

INTRODUCTION

The construction of the White House prompted the growth of the surrounding area into a vibrant neighborhood for the president. Today, Lafayette Square sits to the north side of the White House and serves as a public park. Visitors come to catch a glimpse of the Executive Mansion through the gates and, amidst this green space, encounter statues commemorating America’s past. Lafayette Square is bordered by a variety of townhouses and structures, some dating back to the early nineteenth century. Discover the history behind the park and its buildings, as well as the preservation efforts of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy in the White House neighborhood.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

Since construction began in 1792, the White House has drawn people to the president’s neighborhood (**Image 1**). What is now Lafayette Square was part of the presidential estate until



Image 1

Thomas Jefferson, disagreeing with its grandiose proportions, ordered Pennsylvania Avenue cut in front of the White House. This change separated the private Executive Mansion from the public park. Given the close proximity to the White House, people have long used the square as a place of protest and celebration (**Image 2**).

St. John’s Church in Lafayette Square is only predated by the White House. (**Image 3**). Built in 1815, one year after the British burned the White House, “the Church of the Presidents” symbolizes a commitment to maintain Washington, D.C., as the capital city. The home directly next to the church, now the parish house, was frequently rented by visiting dignitaries and used to negotiate treaties. Here British diplomat Lord Ashburton and his neighbor U.S. Secretary of State Daniel Webster finalized the U.S.-Canadian border in 1842.

THE WHITE HOUSE NEIGHBORHOOD



In 1818, Commodore Stephen Decatur, Jr., and his wife Susan built the first private home in the president's neighborhood (**Image 4**). They commissioned architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe to design a house fit for entertaining. The slave quarters added in the 1820s still exists and today remains the only physical reminder of slavery in view of the White House. After the Decatur, a long line of elite tenants and subsequent owners – the Gadsbys and the Beales – preserved the building as a private and prestigious home. Marie Beale bequeathed the Federal-style Decatur House to the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1956, saving the home for posterity. Today it houses the White House Historical Association's David M. Rubenstein National Center for White House History and is used to educate the public on the history of the White House and the surrounding neighborhood.

Directly across the square from Decatur House sits the Cutts-Madison House, named for its first owner, Massachusetts congressman Richard Cutts, and his sister-in-law, First Lady Dolley Madison (**Image 5**). Completed in 1820, Mrs. Madison resided here from 1845 until her death in 1849. When the prestigious Cosmos Club bought the residence in 1886, they joined the property to the neighboring Tayloe House.

Another historic property is the Blair House, named for newspaperman and presidential advisor Francis Preston Blair. He purchased the house from the estate of the first Surgeon General of the U.S. Army in 1837 (**Image 6**). When diplomatic visits increased during World War II, the U.S. Department of State bought the building and designated it as the president's official guest house. This purchase, which included the Blair family's furnishings, ensured the preservation of the home's original character. Although Blair House is primarily used for visiting heads of state, President Truman and his



Image 6

family resided here during critical White House renovations from 1948 to 1952.

On the east side of the White House, the U.S. Treasury is one of the capital's oldest federal office buildings. Following the loss of the first two Treasury buildings to arson, a 33-year period of construction and expansion began in 1836 and culminated in today's structure (**Image 7**). In front of the Treasury on Pennsylvania Avenue is a statue of Albert Gallatin, the fourth and longest serving secretary of the treasury.

To the west of the White House is the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, commonly called the EEOB. Built between 1871 and 1888, this structure represents the confidence of the post-Civil War years and the era's bureaucratic expansion (**Image 8**). The building originally housed the State, War, and Navy Departments. By 1949, these cabinet-level departments were replaced by offices for the Executive Office of the President. Since then, several executive agencies have resided here, as well as the staff of the vice president.



Image 9

In the center of these buildings is the park known as Lafayette Park, operated by the National Park Service (**Image 9**). It was the Marquis de Lafayette's 1824 visit to Washington that inspired the naming of the square in his honor. Alexandre Falguiere's 1891 statue further honors the Frenchman for his role in the American Revolutionary War (**Image 10**). This monument, along with those to the Comte de Rochambeau, General Tadeusz Kosciuszko, and Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, make



Lafayette Square not just a public park, but also a place to honor international contributions to the nation’s history. A fifth monument at the park’s center depicts General Andrew Jackson as a victorious military hero of the War of 1812 (**Image 11**). When the statue was erected in 1853, tensions that would lead to the Civil War were already mounting. Inscribed with Jackson’s 1830 statement, “Our Federal Union, It Must Be Preserved,” the statue may refer as much to the years when the monument was erected as to the battles of Jackson’s military career.

Despite two centuries of change, the appearance of the White House neighborhood today is largely due to the preservation efforts by First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, architects John Carl Warnecke and Grosvenor Chapman, and David Finley, Chairman of both the Commission of Fine Arts and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Mrs. Kennedy knew that people’s appreciation of the White House depended in part on its surroundings and wanted to ensure that the neighborhood would complement the aesthetics of the residence. In 1961, her intervention blocked a congressional plan that would have replaced the historic buildings with modernist government offices. To preserve the integrity of the neighborhood, she worked with Warnecke to develop a new plan for the square that placed modern federal offices behind the historic town houses (**Image 12**). Her work to preserve Lafayette Square served as a model for recognizing and preserving places of historical and cultural significance throughout the nation. In addition, their efforts resulted in the White House neighborhood as it is seen today—a nineteenth-century façade that serves as a work environment close to the president, and a space to educate the public about the nation’s history.

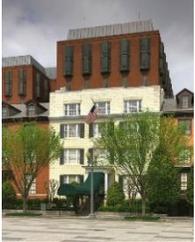
IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	Isometric View of the President's House	Ca. 1857	Unknown	Library of Congress		https://library.withehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5031-Views%20and%20Plans/Main%20Index/Plans/9656.tif.info
2	Group Appealing to President for the Release of Political Prisoners	1922	Herbert E. French	Library of Congress		https://library.withehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1490.tif.info
3	St. John's Church	2016	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.withehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/1111505.tif.info
4	Decatur House on Jackson Place and H Street	2013	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.withehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/1111509.tif.info
5	Dolley Madison-Cutts House	2014	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.withehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/1111526.tif.info

THE WHITE HOUSE NEIGHBORHOOD



6	Blair House	2013	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/111542.tif.info
7	North Side of the U.S. Department of the Treasury	2014	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/111562.tif.info
8	Eisenhower Executive Office Building	2014	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/111594.tif.info
9	Depiction of 1902 Lafayette Square and White House	2010	Peter Waddell	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Views/9486.tif.info
10	Statue Honoring Marquis de Lafayette	2014	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/111537.tif.info
11	Statue of Andrew Jackson Blanketed in Snow	2009	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5025-Premium%20Images/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/111635.tif.info



12	Jacqueline Kennedy Inspects Lafayette Square Plans	Ca. 1961-1963	Robert Knudsen	John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20F%20Kennedy/9217.tif.info
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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Map: National Park Services interactive map of President’s Park. [Click here.](#)
- Slavery in the President’s Neighborhood Initiative from the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Article: “Notable Prominent Neighbors: Personalities of St. John’s Church” by Richard F. Grimmett for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Podcast: “The 1600 Sessions: Researching Slavery in the President’s Neighborhood” by the White House Historical Association. [Listen here.](#)
- Article: “Good Neighbors: FDR, Major Gist, and Blair House by Candace S. Shireman for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)



SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For All Learners:

- Check out this packet’s “Anywhere Activity” featuring the White House Neighborhood. Make your own model of Lafayette Square historic houses with simple paper bags.
- When the Decatur House was built in the early nineteenth century, it was a grand structure meant to impress visitors and neighbors. Learn more about the history of this historic house on the White House Historical Association’s website. [Click here.](#)
 - Follow Up Activity: Consider what you have just learned about the house in the context of the enslaved men and women who also lived there. Read the article on “Slave Quarters at Decatur House” – also on the White House Historical Association’s website. [Click here.](#)

For Older Learners:

- What are the historic buildings in your city? Are there architectural clues that tell how people have used these different spaces over time? Draw an annotated map of a local neighborhood that has a variety of old and new structures. What would you tell someone from another place about these buildings?
- First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy was tireless in her efforts to preserve the character of the White House neighborhood but working in historic buildings can present difficulties for modern day government employees. Write a journal entry reflecting on the tensions between honoring the buildings of the past and providing comfort to those who occupy these structures today.