

The original documents are located in Box 47, folder “White House Historical Association” of the Betty Ford White House Papers, 1973-1977 at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.

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THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

preliminary film proposal

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How and when did this symbol's force begin to be felt?

What influences made the White House transcend the material reality of its brick, stone and wood and attain the abstract dimension?

What historical forces in our own time have heightened the symbol's authority?

Under the working title, "The White House: Anatomy of a Symbol," The White House Historical Association proposes to explore these questions in a 90-minute film production for national television. Funding for the project is requested from the National Endowment for



the Humanities.

For two-thirds of the film the White House will be viewed in terms of the rich fabric of history and legend that brought it into the symbolic realm. Then the film will concentrate on the last quarter-century and through on-the-screen documentation will view the established symbol in our own time. Character and scene impersonation with costumes and authentic settings will be used at particularly crucial points in the first two-thirds; but the main treatment in all three parts will be narrative, using special effects with historical objects, and extensive photographic treatment of all parts of the White House as it stands today. Beginning about half-way in the production we will begin to make use of existing documentary film footage. Likewise, as it becomes possible, the narrator will begin conducting brief interviews with actual personalities involved in the White House story.

The visual common denominator of the entire program is the White House as a symbol. Symbols are physical, and symbols developed in democracies are often quite unlike the symbols developed in other societies. Democratic symbols are seldom the products of single expressions of authority; instead they grow with time and are built by the acts and beliefs of many. This is especially true of the White House symbol. The story of this symbol's gradual birth and flowering is fascinating and is yet untold. It is an intricate story requiring a juxtaposition of architecture and human lives. We plan to tell the architectural story in backgrounds against which the more dominant human themes are presented. The physical symbol will be seen in three



ways: through the existing house, simulation of vanished rooms and gardens, and through the use of top quality documentary materials of every kind -- and the possibilities are myriad.

Prepared for a general audience, the film will provide a unique and colorful exploration of the special character of the symbol of the American presidency. This will be the first time the White House -- or any American building -- has been approached from the symbolic point of view. The material lends itself to a varied film treatment. We propose a single television program, and since the White House is a familiar and irresistible topic to the American public, we believe that we have a kind of freedom one might not normally have in preparing a T.V. "special" for a popular audience. The analysis of symbolism and an inquiry into the nature of facts are themselves heavy subjects, but we believe they can be handled in an entertaining and highly appealing way. We do not intend to produce a White House tour; rather, this will be a unique exercise in the study of history, using the White House, its various occupants and the events that have taken place there as our subject matter. In the course of analyzing the symbol, we will be able to accomplish a second purpose in commenting on American history in more general terms through the 175-year testimony of a single place.

Our proposed 90-minute format offers three natural half-hour divisions. The film could easily be made a full two-hours long by the extension of Part III; as the production takes shape, this extension may seem desirable. From beginning to end, the film follows for



clarity a more or less chronological order. What changes noticeably in each part is the viewpoint, as expressed visually, and of course, verbally by the narrator. The White House symbol is viewed in the first part largely in terms of personalities. Part II focuses on events. Central to these two somewhat different approaches in this question: have momentous events or great and memorable characters molded the symbol? More generally, is history the story of individuals or that of the combined acts of multitudes? In Part III these two perspectives are both employed in dealing with recent history. The viewer, with the narrator's help, applies general historical questions himself to relatively familiar material which reflects his own experience over the last 25 years.

The viewpoints and questions are made perfectly clear. They are not buried in subtleties, but are carefully articulated by the narrator. He is an actual character, appearing on-the-scene sometimes but speaking from behind-the-scenes most of the time. On the occasions when actors are on-screen, he never appears with them; yet when they vacate a "set" he nearly always walks immediately onto it, and before carrying us farther, calls attention very briefly to certain furniture, plate, personal objects, vases, etc., which were actually used there in that historical moment and which are still to be found today in the White House. He will from time to time speak in passing about history in general and the different kinds of fragments -- documents, myths, recollections, objects -- passing time leaves behind it. Historians, he notes, make history from such fragments; and symbols epitomize history that is too vast for man to comprehend. The



narrator is envisioned as being an actual historian, but not necessarily a famous one. He should be an attractive, slightly post-middle age man with a warm and conversational voice. He is very much a part of the film, although less so than the stage manager in Thornton Wilder's Our Town.

The three parts of Anatomy of a Symbol are conceptualized in more detail as follows:

Part I: the perspective of personalities (1790 - 1876)

The symbol is defined by the narrator who walks in the public rooms and on the porticos of the White House and speaks to us about history generally and the White House specifically. Visually we get an understanding of the physical layout of the important interior spaces -- the columned hall, its row of rooms, and its flanking East Room and State Dining Room. The brief opening sequence gives a clear introduction, simply explaining what is to come. An almost ethereal mood is set and the narrator is established as the man-at-the-wheel, making it quite clear how the production to follow will be organized. The house, used as a backdrop, speaks architecturally for itself. It is never off-camera. This is accomplished, showing the changes in the building and its surroundings, through the use of locations throughout the country, set and scene recreations, special film effects and varied use of the actual building.

Moving quickly into the context of past history, the balance of Part I explores the years 1790 - 1876. The emphasis here is the legendary personalities who are directly related to the White House and are a part of its present day historical mystique. This part pivots somewhat on the fact that the White House until the late 1870s was merely the house in which the



president lived. Only in that decade, when the White House was physically threatened first with total demolition, and later by the proposed re-establishment of the seat of government in St. Louis, was its symbolic value first asserted.

In the instances of the presidents themselves, not everyone is a character actually portrayed by an actor. However, since part of the authority of the White House symbol lies in the fact that all presidents except George Washington have lived there, all presidents are included in the film, if only through object associations. The personalities featured will be not only the presidents but the first ladies and their families and other figures who played parts in developing the symbol by drawing national interest and historical attention to the White House. This might include, for example, the explorer Meriwether Lewis, and the adventuress Peggy O'Neil, both peripheral characters in a sense, yet weavers of the fabric of the symbol. Personalities will be represented in many different ways, some through carefully planned scene recreation with characters, dialogue and costumes, and others through the inclusion of symbolic personal belongings that survive -- as for example, Andrew Jackson's coach, which has been recently restored by the Ladies' Hermitage Association of Tennessee. The search for these objects will be nationwide.

Part II: the perspective of events (1876 - 1948)

Historical events and events in the private lives of first families have always kindled public interest in the White House, thus contributing heavily to the symbol's emotional force. The house is a stage for history.



In this part we will approach the White House from that point of view. Individual personalities will become less the issue than the roles of groups -- as families, political parties, groups of guests for special occasions, etc. We seek here to demonstrate also how in one's own time it is often impossible to know which events will ultimately assume the most importance in history. Sometimes small matters have proved more potent in enhancing the White House symbol than great ones. In this case we might contrast the familiar events of Theodore Roosevelt's family life to the lavish public events put on during his administration and now largely forgotten.

Part II will give the viewer a sampling of the kinds of public and ceremonial events in the White House: formal presentations of ambassadors, famous visitors from abroad, levees and drawing rooms, military occasions, balls, state dinners, weddings, state funerals and historical political decisions. An example of this would be Franklin D. Roosevelt's "fireside chats." On another level, the feminist picketing and demonstrating during the administration of Woodrow Wilson called international attention to the White House.

Private events which have become part of the White House mystique will include births and deaths, private trials over public issues, children's lives, first ladies' interests and family events. An example, of course, would be the death watch of the Garfield family; but also there is Grover Cleveland's marriage, and the birth of the second Cleveland daughter.



Part III: the symbol we know (1952 -)

Here we are dealing with "modern" history rather than distant reflection and theatrical recreation. Everyman himself now becomes the historian. The viewer is here brought in intimately on the historical process. He is exposed to the sources of historical fact and he mixes these with the chronicles of his own memory about the Trumans, the Eisenhowers, the Kennedys, the Nixons and the Fords. As his memory is refreshed, he wonders if he thought at the time that certain events would be remembered in history.

Part III begins with actual films of President and Mrs. Truman's return to the White House in 1952 after the reconstruction of the building. This is followed by carefully organized series of film-clips and modern-day interviews with former occupants of the White House and some peripheral characters who are not necessarily familiar to the public. Some still photographs are introduced. The narrator continues his dealing with objects, only now treating the everyday and familiar with the reverence he has previously shown for very old things. Thus history "in the flesh" in Part III will form a parallel to what has been recreated in the other two parts.

The White House symbol remains the central focus. There will be fewer actual efforts to answer abstract questions in this part than there will be in the first two, although the questions are not discarded. It is necessary here for the audience to "join" the narrator in being the historian. Both personalities and events are dealt with. The symbol's history and growth since the reconstruction of the White House are traced,



using the raw materials of history. Recreation and impersonation now enter the realm of the viewer's imagination. He is given "documents" and with the assistance of the narrator, creates history.

The program ends with the narrator again walking in the White House. A whole photo essay is involved in the movement of the narrator through the rooms. The balance between his voice and the visual pace must be very sensitive; one supports the other. Here the narrator speaks about the tremendous continuity of White House history. He relates the force of the White House symbol to the power of historical symbols in general. He speaks of the illusions history can create in men's minds. The White House is a symbol because of its past; that past constantly grows and the story ever lengthens, yet the visual White House is timeless. Americans refuse to allow it to be changed.

Are they deceived? Has the house really remained the same -- or does that matter? Are such symbols really untouchable?

The narrator meanwhile moves along into "foreign parts" of the White House -- offices, kitchens, etc., and points out that it is somewhat more like a small hotel than a house -- at least compared to a house of today -- and that in some respects it is as extensive as a palace, if a small palace. But he is quick to note, in obvious agreement with the audience, that Americans will never accept the White House as a hotel, public building or a palace. No matter its functions, it is envisioned as a dwelling; it is symbolically a private house. The narrator observes that for all its history, the White House is no ordinary historical house -- no Mount Vernon nor a Monticello. Its meaning is far broader



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file "film" Sept. 4, 1974

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