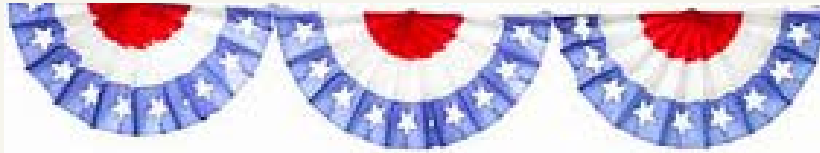




Inauguration Day in America: HOW WE HAIL THE CHIEF



Part solemn occasion, part festive event, a presidential inauguration is representative of a new president’s personality and a quadrennial reminder of our unique peaceful democracy.

By Nancy Mann Jackson

On January 20, the world will watch as the United States installs Barack Obama as its 44th president and the first African-American to occupy the White House. After a historic campaign, it’s sure to be an Inauguration Day to remember. And while the celebration is bound to offer new elements, it will undoubtedly build on the more than 200-year-old tradition of American presidential inaugurations.

“A presidential inauguration, like the presidential campaign preceding it, is both serious and silly,” writes Paul F. Boller in *Presidential Inaugurations* (Harvest, 2002). “It is

important in the nation’s life as a public demonstration of the peaceful transfer of power from one president to another, regardless of political views and party affiliations, and as an occasion to celebrate the basic values that unite the American people and continue to shape the nation’s life. But a presidential inauguration is a carnival, circus, pageant and big show, as well as an occasion for solemnity, and, compared to a royal coronation, it is, as someone once observed, ‘kitsch.’ But Americans [love] the kitsch.”

Today, a presidential inauguration can seem like a huge party with some obligatory speeches stuck in between an extravagant parade and multiple balls. It’s an amazing celebration held to usher in new leadership. But it wasn’t always like that.

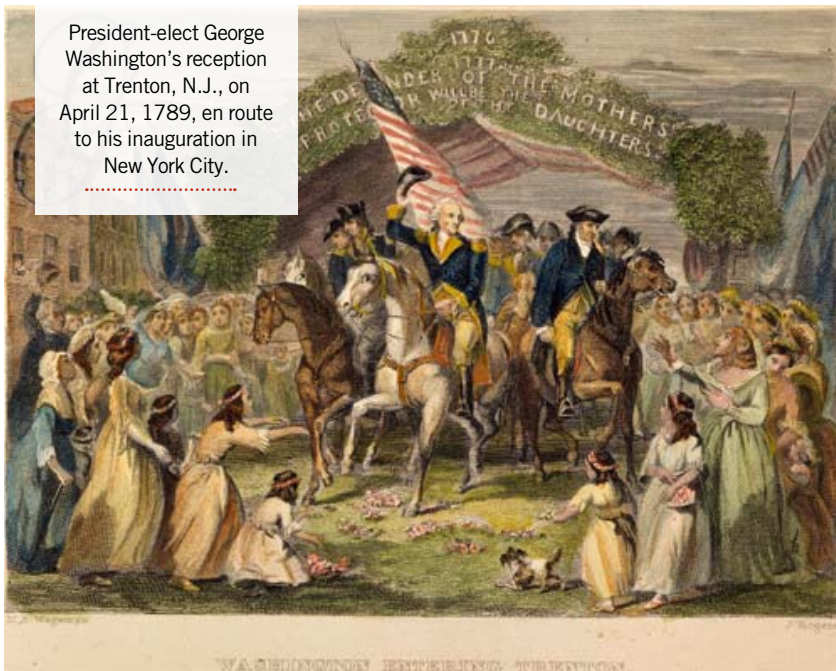


THE FIRST INAUGURATION

When George Washington was inaugurated as the first president of the United States in 1789, it was a momentous occasion. The new country was trying something different from the rest of the world, which was largely ruled by kings, sultans and czars. Because the newly adopted Constitution was silent about how a president should be inaugurated (Article II, Section I simply includes the brief oath each president takes before entering office), Washington was free to make the occasion as simple or as grand as he pleased. The world was watching, and many of Washington's own countrymen were skeptical about the new country's success, so setting a precedent was important.

"Washington was very insistent about establishing precedents and procedures, because everything he did was for the first time," says Gene Smith, professor of history at Texas Christian University and curator of history at the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History. "His inauguration included lots of symbolism, pomp and circumstance."

After boarding a ferry in Elizabeth Town, N.J., Washington traveled to New York, flanked by scores of boats carrying his admirers. In New York, the city's leaders greeted Washington, and he stayed there for a week. He was honored with a 13-gun salute, representing the 13 Colonies. On Inauguration Day, 10,000 people filled the city's streets "to watch and take part in the process," Smith says.



President-elect George Washington's reception at Trenton, N.J., on April 21, 1789, en route to his inauguration in New York City.

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WEIGHTY WORDS

WHILE 55 INAUGURAL ADDRESSES have been composed since 1789 (not including the one to be presented this month), only a few have achieved distinction. Paul F. Boller, author of *Presidential Inaugurations*, says the most stirring are Washington's first (1789), Jefferson's first (1801), Lincoln's first (1861) and second (1865), Wilson's first (1913), Franklin D. Roosevelt's first (1933), and John F. Kennedy's (1961). Here are a few of the highlights:

George Washington: "The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps, as deeply, as finally, staked, on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people." (1789)

Thomas Jefferson: "Sometimes it is said that man cannot be trusted with the government of himself. Can he, then, be trusted with the government of others? Or have we found angels in the forms of kings to govern him? Let history answer this question." (1801)

The entire day was orchestrated, with a processional to Federal Hall, the meeting place set aside for Congress, and militiamen lined up for Washington to walk through. But after repeating his oath of office, he broke from the script and added his own words, "So help me God." These words have been repeated by many presidents since. After the ceremony, Washington attended church services at St. Paul's Chapel and later that night, he watched fireworks with the rest of the city. A few days later, the French minister gave a private ball in Washington's honor.

JEFFERSON, JACKSON ALTER TRADITIONS

While Washington's inaugural opulence set the tone for inaugurations to come, two future presidents would transform Americans' ideas about Inauguration Day and about the presidency in general, Smith says.

Thomas Jefferson, inaugurated in March 1801, was the first president to take office in



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The second inauguration of Abraham Lincoln, March 4, 1865, Washington, D.C.

WEIGHTY WORDS

Abraham Lincoln: “Both [parties] read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other ... The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.” (1865)

John F. Kennedy: “And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” (1961)

At right, souvenir program and button from Harry S. Truman's inauguration after his stunning victory over Thomas Dewey. Items courtesy of *American Spirit* contributing editor Bill Hudgins, whose parents attended the event.

Inaugural Celebrations Through The Years

A Growing Party. As the country grew up, inaugural ceremonies became more elaborate. In 1837, Martin Van Buren's inauguration was celebrated with two balls, and his was the first inaugural parade to contain floats.

Frozen Trumpets. The weather was so cold during Ulysses S. Grant's second inauguration in 1873 that the valves on the band's musical instruments froze during the ball.

Feeding an Army. In 1857, James Buchanan's inaugural ball was held in a building built for the occasion for a staggering \$15,000. Six thousand guests drank \$3,000 worth of wine and devoured 400 gallons of

oysters, 60 saddles of mutton, four saddles of venison, 125 tongues, 75 hams, 500 quarts of chicken salad, 500 quarts of jellies, 1,200 quarts of ice cream and a 4-foot-high cake.

Truman's Carnival. When Harry S. Truman won a surprise victory over Thomas Dewey in 1948, the Democrats were determined to celebrate with abandon, and the lavish, weeklong celebration was

referred to as a “carnival” by *Newsweek* and *Time*. The Republicans couldn't be too upset: Expecting a Dewey victory, the normally thrifty Republican-controlled Congress had approved \$80,000 for inaugural purposes, and the Democrats gladly used it.

Jelly Bellies. At Ronald Reagan's inauguration in 1981, 40 million jelly beans were eaten at his eight inaugural balls.



Washington, D.C., and was dedicated to a simpler concept of government. His inauguration followed suit. Staying in a boardinghouse with friends, Jefferson woke up on Inauguration Day, ate breakfast and walked down Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol. "There were no grand gestures or ceremonies," Smith says. "No crowd gathered; two people heard his inaugural address, [Chief Justice] John Marshall, who administered the oath, and Vice President Aaron Burr."

Earlier that morning, Jefferson had sent out copies of his address to local printers so it could be distributed to the people. But the inauguration itself was a quiet occasion, both because of Jefferson's political ideals and because of his dislike for public speaking. Although Jefferson's simplicity ushered in



John F. Kennedy with Jacqueline Kennedy on their way to his inauguration on January 20, 1961.

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a new era, inaugurations changed again in 1829 when Andrew Jackson heralded the age of the common man. Known as a self-made man who would be the spokesman for common Americans, Jackson was the first "people's president." Citizens came from all over the country to see his inauguration and at the public White House reception after the ceremony, 20,000 people came just to shake Old Hickory's hand.

"The ceremony of Washington, the quietude of Jefferson and the rowdy experience of Jackson shows the evolution of the American politic," Smith says. "Each inauguration shows the heartbeat of America and how it's beating at that moment in history."

So what can we expect to see in 2009? Smith envisions a combination of the

Washington and Jackson philosophies. "Federalists like Washington would see today's celebrations as being part and parcel of the political process, with the elite who helped the president get elected being involved in the events," he says. "But today, we're also hearing a lot about Joe Six-Pack and Joe the Plumber, so I think we'll also see more of Jackson's ceremony of the common man." 🍌

Nancy Mann Jackson traveled the North Alabama Hallelujah Trail of historic churches for the November/December 2008 issue.

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