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## Henry Clay (1777-1852)

### *Statesman--"The Great Compromiser"*

#### Growing Up

**Henry Clay** was born during the Revolutionary War. He lived on a farm in Virginia with his widowed mother and seven siblings. **Clay** helped out on the farm in every way he could. But he knew farming was not for him. When his mother remarried, his stepfather helped him get a job in a store.

#### Education

**Clay** attended a one-room schoolhouse for three years. It was the only formal education he had. But people could see that he worked hard and had great intelligence. His boss at the store introduced him to a court clerk. The clerk introduced him to George Wyeth, America's first law professor. Wyeth suggested that **Clay** educate himself through reading. He also got **Clay** a job with Virginia's attorney general. **Clay** read all the law books he could. He became a lawyer himself in 1797.

#### Career

Clay's mother and stepfather had moved to Kentucky. **Henry** moved west to be near them. He started a law practice near Lexington, Kentucky, in 1798. He quickly became successful. With his wonderful voice and actor's skill, he made the juries see his side. People came to court just to watch him perform! He decided to use these skills in politics. He represented the State of Kentucky throughout most of his career. Though born in the South, he became known as a Westerner. Once, while trying to get votes, he took up a woodsman's challenge to shoot a rifle. **Clay** fired only one shot. Bulls-eye! Later, **Clay** admitted it was the only time he'd ever touched a rifle!

**Henry Clay** and the United States were young--both in their early twenties. In the early 1800s, politicians were still making new laws that would affect all Americans. Debates about important issues made politics an exciting career. One debate concerned slavery. Though **Clay** owned slaves himself, he believed they should be freed over time. He thought the government should pay slave owners to free their slaves. The ex-slaves would then learn trades and return to Africa. But many people disagreed. Arguments about slavery became common--and threatening. **Clay** began earning his reputation as "The Great Compromiser" when he helped Missouri become a state on terms acceptable to both the pro- and anti-slavery sides.

**Clay** was ambitious. He tried three times to become president. **Clay** never did win a presidential election, though he nearly beat Polk in 1844. These losses disappointed him greatly. He even became bitter at times. But he remained a powerful and popular politician. And his most important service to the country still lay ahead.

## The Great Compromise

The slavery argument had become worse over time. Many northerners opposed slavery. They said it was a terrible evil. They did not permit slavery in their states. But in the South, slaves worked on huge farms called plantations. Slave owners said they could not run their plantations without slaves. Southerners did not care about northern views--as long as their states had a fair say in Congress. But over time, more free territories became states. With more free states in the Union, the slave states' votes meant less. The South felt threatened. Talk of civil war became stronger and angrier. Neither side would compromise.

"There is one man, and only one man, who can save the Union. That man is **Henry Clay**," said John Randolph. The outspoken senator was actually Clay's political enemy. Yet he said, "I know [**Clay**] has the power. I believe he will be found to have the patriotism and firmness equal to the occasion."

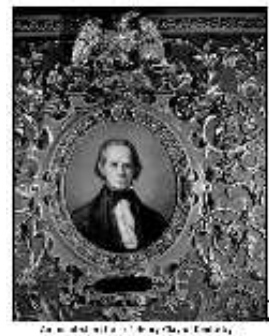
He was right. On January 29, 1850, **Henry Clay** addressed Congress. He had talked to people on all sides of the slavery issue. He suggested a bill with an eight-point plan to avoid civil war. It was voted down time and again. **Clay** did not give up. Though he was old and ill, he worked to keep the plan alive. He felt his own life meant nothing. He needed to save his country from war. Finally, all but one of the eight points became law. These laws became known as The Great Compromise.

[\(See picture, "Clay, Henry."\)](#)

The nation did fight a civil war in the 1860s. It was as terrible and tragic as **Clay** knew it would be. Yet his compromise had given the country ten important years of peace. During this time the west and north combined their strengths. Together, they defeated the south and brought the nation back together.

### Personal Life

Soon after moving to Kentucky, **Henry Clay** married Lucretia Hart. They bought a plantation in Kentucky called Ashland. Though the couple's eleven children were born and raised there, **Clay** had to spend much of his time in Washington, D.C. Sometimes, when he returned to the farm to rest or restore its prosperity, he thought he would be happy as a farmer. But--luckily for the country's future--the draw of politics was stronger. He always returned to Washington.



**Clay, Henry**

### Important Events

**1777:** Born April 12<sup>th</sup>.

**1797:** Moves to Kentucky.

**1798:** Opens law practice.

**1803-1809:** Serves as Kentucky legislator.

**1810-1821:** Serves as U.S. congressman.

**1825-1826:** Serves as Secretary of State.

**1831-1842:** Serves as U.S. senator.

**1850:** Negotiates the Great Compromise that puts off civil war for ten years.

**1852:** Dies on June 29<sup>th</sup>.

### Quotes

*"I know no South, no North, no East, no West."*--**Henry Clay** explains his loyalty to the whole country, not to any one region.

*"[Henry Clay is] my beau ideal of a statesman."*--Abraham Lincoln

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