

Jimmy Carter

Jimmy Carter
National Historical Park
Georgia

National Park Service
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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 homefolks, 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 Jimmy Carter, election as president culminated a career in public service. Like others who rose to the nation's highest office, he made his name on a local and state level before reaching 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, GA.

1941 Graduates from Plains High School. US enters World War II.

1941–43 Attends Georgia Southwestern College, then Georgia Institute of Technology.

1943–46 Attends US Naval Academy. Graduates in 1946; begins naval career. Marries Rosalynn Smith.

1953 Father dies; 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 High School students celebrate George Washington's Birthday, 1941.



Fresh from the US Naval Academy, Ensign Carter (front row, third from left) serves as an electronics officer aboard the USS Wyoming.

1954 In *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the US 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 bid for governor. US involvement in Vietnam escalates.

1971–75 Governor of Georgia.

1977–81 39th US president.

1977 Creates Department of Energy.

1978 Signs Panama Canal treaties.



Carter's populist campaign wins him the Democratic nomination on the first ballot and brings victory in the presidential election of 1976.



Rosalynn Carter holds Jimmy's Bible while Chief Justice Warren E. Burger administers the oath of office to the 39th President of the United States.

Few US presidents have had such close ties with where they were born and raised. The Carters farmed cotton in southwestern Georgia before the Civil War and have remained for five generations. In 1923 Earl Carter married Lillian Gordy, a native Georgian and nurse at the Wise Sanitarium in Plains. The newlyweds lived in a rooming house on Church Street. Their first child, James Earl Carter, Jr., was born October 1, 1924. Everyone called him Jimmy.

When Jimmy was four the family moved to Archery, Georgia. Their farm produced peanuts, cotton, vegetables, pigs, chickens, and dairy cattle. They were prosperous by standards of the rural South at the time and eventually could add indoor 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, sisters Gloria and Ruth, and brother Billy to value education, community service, church, and each other.

Jimmy picked cotton and worked alongside the farm's Black employees, some of whom were friends. One evening in June 1938, Earl Carter set a radio on a window sill so employees and neighbors could listen to the world heavyweight boxing match between German Max Schmeling and American Joe Louis. When the Black boxer

won, the crowd moved across the road before their cheers arose. Despite caution around their white employer, "you could have heard them for five miles celebrating Louis's victory," Carter recalled.

Carter attended Plains High School, where influential teachers were coach Y.T. Sheffield and Miss Julia Coleman, "who encouraged me to learn about music, art, and especially, literature." Carter spent a year at Georgia Southwestern College in Americus and another at Georgia Institute of Technology. In 1943 Carter received an appointment to the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. He graduated in June 1946 and a month later married Rosalynn Smith in the Plains United Methodist Church. They had three sons—Jack, Chip, and Jeff—between 1947 and 1952. Daughter Amy arrived in 1967. Lieutenant Carter served in the nuclear submarine program headed by Adm. Hyman Rickover, a demanding mentor much like Carter's father.

Duty Calls Him Home Earl Carter died in 1953. Jimmy Carter resigned his commission and returned home to take over the family businesses. Witnessing the effects of segregation, he took up his mother's hatred of racial injustice. He joined civic organizations and served on the school board. In 1961 he encountered the hazards of being a moderate in conservative territory when he supported a referendum to consolidate the

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

In 1962 Carter ran for state senate. He lost the primary but proved blatant election fraud by his opponent and finally took office. His 1966 run for governor ended in defeat; he ran again in 1970 and won. In May he was 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." Carter set a progressive course, reorganizing state government, championing civil rights, and waging war on crime and corruption. As his term ended, he decided to run for US president.

"It was a little shocking that someone we knew wanted to be president," said Maxine Reese, Carter's campaign manager, "but if Jimmy wanted to be president, why not?" Townspeople stuffed envelopes, made phone calls, and organized covered-dish fundraisers that reflected the nationwide grassroots campaign. In the years after the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandals, Carter's political calling card was his distance from the Washington establishment and his pledge to be truthful. 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.

A Proud Legacy The Carter presidency can claim a long list of accomplishments (see below), including foreign policy successes carried out despite Carter's lack of experience. Notably in 1978 Carter brought Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to Camp David, Maryland, to work out a peace agreement. But as the 1980 election approached, he drew criticism because of a troubled economy, high inflation, and the US hostage crisis in Iran. In November he lost to Ronald Reagan. President Carter spent his last hours in office negotiating the release of the 52 hostages; they were freed as he left office.

The Carters returned home to Georgia in January 1981. They founded The Carter Center in Atlanta to advance human rights and alleviate human suffering. In 1994 Carter mediated peace agreements or cease-fires in Haiti, Bosnia, and North Korea. He and Rosalynn began working with Habitat for Humanity to build houses for people around the world. Their ties to Plains remain as strong as they were decades ago when young Jimmy walked to town on summer mornings to visit his grandmother and sell boiled peanuts to townspeople.

1978 Brings together Israeli prime minister and Egyptian president to end hostilities between Israel and Egypt. 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 the People's Republic of China.

1979 Creates Department of Education.

1979 American hostages are seized at US embassy in Tehran, Iran, in November.



President Carter celebrates signing the 1979 peace treaty with Egypt's President Anwar Sadat on his right and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin on his left.



Carter visits Yellowstone National Park while president. "I think my feeling of greatest ease is when I'm in the outdoors," he has said.

1980 Signs Alaska Lands National Interest Conservation Act, protecting over 100 million acres of land.

1980 Loses presidential election to Ronald Reagan. Negotiates release of the US hostages held in Iran.

1981–Today Lives in Plains. Works with The Carter Center and Habitat for Humanity. In 2002 is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, advance democracy and human rights, and promote economic and social development.

Jimmy Carter's Plains



PLAINS DEPOT 100 West Main Street. The depot was completed in 1888. The town, then named Plains of Dura, moved a short distance south to take advantage of the new railroad and shortened its name to Plains. In 1919, 66 carloads of hogs and cows were shipped from the depot. In the 1920s, 6,000 to 10,000 bales of cotton were shipped annually from Plains. The building has been restored to its 1976 appearance as Carter's campaign headquarters.



JIMMY CARTER BOYHOOD FARM 402 Old Plains Highway, Archery. Carter remembers the day when the family moved here in 1928. His father had forgotten his key and had four-year-old Jimmy crawl through a window to open the front door. On the original 360-acre farm, the Carters raised cotton, peanuts, and corn to sell, and vegetables and livestock for their own use. In 1938 "an almost unbelievable change took place in our lives when electricity came to the farm," Carter recalls. East of the house is the commissary building where Earl Carter, Jimmy's father, sold seeds and supplies.



PLAINS HIGH SCHOOL 300 North Bond Street. Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter attended grammar and high school here. They were influenced by teacher and principal Miss Julia L. Coleman, who was a guiding force at the school from 1912 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,'" recalls Rosalynn Carter, valedictorian, class of 1944. The last class graduated in 1979. Now the school is the park museum and visitor center, with exhibits on Carter's life and career.



CARTER HOME AND GARDEN 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. Note: The Carter Home and Garden property are closed to the public.

NPS / MATHEW PAGE, NPS / JILL STUCKEY, NPS / KEVIN BROOKES, NPS / BETH WRIGHT

Exploring Plains

In January 1977 the 18-car Peanut Special train left the Plains Depot filled 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 hometown candidate. The press set up a city of trailers and equipment by the water tower. A 13-foot smiling peanut, a campaign mascot, appeared in town. After the election this community of fewer than 700 drew several thousand visitors each day. Souvenir shops and restaurants opened, and the state built a visitor center outside of town. The Secret Service installed guard booths and security devices at the Carter's home on Woodland Drive.

Despite 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.

Jimmy Carter National Historical Park, designated by Congress in 1987, is comprised of Carter's boyhood farm and home, high school, current residence (closed to the public), and the railroad depot. (See photographs and descriptions above.) The preservation district includes the national park sites, a historic district, and agricultural lands in and around the city of Plains, Georgia (descriptions at right).

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

Rylander House Old Plains Highway. Known locally as the Haunted House, Jimmy and Rosalynn rented this house from 1956 to 1961. Built about 1850, it is one of the county's oldest houses. Generations of ghost stories have inspired its nickname.

Plains United Methodist Church Church and Thomas streets. In 1945, while on leave from the US Naval Academy, Jimmy Carter went on a date with his sister Ruth's best friend, Rosalynn Smith. After his graduation, they were married in this church on July 7, 1946.

Public Housing Unit 9-A Paschal and Thomas streets. "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 apartments for a year. The complex still provides public housing.

Plains Baptist Church Bond and Paschal streets. Jimmy Carter was baptized here, and his family attended this church when he was growing up. The Carters attended services here until they left for Washington, DC, in 1977.

Billy Carter's Service Station Church Street. Jimmy Carter's brother Billy owned and operated this gas station from 1972 to 1981. It was a popular place for visitors and members of the media.

Business District Main Street. These brick commercial buildings were built in the 1890s. Downtown Plains remains little changed since Jimmy Carter's youth.

Plain Peanut Main Street and Rosalynn Carter Trail. Formerly the Carter Warehouse complex, this was the site of the family farm supply business as it expanded in the years before Jimmy Carter became president.

Lillian Carter Health & Rehabilitation Hospital Street. Lillian Gordy Carter worked as a registered nurse when this was the Wise Sanitarium, one of the first small Georgia hospitals to receive accreditation. Jimmy Carter was born here on October 1, 1924.

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 here since 1981.

Safety Around Town We encourage you to explore Jimmy Carter's hometown. Be careful walking and driving; obey traffic laws. • For firearms regulations check the park website. • The homes in town are privately owned. Please respect the rights and privacy of all residents.

Emergencies call 911

Planning Your Visit

Plains High School Museum and Visitor Center Start here for information, exhibits, maps, a video, and bookstore. The visitor center is open daily, except Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. Go to the park website for details on activities, hours, special programs, and regulations.

Visit the park's three other sites shown above: The Plains Depot has exhibits; the Carter Home and Garden can be seen from a viewpoint on Church Street; the Jimmy Carter Boyhood Farm (2.5 miles southwest of Plains) has outdoor exhibits and audio stations featuring Jimmy Carter sharing stories about his childhood.

Accessibility We strive to make facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information go to the visitor center, call, or check the park website.

Other Jimmy Carter Sites The Carter Presidential Center in Atlanta (160 miles) includes The Carter Center: 404-420-5100, www.cartercenter.org, and the Jimmy Carter Library and Museum: 404-865-7100, www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov.

Explore the Park Use the official NPS App to guide your visit.

More Information
Jimmy Carter National Historical Park
300 North Bond St.
Plains, GA 31780-5562
229-824-4104
www.nps.gov/jica

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