

Chapter 145 - Taylor's Support Of The Wilmot Proviso Shocks The South

Time: March to July 1849

Administrative Duties Occupy Taylor's First Few Months In office

After the inauguration, Taylor and his family move into a White House marred by a leaky roof and the same suspicious water supply -- sourced from the polluted Potomac River, a mere 2500 feet from the front door – that may have killed Harrison.

Once there, he is quickly surrounded by the usual band of “favor-seekers,” literally camped out on the ground floor near his office, and awaiting the traditional five minute audience with the new executive.

This siege is followed by various ceremonial duties, including two back-to-back funeral services.

On July 17, Taylor delivers a eulogy address in memory of Dolley Madison, who dies in the capitol city at eighty-two. In his remarks the President coins the term “first lady” in referring to her.

Only ten days later, a memorial is held in honor of ex-President Polk, who dies at age fifty-three in Nashville, less than four months after leaving office.

By mid-summer the General is restless and eager to leave his new post and venture beyond Washington.

He decides to tour the Northeast, and sets out on August 9, 1849 for Baltimore, on his way to Pennsylvania and New York.

In Harrisburg he learns that “expansionists” who encouraged the war with Mexico are plotting further moves into foreign lands. Some wish to drive south through lower Mexico and into Central America. Others have their eyes on Cuba, a long-time acquisition target.

To curtail a potential “filibustering” expedition against Cuba, Taylor orders Secretary of State Clayton to closely monitor the ports of New Orleans and New York.

Soon after issuing this order, the President is struck by ominous bouts of what appears to be cholera, with persistent diarrhea and vomiting that perceptibly slow him down.

Time: August 23, 1849

The President Says He Will Support The Wilmot Proviso

Still he rallies sufficiently to travel to Pittsburg, where he praises tariffs that protect jobs.

Heading further north into Mercer County, he meets with a group of free-soil advocates. In off-hand remarks he announces that he will support the Wilmot Proviso if it reaches his desk:

The people of the North need have no apprehension of the further extension of slavery....If the congress sees fit to pass (the Wilmot proviso) I will not veto it.

When this quote appears in the press it shocks the South!

Taylor does not intend to free what he calls the “servants” on his three plantations, nor to abolish slavery in the old South. But he is very aware of the growing volatility that surrounds the institution across the North, and the threat this poses to the Union. And, like General Jackson before him, the sanctity of the Union is first and foremost in his heart. By flat-out banning the spread of slavery, Taylor thinks he will end the divisive debate once and for all.

After heading back east across Pennsylvania, he again becomes violently ill, on August 24. He rests for several days then heads home to Washington after a final stop-over in Albany, New York

Once there he will face the mounting storm over his now public stance on slavery, and on statehood for California – two issues that dominate the remaining ten months of his presidency.