

William Howard Taft

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE
OHIO

William Howard Taft, 27th President of the United States, was born on September 15, 1857, in a first-floor bedroom of the family home at 2038 Auburn Avenue. Writing to her sister, Delia Torrey, almost 2 months later, Louise Taft said that "he is perfectly healthy and hearty and I take real comfort in taking care of him. He is very large for his age, and grows fat every day. The question of complexion is not yet settled—his eyes are at present 'deeply darkly, beautifully blue.' . . ."



Mrs. Alphonso Taft, her four children, a nurse, and the Taft home about 1867. The boy behind the fence in the center of the picture is William Howard.

After receiving a law degree in Connecticut in 1838, William Howard Taft's father Alphonso visited various cities before settling in Cincinnati. "After balancing every consideration, which I have been able to bring to bear upon the case, I am disposed to locate here," he wrote Fanny Phelps in his home town of Townshend, Vermont, from Cincinnati. "The practice is not very profitable, nor is it very unprofitable. The office in which I now am, brings in about five thousand dollars a year." On August 29, 1841, he married Fanny who bore him 5 children. Fanny died 11 years later, but Alphonso Taft did not remain a widower long. At the end of 1853, he married Louise Torrey, of Millbury, Massachusetts.

Though Cincinnati in 1870 had a population of more than 200,000, the people were scattered along the Ohio River and upon the seven hills that form an arc above the river. The atmosphere was one of many small villages rather than that of a large city. The Taft boys—there were four besides William Howard—seem to have lived like other boys their age. They swam, skated, fought with the boys from Walnut Hills and Vine Street, and generally enjoyed themselves on the baseball diamond and in other youth-related activities. Young William Howard was an avid baseball player; second base was his territory. Strong arms made him a strong batter, which somewhat compensated for his lack of speed running the bases. His interest in baseball continued through his presidential years, when he inaugurated the Presidential custom of throwing out the first ball of each new season.



Will Taft attended Woodward High School, one of the first public schools to offer college preparation programs. Encouraged by his father, who believed in earnest application to one's studies, he graduated second in his class in 1874. That autumn he left for 4 years at Yale. Taft enjoyed the years at Yale, and graduated second in the class there, too. A classmate, Herbert W. Bowen, said Taft "was the most admired and respected man not only in my class but in all Yale." In 1878, Taft returned home where he studied law and received a degree from Cincinnati Law School. In June 1886 he married Helen Herron of Cincinnati. They had three children, Robert Alphonso, who became a U.S. Senator, Helen Herron, and Charles Phelps II.

William Howard Taft's career was one of gradually increasing responsibilities. Shortly after his 23rd birthday he became solicitor and then assistant prosecutor for Hamilton County. He was for a brief period collector of internal revenue for Ohio and Kentucky in 1882; judge on the Ohio Superior Court for Cincinnati in 1887; Solicitor General of the United States in 1890; U.S. circuit judge for the 6th Judicial District in 1892; President of the Philippines Commission in 1900; Civil Governor of the Philippines in 1901; and Secretary of War in 1904. He was elected President of the United States in 1908, appointed Kent professor of constitutional law at Yale University in 1913, and named Chief Justice of the United States in 1921.

President Taft prepares to sign the bills admitting New Mexico and Arizona to the Union in 1912.

William Allen White questioned Taft in 1908 about how he "got these jobs at so young an age." Taft replied somewhat facetiously: "I got my political pull, first, through father's prominence; then through the fact that I was hail-fellow-well-met with all of the political people of the city convention-going type. I also worked in my ward and sometimes succeeded in deflating the regular gang candidate by hustling around among good people to get them out."

Taft was indeed the prominent son of a prominent father. Alphonso Taft had served as the Secretary of War and Attorney General under President Ulysses S. Grant. He later went to Vienna as minister to Austria-Hungary, and as minister to Russia at St. Petersburg (Leningrad) for President Chester Arthur. Alphonso's son always remained a loyal Republican, too, and felt uneasy when the party was out of power.

Though Taft was thoroughly interested in politics, he was not a politically ambitious man. His first love was the law. As his biographer, Henry F. Pringle, put it, "Taft worshipped the law; no understanding of him is possible without appreciation of the fact." This admiration early kindled a desire for appointment to the Supreme Court. Even in 1905, when he was being mentioned as a possible presidential candidate, he wrote one of his brothers: "my ambition is to become a justice of the Supreme Court. I presume, however, there are very few men who would refuse to accept the nomination of the Republican party for the presidency, and I am not an exception." On another occasion when the Tafts were dining with President Theodore Roosevelt, the President closed his eyes and said, "I see a man weighing three hundred and fifty pounds. There is something hanging over his head. I cannot make out what it is. . . . At one time it looks like the presidency, then again it looks like the chief justiceship."

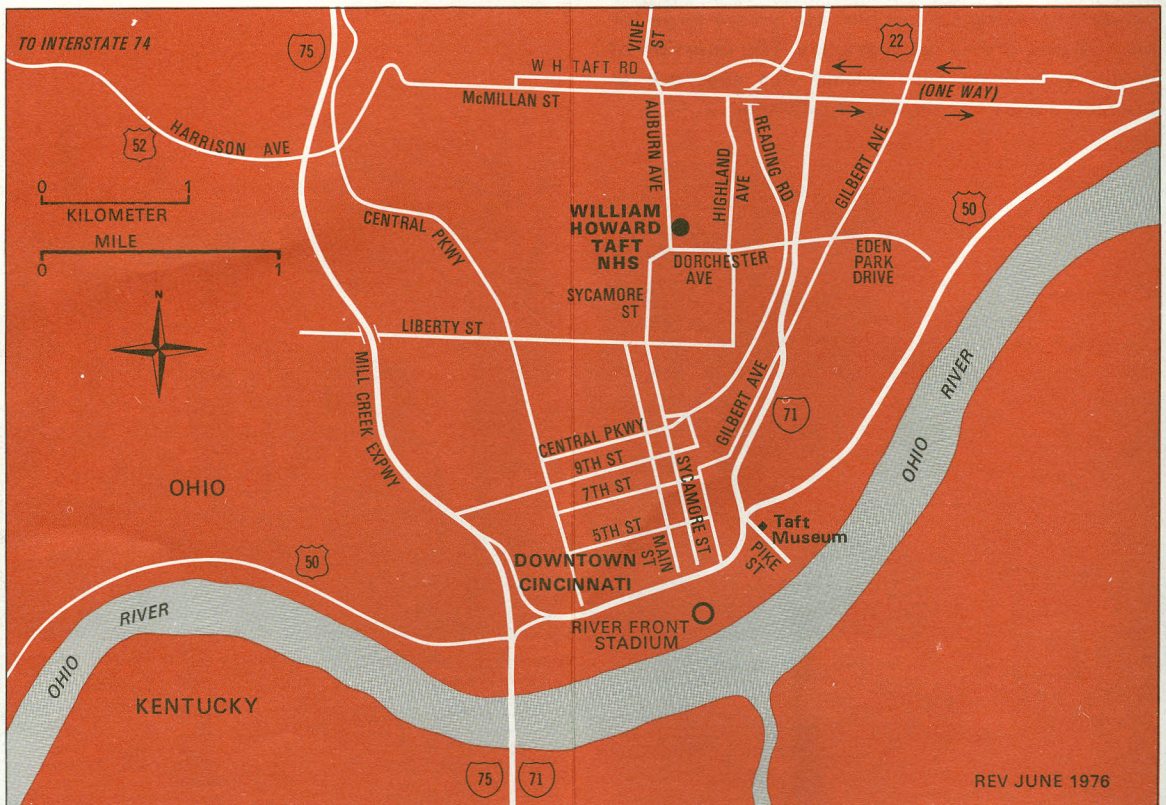
Mrs. Taft replied: "Make it the presidency." Taft replied: "Make it the chief justiceship."

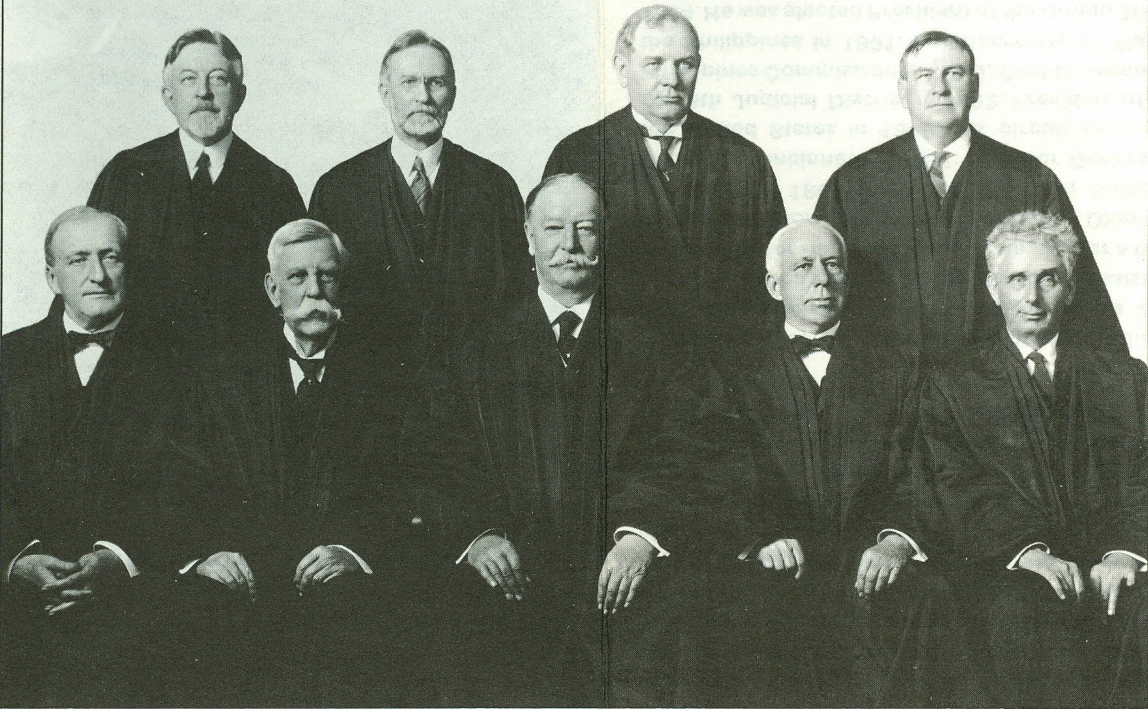
Though Taft longed to be on the Supreme Court, he turned down two Roosevelt offers of appointment while he was serving as Civil Governor of the Philippines, and as Secretary of War. He did not believe that the United States should have taken the Islands, "but being there, we must exert ourselves to construct a government which should be adapted to the needs of the people so that they might be developed into a self-governing people." Once in the Philippines, Taft found that he would have to struggle not only with the problems of the Filipinos but also against the American military authorities who opposed the establishment of the civil government. The "needs of the people" and Taft's steadfast faith in the necessity for a civil government provided the grounds for his refusal to accept a position on the Supreme Court.

On December 23, 1903, Taft sailed for the United States to become Secretary of War in Roosevelt's cabinet. The job became one of intimate advisor to Roosevelt, and the President sent him off frequently to deal with new crises—the Canal Zone; Cuba, where he was Provisional Governor in 1906; and Japan, where he helped smooth out Japanese-American relations.

By 1908, it was clear to most political observers that William Howard Taft would be the Republican presidential candidate if Theodore Roosevelt chose not to run. In the end, this is what happened. And in the autumn, Taft defeated William Jennings Bryan, who was running for the third time, by an electoral vote of 321 to 162.

As President, Taft found it difficult to deal with a Congress made up of Old Guard Republicans, Progressive Republicans, and Democrats. His growing reliance on the Old Guard and the inclusion of





Taft became Chief Justice of the United States in 1921. Several members of this court achieved great prominence, notably Oliver Wendell Holmes, Louis D. Brandeis, and Harlan F. Stone, who himself was appointed Chief Justice in 1941. This 1926 photograph shows, from left to right, James C. McReynolds, Edward T. Sanford, Holmes, George Sutherland, Taft, Pierce Butler, Willis Van Devanter, Stone and Brandeis.

some corporation lawyers in the cabinet made many people conclude that he was abandoning the previous administration's programs, which he had pledged to continue. The growing hostility between Congress and the President produced some legislative stalemates, but many important and progressive acts are still with us today.

Taft recommended in 1909 that Congress submit to the States an amendment which would permit levying a Federal income tax. In 1910, he asked the heads of Government departments to prepare estimates of their coming fiscal year expenses—the first comprehensive budget in the Nation's history. In January 1912 he urged Congress to adopt an annual Federal budget, but this proposal was ignored. Taft's Attorney General, George Wickersham, vigorously enforced the antitrust laws in a careful systematic fashion, and Taft filed more antitrust suits in 4 years than previous administrations, or Woodrow Wilson's. Over the objections of bankers, Taft in 1910 signed a bill instituting a postal savings program which he considered "one of the great Congressional enactments." He also established the Children's Bureau and the Department of Labor and recommended strengthening the Interstate Commerce Commission so that it could regulate the transportation industry more realistically. Two new States, New Mexico and Arizona, came into the Union during his administration.

Taft was not a showman. Perhaps because he did not widely publicize his accomplishments, the popular mind saw him as a vacillator and one who catered to "Big Business." Dissent grew within his

party and at the 1912 convention Roosevelt's name was placed in nomination by those who believed that little or no effort was being made at reform. When Taft won renomination, Roosevelt and his followers formed the Bull Moose party. In November, the separate campaigns of Roosevelt and Taft divided the Republican vote, and the Democratic candidate, Woodrow Wilson, won the Presidency.

Though the campaign was bitter, President Taft left office gracefully and in a few months became Kent professor of constitutional law at Yale University. During World War I, President Wilson named him co-chairman of the National War Labor Board. And in 1921, President Warren G. Harding named him Chief Justice of the United States—the office Taft had always wanted. He, therefore, became the only man who ever served as both President and Chief Justice of the United States.

Taft found the court in an almost unworkable situation. Cases were piling up faster than it could handle them. He worked to improve the efficiency of the courts and urged the passage of legislation for this purpose. Two acts, one in 1922 and the other in 1925, created new Federal judges and lifted some of the burden from the Supreme Court. As Pringle has said, "his prolonged interest in and his tireless labors for judicial reform were his crowning achievements." He was primarily responsible for the construction of the present Supreme Court Building. On February 3, 1930, Taft resigned because of a failing heart. He died in Washington on March 8, 1930, and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Alphonso Taft bought this 2-story brick home in 1851 and extensively remodeled it to accommodate the growing Taft family. The home remained in the family until 1899. In 1961 the Taft Memorial Association, under the leadership of Charles Phelps Taft II, son of the President, acquired control of the house and grounds. The property was designated William Howard Taft National Historic Site by Act of Congress December 2, 1969. The site is open daily from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Memorial Day through Labor Day. It is closed weekends and holidays after Labor Day. Please observe the safety warnings of the rangers while touring the site. Visitors may also wish to see the Taft Museum at 316 Pike St.

ADMINISTRATION

William Howard Taft National Historic Site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The address of the home and of the superintendent is 2038 Auburn Ave., Cincinnati, OH 45219. Telephone (513) 684-3262.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities to protect and conserve our land and water, energy and minerals, fish and wildlife, park and recreation areas, and for the wise use of all those resources. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

National Park Service

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR