

William Howard Taft

National Historic Site
Cincinnati, Ohio



Childhood home of William Howard Taft

Ron Forth



White House Historical Association

From the time of his birth in 1857 until he embarked on a political career that would win him the two highest offices in the nation, William Howard Taft lived here, surrounded by family and breathing in what his mother called "inspiration to everything that was good."

In 1902 Louise Taft reminded her son, then Governor of the Philippines, of his late father's role in his career: "You owe so much to his influence that you might be thought a striking exemplification of the influence of heredity, and the environment which surrounded you in living in the same atmosphere, and breathing the same air—an inspiration to everything that was good." Louise and Alphonso Taft raised their six children in the family tradition of hard work, fair play, and public service. They lived these principles themselves. Steeped in lofty ideals, dutiful Will Taft set a course that took him from his Cincinnati home to the nation's highest ranks.

Cincinnati was a busy river port—the Queen City of the Ohio Valley—when Alphonso Taft arrived from Vermont in 1838. Business was good for the ambitious young attorney, who built a practice and made his place in town society. Soon he could afford to escape the crowding, summer heat, and coal dust of the lower city. In 1851 he moved with his wife, the former Fanny Phelps of his Vermont hometown, young children, and parents to a 10-year-old house and two acres a mile or so out of town in Mount Auburn. Their fashionable suburban neighborhood, according to Grandpa Taft, was "a beautiful high, airy place." The two-story brick house was of popular Greek Revival design—square, symmetrical, with decorative trim and a small porch. The backyard fell toward the river far below. Alphonso's first order of business was to modernize the plumbing and put up a large addition in the rear to accommodate his growing family.

"In ascending the hill you have no view of Mt. Auburn till a sudden turn of the road brings you to the top and you find yourself surrounded with fine residences so shut out from the sight of the city that it seems like a village by itself."

Louise Taft to sister Susan, 1854

After Fanny died in 1852, Alphonso married Massachusetts schoolteacher Louise Torrey. An affectionate stepmother to Alphonso's two sons, Louise gave birth to four healthy

children, including William on September 15, 1857. He was "well and hearty & a most charming baby as you would wish to see," she wrote her mother of the five-month-old. "Willie laughs & plays constantly." To his hired nurse he was "the *beautifullest* boy" she had ever seen. As a child he was outgoing and good-natured, traits he carried into adulthood. Encouraged by his parents, Will earned high marks throughout his school years. "All play and no work makes Jack a mere toy," his father might threaten, but Will escaped his books to play baseball, ride the family's pet pony, sled down Sycamore Hill in winter, wrestle, or tear through the house with his younger brothers.

"[Willie] is a delightful little fellow; seems to make the best of the ills of this life."

Alphonso Taft to Delia Torrey, 1858

"I am more and more impressed with the responsibility of training children properly," Louise wrote her mother in 1860. "It is what we are, not what we do in reference to them, which will make its impression on their lives." In setting an example, the parents could not have been more diligent. The Taft house was a whirl of activity. Their roomy parlor might be the setting for a Christmas sing-along, a game of whist, or a discussion of anti-slavery legislation and women's suffrage with visiting celebrities. Civil War hero and future president James Garfield once accompanied friends to dinner at the Tafts'. Rugs rolled up and furniture pushed aside, the parlor was a makeshift dance hall. Louise surprised Will on his 21st birthday with a gathering of friends for lively music and ice cream. Quiet evenings were spent in the library; Alphonso finished up the day's business, Louise usually had sewing to do, and the children read or brooded over the chess table. Book collector Alphonso was a founding member of the city's literary society. Family discussions and letters were full of references to Dickens, Darwin, and other bestsellers of the day. Alphonso also maintained an "observatory"—a telescope set up in the widow's walk—and was known to wake his family for late-night sightings of astronomical marvels.

There was scarcely a civic or cultural organization in town that could not claim the par-

icipation of one or more Tafts. Alphonso's tireless work for the Republican Party paid off in political appointments which, while they bought him increasing social prominence, led to his departure from Cincinnati. In 1865 he gave up a well-paying law practice for a city judgeship. President Ulysses S. Grant summoned Taft to Washington, first as his Secretary of War then as Attorney General. In the 1880s Taft served as minister to Austria-Hungary and later Russia. Much to Louise's delight, the couple lived abroad for four years and indulged their love of travel; the Auburn Avenue house was intermittently rented out when not occupied by the grown children.

By 1889 Tafts had left Auburn Avenue for good. Alphonso and Louise retired to California where the climate was better for Alphonso's health. Will completed his education and began a law career of his own. In 1886 he married Helen Herron—"Nellie"—and built a house on McMillan Street. The other Taft children were also out on their own. Alphonso died in San Diego in May 1891 and, according to his wish, he was buried in Cincinnati. Tenants were kind enough to allow the family and friends one last gathering in the parlor of their old home for the funeral.

"Never be content until you have done the very best you could have done . . . Work hard, and do your part in building up the reputation of the family."

Peter Rawson Taft to brother Will, 1869

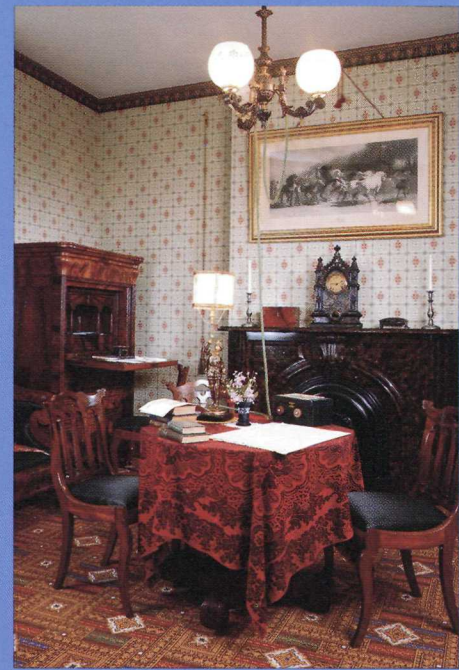
The Tafts sold the house in 1899. It underwent modifications with each successive owner, the last having divided the deteriorating building into apartments. The movement to save the house from demolition began in 1938 with the establishment of the William Howard Taft Memorial Association. In 1969 the federal government designated the Taft house a national historic site, honoring the life and work of the only person to hold the offices of President and Chief Justice of the United States.

Your visit to the Taft home



Parlor

Ron Forth



Library

Ron Forth



Designated by Congress in 1969, William Howard Taft National Historic Site is the only memorial to the nation's 27th President and 10th Chief Justice. The house is restored to its appearance during the years William Howard Taft lived here as a child and young adult.

Louise Taft's letters to her family in Massachusetts provided details of decorating plans, home improvements, and furniture purchases that guided the restoration of the house to its appearance during Taft's childhood.

All family portraits and many of the books belonged to the Tafts while they occupied this house. Where original furniture was unavailable, restorers substituted antiques of the appropriate style. Most pieces were made here in Cincinnati.

Visiting the site The house is open daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; it is closed on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day. There is visitor parking in the neighborhood. Staff members conduct guided tours of the historic rooms. Other rooms display exhibits on Taft's early years and his political career.

Location The Taft house is in the Mount Auburn section of Cin-

cinnati. From I-71N, take Exit 2 (Reading and Florence). Stay in right lane; turn left at first stoplight and proceed up hill. Turn right on Auburn and go ½ block to home. From I-71S, take Exit 3 (Taft Road). Go ¾ mile to Auburn, then ½ mile to home.

Access The house is accessible to wheelchairs. There is an elevator to the exhibits on the second floor. All visitors should observe the staff's safety warnings while touring the site.

Administration The site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Contact: Superintendent, William Howard Taft National Historic Site, 2038 Auburn Avenue, Cincinnati, OH 45219-3025.

Also in Cincinnati The Taft Museum, 316 Pike St., was the home of Charles Phelps Taft, brother of the President. Today the museum exhibits Charles and Anna Taft's collection of European and American paintings, Chinese porcelains, and decorative arts. Alphonso Taft supported construction of the first bridge to span the Ohio, which stands today. It was completed in 1867 by John Roebling who later designed and constructed the Brooklyn Bridge.

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

President and Chief Justice

Louise and Alphonso Taft sent their children out into the world equipped with an education and a belief that academic learning was best put to use in service to others. Family influence, a diploma from Yale (second in the Class of '78), a law degree, and his own ambition propelled Will Taft into public life at a young age. "I am glad that Will is going to work at the law with all his might," Alphonso commented a few years after his son graduated from Cincinnati Law School. "That is his destiny." Still in his 20s, Alphonso Taft's son seemed the natural choice for various county legal and judicial posts. He once quipped that "like every well-trained Ohio man, I always had my plate right side up when offices were falling." But there was more to Will Taft than good luck. He worked hard. He was a loyal party man, campaigning for Republican candidates and receiving jobs in return. His sense of ethics was unshakable, at one point threatening to derail his career: as collector of the revenue, he chose to resign rather than replace competent employees with undeserving party favorites. All the while his goal was taking shape: a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court. Biographer Henry F. Pringle explains, "Taft worshipped the law; no understanding of him is possible without appreciation of the fact."

Taft seemed headed in that direction when, at age 33, he was appointed U.S. Solicitor General. This was his introduction to the national scene and to progress-minded politicians such as Theodore Roosevelt. It was the era of reform. Back in Cincinnati two years later as a U.S. circuit court judge, Taft's efforts to make the judicial system responsive to the needs of a changing society drew President William McKinley's attention. It was also during this time that Taft gained a reputation—not founded wholly in fact—for being anti-labor. President McKinley needed a man in the Philippines to establish a civil government for the new U.S. possession. He named Taft, who left for the islands in 1900. Governor Taft oversaw the construction of schools and transportation lines, strengthened the economy, and brought modern law to the islands. He won the hearts of the Filipinos, who honored him with banquets and gifts. Some historians view these accomplishments as his most important work in light of the strategic role the Philippines later played as a U.S. outpost in the western Pacific.

While Taft was in the Philippines, he was asked by President Roosevelt to fill a vacancy on the Supreme Court. He sacrificed his dream to finish out his work with the people he had grown to love. The Supreme Court offer was repeated a few years later when Taft was Secretary of War. Again it was declined, but Roosevelt was adamant that his deserving friend should sit in high

office. The President, honoring a campaign promise not to run again, anointed Secretary Taft as his successor. "My ambition is to become a justice of the Supreme Court," Taft wrote his brother in 1905. "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." Besides, Nellie Taft, herself an adept politician, wanted her husband in the White House. He received nomination for President in 1908 and won the electoral vote in November two to one.

The fruits of the Taft administration are still a part of American life. He backed the constitutional amendment providing for an income tax, worked within a budget, introduced "dollar diplomacy," strengthened the Interstate Commerce Commission to better regulate transportation and control railroad rate wars, brought dozens of antitrust suits, appointed six Supreme Court justices, and signed New Mexico and Arizona into the union. He inaugurated the presidential tradition of throwing out the first baseball of the season.

Taft's presidential achievements were obscured by his lack of broad-based support. The very perception that made him appealing during the nominating convention—he was neither too conservative nor too liberal—now worked to his disadvantage, particularly in his dealings with Congress. To progressives, who had expected a continuation of Roosevelt's policies, he was paralyzed with inertia. With one eye always on the law, he was too cautious to expand his presidential power in the manner of his predecessor. "It was evident that the army of progress that had been moving along with President Roosevelt was camped under President Taft," noted a journalist. Old Guard Republicans, happily rid of Roosevelt, bristled at what were in their view threats to the free market—the dismantling of lucrative monopolies, artificially low railroad rates, and the notion that one's hard-earned money belonged in part to the government.

Taft himself would likely have no argument with today's judgment that his presidency failed in many ways. "I do not know that I have had harder luck than other presidents," he wrote Roosevelt as early as 1910, "but I do know that thus far I have succeeded far less than have others." Though his party renominated him in 1912, his erstwhile mentor Roosevelt was furious that Taft had ignored his progressive agenda. Roosevelt headed the ticket for the Bull Moose (Progressive) Party, splitting the Republican vote and ensuring victory for Democrat Woodrow Wilson. Much later Taft declared, "I don't remember that I was ever president."

Lifelong devotion to his alma mater took Taft back to Yale where he taught constitutional law for eight years. During World War I, he headed the board which mediated disputes between defense manufacturers and labor. The position brought Taft closer to the concerns of the nation's workers, experience which would benefit him in his next job. A third chance at the Supreme Court came his way when President Warren G. Harding had court vacancies to fill. This time there was no burden of unfinished duty to keep Taft from accepting. In 1921 he was named 10th Chief Justice of the United States.

"The Chief Justice goes into a monastery and confines himself to his judicial work," Taft wrote in 1921. It was rare for Justice Taft not to work. The first problem he encountered was one of sheer volume. The court was bound to accept any case involving a federal point of law. By the 1920s, claims arising from the war, income tax laws, and prohibition generated an overwhelming backlog. The Judiciary Act of 1925, backed by Taft, allowed the high court to choose cases based on merit. This paved the way for more judicial reforms. Decisions of the Taft Court throughout the decade brought law into the new century. He had backed the income tax as president and continued to do so as Chief Justice. His court upheld Prohibition laws and efforts to convict bootleggers, affirmed presidential removal powers, and strengthened the ICC as well as the federal government in general. The Chief Justice never shed his anti-labor reputation, though he always upheld labor's right to organize. Nor did he always side with big business. "While Taft presided as chief justice, and was often accused of conservatism," explains author Pringle, "there occurred a steady redistribution of the wealth of the United States." Taft rallied support for a new court building—a solemn Neoclassical structure completed in 1932—giving it symbolic parity with the other two branches of government.

"Taft worshipped the law; no understanding of him is possible without appreciation of the fact."

Biographer Henry F. Pringle

In February 1930 Taft resigned his post because of illness. A month later he died at age 72. That day President Herbert Hoover articulated the country's sense of loss when he declared, "Mr. Taft's service to our country has been of rare distinction and was marked by a purity of patriotism, a lofty disinterestedness, and a devotion to the best interests of the nation." William Howard Taft was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

A Taft Chronology

- 1857** Born September 15 in Cincinnati, Ohio, to Alphonso and Louise Taft.
- 1863-80** Educated in city public schools. Graduates second in class from Yale University, 1878; graduates 1880 from Cincinnati Law School.
- 1874** "You expect great things of me, but you mustn't be disappointed if I don't come up to your expectations."
William Howard Taft to father, 1874
- 1880-81** Legal reporter for *Cincinnati Commercial*.
- 1881-82** Assistant Prosecutor, Hamilton Co., Ohio.
- 1882** Collector of Internal Revenue, First Ohio District.
- 1885-97** Assistant Solicitor, Hamilton County.
- 1886** Marries Helen "Nellie" Herron. Moves to home on McMillan Street.
- 1887-90** Judge, Ohio Superior Court.
- 1890-92** U.S. Solicitor General.
- 1892-1900** Judge, Sixth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. Rules on patent rights; becomes known for strict interpretation of the law and for efforts at judicial reform.
- 1896-1900** Dean, Cincinnati Law School. Promotes growth of school and founds Circuit Court Library.
- 1900-01** President, U.S. Philippine Commission.
- 1901-04** First Civil Governor of the Philippines. Replaces military rule; establishes modern government and institutions.
- 1904-08** U.S. Secretary of War. Close adviser to President Roosevelt; heads Panama Canal commission.
- 1906** Provisional Governor of Cuba.
- 1909-13** President of the United States.

"We can not meet new questions nor build for the future if we confine ourselves to the outmoded dogmas of the past."

William Howard Taft, 1912

- 1913-21** Professor of Constitutional Law, Yale University.
- 1915-21** President of League to Enforce Peace, a forerunner of the League of Nations.
- 1918-19** Co-chairman, National War Labor Board.
- 1921-30** Chief Justice, U.S. Supreme Court.

"The court, next to my wife and children, is the nearest thing to my heart in life."

William Howard Taft, 1923

- 1930** Retires as Chief Justice. Dies in Washington on March 8.

Top to bottom: Alphonso and Louise Taft; Auburn Ave. home, 1868 (Willie is standing behind fence); with wife Nellie, son Charlie, daughter Helen, and son Robert; delegate's ribbon; with Teddy Roosevelt; as President with First Lady, Inauguration Day 1909; as Chief Justice, 1925

