

Artifacts Bring Grover Cleveland's Presidency to Life for First Graders

Carol Macken

How do students as young as six years old make real-life connections to big ideas like the duties of the president? A hands-on experience with artifacts was the answer for the young historians in my first grade class.

My school is located in Caldwell, New Jersey, which has the honor of being the birthplace of President Grover Cleveland. I wanted my students to connect that legacy to their study of the presidency. I knew that first graders are kinesthetic learners who love stories. I decided to combine excellent children's literature with historical "artifacts" so that my students would develop deeper understandings. As they identified the roles and responsibilities of the presidency in general, they would see examples from the presidency of Grover Cleveland.

A Kit of Artifacts

Often, teaching kits from a museum are in the classroom only one day. I wanted some teaching tools about the Cleveland presidency (he had two terms: 1885-1889, and 1893-1897) that I could use in the classroom over several weeks. I turned to the Associated Antique Dealers of New Jersey, which provides grants for teachers to create resource kits of antiques to use in the classroom to support teaching.¹ (See **Sidebar**, Resources for Teachers: Artifacts and Presidents). With grant money from the association, I was able to assemble a resource box that included artifacts to be used in a series of lessons, each of which taught about several presi-



dential duties over the course of the unit. I bought the antiques at antique shops and on eBay for surprisingly little money (Table 1, A Kit of Historical Artifacts). Several of the items I purchased were actually from the late 1800s, and the others—although probably manufactured in later decades—would have been recognized by a person from that era as

familiar objects (such as skeleton keys), and they all had an appropriately aged look. I housed these artifacts in an antique *Grolier's Encyclopedia* wooden crate.

Duties of the President

Using the picture book, *If I Were President*, I launched the five-day unit of study about the demands and rewards



Resources for Teachers: Artifacts and Presidents

American President

millercenter.org/academic/americanpresident

This website provides in-depth information on each president and administration as reviewed by prominent scholars. It is hosted by the Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia.

Antiques Roadshow (PBS)

www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/teachers.html

This website helps teachers “integrate the study of material culture (artifacts and objects) into their teaching, using objects appraised on the television program *Antiques Roadshow*. Through questions, activities, and other resources, students take a closer look at the “things” people have used throughout history to create history — their own, their communities’, and the world’s — and gain new insights and a sense of wonder about the people and events of the past, the present, and perhaps the future.”

History Detectives (PBS)

www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives

History Detectives is a television program devoted to exploring the complexities of historical mysteries, searching out the facts, myths and conundrums that connect local folklore, family legends and interesting objects. Traditional investi-

gative techniques, modern technologies, and plenty of legwork are the tools the *History Detectives* team of experts uses to give new — and sometimes shocking — insights into our national history. The hosts of the program are a high-energy quartet of renowned experts in the world of historical investigations. Their expertise ranges from architecture, popular culture and sociology to archeology, collectibles and genealogy.

Presidential Libraries Home Page

www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/
These Presidential Libraries (which are part of the National Archives and Records Administration) promote understanding of the presidency and the American experience 1924 through the present. They preserve and provide access to historical materials, support research, and create interactive programs and exhibits that educate and inspire. Currently, there are 12 libraries, covering the presidencies of Hoover through Clinton.

The White House

www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents/

Click on the postage-stamp size picture of a president on this webpage to read “President’s Facts” or a “Full Bio.”

of the U.S. presidency.² The picture book presented an overview of the diverse duties of the president with a variety of young people imagining themselves as president. The descriptions of each presidential duty begin with the words, “If I were president ...” and go on to describe the various responsibilities as spelled out in the Constitution and by tradition and convention.

For my lessons, I wrote “in the voice of Grover Cleveland” about aspects of the presidency. I consulted with Sharon Farrell, the caretaker of the Grover Cleveland Birthplace, to ensure accuracy of the information that I used in class.³ Each entry began, “When I was president...” and told about a connection between the presidential duty described in the text and Cleveland’s experience. I then presented an artifact from the resource kit related to the duty. For example the quote from *If I Were President* reads:

If I were president, I’d promise to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States because that would be my job.

Speaking “in Cleveland’s voice,” I stated,

When I was president, I promised to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States with my hand on a Bible just like this one. The Bible I used was one my mother gave me when I left home.

Then I shared with the students an antique Bible from the 1880s and let children dramatize a presidential inauguration using the artifact.

When we reached the page in *If I Were President* that tells about the president giving the State of the Union address, with a crowd of people watching and listening, I passed around the campaign memorabilia from the election of 1893! I ended the lesson speaking “in Cleveland’s voice,” declaring that, “When I was president, I did not give a speech to Congress, I sent a letter to Congress telling about the

Table 1

A Resource Kit of Historical Artifacts for the “President Cleveland” Unit

Artifact	Teaching Objective
Cleveland campaign items, 1893	National elections
An old Bible	The oath of office
A set of keys	Art and architecture of the White House
Uniform buttons, gunpowder box	Commander in chief responsibilities
An ink well	State of the Union address
A stock certificate	Economic policy responsibilities
Article of women’s clothing	The president’s family in the limelight
Hand-written Correspondence	President’s responsibility to listen to the people
“White House” porcelain dish	The White House chef
U.S. Coins	The president approves disaster relief
A toy (steam) locomotive	Transportation for the president
Postcards of the White House	Receiving honors and awards at the White House
Family Memorabilia	The White House serves as a home



State of the Union. All over the country, people read it in newspapers. Here is an ink well like one that I used when I wrote the State of the Union letter.”

The parallel construction between the picture book text and the teacher-created text about Cleveland reinforced the information presented about both topics.

A Field Trip

On a field trip to the Grover Cleveland Birthplace, the children were eager to show off their knowledge. The budding historians also put on a play for their parents using the two parallel texts as a script and the artifacts as props. The children decorated the hallway with projects that depicted themselves as president on currency, in the White House, and on Air Force One. The young performers dressed for the presentation as if they were president. The enthusiasm generated throughout the study was summed up when the thespians concluded their show with this quote from *If I Were President*,

And who knows? Someday I just might be president of the United States! 🇺🇸

Notes

1. Associated Antique Dealers of New Jersey, www.aadnj.org.
2. Catherine Stier and Dyanne Disalvo-Ryan, *If I Were President* (Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman, 2004).
3. Grover Cleveland Birthplace, a New Jersey State Park in Caldwell, NJ, is the nation’s leading repository of Cleveland artifacts and political memorabilia. Visit www.state.nj.us/dep/parksandforests/historic/grover_cleveland/gc_home.htm.

CAROL MACKEN teaches at Lincoln Elementary School in Caldwell, New Jersey.

Grover Cleveland’s Birthplace

Grover Cleveland’s birthplace was built in 1832 as the Manse, or Pastor’s residence, for the first Presbyterian Church at Caldwell. Cleveland’s father, the Reverend Richard Falley Cleveland, was the minister here from 1834-1841. ...

Most of the first floor rooms portray the Manse as it was in 1837, the year Grover Cleveland was born. The decidedly middle-class character of the rooms reflect the day-to-day life of Reverend Richard Cleveland and his family. Among the artifacts on display from Cleveland’s early years are his cradle and original family portraits.

Contrasting sharply with the humble beginnings portrayed in these rooms, the exhibit gallery features a striking display of artifacts that reflect the financial and political success Cleveland achieved during the last quarter of the 19th century. Here, the mud slinging campaign of 1884, the public’s intense interest in his wife and children, and America’s political climate throughout his split terms of office are explored.¹

The first Democrat elected after the Civil War, Cleveland was the only president to leave the White House and return for a second term four years later. In 1886 he married 21-year-old Frances Folsom, making him the only president to be married in the White House. In his second term, Cleveland had to deal with an acute economic depression, labor unrest, and corruption in business and government.²

Notes

1. Grover Cleveland’s Birthplace, www.state.nj.us/dep/parksandforests/historic/grover_cleveland/gc_home.htm
2. www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents/gc2224.html