

Presidents

by
Mike Prero

Presidents Day is coming later this month, so...

“Presidents” should not be confused here with “Presidential.” The latter refers to Major Political covers referring to presidents, while the former refers to non-Political covers referring to such.

Some collectors only look for pictures of Presidents on covers; others take textual references, as well. As you might assume, the three most common Presidents to be seen here, are Washington, Lincoln, and Jefferson, in that order. For example, Duane Ready, P, had 526 different Lincolns as of January 2016.

Here are some facts about early Presidents that you don't normally find in the history books:

George Washington (1789-1797): Despite popular myth, his dentures weren't made of wood. They were made of hippopotamus ivory, bone, animal and human teeth, lead, brass screws and gold wire. So where did the wood theory come from? Some historians believe that Washington's fondness for dark wine stained the fractures in his false teeth, giving off the look of grainy wood.

John Adams (1797-1801): John Adams visited Shakespeare's home in Stratford-upon-Avon with Thomas Jefferson, before they hated each other's guts. While there, they chipped off a piece of one of Shakespeare's chairs as a souvenir.

Thomas Jefferson (1801-1817): Vandalizing Shakespeare's chair isn't the only chair-related Jefferson trivia: he invented the swivel chair. Something you wouldn't expect from one of the most famous politicians in American history: Jefferson hated public speaking so much that he only gave two speeches in his presidency, one per term. He also started a tradition of sending State of the Union speeches as written documents to be read at Congress by a clerk (Woodrow Wilson reinstated the practice of delivering the speech in person in 1913).

James Madison (1809-1817): Our smallest president stood at 5'4" and weighed around 100 pounds.

John Quincy Adams (1825-1829): The son of our Jefferson-hating second president, John Quincy Adams was known for skinny dipping in the Potomac River every morning. A reporter took advantage of this information and sat on his clothes until he would grant her an interview.

Andrew Jackson (1829-1837): One popular rumor is that Jackson taught his pet parrot how to curse. It was all fun and games, until the parrot had to allegedly be removed from Jackson's funeral because it wouldn't stop cursing. Jackson had a thing for taking it outside. He was involved in an estimated 100 duels, usually because someone said something negative about his wife. In 1806, he was shot in the chest during one of these duels. And in 1813, he took a bullet to the arm in a bar fight with a Senator.

Martin Van Buren (1837-1841): He had a lot of nicknames: "Sly Fox" because of his political prowess, "Little Magician" because he was only 5'6" and "Red Fox of Kinderhook" because he had reddish hair and was from a town in upstate New York called Kinderhook. But the most long-lasting nickname goes to "Old Kinderhook," which was used during his 1840 election campaign in the form of supporters carrying around signs marked OK. The abbreviation became popular around this time and we use it to this day.

William Henry Harrison (1841): During his campaign, the opposition tried to cast him as someone who'd rather "sit in his log cabin, drinking hard cider." Harrison took the criticism and made (spiked) lemonade; he handed out whiskey in bottles shaped like log cabins. Harrison gave the longest inauguration speech ever (8,445 words over 90 minutes) on a wet, cold day in 1841. He fell ill soon thereafter and died 33 days into his presidency.

John Tyler (1841-1845): After Harrison's untimely death, there was disagreement over what power Tyler had as the surviving Vice President. He managed to convince everyone that he should just become president, paving the way for the 25th Amendment, which made the line of succession official. Everyone pretty much hated him. He was expelled from his own party during his presidency, his entire cabinet (minus one person) resigned over his policies, and he was the first president who faced impeachment. One newspaper editor called him a "poor, miserable, despised imbecile" and *The New York Times* called him "the most unpopular public man that had ever held any office in the United States" in his own obituary! Upon his death, Lincoln didn't issue a mourning proclamation and flags were not placed at half-mast.

James K. Polk (1845-1849): Every party has a pooper and that pooper was Polk. He banned booze, card playing and dancing from the White House.

Zachary Taylor (1849-1850): While celebrating the Fourth of July on the grounds where the Washington Monument would later stand, Taylor snacked on a bunch of cherries and washed it all down with iced milk. Bacteria was present in either the cherries or the milk, leading to his death a few days later.

Millard Fillmore (1850-1853): Fillmore married his schoolteacher. Other than that, most historians don't really have much to say about him. Even the White House website calls him "an uninspiring man."

Franklin Pierce (1853-1857): Another president most people don't remember, Pierce was pretty unpopular while in office, leading to his own party refusing to renominate him. His reply to being cast out: "There is nothing left to do but get drunk." □ His penchant for the hooch might explain his alleged arrest for running over an old lady with his horse.

James Buchanan (1857-1861): Buchanan holds the record of being the only bachelor to be president, although he may not have been truly single. There was a lot of speculation about his sexuality and close rela-

tionship with Alabama Senator William Rufus King. The two lived together for more than 10 years, despite being rich enough to have their own homes. Andrew Jackson called them "Miss Nancy and Aunt Fancy" behind their backs. When King left for France in 1844, Buchanan wrote: "I am now 'solitary and alone,' having no companion in the house with me. I have gone a wooing several gentlemen, but have not succeeded with any one of them."

Abraham Lincoln (1861-1865): In addition to being a tall drink of water, Lincoln also served tall drinks as a bartender. He was also a really good wrestler. He won all but one of approximately 300 matches.

Andrew Johnson (1865-1869): The first president to be impeached, Johnson didn't have an easy time in childhood either. After his father died, his mother sent him and his brother out as indentured servants to a tailor. Johnson and his brother ran away two years later. The tailor put out a reward of \$10 for their capture, but they were never apprehended. Using what he learned during his time with the tailor, he made all of his own suits as president.

Ulysses S. Grant (1869-1877): Grant was supposed to be in Lincoln's theater box on the night of his assassination, but changed plans at the last minute. He regretted not being there for the rest of his life because he believed he could have stopped it from happening. He also couldn't stand the sight of blood, which is ironic considering his Civil War history. And he dismantled the Ku Klux Klan during his presidency (they unfortunately regrouped decades later).

Rutherford B. Hayes (1877-1881): The victor of one of the most disputed elections ever; he lost the popular vote by 250,000, but eked out an electoral college win by a single vote, earning him the nicknames "Rutherfraud" and "His Fraudulency." Was also called "Granny Hayes" because he didn't drink, smoke or gamble.

James A. Garfield (1881): Garfield was ambidextrous and could write in Greek with one hand and in Latin with the other at the same time! He was shot a few months into his presidency by an assassin and died 11 weeks later. Doctors tried using a newly invented metal detector by Andrew Graham Bell to locate the bullet, but the metal bedsprings kept messing up the results, leading the doctors to cut in the wrong places. On top of this, the doctors also introduced bacteria into Garfield's body with their unsterilized, prying fingers.

Chester A. Arthur (1881-1885): Arthur wanted the White House completely redecorated, but needed money to pay for all the new furniture. His solution: sell off 24 wagon loads of historical relics, including a pair of Lincoln's pants and one of John Quincy Adams' hats. The redecoration wasn't the only luxury he took; he also owned elaborate clothing, including 80 different pairs of pants, earning him the nickname "Elegant Arthur."

Grover Cleveland (1885-1889): Upon the death of his law partner, Cleveland became the legal guardian to his friend's 11-year-old orphaned daughter. 10 years later, they were married at the White House, making her the youngest First Lady ever at the age of 21 and making him the Woody Allen of the 19th century.

Benjamin Harrison (1889-1893): The grandson of President William Henry Harrison, he was called the "human iceberg" by some for how stiff he was with people. Maybe people misread anxiety for stiffness though: He was the first president to have electricity in the White House and was so scared of being electrocuted that he refused to touch the light switches and was known to go to bed with all the lights on.

[<https://www.kqed.org/pop/20516/weird-facts-you-never-knew-about-the-u-s-presidents>]