

The Death of Harrison

Compiled by the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Target Grade Level: 4–12 in United States history classes

Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be better able to:

- Identify and analyze key components of a portrait and relate visual elements to relevant historical context and significance.
- Analyze the events surrounding the death of William Henry Harrison and John Tyler’s succession to the presidency.
- Apply their historical knowledge and analysis by writing newspaper articles that reflect their understanding of these events.

Portrait

The Death of Harrison

By Nathaniel Currier

Hand-colored lithograph, 1841

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Dr. Frank Stanton

NPG.81.49

[Link >>](#)

Background Information for Teachers

William Henry Harrison (1773–1841) had only been president for one month before he became the first president in U.S. history to die in office. This print, one of many sold to commemorate the historic occasion, shows members of his cabinet, relatives, a physician, and a minister gathered around the bed where he lay dying of pneumonia on April 4, 1841. The caption at the bottom lists those present at the scene, as well as Harrison’s last words, as recorded by his doctor, “I wish you to understand the true principles of the government. I wish them carried out. I ask nothing more.” Vice President John Tyler (1790–1862), away from Washington, D.C., at his home near Williamsburg, Virginia, was informed of Harrison’s death the next morning by a letter from the members of the cabinet.

Because this was the first time that a president had ever died in office, the immediate ramifications of Harrison’s death were not entirely clear. Article Two of the Constitution states that “in Case of the Removal of a President from Office, or his Death, Resignation, or Inability to discharge the Powers and Duties of the said Office, the Same shall devolve on the Vice President.” The ambiguity of that statement raised the question of whether Tyler should become the acting president until a new election could be held, or whether he should serve out the rest of Harrison’s term with full powers of the presidency. The decision that Tyler would be sworn in as president, with the full powers of the office, became the precedent for all future presidents who died in office.

Lesson Procedures

Portrait Activity

Use the “thirty-second look” (found in the *Reading Portraiture Guide for Educators*) to analyze *The Death of Harrison*.

Questions to consider with your students:

- What do you see in this portrait?
- Describe the setting of this portrait. Where might this be? Who is the man laying on the bed?
- Imitate the posture of the seated man and woman. What emotions are they feeling? How can you tell?
- Why do you think the man second from the left (Secretary of State Daniel Webster) is shown looking straight ahead rather than at the bed?
- Look closely at the figure in the doorway on the far right (Postmaster General Francis Granger). What do you think he is doing?

Newspaper Activity

As a class or in groups, create a special April 1841 edition of *The National Intelligencer* (a newspaper published in Washington, D.C., from about 1800 to 1867) that describes the events surrounding the death of William Henry Harrison and John Tyler’s succession to the presidency.

Assign individuals or small groups of students to research and write articles on topics such as:

- The scene at Harrison’s deathbed.
- Tyler’s reaction to the news of Harrison’s death.
- How the decision was made to have Tyler sworn in as president.
- Harrison’s funeral and the public mourning process.
- The Tyler family moving into the White House.
- Tyler’s first actions as president.
- Editorials for and against the decision to have Tyler assume the full powers of the presidency

The newspaper can also include illustrations, advertisements, and any other historically appropriate features.

Web Resources

A collection of primary sources relating to the death of Harrison and the succession of Tyler is available on the website of the University of California, Santa Barbara’s “The American Presidency Project”:

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?month=04&year=1841>

A biographical sketch of John Tyler, containing a very detailed account of the events surrounding Harrison's death, is on the U.S. Senate website:

http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/VP_John_Tyler.htm