

The Mystery of Zachary Taylor's Death

President Zachary Taylor died on July 9, 1850 in Washington, D.C. From the very first, the circumstances of his death were questioned. Was he poisoned or did he die from something else? Since his death was sudden, speculation at the time questioned whether the President was poisoned during the time of the controversy surrounding the passage of the Compromise of 1850. Others believed he died from eating a bowl of cherries and milk after becoming overheated on a hot, humid Washington day. He had just dedicated the Washington Monument and as was typical in the 1850s, he had worn a wool suit in spite of the sweltering Washington, D.C. temperature. The mystery remained until June 17, 1991. Would he have been our first President ever assassinated?

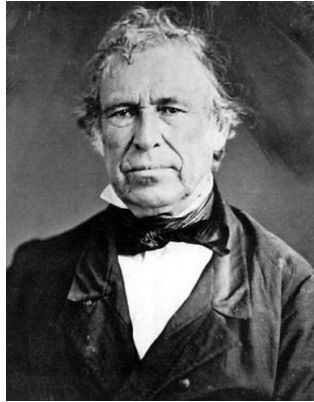
From Legends of America, based on historic text by Hartwell James, 1899:

“As the Compromise of 1850 was being debated, Taylor died of mysterious causes on July 9, 1850. After attending a July 4th celebration at the Washington Monument, he became ill [five hours after eating a bowl of cherries and milk] and died five days later. Shortly before his death, he called his wife to him and asked her not to weep, saying: “I have always done my duty, I am ready to die. My only regret is for the friends I leave behind me.” The cause of death was listed as cholera morbus as the cholera bacteria occurred frequently during the summer months in Washington D.C. He was buried at the Taylor Family plot in Louisville, Kentucky.

“In the 1920s, the Taylor family initiated efforts to turn the Taylor Family burial grounds into a national cemetery. The State of Kentucky donated two pieces of land for the project, turning the half-acre Taylor family cemetery into 16 acres. Then known as the Zachary Taylor National Cemetery, his wife (who died in 1852) remained, until a Taylor mausoleum was commissioned and they were moved on May 6, 1926.

“Years later, in the 1980s, college professor and author Clara Rising theorized that Taylor was murdered by poison and was able to convince Taylor's closest living relative [Helen Marie Taylor of Orange County, Virginia] and the Coroner of Jefferson County, Kentucky, to order an exhumation. On June 17, 1991, Taylor's remains were exhumed and transported to the Office of the Kentucky Chief Medical Examiner, studies were conducted on hair, fingernail and tissue samples. Though assassination theories had lingered for years, it was concluded that Taylor did, in fact, die of acute gastroenteritis, probably due to the things he had eaten in the unhealthy climate of Washington, with its open sewers and flies.”¹

¹ Author Unknown (based on a text by Hartwell James). “Zachary Taylor - Distinguished General & President.” *Legends of America*, Google, Accessed June 24, 2021, <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/ah-zacharytaylor/>



Zachary Taylor about 1850, the year of his death²

An article from the Louisville [Kentucky] *Courier-Journal*, in a 2014 newspaper report by author Holly Holland that explained President Taylor's death and an autopsy that solved the mystery:

Look Back Death of Zachary Taylor solved by Holly Holland

"It won't be murder she wrote when Florida author Clara Rising finishes her book about President Zachary Taylor, but she might have to include a chapter based on new discoveries about the 12th president's apparent teeth-grinding habit.

"A team of Kentucky medical examiners concluded yesterday that Taylor was not poisoned with arsenic or other compounds, as Rising and others have suggested, laying to rest speculation that he was the first president assassinated. Dr. George Nichols, Kentucky's chief medical examiner, told a packed news conference in the Jefferson County Fiscal Court room that the small amounts of arsenic found in Taylor's tissues 'were consistent with being a human being on the planet Earth,' where arsenic is the 50th most common element. He said Taylor also was not killed by mercury, lead or other toxic metals -- such as were used in some medicines prescribed by Taylor's doctors.

"Taylor's tissue samples were examined at medical labs in Frankfort, Louisville, and at the nation's largest research reactor in Oak Ridge, Tenn.

"Nichols said Taylor's tissue samples had arsenic present in levels that ranged up to two micrograms per gram of tissue, or about two parts per million. He said a level at least 200 times higher would have had to be present to conclude that Taylor was poisoned.

² *Ibid.*, photographer unknown.

“ ‘It’s not borderline,’ Nichols said. ‘He was not poisoned.’

“Asked if he was satisfied with Taylor’s reported cause of death -- severe gastroenteritis -- Nichols said, “that’s about as definitive as the flu.” He said death could have resulted from a ‘myriad’ of common illnesses compounded by poor medical treatment.

“But Nichols said Taylor’s symptoms were consistent with acute arsenic poisoning, and ‘it was proper for us to perform the examination.’

“Nichols and Dr. Richard Greathouse, the Jefferson County coroner who approved the exhumation of Taylor’s body last week, said it was not possible to determine exactly what killed Taylor, only that it wasn’t poison. Greathouse said Taylor’s body had decomposed too far to do a full autopsy.

“ ‘He would have had to have some organs or more tissue present,’ Greathouse said.

“Medical examiners found no organs or skin on Taylor. They did find bone; some eyebrow, scalp and hair; and small amounts of soft tissue on each thigh and where his right kidney was located.

“They also found an unusually good set of teeth for a 65-year-old man living in pre-fluoride days.

“Dr. Mark Bernstein, a forensic odontologist at the University of Louisville, said Taylor had ‘rounded, straight arches’ and almost no gum disease. However, Bernstein found that Taylor had several abscesses that probably ‘caused severe and sporadic pain in his life.’

“ ‘Taylor’s front teeth had been worn down considerably,’ Bernstein said, indicating that the president might have been a tooth grinder.

“ ‘In general, the president’s teeth were in good repair and, I might add, better than mine,’ Bernstein said.

“Although reporters seemed disappointed by the results, Helene Rufty said she was ‘relieved’ that Taylor wasn’t murdered. Rufty, 29, Taylor’s great- great-great-great granddaughter from Winston-Salem, N.C. was the only Taylor descendant who attended the news conference. [Helen Marie Taylor of Orange, President Taylor’s closest living relative, had to give permission for the autopsy to occur and was present during it.]

“Although she believes medical examiners had good cause to exhume Taylor’s body, Rufty said she was glad that the results indicated he was ‘allowed to live out his life to the fullest without being cut short.’

“Rufty said family members ‘haven’t been waiting with baited breath’ for the results, but they were very interested in resolving the controversy over Taylor’s death.

“Helen Marie Taylor, a...relative who lives in the Taylor ancestral home in Orange, Va, said she was ‘very pleased’ with the outcome.

“ ‘We don’t want or need another president with that kind of tragic and premature end,’ she said.

“ ‘Don't you think it's good to have the air cleared?’

“The real reason for Taylor's demise has always been a mystery. After attending a dedication to the Washington Monument on July 4, 1850, Taylor returned to the White House hungry for a snack.

“He ate some raw vegetables and fruit -- probably cherries -- and drank several glasses of iced milk and water. Soon after he complained of severe stomach cramps. Over the next four days, he became violently ill with a high fever, chest pains, diarrhea, vomiting and dehydration.

“Taylor died on July 9 despite -- or because of -- ingesting prescribed doses of opium, quinine and calomel, a mercury compound.

“After reading descriptions of his death during her research on Taylor, Rising became convinced that he had been poisoned. She suggested that Taylor could have been murdered by Southern secessionists because he was trying to block the expansion of slavery into western territories.

“In a telephone interview yesterday, Rising said ‘we have the truth,’ and she's not sorry she prompted the investigation.

“ ‘I still feel that this doesn't change the fact that his political enemies were delighted at his removal. Whether they did him in or not, they certainly celebrated’ after his death, she said.

“Rising said she plans to continue writing a ‘historical whodunit’ about Taylor's death, but was not using the exhumation as a publicity stunt.

“ ‘I was naive enough to think I could do this low-key,’ she said. The media ‘came to me. I didn't come to them.’

“Dr. William Maples, a University of Florida forensic anthropologist whom Rising turned to for advice, also said the investigation was necessary and proper.

“Arsenic was reasonably suspected and ‘we have the tests to prove it and we should,’ he said. ‘If the possibility even remotely exists that one of our presidents was murdered, it is something that would have changed history...’

“Maples, who was present at last week's exhumation, said he was pleased that the findings were conclusive. He also said he was ‘rather relieved because maybe now the phone calls will stop.

“ ‘And I'm not going to have to go to Hollywood to make a mini-series.’³

³ Holland, Holly. “Look back, Death of Zachary Taylor solved.” [Louisville] *Courier-Journal*, July 8, 2014, <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/history/river-city-retro/2014/07/08/zachary-taylor-death-solved/12363933/> Accessed June 27, 2021.

The Tomb of Zachary Taylor



--Photo by David R Lutman⁴

⁴ Lutman, David R. "Tomb of Zachary Taylor." [Louisville] *Courier-Journal*, November 25, 2013, <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/history/river-city-retro/2014/07/08/zachary-taylor-death-solved/12363933/>, Accessed June 27, 2021.