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PRESIDENTIAL

Franklin Pierce Rolling off the tracks

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

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LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: On a snowy day in January of 1853, two months after his election to the presidency and two months before his inauguration, Franklin Pierce rode the train back from Andover, Massachusetts, which is near Boston, to his home in New Hampshire. Trains were such a new innovation at the time. Just imagine what it's like to be going at these speeds that seem incredible and impossible to people who are used to riding horses and carriages from place to place.

He was with his wife and their 11-year-old son, Benny, and they were all on their way back from the funeral of a family friend. Just as their train picks up speed past the wintry barren landscape around Andover, a coupler on the train broke. And the car -- the train car that the Pierces were in -- fell off the tracks. It rolled straight down an embankment, and there was one death from the accident, only one death on the train. It was their son, Benny, whose head was crushed and partially decapitated right in front of their eyes.

This was the image that Franklin Pierce was still seeing over and over and over when he entered the White House. At his inauguration, he wouldn't swear on the Bible -- he was so sure that God was angry at him and that his son's horrible death was punishment for his sins.

I'm Lillian Cunningham with the Washington Post, and this is the 14th episode of 'Presidential.'

PRESIDENTIAL THEME MUSIC

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Little baby Franklin Pierce was born in rural New Hampshire in 1804. He had gray eyes. He was one of eight children, and his father had fought in the American Revolution and was active in local New Hampshire politics.

Franklin Pierce ended up going to Bowdoin College in Maine, where he was quite popular and handsome and he became good friends with his classmate Nathaniel Hawthorne, who then goes on to write 'The Scarlet Letter.' Hawthorne would also eventually write Pierce's own campaign biography when he's running for president.

Right after college, when Pierce is in his early 20s, his father was elected governor of New Hampshire. And soon after that, Pierce got into politics himself. He was only 24-years old when he was elected to the state legislature; and then in 1832, when he's only about 28-years old, he ends up elected to the U.S. Congress.

He's a skilled orator, and it's also important to know that Franklin Pierce is a Democrat. So, it's an exciting time for him to head to Washington because this is right as Andrew Jackson is starting his second term as president. Jackson, of course, is the father of the Democratic Party that Franklin Pierce is a part of.

JAMES MCPHERSON: He had a reputation as what was called at the time a 'doughface' -- that is, a Northern man with Southern principles, even though he was from New Hampshire. He was sometimes known as 'the young Hickory' -- a follower of Old Hickory, Andrew Jackson.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: That's historian James McPherson, who wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning book on the Civil War called "Battle Cry of Freedom."

As a Democrat, Franklin Pierce is not big on big government or the idea of a U.S. bank. And while he's in Congress and then the Senate, he's basically just voting along the party line. He isn't passing any huge legislation of note with his name on it. He is, however, getting a name and a reputation around Washington for his drinking and his socializing. And in the course of that, he's strengthening his friendship with others in the Democratic Party, who at this point are mostly Southerners -- particularly Jefferson Davis, who would one day be the leader of the Confederacy.

During this time, Pierce ends up marrying Jane Appleton, whose father was actually a former president of Bowdoin College. And Jane is not a fan of alcohol, she is not a fan of parties, she is not a fan of Washington.

And so in 1841, Pierce decides to resign his Senate seat, and they move back to New Hampshire. A little while after that, he decides it's really important for him to get some military experience, so he has a not-so-illustrious stint as a brigadier general in the Mexican War. What happens is that he falls off his horse and he gets his leg crushed, and he's in so much pain that he faints. But the soldiers around him end up kind of making fun of him for this. And so they give him the name 'fainting Frank,' which sticks for a while after he leaves the war.

In 1852, though, he kind of remarkably ends up back in politics -- and not just back in politics, but the Democratic Party's nominee for president. For that election, there were actually a number of other bigger-name, prominent Democrats who were running. But when they get to the convention, none of these candidates ends up being able to appease a big enough majority of the delegates to get the nomination. So, Pierce's name ends up thrown in the mix at the 11th hour. And James McPherson says that this happens, and he actually secures the nomination, in large part because he's the type of person who isn't going to ruffle any feathers and who'll just adhere to whatever the party leadership wants him to be.

JAMES MCPHERSON: Pierce was somebody who was a kind of nonentity compromise, who could be manipulated by the stronger elements within the party. He was a loyal Democrat, and the Democratic Party at that time was controlled by its southern faction, its pro- slavery faction. And he was basically their candidate and served them well in his four-year presidency.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: During his stretch in the White House, from 1853 to 1857, Pierce is definitely listening to his party's strongest southern voices. And you can imagine that if Pierce was more the type to follow the party line than to carve his own path even before taking office, certainly after this horrific death of his son he's grieving in a way that empties him of any bright, powerfully optimistic vision of his own. He ends up in a position to rely even more on the advice and guidance of others.

I asked James McPherson what it would be like if we could just zap ourselves back in time 160 years to see President Pierce in the White House.

JAMES MCPHERSON: His lack of sociability -- and I think some lack in firmness of character -- was exacerbated by the tragic accident. His wife sort of went into seclusion as a consequence of that. She was very depressed. So things didn't start off very well for him on a personal basis. And on a political basis, things sort of got worse during the course of his presidency. He was not a happy man and he was not a successful president in any sense of that word, I think.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Pierce's wife, Jane, became known as 'the shadow in the White House' because of the way that she just keeps to herself in mourning and wanders the halls like a ghost.

Pierce of course was devastated too, and he's ridden with nervous anxiety. Jane had not wanted him to be president and she felt strongly that it was this -- as she said, this darkness and sinfulness of his political ambition -- that was responsible for their son Benny's death. Benny's life, she thought, had been given to God almost in some sort of dark trade for Franklin Pierce becoming president.

In his inaugural address, he said to the small crowd that had gathered on a really cold, blustery day, "You have summoned me in my weakness. You must sustain me by your strength."

Shortly thereafter his vice president, William Rufus King, died from tuberculosis and was never replaced. So the people Pierce ends up leaning on most are figures like Jefferson Davis, who becomes his secretary of war. By this point, the Democrats have lost many of their northern antislavery members. So, it really is more and more becoming a party that's defined by its slaveholding interests.

JAMES MCPHERSON: The Democratic Party was even more pro-slavery than it had been in the previous decade. And Pierce went along with that. He was not necessarily a fanatic pro-slavery advocate, but he was loyal to the leadership of his party and to the policy and ideology of his party.

And during his presidency, he repeatedly caved in. One of those issues was the so-called filibustering -- that is when a number of Americans, especially southerners, formed sort of private armies and invaded Mexico, invaded Nicaragua, invaded Cuba -- which was a slave society -- with the hope of annexing Cuba to the United States. And Pierce sort of turned the other way and allowed these people to violate American neutrality legislation. In 1854, his ambassadors to Spain, France and Britain got together in Ostend, Belgium, and issued the Ostend Manifesto, which said that Cuba should become part of the United States and the United States should do whatever was necessary to acquire Cuba -- which created a firestorm, as you might imagine, in American politics. It never happened, but Pierce supported that as part of his pro-slavery agenda.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Another feature of his time in office -- and another example of his support for the southern interests in his party -- was his enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, which, as we learned last week, was signed into law by his predecessor, Millard Fillmore. And this law basically puts the government on the hook for helping capture escaped slaves.

JAMES MCPHERSON: He, again, strongly supported efforts to enforce that legislation, which was bitterly hated in the North and was one of the divisive issues in the 1850s that eventually led to secession and war. And the most controversial and notorious example of that was the Anthony Burns affair.

And then the third issue, which became the most divisive issue of all, was the question of slavery in the territories. In 1854, under southern pressure, Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois introduced what came to be called the Kansas- Nebraska Act. Pierce gave in to pressure from Douglas himself and made it a party issue, using all the powers of the presidency to persuade reluctant northern Democrats. The bill passed and it led to the small civil war in Kansas.

All of these things happened on his watch, and I think that he deserves the blame or the responsibility for his weakness in deferring to southern leadership in the party, which eventually led to bitter divisions within the party that made it possible for Lincoln to be elected six years later.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: We're going to dive a little deeper now into Pierce's support of the Fugitive Slave Law, and in particular, as James McPherson had mentioned, this Anthony Burns affair that took place in Boston in 1854.

What happened was that a 19-year-old slave in Virginia named Anthony Burns ran away in 1853 and headed north all the way up to Boston. He lived there and worked there for about a year, and then, under this Fugitive Slave Act, he ends up being captured and put on trial to be sent back to the master in Virginia.

Well, this sets off abolitionists and those with antislavery views in Boston, who are just outraged at the idea. A group of them end up storming the courthouse where Burns is having his trial. They're attempting to free him, but, in the course of it, they end up killing a U.S. marshal. President Pierce decides to make an example of this case and he sends in federal troops to quell the rioters, and Burns ends up being sent back on a ship to his slaveowner in Virginia.

To better understand why this was such an important tipping point and what Pierce's role was in this in particular, I called up Edna Green Medford, who is the chair of Howard University's history department.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Hello, Edna. Thanks for talking with me about this.

EDNA GREEN MEDFORD: My pleasure.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: I know the basic details of the Anthony Burns trial and that, by the time this happens, obviously the Fugitive Slave Act had been around for a couple of years by now. Why, though, did this trial in particular become such a flashpoint?

EDNA GREEN MEDFORD: This became a flash point because it happened in Massachusetts -- one of

the places where you had a significant number of people who were involved in helping fugitives from slavery. And, in this instance, they cannot help this poor man, so they really understand what little power they had to do something about slavery.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: And so I imagine, too, that this just also made the horrors of slavery real for northerners in a way that was closer and more vivid to them.

EDNA GREEN MEDFORD: And especially since it comes on the heels of Harriet Beecher Stowe's 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' too. You know, there are all of these people across the North who are reading about slavery in a way that they hadn't. Even though it's a fictional account, it's still very vivid. And so people get a sense of what the horrors of slavery truly are, and then you have Anthony Burns come along -- a real, live human being who had escaped slavery -- and now he's being returned. It makes it so real to so many people.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: And what is President Franklin Pierce's role in all of this? He's sending in federal troops, right? Is that to show his support of the law, or...?

EDNA GREEN MEDFORD: He wants to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act. He's insisting that it be enforced. And, because of the reaction of the people in Boston to what's happening to this young man, he sends troops -- he sends a company of Marines -- and there are all of these Boston police who were involved. They are there to protect the rights of the slaveholder. And so Franklin Pierce does not come out of this looking like a good guy at all.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: I mean, I imagine that this must be even more shocking, in a way, to the abolitionists and antislavery voices in Boston because this is a president who actually grew up in New Hampshire -- not all that far from Boston.

EDNA GREEN MEDFORD: Absolutely. And keep in mind that none of this is happening in a vacuum. Now, this is the crucial decade. It's not just that you have one black man who's returned to slavery, but you have a confluence of events -- all of these things happening at the same time -- and it's getting the North very angry because they feel threatened. They feel that if you've got a northern president, a president who was born and reared in the North, being willing to side with these southerners (and many of them did, by the way...Franklin Pierce is not the only one) -- when you've got this kind of thing happening, how long can you protect the freedom in the North?

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Talk about events not happening in a vacuum. This Anthony Burns affair is taking place at exactly the same time that President Pierce is signing the Kansas-Nebraska Act into law.

Senator Stephen Douglas from Illinois proposes the idea that Kansas and Nebraska should become new territories and that, when they do, the people in those territories should get to decide if there's going to be slavery or not.

So why in the world does Douglas suggest this? Well, here's where we get into messy congressional maneuvering and special interests...and trains. There's all this excitement and potential financial gain from the advent of railroads, and the railroad companies are pushing at this time to create a transcontinental route. Douglas wants them to start construction in Chicago and for that to be a terminus for this transcontinental line, since -- no surprise -- his home state is Illinois.

But, in order to make this route possible and for it to end or start in Chicago, the railroad tracks would have to go through Nebraska. But they can't really build a railroad through Nebraska until Nebraska officially becomes a territory, which at this time it isn't.

Southerners don't support the idea of making Nebraska a territory because geographically Nebraska is north enough that, under the Missouri Compromise, it wouldn't have slavery -- and this would tip the delicate North/South slavery/antislavery balance.

So, this is why Douglas comes up with this solution to appease southerners. He says: Forget that whole no-slavery-north-of-a-certain-latitude thing. Just let the people in these places decide for themselves the question of whether they're going to have slavery.

This is where Congress basically throws the Missouri Compromise out the window.

There's, of course, a ton more detail that we could go into here about the nuances of this Kansas-Nebraska bill and how it plays out. But just so we don't stray too far from President Pierce, the big point here is that Stephen Douglas convinces President Pierce to support this bill and to sign it into law. And what happens next is that a hugely bitter, bloody fight over slavery unfolds in these areas.

People are pouring across the borders to try to rig the voting on whether to allow slavery. Violence is erupting. And Pierce meanwhile is distancing himself and basically saying that it's not the role of president to have any forceful hand in addressing this conflict. So the conflict just boils and boils and boils.

I'm curious if you have any sense of what Pierce actually cares about or what's driving him. I mean, if he doesn't seem to have strong guiding principles and vision, is it just that he wants power? Or he's someone who just wants to please people? What's motivating any of his actions or decisions?

JAMES MCPHERSON: Well, that's a good question, and I'm not sure that anyone has fully supplied the answer.

He's one of these presidents who lacked, I think, any kind of larger vision for where the country ought to go. And, as a consequence, he allowed himself to be manipulated by the strongest element within his party, which was the southern leadership and Stephen Douglas of Illinois, who was ambitious, of course, to become president himself. And Pierce just drifted along, led by these stronger personalities who had a definite program, which was to strengthen slavery and to expand slavery.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: I asked Edna Greene Medford what leadership lessons she thinks we can take from Pierce's time in the White House and his particular role in these pivotal and transformational events that are leading towards Civil War.

EDNA GREEN MEDFORD: It's interesting how little attention Pierce normally gets. We barely remember his administration. But what we need to recognize is that these are very important times. And as a consequence, he was an important leader -- not just because of what he did do, but because of what he didn't do. The country needed someone at the time who could heal the various divisions, who could bring people together, who could find a way, if not to compromise, to

at least to resolve some of these issues in a meaningful way. But he was not able to do that. And so, in a sense, the fact that he did not live up to what he might have done makes him very important.

It doesn't mean, however, that northerners were drawn closer to disunion and eventually to emancipation because of any one thing that he did or didn't do. But his actions and inactions were a part of that whole era. It's easy for us, in hindsight, to see what should have occurred or what should not have occurred. I don't know that we can criticize him for not having greater vision for America than he did. Those were the times that he had to deal with. And he was who he was. And he certainly was not that different from many of the other leaders we had had before Lincoln, of course. I wouldn't consider Pierce a weak president, but I would consider him one that sort of went along with the traditions of the others. It took someone unusually strong to actually move out of that.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: James McPherson gave something of a different answer when I asked him the same question.

You know, if we're thinking about presidential leadership, ultimately what do you think are some of the biggest leadership lessons that we should be taking from Pierce's time in office?

JAMES MCPHERSON: Well, he was a weak leader. I think his weakness is what wound up ruining basically his administration and harming -- no question about it -- harming the country. And so, I suppose one lesson to be taken from that is that the country does better if the president is a strong leader with firm convictions and an ability to avoid deferring to a particular faction in the party that's going to divide the country, because all of those things are what happened under Pierce's weak leadership.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Is there anything positive to note about Pierce's presidency?

JAMES MCPHERSON: Well, I have a hard time identifying anything positive. We're reading back into Pierce's administration -- and, for that matter, Buchanan's administration that followed -- from the events that happened in the 1860s and focusing on the shortcomings of their leadership and the way in which some of their decisions made the situation worse. And that's a perfectly legitimate way to read history. The events of the Civil War were so crucial in determining the course of American history that it really is necessary to explain how that happened and how his and Buchanan's administrations helped to bring on that crisis.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: By the end of Franklin Pierce's one term in office, his party refused to support him for a second term. This is even though he's basically done exactly what the party has asked of him. But they throw their support instead to James Buchanan, who will go on to become the next president.

Pierce was personally ravaged by these four years in the White House. A reporter at the time described Pierce as 'a wreck of his former self' and said 'his face wears a hue so ghastly and cadaverous that one could almost fancy he was gazing on a corpse.' That comment is particularly powerful when you remember that, by most accounts, Pierce was the most handsome president that we've ever had, and he was definitely the youngest at the time that he took office.

It was also rumored that when a friend asked Pierce what he was going to do upon leaving the role

of president, he said the only thing left to do is get drunk.

Whether he actually said that is unclear, but there is proof that that is precisely what he did. Pierce had struggled with alcoholism his whole life, but after his presidency he really starts drinking heavily and consistently. So much so, that he dies at 65-years old in Concord, New Hampshire, from cirrhosis of the liver. His wife Jane had already passed away, and they never had any more children.

If there's one date to remember from Pierce's administration, it's the year 1854 -- because not only is this the year that the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Anthony Burns trial are rumbling over the country, but it's the year when, out of this pressure cooker, the Republican Party is born. It's also this year, and against this backdrop, that a not very well-known man named Abraham Lincoln is crystallizing his antislavery views.

He begins giving speech after speech about why slavery should not be allowed in these new territories and how that would be a really important first step in ending slavery across the country.