

**Keven McQueen** (2001): *Offbeat Kentuckians: Richard M. Johnson*: One of Franklin D. Roosevelt's vice presidents, John Nance Garner, famously lamented, "The vice presidency isn't worth a pitcher of warm spit." However, on occasion we encounter a vice president whose performance itself isn't worth a pitcher of warm spit. One of these was Kentucky's Richard M. Johnson.

Johnson was born on October 17, 1780 (some sources claim 1781), when much of Kentucky was still the untamed frontier. The site of his birth was a settlement called Beargrass, now known more familiarly as Louisville. Shortly thereafter, the family moved first to Bryant's Station, near Lexington, and then to Scott County.

According to relatives, when he was a young man Johnson fell in love with a woman who was either a schoolteacher or a seamstress. He wanted to marry her, but his mother forbade the union. Deeply hurt, Johnson vowed she would regret her interference some day. His revenge was many years delayed, but when it finally came it caused a major political and social scandal.

Johnson's career in politics started normally enough. He attended Transylvania University in Lexington, then afterwards studied law. He became a professional lawyer at age 19. Upon developing an interest in politics, he became a member of the General Assembly from 1804–06 and was elected to the House of Representatives in 1807. His career in the House was interrupted by the War of 1812. Johnson, a commissioned Army colonel, led a regiment of volunteers to Canada in 1813, where they fought the British and the Indians. The military engagement that made Colonel Johnson nationally famous was the Battle of the Thames on October 5, 1813. This was the fight that resulted in the death of the Shawnee Indian leader Tecumseh, a figure much feared by settlers.

Johnson was said to have killed Tecumseh, but he was just one of several Indian fighters who took credit for the deed. The real identity of Tecumseh's killer remains a hotly debated historical mystery; the best that can be said for Johnson's claim is that he is as likely to have done it as anybody else. At any rate, the popular assumption that Colonel Johnson was the one who permanently removed the threat of Tecumseh from the frontier certainly did no harm to his political career.

It is true that Johnson behaved with great valor while at war. At the Battle of the Thames, an astonishing 25 bullets allegedly struck either Johnson or his horse, and he had to be carried from the battlefield with wounds in his hip and thigh. When he returned to his seat in the House of Representatives in February 1814, he was lauded as a hero.

He remained in the House until 1819, when he was elected to the Senate. For the next several years, until 1837, Johnson was continuously a member of either the Senate or the House. It was said for a while that in Kentucky, Johnson was "more popular even than Henry Clay."

If Johnson had died earlier in his career, he would be remembered today as an early American career politician, Kentucky's major Democratic congressman of the early 19th century, and for his bravery in combat. Instead, his political legacy was affected by his personality, which became increasingly erratic and disagreeable with the passage of time, to the point where many observers seriously questioned his sanity. Richard Johnson's story becomes a strange one indeed after such a promising beginning.

Unfortunately for his image, Johnson had a talent for repelling others. Described by one observer as "the most vulgar man of all vulgar men in this world," Johnson was notorious for his bad taste in clothing and poor grooming. His personal life became the talk of his enemies and even members of his own party. An unabashed seducer, "he was known to have had sexual flings with the wives of at least four senators and congressmen, and the suspicion existed of at least three more," according to writer Carl Sifakis.

That was just scratching the surface of personal scandal. When his father died, Johnson finally saw his chance to pay his mother back for interfering in his choice of a bride. He inherited a mulatto slave named Julia Chinn, and soon made her his mistress. Johnson was quite open about the well-publicized relationship. He introduced Chinn as his wife (though in actuality Johnson never married), even after he became a Senator and entered Washington society. She bore him two daughters, Adaline and Imogene, whom Johnson insisted on treating as his own legal children, even having them educated and introducing them into society. Both women later married white men and were given generous tracts of land by their father. Furthermore, Scott County court records reveal that he freed many of his other slaves. His open affair with Julia Chinn would return to haunt Johnson repeatedly through his political career by giving his enemies plenty of ammunition with which to attack him, but he never backed down.

But this does not mean Johnson was an especially enlightened man. After Julia died in Lexington's cholera epidemic of 1833, he indulged in relations with a second slave mistress. When the second one ran off with another man, Johnson had her captured and then sold her at auction. Then he made her sister his third mistress.

To be fair, some of Johnson's legislative accomplishments were quite farsighted. He was instrumental in abolishing the debtor's prison in America in 1832, though it took 10 years of constant lobbying, and he made great strides in Indian education.

But in keeping with his unstable nature, Johnson also used the Senate floor to discuss strange pet projects. For example, in 1823 he championed the bizarre hollow earth theories of fellow veteran Captain John Cleves Symmes. Johnson even tried to persuade Congress to pass a bill that would fund an expedition to the center of the earth. The bill received only twenty-five votes and was soundly defeated.

In 1836 President Andrew Jackson chose his vice president, Martin Van Buren, to be his successor. The problem was, Van Buren himself would need a vice president. Though by the mid-1830s Congressman Johnson was definitely looking like a liability to his party, he was hand-picked by Jackson himself to be the running mate for Van Buren. (Five years earlier, when Johnson's vice presidential ambitions became known, John Tyler had quipped in reference to the former's habit of using his war wounds to attract votes, "The day is rapidly approaching when an ounce of lead will in truth be worth more than a pound of sense.") Andrew Jackson felt that despised Johnson's antics, his reputation as an Indian fighter and war hero was good for the ticket. Also, he had always been loyal to Jackson, and Jackson was a big believer in the spoils system.

Van Buren did become president in 1837, and vice president Johnson immediately began alienating his peers and the voters with his outrageous behavior. His licentiousness continued unchecked. He cared so little for his duties as vice president that he spent more time at home in Kentucky than in Washington. Indeed, while the country suffered from the financial Panic of 1839, Johnson announced that he was taking a nine-month leave of absence while receiving his full salary.

During this paid vacation, Johnson devoted his energy to opening and publicizing a tavern and spa on his farm in White Sulphur Spring, KY. His celebrity drew in many paying customers, one of whom noted in a letter to Amos Kendall, a member of the Van Buren cabinet, "the Vice President of these United States, with all his civic and military honors clustering around his time honored brow, is, or seems to be happy in the inglorious pursuit of tavern-keeping," and further noted that Johnson seemed preoccupied with nothing more serious than buying eggs and selling watermelons. The suggestion seemed to be that Johnson was much more suited for tavern-keeping than being a heartbeat away from the presidency.

The Democrats finally had enough of Johnson. Even his former supporter Jackson had to admit in a letter to Van Buren that Johnson was "dead weight," and that "...if Col. Johnson is the nominee [for vice president], it will loose [sic] the democracy thousands of votes—jeopardize this state [Tennessee] and surely loose Kentucky... Col. Johnson was the weakest candidate named." When Van Buren ran for reelection in 1839, the party's convention refused to nominate Johnson, or anyone else for that matter, for the vice presidential chair. In other words, Martin Van Buren became the

only presidential candidate in American history who had no running mate whatsoever.

A lesser man would have been mortified, but Johnson ran for president himself as an independent candidate. He embarked on a campaign which was highlighted by his bizarre behavior. Even his sympathetic biographer Leland Meyer remarked that “His manners in this most scurrilous campaign in American history were not above reproach.” He was criticized for making “incoherent, rambling” speeches. The *Kentucky Gazette* of July 11, 1839, reprinted a report from the *Scioto Gazette* claiming that while stumping in Ohio, Johnson displayed his battle scars to the audience. The article also delivered a few tongue-in-cheek compliments; “What though he does crave credit for valiant feats he never performed, has he no precedent for it?.... What if he did not write [the famous Sunday Mail Report]? It requires a man of some ingenuity to palm off the production of another as his own.”

During that campaign of 1840, the memorable Whig slogan was “Tippecanoe and Tyler, too.” Someone in the Johnson camp—some have suggested it was Johnson himself—reflected that their candidate was himself a hero of the War of 1812, and composed a rival campaign slogan: “Rumpsey dumpsey, Rumpsey dumpsey! Colonel Johnson killed Tecumseh!” (However, there is evidence the slogan existed as early as 1824.) This campaign jingle is fondly remembered by historians as one of the most moronic ever devised. Johnson was trounced at the polls, receiving only 48 electoral votes. The crowning embarrassment was that he did not carry Kentucky, his home state.

Richard Johnson returned to Congress in 1841, but again attempted unsuccessfully to run for president in 1844. After this defeat, he retired to his tavern in Kentucky. In 1850 he was elected to the House of Representatives.

However, though elected he was unable to serve. His longstanding erratic behavior had finally turned into outright mental illness. The Frankfort correspondent for the *Louisville Daily Journal* of November 9, 1850, informed its readership: “Col. R.M. Johnson is laboring under an attack of dementia, which renders him totally unfit for business. It is painful to see him on the floor attempting to discharge the duties of a member. He is incapable of properly exercising his physical or mental powers. The veteran form that has filled so many important posts in civil life and born itself so gallantly upon the battlefield seems to totter, and the mind which vivified it seems to flicker and wane in a dim uncertain light.”

Richard Johnson died in Frankfort of a stroke on November 19, 1850. His uniqueness lives after him: he remains the only vice president who was so unpopular that he was elected to the office by Congress rather than by popular vote, in accordance with Amendment XII of the Constitution.

