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MILLARD FILLMORE IN BUFFALO

by John T. Horton

BEFORE the City Hall of Buffalo stand the statutes of two Buffalonians who became President of the United States. After being President, one of these, Grover Cleveland, never lived in Buffalo again; the other, Millard Fillmore, lived there continuously to his death on March 8, 1874. Just seventy-four years of age, he died of a stroke in his big, rambling, brownstone house which stood on Niagara square at Delaware Avenue where the Statler Hilton Hotel now stands. Diagonally across from that site is the statue by Bryant Baker erected by the community Fillmore served for a lifetime.

It is an impressive statue. The man it represents was an impressive man. He was impressive in person, in character, and in accomplishment.

In life Millard Fillmore rose somewhat above middle height and was inclined to be portly. His cheeks were ruddy, his eyes twinkling. His rather massive head was crowned with white hair. Queen Victoria, to whom he was presented in the course of a trip to Europe in 1855-56, is said to have called him the handsomest man she had ever seen. Whether he was or not, he was certainly a man of distinguished appearance who looked as an ex-President of the United States ought to have looked.

In office from July 10, 1850, to March 4, 1853, Fillmore had acted as a President of the United States ought to have acted. At a time of crisis he moved with vigor and resolution. He did much to save the Union by signing into law the series of measures known as The Great Compromise of 1850. He enforced that Compromise even in the parts of the country where it was most hated. He compelled both Massachusetts and South Carolina to obey it. He thwarted a rebellion in South Carolina by prompt and energetic military action. When the Governor demanded to know why he was concentrating troops there, Fillmore curtly refused an explanation. He said he would acknowledge to the Governor of South Carolina no responsibility whatsoever for his acts as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of the United States.

As Commander in Chief Fillmore influenced the course of world history. In 1852 he sent Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry with four warships to open Japan to foreign commerce. The Japanese were not very happy about this at the time. Since then, however, they have erected a monument commemorating Perry's visit to Japan.

Even if he had never become a national figure, Millard Fillmore deserves to be honored by Buffalo. He was one of the most public-spirited citizens that this city has ever had. No native son, he was born of pioneer parents in a log cabin in Cayuga County, New York, on January 7, 1800.

Portrait of Millard Fillmore
As a young man
—Crayon Drawing by Thomas Sully.

When, as a youth of about twenty, he came to live in Erie County, he chose not Buffalo but East Aurora as his new home. It was there that he married his first wife, Abigail Powers. It was there that, from 1823 to 1830, he practiced as a lawyer. In 1830 he formed a partnership with Joseph Clary, a well-established lawyer in Buffalo, and moved to that town. From then onward he never tired of working to advance its interests.

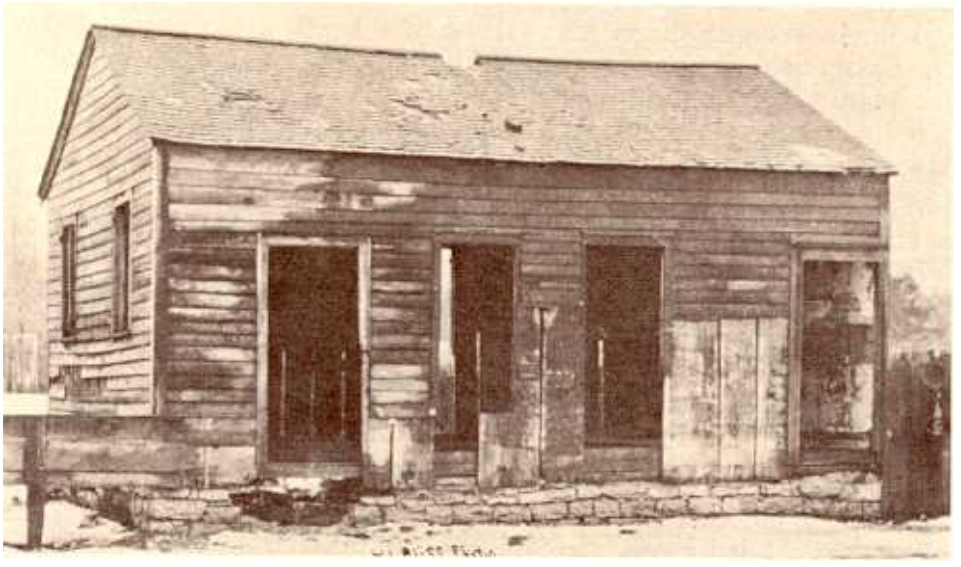
Fillmore was already a rising young man when he moved to Buffalo. Two years before that, he had been a delegate to the Erie County convention of the National Republican Party. As a member of the county committee he had endorsed the candidacy of John Quincy Adams for the office of President. The same year he had been elected a member of the New York Assembly. In 1829 he had been re-elected; he was re-elected once more in 1830. He used to his own advantage the anti-masonic feelings that, in the late 1820's, rose high in Western New York. This uproar was caused by the alleged murder of William Morgan by the Masons to prevent him from revealing the secrets of their order. But if anti-masonry helped young Fillmore to his start as a politician, other and more enduring interests account for his continuation in that career.

At this time the common man was beginning to assert himself in politics. Fillmore understood this. He strengthened his position with the ordinary voters by drafting and defending a bill to abolish imprisonment for debt. The bill became law in 1831. In this same year a citizens' committee was formed to work out the terms of a charter for the incorporation of Buffalo as a city. Fillmore was chosen a member of this committee even though he had been a resident only about a year.

He was already known and respected as one to be reckoned with in local politics.

Among Fillmore's fellow-committeemen were the most prominent citizens of Buffalo. There was Bela Coe, the rich proprietor of extensive stagelines that supplemented the Erie Canal in carrying people to and from the outside world. There was Judge Ebenezer Walden. Charles Townsend was another. Most prominent of all was Samuel Wilkeson who, ten years before, had improved Buffalo's harbor. It was he, also, who had urged Governor DeWitt Clinton and the Canal Commissioners to select Buffalo rather than Black Rock as the western terminus of the Erie Canal.

Since the Canal had opened in 1825 Buffalo had been expanding rapidly. In 1830 it had a population of less than 9,000; in the fall of 1831 it had increased to almost 10,000. Four years later its population exceeded 15,000. Clearly such a fast-growing place needed the powers of a city government. These it received when the recommendations of the citizens' committee, embodied in a charter, were approved by the Governor on April 20, 1832. This legislation gave Buffalo a municipal government consisting of a Mayor and Common Council. The Council was a board of ten aldermen, two elected from each of the five wards and presided over by the Mayor. The Council appointed him as it did the city's attorney, surveyor, street commissioner, clerk, and constables. It had the power to pass laws to protect the city from fire, disease, vice,



School House in Buffalo where Fillmore Taught.

crime, and fraudulent dealing. It could also raise taxes ($8,000 a year) for the maintenance of a night watch, the opening and repair of streets and bridges, and for the salaries of officials.

This was a modest beginning for the municipal government, but it was a good beginning. As one of the committee of eighteen citizens that sponsored it by drafting the terms of the charter, Millard Fillmore may justly be considered a founding father of the city.

It was not in municipal politics, however, that Fillmore was to play his most significant part. In 1832, the same year in which the State gave Buffalo its city charter, he was elected to the 23rd Congress. He was re-elected in 1836, 1838, and in 1840. In the 27th Congress he became the Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee and one of the most powerful members of the House of Representatives. The majority of his fellow citizens in Buffalo and Erie County warmly approved his course as a Congressman. Had he consented, they would have gladly elected him for a fifth time.

Millard Fillmore had given them good reason for satisfaction. War threatened with Great Britain in 1837. Certain Canadians were in revolt against the government party in Canada. These rebels, holding out on Navy Island in the Niagara River were supplied with arms by a group of gunrunners from Buffalo. It was clearly an unneutral act, resented by the government of Canada. Fillmore urged both moderation and preparedness. He was successful in getting money spent for strengthening Buffalo and the frontier.

Being a Whig, Fillmore pleased the merchants of the city by urging the Congress to enlarge the Buffalo harbor. He pleased the manufacturers by supporting a protective tariff, a tax on goods coming in from other countries. It was in this respect that he especially distinguished himself as Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee of the 26th Congress.

Had Whig Presidents sat in the White House during Fillmore's Congressional career, his measures would have met with greater success than they did. It was mainly a time of Democratic Presidents who saw good neither in protective tariffs nor in the improvement of navigation on the Great Lakes. In 1842, Millard Fillmore carried the 27th Congress with him strongly on the tariff issue. President Tyler, a Democrat who opposed this principle, was forced to sign Fillmore's highly protectionist bill into law.

Although often in Washington between 1832 and 1842, Millard Fillmore maintained his office as a lawyer in Buffalo. He and his friend Nathan K. Hall formed a partnership in 1834. Two years later they took in Solomon G. Haven, thus founding the famous firm of Fillmore, Hall and Haven. As might be expected, the firm was given to prac-

Henry Clay addressing U. S. Senate
Vice-President Fillmore presiding.

ticing politics as well as law. The senior partner Fillmore was Whig candidate for governor in 1844 but was defeated by the Democrat, Silas Wright. In 1847 he was elected Comptroller of New York State. He resigned that office to become General Zachary Taylor's vice-presidential running mate in the victorious Whig campaign of 1848.

Millard Fillmore's way to the Presidency opened with President Taylor's death in July 1850. When President Fillmore reorganized the cabinet, he appointed Hall Postmaster General. Later Fillmore made him United States Judge for the Northern District of New York. Hall had meanwhile served in the New York Assembly and in Congress. Solomon G. Haven also went to Congress. The firm therefore was as famous for the political honors that came its way as it was for its legal practice. Its reputation was of the highest. It was a firm in which more than one distinguished Buffalo lawyer served his apprenticeship for the bar.

The busy life of lawyer and politician by no means monopolized Fillmore's interests. The church as well as the state engaged his attention. The building now occupied by The Abstract and Title Company at the corner of Eagle and Franklin Streets was erected in 1833 as the First Unitarian Church. Fillmore was for many years a member of this church. On more than one occasion he had distinguished guests with him in his pew. John Quincy Adams sat there one Sunday in 1843. On

Abigail Powers Fillmore, first wife of Millard Fillmore.

a still more memorable Sunday in 1861 Abraham Lincoln sat there. Among the local men of note who were Fillmore's fellow parishioners in those days were Noah P. Sprague, William P. Letchworth, and Oliver G. Steele. All these men were religious in a way that prompted them to promote various activities for the betterment of the community.

Steele was the founder of the free, common school system of Buffalo, a system which he was developing in the years 1838 and 1839. This was the first system in the State of New York supported by municipal taxation and controlled by the municipal government. As superintendent, Steele was also instrumental in establishing in 1852 the first public high school in the city. It stood on Court street and was affectionately known by the name of Old Central to several generations of students. This school eventually became The Hutchinson-Central Technical High School. In 1870 when the school building was enlarged a son of Noah P. Sprague presented a marble bust of Oliver G. Steele to the principal. Among those who, along with Sprague, had had this bust sculptured was ex-President Fillmore. This was more fitting perhaps than most people realized. In the 1830's Fillmore had been one of Steel's most staunch and energetic supporters in his efforts to establish the Buffalo school system.

Young Men's Association Building, Main and Eagle Sts.—1865-1883

Education remained one of Fillmore's dominant interests throughout his life. As a boy the only kind of formal schooling that he had ever had was in the three R's in a log schoolhouse in the backwoods of central New York. As a youth he taught such a school. The young backwoodsmen who attended it were so rough and rebellious that the schoolmaster's best qualification was not his learning but his strength. Fillmore literally ruled the rowdies with a rod of iron — the stove poker. He seems not to have beaten them with that implement, but he did keep them in order, even though he probably never taught them much. He himself, had never studied much until a wealthy squire in Cayuga county gave him the opportunity to read law in his office. Even then, as Fillmore himself admits, he understood at first but little of what he read, and that little would not have been of much use in his schoolroom.

By hard work, however, Fillmore made himself literate both as a lawyer and a man. If he never won the direct and simple elegance of Lincoln's style, he yet knew how to express himself with force and clarity as occasion might require. He grew interested in books. He accumulated a library. While President, he created the first permanent library in the Executive Mansion. Though never learned, he respected learning. Quite apart from common school education, he did his utmost to promote culture in the city of his choice.

The center of the intellectual life of Buffalo for many years was the Young Men's Association. This was founded in 1836. At first, in rented rooms in lower Main Street, the Association collected documents and books, scientific specimens, and objects of art. It brought such men as

Horace Greeley to deliver lectures. The Association supported these activities by means of the dues of its members of whom there were about four hundred. Of these, some seventy were life members. It was they, chiefly, who provided the ways and means. Their list contained the names of most of the city's leading men. Among them were not only Millard Fillmore himself but also his law partners, Solomon G. Haven and Nathan K. Hall.

In due course the Young Men's Association gave rise to other institutions of first importance in the city's cultural life. One of these is the Buffalo Public Library now incorporated into the library system of Erie County. Another is the Fine Arts Academy, organized in 1861 and housed since 1905 in the Albright Art Gallery. The Museum in Humboldt Park has housed since 1928 the Society of the Natural Sciences, organized in the same year as the Fine Arts Academy. In all these institutions Fillmore was interested. As an intelligent man of the nineteenth century he understood the significance of science in the scheme of things. He even urged that more attention be paid to science in the schools. Naturally he favored the formation of the Society of the Natural Sciences, as well as that of the Academy of Fine Arts. He was a patron of these arts. He sat for his portrait for both Thomas Le Clear and for Lars Sellstedt, the most distinguished Buffalo artists in his time. But his first concern was the Buffalo Historical Society. This was also an offshoot of the Young Men's Association. Housed since 1901 in the New York State Building of the Pan-American Exposition, the Historical Society was founded by Fillmore and his associates in 1862. He, himself, served as its first president until 1867.

Another institution to which he devoted much energy and time was the Grovesnor Library. This library opened its doors to the public in 1870. It then occupied rooms above the Western Savings Bank of Buf-

Buffalo Historical Society in Western Savings Bank of Buffalo Building About 1878.

falo at the northeast corner of what is now called Lafayette Square. A New York merchant, Seth Grosvenor, who had once lived in Buffalo, left a gift of $40,000 to the city in 1857 for a reference library. He stated that the city should cover the cost of the annual current expenses of the institution. These terms being met, the grant was paid in 1865. Fillmore was the president of the Grosvenor's first Board of Trustees, and he remained a member of that board from 1870 until his death. He thus helped to lay a firm foundation for what has since become one of the great reference libraries in the United States.

Older than the Grosvenor Library by almost 25 years is the University of Buffalo. It received its charter following a bill introduced in the legislature by Fillmore's old partner, Assemblyman Nathan K. Hall. The bill became law on the historic date of May 11, 1846. On this same date President Polk's message to the Congress declared that a state of war existed between Mexico and the United States. Fillmore, like other Whigs, disapproved that war. However, he was too busy with establishing the University to brood over it. He was one of the commissioners named to organize the institution. At this time, $20,000 of the authorized capital of $100,000 had been promised and $2,000 paid. As the commissioners were all prominent businessmen, they succeeded in raising the necessary sums. In August they met at the Spaulding Exchange with the other stockholders. Here, they elected the Council which was to be the governing body of the University. Fillmore was elected to the Council, and the Council then appointed him Chancellor. The next step was to appoint a faculty and to find quarters for it to teach in.

Chancellor Fillmore and the Council appointed a faculty of excellent quality. Though the charter authorized them to establish a University in the full sense of the term, they began in a conservative way by appointing only a faculty of medicine. This consisted at first of seven members. They were all competent doctors, and three of them became famous in their time. These were James Platt White, professor of obstetrics; Frank Hastings Hamilton, professor of surgery; and Austin Flint, professor of medicine. In the early 1850's, John C. Dalton joined the faculty. A student of Claude Bernard, the great French physiologist, Dalton was also destined to be famous. He depended more on dissection in the laboratory than on text books in his teaching. Along with White, Hamilton, and Flint, he gave the new school one of the best reputations of any in the land.

The faculty had, at first, only the clinical facilities provided by the Hospital of the Sisters of Charity. In a few years, however, the Buffalo General Hospital provided additional facilities. Chancellor Fillmore, along with certain other members of the University, helped found this

University of Buffalo Medical College
Main at Virginia Sts., 1849.

hospital. It was Fillmore himself who, on June 24, 1858, delivered the address dedicating the new institution.

Meanwhile, the professors had begun their instruction in February 1847. According to Chancellor Fillmore, they started with 72 students. The first graduating class, 18 in all, received their M.D. degrees that same June. This would indicate that, in the beginning, the course was not especially difficult. The first place of instruction was the Baptist Church on Washington Street, but this proved inadequate. The Council bought a site at the corner of Main and Virginia Streets. The architect, Calvin Otis, was hired to plan a new building. It was a plain, rectangular, brownstone structure of two and one-half stories with little spires at the four corners.

Here the University did its work as long as Fillmore was Chancellor, and he was Chancellor as long as he lived. He presided at commencements and gave out degrees. He sometimes visited the professors in their classes. He occasionally gave little talks to the students. Above all, he lent prestige to the University, and he steadily urged that it receive public support. It would have been appropriate if Fillmore, as Chancellor, had received an honorary degree or two. He might have had such a degree from Oxford University. The Chancellor of Oxford invited him to receive one when he was in England, but he politely declined the invitation. He made no pretense to learning. He expressed doubt about the suitability of his getting a degree, the diploma of which he could not have read, since it would have been in Latin. Yet the diplomas that he himself handed out to graduating M.D.'s were in Latin. Perhaps the real reason for his not going to Oxford was his dread of the custom of the Oxford men of jesting about those who received such honors. As Fillmore put it, the young men would probably laugh loudly at his name and cry out, "Fillmore? Fillmore? Who is Fillmore?" This shows that the first Chancellor of the University of Buffalo was a somewhat over-sensitive person. It also shows that he was one of considerable modesty.

He had no particular reason to be modest. He was the first citizen of a city which, by 1870, had a population of almost 120,000. Again and again he was called upon to be its spokesman and to do the honors on

important civic occasions. To the wealth he had gained as a lawyer and as a public man for many years he added a good deal more when he married his second wife. She was a rich widow of Albany, a gentlewoman named Caroline Carmichael McIntosh. In 1858 he sold his house on Franklin Street. He moved into the big, castle-like mansion on Niagara Square where he was to live in great dignity the rest of his life. His circle of friends was large, and it contained the most prominent men in the city. These, and others if they could qualify socially, he gathered around him to form the Buffalo Club in 1867, a gentlemen's club of great exclusiveness. It was a club of wealthy lawyers, of prominent judges and other high officials, of bankers, and of captains of industry and commerce. These were the men whose interests Fillmore, as a Whig statesman, tended to identify with the best interests of the country. They praised him for that; they respected him for himself; and they elected him the club's first president. With his stately presence and his friendly but courtly manners, he gave the club a tone of distinction. The various mansions on Delaware Avenue which the club occupied during Fillmore's lifetime gave it surroundings of elegance and style.

Famous and fortunate though he was, Millard Fillmore nevertheless had his griefs. The wife of his youth, Abigail, died in Washington just after he left the White House. One of his two children, a full-grown and attractive daughter, died of the cholera soon afterward. Moreover, like

Millard Fillmore Residence Niagara Square

any public man, Fillmore had to endure his share of abuse and name-calling. Sadly enough, some of the most violent of this abuse came from his fellow citizens in Buffalo. Some people thought him cold and pompous.

Many thoroughly disapproved of his willingness to compromise with the South on slavery in order to keep it in the Union. Certain members of the Unitarian Church in Buffalo rebuked Dr. Hosmer, the minister, because he would not drive Fillmore from his pew. Fillmore did not like the newly created Republican party and darkly prophesied that if it ever elected a President, the South would secede. To draw the public attention to other issues, in 1856 he became the presidential candidate of another new party called the Native American, sometimes known as the Know-Nothings. He was badly defeated. When Lincoln was elected, his prophesy of disunion came true. He was not prepared to foresee much good in the new administration, and he made enemies by being steadily critical of it.

Nevertheless throughout that time Millard Fillmore proved himself honorable and patriotic. When Lincoln stopped over in Buffalo in 1861 on his way to his inauguration, Fillmore and his wife opened their home to him and his family. The ex-President and the President-elect appeared together on the balcony of the American Hotel. A great crowd of people had gathered to hear the President-elect say what he proposed to do in the face of disunion. As Lincoln made no definite statement of policy in his speech, Fillmore's misgivings about him probably deepened. But when the Civil War began with firing on Fort Sumter in April, Fillmore supported the war effort with vigor and spirit. He loved the Union. Had he been young at the time, no doubt he would have enlisted.

As it was, he organized and commanded a home guard unit of middle-aged, substantial men, known as the Union Continentals. He drilled them, marched them, and brought them to proficiency for at least the purpose of parade. Their chief use was to escort the

Political Cartoon
from Young America Magazine 1856

Charcoal Sketch of Millard Fillmore dated Buffalo, 1857 — Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.

departing regiments of young soldiers to the train and give them a patriotic send-off. This, of course, was only a gallant gesture. Fillmore backed it up with solid service to the Union cause. He prodded the Common Council into more effective action for the enlistment of recruits by offering rewards. In response to the President's call for volunteers, the Union Defense Committee was formed to raise funds for the support of the volunteers' families. Fillmore was one of the most generous contributors.

Late in 1861, war with Great Britain threatened once again. A Union captain had stopped the British merchant ship, the *Trent,* and had removed two Confederate messengers from her. Fillmore became the chairman of a civic committee formed to persuade both the State and Federal authorities to arm the Niagara frontier. He pleaded his case to the Governor and to the Secretary of War. Fillmore urged not only adequate fortification by land, but also a conversion of a part of Great Lakes shipping into vessels of war. He proposed that some hundreds of lakes sailors be trained as naval fighters. He dwelt on the increasing amount of commerce entering Buffalo by canal and lakes. Fillmore argued that if that commerce should be disturbed by military attack, the result would be not a local, but a national calamity. Grain passing through Buffalo was to become the chief national export when the shipping of cotton was stopped by the blockade. Looking ahead, Fillmore showed a firm understanding of the economic aspect of warfare.

Fortunately, however, his plans did not need to be carried out. The danger of war with Britain over the *Trent* was averted by successful diplomacy.

Perhaps Fillmore's best service to the Union cause was the steadfast way in which he upheld it by public speech. He expressed loyalty and patriotism in ringing language again and again, even though, as the war dragged on, he came to think it wise to seek another President. Meanwhile he had helped rouse the war spirit of the community to a high pitch. Speaking at a Union rally on April 16, 1861, at the Metropolitan Theatre, he was brief but to the point:

"We have reached," he said, "a crisis in the history of this country when no man has a right to stand neutral. Civil War has been inaugurated and we must meet it. Our government calls for aid, and we must give it. Our constitution is in danger, and we must defend it. It is no time to inquire by whose fault or folly this state of things has been produced. The Ship of State is in the breakers; and if she sinks we must go down with her. We have a common lot and we must meet a common fate."

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Editor: Thelma M. Moore.