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Souvenir Nation

William L. Bird
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Throughout history, there have been great men and women, wars, tragedies, and triumphs—and seemingly always someone willing to preserve the memories of such. Whether the collector's objective is for money and resale, obsession with the subject matter, or just the innate human desire to show where we've all come from, these tangible mementos often manage to convey what once was in a way that mere words and facts cannot.

Souvenir Nation: Relics, Keepsakes and Curios from the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History spotlights fifty items from the museum's collection and their generally quirky backstories. Smithsonian Curator William L. Bird Jr. has spent years working with these historical artifacts and takes us on a guided tour of the uniquely fascinating treasures. Bird further relates the curious true story of John Varden, a London-born entrepreneur and early curator of the collection—and the man who first brought America the 1853 exhibit, "Hair of the Presidents and Other Persons of Distinction."

Continuing in the presidential realm, we learn how Andrew Jackson thought nothing of offering keepsake clippings of his wiry white locks and often looked a bit close-cropped as a result. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Fireside Chat radio microphones, used by Roosevelt in his Depression-era broadcasts to calm an anxious nation, are also featured. And lest we forget more recent history, some of those pesky hanging chads from 2000's hotly contested Bush-Gore election have been preserved for all eternity.

On a more somber note, the collection includes the dress cuff of Laura Keene, an actress at Ford's Theater on April 14, 1865, the night Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. Keene cradled Lincoln's head in her lap after the fatal gunshot, and she left behind a simple fashion accessory that reminds us of Lincoln's mortality and his suffering before death.

American history buffs will no doubt find equal excitement in Souvenir Nation's miniature compass embedded in a Mount Vernon buckeye nut, and the more conventional fragment from Plymouth Rock. A 1917 "Jailed for Suffrage" pin details how less than a century ago, women were not allowed to vote and were actually imprisoned for demanding the right to do so.

All told, *Souvenir Nation* not only sparks a warm feeling of American spirit but an appreciation for those who collect, preserve, and keep history in a more personal context.
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