



THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

CLASSROOM | *Primary Documents*

A Literary Viewpoint / Charles Dickens Visits the White House : 1842

As the home of America's chief political authority and leading diplomatic figure, the White House has long opened its doors to prominent figures from foreign nations. Presidents have invited monarchs and musicians, prime ministers and poets into their home. Many such visitors have recorded their thoughts and by doing so have provided a resource for future students to explore how the presidency and the White House have been perceived throughout history. More so, we can learn about how notable characters from around the world have viewed American political culture.

Travel accounts have been published about America since its founding. Particularly interesting are impressions of European visitors who have grown up in aristocratic nations and have come to America curious about the workings and by-products of democracy. It should not be surprising that in the 19th century, natives of Great Britain should want to return to the former colonies and investigate the successes and failures of what was considered a "great experiment" in self-government when America declared independence in 1776. In 1842, one of Britain's most celebrated authors, Charles Dickens, toured the United States at the age of 30. By this date, he had already gained fame with publication of *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*; *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*; *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*; and *The Old Curiosity Shop*. His journey took him to Washington, and his itinerary included a meeting with President John Tyler and an evening reception at the White House where he saw his friend and fellow writer Washington Irving.



A Young Charles Dickens. Library of Congress



Although Dickens was sympathetic to the “common man” in much of his fiction, the American public was disappointed in the author’s tour. As one scholar put it, “America, it seems, expected a sort of young messiah of democracy while Dickens, for his part, expected to behold the promised land.” (Michael Slater, *Dickens on America & the Americans*, 1978) Dickens published his impressions in *American Notes* (1842). Shortly afterward, his experiences took on an imaginative form in the novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

The author of great comic prose did not amuse American readers with his portrayal of them. But Dickens’s view of the White House from *American Notes* was fairly balanced. He took sharp aim at the office seekers milling around the president’s offices, producing a number of caricature portraits while commenting frequently on what he considered the uncouth American habit of spitting. President John Tyler, who had recently become the first president to ascend to office through the death of a predecessor, was deemed worthy of his office. As for the White House social gathering, Dickens was struck by the variety of visitors and their respect for the presidency exhibited by their behavior while in the president’s home.

Objectives

1. To examine the point of view of international visitors on American political and cultural institutions.
2. To appreciate that literary documents can be entertaining as well as informative sources for historical researchers.

Background

They called President John Tyler, “His Accidency.” When President William Henry Harrison died only one month into his first term in April 1841, Vice President Tyler rushed to Washington from his Virginia home. Legislators were not clear on the Constitution’s guidance in the case of a president dying in office; it had not happened before. Tyler, however, was not uncertain, and insisted that he not serve out the term as “vice president” or “acting president” but he took the title of “president.” All mail sent to the White House, unless addressed to “President” Tyler, remained unopened.



John Tyler. White House Collection



The White House, 1848. White House Collection



Support for Tyler as Harrison's vice president had come from the Whig party and its leader Henry Clay, but soon after Tyler moved into the White House, it was apparent that the president preferred a states' rights view of policy while the Whigs were more nationalistic. The Whigs also found to their dismay that Tyler was not willing to allow a Whig Congress to reduce his authority as chief executive. When Tyler twice vetoed bills intended to establish a strong National Bank, the Whig leadership expelled him from their party. Most members of Tyler's cabinet resigned. A drunken mob marched upon the White House. Outside the gates they shouted at Tyler and burned him in effigy, cursing his name and throwing stones at the walls built by George Washington a half-century earlier.

Shortly thereafter, two bills were combined and sent to Tyler. The first raised tariff duties, which Tyler favored in order to replenish the U. S. Treasury. The other would stop Congress from distributing the proceeds of public land sales to the states and instead apply them toward the national deficit. Tyler once again used his veto powers to force Congress to ensure his success, but he angered Whigs and Democrats as well as members of both parties in the southern states who wanted the public sales proceeds to flow to them. Tyler was a president without party. No wonder Charles Dickens noted that the president was "at war with everybody." Soon Tyler would raise the issue of the annexation of Texas, something avoided by Andrew Jackson and Martin van Buren, both of whom feared that the addition of another slave state would feed the fires of sectional discontent. Anglo-American relations were testy, as well, as conflicts arose over the boundary between Maine and Canada.

Charles Dickens entered a White House with a sickly first lady who was seldom seen by the public. Standing in for Letitia Tyler was the president's daughter-in-law, Pricilla. The president's seven children, ranging in age from 11 to 26, lived in the house on the second floor, down the hall from his office. A public reception was held monthly and guests could attend without invitation. When Congress was in session, Tyler hosted two evening receptions and two formal dinners on a monthly basis. It is not clear if Dickens knew that Tyler had requested funding for what would shortly become the first permanent White House security force, but the author does mention the orderly manner of the reception crowd.

Dickens visited during the morning, and was escorted upstairs to meet the president. Later during his visit to the nation's capital Dickens and his wife enjoyed an evening reception in the East Room. His account of his White House visit was published in *American Notes for General Circulation*.



American Notes was published in serial form in this New York newspaper. Library of Congress



Primary Document Activities



South Front of the White House, 1846.

Visiting “The President’s Mansion”

Since the first days of its occupancy in 1800, the White House has been a popular place to visit. For much of the 19th century, compared to today, it was not terribly difficult for respectable ladies and gentlemen to get an appointment to see the president. When prominent international visitors came to Washington, they often had the opportunity to meet the president and perhaps enjoy dinner or a reception with him. One of the most famous early visits was that of the Marquis de Lafayette, who toured America in 1824-25, meeting with President James Monroe and President John Quincy Adams. When a writer visits the White House, impressions can be especially interesting. Charles Dickens came to America with the intent to publish his thoughts about the nation, its people and its institutions. His descriptions of American visitors in the “President’s mansion” are especially entertaining and reveal an outsider’s view of the chief executive and his workplace.

Make copies of Dickens’s impressions of the White House and President John Tyler on his first visit and distribute to students to read. **(SEE PG.7)** Also, give them a copy of the south front photograph (click on image at left) showing the White House essentially the way it looked when Dickens visited.

Ask a student to read aloud the first paragraph while classmates examine the exterior photograph. Tell them the photo was taken just a few years after Dickens visited. Some have interpreted the comparison of the White House to “an English club-house,” with gardens that seem to have been “made yesterday,” as a somewhat disdainful description from a British subject who is accustomed to centuries-old government buildings of a majestic nature. But after reading the description and viewing the photograph, ask students to gauge the accuracy of Dickens’s description. Is he exaggerating, or is he close to the truth? While 19th-century Americans were sensitive to descriptions of the President’s House lacking grandeur, the size of the White House is often mentioned by modern presidents as the right size for a democratic nation. Why the change in viewpoints?



Ask students to read the rest of the passage, **(SEE PG.9)** including the descriptions of those who are touring the White House or waiting to see the president, the description of the waiting room outside Tyler’s office, and Dickens’s meeting with the president. Keeping in mind the entire passage, have students make a list of reasons why a young American nation might not care for this description from a British writer. Consider the historical relationship between the two nations, and direct students to write a newspaper editorial, dated July 4, 1842, countering Dickens’s description.

A Democratic Reception

Shortly before he departed the nation’s capital, Dickens and his wife Catherine attended an evening reception (or “levee”) at the White House. The author noted the variety of “classes” represented by the guests, their attire and behavior. He seemed surprised at the sense of order at this crowded event and pleased that Americans were sophisticated enough to admire his friend and fellow novelist Washington Irving, who was also in attendance. Read the passage describing the reception. Discuss Dickens’s positive portrayals, and then ask students to play the part of Dickens. Have them read one or more of the editorials from the activity above and, as “Dickens,” ask them to write a letter to the editor challenging the newspaper’s viewpoint. Extra points for those who try to mimic the master’s style!

Picturing the President’s House

Dickens’s published works were often illustrated with drawings of the places and people he described. Some might say that Dickens did such an excellent job of providing a mental image of the figures in his writing that illustrations were unnecessary. Nonetheless, his publishers insisted. Dickens worked closely with some of England’s finest illustrators, such as George Cruikshank. To see some examples, visit: <http://www.fidnet.com/~dap1955/dickens/illustrations.html>

Have students consider illustrating some of the people described in his White House account **(SEE PG.7)**: the Kentucky farmer, the “oval-faced bilious-looking man,” or others. There are very few interior images that show the White House in the 1840s. Have students use their imagination, along with Dickens’s description, and illustrate the rooms as well, or draw an entire scene as depicted by the British author.



Enrichment and Extension

In the Eyes of the Beholder

Keeping in mind Dickens's comparison of the White House to an "English club-house," ask students to do research on English clubs in London that Dickens knew. Some examples that still exist are the Carlton, the Reform, the University, the Travellers and other clubs in the vicinity of London's Pall Mall.

Students should create brief architectural histories — with images — of the clubs and the White House (see Building the White House: http://www.whitehousehistory.org/whha_classroom/classroom_4-8-building.html). They should include an introduction to their house histories supporting or refuting Dickens's comparison. Arguments should take into consideration architectural style, construction materials, interior design, size, and purpose of the building (or use of the various spaces).

Bibliography

Dickens, Charles. *American Notes for General Circulation*. Patricia Ingham, ed. New York: Penguin USA, 2000.

You can also access American Notes on the Web at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/DicAmer.html>

Schlicke, Paul, ed. *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Slater, Michael. *Dickens on America & the Americans*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978.

National History Standards, Grades 5-12

Era 4 – Expansion and Reform (1801-1861)

Standard 3A The student understands the changing character of American political life in the age of the common man.

Standards in Historical Thinking, Grades 5-12

2C – Read historical narratives imaginatively.

2G – Draw upon visual, literary, and musical sources.

3B – Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions.

3D – Consider multiple perspectives.



Charles Dickens Visits President John Tyler's White House, 1842

[Excerpt from *American Notes*, Chapter 8]

. . . . The President's mansion is more like an English club-house, both within and without, than any other kind of establishment with which I can compare it. The ornamental ground about it has been laid out in garden walks; they are pretty, and agreeable to the eye; though they have that uncomfortable air of having been made yesterday, which is far from favourable to the display of such beauties.

My first visit to this house was on the morning after my arrival, when I was carried thither by an official gentleman, who was so kind as to charge himself with my presentation to the President.

We entered a large hall, and, having twice or thrice rung a bell which nobody answered, walked without further ceremony through the rooms on the ground-floor, as divers other gentlemen (mostly with their hats on, and their hands in their pockets) were doing very leisurely. Some of these had ladies with them, to whom they were showing the premises; others were lounging on the chairs and sofas; others, in a perfect state of exhaustion from listlessness, were yawning drearily. The greater portion of this assemblage were rather asserting their supremacy than doing anything else, as they had no particular business there, that anybody knew of. A few were closely eyeing the movables, as if to make quite sure that the President (who was far from popular) had not made away with any of the furniture, or sold the fixtures for his private benefit.

After glancing at these loungers; who were scattered over a pretty drawing-room [Blue Room], opening upon a terrace which commanded a beautiful prospect of the river and the adjacent country; and who were sauntering, too, about a larger state-room called the Eastern Drawing-room [East Room]; we went up-stairs into another chamber, where were certain visitors waiting for audiences. At sight of my conductor, a black in plain clothes and yellow slippers who was gliding noiselessly about, and whispering messages in the ears of the more impatient, made a sign of recognition, and glided off to announce him.

We had previously looked into another chamber fitted all round with a great bare wooden desk or counter, whereon lay files of newspapers, to which sundry gentlemen were referring. But there were no such means of beguiling the time in this apartment, which was as unpromising and tiresome as any waiting-room in one of our public establishments, or any physician's dining-room during his hours of consultation at home.

There were some fifteen or twenty persons in the room [a reception room near the president's office]. One, a tall, wiry, muscular old man, from the west; sunburnt and swarthy; with a brown-white hat on his knees, and a giant umbrella resting between his legs; who sat bolt upright in his chair, frowning steadily at the carpet, and twitching the hard lines about his mouth, as if he had made up his mind "to fix" the President on what he had to say, and wouldn't bate him a grain. Another, a Kentucky farmer, six feet six in height, with his hat on, and his hands under his coat-tails, who leaned against the wall and kicked the floor with his heel, as though, he had Time's head under his shoe, and were literally "killing" him. A third, an oval-faced, bilious-looking man, with sleek black hair cropped close, and whiskers and beard shaved down to blue dots, who sucked the head of a thick stick, and from time to time took it out of his mouth to see how it was getting on. A fourth did nothing but whistle. A fifth did nothing but spit.



And, indeed, all these gentlemen were so very persevering and energetic in this latter particular, and bestowed their favours so abundantly upon the carpet, that I take it for granted the Presidential housemaids have high wages, or, to speak more genteelly, an ample amount of “compensation:” which is the American word for salary in the case of all public servants.

We had not waited in this room many minutes before the black messenger returned, and conducted us into another of smaller dimensions [the president’s office], where, at a business-like table covered with papers, sat the President himself. He looked somewhat worn and anxious, -- and well he might: being at war with everybody, -- but the expression of his face was mild and pleasant, and his manner was remarkably unaffected, gentlemanly, and agreeable. I thought that, in his whole carriage and demeanour, he became his station singularly well.

[Source: Edited by John Lance Griffith, University of Virginia]



Charles Dickens at a White House Reception, 1842

[Excerpt from *American Notes*, Chapter 8]

. . . I only returned to this house once. It was on the occasion of one of those general assemblies which are held on certain nights, between the hours of nine and twelve o'clock, and are called, rather oddly, Levees.

I went, with my wife, at about ten. There was a pretty dense crowd of carriages and people in the courtyard, and, so far as I could make out, there were no very clear regulations for the taking up or setting down of company. There were certainly no policemen to soothe startled horses, either by sawing at their bridles or flourishing truncheons in their eyes; and I am ready to make oath that no inoffensive persons were knocked violently on the head, or poked acutely in their backs or stomachs; or brought to a stand-still by any such gentle means, and then taken into custody for not moving on. But there was no confusion or disorder. Our carriage reached the porch in its turn, without any blustering, swearing, shouting, backing, or other disturbance: and we dismounted with as much ease and comfort as though we had been escorted by the whole Metropolitan Force, from A to Z inclusive.

The suite of rooms on the ground-floor were lighted up; and a military band was playing in the hall. In the smaller drawing-room, the centre of a circle of company, were the President and his daughter-in-law, who acted as the lady of the mansion: and a very interesting, graceful, and accomplished lady too. One gentleman who stood among this group appeared to take upon himself the functions of a master of the ceremonies. I saw no other officers or attendants, and none were needed.

The great drawing-room which I have already mentioned, and the other chambers on the ground-floor, were crowded to excess. The company was not, in our sense of the term, select, for it comprehended persons of very many grades and classes; nor was there any great display of costly attire: indeed, some of the costumes may have been, for aught I know, grotesque enough. But the decorum and propriety of behaviour which prevailed were unbroken by any rude or disagreeable incident; and every man, even among the miscellaneous crowd in the hall who were admitted without any orders or tickets to look on, appeared to feel that he was a part of the Institution, and was responsible for its preserving a becoming character, and appearing to the best advantage.

That these visitors, too, whatever their station, were not without some refinement of taste and appreciation of intellectual gifts, and gratitude to those men who, by the peaceful exercise of great abilities, shed new charms and associations upon the homes of their countrymen, and elevate their character in other lands, was most earnestly testified by their reception of Washington Irving, my dear friend, who had recently been appointed Minister at the Court of Spain, and who was among them that night, in his new character, for the first and last time before going abroad. I sincerely believe that, in all the madness of American politics, few public men would have been so earnestly, devotedly, and affectionately caressed as this most charming writer: and I have seldom respected a public assembly more than I did this eager throng, when I saw them turning with one mind from noisy orators and officers of state, and flocking with a generous and honest impulse round the man of quiet pursuits: proud in his promotion, as reflecting back upon their country: and grateful to him with their whole hearts for the store of graceful fancies he had poured out among them. Long may he dispense such treasures with unsparing hand; and long may they remember him as worthily!

[Source: Edited by John Lance Griffith, University of Virginia]

