

## David Rice Atchison

Aug 11, 1807 (Lexington, KY) - Jan 26, 1886 (Gower, MO)

**D**AVID RICE ATCHISON WAS the U.S. President for precisely one day, March 4, 1849, and he nearly slept through the most significant part of his presidency.

Nearly all historians have called Atchison's term in office the least controversial in history. Most (if not all) agree that if today's politicians would but follow President Atchison's excellent example of soporific leadership,<sup>1</sup> the country would be better off today.

To put Mr. Atchison's term into a historical perspective, his single day of service followed the administration of President James K. Polk, America's 11th president (1845-1849), and preceded the administration of President Zachary Taylor, America's 12th president (1849-1850).

Lest you doubt the veracity of this story, know there are two camps of historians in the matter. There are those willing to accept reality; and those who refuse to accept Atchison's brief incumbency of the Oval Office. Until this anomaly on the landscape of American history can be resolved, President Atchison will continue to be denied his rightful place in history.

Most of those who refuse to acknowledge Atchison's place as America's 12th president do so on the weak grounds that he never received the key to the presidential restroom. To quote Patrick Layton Paulson, a former perennial and non-partisan presidential candidate: "Picky. Picky. Picky."<sup>2</sup>

Atchison's headstone in the Greenlawn Cemetery in Plattsburg, Missouri, confirms his honored place in history:

**DAVID RICE ATCHISON**  
1807 - 1888  
PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES  
ONE DAY  
LAWYER, STATESMAN, AND JURIST  
U.S. SENATE 1843-1855

Also, in Plattsburg, a statue of President Atchison graces the front of the Clinton County Courthouse. If the citizens of the

“Show Me State,” folks known for their skepticism about almost everything, can recognize David Rice Atchison as president, then everyone should be able to accept his presidency.

The Biographical Congressional Directory published in Washington, D.C., in 1913, acknowledges Atchison as the “legal President of the United States for one day.”

Still not sure about Atchison’s place in history?

In 1991, a full 142 years after his single day of service as the leader of the free world, David Rice Atchison was inducted into the Hall of Famous Missourians. The induction included a bronze bust of President Atchison that remains on permanent display in the rotunda of the Missouri State Capitol in Jefferson City.

And there’s more.

Atchison County, Missouri, is named for David Rice Atchison, as is the city of Atchison, Kansas, which is home to America’s smallest presidential library.

The David Rice Atchison Presidential Library is inside the historic 1880 Santa Fe Freight Depot at 200 South 10th Street in Atchison, Kansas. At the time of the publication of this book, it is maintained by Chris W. Taylor, Executive Director of the Atchison County Historical Society.

Taylor is also the person to see about a tour of the library, which it’s said, he conducts with “equal measures of scholarship, conjecture, and good humor.”

Depending on the number of questions asked, a complete tour of the Presidential Library, including a restroom break, will take about five minutes. “After all,” says Director Taylor, “for a one-day presidency, how much space do you need?”

President Atchison was only forty-one years old on the day he assumed the mantle of the presidency, but that one day in office was long enough to make him America’s youngest *appointed* president.

So, how did this quirky bit of Americana come to be?

The Atchison presidency came about when Zachary Taylor refused inauguration on March 4, 1849, a Sunday. The outgoing president, James K. Polk, left office on schedule, but Taylor’s insistence that he is not sworn in until Monday, March 5th,

created a 24-hour power-vacuum in the most critical office in the land.

In 1849, the next in succession to the presidency was the President Pro Tempore of the Senate, David Rice Atchison.

Atchison never imagined when he went to bed the evening of March 3, 1849, that he would awaken as the President of the United States. In fact, he might not have learned about his presidency at all if it hadn't been for a particular incident.

According to Atchison's account of the event, printed thirty-three years after the fact, this is how he learned of his ascension to the presidency:

*Judge Willie Person Mangum of North Carolina awakened me at 3:00 a.m. and said, jocularly, that I was now President of the United States and he wanted me to appoint him as Secretary of State.*<sup>3</sup>

In that same article, Atchison said that if he had one boast to make during his time in office, it was "that not a man, woman, or child shed a tear on account of my incumbency."

How many presidents, before or after President Atchison, can make such a claim?

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1. soporific: sleep-inducing, about or characterized by sleep, sleepiness, drowsiness, or something that causes sleep, as in "I must say, Senator, your speech today was simply soporific!"
  2. *Stories from History's Dust Bin*, Volume 3, pp. 38-40.  
Pat Paulsen ran a comedic campaign for president every four years from 1968 to 1996 and garnered some votes.
  3. Russell, Helen. "Clinton County Historical Society," *David Rice Atchison (1807-1886)*. March 4, 1999.  
<http://sites.rootsweb.com/~moclinto/histsoc>

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*If you could kick the person in the pants responsible for most of your trouble, you wouldn't sit for a month.*  
Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919) 26th U.S. President