

Garret Augustus Hobart

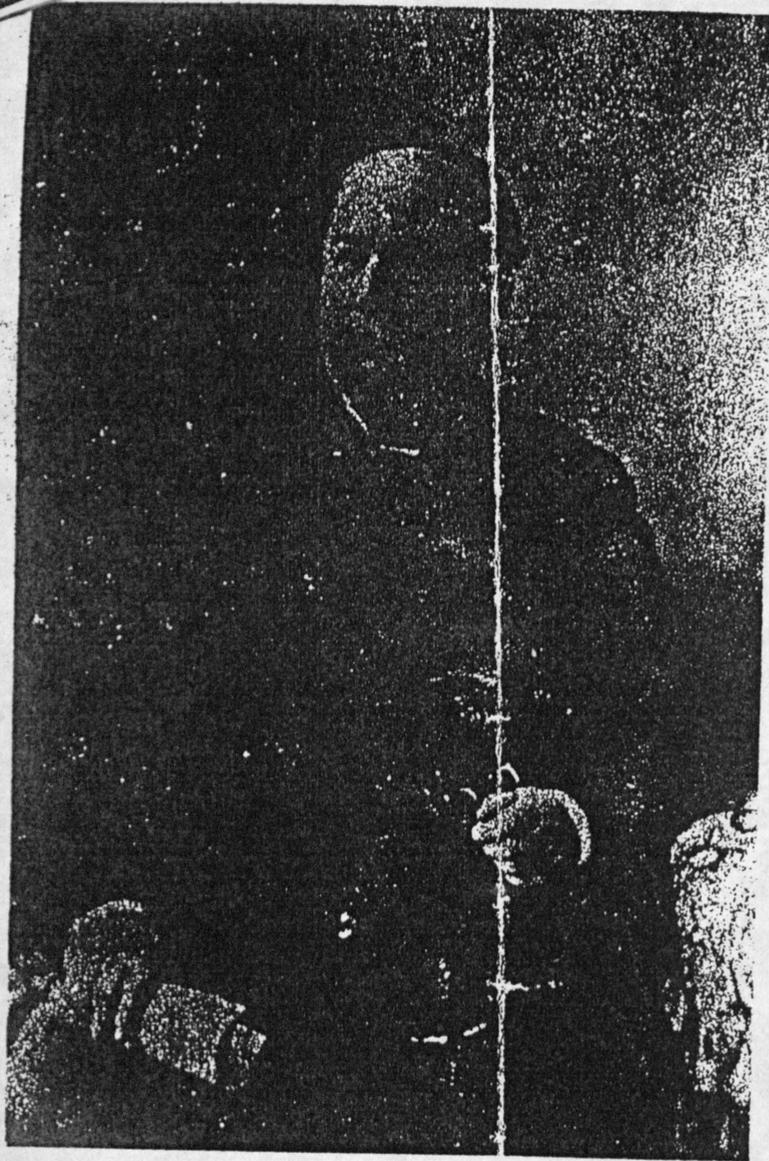
"Assistant President"

REPUBLICAN

IN OFFICE: 1897-1899

PRESIDENT: WILLIAM MCKINLEY

Although little remembered today, Garret Hobart possessed several of the qualities of an ideal vice-president. He was in agreement with the president on all the important issues, or at least discreet enough so that no one would know there were differences. His home state of New Jersey set enough of a geographical "balance" to avoid offending more than half the nation. He had enough wealth (honestly earned) so that visiting royalty and dignitaries could be entertained in such style that it would not be embarrassing to the American people. And politics was not a passion, just an interesting hobby for a person who had made all the money he could ever need and had served on too many committees. Our lack of knowledge of Vice-President Hobart is due in part to the fact that his death was somewhat premature—only two years into the administration.



GARRET A. HOBART
(Collections of the Library of Congress)

He had accumulated a bit of a fortune in his law practice in New Jersey and as director of several corporations and president of some banks and a couple of railroads and of the Passaic Water Company. His financial acumen would endear him to President William McKinley, who, because he was so often in debt himself, stood in awe of those who knew how to handle money. Hobart was in agreement with the presidential nominee and most other Republicans on the big issue of the day—the support of the gold standard—and in opposition to Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryan, who would give his “Cross of Gold” speech to enthusiastic crowds across the country.

For a man who found public speaking painful, Hobart did manage to say one memorable, though not entirely accurate, thing in his nomination acceptance speech. He claimed that an “honest dollar, worth one hundred cents, cannot be carved out of fifty-three cents worth of silver plus a government fiat.” After that he went home and quietly made certain that normally Democratic New Jersey voted Republican.

McKinley, who apparently did not feel the need to overexpose himself to the public, or vice versa, conducted a “front porch campaign” from his home in Canton, Ohio, giving speeches to the trainloads of people who made the pilgrimage there. And he still defeated the peripatetic Bryan. This lesson on underexposure has obviously gone unheeded in American political life since that time. The campaign of the two Republican strong, silent types was in the hands of Mark Hanna, a wealthy Ohio businessman who so admired McKinley that he managed the election almost single-handedly. He raised

millions in campaign funds from bankers and businessmen by appealing to their fears of the "radical" Bryan.

The *Chicago News* wrote of the election of Hobart that "he will not be seen or heard from until after four years when he emerges from the impenetrable vacuum called the Vice-Presidency." This was quickly proven wrong. Although Hobart's political experience had been limited to being state senator and chairman of the New Jersey Republican Committee, he managed to earn the vice-presidency a considerable amount of respect and prestige. In fact, he insisted on it. Columbia University professor Nicholas Butler said that Hobart was the "best presiding officer . . . the Senate has ever had in my lifetime." Henry Cabot Lodge felt that Hobart had "restored the vice-presidency to its proper position." Some went so far as to call Hobart the "Assistant President" because of the effectiveness of his liaison with the Senate and the strength of his position as adviser to the president. Hysterian Louis Hatch claimed that Hobart's influence was "probably greater than any other vice-president has enjoyed."

Being wealthy allowed Hobart and his wife to throw some great parties in the evenings in their rented mansion across from the White House. In the afternoon, Mrs. Hobart would open the windows and leave the room while her husband entertained congressmen at his "smokers." When McKinley joined the festivities, he and Hobart worked together to persuade the legislators of the value of their programs.

War fever was rising at this time, due in large part to the hysteria of the "yellow press," which was calling for Cuban independence from Spain. McKinley and his party

resisted as long as they could in the hope of avoiding anything that would put a crimp in their booming business concerns. After the sinking of the battleship *Maine* in Havana harbor in 1898, they could no longer keep the peace honorably. Hobart was asked to sit in on cabinet meetings during the ensuing Spanish-American War, which was mercifully brief (ten weeks) and immensely successful for the United States.

Because of his closeness to the president, Hobart was privy to McKinley's divinely inspired answer to "the Philippine problem." The problem was what to do with the Philippine Islands, which had been liberated from the Spanish along with Cuba. McKinley's decision, as revealed to him during prayer, was "to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them . . . and to put the Philippines on the map of the United States." That settled, Hobart broke the tie in the Senate by voting against Philippine independence. The result was three years of war in a country reluctant to accept McKinley's plans for it.

It is not known whether it was high living, too many cigars, or too much unaccustomed authority that weakened his cardiovascular system, but when Hobart was only fifty-five years old he went home to New Jersey for a visit and died of heart failure.