

James Monroe, the 'other' former president who died on July 4

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On July 4, 1831, the fifth president of the United States died in New York City, far from his home in Virginia. Sick and heavily in debt, the widowed James Monroe had moved north from Virginia in 1830 to live with his daughter.

Five years earlier, two of the authors of the Declaration of Independence had died on its 50th anniversary. Only sheer acts of will enabled former presidents John Adams, then 91, and Thomas Jefferson, then 83, to survive until July 4, 1826.

The two long-time friends and occasional antagonists had been alienated for more than a decade when they resumed their correspondence in 1813. "You and I ought not to die, before we have explained ourselves to each other," Adams wrote Jefferson that July.

Of the three presidents to perish on July 4, only Monroe had served in the Revolutionary War. In 1776, just 18, he had dropped out of college to join the Continental Army. Although Monroe lacked the intellectual brilliance of army contemporaries like Alexander Hamilton or John Marshall, he nevertheless won their respect and affection — as well as that of France's Marquis de Lafayette.

At the Battle of Trenton on Christmas Day, 1776, Captain Monroe was seriously wounded while attacking the Hessians and nearly died. As an aide to General Washington, Monroe befriended several army officers from France, an American ally.

From one of those officers, Pierre S. DuPonceau, Monroe became acquainted with French philosophers. It was with a French cook, however, that Monroe perfected his French.

Monroe served his country in many posts — as a congressman in the 1780s, as a senator in the early 1790s, then as an envoy to France under President George Washington, and later as governor of Virginia from 1799 to 1802. He was about to return to private life in 1803 when President Jefferson appointed him as a special envoy to France to negotiate the Louisiana Purchase. He remained in Europe for years on diplomatic missions to Spain and England.

When Monroe returned to America in 1808, he was distressed to learn that his longtime friends and neighbors, President Jefferson and Secretary of State James Madison, had assured that Madison would succeed Jefferson in the White House.

Monroe refused to bow out gracefully. He remained estranged from Jefferson and Madison until Madison called upon him to become secretary of state in 1811 in time for the War of 1812.

By the time Madison left office, Monroe's nomination for and election as president seemed assured. As president, Monroe would usher in a short-lived "Era of Good Feelings," including the passage of the Missouri Compromise and the promulgation of the Monroe Doctrine. In retirement, Monroe stayed out of politics in an effort to get Congress to reimburse him for past governmental services. He could afford no less.

Nevertheless, Monroe was called to perform one last public duty. He was elected — along with Madison and Chief Justice John Marshall — to serve at Virginia's Constitutional Convention in the summer of 1829. A stifling heat wave hit Richmond — killing Monroe's son-in-law. At Monroe's northern Virginia home, his beloved wife was very sick. She died a few days later.

Madison reconciled himself that he would never see Monroe again: "The pain I feel at the idea, associated as it is with a recollection of the long, close and uninterrupted friendship which united us, amounts to a pang which I cannot well express." The Father of the Bill of Rights died on June 26, 1836 — just missing the 60th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

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