Martin Van Buren
Eighth President of the United States, 1837 – 1841

Van Buren was born in Kinderhook on December 5, 1782. His parents, Abraham and Maria, were of Dutch descent. Abraham made a modest living as a farmer and tavern keeper. Young Martin was raised in his parents’ tavern, which was also the family home, and attended local schools. Martin was set on his life's course when, unable to afford the cost of college, Abraham secured a place for his son in the office of a local lawyer.

Despite his humble background, Van Buren steadily progressed up the professional ladder. He opened his first law office in Kinderhook in 1803. Four years later, he married his childhood sweetheart, Hannah Hoes. The couple had four sons. In 1819 Hannah died of tuberculosis. Van Buren never remarried.

Van Buren’s star rose quickly in state and national politics. His reputation as a shrewd politician earned him the nicknames Little Magician (Van Buren stood at just 5 feet 6 inches) and the Red Fox of Kinderhook. During the years 1812 to 1820 he served as state senator and state attorney general. In 1821 he was elected to the U.S. Senate. In 1828 Van Buren gave up his senate seat upon his election as governor of New York. He subsequently resigned to serve as Andrew Jackson's secretary of state. In his second term, Jackson chose Van Buren as his vice president. In 1836 Van Buren easily won election to the presidency.

Van Buren holds many firsts in presidential history. He was the first president born of Dutch descent, the first to be born an American citizen, and the only president whose first language was not English. Van Buren may be one of the only presidents to have inspired an addition to the lexicon by popularizing the term “OK,” an acronym for “Old Kinderhook.”

The trajectory of Van Buren’s presidential career took a turn during the economic collapse known as the Panic of 1837. He lost his bid for reelection in 1840 and failed to secure the Democratic nomination in 1844 because of his opposition to the extension of slavery. By 1848 Van Buren was a central figure in the intensifying debate over the future of slavery, running for president as candidate of the Free Soil Party.

In 1840 Van Buren took up residence at Lindenwald, his estate and farm just outside of Kinderhook. Between 1840 and 1848, Lindenwald served as a busy political hub. The final years of Van Buren’s life were happy, though restless, as he sensed that war was coming. Van Buren died in 1862 not knowing whether the nation he had helped forge would endure.

Cover Images:
John Warner Barber, Van Buren Tavern, 1841, Woodcut, Historical Collections of the State of New York;

Village of Kinderhook

The settlement at Kinderhook (Dutch, meaning children’s corner) was founded in the 1660s by Dutch families from Albany. Originally called het Dorp of Groot stuk, the settlement formed on the western bank of the Kinderhook Creek on lands purchased from the Mahican Indians.

During Colonial times large farms and spacious lots were common in and around the hamlet. Roads established during this time, first William Street and later Hudson, Albany, and Broad streets, established a pattern of development that remains to this day.

Colorful historic figures passed through Kinderhook during the American Revolution. Colonel Henry Knox’s horse-drawn sledges carried artillery through the village in January 1776 en route from Ticonderoga to Boston. Turncoat Benedict Arnold spent a night here, suffering from wounds sustained in battle. And British General John Burgoyne was hosted as a prisoner of war in a home on Broad Street after the British defeat at Saratoga in late October 1777.

Following the Revolution, Kinderhook experienced significant growth as it emerged as a postal and stagecoach stop between Albany and New York City. By the time of its incorporation in 1838, the village had become a bustling commercial and manufacturing center, with shops that supplied groceries, dry goods, books, pots, pans, and stoves. Hats and carriages were the principal manufactured products. A printing office published an important newspaper, and several lawyers and physicians helped villagers live more law-abiding and healthy lives. Three taverns afforded lodging, food, and drink and served as ideal locations to air new political ideas. This was the atmosphere in which young Martin Van Buren grew up.

As manufacturing in the village declined during the nineteenth century, Kinderhook became an increasingly residential village. Over time an eclectic collection of houses in the architectural styles of two centuries, including the Dutch Vernacular, Federal, Georgian, and Greek Revival styles, lined the village’s streets.

Today visitors discover historic buildings that appear much as they did when the retired President Van Buren made his favorite horseback ride from Lindenwald to his native village. Preservation of the village’s architectural heritage is recognized by Kinderhook’s listing on the National Register of Historic Places and its designation as a Preserve America Community.
ex-President Van Buren returned to the place of his nativity on Saturday last... After the lapse of a long series of years, spent in the service of his country, he has returned to the home of his youth, probably to spend the evening of his days among those who have long appreciated the splendor of his genius and admired his virtues.”

– Kinderhook Sentinel, May 1841

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