

Lost Features of the White House



INTRODUCTION

The White House is over 200 years old and has served as the home and office of more than forty presidents. Along with its residents, the White House and the surrounding grounds have changed over time for both practical and aesthetic reasons. Over the course of the building's history, several features have been lost to time—from small, decorative elements to larger structures such as swimming pools and acres of land. Uncover and learn the history behind some of the internal and external lost features of the White House.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

The White House Grounds

Although President George Washington never lived in the White House, he did select its location. View **Image 1**, in the chart below, to see a modern print of President Washington and architect James Hoban observing the unfinished White House. The original plan for the White House Grounds included a large tract of land, approximately eighty acres, to be used

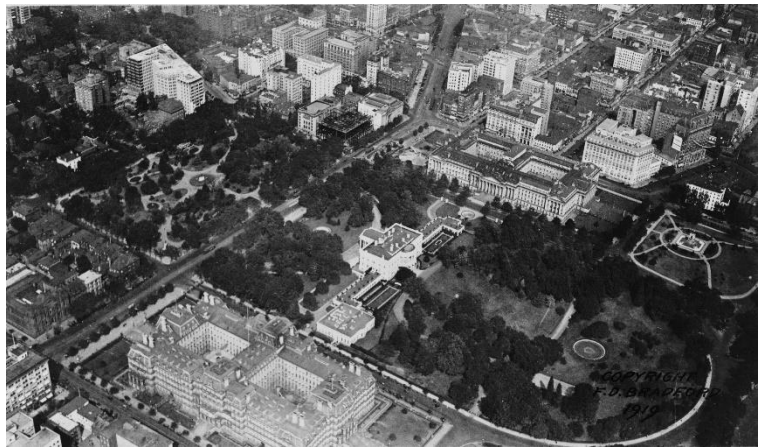


Image 2. Aerial photograph of the White House (1915).

as a working farm. This was later reduced significantly, however, as President Thomas Jefferson quickly realized that it was almost impossible to lead the nation and manage a farm simultaneously. President Jefferson fenced the grounds to about nine acres and ordered Pennsylvania Avenue to be cut in front of the White House. Much of the remaining land to the north of the White House became a public park, now known as Lafayette Square. The modern grounds consist of approximately eighteen acres as some land was reclaimed over the years. **Image 2**, above, features a 1915 aerial view of the White House. The White House grounds and Lafayette Square are visible, as is the Treasury Building (top right) and the Old Executive Office Building (bottom left).

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Tiber Creek



Image 4. Painting of President John Quincy Adams with his son John, and servant Antoine Michel Giusta canoeing in Tiber Creek (Peter Waddell, 2006).

In the early 1800s, Tiber Creek—a small waterway connected to the Washington City Canal and the Potomac River—ran just south of the White House Grounds. Refer to **Image 3**, in the chart below, to see Tiber Creek marked on a section of Charles L'Enfant's 1791 city plan. President John Quincy Adams enjoyed swimming in Tiber Creek. In 1825, he almost drowned when his boat sprung a leak and filled with water.

Image 4, to the left, is a modern painting of the scene. In the following decades, the creek became increasingly polluted with sewage and its odor permeated the surrounding area. In the 1870s, Tiber Creek was enclosed and disappeared underground where it continues to flow as part of the Washington, D.C. sewage system today.

Bronze Statue of Thomas Jefferson

Between 1847 and 1874, a bronze statue of President Thomas Jefferson stood as a welcoming landmark on the North Lawn of the White House. The statue of Thomas Jefferson is visible in **Images 5 and 6** in the chart below. The Jefferson statue was originally commissioned by Navy Lieutenant Uriah Phillips Levy in 1833 as a gift to the American people and was placed in the U.S. Capitol Building. The statue was relocated to the White House Grounds in 1847 and removed in 1874 to make way for a fountain. Congress funded repairs, after years of exposure to the elements tarnished the statue and welcomed the Jefferson statue back to the Capitol Rotunda where it stands today.

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Tiffany Glass Screen

The inside of the White House has also changed dramatically. One of the most famous interior features that has been lost to time is the Tiffany glass screen in the Entrance Hall. In 1882, President Chester A. Arthur commissioned Louis Comfort Tiffany to create the glass screen and redecorate several State Rooms. Tiffany was a popular artist known for his stained-glass work that was highly sought after in New York. **Image 7**, in the chart below, pictures the Entrance Hall in 1889 during the Benjamin Harrison



Image 8. The Entrance Hall of the White House featuring the glass Tiffany screen in 1889.

administration. **Image 8**, at right, is another photograph of the Entrance Hall featuring the Tiffany screen. Refer to **Image 9**, in the chart below, to see a modern painting of the Tiffany glass screen that showcases its vibrant colors. **Image 10**, also in the chart, is a photograph of the Blue Room between 1883 and 1884—one of the several rooms Tiffany redecorated. Both aesthetic and functional, the colorful Tiffany glass replaced the existing architectural screen that was installed to block cross drafts in 1837. The new screen served as both a model for Tiffany's artistry and a symbol of Victorian taste. During the 1902 Theodore Roosevelt renovation, the Tiffany glass screen was removed and sold to a hotel in Maryland. In 1923, the glass was destroyed in a fire and the White House Tiffany showcase was lost forever.

White House Greenhouses & Conservatory

In 1833, President Andrew Jackson built the first White House orangery—a greenhouse to grow fruit trees and flowers. The orangery was demolished in 1857, and a new conservatory consisting of multiple greenhouses was constructed and attached to the west side of the White House. After the original conservatory was destroyed by a fire in 1867, a more sturdy and elaborate structure replaced it featuring

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multiple spaces, including a tropical room and an orchid room. **Image 11**, in the chart below, shows two views of the greenhouses attached to the White House in the late 1800s. To see a photograph taken inside the White House Conservatory, see **Image 12** in the chart.

Many presidents and first families greatly enjoyed the conservatory. For example, First Lady Ida McKinley suffered from epilepsy and often took refuge in the greenhouses to escape from the public eye. Refer to **Image 13**, in the chart, to see a photograph of First Lady Ida McKinley seated in the White House Conservatory in 1900. President Theodore Roosevelt and his large, young family entered the White House in 1901. Seeking a designated workspace for the president and his staff, architect Charles McKim created plans to construct a new West Wing for executive offices. During the 1902 Theodore Roosevelt Renovation, the White House greenhouse complex was destroyed and replaced with what became the modern West Wing.

Indoor Pool



Image 15. The indoor pool during the John F. Kennedy administration featuring a scene of the U.S. Virgin Islands in the background (1963).

In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had an indoor pool built in the West Terrace of the White House to provide therapy for his physical ailments due to polio. See a photograph of the indoor pool during the Franklin Roosevelt administration in **Image 14** in the chart below. In the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy renovated the indoor pool area and added a large wall mural depicting the U.S. Virgin Islands—seen in **Image 15** at left. In the following decade, pool usage decreased and the demand for a designated press space steadily increased. In 1970, the indoor pool was drained, covered, and transformed into what is now the James S. Brady Press

Briefing Room. President Nixon did not completely remove the indoor pool, however, because he

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feared there may be a potential negative public reaction due to the popularity of Presidents Roosevelt and Kennedy. Although the indoor pool is no longer visible to the public eye, it still remains. It is hidden beneath the press room and full of wires and equipment instead of water. View **Image 16**, in the chart below, to see a photograph of the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room.

Conclusion






Although the internal and external structures mentioned in this essay are just some of the lost features of the White House, they do provide a glimpse into the dynamic nature of this unique home. As the White House continues to evolve and change over time, the challenge of modernizing the building to meet the needs of the president and first family while also preserving its history remains.

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IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	George Washington Inspects the Unfinished President's House	Unknown	N. C. Wyeth	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/1426.tif.info
2	1915 Aerial View of White House, Wilson Administration	1915	F. D. Bradford	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Views/400.tif.info
3	Plan of the City Intended for the Permanent Seat of the Government of the United States, Detail of Presidents Park	1887	United States Coast and Geodetic Survey Office	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Plans/9649.tif.info
4	Tiber Creek: The Bathers: John Quincy Adams Takes a Deadly Chance	2009	Peter Waddell	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Artwork/1112699.tif.info
5	North Portico of the White House with the Jefferson Statue	Ca. 1845-1870	Unknown	National Archives and Records Administration		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/6375.tif.info






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6	The North Front of the White House	1861	Mathew Brady	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/243.tif.info
7	Entrance Hall Showing the Tiffany Screen, Benjamin Harrison Administration	1889	Frances Benjamin Johnston	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/984.tif.info
8	White House Corridor (Entrance Hall)	1889	Frances Benjamin Johnston	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/353.tif.info
9	The Grand Illumination: Sunset of the Gaslight Age, 1891	2006	Peter Waddell	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/8917.tif.info
10	Blue Room, Chester A. Arthur Administration	1883-1884	Frances Benjamin Johnston	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/943.tif.info
11	Greenhouses, West Lawn of White House	Late 19 th Century	Unknown	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/9969.tif.info

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12	The White House “Conservatory Promenade”	1877-1902	Unknown	National Park Service		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/1112841.tif.info
13	Ida Saxton McKinley in the Conservatory	1900	B. Dinst	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/William%20McKinley/1112842.tif.info
14	White House Indoor Pool, Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration	1933	Unknown	National Archives and Records Administration		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/1112.tif.info
15	White House Pool with a Mural of the U.S. Virgin Islands Commissioned During the John F. Kennedy Administration	1963	Robert L. Knudsen	John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum/NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/6935.tif.info
16	Press Room	Unknown	Unknown	White House Collection		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/598.tif.info

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Article: “Uriah Levy’s Gift to the Nation” by Lydia Tederick for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

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- Collection: “An Artists Visits the White House Past” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For all learners:

- Explore historical photographs to see how the White House Grounds have changed over time with the White House Historical Association’s “A Garden for the President” gallery. [Click here.](#)

For older learners:

- Between 1847 and 1874, a bronze statue of Thomas Jefferson stood on the North Lawn of the White House. Write a proposal for a statue that you would like to place on the White House Grounds. Consider how who—or what—you choose may or may not be relevant in 50, 100, or 200 years. Describe or draw your proposed statue and explain its significance and the symbolism behind its features.
- The indoor pool was covered by the press room, but President Nixon intentionally did not destroy it due to its connection to Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy. What is the value of preserving a historic space even if it is hidden from view and cannot be used anymore? Share your thoughts with a classmate, family member, or friend.
 - Follow up question: Do you think the indoor pool may be removed one day? Why or why not?

For younger learners:

- The Tiffany Screen is a notable lost feature of the White House. The stained-glass styling of the screen brought color into the Cross Hall and Entrance Hall of the White House. Create your own stained-glass feature at home using tissue paper and other materials with the White House Historical Association’s “Tiffany Screen Stained-Glass Bookmark” Anywhere Activity. [Click here.](#)