



THE WHITE HOUSE  
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## WHITE HOUSE HISTORY | *Timelines : Decorative Arts*

### 1790s

In 1789, the U.S. government rented a house in New York City for President-elect George Washington and authorized funds to furnish it. An extensive list of objects purchased for the house included furniture, plates, looking glasses, linens, carpets, glassware, and china. When compared to the palaces of European monarchs, the President's House was simple, but few Americans lived on the scale of the Washingtons.

In February 1790, George and Martha Washington moved to a larger house near New York's Federal Hall. To supplement the government's purchases, the Washingtons also bought furnishings from Comte de Moustier, the French minister and previous occupant of the residence. When the government relocated to Philadelphia in 1791, the furnishings from the President's House in New York were moved there.

When John Adams took office in March 1797, Washington offered to sell him some personal items to complement the furnishings provided by the government. Having less personal wealth than Washington, Adams declined the offer and worried about moving into a sparsely furnished house. A congressional bill appropriating \$14,000 for new furnishings and another authorizing the sale of furnishings that were "out of repair, or unfit for use" eased his worries.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 19-26.

### 1800s

John Adams spent the majority of his presidency in Philadelphia, but later occupied the President's House in Washington, D.C., which officially became the new federal city on November 1, 1800. The house was unfinished, yet habitable, and the president and First Lady Abigail Adams made six rooms comfortable, and had others prepared for official entertaining using furniture shipped from Philadelphia. They purchased a portrait of George Washington for \$800, the only object remaining in the White House from the Adams period.



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Thomas Jefferson succeeded Adams and moved into a home that was still unfinished. Jefferson spent the majority of a \$25,000 appropriation on structural improvements to make the house habitable and purchased items that were utilitarian in nature: crockery ware, kitchen furniture, floor cloths, and window blinds.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 26-37.

## **1810s**

In 1809, James and Dolley Madison moved into the completed President's House that contained worn furnishings from past administrations. Mrs. Madison employed Surveyor of Public Buildings Benjamin H. Latrobe to refurbish the state floor, and he custom-designed furniture for the Oval Room.

On August 24, 1814, British forces invaded Washington, D.C. and set fire to the public buildings. The conflagration destroyed Latrobe's interior design for the state parlors along with all of the furnishings that had been purchased for presidential use since 1789. Dolley Madison saved the Washington portrait and some of the silver service. The responsibility of rebuilding and refurnishing the house fell to the new president, James Monroe, who took office in March 1817. His goal was to restore the dignity and grandeur of the President's House as a conspicuous symbol of a strong, united country. He ordered the elegant French Empire furnishings that are integral to the historic White House collection today.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 43-53.

## **1820s**

Reconstruction and refurbishing of the burned President's House continued into the 1820s. To refurnish the large house, President James Monroe exceeded funds appropriated by Congress and had even sold the government some of his own pieces to fill the rooms. He employed local craftsmen for some items, but imported most of the furniture from France. Few Americans had seen such grand objects, and visitors to the White House remarked on the splendor and elegance of vases, clocks, tables, gold centerpieces, and candelabrum.

John Quincy Adams took office in 1825 and found many of the house's ordinary furnishings to be in poor condition. However, in the wake of Monroe's extravagance, he needed to be conservative with the spending of public funds. As a consequence of the criticism of Monroe's foreign purchases, Congress enacted legislation requiring that furniture bought for the President's House would be manufactured domestically. As a result, Adams commissioned local cabinetmakers, among them M. Bouvier, great-grandfather of future first lady Jacqueline Kennedy, to create quality pieces for the President's House. Other items were bought at auctions and private sales.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 53-75.



## 1830s

Andrew Jackson's 1829 inaugural reception drew throngs of supporters to the President's House. Their exuberant descent on the house left a wake of broken china and soiled seat cushions. A \$14,000 appropriation was used to repair and refurbish the interior and replace the broken china and glassware. Additional funds were acquired to finish and then furnish the East Room with blue upholstered furniture and mahogany tables made in Philadelphia. During his second term, Jackson sold off old furniture to buy an elegant silver service. Andrew Jackson left the presidency in 1837 having spent \$45,000 for new furnishings, an enormous sum at that time.

Despite a severe economic depression triggered by a bank crisis in 1837, President Martin Van Buren purchased fine glassware, gilt-bordered tableware, marble tables, and large chandeliers. His White House took on a regal tone, and a guest referred to Van Buren as the "prince of Democracy". Notably, he replaced the crimson wall coverings and fabrics of the Oval Room with silver wallpaper and light blue satin. It would be called the Blue Room from that point forward. Criticism of Van Buren's aristocratic lifestyle would contribute significantly to his loss in the 1840 election.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 81-93.

## 1840s

The clamor over Martin Van Buren's perceived abuse of the furniture fund continued after he left office in 1841. Successor William Henry Harrison found the family quarters of the President's House lacking practical furnishings. Congress did approve \$6,000 for new furniture. However, Harrison died of pneumonia only a month after taking office. John Tyler moved in with seven children and invalid wife Letitia, who died in the White House in 1842. Tyler did not receive money for furnishings from Congress, and it was rumored that the president's second wife Julia Gardener used family funds to refurbish the house after their marriage in 1844.

James K. Polk received a \$14,000 appropriation for repairs, maintenance and furnishings at the start of his term in 1845. He entrusted William W. Corcoran, founder of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, as his agent for the furniture fund. Corcoran turned to fashionable New York merchants for goods for the President's House, such as forty-two purple velvet covered chairs bought for the State Dining Room, which remained until 1882. President and Mrs. Polk also purchased a rococo French dinner and dessert service decorated with the shield from the Great Seal of the United States.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 96-105.



## 1850s

During his short term as president, Zachary Taylor refurbished the second-floor family quarters, the area where Margaret Taylor, his ill wife, spent her time. Congress provided the standard \$14,000 for furnishings and Taylor purchased dressing bureaus, mahogany washstands, wardrobes, and beds for the family. When he died in July 1850, Millard and Abigail Fillmore moved into the house and successfully gained a special appropriation to establish a library in the second-floor oval room. Washington cabinetmaker William Cripps made mahogany bookcases, rosewood desks and other pieces for the new space. Fillmore loved gardening and also purchased a group of Rococo Revival cast iron garden settees.

Franklin Pierce arrived at the house in 1853, and received \$25,000 for the furniture fund, a larger than normal sum. Architect Thomas U. Walter supervised decorative work throughout the staterooms: new marble mantels, new wallpapers, gilded frames for various mirrors, and decorative fresco paintings on the ceilings. The Pierces also ordered a French porcelain dinner and dessert service with blue and gilt decoration, a large service of cut glassware, and several pieces of walnut and mahogany furniture among other things.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 111-119.

## 1860s

James Buchanan, our only bachelor president, chose his niece Harriet Lane to assume hostess and decorating duties. With a \$20,000 furnishings appropriation, Lane purchased a marble clock, serving ware, walnut furniture, china, lighting fixtures, carpets and a gilt-framed mantel mirror, all from Philadelphia. The Blue Room suite, imported from France by James Monroe, was long out of style and went to auction in 1860. It was replaced by a nineteen-piece, gilded Rococo Revival suite, of which a circular divan was the focal point.

When Abraham Lincoln moved into the President's House in 1861 the state floor and private quarters were in a "miserable condition." With the approach of Civil War, Lincoln paid little attention to furniture and decorating. He left the purchases to his wife Mary Todd Lincoln and despite a \$20,000 appropriation for furnishings the budget was exceeded. Two supplemental appropriations were needed to pay for a spending spree that included a French porcelain dinner and dessert service, carpets, French wallpapers, draperies, and an ornate, laminated mahogany bedroom suite that included the Lincoln Bed. Successor Andrew Johnson received funds to renovate the now well-worn furnishings and left the arrangements to his daughter, Martha Patterson. By the end of Johnson's tumultuous term in 1869, more than \$135,000 had been spent on the repair and renovation of the house.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 119-137.



## 1870s

War-hero Ulysses S. Grant, elected after a bitter war and the emotional impeachment of Andrew Johnson, spent two terms in the Executive Mansion. First Lady Julia Grant, with an initial \$25,000 appropriation, concentrated on refurbishing the family quarters and executive offices at the east end of the second floor. The Grants purchased Renaissance Revival style furniture with heavy crests, rounded pediments and angular scrolls. For the second term Congress appropriated \$100,000 for a major renovation project. In 1873-1874, the Grants supervised a major redecoration of the White House in preparation for their daughter Nellie's wedding to Englishman Algernon Sartoris. This makeover, epitomized by the Grant's East Room with its grand gas globe chandeliers became one of the premier interiors of the American Gilded Age (1877-1901). Throughout the staterooms, Herter Brothers, a renowned New York furniture maker, supplied sophisticated furnishings.

Rutherford B. Hayes controversial election in 1876 strained his relations with Congress and two years passed before they appropriated any money for furnishings. In the meantime, Hayes and his wife Lucy, both antiquarians, restored pieces of furniture they discovered in the attic and basement and purchased furnishings at auctions with their own money. The main expenditure of their administration was for a unique state dinner and dessert service decorated with American plants and animals purchased in 1879 for \$3,120.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 143-156.

## 1880s

James and Lucretia Garfield moved into the Executive Mansion in 1881. With \$30,000 from Congress, Mrs. Garfield made plans to refurbish the Green Room and ordered a set of ebony furniture. However, by the time it arrived President Garfield had been shot by a disgruntled office seeker and then died a few months later. His successor, Chester Arthur, did not occupy the White House until the house was redecorated to suit his tastes. The rooms were cleared of all damaged and unfashionable furniture. Twenty-four wagonloads of furniture and thirty barrels of old china were sent to auction. Arthur commissioned Associated Artists, of which Louis Comfort Tiffany was a partner, to makeover the house. No furniture was commissioned but stained glass, lighting fixtures, mantels, over mantel mirrors and decorative painting using gold and silver leaf in the style of the Aesthetic Movement were designed for the rooms.

Grover Cleveland and his young bride Frances Folsom bought a private home in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. to protect their privacy and only lived at the White House during the official social season. The Clevelands had the northwest corner room, their bedroom, repaired and ordered some chairs, a wardrobe, and a ladies writing desk to furnish it. Also, a special plush sofa was ordered for the space under the Palladian west window in the second-floor corridor where Frances Cleveland spent time relaxing and entertaining friends.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 156-172.



## 1890s

The extended family of Benjamin Harrison stretched the Executive Mansion's available living space to the limit and a number of beds were ordered to accommodate the family. Caroline Harrison was a life-long art student, and her interest in china painting led her to search the White House for old services. She had these repaired and preserved and can be credited with starting the collection of presidential china now displayed in the China Room. She also oversaw the refurbishing of the house after it was wired for electricity in 1891.

Grover and Frances Cleveland returned to the Executive Mansion in 1893. As before, they lived much of the time in a separate home for privacy. The Clevelands made few changes except to redecorate the Red Room with brighter red walls and a neo-classical frieze and to furnish the Cross Hall with a set of dark oak furniture. By the mid-1890s more flatware was needed for state dinners, and the first lady selected a high quality pattern of gilded silver with metal being provided by melting down old, miscellaneous White House flatware.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 172-176.

## 1900s

Increased coverage by the press and public interest in the lives of the White House families inevitably has led to writing about objects in the White House. Mrs. McKinley granted permission to Abby Gunn Baker to research and write the first history of the White House china. The McKinley's also refurbished the Blue Room in the Colonial Revival style—the first example of the style on the state floor.

Theodore and Edith Roosevelt brought significant changes to the White House out of the necessity of accommodating their six children. Under the direction of the New York architectural firm of McKim, Mead, & White, the second floor family quarters were expanded and the staff offices moved to a new west wing. A major goal of the 1902 Roosevelt restoration was to design and furnish the interior in harmony with its neoclassical exterior architecture in order that it would not be subject to changing fashion. McKim, Mead, & White designed Colonial Revival furnishings for the home, impressive chandeliers were installed in the East Room, and other furnishings were obtained to fill the house. Edith Roosevelt ordered new state china with a restrained pattern to serve 120: the capacity of the newly enlarged State Dining Room.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 176-197.



## 1910s

When President and Mrs. William H. Taft came to the White House in 1909, they didn't change the furnishings in any of the state rooms. The first lady replaced the Victorian furniture in the president's bedroom with Colonial Revival mahogany pieces and personal furnishings. The Taft's twenty-fifth anniversary was the major social event of their administration and among the many silver gifts they received was a Lenox tea service with silver overlay engraved "T" and "1886-1911."

Woodrow Wilson and his family entered the White House in 1913. First Lady Ellen Wilson, a strong supporter of mountain craftswomen, selected their textiles to decorate the second floor. She also redesigned the East and West gardens and purchased naturalistic limestone furniture for them. Ellen Wilson died in 1914 and in the following year President Wilson courted and married Edith Bolling Galt. The new first lady replaced many of the wall coverings, draperies and upholstery in the state floor rooms. Her lasting contribution was the establishment of the China Room in 1917 to display tableware. The Wilsons ordered the first American-made state service, a 1,700 piece made in Trenton, New Jersey by Lenox.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 197-202.

## 1920s

War and Woodrow Wilson's ill health kept the White House closed to the public for several years prior to Warren G. Harding's 1921 succession to the presidency. When he and his wife Florence moved in, they reopened the house immediately on an unprecedented scale, giving visitors and the press more access than ever before. Florence Harding did not want to spend government allocations on furniture for the family areas, and brought many items from their Washington home to furnish the White House. No significant acquisitions were made during the Harding administration. However, the Harding Memorial Association donated gilded glassware and examples of the Lenox dessert service owned by the Hardings.

Grace Coolidge, keenly interested in history, studied old photographs of White House rooms and was disappointed to find very few original furnishings in the house. She obtained a resolution from Congress to provide for the acceptance of treasured objects as gifts to a permanent collection establishing the White House as a museum. In 1925 an advisory committee of experts was appointed to evaluate and make recommendations on the décor of state rooms and to review offers of gifts. When she crocheted a coverlet for the "Lincoln Bed", Grace Coolidge hoped to start a tradition where each first lady would leave a memento of life in the White House.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 202-208.



## 1930s

Interest in the White House grew after President and Mrs. Herbert Hoover took up residence in 1929. Lou Hoover appreciated the historic importance of White House furnishings and introduced a collection of historical paintings, portraits, and objects into the Entrance Hall where visitors gathered before tours. The first lady also initiated a study to record all of the White House's historic objects. Mrs. Hoover created "The Monroe Room" on the second floor as a tribute to President James Monroe. This sitting room had been used as the historic Cabinet Room and a presidential study before 1930. Mrs. Hoover furnished the room (today's Treaty Room) with reproductions of several pieces of Monroe's furniture, a French mahogany table from 1817, and other Monroe-associated objects from the White House collection.

In 1933, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt moved into the White House in the midst of the Great Depression. In addition to two van loads of personal possessions the Roosevelts brought with them, the first lady ordered tables, a mirror, stool and bedsteads from the Val-Kill Furniture Shop. She co-founded the company in 1927 to provide employment for men in the Hyde Park, New York region. To accommodate the entertaining by the Roosevelts, a new state dinner service was ordered from Lenox and new glassware service was ordered. In 1938, Steinway and Sons donated a unique piano designed specially for the White House.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 208-213.

## 1940s

When America entered the second World War, it brought changes to Franklin D. Roosevelt's White House. On December 22, 1941, the Monroe Room became a temporary map room and office for wartime visitor British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

Harry S. Truman inherited the White House suddenly in the midst of World War II. The Truman family had time to settle in the White House just before serious structural problems forced them out in late 1948. Massive renovations and reconstruction of the house continued until 1952.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 213-218.

## 1950s

In the fall of 1950, more than a year before the Truman family returned, the Commission on the Renovation of the Executive Mansion discussed furnishing the house in either late 18th century Georgian style or early 19th century Federal style to celebrate the house's early history ...



**(con't)**

... However, rising construction costs limited the budget for new furniture and many pieces removed before the construction were reinstalled with the addition of some neo-classical reproductions. The most dramatic change in décor was in the State Dining Room where the oak-paneled walls were painted soft green. A new state service designed for the Truman's had a green border to correspond with the newly painted walls. The Trumans saw and approved all sample sketches for the state rooms and were especially involved in the interior decorating of the second and third floors. President Truman's 1952 televised tour of the house showed his immense pride in the results.

President and Mrs. Eisenhower moved into the newly renovated White House in 1953 and were impressed by its simple dignity. Since everything had just been renovated, Congress did not provide the \$50,000 given to each new administration in that period for furnishings and redecorating. Mamie Eisenhower took a great interest in the china collection and arranged for a Smithsonian Institution curator to research, identify, and rearrange the china in the China Room. She also accepted many gifts, among them a collection of gilded silver received in 1956 from Mrs. Margaret Thompson Biddle. In 1958 the Vermeil Room was created to display the pieces.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 220-225.

## **1960s**

In 1960, President and Mrs. Eisenhower accepted a donation of early 19th century American federal furniture for the Diplomatic Reception Room. This was the first successful attempt to furnish a White House room in the period of its earliest occupancy, and set the precedent of obtaining a museum-quality collection of furnishings for the White House.

When President and Mrs. Kennedy came to the White House in 1961, First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy was dismayed to find so few historic furnishings. She began an extensive program to revive the historic character of the White House. She formed a Fine Arts Committee to advise her on the acquisition of authentic period furnishings, and Lorraine Waxman Pearce was hired as the curator of the growing collection. Pearce authored the first guidebook published by the White House Historical Association. A call for donations by Mrs. Kennedy led to a great influx of authentic furnishings, among them three original chairs from Monroe's Oval Room and a chair made for the East Room in 1818. An Act of Congress in 1961 extended legal protection to these and all White House objects.

After the 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy, President and Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson inherited a White House whose state rooms were largely furnished with early 19th century pieces. In 1964, to continue the efforts of Jacqueline Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson issued an Executive Order establishing the advisory Committee for the Preservation of the White House and a permanent position for a White House curator.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 226-252.



## 1970s

When President and Mrs. Richard M. Nixon took up residence in 1969, the wear and tear of thousands of visitors and guests necessitated improvements to several rooms. In 1970, First Lady Patricia Nixon and the Committee for the Preservation of the White House began a program to furnish several of the rooms in high quality American decorative arts from the early 19th century. Major examples by cabinetmakers Duncan Phyfe and Charles-Honore Lannuier were acquired for the Green and Red Rooms. Acquisitions during the Nixon administration were substantial bringing hundreds of pieces of furniture, nineteen chandeliers, examples of china services from past administrations, and carpets among other things to the White House.

President and Mrs. Gerald Ford were in residence during America's bicentennial in 1976, and received several donations from patriotic citizens. Among these were pieces of James and Dolley Madison's French dinnerware and Edith Roosevelt's carved ivory fan. First Lady Betty Ford used examples from the historic dinner services for small, private dinners.

President and Mrs. Jimmy Carter demonstrated a deep appreciation for the history of the house. First Lady Rosalynn Carter concentrated on expanding the art collection and added important works such as George Caleb Bingham's 1847 Lighter Relieving Steamboat Aground. In 1979 Mrs. Carter helped create the White House Preservation Fund, which provides an endowment for new acquisitions and for the refurbishing of state rooms. That same year the only known surviving sofa from the French Monroe suite was given to the house.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 252-257.

## 1980s

When President and Mrs. Ronald Reagan came to the house in 1981, they continued to add furnishings with historic White House associations. Notably, two 1818 East Room chairs and a brass and ivory presidential seal used by Abraham Lincoln were acquired. The first lady was a great force behind soliciting contributions for an extensive redecoration of the private quarters and the maintenance of public spaces. Over 150 collection objects, the marble walls, wood doors and floors in the public rooms were conserved.

First Lady Nancy Reagan commissioned a new state dinner and dessert service that had 220 place settings, each with nineteen pieces. The large and expensive service was acquired with funds donated from a private foundation, but it was widely criticized at a time of federal budget cuts. Under the Ronald Reagan administration, the first comprehensive conservation survey of the White House furniture collection was conducted, and the American Association of Museums accredited the house as a museum in 1988.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 257-259.

## 1990s

President and Mrs. George H. W. Bush resided in the White House for the 1992 bicentennial of the laying of its cornerstone. First Lady Barbara Bush appointed curators and art



historians to a revived Committee for the Preservation of the White House. The committee established procedures to review objects for the collection and recommended the acquisition of a mahogany card table with Charles-Honore Lannuier's label. A sample of the Lincoln state porcelain service was donated, as were pieces of the Lincoln glassware. Barbara Bush also worked to activate the White House Endowment Fund under the White House Historical Association. The goal was to raise an endowment for acquisitions, the refurbishing of the public rooms, and conservation of the collection.

President and Mrs. William Jefferson Clinton moved to the White House in 1993. First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton continued to support the White House Endowment Fund, and through her efforts its 25 million-dollar goal was met in 1998. President Clinton appointed members to the preservation committee to broaden its expertise, and Mrs. Clinton sought its advice for the 1995 refurbishment of the Blue Room and the East Room. The Entrance Hall, Cross Hall and Grand Staircase were refurbished in 1997, and the State Dining Room in 1998. Many objects came into the collection during the Clinton years, including a pair of eighteenth-century mahogany chairs with a history of having been purchased in 1789 for George Washington's first presidential residence in New York.

Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 259-262.

## **2000s**

To celebrate the 200th anniversary of the White House, the White House Historical Association donated a set of special gifts to America's home: a pair of elegant 19th century French porcelain vases, a rare 19th century mahogany desk and bookcase, and a new state dinner and dessert service for 300. The cylinder secretary and bookcase is a sophisticated example of American Empire furniture built by an unknown master cabinetmaker in New York about 1830. The gilded porcelain vases, circa 1820, feature hand-painted images of George Washington and John Adams on one side. The reverse sides include gilded eagles derived from the Great Seal of the United States, along with the words "E PLURIBUS UNUM," all executed in burnished and matte gold.

The new state dinner and dessert service for 300 was used for the first time at a special dinner commemorating the 200th anniversary of the White House. The service incorporated designs inspired by architectural motifs in the State Dining Room, East Room and Diplomatic Reception Room.

In January 2009, shortly before President Bush completed his second term, First Lady Laura Bush introduced two new sets of White House china. The larger, gilt-edged service, consisting of 320 place settings, has a green basket-weave motif, intended to coordinate with any floral arrangement. The smaller service of 74 place settings, hand-decorated with magnolias and butterflies, is to be used in the private family quarters.

