

Chester A. Arthur Sites

Vermont and New York

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Chester A. Arthur Sites

Location:

1. Birthplace: North Fairfield, Franklin County, Vermont
2. Childhood Home: Elm Street, Perry, New York
3. Final Home: 123 Lexington Avenue, New York City

Ownership:

1. Governor Philip H. Hoff, Burlington, Vermont
2. Miss Mildred Forward, Elm Street, Perry, New York
3. Dr. Leo Lindenbaum, 251 Central Park West, New York City

Significance

Chester Alan Arthur was born on October 5, 1830, in a small frame building in North Fairfield, Vermont, that no longer stands. His father, a Baptist clergyman, who saw his son become a sceptic, moved from North Fairfield in 1832, eventually settling in Perry, New York, in 1835. Four years later the Arthur family moved from Perry, thus continuing its nomadic existence while Chester was still very young. Nevertheless, the youth acquired an education, being graduated from Union College in Schenectady in 1848. He then moved to New York City, began a law practice, which was interrupted by the Civil War and resumed in 1863, when Arthur returned to private life. He also entered politics.

As Arthur became more of a politician and less a lawyer, he advanced in the ranks of Senator Roscoe Conkling's powerful political machine in the Empire State. Even so, he never became a machine politician of the worst type, always exhibiting personal honesty, disdain for

blatent corrupt practices, and a strong personal dignity. In the words of his best biographer, Arthur was a "gentleman boss."¹ Conkling secured the collectorship of the Custom House in New York for his young lieutenant in 1871, which post ranked as one of the great patronage offices in the Nation. During Arthur's tenure of seven years and four months, he hired and fired for political reasons, but shunned any financial trickery. President Rutherford B. Hayes, after a terrific battle with Conkling and his followers, forced the dismissal of Arthur in 1878.

Despite Arthur's personal honesty, many in the Country vented alarm when he became the Republican Party's vice-presidential candidate in 1880. Most citizens thought of him as just a machine politician; their appraisal of him probably fell lower when John Sherman, one of the party's great men, commented that Arthur's nomination "was inadvisable."² Dismay thus accompanied horror upon President James Garfield's death from an assassin's bullet on September 19, 1881, and Arthur's taking the oath of office late that night.

Expecting the worst, the Nation soon discovered that its new president was a dignified and honest individual. A handsome man, the tall and impressive looking chief executive exuded courtesy and good

¹George F. Howe, Chester A. Arthur: A Quarter-Century of Machine Politics (New York, 1934), 290.

²Howe, Arthur, 122.

manners while conducting himself in exemplary fashion; and much later a man who had known many presidents said that "Arthur was the only gentleman I ever saw in the White House."³ Furthermore, Arthur ignored most of his former associates. He sought to bring men of ability into his administration and displayed great courage in refusing to appoint many for simply political reasons.

Arthur had risen to prominence through a political machine that had depended on "spoils," but now he supported civil service reform. He joined a sorrowing Nation, horrified at the death of Garfield, in demanding an end to the political distribution of jobs and the compulsory collection of contributions for party use from government workers. In his first annual message, the president recommended the passage of a civil service law, but the Republican dominated Congress enacted such a bill only after it lost many Congressional seats in the elections of 1882. When the bill appeared on Arthur's desk early in 1883, he signed it. The law removed many Federal positions from the spoils list, forbade compulsory donations, and authorized the creation of a commission to enforce the act. To the joy of all but the politicians, Arthur appointed a good commission and supported the enforcement of the law. At the same time, it must be said that all patronage did not end in 1883, and Arthur himself continued to use some of the traditional political methods during his administration.

³Chauncey M. Depew, "Leaves from My Autobiography," Scribner's (December, 1921), 672.

Arthur's presidency is noteworthy for several other things besides the reform of the civil service. The president strongly supported the improvement of the navy's fleet, which in late 1881 had only thirty-two ships ready for action. He backed the measure of 1882 that authorized the construction of two steel cruisers, as well as other innovations, and because of that he is called the father of the new navy. Other of Arthur's actions are also noteworthy. In 1882, he vetoed a "pork-barrel" bill calling for the expenditure of \$13,743,875 on local projects. Irired, Congress repassed the bill. The president also strove to promote fairer treatment of the Indians, seeking to better their schools, but Congress ignored that recommendation.

Arthur, believing he had served the Nation and Republican Party well, hoped for his party's nomination in 1884. Perhaps the country as a whole appreciated his performance as president, but his party did not, and it repudiated Arthur and chose one of its master politicians, James G. Blaine. Disappointed, Arthur became despondent in his last months in the White House. Nevertheless, he had acquitted himself well, and as Harper's Weekly said on March 7, 1885,

It is, indeed, his honor and his praise that he leaves the Presidency with a higher political consideration than when he entered it,⁴

The ex-president returned to his home at 123 Lexington Avenue and

⁴Harper's Weekly, XLIX (March 7, 1885), 146.

attempted to renew his law practice. Illness soon enfeebled him, though, and he remained a sick man until his death on November 16, 1886.

Condition of the Sites

The State of Vermont reconstructed the Arthur birthplace in North Fairfield in 1953, at a cost of \$15,000. As there was practically no material available describing the original building, the State does not claim that the house is an exact replica, but rather only a symbol.

The house in Perry, New York, where Arthur lived between 1835-39, has been moved from its original site and has been greatly altered. It is a one-story frame building, with a porch in front, and the house's date of construction is unknown. The building is now a two family house that has been quite changed inside, a dining room having been added, for example, since Arthur's time. There are no Arthur furnishings in the house.

Arthur's New York City home is a five-story brownstone building that has been considerably altered since Arthur's death. The original entrance, which was on the floor above the ground floor and was reached by a flight of stone steps, has been eliminated; one now enters the house on the ground floor. A grocery store occupies the front part of the house on the ground floor and a beauty shop is above it. The remaining three floors have been divided into apartments, which has produced numerous alterations on those floors. The entire

building, whose exterior has recently been painted white, is in poor condition, there being a great need for plastering and painting inside the building. There are no Arthur furnishings in the house.

None of the Arthur houses possess exceptional historical value as the birthplace is a reconstruction, as the Perry home has been moved to a new site, and as the New York City home has been seriously altered and is in poor condition.

References: Chauncey M. Depew, "Leaves from My Autobiography," Scribner's, (December, 1921), 672-73; Harper's Weekly, XXXIX (March 7, 1885), 146; George Frederick Howe, Chester A. Arthur: A Quarter-Century of Machine Politics (New York, 1934), 4, 29-30, 34, 39, 48-49, 110, 129, 151, 154, 163, 198, 206, 211, 232-33, 240, 255, 282, 284, 286, 290; Edwin E. Sparks, National Development, 1877-1885 (New York, 1907), 198, 245-46, 278-79, 294-95, 327; Edward S. anwood, A History of the Presidency from 1788 to 1897 (2 vols.; Boston, 1898), I, 409, 427; Leonard D. White, The Republican Era: 1869-1901 (New York, 1958), 159-60, 301; State of Vermont, Biennial Report: Board of Historic Sites, 1961-1962 (n.p., 1962), 21-22.

The reconstructed Arthur birthplace,
North Fairfield, Vermont.

National Park Service Photo, 1963



The Arthur boyhood home
in Perry, New York.

National Park Service Photo, 1963



Arthur's home, the brownstone painted
white, at 123 Lexington Avenue, New York.

National Park Service Photograph,
1964



Arthur's New York house.
Note how the doorway and
the first two floors have
been changed.

National Park Service Photograph,
1964



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