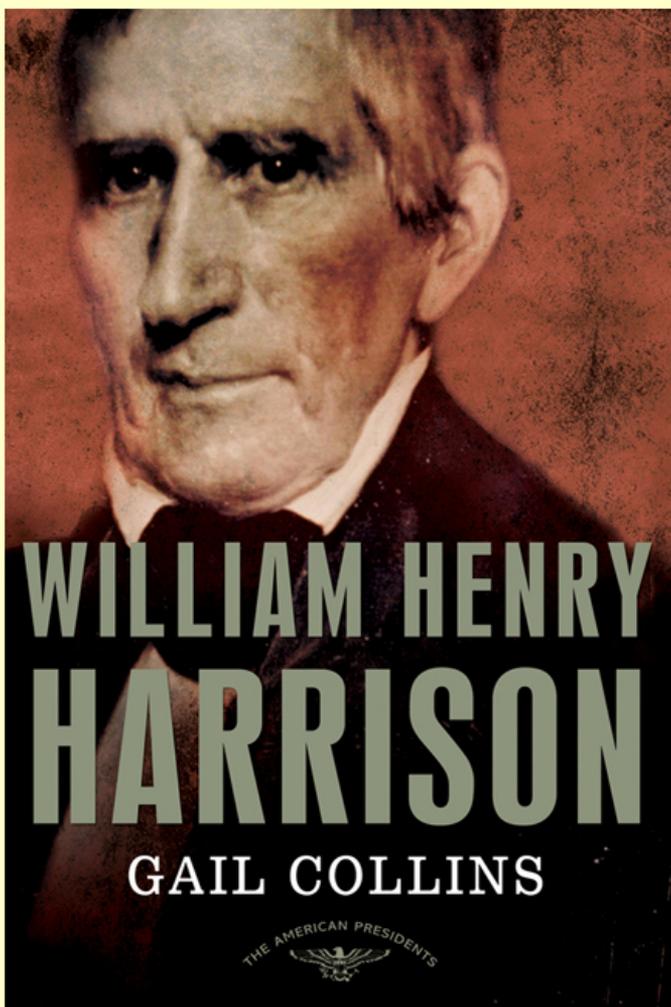


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**WILLIAM HENRY
HARRISON**

GAIL COLLINS

THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTS




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To the Manor Born

William Henry Harrison was born on February 9, 1773, seventh in a family of three boys and four girls, and in a way his destiny was determined by his birth order. The youngest sons of great families were at almost as much of a disadvantage in eighteenth-century America as they had been in medieval Europe. The oldest sons inherited the estate. Their parents could only hope their younger brothers would marry well, or at least stay out of sight and out of trouble—the modern concept of a career had not been invented yet. Control of the Harrison family plantation would go to the firstborn son, Benjamin. A life in law and then politics was mapped out for Carter, the second. When it came time to educate the third son, the Harrisons mainly seemed to be looking for a career that did not require expensive schooling.

The great hereditary name for a Harrison was Benjamin, and of course William Henry came too late for that as well. (When his grandson reached the White House in 1889, he was President Benjamin Harrison to the world, but Benjamin VIII on the family tree.) Benjamin I had arrived in this country in 1633, at the young colony of Jamestown, where he was

soon elected to the governing council. Future Benjamins acquired and built up the family plantation, Berkeley, a vast swath along the James River. Its grounds included the site of what Virginians regarded as the first American Thanksgiving, an event that was pretty much confined to prayer and lacked the meal-oriented focus of the Massachusetts version.

Every generation of Harrisons included prominent office-holders, but the greatest and most famous by far was William Henry's father, Benjamin V—twice governor of Virginia and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. He had become head of the family suddenly, when he was nineteen and his father was killed in a freak accident. (Going upstairs to close a window during a thunderstorm, Benjamin IV was hit by a bolt of lightning that also killed two daughters, who were nearby.)

Benjamin V, who the family reverently called The Signer, was larger than life, standing six feet, four inches and quickly going to fat. (John Adams, who had an on-again, off-again friendship with him, called Benjamin "Jack Falstaff" after the corpulent Shakespearean character.) Stories about The Signer abounded. During the Second Continental Congress, when there was a quarrel over who would assume the chairman's role, Harrison picked up the hesitant John Hancock and literally dumped him into the seat of power. As the Founders prepared to sign the Declaration of Independence, Harrison turned to the thin Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts, grinned, and said, "I shall have a great advantage over you, Mr. Gerry, when we are all hung for what we are now doing." Given the weight of his body, Harrison pointed out, he would die quickly while Gerry would "dance in the air an hour before you are dead." On a less elevated note, during the war the British published an intercepted letter they claimed had been written by Benjamin Harrison to George Washington in which The Signer

bragged about his amorous adventure with “pretty little Kate, the Washer-woman’s daughter.”

William Henry came from the best of Virginia families on both sides—his mother was a relative of Martha Washington and the daughter of Robert Carter, known as “King Carter,” one of the richest men in the colonies. But by the time he arrived, the heyday of the family’s fortune was over. During the Revolutionary War, the Berkeley mansion was sacked by British troops led by the traitor Benedict Arnold. The boy fled with his mother and youngest sisters. When they returned later, they found that the livestock was gone, and that while the house was still standing intact the interior had been destroyed. According to family legend, when a British nobleman visited Berkeley after the conflict had ended, he noted rather snootily that while the exterior of the great homes of Virginia compared favorably to their English counterparts, their interiors lacked elegant furniture and decor. “I can account for my paintings and decorations, sir,” Benjamin roared. “Your soldiers burned them in my backyard.”

The Signer suffered from gout with advancing age. His last public appearance was in 1788, when he attended the Virginia convention called to ratify the Constitution. (Benjamin was unenthusiastic, complaining that it still lacked a Bill of Rights.) He was, an observer reported, “elegantly arrayed in a rich suit of blue and buff, a long queue tied with a black ribbon dangling from full locks of snow.” Three years later he would be dead, having collapsed after holding a great feast to celebrate his reelection to the Virginia House of Delegates.

William Henry was, at least according to his mother, a “delicate” boy, and he was educated at home until he was fourteen. His older brothers were sent to learn the ways of the world of business and law, but the youngest son was targeted

for a career in medicine. It's not clear whether he ever showed any inclination in that direction. Perhaps his father was influenced by his friendship with Benjamin Rush, one of his fellow signers and a prominent Philadelphia physician. But it was also a profession that could provide the boy with a living after a not-too-pricey apprenticeship. Money had become an issue. The Signer had always been more interested in politics than agriculture and, like much of Virginia, Berkeley's overused soil was beginning to erode, producing fewer and fewer crops for a larger and larger family.

At any rate, the youngest son was sent not to the College of William and Mary, where Harrison men had traditionally been educated, but to the small, rustic Hampden-Sidney College, where the curriculum included "the English grammar, Caesar's commentaries, Sallust, Virgil and the Roman Antiquities." Years later, Harrison would say, rather proudly, that he had read Charles Rollin's ponderous histories of Greece and Rome "three times before I was seventeen years old." Later, when he joined the military, he set off to the Indian wars carrying a copy of Cicero. It was a typical education for his day, but it would have a dreadful effect on Harrison's public oratory, which tended to drip with references to Roman generals.

His tenure at Hampden-Sidney was rather short—perhaps the Harrisons, staunch Episcopalians, were disturbed by reports that a spirit of evangelical revival was capturing some segments of the student body. After a brief stay at another school, William Henry was sent to Richmond to study under a doctor, Andrew Leiper. But Richmond, too, had its perils for this young product of plantation society. William Henry fell in with members of the "Humane Society," a group of abolitionists whose leader, Robert Pleasants, had been a political opponent of Benjamin's. (In his diary, Pleasants had recorded the story of Benedict

Arnold's raid on Berkeley and noted with pleasure that the British had carried off forty of the family slaves.) It was probably the closest William Henry Harrison would ever come to flirting with abolitionism. Later, when he became a presidential candidate, Harrison would tell northern supporters that the episode was evidence that he was not pro-slavery, and of course he would discount it entirely when he was in the South.

If nothing else, his exposure to radical thought was brief. Once again, the youngest Harrison was uprooted and transferred to the Medical School of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. But when he arrived at the city by boat and disembarked in the spring of 1791, he was met by a messenger who informed him that his father had died.

His brothers told him—or at least hinted—that the family could no longer afford to pay for his education, and William Henry quickly began looking for a new career. Since most doctors at the time had little formal training anyway, the fact that he quickly abandoned that line of work does suggest that medicine had never held much attraction. He tried unsuccessfully to get a government job, and then sought advice from Richard Henry Lee, the governor of Virginia, who was visiting Philadelphia at the time. Lee offered him help in getting an army commission. When William Henry expressed a willingness to join the military, President George Washington himself signed off on the commission, saying he “had no reason to reject the request of the son of an old friend.”

Some of Harrison's other friends regarded Lee's efforts as less than helpful. The army was at a low point at the time, in terms of both prestige and pay. Fighting the British had given way to fighting the Indians on the western frontier, which most wellborn men regarded as an ignoble occupation—not to mention one that was both extremely uncomfortable and

extremely dangerous. But the newly fatherless and somewhat impoverished eighteen-year-old must have felt more than a little desperate. “In 24 hours from the first conception of the idea of changing my profession, I was an Ensign in the 1st US Reg of the Infantry,” he wrote later. His biographers have noted that there was actually quite a bit more time spent searching for that desired government post, and one has suggested that the real impetus for Harrison’s enlistment was an unsuccessful love affair. But whatever his reasons, he was soon committed to what would become his defining career.

Harrison first became a recruiting officer, staging little parades with a fifer and drummer to draw crowds of passersby with time on their hands, and he managed to sign up eighty men even though at the time army pay was only \$2.10 a month—the equivalent of about fifty dollars now. He marched them from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, where they took off by boat down the Ohio River, Harrison clutching that copy of Cicero. The book must have been a comforting connection to the old days, and also a reminder to himself and those around him that he was a wellborn and well-educated gentleman.

The troops arrived in the fall of 1791 at Fort Washington, a log stockade on the northern side of the river enclosing about an acre of land, at what is now Cincinnati. At the time, it was one of the most western of American settlements, although there actually weren’t very many settlers—just twenty-five or thirty cabins clustered near the comforting presence of the military. There were no roads except for Indian trails and virtually no communication with the East except messages carried by the occasional express rider.

It was hardly an opportune moment to begin a military career on the frontier. The Northwest Territory, which included what would later become the state of Ohio, had been roiled

by Indian wars, most of which the white Americans seemed to be losing. While Harrison was making his way to Fort Washington, the survivors of a battle to the west were racing through the forests toward the protection of the stockade. Forces under the command of the territorial governor, Arthur St. Clair, had been walloped by the Indian chief Little Turtle in a fight that would come to be known as St. Clair's Defeat. It would go down in history as the worst loss ever to be suffered by white forces in the Indian wars—and in fact, in terms of casualty rate, one of the worst defeats in all of American military history. Little Turtle's men, numbering fewer than five hundred, had killed 630 American soldiers—nearly two-thirds of the total force.

A few hundred men, most of them injured, and a few dozen women, who had followed the army as soldiers' wives, laundresses, or prostitutes, made their way to Fort Washington. There, the pathetic company quickly lost the sympathy of the post commanders. They broke into the village stores and took what they could find, which added up to a small amount of food and a great deal of grog. In his first two days in the West, Harrison said later, he saw more drunken men than he had until then in his entire life.

The following days weren't much better. Harrison discovered that his fellow officers resented him, in part because he had gotten a job that the son of one of the captains coveted, without serving the usual apprentice period as a cadet. The other officers were mainly veterans of the Revolution who had worked their way up in the army, and the arrival of a green former college student wielding a copy of Cicero didn't impress them.

Harrison also soon learned that the army had few horses—as soon as new mounts arrived, the local Indians skillfully stole

them. The equipment was poor. Soldiers mainly lived in leaky tents and suffered with faulty guns and poor ammunition. Given the boredom of camp routine, most of the men drank constantly. "At least four fifths of my brother officers died of the effects of intoxication," Harrison claimed later. He grew to dislike drinking, although he would be surrounded by it throughout a life of military encampments and, later, political banquets. When a new commanding officer ordered that any soldier found drunk outside the walls of the fort be instantly given fifty lashes, Harrison enthusiastically followed through. His first target, who was actually a civilian ordnance worker, filed a complaint with the civilian authorities and Harrison was arrested by a local deputy. It was only the intervention of the fort commander that limited Harrison's punishment at the hands of the outraged townsmen to one night in jail.

The only breaks from the dismal circumstances inside Fort Washington were a series of winter marches Harrison was sent on, one of them to try to recover some of the equipment that had been left behind by St. Clair's fleeing troops. The soldiers must have wished they were back in the depressing fort. They trudged through the snow, in freezing rains, and slept exposed to the elements with their saddles for pillows. When they woke up, they often found their hair was frozen to the ground.

Harrison was eventually sent back to Philadelphia, as escort to the wife and children of the fort commander. There, Anthony Wayne, the Revolutionary War hero who was universally known as "Mad Anthony," was busy drilling a new command called the Legion of the United States. (Harrison was far from being the only member of the military obsessed with the ancient Romans.) Wayne had been brought back to duty by his friend

President Washington and charged with whipping the disorganized army into shape.

Harrison joined Wayne's command and was made a lieutenant, but he still yearned for a chance to move upward. Fate intervened when his captain became embroiled in a fight over the affections of a sergeant's wife. Scandal ensued. The captain was whisked away to another post and Harrison was assigned to take his place. Wayne took a liking to Harrison—"a young gentleman of family, education and merit"—and made him his aide-de-camp with a salary of \$64 per month. It was a huge raise, even though Harrison's total compensation would have amounted to only about seventeen thousand dollars per year in modern wages.

By then both his parents were dead. William Henry traded the land he had inherited in Virginia for a large parcel the family owned in Kentucky. Like many of his business ventures, it would turn out to be ill advised. The title to the Kentucky land was wrapped up in the complications of frontier surveying, and it would never prove very valuable. But as a symbol it was significant. His Virginia life was over and he looked west for his future.