

Fillmore: The Early Years

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Introduction

Robert J. Raybeck's biography on Millard Fillmore was published in 1959. The author had intended to write a history of the American Whig party but instead decided on a book about Fillmore and through his life give his readers a view of the Whigs. He admitted that he knew little about his main character, initially thinking that he was a "vain and pompous President." However, upon extensive research, Raybeck changed his view. He found Fillmore to be a man "who possessed an extraordinary strength of character", an "enviable tenacity of purpose" and an "admirable personality."

Previous studies on Fillmore had presented him as obscure, inept, or even a buffoon who somehow bumbled his way into the Presidency. His personality was dominated by his overbearing vanity and by his self serving ambition. Through his study and research, Raybeck realized the error in this thinking.

"True, he was not a clever politician or an inspiring orator, but **if promotion and preservation of the Nation are the criteria, then he was a statesman with only a handful of White House rivals.**" (Raybeck p. vii)

In 1871, at the request of the Buffalo Historical Society, Fillmore wrote an autobiography. The writings do not cover his political life but do give details about his early life. If this period of his life is studied, it may be possible to gain some insight into his adult character and personality.

Was he a “vain and pompous” man or did he truly possess “an extraordinary strength of character”?

Chapter 1: “My childhood was spent, as it were, in the forest” (Vol 2, p. 382)

In 1798, Nathaniel Fillmore, a farmer residing in Bennington, Vt., decided to try his luck in the Finger Lakes region of New York State. He built a log cabin, roughly 14 by 16 feet, in Cayuga County and the town of Locke. Into it he moved his family, which included his wife Phoebe Millard, his daughter Olive, his younger brother Calvin and his wife Jerusha. Nathaniel and Phoebe’s first son was born here on January 7, 1800. The future president humorously commented on the significance of his birth. “I cannot learn that my event was marked by any striking signs in the Heavens above or the earth beneath calculated to alarm the superstitious fears of the scattered inhabitants of that howling wilderness.” (Vol 1. P.)

And a howling wilderness it was! The nearest neighbor was miles away. A road ran in front of the cabin and led into a valley where four miles away existed the hamlet of “The Flats” or “The Owasco Flats”, now known as Moravia. (scarry p. 15) Fillmore later described his birthplace as “completely shut out from all the enterprises of civilization and advancement.” (Vol1 p. 4)

Fortunately for Fillmore, in 1802 his father lost the land due to a defective title. It was a “blessing in disguise as the township ... was one of the poorest in the (region) and far removed from any thoroughfare or central point of business”. (vol 1. P. 4)Nathaniel Fillmore had experienced so little success in working the shallow and rocky soil that being forced to move to another site was probably a welcome respite.

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The family moved ten miles away to a very sparsely settled region in the town of Niles, about a mile from Skaneateles Lake. It was here where Millard Fillmore recalled the earliest memories of his life. The land was “wholly uncultivated and covered with heavy timbers” such as hemlock, maples and chestnut trees. (scarry p.16) After building a small log cabin, the job of clearing the land began.

As any boy growing up in the wilderness did, he had a great passion for hunting and fishing. Interestingly, though, his father frowned upon this saying “that no man ever prospered who spent much of his time” in these activities. This parental displeasure did not stop the boy. Any chance he had, he would get away to hunt and fish on his own. Although not owning a gun,

he was able to borrow one from a neighbor. And when he was able to get to Skaneateles Lake, he took advantage of the opportunity to catch the lake fish. The lake, as it turned out, was one of young Fillmore's favorite places to visit. "It was indeed one of the clearest and most beautiful lakes which I have ever seen. The canoe seemed suspended in mid-air, and the fish could be seen at great depths." (vol 1 p. 4)

The wilderness, however, was a poor teacher for a young boy with ambitions and a great desire to learn. "My father's residence was not only in a new country, but remote from all the great thoroughfares of travel, and my life had been spent in obscurity. I knew nothing of the world, never having been absent from home for two successive days, nor formed an acquaintance of any beyond the few scattered neighbors of the vicinity." (vol 2.381-388)

Chapter 2: Early Education

Nathaniel and Phoebe Fillmore had nine children: six sons and three daughters. Millard was the second oldest and the first born son. The oldest, Olive, was born in 1797 and the youngest, Phoebe, was born in 1819. Almon, Darius and Phoebe died in their 20's while Olive, Millard, Cyrus, Calvin and Julia lived much longer lives extending between 68 and 87 years. (Scar p. 5-6)

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Farm life did not place an importance on education for the children. There were no schools unless a structure was improvised to provide lessons for a month or so. At the age of six or seven, Fillmore attended school for the first time. An old deserted log cabin in New Hope had been converted into a school house by adding some benches without the backs and a board to write on. Taught by a "woman of very limited education" herself, the few students present learned the alphabet and the basics of spelling and reading. (Vol 1 p. 4)

A few years later, at age ten, his education continued. The instructor, Amos Castle, taught the students basic writing and arithmetic skills "and drilled us most thoroughly in Webster's spelling-book." The young student proudly received a certificate showing that he had not misspelled a word from the book. However, he "did not learn the definition of a single one." (vol 1 p. 5)

Although obtaining the bare essentials of an education, Fillmore's main duties were the workings of the farm. Until the age of 15, he labored on his father's property where he learned "to plow, to hoe, to chop, to log and clear land, to mow, to reap, and, finally, to do all kinds of work" associated with cultivating and farming the soil. (Vol. 1 p. 5)

His father, however, was clearly frustrated in his attempts to earn a living, as he could supply only the barest of essentials for his family. "My father's misfortune in losing his land, and

the scarcely less misfortune of having a hard, clayey soil for cultivation, gave him a great distaste for farming; and he was, therefore, anxious that his sons should follow some other occupation." (vol 1 p 5) He could not afford or justify the means of giving his sons the education needed for a profession but he did find someone who could offer an apprenticeship to his eldest son.

Chapter 3: The Apprentice

By 1814, the War had for three years ravaged the New York State and Canadian border. A neighbor in New Hope, having been drafted for a three month service in the militia, offered the 14 year old Fillmore an opportunity to take his place as a substitute. The young man jumped at the opportunity to become a soldier. His father, upon hearing the news, did not think so highly of it. Instead, he spoke to his son and convinced him that maybe an apprenticeship in a trade would be a better choice for his life. (vol 1 p 6)

At this very same time, a former neighbor, Benjamin Hungerford, was in New Hope acquiring supplies for his carding and cloth dressing business. He inquired at Nathaniel's home as to the 14 year old becoming an apprentice in his trade. The young man was interested and they agreed upon a three month trial period. If they worked well together, then he could enter into the apprenticeship program.

The journey from New Hope covered about one hundred miles and due to all the supplies Hungerford bought, Fillmore had to walk the whole distance. It was quite an adventure and turning point in the young man's life as "up to this time I had never spent two days away from home." (vol 1 p.6)

Hungerford's business was located in the tiny hamlet of Sparta in Livingston County, which contained a gristmill, a post office and, of course, a tavern. His home and mill appeared "solitary and desolate as it appeared among the hills in an almost unbroken forest... It was in the town of East Sparta, and three miles northwest of the village of Dansville... on a small rapid mill-stream, emptying into the Canaseraga Creek, about a mile below." (vol. 2 p. 383)

Carding was accomplished through the use of either a wire toothed brush or a card wrapped around a cylinder. The rows of teeth broke up the clumps of animal fiber into individual strands. The mechanical cylinder could be hand driven or powered by animals, such as oxen.

William Scott, the foreman for Hungerford, later recalled his first impression of the newly arrived 14 year old apprentice. "He was dressed in a suit of homespun sheep's gray coat and trousers, wool hat, and stout cowhide boots... His light hair was long, his face was round and chubby, and his demeanor was that of a bright, intelligent, good natured lad, quite sedate, rather slow in his motions, with an air of thoughtfulness that gained my respect." (Scarry p. 19) Fillmore later claimed that it was the friendship and conversations with Scott that awakened in him the ambitions that drove him to self improvement and a better life. "In him I found a friend and also a congenial companion, so far as such a boy could be companion to a man of mature years." (vol. 2 p. 385)

However, the young apprentice was having some difficulties adjusting to his new life. Up to this time, he had spent his life eating very particular foods. "I was very fond of bread and milk, and usually ate it three times a day, regardless of what others ate." In Sparta, though, milk was considered a luxury. "I was compelled to eat boiled salt pork, which I detested, with, occasionally, pudding and milk, and buckwheat cakes, or starve." (vol. 1 p.6)

Getting used to a new diet was one of the issues facing Fillmore, but by far the most disappointing aspect of this new life was the job itself. "I had become anxious to learn the trade, and supposed that I should be at once put into the shop; instead of which I was set to chopping wood for a coal pit." Being not only the newest but also the youngest of the apprentices, he was given the mundane job of chopping wood for the business. In his 1871 memoir, he described an incident that took place:

I was the youngest apprentice, and soon found that I had to chop most of the wood, having very little opportunity to work in the shop; and as it seemed to me that I was made to enslave myself without any corresponding benefit, I became exceedingly sore under this servitude. One day when I had been chopping in the woods, I came into the shop just before dark, tired and dissatisfied; and Mr. Hungerford told me to take my ax and go up on the hill and cut some wood for the shop. I took up my ax, and said (perhaps not very respectfully) that I did not come there to learn to chop; and immediately left without waiting for a reply. I went on to the hill, mounted a log, and commenced chopping. Mr. Hungerford soon followed me up, and, coming near, asked me if I thought I was abused because I had to chop wood. I told him I did; that I came there for no such purpose, and could learn to chop at home; and that I was not disposed to submit to it. He said that I must obey his orders.

I said, "Yes, if they are right; otherwise I will not; and I have submitted to this injustice long enough."

He said, "I will chastise you for your disobedience"; and stepped towards me, as I stood upon the log, with my ax in my hand.

I was burning with indignation, and felt keenly the injustice and insult, and said to him, "You will not chastise me"; and, raising my ax, said, "If you approach me I will split you down."

He looked at me for a minute, and I looked at him; when he turned and walked off.

I am very glad that he did so; for I was in a frenzy of anger, and know not what I might have done. I had dwelt in silence and solitude upon what I deemed his injustice, until I had become morbidly sensitive; and his spark of insolent tyranny kindled the whole into a flame...

The next day he asked me if I wished to go home. I told him I was ready to go, or would stay the three months for which I came, if I could be employed in the shop. He said I might be, and so I remained until the time was up. (vol 1 p. 7-8)

Fillmore did stay for the three month period. A week after his 15th birthday – in mid January - he walked home. Commenting on this episode, he wrote:

I think that this injustice, which was no more than other apprentices have suffered and will suffer, had a marked effect upon my character. It made me feel for the weak and unprotected, and hate the insolent tyrant in every station of life. (ibid p.8)

Another notable event took place during his three month tenure in Sparta. New Year's Day, 1815, was the one holiday given to the employees. They celebrated the day at the home of a Mr. Duncan, who lived on the creek later known as Bradner's Creek. (vol 2 p. 385)

There I witnessed for the first time the rude sports in which people engage in a new country; such as wrestling, jumping, hopping, firing at turkeys and raffling for them, and drinking whiskey. I was a spectator of the scene; taking no part, except that I raffled once for the turkey that was perched up in one corner of the room, and won it. (vol 1 p. 8)

In one corner of the room, filled with the fumes of whiskey and the stench and smoke of tobacco, was a live turkey.

... and in the center a table surrounded by men who were greatly excited in raffling for the turkey. The game, as I recollect it, was this: The turkey was put up by the owner at a certain price – say four shillings, and then they put twelve cents into a hat and each shook them up and emptied them on the table three times, and he who turned the most heads in the three throws, won the turkey, but instead of taking it, he immediately put it up again at the same price, and the same process was gone over again, and this continued through the evening. I was urged to take a chance, and I did so once, and won the turkey. I put him up again, pocketed the price, and have never gambled a cent since. (vol 2 p. 385)

One final story illustrates the wildness of the Finger Lakes region at this point in time. In December or January, with two to three inches of snow on the ground, Fillmore was sent to Dansville to pick up supplies needed to combat illnesses present in the home. He walked what he considered to be a roundabout route to town. It was nearly sundown when he purchased the products and so he asked if there was not another, shorter, route that he could take to get back home.

(He) was told that there was an unfrequented path through the shrubby pine forest much nearer. I accordingly took it, and found the track of a single person, which I followed without difficulty; but just after dark, to my surprise, I came to the Canaseraga Creek, which was not frozen sufficiently to bear me, and there was no bridge. There had once been a wooden bridge, built on cobble horses for abutments on each bank, but it was all gone except the cobble horses and one string piece. Just then I heard the wolves howl, and presume they were on my track. I looked down into the dark waters of the creek and could see very little, but could hear the ice crack as though a rising flood was breaking it up. I looked at the solitary string piece across the dark abyss, covered with snow, and concluded I could not safely walk it. I could not turn back for I had not even a cane with which to fight the wolves. I felt that if I was once across that gulf I should be safe, and that there was but one mode of accomplishing it, and that was to climb up the cobble horse, sit down on the string piece and hitch myself across; and this I did, and arrived safely at home, thankful for my escape. (vol 2 p. 387)

Chapter 4: “Enforced Contentment”

The young man returned to the family farm and soon after, through his father’s help, obtained an apprenticeship yet again in the carding trade. Zaccheus Cheney and Alvan Kellogg had their business very near his father’s home, in the village of New Hope. He “was not indentured, but the verbal bargain was, that (he) was to serve during the season of wool-carding and cloth-dressing – which usually lasted from about the first of June to the middle of December.” (vol 1 p. 9) This verbal agreement was to cover the working seasons until Fillmore was twenty years old; a period of five years. Not only was Fillmore to learn the actual trade of carding and cloth-dressing, but he was also to serve Mr. Cheney in the role of bookkeeper. His pay would be \$55 per year except for the last year when he would receive more.

The rest of his time was to be spent in working for his father, when needed. Fillmore did indeed labor on the farm during the spring months of 1816 and 1817.

He also attended school during the winter months of those same years. But his opportunity to learn was very limited. “I had thus far had no access to books, beyond the school books which I had; as my father’s library consisted only of a Bible, hymn-book and almanac, and sometimes a weekly paper from Auburn.” (vol 1 p. 9)

I was well pleased with my situation, and all things went on smoothly and satisfactorily. The apparent impossibility of anything better... suppressed hope, and enforced contentment.” (vol 1p.9)

At this point, the young man's future looked set. He was fortunate to have a father who did not push the farming life on him but instead helped to get him an apprenticeship in a field where a decent life could unfold. Having such a limited education and living the frontier life of early America left little opportunity for grand dreams or even hope for much beyond what was now offered him. Thus Fillmore's comment on being well pleased with his situation in life was a realistic assessment. "Enforced contentment" was absolutely necessary in order for him to accept this role and to live out a reasonably satisfying life.

But Fillmore's journey in life did take a dramatic change and it happened during this time period of the five year verbal agreement. He entered it as a 15 year old with no illusions to a better life than this. Five years later, his life had taken such a remarkable turn for the better that the mythical American dream was his for the taking.

So what happened during this time that changed his life?

What events and opportunities came his way to set him on the road to the Presidency?

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