

DEWITT CLINTON

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By many people DeWitt Clinton is remembered for his activities in behalf of the Erie Canal, of which he was one of the chief proponents. His distinguished political career, marked by a succession of high offices, occupied most of his adult life. As a student of natural science he is not as well known, yet he was interested in zoology, botany, mineralogy, ichthyology and ornithology and advocated pursuit of knowledge in all of these fields. The botanist, Constantine Rafinesque honored DeWitt Clinton by naming the dogberry which grows in our New York woodlands, *Clintonia Borealis*.

DeWitt's grandfather, Charles Clinton, came to this country from Ireland in 1729 and settled in Orange County, then a part of Ulster County. The family seat was established at Little Britain, a few miles west of Newburgh. James Clinton, DeWitt's father, was a military officer who served in the French and Indian War and in the Revolution. James married Mary DeWitt and the subject of this sketch was born at Little Britain in 1769.

Clinton graduated from Columbia College at the head of his class in 1786. He studied law under his uncle, George Clinton, and was admitted to the bar. Later he studied natural science under the guidance of Prof. S. L. Mitchill and Dr. David Hosack of Columbia. At the age of 28 he was a member of the New York State Legislature. A few years later he became a United States Senator, but resigned to be mayor of New York City. In 1812 he ran for president but was defeated by James Madison.

Since DeWitt Clinton was, more than anyone else, responsible for the building of the Erie Canal, a brief review of his part in this undertaking will be given. In March 1810 he was appointed one of seven commissioners "to explore the route of an inland navigation from Hudson's River to Lake Ontario and Lake Erie." During the summer of that year the commissioners made a journey across the state for this purpose, some travelling by land, others by water. Clinton went by water, via the Mohawk River, Wood Creek, Oneida Lake and the Oswego River. He kept a detailed record of the trip, calling it his "Private Journal". This account has to do with natural resources, agriculture, commerce, industry, local history and contains references to plants, minerals, animals, birds and fish.

Under the date of July 12 he lists 23 kinds of birds seen near Rome. Three days later at Three Rivers; "Colonel Porter shot one of them (an eagle) on the wing — he was alive, and measured eight feet from the extremity of one wing to the other. He was a bald eagle; his talons were formidable; head and tail white." More than once Clinton mentioned the scarlet tanager and was obviously impressed by it. He called it "the most beautiful bird in America". At Fort Niagara on August 1 he wrote, "I observed an uncommon number of mosquito hawks flying over the plains adjacent to this town; they are certainly different from whip-poor-wills. They were in pursuit of insects, and their cry was squah, in a sharp note."

The war of 1812 postponed action on the canal but in 1816 Clinton was again promoting its construction. He became Governor of New York in 1817 and the Erie Canal was begun on July 4 of that year. He took part in the triumphant ceremonies that marked the completion of the canal in the autumn of 1825.

DeWitt Clinton was one of the organizers of the "Literary and Philosophical Society of New York" which was formed in 1814. He served as the first president and delivered an "Introductory Discourse" which has been called one of the best summaries of the state of scientific knowledge in America at the time. Its length is 57 pages and the notes which follow take up an additional 106 pages. Birds are among the many subjects discussed, and Clinton is quoted as follows: "Many meritorious attempts have been made to illustrate the ornithology of America. Mr. Alexander Wilson, whose death is to be sincerely lamented by every friend of science (Wilson died in 1813) had devoted himself for years to this subject with an enthusiasm, industry and ability never surpassed. Although he has done much, yet the subject is by no means exhausted. The whole number of species, according to Latham is 3000. Considering that the American Republic, including our Louisiana acquisition extends from the Atlantic to the Pacific, it is not unreasonable to suppose that we may claim at least 1000 species of birds, who either reside with us, or occasionally visit us. But the most interesting part of ornithology is the migration of birds. There are some that stay with us the whole year; there are others that visit us regularly; and there are several that visit us occasionally or accidentally, which are driven by storms on our coast, by famine from their usual country, by excessive cold from the north, by excessive heat from the south, or by some cause unknown to us. All of these birds ought to be carefully noted and accurately distinguished. Strange birds are frequently seen in the vicinity of the ocean after a storm. Several years ago a large flock of paroquets was observed 25 miles to the NW of Albany. There are birds that sometimes stay with us the whole year, and at other times depart; this depends upon the mildness of the weather, and the quantity of food."

DeWitt Clinton married twice, his first wife being Maria Franklin who died in 1818. He later married Catherine Jones. He himself died suddenly in Albany on February 11, 1828.

Bibliography

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FIELD NOTES

The Evening Raptor Succession at Rough-leg Meadow — There is a wide flat "meadow" immediately south-west of Bridgeport, N. Y., which is bordered on the West and South by the low maple woods of Cicero Swamp, over which the writer noted an unusually large concentration of Rough-legged Hawks (*Buteo lagopus*) in the winter of 1952-53. This area, now locally known as "Rough-leg Meadow" has well lived up to its name in winters of low snow cover, although the terrain is more