

# President Benjamin Harrison

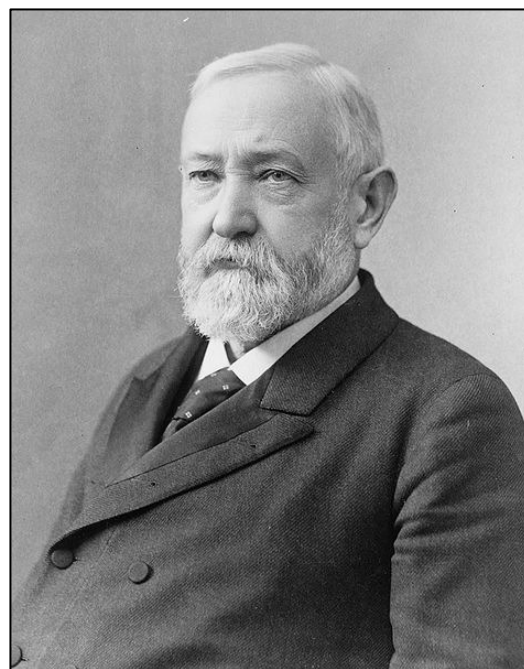
(August 20, 1833 - March 13, 1901)



*"Independency of thought is the first requisite of the responsible citizen. Individual independence necessarily precedes community independence. The free man came before the free state; and the free state will not survive him."* - Benjamin Harrison in an address to Stanford University.

Born with a pedigree that practically promised political office, Benjamin Harrison was a descendant of a family in which, for over 250 years, from the arrival of Benjamin "the Emigrant" Harrison in Virginia in 1630, until his own presidency in the late 1800s, an unbroken line of male descendants held political office. The first four Benjamin Harrisons were members of the Virginia House of Burgesses. The fifth, sometimes known as "Benjamin the Signer", was one of the original signers of the Declaration of Independence, a member of the Continental Congress, and as Governor of Virginia from 1781-1784, turned over to the federal government those portions of Old Virginia which became known as the Old Northwest Territories and which were so prominent in his own son's life story.

This son, William Henry Harrison, had a long career in the public's service, a career which included success in the military against the Indians of the Old Northwest Territory and their leader, Tecumseh. He was appointed Governor of the Indiana Territory, a part of the Old Northwest from 1800 to 1813, and was elected to both the Congress and the Senate before being elected President in 1840. But at 68, his long winded inaugural address on a cold, blustery day, may have led to his death by pneumonia one month after taking office. William's third son, John Scott Harrison, spent most of his life as a gentleman farmer on the family estate at North Bend, Ohio. But he also served two terms in Congress from 1853 to 1857, continuing the family's unbroken record of public service.



Benjamin Harrison, John's son, was born on August 20, 1833 in his grandfather William's house at North Bend and grew up on his father's nearby farm. It was a time and place in which it was not unusual for him, as he rambled through the woods on the family's property, to come across a runaway slave who had just crossed the Ohio. His mother, a devout Presbyterian, instilled "in Ben a devotion to Christian principles that was to be very embarrassing to the unscrupulous men who in later years attempted to make the quiet little president their tool. ... Every act of his life was performed with a quiet regard for the Christian principles which he had been taught early in life and to which he clung with characteristic tenacity. An intelligent and inflexible adherence to principle, whether in civil or sacred matters, was perhaps the great strength of his character." (*The Harrisons*, by Ross R. Lockridge, Jr., p.95)

At the age of 16, Harrison entered Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. He was in love with Caroline Scott, the daughter of a professor there, whom he married after a two year courtship at the age of 20. After two years of his studying law in Cincinnati, the young couple moved to Indianapolis possessing

only \$800, his name, and a determination to succeed. He knew that while his name might attract clients, it was up to his own hard work and intelligence to keep them. To stabilize his financial situation, he accepted a position with the clerk of the State Supreme Court as court crier which paid \$2.50 per day.

His family and reputation grew. A son, Russell, was born on August 12, 1854, followed by daughter Mary Scott Harrison on April 3, 1858. In 1857, he was elected to the post of City Attorney, then Reporter of the Supreme Court in 1860. His private practice continued to grow, bolstered by several high profile cases such as the prosecution of the “Cold Springs Murders” and “Milligan vs. the United States,” until, returning to his practice even after his presidency, he was able to earn \$150,000 a year as an attorney. Several of his contemporaries, including Chauncy Depew, a leading orator of the era, considered him “by far the ablest and profoundest lawyer among our presidents.”

The Civil War offered Harrison the opportunity to extend his public service and his reputation. In July 1862, while he was still only 28 years old, Governor Morton personally appealed to Harrison to help raise the 70th Indiana Volunteer Regiment. Within two years, with no previous military experience, this grandson of celebrated General William Henry Harrison, had himself risen to the rank of Brigadier General and led his men in various battles. It was a turning point in his life as well as the nation’s. “He went to the war a young and inexperienced lawyer. He returned a hardened soldier, a brigadier general who had won his promotion in battle, a man to command the respect of all. The war taught him the greatness of his country. It quickened his patriotism. It taught him a loyalty to the Constitution and to the flag that could have been learned so deeply in no other way. It hardened his character, made him a man among men. It taught him leadership and decision.” (*The Harrisons*, p.119)

After the war, Harrison remained active in his law practice, in local politics, his church, and in the State Assembly. In 1876 he was chosen as a last minute Republican Candidate for Governor to replace the original candidate who had to withdraw due to scandal. He was unable to defeat the popular Democratic candidate “Blue Jean” Williams, but he outperformed the Republican Party in general. With the passing of Governor Morton in 1877, Harrison found himself the state’s leading Republican. He was offered a cabinet post by President James Garfield in 1880, but declined it in favor of a seat in the United States Senate which he held from 1881 to 1887, losing it because the Democrats in the state had been able to gerrymander the districts in their favor.

He sat out the 1888 Republican Convention, having no further political aspirations at the time. But to his surprise, due to a sequence of candidate’s withdrawals and other events, he received his party’s presidential nomination on the convention’s 8th Ballot. When he received this word while at his law offices on Market Street, he reportedly said. “I feel much more disturbed now than I did when I thought it would be a defeat; there is too much seriousness about such a position.”

On that same day, June 25, 1888, he began his famous “front porch” campaign by speaking to the more than 5,000 who assembled outside his Delaware Street home to congratulate him that evening. He never left Indianapolis during the campaign, but spoke instead to all kinds of groups, whether laborers, war veterans, businessmen, patriotic groups, women’s organizations, and newsmen that came to hear him speak from a review stand set up in Military Park. (His wife and neighbors eventually asked him not use his real front porch.) Few issues, except the degree to which to use protective tariffs, actually distinguished the platforms of the two parties, and the two men ran an unusually clean campaign, though the election was marred by the shenanigans and vote buying of the various local political bosses of both parties. In the end Cleveland won the greatest popular vote, 5,540,309 to 5,444,337; but Harrison became president with an electoral college margin of 233 to 168.

Harrison took office as the country was undergoing a relatively quiet transition. There was no great crisis at the time of the character that tends to thrust greatness upon the office holder, nor did he have the type of colorful personality that tends to draw the public's attention and thus leave the individual seeming more important than they actually were. But it was a time when our country was moving beyond many of the internal issues of the past that kept it focused on itself and emerging into the more modern role of "protector of the hemisphere" and a leader in world trade and international affairs. Many of Harrison's policies were instrumental in keeping our country moving in that direction, and perhaps our country's growth during these years is best demonstrated by pointing out that we had our first billion dollar budget while he was president. The Pan American Conference, which he hosted in 1889, strengthened our relations with Central and South America. His support for building a modern navy and aiding American shipping enabled us to become a dominant military and commercial force in both oceans. The tariffs he supported, one of the era's hottest issues, were designed to encourage reciprocal trade and not just restrict it. The Sherman Anti-Trust Act was the direct result of one of his campaign promises, as were various civil service reforms, an expanded veteran's pension, a Meat Inspection Act, and an International Copyright Act. Also, six states, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Washington, Idaho, and Wyoming, joined the union during his administration.

Harrison was also first "environmental" president. He started a policy of creating forest preserves and his own personal edict set aside 17 such areas in eight different states around the west. As another expression of our country's leaving its frontier days of continual expansion and ever growing resources, during the month of May in 1891, he made what became known as "the swing around the circle" in which he visited 20 states and 3 territories, traveling 10,000 miles from coast to coast and from north to south, delivering 142 impromptu speeches.

Harrison developed a mostly undeserved reputation as "the White House Ice Chest." Certainly he was an austere man whose reserved nature was tempered by his strict Presbyterian upbringing and practices. But those who complained were not those who knew him, but those who were unable to bend him to their will. When asked to do favors during the campaign, he would reply, "I can very well afford to be beaten, but I cannot afford to do what you ask." He was proud of the fact that "when I was elected I was absolutely without any obligation or promise as to any official act or appointment — as thoroughly as if I had been born that day." (*The Harrisons*, p.156)

In 1892 he and Cleveland ran against each other a second time. Harrison's refusal to do favors had not won him any loyalty from the party bosses, and Caroline's illness and eventual death from consumption in the last weeks of the campaign had kept his attention focused away from seeking the presidency. Cleveland this time not only had a larger popular margin, 5,556,918 to 5,176,108, he carried the electoral college by 277 to 145.

He returned to Indianapolis and resumed his law practice. From 1893 to 1901 he was actually a member of Crown Hill's Board of Incorporators. On April 6, 1896, he married the widow Mary Lord Dimmick, a niece of Caroline, despite the protests of his first two children, who refused to attend the wedding. A daughter, Elizabeth, was born in 1897. For two years he labored as Head Counsel to Venezuela in a boundary dispute with Great Britain. This meant some travel abroad, including time spent before an arbitration board in Paris. Though his skills were recognized by all involved, England in the end received 90% of what they had wanted, though not the important mouth of the Orinco River.

After a brief swing through Europe with his family, he returned home, reading widely and staying involved in politics, although he refused to campaign for McKinley in 1900 due to a number of differences in policy. On March 13, 1901, after a brief bout with pneumonia, he died at 4:45 p.m. in the upstairs bedroom of his home, almost exactly sixty years after his grandfather had succumbed to the same illness.

The Kregelo Brothers embalmed the body in the bedroom around six o'clock and left him there for the night. By the next day, Indianapolis was preparing itself for a great funeral. Buildings were covered with black bunting and the greenhouses ran out of flowers as arrangements were sent to the house, many of which had to be left outside. Harrison's body was moved from the bed into a solid cedar casket, which was completely lined with copper, and placed on its white silk upholstery. Using its six massive silver handles, the casket was moved in front of the large southward facing windows of the bedroom on Thursday afternoon and to home's front parlor on Friday evening. The Kregelo Brothers spent Friday night, from 8 p.m. to 2:30 a.m. moving flowers, fourteen wagon loads in all, from the house to the State Capitol Building where the body was to lay in state on Saturday.

In the meantime, Crown Hill Cemetery was preparing the burial place next to his first wife. A sturdy mahogany box, built inside a larger box of granite slabs, was built to serve as a vault.

At noon on Saturday, the body was moved to the Capitol Building, accompanied by the pall bearers, Indiana National Guard, and surviving members of Harrison's 70th Indiana Volunteers. These men took turns standing guard during the public viewing as about 100 people per minute filed by in two lines from 1:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. Many more were waiting to enter the rotunda, richly decorated with flowers, flags, black crepe, and a large portrait of Harrison by T.C. Steele, when the doors were closed. The body went back to the house while the industrious Kregelo Brothers began moving the flowers to the First Presbyterian Church at the southwest corner of Pennsylvania and New York Streets. (The huge bell in its tall steeple was last tolled for his funeral. A Tiffany stained glass window in his honor at its new building is now prominently displayed at the Indianapolis Museum of Art.)

President McKinley arrived by train at 6:30 a.m. on Sunday and was the guest of Governor Wilfred Durbin and Senator Charles Fairbanks until the funeral began at 2:30 p.m. He and the other honored attendees arrived at a church draped in black on the outside and, like the capitol, draped with black festoons touched with white silk, flags, flowers, palms, and potted plants, on the inside. The Reverend Doctor M.L. Haines, pastor of First Presbyterian, where Harrison had been an elder for over forty years, gave the funeral sermon, assisted by the Reverend Doctor Samuel Niccols of Second Presbyterian, who read scripture. Kin Hubbard, later creator of Abe Martin of Brown County fame, but then a newspaper reporter, found a seat behind the honorary pallbearers, which included men like James Whitcomb Riley and Booth Tarkington. During a prayer by a visiting clergyman that seemed to drone on and on, he saw that several of the pallbearers were overcome by paroxysms of laughter that they just barely able to contain by stuffing handkerchiefs in their mouths. The cause, he learned, was Riley, who grew so weary of the prayer that he began to whisper to his companions remarks such as "He's explaining to God all about Ben so God will know how to get along with him.—Now he's got program laid out to keep God busy for the next couple o' years."

The mostly solemn service over, a long, slow procession was started to the cemetery. It arrived just a little after 5 p.m., not long before sundown. With the pallbearers standing to the north, the family to the west, and President McKinley and the clergy standing at the head of the casket, a short graveside service was conducted. Then Crown Hill's workmen gently lowered the casket into the vault using long strips of webbing. They screwed shut the mahogany vault lid and then cemented the last 1,200 pound granite slab in place over the top of the vault. Mrs. Harrison, who had been standing quietly by during all this activity, began to sob, and all the rest, including President McKinley, were visibly moved. Gradually, the funeral party began to depart and by 6:15 only Crown Hill workers and the Kregelo brothers remained as the grave was filled in and the site covered with flowers.

Mary Lord Dimmick Harrison survived Harrison by over forty years, but is now buried on his right side. Russell is buried to his mother's left, and Mary Scott Harrison McKee is buried with her husband, J. Robert McKee, just behind the Harrison lot. Elizabeth Harrison Walker is buried with her husband, James Blaine Walker, in New York. The landscaping of the Harrison lot is a gift of the Daughters of the American Revolution, of which Caroline was the first National President.

Each year, on the weekend closest to his birthday on August 20th, the cemetery continues to honor Harrison with a ceremony which includes placing a wreath of flowers sent by the sitting president at the foot of his grave. All are invited to attend. Feel free to contact the cemetery for the exact time of this annual event.

*Researched and written by Tom M. Davis, Crown Hill Cemetery Tour Developer and Guide*  
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*For more information, contact the Benjamin Harrison Home located at 1230 N. Delaware Street, Indianapolis, IN 46202. (317) 631-1888 [www.presidentbenjaminharrison.org](http://www.presidentbenjaminharrison.org)*