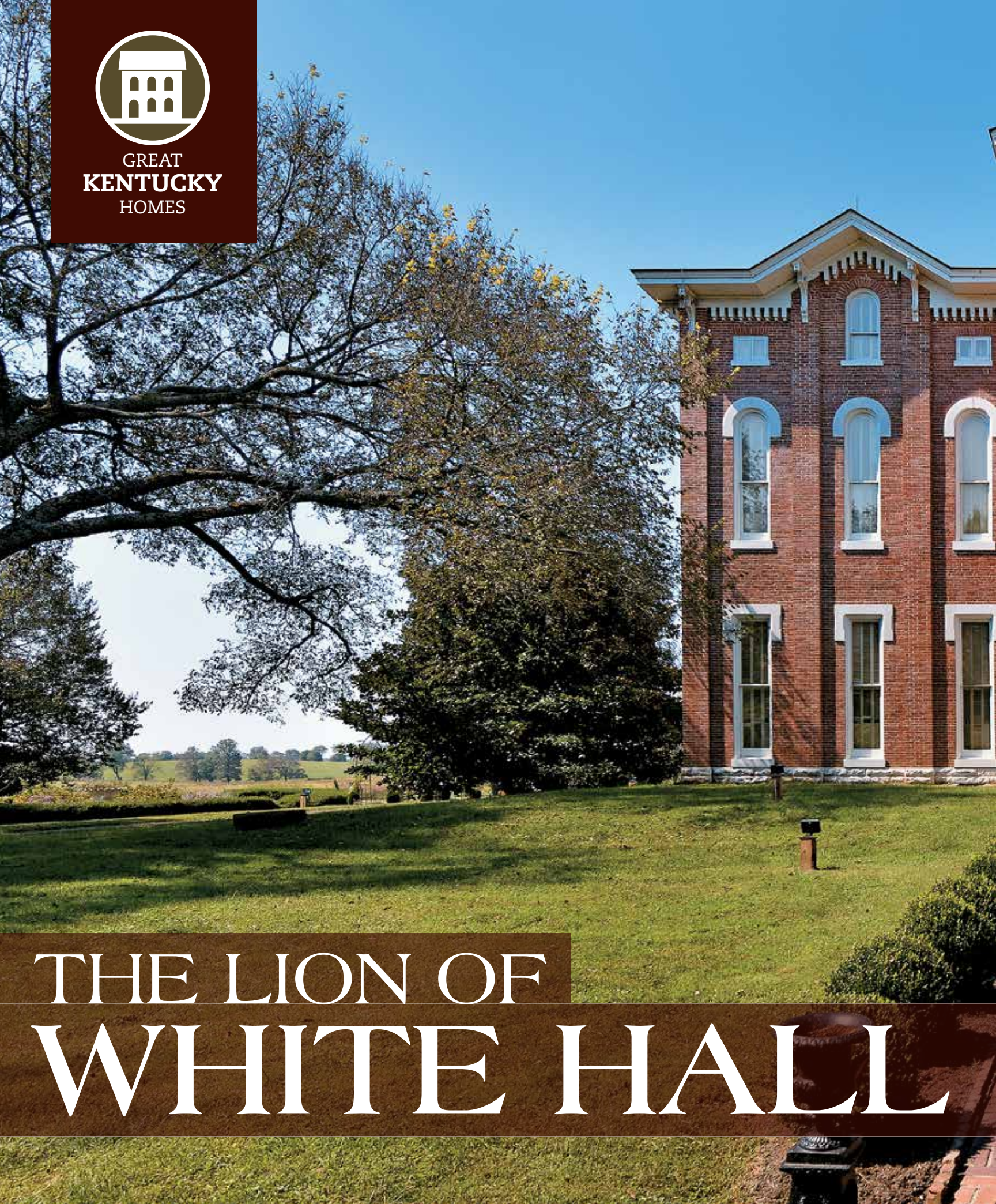




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THE LION OF WHITE HALL



White Hall mansion preserves and interprets the heroic life
of emancipationist and statesman Cassius Marcellus Clay

By William Bowden | Photos by Joseph Rey Au



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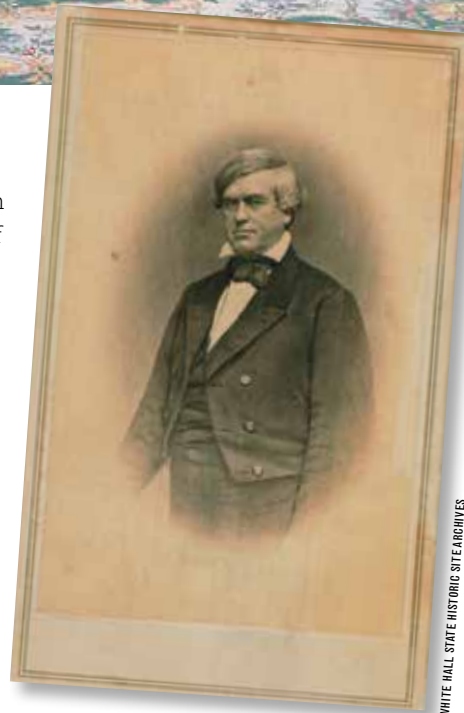
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ollowing tour guide Jeffrey Boord-Dill through White Hall mansion, the restored home of 19th-century emancipationist and statesman Cassius Marcellus Clay, is truly an adventure. That's because you literally are seeing two houses in one.

The intact 1799 seven-room Georgian house known as Clermont, where Clay was born in 1810, got swallowed nearly whole by an elaborate mansion built around, above, and connected to it during the 1860s. This intriguing merger of two eras of homebuilding created the White Hall we see today, a towering 44-room

Italianate residence standing majestically in the gently rolling farmland of Madison County.

"As you tour the mansion you can see how its older and newer sections were cleverly integrated," Boord-Dill said. "For example, curved Italianate elements, plus higher and wider doors, were added to Clermont



WHITE HALL STATE HISTORIC SITE ARCHIVES

The drawing room reflects White Hall at its most glorious. Features include decorative frieze work around the tops of the columns and along the ceiling. An 1859 Steinway square grand piano is the only original piece to remain after a 1903 auction. Left, a photo of Cassius Clay shows him in statesmanlike garb.

to help it flow into its new and grander architectural cocoon.”

Some of the 1799-vintage rooms were remodeled and repurposed to suit 1860s tastes and needs: a parlor became an elegant dining room; two bedrooms were joined to fashion a master suite.

Several creatively designed staircases accommodate the juxtaposition of the new mansion’s 16-foot-ceilinged rooms and Clermont’s 12-foot ceilings. And that’s just the beginning of the surprises found inside historic White Hall.

It actually takes a dwelling of this scale and complexity to encompass the life of heroic proportions that Clay lived. He was a vital force in American politics and society for more than half a century as a fiery and outspoken emancipationist, friend and political ally to Abraham Lincoln, statesman to three presidents, and founding member of the Republican Party.

For good measure, he also held a law degree and was a farmer, businessman, anti-slavery newspaper publisher,



This side view shows how the present White Hall consumed the original

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and decorated soldier.

Clay's larger-than-life persona earned him the unofficial title of The Lion of White Hall. When he died in 1903 at age 92, his unstinting efforts to end slavery and serve his country in numerous other ways made that title a well-deserved tribute. White Hall is a suitably grand stage from which to tell the story of this remarkable Kentuckian.

Overcoming a family legacy

Cassius M. Clay was born into one of Kentucky's largest land-owning and slave-holding families, yet he became a national leader in the anti-slavery movement. He was the youngest son of Sally and Green Clay, founders of a prominent pioneer family. His father was a prosperous planter, businessman, and soldier in the Revolutionary

War and War of 1812. His holdings included 40,000 acres in Madison County alone, along with more than 100 enslaved people.

Cassius graduated from Yale University in 1832 and earned a law degree from Transylvania University. While at Yale, he got fired up about slavery after hearing the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison speak. Clay became an emancipationist, working within the legal system for the gradual freedom of enslaved people. He is sometimes mislabeled an abolitionist, those who favored immediate freedom for slaves.

"An emancipationist would take a more moderate, long-range approach than an abolitionist," Boord-Dill said. "They also favored education to help make freed slaves productive members of society."

His anti-slavery stance became the de-

fining issue for Clay in his domestic political activity. He traveled widely to political rallies in the North and South to educate the masses on the evils of slavery, challenging the humanity of his fellow Americans. In 1844 he freed his own slaves, whom he had inherited from his father.

There was a price to pay for his views, and the attacks on Clay were more than verbal: He was nearly killed on two occasions. Clay was forced to become adept at defending himself with his fists and his trusted Bowie knife, his favorite weapon.

In 1845 Clay began publishing his anti-slavery newspaper, *The True American*, which stirred readers to heated reactions, including death threats.

One letter writer stated, "Your life can not be spared. Plenty thirst for your blood



Tour guide Stephanie Thurman shares the history of White Hall with visitors.

— [and] are determined to have it.”

A court injunction empowered a citizens committee of 60 to storm his office on North Mill Street in Lexington and cart away his printing press. He continued to publish until 1847 by moving the operation to Cincinnati.

Clay had inherited his birthplace, Clermont, when his father died in 1828. He and Mary Jane Warfield were married in 1833, and the couple had 10 children. They first lived at Clermont before moving to Lexington in the late 1830s to further Clay's political career, only to return to his homeplace in 1850. He served three terms in the Kentucky Legislature, was a captain in the Kentucky Militia, and fought in the Mexican-American War of 1846-47.

After failing to win the nomination for vice president in 1860, he joined Abraham Lincoln's presidential campaign. President Lincoln rewarded Clay in 1861 with an appointment as minister to the court of Czar Alexander II in St. Petersburg, Russia. He was recalled in 1862 to accept a general's commission in the Union Army but returned to his minister's post in 1863, where he served until 1869 under Presidents Andrew Johnson and Ulysses S. Grant. He is credited with gaining Russian support for the Union in the Civil War and orchestrating America's purchase of Alaska from Russia.

Clay returned to White Hall in 1869. Marital difficulties followed, whereupon he and Mary Jane separated in 1872 and divorced in 1878. He spent his later years giving speeches and supporting various political candidates. He died in 1903 in the library at White Hall, just steps away from the upstairs room where he had been born 92 years earlier.

Restoring White Hall to glory

From the time of Clay's death until 1965, White Hall was home to tenant farmers and

the occasional vandal. At the height — or depth — of its ruin, the once-proud but rapidly deteriorating mansion had literally become a barn filled with feed sacks and hay bales. The grand entrance hallway once garaged a tractor.

The Richmond Garden Club began campaigning for the restoration of White Hall in 1965. Kentucky first lady Beula Nunn, the Kentucky Mansions Preservation Foundation, and the Kentucky Department of Parks, along with the support of hundreds of donors, saw the project through. A grand opening of the mansion and its surrounding 14-acre park was held in 1971.

Visiting White Hall today, one finds it's easy to distinguish the two homes from different eras by their exterior architectural styles. A strong emphasis on the vertical, including very tall, narrow Palladian windows,



Clay's collection of guns, knives, and swords underscores that he had to take death threats against him seriously.

gives the Italianate front a regal appearance. The 1799 Georgian-style house, the former front façade of which is visible on the left side, shows more modest traditional windows. Flemish bond brickwork distinguishes Clermont while American bond is seen on the Italianate portion. Bricks for both structures were fired on site, with clay from the same pit.

The elegant vision Cassius and Mary Jane had for their home is immediately evident when visitors step through the grand entrance hallway and into the resplendent drawing room, which is a ballroom-sized



A portrait of daughter and women's rights activist Laura Clay hangs above the bed in a second-floor bedroom.



An official document signed by Abraham Lincoln notifies Clay of his appointment as minister to Russia.

chamber graced by two Corinthian columns crowned by delicate frieze work that continues around the soaring 16-foot-high ceiling. An enormous reproduction rug is accurate to the original and was woven by the same loom in England that produced the Clays'.

An 1859 Steinway square grand piano in the drawing room is the only artifact to have stayed in the mansion since Clay's death. When restorers removed the feed sacks surrounding it, they discovered, it is said, a family of chickens roosting inside.

Also on the first level is the dining room, originally the main parlor for Clermont. Impressive American chestnut sideboards are original, as is a china dessert set brought from Russia. Adjacent is the library where Clay spent many of his later years. In both of these rooms are seen the beginnings of extensive original flooring of yellow poplar and pine.

A highlight of the many pieces of artwork seen throughout the house is a winter sleigh scene hung in the grand hallway. The painting was given to Clay as a token of



A painting Czar Alexander II gave to Clay hangs in the entrance hall. Clay brought back many items from his time in Russia to decorate White Hall.

MARY JANE CLAY, CONSTRUCTION SUPERVISOR

White Hall came about largely due to the persistence and hard work of Mary Jane Clay. While her husband was away serving as minister to Russia for much of the 1860s, she assumed the role of construction supervisor for the massive addition to the couple's original 1799 home.

Cassius had laid out plans for the enlargement before leaving for Russia, but it was left to Mary Jane to see the seven-year project through. She did what was typically a man's job in that era, working directly with carpenters, plasterers, painters, and stone masons.

Mary Jane accomplished this while also running the family estate, which encompassed a 2,250-acre farm and other businesses. She bred mules and sold them to the Union Army, sold sheep, and handled cash crops.

The basic structure of the house was complete by 1866. Cassius wrote to his wife not to spend lavishly on furnishings, since he would be bringing back furniture, carpets, paintings, and other items he had acquired while in Russia. This meant that the house remained somewhat barren for a time.

"It was a little awkward for Mary Jane when entertaining visitors at this time," said tour guide Jeffrey Boord-Dill. "You can imagine her saying, 'Welcome to my beautiful new home. I'd offer you a seat, but all my chairs are in Russia.'"

Mary Jane often became weary and stressed with the weight of her responsibilities but still took obvious pride in the creation of her new home, as reflected in a letter to daughter Laura in March 1866: "I do enjoy my house so much, even in its unfinished state, it is a pleasure to me."



A portrait of Mary Jane Clay as well as her presentation gown to the Russian court reminds visitors of her prominent role as mistress of White Hall.

friendship by Czar Alexander, who is pictured riding in the sleigh.

Moving up in style

A grand curving staircase rises from the main hallway to the second floor, where a master bedroom for Cassius and Mary Jane, as well as bedrooms now named for daughters Sally and Laura, are filled with original and period furnishings. The house has 17 closets, unusual for an era when wardrobes were the norm. A stunning original Wooton patent office secretary desk where Clay once worked anchors the far end of the hallway.

In this area of the house, we learn of the prominent roles that Clay's daughters Laura and Mary Barr played as activists for women's suffrage. Among their many activities, Mary Barr was president of the American

Woman Suffrage Association while Laura held key positions in its successor, the National American Woman Suffrage Association.

"White Hall is actually a shrine to the Clay family, not just Cassius," said Melissa Morris, White Hall curator. "Along with their father, Laura and Mary Barr affected issues that are still important today — full rights for women and equality for all people."

Two aspects of White Hall that take visitors by surprise are its central heating system and indoor plumbing. The heating system used two coal- and/or wood-fired furnaces in the basement; ductwork in the walls allowed heat to rise to the various rooms, entering through wall vents (no longer visible) and small openings in shallow-faced hearths. Indoor plumbing relied



A china dessert setting Clay brought back from Russia decorates the dining room table.

on a large water tank that gathered rainwater from the roof to provide gravity-fed pressure for a bathtub — complete with shower — and a flush toilet.

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Two original copies of Clay's anti-slavery newspaper, *The True American*, from March and June 1845 are seen in the third-floor hallway. A display of his firearms, knives, and swords illustrates the extent to which he had to protect himself from physical assault. A facsimile of Clay's appointment as minister to Russia (the house archives the original), signed by Lincoln and Secretary of State William Seward, is shown nearby.

A full basement underlies the entire footprint of the mansion and includes a sinister chamber in the 1799 section that was probably used to restrain enslaved people seen as misbehaving.

Back outside, across the luxuriant lawn, are a restored hen house, smoke house, and ice house. The jewel of the outbuildings is the stone kitchen, built of limestone, that houses a cooking hearth and a loom. The grounds, with their sweeping views of rolling farmland, give visitors a final impression of life for the Clay family on this impressive estate.

Man of principle

Clay had his shortcomings, but he remained true to two defining principles of his life, both of which were critical issues in the life of the nation — the right to free speech and the injustice of slavery. White Hall is a testament to the courage he showed in defending these ideals.

The Society of Professional Journalists recognized the first of these values when it named White Hall the 2011 Historic Site in Journalism. The award honors *The True American* and Clay's defense of free speech.

"When it comes to what he stood for, he defines hero," said Hagit Limor, then-president of the SPJ. She further commented on "how he was able to use freedom of the press and his newspaper to help change the course of our history."

Much earlier, the July 13, 1860, edition of *The New York Times* recognized Clay's bravery in a review of an anti-slavery speech he had given in Louisville a few days prior. The reporter's words provide an apt summary of this accomplished Kentuckian's national stature in his day and the lasting effect he has had on American life:

"Mr. Clay has earned a right to be heard on this question [slavery]... He has sacrificed office, fortune, local reputation, personal friendships, personal security — everything that most men count dear

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Clay used this Wootton patent office secretary desk. Right, he died in the library in 1903.

— to his principles upon this subject, and to his devotion to that fundamental principle of American Liberty, freedom of speech and of political discussion." **KM**