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REAL ESTATE

# Inside Gracie Mansion, then and now: A history of the NYC mayor's home

By Sarah Paynter

March 31, 2021 | 8:48am | Updated



The "Little White House" has been Mayor Bill de Blasio's home for seven years, but when he retires from mayorship next year, the 220-year-old mansion will be occupied by whichever Mayor New York elects on November 2.

Patrick McMullan via Getty Image

Gracie Mansion, the official residence of New York City mayors, is getting a new tenant next year.

The “Little White House” has been Mayor Bill de Blasio’s home for seven years, but when he retires from mayorship next year, the 220-year-old mansion will be occupied by **whichever candidate** New York elects on Nov. 2.

Whoever wins, the pale yellow-ocher-colored home is expected to continue hosting teas, fashion shows, fund-raisers, tours, meetings, protests and parties.

The white-trimmed, green-shuttered building’s address is at the corner of East 88th Street and East End Avenue and located in Carl Schurz Park on the east side of Manhattan.

While the coronavirus pandemic has halted a historic tradition of live tours through the mansion, the de Blasio administration **has offered** virtual tours on Zoom.

Explore the busy building’s history — including facelifts, restorations, famous visitors and, yes, scandals — through the photos below.



Gracie Mansion, the official residence of New York City mayors, is getting a new tenant next year.

Patrick McMullan via Getty Image

### **Now: A tour inside the house**

The NYC home’s yellow paint was chosen by former mayor Michael Bloomberg for historical accuracy, based on the coloring of a painting of a nearby house.

The gracious wraparound porch, restored in 1983, is actually the historic site where the New York Post’s founder Alexander Hamilton recruited investors for the budding New York Evening Post in 1801, **according to** the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation.

Its yellow front door has a wooden frame carved like seed pearls. It is flanked by leaded glass windows and topped with a semicircle window. The interior is a mix of modern and historical artifacts strewn across a ground-level floor plan that includes a foyer, parlor, kitchen, library and dining room.



The yellow door is flanked by leaded glass windows and topped with a semicircle window.

Anthony Behar/Sipa USA

Inside, the foyer has tan-and-white striped wallpaper and a faux marble painted floor, a style called *trompe-l'oeil* that was popular in the 1800s. The center of the floor has a compass pattern and is overlooked by a chandelier.

An ancient grandfather clock has ticked in the corner since at least 1942. Above the fireplace, a gold-framed mirror is flanked by light fixtures.

A winding staircase leads upstairs to the bedrooms, which are closed off to visitors. The second floor has five rooms which, for various tenants, have been configured as bedrooms, sitting rooms and dressing rooms.



Inside, the foyer boasts a faux-marble painted floor in a style called trompe-l'oeil that was popular in the 1800s.

Anthony Behar/Sipa USA



The foyer has tan-and-white striped wallpaper, crown moldings and Federal-style furniture.

Anthony Behar/Sipa USA

A patent yellow parlor sits to the right of the foyer and nods to the home's early history with a cannonball on the fireplace mantel. The cannonball was excavated from the site of the mansion, where a British loyalist home once stood until it was destroyed in September 1776 — perhaps by that very cannonball, [according to NYC.gov](#).

The parlor also has a circular convex mirror with an ornate gold frame and six candle sconces built into the fixture. The convex mirror maximizes light in the room, a trick that might have been used in the house before the installation of electric lights.

But the parlor also celebrates a side of history less often told. Under the de Blasio administration, the house has been filled with art by diverse talents. The yellow parlor most recently displayed art from Japanese artist Tōkō Shinoda and New York City collage artist Baseera Khan.



In the O'Dwyer administration, this room was tan. Recently, the conservancy has been calling the room "peach-colored," so it's possible it could have been repainted since the most recent pictures were taken.

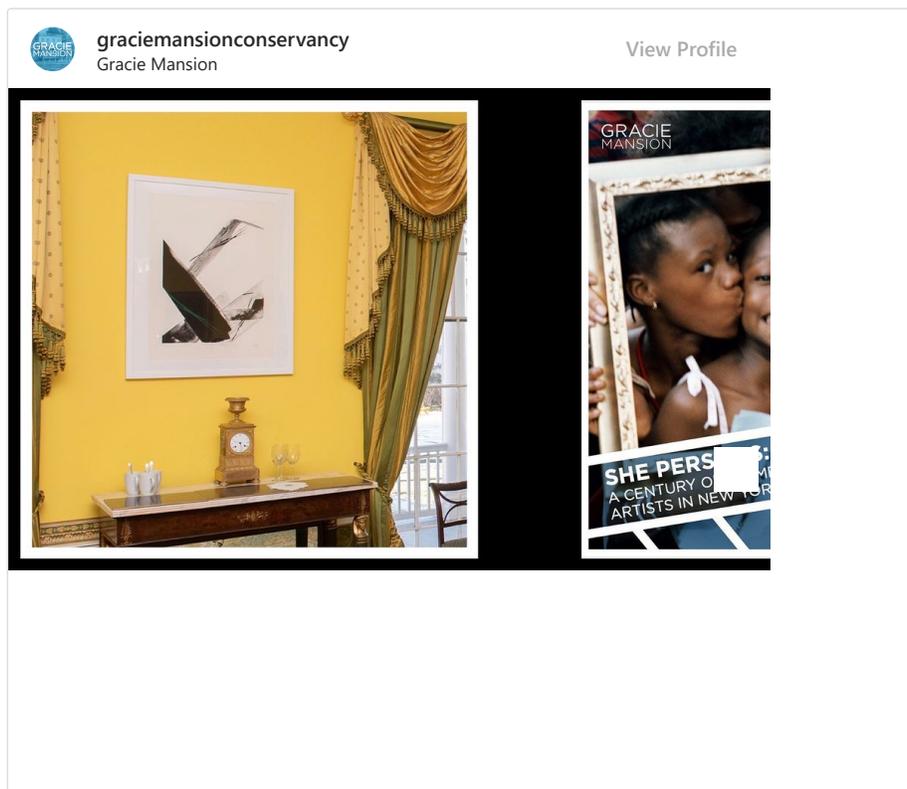
Anthony Behar/Sipa USA



**graciemansionconservancy**  
Gracie Mansion

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Behind the parlor is a kitchen that received a \$1.4 million facelift under Mayor Bloomberg in 2012, [according to the Observer](#).

To the left of the foyer is a very teal library. The carpets are teal, the sofas are teal, the walls are teal — you get the idea. Even the curtains, installed by Mayor John Lindsay in the 1960s, are a floral chintz pattern with a blue background.

The library is also noted for its historic figurines of George Washington but, in a nod to more recent history, the library window is etched with the name “Caroline,” a mark by ex-Mayor Rudy Giuliani’s daughter in a tradition of children marking up the house.



At least one of the maquettes of George Washington in the library was carved by John Quincy Adams Ward.  
Anthony Behar/Sipa USA



The carpets are teal, the sofas are teal, the walls are teal — you get the idea.

Anthony Behar/Sipa USA

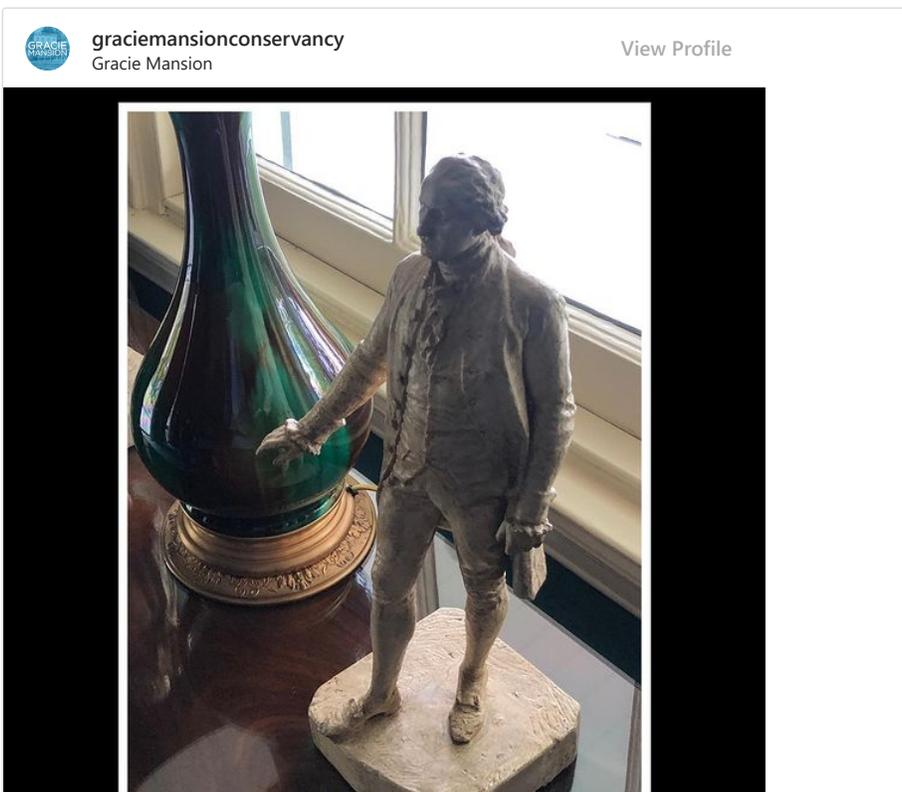
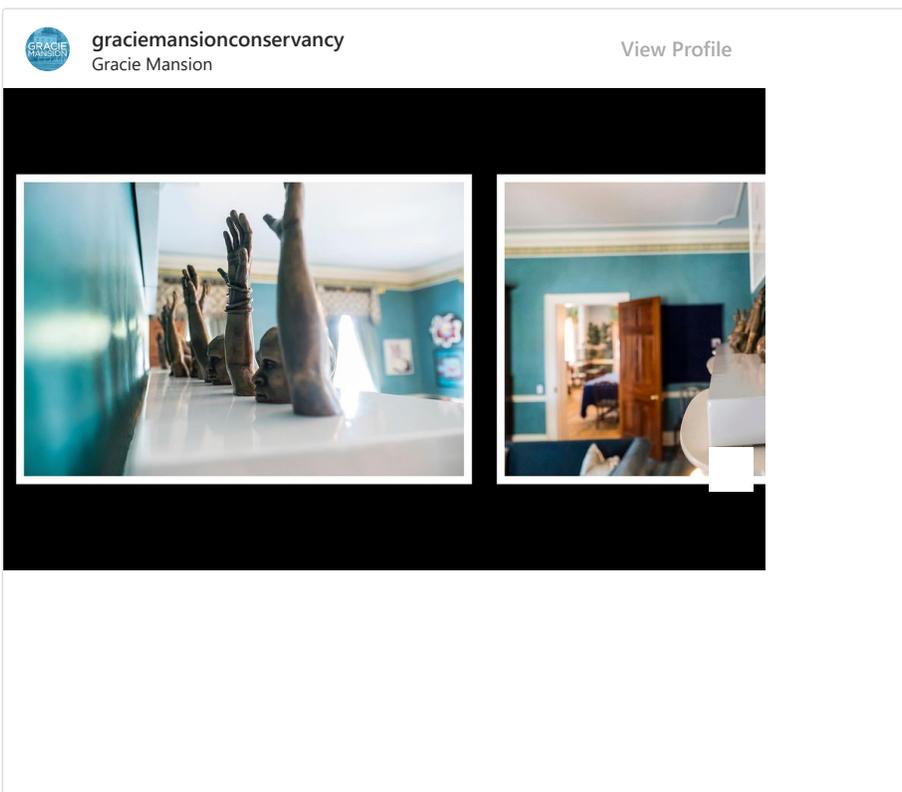


Even the curtains, installed by Mayor John Lindsay in the 1960s, are a floral chintz pattern with a blue background.

Anthony Behar/Sipa USA

The library fireplace mantel features art entitled “Raise Up,” a 2014 installation by Hank Willis Thomas that shows the heads and arms of 10 black men raising their arms; above them two posters say, “I am a man.”

“Raise Up” reflects on the American legacy of slavery and lynching as well as today’s mass incarceration. The repeating hands-up gesture is a nod to “the vulnerability of African-American men in the face of systemic racial injustice,” wrote the Gracie Mansion Conservancy on [Instagram](#).



Through the library, a carpeted dining room is famous for its ornate French wallpaper.

The covering depicts a landscape garden scene and was manufactured in the 1820s by Zuber et Cie and installed under the Edward Koch administration to reflect the original style of the house.

The wallpaper actually does not reach the ceiling of the room, and the area above the wallpaper was painted to match the sky of the landscape, according to the conservancy.



The French wallpaper, with a landscape garden scene, was manufactured in the 1800s.

Anthony Behar/Sipa USA



Gracie traveled to France often in his shipping business.

Anthony Behar/Sipa USA



Another view of Gracie Mansion's dining room.

Alamy Stock Photo

### The Susan E. Wagner wing

Mayor Robert F. Wagner Jr., who served from 1954 to 1965, installed an entire new wing to the house for entertaining in an attempt to create more privacy and safety for his family in the main house — a balance that has proved difficult for mayors throughout their residency in the hybrid public-and-private space.

“She started to complain that people found their way upstairs,” Paul Gunther, executive director of the Gracie Mansion Conservancy, [said in a 2017 lecture](#). “She said, ‘Sometimes I have to get dressed in my closet.’ They took ashtrays, pipes, lipsticks and jewelry. The solution became a new wing.”

But Wagner’s wife wouldn’t live to see the completion of the \$800,000 renovation [designed by architect Mott B. Schmidt](#). Even as the 54-year-old selected silks and decor for the addition, she secretly battled lung cancer. She died at Gracie Mansion in 1964, and the renovation was completed in her name in 1966.

 Mayor Robert F. Wagner, who served from 1954 to 1965, installed an entire new wing to the house for entertaining.

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Anthony Behar/Sipa USA

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Alamy Stock Photo

An ornate chandelier and crown molding overlooks the room, and another golden convex mirror.

An ornate chandelier and crown molding overlook the room, as does a golden convex mirror.

Bennett Raglin

Today, guests enter the blue foyer in the Wagner Wing through heavy wooden doors topped with an ornate semicircle window.

An ornate chandelier and crown molding overlook the room, as does another golden convex mirror — topped with a bald eagle sculpture and installed by Bloomberg — that was used for maximizing light in the space during historical times. The mirror hangs above a historic fireplace taken from the Bayard home where Alexander Hamilton died following his ill-fated duel with Aaron Burr.

Through Sept. 8, 2021, the wing is displaying “CATALYST: Art and Social Justice,” an installation by photographers Gordon Parks, Martine Fougerson and about 50 other artists, activists, collective and student groups.

The "blue room" is pictured. The Susan E. Wagner wing cost \$800,000 when it was built in 1966.

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Anthony Behar/Sipa USA

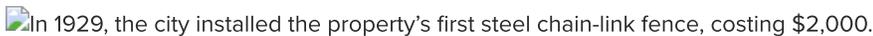
Next to the foyer, carved white doorways lead to the “blue room,” an even bolder blue space equipped with a large bookshelf once owned by a Revolutionary War officer, an ornate chandelier, a fireplace, a convex mirror and a circular mahogany table with four chairs that originally belonged to descendants of Scottish shipper Archibald Gracie, who commissioned Gracie Mansion as a country house (that part of Manhattan was not yet developed) on the site in 1799, according to the conservancy.

### The grounds: fences and bee problems

Speaking of privacy, there’s the matter of the fence — a criticism even older than the tradition of mayoral residence at Gracie Mansion.

When the NYC Parks department acquired the home in 1896, they installed the property’s first fence, maintaining fencing until former mayor Fiorello LaGuardia began his residence in 1942, conservancy director Gunther recently told The Post.

LaGuardia, the first mayor to live in Gracie Mansion, installed a wrought-iron fence, and O’Dwyer moved it 25 feet further away from the house for privacy. Lindsay added a yellow pine stockade fence just inside the wrought-iron fence, and Koch had a double fence as well. Most recently, De Blasio **built an additional “privacy fence”** inside a brick wall and a wrought-iron fence.

In 1929, the city installed the property’s first steel chain-link fence, costing \$2,000.

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Getty Images

Mayor Dinkins installed willows, poplars, daffodils and other flowers, which actually created a bee problem, according to reports.

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Patrick McMullan via Getty Image

LaGuardia filled the home with marigolds and cabbages, and the Wagners had flowering dogwood trees and bright azalea bushes.

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Anthony Behar/Sipa USA

Inside the fences, the home’s gardens have featured centuries of careful cultivation. The original residents of the house had shade trees and flower beds, **according to the National Archives Catalog.**

Today, the front of the house is flanked by tulips, when in season. They offer free seeds for edible or flowering plants to the public in a small “seeds library.”

The grounds are used “to teach local students and young parents why and how fresh foods advance healthy living” in a greenhouse collaboration with Project EATS, [according to the conservancy](#).

**Then: a trip through time**

Tenant	Year	Legacy
Jacob Walton	1770-1776	Built pre-Revolutionary War house
Archibald Gracie	1799-1823	Built Gracie Mansion
Joseph Foulke	1823-1857	Bought Gracie Mansion
Noah Wheaton	1857-1896	Non-payment of taxes
New York Parks department	1886-1927	Ice cream stand and public restroom
Museum of the City of New York	1927-1934	Saved from disrepair
LaGuardia	1942-1945	First mayor in the house
O’Dwyer	1946-1950	Bribery and a quick exit
Impellitteri	1950-1953	Not enough ashtrays
Wagner	1954-1965	The Susan E. Wagner wing
Lindsay	1966-1973	Feud with the Wagners
Beame	1974-1977	National Register of Historic Places
Koch	1978-1989	The Gracie Mansion Conservancy
Dinkins	1990-1993	“No drastic changes”
Giuliani	1994-2001	Divorce and disrepair
Bloomberg	2002-2013	\$7 million historical renovation of “The People’s House”
De Blasio	2014-2021	Art gallery & West Elm furniture

**Pre-mayoral years**

British Loyalist Jacob Walton built a house on the site in 1770. His home was commandeered during the Revolutionary War for its strategic position near the water and was destroyed in September 1776, [according to the NYC Parks website](#).

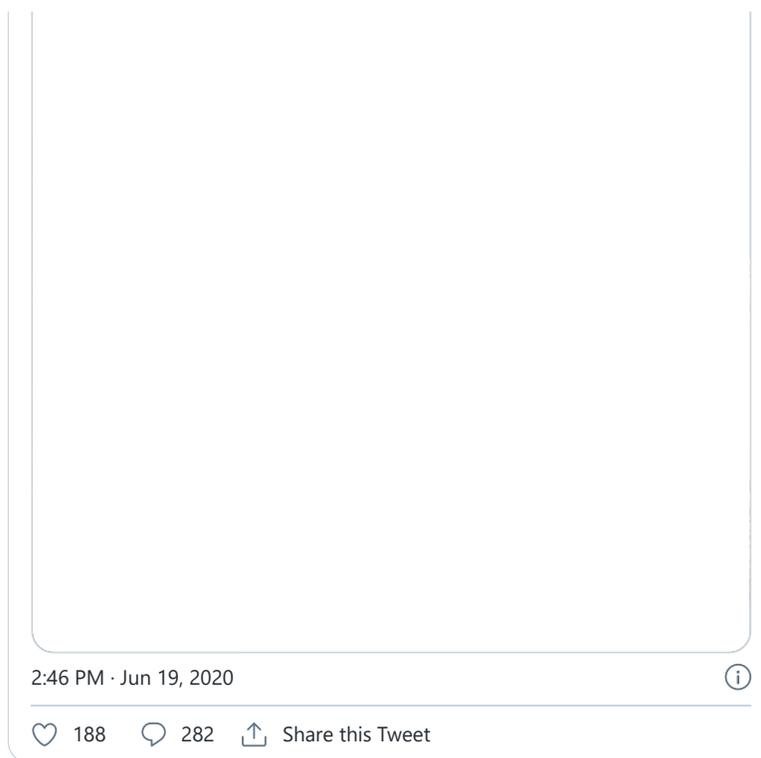
Historians believe Archibald Gracie’s house was built in part by slaves of Ezra Weeks, who is believed to be the builder, along with John McComb Jr., who also built City Hall, [according to amNY](#).



**Chirlane McCray**   
@NYCFirstLady



The house the family and I have the privilege of living in, Gracie Mansion, was built in 1799 by people who were enslaved and indentured servants, a fact that is not detailed in any of the official books about the residence that I have read.



Gracie lived there with his eight children, his wife Esther and three indentured servants. New York's Gradual Emancipation Act passed the year Gracie Mansion was built. Among other measures, the act mandated that slaves would be called indentured servants, but essentially still treated them as slaves. Gracie finally released them from bondage in 1801. He completed a side addition on the house in 1811 before he ran aground with debts.

“During the Napoleonic period, fighting on the high seas increased, embargos were imposed, and finally the war with England broke out in 1812. Gracie's ships were in trouble and so was Gracie. He was a man so well-liked in the community that friends and associates tried to assist him financially, but in spite of their efforts, his company failed in 1819,” [reads the National Registry of Historic Places application](#).

That year, Federalist statesman Rufus King, who signed the Declaration of Independence, took ownership of the house in exchange for loans he had given Gracie, according to the application.

Gracie's son-in-law, a merchant named Joseph Foulke, bought the house from King in 1823 and sold it in 1857 to Noah Wheaton, who decorated the house in the Victorian style, according to the application.

The house still bears the mark of the Wheaton family. Amelie Hermione Quackenbush, Wheaton's granddaughter, etched her name into a window with a diamond ring in 1893, and the mark still remains today — beginning the tradition of children marking their stint in the home.

The city's parks department took over the house when Wheaton, who hadn't paid his taxes, died in 1896.

The house became [a public bathroom and concession stand](#) for Carl Schurz Park before the Museum of the City of New York took it over in 1923, [according to the museum website](#).

### Children who have left their mark on Gracie Mansion

- Amelie Hermione Quackenbush, 1893
- Margie Lindsay, 1965
- John Lindsay, 1974
- Caroline Giuliani, late '90s

In 1934, the Parks Department began a \$25,000 restoration of the house to a residence. Until then, mayors had lived in private residences.

 This photo of Gracie Mansion is from the early 1900's.

This photo of Gracie Mansion dates from the early 1900s.

Bettmann Archive

## First mayors in the house: LaGuardia, O'Dwyer and Impellitteri

LaGuardia began his mayorship at 1274 Fifth Ave., but he made Gracie Mansion his new home in 1942.

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, famed city planner Robert Moses **convinced** LaGuardia to move into the space for security reasons during his third term. In preparation, the city added modern features like heating and electricity, juxtaposing them with 18th-century furniture.

*"The petitioner told him [the briber] to 'drop up' to Gracie Mansion, the official residence of the Mayor of New York."*

- O'Dwyer V. Commissioner of Internal Revenue, 1957

During his tenancy at the mansion, it was filled with items on loan from local museums, plus the family's own personal household items.

Mayor William O'Dwyer wasn't in the house very long, but he managed to get divorced and remarried during his residency. He **resigned** in 1950 because of bribery allegations. In fact, some of the bribery occurred at Gracie Mansion, **according to legal documents**.

After Mayor O'Dwyer resigned, acting Mayor Vincent Impellitteri's wife, Elizabeth Agnes McLaughlin, said she planned to make no changes to the house when they moved in — and, in fact, her only complaint was that there weren't enough ashtrays, **according to historical reports**.

 This photo of the mansion's north front was published in 1933, just before mayor LaGuardia moved in.

This photo of the mansion's north front was published in 1933, just before Mayor LaGuardia moved in.

 A second-floor bedroom fireplace is pictured. Every room in Gracie Mansion has a fireplace.

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Alamy Stock Photo

## Making the house a legacy: the Wagners

The Wagners are the darlings of Gracie Mansion history simply because they loved the house — and not only through the addition of the Wagner Wing.

Susan, who died in Gracie Mansion before the end of their tenancy, painted the living room pale blue and added eggshell damask upholstery. The home was littered with globes, radios, toy soldiers and roller blades, **according to historical reports**.

Susan took her children Robert and Duncan into consideration in the design, tossing a landscape in the drawing room that her children disliked and repainting Robert's room light blue because he said he couldn't sleep in a dark red room. She also converted the home's elevator into a coat room, fearing it would be unsafe for the children.

**Fun fact: In the 1600s, the site was a Dutch farm and later a tavern called the Horn's Hook.**

Susan Wagner died in 1964, and Robert remarried in 1965 before the end of his term. But he and his new bride, Barbara Joan Cavanagh, did not make Gracie their home. Wagner's new wife became a champion of Susan's work, defending her when the Lindsay family criticized the condition of the house when they moved in.

### Dissatisfaction under the Lindsays

The Lindsays did not love their stint at Gracie Mansion, to say the least. John and Mary Anne's loud dissatisfaction offended the Wagners, especially since renovations had been done in the name of the late Susan Wagner.

#### Fun fact:

**Gracie Mansion was actually bugged during the Lindsay administration, which was during the same time period as the Watergate scandal, though no connection was ever found.**

"Susan was ill for a year before she died — how was she going to worry about curtains and carpets? ... I felt miserable because of Susan, and have ever since. And no one seems to answer back on it. So I will," Wagner's new wife Barbara Joan Cavanaugh **said in 1966**.

To be fair, the Lindsays had their fair share of woes at Gracie Mansion. The couple's move-in was delayed by the Wagners' renovations, and they found plenty of work left to do when they finally moved in.

The bedroom door often jammed, causing the couple to have to climb out the window and re-enter the house from another bedroom window, Gunther recently confirmed to The Post.

The windows were rotted with water, the floors were dull, the carpets had holes burned by cigarettes, and Lindsay's wife objected to the outdated style. They discovered fire code violations and occasionally lost heat, said Gunther.

But by 1966, Cavanaugh said that she and Lindsay had "kissed and made up."

"Nonetheless after departing at the end of 1973, the former first lady said that despite the wear and tear of a nearly 200-hundred-year-old house, 'We had a wonderful time,'" Gunther recounted.

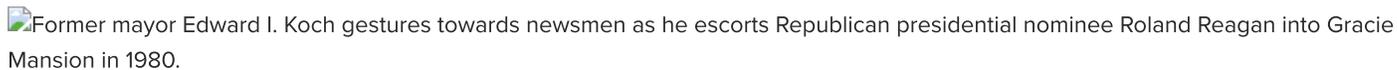
But Gracie Mansion found itself redeemed under the Abraham Beame administration, **which added the house to the National Register of Historic Places for its architectural merit**.

"The mansion is one of the finest Federal-style country seats remaining on the Island of Manhattan from that early period. It is a remarkably distinguished example of the Federal architecture and, as the home of the Mayors of the City of New York, it possesses a distinction in keeping with its architectural qualities and its historical renown," **said original application in 1978**.

*"Susan was ill for a year before she died — how was she going to worry about curtains and carpets?"*

*- Barbara Joan Cavanaugh*

### Koch establishes Gracie Mansion Conservancy

Former mayor Edward I. Koch gestures towards newsmen as he escorts Republican presidential nominee Roland Reagan into Gracie Mansion in 1980.

Former mayor Edward Koch gestures as he escorts Republican presidential nominee Ronald Reagan into Gracie Mansion in 1980.  
AP

For Mayor Edward Koch, Gracie Mansion was a slow burn.

The bachelor mayor started off his term living in Gracie Mansion part-time while spending weekends at his Greenwich Village rent-controlled apartments.

But he eventually moved in full-time and even established the Gracie Mansion Conservancy to care for the house. Today, the nonprofit spends \$400,000 of privately-raised money annually to run and manage the house, [according to tax documents](#).

By the end of his first term, Koch had solicited private donations and loans from museums and other collectors to furnish the home in the Federal style of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, said Gunther.

Koch also borrowed some notable and strange artwork for the house during his residency, including a 44-inch-high, black-and-white rabbit sculpture in the bedroom. The wooden, polyester-resin-coated work was selected by his art curator, Henry Geldzahler, Gunther confirmed.

**Fun fact: Over the past two centuries, the mansion has played host to John Quincy Adams, Washington Irving, General Lafayette, Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Frederick Douglass and countless other history-makers.**

David Dinkins [was the city's](#) first black mayor, serving from 1990 to 1993, and — while the couple didn't make many changes to the house — his wife, Joyce Dinkins, [took on the role](#) of “special projects organizer” at Gracie Mansion, with a focus on children and literacy, according to her obituary.

David Dinkins speaks to reporters at Gracie Mansion with singer James Brown, second from left, his wife Adrienne, and the Rev. Al Sharpton in 1992.

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David Dinkins speaks to reporters at Gracie Mansion with singer James Brown (second from left) and his wife, Adrienne, and the Rev. Al Sharpton in 1992.

AP

## Giuliani makes his home a battleground

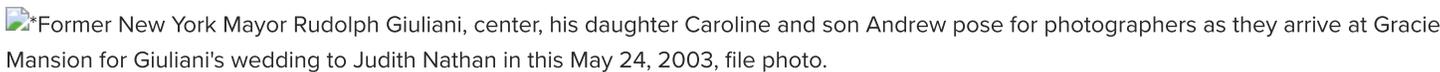
Former mayor Rudy Giuliani's then-wife Donna Hanover barred Giuliani's then-girlfriend, Judith Nathan, from visiting the house.

The disagreement prompted a torrent of legal and personal drama that eventually [prompted Giuliani to leave](#) the mansion before his term ended.

During Giuliani's administration, the house fell into disrepair with peeling paint, [according to complaints at the time](#).

“The house is crying,” [former mayor Koch said](#), according to Vanity Fair. “The house wants to be loved.”

Giuliani actually did have the house repainted as part of regular maintenance, and he also re-carpeted the floors, the conservancy's Gunther told The Post. The home's location near East River winds and Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive's fumes may have accelerated the need for renovations.

Former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, center, his daughter Caroline and son Andrew pose for photographers as they arrive at Gracie Mansion for Giuliani's wedding to Judith Nathan in this May 24, 2003, file photo.

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Former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani, center, his daughter Caroline and son Andrew pose for photographers as they arrive at Gracie Mansion for Giuliani's wedding to Judith Nathan in this May 24, 2003, file photo.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Giuliani married Nathan on the lawn of Gracie Mansion in 2003.

## Major renovation and restoration under Michael Bloomberg

Mayor Bloomberg was responsible for the pale yellow hue of the building, which used to be black and white.

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Mayor Bloomberg was responsible for the pale yellow hue of the building, which used to be black and white.

Alamy Stock Photo

When Mayor Bloomberg took office in 2002, a peeling, drafty mansion didn't seem to be the luxurious life he was accustomed to.

Bloomberg was the only mayor since LaGuardia not to live in the house but, rather than let it rot, he poured \$7 million into its restoration, calling it "The People's House" and opening it up for tours, meetings and events.

With the help of designer Jamie Drake, Bloomberg repainted, added mahogany and faux-bamboo furniture in the Federal-century style, installed French bronze chandeliers, re-carpeted and re-upholstered the furniture to be historically accurate, [according to Architectural Digest](#).

## West Elm-ification under Bill de Blasio

 A far cry from NYCHA housing: the de Blasio family's new living room in Gracie Mansion, decked out in West Elm furnishings.

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A far cry from NYCHA housing: the de Blasio family's new living room in Gracie Mansion, decked out in West Elm furnishings.

West Elm

When de Blasio moved in, he found the mansion to be more like a museum than a home — particularly the bedrooms, which Bloomberg had not lived in and were filled with antique furniture for tours.

De Blasio [received a donation](#) of at least \$65,000 in furniture from the multi-billion-dollar Brooklyn-based furniture chain West Elm in 2014 for the family's bedrooms, putting some of Bloomberg's period furniture in storage.

"When the present administration chose in 2014 to revive the residential role as envisioned by both the Parks Department and the GMC, the late 18th and early 19th century (often fragile) antique furnishings had to be placed in collections storage for future resident consideration. Thus these bedrooms were suddenly empty with immediate need to make them habitable for a 21st century family," said Gunther.

In the public spaces, the home furniture remains unchanged and now offers even more historical and cultural education opportunities through [first lady Chirlane McCray's art exhibitions](#).

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