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Chapter Two

“Clear the Way for Henry Clay”

The 1844 Whig campaign for the American presidency is best understood as a refinement of strategies developed during the successful 1840 presidential bid of William Henry Harrison. Many of the same individuals figured prominently in both races.

Horace Greeley, founding editor of the New York Tribune, in large part responsible for Harrison’s success in 1840, became one of Clay’s most powerful supporters in 1844. Greeley published the widely distributed Junius Tracts, which included partisan critiques of political issues (such as the annexation of Texas) as well as a life of Henry Clay. He also issued the Clay Tribune, Clay’s national campaign newspaper. Perhaps most important, Greeley maintained a network of correspondents throughout the United States which enabled him to keep a finger on the pulse of the American electorate and strengthen political allegiances through a sustained media campaign.

Not all of the American Whigs supported Henry Clay, however. One of the most notable holdouts was Cincinnati businessman Jacob Burnet, manager of William Henry Harrison’s campaign four years earlier. Burnet was now promoting Henry Clay’s chief Whig rival, U.S. Supreme Court judge John McLean. Soon after McLean’s arrival in Springfield, Illinois, in June of 1843, Henry Clay’s representative (and step-nephew) John J. Hardin visited the Supreme Court justice and proposed that the two Whig factions forge a political alliance.1

“A great many strangers are in town,” wrote a Springfield correspondent for Horace Greeley’s New York Tribune, “drawn here by the session of the Court.” The business of the U.S. Circuit Court for the Seventh District was conducted in Springfield, Illinois, when the legislature was out of session and concluded before the oppressive heat of high summer was upon the prairie. Springfield was declared the seat of Sangamon County in 1821 by planting a wooden stake at “a certain point in the prairie, near John Kelly’s field, on the waters of Spring creek.” Sixteen years later the town was named Illinois’s state capital. In 1843, the city of three thousand residents

1. The earliest use of the slogan “Clear the Way for Henry Clay” inserted a comma between ‘way’ and ‘for’; it was soon abandoned. See Daily Cincinnati Enquirer, 11 July 1842. Lambert, Presidential Politics, 105, noted, “The man about whom Henry Clay was most concerned was none other than Judge McLean of Ohio.”
remained isolated; Springfield lacked a navigable waterway and railroads to the capital were still under construction.\(^2\)

Travelers with business in Springfield usually boarded shallow-draft vessels at the Mississippi river ports of Alton (on the eastern shore) or St. Louis (on the Missouri side) which inched their way up the placid Illinois River. From Meredosia, the first town of any consequence on the Illinois’s eastern bank, visitors took an overland stage to the capital, still more than sixty miles due east. Jacksonville, about halfway between Meredosia and Springfield, became a required stopover before continuing on to Illinois’s geographical and legislative center.

The capitol building, placed in the middle of a large public square surrounded by unpaved and often muddy streets, was begun in 1837, the year the capital was moved to Springfield from Vandalia. Constructed of Illinois dolomite that shone golden in the sunlight, the building (about the size of a typical midwestern county courthouse) was only partially finished in the summer of 1843 and still lacked its portico of stacked columns. On the interior, a temporary flight of stairs led to the Representatives’ Chamber on the west wing of the second floor where fifty-eight-year-old justice John McLean presided. Sessions of the court typically lasted the entire month of June, after which the judge returned to his home in Cincinnati.\(^3\)

Judge McLean, a large man of “imposing presence,” had served as an associate justice of the United States Supreme Court since his appointment by President Andrew Jackson in 1829, “the first justice appointed from the old Northwest, and the first Ohio lawyer to be elevated to the U.S. Supreme Court.” McLean’s *Reports of cases argued and decided in the Circuit Court of the United States for the Seventh District*, begun in 1840, was required reading for advocates throughout the Union. McLean was also known for his opposition to political extremism. “Demagogues,” he said repeatedly, “must be put down.”\(^4\)


For all of his success on the bench Judge McLean was above all a politician who had long sought democracy’s highest prize, the presidential chair. One contemporary noted that McLean “thinks of nothing but the Presidency by day and dreams of nothing else by night.” McLean’s name had been first put forward as a presidential contender by Charles Hammond (editor of the Cincinnati Gazette) in 1832. In the 1836 presidential race McLean was supported by Hammond, as well as John Woods, publisher of the Hamilton (Ohio) Intelligencer who had studied law under McLean before being admitted to the bar in 1819. Neither effort was successful. In late 1842 a group of Ohio congressmen again began voicing support for McLean as a presidential favorite.

At the time of McLean’s 1843 Supreme Court sessions in Springfield, the movement to place his name on the 1844 Whig ticket was well underway. “We should not be greatly astonished . . . if [McLean] . . . is looking higher than the exalted seat he now occupies,” the Illinois State Register (published in Springfield) speculated in mid-June. “If the Whigs set aside Mr. Clay, of which there are strong indications in some

5. John Quincy Adams, Memoirs 8:537 [14 March 1833] (night quote). Henry Clay to John M. Berrien, 4 September 1843, in Hopkins and Hargreaves, Papers of Henry Clay 9:854. As Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Berrien was also approached by the Latter-day Saints for assistance. See, for example, Orson Pratt to John M. Berrien, 11 May 1844, cited in Crowley, Descriptive Bibliography, 271–72.
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quarters, then why is not Judge McLean’s chance for a nomination as good as that of Gen. Scott or any other whig?” McLean had two chief Whig rivals, the Register noted, General Winfield Scott, hero of the War of 1812, and Kentucky senator Henry Clay.6

Shortly after the Register article appeared McLean received an unexpected visit from a local candidate for U.S. Congress, John J. Hardin. A native of Kentucky, Hardin had moved to Jacksonville, Illinois, in 1830 after graduating in law from Lexington’s Transylvania University. Hardin was a staunch Clay Whig and a stepnephew of the elder statesman. Hardin’s mother Elizabeth had married Henry Clay’s brother, Porter Clay, in 1830 following the death of her husband, former U.S. senator Martin D. Hardin. Porter and his new wife removed to Jacksonville in 1833 so that Elizabeth could be closer to her son. The couple would remain there through the 1840s.7

Hardin was a member of Henry Clay’s inner circle, known as his “secret committee” to opponents, a network of political informants and confidants assembled over more than four decades of public service. Henry Clay had served as a U.S. congressman from Kentucky beginning in 1806 and was elected Speaker of the House of Representatives in 1811, a position he retained for much of his earlier political career.

Clay first ran for the presidency of the U.S. in 1824. In an unusual circumstance, none of the four candidates secured a simple majority of electoral votes. The final decision as to who would become the next president of the U.S. was left up to the House of Representatives. After courting by “friends” of the three more successful candidates, Clay put his support behind John Quincy Adams. With the election of Adams, Clay took the oath of office as secretary of state. Rumors of a “corrupt bargain” between the two political leaders could not be denied. The charge would plague Clay to the end of his life. Nonetheless, Clay’s appointment as secretary of state survived the Adams administration. Clay returned to the U.S. Senate in 1831 and only retired from that body in 1842 in order to devote himself to the 1844 presidential race.

John J. Hardin’s visit to Judge McLean was prompted by Henry Clay’s fear that the “intrigue of 1839”—involving Jacob Burnet and the successful presidential campaign of William Henry Harrison—might be repeated in 1844. Clay refused to be “set aside” again.8

In December of 1839 delegates from twenty-two of the twenty-six states in the Union were gathered at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to select the 1840 Whig presidential ticket. Following a heated debate (and last-minute changes in balloting procedures) the convention nominated William Henry Harrison. General Winfield Scott and Senator Henry Clay were eliminated from the race.

Harrison’s campaign manager was Cincinnatian Jacob Burnet, “a man of wealth, a lawyer of the first eminence, a Supreme Court Judge, a Senator in Congress, a citizen of extensive influence.” The oldest son of Dr. William Burnet, surgeon general during the Revolutionary War and member of the Continental Congress, and a 1791 graduate of Princeton University, Jacob Burnet arrived in Cincinnati from New Jersey in 1796. Burnet managed his father’s investments in the Symmes Purchase, served on the legislature of the Northwest Territory (1798–1802), and was a major contributor to the Ohio Constitution, working closely with judges William Goforth and Francis Dunlavy. He was elected to the Ohio House of Representatives (1812–1813), a position he resigned in order to replace Senator William Henry Harrison, who had been appointed as U.S. minister to Colombia. Burnet was named justice of the Ohio Supreme Court in 1821 and elected U.S. senator from Ohio (1828–1831), replacing, once again, the departing William Henry Harrison. In addition to his political service, Burnet was president of the Cincinnati branch of the Bank of the United States for several years prior to its demise in 1832. Jacob’s younger brother, Isaac Gouverneur Burnet, was elected the first mayor of Cincinnati following the town’s incorporation in 1819, a post he held for more than a decade. Another brother, David G. Burnet, was elected interim president of the Republic of Texas in 1836.

At Harrisburg in December 1839 Jacob Burnet was called upon to deliver Harrison’s nomination speech. His remarks were prefaced with comments about Henry Clay, the Whig statesman nearly everyone thought (before the convention, at least) was certain to win the nomination. Without directly naming the defeated senator, Burnet declared, “Long, and ardently have I desired to see him in the Presidential chair, and many a battle have I fought for the accomplishment of that desire. But few men on this floor bear more of the scars of political warfare, received in his defense than I do.”

The paths of the two men had crossed frequently. Both were militant anti-Abolitionists. Burnet headed the Cincinnati chapter of the American Colonization Society (Henry Clay was the national president), which had as its object the repatriation of free blacks to the colony of Liberia in west Africa. Most recently Burnet and Clay had worked to settle a boundary dispute between Kentucky and Virginia.

To soften the blow dealt by Clay’s inability, once again, to receive the Whig nomination, Burnet continued, “General Harrison entertains towards him the same feelings, and has long ardently desired to see him at the head of the nation; nor would [Harrison] have been a candidate in 1836, had it not been distinctly announced that Mr. Clay had withdrawn from the canvass.”

With preliminaries out of the way, Burnet addressed the president of the convention. “I hope, sir, I shall not be charged with vanity when I say that I have been [Harrison’s] intimate companion and friend for more than forty years. The free and continued intercourse that has existed between us for so long a period, must necessarily enable me to speak with some confidence as to his character, acquirements, and course of life.” Burnet’s able recounting of General Harrison’s accomplishments was widely praised, often described as his last notable public act.11

The convention over, the work of the canvass was yet ahead. Whig organizers were assembled throughout the Union. Burnet’s speech was translated into German and Welsh in order to attract the immigrant vote. The log-cabin campaign, which appealed to the populace through catchy slogans (“Tippecanoe and Tyler too!”) and hard cider, was a grand success. Harrison, “the poor man’s friend,” was sworn in as the nation’s ninth president in February of 1841. During his lengthy inaugural address the seventy-one-year-old Harrison fell ill, and died of pneumonia less than a month later. He was replaced by his vice president, John Tyler, a former Jacksonian Democrat.

Some time after the Harrisburg convention, Burnet met with Henry Clay in Washington, D.C. In an effort to console the elder statesman, Burnet insisted: “You were the choice of 99 out of a hundred of the Whigs of the U[ntited] States.” Clay was incensed at what he saw as Burnet’s deliberate underhandedness and later wrote, “Believing that, how could he consistently go for another? Or does he think that the wishes of the many should always yield to the desire of the few?” From the results at Harrisburg, Clay knew that Burnet, though a fellow Whig, could be a dangerous opponent.12

If Burnet had been triumphant in his promotion of Harrison, Clay no doubt reasoned, there was every likelihood he could repeat his success with McLean. The threat to the Clay camp was even greater now that McLean and Burnet were in-laws; in 1838 McLean’s son Nathaniel had married Jacob Burnet’s daughter Caroline.13

Hardin proposed that McLean withdraw his name from further consideration in the 1844 race. Then, Hardin assured him, when Henry Clay was president, McLean would be rewarded with a foreign ambassadorship. The intent of the offer was clear. Clay saw McLean as a dangerous political rival who had to be neutralized. At the same time, Clay wanted McLean to back him in the upcoming election in order to strengthen the Clay ticket. McLean was not yet prepared to concede the contest, for even as the two men in Springfield contemplated their political futures, Jacob Burnet and former Ohio congressman John C. Wright (editor of the Cincinnati Daily

13. Cincinnati Daily Gazette, 10 September 1838.
Gazette following the death of Hammond in 1840) were in Boston seeking support
for McLean’s cause. Henry Clay would wait several months for his answer.14

Even before he could hope to impact Henry Clay’s national presidential cam-
paign, however, John J. Hardin had to convince the Illinois electorate of his own
viability as a representative from Illinois’s newly formed Seventh Congressional Dis-
trict, politically the most important region in the state outside of Chicago.