WEEKLY READING # 31
ARTICLE 1:
NAMING YOUR PRESIDENTS

Now, I’m sure you can name the first seven presidents. You know them all. Yes, you do.

Of course you know number one: the man who was said to be “first in war,
first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen.”

The second president had a wife named Abigail. They were New Englanders, from Massachusetts. (Presidents one, three, four, and five were all from Virginia.) Clue: the second president was an important man at the Continental Congress in 1776. He helped persuade the best writer there to write a declaration telling the British to go home.

The man who wrote that famous declaration was president number three. He was the most versatile of the Founding Fathers. That means he could do many different things, and do them all well. He wrote the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and founded the University of Virginia.

President four was a good friend of president three. He was called the “Father of the Constitution.” He wrote the Bill of Rights. His wife’s name was Dolley.

President number five was the last Virginia president to wear knee pants and buckles on his shoes. An important policy—called a doctrine—bears his name. That doctrine told Europe’s nations to keep their hands off the two American continents.

President number six was the son of president two. They were the first father and son to be presidents. Number six was serious, dedicated, and very smart.

Number seven was a general who won some big battles. He was a man of the people, but he didn’t seem to think that Native Americans or slaves were Americans.

If you can’t name the first seven presidents I’m not going to name them for you—not here, anyway. (But if you really don’t remember them, they will find their names in earlier chapters of this book.)

Those first seven were outstanding. Now come the next eight, who were not. (Most people think that the president after that—number 16—was the best of all.) I’m going to list those next eight presidents and just tell you a few things about each of them.

Some of the things you will read are serious and some are silly, but all are true. I would like to tell you more—I really should tell you more—but there is so much to write about in history that choices have to be made. If you want to know more about the presidents to come, you can read their biographies. Some were good presidents; none was a great president; and the last two weren’t much good at all.

President number 8
Martin Van Buren (1837–1841)
Van Buren was the first president who was born a citizen of the United States. The other presidents weren’t born Americans? No, they weren’t. They were all subjects of the British king when they were born.

Martin Van Buren was a hardworking president who believed political parties were necessary and important. He helped turn the old Democratic-Republicans into the modern Democratic Party. He was a good friend of Andrew Jackson, but he was never as popular as the general.

Van Buren was born in Kinderhook, New York. He was called Old Kinderhook, or O.K., by his supporters. The term okay (no one is quite certain where it came from) became popular in the election of 1840; it was used by Van Buren’s supporters to describe him, and then by others to describe anyone who is—okay!

President number 9
William Henry Harrison (1841)
Harrison, who defeated the Prophet at Tippecanoe, was an aristocrat and the son of a Virginia governor. William Henry went to college, studied medicine, and became an army officer.

But aristocrats were out of favor in 19th-century America. So Harrison’s campaign managers made him sound like an old log-cabin boy who came up the hard way. (He didn’t.) They made his opponent—Van Buren—sound like the aristocrat. (He wasn’t.) They even accused Van Buren of being so fancy he put a bathtub in the White House! (He didn’t.)

Well, it worked. Harrison was elected president. He rode a white horse to his inauguration, but refused to put on a coat or hat—even though the weather was bitterly cold.

Then Old Tippecanoe (that was his nickname), gave the longest inaugural address in history. He spoke for nearly two hours and caught a cold. It developed into pneumonia, and that was the end of William Henry Harrison. He was the first president to die in office. He was chief executive for only 31 days.
President number 10

John Tyler (1841–1845)

When William Henry Harrison ran for the presidency, his election campaign slogan was “Tippecanoe and Tyler too.” John Tyler, the vice-presidential candidate, was Tyler too. He was the first vice president to take office because of the death of a president. Tyler, another Virginian, played the violin, loved to dance, spoke softly and had good manners. He had more children than any other president: 14. He was said to have been playing marbles with one of his sons when a messenger came with word that Harrison had died and he was president. Tyler and Harrison were elected as members of the new Whig party. (The Whigs were those who didn’t like Andrew Jackson. Many of them were former Federalists. Henry Clay and Daniel Webster were two Whig leaders.) But Tyler fought with the leaders of the party, and after he had been in office five months they said he was no longer a Whig.

Florida was named a state while Tyler was president.

President number 11

James Knox Polk (1845–1849)

President Polk, who was from Tennessee, didn’t approve of dancing and didn’t like music, except for hymns. He thought having fun meant wasting time, and he didn’t like to waste time. No refreshments were served at White House receptions when he was president. He said, “I am the hardest working man in the country.” His hard work paid off: the Oregon and California territories became part of the United States while Polk was president, and Iowa, Texas, and Wisconsin became states. He fought a war with Mexico. Polk kept a diary (which you can read). He wouldn’t run for a second term.

President number 12

Zachary Taylor (1849–1850)

Taylor was a brave, patriotic general who was called “Old Rough and Ready” by his troops. He was born in Virginia, but moved to Louisiana. He owned slaves, but he didn’t want slavery to spread into the western territories. When some Southerners talked of secession (leaving the Union), he said he would send troops south and stop them.

Taylor had no political experience before he became president. He had never even voted in a presidential election. When the Whig party leaders nominated him, they sent a letter collect to tell him the news. The receiver pays for a collect letter. Taylor wouldn’t pay. It was a few weeks later that he learned of his selection.

Taylor was an intelligent man who knew how to make decisions. He might have been a good president, but he died in office after serving only 16 months.

President number 13

Millard Fillmore (1850–1853)

Millard Fillmore was a New Yorker and the second vice president to take over after a president died. When he was a boy, he was indentured to a cloth maker. Fillmore installed the first kitchen stove in the White House. The cook couldn’t figure out how to work the stove.

President Fillmore went to the U.S. Patent Office, read the patent for the kitchen stove, and came back and taught the cook how to use it.

Jackson’s enemies said that the president trampled on the Constitution and did whatever he wanted. They called him King Andrew I.
There is no second article this week.

President number 14
Franklin Pierce (1853–1857)

Pierce was a New Hampshire man who graduated from Bowdoin College in Maine. It took the Democratic party 49 rounds of voting to choose him at their presidential convention. He was a “dark horse” candidate. All the likely candidates got defeated, until finally Pierce—who wasn’t well known—was left. Although he was a Northerner, he did not object to slavery, and he disliked the abolitionists.

Two months before Franklin Pierce was inaugurated, his 11-year-old son, Bennie, was killed in a train accident. The Pierces were sad all the rest of their lives. Pierce was not a strong president.

President number 15
James Buchanan (1857–1861)

James Buchanan was the only bachelor president. His niece stayed at the White House and hosted his parties. His inauguration was the first to be photographed. Buchanan came from Pennsylvania.

In his time the arguments about slavery grew fierce. He didn’t do anything to try to make things better. In fact, he didn’t do much of anything as president. When Congress passed a bill that would have created some colleges, Buchanan vetoed the bill. He said the country didn’t need more education. There were already too many educated people, said Buchanan.

President Harry S. Truman (who lived in another century, but knew his history) called him “an old fool.”

Things were a mess when James Buchanan stepped down from the presidency. That made the job difficult for the next man in the office: Abraham Lincoln.

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Presidential Facts

- **The managers** of Harrison’s presidential campaign flooded the country with log-cabin handkerchiefs, log-cabin sunbonnets, log-cabin hatboxes, log-cabin buttons, log-cabin teacups. There was Tippecanoe Tobacco and Tippecanoe Shaving Soap. And there were lively dances like the Harrison Hoe-down and the Tippecanoe Quick Step.

- **People who** didn’t like President Tyler referred to him rudely as “His Accidency,” because he got to be president as a result of William Henry Harrison’s death.

- **James K. Polk** refused to run for the presidency a second time because he had ruined his health from overwork while in office. He died of exhaustion only three months after his term was over.

- **Zachary Taylor** was called “Old Rough and Ready” because he was plain and unassuming—in fact downright messy. He almost never wore a proper uniform. “He wears an old oil cap,” said one man, “a dusty green coat, a frightful pair of trousers and on horseback he looks like a toad.”

- **The first** bathtub in the White House was installed by Mrs. Millard Fillmore. (“What an extravagance,” said some people.)

- **Millard** Fillmore sent Commodore Matthew Perry to Japan. Perry took a message from the president to the shogun; trade began between the two nations.

- **When Franklin Pierce** was running for president, his Whig opponents made fun of his military record by distributing a miniature book—an inch high by half an inch wide—entitled *The Military Services of General Pierce.*