

Version 1.0 | Last updated 08 January 2017

Garfield, Harry Augustus

By [Kenna Lang Archer](#)

Garfield, *Harry Augustus*
Lawyer, Public Official, College Administrator
Born 11 October 1863 in Hiram, USA
Died 12 December 1942 in Williamstown, USA

Harry Garfield worked in a number of civic positions during his life. When the United States entered World War I, President Woodrow Wilson asked him to oversee the Fuel Administration. As the leader of the Fuel Administration, Garfield successfully managed America's fuel resources and resolved labor unrest.

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1. Pre-War

Harry Augustus Garfield (1863-1942), the son of President [James A. Garfield \(1831-1881\)](#), worked in a number of civic positions throughout his lifetime. After graduating from Williams College in 1885 and studying at Columbia Law School, he spent the next twenty years practicing and teaching law. In 1908, Garfield was inducted as president of Williams College, a position that he held until 1934.

Although he did not pursue a political career as purposefully as his father had, Harry Garfield became involved in national politics with the escalation of American involvement in World War I.

President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#), concerned that inefficient use of resources might endanger

the war effort, encouraged passage of the Lever Food and Fuel Act. This legislation, commonly known as the 1917 Lever Act, sought the orderly distribution of foods and fuels and created both a Food Administration and a Fuel Administration. A subsequent Executive Order appointed Harry Garfield as the inaugural Fuel Administrator. Garfield owed his appointment to his personal and professional relationship with Wilson. A brief stint with the Food Administration, a family legacy of government involvement, and a working knowledge of contract matters also ensured that Garfield would receive a promising appointment in the Wilson government.

2. The Fuel Administration

To the extent possible, Garfield and his Fuel Administration embraced many of the same goals as the better-known Food Administration – to increase production, reduce hoarding and profiteering, encourage conservation, and regulate prices. Garfield faced a difficult and unenviable task. During the coal shortage of 1917-1918, communities around the nation found themselves without their primary source of energy and heat. As the winter wore on with no relief, some frustrated individuals took dramatic action. City officials commandeered coal trains that, destined for elsewhere, passed through their jurisdictions; families pilfered from industrial coal piles.

For Harry Garfield, the solutions to this fuel problem were manifold. He worked to maintain a good relationship between government and business, recruiting hundreds of coal company managers into government positions. He also increased the number of mines operating, thereby expanding domestic production of coal and creating not a shortage, but an excess of coal by 1919. Most notably, in January 1918, Garfield instituted what became known as “idle” Mondays.

The problem during the coal shortage of the previous months had not been supply but distribution: railcars with coal freight had sat abandoned on eastern lines, waylaid by extensive logjams. To ease the crisis, Garfield closed the majority of the factories east of the Mississippi River for a five-day period and then again on each Monday after that. This strategy reduced the transportation burden on the railroads and freed coal freight for eastern seaports and, ultimately, military use. However, such aggressive intervention by the national government concerned some businessmen, who believed that the factory closures might precipitate an economic downturn or set a precedent for greater federal involvement in industry.

3. Post-War

In December 1919, Garfield resigned his position as Fuel Administrator, and the Fuel Administration itself was disbanded shortly hereafter. Garfield’s reputation was mixed at the time of his resignation. Critics decried his seeming ineptitude and what appeared to be an expansion of power by the federal government; the United States Army, in contrast, awarded him a Distinguished Service Award for his contributions to the war. Garfield built on his experience with the Fuel Administration during World War II. In 1941, he accepted a position with the War Department Defense Board, which he held until

he died of natural causes a year later.

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Citation

Archer, Kenna Lang: Garfield, Harry Augustus , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. **DOI:** [10.15463/ie1418.10572](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10572).

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