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Millard Fillmore

In his rise from a log cabin to wealth and the White House, Millard Fillmore demonstrated that through methodical industry and some competence an uninspiring man could make the American dream come true.



Thirteenth President
 1850-1855
 Married to Powers Fi

Born in the Finger Lakes country of New York in 1800, Fillmore as a youth endured the privations of frontier life. He worked on his father's farm, and at 15 was apprenticed to a cloth dresser. He attended one-room schools, and fell in love with the redheaded teacher, Abigail Powers, who later became his wife.

In 1823 he was admitted to the bar; seven years later he moved his law practice to Buffalo. As an associate of the Whig politician Thurlow Weed, Fillmore held state office and for eight years was a member of the House of Representatives. In 1848, while Comptroller of New York, he was elected Vice President.

Fillmore presided over the Senate during the months of nerve-wracking debates over the Compromise of 1850. He made no public comment on the merits of the compromise proposals, but a few days before President Taylor's death, he intimated to him that if there

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should be a tie vote on Henry Clay's bill, he would vote in favor of it.

Thus the sudden accession of Fillmore to the Presidency in July 1850 brought an abrupt political shift in the administration. Taylor's Cabinet resigned and President Fillmore at once appointed Daniel Webster to be Secretary of State, thus proclaiming his alliance with the moderate Whigs who favored the Compromise.

A bill to admit California still aroused all the violent arguments for and against the extension of slavery, without any progress toward settling the major issues.

Clay, exhausted, left Washington to recuperate, throwing leadership upon Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois. At this critical juncture, President Fillmore announced in favor of the Compromise. On August 6, 1850, he sent a message to Congress recommending that Texas be paid to abandon her claims to part of New Mexico.

This helped influence a critical number of northern Whigs in Congress away from their insistence upon the Wilmot Proviso--the stipulation that all land gained by the Mexican War must be closed to slavery.

Douglas's effective strategy in Congress combined with Fillmore's pressure from the White House to give impetus to the Compromise movement. Breaking up Clay's single legislative package, Douglas presented five separate bills to the Senate:

1. Admit California as a free state.
2. Settle the Texas boundary and compensate her.

3. Grant territorial status to New Mexico.
4. Place Federal officers at the disposal of slaveholders seeking fugitives.
5. Abolish the slave trade in the District of Columbia.

Each measure obtained a majority, and by September 20, President Fillmore had signed them into law. Webster wrote, "I can now sleep of nights."

Some of the more militant northern Whigs remained irreconcilable, refusing to forgive Fillmore for having signed the Fugitive Slave Act. They helped deprive him of the Presidential nomination in 1852.

Within a few years it was apparent that although the Compromise had been intended to settle the slavery controversy, it served rather as an uneasy sectional truce.

As the Whig Party disintegrated in the 1850's, Fillmore refused to join the Republican Party; but, instead, in 1856 accepted the nomination for President of the Know Nothing, or American, Party. Throughout the Civil War he opposed President Lincoln and during Reconstruction supported President Johnson. He died in 1874.

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National Archives

MILLARD FILLMORE **Biography**

Millard Fillmore was the 13th PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES (1850-53), succeeding to that office on the death of Zachary TAYLOR.

Fillmore was born in Cayuga County, N.Y., on Jan. 7, 1800. His parents were poor, and as a child he had little schooling. An apprentice wool carder, he gained his first formal education in 1819, when a slow period at work enabled him to attend New Hope Academy for 6 months. He then purchased a release from his apprenticeship, worked in a law office, and passed the bar examination in 1823. His law practice flourished, first in East Aurora, N.Y., and then in Buffalo, N.Y., which in 1830 he made his permanent home.

Early Political Career

Fillmore began his political career in the mid-1820s, as one of the many young men swept up in the anti-masonic movement of western New York. Elected to the state assembly in 1828, Fillmore successfully sponsored a bill to end imprisonment for debt. In 1832 he was elected to the U.S. CONGRESS as an Anti-Mason. In Congress, Fillmore joined the WHIG PARTY, the coalition opposed to Andrew JACKSON. He served as a Whig congressman from Buffalo from 1837 to 1843 and became a strong advocate of internal improvements and of the protective tariff. A man of solid character and diplomatic temperament, Fillmore won the respect of his colleagues, who in 1840 named him chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. He led passage of the Whig Tariff Act of 1842.

During the 1840s, Fillmore became identified with the conservative wing of the Whig party in New York. The liberal faction, led by Thurlow Weed and William H. Seward, was sympathetic to the growing antislavery movement. Seward and Weed also sought to attract to the Whigs voters from the great numbers of immigrants who flooded into New York after 1842. Fillmore, although against slavery, opposed the abolitionists as disruptive of the Whig party and of the nation itself. He was similarly skeptical about the quick naturalization of foreigners, who voted in droves for the Democratic party. As the Whig nominee for governor of New York in 1844, Fillmore attributed his narrow defeat to the hostile votes of abolitionists and Irish Roman Catholics. He returned (1847) to office when elected comptroller of the state of New York.

Vice-Presidency and Presidency

In 1848 the Whigs chose an outsider, Gen. Zachary Taylor, a Louisiana slaveholder who had never voted and

was not a Whig, as their presidential candidate. To reconcile the more traditional elements of the party, the convention named Fillmore as the Whig VICE-PRESIDENTIAL candidate. Despite rising animosity over the question of the expansion of slavery into territories won in the Mexican wars, the narrow victory of Taylor and Fillmore held out hope of a conciliatory national solution to the problem. The hope proved false. Taylor was fiercely resistant to the proposals that emerged in 1850 to resolve the dispute over slavery, although the measures had the strong support of Whig founders Henry Clay and Daniel Webster.

At the height of the sectional crisis Taylor died unexpectedly, and on July 9, 1850, Fillmore became president. Dramatically and decisively, the new president committed himself to sectional compromise. Accepting the resignations of Taylor's cabinet, he appointed Daniel Webster, the major Northern advocate of compromise, as his secretary of state, and also named Whigs favorable to compromise to the other cabinet posts. As fast as Congress could approve the bills making up the Compromise of 1850, Fillmore signed them into law. His administration strictly enforced the most controversial of the new measures, the Fugitive Slave Law, which required Northerners to collaborate in the return of escaped slaves to their Southern owners. During the remainder of his term, Fillmore became the first president to approve federal aid for the building of railroads and the first to send a trade mission (led by Commodore Matthew C. Perry) to Japan.

Because of his enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, Fillmore was the favorite of Southern delegates to the divided Whig presidential convention of 1852. His antagonists were Northern Whigs, led by his old New York rivals Seward and Weed, who favored the choice of an antislavery presidential candidate. The Southerners

achieved a pro-Compromise party platform, but after 53 ballots, the Northerners succeeded in pushing through an antislavery nominee, Gen. Winfield Scott. The divided Whigs were defeated by Democrat Franklin PIERCE in the election, and the Whig party thereafter began to disintegrate.

Later Life

Fillmore returned to Buffalo but remained active in politics and again sought the presidency in 1856. He profited from the rapidly rising nativist movement, which opposed the deepening influence of Catholic immigrants in U.S. life and politics. The KNOW-NOTHING PARTY, founded on nativism, named Fillmore its presidential nominee in 1856. He also won the nomination of the remnant of the Whig party, now dominated by Southerners. Pitted against both DEMOCRATS and REPUBLICANS, Fillmore carried only Maryland in the election but won over 40 percent of the vote in ten other Southern states.

Fillmore supported the Union during the Civil War but felt that the conflict was needless. He was critical of President Abraham LINCOLN's administration and supported Democrat George B. McClellan in the presidential contest of 1864. After retiring from politics, he became active in the civic life of Buffalo, and died there at age 74 on Mar. 8, 1874.

Sydney Nathans

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