

Presentation given to Clinton Lodge #30 in Henderson Texas on 19 February 2015 on behalf of Nebraska College S.R.I.C.F. --- Author's note this Lodge was named for someone else; yet this Lodge was Chartered in January 1845 by The Grand Lodge of The Republic of Texas. {one of the very few early-day Texas Lodges }. Texas achieved Statehood December 29, 1845.

GOVERNOR DEWITT CLINTON:  
PAST GRAND MASTER OF NEW YORK MASONS AND  
1ST G.M. OF ALL AMERICAN TEMPLARS

By Frater James Marples, VIII°  
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Portrait: DeWitt Clinton

While many Masons have heard of the name DeWitt Clinton and know he was Governor of New York State, most are unaware that he was largely instrumental for the building of the Erie Canal. DeWitt Clinton believed that infrastructure boosted commerce and trade; which, in turn, boosted America's standard of living. He was so right.

DeWitt Clinton was born in 1769 and died in 1828. In those 58 years: he was Mayor of New York City; United States Senator from New York; the sixth Governor of New York State. Impressive credentials, indeed.

In the Masonic Fraternity, he was intensively active: He was Grand Master of the Masonic Grand Lodge of New York for an extensive period of time 1806 to 1819....some 13 years. He was Grand High Priest of Royal Arch Masons of his State in 1798, but served as Head of all Royal Arch Masons in the entire United States from 1816 to 1826 ...an amazing ten years. Similarly, he was Grand Commander of Knights Templar in New York 1814 to 1828 ....fourteen years. But the capstone of his service as a Knight Templar Mason came when he served as the very first Most Eminent Grand Master of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar... thus, serving as the presiding officer of all Templars throughout the United States from 1818 to 1828 {the year of his death}.

There is one oddity which very, very, very few Masonic Scholars give much attention to ---- "The organization of The Grand Encampment (of Knights Templar) of New York was in great measure an outgrowth from the 'Sovereign Grand Consistory' organized by the well-known Masonic charlatan, Joseph Cerneau". This statement meant the "ENTITY" of the Grand Encampment was



an outgrowth of Cerneau's 'Sovereign Grand Consistory. I must take great pains to emphasize that this shouldn't be confused with the individual Degrees themselves... among them the Mark Master Degree, Royal Arch Degree, Cryptic Degrees, Knight of Malta, Knight Templar, Knight Rose Croix Degree, and even Knight Kadosh Degrees which were conferred in regular, legitimate and warranted Craft Lodges in the British Isles in the 1700's or earlier. The 'canopy' which formed the Grand Encampment is different from the Degrees themselves...just as books are different from a bookshelf they rest-upon. Cerneau had some influence upon how the 'bookshelf' was constructed to house the books {i.e., The formation of an ENTITY...the Grand Encampment' } which was structured when it became an independent 'supreme body' in the year 1816 (during Cerneau's lifetime) yet Cerneau had absolutely no influence on Degrees themselves which predated him. DeWitt Clinton was elected the first Grand Master of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar in the U.S.A. and the Order moved forward. The Degrees and Orders were not tampered with by Cerneau.

Since 1982, when I first became a Mason, and a Scottish Rite Mason; and one year later in 1983 when I became a Knight Templar in the York Rite ---I have studied Joseph Cerneau. I have a fairly neutral attitude concerning Joseph Cerneau. I think he was a victim of fate, circumstance and his own naturally high ambitions. Perhaps the most accurate and balanced description of Cerneau comes from a lady named Aimee Newell, a Ph.D., who works for the Museum of the Northern Masonic Jurisdiction of the Scottish Rite. Her academic credentials are impeccable -- plus since she isn't a Mason she has no incentive to be biased in any one direction. She states that Joseph Cerneau was born in Villeblevin, France and went to Santo Domingo where he served as a Secretary of a Masonic Lodge in 1802. Later, a slave rebellion forced Cerneau to leave Haiti and go to Cuba. In 1804, Cerneau successfully petitioned the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania and a Lodge was Chartered in Cuba and he served as the Lodge's first Master. Another Mason who fled Santo Domingo and also went to Cuba was one Antoine Matthieu Du Potet, who was a Deputy Inspector General of the Lodge of Perfection there. Eventually, Cerneau fled Cuba and settled in New York State. His patent granted him permission to confer the 4<sup>o</sup> to the 25<sup>o</sup>. If anything, Joseph Cerneau was in Ms. Newell's words, simply an "Exuberant" Mason. He proceeded to confer the degrees up to the 32<sup>o</sup> on such distinguished men as Bro.: J.J.J. Gorgas in 1806.

The Cerneau Scottish Rite was in my view, somewhat regular inasmuch as its conferrals up to and including the 25<sup>o</sup> were regular in the old style of the day; and even though the rituals beyond that had traces of authenticity and virtuous teachings --- they were, in most respects, clandestine (due to their lack of legitimate sponsorship). By that, I mean that Bro. Joseph Cerneau went out on a limb to confer the full array of Scottish Rite Degrees...even broaching the 33<sup>o</sup> without obtaining any Warrant or Charter for such extended Degrees for which his Patent didn't give him such privileges. To do an analogy which modern people can relate to: Cerneau had the equivalent of a license to operate a car and to teach others the same skill. However, he lacked a C.D.L. or Commercial Driver's License to operate a higher equipment of a higher level or to teach at that level. He had most of the knowledge; he had most of the ability; yet, he lacked Official Authentic Certification granting him that right or prerogative.

Decades later, Cerneau was viciously attacked by such notables as Albert Pike, 33<sup>o</sup> and a Knight Templar for peddling what he termed as a "bastardized Ritual." However, even some of Pike's own revisions to the ritual in the Southern Jurisdiction were slightly dubious and arbitrary in their own contexts {and some passages were revised a Century later}. The Scottish Rite Journal issue of May-June 2010, written by Brothers and Sir Knights Arturo de Hoyas and S. Brent Morris, presented a fairly good, albeit brief article on the up's and down's of Cerneauism. However, the authors were too quick to say that Governor DeWitt Clinton "didn't care one whit for the honors conferred on him by the Cerneau Scottish Rite Supreme Council." That isn't exactly true. Governor Clinton died on February 11, 1828. His early death was a fundamental reason he didn't give Cerneauism an added boost. Keep in mind, Bro.: and Sir Knight Clinton died 25 years before Albert Pike even became a Knight Templar and a Scottish Rite Mason. Had DeWitt Clinton lived a few more years, his voice would have been much more prominent than Pike's voice ever was. Although I fully acknowledge that Pike was a pillar in our Fraternity, DeWitt Clinton could be likened to a dozen pillars, a dozen rooms and a solid roof which, we, as Masons and regular citizens reap



the benefits of...today. DeWitt Clinton's influence was national. Anyone who can serve as a U.S. Senator and be instrumental for such things as development of the Erie Canal...as well as being the governing Head of SEVERAL NATIONAL MASONIC BODIES is deserving of due recognition. I'm not knocking Pike, who was the presiding officer of the Arkansas Royal Arch Masons for one year, as well as Provincial Grand Master of the Royal Order of Scotland for 13 years and Sovereign Grand Commander of the Southern Scottish Rite for 32 years. Pike still didn't have the fire and intensity of Bro.: DeWitt Clinton. Clinton died at age 58. Pike died at age 81. Both men made valuable contributions to our Craft; yet, DeWitt Clinton earned his credentials by doing far more intensive labor in diverse areas. Pike was diverse too, but DeWitt Clinton is still remembered by a broader spectrum of people. And, just because he had an acquaintanceship or friendship with Joseph Cerneau is no reason to automatically invent a "Cerneau Disclaimer." DeWitt Clinton, was after all a politician who mingled with various classes of people. And, naturally, especially back at that time: One Mason would take an interest in what another Mason had to say.

I believe in the wording Ms.Newell used with regard to Joseph Cerneau was TOTALLY ACCURATE in that Bro. Joseph Cerneau was simply an Exuberant Mason. There is no need to cast the baby out with the bath water. Granted, the Cerneau ritual had its blemishes. Had Bro.: DeWitt Clinton lived longer...who knows if these imperfections could have been resolved even before Albert Pike joined Masonry at all? No one will ever know the answer to that.

Aimee Newell is so correct that "Cerneau made and sold silver boxes, which were used by Lodges to hold charter-seals. Indeed, this seems parallel to Paul Revere's work of crafting Masonic officer jewels, and selling them to his own Lodge and to other Boston-area Lodges. Yet, Cerneau was villified, and Revere was, well, "revered."

I would add: It should be noted that the 2nd man to be created a Knight Templar Mason in the United States of America was Bro. and Sir Knight Paul Revere, who was created a Knight Templar on 11 December 1769. So, Ms. Newell's comparison is one of the best I've seen.

Under the leadership of DeWitt Clinton, Knight Templary prospered and thrived as the capstone of York Rite Masonry.

By contrast, at that time, both the Northern and Southern Jurisdiction lagged behind with fewer members. And the Cerneau Scottish Rite obtained even fewer members, since Cerneau Degrees were seen as "diploma mills." This charge had some credence. However, I repeat: the Cerneau Bodies could have easily prospered if fate taken a different turn. The Cerneau Bodies seemingly died-out in the year 1919; yet, evidence shows that the so-called "Cerneau Supreme Council, 33<sup>o</sup> of the Scottish Rite" was in existence as late as the year 1951.

I also wish to point-out that the Cerneau branch of Masonry didn't tarnish the Knights Templar or any part of the York Rite, in any way. The Cerneau-affair was a multi-sided spat amongst the various factions of the Scottish Rite...which I firmly maintain should be unified TODAY all across the United States. However, old traditions die hard. More than a decade ago, Official Committees were formed to study a possible unification between the Northern Jurisdiction and the Southern Jurisdiction of the Scottish Rite. Sadly, their efforts fizzled-out. In an age of declining members, aged members, and costly buildings, it is sad that personal egos got in the way.

My only mention of Cerneau in this article is to say that the York Rite and the Scottish Rite each have a lot to offer. The Grand Encampment's establishment was partially due to a "good seed" inadvertently spread by a bird name Cerneau. Regardless of the seed's origins...we need to be thankful that Templary has produced so many fine members such as Presidents Andrew Johnson, James A. Garfield, Warren G. Harding, and Harry Truman -- as well as distinguished men such as Buffalo Bill Cody, Roy Rogers, Roy Clark, Gene Autry, and Ernest Borgnine...among many others.

One thing that Cerneau, Pike, and DeWitt Clinton each had in common: They were able administrators when it came to their professional lives. Yet, in their personal lives, they fared rather poorly in managing their own personal finances. Each of them have been described as "financially destitute" at the end of their lives. Pike relied on a stipend from the Southern Supreme Council during the last decade of his life. When DeWitt Clinton suddenly died, he was virtually penniless



and his remains were hastily placed in the family vault of Dr. Samuel Stringer (1735-1817), an old friend and fellow Mason from Albany, New York -- in the old Swan Street Cemetery. It took years before money was raised to transfer Clinton's remains to be interred in the Green-Wood Cemetery, in Brooklyn, New York.

DeWitt Clinton governed a State, he served in our National Government, he governed various Masonic Bodies. And, let us be thankful he served to govern Masonic Knight Templary as the first Grand Master of The Grand Encampment of Knights Templar for the United States of America. Freemasonry in this nation owes DeWitt Clinton our utmost "thanks".

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Sources / References / Exhibits /Recommended Readings:

- "The Builder: A Journal for the Masonic Student" Volume 8. Page 211. Year 1922. Describes founding of Grand Encampment {as an Entity; not the Degrees} as an "outgrowth" of "The Sovereign Grand Consistory" of Joseph Cerneau".
- Mackey's Encyclopedia of Freemasonry by Dr. Albert G. Mackey, M.D., 33° and a Knight Templar.
- "Sir Knight DeWitt Clinton: First Grand Master of the Grand Encampment" authored by Brother Companion and Sir Knight George L. Marshall, Jr., PGC of Alabama. Published in The Knight Templar Magazine of the York Rite.
- "A Short History of the Masonic Knights Templar" by Stanley C. Warner. -- A profile of DeWitt Clinton.
- "Joseph Cerneau's Supreme Council...Misunderstanding or Malice?" by Aimee E. Newell, Ph.D.
- Archival information Governor's Office at Albany, New York.
- Archives of The Supreme Council 33° Southern Jurisdiction of the Scottish Rite USA.
- Archives of The Supreme Council, 33° Northern Masonic Jurisdiction USA.
- Archives of The Masonic Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon, Canada.
- Macoy's Masonic Manual by Robert Macoy, 33° and a Knight Templar. Fifteenth Edition. New York. Published in New York, Year 1861 by Clark, Austin, Maynard & Company located at 3 Park Row & 3 Ann Street, New York, New York. "A Pocket Companion for the Initiated".

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