



Ashland: the estate where a presidential loser won

If you love history—especially when it comes to presidential politics—you should add the beautiful Ashland Estate to your travel itinerary. The Kentucky home of three-time presidential candidate Henry Clay is a place where visitors discover that losing wasn't the end of his illustrious career.

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Photo: Courtesy of Ashland, The Henry Clay Estate, Lexington, Kentucky

Much like Hillary Clinton retreated to her Dutch Colonial Style home in Chappaqua, New York, in November, 19th century presidential candidate and Kentucky statesman Henry Clay went home to Ashland, his refuge from the rigors of politics and humiliating defeats in three presidential elections during the early 1800s.

One of America's best-loved politicians, especially in his adopted hometown of Lexington, Kentucky, Clay played an influential role in politics for more than 40 years, including serving as Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives for three nonconsecutive terms and making the position into the powerful one it is today. After his first defeat in the 1824 presidential race, he became Secretary of State under John Quincy

Adams from 1825 to 1829, and later served as a U.S. Senator.

Although somewhat insulated at his Kentucky farm, Clay did not escape the scorn of the press and other politicians, particularly Andrew Jackson who remained a bitter enemy following Clay's run against him for the presidency in 1832. Clay was critical of Jackson's unauthorized attack on Spanish forts in Florida in 1818, and Jackson never forgave Clay for the criticism. As a Whig party candidate, Clay narrowly lost his third presidential bid in 1844 to James K. Polk.

Today, more than 13,000 visitors a year tour the place that Clay declared "as good as any Moses would have found in the Promised Land." The 18-room mansion holds many of the family's original artifacts, including



13k
visitors tour
the Ashland
Estate
annually.



Trip Tip

One of the newest downtown Lexington hotels is the 21C Museum Hotel, where modern art and blue penguins greet you. Even if you don't lodge at the former bank building-turned-into-hotel, be sure to check out the art galleries on the first and second floors. Then grab a bite at LockBox, where the art extends into the former bank vault. And if you're not sure about tomorrow's weather, just look up at the "elemental" art globes in the main dining room, which predict the weather.



Clay's massive collection of law books and election memorabilia. The guided tours give insight to Clay's personality—and his foibles. For example, he liked to gamble and once lost a large silver candelabra. Luckily, the family of the winner eventually donated it back to the Henry Clay Memorial Foundation, which operates Ashland.

Clay provided plenty of fodder for the press, especially political cartoonists. Particularly amusing is an illustration hanging in the Clay's bedroom that showed the candidate's rivals throwing bricks labeled with his faults, including dueling (he had two and was wounded in one) and drinking (he was known to make wine at Ashland).

Despite his shortcomings, Clay became a leading citizen of Lexington where he promoted civic improvements and supported nearby Transylvania University where he taught law. When he bought the farm near Lexington in 1811, he named it Ashland because of the many blue ash trees on the property. He cultivated a variety of grains and raised sheep, cattle, and extraordinary race horses. He and his wife, Lucretia, also had 11 children there, several of whom died as young children. Today, the picturesque setting includes several historic outbuildings,

including a dairy cellar and a carriage house, formal gardens, and 17 acres of wooded parkland.

Visitors are often surprised to learn that Clay's original mansion fell into such disrepair that his son, James, razed it and rebuilt an exact replica, using some of the wood from the original structure. Nevertheless, the estate is one of Kentucky's first designated National Historic Landmarks.

Although Clay never became president, his influence has resonated for centuries. Just before his death in 1852, he was known as the "great compromiser" because he was able to delay the Civil War by almost a decade. Clay was so respected that he became the first person to ever lie in state in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda, and his funeral was a model for Lincoln's in 1865.

More than a century after his death, a majority of American historians honored Clay as one of the greatest U.S. Senators to have ever served.

As I walked through Clay's beloved Ashland, I sensed only a fraction of Henry Clay's disappointments at not becoming president. Instead, I marveled at how one man was able to make a difference, not only in politics, but also how he found joy and contentment in a beautiful home among Kentucky's blue ash trees.



Looking around Lexington

"It's hard to get beyond the horses," Meg Jewett-Leavitt, owner of the exclusive L.V. Harkness shop, told me on a recent trip to the Horse Capital of the World.

Indeed, everyone wants to see the horse farms, especially Ashford Stud Farm where Triple Crown winner American Pharoah [sic], spends his post-racing career. Tickets (\$20) to visit American Pharoah sell out months in advance but they are released gradually. Sign up for email notification of ticket availability at visithorsecountry.com/coolmore.

While the horses are a great reason to visit Lexington, the city has a lot more to offer, especially when it comes to history, art, and food.

Highlights include the Mary Todd Lincoln House, where the future first lady spent her childhood, and the Headley-Whitney Museum, home to an eclectic collection of baubles by George Headley, the 1940s-jewelry designer to Old Hollywood stars.

Downtown Lexington—in addition to being home to the University of Kentucky—offers an array of art galleries, shops, and restaurants. VisitLex.com offers lists of things to see and do.



Photo: Courtesy of Ashland, The Henry Clay Estate, Lexington, Kentucky

Photo: Coolmore America (for new American Pharoah photos)