



**Your on the  
Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

**Presidential Places**

**Herbert Hoover: Childhood Home, Museum, and Grave**

## Presidential Places

George Washington	Birthplace
Andrew Jackson	Home and Grave
Abraham Lincoln	Home, Museum, and Tomb
Herbert Hoover	Childhood Home, Museum, and Grave
Harry Truman	Birthplace, Home, and Museum/Library
Dwight D. Eisenhower	Childhood Home and Museum
Ronald Reagan	Museum and Grave
Richard Nixon	Childhood Home, Museum, and Grave
George H.W. Bush	Museum/Library
William Clinton	Childhood Home
William Clinton	Museum/Library
George W. Bush	Museum/Library

Reflections on Visits to Presidential Places: Government Graft

Pending:

George Washington	Mount Vernon
Thomas Jefferson	Monticello
James Madison	Montpelier

And others as I travel America

## Presidential Places

Hundreds of books, movies, and television programs are available about the homes, libraries, museums, birth, and burial places of America's Presidents. I cannot hope to replicate these works, nor do I wish to. My hope is that the essays in the *Presidential Places* series offer different and humorous perspectives about several of America's revered historical places.

Many of the places we visit in this series are called *libraries*. They are unique places containing historical information about America in general and specifically about an American president during his time in office.

Here is one definition of such a library: "A repository of historical information, where many books are kept."

Here is an alternate and more accurate definition: "A repository of historical information, where many books are kept away from the public."

Here is another definition of a presidential library, "A library, whose contents are forbidden to be examined by people who paid admission to enter the library and examine its contents in the first place. Therefore, Disneyland-like exhibits are created to placate the crowd."

A fourth definition: "Thinly disguised attempt to bolster the public image of a former President."

These definitions are acceptable to those who flock to presidential places. After all, presidential places are crowded places. The visitors must be curious about White House dinner menus, presidential pins, catchy campaign slogans, first-ladies' gowns, and other artifacts of American politics. Because these places vary in how they are named, I use the words *museum* and *library* interchangeably. It appears most of the places have buildings and rooms that serve both as museums and libraries.

In each of these places I visited, I had my fill of political drivel. But of more importance, I witnessed a deep sense of pride the site creators have about these places. And time and again, I beheld the thankfulness and patriotism of American citizens who were aware, while knowing America's faults, that the country offered a better way of life than many other nations. Even with tongue in cheek, I carried away a sense of American citizens' reverence for America and for America's Presidents' contributions to this legacy.

It is my goal in *Presidential Places* to provide you with some lesser-known and humorous aspects of Americana as well as a sense of the pride and patriotism of the sites' creators and visitors.

Unless otherwise noted, the cover page depicting the face of a U.S. President is sourced from Google.

## Presidential Places Herbert Hoover: Childhood Home, Museum, and Grave

**April 13, 2005**

Poor Herbert Hoover. Like Rodney Dangerfield, he gets no respect. To sully his legacy even more, he was an eighth cousin removed from Richard Nixon. He was the opposite of Nixon in that he was incorrigible. But like Nixon, he was shy and sensitive to criticism. And like President Jimmy Carter, he was a detail man.

Several years ago, I read a couple of biographies about Hoover and came to appreciate his intelligence, integrity, and service to his country. However, like this writer, he started-off life with a moniker handicap. No offense to anyone reading this report, what were his parents thinking when they created a jingle with his name, “Herbert Hoover?”



**Figure 1. Hoover’s childhood home.**

Hoover came from humble roots. His father was blacksmith and a farm equipment salesman. Here is a photo (Figure 1) of Hoover’s childhood home at West Branch, Iowa. As the picture suggests, it is tiny. It resembles a doll house. The kitchen table in the house was smaller than a card table. There was no coffee table, or night stands by the beds...which resembled undersized cots. Today, our beds now come in queen size, king size, and over size. In TV commercials, I see beds that would take-up the entire square footage of Herbert’s living room. Lifestyles were modest back in those days.



**Figure 2. Father’s blacksmith shop.**

Hoover’s father died when the boy was six. (The blacksmith shop is also on display a couple blocks from this house, and is shown in Figure 2). And Herbert has a close shave with death at the age of two. Sick from the croup, his parents gave him up for dead. They placed pennies over his eyes and covered him with a sheet. Fortunately, an uncle came by to visit and surmised that the boy had some (barely) perceptible vital signs and revived him. Young Herbert almost left the ranks of the living before he even died.<sup>1</sup> One wonders who would have become

America’s 31<sup>st</sup> President if his uncle had not dropped by.

<sup>1</sup> Seneca the Younger, “Of Peace of Mind,” in Leonard Roy Frank, *Quotationary* (New York: Random House, 2001), 186.

His mother died two years after the death of his father. From age eight, he lived the remainder of his youth with relatives. While walking around the community surrounding Hoover's childhood home, I recalled what I had read about the man. My main memories were the "Hoover Bull Market" before the depression (He had been in office less than eight months when the Wall Street crash occurred), and his mistakes with the so-called Bonus Army. Yet he was a brilliant mining engineer and a dedicated humanitarian. He often worked at public service jobs for next to nothing.

I paid a visit to a nearby Hoover bookstore and curio shop. And down the street were several commercial establishments, which also sold Hoover memorabilia. I managed to get by with the purchase of...my all-time favorite Presidential trinket...a T-Shirt with President Hoover's face on it. Below the picture is the inspiring inscription, "Herbert Hoover, Herbert Who?" His parents named him...they asked for it.

As I walked around Hoover's childhood neighborhood, I reflected on the fact that he is likely forever to be tagged as the reason for the Great Depression that began on his watch in 1929. I disagree. He was not in control of the inflated stock market. On Black Thursday, October 24, 1929, a group of investment bankers, reacting to declining stock prices the day before, bought up huge blocks of stock, which only exacerbated the situation. But the basic causes were classic bubbles: surplus in agricultural products, which depressed farm prices, which led to decreased spending. In addition, America's stock market investors were buying stocks wildly, putting up only 25 percent of a purchase price for the margin. Like modern times, corporations (and their high-echelon leaders) were taking most of the profits from the firms, while worker wages remained stunted. In addition, it must be remembered that the Federal Reserve had been created in 1913, yet had done little to stem an impending disaster.

However, Hoover is rightly faulted (in hindsight) by failing to "grasp the enormity of the Depression."<sup>2</sup> He offered little in direct federal aid to the unemployed and not much to companies either. Hoover's stay away philosophy in government intervention took a 180 degree turn when his successor, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, came to office and essentially remade the federal government.

I found his time spent as a mining engineer in Australia, China, and Burma to be fascinating and instructive about the fiber of the man. He was an active participant in the Boxer Rebellion (anti-Boxer, of course). Later, he made a fortune in a silver mine in Burma (He was worth four million dollars in 1914). Even more, he proved to be a tireless and competent administrator of the American Relief Committee, an organization that provided assistance to Americans stranded in Europe at the beginning of World War I.

Yet, he is usually portrayed as a milk-toast President, because of his lack of asserting the federal government into the problems of the Great Depression. Roosevelt did the opposite, leading to America's present phony capitalism semi-welfare state. Who was bailed-out of the 2008 meltdown? Wall Street, large insurance companies, and the automobile industry. Meantime,

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<sup>2</sup> William A. Degregorio, *The Complete Book of the Presidents* (Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 2005), 473.

hundreds of thousands of average citizens lost their homes because of outright fraud on the part of lending institutions.

Hoover had a laissez-faire approach. Perhaps he was a closet *creative destruction* proponent. Not so today. The Federal Reserve is quite aggressive in rewarding borrowers and penalizing savers with its near-zero interest rates.

But that is another story for another time. For now, if you are traveling on Interstate 80 and are approaching Cedar Rapids from the east, take exit 254 to visit Hoover's childhood home, his father's blacksmith shop, the Hoover museum and library (where, once again, you will encounter no books that you will be allowed to read), and yes!, a bookstore. Figure 3 shows the front of the museum and library (a) and the gravesites of the President and his wife, Lou Henry (b).<sup>3</sup>



Figure 3(a): Museum and library; (b) Gravesites of President Hoover and wife.

### Quotes to Ponder

As you might expect, President Hoover is not noted for his witticism or profound thoughts. He was an average student, but did manage an A.B. in Geology from Stanford University, where he was the “youngest (17) in Stanford’s first class of 1891.”<sup>4</sup> Later in life, he offered these thoughts about war.

War is a losing business, a financial loss, a loss of life and an economic generation. ...It has but few compensations and of them we must make the most. Its greatest compensation lies in the possibility that we may instill [in] our people unselfishness.<sup>5</sup>

Hoover uttered these statements in 1917. The loss of life from World War I ran into nine million combatants and seven million civilians. (Estimates vary. It was difficult to keep score.)

<sup>3</sup> The biography of Ms. Hoover is an interesting story unto itself. She was with her husband during the Boxer Rebellion. She became quite articulate in Chinese (having taken one course in the Chinese language, I can attest to the difficulty of learning it).

<sup>4</sup> David Burner, *Herbert Hoover: A Public Life* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 256, in William A. Degregorio, 476.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 465.

In America, the citizenry joined together for the common cause. The long-term financial future of many companies was enhanced, especially those who were in the armament industry.

Hoover also said, "True liberalism is found not in striving to spread democracy but in striving to set bounds to it."<sup>6</sup> I find this observation especially prophetic as 21<sup>st</sup> century's America's liberal enclave increasingly places bounds on free speech. College campuses are beginning to resemble satiric montages of *1984* and *Brave New World*.

### **"Libraries"**

I have been making fun of Presidential "Libraries" in these reports, having a joke about the absence of books (actually, primary source material) in the public areas of these libraries. The truth is, I favor the approach taken by the newer libraries. With rare exceptions, Joe and Josephine Citizen have little interest in the minutiae of the minutes of a Cabinet meeting, or the telephone conversations between a President and an economist about Fed Funds and interest rates.

I suspect a Presidential library that is a "place where books are kept" will attract only scholars and other cerebral folks. For myself, I am past the point in my life where I want to read detailed descriptions about national budgets and White House menus. Just give me some colorful displays and maybe a hologram image or two. I'll pay my admission and be thankful to someone who takes the time and effort to create interesting placeboes to help me pass my passing days.

While I was watching a TV program about the new Abraham Lincoln Presidential *Museum* (not library), a spokesperson made these comments about potential visitors, "We want to get them in the gut as well as the cranium." He also said. "The point (of this museum) is to feel the history." Points well taken, and I can hardly wait to see the new Lincoln museum. I hope it has a curio store, with racks upon racks of T-shirts.

Your on the Street Reporter

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<sup>6</sup> Anne Emery, *American Friend: Herbert Hoover*, (Rand McNally, Chicago, 1967), 215. Secondary source: William A. Degregorio, *ibid.*

## Post Script

With some of the essays on Blog.UylessBlack.com, Bob Dylan is brought into the story. I am advised that I must be careful not to exploit Mr. Dylan's fame (for my lack-thereof) to make a financial gain. As I am making no money from this work, I rest my case that I am promoting Bob's buck, and not mine.

"Hello Bob, I'm doing Herbert Hoover today. ...Not much verse to borrow from staid Herbert. I thought you were mostly into borrowing from dead Civil War poets, those with lilt to their rhythm of discourse."

Bob, "Ah, still waters run deep. Rhythm can run deep, even for shallow subjects. Here's an example of poor Herbert Hoover's life and name:"

Bob fires up his guitar:  
Strum, strum, strum... 

There's a bore who's going 'rond.  
He's not allowed on this playground. He's  
Herbert Hoover!  
Herbert Hoover!

His name fits his description,  
It will be on his inscription:  
Herbert Hoover!  
Herbert Hoover!

He will never count for much,  
'Cause his name is such a crutch.  
That's Herbert Hoover!

There was Horatio Alger,  
And then Ivan who struck fear...but  
Herbert Hoover?

As for Presidential fare,  
That's like walking on the air,  
with Herbert Hoover.  


"Well done Bob. Pithy for sure, and a reflection of what many people think of him."

"See you the next time you need some angst."