



THE WHITE HOUSE  
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## Background: Halloween Celebrations at the White House

Halloween celebrations at the White House began in 1958 during the Dwight Eisenhower administration when First Lady Mamie Eisenhower decorated the Executive Mansion for the occasion. Decorations included skeletons, jack-o-lanterns, and stalks of dried corn in the State Dining Room. She also hosted a lunch for the wives of White House staff members.

“Ever since First Lady Mamie Eisenhower first decorated the White House in 1958, first families—especially those with young children and grandchildren—have enjoyed celebrating Halloween. From ghost stories, to decorations, to elaborate costumes, and trick-or-treating, presidents have often invited families to the White House to enjoy the spooky holiday.”

- Lina Mann, Historian  
The White House Historical Association

## History of Halloween Celebrations at the White House

- The Kennedys began the tradition of hosting a trick-or-treat Halloween event along with a private family party for friends and staff. Larger events have been held on the grounds of the White House for Halloween ever since.
- Halloween took on more significance during the Richard Nixon administration as the first family hosted a series of public events for children. In 1971, First Lady Patricia Nixon hosted an early Halloween party for 150 children from the C. Melvin Sharp Health School and Hospital for Sick Children. Characters from the Disney on Parade show appeared and entertained the kids. In 1972, First Daughter Tricia Nixon Cox hosted a Halloween party for 200 foster grandparents and their grandchildren, complete with circus clown Emmett Kelly, Jr., trained dogs, and chimpanzees from the popular TV series *Daktari*.

- In 1977, Amy Carter celebrated her October birthday with a Halloween-themed party. She and fourteen friends carved pumpkins and watched the original 1931 “Frankenstein” in the White House Family Theater in the East Colonnade.
- After attending a farewell party for a staffer, President Ronald Reagan and First Lady Nancy Reagan returned home to Halloween pumpkins that read: “Stay the Course” and “Four more in 84.”
- President George H.W. Bush and First Lady Barbara Bush hosted a Halloween party for 600 schoolchildren on the South Lawn in 1989.
- The Clintons held large annual costume parties for their families and friends to celebrate First Lady Hillary Clinton’s birthday, which falls on October 26. One of the Clintons’ most notable coordinated costumes was their appearance as James and Dolley Madison in 1993.
- President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush took part in Halloween fun by dressing up their cat and two dogs as a wizard, strawberry, and cowboy.
- The Obama family welcomed trick-or-treaters from local schools and the children of military families every year except for 2012, when Super Storm Sandy hit the East Coast. President and Mrs. Obama invited presidential impersonators for a special tour of ghosts of the White House. President Obama even met with Abraham Lincoln’s “ghost” in the Oval Office.”
- The Trump family has decorated the South Portico with cobwebs, black spiders, and purple lights. In 2017, jack-o-lanterns depicting previous presidents dotted the grounds, and children from different schools were invited along with military families to celebrate the holiday.

[More on how administrations celebrated Halloween at the White House here.](#)

## Notorious Ghost Stories and Legends

- Many have heard about the ghost of Abraham Lincoln, who supposedly haunts the Yellow Oval Room and the Lincoln bedroom, but few know where the story originated. A man named Jeremiah “Jerry” Smith, the “official duster” of the White House in the late 1860s, may have been the source of the original story. Read more about Smith and his famed ghost stories [here](#).
- During the height of the Civil War, many turned to spiritualism to seek some sort of comfort for the loss of their loved ones. First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln

is known to have participated in spirit circles or séances in both the Red Room at the White House and the presidential cottage at the Soldiers' Home after the loss of her son Willie in February 1862.

- Not all ghosts at the White House have been presidents and first ladies. There are quite a few [lesser-known spirits](#) that have been said to haunt the White House and its grounds, such as the “Thing” – an apparition of a young boy that caused quite a stir during the William Howard Taft administration; as well as a beautiful maiden in a flowing white dress.
- Learn about other ghost lore [here](#).

To schedule an interview with historian Lina Mann or request high-res images of Halloween celebrations at the White House, contact [press@whha.org](mailto:press@whha.org)

To learn more about Halloween traditions and stories at the White House, visit the [Halloween at the White House Press Collection](#).

### **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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