

Collecting The Presidents

by Jeff Figler
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*Hail to the Chief we have chosen for the nation,
Hail to the Chief!*

Yes, that's the beginning of the song written by James Sanderson for the stage adaptation of Sir Walter Scott's poem *The Lady of the Lake*. In 1954 the Department of Defense officially designated the music as the entrance song of the President. The tune will soon be heard again when a new President of the United States is ushered in, whether it is John McCain or Barack Obama.

However, as the 2008 election draws near, collectors of political memorabilia are already in high gear. Political memorabilia are always popular, and items from any of the Presidential candidates are in demand. In fact, even items pertaining to also-rans can become treasures.

For a beginning political memorabilia collector, there is a tremendous amount of material to choose from, and you should select a certain President, campaign, or period to concentrate on.



The most popular form of political memorabilia are pins and buttons.

Which President's memorabilia are the toughest to obtain, and the most desirable? Serious collectors know the answer is William Henry Harrison.

Harrison was the ninth president, but he served in office for only 30 days, starting on March 4, 1841. During his inaugural address, he chose not to wear a topcoat. His speech lasted well beyond two hours, and without wearing a topcoat, he is believed to have caught a cold in the frigid Washington weather that led to a fatal case of pneumonia. Harrison became the first President to die in office.

Only 14 pieces with Harrison's signature are known to exist. Most are in public offices or museums, but a few remain in the hands of private collectors. If you can get your hands on a William Henry Harrison Presidential piece, the chances are you will have trouble paying for it. Market value is well over \$100,000 for such pieces and steadily climbing. Political collectors usually have to settle for a document or letter signed by Harrison when he was not yet the country's commander-in-chief. In case you are curious, James Garfield served the second shortest time as president, a grand total of six months in 1881, before his assassination.

Through the years, the most popular form of political memorabilia have been pins and buttons made from metal disks. There are other types of political items, such as coins, badges, ribbons, bumper stickers, sheet music, ceramic plates, watches, money clips, cards, and even puppets and dolls. However, pins and buttons are the most popular categories, as they are very lightweight, easy to display, colorful, and inexpensive.

Buttons were first used in the 1860 campaign by Lincoln and other Presidential candidates, but the method grew in popularity in the 1880s, with slogans or names printed on paper covered by a piece of celluloid.



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The Whitehead and Hoag company of Newark, New Jersey produced many of the early ones, and some of those are worth several hundred dollars today. As buttons and pins have been quite plentiful, their value has to do more with their rarity and condition, rather than their visual appeal or the slogans.

Among presidential collectors, Lincoln, Truman and Kennedy buttons and pins are the most desirable, with prices ranging from \$25 to several hundred dollars or more.

But if you want to go after the most valuable buttons, two buttons depicting losing candidates stand out as the most valuable, and not coincidentally, the toughest to obtain. The first one is a 1920 button for the Democratic ticket of James Cox and his running mate, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The valuable button is the one that is seven-eighths inch in diameter, with the slogan "Americanize America." At the time Cox was governor of Ohio, and founded what would become today's Cox Enterprises media firm. FDR was the assistant secretary of the Navy. The Republicans Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge, however, soundly beat Cox and Roosevelt. FDR would be heard from quite a bit later. The very scarce Cox-Roosevelt button is worth more than \$100,000.

A second extremely valuable button is of the 1924 Democratic team of John Davis and William Jennings Bryan, which also sold for more than \$100,000.

Surprisingly, buttons of candidates who drop out of the race are also popular. Take for example, Democrat George McGovern's choice for running mate in 1972, Senator Thomas Eagleton of Missouri. After press inquiries, Eagleton disclosed he had undergone electroshock therapy while being treated for depression. That news forced him off the ballot, but a McGovern-Eagleton button nevertheless is a valuable piece.

One piece of Presidential memorabilia remains a real puzzle. In 1932, the U.S. Caramel Company produced a Presidential set of 31 cards called the R114 set. The cards were printed on boxes of chocolates, and as a promotion, the company offered a free box of candy to anyone sending in all 31 cards. However, there was

one problem – and a major glitch for anyone wanting that free box of candy. There were reportedly only four William McKinley cards issued, making it nearly impossible to send in the complete set. There is still one William McKinley card that was never returned to the U.S. Caramel Company for the gift. Shame on U.S. Caramel for leading on collectors! Oh well, the same company did the same with a baseball set they produced, with the card of "Lucky" Lindstrom.

Keep in mind that political collectibles will always be in demand. Political memorabilia collectors are always looking for items to add to their collection. Most items are not terribly expensive, either. For example, most Harry S. Truman buttons from his 1948 campaign go for between \$25-75, with more rare ones about \$500. Most Thomas Dewey buttons from that campaign are worth about \$50, and a button from yet another 1948 candidate, Henry Wallace, is worth slightly less.

However, from that same campaign, the famous "Dewey Defeats Truman" Chicago Tribune newspaper of November 3, 1948 is worth more than a grand if in good condition. If you can also get a photograph of Truman holding up a copy of that newspaper while at St. Louis' Union Station, the newspaper and the photo are worth a whopping fifteen hundred dollars. By the way, if you ever have a chance to look at that paper, take a look at the story on the right hand side of the first page. Toward the top of the article you will see five lines that are upside down. In its haste to get the newspaper printed, which had announced that Dewey defeated Truman, the Chicago Tribune printed five lines upside down. As we all know, Truman won the election, and Dewey faded into oblivion.

Now is the time to go after McCain and Obama button, pins, t-shirts, bobbleheads, bumper stickers, and anything else. You will not be disappointed.

Jots from Jeff...

A 1954 lunch box made by Universal went for \$19,425 in a Top Shop auction. It was in unused condition, and included the thermos.

The new UCLA head football coach Rick Neuheisel, is the same Rick Neuheisel who was the MVP of the 1984 Rose Bowl, and played for the USFL's San Antonio Gunslingers. He is also the same Rick Neuheisel who I took to basketball games when I was the editor of the newspaper in Gilbert, Arizona, The Arizona Roundup.

There are not a lot of Olympic collectibles. You might try to get pins, magazines, tickets, posters, or even medals. Posters and medals hold their value the most.

Brett Farve collectibles are as popular as ever.

Yankee Stadium memorabilia will soon be available. Seats will be about \$500-1500, and dirt will cost around \$250-350, in a small container.

The Babe Ruth statue from Yankee Stadium's Monument Park will cost at least \$1 million.