

Jackie Kennedy's Last White House Days & What She Found in JFK's Desk

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Jacqueline Kennedy writing on the President's Oval Office desk in the spring of 1963. (JFKL)

Two weeks to the day that her husband was assassinated, presidential widow Jacqueline Kennedy moved out of the White House. It was December 6, 1963, fifty years ago today.

Just hours after she had been handed the flag which covered the President's coffin and left his intended final resting place following the burial service, and once all the friends, family, and heads of state had left the **White House** reception, the widowed Jacqueline Kennedy quickly accepted the impromptu invitation from his brother, Attorney General **Robert Kennedy** to visit "our friend."



The temporary Kennedy gravesite. (JFKL)



The President's widow came to kneel in prayer at JFK's burial place, illuminated by the eternal flame. (LC)

And so they returned to **Arlington National Cemetery**, the night black and cold, the crowds gone but for the sentries.

In fact, every remaining night she would spend in the White House, Bobby and Jackie Kennedy would go to pray at the President's grave.

At three the next afternoon, November 26, 1963, Mrs. Kennedy invited **Lady Bird Johnson**, the new First Lady, to join her for a warm hour of tea as she explained the ins and outs of making a home on the second floor of the national museum that was the White House. "Don't be frightened of this

house," Jackie told Lady Bird, "Some of the happiest years of my marriage have been spent here..."

The new First Lady described her predecessor's state as being "orderly, composed," with "an element of steel and stamina somewhere deep within her to keep her going on as she is."

Mrs. Johnson assured her that there was no need to feel pressured to vacate quickly, but rather that she take all the time necessary to find the place she wanted to next make a home for herself and her children.

Although she and President Kennedy owned a house among those famously known as the “Kennedy Compound” in **Hyannis, Massachusetts**, it was a summer home, relatively isolated and not winterized.

They had sold their Georgetown home following the 1960 election and move to the White House. Despite having no home to go to just yet, Jacqueline Kennedy



Sisters of the Kennedys, Jean Smith, Lee Radziwill and Pat Lawford at the Alliance for Progress event. (JBKL)

wanted to vacate the White House as quickly as was humanly possible, setting a target date of December 6, 1963.

With her sister Lee Radziwill and sister-in-law Pat Lawford delaying for several months their return to their homes, London, England and Santa Monica, California, respectively, Jackie Kennedy did receive some help.

Later that day, the two First Ladies appeared together in the **East Room** to attend an address by **President Johnson** on the **Alliance for Progress**.

Although the new President intended on living at the private home of his family for as long as necessary, he did request the morning after the assassination that the process of having his rightful working space in the West Wing, the Oval Office begin as soon as possible.

For Jacqueline Kennedy, this proved upsetting for an unexpected reason.



Jacqueline Kennedy attending LBJ's speech to Alliance for Progress Latin American representatives. (LBJL)

Not until two years into his presidency, after she had refurnished the family quarters and state rooms, did Jackie Kennedy begin redecorating the Oval Office. The renovation was completed while the Kennedys were in Texas. On the morning of November 23, just hours after Jackie Kennedy had returned to the White House with the late President's flag-draped coffin, she went there to see how it looked, and to also remove personal items from the drawers of her husband's desk there.



The redone JFK Oval Office never seen by either Kennedy. (JFKL)



The Kennedy Oval Office, redecorated to the First Lady's specifications while they were in Texas but dismantled before she returned and could see it. (JFKL)

Sadly for her, it was already being disassembled, returned to a bare appearance in order for the new President to create the space according to his own wishes.

When she went through his private desk drawers, however, she found two pieces of paper which shook her composure, although the motivating sentiment had been one of love.

From the drawer, she recovered two yellowed newspaper clippings that President Kennedy had kept there for over a year. Both were from April of 1962.

One, from the Washington Daily News, stated that when she had made her goodwill visit to India, she had "even outdone President Eisenhower as a drawing card." The other, written during her visit to Pakistan quoted her as saying that she was especially saddened that her husband was not there with her.

In the two days following **President Kennedy's** burial, Jackie Kennedy had already begun disassembling the rooms of the White House family living quarters, where they had really lived as a family.

The Center Hall and the **West Sitting Hall** were lined with cardboard boxes and wood crates, as Jackie Kennedy oversaw domestic staff members and friends who helped her through the process of packing.



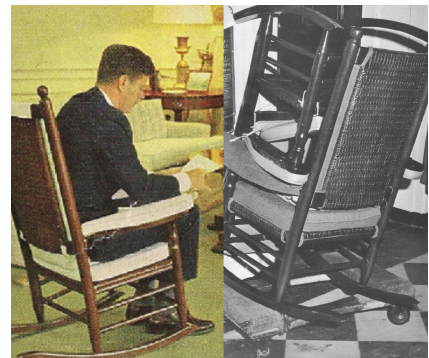
The West Sitting Hall of the Kennedy White House. (JFKL)

Presidential aides throughout the White House complex, from the West to the East Wing, the Executive Office Building to the Executive Residence were often choked with emotion, however, at the sight of crates and boxes which now began to clog the hallways, packed with the assassinated President's office papers, personal and other items.



The Kennedy family possessions ready to be shipped out of the White House. (JFKL)

As she sorted through the contents of their bedroom, she determined what to save for both personal sentiment and historical purposes, what to place in storage and what to dispose of, as mementos for friends, family and staff members.



President Kennedy in one of his rocking chairs, two of which were later placed on a dolly and moved out the day after his assassination. (JFKL)

Among the most personal of his items, one of his iconic rocking chairs used in the Oval Office. She gave one of these to George Thomas, an African-American who had been JFK's devoted personal valet since the Senate years.

She gave away most of her late husband's ties, belts, shirts, suits, shoes, casual clothing, sportswear, and sporting equipment, retaining his personal jewelry and just a few of his suits, and notably his leather jacket with the presidential seal on it.



Just before leaving for Thanksgiving, Jackie Kennedy visited her husband's gravesite on November 28, 1963. (LC)

Three days after JFK's burial was Thanksgiving. Before leaving for their Hyannis home, the widowed First Lady went again to visit her late husband's grave, accompanied by **Bobby Kennedy**, her sister Lee Radziwill, and others. By now, a small wood picket fence had been built around the grave, where it was piled high with floral tributes. Despite the onlooking public crowds, she knelt there in prayer.

Earlier that morning, she was handed the wristwatch her husband had been wearing when he was killed.

From Arlington National Cemetery, Jackie Kennedy went to Hyannis with her children for the holiday weekend. She could not bring herself to join the extended **Kennedy family** in the big annual dinner hosted there by her parents-in-law, choosing instead to remain secluded.

It was over that cold and rainy weekend, however, that she summoned political writer Theodore White and granted him a stream-of-consciousness interview about what President Kennedy's death now meant for her life but also how she hoped the nation and the world would remember him.

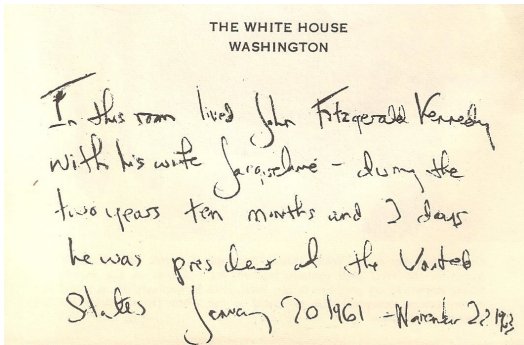
In remarking how he often liked to play the phonograph record of the Broadway musical Camelot and loved the show's title song, she made the implicit comparison between the mythic kingdom and his own presidential Administration.



The December 6, 1963 issue of Life magazine in which Jacqueline Kennedy first drew the analogy between the mythic Camelot kingdom from the popular Broadway musical and her husband's presidency. (Time-Life)



President Kennedy's bedroom; behind the door at left on bookshelves was a hi-fi set where Jackie Kennedy said JFK liked to play the record album from the Broadway musical Camelot. (JFKL)



The inscription Mrs. Kennedy wanted placed with one indicating Lincoln had also slept in the same room. (JFKL)

The story appeared as a Life magazine cover story and permanently embedded her romanticized idea of the kingdom, along with the title song, into the world's imagination to the point where "Camelot" became analogous with the Kennedy White House.

Later, as Mrs. Onassis she strongly regretted doing this, realizing that it lent credence to those critics who judged her husband's presidency to be more about stylish rather than substantive policy.

She also made another emotional decision which she later regretted.

Recalling how there was an engraving on the fireplace mantel in the room designated as "the **President's Bedroom**" which stated that Abraham Lincoln had lived in that room, she wrote out an inscription declaring that JFK "with his wife" had also lived there.

She asked that it be engraved on a plaque and also affixed to the mantle.

Returning to Washington on Monday, the first day of December, Jackie Kennedy accelerated the last stages of her packing. In the interim, Ambassador **Averell Harriman** and his wife offered to vacate their Georgetown home so the Kennedy trio could have a place to use immediately.

Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of heartfelt sympathy letters and cards written to her and her children from people around the world were flooding the White House mail rooms. Her Chief of Staff and Social Secretary, longtime confidante Nancy Tuckerman, along with press secretary Pam Turnure had already devised a system to respond to each individual message, turning some over for

personal response by Mrs. Kennedy, an aide or sending an engraved acknowledgement card.



Along with his wife and sons, Jackie Kennedy attended the ceremony for her Secret Service agent Clint Hill who received the Treasury Department's highest honor for his actions which may have saved her life. (LBJL)

As the days and then the hours of her White House residency winnowed down, Jackie Kennedy used even the wee hours of the morning to accomplish everything she felt she had to do.

This included her writing out by hand several dozen note cards, lined in black mourning with the crest of her husband's family, to every individual person, be they full-time or part-time who worked in the White House and served her husband. In order to be certain that nobody was forgotten, Jackie Kennedy ended up writing about a dozen more than necessary. Each carried the same simple message of appreciation:

Thank you for all you did to help the President. Jacqueline Kennedy

She had mundane matters to process – like signing insurance papers and those from the navy which awarded her benefits as the widow of an active serviceman. She had succeeded in influencing Treasury Secretary Douglas Dillon to award her **Secret Service** agent **Clint Hill** with the department's highest honor, for the bravery of his jumping on the presidential limousine seconds after bullets killed the President – an act which may have very well saved her own life. She insisted on appearing at the ceremony along with Hill's wife and sons.

Only after the Thanksgiving weekend did Jackie Kennedy begin to experience the darkest depth of traumatic grief she had been trying to delay and which would consume her for the better part of the coming year. It was made even more intense by the onset of the Holiday Season.



Before they left their home in the White House, the Kennedy children were permitted to chose one Christmas gift each from among the thousands sent from the public. (JFKL)



The 1963 Green Room rendering which was distributed as a gift print to staff but not sent out in Christmas card form. (JFKL)

Although the White House had not yet begun mailing the 1963 Kennedy Christmas card, Jackie did have distributed the gift prints of the same image, a color rendering of the Green Room.

And, coming into the White House there was now streaming a flow of wrapped Christmas presents were arriving at the White House, sent by the public in an outpouring of sympathy to young Caroline and John Kennedy.

On the morning of the day they were to leave, Jackie Kennedy permitted the children's nanny Maude Shaw to take them both over to the Executive Office Building, where each was permitted to pick out one Christmas present each, a symbolic gift from the nation to the late President's children.

Caroline Kennedy would actually be returning to the White House for several more days.

Lady Bird Johnson had assured Jackie that her daughter's kindergarten class could certainly continue to meet in the third-floor solarium until the holiday

break marked the end of the school semester.

The little girl would also join her classmates in their much-anticipated Christmas pageant, held in the White House movie theater.

Coming to watch her daughter and her class perform on December 14, the pageant marked the only time that Jacqueline Kennedy would return to the White House until the single visit she made by accepting the 1971 invitation of the President and Mrs. Nixon.



Caroline Kennedy during her school Christmas Pageant in the White House movie theater, 1963. (JFKL)

Pictures make obvious the toll that her father's death had on the six-year old girl, bringing a sudden maturity to her nature that was unavoidable, considering she was old enough to comprehend what had happened. She was also, according to accounts left by Maude Shaw and others, tremendously concerned about her mother's well-being.



Caroline Kennedy in her White House school Christmas Pageant, December 16, 1963 in the movie theater. (JFKL)

As a gesture initiated by Jackie, the late President's extended family would be leaving a gift of their own to the nation, choosing a painting to then be donated to the permanent White House collection in his memory.

The chairman of her White House Fine Arts Committee, James Fosburg, gathered several dozen priceless canvases from a variety of legendary artists. and lined them along the Center Hall in the family quarters and walls of the Yellow Oval Room.

The late president's wife, two brothers and three sisters studied all the paintings and managed to eventually winnow the choices down to two.

Both paintings were then carried down and hung on the walls of the Green Room, JFK's favorite.

There, Eunice Kennedy Shriver kept her gaze steady on a landscape by Claude Monet entitled Morning on the Seine.



Morning on the Seine by Claude Monet was donated to the White House by the Kennedy family in memorium to him. (WHHA)

“That picture makes you want to dream, doesn't it?” she remarked to Jackie – who immediately decided that would be the painting they would purchase and donate.

On her last night in what was now a lonely house for her, Jackie Kennedy wrote a sympathy letter to the widow of Dallas policeman who had come upon Lee Harvey Oswald and was also shot and killed by him.



Jackie Kennedy greets household staff members one last time. (JFKL)

On Friday, December 6, 1963, as Caroline Kennedy was finishing up her kindergarten class for the day, Jackie Kennedy and her son stood in the West Sitting Hall, still lined with boxes of their family items, and began receiving groups of the White House staff.



Chief Usher J.B. West, John and Jackie Kennedy on their last White House day. (JFKL)



Jacqueline Kennedy with her son and members of the White House household staff. (JFKL)

This was not the executive aides and advisers, the secretaries and typists who ran the public lives of a President and First Lady.

These were the domestic, garden, electric, kitchen workers. Jackie Kennedy insisting on thanking and giving them each their first chance to spend time speaking with her since the assassination.

Knowing that the White House switchboard operators could not leave their posts, she went down to the large telephone room and waited until each one had a free moment to speak a final word of thanks to them.



Mrs. Kennedy poses with the White House maintenance staff. (JFKL)

She then proceeded downstairs to the East Room to watch, from behind a screen, as President Johnson made the first presentations of the new Presidential Medals of Freedom, which the President and Mrs. Kennedy had worked on re-designing together. One was awarded to the late President.



Jacqueline Kennedy exits the White House with her children. (JFKL)

Before the room's guests filed out, Jackie slipped from the room, down the Cross Hall to the family elevator and went down to the ground floor.

There presidential aide Dave Powers, along with Maude Shaw, were waiting with her two children, clad in their matching blue coats, as she had during the public funeral.

Just before four, as the winter sun was already beginning to fade and the cold air turning frigid, Jacqueline Kennedy grasped the hands of her daughter and son, leading them towards the West Wing, where they exited through a door leading outside.

They passed the Rose Garden, which had been created by the Kennedys, and further to the right, the Oval Office, looking only ahead to the black limousine which awaited them on the crescent driveway of the White House South Lawn.

They climbed into a car and never looked back.

Later in the early evening, when Lady Bird Johnson first went upstairs to begin determining how her family would use the rooms just vacated by the Kennedys, she found a small bouquet with a note from her predecessor.

“I wish you a happy arrival in your new house, Lady Bird,” Jacqueline Kennedy wrote her, “Remember – you will be happy here.”



The remaining Kennedy family exiting the White House. (JFKL)



Jacqueline Kennedy and her children walk towards their car, leaving behind their life in the White House. (JFKL)

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