



In July 1946 Jimmy Carter marries Rosalynn Smith, who later said that "once we got married we were kin to everybody in town." Carter is shown at upper left with daughter Amy in 1978.



Carter meets with Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1976. The president owes much of his political success to the support of the Southern black leadership community.



Carter's personal touch in the 1976 campaign impresses voters—and future voters.



Guided by a park ranger, the president and first lady tour the Civil War battlefield at Gettysburg, Pa., in 1978. Carter discusses the commanders' strategy with historian Shelby Foote (right).

*Jimmy Carter*

Few U.S. presidents have had such close ties with where they were born and raised. The Carters farmed cotton in southwestern Georgia before the Civil War and have remained for five generations. In 1923 Earl Carter married Lillian Gordy, a native Georgian and nurse at the Wise Sanitarium in Plains. The newlyweds lived in a rooming house on Church Street. Their first child James Earl Carter, Jr.—everyone called him Jimmy—was born in Plains on October 1, 1924.

When Jimmy was four the family moved to Archery, Ga. Their farm produced peanuts, cotton, vegetables, pigs, chickens, and cattle. It was prosperous by standards of the rural South at the time, although at first the home lacked plumbing and electricity. "We always had enough to eat, no economic hardship, but no money to waste," Carter wrote in his 1975 autobiography *Why Not the Best?* Earl and Lillian raised Jimmy, sisters Gloria and Ruth, and brother Billy to value education, community service, church, and each other.

Jimmy picked cotton and worked alongside the farm's African American employees, some of whom were childhood friends. One evening in June 1938, Earl Carter set a battery-powered radio on a window sill so that neighbors could listen to the world heavyweight boxing match between German Max Schmeling and American Joe Louis. When the black boxer was declared champion, the

crowd moved across the road before their cheers arose. Despite caution around their white employer, "you could have heard them for five miles celebrating Louis' victory," Carter recalled.

Carter attended Plains High School, where influential teachers were coach Y.T. Sheffield and Miss Julia Coleman, the woman "who encouraged me to learn about music, art, and especially, literature." Carter then spent a year at Georgia Southwestern College in Americus and another at Georgia Institute of Technology. In 1942 Carter received an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md. He graduated in June 1946, and a month later married Rosalynn Smith in the Plains Methodist Church. Between 1947 and 1952, three sons, Jack, Chip, and Jeff, were born; daughter Amy arrived in 1967. Lieutenant Carter served in the new nuclear submarine program headed by Adm. Hyman Rickover, a demanding mentor much like Carter's father.

**Duty Calls Him Home** Earl Carter died in 1953. Jimmy Carter resigned his commission and returned home to take over the family businesses. Witnessing the effects of segregation, he took up his mother's hatred of racial injustice. He joined civic organizations and served on the school board. In 1961 he encountered the hazards of being a moderate in conservative territory when he supported a referendum to consolidate the high schools.

Viewed as integrationist by many citizens the referendum was defeated. "Racial segregation was like a millstone around the necks of all Southerners," Carter said. "It held us down and it created schisms among our citizens that were mutually damaging."

In 1962 Carter ran for state senate. He was defeated in the primary—but proved blatant election fraud by his opponent—and finally took office. His 1966 run for governor ended in defeat. In 1970 Carter ran again and won. In May he appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, which noted: "Nowhere can the promise—and the serious problems—of the emerging South be seen as readily as in Jimmy Carter's state of Georgia." Carter set a progressive course, reorganizing state government, championing civil rights, and waging war on crime and corruption. As his term ended, he decided to run for U.S. president.

"It was a little shocking that someone we knew wanted to be president," said Maxine Reese, Carter's campaign manager, "but if Jimmy wanted to be president, why not?" Townspeople stuffed envelopes, made phone calls, and organized covered-dish fundraisers that reflected the nationwide grassroots campaign. In the years after the Vietnam War and Watergate, Carter's political calling card was his distance from the Washington establishment—and his pledge to be truthful. At his railroad depot headquarters Carter delivered speeches that echoed the ideals of his up-

bringing. In 1976 Jimmy Carter was elected 39th president of the United States.

**A Proud Legacy** The Carter presidency can claim a long list of accomplishments (see *chronology below*), including foreign policy successes carried out despite Carter's lack of experience. Notably in 1978 Carter brought Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to Camp David, Md., to work out a peace agreement. As the 1980 election approached, however, a troubled economy, high inflation, and the U.S. hostage crisis in Iran drew criticism from the press and public. In November Carter lost to Ronald Reagan. Carter spent his last hours as president negotiating the release of the 52 hostages; they were freed as he left office.

The Carters returned home in January 1981. They founded the Carter Center in Atlanta, to advance human rights and alleviate human suffering. In 1994 Carter mediated peace agreements or cease-fires in Haiti, Bosnia, and North Korea. They began working with Habitat for Humanity building houses for people around the world. The Carters' ties to Plains have endured the stresses of public life, remaining as strong as they were decades ago when young Jimmy walked to Plains on summer mornings to visit his grandmother and sell boiled peanuts to townspeople.

## Rising from Plains

"As we walk through the White House door, fires are burning in the fireplaces and hot spiced tea is being served," wrote Rosalynn Carter in her autobiography, *First Lady from Plains*, describing the Carters' experiences on Inauguration Day, 1977. "And we are met, not by ambassadors or cabinet members, but by home-folks, members of the Garden Club of Georgia who have come and filled the White House with flowers trucked in from home . . . They remind us of who we really are and where we come from. And though we face extraordinary responsibilities and will live a life we never even dreamed of, we are first and always Rosalynn and Jimmy Carter from Plains, Georgia."

For Jimmy Carter election as president culminated a career in public service. Like others who rose to the nation's highest office, he made his name on a local and state level before reaching national attention. Carter's story begins in Plains, travels the country and the world, and comes full circle, back to his boyhood home.

**1924** Born James Earl Carter, Jr., October 1 in Plains, Ga.

**1941** Graduates from Plains High School. Attends Georgia Southwestern College and later Georgia Institute of Technology. U.S. enters World War II.

**1943–46** Attends U.S. Naval Academy. Graduates in 1946; begins naval career. Marries Rosalynn Smith.

**1953** Father dies; resigns from Navy; returns to Plains to run family farm and businesses.

**1953–62** Serves on library and hospital boards; chairman of county school board.



Jimmy Carter (upper left) and fellow Plains School students celebrate George Washington's Birthday, 1941.



Fresh from the U.S. Naval Academy, Ensign Carter (front row, third from left) serves as an electronics officer aboard the U.S.S. Wyoming.

**1954** In *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, U.S. Supreme Court rules school segregation unconstitutional.

**1963–66** Georgia State senator.

**1964** President Lyndon B. Johnson signs Civil Rights Act into law.

**1966** Loses first bid for governor. U.S. involvement in Vietnam escalates.

**1971–75** Governor of Georgia.

**1977–81** 39th U.S. president.

**1977** Creates Energy Department.

**1978** Signs Panama Canal Treaties.



"I say to you quite frankly that the time for racial discrimination is over," announces Jimmy Carter at his 1971 inauguration as Georgia governor.



Carter's populist campaign wins him the Democratic nomination on the first ballot and brings victory in the presidential election of 1976.

**1978** Brings together Israeli Prime Minister and Egyptian President to end hostilities between Israel and Egypt. Peace Treaty is signed in March 1979.

**1979** Signs bill deregulating oil prices, promotes energy conservation and alternative energy development programs.

**1979** Signs SALT II treaty with Soviet Union to limit nuclear proliferation.

**1979** Establishes formal diplomatic relations with People's Republic of China.

**1979** Creates Education Department.

**1979** American hostages are seized at U.S. embassy in Teheran, Iran, in November.



President Carter, flanked by Egypt's President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, celebrate the signing of the 1979 peace treaty.



Carter visits Yellowstone National Park while president. "I think my feeling of greatest ease is when I'm in the outdoors," he has said.

**1980** Signs Alaska Lands National Interest Conservation Act, protecting over 100 million acres of federal land.

**1980** Loses presidential election to Ronald Reagan. Negotiates release of the U.S. hostages held in Iran.

**1981–Today** Lives in Plains. Works with Carter Center and Habitat for Humanity. In 2002 is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development.

# Jimmy Carter's Plains



**PLAINS DEPOT** *Main and South Hudson streets.* The depot was completed in 1888. The town, then named Plains of Dura, moved a short distance south to take advantage of the new railroad line and shortened its name to Plains. In 1919, 66 carloads of hogs and cows were shipped from the depot. In the 1920s, 6,000 to 10,000 bales of cotton were shipped annually from Plains. The building has been restored to its 1976 appearance as Carter's campaign headquarters.



**CARTER BOYHOOD FARM AND HOME** *Old Plains Highway, Archery.* Carter remembers the day when the family moved here in 1928. His father had forgotten his house key and had four-year old Jimmy crawl through a window to open the front door. On this 360-acre farm, the Carters raised cotton, peanuts, and corn to sell, and vegetables and livestock for their own use. In 1938, "an almost unbelievable change took place in our lives when electricity came to the farm," Carter recalls. East of the house is the commissary building where Earl Carter, Jimmy's father, sold seeds and supplies to farmworkers and neighbors.



**PLAINS HIGH SCHOOL** *North Bond Street.* Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter attended both grammar and high school here. They were influenced by teacher and principal, Miss Julia L. Coleman, who was a guiding force at the school from 1908 until 1958. "We had to be prepared for the outside world, she told us, reminding us that in a country as great as ours, 'any schoolboy, even one of ours, might grow up to be president of the United States,'" recalled Rosalynn Carter, valedictorian, class of 1944. Plains High School graduated its last class in 1979. Today it is the park museum and visitor center, with exhibits on Carter's life and career.



**CARTER HOME** *Woodland Drive.* After living in several residences around Plains, the Carters purchased a 2.4-acre lot in 1960 and built this ranch house. It is the only home they have ever owned. Renovations were made in 1974 and again in 1981, when Carter installed a wood-working shop that includes tools presented to him by his White House staff. *Note:* Home, drive, and compound are closed to the public.

PHOTOGRAPHS: NPS/KEN LAFFAL

## Exploring Plains

In January 1977 the 18-car Peanut Special train left the Plains railroad depot filled with celebrants bound for the inauguration of the 39th president. Plains was no longer the obscure town of Carter's youth. Even before Jimmy Carter was elected president in 1976, the depot was in the spotlight as his campaign headquarters and backdrop for political speeches. Townspeople painted signs promoting their hometown candidate. The press set up a city of trailers and equipment by the water tower. A 10-foot smiling peanut, a campaign mascot, appeared in town. After the election this community of fewer than 700 drew several thousand visitors each day. Souvenir shops and restaurants opened, and the state built a visitor center outside of town. The Secret Service installed guard booths and security devices at the Carter's home on Woodland Drive.

Despite the changes that national attention has brought, Carter's hometown remains "a magnet that has always drawn me and Rosalynn back . . . in bright, happy times, also times when we were disappointed and distressed." Plains has done its best to maintain the atmosphere of a small agricultural town.

The Jimmy Carter National Historic Site, designated by Congress in 1987, is comprised of Carter's boyhood farm and home, high school, his current residence (closed to the public), and the railroad depot (see *photographs and descriptions above*). The preservation district includes the national park sites, a historic district, and agricultural lands in and around the city of Plains, Ga. (see *descriptions at right*).

**Lebanon Cemetery** *Old Plains Highway.* Earl and Lillian Carter are buried here, as are Jimmy's sister Gloria, brother Billy, and other family members.

**Haunted House** *Old Plains Highway.* The Carters and their three sons rented this house from 1956 to 1961. Built about 1850, it is one of the county's oldest houses. Generations of ghost stories have inspired its name.

**Plains United Methodist Church** *Church and Thomas streets.* In 1945, while on leave from the U.S. Naval Academy, Jimmy Carter went on a date with his sister Ruth's best friend, Rosalynn Smith. After his graduation from the academy, they were married in this church on July 7, 1946.

**Public Housing Unit 9-A** *Paschall and Thomas streets.* "Not having any assured income," wrote Jimmy Carter about their return to Plains in 1953, "we applied for—and were assigned—an apartment in the new housing project in Plains." The Carters lived in the apartments for a year. The complex still provides public housing.

**Plains Baptist Church** *Bond and Paschall streets.* Jimmy Carter was baptized here, and his family attended this church when he was growing up. The Carters attended services here until they left for Washington, D.C., in 1977.

**Billy Carter's Service Station** *Church Street.* Jimmy Carter's brother Billy owned and operated this gas station from 1972 to 1981. It was a popular place for visitors and members of the media.

**Business District** *Main Street.* These brick commercial buildings were built in the 1890s. Downtown Plains remains little changed since Carter's youth.

**Golden Peanut Company** *Main and Bond streets.* Formerly the Carter Warehouse complex, this was the site of the family farm supply business as it expanded in the years before Jimmy Carter was elected president.

**Lillian G. Carter Nursing Center** *Hospital Street.* Lillian Gordy Carter worked as a registered nurse at what was then the Wise Sanitarium, one of the first small hospitals in Georgia to receive accreditation. Jimmy Carter was born here on October 1, 1924. Today the building is a nursing home.

**Maranatha Baptist Church** *Buena Vista Road.* The church was established when the congregation of the Plains Baptist Church split in the late 1970s. Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter have been members here since 1981. The former president made some of the furniture and the collection plates, and he can often be seen doing yardwork on the grounds. He still teaches Sunday school.

**Safety Around Town** You are encouraged to explore Jimmy Carter's hometown. Use caution when walking and driving; obey traffic laws. The homes in town are privately owned. Please respect the rights and privacy of all residents. **Emergencies: call 911.**

## Planning Your Visit

**Plains High School Museum and Visitor Center** Start here for information, exhibits, maps, a video, and bookstore. The visitor center is open daily, except Thanksgiving Day, December 25, and January 1. For details on activities, hours, and special programs, including Jimmy Carter's Sunday school schedule (the public is welcome) contact the park or visit [www.nps.gov/jca](http://www.nps.gov/jca).

**Carter Boyhood Farm** The farm and boyhood home where Carter lived for about 14 years are 2.5 miles southwest of Plains (see *map below*).

**Other Jimmy Carter Sites** The Carter Presidential Center in Atlanta (160 miles) includes the Carter Center: 404-420-5100, [www.cartercenter.org](http://www.cartercenter.org), and the Jimmy Carter Library and Museum: 404-865-7100, [www.jimmycarterlibrary.org](http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org).

**More Information** Jimmy Carter National Historic Site 300 North Bond Street Plains, GA 31780-5562 229-824-4104 [www.nps.gov/jca](http://www.nps.gov/jca)

Jimmy Carter National Historic Site is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about national parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities visit [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov).

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