INTRODUCTION

An inauguration is the act or ceremony of bringing someone into a position or an office. Every president of the United States has been inaugurated dating back to the first president, George Washington. The Inauguration demonstrates America’s commitment to democracy and symbolizes a peaceful transfer of power to the nation and the world. While the United States Constitution outlines the Presidential Oath of Office, the various other Inaugural traditions and practices have developed over time. As the president’s residence and office, the White House plays an important role in Inaugurations. Explore the history behind the Inauguration Day ceremony and traditions including the Oath of Office, the Inaugural Address, and the Inaugural Parade.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

The Presidential Oath of Office

In 1789, the United States inaugurated its first president, George Washington, in New York City. The first Inauguration Ceremony took place before the establishment of a permanent capital city and the construction of the White House. In 1801, President Thomas Jefferson was the first president inaugurated in Washington, D.C. Despite the different locations of their Inaugurations, Jefferson, Washington—and every president since—have taken the same Oath of Office.

Article II, Section I of the United States Constitution specifies the oath that all presidents must take before carrying out any official duties—“Before he enters on the execution of his office, he shall take the following oath or affirmation: I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.” Historically, most presidents have taken the Oath of Office at the U.S. Capitol. Image 1, in the chart below, depicts President Abraham Lincoln giving his first Inaugural Address at the Capitol in 1861. But this constitutional affirmation has also taken place...
elsewhere. In January 1945, for example, President Franklin D. Roosevelt held his fourth Inauguration at the White House. Amidst the Second World War, President Roosevelt did not want a large celebration. Refer to Image 2, in the chart, to see a photograph of President Roosevelt’s final inauguration ceremony at the White House in 1945.

Even in times of crisis, the honored practice of taking the Oath of Office endures. President Harry Truman took the Oath of Office in the Cabinet Room in the West Wing after President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s sudden death on April 12, 1945, just months into his fourth term. Image 3, in the chart, pictures President Truman taking the Oath of Office in the Cabinet Room. Shortly after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963, President Lyndon B. Johnson took the Oath aboard Air Force One in Dallas, Texas—seen in Image 4, above.

**Inauguration Day**

The date of the Inauguration determines the official start and end of the president’s and vice president’s terms. Prior to the ratification of the Twentieth Amendment in 1933, most Inaugurations took place on March 4 at noon. The March 4 Inauguration date created a nearly four-month gap between winning the election in November and taking the Oath of Office. This meant that a sitting president that lost reelection could govern with less urgency and concern for voters—referred to as a “lame duck” period. To strengthen democracy and avoid potential crisis, the Twentieth Amendment shortened the lame duck period by changing the Inauguration date to “noon on the 20th of January.”
President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s second inauguration, in 1937, was the first held on January 20th. Image 5, to the right, is a photograph of President Franklin Roosevelt watching the Inaugural Parade on January 20, 1937. Even when January 20th falls on a Sunday, presidents take the Oath of Office privately—often in the White House—before the official ceremony and public celebrations the following day. The January 20th Inauguration date remains in place today. It is common to see thousands of Americans gather in Washington, D.C. to attend presidential Inaugurations live and celebrate the new administration. Although every American may not attend live, thanks to the internet and television, the Inauguration is broadcast to millions of homes across the country.

The Inaugural Address

President George Washington established the tradition of the Inaugural Address on April 30, 1979. After taking the Oath of Office in New York City, President Washington gave a speech inside the Senate chamber before members of Congress and invited guests. Although not a practice required by the Constitution, every president since Washington has delivered an Inaugural Address. Inaugural Addresses vary in length, but presidents have resoundingly used their first speech to speak about the nation’s past, hopes for the future, and their policy goals for the next four years.

President Washington delivered the shortest speech in 1793. In 1841, President William Henry Harrison gave the longest Inaugural Address in history, speaking for almost two hours. Perhaps the most famous Inaugural address, however, is President John F. Kennedy’s 1961 speech in which he stated: “And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” This line is remembered for inspiring a new generation of Americans to public service. View Image 6, in the chart below, to see a photograph of President Kennedy in the Green
Room with poet Robert Frost, who recited one of his works during Kennedy’s Inauguration Day ceremonies.

**The Inaugural Parade**

After taking the Oath of Office and delivering the Inaugural Address at the Capitol, the new president makes their way to the White House. In 1805, as President Thomas Jefferson made his return trip from the Capitol to the White House, citizens spontaneously joined him in the procession. Thus, began the tradition of the Inaugural Parade. The parade has evolved over time, shedding some of its military character and adopting a more celebratory, civilian tone. Today, as the president and first family make the trip from the Capitol to the White House, they are followed by a parade down Pennsylvania Avenue. View Image 7, in the chart, to see a photograph of President William Howard Taft’s Inaugural Parade in 1909. Once at the White House, the president finishes watching the Inaugural Parade from reviewing stands at the edge of the North Lawn. Image 8, above, shows President Calvin Coolidge watching the Inaugural parade from the reviewing stand on his Inauguration Day.

**The Transition of Power**

Inauguration Day is also “moving day” for the incoming and former president and their families. White House staff prepare for the new first family to move in and help the former president move out. These massive moves require weeks of planning and coordination by the White House staff. Image 9, in the chart, features outgoing President Herbert Hoover greeting president-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt outside the White House on Inauguration Day in 1933. Although the White House previously allowed
members of the public to bid farewell to the former president, as seen in *Image 10* in the chart, gatherings today are typically privately hosted for special guests.

**Inaugural Balls**

After a long day of ceremonies, the president attends celebratory Inaugural Balls in the evening. This tradition dates to 1809, when the first Inaugural Ball was held for President James Madison in Washington, D.C. President Madison’s ball was a smashing success and set a precedent that all presidents have since followed. In the early 1800s, local hotels typically hosted the Inaugural Balls. In 1965, President Abraham Lincoln’s second Inaugural Ball was held in a government building to accommodate the large crowds who wished to attend. President William McKinley’s Inaugural Balls were held in the Pension Building, now the National Building Museum. *Image 11*, in the chart, is a photograph of President McKinley’s second Inaugural Ball on March 4, 1901 at the Pension Building. Eventually, even the largest government buildings did not have enough space for the growing crowds. In recent years, Inaugural Balls have been held at multiple locations throughout Washington, D.C. *Image 12* depicts President Lyndon Johnson’s Inaugural Ball on January 20, 1965 at the National Guard Armory. This photograph also reveals the enormous crowds that attend Inaugural Balls.

**Conclusion**

From the Oath of Office to the Inaugural Ball, presidential Inaugurations feature numerous traditions that connect the past to the present. The Inauguration and surrounding traditions serve as important transitions in the continued story of the White House. To this day, every four, or eight, years, the White House changes occupants on January 20th at the strike of noon.
# Inaugurations and the White House

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Created By</th>
<th>Courtesy Of</th>
<th>Thumbnail</th>
<th>Web Link</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Abraham Lincoln’s First Inauguration</td>
<td>1861</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Library of Congress</td>
<td>![Abraham Lincoln’s First Inauguration](<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Libra">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Libra</a> ry/Main%20Index/Events/3993.tif.info)</td>
<td>[<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Libra">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Libra</a> ry/Main%20Index/Events/3993.tif.info](<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Libr">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Libr</a> ary/Main%20Index/Events/3993.tif.info)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Inauguration, Franklin D. Roosevelt</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>White House Historical Association</td>
<td>![Inauguration, Franklin D. Roosevelt](<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Libr">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Libr</a> ary/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20D%20Roosevelt/11274.tif.info)</td>
<td><a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20D%20Roosevelt/11274.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Libra ry/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20D%20Roosevelt/11274.tif.info</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Harry S. Truman Takes the Oath of Office</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>Abbie Rowe</td>
<td>National Archives and Records Administration</td>
<td>![Harry S. Truman Takes the Oath of Office](<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Libr">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Libr</a> ary/Main%20Index/Events/2884.tif.info)</td>
<td><a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/2884.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Libr ary/Main%20Index/Events/2884.tif.info</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Lyndon Johnson Takes the Oath of Office Following the Assassination of President Kennedy</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Cecil Stoughton</td>
<td>Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA</td>
<td>![Lyndon Johnson Takes the Oath of Office Following the Assassination of President Kennedy](<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Libr">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Libr</a> ary/Main%20Index/Events/1123.tif.info)</td>
<td><a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1123.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Libr ary/Main%20Index/Events/1123.tif.info</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>President Franklin D. Roosevelt in His Reviewing Stand</td>
<td>1937</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA</td>
<td>![President Franklin D. Roosevelt in His Reviewing Stand](<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Libr">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Libr</a> ary/Main%20Index/Events/6491.tif.info)</td>
<td><a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/6491.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Libr ary/Main%20Index/Events/6491.tif.info</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Event Description</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Source Institution</td>
<td>Image Link</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Watching the Inaugural Parade</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Department of State, National Archives and Records Administration</td>
<td><img src="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/_main%20index/Presidents/John%20F%20Kennedy/4955.tif.info" alt="Image" /></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Inauguration Day</td>
<td>1925</td>
<td>National Photo Company, Library of Congress</td>
<td><img src="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/main%20index/Presidents/Herbert%20Hoover/1113013.tif.info" alt="Image" /></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Herbert Hoover Greets Franklin Roosevelt</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Harris &amp; Ewing, Library of Congress</td>
<td><img src="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/main%20index/Presidents/Herbert%20Hoover/2818.tif.info" alt="Image" /></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Crowds Waiting in the Rain to Say Good-Bye and Good Luck to President Coolidge</td>
<td>1929</td>
<td>Herbert E. French, Library of Congress</td>
<td><img src="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/main%20index/events/2664.tif.info" alt="Image" /></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Inaugurations and the White House

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>11</th>
<th>President McKinley’s Second Inaugural Ball</th>
<th>1901</th>
<th>J. H. Harper</th>
<th>Library of Congress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Lyndon B. Johnson and Lady Bird Dance at their Inaugural Ball</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Library of Congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>President and Mrs. Bush Dance at their Inaugural Ball</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>George Bush Presidential Library and Museum/NARA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Articles
- “The Inaugural Address” by Colleen Shogan for the White House Historical Association. [Click here](https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/6498.tif.info).

Collections
- Presidential Inaugurations by the White House Historical Association. [Click here](https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/6518.tif.info).

Inaugural Address Examples
- “George Washington’s First Inaugural Address, April 30, 1789” from the National Archives and Records Administration. [Click here](https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/6518.tif.info).
Classroom Resource Packet

INAUGURATIONS AND THE WHITE HOUSE

• “John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961” from the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. Read or watch here.

Podcasts
• “The 1600 Sessions: Moving Day” by the White House Historical Association. Listen here.
• “The 1600 Sessions: White House Transitions” by the White House Historical Association. Listen here.

Videos
• “The Peaceful Transfer of Power,” featuring Dr. Matthew Costello, Senior Historian at the White House Historical Association. Click here.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For all learners:
• Do you remember any recent Inaugurations or Inaugural Addresses? Share these memories or thoughts with a classmate, friend, or family member.
• Have you ever attended a Presidential Inauguration? Why is it important for the public to be able to attend the Inauguration and participate in celebrations? Share your thoughts with a classmate, friend, or family member.

For older learners:
• Explore Inaugural Addresses from different time periods. Are there similar themes and language? How can we use these speeches to gain an understanding of the time in which they were written? Browse Inaugural Addresses collected by the Avalon Project from Yale Law School. Click here.
For younger learners:

- Choose an Inauguration Day tradition and write or draw about why you think it is the most important part of the day. Traditions discussed in the contextual essay include: the Oath of Office, location, date, the Inaugural Address, the parade, moving to the White House, and Inaugural Balls.