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Dodge County Independent
White House Historic Preservation: Part 2
What's Happening Around Town?
By Joe and Flo

Joe: Hey Flo! Have you got a little time to talk? I'd like to hear more about the White House and the tour conducted by Charles Collingwood of Columbia Broadcasting System with the former first lady, Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy!

Flo: It was a grand tour given by a grand lady who believed that history matters. When Mrs. Kennedy moved into the White House, she soon discovered there were very little furnishings or artifacts that reflected the history prior to 1902. Many of the former items in the house were either auctioned off or given away or destroyed. There was very little left to document our nation's past which was very upsetting to our former first lady.

Jacqueline enlisted the help of Henry Francis du Pont of the Winterthur Museum to assist in collecting artifacts for the mansion. Many of the items were in the museum and others were in private homes, which have since been donated back to the White House. Other antiques, fine paintings and furnishes have been acquired, built or painted by American artists to reflect to world visitors to the House, that America has very talented artists in their own right. Since 1961, a law was passed that anything donated to or acquired by the White House can no longer be discarded or sold but must be stored or on loan to Smithsonian Museum to be put on display.

Joe: Our last meeting inspired me to do some research. I learned that a famous quote by Theodore Roosevelt set the path that determined the future of the White House. He said: "The White House is the property of the Nation and so far as is compatible with living therein, it should be kept as it originally was." When Theodore Roosevelt moved in 1901, he hired McKim, Mead and White to carry out renovations and expansion with the addition of the west Wing. President Roosevelt believed it is a good thing to preserve such buildings and to keep alive its continuity with its past." This statement reflected Mrs. Kennedy's sentiments as well as mine especially concerning our own local historic buildings in Kasson.

Flo: I agree. Without their existence, Kasson's and our nation's history would be lost to the next generation. There were many changes within the house itself but the outside structure remained basically the same; additions were added with the growing of the country and the duties of the presidency; thus many renovations were done through each presidency. The White House did go through hard times and long periods of disrepair. The lack of proper maintenance in hard economic times resulted in the paint peeling off the house. At times there was not enough money even for minor repairs. There was even a time the White House was known as "The Public Shabby House".

Joe: I understand as each President and his wife took office, additions were added as were needed to accommodate their needs.

Flo: That is true. After the War of 1812 and the tragic fire, despite the suggestion of architect Latrobe, President James Madison pledged to restore the White House just as it was. Front and rear porticos were added in Thomas Jefferson's time. Ulysses Grant converted the White House to a high Victorian style. Mrs. Caroline Scott Harrison, wife of President William Henry Harrison, proposed east and west

additions but was turned down. But this came to be when President Theodore Roosevelt took office and extensive remodeling was done. The Victorian décor was removed and Theodore restored the White House to its Federal-period roots with some Georgian elements. Building the east and west wings allowed him to move the presidential staff out of the family rooms giving the president's family more privacy. Eight years later the West Wing was expanded and while President William Howard Taft was in office, the first Oval Office was created. As that section expanded the Oval Office was eventually moved by President Franklin Roosevelt to its present location adjacent to the Rose Garden.

Joe: I understand, a second floor was added and the third floor that was the attic, was converted to living quarters, is that correct?

Flo: Yes; it was added in the 1930's, as well as a larger basement for the White House staff. The attic renovation was done in 1927 by augmenting the existing hip roof with long shed dormers. The East Wing was used as a reception area for social events and by 1946 it was reinvented for additional office space.

Thomas Jefferson was an interesting and very creative President. It was his design for colonnades that now connect the East and West Wings. When he entered the White House in 1801, the house was still unfinished. One of his first acts was to have water closets (early toilets) installed in the upper floor to replace the outdoor privy. He also created a wilderness museum with mounted animals and Indian artifacts. He had a revolving cabinet built in the public dining room (today's family dining room) and pavilions built on the east and west side for servants and stables. Many of his creations were similar to what he had put in his home in Mount Vernon.

Joe: Other President's and their wives made changes as well, did they not?

Flo: True; when President James Monroe became president, the south portico was constructed and the north portico six years later. There was little for furnishings because of the fires from the war, so he along with his wife, Elizabeth Monroe, furnished the house in fashionable style. Running water and central heating were installed in 1935.

Even before that time, when Chester Arthur took office in 1881, he ordered renovations immediately after the departure of the recently widowed Lucretia Garfield. Twenty wagonloads of furnishings were removed from the building and sold at public auction. Entire rooms were redecorated and squares of gold leaf added.

The Arthur renovations were done in haste as well as those done earlier by other Presidents. The result of which weakened the structure of the White House. After President Harry Truman and Bess moved in, a research team had examined the building and found it to be structurally unsound. Mrs. Truman's sitting room showed split beams and the President noted the floor of his study had been vibrating.

During Mrs. Kennedy's interview she said the old interior was dismantled, taken out piece by piece like a jigsaw puzzle; each piece marked accordingly, and then rebuilt using concrete and steel beams in place of the original wooden joints. In her interview, it was brought out how difficult it was to take the steel beams through the windows; that it might have been cheaper to tear it down and start over, but the house was preserved accordingly as to Theodore Roosevelt's statement, "...the property of the Nation should be kept as it was originally with a sense of continuity with the Nation's past."

Joe: What happened after that?

Flo: President Harry Truman added a second floor balcony on the south among other things. While the house's structure was kept intact by the Truman reconstruction, much of the new interior finishes were generic and of little historic value.

During the Kennedy era, Jacqueline Kennedy directed a very extensive and historic redecoration of the house. It was Mrs. Kennedy's belief that the White House should have links to the past just as she had seen at Columbia University. The White House preservation committee now makes determinations with everything documented. Items are selected; all are paid for with donations. Her mission was aimed at maintaining the historical integrity of the White House, and the congressionally authorized committee continues to work with the First Family in achieving this.

Joe: Tell me more about President Theodore Roosevelt.

Flo: He was more than just an outdoor adventurer. He cared deeply about the integrity and design of the White House. It was in his presidency that he changed the mantle above the fireplace to reflect an eagle instead of a buffalo and had it designed in white marble. But it was Franklin Delano Roosevelt that had the words of John Adams carved below the mantle. These words were a letter, which John Adams wrote to his wife on his second day in office:

"I pray Heaven to bestow the best of blessings on this House, and all that shall hereafter inhabit it. May none but honest and wise men ever rule under this roof."

"What's happening around town"

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