

This Day in History... January 7, 1800

Birth of President Millard Fillmore

America's 13th president, Millard Fillmore, was born on January 7, 1800, in Moravia, New York.

Born three weeks after the death of George Washington, Millard Fillmore was America's first president to be born after the death of a former president. With few opportunities available, Fillmore's father apprenticed him to a cloth maker in Sparta, New York, at the age of 14. Working under poor conditions, Fillmore bought his freedom and walked the 100 miles to his family's home. An avid reader, Fillmore read any book he could find, and in 1819, attended school for six months. While at the New Hope Academy, Fillmore met and fell in love with his teacher and future wife, Abigail Powers.

Later that same year, Fillmore worked as a clerk for Judge Walter Wood of Montville, New York, and began to study law. Upon completing his apprenticeship, Fillmore moved to Buffalo, working at the law office of Asa Rice and Joseph Clary until he was admitted to the bar in 1823. Fillmore formed his own law practice in East Aurora, and 11 years later, formed a law partnership with his close friend Nathan K. Hall. The firm quickly became one of western New York's most respected law offices.

In 1828, the Anti-Masonic party approached Fillmore to run for the New York State Legislature. The following year, he began the first of three terms in the state assembly. Well-respected and popular among the assembly and his district's citizens, one of Fillmore's main areas of concern was debtor imprisonment. At the time, people who could not pay their debts were thrown in prison, but Fillmore successfully passed laws forbidding this imprisonment.

With the merging of the Anti-Masonic party into the Whig Party, Fillmore was elected to Congress in 1832 and again in 1836, staying for another three terms. During this time he also served as the chair of the House Ways and Means Committee. Following his unsuccessful run for New York State Governor, Fillmore was elected the first New York State Comptroller, serving for two years, beginning in 1848. Fillmore won the election by such a large margin that he was immediately considered a top Whig candidate for the 1848 presidential election. As comptroller, Fillmore revised New York's banking system, which later became the model for the National Banking System.

*Fillmore stamp the 1986
Presidential Mini Sheets*

At the Whig's nominating convention, General Zachary Taylor was selected as the presidential candidate due to his success in the Mexican War. The choice of a slave owner angered antislavery Whigs from the North, so the party sought a vice presidential nominee they could support. They selected Fillmore, hoping his opposing beliefs, style, and Northern hometown would appeal to a wider audience. As this approach had worked in the past, Taylor was elected president by a five percent margin.

Taylor and Fillmore did not actually meet until after the election, and reportedly did not get along from the beginning. Taylor and his cabinet all but shunned Fillmore. However, as president of the Senate, Fillmore was well-respected for his intelligence, humor, and ability to diffuse tense situations.

In response to the heated slavery issue, Senator Henry Clay introduced the Compromise of 1850, which was as controversial as the slavery debate itself. Clay's bill proposed the organization of Utah and New Mexico, leaving the decision of slavery to a vote in those territories. The bill would also make California a state and prohibit slave auctions in the District of Columbia. Additionally, the bill would introduce a new fugitive slave law ordering that runaway slaves found anywhere in the United States would be returned to their enslavers if a board of commissioners declared them fugitives. The bill would allow authorities to arrest Blacks and return



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During the 1850 Fourth of July celebration at the White House, President Taylor consumed contaminated water and fruit, and died of cholera five days later. For just the second time in America's history, the vice president took over the duties of a deceased president.

With the nation shocked at the president's unexpected death, Fillmore quickly assumed the presidency and accepted the resignations of Taylor's entire cabinet. He immediately replaced them with men he expected to support Clay's Compromise and focused all his energy into getting it passed. However, the task would not be easy, as Clay introduced a modified version of the bill and the pro- and anti-slavery forces battled over every line in Congress. Worn down by the constant fighting, Clay left the capital and Stephen Douglass came in as his replacement.



Clay was called "The Great Compromiser."

Douglass broke the compromise down into five smaller bills, getting each passed one by one. As a result, Texas received \$10 million for settling its border dispute with New Mexico, California was admitted as a free state, New Mexico and Utah became territories, slave trading was made illegal in Washington DC, and the Fugitive Slave Law passed with little quarrel in the Senate or House. Fillmore saw the passage of all five bills as a great triumph in interparty cooperation, keeping America united.

Although Fillmore saw this as a success, most Americans did not agree. To keep Southerners happy amid threats of secession, Fillmore advocated enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, upsetting Abolitionists. To please them, he strengthened forts in South Carolina to discourage secessionist threats. As the slavery controversy continued, the Whig Party began to fall apart.

Although subject to attacks on his domestic policies concerning slavery, statehood, and secession, Fillmore found greater success dealing with America's interests outside of the country. Recognizing the need for a supply port for US ships traveling to China, Fillmore turned his interests to Japan. For over 200 years, Japan had closed off trade with nearly all outsiders. Fillmore sent Commodore Matthew Perry to Japan to establish a trade relationship. The treaty, which was not fully completed until after Fillmore's term, provided that US ships be allowed access to two ports in Japan and receive assistance and supplies when necessary.

Fillmore was firm in keeping France and England out of Hawaii's interests, warning Napoleon III that the US would not allow him to force the Hawaiian king to annex the island to France. Similarly, Fillmore threatened European powers to stay out of Cuba, believing that control of the island "might be almost essential to our [America's] safety."

Weary from his unexpected term as president, Fillmore did not wish to run for president in 1854, but was convinced by his cabinet to run again. Much to his relief, he was not elected president and looked forward to a break from stressful national politics.

Fillmore's beloved wife Abigail caught pneumonia at President Franklin Pierce's inauguration and died less than a month later. Soon after, Fillmore was again devastated by the death of his 22-year-old daughter Mary. Inconsolable, Fillmore returned to politics, receiving presidential nominations from the Know-Nothing and Whig parties in 1856. Although he did not win the election, he prevented the election of another candidate he greatly disliked – John C. Frémont.

After the election, Fillmore retired from politics, marrying Caroline McIntosh in 1858 and taking great interest in several causes and charities. With the outbreak of the Civil War, Fillmore joined the Union cause, organizing enlistment and war-financing drives. Fillmore died of a stroke in March 1874, one of Buffalo, New York's most respected citizens.



Taylor led US forces to their first major victory of the Mexican-American War at the Battle of Palo Alto.



Fillmore gave Perry a letter for Japan's emperor, requesting that Americans stranded in Japan be returned home and expressing interest in opening trade between the two nations.



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