

# The Monday After: Three presidents at 1880 soldiers and sailors reunion in Canton

---



---

*From Willoughby Historical Society*

*The 23rd Regiment, Ohio Volunteer Infantry, is pictured at a reunion in 1878 in Willoughby.*

---

More related photos



By Gary Brown

**CantonRep.com staff report**

Posted Sep 06, 2009 @ 11:47 PM

---

CANTON —

Three men stood out from the thousands of former Civil War veterans who came to Canton for the “Great Soldiers and Sailors’ Reunion of 1880.”

President Rutherford B. Hayes. General James A. Garfield. Major William McKinley. The man who was president. The man who would be the next president. And the man who would become president less than two decades later.

McKinley, of course, already was here, serving as host for the other two men in what was then called the Saxton residence and is now the William McKinley Historic Home. The president and presidential candidate arrived at 6:45 p.m. Aug. 31 on the Valley Railway train, then stayed the night at the Saxton house. It’s the only time three presidents have slept in the same private home at the same time, according to research done by the

National First Ladies' Library, which operates the McKinley Historic Home as a museum.

“Numerous buses, hacks, private carriages covered the large depot grounds and adjacent streets and alleys,” what was then The Canton Daily Repository said Sept. 1, 1880. “The scene at the depot was one of enthusiastic expectation never equaled upon the arrival of any guests of Canton.

“The first whistle of the train brought cheers from the crowded throng, and as it slowly approached, remembering the six-mile ordinance — the excitement grew intense. The length of the train left the Presidential car, which was in the rear, quite a distance from the station. A general rush was made for the car of centering interest, and the scene was one of eagerness. A rush was made for the platform of the car, and it required constant effort of the guards of the car to keep away men and boys, who endeavored in their eagerness to force egress to the car.”

The president and a man referred to in The Repository as “our next president,” took carriages to the home of James Saxton, where McKinley was staying at the time. Hayes was escorted by McKinley; Garfield by Judge G. W. Raff.

Many of the members of the 23rd Regiment, Ohio Volunteer Infantry, already had arrived in the city, so the trio — all of whom served in the 23rd — barely had made it to the Saxton house before the crowd around it had swelled to what the newspaper reported was several thousand. They chanted for Hayes to appear, and McKinley obliged by bringing the nation's chief executive to the front porch.

“You do not, I am sure, expect me to make anything like a speech,” Hayes told the crowd. “I only appear to exchange greetings with you; to thank you for the kind reception you are giving to the soldiers assembled here; to assure you that if you will come out tomorrow wherever the speaking is to be done, I will speak to you about five minutes.”

So the crowd started calling for Garfield, who, after being introduced by McKinley, spoke to those assembled in a lighthearted manner.

“This is a good deal of noise to make in a gentleman's front yard,” he said, and his words were greeted with laughter, “and as I am a guest of his, I do not think I ought to join in any disturbance of the family peace.”

The Repository reported that there was more laughter, and “cries, ‘Go on!’ ”

But, Garfield, too, said good night to the men surrounding the house.

The next day, “50,000 people were fed by bountiful Stark,” reported The Repository.

“The dinner tables for this feast of the mighty multitude occupied nearly the entire part of the Fair Grounds enclosed by the track and were systematically arranged,” said the

newspaper. “Over 28,000 feet of lumber was used in their construction, and if placed end to end, there would have been a line of tables nearly a mile and a half long.”

The tables were arranged, by cities and township, into the figure of a malta cross.

“There were about 400 people who worked as waiters,” said the newspaper. Twenty-one pumps from driven wells furnished water for coffee and drinking water.

Distinguished guests were spread throughout the tables for various communities. General W.T. Sherman sat with Canton. President Hayes sat in the Massillon section. General Garfield was with Alliance soldiers.

Headlines in *The Repository* described the reunion as a “great day” and glorious event.

“All is Right — Everybody Happy and Enthusiastic,” proclaimed the newspaper. “And Compliments for Canton are as Thick as Flags.”

Many “grand speeches” were given at the fairgrounds by Hayes, Garfield, McKinley and others, said *The Repository*, which recorded, many of their words. And indeed, each speaker was greeted by thunderous applause and cheers.

But, later, the people gathered in Canton were talking most about two things — the amazing fireworks display on Canton’s Public Square and “Old Abe.”

The fireworks shot off were listed in the newspaper. Asteroid rockets. Colored rockets. Streaming meteors. Rockets “displaying floating stars of changing colors.”

The finale was a “towering flight of 500 rockets, forming a gigantic aerial bouquet, showering all the various hues known to the art.”

And who was “Old Abe?”

He was an old eagle — a war eagle, as one soldier in attendance told *The Repository*. His appearance was a tradition at such reunions.

“Abe was captured when an eaglet on the Flambeau River, Wisconsin, by an Indian, who sold him to Daniel McCann for a bushel of corn,” the soldier explained. “He was purchased from McCann by Company C of the 8th Wisconsin Infantry.”

The company carried “Old Abe” into battles — between the U.S. and the regimental flags — and “he seemed to have a premonition of battle, being always restless before the fight.”

“During a battle, Old Abe would at times leave his perch and soar away over the battlefield, as if to take a fuller survey of the contending forces, never failing to return to his position beside the regimental colors.”

At the end of the war, “Old Abe” was mustered out of the army, but found a home in the Wisconsin statehouse. Twenty years old by the time of the Canton reunion in 1880, he was “a heavy load for one man to carry.”

“Old Abe” didn’t upstage three presidents. They got their cheers.

But “Old Abe” got more than his share of curious looks from the throng that gathered that summer in the city.

“He is probably better known,” said *The Repository*, “than any other bird in the world.”