

The Burning of the White House

John Adams, the second President of the United States, was the first President to live in the White House. In November 1800, just four months before the end of his presidency, he and his wife, Abigail, moved into the drafty, unfinished mansion. Only six of the 36 rooms were usable, the grounds were littered with construction equipment, and water had to be carried in buckets from nearly a half mile away.

In 1809, when James Madison became President, the White House still needed considerable attention. The mansion was now more comfortable to live in, but its rooms looked shabby and bare. Madison's wife Dolley and the architect Benjamin Latrobe began a flurry of decorating, using funds approved by Congress. Rooms were repainted or wallpapered, upholstered furniture was purchased, and fancy mirrors were hung on the walls. Dolley ordered a piano she particularly wanted and, over the strong objections of Latrobe, selected red velvet curtains for the drawing room.

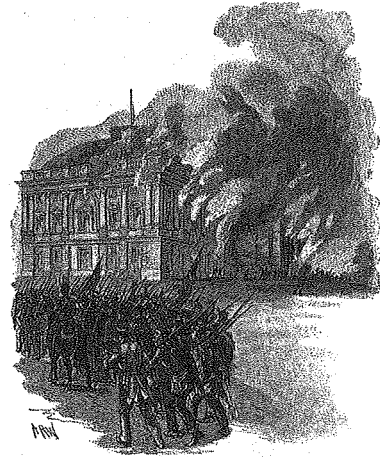
Before long the White House looked beautiful, and its public rooms sparkled with frequent teas, parties, and formal dinners. Dolley, a **vivacious** First Lady, became known for her weekly receptions called "Wednesday drawing rooms."

These festive White House events ended in August 1814. Two years earlier, the United States had entered into a war with England over America's rights on the high seas. Fighting had been mainly in the area of the Great Lakes, at sea, and in Canada. Now, however, British forces had sailed into Chesapeake Bay and were headed toward Washington, D.C.

On August 24 Dolley Madison was busy filling trunks with official papers, silver, and her favorite red velvet curtains. Her husband, who was at a nearby battle, had urged her to be ready to flee the White House at a moment's warning. Sure that her husband and his cabinet would soon return, she asked a servant to prepare dinner. At about three o'clock a messenger arrived crying, "Clear out! Clear out!" Dolley refused to leave until a full-length portrait of George Washington was removed from the wall and taken away for safe keeping. At last, leaving behind everything else, she had the trunks put into a wagon and rode away in her carriage.

That night British soldiers broke into the White House. They **gleefully** ate the meal that had been set out, drank President Madison's wines, and grabbed a few souvenirs. Then, using flaming torches, they set fire to the mansion. By the next morning, all that was left of the house were the blackened outer stone walls.

Reconstruction of the White House began in early 1815 under the direction of James Hoban. It took nearly three years for this beautiful mansion to once again be completed.



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