

Forgotten Fillmore Papers Examined: Sources for Reinterpretation of a Little-Known President

By CHARLES M. SNYDER

State University of New York, Oswego

AS MILLARD Fillmore prepared to leave the White House in March 1853 after a tenure of 32 months, the 53-year-old Executive reflected upon his past and future. The threats of disunion that troubled the Nation at the outset of his Presidency had been silenced. And the Compromise of 1850, representing a victory for moderates, North and South, was a source of deep satisfaction to him. Of course, the rejection of his bid for a second term was too recent to accept philosophically, but he found some comfort in the spirited support of his backers, who had yielded to Scott's nomination only after a protracted stalemate in the convention and who were already setting their sights on 1856.¹

Meanwhile, what of the months and years immediately ahead? The rough and tumble of his former law practice seemed to lack dignity for one so highly exalted; and even his unpretentious but comfortable home in Buffalo did not match the image. In this frame of mind he gathered his Presidential papers into 44 volumes and superintended their packing and shipment to New York aboard the schooner *Fairfax* and to Buffalo via the Troy and Erie Line.

At home, with time on his hands, he placed mementos of the Presidency in the library of his fine new home on Niagara Square—one of Buffalo's showplaces—and occasionally displayed them to visitors. James Grant Wilson, the noted author and editor, examined them there shortly before Fillmore's death in 1874, when he was considering a biography of the former President.

Despite justifiable pride in his papers, Fillmore made no provision for them in his will; and thus they became the property of his son, Millard Powers Fillmore, who resided in the Fillmore mansion until his death in 1889. With no children to inherit the personal papers of his family, Millard Powers Fillmore was reluctant to expose them to the public view: in his will he ordered that his executors "at the earliest practicable moment . . . burn or otherwise effectively destroy all correspondence or letters to or from my father, mother, sister or me."

Until the present time his will has been accepted as evidence that the

The author is professor of history at the State University of New York, College of Arts and Sciences, Oswego.

¹ Robert J. Rayback, *Millard Fillmore; Biography of a President* (Buffalo Historical Society Publications, 1959, 40:366, 370-372).

papers were indeed destroyed, but behind the scenes Charles De Angelis Marshall had intervened to give them a reprieve.

Millard Powers Fillmore had probably surprised no one when he named Charles De Angelis Marshall an executor of his will. The Marshall and Fillmore families had been closely linked for two generations. Marshall's grandfather and grandmother, John E. and Ruth Holmes Marshall, had been friends of Millard and Abigail Powers Fillmore since Buffalo's early years, and Mrs. Marshall had visited the Fillmores in the White House. Their son, Orsamus Holmes Marshall, a prominent lawyer and historian, had drawn Fillmore's attention to the Buffalo Historical Society; both subsequently served as its president. Each was chancellor of the University of Buffalo and a trustee of the Grosvenor Library. Their respective sons, Charles De Angelis Marshall and Millard Powers Fillmore, belonged to the same social clubs.

As executor of Millard Powers Fillmore's will, Marshall ignored the testator's request to destroy his papers and transferred them from the Fillmore home to his own residence at 700 Main Street, seven blocks away, and deposited them in the attic with stacks of Marshall papers; the latter including 50 years of O. H. Marshall's legal papers, manuscripts accumulated during his many years of research on the Niagara frontier, correspondence from the Marshall children, diaries of Ruth Holmes Marshall, De Angelis' and Holmes' correspondence, and a great deal more.

Charles De Angelis Marshall's tastes were not as bookish as his father's. He was an active club man and owned a half-interest in the Mansion House, one of the city's leading hotels. He seems to have given little attention to the papers in the attic, and for 20 years they lay untouched.

But their status changed suddenly on April 22, 1908, when Marshall, while walking from his office to his home as was his custom, fell to the street and died a few hours later. Though he had specialized in handling estates through his 40-year law practice, he left no will. The *Buffalo Times* reported that he had no close relatives, but it was soon compelled to publish a retraction.

Four years earlier, it was revealed, the 63-year-old bachelor had adopted Hazel Hugo, who lacked 2 days of being 20. According to a news column published several months after her dramatic appearance, Marshall had begun to provide for Hazel when she was 12 or 13; he had enrolled her in the Buffalo Female Academy and given her advantages beyond the means of her parents and had convinced the court that there was no impropriety in the adoption.

Hazel, who was now Mrs. Raymond Koerner, was named administratrix and was thus made responsible for the settlement of the somewhat tangled estate, which included some 60 pieces of real estate and was appraised at a half-million dollars. Among the properties was the Marshall residence, a fine old mansion standing in solitary splendor

amidst business blocks on Buffalo's busiest street. Hazel Koerner accepted an offer of \$100,000 for the house and began to dispose of the furnishings while a contractor prepared its demolition. In the garret she discovered the 44 volumes of the Fillmore Presidential papers and stacks of other manuscripts and documents, presumably belonging to the Marshalls. She graciously presented the Fillmore volumes to the Buffalo Historical Society. Only a few months earlier in 1907, this society had published the speeches and writings of Fillmore in two modest volumes, confident that they contained most of his works.² For good measure, Hazel Koerner also dispatched the late O. H. Marshall's *Americana* to the Buffalo Historical Society. The collection included rare editions of works relating to the Niagara frontier. In the light of later developments, it is of interest to note that she had second thoughts about these volumes. Reclaiming them, she sold them at auction at the American Art Galleries in New York.

The newly found Fillmore papers excited a flurry of interest in Buffalo. A newspaper featuring the more famous correspondents noted 345 letters or notes from the great Daniel Webster and 124 from Edward Everett, his successor in the Department of State.

While Buffalo savants reveled in the discovery, they overlooked the stacks of papers remaining in the Marshall garret. They did not go unobserved, however, by Charles Sidney Shepard, who now took a hand in the fate of the Fillmore-Marshall manuscripts. Shepard was the son of Sidney Shepard, a Buffalo business tycoon who had amassed a fortune from the manufacture of tinware and by shrewd investments in railroad and telegraph companies. His mother, Elizabeth Wells Shepard, was a niece of Millicent De Angelis Marshall (Mrs. O. H. Marshall). Charles Sidney grew up in Buffalo and took over the management of his father's businesses when the latter retired to New Haven, N.Y., in the 1880's. After his father's death in 1894, Charles Sidney moved to New Haven, where he lived with his mother and enlarged the family fortune with more shrewd investments. Realizing that the Marshall papers contained correspondence of the De Angelis and Shepard families and apprehensive lest the young administratrix destroy or sell them while dismantling the homestead, he purchased them, boxed them, and shipped them to New Haven. Here he housed them in his rambling 40-room mansion (La Bergerie), which had grown around the more modest clapboard farmhouse of his grandparents, Chester and Hannah Le Moyne De Angelis Wells. He piled 7 of the massive boxes in the second floor hallway of the servants' annex and heaped the remaining 11 boxes on the concrete floor of the basement.

Shepard appears to have lost interest in the papers once they were safely garnered into his home. Two boxes stenciled "MILLARD FILLMORE, BUFFALO, N.Y." in 2-inch letters seem to have elicited only a spot check

² Buffalo Historical Society *Publications*, vols. 10 and 11, 1907.

of their contents by a secretary during dull moments in the office. When Shepard died in 1934, there was no mention of the papers in his will, and they remained where they had been dropped a quarter-century earlier.

Most of Shepard's fortune went to charity, but the papers were a part of the residuary estate, which he left to two elderly cousins, Florence L. and Lillian A. Wells of Traverse City, Mich. Florence's share passed to Lillian at her death in 1955, and Lillian, in turn, willed the real estate and residuary personal property to the State University of New York, College of Arts and Sciences, Oswego, before her death in 1966.

At long last the much traveled papers were readied for inspection. Application of a crowbar revealed the thousands of Marshall, Holmes and De Angelis papers, and, more surprisingly, Fillmore manuscripts dating from his young manhood and extending to the last years of his life. The volume of Fillmore papers, small in the 1820's and 1830's, becomes heavier in the 1840's when Fillmore was successively a Congressman, the unsuccessful Whig candidate for Governor, comptroller of New York State, and the Whig nominee for the Vice Presidency. They are again thin during Fillmore's Presidency but increase to their highest number in 1856, when he sought a return to the Presidency as the candidate of the American (Know Nothing) Party and surviving Whigs. They tail off again thereafter when he withdrew from political life.

Among the papers is the draft of his initial public address, delivered on short notice on July 4, 1825, after a better known orator had declined. Of special value for future research is an index of the incoming correspondence during his Presidency that he referred to the various department heads for action. There is an inventory of the books in his library and another of the furnishings taken from the White House at the close of his tenure. A glance at the correspondents reveals such giants as Thurlow Weed, New York's Whig "Dictator"; William F. Seward, at times a political comrade, at other times a political enemy; Henry Clay; Daniel Webster; President William Henry Harrison; and a host of other national, State, and local figures. Even more surprising are some 70 letters from Dorothea Dix detailing her strenuous circuits from State capital to State capital in behalf of the insane and revealing a deep personal interest in Fillmore during his years as a widower. Equally intriguing are missives from the glamorous Anna Ella Carroll, editor and ghost writer for Fillmore in the campaign of 1856.

Fortunately, the Fillmore papers were stacked high and were thus saved from the creeping dampness incidental to 57 years on the basement floor.

And thus in 1969 the Fillmore papers cast new light on a President obscured for a century by a paucity of sources to interpret his career and in the process help to illuminate the times in which he lived.