

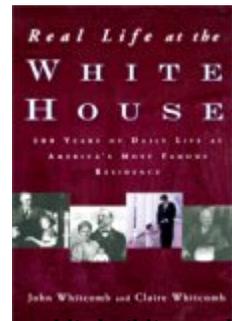
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



John Whitcomb, Claire Whitcomb. *Real Life at the White House: Two Hundred Years of Daily Life at America's Most Famous Residence*. New York and London: Routledge, 2000. xxi + 511 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-92320-0.

Reviewed by Jennifer Hembree (University of Maryland, College Park)
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The Whitcombs provide an overview of the architectural and interior decorative history of the White House while offering vignettes from the often hidden personal lives of its famous residents. Commencing with the initial 1789 concept of the White House and then describing its construction, reconstruction, remodeling and many makeovers, the book concludes with last years 200th anniversary celebration commemorating John Adams's move into the mansion.

Arranged chronologically, each of the forty-two chapters focus on a particular president—from Washington to Clinton—and provide a synopsis of his life within the White House walls. The title of each chapter indicates a theme or idiosyncrasy of the particular presidents residency. For example, chapter six, *A Dull and Stately Prison*, quotes John Quincy Adams's wife, Louisa, and her description of the Executive Mansion. During the Adams's tenure, the White House had no running water; the East Room was undecorated; and stables located beneath the dining room, made for unpleasant odors in warm weather (p. 47). *T.V. Dinners*, chapter thirty-four, pinpoints the Eisenhower's habit of eating T.V. dinners when freed from entertaining guests. Two televisions were set up side by side, allowing the President and First Lady to watch their personal favorite broadcasts at the same time (p. 340). Interspersed throughout the book are ten thematic interludes, including vignettes describing: the creation of the Capital City; pets at the White House; and the White House china tradition.

Periodically, the authors outline the dual and contra-

dictory nature of the White House as public building and private residence. In chapter thirty-four, for example, the crossroads of public and private resonate in Mamie Eisenhower's statement, "This isn't my house. It belongs to Uncle Sam" (p. 337). In chapter eleven, Sarah Polk's insistence that dancing in the White House, would be undignified (p. 96) also shows how first families weighed social obligations with personal principles. The public/private dichotomy, however, is not visible in each chapter. Further exploration of this theme would be intriguing and would also unite the distinctive chapters. This book in fact, can be read either as a whole, or chapters can be read selectively and individually.

My main complaint is with the works citation format. Notes are listed at the end of the book; yet, they are not numbered there, nor within the text. Scholars will find it a challenge determining the difference between a citation, a quote from a primary source, and the authors ideas. Furthermore, there is no bibliography.

Dense with facts, the work, however, is anecdotal and entertaining. Narratives of the less popularized presidents and first ladies, such as Chester Arthur and William Harding, and John and Sarah Polk are revealed. Illustrations compliment many of these anecdotes. As a result, the public, those interested in the structural and interior evolution of a famous residence, and anyone wishing to expand their presidential trivia will enjoy *Real Life at the White House: Two Hundred Years of Daily Life at Americas Most Famous Residence*.

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