

Abigail Fillmore

Lead: Well-read and cultured, Abigail Fillmore maintained a well-tuned political sense in an otherwise lackluster administration.

Intro: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: When Abigail Power's preacher father died in 1799, her mother migrated to Cayuga County, then on the New York frontier. Mrs. Powers took responsibility for the education of the children and so well did she do her job that by the time she was nineteen Abigail was teaching

in a country school near Sempronius, New York. In the winter of 1818, she looked up from her desk into the bright, inquiring eyes of a big farm boy who had appeared in her classroom with little notice. The eighteen-year-old was ambitious to become a lawyer and Abigail responded to his enthusiasm. His name was Milliard Fillmore and after an eight-year courtship, much of the time spent apart as he was reading for the bar, they began a twenty-seven year marriage.

The Fillmores moved to Buffalo in 1830 and there he prospered as an attorney and began his political ascent. Abigail raised two children and began to learn French and to study the piano,

but also became an acute observer of the world in which her husband was coming into prominence. When Fillmore was elected to Congress in the 1840s they went to Washington together and, when Zachary Taylor died in office, moved into the White House.

As First Lady, Abigail established an extensive library and music room on the second floor of the executive mansion where she entertained small groups of friends in the comfortable surroundings. She was a sharp observer of politics and as her husband drifted into compromise with Aouthern slavery interests, in acts such as the Fugitive Slave Law, she warned him that such a course would

be his political ruin. She was right and he lost the Presidency to Franklin Pierce. After attending the inaugural, Abigail checked into the Willard Hotel complaining of a severe chill. She died weeks later, probably of pneumonia. Perhaps in part because he was denied her canny counsel, Millard Fillmore slipped further into well-deserved political obscurity as the losing candidate of the Know-nothing Party in 1856.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

**Boller, Paul F., Jr. *Presidential Wives*. New York, NY:
Oxford University Press, 1966.**

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