James A. Garfield National Historic Site

National Park Service

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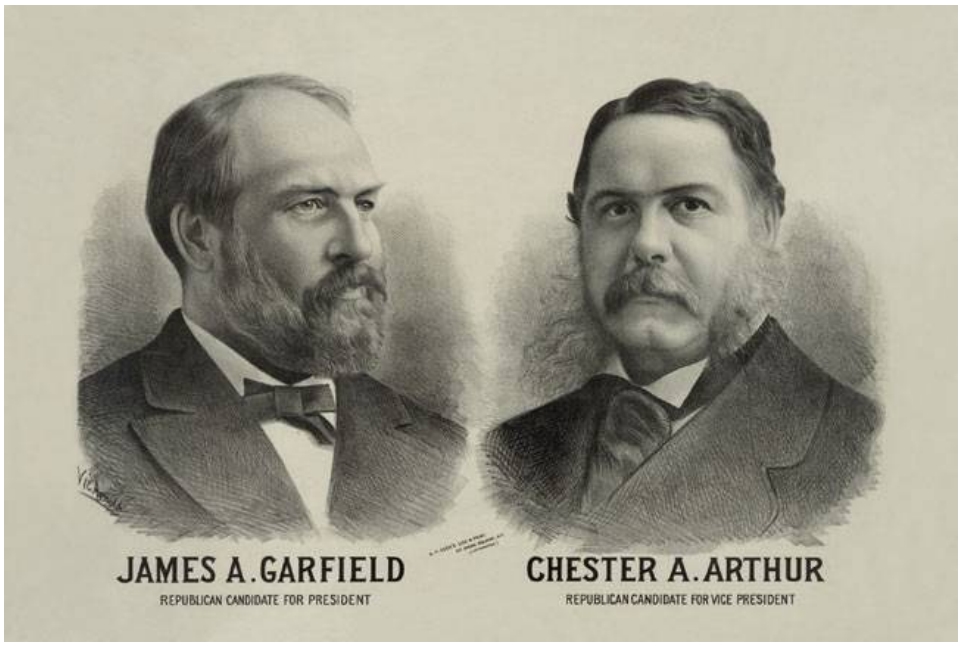
"A Pleasant, Busy Summer": James A. Garfield's 1880 Presidential Campaign

by Park Ranger Alan Gephardt

James A. Garfield conducted the first "front porch" presidential campaign in U.S. history. To understand that campaign, one must understand the political landscape of 1880. The politics of that year are rooted in the Civil War and its aftermath.

At the end of the war in 1865, Radical Republicans controlled Congress and were determined to preserve the newly-won civil and political rights of southern blacks. They also sought to modernize the southern economy by breaking up large plantations and increasing industrial capacity and production. By 1880, however, the antebellum white power structure in the South had been revived, resulting in the displacement of many blacks who had served in local, state, and national offices. Violence and intimidation had reduced the votes of blacks and their Republican supporters. The military occupation of the South, a cornerstone of Reconstruction, was formally terminated by President Rutherford B. Hayes when he withdrew U.S. troops from South Carolina and Louisiana in 1877.

Developing economic prosperity was another major issue of the day. Manipulating the tariff was one way to promote industrial might and economic growth. The question of keeping America on the gold standard or backing currency with silver was openly debated as well.



Many also argued in favor of or against retiring paper money, commonly called "greenbacks." James A. Garfield thought greenbacks were inflationary and favored their removal from the economy.

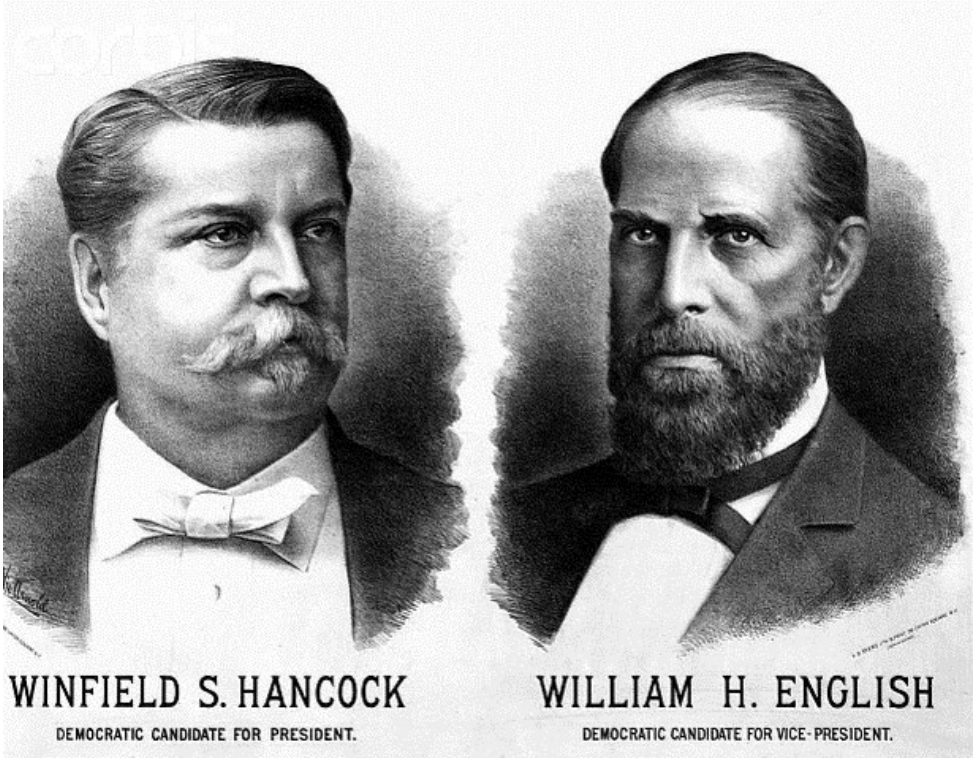
Immigration was another popular topic during the 1880 election cycle, mainly because of concerns about numbers of Chinese immigrants settling on the west coast. Many Democrats wanted no more Chinese immigration, while most Republicans favored honoring treaty obligations that permitted such immigration.

Finally, there was civil service reform. For decades, many held concerns about federal jobs given as political favors to friends and allies of election victors. These jobs rapidly expanded the federal bureaucracy

while increasing fears of incompetence and corruption.

James A. Garfield of Ohio did not actively seek the Republican nomination in 1880, but it fell to him during his party's nominating convention in Chicago when no other major candidate had enough votes to secure it. Garfield, 49, was a Union Major General during the Civil War and a 17-year veteran of the U.S. House of Representatives. At the time of the Chicago convention, he was also a U.S. Senator-elect.

Winfield Scott Hancock, 56, was a West Point graduate and a highly regarded Union Major General during the Civil War. He had no real political experience, but the Democratic party still considered him a strong candidate. He was nominated on the second ballot at his party's convention, and many in the media viewed him as the likely victor as the campaign began.



Both candidates intended to follow the era's practice of not campaigning for themselves. In Garfield's case, however, people began showing up unannounced at his Mentor, Ohio farm even before he returned from the Republican convention in Chicago. Feeling that he should make a few appropriate remarks to people who had come to visit, Garfield eventually began giving speeches from the front porch of his home. He eventually spoke to an estimated 15,000-17,000 people in this manner, mostly reminding them that the Republicans had saved the Union and abolished slavery during the Civil War. Some delegations of citizens and reporters were invited into the home to shake hands with the candidate and say hello to the Garfield family.

Another campaign curiosity is the origin of the name "Lawnfield" for the Garfields' farm. The name was coined not by the candidate himself, but by reporters camped out on the lawn. "It has been a delightful day at Lawnfield, as the papers insist on calling our place," Garfield recorded in his diary on August 22.

A few notable visits occurred in late September 1880. On September 28, former president Ulysses S. Grant stopped by, along with New York Senator Roscoe Conkling. Neither man was enthusiastic about Garfield's candidacy since both had hoped to see the Chicago convention nominate Grant to run again. They offered lukewarm support of Garfield only because they worried that the Democrat Hancock might get elected otherwise. Two days later, on September 30, the Fisk Jubilee Singers of all-black Fisk University in Tennessee visited the Garfield home as well, regaling the candidate with serenades. Garfield told them afterwards, "I would rather be with you and defeated than against you and victorious."

Garfield stayed very busy during the summer and fall, but November 2 eventually arrived, and the nation voted. Garfield went to Mentor around 2 p.m. that day to vote, and returns were coming in by telegraph by 6 p.m. New York looked like it would end up being the decisive state. By 11 p.m., it became evident that Garfield had carried New York and the election. Of more than 9 million votes cast, Garfield won the popular vote by less than 1/10 of one percent, or by only about 9,000 votes nationwide. For his part, Hancock immediately accepted the results without question and went to bed.

After a "pleasant, busy summer" at home, Garfield began to prepare himself for a presidency that would tragically last just 200 days.

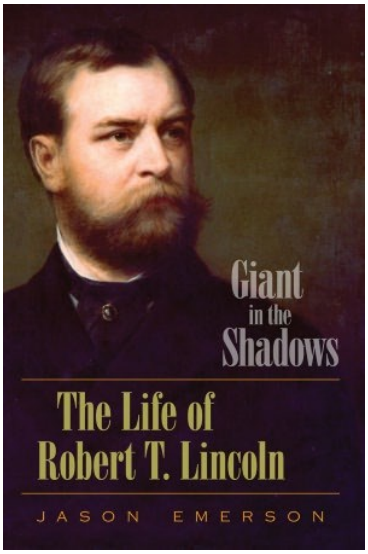
Q & A with Jason Emerson, historian and author of *Giant in the Shadows: The Life of Robert T. Lincoln*

Renowned Lincoln historian Jason Emerson visited James A. Garfield NHS to speak and sign copies of his new book on Saturday, Sept. 29, 2012. He answered a few questions for us based on his research and knowledge of Robert T. Lincoln (son of Abraham and Mary Lincoln) and James A. Garfield.

How did you get interested in writing about the Lincolns?
My interest in Lincoln and his family started in 1994 when I worked at Lincoln Home National Historic Site in Springfield, Illinois. I decided to write two academic articles about Lincoln's poetry, which had never been done before. And the rest is history...I focus my writing on Lincoln's family because I prefer to write about aspects that are typically overlooked and ignored.

How well did James A. Garfield and Robert Lincoln know each other? Why did Garfield ask Lincoln to be his Secretary of War?
As far as I found, they never met before 1881. But their working relationship was close, and they did develop a friendship during RTL's time in the cabinet. Just days before he was shot, Garfield asked Robert to tell him the story of the night Abraham Lincoln died, which Robert did—and Robert did not tell that story to just anybody. Garfield asked RTL to be Secretary of War first at the suggestion of Illinois Senator John Logan, who wanted to be sure an Illinoisan was in the cabinet. Robert was an ardent Republican who campaigned for other Republicans across the Midwest. And his name was Lincoln. Everybody Garfield asked said Lincoln would be an excellent choice both on his own merits and to uniquely satisfy the populace of Illinois, and indeed the country.

Did Robert Lincoln ever consider running for president?
Never. He was not only uninterested but opposed to his own nomination for president, even though the Republicans tried five times to get him on the ticket. In 1888 he was nearly drafted into it against his will. In 1887 he told a reporter, "The presidency to me is but a gilded prison." I think he had seen enough of the dark side of the White House during his father's administration and wanted nothing to do with it. However, he was a man with a strict sense of duty, and he said many times, "A duty may be thrust upon a man which he could not honorably avoid," meaning if he had been nominated against his will, he would have run and served to the best of his ability.



Is it true that R.T. Lincoln was present at the first three presidential assassinations?
It's a great story, but no, it's not true. He was not in Ford's Theater when his father was shot, though he was there when his father died. He was standing 40 feet away when Garfield was shot. He arrived in Buffalo, New York on a train just a few hours after McKinley was shot, though he did visit McKinley on the president's deathbed.

What do you think is R.T. Lincoln's greatest legacy?
I would say his stewardship of his father's legacy and his father's papers for 60 years until his own death in 1926. All of the Lincoln papers in the Library of Congress were preserved by Robert, who also gave out a ton of information about his father's life and career that we wouldn't otherwise have.

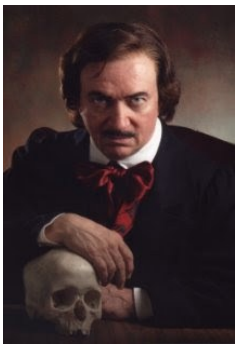
UPCOMING EVENTS

An Evening with Edgar Allan Poe

Wed.-Thurs., October 24-25, 6 p.m. & 8 p.m.

TICKETS REQUIRED FOR EACH SHOW-$15 each

This event for those age 16 and over.



The Campaign and Election of 1880

Sat., November 3—1 p.m.

Veterans Days Weekend—Fee-free days!

Sat.-Sun., November 10-11

A Message from the Superintendent

January 1, 2013 marks the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation going into effect. This landmark document made abolition of slavery a war aim of the Union and let the Confederacy know that if it lost the Civil War its entire social and economic system would change.

On April 14, 1861—just two days after the firing on Fort Sumter —James A. Garfield wrote, "The war will soon assume the shape of Slavery and Freedom...and I believe the final outcome will redound to the good of humanity." In fact, it was nearly two more years before President Lincoln officially put slavery on the path to extinction with the Emancipation Proclamation. How empty the Union's victory would have been had the South been permitted to simply end the war with slavery intact! How many years would have passed before the two sides would have again taken up arms over the issue? And how different might our nation be today had Lincoln not finally come to agree with James A. Garfield's opinion that Union with slavery was no Union at all?

Look for more articles and commemorations of this important anniversary in the months to come and throughout 2013.

-Sherda K. Williams

For more information about James A. Garfield NHS:

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