

INTRODUCTION

For over 200 years, the White House has stood as a symbol of American leadership. But the White House was not always the President’s House nor was Washington, D.C. the nation’s capital. In 1789, George Washington took the presidential Oath of Office in New York City and for most of their presidencies, George Washington and John Adams lived and worked in Philadelphia while the White House was under construction. When initial White House construction was completed in 1800, the federal government moved to Washington, D.C. and John Adams spent the last few months of his presidency in the new White House. Explore the founding of the nation’s permanent capital and the design, construction, and reconstruction of the White House from 1790-1830 that resulted in today’s iconic structure.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

Designing the Federal City: 1790-1800

On July 16, 1790, Congress passed the Residence Act. The act called for the establishment of a permanent national capital at a site along the Potomac River and granted President George Washington authority to both choose the exact location of the capital city and appoint commissioners to oversee the project. President Washington commissioned French engineer and architect—someone who designs buildings—Pierre Charles L’Enfant to design a plan for the federal city along the Potomac, on land ceded from Maryland and Virginia. See a map of the *Plan for the City of Washington* in **Image 1** in the chart below.

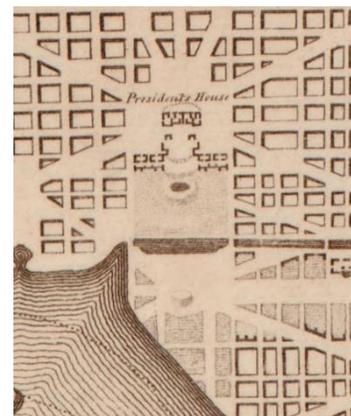


Image 2. Detail of L’Enfant plan designating space for his massive “President’s House” (1792).

L’Enfant’s plan for the federal city used a neatly organized grid system of streets running north-south and east-west, with intersecting diagonal avenues. The plan also designated space for the “President’s House,” in a location selected by President Washington. View **Image 2**, above, to see the first version of the L’Enfant Plan. If you look closely, you can see designated space for the “President’s House.” L’Enfant’s original plan envisioned a palace-like President’s House five times the size of the house

which would be built. But for the young United States, whose leaders would be ordinary citizens, not kings, the building was scaled back.

Building the President's House: 1792-1800

After President Washington dismissed L'Enfant for refusing to follow instructions in early 1792, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson organized an architectural competition that would determine the design of the President's House. The best designer would receive a prize of five hundred dollars or a medal of that value. James Hoban, an Irish-born and trained architect, won the contest. Refer to **Image 3**, in the chart, to see a depiction of Hoban. Using both free and enslaved laborers, Hoban began overseeing the construction of the President's House—known today as the “White House.” **Image 4**, in the chart, shows a close-up view of a stonemason's mark on the White House. These marks served as personal identifiers of particular stonework. Several markers are still visible today. Hoban's plan, drawn in 1792, is the earliest known drawing of the President's House. Hoban designed rooms of varied sizes and shapes on the First Floor, or “State” Floor, where public business would be conducted.

Image 5, to the right, is an architectural sketch of the State Floor of the White House drawn by Latrobe in 1803.

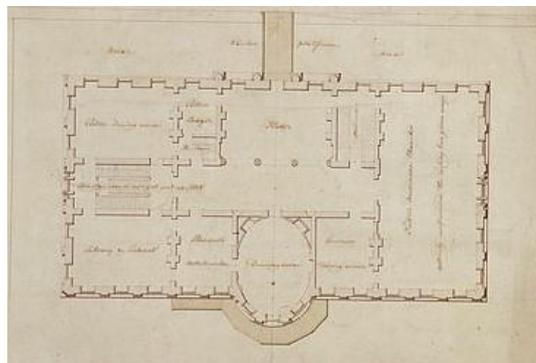


Image 5. State Floor Plan of the Jefferson White House sketched by Benjamin Henry Latrobe and reflecting Hoban's plan for the President's House (1803).

The initial construction of the President's House was completed in November 1800. Although the interior was still unfinished, President John Adams and First Lady Abigail Adams moved into the new house shortly thereafter. View **Images 6 & 7**, in the chart, to see architectural sketches of the White House exterior in 1800. When the Adamses moved into the White House, however, many rooms had not yet been plastered and there was a large hole where the grand staircase was planned but not yet constructed. The largest room in the house, the East Room, was also incomplete. Mrs. Adams

used the unfinished East Room as a laundry room because she did not think the President's clean laundry should be aired on the lawn for everyone to see. **Image 8**, to the right, is a modern painting of First Lady Abigail Adams supervising the hanging of laundry in the unfinished East Room.



Image 8. Abigail Adams supervising the hanging of laundry in the unfinished East Room (1966).

Additions and Restorations: 1801-1830

During his presidency (1801-1809), Thomas Jefferson put his architectural design skills to use in a practical way. President Jefferson worked with Benjamin Henry Latrobe to design and build long colonnades that extended outward on the east and west sides of the President's House. The colonnades functioned as service and storage space and were also used to house enslaved workers.

Tragedy struck when the British invaded the capital during the War of 1812. On August 24, 1814, British forces moved through the city of Washington and set fire to the President's House. **Images 9 & 10**, in the chart below, feature paintings of the burning of the White House. Most of the interior and furnishings were destroyed, but, as seen in **Image 11** below, the exterior walls remained standing. After the fire, some Congressmen discussed rebuilding the house elsewhere, perhaps even in a different city. However, President James Madison quickly moved forward with reconstruction plans to keep the President's House on the same site and recommissioned—or rehired—James Hoban to rebuild the house according to his original design. The reconstruction of the President's House took three years and was completed in 1817, ready for President James Monroe's administration. Restoring the President's House to its original form at the same location sent a message to the world that the United States and its government were permanent.

Many people believe that the President's House was painted white after the fire in 1814 to help cover burn marks. This is a common myth, however. The building was first covered with a lime-based whitewash in 1798 to protect the porous sandstone from freezing and it has been white ever since. The

whitewash was refreshed periodically until the structure was painted with white paint in 1818. The term “White House,” though commonly used, remained only a nickname until 1901, when President Theodore Roosevelt officially changed the building’s name to “White House.”

President James Monroe moved into the rebuilt White House in the fall of 1817 and began furnishing the unfinished interior. Considering that it took nearly ten years to build the President’s House the first time, James Hoban deserves some credit for directing a reconstruction of the house in just under three years. Hoban reused some of the damaged stone walls to save time. He also substituted wood for brick in some of the interior walls, slightly altering the structure of the house. Though faster, these shortcuts ultimately produced a weaker building. The massive structural renovation of the White House during President Harry Truman’s administration—1948-1952—sheds light on the long-term effects of Hoban’s reconstruction shortcuts.

New features were added to the President’s House during the post-fire reconstruction as well. James Hoban supervised the construction of the North and South Porticoes—two large entrance porches—that were originally drawn in 1807 by Benjamin Henry Latrobe.

Image 12, to the right, shows the White House with the North and South Porticoes that were not present on the original structure. The porticoes were made of Seneca sandstone from Maryland. Builders finished the South Portico during President James Monroe’s administration

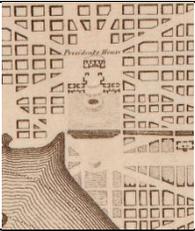
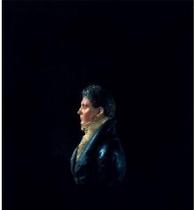
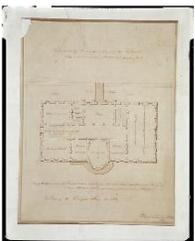
in 1824. See the plans for the South portico in **Image 13** in the chart. After Congress approved funding, Hoban supervised construction of the North Portico from 1829-1830. Following the construction of the porticoes, the President’s House structure was officially complete and stood as an iconic, and resilient, symbol of the presidency.



Image 12. View of the North Portico (right side) and South Portico (left side) designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe and later added by James Hoban (1807).

IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	Plan for the City of Washington	1792	Pierre Charles L'Enfant	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5031-Views%20and%20Plans/Main%20Index/Plans/111111.tif.info
2	1792 Details of the First Official Plan	1792	Pierre Charles L'Enfant	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5031-Views%20and%20Plans/Main%20Index/Plans/9650.tif.info
3	James Hoban	Ca. 1800	John Christian Rauschner	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Artwork/200.tif.info
4	Stonemason's Mark	Ca. 1792-1800	Unknown	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/2070.tif.info
5	State Floor Plan of the Jefferson White House	1807	Benjamin Henry Latrobe	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Plans/903.tif.info#c=%2Ffotoweb%2Farchives%2F5017-Digital-Library%2F%3F526%3D1800-1839%2520Early%252019th%2520Century%26q%3Dstate%2520floor%2520plan

DESIGNING THE WHITE HOUSE: 1790 – 1830



6	West End of the President's House	Ca. 1800	Samuel Blodget, Jr.	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/365.tif.info
7	North Front of the President's House	Ca. 1800	Samuel Blodget, Jr.	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/364.tif.info
8	Abigail Adams Supervising the Hanging of the Wash in the East Room	1966	Gordon Phillips	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20Adams/127.tif.info
9	Brits Burning the White House	1910	Unknown	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/217.tif.info
10	Burning of the White House by British Soldiers in 1814	2004	Tom Freeman	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5031-Views%20and%20Plans/Main%20Index/Views/5720.tif.info
11	Burnt Shell of the White House	1814	William Strickland	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5031-Views%20and%20Plans/Main%20Index/Views/394.tif.info
12	President's House with Porticoes	1807	Benjamin Henry Latrobe	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5031-Views%20and%20Plans/Main%20Index/Views/394.tif.info

						20Index/Views/584.jpg.info
13	South Front of the President's House	1818	James Hoban	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/1806.tif

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Podcast: “The 1600 Sessions: A White House of Stone” by the White House Historical Association. [Listen here.](#)
- Podcast: “The 1600 Sessions: British Invasion to French Restoration” 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.](#)
- Video: “Creating a Federal City” by the White House Historical Association. [Watch here.](#)

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For all learners:

- Imagine living in Washington D.C. during the War of 1812 and seeing the President’s House on fire. What would you think? How would you feel? Do you think the President’s House should be rebuilt in the same location, or moved to a new city? Why? Write or explain your thoughts to friends, family, or classmates.



For older learners:

- Imagine you are a journalist in 1800 and are tasked with writing about the brand new White House. Think about what you would write and what you want your readers to know. Write the article and share with your classmates or family.
- In his farewell address, President Richard Nixon commented on the size of the White House compared to the official homes of other world leaders:

“This house, for example -- I was thinking of it as we walked down this hall, and I was comparing it to some of the great houses of the world that I have been in. This isn't the biggest house. Many, and most, in even smaller countries, are much bigger.”

Why does the size of the White House matter? Considering that the president is elected from, and by, the citizens of the United States, would a large, palace-like building be fitting? Why or why not?

For younger learners:

- As Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson held a design contest to choose a design for the White House. Draw your own design for the White House. Be sure to include why you chose certain aspects of your design! Think about what function it serves.
- The White House design, size, and style acts as a symbol for the United States and our government. What are some of the things the White House symbolizes to you? Write them down and explain why you think it symbolizes those things.

This CRP works as a stand-alone resource but also complements the Changes to the White House (1830-1952) CRP.