

# WASHINGTON, DC PRESIDENT'S GUEST HOUSE, BLAIR HOUSE



Quietly facing the White House on Pennsylvania Avenue, a group of unobtrusive townhouses stands ready to welcome the nation's most important visitors. The President's Guest House, as the buildings owned by the General Services Administration are collectively known, operates under the stewardship of the U.S. Department of State's Office of the Chief of Protocol and accommodates official guests of the United States government visiting Washington. Four interconnected, nineteenth century houses comprise the property: Blair House, Lee House, and 700 and 704 Jackson Place.

Since its 1824 construction, Blair House has played a prominent role in Washington politics. It derives its name from its second owner, Francis Preston Blair, who purchased it in 1837. Blair, editor of the local Globe newspaper, was an influential advisor to Andrew Jackson and several later presidents. In 1852 he built a neighboring home for his daughter Elizabeth and her husband, Samuel Phillips Lee. The adjacent Jackson Place properties were built in 1860. The government acquired all the property in 1942 and transformed it into the president's official guest house.

Several momentous events have occurred in Blair House. On April 18, 1861, Francis Preston Blair invited Robert E. Lee to Blair House and presented him with Abraham Lincoln's request that Lee command the Union army. Lee declined and, following Virginia's secession, resigned from the U.S. Army and departed for Richmond to command his state's forces.

When the White House underwent renovations from 1948 to 1952, Harry Truman and his family resided at Blair House. The room now known as the Truman Study was the president's office. Weekly cabinet meetings in the Lee Dining Room carried out his Fair Deal program, recognized the new state of Israel, and desegregated the U.S. armed forces. The house was officially designated as the President's Guest House in 1957.

The President's Guest House consists of four, visually distinct buildings that have been unified on the interior to serve the needs of visiting dignitaries. At over 60,000 square feet, the property contains over 120 rooms, including fifteen guest bedrooms and thirty-five bathrooms, among other functional spaces. The property has undergone numerous exterior and interior alterations since its original construction, yet retains its historic appeal.

In the years spanning 1982 to 1988, Congress recognized Blair House's historic and architectural significance by appropriating \$9.7 million for the property's renovation and structural additions. The floor plans of the four houses were joined seamlessly and a two-story garden wing was added. The garden reception room is clad in Ohio sandstone that is stylistically similar to the masonry of the White House. Private citizens joined the Blair House renovation effort, donating \$5 million for interior improvements and redecoration. Designers used elements from the houses' many eras to unify interior spaces and create a coherent plan.