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A Multimedia Visit to the White House

The highlight of my first visit to Washington, DC, was a tour of the White House. I visited the White House with other tourists under the watchful eyes of several Secret Service tour guides. When we entered the Red Room, I was awed by the intensity of the room's color. Our guide pointed to a portrait on the wall and challenged the assembly to correctly identify the subject. After several minutes, our guide was satisfied that no one knew the answer. He was about to identify the portrait when I blurted out, "John James Audubon." Of course I was right—I had thoroughly perused the official White House Guidebook prior to my tour.

It is now possible to discover whose portrait is hanging in almost any room, while touring the White House from the comfort of your home. "The White House is Our House: A CD-ROM Visit," a newly-released, multimedia, cross-platform CD-ROM program, takes users on a tour of the most famous home in America in vivid detail and at their own leisure. More than simply a tour, this content-rich program offers a real learning experience for anyone interested in our nation's history and culture.

"The White House is Our House" was produced by Autodesk® for The White House Historical Association in cooperation with the American Architectural Foundation. The program incorporates Quick Time Virtual Reality™ (QTVR) technology (navigable panoramic photography) enabling the visitor to "walk" through the White House as if taking a guided tour. Using a computer's cursor, you can pan up to view the cornice and chandeliers or down to see the intricate

floor coverings. Unlike the real White House tour, the viewer can take his or her time moving through the mansion. And this tour permits access to areas usually denied visitors: the Oval Office, Cabinet Room, florist shop—even the presidential bowling alley. If a certain object or painting catches your fancy, you can click-on that "hot-spot" to get more information. The program is designed so the user can create a unique tour based on five pre-recorded themes, such as historic architecture or the lives of the First Ladies. In fact, the program is packed with information and history and includes more than 1,800 photos, 375 audio clips, and 50 video segments. This multimedia program is also a tool for teaching. Interactive activities are included; there is also a curriculum and Teacher's Resource Guide which accompanies the scholastic version of the CD-ROM.

Historians and museum professionals in America and around the world are realizing the value of multimedia as a way to provide greater access to historic sites and as a tool to reach new and diverse audiences. It may not be possible to truly replicate the visceral experiences associated with visiting a historical place. However, with the advent of virtual reality programs like "The White House is Our House," we have a close substitute for those people who, for whatever reason, are prevented from seeing and experiencing the "real thing."

Panoramic view of the Oval Office from "The White House is Our House." Image courtesy of the White House Historical Association and Mel Curtis.

