



### **Gustavus A. Henry, the “Eagle Orator”**

Gustavus Adolphus Henry was born in Scott County, Kentucky, North of Lexington, on October 8, 1804, to General William Henry and Elizabeth Flournoy Henry. William Henry, probably a distant cousin of Patrick Henry. The family moved to Christian County, Kentucky, when Gustavus was a boy. His early education was in Hopkinsville, and he graduated first in his class from Transylvania College in 1825. He studied law under Judge George Robertson, was admitted to the bar, and established a practice in Hopkinsville, living with his older brother John. He showed an early dislike for Andrew Jackson, writing in 1828, [We hope] “God will save us & shield us from the curse of ‘military rule’ –under Genl. Jackson.”

Gustavus was elected to the Kentucky Legislature in 1831. Four days into the job, he voted to seat Henry Clay as a replacement U. S. Senator from Kentucky. Gustavus served until 1833, and in that time became a stalwart Clay supporter and ardent Whig. Gustavus was re-elected to the Kentucky house in 1833, but quickly resigned. The apparent reason was one Marion McClure of Clarksville, to whom he wrote “You have it in your power to give substance and reality to the ‘baseless fabric’ of my dreams of happiness.” They were married in Clarksville on February 17, 1833, and Gustavus moved here almost immediately. Their union produced seven children, all born in Clarksville.

Henry quickly established himself in the political turf of Clarksville, and was involved in the abortive effort to unseat incumbent Jacksonian Democrat Cave Johnson in the 1833 campaign. During that “canvass” the local political rivalry between Cave Johnson and Gustavus Henry was born. In August of 1836, Whigs Gustavus Henry and Judge Mortimer Martin made speeches in Clarksville, and later in Springfield, in support of Hugh White for president. Their oratorical opponents were Cave Johnson and Felix Grundy.

In 1839 Gustavus Henry was one of the incorporators of the Marine Fire Insurance Company, and the Life and Trust Company, Clarksville. In 1842, Henry ran against Cave Johnson for the U. S. Congress. They debated in dozens of sites in the district, and on July 4, Henry said he had made one of the best speeches of the campaign, however, Johnson prevailed by a margin of 228 out of more than 10,000 votes cast. Henry was a Whig presidential elector, supporting Harrison in 1840, Henry Clay in 1844, and Winfield Scott in 1852. He turned down a nomination to run for governor in 1850, but did run for the Tennessee legislature in 1851, and won by a large margin over W. G. Collins.

Henry was given the chance to run against Andrew Johnson for governor in 1853. G.A. Henry and Andrew Johnson debated face to face more than forty times during the canvass, and Johnson was the victor in a close race. Gustavus Henry’s loss to Andrew Johnson was a defining moment in his life. He never ran for office again, although he was appointed a Tennessee commissioner in 1861 to enter into a “military convention” with the Confederacy, and later that year was appointed to the Confederate Senate and served three years. Fort Henry on the Tennessee River was named for him. After the demise of the Whigs, Henry briefly supported the Constitutional Union party, but later became an active Democrat until his death on September 10, 1880, at Emerald Hill, which is still standing on North Second Street. His Emerald Hill home is now the Alumni Center for Austin Peay State University. He is interred in Greenwood Cemetery.