

# David Wilmot

1814–1868



**WHY HE MADE HISTORY** David Wilmot was an antislavery representative from Pennsylvania who introduced the Wilmot Proviso. The amendment was designed to limit the spread of slavery in new territories.



*As you read the biography below, think about the role David Wilmot played in the antislavery movement. What was the effect of his legislation and of his political career?*



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In 1846 the United States was still at war with Mexico, fighting for control of territory that included Texas. President Polk asked Congress to pass a bill that would allow him to spend up to \$2 million to negotiate a territorial settlement with Mexico. Already, Congress was debating whether this new land should be slave or free. The debate intensified when Pennsylvania Representative David Wilmot introduced an amendment to the bill that would prohibit slavery in the new territory.

David Wilmot was born in 1814 and raised in rural Pennsylvania. He studied law and joined a law practice in the early 1830s. Wilmot married Anne Morgan in 1836. The couple had three children.

Over the years Wilmot's interest in politics grew. He took an active role in the Democratic Party and eventually left his law practice. Wilmot campaigned for Andrew Jackson, for Martin Van Buren, and for James K. Polk. He took the political stage himself when he ran successfully for the House of Representatives in 1845.

At first Wilmot remained loyal to President Polk's pro-slavery agenda. In 1845 he voted to admit Texas as a slave state. However, when Polk requested \$2 million to make peace with Mexico, Wilmot changed his position. He argued that "slavery should be excluded from any territory acquired by virtue of such an appropriation." Wilmot surprised party leaders by proposing an amendment to Polk's bill. The amendment stated that slavery would never exist in any part of the new territory.

The amendment, known as the Wilmot Proviso, passed in the House, but the Senate adjourned in 1846 without voting on it. The proviso (a clause that places a condition on an agreement) generated even more heated debate in the next session of Congress. It became the main issue of the Polk administration. The amendment passed in the House several times but

**The Nation Splits Apart****Biography**

was repeatedly defeated in the Senate. Regardless of their political party, most northerners supported the bill, while nearly all southerners opposed it.

Unhappy with Polk's influence, Wilmot left the Democratic Party in 1848 to help organize the Free Soil Party. However, the new party lost influence and Democrats denied Wilmot nomination for a fourth term in Congress in 1851. Over the next decade, Wilmot became the presiding judge of the Thirteenth Judicial District in Pennsylvania. Even so, he remained active in the political world. Angered by Stephen Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Bill allowing for the expansion of slavery, Wilmot finally left the Democratic Party. He took a leading role in founding the Republican Party in 1854, standing with Republicans against the expansion of slavery.

In 1860 Wilmot supported Abraham Lincoln as the Republican candidate for president. Lincoln considered Wilmot for a cabinet position, but Wilmot won election to the Senate instead. When his Senate term ended in 1863, Lincoln appointed him to be a judge. Wilmot served in that position until his death in 1868.

**WHAT DID YOU LEARN?**

1. **Describe** What was the Wilmot Proviso?

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2. **Evaluate** Did the Wilmot Proviso play a significant role in the antislavery movement? Explain your answer.

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**ACTIVITY**

Most northerners voted for the Wilmot Proviso, while most southerners voted against it. Write two articles about the proviso, one for a northern newspaper and one for a southern newspaper. How might these articles, published at the same time and about the same subject, have differed?