

THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

CLASSROOM | 4-8 Lessons : “First Kids”

What would your life be like if you lived in the White House? Where would you play with your friends? Could you go anywhere you wanted at any time you wanted? Where would you eat and do your homework? Your parents would be the most famous people in America and you would be one of the most famous kids in America. How would that change your life?

When we study the lives of children who have lived in the White House, it is easy to understand that it is more difficult to live a normal life now than it ever was in the days of Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln. With television, magazines, newspapers, and the Internet, the lives of the first family are on view almost every day. Still, the privacy of first kids is generally respected, and living in the White House can be great fun. Let’s look at life in the White House from a kid’s point of view, through the lens of history.



*Thomas (Tad) Lincoln.
Library of Congress*



Quentin and his pony, Algonquin. Library of Congress



*Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. and
his macaw. Library of Congress*



Section 1. What do you do for fun?

If you were Tad Lincoln, seven years old when his father Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1861, you played war games. The Lincolns lived in the White House during the Civil War (1861-1865). Tad loved to watch the Union soldiers that protected his house. For a short while, some troops even camped out in the East Room, the largest room in the house. Tad had a kid-sized uniform made for him and used a toy cannon to bomb the door of the Cabinet Room, interrupting President Lincoln and his advisors when they were meeting.

When his father bought Tad a pair of goats, he harnessed them to a kitchen chair and took a ride through the East Room. A group of women from Boston, who had to dodge the goat, were not amused. Goat power was also used to pull Benjamin “Baby” McKee, the grandson of President Benjamin Harrison (1889-1893). One day the goat, named “His Whiskers,” dashed off without warning, pulling “Baby McKee” across the White House lawn and onto Pennsylvania Avenue. President Harrison, a big and bulky man, ran after him as best he could, and finally caught up to the frisky goat.



Children playing on a maypole. Library of Congress



“Baby McKee” in his goat cart. Library of Congress



Theodore Roosevelt and family. Library of Congress

As long as children have lived in the White House, pets have lived there too. President Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909) and his wife Edith raised six children in the President’s House. The oldest was 16 and the youngest was 3 years old when the family moved in. “I don’t think that any family has ever enjoyed the White House more than we have,” President Roosevelt said.

It’s no wonder, with the children surrounded by animals. There was a pony named “Algonquin,” a macaw named “Eli Yale,” cats, dogs, snakes, badgers, and raccoons. Once, when Archie Roosevelt was in bed sick, his brothers wanted to cheer him up. Quentin Roosevelt knew just what would make his brother smile. He led his pony into the White House, down the hall and pulled it onto the elevator. Up went the pony and Quentin to Archie’s bedroom!



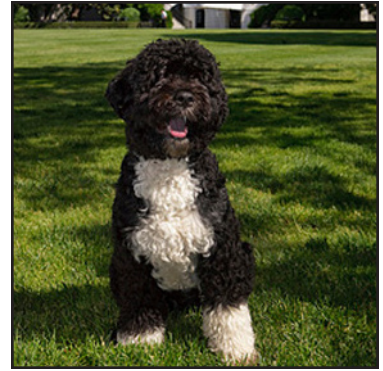
Like most households, though, dogs seem to have been the favorite of all White House pets.



The Bush's dog Barney.



Fala. Franklin D. Roosevelt Library



The Obamas' dog, Bo. White House Photo



President Clinton and Buddy. The White House



Amy Carter with Grits. Jimmy Carter Library



The Reagans' dog, Rex. The Reagan Library

Today, there are 132 rooms in the White House and a huge yard of 18 acres filled with trees, gardens, and fountains, so there is plenty of space to explore.

John and Jacqueline Kennedy were one of the youngest presidential couples to live in the White House, and their children treated it as a play land. Caroline Kennedy, almost 4, and John Jr., just an infant, moved in on February 4, 1961. Americans had not seen children so young in the White House in 50 years — since Theodore Roosevelt's family lived there in the early 1900s. John Jr.'s favorite hiding place was under his father's desk in the Oval Office. He could hide behind a secret door built into the desk. One of the White House staff, Preston Bruce, would have to take the young boy out from beneath the desk when President Kennedy had meetings in his office. In a book of his memories about working in the White House, Bruce wrote: "Sometimes I'd be asked to fetch him because there was business to be done that would be better accomplished without John-John. I'd have to pull him away from his daddy."



Bruce also told of the time that John Jr. fell into a fountain on the south lawn. It was filled with mud and muck from the winter season and had not been cleaned yet. Mrs. Kennedy stepped in to grab her son, and she too became stuck in the mud. A Secret Service agent tossed them a rope and pulled them out. “I took the First Lady and her son upstairs in the elevator,” Bruce wrote. “They were both absolutely filthy, covered with mud, but Mrs. Kennedy didn’t seem to care. She stood and chatted with John-John as if nothing had happened. It was hard not to laugh —they looked so ridiculous.”



Lucy Hayes, her children, and a friend in the greenhouse, 1877. Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center



Fountain on the White House grounds. Erik Kvalsvik



*John F. Kennedy, Jr. hides beneath his father's desk
John F. Kennedy Library*

The land around the White House is called President's Park. There are a great variety of trees and the presidents planted many of them. There are magnolias, pines, beeches, oaks, dogwoods, maples, and more.

First kids have played under and on these trees for decades. Amy Carter, daughter of President Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter (1976-1980), played in a tree house on the south lawn.

In the 19th century, large glass greenhouses were built to grow plants and shrubs. This was often the most peaceful place at the White House, and the first family used these rooms to gather and relax. These greenhouses were taken down in 1902 to make room for the West Wing. Later, another glass room was built for the family — but not for plants! The solarium on the third floor is a large informal room that has a beautiful view of the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial.





John F. Kennedy with his children Caroline and John, Jr. in the Oval Office, 1962
John F. Kennedy Library



Inside the solarium, 1980s. The White House

The first pool was built indoors in the West Wing. President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1945) suffered from polio, and swimming strengthened his upper body. A newspaper, the New York Daily News, helped raise money for the construction of the pool. Citizens from across America, including schoolchildren, mailed in their contributions and the pool was completed in 1933. In 1969, President Richard Nixon (1969-1974) decided to fill in the pool and turn the space into a room where reporters could gather. The pressroom is small but close to the Oval Office, where the president works. In 1975 an outdoor pool was built during the presidency of Gerald Ford (1974-1977).

A theater was built in the East Wing in 1942, during World War II. President Franklin Roosevelt watched films, called newsreels, of the battles. Presidents have also shown Hollywood movies for family and friends. Margaret Truman watched her favorite movie, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, 16 times!

If you were a first kid, your friends could swim in the outdoor pool, golf on the putting green, shoot basketball, go bowling, play tennis, or watch a movie in the theater. And, of course, you could always have fun riding the elevators.



Gerald Ford was one of the best athletes to live in the White House. The White House



The White House theatre during the Reagan presidency. The White House



David Eisenhower, grandson of President Eisenhower, celebrates his birthday with Roy Rogers, 1956. Dwight D. Eisenhower Library

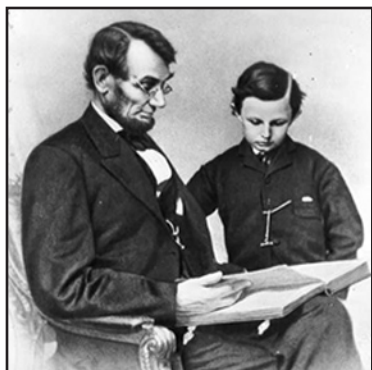


Section 2. Where Would I Go To School?

That would be a decision for you and your parents to make. In the 19th century, it was not unusual for children to be privately tutored in or near their homes, and children living in the White House were no exceptions. Tad and Willie Lincoln studied in the oval room on the second floor, which was also the family library. Andrew Johnson's grandchildren were tutored in a basement schoolroom. Scott and Fanny Hayes, the children of President Rutherford and Lucy Hayes (1877-1881), were taught on the second floor in a space set aside in a hallway.

Mrs. John Kennedy had young children in the White House and did not want reporters following her daughter Caroline to school. Her solution was to create a first-grade classroom in the White House. Ten of Caroline's friends met for class on the third floor. They all had to bring their lunch to school in a lunchbox. No school bus came to the White House. The students' parents drove them to the White House in their family cars.

In more recent times, Americans have become very interested in whether or not the president's children attend public or private schools. They have done both. For example, Amy Carter attended public school in Washington, D.C., while Susan Ford and Chelsea Clinton went to private schools in the area. Susan Ford invited her entire class to the White House for her senior prom!



Abraham Lincoln and son Tad, 1864. Library of Congress



"Reb" and "Billy Button" carry the Grant children to school. The White House



Susan Ford's high school class held their prom at the White House. Gerald R. Ford Library



Section 3. Can I raid the refrigerator? Do I have to make my bed?

There are two kitchens in the White House. The larger one in the basement is used for big dinner parties. The chef and his assistants often make meals for as many as 200 people. Susan Ford convinced one of the pot scrubbers to show her where they kept the key for the “cookie jar.” This was no ordinary cookie jar — this was a large rolling container with trays holding 20 or more different types of cookies! Susan would sneak down to the kitchen, fill her pockets with cookies, and run upstairs to her bedroom to munch.

There is another kitchen upstairs and a private family dining room where the first family can enjoy meals alone. Even this private dining room is a little too fancy for some of the presidential families. Bill, Hillary and Chelsea Clinton often had their dinner in a small room that used to be a butler’s pantry. Of course, first kids can always eat in their bedrooms. The Reagans liked to watch the evening news on television while they had dinner.



White House family kitchen, c. 1890. Library of Congress



Amy Carter enjoys dinner with family in the second-floor dining room. Jimmy Carter Library



The Reagans often watched the evening news while eating dinner. Ronald Reagan Library

In an interview for the book, *A Kid’s Guide to the White House* (by Betty Debnam), Susan Ford answered questions about living in the White House. She was a senior in high school when she and her parents, President Gerald and Betty Ford, moved into the White House in 1974:

What’s it like to live there?

“It’s like a fairy tale. The people you meet — the kings, queens and movie stars — and the experiences. The first time my friends visited me, they were probably impressed, but they got used to it.”



What about the service?

“The service is absolutely delightful. You can be waited on hand and foot if you want that. You can be left alone if you want that. It’s always fresh towels and fresh sheets and the food is delivered to your room. If Mother and Dad were at an event, I’d have the food brought upstairs to my room. I don’t think my mother wanted me to become a little princess . . . She said that ‘Susan will still get up in the morning and make her bed every day,’ and so I did.”

How do you decorate your room?

“You can decorate your room any way you want to at your parent’s expense. I could stick up things on the walls. They have a warehouse full of furniture you can choose from.”



Mrs. Reagan samples dishes prepared by the White House chefs



Susan Ford and “Shan.” Gerald R. Ford Library



Susan and First Lady Betty Ford in the family quarters, 1974. Gerald R. Ford Library

Section 4. Will I be safe? Will people bother me because I’m the child of the president?

When you are the son or daughter of the president of the United States, people are naturally curious about who you are, what you look like, how you live your life, what you wear, and what kinds of things you like and don’t like. Especially since the time television became popular in the 1950s, the public has been able to follow the lives of the first family. The president and first lady try to keep their children out of the news as best they can, and reporters will not interview a first kid when they are still living in the White House. But when the first family travels, it is nearly impossible to stop photographers and television cameramen from taking their pictures.



When you leave the White House, a Secret Service agent travels with you to protect you — whether you are going to school, vacation, or shopping — wherever you go. They are even nearby when you go play in the yard, and not far away even when you are in your White House bedroom.



Frances Cleveland holds her daughter Esther in the White House, 1896. Harper's Bazaar



Herbert Hoover's U.S. Secret Service (USSS) car. Library of Congress



Guards protect the northwest gate of the White House

One first lady became nervous about all the people wandering around her yard. Frances Cleveland, the youngest first lady and wife of President Grover Cleveland (1885-1889 and 1893-1897), was also the mother of the only child of a president to be born in the White House. Esther Cleveland was born on September 9, 1893. She had two other sisters — Ruth and Marion — who lived with her in the White House. Americans sent gifts to the sisters, and sent advice to their mother on how to raise them! One day, little Ruth was on the White House lawn with her nanny. A crowd of curious visitors surrounded them and one of them picked up Ruth and passed her around to be hugged and kissed by these strangers. Mrs. Cleveland saw it all from a White House window. She was so frightened that she ordered that the south lawn gate be closed to visitors. The Cleverlands decided that their children would not be available to the public again.

After a gunman killed President William McKinley in 1901 while he was in Buffalo, New York, security tightened at the White House. Uniformed policemen and Secret Service agents in street clothes guarded the White House and the president. In 1917, the decision was made to protect every member of the first family, including the children.

It was the threat of an attack on the White House during World War II that changed things for good. After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, new plans were made to protect the president, his family, and those who worked in the White House. Guard houses were built at the corners of the lawn. No one was allowed in the White House without an appointment. You could no longer walk up to the front door and ask to see the president. There would be no more strolling on the lawn on a pretty spring day. Today, the Secret Service and military guards are at the White House at all times.



At times, it seemed that the president's family was trapped in the White House. William Howard Taft (1909-1913) said the President's House was the "loneliest place in the world." Julie Nixon Eisenhower was in college when her father, Richard Nixon, lived there. She thought younger children found it easier to live in the White House, but at her age she found it difficult. But, she said, "Once you've been a White House kid, you'll always be a White House kid. It's always part of you."



Archie and Quentin Roosevelt fall in with the White House police, c. 1903. Library of Congress



The Clinton family walks across the South Lawn. The White House

