

THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE

WHITE HOUSE



HISTORY CLASSROOM

STUDY GUIDE



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WHITE HOUSE

ABOUT THE SHOW

In 2010, tall fences went up outside the West Wing of the White House. This massive \$376 million-dollar construction project was intensely guarded from the prying eyes of the press and downplayed as nothing more than a routine upgrade to the wiring and air conditioning systems of the White House. What is the true story behind this sprawling, multistory structure whose underground assembly required truckloads of heavy-duty concrete and steel beams? Many have speculated that the real center of power for the White House is underground. From the first bunkers built to protect FDR and Truman, to the rumored passageways, elevators and vault doors with biometric access control systems, “Secret History of the White House” explores both the hidden and known lairs that lie beneath the most important piece of real estate in America.

Learn More: <https://www.history.com/specials/the-secret-history-of-the-white-house>



THE WHITE HOUSE WASHINGTON

UNCLASSIFIED

VIEWING GUIDE

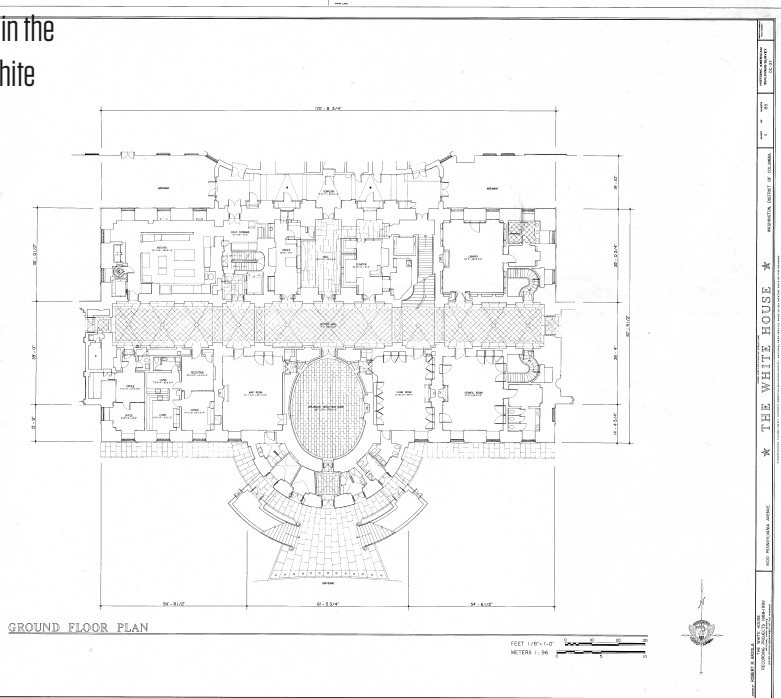
Discussion Questions

1. In what ways is the White House an important location?
2. After seeing footage of the Situation Room during the events of September 11th, why do you think government officials may have believed there was a need for an updated facility?
3. Why do you think the U.S. government would think it was important that the president and his staff have a safe and well-equipped place to operate in the event of an emergency?
4. Why do you think White House spokespeople might be secretive about the construction project at the White House? How might such a project affect security at the White House? What might happen if detailed information about the construction project became public knowledge?
5. Do you think U.S. citizens have a right to know everything that goes on at the White House? Do you think there is ever justification to keep some things confidential in the interest of national security?
6. If you were the White House spokesperson, how do you think you would have answered questions about what was happening at the White House "Big Dig"?
7. Why do you think the former Secret Service agent interviewed in the program refused to say what he knew, if anything, about the White House Big Dig project?

Terms to Define

- National security
- Commander-in-chief
- Excavation
- Bunker
- Command center
- September 11th or 9/11

White House architectural drawings, Library of Congress



RELATED STORIES

The Washington Post, April 14, 2011: "White House 'Big Dig': West Wing entrance fenced off"

https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post_now/post/white-house-big-dig-west-wing-entrance-fenced-off/2011/04/04/AFvegfbC_blog.html?utm_term=.e4d12ee9add9

The New York Times, October 17, 2011: "Big Hole in White House Lawn Prompts Equally Big Questions"

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/18/us/big-hole-on-white-house-lawn-prompts-speculation.html>

The Washington Post, November 27, 2011: "In the nation's capital, underground is where it's at"

https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/in-the-nations-capital-underground-is-where-its-at/2011/11/22/gIQABFo42N_story.html?utm_term=.fd903ec770ad

CNN.com, May 29, 2018: "Let it sink in: the White House sinkhole is no more"

<https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/29/politics/white-house-sinkhole/index.html>

**The White House Historical Association, "Secret Spaces at the White House,"
by William Seale, historian**

<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/secret-spaces-at-the-white-house>

The Washington Post: "The White House situation room through the years"

https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-white-house-situation-room-through-the-years/2011/05/04/AFDNthrF_gallery.html?utm_term=.ec7907ee7980

CIA Library: "Inside the White House Situation Room"

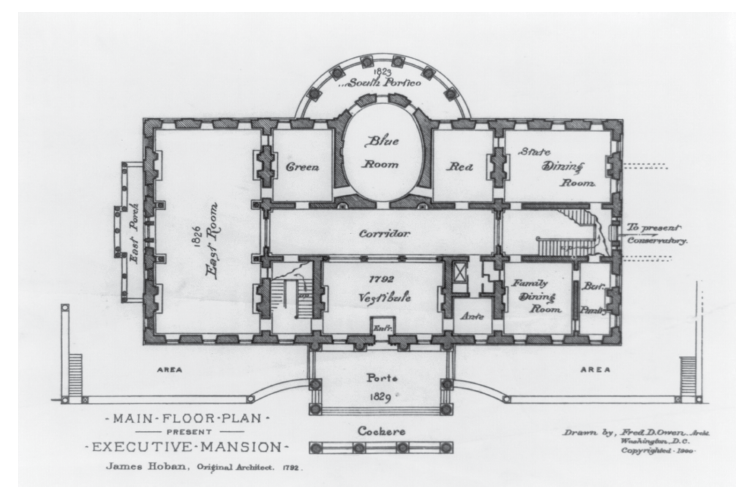
<https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/97unclass/whithous.html>

White House Historical Association: "Security and the White House Classroom Resource Packet"

<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/teacher-resources/security-and-the-white-house>

ACTIVITY 1: DESIGNING A WHITE HOUSE

When the White House was designed, America was just beginning. In many ways, it was a large scale experiment, and America's founders faced many unanswered questions. Among these were questions about the nation's chief executive. This included not only the extent of his powers, but more practical questions: What should he be called? What should he wear? Where should he live? Although Americans agreed--and had fought a war over the idea--that they did not want a king, they did want their president, and their country itself, to be taken seriously on the world stage. Finding the sweet spot between the two proved a delicate balance.



Alterations to the Executive Mansion, for Mrs. Benjamin Harrison, drawn by Fred D. Owen, Public Domain, Library of Congress.

Primary Source: White House Floor Plans

Compare plans for the first and second floors of the White House over the years kept by the White House Museum (unofficial).

First floor plans:

<http://www.whitehousemuseum.org/Floor1-history.htm>

Second floor plans:

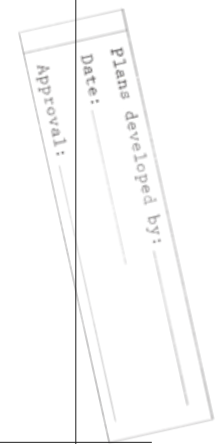
<http://www.whitehousemuseum.org/Floor2-history.htm>

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some of the differences you see in the first floor plans? What differences do you see in the second floor plans?
2. Why do you think these changes were made to the White House?
3. Did you find anything surprising about these plans?

Activity: Design Your Own White House

Ask students to examine the White House floor plans. Then, ask students to think about the decisions they would have made if they had been in the founders' shoes. How many floors and rooms should the executive mansion have? What purposes would these floors and rooms serve? How would the students want the interior and exterior to be designed and decorated? What other buildings would be included on the grounds? How would they address issues of openness and access as well as of security? Students can prepare and present an annotated hand or digital drawing of their designs.



ACTIVITY 2: FIRST LADIES AND THE WHITE HOUSE

Since the early days of our nation's history, it's been America's first ladies who have been in charge when it comes to the White House. And it's largely thanks to their efforts that the White House has retained both its beauty and its function.

Some examples of the first ladies' efforts include:



Edith Roosevelt [1901-1909]: Roosevelt grew tired of what she called “living over the store,” and she was responsible for renovating the White House in order to separate the president's executive offices from the family's living quarters. Just as, around the turn of the century, the United States was becoming a bigger player on the world stage, the renovation overseen by Edith Roosevelt helped ensure that the White House was a fitting home for the president of a world power.

Fun fact: Theodore Roosevelt was the first president to refer to the executive mansion as the “White House.”



Bess Truman [1945-1953]: By the time of the Truman administration, the White House was so badly in need of renovation that it was becoming structurally unsound and unsafe for habitation. In fact, plaster would often fall down around light fixtures, and the Trumans' daughter's piano leg actually fell through the floor of her room. Although it would have been less expensive to raze the White House and start over, Bess Truman insisted that the four exterior walls of the house—which had survived the War of 1812—remained intact while the interior was gut renovated. Find out more about the Truman renovation [here](https://www.whitehousehistory.org/collections/president-trumans-renovation):

<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/collections/president-trumans-renovation>



Jacqueline Kennedy [1961-1963]: When Jacqueline Kennedy moved into the White House, she was disappointed to find that many of its original furnishings, including antique furniture, fixtures and other decor had been removed over the years. She wanted the White House to be decorated in as elegantly and stately a manner as European executive mansions. She spearheaded a major fundraising effort to pay for a complete redecoration of the White House. She then studied White House history to come up with a plan for finding, purchasing and soliciting donations of appropriate furnishings. She also lobbied Congress to give the White House museum status and helped create the White House Historical Association to manage its contents, as well as a printed guide for White House visitors. She even won an Emmy for her televised tour of the redone White House, which was watched by an estimated 56 million people in more than 100 countries.



Pat Nixon [1969-1974]: Although she is not as well-known for her efforts, Pat Nixon continued Jacqueline Kennedy's work, adding more than 600 pieces of furniture and art work to the White House collection, more than was added during any other administration. In addition, Nixon carefully designed the outdoor lighting system that keeps the White House beautifully aglow in the evenings, and was responsible for adding an American flag to the roof. It is flown 7 days a week, 24 hours day, even when the president is not at the residence.



Michelle Obama [2009-2017]: In 2009, with the help of local schoolchildren, Michelle Obama created an 1,100-square-foot vegetable garden on the grounds of the White House. The garden, while designed to inspire American children to eat more healthfully, also provided more than 50 varieties of organic fruits and vegetables for both the White House kitchens and a local food bank. It was the first White House vegetable garden since Franklin Roosevelt's administration.

PHOTO CREDIT FOR ALL IMAGES: Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think the first ladies have largely been responsible for the renovations of and improvements to the White House?
2. The White House is one building that serves many purposes. What do you think some of these purposes are?
3. What kind of building do you think the White House should be? What are some words you would use to describe the ideal White House?

Activities:

Lady of the House

Ask students to choose a first lady (from the above list or another with a significant impact) and research the woman and her efforts on behalf of the White House. The results of his or her research can be presented in a short dossier that includes biographical information; a brief sketch of the first lady's beliefs and achievements; a description of her work on the White House; and an analysis of this work's importance to the presidency, the public or American history.

Guided Tour

When Jacqueline Kennedy oversaw the renovation of the White House, she also created a companion guidebook, which is still available. In groups, ask students to research various sections of the White House interior and grounds and create their own illustrated, informational guidebook. Cross disciplinary potential with English/writing; art; and computer science classes.



White House at Night, Public Domain via White House Flickr

ACTIVITY 3: MAKING MEANING: QUOTES ABOUT THE WHITE HOUSE



Grover Cleveland / U.S. president, 1885-1889 and 1893-1897

“Sometimes I wake at night in the White House and rub my eyes and wonder if it is all not a dream.”

Grover Cleveland: Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons

As a class, read the following quotes about the White House, and try to understand and describe what the speaker's meaning may have been. Use the questionnaire on the next page to help guide the analysis.

“To dance in the [White House] would be...respectful neither to the house nor to the office.”

- Sarah Childress Polk (U.S. first lady, 1845-1849)

“The White House is the finest prison in the world.”

- Harry Truman (U.S. president, 1945-1953)

“Any man who does not like dogs and want them about does not deserve to be in the White House.”

- Calvin Coolidge (U.S. president, 1923-1929)

“Any time someone carries a picket sign in front of the White House, that is the First Amendment in action.”

- Julian Bond (American civil rights activist and politician, b.1940-d.2015)

Guiding the Analysis:

1. Are there any terms used in the quote that you don't understand? Discuss with your teacher and classmates to try to determine their meaning.
2. What do you think the quote means? Try to restate it in your own words.
3. Who is the speaker? What was America like during their lifetime?
4. Why do you think they may have felt the way they did?
5. Do you think the speaker was correct? Do you think their quote is accurate today?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:

FDR's Greenbrier Bunker

Ask students to research the history of the secret bunker built by President Franklin Roosevelt at White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. Related activities could include (1) writing a letter from the perspective of one of the bunker's builders, (2) assuming the persona of FDR, and writing orders for the bunker to be built, including specifications or (3) writing a "news story" about the 1992 discovery of the bunker. Alternatively, students could also study the "Ravens Rock" bunker for government agencies in Pennsylvania.

Related Resources:

NPR, "The Secret Bunker Congress Never Used." March 26, 2011.

<https://www.npr.org/2011/03/26/134379296/the-secret-bunker-congress-never-used>

Greenbrier Resort, "Bunker History."

<http://www.greenbrier.com/Activities/The-Bunker/Bunker-History>

The Today Show, "Deep Down Under, Inside Look at a Secret Government Bunker." June 22, 2018.

<https://www.today.com/video/deep-down-under-inside-look-at-a-secret-government-bunker-1261682243674>

NPR, "In the Event of Attack: How the Government Plans 'To Save Itself.'" June 21, 2017.

<https://www.npr.org/2017/06/21/533711528/in-the-event-of-attack-heres-how-the-government-plans-to-save-itself>

White House Press Secretary

The program "Secret History of the White House" includes clips of former White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs answering, and neatly evading, questions about the White House "big dig." Ask students to research the responsibilities and role of the White House press secretary. Why is this role important? How should the press secretary balance telling the American public the truth with national security? Related activities might include (1) writing a job description or posting for the job of press secretary, (2) writing a statement in the voice of the press secretary about the Big Dig, or the Greenbrier or Ravens Rock bunkers or (3) holding a mock press briefing.

Related Resources:

White House Historical Association: What is it like to be the White House Press Secretary?

<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/questions/what-is-it-like-to-be-the-white-house-press-secretary>

Encyclopedia Britannica: The White House Press Secretary

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/White-House-press-secretary>

White House Historical Association: The White House and the Press Timeline

<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/press-room/press-timelines/the-white-house-and-the-press-timeline>

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

RESOURCES

RELATED WEBSITES

About the White House, White House official site
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/>

White House Historical Association
<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/>

White House Historical Association Education Resources
<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/rubenstein-center>

The White House, History.com
<https://www.history.com/topics/landmarks/white-house>

The White House Restoration, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library
<https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/the-white-house-restoration>

History of the White House, The Truman Library
<https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whitehouse/exhibit/white-house-history.html>

RELATED BOOKS

Goldberg, Vicki. *The White House: The President's Home in Photographs and History*. (Little, Brown and Company, 2011.)

Klara, Robert. *The Hidden White House: Harry Truman and the Reconstruction of America's Most Famous Residence*. (Thomas Dunne Books, 2013.)

Monkman, Betty. *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*. (Abbeville Press, 2014.)

Phillips-Schrock, Patrick. *The White House: An Illustrated Architectural History*. (McFarland & Company, 2013.)

Seale, William. *The President's House*. (White House Historical Association, 2008.)

Seale, William. *The White House: The History of An American Idea*. (White House Historical Association, 2001.)

White House Historical Association. *The White House: An Historic Guide*. (White House Historical Association, 2011.)