

Hemp at Ashland

Hemp was Henry Clay's most lucrative cash crop at Ashland. Men enslaved by Clay grew thousands of pounds of hemp and manufactured it into rope and bagging for the cotton industry.

Clay was interested in experimentation and pursued many new innovations in equipment and hemp varieties. Clay's opinion and expertise were highly sought on many agricultural topics. He wrote a chapter in an 1837 agricultural textbook about hemp production in which he detailed his operation at Ashland and noted that Kentucky's success with the crop was due to its abundant supply of slave labor.

Hemp was a principal element of Henry Clay's personal economy and, as a result, influenced his public career. Clay was a staunch advocate of American hemp and wanted it to be used exclusively by the U.S. Navy and to be the primary product in the U.S. marketplace. Ideally, he wanted that American hemp to be Kentucky hemp, Lexington hemp, and Ashland hemp. This contributed to several planks in his political platform called the American System.

Henry Clay found that one challenge to selling hemp nationally was that it was difficult to transport it to far-off markets. Clay came to believe that the federal government should invest in internal improvements or roads, bridges, and waterways to move goods including hemp, and people more easily around the country.

Clay also recognized that foreign competition was a problem for American farmers and manufacturers. Because of this, he supported tariffs on incoming goods like Russian hemp to protect American goods from foreign competition.

Ever since 2015 hemp has been grown at Ashland as part of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture Hemp Program. Thanks are also given to the [Kentucky Hempsters](#) for their continuing support that has made this project possible.