

James Monroe

Our 5th President (1817- 1825)

On New Year's Day in 1825, at the last of his annual White House receptions, President James Monroe made a pleasing impression upon a Virginia lady who shook his hand. "He is tall and well formed. His dress plain and in the old style... His manner was quiet and dignified. From the frank, honest expression of his eye... I think he well deserves the encomium passed upon him by the great Jefferson, who said, 'Monroe was so honest that if you turned his soul inside out, there would not be a spot on it.'"

He was born April 28 in Westmoreland County, Virginia in 1758. His father was a woodworker and tobacco farmer and his mother had land holdings but little money. Like his parents, he was a slaveholder. Monroe attended the College of William and Mary, fought with distinction under George Washington in the Continental Army where he was shot in the left shoulder, and practiced law in Fredericksburg, Virginia. He married Elizabeth Kortright on February 16, 1786 at the Trinity Church in New York.

As a youthful politician he joined the anti-Federalists in the Virginia Convention which ratified the Constitution, and in 1790, an advocate of Jeffersonian policies, was elected United States Senator. As a Minister to France in 1794-1796, he displayed strong sympathies for the French cause and later with Robert R. Livingston, he helped negotiate the Louisiana Purchase.

His ambition and energy, together with the backing of President Madison, made him the Democratic Republican choice for the Presidency in 1816 becoming the 5th President. With little Federalist opposition, he easily won reelection in 1820. His daughter, Maria Hester Monroe married Samuel L. Gouverneur in the first White House wedding.

Monroe made unusually strong Cabinet choices, naming a Southerner, John C. Calhoun as Secretary of War and a Northerner, John Quincy Adams as Secretary of State.

Early in his administration, Monroe undertook a goodwill tour. At Boston, his visit was hailed as the beginning of an "Era of Good Feelings." Unfortunately, these "good feelings" did not stay.

A painful economic depression undoubtedly increased the dismay of the people of the Missouri Territory in 1819 when their application for admission to the Union as a slave state failed. An amended bill for gradually eliminating slavery in Missouri began two years of bitter debate in Congress. The Missouri Compromise bill of 1820 resolved the struggle, pairing Missouri as a slave state with Maine, a free state and barring slavery north and west of Missouri forever.

In foreign affairs, Monroe responded to the threat that the more conservative governments in Europe might try to aid Spain in winning back her former Latin American colonies. He and Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams wished to avoid trouble with Spain until it had ceded the Floridas to the United States, as was done in 1821. (His administration was marked by the acquisition of Florida in 1819).

Great Britain, with its powerful navy, also opposed reconquest of Latin America and suggested that the United States join in proclaiming "hands off." Ex-Presidents Jefferson and Madison consoled Monroe to accept the offer, but Secretary Adams advised, "It would be more candid... to avow our principles explicitly to Russia and France..." Monroe accepted Adam's advise. Not only must Latin America be left alone, he warned, but also Russia must not encroach southward on the Pacific coast. "...the American continents" he stated, "by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European power." Some 20 years after Monroe died in 1831, this became known as the Monroe Doctrine.



This statue of James Monroe is on the grounds of Ash Lawn-Highland, his Albemarle County, Virginia home which is owned, cared for and operated by his alma mater, the College of William and Mary.