

“What Independence Day Meant to Grover Cleveland?”

On July 2, 1776, members of the Continental Congress voted in Philadelphia to declare independence from the British crown. Two days later, July 4 the Continental Congress formally adopted the Declaration of Independence and since that’s the day printed in broad strokes on the historic document, it is the day that we celebrate the birth of the United States of America.

John Adams believed the event would be celebrated in the annals of American history. In a letter to his wife and confidante Abigail, he predicted that Independence Day, “will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forever more.”¹

In my brief paper I will explore, *What Independence Day meant to Grover Cleveland?* who was twice president of the United States of America.

But before that I will discuss, *how did Grover Cleveland celebrate Independence Day?* In his elder years, a reporter once asked Grover Cleveland how he spent the holiday as a boy. His response, however, did not make great copy, as he only recalled, “They were all odd and exciting. I can not very well discriminate.”² But surely he would have seen parades and fireworks at local patriotic celebrations. An account from a biography tells the story of an enthusiastic young Grover. One year when he was a boy in Fayetteville, New York, Grover and his friends collected iron ore and brought it to a foundry in nearby Manlius to melt down for a cannon to use in a Fourth of July celebration. When stuck for payment, young Cleveland, his

hagiographic biographer wrote, “seemed to be a lad of resources, soon found a way out of the difficulty” and proposed that “he and his fellow patriots would drag up another load of iron to square up accounts.”³

After he entered the world of politics, the holiday became more eventful. July 4 was a day of patriotic festivities with politicians often featured guests of honor. In 1882, along with twenty-first president Chester Arthur, Grover Cleveland, then mayor of Buffalo, laid the cornerstone at Soldiers and Sailors Monument in Lafayette Square.⁴ On July 4, 1884, now as Governor of New York, he was back in Buffalo to attend the dedication of the completed Soldiers and Sailors Monument.⁵

As president he typically such ceremonious events in favor of working. His first July 4 in the White House in 1885, he spent the day working and received no visitors. One notable exception occurred on July 4, 1896, when President Cleveland was in Popes Creek, Virginia to dedicate a fifty-foot granite obelisk that had been erected at the birthplace of George Washington.⁶ At the time the planners believed the obelisk was at the precise location where Washington was born. Later they would learn it was a few hundred feet off.⁷ But that is a story for another time.

More than *how* he spent the day, perhaps it is more important to learn of what July 4 *meant* to Grover Cleveland and what he felt it should mean to Americans. Fortunately for us, he wrote a series of fascinating letters with words that still resonate today.

At a time when graft and corruption was rampant in the Gilded Age, Grover Cleveland made his name in politics as an honest reformer who campaigned on the slogan, “A public office is a public trust.” Perhaps the organization most emblematic of the scandalous era was the powerful Tammany Hall New York political machine, once led by the poster-boy of politics-for-

profit, William M. “Boss” Tweed. But despite the tensions between the two, over the years Tammany Hall leaders invited President Grover Cleveland to their annual July 4 events. Cleveland inevitably and politely declined, but his responses, which surely, he knew would be published, are informative.

In 1885, in his cordial decline, he shared what he felt his responsibilities were as president, his thoughts on party politics, and how he felt Americans should recognize the day. He wrote,

I regret a pressure of official duties and engagements prevent my acceptance of this kind invitation. Of the purposes sought to be accomplished by the people in their choice of a chief magistrate I am seriously mindful. In order that the hopes of the people will be fully realized every member of the party in power should yield a cordial support to all efforts on the part of the administration to restore a pure free and just government. While the coming celebration will revive and keep alive the memory of patriotic devotion and sacrifice for the sake of free institutions. . . . No occasion is more propitious for a renewal of our pledges to a true and progressive Democracy so essential to our country’s safety and prosperity

Yours very truly, Grover Cleveland.⁸

In 1887, once again Grover Cleveland declined, and his brief letter was read to the crowd gathered that day. “I hope the significance of [Independence Day] will preeminently exist in a clear and emphatic announcement of the principles and belief which accord with the best and most thoughtful opinions of our countrymen.” The reading was met with boos and hisses, but, I suspect, Grover Cleveland would have been fine with that!⁹

In 1893, a persistent Tammany Hall once again invited President Cleveland to their celebration in New York City. His customary decline offered his most direct rebuke of their brand of Gilded Age politics as well as a statement on economic disparities, and his commitment to honest government.

We should lose the most important lesson of the day we celebrate if we forget that the labor and diligence of those entrusted with self-government must be unremitting and always patriotic. There has never been a time when our countrymen should be more soberly reminded that they can not safely delegate their duties and obligation of citizenship nor neglect to cultivate their individual and personal interest in public affairs. If those who now celebrate the anniversary of American independence guard the sordid struggle for unearned wealth that stifles patriotism, if they exact from public servants the strictest of accountability in the performance of public duties, if they hold fast to the American ideas that work is honorable and economy is virtue, if they insist that there should be honesty and cleanliness in politics and if they refuse to encourage expedients that endanger foreign or national finances, those who follow us will joyously celebrate the day in centuries yet to come.

Yours very truly, Grover Cleveland.”¹⁰

Out of office, Grover Cleveland’s work done, he could finally relax. In 1904 he spent the afternoon fishing at his Cape Cod home in Buzzards Bay.¹¹ So, as you’re enjoying this July 4, perhaps fishing like Grover Cleveland or enjoying food, fun fireworks with friends and family, let me leave you with one more thought from Grover Cleveland from his 1893 letter,

This is the day which all true Americans ought to celebrate as often as it occurs. The occasion should revive & stimulate all ennobling and patriotic sentiments which are essential to the safety and perpetuity of the American institutions. At such times it is fitting that we rejoice in the dauntless purpose and constant devotion that have thus far marked out the way of our nation.

Happy Independence Day!

Yours very truly, Louis L. Picone

About the paper:

The research for this paper was undertaken as part of the July 4, 2020 Grover Cleveland Birthplace Memorial Association virtual July 4 celebration on July 4, 2020. The video can be found at and a <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84mdk3jFanc>. A full list of virtual events can be found at <http://presidentcleveland.org/virtual-july-4th-2020>.

About the author:

Louis L. Picone is the award-winning author of *The President Is Dead! The Extraordinary Stories of the Presidential Deaths, Final Days, Burials, and Beyond* and *Where the Presidents Were Born: The History & Preservation of the Presidential Birthplaces* and the upcoming *Grant's Tomb: The Epic Death of Ulysses S. Grant and the Making of an American Pantheon*. He holds a Masters in History and also teaches American history at William Paterson

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Notes

¹ Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 3 July 1776, "Had a Declaration..." [electronic edition]. Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive. Massachusetts Historical Society, accessed June 30, 2020, <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams>.

² "My Fourths are all Exciting," *Albuquerque Citizen*, July 4, 1906.

³ Robert McNutt McElroy, *Grover Cleveland, the Man and the Statesman, An Authorized Biography* Volume 1, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1923), 8.

⁴ "The Fourth," *Buffalo Commercial*, July 5, 1882.

⁵ Drew C. Boyle "Public Art and Patronage: A Collective Study of Four of Buffalo, New York's Early Monuments, 1882-1907," State University of New York College at Buffalo - Buffalo State College. August 2018.

⁶ "Along Washington's Path," *Evening Star*. (Washington, DC), February 24, 1932.

⁷ Louis L. Picone, *Where the Presidents Were Born: The History & Preservation of the Presidential Birthplaces* (Atglen, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing, 2012), 12-13.

⁸ "Fourth Doings," *Salt Lake Herald*, July 5, 1885.

⁹ "Celebration of the Nation's Birthday," *Chattanooga Daily Times*, July 6, 1897.

¹⁰ "To Tammany," *Comet* (Johnson City, TN), July 6, 1893.

¹¹ "Cleveland Goes Fishing," *San Francisco Call*, July 5, 1904.