

The original documents are located in Box 33, folder “Curator's Office - Functions” of the Betty Ford White House Papers, 1973-1977 at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.

Copyright Notice

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Betty Ford donated to the United States of America her copyrights in all of her unpublished writings in National Archives collections. Works prepared by U.S. Government employees as part of their official duties are in the public domain. The copyrights to materials written by other individuals or organizations are presumed to remain with them. If you think any of the information displayed in the PDF is subject to a valid copyright claim, please contact the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.

MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

November 20, 1974

MEMORANDUM FOR MRS. FORD

FROM: WILMA SANDS

You mentioned that you would like to discuss the Office of the Curator, so I thought you might like to have a copy of a summary of the functions of the office which I dashed off to give you some idea of what does go on in this office.

I am also enclosing a brief summary of methods of operation.



THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

FUNCTIONS OF THE OFFICE OF THE CURATOR

In 1964, by Executive Order, the Curator's Office was established to work with the First Lady and the Committee for the Preservation of the White House as a permanent White House Office. The files remain in the office and do not go with the outgoing administrations. The principal duties of the Curator are to maintain and preserve the State Rooms of the White House (Ground Floor, State Floor and six Second Floor Rooms) as well as to oversee redecoration and refurbishing of rooms on all floors and acquisition of fine American furniture, American paintings and decorative objects for the White House and certain parts of the East and West Wings. The Office of the Curator also performs the following functions:

TELEPHONE

The Curator's Office maintains constant communication with offices of the White House as well as representatives of the press, historians, researchers, and the general public to supply information regarding Presidential and First Lady history as it relates to the White House and its collections.

COMMITTEE FOR THE PRESERVATION OF THE WHITE HOUSE

Handles communications with members of the Committee for the Preservation of the White House concerning Committee business. Assists in preparation of letters for the First Lady's signature to the Committee as well as the thank-you letters which go out to donors from the First Lady and the Curator. Assists the First Lady with the art and museum world with functions held at the White House or in which the First Family participate. Assists in arranging First Lady visits to historic places such as museums, art galleries, historic houses, etc.

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Works closely with the Smithsonian Institution as stated in legislation passed by Congress. The Smithsonian is the only Institution which may borrow White House items for display. Assists Smithsonian in White House research.



TOURS

This office handles special tours of the White House such as groups of donors or potential donors and lenders to the White House. Also conducts tours for numerous art groups and museum study groups which require more than just the usual guided tours of the rooms showing the historic pieces as they relate to their interests. Also, the Curator's Office frequently assists special friends of the First Family on tours of the Mansion.

Room guides and information for the training of tour officers come from this office. The Curator periodically gives lectures for the tour guides, explaining in detail American furniture, paintings, decorative objects, etc.

LECTURES

Lectures relating to the White House are handled through this office. The Curator keeps a current two color slide lecture (two projector - two screen) which shows the rooms of the White House as they appear today, along with close-ups of important pieces of furnishings and fine paintings in the White House collection. Also included are a few current slides of recent First Families engaged in administration activities. Travel expenses and an honorarium are accepted for each lecture. The honorariums go to the White House Acquisition Fund for use in the refurbishing program. Honorariums average \$500 each.

PORTRAITS OF FIRST FAMILY

All requests from artists to paint the portraits of the President and First Lady come to this office for handling. A file is maintained for future reference should the First Family desire suggestions or be interested in having artists in the reference file execute portraits. Letters are sent to each artist thanking them for their interest. These requests are very numerous.

PHOTOGRAPHS

The Curator's Office maintains an extensive collection of color and black and white photographs and slides relating to its collections. The office supplies at the request of researchers, newspapers, book publishers, and interested institutions, photographs of items in the collection with descriptions etc. for reproduction as well as study purposes.



WHITE HOUSE LIBRARY & DECORATIVE ARTS LIBRARY

Maintains the White House Library continuing and enlarging the collection annually of books selected by the White House Library Committee in 1962. This Committee was composed of scholars from leading universities throughout the country. Books are checked out by members of the White House Staff and First Family with the Curator's Office.

A growing Decorative Arts Library is maintained in the Curator's Office on White House History for reference purposes. The office also preserves magazines and important articles relating to current and past administrations, dating as far back as the pre-1900's.



DISPLAY CASES

Creates and maintains current and varied exhibitions and display cases along the route of tourists in East Colonnade.

CORRESPONDENCE

The Curator's Office handles a constant flow of correspondence. It could be any type of inquiry from the Office of a Governor on how to establish a Committee similar to our Committee to questions about ghosts in the White House, to numerous letters from Congressmen as well as the public on every known subject. Many letters inquire about the Lincoln Bed, White House Christmas traditions, Easter, Thanksgiving, bathtubs, electricity, air-conditioning, etc. books in the library, requests for White House guidebooks, information on White House grounds, trees, fences, tennis court, swimming pool, etc., just to mention a few.

LOANS

The Curator's Office handles loans of major art works and furnishings to the White House from 15 different museums and art galleries throughout the country. It is responsible for display and for maintaining insurance as well as their proper care and shipping.

SPECIAL STUDIES

This office constantly does research on subjects relating to White House history such as White House weddings, children, etc. and all areas concerning the history, architecture, and contents of the building

and its wings from 1800 to the present. Also maintained by the office is a study of fabrics used in the past and currently in every room in the residence.

WHITE HOUSE PUBLICATIONS

The Curator's Office works very closely with the White House Historical Association and the National Geographic Society in publishing The White House : An Historic Guide, The Living White House and The Presidents of the United States. For the guidebook, the Curator's Office supplies historical material for the editorial office of the National Geographic Society and arranges for all photographic work done by the Society. After a text is written, the Curator's Office reviews it for accuracy and assists with the layout. The Curator also suggests all the proper photographs for the Guidebook and most of the photographs for the other books. The book is then presented to the First Lady for her comments and final suggestions before publication. New revised editions are prepared about every 18 months.

CONSERVATION AND PRESERVATION

A continuing program of the office is the conservation of paintings in the White House Collection. Numerous paintings have undergone restoration, cleaning and reframing in the past several years. The preservation and treatment of antique furniture, porcelain and other decorative arts is also an ongoing program.



RAISING FUNDS

The Curator's Office maintains a "revolving" White House Acquisition Fund to enable the White House to purchase important pieces of furniture, American paintings, decorative objects, rugs, lamps, chandeliers, etc. As fast as desired objects are acquired, the Curator tries to find a donor. List of "Objects Available for Donation" are maintained and circulated occasionally. The funds or securities received go back into the "revolving fund." Contributions to this fund come from private individuals, corporations, and foundations. Funds are also received from the sale of White House guidebooks and the other two White House publications of the White House Historical Association. Funds in the form of contributions (royalties) are received from the sale of First Lady and Presidential medals by the Franklin Mint. Recently as much as \$1,000,000 has been raised in a single year.

The Curator's Office, since its inception in 1961, has amassed a collection valued at more than \$15,000,000. Most of this work has been accomplished in the last 5 years.

It is very important that donors and lenders be thanked properly and be invited occasionally to White House dinners or social functions.



November 20, 1974

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON



OFFICE OF THE CURATOR
A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE METHOD OF OPERATIONS

General

The Curator's Office finds itself with several functions: establishing a worthy collection of furniture, paintings, and objects of art; preserving the collection; raising funds to obtain and preserve the collection; attending to donors; researching the collection and meeting the needs of researchers involved with pieces in the collection; and collecting materials relating to the history of the White House. The small staff cannot, of course, perform all of these functions and in many cases acts as a clearing house to provide functions, such as the restoration of furniture and paintings.

The office does keep a file on the history of the White House and attempts to do historical research when there is time. This file is kept according to administration and also according to different aspects of White House activities, ie. Christmas, restoration of 1948, social functions, Presidential porcelain, etc.

Cataloguing

The White House cataloguing system as established under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution provides a catalogue card containing all essential information on each specimen. This is the basic record of the piece. As soon as an object is accepted for the permanent White House Collection, it is assigned a number and recorded in an Accession Book which lists the object, the donor, and the date of acquisition.

Cross reference card files are made according to

- (1) location
- (2) artist or maker
- (3) Presidential association
- (4) category of object (ie. chair, chest, clock, etc.)
- (5) donor

Each object is numbered, the prefix being determined by the year the piece came to the White House, the suffix being an arbitrary reference number assigned consecutively to each new accession. (A catalogue number 972.804.1-2 would indicate a piece accessioned in 1972; it would be the 804th accession since the accession record started; and the 1-2 would indicate that there are two pieces in the accession, ie. two matching chairs received from the same source). The piece is marked with its number according to approved museum methods.

Each accession has an "object folder" containing a photograph of the object, pertinent correspondence or provenance information, a record of changes in location (before it came to the White House as well as since its acquisition), record of restoration, and a bill, appraisal or record of acquisition.

Reviewing an Object for the Collection

When a specimen is offered to the White House through correspondence, staff assistants in the Curator's Office respond by requesting a photograph of the specimen, a provenance, any documentation, measurements, and any other significant information. When all available information is at the Curator's disposal, he decides whether he would like to see the piece. If he wishes to examine it, the owner is asked to have the piece sent to the White House on consignment. As soon as it arrives, it is recorded in a consignment book, so that there is a written record of each object and its source as soon as it enters the White House.

When the object arrives, the Curator views the specimen. If he feels that it is necessary, he consults experts in the particular field concerned. Together they judge it according to quality of the piece, suitability to the White House, availability of display area, usefulness, and historical value. It should be



noted that the White House (because of limited space and security regulations which prevent easy access to researchers) does not attempt to acquire a study collection. Each piece acquired is acquired for use in the Executive Mansion.

The Curator then discusses the piece with the First Lady and together they try the piece in an appropriate place. If they agree that the piece should be acquired, they try to find a donor and present the piece to the Committee for the Preservation of the White House (an advisory board appointed by the President, comparable to a board of trustees) for final approval.

Two fortunate regulations have saved the Curator's Office from innumerable problems. (1) The White House is prohibited by law from de-accessioning any piece in the White House Collection. This not only assures future Presidents that the choices of his predecessors will be preserved, but it also prevents commercialization based on White House association. (2) No work of art is accepted for the White House Collection unless the artist has been deceased for at least 20 years (except for painters of Presidential and First Lady portraits). This makes the White House immune to the countless petitions of living artists and also allows the art to "withstand the test of time".

February 11, 1972

