

From the *Reading Eagle* 2/19/2018: <http://www.readingeagle.com/news/article/wheatland-offers-insights-into-james-buchanan-the-only-president-from-pennsylvania>



### **Wheatland offers insights into James Buchanan, the only president from Pennsylvania**

The stately brick manor west of Lancaster is a window to the past.

WRITTEN BY JIM LEWIS

LANCASTER - Poor James Buchanan. The 15th president of the United States, the only Pennsylvanian to occupy the White House, gets no love from historians, some of whom rank him as the worst president ever.

Though he claimed he opposed slavery, he did nothing to abolish it, announcing at his inauguration that its future was "a matter of but little practical importance" to him, an issue to be handled by the Supreme Court.

When Southern states threatened to secede, he claimed he had no power under the Constitution to stop them.

He appointed several Southerners to his Cabinet, and though the Civil War still loomed, he saw himself as a peacekeeper, a leader who decried the "agitation" of Northerners who hotly opposed slavery and Southerners who hotly defended it.

He declared on his deathbed, "Posterity will do me justice."

Boy, was he wrong.

He's reviled, not revered, by historians. Example: A 2017 poll of 91 U.S. historians by C-SPAN ranked Buchanan as our worst president, even below William Henry Harrison, who died of pneumonia after just 31 days in office.

It was the third such poll by C-SPAN since 2000, and Buchanan finished last in all three of them.

The notoriety may be helping the efforts of some in Lancaster County to present a picture of Buchanan beyond his politics, however.

At his home, Wheatland, a stately brick manor just west of Lancaster in Lancaster Township, volunteers offer paid tours and historical tidbits about the former president and his family, including the niece and nephew he adopted and raised.

#### Glimpses of the man

Purchased by community leaders in 1936, Wheatland, a three-story Federalist-style estate, holds a number of Buchanan artifacts, from the desk where he wrote his inauguration speech to the metal tub, sitting on his bedroom floor, in which he bathed.

About 70 to 80 percent of the furnishings belonged to Buchanan or his family, said Stephanie Townrow, Wheatland's museum educator.

She hopes that Wheatland "presents Buchanan as a man, a father figure, and as a Lancastrian and a person in a fuller way so we get beyond his political history," and his dismal ranking attracts visitors, she said.

"For the sake of tourism, we're certainly glad he's not in the middle," Townrow said. "If he was in the middle, you'd probably say: 'Meh. OK. Fine,' and keep going by. If you're intrigued by that 'worst' moniker, you're more inclined to research him."

Research Buchanan and you'll find a number of critical opinions about his presidency, which ran from 1857 to 1861, after Franklin Pierce and before Abraham Lincoln.

Historians have grown more critical of Buchanan as time has passed, and as many experts have drawn bolder connections to the Civil War and slavery.

"He never fully grasped the moral objections to slavery," said G. Terry Madonna, a political science professor and noted pollster at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster.

Though Buchanan, tall and courtly, was a seasoned politician, a former secretary of state, ambassador, congressman and state legislator, as well as a lawyer, he was hamstrung by his view of the limits of his constitutional powers, so he did nothing, Madonna said.

To Madonna, who voted in the 2017 C-SPAN poll, Buchanan's ranking is no surprise.

"Given the understanding of what actually happened to our country, it's probably accurate, it's probably fair," he said.

But Townrow hopes Wheatland offers the roughly 13,000 tourists who visit each year another glimpse of Buchanan through a host of curiosities.

There's a piano that Buchanan, a lifelong bachelor, bought for Harriet Lane, his niece who served as his first lady; a bird cage, where Buchanan's pet canary, named Dick, was snatched by an owl that flew into the parlor through an open window; a 191-year-old bottle of Madeira, a sweet Portuguese wine he enjoyed.

He loved liquor, and kept bottles in a large wine cellar beneath his study.

Even a set of Buchanan's stunning pink china tells an interesting story: He bought it from a French ambassador who didn't want to pay to have it shipped back home, and the deal saved Buchanan the cost of ordering and shipping china from France.

Buchanan was a shrewd businessman, Townrow said. He took his personal china with him to the White House, eschewing the cost to taxpayers of commissioning presidential dinnerware.

"I hope people feel some connection to him by visiting his home and seeing his things and walking amid his stuff," Townrow said.

#### Oasis after Washington

For Don Childs, a military retiree from Colerain, N.C., and his wife Donna, a retired VA hospital employee, a tour of Wheatland did just that.

In Lancaster County to see the touristy Amish sights Thursday, they discovered Buchanan's house in a travel brochure, knowing little about the former president. After a tour, they skewered his "worst" rating.

"He's labeled that, but I don't think he is," Don said. Added Donna: "You know, today they have to blame everything on somebody. He was just a man of the times."

Wheatland was Buchanan's oasis, 22 acres of peace after a tumultuous four years in the White House. After attending his successor's inauguration in Washington on March 4, 1861, he told Lincoln as they rode together in a coach, "Sir, if you are as happy in entering the White House as I shall feel on returning to Wheatland, you are a happy man indeed."

Buchanan, 77, died of respiratory failure in his second-floor bedroom on June 1, 1868 but not before telling a friend, "I have no regret for any public act of my life and history will vindicate my memory from every unjust aspersion," according to the website of the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, which manages a state park in Franklin County where he was born.

In Lancaster County, they celebrate his fame, though not necessarily his politics.

In Lititz, Fetish Brewing Co., a microbrewery, served a batch of stout inspired by Buchanan's beloved Madeira over the Presidents Day weekend.

If the beer proves popular, the brewery may make more, said Mike Simpson, a co-owner.

"I honestly think in Lancaster there's some pride for Buchanan," Simpson said. "He's still part of the history of Lancaster."

Community leaders gather at Buchanan's grave in Woodward Hill Cemetery in Lancaster every April to lay a wreath and remember Pennsylvania's only president.

He may rank as the worst, but the White House has sent the wreath every year since 1960, said Jean Weglarz, president of the cemetery's board of directors.

"I think anybody who came before Abraham Lincoln would have paled in comparison," Weglarz said.

**Wheatland**

**Open:** Today, Presidents Day, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.; Mondays through Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

**Where:** 230 N. President Ave., Lancaster, on the campus of LancasterHistory.org.

**Cost:** \$15 for adults 18 and older; \$13 for seniors age 65 and older; \$8 for children age 11-17; free for children 10 and under.

**Phone:** 717-392-4633.