

## The President Moves Into the White House

March 15, 2023

Do you know where the president of the United States lives? If you said at the White House in Washington, D.C., our nation's capital, you'd be right!

But did you know that the president didn't always live at the White House – or even in Washington, D.C.?

America's first president, George Washington didn't live in the White House – because when he was president, it wasn't built and Washington, D.C. didn't exist. The first capital of the United States was located in New York City; the first Congress under the new U.S. Constitution met for the first time at New York City's Federal Hall on March 4, 1789 and George Washington also took his oath of office there while in front of a Joint Meeting of Congress on April 30, 1789.<sup>1 2</sup>

<sup>3</sup>The government (at the time, the Congress of the Confederation) had temporarily moved out of Philadelphia to various cities, one of which was New York, after safety concerns arose from the Pennsylvania Mutiny of 1783.<sup>4</sup>

Congress arranged Washington's first presidential residency in New York City, which was located at 3 Cherry Street. The home was leased from Samuel Osgood at a rate of \$845 per year and made ready for the Washington family. Congress spent \$8,000 furnishing and updating the house so that it was comfortable and usable for America's first family.

When Washington moved into the Osgood house in the spring of 1789, it was the best option available at the time, however, as time went by, it became clear that the house was too small and located in a place that was out of the way. In February 1790, Washington moved to the Macomb house, which became available after the French Minister to the United States moved back to France. This home was significantly larger and located at 39 Broadway.<sup>5</sup>

Congress was given the authority by the Constitution to create a federal district where the government would be located – but members had to agree on where that would be. Eventually, a compromise was reached between Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison, and Congress passed the Residence Act, which George Washington signed into law on July 16, 1790. The law designated that Philadelphia would serve as the temporary capital for 10 years and that a new site on the Potomac River would become America's capital.<sup>6</sup> George Washington chose the exact location of the ten-mile square federal district – and with the help of city-planner Pierre Charles L'Enfant and three appointed commissioners – the city, which we

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/new-york-historic/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/treasures\\_of\\_congress/text/page2\\_text.html](https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/treasures_of_congress/text/page2_text.html)

<sup>3</sup> <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1700s/The-first-inauguration-at-Federal-Hall-in-New-York-City/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/how-philadelphia-lost-the-nations-capital-to-washington>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/presidential-residency-in-new-york/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://guides.loc.gov/residence-act>

know as Washington, D.C. was born.<sup>7</sup> (Note: the name Washington was chosen for the federal city by commissioners in September 1791, and it was located in the Territory of Columbia. This was changed to the District of Columbia in 1871.)<sup>8</sup>

In November 1790, George Washington moved into a new Philadelphia home, which was rented from financier Robert Morris, on Sixth and Market Streets. The three-story brick mansion was described by Washington as “the best single house in the city.”<sup>9</sup> Washington lived here until he finished his second term as president in 1797 at which time, the second president of the United States, John Adams moved into the Philadelphia President’s House.<sup>10</sup>

While the presidents lived in Philadelphia, our nation’s capital was in the process of being built, with planning and construction beginning shortly after the passage of the Residence Act. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson announced a contest to design the White House, with the winner earning a prize of \$500 or a medal of equal value.<sup>11</sup> [Editor’s note: At the time, the White House was referred to as the “President’s House” or the “Executive Mansion.” Some used the nickname the White House but it wasn’t until 1901 under the administration of President Theodore Roosevelt that the residence was formally referred to as the White House. For simplicity, the term “White House” will be used.]<sup>12</sup> The winner was chosen by the appointed construction commissioners and approved by George Washington was the Irish-born architect James Hoban whose design was based on a villa in Dublin, the Leinster House.<sup>13 14</sup>

Construction of the White House began with the laying of a cornerstone on October 13, 1792. Land was cleared, roads were built, trees were cut down, bridges were constructed, and materials were gathered. A stone quarry that was inland from the Potomac River and located on Aquia Creek was purchased by the federal government in 1791. This Aquia Creek sandstone was cut and used for building the White House – and the Capitol Building – and was transported along the river. Bricks were produced nearby to construct the inside structure and trees were cut by axemen in Maryland and Virginia for floors and roof timbers.

It was hard work that required the effort of many wage workers, craftsmen, and unfortunately, enslaved workers. As we’ve discussed in previous lessons, the institution of slavery was a tragic reality in America’s early history. Although the truth is painful, it is important to recognize and honor the contributions of slaves when we learn about America’s history, in this instance, the more than 200 slaves who worked on building the White House and Capitol Building.<sup>15</sup> The

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-first-president/building-the-new-nations-capital/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.history.com/news/how-did-washington-d-c-get-its-name>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/inde/learn/historyculture/places-presidentshousesite.htm>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/inde/learn/historyculture/the-presidents-house-washington-and-adams.htm>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/fotoware?id=5E1FCB3066744273%2097AC1F8FB685754A>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/questions/how-did-the-white-house-get-its-name>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.history.com/topics/landmarks/white-house>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/building-the-white-house>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/building-the-white-house>

federal government did not own slaves but rather, paid the owners for the slaves' work.<sup>16</sup> The owner would provide clothing and some medical care while the commissioners overseeing the construction of the city would provide housing, two meals per day, and basic medical care.<sup>17</sup>

The White House is located at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, and until after the Civil War, was the largest house in America.<sup>18</sup> In 1798, the two-story structure was covered with a lime-based whitewash, which inspired its nickname and later formal name. The cost to build the White House totaled \$232,372 and after eight years was ready for its first residents.<sup>19</sup>

Although there were still some finishing touches needed, President John Adams and his wife, Abigail, moved into the White House on November 1, 1800. Every president since then has lived in the White House but it looks different today than it did 200 years ago. There have been numerous additions, updates, and renovations and numerous presidents have put their own touches on the structure.

But there has also been disaster.

Amid the War of 1812, which was fought between the United States and England, British troops stormed the nation's capital and set fire to the White House on August 24, 1814. President James Madison and First Lady Dolley Madison had managed to escape in advance of the British attack. When the troops arrived at the White House and found them gone, some accounts say the soldiers ate a meal of leftovers and drank wine using the fancy White House dishes and silver.<sup>20</sup> Troops put the president's hats atop bayonets and marched around as windows were smashed and furniture was piled up in the middle of rooms. On the admiral's signal, torches were lit and thrown like spears through the shattered windows.<sup>21</sup>

After the British troops left Washington, the Madisons came back to the city just three days after the attack. They weren't able to live in the destroyed White House and had to move to the Octagon House.<sup>22</sup>

The original architect, James Hoban was in charge of rebuilding the White House and in 1817, it was finished. In collaboration with architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe, Hoban also oversaw the addition of the South Portico in 1824 and the North Portico in 1829 (essentially, these are really big porches with columns).<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.history.com/news/white-house-history-facts-presidents>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/building-the-white-house>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/construction-of-the-white-house>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.history.com/topics/landmarks/white-house>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/british-troops-set-fire-to-the-white-house>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/lifestyle/this-day-history-august-24-british-troops-ransack-torch-white-house-capitol>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/british-troops-set-fire-to-the-white-house>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/white-house-renovations-timeline>

The White House Entrance Hall has a marker on the floor with the dates 1792, 1817, 1902, and 1952 that commemorate significant dates of construction and renovation. (Editor's note: The renovation during the Calvin Coolidge administration in 1927 is not included.)<sup>24</sup> We know what happened in 1792 and 1817 but what about the other two years?

Theodore Roosevelt modernized the White House, installed electric lights, and created the West Wing – which is where the president has his office as well as his senior staff. The year 1902 marks this significant update.<sup>25 26</sup> Roosevelt had a temporary office in the West Wing, but it was during the administration of President William Howard Taft that the Oval Office was created. Taft was the first president to use the Oval Office beginning in October 1909.<sup>27</sup>

Under President Harry S. Truman, the White House underwent a full interior gutting and rebuilding of the structure and foundation from 1948 to 1952 after engineers said it was unsafe.<sup>28</sup>

Today, the White House stands at approximately 55,000 square feet (not including the West or East Wings).<sup>29</sup> In the six-level residence, there are 132 rooms, 35 bathrooms, 412 doors, 147 windows, 28 fireplaces, 8 staircases, and three elevators. Painting the exterior of the White House requires 570 gallons of paint. The White House is also well prepared to host big events with heads of state, dignitaries, and other guests and is equipped to serve dinner for 140 people and appetizers for more than 1,000 people. (That's a big party.)<sup>30</sup>

There have been other features added to the White House over the years – after all, presidents get to have some fun, too! An indoor swimming pool was added with money from a fundraising campaign for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who found relief by swimming in pools after surviving polio. The pool was opened on June 2, 1933 but was covered and converted into the press briefing room. An outdoor pool was put in by swimming-enthusiast President Gerald R. Ford in 1975.<sup>31</sup>

The White House also has a bowling alley, putting green, movie theater, tennis court, and running track.<sup>32</sup> The White House is not only a place where the president works, eats, and sleeps, -- it's where he or she and their family lives.

---

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/questions/has-the-white-house-ever-been-renovated-or-changed>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/questions/has-the-white-house-ever-been-renovated-or-changed>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.history.com/news/white-house-history-facts-presidents>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/questions/why-is-the-oval-office-oval>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.history.com/news/white-house-history-facts-presidents>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/questions/how-big-is-the-white-house>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/the-grounds/the-white-house/#:~:text=Our%20first%20president%2C%20George%20Washington,architect%20James%20Hoban%20was%20chosen.>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/questions/does-the-white-house-have-a-pool>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.history.com/news/white-house-history-facts-presidents>

It's a place where Americans can visit and take pride in our nation's history and pay tribute to the leaders who have shaped our country into what it is today. If you get the chance, pay a visit to the White House – you can have the chance to live or work there one day!