

John Adams was the first president to live in the White House. Called "the President's House," when Adams first arrived there on 1 November 1800, the White House was built with the help of slave labor.

The White House Historical Association provides more information about the use of slaves to build the Executive Mansion (as the White House was also known):

The D.C. commissioners, charged by Congress with building the new city under the direction of the president, initially planned to import workers from Europe to meet their labor needs. However, response to recruitment was dismal and soon they turned to African American—enslaved and free—to provide the bulk of labor that built the White House, the United States Capitol, and other early government buildings.

The White-House architect—James Hoban, an Irishman—patterned his design after the Leinster House in Dublin. Three of his slaves—Ben, Daniel and Peter—were carpenters who worked on the White House. The government paid Hoban for the use of these carpenters.

In fact, the government paid wages for all of the slave workers who built the White House, but the wages earned by these individuals went to their "owners," not to the workers. The White House Historical Association tells us how that occurred:

The payroll to slave owners shows that the government did not own slaves, but that it did hire them from their masters. Slave carpenters Ben, Daniel, and Peter were noted as owned by James Hoban.

What jobs did the slaves have, as they worked on the President's home, and where did they get their specific training?

Stonemason Collen Williamson trained enslaved people on the spot at the government's quarry at Aquia, Virginia. Enslaved people quarried and cut the rough stone that was later dressed and laid by Scottish masons to erect the walls of the President's House. The slaves joined a work force that included local white laborers and artisans from Maryland and Virginia, as well as immigrants from Ireland, Scotland, and other European nations. (See the White House Historical Association's article, "Did Slaves Build the White House?")

When Abigail Adams arrived at the home she would soon call "the great castle," later in November of 1800, she was singularly unimpressed.

It wasn't just that she was upset so many slaves were involved with building the place. The unfinished house was cold and she had to hang their laundry (after washing it herself) in an empty "audience room." Today, that room is called the "East Room."

Soon after moving into her new home, Abigail wrote to Cotton Tufts (on November 28, 1800). In her long letter, she mentions watching twelve poorly clothed and poorly fed slaves who were working on the White-House grounds:

The effects of Slavery are visible every where ...Two of our hardy N England men would do as much work in a day as the whole 12 [of slaves she was observing], but it is true Republicanism that drive the Slaves half fed, and destitute of cloathing, or fit for [text unclear], to labour, whilst the owner waches about Idle, tho his one Slave is all the property he can boast...

...But no sooner do we leave the city [of Washington] than we are again enveloped in woods, here and there a thatchd cottage without a Glass window peeps out from under the gloom inhabited, by blacks. the children as nature sent them into the world, the lower class of whites, are a grade below the negroes in point of intelligence, and ten below them in point of civility... (See Abigail Adams' letter at the U.S. National Archives' "Founders Online.")

This clip, from the HBO mini-series, "John Adams," dramatizes the scene when John and Abigail first arrive at the house, together, in November of 1800.

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