

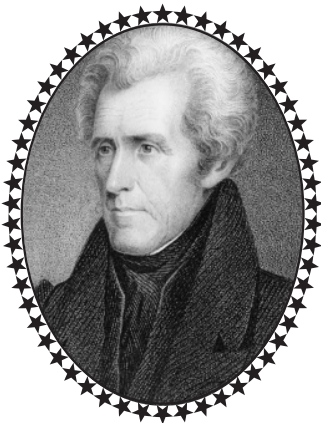
# ♦ ♦ ♦ U.S. PRESIDENTS FROM ♦ ♦ ♦ NORTH CAROLINA

## PART 1: ANDREW JACKSON AND THE AMERICAN MERITOCRACY

### LEARNING OUTCOME:

Students can:

- ♦ *Explain how President Andrew Jackson's life story demonstrates the foundational American principle of meritocracy.*
- ♦ *Explain how the presidential election of 1824 marked a change in U.S. politics.*
- ♦ *Describe the events that became known as the "corrupt bargain" of 1824 and explain how these events led to the restoration of the two-party political system the United States.*



**Andrew Jackson**

Andrew Jackson was a pivotal figure in American history. He was the first American president who was not a **Founder** (someone who had participated in the American Revolution and the creation of the U.S. Constitution) or the son of a Founder. Throughout his life, Andrew Jackson overcame many challenges and excelled in many areas. Jackson's life story illustrates one of the principles that Americans have valued since the country was founded: the idea that people should be free to succeed based on their talent and hard work, regardless of whether they come from a family that is rich or poor, famous or unknown. This idea is called "**meritocracy**." People who believe in meritocracy think that the government should not do anything to interfere with the freedom of every individual to succeed based on their **virtues** (positive personal characteristics), abilities, and hard work.

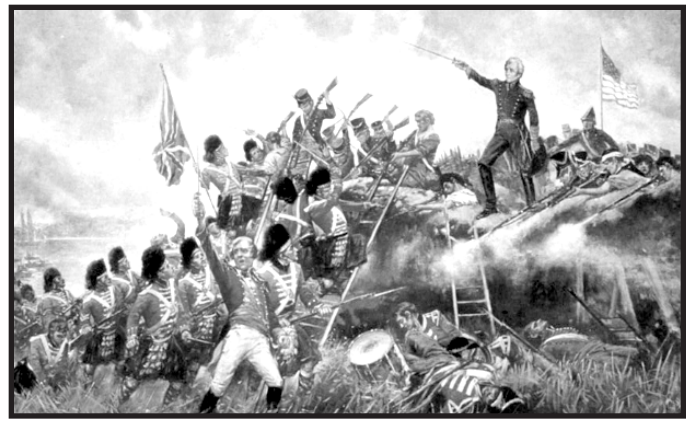
When the United States declared its independence from Great Britain, it also rejected the European system of aristocracy, which gave special legal and political privileges to people from certain families (the dukes, counts, barons, and other nobles of Europe). However, by the 1820s, some people feared that a new aristocracy might be forming in the United States. Jackson's election as president of the United States and his continuing influence in American politics for decades after his presidency can be understood as a rejection of aristocracy and an embrace of the principle of meritocracy by the American people. Andrew Jackson's political success not only demonstrated that Americans value meritocracy — it also helped to ensure that the United States would continue to be a meritocracy up until today.

Jackson was born in the Waxhaws region on the border between North and South Carolina near the present-day city of Charlotte. At that time, the area was so remote that, today, nobody is sure whether Jackson was born in North Carolina or South Carolina. (Today, the site of the house where he is believed to have been born is located in North Carolina, and the church where he was baptized is located about one mile away in South Carolina.)

The first six presidents of the United States were not rich, compared to the nobles of Europe. They were, however, all from families that were at least somewhat wealthy by the standards of the early United States. By contrast, Andrew Jackson was born in a very poor region on the frontier of the American colonies. His father died just before he was born, and his mother died when he was 13 years old. He had no

wealthy or powerful relatives to help him succeed in life. But he did succeed as a lawyer, a political leader, and a general in the U.S. army.

During the War of 1812, Jackson led a group of soldiers that defeated the British army at the Battle of New Orleans. This victory guaranteed that the U.S. would continue to control the Mississippi River basin (the Mississippi River and all the smaller rivers that flow into it) after the war. For several decades after the War of 1812, Andrew Jackson, the man responsible for that victory, was celebrated as a national hero.



*A painting glorifying Andrew Jackson's leadership at the Battle of New Orleans*

In 1828, Jackson was elected as president of the United States and served for two terms. For a generation after his presidency, political leaders in both parties (including Abraham Lincoln) imitated Andrew Jackson's straightforward, folksy style. The people who voted for Andrew Jackson to be their president saw him as the representative of the "common man," meaning ordinary people who were not born into families with great wealth, and whose success (if they did succeed) was the result of talent, hard work, and good decisions.

## THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 1824

Although Andrew Jackson was not elected president until 1828, to understand his significance in American politics, it is necessary to understand the presidential election of 1824. This election marked a generational shift in the politics of the United States. Anyone who was an adult at the time the Declaration of Independence was signed (in 1776) was elderly by 1824. For the first time in history, the United States was going to be run by people who had not created it. Where would this new generation take the country? How would they change it?

At this time, there was just one political party in the United States, the Democratic-Republican Party. (This was not the Democratic or the Republican party of today. It was an entirely separate party, which used the name "Democratic-Republican" to describe itself. Neither the Republican Party nor the Democratic Party existed at this time.) Four candidates from this party ran for president in 1824: Andrew Jackson, John Quincy Adams (son of former U.S. President John Adams), Henry Clay, and William Crawford. The two most popular candidates were Jackson and Adams. Both of these men had been children during the American Revolutionary War. But their childhoods and their political careers as adults couldn't have been more different.

Andrew Jackson grew up in wilderness, suffered the loss of his parents at an early age, fought in the American Revolutionary War while he was still a child, and went on to be the hero of the Battle of New Orleans. John Quincy Adams grew up on a farm outside of Boston, which was one of the largest and most prosperous cities in the colonies. His father was a well-respected lawyer. John Quincy Adams was also related to Samuel Adams, who played an important role in the American Revolution. Both John Adams and Samuel Adams were signers of the Declaration of Independence.

During the Revolutionary War, John Quincy Adams had accompanied his father to France and Holland. As a child, he had private tutors and socialized with European aristocrats, diplomats and courtiers. After the war, he was appointed as the first U.S. ambassador to Russia — at the age of 18. He eventually went to Harvard, became a lawyer, and then won a seat as a senator from Massachusetts. Later, he was appointed secretary of state of the United States under President James Monroe.

By the 1820s, serving as U.S. secretary of state had become a “stepping stone” to the presidency. Four of the first six U.S. presidents had been secretary of state before being elected as president. So, people who paid close attention to politics expected this pattern to continue. John Quincy Adams would be the next president, since the current president had chosen him to be secretary of state. Now that there was just one party, every president would pick the next president. Presidential elections would still take place, but they would be just for show. This new way of picking presidents would have no place for a political outsider like Andrew Jackson.

In 1824, the American people expressed a clear preference for Andrew Jackson to be their president. Jackson won the most votes from citizens (the “popular vote”), and he won more electoral votes than any other candidate. However, he did not win more electoral votes than all the other candidates combined. According to the Constitution, in a presidential election, if no candidate wins more than 50 percent of the electoral votes, the members of the U.S. House of Representatives choose the winner of the election. The House of Representatives chose John Quincy Adams, who was well-known and trusted by the powerful political leaders in Washington, D.C.

After the election, the leader of the House of Representatives (who is called the Speaker of the House) was chosen to be John Quincy Adams’ new secretary of state. Andrew Jackson’s supporters called these events the “corrupt bargain.” They began to fear that well-connected Washington politicians were taking control of the American political system in a way that would take power away from ordinary citizens.

These concerns led Jackson’s supporters to form a new political party to make sure that Jackson would win more than 50 percent of the electoral votes in the next election. Jackson’s party called itself “the Democratic Party.” (This is the same Democratic Party that exists today in the United States, although its political positions have greatly changed since the time of Andrew Jackson.) By 1828, the United States once again had two major political parties that were competing for power and giving voters a real choice. In the 1828 presidential election, Jackson ran against Adams again. Andrew Jackson won by a landslide.

Today, historians and other people debate whether or not Andrew Jackson was a good president. Some of his decisions are considered controversial. But the fact that Andrew Jackson could rise from being a poor orphan in the backcountry of North Carolina to become the hero of the Battle of New Orleans and the president of the United States demonstrates the degree to which the United States had become a country where people’s success is mainly determined by their talent, virtue, and choices, in other words, a meritocracy. Moreover, Jackson’s supporters started a political movement that became known as “Jacksonian democracy,” which continued to expand opportunities for the “common man” to succeed based on talent and hard work.

## READING REVIEW QUESTIONS:

Write a paragraph summarizing Andrew Jackson’s professional, military, and political successes. In your response, explain the meaning of “meritocracy” in your own words and explain how Andrew Jackson’s life story illustrates this principle.

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Generally, how was Andrew Jackson’s early life different from the lives of the first six presidents of the United States?

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In 1824, why were people who paid close attention to politics expecting John Quincy Adams to be the next president of the United States?

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Write a paragraph describing the events that became known as the “corrupt bargain” of 1824 and explain how these events led to the restoration of the two-party political system in the United States.

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