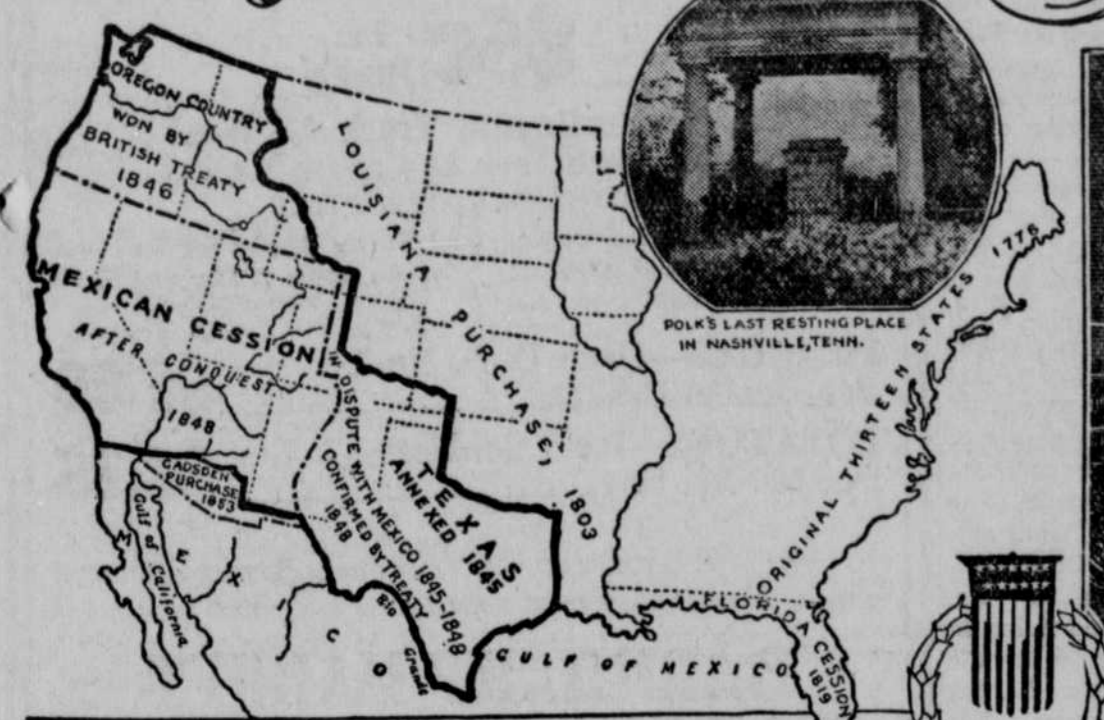


# James K. Polk Empire-Builder



James K. Polk

By ELMO SCOTT WATSON

**B**ACK in 1844 when the Democrats at their national convention in Baltimore nominated James Knox Polk of Tennessee for the Presidency, their opponents, the Whigs, asked somewhat scornfully "Who is Polk?" They soon had their answer, for, as it turned out, he was the next President of the United States.

Mention of him today would probably result in a similar question. For Polk is one of our Presidents who is little more than a name to the average American. Yet the historians who in recent years have been rescuing him from the obscurity into which his name had lapsed assure us that he was more important in the history of the nation than many another Chief Executive who is much better known. Here are some of the elements in his career which make him outstanding:

He was the first "dark horse" in American political history.

He was the first and, thus far, the only speaker of the national house of representatives who went on to the White House.

He was one of two Presidents who made and kept a promise not to seek a second term.

He was the only President who accomplished virtually everything he set out to accomplish when he took office.

He was truly an "empire builder," for during his one administration he added more territory to the United States than did any other President, with the exception of Thomas Jefferson. (Under Polk we acquired 529,189 square miles in the Mexican cession and 286,541 square miles in Oregon by treaty with England, a total of 815,730 square miles as compared to the 827,987 square miles in Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase. However, if the 389,106 square miles acquired by the annexation of Texas, which was formally completed during Polk's administration, is counted in, it brings his total up to 1,204,836 square miles.)

Although Tennessee claims Polk as one of the three men whom it sent to the White House, he was, like the other two, Jackson and Johnson, a "Tennessean from North Carolina." He was born in Mecklenburg county just 140 years ago—on November 2, 1795. The original family name was Pollock but among the frontiersmen this was slurred into Polk and eventually became Polk.

When James K. Polk was eleven years old the family moved to Tennessee and settled in the town of Columbia. After his first schooling there he entered the Murfreesboro academy from which he was graduated in 1815 and immediately enrolled in the University of North Carolina as a sophomore. Graduated from the university with the highest honors in the class of 1818, Polk began reading law with Felix Grundy of Nashville and from this attorney's office the next step into politics was a natural one.

In 1823 Polk was elected to the general assembly of the state of Tennessee and began the career of public service which during the next quarter of a century would take him to the highest office in the land. In 1825 he was elected to congress and during the next 14 years, first as one of the leaders in the Jackson administration, and from 1835 to 1839 as speaker of the house, he was an important factor in the party battles of that stormy period. From 1839 to 1841 he was governor of Tennessee and three years later he became President.

For an understanding of the forces which resulted in Polk's election to the Presidency, a brief review of political history preceding it is necessary. When Andrew Jackson was ready to lay down the reins of power which he had held for eight years, he decided that Martin Van Buren of New York, who had helped manage his second campaign and who was later his secretary of state, should be his successor. Although the Whigs, under the leadership of Gen. William Henry Harrison, had put up a valiant fight in the campaign of 1836, Van Buren was elected and the Jacksonian Democracy was destined to rule for four years more in the White House.

But the campaign of 1840 was a different matter. With their shouts of "Tippecanoe and Tyler, Too," the Whigs swung into their famous "Log Cabin and Hard Cider" campaign with an enthusiasm that had rarely before been displayed. And the popular appeal of this military hero, something of the same sort of appeal that had helped elect Jackson, enabled Harrison to defeat the "Little Magician," Van Buren, and put the Whigs in power for the first time in history.

Then Harrison died, soon after taking office, and John Tyler, the vice president who had been elected as a Whig but who soon proved that he was not a dyed-in-the-wool Whig in principle, became President. As the campaign of 1844 approached, it was apparent that Tyler would not be the Whig candidate but that that mantle would fall upon Henry Clay, Jackson's old enemy who had cast envious eyes at the White House since 1824. Van Buren was the logical Democratic candidate, although his opposition to the annexation of Texas had lessened his popularity in the party.

When the Democratic convention met in Baltimore it was apparent that Van Buren would have a majority of the delegates. And then the second



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morning of the meeting the celebrated "two-thirds majority" rule was passed. After what seemed a hopeless deadlock between Van Buren and Lewis Cass, Van Buren's name was withdrawn. Then followed the first convention stampede in American history and James K. Polk of Tennessee, who had been a prominent candidate for vice president, was nominated as the first "dark horse" in our political history.

Back of his nomination was a little-known figure in American political history, one of those real "history-makers" whom the school history books so often overlook. He was Senator Robert J. Walker of Mississippi who, a month before the convention, had resolved to defeat Van Buren. When both Clay and Van Buren sidestepped the question of the annexation of Texas, Walker boldly demanded not only the annexation of Texas but also the re-occupation of Oregon. It was Walker who put through the two-thirds majority rule, thus depriving Van Buren of the leadership of the party; it was Walker who gave the convention its slogan of "All of Texas; all of Oregon" and it was Walker who engineered the deadlock which resulted in Polk's nomination.

Thus the campaign opened with the Democrats committed to an expansionist policy. James C. Calhoun supported Polk. Daniel Webster, Clay's great rival for the leadership of the Whigs, said little during the campaign. The contest centered about territorial expansion and slavery. Polk, whose platform supported both propositions, found himself in a highly favorable position. Clay, whose prestige and personal popularity were vastly greater than that of his opponent, was put on the defensive at the outset.

So Polk won by an electoral vote of 170 to 105. Upon assuming office he found one of the main planks of his platform already adopted. President Tyler had persuaded the short session of congress in December, 1844, to offer the independent republic of Texas satisfactory terms for entering the Union. These were accepted so all that there remained for Polk to do was to carry out the formalities of receiving the Lone Star commonwealth into the sisterhood of states.

He next turned to the question of Oregon which for the past 50 years had been claimed by both Great Britain and the United States. Polk's offer to England to divide this country by extending the forty-ninth parallel, already the boundary as far west as the Rockies, was rejected. At once the expansionists raised a cry that had already been heard during the campaign. It was "54-40 or Fight!" meaning that America demanded the whole coast as far north as the Russian possessions.

But Polk had no intention of embroiling the country in two wars, for he foresaw that conflict with Mexico was inevitable. So he persisted in his negotiations with England until in June, 1846, a treaty with her was signed establishing the forty-ninth parallel boundary line. For the first time America now had an undisputed foothold on the Pacific coast, given to her by the diplomacy of James K. Polk.

The dispute with Mexico was not so easily settled, however. That country had refused to recognize the independence of Texas and had protested against its annexation by the United States. Moreover, it rejected the southern boundary claimed by the Texans and had been very slow in settling the claims against it for outrages against the person and property of Americans.

These matters, however, might have been settled amicably had it not been for the ambitious extent of the expansionist policy under Polk's administration. Polk wanted California to add to Oregon and extend to our holdings on the Pacific coast and he was willing to buy it. But when he sent John Silldell to Mexico to open negotiations for its purchase, the Mexicans refused even to receive Silldell.

Relations on the border became strained and Mexico began mobilizing for war. At the same time Polk ordered Gen. Zachary Taylor, who was stationed at Corpus Christi on the Nueces river, to advance with his troops to the Rio Grande.

Taylor did so and closed the trade of the river with his guns. The inevitable collision between the armed forces came on April 24, 1846, when the Mexicans attacked a body of American cavalrymen on the northern side of the Rio Grande. Thereupon Polk, on May 11, 1846, sent a message to congress recommending that war be declared, since "War exists, and notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it."

Among the Abolitionists of the North Polk was denounced as "the mendacious tool of a grasping slavocracy" and some historians have criticized severely his Mexican adventure and declared that the war with Mexico was unjustifiable. He has been accused of trying to foment revolution among the Californians as a preliminary to its annexation and he is said to have been determined to acquire not only California, but New Mexico and other northern provinces of the southern republic by fair means or foul.

But other historians, especially since the publication of his diary, have taken a more kindly view of his actions. One of them declares that it "leaves little question as to Polk's honest dealing with England in Oregon or of equal effort to deal fairly with Mexico on the southern border." Another says "His own perception of the objects of the war was never clouded by doubt or hypocrisy. He would have been glad to buy the northern provinces from Mexico if that had been possible."

As the war progressed the American forces, despite the blundering of their general officers, won victory after victory, and an early end to the conflict became a certainty. Some of the greedier expansionists began shouting for the annexation of the whole of Mexico. But Polk was content with the cession in March, 1848, of more than 500,000 square miles of territory in California and the Southwest for which Mexico was paid \$15,000,000. Just as the states which were carved out of the Louisiana Purchase are a perpetual monument to Thomas Jefferson, so are the states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and parts of Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas and Oklahoma a similar memorial to James K. Polk, the "empire builder."

He left the White House in March, 1849, a sick and exhausted man, the first victim of the terrific strain which we put upon the men whom we elect President. Says a historian: "Polk was plainly murdered by an office which the prevailing notions of 'democracy' joined with his own inability to delegate details, had rendered beyond any man's powers. He felt it his duty to be accessible to everyone. He was annoyed and irritated beyond belief by a swarm of office-seekers who kept after him until almost the final day of his term—all manner of people of no importance rambling into the Presidential presence at will to demand petty offices and giving him a piece of their minds on being refused; common drunkards waylaying the President on his walks with pleas for money; wanderers from home calling at the White House for loans of \$5 and \$10."

"Polk's election to the Presidency was a sentence to confinement at hard labor. In his diaries he speaks again and again of his 'excessive fatigues,' nor did they end in March 1849. On his way home to Nashville by way of Richmond, Charleston, Mobile and New Orleans, he was almost as literally assassinated by his friends as though he had been shot; he was suffering from a digestive disorder requiring plain food and absolute rest, and he was, in plain fact, feted and banqueted to death. He reached Nashville on April 2 and he died on June 15."

His wife, Sarah Childress Knox, is described as "a very handsome woman, whose black hair and dark eyes and complexion were reminiscent of a Spanish donna, a woman who was a sincere and understanding student of political affairs in a day when women were not supposed to know anything about politics and who had a better grasp of public questions than most of the 'statesmen' who thronged the Washington of her day." She was devoted to her husband and as long as she lived she kept his study in their home just as he left it.

On the grounds of what is now the statehouse yard in Nashville she had erected a small marble temple and there his body was placed. On three sides of a monument inside the structure she set down in orderly array the record of his life: "The mortal remains of James Knox Polk are resting in the vault beneath. He was born in Mecklenburg county, North Carolina, and emigrated with his father, Samuel Polk, to Tennessee in 1806. The beauty of virtue was illustrated in his life. The excellence of Christianity was exemplified in his death. His life was devoted to the public service. He was elevated successively to the first places in the state and federal governments. A member of the general assembly. A member of congress and chairman of the most important congressional committees. Speaker of the house of representatives; governor of Tennessee and President of the United States. By his public policy he defined, established and extended the boundaries of his country. He planted the laws of the American union on the shores of the Pacific. His influence and his counsels tended to organize the national treasury on the principles of the Constitution and to apply the rule of Freedom to Navigation, Trade and Industry."

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## Whale Yields New Product

What may prove to be as valuable to Norway as whale oil itself, is a new kind of meat extract made from whales. Experiments described as highly successful have been carried on in the Antarctic aboard Norwegian whalers. The greater part of the world's supply of whale oil is delivered in Norway. Although the value of whale meat as food has long been recognized only the oil of the whale has been utilized, owing to the difficulty of transporting the meat from the Antarctic. Now, however, the meat is being made into a sort of meat flour aboard the whalers. The flour is taken back to Norway, where a meat extract of a very satisfactory character is being produced.

## Trouble Maker

Usually a man who is worried about "the future of civilization" is going to make trouble for people.

## Storage Solves Problem

### of Surplus for Gardeners

Each year the average gardener has a surplus problem. His garden normally produces more vegetables during the summer than he and his family can consume.

This surplus—of little value in the summer—can be used during the winter in preparing a variety of tasty and wholesome dishes if the extra vegetables are properly stored in cellars, attics, or other suitable places. Storing of vegetables also lightens the annual canning work. Beets, late cabbage, carrots, celery, onions, parsnips, potatoes, sweet potatoes, salsify, pumpkins, squash, and turnips may be stored in their natural condition. Beans of various kinds, including the limas, may be dried and stored.

A half-acre garden, according to horticulturists of the United States Department of Agriculture, will, if properly cared for, produce enough vegetables for year-around use by the average family.

Cellars containing a furnace usually are too warm and dry for storing root crops but a room may be partitioned off in one corner or end of the cellar and temperature controlled by means of outside windows. Outdoor cellars may be built at a low cost.

## Metal Deposits in Cave

Russian scientists who have examined the rocks in one of the world's largest caves in mountains of Turkestan report that they contain huge quantities of silver, lead and manganese.

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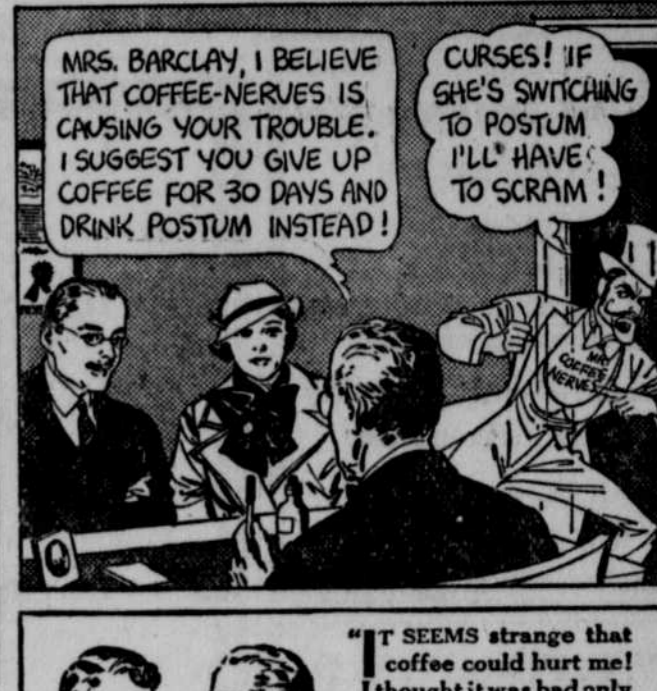
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