

This Day in History... December 29, 1808

Birth of President Andrew Johnson

Andrew Johnson was born in Raleigh, North Carolina, on December 29, 1808. When Johnson was just three years old, his father, Jacob Johnson, died. Mary McDonough Johnson supported him and his brothers by taking on washing and sewing for others.

At the age of 13, Johnson was apprenticed to a tailor. Shortly thereafter, the young man was taught to read. It was at this point that he first became interested in history, politics, and the United States Constitution. After just two years of his apprenticeship, Johnson ran away to Carthage, North Carolina, and then Greeneville, Tennessee, to start his own tailoring business.

Johnson formed a workers' party in 1829 and was later elected its leader. He was then elected mayor of Greeneville, Tennessee, and in 1835 joined the state's House of Representatives. He was popular among poor farmers and laborers for his stance against the wealthy. Johnson was elected to the Senate in 1841 and pushed for a bill that eventually became the Homestead Act. He was later elected governor before serving in the US Senate.



Johnson stamp from the Presidential Series.



Issued for the 100th anniversary of the Homestead Act.

Johnson's early political career was marked by the support of the institution of slavery. As a slave owner himself, he believed that the US Constitution protected a citizen's right to own slaves and that the states had the authority to protect this right. He also loved the Union and what it stood for, so when states began to secede in 1861, Andrew Johnson spoke out against them. He became the only Southern senator who did not secede with his state.

As a Southerner, a strong Unionist, and a leading member of the War Democrats, Andrew Johnson was an ideal candidate to run for vice president in 1865. The Lincoln-Johnson ticket was elected by both an electoral and popular landslide. Johnson's term as vice president lasted six weeks. On April 14, President Abraham Lincoln was shot while attending a play. Johnson took the oath of office the following morning.

Andrew Johnson became president at a difficult time in American history. The Civil War had ended just days before, and there was no system in place for Reconstruction of the South. Because he felt that the South was led into rebellion by politicians and wealthy plantation owners, President Johnson favored a moderate course of Reconstruction. He granted full pardons to all Southern citizens except military and political leaders, and plantation owners whose estates were valued at over \$20,000. Congress favored a more radical Reconstruction; one that would limit the power of former Confederate leaders, protect the former slaves and give voting rights to African Americans.

Because Congress was not in session when Johnson assumed the presidency, he began his more moderate plan of Reconstruction. However, when Congress returned, all of President Johnson's Reconstruction laws were repealed and the more radical measures were voted in – even over presidential veto.

The tension between the president and Congress came to a head when Congress passed two more laws that Johnson felt were unconstitutional. One law, the First Reconstruction Act, put the South under strict military rule, denying citizens the right to vote for constitutional convention delegates. Also, the Tenure of Office Act made it illegal for the president to remove from office any cabinet member who had previously been approved by Congress.

When President Johnson violated the Tenure of Office Act by removing Secretary of War Stanton from office, Congress took action against him. They adopted eleven articles of impeachment, the most important of which charged Johnson with violating the Tenure of Office Act and conspiring against Congress and the Constitution. On March 13, 1868, a two-month-long impeachment trial began. However, Congress had a weak case against Johnson, and the president was found not guilty on all articles – by one vote.

Despite his continuing battles with Congress and the massive task of Reconstruction, Johnson's term is more positively remembered for some of his foreign policy measures. Much of this was thanks to his secretary of state, William Seward. In 1866, Seward discovered that Czar Alexander II wanted to sell his holdings in North America. Seward, under President Johnson's guidance, offered the Czar \$7.2 million for the nearly 500,000 square mile area, costing just 2¢ an acre. The people of this land, that eventually became Alaska, became American citizens and the territory became a colonial possession. At the time, many called the purchase "Seward's Folly" because they viewed it as a massive, frozen wasteland.

South of the United States, in Mexico, Seward demanded that Napoleon remove his forces following a long conflict between the French and Mexicans. While the Monroe Doctrine was never mentioned specifically, it was likely a driving force. Additionally, Johnson introduced neutrality laws against Irish-American Fenians (a revolutionary brotherhood), who had staged several armed attacks in Canada in an attempt to annex it. He also helped to put to rest the issue of the British helping the Confederates during the Civil War.

One of Johnson's last major acts before leaving office was giving unconditional amnesty to all Confederates on Christmas Day, 1868. Upon leaving the office, Johnson said, "I have performed my duty to my God, my country, and my family... I have nothing to fear."

Returning home to Tennessee, he ran unsuccessfully for the US Senate and House of Representatives. But in 1874, he was re-elected to the Senate, making him the only US president to serve in the Senate after his term. In July of the following year, he suffered a stroke and died on July 31, 1875.



Issued for the 70th anniversary of Seward's purchase of Alaska.

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