William Learned Marcy Biography

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Biography

American statesman William Learned Marcy (1786-1857), a leader of the Democratic party from its origin in the 1820s, served as secretary of war and as secretary of state.

William Marcy was born in Sturbridge, Mass., on Dec. 12, 1786. After graduating from Brown University, he studied law in New York and became a resident of the state. In the confused politics of the "Era of Good Feelings" (1815-1824) in New York State, Marcy was associated with the faction headed by Martin Van Buren in opposition to the group headed by DeWitt Clinton. Van Buren, Marcy's early patron in politics, was responsible for his rapid advancement, and Marcy followed the "Little Magician" into the Democratic party.

After holding several state offices, Marcy was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1831 and became governor of New York State in 1833. As governor, Marcy broke with Van Buren (now president) over the latter's financial policies, especially his proposal for an independent treasury system. This split was to dominate New York State politics for about 15 years. Marcy's appointment as secretary of war by President James K. Polk alienated Van Buren from the administration.

As secretary of war, Marcy supported Polk's ambitions in Mexico and took the responsibility for properly supplying the army during the Mexican War. He also had the odious task of trying to arbitrate the various disputes between Polk and his generals in Mexico--Winfield Scott and Zachary Taylor. Polk assumed the major burden for the actual battlefield tactics.

A leading contender for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1852, Marcy was appointed secretary of state by the victorious candidate, Franklin Pierce. Marcy was the administration's foreign policy adviser and its chief dispenser of patronage. He reorganized the State Department, bringing in many able men. Two major foreign policy problems occupied him: an Anglo-American negotiations involved American opposition to British expansion in Central America, and all efforts at reaching an agreement failed.

To satisfy the more expansionist-minded Democrats, Marcy sought the acquisition of Cuba through negotiations with Spain. But the Ostend Manifesto of 1854, circulated by the American ministers to France, Spain, and England, which maintained that "by every law, human and Divine, we shall be justified in wresting it (Cuba) from Spain...," caused such a reaction in Spain that all hope of peaceful acquisition of the island ended. Marcy died shortly after leaving office, on July 4, 1857.