A hush had fallen over Nashville. Tennessee’s most prominent citizen, former President James K. Polk, at the age of 53 was dying at his new home, “Polk Place,” a few steps from the state’s capitol building. It had been a little more than three months since he left the White House. He was most likely succumbing to cholera: an epidemic had a death grip on the South in the spring of 1849. In Polk’s case, resistance to the disease was lessened due to exhaustion.¹ During the past four years in Washington, the often ill but always driven chief executive usually began his labors at dawn and did not stop until midnight.² It was stunning how much he aged in the presidency.³

Polk’s wife and mother, both devout Presbyterians, pleaded with him to be baptized.⁴ As an infant, his christening was aborted at the altar, when his loving but irascible father, Samuel Polk, had gotten into a religious argument with the minister, who then refused to perform the ceremony.⁵

Although raised a Presbyterian, President Polk had never joined the church. When the First Lady was away, he would attend Methodist services.⁶ Thus, at his request, a Methodist minister was hurriedly summoned to administer the sacrament.⁷ On June 15, 1849, he died. His last words were: “I love you, Sarah, for all eternity, I love you.”⁸

Polk’s Early Years
James Knox Polk’s life began on Nov. 2, 1795, in a log cabin on Little Sugar Creek in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. The oldest of 10 children, he was 11 when, his family moved to Tennessee’s Duck River Valley in 1806.⁹
His father was soon well-off from land and commercial investments. Hence, in 1813, Samuel could send his son, who had completed basic schooling in the local common school in 1810 and was unhappy working in a store, to Zion Church Academy and later to Bradley Academy in Murfreesboro. Polk’s studies were interrupted when, at the age of 16 he was taken to a frontier physician in Kentucky for surgery to remove gallstones. The operation, described as “a hellish half hour of sheer torture,” was performed without anesthesia or antisepsis, with only liquor to deaden the pain. His health recovered, and “Jim,” convinced his father to let him pursue higher education at the University of North Carolina.

Polk did so well at his entrance exams that he was admitted in 1816 as a second-semester sophomore. Active in the debate club, he advocated the expansion of American territory. He never missed a lecture, attended devotional services at sunrise and sunset and graduated first in his class in 1818, but was unable to return to Tennessee for months because of illness and exhaustion.

Tennessee Lawyer
Polk went to Nashville to study law in the office of Tennessee’s greatest criminal attorney, Felix Grundy (who would later serve as U.S. attorney general). Grundy not only offered a topnotch legal education, he also opened the door to the world of politics. Andrew Jackson, a frequent office visitor, had long been a friend of Polk’s father since their childhood in Mecklenburg County, and he too took great interest in the young law clerk.

Grundy, then a member of the General Assembly, secured his apprentice’s election as clerk of the state senate in 1819, a post paying a “princely” $6 a day that allowed him to master parliamentary procedure. Polk furthermore met Sarah Childress in 1819 (they would marry in 1824). When admitted to the bar in June of 1820, Polk informed his family they should call him “James.”

Polk’s proud father had a one-room building built in Columbia to house his son’s law office, gave him $140 to buy books, and became his first client. He was retained to defend Samuel against the charge of “public fighting.” Polk got his father released from jail with a fine of one dollar and costs. He also did much title work for his father, and future governor Sam Houston brought him collection cases. Houston’s only criticism was that the teetotaling Polk was “a victim of the use of water as a beverage.” Initially, collections were his mainstay. One client instructed Polk to negotiate with his debtors for “whisky money.”

Polk’s fees soon increased from 1 percent of recovery to 2.5 percent.

Grundy and Polk’s many relations sent him much business and his practice became “lucrative.” Polk appeared most often in the courts in Columbia, Pulaski, Lawrenceburg, Shelbyville and Fayetteville. He was quickly recognized as “one of the most industrious and skillful attorneys” in the region. When pitted against Grundy, his mentor told the judge, “I believe, may’st please the court, that I have been preparing a club here with which my own head is to be broken.”

Polk was of a generation of Tennessee lawyers. He was well-educated, well-spoken and well-dressed. Also considered a courteous, ethical and striking figure, he became a leading title attorney at a time when massive litigation ensued because of the opening of West Tennessee because of the 1818 treaty with the Chickasaw. Disputes were legion because of conflicting grants issued by North Carolina and Tennessee.

In 1827, he co-counseled with Missouri U.S. Senator Thomas Hart Benton in a land dispute that went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Opposing counsel were Tennessee’s two U.S. Senators, Hugh Lawson White and John Eaton. Polk was victorious with a decision authored by Chief Justice John Marshall. Yet Polk only viewed the law as a road to politics.

The General Tennessee Assembly
Polk loved politics and had few other interests. He had the makings of a successful politician. He was dignified, erect, purposeful and a fine public speaker and debater. Moreover, he was blessed with the ability to never forget a name or face.

In 1823, at the age of 28, Polk won election to the Tennessee House after visiting every Maury County farm. He also followed the custom of giving spirits to voters, purchasing “twenty-three gallons of cider, brandy, and whiskey in one election district alone.” Once in the legislature, Polk “championed the debtor class of farmers” in opposition to Grundy, the advocate of creditor interests. This effort thrust Polk to the forefront of legislators and delighted Jackson. He drew more attention when he won enactment of a measure outlawing dueling.

Congressman and Speaker of the House
Andrew Jackson lost the bitter presidential election of 1824, despite winning the popular vote. He angrily blamed his defeat on a “corrupt bargain” between his opponent, John Quincy Adams, and Speaker of the House Henry Clay.

In this poisonous political atmosphere, Polk took a seat in the U.S. House in 1825, after defeating one-term incumbent James T. Sandford. He represented Tennessee’s 6th Congressional District composed of Maury, continued on page 20
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Bedford, Lincoln and Giles counties. In his first speech in Congress, Polk called for a constitutional amendment to replace the Electoral College with popular election of presidents. He also opposed President Adams, who said Polk had "no wit, no literature … no elegance of language … no pathos, no felicitous impromptus, fluency, and labor." Congressmen Polk became known for his interest in foreign affairs and finances. Because of his duties in Washington, his law practice suffered and he increasingly turned cases over to fellow lawyers back in Tennessee. When Jackson won the presidency in 1828, Polk became the administration’s spokesman in the House, where his debating skills were second to none. His enemies accused him of being the president’s “lackey,” and his friends bestowed upon him the moniker “Young Hickory.”

In 1833, Polk ran for the speakership, but lost narrowly to Tennessee Congressman John Bell. In 1835, however, he defeated Bell and won re-election two years later. As speaker, he supported the Jackson and Van Buren administrations with a tight grip on proceedings. Henry Wise, an exasperated Whig congressman, tried to entice Polk into a duel, shouting from the floor: “You are a damned little petty tyrant. I mean this personally — pocket it!” The calm, cool Polk could not be provoked.

Governor of Tennessee and Defeat

After 14 years in Congress, and at Jackson’s urging, Polk was drafted to run for governor in 1839 against Whig incumbent Newton Cannon. He opened his campaign at a barbecue attended by thousands before Rutherford County’s courthouse. A bitter campaign ensued. Polk challenged Governor Cannon to an unprecedented series of debates across Tennessee. He was a devastating debater and earned the title “the Napoleon of the Stump.” Overwhelmed, Cannon withdrew from the scheduled encounters, claiming “the press of state business.” After street fights took place between Democrats and Whigs, Election Day finally arrived. It was too close to call for days, but Polk was eventually declared the winner by 2,500 votes. He lost East and West Tennessee, but Middle Tennessee put him over the top.

As governor, Polk championed educational and road improvements and banking reforms. Since governors served two-year terms, it was not long before Governor Polk was back on the campaign trail debating Whig James “Lean Jimmy” Chamberlain Jones (Jones stood over six feet and weighed 125 pounds). Jones’s hilarious yarns and mimicry were more effective than Polk’s mastery of issues. Jones won by 3,000 votes. After Jones defeated Polk again in 1843, Polk’s political career appeared over. He turned down an offer to join President John Tyler’s cabinet and sadly returned to his Columbia law practice.

The 1844 Presidential Election

Andrew Jackson never lost faith in Polk and launched an effort to obtain for him the 1844 vice presidential nomination on a ticket with former President Van Buren, the front-runner for the presidential nomination. Yet Van Buren rejected Polk as a running mate because of the recent defeats. Then Van Buren announced opposition to the annexation of Texas.

Rightly sensing that Americans wanted expansion, the wily Jackson saw an opportunity. On May 10, 1844, he called a conference at his home, The Hermitage. Polk wrote: “General Jackson … speaks in terms of deep regret at the fatal error which Mr. Van Buren has committed. He thinks the candidate … should be an annexation man and reside in the Southwest; and he openly expresses (which I assure you I never for a moment contemplated) the opinion that I would be the most available man.”

Jackson and his lieutenants worked feverishly during the weeks before the Democratic convention, while Polk made clear that he favored “immediate annexation.” When the delegates deadlocked between Van Buren and Lewis Cass, “the convention stampeded to Polk” and unanimously gave him the presidential nomination on the ninth ballot. Therefore Polk became the first “dark horse” candidate to be a major party nominee. Hoping to unite all party factions, he promised to serve one term if elected. Jackson helped Polk further by convincing President Tyler not to run as an independent.

The Whigs nominated their preeminent leader, Henry Clay, while chanting “Who is James K. Polk?” Most believed Clay would win, but he made the same mistake as Van Buren by opposing Texas annexation. In the vicious campaign, Democrats called Clay an alcoholic, gambler and opportunist, while Whigs called Polk Jackson’s puppet and a coward for not dueling. Clay even challenged Polk to a debate in Tennessee with a jury of 12 Democrats and 12 Whigs to determine whether Polk had slandered him.

Polk won the election, but a shift of 5,000 votes in New York would have changed the result. Reflecting the evenly divided nature of Tennessee politics, and despite Jackson’s active campaigning, Polk failed to carry the state by 267 votes. Yet Jackson proclaimed: “The glorious result of the presidential election has rejoiced every democratic bosom in the United States.” A few months later Jackson died.

Andrew Jackson, during his last year of life.
President Polk
Before Polk took office as the nation’s 11th president, but cunningly working behind the scene, Congress passed a joint resolution approving the annexation of Texas. Therefore, when he took office on a rainy March 4, 1845, at the age of 49 (the youngest president the nation had seen), he confronted the probability of war with Mexico. Furthermore, Polk, said he had four goals: “one, reduction of the tariff; another, the independent treasury; a third, the settlement of the Oregon boundary question; and lastly, the acquisition of California.”

“Polk as President displayed marked executive ability and an unexpected determination to direct his own administration.” He dominated Congress, the bureaucracy, diplomacy and his cabinet. He also personally oversaw appointments to guarantee competence and even retained some Whigs in office. “He did everything himself rather than trust anything to aids.” Polk was the first president to stay in the White House during stifling Washington summers to work and keep “his fingers in every crevice of government.”

Long opposing protectionism, in 1846 the president won replacement of the protectionist tariff with duties only to raise revenue. Some argue that his free trade policy broke the brutal cycle of depressions endured in the 1830s. In any event, the economy boomed.

Polk believed that “all politics was fiscal.” He carefully crafted budgets (creating the modern budget process) and achieved another agenda item when he won creation of an independent treasury system. Accordingly, federal funds would be held in government vaults and no longer deposited in a national bank or reckless state banks.

A third goal was accomplished by obtaining most of the Oregon territory. He cleverly maneuvered Great Britain into agreeing to the previously rejected boundary at the 49th by leading Britain to believe he would resort to war. A treaty was signed in 1846. The following year, he procured another treaty that granted the United States access to the Isthmus of Panama for development of a railroad or canal.

War with Mexico
Polk wanted to acquire California and New Mexico, but Mexico rebuffed Polk’s purchase offers. The angry Mexican government also refused to recognize the U.S. claim that the Texas border was as far south as the Rio Grande, maintaining that the border was to the north at the Nueces River. So, Polk sent forces into the disputed region. On May 9, 1846, while preparing a message asking Congress for a declaration of war, he received word that Mexican troops had crossed the Rio Grande and attacked American soldiers. Polk re-drafted his message to base his request on invasion and the shedding of “American blood on American soil.” However, Polk would not specify where the engagement took place, for it would weaken his position if confirmed to be in the disputed area.

Whig Congressman Abraham Lincoln introduced “spot resolutions” demanding to know the precise spot where the blood of Americans had been shed. Whigs called the conflict “Mr. Polk’s War” and said it was “unnecessarily and unconstitutionally” begun by “Polk the Mendacious” to spread slavery. Many Southerners, however, were furious with Polk, fearing that war might endanger slavery and expansion might weaken the position of Atlantic seaboard slave states.

The undeterred Polk’s only purpose was expansion balanced between the Northwest and the Southwest. Polk was a moderate. He rejected demands that all of Mexico and Oregon and even Cuba be taken. He also rejected the extreme pro-slavery faction and denounced John C. Calhoun’s foment of the slavery issue. He warned Calhoun that if he continued with his “dangerous” agitation, he “should be arrested.” Polk believed that slavery could never exist in any won territory. And he did not want the issue marring America’s future. He abhorred rising sectionalism and all extremism. He has been called “a moderate in the midst of radicals and reactionaries.”

With his attention to every detail, a military management Lincoln would study during the Civil War, Polk proved “a masterful commander in chief.” The American armies secured a sweeping victory, including the capture of Mexico City. American forces also took California and New Mexico.

In the peace treaty, Mexico sold California...
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formed and New Mexico, which would become the states of New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah and parts of Colorado and Wyoming. America had gained half a million square miles and almost half of Mexico. The United States had become a continental power stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Polk achieved creation of the Department of the Interior to oversee the territories.127

Retirement and Assessment
Although many pressed him to seek re-election,128 Polk refused to break his one-term pledge.129 Besides, he had accomplished all his objectives, and he was worn out. He wrote in his diary: “In four months I shall retire from public life forever — I will soon go the way of all earth. I pray God to prepare me to meet the great event.”130 Amid the death and dying of the cholera outbreak contrasted with jubilant yet tiring receptions during the month-long journey, by carriage, train and boat, the somber former president returned to Tennessee.131 At his wishes, it was at his Nashville home that he was buried. His remains were moved to the Tennessee capitol grounds in 1893.

James K. Polk changed “forever the geography and the economy of the country.”132 He was the only strong president between Jackson and Lincoln, and his reputation continues to grow. He is consistently ranked high among presidents by historians. In 2002, U.S. News and World Report placed him among the “15 Presidents Who Changed the World.”133

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Notes
4. See Borneman at 344; Joseph Nathan Kane, Facts About the Presidents, 131 (1976); Margaret Bassett, Profiles and Portraits of American Presidents & their Wives, 116 (1969).
7. Id.; Kane at 131; Borneman at 344.
8. Borneman at 344.
14. Williams at 41; Degregorio at 164.
15. Robert H. White Ill Messages of the Governors of Tennessee, 265 (1954); Williams at 41.
16. Williams at 41.
17. Johannsen at 88.
18. White at 265.
20. Degregorio at 165.
21. Johannsen at 89, Borneman at 10; Cutler at 740.
23. Johannsen at 90; Bassett at.
24. Johannsen at 91-92; Borneman at 11.
25. Merry at 17.
27. Borneman at 11; Johannsen at 90; Seigenthaler at 23.
28. Williams at 41.
29. Johannsen at 90, Borneman at 11.
30. Borneman at 11.
31. Williams at 41.
32. Borneman at 11.
33. Seigenthaler at 24.
34. Id. at 24-25.
35. Merry at 17.
36. Williams at 41.
37. Henry S. Foote, The Bench and Bar of the South and Southwest, 177 (1876).
38. Seigenthaler at 24.
39. Id. at 26.
40. Williams at 41; Foote at 177; Seigenthaler at 25.
41. Johannsen at 91.
42. Williams v Norris, 25 U.S. 117 (1827).
43. Id.; See Johannsen at 91.
44. Hamilton at 89;
46. See Glyndon G. VanDeusen, The Jacksonian Era, 192 (1959);
47. See Leonard at 7.
49. See Moore at 125.

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95. Freidel at 77; Hamilton at 91.
97. The Saturday Evening Post United States Presidents, at 44.
98. See Freidel at 77; Bergeron at xii;
Williams at 53.
99. Roseboom at 134.
100. The Saturday Evening Post United States Presidents, at 44.
101. Kunhardt at 411.
102. Braun at 298.
103. Hamilton at 91.
105. Seigenthaler at 29.
106. Bergeron at 40, 42-43.
107. Hamilton at 91.
108. Whitney at 98.
110. Id. at 79; David Rubel, Mr. President 71 (1998).
111. Earl Schenck Miers, America and Its Presidents, 65 (1970).
112. Freidel at 77.
113. Polk at xiii; Braun at 296.
114. Pessen at 324.
115. Kunhardt at 410.
117. Leonard at 184.
118. Seigenthaler at 149.
119. Polk at xvi.
120. Braun at 298.
121. Caldwell at 183.
122. Braun at 131.
124. To the Best of My Ability at 87.
125. See Polk at xxi.
126. To the Best of My Ability at 88.
128. Moore at 131.
129. Miers at 67.
130. Bonnell at 83.
131. Degregorio at 172; Williams at 66-67.
132. Seigenthaler at 156.