

Famous New Yorker: Martin Van Buren

Martin Van Buren was the first New Yorker to become President of the United States. In doing so, he helped shape American politics into its modern form.

The Van Buren family had been in America for 150 years when Martin was born in Kinderhook, Columbia County, on December 5, 1782. At his father's tavern, Martin listened to local gossip and became fascinated by politics.

Despite leaving school at age thirteen, Martin wanted to study law. He became a clerk for Francis Sylvester and did chores around the office while he studied. Sylvester encouraged him to become a Federalist, but Martin shared his father's loyalty to Thomas Jefferson's "Republicans." He moved to New York City to work for a Republican lawyer.

Van Buren started a Kinderhook law practice in 1803. In 1812 he won a state Senate seat. In Albany, he worked to protect debtors from imprisonment and organized opposition to Governor DeWitt Clinton. As a leader of the "Albany Regency," he became Attorney General in 1815 and promoted a new state constitution that increased voting rights and limited the governor's power.

In 1821, when the state legislature elected Van Buren to the U. S. Senate, the country was virtually a one-party Republican state, but rival leaders were splitting the Republicans apart. Senator Van Buren believed that a political party should be based on consistent principles and disciplined organization, not on elite personalities. He also hoped that a party based on Jeffersonian principles of limited government and vigilance against dangerous concentrations of wealth could keep the country united despite growing conflicts of interest between Northerners and Southern slaveholders.

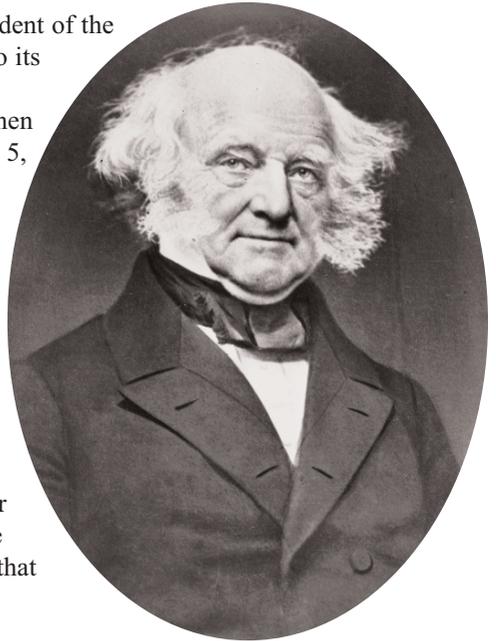
In 1824, four Republicans ran for President, but none received a majority. Andrew Jackson received the most votes, but the House of Representatives elected John Quincy Adams. Van Buren befriended Jackson, who shared many of his views, and helped convince Adams's opponents to unite in support of Jackson in 1828. Elected Governor himself, Van Buren soon left Albany to become Jackson's Secretary of State.

Jackson's Cabinet was split between Van Buren's allies and friends of Vice President John C. Calhoun. When Jackson named Van Buren ambassador to England, Calhoun's Senate allies rejected him. Jackson's supporters responded by nominating Van Buren in Calhoun's place at the Democratic Party's first national convention in 1832.

In 1836, the Democrats nominated Van Buren to succeed Jackson. While the opposition Whig Party nominated three candidates for different parts of the country, Democratic unity made Van Buren the nation's eighth President.

When the country suffered an economic depression in 1837, the Whigs blamed Van Buren and portrayed him, ironically, as an aristocratic elitist. By imitating many of his tactics, the Whigs defeated Van Buren in the 1840 election.

When pro-slavery Southern Democrats thwarted his comeback in 1844, Martin Van Buren realized that party loyalty alone might not hold the country together. In 1848, he ran unsuccessfully as a third-party candidate, but the Democratic Party outlived Van Buren, who died on July 24, 1862, and survived the Civil War as a strong unifying force in American history.



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Kinderhook is in the scenic Hudson River Valley about 20 miles southeast of Albany.

For more information about Martin Van Buren go to www.whitehouse.gov/history presidents/mb8.html. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA - Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2006.