

Furnishings of the White House



INTRODUCTION

Today, the White House Collection includes more than 60,000 pieces of art, tableware, furniture, and more. Managed and preserved by professional curators, the historic furnishings in the White House reflect the building's roles as home, office, museum, and stage. While desks, chairs, sofas, and other items provide a comfortable living and working space, the furnishings also have historical significance and provide a glimpse into the over 220-year history of the White House and its occupants. Although furnishings in the White House have changed over time, each piece has a rich history of its own. Explore the stories behind the *Resolute* Desk, the Lincoln bedroom furniture, and several other pieces in the White House Collection.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

President Monroe's Pierre-Antoine Bellangé Furniture Suite



Image 1. Pierre-Antoine Bellangé sofa and armchair set in the Blue Room (circa 1817).

After British troops set fire to the White House during the War of 1812, nearly all the building's early contents were destroyed. In 1817, President James Monroe moved into the rebuilt White House and began refurnishing the residence with pieces that would later form the basis of the White House Collection. President Monroe selected furniture that he believed would provide the White House with status and prestige. He purchased a 53-piece set of gilded, or covered in gold, furniture made by Pierre-Antoine

Bellangé of Paris for the Oval Room of the White House—what is now known as the Blue Room. **Image 1**, to the left, features a sofa and armchair set from the Bellangé collection. Although the gilded furniture was sold and replaced in 1860, some of the original pieces returned to the Blue Room in the 1960s and 1970s. Some of those pieces remain in service today and were recently restored with the help

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of the White House Historical Association. View **Image 2**, in the chart below, to see a photograph of a Bellangé chair in the Blue Room in 1963 during the John F. Kennedy administration.

The Resolute Desk

One of the most well-known pieces in the White House Collection, however, is the *Resolute* desk—seen in **Image 3** below. In 1880, Queen Victoria of the United Kingdom presented President Rutherford B. Hayes with a large oak desk crafted from the timbers of an English ship, the H.M.S. *Resolute*. The ship was abandoned after getting trapped in ice during an arctic expedition in 1854. The following year, an American whaling ship recovered the H.M.S. *Resolute*. Congress provided funds to repair the ship and sent it back to England as a gesture of goodwill. Queen Victoria returned the kindness and gifted the *Resolute* desk to President Hayes and the United States. Since 1880, nearly every president has used the desk somewhere in the White House. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy began the tradition of using the *Resolute* desk in the Oval Office and many recent presidents have followed his lead. Refer to **Image 4**, in the chart below, to see a photograph of President Ronald Reagan seated at the *Resolute* Desk in the Oval Office circa 1982. **Image 5**,



also in the chart, features President Bill Clinton at the *Resolute* Desk in the Oval Office in 1994.

The Davenport Console Tables

The 1902 Theodore Roosevelt Renovation significantly increased the functionality of the White House and paved the way for further redecoration. President Roosevelt hired an architectural firm, McKim, Mead & White, to complete the massive renovation project that involved the construction of the West Wing, doubled the space allocated to the family living quarters, and created a new East Wing

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and entrance for receiving guests. Furniture maker A.H. Davenport of Boston built ornate marble-topped console tables with carved American eagle supports for the State Floor, or main floor of the White House. Inspired by pier tables from President Andrew Jackson's era, the Davenport tables are still used in the State Dining Room today. See a photograph of the mahogany console table in 1902 in **Image 6** in the chart below. Notice the intricate eagle-shaped legs of the table. **Image 7** and **Image 8**, in the chart below, show Davenport's design drawings of the table. Other White House furnishings, including the side chair and armchair seen in **Image 9** in the chart, were commissioned by Davenport and symbolize the large changes at the White House during the Theodore Roosevelt administration.

The Lincoln Bedroom



Image 12. The Lincoln Bedroom in 2005 during the George W. Bush administration. First Lady Laura Bush lead a refurbishment of the room to increase the historical accuracy of the room.

Before the construction of the Oval Office, the president's office space was located on the Second Floor of the White House. During the 1902 Theodore Roosevelt Renovation, the Second Floor was converted into family space and the room previously used as an office and cabinet room became a bedroom. The room features Lincoln-era furnishings purchased by First Lady Mary Lincoln in 1861 and is known today as the Lincoln Bedroom. Although Mrs. Lincoln's bedroom suite was originally located in a guest room on the

opposite side of the floor, President Harry Truman moved the Lincoln-era furnishings to the former office space. View **Image 10**, in the chart below, to see a photograph of the Lincoln Bedroom in 1962. While the high-back bed was purchased by Mrs. Lincoln, President Lincoln most likely never slept in it. Several administrations renovated the bedroom including First Lady Laura Bush in 2005. **Image 11**, above, features a photograph of the Lincoln Bedroom in 2005.

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The Monroe Room

First Lady Lou Hoover had a deep interest in White House furnishings and restoration. In 1932, she redecorated space on the Second Floor of the White House with reproductions of Monroe-era furniture. Known as the “Monroe Room,” the space featured a recreation of the desk where President James Monroe reportedly signed the Monroe Doctrine in 1823. **Image 12**, in the chart below, is a photograph of First Lady Lou Hoover sitting at a reproduction of the Monroe Doctrine Desk in 1932. Refer to **Image 13**, also in the chart below, to see a close-up of the desk. The space was renamed the “Treaty Room” during the John F. Kennedy administration and has since kept the name.

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt’s Val-Kill Furniture Shop

In 1927, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and a small group of friends founded the Val-Kill Furniture Shop in Hyde Park, New York to increase employment opportunities near her home along the Hudson River. After becoming first lady in 1933, Mrs. Roosevelt brought eleven pieces of Val-Kill colonial revivalist furniture to the White House—furniture that replicated early American styles. Refer to **Image 14**, in the chart below, to see a photograph of a maple dressing table made by the Val-Kill Furniture Shop. **Image 15**, also in the chart below, pictures a close-up of the Val-Kill maker’s mark on the dressing table. The Val-Kill Furniture Shop’s business model—providing work for the unemployed—was a precursor to the agencies established under President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal policies in the 1930s. Mrs. Roosevelt’s Val-Kill pieces brought a personal touch to the White House and connect to a wider narrative about the Great Depression.

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First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy's Preservation Efforts

Determined to preserve and promote the history of the White House, First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy began several initiatives to restore the building's public rooms. In September 1961, Congress passed legislation that designated "historic or artistic" furniture permanent property of the White House. She initiated the formation of an official White House Collection, hired the first White House Curator, and established the White House Historical Association to preserve and share the history of the White House. In 1962, Mrs. Kennedy conducted a televised tour of the White House to highlight her restoration efforts. She



Image 16. Bellangé pier table in the Entrance Hall of the White House (circa 1817).

appealed to the American people to donate objects, resulting in an influx of authentic furnishings. View **Image 16**, above, to see a photograph of an original pier table from President Monroe's 1817 Pierre-Antoine Bellangé furniture collection. Mrs. Kennedy discovered the Bellangé table in the carpenter's shop and had it restored—one of her many preservation efforts as first lady.

Conclusion

Each piece of furniture in the White House has its own unique story that gives insight into life in the White House, the interests of presidents and first ladies, and even international relations. First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy's preservation efforts culminating in the founding of an official White House Collection under the permanent care of professional curators allows us to explore and appreciate the White House's historic furnishings today and in the future.

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IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	Sofa and Armchairs, Blue Room	Ca. 1817	Pierre-Antoine Bellangé	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/4186.tif.info
2	Bellangé Armchair, Blue Room	Ca. 1817	Pierre-Antoine Bellangé	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/3142.tif.info
3	<i>Resolute</i> Desk	1880	William Evenden	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/797.tif.info
4	Ronald Reagan on the Telephone in the Oval Office	Ca. 1982	Unknown	Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum/NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Ronald%20Reagan/3054.tif.info
5	President Clinton, Chelsea Clinton, and Socks Clinton (Cat) in the Oval Office	1994	Robert McNeely	William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum/NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Bill%20Clinton/572.tif.info
6	A. H. Davenport Console Table	1902	A. H. Davenport	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/816.tif.info




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7	Design Drawing of Mahogany Console Table	1902	A. H. Davenport	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/949.tif.info
8	Eagle Table Plan	1902	A. H. Davenport	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/2389.tif.info
9	Side Chair and Armchair by A. H. Davenport	1902	A. H. Davenport	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/814.tif.info
10	Lincoln Bedroom, 1962	1962	George F. Mobley	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/1113483.tif.info
11	Lincoln Bedroom of the White House, George W. Bush Administration	2005	Erik Kvalsvik	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/6846.tif.info
12	Lou Henry Hoover at Monroe Desk	1932	Harris & Ewing	Stock Montage, Harris & Ewing Collection		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Herbert%20Hoover/1112146.tif.info
13	Mahogany Desk	1932	Morris W. Dove	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/832.tif.info

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14	Dressing Table	Ca. 1933	Otto Berge	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/833.tif.info
15	Dressing Table Maker's Mark	Ca. 1933	Otto Berge	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/966.tif.info
16	French Empire Pier Table	Ca. 1817	Pierre-Antoine Bellangé	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/727.tif.info

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Articles

- “Hail to the Chief Curator” by Sarah Fling for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- “The Lincoln Bedroom: Refurbishing a Famous White House Room” by William G. Allman for the White House Historical Association.

Collection

- “Decorative Arts in the White House” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

Gallery

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

Magazine

- *LIFE* magazine featuring First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, September 1, 1961. Accessed from Google Books. [Click here.](#)

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Podcast

- “The White House 1600 Sessions: The Curator” by the White House Historical Association. [Listen here.](#)

Video

- “Jackie’s White House Tour” televised on CBS on February 14, 1962. [Click here.](#)

Subject Files

- Correspondence and press releases regarding the Fine Arts Committee for the White House (1961-1963), includes references to White House furnishings. Courtesy of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. [Click here.](#)

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For all learners:

- Choose a piece of furniture in your home or school and investigate the origins of the item. Who made it? Did it come from a store? What is it made of? Was it passed down from another family member? Has its use changed over time? Share your conclusions with a classmate, family member, or friend.

For older learners:

- Watch First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy’s 1962 White House tour [here](#). Create your own video tour or write a script for a tour that highlights artifacts in your own home or school. Discuss the historical significance of the furniture and objects that you chose to feature in your video or script.

For younger learners:

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- Make your own origami Pierre-Antoine Bellangé chair with the White House Historical Association’s “Paper Chair!” Anywhere Activity. [Click here.](#)
- Write a short journal entry from the perspective of a piece of furniture in the White House—a chair in the Oval Office, for example. Consider the following questions in your response:
 - What important event has the piece of furniture experienced?
 - What people/animals sat on the chair? Why were they there?