

# William Howard Taft

By Charlie McBriarty

I had not decided this month's topic when Dick Watson, a fellow guest at a neighbor's birthday party, commented that Teddy Roosevelt would be a worthy subject for *The Shoreline*. He had recently finished Doris Kearns Goodwin's book *The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft and the Golden Age of Journalism*. After I indicated I had done something on Roosevelt and was considering Taft, he offered to lend me his copy of Goodwin's book. That is when I decided the focus of this article.

September 15, 1857, is the birth date of William Howard Taft, the 27th president of the United States and the only one of this nation's 43 presidents born during the month of September. In addition, Taft is the only president to also serve as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. He was the first of only two presidents to be buried in Arlington Cemetery, the other being John F. Kennedy, and his funeral was the first to be broadcast on the radio. As president, he is credited with a number of other firsts. He was enamored with the "horseless carriage" and was the first president to have a presidential automobile. In October 1909, when construction was finally completed, he was the first to occupy the Oval Office. He also initiated the practice of the president's throwing the ceremonial first pitch to open the baseball season, and he was the first president to play golf as a leisure activity. Additionally, he is the only Chief Justice whose final resting place is Arlington Cemetery.

Taft was born into a family whose political roots can be traced back to the 1680s. That is when Robert Taft I sailed from Braintree, England, to the Mendon, Massachusetts, area where he built his family homestead. (That house and the surrounding area eventually became Uxbridge.) Robert Taft had three sons: Robert II, Daniel and Joseph. His oldest son, Robert II, was reported to be the first American-born Taft to hold political office when he became a founding member of the Uxbridge Board of

Selectmen in 1727. Neither Daniel nor Joseph became involved in politics, but Joseph's grandson, Peter Rawson Taft, was a Vermont legislator.

Peter's only son, Alphonso, did become a politician. He attended schools in Vermont until he entered Yale College in 1829 where he and a classmate, William H. Russell, founded, in 1832, the secret society, Skull and Bones. He graduated in 1833 and later earned a law degree from Yale. Subsequently, he practiced law first in Connecticut and then New York. In 1839 Alphonso decided to relocate to Cincinnati, Ohio, where his focus eventually shifted from the practice of law to politics. What began as serving as a member of Cincinnati's City Council led Alphonso toward his career in public service and marked the beginning of the "Taft dynasty" that prospered in Ohio into the 21st century.

Alphonso also served on the board of trustees of both the University of Cincinnati and Yale College, and it was not long before he became well known throughout the state. In 1856 he made an unsuccessful bid to represent his district in the United States House of Representatives. From 1866 to 1872 he served as a judge in the Cincinnati Superior Court.

In 1875 he suffered another defeat in his bid to win the Republican nomination for governor of Ohio. However, in 1876 President Grant appointed him to serve as his Secretary of War, and three months later he was appointed to the position of United States Attorney General. In 1879 he launched another unsuccessful effort to become the governor of Ohio. In 1872 President Chester A. Arthur appointed Alphonso to serve as United States Minister to Austria-Hungary, a position he held until he was appointed to serve as Minister to Imperial Russia in 1884.

Alphonso was first married to Fanny Phelps from Townshend, Vermont, in 1841. They had five children; however, only two survived infancy: Charles P. and Peter R. II. Fanny died in 1851. In 1853 he married Louise Torrey from Millbury, Massachusetts, and they had five children, one of whom died in infancy. William H. was the oldest surviving son of Alphonso and Louise. The other three children included Henry W., Horace D. and Frances (Fanny). Several of these six children made noteworthy contributions, including Charles P., who served as a member of the United States House of Representatives and was publisher of the *Cincinnati Times-Star*; Henry W., who was a candidate for the New York Court of appeals; and Horace D., who was an author and founded the Taft School in Watertown, Connecticut. One of their children achieved the highest political office in the nation and also became the Chief Justice of the highest court in the country. That was William H.

Mount Auburn, one of the hills surrounding Cincinnati, was the birthplace of William Howard Taft. By all accounts, Will was a "fat and healthy" baby who had a good appetite from birth. He was also credited with being a good-natured, tolerant and cheerful child. These characteristics served him well as he pursued his education in Cincinnati. Upon graduation from Woodward High School, he followed in the footsteps of his father and others in the family and attended Yale. He was well liked by fellow students, acquiring two nicknames—"Big Lub" and "Old Bill." In addition, he was salutatorian of his 1878 graduating class and was chosen by his classmates to deliver the graduation address.

Upon his graduation, he returned to Cincinnati to attend law school where he received his Bachelor of Laws in 1880. His first job was as a Hamilton County, Ohio, assistant prosecutor. Two years later he was appointed to serve as the local Collector of Internal Revenue. In 1887 he was appointed to the Superior Court of Cincinnati. Three years later, at age 32, he was appointed to serve as United States Solicitor General by President Benjamin Harrison. In 1881 he was appointed to the newly created United States Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals.

It was in 1900 that President William McKinley invited Taft to serve as commission chairman to organize a civilian government in the Philippines. Although he eventually agreed to accept the invitation, he first told McKinley that his ultimate goal was to serve as a Supreme Court justice. From 1901 to 1903 Taft served as the first civilian governor of the Philippines and was well liked by both Filipinos and Americans. In 1903 President Theodore Roosevelt offered Taft a seat on the Supreme Court but Taft passed up this opportunity, arguing that his job was not completed in the Philippines. This refusal has been characterized as showing his singular focus on fulfilling his responsibility to complete his assigned task irrespective of his personal desire or ambition.

Roosevelt was able to convince Taft to serve as Secretary of War in 1904, when he permitted Taft to continue to be involved in the Philippines. That year Taft also served as a spokesman promoting Roosevelt's presidential reelection. Roosevelt was reelected and on the election night he publically announced that he would not be a candidate in 1908. He chose the most logical member of his cabinet, Taft, to be the Republican standard bearer in 1908. Once more Taft indicated that he did not wish to be president and would prefer to serve on the Supreme Court. Eventually Taft accepted that he was the dominant and most "available" member of the cabinet and agreed that, if nominated by the party, he would campaign energetically. On election night, results revealed that Taft had defeated his Democratic opponent, William Jennings Bryan, by 159 electoral votes.

*To be continued.* In the next issue William Howard Taft's presidency and his relationship with Teddy Roosevelt will be explored.



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