Background: Winter Holidays at the White House
A History of Celebrations, the National Christmas Tree Lighting, and Decorations

November 14, 2018 (Washington, D.C.) – The first White House Christmas party was held in December 1800 by President John Adams and First Lady Abigail Adams for their four-year-old granddaughter Susanna Boylston Adams. The First Family invited government officials and their children to the party. Since then, winter time in the White House has been filled with various holiday festivities.

History of Christmas Celebrations at the White House
• In 1923, the Coolidge’s celebrated Christmas by honoring those in need. First Lady Coolidge assisted the Salvation Army on Christmas Eve and sent roses to the homes of working women. President Coolidge sent a Christmas message to disabled veterans of World War I, telling them, “The heart of America is with those who made great sacrifice in defense of our great ideals.”
• During his time in office, President Franklin Roosevelt spent ten consecutive Christmases at the White House. Every year, the President and the First Lady hosted a party for White House staff and their families in the East Room. The First Lady and President showed their appreciation by handing out small gifts at these parties. For example, in 1934, they gave out autographed copies of the president’s book On Our Way.
• See images of celebrations at the White House
• Read more about Holiday Celebrations at the White House.

Holiday Decorations at the White House
• President Benjamin Harrison placed the first Christmas tree in the White House in 1889. It was decorated with candles, toys, and other ornaments designed to impress the Harrison grandchildren.
• Electricity was installed in the White House in 1891. Three years later during the presidency of Grover Cleveland, electric lights first appeared on a White House Christmas tree.
• According to popular belief, President Theodore Roosevelt, an avowed conservationist, forbade Christmas trees at the White House. His children surprised the president by hiding a tree in a sewing room closet.
• President William H. Taft’s children placed what is believed to be the first Christmas tree in the Blue Room in 1912.
• First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy began the tradition of selecting a theme for the official White House Christmas tree in the Blue Room in 1961. That year the tree was decorated with ornamental toys, birds, angels and characters from the "Nutcracker Suite" ballet.
• The National Christmas Tree Association has held a national competition since 1966 to select the “official tree” for the White House Blue Room. To qualify, growers must first win their state or regional competitions. Being named National Grand Champion is a major achievement.
• The Dwight D. Eisenhower administration set a long-standing record for the number of trees in the White House, installing 26 trees that filled every floor of the house in 1959. That mark has been eclipsed on several occasions in recent times.
• In 1975, the tradition of creating a tree of cranberries began as a result of First Lady Nancy Reagan’s love of red.

National Christmas Tree Lightings
• President Calvin Coolidge was the first President to preside over the National Christmas Tree Lighting ceremony, in 1923.
• More than 6,000 people came to view the first lighting of the National Tree on the Ellipse on Christmas Eve, participating in Christmas carols and listening to the Epiphany Church Choir and U.S. Marine band play.
• The origin of the National Tree Lighting ceremony involved both local and national organizations. Lucretia Walker Hardy of the D.C. Community Center Department advocated for a “national tree” on the grounds of the White House. The Society for Electrical Development helped fell the tree, seeing it as an opportunity to showcase outdoor electric lighting technology.
• The first National Christmas Tree came from Middlebury College as a gift.
• In 1944, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt invited wounded servicemen and their families to watch the National Christmas Tree Lighting from the comfort of the South Portico.
• The Christmas Pageant of Peace has been held on the South Lawn annually since 1954 and includes the lighting of the National Christmas Tree, an appearance by the first family, and musical and dance performances.
• In the 1960s, the National Park Service initiated a permanent shift from cut trees to a live tree. The first trees planted were lost due to damage or inability to thrive. The third tree, planted in 1978, survived until 2011 when it was lost in a windstorm. A new tree was planted in 2012 and survives to this day as the National Christmas Tree.
Gingerbread at the White House

- While the tradition of displaying an intricately designed gingerbread house in the State Dining Room didn’t begin until the early 1970s, the tradition of making gingerbread goes back to the very first administrations. Both Martha Washington and Dolley Madison were renowned for their soft gingerbread cake recipes.
- In 1969, Assistant Executive Chef Hans Raffert added the first gingerbread house to the White House holiday decorations for the Nixon Administration.
- In 1992, Executive Pastry Chef Roland Mesnier expanded the tradition of the White House gingerbread house to include an entire gingerbread village, with a display of five gingerbread houses and hundreds of marzipan figures and spun sugar adornments. In 1993, Mesnier created a scale replica of the White House in gingerbread, which weighed in at nearly 100 pounds. See his 2002 White House replica here. Since Mesnier’s expansion of gingerbread at the White House, each year the White House gingerbread houses have highlighted a different theme, often reflecting the overall theme of the decorations selected by the first lady. This has resulted in various unique and intricate displays of gingerbread at the White House over the years. Chef Mesnier wrote a book about his time creating gingerbread displays in the White House: The White House in Gingerbread, available for purchase from the White House Historical Association’s White House History Shop.
- To learn more about the role gingerbread has played in the White House, read the full article.

History of Hanukkah at the White House

- Jimmy Carter was the first president to light the National Menorah in 1979 when it was located across the street from the White House in Lafayette Park.
- Menorahs have been given as gifts to presidents for many years, but President George H.W. Bush was the first to display a menorah in the White House in 1989.
- President Bill Clinton became the first to light a menorah at a White House ceremony in 1993.
- In 2001, President George W. Bush, began the annual tradition of hosting an official White House Hanukkah party.
- President Barack Obama hosted Jewish members of his administration, Jewish members of congress and Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg at his 2011 White House Hanukkah party.
- President Donald Trump invited Holocaust survivor Louise Lawrence-Israëls to the 2017 White House Hanukkah party.

See a photo album of high-res White House winter holiday images here. (Please credit The White House Historical Association when using photos or information.)
The Official White House Christmas Ornament

- The White House Historical Association’s annual Official White House Christmas Ornament honors an individual president or a significant White House anniversary, such as the bicentennial of the American Presidency.
- This year’s ornament honors the time that President Harry Truman spent in the White House.
  - The 2018 version of the Official White House Christmas Ornament features the Truman Balcony, Blue Room and Presidential Seal. These three key features tell the story of the major White House renovation that took place 1948-52 as well as Truman’s changes to the Presidential Seal.
- To learn more about the Official White House Christmas Ornament, or to purchase, visit whitehousehistory.org.
- See a photo album of high-res 2018 Official White House Ornament images. (Please credit The White House Historical Association when using photos or information.)

For more information or to book an interview with Stewart McLaurin, President of the White House Historical Association, or a historian, please contact Jessica Fredericks, Communications Director, at JFredericks@whha.org.

About The White House Historical Association
First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy envisioned a restored White House that conveyed a sense of history through its decorative and fine arts. In 1961, the White House Historical Association was established to support her vision to preserve and share the Executive Mansion’s legacy for generations to come. Supported entirely by private resources, the Association’s mission is to assist in the preservation of the state and public rooms, fund acquisitions for the White House permanent collection, and educate the public on the history of the White House. Since its founding, the White House Historical Association has contributed more than $47 million in fulfillment of its mission. To learn more about the White House Historical Association, please visit www.whitehousehistory.org.

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