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You don't have to crash a White House dinner to see presidential china

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January 28, 2010 8:38 AM

Bernie Petit

Unless you've been a guest – invited or otherwise – at a White House dinner, you probably haven't had many chances to see presidential china firsthand.

Until now.

The Presidential Culinary Museum at The Inn of the Patriots Bed & Breakfast in Grover is featuring pieces of the china collection of former President James K. Polk and First Lady Sarah Childress Polk through June 11.

The display, which includes their dinner plate and teacup with saucer, highlights a bigger collection of china patterns used by former first families George and Martha Washington, John and Abigail Adams, Thomas and Martha Jefferson, James and Dolley Madison, Franklin and Jane Pierce, and Abraham and Mary Lincoln.

Besides being representative of history, the china shows the tastes of the day, said Martin Mongiello, who opened the Grover inn almost two years ago with wife Stormy, a Cleveland County native.

"Not many people have ever seen the china," said Mongiello, a former White House chef and executive chef at presidential retreat Camp David. "The majority of the presidents' china has been locked up in various airlock tombs and holding collections and private collections."

Not every president and first lady opts to commission a china pattern of their own, he said. Early on, it was popular for incoming presidents to select new china, particularly since the frequent entertaining at the White House could diminish the pieces, and breakage would eat up their numbers.

That hasn't been the case in later years, Mongiello said, thanks to the improved quality of china, less broken pieces and the hefty price tag. The china selected by Ronald and Nancy Reagan was used for almost two decades until Bill and Hillary Clinton replenished the stock of official state china with 300 12-piece place settings in 2000.

The price tag? About \$240,000, footed by privately raised funds

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(Benjamin Patton The Gazette) Part of the Inn of the Patriots Bed and Breakfast display honoring former President James Polk.

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though the White House Historical Association Acquisition Trust. Before leaving office, outgoing President George W. Bush and wife Laura unveiled a 4,300-plus-piece set a few months before he left office – enough to sit 320 people at a full sit-down dinner. The \$493,000 tab was also picked up by the White House Historical Association Acquisition Trust.

"With the standards of today, if the Reagan china lasted 20 years, you can imagine how strong today's china is," Mongiello said. "It could be the year 2050 before a new set is purchased."

All the more reason to see past presidential china patterns today.

What's on the President's Plate?

"First Lady of the United States of America, Sarah Childress Polk and North Carolina's pride, President James Knox Polk," a historic exhibition of their receptions in the White House and a china exhibit of their dinner plate and teacup with saucer on display next to their famed favorite recipe, Hickory Nut Cake, runs through June 11 at The Presidential Culinary Museum at The Inn of the Patriots Bed & Breakfast, 301 Cleveland Ave., Grover.

Presidential China Tidbits

Martin Mongiello, who opened The Inn of the Patriots almost two years ago with wife Stormy, offers some tidbits and stories about the presidential china on display. Mongiello is a former White House chef and executive chef at presidential retreat Camp David.

>> The James and Sarah Polk China is the first set to ever feature the U.S. seal in red, white and blue on it.

>> Mongiello's least favorite china? The yellow and black pattern of James and Dolley Madison. "It's kind of like a bumblebee, it distracts so much from the plate."

>> There's a reason rice is on the dessert plate of Thomas and Martha Jefferson. Thomas Jefferson smuggled rice out of Italy despite the threat of death (which was the punishment for illegally exporting the country's rice) and planted it in North and South Carolina.

>> George and Martha Washington's dinner plates had the names of 15 states. (The original 13 colonies gave rise to 18 present-day states.)

>> Abraham and Mary Lincoln's first china set garnered criticism because purple, which some thought represented royalty, was the predominant color. Following Lincoln's assassination, President Andrew Johnson had get Congress to pass a bill to pay the debt for their second set of china.

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sronce wrote:

"President Andrew Johnson had get Congress to pass a bill to pay the debt for their second set of china." And we are still paying for it.

Wiki

"As of 2007, US public debt as a percentage of GDP ranked 27th highest out of 126 countries"

"Debts incurred during the American Revolutionary War and under the Articles of Confederation led to the first yearly reported value of \$75,463,476.52 on January 1, 1791. Over the following 45 years, the debt grew, briefly contracted to zero on January 8, 1835 under President Andrew Jackson but then quickly grew into the millions again."

1/28/2010 9:32 AM EST

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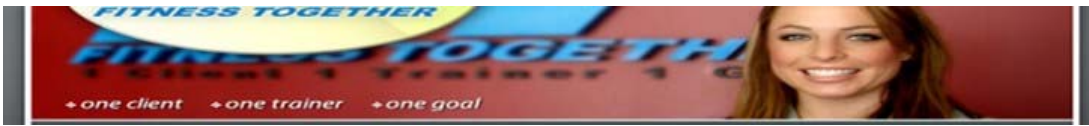
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