

# Famous New Yorker John Clum

As the mayor of Tombstone, John Clum was part of the legend of Wyatt Earp, but the Gunfight at the OK Corral is just a part of Clum's life of adventure on the American frontier.

John Phillips Clum was born in Claverack, Columbia County, on September 1, 1851. After attending the Hudson River Institute he enrolled at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Clum was one of the American football players, taking part in the second-recorded game in 1870. He had to drop out of Rutgers due to lack of funds in 1871, but his ties to the school came in handy later.

Clum joined the U.S. Army Signal Corps and became a weather observer in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Meanwhile, Rutgers recommended him to a search committee seeking an agent to operate the San Carlos Apache reservation. Taking the job in 1874, Clum gained a reputation for looking out for Native American interests when some reservation agents neglected their charges and enriched themselves. He created a tribal police force and tribal court to give the Apaches a degree of self-government. With the help of the tribal police, he captured the renegade chief Geronimo without firing a shot in 1877. Three months later, tired of interference from the Army, Clum resigned.

The next stop for Clum was Tucson, Arizona, where he published a newspaper, the *Citizen*. Newspaper publishing gave Clum influence with local businesses and politicians. He saw greater opportunity in both fields in Tombstone, a boom town based on silver mining. He moved there in 1880 and founded a new paper, the *Epitaph*.

Tombstone already seethed with conflict from the beginning. Different factions quarreled over land ownership. So-called cowboys rustled cattle from Mexico to sell in town tax-free. The cowboys were popular with many in Tombstone because they spent money freely and sold beef cheap. Others thought the violent cowboys made Tombstone lawless and held back progress.

Clum was elected Mayor of Tombstone in January 1881. Determined to crack down on the cowboys, he appointed Virgil Earp marshal to enforce a ban on deadly weapons in town. With his brothers Wyatt and Morgan and the gunfighter Doc Holliday, Marshal Earp killed three cowboys at the OK Corral on October 26. The conflict continued into the next year as cowboys wounded the marshal and killed Morgan Earp. Clum himself came under attack on December 14 while riding a stagecoach. Many people in Tombstone regarded the Earps as vigilante killers and criticized Clum for supporting them. After his term expired in 1882 Clum sold the *Epitaph* and left town.

John Clum spent the longest part of his career with the U.S. Postal Service in the Alaska territory. During the time of the Klondike gold rush, Clum served the vast territory as a postal inspector, setting up post offices and a free-delivery service that earned him a place in the Mining Hall of Fame. In Alaska Clum renewed his friendship with Wyatt Earp. In old age, Clum helped build the legend of Wyatt Earp as a heroic lawman by telling his side of the Tombstone story. After his death on May 2, 1932, some historians would question his version of events, but John P. Clum's place in American history and folklore was secure.



Image of John P. Clum in Apache group portrait with the Yuma Chief in 1875 from the Smithsonian National Postal Museum



**Claverack** is located in Columbia County east of the City of Hudson about 35 miles south of the capital city of Albany.

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