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(Sad) Bachelor President

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(Sad) Bachelor President

Has there ever been a president who was not married?

Only one man never married before, during, or after his time in the White House: our 15th president, James Buchanan, was America's only bachelor to reside at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.



Apparently not by choice: it turns out that Buchanan was as unlucky in love as he was in luck when later he was president. He came close to marrying in his late twenties. During the summer of 1819, at the age of 28, he became engaged to Anne Coleman, who lived in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and was the daughter of the richest man in Pennsylvania, Robert Coleman. Contemporary accounts say that she was extremely winsome. But by the fall there was a deal-breaking lovers' quarrel. It is conjectured that Anne was unhappy for three reasons: (1) she thought that he put his career before her; (2) she grew suspicious that James was marrying her only for her money; and (3) his underlying sexual orientation may have been toward other men.^[1]

We will probably never know exactly what caused the break-up, as Buchanan did something rather curious. Years after the engagement, he placed under lock-and-key documents that he claimed would explain why the couple broke up. But when he died and the sealed materials were found, there was a note accompanying them stipulating that the materials be destroyed unexamined; Buchanan's executors complied, so we will probably never know the particulars of the break-up.

After Anne broke off the engagement, she went to stay with relatives in Philadelphia to recover from her emotional wounds. There the 23-year-old's health deteriorated precipitously and she died suddenly on December 9, 1819. Some believe she suffered from a terminal case of "hysterical convulsions" (epilepsy); others, that she committed suicide. Whatever the cause of death, her father would forever hold James responsible for the loss of his daughter; he even prevented James from attending the funeral or walking in procession behind the coffin.

James took Anne's death hard. He wrote: "I have lost the only earthly object of my affections, without whom life now presents to me a dreary blank. My prospects are all cut off, and I feel that my happiness will be buried with her in the grave."^[2]

In later years, Buchanan tried to cultivate the impression that he would never marry again, as a sign of devotion to Anne. But in fact in 1833 and again in 1856 he tried to woo a mate. This last apparent attempt occurred when he was running for president, and he seriously considered engaging Dolley Madison's nineteen-year-old niece, Anna Payne. But that relationship never ripened into full romance.^[3]

In 1856, Buchanan was elected the nation's fifteenth president and went to the White House having never married. He asked his orphaned niece, Harriet Lane, whom he had reared, to serve as the official hostess of the White House.

Historian Jean Baker puts Buchanan's bachelorhood in broader context: "In the end James Buchanan never married and so remains the only bachelor among American presidents. Certainly bachelorhood has always been an exceptional and potentially harmful status for any public man in any generation. Before the Civil War only three of every one hundred American men stayed single. Buchanan's celibacy (there was never creditable gossip about his having a sexual relationship with any woman) shaped his personality. His life was never modulated by the need to make compromising adjustments in his domestic affairs, nor did he benefit from the intimacy, affection, and relaxation that a marriage and family might have afforded. An often lonely James Buchanan came to depend on his male friends, and this reliance had a dramatic impact on American history in the winter of 1860 [just before the Civil War]."^[4]

(Question from Todd P. of Big Rapids, MI)

^[1] Jean H. Baker, *James Buchanan* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004), p. 20.

^[2] George Ticknor Curtis, *Life of James Buchanan: Fifteenth President of the United States* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1883), vol. 2, pp. 664ff; quoted in *The Complete Book of U.S. Presidents: From George Washington to George Bush*, 3rd ed. (New York: Wing Books, 1991), pp. 213, 223.

^[3] Baker, *Life*, p. 21.

^[4] Baker, *Life*, p. 22.