

James K. Polk

Essential Question: As president, how did James K. Polk change the United States?

James K. Polk was born in Pineville N.C., on November 2, 1795. Polk's father Samuel was a successful farmer and surveyor. Seeking new opportunities, he moved his family to Tennessee in 1806. The family settled in the town of Columbia along the Duck River. Samuel was a successful land speculator and judge. Polk was a serious and sickly child. At the age of 16, he underwent a painful operation for urinary stones. After that his health improved somewhat and he was able to enter the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Polk excelled there and graduated first in his class in 1818.

Polk returned to Tennessee and began to study law under Felix Grundy. When Grundy was elected to the legislature, Polk took the post of clerk of the state senate. There he learned parliamentary procedure while also finishing his legal education. Polk was admitted to the Tennessee Bar in 1820 and began to practice law.

During this time, Polk met both his future wife Sarah Childress and his mentor Andrew Jackson. Sarah Childress, a wealthy and intelligent young woman, would prove to be a great asset to Polk's political career. Quiet and serious, Polk lacked the social skills of his contemporaries, Crockett and Houston. Sarah helped to make up for the deficit. With the advice and support of Jackson, Polk was elected to Congress in 1825.

Polk used his position in Congress to defend Jackson and to help Jackson win the election in 1828. With Jackson's support, Polk was elected Speaker of the House in 1835. In 1839, Polk was elected governor of Tennessee. He was very disappointed when he lost his bid for reelection in 1841. He lost again in 1843 leading most people to believe his political career was over. The issue of Texas annexation was the most important issue in 1844 and Jackson wanted to make sure that Texas joined the United States. Jackson backed Polk as the Democratic candidate for president in 1844. When the early favorite Martin Van Buren did not earn the nomination, supporters were able to sway opinion towards Polk. As a "dark horse" candidate Polk faced a difficult campaign against the well-known Henry Clay, but won in a very close election. A "dark horse" candidate is one who unexpectedly wins his party's nomination.

Polk believed that the nation's future lay in farming and continued success in farming meant gaining new lands in the west. His victory in the election was due in large part to his promise to annex Texas and control the Oregon country. As president, Polk intended to make good on those promises. In December 1845, he signed the resolution admitting Texas into the union. Polk entered into negotiations with Britain concerning the Oregon country. Polk pushed

the British to give up their claims and in 1846 his aggressive position was rewarded when the British agreed to set the boundary at the 49th parallel.

With the Oregon question settled, Polk could turn his attention to relations with Mexico. Though Mexico had accepted Texas independence, the border was still under dispute. Polk was also interested in bringing California into the United States. Polk ordered General Zachary Taylor to cross into territory between the Nueces River and Rio Grande claimed by Mexico. When shots were fired on April 25, 1846 it gave Polk the opening he needed to ask Congress to declare war.

The Mexican War was controversial in the United States because many people viewed it as a war to expand slavery. Public opposition did not concern Taylor who won a number of key battles. Polk became concerned that Taylor's success in battle would lead to a nomination for President in 1848, so he replaced him with Winfield Scott. Scott's victory at Mexico City brought an end to the war. In the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico ceded California, and 800,000 square miles of land that makes up the current states of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Nevada as well as parts of Colorado and Wyoming. The United States paid Mexico \$15 million for the land and promised full citizenship to Mexican citizens who choose to stay. Polk had achieved his goal of a United States that stretched to the Pacific. Polk left office after a single term and returned to Tennessee in March 1849. Suffering from overwork and poor health, Polk died just three months later on June 15, 1849.

Sources: Morgan, Robert. *Lions of the West*. Chapel Hill NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2011. Print.

"James K. Polk ." *New Perspectives on THE WEST*. PBS, 2001. Web. 28 June, 2014. <http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/i_r/polk.htm>

"History." *President James K. Polk Home and Museum*. James K. Polk Home and Museum. 2014. Web 28 June, 2014.

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Summarize the key events in James K. Polk's life using the graphic organizer below. Then complete the question at the bottom of the page.

1844 "Dark Horse" nomination

Oregon Country

Texas Annexation

Mexican War/ California

Overall, I think that James K. Polk's impact on the United States was mostly **positive/negative because _____**

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_____ , and

_____ .