

THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

CLASSROOM | *Primary Documents*

Interpreting Buildings / Designing the White House : 1792

Reminders of the past are all around us. The buildings that survive through the years are artifacts that can tell us a great deal about the values and aspirations of the people who built them. Architects use size, massing, ornamentation, symmetry or asymmetry, and other design features to project an overall image of a structure. This lesson will focus on one of the most famous buildings in America, the White House, to determine what image its builders meant to project.

Objectives:

1. To discover how a building can represent a people's values and symbolize ideas.
2. To understand how the design and construction of the White House helped establish a sense of permanence and power for a young America and its republican form of government during the early, uncertain years of the United States.



George Washington inspecting the building of the White House. N.C. Wyeth for Pennsylvania Railroad, courtesy Smithsonian Institution



Background

After declaring independence from Britain in 1776, the Congress of the United States had wandered around the Mid-Atlantic States, looking for a home. At various times, Philadelphia, Princeton, Trenton, Annapolis, and other cities had served as the nation's capital. European observers, accustomed to having capitals hundreds of years old, ridiculed the new nation for lacking a permanent seat of government. More importantly, many Europeans—and some Americans—were skeptical that a republican form of government would endure. History had seen many republics come and go; only the Roman Republic had endured for long, and it collapsed into dictatorship.

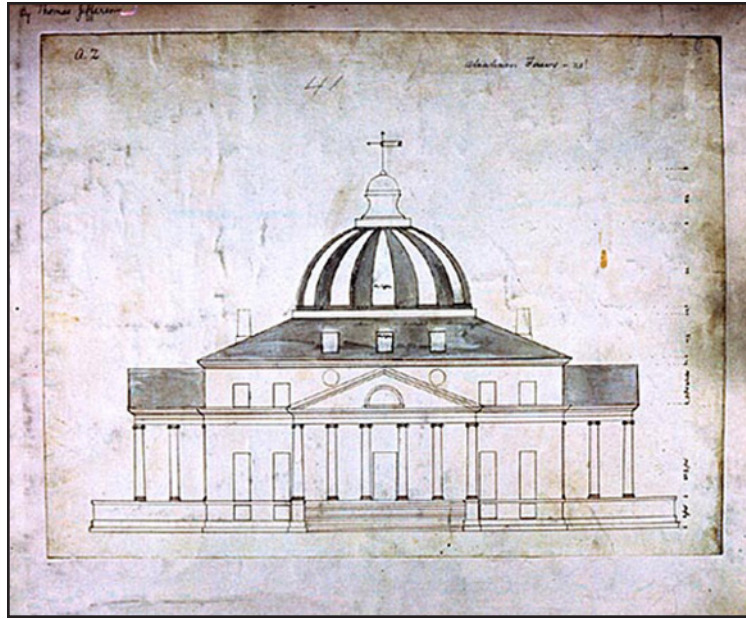
In 1789, after the ratification of the U.S. Constitution created a stronger national government, President George Washington and a newly chosen Congress assumed office in the temporary capital of New York City. After deciding to build a permanent capital, Congress authorized President Washington to choose a site for the city and pick a design and site for the President's House. The building would be the first undertaken as the federal government prepared to move to its new home.

In 1792, at Washington's request, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson announced an architectural competition to produce design drawings for the President's House. Washington insisted that the building should be made of stone, so that it would have a more substantial appearance, much like the most important buildings in Europe. The President's House would be the largest residence in the country until after the Civil War. The young nation had never seen anything like it, and that was what Washington liked about it. The building was to be more than the home and office of the president; it was to be a symbol of the presidency. A republic could not have a king's palace, but the building must command respect from citizens in the United States and, just as importantly, foreign visitors who came to visit America's leader.

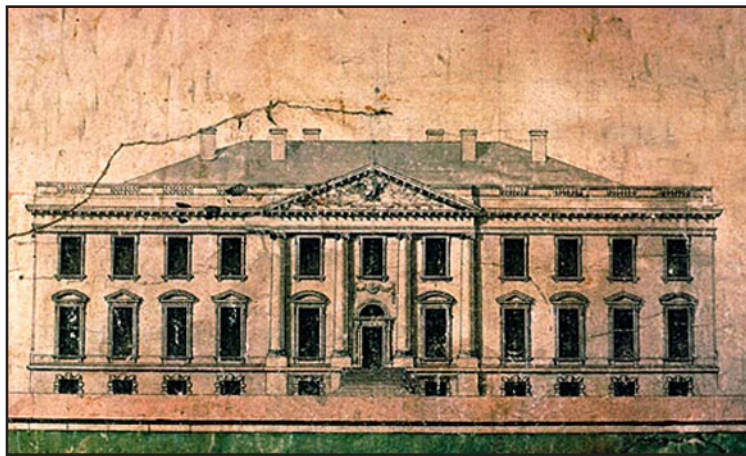
President Washington also hoped that the public buildings in the new capital “in size, form, and elegance shou'd look beyond the present day.” The nation could not afford anything too extravagant at this time, but the design should allow for flexibility in the future, when the nation progressed. “For the Presidents House,” wrote the nation's leader, “I would design a building which should also look forward, but execute no more of it at present than might suit the circumstances of this Country when it shall be first wanted. A plan comprehending more may be executed at a future period when the wealth, population, and importance of it shall stand upon much higher ground than they do at present.”

On July 16, 1792, President Washington examined at least six designs submitted in the President's House architectural competition. The plans were quite varied. Have your students examine three of these designs. They are presented as elevations, showing the front of the building, as if you were standing outside looking at it from across the street or lawn. One of the designs is by James Hoban, an Irishman whom the president had met a year earlier in Charleston. A second plan was submitted by a mysterious man known only as “A.Z.” Historians have speculated that Thomas Jefferson was the mystery designer, but records suggest that the architect likely was John Collins, a builder from Richmond, Virginia. The third design is by James Diamond, a Maryland inventor.

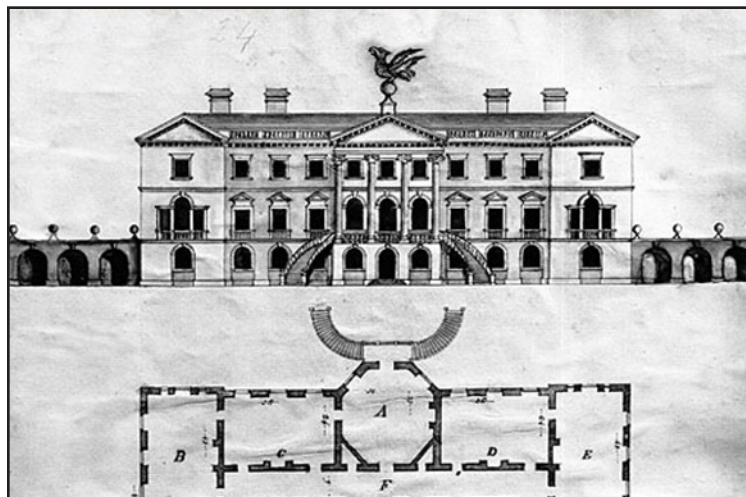




I. White House design, designer known only as "A.Z." Maryland Historical Society



II. James Hoban's White House design. Maryland Historical Society



III. White House design, James Diamond. Maryland Historical Society



Activity 1

Ask your students to assume the role of visitors from Britain or France in 1792, ancient countries with splendid castles, cathedrals, and public buildings. President Washington invited these visitors to tea, where he showed them the three designs. Have the students, as these foreign visitors, write entries in their journals describing the three designs and offering an opinion as to which one President Washington should pick and why. For a contrast, you might also have the students go through the same assignment, but as American frontier settlers, farmers barely eking out an existence beyond the Appalachian Mountains and living in ramshackle cabins.

Activity 2

On July 17, 1792, President Washington announced that the winner of the design competition was James Hoban. By 1792, political parties were beginning to develop in the new nation. Rather than attempting to be nonpartisan, most newspapers openly favored either the Federalists, who controlled the government, or their opponents, who were gradually coming to be known as Republicans. Have your students write newspaper editorials, either as Federalists extolling the President's design choice or as Republicans criticizing his choice.

Enrichment and Extension

1. Select a neighborhood in your town, or around your school, and have students make an inventory of the buildings. Categorize the buildings by use. Assign a group of students to each building type: churches, stores, apartment buildings, houses, offices, etc. Have each group report on their type, explaining how they share characteristics, and how they differ in design.
2. Have students research a favorite historic building that they have visited or admired, and write a brief essay on the origins of the structure. Who commissioned the building, and why? What are the most interesting design elements? If they can find an image of the architect's drawings, have them compare it to a photograph of the building. Did the builders follow the architect's plans?

Links

Architecture Timeline:

http://www.whitehousehistory.org/whha_timelines/timelines_architecture-01.html

Classroom: Building the White House:

http://www.whitehousehistory.org/whha_classroom/classroom_4-8-building.html

American Architectural Foundation:

<http://www.archfoundation.org>



Bibliography

Debnam, Betty. *A Kid's Guide to the White House*. Washington, DC: White House Historical Association, 1997.

Poppeliers, John C., et al. *What Style Is It? A Guide to American Architecture*. Washington, DC: Preservation Press, 1983.

Seale, William. *The President's House: A History*. Washington, DC: White House Historical Association, 1986.

The White House: An Historic Guide. Washington, DC: White House Historical Association, 1999 or earlier editions.

National History Standards

This lesson meets the following National History Standards:

Draw upon visual sources (Historical Comprehension, Standard 2G); formulate historical questions (Historical Research Capabilities, Standard 4A); identify issues and problems in the past (Historical Thinking Standards, Historical Issues -- Analysis and Decision-Making, Standard 5A).

The institutions and practices of government created during the Revolution and how they were revised between 1787 and 1815 to create the foundation of the American political system based on the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. (United States History Standards, Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation, 1754-1820s, Standard 3).

