

PART OF A SERIES

James A. Garfield, Part 2

By Charlie McBriarty

Some would suggest a second article about a president who occupied the office less than one year a questionable endeavor. Nonetheless, a more in-depth investigation of the man revealed a number of interesting aspects of his life.

On July 2, 1881, just 121 days after being sworn in, President James A. Garfield was shot by an angry attorney and office seeker in a corridor of the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Station in Washington, D.C. Garfield was on his way to visit his alma mater, Williams College. The attempted assassin was Charles J. Guiteau, who had been rejected for the position he sought as consul in Paris. He fired two shots, one glancing off the president's arm and the other entering his back.

Garfield remained conscious as he was moved to a room in the station where at least 10 doctors had arrived to treat the wounded president. The primary goal of these assembled doctors was to find the bullet that had entered Garfield's back. With unwashed hands and instruments, several of the physicians probed the wound in search of the bullet. Garfield was given morphine to reduce the pain, but remained alert throughout their search. During this time he was able to dictate a telegram to his wife apprising her of what occurred. After a number of unsuccessful efforts to locate the bullet, he finally requested that the doctors get him to his bed in the White House.

The doctors' probing for the location of the projectile continued even after his arrival at the White House. Garfield recognized only one of the doctors surrounding his bed—Dr. Willard Bliss, a noted surgeon and friend of Garfield's from Ohio. After conferring with the other doctors, Dr. Bliss took control of Garfield's care, whereupon he cleared the room, while restricting access to the president's quarters so he could rest.

Before the day ended, Dr. Bliss reported what had occurred to members of the press and characterized the president's wound as fatal. The following morning these dire reports were revised since Garfield's condition appeared to have improved overnight. Thus began the roller coaster series of reports from the White House which undulated throughout the rest of July, all of August and into September.

Garfield finally convinced Dr. Bliss that he should be removed from the heat and humidity of Washington, and on September 6 was moved by train to the cooler New Jersey shore. The train traveled to Elberon, New Jersey, where special tracks had been laid to the door of a seaside home which had been made available to Garfield.

The bulletins to the press continued from the New Jersey seaside, with the resulting emotional ups or downs each report created. However, on September 19, 1881, at 10:35 p.m., 81 days after he was shot, Garfield died with his wife at his bedside.

At 2:15 a.m. on September 20 Vice President Chester Alan Arthur was sworn in as the 21st President of the United States.

The autopsy of the president noted that the bullet was nearly one foot away from where the physicians believed it to be located. Blood poisoning, resulting from doctors' attempts to find and remove the bullet, was identified as the cause of death.

Standard procedures of the day held that finding the location of the bullet was of paramount importance, and the accepted method of locating the slug was to probe the wound with fingers or instruments, none of which had been sanitized. Although English physician Joseph Lister had introduced his pioneering efforts with antiseptics when he visited America in 1876, Lister's new protocol had yet to be completely accepted in the United States. With the wisdom of hindsight it has been noted that sanitized instruments and scrubbed doctors' hands would likely have resulted in the president's complete recovery.

The tragedy of Garfield's death did introduce the nation to two inventions that have become commonplace today. Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, became involved with the process of locating the shooter's bullet. On July 26 Dr. Bliss and Bell used an early version of Bell's metal detector on the

July Sudoku Puzzle

				9		5		
		4		7				
	3					2		7
							7	
6			3	8				2
3	2	1	4					
	8					1		
	9				1			4
			5	2	6			8

See solution on page 12

president's back where the doctors had believed the bullet was located. This test found no evidence of any metal; however, the area covered by the device did not come within 12 inches of where the projectile was found during the autopsy.

In the early 1880s the U.S. Navy was working on a project which has become common place—air conditioning. One of the earliest air conditioners was used to cool the hot, humid summertime air in Garfield's Washington bedroom. This rudimentary system used fans blowing air over blocks of ice that was subsequently dehumidified to maintain a cool, dry air that relieved some of the president's discomfort.

Of the 44 presidents elected to date, only 10 have the dubious distinction of serving in office for less than one full four-year term. These 10 are William Henry Harrison, with 31 days in office; James A. Garfield, whose attempted assassination reduced his term to 202 days; Zachary Taylor, 491 days; Warren G. Harding, 881 days; Gerald Ford, 895 days; Millard Fillmore, 969 days; John F. Kennedy, 1,036 days; Chester A. Arthur, 1,262 days; Andrew Johnson, 1,419 days; and John Tyler, 1,430 days.

Garfield was the seventh and last president born in a log cabin. The earlier presidents born in a log cabin are Andrew Jackson, Zachary Taylor, Millard Fillmore, James Buchanan, Abraham Lincoln, and Ulysses S. Grant.

During the 227 years since George Washington was president, on only two occasions has the nation been served by three different presidents during the same calendar year. The first time this oddity occurred was in 1841 when Martin Van Buren, William H. Harrison and John Tyler each served as president. The only other time this occurred was 1881 when Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield and Chester A. Arthur each spent a portion of that year as president.

Garfield was the only president who, prior to his election, served as a clergyman. He was an ordained minister of the Disciples of Christ church.

Perhaps the most unusual talent that has been attributed to James Garfield is his ability to answer a question by writing the answer simultaneously with his right and left hand. One hand would write in Latin while the other hand wrote in Greek.