

INTRODUCTION

Presidents make important political decisions at the White House, but they also celebrate holidays, just like many everyday citizens. However, the way presidents and first families celebrate various holidays can differ slightly from the average American. Easter involves a large-scale public event with hundreds of people rolling eggs on the South Lawn, and at Christmas time the public is invited to view elaborate White House decorations on special tours. Explore both the past and present holiday traditions of the White House starting with the home's first resident, John Adams.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

The White House is over 200 years old, but some holiday traditions have not lasted as long as the structure itself. On January 1, 1801, John Adams hosted the first public reception in the newly built President's House, now known as the White House (**Image 1**). For over one hundred years, presidents upheld this holiday custom on New Year's Day, and it was cancelled only a handful of times due to war, the president's travel schedule, or illness. Everyone from the common citizen to the highest-ranking diplomat was welcomed to shake hands with the president (**Image 2**). Details of these annual receptions, from floral decorations to dress styles, filled the columns of Washington's newspapers. By the early twentieth century, crowds swelled to more than 6,000 people eager to meet the president. Lines stretched down the White House sidewalk and beyond the gates to the neighboring block (**Image 3**). During the Great Depression, one man mistook the line of people waiting to get into the White House for a bread line. Ending the tradition, President Herbert Hoover held the last New Year's Day reception in 1932.



Image 3

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In December 1800, John Adams was also the first president to hold a Christmas celebration at the White House with his wife Abigail and granddaughter Suzannah. Generally, nineteenth-century White House Christmas celebrations were not grand public events but small family gatherings. In 1889, President Harrison and his family brought the first Christmas tree to the residence, and electric tree lights arrived in the late 1890s (**Image 4**). President Taft's children placed the first tree on the State Floor in 1909. In 1929, First Lady Lou Hoover established the tradition of decorating an official tree for the State Floor, and in 1961 First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy established the tradition of a themed Blue Room Christmas Tree (**Image 5**). Another feature of modern White House Christmas decorations is elaborate gingerbread houses (**Image 6**). Since 1969, pastry chefs have created a gingerbread house for the enjoyment of first families, the American people, and White House visitors.



Image 8

The White House Grounds provide another setting for an important presidential Christmas tradition, which started in 1923 when Calvin Coolidge presided over the National Christmas Tree lighting on the Ellipse just south of the White House. This public event evolved in 1954 to become the modern-day Christmas Pageant of Peace (**Image 7**). The celebration honors the holiday worship of many faiths, and the first family lights the National Christmas Tree and hosts live performances (**Images 8 & 9**).

The Thanksgiving holiday dates back to the Civil War, when President Lincoln proclaimed it as a national holiday to reflect and give thanks. Historically, many presidents received turkeys as gifts to be eaten at the Executive Mansion. Combining that gift with the president's constitutional power to pardon, modern presidents have often pardoned a turkey from ending up on the dinner table in a

lighthearted ceremony on Thanksgiving Day (**Image 10**). Aside from the turkey pardon, first families typically celebrate Thanksgiving quietly with friends and family at the White House.

Another exclusively American holiday at the White House is the Fourth of July, the date marking the signing of the Declaration of Independence. In 1801, President Thomas Jefferson first celebrated the Fourth of July at the White House. Like the New Year's reception, Jefferson opened the residence to the public, including diplomats, military officers, and Cherokee chiefs. Since Jefferson, presidents have held similar public receptions or greeted Fourth of July visitors for garden parties, picnics, and fireworks displays on the South Lawn (**Images 11-13**). While the nature of the celebrations differs, the White House continues to recognize the day of America's independence each Fourth of July.



Image 15

The White House South Lawn also hosts the annual Easter Egg Roll on the Monday following Easter (**Image 14**). Presidents and their families have permitted children and their parents onto the grounds to compete in races where eggs are pushed in the grass with a wooden spoon (**Image 15**). Beginning in the 1870s, Washington, D.C., residents rolled eggs on the United States Capitol grounds, but concerns for its landscaping

led to a law signed by President Ulysses S. Grant in 1876 banning the practice. The Capitol grounds became off limits to egg rolling and left the tradition in question. In 1878, President Rutherford B. Hayes instructed his guards to open the White House gates and let the children use the South Lawn instead. The Easter Egg Roll has experienced small changes and interruptions, such as during World

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Wars I and II. Nevertheless, it continues today as one of the oldest annual events at the White House (**Image 16**).

From 1800 to the present, such festivities have been important White House traditions, and first families continue to find ways to enjoy these holidays both publicly and privately. The receptions on New Year's Day may no longer occur, but presidents carry on many traditions from previous administrations, such as the Easter Egg Roll. First families also celebrate other holidays, including lighting a menorah for Hanukkah, or even dressing in costumes for Halloween (**Images 17 & 18**). Whatever the holiday, the White House presents a stage for celebration and enjoyment for the first family and the American public.







IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	The President's House, December 1800	2000	Tom Freeman	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/3969.tif.info
2	Carriages Awaiting Guests at Cleveland's New Year's Reception Outside the North Portico	1889	Frances Benjamin Johnston	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/2499.tif.info
3	New Year Reception at the White House	1927	Herbert E. French	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1588.tif.info
4	Yellow Oval Room Decorated for Christmas	Ca. 1896	Frank Boteler	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/9188.tif.info
5	Lady Bird Johnson with the White House Christmas Tree in the Blue Room	Ca. 1968	Unknown	Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Lyndon%20B%20Johnson/1111793.tif.info







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6	White House Gingerbread House	1993	Sharon Farmer	William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/8456.tif.info
7	1953 National Christmas Tree Lighting	1953	Abbie Rowe	National Archives and Records Administration		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/5066.tif.info
8	President Lyndon B. Johnson Lights the National Christmas Tree	1964	George Szabo	National Archives and Records Administration		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Lyndon%20B%20Johnson/6373.tif.info
9	President and Mrs. Clinton at the National Tree Lighting Ceremony	1993	Unknown	William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Bill%20Clinton/9176.tif.info
10	President Truman Pardons Thanksgiving Turkey	1949	Abbie Rowe	National Archives and Records Administration		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Harry%20S%20Truman/5021.tif.info
11	Fourth of July Crowd on White House Lawn	1903	Unknown	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1111794.tif.info


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12	Reagan's First Fourth of July in the White House	1981	Unknown	Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1111796.tif.info
13	Fourth of July Festivities on the South Lawn	1980	Unknown	Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1111795.tif.info
14	Easter Egg Roll, South View	1966	James P. Blair	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/5263.tif.info
15	Children Participate in 2002 Easter Egg Roll	2002	Eric Draper	George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/5706.tif.info
16	Easter Egg Rolling at White House – Children Clamor for Eggs	1929	Herbert E. French	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1613.tif.info
17	President George W. Bush Assists with the Lighting of the Menorah Ceremony	2001	Unknown	George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/George%20W%20Bush/8322.tif.info

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18	Kennedy Children Visit President Kennedy in the Oval Office on Halloween	1963	Cecil Stoughton	John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20F%20Kennedy/36.tif.info
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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Podcast: Episode 3 – “Springtime at the White House” from the *1600 Sessions*, presented by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Video: Panel discussion “Deck the Halls: Holidays at the White House.” [Click here.](#)



SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

- Discuss how White House celebrations are similar or different from how your students celebrate these holidays. What holiday celebrations should be added to the White House?
- The United States was established on the ideas of a democracy – a government ruled by the majority opinion of the people. The historic New Year’s Day reception and later holiday traditions have long made the White House accessible to the public. Ask students to write a short response to the question: How does opening the White House for various holidays or public tours support the ideas of democracy?
- In 1961, First Lady Jaqueline Kennedy began the tradition of selecting a theme for the official White House Christmas Tree. That year, it was the theme of the Nutcracker ballet. Have students imagine that they are one of the White House staff members charged with deciding the theme for next year. What would that be, and how would the decoration for the tree support the theme? Let students draw their design.
- The tradition of pardoning a turkey is said to have started because of President Abraham Lincoln’s youngest son, Tad. He grew attached to a turkey that had been sent for the family’s Christmas dinner and, naming him Jack, begged his father to write an official reprieve to save him. Recent presidential speeches cite this historic story as the basis for the modern-day turkey pardoning at Thanksgiving. Ask students to consider holiday traditions they have started or would like to start in their family.