

Liberty University

**James Monroe's White House:  
The Genius of Politics and Place**

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by

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## **Abstract**

This research endeavor has discerned the origins of an enduring American nationalistic distinctiveness perpetuated by President James Monroe's White House. A careful scholarly examination of Monroe's White House as a cultural landscape enquires into the genesis of interdependence between place and politics. It also studies the depth of the American people's ability to embrace, as their own, the symbolism and national vision fashioned in these spaces. The juxtaposition of James Monroe's election as the first United States president after the War of 1812 with the resurrection of the White House manifested for him an exclusive opportunity, still fraught with perils, to define national identities and interiors for the early republic and its posterity. Early attempts to write about the White House compartmentalized the historical context by architecture, social aspects, executive functions, political power, and biographical literature. Self-imposed confinement in historical discourse prohibits a comprehensive narrative while encouraging the autonomy of places, events, ideals, and people. Interpreting the White House as a cultural landscape illuminates the agency of culture as a force in shaping the visible features within those spaces. Reciprocally, the physical environment retains a central significance as the medium through which human cultures act. Consequently, Monroe's White House transubstantiated disaffection into a maturing national consciousness. Emphasizing and interpreting primary resources permits the examiner to expose a seemingly mutually exclusive trajectory of James Monroe's early political career with the White House's architectural evolution. In contrast, their paths reveal a diminishing parallel. At the point of infinity, the newly elected President Monroe refurbished the interiors and nurtured administrative protocols to foster domestic public and foreign diplomacy while encouraging national respect and integrity for the country.

## Contents

Chapter One: James Monroe’s White House .....	1
Chapter Two: Pathway to the Presidency .....	19
Formative Years.....	20
The Revolutionary Soldier.....	24
Political Apprenticeship.....	27
Lawyer and Public Servant .....	30
Foreign and Domestic Policy .....	34
Governor of Virginia.....	38
Second Mission Abroad.....	41
Secretary of State and Secretary of War .....	44
The Fifth President.....	46
Chapter 3: Rise & Ruin .....	48
George Washington’s White House.....	49
John Adams’s White House.....	60
Thomas Jefferson’s White House .....	65
James Madison’s White House.....	72
Chapter 4: Resurrection.....	78
Resilience.....	79
Repaired .....	85
A Change of Scenery .....	92
Redefining.....	99

Chapter 5: Designed to Impress .....	106
Something Old, Something New, and Something Borrowed .....	110
Splendidly Furnishing Spaces .....	114
Presidential Decorative & Fine Arts .....	126
Fine Dining .....	135
Architectural & Aesthetic Tones .....	147
Grand Remembrance .....	152
Chapter 6: Etiquette & Entertaining.....	155
Rules of Engagement .....	160
Taste of Elegance .....	169
Public Perception .....	174
Finesse & Flair .....	179
Domestic Landscape .....	186
Lasting Memories .....	189
Chapter 7: Place & Politics .....	193
The Era of Good Feelings .....	197
Securing the Nation’s Borders .....	204
Gaining Florida .....	211
“Indian” Policy.....	217
“Fire Bell in the Night” .....	222
The Monroe Doctrine.....	229
Triumphal Tour .....	238
“War of the Giants” .....	242
Achievements and Evaluation.....	251

Chapter 8: Emulation & Preservation .....	256
The Utility of Emulation .....	259
Preserving an Idea .....	270
Chapter 9: Cord of Affection .....	293
“City of Magnificent Intentions” .....	294
Conclusion .....	298
Bibliography .....	303

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## Figures

Figure 1. President's House, Washington, D. C.....	1
Figure 2. James Monroe.....	19
Figure 3. Building the First White House.....	48
Figure 4. James Hoban's White House Competition Design.....	56
Figure 5. James Hoban's White House Floor Plan.....	62
Figure 6. View of the President's House, Washington, D. C.....	78
Figure 7. James Hoban's South Portico Drawing .....	103
Figure 8. James Monroe, L.L.D., President of the United States .....	106
Figure 9. James Monroe Doctrine Desk .....	116
Figure 10. James Monroe Commode, Console Desserte, and Tea Table .....	117
Figure 11. George Peter Astor Pianoforte.....	118
Figure 12. Eliza Monroe Lap Harp .....	119
Figure 13. Bellangé Bergères & Pier Table .....	122
Figure 14. Sébastien Érard French Ormolu Grand Piano Replica .....	123
Figure 15. William King, Jr. East Room Chair.....	125
Figure 16. Minerva Clock and Candelabras .....	127
Figure 17. Hannibal Clock.....	128
Figure 18. James Monroe Administration Vases.....	129
Figure 19. Christopher Columbus, George Washington, and Amerigo Vespucci Busts .....	130
Figure 20. James Monroe Portraits .....	133
Figure 21. James Monroe & Elizabeth Kortright Portraits .....	134
Figure 22. Monroe State Service .....	138

Figure 23, Monroe Wine Cooler .....	140
Figure 24. Monroe Administration Soup Tureen.....	141
Figure 25. James Monroe Water Decanter .....	143
Figure 26. Monroe Dining Plateau in Situ .....	145
Figure 27. James Monroe's Italian Marble Mantel.....	148
Figure 28. Levee at the White House.....	155
Figure 29. Birth of the Monroe Doctrine .....	193
Figure 30. The President's House .....	256
Figure 31. The President's House from the River .....	293



## Chapter One: James Monroe's White House



*Figure 1. President's House, Washington, D. C.  
Artist: unknown, ca. 1832-1833  
Image courtesy of White House Historical Association*

Why do old places matter? How do these aged relics perpetuate a potent sway over us? Scholars have asked and pondered these questions since the dawn of recorded history. Just as the Romans marveled at the ruins of Troy, historians continue to explore the role of old places as powerful and thought-provoking, reflecting continuity, memory, identity, beauty, and sustainability. They personify the existential physical realm retaining fundamental import as the instrument with and through which human cultures act.<sup>1</sup>

So, what generates the quintessential essence of the White House's enduring attraction and legacy? Americans, seeking in earnest, will discover their White House fascination rooted in more than a memory of the great men who created and nurtured the United States. A decade after Congress had designated the nation's permanent capital in the fields and wild forests

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<sup>1</sup> Carl O. Sauer, *The Morphology of Landscape* (Berkeley: University Press, 1925): 19-53.

alongside the expansive Potomac River, John Adams would hold the distinction as the first executive mansion resident arriving by November 1800. Far from complete, the stark stone structure loomed over a desolate landscape enveloped by mounds of mud and littered with dilapidated worker shanties and heaps of building debris. Reflective on the infant republic, the White House embarked on a journey transforming it into a governmental nexus and a barometer for the country's political, economic, and social state. Observed as an elaborate historical tapestry, the imposing early edifice deftly wove threads of diplomacy, ceremony, art, and architecture, hoping to reveal a nation's exceptionalism. Ergo, the White House uniquely exemplifies the maturation of national character and consciousness as a cultural landscape. Our accelerated national dynamic necessitates an energetic awareness to study our heritage origins and cultural foundations to develop citizens' present sense of identity and future direction. Thus, inspired to unveil America's ancestry, scholars should pursue a dedicated historical inquiry into President James Monroe's tenure in the White House to illuminate and articulate the interdependence betwixt the genius of place and politics to nurture a national identity for a new republic and its posterity.<sup>2</sup>

The White House exists as a living history alive in the ambitions of the present and the dreams and deeds of the past. The landmark can inspire people to heroism, loyalty to a cause, high ideals, and the courage to carry them out. One may discern that American nationalistic distinctiveness may find its origins tethered to the regeneration of the White House by President James Monroe. President James Monroe employed architecture, aesthetic spaces, and protocols in the White House to ascertain political agendas and foster a national identity for a new

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Nixon, "Proclamation 4215—National Historic Preservation Week, May 5, 1973," eds. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/307586>.

republic. Political ideologies, foreign diplomacy, and federal city demographics refined Monroe's tastes and ultimately defined the new interior and exterior spaces. Contextually significant, this study reviews the historical narrative that positioned James Monroe in his pivotal statecraft role versus his predecessors. Finally, the research will demonstrate how President Monroe's choices affected future presidential administrations, public perception, and preservation initiatives.

At the heart of the matter, the investigator must accept the supposition that the intersection of politics and place impacts the formation of a state. Cultural landscapes and their corresponding material culture can exist as a political resource and base for national identity. They represent active voices that emphasize individuals' agency and their choices' impact. Therefore, we can interject that cultural history of this sort permits us to take a step back. We discover the notability of landscapes and material evidence previously taken for granted for the first time. Furthermore, some of what we have thought unchallengeable and natural exists as contingent and open to modification. And while the White House appears as a constant fixture in American public consciousness, the centuries-old building resides in a perpetual metamorphosis surviving several significant renovations. As a direct result, we uncover devoted interpretative scholarship significantly disproportionate or noticeably unrelatable.

Speculating the potential causes of this historiographical gap will aid in articulating a remedy. From a literary perspective, Esther Singleton, *The Story of the White House* (New York, 1907) represents an early attempt to write a comprehensive narrative to examine the construction, architecture, and manner of living in the executive residence. Rarely referenced today, Singleton's compendium deserves recognition for its overwhelming collection of primary

sources to chronicle the building's history during the early twentieth century. Regrettably, Singleton's self-imposed confinement to the president's social sphere and strict avoidance of political turmoil fashioned a picturesque façade.<sup>3</sup>

Regardless, Singleton's unrealistic narrative of a nation as embellished in a house and its occupants abstaining from political bias remained unchallenged until the publication of William Seale's *The President's House: History* (Washington, D. C., 1986) and *The White House: The History of An American Idea* (Washington, D. C., 1992). Seale's authoritative works for the White House Historical Association for over forty years instrumentally choreographed the research and dissemination of White House history. His unique approach to studying history through biography, architecture, landscape, and cultural context expanded our understanding of the American past by emphasizing the human stories of public spaces. Efforts to emulate Seale's success have perpetuated subsequent works, such as John and Claire Whitcomb's *Real Life at the White House* (New York, 2000) and Vicki Goldberg, *The White House: The President's Home in Photographs and History* (Boston, 2011). Dismayingly, researchers will find not much more than mere notations scattered about Monroe across these texts as President James Monroe's contribution to the reconstruction and refurbishment of the White House remains relegated to the recesses of these literary endeavors.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Esther Singleton, *The Story of the White House*, 2 vols. (1907; repr. London: Wentworth Press, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> William Seale, *The President's House: History*, 2 vols. (Washington, D. C.: White House Historical Association and National Geographic Society and New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986); William Seale, *The White House: The History of an American Idea* (Washington, D. C.: American Institute of Architects Press, 1992); John and Claire Whitcomb, *Real Life at the White House: Two Hundred Years of Daily Life at America's Most Famous Residence* (London: Psychology Press, 2002); Vicki Goldberg, *The White House: The President's Home in Photographs and History* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 2011).

Some historians have traversed a jaded path and contributed their unique slant while trying to achieve the elusive inclusion of each new president and family. As a result, the origins of our national identity tied to the edifice and the enacting president becomes obscured. Corrective measures for gaps in the historiographical interpretations have recently spawned monographs attributing the building's classical inspirations as a patriotic beacon to a designated president, much like Robert P. Watson's *George Washington's Final Battle: The Epic Struggle to Build a Capital City and a Nation* (Washington, D. C., 2021). Watson, a professor, author, historian, and media commentator, recounts how the United States' first president tirelessly advocated for the federal city during a fractious first congressional session. Washington's vision and instrumental leadership propelled the capital establishment forward. While it is true that Washington designated the location and meticulously guided the initial construction, he resigned as president after two terms, subsequently followed by his untimely death before the federal government's official relocation to the city that bears his name. Washington would never become an occupant nor utilize the President's House as a venue for his administration.<sup>5</sup>

Still, other authors have pursued examining the first presidential occupants, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, as seen in James B. Conroy's *Jefferson's White House: Monticello on the Potomac* (Lanham, MD, 2019). Conroy's previous positions as a House and Senate press secretary, speechwriter, and chief of staff placed him in the unique job of fully understanding and describing the connection between place and policymaking initiatives. His character-driven narratives bring to life the people who engaged with the Executive Mansion, from servants to cabinet secretaries and ordinary citizens to visiting dignitaries and diplomats. In

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<sup>5</sup> Robert P. Watson, *George Washington's Final Battle: The Epic Struggle to Build a Capital City and a Nation*. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2021).

*Jefferson's White House*, Conroy skillfully articulates the architectural features deftly deployed by President Jefferson to develop the executive office. Conroy's works exemplify the study of cultural landscapes and provide a valuable guide to formulate similar efforts. However, his supposition that Thomas Jefferson shaped the president's residence, literally and figuratively, more than any of its other occupants lends itself to objectionable debate. Also, forgetting that before President Jefferson's White House could foster a national persona attached to the unfinished house and firmly embed it upon the citizens' psyches, British invaders during the War of 1812 put such notions and the executive mansion to the torch.<sup>6</sup>

As the building represents continuity and stability to the American citizens, the actual residence remains in a constant state of change. According to their tastes and the prevailing styles of the era, each first family redecorated the interior, some more dramatic than others. Consequently, the alterations of the White House's revolving residents fashioned a dynamic and transitional history for the vital dwelling and its future preservation. In collaboration with the White House Historical Association, former White House curator, Betty Monkman, has best chronicled the interiors spaces, their furnishings, and their uses in two works: *The Living White House* (Washington, D. C., 2013) and *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families* (New York, 2002). Readers who peruse the texts will notice the recurring reference to President James Monroe and the White House collections. However, once again, the historical narrative falls short in spotlighting President James Monroe's contributions to the interior spaces

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<sup>6</sup> James B. Conroy, *Jefferson's White House: Monticello on the Potomac* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), Kindle.

that, arguably, branded themselves indelibly upon our cultural consciousness as defining our national identity.<sup>7</sup>

Interested parties may find a cache of literature chronicling the Kennedy Restoration. The White Historical Association recently published *Designing Camelot: The Kennedy White House Restoration and Its Legacy* (Washington, D. C., 2021) by James Archer Abbott and Elaine Rice Bachmann, celebrating the diamond jubilee of its founding and the first significant preservation effort orchestrated by the First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy.<sup>8</sup> Contrastingly, White House aficionados can dredge up a less than flattering quantity of discourse documenting the Truman Renovation. While often referenced within other historical texts, critically acclaimed author Robert Klara produced the only book, *The Hidden White House: Harry Truman and the Reconstruction of America's Most Famous Residence* (New York City, 2013), dedicated to the building's second interior rebuild.<sup>9</sup> Although the White House Historical Association, through its quarterly journal, has documented much of the White House's history, including its reconstruction after the War of 1812, no author has published a book emphasizing President Monroe's contribution to defining our image of this national symbol.

Another challenge to the literary scope falls within the realm of the advent of cultural studies. As this approach evolved during the latter twentieth century, historians began to stress the interpretation of human societies through landscapes and material evidence by signifying the

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<sup>7</sup> Betty C. Monkman, *The Living White House*, 13<sup>th</sup> ed. (Washington, D. C.: White House Historical Association, 2013); Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, 2nd ed. (New York: Abbeville Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> James Archer Abbott and Elaine Rice Bachmann, *Designing Camelot: The Kennedy White House Restoration and Its Legacy* (Washington, D. C.: White House Historical Association, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Robert Klara, *The Hidden White House: Harry Truman and the Reconstruction of America's Most Famous Residence* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, St. Martin's Press, 2013).

various distinctive aspects of living constructed by a group of people under consideration.<sup>10</sup>

Denoting the symbiosis between people and places still resides in an infant state. Its complete application to historic sites, such as the White House, continues to progress gradually, at best. Authors must learn to reinterpret places with a new, more complex sentiment on how history “inhabits” a space versus just mere attachment. Also, historians find locating evidentiary materials a daunting task to achieve inclusivity and culturally responsive interpretations.

Therefore, through a cultural historian lens, the White House transformed from an unassuming place in which presidents lived and worked into an aggregate of past cultural activity, ceremonies, class in practices, government, art, architecture, domestic and foreign diplomacy, etc. Yet, to discover the relationship between people and place in forming nationalistic attitudes and identities, one must delve much deeper into the nuances of their influence upon one another, shaping a distinctive voice, a unique perspective, a rudimentary plot, and some suggestion of characterization. The research will emulate Richard Bushman’s strategy for approaching American cultural landscapes to achieve this objective. In his book, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York City, 1992), Bushman, a renowned American historian and the Gouverneur Morris Professor Emeritus of History at Columbia University, illustrated the nature of how ideals interact with materials to change the American environment and reshaped American culture.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 20.

<sup>11</sup> Richard L. Bushman, “*The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), xii.



By employing a chronological framework to permit a natural progression, this study can explore the juxtaposition of Monroe's presidency and his architectural and aesthetic embellishments to the White House and will underscore Monroe's quest for a national identity. Consequently, it will highlight the evolution of the White House's iconography as a national symbol and its preservation. Finally, and more importantly, the Executive Mansion demonstrates the continuity between past and present. It serves as a record of the victories and defeats of a nation with a determination to turn those losses into lessons. It symbolizes Monroe's vision of how a president can unite a country and restore its aspirations for our troubled time, thus, a stalwart beacon to be esteemed by her people. President John F. Kennedy best echoed these sentiments: "When we [the United States] were founded, there was a king in France, a czar in Russia, an emperor in Peking. Today all that's been wiped away – and yet this country continues. It makes us feel we will continue in the future...Anything which dramatizes the great story of the United States – as I think the White House does is worthy of the closest attention and respect..."<sup>12</sup>

This research attempts to discover that Monroe's White House uniquely illustrates a growing nation and the evolving perpetual cultural symbolism attached to the structure and furnishings that personify past, present, and future by drawing upon original sources and pertinent secondary literature. For contextual understanding, chapter two will provide a glimpse into President James Monroe's formative years, military service, and political career to introduce the reader to his political ideologies and personal tastes that affected his presidency and the White House. Aptly characterized as America's first professional politician by authors such as

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<sup>12</sup> "A Televised Tour of the White House, February 14, 1962," CBS, John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/the-white-house-restoration>.

Harry Ammon and Noble Cunningham, Jr., Monroe possessed the experience and temperament ideally suited to assume office in this new environment of constitutional government. Over a 40-year career, beginning with his distinguished military record in the American Revolution, Monroe served as a legislator of the Virginia General Assembly, the Confederation Congress, the Virginia ratification convention, and the United States Congress; minister to France, Spain, and England; governor of Virginia; and, finally, United States secretary of state and war to President Madison.

Then, the research can segue into a transitory narrative of the architectural evolution and demise of the original White House and will shed light on Monroe's significant role in its rebuilding, completion, and aesthetic expression. Therefore, chapter three will turn back the pages in time to the close of the eighteenth century. The vestiges of thirteen British colonies fraught with strife have disappeared. In their place, states persevere through trials and tribulations to forage *a more perfect union*. Casting a critical eye toward the new seat of government, one catches a glimpse of the early signs of a future bastion of democracy in the bustling constructions along the Potomac River. Among these existed an Irish architect's effort for the President's House to become the nation's symbol and compete with great European halls. James Hoban, an immigrant from Ireland, and the new republic's first president, George Washington, collaborated to design a mansion whose size, form, and elegance would command respect at home and abroad without the trappings of monarchical opulence.<sup>13</sup>

Although Washington left the indelible mark of his dignity and good taste on the eighteenth-century building, mournfully, he would not live to see its completion. Yet, this same

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<sup>13</sup> Nathan Aaseng, *The White House* (San Diego: Lucent Books 2001), 27.

twist of fate spared Washington from the demoralizing torching of the executive residence. By 1812, the United States, still in its infancy, found itself embroiled again in an armed conflict with Great Britain. Regardless that most Americans consider the United States the victor in the War of 1812, the British forces successfully executed an invasion of Washington, D. C. In retaliation for the American's recent burning of the Canadian capital at York, today's Toronto, British Major General Robert Ross commanded the government and military buildings burned, especially targeting the White House. The British troops looted the premises before setting it ablaze, reducing the President's House to ashes, entombed by the charred ruins of its sandstone walls.

The catastrophic incineration gutted the interiors expunging from history any relic associated with the growing republic and her first four presidents. However, the scorched walls shrouding the smoldering cinders did not plummet the country into despair and chaos, much to the bane of the British. Ironically, the atrocities unleashed upon their capital, aided by General Andrew Jackson's resounding victory at New Orleans, goaded American citizens and infused them with a new patriotic spirit. And, with steely resolve, they would rebuild their capital city, including the White House. In *déjà vu* fashion, Congress again commissioned James Hoban's talents to reconstruct the presidential residence. And, though Hoban would replicate the original architectural design, he remained powerless to recapture the interior alterations and *décor* of the current and former first families. Lacking alternatives, President James Madison and his wife, Dolley, relocated to much smaller and less elaborate accommodations during the remainder of Madison's presidency. The cramped quarters made it impossible to resume regular presidential

affairs or recreate the first lady's lavish levees atmosphere instrumental in fostering bipartisan compromises.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, much like the mythological phoenix rising from the ashes, the nation and the White House experienced a rebirth, embracing the idea of an "Era of Good Feeling." With the dawning of 1817, the United States became keenly aware of its interest in a growing national community. Its newly elected United States president, James Monroe, found purpose in seeking to broaden expanding national aims while binding the United States' people together in unity.<sup>15</sup> However, the resurrected Executive Mansion remained unfinished. Thus, chapter four emphasizes President Monroe's careful supervision of the completion of the remaining architectural and landscaping elements of the adjacent grounds that we recognize most today.

Next, chapter five will focus on the President's House remaining unfurnished as the reconstruction absconded the early release of the stipend customarily allotted to the first families for necessary repairs and replacements, postponing the acquisition of new state furniture. Monroe used his personal furnishings and fine arts acquired during his diplomatic travels abroad, interspersed with new but delayed importations, to decorate the White House. At this juncture, one should note that Monroe's prior service as an American Minister to France nurtured a distinctive taste for French-style décor rather than American. Ironically, Monroe's French fixtures created the first distinguishing interior appearance of the White House. The excellent quality of the Monroe collection prevented their future wholesale dispersal in the sweeping redecorations and renovations of future presidents. Monroe's furnishing and interior design

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<sup>14</sup> William Ryan and Desmond Guinness, *The White House: An Architectural History* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1980), 127.

<sup>15</sup> Ryan and Guinness, *The White House*, 127.

bestowed a “dignity and grandeur” to the executive mansion that subsequent presidents would attempt to replicate and preserve, as discussed later in chapter eight.<sup>16</sup>

Presented in chapters six and seven, the President’s House, as a home and office for the executive, exists as private, domestic, and intimate while at the same time, public, visible, and powerfully linked with the people like no other stage. In its simplest form, President Monroe hoped to make America more American and bring emancipation from its dependence upon European monarchical practices and attitudes. He would pursue these goals with vigilance in a variety of ways. His greatest successes lay in foreign affairs and evolved new policy concepts which became equivocally American, like the Monroe Doctrine. In contrast, he failed notably to channel American political life in a direction that would culminate in party reconciliation, which President Monroe so ardently envisaged as an important development to ensure the stability of republican institutions. Unfortunately, from the moment that Monroe adopted as his guiding code the adage that he served as the head of the nation, not the party leader, he repudiated, for all practical purposes, party unity as a means of realizing presidential policies. Without party solidarity, his executive leadership became complicated with challenges in exercising policymaking initiatives. Undaunted, President Monroe employed the White House as the impetus to orchestrate presidential protocols, etiquette, and entertainment to establish effective networking and generate reliable contacts among his cabinet and congressional representatives.<sup>17</sup>

Although authors such as Watson and Conroy have placed us on the correct trajectory, their efforts exist as anomalies engulfed by a sea of one-dimensional scholarship. A

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<sup>16</sup> Ryan and Guinness, *The White House*, 127.

<sup>17</sup> Harry Ammon, *James Monroe: The Quest for National Identity* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1971) 380.

historiographical survey uncovers the narrow path most historians have embarked upon when investigating the White House and the presidents. The typical approach pursues sovereign entities overlooking the significance of continuity between place, people, and culture.

Nevertheless, such inadequacies breed the opportunity for this research to craft a compelling story to fill this particular void. As a result, this research will analyze and interlace these individually scholarly fields of work to explain how a place, such as the White House, helps us establish a sense of identity, remember our distinctiveness, and where we originate. As White House history has already received much attention, now, in due course, the discussion must set its sights on the individual, James Monroe. As the most instrumental in influencing that cultural landscape, he would foster a uniquely national sentiment and establish the benchmark for most White House historical spaces.

As the fifth elected president of the United States, James Monroe began his presidency by becoming the first family to reside in the rebuilt mansion. In stark contrast to the mounds of ash and burnt timbers, the monolithic-like structure became habitable again by late 1817 for the first family but beckoned for revival. In an atmosphere of renewed confidence following the country's second confrontation with the British, Monroe's administration resumed conducting executive affairs in the White House, which ran parallel to remodeling the interior. The rejuvenated executive mansion would become the forum in which President Monroe led the United States while facing diplomatic challenges stemming from the recession of the Spanish Empire in the Americas, the Russian Tsar Alexander's hopes to populate the Oregon Coast, and the acquisition of Florida while warding off European imperial interference and negotiating the controversy over slavery in Missouri.

Vital primary resources to this project include the papers of James Monroe, George Washington, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, James Hoban, etc., in conjunction with the Commissioners Records for the Federal City, congressional records, Washington newspapers, Washingtonians' letters, and Federal City visitors during the early nineteenth century. Pairing those evidentiary resources with quality Monroe biographies will provide an essential scholarly perspective. Unfortunately, compared to the first four presidents, biographers appear somewhat detached from Monroe as a Founding Father, with only a modest number of published books. *James Monroe: The Quest for National Identity* (Charlottesville, 2016) by Harry Ammon, a former professor emeritus at Southern Illinois University, still represents the most authoritative biography based on scholarly opinion. Disregarding that its original publishing occurred over forty years ago, the work remains the standard for interested researchers and aspiring presidential historians due to its thorough and informative record of Monroe's life. Critics' main objection resides in Ammon's overindulgence to avoid injecting bias, leaving his work wanting for the author's insight and illustrating Monroe's human element.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to Ammon's lengthy and lackluster text, Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., a leading presidential scholar and professor, provides his readers with an alternative to the typical life-spanning biography by just profiling Monroe's presidency. In *The Presidency of James Monroe* (Lawrence, 1996), Cunningham's history of the fifth presidency identifies a young nation beset by growing pains and directed by a cautious politician who, questionably, had neither the education nor the intellect of Thomas Jefferson or James Madison but whose actions reinforced both the United States and the presidency. Cunningham's work signifies new interpretations that

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<sup>18</sup> Ammon, *James Monroe*, v.

clarify that the mislabeled “Era of Good Feelings” had more than its share of crises.

Cunningham highlights how Monroe successfully defused these potentially explosive states of affairs, most remarkably by negotiating the 1820 Missouri Compromise and issuing a proclamation in 1823, otherwise known as the Monroe Doctrine, a document that still navigates American policy in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>19</sup>

Recently, *James Monroe: A Life* (London, 2021) may present a better literary choice. Tim McGrath, author and historian, has published the first biography in over a decade, developing a more comprehensive interpretation of James Monroe’s life utilizing newly available primary sources. McGrath’s work reads more like a two-volume set in a single book. The first section covers Monroe’s early life through the American Revolution. The second part addresses his political roles serving the Early Republican government as a senator, governor, diplomat, and president. McGrath’s ability to more prevalently underscore Monroe’s skills and achievements finds new resonance and relevance in our own time.<sup>20</sup>

In conclusion, this investigation recognizes the stoic structure erected as a symbol of democracy to many and identifiable worldwide to those who have endeared liberty for over two hundred years. The White House serves as the first family’s home, the United States executive branch, the American seat of the government, and an iconic site for civil discourse.<sup>21</sup> The President’s House remains the nation’s house belonging to the people, and much care goes into

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<sup>19</sup> Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., *The Presidency of James Monroe* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> Tim McGrath, *James Monroe: A Life*. (London: Penguin, 2021), Kindle.

<sup>21</sup> "President's Park (White House) (U.S. National Park Service)," NPS (U.S. National Park Service), last modified September 14, 2017, <https://www.nps.gov/whho/index.htm>.



its management. Over the years, the President's House experienced building, rebuilding, altering, expanding, and renovating. Many have contributed to its perpetuity to the nation, the hearts of the citizens, and its preservation. Significantly, the restoration initiatives during the Kennedy administration reflect the utmost identifiable in reinstating, legislating, and authenticating the historical integrity of the executive mansion.<sup>22</sup> Although a plethora of scholarship exists related to the White House and the United States presidents, few meticulously study the Monroe refurbishment or the synergy between residential spaces, policymaking, and nation-building to learn and articulate the overarching totality of James Monroe's White House.

History, defined as a mosaic, encompasses individual experiences that comprise larger sweeping narratives. We must view the White House as an archaeological and architectural footprint crafted by those who built and passed through its rooms. Capturing the voices of those individuals will illustrate the larger picture that resonated with President James Monroe's quest for American national identity and contributed to transforming the presidential spaces. According to architectural historian Dell Upton, people construct things that make sense to them, and such structures represent the builder's ideological perspectives. Therefore, landscapes extend the ideological process and the cultural construct. This supposition enables a critical evaluation of space and place as markers of social customs, mores, and materializations of cognitive patterns. Therefore, examining the White House within the larger context of Presidents Monroe's political agenda uncovers the centrality of this designated space in the

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<sup>22</sup> "Restoring the Past in the White House: A Look at the Jacqueline Kennedy White House Restoration Project – Archivally Speaking: An Inside Look at the JFK Library Archives," John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, accessed November 25, 2017, <http://archiveblog.jfklibrary.org/2014/03/restoring-past-white-house-look-jacqueline-kennedy-white-house-restoration-project/>.

nation's identity.<sup>23</sup> How subsequent first families characterize that cultural narrative determines how we think about heritage and foresee our future. This relationship between the past and present echoes across generations and essentially defines the human experience.

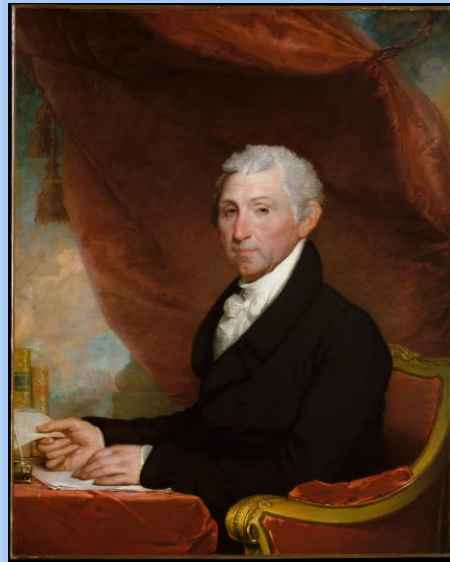
From its inception, James Hoban designed the White House destined to be a stage for events that marked the nation's progress from fewer than a score of states stretched along the Atlantic seaboard to a preeminent world power reaching far into the Pacific. Envisioning a nation encompasses only a portion of the process of founding one. Symbols must exist to solidify a sense of nationhood in the citizens and foreign countries abroad. The White House serves as the linguistic equivalent of the president, his administration, and the government, past or present. How we characterize the past significantly affects how we think about today and what we can imagine tomorrow. History is always alive to us only so far as we can make sense of it in the present.

The White House incorporates the confluence of its residents' personal lives and the life of the nation they represent. Each president-elect will arrive at residence with the inexplicably intertwined emotions of exuberance and stoic resolve as companions. As the nexus of state affairs and purposeful conviviality, the solitary stone structure's aesthetics rejuvenated under President James Monroe's orchestration and became instrumental in crafting a national identity during his administration. Therefore, exploring the synergetic relationship between place and politics divulges an innovative perspective of the American cultural experience and fundamentally alters the way we think about the genesis of American civilization.

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<sup>23</sup> Dell Upton, "Black and White Landscapes in Eighteenth Century Virginia," in *Material Life in America, 1600-1860*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 357.

## Chapter Two: Pathway to the Presidency



*Figure 2. James Monroe  
Artist: Gilbert Stuart, ca. 1820-1822  
Image courtesy of The Met Fifth Avenue*

“Our country may be likened to a new house, we may lack many things, but we possess the most important of – liberty!”<sup>1</sup> United States Minister to France James Monroe spoke these words in 1801, unaware of how literal their connotation would soon become for him and the President’s House.<sup>2</sup> In 1816, the newly elected President James Monroe faced the task of rebuilding a war-torn nation and rehabilitating the President’s House in the aftermath of the War of 1812. Understanding the symbolic significance of the President’s House, Monroe sought to finish the interiors and exterior in a manner that dually served as functional, patriotic, and befitting a nation. The interior and exterior spaces orchestrated by President James Monroe

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<sup>1</sup> James Monroe, commentary, 1801, quoted in Violette M. Montague, *The Celebrated Madame Campan* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1914), 266.

<sup>2</sup> Donald R. Hickey, “When Did the White House Become ‘the White House’?” *White House History*, no. 41 (Spring 2016): 4-11. The populace provisionally identified the structure located at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D. C., used as the residence and office of the president of the United States as the President’s House, the Executive Mansion, and the White House. The title “White House” became the officially adopted name per President Theodore Roosevelt’s administration.

reflect the values, beliefs, and tastes Monroe and his family developed through their life experiences in American and European society.

### Formative Years

The oldest child of a moderately prosperous family in the Virginia tidewater, James Monroe, born on the Northern Neck<sup>3</sup> in 1758, became the fifth President of the United States in 1817 and the fourth Virginian to attain this post. Monroe played and excelled in his roles as a student, soldier, politician, diplomat, and executive. He embraced and carried what he learned for the rest of his life. Monroe held more distinguished public offices than any other president, before or since. Though his contemporaries more often receive public adulation, Monroe deserves a high place of honor in the recorded history of this great nation.

Metaphorically, one could compare James Monroe to the wind, sometimes quietly and sometimes boldly, but always making his presence known in Early American history. Over four decades, commencing with his distinguished military record in the American Revolution, Monroe served as a member of the Virginia Assembly, the Confederation Congress, and the Virginia State Convention, and as a United States senator; minister to France, Spain, and England; governor of Virginia; and secretary of state and war. Thought by some to be dull and simple-minded, Monroe, a thoughtful and practical man, possessed a shrewd intelligence and excellent judgment honed by his many years of arduous experience. Genial and approachable, he presented a warm and even-tempered personality and an unpretentious manner that made men and women comfortable in his company. A well-affiliated, enthusiastic Republican partisan of

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<sup>3</sup> The Northern Neck is a 100-mile long peninsula located between the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers in the Tidewater region of Virginia.

great integrity, Monroe also demonstrated open-mindedness and moderation, sensibility under extreme duress, resoluteness over fundamental issues, and flexibility to accomplish objectives.<sup>4</sup>

Born to Spence and Elizabeth Jones Monroe, James Monroe became the third generation of the Monroe family (Clan Munro), whose ancestors immigrated from Scotland to America during the mid-seventeenth century. Like other early British colonists, they settled on the Northern Neck peninsula due to its easy accessibility to the Potomac River and the Chesapeake Bay. These immigrants found the rich soil and moderate climate optimum for a bountiful agricultural plantation lifestyle for themselves and their descendants. The Washingtons, Monroes, Madisons, Lees, Marshalls, and many others made their mark in history from humble beginnings in the Washington Parish.<sup>5</sup>

As a farmer and joiner, Spence Monroe achieved only modest financial affluence, which relegated the Monroe family to respectable obscurity and intermittent political interest. Yet, these seemingly mediocre conditions would provide the circumstances necessary to mold James Monroe's work ethic and political philosophies during his formative years. As a middling planter with a limited labor source, Spence Monroe included his eldest son, James, beside him in the managing and back-breaking working on the plantation. Though not extensive, Spence Monroe's landholdings still proved sufficient to qualify him as a "landed gentry" member and

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<sup>4</sup> James Monroe, *The Autobiography of James Monroe*, ed. Stuart Gerry Brown (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1959), 1; Charles Francis Adams, ed. *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*, vol. 4. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1874-1877), 470; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 4, 8, 42, 366-69.

<sup>5</sup> Carl F. Flemer, Jr., *Four Centuries of Little Known Washington Parish History* (Richmond: Lewis Printing Company, 1991); Lee Langston-Harrison, *A Presidential Legacy: The Monroe Collection* (Fredericksburg: James Monroe Museum and Memorial Library, 1997), 3. Washington Parish is present-day Westmoreland County, Virginia. James Monroe was born at Monrovia, also known as Monroe Hall, on Monroe Creek, a tributary of the Potomac River near present-day Colonial Beach, Virginia.

secured James's formal education with the local Anglican rector for Washington Parish.<sup>6</sup>

Between the ages of eleven and sixteen, James Monroe attended the acclaimed Campbelltown Academy under the careful tutelage of Reverend Archibald Campbell. Regardless of the family plantation demands that allowed him to participate only eleven weeks per annum actively, James excelled in his studies, including Latin, mathematics, science, and the Romance languages.<sup>7</sup>

Rising hate and discontent between the colonists and officials of the Crown mounted during the 1760s and 1770s. Altercations between colonists and British soldiers did nothing to alleviate the tensions. James Monroe had first-hand knowledge of these events as his father, his maternal Grandfather James Jones, and maternal Uncle Judge Joseph Jones, an aggressive member of the Virginia House of Burgesses, aided and supported one of the earliest protests to obstruct the execution of the 1765 Stamp Act. The 1766 Westmoreland Resolves demanded stopping British import consumption and declared that every British citizen's birthright disallowed taxation by the Parliament without representation. Anyone attempting to deprive the Virginia colony's fundamental rights proved dangerous warranting extreme punishment. Understandably, these events fostered James Monroe's suspicion and mistrust of the royal governmental regime and schooled him in ways of civil disobedience against the Crown.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ruth and Sam Sparacio, eds. *Virginia County Court Records: Deed Abstracts of King George County Virginia, 1735-1752*, Deed Book (McLean, VA: by compilers, 1987), 3; David W. Eaton, *Historical Atlas of Westmoreland County* (Richmond: Dietz Press, 1942), 46, 62; "James Monroe Birthplace, Westmoreland County, Virginia, Virginia Department of Historic Resources 096-0046; 44WM0038, National Register of Historic Places Registration Form" (Washington, D. C.: United States Department of the Interior National Park Service, 2008), 23. Spence Monroe was "indentured" for five years to apprentice as a cabinetmaker in 1743. During James Monroe's youth, Spence Monroe's landholding accumulated to 350 acres.

<sup>7</sup> Monroe, *Autobiography of James Monroe*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Emily J. Salmon, ed., *A Hornbook of Virginia History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1983), 66.

Before contending with the distractions of the impending revolutionary storm, tragedy struck the Monroe family. James's mother died in 1772, and Spence Monroe passed less than two years later. According to prevailing era customs, the 16-year-old orphaned James Monroe became head of the household, responsible for raising four younger siblings. Divinely providential, Judge Joseph Jones, James's maternal uncle, actively interceded as a surrogate father. More importantly, Judge Jones, an esteemed colonial leader, illustrious legislator, and enthusiastic patriot, bestowed his patronage and counsel upon James. The powerful and influential Judge Jones introduced his nephew to Virginia's revolutionary gentry and his confidential friends, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. Monroe's strong affiliations with these future Founding Fathers would mentor his republican ideas, guide his career, and foster his nationalist beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

In 1774 James Monroe accompanied his Uncle Joseph Jones to Williamsburg and enrolled in the "philosophical school" at the College of William and Mary. Young James' "classical acquirements" at Reverend Campbell's academy equipped him well, and he successfully passed the entrance examination. Although he would soon distinguish himself through military and political service, the astute and intelligent Monroe applied himself to his law studies under the watchful eye of George Wythe, noted classics scholar and America's first law professor.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Williamsburg, Virginia's capital, thrived with revolutionary fervor, and James Monroe and his classmates had no immunity to the rising spirit of independence. By late summer of 1775, Virginia's Colonial Governor, Lord Dunmore, a staunch supporter of the English monarchy and Parliament's policies, raised the ire of patriot leaders by

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<sup>9</sup> Ammon, *James Monroe*, 2-4.

<sup>10</sup> Monroe, *Autobiography of James Monroe*, 22.

attempting to dissolve the Virginia House of Burgesses and deny the patriot militia access to the city's military stores. In violent opposition, Monroe and twenty-three young compatriots stormed the Governor's Palace seizing the munitions and returning them to the powder magazine. With the fracture from Great Britain on the horizon, Monroe needed no coaxing to answer the Continental Congresses' call for riflemen. The die now cast, the military became his first chosen career.<sup>11</sup>

### The Revolutionary Soldier

James Monroe's introduction to the complexities of war and diplomacy began with his experiences as a soldier during the American Revolution. By 1776, Monroe, fully entrenched in the revolutionary cause, terminated his academics and enlisted in the Third Virginia Infantry. With keen intent and clarity, he had no regrets as he remarked early in his presidency, "Tho' young at the commencement of our revolution, I took part in it, and its principles have invariably guided me since. Nothing can be more deeply fixed, in the judgment [sic] and heart of anyone, than are the principles of our free system of government..."<sup>12</sup>

James Monroe, ranked as a lieutenant, deployed with the Third and Sixth Virginia regiments for the long, slow march northward to rendezvous with the Continental Army under the command of General George Washington in New York. Lieutenant Monroe's first engagement with the enemy occurred at Harlem Heights. Though considered a patriot victory,

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<sup>11</sup> Maurice A. Thorne, "James Monroe – The Forgotten Patriot," *Sons of the American Revolution Magazine* (Winter 1982): 20; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 7, 578n10-11; Richard Hanser, *Glorious Hour of Lt. Monroe* (New York: Athenaeum, 1975), 36.

<sup>12</sup> James Monroe to Sir John Sinclair, November 17, 1817, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition*, Retirement Series, 36 vols., eds. James P. McClure and J. Jefferson Looney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008-2022), 11:381-382, <https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/default.xqy?keys=TSJN-print-03-11&mode=TOC>.



Monroe found little to celebrate due to the considerable loss of life. He had just experienced the most challenging consequence of war: men must die. Sustained by sheer determination and patriotic convictions, Monroe persevered as a soldier seeing action at the Battles of Trenton, Brandywine, Germantown, and Monmouth. During the Trenton campaign, Monroe volunteered to lead an advanced guard that silenced a battery of Hessian cannons threatening General Washington's position resulting in his suffering a near-fatal injury. His initiative and bravery under fire garnered the attention and respect of his superiors, a promotion in rank to Major, and an assignment as aide-de-camp to Lord William Alexander Stirling.<sup>13</sup>

Hardship, suffering, and atrocities accompany war, but those conditions also transform acquaintances into abiding and lasting relationships and forever change a person's life. Major Monroe served under Lord Stirling alongside another aide, a young Frenchman aristocrat Gilbert du Motier, the Marquis de Lafayette. They quickly became esteemed colleagues and kindred spirits sharing the same fearless resolve toward the revolutionary cause and military action. Broadening their circle of friends occurred when General Baron von Steuben arrived at Valley Forge with his French secretary and interpreter, Pierre du Ponceau, a philosopher, linguist, and jurist. Monroe, Lafayette, and du Ponceau became fast friends with shared interests. The abysmal weather and insufferable camp conditions seemed less formidable in the evenings as Monroe's compatriots taught him French while reading the classics, French poetry, Nicholas Rowe's political plays, and James Watson's sermons.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Hanser, *Glorious Hour*, 36, 55, 62-63; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 12-14, 16-17, 578; Langston-Harrison, *A Presidential Legacy*, 2; Harriet Marble, *James Monroe: Patriot and President* (New York: Putnam & Sons, 1970), 52; Fred I. Greenstein, "The Political Professionalism of James Monroe," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, no. 39 (June 2009): 276. ProQuest.

<sup>14</sup> Monroe, *Autobiography of James Monroe*, 27; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 17-19.

Following that miserable season in winter quarters amidst the Pennsylvania backcountry, the summer of 1778 appeared more promising. Major Monroe conducted reconnaissance near Monmouth Court House, New Jersey, for General Washington. He temporarily served as an adjutant general during the ensuing battle, whetting his appetite for a field command. Impatient for the requested opportunity to avail itself, Major Monroe decided that he might manifest such a position. Monroe petitioned and earned a commission as a lieutenant colonel to recruit a regiment at his insistence. Although Monroe pursued this venture wholeheartedly, it never bore any fruit. Any able-bodied, young patriot had already enlisted, and no ready capital existed for sponsorship.<sup>15</sup>

Disappointed, James Monroe, at the very young age of twenty, retired as a Lieutenant Colonel in December of 1778. Monroe returned to his native Virginia with one last hope of applying for a rank within the state line. Again, no such post presented itself. Then, in 1780, Virginia Governor Thomas Jefferson appointed Monroe as Military Commissioner from Virginia to the Southern Army. His assignment involved developing reconnaissance and an express communication system throughout the southern colonies to warn of British movements northward. The post commemorated his last official duty in a military capacity before resigning himself to civilian life. Though Monroe preferred a different outcome, his military service contributed invaluable real-world experience and connections that would bolster his political career.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> James Monroe to George Washington, June 28, 1778, in George Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 15, ed. Edward G. Lengel (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006) 580; Langston-Harrison, *A Presidential Legacy*, 23.

<sup>16</sup> James Monroe, *The Writings of James Monroe*, 7 vols., ed. Stanislaus Murray Hamilton (1898-1903, repr. New York: AMS Press, 1969), 1: 3.

### Political Apprenticeship

The transition from military to civilian life troubled Monroe as a young man dedicated to the American cause. With the outcome of the Revolution still unresolved and himself relegated to the sidelines, Monroe harbored frustration and doubts about his future. Morosely, he considered renouncing public life and returning to his roots, farming. In his distress, he sought advice from a new but trusted friend, Governor Jefferson. Despite Jefferson's status as governor and the celebrated Declaration of Independence author, Monroe's relationship did not rest merely on self-seeking ambition. Monroe expressed this emotional bond in a letter to Jefferson: "I feel that whatever I am at present in the opinion of others or whatever I may be in the future has greatly arose from your friendship."<sup>17</sup> In earnest, he enjoyed his association with his preceptor and reveled in their joint interest in the philosophical and political concepts of the Enlightenment. Jefferson influenced Monroe's life by advising his protégé to prepare for a career in politics by studying law. Following Jefferson's advice, Monroe reentered William and Mary early in 1780 and began reading law under his mentor's direction. Jefferson disavowed learning the law through clerical drudgeries and advocated the case method while coaching his apprentices in the Virginia Statutes. The reading included books that illuminated the fundamental principles of the social order, legal origins, and political philosophies, such as Blackstone, Montesquieu, Rosseau, Aristotle, etc. Monroe embarked on a political apprenticeship uniquely devised by Jefferson that would forever be advantageous to Monroe's political endeavors.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, September 9, 1780, in Thomas Jefferson, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vols.36, ed. Julian P. Boyd, et al. (Princeton: University Press, 1950-1982), 3:621-623.

<sup>18</sup> James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, September 9, 1780, in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 1:8-11; Thomas Jefferson, diary, January 30, 1787, in Jefferson, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Boyd 1:97; Thomas Jefferson to Henry Skipwith, August 3, 1771, in Jefferson, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Boyd, 1:76-80; Cunningham, Jr., *Presidency of James Monroe*, 1.

James Monroe began his political ascent as an elected member of the Virginia House of Delegates and the Executive Council in 1782, followed by a three-year appointment to the Congress of the Confederation. While serving as a Virginia delegate to the Confederation Congress from 1783 to 1786, Monroe embarked on another fortuitous friendship when Jefferson introduced him to James Madison, another political philosophy savant. Throughout his career, Monroe remained closely associated with both Jefferson and Madison ideologically, politically, and organizationally, though often misinterpreted. According to the University of Virginia Professor William M. Ferraro, many, if not most, informed observers categorized James Monroe as a follower rather than a leader before 1800, a misconception warranting revision. Rather than an apprenticeship permanently relegated as a background figure who simply took commands from Thomas Jefferson and James Madison as the Republican party came into existence, Monroe generated his own ideas and launched his own partisan fights in his early years. Additionally, Monroe preferred pugnacious tactics over milder approaches much more frequently than Jefferson and Madison. In essence, the trio collaborated as a leadership team instead of forming a distinct hierarchy with Jefferson at the top.<sup>19</sup>

Monroe's service in Congress contributed to his vital insight into the nation's sectional divisions and the diverse economic interests competing for national power. These experiences shaped Monroe's early attitudes toward strengthening the central government and recommending legislative reforms while still staunchly believing in republican liberties. For example, during peace negotiations to end the American Revolutionary war, John Jay, minister to Spain, proposed

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<sup>19</sup> Ammon, *James Monroe*, 41, 43; William M. Ferraro, "James Monroe in the 1790s: A Republican Leader," in *A Companion to James Madison and James Monroe*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., ed. Stuart Leibiger (Sussex, United Kingdom: 2013), 375.

relinquishing free use of the Mississippi River to Spain for preferences beneficial to northeastern fisheries. An enraged Monroe demanded proper regard for western interests. Ironically, the nine-state supermajority requirement of the Articles of Confederation impeded the acceptance of Jay's offers, which relieved and exasperated Monroe. The unanimity required for major government reform belabored legislation and contradicted republicanism. He would join proponents who desired to overhaul the constricting arrangement.<sup>20</sup>

During his congressional three years, Monroe found interest in developing the lands between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River, a concept much later known as "Manifest Destiny." In 1784 during the summer session break, he joined the government's "Indian agents" to traverse the Western Territories to acquire a better knowledge of its geography and gauge "the temper of the Indians tow[ar]d us." Monroe's expedition cohort traveled from New York, along the Canadian border, then down the Cumberland Gap between Kentucky and Tennessee into Virginia. Not only did Monroe discover the vast splendor of the terrain, but he also discovered the precarious rapport between the British, the United States, and the Native People. British troops encroached across the United States borders in violation of the Treaty of Paris while the relationship with indigenous populations remained tenuous.<sup>21</sup>

During these intermediate years, Jefferson and Monroe experienced a transformation in their relationship from mentor and protégé to colleagues and comrades. They boarded together while the Confederation Congress held sessions in Annapolis, Maryland. And the two spent

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<sup>20</sup> George Washington to James Monroe, August 20, 1786, in George Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, Confederation Series, vol. 4, ed. W. W. Abbot, et al. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992–1997), 223–225; Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, May 8, 1784, in Jefferson, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Boyd, 7: 231–235.

<sup>21</sup> Ammon, *James Monroe*, 41–60; James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, July 20, 1784, in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 1: 37–38.

many an evening having spirited conversations regarding republican dynamics. But their bond went beyond politics and blossomed into an endearing and lasting friendship. Jefferson, a renowned Francophile, shared and nurtured Monroe's interest in French culture, already spurred by his alliances with du Ponceau and Lafayette during the American Revolution. Jefferson's French-born cook prepared their meals and tutored Monroe in speaking French, expanding on previous lessons from du Ponceau. Jefferson shared his French books and spent hours discussing French poetry. These experiences would significantly enhance Monroe's diplomatic service abroad and fuel his love for French décor for the President's House during his future presidency.<sup>22</sup>

#### Lawyer and Public Servant

During the 1785-86 session, the Confederation Congress relocated to New York City, a bustling metropolitan with a rich and energetic social life. High society eagerly accepted the eligible bachelor Monroe, who possessed all the proper and matrimonial attributes: a war hero, respected statesman, landed gentry, confident, pleasant, and, not to mention, tall and handsome. Monroe became quite a favorite among the ladies, never left wanting an invite to high society. Not surprisingly, Monroe soon met and immediately became smitten with Elizabeth Kortright, the stylish 20-year-old daughter of a New York City merchant. Although her father, somewhat a reformed loyalist, found his fortunes waning, the family sustained their social standing among New York's upper class. Elizabeth, a beautiful Manhattan socialite, retained her elite affiliations and charmingly performed the social graces expected by polite society. Almost love at first sight, the young couple married on February 16, 1786. Monroe found in Elizabeth a stalwart

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<sup>22</sup> Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 1:26; Langston-Harrison, *A Presidential Legacy*, 40.

friend and life partner sharing in life's joys and tragedies. She supported, allied, and accompanied Monroe as a lawyer during all his years of public service at home and abroad. Their objectives and tastes aligned flawlessly, sharing a love for French styles and devotion to their country that would forever shape the nation.<sup>23</sup>

As the Confederation Congress session closed, James Monroe decided to establish his residence and law practice in Fredericksburg, Virginia. The young couple readjusted to life in the small town as Monroe admitted to practice law before the Court Chancery, Court of Appeals, and the General Court, covering a circuit from Fredericksburg to Charlottesville to Richmond. Monroe busily practiced law for the next three years, but his time as a public servant had just begun. During this time, he served as Fredericksburg's Common Council member, a Fredericksburg Academy Trustee, and a vestryman of St. George's Church. Although the Virginia Constitutional Convention delegation excluded him, Spotsylvania County elected the energetic Monroe as their Virginia State Convention delegate to ratify or reject the proposed United States Constitution. Monroe favored the overarching proposed government structure. Still, he found other provisions unacceptable and inharmonious with republican ideals. Therefore, he opposed and voted against ratification in June 1788 based on fears of an aristocratic Senate, the prospect of high federal taxes and a grasping judiciary, and, most significantly, the absence of a bill of rights. After a much-heated debate among the delegates, the new constitution received Virginia's ratification by a narrow margin.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> James E. Wootton, *Elizabeth Kortright Monroe, 1768-1830* (Charlottesville: Monroe's Highland and Fredericksburg: James Monroe Museum and Memorial Library, 2002), 1-6. James Monroe destroyed most of his wife's correspondence on the evening of her funeral. As a result, little is directly known about Elizabeth Kortright Monroe's life except through the correspondence of others.

<sup>24</sup> James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, May 11, 1786, in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 1: 125; Langston-Harrison, *A Presidential Legacy*, 55-56; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 78.

Wanting to address the defects of the new government, Monroe ran for the House of Representatives but lost a spirited contest to Madison. Frustrated, Monroe contritely sent President Washington in February 1789 a copy of his pamphlet, *Some Observations on the Constitution*, never distributed publicly. Acknowledging this work, which summarized Monroe's doubts over the Constitution while still calling for a reformed government, Washington wrote consolingly to the younger man. Monroe later recalled that Washington's response's "liberality and candor" encouraged him to continue his political career. As a distinguishing state figure and reanimated to action, Monroe bid for one of Virginia's first two senatorial seats but fell short. Another opportunity arose when one of those men unexpectedly passed away. Virginia's governor and council considered Monroe for the interim appointment, but he lost by one vote. While in Richmond during June 1790, Monroe happily received appeals to stand again that fall. Prominent endorsements separated Monroe from his aspirants. As a result, the state legislature elected him on November 9.<sup>25</sup>

Following his belated victory, the Monroe family struggled to reach Philadelphia, the current United States capital, for the start of the session. Among the first senators to win a six-year term in his own right, Monroe enthusiastically delved into legislative matters. James Madison from the House of Representatives, and Thomas Jefferson from President Washington's cabinet, kept him abreast of contentious issues and intriguing cabals related to the government's

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<sup>25</sup> James Monroe, *Some observations on the Constitution, &c.*, (Petersburg, VA: Hunter and Prentis, 1788). Evans Early American Imprint Collection; George Washington to James Monroe, February 23, 1789, in George Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series, 21 vols., ed. Dorothy Twohig, et al. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987), 1:337; Ferraro, "James Monroe 1790s," 376; James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, October 20, 1790, in Jefferson, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 17: 607; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 81-82; James Monroe to James Madison, October 13, 1787, February 7, 1788, and James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, April 22, 1788, in *The Papers of James Madison*, 17 vols., eds. William T. Hutchinson et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, and Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1962-1991) 10:193, 481, 11:28; James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, April 10, July 12, 1788, in Jefferson, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 13:50, 351-53.



assumption of the states' war debt and for the permanent federal government location. The debates and maneuvering disturbed Monroe to find the most critical measures of congress still unsettled.<sup>26</sup>

Defining and limiting the extent of the powers granted to the national government under the United States Constitution guided Monroe's thinking throughout his senatorial tenure. He employed this supposition to address issues such as the national bank, military campaigns against western Native People, and to counter violent disobedience to the excise laws on whiskey. Increasingly substantial partisan differences likewise shaped Monroe's behavior. With Jefferson, Madison, and others, he feared that a monarchical element sought to concentrate the power and wealth in the federal government. Such a consolidation threatened republican aspirations for liberty and equal opportunity. Alexander Hamilton, Washington's Secretary of the Treasury, embodied such a threat. As the leader of the anti-republicans, Hamilton advocated the assumption of state debts, a significant standing army, and closer relations with Great Britain. The emerging parties adopted opposing positions on developments in France. Hamiltonians, later called Federalists, viewed the French Revolution as a menace to the social order, while Republicans cheered the unrest in France as an extension of the American Revolution.<sup>27</sup>

Monroe demonstrated his concern for sound government and his eagerness for fortitude. He applauded Republican legislative transparency believing that congressional isolation provided a fertile ground for devious machinations and concealed lethargy. Never one to be accused of laziness, Senator Monroe attended all sessions, served on numerous committees, and

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<sup>26</sup> Ferraro, "James Monroe 1790s," 378. Elbridge Gerry to James Monroe, June 25, 1790, in *The Papers of James Monroe*, vol. 2. eds. Daniel Preston and M. C. DeLong (Westport: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 481; James Monroe to James Madison, July 2, 1790, in Madison, *The Papers of James Madison*, 13: 261.

<sup>27</sup> Monroe, *Autobiography of James Monroe*, 54.

voiced his opinions. He cast ballots on minor measures as readily as on momentous ones. In January 1791, he notably voted against the bill to charter the Bank of the United States.<sup>28</sup> Concerned, Monroe voiced his reservations: “I had objections to the plan, as exceeding the powers of Congress; for it appears to me they have no authority to grant an exclusive charter to any one company. Tis not given in the enumeration of the powers in the constitution, nor does it appear to me to flow from any that are enumerated.”<sup>29</sup>

### Foreign and Domestic Policy

As a senator, James Monroe’s legislative accomplishments trailed his importance as a Republican promoter. The disingenuous session of Congress that started in December 1793 disgusted Monroe with its constant bickering and devious plots. A calm debate had become almost impossible in the poisonous partisan atmosphere. Republicans and Federalists clashed in legislatures, newspapers, and public meetings. Republican senators seemed incapable of checking Federalist measures that abetted British interests and irritated the French. He contributed and urged support for the French Revolution. If that revolution failed, he argued, it would weaken republicanism in the United States. For their revolution to succeed, republicans in both the United States and France must demonstrate valorousness and vigilance. Reports that President Washington planned to send John Jay as a special envoy to England to adjust differences did not improve Monroe’s outlook inferring that the nation consorted with the enemy.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ferraro, “James Monroe 1790s,” 379.

<sup>29</sup> James Monroe to Nicholas Lewis, February 7, 1791, in James Monroe, *The Papers of James Monroe*, University of Mary Washington, Fredericksburg, Virginia, <http://monroepapers.com/>.

<sup>30</sup> James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, March 16, 1794, in Jefferson, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 28: 40-42.

An opportunity to soothe the French arose the following month by naming a new minister to France. President Washington recalled Gouverneur Morris, the current minister, at the request of French officials, who found his performance lax and partial toward Great Britain. Seeking a Republican-friendly toward France, Washington solicited first Robert Livingston and next James Madison, who both declined. To fill the void, Secretary of State Edmund Randolph suggested Monroe, who “accepted this appointment with an earnest desire to discharge its duties with advantage to his country, satisfaction to his government, and credit to himself.”<sup>31</sup>

As the new Minister Plenipotentiary of the United States of America to the Republic of France, Monroe departed rapidly to suit the administration on June 18, 1794, accompanied by his wife and daughter, Eliza. The Monroe family arrived in Paris amid great political upheaval as the French Revolution’s “Reign of Terror” consumed the country. Apprehensively, Monroe launched his mission only five days after citizen Robespierre’s execution. A Convention of several hundred members governed France without a defining executive. Monroe, aware of the tensions mounting in Paris and unable to present his credentials in a typical manner, managed to gain an audience before the assembly. Once received, he announced his presence and official instructions in a speech that called for a rejuvenated alliance between the United States and France to assuage ulterior motive suspicions. In both countries, Monroe proclaimed, “cherish the same principles and rest on the same basis, the equal rights of man.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Monroe, *Autobiography of James Monroe*, 58.

<sup>32</sup> Langston-Harrison, *A Presidential Legacy*, 78-79; George Washington to James Monroe, letter of credence, May 28, 1794, in Monroe, *Papers of James Monroe*, University of Mary Washington; George Washington to James Monroe, commission as minister to France, May 28, 1794, in Monroe, *Papers of James Monroe*, University of Mary Washington; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 116-117; James Monroe to the National Convention, speech, August 15, 1794, in Monroe, *Papers of James Monroe*, University of Mary Washington.

The new minister's performance excited the French but dismayed Washington believing Monroe overstepped his authority and breached the government's neutrality stance. Unaware of the Washington administration's unfavorable reaction to his first official act, Monroe pursued usual ministerial activities. He wrote lengthy dispatches on French military operations, political swings, and economic conditions. He revised consular functions to assist American merchants and fielded appeals from distressed American citizens. More notably, Monroe engineered the daring visit of his wife to Lafayette's imprisoned wife, Adrienne, which saved her from the guillotine. Monroe also intervened to free Thomas Paine from prison. Revered among patriotic Americans for his pamphlets during the American Revolutionary War, Paine became a French citizen and government member before political differences prompted his arrest.<sup>33</sup>

Monroe attempted futility to manage French reactions to the 1795 Jay Treaty with Great Britain, which became his greatest diplomatic challenge and undoing. The minister's problems stemmed from his inability to obtain information on Jay's agreement. Powerless to convince Jay to share the treaty after its negotiation in the early months of 1795, Monroe failed to deliver on his promise to French officials to convey its contents. The predicament compelled him to employ strategies to calm the indignant French, who believed Jay's arrangement abrogated their 1778 treaty of alliance with the United States. The publication of the Jay Treaty in newspapers shattered Monroe's optimism. Miserably defeated and angry, Monroe strove to avoid a total rupture with France.<sup>34</sup>

Not entirely blameless, Monroe's solicitude for the public interest and his character did not prevent reckless decisions on his part. His partisan enthusiasm led him to correspond with

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<sup>33</sup> Ammon, *James Monroe*, 117, 123-125, 129-130; Monroe, *Autobiography of James Monroe*, 70-72.

<sup>34</sup> Monroe, *Autobiography of James Monroe*, 83-85, 91-97, 103-105.

Republicans in the United States, like Jefferson and Madison, about diplomatic intelligence that should have stayed within administration channels. His communications with French officials, too often subtly and sometimes not so subtly, presented his government's positions as contrary to public opinion, suggesting patience until a Republican administration took control of foreign policy and adopted a friendlier posture. Notwithstanding his government's sabotage efforts, Monroe's most prominent biographer, Harry Ammon, still concluded that Monroe trod a perilous path, "attempting at one and the same time to serve as a spokesperson for his government and to act as a political leader seeking victory for his party."<sup>35</sup>

The failure to apprise Monroe of John Jay's commercial negotiations with France, paired with Monroe's French Revolution bias, resulted in his words and actions in discord with the policies of the American government he represented. Such activities generated enmity toward Monroe in the Washington administration. In early July 1796, after two tumultuous years, President Washington recalled Monroe with a less than stellar admiration of his efforts. But not before Monroe received a lavish official ceremony from the French government for his service to their country, who believed that Monroe's solidarity toward France genuine. Truthfully Washington's trust that Monroe's pro-republican ideologies and empathy for the French Revolution made him the logical choice to improve diplomatic relations with France proved accurate.<sup>36</sup>

Some perceived Monroe's assignment as a palpable failure, but it produced an unforeseen and fortuitous paradox for the Monroe family and the American people. The mission permitted Monroe to develop an acute awareness of expected foreign diplomacy protocols and principles,

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<sup>35</sup> Ammon, *James Monroe*, 134-135, 148; Ferraro, "James Monroe 1790s," 385.

<sup>36</sup> Monroe, *Autobiography of James Monroe*, 64-65.

and he honed the talents necessary for international relationships advantageous to his future presidency. James and Elizabeth Monroe became adept at diplomatic protocols and entertaining. During their stay, the family moved into a small but lavish residence called *Folie de la Bouexière*. With a growing affinity for French styles, the couple furnished the mansion with the latest French furniture of mahogany and marble, textiles, and decorative objects such as clocks, porcelain, paintings, and books. Much of the articles and decorative arts that the Monroe family acquired became the nucleus of their President's House furnishings twenty years later, thus, establishing a benchmark for the mansion interiors and adopted as a national standard often referred to as American Federal.<sup>37</sup>

#### Governor of Virginia

Upon returning stateside in June of 1797, the Monroes received a warm welcome from Thomas Jefferson, Aaron Burr, and Albert Gallatin as they disembarked the *Amity* in Philadelphia. However, Monroe returned to a vastly altered congressional political climate entrenched by Federalist power. Admirers and friends gave several receptions and dinners in Monroe's honor, though President Washington declined to attend all of these ceremonies. Monroe, depressed and resentful by the President's disapproval, quickly began drafting his defense in response to the recall. The former French minister later recalled writing "in a spirit of independence and a defiance of all scrutiny." Washington did not receive this publication well, and the relationship between the two politicians deteriorated. Their rift never reconciled, although Monroe later admitted that he still admired and respected Washington as a general.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Wooten, *Elizabeth Kortright Monroe*, 133-139; Seale, *The President's House*, 1: 153. Langston-Harrison, *A Presidential Legacy*, 80.

<sup>38</sup> Ammon, *James Monroe*, 158; Monroe, *Autobiography of James Monroe*, 146. The 467-page narrative, encouraged by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, was entitled *View of the Conduct of the Executive, in the*

Unsuspecting, the returning statesman, or scapegoat, became entrapped in a maelstrom involving disreputable partisan infighting. The Federalists erroneously accused James Monroe of authoring a published letter written by Jefferson to Philip Mazzei in January 1797, which incensed Federalists because it castigated the Washington administration and the president while praising Monroe as “a most worthy patriot and honest man.” Furthermore, an innocent Monroe received an angry letter from Alexander Hamilton, irate over a perceived breach of confidence regarding Hamilton’s extramarital affairs years early. The travel-weary Monroe failed to respond promptly to Hamilton’s requests for an explanation. Therefore, an agitated Hamilton demanded satisfaction. Tempers flared, and if mutual friends had not seen fit to intervene, a duel would likely have ensued.<sup>39</sup>

Disillusioned by national political party malcontents and fractious congressional controversies, Monroe returned to Virginia, considering his options. He would either resume his legal career, become a full-time farmer on his Albemarle County plantation, or pursue a seat in the General Assembly. Republican primacy throughout Virginia boded well for Monroe. After leaving the House of Representatives in March 1797, Madison secured a seat in the Virginia legislature, which elected the state’s chief executive. With Madison’s assistance, Monroe unexpectedly received the nomination as the Republican candidate for governor. He won the election as Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia in November for three consecutive years. Monroe emphasized the conservative side of his dichotomous political personality, a wiser and more experienced politician no longer oscillating between impulse and caution. Monroe

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*Foreign Affairs of the United States, Connected with the Mission to the French Republic, During the Years 1794, 5, & 6* published in 1797.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Philip Mazzei, April 24, 1796, in Jefferson, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 29: 73-83; James Monroe to Alexander Hamilton, November 27, 1797, quoted in Langston-Harris, *The President’s Legacy*, 81.

assumed a more prominent leadership role than most previous governors. He introduced many practices and policies he would later exercise as president, such as an annual address to the legislature evaluating his administration and state needs. For example, his 1801 Annual Address to the Virginia Assembly strongly advocated for public education. Monroe remarked, “In a government founded on the sovereignty of the people the education of youth is an object of first importance. In such government knowledge should be diffused throughout the whole society...”<sup>40</sup>

With perseverance and dedication, James Monroe learned to balance the trials and tribulations he faced as a father and a public servant. The family rejoiced on May 9, 1799, with the birth of a son, but their delight became short-lived as the infant’s health started to decline. Monroe’s ministerial duties and the costs of running an estate drained his finances. By August 1800, an outbreak of yellow fever and subsequent quarantine in Richmond summoned Monroe from his infant son’s bedside at *Highland*. While confined to the state capital, Governor Monroe learned of the diabolical plans for a tri-county slave insurrection and his potential kidnapping. Lousy weather and Monroe’s quick call alerted the state militia and stopped the fiendish revolt. The militia apprehended seventy-two conspirators, including the leaders and previous felons, Gabriel Prosser and his brothers, Solomon and Martin. Briefly, Monroe returned home to attend to his dying son, too frail to overcome a bout of whooping cough. Near the end of September 1800, the insurrectionists’ trials forced the governor to put aside his grief. Although the court condemned Gabriel and twenty-six others to death, Monroe recommended more lenient sentences for conspirators. The governor reminded citizens, “It [is] less difficult to say whether

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<sup>40</sup> Ammon, *James Monroe*, 170-73; James Monroe, message, December 7, 1801, in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 1:3-8; James Monroe to Larkin Smith and Richard Kennon, annual message, December 1801, in Monroe, *Papers of James Monroe*, University of Mary Washington.



mercy or severity is the better policy in this case, tho' when there is cause for doubt it is best to incline to the former policy."<sup>41</sup>

Characteristically, James Monroe brought to the governorship not only extraordinary leadership qualities but a determination to use the power of office within the state constitution's limits to inaugurate fundamental reforms. He gave this lesser office the same dedication and steady application to detail that he gave other posts. Monroe did not regard it as just an award for meritorious service to the state and the party. As governor, he sought to press the legislature to act on various issues to improve state conditions. For Monroe, the principal gain of his service allowed him to demonstrate his abilities in an administrative office and thus rehabilitate his reputation. His outstanding performance as governor received attention from Thomas Ritchie, editor of the powerful semiofficial Republican organ, the *Richmond Enquirer*, who praised him unreservedly, "he [Monroe] erected the negative functions of a governor into the instruments of a most respectable influence."<sup>42</sup>

### Second Mission Abroad

Early in 1803, shortly after Monroe retired from the governor's chair, he welcomed the chance to return to diplomatic service in France. President Thomas Jefferson appointed him as a special Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to France to assist Robert R. Livingstone in negotiations for New Orleans. Jefferson believed Monroe's popularity in America's west and among republicans would support the controversial acquisition. Also, the president recognized Monroe would convey to the French government his intense interest in

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<sup>41</sup> James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, September 15, 1800, in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 3: 209; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 186-189; Langston-Harrison, *The Presidential Legacy*, 109.

<sup>42</sup> *Enquirer* (Richmond), June 25, 1805; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 175.

attaining this land. Therefore, on March 9, Monroe and his family, recently enlarged by the birth of a second daughter, Maria Hester, sailed from New York City to Paris.<sup>43</sup>

Within days of landing at Le Havre, James Monroe joined Robert Livingston and François de Barbé-Marbois in Paris to complete the talks for the port of New Orleans and the free navigation of the Mississippi River essential to the development of western expansion. By April 30, 1803, Livingston and Monroe joined the wily Napoleon Bonaparte and his equally wily foreign minister, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, for an offer much more significant than anticipated, including the Louisiana Territory. With the treaty signed on May 1<sup>st</sup>, Monroe closed the largest real estate transaction in American history, acquiring 828,000 square miles for the substantial sum of \$15 million.<sup>44</sup>

After securing Louisiana, President Jefferson entreated Monroe to remain in Europe, serving as special envoy to Spain and as America's minister to Great Britain. Monroe expected a chilly reception upon his arrival in London as a former "rebel" and ardent supporter of the French. However, the official government delivered a gracious welcome, and King George III received Monroe cordially. The King, who had long been the object of Monroe's animosity, showed great interest in the welfare of the United States and the continuance of amicable relations between the countries. However, tensions between Great Britain and her former colonies continued to mount, fueled by the issue of impressment. In dire need of sailors, the nascent American Navy offered unprecedented pay rates. As a result, British seamen deserted to

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<sup>43</sup> James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, March 7, 1803, in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 4: 4; Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, appointment to France, January 10, 1803, in Monroe, *Papers of James Monroe*, University of Mary Washington; Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, appointment and instructions to France, January 13, 1803, in Monroe, *Papers of James Monroe*, University of Mary Washington.

<sup>44</sup> Jon Kukla, *A Wilderness So Immense: The Louisiana Purchase and the Destiny of America* (New York: Anchor 2004), 261, 263, 281.

serve American ships. The Royal Navy's solution to the problem consisted of stopping American ships and seizing any sailors thought to be deserters or simply unable to prove their United States citizenship. Deceitful British officials in American ports often kidnapped American sailors from the city docks, streets, and pubs. In this manner, Great Britain forced or impressed sailors to serve on their ships via coercion and deception.<sup>45</sup>

Following other American ambassadors' footsteps in London, Monroe attempted to arbitrate a treaty banning impressment and end aggressive British trading practices that undercut American sovereignty on the Atlantic Ocean. Working with special envoy William Pinkney from Maryland, Monroe believed that the Monroe-Pinkney treaty of 1806, while not perfect, represented a positive step forward in Anglo-American relations toward foreign trading and a latent stepping stone to reducing impressment. To Monroe's great disappointment, Jefferson and Madison refused to submit this treaty to the United States Senate for approval for failing to eliminate impressment, and, potentially, they knew Congress would reject any half-measures. The decision had surprisingly profound political and international ramifications. With the seeds of war now planted, President Jefferson called Monroe to return home.<sup>46</sup>

Again, James Monroe returned from a mission abroad feeling aggrieved and deflated. Dejected, Monroe deeply resented the denunciation of his diplomatic expertise and took a brief hiatus from politics and his association with his anti-federalist compatriots, Jefferson and Madison. At that moment, Monroe could not see the "forest through the trees." The quite able Monroe had proved to be the ideal candidate because of his close ties to the president and his

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<sup>45</sup> Ammon, *James Monroe*, 225-226; Marble, *James Monroe*, 90.

<sup>46</sup> Daniel Preston, *The Presidency of James Monroe, 1817-1825* (Charlottesville: Ash Lawn-Highland and Fredericksburg: James Monroe Museum and Memorial Library, 2000), 2; Sandra Moats, "President James Monroe and Foreign Affairs, 1817-1825: An Enduring Legacy," in *A Companion to James Madison and James Monroe*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., ed. Stuart Leibiger (Sussex, United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 458.

ongoing popularity in France. The French interpreted his previous partisan indiscretions in a positive light. As a special envoy to France, Monroe thus played a brief but critical role in the delicate negotiations that doubled the size of the United States and represented one of the most significant achievements for the expanding nation. His experience abroad continued to perfect his expertise in foreign diplomacy and enlarge his reputation as a national leader. Also important, Monroe's family benefitted from immersing themselves in European culture, and his daughters profited from attending private schools. These experiences would serve them well as a future White House first family.

#### Secretary of State and Secretary of War

The political restoration of Monroe resumed with his election to the Virginia General Assembly in 1810 and then rapidly followed by his election in 1811 to the governorship, thus filling the vacancy created upon John Tyler's resignation to accept a federal judgeship offered by President Madison.<sup>47</sup> Difficulties and dissension within President Madison's cabinet influenced his interest in Monroe's return to political life. Reconciled with his former republican allies, Monroe heartily accepted the appointment. Although Monroe's earlier diplomatic career generated controversy, no other Republican would bring so much experience in diplomacy to the secretary of state position.<sup>48</sup>

Monroe took up his cabinet duties in 1811, mindful of the critical state of affairs with Great Britain that continued to impress American sailors, incite Native People to attacks on the western frontier, and ignore established borders. Monroe became President Madison's most

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<sup>47</sup> Ammon, *James Monroe*, 280-86.

<sup>48</sup> Irving Brant, *James Madison*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1941-1961), 5: 2-25, 275, 278, 282-87.

effective liaison and advisor as the United States became embroiled in a second war against Great Britain in 1812. As secretary of state, Monroe participated in every aspect of the war, including strategy, planning, mobilization, financing, congressional relations, and peace negotiations. Because of political disagreements, outright incompetence, and high turnover with Madison's cabinet, Monroe served as acting secretary of war while still holding the administration's top diplomatic post. As a Revolutionary War veteran and the only cabinet member with military experience, Monroe became an obvious choice to serve as secretary of war. Madison desperately concluded that he needed Monroe's military and political skills on the civilian side of the war effort, so Monroe held both cabinet positions jointly.<sup>49</sup>

While the United States enjoyed some military successes, particularly on the Great Lakes, the nation also experienced some embarrassing defeats, most notably the burning of the nation's capital. Monroe's repeated warnings of the Federal City's vulnerability to attack remained unheeded by former Secretary of War John Armstrong, with disastrous consequences. In August 1814, British troops invaded the capital city and set fire to all public buildings targeting the President's House and the Capitol Building. The ravaged and smoldering capital created a defeatism mentality. The humiliation that pervaded the nation only began to fade with the Treaty of Ghent's finalization in December 1814 and General Andrew Jackson's glorious vanquishment over the British at New Orleans in January 1815, bringing an end to the War of 1812 and peace to a nation that now must rebuild. Madison's presidency swiftly hurdled toward its termination in the wake of the devastation. He would spend the remainder of his tenure attempting to address previous inadequacies and point the nation toward reconstruction. The burden of

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<sup>49</sup>John Charles Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in Early American Republic, 1783-1830*, (Princeton: University Press, 1983), 153, 223, 277, 308.

rebuilding and unifying the country resided with his successor and the fifth president of the United States, James Monroe.<sup>50</sup>

### The Fifth President

Despite the controversies periodically plaguing James Monroe throughout his political career, his election as the nation's fifth president proved remarkably smooth and uncontroversial for several reasons. First, the Federalist party, while still strong in some northeastern states, lacked the national following to launch a credible challenge to any Republican candidate. Second, Monroe benefitted from a tradition that made the secretary of state the frontrunner for the nation's highest political office. Last, a confluence of roles such as Monroe's distinguished career as a public servant, his long association with Jefferson and Madison, and his status as the last Founding-era politician further elevated his presidential prospects.<sup>51</sup>

By 1817 James Monroe had become a mature, qualified statesman. After thirty years of serving his country as a soldier, diplomat, governor, senator, and cabinet member, a wiser Monroe saw opportunities as president to tame the demons of partisanship and to assert a more extraordinary voice for the United States internationally. As an expanding nation, the United States spread westward across the continent. It sought to establish its place globally while confronting the challenge of maintaining a union of growing states. The era provided an illuminating new look at a president and a country on the brink of greatness. Monroe's administration's decisions shaped the republic's future and sculpted national identity visions.

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<sup>50</sup> Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War*, 486; Cunningham, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 12-13.

<sup>51</sup> Cunningham, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 15, 18, 19.

The citizens had cast Monroe as the protagonist in a national arena with the President's House as his stage.

### Chapter 3: Rise & Ruin



*Figure 3. Building the First White House*  
*Artist: N. C. Wyeth, ca. 1931*  
*Image courtesy of Brandywine Museum of Art*

In the absence of a monarchy, the young nation under a constitutional government faced the challenge of conveying the gravitas and strength of leadership while reflecting the more open egalitarian Revolutionary era ethos that informed popular opinion. While exuding authority, garnering respect, and exhibiting refined taste that befitted the political elite and American virtue, the United States desperately needed a new permanent seat of government. For the United States, a new language of republican symbolism embodied by a shining capital promised to draw together a divisive people and unify a country so young that it lacked the traditional emblems of nationhood. Since the time of the pharaohs, governments have used architecture for political ends; thus, the vision for the great capital encompassed an ambitious public buildings venture. The White House, the Capitol, and the city plan still prevail as symbols of the nation the founders imagined. Of the three, the White House remains the truest



to its earliest recognizable designs created by architect James Hoban and President James Monroe.

The semiotic nature of James Monroe's White House associated with American identity and political sociology embraces the philosophy that representational power resides in material culture and the built environment. This interpretation emphasizes American institutions not as singular, coherent entities with clearly defined interests but as a heterogeneous assemblage of humans and non-humans composed of ideas, discourses, practices, organizations, natural elements, and cultural materialities. Therefore, cultural landscapes occur through relational objects. They can change and retain meaning based on how strong and permanent their relationship with other entities and actors change. Within this framework, President Monroe contributed the most to the cultural and political embeddedness of the White House. Based on this premise, this line of research proposes that a significant distinction exists that deposes the representational productivity enacted upon the executive mansion during the first four presidential administrations.<sup>1</sup>

### George Washington's White House

Victory on the battlefield left the success of the American experiment in doubt. The rebels had fought for more than the national independence of certain former British colonies in North America. They had waged a radical revolution aimed at nothing less than the transformation of Western civilization. They hoped to create a republican government founded on the core principle of the people's sovereignty, regardless that freedom and liberty did not

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<sup>1</sup> Additional information regarding the study of intersections between material culture and politics, see: Virár Molnár, "The Power of Things: Material Culture as Political Resource," *Qualitative Sociology*, 39, no. 2 (June, 2016): 205-210, ProQuest; and Leslie Sklair, "Iconic Architecture and Urban, National, and Global Identities, in *Cities*," *Sovereignty: Identity Politics in Urban Spaces*, ed. D. Davis and N. Libertun de Duren, 179-195 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

equate to racial and gender equality. The consummation of the American Revolution could mean the end of hereditary power and the beginning of a new era. But soon, anarchy and despotism threatened to overtake the Revolution. Would it prove, as philosophers predicted and as history seemed to confirm, that the republican experiment could never provide the bonds of power needed to hold together a large nation?

Once the primary mission of winning the war ended, states began to look inward to protect their welfare rather than the whole country. The Articles of Confederation, little more than a treaty between thirteen sovereign states, created a *firm league of friendship* with only one goal, to wrench the colonies free from Great Britain's controlling grasp. As a result, they lacked any nation-building powers. The states hoped to resolve fractious intrastate behaviors and attempted unification; therefore, they ratified the United State Constitution but not without controversial debate. The United States Constitution gave the United States Congress "exclusive Legislation" over establishing a district for the "Seat of Government." George Washington, the newly elected first president of the United States, had become an American nationalist before an American nation existed.<sup>2</sup> He saw the creation of the Federal City as an instrument of nation-building and would potentially abate partisanship attitudes. The opposite transpired.

Since the Continental Congress first met in 1774, eight cities and towns had been the seat of government. The selection of a permanent site became a source of bitter ideological conflict during the first constitutional congress. Two rival visions of the American future

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<sup>2</sup> Amidst future uncertainty, General George Washington offered parting advice for the success of a new nation before retiring from his command. He addressed the establishment of a "national character" in his "Circular Letter to the States, June 8, 1783," in *The Writings of George Washington: From the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, 39 vols. 27, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1938), 27:1-13.

battled for the soul of the new nation and stalled more urgent matters, such as addressing the aging war debt. Realizing the prestige and financial boon, if chosen, the northern and southern states belabored congressional sessions through interminable and acrimonious debates. Still, other factors spurred contentions. Most northern states pursued an imposing city to signify America's continental destiny, impress foreign nations, promote industrialization, and distance the government from pro-slavery sentiment. Dissimilar, the southern states championed limited government, agrarianism, and involuntary servitude. As a result, these states dreaded a sinister aristocratic conspiracy to subvert republican institutions in America. They viewed the creation of a magnificent capital worthy of monarchical Europe as a fatal step toward a path of tyranny.<sup>3</sup>

After months of deliberations, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, became the preferred contender advanced by many congressmen in the north and south; not an unnatural choice since the city currently served as the capital and, previously, for the Continental Congress and the Constitutional Convention. In President George Washington's estimation, a Potomac River site offered more advantages toward future desirability and trumped Philadelphia's claim based on seniority and familiarity. He believed the river would become America's destiny, the one true passage to the West, and an inexhaustible fountainhead of national status and wealth.<sup>4</sup>

Finally accepting Washington's views, Congress passed the Residence Act on July 16, 1790, which empowered the president to select a tract on the River Potomac, not to exceed ten miles square, for the permanent location as the national capital.<sup>5</sup> Washington chose a place

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<sup>3</sup> John Rhodehamel, "Washington's City," *White House History*, no. 6 (Fall 1999): 12.

<sup>4</sup> Catharine Van Cortlandt Mathews, *Andrew Ellicott: His Life and Letters* (New York: Grafton Press, 1908), 82; Rhodehamel, "Washington's City," 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> United States Congress, "An Act for Establishing the Temporary and Permanent Seat of the Government of the United States, July 16, 1790 (Residence Act of 1790)," *The Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America*, vol. 1, ed. Richard Peters (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1845), 130, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/united-states-statutes-at-large/about-this-collection/>. The Residence Act of 1790

positioned at the confluence of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers which author James Conroy described as a “malarial swamp and primeval forest among grain and tobacco fields.” However, with his characteristic farsightedness, the president chose not for that year or the next but for the country’s future demands. The former surveyor, now president, imagined the slopes and elevations of this tract crowned with noble buildings that rival Paris. The Potomac’s deep waters suggested opportunities for commerce and quick and easy communication with other states. With improvements, the river would connect to the Ohio River Valley and, thus, westward to the great Mississippi River and southward to the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>6</sup>

In the spring of 1791, the *long-talked-of* undertaking of national interest had reached the point where an active beginning could occur to design a permanent seat for the United States government. The site secured, there existed an urgency to occupy and confirm the new capital before Congress could reconsider. The project commanded Washington’s utmost attention, which required an accurate survey and an architect engaged in planning the proposed city. For the latter work, President Washington hired Major Pierre Charles L’Enfant, a French military engineer of ability and former Continental Army officer, to collaborate with himself and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. The land survey being the most immediate necessity, Jefferson requested, per Washington’s recommendation, that Major Andrew Ellicott proceed promptly to the “Federal Territory on the Potomac for the purpose of making a survey of it.” Given authority to oversee the progress, General Thomas Johnson, the Honorable Daniel Carroll

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permitted the president of the United States to select a ten-mile square of land ceded by Virginia and Maryland along the Potomac River. The location included the villages of Georgetown, Maryland, and Alexandria, Virginia. This is the present-day District of Columbia, except for Alexandria, which was retroceded to Virginia in 1846.

<sup>6</sup> James Conroy, “Thomas Jefferson’s White House,” White House Historical Association, The Presidency, C-SPAN 3, September 15, 2020.

of Maryland, and Dr. David Stuart of Virginia, Washington's family physician, received appointments as commissioners for the District of Columbia.<sup>7</sup>

The president, secretary of state, the architect, and the commissioners gathered at Suter's Fountain Inn in Georgetown and deliberated over ideas for this wilderness capital. While they plotted how to turn the unpopulated setting into a pastoral landscape while promoting a sense of pride and achieving the republican experiment, Major Ellicott trudged through unattractive outlying lands of the district appropriately titled a century earlier as "Turkey Buzzard Point."<sup>8</sup> On June 26, 1791, Ellicott wrote to his wife Sally slightlying of its advantages or lack of them thereof from the surveyors camp:

"The Country thro' which we are now cutting one of the ten-mile lines is very poor; I think for near seven miles on it there is not one House that has any floor except the earth; and what is more strange, it is in the neighborhood of Alexandria, and George-Town, - we find but little Fruit, except Huckel berries...As the President is so much attached to this country, I would not willing that he should know my real sentiments about it."<sup>9</sup>

In Georgetown, L'Enfant, who saw himself as an artist on a grand scale, lost no time drafting his vision of the national metropolis. Enthusiastically, he designed the city abounding with neoclassical architecture with allegorical figures of virtue and liberty as a tribute to America's glory. On a grid of perpendicular streets, he had overlaid a bold pattern of broad diagonal avenues joining those high points where the temples of republican government would

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<sup>7</sup> James Madison, "Memorandum on the Residence Act, August 29, 1790," in Madison, *Papers of James Madison*, ed. Hobson, 13:294-296; George Washington to Thomas Jefferson, February 1, 1791," in Jefferson, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 19: 68; Thomas Jefferson to Andrew Ellicott, February 2, 1791, in Jefferson, *Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition*.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine Herrman, Henry Faithorne, and Thomas Withinbrook. "Virginia and Maryland as it is planted and inhabited this year 1670," map (London: Augustine Herrman and Thomas Withinbrook, 1673), *Library of Congress*, <https://loc.gov/item/2002623131/>.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Ellicott to Sally Ellicott, June 26, 1791, in Mathews, *Andrew Ellicott*, 89.

rise. The epitome of kingly ostentation, he further embellished the conurbation with malls, cascading fountains, and circles awaiting monuments to the republic's unborn heroes.

Braggartly, he shared his sentiments with President Washington, "Before him [L'Enfant] the prospect of celebrating the ideals of popular government in monumental stone and noble vistas that seemed to open out on a boundless future."<sup>10</sup>

But, for quite some time, trouble brewed between Major L'Enfant and the commissioners as they bickered over various matters. A clash regarding the sale of lots within the federal district, imperative to funding construction, turned the smoldering wrath amongst them into a roaring blaze. The situation reached a crisis when L'Enfant refused to forward a map of the city to the commissioners per the purchasers' behest. Aggrieved at L'Enfant's continuing "untoward disposition" and "perverseness," President Washington had no other recourse but to intervene.<sup>11</sup> By letter on March 6, 1792, Secretary of State Jefferson communicated the outcome to the commissioners. Jefferson matter-of-factly reported, "...it having been found impracticable to employ Major L'Enfant about the Federal City in that degree of subordination which was lawful and proper, he has been notified that his services are at an end...Ellicott is to go on and finish laying off the plan on the ground and surveying and

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<sup>10</sup> Pierre Charles L'Enfant to George Washington, September 11, 1789, in Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series, 4:15-17; Rhodehamel, "Washington's City," 13.

<sup>11</sup> George Washington to David Stuart, November 20, 1791, in *The Writings of George Washington*, vol. 12, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1891), 87; Andrew Ellicott to Sally Ellicott, December 14, 1792, and January 15, April 10, 1793, in Mathews, *Andrew Ellicott*, 98-100; Andrew Ellicott to Thomas Jefferson, January 9, 1793, in Mathews, *Andrew Ellicott*, 96-97. L'Enfant's dismissal is a historical fact, but Pierre Charles L'Enfant may have not been entirely to blame for the disputes between himself and the Commissioners of the Federal City. According to Andrew Ellicott's correspondence, the commissioners rushed and abused his work until he submitted his resignation. The somewhat repeat scenario begged for an investigation that vindicated Ellicott.

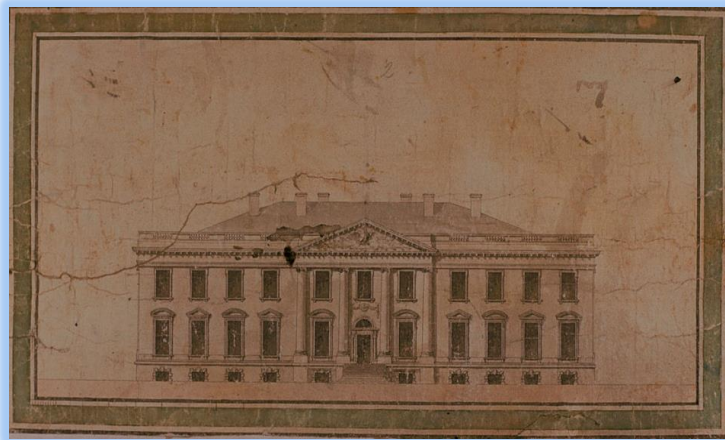
plotting the District.”<sup>12</sup> Dejected, L’Enfant bid farewell to his lofty dreams and departed with his grand city plans, visionary architecture, and monumental European schemes.

An ambitious proposal from the beginning, the 1790 congressional act prescribed the city’s occupation by November 1, 1800. The legislation specified the construction of only two public buildings: the Capitol and the presidential residence. With special attention conferred on the executive mansion, the most obtainable goal, those involved already labored on a tight schedule. In L’Enfant’s wake, Secretary of State Jefferson arranged for a competition to hasten the commission of new architects. Not unreasonably, President Washington accepted the Neo-Palladian norms of his early and middle years as the appropriate form of architectural and urban expression. Not overawed by new fashions or advancing orders of taste, he had taught himself to be pragmatic in his confidence. Regarding the outcome, Washington chose right on all counts by selecting the designs of a “practical builder” who had impressed him while visiting Charleston, South Carolina. James Hoban, the practical, diligent, and perceptive architect, now secure in society yet bred with an innate peasant’s deference to the gentry, collaborated as the perfect partner in achieving the ambition of his patron.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “Thomas Jefferson to Washington, D.C., Commissioners, March 6, 1792, with Statements, from Thomas Jefferson and the National Capital,” Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.; George Washington to Tobias Lear, July 30, 1792, in George Washington, *Letters and Recollections of George Washington, Being Letters to Tobias Lear and Others Between 1790 and 1799* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1906), 57-58; Andrew Ellicott, “Plan of the City of Washington in the Territory of Columbia, 1793,” D. O. Garden Stories, accessed July 21, 2022, <http://images.doaks.org/garden-histories/items/show/417>; Pierre Charles L’Enfant, “Plan of the City, intended for the Permanent Seat of the Government of the United States, 1791,” D. O. Garden Stories, accessed July 21, 2022, <https://images.doaks.org/garden-histories/items/show.411>. Andrew Ellicott’s 1793 plan superseded L’Enfant’s 1791 plan, which is the most widely circulated plan for the city on which all subsequent development was based.

<sup>13</sup> William Seale, “The Stone Masons Who Built the White House,” *White House History*, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 17.



*Figure 4. James Hoban's White House Competition Design  
Original Plans Maryland Historical Society, ca. 1793  
Image courtesy of White House Historical Association*

Fortuitously, the executive mansion fell under the patronage of President Washington. He alone selected the site within the district for L'Enfant's "Presidential Palace." Inspired by the rolling hills and the sweeping vistas, the house would sit upon a ridge overlooking the Potomac River to the southwest, just north of the Tiber Creek marshes. Ever zealous, L'Enfant, who envisioned a vast palatial edifice, had already ordered the foundation excavated, leaving a massive, orphaned hole that disfigured the pristine landscape. The building Hoban proposed consumed only a quarter of the dugout cellars. The president, now dubious of L'Enfant's schemes, preferred the smaller scale and believed the house dignified, even rather magnificent, that could later expand as needs arose through the years. Hoban's initial surviving plan showed the house had three stories with a basement below ground level. The north front featured a rusticated centerpiece at entry level and a long one-story colonnaded gallery spanning the width of the south facade. Surviving letters revealed President Washington's request for the footprint of Hoban's original design size enlarged by one-fifth. Afterward, as a cost savings measure, the commissioners instructed Hoban to remove one floor from his first proposal resulting in the



two-story house seen today.<sup>14</sup> As Hoban and Washington formalized the details, industrious stonecutters at Brent's quarry readied the Aquia Creek gray sandstone with its buttery and rose hues. President Washington insisted on stone for the house to compare favorably with world capitals across the ocean. So, the busy work crews hoisted the tremendously heavy freestone onto rafts and poled upstream from Wigginton Island to the construction site, a journey close to forty-five miles.<sup>15</sup>

With the cornerstone laid on October 13, 1792, construction picked up considerably into the following spring, with the demand for workers outstripping the available labor pool. Numerous Irish carpenters already accompanied Hoban, but not near enough. The commissioners had to secure stonemasons from other cities and abroad, mainly from Scotland. As the district commissioners struggled to recruit laborers, it became progressively clear that few free workers resided locally, and enslaved workers would help meet their demands. Hired out by local enslavers, bondage laborers cleared the land, chopped down trees, removed stumps, quarried and transported stone, molded thousands of bricks, and apprenticed with carpenters and

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<sup>14</sup> Seale, "Stone Masons," 17; George Washington to Commissioners, March 3, 1793, in George Washington, "The Writings of George Washington Relating to the National Capital," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, no. 17 (1914):76-77; Seale, *The President's House*, 1:32; James Hoban, "White House Competition Design, 1793," White House Historical Association, Washington, D. C., original plans courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore Maryland, accessed July 24, 2022, <https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/cache/5017/Main%20Index/Plans/1118446.t5afd7ac3.m1200.tif.pv.xK1kHCwqm2UBnqs5f.jpg>.

<sup>15</sup> Gary Scott, "The Quarries at Aquia and Seneca," *White House History*, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 32, 35; Margaret Brent to L'Enfant, deed, November 18, 1791, *File book of deeds*, no. 13, Records of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, Record Group 42, U. S. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D. C., 5; Pierre Charles L'Enfant to John Gibson, lease, November 18, 1791, Records of the Commissioners; Pierre L'Enfant to Isaac Roberdeau, in Paul H. Caemmerer, *Life of Pierre Charles L'Enfant* (Washington, D. C.: National Republic Publishing Company, 1950), 187.

stonemasons. The construction site became a diverse demographic microcosm, each playing a vital role, whose sweat and sheer muscle shaped the executive mansion.<sup>16</sup>

The original architectural vernacular of the White House represented a country manor version of the Neo-Palladian style aristocratic homes, often in rural settings in England and Ireland. Hoban modeled its design features based on Leinster House in Dublin, Ireland, a ducal palace. Alterations to size and exterior detailing transformed the deliberate European form into an Americanized architectural style. Removal of the third story repositioned the *piano nobile* placing the public rooms near ground level. The stone walls resided as the edifice's face and amour, boasting a depth of four feet for the basement and over two feet thick on the upper stories. The great skill of Scotland's stonemasons showed in their superb architectural cutting of ashlar blocks, *dressing* the sandstone veneers to a smooth polished finish, and precise stone setting. These accomplished craftsmen framed the windows with large quoin stones and keystones, also rendered smooth. Collectively, these dramatic changes eliminated palatial airs and produced a character of affluent but dignified republican equality.<sup>17</sup>

Much of the building's ornamentation subscribed to Neo-Palladian motifs grounded in a reverence for Greek and Roman antiquity perfectionism. The talented carvers decorated the thick stone in high-relief treatments from antiquity, such as acanthus leaves representing immortality and rebirth and stoic griffins to signify strength, military courage, and leadership. More contemporary artistic elements introduced features, like the charming Double Scottish Rose, an emblem boasting the power of love and depth of passion. Other decorations

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<sup>16</sup> Robert James Kapsch, "The Labor History of the Construction and Reconstruction of the White House, 1793-1817," Ph.D. diss., (University of Maryland, 1993); Stewart D. McLaurin, *James Hoban: Designer & Builder of the White House* (Washington, D. C.: White House Historical Association, 2021.) 72.

<sup>17</sup> William Seale, *The President's House*, 1: 44-46.

symbolized American strength, wisdom, and endurance by creating elegant swags adorned with American white oak leaves and acorns.<sup>18</sup>

Striking pediment hoods crowned every State Floor window on the building's north, east, and west sides. Carved architectural borders bedecked each window with splendidly engraved guilloches called "Grecian chains," consoles with lush acanthus leaves or fine fish-scaling, and rich moldings upon moldings. Against the smooth, flat surface of the walls, the windows appeared to hang as formal portraits placed symmetrically between the heroic pilasters capped by refined Ionic capitals with voluptuous Double Scottish Roses. Close-placed stone modillions encircled the eaves beneath the cornice, and the boisterous stone balustrade stood sentry enthroned upon the stone walls. Giant arched windows on the east and west fronts stood two full stories up, handsomely framed in a border of carved fruit and flowers. Double Scottish Roses, acorns, fruits, and oak leaves filled an abundant garland, suspended from fluttering ribbons, all rendered in Aquia stone above the North Door. Hoban had projected the draped festoon idea, but the Scots, in design and execution, adorned the entrance with a halo playfully lush. In their grandest act, the Edinburgh masons seemed to have made a labor of love carving the fourteen-foot swag.<sup>19</sup>

Still extremely large by American standards, L'Enfant's "Presidential Palace" had transformed into simply the President's House. This bundle of compromises created a uniquely identifiable American Federal Style architecture born of Washington's and Hoban's imaginations. Soon, the President's House would become the nation's house, a singularly

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<sup>18</sup>William Seale, "Beauty and History Preserved in Stone," *White House History*, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 7.

<sup>19</sup> William Seale, *A White House of Stone: Building America's First Ideal in Architecture*, (Washington D. C.: White House Historical Association, 2017), 26, 38.

American place, breaking Old World rules and adapting traditional forms to new use; however, this moment would not occur during Washington's administration, even though he had invested the most into its birth. After two terms in office, the gentleman farmer and citizen soldier resigned as president of the United States. Sadly, he would never witness the mansion's grand finale as the prodigiously slow construction pace would not reach completion for years to come. Washington would never sleep under its rafters or hear his voice echoing among its spacious halls.

### John Adams's White House

John and Abigail Adams became the first presidential family to live in the White House. One would not describe their stay as happy. As the presidential successor to George Washington in 1797, Adams inherited the futile responsibility of sustaining the Federalists' supremacy. Even as Adams settled down in the President's House, Jefferson's Antifederalist hordes banged, figuratively, at the gate, which by the time the presidential election results arrived in early December, had swept open to receive them. Adams had no recourse but to reside for a few months in defeat in the "castle," as Abigail called the house, that President Washington had built to house a Federalist dynasty. Henceforth, the age of "republican simplicity" approached.<sup>20</sup>

Against all odds, the improbable new capital rose during the previous decade. President Adams accepted its visionary plan and the principal public structures, which now included two executive department buildings flanking the residence. Espoused by the Federalists, the executive mansion analogized strong central government as a statement in stone. But, this idea

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<sup>20</sup> Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, Philadelphia, November 21, 1800, in *New Letters of Abigail Adams 1788-1801*, ed. Stewart Mitchell (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), 256-260.

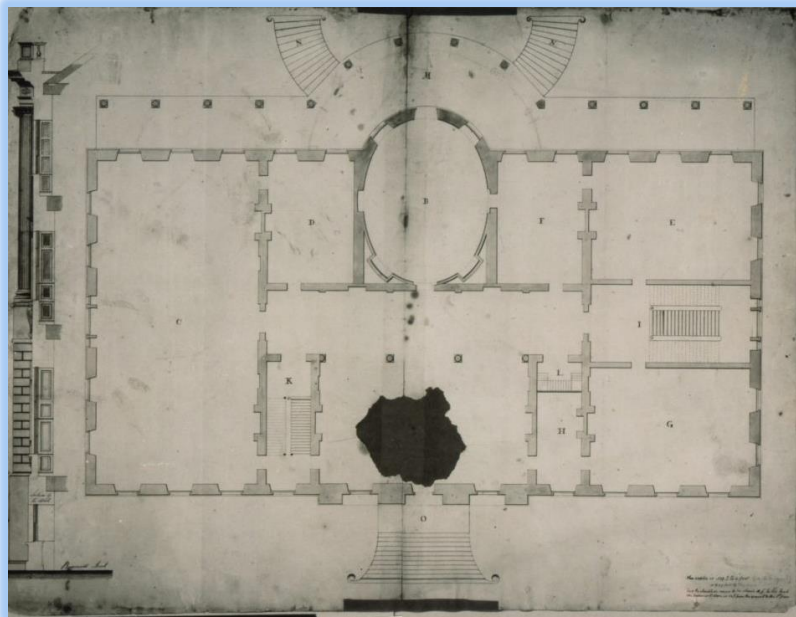
belonged to Washington, not Adams. Uninterested, he delegated its management primarily to the commissioners, with few exceptions. During a particular visit before his occupancy, he ordered the removal of figures “of man or beast” composition ornaments from several fireplace mantels. Annoyed, he complained about the commissioners omitting a vegetable garden and mandated one planted forthwith. And, based on the president’s frequent off-handed remarks and simpler Puritan leanings, speculation circulated that he may not live in the house suggesting the United States Supreme Court might take possession of the building.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, President Adams, a lawyer and a stickler in legal matters, honored the Residence Act of 1790 to the letter and moved into the President’s House as specified on November 1, 1800. The Federal City, which now swarmed with construction workers and government employees, boasted approximately six hundred houses, from dilapidated huts to deplorable plank boarding houses. The seemingly industrious new capital did not exhibit majestic urban sprawl. The public buildings remained in various construction stages, but none had reached completion. Adams must have felt disheartened upon arrival in this desolate and disarrayed setting. Instead of panoramic vistas of gently sloping grassy meadows unfolding onto the tidal marshes with soft sounds of lapping waters along the Potomac, the second president dismounted his carriage apprehensively to the ringing of hammers, piles of debris, worker shanties, and mud as far as the eyes could see.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> William Seale, “The White House in John Adam’s Presidency,” *White House History*, no.7 (Spring 2000): 26-27; Alexander White to the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, letters received, March 8, 11, and 22, 1798, Records of the Commissioners; Commissioners to George Andrews, November 1, 1800, Records of the Commissioners.

<sup>22</sup> John Ball Osborne, “The Removal of the Government to Washington,” *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, vol. 3 (Washington, D. C.: Columbia Historical Society, 1900), 136-60; Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, Philadelphia, February 27, 1800, in Adams, *New Letters*, 234-236.



*Figure 5. James Hoban's White House Floor Plan  
Original Plans Massachusetts Historical Society, ca. 1792  
Image courtesy of White House Historical Association*

Despite the circumstances, the Adams family attempted to make the best of the situation. They found that James Hoban, the architect, designed the interior spaces on a grand scale in adapting the Leinster House floor plan. Following standard eighteenth-century social custom, the first story's formal and informal dining rooms likely had attached drawing rooms, to which ladies might retire after dinner. This arrangement created two separate circuits of parlors, one public and one private, explaining the rationale behind the unusual break in the enfilade of Hoban's principal floor plan. He formed two patterns, centering one on the building's large room at the east end, today's East Room, and anchoring the other on the Oval Room projecting outwards in a sweeping bay to the south. The latter possibly planned for events like Washington's rather stiff circular levees in mind (positioning the president in the bay) and thus would have been the more formal of the two.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Robert F. Dalzell, Jr. and Lee Baldwin Dalzell, "Memory, Architecture, and the Future: George Washington, Mount Vernon and the White House," *White House History*, no. 6 (Fall 199): 44; McLaurin, *James*

Hoban's carpenters outfitted the public rooms with highly-polished mahogany doors inlaid with sweet bay magnolia satinwood and holly, each surrounded by fine moldings. The skilled joiners fashioned enormous mahogany window sashes with delicately formed ornamentation and shutters to complement them. Every window and door received the highest quality iron and brass hinges, some even gold-leafed and silver-plated. Imported wallpapers and trimmed with borders colorfully decorated the oval room and the two flanking square rooms. But these rich details cannot deny that, in general, the President's House loomed like a barnlike affair with wooden floors and giant windows that rattled in the wind. Almost every fireplace in the house brimmed night and day with big log fires to keep out the cold and in an effort to dry the fresh plaster.<sup>24</sup>

The first family occupied only a portion of the house. On the first floor, the huge unserviceable East Room with its bare brick walls became the first lady's "drying room" for the presidential undergarments best not seen by the public, a far cry from the planned stately space Hoban intended as an "Audience Chamber" for formally receiving petitions from Congress. To avoid the chaotic north grounds' construction materials, Adams reinvented the south face as the main entrance and commissioned an uncovered porch with stairs to access the house. Due to the revision in entries, the formal Oval Room, today's Blue Room, became the vestibule. In the absence of the East Room, the Adams entertained modestly in the Entrance Hall for large

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*Hoban*, 66; James Hoban, "James Hoban's White House Floor Plan, 1792," White House Historical Association, Washington, D. C. original plans courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland, accessed July 27, 2022, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/james-hoban-floor-plan>.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Claxton, "Inventory of the Furniture in the President's House, the Property of the United States, February 26, 1801," in *Times and District of Columbia Advertiser*, March 6, 1801; Commissioners to James Hoban, July 31, 1793, Records of the Commissioners; Commissioners to Harrison & Maynardier, October 15, 1799, Records of the Commissioners; Edward Langley, invoice for hardware from England, September 10, 1799, Records of the Commissioners.

gatherings and dinners. President Adams employed the southwest room, today's State Dining Room, as his levee room. Designated initially as a library, the northwest room, today's small family dining room, he used for smaller dinners with Congress members and elite quests. In the west adjacent room to the Oval Room, today's Red Room, the family met informally and ate breakfast. Of the eleven second-floor spaces, the president and first lady placed six rooms into service: four rooms as bedchambers, one as the president's office, and the elliptical upstairs room as a ladies' drawing room. To preserve heat and ward off drafts, any vacant rooms remained closed. Their upstairs accessibility depended on a narrow flight of service steps as the grand divided staircase on the west end of the lofty Transverse Hall still needed building.<sup>25</sup>

The Ground Floor housed a forty-foot kitchen on the north front with two grand fireplaces on opposite ends. The remaining cellar rooms performed as ample storage areas and servant quarters. The Irish architect designed a fully exposed south face for domestic work and to deter dampness. In contrast, the north side remained barely raised above ground level. Out of view, a sunken areaway on the north pulled the earth away from the basement level. It provided a paved passageway to allow carriage and pedestrian access for practical and utility services.<sup>26</sup>

When President Washington resigned, President Adams took possession of only a few well-worn state furnishings to fill the house. The second president replaced and purchased additional furniture as needed, which he transferred to the White House, but not enough for the spacious mansion. A few pieces worth mentioning included a long seven-section pine table,

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<sup>25</sup> William Stoddard to William Thorton, January 20 and 30, 1801, in William Thornton Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.; Seale, "White House Adam's Presidency," 29, 32-33.

<sup>26</sup> William Seale, *White House of Stone*, 9.



which provided an elegant display for banquets when joined and concealed with a white damask tablecloth. Two sideboards and forty-eight black-and-gold chairs in the State Dining Room suggested the number of guests the first family could conveniently accommodate for smaller formal dinners. The breakfast parlor, by its contents, the family used informally for both family meals and sitting, with a table, side chairs, sofa, and easy chairs. The upstairs drawing room, decorated with some elegance, contained thirty-two mahogany chairs, card tables, sofas, niches, and damask drapery. Other articles seemed homey and unnoteworthy, except for Gilbert Stuart's stately portrait of George Washington displayed in the president's levee room.<sup>27</sup>

Since the 1800 presidential election loss deemed the family's stay temporary, a begrudging Adams indeed did not feel motivated to acquire an extensive collection of fine furnishings for, in his estimation, the undeserving successor. The inventory conducted the following spring distinctly documented the rooms as deficient in furniture. Considering the brevity of Adams's presidential tenure with his disinterested and disconsolate attitude, he bequeathed an unfinished executive mansion to Thomas Jefferson. Ironically, Adams, a passionate patriot and renowned founding father, lacked the initiative and innovation as president to meaningfully contribute to White House traditions and iconography.

#### Thomas Jefferson's White House

As the spring of 1801 bloomed, a new body politic ecstatically prepared for their nominee, Thomas Jefferson, to accept his position as the third president of the United States. A new age dawned with the inauguration of the country's first Republican leader. The Federalist dynasty managed to institute a constitutional government. Still, it remained burdened with

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<sup>27</sup> Claxton, "Inventory Furniture President's House;" Seale, "White House Adam's Presidency," 33.

various adversities, from a runaway national debt to pirates who harassed American commerce in the Mediterranean. Upon President Jefferson's assumption of these taxing duties, he found himself with an incomplete and deteriorating residence devoid of landscaping, one adrift in a sea of muck surrounded by unsavory temporary outbuildings, now useless brick kilns, and a less-than-presidential split-rail-fence. The primarily empty shell vacated by John and Abigail Adams with its littered grounds presented a *tabula rasa*, facilitating Jefferson's amateur architect's fertile imagination to create remodeling solutions for the former and landscaping plans for the latter.

Jefferson, known for his accomplishments as a statesman and philosopher, also possessed a penchant for Palladio architecture and a natural ability for design. Although never formally trained as a draftsman, he studied the structures of Europe and read extensively on the great architects of Europe. In his mind, Jefferson envisioned a building not merely as a walled structure but as a metaphor for American creeds, and the construction process equaled the task of building a nation. Devoted to his passion, he wrote to Madison, "You see I am an enthusiast on the subject of the arts [architecture]. But it is an enthusiasm of which I am not ashamed, as its object is to improve the taste of my countrymen, to increase their reputation, to reconcile them to the rest of the world, and procure them its praise."<sup>28</sup>

Unconstrained by romantic notions alone, President Jefferson believed in architectural logistical power and practicality. His view emphasized the instrumental ability to transform the built environment in shaping everyday life's social organization and social relations' functioning. It involved physically reworking the environment to shape the conditions and

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, September 20, 1785, in Jefferson, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 8:535.

opportunities for collective life. In practice, Jefferson wanted the existing President's House repaired and finished as economically as possible, with the amenities necessary for the chief executive's residence. As a Republican president, he also wished to eliminate what he considered the trappings of monarchy, which characterized the administrations of George Washington and John Adams.<sup>29</sup>

In 1803, President Jefferson decided to decentralize government-building activities. The outcome definitively dismissed the Federal City commission and established a surveyor of public buildings position to revise and complete the unfinished work. The president believed that *one* man, the *right* man, would eliminate delays incurred by committee deliberations and preside in his position as a presidential public buildings proxy. For this post, Jefferson appointed an English-born and trained architect who had immigrated to America, Benjamin Henry Latrobe. Jefferson highly respected Latrobe's ability and chose him over James Hoban to bring the President's House to completion. Both gentlemen mutually held Hoban's original designs for the house in low esteem and desired to improve them.<sup>30</sup>

Jefferson's and Latrobe's work at the executive mansion began modestly, with much-needed repairs and minor renovations. The job would progress through the design of service wing additions to support domestic functions with a related site reorganization. It culminated in a radical but largely unexecuted redesign of the interiors, significant exterior landscaping, and dramatic new entryways. Remodeling related to convenience and service received attention

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<sup>29</sup> Chandra Mukerji, *Impossible Engineering: Technology and Territoriality on the Canal du Midi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 404; Seale, *The White House*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin Latrobe to Thomas Jefferson, May 5, 1805, in *The Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, 4 vols., ed. John C. Van Horne (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984-88), 2:62-67; Jeffrey A. Cohen and Charles E. Brownell, *The Architectural Drawings of Benjamin Latrobe*, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 327.

first: replacing the leaking wooden roof and gutters; substituting the outdoor privy with two indoor water closets; establishing an improved wine cellar; hanging service bells; upgrading the kitchen spaces for his French sous-chef by installing boilers, stewing stoves, and ranges; and the unsightly and precarious south stairs removed in favor of stone steps supported by a groin vault bridge across the basement areaway for the north house entrance intended for public access. Of significance, Latrobe finally installed the missing “great western staircase” between the Library and State Dining Rooms as prescribed by Hoban’s initial plans but reconfigured. The new design rose in a single range and then divided at a broad landing into a pair of stairs, horse-shoe shaped, that encouraged free visual passage to the second floor.<sup>31</sup>

President Jefferson, the mansion’s first long-term resident from 1801 to 1809, moved into the President’s House not overly enamored. Always the diligent amateur architect, he observed immediately that his predecessor had not honored the original staging of the interior spaces. The floor plan, devoid of flow and functionality, warranted aesthetic modifications and rearrangement. The massive north Entrance Hall returned to its original entry function but also served as an exhibit area for Jefferson’s growing western artifacts collection. The Oval Room resumed as the drawing room for receiving foreign diplomat credentials and after-dinner entertainment. Jefferson converted Adams’s levee area into the library and his office, today’s State Dining Room. Jefferson preferred semi-formal dinner parties in smaller settings, so the adjoining room to the east of the Oval Room, today’s Green Room, became the “common” dining space. The expansive unfinished East Room served as a multi-purpose space for storage

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<sup>31</sup> Travis McDonald, “The East and West Wings of the White House: History in Architecture and Building,” *White House History*, no. 29 (Summer 2011): 45, 47.

and temporary quarters for Meriwether Lewis, Jefferson's secretary, and Lewis's canine friends before his expedition west with William Clark.<sup>32</sup>

Public concern and curiosity persisted over the poor condition of the chief magistrate's residence. Congressional debates over adequate appropriations for the new administration centered on the deficient state of the President's House. The furniture "was by no means sufficient to furnish it in that style it demanded," commented one congressman. At the same time, another mentioned that "the largest and most elegant rooms were not yet furnished."<sup>33</sup> Washingtonians also commented on the uncomely state of the furnishings. Margaret Bayard Smith, *The National Intelligencer* editor's wife and an admiring friend of Jefferson, recalled that the president found the house "scantily furnished with articles brought from Philadelphia and which had been used by Genl. Washington." But, she explained, Jefferson retained the worn and faded pieces out of respect for the revered first president. Smith labeled the fixtures added by the government as "plain and simple to excess."<sup>34</sup>

Jefferson lived simply in the President's House, among the furnishings Washington and Adams bequeathed. Although his taste for French objects remained well documented, no record indicated that Jefferson ever purchased French décor for the residence. The president actively diverted most congressional furnishing funds to the many necessary maintenance projects mentioned previously. Existing government records accounted for Jefferson's expenditures as

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<sup>32</sup> Seale, *The President's House*, 1:41, 48, 92-109; Benjamin Latrobe's 1807 plan, including a report on the condition of the house in 1803, repairs and renovations completed, and proposed new redesigns, in Cohen and Brownwell, *Architectural Drawings of Latrobe*, 2:501.

<sup>33</sup> Congressmen comments from the *Annals of Congress*, 6<sup>th</sup> Congress Second Session, in Monkman, *The White House*, 32.

<sup>34</sup> Margaret Bayard Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, ed. Gaillard Hunt (1906, repr. New York: F. Ungar Publishing Company, 1965), 384-385.

utilitarian in nature and replacement articles for continuous entertaining settings. For example, practical early purchases included carpeting, cabinet and upholstery work, china, crockery ware, grates, and kitchen furniture. Additional congressional appropriations during his second term repeated his procurement of similar husbandry articles. Jefferson's interiors reflected "republican simplicity" noted for their "absence of splendour ornament and profusion" but compensated by the "neatness, order and elegant sufficiency" pervading the establishment.<sup>35</sup>

While Benjamin Latrobe's and President Jefferson's redesign plans for the interiors had few long-term effects, their accumulated work impacted the evolution of the exterior. Site development of the President's House presented a complex design problem involving the ensemble of executive buildings that President Washington arbitrarily located within the presidential grounds. The Treasury Department stood to the east of the mansion, and the State and War Departments resided together under one roof on the west. The undeveloped and irregular topography, including the awkward and precarious house entries, produced foot travel to the executive buildings unorganized and virtually nonexistent. Jefferson's resolved to unite the President's House with the flanking structures by designing low terrace pavilions on either side of the house. These multi-functioning architectural features would host the domestic outbuildings and mediate a drop in the ground level from the north to the south grounds, plus soften the structure's grandiloquent impression. The wings' north sides would serve as retaining walls while the south would open to warm and drying sunshine. The colonnaded south face allowed access to the interior spaces and provided covered passages from the

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<sup>35</sup> Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts of the General Accounting Office, 1790-1894, account 21304, March 1801 to February 1809, Record Group 217, U. S. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D. C.; Marie G. Kimball, "The Original Furnishings of the White House" Parts 1 and 2, *Antiques* 16 (June 1929): 481-486 and (July 1929): 33-37; Smith, *The First Forty Years*, 392.

executive mansion's ground floor to the administrative office's first floor. The roofs of the additions would provide terraces from the President's House main floor to the executive buildings' second-story levels.<sup>36</sup>

President Jefferson tasked Benjamin Latrobe to integrate his diverse architectural ideas with a vehicular and pedestrian circulation system to respond to the confrontation of the house grounds with the bustling surrounding streets. Then, these areas would receive much-needed landscaping to combine geometric and picturesque gardens. Latrobe appreciated Jefferson's patronage and had much affection for the president but sorely resented his frequent interference in the design process. Frustratingly, congressional money for the executive mansion severely waned as Latrobe's Capitol building expenditures far exceeded those budgeted. Consequently, Latrobe only constructed drastically abbreviated service additions without the colonnades. He indefinitely postponed ideas of cultivating the extravagant pleasure gardens altogether. Relenting, a five-acre lot surrounding the house became an enclosed lawn within the President's Park with a twelve-foot thick stone wall on the southern border and a somewhat less than stellar rail fence on the other three sides.<sup>37</sup>

Inclusively, President Jefferson treated the executive mansion more as the residence of a democratically elected official than as an unforgettable ceremonial palace initially intended by President Washington and Pierre L'Enfant. The small interior projects suggested the removal of relatively little structural fabric from Hoban's construction. The more radical and potentially superior redesigns of Hoban's rather staid and old-fashioned President's House proposed by

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<sup>36</sup> Seale, *The White House*, 38, 40, 47; Latrobe, *Correspondence Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, 62-70.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Fazio and Patrick Snadon, "Benjamin Latrobe and Thomas Jefferson Redesign the President's House," *White House History*, no. 8 (Fall 2000): 36; Lucinda Prout Janke, "The President's Park," *White House History*, no. 27 (Spring 2010): 71.

Benjamin Latrobe gradually lost support as presidential and congressional apathy grew. Sweeping changes, such as the monumental North and South porticoes, merely gathered dust. The tenacious architectural terraces became abridged and waited for future architects to complete. As a consequence, early nineteenth-century Americans tried to compulsively explain their national identity without validation because the country, including its public buildings, kept changing beyond the conception and even the recognition of its people.<sup>38</sup>

### James Madison's White House

Jefferson's successor, James Madison, the fourth president of the United States, inherited a nation that continued to grow physically and economically regardless of President Jefferson's commercial isolationist policies. As Jefferson's secretary of state, President Madison assumed an active governmental role in tune with the political machinations at home and globally. Though Jefferson's administration managed to keep the country at peace, President Madison recognized the rising clamor from the people objecting to the repeated humiliations at sea at the hands of the British. He sensed the depth of the incensed public's desire to teach monarchical Great Britain a lesson ending any further concessions or intrusions.

Discerning and perceptive, President Madison and First Lady Dolley Madison learned during President Jefferson's administration that Washington, D. C. thrived as a company town with politics its only industry. As Madison's first order of business, he immediately stationed his wife, an expert in Washington's political society, in charge of the White House and the entertainment. Mrs. Madison recognized that President Jefferson's studied informality offended more than it embraced. She comprehended that the President's House must balance the formal

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Latrobe, April 26, 1808, in Jefferson, *Correspondence Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, 611-613.



and informal state activities that would ingratiate American citizens, foster bipartisan congressional relationships, and dignify foreign ambassadors. Her endeavors would require a more refined and redecorated executive mansion than the one Jefferson bestowed to his successor. The matter dictated a sole focus on the interiors and the need for panache.

Mrs. Madison partnered with a delighted Benjamin Latrobe to orchestrate and define an executive mansion interior conducive to her objectives. The simple and plain furnishing and décor did not suit Mrs. Madison's flamboyant tastes nor match her precedented entertaining repertoire. Naturally, Latrobe viewed the chance as a renewed opportunity to showcase his skills and theories in domestic design and, maybe, salvage his diminishing favor. The duo refashioned the State Rooms with haste, emphasizing the State Dining Room, the Oval Room, and the sitting parlor, today's Red Room. Their combined efforts allowed the residence to quickly become the centerpiece for social and political life in the capital.<sup>39</sup>

Almost all congressional furnishing appropriations during Madison's first term went directly toward the three State Rooms and their associated activities. Latrobe purchased elegant and sophisticated articles like looking glasses, silver, porcelain and pottery, furniture and upholstery work, books for the president's library, carpeting, linens, etc. from Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, and Washington, D. C. His extravagant acquisitions included furniture that he specially designed for the Oval Room. Latrobe eagerly expended his energies and talents to create an entire ensemble suite of chairs, sofas, and settees blending ornate Grecian neoclassical and American styles with rich woods enhanced by paint, varnish, gilding, and red velvet upholstery.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Margaret Brown Klapthor, "Benjamin Latrobe and Dolley Madison Decorate the White House," *Contributions From the Museum of History and Technology*, paper 49 (1965): 153-64.

<sup>40</sup> Klapthor, "Decorate the White House," 153-64.

Next, the team collaborated on reconfiguring President Jefferson's sitting room, designated as Mrs. Madison's Parlor. Explicitly remodeled for lively entertaining, the space would host afternoon teas, poetry readings, after-dinner conversations, gaming, and music. Jefferson's old furniture became reinvigorated with new bright yellow satin upholstery. The two redesigned the window treatments with valances and swags in sunflower-yellow damask. With zeal, Latrobe purchased a new carpet, pier tables, card tables, a pianoforte, and a guitar. Last, Jefferson's former office, now the State Dining Room, received new wallpaper, carpet, and a colossal sideboard. At President Madison's behest, Latrobe relocated Gilbert Stuart's George Washington portrait to this handsomely restyled room to lend an air of stature.<sup>41</sup>

Tragically, Benjamin Latrobe and Mrs. Madison's exalted triumphs transformed into fleeting memories consumed by the savageries of war. From the beginning, European incursions and insults thwarted James Madison's presidency. Great Britain's depredations against the neutral United States at sea and affronts to American settlement on the northwestern frontier tipped the scale. The infuriated United States declared war on England on June 18, 1812, as a matter of national honor. In less than a year, British ships sailing out of Bermuda attacked piecemeal along the Atlantic Ocean coast, burning harbors and attempting a blockade. Great Britain now had the advantage. They crushed Napoleon in the spring of 1814, so many hardened veterans, no longer needed in Europe, joined military forces already active in America and accelerated the war. The Americans fared poorly in the confrontation, and by the summer, the British ruled the Chesapeake Bay and plotted an invasion. The landing of 4,000-plus men

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<sup>41</sup> Elbridge Gerry, Jr. *The Diary of Elbridge Gerry, Jr.* (New York: Brentano's, 1927), 180; Ethel Lewis, *The White House: As Informal History of Its Architecture, Interiors and Gardens* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1937), 69.

took place in Maryland in July 1814, and the British troops marched to Washington, dispatching opposition along the way with relative ease. Arriving in the Federal City late on August 24, the invaders first torched the Capitol building. Next, the British invaders turned their sights on the abandoned President's House. After pillaging and plundering the mansion, the British attackers set it afire.

The President's House burnt to a blackened bare shell. Eyewitnesses recounted the British looting and hurling of torches like a "machine of wild-fire" in which an "instantaneous conflagration" arose as "the heavens redden'd with the blaze."<sup>42</sup> The act symbolized the country's premier defeat to Americans at the time. The first family's efforts to achieve invaluable civility and inclusivity among the many visitors and guests that thronged their weekly events quickly became forgotten. The first lady's outgoing personality made her a celebrity, and her entertainment drew widespread attention as exercises in merrymaking eclipsing their actual purposes as venues for state formation. But, the Madisons' energies to perpetuate a national identity and bipartisan alliances dissolved in the face of war and the British attack on the capital. Learning of the mansion's burning mortified Americans. The symbolic impact transcended even the sad reality and cemented the people's disaffection.

A survey of the smoldering ashes and rubble spurred new talk of erecting a capital further west. Although Congress had already ratified the peace treaty, only Andrew Jackson's victory in New Orleans five months later dimmed the glare of the demoralizing events. Only then could Congress swiftly pass a bill to rebuild the Federal City, starting with reorganizing the Commissioners of the District of Columbia. Realizing the capital's significance, President

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<sup>42</sup> Mrs. William (Anna) Thornton's eyewitness account as told to Mrs. Margaret Smith, August 30, 1814, Washington, D. C., in Smith, *The First Forty Years*, 111-12.

Madison emphatically informed the commission that for political reasons, what they built must “not deviate from the model destroyed.” He reiterated that the act specified “rebuilding” and any modifications undetectable.<sup>43</sup>

The commissioners summoned and employed the original architect, James Hoban. But, considering that it had taken nearly ten laborious years to build the first White House, Congress stipulated reconstruction completed within three years. Discovering the damage to exceed initial reports, Hoban would need expediency to reconstruct huge defective sections of the stone walls before politicians raised a formal complaint. Surprisingly, the building moved along quickly due to several salvageable areas combined with improvements in transportation, improved access to foreign supplies, and increased domestic manufacturing. Hoban had made sufficient progress on the whole building by the time President Madison left office in March 1817, but completion would take at least another year. Thus, newly elected President James Monroe found himself obligated to continue the work.<sup>44</sup>

James Hoban made every effort to reconstruct his great monument, the President’s House, live *anew*. *Anew* characterized construction elements, such as hewing logs, carving stone, laying bricks, and plastering walls. Regardless of the architecture’s familiarity, the genesis of the President’s House into one of our most revered national symbols consisted of more than just stone. The historical record acknowledges that each presidential generation leaves an indelible mark on the house. However, in the early years, the unfinished presiding conditions, including changes that reflected contemporary circumstances, characters, ideas, and

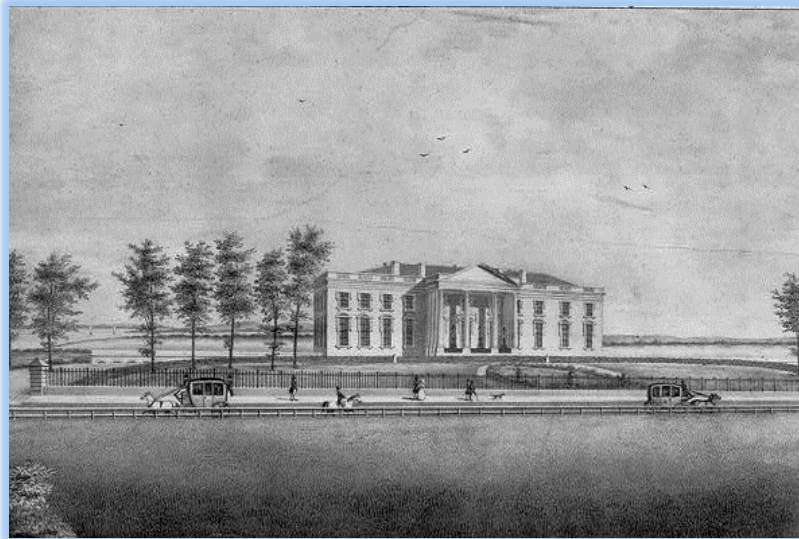
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<sup>43</sup> James Madison to the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, May 23, 1815, Records of the Commissioners.

<sup>44</sup> James Hoban to the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, August 12, and August 16, 1816, Records of the Commissioners.

conflicts, hampered the nation's ability to embrace shared beliefs and continuity. Even more vexing, the British invaders reduced to ashes any advances in citizens' deep attachment and national pride bound to the house. Yet, from the ruin would come a resurrection as President James Monroe navigated the nation into a spirit of regeneration.

## Chapter 4: Resurrection



*Figure 6. View of the President's House, Washington, D. C.  
Artist: D. W. Kellogg & Company, ca. 1830-1840  
Image courtesy of the Library of Congress*

The swearing-in of a new president had evolved into an actual spectator sport with throngs of well-wishers and congratulatory crowds. The surreal atmosphere laden with its cornucopia of sentiments, from solemn and sacred to joyous and jubilant, enveloped the newly elected president and the numerous onlookers. As he placed his hand upon the Bible, James Monroe, no doubt, felt awash by these emotions. No one can claim to know all the thoughts that may have crossed his mind at that moment. Yet, in hindsight, one might conjecture that patriotic perceptions prevailed as he recited the oath of office. With republican prudence, President Monroe believed the capital belonged to the American people. In the seat of government, the nation's representatives confronted challenges, and the nation's people celebrated triumphs. The District of Columbia promoted and protected the principles in the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. The President's House served as the setting for the pivotal interplays between world leaders and uniting the nation's citizenry while

projecting American ideals. Grasping these truths, President Monroe desired the house to realize now and forever the symbolic identity its importance merited.

### Resilience

Historically, cities have experienced devastating destruction, whether sacked, burned, torched, bombed, flooded, besieged, or leveled. And, metaphorically, they almost always arose from the ashes to rebuild like the mythological phoenix. If an individual traced the aftermath of such cataclysms, it revealed how traumatized city-dwellers unswervingly advance narratives of resilience and how the pragmatic progression of urban recovery found fuel in highly symbolic actions. Thus, the ubiquity of urban rebuilding after disaster resulted from, among other things, a political need to demonstrate resilience and cultivate progress-oriented uplift. Such “resilient cities,” like the nascent American capital, have remained a tribute to a nation’s dogged persistence and indeed of the human spirit.<sup>1</sup>

But, in the late summer of 1814, all seemed lost. With the Capitol ablaze, the British troops reassembled and marched west toward the executive mansion. Earlier in the evening, the residence fell into utter pandemonium as Mrs. Madison hastily packed trunks with presidential papers, assorted silverware, and bric-a-brac. Panic-stricken servants heaved, hoisted, and heaped the loaded boxes onto waiting carts harnessed to alarmed animals. Anticipating the worst, Mrs. Madison commanded the removal of Gilbert Stuart’s George Washington portrait before fleeing. As the first lady and her servant entourage hurriedly escaped, the city’s underbelly crawled out of the night. Creating more chaos, rogues and wretches took to scouring and looting the premise.

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence J. Vale and Thomas J. Campanella, eds., *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), intro. and 339, ProQuest Ebook Central.

When the British soldiers arrived, the reigning terror and turmoil transformed into an eerily quiet as the thieves abandoned their exploits and slunk back into the depths from whence they came.<sup>2</sup>

The soldiers invaded the President's House and deviously dismantled the dwelling in double-quick time. A melodramatic atmosphere pervaded the scene as the British officers barked orders. The officers, discovering the bountiful banquet already prepared for the evening dinner, situated themselves around the table, feasted on the food, and raised glasses of wine while making disingenuous salutations and mocking the irony of the matter. When "made ready," the British troops set and carried out the fire in a most effective militaristic fashion. On the second floor, the destroyed fixtures created great piles of kindling and tinder. Once lit, the blistering flames from smashed furniture and lamp oil swiftly consumed the wooden attics above. The resulting hellfire ignited the wooden timbers, flooring, and lath of the floor beneath before plunging into the main level. With fury and finality, the massive burning wreckage crashed into the cellars, where the eventual exhaustion of fuel and a fortuitous rain storm extinguished the flames. Most accounts reported the unholy conflagration as both quick and neat, martial and businesslike, leaving a blackened stone specter.<sup>3</sup>

On the early dawn of August 25, heavy smoke shrouded Washington City from the rising sun. Satisfied with their night's exploits, the British invaders seemed to evaporate into the thick haze as they withdrew from the ravaged capital. The malicious inferno produced a vicious glow in the night sky vividly seen as far away as Baltimore and even aboard British warships moored

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Jennings, Madison's enslaved valet and servant, recalled much later that Jean-Pierre Sioussat, Madison's steward, and Thomas McGrath, Madison's gardener, worked together to free Gilbert Stuart's George Washington portrait from a frame permanently affixed to the wall of the State Dining Room and "sent it off with some large silver urns and other valuables as could be hastily got hold of." in Paul Jennings, *A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison*, 1865, reprinted in *White House History*, no. 1 (1983): 49-50.

<sup>3</sup> "America Under Fire," White House Historical Association, accessed August 14, 2022, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/collections/america-under-fire>.



some fifty miles away on the Patuxent River. Surprisingly, the marauders spared all the private buildings, but window-blown sparks still claimed some as hapless victims. Though the soldiers thoroughly terrorized the few cowering residents who could not flee, none received any physical harm. As aforesaid, the public buildings esteemed no such favor. The Capitol, the President's House, and the executive offices took their turn at the torch.<sup>4</sup>

Fugitives slowly filtered back into the city, greeted by the still-smoldering mounds of hot ash. With their eyes burning and choking from the acrid fumes, they surveyed the numbing scale of the district's degradation. All seemed lifeless and sepulchral, scorched and roofless. The once-glorious Capitol sat alone and conspicuous on the hill that Pierre Charles L'Enfant had once pronounced as "a pedestal waiting for a monument."<sup>5</sup> A mile to the west, the President's House stood apocalyptic, cracked and charred, hollowed out by the flames. The flanking executive buildings, fellows in the conflagration, filled the gaunt landscape with a blackened menagerie of mangled and burnt rubbish. Disquieting reverberations began to haunt the fledgling capital and its despondent community.<sup>6</sup>

Mortifying rumors began circulating among Washingtonians that with the *raison d'être* attenuated the government would pull up stakes and abandon the city to wither and die. If the

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<sup>4</sup> David Winchester to James Winchester, August 25, 1814, in James Winchester Papers, Tennessee Historical Society Collection, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee; HMS *Albion*, logs, August 25, 1814, George Cockburn Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. For descriptions of the British attack and occupation of the city, see Wilhelmus B. Bryan, *A History of the National Capital: From Its Foundation Through the Period of the Adoption of the Organic Act*, vol. 1, 1790-1814 (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 625-628; Constance M. Green, *Washington: A History of the Capital, 1800-1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 60-64; and Anthony S. Pitch, *The Burning of Washington: The British Invasion of 1814* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 99-152.

<sup>5</sup> L'Enfant to George Washington, June, 22, 1791, in *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series, 21 vols., March – September 1791, eds. Mark Mastromarino and Jack Warren, Jr. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 8:290.

<sup>6</sup> Green, *History of the Capital*, 60-64.

government decided to cut and run, it represented a treacherous breach of the faith in the nation, sharpened its disgrace, and completed its humiliation. An exodus would finish what the enemy initiated, deserting the city at the dastardly dictate of the British regime. An epiphany for many, the British invaders had assaulted the ideals of progress and modernity, the values of republican democracy, the sanctity of human life, and the commitment to an evolving egalitarian society. Whatever the American people's previous misgivings or misconceptions about the capital's public buildings, they now mourned them and joined in the widespread speculation about what they represented.<sup>7</sup>

In the attack's wake, the government faced a perilous journey on how best to navigate a toxic narrative to transform it into a story of redemption and progression. Seemingly insurmountable, the early republic's leaders would have probably found it easier to pray for transcendence amid the rubble. Undaunted, the first hurdle regarding the seat of government demanded Congress confront the contradictory impulses inherent in this contested process between recovery and remembrance, triumphalism and despair. An entrenched verbal tug of war dragged on into October 1814 between the legislators. Congressional proponents for the Federal City parried every thrust and blunted every offensive. At last, they quelled capital relocation dissenting discussions and predatorial rants by invoking the city's namesake. Opponents suggesting treasonous alternative sites soon found themselves on a fool's errand and their character maligned for daring to desecrate General Washington's honor and sacrifice.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D. C.), September 2 and 28, October 3, 1814.

<sup>8</sup> *National Intelligencer*, September 4 and 28, 1814; United States Congress, *The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States*, Thirteenth Congress, Third Session, September 19, 1814-March 3, 1815 (Washington, D. C.: Gales and Seaton, 1854), 216-222, 311-323, 341-342, 344-376, 387-396, 624-625.

Unaffected by the relocation issue in abeyance, gloom and doubt still hovered low over the capital for months as Britain and the United States remained embroiled in hostilities. Not until early in 1815, with the arrival of the Treaty of Ghent and the triumphant news of General Andrew Jackson's victory at New Orleans, did citizens allow for the displacement of civic despair for relief. The nation seemed poised for a revival, but the people remained wary, even though the capital city had won a reprieve. So long as the public edifices bore gashes and scars, the nation itself lay wounded. The time had come for President Madison and Congress to purposefully plan for the public buildings.

The most pressing questions addressed erecting new architecturally styled buildings and regrouping them within the district. Even though cost factors primarily commanded such choices, a more profound issue prevailed. How would the government attempt to repair torn cultural fabrics and make reparations for the people's damaged psyches? The matter mandated rededicating the nation to its foremost constitutional philosophy "in Order to form a more perfect Union." Thus, the public buildings necessitated repairing and rebuilding the ruins where they already stood. But, a fragile population with few unifying symbols must observe and feel a familiar foundation. Ignoring the inconvenience of governing from makeshift quarters, Congress deliberately decided that the most recognizable, respected, and closest to completion public structure receive the first and fastest attention, the President's House. And, to further allay the dispirited people's fretting fears, President Madison dictated to the public building commission, "In carrying into execution the law for rebuilding the public edifices, it will best comport with its object and its provision, not to deviate from the models destroyed..."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Seale, *The President's House*, 139-140; James Madison to the Commissioners, May 23, 1815, in Madison Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

The opportunistic Benjamin Latrobe, falling on hard times, exerted himself and attempted to reobtain his former position as the federal architect. He desired to rebuild and, if necessary, redesign the incomplete Capitol and ruined President's House. Optimistic, Latrobe resurrected the extensive executive mansion plans created for President Jefferson in 1807. He hoped to woo President Madison and Congress with confidence and vigor as the designs hinged on numerous improvements. Perhaps, Latrobe reveled in the chance to revive a dialogue regarding the monumental porticoes. Regrettably, Latrobe's reputation proceeded him. No one doubted his architectural genius, but he had proved himself difficult in past dealings, determined to produce something different. Emphatically, Madison disinclined to acquiesce to Latrobe's requests for the President's House while consenting to his supervision of the Capitol. For political expediency, President Madison wanted the residence "repaired," and only the original architect would suffice. The reappointment of James Hoban for the mansion's reconstruction signaled a solid determination to recreate a capital of equal worth and stature to the one the British laid waste.<sup>10</sup>

Just a stepping stone during the early nineteenth century, the attorney general at the time, Richard Rush, described Washington as "a meager village, with a few bad houses and extensive swamps."<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, devoted nationalists accepted that even a "meager village" and its binding structures had to some degree, embodied the collective hopes and aspirations of the young liberated republic. Few may have eagerly embraced this truth with a level of genuine

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<sup>10</sup> McLaurin, *James Hoban*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Rush to John Adams, September 5, 1814, in Richard Rush Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

sincerity, as expressed by President James Monroe. He believed the executive residence's resurrection would orchestrate a profound symbolic import of resilience and unity.

### Repaired

Before the British set it alight, the President's House stood as the most conspicuous landmark in the still-wooded countryside on its western perch above the glorified village of Washington. With congressional stipulations demanding the reconstruction of the executive mansion in three years, work began at a fevered pitch in the spring of 1815. Almost overnight, the abandoned ridge with its gutted, soot-stained ruin duly transformed into a scene not all that far from its past. Reminiscent of an anthill, workers scurried about securing the remaining stone walls, sifting through ash for salvage, and carrying off cartloads of rubbish. Wildly ringing hammers and singing saws resounded throughout the city as carpenters hurriedly built huts for housing and shacks for storage. A broad brickyard, a large woodworking shop, and a makeshift stable remerged on the northern grounds, while a vast stone yard with crowded sheds reappeared on the east corner of the commons. Rafts laden with quarried "pudding stone" already dotted the Potomac as sinewy men poled their bulky cargos upstream against the robust current. Burdened beasts rutted and plowed deep into the ridge as they struggled against their weighty loads on wagons and flats. The landscape quickly lost its grassy green coat reverting to its former muddy blanket bestrewn with timber and iron tools.<sup>12</sup>

By December 1816, Hoban filed his fastidious annual report on the work progress to the impatient commissioners. He carefully documented the extensive injury the fire had caused and detailed the volumes of stone, carpentry, and brickwork undertaken that year to rectify the

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<sup>12</sup> James Hoban to the Commissioners, April 25, 1815, Records of the Commissioners; William Seale, *White House of Stone*, 16.

damage and rebuild the walls. To shorten the construction schedule, the laborers framed and raised a temporary wooden shingle roof, later replaced by the reddish-orange metallic luster of copper. The provisional top accelerated the construction. The stonemasons and bricklayers worked above the elevated cornice line on the encircling balustrade and the high chimneys. Concurrently, the carpenters could commence with the woodwork for the interiors. Well underway, the carpenters labored on the mahogany doors' trimming, framing, and paneling, making window frames ready for glazing. Clearly, Hoban's strategy paid substantial dividends as he reported finishing structural woodwork, including interior walls, ceilings, and floor joists.<sup>13</sup>

Compared to the Capitol, work on the President's House, more minor in scope and complexity, progressed with relative calm. The building proceeded so well that when James Hoban installed the principal rafters before Monroe's presidential election, he cheerfully requested \$60 for the traditional roof-raising party for his workers. Seven weeks later, Hoban reported completing the mansion's walls, an extraordinary feat considering the underlying circumstances. When the recommissioned architect set to work on the project, he discovered, to his dismay, that the walls had sustained significantly more damage than documented. By a sheer miracle, the entire south façade of the house remained intact after the inferno. The rest of the building had fared far worse. In stark contrast, the center frontispiece on the north face survived, but the frail flanking walls collapsed. The east and west walls suffered irreparable harm and demanded the dismantlement to the ground level. As for President Jefferson's terraces, there remained nothing to claim, completely lost. Even worse, the ruins rapidly deteriorated while Congress belabored debates over the capital's fate. L'Enfant had selected the attractive Aquia Creek stone for its subtle warming hues, convenience to the capital, and harvesting ease.

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<sup>13</sup> James Hoban to Samuel Lane, December 3, 1816, Records of the Commissioners.

Unfortunately, with its exceedingly porous composition, the ancient arkose sandstone possessed imperfections aggravated by prolonged weather exposure. Fearing reprisals to mounting monetary outlays, James Hoban and Samuel Lane, the chief commissioner, conspired in a chancy ruse. When the congressional session adjourned and most members departed the city for the season, the work hands hastily pulled down the unsalvageable sections and rebuilt them from scratch.<sup>14</sup>

A herculean effort expedited the construction while honoring President Madison's repeated admonition, merely "repaired." But progress, bedeviled by logistical constraints and bureaucratic exigencies, sometimes reduced construction to a plodding pace. By March 1817, the public buildings' work continued as President Madison resigned his tenure and President James Monroe picked up the reins. A disciplined leader, President Monroe brought managerial oversight to the nation's capital after his inauguration. He sought quicker action and visible results as he considered the President's House and the Capitol tangible symbols of America's purpose and vital to the spirit of national recovery and cohesion. Monroe would tolerate no further debilitating delays. Forthwith, he summoned Samuel Lane and firmly directed him to streamline and reorganize the labor force into specialized teams "to promote dispatch." Accordingly, Lane would provide the president with a comprehensive weekly account of the rebuilding advancements.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> James Hoban to Samuel Lane, October 10 and December 3, 1816, Records of the Commissioners; Samuel Lane to Lewis Condict, February 15, 1817, in James Monroe, *A Documentary History Of the Presidential Tours of James Monroe, 1817, 1818, 1819*, ed. Daniel Preston and Matthew C. DeLong (Westport: Greenwood, 2003), 196; Seale, *President's House*, 1:141-142; U. S. Congress, *The Debates and Proceedings*, 1728-1729; George Hadfield to Thomas Munroe, "Report of the undersigned respecting the present state of the Public Buildings," October 13, 1814, in William B. Bushong, "Ruin and Regeneration," *White House History*, no. (Fall 1998): 26; Seale, *White House of Stone*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> James Monroe, "First Annual Message to Congress, December 2, 1817," in James Richardson, *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (New York: Bureau of National Literature, 1879); 2:588; *National Intelligencer*, February 11, 1818; James Monroe to Samuel Lane, April 4, 1817, in *Documentary History*,

Now in control, President Monroe might have considered making many architectural revisions, but the project neared completion. Also, Monroe, chomping at the bit, wanted to occupy the executive mansion before Congress returned in the fall. Therefore, he recommended only nominal utilitarian changes. First, room partitions received adjustments. On the four corners of the bedchamber floor, he added narrow rooms as dressing rooms with the dual purpose of winter insulation for the adjacent large bedrooms. Similarly, Monroe added a pantry to serve what should always be a family or everyday dining room for the main floor's northwest corner room. The enfilade of the main floor, which Hoban had broken into two separate circuits when built initially, returned to a single, continuous course by inserting a door between the Oval Room and the Green Room. This modification would encourage guests to mingle with the president supporting republican simplicity and explore the State Rooms that President Monroe planned to furnish handsomely. Familiar with the drafty conditions possessed by the house while serving as Secretary of State for President Madison, Monroe significantly increased the number of fireplaces throughout the dwelling and reconfigured them to burn coal. The president also requested wooden mantels treated with plaster compositions abstain from featuring “nudities” in their ornament.<sup>16</sup>

By April 1817, Samuel Lane penned a pensive note to James Hoban advising him of the president’s orders “to proceed with all possible dispatch in completing the President’s House.” Lane requested a thorough statement, posthaste, identifying any additional employees Hoban needed to speed up the reconstruction further. Hoban specified twelve extra carpenters bringing

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199; R. B. Lee and Tench Ringgold to James Madison, May 16, 1815. Records of the Commissioners; Seale, *The President’s House*, 1:146.

<sup>16</sup> McLaurin, *James Hoban*, 23; See William Seale, *The White House*, 83. A plan of the house drawn by Alexander Jackson in 1834 clearly shows the change, which involved inserting a doorway between the present Blue Room and Green Room.



the total workforce to 112 members, comprised of nineteen stonecutters and setters, seven bricklayers, forty-four carpenters, four sawyers, and thirty-eight laborers. They all worked at a furious pace to finish the staircases, floorboards, joinery, and house plastering based on the president's imposed deadline. By June, near the high point of the building season, the number of men employed at the executive mansion increased to 190, consisting of seventy-four carpenters.<sup>17</sup>

Once President Monroe redirected the rebuilding efforts, instilled a renewed sense of urgency, and arranged for new interior furnishings, little remained on his plate, demanding immediate action after his inauguration. The newly elected Congress would not reconvene until December. He could not deliberate effectively with the cabinet until Secretary of State John Quincy Adams returned from Great Britain as the American minister. Making the most of what otherwise appeared as a potentially unproductive intermission, Monroe dedicated the early months of his administration to conducting the first of his well-received tours of the nation. The three-month time scheduled for visiting the Northern and border states would allow the president to run a personal inspection of the coastal and inland fortifications to follow up the call in his inaugural address for improved military preparedness. Recognizing the political unity of his tour, Monroe used his time in the Federalist stronghold of New England to rekindle patriotic sentiment and establish friendly relations with former partisan adversaries.<sup>18</sup>

Before leaving the sweltering capital and heading north in June 1817, President Monroe made it abundantly clear to the commissioner and the architects that he expected to find the public buildings completed upon the termination of his tour, an arbitrary deadline and impossible

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<sup>17</sup> Samuel Lane to James Hoban, April 4, 1817, Records of the Commissioners; "Report of the Commissioners of Public Buildings," April 21, 1817, Records of the Commissioners; Peter Lenox to Samuel Lane, June 26, 1817, Records of the Commissioners.

<sup>18</sup> Greenstein, "Political Professionalism," 278-279.

to meet, especially for the Capitol. Nevertheless, the president had thrown down the gauntlet. To disregard, well, these men's reputations and careers hung in the balance. They would not hazard thoughts of disgrace and dismissal at this juncture but frantically increased their efforts and hoped for the best. But, as summer drew to a close, the moment of reckoning bore down upon them. With September's arrival, the optimistic President Monroe returned to Washington from his successful national sojourn. Although great strides in the construction prevailed, there remained no conclusion. Disappointed, the president disdainfully voiced his discontent to Samuel Lane and Benjamin Latrobe for not achieving their objective. Perchance, the same fate had awaited James Hoban, too, but the president abstained. Once Monroe laid eyes upon the President's House, he lacked the provocation to reprimand the architect. What Monroe saw astounded him. Although Hoban had not achieved completion, he had followed Monroe's direction to remove any signs that reflected the city's vanquishment.<sup>19</sup>

Peering through the trees and the endless clouds of dust created by busy city traffic on unpaved pathways, President Monroe, transfixed, beheld a spectacle he had hoped for but dared not anticipate. A metamorphosis happened in his absence. The dull gray and blackened-marred monstrosity had vanished. In its stead stood a brilliantly gleaming beacon upon a hill. The handsome shafts of the colossal pilasters stood out sharply against the smooth ashlar of the walls of the monolith. The play of light and shadows across the stone carvings' bold relief, especially the feathery Double Scottish Roses, captivated their audience. The light glinted across the copper adorning the top of the mansion. Impervious to its former semi-transparent whitewash, James Hoban had transformed the walls with a fresh coat of opaque paint. The paint, a superior lead-linseed oil-clay-based concoction, veiled the natural mottled stone colorations, the soot-

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<sup>19</sup> *National Intelligencer*, September 18, 1817; Adams, *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*, 7.

stained scars, the water-holding nooks and crannies, and the hodgepodge of patchwork. In so doing, Hoban bequeathed a painted house to the future, one already characteristically dubbed “The White House.” Hoban planned for the future by placing pediments that anxiously awaited new porticoes on the north and south fronts. The Irish architect achieved the almost impossible. The residence bespoke “presidential.” Best of all, it posed potentially habitable for all intents and purposes.<sup>20</sup>

The ecstatic and semi-adventurous first family, anxious to move in, wisely chose to postpone possession for another month. The interiors still required attention to make them presentable. After months of traveling, the road-weary president preferred not to share the house with the workers and battery of construction noise. Not to mention, unavoidable delays held up the arrival of the new state furnishings. A little relaxation would do him good. Therefore, the Monroe family took a brief hiatus from the district. They returned home to Highland, a modest plantation nestled in Virginia's quiet and scenic foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. After their respite, the first family would sojourn to Washington along with the reconvening Congress for the season that began in October.<sup>21</sup>

In a blink of an eye, the month of September slipped away. No longer avoidable, the enviable “moving day” had arrived. No matter how hard James Hoban tried, pushed, and utzed the workers, the President’s House remained somewhat unfinished. Interior plaster walls had not yet dried and demanded around-the-clock fires burning to hurry the process along. The raw yellow pine floors needed covering with paint, carpeting, or oilcloths. Though primed,

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<sup>20</sup> James I. McDaniel, “Stone Walls Preserved,” *White House History* no. 1 (1983): 38-45; Seale, *The President’s House*, 1: 122-133, 149-152.

<sup>21</sup> Greenstein, “Political Professionalism”: 279.

wainscoting, cornices, and other woodwork called for their final coats of paint. Gaping fireplaces awaited marble mantels en route from Italy on seas now open to the world. Stalwart, the first family, cheerfully faced the discomforts of their new home along with the annoying paint and plaster fumes permeating the abode. The residence would not be ready for the season's opening, so all preparations must refocus on its grand debut during the annual New Year's Day public reception. Undoubtedly, President Monroe felt a prick of pride. He played a significant role in seeing the house restored. Where ashes, rubble, and ruins gathered, the resurrected mansion now stood, a display of unifying forces, sheer will, grit, and determination for the world to behold.<sup>22</sup>

#### A Change of Scenery

“My Dear Child, I arrived here on Sunday last,” expressed First Lady Abigail Adams to her daughter Abigail Smith in a letter written on November 21, 1800, a few days after she settled in the newly established City of Washington. Describing the site of her new home, she lamented, “We have not the least fence, yard, or other convenience, without.” Yet, she closed the letter with a happier thought, “It is a beautiful spot, capable of every improvement, and the more I view it, the more I am delighted with it.”<sup>23</sup> The unabridged truth presented an unholy visage in “great confusion” still filled with sheds, shacks, and heaps of refuse. The rough terrain torn asunder lay inflicted with pockmarks and scars from construction. With exceptional deference, the *first* lady to make the executive mansion her home recognized the future potential

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<sup>22</sup> Seale, *The President's House*, 1:149-152.

<sup>23</sup> Abigail Adams to Abigail Adams Smith, November 21, 1800, Adams Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, in Singleton, *The Story of the White House*, 11-13.

in the bleak scene she encountered. If blessed by only a few more years, Mrs. Adams may have had the chance to glimpse many ways President Monroe had filled her inspiring vision.

Throughout the presidential administrations of Adams, Jefferson, and Madison, the executive mansion garnered all of the attention while the grounds mainly remained an afterthought. The architecture of neatly hewn stones and delicate carvings meant to invoke praise but lost their appeal surrounded by a landscape of negligible indifference. A British traveler and business speculator, unimpressed, criticized the scene:

“The ground around it [President’s House], instead of being laid out in a suitable style, remains in its ancient rude state, so that, in a dark night, instead of finding your way to the house, you may, perchance, fall into a pit, or stumble over a heap of rubbish. The fence around the house is of the meanest sort; a common post and rail enclosure. The parsimony destroys every sentiment of pleasure that arises in the mind, in viewing the residence of the president of a nation, and is a disgrace to the country.”<sup>24</sup>

In reflection, the initial plans for the president’s residence and setting presented much more ambitious. The designer, Pierre Charles L’Enfant, established an approximately eighty-five-acre tract for this purpose alone and aptly labeled the “President’s Park.” Immediately, deviations in L’Enfant’s perfectly rectangular reserve commenced. City squares encroached on the northernmost corners of the park, while extra country lanes intersected the commons. Lush viewing gardens designed to flank the east and west lawns of the President’s House became redesignated for the executive department buildings and further diminished the park’s scale. In addition, Congress authorized the construction of four office structures to replace the two destroyed to house the growing executive administration. Any residual spaces, commissioners,

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<sup>24</sup> Charles William Janson, *The Stranger in America, 1793-1806*, (1807; repr. New York: Press of the Pioneer, 1935), 213.

architects, and an array of workers had claimed almost uninterrupted for upwards to two decades.<sup>25</sup>

Intermittently, governmental officials or affiliates made various efforts to better the President's House setting and create a worthy landscape. Under the nation's second president, John Adams, Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert enlisted Capitol Architect Dr. William Thorton's assistance to improve the grounds. After making preliminary sketches and consulting with the City Surveyor Nicholas King, they realized that a lack of time, money, and manpower prohibited the great chore of grading, planting trees, and developing pleasure gardens. A small kitchen garden had to suffice.<sup>26</sup>

During President Jefferson's time, visitors to the White House complained of the place as "barren, stony, unfenced waste" and "in a rough, wild state." Wholeheartedly, Jefferson concurred with the assessment and developed a strategy to clear debris, grade the lot, and plant fragrant gardens. Of these grand intentions, few occurred. Near the house, sufficient cleaning, minimal grading, and installing a wooden and stone fence did happen. As for addressing the distance spaces within the park, these goals stayed postponed with one exception. The muddy declivity behind the house, sloping to the wild current of Tiber Creek, received some earth filling creating a field terrace on the south side. President Jefferson, indeed frustrated by the extent of the work and its fantastic cost, capitulated and planted many seedling trees to cover up the ills of the site.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Ogle Tayloe, *Our Neighbors on Lafayette Square*, (Washington, D. C.: privately printed, 1872), 3; Seale, *The President's House*, 1:64-71; Janke, "The President's Park," 69-70.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin Stoddert to William Thorton, January 20, 1800, in *Papers of William Thorton*, vol. 1, ed. C. M. Harris (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 532-533; Anna Maria Brodeau Thorton, "Diary of Mrs. William Thorton, 1800," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, no. 10 (1907): 119-120.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Clemmer Ames, *Ten Years in Washington: Life and Scenes in the National Capital as a Woman Sees Them* (Cincinnati: Queen City Publishing, 1874), 176; Stilson Hutchins and Joseph West Moore, *The National*

Unimplemented mainly by himself, President Jefferson's garden and landscaping designs would go on to inspire other presidential plans. His successor, President Madison, planted trees and vegetables in abundance. Possibly, Jefferson placed the requisite plant orders before his retirement. As compliments by the British invaders, any improvements to the grounds became unintended victims due to the burning of the executive mansion. Regrettably, the President's Park would regress into its former "glory" disrupted by unbridled construction.<sup>28</sup>

Although President Monroe knew his vision for the President's Park would not fully achieve reality in his lifetime, he approached landscaping and planting with selfless optimism for the future and orchestrating the verdant greensward known today. For far too long, the White House grounds appeared as a blight, an abused patch of earth. But Monroe had pragmatic confidence, like President Washington. He envisioned and arranged for an elegant and functional space befitting the president's office of the United States. Still, Monroe presented himself as a genuine republican citizen; therefore, the official residence of the chief magistrate also held the affectionate distinction as the people's house and its grounds, the people's grounds. This duality of possession meant that Monroe had to weigh the merits of presidential privacy against the right of any citizen to visit and stroll upon its green grasses. Ever an apt politician, President Monroe devised a compromise.

In June 1818, Commissioner Samuel Lane dispatched thirty-nine men to clear the land north of the President's House at President Monroe's behest. The work crew arrived with hoes, shovels, and pushcarts in hand and began to remove the relics from one or other episodes in the

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*Capital Past and Present: The Story of Its Settlement, Progress and Development* (Washington, D. C.: Post Publishing Company, 1885), 160; James Hoban to Thomas Munroe, April 25, 1815, Records of the Commissioners; Jonathan Pliska, *A Garden for the President: A History of the White House Grounds* (Washington, D. C.: White House Historical Association, 2016), 11, 15. Seale, *White House of Stone*, 39.

<sup>28</sup> Pliska, *Garden for the President*, 174.

construction of the mansion. Subsequently, Lane requested Charles Bulfinch, the Capitol architect who replaced Benjamin Latrobe, to plan for the square. Bulfinch formulated a project to grade the rough terrain and establish a plantation of trees. When finished, the area once possessed by a horse racetrack and converted into a great builders' fair had an orchardlike attractiveness. Bulfinch alternated slow-growing elms for permanency and fast-growing Virginia red cedar trees for quick shade. He directed the laborers to sow field grass in open spaces for beauty and to discourage the Potomac's claim to eroding the earth. As a safeguard, new north-south streets bordered the park, so city visitors and residents might enjoy the landscape without trampling the foliage.<sup>29</sup>

Welcomingly, the reconstructed White House reopened with fanfare on New Year's Day, 1818, but the yard work continued. By 1819, President Monroe hired a permanent gardener to address the perpetual endeavor of landscaping. The Frenchman Charles Bizet previously employed by President Madison at his Virginia home, Montpelier, strongly recommended to them by Monroe himself. Given Bizet's achievements at Montpelier, President Monroe logically enlisted his services to redevelop the White House Grounds. The surviving records documented that Bizet planted supplementary shade trees. Bizet most likely arranged the new flora according to Bulfinch's master plan. He framed whitewashed boxes around his young charges to protect them from the itinerant heels of clumsy workers and the hungry mouths of the president's cows and horses grazing on the greens.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> F. C. De Kraftt to Samuel Lane, June 23, 1818, "Miscellaneous Accounts," Records of the Commissioners; Samuel Lane, abstract of disbursements, June 24, 1818, to December 5, 1821, "Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts," Records of the Commissioners; William Seale, "The Design of Lafayette Park," *White House History*, no. 2 (June 1997): 10; Janke, "The President's Park," 71-72.

<sup>30</sup> James Monroe to James Madison, July 25, 1810, in James Madison, *The Papers of James Madison*, Presidential Series, vol. 2, October 1, 1809–November 2, 1810, ed. J. C. A. Stagg, Jeanne Kerr Cross, and Susan Holbrook Perdue (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), p. 437; Pliska, *Garden for the President*, 197-198.



Furthermore, Bizet planted and harvested vegetables for the White House kitchens. In all likelihood, he also designed a mixed-use garden located southeast of the mansion. Bizet practiced the first recorded instances of gardening under glass on the grounds. He placed the first cold frames and hotbeds outdoors conveniently near the kitchen garden. A bottomless box with a glass cover, the cold frame, permitted delicate herbs, aromatics, and certain vegetables that garnished the president's table to grow after the air temperature cooled in the winter.<sup>31</sup>

President Monroe embellished the substantial curb appeal of the president's lawn by the skillful arrangement of iron fences and gates, stone piers, and the side-arching driveway that constituted the principal entrance to the north grounds. These features framed and anchored the house within the landscape, drawing an observer's eyes straight toward America's most famous front door. Functionally accessible and secure by design, the North Entrance, exceedingly ornamented with its grandiloquent garland, greatly enhanced the overall character of the North Grounds. Moreover, these spaces hold some of the oldest extant landscape elements in President's Park.

Redesigning the North Entrance began in 1818 when New York ironworker Paulus Hedl received the contract to supply the White House with four new gates. The order included two large double-gates for carriages, two smaller single-gates for pedestrians, plus 180 feet of iron railing to run between them. A set of gates flanked by a pair of stone gate piers of the appropriate size installed at opposite ends of the bowed drive marked the advent of a visitor with the president. Three glass oil lamps and wrought iron brackets staggered along the heavy iron railing illuminated nighttime footpaths and added an ambiance. Hedl, a master of his craft,

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<sup>31</sup>Pliska, *Garden for the President*, 264, 291.

forged a fence and gates that proved strong, elegant, and highly refined. The complementary cast iron fence and gates received individual palings capped with brave spearhead finials, while the posts acknowledged finials reminiscent of a classical urn.<sup>32</sup>

On the elongated south lawn, Charles Bulfinch directed a large workforce of manual laborers engaged in the filthy and arduous task of grading the White House grounds to remedy construction damage. This extensive earthmoving campaign favored a varied topography over a completely level lawn. About halfway down the south slope, a pair of large knolls rose from the property as the men sculpted the landscape. Their symmetrical topography redefined the space as unmistakable. The mounds became most commonly known as these enormous balls of the earth, ranking among the most iconic features in the presidential landscape. Given the great depth of study typically afforded to even the most ephemeral White House aspects, it came as a considerable surprise that so little knowledge about the mounds existed for so long. The earliest definite reference appeared in an 1850 Washington guidebook that described them as “artificial hillocks.” This brief notation explained the mounds as artificial constructions due to their dimensions: too perfectly rounded, too evenly spaced, and too symmetrical to be natural occurrences. The designer of the visual aspects of the observed landscape incredibly considered the mounds’ placements to cradle the President’s House as the viewers’ eyes would follow the gradually rising lawn and create a focal point for the future south portico<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Paulus Hedl: vouchers 5, 10, 12-15, 17, 20, 23-24, 26, “Abstract of Disbursements 6, no. 44,567, Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts, Records of the Commissioners; James Hoban to Samuel Lane, December 12, 1818, Records of the Commissioners.

<sup>33</sup> E. S. Street, comp., *The Stranger’s Guide (The Daguerreotype of Washington, D. C.)* (Washington, D. C.: C. Alexander, 1850), 21; Janke, “The President’s Park,” 71-72; Pliska, *Garden for the President*, 48, 51; John F. Pousson and Christine Hoepfner, *Archaeological Evaluation: President’s Park, Washington, D. C.* (Denver: Eastern Applied Archaeology Center, Denver Service Center-Eastern Team, National Park Service, 1995), 32. An archaeological analysis of the mounds conducted in 1995 concluded that the mounds creation occurred circa 1818-1824, during the President James Monroe’s administration.

## Redefining

The Early Republic trudged forward beset with ague disguised as factionalism and international intrigue. From its constitutional inception, devotion to the national creed, “E Pluribus Unum,” waned for the first quarter century. President Monroe, profoundly sensitive to the figurative dimension of his role as head of the nation, believed that the country would build a strengthening bond through its resilience over the British and its optimistic future, possibly even putting aside petty party politics. He wished to symbolize these beliefs in his presidency. In Monroe’s mind, the President’s House’s reconstruction represented this purposeful reclamation.<sup>34</sup>

Building projects on the President’s Square perpetually paralleled Monroe’s presidency. Some instances included finishing touches or tweaking work that had already begun. In other situations, new addendums redefined the constructed landscape. And, even though the unceasing work presented an appalling inconvenience, President Monroe took pleasure in the construction and appreciated its symbolic impact.

By the winter of 1818, the four executive department buildings neared completion. Hoban quickly reconstructed the old, torched buildings by salvaging exterior brick walls touched up with paint to conceal burned scars. One hundred paces north sat the new executive offices approved by Congress. Hoban took liberties with the original design by George Hadfield. Hoban replaced the English plain style architecture with the Neo-Palladian, more familiar to his work and complementary to the White House. Hoban redesigned each building’s exteriors with a set of north and south porticoes. With those on the north completed, President Monroe had an epiphany. Why not resurrect President Jefferson’s proposal to extend the executive mansion’s

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<sup>34</sup> Ammon, *James Monroe*, 366, 396-405.

service wings to adjoin the office buildings? It promised a handsome composition to the overall executive branch.<sup>35</sup>

Alas, all building programs came to an abrupt halt for further assessment with the Panic of 1819, which ended the postwar boom and, to a great extent, the “Era of Good Feelings.” In the shadow of the looming economic menace, President Monroe, reluctant to appear extravagant, reduced the ambitious scale of the public works that kept the landscape so animated outside his windows. Anything which might be judged superfluous he snipped from the residence’s construction or redirected to the Capitol, still sorely lagging in the reconstruction process. Again, James Hoban had to abandon the north portico and the south porch. He had gotten closer to building them this time than ever before. Woefully, he left the marble-floored, unroofed pedestals as orphans. As proposed, the full extension of the domestic terraces and walkways also fell victim to the budgeting ax.<sup>36</sup>

Regardless that congressional funding forbade the full leeway of the wings, a compromise advantageous to all parties could possibly achieve a consensus. President Monroe insisted on a new coach house and stables built on the west service terrace, abandoning the “temporary” coach house and stables previously added “under the colonnade” on the east. In rebuttal, the Committee on the Public Buildings from January 1819 reported that as a symmetrical necessity, the 60 feet-long western extension matched the 60 feet added earlier to the eastern wing. New proposed plans encompassed the president’s requests while maintaining an observable balance between the east and west terraces from the north lawn. Hoban razed the ruined arch, terminating the east wing to match that on the west. The west wing addition housed

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<sup>35</sup> Seale, *President’s House*, 1:150-151.

<sup>36</sup> Seale, *President’s House*, 1:150-151.

a requisite stable, carriage house, and granary installed southward, creating an ell with a paved courtyard nested against the southwest end of the house. These decisions determined that the executive mansion would never be linked from the exterior to the administrative department buildings and would guide future modifications to the service wings.<sup>37</sup>

President Monroe demonstrated practical mindfulness, fiscal stewardship, future opportunities, national unification, and cultural bonding as a career public servant. Cognizant that reconstruction far exceeded approved estimates and supplemental appropriations made worse by the Panic of 1819, the Capitol took precedence, already the victim of ongoing design changes and material shortages. When the depression spread nationwide between 1820 and 1821, it would further delay the completion of the domed center section, which would unite the Senate and House of Representatives physically, but, more importantly, symbolically. The astute president, conscious that Americans needed a tangible expression of national optimism, pride, and prosperity, required a new symbol of hope. The White House remained unfinished but still nearer completion than ever before. In its repaired state, the house represented perseverance and fortitude. With a new addition, the fundamental symbolic foundation still prevailed and supported a redefined architectural symbol of national inspiration.<sup>38</sup>

Once an impossibility, building the porticoes became merely postponed until after the depression precipitated by the Panic of 1819. President Monroe began his second term resurrecting the idea of the proposed north and south porches. Still honoring President Washington's original design requests, James Hoban had prepared the building for these

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<sup>37</sup> James Hoban to Lane, February 8, 1817; James Hoban to Samuel Lane, report, December 23 and 28, 1818, Records of the Commissioners; Samuel Lane, "The Report of the Committee on the Public Buildings," January 7, 1819, Records of the Commissioners.

<sup>38</sup> Seale, *President's House*, 1:152.

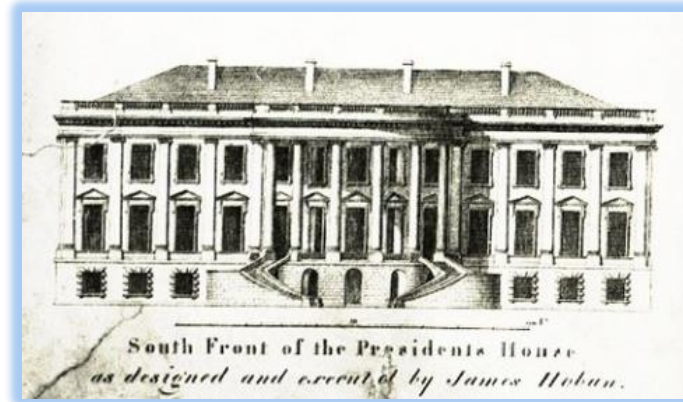
addendums before reconstruction halted. Monroe made his interest known to Capitol Architect Charles Bulfinch, who could not locate the drawings and immediately reached out to Hoban. These drawings did exist. However, Hoban still had in his possession the plans he had created for President Washington for a portico on the north side. Hoban and Bulfinch joined together in taking down an original White House drawing from the wall, framed in glass, and traced the one for a pedimental north porch, precisely as seen today. The openings in the north roof beneath canvas covers awaited these new additions.<sup>39</sup>

In 1824, President Monroe decided to build a south porch and summoned James Hoban, by now a prominent building contractor and entrepreneur in the city, to do the job. The president asked the architect to build a columned porch around the protruding bay made by the oval rooms on the South Front of the President's House. President Jefferson may have created this idea and then turned it over to Benjamin Latrobe many years ago. It first appeared as a concept in 1806 in one of Jefferson's many sketches to improve the President's House. To realize Hoban's original idea for a south porch, approved by President Washington, the required addition of a stone podium installed by Collen Williamson more than twenty years ago projected entirely across the south wall of the basement. Perhaps as a way of saving money, the idea morphed into wrapping only the bow with a porch, extending its verticality with heroic columns, and discontinuing the rest of the porch. Evidence of the original intent survives in the doorways still there today to give access to the parts of the porch never built but made into windows in-filled with "jib" doors that opened for particular uses. Those serving the Oval Room, Green Room,

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<sup>39</sup> McLaurin, *James Hoban*, 21; Charles Bulfinch, "Tracing of James Hoban's North Face Architectural Plan of the White House," Records of the Commissioner; Seale, *White House of Stone*, 41.

and Red Room guests used them often, while those in the State Dining Room and East Room had grilles and opened as balconies.<sup>40</sup>



*Figure 7. James Hoban's South Portico Drawing  
Original Drawing Library of Congress, ca. 1818  
Image courtesy of White House Historical Association*

The new porch entered history as the “South Portico,” a nomenclature inaccuracy for a portico should have a triangular crown. In contrast, the south porch possessed a roof surmounted by a continuation of the handsome cornice of the house. As an aside, the porch on the north entrance completed by James Hoban early in Andrew Jackson’s administration represents an actual portico with pediment.<sup>41</sup> Hoban extended six soaring Ionic composite columns from the podium, following the designs introduced to the White House as pilasters in the original construction. They contained a complete representation of the decorative Double Scottish Rose on four corners of the stately capitals. The uninterrupted shafts later altered by President Truman’s 1952 balcony gave access to the second-floor living quarters but did not improve or detract from Hoban’s South Portico. By 1824, the Aquia quarry’s once rich sandstone resource

<sup>40</sup> James Hoban, “James Hoban’ South Portico Drawing, 1818, White House Historical Association, Washington, D. C., courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/south-portico-drawing>; McLaurin, *James Hoban*, 24; Seale, *The President’s House*, 1:42.

<sup>41</sup> Seale, *White House of Stone*, 41.

began thinning, so Hoban familiarized himself with the Seneca quarry upriver and put it to use on the South Portico. Alas, when tried, the Seneca stone's intense reddish color clashed, quite in contrast to Aquia sandstone's soft pinkish tan. As a compromise, the architect finally decided to employ the Aquia Creek stone for the columns and the Seneca stone for the pediment.<sup>42</sup>

The South Portico's graceful curve added a new dignity to the façade of the President's House. James Hoban embellished the porch with six Ionic delicately polished smooth columns that step out and around the center bow or bay as a fully three-dimensional continuation of the monumental pilastrade that encircled the house on the south, west, and east sides. Like the pilasters, Hoban placed the portico's columns on raised square plinths climbing two floors up to the entablature. Its creation produced a resplendent protected terrace for the state parlors. The portico blessed its visitors with a near-perfect panoramic vista of the south elevation, drinking in the kind slope of the south lawn, the tender rushes of the Tiber Creek marshes, the sing-song of lapping water along the river shores, bustling barges, and meandering skiffs. Serviceable and beautiful, a winding pair of elegant stone steps swept down, partially shrouding the pedestal. Seven arched openings pierced the podium's thick walls, in which Hoban crafted a series of groin vaults and arches that lightened the heavy boasting mass of the structure. For visual interest, each arched niche contributed a shadowy depth element to contrast with the outward curve. Hoban decoratively formed the dramatic dais to feature large protruding stone blocks with sufficient space between the "blocks" to enhance their appearance of massiveness.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> McLaurin, *James Hoban*, 24; Seale, *The President's House*, 1:42. Seale, *White House of Stone*, 41; Thomas Townson to Thomas Elgar, July 1, 1824, letter with drawing, Records of the Commissioners.

<sup>43</sup> James A. Jacobs, "In a White House Passageway: Evidence Survives of James Hoban's Building Skill," *White House History*, no. 29 (Summer 2011): 39-40; Seale, *White House of Stone*, 8.



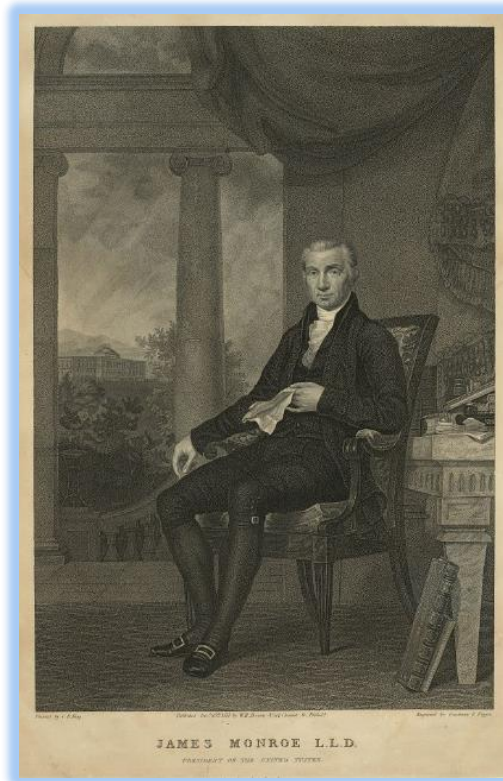
Brilliantly, President Monroe juxtaposed the perfect exterior enhancements with the original architecture to return to its citizens a familiar foundation with the ability to expand as envisioned by the forward-thinking President Washington. An ethereal aura possessed the South Lawn with gentle swells that safely snuggled views of the new portico that flawlessly blended ancient stately form with the charm of an enchanted manor overlooking the mesmerizing panoramas of the Potomac. The North Lawn radiated a dignified air embellished with a very modest majesty. The new iron fence with its classical ornamentation and lanterns illuminated the mansion's grandeur, yet, always visible and accessible in a republic. As guests arrived through the stone arches and either transported or promenaded up the curved drive, they shared an interconnectedness laced with prominence in their own stature and that of the landscape. The public seemed to have agreed that the President's House embodied enough "state," but not too much. N. P. Willis, an early commentator, observed, "The residence of the Chief Magistrate of the United States resembles the country seat of an English nobleman, in its architecture and size...It is a commodious and creditable building, serving its purpose without too much state for a republican country."<sup>44</sup>

Remarkably, the city had risen from the melancholy ashes of 1814 to assume a place in the pantheon of national capitals. The executive mansion's resurrection, reclamation, and redefinition demonstrated the tenacity of the nation's life force and cemented the intertwined politics of symbolic succession and institutional processes. It galvanized the country and strengthened its commitment to unity, freedom, and democracy.

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<sup>44</sup> N. P. Willis, *American scenery; Land, Lake, and River Illustrations of Transatlantic Nature* (London: Virtue, 1840), 2:32.

## Chapter 5: Designed to Impress



*Figure 8. James Monroe, L.L.D., President of the United States  
Engraving: Goodman & Piggot,, December 15, 1817  
Image courtesy of the Library of Congress*

Creating a symbolic building exercises a discerning eye and an unbridled passion for uniqueness. One must delve into the confusing and complex challenge of unraveling, synthesizing, and pairing philosophical postulation with mortar and stone. The chief magistrate required an architectural statement of a president's presence that could be satisfied with a house. Finishing a home, even a big one, turnkey, a person might achieve easier than the ambition to produce a place symbolizing a new nation's identity.

Upon assuming the presidency in March 1817, Monroe confronted the tedious task of refurnishing the President's House even as workers continued to repair the damage inflicted by the British raid three years earlier. While Monroe supervised the final stages of the architectural

project, he planned with aplomb for the interior decoration. Beyond obvious function, the furnishings and aesthetics selected for the President's House must embody symbolic meaning and resonate with stature for both the executive office and the nation. President Monroe nominated and designed furniture and décor as strategically as a political maneuver.

Significantly, the president had to consider how Americans reconciled their commitment to gentility with their devotion to republican equality. The confounding contradiction between republican simplicity and sophisticated elegance caused a general problem for many American intellectuals trying to conceive a consistent American character. In reality, the perceived prickly paradox existed as a misnomer. Gentility did not occur at cross purposes with republicanism or suggest new pioneering activities for people. It only elevated longstanding ones. So, what distinguished genteel drawing rooms? The manners and deportment persons employed and the stylishness of the objects that surrounded them. To upgrade life to a heightened standard of attractiveness and grace required support from a beautiful milieu. Refinement afforded the practicality of identity and a definition of position in the confusing fluidity of democratic society.<sup>1</sup>

As the fifth president, James Monroe had slightly an advantage over his predecessors, who struggled with their American roles and the appropriate custom to live. Monroe observed the insolent attitudes in opposition to presidential pomp reflected in early presidential salaries that scarcely kept pace with the financial burdens inherent in the office. As for furnishing the residence, congressional appropriations underbudgeted the rudimentary needs for the large mansion and its demanding maintenance. The "republican simplicity" cherished by Americans triggered disappointment and frequent scorn among European visitors accustomed to the glitz

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<sup>1</sup> Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, xvi-xiv, 193.

and glamour flaunted by royalty courts. One typical reaction written by English traveler Charles Janson after he beheld the President's House lamented with disdain: "Only part of it [executive residence] is finished. The whole salary of the president would be inadequate to the expense of completing it in a style suitable elegance..."<sup>2</sup>

Opposition notwithstanding and with insightful hindsight, President Monroe tacitly understood that republicanism personified economy, industry, and hardihood and embraced graceful embellishment as a political gentleman. Americans valued the lofty spiritual reaches of refined living and admired the beautification encompassed by gentility. By establishing firm limits to their power indulgences, the people would not blindly stray into oppression and tyranny. So long as the executive branch commanded power and attention, the president had the immense advantage of influencing cultural forms, compelling human authorities, and the ability to confirm identity responsibly.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, President Monroe endeavored to furnish the executive mansion in an elegant style commensurate with its purposes. As a politician, he wished to separate himself from the preceding administration in many aspects, interior aesthetics included. James and Dolley Madison, with architect Benjamin Latrobe, filled the executive mansion with neoclassical-styled wares copied from contemporary English Regency fashion. The British troops, without compunction, arranged for the Madison interiors' incineration when they invaded the capital city in August 1814. With a clean slate, President Monroe decided to categorically define himself in a style opposite Madison. The antithetical aesthetic of the English Regency then should warmly welcome the French Empire and endearing to the Francophile Monroe.

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<sup>2</sup> Janson, *The Stranger in America*, 206.

<sup>3</sup> Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 201 405.

The Early Republic decorative arts echoed the close ties of our Founding Fathers to the French, due in large part to the succor provided by France during the American Revolution. As the nation leaders journeyed to France to arrange that alliance and negotiate the operation particulars, they had ample opportunity to immerse themselves and admire how the French people furnished their homes and ordered their lives. Next came the commissions from friends and neighbors at home through Americans liaisons still in France to purchase and partake in similar fashions. These American ministers, like James Monroe, returned home with extravagant souvenirs, attire, and décor to enhance their dwellings with the latest French trends.<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately, the newly elected president favored French vogue, impressed with its aura. In his early years, friendships with the Marquis de Lafayette, Pierre du Ponceau, and Thomas Jefferson nurtured a passion for French culture through its Romance language, poetic literature, and epicurean delights. James Monroe's diplomatic missions fostered European cultural experiences that strongly influenced his tastes and predisposed his choices when developing the executive mansion's presidential landscape. Monroe's commissions for the United States in France, England, and Spain during the 1790s and early 1800s exposed him to European capitals and their leaders' opulent dwellings and luxurious surroundings. These environments provided an abundant education in proper centers and peripheries for official interiors and atmospheres. During the two ministerial appointments abroad, Monroe's natural affinity for Parisian dress, etiquette, fare, furnishings, and decorative arts molded the former farm boy from Virginia into an ardent Francophile. Thus, faced with an unfurnished executive residence meshed with a

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<sup>4</sup> William G. Allman, *Official White House China: From the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries* (Washington, D. C.: White House Historical Association, 2016), 7.

penchant for French styles, the president engaged the American firm of Russell & La Farge in Le Havre, France, to acquire the décor for the residence's most formal spaces.

### Something Old, Something New, and Something Borrowed

Confronted with the certainty of starting from scratch, President Monroe astutely considered all viable options. He requested high-quality prefabricated furniture from abroad to encourage frugality and expedite delivery. Unfortunately, Russell and La Farge found this criterion untenable in the current French marketplace. American artisans still honing their talents also received orders but, like in France, needed to manufacture requests without available stock. Perceiving the immediacy for suitable stately furniture, President Monroe proffered the only alternative, temporarily leasing his family's household possessions to the government for the executive mansion. The president pensively penned the commissioner of the public buildings: "It appearing, after the order sent to France, & the contracts already made here & in Phila., that there will be a considerable deficiency, in the sum appropriated for furniture for the President's house, and there being little if any on hand fit for immediate use; it may be advisable to retain from my furniture, such articles as may be found proper and indispensable...I have also dining room, drawing & bed room furniture, French china, glass, and kitchen furniture, all of good quality and in good state." In good conscience, the sentient president tendered the curative measure with no ulterior motive except for the country's benefit. Monroe's letter to the commissioner extended, "I shall be content to wait for payment until another appropriation be made, my object being to supply the present demand, in a mode, by which the public cannot lose,

and to apply the money, when appropriated, in the purchase of articles of the best kind, & on the best terms, for the new buildings, which it is expected will be finished by the time they arrive.”<sup>5</sup>

All parties gleefully concurred that using his family belongings in the White House resolved an interim conflict for Monroe and Congress. Still, the longstanding financial implications and mismanagement convoluted the honorable gesture. Flawed from the beginning, Congress budgeted an insufficient \$20,000 toward the furniture fund for the complete refurbishment of an entire presidential residence. The president micromanaged much of the project but still required provisional staff to see to its implementation. Without reservation, he entrusted day-to-day financial management to Commissioner Samuel Lane and procurement to William Lee, the second auditor of the treasury and a former American consul in Bordeaux. After an exhaustive inventory, the president’s personal property received an estimated value of approximately \$9,100, but with undefined compensation parameters, a foreshadowing of future unpleasantness to arise. With all new acquisitions delayed, Lane disbursed roughly \$6,000 as a temporary loan from the furniture fund to underwrite the president’s northern state tour from June to September 1817, with an indeterminant source covering the balance. Upon Monroe’s return to the capital, he reimbursed the loan proceeds. But to his demise, Monroe discovered the fund’s status in arrears, even with his loan repaid. Hard-pressed, the president would have to pursue supplementary moneys from Congress, not an easy sell.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> J. Mason and John P. Van Ness, “Estimate of furniture in the President’s house,” May 15, 1817, in Singleton, *Story of the White House*, 1:99-104; James Monroe to Samuel Lane, August 28, 1817, in Scott H. Harris and Jared Kearney, “‘Articles of the Best Kind’: James Monroe Furnishes the Rebuilt White House,” *White House Historical Association*, no. 356 (Summer 2014): 29-30.

<sup>6</sup> William Lee, report to Congress, ca. 1818, in Singleton, *Story of the White House*, 104-105; James Monroe, appraisal of personal effects, acct. 43754, voucher 86, April 18, 1817, Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts; Allman, *Official White House China*, 33. A comprehensive account of Monroe’s use of the furniture fund and his prolonged efforts to receive compensation for expenses incurred in government service as reported in this and subsequent paragraphs are in Lucius Wilmerding, Jr., *James Monroe: Public Claimant* (New Brunswick: Rutgers

By early nineteenth-century standards, Americans still looked to Europe, particularly France, for the finest furniture, decorative accessories, and silver. In securing permanent furnishings for formal entertaining spaces in the mansion, Monroe paired his lifelong affection for France with his vision for the White House's architectural dignity and grandeur to orchestrate a plan to serve the purpose. Because of his familiarity with France, the president hired the firm of Joseph Russell and John La Farge to act as agents on his behalf for the United States. Bostonian Joseph Russell of the firm remained an intimate acquaintance of the president. They met years earlier when Monroe served as minister to France and Russell as consul at Le Havre. Hence, Monroe trusted the firm would represent his and the nation's best interests. Demonstrating his knowledge of French domestic goods, President Monroe meticulously requisitioned the desired furnishings with minute specifications and anticipatory costs. With due diligence, the agents worked within the president's instructions, but they could not always fulfill his wishes.<sup>7</sup>

Monroe categorically directed the agents to acquire "articles of the best kind & on the best terms." While primarily successful in achieving the former, the latter proved more demoralizing. The French furnishings for the State Floor Rooms accumulated to approximately \$18,400.00, not including transportation costs of close to \$1,300. The future term "sticker shock," uncoined in Monroe's day, probably described the president's reaction to a report from the American agents dated September 15, 1817. Russell & La Farge testified that they had exerted every energy without success securing the requested ready-made articles. Eager to

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University Press, 1960). Wilmerding's book though informative is undermined somewhat by an aggressively adversarial perspective.

<sup>7</sup> Allman, *Official White House China*, 33. No copy of James Monroe's to Russell & LaFarge has been found but Monroe refers to it in his report on the furniture fund in the Records of the United States House of Representatives, 18<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session, 1824-1825), House Report 79.



secure furnishings that “united Strength with Elegance of Form, and combining at the same time, Simplicity of ornament with the Richness suitable to the Decoration of a House occupied by the first Magistrate of a free nation...,” the agents ordered the requisite pieces manufactured.<sup>8</sup>

Accrued expenses for purchases from France, Washington, D. C., and Philadelphia catapulted the furniture fund deficit to well over \$11,000, while particular interiors remained unfinished. With fortitude, Monroe defended his case for additional money and received a supplemental \$30,000 appropriation from Congress to complete any unfinished rooms and future repairs caused by public access. Complications arose when in 1819, President Monroe again acquired a provisional loan for the value of his personal property from the fund to provide for a southern states presidential tour. The president volunteered to repossess his furniture if the supplemental appropriation did not adequately serve both purposes. When Samuel Lane died unexpectedly in 1822, auditors discovered Lane had not accounted for \$20,000 of public money. Monroe, stunned, owed the Commissioner Lane’s estate \$6,500 for expenditures made in the president’s name. Unfortunately, the accounting audit did not reveal if Lane’s bookkeeping presented evidence of an inept, conspicuously lax individual or something more sinister, an attempt to defraud the government and the president. Monroe paid the outstanding debt to Lane’s executors as a personal financial obligation to eradicate any potential stain on his character.<sup>9</sup>

Hopeful of eventually receiving compensation for using his furniture, President Monroe deferred any claims for final reimbursement until he retired from office. To clear his name,

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<sup>8</sup> John LaFarge to James Monroe, September 15, 1817, Records of the United States House of Representatives, 18<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2nd session, Record Group 233.

<sup>9</sup> The findings of the congressional inquiry requested by Monroe appear in Records of the United States House of Representatives, 18<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session (1824-1825), House Report 79. The committee reported only the facts of the Furniture Fund transactions, making neither positive nor negative comments on the matter.

President Monroe, in January 1825, sent an extraordinary petition to Congress requesting an inquiry into the accounts and entitlements between himself and his country to resolve any differences. The House of Representatives appointed a select audit committee to receive Monroe's evidence and explanations. The multitudinous documents submitted by the president demonstrated he received only the money authorized by the appraisers. Overlooking the tedium of financial distress, the first official state collection recognizable as a presidential benchmark existed as an amalgamation primarily of preowned and new French acquisitions by President Monroe.<sup>10</sup>

### Splendidly Furnishing Spaces

Intensely interested in the residence, President Monroe, as a former diplomat, admired the social form and gentility of the diplomatic community, and he had ambitions for a setting suitably splendid for social events. Monroe's family possessions complemented the new interiors of the President's House. In Paris, the family, familiar with particular public spaces, recognized the most radical movements in interior design, such as the Assembly Hall of the Convention or Napoleon's *Château de Saint-Cloud*. While the Monroe family had an excellent impression of new French flair in furniture design inspired by antiquity, they kept a more restrained modern style, less ornate, with minimal gilding or carving for personal use. The Monroes tailored their choices to the ideals of elegant moderation. The savvy diplomatic couple captivated by French vogue sustained relative sobriety with their furnishings, knowing they would take them to America. They opted for finely produced furniture in a simplified design,

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<sup>10</sup> Allman, *Official White House China*, 39; Records of the United States House of Representatives, 18<sup>th</sup> Congress, 18<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, (1824-25), House Report 79; Wilmerding, Jr., *James Monroe: Public Claimant*.

not exhibiting the individual maker, and available for purchase in any Parisian furniture shop. In France, affluent bourgeois families owned this style and quality of furniture in their homes into the early years of the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

A cornerstone of the family collection used in the President's House included the mahogany fall-front *Secrétaire à Abattant* in the late Louis XVI style. Monroe purchased this desk, a furniture suite member, while he served as minister to France, 1794-1796. The desk featured a creamy white marble top ensconced by a distinctive pierced brass gallery. All four corners of the desk had fluted columns fitted with shining brass inserts and a fall-front writing surface covered with black tooled leather. Without markings, curators had not definitively identified the manufacturer, though current research in the field of French furniture may now lend some clues to the cabinetmaker's identity. Monroe's furniture ensemble resembled a style similar to that of Parisian *ébéniste* (cabinetmaker) Godefroy Dester. The president used this desk in his executive office for writing pertinent correspondence, especially his congressional annual message containing the well-articulated Monroe Doctrine address considered by many the cornerstone of American foreign policy.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ulrich Leben, "Furnishings in Paris: From the Directory to the Coronation of Napoleon," *White House History*, no. 44 (Winter 2017): 18-19.

<sup>12</sup> James Monroe, James Monroe Papers, Series 3, account book 1794-1797, August 17, 1794, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.; Harris and Kearney, "'Articles Best Kind,'" 32-33, 36-37; Langston & Harrison, *A President's Legacy*, 83; "James Monroe Doctrine Desk," ca. 1797, James Monroe Museum and Memorial Library, Fredericksburg, Virginia, The White House Historical Association, Washington, D. C., accessed September 17, 2022, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/the-monroe-doctrine-desk>.



*Figure 9. James Monroe Doctrine Desk*  
 Artist: unknown, ca. 1797  
 James Monroe Museum and Memorial Library  
 Image courtesy of White House Historical Association

Other members from the suite acquired in 1797 and used in the White House included a pair of hanging “S” shelves, a writing table, a tea table, a commode (clothes dresser), and a console desserte. The pieces defined the French style, often called *Directoire* or French Empire. The restraint of this style marked the contrast to the elaborate earlier French style-almost contemporary in its simplicity. Introduced in the last years of King Louis XVI, the trim, elegant objects encompassed well-balanced proportions from a minimum of materials, typically rosewood and mahogany, richly cast bronze, thin-cut marble tops and shelves with pierced brass galleries, and delicately thin brass inlay along the legs and drawers. The commode originated from bureau-type furniture around 1695. Artisans designed it to store clothing in its three-tier hefty drawers. The two-tier console desserte, with its canted corners, made a lovely presentation of the homeowners’ elegant dessert porcelain and the luscious sweets and pastries for the final course. Artisans crafted the ornate tea table with a paneled frieze and decorative brass inlay.

Two drawers at the front and back of the table had fitted “candle slides,” the perfect complement to hold a silver tea or coffee service or for a friendly card game of “Bouillotte.”<sup>13</sup>



*Figure 10. James Monroe Commode, Console Desserte, and Tea Table  
Artist: unknown, ca. 1790s  
James Monroe Museum and Memorial Library*

Women of means achieved accomplishments in many different art forms in the era, but music prevailed as a prevalent and accepted pastime. All the Monroe women received recognition as accomplished musicians. Elizabeth and Maria played the piano, and Eliza played the harp. The family brought with them to the President’s House a pianoforte. This instrument belonged to Elizabeth, purchased by Monroe while in London as minister to England. George Peter Astor constructed the piano of silky satinwood, a type of mahogany. It had a delicate and decorative inlay of olivewood, satinwood, and ebony surrounding the entire perimeter of the upper case and legs. Inside the left two-thirds of the case, the keys or “ivories” covered five full octaves. A small compartment opened to the keyboard’s left to hold a single candlestick.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> James Monroe, James Monroe Papers, Series 3, account book 1794-1797, August 17, 1794, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.; Harris and Kearney, “Articles Best Kind,” 32-33, 36-37; Langston & Harrison, *A President’s Legacy*, 83-90; “James Monroe Commode, Console Desserte, and Tea Table,” ca. 1790s, James Monroe Memorial Library, Fredericksburg, Virginia, accessed October 9, 2022, <https://jamesmonroemuseum.umw.edu/visit/3-d-virtual-tour/>.

<sup>14</sup> Elise K. Kirk, “Pianos in the White House,” *Magazine Antiques* (May 1984), 1164-1169; Langston-Harrison, *A President’s Legacy*, 143; George Peter Astor, “Monroe Family Pianoforte,” ca. 1803-1807, James Monroe Museum and Memorial Library, Fredericksburg, Virginia, accessed September 17, 2022, <https://jkearney32.wixsite.com/jmmmuseumkiosk/copy-of-3d-tour-stop-10>.



*Figure 11. George Peter Astor Pianoforte  
ca. 1803-1807  
James Monroe Museum and Memorial Library*

All respectable societies considered the harp a classical and ancient instrument appropriate for any accomplished young lady to play in the early nineteenth century. Monroe presented Eliza with a harp while she still attended school abroad and then shipped it to America in 1807 with the other furnishings purchased during Monroe's tenure in France. The ebonized and parcel gilt "lap" harp, constructed of wood and fitted with full gut strings manufactured in Ireland circa 1800, made an excellent gift. The unidentified maker decorated the top of the front post with three carved and applied female figures above a rosette, all gilded. Imagine, the atmosphere and ambiance seemed surreal to hear the musical lilt reverberating through the White House as the beautiful Eliza gracefully touched the strings.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> C. G. Sloan and Co, Inc., "Appraisal of the Collections at the James Monroe Museum," (Fredericksburg: James Monroe Museum and Memorial Library, 1989), 38, 51; Wendy Cooper, *Classical Taste in America* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), 33; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 248; "Eliza Monroe Hay Lap Harp," ca. 1800, James Monroe Museum and Memorial Library, Fredericksburg, Virginia, National First Ladies Library, accessed September 17, 2022, <http://www.firstladies.org/blog/first-ladies-never-married-to-presidents-eliza-monroe-hay/>.



*Figure 12. Eliza Monroe Lap Harp  
Artist: unknown, ca. 1800  
James Monroe Museum and Memorial Library  
Image courtesy of National First Ladies Library*

The president considered France the apex of fashion diversity and quality. Anxious to secure the country's future and its place on the global stage, Monroe understood the role that interior furnishings could play in establishing respectability. He decided to furnish the State Rooms with new articles of excellence from France. For example, for the Oval Room, the choice of decorations remained of the utmost importance due to its use for formal receptions and entertaining. Monroe requested the furniture constructed of mahogany, known for its strength and ability to hold finely carved details. Complementary, James Hoban employed the desirable material in producing architectural features, such as the heavy window sashes and doors of the President's House. Monroe further instructed that the furniture must feature eagles in the decoration, a preference derived from the appointment of the noble bird as the national symbol in 1782 and its prominent placement on the Great Seal.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Leslie B. Jones, "James Monroe's White House: State Furniture *à la Française*," *White House History*, no. 44 (Winter 2017): 30.

These acquisitions marked the creation of the first official state collection. Early in the autumn, Messrs. Russell and La Farge notified the president that they shipped his order to the United States on the *Resolution*, which sailed on September 17, 1817, and would arrive in Alexandria by November 11. The attention to detail and finish, excellent artistry, and use of the finest materials by these craftsmen resulted in interiors that lent prestige to the French court and set the tone for the rest of Europe, including the President's House. The designs depicted an aura of solidness, dignity, and richness in the well-proportioned objects acquired for the residence. Many reflected the new interest in ancient Rome and Egypt symbols, which dominated the French decorative arts during Napoleon's reign, spurred by amazing discoveries made during the 1798 Egyptian campaign and archeological artifacts of the Roman world uncovered at Pompeii and Herculaneum in the eighteenth century. Designers incorporated Egyptian motifs such as sphinxes, obelisks, figures of gods, and lotus flowers; the Romans drew upon a vocabulary of displayed ornaments, laurel wreaths, and olive branches, all of which appear on White House objects. The arrival of a society that worshipped the memories of the Greek and Italian republics served to hasten the movement.<sup>17</sup>

The rich and elegant French pieces retained their reputation as the most treasured objects in the White House Collection. Their grandeur impressed visitors since the President's House reopened to the public during the traditional New Year's celebration in 1818. Of the Monroe collection, the handsome Bellangé suite amazed guests then and now. Russell & La Farge hired

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<sup>17</sup> Russel and La Farge Invoice, account 37131, voucher 3, Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts; Russell & LaFarge to James Monroe, May 25, 1818, in Records of the United States House of Representatives, 18<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, Record Group 233; Monkman, *The White House*, 58; Esther Singleton, *The Furniture of Our Forefathers* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Page, 1900), 2:571-572. For more information on the French Empire style and craftsmen, see Madeline Deschamps, *Empire* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1994); Alvar Gonzalez Palacios, *The French Empire Style* (London: Hamlyn, 1970); David Revere McFadden et al., *L'Arte de Vivre: Decorative Arts and Design in France 1789-1989* (New York: Vendome Press for the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, Smithsonian Institution, 1989).



Pierre-Antoine Bellangé, a highly regarded *menuisier* (cabinetmaker) for Emperor Napoleon I and the restored King Louis XVIII, to fill the furniture order for the President's House.

Bellangé's reputation came at an inflated price and required flexibility with the furniture's outcome. Previous conflicts between England and France reduced imports to Continental Europe by 1817, limiting the accessibility to mahogany and severely escalating the cost. Also, by current Parisian standards, mahogany became outmoded and no longer considered fashionable in any gentlemen's private house. Russell and La Farge knew of Monroe's desire to furnish the President's House in a manner that would help establish the new nation's credibility with its international peers. In ordering gilded beechwood, they would save the president's reputation and their native country an expense and embarrassment.<sup>18</sup>

Bellangé's fifty-three pieces of furniture probably overwhelmed the 39 x 29 foot Oval Room. The suite consisted of two nine-foot sofas, eighteen *fauteuils* (armchairs), eighteen *chaises* (side chairs), two bergères (large armchairs with enclosed sides), two fire screens, four X-shaped *tabourets* (stools), six footstools, and a pier table crowding the room. Here ornamental richness harmonized with carved laurel leaves and other *trophé*. Cartier et fils of Paris made the luxurious upholstery fabrics of crimson silk with laurel leaves and an eagle in shades of gold used by tapissier Laveissier to upholster the suite. Joining the crush of the Bellangé ensemble as the centerpiece of the Oval Room, a delightful round mahogany table with a marble top and three bold columnar legs with gilded bronze capitals described on the original bill as "une table ronde enbois d'acajous." A visitor to the President's House in 1825 described the positioning of the

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<sup>18</sup> John LaFarge to Samuel Lane, September 15, 1817, Records of the United States House of Representatives, 18<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, (1824-1825), Record Group 233; James Monroe to Samuel Lane, August 28, 1817, Record of the House of Representatives; Joseph Russell to James Monroe, September 15, 1817, Records of the House of Representatives, 18<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, (1824-1825), Record Group 233; Leben, "Furnishings in Paris," 30-37.

many chairs in the room, writing that they were “alternately armed and single so that in the arrangement of the chairs around the room there appears to be no confusion of arms, but a resplendency and simplicity with is very admirable.”<sup>19</sup>



*Figure 13. Bellangé Bergères & Pier Table  
Artist: Pierre-Antoine Bellangé, ca. 1817  
White House Collection  
Image courtesy of White House Historical Association  
(original upholstery crimson silk)*

Like any object of decorative art, musical instruments offered aesthetic beauty to complement their purpose. Yet, as pieces of material culture, few things present rich and versatile history. The significance of musical instruments became more apparent in the social settings of Washington in the early republic. From official galas to intimate gatherings, music figuratively and literally set the tone for the most meaningful scenes in the President’s House. Although the first family owned a pianoforte, the president recognized that the residence needed a piano with an imposing sound, style, and size appropriate for the executive mansion’s public

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<sup>19</sup> Alexander Macomb to Jane Kennedy, November 6, 1825, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Free Library, quoted in Seale, *President’s House*, 1:154; Leben, “Furnishings in Paris,” 30-37; Melissa Naulin, “A Suite for the Nation Restored: To Its Original Splendor,” *White House History*, no. 56 (Summer 2020): 9; Monkman, *The White House*, 61-62. Pierre-Antoine Bellangé, “Bellangé Bergères & Pier Table,” ca. 1817, White House Collection, Washington, D. C., White House Historical Association, accessed September 17, 2022, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/treasures-of-the-white-house-monroe-armchair>.

entertaining. Monroe's agent engaged Sébastien Érard, a French instrument craftsman of German origins who specialized in harps and pianos. Érard led the industry by creating lavishly decorated horizontal pianos with pedals that rendered wind and percussion sound in harmony with the piano notes as the performer elected. The first family positioned the Érard piano center stage in the Sitting Room, today's Red Room. Its republican splendor offered beauty, enjoyment, and bonding within the social setting. The mesmerized audience enveloped by musical delights while engaging in the thrills and intrigues of intimate whispers.<sup>20</sup>



*Figure 14. Sébastien Érard French Ormolu Grand Piano Replica  
ca. 1817-1819*

*Image courtesy of Antiques Piano Shop Online Museum*

The fanciful furnishings depicted, in fact, a physical part of Monroe's administration. A prophetic announcement by Monroe, as he defended the cost of the French furnishings, suggested his desire for the furniture to be revered and preserved in perpetuity. His comments foreshadowed their existence: "The furniture in its kind and extend is thought to be an object no

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<sup>20</sup> Sébastien Érard, "French Ormolu Grand Piano Replica," ca. 1817-1819, Antiques Piano Shop Online Museum, accessed October 9, 2022, <https://antiquepianoshop.com/online-museum/erard/>; Elise Kirk, "Pianos in the White House," *Magazine Antiques* (May 1984), 166.

less deserving attention than the building for which it is intended. Both being national objects... For a building so extensive, intended for a purpose exclusively national, in which the furniture provided for it a mingled regard is due to the simplicity and purity of our institutions and to the character of the people who are represent in it... Many of the articles, being of durable nature, may be handed down through a long series of service.”<sup>21</sup> Two hundred years later, many of these iconic French articles held their place in prominence and retained an identity intertwined with the White House, both symbolic of a nation characterized by liberty.

President Monroe persisted that the presidential residence reflected ceremonial symbolism conveyed by formal architecture and decorative art. As the executive branch of the United States, he wanted the President’s House to be a residence fitting the chief executive featuring the work of American artisans alongside delicate French objects. To that end, he also turned to local craftsmen to supply furniture for the executive mansion. For example, William Worthington, a Georgetown cabinetmaker and upholsterer, delivered a mahogany sideboard, a French-styled bedstead with fluted posts, and five large dressing tables with washstands to the residence for the family’s upstairs living quarters. An 1817 newspaper article reported that “all the furniture of the small saloons, sitting room, dining room, and bed rooms, are made or making in the city of Washington.”<sup>22</sup>

While the pressure of his responsibilities necessitated the postponement of some ideas, he had much more in mind than documented. He approved and realized Hoban’s design for handsome Grecian plaster decorations for the East Room which had never achieved any

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<sup>21</sup> James Monroe, “Special Message,” February 10, 1818, American Presidency Project, ed. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, <https://www.presidency.uscb.edu>.

<sup>22</sup> William Worthington furniture receipt, acct. 43754, voucher 66, October 18, 1818, Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts.

adornment under his predecessors. He ordered an unupholstered suite of twenty-four mahogany armchairs and four sofas from Georgetown cabinetmaker William King, Jr., who had apprenticed with the talented Annapolis cabinetmaker John Shaw. In the latest style of the day, these solid, well-made pieces with square backs and scrolled arms demonstrated the quality of cabinetmaking in early Washington, possibly inspired by the Bellangé suite. Monroe also ordered three iron candle chandeliers to semi-complete the room, probably forged in a local blacksmith shop. This rendered the room usable, especially for the Marquis de Lafayette's visit in 1824. Monroe had accomplished more for this space than his presidential forerunners, but beyond those improvements, the East Room project still needed polish that it would not receive until Andrew Jackson's administration.<sup>23</sup>



*Figure 15. William King, Jr. East Room Chair  
ca.1818  
James Monroe Highland Collection*

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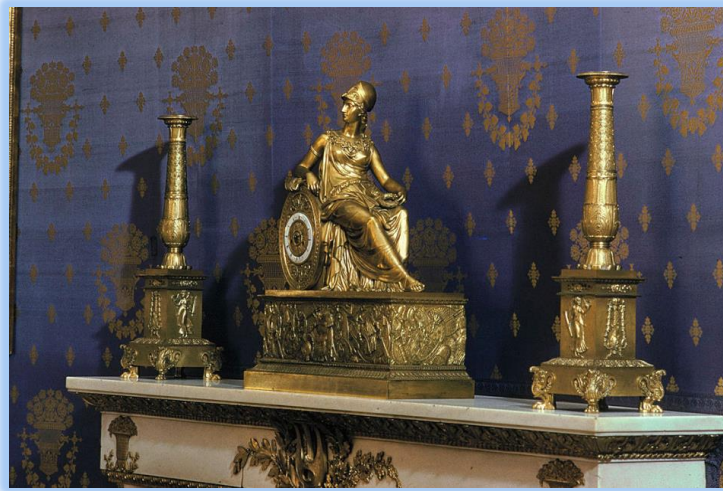
<sup>23</sup> McLaurin, *James Hoban*, 23; William King, Jr. receipt, acct. 43754, voucher 70, December 17, 1818, Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts; Monkman, *The White House*, 56; William King Jr., "East Room Chairs," photograph, ca. 1818, James Monroe Highland Collection, Highland, Charlottesville, Virginia.

### Presidential Decorative & Fine Arts

In addition to the furniture, other décor added to the elegance of the State Floor Rooms, such as the two exquisite mantel clocks requisitioned. President Monroe, an avid horologist and a man from the Age of Enlightenment, prided himself on owning the best and the most current scientific instruments. He had a great interest, even fascination, in the science of timekeeping. As quite an aficionado, he collected numerous timepieces and pocket watches. A gilded bronze clock marked “Thomas et Cie” portrayed a seated figure of Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom. Pierre-Phillips Thomire, renowned as one of the finest bronze makers, employed nearly eight hundred artisans in his shop. Many of Thomire’s works portrayed mythological subjects, which this clock represents. Russell and La Farge had difficulty acquiring the style of clocks specified by the president, as they found “great difficulty in getting Pendules [clocks] without Nudities, and were...forced to take the two models we have bought on that account.” A pair of gilded bronze candelabras arrived to accompany the Minerva clock on the mantel, not marked but resembling examples of Thomire’s work. Each had a central shaft of a classically draped woman and bases carved in low relief with military *trophés*, a familiar theme of the Empire period and a *aide-mémoire* of the emperor’s military prowess.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Russell to Monroe, May 25, 1818, Records of the United States House of Representatives, 18<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2nd session, House Report 79; Monkman, *The White House*, 62.; Langston-Harrison, *A President’s Legacy*, 92; Pierre-Phillips Thomire, “Minerva Clock and Candelabras,” circa 1817,” White House Collection, Washington, D. C., White House Historical Association, accessed September 17, 2022, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/fotoware?id=4E403822D5A44B3C%20A603F705E560B7D4>.



*Figure 16. Minerva Clock and Candelabras  
Artist: Pierre-Phillips Thomire., ca 1817  
White House Collection  
Image courtesy of White House Historical Association*

A second clock acquired for the sitting room, today's Red Room, represented the Carthaginian General Hannibal following the Cannae Battle. On its base, reliefs carved of Hannibal's other victories at Trebia and Transimene during the Second Punic War, 218-201B.C. Denière et Matelin, who owned a large shop of highly skilled bronze makers in Paris, created this clock for the President's House. He also crafted an accompanying pair of gilded bronze candelabras with standing classical female figures, each holding six lights above her head, much like those for the Oval Room attributed to Thomire.<sup>25</sup> These exquisite gilded timepieces and their accompanying luminaries remained wonderfully prized displayed artifacts of the White House collection.

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<sup>25</sup> Monkman, *The White House*, 62; Denière et Matelin, "Hannibal Clock," ca. 1817, White House Collection, Washington, D. C., White House Historical Association, accessed September 1817, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/white-house-decorative-arts-in-the-1820s-photo-1>.





*Figure 17. Hannibal Clock  
Artist: Denière et Matelin, ca 1817  
White House Collection  
Image courtesy of White House Historical Association*

A pair of French porcelain vases illustrated scenes of the Greek poet Homer and the Byzantine general Belisarius joining the Hannibal timepiece. The Paris firm of P. L. Dagoty, which also supplied the porcelain dinner and dessert services, created these vases. The painted figure on one vase showed Belisarius by Francois Gerard, a French artist working during the Empire Period. A pair of gilded bronze candlesticks with lotus-decorate columns by an unknown maker escorted the vases. The agents acquired the second pair of porcelain vases, unmarked but probably by Dagoty, for the Card Room, today's Green Room. The painted landscape scenes on these cobalt blue and gilt vases exhibited Benjamin Franklin's abode at Passy, where he lived as an American minister to France, and another view of Passy.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Monkman, *The White House*, 62-66. Pierre-Louis Dagoty, "Monroe Administration Sitting Room Vases," ca. 1817, White House Collection, Washington, D. C., White House Historical Association, accessed September 17, 2022, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/fotoware?id=EB5D7A946D844C58%20AAA3BAB871761AC>; "James Monroe Administration Card Room Vases," ca. 1817, White House Collection, Washington, D. C., White House Historical Association, accessed September 17, 2022, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/fotoware?id=9416526999A94E89%209DA2610C7A8C5539>.



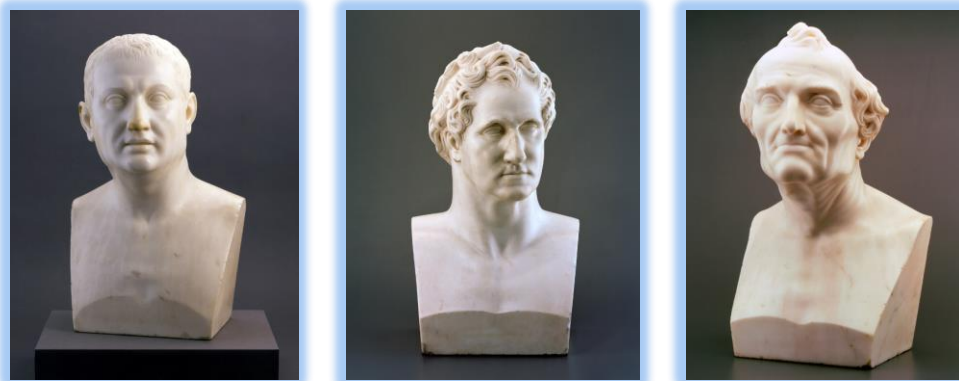


*Figure 18. James Monroe Administration Vases*  
 (Left) *Sitting Room Vases*, Artist: *Pierre-Louis Dagoty*, ca 1817  
 (Right) *Card Room Vases*, Artist: *unknown*, ca 1817  
*White House Collection*  
*Images courtesy of White House Historical Association*

Impossible to share the history of each piece of the Monroe collection, yet some items with a somewhat jaded history warranted a glimpse as they added to the contextual fabric of the building and remained prized works of art, like the Ceracchi statues. Giuseppe Ceracchi, an American, Italian Neoclassical sculptor, crafted numerous marble busts of prominent men such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington. His talents earned him a reputation as one of the most prolific sculptors in early American history, except for sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon, Ceracchi, the only other artist known who modeled George Washington during his lifetime. The talented artist orchestrated a deal with the United States government to build an equestrian statue of George Washington in Philadelphia. However, when the 1790 Residence Act changed the location of the capital's site, the agreement became null and void. A disgruntled Ceracchi returned to Paris and, later, joined an assassination plot against Napoleon, costing him his life. Before his sad demise in the Napoleon coup d'état, Ceracchi sold his terra-cotta busts. Many of his works became models for the originals, but others carved the replicas.

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In 1816, Washington's former secretary, Tobias Lear, purchased marble busts of George Washington, Amerigo Vespucci, and Christopher Columbus from Thomas Appleton, the United States Consul at Livorno, Italy. According to art historian Philipp Fehl, Raimondo Trentanove possibly carved these busts, passing them off as Ceracchi originals. When Lear tragically committed suicide, his son Benjamin sold the marble variants to the government. President Monroe orchestrated the purchase as a former friend of Ceracchi's, and he needed new furnishings for the nearly rebuilt White House. Extraordinary pieces of art highlight America's artistic heritage and the residence's history and occupants. Despite Ceracchi's struggles, his busts deemed worthy of display in the President's House represented the struggles of the Founding Fathers to create a national identity while adhering to revolutionary principles.<sup>27</sup>



*Figure 19. Christopher Columbus, George Washington, and Amerigo Vespucci Busts  
Giuseppe Ceracchi, modeled ca. 1790-1794, carved ca. 1815  
White House Collection  
Images courtesy of White House Historical Association*

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<sup>27</sup> Lina Mann, "Sculpture, Bribery, and the Founding Fathers: The Curious Tale of Giuseppe Cerrachi," November 2, 2018, White House Historical Association, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/sculpture-bribery-and-the-founding-fathers>; Giuseppe Ceracchi, "Christopher Columbus, George Washington, and Amerigo Vespucci Bust," modeled ca. 1790-1794, carved ca. 1815, White House Collection, Washington, D. C., White House Historical Association, accessed September 18, 2022, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/sculpture-bribery-and-the-founding-fathers>.

Most of the early republic's fine arts found a voice through the medium of oil and canvas in portraiture. Portraits had the practical purpose of recording a likeness for posterity. With the War for Independence and the establishment of the new nation, artists rose to the challenge of depicting people of great deeds and great ideas in styles that combined realism and idealism. Typical of such imagery is the fine early group of portraits of the Founding Fathers by the most distinguished portraitists of the period, Gilbert Stuart, Charles Willson Peale, and John Trumbull. Their occasional use of the full-length format reminded us of inherited English traditions. Peale and his artistic offspring increasingly demonstrated more striking poses, settings, and presentation informality. Their techniques characterized American sensibility and straightforwardness. Other artists, like John Vanderlyn and Samuel F. B. Morse, would employ similar direct and self-confident styles for their sitters during the first quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup>

The United States Congress probably agreed with this sentiment but viewed the executive mansion's early role as more a home than an office. It certainly did not ascertain any notion of being a repository for the nation's history via fine arts, even though it drew symbolic stature. As a result, Congress had only appropriated funds for the Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington. Any other wall art remained at the discretion of the current presidential occupant, which according to the record, seemed sparse. The walls did not go unadorned, for first families hung numerous sconces and mirrors to illuminate the interior in a time before electricity. Author Esther Singleton, in *The Story of the White House*, referenced a receipt of \$36.00 to repair four unidentified portraits' frames and \$150.00 for a new frame for the Washington portrait.

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<sup>28</sup> Stewart D. McLaurin, "Preface," in William Kloss, *Art in the White House: A Nation's Pride* (Washington, D. C.: White House Historical Association, 2018).

Similarly, author Lee Langston-Harrison, in *A Presidential Legacy*, highlighted family silhouettes and a few family portraits. Still, she failed to definitively locate in the records or through family tradition where these framings hung.<sup>29</sup>

Primary sources do confirm that several artists painted President Monroe during his tenure. Some of these he agreed to at the request of others. For example, Charleston, South Carolina, commissioned Samuel F. B. Morse to paint a full-length portrait to display in their city hall. A talented artist, Morse had also created a bust-length image of the president. To Morse's obvious pleasure, it met with great success with the first family: "The daughter told me (she said as a secret) that her father [James Monroe] was delighted with it and said it was the only one that ...looked like him; and this, too, with [Gilbert] Stuart's [Monroe portrait] in the room."<sup>30</sup> Morse's notation of this exchange implied that Gilbert Stuart's and Morse's paintings hung in the White House, possibly in different rooms.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Singleton, *Story of the White House*, 106. Langston-Harrison, *A Presidential Legacy*.

<sup>30</sup> Samuel Morse, *Samuel F. B. Morse: His Letters and Journals*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 1:226.

<sup>31</sup> Gilbert Stuart, *James Monroe*, oil and canvas, ca. 1820-1822, The Met Fifth Avenue, New York, New York, accessed on October 9, 2022, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/12668>; Samuel F. B. Morse, *James Monroe*, oil and canvas, ca. 1819, White House Collection, Washington, D. C., accessed October 9, 2022, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/fotoware?id=7365B35FC8FF4EFF%20B2F69FE6E95D37BA>.



*Figure 20. James Monroe Portraits*  
 (Left) James Monroe, Artist: Gilbert Stuart, ca. 1820-1822, The Met Fifth Avenue  
 (Right) James Monroe, Artist: Samuel F. G. Morse, ca. 1819, White House Collection  
 Image courtesy of White House Historical Association

Also, John Vanderlyn, an expatriate native of upstate New York, painted in Paris and Rome and returned to America as an artist of note. He visited the President's House in the 1820s and painted President Monroe and Mrs. Monroe using the East Room as his studio. Mrs. Monroe, whose beauty and courage the French had celebrated during the diplomatic years in postrevolutionary Paris, had become more reclusive during the presidency, with an aura of aloofness and mystery. Vanderlyn captured this in his portrait by an austere framing of her face and ivory skin in a turban and dark cloak of black velvet trimmed ermine. Therefore, anecdotal evidence may infer that the first family also displayed these works in the residence.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> William Seale, "Portraits Made At the White House," *White House History*, no. 16 (Spring 2005): 5-6; John Vanderlyn, *James Monroe*, oil and canvas, ca. 1816, The National Art Gallery, Washington, D. C., accessed October 9, 2022, [https://npg.si.edu/object/npg\\_NPG.70.59](https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.70.59); Ebin F. Comins, *Elizabeth Kortright Monroe* *Reproduction*, oil and canvas, ca. 1932, White House Collection, Washington, D. C., White House Historical Association, Washington, D. C. accessed October 9, 2022, <https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/James%20Monroe/3752.tif.info>.



*Figure 21. James Monroe & Elizabeth Kortright Portraits  
 (Left) James Monroe, Artist: John Vanderlyn, ca. 1820, National Art Gallery  
 (Right) Elizabeth Kortright Monroe Reproduction from John Vanderlyn Portrait  
 Artist: Ebin F. Comins, ca. 1932, White House Collection  
 Image Courtesy of White House Historical Association*

Monroe's decorating choices received validation from the responses they elicited from White House visitors. The Oval Saloon, today's Blue Room, the principal setting for many French pieces, hailed as "a most splendid room" by one guest in 1819. After visiting in 1823, Virginian Senator John Taylor described the room as "designed to impress upon foreign ministers a respect for the government, which may have a valuable influence upon our foreign relations."<sup>33</sup> Samuel F. B. Morse's complimentary remarks resonated with the president's efforts: "The drawing-room and suite of rooms as the President's are furnished and decorated in the most splendid manner; some think too much so, but I do not. Something of splendor is certainly proper about the Chief Magistrate for the credit of the nation. Plainness can be carried

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<sup>33</sup> John Taylor and Samuel Morse quoted in Monkman, *The White House*, 62.

to an extreme, and in national buildings and establishments it will with good, reason, be styled meanness.”<sup>34</sup>

### Fine Dining

An invitation to the White House for a State Dinner or formal celebration would set the stage for a memorable experience. Selecting the exemplary service to complement each special event provided an opportunity to engage in diplomacy, express Americanism, to share republic values and visions with visitors. Therefore, considering the place of acquisition, the types of porcelain used, the pieces composing the dinnerware, and its design, convey a great deal regarding the material culture and the social mores of the country. The “state china” referred to an extravagant banquet service bought for use on state occasions, such as the formal multiple course dinners given for members of Congress, foreign diplomats, heads of state, and other formal events. In addition to state service, the first family often purchased less elegant china for everyday use. The term “china” usually defined porcelain and earthenware employed for table services at the executive mansion.<sup>35</sup>

The delight in French taste proved the most evident in elegant furnishings for the dinner table, especially in the porcelains ordered for the use of the president of the United States. In this early period, the wares chosen for the formal state banquet service promoted neoclassic design typical of the extensive dinner services made in the Parisian factories in the nineteenth century. Among the plethora of household goods originating in France, Monroe ordered the first sets of porcelain china commissioned explicitly for an American president composed of a dinner service

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<sup>34</sup> Samuel F. B. Morse to Jedidiah and Elizabeth Morse, December 17, 1819, Samuel F. B. Morse Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

<sup>35</sup> Allman, *Official White House China*, 4-5.

of thirty place settings. The dinner collection received by the president in 1817 continues to be debated by historians. Candidates include remnants of a French porcelain dinner service with forms such as a round soup tureen and square-covered dishes correspondingly to those on the original invoice. The gilt decoration of the service included an eagle and shield enclosed in a circle of twenty stars and the monogram “M” within a shield. The eagle presented seemed similar to that stoically atop the Tripoli Monument, which stood at the United States Navy Yard, 8<sup>th</sup> and M streets, within the District from 1807 to 1831, thus surviving the War of 1812 and indicating possible ownership by a naval officer rather than the President’s House. Another possibility consisted of misidentified pieces as part of the Andrew Jackson dessert service, which had blue-marbled bands with gilt-edged and an ascendant golden eagle almost identical to the one emblazoned on the Monroe dessert service, but reversed. Family tradition held that this latter set the Monroe first family used for their White House dinner service.<sup>36</sup>

Unquestionably, President Monroe ordered the dessert service, the most significant portion of the service ware. The Parisian firm of Pierre-Louis Dagoty and Edouard D. Honoré, under the patronage of the daughter of King Louis XVI, Marie Therese, manufactured the intricate and delicate service. Few today understand the importance of a dessert service on the tables during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The brilliant dressing out of a dessert reflected an art form from ancient times. As a result, dessert services presented the most elegant part of the tableware of the household. A sophisticated host would present a menagerie of baskets, compotes, coolers, saucers, and assorted plate sizes. The dessert course introduced a feast of culinary delights. The smart host prepared a wide array of fresh or stewed fruits, jellies,

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<sup>36</sup>Allman, *Official White House China*, 38; Janet A. Headley, “The Monument without a Public,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 29, no. 4 (1994): 248; Margaret Brown Klapthor, *Official White House China: 1789 to the Present*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 40-47, 291.



tarts, sweetmeats, or candies. Cooler desserts also became very popular, like puddings, ices or ice cream, and any concoction of cream and wine called syllabubs. In easy reach, servants placed assorted nuts and dragées, commonly known as Jordan almonds. Presenting the most elegant dessert reflected the ultimate status symbol. An ambitious host, like the President's House, required the choicest eatables and stylish presentations.<sup>37</sup>

Each setting of the dessert porcelain received an outline of gilding and a single band of amaranth. The reddish-purple color, referencing a flower believed never to fade, symbolized the immortality of America. The decorations on the amaranth border illustrated allegorical trophies or vignettes representing strength, the arts, commerce, science, and agriculture. The central image represented the early armorial arms of the United States with a spirited rising eagle in flight facing its dexter (right) talon, clutching an olive branch to symbolize peace and victory, and arrows in its left talon. The handsome eagle bore a red, white, and blue escutcheon or shield representative of the United States flag and draped with a banner reading the motto "*E Pluribus Unum.*" The majestic golden eagle, a European embellishment or mistake, demonstrated the nation's glory superimposed upon an azure sky bearing a constellation of thirteen stars crowned by a halo cloud.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Russel & La Farge invoice, , account 37131, voucher 3, Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts; Russell & LaFarge to James Monroe, May 25, 1818, House of Representatives Records, 18<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, (1824-1825), Record 233; Klapthor, *Official White House China*, 40-47, 291; Allman, *Official White House China*, 32, 38. Information about the dessert course is primarily from Georgiana Reynolds Smith, *Table Decoration: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1968.)

<sup>38</sup> Russell & LaFarge invoice, accounts 43754, voucher 33, Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts; Allman, *Official White House China*, 7, 34-39. James Brown, American minister to France, permitted the eagle to shown in flight as a compromise with the French manufacturers who considered the rising eagle in bad repute with the French Court after Napoleon Bonaparte's exile. As a compromise the evil omen bird was redesigned with proper assurances that the furnishings would speedily take flight to America. See James Brown to James Monroe, June 4, 1817, in James Monroe Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Pierre-Louis Dagoty and Edouard D. Honoré, "Monroe State Service," ca. 1817, White House Collection, Washington, D. C., White House Historical Association, accessed September 17, 2022, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/fotoware?id=732DE61699944A5B%2090E0D0599D7B06CD>.



*Figure 22. Monroe State Service  
Artists: Pierre-Louis Dagoty and Edouard D. Honoré, 1817  
Image courtesy of White House Historical Association*

One notable visitor to the Monroe White House surely appreciated the French décor. On October 12, 1824, the Marquis de Lafayette, who had begun a celebratory tour of the United States in late summer, welcomed to the residence by his Revolutionary War comrade. A State Dinner held in Lafayette's honor no doubt featured the Dagoty and Honoré china. As a gesture of their friendship and Monroe's generosity, the Marquis sent a bronze bust of himself along with several other gifts after he visited America. A plaster copy of the bust given to the White House by a Monroe descendent in 1930 remains on display in the Library.<sup>39</sup>

The first replenishment of French silver for the White House resulted directly from the British burning of the house and all its contents. It survived, bruised and dented, no doubt, due to hasty packing and a rough wagon ride while fleeing the capital. Dolley Madison did save some of the silver before deserting the premises. Afterward, the Madisons traded the damaged silver for new flatware when they resumed housekeeping in the Octagon House. Though new,

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<sup>39</sup> Ammon, *James Monroe*, 541-542; Scott H. Harris, "James Monroe's Ties to France: 'Republics should approach near to each other'," *White House History*, no. 44 (Winter, 2017): 14.

this set would be unserviceable after two more years of entertaining within the Madison administration. Early in 1817, William Lee's survey reported, "There was no recourse in the remnants...none of these articles fit for use."<sup>40</sup>

Early in Monroe's presidency, Monroe described his donated family collection as "a small service of excellent plate, made for my use, by the best artists in France and England" and "dining room, drawing [room] and bedroom furniture. French china and kitchen furniture, all of good quality, and in good state."<sup>41</sup> Of these items, four silver wine coolers with an engraved border of grapevines, lion's mask handles, and sphinx-shaped feet still reside in the White House. Made between 1789 and 1809, the French silversmith Jean-Baptiste-Claude Odier crafted the silverware. Odier, one of the most highly esteemed metalworkers in Paris, created numerous works for Napoleon, his family, and nobility throughout Europe. Odier, technically accomplished, became known as one of the earliest French silversmiths to incorporate such sculptural elements in silver as the cast handles and feet on the coolers. Monroe had the coolers engraved with the early nineteenth-century epigraph "President's House." The tradition started by James Monroe and continues to this day on most White House silver.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Joseph D. Carr, "History in White House Silver," *White House History*, no. 1 (1983): 31; William Lee to the Honorable B. Bassett, et al., February 24, 1818, in the House of Representatives Records, 18<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session (1824-1825), House Report 79.

<sup>41</sup> James Monroe to Samuel Lane, April 28, 1817, in House of Representatives Records, 18<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session, House Report 79.

<sup>42</sup> Monkman, *The White House*, 53-54; Jean Baptiste-Claude Odier, "Monroe Wine Cooler," ca. 1798-1809, White House Collection, Washington, D. C., White House Historical Association, accessed September 17, 2022, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/fotoware?id=57A5AA56FD3545C2%20BDFB51EE9E58F1A7>.



*Figure 23, Monroe Wine Cooler  
Artist: Jean Baptiste-Claude Odier, ca 1798-1809  
White House Collection  
Image courtesy of White House Historical Association*

Monroe procured small orders of silver, plated ware, and fireplace equipment from a Georgetown silversmith and retailer, Charles Burnett. Yet, he included the more extensive and more elaborate collections with the requisition from Russell & La Farge. The president ordered two sets of flatware, one of vermeil (silver gilt) and a pair of large soup tureens known today as the French Empire style. Fashionable, the collection reflected an interest in the antiquities of Rome, Greece, and Egypt in its details. For Monroe and his parade of guests, the themes appeared especially apropos since so many Americans recognized these motifs as symbols of the ideas of virtue, citizenship, and justice incorporated into their young republic. The assemblage included a set of perfect pearl-handled knives with blades sheathed in silver gilt by J. B. Boitin, ideal for paring fruit. A favorite for entertaining, the soup tureens always presented an elegant flair. Jacques-Henri Fauconnier, an understudy of Jean-Baptiste-Claude Odier, perfected the duo. The sophisticated soup service marked stylistically in low relief by alternating classical musician assembles and tazzas of fruit flanked by griffins and eagle finials on the lids remain in

use today in the president's private dining rooms. The craftsmen affixed each piece with the maker's mark, date, place of origin, and silver content. These authentic fine pieces received from the official government assayer the rooster mark certifying the finest quality silver (950/100 pure) produced in Paris to attest to its highest quality.<sup>43</sup>



*Figure 24. Monroe Administration Soup Tureen  
Artist: Jacques-Henri Fauconnier, ca 1817  
White House Collection  
Image courtesy of White House Historical Association*

President Monroe sold his French glassware to the White House for official use, including two pairs of decanters, eighteen claret glasses, and forty-nine wineglasses. In September 1817, during his New England states tour, the president visited Pittsburgh and toured the Bakewell glasshouse. According to the author and publisher of the *Washington Post*, Frederick J. Ryan Jr., Bakewell became the first manufacturer and cutter to produce fine lead-

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<sup>43</sup> Charles Burnett receipt, acct. 43754, voucher 12, May 20, 1818. Miscellaneous Treasury Records; Carr, "History White House Silver," 33, 35. For information related to identifying 18th and 19th French silverware see, Louis Carré, *A Guide to Old French Plate* (London: Methuen London, 1931); Monkman, *The White House*, 71; Jacques-Henri Fauconnier, "Monroe Administration Soup Tureen," ca. 1817, White House Collection, Washington, D. C., White House Historical Association, accessed September 17, 2022, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/fotoware?id=D553568485364B09%2089D42150C0DEE5E0>.

glass tableware profitable in the United States. Employing self-promotion, Bakewell previously gifted a pair of decadent decanters to President Madison with a note iterating, “materials for glassware are found abundantly in our own soil.” In-kind, the proprietor also presented President Monroe with a pair of decanters, but adorned differently. The delicately cut glass revealed the United States coat of arms but, more poignantly, a brilliant rising sun. Shortly thereafter, Monroe ordered glassware from Bakewell for the White House: “a full set of Decanters, Wine Glasses and Tumblers of various sizes and different models, exhibiting a brilliant specimen of double flint, engraved and cut by Jardelle. This able artist has displayed his best manner, and the arms of the United States on each piece have a fine effect.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Benjamin Bakewell to James Madison, February 19, 1816, in James Madison, James Madison Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.; James Monroe glassware sold to the White House, March 15, 1817, Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts, Record Group 217, Account 43.754, voucher 86, National Archives Records and Administration, Washington, D. C.; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, November 10, 1818; Bakewell, and Page and Bakewell, “James Monroe Water Decanter,” ca. 1818-1819, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://collection.cmoa.org/objects/ccc5a05e-846c-406f-85af-f23545701bdc>. Often, observers mistaken the Madison decanters in the White House Collection as belonging to Monroe. The Monroe decanters have more rib cutting while the Madison decanters have more diamond cutting. The most significant difference is that Monroe’s decanter has an eagle displaying a shield engraved with a monogram “M”. The Monroe decanter has a regular United States coat of arms but beneath it is a rising sun above the base of the piece.



*Figure 25. James Monroe Water Decanter  
Manufactured by Bakewell, Page and Bakewell, ca. 1818-1819  
Carnegie Museum of Art*

Following the latest European dining vogue, President Monroe also acquired a silver plate, a dramatic fourteen-foot dining table centerpiece or “*surtout de table*,” commonly called a plateau, made of gilded bronze with mirrored platforms for the State Dining Room. A mirrored plateau like the one Monroe ordered, the owners typically decorated with items like whimsical wax forms, sculpted sugar, cherished ceramic figurines, fragrant fresh florals or artificial floras, gleaming metal baskets, or gilt urns. Scattered over the mirror and glowing in the yellow candlelight, the decorations awed spectators with their beauty and charm. Russell and La Farge exceeded their talents by commissioning Denière et Matelin to craft the most elaborate centerpiece produced from mercury, gilded bronze called ormolu, a Parisian specialty.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Seale, *The President's House*, 1:153-154; Russell & LaFarge to James Monroe, Records of the House of Representatives, Record Group 233, House Report 79, 262; Melissa Naulin, “James Monroe’s White House Plateau: ‘A perfect riot of festooned railings and graceful figures’,” *White House History*, no. 23 (Summer 2008):20; Russell & LaFarge Invoice, September 15, 1817, Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts.

The plateau consisted of two D-shaped ends with five interchangeable rectangular sections to fit in between, allowing its length to accommodate any size table used. All seven pieces had inset mirrors on their horizontal surface. Each unit had a gilded bronze balustrade featuring Bacchus, the Roman god of horticulture and wine, and his followers supporting abundant swags of grapevines, ivy, and fruit. Bacchus sat on an overturned ewer in the center of each balustrade, holding a drinking vessel in one hand and a thyrsus (staff crowned with a pine cone) in the other. Bacchantes, Bacchus's female devotees, reclined on either end of the balustrades, also holding thyrsi. A laurel leaf border ran below the railings. Each plateau section featured two plinths with a wreath mount on its face, except for one of the end sections, which had four plinths. Each plinth supported a removable classically dressed woman balancing on a sphere wreath. Alternatively, the plinths held sixteen shallow, oval-shaped bronze dishes decorated with grapevines and acanthus leaves.<sup>46</sup>

Russell & La Farge also sent seven gilded bronze containers as complementary pieces to the plateau to form a complete ensemble. A trio of three ornate baskets, each supported by three classical female figures assumed to represent the Three Graces, Greek goddesses who dispensed beauty and charm, stand on circular plinths. The large and the smaller versions of the baskets came with removal candelabra inserts of six arms each. A pair of stands "copied from the ancient style" and featuring three winged sphinxes on top of animal legs also accompanied the plateau. A couple of vases in the "Etruscan" form, wreath mounts encircling classical masques ornamented with garlands of flowers, and a pair of trépieds (stands) with sphinx-feet completed

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<sup>46</sup> Naulin, "James Monroe's Plateau, 21-24; John Pearce, "The 1817 Catalogue Drawing of the White House Plateau," *The Connoisseur* (August 1971): 284-286.



the plateau decorations. All seven of these containers remain in the White House collection today.<sup>47</sup>



*Figure 26. Monroe Dining Plateau in Situ*  
 Artist: Denière et Matelin, ca 1817  
 White House Collection  
 Image courtesy of White House Historical Association

The powerful impression the plateau's unbridled beauty made on guests to the White House in the early nineteenth-century one could not overstate. According to historian Melissa Naulin, almost every known written account of dining at the President's House during this period comments upon the centerpiece. New York Congressman Thomas Hill Hubbard's complimentary and detailed account of his experience at the President's House with the plateau in February 1818 is not uncommon:

"We had a good dinner and the table was more richly furnished than any that I have yet seen. There were about thirty sat down to dinner... The plateau was the most elegant thing that I ever saw. It is as much as twelve feet long and two feet wide, oval at the ends. The bottom, which is raised on little gold balls or

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<sup>47</sup> Naulin, "James Monroe's Plateau," 24; Russell & LaFarge invoice, September 15, 1817; Pearce, "The 1817 Catalogue Drawing," 284-286; Denière et Matelin, "Monroe Dining Plateau in Situ," ca. 1817, White House Collection, Washington, D. C., White House Historical Association, accessed September 17, 2022, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/fotoware?id=EBD5D7A24C264DBD%209F8AA1B552DCC44C>.

feet, is a mirror edged around with a gold border about two inches high, beautifully wrought, and at equal distances, about eighteen inches apart on the outer edge, stands a female figure about eight inches high, of gold with her arms extended over her head, holding a gold branch or candlestick in each hand, so that there were about forty candles burning around the superb article. Three were also three large flowerpots [probably the Three Graces baskets], whether gilt or plated I cannot tell, filled with a variety of artificial flowers. The whole had a most pleasing effect and as you looked across the table you saw in the mirror the ladies and gentlemen who were setting opposite you with faces inverted. All of the furniture of these rooms is rich beyond anything I ever say.”<sup>48</sup>

Descriptions like Hubbard’s helped to visualize the dazzling effect of seeing the candlelit plateau in the age before electricity. Although Americans in this period typically ate their main meal of the day in the late afternoon when there remained natural light, genteel dinners preferred to dine with the shutters or curtains drawn and rely on artificial light. Due to the expense of fine-quality candles and the fashion for candleholders made of precious metals, a well-lit room demonstrated both wealth and hospitality. With all the sections in place, the classical female figures standing on the sixteen plinths of the plateau held thirty-two candles, whose light reflected and magnified across the sheets of mirror glass below. The gilding of the plateau and its accouterments would further amplify the light. Thus, the plateau quite literally glowed at the center of the dining table. Seeing the plateau in candlelight emphasized its superb craftsmanship, such as the subtle finish differences between the plateau matte and burnished components. I golden ethereal vision and memory that one would cherish for years to come.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas Hill Hubbard to Phebe Hubbard, February 21, 1818, in Naulin, “James Monroe’s Plateau,” 24.

<sup>49</sup> Elisabeth Donaghy Garrett, *At Home: The American Family: 1750-1870* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 93-94, 140-162; Naulin, “James Monroe’s Plateau,” 25; Pearce, “The 1817 Catalogue Drawing,” 284-286.

### Architectural & Aesthetic Tones

The most significant James Hoban change occurred in the architectural tone of the interior, but scholars know little about it except for the result. According to Steward McLaurin, since Hoban designed the house's interior after the fire, we might assume the interior details of the second house would mirror the first house's interiors. But, this supposition would mistake the rebuilt interiors to have initially followed an earlier Georgian taste, reflecting heavier and more ornamentation treatment, not the reconstruction's light, more modern configuration. As seen earlier, the original Hoban interior detailing appeared designed after mid-eighteenth-century tastes. In contrast, the rebuilt house appeared modern, with its openings trimmed simply, except for richly embellished corner blocks. Set at the upper corners of the doors of the first and second floors, these square elements, with their elaborately carved circular mounds of rosettes and acanthus leaves, climaxed a restrained trim molding of sharp verticals that frames the door openings in delicate shadow lines. Wooden wainscoting banded the rooms of the two floors to protect the plaster and wallpaper of these busy spaces. The workers plastered the walls smooth, intended for wallpaper or a popular rubbed-work finish known as "marble," rising to decorative cornices in cast plaster probably supplied by George Andrews. Hoban arranged to enhance State Room ceilings with plaster centerpieces, sunbursts, or floral ornaments surrounding the pulley devices that moved the chandeliers up and down for cleaning and lighting. English merchants at Leghorn (present-day Livorno) provided Italian marble mantels, customed-carved by "our finest." A pair have survived in the White House, ones originally at the east and west ends of the State Dining Room, and, in 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt moved to the Red and Green

Rooms, where they remain. They feature the popular statuary snowy marble polished finish, carved as terms or figures supporting a shelf adorned with Grecian devices.<sup>50</sup>



*Figure 27. James Monroe's Italian Marble Mantel  
Artist unknown, ca. 1819  
White House Collection  
Image courtesy of White House Historical Association*

Since the East Room had never received plaster from President Monroe's predecessors, its decorations cleared an entirely new hurdle that early presidents had not achieved. The most elaborate in the house, the ornamental plaster, featured a heroic frieze of Grecian anthemion, which formed a heavy band encircled the vast room at the tops of the walls. Each anthemion rose thirty inches tall and twenty-two inches at the broadest width. James Hoban highlighted the anthemion band with gold leaf and backed it with black flocking. This rather elaborate conceit

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<sup>50</sup> McLaurin, *James Hoban*, 17, 23; Seale, *The White House*; 65-66; "James Monroe's Italian Marble Mantel," ca. 1819, White House Collection, Washington, D. C., White House Historical Association, accessed October 6, 2022, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/fotoware?id=8DAD5FA7BAB545EA%20BA8B0D2BFF7CCE45>.

remained the room decoration for the next eleven years, though Monroe had envisioned a bold alternative planned.<sup>51</sup>

Renowned American artist John Trumball desired a commission to paint historical pictures for the Capitol for the government's patronage. He wisely observed that support of the fine arts encouraged decorating national edifices to preserve national history, bestow an attractive reward to the meritorious public servants, and advance the nation's glory. Trumball's goals, later espoused by the White House, few others considered during the early days of the residence. A notable exception came during Monroe's administration when John Vanderlyn set up a studio in the East Room in 1817 to complete a commission to paint the president for the City of New York. Monroe asked him to consider adorning the room with nationalistic painted murals. Congress thwarted the plan in 1819 by a lack of funding due to the economic crisis gripping the country. In the early years of the nineteenth century, Congress only commissioned for the White House the Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington.<sup>52</sup>

To advise and execute the interior decorative features inside the house to their best advantage, the President Monroe hired two French-born citizens of Washington, draper René de Perdreauxville and upholsterer Charles Alexandre. The magic they performed created dramatic and alluring effects juxtaposed with the elaborate furnishings. Few Americans had seen objects of such grandeur, and visitors to the White House remarked on their elegance and splendor. "We entered a Saloon which is elyptical-crimson papering, with rich gilt bordering. The windows are

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<sup>51</sup> Seale, *The White House*, 66.

<sup>52</sup> John Vanderlyn to Samuel Lane, proposals and estimates, March 26, 1819, Records of the Commissioners of Public Building Records, National Archives Records Administration, Washington, D. C.; "Art for the President's House—An Historical Perspective," Art for the President's House IV, accessed September 18, 2022, <https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/WH/glimpse/art/html/presart4.html>; Seale, *The White House*, 69.

corniced with large gilded, spread eagles...This is a most splendid room,” commented a guest in 1819 in describing the Oval Room.<sup>53</sup>

The Oval Room, now the Blue Room, promoted a palette of crimson from the silk upholstery on the gilded Bellangé suite to the taffeta curtains draping from the gilded cornices to the fringed silk scarf woven into the arms of the golden chandelier. The room glowed rose and glittered with gold from virtually every surface, from the chandelier to mirrors to the furniture. The Sitting Room or Parlor features today’s Red Room, combined crimson and yellow hues that complemented the mahogany and marbled furniture. The white cast ornamented mantel displayed the gilt bronze Hannibal clock accompanied by the porcelain vases richly decorated with vignettes of Homer and Belisarius. The Sébastien Érard piano placed center stage commanded the space supported by three columns with bronze ornaments and a four-pedal mechanism that elicited musical woodwind and percussion sounds. Candlelight enhanced the ambiance from the gilt bronze and crystal chandelier and the gilt-bronze lion-head sconces decorating the room.<sup>54</sup>

The Card Room, President Monroe decorated with washes of green treatments. It would always retain its color and name as the Green Room. Such longevity would have pleased the president as he had hoped to give his country permanence. Much of the mahogany furniture came from Monroe’s family collection, including “14 Elegant silk-bottomed chairs” and a “Large Mahogany writing table.” A favorite room of the family, who enjoyed playing card and board games. The room also received a crystal and gilt bronze chandelier accompanied by

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<sup>53</sup> Monkman, *The White House*, 59, 62; Robert Donaldson, “Notes on a Journey Through the Most Interesting Parts of the United States and the Canadas,” January 16, 1819, William Gaston Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

<sup>54</sup> Esther Singleton, *The Story of the White House*, 2 vols. (1907, repr., London: Wentworth Press, 2019), 1:115-116.

several pairs of candelabras and a large gilded mirror to increase the illumination. The pair of porcelain vases with views of Passy and Franklin's House complimented the green silk window drapery and wallpaper. The State Dining Room hosted two large mahogany dining tables and thirty-six mahogany chairs covered with horsehair. Covered with fine white linen cloth, they would showcase the exquisite French plateau, the elegant porcelain dinnerware, and silverware designs. The Italian marble mantels enhanced the room's appearance. Carved and gilded lamps and numerous sconces around the room aided the reception of candles garnishing the plateau. With everything illuminated and reflected in the magnificent mirrors of the plateau, the ethereal ambiance appeared as a festival of lights.<sup>55</sup>

The State Floor hosted the ceremony associated with the presidency. From the start, its furnishing and general effect signified the importance of the chief magistrate and the nation. After the rebuilding, the bright pine floors remained covered with wall-to-wall Brussels carpeting. But, for the Oval Room, the president purchased a rug specially designed with the United States coat of arms woven into it. Here the president or the first couple would stand to receive their guests and promote their patriotic devotion and identification with their nation. While the State Dining Room and parlors featured wall paper, paint covered the Entrance and Transverse Halls. Charles Bulfinch, the architect of the Capitol reconstruction, observed, "the walls generally of plain grounds, blue or green, with as much gilding as to give each apartment the air of a palace."<sup>56</sup>

On rare evenings artificial light illuminated crowds large or small – five thousand for a public reception, forty for a dinner – each received graciously by the president. In this scene, by

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<sup>55</sup> Singleton, *Story of White House*, 107, 116-119; Seale, *The White House* 100.

<sup>56</sup> Seale, *The White House*, 102, 105; Singleton, *Story of the White House*, 107.

day, hundreds of guests and visitors passed to inspect and react to the house they provided for the president and to judge how well he treated it; no detail, too small.

### Grand Remembrance

One of James Monroe's most eloquent expressions of his regard for France came in his farewell message to its Directory on January 1, 1797. Disavowed by his government and uncertain of his political prospects, Monroe struck an affectionate and appreciative tone in bidding farewell to the country he so admired: "As I shall always take a deep and sincere interest in whatever concerns the prosperity and welfare of the French Republic, so I shall never cease in my retirement to pay you, in return for the attention you have shown me, the only acceptance recompense to generous minds, the tribute of a grateful remembrance."<sup>57</sup>

President Monroe would self-impose the same sentiment to the executive residence. He had brought the state parlors back from the fire with style, but the expensive French furnishings that Monroe had selected inspired extensive criticism. However, what some visitors to the President's House saw as elegance, others saw as an unjustified extravagance for the head of a republican government. But the dual needs of the President's House to represent the values of the United States republican government while simultaneously commanding respect from foreign officials accustomed to their leaders living in great luxury inevitably evoked criticism from both parties.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, all the furnishings produced within a relatively short time represented the best of the classical revival. They spoke with eloquence about the "days of Greece...revived in

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<sup>57</sup> James Monroe, "Address to the Executive Directory," January 1, 1797, in *The Papers of James Monroe*, vol. 4. ed. Daniel Preston (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2012), 138-139.

<sup>58</sup> "To Corn-Planter" and "For the Gazette," *Washington Gazette*, May 28, 1818, 3.



the woods of America,” of which English-born architect Benjamin Latrobe reminded Americans in the Republic’s early days.<sup>59</sup>

The buyer, William Lee, defended the costs incurred. He argued that the French purchases demonstrated manufacturing representing the “very first quality, and so substantial that some of them will last and be handsome for 20 years or more.” He continued, “...in furnishing a government house, care should be taken to purchase substantial heavy furniture, which should always remain in its place and form as it were a part of the house, such as could be handed down through a succession of Presidents, suited to the dignity and character of the nation... the convenience, solidity, and usefulness of the public furniture has a decided preference.”<sup>60</sup> The objects that survived have indeed retained their fine quality and continue to be among the historical treasures within the President’s House.

Nevertheless, James Monroe’s deep fondness for France and devotion to the political and spiritual bonds of the American and French revolutions stayed a central theme in his life. The lasting friendship he formed as a young soldier with Lafayette and du Ponceau started the first of many cordial relationships he would enjoy with their countrymen. His diplomatic service, animated by his Democratic-Republican partisanship, he dedicated to preserving the alliance between the two nations through shifting fortunes and evolving priorities. As a husband and father, Monroe introduced his family to the sophistication of upper-class French society, including the fleeting glory of the Napoleonic court. As president, he employed France’s decorative arts and social customs to create an elegant style for the White House. In essence,

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<sup>59</sup> Benjamin H. Latrobe, *Anniversary Oration for the Society of Artists of the United States, May 8, 1811* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1811), 6.

<sup>60</sup> William Lee, “Statement of William Lee, Esquire to 15<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session,” March 9, 1818, in Monkman, *The White House*, 71, 74.

Lee, Russell, LaFarge, and Monroe have certainly been vindicated by history as the once-controversial French furnishings now remain among the most highly treasured objects in the White House collection. If they had not sought out such exceptional craftsmanship, the furnishings they selected would have never survived the strenuous schedule of White House entertaining to attain their status today. The décor still serves as a tangible link to the United States' earliest presidents and their efforts to secure the respect that allowed the young country to flourish.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Harris, "James Monroe's Ties," 14-15.

## Chapter 6: Etiquette & Entertaining



*Figure 28. Levee at the White House  
Artist: unknown, ca. unknown  
White House Collection  
Image courtesy of White House Historical Association*

On New Year's Day, 1818, the White House reopened with a grand reception. Inaugurated the previous March, the United States' fifth president, James Monroe, became a very popular president. A New England newspaper called his early administration "The Era of Good Feelings," and the title enraptured the public and the president.<sup>1</sup> Businesses prospered, and thousands migrated to the new land in the West. Many citizens believed that political parties lacked perpetuity. The people turned in admiration toward Monroe, a new executive with a powerful presidential presence like George Washington. The remarkable resemblance to "The Father of His Country" in no aspect diminished Monroe's stature. Although a republican to his soul, the new president had a diplomat's love of form and elegance. His interests in the

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<sup>1</sup> *Boston Evening Sentinel*, July 12, 1817.

President's House encouraged his attentiveness to its design and progress. The rebuilt executive mansion symbolized the resiliency of a robust and united country that had successfully survived a war with one of the world's most powerful nations. President Monroe proudly appreciated how it enhanced his image and reputation as well as the country's.

The nation's citizens increasingly conveyed their self-assurance, sophistication, and individuality as Americans through their homes and possessions. This display, particularly significant in Washington, concerned its leaders and residents, who for decades faced constant criticism and ridicule for the still unfinished state of their city. In a world where reputation mattered greatly, the president recognized that the construction of a positive self-image vitally demonstrated to outsiders the worthiness of the nation for social and economic investment.

In a city like Washington, D. C. that existed for government, etiquette and entertaining took on unprecedented political dimensions, and social life became an extension of politics. In this environment where politics resided profoundly personal, entertaining facilitated building social relationships for government and national identity. The first family believed their character and national ideals would heighten in a beautiful yet dignified setting where they interacted with their guests, relying on the sumptuous food, music, lighting, and décor to inspire the conversation.

Therefore, architectural elements and household furnishings determine the kinds of social activities which can occur in space. So, decorating the President's House presented a unique challenge because the residence reflected more than the personal taste of the current occupant. Its décor also represented the nation's aesthetics to the countless domestic and foreign visitors, Congress members, Washingtonians, and American citizens who passed through its doors. But, the executive mansion, designed for more than just entertaining, provided a valuable space for

exchanging ideas, business deals, and political compromises in a sometimes official but mostly unofficial social sphere. Indeed, the social setting proved even more important in a republic than in a monarchy by providing a neutral space where men and women could build relationships, conduct diplomacy, and discuss politics while avoiding the appearance of power.<sup>2</sup>

The great trial that produced the American republic in the early decades offered countless opportunities for enlightened heroics and stumbling miscues. President Washington sensed this as acutely as any of his fellow citizens, stating, “The eyes of America, perhaps of the world are turned to this government, and many are watching the movements of all those who are concerned in its administration.”<sup>3</sup> Of course, he meant matters such as establishing the branches of government; negotiating with European powers of superior attitude and Native American tribes with complex leadership systems; and creating a favorable economic climate with trading partners while maintaining political distance from neighbors in the Western Hemisphere. But, the president had to also look keenly to his household, for the American public and foreign observers would also look for cues for future executive leadership. He had to determine how the president would best strike a balance both as an elected official accessible to his fellow citizens and as a chief executive due to a reasonable degree of respect for establishing the authority of the office at home and abroad.<sup>4</sup>

Many believed that the nation’s citizens had an inalienable right to meet their president at will with the obligation to entertain them, too. In reality, even the always hospitable President

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<sup>2</sup> Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 2000), 21.

<sup>3</sup> George Washington to David Stuart, July 26, 1789, in Washington, *Writings of George Washington*, 39 vols., ed. Fitzpatrick, 30:360.

<sup>4</sup> George Washington to David Stuart, June 15, 1790, in Washington, *Writings of George Washington*, ed. Fitzpatrick, 31:53.

Washington found that this republican propensity for intruding on the president for the slightest excuse – or indeed none – made it almost impossible for him to carry out the work the citizens had elected him to do. After consultation with trusted friends and advisers, Washington prepared a formal schedule of public entertaining and refused to receive guests at other times.<sup>5</sup>

Each president, including Monroe, faced the same quandary. How often, in a week, would he avail himself for visits of compliment? What manner of public entertaining would the president offer, and who would receive invitations to private dinners? How would he respond when invited to tea or dinner? On the surface, these matters seemed hardly imperative enough to occupy the president's time, but in small details resided the success or failure of more significant concepts. He also knew enough about human nature to realize he risked offending someone if the structure of presidential protocol remained ambiguous. Monroe endeavored to stay true to the founding principles while improving on his predecessors' missteps.

The Monroe couple felt the importance that America displayed as an enlightened and powerful country rather than a bumbling political version of the nouveau riche. They were determined to uphold their country's dignity and republican virtues as the first family. Aware that aristocratic foreign powers put great stock in social sophistication as a measure to judge political maturity, James and Elizabeth Monroe combined casual American manners and social customs with the more formal and stylized protocols of Europe. The precedents set during the

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<sup>5</sup> George Washington to John Adams, May 10, 1789, in Washington, *Papers of Washington*, Presidential Series, ed. Twohig, et al., 2:245-247; John Adams to George Washington, May 17, 1789, in Washington, *Papers of Washington*, Presidential Series, ed. Twohig, et al., 2:312-314; Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, May 5, 1789, in Washington, *Papers of Washington*, Presidential Series, ed. by Twohig, et al., 2:211-214; *New York Gazette of the United States*, May 2, 1789, in Washington, *Papers of Washington*, Presidential Series, ed. Twohig, et al., 2:247.

early republic years would form the basis of American relationships with other countries for decades to come.<sup>6</sup>

French influences evident in the formalized social etiquette instituted in the White House by President Monroe and Mrs. Monroe garnered praise, censure, and pervasive melancholia. The diplomatic corps broadly welcomed their approach, a striking departure from the more extreme casual practices of the Jefferson and Madison administrations. In an ironic twist, a president whose career emphasized the virtues of republican simplicity sometimes came across as cold and aristocratic by his guests now reaccustomed to republican spontaneity. Unjustly, the first family received the same criticism bestowed on Washington and Adams, noted for their “stiff” and courtly affairs. Due to her fragile health, Elizabeth Monroe’s limited return of social calls and frequent absences from social functions widely warranted disapproval. In these instances, daughter Eliza Monroe Hay posed as the de facto White House hostess, often proving nettlesome. Over time President Monroe and Mrs. Monroe relaxed some of the strict social conventions by hosting smaller intimate dinner parties and drawing rooms. As guests became better acquainted with their new first family, they remarked on their charm and conviviality, as well as the respectable elegance they orchestrated in style and design in the people’s house.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Julie K. Fix, “Elizabeth Kortright Monroe (1768-1830), First Lady: 1817-1825,” in *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Their Legacy*, ed. Lewis L. Gould (London: Routledge, 2001), 37-44.

<sup>7</sup> Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies: From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 17, 19; Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, June 9, 1793 in James Morton Smith, ed. *The Republic of Letters: The Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, 1776-1804* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 781-782; John Quincy Adams, diary, May 19, 1820, in Singleton, *Story of the White House*, 1:143; Smith, *The First Forty Years*, 143.

## Rules of Engagement

Points of protocol and style signified more than just the trappings of a successful career. Throughout his public service, James Monroe advocated the recognition of the United States as a significant influence in the western hemisphere and as the equal of any government in Europe. The Monroe couple realized that just as they had to learn the proper presentation of themselves in Europe, they would have to present an equally formal, acceptable appearance to dignitaries coming to the American center of government.

During his years abroad, James Monroe painfully remembered the diplomatic brash insult against him in London. At his first British state dinner, his host seated him between the representatives of two minor German principalities at the foot of the table. Monroe asserted that he did not care where he ate his dinner, but finding himself as the *American minister* between these paltry principalities “no bigger than my farm in Albemarle” angered him. The affront stemmed from a backlash from the “Merry Affair” in America. British Ambassador Anthony Merry journeyed to the White House. He presented his credentials in full diplomatic dress to President Jefferson, who received him wearing bedroom slippers and dirty clothes partially cloaked by a drab housecoat. President Jefferson’s “utter slovenliness” greatly galled the ambassador, among other grievances. Without hesitation, Merry shared the offense with others, and news of the incident traveled quickly to London. As a result, Monroe’s dinner host had treated him as a penurious minister of a neutral country not involved in Europe’s power plays. The dinner snub implied the King of England deemed the United States political and social status unworthy of acknowledging and made him and his wife nonentities in Britain. Such a lack of respect, President Monroe would not tolerate or replicate during his administration.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Wootton, *Elizabeth Kortright Monroe*, 26; Malcolm Lester, *Anthony Merry “Redivivus”: A Reappraisal of the British Minister to the United States, 1803-1806* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 30-32.



On December 29, 1817, President James Monroe held a cabinet meeting to discuss the official protocols for receiving diplomats in Washington as the reconstructed residence prepared to resume regular social observances. Elizabeth Monroe and Louisa Adams, the wife of the secretary of state, John Quincy Adams, also met to consider their social stratagems. The final decisions implemented the formal social customs that had marked James and Elizabeth Monroe's entertaining as the American minister to France and later as the secretary of state into the new role as the first family. After their experiences abroad, they realized the Europeans' importance of courtly etiquette. Despite the insult much of Washington society would inevitably feel due to the first couples' use of some European conventions, they applied them to everyone to avoid an accusation of favoritism. The circumstances necessitated that visiting dignitaries and the diplomatic corps resident in Washington respect the country and its president.<sup>9</sup>

The first significant modification, which only affected the diplomatic cohort, did not arouse widespread resentment. During his first term, President Monroe positioned all Washington, D. C. diplomats on the same social footing as in European courts, title first and seniority second. The president received them only on official occasions, usually one of the two days designated each week for visits of compliment. Informal calls to take tea and converse with the president as with a friend, as allowed by Jefferson and Madison, became impermissible. Monroe based this policy, not on assumptions but on disparaging allegations and innuendos gained from his European experience. While in harmony with the ideals of republican simplicity, Jefferson's and Madison's casual behavior had not elevated the nation's prestige in the foreign dignitaries' eyes. Even worse, the informal liaisons created the interpretation that the

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<sup>9</sup> Fix, "Elizabeth Kortright Monroe," 41.

United States accorded favorable treatment to certain countries. Increasingly sensitive toward national unity and against partisanship, Monroe felt it imprudent to discuss public affairs with the ministers, lest in a casual conversation, he inadvertently created an impression contrary to the secretary of state in official conferences.<sup>10</sup>

At the official introduction, the foreign diplomat's carriage would carry him through the ornate iron gate and up the circular drive. He possibly nodded satisfactorily at the clean brilliant white sparkle the walls reflected. Crossing the stone bridge, he paused to admire the elaborately stone garland with its delicately carved roses that greeted him at the North Entrance. A steward dressed in livery answered his swift knock, escorted him through the marbled-columned Entrance Hall and entered the elegant crimson and gold Oval Room. Secretary of State Adams introduced the honored guest, who arrived in full court dress, to President Monroe. The president confidently received his guest in the Oval Room's center directly underneath the exquisite crystal chandelier and standing on the United States coat of arms woven into the specially procured carpet. According to John Quincy Adams, President Monroe conducted himself in much the same manner as the Prince Regent. A formal and polite bow with his hands by his side, but very much in contrast to President Washington, who kept one hand resting on his sword's hilt and the other behind his back. With a mild flourish, the minister presented his letter of credence to the president, who immediately passed the document over to the secretary of state without reading them to respectfully give his full attention to his guest's remarks. Monroe had a scripted reply, expressing the interest of the citizens of the United States in the welfare of the

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<sup>10</sup> Adams, *Memoirs*, 16-22.

minister's sovereign. The brief but highly regarded interaction usually concluded cordially after approximately ten minutes.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps, the diplomatic corps expected to submit to more form and ceremony, but what atmosphere lacked in keeping open house gained in decorum. The president accepted visits of compliment twice a week with still considerable latitude for countenances, as seen in the following two encounters. The American historical romance author, James Fenimore Cooper, described his first visit introduction to the chief magistrate:

“The principal entrance of the ‘White House’ communicates with a spacious vestibule...From this, we passed into an apartment, where those who visit the President in the mornings are to wait for their turns for the interview. Our names had been given in at the door, and after two or three, who proceeded us, had been admitted, we were desired to follow the domestic. Our reception was in a cabinet, more than likely the Library, and the visit, of course, quite short. Colonel Monroe received us politely, but with an American gravity, which perhaps was not misplaced in such as officer. He offered his hand to me.”<sup>12</sup>

Between 1818 and 1820, Sweden commissioned Lieutenant-Colonel Baron Axel Leonhard Klinckowström to travel to the United States to investigate the steamboat and assess its military potential in the Swedish Navy. The baron wrote about his appointment with President Monroe to present his credentials:

“I passed no guards on the avenue to the President's house; there was not even an honor guard at the entrance itself. A servant in livery showed us [accompanied by Secretary of State John Quincy Adams] up the stairway and he went in [to the President's upstairs office located above the North Entrance] to announce us...The President, dressed in a plain brown coat, received us courteously and asked us to sit beside the fire...Although I had imagined this presentation to be simple and lacking ceremony...it startled a newly-arrived foreigner from Europe who had as yet not become accustomed to this country's informal ways.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Adams. *Memoirs*, 314; Singleton, *Story of the White House*, xi; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 397.

<sup>12</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, *Nations of the Americans* (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1850), 60.

<sup>13</sup> Gloria Gilda Déak, *Picturing America, 1497-1899*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 217.

When the baron observed to a member of Congress that he found the President's House neither immense nor awe-inspiring, the congressmen responded, "the building served its purpose, that if it were larger and more elegant, perhaps some President would be inclined to become its permanent resident, which was something to be aware of."<sup>14</sup> Purposeful or not, the dignified comparative modesty of the President's House and the president the Baron had inescapably recognized.

As Washington grew steadily in the early 1800s, the blossoming city placed new social demands on its citizens, especially its females. Mrs. Monroe chose to observe the European customs she had learned regarding *paying calls* to existing friends and acquaintances but not returning the calls that new visitors paid her. Polite society accepted these practices from Mrs. Monroe while her husband served as secretary of state. Expectedly, Mrs. Monroe kept a social profile lower than President Madison and Mrs. Madison. Though wildly unpopular, Mrs. Monroe's extension of this policy as the president's wife became a necessity for the changing character of Washington, no longer a wilderness capital. In the postwar era, the number of congressmen considerably increased, corresponding to the nation's population and the number of permanent residents. In addition, introduction of the steamboat, offering cheap and rapid travel, brought a steadily rising flow of visitors in to the district. The influx included many relatives or friends of congressmen; thus, under Dolley Madison's etiquette rules, entitled them to receive the first call. Logistically, a person could not sustain such a routine. Indeed, Secretary Adams

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<sup>14</sup> Déak, *Picturing America*, 217.

regarded this practice as a veritable “torture” in a city without paved streets and where the residents lived scattered miles apart.<sup>15</sup>

How did Mrs. Madison’s pattern for “paying calls” arise? The custom stemmed from widowed President Jefferson’s administration and Dolley Madison’s valiant effort to help the infantile capital. The high turnover in congressional representatives operated against residential continuity within the electorate. As the ranking wife in Jefferson’s cabinet, Mrs. Madison cultivated wealthy permanent residents to build a stable foundation for a new “social” order. Brilliantly, she drew the local gentry into the President’s House and thus into the political vortex. Dolley graciously and diligently made first and returned all social calls, an exhausting practice she continued as the first lady. In the early years, before many congressmen’s wives traveled with their husbands to the capital, the number of manageable calls a president’s wife made would still exhaust someone in perfect health.<sup>16</sup>

Though facing abusive public and media scrutiny, Elizabeth Monroe prepared. A Washington friend confided to Dolley that she had “so filled” her role as presidentress “as to render yourself more enviable this day than your successor.”<sup>17</sup> Those gloating sentiments concerned Mrs. Monroe with their implied snipes by females who now fancied themselves indispensable to Washington society. Regardless of her consternation over the political

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<sup>15</sup> Adams, *Memoirs*, 45-46; Fix, “Elizabeth Kortright Monroe,” 41; Wootton, *Elizabeth Kortright Monroe*, 23.24; E. Cooley, *A Description of the Etiquette at Washington City* (Philadelphia: L. B. Clark, 1829), 70. As the city developed, however, more and more of the distaff branch of Congress took up residence in Washington. As the District grew and eight states were added to the union between 1800 and 1825, increasing numbers of Congressmen, federal employees, local businessmen, and domestic and foreign visitors expanded the capital’s social scene. In 1800, there were 107 members of the House of Representatives, by 1820, that number had grown to 186, and by 1825, to 213 members.

<sup>16</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 48-101.

<sup>17</sup> Eliza Lee to Dolley Madison, March 30, 1819, in Dolley Madison Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

impressions that America's social customs conveyed to visitors, the wife of the new president still chose to institute a distant and reserved etiquette for a more prosaic reason. Elizabeth Monroe had never enjoyed a sound constitution, plagued continually with health problems resulting in frequent absences due to symptoms and to avoid stigmas from a public with limited medical knowledge or empathy.

Despite frequent trips to health spas in Europe and western Virginia mineral springs, Mrs. Monroe's health maladies did not improve. A Washington newspaper in 1817 described the new and unsympathetic social world the president's wife entered:

"Mrs. Monroe is an elegant, accomplished woman. She possesses a charming mind and dignity of manners which peculiarly fit her for her elevated situation. Her retired domestic habits will be much annoyed by what is here called society if she does not change the etiquette (if it may be called so) established by Mrs. Washington, Adams, and Madison, a routine which her feeble constitution will not permit her to encounter. To go through it, she must become a perfect slave to the sacrifice of her health."<sup>18</sup>

Correspondence between family and friends corroborated that her condition worsened throughout her adult life to the point that she lost consciousness, collapsed into a fireplace, and sustained severe burns. Though never formally given an official diagnosis, Elizabeth Kortright Monroe's biographer, James Wootton, believed she may have suffered from erysipelas, an inflammation of the skin accompanied by rashes, fever, headaches, digestive disorders, and joint pain. Confirming this chronic condition, in an 1823 letter, son-in-law Samuel Gouverneur bemoaned "the constant affliction of her head to which she is so subject."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Wootton, *Elizabeth Kortright Monroe*, 27.

<sup>19</sup> In July 1820, Mr. Monroe had advised his friend and physician Dr. Charles Everett of Elizabeth's digestive disorders, particularly her problems with her "bile." That same month Eleanor Randolph, the granddaughter of Thomas Jefferson, informed Dolley Madison that Mrs. Monroe "is at present subject to attacks of a dangerous nature- & there seems to be some reason for apprehending apoplexy." Her illness forced her to curtail her social activities at Highland as well as in Washington. Eleanor Randolph also informed Dolley Madison that "although near neighbours of the President's we have not seen much of his family, partly from their being I suppose not so socially inclined as they might be & partly from the state of Mrs. M's health..." Wootton, *Elizabeth Kortright*

Because of the exigencies of her new role, Mrs. Monroe delegated some responsibility for social commitments to her eldest daughter, Eliza Monroe Hay, who lived at the White House during Monroe's presidency. However, her reliance on Eliza soon led to conflict. Unlike Dolley, whose charisma and charm united people, Eliza proved a divisive figure. Despite her excellent French education, or perhaps, in light of the accusations of aristocratic tendencies, Eliza managed to alienate virtually all members of Washington society. Although she frequently acted in her mother's capacity, Washingtonians did not accept her in lieu of the president's wife. In her impatience with social niceties and rather fumbling effort to define her role, Eliza often appeared high-handed and dictatorial.<sup>20</sup>

Obligated by her position to join the calamity, Louisa Adams governed her conduct by the same rules the president's wife used. The Secretary of State John Quincy Adams and his wife Louisa fully approved Mrs. Monroe's decision. But, until Washington ladies accepted the finality of these decisions, neither Mrs. Adams nor Mrs. Monroe met with much approval. Finally, the women of Washington socially boycotted Elizabeth Monroe, Eliza Hay, and Louisa Adams. The quiet battles fought over etiquette became so fierce that they began to affect

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*Monroe*, 21, 25, 27, 31, 34. Author Carl Sferrazza Anthony diagnosed Mrs. Monroe's unidentified medical condition as epilepsy known as "the falling sickness" due to the one life event. Though it might explain many of her ailments, her condition was never identified. See Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *First Ladies: The Saga of the President's Wives and Their Power, 1789-1961* (New York: William Morrow, 1990), 103.

<sup>19</sup> Letter of Mrs. William Seaton, 1818, in Anne Hollingsworth Wharton, *Social Life in the Early Republic* (Philadelphia, n.p., 1902), 185.

<sup>20</sup> Letter of Mrs. William Seaton, 1818, in Anne Hollingsworth Wharton, *Social Life in the Early Republic* (Philadelphia, n.p., 1902), 185; Fix, "Elizabeth Kortright Monroe," 40-41; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 406-407; Seale, *The President's House*, 1:158. Eliza was sent to a private girls' school in St. Germain-en-Laye run by Madame Louise Genet Campan, Marie Antoinette's former lady-in-waiting. Later, Eliza married George Hay, an attorney and political ally of Monroe's from Richmond, Virginia. Eliza moved into the President's House to help her mother, but this proved to be a disaster. Unlike her mother, whose beauty and elegant style were often emulated, Eliza appeared haughty and aloof. She quickly alienated much of Washington society including the wives of the diplomatic corps. See Louise Genet Campan to Edmund C. Genet, March 8, 1797, in Langston-Harrison, *A Presidential Legacy*, 80.

Washington's domestic and political atmosphere. Secretary Adams noticed that the issues raised by the women the men used for political purposes caused dissension between himself and the senators. The president had somewhat sidestepped the issue by adhering strictly to George Washington's policy of not accepting invitations to events at cabinet officials' homes or other affairs with political overtones, leaving it to his wife to accept or refuse other social advances. However, by 1819, the president, forced to address these "petticoat" politics, held a cabinet meeting to discuss standard rules of etiquette for the second time.<sup>21</sup>

Elizabeth Monroe persevered in the face of harsh criticism and fickle attitudes, attempting to reach an acceptable compromise. Dinners at the President's House remained formal and served in the European style, with one waiter per guest. At the same time, the first family retained the American customs of public holidays and "drawing rooms." "Drawing rooms" occurred about every week during the congressional session, though, in contrast to Madison, the Monroe first family would be held every fortnight. The executive mansion opened to anyone suitably dressed for an evening party who cared to meet the first family without an invitation. Having established the rules of social etiquette, the first family maintained them rigidly to avoid charges of favoritism. Also, possibly in anticipation of further criticism, whereas Martha Washington had gone by the title of "Lady" and Dolley Madison that of "Presidentress," Elizabeth Monroe preferred to be addressed simply as "Mrs. Monroe." Eventually, her patience and perseverance succeeded, and Washington society abandoned its boycott against the president's wife and her circle. By James Monroe's second term in office, Washingtonians had begun to accept his wife's policy of restricting social obligations to receiving guests.

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<sup>21</sup> Louisa Adams to John Adams, January 22, 1818, Adams Family Papers Manuscripts, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts; Fix, "Elizabeth Kortright Monroe," 42.



Noteworthy, the Monroe family's social customs developed during his administration became the core of the White House protocol today.<sup>22</sup>

### Taste of Elegance

Without their spouses in residence, congressmen in a half-built Washington tired of living in boardinghouses and eating their meals in a common "mess." Foreign ministers accustomed to conducting political affairs in social settings pursued in vain for channels to perform their duties. Many early visitors of the district condemned its desolate appearance and lack of amenities. Such criticism and circumstances rankled lawmakers and officials alike. Desperate for some pomp and ritual, recipients of a presidential dinner invitation delightfully accepted the honor and a respite from the mundane.

Unexpectedly, President Monroe encountered incredible difficulty solving the precedence problem at diplomatic dinners. He had utterly discredited Jefferson's numerous small intimate dining experiences employing round tables where guests served themselves from rolling carts. Jefferson carefully crafted the conversation to deter suppression of speech. He resisted authoritarianism and oligarchy by prohibiting marches to dinner or seating by rank, which appalled the diplomatic corps. Also, Jefferson never blended political parties to charm the Federalists and promote Republican harmony and bonding. Monroe preferred the Madison administration's method, who held frequent ample dinners seating thirty or more people mixing political parties, government departments, diplomats, and a few local visitors for spice.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Fix, "Elizabeth Kortright Monroe," 42. The term "First Lady" had not been coined during the time period.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, *The First Forty Years*, 29, 389; Conover Hunt, "Getting it Right: The Embellished Obligations of Dolley Madison," *White House History*, no. 35 (Summer 2014): 6-7; Singleton, *Story of the White House*, xi-xii; Conroy, "Thomas Jefferson's White House," C-SPAN 3

At first, when Monroe only invited the secretary of state to such functions, the other secretaries felt slighted. Still, when the secretaries received invitations, the ministers resented sitting at the foot of the table below cabinet officers. The alternative of inviting other officials and private citizens, though seated below the diplomats, proved equally unsatisfactory since the ministers objected to associating with persons of inferior status at a function to honor them. Secretary Adams resolved the irascible matter by recommending the president invite only one department head at a time. Regardless of the elegant surroundings, these dinners became official solemn affairs, starting at four or five in the afternoon. President Monroe greeted his guests again in the luxurious Oval Room filled with gilded furnishings. After conversing with them formally until all arrived, he led the way into the dining room. James Fenimore Cooper recollected attending one such presidential dinner in his writings. He described the affair in which the overall mood prevailed somber and the conversation cold. After commenting on the elegant dining room décor, he described dinner as “served in the French style, a little Americanized.” Cooper observed that although the evening began at six, because of the subdued atmosphere, “everyone left the house before nine.”<sup>24</sup>

Regardless, the Monroe family loved to entertain, and several presidential dinners occurred each week. These large affairs had a more comfortable formality when ladies and gentlemen both attended. The guests assembled shortly before dinner in the Oval Room for salutations with Colonel Monroe, his preferred address, and Mrs. Monroe. They would lounge on the sumptuous crimson satin and gilt Bellangé suite, chit-chatting amicably for all parties to arrive. As soon as the last guest appeared, the party moved with some panache into the dining

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<sup>24</sup> Adams, *Memoirs*, 295; Samuel L. Southard to Rebecca Southard, December 22, 1822, in Samuel L. Southard, *Southard Papers*, Princeton University Library, Princeton, New Jersey; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 398-399; Wootton, *Elizabeth Kortright Monroe*, 30.

room, with the President escorting the lady nearest him. Mrs. Monroe accepted the arm of the vice president, the secretary of state, or a cabinet member. No rigid rules for seating prevailed, although senators anticipated positions at the head of the table.<sup>25</sup>

The dining room, like the rest of the house, admired for the taste of furnishings, had less furniture with a simpler fashion. The large table, covered with a fine cloth, captured guests' attention because of the magnificent gilt plateau centerpiece. The decoration on the French porcelain dinnerware and cutglass, depicting an eagle bearing an olive branch, resonated appropriately with quests comprehending its emblematic intentions. Dinner service styled in the French manner provided guests individual attention as servants offered the delicious dishes to each person in turn. Guests glowingly shared their experiences with families and friends. Congressman William Lowndes proclaimed the presidential dinner among Washington's finest, and Mary Crowninshield, the wife of the Secretary of the Navy, exclaimed an evening at the executive mansion "the most stylish dinner I have ever been at." Mesmerized, Mrs. Crowninshield described the wide table with vases of delicate flowers, lighted candles, and shimmering silver dishes and utensils as "so heaving I could hardly lift them to my mouth."<sup>26</sup>

Although the scant records only allow one to speculate on the culinary delights served at a presidential dinner, scholars know that they paired nicely with fine French champagnes and Burgundy wines the president imported. To American visitors, the plate presented sumptuous, but to Europeans, accustomed to French-style cuisine, it probably seemed more ordinary. On great occasions, Louisa Adams reported, the guests received an abundance of "good vivands."

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<sup>25</sup> Samuel Southard to Rebecca Southard, December 22, 1822, in Southard, *Southard Papers*; Louisa Adams to John Adams, January 8-18, 1819, in John Adams, *Adams Family Papers Manuscripts*; Cooper, *Nations of America*, 53-55; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 402-403.

<sup>26</sup> Wootton, *Elizabeth Kortright Monroe*, 24.

Wine at the president's table expressed warmth and hospitality, sparked curiosity, and brought people together in companionship. Along with imported champagnes and wines, President Monroe also had a fondness for serving native wines, particularly scuppernong, in place of Madeira.<sup>27</sup> Monroe, a generous host, shared wines at dinners gifted to him as president. Louisa Adams wrote to her father-in-law, former President John Adams, that a dinner at the Monroe White House in 1819 carried off "uncommonly social and pleasant. The President," she added, "gave us some Mendoza wine which was sent him as a present."<sup>28</sup>

Despite etiquette limitations, some observers admired the first families' lifestyles. Rosalie Stier Calvert of Riversdale in Prince George's County, Maryland, approved of the changes that Elizabeth Monroe brought to the President's House. Calvert wrote many of these details enthusiastically in her letters to her sister living abroad. Calvert described that she attended an "extremely splendid state dinner at the President's House." She complimented Mrs. Monroe, who "does the honors with much grace and dignity," and that "she is a charming woman, much superior to the last President's wife." She remarked favorably on Elizabeth's background as "one of the better families," as well as receiving an "excellent education."<sup>29</sup> With enthusiasm, Calvert elaborated:

"Yesterday we dined at the President's House. I have never seen anything as splendid as the table—a superb gilt plateau in the center with gilt baskets filled with artificial flowers...I was seated at the table between the English Minister, Mr. Bagot, and the Russian Minister, Mr. D'Ashkof. It was a great honor for us to be included in such a distinguished company, and both Mrs. Monroe and the

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<sup>27</sup> Louisa Adams to John Adams, January 7, 1818, Adams Family Papers Manuscripts; James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, April 23, 1817, in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 4:21-22.

<sup>28</sup> Louisa Adams to John Adams, January 8, 1819, in John Adams Papers, Founders Online, National Archives and Records Administration, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-03-02-3601>.

<sup>29</sup> Rosalie Stier Calvert to Isabelle de Havre, March 25, 1819, in Rosalie Stier Calvert, *Mistress of Riversdale: The Plantation Letters of Rosalie Stier Calvert, 1795-1821*, ed. Margaret Law Callcott (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1991), 349.

President received us with the most flattering kindness in such a way that I spent a very pleasant evening.”<sup>30</sup>

As the first family entertained often, their parties received more and more compliments for their elegance and style. At smaller affairs, the first family appeared at their best. Relaxed and conversing freely with an innate warmth and courtesy, Colonel Monroe readily made his guests feel at ease in that distinctive Virginia gentlemanly way, avoiding subjects that might cause irritation or awkwardness. Thus, when Massachusetts Senator Harrison Gray Otis, a confirmed Federalist at a dinner attended by Republican luminaries sought to obscure himself at the foot of the table, the president specifically addressed him. Otis felt deeply touched by the gesture of the “Old Sachem,” [President Monroe] who “in a few minutes looked at me with a great significance and kindness and called to me aloud to know if I was warm. He then drank a glass of wine with me to make friends.” On another occasion, Senator Otis, a polished host, told his wife about a presidential dinner: “I dined at the palace, and at the right hand of the Queen [Mrs. Monroe] who was most exceedingly gracious and conversable, and I believe has no colour but what is natural, at least her colour very much increased during the dinner time in the glow of occupation and attention to her guests...A very superb dinner and much less funeral ceremony that is common.”<sup>31</sup>

Despite the fallacy about their grave demeanor, President Monroe and Mrs. Monroe had an excellent sense of humor. The presence of lively wits and raconteurs like Speaker Henry Clay gave color to the smaller parties. On one occasion, when the president served a wine sent to him by a South American, all concurred it had a disagreeable taste. Clay’s boisterous comment that

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<sup>30</sup> Calvert, *Mistress of Riversdale*, 343-344.

<sup>31</sup> Wootton, *Elizabeth Kortright Monroe*, 31-32; Harrison Gray Otis to Sally Foster Otis, January 27, 1821, in Harrison Gray Otis, Otis Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

the bottle should accompany the recent documents on South America to the House of Representatives delighted the first couple as much as the guests. All shared in the spirited laughter and chuckles.<sup>32</sup>

### Public Perception

Public perception, a fearsome intangible adversary, potentially worries president's the most. A consistent narrative that the commander-in-chief may somehow prove out of touch with the average citizen can starve a president of the political capital needed to complete his political agenda and can most certainly hurt his reelection chances. In the early American democracy, where theoretical equality existed, the president, perceived as an elitist, presented a severe offense. Knowing the compelling precedent that his administration would set, President Monroe remained image-conscious during his tenure. The Founding Fathers' generation could not imitate the monarchy from which they had successfully rebelled while knowing they could not entirely shed the European customs they knew so well. Even Secretary of State John Quincy Adams's wife, Louisa, lamented "...it is becoming an insupportable burden" because of the political "footing on which [society] is set in this place." She found that "the most trifling occurrences are turned into political machinery – Even my countenance was watched at the Senate."<sup>33</sup>

As the first citizen, the republic expected and anticipated the White House to lead in celebrating the national holidays. During the early nineteenth century, the most important "public days" acknowledged included the Battle of New Orleans anniversary, New Year's Day,

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<sup>32</sup> Louisa Adams to John Adams, January 8, 1819, in Adams, John Adams Papers, Founders Online.

<sup>33</sup> Louisa Catherine Adams, diary, January 29, 1820, Adams Family Papers Manuscripts, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

and the Fourth of July. The President's House opened and removed most of the seclusion on public days. The first family emerged front and center. They received in the middle of the Oval Room with the United States coat of arms as their stage and the suspended crystal chandelier as their halo. Republican principles prevailed to such an extent as to offer sharp contrasts to everyday practices at the White House. Attendance usually swelled to well over a thousand. In its reception rooms, people of all ages, ranks, and conditions socialized on an equal standing to shake hands with the nation's first citizen and enjoy his hospitality.<sup>34</sup> Again, James Fenimore Cooper's writing best described the scene:

“I have known a cartman leave his horse in the street and go into a reception room to shake hands with the President. He offended the good taste of all present because it was not though decent that a labourer should come in dirty dress on such an occasion; but while he made a trifling mistake in this particular he proved how well he understood the difference between government and society. He knew the levee was a sort of homage paid to political equality in the person of the first magistrate, but he would not have presumed to enter the house of the same person as a private individual without being invited.”<sup>35</sup>

During President Monroe's first term, Americans considered the New Year's Day event in 1818 one of the most significant public days. Secretary of State John Quincy Adams penned in his diary on Monday, December 27, 1817, that President Monroe announced the presidential mansion “would be opened on New Year's Day at noon to receive company, according to the old custom.”<sup>36</sup> So the great day came, and the rebuilt White House made its public debut. For the New Year's Day opening, the president appreciatively ordered a complete feast, including wine and beer set up in the basement for the workers who had built the President's House back again.

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<sup>34</sup> John Quincy Adams, “Procedures at the President's House, “March 13, 1819, in Singleton, *Story of the White House*, 1:139; Seale, *The President's House*, 158.

<sup>35</sup> Cooper, *Nations of the Americans*, 60. Singleton, *Story of the White House*, xiv.

<sup>36</sup> John Quincy Adams, diary, December 29, 1817, in Singleton, *The White House*, 1:132.

A joyous occasion blessed by sunny weather. People crowded the mansion throughout the afternoon and perused the State Rooms. After months of intense interior decoration, the heavy odor of wet plaster and paint indeed rivaled nineteenth-century society's characteristic aromas of rouge, pearl powder, camphor, and macassar hair oil. The *National Intelligencer*, Washingtonian's source of keeping the masses *in the know*, joyously reported the event:

"The charming weather of yesterday contributed to enliven the reciprocal salutations of kindness and good wishes which are customary at every return of New Year's Day...The President's house, for the first time since its re-edification, was thrown open for the general reception of visitors. It was thronged from twelve to three o'clock by an unusually large concourse of gentlemen and ladies, among whom were to be found Senators, Representatives, heads of Departments, foreign Ministers, and many of our distinguished citizens, residents, and strangers. It was gratifying to be able once more to salute the President of the United States with the compliments of the season in his appropriate residence; and the continuance of the truly Republican custom has given, as far as we have heard, very general satisfaction."<sup>37</sup>

The first family entertained on a grand scale. One guest at the New Year's Day reception in 1821 recalled the "wine was handed about in wine-glasses on large silver salvers."<sup>38</sup> Ladies and gentlemen could stand and walk about the rooms in mingled groups with appreciated ease and permitted the flexibility needed for men and women to successfully conduct politics, or courtship, outside the official sphere. They came for a firm handshake from the president, a look at the ladies' dresses, and a gaze at the French finery. In other words, "to see" and "to be seen." In 1824 at the annual New Year's Day reception, guest Auguste Levasseur, taken by Mrs. Monroe's charm, wit, and beauty, described her as "regal looking" and noted, "her dress was superb black velvet; neck and arms bare and beautifully formed; her hair in puffs and dressed

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<sup>37</sup> *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D. C.), January 3, 1818.

<sup>38</sup> Singleton, *Story of the White House*, 1:148-149.



high on the head and ornamented with white ostrich plumes; around her neck an elegant pearl necklace. Though no longer young, she is still a very handsome woman.”<sup>39</sup>

Heads of state and elite members of society in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Europe and America understood attire not only made a fashion statement but could also reflect levels of status and power while conveying a strong political message. This idea applied to public servants’ formal or official dress, from presidents to diplomats to congressmen. The nation had shed its relationship with a monarchical system, and any attempt to mimic it contradicted the American Revolution’s meaning. Yet, presidents celebrated the presidency on a fine line, blending republican simplicity and the pomp and circumstance commonly associated with French fashions. Modish fashions also included the president’s wife, who played a visible role in setting the tone of their husband’s administrations. Their dress style reflected their tastes and desire to win public approval and support for their spouses.

The Monroe family had long appreciated fine, high-quality apparel and accouterments. They astutely observed the expectations associated with President Monroe’s role as chief magistrate and recognized the public’s blatant criticism of the previous presidents. Conspicuously, their attire must mirror regal dignity while eschewing the excesses of European luxury. Noticeably by Monroe’s administration, society accepted and expected the president’s wife to dress more elegantly as a trendsetter. As noted by Mrs. Crowninshield, she approvingly commented, “Mrs. Monroe is a very elegant woman. She was dressed in a very fine muslin worked in front and lined with pink, and a black velvet turban closed and spangled.”<sup>40</sup>

President Monroe and Mrs. Monroe had an extensive and fashionable collection of garments and accessories. The dresses, court suits, waistcoats, and numerous other articles

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<sup>39</sup> Wootton, *Elizabeth Kortright Monroe*, 32-33.

represented the wealth and national importance the couple achieved by the early nineteenth century and their European experiences. Foreign court appearances by Americans required clothing such as highly embroidered waistcoats and expensively adorned dresses that would have been considered extravagant and possibly inappropriate, even in the most elite American venues.<sup>41</sup>

Regardless, the fashion in France's court reigned supreme over other European courts and had led Western style and even supported it as a national industry since the seventeenth century. Elizabeth Monroe enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to enhance her natural beauty with embroidered muslins, shimmering silks, and rich velvets of lavish styles. Mrs. Monroe's beauty, grace, and taste in fashion immediately appreciated by the French proclaimed her "*La Belle Américaine*." She collected a variety of formal Empire gowns with high waists, puffed-gathered sleeves, square necklines, and flowing skirts for her petite size. Some trimmed with gold and silver thread, others richly colored velvet. She stunningly accessorized with cameo brooches and brilliant faceted gemstone jewelry set into necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and bandeaus.<sup>42</sup>

The six-foot James Monroe probably cut a dashing figure as a diplomat in the era's neoclassical fashion, which sought to elongate the male silhouette with slim waistcoats with standing collars, high-waisted breeches, and tall-crowned hats worn in the evening at more formal occasions.<sup>43</sup> Since fashion functions as an extension of self and a personality

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<sup>41</sup> Lynne Zacek Bassett, "The Court Ensembles of James and Elizabeth Monroe: American Diplomatic Dress in France," *White House History*, no. 44 (Winter 2017): 61.

<sup>42</sup> Bassett, "The Court Ensembles," 61; Harlow Giles Unger, *The Lasting Founding Father: James Monroe and a Nation's Call to Greatness* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2009), 104, 113; Wootton, *Elizabeth Kortright Monroe*, 20-21.

<sup>43</sup> Bassett, "The Court Ensembles," 61.

presentation, President Monroe chose fine selections, preferring quality garments with a look more closely associated with those worn during the late eighteenth century and the early days of the republic. He had an extensive collection of vests, which he often wore with a pair of wool, velvet, or silk breeches with knee buckles, and a coordinating long “frock” coat. He added silk hoses and pumps fastened with buckles to the ensemble. Margaret Bayard Smith reported that his “old fashioned” mode of dress led to his nickname, “the last of the cocked hats,” because he never wore the more fashionable long pants that came into popularity in the early nineteenth century.<sup>44</sup> Though Smith’s remarks may have seemed less flattering, people appreciated his deportment. William Wirt, Monroe’s attorney general, commented approvingly on the president’s attire in his “Letters of a British Spy,” published letters on his studies of eloquence and eloquent men. Wirt admiringly wrote, “His [Monroe’s] dress and personal appearance are those of plain and modest gentleman.”<sup>45</sup>

### Finesse & Flair

Early in the presidency, it became customary for the president to hold weekly receptions for invited male guests at his official house in Philadelphia. Presidents Washington and Adams conducted an imitation of the weekly receptions by the king of England as witnessed firsthand by Americans in the diplomatic service. As the men stood in the formation of a long oval, the president and an announcer walked around the oval, making pleasantries. In contrast, President Thomas Jefferson believed weekly White House “levees” epitomized too “Old World” autocratic, and he dismissed the practices of President Washington and President Adams.

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<sup>44</sup> Margaret Bayard Smith, quoted in George Morgan, *Life of James Madison Monroe* (Boston: Small, Maynard and Company, 1921), 410, n1,411; Daniel Gilman, *American Statesman, James Monroe*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1899), 215.216.

<sup>45</sup> William Wirt, quoted in Gilman, *American Statesman*, 213.

Jefferson opened the executive mansion to the public for the Fourth of July, New Year's Day, and daily tours. Dolley Madison reestablished weekly receptions and renamed them "drawing rooms." These open invitation soirées might better have been characterized as a shindig or rave courting raucous laughter, lewd jokes, dancing, and card playing with plenty of chewing tobacco and whiskey punch to round out the venue.<sup>46</sup>

Having grown fond of the effervescent sociability of the Madison era, many Washingtonians felt disappointed that the Monroe first family did not continue entertaining to the same degree. Having spent the better part of a decade in Europe, the first family grew to appreciate aristocratic European standards of entertainment and reluctant to embrace the bawdier style introduced by Madison's administration. A dismayed society matron disparagingly noted, "People seem to think we shall have great changes in social intercourse and customs. Mr. and Mrs. Monroe's manners will give a tone to all the rest." Nevertheless, the first family continued the drawing room tradition that had become expected in Washington. Elizabeth's deportment at these openings did not go unnoticed. A British visitor offered the following left-handed compliment, "Mrs. Monroe is a lady of retired and domestic habits. Having lived in Europe with her husband, she has acquired some of its manners and a good deal of its polish."<sup>47</sup> In contradiction, the revered Margaret Bayard Smith admiringly remarked, "With Mrs. Monroe, I am really in love. . . She is charming and very beautiful. She did me the honor of asking to be introduced to me and saying 'she regretted very much she was out when I called' & c and, tho'

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<sup>46</sup> Edward Lawler, Jr., "George Washington's Bow Window: A Lost Fragment of White House Precedence Comes to Light in Philadelphia," *White House History*, no. 22 (Spring 2008): 58-61; Smith, *The First Forty Years*, 29, 389; Hunt, "Getting it Right," 6-7.

<sup>47</sup> Wootton, *Elizabeth Kortright Monroe*, 26-27.

we do not believe all these kinds of things it is gratifying to the vanity to hear them. It would not however have flatter'd me half so much from Mrs. Madison as from her."<sup>48</sup>

During the Monroe era, entertaining and social observances increased substantially throughout the Federal City. A witness who spent four winters in the capital wittily penned "that evening parties are so much the fashion at Washington, that everyone aims at them, as the principal amusement of all classes and conditions, from the president down to the constable."<sup>49</sup> In 1819, Rosalie S. Calvert boasted to her sister, Isabelle Van Havre, "There is a public ball every fortnight and an assembly at the President's House every fortnight, also. There are always a good many foreigners in Washington during the session of Congress, which makes society here very pleasant and diversified."<sup>50</sup> The presidential dinners and drawing rooms transformed into legendary events, drawing throngs of Washingtonians and visitors. Attending one of the popular "squeezes," James Fenimore Cooper recollected, "No invitation was necessary, it being the usage for the wife of the President to receive once a fortnight during the session without distinction of persons... We reached the White House at nine. The court (or rather the grounds) was filled with carriages, and the company was arriving in great numbers. On this occasion two or three additional drawing-rooms were opened..."<sup>51</sup>

A Wednesday night drawing room at the President's House held too much significance and curiosity to miss. Open to all who attired suitably, they provided an opportunity for diplomats, Congress members, public officials of all degrees, and private citizens to meet with

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<sup>48</sup> Wootton, *Elizabeth Kortright Monroe*, 24.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Cooley, *Description of the Etiquette*, 60.

<sup>50</sup> Calvert, *Mistress of Riversdale*, 346.

<sup>51</sup> Cooper, *Nations of the Americans*, 60. Singleton, *Story of the White House*, xiv.

Colonel Monroe and Mrs. Monroe, explore the State Rooms, and embrace respectable society. A Washington newspaper in 1817 reported on the motley assortment who attended to meet the first family:

“The secretaries, senators, foreign ministers, consuls, auditors, accountants, officers, of the navy and army of every grade, farmers, merchants, parson, priests, lawyers, judges, auctioneers and nothingarians – all with their wives and some with the gawky offspring crowd to the President’s House every Wednesday evening: some in shoes, most in boots, and many in spurs; some snuffing, others chewing, and many longing for their whiskey-punch left at home. Some with powdered heads, others frizzled and oiled, with some whose heads a comb has never touched, half-hid by dirty collars reaching far above their ears, as stiff as paste board.”<sup>52</sup>

Visitors arrived at eight and left at ten o’clock. Drinking in the aesthetics of deliberate artfulness and unabashed dignity, the guests enjoyed “entertaining themselves by promenading from one room to another and conversing with their acquaintances.”<sup>53</sup> American inventor and painter Samuel F. B. Morse, who traveled to Washington to paint the President’s portrait also approved of the first family’s higher tone. After attending a reception hosted by Mrs. Monroe, Morse recounted the affair in a letter to his father; Mrs. Monroe hosted “splendidly and tastily dressed; the drawing room and suit of rooms at the President’s are furnished and decorated in the most splendid manner...” Morse disagreed with those who criticized the stylish décor at the President’s House, telling his father that “something of splendour is certainly proper about the chief magistrate, for the credit of the nation...”<sup>54</sup>

Mrs. Monroe trained in an elegant routine of a cosmopolitan experience, versed in the stately amenities of the most brilliant courts in Europe, accustomed to a style of life and

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<sup>52</sup> Wootton, *Elizabeth Kortright Monroe*, 27-28.

<sup>53</sup> Rosalie Calvert to Isabelle Van Havre, March 25, 1819 in Calvert, *Mistress of Riversdale*, 346.

<sup>54</sup> Wootton, *Elizabeth Kortright Monroe*, 29.

intercourse in the capitals of the Continent, knew musical performances added cultural gravitas and provided the opportunity for social interactions to advance a variety of personal, social and political aims. Statecraft choreographed in parlor settings, and the triumph of these endeavors depended largely on genteel women's ability to create a convivial environment through their musical talents. More than mere entertainment, music reflected social customs, political circumstances, and the unification of various communities into a cohesive whole.

Indeed, the White House from its earliest days resounded with musical tones and airs reflecting early America's perennial fascination with the keyboard. And in the president's mansion, the piano reigned in yet another fashion as an elegant image of court life in a democracy. While no evidence exists documenting James Monroe's musical inclinations, Elizabeth and his daughters displayed musical talents. Eliza Monroe Hay played the harp. Mrs. Monroe and the youngest daughter, Maria Hester Gouverneur, who joined the family in the executive mansion in 1819, played the piano. For the first family, music integrated refinement and pleasure while entertaining.<sup>55</sup>

The family bought at least two pianos abroad for their homes, which accompanied them to the executive mansion. But, especially for the President's House, President Monroe ordered an elaborate Sébastien Érard horizontal piano for the President's House. The purchase of an expensive, first-class piano suggested he recognized the executive mansion must look as well as

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<sup>55</sup> Patricia P. Norwood, "Salon Music of President Monroe's Family," *American Music*, vol. 26, issue 1 (Spring 2008), Gale; Mary Ornsby Whitton, *First Ladies, 1789-1865: A Study of the Wives of the Early Presidents* (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 75; C. G. Sloan, Inc., "Appraisal of the Collections". Elizabeth's nephew, Samuel L. Gouverneur, was brought from New York in early 1818 to fill in for his often absent uncle-in-law, James Monroe and brother to the president. It was while Samuel was working for Monroe, and residing at the President's House, that he fell in love with his first cousin, Maria Hester Monroe. She came home from Philadelphia bordering school in 1819 and the couple was married in March of the following year. Monroe officially hired his new son-in-law to be his personal secretary after the wedding. Sam remained in this position until late in 1822, when he decided to go to New York to study law. See Ammon, *James Monroe*, 405; Cunningham, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 123-124.

sound exceptional, befitting for the residence of the nation's leader. These instruments demonstrated the family's love of music and, possibly, curried political favor and influence. Imagine guests gathered around the exquisite instrument adorned with well-worked ormolu ornamentation and fascinated by its imposing size delicately balancing on three French tapered columns. Guests filled with enchantment as the candlelight playful danced across the crystal and gilt chandelier, the gilded candelabras, and the piano's ormolu. One can imagine the audience's delight when Mrs. Monroe or Maria Hester engaged the unique pedal mechanism, which allowed for theatrical colors and sound effects. The pianist would not only tickle the ivories but could render the sounds of a plucked lute, a reedy bassoon, a triangle, and a drum during her musical.<sup>56</sup>

The diverse contents of Maria's sheet music collection for harp and piano created a portrait of music genres guests might experience during an evening. She played marches bearing President Washington's name, evoking the undying revolutionary spirit that preserved his memory. Her nearly unanimous choice of George E. Blake's publications indicated a preference for works popular in America in the early nineteenth century but originated in Europe. The Bonaparte march reflected the regard once held for that French general and the Francophile tendencies of the Monroe family. Furthermore, the collection's assorted vocal contents suggested the awareness of and preference for contemporary European, operatic arias, and a few traditional Scottish songs, reflecting the family's ancestral heritage.<sup>57</sup>

Carefully selecting the music and choreographing the entertainment, the first family had the opportunity to influence their audience's mood, sentiment, and behavior. Patriotic tunes and

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<sup>56</sup> James Monroe from Russell & La Farge, September 15, 1817, Miscellaneous Treasury Records; Elise Kirk, *Music at the White House: A History of the American Spirit* (Chicago; University of Illinois Press, 1986), 40-41.

<sup>57</sup> Norwood, "Salon Music," Gale.



military marches provided a popular way for citizens to reaffirm their burgeoning nationalism. So, the festive U. S. Marine Band often performed at the President's House. Thus, guests heard and felt the White House halls reverberating with Swiss echo airs, Turkish marches, and battle pieces with their Janissary effects – oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, bass drum, bugle horn, cymbals, and the serpent (raspy forerunner of the tuba) - made popular by the Italian instrumentalists that had joined the band of the time. The music, above all, “awakened patriotic feelings as well as gaiety,” recalled Margaret Bayard Smith. She praised their excellent abilities as a band playing various military evolutions and a succession of fine patriotic airs.<sup>58</sup>

Orchestrating the performances and movements of others, the first family used drawing rooms to bring together the ruling class, whatever the political differences, and American citizens to develop a shared set of assumptions, values, and manners to create an American identity. Elizabeth Monroe brought her flair for fashion and elegance to the United States, and, as the president's wife from 1817 to 1825, she altered the Washington social scene. She replaced the informality of the Madison presidency with much more formal customs, many with a continental flair. Some aspects of Mrs. Monroe's role presented challenges to control, especially the public's increasingly high expectations and the media crucible she faced. However, history has shown that Elizabeth Monroe found a way to operate within her boundaries. Thus, the ceremonial tradition and the pageantry associated with these social observances still play a significant role today.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Smith, *The First Forty Years*, 30, 399; Kirk, *Music at the White House*, xv-xviii, 40-41; *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D. C.), May 12, 1817.

<sup>59</sup> Seale, *The President's House*, 1:156.

### Domestic Landscape

Over a century ago, historian Gilson Willets declared, “Compared to a human being, the White House, as a building, is the body; the home created within that body is the soul.”<sup>60</sup> Therefore, the executive mansion’s tangible and visible soul encompasses the rooms and furniture, together with the decorations. The responsibility for creating that home falls to the president and first family, and the domestic staff. The President’s House as an excellent machine for the presidency, and the nation operates entirely by hand. The individuals who serve in domestic capacities embody seasoned and devoted functionaries, often taking on various tasks to meet the fluctuating necessities of each first family.

Early in our nation’s history, presidents not only paid for all of their domestic staff but also underwrote all entertaining costs. An individual president could not afford to keep up the house and perform the requisite entertaining without utilizing enslaved staff or owning extensive personal wealth. This custom partly explains why so many early presidents brought their enslaved cooks and personal servants. They could not afford to pay competitive wages for staff in an open labor market based on their presidential salaries.<sup>61</sup>

As with any investigation that explores the practices of enslaved communities, documentation sometimes remains scant and often incomplete. Most people practicing involuntary servitude did not teach enslaved people the fundamentals of reading and writing, and over time states passed legislation that made these acts illegal; thus, few written sources

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<sup>60</sup> Gilson Willets, *Inside History of the White House: The Complete History of the Domestic and Official Life in Washington of the Nation’s Presidents and Their Families* (New York: Christian Herald, 1908). 11.

<sup>61</sup> The presidential salary from 1789 to 1873 was \$25,000 per annum.

survived. While their stories might appear lost or inadequate, enslaved persons vitally contributed to the presidency and the nation's success.

First families have often leaned on their African American cooks to burnish their reputation by dazzling presidential guests while aiding and abetting a positive presidential entertaining image. The earliest presidential kitchens usually had a staff of five persons: the steward or housekeeper, who purchased groceries and planned menus; a head cook in charge of all prepared meals involving the president, a second cook, who prepared meals for the residence staff and two other workers who shared a variety of preparation and cleanup duties.<sup>62</sup>

Monroe's President's House had been a multicultural workplace from the beginning, with people of different races, classes, sexes, legal statuses (enslaved or free), and countries of origin all working side by side. According to the research conducted by the White House Historical Association, when the first family moved into the executive mansion, President Monroe staffed three enslaved women -Sukey, Eve, Betsey – and four enslaved men – Daniel, Tom, Peter, and Hartford. By the 1820 census, Monroe employed five enslaved men, one enslaved woman, two free African men, and three “foreigners not naturalized,” all unnamed. While one can speculate somewhat about the foreigners, the identities of the enslaved individuals and two free African Americans remain unknown. Two possibilities may name Joseph Jeater, the steward, and Charles Bizet, the president's gardener, both born abroad. <sup>63</sup> Indeed, Monroe represented an inherent contradiction, keeping enslaved individuals while calling for the abolition of slavery.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth Jaffray, *Secrets of the White House* (New York: Cosmopolitan Book, 1927), 124.

<sup>63</sup> Matthew Costello, “The Enslaved Households of President James Monroe,” February 25, 2020. *White House History*, White House Historical Association, <https://whitehousehistory.org/the-enslaved-households-of-president-james-monroe>.

<sup>64</sup> “Highland and Slavery,” Highland, accessed June 3, 2022, <https://highland.org/highland-and-slavery/>. Article discusses James Monroe's views on involuntary servitude and specifically references letters quoting his views from James Monroe to John Mason on August 31, 1829.

Most of the president's staff worked in the kitchen or scullery, usually the center of activity for any household, including the President's House. As the site of the daily meal, preparation for presidential families, and cuisine for more formal entertaining, the central kitchen of the residence rarely saw quiet. Most service areas in the executive mansion remained private areas. However, the location of the kitchen in the President's House gave guests a unique view. Architect James Hoban located the kitchen for the residence at the center of the Ground Floor, underneath the forty-foot Entrance Hall, and roughly the same size, with a grand stone fireplace at each end. In 1796, a correspondent described it as "large enough to hold the house of representatives of the Congress, and that the Senate may find room to sit in the chimney corner." Before the addition of the North Portico in 1829-30, guests could see through the windows from the stone bridge as they approached the north door entrance.<sup>65</sup>

Later architect Benjamin Latrobe, dissatisfied with the existing location of the kitchen in the basement beneath the Entrance Hall, felt that it received poor lighting and produced unacceptable noises and odors. He graphically criticized these problems in an 1817 letter:

"The situation of the Kitchen is intolerable, and has been a nuisance to every President's family that has occupied the House...It perfumes the whole house with the steam and smells of the victuals: The operations of cooking are seen by the visitors that approach the front door...Oh the clatter of knives and skewers, and dishes, that has assailed me out of the den of a kitchen on going to dine with the President. Had it not been for the savory exhalations that accompanied the rattling of the Irons, you might have supposed yourself listening to the tortures in the dungeons of the inquisition."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Lydia Barker Tederick, "A Look at the White House Kitchens," *White House History*, no. 20 (Spring 2007): 10.

<sup>66</sup> Benjamin Latrobe to William Lee, March 22, 1817, in Latrobe, *Papers of Benjamin Latrobe*, 3:872-873.

However, the smells and inconveniences of the kitchen did not deter guests to the President's House in a society accustomed to the necessity of kitchens employed all day in food preparation. More importantly, Latrobe's remark about "savory exhalations" undermined his argument. The beautiful aromas of succulent French cuisine, decadent sweetmeats, and delicate pastries piqued guests' interests and taste buds, beckoning them to visit the President's House and relishing the experience.

American citizens and presidential guests want the president to be extraordinary while having a personal connection with them. As a result, people believe that the food the president likes to eat and serves their guests indicates presidential character. In our system of government, where power ultimately derives from its citizens, a president's popularity represents the bread and butter of maintaining political power. Savvy first families carefully use food to ordain and establish public consciousness. Any gaffes could make a president seem too aristocratic or too common. Whether acknowledged or not, presidents and the public converse through every possible medium. Through food, we get an authentic taste of our president's personality made only possible through the culinary talents of his domestic staff.<sup>67</sup>

### Lasting Memories

Historian Paula Baker noted that in Federal-era Washington, unique both as a new city and as the nation's capital, entertaining often carried political implications, and people used private and public social settings to achieve political gain.<sup>68</sup> The experience of planning the

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<sup>67</sup> Adrian Miller, *The Presidents' Kitchen Cabinet: The Story of the African Americans Who Have Fed Our First Families, from the Washingtons to the Obamas*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017). Kindle.

<sup>68</sup> Leah R. Giles, "Entertaining a New Republic: Music and the Women of Washington, D. C., 1800-1825," MA diss. (University of Delaware, 2011), iv-xiii; Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and America Political Society, 1780-1920," *The American Historical Review* 89 (June 1984), 620-647.

appropriate complements to each of the facets of the event – food, entertainment, flowers, décor, settings, and wine – presented for the Monroes in itself a great honor for the first family to celebrate and showcase the best of America while paying tribute to their guests. Successful pairings so often enhanced the lasting memories of the evening while building relationships.

But, when the house reopened to the public in 1818, the first family precisely choreographed admission and movement. Some visitors who had become accustomed to the daily laissez-faire accessibility from the days of Jefferson and Madison felt the presidential hospitality lacked warmth and spontaneity. When not used, the State Rooms presented less than welcoming as the blinds and curtains remained drawn to prevent fading. The furnishings stayed shrouded in linen dust covers for protection against pests and voluminous dust clouds from Washington's unpaved streets. The Entrance Hall no longer carried that circus-like appeal as Jefferson's cabinet of curiosities. The State Rooms no longer echoed Madison's bawdy galas spirited along with whiskey punch. Notably, James and Elizabeth Monroe represented respectable society, genuinely congenial, and never haughty, though some will misconstrue Mrs. Monroe as less than affable. Their ideas of what meant "republican" for the first family transformed into a more refined platform, possibly more reminiscent of General Washington's style. Preferably, President Monroe and Mrs. Monroe blended his predecessors' best etiquette and entertainment with his diplomatic experiences abroad establishing a new norm..<sup>69</sup>

As the president's wife, the public expected Mrs. Monroe to fulfill a multitude of roles flawlessly, and any departure from perceived standards received scrutiny. Americans sensed that the president of the United States's wife said something meaningful about how the nation had chosen to organize its private and public affairs. Official responsibilities as a housekeeper,

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<sup>69</sup> Seale, *The President's House*, 1:156.

hostess, and monitor of social life in the nation's capital essentially set aside the president's wife's personal life for the duration. Private and public citizens expected her to behave cordially and graciously to all people at all times, to present a public image that projected amiability, satisfaction with her station, subordination to her husband, neatness, and taste in personal style, though not flamboyant.

In France, Elizabeth Monroe had learned about the vital link between protocol and politics; in London, she realized that she could survive social ostracism. Therefore, she retained the reserved manners that had served her well in France but in stark contrast to Dolley Madison. In his autobiography, James Monroe hailed and justified his wife's efforts as his "partner in all the toils and cares" of his foreign and domestic public service throughout their life together. He further proclaimed, "When the nature of these [public service duties] is considered, and the duties of a family devoted to the honor and interest of their country and bound to cherish economy, it will readily be conceived that her burdens and cares must have been great. It is a remark, which it was improbable for any female to have fulfilled all the duties of the partner of such cares, and of a wife and parent, with more attention, delicacy, and propriety than she has done."<sup>70</sup>

Unfortunately, James Monroe's desire for privacy left his wife no voice in history. In September of 1830, Elizabeth Monroe died. He destroyed all of his wife's correspondence because, as he stated, he did not want Elizabeth scrutinized by an often harsh and critical public. Despite the paucity of sources, Elizabeth Monroe still emerges as a sympathetic figure. A brave and tenacious woman, she hid beneath her quiet, retiring surface a backbone of iron that allowed her to face grief, penury, social ostracism, and chronic illness with grace and composure.

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<sup>70</sup> Fix, "Elizabeth Kortright Monroe," 40; Wootton, *Elizabeth Kortright Monroe*, 35.

Despite her poor health and her belief that a woman should not make her presence strongly felt in public, except in support of her husband, Elizabeth Monroe had a decided and lasting impact on Washington society and the role of the First Lady. She shaped the core of the First Lady's social obligations in the face of furious opposition. Though faded with time, her mark on protocol and diplomacy in Washington remains visible.<sup>71</sup>

Historian William Seale best summarized the manner of life in the White House during President Monroe's administration. Jefferson's 1800 "revolution" brought the Republicans to the White House. Jefferson and Madison used the White House differently to epitomize their more modest ideas about the presidency. Illustrating this philosophy, the two considered extremely important in the pre-war years when young America struggled for its identity. By Monroe's time, victory over Great Britain had brought the people a sense of security and nationhood. The principle of republicanism simplicity no longer carried the same significance. The fine French pieces with which President Monroe furnished the White House worried critics that the first family had aspirations of the aristocracy. Hence, citizens flocked to the residence to enjoy their visits. American perspectives evolved to the point where they esteemed the finery with respectability as part of the extraordinary aesthetics of the people's house. President Monroe did not need to use his presidency as a pulpit from which to preach political sermons or dramatize partisan points of view. A better rule for the White House embraced symbolizing the triumph and unity of the nation.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Fix, *Elizabeth Kortright Monroe*, 42. Gilman, *James Monroe*, 186-195. Recollections of Egbert Watson, a former lodger at Oak Hill, visiting with the James Monroe on the evening after Mrs. Monroe's funeral.

<sup>72</sup> Seale, *The President's House*, 1:159.



## Chapter 7: Place & Politics

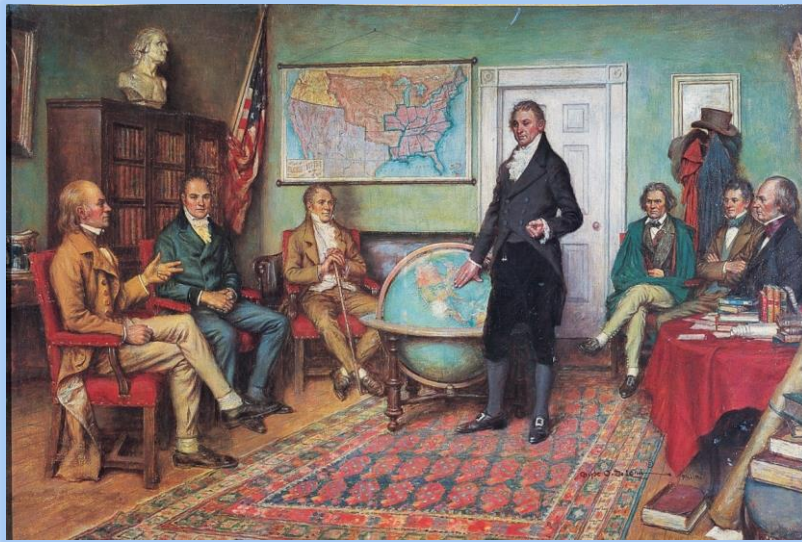


Figure 29. *Birth of the Monroe Doctrine*  
 Artist: Clyde Osmer DeLand, ca. 1912  
 Image courtesy of Smithsonian National Art Gallery

In 1803 William Wirt, a young Richmond counselor, composed a series of articles on Virginia affairs published as *The Letters of the British Spy*. He included in these essays a lengthy sketch of James Monroe, the governor of Virginia. Wirt portrayed Governor Monroe as a man of excellent judgment and strong character:

“As the elevated ground, which [Monroe] already holds, has been gained merely by the dint of application; as every new step which he mounts becomes a means of increasing his powers still further, by opening a wider horizon to his view, and thus stimulating his enterprise afresh, reinvigorating his habits, multiplying the materials and extending the range of his knowledge; it would be a matter of no surprise to me, if, before his death, the world should see him at the head of the American administration.”<sup>1</sup>

Wirt’s assessment served as a fitting starting point for any thought of Monroe as president, for it addressed two vital conditions that transported the young diplomat to the “head

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<sup>1</sup> William Wirt “The Letters of the British Spy,” in Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 1.

of the American administration”: his extensive service in public affairs and early recognition as a contender for the presidency. Regarding Monroe’s nomination, New York House Representative Jonathan Fisk acknowledged, “He is certainly the most prominent public figure. Public opinion centers upon him as unhesitatingly, generally, and steadily, as it did upon Jefferson, or Mr. Madison. He is the man most experienced in the government, most tried and approved in his political Stations, whom the republic can now Select as chief magistrate...”<sup>2</sup>

In late 1816, James Monroe claimed a resounding victory in the presidential election against Federalist Rufus King, capturing 183 out of the 221 electoral votes. Daniel D. Tompkins, Governor of New York, became Vice President-elect. Monroe, like General Washington, had not actively campaigned for office or his advocates. He held strong backing from influential Republican Virginians and his admiral record of public service spoke for itself.<sup>3</sup> The newly elected Monroe responded with heartfelt commitment, “I should be destitute of feeling, if I was not deeply affected by the strong proof which my fellow citizens have given me of their confidence, in calling me to the high office whose functions I am about to assume...”<sup>4</sup>

During his first term, deemed “The Era of Good Feelings,” President Monroe guided the young country toward prosperity and political strength. The phrase “from sea to shining sea,” once simply a dream, became a reality because of the hard work and dedication of the tireless public servant. His second administration, though often fraught with political turmoil, still became a period of advancement, especially in the fields of transportation, western expansion, education, and social policies. His achievements esteemed him to the country and its citizens

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Fisk to John W. Taylor, December 31, 1815, in Cunningham, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Ammon, *James Monroe*, 355-357.

<sup>4</sup> James Monroe, “Inaugural Address,” March 4, 1817 in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 6:6.

through accomplishments effectuated by optimizing communication mediums which some might refer to as purposeful political pageantry.

Every successful president of the United States has found his own strategy to communicate his messages to the citizens, Congress, and the rest of the government. The methods have differed as much as the personalities and management practices. Whether the president used forceful arm-twisting, a persuasive, charming, or commanding personality, or some other device, advancing an administration's agenda cannot be left to pure chance. This fact has remained the case since 1789, when our republic began. Then, as now, the man shapes the administration and determines the political setting. For President James Monroe, who made two national tours, the executive mansion heralded center stage status, indeed, a unique opportunity for the fifth president. How so? Monroe's presidential responsibilities encompassed not only his political agendas but also the endowment of the reconstructed and refurbished President's House with an active national identity.

According to political scientists such as Barbara Hinckley, Charles Elder, and Roger Cobb, endowing identity or symbolism forms a significant and essential part of political activity to shape attitudes, build support, and fashion a national consciousness. Symbols involve emotional, psychological, and moral content to develop a relationship for a vast and powerful share of human experience not otherwise easily induced. Symbols depend on interaction and communication between those giving and those receiving them. Consequently, an object like the White House, including its exteriors, interiors, and furnishings, became a symbol when people endow it with meaning, value, and significance.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hinckley, *The Symbolic Presidency*, 1; Charles Elder and Roger Cobb, *The Political Uses of Symbols* (New York: Longman, 1983), 29.

For society as a whole, the symbolic meaning typically evokes ideas already in the public philosophy, with the term or place understood as a set of beliefs characterizing the identity and history of a people. However, to develop a national distinctiveness when the Early Republic's citizenry uniqueness remained fluid, the people turned to their leaders, especially the president. As president, James Monroe had to embody the virtues already prized in the country. His role in building the legend, or national identity, required enactment through self-presentation. In the drama of politics, actors, setting, dialogue, and action themes all contribute to the total symbolic effect. Once selected, the symbols, institutions, and national consciousness will carry on a life of their own via material culture.<sup>6</sup>

Understandably, if symbolism represents a fundamental principle of politics, it also fundamentally denotes the president's office. As a politician, the chief magistrate stays potentially always on stage. Every aspect of his behavior and environment can become part of a public performance to mobilize support. Many of his activities will reflect symbolism essentially to create the desired identity or understanding to draw the audience into his drama. It remains also confirmed that the president may not control every situation because he cannot always assure audience support. These outcomes result from other performers competing with him and offering negative impressions of his performance. And because he may have to respond to situations, not of his making. However, presidents can rise above these challenges and still achieve their objectives. In this case, President Monroe believed a strong and visible head of state demonstrating the appropriate foreign and domestic diplomacy and policies promoted the coming age of the White House reborn.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hinckley, *The Symbolic Presidency*, 5-8.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Hall, "A Symbolic Interactionist Analysis of Politics," *Sociological Inquiry*, 42 (1973): 61.

### The Era of Good Feelings

President James Monroe mobilized the energies of an enormous class of artisans, and his requirements of simplicity and solidity characterized the Empire-style furnishings selected for the State Rooms. He sought to create a setting of dignity and stability for political utility and unity for the presidency and a government previously under attack. Other than the presidential residence, the executive mansion officiates as the nexus for the executive branch. Within its interiors, Monroe hoped to cultivate personal intercourse with his cabinet. The president wanted to foster opportunities to build relationships and produce understanding to promote harmony and mutual confidence among the government functionaries while avoiding jealousies and suspicions injurious to the public interest. He depended much on his advisors and the congressional legislators for domestic and foreign communication necessary to address matters and monitor the pulse of public sentiment.

Encapsulated in his second-floor office and bent over his mahogany fall-front desk, President Monroe exerted hours penning correspondence to individual legislators and his closest colleagues, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. He wrote often to his son-in-law George Hay about family and confidential matters, often soliciting his aid as a ghostwriter. He wrote volumes of political philosophies and policies for the country. One can imagine the desk and floor littered with papers as the president composed his annual messages to Congress. With a quill and inkwell ever ready, he neatly crafted his agendas for each cabinet meeting. Afterward, he exhausted hours by candlelight scouring through his meticulous notes to articulate executive actions.

Although President Monroe met with lawmakers, he convened the cabinet regularly for policy debates. Monroe choreographed these quite lengthy meetings with acumen and patience,

allowing all perspectives to be voiced and navigating toward a formulated consensus. He also avoided convening a meeting when he knew he would not ascertain agreement but further, entrench dissent. Monroe's cabinet, notable for its low turnover, retained four of its five members who served for his full terms. The scholar Noble Cunningham, who has most thoroughly examined the inner workings of Monroe's presidency, described him as a "hands-on" chief magistrate "who held tightly to the final executive authority."<sup>8</sup>

Monroe launched his presidency dedicated to ameliorating the partisan spirit still lingering from bitter divisions fueled by the War of 1812. And yet, despite his desire for reconciliation, President Monroe would not entirely dismiss his longstanding distrust of the Federalists. He rejected suggestions that he appoint Federalists or former Federalists to top executive positions, arguing that the reins of power stay entrusted to those "decided friends" who had proved their devotion to the Union and the Republican cause. In selecting his cabinet, Monroe sought to overcome this conundrum by carefully contemplating the appointee's skills and the political and geographical implications of the nomination.<sup>9</sup>

The appointment as treasury secretary went to William H. Crawford. Even though the two men competed for the presidency, Monroe considered Crawford a comrade and greatly respected his political and administrative ability. They had served together in Madison's administration; therefore, Monroe eagerly believed Crawford would continue as an asset to his administration. Seeking a westerner for the secretary of war, Monroe initially offered the position to Kentucky Governor Isaac Shelby. Shelby declined, and after evaluating several other

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<sup>8</sup> Cunningham, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 118.

<sup>9</sup> Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 6; Andrew Jackson, *The Papers of Andrew Jackson*, vol. 4, ed. Harold D. Moser, et. al. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 74-75; James Monroe to Andrew Jackson, December 14, 1816, in James Monroe, *The Papers of James Monroe*, Mary Washington University, Fredericksburg, Virginia, <http://monroepapers.com/items/show/3557>.

potential western candidates, Monroe extended the job to William Lowndes, a South Carolina Congressman who also declined. Finally, John C. Calhoun, a South Carolina Congressman, accepted the appointment. Monroe selected as attorney general his friend William Wirt, a native of Maryland after Richard Rush accepted the appointment as Minister to Great Britain in the autumn of 1817. From Massachusetts, Benjamin Crowninshield, the former secretary of the navy under Madison, continued in the position under Monroe. Crowninshield resigned in 1818. His successor, New York Supreme Court Justice Smith Thompson, held the position until 1823 and accepted Monroe's appointment to the United States Supreme Court. New Jersey Senator Samuel Southard filled the vacancy due to Thompson's promotion.<sup>10</sup>

President Monroe selected John Quincy Adams, a long-time United States diplomat, for the position of secretary of state. Adams's foreign affairs experience and views on foreign policy matched the president. Moreover, the appointment of a New Englander, the son of a former Federalist president who had proven himself a loyal Republican, would offer an olive branch toward reconciling the northeastern states with their legislative kinsmen. Similarly, Adams's appointment would ease concerns and conspiracies regarding a "Virginia Dynasty" controlling the presidency, for the State Department appeared as a stepping stone to the presidency since Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe each served as state secretary before becoming president.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, February 23, 1817, in Jefferson, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition*, Retirement Series, 11:145-146; James Monroe to Andrew Jackson, March 1, 1817, in Monroe, James Monroe Papers, Library of Congress; James Monroe to Isaac Shelby, February 20, 1817, in Monroe, James Monroe Papers, Library of Congress; Isaac Shelby to James Monroe, April 7, 1817, in Monroe, James Monroe Papers, Library of Congress; James Monroe to William Lowndes, May 31, 1817, in James Monroe, James Monroe Papers, New York Public Library, New York, New York; William Lowndes to James Monroe September 28, 1817, in Monroe, James Monroe Papers, New York Public Library; Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 6-7.

<sup>11</sup> James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, February 23, 1817, in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 6-:2-4; Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 6.

President Monroe demonstrated his ability as chief executive most clearly via his cabinet management style through his “habit of application,” according to historian Tim McGrath. Rarely had the cabinet comprised a more robust, more able, or more ambitious assembly. Monroe, recognizing their talents, delegated to the secretaries full authority to conduct their departments accordingly, to fully disclose matters, and provide counsel for his careful consideration. The president coveted their counsel and frequently deferred to the expertise of the secretaries. However, Monroe retained the right to make the final executive decision as the ultimate responsibility of all outcomes firmly resided in his realm. Although Monroe employed a prolonged, systematic effort to reach a consensus among his cabinet, it proved necessary and effective in realizing policy. Monroe’s practical acumen and vast experience provided him with a solid general policy vision and the shrewdness to engage his learned associates to assist him in deliberating and developing specific policy conceptions. He sustained a close working relationship with his executive officers and counted them among his closest colleagues. The president’s cognitive style received illumination from such accolades as asserted by Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, “He [Monroe] had a wonderful intellectual patience and could above all men that I ever knew, when called upon to decide on an important point, hold the subject immovably fixed under his attention until he had mastered it in all of his relations...I have known many more rapid in reaching a conclusion, but few with a certainty so unerring...”<sup>12</sup>

President Monroe affirmed a strict adherence to the constitution, a dedicated loyalty to the republican beliefs generated by the American Revolution, and a strong advocacy for union maintenance. He believed that national devotion to republican principles and institutions

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<sup>12</sup> McGrath, *James Monroe*, 400; Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 7; Gary Hart, *James Monroe*, (New York: Henry Holt, 2005), 24-47; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 369, 384-385, 476-492.



overshadowed sectional differences. Monroe thought the states would find the most significant protection for their rights in a union of states bonded by the Constitution and republican ideals. A self-assured Monroe wrote to his son-in-law, George Hay, just months after his inauguration professing, “I wish to bring about a union of the whole population of our country in support of our republican govt., which can be done only by a union of parties on republican principles.” Monroe’s words reflected his deeply held conviction that post-war America presented a unique opportunity to nourish a lasting sense of national unity and purpose among the people and to realize the Revolutionary generation’s long-sought goal of delivering them once and for all from the curse of partisan politics.<sup>13</sup> A curse so poetically envisioned by future French political philosopher Bertrand de Jouvenel as the competition between “mechanized” party machines:

“Let one of these machines put more method into its organization and more cunning into its propaganda, let it boil down its doctrine still further into propositions which are at once simpler and falser, let it surpass its adversaries in insult, treachery, and brutality, let it once seize the coveted prey and, having seized it, never let it go-and there you have totalitarianism. A single party leaves the marks of the masters talons on every inch of the nation’s flesh. This tyranny is accepted by the citizen who come to hate it only when it is too late.”<sup>14</sup>

To warn against such treachery, in his first inaugural address, President Monroe publicly welcomed a spirit of cooperation and applauded “the increased harmony of opinion which pervades our Union.” The federal government not only had survived, but the people, in whose hands sovereignty rested, had prospered and maintained “the full enjoyment of their rights.” As such, there could be no good reason why “one portion of the community” should be at odds with any other or be less eager to preserve the Union. “Discord does not belong to our system,”

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<sup>13</sup> James Monroe, *The People the Sovereigns*, ed Samuel L. Gouverneur (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1867), 32, 43; Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 8; Monroe, *Documentary History of the Presidential Tours*, 424.

<sup>14</sup> Bertrand de Jouvenel, *On Power: The Natural History of Its Growth*, trans. J. F. Huntington (1948, repr. Carmel, IN: Liberty Fund, 1993), 305-306.

Monroe concluded, where the people formed “one great family with a common interest.” He pledged to do everything in his power to perpetuate that bond.<sup>15</sup>

With these views in mind, Monroe conducted a northeastern states tour during the summer of 1817 while waiting for executive mansion reconstruction to conclude and for Secretary of State Adams to return stateside. Early in his first term, Monroe proved that he cared profoundly about American territorial expansion and external boundaries when he became the first sitting president to travel into the nation’s western territories. Although the trip was intended primarily to inspect coastal fortifications, Monroe saw it evolve into an opportunity to ease sectional differences and partisan tensions. The trip immediately became a celebratory procession for Americans to meet their president. In addition to inspecting Atlantic coast and Canadian border military installations, the president attended welcoming ceremonies in the numerous towns he visited. The symbolic import of a native Virginian as president visiting New England, attending Independence Day festivities in Boston, and meeting with Federalist leaders captured the people’s attention. The editor of the *Columbian Centinel* newspaper coined the expression “the era of good feeling” to describe the national unity citizens felt as well as the lack of party enmity in the 1816 election. The phrase “The Era of Good Feelings” would become synonymous with Monroe’s first administration. Two years later, during the spring and summer of 1819, the president took an equally successful tour of the southern and western states. Monroe’s two national tours confirmed a widespread impression of the president’s accessibility and supporting the “common man.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 6:6-14; Monroe, *Documentary History of the Presidential Tours*, 16-17.

<sup>16</sup> Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 9-10.; *Columbian Centinel* (Boston), July 12, 1817; Monroe, *Writings of Monroe*, 6:26-29; Monroe, *Documentary History of the Presidential Tours*, xxiv; *Niles Weekly Register* (Baltimore), July 19, 1817.

The exhausted president returned to the Federal City and inspected the construction progress on the President's House and the Capitol. Although he found delight in the newly painted executive mansion, the tired President decided to avoid the fumes and excessive fires to dry the still-wet paint and plaster. Monroe chose to hiatus with his family at his Highland plantation until Congress returned in later October and early November. However, Monroe tarried in Washington before heading to Highland anticipating the arrival of the secretary of state. After visiting his parents for the first time in years, John Quincy Adams arrived in Washington on September 20, 1817. Rush accompanied him to the President's House. After a warm greeting from Monroe and small talk, the three men went straight to the president's agenda. Rush would succeed Adams as minister to Great Britain and receive instructions from Adams, the first sign of Monroe's confidence in his new secretary. While the three reviewed current relations with the British, French, and Spanish, Monroe revealed another foremost concern, the spreading of revolutions in South America. Leaders like Simón Bolívar and Bernardo O'Higgins furthered winning independence for Spanish-held colonies throughout the continent.<sup>17</sup>

President Monroe endeavored to overcome congressional recalcitrance and ongoing problems for the administration due to constitutional limits on executive power and a lack of party discipline by relying on the cabinet to attain congressional support on many key issues. Monroe relied on this strategy to navigate the dangers of the Union posed by domestic and foreign crises to unify the nation.<sup>18</sup> However, Monroe and John Quincy Adams began one of the

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<sup>17</sup> John Quincy Adams, John Quincy Adams Diary, September 20, 1817, "The John Quincy Adams: A Digital Collection," Massachusetts Historical Society, <https://www.masshist.org/jqadiaries/php/>.

<sup>18</sup> Ammon, *James Monroe*, 380-381, 384-385.

most significant relationships in American history that afternoon. Thomas Jefferson assessed them succinctly. “Adams has a pointed pen,” Jefferson believed, while “Monroe has judgment enough for both.” One would not describe their relationship as personally close friends. Instead, they coalesced into a partnership based on mutual respect and absolute trust for the common goals of America’s best interest as they saw it.<sup>19</sup>

### Securing the Nation’s Borders

President James Monroe called his first cabinet official meeting on October 25, 1817, the first of many essential conferences. On this day, Adams, Crawford, Rush, and acting war secretary George Graham would join the president until Calhoun arrived in December. As these crucial men gathered, one can imagine hearing the diminutive dialogues interspersed with the distinct footfalls of the executives on the bright yellow pine flooring as they made their way across the Entrance Hall and up to the second floor. The residents of the executive mansion would come to recognize those unmistakable echoes until the additional floor carpeting arrived in late spring. The cabinet room became an all too familiar setting over the next eight years for the collaborators with its sturdy rich mahogany bureau table covered with green baize prepared by Washington’s fashionable cabinetmaker and upholster, René de Perdreauxville. The approximately ten-foot spanse would comfortably seat twelve people and efficiently accommodate the president’s council. Monroe undoubtedly ensured an endless supply of foolscaps, quill pens, and inkwells within arm’s reach. The coordinating green curtains and muslin linings fully drawn allowed in the noon-day sunlight. Still, the president arranged for numerous candle sconces and oil lamps strategically placed in the room, knowing a time would

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<sup>19</sup> James Traub, *John Quincy Adams: Militant Spirit*, (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 235.

come when meetings may go deep into the night. Today's session began at eleven A. M. with a short welcome to all from Monroe, who sat at the head of the table. Several sheets of paper he placed on the table in front of him, each with a subject written at the top, with outlined notes on one side and space for discussion points on the other. During the meeting, Monroe scribbled comments and edits throughout deliberations. This organization pattern he used throughout his presidency. Adams came to call Monroe's paper parade his "Sibylline leaves."<sup>20</sup>

The discussion that day focused on "Spain and South American insurgents." For years, Spain's New World subjects fought for the same independence the United States won in 1783, and many Americans believed had re-won in 1815. The forlorn King Ferdinand VII of Spain, aware that his South American forces continued to lose battles and land, looked to Great Britain and France for military aid to turn that tide. As Monroe perceived the revolutionary circumstances, they needed to consider a very broad question, especially how Spain would react to any recognition of the newly independent countries by the United States.<sup>21</sup>

More immediate issues in America's backyard demanded attention, the covert smuggling establishments at Amelia Island and Galveston. Both sites became dens of ill repute crawling with pirates, illegal slave traders, and enslaved runaways. For nearly five hours, the cabinet debated the possible courses of action to take, with Monroe giving each member freedom to agree, argue, and pose their own questions. Did Monroe have the power to acknowledge the independence of these new countries? Was it expedient to eradicate the establishments at Amelia Island and Galveston? And, finally, how would Spain react to all this?<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Singleton, *Story of the White House*, 120-122; James Monroe to members of the cabinet, "meeting agenda, October 25, 1817, in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 6:31-32; Adams, Adams Diary, October 25, 1817; Adams, Adams Diary, November 30, 1824.

<sup>21</sup> Adams, Adams Diary, October 25, 1817; Traub, *John Quincy Adams*, 218.

<sup>22</sup> Adams, Adams Diary, October 25 and 30, 1817.

Several lengthy sessions took place before President Monroe achieved what he wanted, a genuine consensus among his advisers. Having recalled the days when George Washington could not get even a basic agreement between his fractious cabinet, usually due to Hamilton and Jefferson, Monroe wanted his administration unified behind every position taken as possibly feasible. After hours of debate, heated at times according to Adams, Monroe urged a neutral position regarding Latin America's struggles. Still, he approved decisive military action to eliminate the outlaw elements on Amelia Island and in Galveston, both of which he intended to do in the first place once the appropriate infrastructure and accord existed. The president also recommended that the frigate *Congress* carry emissaries posthaste to Buenos Aires to witness firsthand developments and supply reports. He knew all too well that the capital city had a well-deserved reputation as being a sieve regarding confidentiality.<sup>23</sup>

Although Monroe's predecessors began their administrations hoping to pursue specific goals, they spent much of their time confronting difficulties, not of their choosing. President Monroe would claim no exception to such eventualities, yet, in retrospect, he devoted a substantial amount of attention to an issue of great importance to him. Monroe's first-term foreign policy focused on strengthening existing boundaries while unapologetically pursuing territorial gains from Britain and Spain, two European countries with holdings in North America. In 1817 the borders of the United States, except for the Atlantic coast, remained manifestly undefined or in irreconcilable dispute. Contrabandists, pirates, privateers commissioned by foreign countries, filibusters, revolutionary groups, and assorted adventurers ran nefarious operations from American ports and territories. Unfortunately, the War of 1812 had graphically

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<sup>23</sup> Adams, *Adams Diary*, October 25, 1817; Traub, *John Quincy Adams*, 218; McGrath, *James Monroe*, 399.

proven that coastal areas remained highly vulnerable to barefaced blockade and unimpeded invasion. Monroe, all too familiar with these problems during his years in Madison's cabinet, made a concerted effort to define the nation's boundaries and reduce their defenselessness during his tenure.<sup>24</sup>

What the United States learned far surpassed in importance what it gained. President Monroe marshaled for military preparedness and urged that the nation's coastal and inland frontier needed solidification. This theme required little embellishment or retintation in a city that bore the scars from its British invaders in the War of 1812. In his first inaugural address, Monroe recommended that "our coast and inland frontier . . . be fortified, our Army and Navy...be kept in perfect order, and our militia be placed on the best practicable footing." With these instructions, army engineers commenced drafting an ambitious program for coastal fortifications and defensive measures. Monroe observed many of his recommendations implemented and structures obtain fruition. However, during his second term, the president felt disappointed and betrayed when Congress, motivated by economic shortfalls and partisan politics, vehemently slashed appropriations and forced the construction curtailment of several vital installations. Undaunted, the president recurrently reminded Congress throughout his presidency, "the subject of defense becomes intimately connected in all parts in war and peace."<sup>25</sup>

During James Monroe's tenure as secretary of war, 1814 to 1815, he initiated programs to restructure the army and introduced improvements to West Point Military Academy. During

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<sup>24</sup> James Monroe, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1817; in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 6:6-15; Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 11; Moats, "President James Monroe," 461; Lois Garver, "Benjamin Rush Milam," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 2 (October 1934): 79-121.

<sup>25</sup> James Monroe, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1817; in Monroe *Writings of James Monroe*, 6:6-15; James Monroe to House of Representatives, January 30, 1824, in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 7:5.

those years, he launched the United States Navy on a path toward becoming a global force with steady Congressional funding for ships. Now teamed up with Secretary of War Calhoun and Secretary of Navy Crowninshield, the president's first term began to see the efficacy of these efforts materialize. Military staffing responsibilities became centralized, establishing positions for a quartermaster general, a judge advocate general, and a surgeon general. Rations and supplies became economically viable through bulk purchasing and storing in accessible depots and arsenals throughout the country. Structural improvements began on coastal and frontier defenses but, by extension, dictated the need for advancements in communications and transportation. Calhoun, keenly aware, prompted Congress, "We occupy a surface prodigiously great in proportion to our numbers...Good roads and canals, judiciously laid out, are the proper remedy. In the recent war, how much did we suffer for want of them!"<sup>26</sup>

The cabinet urged Congress to finance a standing army with a professionally trained core of well-paid officers instead of depending on untrained contingent militia augmented during times of war. Furthermore, they requested government subsidy for military education for underprivileged but ambitious young men. The Military Academy at West Point transformed from a neglected army outpost into a national center for military education, which promoted the United States Army's adoption of General Henri Lallemand's *Treatise on Artillery*. Secretary Calhoun also boosted the career of General Simon Bernard, instrumental in planning and staffing a set of coastal and frontier fortifications. Bernard recommended employing the peacetime army

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<sup>26</sup> Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 11-12; "John C. Calhoun: War Hawk," Shannon Selin, accessed June 15, 2022. <https://shannonselin.com/2015/10/john-c-calhoun-war-hawk>.



to aid in constructing a network of roads and waterways to support the nation's defense and growth.<sup>27</sup>

To support and maintain these endeavors, Monroe pointed to the War of 1812 as a triumph and the nation's expansion impetus. "It has been said that our Union and system of government would not bear such a trial," Monroe said. "The result has proved the imputation to be entirely destitute of foundation...[O]ur Union had gained strength, our troops honor, and the nation character by the contest."<sup>28</sup> As a result, America turned its attention west. Internal improvements, such as the construction of new roads, turnpikes, and canals, significantly facilitated the westward movement of pioneers and entrepreneurs. The Treaty of Ghent called for an end to all hostilities with indigenous people and restored pre-war boundaries, but this proved to be an empty promise. The ambiguous and unenforceable terms of the treaty did not incumber the drive west. The Northwest Territory, rather than becoming the buffer envisioned by Britain, soon transformed into the carved-up states of Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> United States Congress, Senate Journal March 26, 1822, *Journal of the Senate of the United States of America*, Seventeenth Congress, First Session (Washington, D. C.: Gales & Seaton, 1812), 217-219; James Monroe to the Senate of the United States, April 13, 1822, in Richardson, *A Compilation of the Message*, 128-134; James Monroe to John Randolph, June 16, 1806 in James Monroe, *Papers of James Monroe*, vol. 5, ed. Daniel Preston (Westport: Greenwood, 2014), 502-503; Steve Vogel, *Through the Perilous Fight: Six Weeks That Saved the Nation* (New York: Random House, 2013), 401; Samuel J. Watson, "James Monroe and American Military Policy," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 128, no. 1 (2020): 26-32.

<sup>28</sup> Ammon, James Monroe, 344.

<sup>29</sup> Vogel, *Through the Perilous Fight*, 399-401; James H. Young, *Mitchell's Travellers Guide Through the United States: A Map of the Roads, Distances, Stream Boat & Canal Routes &c.* (Philadelphia: S. Augustus Mitchell, 1835), Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress, Washington D. C., <https://www.loc.gov/item/98685469/>. Young's map includes United States census data from 1790 to 1830. During that time the original thirteen states population increased one and one-half times while the western territories increased twenty-five times larger.

The war also underscored the weakness between the United States and the British provinces along the Canadian border. The first treaty signed by Monroe as president – the 1817 Rush-Bagot Treaty, named for Acting Secretary of State Richard Rush and British Minister Charles Bagot – improved relations between the two former belligerents and limited naval armaments of the Great Lakes. Although it bore Rush's name, President Monroe considered the treaty a personal triumph since he had conducted the initial negotiations during his last months as secretary of state. The United States and Great Britain maintained forts in the vicinity of the Great Lakes, but the treaty averted a naval arms race threat and created an economic savings for the United States.<sup>30</sup>

The United States and Great Britain endeavored to settle the boundary disagreements from the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean. However, preliminary discussions and surveys proved inconclusive, so border disputes remained and unresolved until the late 1840s. In contrast, negotiations regarding the western part of the boundary achieved beneficial success. In 1818 the two nations signed the Anglo-American Treaty, negotiated by Rush in his new role as United States minister to Great Britain, assisted by Albert Gallatin, United States minister to France. The accord demarcated the borderline between the Great Lakes and the Rocky Mountains as the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel and settled on joint occupation of the Oregon country. The United States urged subsequent negotiations to end the undecided dual claim to Oregon, but Great Britain would only concede joint occupancy at the time. In 1824, the United States succeeded

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<sup>30</sup> Ammon, *James Monroe*, 345-352; Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 12.

better with Russia, who agreed to a treaty relinquishing its claim to Oregon and northern California.<sup>31</sup>

### Gaining Florida

With unyielding perseverance, President Monroe admitted sometimes consensus proved hard to win. In December 1817, General Edmund Pendleton Gaines succeeded in capturing Amelia Island. A few weeks later, in a meeting with his cabinet, Monroe professed that Gaines's troops needed to withdraw from the island after the eviction of any pirates, smugglers, or other riffraff. Secretaries Crawford, Wirt, and Crowninshield hardly concurred. In rancorous opposition, Secretary of War Calhoun and Secretary of State Adams advocated holding it. Amelia Island posed as a possible bargaining chip to both men, not for the isle itself but, perhaps, all of Florida.<sup>32</sup>

The alarm stemmed from the longstanding disagreement over Spanish-held Florida. The United States regarded Florida's foreign possession as threatening its security. In contrast, Spain proclaimed the province essential to protect its colonies in the West Indies. The Spanish repeatedly rebuffed United States' efforts to purchase Florida, including Monroe's diplomatic mission to Spain in 1805. As president, Monroe prepared to renew his stalwart commitment to attaining Florida without instigating a war with Spain and its European allies. The delay had become untenable and hazardous for many southern Americans along Florida's border. These southern Americans demanded retributive action for lethal incursions against them by uninhibited native predators inhabiting Florida. Monroe had to restrain unauthorized expeditions

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<sup>31</sup> Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 12-13; Samuel Flagg Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 292; George Dangerfield, *The Era of Good Feelings* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1952) 149-151.

<sup>32</sup> Adams, *Adams Diary*, January 6, 1818.

into Florida twice during his cabinet years. The first time occurred in 1811 when General George Mathews marched into Florida to aid liberal revolutionaries. The second occurrence happened in 1814 when General Jackson captured the Spanish post at Pensacola aggravated by the unthwarted heinous brutality by Native People. The complicit Spanish and British exacerbated the tense situation by allowing hostile tribes to use Florida as a haven following raids on United States citizens.<sup>33</sup>

Throughout two more daylong cabinet sessions, the muffled sounds of ardent perspectives and raised voices reached the ears of the mansion's occupants. Secretaries Adams and Calhoun diligently beseeched to sway President Monroe. Their most vociferous opponent, Secretary of Treasury Crawford, believed holding Amelia Island created a *casus belli*, inviting war with Spain. As the hours dragged on, Monroe realized the wisdom of Adams and Calhoun's opinions and changed his mind. "These Cabinet councils open to me a new scene and new views of the political world," Adams marveled. "Here is a play of passions, opinions, and characters different in many respects from those in which I have been accustomed." And, over the next few months, the passions would intensify on both sides as President Monroe directed Secretary of War Calhoun to forward the orders he and General Andrew Jackson had both anticipated for a year would eventually come. Wary of the General's zeal, Monroe included his own letter to Jackson for good measure. Jackson received instructions to forthwith lead an army opposing the Seminoles, "a tribe which has long violated our rights and insulted our national character."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 14.

<sup>34</sup> Adams, Adams Diary, January 9 and 12, 1818; Traub, *John Quincy Adams*, 220; McGrath, *James Monroe*, 409; James Monroe to Andrew Jackson, December 2, 1817, in Andrew Jackson, Andrew Jackson Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

If the treaty with Great Britain represented unfinished business, the acquisition of Florida from Spain demonstrated how the skilled Monroe-Adams foreign policy team forged an international incident into a diplomatic triumph. While the United States in 1818 owned West Florida, the southern portions of present-day Mississippi and Alabama, East Florida, essentially the present-day state of Florida, still belonged to Spain. The disreputable Seminoles, perhaps with Spain's and Britain's encouragement, frequently conducted notorious raids into southern Georgia, harassing white farmers, their enslaved labor, and other Native People. Enraged by these encroachments, President Monroe and his cabinet finally ordered General Jackson, the Battle of New Orleans hero, famed "Indian" fighter, and all-around tough guy, who tended to shoot first and deal with the consequences later, to resolve the matter with military mediation and diplomatic ardor if possible. With vigor and efficiency, Jackson remained true to form upon entering Florida in January 1818. Monroe understood Jackson's aggressive personality and had essentially furnished the zealous general a blank check to invade Florida.<sup>35</sup>

General Jackson's raid to push back the Seminoles quickly escalated into a six-month saga, a battle known as the First Seminole War, where a thousand American troops attacked the offending tribes and captured several Spanish forts. In 1818 the crisis came to a climax when Andrew Jackson, marching in pursuit of hostile Seminoles, seized the Spanish fortifications at St. Marks and Pensacola and executed two British traders for aiding and abetting the hostiles. The assault infuriated the Spanish and many in President Monroe's cabinet, particularly Secretary Calhoun, who demanded that Jackson required punishment for overstepping the president's instructions. While Monroe reproached Jackson for exceeding his orders, the president also

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<sup>35</sup> Cunningham, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 58; Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire, 1767-1821* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 345.

tempered his disapproval with support for what Jackson accomplished in the heat of battle, a mixed approach that complicated efforts to punish him. Secretary Adams finally detected an opportunity to gain Florida from Spain and took Monroe's tactic further by openly defending Jackson's conduct in Florida. The political rivalries formed in the upstairs cabinet around the long mahogany table spilled into Congress, where a malicious Henry Clay picked up the gauntlet and led a rigorous but ultimately unsuccessful campaign to censure Jackson.<sup>36</sup>

For six days, high drama reigned in the Cabinet Room. President Monroe and his advisers deliberated over the ramifications of General Jackson's deeds. The situation dictated official responses to diplomats, the press, and Congress. These sanctioned statements required the utmost care in their composition without divulging the discussions Secretary Adams had initiated with Spanish minister Don Luis de Onís, British minister Charles Bagot, and other ministers behind closed doors. The cabinet meetings persisted contentiously for hours. Had Jackson surpassed his bounds, if not ignored orders outright? Did his belligerent deeds confirm acts of war? While Jackson's opponents in the cabinet and Congress would not stop lashing out at him, President Monroe nor Secretary of State Adams gave credence to their debates. Intent on Florida's acquisition, they used Jackson's incursion as a diplomatic device to force Spain to cede the province. Furthermore, Monroe, committed to strengthening the nation's defenses, would not condemn or cashier the army's most able general. Once the cabinet agreed on its wording, they forward a uncertified article for publication in the *National Intelligencer* with no indication of its authorship: "The President of the United States has, we understand, decided that Pensacola, and the other Spanish posts, which have been taken by General Jackson, in the

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<sup>36</sup> James Monroe to George Hay, September 6, 1818, in James Monroe, James Monroe Papers, James Monroe's Highland, Charlottesville, Virginia; Cunningham, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 61, 66-67; Remini, *Andrew Jackson*, 350, 358.

Floridas, shall be restored to the Spanish authority; but with a requisition, that the King of Spain shall, hereafter keep such a force in those colonies, as shall enable him to execute, with fidelity, the fifth article of the treaty between the United States and Spain.” In other words, Spain would retain her territory and would maintain enough troops in Florida to prevent further “Indian” infiltrations in the United States.<sup>37</sup>

As December 1819 drew nigh, the summer and fall congressional abeyance did nothing to soothe Henry Clay’s wrath for General Jackson. Concerned congressmen, including Secretary Adams, wished to circumvent the resurrected drama. Knowing when Congress reconvened, one of its first tasks required the election of the House of Representatives’ speaker, a position Clay had held and would likely again. The scenario that unfolded in the pages of Adams’s diary demonstrated the public’s accessibility to the executive mansion and the belief in its chief resident, yet, another glimpse at why so many contemporaries admired President Monroe’s wisdom. At the White House that afternoon, President Monroe confided to Adams that several Congress members had come to visit him before the legislature caucused, imploring him to support a move to malign Clay’s petition for House speaker seat. The gentlemen felt confident that Monroe would approve. After all, Clay had opposed practically every measure the president stood for, and his “inability” to meet with Monroe in Kentucky during his southern states tour represented an outright snub. To their surprise, Monroe disinclined to acquiesce to their request. “First,” he explained to Adams, “it would be giving Mr. Clay more consequence than belongs to him.” Second, Clay’s obstinacy against the president “has injured his own influence” in the eyes of most, and “if it should be necessary to put him down, let it be done by his Constituents.”

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<sup>37</sup> *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D. C.), July 27, 1818; James Monroe to George Hay, September 6, 1818, in James Monroe, in Monroe, James Monroe Papers, James Monroe’s Highland; Cunningham, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 62-63; Adams, Adams Diary, July 15-21, 1818.

Lastly, Monroe reminded them, as well as Adams, that “there is no other member of the Administration for the Western Country,” and “it is gratifying to them to have one of their members Speaker of the House.” Henry Clay had no other westerner to rival his standing in Washington, and “if he should be dismissed they would feel hurt in their pride, and be stimulated to take part with him. It would be best,” Monroe concluded, “to leave him in his chair.” Adams, who vented almost daily in his diary about Crawford, Clay, and other enemies, went home convinced “the President has acted and spoken wisely,” better to have Clay as an adversary down the street than a martyr to a sizable bloc of voters.<sup>38</sup>

As predicted, Congress renewed the debate censuring General Jackson for his unauthorized actions with bated breath. Its members, led by Speaker Henry Clay, would accuse General Jackson and President Monroe of conducting war with forethought and malice while lacking Congress’s constitutional authority to endorse it. The peevish proponents of the censure mostly hoped to sully General Jackson’s hero reputation and weaken his growing popularity as a potential future presidential candidate. On January 20, 1819, Clay rose to speak and unleash a three-hour diatribe against Jackson while making several innuendos against President Monroe and his administration. At first, Clay’s stratagem to deprecate Jackson prevailed until General Jackson rode into Washington three days later. President Monroe immediately and graciously received him at the President’s House. The president painstakingly demonstrated to the general his scrupulously documented support and shared Jefferson’s and Madison’s as well, which mollified Jackson. As for Clay and his cronies, General Jackson now had them “in his book.” In Congress, all motions to denounce Jackson disintegrated.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Adams, Adams Diary, November 19-December 6, 1819.

<sup>39</sup> Henry Clay to United States Congress, speech, January 20, 1819 in Henry Clay, *The Works of Henry Clay: Comprising His Life, Correspondence, and Speeches*, 10 vols. ed. Calvin Colton (New York: Knickerbocker,



While Congress had debated Jackson's fate, Adams seized the diplomatic moment. He pursued treaty negotiations with a reluctant Spain, correctly recognizing the inability of this imperial power to defend its territories in North and South America. Adams's relentless diplomacy finally wore down the Spanish minister, Don Luis de Onís, and his government. The Transcontinental Treaty of 1819, also known as the Adams-Onís Treaty, resolved the boundary disputes by extending the western United States boundary to the present-day Louisiana-Texas border and the northern boundary to the 42nd parallel, the current northern border of California. The treaty also led to the United States' acquisition of Florida for \$5 million, a significant addition to an American nation growing in territory and supremacy. The attainment achieved an excellent accomplishment for President Monroe, who had pursued Florida's acquisition for years, and for State Secretary Adams, who had brilliantly negotiated the treaty.<sup>40</sup>

#### "Indian" Policy

The continued presence of Native People within the United States supplemented the boundary difficulties experienced with Great Britain and Spain, increasing concerns related to national security. The United States recognized the indigenous tribes as alien nations retaining control over their tribal lands while residing within the United States territories. Under the Jeffersonian "Indian" policy of "anglicizing" or civilizing, the Native People would learn how to become land-owning farmers. While many tribal communities accepted this fate as unavoidable, others refused to abandon their native culture or sell their tribal lands. In the beginning,

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1904), 178-204; Andrew Jackson to William Berkeley Lewis, January 30, 1819, in Jackson, *Papers of Andrew Jackson*, 4:268-271; McGrath, *James Monroe*, 422-424.

<sup>40</sup> James Monroe to George Hay, September 6, 1818, in Monroe, *James Monroe Papers*, James Monroe's Highland; Adams Diary, January 10 and May 13, 1818; Bemis, *John Quincy Adams*, 329, 334-338; Adams Diary, February 1-24, 1819; Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 15.

President Monroe adhered to Jefferson's program, but by 1820 he became an advocate of a relocation policy. Native People would concede to exchange their eastern land for vast territory west of the Mississippi River. The president argued that the process would open millions of valuable acres to settlement by resettling tribes beyond the limits of westward expansion and protecting them from depredations by rapacious Americans.<sup>41</sup>

This strategy would also address the president's apprehensions about security. During the War of 1812, Native People in both the north and south aligned with the British; relocation of the tribes to the west would eradicate this internal threat. Efforts to purchase tribal land in the east increased during the Monroe administration resulting in the federal government buying millions of acres of such land. Even so, President Monroe held to the principle that indigenous land acquisition only occurred with the consent of the tribes. However, Georgia became particularly surly and adamant about the forced removal of Native People from within their state boundaries. Monroe rebuffed their demands, pointing out that a forced action "would be revolting to humanity and utterly unjustifiable." His decision would provide only a temporary hiatus to the inevitable conflict during President Jackson's administration.<sup>42</sup>

Along with his appointment as Secretary of War in 1817, John C. Calhoun also assumed responsibility for managing "Indian" affairs. Like President Monroe, Calhoun wanted to reform relations with Native Americans. He thought that contact with white civilization altered tribal

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<sup>41</sup> James Monroe, *The People the Sovereigns*, 74; James Monroe, Second Inaugural Address, March 5, 1821, in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 6:163-174; Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 16. Emilie Connolly, "Fiduciary Colonialism: Annuities and Native Dispossession in the Early United States," *American Historical Review*, vol. 127, issue 1 (March 2022): 235-236; Bernard Sheehan, *Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973).

<sup>42</sup> James Monroe to the Senate, March 30, 1824, Richardson, *A Compilation of Messages*, 2:243-245; Monroe, *The People the Sovereigns*, 82; Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 16-17. Connolly, "Fiduciary Colonialism," 239n68-71.

culture for the worse. Calhoun also concluded that Native People needed protection, civilizing, and saving from extinction. In 1821, skirmishes with and among tribes in the Upper Missouri region brought the nation's attention to the small United States military presence at Fort Atkinson. American traders and trappers encroached on tribal lands inciting the Native People to brutal violence. The inadequate military installation provided little to no protection to the western territory or migrating settlers. In April 1821, the United States "Indian" Agent Benjamin O'Fallon, stationed at Council Bluffs, reported to Calhoun the Native People remained "disposed to underrate our strength, to believe that the detachment of troops on the Missouri is not a part, but the whole of our Army."<sup>43</sup>

As a result, Secretary Calhoun parlayed with O'Fallon to convey the tribal leaders to Washington, where they would receive a stout warning about their behavior. More importantly, they would observe the United States' actual populace and military strength first-hand. O'Fallon, accompanied by two interpreters, traveled to the capital city with sixteen chiefs and warriors from Kansas, Missouri, Omaha, Otoe, and Pawnee tribes, including one Otoe chief's wife.<sup>44</sup> Upon arrival, the group wished to honor the "Great Father," a term given to the sitting president, with an elaborate ceremony performed on the North Lawn of the President's House. Observers and journalists reported an audience of 3,000 to 6,000 gathered to watch the event. The French minister, Baron Hyde de Neuville, and his wife joined the crowd attending this historic event. The Baroness delighted in sketching part of the dance. Spectators reported, "They showed their manner of sitting in council, their dances, their war whoop, with the noises,

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<sup>43</sup> John C. Calhoun, *The Works of John C. Calhoun, Vol. V: Reports and Public Letters*, ed. Richard K. Crallé, (New York: D. Appleton, 1855), 18-19.; Herman J. Viola, *Diplomats in Buckskins: A History of Indian Delegations in Washington City* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 25.

<sup>44</sup> *Niles Weekly Register* (Baltimore), December 15, 1821.

gesticulations, &c. of the sentinels on the sight of an approaching enemy. They were in a state of perfect nudity except a piece of red flannel round the waist and passing between the legs...They were painted horribly, and exhibited the operation of scalping and tomahawking in fine style.” After the ritual ceremonial, the president presented each tribal delegate with a silver peace medallion and a suit of clothing.<sup>45</sup>

On February 4, 1822, the delegation visited with the first family at the President’s House. Accompanied by O’Fallon, the indigenous entourage, now fully attired, entered the Entrance Hall. Their American garments dressed the warriors in blue broad cloth frock coats with red cuffs and capes, blue pants, and boots. They enhanced their appearance by adorning their heads with tribal coronets bedizened with red and blue foil and feathers of the gayest colors. Standing near her husband, the female garbed in scarlet pants shrouded with a green camblet cloak with her long black hair down and unornamented. The group painted their faces for the occasion in a less fantastic style than usual. President Monroe and Secretary Calhoun greeted them in the Entrance Hall. Through interpreters, Monroe welcomed them and then adverted to their visit: “to our arsenals, navy yards, and the like, and told them that as much as they had seen, it could give them but a faint idea of our numbers and strength...He enjoined them to preserve peace.”<sup>46</sup>

One of the most poignant moments during their visit to the President’s House occurred when President Monroe received Chief Petalesharro's address. Chief Petalesharro, a Pawnee native of central Nebraska near the Loup River, had achieved celebrity status for rescuing a woman his tribe attempted to burn at the stake. With fear, the warrior tore her from the fire and

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<sup>45</sup> Langston-Harrison, *The Presidential Legacy*, 235; William Faux, *Memorable Days in America: Being a Journal of a Tour to the United States* (London: W. Simpkin and R Marshall, 1823), 378-382; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 405.

<sup>46</sup> *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D. C.), February 11, 1822.

rode away with her on his horse.<sup>47</sup> His luminary status made him the delegation's de facto leader in negotiating with officials. He appeared before Monroe, not in American clothing but in full tribal chief regalia. He delivered to the president and guests a speech that has survived as a high point amidst American history's formal orations and a refined declaration for preserving native culture:

“Great Father, I have travelled a great distance to see you – I seen you and my heart rejoices. I have heard your words – they have entered one ear and shall not escape the other, and I will carry them to my people as pure as they came from your mouth...If I am here now and have seen your people, your houses...and a great many wonderful things far beyond my comprehension, which appear to have been made by the Great Spirit and placed in your hands, I am indebted to my Father here, who invited me from home, under whose wings I have been protected. The Great Spirit made us all – he made my skin red, and yours white; he placed us on this earth, and intended that we should live differently from each other...we have everything we want-we have plenty of land, if you will keep your people odd of it...Here, My Great Father, is a pipe which I present you, as I am accustomed to present pipes to all ...in peace with us...I know that the robes, leggings, moccasins, bear-claws, etc., are of little value to you, but we wish you to have them deposited and preserved in some conspicuous part of your lodge, so that when we are gone and the sod turned over our bones, if our children should visit this place, as we do now, they may see and recognize with pleasure the deposits of their fathers; and reflect on the times that are past.”<sup>48</sup>

After each warrior had an opportunity to share with the president about his great deeds, the group assembled in the Sitting Room, today's Red Room. “They partook of wine, cake, and other refreshments, of which they were no wise sparing; and then lighting their pipes, filled with wild tobacco, they smoked awhile and presented their several pipes to President, Chief Justice, and others, to take a whiff, in token of peace and amity.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> William Seale, “An Eloquent Visitor from the Great Plains: Chief Petalesharro Visits the White House, 1821,” *White House History*, no. 34 (Fall, 2013): 41.

<sup>48</sup> Chief Petalesharro, speech to James Monroe, January 1, 1821, transcription in *Great Speeches by Native Americans*, ed. Bob Blaisdell (Mineola, NY: Dover Publication, 2000), 75-77.

<sup>49</sup> Jedidiah Morse, *A Report to the Secretary of War of the United States on Indian Affairs* (New Haven: G. Goodwin & Sons, 1822) 244-245.

### “Fire Bell in the Night”

In 1819, President Monroe confronted the greatest crisis of his administration during the bitter debate over the admittance of Missouri to the Union, which former President Jefferson aptly referred to as a “fire bell in the night.” “I have never known a question so menacing to the tranquility and even the continuance of our Union as the present one,” Monroe wrote to Jefferson on February 19, 1820.<sup>50</sup> Still slightly empathetic to the state rights stance of the southern states, Monroe supported the unobstructed admission of Missouri as a slave state. Lasting suspicions of New Federalists, the president blamed the controversy on conniving politicians, he claimed, who used the slavery question as a rallying point to revive their diminishing party. Nevertheless, Monroe feared that the contentious argument, an explosive political powder keg, over the volatile slavery issue would potentially destroy the Union, and his greater loyalty remained to the Union. President Monroe favored the proposed compromise permitting Missouri entrance as a slave state into the Union while forbidding slavery in the western territory’s northern portion as a viable solution. Regardless, the president understood that his open-plan espousal would endanger its success by alienating southerners or others opposed to executive interference in legislative matters. Therefore, Monroe quietly but effectively aided the proponents of the concession to garner the votes necessary for the bill’s passage with a hidden hand.<sup>51</sup>

This moment in history always beckons scholarly attention regarding President Monroe’s beliefs regarding slavery. Emphatically, President Monroe based his support for the Missouri

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<sup>50</sup> James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, February 19, 1820, in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 6:116.

<sup>51</sup> James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, February 7, 1820, in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 6:113-114; Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 26; James Madison, *The Papers of James Madison*, Retirement Series, 2 vols. ed. David Mattern, et. al. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009-2013), 1:558; United States Congress, *Annals of Congress*, 42 vols., 15<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session (Washington, D. C.: Gales and Seaton, 1834-1856), 1162-1188, 1193-1204.

compromise on preserving the Union, not securing the “peculiar institution” of slavery.

Historian Daniel Preston asserted that characteristically, Monroe made little comments regarding involuntary servitude beyond affirming that it existed as a state institution in which Congress had no right to legislate. His few remarks indicated that he believed slavery existed as a necessary evil and the United States would improve without it. Gladly, he would support a practical emancipation plan if one presented itself.<sup>52</sup>

However, evidence to the contrary has come to light that discredits this misnomer about the fifth president of the United States. James Monroe understood slavery not as an abstract concept but as part of everyday life. Monroe and his brothers worked side-by-side with the enslaved people in the field in his youth. As a plantation owner, he employed enslaved labor to work the farm. As a lawyer, he had represented enslaved people as his clients. As Governor of Virginia, he negotiated a failed slave insurrection and its subsequent aftermath requesting leniency for the perpetrators. Monroe knew the enslaved people he owned and saw them as people.<sup>53</sup> For example, he defended his enslaved persons against unfair treatment from others. In 1812, he filed a lawsuit against a Mr. Brand, who had viciously assaulted an enslaved person he hired from Monroe. Monroe wrote about the case: "I want no money, just the sentiment expressed by a respectable jury, which ...was decided against such an act, affords me great satisfaction. The God who made us, made the black people & they ought not to be treated with barbarity."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 26-27.

<sup>53</sup> Meghan C. Budinger, “The Domestic Life of James Monroe: The Man at Home,” in *A Companion to James Madison and James Monroe*, ed. Stuart Leibiger (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 478-479; Costello, “The Enslaved Households.”

<sup>54</sup> James Monroe to Dr. Charles Everett, March 23, 1812, in James Monroe, “Letters of James Monroe,” *Tyler’s Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, vol. 4 (October 1922), 106-107.

By the time of the Missouri Controversy in 1820, Monroe began to see the institution of slavery as a detriment to the nation. He rarely publicly discussed slavery's moral implications, at least not in great depth. Still, he did see it being a divisive issue with the United States: "I have wishes also to let it be seen by our fellow citizens in those states, where there are no slaves, that we to the south, are as friendly to liberty, as they are, and that the existence of slavery among us, is one of the evils still remaining, incident to our Colonial system, and of which to so great a height had it risen, that we have not yet been able to rid ourselves." Although this appears as a great contradiction, historian Joseph Ellis aptly remonstrated our obligation to understand the past on its own terms. The nation's Founding Fathers, recognized as politically talented, never became demigods. Racial oral failings did coexist with politically elite ideas in which freedom and liberty did not equate to racial and gender equality.<sup>55</sup>

President Monroe advocated the gradual abolition of slavery and the recolonization of formerly enslaved people to Africa. Monroe could not envision a world where freed ex-slaves and their former masters could live in harmony. Freedmen, he wrote, "can never here enjoy all the advantages, social and political of freemen. If the Constitution and the laws were even to proclaim them entitled to these advantages, such is the force of habit and of prejudice, that the constitution and the laws, would in this respect be altogether inoperative."<sup>56</sup> He had long advocated against the international slave trade, and in 1819 he signed Congressman Charles Fenton Mercer's bill prohibiting the African slave trade as an act of piracy. The president dispatched naval warships to the coast of Africa with orders to intercept any United States

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<sup>55</sup> James Monroe to John Mason, August 31, 1829, in Monroe, James Monroe Papers, New York Public Library; Joseph Ellis, "Learning From the Founding Fathers," U. S. Capitol Historical Society, America History TV, C-SPAN 2, July 1, 2021.

<sup>56</sup> James Monroe to unknown, September 22, 1817, in Henry Clay, Henry Clay Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.



vessels suspected of carrying enslaved people. Sympathetic to the American Colonization Society's objectives, Monroe encouraged the organization to select agents to cooperate with them in establishing a colony, Liberia, in Africa for freed American blacks. Later, Liberia renamed its capital Monrovia in honor of James Monroe's efforts.<sup>57</sup>

So, as the acrimony in Congress rose to a fevered pitch over Missouri's statehood, and threats of disunion assailed every debate, Secretary of State Adams arranged for a private audience with President Monroe at the executive mansion. Quite unsettled, Adams voiced his concerns about Missouri and Maine. Astonished by the president's observation, Adams recounted, "He [Monroe] apprehended no great danger from that. He believed a compromise would be found and agreed to, which would be satisfactory to all parties." In disbelief, the secretary wrote, "Either there is an underplot in operation upon this subject of which I had no suspicion, or the President has a very inadequate idea of the real state of that controversy." The real issue lay in the balance between the congressional houses, not in Monroe's cabinet meetings. A befuddled Adams departed the residence wondering what the president knew. Had the president involved himself in a clandestine collusion?<sup>58</sup>

Adams had suspected right. President Monroe did not officially involve his cabinet in these covert operations. Monroe often succeeded in whittling a consensus from the likes of Adams, Calhoun, and Crawford; less trouble came from Wirt and Thompson. However, other times the president, like a seasoned orchestra conductor, exhausted his advisers by letting them debate with fervor until they realized they would have to agree to disagree and then work toward

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<sup>57</sup> James Monroe to the United States Congress, December 17, 1819, in Richardson, *A Compilation of Messages*, 2:65-67; Daniel Preston, "James Monroe & the Practicalities of Emancipation & Colonization," in *New Directions in the Study of African American Recolonization*, eds. Beverly C. Tomek and Matthew J. Hetrick (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2017), 136-137, 139, 141.

<sup>58</sup> Adams, Adams Diary, January 8, 1820.

a compromise. With Missouri, the president refused to subject Adams and Thompson to a series of nasty arguments with their three southern colleagues in which neither side would concede. Monroe also perceptively knew he would not be able to arbitrate a cabinet meeting on the controversial matter as a hater of slavery but as the owner of enslaved people. Any commentary regarding the abomination of slavery's existence against a lifestyle supported by it would fall on deaf ears and more than likely dissolve his cabinet.<sup>59</sup>

Instead, President Monroe mustered outside forces for a subtle political offensive worthy of Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson. He established a network of people he could trust, both as players in this stealth game and in keeping his role confidential. They included Senate president James Barbour, Monroe's son-in-law George Hay, back in Virginia, and his former secretary turned financial wunderkind Nicholas Biddle in Philadelphia. He still met with cabinet members to continue private discussions, but it would be the former three Monroe would rely upon for geographical feedback as well as political reasons. The president enlisted his son-in-law George Hay as a ghostwriter to advocate the southern states' position in a series of editorials. But Barbour's role in the Senate would prove the most valuable as he had already introduced a bill linking the admission of Missouri with that of Maine. Sensing Barbour's reluctance to involve the chief executive in Congress's business, President Monroe applied the finishing touch: "Come and dine with me today." Monroe enjoined two other politicians to break bread, who might just convince Barbour, just as he might do the same for them. In deference to Monroe, Barbour hinted at discussions of his bill but did not withdraw it.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> McGrath, *James Monroe*, 450-451.

<sup>60</sup> James Monroe to James Madison, February 17, 1821, in Madison, *Papers of James Madison*, Retirement Series, 254-255; James Monroe to James Barbour, February 3, 1820, "Missouri Compromise Letters to James

President Monroe lacked the authority to influence Congress openly, but he had the insight and skill to do so behind closed doors. In the meantime, Monroe continued his private meetings with Senator Barbour and other members of Congress, including Samuel Ringgold of Maryland and John Floyd of Virginia. Ringgold, Monroe's grandson-in-law, and Floyd, a supporter during the Jackson-Florida affair, proved trustworthy in keeping their meetings at the White House confidential. Monroe had his own talents at garnering support, as well, by putting his guests in the room at ease, listening before convincing. Monroe invited congressmen of lesser influence into his discussions as the president sought to expand advocacy for whatever compromise he, Barbour, or someone else could develop. In these meetings, Monroe appeared as his unassuming, pleasant self on the surface, but by the time his small talk moved into the Missouri question, he had assessed what strategy to employ to garner support. Sometimes, just admittance into the president's inner circle, even temporarily, provided enough incentive. Historian Robert Forbes exclaimed with "great exhilaration, that they were transcending parochial interest of their states...ignoring their own political futures for the sake of preserving the Union."<sup>61</sup>

Occasionally, desperate times called for desperate measures. Predating Jackson's presidency by eight years, Monroe had no qualms about using a "spoils system" to win over a less pure, if practical, politician. "The influence of the Palace," Congressman William Plumer, Jr., told his father in New Hampshire, "is heavier than the Capitol." Nowhere did Monroe use

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Barbour, Senator of Virginia in the Congress of the United States," *William & Mary Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (July 1901): 9; James Monroe to James Barbour, February 3, 1820, in Monroe, James Monroe Papers, New York Public Library.

<sup>61</sup> James Monroe to James Barbour, February 3, 1820, in Monroe, James Monroe Papers, New York Public Library; Cunningham, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 97-98; Adams, *Adams Diary*, January 8, 1820; Robert Pierce Forbes, *Missouri Compromise and Its Aftermath* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) 89-90; McGrath, *James Monroe*, 452.

patronage more successfully than in New York. The president sequestered Navy Secretary Smith Thompson's New York connections with Senator Martin Van Buren to barter jobs in the Brooklyn Navy Yard for at least one congressman's unemployed relatives and the gentleman's vote in Congress.<sup>62</sup>

Just when the impasse in Congress seemed insurmountable, Illinois Senator Jesse B. Thomas offered the solution. Thomas's proposal outlined Missouri's admittance into the Union as a slave state but banned slavery north of parallel  $36^{\circ}30'$ , Missouri's southern boundary line. When President Monroe met with Barbour and learned that the Senate head count on such a vote gave him a miniscule majority of only one, the president suggested that Barbour consider allowing Maine's admittance untethered to Missouri. This could provide southern Republicans the chance "to reflect" on supporting Maine's entry, then compel their northern counterparts to show their "magnanimous conduct" and do the same for Missouri.<sup>63</sup>

Furthermore, President Monroe met with several congressmen, including Mark Hill of Maine, to ensure this. With innate dexterity, Monroe listened more than spoke, asked more than answered, and got what he wanted by agreeing with *their* suggestion. They would support Thomas's measure if Monroe and Calhoun's friend William Lowndes could guarantee enough southern Republican votes for a win. Hill, reporting to his Maine colleagues, bragged that he "induced the President to *think* and advise his Southern friends to be cautious." Regardless of who received the credit, Monroe agreed with the strategy. The president had known of the close friendship between Lowndes and Thomas and his secretaries, Calhoun and Crawford, whom he

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<sup>62</sup> Sean Wilentz, *Rise of Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 233; McGrath, *James Monroe*, 455-456, Forbes, *Missouri Compromise*, 90-91.

<sup>63</sup> James Monroe to James Barbour, February 3, 1820, in "Missouri Letters" 9; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 454-455.

still privately conversed with regarding a resolution to the stalemate. Like most human endeavors, politics prevailed as an art form, and Monroe claimed mastery.<sup>64</sup>

Speaker Henry Clay wrangled with fervor the bill through the House and onto the Senate. Additionally, Clay adverted Congressman John Randolph's concerted and contemptable efforts for its reconsideration dismissal. Washingtonians of every social level crowded into the Senate chamber on March 2, anticipating another day of tumult. Instead, they received a lesson in decorum and gentlemanly behavior. Senator Barbour read the bill twice and, without hesitation, announced to the chamber there had been enough debate these past weeks and asked for a vote. Surprisingly, several previous opponents gracefully concurred. The Senate voted overwhelmingly to approve the Missouri Bill with Thomas's amendment, 27 to 15. President Monroe viewed the Missouri Compromise as a victory on several levels. It immobilized the threats of disunion and possibly war and gave Monroe a rare chance to be on the same side as Henry Clay. Monroe felt the compromise represented another stepping stone in American expansion that he called "this march to greatness" in a letter to Jefferson. While "attempts have been made to impede it," Monroe saw nothing that could stop American progress.<sup>65</sup>

### The Monroe Doctrine

Other nations, too, confronted a vastly different international situation in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The comprehensive European agreement known as the Congress of Vienna sought to put the continent back together after being repetively dislocated by Napoleon

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<sup>64</sup> Ammon, *James Monroe*, 454-455; John Niven, *John Calhoun and the Price of Union: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988) 82-83.

<sup>65</sup> Unites States Congress, *Annals of Congress*, 16<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, March 3, 1820, 1588-1593; James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, May 27, 1820, in Thomas Jefferson, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

Bonaparte and his French troops. While Europe embraced its “return to normalcy,” their colonies in South America derived different lessons from the revolutionary upheavals across the Atlantic and within their hemisphere, both in the United States and Haiti. The 1810s and 1820s witnessed a series of violent uprisings throughout South America, from Ecuador to Argentina, with colonial subjects aggressively demanding political freedom and rights. A significantly weakened Spain watched with despair its American empire begin to collapse. South American revolutionaries reminded Americans of their own hard-fought struggle for independence. The United States realized it had more in common with the “American System” of autonomy and equality than with the “European System” of absolutism and tyranny.

Monroe’s efforts to strengthen the country’s borders faced further complications by independence movements in the Spanish-American empire. Since its inception, the United States stayed bedeviled by adventurers who hatched various schemes for nefarious incursions into Spanish territories bordering the United States. The ongoing problem became increasingly aggravated by the revolutionary outbreaks in the Spanish empire in the early nineteenth century. Between 1810 and 1820, adventurers from America and Europe joined forces with revolutionary government representatives. These filibusters embraced a mixed group of steadfast patriots seeking independence and freebooters hoping to reap personal gain amid revolutionary confusion. With most of the chaos positioned on the Louisiana-Texas border and the Atlantic coast ports, these adventurers posed a severe dilemma for the United States government.<sup>66</sup>

Both the Madison and Monroe administrations and a vast majority of American people empathized with the Spanish-American anguished dissenters. The government would not sanction open violation of United States neutrality by persons engaging in war against Spain

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<sup>66</sup> Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 18; Monroe, *Writings of Monroe*, 6:347, 355.

from United States soil. Simultaneously, the government would not endorse any action that would disaffect the Spanish or jeopardize negotiations for Florida. Monroe first confronted this issue during his years as secretary of state. As president, he sought to suppress such provocative activity. He attempted to squash the illegal outfitting of privateers in United States ports by sending expeditions to destroy pirate and privateering bases along the Gulf of Mexico. Next, he ordered a clampdown on filibustering expeditions moving against Texas.<sup>67</sup>

Due to the frequent inability to differentiate between legal and illegal activities, the government's efforts only partially succeeded. Additionally, Monroe had to balance domestic politics and diplomatic considerations as support for Spanish-American independence spread. Monroe's political opponents repeatedly condemned him for his lukewarm support of the cause. Countering, President Monroe argued that a neutrality policy benefited the United States by avoiding war with Spain while, also, recognizing revolutionaries as belligerents with an equal status to Spain. Monroe resisted appeals for the recognition of Spanish-American provinces until he ascertained assurances that they had the wherewithal to establish themselves as independent nations.<sup>68</sup>

Disregarding the extreme leverage he needed against Spain, President Monroe regularly demonstrated cunning and forbearance while avoiding political skullduggery. For example, when *Aurora's* publisher, William Duane, sought a political favor and office, Monroe put principle ahead of political necessity. Duane, now "poor and growing old," reached out to Pennsylvania Senator Richard Johnson with a proposal for Monroe based on a rumor that the

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<sup>67</sup> Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 18-19; Alfred Toledano Wellborn, "The Relations between New Orleans and Latin America, 1810-1824," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 3 (July 1939): 749-761.

<sup>68</sup> Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 19; Henry Clay, *The Life and Speeches of Henry Clay*, vol. 1, ed. Daniel Mallory (New York: Barnes, 1857), 481-487; McGrath, *James Monroe*, 473-474.

government would send thousands of arms to Venezuela. Johnson, as Duane's proxy, respectfully requested an audience with the president. Still, before he completed Duane's appeal, Monroe interrupted and sent him to see Secretary of State Adams at the State Department. Once there, Johnson confided that *Duane* offered to go with the weapons and broker the deal in return for a small commission and his appointment as the United States agent for Venezuela.<sup>69</sup>

Secretary of State Adams, like President Monroe, found Duane repugnant; both considered the *Aurora* "the most slanderous newspaper in the United States." Still, Adams recognized Duane's "indefatigable" writing talents and public influence. "What the president's feelings were," he told Senator Johnson, "I could not say." The meeting concluded, Adams hastened to the President's House to review Duane's proposal.<sup>70</sup> After allaying Adams's concerns over Duane's unrealistic notion, Monroe unleashed years of pent-up anger over Duane and his libelous publication and convoluted machinations. "If we were to furnish arms to the South Americans, it should be done openly in the light of day," Monroe ranted. To him, the idea of using Duane as an agent to represent his administration seemed a perverted joke. The president "believed him to be as unprincipled a fellow as lived," which Adams could quickly agree with after reading the blistering diatribes about his father in the *Aurora*. How would Americans view such an appointment as anything but "buying off his opposition"? Duane's proposal tried "to sell his silence," Adams recorded, telling Johnson, "the President offers nothing but his contempt."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> McGrath, *James Monroe*, 455-456.

<sup>70</sup> Adams, Adams Diary, January 18, 1820; Forbes, *Missouri Compromise*, 88-89; Richard N. Rosenfeld, *American Aurora: A Democratic-Republican Returns* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997) 906.

<sup>71</sup> Adams, Adams Diary, January 18 and 24, 1820; McGrath, *James Monroe*, 456.



Since his time as Madison's secretary of state, Monroe had strongly supported Latin American independence movements. This position resonated with the American public, even though Secretary Adams urged more sincere reticence on the subject. By 1822, the United States demonstrated its ideological and political affinity with its former colonial neighbors to the south when it offered diplomatic recognition to the newly independent states. But, the United States' identification with its southern neighbors also demonstrated its vulnerability toward Europe, despite its recent diplomatic triumphs.<sup>72</sup>

Now, in the seventh year of his presidency, three events presented him with the chance to alter forever American foreign policy: the ongoing struggle for independence in South America; the re-establishment of the principle and practice of "the divine right of kings" across Europe through alliances pledged to suppress democracies; and the growing foreign presence on the west coast of North America. All these demanded Monroe's undivided attention and action. In 1822, after five years of uttering encouraging words to the Latin American independence armies while remaining officially neutral, President Monroe informed Congress he would recognize four of the new republics in South America: Buenos Aires (present-day Argentina), Chile, Colombia, and Peru, along with the government of Mexico. Monroe considered the conflicts, even the ongoing ones, as "manifestly settled." He felt this bestowed acknowledgment without violating his neutrality policy and without altering "in the slightest manner" any policies or sentiment toward Spain.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ammon, *James Monroe*, 409; Cunningham, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 149-151; John Charles Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire: A Concise History of Latin America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 100, 102, 103, 104.

<sup>73</sup> James Monroe to the United State Congress, March 8, 1822, Richardson, *A Compilation of Messages*, 2:117-118; James Monroe to James Madison, May 12, 1822, in Monroe, *Papers of James Monroe*, Mary Washington University.

On June 19, 1822, Secretary of State Adams escorted Manuel Torres to the White House. Born in Spain, Torres had studied military sciences before sailing to the New World. After taking part in a conspiracy against King Charles IV's overlords in Bogotá, he fled into exile, arriving in Philadelphia where other expatriates found a haven in his Spruce Street home. He championed South American independence for the next twenty-five years, writing articles, petitioning merchants and politicians to support his comrades' struggles, and enlisting Stephen Girard to finance gun-running schemes. Bolívar and other influential South Americans duly noted his efforts.<sup>74</sup>

Known for their brevity and professional courtesy, this introduction to President Monroe failed to meet every diplomatic protocol established except unquestionable respect. Recognizing the revolutionary's pride and frailty, Secretary Adams lamented that Torres "has scarcely life in him, to walk alone," but he would not accept assistance this day. In great pain, Torres, his head held high, shoulders back, and with a piece of parchment in his hand, "spoke of the great importance [of United States recognition] to the Republic of Colombia," Adams recalled, "and of his assurance that it would give extraordinary gratification to Bolívar." The president addressed Torres "with kindness which moved him even to tears" and "of the particular satisfaction with which he received him as its first representative." After Torres departed, Monroe told Adams to notify the *National Intelligencer* of his visit. Torres returned to Philadelphia, sending word of Monroe's long-anticipated support back to Bolívar before dying four weeks later. For Monroe,

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<sup>74</sup> Charles H. Bowman, Jr., "Miguel Torres, a Spanish American Patriot in Philadelphia, 1796-1822," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 94, no. 1 (January 1970): 27-32; Caitlin Fitz, *Our Sister Republics: The United States in an Age of American Revolutions* (New York: Liveright, 2016) 48.

the years of encouraging statements had ended. “The time had certainly arrived,” he told Madison, “when it became our duty to recognize” the new republics.<sup>75</sup>

In 1823, a new definition of the United States boundaries achieved a philosophical dimension with the Monroe Doctrine enunciation. During the summer, British Prime Minister George Canning proposed an Anglo-American alliance to defend the former Spanish colonies, now revolutionary states. A proposal for consensual cooperation between the United States and Great Britain, unthinkable only a few years earlier, seemed hardly believable now. When President Monroe received United States minister Richard Rush’s dispatches detailing the Canning proposal, he immediately forwarded them to Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Jefferson and Madison boldly urged President Monroe to pursue the alliance. This question indeed involved the highest interests: a commitment to republican self-government, which the British ministry, for whatever reason, now seemed prepared to defend. In Jefferson’s mind, Americans had come to embrace their former foe.<sup>76</sup>

After hearing from his lifelong advisors and receiving a tribute to the British proposal, President Monroe chose a different course in a bold decision that cemented his place in history. He seated himself in his favorite black leather chair and hunched over his fall-front desk to draft the unilateral declaration known to history as the Monroe Doctrine, its origins, generally speaking, in the intense post-war nationalism that defined Monroe’s administration. More specifically, Monroe’s reflections, in private and with members of his cabinet, especially

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<sup>75</sup> Adams, *Adams Diary*, June 19, 1822; William Duane to James Monroe, October 25, 1814, in Madison, *Madison Papers*, Library of Congress; James Monroe to James Madison, May 12, 1822, in Monroe, *Papers of James Monroe*, Mary Washington University.

<sup>76</sup> George Canning to Richard Rush, August 20, 1823, in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 6:346-350, 365-366; James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, October 17, 1823, in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 6:323-325; Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 21; Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, October 24, 1823, in Thomas Jefferson, *Thomas Jefferson, Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Routledge 1984), 1481-1483.

Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, convinced him that a joint declaration with Great Britain would not be in America's best interests. Britain's stilted plan emphasized free trade in the Americas but not self-government.<sup>77</sup>

"Cabinet meeting at the President's from half-past one till four," Adams noted in his diary for November 7, 1823. On the bleak rainy Washington day, Secretary of State Adams, Secretary of War Calhoun, and the new navy secretary Samuel Southard met with Monroe in the Cabinet Room. Attorney General Wirt and Treasury Secretary Crawford had not yet returned to the Federal City. For three hours, the group huddled around the sturdy mahogany table, which now had numerous tales to share if it could talk. They reviewed Canning's proposals and Rush's reports while considering multiple interpretations and hypothetical outcomes.<sup>78</sup> Reciting what Monroe had accomplished as president, Adams wanted this new policy to be its capstone. Monroe's administration "would hereafter, I believed, be looked back to as the golden age of this republic, and I felt an extreme solicitude that its end might correspond with the character of its progress; that the Administration might be delivered into the hands of the successor, whoever he might be, at peace and in amity with all the world." Leave Europe's affairs out of your annual message, Adams recommended with clarity, "If the Holy Alliance were determined to make up an issue with us," then "it was our policy to meet, and not to make it."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, June 2, 1823, in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 6:308-311; Michael Schwartz, "James Monroe and Thomas Jefferson: Republican Government and the British Challenge to America, 1780-1826," in *A Companion to James Madison and James Monroe*, ed. Stuart Leibiger (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 501-502.

<sup>78</sup> Adams, Adams Diary, November 7, 1823.

<sup>79</sup> Adams, Adams Diary, November 23, 1823; Brook Poston, "Bolder Attitude: James Monroe, the French Revolution, and the Making of the Monroe Doctrine," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 124, no. 4 (November 2016): 283-285.

The portion of President Monroe's annual message to Congress that became known as the Monroe Doctrine encompassed three key foreign political elements. The first element reaffirmed the traditional United States' neutrality and noninvolvement policy in European affairs. The second element, directed toward Spain and its allies, asserted unvarnished the United States acknowledgment and legitimacy of existing Spanish-American colonies. Furthermore, the United States would consider "any interposition for oppressing or in controlling in any other manner their destiny," including any European attempt "to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere" as "dangerous to our peace and safety" and considered a "manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States." The final element, addressed Russia's territorial ambitions in the Pacific Northwest, unwaveringly decreed that the western hemisphere would not permit any new colonization by European nations.<sup>80</sup>

The declaration proved ineffectual as an immediate deterrent to the anticipated invasion, as Britain had diffused that threat by already extracting a promise from France not to assist Spain in recovering its colonies. Regardless that his pronouncement had no immediate diplomatic effect, the president remained unconcerned as he had not intended his message to be merely a diplomatic missive. Instead, Monroe perceived it as an energetic declaration of the United States envisioned position for itself in the world. According to Monroe, the United States represented a nation in which government and society existed based on the republican principles of the American Revolution, making it an exceptional place. These ideals flourished in the Americas

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<sup>80</sup> James Monroe to U. S. Congress, annual message, December 2, 1823, in *The State of the Union Messages of the Presidents, 1790-1966*, 3 vols. ed. Fred Israel (New York: Chelsea House, 1967), 1:204. Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 21.

but not in Europe, as seen by France's recent suppression of a constitutional movement in Spain.<sup>81</sup>

Therefore, President Monroe argued that any attempt to reconquer those provinces emulating the United States and espousing republican forms of government, any effort to establish a monarchy in the Spanish empire, or attempts to found new colonies in the western hemisphere represented an attack on independent nations and republicanism and, by extension, on the United States. In other words, the doctrine proclaimed by Monroe defined a hemispheric boundary for United States republicanism, no different than pacts with Spain, Great Britain, and Russia affixed the geographic boundaries of the continental nation.<sup>82</sup>

President Monroe's success in securing the nation's boundaries accomplished an impressive but not an easy feat. The treaty negotiations, especially those with Spain, required long hours and much patience. General Jackson's foray into Florida, associations with the Spanish-American revolutionaries, the military's reorganization, and "Indian" policies created highly-charged political trials. These challenges and the other difficulties he managed as president sorely tested Monroe's mettle as a politician and the chief magistrate of the nation.<sup>83</sup>

### Triumphal Tour

Almost fifty years had passed since the first unforgettable shots at Lexington and Concord. The nation mourned the gradual passing of the immortal generation who fought to

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<sup>81</sup> James Monroe to U. S. Congress, annual message, December 2, 1823, in *The State of the Union Messages of the Presidents, 1790-1966*, 3 vols. ed. Fred Israel (New York: Chelsea House, 1967), 1:204; Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 22.

<sup>82</sup> James Monroe to U. S. Congress, annual message, December 2, 1823, in *The State of the Union Messages of the Presidents, 1790-1966*, 3 vols. ed. Fred Israel (New York: Chelsea House, 1967), 1:204; Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 22.

<sup>83</sup> Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 22-23.

secure the country's independence from British tyranny. Supported by a Congressional resolution in January 1824, President Monroe invited General Marquis de Lafayette, the last surviving American Revolutionary War general, to make a grand visit to the United States as "the Nation's Guest." A celebratory tour by General Lafayette, who had commanded troops under George Washington, would reinvigorate the American Revolution's patriotic spirit in younger Americans. A living monument and reminder of the virtues and sacrifices demanded in the struggle for liberty.<sup>84</sup>

But, American political leaders dreaded that after France's victory in defeating a liberal rebellion in Spain, the European monarchies would aid Spain to reconquer its former colonies in Latin America. The invitation to Lafayette, a prominent liberal adversary of the French regime, possibly would reinforce to the European powers Monroe's doctrinal message. Also, President Monroe and Congress also hoped that Lafayette's visit would encourage the Americans to support the government's bolder posture on potential military intervention in Spanish America, if compulsory. "As the most famous example of a fighter for liberty on foreign shores, Lafayette could help to rally the American people to greater exertions should it prove necessary."<sup>85</sup>

General Lafayette spent weeks touring all twenty-four states of the Union. He received a hero's welcome everywhere he visited. Like choreographing a theatrical performance, the traveling planners considered diplomatic and political implications for President Monroe and General Lafayette while making the itineraries. Therefore, the general's schedule would plan his last visit in the United States in Washington, D. C. Devoting his attention first to the nation's

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<sup>84</sup> James Monroe to Marquis de Lafayette, February 7, 1824, in Monroe, James Monroe Museum and Memorial Library; Sylvia Neely, "The Politics of Liberty in the Old World and the New: Lafayette's Return to America in 1824," *Journal of the Early Republic*, vol. 6, no.2 (Summer, 1986): 151-171.

<sup>85</sup> Cunningham, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 171; James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, October 18, 1824, in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 7:42-43.

citizens confirmed Lafayette's intentions which would eliminate France's scrutiny for conspiratorial motives. Monroe wrote of Lafayette's visit, "He did well by commencing with our constituents, and coming from them to the government...It shows that the sentiment in favor of our republican principles are universal and that he is respected and beloved by all for his devotion to those principles." Had Lafayette come to Washington first, Monroe confided to Jefferson; it would have compromised his administration with the Holy Alliance. Now Lafayette's trip represented an unofficially personal visit to the country that loved him more than France ever did.<sup>86</sup>

After rapturous receptions in Trenton, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, General Lafayette arrived in the Federal City on October 13. A cavalry escort met Lafayette's entourage at the city limits. After passing under a hastily built arch of triumph, Lafayette greeted an ecstatic crowd. Once inside the President's House, Lafayette, his son, and his companion Auguste Levasseur "were immediately introduced into the hall of audience, which is of considerable size, elliptical in shape and decorated and carpeted with a remarkable correctness of taste," Levasseur recalled. The cabinet secretaries, congressional leaders, and military officers encircled President Monroe "all dressed plain blue, without lace, embroidery or decorations, without any of those puerile ornaments for which so many silly men dance in attendance in the ante-chambers of European palaces." Levasseur marveled at Monroe's lack of pretension, recalling, "The president at the upper end of the room, was seated upon a chair not differing in form or elevation for the rest."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, October 18, 1824, in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 7:41-42.

<sup>87</sup> Auguste Levasseur, *Lafayette in America in 1824 and 1825, or Journal of a Voyage to the United States*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Carey and Lea, 1829) 1:173-174.



As Lafayette arrived, “the whole assembly rose, the president advanced eagerly to meet him, embraced him with fraternal tenderness, then came to us and shook us kindly by the hand.”

Monroe addressed his old friend:

“You are aware from my last letter how much I desired to have you in my house along with your two companions...but I am obliged to renounce this pleasure. The people of Washington claim you; they say as the Nation’s Guest, none but the nation has a right to lodge you...The municipality have prepared a hotel, provided a carriage, and in short, have anticipated all your wants...I hope that this will not hinder you in considering my house as your own; you will always find your places ready at my table...I will do everything I can that you may be as frequently as possible a part of my family.”<sup>88</sup>

The following evening, Lafayette attended as the first family’s guest of honor at a grand reception at the White House, reunited with Mrs. Monroe and her daughters. Levasseur observed in them “the same cordiality and simplicity” he found in the chief magistrate. “Mrs. Monroe is a fine and very agreeable woman,” he happily noted. Mrs. Monroe regaled at the lavish event held in East Room to accommodate all the quests. Indeed, all the exquisite gilded plateau sections adorned the white linen and floral décor. Purely a magical illumination presided over the room flooded with the candlelight from the plateau, candelabras, and sconces and reflected off of their burnish finish. One can imagine that Lafayette took special note of the resplendent scene, and the majestic eagle adorned the fine porcelain and the elegant wine glasses. Indeed, sentimentally his thoughts reflected the once infant country he had defended with his life had founded a now growing republic.<sup>89</sup>

General Lafayette and his guests, fêted almost daily with social events, saw little of his close friend. Following his self-imposed protocol regarding outside invitations with any political

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<sup>88</sup> Levasseur, *Lafayette in America*, 1:173-174.

<sup>89</sup> Levasseur, *Lafayette in America*, 1:173-174.

affiliation, President Monroe graciously declined offers to attend, except one. On New Year's Day, 1825, the Monroe family held their last open house for the public, "much crowded as usual." Morning rain showers soon changed to snow, which fell well into the evening but did not dampen the day's festive mood. That night, Congress gave a dinner honoring Lafayette at Williamson's Hotel. To everyone's surprise, Monroe enthusiastically accepted their invitation. Nearly two hundred attended the celebratory gala. After dinner, guests raised sixteen toasts, including one to Monroe: "The President of the United States – Our respectability abroad and prosperity at home are the best eulogy of his administration."<sup>90</sup>

### “War of the Giants”

In 1819, the United States witnessed initial signs of a significant economic depression since the 1780s. President Monroe had informed Congress that, despite the Panic, there resided enough revenue to cover expenses, only to learn that Secretary Crawford's Treasury report disclosed a \$5 million deficit two weeks later. Although Monroe sympathized with those injured by declining exports, curtailed credit, and a currency shortage, he believed that the national economy remained healthy and would soon right itself. Furthermore, he and most other Americans thought the federal government could do little about the crisis. In his view, the responsibility for dealing with the economic downturn resided with the Bank of the United States. The National Bank had the ability to regulate currency and credit, had the authority to enact debtor relief laws, and charter state banks to aid in regulating the currency.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Adams, *Adams Diary*, December 8, 1824 and January 1, 1825; Cunningham, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 176.

<sup>91</sup> Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 24; Andrew H. Browning, *The Panic of 1819: The First Great Depression* (Columbia, OH: University of Missouri, 2019), 6-8, 216, 218-222; Murray Rothbard, *The Panic of 1819: Reactions and Policies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 4-12.

However, the economic setback and Presidents Monroe's fears about a Federalist party revival proved unnecessary during the 1820 presidential primaries. With the demise of the Federalists as a national party virtually complete, no candidate openly opposed Monroe. The Republicans met in caucus but nonchalantly adjourned without making a nomination, assuming that Monroe would easily win re-election. Discontented about the Missouri compromise, the Virginia Assembly threatened to withhold Monroe's endorsement, raising some restless doubts regarding his re-election. The president finally placated his home state when he assured to veto any bill not allowing Missouri statehood on an equal footing with the existing states. In other states as well, including New York, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina, dissatisfaction over the compromise led to the fielding of alternate candidates merely as token opposition. Surpassing all the concerns, the popular Monroe received every presidential electoral vote, except one.<sup>92</sup>

On March 5, 1821, President Monroe and the heads of the executive departments assembled at the executive mansion. The District of Columbia Marshal and one deputy would escort the president and the administrative department heads to the Capitol. Although Monroe appreciated French finery, as a president of the "common man," he stepped out onto the North Portico "attired in a full suit of black broad cloth, of somewhat antiquated fashion, with shoes and knee buckles." The president arrived to the cheering crowds in a plain carriage hitched to a single horse with his entourage following in similar carriages riding in pairs. After taking his oath of office, Monroe delivered his carefully written inaugural speech. Throughout his list of accomplishments, challenges, and unfinished business, he interwove comments from his innate optimism. After addressing "the internal concerns of our country," he declared, "we have every

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<sup>92</sup> *Enquirer* (Richmond), November 7, 1820; Glover More, "Monroe's Re-Election in 1820," *Mississippi Quarterly* 11, no.3 (Summer 1958):130-33; Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 28.; McGrath, *James Monroe*, 449-450; Dangerfield, *Era of Good Feelings*, 239-240.

reason to anticipate the happiest results.” President Monroe gave a professional address, sparing any lofty rhetoric in his final paragraph. “We now, fellow-citizens, comprise within our limits the dimensions and faculties of a great power under a Government possessing all the energies of any government ever known to the Old World, with an utter incapacity to oppress the people.” After pledging to “forthwith commence the duties of the high trust to which you have called me,” Monroe left the podium to enthusiastic applause and cheers. The Marine Band played the Monroes out of the chamber to “Yankee Doodle.” Once back at the President’s House, the first family opened the doors for a grand reception attended by dignitaries and citizens alike.<sup>93</sup>

If the election of 1820 appeared a lackluster affair, the election of 1824, the press referred to as the “War of Giants,” became anything but that. The last of the revolutionary generation to serve as president at that time, President Monroe realized that his successor born from a political age during the War of 1812 would create a mad scramble amongst the many potential candidates. The most notable presidential aspirants included John Quincy Adams, John C. Calhoun, William Crawford, Henry Clay, and General Andrew Jackson. Trying to make light of a harried situation, Monroe joked with Attorney General William Wirt as the only cabinet member not running for president. This mirthful and rare remark facetiously set the tone for the intense rivalry to succeed him, a competitiveness that began in 1817 and persisted as a source of eternal trouble for the president. In private, Secretary Adams confessed that “it appears to me scarcely avoidable that second term will be among the most stormy and violent...The difficulties before him [Monroe] were thickening, and becoming hourly more and more formidable.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> James Monroe, Second Inaugural Address, March 5, 1821, in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 6:163-174; *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D. C.), March 6, 1821; Adams, Adams Diary, March 5, 1821.

<sup>94</sup> Adams, Adams Diary, January 1-6 and January 8, 1820; “Viginius,” *National Enquirer* (Washington, D. C.), November 7, 1820; Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 29.

President Monroe got along well with the five primary candidates. Still, their mutual distrust and relentless maneuvering to discredit their rivals and underscore their candidacies frequently undermined Monroe's programs, especially the political machinations of Treasury Secretary Crawford. As Congress reconvened in 1820, Crawford advised Monroe that the 1819 deficit would not happen again. The delighted president made the same assurance in his annual message. He happily noted that the government's national debt, which stood at nearly \$160 million in 1815, had decreased by approximately \$70 million. Monroe's short-lived exuberance vanished when he discovered that Crawford intentionally misinformed him. Two weeks after his rosy prediction, Crawford reported to Congress the deficit for 1820 would reach \$7 million.<sup>95</sup>

On the surface, it made no sense for Crawford to sabotage his boss. Errors in Monroe's meticulous presentation would reflect just as severely, if not worse, on the man responsible for them. But Crawford, aware that Congress wanted to make deep cuts in the federal budget, to undermine Monroe's optimistic message and the expenses necessary to carry out his programs high impossible. Crawford anticipated that his subsequent report and willingness to make those deep cuts would bring him favor in Congress, having saved the body from raising taxes. His subterfuge angered Monroe but bolstered the election campaign Crawford had been not-so-secretly conducting since 1816. Secretary Adams derided Crawford as "a worm preying upon the vitals of the Administration within its own body."<sup>96</sup>

The remedies available to the national government prevailed as much more proscribed and heavily influenced by political considerations. With the Treasury now due to collect nearly

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<sup>95</sup> James Monroe, Fourth Annual Message, November 14, 1820, in Richardson, *A Compilation of Messages*, 2:76-81.

<sup>96</sup> *Niles Weekly Register* (Baltimore), December 9, 1820; Adams, Adams Diary, March 3, 1821.

\$23 million from public land sales to thousands of Americans before the Panic, President Monroe had no aspirations of being a debt collector and appealed to Congress's "wisdom," confident its members would agree to the "great relief" of their fellow Americans. Congress passed several laws providing reprieve to those indebted to the United States for purchasing public land, a popular and non-controversial measure. However, Congress refused to undertake the politically dangerous chore of swotting the cotton tariff. Though probably deemed as only a small gesture, Monroe demonstrated his empathy by readily granting pardons to the many hardship petitioners convicted of defaulting on debts owed to the national government.<sup>97</sup>

Unsatisfied, Congress now focused on the cuts it felt necessary financially, and Secretary Crawford wanted politically. The most draconian hit targeted the War Department. Congress demanded the standing army cut from 10,000 men to 5,000, and its budget, which ran to \$9 million in 1818, sliced below \$5 million by 1821. Frustrated, Monroe had to slash spending for coastal and frontier fortifications from appropriations of \$800,000 to \$202,000. The strengthening of American defenses established the cornerstone of Monroe's administration. Watching the president deliberate what to cut at a cabinet meeting presented a sobering and disheartening experience for the members, except for Crawford.<sup>98</sup>

In 1822, President Monroe, a devote constitutionalist, exhibited his statutory scruples when he vetoed the Cumberland Road bill in which Congress "suddenly called" for \$9,000 for repairs, including "the erection of toll gates." Although he favored constructing a national transportation system, the president believed the federal government lacked the constitutional

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<sup>97</sup> James Monroe, Fourth Annual Message, November 14, 1820, in Richardson, *A Compilation of Messages*, 2:76-81; Adams, *Adams Diary*, January 8, 1820; Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 24.

<sup>98</sup> Adams, *Adams Diary*, March 3 and 19, 1821. Niven, *John Calhoun and the Price of Union*, 91.

authority to undertake such a project. In President Monroe's first annual message to Congress and on many subsequent occasions, he recommended submission to the states for a constitutional amendment granting that power. Monroe sent his private secretary Sam Gouverneur to Congress, carrying the veto and a seventy-page essay. The essay, a tedious read, drifted in and out of legislative minutiae and Congress's questionable authority to make internal improvements. Monroe worked on the paper for years. It would address a new generation of legislators, and he wanted them to know the history of this debate. Where "good roads and canals will promote many important national purposes," Monroe held fast that "such a right has not been granted " to Congress. But amid his history lesson, Monroe shifted into uncharted constitutional territory. "My mind has changed, which I will frankly unfold," he wrote. The president reiterated his proposal to give Congress the authority to raise money for interstate roads and canals by constitutional authority amendment. In the meantime, Congress could raise the necessary funds to improve Cumberland Road and proceed with funding for other highways and canals. Then Congress need only assign the necessary portions of funds to the "other agencies [the states]" for application. Almost with malice as forethought, Congress overrode Monroe's only legislative veto.<sup>99</sup>

The Early Republic, philosophically represented a plebiscitary regime in which groups formed linking those who think alike and can only survive in the perpetual flux of disintegration and reconstitution. The result produced a living assembly in which opinions freely clash with one another for the nation's good and the education of the public. But when the democracy's

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<sup>99</sup> Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 25; James Monroe to the House of Representatives, veto message, May 4, 1822 in Monroe, *Writings of James Monroe*, 6:32, 41-42, 46; Monroe, *Autobiography of James Monroe*, 66-71; United States Congress, *Annals of Congress*, 42 vols, 15<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session (Washington, D. C.: Gales and Seaton, 1834-1856), 1114-1138, 1374-1379, 1381-1389.

representative assembly evolved into a repository of “Power,” the appetite for command urged the members to group themselves into permanent factions, thereby sacrificing something of their personalities for the effective cohesion of the group in its quest for victory. By extension, the assembly becomes a mere adjunct of “Power.” As a result, the forthcoming elections would transform from an objective of assembling an accession of fresh talent to either strengthening or weakening the various groups, thus, degrading the assembly and the electors’ sovereignty.<sup>100</sup> For the political battle becomes a war in the truest sense. French poet Charles Baudelaire marveled at its military jargon: “The advance guard of democracy is the forefront of the battle for the republic and others.” Baudelaire aptly pointed out the electors had transformed into soldiers engaged in a campaign under the pressure of their leaders to take possession of “Power.”<sup>101</sup>

And so, the rivalry and distrust became particularly intense between the contenders. President Monroe attempted to claim indifference to the campaign and avoid any action or remark interpreted as favoritism toward a candidate. Despite his efforts, the president became mired in the campaign, for the jostling to destabilize rival candidates swiftly turned into attacks on himself. Although Monroe bristled under these attacks, he quelled the urge to respond publicly. He fostered friendly relationships with all the contenders except Secretary Crawford, whose efforts to sabotage the initiatives of his opponents became too blatant to ignore. Monroe reprimanded Crawford and should have dismissed him. But, Crawford had suffered a stroke in 1823, and continued in a state of ill-health. Hence, Monroe feared that dismissal would have enhanced his candidacy appeal.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> De Jouvenel, *On Power*, 298.

<sup>101</sup> De Jouvenel, *On Powe*, 303.

<sup>102</sup> Adams, Adams Diary, January 8, 1820; Adams, Adams Diary January 6 and June 2, 1822; Joel Poinsett to Monroe, May 10, 1822, in Monroe, James Monroe Papers, Library of Congress; *National Intelligencer*



Unfortunately, these fractious events rarely stayed self-contained within Monroe's cabinet office. They spilled over into other settings, including the President's House. Secretary Adams commandeered one room while General Jackson took another. At the Monroe's January drawing room reception, Louisa Kalisky, a German teenager visiting the Lee family of Massachusetts, noted how the popularity of the candidates' wives affected their husbands' candidacies. Kalisky observed, "If [Jackson] had not a very ordinary wife who smokes with him, he could certainly be nominated this time, but the ladies do not like to bow down to his wife...They would however far prefer to elect Mr. Clay another candidate, and a great ladies man. Jackson has a charming, open-hearted character and great elegance of speech, says something agreeable to everyone, Adams is silent and cold and has a disagreeable face, but his wife is much beloved."<sup>103</sup>

A thousand spectators packed themselves tightly into the House gallery on February 9, 1824, for the first vote by Congress for this presidential election. General Andrew Jackson received the most popular electoral votes but not the requisite majority during the election. So, like a replay of the 1800 Presidential Election, the House of Representatives would decide on the next sitting president. Each state with only one vote jockeyed at last-minute attempts to sway the most tentative of electors and continued until Speaker Clay gavelled for order. With the votes tallied, Adams had thirteen votes to Jackson's seven and Crawford's four. It had taken thirty-

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(Washington, D. C.) October 13, 1823; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 463, 501-502; Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 30.

<sup>103</sup> Adams, Adams Diary, January 21, 1824; Louisa Kalisky, Louisa Kalisky Journal, January 20, 1824, Lee-Palfrey Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.; Cunningham, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 168-169.

five votes and weeks to settle the 1800 election between Jefferson and Burr; this election took one session and a single vote.<sup>104</sup>

That night, the first family scheduled their last levee at the President's House, which took on a commemorative air as General Lafayette appeared as the honored guest. On this momentous occasion, Congress awarded the nearly poverty-stricken Lafayette \$200,000 and a land tract near Tallahassee, Florida, in honor of his service to the United States. President Monroe personally presented the deed to his old friend in what proved to be one of Monroe's last official acts. With heartfelt admiration, Monroe proclaimed, "Resolved that his Excellency's wise an impartial and dignified administration of the General Government has justly entitled him to the approbation and affectionate regards of the good people of the Union." After the presentation and with the presidential election resolved, the lively guests congregated "conversing cheerfully, like men who had just got rid of an irksome and onerous toil." The executive mansion States Rooms appeared "crowded to overflowing," Adams noted. Guests found Monroe "encircled by a knot of politicians" and Elizabeth "attended by a circle of women, of rather brilliant appearance." General Lafayette even joined in the festivities, but neither he nor the first family held center stage that evening; everyone came to see Adams, Clay, and Jackson under the same roof and their reactions to each other.<sup>105</sup>

Henry Clay attended, with a young lady on each arm, but had either departed or kept his distance when Jackson arrived with a lady on his arm. Eventually, the general entered the same

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<sup>104</sup> Adams, Adams Diary, February 9, 1825; H. W. Brands, *The Heirs of the Founders* (New York: Doubleday, 2018), 111-113.

<sup>105</sup> Adams, Adams Diary, December 10 and 12, 1824; James Monroe to Poinsett, December 13, 1824, in Monroe, James Monroe Papers, Library of Congress; Marquis de Lafayette to James Monroe, December 29, 1824, in Monroe, James Monroe Papers, New York Public Library; John Brewer to James Monroe, February 10, 1825, in Langston-Harrison, *The Presidential Legacy*, 256.

drawing room where a ring of guests congratulated Mr. and Mrs. John Quincy Adams. General Jackson, maintaining his pleasant but mischief expression, approached the couple as the crowd went silent. Jackson reached out his left hand: "How do you, Mr. Adams? I give you my left hand for my right as you see is devoted to the fair; I hope you are very well, sir." Adams, who had more experience at diplomatic aplomb than any living American, responded in kind. "Very well, sir," he replied, adding, "I hope General Jackson is well." The relieved first family allayed their fears of any potential brouhaha and now would enjoy the evening. Unaware, they and their guests had just witnessed the last civil remarks exchanged between the two men.<sup>106</sup>

### Achievements and Evaluation

Although Monroe entered Madison's administration as a committed Jeffersonian, the realities of the international arena caused Monroe to jettison Republican foreign policy dogma. He learned early that hope did not exist as a strategy and that chance provided a weak hook upon which to hang a nation's security. Accordingly, he laid the basis for an American grand design that later manifested during his presidency. Hegemony required a foundation based on the idea that the republic's safety precluded any sharing of American power in North America. That continent constituted the nation's sphere of influence. Rejecting a multinational balance of power in the western hemisphere, the United States sought to ensure its predominant power. The close call of the War of 1812 confirmed Monroe's belief that the consent of the governed would replace tyranny in the New World only if America survived as an independent and unified nation. The volatile and uncertain geopolitical situation required that the United States take the necessary steps to defend its rights and honor. Some of these steps dictated anathema to

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<sup>106</sup> Adams, Adams Diary, February 9, 1825; McGrath, *James Monroe*, 548-549.

traditional Republican doctrine: the establishment of credit and a national bank, the encouragement of manufacturers, the creation of an expandable standing army, and the building of an ocean-going navy. However, Monroe realized that the essence of strategic thinking recognizes that one must prepare not only for the expected but also for the unforeseen. Monroe believed that Americans would secure their independence only by expelling European influence from the region and determining their own American identity. As secretary of state, he laid the foundation for doing so during his time as president.<sup>107</sup>

Monroe departed the presidency contented that his administration had been a success. His years as president had undoubtedly experienced controversy and challenges, most notably the Panic of 1819, the rancorous debate over Missouri's statehood, and the long, bitter contest over the presidential election of his successor. The president also suffered disappointments. The curtailment of the program for the construction of coastal fortifications remained probably the greatest. And Monroe certainly had his opponents and detractors: the Old Republicans of his native Virginia believed his conquest for nationalism caused him to stray from republicanism's true path, northern and southern politicians believed his support of the Missouri Compromise as a betrayal, advocates for the Spanish-American independence movement who thought his support of the revolutionaries too slow, and a host of political rivals.<sup>108</sup> In contrast, perhaps the finest accolade Monroe received came from his oldest friend and *foe*, John Marshall: "You have filled an ample space in the public mind and have been conspicuously instrumental in effecting objects of great interest to our common country. Believe me when I congratulate you on the

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<sup>107</sup>Mackubin Thomas Owens, "James Monroe as Secretary of State and Secretary of War, 1809-1817: Toward Republican Strategic Sobriety," in *A Companion to James Madison and James Monroe*, ed. Stuart Leibiger (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 419.

<sup>108</sup> Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 31.

circumstances under which our political course terminates and that I feel sincere pleasure in the persuasion that your administration may be reviewed with real approbation by our wisest statesmen.<sup>109</sup>

Always protective of his reputation and honor, Monroe begrudged the antagonism and the personal attacks. Nevertheless, the years of public service experience and his driving ambition that carried him to the presidency honed him into an proficient politician who knew when to remain silent and respond. He understood how to promise just enough to keep his supporters satisfied and to judiciously employ political benefaction to ensure support at crucial moments. He also learned how to tailor his letters to their intended readers. For example, during the Missouri controversy, letters to political associates in Virginia that Monroe knew Richmonders would read emphasized his attachment to state rights and the Constitution. At the same time, his private correspondence revealed his avid support for a compromise. He did not lie but carefully composed his remarks to convey the desired impression. Even when Secretary of State Adams disagreed with Monroe, he found the president's "failing leans to virtue's side."<sup>110</sup>

Monroe's satisfaction with his years as president would receive justification for all the tumult. His efforts to fortify the boundaries and defense of the country proved immensely successful. His decision to delay acknowledging the independence of the Spanish-American republics to a later date than his critics demanded also proved vindicated. The nation recovered from the 1819 economic reverses and weathered the sectional crisis stimulated by the Missouri controversy. Monroe found sincere gratification in his many letters that commended his

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<sup>109</sup> John Marshall to James Monroe, March 7, 1825, in Monroe, James Monroe Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>110</sup> Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 31-32; Adams, Adams Diary, June 23, 1820.

presidential service and the resolutions passed by state legislatures expressing approbation of his conduct. The continued prosperity and flourishing of the United States and its people under the republican foundations engendered by the American Revolution brought President Monroe the most satisfaction. He frequently remarked on the blessings and affluence enjoyed by the nation, and the president characteristically closed his last annual Congressional message by affirming:

“I cannot conclude this communication...without recollecting with great sensibility and heartfelt gratitude the many instances of the public confidence and the generous support with which I have been honored. Having commenced my service in early youth, and continued it since with few and short intervals, I have witnessed the great difficulties our Union has been exposed to and admired the virtue and intelligence with which they have been surmounted. From the present prosperous and happy state I derive a gratification which I cannot express. That thee blessings may be preserved and perpetuated will be the object of my fervent and unceasing prayers to the Supreme Ruler of the Universe.”<sup>111</sup>

Historian Fred I Greenstein asserted that President James Monroe stood as an effective political professional who advanced his purposes consistently with the standards of his time, which dictated that the president not usurp the powers of Congress. Monroe brought a pragmatic style to politics and an self-effacing capacity for hard work to his presidency. Monroe adhered to the prevailing notion of executive leadership and placed a personal stamp on public policy and national unity. Those characteristics defined Monroe’s presidency, so, by extension, they married to the setting from which they evolved. Close attention to the politics of style, in other words, the mobilization of material objects to express group identities, sheds light on the relationship between the semiotic and the political. It reveals how material culture becomes an essential conduit for political communication to stress precisely the multifaceted nature of how material culture operates as representation, as a political instrument employed by the state, as a

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<sup>111</sup> Preston, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 32-33.

counter-hegemonic strategy, or as a combination of these forces. Still, these categories can move us toward developing an analytical framework that helps us better understand how material culture transforms into political action.<sup>112</sup>

On March 4, 1825 John Quincy Adams took office as the sixth President, thus ending almost three decades of a “Virginia Dynasty” in power. Adams would later say of Monroe and his service as the President, “he is entitled to say, like Augustus Caesar of his imperial city, that he found her built of brick and left her constructed of marble.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Greenstein, “The Political Professionalism,” 275t; Molnár, “The Power of Things,” 205-210.

<sup>113</sup> John Quincy Adams, eulogy of James Monroe, August 25, 1831, in Ammon, *James Monroe*, 573.

## Chapter 8: Emulation & Preservation



*Figure 30. The President's House  
Artist: Augustus Kollner, ca. 1848  
Image courtesy of the White House Collection*

The realm of the Federal City encompasses all manner of architecture – Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, Composite, Elizabethan, Gothic, Norman, African, too- a fantastic collage of styles borrowed from all nations and all ages. But among them all, no building captures the attention quite like the White House. Unpretentious compared to royalty, the house requires no straining after striking effects, the fault of so many of our modern constructions. For the Early Republic, James Hoban built the largest stone structure in the United States, yet he did not attempt to construct a temple, a cathedral, or a castle. Hoban tried erecting a spacious and dignified dwelling and nothing more. And, in this, he entirely achieved success.

Probably no building in the world exists where, a little over two centuries, more history has centered than in this shining, white mansion, screened by trees on the city side, and looking out from its southern windows across the placid Potomac to the red Virginian hills. Forty-four presidents have lived in it; sadly, eight have died. The stately structure has provided the setting



for marriages and merrymaking, too, joyous feasts and ceremonial banquets; grave state councils that shaped the nation's destiny; secret intrigues and midnight conclaves that cemented or crushed political parties; and war conventions that aligned great armies and set lines of battle in deadly front.<sup>1</sup>

The story of the White House covers the United States governmental and political history from 1800 to this day. A history comprised of the domestic lives, the ambition, and the personal traits of forty-four presidents, their families, and their near friends and closest advisers. During its first century, much of its narrative scholars had to seek out piecemeal in libraries. One cannot even learn which room saw the death of William Henry Harrison after his brief four weeks of power or where bluff, honest Zachary Taylor, the "Rough and Ready" of the Mexican War, breathed his last. The few traditions that clung to the residence created incongruous mosaics of tragedy and gayety. "Here is where the President usually stands at receptions," says an attendant drawing your attention to the color and oval shape of the Blue Room. In the next breath, while ushered into the East Room, the attendant points out that young Nellie Grant married an Englishman, Algernon Sartoris.

It has acted as an authorized inn for much of the mansion's life. The official guests come and go, and when they depart, they take with them, along with their trunks, whatever personality they diffused through its stately apartments. Some have dwelled in the house in the spirit of freehold owner, sure of undisturbed possession. Some, like short-term tenants, never feel quite at home. President Andrew Johnson's daughter said of the latter, "We are plain people from the mountains of Tennessee, called here for a time by a great national calamity. We hope too much

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<sup>1</sup> Although to date there have been forty six presidents, only forty-four different men have served as president and lived in the executive mansion known as the White House. George Washington never occupied the residence. Grover Cleveland served two nonconsecutive terms and is only being counted once.

will not be expected of us.”<sup>2</sup> Whether proud or modest in their temper or belongings, the presidents, when once they have surrendered the reins of power, soon dropped back into the dim and ghostly parade of their illustrious predecessors.

One of the saddest spectacles coupled with official life in Washington, and one to which no pen had done adequate justice during the first century, would tell of the hasty packing of an outgoing President’s effects just before March’s fateful fourth, which ended his power. After noon that day, the family conferred no longer an entitlement to the place than the passing stranger on the street. While the cannoning fired hails of welcome to the new president and the long procession moved up Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol front for swearing-in, the White House family gathered their personal effects together. They took last looks at the rooms where they received honors, courted, and flattered for years. The delightful sense of greatness and power they had once enjoyed terminated swiftly in just a single day.

Most first families, since its inception, receives regular congressional and private funds to make the White House a comfortable home. The legislative appropriation encourages the first families to acquire furniture and decorative art to fulfill the White House’s role as a nexus of ceremony and entertainment. But, as the president’s residence morphed into a public office, many of its rooms converted into tramping and lounging places for office seekers and political plotters. No part of the original plan, the unintentional consequence derived from the modern system introduced in a small way by its early occupants, and since grown to monstrous dimensions, under which the president devotes nine-tenths of his working hours to hearing and considering the applications of place-hunters. And, as the nation grew, so did the executive

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<sup>2</sup> E. V. Smalley, “The White House,” *The Century Magazine*, vol 23, no. 6 (April, 1884): 806.

responsibilities that demanded the mansion adequately attend to all the domestic and social uses of a republican chief magistrate.

As a result, the furnishing in the White House covers a wide range of genres, all rich with historical association. Official inventories, documents, letters, and diaries tell us what could be found in the White House as early as 1801 when John Adams turned the property over to Thomas Jefferson. These records also document many historic objects bought and sold at auction during the building's lifetime. They reveal and chronicle how James Monroe ordered precious furnishings from France in 1817 during the reconstruction and refurbishment of the President's House that became the focus of some of our nation's most treasured heirlooms, including historically significant furniture, silver, glass, porcelain, and textiles worthy of emulation and preservation over the past two hundred years.

### The Utility of Emulation

In the substance of sophisticated culture, the signs of gentility's origins in European courts remain everywhere. The evidence of genteel cultural artifacts compels scholars to emphasize emulation as the starting point for an explanation. Historians can rarely doubt that populaces on the provincial periphery borrowed their culture from aristocratic centers. Late eighteenth-century mansions mimicked the styles of English country manors, and American city plans adapted Renaissance conceptions of civic spaces. Artisans and shopkeepers promoted their goods by making the latest European fashion claims. Stamped on every form of genteel culture resided the mark of European origins. Later, people in rural towns took their cues from American urban centers, following the emulation patterns but shifting the source.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 403.

The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American gentry desired the latest from Europe. Given this evident emulative impulse, scholars can easily envision the approaches to cultural transmission. The exercise of emulation, simulated at every level with every cultural good, created countless persuasive networks along which gentility influences flowed from European-style centers to remote American outposts. Such transfers, multiplied a thousand times, presented the primary mechanism for the spread of culture.<sup>4</sup>

For the growing American populace that strove for refined respectability and national identity, the spread of gentility met the unfulfilled need. For Americans, gentility stabilized identity amid the social confusion of the early nineteenth century. Genteel conduct and material objects endowed with identity helped individuals move from a traditional society of entrenched personal connections into a world of constantly shifting relationships. As traditional communities separated and people dispossessed, status and identity lost their footing. Established hierarchies dissolved, and strange faces replaced familiar ones. Strangers had no preconceived idea of each other's places in the world, especially in the flux of the city. They could only judge by appearances and manners. Gentility enabled the wanderers to claim a place, forge an identity, and establish a recognizable hierarchy.<sup>5</sup>

As discussed in chapter five, gentility served multiple purposes, including republicanism, by asserting power, reconciling conflicts, stabilizing identity, and bolstering confidence. Our democratic impulses made us want to believe that cultural exchanges between the powerful and

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<sup>4</sup> Neil McKendrick, "Commercialization and the Economy," in McKendrick, Neil, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birthplace of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, IN: Edward Everett Root, 1982), 9-196. This article includes an in-depth analysis on emulation.

<sup>5</sup> John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill & Wang Publishers, 1990); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 34-37, 192-195.

weak go both ways, and high culture and low culture borrow from one another in more or less equal portions. But the spread of gentility in America reminded the people that some of our democratic instincts proved false. The exchange between high and low cultures represented anything but equality. The most apparent social fact about power demonstrated that it exercised influence, not just physical coercion, but influence over hearts and minds. It compelled attention. The surest sign of the end of power resided with unselfconscious neglect; then, power no longer matters. So long as an institution retained power, it stood at the center of attention. Therefore, the people at the top had an immense advantage in influencing cultural forms. Moreover, they exercised the most compelling of human authorities, the power to confirm identity.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, gentility produced and spurred emulation, not imitation. The impulse would avoid copying but partake of power, glory, strength, beauty, ideals, identity, etc., believed to inhere in persons and objects at the peak of society and government. In other words, emulating people adapted what they borrowed and made it their own, as became evident with the White House President James Monroe aesthetically designed.

From James Monroe's service in the American Revolutionary War through a fifty-year political and diplomatic career that culminated in the presidency, Monroe's republican principles, nationalist sentiment, and French affections played a significant role in defining his legacy. As the presidential guardian for the executive mansion's reconstruction and refurbishment after its demise in 1814 at the hands of the British, Monroe's personal tastes and political beliefs became indelibly reflected in the exterior and interior redesigns. More

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<sup>6</sup> Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 405.

importantly, his endeavors to strengthen the country's unity and international respect endowed the presidential spaces and furnishings with a national identity that his successors would emulate.

As Monroe's successor, President John Quincy Adams, as the sixth president, and Mrs. Louisa Adams became the first occupants of a fully furnished residence. Except for minor repairs to overly used furniture, the first family needed only to concern themselves with purchasing some decorative items for their pleasure. As predicted, the French furnishings and decorative arts remained in style, and return guests expected to see those familiar ornaments. Numerous decorative items acquired by President Monroe such as the clocks, the vases, the plateau, the Cerrachi busts, and portions of the Bellangé suite, to name a few, will remain continuously in the White House state collection in continual use not only by the Adams but future presidents, as well.

With the inauguration of President Andrew Jackson, the exteriors and interiors of the President's House received an infusion of Monroe-inspired face-lifts and additions. As mentioned in chapter four, Jackson engaged Paulus Hedl, the same ironworks artisan employed by President Monroe. Hedl, using the same design, extended the wrought iron fence around the north and south yards, still utilized today but with the addition of a cement-reinforced foundation. Jackson also requested additional grading work for the North Yard, but the two mounds sculpted in the South Yard that cradled the South Portico view during Monroe's tenure have never received alteration. Jackson's administration's most monumental exterior alteration consisted of the North Portico appendage. Monroe recommissioned architect James Hoban in 1824 to install the South Portico before his second term ended. Monroe had planned both porticos erected during his tenure, but the Panic of 1819 delayed the north face addition.

President Jackson requested Hoban to complete the north façade's portico as planned initially by Monroe in 1830.<sup>7</sup>

Although French-style interiors reached their zenith during President Monroe's administration, they did not terminate with his departure. During the eight years of Andrew Jackson's presidency, he acquired objects of the highest quality for the executive mansion. Furniture crafted in Philadelphia by the French émigré Antoine-Gabriel Quervelle graced the East Room. Additional silverware ordered from French silversmiths Martin-Guillaume Biennais, Jacques-Henri Fauconnier, Françoise-Dominique Naudin, and Pierre-Joseph Dehanne still reside in the state collection and dress presidential dinner settings. The silver services received the traditional engraving of "President's House," a custom started by Monroe. Like President Monroe, President Jackson had not forsaken American artisans either. In 1829, he ordered a 425-piece state service of the "richest cut" glassware with the United States coat of arms from the Pittsburgh firm that Monroe favored in 1818.<sup>8</sup>

Monroe initiated some of the interior work to the East Room, but President Jackson oversaw its finish with decorative wall and window treatments. Like Monroe, Jackson employed a French-born cabinetmaker and upholster, Louis Vernon to attend to the interior ornamentation. Vernon supplied the lemon-colored wallpaper with a cloth border, seven sets of light blue moreen curtains with yellow draperies surmounted by gilt eagle cornices replicating those in the other State Rooms. In Monroe-like fashion, Jackson ordered mahogany furniture, overmantel mirrors in rich gilded frames, and fashionable crystal chandeliers. The mahogany suite with

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<sup>7</sup> Seale, *The President's House*, 1:173, 202-203; Pliska, *A Garden for the President*, 30-32.

<sup>8</sup> Monkman, *The White House*, 81, 86-89; Carr, "History in White House Silver:" 33-34; Marie Beale, *Decatur House and its Inhabitants* (Washington, D. C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation), 1954), 17-19.

rosewood veneers created by Antoine-Gabriel Quervelle included three monumental center tables, with black-and-gold marble cut stones inset into the tops and four pier tables, all robust examples of the French influence in the development of the mansion interior design.<sup>9</sup>

Even gifts to President Jackson represented a flair for French-style. Robert Patterson, a long-time Jackson supporter, gifted a pair of French gilded bronze torchères, each with leaf-scrolled candle arms and a scrolled tripod base. Patterson bought these candelabras from Joseph Bonaparte, Napoleon's oldest brother, who served as king of Naples and Spain before moving to New Jersey. The highly ornamented golden candelabrams paired nicely with the Bellangé suite in the Oval Room.<sup>10</sup>

As historians and curators research the history of the White House and the presidents, a tradition of acquiring French-style furnishings and items similar to President Monroe's interiors by future presidents remains a commonality. For example, other French-crafted mantel clocks would join Monroe's lavish gilt mantel clocks, Minerva and Hannibal. President Jackson purchased the mantel "portico clock" from Philadelphia retailer Louis Beron in 1833, but made in France. Intended for the second-floor audience room, the black marble and gilded pendulum timepiece resides today in the Lincoln Bedroom. In 1869, the U. S. Government purchased a French-made mantel clock from New York retailers Browne & Spaulding for President Ulysses S. Grant's cabinet room, today's Treaty Room. The black marble and malachite beauty boasts a thermometer and three dials – a clock, a barometer, and a perpetual calendar. In form and features, the George Washington mantel clock, made around 1815, favored the Monroe

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<sup>9</sup> Monkman, *The White House*, 83-85; Louis Vernon & Company to Commissioners, commissioners miscellaneous treasury warrants, November 25, 1829, Records of the Commissioners; Seale, *The President's House*, 1:183-85.

<sup>10</sup> Monkman, *The White House*, 90.



timepieces. French clockmaker Nicolas Dubuc produced a gilded bronze clock depicting General George Washington's resignation from his commission as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army in 1783. Beneath the dial, the craftsman sculpted in low relief a draper mount bearing the famous words of General Henry "Light-Horse Harry" Lee: "WASHINGTON, First in WAR, First in PEACE, First in the HEARTS of his COUNTRYMEN." Dudley P. K. Wood donated the excellent clock to the White House Collection during Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy's restoration project in 1961.<sup>11</sup>

In the early years, the first families arrived at the White House with their possessions in tow or purchased for the White House with governmental funds. Like clocks, pianos became a mainstay and an essential part of White House furnishings and social status. President Monroe started a new trend by buying the first horizontal piano, the French *Sébastien Érard*. Surprisingly, President Jackson exchanged the "French grand piano" for a "rosewood pianoforte of six octaves" with an American eagle gracefully carved into one corner of the case. A trend of pianofortes and vertical pianos employed in the executive mansion lasted until James Buchanan became president. However, President Buchanan reverted to the horizontal style that once graced the Red Room during Monroe's presidency. In 1857, President Buchanan requested John Blake, commissioner of Public Buildings and Grounds, to write to Jonas Chickering to purchase a superb "full grand" piano, one of the first firms in America to make grand pianos. This piano style, considered relatively rare in America, reflected the great affluence and image of the nation President Monroe tried to perfect.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> William G. Allman, "Jackson Portico Mantel Clock: France, c. 1833," *White House History*, no. 61 (Spring 2021): 20-21; William G. Allman, "Mantel Clock: France, c. 1869," *White House History*, no. 61 (Spring 2021): 40-4; William G. Allman, "George Washington Mantel Clock, Nicolas Dubuc, Paris, France, c. 1815," *White House History*, no. 61 (Spring, 2021): 76-77.

<sup>12</sup> Kirk, *Music at the White House*, 50-51, 76.

With the musical Hayes first family and possibly even with President Grant, a new trend began, coincident with the great boom in American piano production, structural development, and mass marketing techniques after the mid-century. Some manufacturing firms realized that donating a piano to the president, though a great honor, also produced marketable returns. William Knabe and Company gifted a grand piano to President Rutherford Hayes. Next, Steinway honored President Theodore Roosevelt with their 100,000<sup>th</sup> piano in January 1903. A mahogany grand piano covered in dull gold leaf and decorated with the coat of arms of the thirteen original states interconnected with scrolls of acanthus. The delicate instrument graced the East Room, becoming the artistic medium of hundreds of pianists until replaced by a new state Steinway during the administration of Franklin Roosevelt.<sup>13</sup>

Presented to the nation on December 10, 1938, the new 9'7" Steinway instrument replaced the old one, relocated to the Smithsonian Institution. The company hired New York architect Eric Gugler to design the special edition of their 300,000<sup>th</sup> produced piano. Dunbar Beck adorned the crafted Honduras mahogany case with gold leaf, including the giant supporting eagles modeled by the sculptor Albert Stewart. The paintings on the case represented five forms of American music: the Virginia reel, an indigenous tribal ceremonial dance; the New England barn dance; black folk music; and the cowboy song. Last renovated in 1981 during the Carter administration, the historic piano retains a commanding presence and remains used by first families and their talented guests.<sup>14</sup>

Other than musical entertainment, state dinners and other formal occasions welcome visitors from around the country and the world with décor that showcases this legacy and

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<sup>13</sup> Kirk, *Music at the White House*, 124, 126, 172.

<sup>14</sup> Kirk, *Music at the White House*, 236.

highlights our nation's enduring values. The sets of elegant china serve as timeless representations of White House history, American diplomacy through the ages, and President Monroe's defining tastes. Dinners served at the President's House used fine French porcelain until President Woodrow Wilson's administration when Lenox in America became the preferred manufacturer. Regardless of their origin, Monroe's first state dinner service established a precedent for replicated features, some presidential sets more than others. The one definitive consistent ornamentation on all successive dinnerware has remained some level of gilding inspired by President Monroe's plateau. The beautiful plateau, next to the Bellangé suite, maybe the most treasured of the Monroe acquisitions and the most associated with the former president.<sup>15</sup>

Other than the gilding, President Monroe's porcelain displayed the United States heraldry. As the second most replicated feature, some form of the coat of arms, an eagle, and stars decorated the dinnerware of fifteen other presidents: Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, Franklin Pierce, Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, William Henry Harrison, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Lyndon B. Johnson, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. However, the Lincoln state dinner service replicated more of the Monroe ornamentation employing gilding, the coat of arms emblazoned in its center, and requested the same color of nobility, amaranth, to encircle the crafted porcelain. Lincoln's successor, President Andrew Johnson, reordered the same dinnerware in 1865 for use during his administration.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Allman, *Official White House China*, ix; Melissa Naulin, "James Monroe's White House Plateau," 30-31.

<sup>16</sup> Allman, *Official White House China*, 79-82.

After President John F. Kennedy's tragic assassination, Lyndon B. Johnson assumed the presidency, and Mrs. "Lady Bird" Johnson rose to the occasion to continue the Kennedy restoration. In response to an inquiry from Mrs. Johnson regarding presenting proposals for consideration to the Committee for the Preservation of the White House, Mrs. Kennedy responded with a list of some projects "that were vaguely in the works-just waiting for some money to do them," including a state service. Later in the letter, she wrote, "...the State china service could be so beautiful – an [French] Empire design that would go with all the magnificent Monroe gilt centerpieces – a simple design that wouldn't clash with the flower at different times of the year." By May 1967, Mrs. Johnson decided that the central decorative theme on the new state service would be the exact golden eagle poised in flight emblazoned on the Monroe porcelain.<sup>17</sup>

A fundamental component of official entertaining for each president transpires at the dinner table. To enhance each White House event, the table setting, with its china, silver, linens, and flowers, elegantly designed, convey the ultimate in diplomacy, national pride, and hospitality. Thanks to the interest of such first ladies as Caroline Harrison, Ida McKinley, Edith Roosevelt, Mamie Eisenhower, and Jacqueline Kennedy, state china no longer fears the vulnerability to sale or destruction, but carefully preserved, studied, exhibited, and still adorns the presidents' table.<sup>18</sup>

French-inspired furniture also maintains a common theme throughout the people's house. For example, from March 1845 to March 1849, President James K. Polk and his wife, Sarah

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<sup>17</sup> Jacqueline Kennedy to Lady Bird Johnson attached to note date April 8, 1966, in "Mrs. Kennedy 1966, White House Famous Names," Box 5, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Texas; Allman, *Official White House China*, 183-187.

<sup>18</sup> Allman, *Official White House China*, xi.

Childress Polk, presided over what historian William Seale considered the second imperial White House, the first being the administration of James Monroe. Guests attired in elaborate ballgowns and headdresses made in France and of French design attended weekly festive evening receptions and frequent formal dinners. These journaled descriptions provide a window into the past when the nation rapidly changed and expanded to the Pacific Ocean. The interiors of the White House would also change to keep pace with new standards, conveniences, and the luxuries afforded by being a world power. However, nostalgia and national pride had indoctrinated the ideas and styles of President Monroe's early republic.

When Elizabeth Dixon, wife of Connecticut Congressman James Dixon, attended a reception in December of 1845, Mrs. Sarah Polk received her in the "Receiving or Red Room" divinely adorned with new crimson velvet curtains and chairs presenting an air of regalia. The room looked "warm and comfortable," according to Mrs. Dixon. The Polk family had purchased the curvilinear, richly carved rosewood and mahogany armchairs, two couches, and ten chairs in the fashionable Louis XV style upholstered in crimson plush in 1845 from the New York cabinetmakers John and Joseph W. Meeks. The earliest illustration of the room, published in 1856, illuminated the high-banked upholstered chairs in the popular "French antique" style, so-called for its evocation of the old days at Versailles.<sup>19</sup>

According to historian David Ramsey, the new "Frenchy" furnishings primarily derived their style from Louis XV precedents but with greatly exaggerated scale, proportions, color, and decoration. Many even hinted at French Gothic detailing. The blend of these new, more sculptural furniture forms with the older, more rectilinear Monroe furnishings, with their simpler

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<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth L. C. Dixon, diary, December 6, 19, 1845, in ed. Caroline Welling Van Deusen, *White House History*, no. 33 (Summer 2013): 38, 46, 48; David Ramsey, "The First Red Room: Illuminated by Candlelight with the Computer's Eye," *White House History*, no. 42 (Summer 2016): 35-36.

Roman character, must have appeared eclectic and unexpected to visitors to the Polk entertainments. These bold forms, along with the plush, colorful, exuberant upholstery and floor coverings, would have appeared most impressive in their richness. The overlay of patriotic, imperial symbolism would have seemed even more intoxicating and, indeed, would have garnered approval from the nationalistic Monroe.<sup>20</sup>

### Preserving an Idea

From the advent of the twentieth century until the present, the President's House has experienced a collision of different sentiments, arcs of truth struck, and political light obtained. Emulative predispositions evolved into restoration initiatives and further morphed into a preservation dynamic. Historical space stasis becomes a transformational reinvigorated active place for interpreting thoughtfully, inclusively, and expansively to build empathy; inspire people to act for social justice; and address the unfinished work of advancing democracy and freedom. Each generation must add its page to America's unfolding story, and each generation's ability to do so infuses a part of the story's historical significance. Therefore, preservation embraces ongoing and evolving stewardship of the building, the landscapes, the furnishings, the stories, and even the communities associated with the residence. There exists an illuminating power of alchemy when all these elements interact across time but remain rooted in a place and traceable to their origins.

As the White House narrative opened, Congressional policy allowed the public to acquire articles cast off from the President's House. The act of March 3, 1797, granted John Adams funds to furnish the executive mansion but also allowed him to sell items unconditionally that

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<sup>20</sup> Ramsey, "The First Red Room," 36.

became worn out, out of style, or unfunctional. Congress reinvested the proceeds toward a purported “furniture fund.” These sales, often in the form of a public auction, offered the public an opportunity to buy the White House furnishings previously acquired with public funds. By the middle of the nineteenth century, presidential souvenir hunters sought after these articles at state vendues. They cherished the items for generations by the families who acquired them, but purchasers often knew little about their prized possessions’ history. The result created a two-fold effect. First, first families continued purchasing furnishings and decorative items that honored and emulated the early republic’s best-known interiors, President Monroe’s. Second, first families began to pursue with growing diligence a form of preservation program to save for posterity examples of our national and cultural heritage.

The 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia increased public awareness of America’s history. It led to a serious piqued interest in objects connected to the country’s past when there had been little sense of the historical value of decorative objects associated with the White House. As this consciousness grew, the first families tried to identify and preserve articles about past presidents’ lives. First Lady Caroline Harrison, in the 1890s, commenced assembling examples of surviving porcelain from the state table services ordered and used by earlier presidents. This first attempt to document a group of White House objects eventually resulted in the setting aside of the China Room in 1917 as a place to display historical china, glassware, and silver. However, much of what became known about the provenance of those pieces came from word-of-mouth stories handed down by the executive mansion staff, many of whom had employment stretching back several administrations. The recollections of a White House

doorkeeper recorded in 1898 resided as the primary source of information for several decades on the original history of objects in the State Rooms.<sup>21</sup>

Increasing historical mindfulness toward the end of the nineteenth century would lead to an attempt in 1902 to return White House interiors and exteriors to an imagined colonial past through architectural and design changes in the rooms and objects made for those spaces. In 1900, as superintendent of public buildings and grounds, Colonel Theodore Bingham triumphantly unveiled his drawings and model of his centennial project with intentions to add massive wings with a round pavilion and low corner towers to the White House core. Although President Theodore Roosevelt's family and executive staff needed additional space within the residence, these L'Enfant-like palatial ideas the president deemed unacceptable. The architectural firm of McKim, Meade & White reported the president's stance on the matter: "His [Theodore Roosevelt] very first remark was that he was glad that the Commission agreed with him, as he did with it, that the White House should not be disturbed. He regards it as a historical monument and a landmark and will not listen to any proposition to its alteration."<sup>22</sup>

Though McKim, Meade & White, and the first family had the purest intentions, the practice of historic preservation prevailed decidedly different from today. A determined President Roosevelt ventured to sweep away the exuberant Victorian decorations seen as free-wheeling incongruities. The outcome created an interpretation and embellishment of the Georgian architecture, attempting to extol the White House renovation as an example of enlightened federal patronage of the arts and noble past. In their mind's eyes, they pared it back

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<sup>21</sup> Monkman, *The White House*, 14.

<sup>22</sup> Charles F. McKim to Frank Miller Day, November 30, 1901, Records of the Commissioners of Public Grounds, RG 801, Box 19, American Institute of Architects Archives, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.; Antionette J. Lee, "The White House in the Monumental City," *White House History*, no. 11 (Summer 2002): 20-25. Seale, *The White House*, 166.



to the original relic with a refined outside and restored inside. Intrusions such as greenhouses, Tiffany glass screens, etc., had to go. The architectural firm relocated and reconfigured office spaces to the east and west wings allowing for additional preservation efforts within the original mansion. Leon Marcotte of New York produced replicas of the signature style Pierre Bellangé chairs that President James Monroe had purchased in 1817 because President Buchanan had disposed of many. The Roosevelts exchanged old gas lamps for French crystal chandeliers. The architects replaced the East Room's originally plastered walls with wood paneling designed after the Louis XVI suite at the Chateau de Compiègne.<sup>23</sup>

The philosophy that had governed the Roosevelt redecoration to refurnish the building's interiors in harmony with its exterior architecture continued to impact the furnishings of the White House State Rooms throughout the twentieth century. In the 1920s, Grace Coolidge also sought to create a sense of the nation's early history in the state floor rooms. The first advisory committee formed for such a task guided her. President Coolidge assisted by persuading Congress to authorize the acceptance of appropriate antiques and historical objects as gifts to the White House. The first concentrated effort to record the history of White House furnishings originated in 1929 with Lou Hoover, who wished to learn more about various pieces.<sup>24</sup>

Lou Henry Hoover presided as the first lady from 1929 to 1933, opposite her husband Herbert Clark Hoover, the thirty-first president of the United States. Mrs. Hoover, an accomplished scientist, editor, designer, humanitarian, and philanthropist, worked in the shadows and did not disclose her successes to the press. Understanding that Lou Hoover would not seek

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<sup>23</sup> William Seale, "Theodore Roosevelt's White House," *White House History*, no. 11 (Summer 2002): 29-37; A. H. Davenport, notes, A. H. Davenport Papers, Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum Library, Rochester, New York.

<sup>24</sup> Monkman, *The White House*, 14-15.

public credit for her work, Laurence Gouverneur Hoes, the great-great-grandson of President James Monroe, wrote a gracious article for the *New York Herald Tribune* about her historic preservation efforts, “Mrs. Hoover’s Gift to History.” Hoes had not informed the first lady of his intentions. He afterward wrote to explain that the American people wanted to know how she arranged to have copies of furnishings from the James Monroe presidency made for the White House, a project on which they had collaborated.<sup>25</sup>

Laurence Hoes, correct in his assessment, observed Mrs. Hoover work in anonymity alongside Rose de Cine Gouverneur Hoes, great-granddaughter of James Monroe, on the donation and development of the collection that the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History still exhibits. As the first lady, Lou Hoover undertook a novel idea of creating a catalog and historical study of White House furnishings. Realizing the immensity of completing the project for herself and her secretary, Ruth Fessler, Mrs. Hoover commissioned Dare Stark McMullin in 1929 to research and record the provenance of the White House furnishings and write a comprehensive series. McMullin’s work on the catalog revealed that some presidential administrations remained unrepresented to the extent necessary to reflect historical integrity. Therefore, she sought out artifacts to fill these gaps.<sup>26</sup>

Without congressional appropriation for the acquisition or the catalog preparation, Lou Hoover unselfishly paid for the project with her own funds. When donations of original pieces proved not forthcoming, she commissioned reproductions. The most famous among the replicas, Mrs. Hoover had furnishings from the Monroe administration manufactured. In early September

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<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Dinschel, “First Lady Lou Henry Hoover and the First White House Catalog,” *White House History*, no. 45 (Spring, 2017): 31; Laurence Gouverneur Hoes, “Mrs. Hoover’s Gift to History,” *New York Herald Tribune*, November 6, 1932.

<sup>26</sup> Dinschel, “First Lady Lou Henry Hoover,” 33.

1931, she met with Mr. and Mrs. Laurence Hoes, who agreed to collaborate with the first lady to have Elizabeth Kortright Monroe's portrait copied, which now resides in the Blue Room. The team also arranged for several pieces of the Monroe furniture reproduced, especially the Monroe Doctrine Desk, installed in the Monroe Room, today's Treaty Room. When the plans for reproducing Monroe's pianoforte met with complications, Mrs. Hoover located an identical Astor of the same period in the Hugo Worch collection, precisely like James Monroe purchased while minister to England. She borrowed the instrument from the Smithsonian and placed it in "Monroe Room," as well.<sup>27</sup>

The catalog provided insight into First Lady Lou Hoover's efforts to make the White House accessible to the American people. Thus, Lou Hoover's remarkable accomplishments on behalf of the historic preservation of the White House laid the groundwork for modern studies of the White House. Unbeknownst to her at the time, the compendium would become essential to the forthcoming Truman Renovation and, later, to the Kennedy Restoration, as well as scores of scholars engrossed in America's national heritage.

The week after the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 1941, the Army Corps of Engineers proceeded to the house to inspect its structural condition. The thick stone walls shrouded an interior comprised of old, decaying, and damaged wood, so much so that the brick and wooden structure had sagged. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, not troubled by the resulting report, judged it as excessive and, loving old houses himself, ignored most of the data. Yet, the ignored information sat on the president's desk until President Harry S. Truman took office. Without

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<sup>27</sup> Dinschel, "First Lady Lou Henry Hoover," 33; Ruth Fessler to Mrs. Laurence Hoes, September 18, 1931, box 185 subject file: White House Furnishings – General, 1930, White House Library, "Monroe Furnishings," Hoover Papers, White House, Washington D. C.; Kirk, *Music in the White House*, 208-209, 393n24; Hoes, "Mrs. Hoover's Gift to History."

hesitation, the Army Corps of Engineers ensured the new president saw it. Curious occurrences in the house that might otherwise have passed unnoticed began to spice the narrative.

Chandeliers began to sway slightly. Plaster dust snow-like from cracks in walls and ceilings.

Odd noises, creaks, and groans tentatively spawned spectral hauntings that inhabited the halls.

When Margaret Truman, the president's musical daughter, loaded her second-floor sitting room with several heavy pianos, the leg of one of them slipped between two floorboards, sending

chunks of plaster ceiling falling into the space below. This event, the proverbial "straw that broke the camel's back," made headlines and proved, conclusively, that intervention must occur

forthwith. In 1948, President Truman and his family moved out of the White House and into

Blair House, the guest house Franklin D. Roosevelt had created in 1942 from an old family home

across Pennsylvania Avenue. For the next three and one-half years, the White House underwent

a renovation, the only radical change that had come to it since the British burned it in 1814.<sup>28</sup>

So, adamant against the house for its structural weaknesses and threat to the president's safety, the engineers' and Secret Service's first solution demanded the executive mansion's demolition to the ground and a new house rebuilt that looked like the old one.

Unquestionably, this would have taken place, but President Truman's stalwart sensitivity to history and the building's powerful symbolic aura dictated salvaging it at all costs. He absolutely stopped the idea in its tracks. He asked for the least evasive action to make the White House serve the modern purposes of an official house. The president approved fireproof construction and up-to-date amenities – all these, and he knew the engineers would accomplish without a total demolition. In conference with Douglas Orr, a restoration architect, and Lorenzo Winslow, the White House architect, President Truman adopted the plan, and Congress approved it. The

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<sup>28</sup> Seale, *White House of Stone*, 43-44.

project proffered and followed required stripping the entire interior, saving the old stone walls, and rebuilding the interior with modern materials. This plan, of course, became the salvation of the stone walls the Scotch stonemasons built in the 1790s and why they still stand today.<sup>29</sup>

In 1948, the dismantling of the interior began. Survival of Scot's stone walls remained President Truman's personal prerogative. Left to anyone else involved, the naysayers would have them destroyed. Historians esteemed Truman's rescue as not antiquarianism. He saw the walls as American symbols distinguished by their creators. As touchstones to the nation's founding and, if present, would maintain the historical validity of the house. Preservation philosophies of the period predominantly concentrated on the exteriors of structures. Hence, laborers attacked the walls of wood, plaster, brick, the board flooring, and the trim of the interiors with picks and sledgehammers. Winslow, an antiquarian, rescued what he could reuse. He would retain character-defining elements such as doors, mantels, and fixtures for later installation. Then a new steel and concrete structure built on the inside would support a duplicate of the original interiors.<sup>30</sup>

The renovation of the President's House ended three-and-one-half years after it began, on March 27, 1952. The interior, still recognizable as the White House, seemed colder and more public, especially where the marble had replaced plaster and wood in the Entrance Hall. Portions of the 1902 decorations architects had redesigned, and Modern post-war forms had appeared, especially away from the State Rooms. Winslow attempted to preserve essential interior elements, but artisans recreated most treatments. Antiqued window glass, yellowish with

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<sup>29</sup> Seale, *White House of Stone*, 44.

<sup>30</sup> Seale, *White House of Stone*, 44-45; William P. O'Brien, "Reality and Illusion: The White House and Harry S. Truman," *White House Historical History*, no. 5 (Spring, 1999): 8.

bubbles, presented a quant foil to all else that seemed new. The Blue Room, Red Room, and Green Room appeared bright with new damask wall coverings copying eighteenth-century designs in their famous colors. White House antiques returned, refurbished and shining, to take their places besides “traditional furniture” from current catalogs. However, under no illusion, President Truman realized that he had retained the historic edifice, but the White House transformed into a new structure based on a historical model. Nevertheless, as an image, the White House persisted as the President’s House in the minds of the American public, regardless of alteration.<sup>31</sup>

The unprecedented scope of what President Truman did and his commitment to the preservation of the essentials of a preeminent American symbol recast the historic building. He had yielded a portion of the original house as it had evolved over the years so the national character President Monroe created could endure. Changes made to the White House interiors during the Truman Renovation, the public encountered virtually widespread acclamation. The White House’s “original 18<sup>th</sup> Century style of decoration has been restored, [and] anachronistic details eliminated,” announced *Life* magazine. “Every one of the ... White House rooms is adequately and tastefully furnished,” reported Bess Furman for the *New York Times*. Although individuals made efforts with some due diligence since the Roosevelt Remodeling of 1902, the result still lent itself to a more characteristically English Georgian style than the French Empire style, renamed American Federal, created by President Monroe.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> O’Brien, “Reality and Illusion,” 8-12; Seale, *The President’s House*, 2:1050-1051; *Report on the Commission on the Renovation of the Executive Mansion* (Washington, D. C.: Public Buildings Administration, Federal Works Agency, 1949), 12.

<sup>32</sup> “The White House Redecorated,” *Life*, July 7, 1952, 47; Bess Furman, “Keeping House at the White House,” *New York Times*, December 28, 1952, SM7.

After the government had just expended nearly \$5.8 million renovating the White House, Congress proved less than generous with the installment of Dwight D. Eisenhower as the newly elected Truman successor. Neither Congress nor the general public would agreeably consider spending significant revenues to modify the interior decorations. Hence, the Eisenhower presidential administration did not receive the traditional \$50,000 congressional allotment for the White House interiors. Crestfallen, First Lady Mamie Eisenhower recognized historical inaccuracies and lack of authenticity among the furnishings. She had to devise and endorse a program for donations to benefit, correct, and protect the historical narrative.<sup>33</sup>

During the Eisenhower family's tenancy, committees evaluated potential acquisitions primarily on their historical integrity, particularly to the White House, their appropriateness for ornamenting the residence to reflect its earliest era, and their pragmatism. Some items required less scrutiny than others. For example, Mrs. Eisenhower eagerly accepted the bequest for a classical mahogany sofa verified as part of President James Monroe's state collection. Appreciatively, in September 1956, the first lady corresponded with the contributor, Colonel Theodore Barnes, Jr.: "The mahogany French couch which you have graciously given to America by placing it again in the White House is a source of deepest pleasure to all of us who are aware of the importance of such a gift. The sofa will be placed in the Monroe Room, where it will highlight furnishings that are also products of the former President's selection." After arranging for its reupholstering, Mrs. Eisenhower fulfilled her promise. The sofa joined the

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<sup>33</sup> Melissa Naulin, "'Proud Housewife': Mamie Eisenhower Collects for the White House," *White House History*, no. 21 (Fall, 2007): 52-55; J. B. West and Mary Lynn Kotz, *Upstairs at the White House: My Life with the First Ladies* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1973), 139.

other Monroe furnishings in Mrs. Lou Hoover's upstairs room designed for the fifth president, the Monroe Room, today's Treaty Room.<sup>34</sup>

The most significant and prophetic alternation to the Eisenhower White House interiors included refurbishing the Diplomatic Reception Room with fine early nineteenth-century antiques. President Theodore Roosevelt had the former furnace room on the Ground Floor turned into a reception space during the remodeling in 1902. It became the first room in the White House fully furnished exclusively with authentic antiques. The project, recognized as the brainchild of gifted decorator and Board of Directors Chairman of the National Society of Interior Designers, Michael Greer, introduced a successful new concept. Greer positioned the elegant Federal-era furnishings, primarily crafted in New England and New York state, into small conversational groupings. According to former White House curator Betty C. Monkman, the Diplomatic Reception Room served as an essential model and inspiration for Jacqueline Kennedy's refurbishment.<sup>35</sup>

President John F. Kennedy moved to the White House on January 20, 1961. First families had only occupied the residence for nine years since the significant remodeling of 1948-1952. If President Harry S. Truman's metamorphosis of the place had altered everything structurally, Kennedy's brief years in the presidency, 1961-1963, would oversee the house transformed forever in the world's understanding of it. The change became almost spiritual in nature, not just academic. Not simply a matter of antique furnishings and period interiors would make the difference. The Kennedy influence went far deeper into stirring the embers into a

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<sup>34</sup> Naulin, "'Proud Housewife'," 56; Mamie Eisenhower to Colonel Theodore Barnes, Jr., September 11, 1956, Office of the Curator, The White House, Washington, D. C.

<sup>35</sup> Naulin, "'Proud Housewife'," 64-66; Monkman, *The White House*, 226.



bright glow, playing not only upon the house itself but its surroundings. Preservation and historical study of the White House became institutionalized in law and prescribed to an organization, the latter being the White House Historical Association.

To the discerning eye of Jacqueline Kennedy, educated in French history and art at the Parisian Sorbonne University, the White House had an “interior remoteness” laden with historical inexactitudes. However, as a living museum, it had also to incorporate the changing executive leadership. Therefore, as a guide to the restoration project she pursued, she often referred to a mission statement prepared by the Smithsonian Institution. Its most salient point, she felt best expressed in these words:

“First of all, the White House does and must continue to represent the living, evolving character of the executive branch of the national government. Its occupants have been persons of widely different geographical, social, and economic backgrounds, and accordingly of different cultural and intellectual tastes...It would therefore be highly inadvisable, even if it were possible, to fix on a single style of decorations and furnishings for a building that ought to reflect the whole history of the presidency.”<sup>36</sup>

Dedicated to this initiative, the committees and Mrs. Kennedy, with her own preference for French styles, led the efforts to restore and replicate as much of the Monroe interiors in the State Rooms as possible.

Even before moving into the residence, Mrs. Kennedy had started her project rolling with zeal and enterprise. She dragooned a special committee to advise and help her ferret out either authentic White House pieces or American antiques of suitable periods. Mrs. Kennedy enlisted the help of David Finley, Chairman of the National Commission of Fine Arts, Francis du Pont, one of the country’s foremost authorities on American antiques, and Lorraine Pearce, a trained

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<sup>36</sup> Hugh Sidey, “Editing the First Lady: *Life* Magazine Goes to the White House.” *White House History*, no. 13 (Summer, 2003): 10.

museum curator from Winterthur. She also engaged the talents of Europe's celebrated elite decorator, Stéphane Boudin, to infuse an intercontinental and artistic perspective into the decidedly American house, especially a Parisian one. Boudin's expertise, though controversial, received validation as the designer that steered the historic interior restoration at Empress Josephine's Malmaison.<sup>37</sup>

Once in residence, Mrs. Kennedy and Mrs. Pearce engaged in a systematic prowling of the mansion's fifty-four rooms and sixteen baths, then began cataloging the thousands of items in the White House and trying to establish their authenticity. Mrs. Kennedy's treasure hunt within the walls paid huge dividends. She found Monroe's massive Bellangé pier table in the White House carpenter shop. The cellar yielded two dusty bales, which proved to contain rugs Theodore Roosevelt had ordered woven in 1902. No place proved off limits to the knowledgeable team trying to track down the past. One day a butler, accompanying the ladies on a spelunking exploration of the basement, gestured toward the black recesses of a shelf filled with old junk. Mrs. Kennedy and Mrs. Pearce retrieved the items, scoured them, and found they had recovered the gold and silver flatware President Monroe ordered from France in 1817. Mrs. Kennedy and Mrs. Pearce invaded a downstairs men's room. They came away with a whole collection of prizes, including the Cerrachi busts of George Washington, Christopher Columbus, and Amerigo Vespucci that President Monroe had purchased over a century before.<sup>38</sup>

While Mrs. Kennedy and her task force had been shaking down the home grounds for treasure, her committee had been roving further afield for the same thing. Several notable contributions arrived. Secretary of Treasury and Mrs. Douglas Dillon gifted a room full of

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<sup>37</sup> Sidey, "Editing the First Lady," 13.

<sup>38</sup> Sidey, "Editing the First Lady," 14.

American Empire furniture, including Dolley Madison's sofa. Miss Catherine Bohlen of Villanova, Pennsylvania, donated a chair, another piece from the Bellangé suite Monroe ordered for the Oval Room. Mr. and Mrs. Charles W. Engelhard, from Far Hill, New Jersey, contributed Baltimore dining room furniture made in 1785. Mrs. Millard Black of Arlington, Virginia, sent from her home an upholstered chair once used in Lincoln's bedroom.<sup>39</sup>

The program proved more complex than simply redecorating. The project involved congressional oversight and interagency debate. In 1961 Congress passed legislation to establish the museum character of the public rooms of the White House and to provide for the permanent protection of its historical objects. To assist her with coordinating and implementing her White House restoration plans, Jacqueline Kennedy also appointed a Fine Arts Advisory Committee. At the entreaty of Mrs. Kennedy and her committee, legislators drafted Public Law 87-286. The act approved by Congress on September 22, 1961, provided in Section 2 that:

“Articles of furniture, fixtures, and decorative objectives of the White House when declared by the President to be of historic or artistic interest, together with such similar articles, fixtures, and objects as are acquired by the White House in the future when similarly, so declared shall thereafter be considered to be inalienable and the property of the White House. Any such article, fixture or object when not in use or on display in the White House shall be transferred by direction of the President as a loan to the Smithsonian Institution for its care, study, and storage or exhibition and such articles, fixtures, and objects shall be returned to the White House from the Smithsonian on notice by the President.”<sup>40</sup>

Jacqueline Kennedy's installation of a curator created for the first time an office in the White House that would meet museum standards of documentation care and preservation for growing collections and provide the research for room restoration projects. The office and position became formalized in 1964 when President Lyndon B. Johnson issued an executive order instituting the permanent placement of a White House Curator and agency of the

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<sup>39</sup> Sidey, “Editing the First Lady,” 14.

Committee for the Preservation of the White House to advise the president and first lady on the museum character of the public rooms and the collections. The committee members have been active participants in formulating policies, establishing acquisition guidelines and goals, and advising on restoring and preserving State Rooms ever since.<sup>41</sup>

Mrs. Kennedy determined that the project would be self-financing and self-sustaining, as well as elevate academic research and scholarship. Therefore, she founded the White House Historical Association in 1961 to study and publish educational materials on the White House to provide funds for the ongoing conservation and preservation efforts and support the White House Acquisition Trust to reacquire dispossessed executive mansion collections.

While earlier efforts, in due course, lacked significant impact on the White House interiors, the Kennedy administration's program benefited from better historical timing. In the years succeeding World War II and the United States viewing itself resolutely as the premier world power, Americana interest became more prevalent. Furthermore, recent tax laws made charitable giving far more attractive to those able to make significant donations. The first lady's enormous public appeal and social connections also played an essential role in the success of her project. The Kennedys would survey many wealthy and influential friends to contribute to the project, as well as those who wanted to become "friends" of the first family. With the technological advancements in media, particularly television, Mrs. Kennedy welcomed the world into the White House via a televised tour promoting interest and its duality as the people's house.

The Kennedys did not believe that history embraced dry academic affairs but transfigured into a conversation with the most thought-provoking people you could ever hope to meet – a dialogue that could help foster a sense of identity and continuity. Mrs. Kennedy, determined to

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<sup>41</sup> Monkman, *The White House*, 15-16.

obliterate the institutional aesthetic that permeated the White House, focused on transforming the mansion instead into a home reflecting the lives of its former residents and the historical events that had taken place within its walls. She envisioned the President's House as a showcase for the premium examples of American art and culture. Like President Monroe, Mrs. Kennedy wanted the executive mansion to befit the nation's highest elected official, exuding an American stateliness and splendor to match in power the palaces of Europe.

First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy ushered in a new era and changed how the world perceived the United States and demonstrated for future administrations how to enrich and educate from the people's house. The Committee for the Preservation of the White House cooperated with first families to maintain the White House's historical integrity and continuity. After the Kennedy Administration, first families have been actively responsive to preserving the longevity of one of our national treasures in deeds and physical accouterments. President Lyndon B. Johnson carried the Kennedy plans for the State Rooms to completion. At the restoration's conclusion, some of Kennedy's committees had no legal authorization for a sustained existence, except the White House Historical Association. As a result and already briefly mentioned, President Johnson issued Executive Order 11145 on March 7, 1964, commissioning the Committee for the Preservation of the White House to legally secure the White House positions of curator and a chief usher and the Commission of Fine Arts to work in conjunction with the National Park Service Director, the Smithsonian Institution Secretary, the Commission of Fine Arts Chairman, and the National Gallery of Art Director.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, *Executive Order 11145, March 7, 1964*, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D. C.

With President Richard M. Nixon, the White House had another ardent devotee of history. With the guidance of White House curator Clement E. Conger, the Nixon Administration sponsored the most extensive antique acquisition program than any prior president to date. The emphasis on the new collection would be furniture from the early republic, 1800 to 1840. This undertaking secured three additional Bellangé suite chairs including the only surviving bergère, enclosed armchair, made for President Monroe and Mrs. Monroe.<sup>43</sup>

Normal wear and tear on the furnishings from thousands of visitors and guests perpetually necessitate the refurbishment of State Room treatments. The increasing availability of primary sources aided First Lady Pat Nixon in enhancing the authenticity of the interior spaces. The updated textiles enhanced the exhibit eras of Jefferson through Van Buren, which included silks, striped patterns, brighter color palettes, and fringed or tasseled borders. Fabrics in a different shade of turquoise blue and wallpaper reproduced from a French document made by Jacquemart & Bénard, circa 1800, replaced the silk wall covering from 1962 and new more elaborate draperies based on French pattern books installed.<sup>44</sup>

Amassing fine paintings, a costly endeavor, proceeded much slower than collecting antiques. Succeeding administrations have relied on the advice of the Committee for the Preservation of the White House, and works by American artisans and artists have entered the collections. Beginning with the Gerald Ford Administration, the interest shifted from furniture to artwork, extending into Jimmy Carter's Administration. The Fords acquired twenty-six works of art sporting professional landscapes by Childe Hassam and Frederick Church. A different

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<sup>43</sup> Monkman, *The White House*, 252.

<sup>44</sup> Seale, *The President's House*, 2:1055; Monkman, *The White House*, 252.

purchase included a wax portrait of the White House architect, James Hoban. President and Mrs. Carter provided thirty-four paintings to join the permanent collection. Three striking images included Charles Willson Peale's George Washington, R. E. W. Earl's Andrew Jackson, and George Caleb Bingham's "Lighter Relieving a Steamboat Aground."<sup>45</sup>

President-elect and Mrs. Ronald Reagan decided to finish redecorating the family quarters on the second and third floors. The semi-state rooms consisting of the Yellow Oval Room, the Queen's Bedroom, the Lincoln Bedroom, and the Treaty Room remained untouched, garnering no mandatory solicitation from the Committee for the Preservation of the White House. This did not represent any effort to create historical settings. Still, they reflect the present-day taste for republican informality and the mingling of many furnishings, indicative of old and new. Yet, the Reagans promoted conservation efforts for improved collection storage facilities. Also, the first family acquired two East Room chairs produced by William King, Jr. for President Monroe and eight pieces of Monroe's elegant state dessert service.<sup>46</sup>

In the early 1990s, conservation and subsidizing emphasized the rich White House collections. During George H. W. Bush's administration, Congress granted a special dispensation for historical objects housed in the White House to be evaluated and treated for preservation including Monroe's gilded plateau. A new modern off-site museum storage facility equipped with a conservation laboratory, temperature/humidity-controlled spaces, and a computerized inventorial system was acquired and placed under National Park Service management. First Lady Barbara Bush revitalized the White House Endowment Fund under the umbrella of the White House Historical Association, formerly the White House Preservation

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<sup>45</sup> Seale, *The President's House*, 2:1055-1056.

<sup>46</sup> Seale, *The President's House*, 2:1055; Monkman, *The White House*, 257.

Fund, until reorganized by Mrs. Rosalyn Carter. Mrs. Bush seized the opportunity to solicit new venues and patrons to rebuild the nearly depleted reserve, setting a \$25 million goal.<sup>47</sup>

President and Mrs. William Clinton participated enthusiastically as active stewards of the Executive Mansion. As keen history students, the Clintons enjoyed learning the backstory of the White House. First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton undertook a dynamic approach to make the White House a distinctly American showcase figuring prominently in the country's cultural and political life and the first family's life. Reminiscent of Jacqueline Kennedy's fervor, Mrs. Clinton's refurbishment engulfed all public spheres, from historically accurate renovations to significant American art procurements. President Clinton appointed additional members to the Committee for the Preservation of the White House to broaden its expertise to reaffirm historical accuracy. First Lady Clinton pursued new paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe and Henry Ossawa Turner. She retrieved stored treasures such as James Whistler's *Nocturne* to fill essential gaps in the White House's art collection.<sup>48</sup>

After careful research, the State Rooms received new upholsteries exacting in style and reproduced to period specifications. A feat unavailable to her predecessors accomplished via advanced technologies, global networks, and partnering with antiquities artisans. For the Blue Room, the Clintons replaced the wallpaper installed by the Nixon administration. The new wall treatment represented historically accurate early nineteenth century French wallpaper produced during Monroe's presidency. They ordered a new carpet woven based on European designs of about 1815. The gilded furniture in the Entrance Hall and Cross Hall received new rich red

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<sup>47</sup> Monkman, *The White House*, 259.

<sup>48</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, *An Invitation to the White House: A Home with History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), x-xi.



fabric and the floors new carpets, too, replicated from French design sources of the first quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>49</sup>

The delay in selecting a president in the election of 2000 left little time for President George W. Bush and Laura Bush to plan to move their move to the White House. First Lady Laura Bush wanted to capture a sense of serenity and comfort for the first family in the White House. She devoted her initial attention to the family living quarters and President Bush's office designated to the Treaty Room. Mrs. Bush wistfully preferred nostalgic pieces and requested furnishings from storage, such as President Grant's 1869 cabinet table and sofa. In counsel with the Committee for the Preservation of the White House, Mrs. Bush concurred progressive preservation techniques applied to the rooms receiving the most negligible benefit since the Kennedy Restoration. The Diplomatic Reception Room acquired a newly designed carpet featuring an American golden eagle design and sunburst derived from President James Monroe's dessert service of 1817. In 2007, the Green Room on the State Floor received a reproduction of a French neoclassical carpet. In 2008, Mrs. Bush had the Family Dining Room repainted and ordered a new rug featuring borders of eagles and floral swags derived from the late eighteenth-century French mantel in the room.<sup>50</sup>

The Obamas joined a long line of presidential families in 2009. During the Obama Administration, the interiors required and received little redress. First Lady Michelle Obama consulted with the Committee for the Preservation of the White House on producing a new carpet with border designs based on White House plasterwork for the State Dining Room. The Blue Room's window and wall treatments required refreshment. Due to their historical

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<sup>49</sup> Monkman, *The White House*, 259-260.

<sup>50</sup> Monkman, *The White House*, 262, 264.

accurateness, Mrs. Obama had replicas produced from the 1990 and 1995 renovations. More fine wares consisted of the reacquisition of one of a pair of carved and gilded fire screens made by Pierre Antione Bellangé originally produced for James Monroe's Oval Room and a French porcelain confectionary stand from the James Polk state dessert service from 1846. The White House Historical Association partnered with Mrs. Obama to initiate the restoration of the fire screens.<sup>51</sup>

Every departing first family who has resided in the 132-room house imparts something of themselves behind. And while First Lady Melania Trump did not make refurbishing a primary focus due to the constraints caused by the worldwide Coronavirus pandemic, she secured some significant additions to the state collections and supervised improvements during her tenure. They included East Room restoration efforts and new fabric treatments to replace sun-faded upholstery and walls in the Red Room. Other practical projects encompassed the modernization of subbasement curatorial storage and refurbishment of historical wooden doors that had suffered the abuse of thousands of guests, visitors, staff, and many a presidential pet over the decades. Whereas first ladies Laura Bush and Michelle Obama published their White House interiors in cover spreads such as the *Architectural Digest* before leaving office, Melanie Trump did not seek publicity and headlines for her efforts. However, Stewart McLaurin, the White House Historical Association's president, noted Mrs. Trump's concentration on "historic preservation and caring for the beauty and historical elements of the spaces."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Monkman, *The White House*, 265.

<sup>52</sup> Jura Koncius, "Melania Trump is out of the White House, but she left her mark on its public spaces," *The Washington Post*, March 1, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/home/melania-trump-white-house-decorating/2021/02/28/2f31231e-5f53-11eb-afbe-9a11a127d146\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/home/melania-trump-white-house-decorating/2021/02/28/2f31231e-5f53-11eb-afbe-9a11a127d146_story.html).

Mrs. Trump honored customary and traditional preservation protocols before adding her flair or personal input. A notable acquisition included an additional rare 1817 East Room chair that President Monroe commissioned William King, Jr. of Georgetown to produce for the President's House. About thirty doors earned a much-needed facelift. Artisans professionally refinished the rich stately mahogany doors and doorknobs polished to glossy perfection. Of the original fifty-three pieces of the Pierre-Antoine Bellangé furniture, the White House collection now includes twenty-one items. Restoration of those articles that began during the Obama years reached completion and lovingly returned to their Blue Room home. A signature project for First Lady Trump involved a new brass wall clock ensconced over the White House elevator. Custom-built by the Chelsea Clock Company, founded in 1897 in Chelsea, Massachusetts, White House calligraphers scripted the timepiece's numbers and the traditional "President's House." The design also emblazoned a center golden eagle inspired by the James Monroe state dessert collection.<sup>53</sup>

The White House has undergone cycles of change in the last two centuries and will continue as long as it remains the residence and executive workplace of the President of the United States. Past and present will coexist in the Executive Mansion, developing a stronger panorama of America's remarkable story. As the White House settles into its third century as residence to America's executive leaders, the myriad of objects acquired by first families over the centuries will continue in perpetuity to bear witness to life at the center of the nation. Mrs. Kennedy defined the indelible legacy and set the parameters for the paradigm for the White House's preservation that remains dominated by the influences, styles, and tastes of President James Monroe.

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<sup>53</sup> Koncuis, "Melania Trump."

Philosophical, diplomatic, pragmatic, simple elegance in his tastes, and democratic in his convictions, President James Monroe may have expressed more skepticism among the early presidents of the United States but the most definitive in defining a national identity. His passion always seemed pledged toward the United States' cause from his 18th to his 73rd year in almost continual public service. According to historian David Holmes, no one cared more for the new nation's identity.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> David L. Holmes, "The Religion of James Monroe," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol. 79, no. 4 (Autumn 2003): 606.

## Chapter 9: Cord of Affection



*Figure 31. The President's House from the River  
Artist: William Radclyffe, ca. 1841  
Image courtesy of White House Historical Association*

History lives like a mosaic in which defined individual experiences make up larger comprehensive narratives. Any approach to understanding the past leaves room for criticism and neglect. However, the knowledge that painting pictures can occur in many ways and with several layers means that every addition brings us closer to the past. This work captures many individual voices while providing enough sweeping statements to illustrate the larger picture that resonates in our collective memories. Overall, this research seeks to redefine how one remembers, acknowledges, and promotes the legacy of James Monroe. It grants full cultural authorship in the historical landscape he and his collaborators designed at the President's House as a recognizable benchmark for the nation's identity.

In other words, the public no longer treats the built environment as a mere backdrop or passive setting. Suddenly, the president, the nation, the government, the "people," the beliefs, and the executive mansion have symbolic equivalency, which endows the associated material

culture with productive power. James Monroe's investment into the President's House and republican convictions bestowed the residence with its own agency and *cord of affection* with the nation. This affection embraces the cultural landscape's ability to impose highly political characteristics: cultural politics, defined by a shared national heritage; participatory politics, where the citizens invest in what they have a hand in; and utilitarian politics, which serves the public interest and legitimizes the government.<sup>1</sup>

### "City of Magnificent Intentions"

An observer would define the American capital in the early nineteenth century as an anomaly. Other towns and cities dotting the young republics' landscape acknowledged their growth tethered to a commercial foundation. Even the crudest frontier settlements and outposts established in advance of an influx of permanent householders typically had secured trading prospects by river, trail, or rail. Yet, the knowledgeable founders of the nation envisaged even more for the federal city than a meeting place for Congress and a seat of the executive branch of government. These statesmen, familiar through travel or study with the great cities of Europe, succumbed to grander notions. The great novelist and social critic Charles Dickens described the District of Columbia the best as a "city of magnificent intentions."<sup>2</sup> A cohort of leaders, idealists, and designers meticulously crafted a plan for the city of Washington. Paradoxically, pragmatists and romantics proclaimed their dream of personifying in the stones of her buildings, in her parks and fountains, and in the broad sweep of her avenues a surreal dignity and beauty that would symbolize the new republic ethos. With the federal city a legislative reality in 1792,

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Pears, "Power and Liberty," National Constitution Center, American History TV, C-SPAN 2, July 4, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Dickens, *American Notes* (New York: Harper & Brother, 1842), 48.

architectural competitors vied for the new nation's two most illustrious edifices, the Capitol and the President's House.

President George Washington, State Secretary Thomas Jefferson, and the appointed commissioners of the district awarded William Thornton the prize for the Capitol and James Hoban the commission for the president's residence. The Irish Hoban ostensibly drew inspiration for his modest design exemplifying the ducal palace Leinster House, Dublin, juxtaposed with other charming English and Irish country manor houses. His original drafts planned for a structure three stories in height, but with meager and swiftly waning federal monies, two floors would scornfully suffice. With earnest, erection had begun in the autumn of 1792, but progress continued at a debilitating degree during the succeeding eight years. When, in November 1800, President John Adams and Mrs. Abigail Adams took up residence in concurrence with pronounced legislation, the house set within Virginia sandstone walls had not achieved completion. Mrs. Adams penned her daughter, bemoaning, "There is not a single apartment finished...We had not the least fence, yard, or other convenience, without, and the great unfinished audience-room [the East Room] I make a drying room of, to hang up the clothes in." Confronted with the drafty and disagreeable setting, Adams nonetheless beneficently bestowed a lasting benediction on the house following his first night there: "May none but honest and wise men ever rule under this roof."<sup>3</sup>

The mansion's first long-term denizen, from 1801 to 1809, President Thomas Jefferson also faced occupancy with disdain. Not overly enamored either, his extreme republican sensibilities pervaded his remarks, grousing the President's House as "big enough for two emperors, one pope, and the grand Lama." A diligent amateur architect who perceived

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<sup>3</sup> Abigail Adams to Abigail Smith, November 21, 1800 in Adams, *New Letters of Abigail Adams*.

perfection in functionality, he designed low terrace pavilions for either side of the main building, thinking they would soften the structure's grandiloquent impression with later extensions to join the executive mansion with the administrative department buildings. Jefferson appointed Englishman architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe to enhance structural integrity. Latrobe completed numerous projects and assisted President Madison and Mrs. Dolley Madison in remodeling the public floor rooms before British troops burned it in August 1814 during the War of 1812. Once dissenting opinions abated, the gutted mansion would receive precedence in a rebuilding effort in which President James Madison rehired James Hoban.<sup>4</sup>

By 1817 President James Monroe undertook the final reconstruction of the house, requisitioning the elaborate French Empire furnishings that remain at the core of the historic White House collection and embody symbolic import. In 1824, Monroe recalled Hoban, still residing in Washington, D. C. to add the semicircular South Portico, a Hoban pastiche. Five years later, Andrew Jackson engaged Hoban to build the North Portico, again following Hoban's sanctioned plans, although erroneously credited to Latrobe and Jefferson. Throughout the nineteenth century, creature comforts invented by advancing technology included water closets, running water, central heating, gas lights, and electricity by 1891.

The symbol of continuity and stability, the White House, in reality, has existed in a perpetually moderate revision stage over the past two hundred years. Ever since the Adamses moved into the White House, first families have furnished and redecorated the White House in the prevailing styles of their times, the exigencies of the moment, or emulating their predecessors. Because the house has dual functions as the president's home and office, the

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Jefferson quoted in Monkman, *The White House*, 10.



structure endured the stress and strain of daily use by numerous visitors and the introduction of contemporary innovations.

When Congress denied President Chester A. Arthur additional appropriations for a complete interior renovation, Arthur undertook the enterprise at his own expense. He supervised a major refurbishing of the mansion in 1882, having wagon-loads of old furniture carted away to public auction. Then, he engaged the celebrated New York designer Louis C. Tiffany to redecorate the interior. When Theodore Roosevelt became president, the house underwent another revamping. Literally bursting at the seams, the residence would not accommodate the ever-increasing executive staffing demands and the president's very large family. Roosevelt employed the prominent architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White to survey the structure, make rational recommendations, and eradicate flamboyant, ostentatious embellishments, such as President Arthur's Tiffany glass screens. Roosevelt dictated demolishing extensive greenhouses that had flanked the building for decades and interior facilities modernized. Most significantly, the Roosevelt renovation envisioned the first serious preservationist initiatives to reshape the White House into its original appearance, a process extending through succeeding presidencies.

A hundred and fifty years of wartime destruction and rebuilding, rushed renovations, routine maintenance, new service addendums, innovation improvements, and the third-floor addition weakened the infrastructure to near-imminent collapse. During President Harry S. Truman's administration, the President's House underwent a renovation so extensive it would rival the changes inflicted by the flames from the fire of 1814. From 1948 to 1952, in a remarkable feat of engineering, the executive mansion's interiors underwent a comprehensive dismantling while protecting, preserving, reusing, or replicating interior elements. Laborers

replaced the abused and decaying wooden framework with steel without damaging the iconic sandstone walls.

By the early 1960s, Mrs. John F. Kennedy set out to bring back the furnishings and the art of America's illustrious past and found herself embarked on a dusty but fascinating adventure. Searching through basement corners, attics, and storage facilities, she unearthed forgotten treasures pushed aside by the succession of first families. She grew resolute and more insistent that her idea of a living museum take root not only in the Washington rituals of power but in the hearts and minds of United States citizens. This idea of turning the White House into a living museum dictated restoring the White House and obtaining the original furniture and paintings still available. So, the White House would reflect the ideas of the first presidents, especially James Monroe, as he created the most permanent standard. Not to mention, Mrs. Kennedy, like Monroe, preferred and embraced French styles. With curators, historians, and designers by her side, she defined the historical protocols and preservationist initiatives still employed today. She reaffirmed the purity, beauty, and intense feel of national tradition implicit in the building's noble exterior lines, in essence, emulating the same objectives as President James Monroe.

### Conclusion

One may find it difficult to know whether to be more astonished at the boldness and courage or the originality and genius of that generation of incomparable leaders who launched this nation. The founding fathers formulated the paradox of democracy and limited government. They and their successors institutionalized it with practical devices such as written constitutions, bills of rights, a system of checks and balances, and judicial review, all sanctioned by the primacy of law. That the American cause had a new chapter in the history of humanity,

nationalists found reaffirmed by foreign liberal intellectuals throughout the nineteenth century. The French social philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, “In that land, the great experiment of the attempt to construct society upon a new basis was to be made by civilized man; and it was there, for the first time, that theories hitherto unknown, or deemed impracticable, were to exhibit a spectacle for which the world has not been prepared by the history of the past.”<sup>5</sup> America existed not just as one more empire but a transforming presence whose center of history emergence became possible not only by the providential wealth of a virgin continent but by the first successful application of a new principle in human affairs.

Between the time of Washington and Madison, Americans searched for an identity to give meaning to their past, present, and future. One reason Americans tried to compulsively explain their sense of identity reflected in the early republic’s upheavals and evolving character beyond the people’s conception and even the recognition of the expanding country. The belief that the United States had achieved a state of exceptionalism prevailed as a national mythology of sorts. All expected the infant republic to become the most splendid empire since Rome, the first true liberty empire in the history of humankind. The principal instrument of collective progress resided in an exceptionally functional elite, a swarm of achievers, largely self-taught, who had earned rather than inherited their places. They presided over the government, rigorously continental in scope and vigorously capitalist in thrust, this multitude of uncommon men and women Lincoln hailed as “the fairest portion of the earth.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve. repr. (1835, Toronto: Bantam Publishing), 41.

<sup>6</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Lyceum Address, January 27, 1838, Abraham Lincoln Online: Speeches & Writings, <https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/lyceum.htm>.

The diverse and, in many ways, unique collection of furnishings and decorative arts featured within the White House vividly reflects the disparate strands of the emerging American culture. “Democratic nations,” De Tocqueville observed, “will therefore cultivate the arts that serve to render life easy in preference to those whose object is to adorn it. They will habitually prefer the useful to the beautiful, and they require that the beautiful should be useful.” Romantic beliefs led artists to seek truth and beauty in the commonplace of daily life, and there resides a functional beauty in the peculiarly American household objects of utility and adornment in the executive mansion. This kind of art represents democratic and practical, moral and optimistic. And in that spirit, over two centuries, artisans and artists created, both ornamental and functional, all across this broad continent to emulate those early republican ideas and tastes. Herman Melville called America the advance guard of humanity, “sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a path in the New World that is ours.”<sup>7</sup>

Architects and artisans built the White House as the residence of America’s presidents and their families. Within its stone walls, presidents have led public and private lives, and the house has served as the president’s office and as a stage for state ceremonies. Millions recognize the executive mansion as a symbol of the nation that required endowing and forging an identity. Today, the White House coexists as a museum of American history and art due to the realization of Mrs. Kennedy’s dedicated efforts. “Everything in the White House,” she proclaimed, “must have a reason for being there. It would be a sacrilege merely to ‘redecorate’ it – a word I hate. It

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<sup>7</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 439; Herman Melville, *White Jacket: Or, The World in a Man-of-War* (New York: United States Book, 1892), 144.

must be restored – and that has nothing to do with decoration. This is a question of scholarship.”<sup>8</sup>

In meeting the residential needs of first families, the office functions of the president, and the continuous demands of ceremony and entertaining, the White House, over the years, has accumulated an extraordinary collection of decorative objects. Many have rich historical associations with occupants of the house, and several bear emblems of national sovereignty, such as the American eagle and the Great Seal of the United States, as well as the president’s own seal. Presidents acquired other furnishings as examples of the highest quality in American and European decorative arts. These historic furnishings duly reflect and document the tastes and daily life of White House residents, who, from diverse backgrounds and various regions of the country, helped shape the collections. The furnishings in the house resonate with import, conveying inspiration and a glimpse into past presidential lives and significant White House events for each new first family. Regardless of all the vicissitudes in the nation’s taste and technology, and decoration styles, the collection’s core reflects the country’s early republican history and its cultural legacy contributed to President James Monroe. It provides fresh insights into an image of the presidency and the gradual emergence of America’s unique national character. More importantly, it demonstrates that a cultural landscape like the White House can mold the political process, shape a historical event, and capture the human spirit like no other building.

Finally, President James Monroe lived to see his years of service and labor bear fruit in America. The phrase “from sea to shining sea” applied particularly apropos to this Virginian.

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<sup>8</sup> Hugh Sidey, "The First Lady Brings History and Beauty to the White House," *Life*, September 1, 1961, 57.

He spent his life working to create and expand a nation. Young, when the “Founding Fathers” labored over the rudiments of democracy, “Founding Son” might have defined him better as the next generation. Monroe fought in the War of Independence, saw to the implementation of a Bill of Rights, helped forge a path westward toward the Pacific Ocean, struggled with the questions of slavery and the theory and impact of a “manifest destiny,” and found time to run several farms. Monroe, strong, assertive, and intelligent, took advantage of what life presented and made the most of it. He achieved accomplishments as a student, soldier, lawyer, family man, public servant, farmer, politician, and statesman. But he considered himself, first and foremost, an American. Born under colonial rule, Monroe lived to see his country become an emerging world power. His steadfast dedication to the principles of democracy and freedom rings true even today.<sup>9</sup>

Monroe biographer Nobel Cunningham said it best, “as the last president of the United States to have borne arms against the British in the Revolutionary War, Monroe closed an era that has given birth to a new nation.”<sup>10</sup>

Indeed.

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<sup>9</sup> Langston-Harrison, *The Presidential Legacy*, 261-262.

<sup>10</sup> Cunningham, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 187.

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