

A Look at the White House Kitchens

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*T*he kitchen is usually the center of activity for any household. The same can be said for the President's House. As the site of daily meal preparation for presidential families and cuisine for more formal entertaining, the main kitchen of the White House is rarely quiet. The kitchen, as with other service areas in the Executive Mansion, is not often shared with the public. Views of this important room during the nineteenth century are rare. During the twentieth century, it was photographed on occasion, sometimes to document the appearance of the room and other times to feature the culinary staff. It is never on tour.

Originally the kitchen for the President's House was located at the center of the Ground Floor, underneath the Entrance Hall and the same size, with a great stone fireplace at each end. Prior to the addition of the North Portico in 1829–30, the windows to the kitchen could be seen from the bridge that led to the north door. Although it was an area that saw continuous activity, descriptions of this room are sketchy. 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.”¹ During the presidency of Thomas Jefferson, one of the fireplaces was fitted with a coal-fueled iron range that had stew holes, or water heaters, spits, and a crane.²

At some point during the mid-nineteenth century, the kitchen moved to two adjoining northwest corner rooms, where it can be found today. The reason for the move

and the exact year have not been determined. Journalist Abby Gunn Baker wrote in 1904 that the central room, lacking exterior light after the construction of the North Portico, remained the kitchen until Mary Todd Lincoln moved it.³ A floor plan drawn by architect Thomas U. Walters in 1853 to show proposed heating systems clearly designated the northwest corner rooms as “Kitchen,” “Scullery,” and “Pantry.” The central room was identified as a cellar. Because some elements of the Walters plan were never executed, the room designations are thought to be proposals.⁴ Historian William Seale has also suggested that the principal kitchen remained in its central location, but under President Andrew Johnson, a second kitchen, probably used for baking, was placed in the northwest corner.⁵

Two separate kitchens first appear in the inventories beginning in 1869, the first year of the Ulysses S. Grant administration. One room is identified simply as “Kitchen,” and the other is listed as “Small Kitchen.” The location of the rooms and whether they were adjacent to each other, or not, are unknown. The next inventory, taken in 1875, also lists the contents of two rooms; one was labeled “Large Kitchen” and the other “Small Kitchen.” In this case, they follow each other on the same page of the document, suggesting that they were located next to each other on the Ground Floor.⁶

A plumbing plan from 1881 that was included with a report from the Committee for Sanitary Improvement of the Executive Mansion,⁷ illustrates the two kitchens



A view of the kitchen in 1901. The large kitchen was used for main events and more formal entertaining. The round table at left is set for a staff meal. The presence of electricity, introduced to the White House in 1891, can be seen by the surface-mounted electrical wiring placed along the ceiling. Single light bulbs hang from the ceiling to illuminate the room; one appears over the round table.

adjacent to one another in the northwest corner. Of special interest are the locations of the ranges and sinks, which are marked in each room. A dumbwaiter is also identified in the small kitchen.

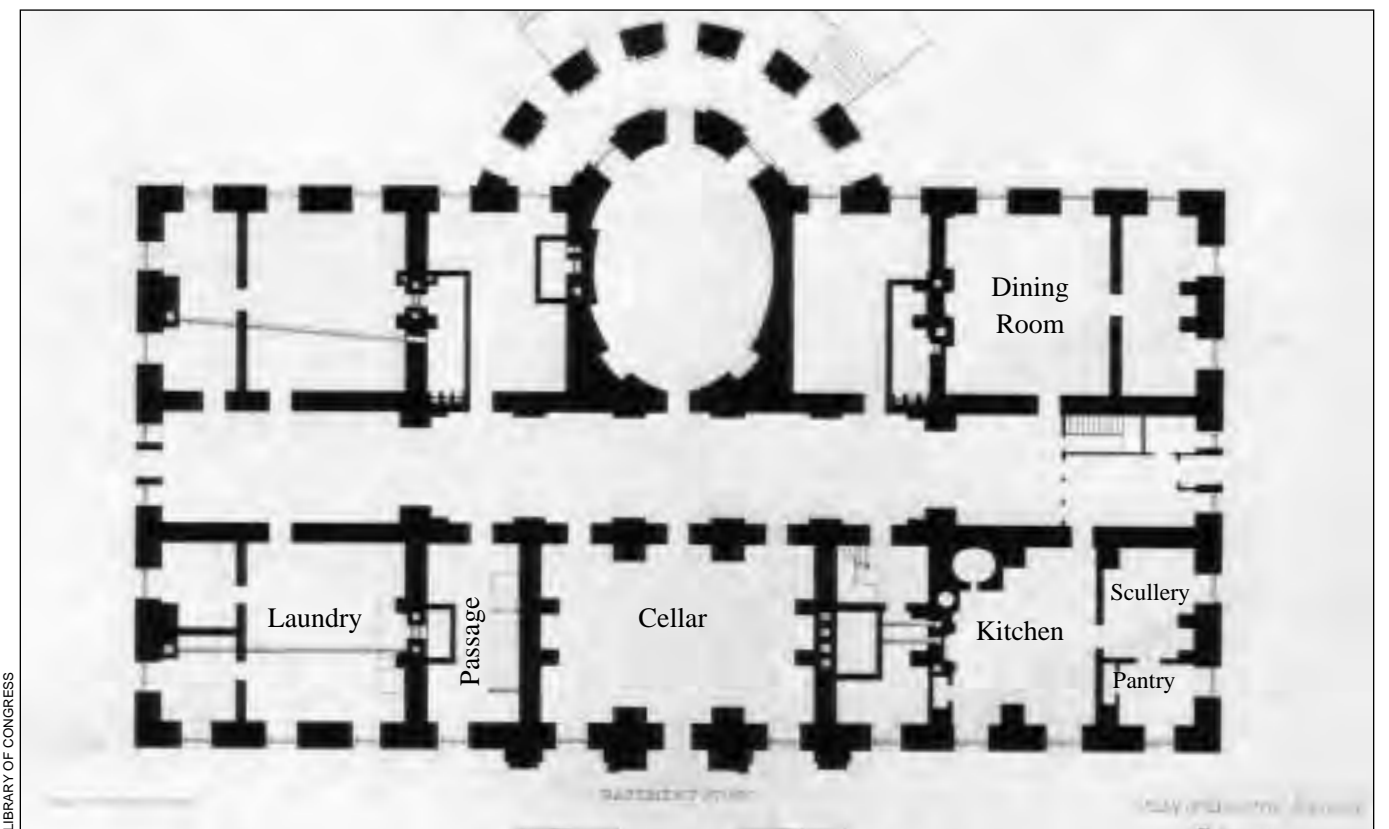
Located directly below the State Floor Butler's Pantry, the so-called small kitchen was used to prepare everyday meals for family and staff. The earliest photograph of this room may have been taken by photojournalist Frances Benjamin Johnston. The revealing image, dated c. 1890, shows a coal range and shelves laden with pans, various cooking utensils, and tableware. Also featured is the Benjamin Harrison family cook, Dolly Johnson.



Washington, D.C.— The White House Kitchen—Preparing Dinner, after C. Bunnell (dates unknown), from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, April 6, 1889. This wood engraving, published not long after Benjamin Harrison became president, includes an early image of the main kitchen, located in the northwest corner of the Ground Floor since the mid-nineteenth century; a view of the original kitchen in Andrew Jackson's time (inset above left), which was located at the center of the Ground Floor beneath the Entrance Hall; and a portrait of Hugo Ziemann, a chef for President Chester Arthur (inset above right).

Opposite, top: Plan of Executive Mansion, 1853. Architect Thomas U. Walters drew this plan to show proposed heating systems. Because some elements of the plan were never executed, the various room designations may also have been proposals.

Opposite: Detail from plumbing plan of the White House, 1881. The Ground Floor plan, although in a few respects conjecturally, shows the two kitchens located in the northwest corner of the building. Sinks, ranges, and a dumbwaiter are also indicated.





Dolly Johnson, the family cook for President Benjamin Harrison, was photographed in the small, or everyday kitchen in the northwest corner of what was then called the basement, by Frances Benjamin Johnston, c. 1890. In addition to a dish rack, visible in the background, and various everyday utensils and pans, a soup tureen (on exhibit today in the China Room) from the Ulysses S. Grant rose-band service can be seen at left on the top shelf. Ordered in 1870 from Haviland & Co., this porcelain dinner service was utilized for less formal occasions.

The neighboring larger kitchen, today's main kitchen, was utilized only for major occasions when more workspace was required. Because it was used less frequently, it also served as a dining area for the domestic staff. In 1889, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* published a wood engraving of this room that is one of the earliest images. A similar view was photographed by C. M. Bell in 1901, showing a large gas range and a table set for a staff meal.

In 1902 under President Theodore Roosevelt, the White House underwent a major renovation overseen by Charles F. McKim of the architectural firm McKim, Mead & White. While the kitchens were not altered dramatically, the arrangement of the Ground Floor service areas was changed. Visitors and guests would now enter the White House through the newly constructed East Wing at the east end of the Ground Floor Corridor. Service functions were, therefore, shifted to the west end of the floor and extended into the West Terrace.

Subsequently, groceries and other items, previously delivered on the east side, were instead received on the west side, closer to the kitchens and storerooms and concealed from the president's guests.⁸

Photographs of the large kitchen taken following the renovation reveal few noticeable changes. Lighting was improved when the entire electrical wiring system for the building was redone. Modifications were also made to the ventilation system. Alterations made in the small kitchen were more significant. A doorway was added to the south wall that led into the Ground Floor Corridor. This provided easier access to the storeroom and a new walk-in refrigerator, located across the hall in the southwest corner of the building, and to incoming deliveries. A new stairway enabled direct access to the Butler's Pantry on the State Floor. To further assist the kitchen staff, a new "electric" dumbwaiter was installed that ran from the kitchen to the newly created mezzanine level of the Butler's Pantry.⁹ Although housekeeper Elizabeth Jaffray complained that it was "often out of order," it was of great assistance to the kitchen staff and butlers when food was transported to the dining areas located above on the State Floor.¹⁰

The central room that had been the original kitchen, located under the Entrance Hall, was turned into a furnace room in 1902 and was used for that purpose until the Truman renovation, 1948–52. In 1935, the machinery was repositioned within the space to partition rooms for use as a staff dining room and a store pantry. During the Truman renovation, the furnace was placed underground and the old kitchen became the Broadcast Room. Since the Kennedy administration, the room has again been partitioned into smaller spaces, one of which is now occupied by the Office of the Curator.

Although the first electric refrigerator was installed in 1926, it was not until 1935, during the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration, that the kitchen would again undergo significant changes.¹¹ Upon her arrival in 1933, housekeeper Henrietta Nesbitt toured the White House with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Describing her initial impression of the kitchen, Mrs. Nesbitt wrote:

I can't work up any charm for cockroaches. No matter how your scrub it, old wood isn't clean. This was the "first kitchen in America," and it wasn't even sanitary. Mrs. Roosevelt and I poked

around, opening doors and expecting hinges to fall off and things to fly out. It was that sort of place. Dark-looking cupboards, a huge old-fashioned gas range, sinks with time-worn wooden drains, one rusty wooden dumb waiter. The refrigerator was wood inside and bad-smelling. Even the electric wiring was old and dangerous. I was afraid to switch things on.

She then reported Mrs. Roosevelt saying, "There is only one solution—we must have a new kitchen."¹²

Describing the kitchen before the renovation, a newspaper correspondent of the time wrote, "It looks like an old-fashioned German rathskeller, with a great deal of ancient architectural charm."¹³

Engineers from General Electric and Westinghouse conferred with staff at the White House to plan the modernization of the entire culinary department. The size of the kitchen, approximately 23 x 28 feet, was relatively small for the quantities of food prepared in it. The new layout would encompass contemporary ideas about grouping equipment into workstations to keep the different functions moving along in a smooth sequence during the preparation of meals.¹⁴ The doorway that had led from the main kitchen to the Ground Floor Corridor was removed, and additional cabinet space was provided along the south wall. The small kitchen became a pantry with new, more efficient dumbwaiters to assist with transporting food to the State Floor dining rooms. Underground storerooms and refrigerated areas were also constructed under the north driveway, helping to alleviate cramped storage conditions. This transformation was funded with money allocated by the Public Works Administration and was referred to as Public Works Project No. 634. At President Franklin Roosevelt's request, relief workers were used as much as possible.¹⁵

Demolition and construction took place during the summer and fall of 1935. To accommodate the number of new electric appliances, the entire electrical system was changed from direct current to alternating current.¹⁶ As with any major renovation, unforeseen problems arose. While changing the wiring, it was discovered that the plumbing had badly deteriorated. To replace all of the rusted pipes, the floors and walls were disturbed more than originally planned. Amazingly, with the room under excavation, wooden planks on the floor, and tun-

nels placed throughout, food service was provided when it was needed for the president, whose summer departure was delayed, and his guests. Large dinners were especially problematic for the staff. Mrs. Nesbitt recalled:

Finally I had to scrap the menus and get in things that required just heating through. I had to co-operate with Ida by changing the menus that took too much trouble. She would be over the cooking, surrounded by a dozen men with wheelbarrows full of dirt. You couldn’t tell if the place was the White House kitchen or a quarry. The world and its work kept pouring through the White House, and we balanced on boards over a bottomless pit.¹⁷

Photographs taken by the National Park Service documented the appearance of the kitchen prior to construction and the dramatic end result. The “New Deal Kitchen,” as it was nicknamed by the staff, now had the latest equipment in stainless steel and was capable of providing a full-course meal for more than one thousand people. Electric appliances included a 16 foot long stove, six roasting ovens, warming ovens, eight refrigerators, new dumbwaiters, a meat grinder, all sorts of mixers, five dishwashers, waffle irons, a soup kettle, a 30 gallon ice cream storage box, and a deep fry pan that could hold 5 gallons of fat. Aluminum utensils, so shiny and new “they looked like a display window in Tiffany’s,” were also purchased.¹⁸ New fixtures provided indirect lighting to the room. Walls of Carrara glass bordered with strips of black glass, floors of green and cream linoleum, and sinks and work surfaces of stainless steel also added to a clean, modern look. Special attention was given to selecting equipment with rounded corners to help prevent dust from accumulating and surfaces that would be easy to clean. Mrs. Nesbitt recalled:

The Roosevelts thought it wonderful. But we had a funny situation with the help. They wouldn’t use the new electric equipment. Our kitchen was a dream come true with its stainless steel and tinted walls, but the help used dishrags and towels when they could, ignoring the new dishwashers, and did their slicing and chopping by hand

although the electric company sent a man in to show them how to work things.¹⁹

The first major meal prepared in the new kitchen was Thanksgiving dinner. On December 16, 1935, Mrs. Roosevelt led press members on a tour, which she said would be “the first, last, and only tour of this part of the Executive Mansion.”²⁰

During the Truman renovation, the interior of the White House was gutted, with the exception of the Third Floor, and rebuilt to include basement levels that provided additional space for staff, storage, and machinery. Along with the replacement of some of the appliances, the kitchen area was reconstructed with a few noticeable changes. No longer needed structurally in a house newly framed in steel, the great ceiling arch was removed and replaced with a flat ceiling. Ranges and ovens were moved to the south wall, and stainless steel sinks and draining racks were placed along the east wall. New metal cabinets also lined the room. In addition to dumbwaiters and a spiral staircase in the neighboring pantry area, a staff elevator was added that has proved invaluable with the movement of staff, food items, and equipment to other floors of the house. Several photographs taken by National Park Service photographer Abbie Rowe captured views of the kitchen before, during, and after the renovation.

The main kitchen was again renovated during August 1971, while President Richard M. Nixon and his family were away for a summer vacation. The project was undertaken primarily to make more efficient use of the limited available space and improve the ventilation and fire prevention systems. In addition, most of the equipment that dated to the Truman renovation, as well as two ranges and a food warmer from 1935, was obsolete and needed to be replaced.²¹ The renovation also eliminated foot traffic through the food preparation area by sacrificing a small part of the north end of the kitchen for a narrow hallway, created by the addition of a partial wall covered with tile, that led around the kitchen, into the pantry, and to the staff elevator. The White House Photo Office was on hand to photograph various stages of the work.

From 1988 to 1992, the Historic American Building Survey (HABS) produced measured drawings, field notes, and photographs of the White House, including

the kitchen area, to show the changes that had occurred since the Truman renovation. Since 1971, few alterations have been made to the main kitchen. The general layout of equipment and workstations has remained the same, and appliances have been replaced only when necessary. Work space for the main kitchen staff increased slightly in 1993 when the pastry department was moved to the new pastry kitchen installed in the mezzanine level of the Butler’s Pantry. In 1997, the kitchen was completely enclosed with the addition of glass and stainless steel doors and a floor-to-ceiling partition, replacing the partial wall along the north end of the room, to further remove outside distractions.

The main kitchen has occupied the same location on the Ground Floor of the White House since the mid-nineteenth century. While early views are rare, later photographs have shown modifications made to the room throughout the twentieth century. In recent years, photographs, especially those taken by White House photographers, have provided the public with perhaps the best “behind-the-scenes” look at one of the mansion’s busiest areas. This documentation process will continue with upcoming administrations as technology advances and adaptations are made to meet the demands of the future.

NOTES

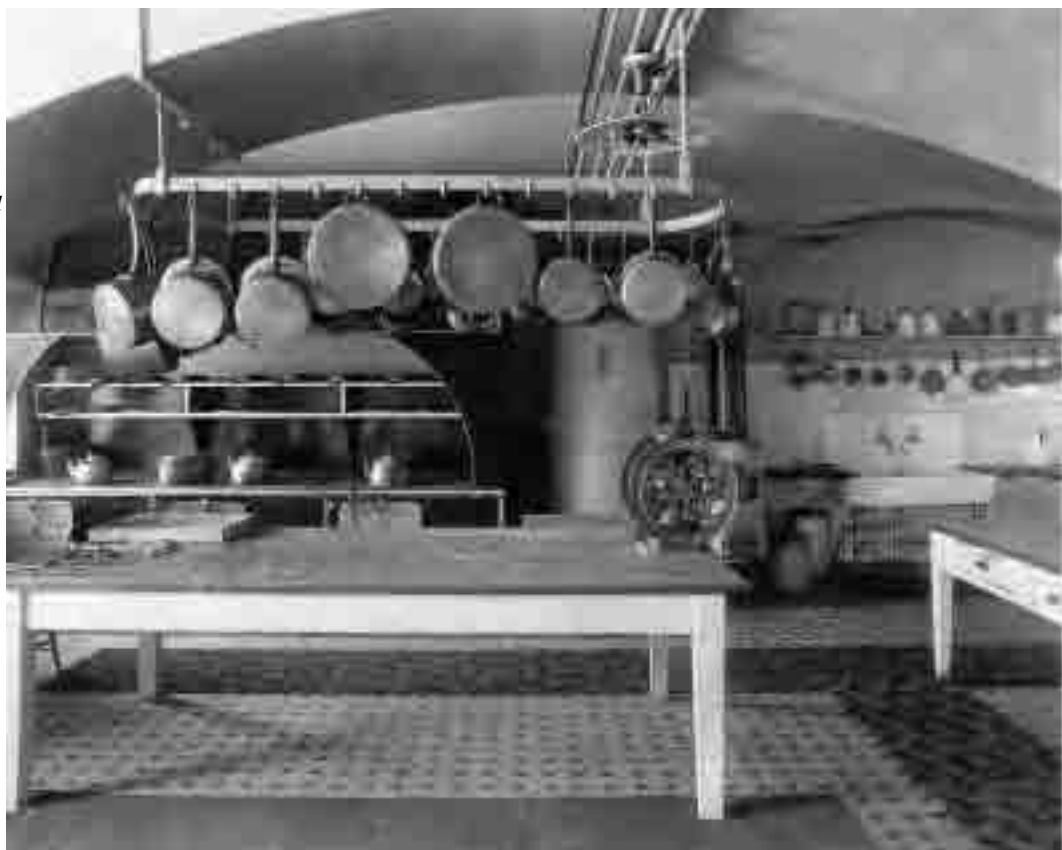
1. *Columbian Museum and Savannah (Ga.) Advertiser*, May 31, 1796, cited in “Clues and Footnotes,” ed. Eleanor H. Gustafson, *The Magazine Antiques*, September 1977, 522.
2. William Seale, *The President’s House: A History* (Washington, D.C.: White House Historical Association, with the cooperation of the National Geographic Society, 1986), 1:102. Jefferson’s range was recovered from the wreckage left by the 1814 fire, repaired by a blacksmith, and reinstalled in the kitchen after it was rebuilt in 1817.
3. Abby Gunn Baker, “The New White House Kitchen,” *Harper’s Bazar*, November 1904, 1075–76.

4. William Seale, “The White House: Seat of the Presidency,” in *Capital Drawings: Architectural Designs for Washington, D.C.*, ed. C. Ford Peatross (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 100.
5. Seale, *President’s House*, 1:438.
6. Clark, Edward. “Inventory of the Furniture of the Executive Mansion, December 14, 1869, Exclusive of Plants in the Conservatory,” *Inventory of Public Property about the Capitol*, House Miscellaneous Document, no. 45, 42nd Congress, Third Session, Vol. VII, no 1572, 32–33, 36. Edward Clark, *Inventory of Public Property in the President’s House*, Inventory of Public Property, House Miscellaneous Document, #39, 44th Congress, 1st Session, vol. 1, no. 1698, January 4, 1876, 27. Until recent times, inventories were not taken annually. Because of the gaps, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact year a change may have taken place.
7. Report from the Committee for Sanitary Improvement of the Executive Mansion, 1881, Office of the Curator, The White House.
8. Seale, *President’s House*, 1:663–64.
9. Theodore Roosevelt, *Restoration of the White House: Message of the President of the United States Transmitting the Report of the Architects* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1903), 30.
10. Elizabeth Jaffray, *Secrets of the White House* (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1927), 120. Mrs. Jaffray held the position of housekeeper from 1909 until 1926.
11. “White House Ice Box Is Now Equipped with Modern Electric Refrigerator,” newspaper clipping, August 17, 1926, files, Office of the Curator, The White House. See also “Mrs. Roosevelt’s New Kitchen,” *Delineator*, November 1935, 70.
12. Henrietta Nesbitt, *White House Diary* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1948), 30. Mrs. Nesbitt, a neighbor of the Roosevelts in Hyde Park, New York, held the position of White House housekeeper from March 1933 until May 1946. Her husband, Henry Nesbitt, also worked at the White House as a custodian or steward from March 1933 until his death in 1938.
13. Quoted in *ibid.*
14. Ruth Van Deman, “U.S. Kitchen No. 1,” *Journal of Home Economics*, February 1936, 28:94.
15. Federal Writers’ Project (Works Progress Administration), *Washington: City and Capital* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1937), 301.
16. “Mrs. Roosevelt’s New Kitchen,” 70.
17. Nesbitt, *White House Diary*, 143. Ida Allen, who cooked for the Roosevelts in the Albany governor’s mansion, worked at the White House from March 1933 until December 1940.
18. *Ibid.*, 146–47.
19. *Ibid.*, 149.
20. Van Deman, “U.S. Kitchen No. 1,” 93.
21. “1st Renovation since 1949: White House Gets New, \$97,000 Kitchen,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 24, 1971, 67.

July 20, 1902.
During the 1902 renovation, the space that had been the original kitchen, under the Entrance Hall, was excavated for a boiler pit. One of the early kitchen fireplaces is visible at right, still with fragments of an early turning spit.



c. 1909.
The kitchen as renovated in 1902 by Theodore Roosevelt used modern equipment. Electrical lighting was improved with reflectors and brackets. Next to the gas range and hot water heater is a radiator, heated by coal, which provided heat to the room especially during those times when the range was not in use. Two worktables are shown; the one in the foreground includes a coffee grinder at one end. Note the remnants of carpeting, removed from the East Room during the renovation, that eased feet on the hard tile floor.



June 20, 1935.
The kitchen and pantries were photographed prior to remodeling in 1935.



June 20, 1935.
Note the galvanized steel countertop, an idea that would be carried over into FDR's New Deal kitchen.

June 20, 1935.
The smaller family kitchen was equipped with a dumbwaiter. The 1902 device, seen on the right, was electrically operated, where its predecessor had been hand operated with pulleys, rope and counterweights. The box with the drip pan centered in the window well appears to be an ice chest. In the corner next to the chest is an electric coffee percolator.



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, OFFICE OF NPS, LIAISON TO THE WHITE HOUSE

June 20, 1935.
This photograph shows the southwest corner of the kitchen of 1902 as it appeared almost unchanged before remodeling. The door at left leads into the Ground Floor Corridor. The doorway at right opens into a pantry. This kitchen was not all of one design but was an accumulation of improvements beginning in 1902. The linoleum floor for example may not have been especially old.



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1935.
The southwest corner of the kitchen, photographed during construction. Through the doorway at right is a glimpse of the staircase added to the adjoining pantry in 1902. Note the pot rack still hanging overhead and in the walls, evidence of the old arching system that supported the house. Today this structural work is replaced by steel.



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, OFFICE OF THE CURATOR, THE WHITE HOUSE

1935.
After the renovation project was completed, the southwest view was again photographed showing the revised streamlined kitchen. The door that led into the Ground Floor Corridor was removed and replaced with cabinets. One of several new refrigerators can be seen in the service pantry, through the doorway at right.

1935.

FDR's "New Deal" kitchen had the up-to-date appointments of America's best hotels—except the space, which always at the White House is limited. The renovated space contained new stainless electric appliances including ranges, ovens, and food warmers. A new doorway was added at left, which led to the preparation pantry, the store pantry, and access to various storerooms, a wine cellar, and refrigerated areas that were also built under the north driveway in 1935.



December 16, 1935.

A special warming and delivery cart was acquired for food prepared for President Franklin Roosevelt. It had two drawers for hot dishes and one drawer for cold and enabled the president's meals to be transported from the residence kitchen to the West Wing at an ideal temperature.



1935.

In the central room that had been the original kitchen and, after 1902, a furnace room, space was partitioned off for a staff dining room and the store pantry, seen in this photograph. Stainless steel food cabinets appear at left, and, at right, is a stainless steel fish box. The main kitchen can be seen in the background through the doorway.



1935.

The service pantry, the room that had been the everyday kitchen, was reconfigured in 1935 to include built-in refrigerators, under the arch, and two new dumbwaiters. The ice cream storage box appears at left.

January 21, 1948.
Abbie Rowe
photographed the
White House interior
prior to the Truman
renovation. The main
kitchen and the service
pantry still reflect
the 1935 remodeling,
dented and scratched
from many years of
wear.



ABBIE ROWE, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, OFFICE OF THE CURATOR, THE WHITE HOUSE

January 21, 1948.
Dumbwaiters in the reno-
vated kitchen of 1935 as
they appeared just before
demolition.



ABBIE ROWE, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, OFFICE OF THE CURATOR, THE WHITE HOUSE



ABBIE ROWE, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, OFFICE OF THE CURATOR, THE WHITE HOUSE

June 12, 1950.
During the Truman
renovation, the interior
of the White House was
removed with the excep-
tion of the Third Floor.
The kitchen was rebuilt
in its previous location
in the northwest corner
of the building, seen
in the background at
center.



ABBIE ROWE, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, OFFICE OF THE CURATOR, THE WHITE HOUSE

February 14, 1952.
In addition to document-
ing the demolition of the
building's interior, Abbie
Rowe also photographed
rooms while they were
being reassembled. In
February 1952, appli-
ances and other fixtures
were installed in the
main kitchen.

February 21, 1952.
The new Truman kitchen shown here being installed was tailored precisely to White House needs, with every modern culinary convenience. The ovens and ranges that had been against the east wall were now positioned along the south wall of the room.



ABBIE ROWE, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, OFFICE OF THE CURATOR, THE WHITE HOUSE

March 21, 1952.
Staff clean and reset the kitchen in preparation of President Harry Truman's return to the White House, March 27, 1952.



ABBIE ROWE, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, OFFICE OF THE CURATOR, THE WHITE HOUSE



WHITE HOUSE PHOTO, OFFICE OF THE CURATOR, THE WHITE HOUSE

August 3, 1971.
The north end of the service pantry is seen prior to remodeling work that occurred during August 1971 under President Richard M. Nixon.



WHITE HOUSE PHOTO, OFFICE OF THE CURATOR, THE WHITE HOUSE

September 22, 1971.
This southeast view of the kitchen was taken after the project was completed. Much of the equipment installed nearly twenty years earlier during the Truman renovation, including two ranges and a food warmer from 1935, had become obsolete and was replaced. Work areas were rearranged to make better use of limited space.

September 22, 1971.
In 1971, a partial wall, seen at right, was installed along the north end of the kitchen to create a hallway to help restrict foot traffic through the food preparation area.



WHITE HOUSE PHOTO, OFFICE OF THE CURATOR, THE WHITE HOUSE

c. 1990–92.
The Historic American Building Survey (HABS) produced measured drawings, field notes, and photographs of the White House, 1988–92, to show the changes that had occurred since the Truman renovation. This image reflects the appearance of the main kitchen as it is today. The placement of the sinks, ranges, ovens, and work spaces has not changed since the Nixon administration. Equipment installed in 1971 has been replaced when necessary.



JACK E. BOUCHER, HABS, OFFICE OF THE CURATOR, THE WHITE HOUSE



JACK E. BOUCHER, HABS, OFFICE OF THE CURATOR, THE WHITE HOUSE

c. 1990–92.
During the Truman renovation, a spiral staircase and a staff elevator were placed next to the dumbwaiters in the pantry area to enable easier movement of food from the kitchen to the State Floor dining rooms. This arrangement remains to the present day.



WHITE HOUSE PHOTO, OFFICE OF THE CURATOR, THE WHITE HOUSE

1982.
First Lady Nancy Reagan views a swan made of spun sugar while visiting the White House kitchen. Chefs from left to right, Roland Mesnier (pastry chef, 1980–2004); Henry Haller (executive chef, 1966–87); and Frank Ruta (assistant chef, 1980–87 and 1988–90).