

President Taft Visit to Petersburg

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On May 19, 1909, "Centre Hill was the scene of one of the best parties we ever had—a reception to that genial President of the United States, William Howard Taft." Taft was a Republican, the 27th President of the United States. He was from Cincinnati, Ohio, and his father had been President Ulysses S. Grant's attorney general. William Howard Taft had served as an appointed judge in Ohio, solicitor general in the United States Department of Justice, a judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals, commissioner and governor-general in the Philippines, and Secretary of War. The only elective office he ever held was President of the United States. A very corpulent fellow, he weighed over 300 pounds and is still the heaviest president in United States history. Taft was a busy man while in Petersburg on that spring day almost 105 years ago.

Mr. and Mrs. Charles Hall Davis, the owners of the historic 1823 Centre Hill mansion, were the hosts for the presidential reception. Mr. Davis, a Petersburg attorney, had purchased the property in 1901. President Taft was received in the large parlors in the house. The luncheon was served *alfresco* style on tables on the south lawn, meaning that the meal took place in the open air. Hundreds of guests were invited to lunch on the grounds.

Among the distinguished guests were the Governors of Virginia and Pennsylvania, Governors Claude A. Swanson and Edwin S. Stuart, respectively. Governor Swanson was a Democratic politician who served in a variety of important political offices for 40 years. He served in the U.S. House of Representatives for seven terms, was Virginia's 45th governor from 1906 to 1910, and spent the next 23 years in the U.S. Senate. He was President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Secretary of the Navy for six years until his death in 1939. Governor Stuart was a Republican who served as the Mayor of Philadelphia from 1891 to 1895 and was Pennsylvania's 24th governor from 1907 to 1911. A Frenchman, Jean Adrien Antoine Jules Jusserand, also attended the event. An author and diplomat, between 1878 and 1902 he served in London, Tunis, and Copenhagen. He transferred to Washington in 1902 as the French Ambassador, a

post he held until 1925. He thus served during the administrations of Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, Warren Harding, and Calvin Coolidge. He was the French Ambassador to the United States during World War I, and he participated in the Treaty of Versailles conference in 1919. In 1936, he became the first foreign diplomat to have a memorial erected on Federal property.

While at Centre Hill, President Taft spoke to the citizens of Petersburg from the north portico. In addition to the reception, there was “a monster parade in the city” in honor of the president. He also participated in two monument dedications to commemorate the exploits of Pennsylvania soldiers during the Siege of Petersburg. The Pennsylvania Monument, also known as the Hartranft Monument, was erected by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania at a cost of \$50,000. Brigadier General John Frederick Hartranft had commanded the 1st Brigade, 3rd Division, 9th Corps during the Battle of the Crater on July 30, 1864. The 48th Pennsylvania Regiment, whose soldiers dug the tunnel underneath the Confederate lines, was a part of the 3rd Division. Early on the morning of July 30, 1864, soldiers from the regiment detonated the 8,000 pounds of gunpowder that opened the Battle of the Crater.

Brigadier General Hartranft was breveted Major General for his role in the Union victory at Fort Stedman. President Taft was present for an unveiling of a tablet at Fort Stedman commemorating its capture on March 25, 1865, by soldiers from the 3rd Division. The President also personally dedicated the large Pennsylvania Monument to the 3rd Division, 9th Corps, Army of the Potomac, to commemorate the soldiers from this division and its commander, Major General Hartranft. The monument is located at the site of Confederate Fort Mahone, where Walnut Hill Elementary School now stands. The division attacked Fort Mahone on April 2, 1865.

And now for the rest of the story... Major General Hartranft received the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1886 for his service at the Battle of First Bull Run (or First Manassas) on July 21, 1861. President Taft left the presidency in 1913 after one term. But eight years later, he became the only president to be appointed the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, a position he held from 1921 until his death in 1930.