

INTRODUCTION

Many large, formal events at the White House include meals served on official White House china. These plates, cups, bowls, and other service items, collectively known as “china services,” “china sets,” or “State Services,” serve as both dinnerware and decorative arts. For over two hundred years, presidents and first ladies have brought their own personal dinnerware to the White House or designed china to suit their tastes and accommodate an increasing number of guests at the White House. Today, the China Room—located on the Ground Floor of the White House—is dedicated to displaying the official White House China Collection featuring pieces from every presidential administration or items from a president’s personal collection. Explore the history of selecting, preserving, and exhibiting presidential china at the White House.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

On March 3, 1797, Congress passed an act that provided President John Adams with government funds to furnish the White House upon completion and allowed presidents to sell items from their predecessors that were worn out, out of style, or unusable at public auctions. In turn, the act also made it possible for the public to acquire items from the White House.

Early White House staff and first families often sold presidential china at public auctions, not always considering the historical significance of the items. The proceeds of these auction sales were used to purchase furnishings for the incoming administration. Years later, however, first ladies worked to recover, preserve, and permanently display presidential china for the future.



Image 1. Porcelain and gilt dinner plate made by the Nast manufactory of Paris ca. 1806. James and Dolley Madison personally purchased the porcelain service with this pattern while Madison served as Thomas Jefferson’s secretary of state.

Early administrations most likely used personal china and services already in the White House. In 1800, President John Adams and First Lady Abigail Adams moved into the White House and began furnishing the residence. Presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison continued the Adams' efforts. When the British set fire to the White House during the War of 1812, however, much of this early progress was destroyed. **Image 1**, above, pictures the dinner plate purchased by James and Dolley Madison while Madison served as Thomas Jefferson's secretary of state. The service may have been used in Washington, D.C. during Madison's presidency.

After the burning of the White House in 1814, Congress appropriated, or assigned, funds for the purchase of an official presidential china set. In 1817, President James Monroe ordered thirty place settings and a matching dessert service from Dagoty and Honoré of Paris for a total cost of \$1,167.23. Because the presentation of desserts was a sign of a home's sophistication and social status, every presidential china service selected during the 1800s included an elegant dessert service. Refer to **Image 2**, in the chart, to see selections from President Monroe's State Service made in France. The pattern features a dark red border and a version of the arms of the United States at the center.



Image 4. Porcelain oyster plate made for the White House in 1879. President Rutherford B. Hayes purchased the plate as part of a state dinner service that featured designs by American artist Theodore Russel Davis (1879).

In the 1800s, Presidents Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, Franklin Pierce, Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, and Benjamin Harrison selected State Services while in office. While each service varied in color and design, President Hayes' selection is especially unique. First Lady Lucy Webb Hayes commissioned artist Theodore Russell Davis to produce 130 designs for the 562-piece set. First Lady Lucy Hayes had originally planned to select a floral pattern for the White House service. Davis instead suggested depictions of North American flora and

fauna, and Mrs. Hayes agreed. View **Image 3**, in the chart below, to see selections from the Hayes' flora and fauna-themed china. **Image 4**, above, shows a plate with five molded oyster half shells projecting from an ocean blue background. **Image 5**, in the chart below, pictures an ice cream plate with a molded golden snowshoe sitting on top. Presidents Chester A. Arthur and Grover Cleveland liked this decorative set so much that they ordered additional copies of some of the pieces.

During a 1901 inventory, Colonel Theodore Bingham—the commissioner of public buildings and grounds during the William McKinley administration—realized most of the china from previous administrations was no longer in the White House. He asked journalist Abby Gunn Baker, seen in **Image 6** to the right, to write a story about the history of presidential china, hoping that it would encourage future preservation efforts. After getting permission from First Lady Ida McKinley, Mrs. Baker spent four months at the White House studying the remaining pieces as well as records from the Treasury Department and other government agencies. The assassination of President McKinley later that year ended her research, but Mrs. Baker had gathered enough information to write an article that was published in *Munsey's Magazine* in December of 1903.



Image 6. Black and white image of Abby Gunn Baker (1885).

First Lady Edith Roosevelt, wife of President Theodore Roosevelt, was inspired by the publication and established the official “White House China Collection” with help from Mrs. Baker. Mrs. Roosevelt and Mrs. Baker wanted the collection to feature items from every administration and accepted previous presidential china as gifts or loans. Mrs. Roosevelt had the collection designated official government property so it could not be sold off. The Theodore Roosevelt administration also

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selected their own State Service, adding to the newly established collection. View **Image 7**, in the chart below, to see the Roosevelt's china service, made by the English firm Wedgwood in 1903.



Image 9. The White House China Room, located on the Ground Floor of the White House, during the George W. Bush administration. The red theme was inspired by the painting of First Lady Grace Coolidge which has hung in the room since 1952 (2007).

photograph of the White House China Room taken in 1918 during the Wilson administration. **Image 9**, above, pictures the China Room in 2007 during the George W. Bush administration. The Wilsons also ordered the first American-made State Service, a 1,700-piece set made in Trenton, New Jersey. See President Wilson's State Service featuring stars and stripes borders and the presidential arms in **Image 10** in the chart.

Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, and Ronald Reagan also added their full sets to the White House China Collection. President Reagan ordered a 4,370-piece set to accommodate the growing State Dinners, notably larger than President Truman's 1,572-piece service. **Image 11**, in the chart, features President Truman's State Service including a gold rim, the Presidential Seal, and dark green details to match the newly painted White House State Dining Room. President Reagan's State Service, seen in **Image 12** in the chart, features a wide red border, a crosshatch pattern, and a raised gold version of the Presidential Seal.

In 2000, the Clintons selected a State Service to celebrate the White House's 200th anniversary—seen in **Image 13**, to the right. The George W. Bush administration selected a china service featuring a green basket weave pattern and an eagle design in 2009. Refer to **Image 14**, in the chart, to see the George W. Bush state service. In 2015, President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama chose a set featuring a modern design with a personal touch. As seen in **Image 15** in the chart, the set



Image 13. President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton selected a state service with this design to celebrate the White House's 200th anniversary in 2000.

features a representation of an 1806 service plate belonging to Secretary of State James Madison. The Obama State Service shifts from the primary colors used more recently in State Dinners to a unique color selection of Kailua Blue—to represent the blue waters of Hawaii, President Barack Obama's home state.

Featuring pieces from every presidential administration, the White House China Collection truly reflects the position of the residence as a bridge between the past and the present. Each State Service is symbolic and unique to the administration and serves as a lens into American taste and culture.








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

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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	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
9	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
10	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%20Decorative%20Arts/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/826.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		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Libra

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				Historical Association		ry/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

Articles:

- “Official White House China from the 18th to 21st Centuries” for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- “The Splendor and Scrutiny of White House Tableware” for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Sugar, Slavery, and the Washington China” by Sarah Fling for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

Timeline:

- “White House China Service” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#) Video:
- Catching Up with the Curator: The Obama State China Service. [Click here.](#)



Book:

- *Official White House China* by William G. Allman. [Click here.](#)

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For all learners:

- View different presidential administration's china sets using the contextual essay and the White House Historical Association's Digital Library. What State Service set is your favorite and why? Consider the meaning behind each color and design choice. Share your thoughts with a classmate, family member, or friend. [Click here.](#)

For older learners:

- Should the president have the power to sell previous administrations' china services, or should the china collections be considered permanent government items that cannot be sold? Write a persuasive essay arguing your position.
- Print images of 10 White House china patterns and their corresponding president. Create a matching game and try to connect a president with their state service. Then try to organize the patterns chronologically, guessing the correct order based on their pattern and style.

For younger learners:

- Use paper plates and art supplies to create your own White House china with the White House Historical Association's Anywhere Activity. Be prepared to explain the reasoning behind your custom design. [Click here.](#)