



NEW JERSEY: FIRE HOUSE, MORRISTOWN.

Gwen: This episode of "History Detectives" comes from New Jersey. And our first investigation begins in a place called Morristown. We all think we're sitting on a piece of history. Go to any old town in the northeast and the locals will tell you, "George Washington slept here." Well, a firefighter in Morristown has found a logbook that could be evidence of an extraordinary presidential visit. Halfway down the front page is what appears to be the signature of President Ulysses S. Grant, dated the 4th of July, 1876, the Centennial of American independence. Was the president really here or could the signature be a fake? I'm Gwen Wright and this is Wes Cowan. We've come to Morristown to get to the bottom of this political mystery.

Wes: The book was found by Fred Richards, president of Morristown's independent hose company. It was the town's first firehouse, and Fred feels a duty to keep it going.

Fred: I look at the photos on the wall here that go back 100 years or more. I look at their faces. I get the feeling that they're looking down at me to say, "don't Screw this up, kid, we had a good thing here, and you keep it going, because we're counting on you".

Wes: The past came to life for Fred when he discovered that the Firehouse logbook might be a piece of presidential history. To think that a president might have been in this very room that we're in right now is something else. It's very exciting. So Fred, tell us, how did you come to find this book?

Fred: Well, Gwen, we're in the basement of the Firehouse and we open up this cabinet, an old bookcase, and we discover several volumes of books. And it appears that there's a possibility that president Ulysses S. Grant visited Morristown and signed the guest register of the Independent Hose Company.

Wes: Oh, look at that. There it is, yeah. "U.S. Grant, Galena, Illinois." These signatures are extraordinary and his certainly stands out. But you know what's also interesting, is to look at the date, July 4th, 1876, the centennial of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. It's amazing. The question to ask is, why was president Grant here? Morristown's a very nice town but why did he come to Morristown on such a significant date? Well, now, wait a minute. I think we're getting a little ahead of ourselves here because the real question is, is this really Ulysses S. Grant's signature? We've got to answer that question before we can figure out anything. Well, one thing, we have to find out more about this town. Who lived here? What possible political connections could have drawn him here? And you know the other thing we really need to take care of is, I'd really like to verify this signature. And if we can prove that that's his signature, then we at least have that one part nailed down. Okay. Let's go!

Wes: I first learned about General Ulysses S. Grant in grade school. He became a national figure after leading the union army to victory in the civil war. Defeating the Confederates propelled him to the White House in 1868 where, despite constant accusations of corruption, he served two terms as president. But Morristown, New Jersey, was never mentioned in any of my history books.

Gwen: Wes is heading off to New York to verify the signature, and I'm going to the Morristown Public Library to meet the town's archivist, Cheryl Turkington. She's a key person in this investigation. Cheryl first discovered Grant's signature when asked her to examine the logbook. And I think she'll be a great source of local information. Our first job is to check the local papers. If Grant was in Morristown on the 4th of July, 1876, then surely it'll be in here. [examining papers] It's just like today, half of it's ads. Here we have it...perforated buckskin and medicated red flannel underwear... counterfeit champagne. [laughing] after an hour of searching, we found plenty to keep us amused. But we haven't found anything about Grant. Then we discover an article about Centennial celebrations in Morristown. Well, here's something about the Independent Hose Company. And refreshments served at the hose house. It does, it talks about all the citizens. They talk about the hose company and the party but they don't mention President Grant. I find it really hard to believe he could have been here and not have the paper -- and not have anyone talk about it. That doesn't look good. So, if Grant wasn't here, then he couldn't have signed the logbook, which makes me think the signature's a fake.

Wes: I'm taking the logbook to Christie's auction house in New York City. Hopefully, Chris Coover, one of their top manuscript experts, can help me establish whether or not the signature is the Real McCoy. We've already analyzed the paper in the book and confirmed that it's from the right period. But what about the signature? The most reliable way to prove it's authentic is to compare it to a Grant signature we already know is genuine. Ok, Chris. We've got two signa-

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tures: here from the Firehouse, and this one from your files from one of your upcoming auctions. You know, what do you think?

Chris Coover: [compares signatures] Well, first thing you notice probably is this marvelous oblique angle that Grant likes to give to his signature. Same thing over here. Matches on that one, too, the Firehouse one. Grant likes to start his signature with this very decisive stroke for the “U” very characteristic. And, in fact, the whole signature has a decisive quality to it. Well, you know, and I see the same thing then, the same bold way he made his “U” his “S” I’ve always liked the way Grant finishes his signature, too. He makes a whole flourish like a sword stroke. Yeah, and look at this one. It’s sort of almost a “U” he actually starts up here. Comes all the way around and then finishes very quickly. You can see the pen gather strength as it comes around.

Wes: So, Chris, we’ve looked at both the signatures. What’s your conclusion?

Chris: I have no doubt in saying, Wes, that both these signatures are from the same hand, that of Ulysses S. Grant.

Wes: Excellent! We’re in business. We know for sure it’s Grant’s signature.

Gwen: Knowing that the signature is authentic only makes the mystery deeper. Why was Grant in Morristown to begin with? Doesn’t make sense. No, it doesn’t. I’m just trying to think of every possibility. I’m going back to the Logbook to look for clues.

Gwen [asks Fred]: Tell me, how was it, as you were looking through these logbooks, that you focused on this page and found Grant’s signature?

Fred: Well, it was Thomas Nast that I saw originally, very famous cartoonist. And he’s a resident of Morristown.

Gwen: That’s interesting. He lived in Morristown. He was a Republican. He really supported the party. And Grant, of course, was the Republican candidate for the two elections before this. Then that could be a lead.

Gwen: Thomas Nast is probably America’s most famous political cartoonist. Why is his name on the same page of the Logbook as Grant’s? Could he be the reason the President came to Morristown? I want to take a look at his cartoons to see what they can tell me about the relationship between these two prominent Republicans.

Gwen: In New York, Wes is heading to the Public Library to investigate where Grant was on the Centennial. In the meantime, I’m making some interesting discoveries about Nast. He was the staff cartoonist for “Harper’s Weekly” for over 20 years. The magazine’s massive readership made Nast’s cartoons hugely influential. Even if you haven’t heard of Nast, you’ll know his work. The donkey and the elephant, the symbols we still use today for the Democratic and Republican parties, were both Nast illustrations. Nast himself was a devoted Republican. Just look at the images Nast drew of Grant. Grant is always seen as the hero of the Civil War, a commanding, honorable figure. In reality, he wasn’t as pure as Nast portrayed him. He was a bit of a rogue who liked a good drink. In fact, we could say that Nast becomes a spin doctor for Grant. One understands through this, what could have brought Grant to Morristown? To see his friend, Thomas Nast? But I still can’t explain why either of them were in the Firehouse. Then, at the end of the hall, I spot the answer. A picture of a man who clearly knows how to have a good time. It’s a self-portrait of Thomas Nast and he’s dressed like a firefighter. According to the painting’s caption, in 1873, Thomas Nast joined the Independent Hose Company’s fire company, as an honorary member. I want to find out more about fire companies in the 1870s and why a wealthy man like Nast would be a member. Now, here’s a photo of this building, of this room, well over 100 years ago. Approximately 1880, 1888 maybe. It’s extraordinary. It looks like a parlor in a very fancy house. Oh, my goodness, this is wonderful! Look at these gentlemen of the company. Here they are with their hats and their lovely parade horns. These guys were extraordinary, because here they were, these very well-to-do men, who were playing at being tough guys, out fighting fires. This is really wonderful. Well, this certainly tells us a lot about the life around these fire companies at that time. And what would have drawn Nast into it and certainly what would have drawn Grant to this kind of activity, too.



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Gwen: It makes sense that Nast would have brought his friend, the President, to the firehouse to show him off to his buddies and to have a good time. But one piece of the story is still missing: We don't know for sure where Grant was on the 4th of July, 1876. Wes has been hard at work in the New York Public Library.

Wes: After a day searching through the archives, I found an article in the "New York Times" that nails this part of the investigation. Where was President Grant on the centennial of American Independence? "Washington, July 4th, 1876, at 10:30 o'clock today, "Mr. Cadwallader, acting Secretary of State, presented Mr. Schlozer, the German Minister, to the President." That's it. That means that Grant was in Washington on July 4th, 1876. He could not have been in Morristown. But we know his signature's real. So the question now is, when was he in Morristown?

Wes: Here's something. What's that? Ex-president Grant, 1877, May 8th. "Ex-president Grant visited Morristown on Wednesday last and took dinner with Thomas Nast." What's the date again? May 8th -- 1877. This is important, Cheryl. He came to Morristown specifically to visit Nast.

Gwen: And the timing of this visit is very important. It's well-known that Grant wanted to run for an unprecedented third term in 1880. He would have come to see Nast to plot his return to the White House. Whatever plans they came up with sitting in 's old Firehouse weren't successful. Grant failed even to win the Republican nomination. As Wes returns from New York, we've finally gotten to the bottom of this investigation, and it's been quite a journey.

Wes: We've answered one question, the signature in Fred's Firehouse logbook really is President Ulysses S. Grant's. He was in Morristown to see his political ally, Thomas Nast.

Gwen: Nast was a member of the Independent Hose Company and would have brought Grant to the Firehouse to show him off.

Wes: But we know the date of the signature is wrong. Grant was in Washington on the day of the Centennial. We think he actually signed the Logbook a year later, probably when he was asking Nast for his support to run for an unprecedented third term as president.

Gwen: And so now it's time to tell Fred what we've learned. You'll remember, Fred, that one of the very first things that we wanted to know was, is this signature of "U.S. Grant, Galena, Illinois," really a genuine signature? Was that really Ulysses S. Grant's signature? Well, we went into New York, and we found out that it is, in fact, Ulysses S. Grant's signature.

Fred: That's fantastic. That's very exciting, isn't it? That is -- I'm speechless.

Gwen: We also know that he was in this building because we can understand why. The reason that he's here is this guy on the wall, Thomas Nast, who helped create Grant as a President. But there's still this issue of the date. We know categorically that U.S. Grant was not in Morristown on July 4th, 1876, because he was in Washington attending an important function.

Fred: Wow, isn't that something?

Wes: He did sign this ledger, just not on that date.

Fred: That's very significant, the fact that he was here.

Wes: Absolutely. We have proof positive that he was here.

Fred: That's good enough for me.

Wes: we're guessing that the date, July 4th, 1876, was added later, perhaps by one of these guys who wanted to embellish the history of the Firehouse. But we do know that these men put their lives on the line to protect the people of Morristown.



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Before we left, we wanted to give Fred a glimpse of what it was like to be a firefighter over 100 years ago.

[antique fire engine]

Fred: Oh, my God. That's absolutely beautiful.

Wes: So what do you think?

Fred: I'm amazed. This is like stepping back in time.

Gwen: Have you seen a Pumper like that with horses hitched?

Fred: No, only in a museum.

Gwen: We borrowed this 1880s Clapp & Jones steamer from the town of Dover Fire Company, one of only six left in the country. It was used to pump water at the scene of a fire.

Fred: Okay, let's go. Let's respond to the fire.

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