



American presidents are traditionally associated with Air Force One, the State of the Union, “Hail to the Chief” and the West Wing. Historically, though, there’s also the tradition of – yes, really-big wheels of cheese.

Mammoth Cheese, a presidential gift



The tradition began in 1802, when president Thomas Jefferson was gifted a giant cheese from the residents of Cheshire, Massachusetts. The Cheese was the idea of Baptist Elder John Leland, a Jefferson supporter in the fraught election of 1800 in which Jefferson (a Republican) defeated John Adams (a Federalist).

Mammoth

The cheese was made from the milk of 900 immaculate Republican cows and pressed in an oversized cider press. When finished the cheese weighed 1235lbs and was inscribed with the patriotic motto “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God”. The cheese was shipped to Washington by sleigh (pulled by six oxen), sloop, and wagon.

The cheese arrived on December 29, 1801, and Leland himself was on hand to present it, pointing out – somewhat uncomfortably for Jefferson who owned slaves – that the cheese “was produced by the personal labor of freeborn farmers and with the voluntary and cheerful assistance of their wives, and daughters, without the help of a single slave”.

The giant Jeffersonian cheese was the first object to have the word “mammoth” applied as an adjective (Jefferson’s Mammoth Cheese). The first complete mammoth skeletons had recently been unearthed in a marl quarry in Newburgh, New York, and were on display in Charles Willson Peale’s Philadelphia Museum – where audiences were so excited that the word “mammoth” was soon used to describe something huge.

The mammoth cheese was displayed in the entrance hall for two years. The cheese lost its good smell, or rather started to smell, and was then put in the East Room of the White House. The visiting public was invited to cut and eat as much as possible.

The poet Thomas Kennedy was so impressed that he composed an ode of eight verses, beginning with ‘Most excellent, far fam’d and far fetch’d Cheese!’. The painter Peter Waddell even painted ‘The Great Cheese’ in the East Room.

It’s not clear what eventually happened to the cheese, though Jefferson’s guests still appear to have eaten the cheese a year later. According to one story, its remains were eventually thrown into the Potomac River.



A tradition is born

But pouring a great cheese didn't stop there. An even bigger cheese arrived at the White House in 1835, a gift to President Andrew Jackson from Colonel Thomas Meacham of Oswego County, New York. Meacham wasn't a fan of Jackson, but he hoped the cheese would serve as an advertisement for his home state's exceptional industry and ingenuity. Meacham's cheese, which weighed more than 1400lbs, was paraded through New York in a wagon decorated with flags; then shipped to D.C. via schooner.

Jackson, like Jefferson, displayed his cheese in the East Room and served it to a crowd of 10,000 people on Washington's birthday in 1837. The cheese would be a hit, despite its powerful scent ("so strong as to overpower a number of dandies and

lackadaisical ladies", according to The Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics).

As the 19th century progressed, ever-larger cheeses became a feature of exhibits and agricultural fairs, often ceremonially cut by a prominent public figure.

In the year 1911, President William Howard Taft cut a six-ton cheese at the National Dairy Show. "The grandfather of all cheeses made, manufactured or invented since the beginning of the world", said Walton Williams of The Daily Times, a Pennsylvania newspaper, on October 16, 1911. Today, twice in January, the White House sponsors Big Block of Cheese Day, a holiday inspired by both Andrew Jackson's democratically shared cheese and a cheese promotion episode of the hit political TV drama The West Wing.

In the town where it all started, Cheshire, Massachusetts, stands a monument in honor of the original Cheese Press. In fact, this year, the historic event inspired a full-size replica of the Mammoth Cheshire Cheese – 4 feet in diameter and 18 inches thick.



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