

Millard Fillmore Biography

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Contents

Millard Fillmore Biography.....	1
Contents.....	2
Biography.....	3

Biography

The major contribution of Millard Fillmore (1800-1874), thirteenth president of the United States, was his signing of the Compromise of 1850.

Millard Fillmore was born in Cayuga County, N.Y., the son of a poor farmer. Although he held several legal clerkships, he was largely self-taught in the law. He entered politics in association with Thurlow Weed and William H. Seward, helping to organize the Anti-Masonic party as a major third party in the North. As one of the party's leaders in the New York Assembly, Fillmore sponsored reforms, including abolishing debtor imprisonment and a bankruptcy bill. As a member of the U.S. House of Representatives in the 1830s and 1840s, he led his party into the newly formed Whig party. He was elected comptroller of New York State in 1846.

In 1848 Fillmore was elected vice president of the United States under Zachary Taylor. This proved an unpleasant experience, as he was excluded from all patronage and policy-making decisions. He was unable to prevent Taylor's opposition to Henry Clay's proposals for ending the sectional crisis over the extension of slavery into territories acquired by the Mexican War; but before Taylor could veto Clay's compromise bill, he died. Fillmore, now president, quickly accepted the five bills which made up the Compromise of 1850. This was the high point of his administration and demonstrated his attempt to find a middle ground on the slavery question. However, he was attacked by antislavery groups, especially for his vigorous enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, which was part of the compromise. Fillmore believed that slavery was evil but, as long as it existed, had to be protected.

Fillmore's policies all aimed at turning the country away from the slavery question. His most important recommendation was that the U.S. government build a transcontinental railroad. His foreign policy, formulated with Secretary of State Daniel Webster, had similar goals. In marked contrast to the aggressive policy followed by the United States during the rest of the 1840s and 1850s (when Democratic administrations made every effort to acquire additional territory), Fillmore sought to encourage trade through peaceful relations. One of his major undertakings was to send Commodore Matthew Perry to open Japan to American commerce.

In 1852 Fillmore was repudiated by the Whigs. After he ran unsuccessfully for president in 1856 as the Know-Nothing party's candidate, he returned to Buffalo to devote himself to local civic projects. He died on March 8, 1874.