

Public Spaces of the White House



INTRODUCTION

Thousands of people visit the White House every year. During public tours, visitors walk through rooms that have been used by presidents and their families for over two centuries. Years ago, curious guests could knock on the front door of the White House and ask to see inside. Today, visitors wait weeks or even months to gain access for a tour of the President's House. Discover the history and different uses of the public spaces that are part of the public tour of the White House.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY



Image 1: The White House Ground Floor Corridor. Sculptures of founding fathers and other important historical figures line the wall (2010).

The White House Complex is composed of the central Executive Residence and the East and West Wings. The central White House building, often referred to as the “Executive Residence” or simply the “Residence,” has three main floors—the Ground Floor, the State Floor, and the Second Floor. Public tours of the White House bring visitors inside the halls of the Executive Residence and provide access to all the public rooms on the Ground and State Floors. Visitors pass through the East Wing and begin the tour on the Ground

Floor of the central White House building. **Image 1**, to the left, shows the White House Ground Floor Corridor, where most visitors will enter the Executive Residence from the East Wing. Until 1902, the Ground Floor was primarily a basement area that housed kitchens, a furnace room, and storage. Enslaved individuals lived in this basement, now the Ground Floor, during the early years of the White House. Refer to **Image 2**, in the chart below, to see the White House kitchen on the Ground Floor around 1901. Today, however, the finished space of the Ground Floor contains historically significant rooms that are accessible to the public including the Library, the China Room, and the Vermeil Room.

Public Spaces of the White House



The Library is one of the first rooms visitors see on a White House tour. The private library was created in 1935, during President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration. **Image 3**, in the chart, shows the Ground Floor Library. Visitors next enter the China Room. Once a cloakroom, the China Room was transformed in 1917 to serve as an exhibition space to display White House ceramics, glass, and silver. The China Room features china and glassware from nearly every presidential administration and a



Image 4: The White House China Room located on the Ground Floor. The room has been used since 1917 as exhibition space for White House ceramics, glass, and silver. The painting of First Lady Grace Coolidge has hung since 1952 (2007).

full-length portrait of First Lady Grace Coolidge and her dog Rob Roy, which has hung since 1952 and inspired the red decorations of the room. **Image 4**, to the left, shows the red-themed White House China Room. The last public tour stop on the Ground Floor is the Vermeil Room. The Vermeil Room displays the White House collection of vermeil, or gold-plated silver, gifted by Margaret Thompson Biddle in 1957. First Lady Mamie Eisenhower first displayed the vermeil collection in the room. The Vermeil Room also houses portraits of first ladies, including Eleanor Roosevelt and Jacqueline Kennedy. View **Image 5**, in the chart, to see the elegant Vermeil Room.

Visitors then make their way upstairs to the State Floor. The first stop on the State Floor is the East Room. The East Room is the largest room in the White House and serves primarily as a space for large group gatherings. Refer to **Image 6**, in the chart, to see a photograph of the East Room. The East Room has, however, served many other purposes during previous administrations. The White House's first occupants, President John Adams and First Lady Abigail Adams, used the unfinished East Room to hang their laundry, seen in **Image 7** in the chart. During the Civil War, Union soldiers temporarily camped in the East Room until alternative housing arrangements were made in

Public Spaces of the White House



Washington, D.C. Today, the East Room is used as a space for large press conferences, social engagements, and performances. **Image 8** in the chart, features President George W. Bush giving remarks during a signing ceremony for a tax bill.



Image 9: The Green Room. Located on the State Floor, this room is primarily used for interviews and social gatherings (2009).

Exiting the East Room, visitors then tour a series of smaller rooms, each named after a color. The first stop, the Green Room, is a rectangular parlor named for its green wallpaper, furniture, and carpeting. **Image 9**, to the right, is a photograph of the Green Room. James Hoban, the original architect of the White House, intended that the space be used as a small dining room. President John Adams and First Lady Abigail Adams used the room as a guest bedchamber. President Thomas Jefferson served

meals in the room and may have foreshadowed its famous color scheme when he placed a green rug under his breakfast table. In 1818, President James Monroe decorated the room with green silks and used it as his “Card Room.” President Monroe was the first to call the space the “Green Room,” and it has remained green since.

The Blue Room is the only oval-shaped room on the State Floor. View **Image 10**, in the chart below, to see the elegant Blue Room featuring curving French doors and long windows that look out onto the White House South Lawn. While this oval room has been used for receptions since Thomas Jefferson’s administration, it has not always been blue. First Lady Dolley Madison preferred red drapery for the room. President Andrew Jackson decorated the room in green. In 1837, President Martin Van Buren started the tradition of the “Blue Room” when he chose to redecorate the space in

Public Spaces of the White House



blue. Today, the Blue Room still serves as a reception area. Most notably, the room houses the official White House Christmas tree during the holiday season. The chandelier must be removed to make space for the enormous tree! **Image 11**, in the chart below, features the Blue Room Christmas tree in 1993. If you look closely, you can see that the tree is secured to the ceiling to provide extra support for the many ornaments.

Visitors then make their way to the Red Room, the last color-named parlor on the State Floor. Refer to **Image 12** in the chart to see the Red Room. The Red Room was traditionally used as a parlor or sitting room. Previously yellow, the space became known as the Red Room when President James K. Polk and First Lady Sarah Polk furnished the room with rocking chairs, ottomans, armchairs, and loungers of various shades of red in 1845. Today, the Red Room is typically used to host teas or other small events.

White House public tours continue into the State Dining Room, seen in **Image 13** to the left. The State Dining Room served at various times as a drawing room, office, and Cabinet Room. President Thomas Jefferson used the space as his private office. After he left the White House, presidents primarily used the room for hospitality and diplomatic State Dinners. **Image 14**, below, shows President George H.W. Bush seated with Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom at a 1991 State dinner hosted in the State Dining



Image 13: The State Dining Room during President Barack Obama's administration (2010).

Room. The State Dining Room has been refurbished many times in its history. During the 1902 renovation, President Theodore Roosevelt expanded the space to accommodate up to 140 seated

Public Spaces of the White House



guests, and many more for a standing event. First families ate smaller meals with their families in other spaces of the building but in 1962, First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy created a private family dining room on the Second Floor and most presidential families take their meals there.

The last spaces visitors see on the White House tour are the Cross Hall and Entrance Hall—also on the State Floor. **Image 15** depicts the Entrance Hall of the White House, including a view across the Cross Hall. If you look closely, you can see into the Green, Blue, and Red Rooms. Portraits of the most recent presidents are traditionally displayed here. Today, the Cross Hall serves as a welcoming entrance for events and special occasions. After viewing the Cross Hall, visitors exit the White House through the North Door.







The White House has fascinated the public since it was first occupied in 1800. While some rooms are completely closed to visitors, the public rooms on the Ground and State Floors of the White House give visitors the opportunity to explore the rich history of the People's House and gain a greater understanding of the presidency and the many roles of the White House.

Public Spaces of the White House



IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	Ground Floor Corridor	2010	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/9441.tif.info
2	White House Kitchen	1901	C.M. Bell	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/1650.tif.info
3	White House Library	After 1935	Abbie Rowe	White House Collection		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/2410.tif.info
4	China Room	2007	Peter Vitale	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/9449.tif.info
5	Vermeil Room	Ca. 1999	Erik Kvalsvik	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/660.tif.info
6	East Room, Bill Clinton Administration	2000	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/810.tif.info




Public Spaces of the White House



7	Abigail Adams Supervising the Hanging of 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
8	President Bush Speaking in the East Room During Bill Signing Ceremony	2001	Unknown	George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/George%20W%20Bush/9051.tif.info
9	Green Room	2009	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/9428.tif.info
10	Blue Room, Barack Obama Administration	2010	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/9431.tif.info
11	Blue Room Christmas Tree	1993	Bob McNeely	William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/8503.tif.info
12	Red Room, Ronald Reagan Administration	1987	Joseph H. Bailey	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/4189.tif.info

Public Spaces of the White House



13	State Dining Room, Barack Obama Administration	2010	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/9437.tif.info
14	State Dinner for Queen Elizabeth	1991	White House Photo	George Bush Presidential Library and Museum/NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/George%20H%20W%20Bush/597.tif.info
15	Entrance Hall Seen from the North Portico	1999	Erik Kvalsvik	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/1020.tif.info

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Articles

- “The Ground Floor” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- “The Green Room” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- “The Blue Room” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- “The Red Room” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- “State Dining Room” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- “The Entrance Hall” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

Videos

- “A Tour of the White House” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

Public Spaces of the White House



- Historian-narrated video tours with accompanying digital notebooks for students. [Click here.](#)
- 360 Virtual Tour with accompanying digital notebooks for students. [Click here.](#)

Gallery

- “The State Dining Room” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For all learners:

- Visit the White House Historical Association’s 360-degree tour and work through the activities in the digital notebook. [Click here.](#)

For older learners:

- Research rooms in the White House that are not on the public tour and write a letter to the president requesting it be added. Why that room? What would the public gain from seeing it on a tour?
- Why do you think it is important for the public to have access to the White House? What does it say about the White House and the presidency? Write 1-2 paragraphs reflecting on these questions.

For younger learners:

- Using the resource images in the chart above as visuals, use your knowledge of geometry to create a list of the different shapes found in the White House public rooms. Include the shape of the rooms and the objects inside of the room.
- Design a new room for the White House. Imagine that the White House is expanding and adding more public rooms. Draw or write about a new room. Think about the following questions: What color? What shape? What would it be used for? Why is it needed?