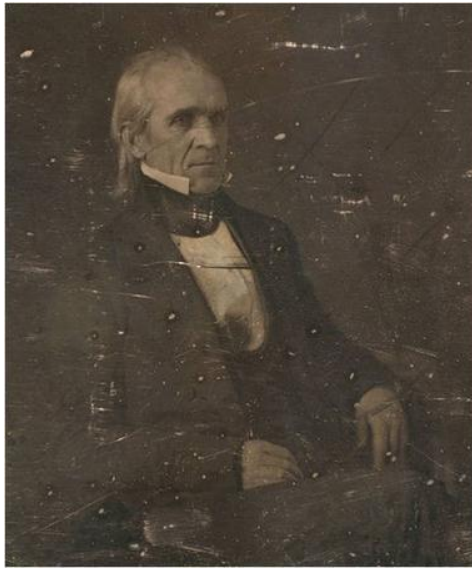


## James K. Polk



James K. Polk served as United States president (1845-49); won election seven times to Congress and presided over the U.S. House as its Speaker (1825-39); served as governor of Tennessee (1839-41); and represented Maury County in the Tennessee General Assembly (1823-25). A lifelong devotee of Thomas Jefferson's political creed and a loyal son of Andrew Jackson's democracy movement, Polk holds a unique place in American history as the first "dark horse" candidate for president and as the first former Speaker of the House of Representatives to serve as president.

The son of Samuel and Jane Knox Polk and the eldest of ten children, young James moved in 1806 with his family from their farm in North Carolina, to Tennessee, where he attended common schools from 1808 until 1810. Upon graduation from the University of North Carolina in 1818, Polk commenced legal studies in the law office of Felix Grundy, a renowned Nashville trial lawyer and member of the general assembly. Impressed with his young law clerk, Grundy sponsored Polk's election in 1819 to the post of chief clerk of the Tennessee Senate. Licensed to practice law the following year, Polk returned to Maury County and started his legal practice. Election to the Tennessee House in 1823 again took the young lawyer-politician to Murfreesboro in the fall. On New Year's Day next he and Sarah Childress, married and so formed a union of two influential families in Rutherford and Maury Counties.

At the age of thirty, Polk defeated James T. Sandford, for a seat in Congress and began a distinguished career in the House marked by opposition to John Q. Adams's administration and support for Jackson and Martin Van Buren. Polk gained notice by his opposition to Adams's appointment of ministers to attend the Panama Congress on grounds that the United States should not abandon its tradition of neutrality or participate in a diplomatic agenda in which the objectives were enveloped in uncertainty. Polk led the House minority in its fight against rechartering the Second Bank of the United States in 1832, and he fully supported Jackson's Bank veto. Polk backed Jackson's removal of federal deposits to state banks, and later as House Speaker he would champion creation of a treasury system entirely independent of banking corporations. In Tennessee, the Bank Party worked to undermine Jackson's control of the state by bringing forward Hugh Lawson White as the state's favorite-son presidential candidate. In the election of 1836, Polk campaigned across the state for the Democratic nominee, Martin Van Buren, but state pride ruled in favor of White. In the 1837 congressional elections only three of the Jackson loyalists held their seats against the tide of economic panic and Bank money. Polk returned to Congress for a second term as Speaker fully aware that the Tennessee Democracy could not survive another such defeat two years hence; before returning to Washington in the fall of 1838, Polk announced his decision to run for governor in the next election.

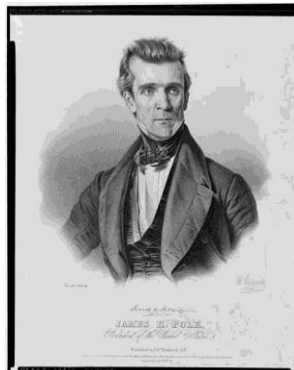
Polk's race to recapture the state for the Democracy proved his loyalty both to Jackson and to Democrats across the Union. With the help of John C. Calhoun's friends in East Tennessee, Polk won the governorship. He had hoped that hard times would pass before the 1840 presidential election and that his loyal efforts in Tennessee would win him the party's vice-presidential nomination. But no one on the ticket could have spared Van Buren his defeat to the Whig presidential candidate, William Henry Harrison. In 1841, during his own reelection campaign, Polk stood by his support of Van Buren, as he had done in four prior elections, but he lost his first election.

Polk won the 1844 Democratic presidential nomination because Andrew Jackson had arranged for the convention to choose a loyal Democrat from the West who could bridge the widening sectional divide and who would support the annexation of Texas. The expansion issue brought the election a more serious side, for the threat of war with Britain over Oregon and with Mexico over Texas framed the political discourse of the campaign. Henry Clay hurt his candidacy by publishing extended and somewhat varied commentaries on the Texas question, and Polk helped his dark-horse bid by limiting his public utterances to a single statement on the tariff issue. Elected by less than a majority of the voters and the narrowest of popular pluralities, Polk nevertheless took the presidential oath with a determination to direct personally the administration of the general government and, the annexation of Texas already having been approved by the outgoing Congress, to accomplish four major goals: to settle the Oregon boundary dispute with Great Britain, to reduce tariffs, to establish an independent Treasury, and to purchase California. In the course of meeting his objectives, he would lead the nation into war with Mexico by defending Texas. Convinced that Mexico intended to move its army into Texas, Polk sent Zachary Taylor and his troops to the Rio Grande, and on April 24, 1846, a Mexican force of sixteen hundred crossed the river and captured an American patrol of sixty dragoons.

Within a week of learning that the Mexican and American armies had clashed, the British cabinet decided to settle the Oregon boundary dispute and sent instructions to its minister in Washington to agree to a partition at the forty-ninth parallel. Although militarily the United States stood unprepared for a land war in Mexico and a maritime struggle with the British navy, the president calculated correctly that Britain would not go to war over its commercial interests in Oregon, Texas, or Mexico. Polk's diplomatic successes in settling the Oregon question and his military strategy for winning the war in Mexico did not bring political consensus at home. Whigs blamed him for giving up half of Oregon and charged him with fighting an immoral war in Mexico.

Polk made every effort to resolve the Texas issue through diplomacy and offered to purchase Mexico's northern provinces, not because he believed in manifest destiny but because he knew that an agrarian republic like the United States could not close its borders to prevent emigration. Polk's expansion policies postponed the demise of the agrarian republic but did not resolve the problems of a Union bereft of compatible economic, religious, and racial interests. In four tumultuous years he accomplished his basic goals, and true to his word he declined all interest in a second term. Although blessed with a strong constitution, "Young Hickory" fell victim to cholera and died at his home in Nashville on June 15, 1849.

*Source: Wayne Cutler, University of Tennessee, <http://tennesseencyclopedia.net>*



James K. Polk, President of the United States / From life on stone by Ch. Fenderich 1845. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

several methods, according and joining to the Capitol, having just declared their votes, as well as having taken their seats in the galleries of the Senate, they were seated on the benches.

**President James Buchanan** sat in the magnificent chair of the Capitol, which was the only one of its kind which could be used here every thing that could be done to make it more magnificent, the building under review at the inauguration of the President, commencing with the ceremony of the laying of the cornerstone.

The ceremony of the laying of the cornerstone of the Capitol in the following order—  
 Chief Marshal and six.

**President Eliot** and six Procession, in an open carriage, preceded by the Chief Marshal.

**Justice of the Peace** and six.

**Members of the House of Representatives** and six.

**Members of the Senate** and six.

**Members of the Executive Council** and six.

**Members of the Judiciary** and six.

**Members of the Military and Naval Services** and six.

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INAUGURATION OF PRESIDENT POLE—APPROACH TO THE CAPITOL.

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INAUGURATION OF PRESIDENT POLE—THE GAIT.

Inauguration of the American President. Illustrated London News, v. 6, April 19, 1845, pp. 243-244.