

## One

# *At Home with the First Families*

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**I**n the history of the White House are the stories of first families. The study of the establishment of a home for the president and two-plus centuries of changes to the President's House offer insights on the occupants who lived there. So too does the study of the social history of family life in the White House provide a useful lens by which to assess the presidents and presidency. What explains why first families made certain changes to the building? What activities and hobbies were a part of family life in the White House? How did the presidential marriage and first family cope with the demands of living in this public home? The answers to these questions promise to inform our understanding of an array of issues surrounding the presidency, from character to decision making.

For instance, Warren Harding's poor choice in friends and minimalist work ethic might be better understood through his preoccupation with playing cards and gambling in the White House. Many of those who shared his card table and bets were involved in the Teapot Dome scandal and other downfalls of the Harding administration. The mind of Thomas Jefferson is revealed in part in his passions for botany, architecture, literature, and science, all of which he brought to the President's Home, indulging his intellectual and creative interests through such means as technical and aesthetic improvements to the building and the Lewis and Clark expedition. Insights to Herbert Hoover's character and style of governing might be gleaned from the distance with which he treated the White House staff, while Richard Nixon's practice of bowling alone in the White House while wearing dress clothing says a lot about the man.

Families have been a part of the presidency for nearly all of its history and many family members have been a viable part of the

institution of the presidency. The social history of the presidency and President's Home reveal the central role of members of the first family in both the institution and building. Edith Roosevelt regularly visited her husband in his office, Rosalynn Carter attended Cabinet meetings, and Sarah Polk followed closely the legislative business of the Congress. Dolley Madison's elaborate socials and popularity brought the Madison presidency political support. And the presence in the White House of their spouse, children, or grandchildren comforted the presidents during what was easily the most difficult times of their lives.

## A BUILDING "FOR THE AGES"

### *A Great Privilege and Responsibility*

In spite of the challenges of the presidency and loss of privacy coming from living in the White House, it is a special privilege for all who have called the building home. The White House is the most famous residence in the country, if not the world. On entering the White House, first families become a part of the building's powerful symbolism, whether they want to or not, and must be mindful that they are occupying a living museum. Living in the centerpiece of the nation's government and political system, it is not surprising that Nancy Reagan echoed the sentiments of many other first families when she said, "Nothing can prepare you for living in the White House."<sup>1</sup>

Monumental decisions have been made within the building's walls. This is a part of the history of the White House that challenges each new occupant, yet is a part of the institution of the presidency from which each president draws strength and esteem. It was in the building that Thomas Jefferson made the decision to acquire from Napoleon the Louisiana Purchase, greatly expanding the nation's borders, providing access to the important Mississippi River delta, and doubling the size of the young country at the bargain price of 15 million dollars. It was here that Abraham Lincoln wrestled with the weight of the nation and her people being torn apart by civil war. Franklin D. Roosevelt crafted his response to the Great Depression within the walls and hosted Winston Churchill to discuss the status of World War II. From the White House, Harry Truman managed the end of the war and the reconstruction of Europe under the Marshall Plan, John F. Kennedy took

the country to the brink of another world war during his showdown with the Soviets over the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the forty-first president, George Bush, watched the demise of the Soviet Union and decades of the Cold War come crashing down with the Berlin Wall.

### *A Grand Vision*

Known simply as *The President's House* upon its establishment—the name preferred by George Washington—the building has also been called the Executive Mansion throughout its history. It was not until Theodore Roosevelt decided to place the name *White House* on official letterhead in 1901 that the now-popular term become commonplace.<sup>2</sup>

The initial plans for a presidential house within a larger capital city date to the founding of the nation and reflect both the internal struggle over the vision of the new nation by its founders and the democratic principles embodied in that founding. These plans sought to erect a building unlike the ornate palaces of European leaders: An unpretentious home for the new democracy, yet one mindful of the need for legitimacy and befitting the aspirations of the new nation.<sup>3</sup>

George Washington, for whom the capital city was named, played a fundamental role in selecting the site and approving the plans for both the city and president's home. Authority for selecting a site for the capital city and president's house had been established in the Constitution and delegated to Congress. However, Congress authorized George Washington to make the decision with the support of a committee. Three commissioners were appointed in this capacity, all with ties to Washington and, interestingly, to the Potomac River as well. Essentially, it was George Washington's project from the start. The Resident Act of 1790 authorized the president to determine the site of the capital city and presidential residence. The same legislation relocated the seat of government from New York to Philadelphia.

Even though it was a region of swamps and sparsely populated forests, George Washington grew up and lived along the banks of the Potomac River and preferred this site to any other. New York and Philadelphia had lobbied hard to sway the committee and president, even building mansions in an attempt to become the permanent capital. But, by July 1790, Washington had selected the location near the Potomac River. In 1800, legislation would transfer the

location again to what is now known as the city of Washington in the District of Columbia.

The General wisely selected this neutral location, one neither north nor south, on lands ultimately ceded by Maryland and Virginia. Having lived in a mansion in New York City during the inaugural presidency, and later in a stately home owned by Robert Morris on Cherry Street in Philadelphia, Washington recognized the need for a spacious structure. Although the homes in both temporary capitals were large, comfortable, and considered to be grand residences, they were far too small for the needs of family, staff, office space, and social hosting. Washington would eventually approve the design for a large building, expand on the original size, and later even inspect the pace of construction.<sup>4</sup>

Washington had been working with the celebrated architect Charles L'Enfant to design the capital city and its public buildings. L'Enfant had arrived in the colonies in 1777 and joined the Revolutionary cause, even serving under Washington. During the encampment at Valley Forge, L'Enfant had even painted the General's portrait. Egotistical and arrogantly sure of his abilities and of his selection as the capital's architect, L'Enfant used his personal connection to Washington to promote himself. He even proceeded with his plans for the capital and president's house before final approval had been bestowed on him. With visions of grandeur, L'Enfant intended to carve out of the rural marshes a Roman-inspired city of wide avenues connecting to a central political mall. But by 1792, the French architect had succeeded in making enemies of most everyone he encountered, including a reluctant Washington, and was summarily relieved of his duties.<sup>5</sup>

L'Enfant's grand city "for the ages" remained a guiding influence for the design and construction of both the capital city and president's home. It was Washington, however, who selected the current location of the White House on account of the small hill and view it afforded.

At the urging of Thomas Jefferson, an open, democratic contest was held, inviting designs for the presidential home. The competition and design prize of 500 dollars drew a handful of applicants from the small pool of capable architects in the young country. Even if the contest was not truly democratic, as Washington used his influence to select his preference for the building, the symbolic nature of the establishment of what would become the White House sent a powerful message. Washington's choice from the entries was the plan submitted by Irish architect, James Hoban. Hoban had a

reputation as a competent designer of public buildings and his work in the city of Charleston, South Carolina, had caught the attention of many, including Washington. Hoban's design for the presidential house was a simple but elegant structure modeled after an estate in Dublin, Ireland, known as Leinster House.

Washington's vision for the city and home was on a grand scale and, from a contemporary perspective, proved to be practical and prophetic. Where Washington favored a large, stately stone structure, Thomas Jefferson—true to his vision of democratic simplicity for the young nation—made known his preference for a basic structure made of brick and hoped the competition would promote his plan.<sup>6</sup>

George Washington further extended his influence by amending Hoban's original design to include a larger, fancier house. However, with costs already too high for the cash-strapped nation, compromises were made in the plan and construction delayed by rain, mud, and a shortage of skilled workers and money. The number of floors was reduced from three to two and Washington's preferred stone structure was made of stone, along with brick and wood, the stone being used only for the bottom level and exterior façade. The building also incurred its share of criticism because of cost overruns and by those feeling the house was extravagantly large and undemocratic: "big enough for two emperors, one pope, and the grand lama," opined one sarcastic critic.<sup>7</sup> But with the considerable influence of George Washington, the sweat of slave labor, and skill of Scottish stonemasons, the cornerstone of the President's House was set down on October 13, 1792.

James Hoban continued to play a role in the building he designed, by supervising much of the construction. The General continued to monitor the progress of his vision during his second term in office in Philadelphia. The construction progressed slowly. At the conclusion of his presidency in 1797, Washington stopped at the construction site to inspect the building and city while on his way home from Philadelphia to Mount Vernon in Virginia. This would be Washington's last view of the unfinished site. Sadly, George Washington did not live to see his vision fulfilled. He died in December 1799, less than one year before John Adams moved into the home.

Although he was a visionary, it is doubtful Washington would recognize the home and city today. The cultural backwater of muddy streets, farms, and swamps has become a bustling city beyond even L'Enfant's dreams. In fact, most presidents serving prior to the start

of the twentieth century would scarcely recognize the home. Gone are the stables, smokehouse, and old stone wall. In place of the 82-acre "Presidential Park" established in 1791 by Congress is a 500-acre estate of immaculate landscaping surrounded by fences and security, a vast White House complex, and a major urban center. But George Washington would appreciate the enduring symbol the building remains after over 200 years.

## CALLING THE WHITE HOUSE HOME

### *Living over the Family Store*

With the rare exception of times of war, threats of terrorism, and major renovation projects, the White House remains open and accessible to the public several days a week. Tuesdays through Saturdays the public is permitted to tour the home and grounds and dignitaries, public officials, and privileged individuals are frequently invited to the White House.<sup>8</sup>

What they tour is both a public museum and private residence. Accordingly, first families lead two lives in the building, one private and the other public. They must find a way to live among the tourists and employees in a highly public home that houses an extensive office complex and is the center of national government. As Ronald Reagan quipped, the experience of living in the White House is like "living above the family store."<sup>9</sup>

Living space and office space in the building have often been intertwined. Historically, both were also insufficient for the needs of first families and the president. For instance, stairways in the mansion were public and first families going about their daily business in their home routinely passed tourists, presidential advisers, and visiting dignitaries. Such invasions of privacy were especially taxing on spouses and children of presidents who shunned the public eye, for they found it inescapable while living in the President's House.<sup>10</sup>

When Benjamin Harrison moved into the President's House in 1889, he did so surrounded by a large, extended family. The President delighted in the company of his grandchildren, most notably his favorite grandson, nicknamed Baby McKee. Advances in photographic technology around the time of Harrison's presidency, coupled with the photogenic first family, made Baby McKee an overnight sensation. It is likely he was the most photographed and well-known child in the country. The media coverage of Baby McKee

and public fascination with the first grandson ushered in a new relationship between the first family and the American public.

This intensive and personalized coverage of Baby McKee by the media brought a new human side to how the media covered presidents and, in this case, their families. The human dimension was newsworthy and the public clamored for more. They received it in 1901 with the arrival of Theodore Roosevelt and his large and lively brood in the White House. The charismatic president made for good copy with his bustling schedule of activities, quick wit, and willingness to engage the press. So too did his children, who were frequently seen wrestling with their father or romping through the White House with their veritable zoo of pets. Alice Roosevelt, the President's daughter from his first marriage, was deemed "Princess Alice" by the press. Headstrong, attractive, and not shy about sharing her opinions, Alice's every move was covered by the press and "Alice watching" became something of a nationwide pastime. This new human interest approach to reporting on the presidency was a two-way street, as President Roosevelt recognized the utility of reaching the public, enhancing his popularity, and crafting messages to his benefit through his intimate interaction with the press.<sup>11</sup>

The media's relationship with the president would never again be the same, as the proliferation of media outlets, media technologies, and intensity of coverage increased dramatically over the twentieth century. Franklin D. Roosevelt, much like Theodore Roosevelt, was media savvy and charismatic. He benefited greatly from the press coverage of both his message and himself. Roosevelt's wife, Eleanor, also became a media sensation and was easily the most widely covered first lady in history. The unprecedented fourth inaugural of FDR even showcased the President's thirteen grandchildren for the press and American public. First families since his time have also featured their family not only during inaugural festivities but the campaign as well.

Of course, with this new relationship, came a further erosion of any sense of privacy and anonymity afforded first families. The White House today houses within its complex of offices a large contingent of reporters representing the world's press. The media having been invited in to the home, first families are living their lives increasingly in the public fishbowl that the White House has become.<sup>12</sup>

### *Pets, Weddings, and Children*

Because it is a home, the everyday activities, challenges, and special moments associated with family life are present within the

White House. Most first families brought with them to the residence their favorite furnishings, memorabilia and mementos, and hobbies. Such connections to their former lives helped first families establish some sense of normalcy while living in such a public home. The Hayes family, for instance, enjoyed the game of croquet and frequently played it on the mansion grounds. Lucy Hayes started the White House custom of the Easter egg roll for children, in part because of her own love of children and religious beliefs. Held on Easter Mondays, thousands of children gather for the fun event, which has been hosted by first families since the time of Mrs. Hayes. The Christmas holiday has always been a special time at the White House, where first families have celebrated with the nation by displaying numerous beautifully decorated trees and the official White House Christmas tree in the Blue Room, along with sparkling holiday lights and decorations in both the interior and on the exterior of the building.

Many families have pets. The same has been true for first families, who often brought pets with them to the mansion.<sup>13</sup> Several of these pets became popular with the press and public. Benjamin Harrison's grandchildren, for instance, had a goat named Whiskers and Caroline Kennedy, daughter of President John F. Kennedy, had a pony named Macaroni, who was photographed and reported on by the news media on a daily basis. Guests to the Jefferson home often saw the President's mockingbird, Curious, sitting on the presidential shoulder or eating from the same hand that penned the Declaration of Independence. Of the famous bird, Jefferson is reported to have said, "I tamed it and became its friend."<sup>14</sup> Lou Hoover had so many birds that the White House lawn appeared to be an aviary and, with the British army advancing on the President's House, intent on burning the structure, Dolley Madison not only saved priceless presidential artifacts and her husband's papers, but her pet parrot at the critical eleventh hour.

Many presidents have been dog lovers.<sup>15</sup> George Washington was an enthusiastic fox hunter who both bred hunting dogs and received dogs as gifts from diplomats knowledgeable of the General's interest in the sport. Among the most famous first pooches were Franklin Roosevelt's Fala, Kennedy's Charlie, Lyndon Johnson's two beagles Him and Her, Bill Clinton's chocolate Labrador Buddy, and George W. Bush's Spot. Richard Nixon's dog Checkers, a gift from a supporter, might even have saved the then-vice presidential nominee's political career thanks to a sentimental reference to the dog while giving a televised speech designed to allay allegations



that Checkers' new owner was corrupt. George and Barbara Bush proudly showed the country the litter of puppies bore by their spaniel, Millie, and the First Lady penned the book *C. Fred's Story* as if it were written by her dog.

The two first families with the largest and most unusual assortment of pets were those of Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt.<sup>16</sup> Lincoln's boys loved animals and collected the likes of rabbits, a pony, a turkey, and a goat who pulled a wagon around the mansion grounds. Theodore Roosevelt's boys had a badger, racoon, cats, dogs, snakes, rooster, and a pony, who was ridden inside the White House in an effort to cheer up one of the Roosevelt children.

One of the most celebrated events in the White House is the occasion of the wedding of a member of the first family.<sup>17</sup> One of the most storied of all White House weddings was the 1906 union of Theodore Roosevelt's daughter Alice to U.S. Representative Nicholas Longworth.

The first wedding to take place in the President's House was that of Lucy Payne Washington to Supreme Court justice Thomas Todd, which was arranged by and during the reign of First Lady Dolley Madison.

The first child of a president to marry in the President's House was first daughter Maria Hester Monroe who wed her cousin Samuel Laurence Gouverneur. A few years later, the son of John Quincy Adams wed in the mansion. Grover Cleveland remains the only sitting president to be married in the mansion. Cleveland wed Frances Folsom in 1886 in a ceremony that attracted more than its fair share of publicity. Not only was Cleveland the president at the time of the wedding, but Ms. Folsom was barely out of her teens and Cleveland had been acting as her god-father since the passing of Frances's father—Cleveland's former law partner—when she was a young girl. Not surprisingly, tongues wagged.

Among the many White House weddings were Elizabeth Tyler and William Walter, marking about the only event in which gravely ill first lady Letitia Tyler made a public appearance; Ellen "Nellie" Grant and Englishman Algernon Charles Satoris; both Wilson daughters—Jessie and Eleanor, the latter to William McAdoo, the Secretary of Treasury; Tricia Nixon and Edward Cox, married in the Rose Gardens; and Lynda Johnson to U.S. Marine Charles Robb, who would later serve as a U.S. senator from Virginia.

The White House has also experienced the births of many children over its 200-year history. The first baby born in the mansion was James Madison Randolph, son of Thomas Jefferson's daughter Martha

Randolph, born while Martha was visiting her father at the President's House in 1805. The child was named in honor of Jefferson's Secretary of State and fellow founding father, James Madison. The birth brought the President immense happiness, as he had lost his wife and all of his other children and was exceptionally close to his remaining daughter Martha. The first presidential child to be born at the White House was Esther Cleveland, the second daughter of Grover and Frances Cleveland. Esther was born during Cleveland's second—and nonconsecutive—term in office. An earlier daughter, Ruth, had been born to the first couple but not in the mansion. Baby Ruth, for whom the candy bar was named, had been born during the interim between Cleveland's two terms.

The press and public have always been drawn to children born or living in the White House and Baby Ruth was no exception, becoming perhaps the most popular child alive at the time and a source of joy to the mansion staff. Another daughter, Marion, would arrive during the second term in office, but was born at the Cleveland summer vacation home in Massachusetts. In part because of the interest shown in the Cleveland children, the First Lady was forced to have the building's gates closed and the South Lawn restricted from public access. Although acting in the best interests of her young children, Mrs. Cleveland was criticized for her precautions. Like the Cleverlands, the Kennedys raised young children in the White House—Caroline and John, Jr. Stories of the Kennedy children were featured in newspapers across the country, while Mrs. Kennedy struggled to protect the privacy of her children. The First Lady even established a school in the White House for daughter Caroline and other children her age.

### *Stories of First Families*

In addition to an assortment of first pets, elegant weddings, and the birth of children, the White House has housed over forty different presidential families. Their experiences in the building have covered the full range of possibilities, at times mirroring those found in homes of private citizens across the country. The first presidential couple to live in the building was John and Abigail Adams, who moved into the unfinished President's House in fall of 1800.

John Adams joined many other public officials residing in the temporary capital city of Philadelphia in departing the city during the summer months. Leaving the same brick mansion on Cherry Street inhabited by George Washington during his presidency, Adams

traveled home to Quincy, Massachusetts, to escape the heat, humidity, and disease that plagued the city in summer.

On his way to Massachusetts, the President checked the status of construction at the President's House and was assured of its completion in time for his return in fall. Interestingly, Adams had demonstrated very little interest in the establishment and construction of the city and home, rarely visiting the site during either his vice presidency under Washington or his presidency to assess the progress. It was atypical behavior for Adams, who otherwise was engaged in most of the business of the founding period, but possibly a matter of him recognizing the centrality of George Washington in all matters pertaining to the creation of the federal city and president's house.

His furnishings shipped ahead of him to the President's House, Adams arrived in the new capital city on November 3, 1800 after a journey of roughly three weeks. His arrival coincided with the election, which he hoped would grant him a second term in office. The results of the election, however, were not the only disappointment to welcome Adams to the new mansion. As if the loss to rival Thomas Jefferson were not painful enough, construction in the city and on the home was running well behind schedule, and Adams found the residence far from completed. Only approximately half of the thirty-six rooms in the mansion were even plastered, the wall paper was still drying in others, and the President had only six rooms completed in which to enjoy.<sup>18</sup>

Abigail Adams had not accompanied her husband to the new residence and was planning on departing soon after him. The President, obviously understating matters, wrote to his wife of their new home, "The building is in a state to be habitable and now we wish for your company."<sup>19</sup> True to expectation, Mrs. Adams arrived to find the debris of construction strewn about the grounds, workmen coming and going, and the irritation of constant noise.<sup>20</sup> The unfinished building leaked when it rained, was cold and damp that first winter, had an insufficient number of fireplaces to warm its residents, and contained among the six finished rooms no place to hang the family's laundry. Abigail was careful not to voice her concerns in public, but did complain of the workers being lazy.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, the mansion's system of bells to summon servants was still under construction and the first couple had roughly half the staff of thirty they estimated it required to run the President's House.

With the sting of defeat from the election still lingering and the recent death of their son Charles, who died an alcoholic and in

debt, the four months the inaugural first family spent in the mansion was not what they had hoped for. Still, Mrs. Adams enjoyed the scenic view the home offered and the promise of the building, commenting with mixed emotion and meaning on the “great castle” in which she resided.<sup>22</sup> After four months in the home, John and Abigail Adams vacated the building in the early hours of the morning, so as to not be seen and to avoid having to attend the inauguration of Adams’s successor, Thomas Jefferson.

Unlike Abigail Adams, life in the Executive Mansion agreed with Julia Tyler, who thoroughly enjoyed the experience. This was reflective in her approach to hosting social events and her popularity. Other residents of the home also enjoyed their time in the building, including Dolley Madison, Julia Grant, and, more recently, Bill Clinton. On the other hand, several former residents spent perhaps the most trying times of their lives in the building, including Margaret Taylor and Jane Pierce.

The Lincoln home was one that ran the full gamut of experiences. The President and his wife embraced the opportunity to be the first couple and their children—Thomas (“Tad”), William (“Willie”), and Robert, who lived there only between terms at college—also contributed to a lively, happy home. Abraham Lincoln loved children and relished in the joys of fatherhood, while the Lincoln boys dashed through Cabinet meetings, explored the third-floor attic, and kept the domestic staff busy with pranks and youthful mischievousness. The boys also provided the President with a needed distraction from the pressures of the Civil War. The War weighed heavily on Lincoln and William’s death in 1862 brought much grief to the family. The President also suffered through criticism of his handling of the war and his wife’s constant scandals, from extravagant spending, to experimenting with the occult in an effort to communicate with her two deceased children, to her family’s support of the Confederacy.<sup>23</sup>

The Eisenhowers used a quiet family room in the private residence to relax, established by Mamie Eisenhower in order that her husband might recover his declining health. Mrs. Eisenhower also brought to the home her signature color—pink—in the form of decorations and color scheme for the walls.

A number of presidential spouses sought to not only re-create a sense of home in the building, but to restore the mansion’s history and integrity and to play an active role as the nation’s hostesses.<sup>24</sup> Because of the expectations of society, the role of housekeeper customarily fell to first ladies. Yet maintaining the home when the

home in question is the President's House is quite a feat. First Ladies thus managed not only their own household affairs, but the mansion's staff, kitchen, and social events. Among those spouses most active in managing and preserving the White House or hosting social and state affairs were Julia Tyler, Abigail Fillmore, Mary Lincoln, Julia Grant, Caroline Harrison, and Edith Roosevelt.<sup>25</sup>

Julia Tyler sought to enhance the status and livability of the mansion, acquiring regal French furnishings and installing a new lighting system. The Tylers ended up covering much of the costs from their own pockets. The First Lady also offered elegant, grand social events on a scale rarely seen in the building's history. The Fillmores were successful in obtaining funds from Congress to establish a library on the second floor of the building and install improved plumbing, a new bathtub, and iron range in the kitchen.

Mary Todd Lincoln also desired to restore the mansion. Through elaborate redecorating and social events, Mrs. Lincoln reasoned that she could inspire pride in the Union and legitimacy in the presidency during the crisis of the Civil War. However, unlike other first ladies, her efforts toward those ends were merely seen as extravagant and wasteful. In part, the fault was her own doing. For instance, the First Lady's china service was extremely expensive and she ordered a second set, all the while her husband was encouraging thrift for the war effort. Mrs. Lincoln was also privy to an illegal plan to divert funds to cover her outstanding bills.<sup>26</sup>

Julia Grant used congressional funds to redecorate the Blue Room and East Room and install new gates on the mansion grounds. Mrs. Grant also purchased new china and fine art. Celebrated works of art have long graced the walls of the White House, making the building a center for showcasing American arts. Jacqueline Kennedy also brought performing arts to the building. Her "In Performance at the White House" series featured many of the nation's leading musicians, singers, and performers, along with acclaimed international performing artists. The Nixons, for example, marked George Washington's birthday in 1970 with a live performance of the Broadway musical *1776* in the White House. Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, George and Barbara Bush, and Bill and Hillary Clinton all featured such distinctly American performances as jazz, country, gospel, and the blues.

Perhaps no other member of a first family has done as much to make the White House a living history museum and showcase for the arts and culture than First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy.<sup>27</sup> Accustomed to a life of great affluence and privilege, the First Lady

was distraught when she first saw the condition of the White House. After poor design choices by previous first families and inadequate consideration to historical authenticity, Mrs. Kennedy found the building unsuitable to her tastes. She thus proceeded to catalog all items in the White House and building's storage areas and then set about collecting period furnishings. She restored the White House to its original vision, focusing on the quarter-century period from the arrival of John and Abigail Adams in 1800 to the end of the Monroe administration in 1825. The fruits of her work were unveiled to a nationally televised audience in 1962, with the First Lady leading a tour of the renovated home that would earn an Emmy Award and inspire record numbers of visitors to the White House in subsequent years.

The permanent preservation of the White House is her legacy.<sup>28</sup> The First Lady was the driving force behind the establishment of a Fine Arts Commission, the Committee for the Preservation of the White House, and the Office of the Curator of the White House. Because of her vision, any new furnishings or additions planned for the building must now be approved by the Committee for the Preservation of the White House and must reflect the history of the building. Existing furnishings cannot be sold or discarded, ending a practice that dated to the original construction of the building. In 1988, the White House was designated with museum status by the American Association of Museums.

## THE PEOPLE'S HOUSE

### *Hosts for the Nation*

Neither is it mentioned in the Constitution, nor is it found in statute, but one of the duties that has emerged for the first family is that of functioning as the nation's official hosts.<sup>29</sup> The first family represents the nation in meetings with kings and queens, prime ministers and presidents, while presiding over affairs in the White House. A first family's interest in hosting and their style of hosting have varied considerably. Thomas Jefferson, for example, was so informal at times that he stood at the door of the President's House to shake hands with anyone happening into the home.<sup>30</sup> Some guests even reported that the President greeted them "standing in slippers."<sup>31</sup>

Historically, presidential families were expected to cover the costs of hosting social affairs and the upkeep of the President's

House out of their own pockets.<sup>32</sup> The cost of food and wine, stables and horses, supplies and servants, drained many a presidential coffer. Indeed, presidents such as James Monroe and Thomas Jefferson experienced severe financial hardships as a direct result of their service as commander-in-chief, while other presidents including George Washington and Andrew Jackson saw their plantation businesses suffer in their absence while serving in the President's House.<sup>33</sup> Jefferson was known to serve bountiful feasts to guests at his state dinners and the cost of champagne itself threatened to bankrupt him. A presidential salary of 25,000 dollars might seem considerable for the time, but it more often than not proved inadequate.

Congress would eventually cover the costs of some of the repairs to the mansion and its furnishings, but it was not until the twentieth century that the problem was adequately addressed. During the presidency of William Howard Taft, Congress provided funding to cover the costs of maintaining and staffing the White House. By the time of Warren Harding's administration in the early 1920s, Congress expanded the funds and coverage to include the cost of entertaining, finally alleviating presidential families from that burden. Correspondingly, the presidential salary was increased from 25,000 dollars to 50,000 dollars in 1873, during the second term of Ulysses Grant. It was again raised to 75,000 dollars in 1909, to 100,000 dollars in 1949 during Harry Truman's presidency, and 200,000 dollars in 1969 under Richard Nixon. Today, the presidential salary is 300,000 dollars.

First families still pay for their own living expenses, which include everything from phone calls to weddings and birthday parties, to other family activities and consumption for personal use. The White House staff includes ushers, chefs, and an impressive array of individuals to assist with virtually every need that might arise. Nevertheless, the sometimes arduous task of constant entertaining remains a responsibility of the first families. One need only be reminded of the experience of Grover Cleveland, who claimed that he shook hands with roughly 8,000 people in one evening alone.<sup>34</sup>

### *Preserving History*

In 1814, the British landed troops in Maryland and began an offensive that would take them to the President's House in the federal city. With President James Madison away with the American army and any resistance to the British crushed, the President's House sat

unprotected. From her vantage point atop the mansion, First Lady Dolley Madison observed the British marching toward the building, but refused to abandon the home until the final moment. To the sound of cannon fire, she wisely and courageously collected priceless artifacts, her husband's presidential papers, and ordered the infamous Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington removed from its frame.<sup>35</sup> Her act of heroism in carting off these objects secured a link to the past and was perhaps the most dramatic effort to preserve the building and its history.<sup>36</sup> On August 24, 1814, the British burned the President's House. Only a timely rainstorm prevented complete destruction of the mansion. Mrs. Madison rallied the nation to rebuild the home and federal city. Shortly after the war, renovations of the mansion were under way. President James Monroe and his family were able to move in to the building in the fall of 1817.

Another dramatic threat to the building came in 1829 with the inauguration of Andrew Jackson, the popular "people's president" whose supporters literally wrecked the interior of the mansion during their wild, drunken celebration.<sup>37</sup> A little over three decades later, the building was again in imminent danger of destruction. During the Civil War, the Confederate army closed to within a few miles of the Executive Mansion and seemed ready to seize the Union capital. President Lincoln ordered the "Bucktail Brigade," a Company of Pennsylvania soldiers from the 150th Regiment, to be stationed on the building's grounds to protect not only the president, but the mansion as well.

The most enduring threats to the integrity of the mansion have come from the day-to-day use of the building by the first family, presidential advisers working in the offices, and the vast numbers of tourists coming through the President's House year after year. Furnishings wear out, carpets are stained, and drapery is torn. Sticky fingers of tourists eager for souvenirs also walk away with countless items from and pieces of the building. All need to be replaced.

All first families have added their own touch and tastes to the building, as historically there was no systematic approach for designing, redecorating, or preserving the building. Any efforts were largely left up to the individual families, along with the approval of Congress when public funds were utilized for the task.<sup>38</sup> Thomas Jefferson, the first occupant to serve a full presidential term in the building, began in 1801 to tinker with amenities and improvements for the building and its grounds. Working with the famous



architect, Benjamin Latrobe, he had porticos on the north and south sides of the building designed, along with terraces on the east and west ends of the home.

Starting in 1815, the Madisons rebuilt the mansion after the 1814 fire and attempted to restore the structure to its original condition. They were assisted in this task by the Commission of the District of Columbia and the building's original architect, James Hoban, who reinforced the structure, replaced destroyed walls, and repainted the home. The restoration continued into the administration of James Monroe, who moved in with the project still under way. Like the mansion's first residents, John and Abigail Adams, James and Elizabeth Monroe found only a few rooms completed, but had a new south entrance constructed and revised the custom of hosting a New Year's Day reception for the public.<sup>39</sup> Later, Andrew Jackson added the large North Portico.

Lifelong bibliophiles Millard and Abigail Fillmore must have been shocked to find the absence of any books in the President's House when they moved to the building in 1850.<sup>40</sup> They promptly added a library on the second floor, a room used by the first family for entertainment and private family time. At times, the mansion fell into disrepair either from lack of funds, neglect, or the rapid change in residents. After a lifetime of living opulently and with expensive tastes, Chester A. Arthur refused to move into a building he deemed wholly unsuitable until he had the chance to completely redecorate and refurnish the home. Arthur ordered that the interior of the building be gutted and the items be hauled away by wagons so that he might improve on its delapidated appearance.<sup>41</sup>

Happily, not all of the decorating and renovating by first families was so drastic or done with so little regard for history. One of the problems most first families faced was the need for additional living and office space. The basement of the building housed employees, stairways crowded with tourists, aides, and members of the first family, and offices and private rooms figured into the second-floor scheme. So extensive were the renovations that the families of Chester Arthur, Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge, and Harry Truman had to vacate the building in order that the repairs and improvements be completed. Two fires—the one in 1814 during the War of 1812, and another by accident in 1929—destroyed considerable sections of the mansion.

Perhaps the most ambitious and extensive plan for renovating the mansion envisioned by a member of the first family was that conceived by First Lady Caroline Harrison.<sup>42</sup> Working with

Congress and architects, Mrs. Harrison had plans developed for a complete renovation of the building, engaged in a publicity campaign to build support for the project, and undertook a comprehensive historical inventory of all items in the home. Her vision included the addition of wings coming off the sides of the home, a separate residence for the president, and an entirely new structure. Congress ultimately rejected the First Lady's bold plans, but did appropriate 35,000 dollars that enabled her to renovate parts of the building, replace worn furnishings, and install new electric lights. Moreover, her vision and efforts were later realized in the contemporary East and West Wings of the White House.

Another presidential spouse picked up where Mrs. Harrison left off. Shortly after the turn of the century, Edith Roosevelt also saw the need for extensive improvements to the building and campaigned for the work to be done. The Roosevelts oversaw a major renovation of the White House and employed the services of the prestigious New York architectural firm of Charles McKim. In one of the most comprehensive renovations of the building, the White House was made to be more livable for first families, a West Wing and presidential Oval Office were added, the size of the structure was increased, and an effort was made to return the mansion to the original vision of George Washington. The construction necessitated that the conservatories on the grounds be removed to make way for enlargements and the new wing, and internal walls be knocked down so as to increase the size of the State Dining Room.

By the 1920s, the ceiling was sagging due to the earlier removal of some of the walls to enlarge the building and cracks had appeared on the walls. President Calvin Coolidge ordered the second and third floors be rebuilt, with the attic redesigned to house guest rooms and additional living space for first families, and the walls and ceilings reinforced. In 1942, Franklin Roosevelt oversaw the construction of a new East Wing to the building, to match the earlier West Wing.

The 1920s renovations, however, had been poorly planned and soon took their toll on the building's foundation. By the late 1940s, the thick concrete poured for the third floor caused the ceiling to once again sag and the floors of the mansion creaked and groaned, indicating to Harry Truman that the whole structure was in jeopardy of collapsing. So, once again, extensive restoration of the building occurred from 1948 to 1952. This time the home was completely gutted and walls and floors removed. Rather than knock out all the walls, however, the Trumans ordered that a bulldozer

needed for construction on the foundation be disassembled, taken inside the building piece by piece, and reassembled once again. Steel beams reinforced the structure, the third floor was expanded creating additional living space and apartments for the first family, and office space was expanded and better designed.

Another area of preservation has been the White House grounds. The "President's Park," the original 18-acre estate of lawns, gardens, and trees has changed considerably since John and Abigail Adams found it strewn with the debris of construction.

It did not take long for improvements to occur. The original wood fence was replaced by a stone wall designed by Thomas Jefferson, who also developed an intricate landscaping plan and gardens for the estate.<sup>43</sup> John Quincy Adams, an avid gardener, improved the grounds' appearance and practicality by adding flowers and an assortment of bushes along with vegetables and fruit trees. A lifelong horseman, Andrew Jackson had new stables erected on the grounds and provided a graveled pathway for carriages entering the estate. In honor of his late wife, Rachel, Jackson also planted a magnolia tree outside the President's House, which, as of this writing, still provides shade for presidential families.

Various landscaping plans, fences, and security measures have come and gone, along with meat houses, a wine cellar, and conservatories. Harriet Lane, niece and hostess for bachelor president James Buchanan enjoyed fresh flowers, so a variety of flowers were planted in a new conservatory. Today, a helicopter pad, jogging track, tennis courts, and elaborate underground security system can be found on the estate. The grounds are managed by the National Park Service and a staff of florists, gardeners, and groundskeepers.

With the building still unfinished and most of the servants and staff as well as his wife still en route to the new capital city, President John Adams had time for reflection. On his second night in the President's House, he composed in a letter the following words, which were later cut into the fireplace mantel of the State Dining Room by Franklin D. Roosevelt, that all posterity might heed the advice:

I Pray Heaven to Bestow  
The Best of Blessings on  
THIS HOUSE  
and on All that shall hereafter  
Inhabit it. May none but Honest  
and Wise Men ever rule under This Roof.<sup>44</sup>

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

1. Nancy Reagan, *My Turn . . .*, 1989, 22.
2. Lonnell Aikman, *The Living White House*, 1991, 2.
3. Donald R. Kennon, *A Republic for the Ages . . .*, 1999, 270–285.
4. Richard Norton Smith, *Patriarch*, 1993, 115–130.
5. Smith, 1993, 128.
6. John Whitcomb and Claire Whitcomb, *Real Life at the White House . . .*, 2000, 1–2.
7. *Ibid.*, xvii.
8. An excellent source of information on public accessibility to the White House and the history of the “people’s house,” see the White House Historical Association’s *The White House: An Historic Guide*, 1995.
9. Whitcomb and Whitcomb, 2000, xv.
10. See Tom Lansford, “Family Life in the White House,” 2002, 394–403.
11. See the following helpful sources on the media’s relationship with the president and press coverage of the presidency: Timothy E. Cook, *Governing with the News: The News Media as a Political Institution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) and Kenneth W. Thompson, *The White House Press on the Presidency: News Management and Co-optation* (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1998).
12. See Lansford, 2002, 394–403.
13. Webb Garrison, *A Treasury of White House Tales . . .*, 1989, 192–197.
14. *Ibid.*, 193.
15. For an insightful discussion of the first families’ pets, see Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *America’s First Families . . .*, 2000, 241–264.
16. Lansford, 2002, 402.
17. For an insightful discussion of weddings in the White House, see Anthony, 2000, 188–196.
18. Page Smith, *John Adams*, 1902, 1050.
19. Phyllis Levin, *Abigail Adams*, 1987, 387.
20. *Ibid.*, 387–388.
21. Aikman, 1991, 15; Charles Hurb, *The White House Story*, 1966, 30.

22. Aikman, 1991, 15; Hurb, 1966, 30; Levin, 1987, 387.
23. See Jean Baker, "Mary Lincoln," 2002, 113–119.
24. Robert P. Watson, *The Presidents' Wives . . .*, 2000, 80–84.
25. See Robert Dewhirst, "White House Manager," 2002, 341–348.
26. See Baker, 2002, 113–119.
27. See Gil Troy, "Jacqueline Kennedy," 2002, 250–258.
28. Robert P. Watson, *First Ladies of the United States . . .*, 2001, 237–243.
29. Watson, 2000, 76–78.
30. Garrison, 1989, 188–190.
31. Paul F. Boller, Jr., *Presidential Anecdotes*, 1981, 34–35.
32. Watson, 2000, 76–78.
33. Garrison, 1989, 215–221.
34. *Ibid.*, 191.
35. Dewhirst, 2002, 341.
36. Aikman, 1991, 39–41.
37. *Ibid.*, 33–35, 43–44.
38. Dewhirst, 2002, 341–348; Robert P. Watson, "Nation's Social Hostess," 2002, 349–356.
39. Dewhirst, 2002, 342.
40. Elizabeth Lorelei Thacker-Estrada, "The Heart of the Fillmore Presidency . . .," 2001, 83–98.
41. Garrison, 1989, 234–237.
42. Watson, 2001, 151–157.
43. Margaret Baynard Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society . . .*, 1965, 18–20.
44. As quoted in Aikman, 1991, 29.