

## Chapter 211 - James Buchanan's Term

Time: 1791-1868

### James Buchanan: Personal Profile



James Buchanan, Jr. 1791-1868

James Buchanan is born in a log cabin in Pine Grove, Pennsylvania, located just north of the border with Maryland. He is the eldest son and namesake of an Irish immigrant father who becomes a wealthy merchant in the area. At sixteen he is off to study at Dickinson College in Carlisle. After two disciplinary run-ins, he graduates with a law degree in 1809. He then moves to Lancaster and begins to build a law practice before becoming prosecutor for Lebanon County in 1813.

On August 25, 1814 – one day after the British have burned Washington, DC, Buchanan makes his first public speech, urging citizens to defend their country. True to his word, he joins the Lancaster County Dragoons and marches off to defend Baltimore, albeit arriving too late to engage in combat.

He comes home in October, 1814, just before the War of 1812 ends, and decides to run for public office. Like his father, his politics at age twenty-three are pro-Federalist, favoring infrastructure projects, a U.S. Bank and high tariffs – all decidedly antithetical to southern wishes. After parlaying his new government contacts into an expanded and profitable law practice by 1819, he courts a young woman named Ann Coleman, daughter of a well-to-do iron broker. This ends in tragedy when her parents disapprove of the match and she then dies suddenly, leading Buchanan to vow that he will never marry.

By 1821 with a net worth estimated at \$250,000, he enters the U.S. House for the first of five consecutive terms. He abandons his Federalist views and campaigns for Andrew Jackson and the Democrat Party. As a reward, Jackson names him Ambassador to Russia in 1832. His journey to St. Petersburg is a brutal seven week affair, but once there he masters French, the language of diplomacy, wins favor with Tsar Nicholas I, and is able to conclude a valuable trade agreement.

He returns home in 1834 and decides to run for the Senate. As his campaign gets under way, he recognizes a possible threat in the fact that his sister, Harriet, and her husband, who live in Virginia, own two slaves. His response is to “hire” twenty-two year old Daphne Cook and her five year old daughter, Ann, as his “indentured servants,” to support his household in Lebanon for terms running upwards of seven years apiece.

Buchanan wins the Senate seat in 1834 and is re-elected in 1836 and 1842. He supports Jackson's war on the Second U.S. Bank and the entire Manifest Destiny movement, including the annexation of Texas. His views on slavery smack of familiar equivocations – yes, it is morally wrong, but the Africans are an inferior lot and emancipating them will lead on to “evils

infinitely greater,” namely “the massacre of the high-minded and chivalrous race of men in the South.” Included in this “chivalrous race” is Alabama Senator William Rufus King, with whom Buchanan has an intimate, perhaps homosexual, liaison between 1840 and King’s death in 1853.

In 1845 his presidential ambitions receive another boost when he joins James Polk’s cabinet as Secretary of State. In that role he earns his reputation as a Northerner with Southern sympathies. He backs the Mexican War, opposes the Wilmot Proviso, which would outlaw the spread of slavery into lands seized in the conflict, and embraces the 1850 Compromise aimed at maintaining an equal division of Senate seats between the Slave and Free States. Buchanan does, however, manage to irritate Polk by vacillating on treaty terms relative to the Oregon Territory and the Mexican Cession, both apparently to serve his own political purposes at the time.

In 1848 he considers a run for the Democratic nomination, but the prize goes to Lewis Cass, who promptly loses the election to the Whig, Zachary Taylor. This sends Buchanan back home to Lancaster, where he buys his *Wheatland* mansion, and awaits a reentry into national politics. The opportunity arrives at the 1852 Democratic convention in Baltimore where he and Stephen Douglas vie for the nomination through twenty-nine ballots, only to see dark horse Franklin Pierce slip by them and get the nod on the forty-ninth.

Given Buchanan’s seniority, Pierce finds a place for him as Minister to Britain, where he serves from 1853 to 1856. His pro-Southern sympathies are again revealed here in his “Ostend Manifesto,” which calls for the acquisition of Cuba, by force if necessary, and the expansion of slavery into the Caribbean. When this document becomes public it proves embarrassing to himself and to Pierce.

However, as luck would have it, Buchanan’s absence abroad insulates him from the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act controversies and the resulting chaos in Kansas, and sets him apart and above both Douglas and Pierce when the Democrat’s 1856 nomination is decided.

His victory in the November election finally brings him to the office he has regarded as rightfully his for decades.

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Time: 1840’s Forward

### **The President’s Pro-Southern Bias Is Also Clear All Along**

Despite his roots in Pennsylvania, Buchanan exhibits an almost blind favoritism toward the values and people of the South, a trait that will irreparably harm his term in office.

Southerners comprise his closest friends and advisors all along.

For thirteen years, from 1840 to 1853, he shares his residence in Washington with William R. King of Alabama. The intimacy of this relationship is noted frequently, even by an aging Andrew Jackson, who refers to the pair as “Aunt Nancy” and “Aunt Fancy.”

Of the seven man in Buchanan’s cabinet, three will end up serving the Confederacy, with two (Howell Cobb and John Floyd) later becoming Generals in the army and one (Jacob Thompson) serving as its Inspector General. Another member (Aaron Brown) is a slave-holder from Tennessee, while his Attorney General, Jeremiah Black, is an outspoken opponent of the Free-Staters in Kansas. .

Buchanan’s social and legal views also align with the South. He is a staunch cultural conservative, forever alarmed by what he sees as the “radical reformists” of New England. He claims to see slavery a moral evil, but says that abolishing it would be far too risky.

*Is there any man in this Union who could for a moment indulge the horrible idea of abolishing slavery by the massacre of the high-minded and chivalrous race of men of the South?*

Likewise, he is a strict constructionist when it comes to the U.S. Constitution. Along with Chief Justice Taney, he is absolutely convinced that slaves are “property,” with no standing in the legal system, and that owners have every right to transport them wherever they desire – including the Kansas Territory. Just as the Lecompton Constitution says.

Finally, above all else, he recognizes that his ambition to win the White House was realized by carrying 14 of the 15 Slave States in the 1856 election. These are the people who put him in office and now is the time to support their legitimate rights to slavery.

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**Time: March 1857**

### **Buchanan’s Cabinet Is Chosen For Internal Harmony**

When the new President comes to naming his cabinet, he has a choice between reaching out to the diverse factions within his party in search of open debate and compromise, or surrounding himself with those who share and reinforce his beliefs. He settles on the latter course, and it seldom serves him well.

Like other presidents, he decides to run foreign policy on his own, and thus selects a figurehead Secretary of State in Lewis Cass. Like Buchanan, Cass has superb credentials for the job, having served in Jackson’s cabinet, as Minister to France, Territorial Governor in the west, and years in Washington politics, including his 1848 run for the White House. But he is now seventy-four years old and no longer fit for the rigors of office. Cass’s most notable act will be to resign in December 1860 when convinced that Buchanan is failing to handle the military threats from the South.

Southerners fill four of the remaining six cabinet slots, and together they will exert pressure on most all of his policy decisions going forward. The leading figure here is Howell Cobb, who serves as Treasury Secretary and as the senior “voice” for southern interests. Cobb has also had a remarkable career. Speaker of the US House at age thirty-four; Governor of Georgia; and author,

along with Alexander Stephens and Robert Toombs, of the “Georgia Platform” which supports the 1850 Compromise and lays out the South’s demands to preserve the Union.

His pick for Secretary of War is John Floyd of Virginia, who first bungles preparations for the “Mormon War” and later, with perhaps treasonous intent, assists the southern rebels by scattering northern troops and transferring armaments to vulnerable forts just prior to the start of the war. Like Cobb, Floyd will later resign from the cabinet and subsequently become a General in the Confederate army in 1861.

Jacob Thompson of Mississippi is named Secretary of the Interior, after completing five terms in the House, where he concentrates on Indian Affairs. He too will resign before enlisting in the CSA army, serving as Inspector General.

The final southerner is Postmaster General, Aaron Brown, ex-law partner of James Polk, with three terms in the House before his election as Governor of Tennessee. Brown becomes famous during the Mexican War, after his plea for troops leads to a flood of “Tennessee Volunteers.”

Buchanan names the Connecticut native, Isaac Toucey, as his Navy Secretary, largely as a sop to the Pierce faction of the party. Toucey is a strong states right advocate who has served as Attorney General under Polk. He has also been Governor of his home state, in addition to completing two terms in the House and one in the Senate. He will remain loyal to Buchanan to the end.

Lastly there is Attorney General Jeremiah Black, a self-taught lawyer who advances to the post of Chief Justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court before Buchanan calls him to Washington. After Cass resigns, Black takes over as Secretary of State and becomes the key advisor during the secession crisis. He tells Buchanan that abandoning the Union is unconstitutional and advises him to defend the Charleston forts. But he also wavers about initiating the use of force against the rebels.

Ironically these cabinet choices overlook the one man perhaps most responsible for the president’s victory. That is John Weiss Forney, a friend from Lancaster, publisher of the *Pennsylvanian*, and champion of Buchanan’s close wins in his home state. Forney is promised one post after another only to be shut out in the end. Eventually he will abandon the President over his Kansas policies, and help the Republicans and Lincoln in 1860 and beyond.

**James Buchanan’s Cabinet In March 1857**

<b>Position</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Home State</b>	<b>In War</b>
<b>Secretary of State</b>	Lewis Cass	Michigan	USA
<b>Secretary of Treasury</b>	Howell Cobb	Georgia	CSA
<b>Secretary of War</b>	John Floyd	Virginia	CSA
<b>Attorney General</b>	Jeremiah Black	Pennsylvania	USA
<b>Secretary of Navy</b>	Isaac Toucey	Connecticut	USA
<b>Postmaster General</b>	Aaron Brown	Tennessee	Died 1859
<b>Secretary of the Interior</b>	Jacob Thompson	Mississippi	CSA

By all accounts, Buchanan's cabinet works according to his wishes – backing his policies and avoiding dissension right up to his last three months in office, when his administration and the Union collapse.

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Time: March 4, 1857

### The Inaugural Address Touts The End Of Agitation Over Slavery



The circumstances surrounding James Buchanan's inaugural address are anything but sanguine. In Kansas, the Free State Party has reconvened its legislature in defiance of Governor John Geary's orders, and the controversial pro-slavery candidate for Douglas County Sheriff has just been shot dead by a state official. In Washington, the weather has turned bitterly cold and Buchanan is so sick from a case of dysentery that he considers foregoing his speech.

Copy Of A Photo Showing Buchanan's Swearing In Ceremony

But on March 4, 1857, he and Pierce enter an open carriage and are cheered down Pennsylvania Avenue to the capitol, arriving at 1pm under cloudy skies. His speech begins by citing the words in the oath of office and...

*Humbly invoc(ing) the God of our fathers for wisdom and firmness...to restore harmony and ancient friendship among the people of the several States.*

Unlike Pierce who dodges around the issue of "involuntary servitude," Buchanan forthrightly acknowledges that slavery *is* the root cause of the disharmony. But he then goes on to blindly assert that the "tempest" has been resolved by his election and the undeniable wisdom of "popular sovereignty."

*We have recently passed through a Presidential contest in which the passions of our fellow-citizens were excited... but when the people proclaimed their will the tempest at once subsided and all was calm...What a happy conception...that Congress is neither "to legislate slavery into any Territory or State nor to exclude it therefrom, but to leave the people thereof perfectly free to form and regulate their domestic institutions in their own way, subject only to the Constitution of the United States."*

With that much settled, the only question left to resolve in Kansas is whether the Free vs. Slave State designation should be resolved early on when the Territory is first organized or later when it applies for statehood. Incredibly he brushes this contentious issue aside:

*This (timing) is, happily, a matter of but little practical importance.*

After declaring that “timing” is a judicial matter soon to be addressed by the Supreme Court, Buchanan comes down on the Southern side of the issue, which would allow slavery to take hold during the entire “Territorial phase,” and the final designation delayed until the “admission phase.”

*It has ever been my individual opinion that under the Nebraska-Kansas act the appropriate period will be when the number of actual residents in the Territory shall justify the formation of a constitution with a view to its admission as a State...*

Having said that “all was calm,” he now backtracks, warning of the dire risks of any further agitation.

*But this question of domestic slavery is of far graver importance than any mere political question, because should the agitation continue it may eventually endanger the personal safety of a large portion of our countrymen where the institution exists. In that event no form of government...can compensate for the loss of peace and domestic security around the family altar. Let every Union-loving man, therefore, exert his best influence to suppress this agitation, which since the recent legislation of Congress is without any legitimate object.*

Buchanan is indeed a “Union-loving man” himself, and he goes on to criticize any who would try to simply base its value on economic terms alone, rather than on its capacity to insure good government and personal freedom.

*It is an evil omen of the times that men have undertaken to calculate the mere material value of the Union... Such considerations, important as they are in themselves, sink into insignificance when we reflect on the terrific evils which would result from disunion to every portion of the Confederacy--to the North, not more than to the South, to the East not more than to the West. These I shall not attempt to portray, because I feel an humble confidence that the kind Providence which inspired our fathers with wisdom to frame the most perfect form of government and union ever devised by man will not suffer it to perish.*

The new President is roughly half-way through his entire address when he finally shifts away from the slavery issue. He says that the nation’s finance have never been better, while warning against “extravagant legislation” and the dangers of speculation and corruption.

*Our present financial condition is without a parallel in history... This almost necessarily gives birth to extravagant legislation (and) produces wild schemes of expenditure and begets a race of speculators and jobbers, whose ingenuity is exerted in contriving and promoting expedients to obtain public money. The purity of official agents, whether*

*rightfully or wrongfully, is suspected, and the character of the government suffers in the estimation of the people. This is in itself a very great evil.*

He wants to spend surplus money on “the extinguishment of the public debt and a reasonable increase of the Navy.” He promises to not squander public lands and instead to use them to support settlers, including immigrants who “have done much to promote the growth and prosperity of the country.” His infrastructure focus will be on a military road to the west coast to secure the safety of the new territories.

Nearing the end, the speech segues briefly into foreign policy starting with the usual call to avoid foreign entanglements and seeking peaceful relations with all. But then comes a rather extraordinary set of assertions about America’s Manifest Destiny history and the potential for future territorial acquisitions – this being consistent with his long-term interest in expanding further into Mexico, the Caribbean and Central America.

*It is our glory that whilst other nations have extended their dominions by the sword we have never acquired any territory except by fair purchase... Even our acquisitions from Mexico form no exception... Our past history forbids that we shall in the future acquire territory unless this be sanctioned by the laws of justice and honor. Acting on this principle, no nation will have a right to interfere or to complain if in the progress of events we shall still further extend our possessions.*

He then closes, invoking Divine Providence, and preparing to take the oath of office from Chief Justice Roger Taney, a fellow Dickinson College grad, who swears him in.

*I shall now proceed to take the oath prescribed by the Constitution, whilst humbly invoking the blessing of Divine Providence on this great people.*

For the first time in history, a photograph is taken of a crowd of largely top-hatted men gathered around the East Portico either awaiting, or listening to, Buchanan’s speech.

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Date: March 4, 1857 to March 3, 1861

## **Overview Of Buchanan’s Term In Office**

It is often said that no president in American history ever entered office with finer governmental credentials than James Buchanan.

Despite this, his term will prove a disaster for the nation, for his party, and for himself.

Once in office, he misreads the impact of the Dred Scott decision on resolving the future of slavery.

His proposals to deal with the financial “Panic of 1857” add to its severity.

He doggedly backs the fraudulent pro-slavery Lecompton Constitution for Kansas in order to preserve his approval in the South, a move which backfires in the end and makes a mockery of the entire “popular sovereignty” principle.

He properly sends troops to Utah to put down the Mormon rebellion, then abandons his tough stance and abruptly grants them all a pardon for their “treasonous” activities.

He then watches helplessly as the Republicans win the mid-term elections and take control of the House.

His animosity toward Stephen Douglas at the 1860 Democratic convention contributes to the initial southern walk-out, the eventual Democratic Party schism, and the fateful election of Abraham Lincoln.

As the nation looks to the President to solve the crisis over slavery, Buchanan first blames the North for causing the entire conflict, and then retreats behind a lawyerly response to explain his inaction -- saying that the Constitution neither permits a state from exiting the Union nor provides for moves to restrain such an outcome.

His “way out” is to hand the problem over to the Congress while hoping that the Union will not collapse until after he has left office.

But he is not that fortunate. Despite efforts by “special committees” in both chambers, no satisfactory compromises emerge, and, on December 20, 1860, South Carolina becomes the first of what will be seven states to secede on his watch. Buchanan is now overwhelmed by the looming conflict. As he vacillates over how to respond to the seizure of U.S. forts in Charleston harbor, his Cabinet disintegrates around him. At long last he agrees to defend Ft. Sumter, the last remaining garrison in South Carolina, which leads on to open warfare, albeit not until April 12, 1861, after Lincoln has been inaugurated.

Thus James Buchanan, deemed to be most qualified man to ever enter the White House since JQ Adams, exits according to most, as America’s worst president ever.

**Key Events: Buchanan’s Term**

<b>1857</b>	
Mar 4	Buchanan is inaugurated
Mar 6	<i>Dred Scott</i> decision says that slaves have no legal standing & that slavery is constitutional
March 12	New governor Robert Walker and federal troops are sent to Kansas
May 1	William Walker’s filibuster in Nicaragua comes to an end
June 6	Governor Walker urges Free-Staters at Topeka, Kansas to abandon their cause
June 18	Japan-US treaty to open the port of Nagasaki
June 29	Buchanan declares Utah in rebellion and replaces Governor Brigham Young
July 15	Kansas Governor Walker declares Free-Staters in rebellion for re-opening their legislature
Aug 24	Ohio Life Insurance payments suspended setting off financial “Panic of 1857”
Sept 7	A Constitutional Convention opens in Lecompton, Kansas



Sept 8	Small contingent of US troops arrive in Salt Lake City
Sept 11	Mormons disguised as tribesmen kill 133 travelers in the Meadow Mountain Massacre
Oct 5	Free-Staters win official Kansas legislature election after Walker voids fraudulent votes
Nov 7	The pro-slavery convention in Kansas completes the Lecompton Constitution
Dec 8	Buchanan announces his support for Lecompton
Dec 9	Douglas immediately opposes Lecompton, splitting the Democratic Party on regional lines
Dec 15	Kansas Governor Robert Walker resigns and is replaced by James Denver
Dec 21	The Lecompton Constitution approved in a public vote, but boycotted by free-staters
<b>1858</b>	
Jan 4	A second vote on Lecompton, including Free-Staters, soundly rejects the Constitution
Feb 2-3	Buchanan again tries to ram the pro-slavery Lecompton Constitution & Douglas objects
Mar 23	The Senate approves Lecompton, but the House rejects it and stalemate continues
Apr 6	Buchanan pardons “treasonous” Mormons in Utah
April 12	Alfred Cummings succeeds Brigham Young as governor in Utah
April 30	The “English Bill” is added to Lecompton; both chambers approve; Buchanan signs
May 11	Minnesota is admitted as the 32 <sup>nd</sup> state (17 Free/15 Slave)
June 16	Republicans nominate Lincoln for Senate/he accepts in “House Divided” speech
June 18	China and US sign a treaty of friendship
July 29	Another Japan-US treaty opens more ports to foreign trade
Aug 2	Kansas voters reject the English Bill/Lecompton by a 6:1 margin embarrassing Buchanan
Aug 16	Buchanan & Queen Victoria communicate over Morse’s transatlantic cable
Aug 21	1 <sup>st</sup> Lincoln-Douglas Debate
Sept 1	James Denver resigns as Kansas Governor
Oct 9	First Overland Mail arrives in St. Louis from SF after 23 days
Oct 15	Final Lincoln-Douglas debate, in Alton.
Fall	Republicans on way to winning majority of seats in House (116-98)
<b>1859</b>	
Feb 14	Oregon is admitted as 33 <sup>rd</sup> state with a “black exclusion” clause (18 Free/15 Slave)
Mar 7	Supreme Court reverses WI decision in <i>Ableman v Booth</i> which freed Booth as slave
May 12	Vicksburg convention seeks federal endorsement of slave trading
June	Comstock Lode discovery of silver in Virginia City, Nevada
July 29	Kansas convention passes free-state Wyandotte Constitution
Oct 4	Kansans approve the Wyandotte Constitution banning slavery and free blacks
Oct 16-18	The white abolitionist, John Brown, seizes the Harper’s Ferry, Va. arsenal
Dec 2	Brown is hanged six weeks after his surrender

Dec 5	After a two month conflict Republican William Pennington elected Speaker of the House
Dec 14	New Georgia law prohibits freeing slaves in wills
<b>1860</b>	
Feb 2	Jeff Davis seeks senate agreement that federal government cannot ban slavery in territories
Feb 22	Labor strike in Lynn, Massachusetts' shoe factory
Apr 23	Southern Democrats bolt from nominating convention in Charleston over slavery platform
May 9	Constitutional Union Party of ex-Whigs and Know Nothings nominates John Bell
May 14	Japanese delegation arrive in DC to present Treaty of Peace and Amity to Buchanan
May 16-18	Republicans nominate Lincoln on 3 <sup>rd</sup> ballot
June 18-23	Northern Democrats meet in Baltimore and nominate Stephen Douglas
June 22	Buchanan vetoes Homestead Bill after Congress passes it
June 28	Southern Democrats nominate John Breckinridge
Sept 12	Filibusterer William Walker executed in Honduras
Nov 6	Lincoln elected president with 39% of the popular vote
Dec 3	Buchanan message to Congress blames the North for starting the conflict, says the Constitution prohibits states from seceding and the government from acting to stop them, and hands the problem back to congress
Dec 6	House appoints Committee of 33 to address problem of sectionalism
Dec 8	Treasury Secretary Howell Cobb resigns from Buchanan cabinet
Dec 14	Secretary of State Lewis Cass resigns
Dec 20	South Carolina secedes
Dec 26	Major Robert Anderson moves troops into Ft Sumter
Dec 27	South Carolina militia seizes Ft. Moultrie and Castle Pinckney
Dec 29	Buchanan sacks Secretary of War Floyd
Dec 31	Buchanan declares that Ft Sumter will be defended
<b>1861</b>	
Jan 3	Georgia militia takes over Ft. Pulaski
Jan 9-26	Five more states secede: Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana
Jan 29	Kansas admitted as 35 <sup>th</sup> state with a "black exclusion" clause (19 <sup>th</sup> Free State)
Feb 4	Montgomery convention organizes the Confederate States of America
Feb 4	Washington Peace Conference convenes, with John Tyler and 131 politicians
Feb 9	Jefferson Davis elected CSA president
Feb 21	Texas secedes
Mar 4	Lincoln is inaugurated
Mar 11	CSA adopts its constitution
April 12	Ft Sumter attacked and Civil War begins