**Who Was Our First Gay President?**

Historians say the most likely candidate is James Buchanan.

By [Katherine Cooney](http://newsfeed.time.com/author/katherinecorrigan/) [@kccooney](http://www.twitter.com/kccooney)May 17, 2012

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You may have seen the [*other*](http://www.time.com/time/covers/0%2C16641%2C20120521%2C00.html)controversial newsmagazine cover this week, the one where *Newsweek* dubbed President Obama “[The First Gay President](http://andrewsullivan.thedailybeast.com/2012/05/the-daily-wrap-7.html)“. But as [Jim Loewen at the *History News Network*](http://hnn.us/jim_loewen/articles/146241.html) would like to remind us, even if Obama were gay, he wouldn’t be the first: more than 150 years before the United States had its first black president, it had its first homosexual commander in chief.

Loewen is one of several historians who believe that James Buchanan, who served from 1857 to 1861, was in fact our first gay president. He is the only president to have remained a bachelor throughout his life. (His niece, Harriet Lane, handled the duties of First Lady during his term in office.) He shared a home with William Rufus King, an Alabama Senator and Vice President under Buchanan’s predecessor, Franklin Pierce. Their relationship was reportedly so close that Andrew Jackson and other contemporaries referred to them as ”Miss Nancy” and “Aunt Fancy”.

In one letter to a confidante dated May 13, 1844, Buchanan wrote about his life after King moved to Paris to become the American ambassador to France:

“I am now ‘solitary and alone,’ having no companion in the house with me. 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.”

Other historians, however, believe that his relationship with King was in fact more complex than that, and that the book is far from closed on the matter of Buchanan’s sexuality (he was at one point engaged to be married, and went a wooing with several ladies in addition to the aforementioned gentlemen). Either way, it’s also almost impossible to know for sure: Buchanan ordered that all his correspondence be destroyed upon his death.

But Loewen, author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*,notes that — importantly — Buchanan’s rumored sexuality was not a secret at the time. For much of the 19th century, American society was considerably more open and accepting than it was in much of the century that followed. It’s a concept that many of us have trouble grasping: indeed, one of the reasons Americans have trouble viewing the past as more progressive than today is because of the narrative many high school history books follow, which portrays the United States as a country that started great and is getting better — “chronological ethnocentrism”, as he terms it.

This type of thinking leaves many students to see history as irrelevant: inconsequential events of the distant past that are totally separate from issues we face today. And while Loewen notes that Obama’s stance on gay marriage is a welcome departure from our recent past, to tout modern American society as more tolerant than any in our history is a claim that has yet to pass the test of time.

Read more: [Despite the Newsweek Cover Claim, James Buchanan Was Our First Gay President | TIME.com](http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/05/17/who-was-our-first-gay-president/#ixzz2vm0nT3aH) <http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/05/17/who-was-our-first-gay-president/#ixzz2vm0nT3aH>