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James Buchanan: America’s first gay president?

* See more at: [http://www.washingtonblade.com/2011/10/04/james-buchanan-america’s-first-gay-president/#sthash.8CgdEp3r.dpuf](http://www.washingtonblade.com/2011/10/04/james-buchanan-america's-first-gay-president/#sthash.8CgdEp3r.dpuf)

*This is the first in a series that will run throughout October in conjunction with our friends at the Philadelphia Gay News and partners around the nation. We hope that you treasure these little looks at where we’ve come, as they help us reflect and prepare for where we are going.*

*By Timothy Cwiek*

*National Gay History Project*

More than 150 years before America elected its first black president, Barack Obama, it most likely had its first gay president, James Buchanan (1791-1868).

Buchanan, a Democrat from Lancaster County, Pa., was the 15th president of the United States, and a lifelong bachelor. He served as president from 1857-61, tumultuous years leading up to the Civil War.

Historian James W. Loewen has done extensive research into Buchanan’s personal life, and he’s convinced Buchanan was gay.

Loewen is the author of the acclaimed book “Lies Across America,” which examines how historical sites inaccurately portray figures and events in America’s past.

“I’m sure that Buchanan was gay,” Loewen said. “There is clear evidence that he was gay. And since I haven’t seen any evidence that he was heterosexual, I don’t believe he was bisexual.”

According to Loewen, Buchanan shared a residence with William Rufus King, a Democratic senator from Alabama, for several years in Washington, D.C.

Loewen said contemporary records indicate the two men were inseparable, and wags would refer to them as “the Siamese twins.”

Loewen also said Buchanan was “fairly open” about his relationship with King, causing some colleagues to view the men as a couple.

For example, Aaron Brown, a prominent Democrat, writing to Mrs. James K. Polk, referred to King as Buchanan’s “better half,” “his wife” and “Aunt Fancy … rigged out in her best clothes.”

In 1844, when King was appointed minister to France, he wrote Buchanan, “I am selfish enough to hope you will not be able to procure an associate who will cause you to feel no regret at our separation.”

Loewen also said a letter Buchanan wrote to a friend after King went to France shows the depth of his feeling for King.

“I am now solitary and alone, having no companion in the house with me,” Buchanan wrote. “I have gone a wooing to several gentlemen, but have not succeeded with any one of them. I feel that it is not good for man to be alone; and should not be astonished to find myself married to some old maid who can nurse me when I am sick provide good dinners for me when I am well, and not expect from me any very ardent or romantic affection.”

Loewen said their relationship — though interrupted due to foreign-service obligations — ended only with King’s death in 1853.

In the late 1990s, Loewen visited Wheatland, the mansion in Lancaster, Pa., where Buchanan spent his later years.

Loewen said he asked a staffer at Wheatland if Buchanan was gay, and the reply was: “He most definitely was not.”

Loewen said the staffer pointed to a portrait of Ann Coleman, the daughter of a wealthy iron maker, whom Buchanan was engaged to briefly 1819 — shortly before she committed suicide.

However, Loewen scoffed at the staffer’s suggestion that the brief engagement to Coleman proved Buchanan was heterosexual.

Loewen said Buchanan showed little interest in Coleman, appeared more interested in her fortune, and possibly contributed to her suicide due to his emotional detachment.

Patrick Clarke, the director of Wheatland, said the staff now takes a neutral stance on Buchanan’s sexual or affectional preference.

“There’s no solid proof that Buchanan was heterosexual, nor is there solid proof that he was homosexual,” Clarke said. “If we ever come up with a smoking gun that proves it one way or the other, I would definitely encourage our staff to share it with the public.”

But, he said Ann Coleman’s portrait no longer is displayed at Wheatland.

The tours focus mainly on the mansion’s décor and activities that took place there during the later years of Buchanan’s life, he added.

Wheatland also has about 45 volunteer tour guides, and to Clarke’s knowledge, none of the guides is openly gay.

“The volunteer guides who we train to share the history of James Buchanan’s life and times are directed to take a neutral stance regarding [his] sexual preference,” Clarke said. But Clarke said he wouldn’t object if a volunteer offered a personal opinion that Buchanan was gay, if asked by a visitor.

“When you have 50 minutes to take people through a nine-room house, there’s only so much you can discuss,” Clarke said. “But if the question is raised, the guide may express a personal opinion.”

Loewen said many historians rate Buchanan as one of the worst U.S. presidents. Buchanan was part of the pro-slavery wing of the Democratic Party, and corruption plagued his administration.

But Loewen said those flaws shouldn’t discourage members of the LGBT community from acknowledging Buchanan’s status as a gay man. “Lots of gay people have been exemplary,” he said. “Let’s look at Walt Whitman. For my money, he’s the best poet in the history of the country. But we also have to acknowledge the failures.

If we only admit that really great people are gay, what kind of history is that? And how is that believable? It’s ridiculous. We have to tell it like it was.”

As a heterosexual male, Loewen added, he has no hidden agenda in outing Buchanan. “I’m not gay,” Loewen said. “I don’t run around trying to find gay folks or black folks underneath every rock. But I’m not going to ignore clear evidence.”

*Timothy Cwiek holds a bachelor of art degree in U.S. history from West Chester University. He has written for Philadelphia Gay News since the late 1970s and written freelance articles for numerous publications on topics such as the Lincoln assassination, the Kennedy family, the shootings at Kent State University, first ladies and the macrobiotic movement in America.*

*Introduction to the National Gay History Project: Historians take note. This year’s National Gay History Project is a shout out to say that the LGBT community will no longer allow insensitivity, intentional or not, to downplay the contributions LGBT people have made to this country.*

*To put it simply, this year’s project is definitive. Without people who were LGBT or LGBT allies, there would be no United States of America. We helped create this nation and we helped keep it together through the Civil War. And indeed, the Founding Fathers not only had us in mind when creating this country, they welcomed and recruited us in their efforts. - See more at: http://www.washingtonblade.com/2011/10/04/james-buchanan-america’s-first-gay-president/#sthash.98G6S9Gp.dpuf*