

**GEORGE CLINTON: SOME OF  
HIS COLONIAL,  
REVOLUTIONARY AND POST-  
REVOLUTIONARY SERVICES**

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**RALPH EARL PRIME**

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**"Steadfast for God and Country"**

# GEORGE CLINTON

SOME OF HIS  
COLONIAL, REVOLUTIONARY AND  
POST-REVOLUTIONARY SERVICES

BY

COL. RALPH EARL PRIME

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**I**N presenting any part of the life or doings of any great man, it is difficult, nay impossible, to avoid presenting also other men and other things. What a man thinks and does, what his opinions and impulses are, what his relation to coincident events and affairs, his heredity, his environment, the effect upon him of the opinions and the personality of other men, the influence of all these varied things that happen, and of which he is a part, all these things are so interwoven with the man himself, that in order to get a just appreciation of him, it is necessary to consider them as well. This is peculiarly true in the story of George Clinton, as we shall see. The people among whom he lived, the locality where he lived, the great Hudson River Valley so intimately connected with him in his career, the events and the sufferings of the people, of whom he was a part, during the period that preceded the Revolution, the events of that Revolution itself, all these necessarily have much to do with the life of George Clinton.

It hence will be impossible to the present task, to omit a large consideration of all of these, in attempting to set out something of the place which George Clinton occupied in history, and in order to enable us to judge of his character and of what he did. Therefore, although much will be said about the events of the Revolutionary War and of other men, yet are we in fact dealing with George Clinton.

Many of the events that happened then, though inconspicuous when compared with others, were in fact momentous to us. The

men who acted their part then, have their place in history, though we do not often dwell upon their story. Among them were many who, out of real native worth, wrought great things, and they have come to be historic and to be inseparable from the story of our country and the State. Some of them were specially fitted by nature and by heredity, for their work, and were called of God to it, and of none can this be more truly said than of George Clinton.

This country of ours gives equal opportunity to all, and God forbid the time when the worship of wealth shall so take possession of it that it shall make wealth the symbol of personal worth. Notwithstanding any of our fears, I believe it will never come. But although we endorse the abstract sentiment of our fathers that all men are born free and equal, yet there is an heredity of fitness, which cannot be counted out, and men become trained in long lines of blood and development for the work God has for them to do.

George Clinton came of a line of soldiers and true men. His great-grandfather, William Clinton,<sup>1</sup> was a soldier in the royalist army and he fought for Charles I., in those days that produced the Cavaliers and the Roundheads. Irving gives his name as Gen. Charles Clinton.<sup>2</sup> The King fell and the great Protector came to be the fountain-head of English liberty, at least of that period, and of the freedom which we enjoy with its development, which includes religious liberty. In the fall of that King, the blood was spilled that flowing in his veins meant oppression and repression, but spilled upon the ground it enriched England and fertilized it and gave a new start and an impulse to the growth of constitutional liberty. The triumph of the Roundheads drove out the followers of the King, and William Clinton found refuge in France for a time, but later he went to Scotland.<sup>3</sup> There he married. We know nothing of his religious tendencies, prejudices or opinions before Charles I. fell, but presumptively from his official rank in the army of the King they were toward the establishment. I have before this wondered if by breathing the Scotch Presbyterian air, or perhaps by the influence of a good Scotch wife, there was planted in him, and through him in the line of his descendants, some of the

1. Clinton Papers; vol. 1, p. 15. 2. Irving's Washington; book 2, p. 70.  
3. Clinton Papers; vol. 1, p. 15.

stern Calvinistic iron and sinew and spirit which grew and developed and came out to notice in the line of his descendants and in the person of his great-grandsons, James and George Clinton, both of whom, just before the Revolutionary war, were in the Church records of Orange County as District trustees of a Presbyterian Church.<sup>1</sup> The Tory historian, Jones, writing of George Clinton, speaks of him as a "rigid, true Presbyterian," a "hypocrite."<sup>2</sup>

But William Clinton did not escape in Scotland from persecution as a result of his former royalist connections and perhaps his yet treasured loyalty to the memory of the fallen King. It may have been in a degree, a "fool's errand" that begat trouble for him. Even the best men sometimes will talk, and a soldier's life of adventure and danger is full of romance, and of story, and none more than a soldier likes to talk of his campaigns and dangers. He was at all events compelled to seek safety and fled with his wife to Ireland and there soon after died, leaving an only son, James, then only two years old. James married and his son Charles (named perhaps for the King or Prince Charlie) was born to him in County Longford, Ireland, in 1690.<sup>3</sup>

The stories of the strange new things in this then new world across the seas, and the opportunity for adventure, filled the mind and excited imagination and attention in the old world. Perhaps those stories offered gratification of the spirit of adventure in Charles Clinton, then grown to be nearly forty years of age, and created in him desire, and nerved him, in 1729 to organize an expedition of 70 souls and with them to cross the great stormy sea. They sailed in the ship "George and Annie" for America.<sup>4</sup> When we think of the ships of this day, and the ships of those days, what a ship the "George and Annie" must have been! Would we to-day, even the most adventurous of us, trust ourselves in such a craft to cross the now familiar waters?

It is said that their destination was Philadelphia. The voyage was not itself without adventure. The strange actions of the ship's captain begat suspicion among the voyagers and we are told that the company sought to induce their leader, Charles Clinton, to assume command of the ship.<sup>5</sup> We at once imagine he must have already shown among his qualities, fitness to com-

1. Rittenber's History of Newburgh; p. 299. 2. Jones History of N. Y.; vol. 2, p. 326. 3. Clinton Papers; vol. 1, p. 15. 4. Idem. 5. Idem.



mand on sea as well as on land, to have induced such an offer of command. He declined the task however and then the evidently well to do party, by large gifts of money, induced the crafty captain to fulfil his engagement and to put them safely ashore in America, and the whole company bound for a new land were glad indeed to be landed on the shores of Massachusetts Bay,<sup>1</sup> where they tarried until 1731, and then took up a further tramp, and a new stage in their journey, and came to the grand river and beautiful valley of the Hudson, and made their home at Little Britain, then in Ulster County, N. Y.

Charles Clinton, the leader of the colonists, was educated it seems to be a civil engineer. He became a lawyer. Later he was first Judge of his county. The instincts born in him and inherited from his grandfather, with the ever conscious necessity of protection from the savages of the forest, led him also to become a soldier, and they fortified and defended the farms, and later we find him the Lieutenant Colonel of the Militia Regiment of his county. His was no paper title only, for he served the colony with his regiment in the field and was actively engaged in campaigns, far from Little Britain, along the north borders and along the great lake and in the wilderness resisting the French and Indians, who came down from the then French Canada, to ravage the British colony of New York.<sup>2</sup>

Two sons had been born to him, James Clinton and George Clinton, both to write their names high on the historic roll of sons of New York; James as a Major General in the war for independence and from whom sprang De Witt Clinton, a distinguished son, a name not necessary to enlighten a New Yorker about, but the younger son, George, became not only distinguished as a general officer and a soldier, but a most prominently great figure in the early history of the State and the nation and a leader of the people. These two sons, as mere boys, accompanied their father and his regiment in the French and Indian wars, the eldest, James, as captain of one of the regimental companies, and George as a lieutenant, no doubt in his brother's company.<sup>3</sup> They thus early showed themselves as worthy sons and scions of a soldier family, and, as very young fellows, they distinguished themselves, also among their other adventures,

1. Clinton Papers; vol. 1, p. 15. 2. Irving's Washington; book 2, p. 71.  
3. Idem; p. 71.

by capturing an armed French vessel on Lake Champlain.<sup>1</sup> Charles Clinton was a patriot and on his death bed in 1773, being 88 years of age, charged his sons to stand by the liberties of their country.<sup>2</sup> They were born to it and needed not the admonition.

But it is with the story of George Clinton that we have to do to-day.

George Clinton was born at Little Britain, Ulster, now Orange County, July 26, 1739.<sup>3</sup> Adventure was a large part of his story. In 1755, when only 16 years of age, he was for a time a sailor boy and sailed from New York on a privateer,<sup>4</sup> but returning home when scarce 20 years old, as lieutenant he accompanied his father and brother in the same regiment, to the Canadian frontier and Lake Champlain in the French and Indian wars, in the Wilderness, and along Ontario and against Fort Frontenac.<sup>5</sup>

The peace between Great Britain and France in 1763, brought the three Clintons home to peaceful pursuits. George, born to conflict of one kind or another, turned about for occupation most to his taste, and chose the calling of his father. He became a lawyer, and was admitted to the bar in 1764 by Governor Cadwalader Colden,<sup>6</sup> lawyers in those days being licensed by the Governor of the Colony. Strange that when later on he became General Clinton and Governor Clinton he sent the grandson of the same Cadwalader Colden to Kingston Jail as a spy.<sup>7</sup>

Those days did not offer continuous occupation to the country lawyer, and it seems not to have met all the demands of Clinton's nature, and so he added politics to the things that interested him, and thus early in his life came before the people in that line. He became Clerk of the Court of Common Pleas of his county, and engaged in legal strifes generally, and not of his *own*, only. That was a greater place in those days than in these, although there was then less money in it. His father had risen from a legal practitioner, whatever it then was, to the bench, and so also the son, for he soon became Surrogate and Probate Judge of the County,<sup>8</sup> and, according to the practice then, and for long years later, and perhaps in some places until

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1. Clinton Papers; vol. 1, p. 17. 2. Irving's Washington; book 2, p. 71.  
3. Clinton Papers, vol. 1., p. 17. 4. Idem; p. 17. 5. Idem; p. 17. 6. Idem;  
p. 18. 7. Idem; p. 738. 8. Idem; p. 18.

these days, the general adviser of widows and of the representatives of estates of deceased persons. In 1768 he was chosen a member of the General Assembly of the Colony of New York, and sat in that body for seven successive years.<sup>1</sup>

The grievances of the colonies and their complaints, against the then existing kind of British rule, and of taxation without representation had reached abroad and was loudly heard in the mother country. I wonder if such rule was not on the whole for the benefit of the future of our country, for what would have happened we do not know, if the colonies had then been colonies of that "veiled republic" of to-day. But even then the Colonists had their friends in England. Pitt, the great Commoner, espoused their cause. Col. Isaac Barre, in old Westminster Hall, in the sitting of Parliament, in a public speech called the colonists "Sons of Liberty."<sup>2</sup> As the opprobrious epithet "Beggars of the Sea" was adopted by the victorious Dutch sailors who swept the sea and nailed the broom to the masthead and used it for a figurehead on their ships, and made the epithet a title of honor, our ancestors took up those words "Sons of Liberty" and formed an organization, necessarily secret, but which had its members in many American cities and towns, and there are some of us who to-day are most happy to include in our genealogical story a descent from one of the later acknowledged "Sons of Liberty."

Just to enumerate a few only of the grievances of the colonies against British rule: Town meetings were forbidden; juries

1. N. Y. Civil List, Ed. of 1888, pp. 311, 312.

2. The words of the speech of Col. Barre in that connection were: "They planted by your care! No; your oppressions planted them in America. They fled from your tyranny to a then uncultivated, inhospitable country, where they exposed themselves to almost all the hardships to which human nature is liable; and among others to the cruelties of a savage foe, the most subtle, and I will take upon me to say, the most formidable of any people upon the face of God's earth; and yet, actuated by principles of true English liberty, they met all hardships with pleasure, compared with those they suffered in their own country, from the hands of those who should have been their friends.

"They nourished up by your indulgence? They grew by your neglect of them. As soon as you began to care about them, that care was exercised in sending persons to rule them in one department and another, who were perhaps the deputies of deputies to some member of this house, sent to spy out their liberties, to misrepresent their actions and to prey upon them; men whose behavior on many occasions had caused the blood of those Sons of Liberty to recoil within them; men promoted to the highest seats of justice, some who, to my knowledge were glad, by going to a foreign country, to escape being brought to the bar of a court of justice in their own."