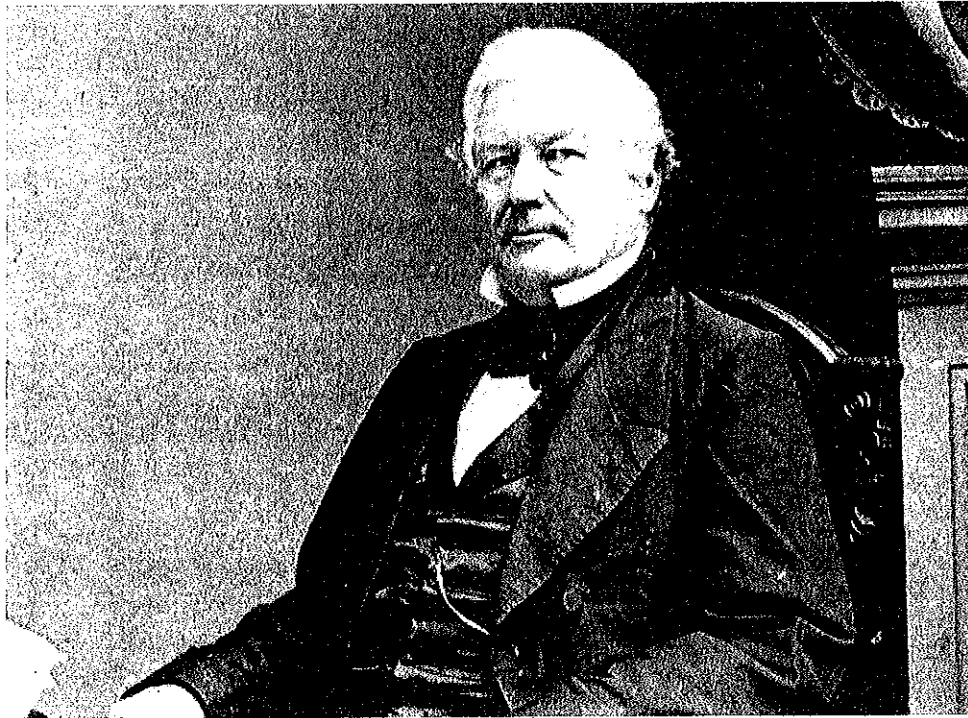


# Millard Fillmore: A Re-Assailing



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**Presidents' Day honors the (to date) men who've served as our nation's Chief Executive. In the case of some of former Presidents, the man and the moment met; and their legacy is secure in history and the hearts of their fellow Americans. Others former Presidents, however, still await they day their true legacy will be understood and embraced.**

For Millard Fillmore, it'll be a long wait.

Upon his predecessor Zachary Taylor's death, in one of fate's most emphatic instances of foreshadowing, Millard Fillmore became the 13th President (and loosed an outbreak of triskaidekaphobia). Really, here is the best that can be said of Fillmore on the official White

House web site: “In his rise from a log cabin to wealth and the White House, Millard Fillmore demonstrated that through methodical industry and some competence an uninspiring man could make the American dream come true [Emphasis history’s].”

In a kinder light, it is also claimed that Queen Victoria considered Fillmore the most handsome man she’d ever met (Prince Albert’s opinion was not recorded).

But it wasn’t on good looks and “some competence” alone that Fillmore arose to the nation’s highest office. He ascended under the wing of Thurlow Weed, New York’s Whig party boss. With Weed’s patronage, Fillmore was elected a New York State Assemblyman, U.S. Congressman, and New York State Comptroller. Then, to placate Boss Weed and provide regional balance, Fillmore was chosen to be Mexican-American War hero Zachary Taylor’s running mate and, subsequently, was elected Vice President of the United States.

So far, so good – until the nation’s second banana forgot to warn his boss about quaffing cherries and ice milk during a cholera epidemic. After President Taylor’s untimely demise, in July 1850 Millard Fillmore became President; and contemporary wags presciently christened him “His Accidenty.”

Historians have been even less kind. Fillmore’s presidency has been consistently ranked in the “Bottom 10,” no mean feat for someone who wasn’t a Republican. A key reason is Fillmore’s acquiescence to signing the Compromise of 1850 over the objections of, among others, Northern Whigs and his wife Abigail (Note to husbands: she is always right).

The Compromise of 1850 admitted California as a free state; settled the Texas boundary and gave that state \$10,000,000 in debt relief; granted territorial status to New Mexico and Utah and allowed them to determine the status of slavery within their own borders; enacted the fugitive slave law, which put Federal officers in the service of slaveholders; and abolished the slave trade, but not slavery, in the District of Columbia. Intended to end slavery’s sectional divisions, the compromise only exacerbated them: afterwards, Northern Whigs prayed, “God Save Us from Whig Vice Presidents!”

God did: denied the 1852 nomination, Fillmore turned out to be last Whig elected to the presidency, and shortly after the party crashed. Unconvinced God also decided to save the nation from Millard Fillmore, in 1856 the latter ran for President on the American Party’s ticket, which was the political arm of the anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant Know-Nothing movement. Fillmore lost, though he oddly carried the heavily Catholic state of Maryland.

Done with elective office, Fillmore became a 19th-century Jimmy Carter, spending his post-presidency days trying to rehabilitate his political legacy by always keeping his tone-deaf ear to the ground and his voice raised in national debates. Despite getting off to a solid start by opposing secession and heading up a New York “home guard” composed of men over 45 years of age during the Civil War, Fillmore refused to become a Republican; opposed President Lincoln and his policies; and, conversely, supported President Andrew Johnson’s and his failed reconstruction policies. Oops (There is no specific historical evidence Fillmore drafted a play entitled “Andrew Johnson: Zombie Hunter”).

On the personal front, things fared better for Fillmore. Following the loss of his first wife, Abigail, he carried a wealthy widow from Maryland over the threshold and signed a forerunner of a pre-nuptial agreement, wherein he could invest the money though it remained in her name. Ironically, for a member of the Know-Nothing movement, Fillmore helped found and served as Chancellor of the University of Buffalo and was instrumental in starting the (now) Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.

Thus does even Millard Fillmore remind us why we observe President's Day, because every former President's political and/or personal legacy can affect us today. Fillmore's life's work touches University of Buffalo students, who themselves go on to positively impact others' lives; and the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society members and visitors, many of whom journey to the city's Forest Lawn Cemetery every January 7th to gather round the pink obelisk over his grave and commemorate his birthday (Once on a trip to West Point, I myself felt Fillmore's legacy when sleeping in his old bed, as it was still damp).



Yet, if any of you Baby Boomers or Gen X-ers doubt you've been impacted by President Millard Fillmore's legacy, here's a flashback for you: on a street and in a section of San Francisco named in honor of our 13th President, a visionary young entrepreneur founded a theater and, given its success, founded a second one in New York City. From these geographically eponymous theaters has emanated some of the greatest Rock-n-Roll ever heard by man or beast (These theaters got a bit wild, shall we say). So, the next time you listen to the Allman Brothers' "You Don't Love Me Anymore." pause to think of President "Fillmore East."

Happy President's Day, Millard Fillmore. If unloved, your legacy's been recorded.

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