

Opossums and the Presidency: A Tail of Intrigue and The White House

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Following the American Civil War, our nation struggled to regain its strength as a nation and a people. Even opossums fell on hard times. Through tenacity, pulling oneself up by the tail, the opossum began to flourish and thrive out of ruin.

One such story, which can be found in the UALR's Center for Arkansas History and Culture's Arkansas Opossum Institute, chronicles the lives of two very famous opossums who were on skid row and made it to the big time.

Our 23rd president, Benjamin Harrison served our nation from 1889 to 1893. It was widely known that President Harrison had a fondness for animals, including the marsupial of choice...the opossum. While in office, President Harrison was known for having two pet opossums in the White House. The opossums' names were Mr. Protection and Mr. Reciprocity. The opossums were loved and cherished by not only the Harrison family, but America alike.

On April 13, 1891, President Benjamin Harrison departed Washington, D. C. for his transcontinental rail excursion that took him through numerous states, including Arkansas. He was the first president to visit the state while in office.

There was much excitement and people from all over Arkansas turned out by the hundreds in hopes of seeing Mr. Reciprocity and Mr. Prosperity. Unfortunately they were unable to make the long journey and the masses had to settle for President Harrison.

Here's a brief statement of that event:

Benjamin Harrison...came through Little Rock on his way to the Pacific coast in 1891. All the buildings in downtown Little Rock were decorated and lampposts were covered with red, white, and blue bunting. As the president's train reached Argenta, whistles and horns on both sides of the river sounded for 15 minutes.

History Happened Here: Presidential Pathways in Arkansas
Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism

This story is but one of many that highlights the significance of this endearing marsupial. If not for the Arkansas Opossum Institute, much of Arkansas' opossum history would be lost to the ages.