assassination in 1963, his brother Robert became a U.S. senator and presidential contender himself. And John’s youngest brother Edward, throughout his political career as a senator from Massachusetts, stayed in the political forefront longer than any other member of the family.

The twentieth century has produced two other presidential dynasties. William Howard Taft was born of a prominent Ohio political family; his father was Ulysses S. Grant’s attorney general and later served as ambassador to Austria-Hungary and Russia. And following William Taft’s presidency, his eldest son, Robert, went on to become a U.S. senator and a leading conservative Republican. The other notable family line of the twentieth century belongs to George Bush, the son of U.S. Senator Prescott Bush, and the father of two sons who have assumed prominence within the Republican party. One of them, Governor George W. Bush of Texas, seemed destined, like his father, for presidential politics.

But despite the occasional family success story, most American presidents still come from humble origins. Bill Clinton was the son of an itinerant salesman; Ronald Reagan, of a shoe salesman; Jimmy Carter, of a peanut farmer. Gerald Ford was the adopted son of the owner of a paint store. Richard Nixon’s father owned a gas station and family market; Dwight Eisenhower’s managed a small gas company; Harry Truman’s was a small farmer and livestock salesman. Americans trust leaders who have come up the hard way, even though running for president now requires access to a small fortune. Ever since Andrew Jackson, Americans have wanted presidents who are “of the people.”

Still there is the other tradition: of a kind of American royalty—represented by the Adamses, the Harrisons, the Roosevelts, and the Kennedys, and in most recent times by the Bush dynasty—which offers something appealing to the American public. Provided native aristocrats know how to conduct themselves in office and have a popular touch, as did FDR and Kennedy, there is something exciting and reassuring about political dynasties. And once or twice in a century, America seems to raise to the presidency successive members of powerful and prominent families.

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS
1825–1829

H is Father’s Son

John Quincy Adams once wrote, “I cannot escape my destiny... I am bound to my parents by more than ordinary ties.” He was the only son of a president ever to rise to the presidency, and he did so almost in spite of himself. A recluse by nature, always more respected than loved, he described himself as a “cold” and “silent animal.” “I well know that I never shall be a popular man,” he wrote. “I have none of the honey which is the true fly-catcher.”

Adams was raised at the family homestead in what would later be known as Quincy, Massachusetts. With his famous father off helping run the country during the Revolutionary War, his mother became the dominating influence in his
early life. When, at age eleven, he accompanied his father on a diplomatic mis-
sion to Europe, she tried hard to maintain her maternal control over him. “[My
son] must never disgrace his mother,” Abigail Adams wrote in a letter. “For dear
as you are to me, I had much rather you should have found your grave in the
ocean . . . than see you an immoral profligate or a graceless child.” John Quincy’s
father also put enormous pressures on him to succeed. “You came into life with
advantages which will disgrace you if your success is mediocre,” he once lectured.
“And if you do not rise to the head of your country, it will be owing to your own
laziness and slovenliness.”

In his twenties, in part to please his parents, John Quincy accepted an
appointment as America’s minister to Holland. While abroad, he met and pro-
posed marriage to Louisa Johnson, the daughter of the U.S. Consul in London.
He himself admitted that he was marrying the wealthy heiress in part to support
him in his literary pursuits once back in America. But when Louisas family
declared bankruptcy in 1796, the stiff-lipped young ambassador went through
with the marriage anyway. “I have done my duty—rigorous, inflexible duty,” he
wrote. “I am as happy as a virtuous, discreet and amiable woman can make me.”

John Quincy’s methodical approach to life served him well in his work. In
time President Washington called him “the most valuable public character we
have abroad.” And when John Adams became president in 1797, his son was ele-
vated to the position of minister to Prussia.

In 1801, with his father’s retirement from the presidency, John Quincy
returned to the United States to settle down on the family homestead. “I never
can find contentment . . . at a distance from my parents,” he wrote. “I feel an
attachment to these places more powerful than to any other spot upon earth.”

While he was away, tragedy had struck the family. John Quincy’s younger
brother Charles had succumbed to alcoholism. An angry John Adams had refused
even to visit his dying son, branding him “a mere buck and beast” and utterly
renouncing him. Unable to live up to the family ideal, Charles had become its
first victim.

Fearing the pressures that had destroyed his brother, John Quincy vowed he
would never enter politics—he would rather “clean filth off the streets.” But the
family destiny proved impossible to resist. Elected to the upper house of the
Massachusetts legislature in 1802, one year later he won a seat in the U.S. Senate.
And in 1809, he was named minister to Russia by Republican president James
Madison.

It was John Quincy, widely recognized as the country’s most skillful diplo-
mat, who negotiated the close of the War of 1812. In recognition of his accom-
plishments after eight years overseas, he was named James Monroe’s secretary of
state.

He proved himself to be brilliant in this role, perhaps the finest secretary of
state in American history, toiling over complex negotiations involving boundary
disputes and the acquisition of Florida. And he became the chief architect of the
Monroe Doctrine. “Of the public history of Mr. Monroe’s administration,” he
wrote, “all that will be worth telling to posterity has been transacted by the
Department of State. . . . I might confidently say by me.”

In 1823 Adams’s name was put forward as a candidate for president. When
no victor emerged in the electoral college, John Quincy, who had run second to
Andrew Jackson in the popular vote, was named president by the House of
Representatives.

He was one of the brightest men ever to enter the high office and his admin-
istration was marked by its bold initiatives. He advocated federally funded roads,
canals, river widenings, and harbor works. And in a visionary program far ahead
of its time, he called for the creation of a national observatory. In foreign affairs, he became known for his patient negotiations, concluding more commercial treaties than any president prior to the Civil War.

But Adams's basic independence and arrogant manner overshadowed his many achievements. Over his years in office, he became vilified as one of the country's most unpopular presidents ever. "[I am] reproach[ed as] a gloomy misanthropist [and] an unsocial savage!" he wrote. "But I am not formed to shine in company, nor be delighted with it. . . . I have no powers of fascination."

In early July 1826, Adams received a letter from Massachusetts, announcing that his father's health was rapidly sinking. The President reached the family homestead on July 13, six days too late for his father's funeral. Dazed, he wandered through his father's house. "Everything about the house is the same," he wrote. "I was not fully sensible of the change til I entered his bed-chamber . . . That moment . . . struck me as if it had been an arrow to my heart . . . . The charm which has always made this house to me an abode of enchantment is dissolved; and yet my attachment to it . . . is stronger than I ever felt it before."

John Quincy descended into a profound depression, and the remainder of his presidency was desperately unhappy. Two years later, the hugely popular "people's candidate," Andrew Jackson, defeated Adams by a large majority. "My own career is closed," John Quincy wrote dejectedly. "The sun of my political life sets in the deepest gloom."

His hopes now focused on his own children, all three of whom he had largely ignored during the past two decades. "My sons have not only their own honor but that of two preceding generations to sustain," he wrote.

For years, though, he had had troubles with his offspring, none of whom had distinguished himself academically. "I had hoped that at least one of my sons would have been ambitious to excel," he had written. "[But] I find all three coming to manhood with indolent minds . . . [It is a] bitter disappointment." When he learned that his oldest son George had begun drinking heavily, as well as gambling and womanizing, he wrote, "I have been horror struck at your danger. May I remind you of the blood from which you came." But when he demanded that George come to talk over his life, his confused and despairing son leapt to his death from aboard a steamboat. "Oh! My unhappy son!" Adams wrote, "What a paradise of earthly enjoyment I had figured . . . as awaiting thee and me. It is withered forever."

A year later Adams was still depressed. "No one knows . . . the agony of mind that I suffered," he wrote. "[It was like] roasting to death by a slow fire." It was his religious faith that finally brought him around. That, and a distinct honor awarded him in 1831 by the people of Massachusetts, who elected him as a representative to the U.S. Congress. He became the only ex-president ever to serve in the House of Representatives. "No election or appointment ever gave me so much pleasure," he wrote. "My election as president was not half so gratifying."

And so commenced the final chapter in John Quincy's long life. He served in Congress for the next seventeen years, becoming the most passionate and respected liberal voice in Washington. He spoke out on Indian rights, on the advancement of science, on freedom of speech, on the evil of slavery. But in his family life, problems continued. In 1834 his second son, John, died, also from alcoholism. That left only his youngest son, Charles Francis. "All my hopes . . . in this world are now centered upon him," Adams wrote. "[I would] die despondent if I were under the conviction that no remaining drop of my father's blood transmitted through me would survive." The family name would continue on through Charles Francis, who would go on to become a U.S. congressman.

John Quincy once swore he would die in the pursuit of duty, and in 1848
he received his wish, suffering a fatal stroke on the floor of the House of Representatives. To the end, it was his family that had kept him going. That, and a lifelong ambition that destroyed so many other Adames— to have earned the right to be called his father’s son.

BENJAMIN HARRISON
1889–1893

“Nobody’s Grandson”

No politician ever made less use of his family heritage than Benjamin Harrison, grandson of President William Henry Harrison. All his life he had a desire to be his own man. “He will not build high who has not built for himself,” he once told a crowd of his grandfather’s admirers. But he also had a burning need to prove himself his grandfather’s equal. “I [will] show all,” he once wrote privately, that “[my] family . . . name is . . . safe in my keeping.”

Harrison was a disciplined, dispassionate, proper individual and one of the finest lawyers in Cincinnati. But the very qualities that made him excel — his methodical approach, his absorption in logic and detail, his unwillingness to delegate— turned him into an overefficient workhorse with little sense of fun. “I do the same things every day— eat three meals, sleep six hours and read dusty old books the rest of the time,” he wrote. “My life is about as barren of anything funny as the Great Desert is of grass.”

Only once was his orderly life turned upside down, when in 1862, he left his wife and two young children to fight for the Union during the Civil War. His letters home were as personal as he ever got. “I am thinking much of you and the dear children,” he wrote. “Many earnest prayers will I send up to God this night, should you lose a husband and they a father in this fight.”

Because of his grandfather’s reputation as a successful general, much was expected of Harrison during the war. Intent on proving himself worthy of his heritage, he fought in more battles in six months than his grandfather had in a lifetime. And serving under Sherman during the 1864 campaign in Georgia, Harrison distinguished himself for his bravery.

Returning to his law practice after the war, he became a force in Republican politics. His ascent was typically methodical: in 1876 he made an unsuccessful but politically important run for the Indiana governorship; in 1881 he won a seat in the U.S. Senate, a perfect position for increasing his visibility; and in 1888, four years after first being mentioned for the job, he won the Republican nomination for president. He told his party he wanted a low-key campaign, with as little emphasis placed on himself as possible, and with no mention at all of his famous ancestry.

“My ambition is for quietness rather than for publicity,” he wrote. “I want to avoid everything that is personal . . . . I want it understood that I am the grandson of nobody.”

But against his wishes, Harrison’s managers insisted on making the connection to his famous grandfather. Campaign posters referred to “Tippecanoe.”