

The Early Life of Andrew Jackson

- Was Andrew Jackson an out of control delinquent who became successful through luck and slave labor or a “rags to riches” story of an impoverished young man who used his talent and daring to gain success?

When new groups of white men gained the right to vote in the 1820s, they helped elect the first self-made man president, Andrew Jackson. As a result, Jackson was known as the “people’s president.” Many of these new voters were westerners, farmers, and small business owners who believed the American government was controlled by wealthy, corrupt individuals. Jackson promised to throw the rich out and return the government to the people.

Jackson’s life story helped to convince voters that he was a champion of the common man. He was born on the South Carolina frontier. His father died before he was born, leaving Jackson, his mother and two brothers in poverty. He did not do well in school and often picked fights with his neighbors. However, the onset of the American Revolution began to change his life. At 13, he joined the local militia and the British captured him and his brother Robert. During his captivity, a British officer ordered Jackson to polish his boots. When Jackson refused, claiming he was a prisoner of war, the officer sliced his cheek and hand with his sword. This experience showed both Jackson’s reckless behavior and his courage in standing up to the British.

Upon his release from prison, Jackson went home to South Carolina with his mother and brother. Both boys were sick and Jackson’s brother died of his illness. Earlier in the Revolution, Jackson’s other brother was killed. Within 6 months, Jackson’s mother also died of a disease called cholera. As a teenager, Jackson was orphaned and alone.

Jackson the Lawyer and Farmer

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Despite his early, tragic life, Jackson decided to educate himself and become a lawyer in Salisbury, North Carolina. He gained a reputation as a brawling, drunken young man. As one friend put it Jackson was, “the most roaring, rollicking . . . horse racing, card playing, mischievous fellow” in town. It was shocking he learned to become a lawyer!

Eventually, Jackson did establish a law practice and moved to Nashville, Tennessee. As the city grew, so did Jackson’s legal career and he earned enough money to buy land and become a planter. He named his new plantation the Hermitage and it grew to 1,000 acres. The farm relied entirely on enslaved African American men, women, and children to produce the cash crop, cotton. Jackson’s wealth accumulated on the backs of slaves. At the time of his death, he owned around 150 slaves.

Jackson’s temper continued to get him in trouble, even as a professional lawyer. After being insulted by a slave trader named John Dickenson, he challenged him to a duel. Jackson was shot in the chest before he fired at Dickenson, killing him. The bullet that hit Jackson was an inch from his heart and could not be removed by doctors. He lived with it for the rest of his life.

Around the same time, Jackson married Rachel Donaldson. Never to be without controversy, Jackson’s marriage also caused him problems. She was married when he met her, and some accused the couple of adultery and bigamy after they wed. (See movie notes!)

Jackson's Military Career

- Were Jackson's actions as a military general and rise in politics heroic or villainous?

Earning "Old Hickory"

Jackson became a military hero during the War of 1812. Jackson had run into some financial difficulties and decided to join the military during the war. However, his reputation for reckless behavior almost cost him a job. Eventually President James Madison decided to appoint him Major General of the Tennessee militia. He was ordered to go to New Orleans with his U.S. Volunteers. Soon, the military decided the threat to New Orleans had ended, and the War Department ordered his troops dismissed and returned to Tennessee without pay and with no transportation home. Outraged, Jackson led his troops home and earned the nickname Old Hickory because his men compared him to that tough tree.

The Red Stick Wars

Later in the War of 1812, Jackson was ordered to put down an uprising of Creek Indians in the west. This became known as the Red Stick Wars. At the time, he faced the threat of desertion from his soldiers due to supply problems and their enlistment. Twice, Jackson prevented mass desertions of his troops by threatening them at gunpoint. Old Hickory to some soldiers, Jackson could be a brute to others under his command.

Finally, in January 1814, Jackson had 5,000 men to attack the Creek Nation. Greatly outnumbering the Indians, Jackson's army defeated them at Horseshoe Bend, ending the Creek War in March of 1814. In the later Treaty of Fort Jackson, the Creek Nation gave up half its land to the United States. The people of Tennessee greeted Jackson as a hero for ending the threat from Indians, and securing the state. The decimated Creek Nation called him Black Heart.

Savior of New Orleans

Jackson set his role as military hero with his defense of New Orleans at the end of the War of 1812. With the war going badly, this lopsided victory over the British caused celebration and pride in Americans. Outnumbered by the British two to one, Jackson handed the attackers a crushing defeat. This victory caused mass celebrations around the United States and hard-fought respect for the young nation. Jackson's string of military success during the War of 1812 made him a national hero, admired above all others except George Washington.

The Start of Jackson's Political Career

Following a successful military career, Jackson entered politics in Florida and Tennessee. After he invaded Florida, President James Monroe appointed Jackson its territorial governor. Many considered Jackson's actions in Florida an illegal invasion and accused him of being a military tyrant in his rule over the territory. Tiring of the criticism and Florida's climate, he and Rachel decided to move back to Tennessee. Despite a desire to retire from political life, Jackson helped to write the Tennessee state constitution and became its first member of the House of Representatives. Later, he served in the Senate. He also became a circuit judge, owned several businesses (like a whiskey distillery), and maintained his law practice. He continued to run his plantation and to purchase more slaves.

- Jackson's rise from crushing poverty to prosperity became a compelling life story. Many common people looked to him as a role model and a president who would stand up for them against the rich and well-born. On the other hand, Jackson's life story is littered with reckless behavior, questionable military actions, and slave ownership. Was he heroic or villainous in his climb to success on the road to the presidency?

The Presidency of Andrew Jackson

- Was Andrew Jackson's presidency an empowerment of the common man and a return of the American government to people or was it a series of bad decisions that hurt American democracy?

Inauguration

Jackson's inauguration was a mass celebration in Washington D.C. As a role model and hero to the common man, many average Americans travelled to the capital to welcome the "People's President."

The Spoils System and the Kitchen Cabinet

After Jackson took office, he fired a large number of government workers. Some called this the "spoils system." This was an old term that referred to those who win battles get to take "spoils" or riches from their defeated enemies. Some thought Jackson fired mostly Republicans and political enemies and replaced them with his friends. Others pointed out that Jackson only fired around 10% of the government workforce, and many of them deserved to be fired for doing a bad job. Whatever the case may be, Jackson's rivals accused him of favoritism and dishonesty at the beginning of his presidency.

Jackson hired and fired cabinet members on a regular basis. Due to a scandal involving the wife of his Secretary of War two years into office, Jackson asked his entire cabinet to resign. After this, he often did not feel comfortable with the men who ran the executive departments, and routinely fired cabinet members. For example, he went through four secretaries of state and five secretaries of the treasury. As a result, Jackson came to rely on a group of trusted friends to help him run the government. This shadow cabinet became known as the "kitchen cabinet." This caused suspicion in Jackson's opponents because his kitchen cabinet was made up of unelected and unapproved individuals who were entrusted with helping to run the American government. Some believed this was undemocratic and showed a lack of judgement in Jackson, but others thought Jackson had a right to rely on people he trusted.

The Nullification Crisis and States' Rights

Jackson faced a crisis early in his presidency that threatened to split up the United States. Congress passed tariffs to encourage the creation of factories and jobs in America. The northern states favored the tariffs because it would help their economy. The south, on the other hand, opposed the so called "Tariff of Abominations" because the region believed high tariffs caused prices to rise and could disrupt the trade of cotton. Also, the south claimed the tariffs were unconstitutional because they favored one region of the country over another.

Jackson tried to solve this problem by signing a law that lowered the tariffs. But the new tariffs were still not low enough for South Carolina. It believed in the idea of states' rights. This would allow South Carolina to reject, or nullify, the tariff laws. The state threatened to secede, or leave, the United States if the national government forced it to pay the tariffs. This was known as nullification.

Jackson responded with anger. He convinced Congress to pass the Force Bill, which allowed him to use the army to collect the tariffs from South Carolina if needed. Fortunately, Congress passed a new law that further lowered the tariffs to help the South. With the compromise and Jackson's threats, South Carolina backed down.

Some think Jackson was right to enforce the nation's laws and stop America from breaking apart over tariffs. Others think Jackson went too far in threatening a state with the military and using intimidation against his own countrymen.

Jackson Battles the National Bank

President Jackson tried to prove his allegiance to the common man when he vetoed the National Bank (also known as the Bank of the United States). This bank was partially owned by the government and was the only bank that could take deposits of money for the American government. Jackson thought the bank favored the rich, especially in the east. Often the National Bank refused to give loans to farmers and workers, many of whom lived in the west. Also, it hurt many state banks by depriving them of cash.

Congress had to approve the bank's charter (permission to be a bank). Congress decided to renew the charter in 1832, hoping Jackson would veto it and lose the vote of businessman. If this happened, he could lose the presidential election and his second term. Jackson decided to veto the charter bill anyway, saying the Bank only served to make the rich much richer. Common people agreed and re-elected him.

Along with vetoing the charter for the National Bank, Jackson decided to starve it to death. He ordered his Secretary of the Treasury to remove all of the national government's deposits from the Bank and put the money in state banks. No money meant no National Bank.

Critics of Jackson accused him of putting money into state banks run by his supporters. Many businessmen who relied on the Bank for loans begged him to keep the National Bank open. Jackson responded by saying the bank was corrupt, helped only the wealthy, and vetoing it was a victory for the common person and economic justice.

Jackson's Indian Policy

- Did Jackson's Indian policy lead to genocide?

“Black Heart”: one of the nicknames Native Americans gave to Andrew Jackson. To many Indians, Jackson was the ultimate villain. On the other hand, Americans, especially common men, thought Jackson's Indian policies benefited them by opening the west to safe and protected settlement.

Jackson's interactions with Native Americans started before his presidency. He was involved with Indian wars during the War of 1812, and to remove Indians to the west. The battles were brutal and left many tribes weakened.

Before Jackson's presidency, earlier administrations made treaties with Native Americans to set up boundaries between settlers and Indian land. In exchange for giving up their territory, Native Americans were guaranteed food, supplies, and money. However, the treaties were often broken and by the time Jackson became president only 125,000 Indians still lived east of the Mississippi River. Many had died of diseases or warfare, while others moved west after selling their land for little money.

Most of the remaining eastern tribes lived in the south. Many belonged to five tribes: The Creek, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole. They became known as the “Five Civilized Tribes” because they attempted to adopt white ways to remain on their homelands.

The Indian land was in valuable cotton growing areas. Many wealthy planters and poor whites looked greedily at the Indian's homelands. After gold was discovered on some of their land, the urge to push Indians west grew.

President Jackson and Indian Removal

As president, Jackson dealt with Indians harshly. He signed the Indian Removal Act in 1830. This law allowed the president to move Indians off of their land in the east to western territories. The government was supposed to negotiate fairly with Indians and did not allow the president to force Native Americans to give up their land. However, Jackson often made Indians leave lands they had lived on for generations. One example is the Choctaw nation. They were the first to be forced west by the U.S. Army under threat of invasion. They left on foot, some chained, and without food, supplies, or help from the government. Thousands died on the journey. This 1831 march was the first time Native Americans called this forced removal west “a trail of tears and death.”

Eventually, the Supreme Court ruled that the Indians had a right to their land, and states could not remove them (*Worcester v. Georgia*). In defiance of the Court, Jackson continued to order tribes to move. Those that resisted were again met with military force. One tribe, the Sac and Fox, fought removal for two years led by a chief named Black Hawk. In 1832, the resistance ended with the slaughter of most of his warriors.

Many whites protested the removal of Indians. Nevertheless, Native Americans continued to be violently pushed off their land in Jackson's presidency. In 1836, thousands

of Creeks who refused to leave Alabama were rounded up and marched west in handcuffs. Others were arrested and thrown in concentration camps.

Following the example set by Jackson and his signing of the Indian Removal Act, President Van Buren forced the removal of the Cherokee Indians in Georgia. The American army dragged 17,000 Cherokee from their homes and moved them west to Oklahoma. Along the way, 4,000 died of cold, hunger, and disease on what would become known as the Trail of Tears.

Jackson believed he had “solved” the Indian problem by moving them west. In reality, thousands of Native Americans were thrown into camps, forcibly moved from their homes, suffered terribly on the march west, and died by the thousands as a result of Indian removal started by Jackson’s presidency.

Additional Information:

<https://www.history.com/topics/native-american-history/trail-of-tears>