



A 1792 ink wash and pencil drawing on paper by James Hoban of the floor plan for the President's House. The design was inspired by the Leinster House in Dublin, Ireland.

# JAMES HOBAN

## IRISH IMMIGRANT SHAPED THE NATION'S CAPITAL

Under the shade in a far corner of Mount Olivet Cemetery in northeast Washington, D.C., stands a humble marker for White House architect James Hoban and his wife, Susanna. The simple inscriptions have been weathered by time and acid rain. *By Stephanie Green*

There's no commemorative plaque or epitaph detailing his patriotic contributions. But such is Hoban's legacy—it's been etched away by time and unfortunate twists of fate. His most famous commission at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue was burned nearly to the ground by the British in 1814. St. Patrick's Cathedral in Washington, D.C., also attributed to Hoban or at least influenced by him, was demolished, too. Most frustrating for historians is that Hoban's sketches and personal papers were also destroyed by flames in the 1880s.



Though little remains of Hoban's work, his name has been kept alive by one singular commission: The White House, which he returned to build after it burned, then returned twice more to add its iconic porticoes. "Captain Hoban had been of the generation, ever thinner in number, who had forged the capital city of the great republican experiment from fallow fields and deep forest, following the wishes of the idolized George Washington," writes William Seale in a 2008 essay on Hoban for *White House History* published by the White House Historical Association.



Though George Washington never lived in the White House, he took a special interest in its design.

**H**oban was born in 1758 in County Kilkenny, though the exact date is unknown. As a young man, he was thought to have worked as a wheelwright and carpenter. In his 20s, he won a place at the prestigious Dublin Society drawing school, where he trained in drafting and construction under notable Irish architect Thomas Ivory. “As Ivory’s student, Hoban excelled and won second prize for his drawing of a country house,” Seale writes. “This was one of two medals he would win and cherish, the other being for designing the White House.”

He immigrated to the United States sometime after the Revolutionary War, first settling in Philadelphia as an architect. He was working in Charleston, S.C.,

by 1787. On his 1791 Southern Tour, George Washington likely saw Hoban’s work on the Charleston County Courthouse. (The building is one of the few Hoban structures still standing.) Matthew Costello, Ph.D., assistant director of the David M. Rubenstein National Center for White House History, explained that Washington took special interest in the creation of what would become the nation’s capital, and in the home of the president, in particular, so he urged Hoban to enter a design contest to build it. The talented Irish immigrant’s architectural drawings won the contest in 1792, even beating out an anonymous submission by Thomas Jefferson.

Hoban, while only in his 30s, had two important assets that impressed Washington: He was a Mason and a founding member of the first lodge in Washington, D.C. He was also an admirer of grand

stone buildings, such as the Leinster House in Dublin, which served as his inspiration for the Charleston County Courthouse and the White House. (Costello said references to “The White House” have been used since around 1811, though the term wasn’t official until Theodore Roosevelt’s term in 1901.) Jefferson, on the other hand, preferred a more modest brick house in keeping with the new republic’s democratic ideals.

Unlike others of his time, Washington wasn’t scandalized by the fact that Hoban was Irish and a Catholic. “Washington wanted someone he could trust and could get the job done,” Costello said.

Hoban oversaw as many as 150 workers on the White House project, mostly African-American slaves, though he also employed many immigrants like himself. He tried to help his fellow countrymen, from both his homeland and his adopted young nation, with employment, Costello said. Hoban was also a captain of the Washington, D.C., Artillery, which he required his workmen to join, “docking their pay if they didn’t show up for drills,” Seale writes.

One of his personal assistants was Robert Mills, the eventual architect of the Washington Monument. (See story on page 38.) “Hoban, a joiner himself, was a competent manager, and he directed drawings for wainscot, staircases, and doorways [of the White House]. ... In addition to overseeing the construction of the White House, Hoban was directing construction at the Capitol, where the north wing was nearing completion, when Mills arrived,” writes John M. Bryan in *Robert Mills: America’s First Architect* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2001).

Hoban’s team laid the White House’s cornerstone in October 1792, and John and Abigail Adams were the first inhabitants in 1800. In the summer of 1814, British troops seized the city. The White House—occupied by James and Dolley Madison—went up in smoke, as did the executive offices at the Department of Treasury and the Department of War, which Hoban also helped design.

In 1815, Hoban began reconstruction on the White House. It was finally finished by 1830 during Andrew Jackson’s administration.

Hoban died in Washington, D.C., on December 8, 1831, spending his last days in devoted service to his beloved city. In addition to his militia duties, he was a longtime city council member.

“A lot of Hoban’s work has been burned, but you could argue that the White House is one of the most famous buildings in the world,” Costello explained. “That’s an impressive architectural legacy.”

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