James A. Garfield: 20th President of the United States

José D. Villalobos, University of Texas at El Paso

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CHRONOLOGY
of the
U.S. PRESIDENCY

Volume One

Mathew Manweller, Editor
Chronology of the U.S. Presidency

VOLUME 2
Zachary Taylor through Benjamin Harrison

Mathew Manweller, Editor
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James A. Garfield
20th President of the United States

José D. Villalobos

| Born:      | November 19, 1831 |
| Died:      | September 19, 1881 |
| Spouse:    | Lucretia Rudolph Garfield (1832–1918) |
| Children:  | Eliza Garfield (1860–1863) |
|           | Harry Augustus Garfield (1863–1942) |
|           | James Rudolph Garfield (1865–1950) |
|           | Mary Garfield (1867–1947) |
|           | Irvin M. Garfield (1870–1951) |
|           | Abram Garfield (1872–1958) |
|           | Edward Garfield (1874–1876) |
| State From:| Ohio |
| Presidency:| March 4, 1881–September 19, 1881 |
| Vice President: | Chester A. Arthur |

**ELECTION DATA**

**1880 Election**

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**BIOGRAPHY**

President James A. Garfield served for only 200 days before an assassin's bullets ended his unlikely rise to power. Garfield was the last "log cabin" president and a lifelong Republican, both in the tradition of his predecessor, Ulysses Grant. In his
lifetime, he served honorably as educator, general, and politician. His surprising
nomination for president in 1880 earned him the nickname of the dark horse can-
didate, and his victory in the general election sealed his place in history as a U.S.
president. His rise to power and tragic death highlight an important episode of the
Gilded Age. Although Garfield’s time as president was cut short, his assassination
set the stage for the passage of the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act of 1883.

In line with his political reputation as a dark horse, James Garfield was brought
up from meager beginnings. He was born on November 19, 1831, in a log cabin in
an Ohio settlement called Orange Township within Cuyahoga County. His father,
Abram Garfield, died when James was only 17 months old, leaving the future
president without a solid father figure. James’s mother, Eliza Ballou, took care to
fill the void by providing a stable home life. Eliza recognized Garfield’s intellect
and encouraged him to strive for an education. At the age of 17, Garfield had his
eyes on becoming a sailor against his mother’s wishes. After falling ill on one of
his excursions out to sea, however, Garfield accepted $17 from his mother and
brother for admittance into Geauga Academy. The academy served as a neighbor-
hood institution for secondary studies.

As a young adult, Garfield successfully navigated his college education, first
attending the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute (today Hiram College) and later
transferring to Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts. He graduated in
1856 with a reputation as an outstanding student, an accomplishment that would
open the doors to a bright future. In fact, Garfield was soon given a position at the
Eclectic Institute as an instructor of classical languages and thereafter served as
principal until 1860. Later, as president, Garfield reflected on his rise out of pov-
erty when visiting with students at his old alma mater, by then renamed Hiram Col-
lege: “Poverty is uncomfortable, as I can testify; but nine times out of ten the best
thing that can happen to a young man is to be tossed overboard and compelled to
sink or swim for himself. In all my acquaintance I never knew a man to be drowned
who was worth the saving.”

After his stint as principal of the Eclectic Institute, Garfield decided to study
law and go into politics. He was nominated and successfully ran for Ohio state
senator in 1859, was seated in January 1860, and served until 1861 when his new
career was interrupted by the start of the Civil War. Almost immediately, Garfield
joined the Union army and, after being commissioned by Gov. William Dennison

The First Left-Handed and Ambidextrous President

James Garfield was the first left-handed president of the United States. He
was also ambidextrous, able to write Greek with one hand and Latin with
the other simultaneously.
as lieutenant colonel, took command of the 42nd Ohio Volunteer Infantry. Serving as a colonel, Garfield was most noted for successfully leading a large cavalry charge against the Confederate cavalry forces of Brig. Gen. Humphrey Marshall in January 1862. Garfield's forces fought the Confederates in Paintsville, Kentucky, and forced them to withdraw. His victory received wide recognition, which added to his reputation as a leader. Garfield was subsequently promoted to brigadier general and later on to major general in the U.S. Army.

In October 1862, Republicans of the Ohio state legislature rewarded Garfield (then still serving in the military) by nominating him to serve at the national level in the House of Representatives for the Nineteenth Congressional District of Ohio. Holding a convention in Garrettsville on September 2, Garfield's name was placed among four other nominees, one of which was the incumbent, John Hutchings. Garfield took an early lead on the first ballot, barely edging Hutchings by a single vote. By the eighth ballot, Garfield won the nomination by a margin of 78 to 71 over Hutchings. Lacking an opponent for the election, Garfield's nomination victory had sealed his position as a member of Congress. Garfield then left the military in December to continue his political career. He kept his seat in the House of Representatives until the 1880 Republican National Convention when, to everyone's surprise, he was nominated for the Republican presidential ticket. Had the dark horse not been chosen for the nomination (or had he lost the nomination), Garfield would have otherwise been set to take one of Ohio's U.S. Senate seats in March 1881 as previously planned by the Republican-controlled Ohio legislature.

Among Garfield's other notable episodes during his political career were the controversial roles he played in the 1872–1873 Crédit Mobilier of America scandal and the Electoral Commission of 1876. The Crédit Mobilier scandal broke in the middle of Ulysses S. Grant's reelection campaign and had to do with the U.S. government appropriating funds to Union Pacific Railroad, a private company, and then distributing stock from the Union Pacific's construction company, Crédit Mobilier, to the vice president, Speaker of the House, and more than 30 members of Congress, including Garfield. As one of the members of the highly controversial Electoral Commission of 1876, Garfield voted along party lines with his Republican colleagues to deliver a highly controversial 8–7 victory vote that helped elevate Rutherford Hayes to the presidency. Consequently, Garfield's reputation as an independent thinker in Congress suffered a major blow. Despite Garfield's involvement, the Crédit Mobilier scandal and the Electoral Commission of 1876 did not sink his political career. On the contrary, Garfield's subsequent efforts to move away from such scandals of the Gilded Age and toward civil service reform—along with the sympathy and mourning felt in the aftermath of the president's assassination—would leave an overall positive reputation and legacy.

At the start of the Republican National Convention, several nominations were made, with Ulysses S. Grant, James G. Blaine, and John Sherman at the head of the
field. Roscoe Conkling, a prominent U.S. senator from New York and leader of the "Stalwart" faction of the Republican Party that opposed civil service reform, was among the Grant supporters who pushed heavily for the former president to attain the nomination for a run at a third term in the White House. Conkling no doubt also had his eyes set on James Blaine, his archrival, and was prepared to do whatever he could within his means to impede Blaine's nomination. Indeed, in the previous Republican convention of 1876, Conkling sacrificed his bid to help Rutherford B. Hayes clinch the nomination and thereby ruin James Blaine's chances for victory. This time, Conkling rallied those referred to as the "Stalwart" Grant supporters against Blaine's supporters who were inauspiciously dubbed the "Half-Breeds" due to their support of civil service reform through a merit system. Not far behind were the John Sherman supporters. Sherman filled the gap left by then president Rutherford B. Hayes, who had decided to forgo a run for reelection after having turned away from the tradition of party patronage in favor of more bipartisan appointments for southern Democrats. Sherman had earned his reputation as a U.S. senator by helping to mold the national banking system, pushing for increases in the nation's gold reserves and a merit system in the bureaucracy that would replace the controversial practice of patronage. His efforts would eventually play a key role in the passage of the 1883 Civil Service Reform Act. Blaine and Conkling, along with many other northern Republicans, led their rival factions against both Hayes and each other.

Before the start of the convention, James Garfield had openly endorsed James G. Blaine for the presidential nomination. However, once John Sherman announced his candidacy, James Garfield loyally (and perhaps feeling a bit obligated) decided to throw his support behind fellow Ohioan John Sherman. Along with other Sherman supporters, Garfield focused on Sherman's numerous contributions to the country and gradual ascension within the Republican Party. Sherman was seen by his supporters as someone who had paid his dues and earned his chance for the nomination. Despite his accolades, however, Sherman was also haunted by a reputation for being less personable than was customary for a presidential candidate. He was also criticized as being a weak public speaker and badgered by the nickname the "Ohio Icicle."

Although quite clearly fighting upstream against the other two front-runners, Sherman and his supporters saw an opportunity to capture the nomination should Grant's supporters break rank amid the first handful of ballots cast at the convention. Representing the Ohio delegation as a newly elected (but not yet seated) U.S. senator, Garfield delivered a moving speech on behalf of Sherman, which caught much of the attention of the convention members. However, some took the view that Garfield had somehow stolen the show (inadvertently or otherwise) from Sherman. In particular, some observers were taken aback because Garfield failed to mention John Sherman's name until the end of his speech. Garfield was angered
by the notion that he had been less than supportive of Sherman and expressed his discomfort to those near him.

The balloting stalemated soon after it began, and neither Grant, Blaine, nor Sherman were able to break from the pack to secure an early nomination. Thirty-four ballots later, a sudden surge came from the delegates of Wisconsin, who chose James Garfield as their dark horse favorite, awarding him the support of 16 delegates. Both Blaine and Sherman sensed the change in momentum and sent their blessings to Garfield, in part to ensure that Grant would not be able to clinch a third nomination. There was little doubt that Blaine's decision to back Garfield was in part influenced by his animosity toward Conkling and the other Stalwarts. The vote count in support of Garfield quickly swelled to 50 in the next ballot, and the 36th ballot saw a sudden, final, and overwhelming swell of support for Garfield. He won the nomination by a count of 399 delegates. Chester A. Arthur was subsequently chosen by Garfield as his running mate.

Once Garfield became the nominee for the Republican Party, he began his face-off with the nominee for the Democratic Party, Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock. A tough opponent, Hancock was a decorated Union war hero who had fought at the Battle of Gettysburg. Hancock also had strong support in the southern states,
Grant’s Postconvention Snub of Garfield

After Garfield’s unlikely victory at the Republican National Convention of 1880, Ulysses Grant made no effort to see or congratulate his fellow Republican while still in Chicago. He left the Palmer House and took a train to Wisconsin without stopping by the nearby Grand Pacific Hotel where Garfield was staying. As Ackerman (2004) notes, “Grant never sent Garfield any congratulations at all: no telegram, no letter, no private message.” In his first public remarks thereafter, Grant instead thanked his supporters and, highlighting the loyalty and support of Sen. Roscoe Conkling, declared that Conkling would have been best suited to take the nomination in his place.

and the Democratic Party was largely united behind him. In the end, however, James Garfield won the general election by a margin of 59 Electoral College votes, 214–155. Oddly, Garfield somewhat regretted his victory, stating on the eve of his inauguration, “I have no feeling of elation in view of the position I am called upon to fill. I would thank God were I today a free lance in the House or Senate.”

Garfield served as president for only 200 days. During that time, Garfield worked closely with Secretary of State Blaine to push for new policies and more vigorous dealings with Latin America, such as, among other things, looking to forestall European intervention in Venezuela and proposing that a grand Pan-American Conference be organized in Panama in 1882. Elsewhere, he made some headway with Attorney General McVeagh in trying to investigate acts of fraud connected with the postal service, known as the Star Route frauds. Garfield also had plans for furthering the industrialization movement in the United States. Part of Garfield’s vision for his presidency was to facilitate healing relations between the North and South in the aftermath of the Civil War. Garfield sought to change the hearts and minds of those from the South opposed to the emancipation of African American slaves. In fact, Garfield made several public speeches—including his inaugural address—wherein he made clear his support for extending full citizenship and suffrage rights to African Americans.

Print Your Own Ballots

At the time of the 1880 election, political parties were expected to provide their own ballots for voters to fill out. As such, voters would choose one party’s ballot and fill it out rather than working from a combined list. If a voter did not like any of the candidates listed on the ballot, he would simply scratch out that name.
Another major part of Garfield’s vision had to do with seeking civil service reform by replacing the practice of patronage with a true merit system for selecting bureaucrats and making government appointments. Garfield considered civil service reform a major challenge that merited serious attention. All the while, however, Garfield was besieged by requests for political appointments, particularly facing pressure from Roscoe Conkling and the Stalwarts. Garfield let out his frustration in one of his daily diary entries, dated March 15, 1881: “I am feeling greatly dissatisfied with my lack of opportunity for study. My day is frittered away with the personal seeking of people when it ought to be given to the great problems which concern the whole country.... What ought not a vigorous thinker do, if he could be allowed to use the opportunities of a Presidential term in vital useful activity? Some civil service reform will come by necessity, after the wearisome years of wasted Presidents have paved the way for it.” Ironically, Garfield’s vision for reform was cut short when he was assassinated by Charles Guiteau, a patronage seeker. Nevertheless, Garfield’s death would serve as a major springboard for the passage and implementation of the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act of 1883 under Garfield’s successor, President Chester A. Arthur.

**FIRST FAMILY BIOGRAPHIES**

Garfield’s wife, Lucretia, was born in Garrettsville, Ohio, on April 19, 1832. She was of German, Welsh, English, and Irish ancestry and came from a very affluent family. Her ancestors included James and Mary Chilton, who had been among the original pilgrims on the *Mayflower*. Like her husband, Lucretia went to school at the Hiram Eclectic Institute, which her father had helped found. She gained a high level of expertise in linguistic studies, most notably Greek and Latin. She also helped put together a literary society, which she often used as a platform for stating her beliefs on women’s rights. James Garfield was one of her Greek professors at the Eclectic Institute and soon began a long correspondence with her that would eventually lead to marriage. Lucretia took a number of teaching jobs before she married Garfield, one in Ravenna, Ohio, as a French, Latin, and algebra teacher, and another in Bryan, Ohio, where she taught art classes.

James Garfield married Lucretia Rudolph on November 11, 1858. He often referred to her by her nickname, “Crete,” and would depend heavily on her insights throughout his career. Lucretia and James had seven children together: Eliza Arabella, Harry Augustus, James Rudolph, Mary, Irvin M., Abram, and Edward. One of their sons, Harry, became a professor at Princeton University, served as president of Williams College, and eventually went on to serve President Woodrow Wilson as fuel administrator during World War I. Another son, James R. Garfield, eventually took the position of secretary of the interior under the administration of President Theodore Roosevelt.
Married Life amid Politics and War

During their first five years of marriage, James and Lucretia Garfield lived together for only 20 weeks but still managed to start their family by having their first two children, Harry and Elize, during the same time period. Their long bouts of separation were due mostly to the demands that Garfield faced first in trying to start his political career and then in serving in the Union army during the Civil War. After their fifth wedding anniversary, Lucretia discovered that Garfield had been having an affair, which took a heavy toll and nearly brought their marriage to an end. Lucretia eventually forgave her husband and the couple had five more children thereafter.

As First Lady, Lucretia was quite assertive in shaping her role. She refused pressure from the Republican establishment and Garfield’s temperance colleagues who wanted to maintain a ban on alcohol in the White House. She was also quite involved in political discussions within the White House, though she refused to directly involve herself in facilitating federal positions or to publicly engage in controversial debates over social issues. After her tenure as First Lady was cut short by the sudden and tragic death of her husband, Lucretia helped set up numerous memorials for him, including a burial monument located in Cleveland, Ohio.

CABINET MEMBERS

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<th>Position</th>
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<tr>
<td>Attorney General</td>
<td>Wayne McVeagh</td>
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<td>Postmaster General</td>
<td>Thomas L. James</td>
<td>(1881–1882)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary of the Interior</td>
<td>Samuel J. Kirkwood</td>
<td>(1881–1882)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary of the Navy</td>
<td>William H. Hunt</td>
<td>(1881–1882)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary of State</td>
<td>James G. Blaine</td>
<td>(1881)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secretary of the Treasury</td>
<td>William Windom</td>
<td>(1881)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secretary of War</td>
<td>Robert T. Lincoln</td>
<td>(1881–1885)</td>
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*Note: All Cabinet members served President Garfield until his death on September 19, 1881, and then served under President Chester A. Arthur thereafter.*

Once in office, Garfield faced the daunting task of trying to overcome political corruption while facing pressure to heed the requests from the various factions within the Republican Party for filling positions at the cabinet level and elsewhere. Indeed, Garfield had to contend with the doubt and disappointment shown by Grant’s Stalwarts
and in trying to win them over risked offending Blaine’s Half-Breeds. Garfield held numerous conferences at the farm at Mentor to weigh his various options. One of the most prestigious posts, secretary of state, went to James Blaine, who had played a key role in assisting Garfield in the nomination period while Conkling and the other Stalwarts were continuing their push for a Grant nomination.

Roscoe Conkling, meanwhile, let it be known that he was highly interested in the position of treasury secretary (either for himself or Levi P. Morton, who put forth as a possible candidate), particularly for the power and patronage that could be wielded through the office. Garfield decided against Conkling because he did not want to hand over a great deal of financial power to a political figure from New York where much power was already concentrated. After some stumbling blocks, the post eventually went to William Winfield of Minnesota. This was a huge blow to Conkling, particularly given Blaine’s appointment to the State Department.

Trying to appease Conkling, Garfield did give a nod to Stalwart Thomas L. James by appointing him postmaster general. Unfortunately, Conkling was only further angered by what he viewed as a major snub. Concerning the remaining cabinet positions, Garfield chose Robert Todd Lincoln (son of President Lincoln) as secretary of war, which pleased Grant supporters. He also chose Wayne McVeagh as attorney general, William H. Hunt as secretary of the navy, and Samuel J. Kirkwood as secretary of the interior.

The Rivalry of James Blaine and Roscoe Conkling

How James Garfield suddenly catapulted to the presidency is a tale well told through Kenneth D. Ackerman’s (2004) account of the rivalry between Roscoe Conkling and James Blaine. The rivalry led to several events that turned out to be quite fortunate for the so-called dark horse candidate, culminating with Garfield’s nomination at the 1880 Republican convention. Circa 1866, Conkling and Blaine, both Republican members of the House of Representatives, came to greatly dislike each other over a number of public quarrels. Perhaps most notable was the incident that occurred in April 1866 wherein Conkling attempted to abolish the office of another foe—then postmaster general James Barnet Fry. James Blaine had helped to draft the military bill that set up the office and although he hardly shrugged at Conkling’s efforts to do away with it, Blaine took offense to what he viewed as a personal attack conducted by Conkling against Fry. Blaine could not help but defend the accusations against the general and his challenge to Conkling would contribute to a deep resentment that would later influence, in part, the decisions made at the 1880 Republican National Convention that led to Garfield’s unlikely nomination as Republican candidate for president.
James G. Blaine (1830–1893)

James Gillespie Blaine was a two-time secretary of state and prominent U.S. senator from Maine. Blaine studied at Washington College in Pennsylvania and taught for some years at the Western Military Institute in Blue Lick Springs, Kentucky, as well as at the Pennsylvania Institution for the Blind in Philadelphia. In 1854, he got married and settled down in Augusta, Maine, where he worked as editor of the Kennebec Journal and Portland Advertiser. He eventually entered public service as a member of the House of Representatives in Maine and soon earned himself the nickname of the “Plumed Knight.” During the Civil War, he supported President Abraham Lincoln as a moderate Republican. Three years after President Garfield’s death, Blaine nearly became president himself but lost in a highly competitive campaign against Democrat Grover Cleveland in 1884.

Once he took his post as secretary of state, Blaine immediately preoccupied himself with a laundry list of domestic matters, but his most notable actions during his short stint under President Garfield concerned international policy developments. He eyed the potential of American investment abroad, particularly in Latin America. He saw the United States as a two-ocean power and urged that the Monroe Doctrine be extended to the Pacific. Blaine was also interested in having an American-controlled canal across Central America to help further U.S. trade interests, especially with regard to the markets tied to American industry. Many of his goals became reality within the following decade, and historians have credited Blaine’s activism in pursuing Latin America during his brief months under Garfield as a major catalyst for numerous policy developments abroad.

Robert T. Lincoln (1843–1926)

Robert Todd Lincoln served as secretary of war for President Garfield. He was the first son of President Abraham Lincoln and the only one of Lincoln’s four sons who lived to adulthood. He studied at Harvard University for his bachelor’s degree and thereafter enrolled in Harvard Law School, but failed to graduate. Against his father’s wishes, his mother, Mary Todd Lincoln, kept Robert from entering the Civil War until its near end in 1865. Thereafter, Robert served the Union army as a captain and close staff member under Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, which saved him from any risk of combat. Following President Lincoln’s assassination, Robert reentered law school—this time at the University of Chicago—and was admitted to the bar in February 1867. After improving his image as a prominent lawyer and statesman, he graciously turned down an offer from President Rutherford Hayes to serve as secretary of state in 1877. Four years later, however, he agreed to serve as secretary of war for President James Garfield. Although Robert Lincoln did not undertake any major policy initiatives as Garfield’s war secretary, he is nevertheless noted as the longest serving of all of Garfield’s cabinet members, remaining in his post under Chester Arthur until 1885.
Chronology of the Garfield Presidency

Ironically, Robert Lincoln's most notable act during Garfield's term occurred at the time of Garfield's assassination. Shortly after the shooting, Lincoln sent out for Dr. D. W. Bliss, a leading physician, to respond to the emergency. Dr. Bliss was located walking along Pennsylvania Avenue about four blocks from the train station where the shooting occurred and arrived quickly to the scene upon hearing the news. A well-known acquaintance to Garfield, Bliss would take charge of the president's medical case as chief physician. Just days before Garfield was shot, Robert Lincoln had recounted during a cabinet meeting the eerie dream his father, President Abraham Lincoln, had of his dead corpse lying on a catafalque in the East Room of the White House just before his own assassination. Three days later, looking down at President Garfield, who was in deep shock and only partially conscious on the second floor of the train depot, Robert Lincoln declared in horror, "How many hours of sorrow I have passed in this town!"

William Windom (1827–1891)

William Windom served as a U.S. representative and U.S. senator from Minnesota before becoming secretary of treasury under James Garfield. During the 1880 Republican National Convention, Windom had been one of the candidates considered a "dark horse" who could have broken the deadlock in the ballot process. After leaving his post as treasury secretary, Windom resumed his Senate seat until 1883 and thereafter moved to New York City to work as a lawyer.

Windom's most notable contribution to Garfield's term was his leadership in figuring out how old bonds from the Civil War could be redeemed. Facing a heavily divided and unorganized legislature, President Garfield decided against calling a special session of Congress to deal with the matter and instead relied on Treasury Secretary Windom (along with Attorney General Wayne McVeagh) to figure out whether it would be possible to have a new loan put together within the provisions of preexisting legislation for redeeming the old bonds. Windom and McVeagh developed a proposal by April 1881 that allowed for the old bonds to be redeemed after July 1, but added an incentive of 3.5 percent interest that would be applied to the bonds for those who held on to them for an extended period. Consequently, relatively few bonds were redeemed outright, which helped reduce the interest on the public debt by nearly half as was originally expected.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE GARFIELD PRESIDENCY

August 23, 1851   Garfield, along with four of his cousins, begins taking classes at the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute. The institute had opened only one year earlier and consisted of a brick building set in the middle of a cornfield. The institution, later renamed Hiram College, would set Garfield's educational foundation, as well as his early career as a professor and then principal of the institution.
August 1861–March 1862  Gov. William Dennison commissions James Garfield as a lieutenant colonel in the 42nd Regiment of Ohio. In December of that year, Garfield reported to Gen. Don Carlos Buell in Louisville, Kentucky, who took notice of Garfield’s regiments and his leadership skills. Buell decided to put a full brigade under Garfield’s leadership and then sent him to face off with Gen. Humphrey Marshall’s confederate forces out of eastern Kentucky. Marshall’s forces far outnumbered Garfield’s, but Garfield was skillful in patiently planning his offensive while sending out misleading reports about the location of the Union forces. On January 6, 1862, in need of supplies, Marshall’s forces began to abandon their position at Jenny’s Creek. Upon hearing word of this development, Garfield led his forces after them. Four days later, on January 10, Garfield led several infantry regiments in an attack on General Marshall’s Confederate cavalry at Middle Creek. Garfield’s forces held off Marshall’s men until reinforcements arrived. General Marshall soon fled in full retreat, leaving Garfield the clear victor. The Confederates had lost the state of Kentucky. It had been one of the most important minor battles of the Civil War. Later, in March 1862, Garfield was promoted by President Abraham Lincoln to the rank of brigadier general in recognition of his victories against Confederate forces at Jenny’s Creek and Middle Creek.

December 5, 1863  Garfield leaves his army post. He then took his seat in the House of Representatives for the Nineteenth District of Ohio. He served from 1864 until 1880. Although Garfield had been chosen by the Ohio state legislature to take a U.S. Senate seat left vacant by Democrat Allen Granberry Thurman in March 1881, Garfield’s nomination to run as the Republican candidate for president in 1880 changed these plans.

1872–1873  Garfield runs into controversy for his involvement in what came to be known as the Crédit Mobilier of America scandal. The scandal broke in the middle of Ulysses S. Grant’s reelection campaign and had to do with the U.S. government appropriating funds to Union Pacific Railroad, a private company, and then distributing stock from the Union Pacific’s construction company, Crédit Mobilier, to the Vice President, Speaker of the House, and more than thirty members of the Congress, including Garfield. The New York Sun reported that $72 million had been spent in contracts for the building of a railroad that was estimated to actually cost $53 million. The members of Congress involved both helped to appropriate government funds to cover the inflated charges and thereafter profited from their selling off shares to a largely undersubscribed market. The scandal came to be known as a major example of graft in American history.

February 1–9, 1876  Garfield serves as one of the members of the highly controversial Electoral Commission of 1876. During the election that year, the commission
ran into heavy controversy when it gave 20 electoral votes to Rutherford B. Hayes in his bid against Samuel J. Tilden. At first, James Garfield had been openly opposed to the commission on political and constitutional grounds. He voted against the congressional bill to authorize the commission but was subsequently chosen as one of two House Republicans to serve on it. Despite his misgivings, Garfield voted along party lines with his Republican colleagues, which ended with an 8–7 victory for Hayes and livid rage from Democrats, who had originally supported the commission believing that it would be unlikely that Hayes would prevail. Thereafter, Garfield’s reputation as an independent thinker in Congress suffered a major blow. As Taylor put it, “his conversion from the ardent, independent-thinking congressman of the late 60s to the party wheel horse was complete.”

**June 2–8, 1880** The Republican National Convention convenes and nominates James A. Garfield as candidate for president. Early on in the Republican convention, former president Grant had been the clear favorite. After two terms, Grant had left the presidency tired and seeking a hiatus. Before deciding to run for a third term four years later, Grant took his wife, Julia, on a trip around the world. They were accompanied by *New York Herald* writer and close friend John Russell Young, who documented and wrote a book on the trip. Grant’s standing around the world was evident by the massive receptions he encountered, and soon Stalwart Republicans were clamoring for his return. As a springboard to secure Grant’s nomination, Roscoe Conkling turned to Pennsylvania’s J. Donald Cameron and John A. Logan of Illinois to form what he called the “triumvirate” coalition to lead the Stalwarts in their march for the legendary General Grant.

Despite all the show of support amid Stalwarts, John Russell Young privately took Grant aside to warn him that majority support was far from certain and that Grant might consider withdrawing in order to protect his legacy from certain embarrassment. Apparently shaken by the prospect of such a fate, Grant wrote a letter to J. Donald Cameron asking for the Stalwarts to reconsider his nomination and offering to drop from the race. Such a move may have placed James G. Blaine in an ideal position as front-runner. However, Grant’s wife insisted that her husband should proceed with his bid whatever the consequences may be. Grant obliged and the Stalwarts took no action on the letter and instead continued with their plans for making a third Grant administration a reality.

**June 4, 1880** During the proceedings of the Republican convention, Roscoe Conkling submits a resolution that would have all delegates wholeheartedly support whoever was chosen as the party’s nominee. Although most supported the resolution, three delegates from West Virginia openly declared themselves to be in opposition after Conkling forced a role call to identify dissenters. When Conkling moved to have their voting rights withdrawn and have them censored, James
Garfield stepped in on their behalf and voiced his strong opposition. He argued simply that the delegates should not be disenfranchised for refusing to support a candidate that was yet to be chosen, for which he earned heavy applause. Conkling had to withdraw his motion.

June 7, 1880  Balloting for the presidential nomination begins. As with previous conventions, the first ballot did not result in clear victory for any candidate. The results for the first ballot were recorded as follows: Grant, 304; Blaine, 284; Sherman, 93; Edmunds, 34; Washburne, 30; and Windom, 10. Though in the lead, Grant finished the first ballot 75 votes short of the 379 needed for victory. One of the main reasons Grant could not edge out a victory had to do with some of the key large states that had split votes. As Ackerman points out, "Illinois broke early: of its forty-two delegates, only twenty-four stuck with Grant—not at all 'solid' as John Logan had advertised." Roscoe Conkling and other Grant supporters had seen this coming. Conkling had insisted on having a "unit rule" that would obligate all the delegates of a state to support the winning candidate who received the majority of the ballot votes. The delegates of the convention had ultimately voted against the unit rule, 449–306, leaving the ballot process more open and dependent on the delegates themselves to resolve any deadlocks. It was under such circumstances that delegates would periodically look for an outside "dark horse" to support as a means to break the deadlock between the leading candidates. In the case of this election, Garfield's name would gradually surface and change the course of the nomination.

When the results of the second ballot were announced, the first vote for Garfield had been cast by Pennsylvania delegate W. A. Grier. A sense of excitement was observed throughout the delegation, though few expected anything serious to come of it. Twelve hours and 28 ballots later, there had been no real groundswell for any of the candidates. Late into the evening and early morning hours, a meeting occurred between the Sherman and Blaine factions to negotiate a possible deal to join forces behind one candidate in a bid to overcome Grant's lead and clinch the nomination. After some debate, no agreement could be reached. At about the same time, Grant's Stalwarts gathered in Conkling's hotel room to discuss the day's events. Fearing Grant was in serious trouble, the room's attention turned to Conkling as a possible alternative to Sherman or Blaine getting the nomination. In response, Conkling utterly refused the offer, stating that anyone "who would forsake [Grant] under such conditions does not deserve to be elected, and could not be elected."

June 8, 1880  On the second day of balloting at the Republican convention, James Garfield gets his chance of a lifetime. Early on, a first sign of progress
occurred when the Massachusetts delegates switched 21 of their votes from Sen. George Edmunds to Sherman, but any hopes for a major break soon faded. In fact, it was not until the 34th ballot that the dark horse candidate began his unlikely rise to power. Near the end of the roll call the chairman for the Wisconsin delegation, John B. Cassidy, announced with great effect that his delegation declared 16 votes for James A. Garfield. Garfield immediately sprung up and asked to be recognized so that he might bring a question to order that he had not given his consent to be nominated. Whether he was being sincerely humble or making an effort to appear sincere in the midst of stealing the show from the other nominees, including Sherman, remains in doubt, though the San Francisco Bulletin and New Orleans Times made accusations that the latter had been the case. The chairman of the convention, Sen. George Frisbee Hoar, recognized Garfield but immediately pushed back, forcefully declaring that Garfield was not stating a question of order and that he should resume his seat. Hoar would later admit that he was “terribly afraid that he [Garfield] would say something that would make his nomination impossible.” Instead, Garfield did as he was told and Hoar would take great pride in his role in paving the way for Garfield’s nomination.

When the 35th ballot was cast, Garfield picked up an additional 27 votes from Indiana, 4 from Maryland, 1 from Mississippi, 1 from North Carolina, and 1 from Pennsylvania, bringing his total vote count to 50. Soon, word reached Blaine and Sherman, both of whom took it as a sign that their respective bids were doomed and that supporting Garfield would be the most prudent action to take. Blaine sent the following telegram: “Maine’s vote this moment cast for you goes with my hearty concurrence. I hope it will aid in securing your nomination and assuring victory to the Republican Party.” In Blaine’s message, one could scarcely doubt that his admission to defeat was closely followed by desire to stop Conkling and the other Stalwarts from succeeding in having Grant nominated for a third term. Meanwhile, Sherman sent through telegraph operator a message stating, “Whenever the vote of Ohio will be likely to assure the nomination of Garfield, I appeal to every delegate to vote for him. Let Ohio be solid.”

Blaine’s and Sherman’s declarations of support would greatly aid Garfield in securing the Republican nomination. On the 36th ballot, Garfield received 399 votes to clinch the nomination. Grant finished with a final count of 306 votes and Blaine was left with a mere 42, while Sherman had all but disappeared from the count. Shortly after his victory, Garfield chose Chester Arthur as his running mate.

June 11, 1880  Charles Guiteau decides to travel from Boston to New York to seek work with the National Republican Committee in order to aid Garfield’s presidential campaign. Guiteau boards an overnight steamer called the Stonington along with 300 other people. Around midnight, Guiteau was taking a walk on the steamer’s
deck when he spotted another vessel called the Narragansett and noticed it was heading directly toward the Stonington. The two ships collided, leaving approximately 80 people dead. Help came and saved the surviving passengers. Charles Guiteau considered his survival a miracle and part of God’s plan for him. After arriving in New York the following day, he began work on a political speech for Garfield’s campaign. Although there is no evidence that Guiteau ever publicly delivered the speech, he is said to have circulated numerous copies. After Garfield’s election victory, Guiteau would become convinced that the speech had played a key role in the campaign. Guiteau would later claim that this contribution laid the basis for his desire to be rewarded and, eventually, his decision to assassinate President Garfield.

October 20, 1880  During the presidential campaign between James Garfield and Winfield Hancock, a forged letter referred to as the “Morey letter” appears in the New York publication The Truth suggesting that Garfield favored complete, unrestricted Chinese immigration. This was in contrast to Garfield’s public declarations endorsing limited Chinese immigration for fear of overpopulation occurring on the Pacific coast. The letter was addressed to “H. L. Morey” but no person by such name was ever located. To help clear his name of any suspicion, Garfield released a copy of the letter in his own handwriting so people could see the Morey letter had been a forgery. Although the origin of the letter could never be determined, many speculated it had been leaked by Democratic Party operatives, which ultimately hurt Winfield Scott Hancock’s election bid.

November 2, 1880  James Garfield wins the presidential election over rival Winfield Scott Hancock by a margin of 59 Electoral College votes, 214–155. Each ticket had carried 19 states, but Garfield had taken the key state of New York with 35 electoral votes, which helped put him over the top. The popular vote margin of victory was razor thin with fewer than 10,000 votes separating the two candidates; Garfield received approximately 4,454,416 votes to Hancock’s 4,444,952.

Spring–Summer 1881  At the start of his administration, Garfield showed particular interest in attending to policy matters related to finance. One issue that came to the president’s immediate attention had to do with the manner in which old bonds from the Civil War could be redeemed. At first, Garfield considered calling a special session of Congress but changed his mind in light of a close division between Republicans and Democrats that made enacting new legislation in a timely manner unlikely. Instead, Garfield called on Secretary of Treasury William Windom and Attorney General Wayne McVeagh to go to Wall Street and figure out a way to get a new loan put together within the provisions of preexisting legislation. By early April, Windom and McVeagh presented Garfield with a proposal for introducing two new series of bonds. Those that held the old bonds
were informed that they could redeem their bonds after July 1, but they could receive 3.5 percent interest on them if they held on to them for a longer period. To the credit of the Garfield administration, relatively few bonds were redeemed outright, which helped reduce the interest on the public debt by nearly half as much as previously expected.

**May 12, 1881**  President Garfield’s only high court nominee, Stanley Matthews, begins his tenure as justice of the Supreme Court. Matthews had previously been nominated by President Rutherford Hayes who had been his childhood friend and classmate. However, Matthews was met with much opposition and controversy that left him in limbo as a nominee until Garfield renominated him as a favor to Hayes shortly after taking office. Matthews would only serve a short term until his death on March 22, 1889.

**May 21, 1881**  With the backing of President Garfield, Clara Barton holds the first national meeting for organizing the Association of the American Red Cross, thus increasing America’s involvement and leadership in conjunction with the International Red Cross. Barton, a nurse and heroine of the Civil War, had repeatedly sought aid for her cause during the four years of the Hayes administration to no avail. Barton noted that she had made more progress in the first two weeks she had worked with the Garfield administration than she had made in all four years of her efforts in petitioning president Hayes. With the continued support of President Garfield, the first local society of the American Red Cross was established on August 22, 1881. The following year, President Arthur would sign and the Senate would ratify the Red Cross Treaty for the official establishment of the American Red Cross.

**July 2, 1881**  President Garfield is shot twice in Washington, D.C., by Charles J. Guiteau at approximately 9:30 a.m. According to witnesses, Guiteau identified himself as a proud Stalwart upon murdering the newly serving president. After receiving the fatal gunshots delivered by his assassin, President Garfield took to bed rest for 11 weeks. Despite what appeared to be successful attempts by doctors to save him, Garfield died suddenly from blood poisoning on September 19, 1881. Charles J. Guiteau was executed by hanging for his crime and his body was buried in a jail corridor.

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**A Single Executive Order**

On May 28, 1881, President Garfield issued his only executive order to commemorate those who had died in the Civil War by having government workers in the executive branch decorate the graves of the fallen.
Cover from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* shows President James Garfield after he was shot twice by Charles J. Guiteau on the morning of July 2, 1881. Garfield would later die from his wounds. Guiteau was upset that he did not receive an appointment in the Garfield administration. (Library of Congress)
PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

Letter to Lucretia Rudolph, Williams College (March 9, 1856)

James and Lucretia Garfield wrote letters to each other constantly from the
time of their courtship through most of their marriage, during which James
spent much of his time away from home. Below is an excerpt from a love letter
written by James to Lucretia during the second year of their courtship.

My Darling Crete:
It was late hour yesterday when the ruthless snows let your dear little message
of love pass over the wide wintry waste that lies between us, to reach me, but all
the fierceness of the winter storm was unable to refresh my heart with its fullness.
I still persist in saying that your dear letters are by far your most dangerous rivals;
but when we meet I’ll very soon decide the question of choice. The difference is
like that between a drop and a shower, a rose and a garden of roses, for your letters
are only dear little drops of yourself, sweet roses from the full garden of your heart.

Source: John Shaw, ed., Crete and James: Personal Letters of Lucretia and James Gar-

Garfield Diary Entry (October 1, 1876)

Garfield kept a daily diary that covered much of his early years and his career.
Below is an excerpt that provides a random glimpse into a few of Garfield’s
day-to-day experiences.

SUNDAY, 1. Rose at five A.M. and took the early Express, which I had arranged
should stop for me. It was thirty minutes late, but I telegraphed to the Conductor
of the Atlantic & Great Western train to wait for me, which he did; and I made
connection at Cleveland and reached Hiram via Garrettsville, at 9 A.M. The time
I have spent at Hiram this fall is but five hours. Attended church; no preaching,
but social meeting. Burke and I spoke a short time. I on the element of personal
influence in Christianity. Took dinner (Crete, Mollie and I) at Burke’s, visited at
Phebe’s, home evening, retired early.

MONDAY, 2. At ten o’clock, Brother Joseph drove me to Farmington, and we took
dinner with O.K. Wolcott. At half-past one P.M. address[ed] a mass meeting of
about 3,000 people in the open air, at West Farmington. I was very hoarse but suc-
cceeded in making a pretty effective speech. After taking a lunch at the Town Hall,
Joe and I drove back to Hiram, where I spent the night.
TUESDAY, 3. Took the morning train at Garrettsville and went to Cleveland. Attended the Soldiers' meeting. After the procession reached the Public Square I made a short speech in reply to a portion of Judge Black's open letter to me. Took the 3.23 P.M. train to Mineral Ridge, where Mr. Stewart [Stuart] met me, and took me to the new Town Hall, which was crowded. Twelve wagon loads of people and the gun squad from Niles were there. I spoke two hours effectively. Discussed the Silver question among other things. Spent the night at Dr. McKinley's.


Garfield's Inaugural Address (March 4, 1881)

James Garfield strongly advocated the cause of emancipation. In his inaugural address, he elaborated on these beliefs with the intention of making further headway on the issue during his presidency. Below is an excerpt from his inaugural speech.

The elevation of the negro race from slavery to the full rights of citizenship is the most important political change we have known since the adoption of the Constitution of 1787. No thoughtful man can fail to appreciate its beneficent effect upon our institutions and people. It has freed us from the perpetual danger of war and dissolution. It has added immensely to the moral and industrial forces of our people. It has liberated the master as well as the slave from a relation which wronged and enfeebled both. It has surrendered to their own guardianship the manhood of more than 5,000,000 people, and has opened to each one of them a career of freedom and usefulness. It has given new inspiration to the power of self-help in both races by making labor more honorable to the one and more necessary to the other. The influence of this force will grow greater and bear richer fruit with the coming years.

No doubt this great change has caused serious disturbance to our Southern communities. This is to be deplored, though it was perhaps unavoidable. But those who resisted the change should remember that under our institutions there was no middle ground for the negro race between slavery and equal citizenship. There can be no permanent disfranchised peasantry in the United States. Freedom can never yield its fullness of blessings so long as the law or its administration places the smallest obstacle in the pathway of any virtuous citizen.

The emancipated race has already made remarkable progress. With unquestioning devotion to the Union, with a patience and gentleness not born of fear, they have "followed the light as God gave them to see the light." They are rapidly laying the material foundations of self-support, widening their circle of intelligence, and
beginning to enjoy the blessings that gather around the homes of the industrious poor. They deserve the generous encouragement of all good men. So far as my authority can lawfully extend they shall enjoy the full and equal protection of the Constitution and the laws.”


BIBLIOGRAPHY


Kenneth Ackerman provides a memorable and brilliant account of James Garfield’s rise to power and sudden death at the hands of Charles Guiteau. A Capitol Hill veteran himself, Ackerman painstakingly recreates a narrative of the behind-the-scenes events that occurred during the 1880 Republican National Convention. He highlights the ugly partisan backroom dealings and deep resentments between political rivals Roscoe Conkling and James Blaine that later played a key role in the nomination battle between General Grant, Blaine, and John Sherman that ended with a deadlock that was broken by the nomination of James Garfield as a dark horse alternative to quell the factions. Ackerman’s account also brings to light an in-depth understanding of the politics surrounding Charles Guiteau’s assassination of President Garfield.


This narrative of Garfield’s life provides a thorough if very generous depiction of the president. It covers everything from Garfield’s early childhood experiences to his early career as a teacher and continues in depth to his military service and his political career. There are quite a number of accounts related to the Republican convention of 1880 and Garfield’s unlikely rise to the presidency. The book ends with a moving recounting of Garfield’s assassination and the ceremonies held by mourners in remembrance of him.


This collection of diary entries spans 33 years from 1848 to 1881. With respect to details on his political career, the entries cover Garfield’s debates and hearings in Congress, his campaigns in Ohio, and his personal views on policy issues. Some of the topics covered include tariffs, policy changes in the South, use of currency, fiscal issues, and the need for civil service reform. The diaries also cover the more personal topics of religion, education, agriculture, literature, law, and medicine.


This biography is meticulous in detailing James Garfield’s life and rise to power. It details Garfield’s family background, his early years leading to his college education, evangelical influences, political and military careers, as well as his short-lived presidency. Caldwell also touches on how Garfield’s experiences during the Civil War influenced his political success and policy interests. Unlike some previous
biographies that tended too much toward adulation of the president, Caldwell also
details the political scandals Garfield had to weather, particularly the Crédit Mobil-
ier scandal of 1873.

Clarke, James C. The Murder of James A. Garfield: The President’s Last Days and the
This book provides an in-depth look at the story behind Charles Guiteau’s assassinat-
ion of President Garfield. Clark begins by sketching out the troubled background
and psychological problems of Charles Guiteau and how he became politically active
in Garfield’s presidential campaign, his subsequent sense of entitlement in demand-
ingar a government post from Garfield, and how, in his disappointment, he planned
and executed the president’s assassination. Clark’s final chapters cover Garfield’s
remaining days after the shooting, including the medical treatments that Garfield
received, the attempts to nurse the president back to health, the funeral proceedings
that occurred after the president passed away, and Guiteau’s trial and execution by
hanging.


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no. 1 (July 1979): 79–89.


Reeves, Thomas C. Gentleman Boss: The Life of Chester Alan Arthur. New York: Alfred

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Shaw, John, ed. Crete and James: Personal Letters of Lucretia and James Garfield. East

Shaw’s book represents a focused collection of personal letters by James Garfield
and his wife, Lucretia, written between the years 1853 and 1881. Shaw provides 400
letters (out of a collection topping 1,200 letters total), which he chose specifically for
the purpose of exploring James and Lucretia’s marriage and personal relationship. In
doing so, the collection also puts Garfield’s experiences with the Civil War and the
political arena in a more personal perspective.


This book is intended to revitalize the story and legacy of President Garfield by pro-
viding a balanced and realistic look into Garfield’s life and career. Taylor cites the con-
tradiction between Garfield’s reputation as a war hero with the little-known account
of how his tendency to take part in clandestine communications led to the dismissal of
his comrade and commanding officer, William S. Rosecrans. From Garfield’s private
life, Taylor contrasts the stories concerning the president’s dedication to his wife and family with the exposed marital affair that nearly undid Garfield’s marriage. Taylor also considers how Garfield’s ambitious nature was nevertheless kept in check by his adherence to custom and humility and how through a series of fortunate opportunities he experienced his rise to power.