

Connecticut Explored

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CONNECTICUT'S COMMANDERS IN CHIEF

By Thomas J. Balcerski



George W. Bush as a cheerleader at Yale University.
Courtesy of the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum.

Connecticut is the birthplace of only one president—George W. Bush, born on July 6, 1946, at Grace-New Haven Hospital in New Haven. However, the Nutmeg State was, in many ways, home to another U.S. president, George H. W. Bush, who grew up in Greenwich after his family settled there when he was an infant. His interest in politics originated with his father, Prescott Sheldon Bush, a moderator of the Greenwich Representative Town Meeting and a U.S. senator. From the 1920s through the 1970s, three generations of the Bush family called Connecticut home.

Since then, the Bush family has only grown in prominence. From George H. W. Bush's election to the presidency in 1988 to George W. Bush's departure from office in 2009, this father-son duo shaped national politics in a way not seen since John Adams and John Quincy Adams two centuries earlier. Exploring the Connecticut roots of the nation's 41st and 43rd presidents reveals much about the values of these leading political figures and, consequently, the Nutmeg State's indirect influence on national leadership in the two decades following the end of the Cold War. The impact of Connecticut on the lives of the Bush family, and thus on American history, was profound.

BANKER, MODERATOR, SENATOR

The Bush family's Connecticut roots trace back to the 19th century. Prescott Sheldon Bush was born in Columbus, Ohio, on May 15, 1895, the son of Samuel Prescott and Flora Bush. A child of economic privilege, Prescott spent summers in Osterville, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod. After public school in Columbus, he attended St. George's School in Middletown, Rhode Island, before following in the footsteps of his paternal grandfather, James Smith Bush, class of 1844, and his maternal uncle, Robert E. Sheldon Jr., class of 1904, to Yale University.

Known variously as "Pres" and "Doc," Bush embraced collegiate sports, earning varsity letters in golf and baseball; sang in the glee club, quartet, and choir; and joined secret societies, including Skull and Bones. He graduated in 1917. A year earlier, reflecting the mood of preparedness sweeping the nation, Bush had joined the Connecticut National Guard. After being deployed to France near the end of World

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War I, he attended his Yale reunion in 1919, a gathering that launched his career in the hardware business.

Prescott's commercial ventures took him across the United States, with assignments in St. Louis, Missouri; Kingsport, Tennessee; and Columbus, Ohio. In St. Louis, he met his future wife, Dorothy Walker; the couple married in Kennebunkport, Maine, in 1921. Prescott Bush next joined Stedman Products, a rubber company based in South Braintree, Massachusetts, and the family relocated to nearby Milton, where, on June 12, 1924, their second son, George Herbert Walker Bush, was born. A year later, Prescott accepted a job with the U.S. Rubber Company, headquartered in New York City. In deciding where to live, the family settled on Greenwich, Connecticut, the town where Prescott and Dorothy Walker Bush raised five children and made their home for the next five decades.

From his home base in Greenwich, Prescott Bush entered the industry that would define his business career: investment banking. Roland "Bunny" Harriman offered him a position at the W. A. Harriman investment bank in Manhattan, which merged with Brown Brothers in 1931 to form Brown Brothers Harriman. Over time, Prescott became a leading partner at the firm. However, public service was an even greater calling for Bush; he was elected moderator of the Greenwich Representative Town Meeting in 1935, a position he held for 17 years.

Prescott Bush was active in social and political causes as well. Among them was his support for the American Birth Control League, Planned Parenthood of America, and the United Negro College Fund. But it was with the Republican Party that Bush found his greatest platform for contribution. From 1947 to 1950, he

served as the state Republican finance chair, followed by an unsuccessful run for the U.S. Senate in 1950. After Senator Brien McMahon's death in 1952, Bush defeated Democrat Abraham Ribicoff in a special election for the open seat.

Once in the Senate, Bush, a fiscal conservative and a social moderate, became known as a staunch supporter of the Eisenhower administration's policies, including a balanced budget, civil rights legislation, and the Interstate Highway System. He was also notable for his outstanding golf game—scratch or better in his prime—and became a frequent golf partner of the president. After his reelection to the Senate over Thomas Dodd in 1956, he retired from public life in 1963. Bush died of cancer in 1972 and was buried at Putnam Cemetery in Greenwich. Beginning in 1979, the Connecticut Republican Party honored its adopted son by naming its annual banquet the Prescott Bush Awards Dinner.

A VERY HAPPY CHILDHOOD

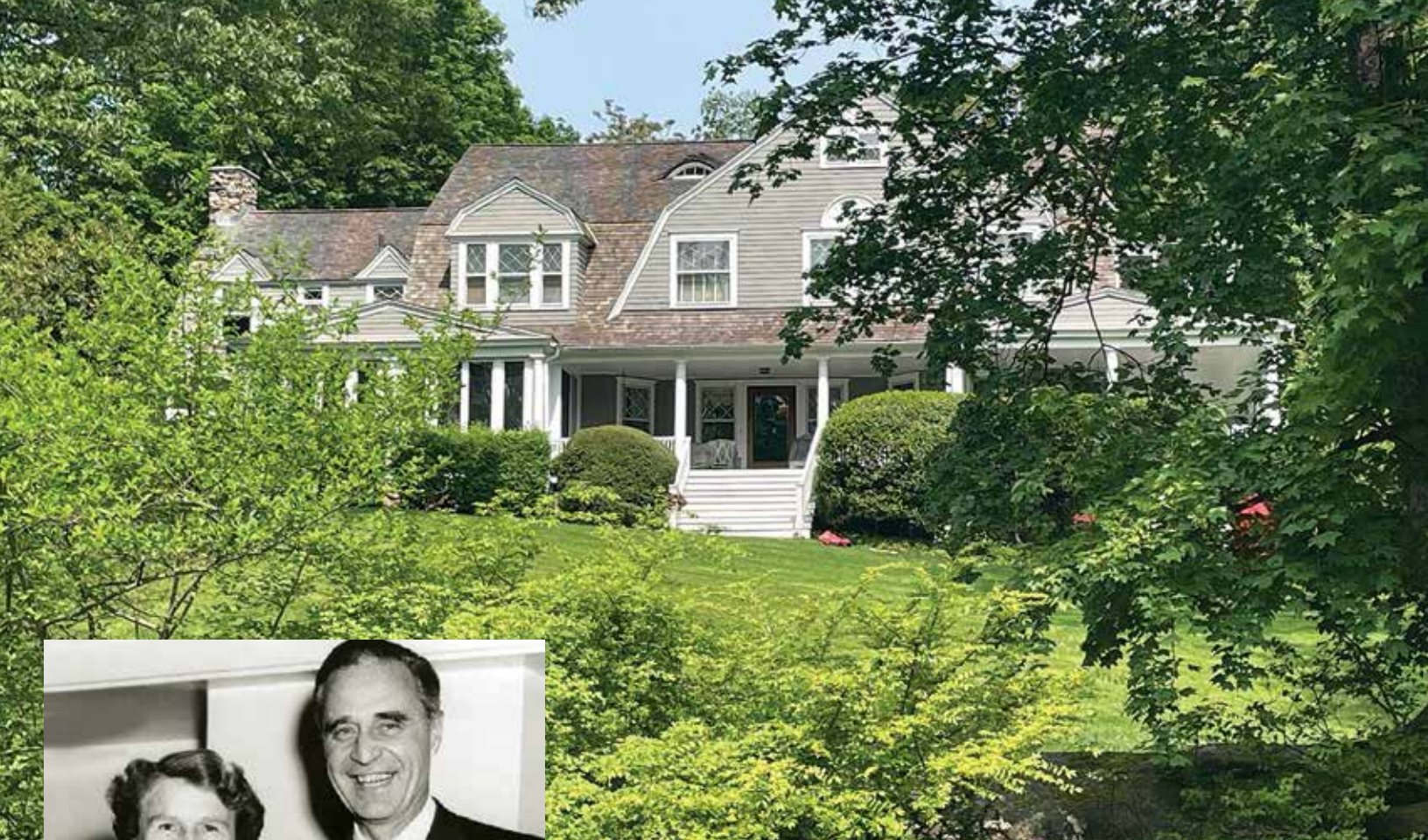
Prescott Bush set a memorable example for his children, especially George H. W. Bush. In his published collection of correspondence, *All the Best, George Bush: My Life in Letters and Other Writings* (Scribner, 1999), George H. W. Bush described his father as "an imposing man of six feet four inches" and "perhaps the most powerful influence" in his life. "By example," he wrote, Prescott "taught all five of his kids about character." At the same time, George H. W. Bush's upbringing was shaped not only by his parents but also by broader forces. From the moment his family moved to the house at 15 Grove Lane in 1924, he also became a product of centuries of Connecticut's history and culture.

George H. W. Bush, who went by "Pop" or "Poppy," remembered in *All the Best* that he had a "very happy childhood,"

though his upbringing was "strict—indeed, puritanical." Both mother and father imparted important lessons to Poppy, who was named after his grandfather, George Herbert Walker. "Dad taught us about duty and service. Mom taught us about dealing with life on a personal basis relating to other people," he later recalled in Ellie LeBlond Sosa and Kelly Anne Chase's *George & Barbara Bush: A Great American Love Story* (Down East Books, 2018). His daughter Dorothy Bush Koch, writing in *My Father, My President* (Grand Central Publishing, 2006), described life in Greenwich as "filled with sports." At the newly established Greenwich Country Day School, the Bush children embraced the school's signature blend of academics and athletics, as historian Herbert S. Parmet notes in *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee* (Scribner, 1997).

Poppy's education, typical in some respects, was nonetheless gilded with upper-class trappings. The Bushes sent young H. W. to school each day in a private limousine. Still, Poppy was noted for his kindness, humility, and character. As Tom Mellana later reported in a December 1, 2018, *Greenwich Time* article, a surviving note on his fifth-grade report card read prophetically: "One day, Bush will become a leader."

After graduation, Bush was sent to Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. On his 18th birthday, he followed in his father's footsteps and enlisted in the military, becoming the youngest pilot in the U.S. Navy when he received his wings. Before enlisting, George H. W. Bush met his future wife, Barbara Pierce of Rye, New York, at the Round Hill Country Club during a holiday dance in 1941. The next day, at a dance at the Apawamis Club, the couple met again, which led to a prolific correspondence. From that point forward,



The Bush family house at 15 Grove Lane in Greenwich. George H. W. Bush attended Greenwich Country Day School, traveling there by private car. Courtesy of Kurt's Historic Sites.



Prescott and Dorothy Bush, parents of George H. W. Bush and grandparents of George W. Bush, undated. Courtesy of the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum.



President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Senator Prescott Bush, 1956. Bush used the photo in his reelection campaign against Democratic Representative Thomas Dodd under the heading "President Eisenhower Signs a Senator Bush Bill." Courtesy of the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum.



George H. W. Bush welcomes Babe Ruth to a pregame ceremony at Yale University Field, June 1948.

Courtesy of the Yale University Office of Public Affairs.

the pair could think of no one else. The couple married at the First Presbyterian Church in Rye on January 6, 1945.

LOST TIME

After the war, George H. W. Bush matriculated at Yale University in the fall of 1945. Like many universities across the country, Yale was undergoing a massive transformation from a campus dominated by military training to an overcrowded, bustling hub for returning veterans. Incredibly, according to Brita Belli's June 13, 2018, *YaleNews* article, "Yale and World War II — Reflections from Members of the Class of '48," some 8,000 students were enrolled, including 5,000 service members; Yale now enrolls about 6,700 undergraduates. As Bush later remarked in his 1991 Yale commencement address, "Like so many of my classmates, I'd come to Yale fresh from war, ready to make up for 'lost time.'"

Severe housing shortages were the norm. Barbara Bush remembered

especially the constant shuffling from place to place. "We lived in three different places the two and a half years George was at Yale," she recalled in *Barbara Bush: A Memoir* (Scribner, 1994). "The first was a shotgun apartment on Chapel Street, a tiny, adorable place we loved." In 1946, George and Barbara welcomed their first child, George Walker Bush, into the world at Grace-New Haven Hospital, now Yale New Haven Hospital. Before the delivery, the Bushes had been forced to move again, since, as Barbara later put it, "the [1275] Chapel Street landlord liked dogs, but not babies."

The expectant couple then moved into an apartment on the second floor of a house at 281 Edwards Street. After George W. was born, the enlarged family sought an apartment at 37 Hillhouse Avenue, a converted mansion where they shared quarters with more than 10 other couples and their children, totaling about 40 people.

Bush graduated in just two and a half years, earning a Phi Beta Kappa key. From then on, George H. W. Bush and his wife, Barbara, never lived in Connecticut. In 1948, they and their son, George W., moved to Odessa, Texas, to pursue the oil business. In *41: A Portrait of My Father* (Random House, 2014), George W. Bush later recalled his father's reasoning, "After flying bomber planes, landing on aircraft carriers, and working next to people from all walks of life, the idea of boarding a commuter train from Connecticut and sitting behind a desk in New York had limited appeal."

HOME AND FRIENDS

The influence of Connecticut on the two future presidents did not end in 1948. Prescott Bush's evolution from banker at Brown Brothers Harriman to an Eisenhower-era Republican in the U.S. Senate served as both an example and a caution-

ary tale for his son, George H. W. Bush. Poor health led Prescott Bush to retire from politics in 1962, and his chance for higher office passed him by. "His experience showed the importance of timing in politics," George W. Bush reflected in *41*, noting that his own father realized he needed to begin his political ascent at an earlier age. Moreover, George H. W. Bush "knew from watching Prescott Bush that it was possible to enter public service and remain a good father and a good man," a lesson that George W. Bush also learned from his father and grandfather.

Through his father's connections to President Eisenhower, George H. W. Bush secured a meeting with the former president in 1964. That same year, he sought a seat in the U.S. Senate from Texas. Bush lost that election, but he did not give up his desire to serve in politics, eventually winning two terms in the House of Representatives. Under President Richard Nixon, Bush was appointed ambassador to the United Nations and later chair of the Republican National Committee. Under President Ford, he served as chief of the U.S. Liaison Office in China and then director of the Central Intelligence Agency. Throughout, George W. Bush remembered in *41* that his father "would carry the lessons of Prescott Bush with him for the rest of his life."

The 1980 election catapulted George H. W. Bush onto the national stage. Although he ran as a proud Texan, Bush cultivated support in the New England states by invoking his Connecticut roots. "I think of Greenwich as home and friends," Bush told *Greenwich Time* just before the New Hampshire presidential primary. "The change is amazing. I guess I remember Greenwich as more of a village ... the Pickwick Theater, the Franklin Simon store and the railroad station. When I was in high school, we used to go

on the train a lot to go to hockey games.”

George H. W. Bush regularly returned to Connecticut throughout his adult life. His mother, Dorothy, lived on Pheasant Lane in Greenwich until her death in 1992, as did his older brother, Prescott Bush Jr., who famously challenged Lowell Weicker for a U.S. Senate seat in 1982. George H. W. Bush received the Distinguished Alumni Award from Greenwich Country Day School in 1997. In 2018, the Greenwich Historical Society mounted an exhibit dedicated to the 41st president.

OUR LITTLE SECRET

By contrast, George W. Bush has been reluctant to embrace his Connecticut roots, or, for that matter, his higher education there. He returned to Connecticut from 1964 to 1968, attending Yale University, earning a bachelor of arts in history, joining the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity, and becoming a member of the secret society Skull and Bones. He recalled in his memoir that these were “work hard, play hard” years.

During the 2000 presidential election, a *New York Times* article relayed an anecdote about then-Governor Bush’s reticence on the subject: when Mark Effron of West Hartford told Bush that he understood he had been born in New Haven, Bush put his arm around Effron and said quietly, “Let’s keep that our little secret.” Though not quite a lifelong Texan, George W. Bush rarely acknowledges the part played by the Nutmeg State in his family history.

For its part, Yale has embraced its most recent graduate to become a U.S. president. In 2019, George W. Bush received the Yale Undergraduate Lifetime Achievement Award. He is one of five U.S. presidents to have attended the school. In the next generation, Jenna Bush Hager, the former president’s daughter, has made her home in Connecticut.

THE BUSH FAMILY LEGACY IN CONNECTICUT

Few remnants of the Bush family’s time in Connecticut remain visible today. The house on Grove Lane in Greenwich has stayed in private hands. The birthplaces of U.S. presidents are now often visited by enthusiasts and the public alike, but Yale New Haven Hospital remains an active medical facility, and no marker indicates the room where George W. Bush was born. The same is true of the various homes the Bush family lived in during George H. W. Bush’s student years at Yale. However, a long-stalled effort by the town of Greenwich to erect a bronze statue of George H. W. Bush off Greenwich Avenue has continued through the town approval process.

Although few physical markers remain, the depth of the Bush family’s Connecticut roots is readily apparent. There the Bushes learned the importance of public service and of starting early on the path to elected office. Their education in Connecticut likewise instilled a belief in education as a path to success, while the area’s many social connections helped bring George H. W. and Barbara Bush together. Perhaps most importantly, the Bush family embodied a fiercely competitive devotion to winning—whether in sports or in politics. From Connecticut soil, the Bush family drew a determination never to quit. 🐾

Architectural rendering of the George H. W. Bush statue. Courtesy of Greenwich Time.

The third and final New Haven residence of Barbara and George H. W. Bush at 37 Hillhouse Avenue, New Haven. Courtesy of Kurt’s Historic Sites.



George H. W. and Barbara Bush with their firstborn child, George W. Bush, while George H. W. Bush was a student at Yale. Courtesy of the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum.

