

Claude Augustus Swanson 1862-1939

The late Claude Augustus Swanson came from a Virginia family that was an integral part of the history of Pittsylvania County. In 1768, the year after Pittsylvania became a county, Claude Swanson's pioneer ancestor, William Swanson, had moved from Abermarle County to the frontier of the Old Dominion, near what is now Swansonville. His great-great grandfather, William Swanson, represented Pittsylvania County in the General Assembly of Virginia for eight terms, from 1818 until 1836. It was this William Swanson, along with another of Pittsylvania County's distinguished sons, Whitmell Tunstall, who secured state aid for building the railroad from Danville to Richmond. It was with this lineage that Claude Augustus Swanson was born on March 31, 1862 at Swansonville. His parents were John and Rebecca Pritchett Swanson, the former being a farmer who entered into the manufacturing of tobacco.

Claude Swanson grew up during the reconstruction period following the war between the states. He attended public schools in Pittsylvania County at a time when money was scarce, as plantation owners attempted to adjust their lives to a vastly changing socio-economic structure. Along with his brothers, John, William, and Henry, Claude Swanson ploughed and hoed on his father's farm until the age of sixteen when he accepted a teaching position at a one-room school in Pittsylvania County. The money he earned was saved until he had enough to pay his expenses for one year at Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical Institute, now Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. While there, he was a sergeant of Company A. It was a lack of funds that prevented him from attending Virginia A & M for a second year. Instead, he found a job in Danville as a clerk in a grocery store.

While working in Danville, Claude Swanson attended the Methodist church, and attracted the attention of four prominent Danville men: a lawyer and three tobacco manufacturers. These men were so impressed with his abilities that they offered to finance his college education. Claude Swanson accepted the money from the men and gave them individually his notes refusing to take the money as a gift. Three years later, in 1885, he graduated with honors from Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, and in another year, completed a two-year law course at the University of Virginia, earning a Bachelor of Law degree. He passed the bar examination and opened his law practice in Chatham.

Within two years, Swanson had built an excellent law practice, repaid his financial obligations, and embarked on a political career. After another four years, he entered into national politics, as he was elected to Congress from the fifth congressional district. He returned to Congress in six successive elections and served until his resignation in 1906. At that time he ran for the Governorship of the Commonwealth of Virginia, a nomination he had sought and lost to Andrew Montague early in 1901.

Once elected governor in 1906, Claude Swanson picked up the movement for public education initiated by Governor Montague, and, as one historian recalls, "put the power of his office behind the movement for the up-building of the school system, materially and spiritually."

After his tenure as Governor, Claude Swanson was appointed in 1910 to the U.S. Senate to fill the vacancy caused by the death of John W. Daniel. He was reappointed in 1911 and then elected to the seat in which he served until March of 1933, at which time he resigned to accept a cabinet position in the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Claude Swanson was the American delegate to the disarmament conference at Geneva, Switzerland, and was appointed by President Roosevelt to be Secretary of the Navy, a position he held until his death in 1939.

He passed away while visiting Rapidan Camp in the Blue Ridge Mountains near Criglersville, in Madison County, Virginia. His funeral was conducted in the chamber of the United States Senate.

Claude Swanson's contributions to Virginia and this nation cannot be understated, and his worth to Pittsylvania County is astounding. In 1939, on presentation of the portrait of Claude A. Swanson to Pittsylvania County, Mrs. N.E. Clements offered a most fitting eulogy when she called him "Pittsylvania's most distinguished son."