

Picking the National Flower: A Primary Source Investigation

Overview:

In this activity, students will explore how people and organizations can influence the legislative process. Students will build their primary source analysis skills by examining documents from the Archives of American Gardens and other repositories that represent how David Burpee lobbied for the marigold as the national flower for the United States. They will consider the strengths of the different strategies and arguments that Burpee used to target different audiences. Finally, students will reflect on the purpose of lobbying and consider any lessons they can learn for their own civic participation from this historical investigation.

Grades:

8–12

Topics and Skills:

Document Analysis, Civics, National Symbols, Lobbying

Procedure:

How can people and organizations influence the legislative process?

In 1986, Congress passed, and President Ronald Reagan signed [a proclamation](#) adopting the rose as the national floral emblem of the United States. This concluded a nearly century-long debate over the adoption of a national flower, during which people, businesses, and members of Congress all made enthusiastic cases for a variety of flowers to represent the American people. In 1959, David Burpee, head of the W. Atlee Burpee Seed Company, registered as a lobbyist and entered the national conversation as a champion for the marigold. Although it was ultimately unsuccessful, primary sources from his quest reveal some of the ways people and organizations can influence the legislative process.

In this historical investigation, students will examine primary sources that document some of David Burpee's early efforts to advocate for legislation making the marigold the national flower and reflect on the strategies and messages he used as a lobbyist to advance his cause.

Begin by using the Investigation Introduction slides to share historical context with students.

Share: Investigation Introduction Slides

Slide One:

Today we are going to investigate how people and organizations can influence the legislative process by looking at the debate for a national flower. Before we begin, I have a few questions for you to consider:

- Why do we have national symbols?
- Can one symbol really represent an entire nation?

Teacher note: the flowers pictured on this slide from right to left are marigolds, a rose, goldenrod, corn tassels, and mountain laurel.

Slide Two:

During our investigation, we'll be looking at primary sources from the W. Atlee Burpee Company, a mail order seed company started in 1876 that sold vegetable and flower seeds to home gardeners and retailers. David Burpee was the company's second president. In the 1930s, he developed a passion for marigolds and devoted resources to cultivating new varieties. Burpee scientists created the first marigold hybrid (a cross between two different varieties of marigold) that was free of the plant's distinct odor. He also launched a competition in the 1950s to find the first all-white marigold.

Slide Three:

During this time, there was new interest in adopting a national flower for the United States. The debate first rose to national prominence in 1889 with a push for goldenrod. Over the decades there were proposals for the rose, columbine, dogwood, corn tassel and others without much success. The adoption of a national flower for the United States would require both the House of Representatives and the Senate to pass a joint resolution proclaiming a national flower and the President to sign it into law.

Slide Four:

In 1959 David Burpee registered as a lobbyist to advocate for the marigold as the national flower. Lobbyists work to influence government officials, including the passage of legislation by Congress. Lobbying has a long history as a political tool in the United States. While the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights protects the right to petition the government, Congress can pass legislation to help provide transparency into the efforts of lobbyists and to make sure one group does not have an advantage over others, while still permitting the efforts of lobbyists to influence government decisions. In 1946, Congress passed the Regulation of Lobbying Act which required lobbyists (persons or organizations) to register



with Congress and submit quarterly reports on their expenditures. In *United States v. Harriss* (1954) the Supreme Court found that registration requirements applied only to paid lobbyists who communicated directly with members of Congress regarding the passage or defeat of legislation. This meant that David Burpee, while not technically required to register as a lobbyist, still chose to do so.

Activity:

Share a copy of the graphic organizer with each student. Have students form four groups. Either place the document sets around the class and have students rotate through each set or share the documents with the students electronically. Students should complete the graphic organizer for each document set, or for as many sets as class time permits. As they examine each document, students should first discuss: What type of document is it? Who made it? When is it from? What is it talking about? Then, complete these graphic organizer questions for each of the document sets.

How does David Burpee advocate for the marigold as the national flower?

Who is Burpee trying to convince with this strategy? Cite evidence from the source to support your answer.

After students complete the document rotation, watch this video from the Dirksen Congressional Center and add notes to the final column of the graphic organizer.

<https://youtu.be/bwogofdiGys?si=1apTHKaorMsVLbjy>

Wrap-Up

Invite students to report on what they discovered during their investigation in a class discussion.

Additional Discussion Questions:

- How effective were David Burpee’s strategies in influencing legislation?
- In your opinion, did Burpee make a compelling case for the marigold? What were some of his strongest and weakest arguments?
- One of David Burpee’s strategies included sending gifts of marigold flowers and seeds to members of Congress. Congress has passed legislation regulating the



business of lobbyists and rules regarding gifts that members of Congress and other government officials may accept. Do you think it is important for the government to regulate lobbyists? Why or why not? (Students may want to investigate what restrictions exist today regarding gifts made to public officials.)

- While the national flower debate is settled, participation in government affairs will always continue. Can you draw any inspiration from Burpee's work to advocate for causes or legislation that you are passionate about?

Keep Growing

Keep the conversation going with more activity ideas from Smithsonian Gardens.

Create: Draft a proposal for another national symbol. Explain why your national symbol should be adopted and list communication strategies for how you would persuade the public and Congress to adopt your symbol.

Compare: The Burpee Company archives includes materials published by groups that supported other flowers for the national floral emblem. Examine the materials in support of corn and grass. How do the arguments their supporters make compare to Burpee's arguments for the marigold?

Materials:

Background

Investigation Introduction Slides

Main Activity

Graphic Organizer

Document Set 1

Document Set 2

Document Set 3

Document Set 4

Optional Keep Growing Activity

Document Set 5

Background Information:

The Burpee Seed Company

W. Atlee Burpee & Co. is a seed company founded in Philadelphia in 1876 that grew to become one of America's largest mail order companies. It sold vegetable and flower seeds to retailers as well as to home gardeners and farmers in the U.S. and internationally. Part of its fame came from its several trial farms where workers bred and tested new varieties of plants. Under its founder, W. Atlee Burpee, the company sold mostly vegetable seeds; when David Burpee took over after his father's death the company focused more on selling flower seeds. The company is still in existence, now owned by George J. Ball, Inc.

National Symbols

National symbols are representations of a country, meant to evoke feelings of unity and pride and often incorporate a country's history, values, and resources. National symbols can stir up different emotions for different people.

The earliest American flags featured Britain's Union Jack in the upper left corner along with thirteen red and white stripes. The Continental Congress approved a new American flag with a star pattern in the upper left corner as a national symbol in 1777. The bald eagle became a national symbol as part of the Great Seal of the United States in 1782. A joint resolution of Congress made "The Star-Spangled Banner" the U.S. national anthem in 1931, signed into law by President Herbert Hoover. President Barack Obama approved the American bison as the national mammal in 2016.

The process for naming a new national symbol is the same as that for passing any new federal law: a congressperson must introduce a bill in the House of Representatives or Senate, and a committee convenes to discuss it and put it before the members for a vote. That bill must pass both the House and the Senate, then the President must sign it into law.

While David Burpee was successful in getting Senator Everett Dirksen (R-IL) to introduce a bill in the Senate to name the marigold the U.S. national floral emblem and Representative Willard Curtain (R-PA) to introduce it in the House, both bills stalled in committee, and Congress never voted on whether to adopt the marigold as the national flower. That honor ultimately went to the rose, signed into law by President Ronald Reagan in 1986, six years after David Burpee's death.

Lobbying in the United States

The right to petition the government is protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution, while the tradition of trying to influence politicians, whether on one's own behalf or on behalf of a company or other organization, is as old as America itself. The word "lobby" refers to the lobbies in the halls of the British Parliament where people waited outside the deliberation chambers attempting to persuade legislators as they entered or left the premises.

Lobbying was mostly unregulated in the U.S. until the eve of World War II, when fears of Nazi propagandizing led to the Foreign Agent Registration Act which required non-U.S. lobbyists to disclose their relationships with American politicians. The 1946 Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act required lobbyists to register with Congress and submit records of payments they received as well as their expenditures. *United States v. Harriss* in 1954 clarified that the 1946 act only covered paid lobbyists who met in person with politicians.

A 1995 act further defined what constitutes lobbying, and the 2007 Honest Leadership and Open Government Act required more disclosure reports and narrowed restrictions on gifts lobbyists can give to members of Congress.

Vocabulary:

emblem – a design or object that represents something. A symbol.

hybrid – a cross between two different varieties of a plant. Some plants hybrids occur naturally. When people formulate hybrids it is usually for the purpose of creating or enhancing a desired trait, such as producing different flower colors, sweeter fruit, larger or smaller growth, better disease resistance, better tolerance for strong shade or sun, etc.

lobby (verb) – to attempt to influence the votes or actions of a public official.

About the Archives of American Gardens

The [Archives of American Gardens](#), managed by Smithsonian Gardens, offers the public access to a collection of tens of thousands of photographic images of historic and contemporary gardens as well as records that document the work of landscape architects, garden designers, photographers and a handful of seed companies, including W. Atlee Burpee & Co. Records in this archives help trace the history of a wide variety of topics



Smithsonian Gardens

ranging from gardening, art and design, and foodways, to business, advertising, photography, and daily life.