



THE WHITE HOUSE  
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## Background: The Fourth of July at the White House

The White House has a long history of Independence Day celebrations, beginning with Thomas Jefferson in 1801. There is no one tradition which has been practiced from administration to administration. Instead, presidents and their families have celebrated the Fourth of July in their own unique ways.

Below is a timeline of Fourth of July celebrations at the White House over the years:

- Although John Adams was the first to occupy the Executive Mansion in November 1800, it was Thomas Jefferson who [first celebrated](#) the Fourth of July at the White House in 1801. Jefferson opened the house and greeted diplomats, civil and military officers, citizens, and Cherokee chiefs in the oval saloon (today's Blue Room). The Marine Band played in the Entrance Hall while on the north grounds a festival took place—complete with horse races, parades, and food and drink. The tradition of an annual reception at the White House continued for much of the [nineteenth century](#).
- John Quincy Adams often celebrated the holiday by joining a procession to the Capitol before returning to the White House to receive the public. For John Quincy Adams, the Fourth of July was bittersweet. His July 4, 1827 diary entry reveals: “The day had for the first time a threefold interest of glory of joy and of melancholy which mingled in all my recollections—as the day of Independence as my son John’s birthday, and as the day of my father’s decease.” His father, President John Adams, along with President Thomas Jefferson, had both passed away on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.
- In a diary entry for July 5, 1841, Massachusetts Representative and former President John Quincy Adams mentioned attending a private dinner at the White House with President John Tyler to celebrate the anniversary of American independence. Adams wrote, “There was turtle soup from a turtle weighing 300 lb a present from Key West.” President Tyler ended the evening watching fireworks with his guests from Lafayette Square.

- During the James K. Polk administration (1845-1849), celebrations were shaped by a sharp rise in patriotic sentiment brought on by the Mexican-American War and westward expansion. In 1845, the Polks opened the White House for the annual Independence Day reception. The fireworks were lauded for their especially brilliant display, but the celebration was marred by an unfortunate accident when several rogue fireworks discharged in the direction of those watching the display on the White House Grounds killing a man named James Knowles and injuring a dozen others. In 1846, Polk opened up the White House for a public celebration, and in 1847 President Polk spent the holiday in Portland, Maine, as part of a two-week tour of the Northeast to garner support for the Mexican American War, although the usual Independence Day celebrations continued in Washington despite his absence. The Polk era celebrations reached their pinnacle in 1848 when the dedication of the Washington Monument enhanced the overall patriotic mood of the nation's capital.
- In 1850, President Zachary Taylor fell ill after drinking ice water and eating cherries while attending the Independence Day celebrations at the Washington Monument. He died five days later from a gastrointestinal illness (perhaps cholera), which was not uncommon in D.C. before the advent of modern plumbing and sewage.
- In 1864, amid the turmoil of the Civil War, President Lincoln attended a picnic for African American schools and churches, as well as religious groups on the Fourth of July. He allowed these groups to hold the event on the White House South Grounds, in between the War Department and the President's House, setting an example of tolerance for the rest of the country. During the event, participants listened to a recitation of the Declaration of Independence.
- President Calvin Coolidge, the only president to share a birthday with the United States, celebrated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1926. He gave a speech in Philadelphia stating: "It was not because it was proposed to establish a new nation, but because it was proposed to establish a nation on new principles, that July 4, 1776, has come to be regarded as one of the greatest days in history."
- In her Fourth of July "My Day" column in 1937, Eleanor Roosevelt reminisced about the boisterous holiday celebrations that her father Elliott and her uncle, President Theodore Roosevelt, had enjoyed during their childhood at Oyster Bay. The first lady looked forward to the much quieter Fourth of July celebration that she and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had planned for that year away from the hustle and bustle of the White House. On Independence Day, President Roosevelt toured White House staff around Hyde Park, their home and estate along the Hudson River, before hosting a picnic with the first lady for everyone at Val-Kill, the Roosevelt's nearby cottage.

- Many presidents in the past fifty years have invited staff and special guests to celebrate the holiday and enjoy fireworks from the comfort of the White House South Lawn. In 1969, President Richard Nixon invited staff and a group of Vietnam veterans to join these celebrations. President Nixon was not at the White House that year for the celebrations, as he was away on vacation in Key Biscayne, Florida. While the first family often leaves town for the holiday, White House staff and guests are often permitted to celebrate on the South Lawn with picnics, games, and the fireworks display.
- In 1976, President Gerald R. Ford and First Lady Betty Ford celebrated the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of American independence. Celebrations kicked off with President Ford and his daughter Susan flying by helicopter from the White House to Valley Forge in Pennsylvania. There, they participated in the Valley Forge State Park's Bicentennial celebration, which included the president signing legislation which made Valley Forge a national park. He then flew to Philadelphia to attend celebrations at Independence Hall, just as President Calvin Coolidge had fifty years earlier. After a bell ringing ceremony in New York, the Fords returned to the White House to watch Washington, D.C.'s fireworks display over the National Mall. Three days later on July 7, the Fords hosted a State Dinner in honor of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and His Royal Highness, Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh.
- In 1986, President Ronald Reagan and First Lady Nancy Reagan traveled to New York Harbor to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of the Statue of Liberty. He delivered an address from the USS *John Kennedy* saying: "Tonight, with heart and hand, through whatever trial and travail, we pledge ourselves to each other and to the cause of human freedom, the cause that has given light to this land and hope to the world."

[View a Gallery of Fourth of July Celebrations at the White House](#)

*Compiled by the White House Historical Association. Please credit the Association by its full name when using this as background material. Specific sources consulted available upon request.*

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### **About The White House Historical Association**

First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy envisioned a restored White House that conveyed a sense of history through its decorative and fine arts. In 1961, the White House Historical Association was established to support her vision to preserve and share the Executive Mansion's legacy for generations to come. Supported entirely by private resources, the Association's mission is to assist in the preservation of the state and public rooms, fund acquisitions for the White House permanent collection, and educate the public on the history of the White House. Since its founding, the White House Historical Association has contributed more than \$50

million in fulfillment of its mission. To learn more about the White House Historical Association, please visit [www.whitehousehistory.org](http://www.whitehousehistory.org).

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