

The most important building in America

David Kruh

One of the more popular expressions being used by the writers and broadcasters who are covering the presidential race is “the run for the White House.” It is interesting to note how few use the term “run for the Presidency.” That’s understandable, in part, because the Presidency is a job described by a set of duties and obligations that can be fairly abstract. But the White House, a 132-room, 204 year-old building just off the Washington mall, is anything but abstract. It is a tangible prize for those who run for the office of President of the United States, and for many reasons there may be no more important building in America.

Let’s start off with the most compelling fact about the White House: unlike almost every other government building in Washington, this one houses not just an office, but a family. And while it is difficult for most Americans to identify with the pressures of the Presidency, almost all can identify with the ups and down of being in a family. In two centuries of use Americans have celebrated White House weddings (in two cases that of the president himself, once in the mansion itself,) shared the joy of births, mourned the loss of wives and of children, and eight times have grieved with the First Family upon the death of the President himself. Those events have created strong emotional bonds, not just with the family inhabiting the White House at the time but, because no family is there for longer than eight years, with the home itself. It is that transitory nature which provides one of the great symbols of our republic: the simple act of one family moving into the White House while another family, sometimes that of the defeated candidate, (three out of the last seven elections, alone) moving out.

Temporary as their stay may be, residents of the White House have made numerous changes and additions to their home. Some, like the 1889 hiring by Benjamin Harrison of the first woman on the White House payroll, foreshadowed great social changes in the country. Tracking the introduction of new technologies on daily life in America, from the nascent days of the rural republic when the first First Lady, Abigail Adams, hung

laundry in the East Room to when Bill Clinton sent the first email, we witness the raising of standards of living and quality of life: James Polk, who was the first to have his photograph taken, also had gas lights installed. Franklin Pierce put in electric heating. Andrew Johnson had a telegraph office built in the White House and Rutherford B. Hayes installed a telephone. William Howard Taft bought the first official automobiles and, as many Americans would do in the ensuing years, turned the stables into a garage. Coolidge bought the first electric vacuum cleaners, electric refrigerators, and radio while FDR, who was also the first to travel in an airplane, used the first air conditioners. Harry Truman gave the first televised address from the White House and Lyndon Johnson was the first to have his image beamed through a satellite.

Over two centuries after it was designed, the White House still serves the purposes for which it was designed. It is a home. It is a seat of power. It is permanent. It is ever changing. We draw comfort from those qualities, from the building's very presence there on the mall. On his second night in the still-uncompleted mansion, President John Adams wrote the following inscription, which still sits over the mantle of the White House Dining Room fireplace. It reads: "I pray Heaven to Bestow the Best of Blessings on THIS HOUSE and on All that shall hereafter Inhabit it. May none but honest and Wise Men ever rule this roof." Two centuries after he wrote those words, America is no longer the rural land where his wife hung laundry in the East Room, but a nation on which so many people around the globe depend for their security and prosperity. And so the big white house at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue may not only be the most important building in America, but the most important in the world.

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