

PART OF A SERIES

# President Millard Fillmore

By Charlie McBriarty

On July 9, 1850, President Zachary Taylor died suddenly, and Vice President Millard Fillmore was sworn in the next day as the 13th President of the United States. When Fillmore assumed office, the slavery issue had reached a point where the stability of the Union was being threatened. The Northern states were pushing to abolish slavery while Southern states were exploring the feasibility of secession. Though he was an opponent of slavery, Fillmore believed that any effort made by the Southern states to sever relations with the Union would fail and would ultimately result in the destruction of the entire nation. He believed that the Union would be best served by his maintaining a position midway between the extremes of either side while serving as president.

He saw the measure of Kentucky Senator Henry Clay that was moving toward a vote as having a chance of achieving the balance he was seeking. The measure, however, did not receive enough votes to gain passage. Clay then became quite ill and was unable to revise and resubmit the bill. Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas assumed that responsibility and eventually split Clay's measure into five separate bills. These bills included: 1) admitting the California Territory as a slave-free state; 2) resolving the Texas-New Mexico border controversy by redrawing the border and providing compensation to Texas for the lost territory; 3) recognition of the New Mexico Territory; 4) prohibition of the slave trade in the District of Columbia while not abolishing slave ownership; and 5) passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. Each of these measures ultimately passed Congress, and Fillmore signed them into law with the hope that, taken together, they would appease both the North and the South and preserve the Union. Collectively, these five acts became known as the Compromise of 1850.

Were it not for the Fugitive Slave Act, Fillmore's hope might have become a reality; however, this act called for slaves who escaped to another state to be returned to their owners. It also included provisions that the federal government would help with the return of these escapees. Abolitionist members of his own party strongly opposed this act. When Fillmore enforced the act and authorized federal troops to take the action required, his future political career became bleak. Nevertheless, the Compromise of 1850 has been credited with delaying the Civil War for more than a decade.

President Fillmore did accomplish a number of things during his relatively brief tenure in office. He dispatched Commodore Perry to negotiate with Japan to open trade relations. This exploration was eventually deemed a success because it opened Japanese trade not only with the United States, but also with other nations. He actively and effectively opposed foreign efforts to acquire Hawaii. He opposed Southern efforts to acquire Spanish-controlled Cuba, a country that permitted slavery. He is also credited with initiating ventures to explore markets in China and South America.

On the domestic front, he appointed the Mormon leader Brigham Young as the first governor of the Utah Territory on September 28, 1850. A national women's rights convention was convened in Worcester, Massachusetts, on October 24, 1850, which attracted delegates from nine states and hundreds of other attendees. Some of the topics explored included women's employment; legal, political and post nuptial rights; and educational opportunities. On March 3, 1851, the three-cent coins were minted to facilitate payment for postage stamps which had been reduced from five cents to three cents. The discovery of gold in present-day Oregon stimulated a migration of prospectors to that territory.

When the 1852 Whig National Convention convened on June 16 in Baltimore, the party was severely fractured over the slavery issue. The Southern Whigs favored Fillmore as the party's presidential candidate, while many of the Northerners opposed his implementation of the Fugitive Slave Act and were convinced he could not defeat the Democratic Party candidate Franklin Pierce. The first ballot gave Fillmore 133 votes, which fell short of the number required to receive the nomination. The balloting continued with Fillmore gradually losing votes. The 53rd ballot finally resulted in the successful identification of Winfield Scott as the Whig Party candidate for president. Scott received nearly 54% of the votes while Fillmore received slightly less than 38%.

During the "lame duck" period of his presidency, the Washington Territory was established on March 2, 1853, after its separation from the Oregon Territory.

With one day remaining in office, Fillmore approved the Transcontinental Railroad Survey that resulted in the coast-to-coast railway, which was completed in May 1869.

President Fillmore has been aptly identified as the "Last of the Whigs" since the party had essentially disintegrated by the time he left office. As president he did his best to preserve the Union through strategic use of compromise and a willingness to do so behind the scenes. His service and his efforts as president have been characterized as far-sighted and understanding. To his credit, the nation was experiencing prosperity and was at peace with the rest of the world when he left office.

After the inauguration of President Franklin Pierce, Fillmore left Washington and returned to his law practice in Buffalo. Less than a month later, his wife Abigail Powers Fillmore died on March 30, 1853. Within 16 months of the death of his wife, his only daughter, Mary Abigail Fillmore, died on July 26, 1854.

Fillmore was one of the founders of the University of Buffalo and served as its first chancellor. He was also instrumental in the establishment of the Buffalo Historical Society as well as the Buffalo Hospital.

In January 1855, before he left for an extended European trip, he announced he would seek the nomination of the American Party, also known as the Know-Nothing Party. While in England, Fillmore was invited to receive the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Civil Law from Oxford. Upon learning the degree was written in Latin, he declined the offer saying, "No man should accept a degree he cannot read."

Meanwhile, the Know-Nothing Party attracted some former Whigs and others. It maintained a solidly anti-immigration and anti-Catholic position and gained strength in the East and in the Midwest, where the flood of Irish Catholic immigrants (East) and German immigrants (Midwest) threatened the economic and political advantages of the native-born Protestants. At its 1856 party convention, the delegates elected Millard Fillmore to run for president, which he accepted upon his return from Europe. Fillmore did little campaigning but did carry Maryland and its eight Electoral votes. Democrat James Buchanan won the election and became the 15th President of the United States.

On February 10, 1858, Fillmore married Caroline Carmichael McIntosh. The couple became involved in Buffalo society, and he remained active throughout most of the rest of his life. During the Civil War he was critical of Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief, and he supported President Johnson's Reconstruction plan.

On March 8, 1874, at 11:10 p.m. Millard Fillmore died of a stroke in Buffalo, New York.

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