

INTRODUCTION

Today, there is a stone engraving on the floor of the White House Entrance Hall—pictured in **Image 1** in the chart below—which includes the dates of the four major instances of White House construction and renovation: 1792, 1817, 1902, and 1952. **1792** represents the year that construction began on the White House. **1817** marks the completion of the White House rebuild following the fire on August 24, 1814, during the War of 1812. **1902** commemorates President Theodore Roosevelt’s renovation that modernized the White House and established the West Wing as the new executive office for the president and their staff. Finally, **1952** marks the completion of President Harry Truman’s renovation, an extensive structural rebuild. Explore the major expansions and renovations of the White House between 1830 and 1952—including the Roosevelt and Truman Renovations—as the structure of the building changed to meet the evolving needs of the president, the first family, and staff.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

Initial Construction: 1792-1830

Initial White House construction began in 1792, during George Washington’s presidency, according to designs of Irish-born architect James Hoban’s. After the British set fire to the White House during the War of 1812, James Hoban returned to lead the first major White House rebuild, which was hastily completed by 1817. Hoban was called upon again to build the South and North Porticos, completed in 1824 and 1830, respectively. **Image 2**, to the right, is a modern photograph of the South Portico. Refer to **Image 3**, in the chart below, to see a modern photograph of the North Portico. By 1830, the central White House building was completed. The White House has undergone many expansions, renovations, and restorations since 1830. Although much of the residence has been transformed, one thing has remained largely the same—the iconic façade, or outward appearance of



Image 2. View of the White House South Lawn. The oval-shaped porch with columns is the South Portico (2012).



the building. Between 1830 and 1902, however, many changes were made to the White House's interior. These changes, including the installation of new amenities such as running water, central heating, and electricity, reflect the evolving needs of the occupants of the White House.

The Roosevelt Renovation: 1902

The White House is the workplace and residence of the president of the United States and the first family. Originally, the president's office and living space were both located on the Second Floor of the building. Throughout the 1800s, presidential staff and first families crowded into the second floor and were able to make the space work for their families and their staff. However, the lack of privacy sparked demands for more space at the White House. During President Benjamin Harrison's administration (1889-1893), First Lady Caroline Harrison called for a major expansion of the White House complex, but Congress refused to fund the project. Refer to **Image 4**, in the chart below, to see a plan to expand the White House drawn for First Lady Caroline Harrison.

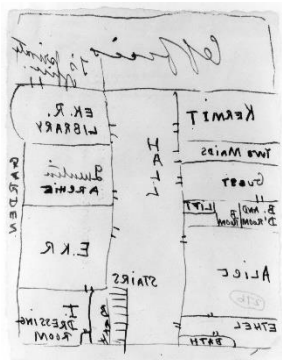


Image 6. First Lady Edith Roosevelt's plan for the family rooms of the White House (1901).

In 1901, President Theodore Roosevelt became the youngest president to assume office and brought his six children to the White House. To see a photograph of the large Roosevelt family, see **Image 5** in the chart. One year into his presidency, First Lady Edith Roosevelt consulted architect Charles F. McKim for advice regarding the overcrowded Second Floor quarters. **Image 6**, to the left, depicts First Lady Edith Roosevelt's attempt to organize the crowded space. In 1902, McKim recommended a complete renovation of the White House.

The 1902 Roosevelt Renovation removed the noise and disruption of the executive offices from the first family's home. The remodel included the construction of what came to be known as the West Wing—designated executive office space for the president and his staff—the East Wing for social events and guests, and a large expansion of the Second Floor family living quarters. **Image 7**, in the

chart below, shows Archie Roosevelt, President Theodore Roosevelt's son, on his pet horse in front of the new West Wing. See **Images 8 and 9**, in the chart, for photographs of the construction of the East Entrance and Terrace. Additionally, a new elevator was installed, electric lights fully replaced gaslight, and a staircase was removed to enlarge the State Dining Room. These changes significantly increased the functionality of the White House. The design of the White House complex today still mirrors the design from the 1902 renovation. In 1927, President Calvin Coolidge oversaw a significant renovation of the upper floors and attic of the White House, transforming the attic into the fully finished Third Floor.

West Wing Renovations: 1909-1934



Image 11. Firefighters on ladders battling the fire in the West Wing on December 24, 1929.

Although the term “West Wing” did not come into common use until the late 1960s, the space underwent several renovations and expansions between 1909 and 1934. In 1909, President William Howard Taft oversaw the first expansion of the West Wing, which doubled the size of the Executive Office Building. Nathan C. Wyeth, a Washington D.C. architect, created the first Oval Office space for the president. **Image 10**, in the chart below, shows President Taft seated in the newly constructed Oval Office. In 1929, during President Herbert Hoover's administration, a Christmas Eve fire caused significant damage to the West Wing, pictured in **Image 11** to the left. Although the exterior walls of the West Wing survived, the roof, attic, and floors were either burned or warped beyond repair. Congress passed a special appropriation to rebuild the West Wing which was completed in 1930.

In 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt oversaw yet another expansion of the West Wing. Under the supervision of architect Eric Gugler, the expansion included moving the Oval Office to its present location in the southeast corner of the building, next to the Rose Garden. Refer to **Image 12**, in the chart, to see a photograph of President Franklin D. Roosevelt seated in the renovated Oval Office. To

accommodate the expanding presidential staff, Gugler added a second story to the existing office space and a larger basement for staff and support services.

The Truman Renovation: 1948-1952

When President Harry Truman moved into the White House in 1945, he noticed large areas of cracking plaster and unusual popping and creaking noises. Engineers conducted a survey and confirmed that the White House's structural integrity was compromised. The fire during the War of 1812, James Hoban's hasty rebuild, major renovations in 1902 and 1927, and the continuous installations of indoor plumbing, gas lighting, electric lighting, and heating ducts all contributed to the structural weakening of the White House. While constructing a balcony on the South Portico in 1948, architect Lorenzo S. Winslow worried the whole building might collapse.

Shortly thereafter, President Truman appointed a Commission on the Renovation of the Executive Mansion to manage the modern restoration of the White House. The Truman Renovation retained the original sandstone walls, the Third Floor and the roof, while removing and then rebuilding the other interiors on a skeleton of steel structural beams and a new concrete foundation. Two levels of sub-basements under the North Portico were constructed and the Grand Staircase was changed significantly. See **Images**



Image 14. The South Portico, or porch, under construction during the Truman Renovation (1950).

13, 14, and 15 to see the White House under construction during the large-scale Truman Renovation.

During renovations, President Truman and the first family moved across the street into the Blair House on Pennsylvania Avenue. On the evening of March 27, 1952, in a small ceremony at the entrance



Image 16. President Harry Truman and First Lady Bess Truman returning to the White House after living in Blair House during the renovation (1952).

door, President Truman received a gold key to the newly renovated White House. After spending more than three years living in the Blair House, the first family returned to the White House for the remainder of Truman's presidency. You can see President Truman and First Lady Bess Truman returning to the White House in **Image 16**, to the left.

Conclusion

Since the completion of the last major White House renovation in 1952, every president and first lady has made changes to the home's interior in various ways. Some have renovated or refurbished rooms. The Blue Room underwent renovations by Jacqueline Kennedy, Thelma "Pat" Nixon, and Hillary Clinton. Some have added artwork, portraiture, and furniture to the White House Collection. Michelle Obama secured Alma Thomas' painting *Resurrection*, the first work of an African American woman in the collection. Others have supported exterior projects on the White House Grounds. During his administration, President Gerald Ford ordered an outdoor swimming pool to be built. Although numerous exterior and interior changes have been made to the White House throughout its history, its recognizable façade remains.



IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	White House Building Dates	Unknown	Unknown	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/1993.tif.info
2	South Portico and Lawn	2012	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/1112808.tif.info
3	North Portico	2010	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/9398.tif.info
4	Plan for Enlarging Executive Mansion	1889	Fred D. Owen	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/1038.tif.info
5	The Theodore Roosevelt Family	Ca. 1903	Unknown	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Theodore%20Roosevelt/1637.tif.info






CHANGES TO THE WHITE HOUSE: 1830 – 1952



6	Edith Roosevelt's Plan for the Family Rooms of the White House	1901	Edith Roosevelt	Houghton Library, Harvard University		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Plans/1880.tif.info
7	Archie Roosevelt on Algonquin in Front of the New West Wing	1903	Unknown	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Theodore%20Roosevelt/2528.tif.info
8	East Terrace Construction	1902	Unknown	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/372.jpg.info
9	East Entrance	Ca. 1906	Handy Studios	White House Collection		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/9278.jpg.info
10	Taft Seated in Oval Office	Ca. 1909	Unknown	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/William%20H%20Taft/1763.tif.info
11	Fire in the West Wing	1929	Herbert E. French	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/2923.jpg.info

CHANGES TO THE WHITE HOUSE: 1830 – 1952



12	Franklin D. Roosevelt in the Oval Office	1935	Unknown	Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20D%20Roosevelt/2539.tif.info
13	Bulldozer in the White House	Ca. 1948-1952	Abbie Rowe	Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Construction%20%26%20Maintenance/367.tif.info
14	South Portico Under Construction	1950	Abbie Rowe	Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Construction%20%26%20Maintenance/369.tif.info
15	Entrance Hall Under Construction	Ca. 1950	Abbie Rowe	White House Collection		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Construction%20%26%20Maintenance/2435.tif.info
16	The Trumans Entering the White House after Renovations	1952	Abbie Rowe	Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Harry%20S%20Truman/434.tif.info



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Article: “Theodore Roosevelt’s White House” by William Seale for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Collection: President Truman’s Renovation by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Essay: “President Roosevelt’s White House Improvements” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Essay: “White House Tour” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Podcast: “The White House 1600 Sessions: Remembering the Truman White House, A Grandson’s Reflections” by the White House Historical Association. [Listen here.](#)
- Virtual Tours: “A Tour of the White House” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
 - Historian-narrated video tour with accompanying digital notebook for students. [Click here.](#)
 - 360 Virtual Tour with accompanying digital notebook for students. [Click here.](#)

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For all learners:

- If you were appointed to President Truman’s Commission on the Renovation of the Executive Mansion, what actions would you recommend he take? Should he have torn the White House down and rebuilt it? Would you have advised him to make the renovations he ultimately made? Write a letter to the president offering your recommendations.

For older learners:

- Before the 1902 Roosevelt Renovation, the Second Floor of the White House served as both the president’s office and the first family’s residence. The construction of the West Wing provided official separation between the president’s living space and working space. Reflect on



the experiences of many people merging of their living and working spaces due to the COVID-19 pandemic. How did it feel to have merged spaces rather than separate spaces? Share your thoughts with a classmate, friend, or family member.

- Consider what you just learned about modern changes to the White House. What change or changes do you think may happen next? Why? Be sure to cite specific evidence to support your claim.

For younger learners:

- During extensive renovations, some president and their families had to move out of the White House and into a different place. What does it feel like to be in a new classroom every year? How does it feel to adjust to a new space? Share your thoughts with a classmate, friend, or family member.

*This CRP works as a stand-alone resource but also complements the *Designing the White House (1792-1830) CRP*.*