

Biographical Portrait
CHARLES WILLIAM GARFIELD
(1848–1934)

LOVER OF TREES AND PEOPLE

By Joseph J. Jones

In 1913 journalist Ida M. Tarbell visited Grand Rapids, Michigan, to learn about its parks and playgrounds, which were said to be “within a half mile of every child in town.” Instead, she wrote of Charles W. Garfield, whom she called the “first citizen of Grand Rapids.”¹ Garfield had a “passion for trees,” she wrote, that served as the impetus for his conservation activity. He “knows [trees] and loves them more than most of us do people, and all his life he has made it his business to fight for them.”² Although Garfield’s love of trees was Tarbell’s hook, her actual point was that his forty-year passion for conservation was just one expression of his overriding goal of creating a great city for everyone. He changed the city and state not through political wrangling, economic inducement, or social strong-arming but by exuding an enthusiasm that generated cooperation for the health, beauty, and conservation of people, resources, and nature. Garfield’s practice of seeking and honoring such cooperation made him beloved, but it also set an example that made Michigan one of the most cooperative places for reforestation, public lands and parks, and country and city life in the nation.³

Charles William Garfield was born in a log cabin in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, on March 14, 1848, to S. Marshall and Harriet Garfield.⁴ Marshall, a farmer and sawmill superintendent, taught his son the importance of trees at an early age. One of Charles’s earliest memories was planting a honey locust in the front yard with his parents. On a visit to Michigan when Charles was eight, their stagecoach stopped outside the village of Martin, which gave the family an opportunity to view the



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largest black walnut tree in the state. When standing before the ten-foot-diameter trunk, Marshall told Charles to remove his hat to honor the “noble tree.” After the family relocated to the Grand Rapids area when Charles was ten, a common family outing was to travel to a pine grove considered by Marshall as “holy ground” and listen to the wind in the trees. The consis-

tent emphasis on a love of trees affected Charles greatly, and promoting forest concerns became the focus of his life’s work.⁵

After moving to Michigan, his father purchased a portion of Burton Farm, located two and a half miles south of downtown Grand Rapids and one of the oldest farms in Kent County. For the rest of his life Charles’s permanent residence

was on or near the farm. The Garfields grew a variety of crops on Burton Farm, but arboriculture was practiced from the outset as Marshall and Charles planted orchards and shade trees near the house. As an adult, Charles broadened to silviculture experiments of forest and ornamental trees. His experiences with farming and horticulture fueled his interest in other sciences. As a student at Grand Rapids Central High School, Charles and other students founded the Kent Scientific Institute to display natural history specimens.⁶ In 1870, he graduated from Michigan Agricultural College (MAC, now Michigan State University) with a bachelor's degree in geology with the intention of becoming a teacher. However, the poor physical health that would disrupt many of his life plans prompted him to initially select an outdoor career instead, in keeping with the accepted medical beliefs of the day.

In 1871, Garfield began working in Painesville, Ohio, at the Storrs & Harrison Nursery, a growing national supplier of ornamental shrubs, trees, and perennials. Even though his own nursery failed in the severely cold winter of 1872–1873 (which nearly ruined Storrs & Harrison), he was hired to tend the gardens of MAC. During his four years there, he earned a master's degree and became one of the foremost horticulturalists in the state. He was a founder and secretary of the State Horticulture Society, a position that later gave him considerable influence in the forest conservation movement. He developed the first promotional exhibits and advertising campaigns for Michigan fruit. He became agriculture editor of the *Detroit Free Press* and was a regular contributor to state newspapers—an activity he would continue throughout his life. Taken as a whole, this work made Garfield nationally prominent in horticulture. Numerous colleges (most notably Cornell) offered him the position of department chair, and Republican politicians considered him for the federal post of secretary of Agriculture. However, his father's death in 1877 and his desire to care for his mother led him to return to Grand Rapids and reject these and other offers for significant national positions over the next forty years.⁷

Garfield served as a representative to the Michigan legislature in 1880–1881, a seat his father had held for two terms in the early 1870s. Forestry was at the core of the bills he introduced, and his views were ahead of their time. He proposed tax credits for



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Ida Tarbell's article about Garfield featured this photo of him. The caption states in part, "He wants to make Grand Rapids the finest place in the world to live in."

property owners who planted and cared for shade trees along public highways, for example. He also attempted to establish the first state forestry reserve, encompassing sixteen townships in Roscommon and Crawford counties, based on a large land donation by lumberman Delos Blodgett. His resolution recognizing Arbor Day in the state was his only conservation bill approved by the legislature. It would be another two decades, however, until his forestry advocacy began to bear fruit.⁸

After his term with the legislature, he returned to Burton Farm and managed

it until it was subdivided for homes in 1904. His primary source of income was finance: he served as director, president, and chairman of the board at Grand Rapids Savings Bank, which his father had founded. His work at the bank enabled working-class citizens to improve their financial situation and purchase homes.⁹ Yet Garfield's true calling was advocating for Michigan's forests.¹⁰ In August 1882, he attended a meeting of the American Forestry Congress (later the American Forestry Association), which expanded his ideas regarding

forestry in Michigan. His first major publication—"The Forestry Problem," written for the 1886 State Horticulture Society annual report—reflected two years of research. Lumbermen, he wrote, did not care about the effects of forest removal, but other citizens must. He described prevailing notions regarding the effects of forests on climate, flooding, and health. He also provided suggestions on how to grow and transplant trees and curb tree destruction, and instructed readers on proper timber-cutting methods to maximize returns while ensuring regrowth. He concluded by urging that fires and waste of timber resources be prevented to ensure national prosperity.¹¹

His political connections and work as secretary of the State Horticulture Society resulted in the 1887 creation of the state's Forestry Commission, which Garfield codirected with William Beal, a MAC botanist. The commission investigated the forestry situation in Michigan and identified land that might be suitable for a forest reserve, but its most significant act was a botanical expedition across northern Michigan in 1888. With Garfield unable to travel because of illness, Beal took Liberty Hyde Bailey, his former horticulture student and fellow faculty member. (Garfield no doubt approved the choice: he had encouraged Bailey to study at MAC. Bailey returned the favor by dedicating his 1911 volume *The Country-Life Movement in the United States* to Garfield.¹²) The two identified new plant species, potential agricultural products for the region, and several sites for forest experiments.¹³

Garfield continued using the Horticulture Society to assert his forestry goals. He led a session at its 1890 meeting on the value of forests for farming and the need for a state forest reserve.¹⁴ Although budget cuts by the legislature the following year eliminated the commission, the impetus toward forestry had begun. It would gain momentum over the decade because of pressure from the Horticulture Society and from the rise of progressive politics. At one society meeting, Beal showed his progressive sentiments (and sarcastic wit) when advocating for a permanent forestry commission, asserting that only in such a "free country" would the government let individuals abuse their own land in ways that could harm their neighbors through fire and erosion.¹⁵ At subsequent meetings, representatives from the state colleges, women's clubs, sportsmen's organizations,

and the state game commission began speaking in favor of forestry.¹⁶ This broad-based coalition, combined with an improved economic picture in the state, persuaded the state legislature to establish a new forestry commission in 1899. It was charged with establishing public education in scientific forestry and identifying tax-reverted and public domain land for state forest reserves under scientific management. Garfield served as president of the three-man commission until it was reorganized as part of the Public Domain Commission in 1909.¹⁷

As commission president, Garfield was involved in every facet of forestry politics and action in the state. He argued that the legal problems of forestry were more pressing than the scientific ones. Timber theft, land titles, taxation, and fire needed legislative action and law enforcement before the principles of scientific management could be implemented and embraced by landowners and citizens. He explained these concerns in letters, speeches, and essays to state supporters and opponents, as well as a national audience. In a direct appeal to Michigan citizens, Garfield urged them to become active in reforestation, which, he said, would contribute to the state's prosperity by providing wind breaks, preventing erosion, and conserving water for farmers and could make lumbering in northern Michigan "a permanent business." His argument did not solely rest on political, scientific, and economic arguments; Garfield included moral appeals from his pastor at Park Congregational Church in Grand Rapids, who specifically cited Ezekiel 31 from the Old Testament to warn that the destruction of life comes from the waste of resources.¹⁸ For Garfield, forest conservation went back to the lessons he learned as a child.

To get results on the ground, Garfield united federal foresters, academic experts, and journalists with state officials to assess northern Michigan. At Garfield's direction, in 1901 state land commissioner William French withheld cutover land in Roscommon and Crawford counties from sale for testing of scientific management procedures. The following summer in Lansing the forestry commission hosted the annual meeting of the American Forestry Association. The highlight of the conference was a field trip to this experimental reserve. The resulting national and state publicity built support for the reserve but

generated opposition from local residents who saw the forest reserve as a threat to their boosterism efforts. Garfield's response defined Michigan conservation politics for decades. Rather than conceding or asserting state authority, Garfield chose to meet with reserve opponents and in 1903 negotiated a compromise on its borders and purpose. These actions broadened support for the reserve and set the stage for the state's approach to reforestation politics until the mid-twentieth century.¹⁹

Garfield also campaigned for establishing college forestry programs and a state forestry association. As a lifelong advocate of the land-grant education model, Garfield initially thought that MAC would provide the best site for scientific forestry education. However, college officials felt that the school should serve state farmers and considered the botanical study of trees and the agricultural application of those studies as the college's only role in forestry. Garfield, preferring to train professional foresters who could assist the commission's efforts, appealed to the University of Michigan, which then hired former federal forester and Cornell professor Filibert Roth as the first permanent forestry chair. MAC hired its own forestry professors. Within a few years, the University of Michigan was training professional foresters and implementing the policies of the state commission, while MAC taught forestry as adjunct to agricultural education. The result was increased public and professional education and support for forestry in the state.²⁰

Recognizing the limits of the forestry commission, Garfield wanted a citizens group that could be an effective advocate. With other forest conservation supporters he formed the Michigan Forestry Association, which held its first meeting on September 29–30, 1905, in Grand Rapids at Ryerson Library and Park Congregational Church. Though he distanced himself from its leadership and activities while on the forestry commission, the association clearly followed Garfield's lead regarding state action. For several years, the association published a periodical for advocacy and public education. When the association launched a drive to increase membership to reinvigorate itself in 1923, its leaders contacted Garfield for his support and blessing in their endeavor.²¹

In addition to his state work, Garfield also served the interests of the residents of Grand Rapids, then a city of 115,000. It was this work that would bring Ida

Tarbell to town in 1913. His efforts increased green and open spaces, as well as playgrounds and ball fields, throughout the city, including in working-class neighborhoods. As Tarbell noted, to children he was known as the “playground man”; homeowners called him the “tree man.”²² As such, these civic conservation activities defined how he presented himself and how the public knew him.

In 1906, he and his cousin Julia Fletcher donated the land for the Garfield-Fletcher Playground on the site of the family’s portion of Burton Farm. Twelve years later, Garfield added 15 more acres, including the nearby six acres of Burton Woods, with the native trees he had raised from seeds. In recognition of this gift, the city renamed it Garfield Park.²³ He organized the Grand Rapids Citizens League to counsel city management.²⁴ He organized the Playground and Recreation Association of America’s annual meeting in Grand Rapids in October 1916. He chaired the city’s Planning Commission from 1919 to 1929, focusing on expanding the park system. Upon construction of Alger School, a local public elementary school, he visited the students often and encouraged them in their studies and sponsored their garden and museum.²⁵ Even in his last year of life, he was an honorary member of the Better Government League—though he could not attend the meetings, he always sent a letter of greeting and support.²⁶

For all of his service to the city and state, numerous groups feted Garfield late in life. MAC granted him an honorary doctoral degree in law in 1917. The Boy Scouts planted trees in city parks in 1924 in his honor. A testimonial dinner with twelve hundred invited guests was held on December 17, 1924, at the Pantlind Hotel. E. A. Stowe, the long-time editor of the *Michigan Tradesman* journal, published articles honoring Garfield in November 1927 as a surprise for his friend of nearly sixty years. In 1929 the Grand Rapids Rotary Club honored him as a “public-spirited citizen” known for being “lovable, loyal, reverent, charitable, clean, wholesome, winsome, modest, and helpful.”²⁷

After his death from heart disease on September 9, 1934, the honors to Garfield continued. His cremated remains were placed under his favorite sycamore in Garfield Park and marked with a simple stone and plaque.²⁸ Michigan State College dedicated an issue of its alumni magazine to Garfield, with heartfelt remembrances



The remains of Charles and Jesse Garfield were placed under his favorite sycamore in Garfield Park and marked with a simple stone and plaque.

from friends on how he had shaped their lives. The contributors stressed Garfield’s goodness and commitment to others as influencing their views on nature and humanity.²⁹ On February 12, 1938, Boy Scouts from throughout the city marched to his grave in Garfield Park to honor his work for the children of the city.³⁰

Garfield is important to forest history not so much because of the scope of his

work but for the model he provided in obtaining results that benefited both trees and people. Stowe summarized the importance of his thought and work: Garfield recognized talent and opportunities, organized civic work for the present and future, and trained his contemporaries and successors in his methods of cooperative problem solving.³¹ The results were conservation programs in Grand Rapids and

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

throughout Michigan that united individuals and groups at local, state, and national levels in creating forests and parks and promoting land and resource management—all gifts to the people of the state today. □

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NOTES

I would like to thank the staff of the Grand Rapids History and Special Collections at the Grand Rapids Public Library who tracked down various photographs, collections, and volumes that inform this article. Most of the articles from Grand Rapids publications are available in the Charles W. Garfield biographical file located in the library's vertical files.

1. Ida M. Tarbell, "Charles W. Garfield," *American Magazine* (March 1914): 62–65.
2. Tarbell, "Charles W. Garfield," 62.
3. Tarbell, "Charles W. Garfield," 64; E. A. Stowe, "The Late Charles W. Garfield," *Michigan History Magazine* 19, no. 1 (Winter 1935): 51–63.
4. Samuel Marshall Garfield was called Marshall by his contemporaries but Samuel by Charles's biographers. I am using the name his friends used.
5. Charles W. Garfield, "Learned to Love Woods," *Michigan Tradesman* (September 12, 1900): 44, 46, 48; "Death Claims Charles W. Garfield," *Grand Rapids Herald*, September 10, 1934; Stowe, "The Late Charles W. Garfield," 52–55.
6. The Kent Institute was the forerunner of the Grand Rapids Public Museum. Allen G. Miller, "Charles W. Garfield," *Spokes o' the Wheel*, March 14, 1929; Stowe, "The Late Charles W. Garfield," 55–56. *Spokes o' the Wheel* was the periodical of the Grand Rapids Rotary Club.
7. "Charles W. Garfield—A Biographical Sketch," *Annual Report of the Secretary of the State Horticulture Society of Michigan, 1895* (Lansing: Robert Smith Printing, 1895), 40–53; "Death Claims Charles W. Garfield"; Glen O. Stewart (ed.), "A Tribute to Charles W. Garfield—Most Beloved Alumnus," *Michigan State College Record* 40, no. 1 (September 1934).
8. "Death Claims Charles W. Garfield"; Dave Dempsey, *Ruin & Recovery: Michigan's Rise as a Conservation Leader* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 52.
9. "Men of Mark: Charles W. Garfield, President Grand Rapids Savings Bank," *Michigan Tradesman*, January 23, 1901: 6, and "Men of Mark: Charles W. Garfield, President Grand Rapids Savings Bank," June 4, 1902: 9; Tarbell, "Charles W. Garfield," 65. *Tradesman* had a regular feature called "Men of Mark." These two articles have the same name and neither had an author credit. However, they are not the same article, nor are they a continuation of one another.
10. Letter from Charles W. Garfield to Kenyon L. Butterfield, October 7, 1904, Charles W. Garfield (1) folder, Box 3, Kenyon L. Butterfield Papers, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as Butterfield Papers).
11. Charles W. Garfield, "The Forestry Problem," *Annual Report of the Secretary of the State Horticulture Society of Michigan, 1886* (Lansing: W. S. George, 1886), 60–128.
12. *The Country-Life Movement in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1911), dedication page. Bailey called Garfield a "seer of visions, prophet of the better country life."
13. William J. Beal, "Report of the Independent Forestry Commission" and "Report of the Botanist," *1888 State Board of Agriculture Report* (Lansing: Thorp & Godfrey, 1888), 69–135, 171–93; Joseph J. Jones, "Good for a National Cemetery: Questions of Land Use and an 1888 Botanical Expedition across Northern Michigan," *Agricultural History* 83, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 174–200.
14. "Proceedings of State Conference in Kalamazoo, Dec. 2–4, 1890," *Annual Report of the Secretary of the State Horticulture Society of Michigan, 1890* (Lansing: W. S. George, 1890), 40–53.
15. William J. Beal, "The Needs of Michigan Forestry," *Annual Report of the Secretary of the State Horticulture Society of Michigan, 1894* (Lansing: W. S. George, 1894), 124–29.
16. "Proceedings of State Conference in Ann Arbor, Dec. 6–8, 1898," *Annual Report of the Secretary of the State Horticulture Society of Michigan, 1898* (Lansing: Robert Smith, 1898), 246–72.
17. Dempsey, *Ruin & Recovery*, 49–64; William B. Botti and Michael D. Moore, *Michigan's State Forests: A Century of Stewardship* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2006), 1–19; Joseph J. Jones, "The Making of a National Forest: The Contest over the West Michigan Cutover, 1888–1943" (PhD diss., Michigan State University, 2007), 74–136.
18. Charles W. Garfield, "Forest Problems in Michigan," *Forester* 6, no. 11 (November 1900): 255–58; Charles W. Garfield, "A Little Talk about Michigan Forestry" (Lansing: Michigan State Forestry Commission, 1900[?]). Garfield's parents were Universalists and raised their son the same. Garfield was accepted as a member of Park Congregational Church when he married Jessie Robertson Smith in 1897 despite his assertion that he would not change his theological beliefs. His character and loyalty to the church were such that he served as an elder for many years. *Park Congregational Church: The Story of One Hundred Years* (Grand Rapids: Park Congregational Church, 1936), 34–35.
19. Joseph J. Jones, "An Unanswerable Argument in Favor of Forests: Conservation, Compromise, and the 1903 Creation of Michigan's First Forest Reserve," *Michigan Historical Review* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 101–32. Much of this forest reserve land was the same as the land Garfield had wanted for a state forest reserve in 1881.
20. Charles W. Garfield to Kenyon L. Butterfield, May 6, 1907, Charles W. Garfield (2) folder, Box 3, Butterfield Papers; Donald I. Dickmann and Larry A. Leefers, *The Forests of Michigan* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 176–177; Jones, "The Making of a National Forest," 90–93.
21. Michigan Forestry Commission, "The Advance Movement in Michigan Forestry" (Lansing: Michigan State Forestry Commission, 1905); Charles W. Garfield to Kenyon L. Butterfield, October 9, 1905, Charles W. Garfield (1) folder, Box 3, Butterfield Papers; Charles W. Garfield to Kenyon L. Butterfield, April 6, 1923, Charles W. Garfield (6) folder, Box 3, Butterfield Papers. The periodical was called *The State Review and Michigan Roads and Forests*.
22. Tarbell, "Charles W. Garfield," 62.
23. "Garfield Park," *Friends of Grand Rapids Parks*, <https://www.friendsofgrparks.org/parks/find-a-park/garfield-park-2>. The Garfield Lodge that still stands was constructed in 1906 with funds provided by Harriet Garfield, in memory of her husband Marshall, as a meeting place for people and societies for purposes of art, learning, and community gatherings.
24. "Citizen Garfield: His Splendid Gift to the City He Loves," *Michigan Tradesman* (January 31, 1906): 6; "Sale of Burton Home: Important Link in Chain of Local Events," *Michigan Tradesman* (June 23, 1920): 16; Stowe, "The Late Charles W. Garfield," 58–59; Mary Emily Schroeder, *The Charles W. Garfield Story* (Grand Rapids: Serfling, 1977).
25. "Gabby Gleanings from Grand Rapids," *Michigan Tradesman* (August 27, 1930): 1; "Unveiled Marker in Tribute to C. W. Garfield," *Grand Rapids Herald*, May 12, 1932.
26. Miller, "Charles W. Garfield"; Stowe, "The Late Charles W. Garfield," 59.
27. "1200 Are Invited to Testimonial to Sterling Citizen," *Grand Rapids Herald*, December 14, 1924; "The Garfield Symposium" and "The Glory of Grand Rapids," *Michigan Tradesman* (November 16, 1927); Miller, "Charles W. Garfield."
28. "Garfield Park," *Friends of Grand Rapids Parks*, <https://www.friendsofgrparks.org/parks/find-a-park/garfield-park-2/>. Garfield had raised the tree from seed and planted it himself.
29. Stewart (ed.), "A Tribute to Charles W. Garfield." Contributors to the special issue of *Michigan State College Record* included Senator Arthur Vandenberg, college president Robert Shaw, University of Illinois dean Eugene Davenport, horticulturalist Liberty Hyde Bailey, journalist Ray Stannard Baker, and educator Kenyon Butterfield. Bailey stated that Garfield's "life was a poem."
30. "G.R. Scouts to Pay Tribute Saturday to Charles Garfield," *Grand Rapids Herald*, February 6, 1938.
31. Stowe, "The Late Charles W. Garfield," 60–63.