Holidays at the White House are celebrated with an array of annual traditions that may differ slightly from the average American’s traditions. The Christmas season at the White House is celebrated with an abundance of glittering décor, fresh pine, and sugary treats. Presidents and their families celebrate Easter by hosting an “egg roll” party on the South Lawn. While a relatively quiet holiday for the president and first family, Thanksgiving involves the ritual of granting presidential pardons to White House turkeys. Explore the rich history of these—and other—holiday traditions at the White House.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

New Year’s Day

On January 1, 1801, the first public reception was held in the White House, and a democratic social custom began. From 1801 until its end in 1932, the New Year’s Reception at the White House was a tradition met with anticipation by diplomats, government officials, military officers, and the public alike. Everyone from the common citizen to the highest-ranking diplomat was welcomed. Men, women, and children waited in line for hours in the cold and wind to get a chance to shake hands with the president. View Images 1 and 2, in the chart below, to see visuals of New Year’s Day receptions during the administrations of Presidents John Adams and Grover Cleveland. By the early 1900s, crowds swelled to more than 6,000, and a line on the sidewalk outside the White House stretched beyond the gates and into the neighboring block. During the Great Depression, one man mistook the line of people waiting at the White House for a bread line. Image 3, above, pictures guests waiting in line to greet President Calvin Coolidge during the New Year’s Day reception in 1927.
Year after year, details of the reception—floral decorations, dresses worn by the women, and musical selections—made front-page stories in the Washington newspapers. Spanning more than a century and only cancelled a few times because of wars, illness, or the president’s travel schedule, the New Year’s Reception became a major event in the social life of the nation’s capital. President Herbert Hoover held the last New Year’s Day reception in 1932. Yet, J.W. Hunefeld, a man who prided himself with being first in line for many years, waited at the White House gates in 1934 because “he wanted to make sure the president hadn’t changed his mind.”

Christmas

The first White House residents, President John Adams and First Lady Abigail Adams, held the first Christmas celebration at the White House. In the 1800s, Christmas at the White House was a private celebration. First families decorated the house modestly with greens and celebrated the holiday with family and friends. In 1889, the first Christmas tree, decorated with candles and toys, was brought to the White House for President Benjamin Harrison and his family. Refer to Image 4, on the left, to see one of the earliest known photographs of a White House Christmas tree. Taken around 1896, during President Grover Cleveland’s administration, it is also one of the first images of an electronically illuminated Christmas tree.

In 1912, President William Taft’s children helped decorate the first tree on the State Floor in the Blue Room. Although previous presidential administrations displayed Christmas trees indoors throughout the public rooms on the Second Floor, it was First Lady Mamie Eisenhower who consistently placed a tree in the Blue Room. First Lady Jaqueline Kennedy began the tradition of selecting a theme for the official White House Christmas tree in the Blue Room in 1961. Image 5, in the chart below,
features First Lady Lady Bird Johnson posing with the White House Christmas tree in the Blue Room in 1968.

President Calvin Coolidge was the first chief executive to preside over a public celebration during the holidays with the lighting of the National Christmas Tree in 1923. Since then, the public event has evolved into the Christmas Pageant of Peace, a celebration that honors the holiday worship of many faiths. Festivities include live performances by popular entertainers and the lighting of the National Christmas Tree by the president and first family. View Images 6 and 7, in the chart, and Image 8, to the left, to see photographs of National Christmas Tree Lighting ceremonies during the Eisenhower, Johnson, and Clinton administrations. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter lit the menorah at the National Menorah Lighting in Lafayette Square, making him the first president to light a menorah in celebration of Hanukkah at a public ceremony.

Another modern tradition at the White House is the unveiling of the official holiday gingerbread house. Since 1969, pastry chefs have created intricately detailed gingerbread houses for the enjoyment of the first family and White House visitors, displaying them in the State Dining Room. View Image 9, in the chart, to see a photograph of the official White House Gingerbread House in 1993. Dubbed the “House of Socks,” it was created in honor of the Clintons’ cat, Socks, and featured twenty marzipan versions of Socks.

**Thanksgiving**

Although President George Washington issued a proclamation naming Thursday November 26, 1789 as a day of public thanksgiving, it wasn’t until 1863 that President Abraham Lincoln called for a
national Thanksgiving Day. Amidst the Civil War, President Lincoln declared the last Thursday in November to be regularly commemorated as Thanksgiving Day in the Thanksgiving Day Proclamation of October 3, 1863. In 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed legislation designating the fourth Thursday in November as the federal Thanksgiving Day holiday.

Thanksgiving at the White House is a quiet holiday for the president and first family, featuring a meal that traditionally included turkey, oysters, cranberries, and mince and pumpkin pies. Presidents and their families have received turkeys for the holidays since the 1870s. Image 10, to the left, shows President Harry Truman receiving a turkey from members of the National Turkey Federation and the National Egg and Poultry Board in 1949. The tradition of the presidential turkey pardon—a lighthearted ceremony that combines the gifted turkey with the president’s constitutional power to pardon—is said to have started with President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, after he offered a pardon to a turkey purchased for Christmas dinner at his son’s request. In 1989, however, President George H.W. Bush officially pardoned an unnamed, 50-pound turkey, firmly establishing the tradition that is followed to this day. In 2009, President Barack Obama pardoned a North Carolina turkey named Courage alongside his daughters, Sasha and Malia. President Donald Trump made a trip to Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan to spend the holiday with U.S. military personnel and service members in 2019.

The Fourth of July

The Fourth of July, marking the signing of the Declaration of Independence, is another exclusively American holiday celebrated at the White House. President Thomas Jefferson first celebrated the Fourth of July at the White House in 1801. President Jefferson opened the White 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 a festival took place on the north grounds, featuring horse races, parades, and food and drinks. Throughout the 1800s, the tradition of an annual reception at the White House continued. Presidents since Jefferson have incorporated their own Fourth of July traditions including parades, garden parties, picnics, and fireworks displays on the South Lawn of the White House. View Images 11, 12, and 13 in the chart below to see Fourth of July celebrations during the Roosevelt, Carter, and Reagan administrations. The White House is an enduring symbol of America’s founding and continues to play an important role in Independence Day celebrations.

Easter

Since 1878, American presidents and their families have celebrated Easter Monday by hosting an “egg roll” party. Held on the South Lawn, the Easter Egg Roll is one of the oldest annual events in White House history. Image 14, in the chart, pictures the White House Easter Egg Roll during the Johnson administration. Participants roll dyed, hard-boiled eggs across the grass to see whose will go the furthest before cracking. To see egg rollers in action, view Image 15 to the left.

Beginning in the 1870s, Washingtonians celebrated Easter Monday on the west grounds of the U.S. Capitol. Children rolled brightly dyed eggs down the terraced lawn. By 1876, however, concerns for the landscape led Congress to pass legislation to restrict public use of the Capitol lawns, prohibiting any future egg rolling. In 1878, President Rutherford B. Hayes opened the South Lawn to egg rollers,
as it had previously been reserved for the first family’s private Easter celebrations. Thus, a new tradition was born. Refer to Image 16 below to see a photograph of the Easter Egg Roll in 1929, during the Hoover administration. In 1974, the Nixons hosted eggs roll races, an event which has become an Easter Monday favorite. Although canceled during World Wars I and II, amidst White House renovations, and in cases of inclement weather, the egg roll holds an important place in White House history and remains a cherished springtime tradition today.

**Conclusion**

Presidents make important political decisions at the White House, but they also celebrate holidays like many everyday citizens. Although the New Year’s Day reception no longer takes place, many holiday traditions—including the annual Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony and the Easter Egg Roll—remain from previous administrations. Seen in Images 17 and 18, in the chart, first families also celebrate other holidays, like Hanukkah and Halloween. While traditions have changed and evolved through the years and each First Family has put their stamp on holiday observances, the White House continues to serve as a national stage for celebration and enjoyment.
# IMAGES

*Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing*

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Questions? Email education@whha.org
### Classy Resource Packet

#### Holidays and the White House

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Articles

- “White House Christmases Past” from the White House Historical Association. Click here.

Collections

- The White House Easter Egg Roll. Click here.
- Fourth of July at the White House. Click here.
- All Hallows’ Eve Haunts & Traditions. Click here.
- Giving Thanks at the White House. Click here.
- Holiday Cheer at the White House. Click here.
- The White House in Gingerbread. Click here.

Podcasts

- “The 1600 Sessions: Springtime at the White House” by the White House Historical Association. Listen here.
- “The 1600 Sessions: Holidays at the White House” by the White House Historical Association. Listen here.

Videos

- Panel discussion “Deck the Halls: Holidays at the White House.” Click here.
- “Is the White House…Haunted?” Click here.
SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For all learners:

• In 1961, First Lady Jaqueline Kennedy began the tradition of selecting a theme for the official White House Christmas Tree. That year, the theme was the Nutcracker ballet. Imagine you are tasked with deciding the theme for next year. What theme would you choose? How would White House decorations support your theme? Draw your design or share your thoughts with a classmate, friend, or family member.

• Make your own gingerbread cottage with a recipe and tips from White House Pastry Chef, Roland Mesnier. Click here.

• Solve the Easter Egg Roll Digital Jigsaw Puzzle. Click here.

For older learners:

• The United States was established as a democracy—a government ruled by the majority opinion of the people. The historic New Year’s Day reception and later holiday traditions have long made the White House accessible to the public. Discuss the following question with your family: How does opening the White House for various holidays or public tours support the ideas of democracy?

For younger learners:

• President and Mrs. Eisenhower sent the first official White House holiday card in 1953. Since then, the First Family sends out their own personalized card each year. Create your own greeting card for whatever holiday or season you are celebrating right now.