

HENRY CLAY

Born: April 12, 1777

Birthplace: Hanover County, Virginia

Henry Clay came to Kentucky in 1797. He began a law practice in Lexington and within ten years had established a reputation as a successful trial lawyer.

Although Henry Clay owned slaves, he supported a program of gradual emancipation. He was also an early supporter of efforts to create a colony in Liberia for freed African Americans.

Henry Clay became known as “The Great Compromiser” as a result of his efforts in support of the Missouri Compromise. In an effort to preserve the balance of power in Congress between slave and free states, the Missouri Compromise was passed in 1820, admitting Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state. Furthermore, with the exception of Missouri, this law prohibited slavery in the Louisiana Territory north of the 36° 30′ latitude line. This established a precedent that would be followed for the next 30 years. New states would be admitted in tandem—one slave, one free.

Henry Clay ran for President of the United States in 1824, 1832, and 1844. Abraham Lincoln, a Whig elector for Illinois, campaigned tirelessly for Clay. The campaign took him to almost every part of the state and across the Wabash into Indiana, near his boyhood home. Lincoln’s efforts on behalf of Clay brought him recognition throughout Illinois and beyond, putting him in a position from which he was able to launch a successful campaign for Congress.

The Compromise of 1850 is considered by many people to be Henry Clay’s greatest success. The adoption of Henry Clay’s compromise proposals in 1850 preserved the Union, but the issue of slavery was not settled. The Fugitive Slave Act was one of the compromises, but this act required citizens to assist in the recovery of fugitive slaves and denied fugitive slaves the right to a jury trial. Free African Americans were captured, and without the right to a jury trial, were enslaved. The Underground Railroad became more active and Civil War appeared inevitable.