Biography of Andrew Jackson

Early Life

Born to poor Irish immigrants on March 15, 1767, near Camden, South Carolina, no one could have possibly written the story that would become Andrew Jackson’s life. Two years earlier, his parents, Andrew and Elizabeth, and two older brothers, Hugh and Robert, had emigrated from Northern Ireland. Jackson was named after his father who had died shortly before he was born. Jackson spent his early life in the Waxhaw settlement located near the North and South Carolina border. Raised by his widowed mother, Jackson grew up with a large extended family—aunts, uncles, and cousins—who were also Irish immigrant farmers. As a youth, Jackson attended a good school and his mother had hopes of him becoming a Presbyterian minister. However, young Jackson’s propensity for pranks, cursing, and fighting quickly dashed those hopes.

From 1778 to 1781, the American Revolutionary War raged in the Carolinas. The war had a devastating impact on Jackson’s life. When he was thirteen, Jackson and his brothers joined the patriotic cause and volunteered to fight the British. His oldest brother Hugh died of heat stroke following the Battle of Stono Ferry in 1779. The following year, Jackson saw battlefield action in the Battle of Hanging Rock. In 1781, Jackson and his brother Robert were captured. After their capture, a British officer slashed Jackson with his sword because he refused to polish his boots. He and his brother Robert were taken prisoner-of-war and both contracted smallpox in prison. Jackson’s mother arranged for their release in a prisoner exchange. Jackson eventually recovered, however, his brother died. After he recovered, his mother traveled to Charleston to aid the war effort by nursing injured and sick soldiers. She contracted cholera and died. By war’s end, Jackson was an orphan.

After the war, Jackson briefly resided with members of his mother’s family, but soon went to Charleston and embarked upon a campaign of youthful adventure and mischief. When his money ran out, Jackson finished school and although he disdained studying, he even worked as a schoolteacher for a short period. Tall and lanky with red hair and piercing blue eyes, Jackson was known for his fiery temper, fearlessness, playful personality, and daring spirit.

At age seventeen, Jackson made the decision to become an attorney. He moved to Salisbury, North Carolina, where he studied law by apprenticing with prominent lawyers. In 1787, after three years of studying law, Jackson received his license to practice law in several counties scattered through the North Carolina piedmont. To supplement his income, he also worked in small-town general stores. While living in North Carolina, Jackson gained a reputation for being charismatic, wild, and ambitious. He loved to dance, entertain, gamble, and spent much of his free time with friends in taverns.

Soon after Jackson celebrated his twenty-first birthday, the North Carolina legislature elected John McNairy, whom Jackson studied law with, Superior Court Judge of its “Western District,” which stretched from the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River, and McNairy appointed Jackson public prosecutor. In 1788, Jackson followed the Wilderness Road across the rugged mountains to Jonesborough. Jackson practiced law in Jonesborough and Greeneville. He boarded in a log farmhouse outside Jonesborough where he trained racehorses. Jackson purchased his first African-American slave, a woman named Nancy, in 1788 while in Jonesborough.

Tennessean

In the fall of 1788, Jackson took up his post as Western District public prosecutor in Nashville. Over the next two years, Jackson divided his time between courthouses in Nashville and Jonesborough and resided in frontier forts, including John Donnellson’s Station where he met Rachel Donnellson Robards. Rachel and her husband Lewis Robards clearly had a broken marriage. Rachel’s mother sent her to visit friends near Natchez and Jackson accompanied her on the journey. During a later visit, after hearing that Robards had divorced Rachel, they supposedly married. No one has ever located any written record of the Natchez wedding. When the couple returned to Nashville in 1791, they found that Robards had only initiated the divorce proceedings. With new evidence based on the Natchez “marriage”, Robards completed the divorce by charging Rachel with bigamy. Andrew and Rachel re-married in Nashville in 1794. Such events sometimes happened on the frontier where communications were difficult. Little notice was made of the two marriages among Nashville society.

Between 1790 and 1796, Jackson played an instrumental role in developing North Carolina’s western lands into the State of Tennessee. In 1791, he was appointed Attorney General of the Mero District (the present day area around Nashville). Jackson also made a name for himself in the world of politics. In his first elected position, he served as a delegate to the Tennessee Constitutional Convention in Knoxville where he helped draft a state constitution and bill of rights. In 1796, Jackson traveled to Philadelphia to lobby Congress to approve Tennessee as the 16th U.S. state. Over the next two years, Tennesseans elected him their first member of the U.S. House of Representatives (1796-1797) and he was selected by the Tennessee General Assembly as U.S. Senator (1797-1798). Jackson, however, cut his senatorial career short because of mounting financial difficulties at home. Jackson returned to Tennessee and in 1799 took a well-paid position as a circuit judge on Tennessee’s Superior
Court, a post that required him to travel throughout the state, including the state capital at Knoxville. Simultaneously, Jackson maintained a law practice in Nashville and established several commercial business ventures—including general merchandise stores, whiskey distilleries, and boat making—at his plantations in northeastern Davidson County.

He and Rachel lived first at Poplar Grove (1792-1796) and then Hunter’s Hill (1797-1804), a 640-acre riverfront plantation worked by fifteen African-American slaves. In order to keep his stores stocked with the latest fashions and merchandise from around the world, Jackson made many buying trips to major cities such as Baltimore, New Orleans, and Philadelphia, then the U.S. capital. In 1802, Jackson received an honor he had long coveted; the Tennessee militia elected him their Major General. Jackson also formed business partnerships to speculate in land sales throughout the region. One such partnership failed miserably. In order to avoid bankruptcy, he was forced to sell Hunter’s Hill. On July 5, 1804, Jackson purchased his neighbor Nathaniel Hays’ 425-acre farm, which he named “The Hermitage.” Soon after, Jackson established a new riverfront enterprise at nearby Clover Bottom where he operated a general store, tavern, and tracks for racing thoroughbred horses. Jackson also quit his Superior Court judgeship to focus on The Hermitage and his Clover Bottom enterprises. Jackson would continue to add land and slaves to his Hermitage operations in the coming years.

Personally, he and Rachel began a family at The Hermitage by taking in several wards, including her nephew Andrew Jackson Donnellson. In 1808, they adopted another of Rachel’s nephews and named him Andrew Jackson, Jr. Jackson corresponded with political leaders such as President Thomas Jefferson and entertained others, including Vice President Aaron Burr. Jackson’s friendship with Burr, who conspired to break up the U.S. for his personal advancement, almost led to attempts to desert by much of his force. Twice

Military Man

When the United States declared war on Great Britain in summer of 1812, Andrew Jackson’s political career was at a standstill, his social standing had fallen as a result of his duel with Charles Dickinson, and his finances were still in shambles. Jackson was disillusioned not only by the state of his own life, but with the inability of his country to protect its citizens and their property. However, the war with Britain offered Jackson renewed hope for the future of the United States and the opportunity to turn around his personal fortunes through his position as Major General of the Tennessee Militia. Jackson, like his country, had a deeply ingrained need to prove himself.

Jackson offered his services, but President Madison’s administration hesitated to call on Jackson because of his reputation for rashness and his friendship with Aaron Burr. Finally in December 1812, Madison commissioned Jackson Major General of U.S. Volunteers and ordered him to lead 1,500 troops south to Natchez and eventually to defend New Orleans. Jackson led his troops to Natchez, but in March the War Department believing the threat to New Orleans abated ordered the immediate dismissal of Jackson’s force and made no offer to compensate the troops or provide for their return to Tennessee. Outraged, Jackson decided that he would march his force home intact through hostile Indian lands even if he had to pay the expense himself. Jackson successfully led his poorly provisioned army back to Tennessee sharing in all the hardships his troops faced and encouraging them all the way by his example. His troops compared Jackson’s toughness to that of the hickory tree and nicknamed him “Old Hickory.”

Tennesseans greeted Jackson with new found respect for his actions to preserve the honor of its volunteer fighting men. At last, Jackson had begun to move out of the shadow of his past, but his temper once again got him into trouble. Jackson chose sides in a dispute between two of his officers when he should have acted as a peacemaker. As result, the argument expanded leading to a gunfight in the streets of Nashville that left Jackson horribly wounded in the upper left arm.

While recovering from his wound, word reached Tennessee that settlers at Fort Mims (in present day Southern Alabama) had been massacred by a hostile faction of the Creek Nation. Jackson, received orders to put down the Creek uprising. Despite his health, Jackson gathered his forces together in early October 1813 and marched south. In November 1813, Jackson won significant battles against the Creeks at Tallushatchee and Talladega.

Jackson’s initial successes left him hungry for further victories, but supply problems and disagreements over the length of service many of his militia signed up for led to attempts to desert by much of his force. Twice
Jackson prevented mass desertion by his troops at gun point. However, when his troops reached the end of their terms of service Jackson was compelled to let them go. Jackson appealed to the governor of Tennessee to send him more troops. Finally, in January new troops began to arrive and by March Jackson’s army reached 5,000 men, which greatly outnumbered the Creek warriors. At Horseshoe Bend, Jackson’s army surrounded the Creeks and inflicted a punishing defeat effectively ending the Creek War.

The victorious Jackson returned to Tennessee where he was greeted as a hero that had not only defeated the Creeks, but also at the same time provided for the future security of the region by building military roads and forts. Jackson’s successes were lauded across the country at a time when the War of 1812 was going poorly. Even the Madison Administration recognized that in Jackson they had a man, despite his lack of military training, who stood out on the field of battle where others had failed miserably. In May, the War Department rewarded Jackson with a commission as Major General in the U.S. Army over the 7th Military District, which included Tennessee, Louisiana, and the Mississippi Territory. Jackson’s immediate orders were to negotiate a peace treaty with the Creek Nation. In August 1814, Jackson met with chiefs of the Creek Nation and imposed the Treaty of Fort Jackson that forced the Creeks to give up nearly 23 million acres and remove their settlements to a smaller area of land that American forces could more easily patrol.

Britain’s war with France ended in 1814 and the British turned their attention to the United States. Fresh troops were sent to invade the U.S. and secure Canada. In August 1814, the British burned Washington, but were repulsed at Baltimore. Jackson meanwhile learned of a rumored invasion of the South through New Orleans or Mobile. Jackson acted quickly to repair the defenses at Mobile and then with questionable authority he invaded portions of Spanish Florida to eliminate threats from British forces and Indians hostile to the United States. On December 1, 1814, Jackson entered New Orleans to strengthen its defenses and pull together a truly unique American Army. Regular U.S. troops, volunteer militia from Tennessee, Kentucky, Louisiana, and the Mississippi Territory, free blacks, Indians, and even a band of pirates comprised Jackson’s force. However, Jackson’s army was greatly outnumbered and inexperienced compared to the superior British force that threatened New Orleans.

The British invasion of Louisiana began on December 14 with light resistance from Jackson’s army. On December 23, Jackson attacked the advancing British troops and halted their progress. For the next two weeks the two armies squared off as the British probed for a way through Jackson’s defenses. Finally, on January 8, 1815, the British conducted a full-scale attack on Jackson and the defenders of New Orleans. To the amazement of the world, Jackson’s army handed the British attackers a crushing defeat that forced them to withdraw from Louisiana.

Word of Jackson’s victory set off a wave of celebration and national pride in the young United States. Although the signing of a peace treaty between the United States and Great Britain actually preceded the American victory in New Orleans, neither army knew it due to slow communications. Even after learning of the Treaty of Ghent, the importance of the Battle of New Orleans was undiminished for the Americans. Jackson’s string of military successes despite the obstacles he faced, the poor showing by other military leaders during the War of 1812, and his stunning victory at New Orleans against the best trained army in the world made him a celebrated national hero revered above all others except Washington.

In the peacetime army that followed, U.S. forces were divided into northern and southern divisions with Jackson in command of the latter with a rank of Major General. Jackson would use this post to secure the United State’s southern borders. In Jackson’s eyes, the United States southern lands suffered from two security problems, the Indians and Spanish Florida. Jackson used his reputation as a fierce fighter and the threat of force to get the Creeks, Chickasaws, Cherokees, and Choctaws to sign treaties ceding huge tracts of land and confining the tribes to much smaller territories. For the Indians these treaties were disasters that proved to be the first step in their eventual removal to the west.

For Jackson, Spanish Florida threatened American security because it did not have the military might to defend itself. The British had seen it as a possible route of invasion and the Seminole Indian tribe conducted raids in the United States then fled to the refuge of Spanish Florida. In 1818, Jackson once again acting with questionable authority from Washington invaded Spanish Florida to attack the Seminole Indians. After three months, Jackson declared the Seminole threat over and withdrew. The Spanish realized that Jackson and the United States were determined to take Spanish Florida. In 1819, Spain and the United States agreed to the Adams-Onis Treaty that turned over Florida to the United States and advantageously settled the boundaries between the respective governments’ holdings in North America in favor of the United States.

In June 1821, Jackson hesitantly resigned his commission in the U.S. Army to become Governor of the Florida Territory. From 1812 to 1821, Jackson’s military career made him a national hero and brought him increased wealth and opportunities. For the United States, Jackson’s actions secured its southern lands, acquired millions of acres of lands for settlement that fueled the cotton boom, and gave Americans a new found confidence or “go ahead” spirit that began an
unbridled expansion in agriculture and manufacturing. Soon, Jackson’s countrymen would mention him as a candidate for President of the United States.

The Candidate

On July 17, 1821, Jackson took possession of Florida from Spain and began his term as governor. From the start, Jackson despised Florida’s climate and so too did Rachel. He quickly became fed up with the unending appointments and office seekers, dealing with the transition from Spain, and political disagreements with President Monroe’s administration. In November, Jackson resigned his governorship citing health reasons and his desire to retire from public life. Jackson had a thriving plantation in Tennessee, had just completed a new brick home and both he and Rachel yearned to return there and live out their lives. The American people quickly ended any real or feigned hope Jackson had of spending a quite life in retirement as a gentleman farmer at The Hermitage.

In 1822, the Tennessee Legislature nominated him as a candidate for President of the United States. Then, in a test of Jackson’s political strength he was put forward and elected as a U.S. Senator from Tennessee in 1823. As Senator, Jackson cautiously steered clear of controversy and favored to work with military affairs. Jackson used his time in Washington to make friends and political allies. He also disabused many Washingtonians of the notion that he was an uncivilized Westerner or a military tyrant by demonstrating his refined manners and controlling his temper. However, Jackson’s time in Washington only reinforced his belief that many politicians and government officers were corrupt.

In the 1824 Presidential Campaign, Jackson did not publicly advocate for his election, as was the tradition of the day. He espoused no platform and actually all the serious candidates who ran, Jackson, John Quincy Adams, William Crawford, and Henry Clay, were from Jackson’s own Republican Party. However, through his campaign managers, Jackson made it clear that he was determined to cleanse government of corruption and return it to its earlier values. Americans went to the polls in the fall of 1824, handing Jackson a victory in the popular vote, but not enough Electoral College votes to win. The decision fell to the House of Representatives who met on February 9, 1825 and elected John Quincy Adams with House Speaker Henry Clay as Adams’ chief supporter. Jackson graciously accepted his defeat until rumors began to fly that Clay and Adams had struck a deal to ensure Adams’ election. When Adams’ named Henry Clay as his Secretary of State, it confirmed Jackson’s suspicions that the two men had reached a “corrupt bargain” and deprived the American people of their popular choice for president.

In frustration with Washington, Jackson resigned his Senate seat and returned to Tennessee. Immediately, Jackson and his supporters began laying the groundwork for his election in 1828. What they did best was to organize a grassroots party around Jackson known initially as the Democratic-Republicans and later simply as the Democratic Party. Jackson’s party organization earned him support across the nation and more importantly it helped get more people involved in the political process just as voting qualifications for white men were being eased. Jackson’s supporters also assailed Adams’ Administration over the “corrupt bargain” and other scandals that cropped up. In Congress, Jackson men opposed Adams and his programs that called for increased spending on internal improvements. Adams’ further compounded his problems by appearing out of touch with the “common man.” Thus, after three years in office Adams had accomplished little due in part to opposition from Jackson, corruption within his administration, and his own shortcomings.

By 1828, Jackson was ready to win the White House, but first he had to suffer through a bruising campaign that to this day is still recognized as one of the meanest in American history. Adams’ supporters accused Jackson of being a military tyrant who would use the presidency as a springboard for his own Napoleonic ambitions of empire. For proof they ran out every skeleton in Jackson’s closet, his duels and brawls, his execution of troops for desertion during the War of 1812, his declaration of marshal law in New Orleans, his friendship with Aaron Burr, and his invasions of Spanish Florida in 1814 and 1818. But by far, the most painful personally for Jackson was the attack on his and Rachel's character over their marriage. Technically, Rachel was a bigamist and Jackson her partner in it. Adams’ supporters attacked not only Jackson, but also Rachel as morally unfit to hold the nation’s highest office.

Jackson’s forces went into the Campaign of 1828 with the political advantage and spent much of their time simply defending Jackson. They promoted Jackson’s program of governmental reform, retrenchment, and economy to bring honor and financial solvency back to Washington and largely stayed away from other controversial issues. However, they did not let the character assaults launched by Adams men go unanswered. They struck back with attacks on corrupt officials in Adams’ Administration and labeled Adams an elitist who wanted to increase the size and power of government to benefit the aristocracy.

In the fall of 1828, the decision fell to the voters and they overwhelmingly elected Jackson. Jackson’s victory was seen as a complete repudiation of Adams and his vision for America. Furthermore, it revealed the belief of some that the United States government was run by a small group of aristocrats that were unresponsive to the demands of the voters. The “common man” placed
Jackson in office and sent him to Washington to crush the power of the aristocrats. But, Jackson’s victory was also due in large part to his military accomplishments and the trust voters had that he would bring the same success in restoring honor to government. Personally, Jackson had achieved vindication for the “corrupt bargain” that robbed him of the White House in 1824 and laid waste to the barbs and accusations flung during the campaign. Jackson had reached a high point in his life, but its cost proved tragic.

The public controversy over her marriage to Jackson placed a great deal of strain on Rachel emotionally and physically. Rachel also feared Washington’s social circles and had no desire to return to it. She had already fallen gravely ill once in the fall of 1828, but her health had begun to recover and even Jackson noted such in a letter he wrote on December 22, 1828. In a matter of hours after writing those words, Rachel collapsed and died from what modern day physicians believe was a heart attack. Grief stricken, Jackson buried Rachel two days later in the Hermitage garden with a large assemblage of mourners on hand. One month later, Jackson left The Hermitage for Washington to assume the nation’s highest office bereft of the love of his life.

The Presidency

For the United States of America, Andrew Jackson’s time as President marked a turning point in its history. He strengthened the power of the presidency, defended the Union, gained new respect for the United States in foreign affairs, and extended democracy to more citizens.

Unfortunately for Jackson, the first two years of his term were marred by a social scandal turned political. Jackson’s Secretary of War John Eaton, married Margaret “Peggy” Timberlake just months before Jackson took office. Washington socialites disapproved of Mrs. Eaton because of her upbringing and rumors about her past. Other cabinet members’ wives refused to associate with Mrs. Eaton forcing Jackson to defend the Eatons. Since John had been Rachel Jackson’s chief defender during the 1828 Presidential Campaign, Jackson felt that he must demand that Peggy be accepted into Washington’s social circles.

At the same time, several of Jackson’s cabinet members believed Jackson would serve only one term and were positioning themselves to succeed him as President. The end result was that those who socialized with the Eatons and proved their loyalty to Jackson in other areas as well won his favor. However, to rid himself of the immediate controversy Jackson dismissed his entire cabinet in 1831 except for the Postmaster General. In time this controversy caused Jackson to turn to a group of unofficial advisors that his opponents labeled his “Kitchen Cabinet” because of their “back door” access to the President.

Despite the Eaton Affair, Jackson still managed to accomplish much of his reform, retrenchment, and economy program. Jackson took office with great expectations that he would cleanse government of corruption and restore the nation’s finances. Washington’s elite feared that Jackson would fire everyone that held government positions, even the competent, and replace them with his own people. Jackson eventually replaced about ten percent of the government officers he held power over, but that was a high percentage as compared to his predecessors. The officers he replaced were largely inept, corrupt, or were politically opposed to Jackson. For this, Jackson is credited with what he called “the principle of rotation in office,” but others would label it the “spoils system.” Jackson kept a watchful eye over government expenditures and congressional appropriations. In one instance, Jackson vetoed a road bill approved by Congress that benefited only one area of the country, did not improve the nation’s defenses, and was costly. Prior to Jackson, presidents had only vetoed legislation because they believed it unconstitutional, but Jackson established a new principle of vetoing legislation as a matter of policy. Jackson’s spending controls along with increased revenue enabled him to pay off the national debt in 1835 and keep the nation debt free for the remainder of his term.

Jackson also espoused removing Indian tribes in the United States to the west of the Mississippi River as one of his reforms. Jackson argued that the United States policy of attempting to assimilate Indian tribes into white society had failed and moreover, it would destroy the Indians’ way of life. Furthermore, Jackson recognized that whites desired Indian lands and he feared that if they remained in those areas that they would eventually be exterminated. Opposition groups fought Jackson’s removal policy in Congress, but their efforts failed by just a handful of votes. Congress’s authorization of removal empowered Jackson to make treaties with the Indian tribes to arrange for their removal.

At this point, Jackson who railed against government corruption largely turned a blind eye to the shady treaties forced on the various tribes and the actions of government officials. The Indian Removal process was completed two years after Jackson left office with great loss of Indian life due to corruption, inadequate supplies, and the removal of many Indians by force. Today, Jackson’s Indian Removal policy and its tragic consequences that produced the Trail of Tears is the most conspicuous blight on his presidential legacy.

With the Eaton Affair behind him and his programs in full swing, Jackson turned his attention to the issue that would define his presidency and forever reshape the office he held. In 1816, the United State Congress chartered the Second United States Bank for twenty years to hold the country’s money, make loans, and
regulate currency. Bank profits benefited private stockholders and the U.S government. The Bank’s early history was riddled with corruption and poor financial management that resulted in economic hardship in the U.S. However, the Bank under the direction of Nicholas Biddle had turned itself around and astutely managed the nation’s money producing a good business climate.

Jackson distrusted banks in general, but he realized that they played an important role in the U.S. economy. However, Jackson believed the Bank of the United States held too much power and could wield it at any moment to ruin the U.S. economy. Furthermore, the Bank’s stockholders were mainly foreign investors with allegiances to other governments, so Jackson also viewed the Bank’s power as a threat to national security. The crux of the issue for Jackson was the never ending battle between liberty and power in government. In Jackson’s belief system, people sacrificed some individual liberty for the beneficial aspects of government, but if any government institution became too powerful it stood as a direct threat to individual liberty.

Jackson signaled early on in his administration that he would consider re-chartering the Bank, but only if its powers were limited. Jackson’s opponents quickly seized this issue to attack Jackson. Led by Henry Clay, Jackson’s chief rival in the 1832 presidential contest, supporters of the Bank argued that it played a vital role in the economy and that the true threat to individual liberty came from Jackson and his broadening of presidential powers. Clay decided that he would force Jackson to make the Bank a campaign issue in 1832 by re-chartering the Bank early. Clay secured Congressional approval of the re-charter and Jackson promptly vetoed it on constitutional and policy grounds. Clay and Jackson then put the issue of, who was the greater danger to individual liberty, the Bank or Jackson, to the people. The people overwhelmingly re-elected Jackson.

Vindicated by the people, Jackson prepared to finish his fight with the Bank in his second term, but first he had to put down a threat to the Union. South Carolinians led by Jackson’s former vice president, John Calhoun, felt the Tariff of 1832 unduly harmed their state, while it directly benefited northern manufacturing states. Tariffs were levied to protect northern manufacturers from foreign competitors who offered cheaper goods. Calhoun had advanced theories that the states had the constitutional right to nullify (or invalidate) any federal law and that states could secede from the Union. In late 1832, South Carolina nullified the Tariff of 1832 and threatened secession. Jackson rejected the notions that any state had the right to nullify a federal law or secede from the Union and promised the use of force if South Carolina disobeyed the law. After much brinksmanship, Congress passed a compromise tariff that placated South Carolina and a bill that authorized the use of force against it. Jackson’s actions prevented disunion and set the precedents that Abraham Lincoln would later use to oppose secession.

With nullification put down, Jackson returned to the Bank War. Jackson’s relationship with “the people” over his first term convinced him that he was the only elected official in the United States that represented all “the people.” As such, Jackson believed he had to use his office to carry out the “will of the people.” Here again, Jackson detoured from his predecessors who viewed the president as a mere executive by expanding his power when a clear mandate was expressed to him from “the people.”

Jackson interpreted his victory over Clay and the Bank in 1832 as “the people’s” mandate to destroy the powerful Bank and replace it with a decentralized government banking system. Jackson pushed his banking plan in Congress and at the same time handicapped the Bank by ordering the removal of government deposits. In response, the Bank created an artificial economic panic by calling in loans and the opposition controlled Senate censured Jackson for removing the deposits without Congressional authorization. Meanwhile, the old debate over liberty and power continued to rage as Jackson, Congress and the Bank were all accused of abusing their powers. Finally in April 1834, the House approved Jackson’s actions against the Bank.

Jackson’s focus as president and his determination to carry out the “people’s will” were no doubt motivated in part by the price he had paid to become president. The loss of Rachel deeply affected him and he would spend the remainder of his life mourning her. Compounding his sorrows were constant struggles with his health, a result of wounds, harsh military camp life, and the natural aging process. To cushion her loss and assist him when his health turned, Jackson filled the White House with family and friends, most notably Andrew Jackson Donnellson and his wife Emily who served as his private secretary and official hostess. Andrew Jackson Junior and his wife, Sarah, replaced the Donelson’s in 1836. Jackson’s favorite portrait painter, friend, and fellow widower Ralph Earl also lived in the White House. Jackson left his mark on the White House by completing the north portico, redecorating several rooms with the most notable being the East Room, and making various improvements to the service buildings and grounds. Jackson entertained lavishly at the White House for both private affairs and public levies, always surprising his detractors who thought him an uncivilized military tyrant.

While Jackson struggled with sorrow, health, personal finances, and domestic policy issues he enjoyed almost complete success in foreign affairs. Jackson made it known at the outset of his administration that he intended to take no aggressive action against any foreign country. He approached foreign affairs with a
simple principle, “to ask nothing that is not clearly right, and to submit to nothing that is wrong.” With his foreign policy principles in hand and Jackson’s military reputation preceding it, American ministers were able to win new found respect for American rights and trade all over the globe. Jackson’s Administration opened new ports to American trade, won most- favored-nation trading status in other countries, and collected huge sums of money owed the United States by foreign governments.

Although, Jackson promised not to increase the size of the U.S. through force he did try over and over again to buy Texas from Mexico, but failed. In 1836, Texans declared and won their independence from Mexico. Jackson badly wanted Texas to join the Union, but in this instance he stuck to his foreign policy principles and refused to interfere in Mexico’s internal affairs. He cautioned Congress to wait until the situation stabilized before recognizing Texas’s independence. Just days before he left office, Congress recognized Texas and Jackson approved its action.

Jackson’s only true foreign affairs crisis came when France balked at paying indemnities to the U.S. that it had agreed to in 1831. As the French continued to delay payment, Jackson’s temper surfaced and he began hinting that war with France might be necessary to preserve American honor. With two of its largest trading partners at the brink of war, Great Britain stepped in and helped settle the dispute to preserve the peace. At last, France paid the indemnity and Jackson offered explanations for his threats, but he never apologized to France.

With the French crisis behind him and the nation free of debt, Jackson settled in for the last year of his presidency. Several issues dominated his final days in office including: approval of his decentralized banking system, distribution of the national surplus, currency reform, and the campaign to elect Vice-President Martin Van Buren, president. With 1836 an election year, Congressmen wanted a victory to take home to the voters and they zeroed in on distributing government surpluses to the states for internal improvements. Jackson opposed distribution because he felt it unconstitutional and he preferred that the surplus be reserved for national defense. Knowing Jackson would oppose their distribution plan, Congress tied it to the banking reforms Jackson long desired.

In June 1836, Congress approved the legislation and sent it to Jackson. Jackson was tempted to veto it because he despised distribution and he felt the regulations on the state banks that held U.S. deposits did not go far enough, but the bill offered a final victory in the Bank War, currency reform, and it would assist Van Buren in his presidential campaign. Jackson signed the bill, but also went one step further in reforming the nation’s currency. Jackson argued that the paper money system allowed speculators to buy huge quantities of land that drove prices so high that “the people” could not afford it. To combat the speculators, Jackson issued his Specie Circular that required government land be purchased with gold or silver, unless the land was bought directly by actual settlers. Though well intentioned, Jackson’s Specie Circular, the lack of regulations on the state banks, and other issues eventually produced a calamitous economic downturn that destroyed the presidency of Martin Van Buren, who was elected to Jackson’s great joy in November 1836.

When Jackson left office in March 1837, he had left his mark on the presidency and forever changed the course of American history. Jackson had firmly established that presidents could be more than just mere executives to carryout the law. He set the precedent that the president was the sole representative of all “the people” and as such the president could wield his power broadly to carryout their will. Through his actions Jackson squarely set the Executive Branch on an equal footing with Congress in terms of power and shaping law and government policies. Jackson preserved and defended the Union against threats from nullifiers and secessionists. Nations across the globe viewed the United States with new found respect due to Jackson’s management of foreign affairs. Most importantly, however, Jackson’s presidency pushed the nation further toward democracy, but much work remained in granting equal rights and freedoms to those still oppressed in the United States.

The Sage of Hermitage

Andrew Jackson retired from public office on March 4, 1837. His vice president, Martin Van Buren, succeeded him as president. Lack of an official office did not prevent Jackson from maintaining a lively interest in public affairs. He kept up an active correspondence with many in Washington, offering his insights and advice, and stayed current with subscriptions to over twenty newspapers. One issue that captured his interest was Texas. Texas had won its independence from Mexico in 1836, toward the end of Jackson’s second term as president. Jackson’s old friend Sam Houston, former governor of Tennessee, was the president of the Republic of Texas. Both men desired to bring Texas into the Union. Jackson wielded his considerable influence and in the spring of 1845, Congress authorized the annexation of Texas to the United States. That same spring, Jackson’s protégé, James K. Polk, took office as the 11th President of the United States.

Matters closer to home also kept Jackson busy. Andrew Jackson Junior, his adopted son, had mounting debts, from expensive purchases and co-signing promissory notes for others. Jackson sold property in Alabama and took out loans to pay the debts, but new problems kept arising. He purchased another plantation in
Mississippi, hoping that the profits from that farm would improve the family's financial status. That effort was not successful either. Despite the debts and problems, Jackson was by no means poor since he still owned nearly 1000 acres at The Hermitage and around 150 slaves.

Jackson's family lived at The Hermitage and was a great source of joy for him. Andrew Junior and his wife, Sarah Yorke Jackson, had three children, Rachel, Andrew, and Samuel. Their last two children, Thomas and Robert, died as infants. Sarah's widowed sister, Marion Yorke Adams, and her three sons joined the family in 1837. The artist, Ralph E. W. Earl, also lived with the family until his death in September 1838. Jackson and Sarah joined the Presbyterian Church in July 1838 and the family held evening prayers before retiring every night.

Andrew Jackson's health, never good, deteriorated badly in his final years. Constant infections, gastrointestinal problems, pain, eye and ear troubles, and fluid build-up made him miserable. He frequently predicted his own death, but continued to hang on to life. Finally, on June 8, 1845 with his family and slaves surrounding him, he died in his bedroom at The Hermitage. He was buried two days later in the Hermitage garden with nearly ten thousand people in attendance.