

William McKinley was born in Niles, Ohio, in 1843; he was one of nine children. McKinley's father, who worked in the iron industry, moved the family to Poland, Ohio, known then for its excellent schools, when McKinley was eleven years old. McKinley was educated at the Poland Seminary, where he excelled (particularly in oration and debate). He briefly attended Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania, but returned to Poland when he became ill. In Poland, McKinley took a job at the local Post Office.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, McKinley enlisted as a private in the Poland Guards, which was attached to the 23rd Ohio Infantry Regiment. McKinley was a competent soldier who was well liked by his commanding officers and fellow soldiers (among them were two future U.S. presidents—Rutherford B. Hayes and James A. Garfield—both from Ohio).

McKinley was promoted from private to commissary sergeant, quartermaster, and adjutant. By the time he was finally mustered out of service toward the end of the war, McKinley had achieved the rank of Major. This was his proudest military achievement; in fact, to the end of his life, McKinley preferred to be called "Major," even after he became president of the United States.

McKinley was never a prolific writer; his Civil War diary addresses only about the first six months of his military service. McKinley filled the diary with sparse entries that dealt primarily with camp life (particularly the religious experience of soldiers in camp). One thing that definitely comes through in McKinley's words, however, is his affection for the Union: this young soldier was willing to fight and, if necessary, to die for his country in order to preserve the ideals envisioned by the nation's founders.

McKinley participated in numerous engagements throughout the course of the war. His most famous battlefield moment occurred during the Battle of Antietam in 1862, when, as a young commissary sergeant, McKinley risked his life to get hot food and coffee to the men at the front lines. McKinley also participated in the Battle of Cedar Creek in 1864, delivering the news of General Philip Sheridan's return to the despondent Union troops gathered at Newtown (Stephens City today), and instructing them to return to the battlefield.

Following the war, McKinley pursued a career in the law. He moved to Canton, Ohio, in 1867, where he set up his own legal practice. He courted a beautiful young socialite, Ida Saxton, daughter of one of Canton's most prominent families. The couple was married in 1869; they had two daughters—both girls died at a young age. The stress of having lost two children took its toll on Ida's health, and she became totally dependent upon her husband. Despite her invalidism, Ida supported her husband's public life in politics.

McKinley vigorously campaigned for Republican presidential candidates (such as Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes and James A. Garfield) throughout the 1860s and 1870s. He was

elected Stark County prosecutor in 1869 but lost his bid for reelection two years later. He went on to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives (1877-1883 and 1885-1891), where he left his mark with the protectionist McKinley Tariff (1890). McKinley served two terms as governor of Ohio (1892-1896). In 1896, he became the Republican Party's standard-bearer and was elected the nation's 25th president—McKinley was the last Civil War veteran to reach the presidency.

As president, McKinley made a name for himself in world affairs. His presidency was marked by the rise of American imperialism—during McKinley's tenure, the United States defeated Spain during a "splendid little war" and acquired the Philippines. Poised to lead America into the twentieth century as one of the world's great powers, McKinley was assassinated by anarchist Leon Czolgosz in Buffalo, New York, in 1901, just six months into his second term. He was buried in Canton, Ohio.

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