

The Tragedy of Sir Knight Daniel D. Tompkins: Grand Master, Governor, Vice President

By
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In the first decade of the nineteenth century, Daniel Decius Tompkins seemed destined for future greatness. Well educated and described as “gentle, polished, and unpretentious” by contemporaries, Tompkins achieved great success both in his Masonic and his public life. Yet false accusations of malfeasance in office and mishandling state funds, followed by years of near endless litigation drove him into depression and chronic alcoholism. Although eventually vindicated, he died “an embittered and tortured old man,” although he was just short of his fifty-first birthday.

Daniel Tompkins was born in Westchester County, New York on June 21, 1774, one of seven children of Jonathan G. and Sarah Hyatt Tompkins. His father, a tenant farmer who attained middle class status, provided his son with a nickname “the Farmer’s Boy” when he sought public office in later years. The self-educated elder Tompkins wanted young Daniel to obtain the best schooling possible, and accordingly the son graduated from Columbia in 1795, first in his class. Two years later he began the practice of law and also married Hannah Minthorne, the daughter of well-connected merchant Mangle Minthorne. The couple subsequently had eight children.

Tompkins’ father-in-law was an active participant in the Jeffersonian political party, in particular the Tammany group (this was decades before that name became a virtual synonym for urban

corruption). The Federalists in New York were led by John Jay and Alexander Hamilton, while the Jeffersonian Republicans had such factions known from their leaders as Burrrites, Livingstonians, and Clintonites. All sought Tammany support, and loyalties frequently shifted in efforts to mount winning coalitions. Into this political maelstrom an ambitious young Daniel Tompkins sought favor and success.

Tompkins entered politics in 1800, helping in his father-in-law’s ward on behalf of favored legislative candidates. The following year, both he and Minthorne served as delegates to the state’s constitutional convention. In 1803, Daniel served in the New York legislature, and in 1804 he was elected to the U. S. House of Representatives. However, he resigned his seat before Congress convened to accept an appointment as an Associate Justice on the State Supreme Court. During his service on the Court, the young judge won wide respect for decisions characterized as “popular and fair-minded.”

In those same years, Daniel Tompkins also became deeply involved in the Empire State Masonic scene. According to the best available data, he “was made a Mason” in Hiram Lodge No. 72 in Mt. Pleasant and later became a member of Salem Lodge No. 74, both in Westchester County. From 1801 to 1805, he served as Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of New York. Although he was both a Royal Arch Mason and a

Knight Templar, details are lacking. In 1809, he received the 32° in the Scottish Rite, and on August 5, 1813, the 33°. In both his Masonic and his political career, Tompkins was first a close friend and later a rival of New York's other best known Masonic and political figure, DeWitt Clinton.

In 1807, Daniel D. Tompkins became a candidate for governor with the active support of the Clinton faction that included not only DeWitt but his uncle George, a former governor and current Vice President (and probable Mason). His opponent was incumbent Morgan Lewis, a favorite of the Livingstonians and the landed gentry. Lewis, an older man, was the cousin of Robert Livingston and like Tompkins and Clinton, a future Grand Master. Styled "the Farmer's Boy" to contrast him with the aristocratic Livingston supporters, Tompkins won an April 30, 1807, victory over Lewis 35,074 to 30,989, garnering slightly over 53% of the total. Inaugurated on July 1, he went on to serve as Governor for nearly a decade. Tompkins won each time by a larger vote except in 1813 when dissatisfaction with the War of 1812 reduced his victory margin to 3,606.

The Chesapeake Affair in which a British warship fired upon an American frigate and the resulting Embargo Act of December 1807 put a strain on the hitherto cordial relations between Tompkins and the Clintons. The governor strongly supported both the new federal law and Virginian James Madison to succeed Jefferson as President. DeWitt Clinton, on the other hand, hoped to elevate his uncle George, then serving as Vice President, to the top spot. Neither Clinton favored the Embargo Act which had damaged mari-

time shipping and commercial interests in New England and New York City (where DeWitt was Mayor). Although both sides remained outwardly friendly, their close alliance began to erode.

With the outbreak of the War of 1812, the gulf between Tompkins and Clinton widened.

The governor supported the conflict and the Madison administration while Clinton emerged an opponent to the President running as head of a coalition of "Peace" Republicans and Federalists. Madison won the election by an electoral count of 128 to 89. Tompkins found himself literally caught between the proverbial "rock and hard place," forced to alienate either the White House or the Clintonites.

As wartime governor, Brother Tompkins provided strong leadership and supported the American cause to the best of his ability. Much of the state legislature remained less than enthusiastic and limited funding for the conflict. To arm and support the militia, Tompkins spent a great deal of his own money and borrowed heavily, signing his own name on numerous notes. While both patriotic and unselfish, these actions left him open to later charges of mishandling public funds and ultimately wrecked his personal finances. After leaving the State House in February of 1817, much of his eight-year tenure as Vice President was marred with numerous lawsuits, litigation, and court squabbles which caused him to seek solace in the bottle. The latter in time not only cost Tompkins his career but ended his life.

Despite public controversy, Brother Tompkins continued his Masonic activities. Shortly after receiving the 33° he was named Sovereign Grand Com-



mander of the Scottish Rite, Northern Masonic Jurisdiction, a post he held until his death in 1825. It is but fair to say that in that era this Scottish Rite membership was quite small and also contended with the Cerneau group. Ironically, Brother DeWitt Clinton who was Grand Master of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar also held high office in the Cerneau Rite. In 1820, Tompkins was chosen Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of New York and was re-elected in 1821, subsequently declining a third year in the office.

Meanwhile, the American position in the War of 1812 was much stronger in the latter part of 1814 and led to a resurgence in American pride capped off by Andrew Jackson's victory at New Orleans on January 8, 1815. Daniel Tompkins' popularity soared, and knight templar

in April 1816, he won his biggest success as governor, defeating Federalist Rufus King—reputed to be a Mason—by over 6,700 votes in spite of the charges of mishandling money. It represented the high point of his political career, and that fall he was easily elected Vice President on a ticket with James Monroe.

Just before departing from Albany for Washington, D. C., Tompkins sent one of his most significant messages to the legislature. On January 28, 1817, he recommended that slavery in New York cease to exist. On March 31, the assembly adopted his plan, setting the date in 1827

that all remaining slaves would be free. Although the governor had resigned on February 14 and departed for the national capital, he played perhaps the key role in abolishing slavery in New York.

As Vice President, Brother Tompkins performed ably when present but was frequently absent. Much of the time he was back in his home state, trying to clear up his mounting debt problems. As Grand Master he also tended to Masonic business, trying to mediate tensions between lodges in the city and those upstate; he attended some meetings but missed others. In 1821, the Sir Knights of Morton Commandery No. 4 awarded him an honorary membership.

Meanwhile, the stress encountered by the Vice President over his financial

problems continued to mount. Increasingly, he tended to try drinking away his troubles. In a sense, his new rival Sir Knight Clinton, now Governor of New York, was being kind when he wrote in September 1819 that "Our friend on Staten Island is unfortunately sick in body and mind. His situation upon the whole is deplorable . . ." Rumors suggested that Tompkins sometimes passed out when presiding over the Senate.

Still in his search for vindication, Tompkins opted to seek again the governorship of New York. All things considered, he came remarkably close to victory, losing to Clinton by a vote of 47,447 to 45,990. Ironically, he made one of the few policy miscalculations of his career by opposing the construction of the Erie Canal as an extravagant expense when he believed another war with Great Britain was on the horizon (he missed on that one too). Nonetheless, he still easily won another term as Vice President that fall, garnering 218 electoral votes out of a total of 232. William Plumer of New Hampshire voted against both Monroe and Tompkins, citing Monroe as a big spender and Tompkins for his frequent absences along with the "fact that he is grossly intemperate." Many New Yorkers took offense for the attack on their native son.



With Congress not in session in the spring and fall of 1821, Grand Master and Vice President Daniel Tompkins chaired the New York Constitutional Convention. The delegates honored his service with a unanimous vote of commendation and thanks. Returning to Washington in December, he diligently presided over the Senate for a month but then fell ill. He soon left for New York. A group of angry Senators introduced and passed a law to withhold salaries of absentee officials and those with outstanding debts. Senator Martin Van Buren, a Tompkins ally, ably defended the Vice President and saw the bill as a slap at one who had sac-

rified so much during the late war.

In New York, the Vice President sought vindication by persuading the federal district court to bring suit against him to recover the “supposed balance for which I have been reported among the defaulters.” Bankers who had loaned him money to arm and pay soldiers testified for him as did his one time opponent in the 1816 governor’s race, Senator Rufus King. After deliberation, jurors not only exonerated him but also proclaimed that the federal government owed Tompkins \$136,799.97 (the latter a non-binding judgment). However, the money to settle would have to be approved by a congressional appropriation.

Back in Washington for the December session of Congress, observers noted that the Vice President “seemed a changed man.” Sober and dignified, he became his old self again. His salary was restored, and a writer for *Niles Weekly Register* said no Vice President had ever “filled the chair” of his office “more satisfactorily or with greater dignity.” Tompkins felt vindicated. Debate within the halls of government over the amount owed to Tompkins varied. Some recommended \$35,000 while others including President Monroe wanted \$60,000. Finally in May 1824, the Senate approved the latter amount.

During the frustration over the long delay, Tompkins began drinking again. With the conclusion of the session and his term expiring, he returned to New York where he died on June 11, 1825, three months after his retirement, a broken man. Most of his extensive properties were sold at sheriff’s sales. Hannah Tompkins lived on four more years, dying in 1829. Some years later congress awarded his heirs another amount of

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nearly \$40,000, but like the first payment, it was not enough to save his life.

The career of Daniel Tompkins had both high and low points. He was perhaps best remembered by his Masonic brethren. A lodge was named for him. In 1911, the Grand Lodge dedicated and named for him the Daniel D. Tompkins Memorial Chapel at the Masonic Home in Utica. Elsewhere his name lives on in a county, towns, a school, streets, and a square in New York City. Whatever his flaws, Brother Tompkins ranks in the words of his biographer, Ray W. Irwin, as a man of “integrity” and “conclusively certified by the government of New York State, a federal jury, the accounting office of the Treasury Department, President Monroe, and both houses of Congress.”

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