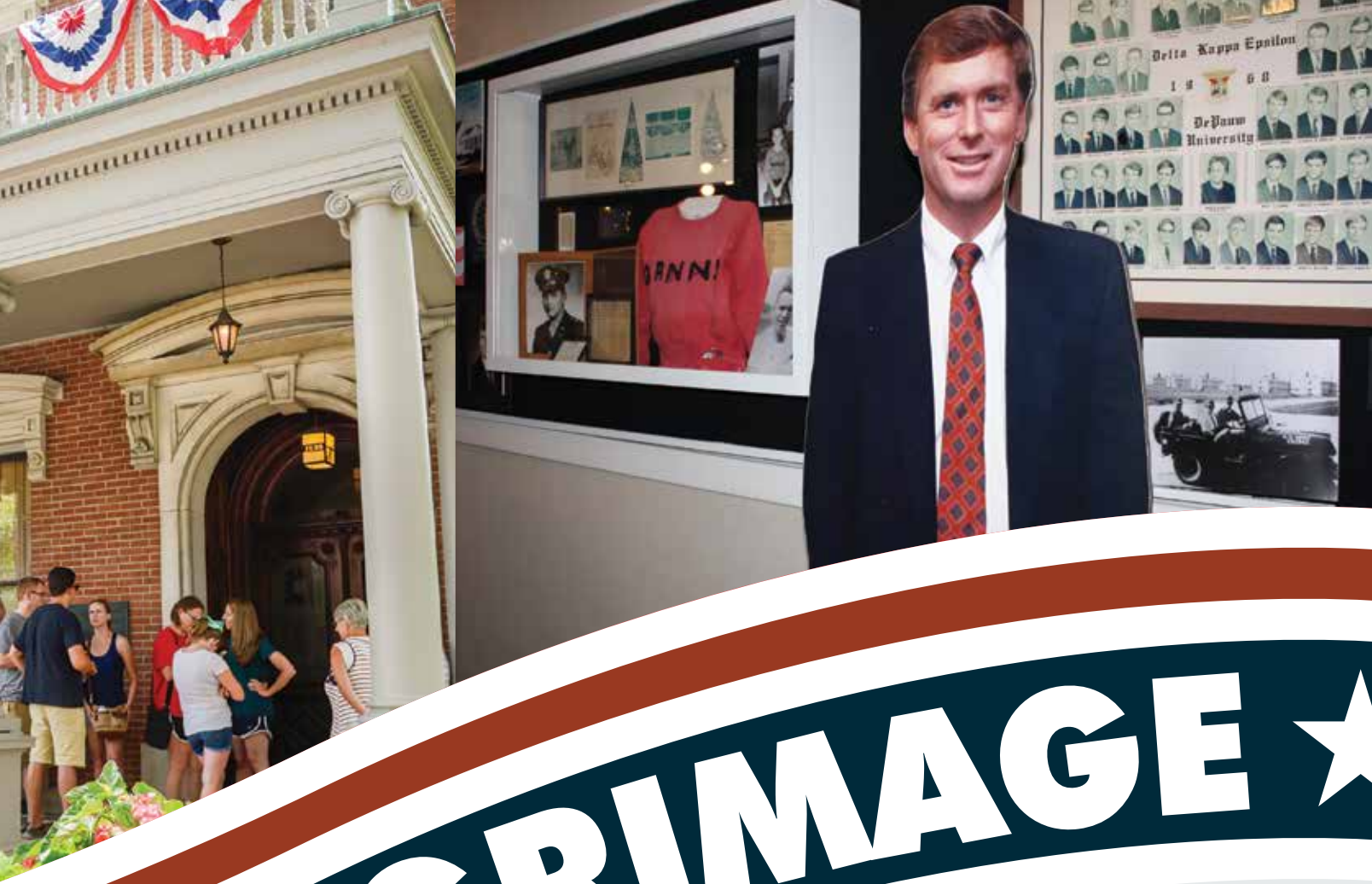




# ★ ★ POLITICAL

Tour stops include (from left): the Museum of American Political Communication, the Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site and the Quayle Vice Presidential Learning Center.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Each 2018 issue of BizVoice® will feature a Road Trip Treasure, highlighting Indiana destinations and activities.*



# PILGRIMAGE ★

## HOOSIER SITES BRING HISTORY TO LIFE

By Rebecca Patrick

Democrat. Republican. Independent. It doesn't matter. All that's needed is an appreciation for politics to enjoy three Indiana destinations brimming with history and unique stories:

- Logansport's **Museum of American Political Communication** is a 3,000-square foot showcase of memorabilia large and small, commonplace and unusual, from the collection of Sue Ridlen and her late husband, Julian, Indiana's 48th state treasurer
- The **Quayle Vice Presidential Learning Center** pays tribute to Huntington's favorite son and much more – focusing on the history, responsibilities and contributions of the second highest office in the land with a look at all 48 officeholders
- The **Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site** in downtown Indianapolis is where the 23rd U.S. President lived for much of the last 30 years of his life; Harrison is the only commander in chief elected from Indiana

### **MUSEUM OF AMERICAN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION**

Imagine getting comfortable at the end of a long day in slippers adorned with doll-like heads of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton (naturally, the latter is for the left foot).

Actually, it could have happened.

They are among the thousands of items in the collection amassed by the Ridlens, who first opened their museum in 2013 in a family-owned building. But until very recently, when it was listed on the Cass County Visitors Bureau web site, you basically had to find out about the place through word of mouth.

The Ridlens met while working in Indiana Sen. Homer Capehart's office in Washington D.C. in the summer of 1962. When she was about 10, Sue started collecting memorabilia, while Julian picked up the hobby in college.

“We have always been generalists in our collecting, which is not good in some ways because everything looks good,” she admits. “We were, of course, kind of partial to Benjamin Harrison since he’s from Indiana. We have a lot of (1940 presidential candidate) Wendell Willkie. I’m partial to the Indiana connections. And you can’t go wrong with (Abraham) Lincoln.”

### From torch lights to soap

Tours, which are by appointment only, begin in the back of the bottom floor. Sue, in her American flag vest, leads the way to the most antique section. The oldest pieces are tokens – no buttons yet – which date back to the 1790s.

She holds up a picture from Lincoln’s inauguration that allegedly includes his future assassin John Wilkes Booth in the crowd. Another favorite is the set of kerosene lamps

of Harrison and his rival Grover Cleveland from 1892, the only contest to pit two presidents against one another.

Torch lights, which are a particular interest of Sue’s, adorn the farthest wall. These were used pre-electricity and were often seen at political rallies or parades.

As we make our way back to the main area on this floor, a collection of walking sticks captures my attention, especially the Halloween-looking head of President Eisenhower. The same pale noggin is used on a salt and pepper shaker, Sue points out.

It’s a sea of predominately red, white and blue. Some ornate and lovely, others cheesy and yet somehow appealing. Ribbons, handkerchiefs, glasses, umbrellas, light pulls, watch fobs – to name a sampling.

And no area is immune from being part of the collection.

“When in doubt, if you need more space

– put it in the bathroom,” Sue proclaims. That’s where her Frankoma pottery mugs reside that her husband, who passed away last fall, wasn’t particularly fond of. The upstairs bathroom appropriately features soaps with candidates’ likeness and straight razors with their names.

“They truly made everything, and that was the whole purpose of the museum – to show the way people communicate. How they communicate a particular interest in a candidate, whether that’s quilts, buttons or whatever,” she explains.

Sue is a self-admitted hoarder – and it has paid off, she proudly states. She “bid and bid – got carried away” on a young girl’s parade outfit supporting Grover Cleveland in the 1888 election.

“I had this beat-up little mannequin. I know my husband was looking down from heaven and saying, ‘Sue, you’ve got to be kidding. You are not going to try to make that mannequin work for that little girl!’ It was a boy doll – and it had a bashed-in head and the legs were split. I put socks (and shoes) on him, found this little red wig and a hat. I laugh every time I see her because I remember what she – or he – looked like. Oh, and the dress fit just perfectly!”

### Themed spaces

The downstairs voting room recreates Election Day with a 1970s polling booth, curtain included, and one of the infamous Florida voting machines from the 2000 presidential election.

“They couldn’t get rid of those fast enough,” Sue quipped. A completist, she searched online and found an assortment of the actual chads from the ballots – dimpled, pregnant and post hanging.

Across the hall is Indiana-land, with a focus on Hoosier candidates who held state or national office – or tried to in Willkie’s case.

A giant framed photo of a young Sen. Richard Lugar with Julian from 1982 is on proud display and catches one’s eye. To the left is the (Charlie) Halleck Room named after the congressman from Indiana’s second district who was the House Minority Leader when Sue went to work for him after Capehart lost to Birch Bayh.

Floor two of the museum includes a political cartoon and magazine collection that Julian framed, a small mourning room for the four presidents who were assassinated, a nod to presidential china and a modern wing that includes those slippers, Trumpy Bear and much more.

Sue made sure to show me a model train scene recreating Harry Truman’s 1948 stop in Cass County. A Logansport native, she saw



The unique ambiance of the Logansport museum is also a perfect fit to host political fundraisers. Sue Ridlen says: “It’s very suitable for those open house type of settings. Hey, I’m willing to come down from time to time (from her top floor apartment) and look around myself!”



him here; Julian did the same a day later when the train stopped in his home state of Illinois. Sue laughs that they didn't realize that shared connection until years down the road – "that's not something you just mention in daily conversation."

When I left, I wasn't empty-handed.

Sue gave me a memento: a pen with a built-in flashlight and the museum's name on it. Somehow, that seemed fitting.

## QUAYLE VICE PRESIDENTIAL LEARNING CENTER

To accept or not to accept the nomination. No one did that decision haunt more than Levi Morton.

He turned down being on the ticket twice and either occasion would have ultimately made him president. The men he rebuffed, James Garfield and William McKinley, were both assassinated. In between, Morton did say "yes" and was Benjamin Harrison's vice president.

This is the type of quirky information you'll hear from Daniel Johns, the center's executive director, or as he puts it – "the other Dan."

What started out as a local library exhibit to Dan Quayle became a full-fledged museum in 1993, when the former Christian Science Church was donated. Originally, it was all about the 44th vice president upstairs and rotating exhibits downstairs.

The focus broadened to all vice presidents and education once Johns arrived in 1999.

"It took me seven to eight years to collect artifacts from everybody and to put together the exhibits. In the meantime, I started the education programs and took it from 1,500 school kids a year to as high as 10,000."

The different offerings can take place at the museum or on the road at the school. The Friday before my visit, Johns was at Stony Creek Elementary in Noblesville doing "Let's Make It a Law", which allows students to learn the legislative process through role playing guided by Johns and the teacher.

The center is open most weekdays from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., but it's always a good idea to call first because Johns is the lone employee – so when he's gone, the museum is closed.

## Second fiddles; first-rate experience

Cheerful and a good kind of crazy (more about that later) is perhaps the best way to describe Johns' entertaining history lesson. (The tour is also available to do on your own; there's plenty to read.)

Indiana is second in the nation as home for vice presidents with six of the 48. In the exhibits, those are marked with their own

special blue and gold signs.

The oldest museum piece dates back nearly 229 years, to John Adams. It's a newspaper story regaling his breaking the first tie in the Senate.

Handwritten letters, personal and professional effects, and campaign memorabilia are among the other items on display.

Most of the artifacts are flat, but Johns has put some in three-dimensional cases to give depth and make things more visually interesting.

Scandals – both love and money, relationships with the President and health woes are frequent tour topics.

Some vice presidents are the namesakes for cities. Others are the creators of things still in place today, like gerrymandering. One even had his music turned into a pop song.

The tour upstairs starts with Adams and finishes with No. 24: Garret Augustus Hobart, who was one of seven vice presidents who died in office. Hobart's boss was the ill-fated McKinley.

With a straight face and serious tone, Johns says. "Let's play what if. What if Hobart took better care of himself – and ate chicken instead of steak? Hobart would have been on the ticket in 1900 (instead of Teddy Roosevelt who was the nominee) and would have been President. That would have changed history. Nobody, absolutely nobody would have ever had a teddy bear ... that's serious stuff."

After a chuckle, we head downstairs to get to know the rest of the exclusive club.

Some former vice presidents – Gerald Ford, Walter Mondale, George H.W. Bush



The first vice president from Indiana, Schuyler Colfax, was U.S. Speaker of the House during the Civil War and one of only two men to ever hold both offices. When educational programs take place on-site, upstairs becomes a country and each row of chairs becomes a state. Elections are held and bills are introduced.



and Dick Cheney – have signed photographs for the museum.

In this more modern group, Johns breaks out his impressions. First is Bush, who is a museum member: “Not gonna do it” – sounding more than a little like Dana Carvey’s turn on *Saturday Night Live*.

He says Al Gore sounds like Forest Gump with a lisp, then proceeds to have a short conversation between Gore and President Clinton.

The Dan Quayle section is last on the tour.

It tells the poignant reason why he is named James Danforth Quayle, after his father’s friend who died in World War II. Photos and items from his youth and political career are well chronicled.

Most newsworthy to me: what he did behind the scenes that wasn’t released to the media. Foremost, his official response to the coup attempt in the Philippines (Bush was in a plane), which saved the government there, says Johns, and with Desert Storm.

Ever present and seemingly looking at you no matter the angle is a life-size Quayle cutout from his vice-presidential days. Quayle is 71 now and living in Arizona. Johns says his business ventures keep him busy, but they still talk over the phone.

As we are wrapping up, two visitors come in ready for their glimpse into American politics. . . . It will be a memorable one.

## **BENJAMIN HARRISON PRESIDENTIAL SITE**

“One of our great strengths is we are the only museum representing the 23rd President, America’s Hoosier President. We have a nationally significant collection of over 10,000 items in this 10,000-square foot building (that was his home). It puts us in this interesting position of being locally relevant but also nationally significant,” offers Charles Hyde, museum president and CEO.

Approximately 75% of what’s on display

is original to the Harrisons; less than 10% of the entire collection is seen at any one time.

Very few areas or items are roped off, which is uncommon for a home built in 1875 – with many artifacts dating back to that time or even before.

Family photos help bring the story to life and are found throughout.

The most impressive room is the library.

As Hyde articulates well, “It’s almost palpable walking in there; you can almost see his mind at work to go with the enormous bookcase.”

Harrison, who was an attorney, received the bookcase as payment from a German cabinet-maker for winning his immigration case. The piece of furniture is majestic with some type of creatures adorning the top and overseeing things.

One of the more unique items is also found nearby, in front of the desk. It’s a cane depicting all the presidents from Washington to Harrison, who took office 100 years later. It’s an impressive folk art piece. Hyde reports it’s a favorite among youngsters who visit, “in part because there are typos on it (including spelling Madison wrong) . . . children appreciate the fallibility but the sentiment was there.”

I knew little about Harrison beyond the basics, so it was a pleasure learning about his significant actions. Among them:

- He called for the flying of the American flag in front of public buildings and schoolhouses.
- A Civil War veteran and a volunteer for the Union cause, he was strongly anti-slavery and as President advocated for African American voting rights.
- Harrison expanded the navy fleet to 21 ships; it had dwindled to just a few when he took office.
- He created the second, third and fourth national parks, including what became Yosemite.

Adds Hyde, “I think there is a special appreciation for Benjamin Harrison and what he represents as a statesman . . . the way he was able to articulate what it means to be an American. He has a great quote: ‘An American citizen could not be a good citizen who does not have a hope in his heart.’”

The museum averages about 30,000 visitors per year; 18,000 are students from primarily the third through fifth grades on field trips. Tours are available to the general public Monday through Saturday starting at 10 a.m. (last one at 3:30 p.m.) and run 75 to 90 minutes.

Special occasions make a great time to visit. For President’s Day, live actors – including ones playing the Harrisons – engage with guests.

Continued on page 80



Tours are not scripted, Charlie Hyde stresses. “Our docents work from a large knowledge base; they probably have three to four hours of content in their head. They really try to tailor the individual tour to the interests of the visitor or group.” Special events, such as the Presidential Egg Roll, lure more visitors in to learn about the life of Benjamin Harrison.



## Political Pilgrimage

Continued from page 22

On that day last year, one visitor made an impression on Hyde.

“A family came out from New York because their young son had latched on to Benjamin Harrison as his favorite President. He wanted to learn everything he possibly could about him. He had even read facts about Harrison and was able to layer in comments as we were doing the tour.

“He might have been seven or eight. . . . It was a lot of fun to see someone so deeply engaged at that young age.”

Docent Debbie Proctor, who led my journey, says any time there is a big event in Indianapolis, the museum tends to get people in from other states and even countries. She also has given tours to those who use their vacations to visit presidential homes.

### Interaction and events

The third floor – originally used as a ballroom – is now exhibit space.

When I was there, they were in the process of changing it out for the next one: Six Degrees of Harrison, “which shows how he’s connected to some other famous people or events that you might not know,” Proctor notes.

The previous exhibit was on White House pets and included a

photo op with Mr. Whiskers, the Harrisons’ pet goat.

The exhibits and special events help garner attention and community engagement.

For high school students, there is the Future Presidents of America Youth Leadership Camp. Candlelight Theatre happens four times a year – once each season. The Wicket World of Croquet generally sells out. “People in dress whites and croquet on the lawn – with drink in one hand and crepes in the other. It’s a great scene,” Hyde smiles.

More than 600 attend the Independence Day Social, while the Presidential Egg Roll, copying the longstanding White House tradition, is now in its third year.

Hyde and his team have also thought outside the box.

The museum partnered with the federal court for a large naturalization ceremony and since 2015 is an official polling site. “It has been embraced by the community and we have good turnout,” Hyde shares.

“People recognize being able to vote in such a historical place . . . particularly in 2016 being able to vote for President in the home of a President. It’s especially charming and meaningful.”

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**RESOURCES:** Sue Ridlen, Museum of American Political Communications, at (574) 722-9640 | Daniel Johns, Quayle Vice Presidential Learning Center, at [historyeducates.org](http://historyeducates.org) | Charles Hyde, Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site, at [www.presidentbenjaminharrison.org](http://www.presidentbenjaminharrison.org)