

INTRODUCTION

Many large formal events at the White House include meals served on official china. These plates, cups, bowls, and other service items function both as dinnerware and decorative arts. For two hundred years, different presidents have ordered china to suit their tastes and accommodate an increasing number of guests who dine at the Executive Mansion. Today, the White House has a room on the Ground Floor – the China Room – dedicated to displaying various administrations’ china services, which have grown into an official collection. Understanding the history of White House china provides a lens on American culture and changing tastes over time.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

A 1797 Act of Congress provided government funds for furnishing the White House. This money could be used to buy a china set, also known as a dinner service. The early presidents purchased some china, but also used their own personal services for the Executive Mansion’s dining tables (**Image 1**). China acquired with government money has not been identified for the first three residents of the White House – Presidents John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. One reason could be that the 1797 act granting funds also permitted presidents to sell items from their predecessors at public auctions if they felt anything was worn or outdated. Throughout the nineteenth century, White House china would be sold, and only later sought out and purchased in an effort to build a historic collection.



Image 1

After the burning of the White House in 1814, Congress appropriated funds specifically for an official china set to be used by an American president. In 1817, James Monroe received this set manufactured

by Dagoty and Honoré of Paris. This first service cost \$1,167.23 and consisted of thirty place settings with a matching dessert service (**Image 2**). Coordinating dessert china, like that in the Monroe set, was important in the nineteenth century. The presentation of desserts was a sign of a home's sophistication and social status. Elegantly decorated porcelain was needed to stage this last course. Every presidential china service ordered during the nineteenth century included a dessert service.

Nineteenth century presidents who ordered a china set while in office included Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, Franklin Pierce, Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, and Benjamin Harrison. As tastes changed, many of these services varied in color, but none differed as much as the Hayes china (**Image 3**). First Lady Lucy Webb Hayes wanted to commemorate North



Image 4

American flora and fauna in her new service. She commissioned artist Theodore R. Davis to create 130 designs for the set. His work included a plate with five molded oyster half shells projecting from an ocean blue background, and an ice cream plate with a molded golden snowshoe sitting on top (**Images 4 & 5**). Both Chester A. Arthur and Grover Cleveland liked this decorative set so much that they ordered additional copies of some of the pieces.

At the turn of the twentieth century in 1901, First Lady Ida McKinley sought information on the history of White House china. She asked journalist Abby Gunn Baker to research this subject in hope that some of the previous presidential china might be preserved (**Image 6**). President McKinley's assassination later that year ended her inquiry, but Baker had enough information to publish an article. Inspired by this publication, First Lady Edith Roosevelt worked to create an official White House china collection with help from Baker. Mrs. Roosevelt had the collection designated as government property so that services would no longer be sold off. She and Baker also

began to accept previous presidential china as gifts or loans, and the Theodore Roosevelt administration created their own design, thus adding another service to the collection (**Image 7**).

Continuing into the twentieth century, the Wilsons ordered the first American-made service in 1918 (**Image 8**). During the two years before the purchase, the Woodrow Wilson administration worked to renovate a Ground Floor room to permanently display the china collection (**Image 9**). Even today, the China Room continues to show the services of past generations (**Image 10**). After the Wilsons, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, and Ronald Reagan added their own full sets to the White House china collection. Needing more pieces to accommodate the growing state dinners, Reagan ordered a 4,370-piece set, notably larger than Truman's 1,572-piece service (**Images 11 & 12**).

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Clintons added a presidential service to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the occupancy of the White House (**Image 13**). Subsequently, the George W. Bush family ordered new china in 2009 (**Image 14**) and then the Obama family selected their service in 2015 (**Image 15**). First Lady Michelle Obama's design drew inspiration from the








Image 13

history and present day. Both practical and symbolic, the china included a familial touch with Kailua Blue color to represent the blue waters of Hawaii, President Barack Obama's home state, but also referenced Presidents James Madison and McKinley's services for inspiration. The White House china collection truly reflects the position of the residence as a bridge between the past and present.




IMAGES





Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	Dinner Plate, Madison Personal Service	Ca. 1806	Nast Factory	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/2714.tif.info
2	Dessert Plate, Dessert Cooler, Basket, Monroe State Service	Ca. 1817	Pierre Louis Dagoty and Edouard D. Honoré	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/738.tif.info
3	Hayes Dinner Service	1880	Haviland & Co.	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/666.tif.info
4	Oyster Plate in the Hayes State Dinner Service	1879	Haviland & Co.	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/2746.tif.info
5	Ice Cream Plate in the Hayes State Service	1879	Haviland & Co.	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/2758.tif.info

WHITE HOUSE CHINA



6	Abby Gunn Baker	Ca. 1885	Unknown	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/1112194.tif.info
7	Tea Cup and Saucer and Oyster Plate, Theodore Roosevelt Service	1903	Wedgwood	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/822.tif.info
8	Service Plate Entree/Fish Plate, and Ramekin and Plate, Wilson Service	1918	Lenox China	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5039-Fine%20%26%20Decorative%20Arts/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/826.tif.info
9	China Room as Organized by Abby Gunn Baker	1918	Unknown	White House Collection		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/4142.tif.info
10	China Room, George W. Bush Administration	2007	Peter Vitale	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/9449.tif.info
11	Bouillon Cup and Saucer, Service Plate, and Soup Plate, Truman Service	1951	Lenox China	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/838.tif.info

12	Reagan State Service	1981	Lenox China	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/1112266.tif.info
13	Clinton Anniversary Service	2000	Lenox China	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/1112267.tif.info
14	Dinner Plate, Bush State Service	2008	Lenox China	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/9216.tif.info
15	Obama State Service Complete Set and Table Settings	2015	Pickard China	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/ObamaChina/10111.tif.info

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Video: Catching Up with the Curator: The Obama State China Service. [Click here.](#)
- Timeline: White House China Service from the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Article: “Official White House China from the 18th to 21st Centuries” from the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Article: “The Splendor and Scrutiny of White House Tableware” from the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)



SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For Younger Learners:

- Use paper plates and art supplies to create your own design for a new presidential china set. Prepare a presentation about your custom design and explain your reasoning behind the design choices.
 - Using the Resources, find inspiration from previous services or explore more presidential china in the White House Historical Association's Digital Library. [Click here.](#)
- Print images of each White House china pattern. Make sure the image is not labeled with a date or a president's name. Then try to organize the patterns chronologically, guessing the correct order based on the pattern and style.

For Older Learners:

- Consider the following question: should the presidents have the power to sell previous administrations' china services or should the china collections be considered permanent government items that cannot be sold? Explain and support your position.
- During the nineteenth century, having a matching dessert service showed a home's stature or prestige, as mentioned in the Contextual Essay. What items do you have in your home that are of importance? Create a list of modern items in homes that show stature or prestige.
- Create a matching game with images of 10 china designs and 10 presidents and have them try to connect a president with a china design.