

President Chester A. Arthur

By Charlie McBriarty

In last month's *Shoreline*, it was disclosed that Vice President Chester A. Arthur was sworn in on September 21, 1881, as the 21st President of the United States following President James A. Garfield's assassination. The new president faced a number of obstacles upon taking office. Many within the party viewed Arthur as a political hack hardly worthy of being a candidate for vice president. While both President Garfield and Vice President Arthur were Republicans, they were from opposite factions of the party and shared few commonalities. Garfield's cabinet clearly shared the president's views of the anti-Arthur faction of the Republican party. Additionally, Garfield had essentially ignored Arthur during his brief tenure in office.

In contrast, Arthur demonstrated compassion by giving Garfield's widow extra time to vacate the White House. After Mrs. Garfield left, he found the residence in dire need of repair with excess furniture and household items needing to be removed. The clearing process filled 24 wagon loads, which were sold at public auction. He then hired the renowned designer Louis C. Tiffany from New York City to implement the refurbishment and remodeling of the White House. During the interim Arthur utilized the Washington home of friend and Nevada Republican Senator John P. Jones as the presidential office and his personal quarters. The White House remodeling was completed on December 7, 1881.

Arthur soon realized the existing cabinet members needed to be purged and replaced with those more supportive of his views. He systematically undertook this project and successfully reshaped his administration with only Garfield's Secretary of War, Robert Todd Lincoln, remaining throughout Arthur's presidency.

Arthur surprised many of his detractors during his first address to a joint session of Congress. The new president, a benefactor of and staunch supporter of patronage, noted he would welcome legislation providing an alternative to the existing patronage system of hiring governmental employees. This request stimulated one Ohio senator to reactivate a measure he had proposed several times previously.

In 1880 Ohio Senator George H. Pendleton had introduced a bill to end patronage by requiring candidates for civil service positions to pass an examination designed to measure merit rather than political party affiliation. Pendleton's first as well as his second effort failed to receive consideration by the Senate. However, the 1882 midterm congressional election added more reform-minded members to both houses of Congress and Pendleton's third submission achieved support of both the Senate and House. Arthur provided his critics with another surprise when, on January 16, 1883, he signed the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act into law. Additionally, his rapid appointment of members to the Civil Service Commission solidified the actual implementation of the new law.

Arthur's personal experience with patronage may best be understood by looking back some 22 years earlier. Arthur had for some time been very involved in the organization and expansion of the New York Republican party and developed a close working relationship with the party boss, Senator Roscoe Conkling. Through the years he had benefited from patronage appointments, such as Engineer-in-Chief of the Republican Governor's State Militia. This relatively insignificant political appointment became more important after the outbreak of the Civil War and led directly to Arthur's promotion to the position of Quartermaster of the State Militia and the promotion to the rank of Brigadier General. He proved to be quite adept in outfitting and housing the troops flowing into and out of New York City, resulting in another promotion to Quartermaster General. He remained in this position until 1863 when the newly elected Democratic governor replaced him with a member of the governor's party.

The 1868 election of republican President Ulysses S. Grant reopened patronage positions to loyal Republican Party members. Grant did not forget Arthur's help in capturing the New York vote during his successful election. In 1871 the coveted and financially rewarding position of Collector of the Port of New York became available and Grant appointed Arthur to this highly sought after position. This job paid an annual salary of \$6,500 (generous then), plus several perks boosting the annual pay to as much as \$50,000, a sum equal to that of the President of the United States. Arthur held the position until 1878—and throughout his tenure as Collector, unlike some of his predecessors, there was no evidence of any involvement with bribes or graft. He did routinely collect kickbacks from employees, but none of these funds directly benefited Arthur because the entire collection was transmitted directly to the party machine.

Chester A. Arthur was born in a log cabin in Fairfield, Vermont, on October 5, 1829. He was the fifth of eight children of Malvina and William Arthur. His father had

emigrated at age 18 from Northern Ireland to Canada and later to Vermont where he served as a Baptist preacher. He did not remain in any one parish long, frequently moving from town to town in Vermont and New York during Chester's youth. As a result, Chester and his siblings attended public school in whatever town they were living until the family again relocated.

As Arthur matured, he learned to appreciate the finer things that became available to him. He was fastidious about his attire. By the time he achieved the presidency, he owned at least 80 pairs of pants and might change two or three times each day. Additionally, he was the first resident of the White House to have a personal valet. At 6' 2", he stood taller than most of his peers. Throughout his adult life he enjoyed the good life with friends and associates and acquired a variety of nicknames, including Chet, General, the Gentleman Boss, Prince Arthur and the Dude President.

At age 16 Chester Arthur entered Union College in Schenectady, NY, and in 1848 he graduated in the top one-third of his class. He was a fun-loving, popular student who was initiated into prestigious Phi Beta Kappa. Following graduation, he taught school, served as a school principal and in his spare time studied law.

In 1854 he was admitted to the New York bar. With some help from his father he acquired a clerkship in a prominent NYC law firm known for its support of civil rights. It was here he learned the practice of law that led to his becoming a partner. His skill as a trial attorney was demonstrated when he served as the lead attorney representing an African American woman who had been denied a seat on a New York City streetcar. He won the case, the woman was awarded compensation and this case led directly to the desegregation of the entire NYC streetcar system.

In 1856 Arthur and Henry D. Gardiner began a law partnership in Kansas. Their stay in Kansas was brief, and within a few months they returned to New York City where their law practice prospered. Upon returning to New York, Arthur also began a three-year courtship of Ellen "Nell" Herndon that culminated in their marriage at the Calvary Episcopal Church in Manhattan on October 25, 1859. He was 30 and she 22.

For a while his family life, legal practice and political involvement flourished, but the sudden death of the Arthurs' only son, three-year-old William, altered everything. The loss was a major blow to both Arthur and Nell. In 1864 they had another son, Chester Jr., who became a focal point of both of their lives. Seven years later they had a daughter, Ellen. Both of these children received the loving attention of their parents. Then, shortly before he became president, he faced the personal trauma of losing his wife to pneumonia in 1880. When Arthur assumed the presidency, Chester Jr. was enrolled in Princeton University and daughter Ellen remained in New York under the care of a governess until 1882. Arthur did his best to shelter both his son and daughter from the intrusive Washington press whenever they spent time in the White House.

During Arthur's presidential term, his administration faced a predicament few presidents ever confront. In 1882 the federal budget had a surplus of nearly \$150 million. The resulting clash of how to reduce this "problem" pitted the Democrats, who argued for lowering tariffs, against the Republicans, who maintained the surplus funds be used for domestic improvements and reductions in excise taxes. Various measures were forwarded to Congress and several were enacted. Congress passed the 1882 Rivers and Harbors Act, which called for \$19 million expenditure for certain rivers and harbors. Arthur vetoed the measure, arguing that the amount of money was excessive and that it did not benefit the entire nation. On the following day Congress overrode the veto.

Soon after becoming president, Arthur received some disquieting medical information. He had acquired a kidney disorder, then called Bright's disease (now identified as nephritis). Although he attempted to keep his illness confidential, his physical condition began to deteriorate, leading to rumors of his declining health. By 1883 close friends convinced him to take some time off to regain his strength. He and a small group traveled to Florida where he tried to rest. However, upon his return to Washington there seemed to be no improvement. A second trip to Yellowstone National Park followed, and upon his return he seemed to be more refreshed and demonstrated an increased energy level.

Because of the physical impact of his illness, he decided not to run for president during the 1884 presidential campaign. He completed his term as president in 1885 and returned to his home in New York City. His declining health reduced his public appearances and activities. He spent the summer of 1886 in New London, Connecticut. He became seriously ill upon his return home and on November 16 he ordered all of his personal and official papers burned. He suffered a cerebral hemorrhage on the next morning and never regained consciousness. On November 18 he died at 57 years of age.

Alexander McClure, a journalist of Arthur's time, wrote: "No man ever entered the Presidency so profoundly and widely distrusted as Chester Alan Arthur, and no one ever retired . . . more generally respected, alike by political friend and foe."