

Chapter 156 - Millard Fillmore's Term

Time: 1800 - 1874

President Millard Fillmore: Personal Profile



Millard Fillmore (1800-1874) Decked Out As A New York Militia Man.

Millard Fillmore, America's second "accidental President," ascends to his thirty months in high office with unremarkable political credentials.

He has been defeated for Governor of New York in 1844, never elected to a Senate seat or chosen for a cabinet secretary. His inclusion on the 1848 ticket is merely a sop to Northerners troubled by Taylor's plantation owner status and thin Whig party connections.

Most view him as a "riser," insecure, obsequious, prone to blow with the wind to advance his career.

He is born in Moravia, N.Y. in 1800 and given his mother's maiden name, Millard. His family lives hand-to-mouth on a rental farm, worked by his parents and nine children. His formal education is negligible and at age 14, his father sends him off to

apprentice in the cloth-making trade. But he is soon reading law, guided by a local judge. In 1821, he moves to Buffalo, four years before it becomes a boom town as terminus of the 363 mile Erie Canal, linking it with Albany. Fillmore passes the bar in 1823, marries his schoolteacher bride, and builds a successful law firm dealing with the influx of people and cases that accompany the new Canal. He also expands his horizons – serving as a Major in the N.Y. State Militia, and being elected to the State Assembly on Thurlow Weed's Anti-Masonic Party ticket.

In 1832 he wins a seat in the U.S. House as a National Republican, and later serves three more terms, from 1837 to 1843, as a Whig. His aspirations slip when he suffers a narrow loss to Silas Wright in the 1844 race for NY Governor – but his reputation rebounds four year later when he overhauls banking industry practices as State Comptroller. At the 1848 Philadelphia convention, he slips on to the ticket with a second ballot victory over Abbot Lawrence of Massachusetts, who is "vetoed" by Dan Webster for supporting Clay, and Henry Seward, whose anti-slavery views are too extreme for many delegates.

Fillmore's own views on slavery will mark him as a "Doughface" Northerner – eager to follow up words of moral criticism with assurances of inaction against the South's institution.

God knows that I detest slavery, but it is an existing evil, for which we are not responsible, and we must endure it, and give it such protection as is guaranteed by the constitution, till we can get rid of it without destroying the last hope of free government in the world.

On July 10, 1850, he is sworn into office by William Cranch, Chief Judge of the U.S. Circuit Court in D.C., who earlier performed the same duty when John Tyler succeeded the fallen Harrison.

Like Tyler, Fillmore does not immediately deliver an Inaugural address.

Time: July 1850

Fillmore Names His Cabinet

After taking the oath, the new President receives pro-forma resignations from Taylor's entire cabinet, each of whom expects to be retained. Fillmore, however, feels that these men have systematically excluded him from the White House inner circle, and he takes the rash action of dismissing them all.

When he asks them to stay on until replacements are found, they refuse – and thus he is left scrambling to staff his new government. His picks are uneven, and generally tilted toward seeking whatever compromises with the South are needed to avoid conflict.

The key post of Secretary of State goes to Daniel Webster, a long time Whig leader on the national stage, but now severely weakened across the North by his stand in favor of the Fugitive Slave portion of the 1850 Omnibus Bill. In accepting the post, Webster has his eye on the 1852 presidential nomination, and he signs on only after several Boston supporters agree to supplement his regular government salary.

The Treasury falls to Senator Tom Corwin of Ohio, an outspoken critic of the Mexican War and supporter of higher tariffs to fund Whig infrastructure spending.

Fillmore's military-related appointees are particularly troublesome.

His first three choices for Secretary of War turn him down, and it isn't until September that he finally settles on Louisiana Congressman William Conrad, survivor of an earlier fatal duel and later a leader of the secession movement in his home state.

The Navy post goes to William Graham, the Governor of North Carolina, who likewise will abandon the Union to serve in the Confederate senate.

The President nearly begs a reluctant Thomas McKennan to oversee Indian affairs as Secretary of the Interior, and he then resigns after ten days in the job. He is succeeded by the Virginian, Alexander Stuart, who serves with competence and loyalty.

Finally the strong Unionist and Whig Party leader John J. Crittenden returns to the Attorney General position he held under William Henry Harrison while Fillmore's close confidant and former Buffalo law partner, Nathan Hall, is named to the "spoils-laden" job as Postmaster General.

Millard Fillmore's Cabinet

Position	Name	Home State
Secretary of State	Daniel Webster	Massachusetts
Secretary of Treasury	Thomas Corwin	Ohio
Secretary of War	Charles Conrad	Louisiana
Attorney General	John J. Crittenden	Kentucky
Secretary of Navy	William Graham	North Carolina
Postmaster General	Nathan Hall	New York
Secretary of Interior	Thomas McKennan	Pennsylvania

Time: July 1850 to March 1853

Overview Of Fillmore's Term

During the twenty-one months of Taylor's term he serves out, Millard Fillmore will capitulate endlessly to the interests of the South – thus precipitating the death knell of the Whig Party.

This begins with his support for the 1850 Compromise Bill put together by the Democrat, Stephen Douglas, which discards Taylor's intent to impose the "Wilmot ban" on slavery across the west – and instead allows owners to bring their "property" into any new territory of their choosing. This same bill institutes a new Fugitive Slave Act which puts blacks everywhere at risk of being arrested by bounty hunters, tried without due process, and returned to bondage. It also requires that northerners actively participate in these captures or face fines and jail.

The 1850 Bill is a near total sop to the South, and immediately alienates voters who elected Taylor in the 1848 election.

On the other hand, Fillmore does at least try to pass some traditional Whig legislation, unlike the former “accidental President,” John Tyler.

This includes maintaining a sufficient tariff to fund the government, and plowing revenues back into a host of “infrastructure advances” to support economic growth. He proposes improved harbors and more canals, including one in Central America connecting the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean. He is also an early proponent of a transcontinental railroad, and, to his credit, sponsors several initiatives to broaden American trade in the Far East. Of note here is Admiral Matthew Perry’s expedition to Japan, launched in November 1852.

The national economy registers sharp gains during Fillmore’s tenure, largely in response to the California gold rush and the general stimulus it provides.

Key Economic Overview

	1848	1849	1850	1851	1852
Total GDP (\$000)	\$2,400	2,419	2,581	2,724	3,066
% Change	+1%	+1	+7	+6	+12
Per Capita GDP	\$111	108	111	113	123
President	Polk	Taylor	Taylor	Fillmore	Fillmore

But Fillmore’s presidency is consumed by sectional animus on the slave issue.

The first blows come from Northern resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act. In February 1851 protestors mob a Boston courthouse to free a runaway named Shadrach Minkins. When a second slave, Thomas Sims, is captured, Fillmore draws fire for sending in federal troops to escort him to Boston harbor for a return trip to Georgia.

In June 1851 public sympathy for the run-aways is further heightened by the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

This is followed by Fillmore’s embarrassing attempt to curry favor in the South by demanding that a group harboring fugitives in the town of Christiana, Pennsylvania be charged with the high crime of treason. After withering criticism of the government’s case from both the defense and the presiding judge, the jury brings in an acquittal verdict in fifteen minutes. (This remains the largest treason trial ever brought in America.)

Another slavery-related set-back materializes when the President fails to stop another attempt by the filibusterer Narciso Lopez to invade and conquer Cuba in a plan backed by Governor John

Quitman of Mississippi. After Lopez and fifty Americans are captured and executed, he pays Cuba for the release of other raiders, but then simply releases them without prosecution.

As his term nears an end, Fillmore at first appears to back away from a re-election run in favor of Daniel Webster, his own Secretary of State. But since he is well aware that Webster is critically ill, this “deference” is merely a ploy intended to sit well with New England Whigs. At the June 1852 convention he campaigns hard for the nomination, with a strong base of support from the South for his track record as a “doughface.” He remains neck and neck against his chief rival, General Winfield Scott, before falling short on the forty-first ballot.

Once he leaves office, two tragedies befall him within the first year, the loss of his wife, and of his twenty-two year old daughter.

In 1855 he embarks on a grand world tour, before returning home to participate in the 1856 race as presidential candidate of the momentarily vibrant Know Nothing Party, whose slogan is “Americans must rule America.” This fits with Fillmore’s lifelong animus toward any groups he regards as deviant, from his early attacks on the Free Masons to his later diatribes against the Irish and German Catholic immigrants.

His message during the campaign that “foreigners are corrupting the ballot box” garners a credible 875,000 votes (13% of the total), and he carries one state, Maryland.

After the loss he returns to home town adoration in Buffalo, marries a wealthy widow, and continues his role in the city university he began. As the Civil War approaches, he backs the Constitutional Union Party and blames Lincoln for antagonizing the South. In 1864 he supports the “Truce Now” Democrat, George McClellan.

After suffering two strokes, Fillmore dies in March 1874 at seventy-four years old.

Key Events: Fillmore’s Term

July 9	Taylor dies suddenly & Fillmore becomes president
July 12	Texas demands that its border claims to New Mexico land be approved by Washington
July 22	Clay’s attempt to pass the Omnibus Bill fails in congress
August	Voting begins in mid-term House & Senate races (extends to Nov. 1851)
Sept 9-12	Stephen Douglas drives passage of 1850 Compromise, including Fugitive Slave Act
Sept 20	Douglas land grant bill to support Chicago to Mobile railroad is approved
Sept 27	Conservative NY Whigs break w Seward & back Fillmore’s support for Compromise
Oct 21	Chicago city council refuses to support Fugitive Slave Act
October	James Hamlet, first runaway slave arrested, is freed by money raised to buy his freedom

Nov 11-18	Southerners meet in Nashville and discuss secession
Dec 13-14	Georgia state convention decides it will secede if North fails to follow 1850 Comp.
December	Runaways Ellen and William Craft escape from Boston to England
Year	Immigration passes the 400,000 mark for the first time in American history
1851	
Jan 15	John Brown organizes League of Gileadites with blacks in Springfield, Mass
Feb 15	Shadrach Minkins rescued from Boston jail by those protesting Fugitive Slave law
April 4	Thomas Sims captured in Boston setting off further anti-Fugitive Slave Law protests
April 25	Fillmore again warns against Southern filibustering directed at Cuba
May 19	Train line connecting New York City to Dunkirk, NY (483 miles) is completed
June 2	State of Maine passes bill prohibiting the sale of alcohol
June 5	<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> chapters begin to appear in the anti-slavery <i>National Era</i> paper
July 23	Sioux turn over lands in Iowa & Minnesota in Treaty of Traverse des Sioux
Aug 3	Narciso Lopez leads second invasion of Cuba, which fails by Aug 16
Sept 18	First issue of <i>NY Daily Times</i> (later <i>NY Times</i>) started by Henry J. Raymond
Oct 22	Fillmore warns against those who wish to conquer all of Mexico
Dec 1	Whigs lose 22 seats in the House to Democrats & the heavily southern Unionist Party
Dec 11	Fillmore embarrassed by Christiana treason trial which ends with acquittals
Dec 5	Hungarian revolutionary visits U.S. to cheers
Year	Melville publishes <i>Moby Dick</i>
1852	
Jan	<i>Democratic Review</i> publishes articles on the Young Americans movement & S. Douglas
Feb 20	Chicago terminal opens for trains coming from the east
March	Complete book of <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> is published in Boston
Spring	<i>The Pro-Slavery Argument</i> responds to ongoing criticism
June 1-6	Democratic Convention nominates Franklin Pierce on 49 th ballot; King as VP
June 16-21	Whigs nominate Winfield Scott on 53 rd ballot; Graham for VP; support 1850 Comp.
June 29	Henry Clay dies
July 5	Fred Douglass speech: <i>What To The Slave Is The Fourth Of July?</i>
Aug 11	Free Soil Party nominate John P. Hale; Julien as VP; oppose 1850 Comp & slavery
Aug 24	First stage play of <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>
October 24	Daniel Webster dies
Oct 26	Senator Charles Sumner introduces a bill to repeal the Fugitive Slave Act
Nov 2	Franklin Pierce elected as 14 th President

Nov 13	In <i>Lemon v New York</i> , slaves brought into the Free State of NY are declared free
Nov 24	Commander Matthew Perry begins voyage to Japan
December	Many Whigs and Free Soilers drift to new Know Nothing Party
Year	<i>The Pro-Slavery Argument</i> published in the south
1853	
March 2	Washington Territory created out of northern Oregon
March 4	\$150,000 appropriation for the army to explore transcontinental railroad routes
March 4	Franklin Pierce inaugurated