Alexandria Times

Denise Dunbar
Publisher & Executive Editor
ddunbar@alextimes.com

Margaret Stevens
Director of Sales & Marketing
mstevens@alextimes.com

Caitlyn Meisner
Editor
cmeisner@alextimes.com

Sydney Kodama
Reporter/Photographer
skodama@alextimes.com

Mathylda Dulian
Photo Intern
mdulian@alextimes.com

Ella Mitchell
Reporting Intern
emitchell@alextimes.com

SALES & MARKETING

Margaret Stevens
mstevens@alextimes.com

Marty DeVine
mdevine@alextimes.com

Patrice V. Culligan
pculligan@alextimes.com

Stephanie Santiago
ssantiago@alextimes.com

Tina Franco
Business Operations Manager
tfranco@alextimes.com

DIRECTOR OF ART & DESIGN

Jessica Kim
graphics@alextimes.com

CONTRIBUTORS

Gayle Converse
Kim Davis
Mark Eaton
Mark Edelman
Thompson Eskew
Kim Gilliam
Jim McGrath
Erin Shackelford
Hannah Shiblaq
Kathryn Ziemer

ACM BOARD

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can be mailed to:
Alexandria Times
908 King Street, Suite 200
Alexandria, VA 22314

Alexandria Community Media

A President's Day collapse

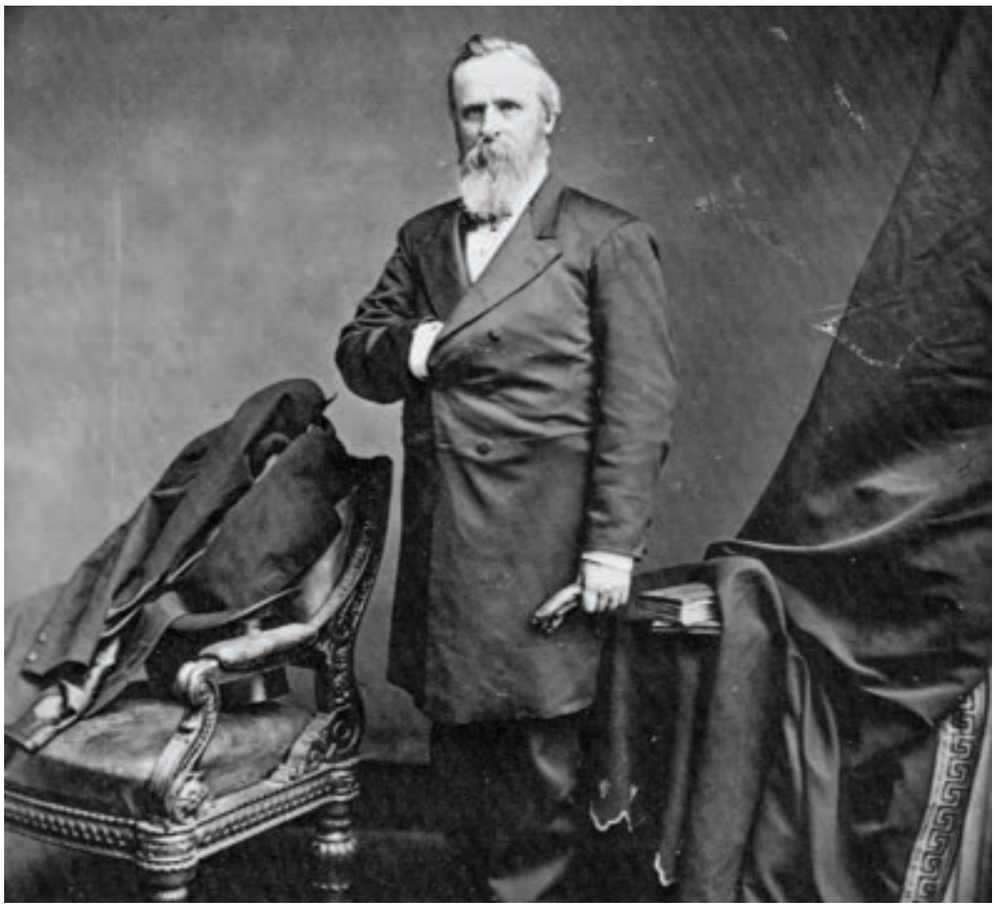
Alexandria's proximity to Washington, D.C. means that presidents have come to our city regularly. George Washington and Gerald Ford lived in Alexandria before and after being sworn into our nation's highest office. Today, we highlight the day that a grandstand collapsed on a sitting president, Rutherford B. Hayes.

The Feb. 22, 1881, Baltimore Sun described the event:

"The Birthday of Washington was celebrated here by the city authorities, the civic and military associations. … The President of the United States and a number of visiting corps from abroad were the town's guests. … Only one untoward incident occurred, which was the falling of the platform on which President Hayes and one or two hundred persons sat."

The Alexandria Gazette chronicled "nobody was even severely bruised, and only a few received slight scratches." The local paper then commended Hayes, who was on a farewell tour, for a speech that was both "short, and full of common sense." The Sun claimed that Hayes joked that the collapse must have been punishment for past imperfections on his part.

Other papers, including Hayes' hometown paper, the Cleveland Plain Dealer, focused more on the platform collapse rather than the speech, with the headline "Hayes Tumbles." Truth, a New York City paper, ran with "President Hayes' Narrow Escape." It noted that while Hayes escaped injury, Virginia Sen. Robert E. Withers was injured and had to be moved to his home without participating in the rest of the celebration of Washington's Birthday.



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A grandstand collapsed on then-President Rutherford B. Hayes during Alexandria's 1881 Washington's Birthday celebration.

The next month, Hayes, who had not run for re-election, peacefully transferred power to his successor, the ill-fated James Garfield. Perhaps because of his role in ending Reconstruction, the local press was remarkably complimentary towards Hayes, despite his political party affiliation and his reputation gained as a Union officer. More recent visits to our city by American presidents have not put their physical safety in danger.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.