



Martin Van Buren Biographies/Monographs

Ted Widmer, *Martin Van Buren* (New York: Times Books, 2005) – Widmer’s biography is both the newest and shortest traditional biography on the 8th President. It is part of “The American Presidents Series,” which presents a “grand panorama” of the chief executives “in volumes compact enough for the busy reader.” It provides a concise and accessible overview, though lacks greater detail and analysis present in more extensive biographies. Overall, it works well as an introduction to Martin Van Buren.

Donald B. Cole, *Martin Van Buren and the American Political System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) – Cole provides a richly detailed and critical biography. This work offers an excellent balance of Van Buren’s upbringing and family affairs, as well as extensive overviews of his political development and rise to national power. Cole’s work benefits from clear and flowing prose and a well-balanced telling of Van Buren’s role in locality and on the national stage. An excellent choice for readers desiring more detail and critical analysis than Widmer provides.

John Niven, *Martin Van Buren: The Romantic Age of American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) – Perhaps the most authoritative biography on Martin Van Buren, Niven’s work provides in-depth analysis of Martin Van Buren’s political career, as well as Van Buren’s personal life. It places particular emphasis on his role in New York state-level politics and the creation of political parties. Thoroughly researched, Niven’s writing and amount of detail does not lend itself for a quick and easy read.

Joel H. Silbey, *Martin Van Buren and the Emergence of American Popular Politics* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002) – Silbey’s study provides a concise and thoughtful analysis of Martin Van Buren and his important role in shaping American politics. This is primarily a political study, rather than a traditional biography, focusing on the development of American democratic politics after 1815. In particular, Silbey shows how Van Buren played a crucial role in expanding the sphere that comprised the “political” world through concerted organizing efforts that took the form of political parties.

Robert V. Remini, *Martin Van Buren and the Making of the Democratic Party* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959) – True to its title, Remini’s work provides an insightful study of Van Buren’s role in the creation of the Democratic Party in New York and at the national level. Starting with Van Buren’s entrance onto the national stage as a U.S. Senator, Remini intimately examines Van Buren’s role creating the framework necessary for the “Age of Jackson,” and concludes once Jackson entered the presidency.

Major L. Wilson, *The Presidency of Martin Van Buren* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1984) – The general consensus of Martin Van Buren’s numerous biographers is that his presidency was largely unsuccessful. Generally speaking, Van Buren the Senator and party-man was important, Van Buren the president, not so much. Yet Wilson’s focus on Van Buren’s presidency offers a useful study on the eighth President. At points a little too positive in his reappraisal, Wilson nonetheless offers particularly useful information on Van Buren’s Independent Treasury and his role hammering out the disputed Maine and Canadian border.

General Reading on Antebellum & Jacksonian America

Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2006) – Watson’s book provides a highly readable synthesis of American politics from roughly 1815 to 1840. This includes digging into political culture and social issues that all impacted politics, including the period’s larger religious reform movement, and others including temperance, abolitionism, and women’s suffrage. Touching on more familiar and contentious issues such as the “Corrupt Bargain” of 1824, the Nullification Crisis, and the Bank War, Watson also offers readers a useful framework to think about the relationship of federal power, liberty, and tyranny, and what the role of the federal government should be in American society.

Three Competing/Complementary Narratives:

Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991)

Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005)

Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007)

For readers looking for a single-volume synthesis of this period, there are three impressive options. Each work covers the first half of the nineteenth century (Wilentz beginning a little earlier and going a little later) and tries to draw attention to the significant and often tumultuous and unsettling changes that occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century. This is what Seller’s called a “market revolution,” emphasizing the significant changes in the movement of people and goods across a truly vast early America. Each of these works examines the notable political change (as Wilentz calls the rise of democracy, throwing off the older classical republican form of government), all accompanied by similar social, cultural, and economic change. Reading straight through any of these options is daunting (the shortest sitting at more than 400 pages, and the longest more than 800 pages), but is a worthwhile endeavor. Another option is to read the works side-by-side, comparing each author’s interpretation of particular events. Regardless of choice, each book provides great insight on this incredibly important period of American history that Martin Van Buren lived through and helped shape.

Louis P. Masur, *1831: Year of Eclipse* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2001) – Focused around the “great eclipse of 1831,” Masur uses this event to capture the major movements and feelings in one tumultuous year. Each chapter examines a different aspect of American society, including Nat Turner’s failed slave revolt and the entrenchment of the slave system across the south simultaneously corresponding with a well-organized abolition movement; the Second Great Awakening and the various reform movements ranging from anti-masonry to temperance; Jacksonian politics and Indian removal (Martin Van Buren again appears as a key member implementing Jackson’s policies); and the major transportation and industrial innovations and horrors (such as cholera in urban centers). A fast-paced and quick read that offers readers a glance into the psyche of Van Buren’s time, along with an overview of many contested issues of the antebellum period.

Stephen Mihm, *Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) – Martin Van Buren’s presidency was largely consumed by one of the worst depressions in American history: the Panic of 1837. While not focusing explicitly on that Panic, Mihm’s truly fantastic work provides excellent insight on the American economy and the system of credit and money that unraveled. Spanning from the era of the American Revolution to the American Civil War, Mihm provides a series of fascinating vignettes on the world of counterfeiters and counterfeiting. He then demonstrates how the federal government (the only institution per the U.S. Constitution allowed to “make money”) abdicated its authority for creating a standardized federal currency, leaving hundreds of small and unreliable banks to provide unreliable and often worthless circulating currency to make the nation’s economy function. Between the 1830s and the Civil War, Mihm convincingly shows that the entire paper currency system was a mess, in large part due to Jackson’s (with the help of Martin Van Buren!) destruction of the Second Bank of the United States. On the Panic of 1837, see also **Alasdair Roberts, *America’s First Great Depression: Economic Crisis and Political Disorder After the Panic of 1837* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012)** and **Jessica M. Lepler, *The Many Panics of 1837: People, Politics, and the Creation of a Transatlantic Financial Crisis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013)**

Amy S. Greenberg, *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2012) – *A Wicked War* offers readers an excellent overview of the political developments that led to James Polk’s election (and Martin Van Buren’s failed attempt for re-election) in 1844, and the behind-the-scenes work to bring Texas and large chunks of Mexico into the United States (notably as slave states). Greenberg’s chapters alternate between local politics of a young Abraham Lincoln, James Polk’s concerted effort to spread slavery and the important role of his wife Sarah as a key advisor and developer of such plans, the gritty scenes of battle in Mexico, and the international efforts of diplomacy to end a wicked war. Sketched across this work, Greenberg makes a compelling argument that a growing anti-war movement in Congress, in the streets, and in the newspapers helped engrain opposition to such as war as being both legitimate and patriotic.

Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016) – Sinha’s work provides a comprehensive history of the abolition movement from before the American Revolution up to the American Civil War. In reexamining abolitionism, Sinha centers her work around black Americans. Sinha also demonstrates that the lines between slave resistance and antislavery activism were far less defined than portrayed in popular narratives, as well as the seeming fault-lines between “radical” and “bourgeois” divisions. Focusing on the diverse membership within this movement while simultaneously placing it within its transnational context, Sinha’s work stands as the authoritative overview of the abolitionist tradition in America.

Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African American Slaves* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) – As an overview of American Slavery, Berlin’s work places the experience of enslaved persons at the center of this study. Digging into the slave experience, this work provides both a chronological and geographic overview of the changing nature of slavery in America. Dividing “generations” into different eras, Berlin shows how the experience of slavery differed during the Age of Revolution and that of the “plantation generation,” shaped by greater violence and the dominance of cotton. For an overview on the vast scholarship on American slavery and for further reading recommendations, see **Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery: 1619-1877* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993).**

Bruce Levine, *Half Slave and Half Free: The Roots of Civil War*, revised ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005) – The scholarship on the coming of the American Civil War is incredibly large and continues to grow each year. Levine’s work stands as a superb synthesis with which to start exploring this topic. Covering the development of social, economic, political, and cultural divergence between North and South (but also within these diverse regions, as neither region was a monolith), Levine provides a concise background from the colonial period into the Antebellum age. He then narrows his focus on the decades preceding the Civil War and provides readers with an overview that effectively outlines the centrality of slavery as the cause of the war, yet also examines the proximate causes of war as well. At the end of the book, Levine also provides a helpful bibliographical essay for further reading. An excellent choice for those new to coming of the Civil War or looking for a comprehensive 1-volume synthesis. For another excellent 1-volume (slightly newer) account of the coming of the Civil War, see also **Elizabeth R. Varon, *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010).**

Claudio Saunt, *Unworthy Republic: The Dispossession of Native Americans and the Road to Indian Territory* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2020) – Beginning with the 1830 Indian Removal Act, this work traces the forced abandonment of homes and lives built in what is now Mississippi and the journey to Oklahoma. Saunt’s work simultaneously examines the impact this had on these areas, quickly filled with by white settlers and enslaved black labor. An encompassing synthesis, Saunt forcefully shows that expulsion was not inevitable, but rather a concerted effort by the federal government and settlers on the ground that refused to accept indigenous peoples who were readily adapting to what politicians deemed American “civilization policy.” An excellent introduction to this topic, and one in which Van Buren played an intimate role.

New York Specific

John L. Brooke, *Columbia Rising: Civil Life on the Upper Hudson from the Revolution to the Age of Jackson* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010) – *Columbia Rising* provides a grand overview the changes in civil life in a particular locality: Columbia County, NY (the birthplace and home of Martin Van Buren). Van Buren is a recurring character woven in and out of the narrative, but he does not take the main stage. Rather, his experience in Columbia, along with a host of other lesser-known men and women, is used to demonstrate the significant changes occurring in Columbia and the nation. As Brooke shows, “politics” is too limiting of a term to encompass the civic lives of Americans during this period. Brooke demonstrates how a growing public sphere and actions taken by those shut out of traditional politics such as women and free black persons came to influence governance and political decisions. A must read to understand the local world that shaped Martin Van Buren and his push to reform American politics and efforts to build the Democratic Party.

Andrea C. Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement: A History of Slavery and Resistance in Dutch New York* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021) – For those interested in the origins of slavery in the region that today composes New York State, Mosterman’s work provides a concise and highly insightful study of slavery under Dutch controlled New Netherland. Mosterman’s work offers a much-welcomed overview of the Dutch system of slavery, but also digs into the experience of enslaved peoples. Exploring attics, basements, and other small spaces where enslaved people lived, Mosterman’s work provides a thorough background for those interested in the type of slavery present in Dutch cultural holdouts such as Kinderhook, and that Martin Van Buren grew up with in his father’s tavern and later in his own household.

David N. Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777-1827* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2006) – Gellman’s work stands as the most comprehensive book on the process of emancipation in New York. He offers readers a concise background on the proto-abolition movements during the colonial period and then evaluates New York’s failure to abolish slavery in the fervor of the American Revolution. The later portions of the book outline the slow and often painful process of gradual emancipation enacted post-1799, digging into the numerous social, political, and economic changes that occurred in New York to make total abolition in 1827 possible. As in other works on this list, Van Buren appears once again, this time as an opponent to full citizenship for black New Yorkers during the 1821 Constitutional Convention.

Martin Bruegel, *Farm, Shop, Landing: The Rise of a Market Society in the Hudson Valley, 1780-1860* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) – While the use of “market revolution” is often thrown about too freely, Bruegel’s work demonstrates that substantial changes occurred in the social and economic lives of the residents of the Hudson Valley from the era of the American Revolution to the American Civil War. Focusing on Columbia County and Greene County, Bruegel’s work is an excellent choice for digging deeper into the world in which Martin Van Buren grew up and the changes that occurred prior to his return to Lindenwald in 1841. It provides insight on the changing day-to-day (and face-to-face) interactions of farmers and laborers, as farmers increasingly sold goods to distant markets in New York City and did so via unknown intermediaries. The goods they sold also changed, as Van Buren’s Kinderhook neighbors found themselves outcompeted by western wheat and barley coming down the Erie Canal and had to adapt to raising cattle and sheep and growing hay instead. Readers will find other changes as well, such as the transition toward using paper bank notes rather than trading services and labor, as well as the intrusion of clocks for organizing work, replacing the sun and seasons in regulating daily labors.

Charles W. McCurdy, *The Anti-Rent Era in New York Law & Politics, 1839-1865* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001) – One of the most explosive and violent events in eastern New York in the Antebellum period, the anti-rent movement sparked widespread tenant revolt against oppressive landlords and an archaic system of land tenure. McCurdy traces the development of the tenant movement and the actions taken in response by landlords and political figures, as well as the reach and limits such a movement had in electoral politics. While not a direct actor in this movement, Martin Van Buren appears once again, along with his son John, the state’s Attorney General, who found himself trying to balance demands to crush the anti-rent movement and to reform New York’s system of property ownership. See also **Reeve Huston, *Land and freedom: Rural Society, Popular Protest, and Party Politics in Antebellum New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).**