

This Day in History... April 23, 1791

Happy Birthday James Buchanan

James Buchanan was born on April 23, 1791, in Cove Gap, Pennsylvania, to Irish immigrants. He was the second oldest of 11 children, although three died in infancy.

The family's financial success ensured that young James could afford to be well educated. He graduated with honors from Dickinson College in 1809, studied law, and was admitted to the Pennsylvania Bar in 1812.

Success came quickly and easily for Buchanan as an attorney. In 1813, he opened his first legal office, and two weeks later was named prosecutor for Lebanon County, Pennsylvania. A year later, Buchanan and a colleague bought a tavern to use as a residence and an office. This year also marked his entry into politics – and war.

In 1814, British troops marched into Washington, DC, and burned the city – including the White House. A day later, after news of Washington's destruction, Buchanan gave his first public speech, urging people to join the fight against the British. The young lawyer then stood behind his words by joining a volunteer dragoon (cavalry) unit on the same day. He saw action at the Battle of Baltimore. Later that fall, Buchanan was elected to the state legislature. Both his political and legal careers were thriving.

Buchanan made his entry into national politics in 1820, first as a US Representative for the Federalist Party, and then as a "Jacksonian Democrat" – part of Andrew Jackson's growing power bloc. However, Jackson and Buchanan had a difficult personal relationship. By 1831, Buchanan hoped to get the vice presidential bid under Jackson, who had just completed his first term as president. But Jackson instead offered him the post of minister to Russia – considered to be a political graveyard.

As minister to Russia, Buchanan was out of the country as some bitter domestic issues arose. Buchanan's absence meant he avoided the nasty disputes. Jackson rewarded Buchanan's loyalty and patience by clearing a path for his nomination to the US Senate three years later, where he served from 1834-45.

Buchanan made a run for the presidency in 1844. He never gained much support, and James Polk emerged as a dark horse candidate and won the election. Polk later appointed him secretary of State, a role in which he negotiated the Oregon Treaty of 1849 with Great Britain, peacefully resolving a tense border dispute.

In 1852, Buchanan again made a bid for the White House, and again lost – this time to Franklin Pierce. Pierce appointed him minister to the Court of St. James (Great Britain), one of the most prestigious foreign assignments.



Historians consider the Dred Scott decision the worst decision ever made by the US Supreme Court.



Buchanan was the only unwed US president up to that time.

Buchanan made his third try for the presidency in the 1856 election, and this time was successful. As Buchanan's inauguration approached, he became personally involved with a case before the US Supreme Court, *Dred Scott vs. Sandford*, in which a slave, Scott, was suing for his freedom. Buchanan was in direct contact with several of the justices, who assured him the case would be ruled against Scott. In Buchanan's inaugural speech, he said, "This is, happily, a matter of but little practical importance... and will, it is understood, be speedily and finally settled." Two days after Buchanan took office, the Supreme Court struck down Scott's plea. The justices additionally overturned the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which

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had set guidelines for whether new states would legally allow slavery. The ruling immediately created an uproar, and many people accused Buchanan of tampering with the court. This controversy set a tone for his administration.

Another slavery dispute helped define Buchanan's administration. Since 1854, Northern and Southern interests had been engaged in a "proxy war" in Kansas, with both sides trying to influence the territory into entering the Union on their side of the slavery issue. Factions from both sides tried to influence the Kansas Territory's position by sending groups of armed men to enforce their favored position. Vigilante groups were called "Border Ruffians" for the pro-slavery interests and "Jayhawkers" for the anti-slavery supporters. Disputes often ended in bloodshed, sometimes in armed conflicts involving hundreds of people.

Efforts were made to draft a Kansas state constitution several times. In one notable attempt called the Lecompton Constitution, Buchanan tried to influence the process by appointing Robert Walker, a strong slavery supporter, as territory governor. But Walker soon resigned, citing clear instances of fraud and improper pressure from Buchanan.

In an 1856 vote in Lecompton, Kansas's territorial capital, a very limited group of voters approved slavery. But in 1858, the entire territory was able to vote on the Lecompton Constitution, and overwhelmingly rejected it. The issue sharply divided Buchanan's own Democratic Party, contributing to the birth of the Republican Party and the election of Abraham Lincoln. Kansas would not be granted statehood until after Lincoln's election.

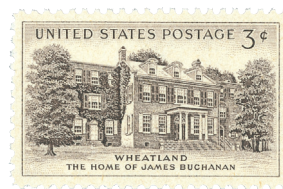
Events in Kansas were just one of the growing number of disputes between the factions. Buchanan continued to propose resolutions designed to favor the South. Some, such as a proposed constitutional amendment to forever preserve slavery, were simply ignored by both parties.

In 1858, the newly formed (and Northern-based) Republican Party gained a plurality in Congress. Lincoln had made his famous "House Divided" speech in response to the Dred Scott case. Buchanan's support for Southern interests grew more blatant, as he vetoed numerous Republican-sponsored bills. By October of 1859, US Army General Winfield Scott advised the president that a Lincoln victory would cause Southern states to secede, and that federal Army forts needed to be protected. Buchanan was hung up on his view of the circumstances. He felt that no state had the right to secede, but that the federal government did not have the authority to force them to stay in the Union. He ignored Scott's advice to reinforce Southern Army forts.

November 6, 1860, marked the presidential election of Lincoln. Buchanan kept his inaugural promise to not seek re-election. Most of Buchanan's Cabinet members were Southerners, and by the final months of his presidency they all resigned, as war appeared certain. On December 20, 1860, South Carolina seceded from the Union and by February 1st, six more states followed. Buchanan moved to defend federal installations in the South. He ordered supplies and reinforcements to be sent to Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina, but then he delayed. The shipment would not leave until after Buchanan left office.

On March 4, 1861, Abraham Lincoln was sworn in as president of the United States. Outgoing President James Buchanan told him, "If you are as happy in entering the White House as I shall feel on returning to Wheatland, you are a happy man." On April 12th, confederate cannons opened fire on Fort Sumter. The Civil War had begun.

Buchanan returned to Wheatland, his family estate in Lancaster. He published his memoirs in 1866, two years before his death, called *Mr. Buchanan's Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion*. The former president said, "History will vindicate my actions," however, he is frequently rated the worst US president by historians. James Buchanan died on June 1, 1868, in Lancaster.



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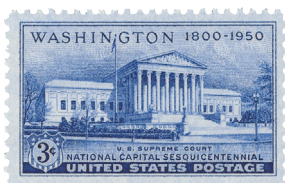
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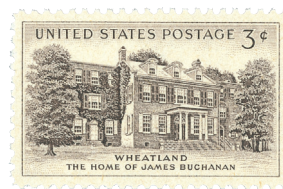
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