

President	Martin Van Buren
Chronological Order	8
Life Span	1782-1862
Home State	New York
Elected	1836



Political Party	Democratic
Vice President	Richard M. Johnson
First Lady	Wife Deceased
Children	5 sons
Physical Attributes	5' 6" tall, balding, reddish-blond hair, blue eyes, medium build, large mutton-chop sideburns
Undergraduate Education	None
Military Service	None
Profession	Attorney
Other Political Offices	Minister to Great Britain, Governor, U.S. Senator, Secretary of State, Vice President
Nickname	The Little Magician or The Careful Dutchman
Family Lineage	Dutch
Religious Affiliation	Dutch Reformed

Biographical Notes

1. Van Buren was the driving force behind the formation of the modern Democratic Party. He was a great admirer of Jefferson and of the way the Virginian linked up his state's Republicans with Aaron Burr's New York Republicans to win the election of 1800. With this in mind, Van Buren established a connection between his New York state political machine (the Albany Regency) and Thomas Ritchie's Virginia organization (the Richmond Junto). He then identified like-minded politicians and brought them in to form a truly national organization.

Van Buren loved to socialize and work out political deals behind the scenes. He had excellent backroom skills, which earned him the nickname "The Little Magician." As Jackson's vice president and as president, Van Buren was cautious and amenable to compromise, which earned him the nickname "The Careful Dutchman."

An extremely difficult economy handicapped his presidency. When slavery and abolition started to cause tensions between the North and South, he appeased the North by refusing to annex Texas and placated the South by carrying out Jackson's Indian removal policy.

2. All Van Buren's known ancestors were Dutch. Hence, he and John F. Kennedy are the only two presidents with no Anglo-Saxon ancestors. (All Kennedy's known ancestors were Irish.) Van Buren is the only president to grow up in a household where English was not the primary language – he grew up speaking Dutch. In fact, his name at birth was Maarten Van Buren, which translates as Martin from Buren (a city in the Netherlands).

3. Martin Van Buren's father, Abraham, owned a farm in Kinderhook, New York, a small Dutch village on the Hudson River's eastern bank about twenty miles south of Albany. Martin was born there in 1782. The farm was not very profitable, so Abraham turned his farmhouse into a tavern/inn to support his large number of dependents (a wife, eight children, plus six slaves). Travelers spent the night at the inn on their way to Albany or New York City. The family, the slaves, and the travelers all lived at the inn. As a result, Martin learned, at a young age, how to get along with people and how to compromise.

The tavern was an exciting place to grow up for a boy interested in politics. The locals who came there to drink liked to air their grievances and talk politics. The travelers passing through brought news and gossip from Albany and New York City. At election time, the tavern was Kinderhook's polling place. Much like young Bill Clinton in his grandfather's grocery store in Hope, Arkansas, young Martin Van Buren learned a lot

about people and politics in his father's tavern in Kinderhook.

4. At age fourteen, Van Buren left home to begin an apprenticeship with a local lawyer, Francis Silvester, a wealthy Federalist. In exchange for building a fire each day and sweeping out the office, Martin learned the basics of the law. Silvester had two lasting effects on Van Buren. First, on Martin's first day at work, Silvester harshly criticized his homespun clothes. Van Buren returned two days later, wearing the same expensive outfit Silvester had worn while scolding him. And for the rest of his life, Van Buren was an impeccable dresser. Second, Silvester pressured Martin to join the Federalist Party, which he refused to do. Instead, he became a Jeffersonian Republican like his father and parted ways with Silvester.

5. The Van Ness family was the leading Jeffersonian Republican family in Kinderhook, and they helped Van Buren become a delegate to the Republican Party caucus in Troy in 1801. Martin helped John P. Van Ness win a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives that same year. As his reward, he was sent to New York City to live and study with William Van Ness, an up-and-coming Republican lawyer.

Being around William Van Ness drew Van Buren into Republican state politics at just the right time. When Republican George Clinton defeated Federalist Stephen Van Rensselaer for governor in 1801, the party took control of the state, which would never again go Federalist. Since Van Ness had studied with Mayor Edward Livingston and was friends with Aaron Burr, Van Buren had entrée into the New York City Republican organization. Still not twenty, Martin had widened his experience to include politics and politicians at the state level.

6. In November 1803, Van Buren was admitted to the bar and moved back to Kinderhook, where his half-brother, James J. Van Alen, made him a partner in his law firm. Later, he moved to Hudson, a slightly larger town closer to the river, and began building a reputation as one of the finest attorneys in the Hudson River Valley.

Wealthy old Dutch families owned vast swaths of land in the region, and Van Buren often battled them in court on behalf of clients of modest means. Van Buren often defeated flashier lawyers with his pre-trial preparation, diligence, and plain-spoken logic. Later, *he* would become president – not the great orators Calhoun, Webster, Clay, or Benton – by building a political organization behind the scenes, brick-by-brick. Senator John Randolph later described his working style perfectly when he said that Van Buren "rowed to his object with muffled oars."

7. Van Buren married Hannah Hoes in 1807. She was his childhood sweetheart and his first cousin once removed. (Her grandfather was the brother of Martin's mother.) Like Van Buren, Hannah grew up speaking Dutch at home. Later, she spoke English with a marked accent. The couple had five sons, four of whom lived to adulthood. Hannah contracted tuberculosis and died in Kinderhook in February 1819, at age 35. Van Buren never remarried.

When Hannah died, the boys were ages twelve to two. In the years immediately following her death, Van Buren got help raising the children from close relatives. As the boys grew older, they spent increasing time with their father in Washington and Albany. Indeed, as adults, they became his trusted aides and advisers. When their father became President, Abraham and Martin Jr. served as his private secretaries, while John and Smith stayed in Albany and kept their father informed of the political goings-on in his home state. In the 1850s, after Van Buren receded from the political scene, the ex-President spent more and more time with his sons and their families.

8. Van Buren was elected to the New York State Senate in 1812, and once he got to Albany, power began to flow to him. He was a gifted legislator, comfortable in the salons where deals were made, quick to see how one favor could lead to another. Van Buren was a workhorse, rising at 4:30 a.m. each morning, and even his enemies agreed that he was easy to get along with. He was a great vote counter and would quietly arrange for members to arrive or disappear at the last minute to tilt a vote one way or the other. He also identified with the right issues.

Van Buren sensed that the state was ready for a new kind of politics. In particular, he envisioned an organization of like-minded legislators that would be well-organized and quick to move on issues. The organization he built, the "Albany Regency," featured carefully worked out positions, strict loyalty – they almost always voted as a block – and reasonable meritocracy. The efficiency of his organization eventually allowed it to dominate New York state politics.

9. Van Buren was elected attorney general of New York in 1815, while retaining his senate seat. He began to surround himself with a group of talented young supporters. These youthful lawyers and journalists looked to Van Buren for leadership; they also seemed to like each other. They included the men who would form

the core of the Albany Regency: John Edmonds; Benjamin Butler, future U.S. attorney general; Silas Wright, future governor and U.S. senator; and William L. Marcy, future governor, U.S. senator, secretary of war (for Polk) and secretary of state (for Pierce). Some came to Van Buren as law clerks; some he discovered on his trips across the state. The journalist Thurlow Weed wrote, "I do not believe that a stronger political combination ever existed at any state capital ... These were men of great ability, great industry, indomitable courage, and strict personal integrity."

10. Van Buren was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1820, and when he arrived in Washington in 1821, he was appalled at the state of the Republican Party on the federal level. It had split into factions – the John Quincy Adams faction, the John C. Calhoun faction, the William H. Crawford faction, etc. – and he decided to try to organize this mess. So, he set to work, building alliances, emphasizing the need for a disciplined platform, and using his New York base – with its 36 electoral votes in 1824 – to command respect from legislators from all parts of the Union.

Van Buren envisioned a national organization that would unite the aspirations of "the planters of the South and the plain Republicans of the North" and utilize speedy communications and tight message control. From across the Union, people would be connected by alert local committees reporting to their state chairman and by the sense that participating in politics is exciting and fun.

11. So, how did Van Buren form the Democratic Party? Even now, no one knows the whole story, but his ability to socialize and make friends was a significant factor. A widower, blond and charming, and in control of a major state, he was immediately popular on the Washington scene. From the minute he arrived, he was in the thick of things: playing cards with Calhoun's friends; talking horses with John Randolph of Virginia; visiting congressmen and senators at their homes; and loving every minute of it. During horse racing season, he often went to Saratoga Springs, New York, for the races, and politicians from the South and West loved to visit him there. To them, he was a different kind of Northerner – he was fun.

12. Van Buren had a special rapport with the South throughout his career. He was an "old school" Jeffersonian. He believed in a modest-sized government; constrained banks; internal improvements funded by the states, not the federal government; any power not spelled out in the Constitution reverts to the states. These principles resonated with Southerners, and soon a host of influential Southern politicians – including Nathaniel Macon, John Taylor, and William H. Crawford – were paying attention to the diminutive New Yorker.

Van Buren took frequent long trips to the South to cement these friendships and continue to build the party by expanding his alliances. In particular, in 1823 he became close friends with Thomas Ritchie, an important newspaper editor and political operator who controlled the Richmond Junto in the same way Van Buren controlled the Albany Regency. Van Buren also spent several days with Jefferson at Monticello and maintained a correspondence with James Madison. Van Buren's New York-Virginia alliance with Ritchie eventually formed the backbone of the Democratic Party.

13. On vacation at Saratoga Springs in the summer of 1826, Van Buren entertained visitors from the North, South, and West and began cobbling together the sub-parties of Jackson, Calhoun, and Crawford. Later, he established connections with regional power brokers such as Isaac Hill of New Hampshire, Amos Kendall and Francis Preston Blair of Kentucky, James Buchanan of Pennsylvania, Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, and the members of Jackson's Nashville Junto.

In January 1827, he wrote a letter to Thomas Ritchie that outlined his hopes for the organization they were building. He began by suggesting that they hold a national convention to present their presidential candidate to the world. The new organization, "the Democracy," would draw the old Federalist-Antifederalist lines anew and bring better organization to the chaotic presidential nomination system, which currently emphasized personalities, not principles. Three months later, Ritchie signed on to Van Buren's plan, and the Democracy (subsequently referred to as the Democratic Party) was born.

14. The Democratic Party got its first presidential candidate in 1828: Andrew Jackson. At first, Van Buren and Jackson were wary of each other. Van Buren's reputation as a backroom dealmaker preceded him, and Jackson's reputation as a hotheaded military chieftain was even more pronounced. But there were important things that they had in common: both despised the Adams-Clay coalition; both grew up in humble circumstances and felt that the wealthy should not be given special privileges; and both desperately wanted to win the election. Jackson defeated John Quincy Adams soundly (178 to 83 electoral votes) and chose Van Buren to be his secretary of state.

15. Jackson's governing style used two techniques that had been widely used by the Albany Regency in New

York. First, he instituted the spoils system in the federal government on a large scale for the first time. (In fact, the quip "to the victor belong the spoils of the enemy" is due to Regency member William L. Marcy.) Second, he made extensive use of the partisan press. In particular, Jackson inserted Francis Preston Blair, one of his closest advisors, as editor of the influential *Globe* newspaper. During the Jackson administration, the *Globe* was, in effect, the Democratic Party's newspaper.

16. During the first two years of the Jackson administration, there was significant tension in the cabinet due to the Eaton Affair (a.k.a. the Petticoat Affair). John Eaton was Jackson's Secretary of War, and his wife Margaret "Peggy" Eaton was the subject of many rumors about her past. As the daughter of a Washington innkeeper, Peggy had grown up smiling and flirting with male guests, who included John Eaton and occasionally Andrew Jackson. Eaton, a widower, flirted back, even though Peggy was married. Her husband, John Timberlake, was a naval officer whose assignments carried him far from Washington for extended periods, and Eaton and Peggy became intimate. In April 1828, her husband died, and soon Peggy began seeing Eaton openly. They were married on New Year's Day, 1829. It was also rumored that Peggy Eaton had several scandalous affairs before marrying Timberlake.

After Jackson's inauguration, Vice President Calhoun's wife and the wives and daughters of three cabinet members refused to interact with the Eatons socially because of Peggy's reputation. So did Emily Donelson, the wife of Jackson's aide, nephew, and surrogate son, Andrew Donelson. The Donelsons lived at the White House, and Emily often served as Jackson's hostess. Jackson, remembering how his wife Rachel had suffered due to slander, came to Peggy Eaton's defense, which created a great deal of tension both in the cabinet and in his household.

As a widower, Van Buren had no wife to embroil him in this controversy, so he could have avoided it altogether. Instead, he took Peggy Eaton's side by visiting the Eatons at their home and inviting them to the receptions he hosted as secretary of state. This support endeared him to Jackson.

17. Over time, Van Buren became one of Jackson's closest friends and most trusted advisors. Jackson, famously short-tempered, did not always see the long-term consequences of his outbursts. On the other hand, the Careful Dutchman was a conciliator and a master strategist who could turn Jackson's impulses into public policy. And Van Buren was one of the few people who could make Old Hickory laugh; in fact, Jackson believed that a well-known newspaper humorist was Van Buren himself.

18. Even though Van Buren had no previous experience in foreign affairs, he turned out to be an excellent secretary of state. (Perhaps it is not surprising that a smooth-talking dealmaker turned out to be a good diplomat.) He helped reverse one of the failures of the John Quincy Adams administration by negotiating a successful trade agreement with Great Britain that reopened the British West Indies to American ships. He also secured a large payment (several millions of dollars) from France for damage to American shipping during the Napoleonic wars. He concluded the first treaty with the Ottoman Empire, a significant agreement that laid the foundation for the modern-day alliance between the United States and Turkey.

19. In April 1831, Van Buren approached Jackson about resigning from the cabinet. He had several reasons: he had accomplished his goals as secretary of state; he was being attacked for political purposes by John C. Calhoun; Jackson did not need him to get re-elected. Also, complicated issues such as the Bank and the tariff loomed ahead. At first, Jackson resisted, but after the two men discussed it, they saw a crucial possible benefit. If Jackson presented Van Buren's resignation as part of a cabinet reorganization, he could ask for the resignations of Eaton and the three problematic cabinet members without drawing attention to Eaton Affair. Jackson accepted their resignations and Van Buren's; only Postmaster General Barry remained in place.

The final piece of the plan was Jackson's nomination of Van Buren for Minister to Great Britain. Congress was not in session, and Senate confirmation was just a formality, so Van Buren traveled to England before being confirmed. However, three men in the Senate – Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and John C. Calhoun – aspired to the presidency and viewed Van Buren as a rival because he had Jackson's favor. Consequently, they rallied their forces against Van Buren's confirmation, and the vote in the Senate produced a 23 to 23 tie. Calhoun, as vice president, broke the tie by voting against confirmation. After casting his vote, Calhoun gloated, "It will kill him [Van Buren], sir, kill him dead. He will never kick, sir, never kick."

But it had precisely the opposite effect. It was evident to all that Van Buren had been the victim of petty politics. And Calhoun's vote was disloyal to the Jackson administration, so he was now finished in the president's eyes. Consequently, Jackson needed a new running mate for the election of 1832, and he decided it would be Van Buren. Senator Thomas Hart Benton commented that Calhoun had "broken a minister" but "elected a vice president."

In May 1832, the Democratic Party held its first national convention. Every state except Missouri was represented, and Jackson was nominated for president unanimously. Van Buren won the vice-presidential

nomination on the first ballot with seventy-four percent of the vote. In the fall, the Jackson–Van Buren ticket won the general election in a landslide, 219 to 49 electoral votes.

20. At the end of his second term, Jackson made it widely known that he wanted Van Buren to be his successor. With this support, the New Yorker won the Democratic Party's 1836 nomination for president unanimously at their 1835 Democratic National Convention. (The convention was held a year early.)

During Jackson's second term, various anti-Jackson groups merged to form the Whig Party to oppose his autocratic use of executive power. The new party included former National Republicans like Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, former Anti-Masonic Party members like William H. Seward and Millard Fillmore, and former southern Democrats like John Tyler, Hugh L. White, and Wille P. Mangum. In 1836, the Whigs were not prepared to unite behind a single presidential candidate. So, they ran four regional candidates instead. Webster was the Whig candidate in Massachusetts, William Henry Harrison in the rest of the North and the border states. Mangum was the Whig candidate in South Carolina, Lawson in the rest of the South. The Whigs hoped that this quartet would keep Van Buren from obtaining a majority in the electoral college, which would throw the election into the House of Representatives, where they might have a chance to win.

Van Buren took the stance that the federal government had the authority to interfere with slavery only in the District of Columbia and added that it should take no action there. This viewpoint helped him do well in the South. Van Buren won fifteen states, including the three most populous: New York (42 electoral votes), Pennsylvania (30 electoral votes), and Virginia (23 electoral votes). Harrison won seven states, White two, and Webster and Mangum one each. Van Buren won the majority of electoral votes, 170 out of 294. However, the Whig strategy almost worked because Van Buren won Pennsylvania by just two percent.

21. Van Buren had been president for only two months when the Panic of 1837 struck. The Panic was the worst financial crisis in American history, except for the stock market crash of 1929.

Events in Britain triggered the debacle. Late in 1836, the Bank of England raised its interest rates to encourage investors to pump money into the faltering British economy. This policy deprived Americans of new supplies of specie (i.e., gold and silver) and credit. Simultaneously, British mills reduced their purchases of raw cotton from the South, causing its price to collapse from 20 cents a pound to less than 10 cents a pound.

As American planters, merchants, and canal corporations withdrew specie from banks to pay off foreign loans and commercial debts; this caused a general financial crisis. On May 8, 1837, the Dry Dock Bank of New York City failed, and panicked depositors withdrew more than \$2 million in coin from other city banks, forcing them to suspend all payments in specie, i.e., to refuse to convert paper money into gold and silver. Within two weeks, every bank in the United States had followed suit.

Andrew Jackson's financial policies helped cause the Panic. In particular, his destruction of the Bank of the United States destabilized the economy, and his Specie Circular, which required the use of gold and silver for western land purchases, drew specie away from the banks in New York City, where it was desperately needed to satisfy international obligations.

22. Van Buren's response to the Panic of 1837 was inadequate. He refused to revoke the Specie Circular. Instead, he called a special session of Congress and proposed an "Independent Treasury" bill, which designated that the federal government's money resides in a system of depositories instead of pet state banks. Congress rejected the proposal, and the country subsequently experienced a depression and high unemployment.

23. The Republic of Texas declared its independence from Mexico in March 1836. The majority of Texans were Americans who wanted Texas to join the United States, and the first president of Texas was Sam Houston, a protégé of Andrew Jackson. Discussions with the Jackson administration concerning Texas's annexation by the United States began, but talks stalled because Mexico refused to acknowledge Texas's sovereignty. (Jackson did not want to start a war with Mexico, especially with a presidential election coming up in the fall.) However, just before leaving office in March 1837, Jackson extended diplomatic recognition to the Republic of Texas, and after his presidency, he supported annexation. Many Southern leaders also strongly supported annexation because it would expand the slave-holding territory in the United States. In contrast, New England abolitionists charged that there was a "slave-holding conspiracy to acquire Texas," and Daniel Webster eloquently denounced annexation.

In August 1837, the Texan minister to the United States proposed annexation to the Van Buren administration. The administration told him that the U.S. could not agree to annexation because Mexico had never recognized Texas's independence. But the real reason Van Buren did not pursue annexation is that it would precipitate a North-South clash in the United States over the extension of slavery. Texas withdrew the annexation offer in 1838.

24. During Van Buren's presidency, slavery resurfaced as a divisive issue for the North and the South, and Van Buren tried to placate both sides at different times. To appease the North, he opposed the annexation of Texas. To appease the South, he carried out Jackson's Indian removal policy, which freed up land in the Southeast and eventually helped bring Florida into the Union as a slave state in 1845.

The Indian Removal Act of 1830, passed during the Jackson administration, specified that Indian tribes were to be moved to lands west of the Mississippi River. The 1835 Treaty of New Echota between the federal government and representatives of the Cherokee tribe established terms under which the Cherokees ceded their territory in the southeast and agreed to move west to Indian Territory (current-day Oklahoma). But these "representatives" spoke for only 1,000 of the 17,000 Cherokee, and the rest refused to move. In 1838, Van Buren directed General Winfield Scott to forcibly move all those who had not yet complied with the treaty.

The Cherokees were herded violently into internment camps, where they were kept for the summer of 1838. The transport west was delayed by intense heat and drought, and they were forcibly marched west in the fall. Under the treaty, the government was supposed to provide wagons, rations, and even medical doctors, but it did not. The Cherokee endured freezing temperatures, snowstorms, and pneumonia. Four thousand of the sixteen thousand tribe members died of cold, hunger, or disease along the "Trail of Tears" to their new home. One Georgia soldier said, "I fought through the Civil War and have seen men shot to pieces and slaughtered by thousands, but the Cherokee removal was the cruelest work I ever knew." The removal constitutes one of the most disgraceful and dishonorable actions in American history.

The removal of the Seminole Indians from Florida was much more difficult. This tribe, led by its charismatic chief Osceola, fled to the Everglades and waged the bloody, costly Second Seminole War (1835-1842) against the United States. At the conclusion of the war, 4,000 Seminoles were forcibly transported to the Indian Territory. Approximately 350 Seminoles remained at large in Florida, which led to the Third Seminole War in 1855.

25. In July 1839, a slave revolt occurred on *La Amistad*, a two-masted schooner owned by a Spaniard living in Cuba. The slaves were Mende tribesmen who had been captured by Portuguese slave hunters in Sierra Leone and brought to Cuba. They had been purchased in Havana by two Spanish plantation owners, Don José Ruiz and Don Pedro Montes, and were being transported to their plantations near Puerto Príncipe, Cuba. The revolt began when a Mende man, Joseph Cinque, unshackled himself and the others. They took control of the ship, killing the captain and the cook.

Cinque ordered Ruiz and Montes to sail to Africa. Instead, they sailed north, up the east coast of the United States, hopeful that an American ship would intercept *La Amistad* and that the Africans would be returned to Cuba as slaves. An American revenue cutter seized *La Amistad* off Montauk Point, the northern tip of Long Island, New York. Cinque and his group escaped the ship but were caught offshore by citizens. They were incarcerated in New Haven, Connecticut, on charges of murder and piracy.

Van Buren viewed abolitionism as one of the greatest threats to the nation's unity, and he resisted the interference with slavery in the places where it existed. His administration supported the Spanish government's demand that the ship and its cargo (including the Africans) be returned to their owners. A federal district court judge ruled that the Africans were legally free and were to be transported home, but Van Buren's administration appealed the case to the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court heard the case in February 1841, with former president John Quincy Adams arguing passionately for the Africans' right to freedom and Attorney General Henry D. Gilpin presenting the government's case. In March, the Supreme Court issued its final verdict: the *Amistad* Africans were free people and should be allowed to return home. The unique nature of the case heightened public interest in the saga, including the participation of former president Adams and the fact that the Africans testified in federal court. The *Amistad* case drew attention to the personal tragedies of slavery and attracted new support for the growing abolition movement in the North. The verdict was truly surprising since the majority of the Supreme Court justices were slaveholders.

26. Van Buren inherited an American army and navy that was not strong, and he wisely avoided confrontations with foreign powers. He avoided a conflict with Mexico by rejecting the annexation of Texas. He avoided a conflict with Britain by calming down a border dispute, the non-shooting Aroostook War, between Maine and the Canadian province of New Brunswick.

27. The country experienced a second financial crisis in 1839 when the Bank of England doubled its interest rates, which cut the flow of capital and credit to the United States. In December, cotton prices plunged, and nearly half the nation's banks suspended specie payments. This time Van Buren was able to get Congress to pass the Independent Treasury Act of 1840.

The Whigs repealed the act in 1841, and the Democrats re-enacted it in 1846. The system of independent depositories established in 1846 endured until it merged with the Federal Reserve System in 1921.

28. Van Buren easily won renomination for a second term at the 1840 Democratic National Convention, but he and his party faced a difficult election. The severe economic downturn and other divisive issues, including his refusal to annex Texas, provided Van Buren's political opponents opportunities to criticize his actions.

Van Buren hoped that the Whigs would nominate Clay for president, which would allow Van Buren to cast the 1840 campaign as a clash between Van Buren's Independent Treasury system and Clay's support for a national bank. However, rather than nominating Clay, the Whigs chose William Henry Harrison. Harrison had served in various governmental positions during his career and earned fame for his military leadership at the Battle of Tippecanoe and in the War of 1812. Whig leaders like William Seward and Thaddeus Stevens believed that Harrison's war record would have a widespread appeal similar to Andrew Jackson's in 1828 and 1832. John Tyler was the Whig nominee for vice president.

The Whigs depicted Van Buren as an aristocrat living in high style in the White House and Harrison as a man of the people who lived in a log cabin and drank hard (i.e., alcoholic) cider. They suppressed the fact that Harrison was from an elite Virginia family, a learned student of classics, and a man who enjoyed luxurious living to the point that he was continually in debt. In reality, Van Buren was the one who came from a humble background.

The Whigs used publicity, slogans, and rallies to promote Harrison on a scale not seen before. They threw such jabs as "Van, Van, is a used-up man" and "Martin Van Ruin" and ridiculed him in newspapers and cartoons. Their main campaign slogan was "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too." The popular vote was close, but Harrison won convincingly in the electoral college, 234 to 60 votes. Van Buren won only two northern states (plus five southern ones).

29. On June 16, 1842, Van Buren was on a western campaign tour, building support for another presidential bid, when muddy roads stranded him for the night in a small town outside Springfield, Illinois, the state capital. Despite the setback, local Democrats were determined to show their guest a good time. So, they invited the area's best storyteller to dinner – state legislator Abraham Lincoln – even though he was a Whig.

Abe did not disappoint, with a "constant supply" of entertaining stories, "each more irresistible than its predecessor." Van Buren had stories of his own, of old New York politics in the days of Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr and from his tumultuous life in government. Lincoln and Van Buren told stories until after midnight. The next day, Van Buren admitted to aides that last night his sides were sore from laughing. When Lincoln ran for president in 1860, Van Buren commented that he "often wondered ... what had become of this man whom he remembered as one of the most remarkable he had ever met."

30. At the Democratic National Convention in Baltimore in May 1844, Van Buren was the favorite for the presidential nomination. But there were many delegates – especially from the South and West – who strongly opposed him because he was against the annexation of Texas. To stymie him, his opponents passed a rule that required the nominee to receive two-thirds of the votes instead of a simple majority.

Van Buren got 55 percent on the first ballot, Lewis Cass 32 percent, with scattered votes for a few others. Van Buren lost a few votes with each successive ballot, and Cass won a few; on the fifth ballot, Cass pulled ahead 107 to 103; by the seventh ballot, Cass led 123 to 99. It now seemed that Cass would get over the top in the next two or three ballots.

If that happened, the party would be hopelessly split because Van Buren's strong residual support would never accept the triumph of what one Van Buren partisan called "the damned rotten, corrupt, venal Cass clique." At this point, supporters of James K. Polk, who had hoped to get him the nomination for vice president, suggested to delegates that he could be a compromise candidate for president. George Bancroft of Massachusetts convinced the New Hampshire delegation to switch to Polk, and on the eighth ballot, five states voted for Polk. During the ninth ballot, New York withdrew Van Buren's name, and support for Polk surged. Eventually, all the states switched to Polk, and he was elected unanimously on the ninth ballot. Polk, an ardent expansionist and a young protégé of Andrew Jackson, narrowly defeated Whig Henry Clay in the general election.

31. By 1848, Van Buren opposed the extension of slavery into the new territories acquired from Mexico, i.e., he supported the Wilmot Proviso. At that time, the Democratic Party of New York state was divided into two factions: the pro-Van Buren, pro-Wilmot Proviso "Barnburners," and the anti-Wilmot Proviso "Hunkers." (The two groups differed on matters other than slavery as well.)

Both the Barnburners and the Hunkers sent delegations to the 1848 Democratic National Convention, and it was up to the convention to choose whom to seat. The convention adopted a compromise under which the two factions would split the New York state delegation's votes, but the Barnburners objected and walked out.

On August 9, twenty-thousand politicians convened in Buffalo, New York, to nominate antislavery candidates for president and vice president. This new Free-Soil Party included Barnburners, Liberty Party members, antislavery Conscience Whigs, and others. It nominated Van Buren for president and Charles Francis Adams (John Quincy's son) for vice president. The ticket did not win any electoral votes in the general election. But it took enough votes away from Democrat Lewis Cass in New York (36 electoral votes) to allow Whig Zachary Taylor to win the Empire State and the election, 163 to 127 electoral votes.

Van Buren returned to the Democratic Party after 1848 but supported Abraham Lincoln's policies during the Civil War. He died in 1862.

32. Van Buren's son John graduated from Yale, studied law, and was the Attorney General of New York from 1845 to 1847. John was one of the leaders of the Barnburner faction of the New York State Democratic Party in 1848.

See the next page for a list of references.

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