

# The White House

## Renovations reflect changing of the guard

By David M. Maxwell  
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Times change, presidents change, and in the White House and public and family rooms, styles and furnishings change, too.

Fifty years ago, the mansion's second-floor West Sitting Hall, used then and now by the president's family as a private living room, resembled a lush garden setting. Wicker furniture was arranged on a checkerboard-patterned grass rug, and long copper trays containing ferns and blossoming plants bordered the palm-lined walls. The deep, fan topped window had been screened to make an aviary for Lou Henry Hoover's canaries. Inside, a tree provided a place for the birds to perch and sing.

Today, what was once the airy sun room is President and Mrs. Reagan's pale yellow sitting room, which contains the family's own furniture, collections, photographs and art shipped from California.

Throughout the family quarters on the White House second and third floors, extensively refurbished rooms and halls reflect the Regans' twin goals of making 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. a place to call home as well as a showcase for the valuable historic furnishings collected by their predecessors.

"I believe very strongly that the White House is a special place and should represent the best our nation has to offer," Nancy Reagan said in response to questions submitted by the Smithsonian News Service about the refurbishing project. "I think people want it that way."

UNTIL RECENTLY, many of the valuable and historic antiques dating back to the republic's earliest decades "were sitting in the warehouse," Mrs. Reagan said. "Insufficient funds had been permitted for renovating and returning them to their proper condition," she added. Many pieces were "deteriorating" while reproductions were substituted throughout the living quarters.

After the election, Mrs. Reagan decided that the historical pieces should be removed from the warehouse, restored and returned to the White House, where they could be used and preserved. But the \$50,000 allowance that is allocated to an incoming administration for redecorating was considered insufficient for repairing, repolishing and regilding the furniture as well as for maintenance work throughout the White House.

"So many things needed to be done, but the funds weren't there," Peter McCoy, deputy assistant to the president and director of staff for the first lady, said. The Regans subsequently raised \$827,640 in private donations for the now completed work which included furniture restoration, painting, sanding and refinishing floors for the first time in 20 years, and replacing worn and sun-damaged carpets, wall coverings, curtains and upholstery.

Today, White House usher Rex Scouten estimates that "95 percent" of the "important items in the White House collection are in use."

The Regans returned the \$50,000 allotted decorating allowance.

With several exceptions, such as painting certain state and ground floor rooms, adding a priceless sofa to the Blue Room and cleaning the mansion's marble fireplace, the project was confined to the family quarters. The state rooms had been extensively restored during the Kennedy and Nixon administrations.

IN THE 16 decades since the White

House was burned by the British in 1814 and reconstructed, it has undergone five major changes — not counting the Regans' alterations — beginning with the Monroe presidency (1817-23) and covering projects by Presidents Arthur, Theodore Roosevelt, Truman and Kennedy.

When President and Mrs. Monroe moved into the rebuilt residence in the fall of 1817 — its exterior had been painted a gleaming white for the first time — they decorated the "large oval room" on the first floor with fashionable French Empire furniture, elegantly carved and gilded pieces they had ordered from France.

On view once again in the oval Blue Room are seven chairs and a sofa from that collection. The sofa had been sold at auction in 1860 but returned to the White House in 1878. Mrs. Reagan had it removed from storage, regilded and recovered in blue silk upholstery to match the chairs.

The White House now represents all periods of American history, with the focus on Federal-period furnishings of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. On display are tables, chairs, prints, paintings, sofas, objects d'art, candelabra and sculpture.

"The walls are graining with things we recover from storage," said Ted Graber, the Regans' decorator. "We really ended up having a treasure hunt. We found eagle carvings, eagle brackets, engraving — things in every nook and cranny."

William Seale, who is working on a two-volume history of the executive mansion, recently said that "the house has to be reshaped constantly to reflect various lifestyles."

"The White House is an environment of run-run-run," The Regans, he said, "like the informal approach — an environment in which they can work and relax. That is what's been done."

THE RECENT WORK completed by the Regans is built on preservativs and restoration traditions followed by 20th-century White House residents. Until the early 1950s, most first families were conscious of keeping up with the latest furnishing styles and would pay for new acquisitions by selling at auction the items bought by previous presidents.

This practice reached an extreme when President Chester Arthur in 1881 removed and sold 24 wagonloads of household goods, including all the furniture in the East Room and Green Room and part from the Red Room.

"I will not live like this," he said, filling the White House with the latest ornate Victorian styles.

But Teddy Roosevelt would have none of that. Appalled by what he considered Victorian excesses — rooms filled with bric-a-brac, beaded-fringed lampshades, clumsy furnishings, gilt and shiny varnish — he brought in the well known architectural firm of McKim, Meade and White to restore the house to its original early 19th-century classicism. The theme has remained throughout this century.

The search for period furniture for the White House was pioneered in the 1920s by Grace Coolidge who successfully urged Congress to pass a resolution authorizing the president to accept "rare old pieces" as gifts for the White House. Though the antiques only trickled in, the Green Room was refurbished before the Coolidges left. In turn, Mrs. Herbert Hoover grouped the few remaining pieces from the Monroe era in an upstairs room and had some other original Monroe pieces copied for the White House.

Mamie Eisenhower launched a refurbishing program in 1959, and two years later, at the beginning of the Kennedy administration, Congress passed legislation providing that White House furniture of "historic or artistic interest" was "inalienable" property to be used only there or loaned to the Smithsonian.

With the arrival of the Kennedys, the decorating emphasis on both the state and family floors went into high gear to look old and display original period furnishings.

"It's been 20 years since Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis began her restoration project in the White House," Mrs. Reagan said. "She did not have time to complete her work. I found there was a great deal to be done."

UNTIL THE TURN of the century, the West Sitting Hall, which the Regans now call home, was little more than a glorified stair landing, sparsely furnished and at one time covered by what one observer described as a "rich but frightfully ugly carpet."

The stairs were ripped out in 1902, and since presidential families have arranged the rooms with their favorite furnishings. The space has been described as the most cheery spot in the White House.

"I wanted the room to be as homelike and comfortable as possible," Mrs. Reagan said, "and I think I have achieved that with my own furniture."

The room has a "very personal look," Graber said. Among furnishings are red chintz-covered sofas, English antiques, collections of jade objects and Chinese porcelains, paintings, miniature Chippendale chairs, plants, flowers and a needlepoint sofa pillow with the initials "R.R."

"My husband's study on the second floor is also furnished with personal furniture and mementos," Mrs. Reagan said. "The desk is his own, as are the two upholstered chairs and a butler's table. Everywhere in our home there are special family photographs to remind us of earlier days."

It is in the adjoining long Center Hall where Nancy Reagan's desire to display furnishings acquired and used by earlier presidential families is evident. Centered in the hall is an octagonal-shaped, 19th-century English partners desk used during the Kennedy years but later sent to storage.

Along the walls are rare pieces of American Federal furniture, most of them acquired during the Kennedy presidency: a Sheraton-style (1800-15) settee, two matching chairs and Pembroke tables with drop leaves in the Hepplewhite style. To one side is a 12-fold Chinese Coromandel screen given to the White House in 1964.

In the room's bookcases, Mrs. Reagan has placed a collection of flower-patterned plates from the china collections of the Polk and Grant administrations. The hall has become "an elongated drawing," according to Graber, "divided like an old Victorian house into two receiving rooms by the partners desk."

Off the hall and overlooking the Washington Monument is the gold-yellow Oval Room decorated with Louis XVI and American Empire furnishings made about 1800. Little changed in 20 years, the Yellow Oval Room is probably the most important room on the second floor of the White House, for it is here that the president receives foreign visitors attending state dinners.

JOHN ADAMS, the nation's second president, but first to live in the White House, also used the room for receptions, holding the first official party in the mansion here on Jan. 1, 1801. A few

years later, Dolley Madison trimmed the room in yellow, but all the early furnishings were lost in the 1814 fire. As the years passed, the Oval Room was taken over by later presidents for their personal studies, libraries or additional family living space. As late as the 1950s, President Eisenhower, displayed his military decorations in cases along the oval walls.

Change came with the Kennedys, who restored the room to its earlier color and formality. Mrs. Reagan has maintained this look but added two upholstered sofas.

"It is a perfectly beautiful room, but we wanted to break down some of the formality," Graber said. A painted settee and two armchairs, decorated with scrollwork and female figures that once belonged to President Monroe, are also in the room.

Among the most dramatic recent changes are those in the formerly forlorn third-floor Center Hall. The area now serves as a sitting room or "warm, large library" for the adjoining bedrooms, Graber said. "The choice was to leave the space empty or to furnish it. We chose the latter; it became a god place to put many of the things that were in storage."

THE STORAGE areas hold a collection of furnishings and art that one White House staff member says "runs the gamut" of the mansion's history. Included are New York Empire tables, a Baltimore secretary-desk, Dutch ginger jars, Currier and Ives prints, 19th-century American painted chairs and a pair of comfortable English chairs.

"Among the wonderful items we discovered in storage," Mrs. Reagan said, "was a 19th-century, French-made Benjamin Franklin clock," a timepiece highlighted by a figure of Franklin who was admired by the French. "We had it cleaned and repaired and it now sits in the third-floor Center Hall. It is beautiful."

"There is an exquisite collection of painted and stenciled furniture we have used to good advantage on the third floor. We found an English Regency settee, circa 1820, and a pair of 19th-century English side table decorated in chinoiserie motifs, and a wonderful set of fine New England chairs made in the early 19th century. It was a shame to have these lovely pieces deteriorating in storage."

A few yards off the hall and overlooking the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial, is a room special to the Regans — the third-floor sun room where they often slip away for lunch. Added to the White House by Mrs. Coolidge and enlarged by the Trumans, whose parakeets were housed in cages near the windows, the room, Graber said "is like a garden setting, very quiet, with everything playing to the spectacular views. It is the only place in the White House where you get sun, sky and clouds."

The sofas have been covered in a green and white print, the walls textured, painted and glazed and Audubon prints selected for decoration.

Working on the White House project with the Regans was an "exhilarating experience," Graber said, and as for the residence itself: "It has one of the kindest spirits — it is so warm and inviting."

Text and photographs courtesy of the Smithsonian News Service.



The Oval Room is where the foreign visitors attending state dinners are received. The Kennedys restored this room to its original formality. This look has been maintained, but two sofas have been added. A painted settee and two armchairs, decorated with scrollwork and female figures once belonging to President Monroe highlight the room.



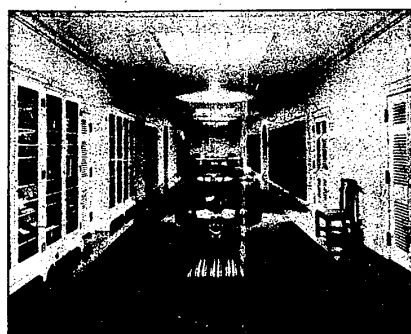
John Adams, the first president to live in the White House, used the Oval Room for receptions. Later presidents used the room for their personal studies, libraries or additional family space. The last president to use it for personal use was Dwight Eisenhower, who displayed his military decorations there. The room is shown as it was during the Truman administration.



Until the turn of the century the West Sitting Hall was little more than a glorified stair landing, sparsely furnished and at one time covered by what one observer described as a "rich but frightfully ugly carpet." The stairs were ripped out in 1902 when presidential families began decorating the room with their own furnishings. It has been described as the most cheery spot in the White House. This is what it looked like when the Herbert Hoover family occupied the presidential mansion.



The Regans, like first families before them, chose to decorate the West Sitting Hall with their own furniture. Among the furnishings are red chintz-covered sofas, English antiques, collections of jade objects and Chinese porcelains, paintings, miniature Chippendale chairs, plants and flowers, and a needlepoint pillow with the initials "R.R."



The third-floor Center Hall as shown during the 1930s was void of most furniture. This is the room Nancy Reagan selected to display furnishings acquired and used by earlier presidential families, thus changing the hall into an elongated drawing room.



Along the walls of the Center Hall as it now looks are rare pieces of American Federal furniture, most of them acquired during the Kennedy presidency. In the room's bookcases, Mrs. Reagan has placed a collection of flower-patterned plates from the china collections of the Polk and Grant administrations.