

The Death Of President Garfield, 1881

Less than four months after his inauguration, President Garfield arrived at the Washington railroad depot on July 2, 1881, to catch a train for a summer's retreat on the New Jersey seashore. As Garfield made his way through the station, Charles Guiteau raced from the shadows and fired two shots point blank into the president. One grazed Garfield's arm; the other lodged in his abdomen. Exclaiming, "My God, what is this?" the president collapsed to the floor remaining fully conscious, but in a great deal of pain.

The first doctor on the scene administered brandy and spirits of ammonia, causing the president to promptly vomit. Then D. W. Bliss, a leading Washington doctor, appeared and inserted a metal probe into the wound, turning it slowly, searching for the bullet. The probe became stuck between the shattered fragments of Garfield's eleventh rib, and was removed only with a great deal of difficulty, causing great pain. Then Bliss inserted his finger into the wound, widening the hole in another unsuccessful probe. It was decided to move Garfield to the White House for further treatment.



The assassination of President Garfield

Leading doctors of the age flocked to Washington to aid in his recovery, sixteen in all. Most probed the wound with their fingers or dirty instruments. Though the president complained of numbness in the legs and feet, which implied the bullet was lodged near the spinal cord, most thought it was resting in the abdomen. The president's condition weakened under the oppressive heat and humidity of the Washington summer combined with an onslaught of mosquitoes from a stagnant canal behind the White House. It was decided to move him by train to a cottage on the New Jersey seashore.

Shortly after the move, Garfield's temperature began to elevate; the doctors reopened the wound and enlarged it hoping to find the bullet. They were unsuccessful. By the time Garfield died on September 19, his doctors had turned a three-inch-deep, harmless wound into a twenty-inch-long contaminated gash stretching from his ribs to his groin and oozing more pus each day. He lingered for eighty days, wasting away from his robust 210 pounds to a mere 130 pounds. The end came on the night of September 19. Clawing at his chest he moaned, "This pain, this pain," while suffering a major heart attack. The president died a few minutes later.