

INTRODUCTION

The White House serves multiple functions, including providing an office for the President of the United States. For more than a century, the president's office has been located in the Oval Office of the West Wing, but this was not always the case. Whether the president is addressing the nation, signing legislation, discussing issues with cabinet members, or meeting with leaders of the world, the White House provides an important and symbolic setting. Discover where in the White House the president's office has been located, how different presidents used these spaces, and why the Oval Office was created.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

In early White House administrations, the president's office was not a set location. John Adams kept a small office adjacent to his bedroom, and when Thomas Jefferson moved into the Executive Mansion in 1801, he established his office in what is now the State Dining Room (**Image 1**). Jefferson kept his office private, only allowing select visitors (**Image 2**). An inventory taken after James Monroe's presidency indicated that he had a room upstairs with a desk, but this was not strictly considered an office. Other reports note that Andrew Jackson often used an office in the nearby Treasury Building.

A series of rooms on the Second Floor of the President's House served as the official site of the executive offices and reception spaces during the nineteenth century. The first detailed evidence of these came during John Tyler's administration, when records show purchases of office furnishings specifically for the Second Floor. Every president from John Quincy Adams through William McKinley used the room now known as the Lincoln Bedroom as a presidential office (**Images 3 & 4**). It was here that Abraham Lincoln met with his cabinet



Image 3

and signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. President Herbert Hoover would later use this room to work at night and called it the “Lincoln Study.” President Harry Truman officially designated the Lincoln Bedroom as a guest room in 1952 and directed that Lincoln-era furnishings be placed there (**Image 5**).

The history of the Lincoln Bedroom highlights how the Second Floor of the White House also served as private quarters for the first family, which has created friction between work and family for many presidents. This tension between office and home was perhaps at its height during Theodore Roosevelt’s administration. As the youngest president, he brought six young children into the White House and needed a separate space for work. In 1902, the nineteenth-century greenhouses on the west side of the White House were demolished, and a new “temporary” executive office building, later called the West Wing, was erected. (**Image 6**). In the West Wing, Roosevelt worked in a rectangular room that was called the “President’s Room” (**Image 7**).

Shortly after his inauguration in 1909, President William Howard Taft held a competition to select an architect to enlarge the West Wing. Taft ordered a southward extension of the existing structure. The winning architect was Nathan C. Wyeth of Washington, D.C., who designed the expansion and the iconic Oval Office (**Images 8 & 9**). Wyeth modeled the new president's office after other oval-shaped rooms in the main White House.



Image 8

During renovations in 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt shifted the position of the Oval Office to the southeast corner of the West Wing, where it remains today (**Image 10**). From this location, the president’s view from the office includes the Rose Garden and West Colonnade (**Image 11**). The Oval

Office has undergone various redecorations by each administration but experienced no physical location changes since the Franklin Roosevelt administration (**Image 12**).

By the late 1960s, the popular names “Oval Office” and “West Wing” came into common use, replacing “President’s Office” and “Executive Office.” The Oval Office has become a site for celebrity visits, like that of Elvis Presley (**Image 13**), meetings with visiting heads of state, and also regular meetings with White House staffers (**Image 14**). Presidents’ children have also been frequent visitors throughout the years (**Image 15**).



Image 14

The West Wing and Oval Office provide a detached work space just a short walk from the main house. While the White House is a family residence, the history of the president’s office reinforces the fact that the Executive Mansion also requires a place for the president to work and carry out the duties assigned by Article II of the United States Constitution.

IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	State Dining Room	1999	Erik Kvalsvik	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archive/s/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/3082.tif.info
2	A Bird That Whistles: In Jefferson's Cabinet, 1803	Ca. 2008	Peter Wadell	Peter Waddell for the White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archive/s/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Thomas%20Jefferson/9309.tif.info
3	Staff Office Quarters, William McKinley Administration	Ca. 1889-1901	Frances Benjamin Johnston	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archive/s/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/2027.tif.info
4	Lincoln Bedroom as Office	1889	Unknown	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archive/s/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/9137.tif.info
5	Lincoln Bedroom, John F. Kennedy Administration	Ca. 1962	National Geographic Society	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archive/s/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/2860.tif.info

THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE



6	Archie Roosevelt on Algonquin in Front of the New West Wing	1903	Unknown	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archive/s/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Theodore%20Roosevelt/2528.tif.info
7	The President's Office, Theodore Roosevelt Administration	1904	Detroit Publishing Co.	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archive/s/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/3025.tif.info
8	Postcard view of the Oval Office	Ca. 1909	Unknown	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archive/s/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/592.tif.info
9	1909 Addition to the West Wing	1909	Unknown	National Archives and Records Administration		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archive/s/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/2888.tif.info
10	Franklin D. Roosevelt at Work with His Personal Secretary	Ca. 1934	Unknown	Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archive/s/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20D%20Roosevelt/2887.tif.info
11	The Rose Garden from Outside the Oval Office	2013	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archive/s/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/1112834.tif.info
12	Exterior View of the West Wing at Night	Ca. 1962	U.S. News & World Report	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archive/s/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/2928.tif.info



13	President Nixon Meets Elvis in the Oval Office	1970	Unknown	Nixon Presidential Materials Project, National Archives and Records Administration		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Richard%20Nixon/2895.tif.info
14	President George W. Bush Oval Office Meeting from Above	2001	Paul Morse	George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/5711.tif.info
15	Kennedy Children Visit the President in the Oval Office	1962	Unknown	John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20F%20Kennedy/2976.tif.info



SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

- Consider how the White House dually serves as the president's home and office. Discuss whether students think the West Wing and Oval Office provide enough separation for the president between work and family.
- On June 28, 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke about his West Wing renovations in a fireside chat. Read the transcript of the radio broadcast through *The American Presidency Project*. [Click here](#). Why did President Roosevelt feel the need to defend the renovations? What else does the chat tell you about the United States in 1934?
- Today, presidents choose their own decorations for the Oval Office. Explore the different appearances of the Oval Office on the WHHA Digital Library. Ask students to consider how they would decorate the Oval Office if they became president. How would these decorations and furnishings help a president perform their job?