

*The Real
Calvin Coolidge*

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

The Real Calvin Coolidge #15 is quite special. We dedicate it to the memory of John Coolidge who worked so hard to preserve the history of his father and mother, Calvin and Grace Coolidge.

This issue, like its 14 predecessors, is dedicated to sharing insights into the life of our thirtieth President Calvin Coolidge as gleaned from the original research and personal experience of our volunteer authors. I present here, brief resumés for each.

Dr. Harpster has preached in the Union Christian Church and has taught about Calvin Coolidge in his history course at the College of St. Joseph in Rutland, Vermont. His interest in Coolidge was noted. He is now a Trustee at the Coolidge Foundation and immersed in educational programs and communication policies. His article in this issue is taken from a speech that he presented to the New England Historical Association Spring Conference at the University of Vermont in 1998.

Mr. Wikander is a long time Trustee and now Emeritus Trustee. He was the first curator of the Coolidge Memorial Room at Forbes Library in Northampton, MA. He initially worked with Grace Coolidge to establish the room and has been a friend of the Coolidge family for many years.

Jim Cooke is the solo historical interpreter of Calvin Coolidge. He works almost on a daily basis to help with inquires about Calvin Coolidge and set the record straight when an author is off track. His contribution in this issue takes aim at the Kunhardts. Beware to those who re-cycle the old cliches and stereotypes!

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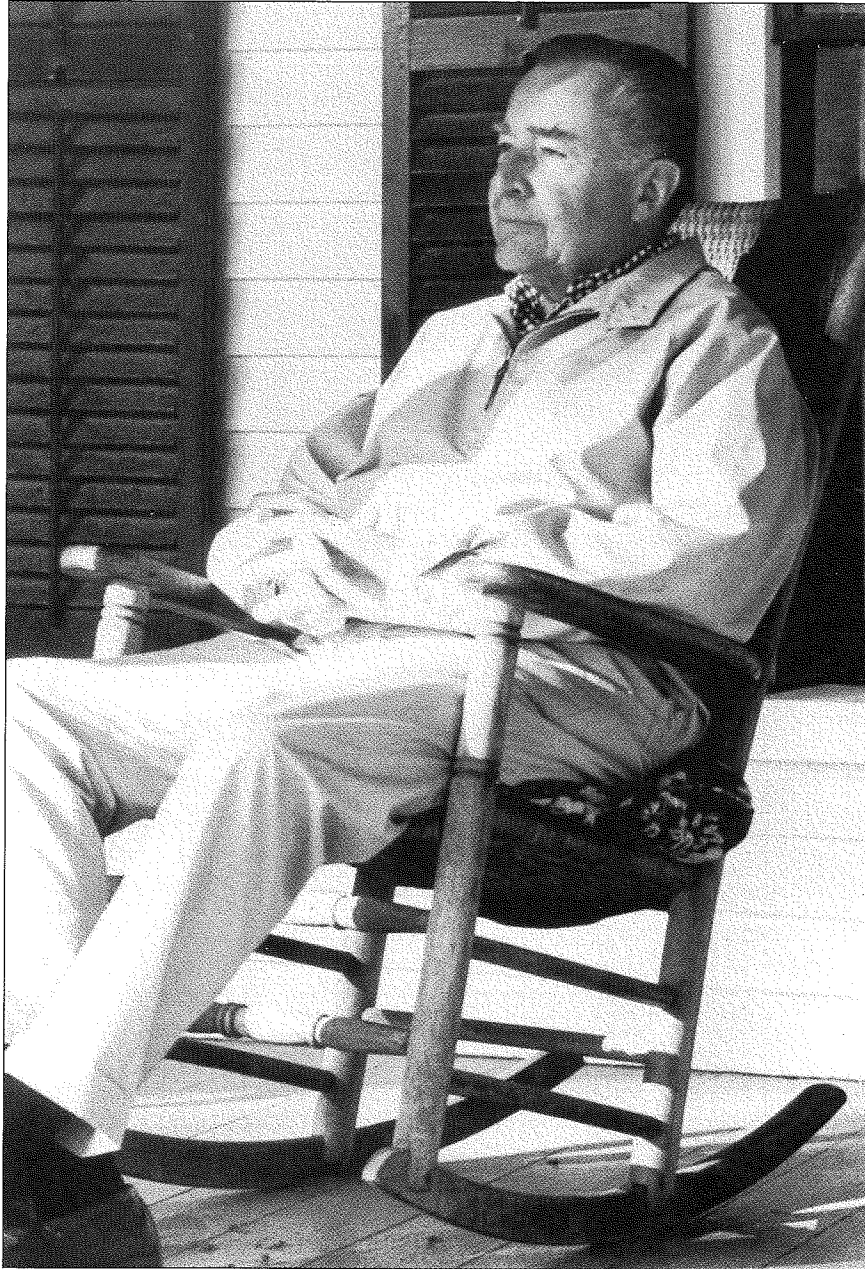
The Coolidge Foundation solicits articles and remembrances concerning Calvin Coolidge, his family, and era. The Publication Committee of the Foundation reserves the right to edit materials to conform to the policies and format of the publication.

Opinions and conclusions in *The Real Calvin Coolidge* are those of the authors and may not necessarily reflect those of the Coolidge Foundation.

The Real Calvin Coolidge is free to Foundation members. Inquiries on membership should be sent to the foundation offices.

The issue is 15th in a series. Back issues are available for purchase year round through the foundation office, Box 97, Plymouth Notch, VT 05056. During the season (May to October) the President Calvin Coolidge State Historic Site sells copies at the Cilley Store for \$2.95 each.

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John Coolidge, in the 1980's, rocking in a chair on the Coolidge homestead. Mr. Coolidge died this year at age 93.

Let Us Remember John Coolidge the President's Son

The Coolidge Foundation sadly notes the passing of its founding trustee, John Coolidge. John Coolidge was the oldest son of Calvin and Grace. He was their pride and joy. They hovered over him and his brother Calvin as doting parents during their childhood.

John Coolidge returned the devotion by pledging himself to buying buildings and property here at Plymouth Notch as a memorial to his Coolidge ancestors, especially father Calvin, President of the United States. His purchases enabled the State of Vermont and the Coolidge Foundation to save a village for history. Visitors really can see the birthplace and boyhood home of a president that has not been re-created or re-envisioned.

In addition, the Coolidge Foundation, with the leadership of the Coolidge family, has been able to reach beyond Plymouth to the region and nation through educational programs. John Coolidge gave the opening talk at the 1998 conference in Boston sponsored by the J.F. Kennedy Library by audiotape. He was willing to be interviewed, at age 92, by our Executive Director in 1999 for the Grace Coolidge retrospective. He was so pleased with the outreach and connections with Forbes Library and the Clarke School for the Deaf in Northampton, MA. He approved of new programs and new initiatives. Thus the headline in The New York Times at the death of John Coolidge was so appropriate: *Guardian of Father's Presidential Legacy*.

We will continue to kindle the flame, he would have wanted us to.

Robert G. Kittner
President CCMF



Portrait of President Coolidge by Frank O. Salisbury

THE RELIGION OF CALVIN COOLIDGE: FROM RURAL VERMONT TO THE WHITE HOUSE

by Dr. Donald E. Harpster

The image many Americans have of Calvin Coolidge, the thirtieth president of the United States, tends to be more negative than positive. In many American history textbooks, Calvin Coolidge is portrayed as representative of traditional values during the 1920's. These values would include the small town or country, family, and traditional Protestant Christianity.¹ Paul Johnson in his recent *History of the American People* describes Coolidge as a "minimalist politician" who saw the republic of the United States not in terms of its democratic values so much as the value of the rule of law and the government which enforces that law.² Nathan Miller's most recent book ranks Coolidge as one of the country's ten worst presidents, mainly because of his inability or reluctance to deal with fundamental problems in the economy of the 1920's. Miller's words are particularly condemning:

He (Coolidge) assiduously followed the maxim that government that governs least is best. Upon entering the White House, the new president placed a rocking chair on the elegant portico and sat there rocking and contently puffing on a cigar for the next five years and seven months while the world passed by.... Coolidge's political career was a shining example of the power of inertia over talent.³

In the same vein, the current PBS documentary, *The American President*, produced by the Kunhardt family, portrays Coolidge mainly as the preacher of prosperity and spokesman of 1920's materialism.⁴ While this negative image of Coolidge still persists in many quarters, there is a renewed interest in the consumerism of the 1920's in general, and Calvin Coolidge, in particular.⁵ A recent issue of *Time* magazine listed as his chief accomplishments the slashing of federal taxes and spending and the scaling down of German reparations. The comments of contributing historians were particularly interesting: "Left little historical legacy"; "Could have been greater if faced with challenges."⁶ It could be argued,

however, given the perspective of Watergate during the Nixon years and alleged scandals with the current occupant of the White House, Coolidge's handling of the scandals of the Harding administration was a major accomplishment for a president. Once he was convinced of the guilt of the accused, Coolidge's commitment to a high ethical standard in government service led him to take swift and appropriate action. These scandals resulted in the resignations of two cabinet members of no less stature than the Attorney General and the Secretary of the Interior, the latter of which went to jail. Albert Fall's conviction marked the first time in United States history that a cabinet member had been judged guilty of a crime.⁷ It was perhaps Alfred E. Smith of New York, a Democratic admirer, who said it best. "His great task was to restore the dignity and prestige of the Presidency when it had reached the lowest ebb in our history... in a time of extravagance and waste...."⁸

The sources of Coolidge's character and ethics are to be found largely in his religious upbringing in the small rural village of Plymouth Notch, Vermont and were later enhanced during his student days at Amherst College in Western Massachusetts. This religious faith sustained him for the rest of his life.

Claude Fuess in his 1940 biography of Calvin Coolidge notes two rather unusual aspects on the religious background of the 30th President of the United States:

1. There is no record of his Christening or where that ceremony took place.
2. He never became a member of an organized church until after he became president.⁹

If that is all one knew about the religious life of Coolidge, one could get the impression that considerations of faith were of little importance in the life of this man. Such was not the case however.

Here I am reminded of a former chief executive, the sixteenth President, Abraham Lincoln. Although Lincoln never aligned himself with a particular religious organization and was often critical of some of the religious practices of his day, there was perhaps no president who had a more deep and abiding religious faith. Both Lincoln and Coolidge were

well acquainted with the Bible.

Themes associated with the religious development of Coolidge would be:

1. Community
2. Family
3. Mysticism— in particular, a close relationship with nature, being one with creation
4. Ethical dimension — service to others
5. Providence of God

Coolidge grew up in the neighborhood around Plymouth Notch, Vermont. In his *Autobiography* he describes the individuals who made up this community as "a people of exemplary habits. Their speech was clean and their lives were above reproach."¹⁰ They worked hard from dawn to dusk. The reason why there was no record of his baptism into the Christian faith he gives in his own words: "They kept up no church organization, and as there was little regular preaching the outward manifestation of religion through public profession had little opportunity."¹¹ Nevertheless the inhabitants of Plymouth Notch were "without exception a people of faith and charity and good works. They cherished the teachings of the Bible and sought to live in accordance with its precepts."¹²

Although the preaching ministry for the Plymouth community was often intermittent, the laity did exhibit a concern for the religious upbringing of the youth of the community. Regular Sunday School classes were held in the church. His grandmother, Sarah Coolidge, served as the Superintendent of the Sunday School until her age prohibited it. His father then assumed that position. Coolidge described his grandmother as a constant reader of the Bible, a devoted member of the church who prayed daily. Her influence on Calvin was extensive since he often stayed with her when working on the farm. She would read aloud a chapter to Calvin each day.¹³

Because of the ill health and early death of his mother when Calvin was 12 years of age, his grandmother Coolidge was often charged with discipline of the young boy. He remembers vividly that if he did not obey his grandmother, she would shut him up in the attic, a room without

windows and yes, a number of spiderwebs.¹⁴

There was a sense of the mystical in the religion of Coolidge conditioned mainly by his Vermont upbringing. Calvin Coolidge's sense of place and fondness for the hills of Vermont is captured best in his poem, "Vermont, the State I Love". It was a place that was not artificial like the more urban environments of Massachusetts and Washington, D.C. He commented on the experience of riding a horse alone in the countryside during the summers of his high school days when the "Silences of Nature have a discipline all their own."¹⁵ All who have ever visited the Notch remember the pictures of Coolidge pitching hay and doing other work on the family farm even when he was president. Perhaps that is why he enjoyed returning to his roots to be closer to the earth and its Creator.

When Coolidge went to the Black River Academy in nearby Ludlow he wrote to his father requesting some items to tide him over the winter, including a warmer coat, some chunks of wood and a Bible. It was during this period that his father, John, wanted to apprentice him to a drug store. The problem was that drug stores also functioned as the local liquor store. The Colonel, as his father was often called, told Calvin of his decision. The son thought for a minute or two and then said, "Father! Sell rum?" That ended the matter and he went to college at Amherst.¹⁶

As was the custom of colleges during the day, religious observances were an important part of the curriculum. Prayers were held every morning. In addition, there were two required church services on Sunday. Like many of his classmates, he did not particularly appreciate the compulsory attendance and felt it should be voluntary. He later commented that such attendance did not do anyone any harm, including himself.¹⁷

While he was at College he did not formally join any religious organizations, either the YMCA or the College Chapel. It was during his Amherst days that he came under the tutelage of Edward Garman, the professor of Philosophy. Next to his family, Professor Garman was probably most influential in the religious development of Calvin Coolidge. Garman was the son of a Congregational Minister from Maine and a grad-

uate of Yale Divinity School. Besides teaching his students to think critically and reach their own conclusions about important matters through the power of reason, Garman in his person and in his teaching embodied the man of faith. Calvin, in his Autobiography, says it best:

We looked upon Garman as a man who walked with God. His course was demonstration of the existence of a personal God, of our power to know Him, of the Divine immanence, and of the complete dependence of the universe on Him as the Creator and Father 'in whom we live and move and have our being.' Every reaction in the universe is a manifestation of His presence. Man was revealed as His son, and nature as the hem of his garment, while through a common Fatherhood we are all embraced in a common brotherhood. The spiritual appeal of music, sculpture, painting and all other art lies in the revelation it affords of the Divine beauty.¹⁸

Coolidge paid his Amherst professor the highest compliment when he wrote: "To Garman was given a power which took his class up into a high mountain of spiritual life and left them alone with God."¹⁹

Garman saw man as set apart of the other creatures of the universe, a true son of God and a partaker of the Divine nature. This is the basis of man's freedom and equality. For Coolidge as for Garman this concept of humanity provided the foundation for democracy and justified one's faith in the people.²⁰

There was also an ethical dimension in Garman's teaching. With the possession of property carries the obligation to use it in service to others and to the larger society. It is in Garman's social philosophy that we see one of the basic ingredients of Calvin Coolidge's call to service to others in the political arena. It is only one ingredient since Calvin himself came from a background of public service with both his grandfather and father serving in the legislature in Vermont. One should also add his father's service to the local community as chief law enforcement officer and justice of the peace.²¹

The concern for high ethical standards permeated the day-to-day

relationships between Coolidge in his office as president and the business world. The Better Business Bureau Advertising Club of Los Angeles, California once desired to use his name in membership solicitations. Even though he did not have anything against the organization, Coolidge declared emphatically that he did not want his name used for soliciting members.²²

Coolidge was particularly sensitive when it came to using members of his family for promotional purposes. On one occasion the Packard factory in Boston offered to give Grace Coolidge a new Packard automobile ostensibly as a goodwill gesture from its employees. In the eyes of the company's chief executive there was precedence for such an expensive gift to public figures since a similar vehicle had been given to General Pershing, the United States commander in World War I.²³ This act of generosity was met with a firm "no" as it was deemed inappropriate for the wife of a president to accept the gift of a car.²⁴ Somewhat later when the Boston Home Market Club requested that a picture be taken of Grace Coolidge in a "Made in U.S.A." metal lace gown, the organization's request was likewise denied.²⁵ In a similar situation, the National Retail Clothier dated 4 February 1926 ran a picture of Mrs. Coolidge with a Joe Nevin who was styled "America's Most Typical Boy". Upon hearing of the photo, President Coolidge asked the publication to discontinue using the picture for publicity purposes.²⁶ The tone of these representative responses in all cases was a strong desire to maintain the dignity and high standards of the presidential office which extended even to the presidential family. It was from Garman and the heritage of his family that he gained a sense of one's duty and sacrifice for others without seeking personal gain. On numerous occasions he would emphasize the spiritual over the material benefits of human endeavor. In an address at Wheaton College on 19 June 1923, delivered shortly before he became president on the occasion of Harding's death, Coolidge would remind his audience that: "We do not need more material development, we need more spiritual development. We do not need more intellectual power, we need more moral power. We do not need more knowledge, we need more character. We do not need more government, we need more culture. We do not need more law, we need more religion. We do not need more of the things that are seen, we need more of the things that are unseen."²⁷

These comments seem in stark contrast to the usual image of Coolidge as the overseer of the acquisitive society of the 1920's.

Let us return for a moment to the question of why Calvin Coolidge did not formally unite with a local congregation until he assumed the office of the President of the United States. We have already mentioned that there was not a regular ministry at the church in Plymouth Notch.²⁸ While in Northampton he attended Sunday Services fairly regularly at the near-by Edwards Congregational Church. He was very active in the church's Men's club. During this time he is said to have respected the church and its beneficial functions in society.²⁹

Coolidge had a long history of not joining groups. This behavior certainly was true during his days at Amherst. While living in Northampton he refrained from joining any fraternal clubs such as the Masons or the Redmen. The reason might have been political, being reluctant to identify himself with any particular group to the exclusion of others. Added to this consideration was the intensely private nature of the man.³⁰

The circumstances of his affiliation with First Congregation Church in Washington are somewhat unique. Calvin and Grace had been attending services at First Congregational for some time. At a Communion service, the pastor, a long-time friend, in keeping with the congregation's practice, invited all who believed in the Christian faith to partake of Communion. He noted Coolidge had taken Communion, considered this actions a sufficient public profession of faith, and requested the governing board to make him a member without his knowledge, which they did. On hearing of this action, Coolidge gave his approval noting that he would have probably not joined of his own accord.³¹ The fact that his assumption of full membership in a congregation occurred shortly after his arrival in Washington after Harding's death, was also a major consideration.³²

Finally, Coolidge, like his predecessor Abraham Lincoln, had a profound sense of the Providence of God. Coolidge saw the office of the Presidency and his place in it as "an instrument in the hands of God."³³ Standing above the Constitution and the laws of this country was the

authority and laws of the Divine. The essence of humanity nature was spiritual, not material. Values such as honesty, dependability, toleration, and service were of high importance. He believed that the Almighty worked out his purposes in and through human history. It was the obligation of the elected representatives to discover and of public administrators to administer them.³⁴

The place of America in the world was couched in a Christian context in his Inaugural Address, March 4, 1925:

“America seeks no earthy empire built on blood and force. No ambition, no temptation, lures her to the thought of foreign dominions. The legions which she sends forth are armed, not with the sword, but with the cross. The higher state to which she seeks the allegiance of all mankind is not of human but of divine origin. She cherishes no purpose save to merit the favor of Almighty God.”³⁵

This understanding of God’s Providence was decidedly pervasive on a more personal level in the tragic death of his son, Calvin Jr., who died of blood poisoning after playing tennis on the lawn of the White House. Commenting later on the tragedy, Coolidge felt that the “power and the glory of the Presidency went with him.”³⁶

In conclusion, the religious dimension, in general, and the Christian faith, in particular, were very much a part of Calvin Coolidge’s life. It was nurtured in the Plymouth Notch community of his birth by family and friends, particularly his grandmother and father. It received its intellectual foundations while he attended Amherst College under Edward Garman, philosopher, mystic, and man of God. His faith received concrete expression in years of public service to his adopted state of Massachusetts and to his country, as a whole, as Vice President and the President of the United States. Coolidge’s embodiment of the values of honesty and service to others speaks directly to the character issue when one considers qualifications for any high office, particularly the presidency of the United States. Those interpreters who have minimized Coolidge’s significance fail to appreciate the ethical differences between his administration and the one which preceded it.

¹ James Kirby Martin, et al. America and Its Peoples. Volume 2. 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 1997) 812-813.

² Paul Johnson, A History of the American People (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 713.

³ Nathan Miller, Star Spangled Banner Men: America’s Worst Presidents (New York: Simon and Schuster, 87. Miller’s rating of Coolidge is similar to other ratings by historians and newspapers; see Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing, Greatness in the White House: Rating the Presidents from George Washington Through Ronald Reagan. 2nd ed.(University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 16-17. A critique of historians who blamed Coolidge and the general Republican Policies of the 1920’s for the Great Depression is contained in Thomas B. Silver, Coolidge and the Historians (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press for the Claremont Institute, 1982), 123-135.

⁴ Philip B. Kunhardt, Jr., Philip B. Kunhardt III and Peter W. Kunhardt, The American President (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 277.

⁵ “Calvin Coolidge and the Coolidge Era,” Library of Congress Symposium on the Political, Economic, Social, and the Cultural History of the United States in the 1920’s, October 5-7, 1995, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. The addresses given at the symposium were later published in John Earl Hayes (ed.), Calvin Coolidge and the Coolidge Era: Essays on the History of the 1920’s (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1999).

⁶ Time, 13 April 1998, 106.

⁷ For an account of the Harding scandals, see David R. McCoy, Calvin Coolidge: The Quiet President (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1988), 203-221.

⁸ Alfred E. Smith, “A Shining Public Example,” Meet Calvin Coolidge: The Man Behind the Myth, edited by Edward Connery Lathem (Brattleboro, Vermont: The Stephen Green Press, 1960), 219-220.

⁹ Claude M. Fuess, Calvin Coolidge: The Man From Vermont (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1940), 22, 26, 315-317.

¹⁰ Calvin Coolidge, The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge (Plymouth, Vermont: The Calvin Coolidge Memorial Foundation, 1989. First published 1929: The Cosmopolitan Book Corporation of New York), 17.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 17-18, 30.

¹⁴ Fuess, Calvin Coolidge, 26.

¹⁵ Ibid., 3 and Coolidge, Autobiography, 42.

¹⁶ Fuess, Calvin Coolidge, 39, n. 5.

¹⁷ Coolidge, Autobiography, 54-55.

¹⁸ Ibid., 65-66 and McCoy, Calvin Coolidge, 15.

¹⁹ Coolidge, Autobiography, 68-69.

²⁰ Ibid., 24-25, 67. For an account of Garman's Influence on Coolidge, see John Almon Waterhouse, Calvin Coolidge Meets Charles Edward Garman (Rutland, Vermont: Academy Books, 1984), 25-38.

²¹ Coolidge, Autobiography, 14-16, 24-25.

²² Francis R. Miller to Gaston Shemp, Secretary to President Coolidge, 21 August 1926. Personal Files of President Calvin Coolidge, Forbes Library, Northampton, Massachusetts.

²³ Alton T. Fuller to Frank T. Stearns, 5 October 1923, Ibid.

²⁴ Frank T. Stearns to Alton T. Fuller, 10 October 1923, Ibid.

²⁵ William H. Cliff (Secretary of the Boston Home Market Club) to Mr. Edward T. Clark (President's Secretary), 30 November 1925 and Edward T. Clark to William H. Cliff, 3 December 1925, Ibid.

²⁶ Note to Svenborn Brothers, 16 February 1926, Ibid.

²⁷ Calvin Coolidge, "The Things That Are Unseen," The Price of Freedom: Speeches and Addresses (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), 390-391.

²⁸ Fuess, Calvin Coolidge, 26.

²⁹ Ibid, 92.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Coolidge, Autobiography, 178.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 235.

³⁴ McCoy, Calvin Coolidge, 56 and "Authority and Religious Liberty," The Foundations of the Republic: Speeches and Addresses (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), 108-110. Glen Thorow, "Abraham Lincoln and the American Political Religion," in The Historian's Lincoln: Pseudo History, Psycho History, and History, edited by Gabor S. Boritt and Norman O. Forness (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1996) provides one of the more recent delineations of Lincoln's religious thought.

³⁵ John Gabriel Hunt, The Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents. Rev. ed. (New York:

³⁶ Coolidge, Autobiography, 190.



Postcard of Calvin Coolidge, his wife Grace, and son John entering the Union Christian Church, President Calvin Coolidge State Historic Site, July 18, 1929 (newly donated item from Margaret Fischer collection)

THE COOLIDGES AND THEIR CHURCHES

by Lawrence E. Wikander

I. Grace Coolidge

Grace Coolidge writes in her *Autobiography*, "I cannot remember the time when I did not attend church. I began going at such an early age that the tick of my mother's watch was clearer to me than the words of the minister's sermon."

Her mother was a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Burlington, Vermont. Her father subsequently joined. "He took this step very seriously, and every pack of cards in the house was dealt in the kitchen stove. I suppose that euchre and casino were the simple card games played in the homes of a few intimate friends, but the discipline of the church strictly forbade the use of cards and my father had subscribed to its tenets. When he had pledged his faith, he kept his obligation."

"At the age of sixteen I joined the College Street Congregational Church... Looking backwards I am unable to think of any definite reason why I chose this church in preference to the Methodist church in which I had been brought up. Often such decisions are made because friends are leaning in a particular direction. This was not true in any case, for the majority of my friends were in the other church... The sermons of the pastor, the Reverend Peter M. Snyder, made a strong appeal to me, and there is no doubt that they were a large factor in the making of my decision. I met with no opposition from my parents. Indeed I think they encouraged me to follow the dictation of my own heart. A short time later they brought their letters from the Methodist church and united with the College Street Church where they carried their full share of the work of maintaining and forwarding its many interests." Young Grace Goodhue took an active part in the various "socials" that the church organizations provided.

After graduation from the University of Vermont in the Class of 1902, she applied to the teacher training course in the Clarke School for the Deaf in Northampton, Massachusetts and was accepted. She brought

her church letter to the Edwards Congregational Church "in the first year of my residence in Northampton."

Her two sons grew up in the Edwards Church. She had kind works for the pastor, the Reverend Kenneth B. Welles. He conducted classes in religious instruction during Lent, and Grace Coolidge rejoiced when aged twelve and thirteen they joined the church at Easter.

When the Coolidges moved to Washington, they attended the First Congregational Church. Upon Calvin Coolidge's succession to the Presidency August 3, 1923, the muckrakers got out their tools. A correspondent in Jacksonville, Illinois, writes on September 27, 1923, "It has been broadcasted through this section of the County, that the President's wife was originally a member of the Catholic Church and that his sons are in a Catholic school. "I am asking you if it is true since relations between the Catholics and Protestants in this section are somewhat strained at this time."

The President's Secretary, Edward T. Clark, replied to this and similar inquiries by stating that Mrs. Coolidge joined the Congregational Church in Burlington, Vermont, while a "school girl." She was thus a Congregationalist "as were her father and mother." The boys attended Mercersburg Academy which was not a "sectarian school."

The wife of a minister in Lakewood, New Jersey, furnished this clue in July 24, 1924. "Through some malicious influence a story has been circulated through the Klu Klux Klan that Mrs. Coolidge was born and raised outside the Protestant Church."

The great tragedy of the Coolidges' White House years was the death of Calvin, Jr.. He developed a blister on his foot after playing tennis and died of septicemia July 7, 1924. A small service led by the Reverend Jason Noble Pierce, Pastor of the First Congregational Church, was held in the East room of the White House, but at the Coolidges' wish Calvin Coolidge, Jr.'s funeral was held at the Edwards Church in Northampton, in Mrs. Coolidge's phrase their "Church home." Reverend Pierce read some scripture verses, and Reverend Welles offered the eulogy, prayer and benediction.

The funeral cortege wended its way to the family plot in Plymouth Notch, Vermont. There Grace Coolidge paid a formal farewell by laying Calvin Jr.'s Bible on the lowering coffin.

Grace Coolidge resumed her active church life upon their return from Washington in 1929. She cheerfully modeled and sold aprons at the annual church fair and chaired a committee raising funds for the church organ.

II. Calvin Coolidge

A telegram to the White House October 17, 1923 to the president from the National Council of Congregational Churches "now meeting in Springfield, Mass., has this day honored itself by electing you honorary moderator. The unanimous vote of the Council is witness of our pride in you and of our confidence that in your high office you are serving God and promoting his reign of peace and good will in all the earth. God give you strength and success. Rockell Harmon Potter, Moderator."

A reply, the same day, accepted. "Please convey my thanks to the Council for honoring me with the office of honorary moderator. The strength of religion is the strength of the state. Your devotion to the cause of righteousness is a guarantee of the permanent security of our institutions. Calvin Coolidge."

This cordial exchange masked the fact that the nomination had been challenged by voices shouting, "He's not a member!" To which the Reverend Jason Noble Pierce (Amherst '02), pastor of the First Congregational Church of Washington, D.C., responded, "But he soon will be!"

Missing from the record, but to be inferred, was that the President had accepted the invitation from the First (Congregational) Church in Washington on condition that the Edwards (Congregational) Church of Northampton approve it. A telegram from Pastor Pierce to the President's Secretary, Edward T. Clark October 20, 1923, relates, "Please inform the President that the Pastor of the Edwards Church, Northampton, gave his hearty approval and that on this very night the First Church, Washington,

by joyous unanimous vote elected the President as member and Mrs. Coolidge (already a member of Edwards Church) an Associate member as of date August fifth."

In a letter of October 31, 1923, Kenneth B. Welles, Pastor of the Edwards Church, did not hide his pleasure:

"My Dear Mr. President: "Great joy has come to the Edwards Church through the knowledge that you have united with the Church in Washington. I know that it needed moral courage to take the step at this time, and we honor you for making a decision in the face of possible adverse criticism. It brings great strength to the Christian cause. Many ministers will feel as I do —an added freedom to place the responsibility before men.

"It was most kind of you to ask Dr. Pierce to communicate with me concerning the matter. There could not be any jealousy between the Churches over an event of such deep significance. Edwards Church more than any other Church will rejoice over what has happened. It is going to give me a grasp over some men like Fred Farrar [hardware merchant who had been the Local Chairman of the Vice-Presidential Notification Committee in 1920] and Judge Field [Henry P. Field partner in the law firm of Hammond & Field in which Calvin Coolidge had read law 1895-1897] which I never otherwise could have had held.

"Please understand how proud we are at what you have done. Sincerely yours, Kenneth B. Welles."

On November 2, 1923, President Coolidge replied:

"My Dear Mr. Welles, Thank you very much for your kind letter. I asked Dr. Pierce to talk with you because I did not want you to feel that I was leaving the Edwards Church which I shall always regard as my home church. Very Truly Yours, Calvin Coolidge."

In his telegram of October 20, Dr. Pierce had declared the President a member "as of date August fifth." That date, was the first Sunday after August 3 when Calvin Coolidge became President. On that date at the First Congregational in Washington Calvin Coolidge confirmed his membership by partaking of Communion "as a public

acknowledgement of his love for Christ," declared Dr. Pierce in a 1934 letter to Mrs. Coolidge when she was compiling material for the magazine series, "The Real Calvin Coolidge." In his view this obviated the customary necessity of qualifying for membership "through formal request or examination by the Diaconate [the church deacons] and having his name read out to come forward to receive the hand of fellowship."

There was, and is, a church building in Plymouth Notch. Itinerant or occasional preachers visited the church. A minister would be sent for when ceremonies demanded one. According to the Encyclopedia of Religions (New York: Macmillan, 1987 Volume 4, page 44) a Congregational Church "must be properly organized with Bible, sacraments, a duly called and trained ministry, and deacons and members in good standing." The Plymouth Notch church did not meet these standards.

Calvin Coolidge could have emulated his sister, Abby, by joining the nearby Ludlow church. His diary of school days notes frequent absences from Sunday services. From Amherst College he wrote home, "I don't like to be compelled to go to church very well but there is no other way here."

Certainly opportunities to join church had abounded. In January, 1921, after he had been elected to national office, the two proprietors of the Northampton bookstore Bridgman & Lyman separately urge him to affiliate with the Edwards church. Clifford Lyman, a friend and political supporter, alluded to earlier office visits when he had urged the cause. In each case Calvin Coolidge wrote, appreciating the interest expressed, but left unanswered his intended reaction.

The book by Hendrik V. Booraem, noted below, emphasizes Calvin Coolidge's innate shyness. It was thus expressed by him in conversation with Frank W. Stearns, his close friend and most devoted supporter [as quoted in Fuess's biography]:

"Do you know, I've never really grown up? It's a hard thing for me to play this game. In politics, one must meet people, and that's not easy for me.....When I was a little fellow, as long ago as I can remember,

I would go into a panic if I heard strange voices in the kitchen. I felt I just couldn't meet the people and shake hands with them. Most of the visitors would sit with Father and Mother in the kitchen, and the hardest thing in the world was to have to go through the kitchen door and give them a greeting. I was almost ten before I realized I couldn't go on that way. And by fighting hard I used to manage to get through that door. I'm all right with old friends, but every time I meet a stranger, I've got to go through the old kitchen door, back home, and it's not easy."

We can surmise that Calvin Coolidge could not bring himself to make the customary public expression of his beliefs. Claude Fuess after considerable analysis suggests, "He approved of the church as an institution, but his own religion was primarily between his God and him."

On May 26, 1927, from Omaha, Nebraska the Reverend Jason Noble Pierce telegraphed that the National Council of Congregational Churches "had unanimously re-elected him Honorary Moderator."

Principal Sources:

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Fuess, Claude M. Calvin Coolidge: The Man from Vermont. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1940).

Book Review

Philip B. Kunhardt, Jr., Philip B. Kunhardt III, & Peter W. Kunhardt.

THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT

(New York: Riverhead Books, 1999)

This \$50 "companion volume" keeps company with that ten-part PBS series that aired last April. The best I can say about it is that the photographs are reproduced with wonderful clarity. (Caption writers, however, often seem ignorant of accompanying text.) Of those presidents of whom I knew little — I learned some things of interest; of the men with whom I had slight familiarity — nothing new was revealed. And, when it came to the administrations I've studied, I found the three Kunhardts to be so often in error it made me question what I thought I had learned.

Let's consider Calvin Coolidge. The Kunhardt's parcel out his history on a "need to know" basis. If it doesn't fit their agenda -- you don't need to know it. They assure us that Coolidge was the minion of Big Business, of the status quo, of "haves" over "have nots." Consequently, you would never guess that, in 1916, Massachusetts' Senate President Calvin Coolidge cast the tie-breaking vote in support of William Monroe Trotter's efforts to suppress a Boston showing of the racist film "Birth of a Nation." We are never reminded of Coolidge's early support for the vote for women or higher wages for teachers. We don't learn that the GOP in 1920 had the only national platform denouncing the "hideous crime of lynching." Or, that the Coolidge administration's relief measures in the wake of the Mississippi Flood of 1927 was the largest Federal Relief project until FDR's New Deal.

They cut and paste from old college notes to give us this young Cal Coolidge: "As he saw it, reading for pleasure, anything musical, dancing, playing a sport, indulging in a hobby, having a sweetheart all squandered precious time and energy."

This simply is not true and the most superficial reading of Coolidge's Autobiography (1929) refutes nearly all of the above.

OK. Cal didn't dance! But he was a voracious reader of history, fiction and poetry, he acted in amateur plays, was an "endman" in the minstrel

show, where — granted, it's not p.c. or musical — but he played the bones. In winter, he hunted; he attended informal neighborhood "singing schools." Baseball? His autobiography reveals, "I had some skill with the bat." Once, every summer he and sister Abby were roused before dawn by their "taciturn, puritanical" father — to do chores! Right? No. To go to the circus. Letters home from Black River Academy, St. Johnsbury Academy and Amherst College list lectures, musical recitals, games, plays, picnics, debates, practical jokes, magic lantern shows, an ox roast, along with vivid accounts of football games and other student events. A monochromatic, straight-laced puritanical Coolidge suits the author's simplistic agenda but never provides anything like an accurate picture of the young Calvin Coolidge.

The Kundharts seem aware that people have been up and working on Calvin Coolidge in the academic kitchen for a while. However, they personally, have not yet smelled any coffee. At the same time, their serious — even dignified treatment of President Coolidge is far better than we might have expected five or ten years ago. Old habits die hard and the vengeance of dead and dying New Deal scholarship continues to twitch reflexively like the severed leg of a laboratory frog.

Ten of this book's 481 pages are devoted to the 30th President. He is grouped with Presidents Jefferson, Hoover and Reagan in a chapter called "The American Way." The Coolidge section is titled: "Preacher to Prosperity." We are told, "In retirement . . . The preacher of the American way had little left to say."

In retirement, Coolidge with "little left to say" completed his autobiography. It ran in serial form in *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. The last chapter, "Why I Did Not Choose to Run" ran first in the May issue of 1929. He traveled, he wrote magazine articles and, for one year, a daily syndicated newspaper column. The Coolidges moved to a new home in Northampton. He had an addition put on the old Homestead in Plymouth, Vermont. (Later removed.) He joined a book club, served as Trustee of Amherst College and on the board of the Clarke School for the Deaf, he was president of the American Antiquarian Society, attending meetings in Worcester, Massachusetts and writing their annual report. He was offered jobs and figurehead positions at huge salaries but declined them all say-

ing, "People are trying to hire not Calvin Coolidge, but a former President of the United States. I can't make that kind of use of the office."

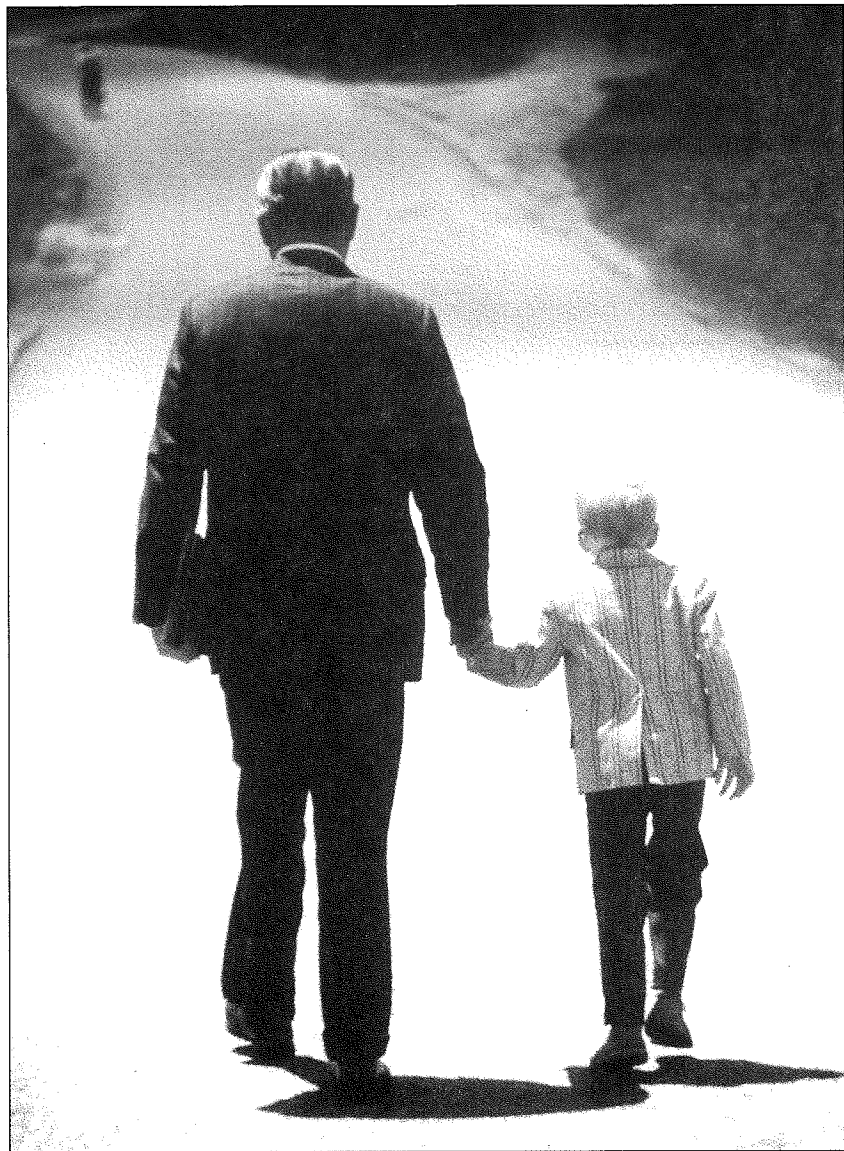
Coolidge accepted a place on the board of the New York Life Insurance Company, and attended monthly meetings in New York City for which he received \$50. He spoke on radio in New York Life's behalf and, in 1932, composed an inspirational message for them. The authorship of this quote on "Persistence" was forgotten. It took CCMF trustee, Lawrence E. Wikander and a "Dear Abby" column to shift the credit from McDonald's Ray A. Kroc back to Coolidge. Of all statements by former presidents -- it may be the best known, the most repeated and memorized.

"Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan 'Press On,' has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race."

This particular omission seems ironic since New York Life was the "generous supporter" and sole underwriter of the PBS series, Internet website and companion volume. Go figure.

Jim Cooke

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July 1972, John Coolidge and his grandson, Christopher Coolidge Jeter, leaving the July 4th ceremony commemorating the birth of his father, Calvin Coolidge.