

JAMES K. POLK THE MAN AND THE FREEMASON

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Who was James K. Polk and why should we talk about him in Lodge? The short answer is that he was a Brother Mason with a first class resumé: an attorney, a member of the Tennessee State Legislature and a seven term Congressman – who for two of those terms was Speaker of the House. He was Governor of Tennessee, and President of the United States.

The Masonic part of his resume is more sparse. In June 1820, at the age of 25, Polk was initiated in Columbia Lodge No. 31, in Columbia, Tennessee, where he was passed and raised. He was exalted a Royal Arch Mason in LaFayette Chapter No. 4 in Columbia in 1825. He was a friend and protégée of Brother Andrew Jackson, who also served as President of the United States and, in fact was Grand Master of Masons in Tennessee. Also, Brother and President Polk assisted in the cornerstone laying of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. on May 1, 1847. Despite his somewhat limited Masonic activity, Masonic influences and sensibilities showed through in his character and demeanor, in both his personal and professional life.

Brother Polk was scrupulously honest in his personal affairs. He was loyal and hard working, with the ability to stay focused even under great stress. He lived during a very noisy and vituperative period in American politics, but he always managed to keep his cool. In his personal demeanor he was somewhat reserved and somewhat of an introvert. In the Congress, Polk received personal attacks with calm dignity, parrying them with an acute command of parliamentary procedure.

In the Presidency, while a demanding taskmaster, he was considerate to his cabinet members considering them as his "official family." He managed to assemble an experienced cabinet and then to take full advantage of their advice. He held cabinet meetings twice a week, opened all subjects to discussion, and encouraged members to call frequently at the White House to present departmental problems.

In the domestic arena, his administration lowered the prevailing high tariff and established a moderate policy that remained in effect until the Civil War. It also reestablished the independent Treasury under which the government was custodian over its own funds instead of scattering them among private banks. This restored some order to a fiscal system still disorganized from Andrew Jackson's Bank War of the 1830s.

In addition, during his term of office the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis was founded, the Smithsonian Institution was created, ground was broken for the Washington Monument, and the first postage stamps in the United States were issued.

Even more notable was the role he played in foreign policy. He was a key figure in Manifest Destiny and an extremely effective leader during the Mexican-American War. Except for Thomas Jefferson, Brother Polk increased the size of the United States more than any other president, gaining 1.2 million square miles after the Mexican-American War, and the Oregon Territory, consisting of more than 200,000 square miles, by treaty with England. The territory acquired as a result of the Mexican Cession became the states of California, Nevada, Utah, most of Arizona, and parts of New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming. The Oregon territory was later formed into the states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, and parts of the states of Montana and Wyoming.

President Polk's legacy and reputation has been subject to reconsideration over the years. Polk was nominated for the presidency during a contentious convention in which he emerged as a compromise candidate. In order to preserve unity amongst the various factions he promised that, if elected, he would serve only one term. However, many observers have come to consider Brother Polk to be the best one-term president we have had.

Early on, Polk was largely ignored and there was significantly more historical interest in some of his contemporaries such as Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, and Daniel Webster. The appearance in 1922 of a major biography by Eugene Irving McCormac established Polk's reputation, and by the mid twentieth-century Polk was being recognized as the major link in the chain of executive dominance between Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln. In the early 1960s a poll of historians ranked Polk eighth in importance among presidents.

John Seigenthaler and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. concluded in their presidential biography of James K. Polk that:

“Polk left office with no iconic image, no host of hero-worshippers, and no hordes of admirers sated with his charisma. If his administration approached “greatness” – and most of the writers cited above agree that it did – it was on the basis of performance alone.”

Brother Polk left the presidency in 1849, returned home to Tennessee and died four months later. As the renowned historian Arthur Schlesinger put it, Presidential greatness is measured by accomplishment, and Polk did great things.

That is a powerful epitaph, and frankly, what more could any Master Mason wish as **his** epitaph?