

VERMONT HISTORY



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The Calvin Coolidge Inauguration Revisited: An Eyewitness Account by Congressman Porter H. Dale

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Executive of the greatest nation of
the world."*

Edited by CHRISTOPHER D. DALE AND PORTER H. DALE II

It was the summer of 1923, and Vice President Calvin Coolidge had journeyed from Washington to his childhood home in Plymouth Notch for a vacation. When word of President Warren G. Harding's death reached Vermont on August 2, it was clear that Coolidge's summer plans, and indeed his political future, would be irrevocably transformed. The stage was set for one of the most unusual presidential inaugurations in the country's history. In the wee hours of the morning of August 3, Calvin Coolidge was sworn into office as president of the United States by his father at the family homestead in Vermont.

Although the story of Coolidge's inauguration is recorded in a variety of sources,¹ only two eyewitnesses have published accounts to date. Coolidge described the event in his 1929 autobiography, and Joe H. Fountain, a young reporter at the time, wrote about it in newspaper and magazine articles and in a monograph entitled *Homestead Inaugural*.² A third account of the event is by another eyewitness, Porter H. Dale, then a U.S. congressman, who stood beside Coolidge as the oath of office was administered.

Descended from three generations of Vermonters, Porter Hinman Dale was born in Island Pond on March 1, 1867. His education included Washington County Grammar School in Montpelier and Eastman Business College in Poughkeepsie, New York. He graduated from James E. Murdoch's National School of Elocution and Oratory in Philadelphia in 1889. After holding a faculty position at Green Mountain Seminary in Waterbury, he taught elocution at Bates College from 1891 to 1892. Concurrently, he had business affiliations in electric power, lumbering, and banking in northern Vermont and Maine. He was admitted to the Vermont bar in 1896 and was deputy collector of customs at Island Pond from 1897 to 1910. After two terms in the Vermont Senate, he was elected to Congress in 1914 and to the U.S. Senate in 1923 to fill an unexpired term caused by the death of Senator William Dillingham. Dale was reelected in 1926 and 1932. He died at age sixty-six on October 6, 1933.

The description of the inauguration was discovered in 1979 at the Dale homestead in Island Pond. The senator's grandson, Dr. Porter H. Dale, found four drafts of the account among papers stored in the summer house, originally used as a lodging for guests but eventually a storage site. The first of the four drafts was handwritten and the others roughly typed, most likely by Florence Conway, Senator Dale's secretary for many years. At this writing Dr. Porter Dale has the original manuscripts in Montpelier, but copies are available in the Wilbur Collection of Vermontiana, Special Collections, Bailey/Howe Library at the University of Vermont in Burlington, where the Dale family papers reside. Copies are also available at the Vermont Historical Society library.

The first draft, in pencil, is not dated but was probably sketched from notes recorded the day after the inauguration. In a letter to Joe Fountain in 1931, Senator Dale explained that "all of the details respecting the whole event I wrote down the next day."³ What seems to be the second version is a carbon copy of a typed original. It includes modifications to the handwritten draft; some sentences were reworded and a few new sentences added. The first page of this draft also shows revisions to the typed copy, penned in ink in Dale's handwriting. The typed original formed the basis

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for the third draft of Dale's account. It incorporates the same first-page changes mentioned above, again in pen. The remaining pages contain several penned or penciled emendations apparently intended to improve the flow and coherence of the second draft.

A new introductory sentence suggests the date of the fourth draft. "The passing of Calvin Coolidge," it reads, "recalls the night at Plymouth, Vermont, when his father administered to him the oath prescribed for the President of the United States." Because Coolidge died on January 5, 1933, and Dale died on October 6, 1933, this draft was probably written during that nine-month interval. It contains a few minor changes; the third page is missing.

All of the drafts are consistent in factual detail. The account that follows is the second draft, chosen because it is one of the two intact versions and fills in many of the abbreviations that appear in the original handwritten manuscript. Dale had further refined the story in the third and fourth versions, but neither manuscript is complete.

Dale's rendering is not entirely clear on each of the fine points of the inauguration, nor does his description of the event square with every account published earlier. For example, there has long been spirited disagreement over exactly who was in the room with Coolidge when he took the inaugural oath. Dale's text does not resolve the controversy. Dale specified that he, Calvin Coolidge, Grace Coolidge, and John Coolidge, as well as Edwin Geisser (Coolidge's secretary) and Fountain were present. Although Dale stated that these six made up "the whole number of who were in the room when the oath was administered," he suggested in the next line that a seventh individual, L. L. Lane, a friend of Dale's, was also present. Lane, he noted, hasped the screen door "on the inside" (our emphasis), apparently indicating that he was in the room with Coolidge and the others.

In his 1950 account Fountain wrote that "there were but six persons within the room proper, including the President, when the oath was administered."⁴ Outside the screen door, on the porch, he wrote, were Herbert P. Thompson, "commander of the Springfield American Legion Post"; Joseph McInerney, Coolidge's chauffeur; and Lane. A few pages later, however, Fountain identified Lane as one of six people "in the room" who signed their names under President Coolidge's as official witnesses to the inauguration.

Two accounts by Vrest Orton have seven people in the room during the inauguration: Coolidge, his wife, his father, Dale, Fountain, Geisser, and McInerney.⁵ Though not an eyewitness, Orton related that McInerney personally told him that he was in the room as Coolidge was sworn into office. Dale did not name McInerney in his account, and in

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the letter to Fountain mentioned above, Dale specifically said that Lane, not McNerney, was in the room. Orton's 1957 monograph identified Lane as one of two men standing on the porch during the inauguration, although he noted in 1960 that Lane—along with Grace Coolidge, John Coolidge, Dale, Fountain, Geisser, and McNerney—signed the oath of office documented under Calvin Coolidge's name.

In his 1929 autobiography Calvin Coolidge wrote that there were five people in the room with him: his wife, his father, Dale, his stenographer (Geisser), and his chauffeur (McNerney). He did not mention Lane, but he also excluded Fountain, someone who was present by every other account.

There is, then, a general consensus that Colonel Coolidge, Grace Coolidge, Dale, and Geisser were all in the room when Calvin Coolidge took the oath of office on August 3 at 2:47 A.M. Assuming an oversight in Coolidge's own description, we can safely say Fountain was there, too. Were both Lane and McNerney present? That remains unclear.

We certainly make no claim that the narrative that follows is the definitive statement on the Coolidge inauguration. It does, though, have obvious value as one of only three eyewitness accounts of this fascinating moment in Vermont history.

PORTER H. DALE'S ACCOUNT

At your request, I speak of Plymouth, the ancestral and native town of President Coolidge in Vermont, and of the night on which the oath as President of the United States was administered to Calvin Coolidge by his father, John C. Coolidge.⁶

A town in Vermont measures about six miles across each way. The town of Plymouth comprises a few small farms of which the nearest level parts are tillage and hay fields and the hillsides are pasturage chiefly for cows, and at times for a few sheep. Beyond the pasture lands are sugar orchards, and higher still are woodlands of birch, maple, spruce and fir.

Approaching from the south, one goes up a long, steep hill through the woods. This hill is so abrupt that many automobiles going there at the same time last Summer, they were halted on the lower level and allowed to go up only one at a time. The woods are so dense as to obscure the view, and the road is through a notch in the mountains. Because of this approach, the little hamlet of Plymouth is better known locally as The Notch. Residents speak of the Coolidge Home as up at The Notch. Passing the cemetery on a knoll to the right, the highway from the south reaches the settlement and joins another highway running to the east and to the west. In the westerly corner where the highways intersect is the country store, built in later years as a larger extension to the little house which

used to be the Coolidge homestead, and from the store one may pass into the room in which Calvin Coolidge was born. The store fronts the highway coming up from the south and the little old homestead fronts the highway running west. Beyond the little homestead and on the same side [as] the highway, stands the village church, or meeting house. Just across from the meeting house, is the Coolidge house and farm. Back of the house, the farm rises to the grove of maples tapped for a hundred and fifty years by four generations of Coolidges, and beyond that are five wooded ranges, each farther and higher to view.

The Coolidge house is side to the road, that is, the eaves of the gable roof are parallel to the road. An ell, in which is the kitchen, runs east as an extension of the house, and along the ell is a veranda. From the end of the veranda a door opens into the sitting room of the main house. It was in this sitting room that the oath was administered to the President.

In going from the house to the store, one passes out over the veranda and down across the dooryard to the highway, thence past the meeting house, the original Coolidge homestead, along the side of the store and around the corner and up the wooden steps which are the full width of the store to the entrance.

In such a country hamlet all responsibilities are great, and merit is developed from generation to generation, and sometimes becomes eminent. In such a place individuals have marked traits and settled convictions and sometimes one has excellent character and uncommon power.

In the Summer of 1923, a man possessed of such merit and traits and convictions and character and power, Vice-President of the United States, had come with his wife to his father's house at The Notch.

At that time I was in the midst of a special election campaign for the United States Senate. On the night of the third of August, ⁷ I was standing with President L. L. Lane, of the New England Railway Mail Association and Editor Joseph H. Fountain on the main street of Springfield, Vermont, which is about twenty miles from Plymouth.⁸ A police officer crossed the street and informed me that the Western Union Telegraph office was calling me. "Do you know what they want?" I inquired. "Well, no," he replied, "but a rumor has come over the wire that the President is dead." "Never mind reporting on me," I said, "but please find out if that rumor is based on fact." In a short time the officer returned with the sorrowful confirmation of the report.

Captain Barney, who had seen service in France, offered to take us in his machine, and we started at once for the Coolidge home.

It was a warm, still night and when we had passed beyond the lights of the village, it was very dark, but Captain Barney drove his car at terrific speed over the country road.

Once when nearly there we made a wrong turn, and stopped to enquire the way at a house set up from the road. Fountain, by rapping, roused the man of the house, who came to the door with a keroscene [*sic*] lamp in his hand. After getting directions, Fountain said: "It may interest you to know why we are going there. The President is dead, and Calvin Coolidge is President of the United States." The man uttered the one word of exclamation: "What!" We sped on, and until a turn shut out the vision, we could see the half clad man still holding the lamp above his head as in a doorway of the night.

As we turned the corner by thre [*sic*] store, lights in the windows of the Coolidge home told us that the household had been informed. Someone had been reached by telephone at Bridgewater and taken the message down on a piece of paper and brought it by automobile. At times for thirteen years I had called to see Colonel Coolidge since we sat together in the Vermont Senate. He met me that night on the veranda, and as we clasped hands neither of us spoke. Calvin Coolidge was standing by the table in the centre of the sitting room holding in his hand the message. He took me by the hand, and said scarcely [*sic*] above a whisper: "This is serious, isn't it?" Everything was suppressed and quiet. There was no excitement and the only natural act seemed to be to stand still and not speak.

After a while, we heard the sound of approaching automobiles, and I called Calvin Coolidge's attention to the fact that Lane was there, that as a railway mail service man he carried a revolver, and I asked if Lane should keep the room clear. "Yes, don't let anyone in:" he answered. He then asked me if I knew the prescribed form of oath to be taken by the President. I suggested that it was in the Constitution of The United States and I asked Col. Coolidge if he did not have the Revised Statutes of Vermont which included the Federal Constitution. He took down from the secretary and handed me the statutes. I turned to the constitution and the oath and laid the book on the table for Calvin Coolidge to read it. He read it, taking considerable time and still standing as at first. He then turned to me and said quietly: "Do you think my father, as Notary Public, has authority to administer the oath to me?" I asked: "Do you want him to do it?" He answered: "Yes." I said: "If you want him to do it, I would have him. If there is any irregularity in it, that could easily be remedied by having the oath administered again by some other authority." "Well, I think he has it. Get ready father:" he said abruptly. This conversation was very deliberately had, up to the last expression.

Col. Coolidge left the room. He went into the kitchen and started the heating of some water in the kettle on the stove. Calvin Coolidge started to leave the house, turned and said to me: "Will you go with me?"

“Certainly:” I replied. As we went out, I noticed that several automobiles and a number of men were in the yard, and I indicated to Lane to follow us. As we stepped out, Calvin Coolidge took my arm, and without speaking, we went to the store.

The storekeeper had been called, and Mr. Clark, Secretary to the Vice-President, had been summoned to the telephone in Washington.

Calvin Coolidge asked me to take down some information he would repeat to me as he received it, which I did with a pencil on a piece of wrapping paper. As we took our places by the telephone in a dark corner of the store, Colonel Coolidge who had also come there, took a round lamp out of a bracket on the wall and held it in his two hands above my shoulder as I wrote. That act of the venerable father seemed so remarkable that all the time I was chiefly conscious of the man seventy-eight years old, called from sleep by the unexpected message that his son was President of the United States, who did think to get the light, and who did hold it some minutes, high up and poised to flame without a flicker.

As we left the store, Calvin Coolidge requested Lane to stay and answer the telephone if there was another call. Lane is my intimate friend and I knew how disappointed he was at that direction, and more than that, I preferred to have him go with us as a matter of decent precaution. I wanted to tell Calvin Coolidge my thought, and I wanted to do it courteously, and I couldn't think how to do it, or even how to address him. I did not want to say Mr. President before the oath had been administered, nor did I want to say Mr. Vice-President under the conditions. I had to act quickly, so I merely touched his arm and asked: “Hadn't Lane better go with us?” To which he replied: “Yes.” We were then at the foot of the steps, and when Col. Coolidge and Lane had come down to us, we wal[k]ed back, went through quite a group of men in the yard, and entered the house.

Mrs. Coolidge, Mr. Geisser, Clerk to the Vice-President, and Mr. Fountain were sitting in the room.⁹ We three entered the room, making six in all. That was the whole number who were in the room when the oath was administered. There was a screen door, which Lane hasped on the inside, leaving the outer door open.

As we came into the room, Calvin Coolidge sat down for the first time that night, in a chair near Mrs. Coolidge. Then I heard him say: “I guess your water is hot, father.” We sat there quietly for some time, during which it was apparent that Mrs. Coolidge was speaking to her husband about the advisability of not hurrying with the oath, but he indicated that he wanted no delay, and I knew from the message he had received from Washington that immediate action seemed best to others. Calvin Coolidge took the Statutes and copied the oath with a pencil on a piece of paper. When



*Arthur I. Keller portrayed the swearing-in ceremony at the Coolidge home-
stead in this painting, commissioned by the Vermont legislature in 1923
or 1924. Calvin Coolidge, second from left, is between his wife, Grace,
and his father, Colonel John C. Coolidge. To the right and in the back-
ground (order uncertain) are Joe H. Fountain and Edwin Geisser. Con-
gressman Porter H. Dale is on the right. Courtesy of Plymouth Notch
Historic District, Vermont Division for Historic Preservation.*

Col. Coolidge came back to the room, he had shaven and put on his collar and tie. He walked to the table where he and his son stood conversing in a low tone for a few minutes. Col. Coolidge took the paper on which his son had transcribed the oath, and we all stood up. Calvin Coolidge stood by the corner of the table facing his father, Mrs. Coolidge by her husband, and I on the opposite side the table, and Fountain and Geisser by the tall sheetiron stove beyond Col. Coolidge and Lane by the screen door. Colonel Coolidge did not raise his hand, as it has been reported he did, but Calvin Coolidge raised his right hand. Father Coolidge adjusted his glasses, then read slowly and distinctly: "I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of the President of the United States." The son repeated the words spoken by his father. The father read again: "And will to the best of my ability preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States." Again the son repeated the words uttered by his father. That concludes the oath as written. There was a pause, then Calvin Coolidge said: "So help me God." As he lowered his hand it rested on his mother's Bible.

It was finished. A scene the like of which you may not find in all history. In the mountain notch where prevails the ancestral influence of generations of righteous men and saintly women; at night among the hills from whence cometh the strength for which men have praised God since ancient days, a venerable father had sworn his son by the oath which made him Chief Executive of the greatest nation of the world.

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Claude M. Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge: The Man from Vermont* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1940), 307-311; Vest Orton, *Guide Book and History of the President Calvin Coolidge Home at Plymouth Notch, Vermont* (Montpelier: Vermont Historic Sites Commission, 1957); Vest Orton, *Calvin Coolidge's Unique Vermont Inauguration* (Rutland, Vt.: Tuttle, 1960); William Allen White, *A Puritan in Babylon: The Story of Calvin Coolidge* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 242-243.

² Calvin Coolidge, *The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge* (New York: Cosmopolitan, 1929), 173-177; Joe H. Fountain, *Homestead Inaugural* (St. Albans, Vt.: North Country Press, 1950).

³ A copy of this letter, dated February 16, 1931, was found with the manuscripts in 1979 at the Dale homestead in Island Pond.

⁴ Fountain, *Homestead Inaugural*.

⁵ Orton, *Guide Book*; Orton, *Coolidge's Unique Vermont Inauguration*.

⁶ Subsequent drafts omit the first six words of this paragraph and make appropriate grammatical adjustments.

⁷ Although the original text reads "the third of August," it was actually before midnight at this point, thus it was still the second of August.

⁸ In the phrase "on the main street of Springfield, Vermont," the words "on the" are smudged and difficult to decipher. The page with this phrase is missing in the third draft, but the fourth draft provides a clear reading of the words; we relied on this draft for interpretation of the exact wording.

⁹ "Mrs. Coolidge" refers to Grace Coolidge, Calvin's wife. Dale spells Geisser's name with two s's in his drafts, although it appears with only one in other sources.