



LESSON PLAN

HISTORY OF HOLIDAYS AT THE WHITE HOUSE



The Journey of the Magi Christmas card painted by Mrs. Kennedy in 1963. Printed by Hallmark and sold to raise funds for "The National Cultural Center," which became the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts after the assassination of President Kennedy.

The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza

Since its first residents in 1800, the White House has seen many first family holiday gatherings, celebrations and traditions. From the simplicity of the early 1800s to the ever more extravagant decorations and celebrations of the 21st century, the holiday season at the White House has been a time for the first families to establish traditions and leave their lasting touch as one-time residents of the White House.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In this fun holiday activity, students in grades 4-12 will learn about the history of holiday celebrations and commemorations at the White House from John Adams's Christmas party in 1800 to the 2023 Lunar New Year reception. Students will explore two centuries of presidential history while making connections to their own winter holiday commemorations.

To apply what they've learned about the history of presidential holiday celebrations, students imagine they are members of the first family and create a holiday tradition to share with the American public.

HOLIDAYS AT THE WHITE HOUSE

PRE-1800: PRESIDENTIAL HOLIDAYS BEFORE THE WHITE HOUSE

Prior to 1800, the holiday season was not a grand affair at the White House. Since the White was not constructed until late 1800, President George Washington spent their Christmas at their rented New York home. Holiday festivities observed were simple and private. The President and Mrs. Washington conducted business as usual on Christmas Eve.

1800: FIRST CHRISTMAS PARTY

Construction of the White House was completed on November 1, 1800. The first Christmas party was held weeks later by President and First Lady John and Abigail Adams for their four-year-old granddaughter, Susanna. Guests including government officials and their families celebrated by singing Christmas carols and playing games while having cake and punch.



1835: CHILDREN'S FROLIC

President Andrew Jackson held a “frolic” for his family and the families of White House staffers, which was one of the most celebrated events held at the White House at the time. Activities included games, dancing and a grand dinner. The party concluded with an indoor “snowball” fight where participants used cotton balls instead of actual snow.

President Andrew Jackson White House, 1835.
White House Historical Association.

1889: FIRST WHITE HOUSE CHRISTMAS TREE

Unlike today, Christmas at the White House was not celebrated publicly. The first Christmas tree at the White House was placed in the Oval Room located in the president's private residence, used as the family parlor and library, during President Benjamin Harrison's time in office. The tree was decorated with candles and toys for their grandchildren.

Note: Not all first families put up Christmas trees after the Harrison administration. The decision to have a Christmas tree at the White House depended on the presence of young children at the White House during the holidays.

1894: ELECTRIC TREE LIGHTS

Electric Christmas tree lights were invented in 1882 by Edward Johnson, an associate of Thomas Edison. In 1895 President Grover Cleveland requested multicolored electric light bulbs be added to the White House family Christmas tree, just four years after the White House installed electricity.

1912: BLUE ROOM TREE

The children of President William Taft were the first to put a tree in the Blue Room of the White House. This was a surprise for their young cousins who were visiting and staying in the residence during the holiday season that year.

1923: FIRST PAGEANT OF PEACE / CHRISTMAS TREE LIGHTING

The tradition of the National Christmas Tree Lighting ceremony started in December 1923, with President Calvin Coolidge illuminating a 48-foot balsam fir tree brought in from Vermont and placed in the middle of the Ellipse. After World War II and the Korean War, the word “peace” was included in the event title to symbolize America’s desire for peace. President Dwight Eisenhower presided over the first Pageant of Peace in 1954 on December 17, 1954, marking the first time the event did not take place on Christmas Eve.”



Christmas Tree presented to President Coolidge in 1923.
Records of the Forest Service / National Archives.

1931: CHRISTMAS GREETING CARD TRADITION BEGINS

President and Mrs. Herbert Hoover sent personalized holiday greetings on family photographs to their friends, family and staff. In 1937 President Franklin Roosevelt began the practice of sending formal designed Christmas cards.



Roosevelt Family in front of East Room Tree, 1941.
FDR Photos: Franklin D. Roosevelt Library Photographs / National Archives.

1933-1944: PRESIDENT FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT FAMILY TRADITIONS

When President Franklin Roosevelt and his family moved into the White House in 1933, they brought their family tradition of lighting their Christmas tree with candles which they displayed in the East Room of the White House. Using candles to light Christmas trees was a practice used before the invention of electric tree lights. The Roosevelts also continued their family holiday tradition in the White House of the President reading Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol aloud to the family gathered. Holiday guests usually included President Roosevelt’s mother, the President and First Lady’s children and grandchildren.

1957: THE OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE TREE

First Lady Mamie Eisenhower was the first to consistently place the official White House Christmas tree in the Blue Room and this became a tradition for future first families that continues through today. The number of Christmas trees displayed in the White House has grown throughout the decades from the Eisenhower’s 26 trees in 1957 to 98 the 2023 Biden White House. Prior administrations displayed Christmas trees indoors throughout the state floor of the White House.

1961: CHRISTMAS TREE THEMES

First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy began the tradition of selecting a theme for the official White House Christmas. In 1961, the First Lady selected the “Nutcracker Suite” as the theme and decorated the tree with ornamental toys, birds, angels and characters from the ballet.



President and Mrs. Kennedy view the 1961 White House Christmas Tree. December 13, 1961. Robert Knudsen. *White House Photographs*. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston

1966: CHRISTMAS TREE GROWER COMPETITION

The National Christmas Tree Association holds an annual competition for the official White House Blue Room tree. To qualify to compete in the national contest, growers must first win their regional or state competition. The Grand Champion Grower provides the official White House tree while the Reserve Champion Grower’s tree is displayed in the Vice President’s residence.

1967: NEAPOLITAN CRECHE

Since 1967, an 18th century Neapolitan creche, or nativity scene, has been on display in the East Room of the White House during the holiday season. It was donated by Charles and Jayne Engelhard of New Jersey.



18th century creche donated to the White House by the Engelhard’s of New Jersey in 1967. *White House Photograph / National Archives*.



Gingerbread house from 1969 made for the Nixon’s by White House Chef Hans Raffert. *Nixon Presidential Library & Museum / National Archives*.

1969: GINGERBREAD HOUSE

For the Nixon’s first Christmas as the first family, White House Executive Chef Hans Raffert created a traditional German gingerbread house. This has since become an annual tradition. The 2023 gingerbread structure is a replica of the White House.



Cranberry tree in the Red Room of the White House, 1975. *White House Historical Association, courtesy of Jennifer B. Pickens*.

1975: CRANBERRY TREE

During the 1975 holiday season, President Gerald Ford started the tradition of displaying a cranberry tree in the Red Room of the White House. Since its appearance in 1975, it has become an annual tradition for White House staff to assemble a tree made of individual cranberries to put on display during the holiday season.

1979: LIGHTING THE FIRST NATIONAL CHANUKAH MENORAH

President Jimmy Carter was the first U.S. president to light a menorah during the holiday season. Every year since 1979, presidents have lit candles on the National Menorah to signify the beginning of the eight-day Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. The National Menorah used today on the Ellipse is the largest in the world.



President Jimmy Carter lighting the Menorah, 1979.
Jimmy Carter Presidential Library / National Archives.

1993: FIRST PRESIDENTIAL KWANZAA GREETING FROM PRESIDENT CLINTON

President Bill Clinton issued the first Kwanzaa greeting noting that the holiday “encourages us to rebuild and gives us the opportunity to celebrate the strengths of the African American community.”



Lighting candles at the first Hanukkah reception held at the White House, 2001.
George W. Bush Presidential Library / National Archives.

2001: FIRST WHITE HOUSE HANUKKAH PARTY

President and First Lady George and Laura Bush were the first to host a menorah lighting in the White House residence in celebration of Hanukkah. In addition to lighting the menorah in the Booksellers Room, the Bushes held a reception upstairs with a kosher buffet and invited members of their staff and families to participate in the event.

2023: FIRST LUNAR NEW YEAR RECEPTION

Lunar New Year is one of the most celebrated holidays by Asians across the world. Participants honor their ancestors, play games and serve traditional food. President Joe Biden held the White House’s first ever Lunar New Year reception on Thursday January 26, 2023, in the East Room.

STUDENT ACTIVITY

After reading through the background information on the holiday history of the White House, it is now time for students to put themselves in the place of the first family.

Ask students to think about what holidays they celebrate in December and January. Have the students share their winter holiday traditions with their classmates in small groups or as a class.

Questions to consider:

1. What is the holiday? What does it honor?
2. Why do you celebrate the holiday?
3. When does the holiday occur?
4. How long does it last?
5. Where do you celebrate the holiday?
6. What activities are connected to the holiday?
7. Who participates and how?
8. How does your family celebrate?

Individually or in pairs, students will pretend they are living in the White House as a member of the first family. Their task is to create a way to share their family holiday tradition. They can plan an event, design a holiday-themed area of the White House or write greetings to the American people sharing the history of the holiday.

Allow students a few minutes to share what tradition(s) they chose to add to the White House holiday season and why they chose that tradition.