

Zachary Taylor Biography

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“Who Was Zachary Taylor?”

Known as a national war hero for his battles in the Mexican War, Zachary Taylor served in the U.S. Army for nearly 40 years before he was elected as the 12th president of the United States in 1849. He led the nation during its debates on slavery and Southern secession.

“Early Life

Zachary Taylor was born on November 24, 1784, near Barboursville, Virginia [or Hare Forest near Orange. Actual place of birth continues to be disputed]. He spent most of his childhood in Louisville, Kentucky, where he lived with his parents and seven brothers and sisters. He was born to a family of planters who by 1800, owned 10,000 acres in Kentucky and 26 slaves. He knew from a young age that he wanted a military career.

In 1808, his first official commission was as the commander of the garrison at Fort Pickering (present-day Memphis). After marrying in 1810, he and his wife and children settled down in Louisiana, where Taylor commanded the Baton Rouge fort. Though Taylor was a military man, he was also known as a slave owner from a wealthy family with estates in Louisiana, Kentucky and Mississippi.

“Military Success

In 1845, Taylor gained prominence as an “Indian fighter” [sic] in the nation’s battle with Native Americans in present-day Wisconsin, Minnesota, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Kansas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Florida and Texas. Though he fought Native Americans, he also wanted to protect their lands from white settlers and believed a strong military presence was the solution to coexistence.

Taylor earned the nickname “Old Rough and Ready” due to his openness to sharing the hardships of field duty with his troops. He gained national-hero status during the Mexican War when he won significant battles at Monterrey and Buena Vista. Supporters eyed him as a presidential candidate.

“Whig Party Candidate and Presidency

Though Taylor was a member of the Whig Party, he identified himself more as an independent or nationalist. He appealed to Northerners for his long military record and was popular with Southerners for owning slaves. The Whig Party positioned him as a war hero, a platform that allowed him more leeway when it came to sidestepping controversial issues.

In November 1848, Taylor won the election and became the nation's 12th president, replacing President James K. Polk. Taylor narrowly defeated the Democratic Party, led by Michigan's Lewis Cass, and the Free-Soil Party, led by former President Martin Van Buren. Thrown into the middle of the slavery debate, Taylor took on an anti-slavery slant. He urged California and New Mexico residents to write constitutions and apply for statehood, knowing that both would likely bar slavery. He was correct in his assumptions, and in doing so angered Southerners who viewed his actions as a betrayal.

In February 1850, Taylor's heated session with Southern leaders led to their threat of secession. To daunt their efforts, Taylor told them that those "taken in rebellion against the Union, he would hang ... with less reluctance than he had hanged deserters and spies in Mexico."

"Death

After only 16 months in office, Taylor died on July 9, 1850, after complaining of severe stomach pains five days prior. Physicians diagnosed him as suffering from a gastrointestinal condition then known as "cholera morbus." Vice President Millard Fillmore succeeded him after his passing. Though during his tenure Taylor made efforts to resolve the nation's slavery issue, his brief session in the presidential office could not prevent the looming Civil War.

"Personal Life

Taylor married Margaret Mackall Smith of Maryland on June 21, 1810. Together they raised their six children in Louisiana: Ann Margaret Mackall (1811–1875), Sarah Knox (1814–1835), Octavia Pannill (1816–1820), Margaret Smith (1819–1820), Mary Elizabeth (1824–1909) and Richard (1826–1879). After Taylor's unexpected death on July 9, 1850, an estimated 100,000 mourners lined his funeral route in Washington, D.C. He is buried in the Zachary Taylor National Cemetery near Louisville, Kentucky."¹

Note: His daughter, Sarah Knox Taylor married Jefferson Davis who would later become president of the Confederacy, but Sarah died from malaria about two months after marriage.

¹Biography.com Editors. "Zachary Taylor Biography." *The Biography.com*, A&E Television Networks, Accessed June 25, 2021, <https://www.biography.com/us-president/zachary-taylor>