

INTRODUCTION

Thousands of people visit the White House every year. During public tours, visitors walk through rooms that have been used by presidents and their families for over two centuries. Years ago, curious guests could knock on the front door of the White House and ask to see inside. Today, visitors wait weeks or even months to gain access for a tour of the President's House. Discover the history and different uses of the public spaces that are part of the public tour of the White House.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

In recent years, visitors pass through the East Wing to enter the main part of the White House on the Ground Floor. Until 1902, the Ground Floor was primarily a basement area that housed kitchens, a furnace room, and storage (**Image 1**). Today, the finished space contains several public rooms that hold important artifacts of American history (**Image 2**). One of the first rooms that visitors see is the Library. This was first created as a private library for President Franklin Roosevelt



Image 3

in 1935 (**Image 3**). The China Room, once a cloakroom, now displays examples of china and glassware from nearly every presidential administration (**Image 4**). The full-length portrait of First Lady Grace Coolidge inspired the red decorations of the room. Portraits of other first ladies hang in the Vermeil Room, which contains the White House collection of gilded silver, or *vermeil*, giving the room its name (**Image 5**).

From the Ground Floor, visitors walk upstairs to the State Floor. The first stop on this floor is the East Room, the largest room in the house (**Image 6**). Primarily a space for large groups, it has served many other purposes over the past two centuries. In 1800, the first presidential couple to live in the house, John and Abigail Adams, used the unfinished East Room to hang their laundry (**Image 7**). During the Civil War, Union soldiers temporarily camped here until other housing was found for

them in Washington, D.C. Now, the East Room serves as a space for large press conferences, social engagements, and performances (**Image 8**).

Exiting the vast East Room, visitors enter a series of smaller rooms, each named after a color. The first room is a square-shaped parlor called the Green Room, so named for its green wallpaper, furniture, and carpeting (**Image 9**). The original architect of the White House, James Hoban, envisioned this space as a small dining room. Thomas Jefferson used it for this purpose and added a green rug under his breakfast table. President John Quincy Adams and his wife Louisa were the first to call the room the “Green Drawing Room,” and it has remained that color ever since.



Image 9

Next, the Blue Room, situated directly opposite the North Door, is the only room on the State Floor in the shape of an oval. Large, curving French doors and tall windows look out onto the White House South Lawn (**Image 10**). Since the early nineteenth century, presidents have used the Blue Room as a reception area. The room received its name in 1837 when President Martin Van Buren chose to redecorate the space in blue. Each December, the Blue Room becomes home to the official White House Christmas tree. To make space for the huge tree and to provide extra support for ornaments, the chandelier is removed and the tree is secured to the ceiling (**Image 11**).

The last of the color-named rooms, the Red Room, is another small, square parlor (**Image 12**). The space became known as the Red Room when President James K. Polk and his wife Sarah purchased crimson furniture and carpeting for the space in 1845. In the nineteenth century, presidents

frequently used it as a music room or informal entertaining space. Today, both the Red and Green Rooms are host teas or other small events.

White House tours then continue into two dining room spaces. The first is the larger State Dining Room. Thomas Jefferson used this space as his office, but after he left the White House other presidents mainly used the room for hospitality, including diplomatic State Dinners (**Images 13 & 14**). President Theodore Roosevelt expanded the space in 1902 to accommodate up to 140 seated guests,



Image 13

and many more for a standing event. A recent addition to the White House tour is the Old Family Dining Room, which was refurbished in 2015 (**Image 15**). First families used this space, originally called the Small Dining Room, for their meals instead of the large, formal State Dining Room. Since 1962, presidential families have taken their meals in a smaller, more private space on the Second Floor, but the Old Family Dining Room continues to be used for lunches or other small gatherings (**Image 16**).

The last space visitors see on their tour before exiting through the North Door is the Cross Hall and Entrance Hall (**Image 17**). Portraits of modern presidents are traditionally displayed here, and it still serves as an entrance on special occasions. Since it was first occupied in 1800, the White House has fascinated the public. While some rooms are completely closed to visitors, the public rooms of the White House give everyday guests a sense of the unbroken connection that presidents share with those who lived there before them.

IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	White House Kitchen	1901	C. M. Bell	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/1650.tif.info
2	Ground Floor Corridor	2010	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/9441.tif.info
3	White House Library	After 1935	Abbie Rowe	White House Collection		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/2410.tif.info
4	China Room	2007	Peter Vitale	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/9449.tif.info
5	Vermeil Room	Ca. 1999	Erik Kvalsvik	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/660.tif.info
6	East Room, Bill Clinton Administration	2000	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/810.tif.info






PUBLIC SPACES OF THE WHITE HOUSE



7	Abigail Adams Supervising the Hanging of 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
8	President Bush Speaking in the East Room During Bill Signing 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/9051.tif.info
9	Green Room	2009	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/9428.tif.info
10	Blue Room, Barack Obama Administration	2010	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/9431.tif.info
11	Blue Room Christmas Tree	1993	Bob McNeely	William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/8503.tif.info
12	Red Room, Ronald Reagan Administration	1987	Joseph H. Bailey	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/4189.tif.info

PUBLIC SPACES OF THE WHITE HOUSE



13	State Dining Room, Barack Obama Administration	2010	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/9437.tif.info
14	State Dinner for Queen Elizabeth	1991	White House Photo	George Bush Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/George%20H%20W%20Bush/597.tif.info
15	Christmas Dinner at the White House	1947	Unknown	Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Harry%20S%20Truman/1540.tif.info
16	Family Dining Room, Barack Obama Administration	2016	Matthew D'Agostino	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/1113334.jpg.info
17	Entrance Hall Seen from the North Portico	1999	Erik Kvalsvik	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/1020.tif.info

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Videos: A Tour of the White House. [Click here.](#)



SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

- Using the resource images for visuals, students can use their knowledge of geometry to create a list of the all different shapes found in the White House public rooms. Include the shape of the rooms and the objects inside of the room.
- Design a new room for the White House. Imagine that the White House is expanding and adding more public rooms. Ask students to draw or write about a new room. Think about the following questions: What color? What shape? What would it be used for? Why is it needed?
- Explore 360 degree views of the White House public rooms by using the Google Arts and Culture tour. Use your internet search bar to find this online or [Click here](#). Along with these views, students can explore the grounds of the South Lawn—something that is not included on a regular public tour of the White House.
- Show students how they can request their own tour of the White House. Tours must be requested through members of Congress. Learn what member of Congress represents your community, and search their websites for more information on tour requests.