

A photograph of the Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site, a large, ornate red brick house with a blue balcony and American flags. The image is framed with a torn paper effect.

Pioneering Preservation

Lesson Guide

US History and US Government



BENJAMIN HARRISON PRESIDENTIAL SITE

#23RD
IN
THE 21ST



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Benjamin Harrison was responsible for the creation of the national forest reserves through the Land Revision Act of 1891. After being inspired by the conservation efforts of Ulysses S. Grant, on March 30th, President Benjamin Harrison set aside land for the Yellowstone Park Timber Land Reserve, located along the eastern and southern boundary of Yellowstone National Park. The presidential proclamation followed a decade over the fate of America's forested areas. In 1890 Benjamin Harrison asked Congress for legislation that would provide for the end of the rapid and needless destruction of our great forests. More than 22 million acres of land was persevered during Harrison's presidency. These acres would make up some of America's most notable natural places. Presidents such as Theodore Roosevelt followed in Benjamin Harrison's footsteps as more National Parks were designated and further protections passed for the nation's forests, wildlife, and cultural heritage sites.

This "Activating the Reserve" mini-lesson invites high school students into the complex world of environmental policy, directly connecting the historical actions of President Benjamin Harrison to contemporary land-use dilemmas. After viewing the "Pioneering Preservation" video, which highlights Harrison's pivotal role in expanding federal land protection through the Forest Reserve Act of 1891, students transform into a presidential cabinet. Each group receives a unique "Presidential Briefing File" detailing a fictional, yet realistic, land scenario with competing interests such as valuable natural resources, indigenous land claims, or economic development plans. Utilizing the provided excerpt from the Forest Reserve Act, students deliberate, working through the complex interpretations of executive power and the difficult trade offs involved in conservation. This activity challenges them to analyze arguments from various perspectives, apply historical legislative precedent to modern day problems, and ultimately make a reasoned recommendation, embodying Harrison's legacy as a pioneer in protecting the nation's natural and cultural heritage.



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Materials and Outline

5th Grade Indiana State Standards

5.G.8 Describe and analyze how specific physical features influenced historical events. (E)

8th Grade Indiana State Standards

8.G.5 Using primary and secondary sources, identify ways people modified the physical environment as the United States developed, and describe the impacts that resulted.

8.G.7 Identify and interpret maps, graphs, and charts showing the distribution of natural resources such as forests, water sources, and wildlife in the United States at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Give examples of how people exploited these resources as the country became more industrialized and people moved westward.

US Government and History Indiana State Standards

USG.3.1: Analyze the powers and responsibilities of the President of the United States.

USG.3.9 Analyze the election of Benjamin Harrison, his approach to the presidency, his relationship to the legislative branch, and his re-election defeat, considering the effects of party politics and public opinion.

USG.4.2: Identify and describe the roles of federal agencies and the federal bureaucracy in implementing public policy.

USG.5.1: Analyze the role of political parties, interest groups, and the media in shaping public opinion and influencing public policy.

USG.5.8 Use information from a variety of sources to describe and discuss current American political issues.

USH.2.6 Describe and assess the contribution of Indiana's only president, Benjamin Harrison, to national policies on environmental protection, business regulation, immigration, and civil rights.

USH.4.3: Explain the causes and consequences of the Progressive Era reforms, including efforts to regulate business, protect the environment, and expand democracy.

USH.6.2: Examine the causes and consequences of major social and cultural movements in the post-World War II era, including the Civil Rights Movement, the women's movement, and the environmental movement.

USH.7.2: Analyze the challenges and changes in American foreign and domestic policy in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.



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Materials and Outline

US History and Government: Activating the Reserve

Description:

Students will role-play as a presidential cabinet deciding whether to declare a new national reserve, critically applying the principles of the Forest Reserve Act (1891), analyzing complex stakeholders' arguments, and evaluating the long-term implications of executive action in preservation.

Materials:

- Briefing files
- Name Plates (roles)
- Cabinet Deliberation Guide (1 per group)

Learning Targets:

- Students will be able to analyze how the Forest Reserve Act of 1891 granted the President authority to set aside public lands for preservation.
 - Students will be able to evaluate the competing economic, environmental, and social interests involved in historical and current land use decisions.
 - Students will be able to construct a reasoned argument, supported by evidence and understanding of presidential power, for or against the creation of a national reserve.
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Materials and Outline

Time	Actions Steps
Introduction & Hook: The President's Power to Protect (5 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Begin by asking students: "Imagine you're the President of the United States. A beautiful, wild piece of land in our country is suddenly facing a big threat perhaps from too much logging, or a new factory. What powers do you think you have, as President, to step in and protect that land?" (Allow for a few student responses, write key ideas on the board: sign laws, make orders, tell people what to do). Introduce the concept of a "precedent": explain it's an action that sets an example or rule for others to follow later. Introduce the lesson: "Today, we're going to learn how President Benjamin Harrison set a huge precedent for presidents to protect our nation's lands. We'll explore his actions, watch a short video, and then, you will step into a presidential cabinet meeting to make a tough decision about land preservation, just like Harrison had to."
Watch Pioneering Preservation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce the video: The 23rd in the 21st Century Project: Pioneering Preservation As you watch, pay close attention to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Which presidents are mentioned for their preservation efforts." "The different types of sites that were preserved (nature, cultural)." "The Forest Reserve Act of 1891 and what it allowed the president to do."
Cabinet Meeting Simulation: Activating the Reserve (15 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Divide students into small "Cabinet Meeting" groups (ideal 4 students per group to match roles). Distribute the following materials to each group: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> One "Presidential Briefing File" One set of "Role Cards" One "Cabinet Deliberation Guide." One copy of the "Primary Source: Excerpt from the Forest Reserve Act of 1891."

Materials and Outline

Time	Actions Steps
Cabinet Meeting Simulation: Activating the Reserve (15 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clearly explain the activity: "You are now a presidential cabinet, tasked with advising the President on a critical land preservation decision. Each of you has a specific role to play. Your goal is to work together, analyze your scenario, apply the Forest Reserve Act, and make a collective recommendation using your 'Cabinet Deliberation Guide.'" Review the "Primary Source: Excerpt from the Forest Reserve Act of 1891" as a whole class, ensuring students understand its core meaning. Emphasize that this is the legal basis for their decision. Remind them of the time limit for the activity.
Share out and Reflection (5-7 min)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Call the class back together. Ask each group's Chief of Staff to briefly report their group's chosen scenario, their final recommendation (Declare, Do NOT Declare, Compromise, Delay), and one key reason for their decision. Facilitate a brief whole-class discussion: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "What was the most challenging part of making your decision?" "How did President Benjamin Harrison's actions with the Forest Reserve Act make decisions like this possible for future presidents?" (Reinforce "precedent" and the lasting impact). "What does this activity teach us about making public policy decisions, especially when different groups want different things?" "Are there similar debates happening today in the news regarding land use or environmental protection?" (Connect to USG.5.8 and USH.7.2).