

Andrew Jackson

1767–1845

Andrew Jackson, America's seventh president, had no reason to expect he would ever hold such a high office while growing up on a farm in North Carolina during the American Revolution. Life was not easy for Jackson. He had lost a brother in the war; and his mother, who tended wounded soldiers, died of one of the many illnesses that swept through 18th century army camps. As a 14-year-old Jackson also had a British officer slash his face with a sword when Jackson refused to polish the officer's boots. The scar remained for the rest of Jackson's life. All these experiences combined to make Jackson critical and distrustful of the British.

When Jackson became a young adult, he left North Carolina for more opportunity in Tennessee. He pursued a career as a lawyer and got a job with a law office. In those days, not all lawyers were necessarily law school graduates. Many served an apprenticeship working at a law office instead, hoping to learn from practical experience what law students learned in school. Jackson passed the bar exam and became a lawyer. In his new role, he met and married a well-to-do woman named Rachel Robards. Through his hard work and her family's wealth, Jackson soon found himself the owner of a fine plantation, The Hermitage, near Nashville, Tennessee.

Jackson also built a name for himself as a military leader. In local wars against the Creek Indians, Jackson was a tough adversary to the Indians. During the War of 1812, still nurturing his childhood grudges against the British, he needed little convincing to join the war effort. Although the war ended in a stalemate and a negotiated truce, Jackson became a national figure because of his military leadership. Jackson was the U.S. commander at the Battle of New Orleans. In this battle, a British invasion force attacked, and Jackson led the city's defenders. The British were driven back and suffered more than one thousand casualties, while the Americans had only twenty-five casualties. This was the biggest American victory of the war; however, the Battle of New Orleans took place two weeks *after* the war was over. (It took about a month for the news of the peace settlement to reach the United States from Europe.) Nevertheless, it was a big American victory, and Jackson became a national hero.

Jackson was a flamboyant character and a product of his times. Intelligent and accomplished but largely self-taught, he wrote often, but was a poor speller. Tall and thin, with a high forehead and an angular face, he was an imposing figure.

Quick to anger and slow to forget an insult, he was involved in numerous fights and as many as one hundred duels. On one occasion, he fought a duel in which his opponent shot first. Jackson was hit in the chest, inches below his heart, and fell to the ground. Yet, he refused to concede, was helped to his feet, took aim at his opponent, and shot him dead. Jackson took weeks to recover, and the bullet was so close to his heart and major arteries it could not safely be removed. He carried the bullet in his chest for the rest of his life, as well as another bullet in his shoulder from another duel. The lead from these bullets slowly dispersed into his body and affected his health as he aged. He suffered severe headaches.

In 1819 Florida was a Spanish territory. The secretary of state sent a military force under Jackson's command to rout a gang of outlaws, runaway slaves, and Indians who had been raiding American settlements in Georgia. The criminals would then flee to their stronghold in the Florida swamps. Jackson and his troops quickly accomplished their mission and continued to the Atlantic coast to the Spanish settlement of St. Augustine. Jackson and his men attacked and overcame the Spanish garrison there. Two British army officers were found in the St. Augustine garrison, and Jackson had them hanged. He claimed they had been selling guns to the outlaws. Jackson now occupied the Spanish territory of Florida.

The Spanish and British governments protested Jackson's actions. The United States government claimed Jackson had acted without orders, offered cash to the Spanish, and kept Florida. Historians have debated whether Jackson was acting on his own or under secret orders from the secretary of state. If there were a secret plan to occupy Florida, no State Department records exist.

Jackson became a national political figure and in 1824 became a candidate for president in a three-way race against Senator Henry Clay and John Quincy Adams. When no candidate received the majority of the electoral vote, Congress decided the election through a vote in the House of Representatives. Jackson hoped Clay, who had the fewest electoral votes, would concede and throw his supporters toward Jackson. Clay and Jackson were from the same region of the country, while Adams was from faraway Massachusetts. Instead, Clay backed Adams and Jackson was defeated. When Adams took office, he appointed Clay as secretary of state. An outraged Jackson accused Clay of making a "corrupt bargain" to steal the election. He held that grudge for the rest of his life.

Jackson had reason to hold another grudge because of that election. This campaign was marked by vicious, personal attacks. Called "mudslinging", this type of campaigning relied on the spread of scandalous stories (true or untrue) about

candidates or their families. In this case, Jackson's opponents discovered that, Rachel, who had been married once before and had filed for divorce, had not been legally divorced when she married Jackson. Jackson's opponents accused her of adultery and bigamy. Embarrassed by this publicity, Rachel went into a deep depression and, not long after, passed away. Jackson was both grief-stricken and furious.

Jackson ran again for president in 1828, and won at the age of 62. Although a wealthy lawyer and landowner, he was the first president to come from lower-class origins. His predecessors had all been wealthy Virginia planters or wealthy members of the Adams family from Massachusetts. He became the first president to come from a state outside the original thirteen colonies, Tennessee.

By appealing to voters in the general population, not just wealthy landowners, Jackson changed American politics. States gradually were expanding the right to vote from only white male property owners to all white males. Jackson was a good representative of that group. When he was inaugurated in 1829, he opened the White House to the public and a mob of people came to wish him well. It was a strong contrast to the exclusive group permitted in the White House before his time.

Yet, in spite of his lower-class origins, Jackson strove to be a powerful president and expanded the power of the office during his term. While president he battled some of the more powerful government institutions and won. In a fierce personal struggle against the National Bank and its aristocratic president, Nicholas Biddle, Jackson succeeded in abolishing the bank. In a power struggle with the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Jackson refused to prevent the forced removal of the Cherokee people from their lands in Georgia to Oklahoma, even though the Cherokees had gone to court and won their case. In a clear violation of the Constitution, Jackson refused to enforce the ruling of the Supreme Court and even sent United States Army troops to expel the Indians.

Jackson's fiercest showdown as president was probably the 1832 conflict over whether South Carolina would be allowed to refuse paying federal import taxes, or tariffs. Claiming that a state could nullify a federal law the state felt was unconstitutional or against its interests, Senator John C. Calhoun, Jackson's former vice president, convinced the South Carolina legislature to void the federal tariff law. Jackson argued a state did not have the authority to nullify a federal law and threatened to send troops to enforce the law. South Carolina said it would resist and several other Southern states expressed their support. Neither side would back

down, but Senator Henry Clay, who had a reputation for working out compromises to solve many problems, proposed keeping the tariff but lowering it to a point South Carolina could accept. The crisis cooled, but the Civil War would come a generation later.

Jackson was truly one of America's most active and controversial presidents. He symbolized the transition of American government to a more representative democracy. He was a man of the people, but he increased the power of the president more than his predecessors. He was an Indian fighter, yet he adopted and brought up as his son a Creek child whose village Jackson's militia had destroyed. Considered an arrogant egotist by many and called "King Andy" by his political opponents, he had listed on his beloved Rachel's headstone a long list of her many accomplishments. In contrast, his headstone, which stands next to hers at The Heritage, is carved only the words "Andrew Jackson."

5. How was the political system changing when Jackson entered politics?

6. What military actions made Jackson a national figure?

7. Was Jackson's assertive attitude and violent temper an advantage or a disadvantage to his presidency?