



## Uncle Sam Is Alive and Well in New Hampshire

Thanks to a wonderfully patriotic French couple, Jean-Pierre and Cecile Mouraux, Uncle Sam has been saved from multicultural oblivion and is now living and thriving in the very farm house in Mason, New Hampshire, where the original Uncle Sam spent his boyhood. When Cecile and Jean-Pierre, who had been collecting Uncle Sam posters, found out that the house was for sale, they bought it and turned it into the Uncle Sam Museum.



It seems odd that a French couple, who settled in California in 1979, would adopt Uncle Sam, America's unique icon, representing the spirit and pride of America, and make Americans once again aware of this great symbol's significance. But they didn't start out with this idea. They came to America to create their own American dream, which had its incredible ups and downs.

Their first enterprise, in which they invested their savings, was a tour guide company, specializing in providing French and French speaking visitors with a complete tour service. Their goal was to have them discover and love America, especially California and the Bay Area. They did a thriving business until a new Socialist government in France limited what French tourists could spend abroad: \$200 a year per person. That killed their business. In a short time they were flat broke.

But they found an immediate solution to the problem of survival: baby-sitting. At first they earned \$2.00 an hour. But soon Cecile found a customer who also needed house-cleaning. That enabled Jean-Pierre to contribute his special talents. He says, "My years in the French Navy taught me everything, especially scrubbing and scouring." They were now earning \$6.00 an hour. They soon became well-known among San Franciscans as expert house-cleaners and were soon involved in commercial maintenance on an ever increasing scale. Indeed, they had to hire employees.

Two years later, another opportunity came their way. Many of their customers had pets, cats or dogs. Jean-Pierre loved animals, and soon he was asked to watch them on weekends or when they went on vacation. This led to the idea of opening a hotel for cats and dogs. They were lucky to find a farm in Sonoma, and Happy Pets Inn was born. They sold their cleaning business and bought an adjoining house. Jean-Pierre writes:

To decorate this new house, I bought an original poster picturing cats. There may have been a virus in this old piece of paper because our "cats and dogs" poster collection is now reaching 300 original lithographs. Captivated by the graphic arts, I decided to study and became an expert in vintage and antique prints and posters....I opened an art and poster gallery. And once again,



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chance struck. We compiled a collection of World War I posters, with among them the famous Uncle Sam "I Want You." I wanted to know more about Uncle Sam and his origins. After asking the question "Who Was Uncle Sam?" thousands of times I found out that most people thought that Uncle Sam was a fictitious character. One of my customers told me that he learned that Uncle Sam was a real person who was born in Arlington, Massachusetts, close to Boston. We decided, on one hand, to start collecting and specializing in Uncle Sam prints and posters, and on the other hand, to engage in the search of the real Uncle Sam.

Jean-Pierre found out that the original Uncle Sam was a patriot named Samuel Wilson (1766-1854), born in Arlington, Mass., who moved with his family to Mason, New Hampshire, in 1780. Samuel's father bought the house and farm in April 1780, and it remained in the family's hands until 1906.

In 1790, Samuel Wilson moved with his brother Ebenezer to Troy, New York, where they started brick-making and meat-packing businesses. Both enterprises were a great success. During the War of 1812, Samuel shipped barrels of meat to the U.S. Army via Hudson River steamboats. The barrels on the dock were stamped E.A., the initials of the buyer Elbert Anderson, and U.S., the initials of the seller. When Wilson's foreman was asked what the U.S. stood for, he said it stood for Uncle Sam. And that's how Samuel Wilson became identified as Uncle Sam.

In 1816, in order to help his younger brother Nathaniel open his own business, Samuel moved to Catskill, New York. He remained there until 1822. The Uncle Sam Bridge was named for Sam Wilson. Back in Troy, Samuel helped make the city a prosperous and progressive community, for which he was much loved. He died in Troy in 1854.

Through his research, Jean-Pierre found that the Wilson family had been very much involved in America's War of Independence. Eight-year-old Samuel had acted as a messenger to bring vital information to Dr. Joseph Warren prior to Paul Revere's historic ride. By the time Edward Wilson acquired the Mason property in 1780, two of his older sons had already joined the Continental Army of General Washington at Valley Forge.

How Samuel Wilson, the original Uncle Sam, became an icon representing America and the American government is the story of how a man becomes a symbol or a myth that achieves a life of its own. But what is important to remember is that Uncle Sam was a real person, and that it was his benign, entrepreneurial, and patriotic character that made him into a symbol of everything that is good and patriotic of America.

Meanwhile, Cecile and Jean-Pierre Mouraux are the kind of immigrants who have taken advantage of all the opportunities America still offers to those willing to work hard and purposefully to achieve what we like to call the American dream. This could have never happened in any other country. Their story is one that every American student should read about because it demonstrates what people can do when they are down and out but still have their health, their brains, and their imaginations. But none of that would have mattered if they had not also had the desire to work at whatever jobs they could find. They knew what they had to do and did it.

Who could have predicted that they would one day become the custodians of the Uncle Sam symbol and its enormously interesting mythology. You can never predict the unpredictable. Which is what makes America the most interesting country in the world. That's why when we speak of America's exceptionalism, we are speaking of a country where the unpredictable can become reality. But it takes courage and human ingenuity to make the impossible happen.



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Who could have predicted that we'd go from the Wright brothers' primitive flying machine to a jumbo jet in less than a hundred years? Who could have predicted that we'd go from a flickering moving picture machine to YouTube in less than a hundred years?

While Cecile and Jean-Pierre were learning more and more about Uncle Sam in California, back in the East a fellow by the name of Fred Polnisch, a member of an Uncle Sam Barbershop Quartet, was taking part in the annual Uncle Sam Day Parade in Troy in 1992. His fellow members asked him to dress up as Uncle Sam, which he agreed to do. "I had the tall, lanky build for it," he says. He was so successful at portraying this great American symbol, that he retired early from his engineering job at General Electric and became a real-life Uncle Sam, appearing in parades, entertaining kids in schools, speaking at civic functions.

"I feel that I am promoting the American way," says Polnisch who enjoys educating Americans about their illustrious history. He now has three grown children and six grandchildren who are no doubt thrilled to have Uncle Sam as their granddad. Fred can also be found on special occasions at the Uncle Sam Museum in Mason.

Why did this French couple become so passionately involved with this unique American symbol? Their answer: "Because we love this country, which allowed us to succeed as no other country would have." Also, they remembered how American doughboys during World War I helped save France from the Germans, and how 27 years later liberated France from the Nazis. Numerous white crosses all over France attest to the sacrifice of these young Americans, and for this Cecile and Jean-Pierre are forever grateful.

Of course, every student of American history remembers the contribution that France and Lafayette made to the success of the Revolutionary War. And that is why Americans and the French have always enjoyed a special relationship. It took more than Julia Child to keep it going. It also took Cecile and Jean-Pierre Mouraux's devotion to an American legacy in the form of Uncle Sam as their unique way of honoring the country they've adopted and love. And they've done it in a way that no other Americans could have done. And for that we are truly grateful.



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