

Discussion: Ghosts in the White House



Winston Churchill
from Atlas Obscura

According to multiple sources, once while staying in the Lincoln bedroom during a 1940s visit to the White House, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill came out of his bathroom naked, smoking a cigar, to find the specter of Abraham Lincoln, assassinated in 1865, standing by the fireplace in his bedroom. Churchill claimed to have greeted him by saying, "Good evening Mr. President. You seem to have me at a disadvantage," but he said Lincoln simply smiled and vanished. And while Churchill repeated the story with apparent relish, he refused to stay in that room again.

Of all the ghosts that supposedly haunt the White House, Lincoln is the one most often reported by residents and visitors, usually in what is now designated as the Lincoln bedroom, but which served as his office during Lincoln's lifetime.

Grace Coolidge, wife of President Calvin Coolidge (1923-29), was the first person to say she had actually seen Lincoln's ghost. According to her, the lanky former president was standing looking out a window of the Oval Office, across the Potomac to the former Civil War battlefields beyond. Lady Bird Johnson, wife of President Lyndon Johnson (1963-69), reportedly felt Lincoln's presence one night while watching a television program about his death.

Sightings of Lincoln's ghost were frequently reported during the long administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-45). First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt used the Lincoln Bedroom as her study, and said she would feel his presence when she worked there late at night. The First Lady's secretary once reported seeing him in the northwest bedroom. He was sitting on the bed, pulling his boots on hurriedly as if he had somewhere important to be. (She left the room screaming.) Other White House staff members have also reported sightings.



Lincoln Bedroom from the White House Museum

During her visit to the White House, Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands heard a knock on her bedroom door in the night; when she answered it, she reportedly saw Lincoln's ghost, wearing his top hat, and fainted dead away.

President Eisenhower said he was once walking down a hallway when he spied a figure coming down the hall straight toward him. After a moment, he realized it was Abraham Lincoln.

President Reagan told a story of his daughter Maureen and her husband staying in the Lincoln bedroom and seeing on separate occasions "a transparent figure standing at the bedroom window looking out."

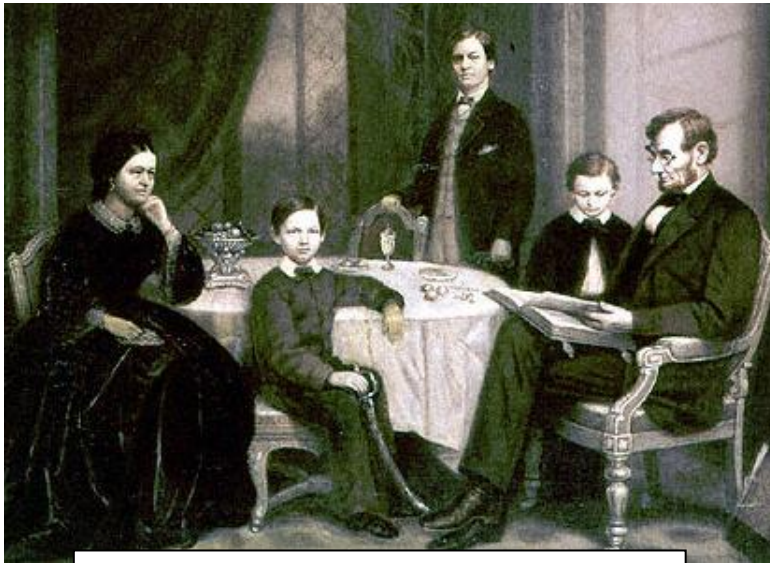


Image is from the White House Historical Association

He also noted that his dog Rex would stand at the threshold of the Lincoln bedroom barking and refuse to go in.

Others – from the Grant administration in the 1870s until the 1960s – have reported seeing Abraham Lincoln's 11-year-old son Willie Lincoln, who died in the White House in 1862 of typhoid fever. The famously superstitious Mary Todd Lincoln claimed to see him regularly at the foot of her bed – and was

comforted by his presence. President Lyndon Johnson's daughter Lynda

Bird Johnson Robb said she saw Willie's ghost — he had died in the room in which she was staying — and talked with him.

First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln told friends of another ghostly presence she heard: former President Andrew Jackson stomping and swearing through the halls of the presidential residence. The Rose Room, Jackson's bedchamber while he was president, is believed by some to be one of the most haunted rooms in the White House.

Jackson's ghostly presence also showed up in President Harry Truman's correspondence. In June 1945, which was early in his first term, he wrote about the spookiness of his new residence to his wife Bess, who was still back in Missouri. "I sit here in this old house and work on foreign affairs, read reports, and work on speeches—all the while listening to the ghosts walk up and down the hallway and even right in here in the study. The floors pop and the



President Truman in Oval Office
Photo from Harry S. Truman

drapes move back and forth—I can just imagine old Andy [Jackson] and Teddy [Roosevelt] having an argument over Franklin [Roosevelt].”

Although he never claimed to see Lincoln, Truman's daughter Margaret said her father actually wished Lincoln and other deceased presidents would drop by. “I’m sure they’re here,” he told her. “I won’t lock my doors or bar them if any of the old coots in the pictures want to come out of their frames for a friendly chat.”



Image from SteamboatToday.org

Sightings of other presidents are rare, although Thomas Jefferson has been said to play his violin in the yellow oval room.

Abigail Adams, the first First Lady to occupy the White House, was known to hang her wash in the unfinished East Room. Her ghost, clad in a cap and lace shawl, has reportedly been seen heading towards the East Room, arms outstretched as if carrying laundry. Some also say the scent of wet laundry or lavender accompanies her. Among those who

have reportedly seen her was President Taft.

Ghosts have also been seen outside the White House. First Lady Dolley Madison planted the famous White House rose garden in the early 1800s. A hundred years later, First Lady Ellen Wilson requested the garden be dug up, but garden workers reported that Dolley Madison’s ghost appeared and refused to let them tear it up. Since then, an unexplained smell of roses sometimes experienced inside the White House is attributed to the ghost of Dolley.



George W. Bush from The Guardian

More recently, Presidents and their families have not necessarily claimed to see ghosts, but the Clintons, George W. Bushes, and Obamas have all had “creepy” experiences, according to [this video](#).

One final note: According to First Daughter Susan Ford, on her last night in the White House, she and a friend slept in the Lincoln bedroom, hoping to catch a glimpse of the famous apparition. Nothing appeared, but Betty Ford tried to make it up to them—in the morning, she entered the room wearing a sheet, making scary noises, and reciting the Gettysburg Address. Said Susan, “We were like, yeah mom, we’re a little too old for that, but it was funny.”

Talk about it:

- Do you believe in ghosts?
- Whether or not you believe in ghosts, do you believe in these stories, i.e., that these people saw or felt *something*?
- Have you ever had a ghostly experience? If so, share your story.
- Do you believe that huge old historical houses – even glamorous and well-guarded ones – can be a little creepy?
- Would you stay in the Lincoln bedroom if given the chance?

Sources:

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