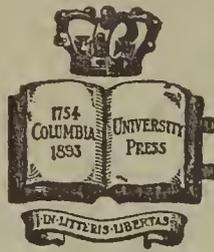


Daniel D. Tompkins

Class of 1795



BY JOHN B. PINE



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DANIEL D. TOMPKINS
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*With the Compliment of
D. D. Tompkins*

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FEW more striking instances of the self-made man can be found in the history of this country than the "farmer's boy" who was four times elected governor of the State of New York, and twice elected vice-president of the United States. The son of a Westchester farmer, born and bred on a farm, Daniel D. Tompkins was fully entitled to the popular sobriquet, which distinguished him during his political career from his more aristocratic rival, DeWitt Clinton, and his remarkable success was due in no small degree to the fact that he was a man of the people. His training for College, such as it was, he acquired between the furrows, and while he certainly inherited the spirit which distinguished his father, his patrimony consisted of little else but blood and brains.

His ancestors came from the north of England and settled at Plymouth prior to 1640. His grandfather, Nathaniel Tompkins, removed in 1665 to Eastchester, of which he was one of the first proprietors, and his father, Jonathan G. Tompkins, combined farming with public duties, serving throughout the Revolution as a member of the legislature, and also as a member of the State Convention that adopted the Declaration of Independence and the first constitution of the State. He was also a judge of the court of

Common Pleas for many years and upon the creation of the State University, he was appointed one of the regents. Daniel was the seventh son of Judge Tompkins, and was born at Fox Meadows, now known as Scarsdale (New York), on June 21, 1774. A bronze tablet commemorates his birth-place.

Entering Columbia College in 1791, he graduated four years later with the highest honors. The estimate which he placed upon his college education may be inferred from a letter written twelve years after his graduation, when he was governor, strongly advising a friend to send his son to college, urging that "the want of a more thorough classical education will, forever, keep him in the lowest and most contemptible grade of his profession."

Among the voluminous papers which he left, and which years afterwards were purchased by the State, are several of his college essays, one of which, dated September 15, 1792, is entitled "On the necessity of establishing when young a character which we intend to support in after life and act always agreeably thereto." His own character showed itself early, and the alert mind, the indefatigable energy and the genial personality that marked him in college, were his prominent traits in later life. Two years after graduation he was admitted to the bar. Politics were his great interest, when a very young man, and, in 1801, he was elected a member of the Assembly and a delegate to the Constitutional Convention of that year. DeWitt Clinton, of the class of 1786, was the leader of the more numerous faction of the Republican party on the issue of the powers of the Council of Appointment, and Tompkins by his nerve and independence soon made himself the leader of the minority. For the next twenty years these two Columbia men were the most conspicuous figures in New York State politics.

Alexander in his recently published work* portrays the situation and the men. "The record of New York politics," he writes, "is a record of long and bitter contests between these chiefs of two antagonistic factions. What the struggle between Stalwarts and Half Breeds was to our time, the struggle between Clinton and

* A political history of the State of New York, by Dr. Alva Stanwood Alexander, A.M., 1906

Tompkins was to our ancestors of two and three generations ago. Two men could hardly be more sharply contrasted—the one appeared cold and reserved, the other most gracious and gentle; Clinton's self-confidence destroyed the fidelity of those who differed in opinion. Tompkins' urbanity disarmed their disloyalty. . . . Tompkins always firm and dignified, was affable in manner, sympathetic in speech, overflowing with good-nature, and unpretending to all who approached him. It used to be said that Tompkins made more friends in refusing favors than Clinton did in granting them. The two men also differed as much in personal appearance. Tompkins, shapely and above the ordinary height, had large full eyes, twinkling with kindness, a high forehead, wreathed with dark curly hair, and an oval face, easily and usually illuminated with a smile." Professor James Renwick, who was one of his College instructors, writes of Tompkins that "he had the faculty of never forgetting a name or face of any person with whom he had once conversed"; and the author of the "National portrait gallery" describes him "as one of the most amiable, benevolent and true-hearted men who ever lived."

Possessing these qualities and strong political ambition it is not remarkable that Tompkins's advancement was rapid. In 1804 he was elected to Congress, as a colleague of Dr. Samuel Latham Mitchill, A.M. (hon.) 1788, but resigned before the session began, in order to accept an appointment as associate justice of the Supreme Court, to succeed James Kent upon his advancement as chief justice. As a judge he was known for his punctuality, his fidelity to duty, his careful consideration of every fact, however small, his strict impartiality, and for the justice of his decisions. Had he remained longer upon the bench, he would undoubtedly have gained great distinction as a jurist, but the three years during which he held judicial office so extended the popular regard in which he was held that in 1807, when only thirty-three years of age, he was nominated and elected governor of the State. The remarkable popularity which led to his election was due not only to his personal charm and happy faculty of dealing with people, nor to the fact, as Alexander expresses it, "that the qualities of fairness and fitness which Greek wisdom praised in the conduct of life were characteristic of his life," but also to his wide range of interests.

He was deeply interested in education, was one of the founders of the Public School Society, and urged upon the legislature the necessity of more ample provision by the State for schools. While governor he labored assiduously to bring about the establishment of Washington College on Staten Island, and no one can read his correspondence with Bishop Hobart on the subject, without being impressed with the earnestness of his convictions.*

He was also a founder of the New York Historical Society, which owes its existence to a combination of Columbia and Princeton graduates; and he was an enthusiastic Mason, holding the office of Grand Master of the Grand Lodge from 1820 to 1821. His broad humanitarian views are shown by his recommendation to the Legislature that capital punishment be abolished for all crimes except treason and murder, that whipping should be abolished as the penalty for petty larceny, and by his last recommendation as governor, in pursuance of which slavery was abolished in the State of New York on July 4, 1827. The bulky volumes of his correspondence, now in the State Library, show him to have been a man who might well say, with Terence, *Humani nihil a me alienum puto*.

When Tompkins was first elected governor, the relations of this country with Great Britain were greatly strained by the latter's impressment of American seamen, and before he was inaugurated England had published its orders in Council, forbidding all neutral trade with France; Napoleon had promulgated his Milan decree barring all neutral trade with England; and the Congress of the United States had ordered an embargo prohibiting all foreign bound American vessels from leaving United States ports. Tompkins was thus confronted with a serious crisis at the very outset of his administration. The feeling in New York against the embargo was especially strong, since New York was the greatest sufferer, but Tompkins stood loyally by the administration and pleaded for "a magnanimous confidence in the efforts of our national councils" and "for a firm unanimous determination to devote everything that is dear to us to maintain our right and national honor." The legislature and public opinion sustained the governor's views, but

* History of Columbia University, p. 103

it was not until he had been twice reelected, in 1810 and again in 1813, upon the breaking out of the war with England, that Tompkins had opportunity to demonstrate the true quality of his patriotism and the extent of his capacity as an administrator. The crisis demanded both qualities in the governor of the State of New York, for the general government had neither men, money nor credit, and New York was the pivotal State. The whole country was in jeopardy, but it was evident from the outset that New York State must be the principal battlefield of the struggle, and that the State must to a great extent provide its own means of defence.

Governor Tompkins urged the Legislature to advance the funds necessary to supply arms and put troops into the field, but the Federalists were in control and refused financial support. The New York banks also declined to make advances on United States Treasury notes. But Tompkins was indefatigable. His enthusiasm inspired enthusiasm in others and by pledging his personal and official credit, he succeeded in securing advances of a million dollars. In these efforts the governor was nobly sustained by his political rival DeWitt Clinton, who, as mayor, induced the Common Council to borrow money on the credit of the city and loan it to the United States, raised a fund and erected fortifications for the defence of the city. It is interesting to note in passing that the students then in College organized a militia company, known from the color of their uniform as the "College Greens," and aided in building earthworks on Morningside Heights.

Hugh Hastings, the State Historian, in his admirable preface to the "Military papers of Daniel D. Tompkins," published by the State under his editorship, epitomizes the services of Governor Tompkins, at this juncture, as follows:

He was not only Governor of the State of New York, and commander of all the forces of the State, but paymaster, quartermaster, commissary, commander of the Third United States Military District and general disbursing agent for the State of New York and for the United States. During the three years of the war he disbursed more than three millions of dollars, of which one million was for the State and two millions were for the United States. In less than forty days, without assistance and money

from the National Government, he mustered into the field at various points of danger in New York, 50,000 men who were organized, armed and equipped; and in less than sixty days, when the credit of the National Government was absolutely gone, he raised \$1,000,000 for the public service and made himself personally liable for the entire amount.

On the strength of his personal credit, he advanced the money which kept up the Military Academy at West Point, and paid for the manufacture of arms in Springfield, and he continued the recruiting service in Connecticut, while the New England Federalists were not only withholding aid, but actually discussing in convention at Hartford the withdrawal of the New England States from the Union. Tompkins was in truth, as Alexander calls him, "a great war governor. Among civilians most admired for their part in the struggle, Daniel D. Tompkins stood first." There can be no doubt that he was largely instrumental in bringing the conflict to a successful issue.

In the spring of 1815, after peace had been proclaimed, he resigned the command of the Third Military District, to which he had been appointed at the outbreak of hostilities, and President Madison addressed to him a letter of thanks for his "patriotic, active, and able support given to the Government during the war."

Before the close of the war President Madison invited Tompkins to become secretary of state, but the offer was declined, and in 1816 the people of New York again reelected him to the governorship by a majority that attested his widespread popularity. "For the moment everyone seemed to be carried away by the fascination of the man," writes Alexander. "His friends asserted that he was always right and always successful; that patriotism had guided him through the long discouraging war, and that swayed neither by prejudice nor by the impulses of personal ambition, in every step he took and every measure he recommended, he was actuated by the most unselfish purpose. . . . Even Federalists ceased to be his critics"

Higher honors were in store for him, and in April, 1816, he was elected vice-president of the United States, James Monroe being the newly chosen president. The office of vice-president, though more

distinguished than that of governor, offered but few opportunities for the exercise of Tompkins's abilities, and while he filled it with great dignity and with such satisfaction to his party that he was reelected for a second term, he does not appear to have impressed himself upon public affairs at Washington to any marked degree. His reelection to the vice-presidency occurred in 1820, and in the same year he was renominated for governor, but was defeated. He was elected, however, to the Constitutional Convention of 1821, and in a body remarkable for the ability of its members, which included John Jay, and his son Peter Augustus Jay, Rufus King, Nathan Sanford, James Kent, Ambrose Spencer, and many others of unusual distinction, by a vote of sixteen to ninety-four Tompkins was chosen president.

But the later years of Governor Tompkins were embittered by official injustice which was not rectified until long after his death, and presents a pathetic illustration of the ingratitude of republics. Charged by the State Comptroller with a shortage in his accounts, in connection with the War of 1812, amounting, as alleged, to \$120,000, Tompkins claimed that there was a large amount due to him from the State. Both the legislature and Congress took action on his accounts, and President Monroe sent a special message to Congress recommending payment. Congressman McLane in supporting the claims of the vice-president said on the floor of the House: "We all know that at a moment when others were husbanding their funds or dealing them out with a very scanty hand, this man risked everything for the public cause and staked his private fortune in its support. It is to services thus rendered that his present embarrassment may be traced. In consequence of them he now calls on his country, not for charity but for justice."

These views were fully shared by the great majority of his fellow-citizens, but none the less he was denied payment by the State. Judgments were entered against him for the moneys which he had advanced or made himself responsible for in carrying on the war, his household furniture was sold under execution, and his wife and infant child literally turned upon the street. Harassed by his creditors, mortified by his political reverses, and heart-broken by the injustice to which he was subjected, he died on June 11, 1825, in the fifty-first year of his age.

Years afterwards it was discovered that the State was debtor to Governor Tompkins to the amount of \$92,000, and the payment of the debt has removed the only shadow from his memory, but justice so long deferred can hardly be deemed justice, and the treatment which he received from the State serves to bring into stronger relief the personal qualities which made him so beloved and admired as a man, and the unflinching patriotism and self-sacrificing devotion to the public weal, which mark him as the highest type of citizen. He lies in a forgotten and almost unknown grave in St. Mark's churchyard, but the monument which may sometime commemorate his activity may fitly repeat the words of the historian, "His life was pure and noble; he was a sincere lover of his country, a brave and often daring executive, a statesman of high purpose." Obscured as his name has been by the misfortunes of his later years, his *alma mater* may well give it a place among the highest on her roll of honor.

JOHN B. PINE

NOTE: THE PORTRAIT OF GOVERNOR TOMPKINS WHICH APPEARS AS A FRONTISPIECE TO THIS ARTICLE IS A REPRODUCTION OF AN OIL PAINTING PRESENTED TO THE UNIVERSITY BY WILLIAM W. TOMPKINS, ESQ., OF NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND, A GRANDSON OF THE GOVERNOR.

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