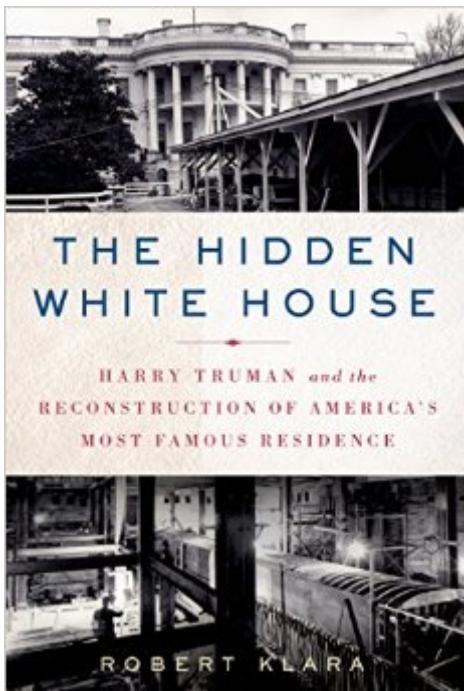


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The Hidden White House: Harry Truman And The Reconstruction Of America's Most Famous Residence



Synopsis

Critically acclaimed author Robert Klara's *The Hidden White House* leads readers through an unmatched tale of political ambition and technical skill: the Truman administration's controversial rebuilding of the White House. In 1948, President Harry Truman, enjoying a bath on the White House's second floor, almost plunged through the ceiling of the Blue Room into a tea party for the Daughters of the American Revolution. A handpicked team of the country's top architects conducted a secret inspection of the troubled mansion and, after discovering it was in imminent danger of collapse, insisted that the First Family be evicted immediately. What followed would be the most historically significant and politically complex home-improvement job in American history. While the Trumans camped across the street at Blair House, Congress debated whether to bulldoze the White House completely, and the Soviets exploded their first atomic bomb, starting the Cold War. Indefatigable researcher Robert Klara reveals what has, until now, been little understood about this episode: America's most famous historic home was basically demolished, giving birth to today's White House. Leaving only the mansion's facade untouched, workmen gutted everything within, replacing it with a steel frame and a complex labyrinth deep below ground that soon came to include a top-secret nuclear fallout shelter. The story of Truman's rebuilding of the White House is a snapshot of postwar America and its first Cold War leader, undertaking a job that changed the centerpiece of the country's national heritage. The job was by no means perfect, but it was remarkable—and, until now, all but forgotten.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

For the general reader, I would recommend that you give this book a try. And a stronger recommendation for those particularly interested in architecture, construction, the history of the building, and history in general. Robert Klara has obviously spent many many hours unearthing names and facts available in widely disparate and, I would imagine, obscure sources, and served them up deliciously. He loves his subject, which helps immensely when your subject is "simply" a renovation. Many historians pile all the facts they have lovingly unearthed onto the plate and leave you to do the writing in your head. Klara sets the jewels of his facts into a setting of the Truman administration: the Cold War, atomic fears, the re-election, the Korean War, the Blaire House assassination attempt... and does it with fluid and clear syntax. The amazingly deplorable and even dangerous condition of the White House was a secret, and Klara explains why. How could painstakingly removed and cataloged carvings, furniture, and panels end up in landfill? You learn the answer as Klara convincingly recreates the pressures and practicalities facing poor, besieged main contractor John McShain, the man who also built the Pentagon. You discover that in some sense the Commission on Renovation made the renovation worse, and that President Truman (brought to life on these pages) also made decisions that sabotaged the work even as he spearheaded the effort and cut through bureaucratic dithering. I was 150 pages into the book on my first sit-down. You learn of the Crumbling, the Studies, The Politics, the Bureaucracy (exasperating and foolish), the Logistics, the Work, the tragedies of lost antiques, and even the Decoration.

The Hidden White House: Harry Truman and the Reconstruction of America's Most Famous Residence by Robert Klara is a terrific book that includes history, mystery, humor and lots of high drama. One would be hard pressed to write a novel that is so absorbing. The President's House, the Peoples' House, or the White House--whatever name you use, was literally falling down by the time Harry S. Truman moved in upon the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1945. This didn't happen all at once. The White House was rebuilt after the British torched it in the War of 1812. Subsequent renovations added too much weight to the structure. Since the interior walls were not footed on solid ground, the building was slowly sinking. And on top of everything, between the Depression and World War II, FDR spent barely a cent on the maintenance and upkeep of his home. The standing joke was that FDR lived in the "Off White House." By the time Truman moved in, chandeliers were swaying, floors were rocking, and the building was making a racket that sounded like the work of ghosts. When the leg of daughter Margaret's piano fell through the floor of her bedroom, it became obvious that the White House was an unsafe place to live. Klara provides a thoroughly engaging and

fascinating tale of just how the White House was rebuilt. As with all DC tales, this one includes intrigue, fighting, money, egos, and as always, politics. It took months just to determine whether the building should be razed or rebuilt. Once the decision was made to rebuild, so many factors influenced the work. The Korean War drove up prices of materials and lead to cost overruns.

In 1948, after winning his come-from-behind election victory to a full term as President, Harry Truman was told by a government administrator, "Mr President, I am going to do something to you that the Republicans couldn't. I am going to move you out of the White House." And so it was that for most of his full term in office, ending in 1953, Harry and Bess Truman resided in Blair-Lee House, across the street from the White House. The government couldn't take the chance that the White House - that crumbling edifice - would fall down around the President. There had been "threats", "rumblings", and odd noises in the White House for years. Several great chandeliers on the second floor had threatened to collapse for years. The floors/ceilings were buckling under the weight of the building as previous renovations had casually removed bearing walls. The ground the White House was built on was also sinking. Since a new roof had been put on the building by Calvin Coolidge, no structural work had been done to shore up the 130 year old building. "The People's House" was a wreck by 1945. Historian Robert Klara has written an excellent book on the problems - structural, politically, and financially - and how the White House was restored to its former beauty. (At least on the outside. While work was done on the inside by first the Trumans and then the Eisenhowers, who can forget First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy's disdain for the interior when she moved in in 1961?) Robert Klara is a masterful writer - a very "easy", fluid writer - and "The Hidden White House" is an engaging look at the White House-through-the-years. But, of course, the "years" he mostly concentrates on are the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt and onward as the White House crumbled around its occupants.

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