

# **“Creative Conservation:” The Environmental Legacy of Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson 1963-1969**

## **Table of Contents**

<b><u>LBJ and the Texas Hill Country</u></b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Overview</b>	<b>5</b>
Activity: Sense of Place and LBJ’s Texas	6
Great Depression and Activity	22
Rural Electrification and Activity	28
TEKS	28
Sources	35
<b><u>The Great Society Responds to the Environmental Crisis</u></b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Overview</b>	<b>38</b>
The Environment and the Great Society	39
LBJ’s Environmental Legislation	40
Activities & Additional Resources	41
TEKS	45
Sources	56
<b><u>Lady Bird Redefines Beauty</u></b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Overview</b>	<b>57</b>
The Environment and the “Great Society”	58
Lady Bird’s Beautification Projects	59
Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center	60
Activity	61
TEKS	70
Sources	75
<b><u>LBJ Expands the National Park System</u></b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Overview</b>	<b>78</b>
LBJ’s Contribution to the NPS	79
Activity	80
TEKS	87
Sources	93

## **“Creative Conservation:” The Environmental Legacy of Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson 1963-1969**

### **Lady Bird Johnson Redefines Beauty**

#### **Overview Providing Context to Educator**

Lady Bird is regarded as a major inspiration for the environmental movement that began during her husband’s presidency. Lady Bird was an environmentalist before the term was coined.

She said while First Lady,

*The environment is where we all meet, where we all have a mutual interest; it is the one thing all of us share. It is not only a mirror of ourselves, but a focusing lens on what we can become.*

— Speech at Yale University, White House Diary, Oct. 9, 1967.

For a warm-up activity, ask students to read the quote with a partner and write down their interpretation.

Mrs. Johnson and the President both felt that beautification went hand in hand with the “War on Poverty” and the various environmental battles he was waging. In his “Special Message to the Congress on Conservation and Restoration of Natural Beauty,” delivered on February 8, 1965, the President called for the Congress to act to “salvage the beauty and charm of our cities.” Lady Bird said in her book, *Lady Bird Johnson: A White House Diary*, that combining her husband’s “Great Society” agenda with beautification was “like picking up a tangled skein of wool—all the threads are interwoven—recreation and pollution and mental health, and the crime rate, and rapid transit, and highway beautification, and the war on poverty, and parks—national, state, and local.” This kind of thinking is de rigueur today; but was cutting edge in its time.

**Over fifty major initiatives related to conservation and beautification were passed during Johnson’s presidency.** President Johnson thanked his wife on July 26, 1968 for her dedication by presenting her with 50 pens used to sign these laws. LBJ also gave his wife a plaque that read: “To Lady Bird, who has inspired me and millions of Americans to try to preserve our land and beautify our nation. With love from Lyndon.”

During her husband’s time in office, her major efforts focused on improving Washington D.C., believing that beautifying the dilapidated nation’s capital could become an example to other cities across the country. The Johnson White House was the most active administration in conservation since the time of Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt, in no small part due to the efforts of Mrs. Johnson.

## **“Creative Conservation:” The Environmental Legacy of Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson 1963-1969**

### **The Environment and the “Great Society”**

In the speech introducing the ideas relevant to the “Great Society” at the University of Michigan commencement on May 22, 1964, the President called on the government and citizens to renew man’s contact with nature, reminding those in the audience that, “we have prided ourselves on being not only America the strong and America the free, but America the beautiful.” The idea of “quality of life” was a key theme in Johnson’s vision for a “Great Society.” Although racial equality and the elimination of poverty were the primary goals of the program, Johnson felt that environmentalism, especially where it concerned pollution and degradation of the natural and urban environments also should be included in working toward the goals of a better America that the “Great Society” envisioned.

Lady Bird Johnson said,

*“Too often we have bartered away not only the land, but the very air and water. Too often we have sacrificed human values to commercial values under the bright guise of progress. And in our unconcern, we have let a crisis gather which threatens health and even life itself ... Today, environmental questions are matters for architects and layman alike. They are questions, literally, of life and death. Can we have a building boom and beauty too? Must progress inevitably mean a shabbier environment? Must success spoil nature’s bounty? Insistently and with growing volume, citizens demand that we turn our building to a sensible, human purpose. They are asking, literally, for a breath of fresh air.”* — B.Y. Morrison lecture at the American Institute of Architects annual convention in Portland, Oregon. June 26, 1968

— B.Y. Morrison lecture at the American Institute of Architects annual convention in Portland, Oregon. June 26, 1968

Share the above quote with students to give an idea of Lady Bird Johnson’s commitment to the environmental cause.

## **“Creative Conservation:” The Environmental Legacy of Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson 1963-1969**

### **Lady Bird’s Beautification Projects**

One of Lady Bird’s most successful efforts at “beautification” was focused on the nation’s capital, Washington, D.C. The city was plagued by “white flight” and growing slums. In 1964, Mrs. Johnson formed the Committee for a More Beautiful Capital and in early 1965, with the support of wealthy philanthropists, found the Society for a More Beautiful Capital.

She felt that the nation’s capital would serve as an example of what could be done through combined efforts to create a more attractive cityscape for citizens. Through the Committee’s efforts, flowers and plants greeted the nation’s visitors all around the tourist attractions.

These endeavors were combined to help local groups clean up and improve their neighborhoods. Under Lady Bird’s efforts over 800,000 daffodils were planted in addition to thousands of Japanese Cherry Blossoms donated from Japan. Beautification was redefined to include preservation of local historic buildings, and the rehabilitation of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers. Numerous parks and recreational areas were improved and developed.

LBJ said of her efforts, “ Whey they [Mrs. Johnson’s Committee] improve some neighborhood parks, when they plant an avenue of flowering trees...I think their shovels—their shovels dig dep into the future of this land because those shovels while digging deep are really changing the lives of our children...” (Remarks by the President at a Reception for the Members of the Citizens Advisory Committee on Recreation and Natural Beauty 29 1968)

Perhaps *the* biggest initiative, ultimately resulting in legislation, was Lady Bird Johnson and her committee’s endorsement of the national highway beautification program which was intended to clean up and upgrade America’s highways with more natural, greener appeal. Lady Bird traveled on numerous highways to and from Texas and Washington, D.C. for decades by the time she was First Lady. While some highways were pleasant-looking thoroughfares, others were had become heavily commercialized, littered, and cosmetically ugly.

In 1965, the President’s and First Lady’s potent powers of persuasion, and that of numerous other individuals, Cabinet departments, and environmental lobbying groups forced Congress into action. The Highway Beautification Act of 1965 was finally passed after much debate over its merits and flaws. This legislation sought to limit and control business billboards and promoted eliminating or cleaning-up junkyards along major federal highways. The bill also encouraged implementing anti-littering and dumping programs in the states along roadways. Lady Bird encouraged planting wildflowers and trees on highway borders and medians

## **“Creative Conservation:” The Environmental Legacy of Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson 1963-1969**

### **The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center**

After President Johnson’s death in 1973, Lady Bird continued her involvement in conservation issues and the environment. She especially loved native plants and in 1982, along with actress Helen Hayes, she established the National Wildflower Research Center in Austin, Texas. It was renamed in her honor in 1997, and is now administered through the University of Texas at Austin.

The Wildflower Center is an ongoing legacy of Mrs. Johnson’s great love of wildflowers and nature. She said, “Our Center works for more than the lovely blossoms in our open spaces. We are concerned for all of North America’s native plants, from the smallest sprout to the tallest tree.”

*My special cause, the one that alerts my interest and quickens the pace of my life, is to preserve the wildflowers and native plants that define the regions of our land-to encourage and promote their use in appropriate areas and thus help pass on to generations in waiting the quiet joys and satisfactions I have known since my childhood.* Lady Bird Johnson— AARP Convention Speech, 1992.

**Schools across America create gardens to teach sustainability, nutrition, and provide opportunities for outdoor learning. Below is a list of resources to help your school continue Lady Bird’s legacy of caring for the environment.**

#### **Resources:**

<https://slowfoodusa.org/school-gardens/>

<https://civileats.com/2010/01/19/school-gardens-across-the-nation/>

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cfs/school-gardens>

<https://www.sierraclub.org/lay-of-the-land/2017/01/leading-example-baltimore-students-put-work-their-school-garden>

<https://www.nps.gov/whho/planyourvisit/white-house-kitchen-garden.htm>

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**Activity:** Find the connection between Lady Bird's environmental work to the problems of the 1960s by analyzing the following two sources. Source: Archives at LBJ Library

**Document 1:** Japanese government agrees to donate thousands of Cherry Blossoms for planting in the nation's capital.

*File*

*EX-104*  
*GI 4*  
*CO 141*  
*PP 5/Johnson*  
*Lady Bird*  
*CM/TREES*  
*FG 145*  
*PA 2/W \**

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
March 3, 1961

THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR  
WASHINGTON

April 5, 1965

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

A flash from the beautification front!

At the opening of the Cherry Blossom Festival tomorrow the Japanese Ambassador will announce on behalf of Prime Minister Sato a gift of 3,000-4,000 cherry trees to be planted around the border of the grounds of the Washington Monument. Mrs. Johnson will accept the gift at the ceremony. We are preparing a suggested letter of thanks to Prime Minister Sato for your signature.

*Not sent to file on 4/12/65*

*[Signature]*  
Stewart L. Udall  
Secretary of the Interior

RECEIVED  
APR 9 1965  
GENERAL FILES

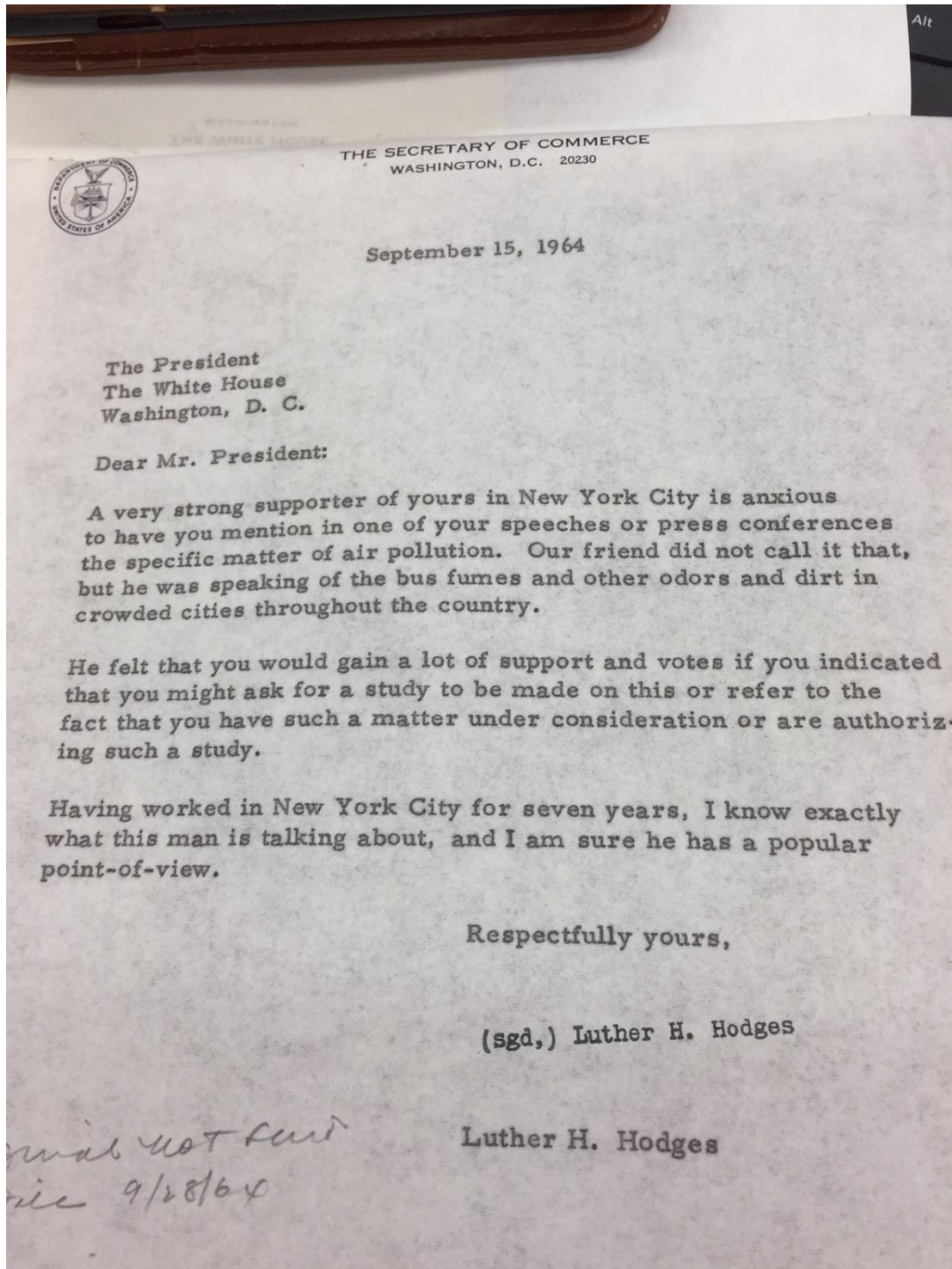
*copy in Permanent File*  
*" to Social Files*



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**Document 2:** Letter from Secretary of Commerce addressing Air Pollution in New York City.

Source: Archives at LBJ Library



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**For Context:** The following letters were sent to Mrs. Johnson in early 1965 inviting her to visit a housing project in Washington, D.C. The First Lady hosted plantings and encouraged overall “beautification” and improvement of the landscape and environment of the housing project. It was Mrs. Johnson’s hope that inspiring improvements to neighborhoods would benefit those living there, as well as the city as a whole.

**Activity:** Gallery Walk

Print out the following sources then post around the room.

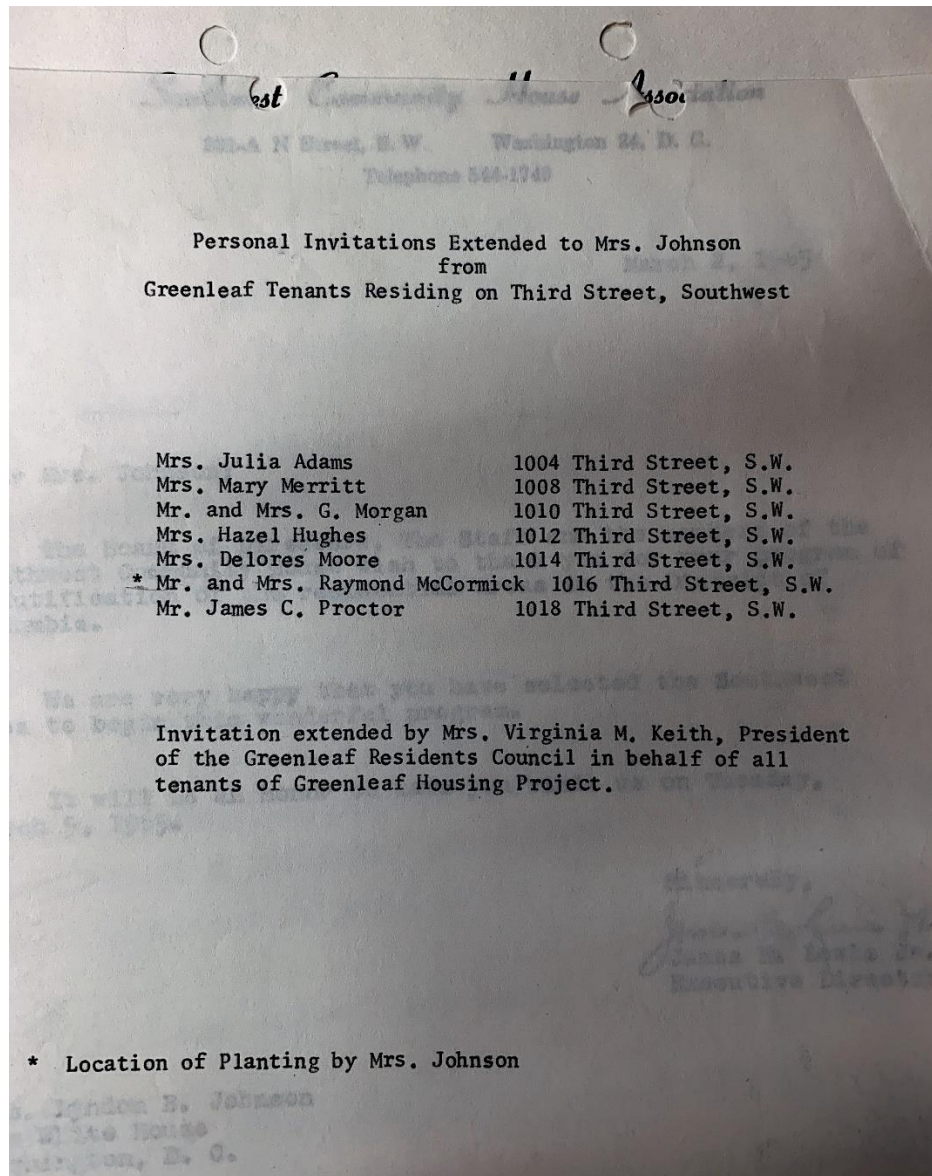
Students analyze each source for 8 min then answer the questions:

- What are your impressions of the letters?
- How do you think the residents really felt about having the First Lady visit?
- Could something like this happen today? If so, how would it be different?



## **"Creative Conservation:" The Environmental Legacy of Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson 1963-1969**

### **Source 1: Invitation to Lady Bird Johnson**



**"Creative Conservation:" The Environmental Legacy of  
Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson 1963-1969**

Source 2:

Mrs. Hazel Hughes  
1012 - 3rd ST. S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20024  
February. 26, 1965

Dear Mrs. Johnson,

IT is with Sincere pleasure THAT I Take  
in addressing This letter To you, IT is  
indeed a great honor and privilege To have  
you as a visitor here in "Green Leaf Gardens"  
I Sincerely hope That your visit with us  
will be most pleasant, I am The mother  
of eight Children, Ages 6 Thru 15, My  
family and I would be Truly delighted if  
we should receive a personal Visit from  
you. May happiness be yours always.

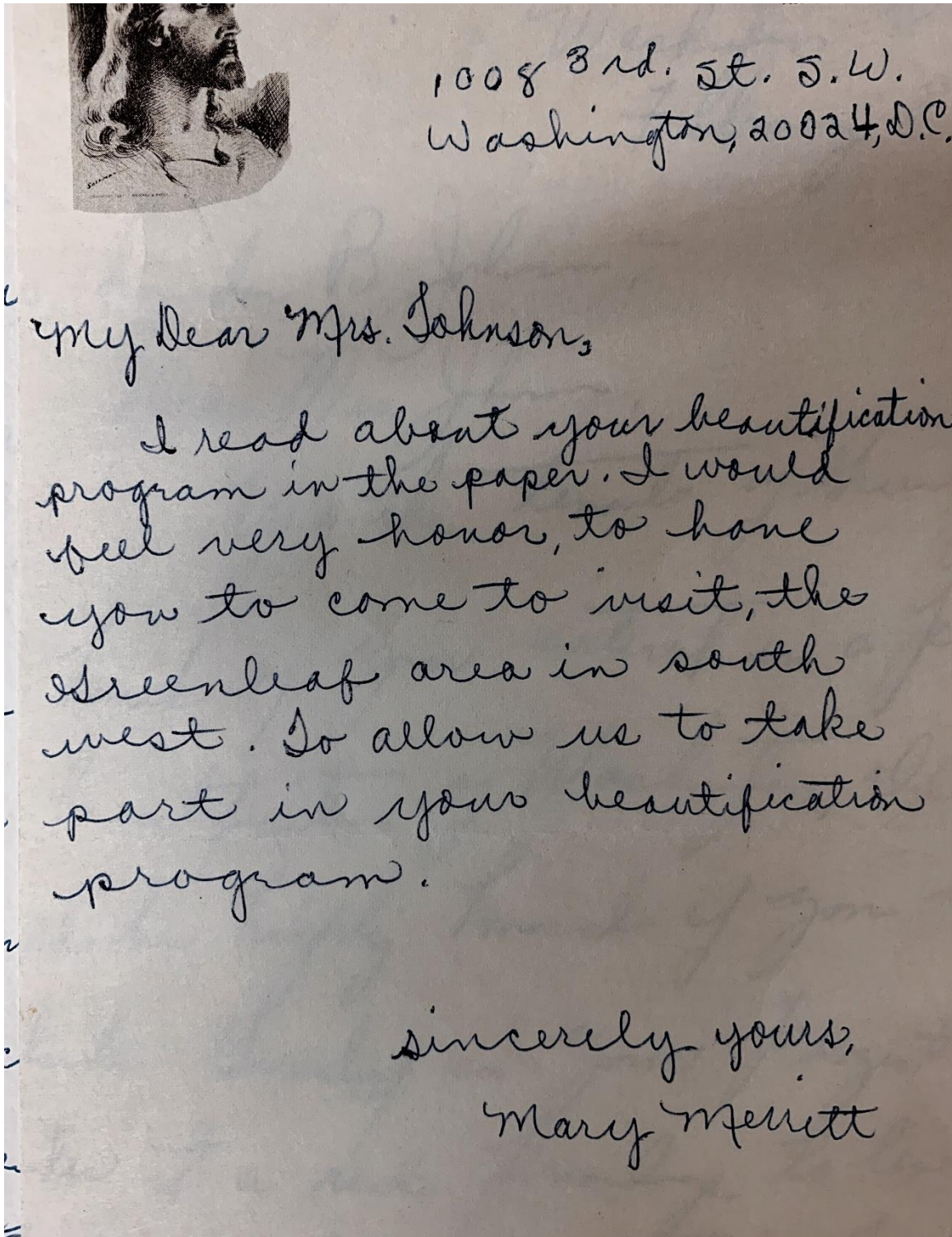
I am respectfully yours,

Mrs. Hazel Hughes.



**"Creative Conservation:" The Environmental Legacy of  
Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson 1963-1969**

Source 3:





**"Creative Conservation:" The Environmental Legacy of  
Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson 1963-1969**

Source 4:

Dear Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson,

My family and I have been  
a tenant of the Greenleaf Dwellings  
for six years. We have seven children.

I have read about the wonderful  
work you are doing to beautify the  
city. I am sure everyone in our  
dwellings will make you and  
everyone else, as well as myself  
proud of the work you have done.  
We will do our best to keep it  
up and make you feel your work  
has been worthwhile.

Sincerely yours,  
Mr. + Mrs. G. Morgan

1010 3rd St, S.W.



**"Creative Conservation:" The Environmental Legacy of  
Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson 1963-1969**

Greenleaf Gardens Housing Project  
201-7, Street S.W.

Washington D.C.

February 26, 1965

Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson;-

Dear Mrs. Johnson,

We the tenants of Greenleaf Gardens,

some thank of your interest in a plan for  
the beautification of Washington, D.C. We  
would be highly honored if you would  
include Greenleaf in your Project. We  
consider it a real privilege to live here  
in S.W. and be able to take part in  
building up a section of Washington, which  
we think will be a real show place in  
the future. So therefore we invite you



**"Creative Conservation:" The Environmental Legacy of  
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Visit us here, and see our home  
and this development. All good wishes  
go to you and President Johnson, and  
your daughters for all the good will  
and help you are offering to make  
Washington D.C. a city the whole Country  
can be proud of.

We remain  
Sincerely —

Virginia M. Keith (Pres. Res. Council)  
Rosalind B. Lewis (Project Manager)  
and

all Tenants of Green Leaf  
Gardens Housing Project

## **“Creative Conservation:” The Environmental Legacy of Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson 1963-1969**

### **TEKS 113.16. Social Studies, Grade 5, Adopted 2018**

#### **Knowledge and Skills**

**(5) History.** The student understands important issues, events, and individuals in the United States during the 20th and 21st centuries. The student is expected to:

(A) explain the significance of issues and events of the 20th century such as industrialization, urbanization, the Great Depression, the world wars, the civil rights movement, and military actions;

(C) identify the accomplishments and contributions of individuals and groups such as Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Cesar Chavez, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, the Tuskegee Airmen, and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team in the areas of civil rights, women's rights, military actions, and politics

**(8) Geography.** The student understands how people adapt to and modify their environment. The student is expected to:

(A) describe how and why people have adapted to and modified their environment in the United States such as the use of human resources to meet basic needs; and

(B) analyze the positive and negative consequences of human modification of the environment in the United States

**(18) Citizenship.** The student understands the importance of effective leadership in a constitutional republic. The student is expected to:

(A) identify past and present leaders in the national government, including the president and various members of Congress, and their political parties; and

(B) identify leadership qualities of national leaders, past and present.



## **“Creative Conservation:” The Environmental Legacy of Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson 1963-1969**

### **TEKS 113.17. Social Studies, Grade 6, Adopted 2018**

#### **Knowledge and Skills**

**(1) History.** The student understands the influences of individuals and groups from various cultures on various historical and contemporary societies. The student is expected to:

(A) identify and describe the historical influence of individuals, such as Lady Bird Johnson on various contemporary societies; and

(B) describe the social, political, economic and cultural contributions of individuals such as Lady Bird Johnson.

**(2) History.** The student understands the influences of individuals and groups from various cultures on various historical and contemporary societies. The student is expected to:

(B) identify and describe the historical influence of individuals, such as Lady Bird Johnson on various contemporary societies; and

(A) describe the social, political, economic and cultural contributions of individuals such as Lady Bird Johnson.

**(11) Citizenship.** The student understands that the nature of citizenship in various contemporary societies. The student is expected to:

(A) describe and compare roles and responsibilities of citizens in various contemporary societies, including the United States; and

(B) explain how opportunities for citizens to participate in and influence the political process vary among various contemporary societies.

Lady Bird Johnson is an excellent example from the U.S. for both points. She said, *Though the word beautification makes the concept sound merely cosmetic, it involves much more: clean water, clean air, clean roadsides, safe waste disposal and preservation of valued old landmarks as well as great parks and wilderness areas. To me...beautification means our total concern for the physical and human quality we pass on to our children and the future.*

*I slept and dreamed that life was beauty. I awoke and found that life was duty.*

*-- From Mrs. Johnson's embroidered bedroom pillows*

## **“Creative Conservation:” The Environmental Legacy of Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson 1963-1969**

### **TEKS 113.17. Social Studies, Grade 6, Adopted 2018**

#### **Knowledge and Skills**

**(18) Science, technology, and society.** The student understands the influences of science and technology on contemporary societies. The student is expected to:

(A) identify examples of scientific discoveries, technological innovations, and scientists and inventors that have shaped the world: such as Lady Bird and her work to reshape the environment and the country’s thinking about it.

(B) explain how resources, economic factors, and political decisions affect the use of technology; such as the choice that Lady Bird made to become an advocate for the environment and her husband’s proposed legislation to it; and

(C) make predictions about future economic, cultural and environmental impacts that may result from future scientific discoveries and technological innovations and how the mindset, work and impact of Lady Bird Johnson will affect those discoveries, especially her work to establish the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

## **“Creative Conservation:” The Environmental Legacy of Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson 1963-1969**

### **113.19 Social Studies, Grade 7, Texas History, Adopted 2018**

#### **Knowledge and skills.**

**(1) History.** The student understands traditional historical points of reference in Texas history. The student is expected to:

(A) identify the major era in Texas history, describe their defining characteristics, and explain the purpose of dividing the past into eras, including Texas in the Civil Rights Era; and Contemporary Texas; and

**(7) History.** The student understands how individuals, events, and issues shaped the history of Texas during the late 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The student is expected to:

(D) describe and compare the civil right and equal rights movements of various groups in Texas in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and identify key leaders in these movements such as Lyndon B. Johnson and his wife, Lady Bird.

**(12) Economics.** The student understands the interdependence of the Texas economy with the United States and the world. The student is expected to:

(C) analyze the impact of significant industries in Texas such as tourism to national parks on local, national, and international markets.

**(17) Economics.** The student understands the economic effects of government policies from World War II through the present. The student is expected to:

(D) identify the actions and outcomes of government policies intended to create economic opportunities for citizens such as the Great Society.

**(17) Citizenship.** The student understands the importance of effective leadership in a democratic society. The student is expected to:

(A) identify the leadership qualities of elected and appointed leader of Texas, past and present, including Texans who have been president of the United States, such as Lyndon B. Johnson

(B) identify the contributions of Texas leaders such as Lady Bird Johnson.

## **“Creative Conservation:” The Environmental Legacy of Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson 1963-1969**

### **113.41 United States History Studies Since 1877, Adopted 2018**

#### **Knowledge and Skills**

**(14) Geography.** The student understands the relationship between population growth and the physical environment the student is expected to:

(B) identify the roles of governmental entities and private citizens, like Lady Bird Johnson, in managing the environment such as the establishment of the National Park System, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the Endangered Species Act.

**(17) Economics.** The student understands the economic effects of government policies from World War II through the present. The student is expected to:

(D) identify the actions and outcomes of government policies intended to create economic opportunities for citizens such as the Great Society.

**(23) Citizenship.** The student understands the importance of effective leadership in a constitutional republic. The student is expected to:

(A) evaluate the contribution of significant political and social leaders in the United States, such as Lady Bird Johnson.

**(25) Culture.** The student understands how people from various groups contribute to our national identity. The student is expected to:

(D) identify the contributions of women such as Lady Bird Johnson to American society.

## **“Creative Conservation:” The Environmental Legacy of Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson 1963-1969**

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