



THE WHITE HOUSE  
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## WHITE HOUSE HISTORY | *Timelines : Architecture*

### 1790s

The President's House was a major feature of Pierre Charles L'Enfant's 1791 plan for the city of Washington. He envisioned a vast palace for the President, a house five times the size of the house which would be built. It was planned and constructed under the personal supervision of President George Washington.

### 1800s

After George Washington dismissed French engineer and architect L'Enfant for insubordination, the design of the White House and Capitol would be determined by separate architectural competitions in 1792. James Hoban, an Irish-born and trained architect then living in Charleston, South Carolina, won the design competition for the White House. Born in Kilkenny, Ireland about 1758, Hoban immigrated to the United States and worked as an architect and builder in Philadelphia and Charleston from 1785 until his move to the nation's capital in 1792. He spent the rest of his life in Washington and became a prominent figure in the building trades and served as a member of the City Council from 1802-1831. He died in Washington City in 1831.

### 1810s

Hostilities with Great Britain, begun in 1812, culminated in the invasion of Washington on August 24, 1814. British troops entered the defenseless city, where they ate a dinner prepared for the President at the White House, and then torched the building, destroying all but the outer walls. At the urging of President Madison, Congress decided to rebuild the public buildings in Washington rather than move the capital to another city. James Hoban returned to reconstruct the President's House as it had been before the fire. The weakened walls were dismantled to the basement level on the east and west sides and on the north except for the central section. Most of the carved ornamentation, bearing the scorch marks of the fire, was re-used. President James Monroe moved into a new house in the autumn of 1817.



## **1820s**

In 1792, James Hoban had proposed a south porch with doors opening to it from the three south parlors. It was never built. In 1817, Benjamin Latrobe drew proposals for north and south porticoes. These were not constructed until 1824 (the south portico) and 1829 (the north portico) and then under the supervision of James Hoban. Both porticoes (the south is really a porch) are made of Seneca sandstone from Maryland. Only after Andrew Jackson's election in 1828 did Congress appropriate the funds to build the north portico, which covered the driveway to serve as porte cochere. With the finishing of the porticoes the image of the White House as we know it today was complete.

## **1830s**

From the 1830s until 1902, changes to the main block of the White House occurred principally to its interiors. Andrew Jackson had furnished the East Room for the first time in 1829. Succeeding presidents and their wives periodically refurbished the house to reflect the changing tastes of their time. As the 19th century progressed and presidential families with children and other relatives crowded into a limited space, demands to move the offices increased. The ground floor was a utilitarian basement area of kitchens, storage rooms, furnace, servants' living quarters, and workspaces.

## **1840s**

The statue of Jefferson by French sculptor Pierre Jean David d' Angers was set up before the White House in 1848 on orders from President James K. Polk, who saw a parallel between himself and the earlier expansionist. The statue stood in the center of the lawn, which was cut and rolled and seasonally decorated with flower beds. Cut off from the driveway by a fence, this small garden was open to the public every day. This statue of Jefferson was moved to the Capitol building in 1873.

## **1850s**

James Buchanan, at the urging of his niece and White House hostess Harriet Lane, added a wooden greenhouse on the roof of the west terrace in 1857, adjacent to the State Dining Room. One could enter a private world of plants and flowers grown for decorating the house. This simple structure burned in 1867 and was replaced by iron and wood structure twice as large as the earlier one.

## **1860s**

Stables were an important part of early White House life. First located several blocks from the Executive Mansion, they were shifted around until the creation of greenhouses forced their removal in 1869 from the west colonnade to the area southwest of the President's Grounds.



## 1870s

In the 1870s and 1880s additional conservatories were added to the White House, including rose houses, a camellia house, orchid houses and a house for bedding plants. All were removed to construct the Executive Office Building (the West Wing) in 1902.

## 1880s

Chester A. Arthur, president from 1881 to 1885, found no charm in the White House and called on Louis C. Tiffany, a new lion of the world of fashionable interiors in New York to add his touch to the White House. “Twenty-four wagon loads of old furniture and junk from the White House” were sent to warehouse and sold in 1882. Tiffany worked in the East, Blue, and Red Rooms; the State Dining Room, and the transverse corridor, all on the state floor. By far the greatest cost of Tiffany’s redecoration was in artistic painting. Practically every surface was transformed with his decorative patterns and complicated glazing accented in the transverse hall and entrance hall by his trademark colored glass.

## 1890s

First Lady Caroline Harrison found the White House inadequate as a residence and supported a proposal for a major expansion of the complex that would include an art wing open to visitors. In 1890, Frederick Owen, an engineer and friend of Mrs. Harrison, created plans from her ideas for the expanded house that included an open court and a glass conservatory on the south front. Congress refused to fund the project.

## 1910s

One of Theodore Roosevelt’s earliest acts as President was to issue an order establishing the “White House” as the building’s official name. Previously, it had been called the “President’s House” or the “Executive Mansion.” This decision portended more serious discussion regarding the status of the house. In 1902, Mrs. Roosevelt asked the distinguished architect Charles McKim for his advice. His recommendations for a complete renovation of the house led to major changes in the interior and in the functioning of the building. It doubled the space allocated to the family living quarters, provided a new wing for the president and his staff, and a new area on the east for receiving guests. The White House and, with a few exceptions, much of the complex as we know it today reflects the design of 1902. This restoration preserved the White House as the home of the President.

## 1920s

The Rose Garden, nearly a century old and redesigned several times, retains the charm and flavor of early American gardens. Ellen Axson Wilson, first wife of Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) planted the first rose garden in the manner of 17th-century Italian gardens. A long, hedge bordered “president’s walk” was built to the executive office, along the Jefferson colonnade. The Rose Garden today reflects its redesign in 1961 for President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy. It functions as an outdoor space for gatherings and accommodates several hundred spectators.



## 1930s

The White House had always had an attic. Mrs. Woodrow Wilson added guestrooms and a painting studio for herself in 1913 in this space. A full third floor was not created until the Coolidge Administration, when problems with the roof structure were discovered. Recommendations were made to replace the old roof and 1817 timber structure. In 1927 William Adams Delano of the New York firm of Delano and Aldrich was called upon for advice. After studying Hoban's 1793 drawing, he increased the pitch of the roof and lowered the floor to accommodate new guest and service rooms beneath a steel and concrete roof structure. At Mrs. Coolidge's request, a sunroom facing south toward the river, the predecessor of the current solarium was added.

**(Part 2)** ... The term "West Wing" did not come into common usage until the 1930s. A "temporary office building" had been built in 1902 for the president and his staff, but Theodore Roosevelt continued to use an office in the residence as well. In 1909, President Taft had the West Wing enlarged and made permanent, adding an oval office. Herbert Hoover remodeled the wing and rebuilt it after a fire in 1929.

With the expansion of the staff in the 1930s, Franklin D. Roosevelt requested additional space, and the wing was completely rebuilt under the eye of Eric Gugler. He built a second story, excavated a larger basement for staff and support services, and moved the oval office from the south to its present location in the southeast corner, adjacent to the Rose Garden. The wing, doubled in size, has not seen further exterior alterations except for a small porte cochere on the north side, constructed in 1969.

## 1940s

At the request of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Lorenzo Winslow, a government architect assigned to the White House, prepared designs and supervised construction in 1942 of a new east wing. Jefferson and Latrobe's original east wing was torn down in 1866 because of its poor condition. In 1902 McKim constructed a new glass-enclosed wing on its foundations and created an entrance for social functions with a port cochere for guests and carriages. There were no changes to the wing for 40 years. The new east wing contained a formal entrance for guests, offices on the first and second floors, and an air raid shelter underground.

## 1950s

Soon after moving into the White House in 1945, President Truman noticed large areas of cracking in the plaster throughout the house. A structural survey revealed major problems caused by stress from the 1902 floor-bearing steel beams and the weight of the third floor and roof, all pressing against the inner brick walls. In 1948 Truman appointed a Commission on the Renovation of the Executive Mansion that decided to retain the original walls, the third floor and the roof, while removing and then reinstalling the interiors within a skeleton of steel structural beams on a new concrete foundation. In the end, little of the 19th-century or early 20th-century interiors were retained. Two levels of subbasements, and service areas under the North Portico were constructed, and the Grand Staircase was substantially changed. Of the state floor rooms, only the State Dining Room walls were reinstalled, but then were painted.



## **1960s**

A swimming pool installed in the west terrace for Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933 is replaced by the press center. A porte cochere is also added to the north side of the west wing.

## **1970s**

Since 1952, attempts to provide a sense of past history of the President's House and new research have resulted in decorative interior changes but no substantive architectural work. The preservation of the historic house and its contents has received high priority. Beginning in 1978, a study was begun to assess problems with the exterior paint. Successive layers—in some areas as many as 40—have been removed from each of the exterior walls. Following the removal of the paint, masons began repairing stone which had deteriorated over time.

## **1980s**

As the restoration of the stone walls of the White House entered its late stage in 1988, the White House in cooperation with the National Capital Region of the National Park Service and the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) began a five-year documentation project to record the exterior elevations as part of that project completed in 1993.

## **1990s**

In 1990 the American Institute of Architects in cooperation with the White House Historical Association sponsored HABS to record the interior architecture of the White House. The results of these two completed projects combined to create a comprehensive record of the historic main house. The updated drawings will be used for base documents for future renovation, restoration, maintenance, and interpretation of the house.

