

INTRODUCTION

As the president’s office and home, the White House stands as a symbol of American leadership. President George Washington selected the site and approved the final design, but he never had an opportunity to live in the building once known as the “President’s Palace.” When the initial construction was finished in 1800, John Adams became the first president to occupy this famous home. Explore the design and creation of the building from its inception, to the burning by the British in 1814, and the completion of the porticoes by 1830 that resulted in the White House’s iconic appearance.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

In 1790, Congress passed the Residence Act, which established a permanent national capital to be built on the Potomac River. President George Washington had the authority to pick the specific site of the capital city, and he selected engineer and architect Pierre Charles L’Enfant to begin planning the city streets inside a 10-mile square section of farmland (**Image 1**). Washington chose the spot for the President’s House, and L’Enfant set aside this space for what he called a “palace” for the president (**Image 2**). L’Enfant’s original plan for the President’s House was five times the size of the house which would be built, so “palace” seemed appropriate at the time. But for a new republic whose leaders would be ordinary citizens—not kings—the building was scaled back, and so was its name. It became known as simply “The President’s House.”

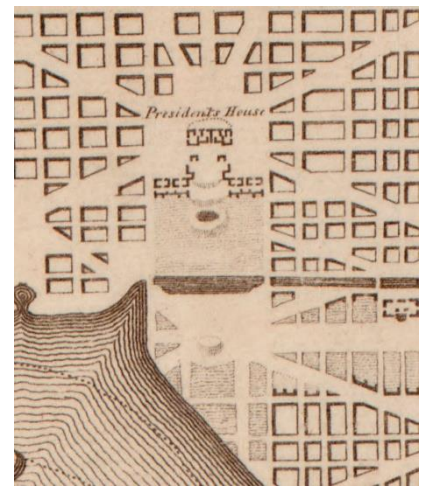


Image 2

After George Washington dismissed L’Enfant for insubordination in early 1792, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson organized a design contest and announced a prize of five hundred dollars or a medal of that value for the best design of the President’s House. James Hoban, an Irish-born and trained architect, was declared the winner (**Image 3**). He then began overseeing the construction of

the President's House (**Image 4**). The earliest known drawing of the White House is Hoban's plan, which he drew in 1792. Hoban created rooms of varied sizes and shapes on the first floor, or "state" floor, where public business would be conducted. Benjamin Henry Latrobe, who would later assist President Thomas Jefferson with some projects at the White House, offers the best architectural sketch of the interior of Hoban's White House (**Image 5**).

The President's House was ready for occupancy in November 1800, although the interior was still unfinished when John and Abigail Adams moved into the house (**Images 6 & 7**). Many rooms had



Image 8

not been plastered, and there was a large hole where the grand staircase was planned but not yet constructed. The largest room in the house, the East Room, was also incomplete. Mrs. Adams thought that the President's clean laundry should not be aired on the lawn for everyone to see, so she set up lines in the East Room (**Image 8**).

While serving as president, Thomas Jefferson's architectural design skills were used in a practical way. He worked with Benjamin Henry Latrobe, the Surveyor of Public Buildings, to design and build long colonnades that extended east and west of the White House to serve as service and storage space.

Tragedy struck when the British invaded the capital during the War of 1812. On August 24, 1814, enemy forces moved through the city of Washington and set fire to the Executive Mansion (**Images 9 & 10**). While the interior and furnishings were completely destroyed, some of the exterior walls remained standing. (**Image 11**). After the fire, President James Madison moved quickly to rebuild the White House on the same site and remained faithful to the original design. Some Congressmen



talked of rebuilding the house on another site, perhaps even in a different city, but Madison quickly had the damage assessed to prevent that from happening. He brought James Hoban back to rebuild it according to his original plan, and it was ready for James Monroe's tenure in 1817. Rebuilding the White House to appear exactly as it did before the war symbolized America's determination and sent a message that the nation and its government were permanent.

A common but false myth persists that the white paint on the President's House helped cover the burn marks from the fire in 1814. In fact, the building was first made white with a lime-based whitewash in 1798, simply as a means of protecting the porous sandstone from freezing. The term "White House" gained popularity before the War of 1812, with the phrase appearing in Baltimore newspapers as early as 1810. The whitewash was refreshed periodically until the structure was, at last, painted with white paint in 1818. The name, though in common use, remained only a nickname until 1901, when President Theodore Roosevelt made it official.

President James Monroe moved into the rebuilt White House in the fall of 1817 and purchased furnishings for the still unfinished interiors (**Image 12**). Considering that it had taken nearly ten years to build the first White House, it was impressive that James Hoban was able to direct a reconstruction of the house in slightly less than three years. Reusing some of the stone walls saved time, but Hoban changed the structure of the house by substituting timber for brick in some of the interior partitions. The shortcut ultimately produced a weaker building. The ill effects of this decision would result in the virtual



Image 12

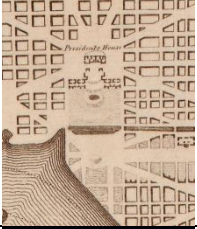

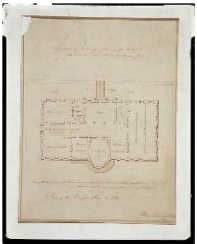







demolition and rebuilding of the White House some 130 years later during President Harry Truman's administration.





The reconstruction after the burning in 1814 added north and south porticoes to the President's House that were originally drawn in 1807 by Benjamin Henry Latrobe (**Image 13**). James Hoban supervised construction of the porticoes made of Seneca sandstone from Maryland (**Image 14**). Builders finished the south portico during Monroe's administration in 1824 (**Image 15**). After Congress appropriated funding, Hoban constructed the north portico from 1829-1830. With the creation of the porticoes, the main image of the White House as we know it today was complete and established the iconic symbol of the presidency.

IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	Plan for the City of Washington	1792	Pierre Charles L'Enfant	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5031-Views%20and%20Plans/Main%20Index/Plans/111111.tif.info
2	1792 Details of the First Official Plan	1792	Pierre Charles L'Enfant	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5031-Views%20and%20Plans/Main%20Index/Plans/9650.tif.info
3	James Hoban	Ca. 1800	John Christian Rauschner	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Artwork/200.tif.info
4	Stonemason's Mark	Ca. 1792-1800	Unknown	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/2070.tif.info
5	State Floor Plan of the Jefferson White House	1807	Benjamin Henry Latrobe	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5031-Views%20and%20Plans/Main%20Index/Views/903.tif.info

6	West End of the President's House	Ca. 1800	Samuel Blodget, Jr.	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/365.tif.info
7	North Front of the President's House	Ca. 1800	Samuel Blodget, Jr.	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/364.tif.info
8	Abigail Adams Supervising the Hanging of the Wash in the East Room	1966	Gordon Phillips	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20Adams/127.tif.info
9	Brits Burning the White House	1910	Unknown	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/217.tif.info
10	Burning of the White House by British Soldiers in 1814	2004	Tom Freeman	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5031-Views%20and%20Plans/Main%20Index/Views/5720.tif.info
11	Burnt Shell of the White House	1814	William Strickland	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5031-Views%20and%20Plans/Main%20Index/Views/394.tif.info

12	Elevation of the South Front of the President's House	Ca. 1817	Benjamin Henry Latrobe	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5031-Views%20and%20Plans/Main%20Index/Views/583.tif.info
13	President's House with Porticoes	1807	Benjamin Henry Latrobe	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5031-Views%20and%20Plans/Main%20Index/Views/584.jpg.info
14	South Front of the President's House	1818	James Hoban	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/1806.tif.info
15	Watercolor of the White House's South Grounds	1827	Unknown	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5031-Views%20and%20Plans/Main%20Index/Views/1315.tif.info

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Podcast: Episode 5 – “A White House of Stone” from the *1600 Sessions*, presented by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Podcast: Episode 4 – “British Invasion to French Restoration” from the *1600 Sessions*, presented by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)



SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

- Ask students to write a journal entry as if they were seeing the White House for the first time either after its initial construction in 1800 or after the rebuilding in 1817. What first impressions might have been made on citizens or foreign visitors of the time?
- Create a class discussion about the idea of a “palace” for the president. Does a palace fit with the democratic ideals our country was founded on? Today, how would students feel referring to the White House as the palace?
- Have students research another iconic historic building or a historic structure in their neighborhood. They should investigate the 5 Ws (who, what, when where and why) of the building’s history. What are the most interesting design elements? If they can find an image of the architect’s drawings, have them compare this to a photograph of the building. Did the builders follow the architect’s plans?
- *This CRP works as a stand-alone resource but also complements the Changes to the White House (1830-1952) CRP.*