

# A PUBLIC HOUSE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE KENNEDY WHITE HOUSE RESTORATION

by

LAURA SMITH

(Under the Direction of John C. Waters)

## ABSTRACT

The Kennedy White House restoration is quite possibly one of the most recognizable projects undertaken by a first family while in office. More than any other public building in the United States, the White House stands at the center of the nation's public life and even the slightest changes are immediately recorded. This work is intended to make a case for the validity of the Kennedy White House restoration, while recognizing the forces that worked against the integrity of the project. While some elements of the final product certainly can be described as a redecoration, the overall goals of Mrs. Kennedy's project were achieved—to restore the historic integrity of the White House as a living museum and to provide protection henceforth. Mrs. Kennedy's work also contributed to the restoration of interiors at other historic sites across the nation and to the national historic preservation movement, which was just beginning to take shape in the United States.

INDEX WORDS: Historic Preservation, Jacqueline Kennedy, White House, Historic Preservation Movement, Historic Interiors.

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by

LAURA M. SMITH

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by

LAURA M. SMITH

Major Professor: John C. Waters

Committee: Wayde Brown  
Andrew Carswell  
Jeanne Strong

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
December 2008

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"... The glory of a next Augustan age  
Of a power leading from its strength and pride,  
Of young ambition eager to be tried,  
Firm in our free beliefs without dismay,  
In any game the nations want to play.  
A golden age of poetry and power  
Of which this noonday's the beginning hour."

-Robert Frost

(written for and read at the Kennedy inauguration)

## CHAPTER 1

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### Introduction and Organization

In the winter of 1961, a young couple moved into the most well-known house in the United States, the White House. The Kennedys brought with them a sense of style that suggested an embodiment of the nation's future with a deep appreciation of its past. With this vision in mind, Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy set out to undertake one of the largest projects ever completed by a First Lady while in residence, a complete restoration of the White House. The announcement of her intentions was met with skepticism and even anger that she would attempt such a project in one of the nation's most valuable historic resources. Mrs. Kennedy was undaunted, however, and was committed to the idea of restoring a sense of history to the White House and creating a framework for its protection in the future.

This work aims to address whether Mrs. Kennedy's project was an academic endeavor, striving to enhance the historic fabric of the White House and create a framework for protection; or a mere redecoration that sought to portray an idealistic American lifestyle. Research into the details of the project sought to determine whether Mrs. Kennedy made decisions that ultimately resulted in an academically-grounded project and if the involvement of certain individuals in the project and the decisions of some (including Mrs. Kennedy herself) ultimately worked against the goals of the restoration. This work also addresses the influence that Mrs. Kennedy had on the preservation movement in the United States through the White House restoration as well as other projects undertaken during her lifetime.

This work is intended to make a case for the validity of the Kennedy White House restoration, while recognizing the forces that worked against the integrity of the project. While some elements of the final product certainly can be described as a redecoration, the question remains whether the goals of Mrs. Kennedy's project were achieved—to restore the historic integrity of the White House as a living museum and to provide protection henceforth. The terms “restoration” and “refurbishment” are used interchangeably throughout this work and are meant to focus on the attention paid to the interiors of the White House by use of elements such as, but not limited to, period furnishings, textiles, woodwork. This thesis is organized in a manner to outline the previous refurbishments that occurred in the White House before the Kennedy project. Each individual floor and room is then described and examined in an effort to outline the work that was done and decisions that were made. The rooms are described in the order in which Mrs. Kennedy revealed them to the nation in her 1961 televised tour of the White House. Rooms that were omitted from the tour have been added where appropriate. The work does not intend to be a definitive record of the house and its contents, but an analysis of the Kennedy project from the lens of historic preservation.

## CHAPTER 2

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### The History of Previous White House Renovations

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As the most important family home in the United States, the White House has been a symbol of the nation since 1800. Built to be the residence of America's presidents and their families, this iconic structure has been host to our nation's leaders' private and public lives. In addition to serving as the presidential home, the White House has functioned as the presidential office as well, and this dual function has increased the impact of stress and strain by numerous visitors. While it has come to represent both continuity and stability to the American people, the actual residence has been in a state of constant change over the past two centuries. Since the time that John Adams and his family moved into the home, first families have changed and redecorated the interior according to their tastes and prevailing styles of the time. While some made changes that were much more drastic than others, the nature of its revolving residents has created a unique and ever-changing history for the White House.

As first families moved in and out of the home, they also often saw fit to discard unwanted items, a practice that horrified Mrs. Kennedy. From 1797 until 1903, Congress periodically authorized the sale of unused presidential furnishings through local auctions, which led to an almost complete dispersal of most of what remained of the nineteenth-century furnishings. The sales were intended to garner extra funds for governmental operations and numerous presidents often sold White House furnishings that were no longer in style or were damaged.<sup>1</sup> As residents moved in and out of the mansion every four or eight years, the

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<sup>1</sup> Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historical Furnishings and First Families* (Washington D.C.: White House Historical Association, 2000), 14, 26.

furnishings and decorations were in constant flux and state rooms faced continuous refurbishing. White House historian William Seale observed that, “improvements [to the White House] have entered a constant flow. In this way the place is a sort of Everyhouse...a cultural artifact. Some presidential couples have focused on remaking the family living quarters, others on remodeling the public state rooms, and some on both.”<sup>2</sup>

### **James Monroe: 1817 - 1825**

In 1814, British invaders set “The President’s House” ablaze and reduced it to a burned-out shell. This led to the first complete refurbishing and redecorating project of the Executive Mansion, which was led by James Monroe. Monroe had spent a considerable amount of time in Europe while he served as the American minister to France, England, and Spain and had a distinct French taste in decorative arts. He offered to sell the government his personal furnishings for use in the White House and, as a result, the house took on a “dignity and grandeur” that Mrs. Kennedy would attempt to replicate in her restoration.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> William Seale, *The White House: The History of an American Idea* (Washington, D.C: The White House Historical Association, 2001), x.

<sup>3</sup> Monkman, 54 and Barbary A. Perry, *Jacqueline Kennedy: First Lady of the New Frontier* (Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 2004), 98.



Figure 1: Bellange armchairs made for the White House during the Monroe administration (White House Historical Association)

### **Abraham Lincoln: 1861 – 1865**

The next major refurbishing of the White House took place during the Lincoln administration under the direction of Mary Todd Lincoln. Not unlike Jacqueline Kennedy, Mrs. Lincoln was well-known for her sophisticated and expensive taste in clothing and furnishings. Congress had appropriated \$20,000 for improvements to the White House that was intended to last four years. Mrs. Lincoln spent these funds within six months and required two more congressional allocations to cover the cost of her purchases.<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Lincoln's interests did not lie with historical accuracy. Her intentions were to provide a comfortable home for her family, to make the White House a showcase for entertaining, and to reflect the high status of the

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<sup>4</sup> Perry, 98.

presidency.<sup>5</sup> Unlike other renovations in which a commissioner was delegated the task of ordering furnishings and overseeing interior decorations, Mrs. Lincoln took these responsibilities entirely upon herself and made decisions without the consultation of any member of the administration. After the assassination of President Lincoln in 1865, Mrs. Lincoln secluded herself in the private quarters for over a month while the public roamed through the unrestricted areas and made off with souvenir china, silver, and fabric from draperies and furniture. When Mrs. Lincoln finally departed, it was widely rumored that her crates contained furnishings that belonged to the White House although she vehemently denied this. These fears were confirmed when an inventory of the house was completed four days after her departure and found that a great deal of furnishings were missing and those that remained were in very poor condition.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Monkman, 124.

<sup>6</sup> Monkman, 133.



Figure 2: Lincoln bed purchased for the White House by Mrs. Lincoln, 1886 (New York Public Library)

### **Rutherford Hayes: 1877 – 1881**

President Rutherford Hayes and his wife, Lucy, were extremely interested in art and antiques, and were the first family to consider the historic nature of the White House. They desired to preserve a sense of presidential history in their decorations and painstakingly assembled a collection of presidential portraits for the house. President Hayes did not have a good relationship with Congress and this resulted in very limited funds for improvements to the interior of the White House during his administration. As a result, Lucy scoured the attic and

basement for old furniture that could be restored, and it was observed that “many really good things owed their preservation to this energetic lady.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Chester Arthur: 1881 – 1885**

President Chester Arthur, however, had little interest in the historical associations of the house and focused his redecoration around aesthetics. He ordered the house to be cleared of furnishings that were in disrepair or were no longer fashionable. In April of 1882, twenty-four wagonloads of furnishings were sold at auction for a final sum of \$3,000. This was the largest sale of White House goods since 1860 and historians have been unable to obtain an accurate listing of the items that were auctioned.<sup>8</sup> Arthur used his Congressional appropriations to renovate the interior in the style of Louis Tiffany. This work became one of the most drastic changes to take place in the White House during the nineteenth-century, although subsequent changes led to the complete disappearance of Arthur’s interiors by 1902.

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<sup>7</sup> H. Crook, *Through Five Administrations*, ed. Margarita S. Gerry, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907), 226-227.

<sup>8</sup> Monkman 162.

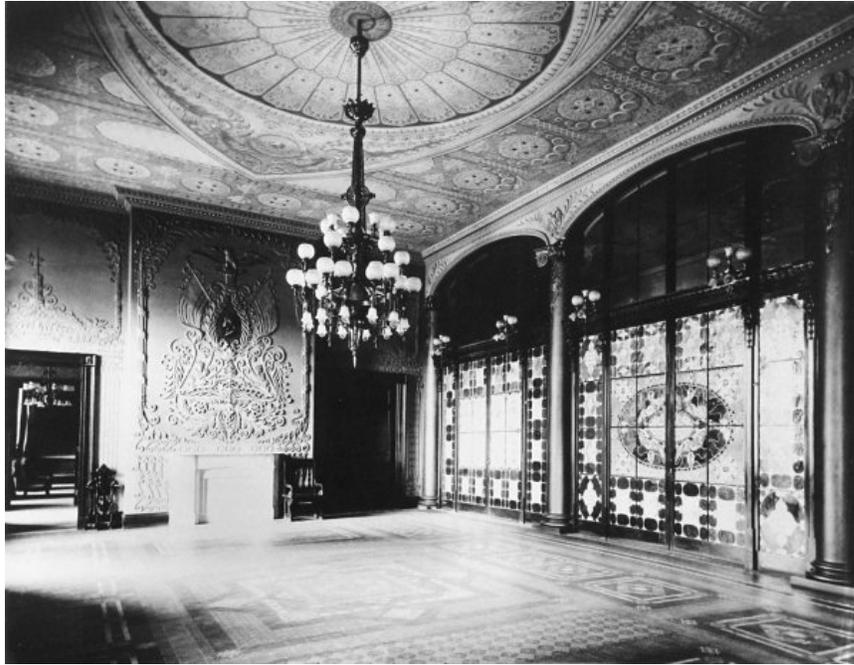


Figure 3: Entrance Hall with Tiffany glass screens, 1894 (Library of Congress)

### **Theodore Roosevelt: 1901 - 1909**

The presidency of Theodore Roosevelt brought dramatic change to the White House. Existing office space was to be reallocated into living space in order to accommodate the president's large family and this required the construction of additions. The firm of McKim, Mead, and White was hired to undertake the extensive project, and the goal was set out to make changes so that the house would not have to be altered again. While the interior of the White House continued to evolve after this administration, the architectural spaces have remained the same as those created in 1902 under this project. The interiors that were created by McKim, Mead, and White were intended to reflect the creation of a national identity that had been developing since the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. This philosophy of redecoration intended to furnish the interior of the building in harmony with its exterior architecture.



Figure 4: The East Room after the Roosevelt renovation (hand tinted), 1904 (Library of Congress)

### **Calvin Coolidge: 1923 - 1929**

The Coolidge administration set a precedent for the reacquisition of lost White House furniture, a process that Mrs. Kennedy would later formalize and streamline. Grace Coolidge was very interested in the history of the White House and studied its past through photographs and historic documents. She attempted to search for stored original pieces to restore but was disappointed to find a very limited supply. As a result, she convinced President Coolidge to request that Congress authorize the acceptance of gifts for the White House. The intention was to restore original furnishings to the White House by the process of donation, a strategy that was commonly used by museums across the world. In 1925, an advisory committee was created to evaluate and review offers of gifts and to make scholarly recommendations on the décor of the

state rooms. This committee was the first of its kind to advise presidents and their wives on the interior of the White House. While the establishment of an advisory committee was monumental in terms of precedent, the committee itself did little to achieve the goals it had set forth. The members began to publicly express their ideas as to what should be done to the interior and this resulted in a very negative public opinion of the administration's changes. President Coolidge soon became frustrated and banned the advisory committee from the White House.<sup>9</sup>

### **Harry Truman: 1945 - 1953**

The Truman renovation was the last great change that occurred to the White House before Mrs. Kennedy's work began. Safety issues and structural problems led the Trumans to move out of the house in late 1948 as a massive reconstruction began. The Truman family moved back into a White House that was complete with new amenities such as central air conditioning, modern bathrooms, and built-in closet space. The White House furniture had been carefully removed and stored and was meticulously returned to previous locations once the renovation was complete. President Truman oversaw this process and wrote, "I am very much interested in the proper replacement of the furniture of the White House in the manner in which it should be placed, and since I am the only President in fifty years who has had any interest whatsoever in the rehabilitation of the White House, I am going to see that it is done properly and correctly."<sup>10</sup> While Truman's rehabilitation did see that furnishings were restored to their original locations, his administration saw very little acquisition of historic or original pieces. The renovation was very costly and left little for government antiques and very few donations were made during this period.

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<sup>9</sup> Seale, 212.

<sup>10</sup> David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), pg. 884.

While many presidential administrations have brought with them a renewed dedication to the historical integrity of the White House, this section is meant to demonstrate that not until Mrs. Kennedy's restoration in 1961, was a museum character of the public rooms established and permanent protection of its historic objects provided. White House curator Betty Monkman maintained that Mrs. Kennedy provided the first official protection for the interior of the structure by "selecting a curator, creating for the first time an office in the White House that would meet museum standards of documentation, care, and preservation for growing collections, and provide the research for room restoration projects."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Monkman, 15.

## CHAPTER 3

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### Mrs. Kennedy and the Organization of the Project

#### **Section 1: Mrs. Kennedy's Road to the White House**

Jacqueline Lee Bouvier was born in Long Island's Southampton Hospital on July 28, 1929 and quickly entered New York's high society along with her well-known parents, John Vernou Bouvier III and Janet Norton Lee. Her mother was a strict disciplinarian and pursued perfection for Jackie and her sister, Caroline Lee, while her own marriage to Jackie's father was quite tumultuous. The family regularly appeared in the New York society columns and Jacqueline was well-known as a sophisticated girl who loved art, literature, ballet, and antiques.



Figure 5: Jacqueline Bouvier, 1935 (Kennedy Library)

When Jacqueline was seven years old, her parents decided to separate amid her father's indiscretions and ultimately divorced. In 1942, her mother married a wealthy investment banker, Hugh D. Auchincloss Jr. and moved the family to Washington D.C. It was then that Jackie began to explore the capital's attractions and became fascinated by such sites as Mount Vernon, the FBI Headquarters, and the National Gallery of Art. Her visits to the White House, however, did very little to impress her, and she felt let down by the mansion that she anticipated to be so regal and striking. In an interview with *Life* magazine's Hugh Sidey in 1961, she recalled being impressed with the outside and feeling a sense of place. But the inside she recalled to be rather bleak. "All I remember is shuffling through. There was nothing in the way of a booklet you could take away, nothing to teach one more about the great house and the presidents who lived there."<sup>12</sup>

During college, Jackie took a short summer trip to Europe and became immediately enthralled with all things European. She made the decision to pursue studying there if possible and eventually convinced her mother and stepfather to allow her to study at the University of Grenoble in France during her junior year. She enrolled in an intensive course of French study and chose to live with a French family rather than staying in the American dormitory. On the weekends, she took side trips to the Riviera and to Italy but fell in love with Paris most of all. She wrote home that she was determined to learn French perfectly and that she loved the arts and culture that she discovered in Paris. She attended operas, theatres, and ballets and developed an appreciation for sophisticated French parties. These experiences no doubt had a profound impact on her refined style of entertaining during her time at the White House.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Hugh Sidey, "The First Lady Brings History and Beauty to the White House," *Life* (September 1, 1961), 62.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Van Rennselaer Thayer, *Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House Years*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 142 – 151.

On September 12, 1953, Jackie married a young U.S. Senator, John F. Kennedy, and settled into political life in the nation's capital. Jackie had once again emerged as a member of elite society and was well-known for her sophisticated style of dress and her dedication to art and culture. Reporters began documenting the Kennedy's "fairy tale" married life as they entertained friends, held formal dinner parties, strolled around Georgetown and the Capitol grounds, and spent intimate time with friends.<sup>14</sup> On November 8, 1960, John F. Kennedy was elected president in a close race against Richard Nixon, and the couple stepped onto center stage. Just two weeks after her husband's election, Jackie delivered a premature son, John F. Kennedy, Jr., who joined a sister, Caroline. The delivery was very traumatic for Jackie and she required a lengthy recovery, which she spent studying the history of the White House and the redecorations that had taken place under each president. Her Chief of Staff, Tish Baldrige, later wrote that Jackie spent this time designing her mission as First Lady along the following lines: "preservation of her family, entertaining with style and grace in the number one house in the world, the makeover of the White House itself as a focus of American history and accomplishment, and the raising of the cultural stature of this country."<sup>15</sup>

## **Section 2: The Road to Restoration: Organization of the Project**

When considering Mrs. Kennedy's project, it is important to understand the state of the preservation movement at that time in the United States. Before this time, historic preservation in our country followed two different paths—one focused on important historical figures and events and associated landmarks (private sector), while the other focused on preserving natural features

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<sup>14</sup> Perry, 42-43.

<sup>15</sup> Donald Spoto, *Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis: A Life* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 2000), 147-149; Baldrige, *A Lady, First* (quotation), 168.

and establishing national parks (public sector). These two paths merged with the establishment of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1949<sup>16</sup>. At its inception, the Trust gave great focus to the acquisition of historic properties, primarily for use as house museums. Not unlike Mrs. Kennedy's project, these properties were intended to provide a window into the nation's past by the preservation of their living characters. During the 1950s and early 1960s, popular public sentiment was "that little that was old was good."<sup>17</sup> Monumental development due to advances in transportation led to the deterioration of the historic environment. As a result, the public began to become increasingly concerned with the protection of the historic structures. The inception of Mrs. Kennedy's project occurred at a time when few were concerned with the protection of the nation's heritage and its completion coincided with a resurgence in national protection of historic landmarks.

While the idea for Mrs. Kennedy's project certainly coincided with the growing preservation movement in the United States, its attention to historic interiors was somewhat unprecedented at the time. Historic interiors were given little attention by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and this trend continued with the National Preservation Act of 1966, which also did little to address protection of historic interiors. Before this time, however, the world of art had begun to take notice with the opening of the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1924. This wing housed an unprecedented collection of historic American furnishings and textiles and created an avenue for public education that still continues today. Mrs. Kennedy's project continued this trend by detailed attention to appropriate use of period furnishings and textiles.

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<sup>16</sup> Norman Tyler, *Historic Preservation: An Introduction to Its History, Principles, and Practice* (W.W. Norton & Company: New York, 1994), 33.

<sup>17</sup> Tyler, 18.

The Kennedy's arrival to the White House in 1961 ushered in a completely new approach to enhancing the integrity of the White House and its holdings. Mrs. Kennedy surveyed the house and found it to only contain a limited representation of the rich history associated with it and resolved to embark on an extensive program of bringing America's history to life in the White House. White House curator Betty Monkman observed that "[Mrs. Kennedy's] interest in history, aesthetic sense, organizational ability, and attention to detail led to a new way of thinking about the historic character of the house and the institutionalization of its museum role."<sup>18</sup> Mrs. Kennedy certainly faced opposition: "I was warned and begged and practically threatened...not to dream of touching the White House. They said it was such a symbol of the American people that anyone who had the audacity to tamper with it could only bring down the wrath of a nation on their head, and it would hurt my husband politically. But I said...I would do it the right way – I couldn't believe if people saw you wanted to save something for them and their children that our country could be proud of – they would be irate." In the face of opposition and a long history of continual change, Jackie Kennedy set out to create a standard of protection for the White House that still exists today. Her project resonated so strongly with the American people that many are under the impression that the White House interiors have not changed since 1963.<sup>19</sup>

Jacqueline Kennedy's interest in the White House began long before she dreamed of living there. As a young girl, she remembered visiting various places in the nation's capital and being very surprised by the appearance of the White House in comparison with other sites of interest. She was shocked to find such a historic landmark to have so little representation of the past. When she learned that her husband planned to run for president, the idea to restore the

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<sup>18</sup> Monkman, 233.

<sup>19</sup> Monkman, 249.

White House began to take shape in her mind. Of course, she was not the first presidential spouse to show interest in the appearance of the White House, but her plans far surpassed a redecoration with fresh paint and new draperies.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects surrounding the changes that were made to the White House was the atmosphere that the Kennedys created while they lived there. The Kennedys strived to create an impression of excellence—excellence that extended to dining and entertainment as well as decoration and diplomacy. While the Kennedys were certainly not the first to emphasize the importance of White House entertainment, they were the first to do it with such style and national attention. They wished to draw attention to the nation’s culture and arts by showcasing such talent as Shakespearean plays, classical ballet, and contemporary vocalists. They also appointed a world-renowned chef, improved the grounds of the White House, and produced lavish ceremonies for visiting dignitaries. These changes were meant to exemplify the sense of grandeur and historical importance that the Kennedys themselves represented. This representation extended to almost every facet of the Kennedy administration, and the restoration of the White House became their greatest undertaking in this respect.

*Time* magazine did a cover story on Mrs. Kennedy and reported that she was spending her first few weeks as First Lady learning every detail of the White House. She was planning a very calculated approach to the project, and it was important to her that the public have the correct impression of her intentions. Mrs. Kennedy told reporters that “the White House is an 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century house. Whatever one does, one does gradually, to make a house a more lived-in house, with beautiful things of its period. I would write 50 letters to 50 museum curators if I could bring Andrew Jackson’s inkwell home.”<sup>20</sup> Mrs. Kennedy intended to marry style with history in her project, but it was very important to her that the undertaking be seen as an

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<sup>20</sup> “Jacqueline Kennedy,” *Time* (January 20, 1961), 26.

academic endeavor. While Mrs. Kennedy's credentials in historic preservation may have been surface at best, she acknowledged the need to employ individuals who could compensate for her lack of experience. Mrs. Kennedy faced one very large roadblock, however—the lack of funds. She had spent her Congressional appropriation of \$50,000 entirely on the private quarters within two weeks' time. She was undaunted by this fact and set out to find a team of individuals who could add academic credibility to the project as well as provide valuable connections for the necessary funding.

The first major player in the project emerged in the form of Henry Francis du Pont, who was regarded as the greatest collector of Americana and the highest qualified authority on the subject of American historical decoration. He was well-known as an academic-minded collector and worked very hard to integrate historical design documentation and social-history-based evidence into his work. His estate-turned museum, Winterthur, just outside Wilmington, Delaware, was host to the first ever graduate program in American decorative arts and published the *Winterthur Portfolio*, a scholarly publication featuring new research in material culture. In 1961, he was awarded the Louise du Pont Crownshield Award (named for his sister) by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and he served as a trustee for several museums and botanical organizations.<sup>21</sup> Mrs. Kennedy was referred to Mr. du Pont by several local experts, and she quickly met with him to discuss the project. He willingly agreed to assist her, and many felt that his participation was the key to the ultimate success of the project.<sup>22</sup> Together they pooled their resources and devised a very calculated plan to get the endeavor started.

Their first order of business was to form a committee that would be knowledgeable of the process of object acquisition as well as connected to powerful social circles to make such

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<sup>21</sup> Jay E. Cantor, *Winterthur* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985) and John A. H. Sweeney, "Henry Fancis du Pont: The Growth of a Collector," *Arts in Virginia*, 19, No. 3 (Spring 1979), 18-31.

<sup>22</sup> Thayer, 282.

acquisitions a reality. This committee, designated as the Fine Arts Committee for the White House, would lay the groundwork for connections to the most famous antique dealers and collectors throughout the United States and Europe.

FINE ARTS COMMITTEE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE

Chairman: Henry du Pont

Honorary Chairman: Mrs. John F. Kennedy

Charles Francis Adams

Mrs. C. Douglas Dillon

Mrs. Charles W. Engelhard

David E. Finely

Mrs. Albert D. Lasker

John S. Loeb

Mrs. Paul Mellon

Mrs. Henry Parish II

Gerald Shea

John Walker III

Mrs. George Henry Warren

Mrs. Charles B. Wrightsman

Figure 6: Fine Arts Committee for the White House

While this approach was somewhat controversial, it was assumed that these very powerful individuals, using their networks of affluent friends and connections, would find donors of funds and furnishings to the project, eradicating the need to petition Congress for more appropriations.<sup>23</sup>

Mrs. Kennedy and Henry du Pont were well aware of the need to promote the image of this project as an academic endeavor. This goal was reinforced by the appointment of the an advisory committee, meant to serve in conjunction with the Fine Arts Committee, to offer guidance on the historical appropriateness of any changes that were to be made. Du Pont worked to select this committee himself (with final approval from Mrs. Kennedy) and chose primarily museum professionals or academicians.

FINE ARTS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

James Biddle, Assistant Curator in Charge of the American Wing  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Dr. Julian P. Boyd, Editor, The Jefferson Papers  
Princeton University

Dr. Lyman H. Butterfield, Editor, The Adams Papers  
Massachusetts Historical Society

Dr. Richard E. Fuller, President and Director  
The Seattle Art Museum

Gerald G. Gibson, Assistant Curator of Decorative Arts  
Henry Ford Museum

John M. Graham II, Director and Curator of Collections  
Colonial Williamsburg

Calvin S. Hathaway, Director  
The Cooper Union Museum

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<sup>23</sup> James A. Abbot and Elaine M. Rice, *Designing Camelot: The Kennedy White House Restoration*, (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1998), 22-23.

Ima Hogg, Founder and Curator  
Bayou Bend Collection

Thomas C. Howe, Director  
The California Palace of the Legion of Honor

Dr. Sherman E. Lee, Director  
Cleveland Museum of Art

Jack R. McGregor, Administrative Assistant  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Henry P. McIlhenny, Curator of Decorative Arts  
Philadelphia Museum of Art

Charles Nagel, Director  
City Art Museum of St. Louis

Richard H. Randall, Jr., Assistant Curator  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Dr. Edgar P. Richardson, Director  
The Detroit Institute of Arts

Mr. Marvin D. Schwartz, Curator of Decorative Arts  
The Brooklyn Museum

John A. H. Sweeney, Curator  
The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum

Mr. C. Malcom Watkins, Curator  
Division of Cultural History, Smithsonian Institution

Figure 7: Fine Arts Advisory Committee

The primary goal of this committee was to supplement the knowledge and experience of the Fine Arts Committee with scholarly advice. The members were also chosen for their nationwide representation that would allow them to inspect and approve items for acquisition that were unreachable by the Fine Arts Committee. They also represented a broad array of expertise, which

included fine arts, the decorative arts, and cultural history. Mrs. Kennedy and du Pont were very shrewd during the planning process of the restoration, and their appointment of such knowledgeable advisory committees was meant to represent a project much larger and academically-grounded than any other first lady had undertaken.

Mrs. Kennedy's original vision for the restoration focused entirely on the earliest occupancy of the White House around 1800. Du Pont and members of the Fine Arts Committee felt that this might be a mistake and, as a result, he asked several historical consultants to draft a statement of purpose that would ultimately guide the restoration in philosophy. The result was a joint treatise entitled "The White House as a Symbol" that put forth the major principles for the restoration. These principles included, first, the evolving nature of the White House and the importance of representing that evolution by the installation of interiors that represented a span of time periods. The statement also stressed the importance of the "living" character of the White House through representation of a variety of administrations.<sup>24</sup> Mrs. Kennedy ultimately agreed and required that the committee not adopt a single period of representation for the restoration plan. As she told one reporter, "The public should have no fear that we might restore the building to its earliest period, leaving out all that came after, or fill it with French furniture, or hang modern pictures all over it and paint it whatever color we like. The White House belongs to our past, and no one who cares about our past would treat it in that way."<sup>25</sup> With this plan in mind, Mrs. Kennedy and the Fine Arts Committee began their undertaking. This enormous project did not occur without setbacks and differences of opinion, which ultimately may have compromised the historical accuracy of some elements.

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<sup>24</sup> Julian Boyd and Lyman Butterfield, "The White House as a Symbol," April 24, 1961, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Seale, 62.

The next step was to choose a curator with proper training who would be in charge of cataloging and organizing the collection of items received. Lorraine Waxman Pearce, a 1958 graduate of the Winterthur Program, was chosen and was made permanent Curator of the White House in late March of 1961. Mrs. Pearce had a small curatorial staff that worked out of an office on the ground floor of the White House. Her appointment reinforced Mrs. Kennedy and du Pont's goal to guide the White House project as an academic endeavor. Because du Pont continued to be based out of Winterthur and only made periodic trips to the White House to check the progress, Pearce served as his eyes on the project and she no doubt felt a sense of loyalty to him as her educator. This often caused tension for Pearce. Mrs. Kennedy had a very specific vision for the aesthetic of the house and often put these visions above her commitment to historical accuracy. Pearce often received instructions from Mrs. Kennedy that were contradictory to those she received from du Pont. This arrangement ultimately placed Pearce in a very difficult situation between two prominent individuals—and between two philosophies of historical and aesthetic authenticity.

This relationship was made more difficult by the involvement of a well-known society decorator, Stephane Boudin. Mrs. Kennedy was an admirer of his work, and when he submitted proposals for involvement in the project, she heartily accepted. Du Pont was not encouraged by Boudin's involvement in the restoration and questioned his knowledge of American decorative arts to create historically accurate period settings in the White House. Du Pont often disagreed with his ideas, and Mrs. Kennedy or Lorraine Pearce was left to make final decisions. Mr. Boudin's involvement was a constant source of stress for Pearce as he would often go back over her work and change installments that she and du Pont had created.<sup>26</sup> The Kennedy

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<sup>26</sup> Abbot and Rice, 36-37.

administration made a strong effort to conceal Boudin's involvement from the press, which indicated the knowledge that he was not academically credible.

James Abbot and Elaine Rice discuss the polarities created by du Pont and Boudin in their work examining the White House project, *Designing Camelot: The Kennedy White House Restoration*. They point out that if du Pont and Boudin represented opposite ends of the decorating spectrum, then Jacqueline Kennedy was stationed somewhere in between. She had grown up in lavish surroundings and had traveled to Europe, giving her an appreciation for both the aesthetic as well as historically accurate decoration. In her own residences, however, Mrs. Kennedy had utilized antiques in order to enhance aesthetics and evoke feelings of the past, rather than create museum standards for historical accuracy.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, Mrs. Kennedy often allowed this practice to dictate her final decisions for the White House. Du Pont's visits were action-packed, and he spent days on site moving furniture and approving pieces as he saw fit. After such visits, Mrs. Kennedy would sometimes go back over his work and move furniture according to her own design aesthetic, giving her the final decision making power in the project.

With time, Lorraine Pearce saw the authority of her position decline while the pressure seemed to rise. She felt trapped between the desires of the committee, du Pont, Boudin, and Mrs. Kennedy. Pearce ultimately resigned from her position in August of 1962 and was replaced by William Voss Elder III, who had worked with Pearce since the beginning of the project. Du Pont and Elder pushed through in the restoration and were resolved to see it to success. William Elder was praised for maintaining museum standards in creating historically accurate period rooms and worked efficiently with the many consultants who came in and out of the White House. Elder also felt the strain of maintaining museum standards while working with the sometimes contradictory Mrs. Kennedy and Stephane Boudin. He often wrote to du Pont and expressed his

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<sup>27</sup> Abbot and Rice, 39

apprehension over Boudin's work. Despite his frustrations, Elder worked hard to push the Fine Arts Committee to the forefront of the decision-making and strived to maintain a sense of accuracy and dedication to appropriate methods in his own work. He realized that little could be done to thwart Boudin as long as Mrs. Kennedy supported his work but felt that, in the end, the restoration project would emerge as successful.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the stress and strain felt by many members of the restoration project, it surged ahead with great success and acclaim. Many accomplishments were celebrated along the way, arguably the most important being Congress' approval of the project by the expansion of legislation that offered protection to the White House. Public Law 87-286 officially declared the White House a museum, stating:

Articles of furniture, fixtures, and decorative objects of the White House, when declared by the President to be of historic or artistic interest, together with such similar articles, fixtures, and objects as are acquired by the White House in the future when similarly so declared, shall thereafter be considered to be inalienable and the property of the White House. Any such article, fixture, object when not in use or on display in the White House shall be transferred by direction of the President as a loan to the Smithsonian Institution for its care, study, and storage or exhibition, and such articles, fixtures, and objects shall be returned to the White House from the Smithsonian Institution on notice by the President.<sup>29</sup>

This act forever provided protection to articles contained within the White House as well as those that would be obtained in the future. It also protected the White House against any future administration making changes that were not sensitive to the historic fabric of the house. This was a great success and proclaimed the project to be not only a redecoration but a success in historic preservation.

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<sup>28</sup> Abbot and Rice, 43.

<sup>29</sup> *An act concerning the White House and providing for the care and preservation of its historic and artistic contents*. 87<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, Serial 2422 (August 15, 1961) Public Law 87-286, approved September 22, 1961.

### **Mrs. Kennedy's Restoration Plan: Steps in Action**

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1. **Research**—became knowledgeable about the history of the White House and changes that occurred in past administrations.
2. **Henry Francis du Pont**—hired to oversee the project and provide an academic approach to the restoration
3. **Fine Art Committee**—formed to assist in acquiring period pieces
4. **Fine Arts Advisory Committee**—formed to provide guidance on historical appropriateness
5. **Hire an official curator**—hired to catalog and organize
6. **Action**—acquire historic pieces and begin restoration

Figure 8: Restoration Plan of Action

## CHAPTER 4

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### Room by Room Description of the Restoration Project

The following sections outline the restoration project by examining each floor and room of the White House individually. As previously stated, the order in which Mrs. Kennedy showed rooms in her 1961 televised tour is followed. In cases where Mrs. Kennedy did not enter or discuss a room, the author has inserted those rooms as appropriate.

#### **Section 1: Ground Floor**

The Ground Floor once served as a basement and housed the servants' quarters, wine cellars, and general storage facilities. Over time, it has evolved into a space devoted to the administration and housekeeping of the White House. This space especially reflects the changes in American life due to utility upgrades that have happened over time. When the Kennedys entered the White House, the Ground Floor had remained the same since the Roosevelt remodel by McKim, Mead, and White (1902). The addition of a visitor's entrance to this level made improvements to its appearance necessary and a series of small reception and receiving rooms had been created. Additionally, the Truman renovation (1948 – 1952) increased the look of these rooms with the addition of paneling made from salvaged White House timbers. Budget cutbacks, however, deemed it necessary to cut corners and the interiors suffered as a result. For this reason, Mrs. Kennedy felt that the Ground Floor deserved special attention.

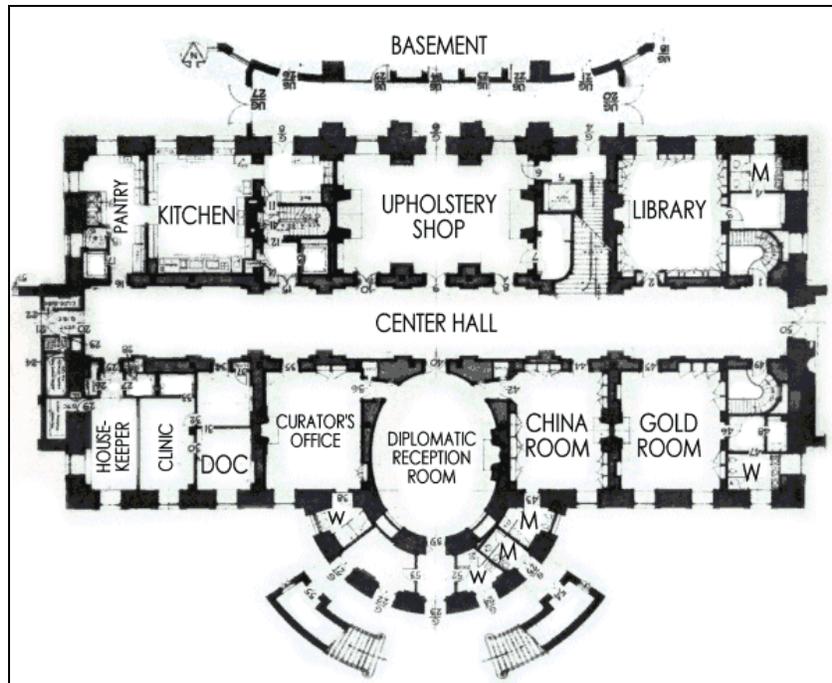


Figure 9: Floor plan for the Ground Floor, 1962 (The White House Museum)

### A. Curator's Office

For the first century of its life, the Curator's Office was part of the original kitchen and furnace room. It was eventually turned into a servants' dining room when the kitchen was moved to the northwest side of the Ground Floor (where it has remained). The room also served as a coat check room and also as the Map Room from which Franklin Roosevelt followed the progress of World War II. The Truman reconstruction (1948 – 1952) saw the room turned into the Broadcast Room for radio and television. The Kennedy restoration established the room as the Curator's Office (as it is today) and it served as a staging area and a hub from which most of the work was directed.



Figure 10: The Broadcast Room during Truman administration, 1952 (Truman Library)



Figure 11: Mrs. Kennedy in the Curator's Office, 1962 (White House Museum)

## **B. Diplomatic Reception Room**

The original plan of the White House included an entrance for guests located on the First Floor. This created a problem as state parlors and formal rooms became cluttered with hats and coats, and receiving lines of dignitaries were interrupted by makeshift checking facilities. In 1902, the visitors' entrance was relocated to the ground floor, and the diplomatic reception room was created. Until this time, the room served as a basement room in which servants polished silver. In 1837, the room was taken over by a very large furnace, which was removed to create the Reception Room in 1902. Quite possibly the most impressive room on the Ground Floor, the Diplomatic Reception Room, is often a visitor's first glimpse of the White House and the grandeur within. During her televised tour of the White House in 1962, Mrs. Kennedy remarked, "This is the room people see first when they come to the White House. Everyone who comes to a State Dinner comes through it and leaves by it, so I think it should be a pretty room."<sup>30</sup>

Upon the arrival of the Kennedys, the Diplomatic Reception room contained the White House's finest collection of period furniture despite the budget-conscious interiors of the Ground Floor. An unsolicited gift, the collection of American Federal furniture, was donated by the National Society of Interior Designers in 1960. The collection included a group of chairs, tables, and an impressive New York serpentine-shaped sofa. The terms of this gift required that these items remain in the Reception Room, and Mrs. Kennedy turned her attention to the room itself as a result. Perhaps one of the most controversial acquisitions during the restoration remained the wallpaper that adorned the walls. In 1961, the Fine Arts Committee was offered for sale a set of wallpaper panels that had been salvaged from a historic house in Maryland. The panels were produced by a French manufacturer, Zuber & Cie, in 1834 and depicted and idealized North American landscape featuring Boston Harbor, the United States Military Academy, and

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<sup>30</sup> Kennedy White House Tour, 1961.

Virginia's Natural Bridge. The controversy arose over the high price paid for the panels despite the fact that the print was still available new at a much lower cost. Mrs. Kennedy and Mr. du Pont, however, felt that salvaging a piece of history was the important thing and that purchasing the new wallpaper would have been a departure from the goals of the restoration.<sup>31</sup>

Mrs. Kennedy's work in the Diplomatic Reception Room may have had impact reaching beyond the walls of the White House. Beginning in 1961 (but not fully realized until 1965), the Diplomatic Reception Rooms in the Main State Department Building began a similar transformation under the guidance of Georgia architect, Edward Vason Jones. This project assembled a collection of museum caliber American furnishings dating from 1750 – 1825, and sought to transform the rooms from ordinary meeting spaces into historically accurate representations of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century architecture. This project has been met with wide acclaim and the State Department's Diplomatic Reception Rooms are some of the most frequently visited rooms in the nation's capital.



Figure 12: Diplomatic Reception Room before Kennedy restoration, 1960 (National Geographic)

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<sup>31</sup> Abbot and Rice 120-122.



Figure 13: Diplomatic Reception Room after Kennedy restoration (note the wallpaper), 1963 (Whitehouse Historical Association)

### **C. Library**

The Library of the White House was considered to be little more than a setting before its transformation under the Kennedy restoration. During his 1952 televised tour of the White House, President Truman remarked that he had more books in his upstairs private library than were in the official Library on the Ground Floor.<sup>32</sup> The room originally served as a laundry area until 1902, when it was converted into a sort of locker room for the servants. In 1935, it was

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<sup>32</sup> Truman White House tour, 1952.

converted into its current use as a library, and the woodwork and paneling were added during the Truman renovation.

Henry du Pont guided the restoration of this room and originally planned a late-eighteenth-century period interior based on the Georgian-style woodwork of the room with Chippendale period furnishings. His research into these choices, however, revealed that the woodwork as well as the desired furnishings were historically inaccurate due to the fact that the dates of the White House's original construction precluded the use of such period details. Rather than remove the well-constructed woodwork, du Pont suggested concealing it with paint to disguise its period and furnishing the room with nineteenth-century furniture. Architectural changes included a reconfiguration of the moldings to allow for storage space doors and the installation of a salvaged mantelpiece from Salem, Massachusetts. A more appropriate wood floor was also chosen to cover the Truman-era marble tiles.

The Fine Arts Committee chose to adorn the walls with paintings, which were historically significant and depicted recognizable events. An oil sketch by nineteenth-century artist Edouard Armand-Dumaresq of the signing of the Declaration of Independence was placed over the mantel. Five portraits of Native Americans painted by Charles Bird Kind on their visit to the White House in 1821 were placed elsewhere in the room. Mrs. Kennedy appointed a committee of scholars to build the Library's collection of books, and the goal was set to find the works "most essential to the understanding of our National experience."<sup>33</sup> Among the furnishings of the room (obtained with funds donated by The American Institute of Interior Designers) was a rare collection of furniture (two sofas and eight chairs) attributed to New York craftsman Duncan Phyfe, a library desk, work and card tables, and a glass chandelier from the home of American

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<sup>33</sup> Abbot and Rice, 127.

author James Fennimore Cooper.<sup>34</sup> The casual atmosphere of this room currently lends itself to presidential teas and meetings.



Figure 14: The Library, 1960 (National Geographic)

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<sup>34</sup> Monkman, 241.



Figure 15: The Library, 1963 (White House Historical Association)

#### **D. Gold Room or Vermeil Room**

The Gold Room serves as a display room for a collection of Renaissance to nineteenth-century English and French vermeil (gilt silver), given to the White House in 1956 by Mrs. Margaret Thompson Biddle. Harkening to its previous use, the room also serves as a ladies' sitting room during formal events. The Gold Room also has served as the "Social Bureau" and "Appointment Room" during the Hoover administration and as a billiard room before that. Mrs. Kennedy wished to retain the room's use as an exhibition gallery and maintained that the collection of vermeil should be the primary focus. Stephane Boudin formulated plans for changes

to the room in early 1963. Although never carried out, the plans included painting the room variations of blue and white, a treatment he had used before. His plan also intended to keep the room simple and sparse, with no furnishings to detract the visitor from the encased focal points around the room.



Figure 16: The Gold Room before the Kennedys' arrival, 1960 (National Geographic)

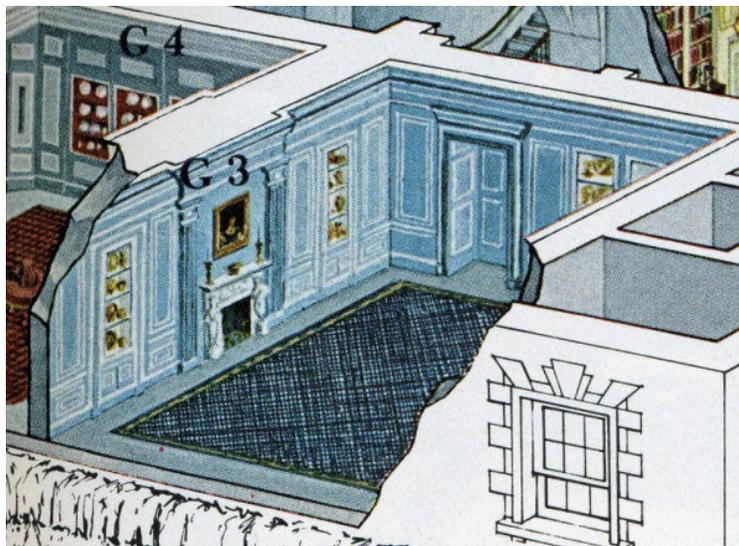


Figure 17: Boudin's plan for the Gold Room, 1963 (National Geographic)

## E. China Room

The China Room once served as a bedroom for a fireman hired by Van Buren to stoke the furnace that was housed in the Diplomatic Reception Room. In 1917, Mrs. Woodrow Wilson designated the space as the “Presidential Collection Room,” intended to display the growing collection of White House china. Until that time, presidential china was sold at auction in order to finance the purchase of new china. Boudin also created plans for this room which included gray and white walls, velvet drapes, and red velvet to line the china cases. He also proposed a single piece of furniture in the center of the room: a contemporary square banquette upholstered in gray velvet. Mrs. Kennedy did not approve of his furniture choice, however, as she wished to use the room’s existing mid-nineteenth-century gilt-framed banquette in an effort to remain true to period furnishings. Mrs. Kennedy and Boudin went back and forth over this choice and ultimately decided to use the existing banquette but cover it in velvet instead of a more accurate damask.<sup>35</sup>

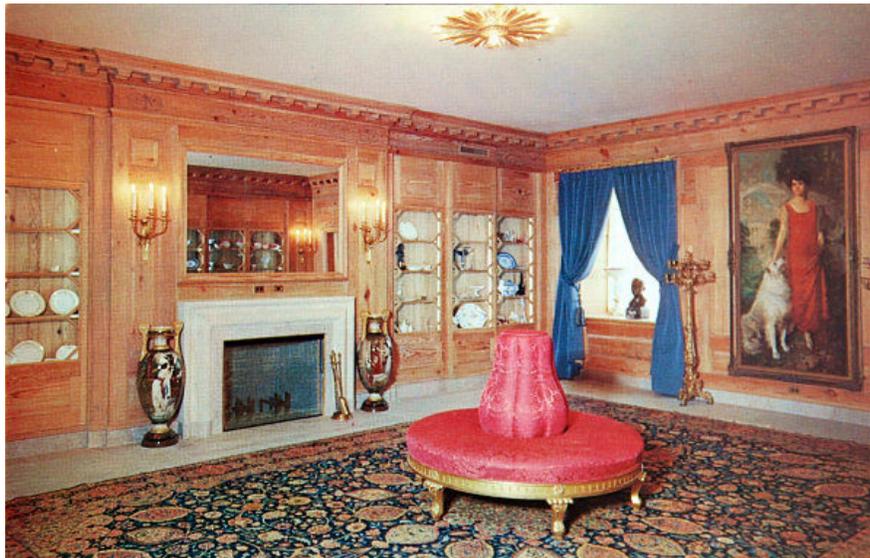


Figure 18: The China Room during the Truman administration (note the banquette), 1954 (White House Historical Association)

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<sup>35</sup> Abbot and Rice, 131.

The rooms of the Ground Floor serve to illustrate the contrasting philosophies of Henry du Pont and Stephane Boudin. Du Pont's work in the Diplomatic Reception Room and the Library displayed his desire for historically accurate recreations and collections of furnishings that reflected the appropriate period of the room. Boudin's proposals for the Gold Room and China Room reflect his desire to create rooms that emphasized proportion, balance, and ceremony. His rooms were not intended to be historically accurate, but were meant to be attractive spaces for the reception of guests.<sup>36</sup> While both men's work was respected and appreciated by Mrs. Kennedy, Mr. Boudin's influence on the restoration was quite possibly the project's most threatening element to historical accuracy.

## **Section 2: First Floor or State Floor**

The First Floor of the White House is the area that most visitors connect with being the President's home and also the area that is the most direct link with the past. This floor and its rooms serve the ceremonial purposes of the President but are modest in size compared to their counterparts in Europe. One is immediately reminded that a leader and his family live here and the rooms tell the story that this leader is a president and not a king. The floor plan shows a modest dining room and three parlors that serve various functions. The largest room on this floor is the East Room that spans the width of the building. This fragmented floor plan is a reminder of the Federal period in which the house was built.

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<sup>36</sup> Martin Filler, "A Clash of Tastes at the White House," *New York Times Magazine* (November 2, 1980), 89.

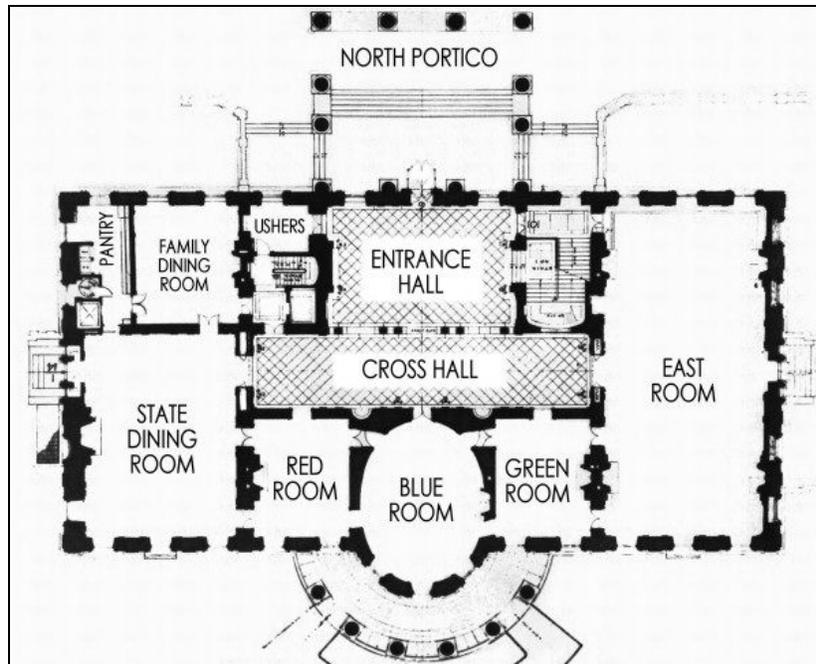


Figure 19: Floor plan of the First Floor/State Floor, 1952 (Truman Library)

### A. East Room

The East Room is the White House's largest room and is the space most readily identifiable by the public due to the many historic events that have taken place there. The room has been host to receptions, weddings, award presentations, press conferences, bill-signing ceremonies, and even presidential wakes. The East Room was originally designated as the "Public Audience Chamber" and has also been known as the "Banquet Room." The interior of the East Room has seen many changes, but its purpose has always been the same—to serve as a gathering place for important presidential events. Throughout time, the East Room has served as the center of the Washington social scene and, as a result, the furnishings wore out more quickly than in any other room.

Despite Congress' realization that the President would need one regally designated room for large social gatherings, the East Room was the last room in the White House to be finished. It

often served as storage space or sat empty while funds were allocated to other areas of the residence. The room was finally finished in 1829 under Andrew Jackson in a decidedly and uncharacteristic aristocratic style although very sparsely furnished to allow for the typical promenade of the time—the practice of seeing and being seen. During the Civil War, the room was used to house Union Soldiers, and after Lincoln’s death, it was ransacked by visitors looking for souvenirs to take away. Under Andrew Johnson, the room was cleared and simple restorations were made. The most dramatic changes came during the Grant administration when the ceiling and floor above the room were considered to be in a state of decay and in need of support. The solution came in the form of two ornately decorated beams supported by gold and white Greek columns. The room was also elaborately decorated in a style that many deemed to be garish and busy. This treatment remained until the Roosevelt renovation when the intricate details (the columns and beams) were removed and replaced with simplicity and elegance. The carpeting was also removed and an oak parquet floor was laid. This treatment has remained in the East Room and has dictated the subsequent changes including Mrs. Kennedy’s.



Figure 20: Hand tinted etching of the East Room, circa 1881 (Library of Congress)

The Kennedys used the East Room as a focus for Presidential activities and recognized its importance in how the nation viewed the current administration. Mrs. Kennedy devoted endless amounts of attention to small and large details relating to the East Room's role as the official backdrop for White House happenings. Mrs. Kennedy oversaw the creation of a portable stage, used to host Shakespearean companies, opera divas, and the nation's best dancers, poets, and musicians. In seating guests for performances, she utilized existing furniture rather than appropriating funds for such a large expense. For official diplomatic guests, Mrs. Herbert Hoover's gilt upholstered dining chairs were used while the remaining guests sat on lattice-backed bentwood chairs.

Other changes made to the room were the result of in-depth research into the history and progression of the East Room by the Fine Arts Committee. In their work outlining the Kennedy

restoration, James Abbot and Elaine Rice support this point by stating that “the removal of two great mid-eighteenth-century English camelback sofas designed by Robert Adam and made by Thomas Chippendale reflected the scholarship that served as the foundation for the Fine Arts Committee’s efforts to acquire appropriate antiques for the White House.”<sup>37</sup> Additionally, through research conducted by Mrs. Kennedy and White House Curator, four early nineteenth-century candelabras that were once used in the room during the Monroe administration were acquired and then returned to their original placements. The window treatments were quite possibly the largest undertaking, requiring almost three years of planning, and were not installed until a year after Mrs. Kennedy moved out of the White House. Stephane Boudin’s original design proposal was not approved by Mrs. Kennedy because it did not utilize the existing 1902 gilt wood cornices, which she thought to be of great value to the historic character of the room. The revised plan did, however, incorporate the cornices and also included early nineteenth-century silk lampas, which Mrs. Kennedy heartily approved. Once complete, the window treatments totaled more than \$26,000 and were paid for by proceeds from Mrs. Kennedy’s White House guidebook.

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<sup>37</sup> Abbot and Rice, 71.



Figure 21: The East Room, 1972 (White House Historical Association)

## **B. State Dining Room**

The State Dining Room was originally much smaller and served at various times as an office, drawing room, and Cabinet room. Although it had been used for formal dinners throughout its existence, the room did not become the “State Dining Room” until the Andrew Jackson administration. In the 1902 renovation, McKim, Mead, and White enlarged and reconfigured the room, resulting in its current state. When Mrs. Kennedy entered the White House, she greatly admired the look of the room and wished to change it as little as possible. During her televised tour of the White House in 1961, she praised the room by noting, “this room’s interesting because it has the most architectural unity of any room in the White House.

It's really all 1902."<sup>38</sup> Thus, Roosevelt's interior provided the backdrop for Mrs. Kennedy's inspiration and the room was for the most part left as it was. The changes that were made, however, were a rare collaboration between du Pont and Boudin. An off-white color was chosen for celadon-colored paneled walls to achieve a minimalistic affect. The simple, dark marble fireplace surround, installed during the Truman renovation, was replaced with a reproduction of the original McKim, Mead, and White mantel, which was on exhibition at the Truman Library.

With these changes to the State Dining Room, came a revision of the traditional White House entertaining. Mrs. Kennedy eliminated the traditional E-shaped banquet tables that had been used by previous administrations in favor of individual round tables that sat ten guests each and were staggered about the room. A long banquet table was reserved for smaller dinner parties and for furnishing the room while not in use. This arrangement provided a more flexible dinner service and a more relaxed atmosphere. High ranking officials were divided amongst the tables, a practice that proved to be a great success. Mrs. Kennedy utilized existing White House possessions to decorate the tables including James Monroe's 1817 bronze baskets. Various pieces of Margaret Thompson Biddle's vermeil collection was also utilized to hold cigarettes, nuts, and candies. The final result of the State Dining Room was said to be both elegant and inviting, due in part to McKim, Mean, and White's design, and to Jacqueline Kennedy's design choices.

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<sup>38</sup>Perry Wolff, *A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy* (Doubleday Garden City, 1962), 101.



Figure 22: State Dining Room (note the fireplace surround), 1952 (Truman Library)



Figure 23: Kennedy State Dining room (note the mantel reproduction), 1962 (Kennedy Library)

### **C. Red Room**

The Red Room serves as one of four reception rooms on the State Floor. It had previously served as a “Breakfast Room” and the “Yellow Drawing Room.” An inventory of purchases made during the Monroe administration indicated that the room was largely furnished with Empire-style pieces, a choice that governed the work of the Kennedy restoration in this room. The Red Room was quite possibly Mrs. Kennedy’s favorite room due to the fact that she loved the French style and wanted to incorporate it into as many elements of the White House as appropriate. She in fact utilized Franco-American décor in the redecoration of the private quarters and liked the effect so much she wished to carry it over into the State Floor.

The architecture of the room lent itself to these choices, which was a combination of neoclassical motifs, some original to the house and others added during succeeding renovations. The most dominating element of the room remained a French Empire mantel with carved caryatid supports, which was originally located in the State Dining Room and moved to the Red Room during the 1902 renovation. The door and window frames (Monroe-era) and the twentieth-century cornice, chair rail, and wainscoting served as complimentary elements to the mantel. Once the decision had been made to continue with the theme, it wasn’t long before impressive American and French Empire pieces began arriving at the White House for consideration to be used in the Red Room. The centerpiece of the room became a small table with caryatids as legs and an elaborately designed faux-marble top. This piece is still considered to be one of the best examples of neoclassical furniture in the White House.<sup>39</sup> Other pieces placed in the room included a set of sofas once belonging to Dolly Madison, an additional sofa once belonging to Nellie Curtis (Martha Washington’s granddaughter), and a pair of chairs that dated before the Van Buren administration.

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<sup>39</sup> Abbot and Rice, 81.

Quite possibly the most striking elements in the room were the textiles chosen to adorn the walls and windows. The committee wished to maintain the traditional color red and chose a more muted tone rather than the fire engine red that had been previously displayed. The Fine Arts Committee commissioned research into historically accurate textiles and a document was found that dated around 1812. The historic textile was reproduced with special attention paid to getting the desired color—this was an element du Pont felt was very important. The result was very successful and was widely publicized. Historic homes across the country began emulating various elements of the room, and the textile reproduction was eventually made available to the public due to high demand.



Figure 24: The Red Room, 1962 (Kennedy Library)

## **D. Blue Room**

The Blue Room is the center of the State Floor and, until 1902, answered the function now served by the Diplomatic Reception Room. The most formal room in the White House, the Blue Room, had served as a parlor and a reception room and was rarely used during the Kennedy administration. The room was notably red under President Monroe and was painted blue under President Van Buren. Since that time, the room has taken on many hues of blue including what has been described as violet-blue (Grant), robin's egg blue (Arthur), cerulean blue (Harrison), steel blue (Roosevelt), and royal blue (Truman)—as it was when the Kennedy's arrived.

The Blue Room was widely recognized as the work of Stephane Boudin and came under much criticism as a result. The donor for the funds to restore the room came from a long-standing client of Boudin's, and he no doubt felt he could exercise freedom in this room unlike other rooms in the White House. During her research into the history of the house, Mrs. Kennedy read about a suite of gilt furniture originally made in 1817 for the Blue Room under President Monroe. She obtained a picture of a table from this suite and asked the White House staff to search the house and see if it still remained there. The table was found and restored and ultimately set the tone for the restoration of the Blue Room. As was custom in the oval-shaped room, Boudin placed acquired furnishings around the perimeter and began looking for a round table to be placed in the center. Du Pont suggested a white marble-topped mahogany table that was purchased by Monroe from France. Boudin evidently did not approve of the design of the table and ultimately covered it with a gold silk damask. Boudin's covering of one of the oldest pieces that remained in the White House attracted criticism, and rumors began circulating that Mrs. Kennedy's "French decorator was draping everything in sight."<sup>40</sup> The final result, however, was not unlike the room that President Monroe attempted to create using numerous French

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<sup>40</sup> Abbot and Rice, 105.

pieces. Although the room was criticized, even du Pont admitted the room to be a historically appropriate success in the restoration project.



Figure 25: The Blue Room as it was when the Kennedy's arrived, 1962 (White House Historical Association)



Figure 26: The Blue Room after the Kennedy restoration, 1963 (Kennedy Library)

### **E. Green Room**

The Green Room was decidedly President Kennedy's favorite due to its masculine design. The room mirrors the Red Room and was meant to serve as an informal parlor and common dining room. President Monroe used the room as a card room where he and his friends played card games after dinner. The precedent of using green in the room began when President Monroe covered the chairs in green silk and hung green draperies over the windows. The room has seen many changes in wall coverings, and the ceiling was lowered during the Truman administration to allow for air conditioning ducts.

During her televised tour of the White House, Mrs. Kennedy explained that the Green Room was meant to represent an American parlor during the time of Adams and Jefferson. She

indicated that when she arrived at the White House, the only pieces of furniture in the room were two Federal-style card tables. It was decided that those pieces of furniture would dictate the style of the room.<sup>41</sup> The Federal style had also been chosen for the room in the 1920s when Mrs. Coolidge redecorated the room and sought the guidance of leading antique consultants, who followed the movements of the time and recommended Federal pieces.

The Green Room was the source of an acquisition scandal that was widely publicized at the time, much to the dismay of President and Mrs. Kennedy. A Baltimore lady's writing desk had been donated to the White House amid much excitement and displayed proudly in the room. After months of being on display to the public as the centerpiece of the Green Room, a well-known antiques dealer and the White House Curator discovered that it was a late-nineteenth-century copy. Mrs. Kennedy was very upset about this discovery and its wide publication because she felt that its occurrence questioned the validity of her project and the choices that were made. Mrs. Kennedy quickly tightened access to the project by outsiders and emphasized the importance that her staff not speak to members of the press regarding the details of the restoration. Despite the scandal, the Green Room emerged as an impressive representation of an American Federal Parlor, and President Kennedy declared it to be his favorite among the rooms on the State Floor.

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<sup>41</sup> Wolff, 152.



Figure 27: The Kennedy Green Room, 1963 (National Geographic)

### **Section 3: Second Floor**

The Second Floor is a balance between private and public spaces as it is the location of the private apartments of the President. For this reason, the documentation surrounding the changes that have been made to this floor is somewhat limited in comparison to the Ground Floor and the State Floor. In her televised tour of the White House, Mrs. Kennedy spent little time here and only showed two of the fifteen or more rooms which make up the Second Floor.

Unlike the Ground and First Floors, the main corridor on the Second Floor is interrupted by a set of sliding doors, which serve to divide this part of the White House into a series of apartments.

As a result, the entire floor can be considered as a grouping of suites.

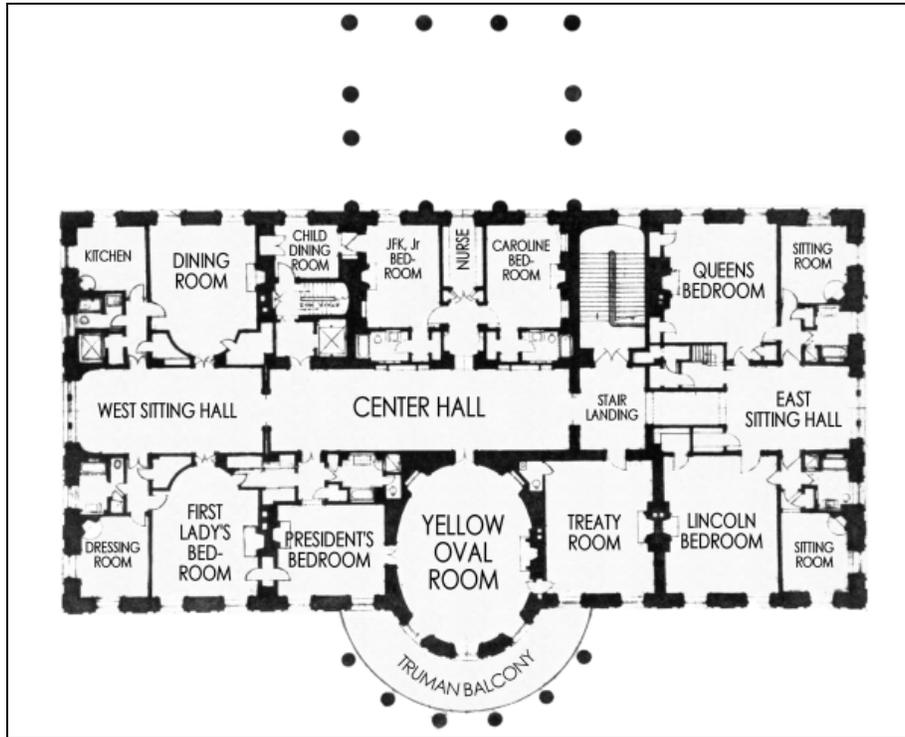


Figure 28: Floor Plan of the Second Floor, 1962 (The White House Museum)

### A. Lincoln Bedroom and Sitting Room

The Lincoln Bedroom and Sitting Room are a part of a suite of rooms on the Second Floor (including a bathroom) and was used by Lincoln as an office. Before the construction of the West Wing in 1902, this room was used as either an office or a meeting room for the president's Cabinet. When the president's staff was moved to the West Wing, these rooms became the "Blue Suite" and were used to house guests of the White House. The room was dedicated to Lincoln after the Truman renovation and is the only room in the White House dedicated to a single president. Mrs. Kennedy had a special appreciation for the Lincoln Bedroom due to the fact that

she and President Kennedy lived there when they first arrived to the White House to allow for renovations to the private apartments. Although Mrs. Kennedy notably disliked all things Victorian, she appreciated the precedent that had been established in this room and maintained that its presence in the White House emphasized the restoration's goal of showcasing the entire history of the mansion.

The room already contained quite possibly the most famous piece of White House furniture, the Lincoln bed. The bed was bought by Mrs. Lincoln and was slept in by President Roosevelt and President Coolidge. Mrs. Kennedy made additions to the existing furniture. She and the White House Curator found and included a pair of slipper chairs documented to the Lincoln administration. Curator William Elder also included a pair of tables ordered for the East Room by Andrew Jackson in 1829. The tables proved to be appropriate due the fact they were "Early Victorian in feeling" and were placed as side tables to the Lincoln bed. The Lincoln Sitting Room also needed little improvements, but Mrs. Kennedy worked to find existing pieces in the White House collection that were credited to the Lincoln administration. In the end, a set of four chairs and a mahogany daybed were added to this room.



Figure 29: The Lincoln Bedroom after the Kennedy Restoration, 1963 (Kennedy Library)

## **B. Treaty Room**

The Treaty Room was originally a part of the presidential offices located on the Second Floor and was used by several presidents as an audience or waiting room. In 1866, President Johnson turned this room into his Cabinet Room and President Roosevelt used it as a study in 1902. During the Hoover administration, the room was named the “Monroe Room” as Mrs. Hoover used Monroe period furniture in the room or had replicas made to match existing furniture. Mrs. Kennedy felt that the room should be returned to its original use as a second floor reception space that could double as a late-night conference room for the President. The room became the greatest expression of Victorian-era style in the White House and gained its name from the many important documents that were negotiated and signed within its walls. During her tour of the White House, Mrs. Kennedy described the room as a “chamber of horrors” due to the

fact that it was not yet complete but she added that “when this room is finished you’ll see how impressive it will be.”<sup>42</sup>

For the room, Mrs. Kennedy utilized the White House’s existing supply of nineteenth-century Gothic, Rococo, and Renaissance Revival furniture. The room was eventually host to Grant’s State Dining Room chairs and a desk that belonged to Grant’s wife. Mrs. Kennedy also commissioned reproductions of famous treaties dating from the time when the room served as a part of the President’s central offices. Quite possibly the most impressive object in the room was an enormous three-tiered chandelier that had been originally purchased for the East Room under the Grant administration. It had been removed from the White House during the 1902 renovation and relocated to the U.S. Capitol. Senate leaders supported its return, and it was the last object placed in the room.

The walls were covered with deep-green flocked wallpaper with a border based on a decorative treatment utilized in the State Rooms during the Johnson administration. A red diamond patterned paper was also chosen that was a copy of the wallpaper in the room in which Abraham Lincoln died. These bold colors and geometric shapes were certainly a departure from the soft palettes adopted by other historic sites interpreting the same period. The choices made, however, were some of the first in the twentieth-century to duplicate the “strong contrasts of color, texture, and form together had been popular immediately after the Civil War.”<sup>43</sup> The room had served as a backdrop for many historic events and continued to do so as President Kennedy signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1963, which was one of the Kennedy administration’s greatest achievements.

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<sup>42</sup> Wolff, 222.

<sup>43</sup> Abbot and Rice, 191.



Figure 30: Completed Treaty Room after the Kennedy restoration (note the chandelier), 1963 (White House Historical Association)

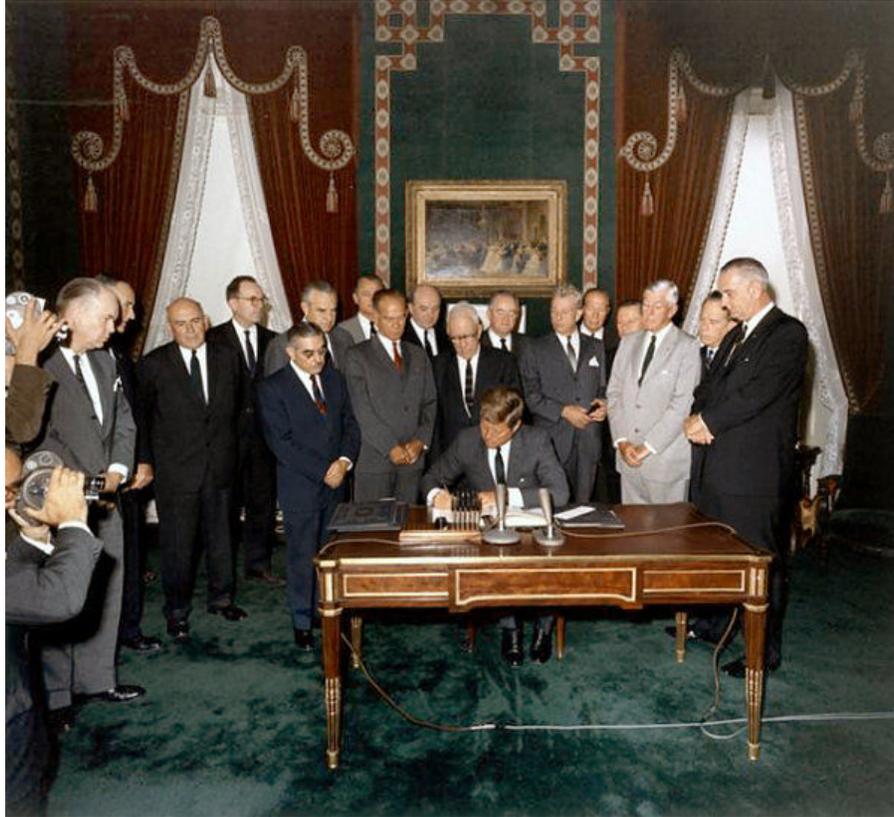


Figure 31: President Kennedy signing the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in the Treaty Room, 1963  
(Kennedy Library)

### C. Queen's Bedroom and Sitting Room

The Queen's Suite is the feminine equivalent to the Lincoln bedroom across the East Sitting Hall on the Second Floor. The room is named for the many royal guests it has hosted, including queens of the Netherlands, Greece, Norway, and Great Britain. Before the 1902 renovation, this room served as a bedroom and office for presidential private secretaries. After this time, it was converted into a bedroom suite and called the "Rose Room" until it was renamed under the Kennedy restoration. This room served as an example of the struggle that existed within Mrs. Kennedy to make rooms stylish while maintaining historic integrity. Because this room was located within the private quarters of the White House and was often used to house special guests of the presidential family, Mrs. Kennedy felt that the room should be comfortable

and inviting above all else. Du Pont, however, worked hard to incorporate as many historic elements as possible although many of his choices were overruled by Mrs. Kennedy's final say in all matters of the restoration. For example, in late 1962, du Pont accepted for the room a set of 1824 French wallpaper panels, which were soon to be removed from a historic house in Boston. Mrs. Kennedy did not approve of his choice and indicated that she had other plans for the room (no doubt Boudin had already made a proposal that was to her liking). She further stressed to du Pont that no more items should be accepted for the White House without her approval.<sup>44</sup>



Figure 32: The Queen's Bedroom before the Kennedy Restoration, 1962 (White House Historical Association)

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<sup>44</sup> Abbot and Rice, 178.



Figure 33: The Queen's Bedroom after the Kennedy restoration, 1963 (White House Historical Association)

## CHAPTER 5

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### Conclusion: Redecoration or Restoration

The Kennedy White House restoration is quite possibly one of the most recognizable projects undertaken by a First Family while in office. More than any other public building in the United States, the White House stands at the center of the nation's public life and even the slightest changes are immediately recorded. Likewise, the Kennedy family held, and still continues to hold, the nation's attention like no other political family. The Kennedys portrayed an image that was more than that of style and youth—it was the image of a younger generation that represented the future of the nation, while appreciating the glory of its past. The arrival of the Kennedys in the White House was described as a cultural renaissance in America and the public eagerly awaited the welcome change. Mrs. Kennedy's restoration project of the White House holds an important place in the history of our nation because of the precedent it set for the preservation of our nation's architectural treasures. Mrs. Kennedy valued art and culture and felt that the White House was the ultimate representation of these elements. Her disappointment in the appearance of the mansion resulted in her desire to weave style and beauty into the project while restoring a sense of historical integrity. Mrs. Kennedy's restoration project became an example for historic sites and homes across the nation where many emulated her efforts.

While the Kennedys' project was certainly not the first to make changes to the White House, it was the first to view the White House as a museum site. It was also the first to establish permanent protection for the historic objects within. Mrs. Kennedy's work led to the creation in 1961 of the White House Historical Association and Lyndon B. Johnson's executive

order in 1964, which instituted the permanent position of Curator of the White House and the Committee for the Preservation of the White House to advise the president and first lady on the museum character of the public rooms and collections. Since that time, the members of the committee have been active participants in the formulation of policies, establishing acquisition guidelines and goals, and in advising on the restoration of state rooms. Today, the committee is composed of members appointed by the President for their experience with historic preservation, architecture, decorative arts, and for their scholarship in these areas. The committee is currently responsible for establishing policies relating to the museum function of the White House, its state rooms and collections. It also works with the White House Historical Association in making recommendations on acquisitions for the permanent collection of the White House and provides advice on changes to the interior of the public space.

The question of scholarship has long surrounded the project and many feel that Mrs. Kennedy's treatment was merely a redecoration rather than a restoration. Mrs. Kennedy was careful to ensure, however, that the project was not a matter of decorating to her tastes, but an effort to honor American heritage and craftsmanship. It was her passion for history that guided and informed her work in the White House. She wanted to share her knowledge and excitement about the past with the American public and felt that the White House restoration was an opportunity to convey this passion to the nation. Mrs. Kennedy and Henry du Pont's careful consideration for scholarship surrounding the project was intertwined in every step along the way. The establishment of the Fine Arts Committee, the Fine Arts Advisory Committee, and the permanent position of White House Curator all supported their quest for scholarship and academic credibility. Mrs. Kennedy confidently maintained to the media that the project was a restoration rather than a mere redecoration by stating, "Everything in the White House must have

a reason for being there. It would be sacrilege merely to have redecorated it—a word I hate. It must be restored, and that has nothing to do with decoration. That is a question of scholarship.”<sup>45</sup>

To avoid the politically controversial use of Congressional appropriations for the restoration, Mrs. Kennedy established the White House Historical Association, which would publish the first official White House guidebook. Profits from the sale of the guidebook would be used to fund the restoration project and to purchase the furnishings and other historic materials located by the Fine Arts Committee. Mrs. Kennedy envisioned a publication that would explain every facet of the White House—its history, its architectural significance, and the importance of its contents. Together with the White House Curator, she approved the guidebook's text, chose which photographs would be featured, and designed the book's layout. The book was finally published with great success. Within six months of publication, 500,000 copies were sold. The book, *The White House: An Historic Guide*, continues to support the work of the White House Historical Association.

These important establishments signified the end of danger that existed for the White House interior with each new First Family that moved into the home. A close look at the project reveals an academic approach to creating an historic representation of the living character of the White House and a framework for the preservation of that representation. While some elements of the project worked against this goal, the final product was a success in the eyes of preservationists and is clear in the museum quality existence of the White House today. Since the Kennedy restoration, there have of course been changes made to the interior of the White House, but many credit Mrs. Kennedy with setting a high standard with regard to preserving the historical integrity of the mansion. This tradition continues today as first families move in and out of the presidential house.

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<sup>45</sup> Sidney, 62.

Mrs. Kennedy's interest in the historic integrity of the White House inevitably led a greater contribution to the field of historic preservation as a whole. She personally intervened in the planned demolition of Lafayette Square across the street from the White House. The square was originally known as “the President’s Park” and eventually became home to members of the Cabinet, Congress, and diplomatic corps. Additionally, several American presidents, including James Polk, Theodore Roosevelt, and Harry Truman, lived in its houses during various White House renovations. This area eventually began to decline and, in the 1950’s Congress gave its approval to demolish most of the homes on the square and proposed to build two large office buildings in their place.<sup>46</sup> The Kennedys perceived this plan to be insensitive to the Square because it was not compatible with the domestic scale of the existing buildings.<sup>47</sup> Mrs. Kennedy, along with her husband, spearheaded the commission of a new plan that, by placing the new office buildings in back of the period townhouses and sheathing them in red brick, preserved the historical identity and residential scale of the famous square. This monumental plan is considered to be one of the first steps in the current trend toward façade preservation<sup>48</sup> and was one of the first to protect an entire neighborhood rather than a specific building.

Later in life, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis became a resident of New York City and attempted to live very quietly, making few public appearances. In 1975, she stepped back into the public eye to assist in the campaign to save New York’s Grand Central Station, one of the city’s most well-known landmarks. She had been strongly affected by the demolition of Penn Station years earlier and felt that its loss was a devastating blow to the fairly new preservation movement in the United States. By 1978, the argument had made its way to the Supreme Court,

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<sup>46</sup> “Lafayette Square History,” The Stephen Decatur House Museum. <http://www.decatourhouse.org/neighborhood/history.htm> (accessed June 4, 2008).

<sup>47</sup> William Seale, *The President’s House: A History*, Volume II. (Washington, D.C.: White Historical Association, 2008), 348.

<sup>48</sup> Barbara Gamarekian, “Saving the Park by the White House.” *The New York Times* (October 20, 1983).

and on the eve of the case, she led a demonstration that wound through the streets of New York and declared, “I care desperately about saving old buildings. If Grand Central Station goes, all of the landmarks in this country will go as well. If we don’t care about our past, we cannot hope for our future.”<sup>49</sup> Two months later the decision was made and Grand Central Station was saved. Mrs. Kennedy’s participation in the fight to save the landmark was a representation of her place in the preservation movement that was sweeping the country at the time.

Her interest in preservation extended beyond the United States and included her involvement in the rescue of the ancient Egyptian temples at Abu Simbel which were threatened by the flood waters created by the Aswan Dam. Mrs. Kennedy also advocated the restoration of Pennsylvania Avenue, the main thoroughfare which connected the White House to Capitol Hill, and supported creation of a national cultural complex, which eventually became the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. Her enthusiasm for historic preservation contributed to its growing influence throughout the nation and enhanced Americans' understanding and appreciation of their heritage.

Mrs. Kennedy’s project made valuable contributions to the progression of historic preservation in our country. The creation of the White House Historical Association in 1961 and the establishment of the Committee for the Preservation of the White House in 1964 resulted in a permanent protection of the museum character of the public rooms and collections of the White House. The establishment of these bodies also set a precedent for similar such committees at historic landmarks across the nation. The relationship between Mrs. Kennedy’s work in the Diplomatic Reception Room and the subsequent restoration of the State Department’s Diplomatic Reception Rooms is one that makes a strong case for the influence that the White House project had on similar projects during this time period. This relationship is one that would

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<sup>49</sup> Jere Hester, “Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis: Daily Things” *Daily News*, (October 13, 1999).

be a suitable topic for research by others. Finally, Mrs. Kennedy's work had a profound impact on historic interiors, an area that is frequently overlooked in the field of preservation. The work completed (particularly in the Red Room) led to the emulation of various elements of the project by historic homes across the nation and established a greater appreciation for the role of interiors in historic preservation.

Overall, Mrs. Kennedy's efforts set a precedent for the appreciation of cultural heritage in the United States today. She saw the White House as a great disservice to the American public and made great strides to restore a living historic character within its walls. During the televised tour of the White House, President Kennedy praised her work by stating, "I think the great effort that she's made has been to bring us much more intimately in contact with all the men who lived here. After all, history is people—and particularly in great moments of our history, Presidents...I think it makes the White House a stronger panorama of our great history."<sup>50</sup> Despite the inevitable inaccuracies that afflict any effort to restore authentic period interiors, Mrs. Kennedy's efforts set a high academic standard. In addition to her work in the White House, Mrs. Kennedy's efforts to further the historic preservation movement in the United States were instrumental. She was committed to the cause of preserving the nation's built heritage and this commitment lasted until the end of her life. She will long be remembered as the First Lady who valued the nation's past and taught us to preserve that past for our future.

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<sup>50</sup> Wolff, 230.

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## APPENDIX A

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### Timeline of the Preservation Movement in the United States

1853

The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association buys George Washington's home and begins rehabilitation.

1876

The Centennial International Exposition in Philadelphia showcased uniquely American architectural styles including: Queen Anne, Romanesque, and American Foursquare.

1906

The Antiquities Act, passed by Congress, sought to protect historic resources that were owned by the United States government and established the National Monuments program.

1924

The American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art opens with a large collection of historic American furnishings.

1926

The restoration and reconstruction of Colonial Williamsburg begins.

1931

The first historic district is designated in Charleston, South Carolina in order to protect the historic character of the designated area.

1935

The Historic Sites Act is passed by Congress, which authorized the designation of national historic sites and landmarks and authorized surveys of historic sites.

1949

National Trust for Historic Preservation is created, which is charged with coordinating historic preservation activities and to act as a clearinghouse for historic preservation information.

1952

University of Delaware's Winterthur Program in Early American Culture founded. The program focused upon administration and interpretation of historic house museums.

1961

Mrs. Kennedy begins her restoration project of the White House.

1966

The National Historic Preservation Act is passed by Congress, which serves as the primary federal legislation relating to historic preservation.