

HON. CADWALLADER D. COLDEN

Statesman, Patriot, Humanitarian



*A DISCOURSE DELIVERED BEFORE THE*

FLUSHING HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BY

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(Abridged)

CADWALLADER D. COLDEN was born in Flushing, New York, April 4, 1769, not far from the street which bears his ancestral name, Colden Street. The eldest of nine children, his birthplace was Spring Hill, Flushing, long a Colonial landmark, which stood until its demolition a few years ago upon a slight elevation on the west side of the Colden Farm, near the public highway at Nassau Boulevard and Rodman Street, just back and to the right of the present Mount Hebron Cemetery office.

For his distinguished service in many fields of activity, Cadwallader D. Colden deserves a place on Flushing's roll of famous men. The descendant of one of Flushing's most illustrious families in colorful Colonial times, he had the distinction of being Mayor of New York City, a member of the House of Representatives at Washington, D. C., a New York State Senator, and in the War of 1812 served as Colonel of a regiment of volunteers in defense of the City.

He was an eminent attorney-at-law, twice District Attorney of New York, a Governor of New York Hospital, an Incorporator and Trustee of New York's first Savings Bank, and author of several interesting books, including the life of his intimate friend, Robert Fulton, builder of the steamboat *Clermont*. Above all, a humanitarian, a native-born Flushingite who, as Mrs. Lamb, the historian, commented, "was industriously active in the interests of humanity."

If we should make a journey to what was once Spring Hill, we would find little to remind us of this great character and his distinguished grandfather, Lieutenant-Governor Colden, who bought the property in the year 1762 from John and Thomas Willet for £200. The estate, which comprised 120 acres, was used by the Lieutenant-Governor as his summer home. He died there in 1776 and is believed to be buried in an unmarked grave within the wooded plot of the pre-revolutionary Willet family.

Lieutenant-Governor Colden, who was the founder of the Colden family in New York, was of Scotch descent, born in Ireland on February 17, 1688, his mother being on a visit there. He was the son of the Rev. Alexander Colden, minister of a church at Dunse in Berwickshire, Scotland. He was educated at the University of Edinburgh, and applied himself to the

study of medicine. In 1710 he came to Philadelphia, Pa.; there he further pursued his medical studies and in 1715 began the practice of his profession.

In 1718 he came to New York, made influential friends and finally became Surveyor-General. In 1760 he was made President of the Provincial Council. In 1761, shortly before his coming to Flushing, he was appointed Colonial Lieutenant Governor, and held that office until he died in 1776 at the age of eighty-eight.

His son, David Colden, father of Cadwallader D. Colden, the subject of this biography, was born at Coldenham in Ulster County, New York State, on November 23, 1733, and was the youngest of ten children. Like his father he became a physician but never practiced his profession except among his friends and neighbors, but after May, 1761, became his father's secretary.

On February 27, 1767, he married Ann, daughter of John Willet of Flushing.

In the interest of the British Government, to which he was most loyal, he was appointed, July 15, 1770, "Assistant Master of Rolls and Superintendent of Police of Long Island, with equity powers."

The estate at Spring Hill was conveyed to him by his father during the period preceding the Revolutionary War. In his father's will is recorded further bequests thus: "I give to my son David my negro slaves, horses, oxen, and stock of cattle of all sorts, together with all carts and wagons and other implements of husbandry, likewise my household and table furniture, silver plate, bedding, etc."

David Colden, being an ardent Loyalist, at the close of the War was proscribed and sentenced, if found in any part of the State to suffer death as a felon. In vain he begged Governor Clinton, old-time friend of his father, for protection, but he was compelled to flee to England, where he died July 10, 1784. His farm at Spring Hill was sold ten days later by the Commissioners of Forfeiture to William Cornwell for £1800. David Colden was for a number of years a Vestryman of St. George's Church in Flushing.

Cadwallader D. Colden, the subject of this biography, was the son of David Colden. His early education was largely at home from private tutors and from a school at Jamaica,

Long Island. When he accompanied his father to England in 1784 he attended a classical school near London until the autumn of 1785. In spite of a few bright days in the earlier part of his young life at Spring Hill, the boyhood of this son of a Tory in Flushing was not a bed of roses. Strife appeared as far back as 1765, four years before his birth, when his grandfather's troubles began. As history relates, the Stamp Act was passed that year, and on the evening of November 1st, a torch-light procession came down Broadway in New York City carrying images of Lieutenant-Governor Colden and the devil; his coach house had been broken open, his best coach seized, and coach and images burned at Bowling Green.

After the Stamp Act episode strife continued between Patriots and Loyalists. In 1776 Flushing fell into the hands of the British troops. At that time young Cadwallader was seven years old and living at Spring Hill. With the termination of his first fifteen years, those spent in Flushing, his home was confiscated, his mother and remaining family denied the right to occupy the Spring Hill estate and forced to take refuge in Coldenham, which had become the property of Alexander Colden, eldest son of the Lieutenant-Governor. There the mother died and was buried, August, 1785.

Upon his return to New York, young Cadwallader began the study of law in the office of Richard Harrison. Then he went to New Brunswick, Canada, and again coming to New York, he completed his training under Hon. Peter Van Schaick at Kinderhook; finally officially admitted an attorney in January, 1791, at New York City, he began the practice of law.

In April, 1793, he married Maria, daughter of the Right Reverend Bishop Samuel Provost, D.D. About this time he again left New York and settled in Poughkeepsie. In 1796 he resumed his practice of law in New York and stood at the head of his profession. Two years later he was appointed District Attorney.

His health becoming impaired in the Spring of 1803, he visited France and other parts of the continent, where he spent eighteen months. Returning in restored health he rapidly extended his clientele and in a few years ranked with the head of his profession and New York's most distinguished citizens. In 1810 he was again appointed District Attorney and served for one

year. Then came the War of 1812, and, hearing the call of his Country, he accepted a Commission as Colonel of Volunteers.

He was elected Member of Assembly in 1818, and the same year succeeded Jacob Radcliffe as Mayor of New York City—also presiding in the Municipal Court with marked ability. In 1822 he was elected to Congress and in 1824 to the State Senate, in which he served during the sessions of 1825, 6 and 7. During this period he was numbered among the favored few pictured in the famous painting now resting in the New York Historical Society which portrays the play, "Monsieur Tonson" in which the notables of that period in New York are represented.

During his term in Congress Mr. Colden made a vigorous attack upon the Fugitive Slave Act, in line with his earlier endorsement of the plan of Governor Tompkins for the emancipation of slaves in New York State. While in the State Senate he sponsored relief for the poor, and advanced the cause of juvenile welfare. In 1825 he drew up an elaborate memoir of the completion of the New York Canals.

The interesting features of the life of Cadwallader D. Colden are that his life's span touched so many points in the history of our Country. He was born in the Colonial period, and his home in Flushing was the rendezvous of great public characters. He also witnessed the period of the evacuation of the British from New York, and the expulsion of the hated Loyalists. He saw his own father distraught and driven from the land in which he was born, and which he still loved. He saw thousands of native born New Yorkers exiled to distant England, Florida and Canada, some by long stormy passages at sea, some by land, many taking their personal effects with them. Also he experienced what has been called "The critical period" in our country, 1783-1789, and shortly afterwards, the period when, as a young man, he began his professional career. All the records of that time bear witness in many different ways to the distress and depression of 1786, New York's blackest year. Not only were the newspapers full of bankruptcy notices, but sheriffs auctioning confiscated lands and farms.

Then followed a period of extensive poverty in New York, when unfortunate debtors were cast into the notorious debtors' prison, and, so great

was this distress that generous citizens started numerous humanitarian movements. But Mayor Colden also at last enjoyed his Country's period of prosperity, called by some "the period of national consciousness," when after the War of 1812, with the opening of the West through the Erie Canal, with the use of steam on land and sea, traffic to the West and commerce to the East increased. In his term as Mayor Mr. Colden could boast of the steamship *Savannah* built in New York, first steamship to cross the ocean. He could also claim the first balloon ascension in New York.

Although Mayor Colden lived through the Presidency of John Quincy Adams and that of Andrew Jackson, yet his genial spirit must have rejoiced most in the buoyant days of President Monroe. These presented to his mind the days of his regime as Mayor which the historian Elson describes as "The Era of Good Feeling."

His last residence was in Jersey City, where he passed away February 7, 1834. His burial was from Grace Church, New York City, after special honors at City Hall. He left one son, David C., a prominent New York attorney, who filled many posts of honor. His son died in 1850.

In Grace Church, New York, may be seen the pew No. 28 which was

purchased by Mr. Colden in 1808. In the vestibule of the Church is a tablet to the memory of this famous Flushingite. On the tablet is a raised likeness of Mr. Colden with the following inscription:

"To the memory of Cadwallader D. Colden, for several years a Mayor of New York City, a Senator of this State and one of the Representatives of the Congress of the United States.

"His talents and public services add lustre to these and many other honors and trusts bestowed upon him by his Nation and City. He was alike eminent for his legal learning and eloquence, for ardent love and pursuit of general science, and for useful application of all his acquirements to the best interests of his Country. As his philanthropy and patriotism commanded the confidence and attachment of his fellow-citizens, so his kindness, frankness and generosity won the warm affection of his family and numerous friends, by one of whom, who having witnessed most nearly, can best estimate his worth, this monument is erected."

Truly it can be said, in the words of the historian, "of this man the people of Flushing can well be proud."



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