

MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

March 12, 1976

MEMORANDUM FOR SHEILA WEIDENFELD
FROM CLEM CONGER *Clem*

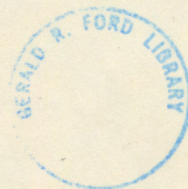
As I mentioned to you two or three months ago, Connoisseur magazine is devoting the May issue to the American Bicentennial with a series of articles on the White House and the Diplomatic Reception Rooms in the State Department collections of furniture and paintings by experts in the field. I have written the lead article on each collection. The lead article on the White House is attached for your comment if any.



THE WHITE HOUSE
By
Clement E. Conger, Curator

The White House, the home and office of the President of the United States, stands today as a symbol of the government of the United States. Situated on 18 acres of land in the midst of the city of Washington, it reflects the history of this country. In times of crisis and celebration, the citizens of America and the world have increasingly turned toward the White House.

George Washington, the only President never to have lived in the White House, and Major Charles Pierre L'Enfant, the French engineer-surveyor who planned the City of Washington, selected the site for the President's House in the newly created city on the banks of the Potomac. In 1792, at the suggestion of Thomas Jefferson, then Secretary of State, the commissioners of the federal city drew up a competition for the design of a house for the President giving as prize the "munificent" sum of \$500. James Hoban, an Irish-born architect then living in



South Carolina, won the competition. The cornerstone was laid October 13, 1792. Another drawing entered into the competition by an anonymous architect was later revealed to be a grandiose plan of Thomas Jefferson, the only competitor to live in the White House. The Georgian design of Hoban was modeled after English designs of the mid-18th century. The greatest similarity is to the Duke of Leinster's residence (now the National Parliament) in Dublin, Ireland.

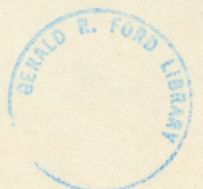
It was not until November, 1800, that the first occupants of the President's ^{and} House, the second President, John Adams and his wife Abigail, took up residence in the still unfinished house. The building was uncomfortable and the main stairs were not yet installed.

When Thomas Jefferson became President in 1801, he took an active interest in the building and added terrace-pavilions to the east and west sides of the house. Then on August 23, 1814, the house was destroyed by fire set by British troops in the "War of 1812" leaving only portions of the exterior walls standing. Between 1814 and 1817, the building was reconstructed by its original architect James Hoban. The south portico was completed in 1824 and the north portico finished by 1829. They encompassed designs of Hoban and Benjamin Latrobe.



In 1902, a much needed West Wing was built to house the offices of the President and his staff. (Prior to 1902, the offices were located in the over-crowded family quarters in the second floor of the residence.) The last major addition to the White House, the East Wing, was constructed in 1942, during World War II. Both the East and West Wings were built at much lower elevations than the residence.

At numerous times in the 19th century there were interior changes in the Mansion. In 1902, a major refurbishing effort occurred under the direction of President Theodore Roosevelt. The Victorian decor of the late 19th century was stripped away and the new interior reflected the interest in the colonial revival popular in America. Between 1948 and 1952 the last major interior renovation of the White House was conducted. Due to the faulty condition of the old timbers of the building, the entire interior was removed and the house made structurally sound. Every effort was made to provide a fire-proof and air-conditioned interior. Most of the present interior architectural details, with the exception of the East Room and the State Dining Room, date from 1952. The old woodwork and plaster ornaments were cut in pieces and sold or given away as souvenirs. The size,



shape and uses of the rooms on the state floor, the area where the official functions are held, have remained fairly consistent since 1800.

Today, the White House is not only the home of the President but a living museum of the decorative arts, reflecting museum-quality works by American artists and craftsmen of the late 18th century, the 19th and early 20th centuries. It also includes selections of historic items purchased in Europe for the White House.

American citizens and people from throughout the world are able to visit the White House five days a week to view the rooms in which so many historic events have occurred. It is the most visited house in the world with 1,500,000 visitors annually. Approximately 50,000 persons are invited to social and official functions each year.

The two largest rooms in the White House, the East Room and the State Dining Room, continue to have the colonial revival interiors installed by the architectural firm of McKim, Meade and White in 1902. The East Room, a sparsely furnished room, is used for ceremonies, concerts, dances, weddings, funerals, press conferences and a variety of other activities. However, no one enjoyed the East Room more than the Theodore Roosevelt children who used the room as a roller-skating rink.



The State Dining Room, with paneled walls of painted oak and an ornamental plaster ceiling, was increased in size in 1902. It retains the 1902 furnishings and details installed by Theodore Roosevelt, but not the moose heads, deer heads, antlers and other trophies mounted on the walls by the great hunter.

The three formal drawing rooms or parlors on the state floor - the Green Room, the Blue Room and the Red Room - were refurbished often ^{during} the 19th and the 20th centuries. All three were completely refurbished under the direction of the Committee for the Preservation of the White House and Mrs. Richard Nixon in 1971, 1972 and 1974 respectively. Every effort was made to restore the rooms to what they might have been in the first quarter of the 19th century - the golden era of the White House. No expense was spared to make them as authentic and elegant as possible in the manner of the time of the Adamses, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe, early Presidents of culture and considerable affluence. Unfortunately, most early Presidents spent most of their personal fortunes on appointments and entertainments.

The Green Room has served as a parlor for teas and receptions for most of its history. It was in this room, however,



that Thomas Jefferson and his small dining room and it was used as a card room while James Monroe was President. By the 1820's, the room had acquired the name "Green Drawing Room" with green used for the upholstery fabrics and window curtains by Mrs. James Monroe. At other times in the 19th century, green paper hung on its walls and there was often a green carpet on the floor. By the end of the 19th century, the walls were being covered with green fabric, a tradition which has continued to the present day. With the formation of the first White House Furnishings Committee in 1925, a proposal was made to furnish the Green Room with furniture of the American Federal period (1790-1825). Reproduction furniture of this period was installed in the room, but in 1961, When Mrs. John F. Kennedy created a Fine Arts Committee for the white House, original early 19th century pieces of furniture in the American Federal style were secured for the room. This philosophy of furnishing the room in the Federal or classical style was greatly expanded in 1972 when the Green Room was again beautifully refurbished with high style museum quality American Federal furniture (1800-1815) principally by Duncan Phyfe, a New York cabinetmaker. New cornices and draperies were made for the windows designed from a document of about 1815.



The Red Room, in its earliest days was used as a reception room for those having appointments with the President. It was called the "President's Ante-Chamber." Later it became a favorite parlor for First Ladies to receive their guests. While Dolley Madison, wife of James Madison was President, it was referred to as "Mrs. Madison's Sitting Room" and furnished with American Sheraton furniture and yellow upholsteries. Also in the 19th century, the room saw frequent use as a music room with a piano, harp, etc. often located there.

The use of the color red in the room dates from the 1840's (Administration of President James Polk) where the room was described as furnished with a variety of new "red plush" pieces. Red has been the predominant color in the room since then and the furnishings in the room have reflected the changing tastes of the families who have lived in the White House. One of the major refurbishings of the room was in the early 1880's when President Chester Arthur commissioned Louis Comfort Tiffany to decorate the parlor.

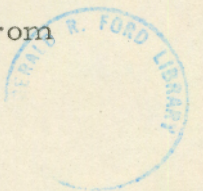
In 1961, the room's decor was changed to the style of the American Empire period (1810-1830) and examples of American and French cabinetmakers were acquired for the room. In 1972 another refurbishing occurred which retained several of the



Empire objects previously in the room but added significantly to the collection of American Empire furnishings, principally by the New York cabinetmaker Charles Honoré Lannuier. The new red silk on the walls is called "Dolley Madison Red" after the red in the back of the chair in Dolley Madison's portrait by Gilbert Stuart which is believed to have hung in this room in 1813, the year before the fire. The portrait is now hanging again in the Red Room having been secured on loan from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

The Blue Room, the oval room designed by Hoban to be the most elegant of the formal state rooms, was originally a vestibule or entrance. Early in the 19th century, however, it became the formal drawing room of the White House. It is here that the President receives the credentials of foreign ambassadors assigned to the United States and receives other guests at receptions.

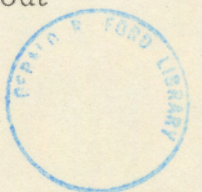
The room remained unfinished until 1809-1810 when Dolley Madison engaged the noted English born architect Benjamin Latrobe to furnish the room in the Greek Revival manner. Unfortunately, his creations went up in smoke in 1814. It fell to the newly elected President, James Monroe to again furnish the room. He ordered a suite of furniture from



France for the room, many pieces which have been recovered and are now in the room. (They had been sold at auction in 1860). A report of the Monroe administration described the crimson 'flock' paper on the walls and the furniture upholstered in crimson silk. Often referred to in the 19th century as the "Elliptical Drawing Room," the "Oval Reception Room," and the "Circular Room," the room did not assume its present name until the upholsteries in the room were changed to blue in 1837. Blue has remained the focal color in the oval room.

The Blue Room was completely refurbished in 1972 under the direction of the Committee for the Preservation of the White House and its architectural consultant, Mr. Edward V. Jones.

Many details in the room were changed to reflect the decor of the room as it might have appeared in the Administration of James Monroe (1817-1825) when the room was furnished in the French Empire style. Several new architectural features were incorporated into this restoration. A new cornice was installed, based on precedents of plaster work of the first quarter of the 19th century found in residences of the District of Columbia and nearby Virginia and Maryland. In the center of the ceiling an oval design of ornamental plaster copied from ornamental plaster work in a Washington, D. C. house of about



1815 was installed. This replaced the circular centerpiece of 1952. The new design combines an oval fluted fan within an oval moulded acanthus leaf motif which is repeated in the frieze of the wallpaper in the room and in the early 19th century French carved gilt wood chandelier.

The walls of the room were hung with wallpaper copied from an antique French Directoire wallpaper of 1800 made under the supervision of Jacquemart and Benard. The paper was reproduced precisely from the period document. The background of the paper is beige and has a frieze containing a classical design of acanthus leaves. The lower border of the paper complements the frieze with its classical motifs in shades of blue, green, pink and gold.

Wallpaper was installed in this room for the first time since the late 19th century because it was felt that one of the major rooms on the state floor of the White House should reflect the use of wallpapers in the White House in the early 19th century rather than the fabric hangings which had continued in use since the 1890's. During the Monroe administration there was wallpaper in this room but of a crimson color. There is evidence of other wallpapers used on the walls of the President's House in the 19th century as well as the existence of painted walls.

The design of the blue silk draperies with gold satin valances was taken from a French period document of the early 19th century. The furnishings in the room consist of several French Empire chairs purchased by James Monroe in 1817 and other examples of the decorative arts of the French Empire.

Other rooms in the White House have been refurbished since 1970 to reflect the styles of the early decades of the 19th century. The greatest efforts, other than on the State Floor, have been expended on the East and West Garden Rooms, the Vermeil Room, the China Room, the Diplomatic Reception Room and the Map Room on the Ground Floor and the Yellow Oval Room, the Queen's Bedroom and the East and West Sitting Halls on the Second Floor.

Particularly noteworthy was the restoration of the Vermeil (Gold) Room. This room serves as a display room for one of the largest collections of vermeil (silver-gilt) items in the world given to the White House in 1956 by Mrs. Margaret Thompson Biddle of Philadelphia and Paris. In 1971 the room was furnished for the first time with American classical furniture.

A major refurbishing project was also conducted in the Yellow Oval Room. This room is used by the President and First Lady to receive Kings, Queens, Presidents, Prime Ministers



and other world notables before state luncheons and dinners. Previously used by presidential families as a library and sitting room, the room was changed in the Kennedy administration to a Louis XVI drawing room. Additional pieces of fine French and American furniture were acquired for the room in 1974 along with important paintings by American artists. A beautiful gold Heriz rug has added special interest to the room. Among the notable pieces of furniture acquired for the room were a settee and two matching arm chairs made in Philadelphia and used by James Monroe. They reflect the French influence on American cabinetmakers at that time.


The last major room to be refurbished was the Queen's Room on the Second Floor. Often called the Rose Room, this bedroom has served as a guest room for distinguished lady visitors to the White House which have included Queen Elizabeth (the Queen Mother), Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain, Queen Wilhelmina and Queen Juliana of the Netherlands, Queen Frederika of Greece and most recently Princess Anne of Great Britain. In recent years, however, all state guests have been housed in the President's Guest House, The Blair House, one block away on Pennsylvania Avenue.



The appearance of the Federal period has been retained in the furnishings of the Queen's Room but the collection has been altered by the addition of a fine collection of early American Federal furniture made by John and Thomas Seymour prominent cabinetmakers of Boston in the years 1794 to 1816.

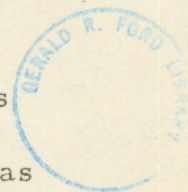
Architectural changes in the room were made to complement the 19th century appointments. The chair rail of 1952 was replaced by a simple chair rail characteristic of the early 19th century and a beautifully carved wooden mantel from a Philadelphia home of the early 19th century was installed in place of a simple mantel made for the room in the 1940's. The walls were painted a soft rose color and the new draperies in shades of pink and green replaced the previous ones which had become worn.

The work of refurbishing the White House will never cease because of the constant wear to the house due to its constant visitation by official guests and the general public. Draperies and upholsteries must be replaced every few years and rugs need replacement every fifteen to twenty years. Through the efforts of the Committee for the Preservation of the White House and the Curator many important items have



been added to the collection. Since 1970, 251 fine examples of furniture (including 156 American pieces) have been added to the permanent collection as well as 60 American paintings and pieces of sculpture, 19 period chandeliers and 27 antique and semi-antique rugs. Hopefully, future First Ladies, White House committees and Curators will never again have to mount extensive acquisition and restoration programs.

The White House collection of American paintings is admirable in quality but is not large in quantity and therefore, seventeen American museums and art galleries have generously lent works from their collections to the President's House. The White House has a continuing program to acquire fine American paintings for its permanent collections, primarily 18th and 19th century landscape scenes depicting all geographical areas of the United States, city scenes, genre paintings and portraits of Presidents, First Ladies and other national notables. An accelerated program has taken place to secure portraits of First Ladies which were missing from the collection. In the past presidential portraits were acquired for the White House but the acquisition of portraits of their wives and hostesses was frequently neglected. In the past few years, the White House has been fortunate to add portraits of Mrs. John Quincy Adams

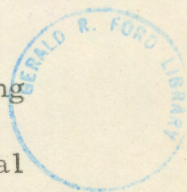


(the only first lady to be born in a foreign country - England), Mrs. John F. Kennedy, Mrs. Warren G. Harding, Mrs. James Garfield and Mrs. Grover Cleveland and has received loans of portraits of Mrs. James Madison and Mrs. James Monroe.

The White House continues to search for life portraits of other First Ladies such as Mrs. William H. Harrison, Mrs. John Tyler, Mrs. Zachary Taylor, Mrs. Franklin Pierce, Mrs. Andrew Johnson, Mrs. Ulysses Grant, Mrs. William McKinley and Mrs. Woodrow Wilson. Life portraits of Presidents John Adams, William Henry Harrison, James Buchanan and Andrew Johnson are also desired for the permanent collection.

The work of the Curator and the Committee for the Preservation of the White House continues regardless of changes in administrations. During the Nixon administration there was a tremendous program to refurbish nearly all of the Ground and State Floor rooms, unparalleled in White House history except the Kennedy Administration. Work had also begun on the rooms of the second floor.

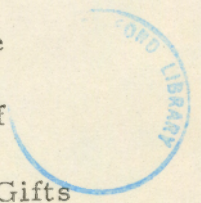
With the change in administrations, the work has continued to synchronize with the interests and efforts of the President and Mrs. Ford. They greatly appreciated the past efforts in refurbishing the White House and were interested only in making changes in their personal quarters and in the President's Oval



Office. A "new look" was desired in the President's Office where new draperies were installed, some changes made in the furniture as well as different American paintings for the walls. President and Mrs. Ford both like American antique furniture and American paintings and ^{decorative} objects. These are used in their private quarters along with more contemporary comfortable furnishings.

Contrary to most government houses throughout the world, there are no official government funds available for the purchase of historic acquisitions for the White House. Congress provides appropriations for the cleaning, painting and other maintenance needs for this great national monument on which the eyes of the world are constantly turned. Over the past several years the generosity of American citizens has made it possible to continue to acquire and preserve historic furnishings of the home of the President. It is the aim of the Committee for the Preservation of the White House to make the White House the most beautiful home in the United States and maintain it in as near a state of perfection as possible at all times.

Gifts to the White House by United States citizens are tax-deductible. Checks made payable to the "Treasurer of the United States" and securities are equally acceptable. Gifts



of objects are tax-deductible in the amount of their appraised value in the year in which they are given or over a period of years.



* A COLLECTION OF WHITE HOUSE BOOKS (4 Books)

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