

11-9-00
800th Anniversary Milk House

FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
REMARKS AT 200TH ANNIVERSARY
THE WHITE HOUSE
NOVEMBER 9, 2000

Thank you all and welcome to the White House for this celebration of its 200th birthday. I want to thank President and Mrs. Ford, President and Mrs. Carter, President and Mrs. Bush, Lady Bird Johnson and all their families for being here tonight, and for your tireless commitment to make this House flourish in all its roles – as the home of the First Family, as a symbol of democracy, and as a living museum open to all citizens. I also want to thank Hugh Sidey, Neil Horstman and Bob Breedan for making this extraordinary celebration possible.

We can only imagine what it was like for President Adams, and later his wife, when they first arrived at this House. The plaster walls were still damp. Only six rooms were habitable, leaving Mrs. Adams to hang her laundry to dry right here in the East Room. And there was only one painting on the White House walls – the Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington that hangs today in the East Room, thanks in large part to Dolly Madison, who risked her life to save it.

That has always been one of my very favorite stories about the White House. How, during the War of 1812, James Madison was out leading his troops and Mrs. Madison had prepared a wonderful meal for her husband and his officers.

Except word came that the British were on their way to Washington and she had to flee. Instead Dolly Madison decided she had to stay behind to collect the most valuable items of the house. They were not the account books, or her personal possessions, but rather the items that represented the founding of our republic.

Here's what she wrote in a letter to her sister: "Our kind friend has come to hasten our departure, and is in a very bad humor with me, because I insist on waiting until the large picture of General Washington is secured, and it requires to be unscrewed from the wall. This process was found too perilous. I have ordered the frame to be broken and the canvas taken out. It is done, and now dear sister, I must leave this house."

I think of Dolly Madison taking time to gather the picture, a copy of the Declaration of Independence and other valuables, and to write to her sister before the British came. [Incidentally, I've reminded the British Ambassador several times that before the British officers burned down the house, they sat down and ate the meal Mrs. Madison had prepared!]

In choosing to save our founding documents, when Dolly Madison understood is that all of us are stewards of this House and the history it represents. It has been the privilege of a lifetime for our family to live in this White House, to have a chance to preserve its history, and share it with people all over the world.

Just today I received a letter from the American Association of Museums letting us know that they have recently voted to again award accreditation to the White House. This is the highest distinction a museum can receive, and it is a testament to the many people who, since the Madisons first moved in, have worked to protect the history, art, culture, ideas, and innovations of this living museum. Many of them are here tonight.

When the White House celebrates its 300th anniversary, I'm sure that they will do a reenactment ceremony highlighting our quaint methods of transportation, not to mention the old fashioned way we used to communicate by e-mail and fax. But, more than anything, they will look back, as we do tonight, and give thanks to all the leaders who helped preserve the story of America that is part of every room and hallowed piece of ground in the White House.

They will give thanks to all the First Families, both those who are here, and sadly those, like the Reagans, who could not be here. They will give thanks to the White House Historical Association and the Committee for the Preservation of the White House. They will give thanks to Gary Walters and the entire Executive Residence Staff, and to the Curators who have worked here. They will give thanks to the many of the artists here, who have entertained us, inspired us, and reminded us of who we are as a nation, and who we want to become. They will give thanks to all of you here who have given special gifts to the White House collection that will grace these halls forever. And they will give thanks to the historians who have made sure that all Americans learn the history of this house, and pass it on to their children.

And now it is my great honor to introduce someone who has taught us all about the American Presidency for almost a half century. He has covered nine Presidents and traveled the world shedding light on the great events of our time. Today, as the President of the White House Historical Association, Hugh Sidey is working tirelessly to teach all our citizens, old and young alike, about the White House, its culture, its history, its meaning. It is my great honor to introduce Hugh Sidey.

