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## Uncle Cleve and Frank: An Unlikely Love Affair

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## Uncle Cleve & Frank: An Unlikely Love Affair

With Valentines Day approaching, are there any interesting love stories about a president and a first lady?

Americans have always wanted to know a little more than is probably healthy about the personal life of the president and first lady. But when it comes to First Couples, the White House is a glass house.

Consider a couple that were deeply in love, Uncle Cleve and Frank. (Keep reading.) Grover and Frances Cleveland were the nation's First Couple during the Victorian Era of the 1880s and 1890s, and they were an unlikely pair. First was the difference in their ages: Grover was 27 years older than his wife. She was the daughter of Oscar (his law partner) and Emma Folsom.

Grover first laid eyes on Frances Folsom in 1864 -- when she was still in diapers. At the time he was a bachelor, and one of his earliest gifts to the little girl was a baby carriage. He seemed genuinely to regard her as an uncle would a niece. Frances grew up calling him "Uncle Cleve," and he called her "Frank."

Tragedy deepened their relationship. When Frank was just 11 years old, her father Oscar was killed in a buggy accident. Uncle Cleve became the guardian of the girl, and at the same time drew close to the mother, Emma. The rising politician was extremely solicitous of them both. He even paid for Frank's college.

What Frank did not know was that Uncle Cleve was paying for another child as well during those years of innocence. It was later discovered that in 1873 Cleveland had an affair with a department store clerk named Maria Halpin. When Maria told Cleveland she was pregnant, he doubted he was the biological father, yet he supported the child nevertheless. More than a decade later, in the 1884 campaign for president, Cleveland's Republican opponent made much of Cleveland's supposedly illegitimate child. Republicans paraded through the nation's streets pushing baby carriages and chanting, "Ma! Ma! Where's my pa?" (And you thought campaigns today were mean-spirited? At a later point, Cleveland supporters had the last laugh, adding the refrain, "Gone to the White House, ha, ha, ha!")

Withstanding what we today would call the "politics of personal destruction," Cleveland won the race and became the nation's 22nd president. Everybody assumed that after he settled into the White House, he would need a hostess to help with entertaining. Speculation peaked when Emma and Frank visited Washington. All the reporters and gossips believed Grover was eying Emma as his bride to be. They agreed that she would make a fine first lady, and that the beautiful Frances -- with her stately bearing, dark hair, and blue eyes -- would be a lively addition to Washington society.

Imagine the dismay of Washington wags when the president announced he was getting married, and the woman under the veil was not Emma but her daughter Frances. Apparently Uncle Cleve's feelings for the girl he used to stroll in a baby carriage had morphed. He once obliquely quipped to friends that he was waiting for his wife to grow up. They had no idea he literally meant she had to mature physiologically.

Cormac O'Brien notes in two entertaining books on First Couples that Uncle Cleve and Frank were an outstanding match. She also became the first "media star" among first ladies. Given her youth, charm and good looks, Frank was the prototype of such later stars as Jacqueline Kennedy and Lady Diana. Her years in the White House coincided with the rise of the advertising industry, and American manufacturers used her name and face to help sell such products as soaps, cosmetics, and elixirs.

Through the ups and downs of life in the White House, Frank remained focused on her family. She opined, "I can wish the women of our country no better blessing than that their homes and their lives may be as happy and that their husbands may be as kind and attentive, considerate, and affectionate, as mine."

Uncle Cleve and Frank -- now there's a good Valentine story.

*(Question from Chantel Ward, senior special education major, Grand Valley State)*



This essay originally appeared in the Grand Valley Lantern.



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