

Pepperdine University

From the Selected Works of Jerry Rushford

1977

James A. Garfield: The Early Years

Jerry Rushford, *Pepperdine University*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/jerry_rushford/25/

James A. Garfield: The Early Years

JERRY RUSHFORD

Santa Barbara, California

James Abram Garfield was born on the Western Reserve, "the principal theatre" of the Disciples movement, on November 19, 1831. Six weeks after his birth the Campbell and Stone movements merged, and for the next fifty years the history of the Disciples of Christ closely paralleled the life of Garfield.

Abram and Eliza Garfield, the parents of James, had by 1831 lived for several years in this western outpost of sparsely settled New England families. Like many of the inhabitants of the frontier the Garfields had severed whatever religious ties they had in New England when they arrived on the Western Reserve.

As related by Eliza Garfield, she and her husband had "resolved to live a different life" after the death of one of their children, provided they "could find the right way." Some sense of direction came from a Disciples of Christ preacher by the name of Murdoch, who delivered "the first Gospel sermon" they had ever heard.² Then into the district moved Adamson Bentley, a Disciple preacher, whose Sunday services, conducted in the neighborhood and in his house, Abram and Eliza seldom missed.

Adamson Bentley³ had been converted by Alexander Campbell to the principles of the Restoration Movement and had become one of the

¹Eliza to Garfield, March 31, 1870. *Garfield Papers*.

²Eliza to Garfield, March 31, 1870. *Garfield Papers*.

³Adamson Bentley (1785-1864), one of the best known preachers on the Western Reserve, began his ministry as a Baptist and was one of the leaders of the Mahoning

most respected of all the Disciple preachers on the Reserve. According to Campbell, he held a foremost position "in authority with the people."⁴ Bentley farmed, ran a store, and pleaded for the restoration of New Testament Christianity wherever he could find listeners.

Through Bentley the Garfields heard the plea for a return to primitive Christianity, and the "right way" soon became clear to both. "We knew our duty," Eliza mused years later, "but like a great many, postponed it."⁵ As a result of Adamson Bentley's wise and patient ministry, Abram Garfield was baptized into Christ on January 22, 1833. In less than two weeks Eliza Garfield likewise "obeyed the Saviour." "It then seemed," wrote Eliza, "we were perfectly happy."⁶

Both Abram and Eliza became zealous Disciples, and their religion became an important part of their lives. But Abram had only a short time to express his new faith, for he died in May 1833, leaving a widow and four young children. In later years when James Garfield wanted to know more about his father, his mother wrote: "Your father . . . was a zealous Christian," who "contended earnestly for the faith once delivered to the Saints."⁷

The tragic event of her husband's death drew Eliza Garfield even closer to her religion. She became an avid Bible reader and taught her children to read it. Her letters and speech were profusely interspersed with the language of the Bible, and she lived up to the Disciple ideal that every member of the church should have a thorough understanding of the Bible and be able "to give a reason for his faith." J. M. Bundy wrote:

In all ways she impressed religious truth on her children, and kept them not only from bad habits but from bad thoughts. Anything that approached impurity of life and speech in any degree, was hateful to her beyond expression. In that household

Baptist Association. After being influenced by Alexander Campbell and Walter Scott, he accepted the principles of the Disciple movement and supported the dissolution of the Mahoning Baptist Association in 1830. In 1831 he moved to Chagrin Falls, Ohio, three miles from the Garfield log cabin.

⁴A. S. Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve* (Cincinnati: Chase and Hall, Publishers, 1875), p. 19.

⁵Eliza to Garfield, December 20, 1868. *Garfield Papers*. Eliza to Garfield, March 30, 1870. *Garfield Papers*. Eliza to Garfield, April 1, 1870. *Garfield Papers*.

⁶Eliza to Garfield, March 30, 1870. *Garfield Papers*. Eliza to Garfield, April 1, 1870. *Garfield Papers*.

⁷Eliza to Garfield, March 30, 1870. *Garfield Papers*.

there was a sort of flaming sword swinging constantly against all forms of indecency and immorality.⁹

For several years the widow Garfield and her children walked three miles every Sunday to the Disciple meetinghouse to hear Adamson Bentley or another Disciple preacher plead for the unity of all Christians on the basis of the New Testament. These years had a significant influence on young James Garfield, and, according to a story related by his niece (who heard it from Grandmother Garfield), he expressed a desire to become a preacher. This incident occurred on a Sunday afternoon when he was three years old. His mother noticed that he was missing from the area near the log cabin and she set out through the woods to find him. When she came within sight of him, he was "standing on a high rock swinging his arms and talking like preacher Bentley whom he had heard that day and he was praying to God to make him a preacher."¹⁰

Close by the Garfield cabin stood the little district schoolhouse in which James began his formal education when he was only three years old. Tradition says that "after a few months he was able to read in the Bible" and further that "at the end of the first term he received a New Testament as a prize for being the best reader in his class of little boys."¹¹ Another traditional story has young James at age seven listening to a political discussion between his relatives and several guests in the Garfield home. When one of the guests turned to the young boy and asked whether he was a Whig or Democrat, he is supposed to have replied, "Oh, I'm a Whig, but I haven't been baptized yet."¹²

Through the encouragement of Eliza Garfield a Disciple church was organized in the small schoolhouse on her property, and this became the focal point for many religious activities of the Garfield family. There can be no question that James Garfield's childhood experiences,

⁹J. M. Bundy, *The Life of General James A. Garfield*. (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1880), p. 13.

¹⁰Ellen Larabie Hoppe, "Memories." This four-page typed manuscript is now on file at the Disciples of Christ Historical Society in Nashville, Tennessee. It is located in the Garfield file.

¹¹Theodore Clarke Smith, *The Life and Letters of James Abram Garfield* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1925), p. 14. The schoolhouse on the Garfield property "was plain and rough enough. The scholars sat on split logs, hewed a little on the top."

¹²Hazel H. Davis, *General Jim* (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1958), p. 26.

many of them centered in this little schoolhouse, aroused his interest in religion. His knowledge of the contents of the Bible and the Disciple hymnbook were to be part of him for the remainder of his life.

The religious influence that Garfield derived from his mother was considerable. It was the opinion of F. M. Green, a fellow Disciple and a classmate of Garfield's at Hiram, that this influence was enduring. He wrote:

Whatever Mrs. Garfield did for her son in other directions, nothing is clearer than that her influence was great in keeping his mind and heart in the direction of the moral and the spiritual. His whole life was religiously influenced by the seed which was planted by his mother's hand, while he lived with her in the little log cabin in the wilderness.¹²

Bundy was one of the few biographers who studied the early years carefully, and he was persuaded that "the dynamic forces that were to take him out of range of all previous Garfields lay coiled up in the fine, sensitive, religious nature of his mother."¹³

During Garfield's childhood and teenage years the Disciples were experiencing a rapid growth on the Western Reserve. The optimism generated by such progress had a wondrous effect on Western Reserve Disciples, and it was probably felt in the Garfield household as well. The Disciples were fond of gathering in large annual meetings which reminded them that they were members of a growing and energetic movement. Garfield had an opportunity to participate in several of these exciting affairs before he left home at the age of sixteen.

Alexander Campbell had encouraged the Disciples to come together in "Yearly Meetings" for the purpose of preaching and fellowship, and these gatherings soon became events of great social and religious significance. Yearly meetings were usually scheduled for the fall of the year and were attended by people from several counties. Over a large region the meetings were staggered in such a way that a person could attend several in one season. In the fall of 1833 Campbell made a twenty-day preaching tour through the Western Reserve and attended several yearly meetings. He gave generous space to these meetings in the pages of his *Millennial Harbinger*, reporting that over one thousand persons were in attendance at the meeting in Warren. In the fall of

¹²F. M. Green, *A Royal Life: The Eventful History of James A. Garfield* (Chicago: Central Book Concern, 1882), p. 152.

¹³Bundy, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

1835 he repeated the tour, this time taking note of the great meeting at Newburg (now Cleveland) in Colonel Wightman's barn.¹⁴

Through the decade of the 1830s the yearly meetings continued to increase in size and Campbell extended his press coverage. The *Harbinger* carried a full report of the yearly meeting at Newton Falls in August of 1839, with Campbell calling it the largest meeting ever held by Disciples in the Western Reserve. In the following month he reported on another large yearly meeting held at Bedford. This was near the Garfield homestead and James, now nearing his eighth birthday, might have been present. Three years later, when Garfield was nearly eleven, Bedford was the site of another exceptional yearly meeting. It was in 1847 that the Disciples on the Reserve raised five hundred dollars for the purchase of the Big Tent to be used for their yearly meetings.¹⁵ This tent contained seating for three thousand people and was indicative of the increasing crowds at the annual Disciple gatherings.

Lasting from two to three days, the yearly meetings helped to fill the need for fellowship among the loosely organized churches of the Disciples. It was at such meetings that the progress of the past year was discussed and plans were made for future work. Preaching was one of the central functions; and, whenever Alexander Campbell was able to be present, he was the featured speaker. But the Disciples were not short of good preachers, and such men as John Henry, Jonas Hartzel, Adamson Bentley, William Hayden, Amos Sutton Hayden, A. B. Green, W. A. Lillie, and J. H. Jones were always in popular demand at the great meetings.

By 1848 the Western Reserve Disciples were in the statistics business. Their rapid growth had aroused an interest in numbers, and that fall at the yearly meetings they gathered statistics. In the nine counties that were represented, it was discovered that Disciples had seventy-one

¹⁴In addition to Campbell's monthly *Millennial Harbinger*, the best sources for information on the yearly meetings held on the Western Reserve are Walter Scott's monthly periodical the *Evangelist*, published from Cincinnati, 1832-1844; A. S. Hayden's *Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve*; Alanson Wilcox's *A History of the Disciples of Christ in Ohio*; and Henry Shaw's *Buckeye Disciples*.

¹⁵Henry K. Shaw, *Buckeye Disciples: A History of the Disciples of Christ in Ohio* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1952), p. 126. Garfield attended numerous yearly meetings under the tent in various locations on the Western Reserve, and later he preached on several occasions under the tent. During the Civil War this tent was cut up and sent to Union hospitals for use in the binding of wounds.

churches and 4,508 members. Cuyahoga County, where the Garfields lived, boasted of 823 members in its twelve churches. These optimistic figures were an encouragement to Disciples everywhere, and Campbell eagerly published the full report in the *Harbinger*.¹⁶

But James Garfield was not numbered among the 823 Disciples in Cuyahoga County in 1848, because he had not yet "obeyed the gospel." His earlier interest in religion had been temporarily replaced by a strong desire to go to sea. The reading of nautical novels had aroused in him a longing for travel, and in the summer of 1848 he decided to leave home. Against the wishes of his mother the sixteen-year-old Garfield gathered up what money he had and "started for Cleveland with the firm intention of beginning at the bottom of the business of sailing and carefully mastering it."¹⁷

Garfield's canal experience lasted a little over six weeks and ended abruptly when he returned home with an illness (apparently malaria).¹⁸ Perhaps the most significant event of his six-week nautical career was an incident where he nearly drowned. Reflecting on the narrowness of his escape and remembering the prayerfulness of his mother, he concluded that God had spared him. "I did not now believe that God had paid any attention to me on my own account," he later wrote, "but I thought He had saved me for my mother and for something greater and better than canaling."¹⁹

In his reminiscences of 1877 Garfield described his return home from the canal:

As I approached the door at about nine o'clock in the evening, I heard my mother engaged in prayer. During the prayer she referred to me, her son away, God only knew where, and asked that he might be preserved in health to return to her and comfort her in her old age. At the conclusion of the prayer I quietly raised the

¹⁶*Millennial Harbinger*, (December 1848), pp. 655, 656. It was discovered that the largest Disciple church on the Western Reserve was the one at Bedford with 231 members. Dr. John P. Robison, later one of Garfield's closest friends, was one of the leaders at Bedford.

¹⁷MS. Biographical Notes, 1877. *Garfield Papers*.

¹⁸This six-week stint on the Ohio Canal became a much romanticized phase of Garfield's youth as the result of presidential biographies like Horatio Alger's *From Canal Boy to President*. Recent biographies have continued to focus on this six-week period, and one says: "As an adolescent he spent much of his time in the company of waterfront loafers." This emphasis seems to detract from other powerful influences in his boyhood, such as his mother and religion.

¹⁹MS. Biographical Notes, 1877. *Garfield Papers*.

latch and entered. I will not attempt to describe the scene which followed. I did not know then how badly mother had felt over my departure. But I afterwards found out that it nearly killed her.²⁰

Garfield's bout with malaria was no slight affair, and he lay ill for five months. He was determined to return to the canal, but his long sickness and the weakness that followed it proved to be a turning point in his life. He explained later:

I still expected to go back. But my mother captured me. All the terrible months of my sickness she did not once repine or reprove me. She simply went about her duties quietly and permitted things to work themselves out. She had great trust in a Providence that should shape the ends of those who trusted in God.²¹

Another account says that as Garfield lay tossing with fever, his brain throbbing and his mind wandering in semidelirium, he overheard in an adjoining room his mother praying. She was asking God to spare his life and to raise him up for wise and noble purposes. "This made me think," he said, "that if my mother could thus rise in the dead of night and pray for my recovery, my life must be worth something; and I then and there resolved to prove myself worthy of my mother's prayers."²²

Although Garfield later attributed his leaving the canal and enrolling in Geauga Seminary to the providence of God, it was probably aided by the silent influence of his mother and a young Disciple preacher named Samuel D. Bates. Bates had attended Geauga Seminary earlier and was planning to return in the spring of 1849. He urged Garfield, who was still home convalescing from his attack of malaria, to return with him. Garfield's mother offered him seventeen dollars, probably her entire savings, if he would use it to go to school with Bates. "I took the money," Garfield wrote, "as well as the advice and went to the Geauga Seminary."²³ Geauga Seminary, located in the township of Chester, twelve miles from the Garfield log cabin, had been founded

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Frederick D. Power, *Thoughts of Thirty Years* (Boston: United Society of Christian Endeavor, 1905), p. 179.

²³MS. Biographical Notes, 1877. *Garfield Papers*. Samuel D. Bates taught in the district schoolhouse that was located on the Garfield property. Referring to Bates, Lucretia Garfield wrote during the 1880s that "to his encouragement at this time may be largely attributed the direction given to the hitherto crude development of the General's life." In 1880 Bates was a minister for the Disciple church in Marion, Ohio.

by the Free Will Baptists. In the spring of 1849 Geauga Seminary was a coeducational academy with 252 students.

During 1849 and 1850 Garfield attended this academy for four terms (March 8-July 4, 1849; August 7-October 30, 1849; March 12-July 2, 1850; and August 7-October 23, 1850). On three occasions during and immediately after the Geauga years he taught district schools (November 1849-March 1850, in Solon; November 1850-February 1851, in Warrensville; and March 1851-May 1851, in Blue Rock).

In his first two terms at Geauga Seminary, Garfield seemed at home in the prevailing Baptist atmosphere of the school, and he was frequently in Sunday attendance at the Free Will Baptist meetinghouse. There he listened to the preaching of George H. Ball. The young student displayed no evidence of Disciple intolerance until the final Sunday of the second term. That night he wrote in his Journal:

Went to meeting. Elder Ball spoke from the following text, 'But now ye are commanded, every where to repent, baptising them,' etc. He endeavored to prove that they were not baptised till they were converted, etc. I can't go his sentiments.²⁴

But Garfield left for home on Tuesday, thereby postponing further confrontation with Baptist theology. The following week he was in Solon for his first district school.

In February 1850, two weeks before he closed his district school in Solon, Garfield was in attendance at a Disciple meeting in Bedford where J. Harrison Jones²⁵ was preaching. Garfield noted that there was "great rejoicing" when "Elder Hawley and another Baptist Preacher and several members of that church united with the disciples."²⁶ Less than two weeks later he confided to his Journal:

About this time I find myself reading Pollok's *Course of Time*. Candor requires me to admit that it has a sensible effect upon my feelings and tends to raise my mind

²⁴*Journal*, October 28, 1849. Garfield wrote the first entry in his Journal on January 1, 1848.

²⁵Jefferson Harrison Jones (1813-1904), sometimes called Harrison or Harry in the Journal, was a colorful Disciple preacher who later became the chaplain of Garfield's 42nd Ohio Infantry Regiment. When Garfield was elected to the Presidency, he remembered his old friend and sent him the following telegram: "I am now President of the United States. What will you have?" Jones wired the White House at once: "Stand out of my sunlight." Jones was one of the speakers at the Garfield funeral in Cleveland.

²⁶*Journal*, February 17, 1850.

to nobler and sublimer thoughts than the mean and groveling scenes of Earth. I feel disgusted with low vulgar company and expressions.²⁷

It was in the next week that Garfield, now eighteen years of age, experienced a spiritual awakening which became an important event in his personal history. This was his conversion to the growing religious movement of the Disciples of Christ. Fittingly, his public acceptance of the religious principles of the Disciples occurred in a meeting at "the little schoolhouse" near the Garfield log cabin where so many events in his childhood had transpired.

On Sunday morning, March 3, 1850, Garfield heard W. A. Lillie preach at the schoolhouse and was "considerably roused on the subject" of baptism and "determined to investigate" it further. That evening, after hearing another sermon, he "determined to obey the Gospel" and made his decision public. The next day he was baptized into Christ in one of the tributaries of the Chagrin River, and in the Biblical terminology of the Disciple preachers he wrote: "Today I was 'buried with Christ in Baptism and arose to walk in newness of life.' For as many as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ."²⁸

Garfield's conversion proved to be an experience which released his whole emotional nature and gave stimulus to his increasing interest in religion. As Wasson noted: "Henceforth his life was to revolve with varying degrees of interest around the religious and educational progress of the Disciples of Christ."²⁹ His new religious affiliation also determined to a considerable extent his friends and associates. One record says:

Then and later, both at home and in the ever widening circles in which he moved, many of his warmest friends and most earnest supporters were to be found in the church to which, committed as a young man, he always remained faithful.³⁰

²⁷*Journal*, February 28, 1850. Robert Pollok's *The Course of Time* (1827) was a long poem on the theme of redemption.

²⁸*Journal*, March 3-4, 1850.

²⁹W. W. Wasson, *James A. Garfield: His Religion and Education* (Nashville: Tennessee Book Company, 1952) p. 14.

³⁰Harry James Brown and Frederick D. Williams, (eds.), *The Diary of James A. Garfield* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967) I, pp. xviii-xix. The 60-page introduction to this volume is an excellent summary of the major contours of Garfield's life. There are four volumes in this series.

Theodore Clarke Smith was convinced that "without any doubt this conversion in 1850 was the strongest single influence he received"³¹ until his involvement in the Civil War.

Garfield attended the Disciple meetings twice each day for the remainder of the week of his conversion. His Journal reflected his joy, and on March 10 he concluded:

Our little school house was filled to overflowing, the cause of God is prospering. In this place 17 have made the good confession and are rejoicing in the hope of eternal life. Thanks be to God for his goodness . . . I'll praise my maker while I've breath . . .³²

Thereafter, Disciple gatherings satisfied many needs in the growing youth. Of prayer meetings he wrote: "I love to attend them," and after a busy weekend of attending religious meetings he wrote one Monday: "Commenced the work with renewed energy. Such meetings renew my strength."

Seven months after his conversion, Garfield reflected on the course his life had taken and wrote:

Two years ago today I was taken with the ague in Cleveland. When I consider the sequel of my history thus far, I can see the providence of God in a striking manner. Two years ago I was ripe for ruin. On the canal . . . ready to drink in every species of vice—and with the ultimate design of going on to the ocean. See the facts. I was taken sick, unable to labor, went to school two terms, thus cultivating my moral and intellectual faculties, took a school in the winter, and greatest of all, obeyed the gospel. . . . Thus by the providence of God I am what I am, and not a sailor. I thank Him.³⁴

³¹Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

³²Journal, March 10, 1850.

³³Journal, March 30, 1850. Journal, June 10, 1850.

³⁴Journal, October 1, 1850.