

The Honest Reformer

The Newsletter of the Grover Cleveland Birthplace Memorial Association



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New Grover Cleveland Birthplace Visitor's Center, November 6th, Framing of exterior walls complete.
(Courtesy of Sharon Farrell, Grover Cleveland Birthplace Caretaker, State of New Jersey.)

Special "Building of the Grover Cleveland Birthplace Visitor's Center" Preview Issue

The Grover Cleveland Birthplace Memorial Association is proud to announce that after many years of planning and development, the Grover Cleveland Birthplace Visitor's Center will be built this year. The contractor has been approved and the order to proceed has been given through the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Parks and Forestry. Completing a project in the works for the last 10 years, the GCBMA has been working with the State of New Jersey to build a new Visitor's Center at the Grover Cleveland Birthplace in Caldwell, N.J. Many state agencies have been involved, including the New Jersey State Historic

Preservation Office, the Department of Environmental Protection, the Division of Parks and Forestry, the NJ Department of the Treasury and the Division of Building and Construction. A planning grant awarded to the GCBMA from the N.J. Historic Trust, combined with funds provided by the GCBMA, paid for the architectural design, survey, permits, soil testing, stabilization, and other planning costs. When completed, the GCBMA will furnish and equip the center. Funding these construction expenses mixed state money with donations, membership fees, and fundraising activities.

The Visitor's Center will provide space for educational programs about Grover Cleveland and his role in American History, a gift store, additional museum displays, meeting rooms, and restrooms. It will serve as a reception area for individuals and school groups when visiting the birthplace. The circa 1832 Birthplace is the "Old Manse" of the Presbyterian Church at Caldwell.

The Visitor's Center will be a very welcome addition to New Jersey History and Tourism. First, it is a heritage tourism site which has grown from 600 to 6,000 visitors a year. Second, it will be able to serve more people with visits from school classes, senior citizens, and tourists who want to see the attraction and an example of suburban America in a historic downtown. Third, the tourists will feel safer without having to worry about crossing a street to park or to use a restroom. Fourth, the center will provide a meeting place for civic groups, historical and cultural organizations, and expanded programming for the community.

Early in the 20th century, the home was purchased by private citizens to be a museum in honor of Grover Cleveland. In the 1930's, the museum was given to the State of N.J. by the original GCBMA to maintain. Since the 1980's, the current GCBMA has served as a private non-profit corporation to help promote the Birthplace and the legacy of Cleveland in the context of N.J. History.

The construction should take about 290 days with a tentative date for the grand opening ceremony set for the spring of 2021. The historical architects are Connolly and Hickey from Cranford, N.J.

This press release is from the Grover Cleveland Birthplace Caretaker, Sharon Farrell, GCBMA President Dave Cowell, and the State of New Jersey.

The Grover Cleveland Birthplace, 207 Bloomfield Ave., Caldwell, N.J. 07006, 973-226-0001. The birthplace is closed right now for upgrades to the air filtration system, and due to the Visitor's Center construction. There are plans to open in the near future. It is normally open year round, Wednesday-Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to noon and Wednesday-Sunday from 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. It is open to the public free of charge and is closed for all State and Federal holidays. The address of the Grover Cleveland Birthplace Memorial Association is PO Box 183, Caldwell, N.J. 07006. For more information, please visit www.PresidentCleveland.org and our Facebook site - www.facebook.com/ClevelandBirthplaceAssociation. Your membership (join-renewal) form is included in this hardcopy mailing of the newsletter or visit our website www.presidentcleveland.org/membership to download this form. Questions about membership? Contact us at dcowell@drew.edu or call us at 973-886-3222.

The Building of the Visitor's Center



Above left: Nov. 10th, exterior wood sheathing applied

Above right: Nov. 13th, custom fabricated roof trusses in process of being attached

Below left: Nov. 18th, wood roof sheathing, exterior water barrier, and interior framing in process

Below right: Dec. 9th, exterior water barrier complete, interior framing in process

(Courtesy of Sharon Farrell, Grover Cleveland Birthplace Caretaker, State of New Jersey)

Grover Cleveland and the First Electric Christmas Lights in the White House

By Louis L. Picone

On Christmas Day 1894, President Grover Cleveland celebrated in the White House with his family, cabinet members and their families. The generous president gave each of his friends a “fat turkey” and for his servants he offered “substantial gifts of money,” surely welcome as the country was suffering through one of the worst economic downturns in its history. ¹ Certainly everyone had a wonderful time; counting their blessings and perhaps offering a toast for a return to prosperity the next year. While the adults socialized, the children enjoyed a “pretty little luncheon.” After the guests departed, the president sat for dinner with his family; his two daughters, his wife and her mother. They dined on fresh duck, recently killed by the president himself on a hunting trip.²

When Grover Cleveland was in office, Christmas in the White House was not the grand national event it is today, but rather, each president celebrated the holiday and decorated the Executive Mansion in their own way. Cleveland entered office in 1885 as a bachelor and while he was married in 1886, the couple did not have children during his first term and therefore did not erect a Christmas tree in the White House. But by 1894, the Clevelands were blessed with two beautiful daughters, three-year-old Ruth and one-year-old Esther (the only child of a President born in the White House), and placed a tree in the Second Floor Oval Room, located in the family quarters and then used as a parlor and library.

The small Christmas tree was of particular interest and a reporter from the Los Angeles Express extolled, "Mrs. Cleveland added the finishing touches to the tree which, while not of great proportions, was beautifully trimmed and decorated." However, the young First Lady also included a touch of modernity into the otherwise "old-fashioned" event when she replaced traditional wax candles with "tiny parti-colored electric lamps."³ Grover Cleveland is the president of many firsts. He was the first Democrat elected since the Civil War; first to be elected to non-consecutive terms, first president to be married in the White House and the first to have a child while president, and now he could add one more: This was the first time electric lights were ever hung on a Christmas tree in the White House.

By this time Christmas lights were already over a decade old as they had been invented by Thomas Edison in his Menlo Park laboratory in New Jersey in 1880. Two years later his partner at Edison's Illumination Company, Edward H. Johnson, improved the design when he "hand-wired 80 red, white and blue light bulbs and wound them around his Christmas tree."⁴

Just like many White House traditions, the Christmas tree has evolved over the years from its humble beginnings. It was his predecessor, Benjamin Harrison, who is credited with erecting the first Christmas tree for his young grandchildren in 1889. Harrison was enthusiastic about the holidays and even dressed as Santa Claus (no fake beard necessary!) for the youngsters. But while electric lights were first installed in the White House two years later, Harrison and his wife Caroline were afraid of the invention and "refused to operate [the switches] for fear of a shock."⁵ It is therefore unsurprising that the Harrisons preferred the real risk of a fire from wax candles rather than use electric Christmas tree lights. Frances, our youngest First Lady and thirty-two years junior to Caroline Harrison, apparently had no such fears and exuberantly added modern technology with classic Christmas traditions.

Today Christmas at the White House is a grand event in which the country is invited to participate either as one of the fortunate few invited guests, among the thousands who tour the White House during the holiday season, or the millions who peek inside the home virtually through online or televised events. In 2019, the White House featured an official Christmas tree in the Blue Room that towered over eighteen feet tall as well as dozens of smaller trees decorated in various themes such as a "cherished Gold Star Family Tree" and four "star-spangled trees."⁶ While the décor on the trees varies, one thing they each have in common are strings of electric Christmas lights, a tradition that started in 1894 by President Grover Cleveland and First Lady Frances Cleveland.

The author, Louis L. Picone is a Trustee on the Board of the Grover Cleveland Birthplace Memorial Association. He is the award-winning author of Grant's Tomb: The Epic Death of Ulysses S. Grant and The Making of an American Pantheon as well as 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. He holds a Masters in History and also teaches American History at William Paterson University in Wayne, New Jersey. Louis is a member of the Authors Guild, and the American Historical Association.

1 "Grover's Tree," Express (Los Angeles), December 25, 1984.

2 "Think Melania's red forest is kooky? Consider the Christmas tree once hidden in a White House closet. White House Christmas decorations through the years," Washington Post, November 27, 2018.

3 "Grover's Tree," Express (Los Angeles), December 25, 1984.

4 "Who invented electric Christmas lights?," Library of Congress, Published November 19, 2019. <https://www.loc.gov/everyday-mysteries/item/who-invented-electric-christmas-lights>.

5 "In what year was electricity installed in the White House?," The White House Historical Association, Accessed October 13, 2020. <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/questions/in-what-year-was-electricity-installed-in-the-white-house>.

6 "First Lady Melania Trump Unveils Christmas at the White House 2019," White House, Issued December 2, 2019. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/first-lady-melania-trump-unveils-christmas-white-house-2019>



Influenced by Louis Picone's research and article, GCBMA President David Cowell and Caretaker Sharon Farrell arranged this Christmas Tree display during the holiday season and Visitor's Center construction. At the display, the following is written: "Frances and Grover Cleveland, with two young daughters, resided at the White House during the 1894 Christmas Season. A table-top tree decorated by Mrs. Cleveland with 'parti-colored electric lamps' occupied the second floor Oval Room. Gifts filled the room for toddler, Ruth Cleveland, and baby sister, Esther. The sparkling tree was put on view for a short time on Christmas Day for children of Cabinet members. Christmas dinner was an intimate gathering for the President's small family, with the only added guest being the First Lady's mother. Though private, the meal was brimming with festive Christmas favorites, including duck that the President had brought in from a recent hunt".

The Grover Cleveland Birthplace: A Works Progress Administration Project

By Paul Maloney

With research provided by Louis L. Picone and the GCBMA website.

With the building of the Grover Cleveland Birthplace Visitor's Center, the public might not be aware there have been other upgrades to the Grover Cleveland Birthplace through the years. One upgrade was the restoration made as part of a New Deal, Works Progress Administration project in 1936.

Up to the WPA restoration, "the Old Manse" or parsonage of the Presbyterian Church of Caldwell was bought by private citizens in 1913 (the 76th Anniversary of Cleveland's Birth). Cleveland's father, the Rev. Richard Cleveland was the church minister who was in residence in "the Old Manse" when Cleveland was born in 1837. The original Grover Cleveland Birthplace Memorial Association had four officers and 39 trustees. (Information on the first GCBMA President John Huston Finley is available in our July 2019 newsletter issue, available on our website. Trustee Dr. Beverly W. Crifasi provided this research.) In 1933, when the Birthplace ran into financial difficulties during the Great Depression, the State of New Jersey took control. Governor A. Harry Moore appointed 20 trustees for a new Board. Edward D. Duffield was this board's first President.

In 1936, the new Board contributed \$300.00 towards \$8,040.30 of federal funds towards the WPA restoration. According to an article in the March 10, 1936 issue of the [Morning Call](#) of Paterson, the WPA employed 23 men to complete the work in three months. The work included removal and replacement of plaster, wood trim, floors, stairs, and windows. Work also included the improvement of heating and plumbing systems, the painting of the interior and exterior of the building, and improving the grounds. The article also mentioned that it is to be the only improved house of its age in Caldwell and that "Through the efforts of the association, much of the atmosphere of 1837 has been preserved in and about it". The goal was to have the restoration completely ready for the centennial of Cleveland's birth in 1937.

A website about the New Deal and the WPA provides a 1936 picture of the birthplace before the restoration, and information and pictures about other New Jersey WPA projects such as the Caldwell Post Office.

See <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/grover-cleveland-birthplace-caldwell-nj/> for a picture of the birthplace before resortations took place.

For additional reading:

"Cleveland Birthplace Restoration Started, Improvements Will Be Made as WPA Project", [The Montclair Times](#), March 13, 1936. Accessed December 18, 2020.

"Grover Cleveland Birthplace Restoration", [The Living New Deal](#), October 30, 2014. Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/grover-cleveland-birthplace-caldwell-nj/>

"Grover Cleveland: Jersey Born President", *The Herald - News (Passaic, N.J.)* June 22, 1971, Accessed December 18, 2020.

"The Association's History", Grover Cleveland Birthplace Memorial Association, Accessed December 28, 2020, <http://presidentcleveland.org/the-associations-history/>.

"To Restore Old Manse: Work on Cleveland's Birthplace to be WPA Project". *The Ridgewood Herald, (Ridgewood, N.J.)* March 13, 1936. Accessed December 18, 2020.

"WPA Is Restoring the Birthplace of Grover Cleveland", *The Morning Call (Paterson, New Jersey)*, March 10, 1936, Accessed December 18, 2020.

Welcome Dr. Frank Gerard Godlewski and Mr. Don Stevens, New Board Members

The GCBMA welcomes Dr. Frank Gerard Godlewski and Mr. Don Stevens to our Board. Dr. Godlewski brings 30+ years in Design and Gallery experience to our Board. He has served as Historic and Land Use Commissioner in Caldwell and Essex Fells and has participated in a wide variety of distinguished architectural projects around the world. Mr. Stevens has prestigious experiences in the private sector and the local community. A CPA, Mr. Stevens is presently Controller for Hotels At Home, Inc. and has worked with the local Boy Scouts and the James Caldwell High School Scholarship Committee.

We are very fortunate to have Dr. Godlewski and Mr. Stevens on our Board and are looking forward to their advice, guidance, and expertise in upcoming years.

Current Activities of the Grover Cleveland Birthplace Memorial Association

-- Throughout the pandemic and the building of the Visitor's Center, the Board of Trustees have been very busy with planning during monthly "Zoom" meetings including the November Annual Meeting.

-- The Gift Shop Committee run by Akiko Axe and Adele Meyer have been making plans for moving the shop into the new Visitor's Center. As this newsletter issue is being written, display cases are being purchased.

-- Louis Picone and Evan McLaughlin have been investigating ways the Grover Cleveland Birthplace can be designated to be a "Presidential Library". Presentations have been made at board meetings and the trustees have given their support. More details will be given in the next newsletter.

-- Dave Cowell, John Hamilton, Sharon Farrell have been meeting with representatives from the State of New Jersey, architects, and builders during regular visits to the building of the Visitor's Center. The original March 2021 date of completion could vary depending on the latest pace of the supply chain, approvals by local utilities' engineers, and code inspections, all overseen by the N.J. Dept. of the Treasury.

-- With suggestions and advice of Board Members, Paul Maloney has been arranging speakers from others in the historical community to speak at the "Zoom" Board Meetings. Board Members are looking to "brainstorm" ideas for programs and the gift shop at the new Visitor's Center. Speakers have included Hannah Gaston, Coordinator of School Programs at the Liberty Hall Museum in Union; Tom Connolly and Margaret Hickey, Historical Architects for the Visitor's Center; Jane Elisaof, Executive Director of the Montclair History Center; and coming in January, Jill Barry, Executive Director of the Morven Museum and Garden in Princeton.

-- Through the efforts of Sharon Farrell and the State of New Jersey, renovations to the front and back porches were made to the birthplace.

-- All of the Board Members are anxiously awaiting this exciting new phase of the Grover Cleveland Birthplace Visitor's Center coming in 2021: President Dr. David Cowell, Vice President Bunny Jenkins, Treasurer, Greg Cowell, Secretary Paul Maloney, Akiko Axe, Dr. Beverly W. Crifasi, Greg Crump, Roxanne Douglass, Dr. Frank Gerard Godlewski, John Hamilton, Janet Markman, Evan McLaughlin, Trevor McLaughlin, Adele Meyer, Louis L. Picone, Matt Rollins, and Don Stevens. We would like to thank all of the Board Members for their assistance and advice through the year. Special thanks to the present and past Board Members who have been involved in the building of the Visitor's Center from the beginning. Acknowledgements and Additional Thanks: Sharon Farrell, Caretaker; Jonathan Lace, Caldwell Township Council Liaison.

-- As we go from 2020 to 2021 with this new phase, our Board remembers Alice Gibson who passed away this past year. Our website has tributes to Alice from Governor Murphy, WCBS Reporter John Elliot, Brian Brodeur from Tap into TV, GCBMA President Dave Cowell, GC Caretaker Sharon Farrell, and Thomas Robertson. We miss Alice very much. See <http://presidentcleveland.org/alice-gibson-tribute/>.



Left: Margaret Hickey, AIA of Connolly and Hickey Historical Architects, LLC

Right: Michael Ensmann, Superintendent, Santorini Construction, Inc.

Special thanks to Tom Connolly and Margaret Hickey for giving permission for the conceptual drawings on the next page.



Conceptual Drawing of Visitor's Center and Carriage House, View Looking North

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Conceptual Drawing of Visitor's Center and Carriage House, View Looking Northeast

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