

Lawnfield: Cottage to Mansion

Dean M. Zimmerman

Lawnfield was described in 1895 in the Buffalo Express: "The new home does not resemble the old Garfield home . . . Mrs. Garfield has become a rich woman . . . and she has built a great mansion for herself and her children . . . But she has made the mansion subsidiary to the cottage. The old home remains intact as Garfield rebuilt it after his purchase . . ."

In 1876 James A. Garfield, his wife Lucretia and their growing family purchased a modest simplified Greek Revival style house built in 1832 in Mentor, Ohio. Garfield spent most of his time in Washington and wanted his family to have a farm experience, as well as a permanent residence near his political constituency. For Garfield, the "promise of the land" was real, for it offered an escape from his political duties, a chance to practice progressive agriculture and a suitable environment to raise his family. He wrote that he longed to touch the earth to renew life as in the Greek fables. To his wife he wrote that, "now you shall have your cow."

James A. Garfield, 20th president of the United States, was born in a log cabin in Orange and had a career that was the subject of a Horatio Alger biography. Garfield was a can boy, scholar, teacher, minister, civil war general, congressman and President. In 1858 Garfield married Lucretia Rudolph, whom he had met at the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute (to become Hiram College). In 1880 as the Republican presidential candidate, Garfield's material possessions were public evidence of his suitability for office. Reporters covering the campaign coined the name "Lawnfield." After his death by assassination in 1881, having served only a matter of months, he became the nation's martyr.

Lawnfield is a complex, highly entertaining, eclectic house. Mrs. Garfield wrote that she believed the house was a more fitting memorial to her husband than anything made of brick and stone. Lawnfield and its furnishings are an expression of Mrs. Garfield's taste, her intellect, her motive to create an enduring memory of her martyred husband, and a sanctuary for her family. Amid overt symbolism and blatant commemoration, the house was not a static, stodgy memorial, but rather, a vital family home that in the best tradition of the Gilded Age combined fashion, memory, meaning, and family.

Lawnfield remained in the Garfield family until 1936, when it was given to the Western Reserve Historical Society. In 1980, Lawnfield officially became the Garfield National Historic Site, when by act of Congress, Lawnfield became a National Park Service property. Lawnfield is operated under a cooperative agreement with the Park Service by the Western Reserve Historical Society. Lawnfield reopened to the public in June 1998 after extensive restoration.