

THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

CLASSROOM | 4-8 Lessons : “Making History at the White House”

The White House and Western Expansion

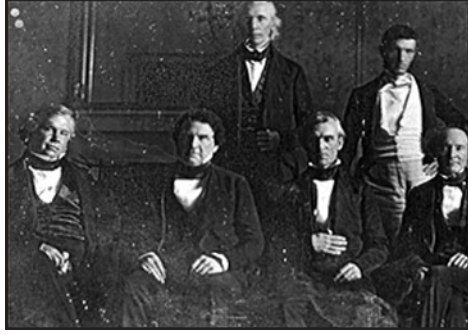
Jefferson’s Museum

Very little was known about the land west of the Mississippi River when Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809) became the third president of the United States. When Jefferson arranged to buy the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803, many said that the land was too expensive. Jefferson believed that most people would agree with the purchase if they knew more about the land. He was already preparing his secretary, Meriwether Lewis, to lead an exploration to map the new territory all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Jefferson taught Lewis natural science and math in his White House office, and sent him to experts in surveying, astronomy and botany. On July 4, 1803, Americans found out that Napoleon had sold the Louisiana Territory to the United States. The next day, Lewis left the White House on his journey. He and his partner William Clark sent back antlers, stuffed animals, Indian costumes, snakeskins and other items. Jefferson displayed them in the White House entrance hall, turning the President’s House into a museum. The public was invited to see these odd and curious artifacts. Another explorer, Zebulon Pike, sent back a live pair of grizzly bear cubs. Jefferson put them in a cage and placed them on the front lawn. In this way, Jefferson showed Americans that new and exciting worlds beyond the Mississippi were waiting to be discovered.

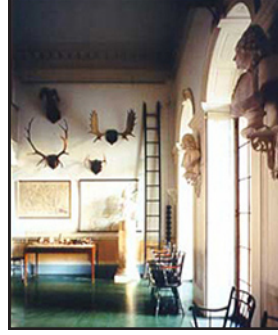
Polk’s War Message

In the 1840s, President James K. Polk (1845-1849) represented the views of Americans who wanted to add more territory to the United States. Much of what is now the southwest United States was gained in a war with Mexico while Polk was president. Mexico and the United States both believed that Texas was part of their country. Polk sent General Zachary Taylor and 3,500 men down to the Rio Grande River. On May 8, 1846, Polk met with his Cabinet at the White House and told them that if the Mexican army attacked the U.S. forces, he was going to send a message to Congress asking for a declaration of war. It was decided that war should be declared in three days even if there was no attack. When Polk went downstairs, members of Congress were waiting. They told the president the news that fighting had begun between Mexico and the United States. Polk closed the doors of the White House and carefully wrote his war message. It was delivered to Congress on May 11 and two days later Congress declared war against Mexico. As soldiers headed south, some stopped at the White House, where Polk greeted them and wished them luck. Eventually, the United States would add Texas, New Mexico and California as a result of the Mexican War.





James K. Polk (seated, second from right) and his cabinet, 1846. Collection of the James K. Polk Memorial Association, Columbia, Tennessee



Jefferson displayed Native American artifacts at the White House and, as pictured here, at his home, Monticello. R. Lautman / Monticello

Theodore Roosevelt, Conservationist

More than any other president, Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909) protected America's wilderness and natural resources. Although he was born and raised in New York City, Roosevelt was a great outdoorsman. He even spent time as a cowboy in the Dakota Territory as a young man. While he was president, Roosevelt established programs that protected America's forests and created parks. Roosevelt believed that natural resources should be used, but used wisely. He cautioned that Americans thought that the land, water, minerals and timber were "inexhaustible; this is not so." He set aside 150,000 million acres of forest in a preserve. While he was president, five national parks were created and the National Monuments Act of 1906 protected places like Devil's Tower in Wyoming. Roosevelt invited the all the states' governors and important conservationists to the White House for a meeting. This is known as the White House Conference on Conservation. Roosevelt praised the work of the group and invited them to meet in the East Room for three days in May 1908. The following month he invited representatives from other nations in the Western Hemisphere to another conservation conference.

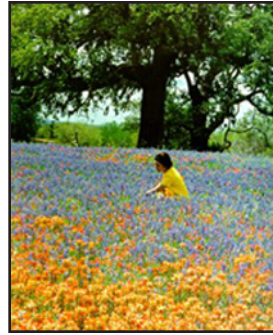


Lady Bird Johnson and American Beautification

By the 1960s, the nation had expanded to 50 states and Americans were no longer concerned about acquiring more territory. Instead they became worried that the beauty of much of America was being spoiled, and that natural resources were being used up. President Lyndon Baines Johnson (1963-1969) and his wife Lady Bird used the White House to help promote these causes. The Johnsons called themselves supporters of “the New Conservation.” They believed that the federal government should make sure that the air and water are clean. They also worked to improve the appearance of America. Mrs. Johnson’s special project was an effort to make the land along highways more attractive by tearing down billboards and planting wildflowers. She used the Blue Room of the White House to host her first meeting of the Committee on Beautification. Later, she invited guests to a larger White House Conference on Natural Beauty in 1965. The Johnsons attention to beautification and the environment made Americans more aware of the threat that growth and industry posed to the American landscape.



*Explorer John Muir (left) and Theodore Roosevelt at Yosemite, c. 1906.
Library of Congress*



Lady Bird Johnson sits amid wildflowers. Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

