

Jimmy Carter

Jimmy Carter National Historic Site
Georgia

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



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, 1978.



Carter meets with Martin Luther King, Sr., 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, Pennsylvania, 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. Carters farmed cotton in the broad, flat expanse of southwestern Georgia before the Civil War and have remained for five generations. Earl Carter called Sumter County home all his life. In 1923 Earl married Lillian Gordy, also a native Georgian and a 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 4, the family moved outside Plains to the tiny community of Archery. Their farm, which produced many crops and animals, including peanuts, cotton, pigs, chickens, cattle, and vegetables, was prosperous by the standards of the rural South at the time, though the home at first 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, his sisters Gloria and Ruth, and brother Billy to value education, community service, the Baptist Church, and each other.

Jimmy picked cotton and did other work alongside the farm's African American employees, some of whom were childhood friends. Witnessing the effects of segregation, he took up his mother's hatred of racial injustice. One evening in June 1938, Earl Carter set a battery-powered radio on a window sill so that a large crowd of neighbors outside 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 quietly moved across the road before their cheers arose. Despite their caution around their white employer, "you could have heard them for five miles celebrating Louis's victory," Carter recalled.

Carter attended school in Plains, where two influential teachers were coach Y.T. Sheffield and Miss Julia Coleman, the woman "who encouraged me to learn about music, art, and especially, literature." After graduating in the class of 1941, Carter spent a year at Georgia Southwestern College in Americus and another at the Georgia Institute of Technology. As the ambitious young man matured, Plains ceased to be the center of his world. In 1942, Carter received an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy. He graduated in June 1946, and a month later he and Rosalynn Smith were married in the Plains Methodist Church. Between 1947 and 1952, three sons, Jack, Chip, and Jeff, were born while the Carters were stationed in various parts of the country; daughter Amy did not arrive until 1967. Lieutenant Carter served in the recently formed nuclear submarine program headed by Adm. Hyman Rickover, a stern and demanding mentor not unlike Carter's own father.

In 1953 Earl Carter died. Jimmy Carter resigned his commission and returned to Plains to take over the farm supply business and several hundred acres of land. He joined local civic organizations and served on the county school board, as had his father. In 1961 he encountered the hazards of being a moderate in conservative territory. He supported a referendum to consolidate the high schools, which was viewed as integrationist

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

While Rosalynn Carter took on an ever larger role in the family business, her husband embarked on a campaign for the state senate in 1962. Carter was defeated in the Democratic primary but was able to prove blatant election fraud by his opponent and finally took office. His run for governor in 1966 ended in defeat. In 1970 Carter ran again and won. The following 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." The new governor set a progressive course, reorganizing state government, championing civil rights, and waging war on crime and corruption. As his term neared an end, Carter decided to run for President.

"It was a little shocking that someone we knew wanted to be President," said Maxine Reese, Carter's Plains campaign manager, "but if Jimmy wanted to be President, why not?" Townspeople set to work stuffing envelopes, making phone calls, and organizing covered-dish fundraisers that were a reflection of the nationwide grass-roots campaign. Many traveled out of state to help in the spring primaries. In the years after the Vietnam War and Watergate, Carter's political calling card was his pledge to be truthful and his distance from the Washington establishment. At his railroad depot headquarters, Carter delivered speeches that echoed the ideals of his upbringing.

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

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

The Carters returned to Plains in January 1981. The former President and First Lady pursue many of the goals of the administration through the Carter Center in Atlanta, which has programs to alleviate human suffering and to promote human rights and world peace. For instance, in 1994 Carter mediated peace agreements or cease-fires in Haiti, Bosnia, and North Korea. Both Carters have written numerous books. They work with Habitat for Humanity building houses for people around the world. When they are in Plains, Carter teaches Sunday school at Maranatha Baptist Church. The Carters' ties to Plains have endured the stresses of public life, remaining as strong as they were decades ago when young Jimmy walked the railroad tracks into Plains on summer mornings, where he visited his grandmother and sold 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 Carter, election to the Presidency was the culmination of a career in public service where, like many other men who rose to the highest office in the nation, he made his name on a local and state level before he came to 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.

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 and begins naval career. Marries Rosalynn Smith in July.

1953—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 race 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 Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to end hostilities between Egypt and Israel. 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.



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.

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

1980—Signs Alaska Lands Removal Act protecting more than 100 million acres of wilderness.

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

1981-Today—Lives in Plains. Works with Carter Center and Habitat for Humanity. Travels abroad on humanitarian missions.

Jimmy Carter's Plains



Plains Depot Main Street and South Hudson Street. The depot was completed in 1888 after the town called the Plains of Dura moved a short distance southward to take advantage of the new railroad line and shortened its name. In 1919, 66 carloads of hogs and cows were shipped from the depot; 6,000 to 10,000 bales of cotton were shipped annually from Plains in the 1920s. The building is restored as Carter's 1976 campaign headquarters and has served as the National Park Service visitor center.



Carter Boyhood Home Old Plains Highway, Archery. Carter remembers the day in 1928 when the family moved to the farm. His father had forgotten his house key, and had 4-year old Jimmy crawl through a window to open the front door. On this 360-acre farm, the Carters grew cotton, peanuts, and corn to sell, and raised vegetables and livestock for their own consumption. In 1937, "an almost unbelievable change took place in our lives when electricity came to the farm," Carter recalls. Just east of the house is the old commissary building where Earl Carter sold seeds and supplies to farmworkers and neighbors. (The house is closed for renovation.)



Plains High School North Bond Street. Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter attended grammar and high school in this building. They both were influenced by teacher and principal, Miss Julia L. Coleman, who was a guiding force 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 of the Class of '44. Constructed in 1921 and integrated in 1966, Plains High School graduated its last class in 1979. (The school reopens in 1996 as the National Park Service 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 woodworking shop that includes tools presented to him by his White House staff. (Closed to private vehicles; Woodland Drive is occasionally open to tour buses.)

Photographs by Ken Laffel

Touring Plains

In January 1977, the 18-car "Peanut Express" train departed from the Plains railroad depot filled to capacity 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 favorite candidate. The press set up a "T.V. City" of trailers and electronic equipment by the water tower. A campaign mascot in the form of a 10-foot "smiling" peanut appeared in town. After the election, this community of fewer than 700 drew several thousand visitors each day; souvenir shops and restaurants opened, and a state visitor center was built outside town. The secret service installed guards and security devices at the Woodland Drive home.

Despite all 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 railroad depot, along with Carter's boyhood home, school, and current residence make up the Jimmy Carter National Historic Site, established in 1987 (see *photographs and descriptions above*). Other buildings and areas are included in the surrounding preservation district and are described at right:

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

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

Plains United Methodist Church Church Street and Thomas Street. 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. Just after his graduation, the two were married on July 7, 1946, at the church attended by the Smith family.

Public Housing Unit 9-A Paschall Street and Thomas Street. "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 Dura Apartments for a year. The complex still provides public housing.

Plains Baptist Church Bond Street and Paschall Street. Jimmy Carter's family attended this church when he was growing up; Jimmy was baptized here as a young boy. The Carters attended services here until they left for Washington, D.C., in 1977.

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 since 1981. The former President made some of the furniture and the collection plates, and can often be seen doing yardwork on the grounds. He still teaches Sunday school.

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. The building is now a nursing home.

Golden Peanut Company Main Street and Bond Street. 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.

Billy Carter's Service Station Church Street. Jimmy Carter's younger brother Billy owned and operated this gas station, popularized as a symbol of small-town culture in the 1976 Presidential campaign.

Business District Main Street. These brick commercial buildings, constructed in the early 1900s, replaced earlier wood-frame structures. This was downtown Plains in Carter's youth, relatively unchanged and still a shopping and gathering place.

About Your Visit

Jimmy Carter National Historic Site is located 10 miles west of Americus, Georgia, on U.S. 280. The visitor center is open daily except January 1, Thanksgiving Day, and December 25 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The Carter Boyhood home is southwest of Plains: follow U.S. 280 west for 0.5 mile; bear left on Old Plains Highway for 1.5 miles. The home and commissary are on the right-hand side of the road.

For your safety and the park's protection: You are encouraged to walk around town to get a closer view of the buildings and scenery, but be sure to obey all traffic laws. Remember that the homes in town are privately owned; be respectful of the residents.

For further information: The Jimmy Carter Presidential Library is located at 441 Freedom Parkway, Atlanta, GA 30307 (404-331-3942). The library and exhibit are open Monday through Saturday from 9 a.m. until 4:45 p.m. and on Sundays from 12 noon until 4:45 p.m.

Administration: Jimmy Carter National Historic Site is a unit of the National Park System, which consists of more than 360 parks representing important examples of our country's natural and cultural inheritance. For information, write to: Superintendent, Jimmy Carter National Historic Site, P.O. Box 392, Plains, GA 31780-0392. Call: 912-824-3413.

