

Chapter 1:

Mayor for Life: He Left His Heart in City Hall

“Once politics is in the blood, the only way they can take it out is embalming fluid.”

*Malcolm Wilson, who spent 14 years as
Nelson Rockefeller’s lieutenant governor and only
14 months as governor.*

It was a bitter cold day in late January, 1983, when Angelo “Joe” Amore – tailor to Mayor Erastus Corning 2nd of Albany for more than thirty years at his shop just around the corner from City Hall on State Street – was summoned to Boston University Hospital. It was an unusual request, but Corning was his best customer, so Amore didn’t hesitate to make the long-distance service trip. Corning’s loyal aide, Bill Keefe, had told Amore on short notice that there was room in the mayor’s official car, the Buick with the “A” license plate. Matilda Cuomo, wife of Gov. Mario Cuomo, had canceled her intended visit to Corning in Boston at the last minute, and Amore joined Keefe, driver Dusty Miller and Judge John E. Holt-Harris Jr., one of Corning’s closest personal and political friends, for the three-hour drive.

“The mayor had written to me, saying he had lost a little weight and wanted me to take in some of his suits,” Amore said. It was typical understatement from the mayor, whose once robust 230-pound physique was gaunt, almost skeletal, and had deteriorated to perhaps 140 pounds of emaciated flesh draped haggardly over his six-foot two-inch frame. Corning had been hospitalized for the past seven months, spending much of that time in the intensive care unit, breathing with the aid of a respirator because of complications from emphysema and chronic lung ailments, as well as intestinal and coronary disease. Three months earlier, in October of 1982, the mayor had been transferred from Albany Medical Center

Hospital to Boston, where an experimental respiratory rehabilitation program – the only one of its kind in the country – had achieved some success in weaning emphysema patients off the respirator.

Over the objections of friends and family in Albany who wanted him to remain close to home, Corning had decided to try the Boston experiment. The mayor refused to relinquish the absolute control he wielded at City Hall for forty-two years – the longest tenure of any mayor in the country – and was determined to come back, against all odds and the cumulative effect of several operations that had begun to seem like medical acts of desperation. Those closest to him could see that he was dying, but Albany's mayor for life refused to go gently into that good night.

One of the last things Corning was able to write was a statement of goals shortly after being transferred to Boston. In labored penmanship, Corning wrote this never-before published summation, a sort of treatise on his purpose for fighting for life, from his hospital bed in Boston on October 27, 1982:

At seventy-three, I have had far more than my share of the good things in life, and I continue to truly enjoy it. I believe I have been productive and my basic goal is to continue to be so, accomplish things and not be a burden on others. My immediate goal is to get strong, and live easily with my present and any further handicaps, and to get back to the Mayor's office for a minimum of eight to twelve hours a week to be able to handle essential matters on a regular and orderly basis. Looking at the future it is hard for me to look at goals more than five years ahead. My family is secure with interesting careers separate from mine. As to myself, I have agreed and just started on two oral histories. These should not be time consuming and completed in three to six months, perhaps as much as nine. In September of 1984 my term as chairman, Albany Democratic Committee, expires. I have to determine if I want to work to be elected for another two year term. My term as mayor expires December 31, 1985 and in April 1985 I must determine if I want to try for four more. If I were to answer today the answer would almost certainly be no. I have simple changes to make in my insurance agency which I own 100%. I have a number of changes to make in transfer of real and personal properties, not time consuming

but interesting. Mrs. Corning and I plan to make a substantial memorial gift to our Church. I have plans to recognize as best I can some of those who have done so much to help me, to give real boosts along the road and just friends, too. There is a possibility I might want to stay on as Democratic County chairman till Sept. 1986 to have greater influence in picking my successor as Mayor. County Chairman is not a time consuming job. My negative goal at all times is: Don't be a burden. My positive goals should be reached generally in two to four years, with the future after that, reading history & nature and energy study, mild hunting and fishing and nature study. I would like to be a senior advisor with no ax to grind, but enjoying to the full the ability to help through long experience.

Throughout his life, Erastus Corning 2nd had been a masterful juggler. He was silky smooth and unflappable and made it look easy as he kept several balls in the air at once. He was a one-man City Hall, personally controlling the minute details of municipal affairs. He played many roles simultaneously: mayor and political boss, insurance company owner and astute bank director, blue-collar fishing buddy and blueblood club member, aristocrat and everyman, paternalistic provider and cunning political strategist.

Corning had been so many things to so many people, he may have gotten lost amid the personas. In the narrative of his life, Mayor Corning tried to mirror the mythic veneer overlaid upon him by a city and citizenry hungry for civic heroes. Despite four generations of outstanding accomplishment in the realms of politics and industry, the Corning family's sterling resume masks a family that, like all ordinary families, knew its share of pain and personal tragedy. Although many Albanians held him in blind reverence, Mayor Corning was far more human than his assuredly aristocratic bearing suggested. An accurate portrait of the mayor contains as much shadow as light, portions of darkness to balance the qualities of brightness and goodness the public most often wanted to find in him. The legacy of Mayor Corning is a life told through stories. Everyone in Albany seemed to have a story about the mayor. He possessed both a common touch and a larger-than-life cult of personality. A Corning encounter usually made a deep impression, a memory that lasted. He had a special ability to make people feel at ease, no matter what their station in life. His greatest quality

was being able to meet people on their own terms, from the poorest to the richest, youngest to oldest, across any spectrum one cares to define. His door at City Hall was always open. His accessibility was as legendary as his approachability. He liked people.

And yet, he kept most people, even longtime friends, at arm's length. He practiced a smiling aloofness. Very few, if any, were granted entry into the intimacies of his interior life. What his closest friends and associates saw was a single branch, whichever branch Corning chose to reveal to them, and not the whole trunk and roots of the entire man. Robert Roche, Corning's family attorney, chose a different analogy to describe the compartmentalized nature of Erastus Corning's personality: "Erastus Corning was like a great novel with twelve amazing sub-plots. Nobody ever really figured him out. The story never really ended. He just died."

State Assemblyman John McEneny, a Corning protégé who dreamed of succeeding his political idol as mayor, viewed Corning in terms of a wheel metaphor: "Corning was the hub of a wheel and all the spokes plugged into the mayor, but none of the spokes touched each other or had any interaction. One spoke was for his judge friends, one spoke for his Maine buddies, another spoke for the Noonans and Rutniks, one for his World War II pals, a spoke for his local political allies, a spoke for state and national Democratic politicians, one spoke for his own family, another spoke for his Fort Orange and society friends, et cetera." McEneny believed that the strict separation of the facets of Corning's life served his intensely private and aloof personality and also strengthened the structure of the wheel itself. "The separate spokes might have contained people who didn't like each other and were even bitter enemies," McEneny said. "But the mayor kept them separate and distinct and each spoke worked for Corning and strengthened the overall wheel that only Corning controlled."

Control was an overriding theme of Corning's life. Growing up, Erastus had almost no control, living under the thumb of his father's subjugation, succumbing to Edwin Corning's obsession to mold a son who reflected his own political ambitions. Later, as Mayor Corning, he relinquished control out of deference to political boss Dan O'Connell, a substitute father figure. In his personal life, the mayor's continuation of an arid society marriage and cultivation of domestic respectability could be seen, once more, as dutiful son proffering control to a grieving mother and widow who lost a husband and three children in their prime in part because

of the ravages of alleged alcoholism. Finally, with the death of his mother and Dan O'Connell less than one year apart, Corning had the opportunity, for the final six years of his life, to run the show himself and he galvanized power and control absolutely, with a micro-manager's possessiveness. After a lifelong quest for control, Corning was not about to relinquish it easily, even as he lay dying.

Back in Boston, for a time, the new year, 1983, had opened with promise for the ailing Albany mayor. Through sheer force of his personality, Mayor Corning, whose condition had indeed been improving slightly, convinced all around him that he would return to his office, Room 102 of City Hall, the only place he felt fully alive and in control: Mayor for life. Preparations were being made for Corning's return, as aides and ward heelers scurried about with the eagerness of serfs welcoming back their king from battle. The mayor's friend, developer Lew Swyer, and contractor Frank Letko had drawn up plans to install ramps and rails at his home at Corning Hill to make the house accessible to the wheelchair-bound Corning. A concrete pad was poured outside the house to hold oxygen tanks and Corning purchased a specially equipped van with wheelchair lift and special controls in January and had it parked outside the hospital in Boston so the mayor could drive himself home, home to City Hall.

"I went to see him in January and he had just bought the van," recalled Judge John E. Holt-Harris Jr., city traffic recorder judge and a close political and personal friend of the mayor's. "He and I talked about going out to the Alcove Reservoir in the van. Erastus was going to put special stops in the back of the van so the wheelchair didn't roll out when he was casting. He made a joke about it and said, 'That would be a hell of a thing if they found me in a wheelchair at the bottom of the Alcove Reservoir.'"

It was on that trip, too, that Corning's spirits were so high that he pantomimed out his hospital room window for a television crew outside. The mayor held aloft a bedpan, swinging it back and forth, pretending to pour it on the reporter's head and laughing with the glee of a Groton first former pulling a prank, Holt-Harris recalled. This was the same January trip on which Amore brought four custom made suits for Corning, made of a gray wool that the mayor himself selected in England. One of the suits Amore carried was forest green, the mayor's favorite color, which matched the green socks Corning wore to City Hall each day without fail – considered an eccentricity by most, but the habit was, in fact, due to Corning's color blindness.

Amore had made more than fifty custom suits and sports jackets for Mayor Corning over the years, some costing as much as \$800, with a label inside the breast pocket of each: "Erastus Corning II." Amore knew the mayor's suit size by heart – forty-six long, forty waist, thirty-one inseam. "He had relatively short legs and a long torso for his height," the tailor said. "He'd come into the store and order three or four suits a year, always gray and blue pinstripes. He was very conservative in his dress. Nothing wild for the mayor."

Erastus Corning 2nd did not like surprises. Since childhood, reared in the military regimentation of Albany Academy and the Protestant Episcopalian sternness of Groton, his life was laid out for him with patrician perspicacity. Erastus had no say in being born into a gray wool pinstripe suit, a WASP Ascendancy uniform that he donned dutifully yet regretfully. There hadn't been many days since adolescence when Corning hadn't been expected to dress formally. Although such rigid style did not suit his other side, his earthy and profane side, Corning, at least in public, rarely shed the uniform of his aristocratic breeding. As a young boy at Albany Academy in the early 1920s, knickers, tie and jacket were required, except when replaced by a military uniform. At Groton, the suit was blue serge, with stiff Eton collars and black patent leather pumps at dinner. The suit at Yale was generally brown tweed. Corning's gray and blue pinstripes became a second skin during a half-century spent in politics. Going casual for the mayor, such as at the annual Democratic Party picnic, meant khakis, a blue blazer and buttoned-down Oxford shirt, sans tie. Corning once joked that when a new acquaintance asked him to go fishing, the man expressed surprise when the mayor showed up without jacket and tie.

Clothes make the man, it has been said, and the aphorism is especially apt in Mayor Corning's case. Clothing style is more than a metaphor for the mayor, who embodied the internal conflict of nature versus nurture. As a boy, left to his own devices, young Erastus was as carefree and free-spirited as his butterfly collector grandfather, Erastus Corning Jr., with the youngster spending his days on long naturalist rambles through the woodlands of Corning Hill, studying birds and plants, collecting specimens from the forest and reading voraciously books pertaining to natural history. That was the nature side of the mayor's personality. The nurture aspect was imposed upon the boy primarily by his overbearing father, Edwin Corning, who uprooted Erastus from his cheerful and unstruc-

tured life in Albany and replanted him in the lonely and competitive prep school groves of Groton's uncompromising academe. Moreover, despite Erastus' innate sensibilities and profound interest in natural history, the father forced the son into a narrowly defined path of politics and business that would continue the Corning family legacy. In one dramatic gesture, then, the destiny of Erastus and the city of Albany was determined by a father intent on making certain his firstborn lived up to that preordained image. As a result, since boyhood, Erastus Corning 2nd felt obliged to wear the uniform his father had tailored for him, and he spent a lifetime struggling to honor the suit of his father's memory and, at the same time, trying to shed its confining shape.

None of the dozens of fitting sessions Amore had conducted with Corning over the years prepared the tailor for the condition in which he found his most loyal customer at the Boston hospital. "He hardly looked like Mayor Corning," Amore recalled. "He had lost so much weight that he was just skin and bones. He'd had that tracheotomy and couldn't talk. He struggled to stand up so I could pin the suits to where they needed to be taken in, but he was so weak. We finally got a couple of nurses and they helped him stand while I took the measurements. He was so far gone, but he insisted he wanted to do this."

Corning's forty-inch waist had shrunken more than eight inches and the pants had to be taken in drastically, as did the jackets. Amore went about his work quickly and silently, marking the alterations with pins. Amore remembered feeling stunned and saddened, unable to find the right words to thank Corning for the many kindnesses the mayor had shown him since Amore emigrated from Calabria in southern Italy in 1960. Amore had worked at first for John Cerasoli at Albany's old Ten Eyck Hotel, before it was demolished, where Corning bought his suits, and later took over the business in 1965 with the mayor's encouragement. "I was afraid my English wasn't good enough to open my own store, but the mayor said I could do it and that he would help me," Amore recalled. "The mayor sent his friends to me and the business prospered. The mayor was as good as his word."

As Amore packed up his supplies, Corning slipped the tailor a note: "Joe, I'll be coming home in two weeks. I'll have Dusty pick up my suits then." Corning never made it home. The mayor was buried in the gray pin-stripe suit that Amore had altered. The other three suits are preserved in garment bags in Amore's third-floor storage room of his shop at 123 State

Street. "I called Betty Corning [the mayor's wife] after the mayor died and she told me to keep them because she had no use for them," Amore recalled. "I've kept them all these years. I think I'll keep them always. I loved that man."

The altered suits, the custom van, the oxygen tanks and the special wheelchair ramps planned for Mayor Corning's triumphant return to City Hall – envisioned as something in the annals of Albany politics every bit as spectacular as Corning's homecoming as the combat-decorated G.I. Mayor in World War II – were left to gather dust. The hopefulness of January was quickly replaced by hopelessness and despair after Corning developed pneumonia and was placed back in intensive care, where he also developed arrhythmia, an irregular heartbeat. Still, in mid-February, 1983, Corning battled against a failing mind and loss of muscle control and scrawled out these notes from his hospital bed in the Boston intensive care unit: "Coughing up secretions is the easy way out but for the super plugs and thick secretions and copious quantities. Try at least four experiments by myself each day with suctioning with and without saline. Sit on stool in tub. Use hand held shower head. Much simpler, does the job. I will get a hospital supply co. representative. There will be twenty different things he will keep me supplied with." It was the last thing Erastus Corning 2nd ever wrote.

During his long decline in the hospital, the mayor had been robbed of all the legendary vitality that had made his return to City Hall seem possible. One by one, his faculties faltered. After he lost his voice and the use of his hands to write notes to visitors, his awareness of reality slipped away in a fog of pain and medication. He breathed with the aid of a respirator and was fed intravenously. The reminders such deterioration triggered in his memory during his own slow and torturous wasting-away must have been frightful, for he had watched his invalid father slide downhill like this and the image was seared into his consciousness: don't be a burden . . . don't be a burden . . . don't be a burden. It had become Mayor Corning's mantra in the hospital, a phrase he wrote over and over again, and now, after his fierce struggle, he no longer had the energy to fight the inevitable.

On February 22, Corning underwent surgery for removal of a tumor on his large intestine and to stop intestinal bleeding. Half of his intestine was removed. Several days later, he suffered a mild heart attack. Still, loyal aide Keefe continued to come to Boston with papers and reports, carrying in his briefcase the essential business of City Hall, which Corning, on his deathbed, refused to relinquish. "I made more than sixty-five trips to

Boston,” Keefe recalled. “The toll collectors on the Mass Pike got to know me. They’d send me on my way with a get-well wish for Mayor Corning’s speedy recovery.”

On March 12, Corning was operated on to treat bleeding ulcers at the base of the esophagus, where it meets the stomach. Doctors termed his condition “life threatening” because of his age and other medical problems. At this time, Betty Corning asked Holt-Harris and the mayor’s Albany physician, Dr. Richard Beebe of Albany Medical College, to meet with her in Boston. “The mayor was semi-comatose and hugely bloated and it was an extremely painful thing to see,” Holt-Harris recalled. “We tried to elicit a reaction, but the mayor was not functioning. That wasn’t Erastus Corning anymore. It was an enormous lump of flesh in bed with a face as big as a pumpkin. It was not my beloved friend.”

Holt-Harris and Beebe conferred and knew what they had to do. “The doctors had been planning to do another operation and Betty wanted us to come and make them stop,” Holt-Harris said. “She didn’t have the energy anymore to fight them. Doctor Beebe sat the Boston medical team down and said they would not invade that poor man’s body again. And that was the end of the discussion.” A few weeks before, Corning had scrawled on a note to Holt-Harris: “I’m not going to make it. I shouldn’t have come here.” Holt-Harris discussed the mayor’s sentiment with Beebe and they turned to Betty Corning and said, “I think the humane thing to do is to let him die now.” “It was tragic at the end,” Beebe said. “They try to keep someone alive and go overboard. He was courageous to the end. He didn’t give up. He was a good patient and a very brave man. I never heard him complain.” After two months of tenuously clinging to life, on May 28, 1983, the mayor died.

The moments when Mayor Corning – a man who seemed emotionally closed off to all, even his family – opened up were rare. One such example could be found in a Christmas letter Corning wrote on December 23, 1982, to his daughter from the Boston hospital, thanking her for the letter she sent the day before and trying to clarify, in shaky cursive and a mind medicated against pain, his life philosophy: “Number one, sentiment is good stuff. Number two, just a small piece of crisp bacon will make an entire sodium free breakfast much more enjoyable. Number three, we are not perfect by a damn sight and in politics that’s very clear. Politics is the art of compromise, and politics and life in general are much the same.” Corning then recalled his days at Groton School, raised under the stern

religious certitude of its founder, Rev. Endicott Peabody, an educator “who never saw a bit of gray any place. It was right or it was wrong. That’s all.” But a long career in politics had taught Corning that life could not be so neatly divided into black and white. He wrote, “In politics, a modest amount of corruption is helpful in getting along. The word is not corruption in day by day existence, but it means pretty much the same.”

Then the father’s letter to his daughter drifted and rambled across a number of cloudy attempts to make meaning of the world and humankind’s place in it, discussing the Big Bang theory versus creationism, before he gave up from fatigue. “Maybe some day I’ll get smarter and explain,” he concluded. His daughter never heard that explanation. Her father’s condition continued to decline after Christmas and his ability to speak or write was soon gone.

The few instances when someone broke through Corning’s tightly held reserve were remembered as special glimpses into the soul he worked hard to shield from view. As the mayor lay dying, his daughter read him “The Gift of the Magi” as he had done for her as a child. “We both cried and cried and it was a beautiful moment,” Bettina recalled. During one of her visits to Boston, she brought her father wintergreen mints, the kind he loved to buy during the summers of her girlhood at the homemade candy and ice cream shop in Bar Harbor, Maine, but he was too sick at that point to eat them, to allow the memory of taste to transport him back to a moment when they were a young and happy and loving family for a time.

There was no apparent closure, however, when it came to the conflicting relationships of Mayor Corning with his wife, Betty Corning, and his longtime confidante, Polly Noonan. Even in the truth-telling moments expected of life’s final chapter, the dying Corning managed to juggle his two lives, the public and the private, never resolving the secrets he had carried and buried for so long. Noonan, a frequent visitor to Boston, made sure to check the schedule with Keefe to determine the days when Betty Corning would not be at the hospital. The dual relationships continued until the end.

When it came to his estranged son, Erastus III, there were no moments of shared reconciliation in the hospital for a lifetime of regret and sadness between father and son. “There was no reconciliation, because a reconciliation implies there was damage that needed repairing and I wouldn’t characterize it that way,” the son said. “It wasn’t good or bad. It was just nothing. I visited him in the hospital a few times, the last time a

few days before he died, and nothing had changed. We simply had no relationship. He was focused on coming back to Albany to continue as mayor. He had convinced others of that, too. Everyone had lost all reason given his condition in my view.”

Corning, the obsessive controller of all details, had used his wit and charm to win over even his doctors. He wanted to be back at his gray metal desk in City Hall, running his kingdom. When David Bray told Corning he intended to retire as superintendent of the Albany School District in 1982 at the age of seventy after a forty-eight year career in education, the mayor couldn't understand Bray's decision.

“Are you serious?” Corning asked.

“Yes, I think forty-eight years is enough,” Bray replied.

“Not me. I'm never going to retire,” the mayor had said. “They'll have to carry me out.”

His words rang prophetic. Mayor Corning never made it back alive to his beloved City Hall. The closest he got was being wheeled over to the window in his Boston hospital room, where he could look out and, on a clear day, catch a glimpse of an Albany Street a few blocks away. Erastus Corning 2nd, America's most durable mayor, died in Boston, just off Albany Street, at 12:20 p.m. on May 28, 1983 at the age of seventy-three. Cause of death was cardiac arrest due to a pulmonary embolism, a blood clot that settled in the lungs.

Back in Albany on the day of the mayor's death, the city was cloaked in gray, overcast weather that felt like a shroud of doom. It was a Saturday. Downtown, word spread person to person in Albany's small-town way. “Is the mayor really dead?” a woman asked, brushing back tears, outside Saint Mary's Church, where, by 3 p.m., less than three hours after Corning's death, hundreds had gathered in the shadow of City Hall for a memorial mass. Even after his long, slow decline, the city seemed stunned. The pace of city life slowed perceptibly for the next couple of days in a stupor of disbelief. The mayor for life. Dead. Could Albany even go on? Citizens seemed unable to comprehend their city A.C., After Corning.

On Tuesday, Mayor Corning's body lay in state, casket closed, out of regard for his skeletal state, in the Episcopal Cathedral of All Saints. More than 8,000 mourners filed past, despite a heavy downpour that did not let up all day. At nine o'clock that night, Betty Corning left the cathedral with her two children, Bettina and Rasty, and they walked down South Swan Street, crossed Washington Avenue and entered the Fort Orange Club for a

late dinner in the bastion of privilege and elite society the mayor's forebears had built to preserve what they perceived as the noblest qualities of Albany.

The next morning, the sun broke through the clouds, clear and bright, for the first time in several days as they buried Erastus Corning 2nd. The funeral cortege bearing the body of Mayor Corning stopped in front of City Hall – a pause heavy with symbolism – where a huge crowd numbering thousands lined the streets ten deep encircling the landmark building the mayor's grandfather had commissioned. The carillon in the City Hall bell tower played "God Bless America" and the throngs of Albany's citizens, many of whom had known no other mayor in their lifetime, wept openly and sang along through muffled sobs. At precisely 12:14 p.m., police motorcycles roared and the cortege quickly started up, gained speed and, within a moment, the mayor for life was gone from his city. Crowds estimated at more than 10,000 people lined Washington Avenue between City Hall and All Saint's Cathedral. The *Times Union* published a photograph of the hearse bearing Mayor Corning, stopped in front of City Hall for the last time, with the headline, "The End of An Era."

At the funeral service, Gov. Mario Cuomo read from the Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians: "Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." After the reading, the choir sang this anthem: "Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts, shut not thy merciful ears unto our prayer; but spare us, Lord most holy, O God most mighty, O holy and most merciful Saviour, thou most worthy Judge eternal, suffer us not, at our last hour, for any pains of death, to fall from thee. Amen."

Everyone had a story about Mayor Corning and each one who had known him tried to eulogize the man, to sum up his legend.

"He was just the greatest," said his loyal aide, Bill Keefe, his voice choked with emotion.

"Albany has lost a great leader," said the new mayor, Thomas M. Whalen III.

"The Empire State mourns the loss of one of her grandest sons, Erastus Corning, the mayor," Cuomo said.

"His door was always open to those who sought him, even when he was advised to close it because of ill health," said the Republican State

Senate Majority Leader, Warren M. Anderson, a friend from the Fort Orange Club.

“Legends are hard to replace,” said Albany Assemblyman Richard Conners, a machine Democrat who served on the Albany City Council under Corning for thirty-five years.

No one person can fully sum up the life and times of Erastus Corning 2nd. He did not reveal himself completely to anyone, not even family members. He was many different people, many different faces, a separate guise for each of the compartments of his life. In piecing together those various parts of his personality we begin to emerge with a more complete portrait of Erastus Corning 2nd.