

Lewis Cass

Lewis Cass remains one of Detroit's most renowned politicians. He served as territorial governor for 18 years and shared the national political stage with such titans as John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay and Daniel Webster. He served as a state senator, Secretary of War, ambassador to France and Secretary of State. He was also a Presidential candidate in 1848.

Cass was born in New Hampshire in 1782. After graduating from Exeter Academy, he followed his family to Ohio. Following military service in Detroit as an officer during the War of 1812, Cass became an outspoken advocate for Michigan. He co-founded the Historical Society of Michigan, penned the state motto and designed the state seal.

He and his wife, Elizabeth, bought property just west of Detroit's village limits. At a pleasant farmhouse near the river, they welcomed visiting dignitaries and hosted regular gatherings. After an illustrious career, Cass died in 1866 and was buried in Detroit's Elmwood Cemetery.



Lewis Cass's Detroit

In 1812, when Lewis Cass arrived in Detroit as a brigadier general in the Ohio Militia, the town was still enclosed by palisades and defended by an aging fort. Every home and shop had been newly constructed after the devastating fire of 1805.

Detroit's 1,650 citizens and 2,200 soldiers found themselves intimately involved in the War of 1812 as a result of the town's temporary surrender to Britain. Following the war, despite the influx of Americans, the village retained a strong French provincial flavor.

In 1825 the Erie Canal opened, bringing a flood of new inhabitants to the region. Detroit's population grew rapidly, numbering 9,124 by 1840. Large new shops, hotels, warehouses and homes replaced the roughly built remnants of frontier Detroit.

By the time of Cass's death in 1866, Detroit's population exceeded 53,000 and the city covered more than six square miles.



Hero?

Lewis Cass was widely regarded as Detroit's and Michigan's leading citizen of the 19th century. As territorial governor he was credited with working tirelessly to improve the image of the region.

Lewis Cass was considered a strong administrator and master politician, with a genius for getting along with people and working well behind the scenes. For this he earned the loyalty of many supporters.

To secure the development of Michigan, Cass embarked on a series of expeditions to meet with Native American leaders. Because they believed in his concern for their welfare and his straightforwardness in treaty negotiations, Cass gained the trust of tribal leaders.

Following his years as Territorial Governor, Cass had a long and successful career in Washington. His ability was generally recognized by all parties, even by those who did not agree with him.

As national events moved towards open conflict and a Civil War, Cass took a strong stance on preserving the Union. When President Buchanan would not support the strengthening of federal forces at Fort Sumter, Cass resigned as Secretary of State. Reaction to Cass' dramatic move ran along sectional lines. His friends in Detroit supported him, though. Wrote one, "Come home, the whole city would welcome you with open hearts and hands...I do not believe a man could be found here (even of your political opponents) who does not honor you for your present act and feels proud that you are from Michigan."



Villain?

As a prominent state and national figure, Lewis Cass took political and personal stances on a number of issues that subjected him to severe criticism and charges of hypocrisy from many of his contemporaries.

Cass spoke out against the institution of slavery but his critics noted that he “owned” at least one house servant. He simply did not treat slavery as a moral issue, focusing instead on its impact on regional divisiveness. While in the U.S. Senate, his powerful speech against the anti-Slavery Wilmot Proviso revealed that preserving the Union was his guiding principle. Accordingly, he approved the Compromise of 1850, even defending the Fugitive Slave Bill. For this stance he was severely attacked by abolitionists.

In the later years of his political career, he earned the enmity of some local leaders for his paternalistic attitude. In the same manner, while he was a strong supporter of Native Americans, he also supported the national policy of removal as the only humane way to ensure the survival of “barbarous” tribes. Consequently, he was strongly denounced by those in opposition and was accused of merely seeking government favor and patronage.

Cass frequently spoke out against the evils of liquor, but it was noted that he and his wife served spirits at dinner parties. He also strongly opposed the use of liquor by Native Americans, but his critics noted he was not above dispensing whiskey during treaty negotiations.

