

Welcome to This Is America from VOA Learning English. I'm Steve Ember.

And I'm Kelly Jean Kelly. This week on our program, we look at the history of the White House, the president's home in Washington, DC.

When America's first president, George Washington, entered office in 1789, the nation's capital was in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. But Washington and other lawmakers agreed to move the capital south.

In 1790, Washington signed an act of Congress to establish the federal government in the District of Columbia. The states of Virginia and Maryland donated the areas. George Washington and French urban planner Pierre L'Enfant chose the site for the new presidential home.

A competition took place to find a designer. An architect named James Hoban from Ireland won the competition. He proposed a building modeled on a wealthy man's house in Dublin. Today, that building—called Leinster House—is where the Irish Parliament meets.

James Hoban originally suggested the house be three stories. But George Washington changed the design to two stories. He was worried the government quarry would not have enough stone for both the president's house and a building for Congress.

Work on the house started in 1792. At that time, the building was called by names such as the President's Palace or the Executive Mansion. Its walls were not yet white, but grayish sandstone.

George Washington supervised the building project. Yet he and his wife, Martha, never lived there. The house was completed long after he left office in 1797.

America's second president, John Adams, and his wife, Abigail, were the first to live in the new home. They moved in on November 1, 1800. The inside of the house was still not completed. Abigail Adams was known to have complained about the house's condition.

Perhaps luckily for her, John and Abigail Adams lived in the president's house for only four months. John Adams lost re-election to Thomas Jefferson that autumn.

During the following eight years, Jefferson tried to finish work on the home. So did the next president, James Madison.

In 1814, British forces invaded Washington. They burned the president's home. President Madison's wife, Dolley, tried to save valuable objects from the fire as she fled.

Some say she rescued a painting of George Washington. However, some historians question that story.

One way or another, the portrait survived. It is perhaps one of the most well-known images of George Washington. The picture — painted by Gilbert Stuart — hangs in the White House to this day.

Here is British Prime Minister David Cameron, talking about the fire of 1814.

“So I am a little embarrassed as I stand here to think that 200 years ago my ancestors tried to burn this place down. Now looking around me I can see you’ve got the place a little better defended today. You’re clearly not taking any risks with the Brits this time.”

After the fire, James Hoban helped rebuild the house he had designed. During this time, it was painted white. Some people began referring to the building informally by its color. Finally, in 1901, President Theodore Roosevelt officially named the residence the White House.

Over the years, the White House has been enlarged and almost totally rebuilt. Today, the White House has 132 rooms and 35 bathrooms. There are also 412 doors, 147 windows, 28 fireplaces, 8 staircases, and 3 elevators.

The White House has an East Wing and a West Wing. The Oval Office, the large round room where the president works, is in the West Wing. The first family lives in the East Wing.

In case you were wondering, the official home of the vice president is on the grounds of the Naval Observatory, about five kilometers away.

First ladies have all added to the White House in some way. Jacqueline Kennedy, for example, created a colorful garden that is named in her honor.

Michelle Obama created one of the largest vegetable gardens. She invited schoolchildren to help her plant the vegetables as an educational experience.

“Today is getting the soil ready. Then we’ll come back in a couple of weeks to actually do the planting. And then sometime in June, right around the time school is over, hopefully we’ll have lots of great vegetables and fruits. We’ll harvest them, and then we’ll bring you guys into the kitchen in the White House.”

Kitchen workers use the vegetables to prepare healthy meals at the White House.

Many presidents have also added features to the White House. For example, in 1979 President Jimmy Carter had solar panels put on the West Wing to use the energy of the sun to heat water.

President Franklin Roosevelt had a pool built in 1933. Polio had disabled his legs, but President Roosevelt still swam.

During President Richard Nixon's time in office, the old swimming pool was covered and the room was used for the media. The change permitted more space for television camera equipment.

The press room was rebuilt in January 2007. The work included a better look for television, a new electrical system, a high technology communication system, better air conditioning and more comfortable seats. President George W. Bush re-opened the room in a ceremony on July 11, 2007. He joked that the room had been so hot before, he lost weight answering questions.

As visitors enter the White House, they see pictures of past presidents on the walls.

In another hall on the same floor are paintings of first ladies. A room off this hallway contains a collection of fine dishes. Most presidents have added to this collection.

Many first ladies have also followed Jacqueline Kennedy's goal to collect art of the nation's finest artists.

Presidents and first ladies have also often invited musicians to perform at the White House. In 2010, the Obamas held a civil rights music night. Here Yolanda Adams sings "A Change Is Gonna Come."

Wide marble steps lead to the next floor of the White House. It is called the State Floor. Presidents use rooms here for official duties and to entertain guests.

The largest room on the State Floor is the East Room. News conferences and music performances take place here. But the room has had other uses over the years.

Abigail Adams hung her family's clothes to dry from the wash. Mourners filled the room to view President Abraham Lincoln's body there. And President Obama recently met with wounded warriors in the East Room.

Other rooms on the State Floor are named for their colors: the Blue Room, the Green Room and the Red Room. The president meets with diplomats and other guests in these rooms. They are also used for special events.

The 22nd president, Grover Cleveland, married Frances Folsom in the Blue Room in 1886. The Green Room held the body of President Lincoln's son Willie, who died in 1862 when he was 11 years old.

And the 19th president, Rutherford Hayes, took his oath of office in the Red Room. He was sworn in as president in 1877 following a disputed election against Samuel Tilden.

Nearby is the State Dining Room, where big events take place, like official dinners for visiting leaders. It can now seat as many as 140 guests.

The Treaty Room on the second floor is used for meetings. Important documents have been signed there. On October 7, 1963, President John F. Kennedy signed a limited nuclear-test ban treaty in the room. At different times, the Treaty Room was the cabinet room or the president's office.

The next floor of the White House contains bedrooms for guests. One of these is the Lincoln Bedroom, named for the 16th president. But Abraham Lincoln never slept there.

Lincoln used the room as an office while he led the country through the Civil War in the 1860s. President Lincoln was murdered days after the war ended with the surrender of Robert E. Lee, the Southern general. John Wilkes Booth, a stage actor and supporter of the South, shot Lincoln at Ford's Theatre, not far from the White House.

Over the years, presidents and other people have suggested seeing Lincoln's ghost or feeling his presence in the White House.

Long gone are the days when people could simply walk into the White House. In fact, the White House was closed to visitors temporarily after the September 11th terrorist attacks in 2001.

Information about White House tours – as well as a virtual tour -- can be found at whitehouse.gov.

I'm Steve Ember.

And I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

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