



DeWitt Clinton Clarke: A Political Life in Antebellum Vermont

Clarke's life charts the rise of a vibrant, indispensable American political type during the formative period in Vermont and New England history. An examination of his career also provides a particularly advantageous avenue for viewing the antebellum era's most important economic, political, and cultural forces in an integrated way.

By GENE SESSIONS

DeWitt Clinton Clarke was a familiar and influential figure in mid-nineteenth-century political and journalistic circles of Vermont and New England. He engaged in major rail transportation projects, participated in the call for ending slavery, and contributed to the rise of the Republican Party, three of the distinctive marks of the period. His greatest impact came, however, in his career as a newspaper editor, as the head successively of two of the largest newspapers in the state, and in his role as a behind-the-scenes political figure from the late 1830s until his death in 1870. Despite this notable career, Clarke's professional and personal life was marked by impecuniousness. Although he possessed a talent for gaining friends and raising money for his various ventures, Clarke was almost perpetually in financial difficulty, and as a tireless worker for first the Whig and then the Republican parties, he repeatedly was forced to rely on party

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reward for his financial well-being. Clarke's life charts the rise of a vibrant, indispensable American political type during the formative period in Vermont and New England history. An examination of his career also provides a particularly advantageous avenue for viewing the antebellum era's most important economic, political, and cultural forces in an integrated way.

Personal and physical attractiveness, civic engagement, and financial trouble were recurring features in DeWitt Clinton Clarke's family history. His grandfather, Stephen Clark, migrated in the late 1780s with his family from Connecticut to the central region of Vermont, where he gave the name Mount Holly to the community where the family settled. He served as its town clerk and as its state representative until a series of bad business deals forced his departure to Ohio in 1815.

Stephen's son, Asahel, the father of DeWitt, was remembered, like Stephen, as possessing traits desirable in a public person. He was an unusually handsome man and dressed with "scrupulous care." An acquaintance described him as the "handsomest man I ever saw."¹ And he was well educated, graduating from Middlebury College in 1807, and studying law at nearby Granville, New York.

At the urging of Israel Smith, a U.S. congressman from Vermont and future governor, Asahel briefly considered accepting an appointment as a federal clerk in Washington, D.C. Instead, he settled into the practice of law at Granville. In 1806 he married Lydia Finney of Shrewsbury, Vermont, and it was at Granville that DeWitt was born on September 27, 1811. (As a young man DeWitt took the liberty of adding an "e" to the spelling of his family surname.) Soon after DeWitt's birth, Asahel moved his practice to Glens Falls, New York, and became a fully engaged citizen, participating in Jeffersonian Republican politics and Freemasonry and, like his father, earning a reputation as an eloquent orator.

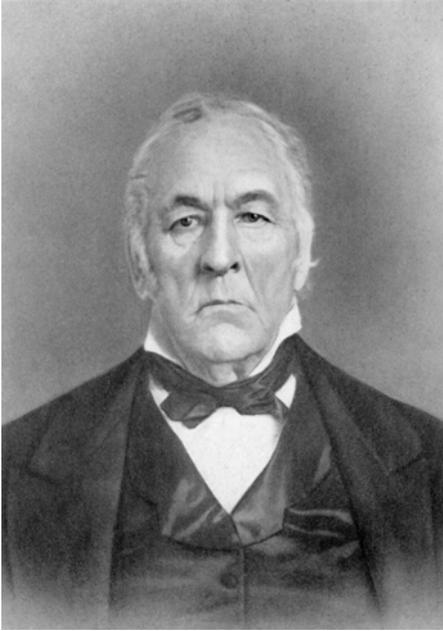
In New York's political wars, Asahel allied himself with independent-minded Republican Governor DeWitt Clinton, after whom he named his son. According to DeWitt's mother, at frequent social events involving the Clarks, Governor Clinton "always seemed to fancy him."² Asahel was a close acquaintance of Clinton's and became sufficiently prominent in New York and national political factionalism during James Madison's presidency (1809–1817) that he, for a time, came under suspicion in the president's circles, of heading—as Asahel melodramatically wrote to his wife—"a grand national plot to blow up the present Government and place Mr. Clinton at the helm."³ In 1822, Asahel was campaigning as a Republican candidate for Congress when typhus cut short his life at age thirty-eight, leaving a young family with little money and significant financial debts.

Asahel's death disrupted a family that included, in addition to ten-year-old DeWitt, a brother, Napoleon Nelson, three years older, and a younger sister, Jane. The next four years were difficult for the family, during which the mother and DeWitt in particular experienced "all the ills of a dependent life."⁴ Lydia later described the young DeWitt as having "lived around after his father's death . . . in so many places, it had a tendency to make a restive boy," and in fact, one "a little wild."⁵ Acquaintances recalled young DeWitt as a source of continual worry for his elders. Although "so hard a child to take care of,"⁶ his mother nevertheless insisted that DeWitt "never had any malice about him"⁷ and, in fact, "had so much good nature that it always disarmed every one who undertook to punish him."⁸

An uncle, Russell Clark, a physician, tried taking responsibility as DeWitt's guardian, but in April 1825, at age thirteen, after several altercations with Russell's wife, DeWitt ran away to Granville, where he took a job as a store clerk. The store owner, pleased by young DeWitt's diligent work, "wanted him bound to him," and applied to his uncle "to bind him to him" under Vermont legal provisions that allowed mandatory apprenticeships for children in poverty. DeWitt and Nelson both protested this proposition, with DeWitt writing to his mother—who was lodging at a brother's house— "If I cannot live in this world without being bound, I do not want to live." She relented and in the fall of 1826, DeWitt was allowed to enter the advanced grammar school at Castleton Seminary as a boarding student.⁹

From early childhood DeWitt had taken enormous pleasure in reading, and his mother worried that her child was "a little too fond of fiction." He had, in fact, read "all of Sir Walter Scott's novels" when "but a boy,"¹⁰ and his love of reading continued throughout his life. His literary tastes were broad. As a young man he began keeping a diary and often copied into it entire pages of verse from Shelley, Coleridge, and Shakespeare. His enthusiasm for reading sometimes led to trouble. While attending school at Castleton Seminary he discovered an outdoor "wildwood nook" near the village where he often took his books to read, uninterrupted. A prying townsman who observed the boy in his outdoor hideaway reported the "scandal" to his stepfather and to school authorities. There were no ill effects for him, and he was not barred from using the spot for study; but, as Abby Hemenway observed, Clarke "writhed a little under the extra watchfulness exercised over him." It was "a fatality that seemed to accompany his young boyhood's careless days; that always rather seemed to follow him life-long, more or less in the distance, to never quite quit him; of some person, or persons, questioning every move that he ever made, or didn't make,

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Ezra Meech, wealthy Shelburne land owner and merchant, and step-father to DeWitt Clinton Clarke. From Genealogical and Family History of the State of Vermont, compiled by Hiram Carleton, (New York: The Lewis Publishing Co., 1903), vol. 2, facing page 584.

and imputing to it some evil that had never entered his head, much less his heart.”¹¹

In the summer of 1826, when DeWitt was fourteen years old, his mother married Ezra Meech. DeWitt’s new stepfather was, at age fifty-three, an imposing figure in the state. Known locally as “the judge,” he was a “self-made man” whose early business forays included a venture in the fur trade with the formidable New York merchant John Jacob Astor.¹² Meech was noteworthy not only for his great wealth—he was reputed to be the largest landholder in the state—but for his “fine physique”: he was six feet four inches tall and weighed 365 pounds.¹³ His “very large size” had necessitated the provision in his home of a specially made chair and bed stand, and a wagon with a seat specially made wide enough for him.¹⁴ Later, when writing as editor of the *Burlington Free Press*, DeWitt described his stepfather as “one of the largest of Whigs in every sense of the word.”¹⁵ He was indeed large in political size. Three times in the 1830s the Democratic Party selected him as its candidate for governor of Vermont (he later shifted his allegiance to the Republican party), and at the time of his marriage to Lydia Clark, he was serving his third term as U.S. congressman from Shelburne.¹⁶

Married to Ezra Meech, Lydia led a more rewarding and ordered life, but DeWitt now saw even less of his beloved mother. She traveled

to Washington, D.C., with her husband for congressional sessions, and while there attracted the attention of capital society. Contemporary accounts describe her appearances there in glowing terms: as a tall, dark-eyed “handsome woman,” with a poised and gracious manner. Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts, a friend of Meech’s, was said to have remarked that Lydia was “the most splendid woman at Washington.”¹⁷

Although DeWitt and his mother remained emotionally close, he seldom visited the new Shelburne home she shared with Ezra Meech. He stayed busy with his school work, bunking at the academies in Castleton and Hinesburgh, and although an indifferent student, continued to nurture his enthusiasm for reading. In 1829 he enrolled at the University of Vermont, but transferred after one term to Union College in Schenectady, New York, from which he graduated in 1831.

Perpetually short of cash while attending college, DeWitt received little assistance from his tight-fisted father-in-law, Judge Meech. Letters from DeWitt to his mother contained references to his chronic financial difficulties and he gained a reputation in the Meech household for carelessness with money. When, in one letter to his mother, he described having his purse stolen, containing all his money, the news was received with skepticism, though Lydia remained trusting. For “DeWitt’s good,” according to his mother, the Judge “was pretty strict with DeWitt,” who nevertheless “never complained.” Meech, a widower, had several sons and daughters by his previous marriage who, however, *did* complain “of DeWitt’s being an expense” and thus harmful to their own financial interests. In fact, DeWitt’s mother later recorded that “all the spending money DeWitt ever had was what I could contrive to save when his father gave me any for some personal expenses, a ten cents here and a quarter there.”¹⁸

In one of his requests for money, DeWitt wrote to his mother, “I know you would, but cannot help me.” In this particular instance his brother, Nelson, did assist him but also took the occasion to caution DeWitt that “we must cut our coats from our cloth, brother.” In a letter, Nelson advised his younger brother that friends are often attracted to “the young man who throws his money about him with a contemptuous kind of indifference where it may fall, or what he may get in return.”¹⁹ “We are sprung,” Nelson warned, “from a source too generous, often, for its own good; that should make us suspicious of ourselves. There never was one of our family who knew the real worth of a dollar. It is from this family trait we have the most to fear.” Then he added, “my brother, look well to the ‘main chance’; take such a course as your own good sense shall dictate; be firm and resolute in pursuing it, and you cannot but succeed.”²⁰

After graduating from Union College, Clarke studied law in Albany for a year. In May 1832, he married Caroline Gardner (known by her nickname “Caro”), a beautiful and artistically talented young woman from a prominent family in Troy, New York. Clarke’s mother described her new daughter-in-law as “very pleasing and talented.” She could “do almost everything a little better than anybody else.” Naturally a great society woman, she was “made for it and shone in it.” She possessed a “gift in conversation . . . so sensible and so quick.”²¹ In 1832, Clarke established a law practice in Troy, and the socially well-connected Gardners provided a boost to his new career. Clarke and Caro became frequent guests at dinner parties at which the governor of New York and other significant political personages were also present.

Clarke, however, soon was exhibiting both his restless nature and his vulnerability to questionable financial judgments. In 1837, despite a declining Vermont economy, Ezra Meech persuaded Clarke that financial opportunity was bright in Brandon, Vermont, where Clarke’s cousin John A. Conant was manager of the Conant Iron Works. In late November of that year, he and Caro moved to that south-central Vermont community and he became a stockholder in the iron works. The enterprise could not shake off serious economic difficulties, however, and in March 1841 it folded, causing Clarke to lose not only his job but “all he had paid in.” The loss also included “a large portion of what came to him from his wife” as the last of her family inheritance, approximately twelve thousand dollars, following the death of her father.²²

Although the financial cost was high, the iron company’s troubles actually delivered Clarke from an employment that had become a source of misery for him. For a while after arriving in Brandon the iron venture had excited his interest, and he had felt “an increasing attachment for business.” After a few months on the job, however, in which he mainly performed the duties of a clerk, he confided his restlessness and boredom in his diary: “Variety is not ‘the spice of’ business,” he wrote, while also lamenting the lack of enlivening incidents in their “quiet little village.” “Twenty-seven years old and as yet nothing done!” he wrote in another diary entry. “Heaven forgive me, I have been dawdling all my life, and in good faith, I should take that place among men which my years at least entitle or require me to hold.”²³

Despite his failed experiment as a Brandon businessman, he earned, over the years, a reputation in the community as a prodigious doer and joiner. He established himself as an unflagging booster of community causes, helping organize Brandon’s village fire company and its library society, joining its Reading Society, serving as president of the village Literary Association, and as justice of the peace and member of a

committee to improve local schools. Still, he remained bored and restless with his situation. After a particularly uneventful evening spent with local Brandon acquaintances, he wrote sarcastically in his diary, “What a mounstrosly eventful life! I’ve a mind to steal a sheep to give it some animation!”²⁴

Gradually through his community experiences, the precocious Clarke came to realize that it was not business but public affairs that gave vibrancy and richness to his life. The political realm satisfied his impulse for service, fired his imagination, answered his desire for recognition, and provided him access to much convivial companionship. For individuals like Clarke, as historian Richard Hofstadter has written about the sphere of pre-Civil War American politics, the political life provided individuals “a creed, a vocation, and a congenial social world all in one.”²⁵

In June 1839, scarcely eighteen months after moving to Brandon, Clarke attended the Vermont Whig party’s state convention in Woodstock, where he was appointed one of the convention’s secretaries. At the Whig county convention two weeks later he gained election as secretary and was appointed to its three-member county committee. Although he failed in a bid for the Whig nomination for the state legislature, he—undaunted—accepted appointment in February 1840 as editor of the campaign organ, *The Rutland and Addison County Whig*.

During that year, according to his own description, he was “dwelling in . . . a state of constant political animation.”²⁶ A highlight of this animation was his participation as a member of Vermont’s delegation to the National Convention of Whig Young Men, in Baltimore. The inclusion of DeWitt (and Caro, despite her “small interest” in political matters) in this group,²⁷ which was composed of several of the most able and ambitious young leaders in the state, signaled his emerging social popularity and his political progress.²⁸ The Baltimore convention also provided DeWitt with occasions to broaden his contacts beyond the state. He reported his “pleasure” there at “seeing and conversing with Mr. [Henry] Clay several times,” and he wrote to his mother that the famous Kentucky senator “desired to be very kindly remembered to you, and to Father Meech.”²⁹

Back home from the Baltimore trip, DeWitt attended the October opening of the state legislative session in Montpelier, where he captured a major patronage prize: election by the Whig-dominated upper chamber as secretary of the Vermont Senate. The position submerged him in the Senate’s three-to-four-week sessions every fall for the next ten years.

For these annual October legislative gatherings, it became his custom to occupy a room in Montpelier at the Pavilion Hotel next door to

the capitol, usually room no. 25. The gregarious Clarke's perpetually open door made no. 25 a boisterous center for each legislative session's political gossip, attracting both friends and visitors. Included were many of "those having business in which they were interested before the Legislature,"³⁰ as well as influential members of the legislative and executive branches. The small village of Montpelier, according to Clarke, had "the reputation of being the loneliest village in New England."³¹ But during the short legislative sessions it swarmed with lawmakers, lobbyists, and hangers-on, lodging in the town's inns and rooming houses, and Clarke's hotel room there was known as an oasis of convivial society.

In these circumstances Clarke found himself acting as an inside player at the upper levels of state politics and establishing personal acquaintances and influential relationships with Vermont's political and economic power wielders. Clarke had a gift for friendships. ("He was from a child always deeply attached to his friends," according to his mother.)³² In the 1840s, he numbered in his youthful circle ex-governor Charles Paine and others, but none more dear than Frederick Billings, the Vermont secretary of civil and military affairs during the 1840s and future railroad magnate. "Him we know," Clarke once wrote, "as the clouds know the rain!"³³ Billings's feelings were reciprocal. Writing to Clarke in 1847, he spoke of their knowing each other "so well" that "we can really meet and mingle, only up in the blue ether."³⁴

During the 1840 presidential election drive—the raucous "hard cider and log cabin campaign" that pitted the Whig ticket of William Henry Harrison and John Tyler against the incumbent Democrat, President Martin Van Buren—Clarke epitomized the new Vermont Whig Party's exuberant, aggressive spirit.³⁵ A witness later recalled that Clarke entertained his Brandon neighbors "by singing Whig songs from the platform around the pump in front of the taverns."³⁶

Singing political campaign songs, often extemporaneous and containing many verses, was characteristic of the new politics of the period and Clarke emerged as Vermont's leading Whig (and later Republican) singer/poet. The importance invested in this form of campaign expression is apparent in a letter written on March 21, 1844, to Democratic power broker and editor, Charles G. Eastman, who was also a leading Green Mountain State purveyor of light verse. The letter writer urged Eastman to "Write more [songs] . . . and send them on for the people must sing and if we suffer them to sing Whig doggerel when you can give them good poetry we ought to be crucified."³⁷

The rowdy 1840 campaign climaxed in a sweeping victory for Harrison in Vermont, and in the nation. Clarke's stepfather Ezra Meech and



DeWitt Clinton Clarke, from History of Saint Joseph Parish, Burlington, Vermont, 1830–1987, edited by Robert G. Keene and Rev. Francis R. Privé (Burlington, Vt.: History Committee of Saint Joseph Parish, 1988). The original source for this image is not identified.

his former business associate John Conant served as Vermont electors for the triumphant Whig ticket. “Laus Deo!” Clarke wrote in his diary on March 4, 1841, the day “Old Tippicanoe” took the oath of presidential office. Reflecting on the year just passed, the exhausted Clarke described it as a time “abounding in great processes and great results politically, at least.” “The busiest year of my whole life,” he added. “It will be remembered and I have helped to make it memorable, in the political annals.”³⁸

Clarke’s record of tireless community service and enthusiastic, faithful party work during the campaign led state Whig leaders to see to it that he was rewarded after the election. The reward came from Harrison’s new postmaster general, who named Clarke to the position of postmaster at Brandon, Vermont. (Clarke’s job at the Conant Iron Works had ended on March 31.)

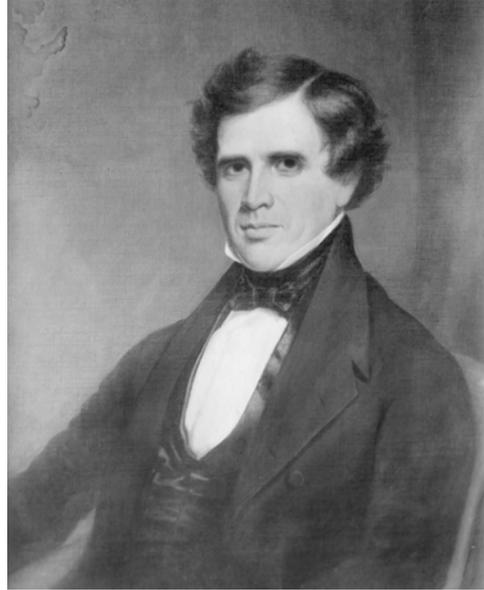
However, events (some of his own making) intervened to deny Clarke his appointment. Harrison, to whom Clarke owed the Brandon position, died after only one month in office. As a result, the presidency went to Harrison’s vice president, John Tyler of Virginia, states-rights former Democrat whose philosophical credentials as a Whig were suspect. In subsequent weeks, national Whig skepticism of Tyler’s leadership mounted when the new president opposed party-backed tariff and banking bills. In Vermont, Clarke was among Tyler’s doubters. At the 1842 Whig state convention, Clarke applied his caustic wit in offering a resolution “That we bestowed but a timid confidence upon John Tyler,

in the beginning, and that this confidence has marvelously decreased, upon better acquaintance; that from his calamitous accession to the Presidency, to the present time, his official course has been distinguished by inconsistency of conduct, instability of purpose, and imbecility of mind.”³⁹ Clarke’s resolution rousingly concluded that Tyler was “a weak, vacillating, contemptible despot.”⁴⁰ The Tyler administration responded to these comments by promptly firing him from his job as Brandon’s postmaster. Clarke took the turn of events in stride. According to the Brandon ex-appointee, “I lost my post office quicker than you could say *spat*.”⁴¹

Within a year, Vermont Whigs replaced Clarke’s lost national patronage with a “better office” derived from state-level spoils. Governor Charles Paine appointed Clarke to the position of Vermont quartermaster general, an office with only intermittent duties that he occupied for the next nine years. This appointment also earned him the rank of brigadier general in the Vermont militia and the title “General” with which he was customarily addressed during the rest of his life. To friends and acquaintances this seemed an appropriate identity for Clarke, who possessed a “carriage” and physical appearance that were notable. He stood six feet two inches in height, with broad shoulders, dark eyes, quickness of movement, and a long, commanding stride. He stepped “like an army officer. . . ready, springy and self exultant.”⁴²

Clarke’s finances continued to be unstable, however. After the iron company folded, he had renewed his law practice and gained admittance to the bar in Rutland County. However, the early 1840s was a period when “railroad fever” afflicted most of the state’s public leaders, and Clarke was soon drawn away from private law practice and into the politics of railroad construction. His political contacts and skills gained him appointment, in the spring of 1845, as chief lobbyist and emissary in the Boston office of Timothy Follett’s Rutland & Burlington Railroad, of which he himself was a small stockholder.⁴³ Operating out of the Tremont House in Boston from late May until early October, he competed with E. P. Walton of Montpelier, who was serving as “the resident agent in Boston”⁴⁴ of the Rutland road’s main rival, the Vermont Central railroad, as they canvassed stock subscriptions for the two roads. Walton was also editor of the Montpelier *Watchman*, the Vermont Central’s principle newspaper voice.

Also spending much of that summer doing railroading in Boston was former Vermont governor—and Clarke’s former benefactor—Charles Paine. With Walton, Paine extolled the benefits of the Vermont Central, which he presided over as company president. At issue was a determination of which of the two roads provided the best route for



*Charles Paine, two-term
governor of Vermont
(1841 and 1842), and
president of the Vermont
Central Railroad.*

gaining the Boston and New York City markets for the agricultural and industrial products of western Vermont. An example of this propaganda competition was an article in the *Rutland Herald* that summer, signed “Otter Creek,” but almost certainly written by Clarke, depicting the Vermont Central’s efforts as “corrupt,” and offering the following poem, lamenting the purported probable fate of those who would purchase Vermont Central stock subscriptions:

In *Paine* they trusted, as a leader
To show to all, their road a feeder
In *pain*, their road will be suspended;
Begun by *Paine*, and in *pain* ended.”⁴⁵

Many years later Walton described the significance of his and Clarke’s activities during that Boston summer. The two men had been “employed in discussing, through the daily newspapers of Boston, the advantages of the two routes, as well as the indispensable importance of either to Boston should not the other succeed. The discussion was ardent and exhaustive, developing two zealous parties in Boston and vicinity, and along the two competing lines in Vermont, which secured the construction ultimately of both roads. The capitalists of Boston were at that time far from appreciating the importance of the western trade, and it is believed that but for that discussion neither road would

have been constructed for some years at least. The results, however, were, that both secured capital for organization in 1845, and both were speedily constructed.”⁴⁶

Clarke’s service in behalf of the Rutland road surprisingly did not damage the close relationship he enjoyed for many years with former governor Paine. This is evident from Paine’s inclusion of Clarke as his guest on the special train that opened the Vermont Central’s tracks from Montpelier to Lebanon, New Hampshire, in 1848. During that historic railroad trip, Clarke wrote and sang a celebratory “Railroad Song” for the occasion. With liquor flowing freely, Clarke’s song was sung “tolerably often” en route and was later published, to good response, in the *Boston Atlas*.⁴⁷

During his efforts in 1845 in behalf of the Rutland road, Clarke developed a close relationship with H. B. Stacey, also a staunch advocate of the Rutland route’s primacy in the state, and the owner and editor of the *Burlington Free Press*.⁴⁸ Clarke had acquired an interest in journalism during the 1840 presidential race when, as one of his tasks for the Brandon Whig Association, he had edited the campaign newspaper, the *Rutland and Addison County Whig*. Begun in March 1840, the newspaper’s life had been brief, lasting little longer than the campaign itself, but it marked Clarke’s initiation to journalism.⁴⁹ And it was considered by observers to have been a sensational effort.⁵⁰ One local historian recorded that Clarke’s product earned “the reputation of being the most vigorous and spicy newspaper ever printed in Vermont” and wondered that Clarke had not been “sued for malicious slander.”⁵¹

Now, six years later, Clarke decided to become a full-time journalist. In July 1846 he purchased the *Free Press* from his friend Stacey, took over its editorship, and abandoned Brandon for Burlington. Clarke’s decision was likely influenced by his ongoing need for a settled job, but also his enthusiasm for politics, his love of the written word, and his desire to live nearer his beloved mother, who resided a few miles south of Burlington, in Shelburne. In taking Stacey’s offer, Clarke probably also was aware that he was embracing a livelihood that could be made to complement his zest for civic involvement and his Whig belief system, and one that placed him continually in an agreeable social milieu. During the next fifteen years, Clarke earned a place as one of the state’s most talented and combative journalists.⁵²

Clarke’s *Free Press* had been founded in 1827 by Lyman Foote, a Burlington lawyer. Stacey, the paper’s printer, joined Foote as co-owner a year later and by 1833 Stacey had become the paper’s sole proprietor. Under his guidance its readership, a Whig audience, gradually surpassed Burlington’s only other newspaper, the *Sentinel* (begun in

1801), and by the late 1830s the *Free Press* had become “one of the most influential” of the approximately twenty weekly newspapers published in the state.⁵³

From the 1830s through the 1850s, local newspaper editors, while not the principal leaders of their towns, were nevertheless, in most cases, figures of significance and influence. Historian Bernard Weisberger has described these early American editors as “adventurous, self-centered, and articulate—not giants perhaps, but certainly originals.”⁵⁴ However, in his biography of New York newspaper editor, James Watson Webb, historian James L. Crouthamel is less diplomatic in describing early newspaper men. He characterizes the journalism of the pre-Civil War era as “not for the aesthete.” The editors, he concludes, were “a boisterous, crude, outspoken, brawling group. . . . Rival editors would curse each other, post one another as scoundrels, liars, or cowards. . . . [and] sue fellow editors for libel or assault.”⁵⁵ It was a fraternity in which DeWitt Clinton Clarke was comfortable and more than able to hold his own. And in an era when Vermont’s newspaper circulation, per capita, was one of the highest of all the states, Clarke emerged as a significant state and regional figure. His financial footing as a journalist, nevertheless, failed to draw to him the support of backers with deep pockets needed for the stability and profitability he continually sought.

Clarke’s purchase price for the *Free Press* apparently had been \$5,000.⁵⁶ To help manage the transaction, he likely used the approximately five hundred dollars earned from Follett while lobbying for the Burlington & Rutland railroad in Boston.⁵⁷ His only other reliable financial sources at the time seem to have been his approximately two hundred dollar annual salary as quartermaster general⁵⁸ and his yearly salary of two hundred and fifty dollars as secretary of the Vermont state senate.⁵⁹ He was forced to borrow funds to pay for significant start-up expenses that included the cost of new font type for the paper. The new font, he explained in soliciting the loan, was needed to “give éclat to my first number.”⁶⁰

Clarke, the ex-lawyer, ex-iron company entrepreneur, and familiar State House personage, moved easily into the *Free Press* editorship. With a weekly run of only about 200 copies and a four-page format, he managed the paper with a small staff that included, in addition to Clarke, a printer and a few helpers to handle advertising, subscriptions, and job work. As a one-man editorial staff, he wrote all the local material himself except when the legislature was in session. During those legislative periods he was busy in Montpelier as clerk of the senate, necessitating that he find annual temporary replacements.

In fact, however, neither his, nor other, newspapers of the time contained much “local news,” which in small towns was most often a

category of information circulated by word of mouth. Newspaper editors consequently augmented their partisan editorial columns with only a few community originated items and with more news of regional and national interest clipped out of newspapers published in Boston, New York City, Baltimore, or Albany. The rest of the paper's news columns typically were filled with extracts from agricultural periodicals, speeches by nationally prominent political figures, and serialized installments of English or American novels. Advertising customarily occupied between thirty and forty-five percent of each issue.

Many of the state's editors, like H. B. Stacey, were actually printers by trade and often lacked skills or flair in writing, but Clarke was an exception. He was a gifted stylist. "His pen mixed the ingredients that made a happy and popular editor," Abby Hemenway wrote of him. "The little locals, accidents and incidents, he had peculiarly the agreeable art to handle in a way that amused everybody, and offended no one."⁶¹ Yet Clarke wanted to produce a paper with a Whig political message. So his editorial columns were outspoken and combative, and he early found himself in fierce quarrels, in print, with other editors. The *Free Press* quickly came to be a reflection of Clarke's personality.

His spirited editorial exchanges most often involved the Burlington *Sentinel*, the *Free Press*'s most consistent rival for readership. In 1845, the *Sentinel* was not only the town's sole other newspaper but also the leading Democratic paper in the state. Other targets of Clarke's barbs were the *Liberty Herald* (later, *Liberty Gazette*), published in Burlington from 1846 to 1848, and the *Free Soil Courier* (which eventually merged with the *Liberty Gazette*), published from 1848 to 1853. Clarke once described himself as "very sanguine and savage . . . in my political opinions," and the *Sentinel*'s editor once denounced him as a "whith [sic]-livered, malignant poltroon." Nevertheless, at least one of Clarke's contemporaries insisted that his attacks, unlike those of many other of the state's editors, were seldom personal. Because of his temperament, according to his obituary writer, he "never retained malice."⁶²

Clarke understood from the outset that his newspaper's primary audience was the Whigs of the Burlington area.⁶³ He issued to that audience his first number of the *Free Press* on July 10, 1846. In it, Stacey used a few paragraphs to "introduce" the new editor to *Free Press* readers, saying that Clarke was "already too well known to the people of this state to require any endorsement from me. As a gentleman of talent and a scholar, he ranks among the first, and . . . possesses those peculiar qualifications which fit him for the duties of an editor."⁶⁴ Clarke then followed with his initial column, in which he sketched "the future course of this paper." He told readers it would be "the organ of the

Whig party in Vermont,” forthrightly committed to “enforce and illustrate Whig principles, and to opposing the favorite and distinctive dogmas of the party which calls itself ‘Democratic’.”⁶⁵

National Whiggery in the 1840s, however, was so faction ridden that its true “principles” were the subject of dispute. Clarke dealt with this situation of ambiguous party ideology by selecting those issues clearly congenial to the party’s northeastern wing. He embraced Henry Clay’s “American System,” championing the protective tariff (“for the reasonable protection of home industry”), the Bank of the United States (for “the management of the National Finances and Domain”), and internal improvements (that is, “river and harbor improvements for the promotion of the interests of internal Commerce and Trade, etc.”).⁶⁶

Clarke also added his editorial voice to the era’s spirit of reform, but he endorsed a moderate pathway to social change that was common among northeastern Whigs. As a good Whig with a regionally calibrated platform, he viewed many of the era’s reformers and proposed reforms as too extreme. Thus, he editorially urged the abolition of slavery and denounced efforts to expand the “peculiar institution” into the western territories. But he also criticized the antislavery Liberty Party for its single-issue focus,⁶⁷ and denounced William Lloyd Garrison as a political fanatic who stirred up “contentions and enmities at home by the most impracticable and exasperating theorizings.”⁶⁸ And he attacked the American Antislavery Society as “the most odious, abominable, and disgraceful focus of villainy, fanaticism, and treason that ever outraged an enlightened and tolerant age!”⁶⁹ When, in 1848, the nomination of the slaveholder Zachary Taylor split the Whig party, causing one group to move into the Free Soil camp, Clarke stayed with his party, editorializing lamely: “A man may be a slave-holder, but it doesn’t follow that he is altogether the lowest demagogue in the world.”⁷⁰ Yet, he was able strongly to denounce the equally divisive “1850 Compromise” legislation, asserting that “the great Whig heart of the Country is opposed to their ‘compromises’ and their temporizing with the spirit of slavery aggression.”⁷¹

On other issues, too, New England Whig moderation appeared to be his guide. He backed increased rights for women, but ridiculed female “extremists” who wore trousers or attempted to engage in business or trade.⁷² He sympathized with a group of Irish railroad workers near Bolton, Vermont, who had gone on strike after laying rails along the track. But, again, he sought a middle way. Although they had done the work but not been paid, Clarke reasoned that the workers’ strike was unlawful. Thus, he denounced “all illegal combinations for the purpose of redressing even *real* wrongs.”⁷³

Clarke invariably used his paper's columns for occasional community boosterism. He enthusiastically encouraged support for the local Handel and Hayden Society, the Lyceum, bookstores, and charities, and for expansion of hotel facilities and travelers' accommodations. He pushed hard for area enterprise and industry, promoting a proposal to move the State House from Montpelier to Burlington, and championing the interests of the Rutland Railroad, an issue that put the *Free Press* in combat with the interests of E. P. Walton's Montpelier *Watchman* and the Vermont Central line.⁷⁴

In return for Clarke's support of projects favored by area Whigs, local party leaders handed him occasional patronage rewards. In a journal entry, Clarke expressed satisfaction that "Mr. Hodges and Judge Follett sent for two hundred extra copies of the paper for circulation among the members [of the legislature] to enlighten them on the subject of the canal and bridging the lake."⁷⁵

Clarke's vigorous local boosterism, his main-line Whiggery, and his wit and personal flair initially appeared to be keeping the *Free Press* on sound economic footing. The financial signs had been hopeful. "The business in my office seems to accumulate," he wrote to his wife, Caro, "and every moment that our presses are free from the papers, they are busy with jobs."⁷⁶ After one year with the paper he glowingly reported to readers a fifty percent increase in his subscription list and "increased patronage . . . [in] all of the business departments of the office." In this spirit of apparent prosperity, he announced a reduction in the paper's subscription price, from \$3.00 to \$2.50 for village carrier subscribers, per year. He also announced that the *Free Press* Company had acquired a new rotary press that would enable the printing department to "execute ordinary job work with much greater dispatch, and in better style, than heretofore."⁷⁷

Appearances were misleading, however. Almost from the beginning, Clarke struggled to satisfy his creditors, and a few months after his upbeat public assessment, he privately acknowledged that the paper was providing him "a good deal of anxiety." "My secretariship [of the Vermont state senate], paper, and military affairs [quartermaster general's responsibilities] . . . present me with a tolerably formidable array of business demands upon my time," he confided to Caro.⁷⁸

The demands were especially severe each fall during legislative sessions when his time was consumed by the duties of senate secretary, which included writing and getting the journal published. In a letter home from Montpelier, he described one of his days as senate clerk: "Yesterday (as you know I have always adhered to my determination to stick to my seat til I had my journal up) I was in my chair, writing

almost incessantly, from two in the afternoon till quarter to eleven at night.”⁷⁹ On another occasion he described himself as having “to work here like a galley-slave.”⁸⁰ In still another letter to Caro, this one at the height of the legislative session, he complained, “I have to write so much, just now, with my journal and my paper, that I almost shudder at the sight of pen, ink, and paper.”⁸¹

Clarke nevertheless continually allowed himself to be diverted—“conscripted”—to ghost-write articles and speeches for legislators or lobbyists involved in the session’s various legislative skirmishes. He even agreed to write a speech that was to be delivered by one of his arch political foes—of the “loco foco” stripe—who had been asked by the governor to speak at a distinctively “ceremonial” occasion, but whose skills were inadequate for the task.⁸²

Clarke urged Caro nevertheless not to “disquiet” herself “about my affairs.” “I shall not fail to be able to make my arrangements so as to meet my payments. I am sure my expenditures are not extravagant, and certainly the income of my office, due now, is very considerably more than everything I owe. If with this and a constantly increasing business, as you know, I cannot get along, I ought to give up.”⁸³

Clarke’s most ambitious step in trying to improve his newspaper’s competitive position was his decision in the spring of 1848 to launch a daily edition of the *Free Press*. Although the paper’s weekly edition, with 692 subscribers, led all weekly newspapers in town circulation, that spring it had suffered a loss of one hundred in its subscriptions from a year earlier, and it trailed the total county circulation of both the *Liberty Gazette* (c. 753) and the combined weekly and daily circulation of the *Sentinel*, which had also begun a daily addition, at 2 cents a copy, in March of the same year. Clarke, meanwhile, asserted in print that the *Sentinel* had been able to pull ahead of the *Free Press* only because a “loco-foco paper lately defunct in St. Albans” had its subscription list taken over by the *Sentinel*. Clarke concluded that a daily edition of the *Free Press* might give him the edge he needed.⁸⁴

Launching a daily newspaper had become possible because of the extension to Burlington in February 1848 of the lines of the Troy & Canada Junction Telegraph Company, of which Clarke had made himself an “active stockholder.”⁸⁵ The line established connections between Burlington and New York City, giving access to an expanded source of news to fill the pages of a daily paper. Also included in Clarke’s calculations for launching the daily was the expanding population of Burlington, which, at 7,000, was the state’s largest town. In addition, he anticipated the arrival by 1849 of rail lines to Burlington from both the Rutland and Vermont Central railroads, through which he hoped to expand the *Free Press*’s circulation over a larger part of the state.

Clarke, nevertheless, struck a note of business fatalism in his announcement of plans for the daily paper. Emphasizing its modest cost to potential future readers, he wrote that at \$4.00 “the price at which it is afforded is so small as to preclude the expectation of profit without such patronage as appears at present at least, little likelihood to be bestowed upon the enterprise.”⁸⁶

He was not wrong. The paper’s first issue arrived at readers’ homes on April 1, 1848, and Clarke soon found that despite the telegraph’s aid he was not only taxed to produce adequate copy for his new daily—especially when the legislature was in session—but that the new paper proved to be of no help in alleviating his financial woes. On April 2, 1849, after one year of daily publication, Clarke confided to readers that the effort had “pretty nearly made an end of us,” and suggested that Burlington’s citizenry did not really desire a daily newspaper, much less two. (The rival *Sentinel* had entered the daily field in January 1849,⁸⁷ and the combined circulation of the two dailies, by 1850 was only 450. In 1852, the *Sentinel* gave up on its daily). “We believe,” Clarke declared, that “our ‘kind patrons’ have about reconciled their consciences to acquiesce in the dogmas that consign country Editors, poor devils! to a labor like that of Sisyphus—hard and profitless.” He claimed that after paying the cost of paper, fuel, lights, presswork, and carrying fees, the compensation from a subscriber’s \$4.00 annual payment was less than 20 cents.⁸⁸

“We don’t believe,” he wrote, “that respectable and sensible people in other callings or avocations, would work as hard as we have done, during the past year, without some little pecuniary . . . compensation.” Nevertheless, he pledged to continue. “[W]e don’t mean to stop it now,” he concluded, “we shall stop—when we get ready, and without further notice.” Describing himself and other “country editors” as “pack mules in the great March of Life,” Clarke told readers he could “get along without a daily paper . . . We have no rich relations, and cannot afford to print a paper . . . for the love of it.”⁸⁹

Despite the hints of approaching insolvency, Clarke nevertheless appeared to many of his acquaintances as a pillar of prosperous stability. According to the 1850 U.S. Census, in which his occupation was identified as “lawyer and editor of *Free Press*,” Clarke claimed real estate holdings of four thousand dollars.⁹⁰ In that same year a local minister, to whom Clarke apparently had given a financial contribution, described the *Free Press* editor as a “rich” man “in every sense,” including his “purse.”⁹¹

Clarke’s anxiety to increase the *Free Press*’s competitiveness and readership—and thus its profitability—was unceasing. In July 1851 he

greeted an advantageous new federal postal law by asserting his “hope to find our already handsome subscription list constantly increasing.” He told readers that he planned “to very soon enlarge our Daily, so that, in *appearance* at least, it shall be respectable.”⁹² That same month, partially in an effort to ease his personal work burden, he brought in Elliot E. Kellogg as an “associate proprietor, and editor.” The addition of Kellogg enabled Clarke to enlarge the daily *Free Press* by “about four columns of additional matter,” and he took the occasion to raise carrier subscription rates by fifty cents per year. Clarke hoped by these moves to “secure to us a wider patronage” in the congressional district and “over the Lake.”⁹³

Within three months, however, he was again publicly lamenting his journalistic ordeal, comparing the country newspaper editor to the Southern slave, and declaring, “Unrewarded servitude in an Editor’s den is in direct contravention of the first postulate of the Declaration of Independence.”⁹⁴

New financial advantages beckoned as he responded to the financial pressures. He briefly explored launching an agricultural periodical with Casper Hopkins, a son of Vermont Episcopal Bishop John Henry Hopkins.⁹⁵ In March 1848, a prospectus for the *Vermont Agriculturist* was published at Burlington, but nothing came of the effort.⁹⁶

Clarke also doggedly pursued a “claim on the Rutland Railroad Company” relating to his service to the company in Boston during the summer of 1845. He traveled to Boston in this regard on at least one occasion to meet with one of the directors—a “Mr. Rice”—who had been “very supportive” in the past. Writing to Caro, he alluded to dissent among the directors on the issue. Mr. Rice, he asserted, had “always over-estimated the value of my exertions in behalf of the railroad in 1845 though not half so much as our excellent friend and cousin [John Conant] in Brandon has always under-rated them.” After much delay, the railroad’s directors finally settled the issue by allowing Clarke “assessments on his stock, for services in Boston promoting there the interests of this corporation.”⁹⁷

He gained additional income by using his authority as senate secretary to contract with his own *Free Press* company to print the senate journal in 1849, 1850, and 1851. This apparently occurred even though Clarke was required by law to follow a process that included receiving proposals from printers, after which the job was to be given to the individuals “who shall offer the best terms of publication, taking into consideration the price, style of execution and time in which the work is to be printed and delivered.”⁹⁸ Even with these contracts, however, he was forced to borrow money in order to complete the jobs. No other

significant public printing contract came his way. To make matters worse, in 1850 his arch-competitor, the *Sentinel*, received the state's contract for printing the proceedings of that year's constitutional convention.

Out of public view, Clarke considered more drastic remedies for his financial problems. In 1848 and 1849, as he colorfully wrung his hands over the fate of his daily *Free Press*, he privately engaged in extended and eventually unsuccessful efforts to gain for himself a federal appointment as clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives, apparently viewing the job as a possible final solution for his financial problems. Clarke had explored his prospects for a federal clerkship on one previous occasion, in 1841, after the Brandon iron company's collapse. In that instance, however, he had yielded to the judgment of his stepfather Meech, who possessed familiarity with Washington through his years serving in the House. Although suggesting he might be able to "obtain" for Clarke a federal clerkship at the national capitol, he advised his stepson against actually accepting such a position, which he implied entailed onerous working conditions. According to Clarke's journal, Father Meech told him that the appointment "would be worth ten or twelve hundred dollars" and that "I should be obliged to be there at all times, and, at the beck and call of the head." Clarke's journal continued, "I can do better by staying in good old Vermont, and shall not leave it, unless for very sufficient inducement." The clerkship, finally, would "furnish nothing more than a bare living, for which I would have to work rather too manfully."⁹⁹

Now, in the fall of 1848, following the Whig presidential victory of Zachary Taylor, Clarke, while telling Caro "I never felt better in my life," confided to her that he had decided to make a serious bid for the House clerkship.¹⁰⁰ He relied for advice this time not on his stepfather Meech but on Vermont U.S. Senator Solomon Foote, with whom Clarke had served on the Rutland County Whig Committee ten years earlier, and who encouraged him to try for the post. Foote advised his old friend in 1849 that to gain the clerkship, an office acquired through election by the House membership, he would need sponsorship by Vermont's congressional delegation. He would also need to gain the near unanimous endorsement of important state-level Whig voices, and to win the backing of House leaders from regions outside New England, an effort that could only succeed through personal lobbying in Washington. Clarke consequently spent much time that winter and spring in the nation's capital, heeding Foote's advice that the candidate "who has the most extensive personal acquaintance has a decided advantage." Included in his Washington rounds was a meeting with President Zachary Taylor.¹⁰¹

In his campaign Clarke easily won the support of the state's party leadership. The many years he had spent establishing contacts and cultivating friendships, earning good will, and accruing obligations from noteworthy Vermonters now served him well. Despite his wide support, however, he ultimately failed in 1849 to win the House clerkship vote, losing to a candidate with broader backing in midwestern states.

In the months following his failed clerkship effort, Clarke and his wife experienced turbulence of a more personal nature that, in its intensity, likely rivaled their fiscal woes and political frustrations. In October 1849, influenced by friends and acquaintances from her years as a resident in Troy, New York, Caro underwent a religious experience and became a convert to the Roman Catholic faith. She brought her artistic talent to the new commitment, painting the back altar picture for St. Mary's church in Burlington and contributing poetry to the *New York Tribune*, among other publications. She published a novel in 1857, *Lizzie Maitland*, which was praised by Orestes Brownson in the book's introduction. Brownson, a prominent figure in New England transcendentalist circles, had himself become a convert to Catholicism in 1844.¹⁰²

A month after his wife's conversion, Clarke also embraced Catholicism, "becoming," according to one observer, "more of a Catholic than his wife—had more faith."¹⁰³ Throughout his adult life, Clarke had been a regular church attendant, variously, at Episcopal (serving as a junior warden), Baptist, and Methodist services at Brandon, Burlington, and Montpelier. Along the way he had made occasional strong criticism of Roman Catholicism, but had been baptised into no denomination. However, during a period of months in 1849 his wife persuaded him to read several "Catholic books," especially the writings of St. Francis, and in response, "he became interested and convinced." "He could not read and not become one," his mother later said.¹⁰⁴

Clarke's conversion to Roman Catholicism appears to have been, in fact, an extraordinary act of courage for a person whose livelihood and social well-being depended heavily on maintenance of a favorable public presence. It came at a time of intensified anti-Catholic feeling in Vermont and the nation, fanned by a large influx into the country of Catholic Irish immigrants, and finding expression in the Know Nothing political movement.

The anti-Catholic controversy intensified the reaction within his family and among groups in the public at large, in response to news of DeWitt's and Caro's conversion. He acknowledged to his mother that their action "would inflict pain and regret upon your heart, and distress to Father Meech."¹⁰⁵ Members of the Meech family, in particular,

treated Clarke “with unkindness and contempt,”¹⁰⁶ and Father Meech made it known that he was “violently opposed” to the Catholic religion.¹⁰⁷ A measure of the Clarkes’ personal sacrifice is apparent in the experience of his mother who, fifteen years later, converted to Catholicism and in so doing discovered she was not able to “retain” her “choice and intimate friends.”¹⁰⁸

DeWitt and Caro Clarke’s conversion to Catholicism was not, however, altogether unique for the period. The rector of the Episcopal church in St. Albans, Rev. William H. Hoyt, became a Catholic convert in 1846, an early participant in what became known as the Vermont version of England’s Oxford Movement, which led to decisions by approximately fifty additional converts over the next few years to embrace Catholicism.¹⁰⁹

It is not clear what impact Clarke’s religious convictions had on his standing as a Vermont journalist and political operative. He certainly did not try to hide his allegiances. When in Montpelier for legislative sessions he attended Mass in that community’s modest, makeshift Catholic chapel. He spoke out editorially in the *Free Press* against “the practice of making our religious opinions party tests.” He used his influence in the state senate and house to gain the loan of state-owned land near the capitol for a Catholic house of worship.¹¹⁰

Events during the 1851 state legislative session, meanwhile, intensified Clarke’s financial distress. During that session his job as quartermaster general, and its annual salary, vanished with the passage of a bill requiring that the position be filled by legislative vote in joint assembly, rather than by gubernatorial appointment.¹¹¹ Also in that period, Clarke brought to an end his eleven-year reign as secretary of the Vermont senate, and its accompanying annual salary, having decided during the previous fall not to return for another term. (This decision likely did not reflect a Catholic-tainted new political weakness, because during that same session the annual Whig Legislative State Convention chose to elect Clarke as secretary for the occasion, as had long been customary for that event.) Clarke took the step of resigning his senate secretarial duties as part of his effort to devote more time to his financially strapped newspaper. In a letter to Caro from Montpelier, he wrote that the amount of time taken up by the secretary’s job was “a real sacrifice,” but that by freeing himself of that office’s responsibilities he would henceforth be “laboring to get completely out of debt, and to make you happy. I shall do it.”¹¹²

Clarke’s renewed commitment to ending his personal money woes did not ease his financial distress. By late 1852, although the archrival *Sentinel* had ceased publishing its daily paper earlier that year, Clarke’s

financial status, and that of the *Free Press*, reached a point of desperation. The end finally came in April 1853, when Clarke sold the *Free Press* to George W. Benedict, a former professor at the University of Vermont, and his son, George G. Benedict. Shortly thereafter, according to a notice published in the *Free Press*, he put at auction his household goods, including furniture, stoves, carpeting, and “several fine framed Engravings, books, pamphlets, etc.” The auction notice declared that “Everything not previously disposed of at private sale will be sold without reserve.”¹¹³ Within a few days he and Caro—they had no children—were gone from Burlington and the state of Vermont for what would be a remarkable and tragic interlude in Texas.

The occasion for the Clarkes’ sojourn to the distant Texas frontier was the invitation DeWitt received to join a railway expedition headed by former Vermont Governor Charles Paine that also included DeWitt’s uncle, Orville Clark, who was a New York State lawyer and businessman, and Philip Greely, Jr., a Boston businessman who once served as collector for the Port of Boston. Paine planned his expedition for a stay in Texas of no more than three or four months. The trip’s stated purpose was to gather information to advise the New York-based Atlantic & Pacific Railroad Company (A&P) regarding the feasibility of a projected rail route through Texas along the 32nd parallel that would connect Mississippi River railheads with the Pacific Ocean. In fact, however, the expedition’s central goal was to attract political and financial support for construction of the A&P road. DeWitt’s role in the delegation seems to have been primarily in this regard—as publicist in the railroad promotional efforts. Thus, as the group moved across Texas from Galveston, on the coast, then to Houston and further inland to Austin, they dispatched letters to newspapers across the eastern United States, and also provided presentations and statements to interested Texans about the ease and practicality of the proposed Texas route for completing the intercontinental railroad.¹¹⁴

Paine’s unexpected death, from dysentery, on July 6, 1853, at the little frontier village of Waco, disrupted the tour. Within weeks all members of the delegation, except Clarke and Caro, had retreated to Galveston and departed the state. The Clarkes remained in Texas, with DeWitt continuing to beat the drum for the foundering A&P project and for other rail ventures in the state on behalf of a group of speculators that included his uncle Orville Clark, former Texas Attorney General Ebenezer Allen, and others. The A&P and other projects eventually collapsed, leaving DeWitt marooned without further prospects in the state or the means for returning to Vermont.

It was this situation that prompted Clarke, reluctant but “homesick,”

to write to Ezra Meech for help. He asked for a loan of five hundred dollars that could provide the means for his and Caro's return. To assure Meech of repayment, Clarke pledged one of the few possessions he had been unwilling to auction in April—his personal library. Although his stepfather reacted with dismay at what he viewed as his stepson's "Texas failure," he nevertheless grudgingly dispatched the money, telling DeWitt's mother that he would "give it . . . instead of remembering him in his will." In the spring of 1856, DeWitt and Caro finally made their return to Vermont.¹¹⁵

Back home in Burlington, Clarke quickly set about financially reestablishing himself. By the fall of 1856 he "found business to go into." Also, according to his mother, "DeWitt succeeded partly to make and partly to borrow money to make . . . payments" for the purchase of a house near the town's market district. Caro raised additional funds for the family by giving music lessons, and his mother, who moved into the house with them in the fall after the death of Judge Meech, contributed her surprisingly small widow's annuity.¹¹⁶

Clarke also quickly became immersed in civic and political affairs, reestablishing old affiliations and connections. Within days of his return he gained election as a delegate from Shelburne to the Vermont Constitutional Convention gathering in January 1857. He was elected secretary for these proceedings, which earned historical notoriety for rejecting an ordinance of the Council of Censors in 1855–1856 (dominated by the American Party, also known as the Know Nothings) that promoted proportional representation by calling for election of ninety delegates to the Constitutional Convention apportioned by county by population rather than by town.¹¹⁷

The most important step in his "return" came on April 8, 1858, when he issued the prospectus for a new newspaper, the *Burlington Times*, with daily and weekly editions, owned and edited by Clarke. On May 18, the first issue rolled off the presses. With the old Whig party now dismantled in the state, Clarke editorially embraced its successor, the new Republican Party. The *Times*' publication thus launched not only a subscription rivalry with the daily *Free Press*, his old paper, but also a struggle over which of the two would be the editorial voice of the region's Republican followers.

The *Free Press* editors initially greeted this new journalistic challenge in a superficially comradely way. They welcomed Clarke "again to the fraternity of the Press," but expressed "regret, on his account, that his success in the objects which have called him from the State for several years past has not been such as to prevent him from returning to the toilsome life of the editor of a small country Daily."¹¹⁸ The *Free Press*

editors observed that the “platform” of the *Times*, which Clarke published in the paper’s initial issue, did “not appear to differ from our own at present, enough to afford much promise of political sparring between the two Dailies.”¹¹⁹

Clarke promptly disabused his rival of any such expectations. He responded that the *Times* saw its job as filling “a want in the community that seemed to be imperfectly supplied.” The *Free Press*, he wrote, was in the grip of “morbid and chronic lifelessness.” Had it not been for that paper’s “extraordinary dullness and vacuity,” and its “grave inanity,” the *Times* would never have been started.¹²⁰

Clarke’s *Times* venture was an almost immediate popular success. During the fall 1858 legislative session the new newspaper claimed the same number of thirty-day subscribers among state legislators as the *Free Press*.¹²¹ Of more significance, by 1860 its general subscription list and circulation was “nearly double that of any other Daily paper in the State.”¹²² Nevertheless, the *Times* foundered. Perpetual shortages of funds kept it from competing successfully with the *Free Press*.¹²³ Shortfalls in advertising profits and the weakness of the *Times* weekly edition apparently contributed heavily to Clarke’s difficulties (the *Free Press* boasted 1,200 subscribers to its weekly number, compared to the *Times*’ 800). As T. D. Seymour Bassett has noted, Clarke quickly faced a situation in which “the cost of publishing a daily was . . . more than the income from subscriptions.”¹²⁴

For two years Clarke tried mightily to make a financial success of his newspaper, while admitting to his readers, “the life of the Editor of a Daily paper is of no little drudgery.”¹²⁵ Finally, in October 1860, with the regional and national economy faltering and his own financial obligations mounting, he sold the *Times* at auction to G. H. Bigelow, for \$950. Clarke kept the title of “editor” for a few months more, but by mid-March 1861 he had severed all connections with the paper.

In contrast to his previous departure from journalism, Clarke this time possessed a secure place to go. In early spring 1861 he accepted a position in Washington, D.C., as executive clerk of the U.S. Senate. Clarke had explored prospects for a federal clerkship on two previous occasions, both coming to naught. The chances for success in this bid for a Washington patronage job had been greatly improved with the November 1860 electoral victory that swept into power Abraham Lincoln and the Republicans. Clarke was politically well positioned in the competition for the appointment with a strong and lengthy record of political service—most recently as a member of the five-man Vermont slate of Lincoln presidential electors. With strong support again from Senator Foote, who now occupied the powerful position of Senate

president pro tempore, Clarke was able to acquire this “plum” Senate appointment.

The clerkship duties involved keeping the record of Senate actions on all treaties and nominations and publishing the record as the *Senate Executive Journals*. Such actions occurred in strict executive session, and the executive clerk’s office, near the senate floor, “was often compared to a bank, for its elaborate metal bars and large safes for protecting secret documents.”¹²⁶ It was a prestigious and highly sensitive post and Clarke’s acquisition of it was a signal tribute to the Vermont newspaperman.

Clarke and his wife traveled to Washington for each year’s Senate term, where they set up housekeeping in either the National Hotel or the Ebbett Hotel in the center of the city. Beyond his clerkship chores, he involved himself again in transcontinental railroad schemes and occasionally published eyewitness accounts in the *New York Times* of Civil War military engagements in the Baltimore-Washington area.¹²⁷ Of most importance personally for Clarke, the job was a financial windfall, assuring a “fine salary” for the first time in his life. He managed within a short period of time to complete payments on his Burlington home and to achieve, finally, genuine financial security.¹²⁸ He occupied the post until his retirement in 1869.

Clarke returned from Washington to Vermont, where he quickly again took up the activity of a “public man.” He campaigned for, and won, election to the Burlington school board of commissioners, and was a representative to the 1870 Vermont Constitutional Convention, which he served as secretary. A few months later, on August 31, 1870, he died at his home off Pearl Street at the center of Burlington.¹²⁹

Clarke’s life intersected the main currents of Vermont’s antebellum years. He was, by turns, a lawyer, businessman, journalist, public official, and—with his wife Caro—a notable participant in the period’s religious ferment. Through it all, however, his vocation, practically, remained that of a patronage politician. Clarke was not one of the era’s major public figures. He was, nevertheless, one of its persistent “public men,” a talented, exuberant, necessary political cog whose career offers a nexus for his times.

NOTES

¹ Abby Maria Hemenway, ed., *Vermont Historical Gazetteer. A Magazine Embracing a History of Each Town, Civil, Ecclesiastical, Biographical and Military* (various publishers, 1860–1892), 3: 1,856 (hereafter cited as *VHG*).

² Abby Maria Hemenway, *Clarke Papers, Mrs. Meech and her Family* (Burlington, Vt.: The Author, 1878), 81 (hereafter cited as *Clarke Papers*).

³ Hemenway, *VHG*, 3: 856.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

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- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 84–88.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 113–114.
- ¹² Jacob G. Ullery, *Men of Vermont: An Illustrated Biographical History of Vermonters and Sons of Vermonters* (Brattleboro, Vt.: Transcript Publishing Co. 1894), 145.
- ¹³ *Clarke Papers*, 53.
- ¹⁴ Ullery, *Men of Vermont*, 145.
- ¹⁵ Hiram Colton, *Genealogical and Family History of the State of Vermont* (Lewis Publishing Company, 1903), 2: 585.
- ¹⁶ *Clarke Papers*, 92, 93.
- ¹⁷ *Burlington Free Press*, 19 July 1849.
- ¹⁸ *Clarke Papers*, 56–58.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 119–120.
- ²⁰ Nelson, an army lieutenant, died in 1832, at age 24, in a duel at New Orleans.
- ²¹ *Clarke Papers*, 275, 252.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 197–98, 135.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 152, 148–49, 146.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 185.
- ²⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System; the Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780–1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 242.
- ²⁶ *Clarke Papers*, 194.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 233.
- ²⁸ Walter Hill Crockett, *Vermont, the Green Mountain State*, 5 vols. (New York: The Century History Company, 1921), 3: 306.
- ²⁹ *Clarke Papers*, 195.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 245.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 83.
- ³³ *Burlington Free Press*, 23 January 1849.
- ³⁴ *Clarke Papers*, 212–215.
- ³⁵ Crockett, *Vermont*, 3: 311.
- ³⁶ E. S. Marsh, “High Spots in Brandon History,” *Vermont* (July 1932): 154–55.
- ³⁷ Eastman Papers, box 41, 1844 folder; J. E. Dow to Eastman, 21 March 1844. Vermont Historical Society, Barre, Vt.
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- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 199–200.
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- ⁴¹ *Clarke Papers*, 203.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 204.
- ⁴³ Edward Chase Kirkland, *Men, Cities, and Transportation: A Study in New England History*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1948), 1: 167.
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- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 16 October 1845.
- ⁴⁶ E. P. Walton, ed., *Records of the Governor and Council of the State of Vermont* (Montpelier: J. & J. M. Poland, 1879), 7: 487.
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- ⁴⁹ M. D. Gilman, *The Bibliography of Vermont* (Burlington, Vt.: Free Press Association, 1897), 220.
- ⁵⁰ *Rutland Herald*, 10 March 1840.
- ⁵¹ Leon S. Gay, ed. *Brandon, Vermont: A History of the Town Dedicated to Its Citizens, 1761–1961* (Brandon: The Town, 1962), 204–205.
- ⁵² Gilman, *Bibliography of Vermont*, 212; Hemenway, *VHG*, 1: 554.
- ⁵³ Hemenway, *VHG*, 1: 554; T. D. Seymour Bassett, *The Growing Edge: Vermont Villages, 1840–1880* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1992), 104–106.
- ⁵⁴ Bernard Weisberger, *The American Newspaper Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 65–66.
- ⁵⁵ James L. Crouthamel, *James Watson Webb; A Biography* (Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), 15.

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⁵⁶ Clarke to “Nat,” 28 April 1846, in Timothy Follett papers, Stevens Collection, box 45, Vermont State Archives and Records Administration, Middlesex, Vt. (hereafter cited as Follett papers).

⁵⁷ *Clarke Papers*, 210.

⁵⁸ *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Vermont, October Session, 1845* (Windsor: Bishop & Tracy, 1846), 316.

⁵⁹ *Acts and Resolves Passed by the Legislature of the State of Vermont at Their October Session, 1839* (Montpelier: E. P. Walton and Sons, 1839), 9.

⁶⁰ Clarke to “Nat,” 28 April 1846.

⁶¹ *Clarke Papers*, 211.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 233; *Burlington Sentinel*, 28 October 1852; *Burlington Free Press*, 1 September 1870.

⁶³ Crouthamel, *James Watson Webb*, 15.

⁶⁴ *Burlington Free Press*, 10 July 1846.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 3 June 1848.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 18 July 1848.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 9 January 1849.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 11 May 1850.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 17 June 1848.

⁷¹ Quoted in Edward P. Brynn, “Vermont’s Political Vacuum of 1845–1856 and the Emergence of the Republican Party,” *Vermont History* 38 (Spring 1970): 118.

⁷² *Burlington Free Press*, 29 November 1850.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 10 July 1846.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Clarke Papers*, 220.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁷⁷ *Burlington Free Press*, 18 June 1847.

⁷⁸ *Clarke Papers*, 217.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 233.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 217.

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⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 2 April 1849.

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⁹⁰ U.S. Census, Burlington, Vermont, Manuscript Schedule I, Seventh Census, 1850.

⁹¹ Robert G. Keenan and Francis R. Privé, eds., *History of Saint Joseph Parish, Burlington, Vermont, 1830–1987* (Burlington: History Committee of Saint Joseph Parish, 1988), 24.

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⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1 October 1851.

⁹⁵ DeWitt Clinton Clarke to J. M. Weeks, 17 January 1848, in *Clarke Papers*, 228–229.

⁹⁶ See *Vermont Watchman and State Journal*, 23 March 1848.

⁹⁷ Hemenway, *VHG* 3: 1,114; *Clarke Papers*, 245.

⁹⁸ *Revised Statutes, 1839*, 54–55. See also *Burlington Free Press*, 26 January 1849.

⁹⁹ *Clarke Papers*, 197.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 295; *Burlington Free Press*, 27 March 1849.

¹⁰² See [Caroline T. Clarke] *Lizzie Mailand*, ed. O[restes]. A. Brownson (New York: E. Dunigan & Brothers, 1857), vii–xii.

¹⁰³ *Clarke Papers*, 251.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹⁰⁶ Frances Harriet Babb, “Abby Maria Hemenway (1828–1890), Historian, Anthologist, and Poet.” Master’s thesis, University of Maine, 1939, 47, 50.

¹⁰⁷ *Clarke Papers*, 273.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁰⁹ *History of St. Joseph Parish, Burlington*, A15. For discussion of Catholicism in antebellum Vermont, see Deborah Pickman Clifford, *The Passion of Abby Hemenway: Memory, Spirit, and the*

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Making of History (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 2001), 160–180. See also Clifford’s article, “Abby Hemenway’s Road to Rome,” *Vermont History* 63 (1995): 197–213.

¹¹⁰ *Clarke Papers*, 260; *Burlington Free Press*, July 22, 1852; Hemenway, *VHG*, 4: 423.

¹¹¹ *Acts and Resolves Passed by the General Assembly of the State of Vermont at the October Session, 1851* (Montpelier: E. P. Walton & Sons, 1851), 39.

¹¹² *Clarke Papers*, 257.

¹¹³ *Burlington Free Press*, 5 April 1853.

¹¹⁴ See Gene Sessions, “The Last Days of Charles Paine,” *Vermont History* 53 (Summer, 1985): 167–184.

¹¹⁵ *Clarke Papers*, 59–61.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 68, 72.

¹¹⁷ Crockett, *Vermont*, 3: 436–438; Paul S. Gillies and D. Gregory Sanford, eds., *Records of the Council of Censors of the State of Vermont* (Montpelier: Secretary of State, 1991), 605–609; Michael Sherman, Gene Sessions, and P. Jeffrey Potash, *Freedom and Unity: A History of Vermont* (Barre, Vt.: Vermont Historical Society, 2004), 276–278.

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¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18 May 1858.

¹²⁰ *Burlington Times*, 10 October 1860, 27 October 1858.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 27 October 1858.

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¹²³ W. S. Rann, ed., *History of Chittenden County Vermont* (Syracuse, N.Y.: D. Mason & Co., 1886), 274.

¹²⁴ Bassett, “The First Vermont Dailies,” 157–158.

¹²⁵ *Burlington Times*, 28 July 1858.

¹²⁶ Letter to author from Donald A. Ritchie, Historical Office, United States Senate, 10 July 1987.

¹²⁷ *Burlington Free Press*, 14 July 1864, 19 July 1864.

¹²⁸ *Clarke Papers*, 71–73.

¹²⁹ City of Burlington, Vermont, Office of City Clerk, Index of Deaths, 1857–1964. *Burlington Free Press and Times*, 1 September 1870.