



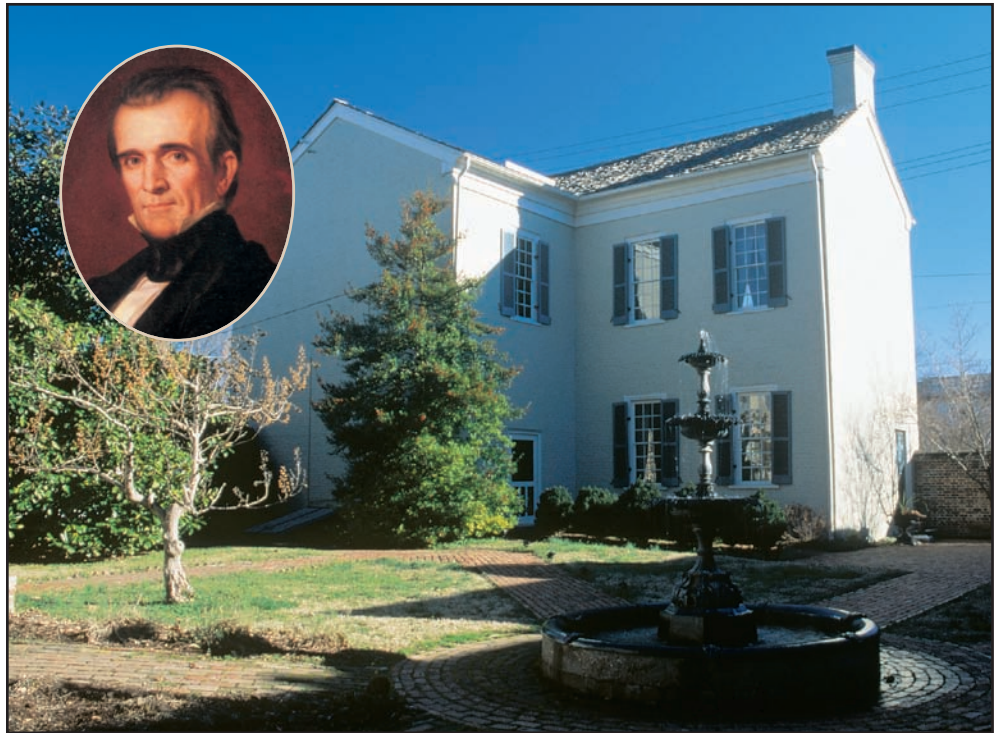
# Polk's legacy remains, but his Nashville mansion long gone

**J**ames K. Polk accomplished much during his four-year term as America's 11th president. He acquired more than 1 million square miles of land for the United States. He lowered the tariff on goods that were imported into the U.S. He oversaw the process under which the first U.S. postage stamp was issued. The U.S. government formed a naval academy.

In fact, historians today consider Polk to have been the last "strong" American president before the Civil War. President Polk was unsuccessful, however, in leaving a permanent monument to his life.

Polk is one of three Tennesseans who became president (along with Andrew Jackson and Andrew Johnson). But, like the other two, Polk wasn't actually born in the Volunteer State. Polk was born in a log cabin near the present-day site of Charlotte, N.C.. He was the first of 10 children born to Samuel Polk, who made his living as a land surveyor. When James was 10 years old, Samuel Polk migrated to Middle Tennessee, settling near present-day Columbia.

Samuel Polk was successful in Maury County; at a time when land was being subdivided for the first time, there was plenty of work for a surveyor. Samuel Polk sent his son, James, to the Uni-



**Above, the Polk Ancestral Home, residence of the parents of former President James K. Polk, still stands in Columbia. He lived with his parents at their home while he practiced law. Below, Polk Place in Nashville was torn down by a developer. President and Mrs. Polk are now buried on the State Capitol grounds.**

versity of North Carolina, from where he graduated at the top of his class. Back in Tennessee, James Polk became apprenticed to prominent Nashville attorney Felix Grundy. Grundy introduced Polk to some of the most important people in Nashville, including Andrew Jackson.

By 1820, young James K. Polk was ready to practice law but not ready to live alone. He moved back home with his parents, who by this time had a prominent residence two blocks from the Maury County Courthouse in Columbia. Today, this house is still standing; it is known as the Polk Ancestral Home and is open to the public. Polk lived in this house with his parents and many of his brothers and sisters, although it is believed that he traveled frequently as part of his job at this time to nearby county seats such as Lawrenceburg, Murfreesboro and Shelbyville.

In those days (long before television, radio and the Internet), court proceedings were popular entertainment; many people went to see them and became familiar with the lawyers on both sides. Young, intelligent, good-looking James K. Polk made a name for himself, and in 1823 he ran for the Tennessee State House and defeated the incumbent.



At that time, Murfreesboro was the capital of Tennessee. And although we aren't certain about how the two originally met, James Polk courted and married Sarah Childress of Murfreesboro while he served in the legislature there. Only a couple of years later, in 1825, Polk successfully ran for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Polk would remain a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 14 years — the last four as the Speaker of the House. As a legislator, Polk was generally supportive of Jacksonian Democracy, which meant he was opposed to the central bank, preferred agricultural interests to industrial interests, favored Indian removal and supported westward expansion. (These positions earned him the nickname “Young Hickory,” in reverence to Jackson’s status as “Old Hickory.”)

Polk left Congress in 1839 and successfully ran for governor of Tennessee. However, he lost the governor’s races in 1841 and 1843 as the Democratic Party lost ground in Tennessee to the Whig Party.

Then came one of the most memorable presidential elections of all time. At the Democratic National Convention in 1844, Polk was nominated for president on the 9th ballot, becoming the first “dark horse” candidate to be nominated by a major political party in the U.S. That fall, Polk successfully ran against Whig Henry Clay with a campaign slogan “54-40 or fight!” in reference to an ongoing border dispute with Canada.

President Polk had a very active four-year term. Through diplomatic efforts, he acquired the land from Great Britain that now comprises all of the states of Washington, Oregon and Idaho and parts of Montana and Wyoming. After his attempts to acquire California through negotiation with Mexico failed, the U.S. ended up at war with its southern neighbor. It was a lopsided and short war, and when it was over, Mexico ceded the modern-day states of California, Nevada, Utah and Arizona and parts of the states of New Mexico, Colorado and Wyoming.

Polk chose not to run for re-election and, at 53, was the youngest former president in American history. He looked forward to retiring at Polk Place, a home in the heart of Nashville



**The Polk Ancestral Home, at left and below, is open to the public. Visitors can tour the home where the parents of former President James K. Polk lived in Columbia.**

that he and his wife had acquired years earlier from his former mentor, Grundy.

But it was not to be. On June 15, 1849 — only 103 days after leaving office — Polk died of cholera during an epidemic in Nashville. At first his body was buried in a mass grave for cholera victims in Nashville’s City

Cemetery, but it was later moved to a grave in the front yard of Polk Place.

Sarah Childress Polk was devastated and wore black (to show that she was in mourning) for the rest of her life. But she lived on and remained one of Nashville’s most highly respected citizens for the next 42 years. Polk Place and Mrs. Polk were revered by people from every political persuasion. During the Civil War, Polk Place was considered neutral ground by both the Confederate and Union armies. In spite of the fact that she had nephews fighting on the Confederate side, Union Gens. Don Carlos Buell and Ulysses S. Grant frequently paid their respects to the former first lady. Mrs. Polk didn’t venture out much, other than attending weekly church services at the First Presbyterian Church three blocks away (where a pew still bears her name).

Mrs. Polk died in 1891. What followed was a long legal dispute centered on James K. Polk’s will, after which the descendants of President and Mrs. Polk sold Polk Place. The state of Tennessee nearly acquired Polk Place and made it the governor’s mansion (at the time, the governor of Tennessee stayed in a hotel room). But that did not occur. Instead, the land ended up in the hands of a developer who tore down the Polk Place mansion and had the graves of President and Mrs. Polk moved to the grounds of the Tennessee State Capitol.



In other words, the Polk Place mansion survived the Civil War, only to be torn down so that an apartment building could be built on the site. Not a great moment for Nashville history.

All of this makes President James K. Polk, one of the most successful presidents in American history, the only president whose body has been dug up and moved twice. Today, however, the spot in which he and Mrs. Polk are buried is one of the most peaceful in downtown Nashville. If you walk around to the north-east side of the state Capitol, you will see the grave. It’s a good place to sit and contemplate the president who deserved more respect. ☺

## Tennessee History for Kids

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