

INTRODUCTION

The historic furnishings in the White House provide a glimpse into the ways that first families have lived and worked for over 200 years. These desks, chairs, and other items allow the Executive Mansion to serve as both the home and the office of the president. Each piece of furniture has a history of its own. While furniture has come and gone from the Executive Mansion, pieces remaining in the collection today often reflect important moments in American history and the presidency. Learn about a few of furnishings in the White House and their respective histories.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY



Image 1

When the British burned the White House in 1814, nearly all of its earliest contents were destroyed. James Monroe moved into the rebuilt White House in 1817 and brought new furnishings that would form the basis of a later historic collection.

Monroe's goal was to provide furniture that would endow the Executive Mansion with status and prestige. He ordered a 53-piece suite of furniture from Paris made by Pierre-Antoine Bellangé for the Oval Room, now the Blue Room (**Image 1**).

This gilded furniture was sold and replaced in 1860, but some of the original pieces would return to the room in the 1960s and 1970s and remain in service today (**Image 2**).

Many of the furnishings in the White House collection reflect specific events or moments in American history. In 1927, Eleanor Roosevelt founded the Val-Kill Furniture Shop to increase employment near her home along the Hudson River in New York. After becoming first lady in 1933, Mrs. Roosevelt bought eleven pieces of Val-Kill furniture, which copied early American furnishings (**Images 3 & 4**). These items brought a personal touch to the White House. Providing work, the Val-Kill shop was a forerunner to the agencies established under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies in the 1930s, and the Val-Kill pieces in the White House collection connect to a wider narrative about the Great Depression.

FURNISHINGS OF THE WHITE HOUSE



Eleanor Roosevelt was not the only first lady to leave a lasting legacy at the White House through its furnishings. First Lady Lou Hoover initiated the first study of furniture at the Executive Mansion and also created a “Monroe Room” (**Image 5**). In 1932, she redecorated space on the Second Floor with reproductions of furniture that had belonged to the Monroes. One of these seven pieces was a copy of the desk where President Monroe reportedly signed his 1823 Annual Message to Congress, a document better known as the Monroe Doctrine (**Image 6**).

Another famous office item from the White House collection is the *Resolute* desk (**Image 7**). In 1880, Queen Victoria presented President Rutherford B. Hayes with this large oak desk crafted from the timbers of the HMS *Resolute*. The English ship was abandoned after being stuck in ice during an 1854 arctic expedition. A year later, an American whaling ship recovered the *Resolute*. Congress then provided funds to repair the ship and send it back to England as a goodwill gesture. Queen



Image 7

Victoria returned the kindness, sending the desk to America as a gift. Nearly every president since 1880 has used the desk somewhere in the White House. John F. Kennedy began the tradition of using the *Resolute* desk in the Oval Office, and many presidents have followed his lead, including Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton (**Image 8 & 9**).

In the nineteenth century, before the Oval Office was built, the president’s office was located on the Second Floor of the White House. Known today as the Lincoln Bedroom, it contains Lincoln-era furnishings including pieces purchased by First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln in 1861 (**Image 10**). Mrs. Lincoln’s bedroom suite was originally located in a guest room on the opposite side of the floor, but the Trumans moved these Lincoln items to the former office space, creating the Lincoln Bedroom as we know it today. Various administrations have renovated the bedroom, including First Lady Laura Bush in 2005 (**Image 11**).

FURNISHINGS OF THE WHITE HOUSE



Image 12

The construction of the West Wing under Theodore Roosevelt permitted the entire Second Floor of the main house to be converted into family space, making the Lincoln Bedroom possible later. This change to the White House opened the Executive Mansion for other reconstruction and redecoration. President Roosevelt hired architectural firm McKim, Mead & White to complete the project. As part of their renovations of the State Floor, ornate marble-topped console tables with carved American eagle supports were added (**Images 12-14**). Built by furniture maker A. H. Davenport, these tables were inspired by pier tables from Andrew Jackson's era and are still in use in the State Dining Room. Other furnishings by Davenport were commissioned and endure as a reminder of Roosevelt's early twentieth century changes (**Image 15**).

Determined to preserve and promote the history of the White House, First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy began several initiatives to restore the mansion's public rooms. In September 1961, Congress passed legislation to ensure that furniture of "historic or artistic" interest would become permanent property of the Executive Mansion. In that vein, when Mrs. Kennedy discovered an original pier table from Monroe's 1817 Bellangé suite in the carpenter's shop, she had it restored (**Image 16**). In addition, she agreed to conduct a televised tour of the White House to highlight the restoration efforts and appealed to the American people to donate objects, which resulted in an influx of authentic furnishings. Her work increased popular interest in antiques and helped to formulate the preservation of historic furnishings at the White House into a collection that endures today.

FURNISHINGS OF THE WHITE HOUSE



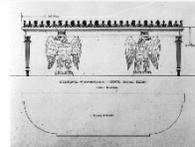
IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	Sofa and Armchairs, Blue Room	Ca. 1817	Pierre-Antoine Bellangé	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/4186.tif.info
2	Bellangé Armchair, Blue Room	Ca. 1963	Pierre-Antoine Bellangé	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/3142.tif.info
3	Dressing Table	Ca. 1933	Otto Berge	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/833.tif.info
4	Dressing Table Maker's Mark	Ca. 1933	Otto Berge	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/966.tif.info
5	Lou Henry Hoover at Monroe Desk	1932	Harris & Ewing	Stock Montage, Harris & Ewing Collection		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Herbert%20Hoover/112146.tif.info
6	Mahogany Desk	1932	Morris W. Dove	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/832.tif.info
7	Resolute Desk	1880	William Evenden	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/797.tif.info

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8	Ronald Reagan on the Telephone in the Oval Office	Ca. 1982	Unknown	Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Ronald%20Reagan/3054.tif.info
9	President Clinton, Chelsea Clinton and Socks Clinton (Cat) in the Oval Office	1994	Robert McNeely	William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Bill%20Clinton/572.tif.info
10	Lincoln Bedroom, 1962	1962	George F. Mobley	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/1113483.tif.info
11	Lincoln Bedroom of the White House, George W. Bush Administration	2005	Erik Kvalsvik	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/6846.tif.info
12	A. H. Davenport Console Table	1902	A. H. Davenport	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/816.tif.info
13	Design Drawing of Mahogany Console Table	1902	A. H. Davenport	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/949.tif.info
14	Eagle Table Plan	1902	A. H. Davenport	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/2389.tif.info

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15	Side Chair and Armchair by A. H. Davenport	1902	A. H. Davenport	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/814.tif.info
16	French Empire Pier Table	Ca. 1817	Pierre-Antoine Bellangé	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/727.tif.info

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Collection: Decorative Arts and the White House from the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

Video: First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy's White House Tour. Televised on CBS February 14, 1962. [Watch here.](#)

Short Video: "Preserving the Legacy of the White House" by the White House Historical Association. [Watch here.](#)

Resource: The White House Collection on the WHHA Digital Library. [Explore here.](#)

Article: "The Diplomatic Reception Room's Historical Wallpaper" by William Kelly for the White House Historical Association. [Read here.](#)

Podcast: *The 1600 Sessions*: "Back in the Blue Room: Restoring the Bellangé Suite" from the White House Historical Association. [Listen here.](#)

Fact Sheet: Decorating the White House from the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

Magazine: *LIFE* magazine featuring First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, September 1, 1961. Accessed from Google Books. [Click here.](#)

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

FOR ALL LEARNERS

- Get crafty with the associated “Anywhere Activity: Paper Chair” and use your own artist touches to transform paper into a model of a Bellangé suite chair!
- Choose a furniture item in your home – perhaps the oldest one you have. Investigate the origins of this piece: Did it come from a store? Who made it? Was it passed down from another family member? Has its use changed over the years?

FOR OLDER LEARNERS

- Use Sources 12-14 to see the evolution of the eagle console table. What do these images tell you about furniture making?
 - Follow-Up: Discuss the symbolism of the eagle in this console table and other White House furniture pieces.
- In the style of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy’s White House tour, create a tour to highlight art and furniture in your home or school. Be sure to explain the significance of the items and furnishings you include in your tour. Write a script of the tour, or record it on video!
- Write a journal entry from the perspective of a chair in the oval office (or any other piece of furniture in the White House, if you want to mix it up). Address one or more of the following prompts:
 - What important events has the chair experienced?
 - What people/animals sat on the chair? Describe their experiences. Why were they there? What might they have seen?