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Dream House: The White House as an American Home

Ulysses G. Dietz, Sam Watters

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Today it s the most famous building in the world, recognizable to millions as a symbol of the American presidency. But the White House was not always an iconic monument it was first an American home.

From 1800 until 1960, the president s house kept pace with changing ideals of the perfect American house and garden. It began as George Washington s dream of a country estate; a century later, when robber-baron palaces came into fashion, it became the imperial seat of the larger-than-life Theodore Roosevelt. In the 1950s, Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower enjoyed the middle-class life in the capital city, barbequing on the roof of the curving south portico. That ended when Jacqueline Kennedy redecorated the White House as a museum to upper-class taste.

Dream House: The White House as an American Home looks at the president s house in the context of American house design and decoration. Hundreds of historic photographs, plans, and drawings compare the president s residence to other American houses, gardens, and interiors, showing the White House as it changed through decades of interior renovation, rebuilding, and landscaping. The nation s finest decorators, garden designers, architects, and retailers Herter Brothers, Sister Parish, Beatrix Farrand, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., and McKim, Mead & White helped first families realize personal, and yet always American, dreams of how presidents should live.

As Americans we think we know the White House, from the Red, Green, and Blue rooms to the Oval Office. What we know is only part of a much bigger story . . .

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