

# James Garfield

Plow Boy, Barge Puller, Preacher, President  
Twentieth, 1881



**Nicknames:** "The Plow Boy of Ohio", "The Canal Boy", "Boatman Jim", "The Preacher President"

**Birth:** November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1831, Orange, Ohio

**Death:** September 19<sup>th</sup>, 1881, Elberon, New Jersey

**Significant Events During Garfield's Partial Term:** Garfield Assassinated ... Number of States remains at thirty-eight

**Quotes:** *"The people are responsible for the character of their Congress. If that body be ignorant, reckless, and corrupt, it is because the people tolerate ignorance, recklessness, and corruption. If it be intelligent, brave, and pure, it is because the people demand these high qualities to represent them in the national legislature."* -- James Garfield, 1877

*"For myself, the year has been full of surprises, and has brought more sadness than joy. I am conscious of two things: first, that I have never had, and do not think I shall take, the Presidential fever. Second, that I am not elated with the election to that office. On the contrary, while appreciating the honor and the opportunities which the place brings, I feel heavily the loss of liberty which accompanies it, and especially that it will in a great measure stop my growth."* -- James Garfield

*"I am bidding goodbye to private life and to a long series of happy years which I fear terminate in 1880."* -- James Garfield

*"There is a great deal of strength in Garfield's life and struggles as a self-made man...From poverty and obscurity, by labor at all avocations, he became a great scholar, a statesman, a major general, a Senator, a Presidential candidate...The truth is, no man ever started so low that accomplished so much, in all our history. Not Franklin or Lincoln even. He is the ideal candidate, because he is the ideal self-made man."* -- Rutherford B. Hayes (#19), 1880

*"He was not executive in his talents – not original, not firm, not a moral force. He leaned on others – could not face a frowning world; his habits suffered from Washington life. His course at various times when trouble came betrayed weakness."* -- Rutherford B. Hayes, 1883

*"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."*  
-- James Garfield, 1881

*"I am a Stalwart! Arthur is now President!"* -- Charles Guiteau, a mentally deranged scoundrel and rebuffed office seeker, immediately after shooting Garfield in the arm and back

*"The President's tragic death was a sad necessity, but it will unite the Republican party and save the Republic...I had no ill-will toward the President. His death was a political necessity."*  
-- Charles Guiteau

**How his term ended:** Assassinated

**Other Professions:** Canal boat tow boy, Mule Driver, Carpenter's helper, Merchant Marine on the Great Lakes, Janitor, School Teacher, Minister, College President, Lawyer, Soldier

**Worst Mistakes:** Garfield carried on an affair with a certain Mrs. Calhoun in New York in 1862; when his wife found out about it, he apologized to her and she forgave him.

Garfield was a co-conspirator in the theft of the presidency in the 1876 Hayes/Tilden election: He helped arrange the bargain that gave his colleague Rutherford B. Hayes the presidency and ended Reconstruction.

**Saving Grace:** Despite his support for Hayes which resulted in the end of Reconstruction in the South, Garfield did seem to have sound principles regarding the utter wickedness and deleterious effects of slavery (see his long quote above).

**Notes:** Garfield was born in a log cabin; his father died when he was 1 ½ years old.

Garfield taught school one winter in the tiny community of North Pownol, Vermont. Many of the “scholars” there could later rightfully claim that they had been taught by *two* future Presidents, for Chester Arthur, who would succeed Garfield following his assassination, had been the previous teacher in that village.

Garfield was just four months into his term when he was shot in the arm and spine while about to board a train in Baltimore. He survived for eighty days. Garfield's assailant, Charles Guiteau, after campaigning for Garfield, had wanted to be assigned a diplomatic post, and was disgruntled when he was rebuffed in that quest. To make clear the degree of his aberrant thinking, the reason he chose the pistol he did to shoot Garfield (a .44 British Bulldog) was because he felt it would look snazzy displayed in a museum.

Garfield probably would have lived for many more years, except that the doctors attending him afforded him unsanitary medical treatment. Specifically, they probed around inside the wound area with bare fingers and unsterilized instruments. The official cause of death was blood poisoning, which the President contracted as a result of this unhygienic handling.

The first bullet Guiteau shot merely grazed Garfield's arm; the second one, though, became embedded in the President's spine. Since the doctors could not locate its exact location in order to extract it, Alexander Graham Bell devised a metal detector expressly for the purpose of locating the bullet. Unfortunately, the metal bed frame on which Garfield was lying caused Bell's invention to malfunction. Metal was an unusual material for bed frames at the time, almost all of them being constructed of wood.

Abraham Lincoln's son Robert was one of the witnesses to Garfield's assassination.

Guiteau was hanged nine months after Garfield's death, on June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1882. Besides an insanity defense, Guiteau also tried to get off by claiming that it was not his bullet to Garfield's spine that killed the President, but medical malpractice.