

BY TIM HEALEY

Gut Rehab of the White House (on the Q.T.)

Soon after Harry S. Truman ascended to the presidency in April 1945, he and his family moved into the White House and discovered that “America’s most famous residence” was literally falling apart. What began as annoying creaky floors and mysterious ghost-like sounds would later give way to more serious incidents.

According to presidential historian Michael Beschloss, writing for *The New York Times*: “One day, while President Harry S. Truman took a bath upstairs, a great Blue Room chandelier threatened to crash down on his wife, Bess, and her guests from the Daughters of the American Revolution. The president later joked that he might have unexpectedly dropped through the ceiling naked on the ladies below, and he confessed that the incident made him nervous. The upstairs floor, he noted, ‘sagged and moved like a ship at sea.’”

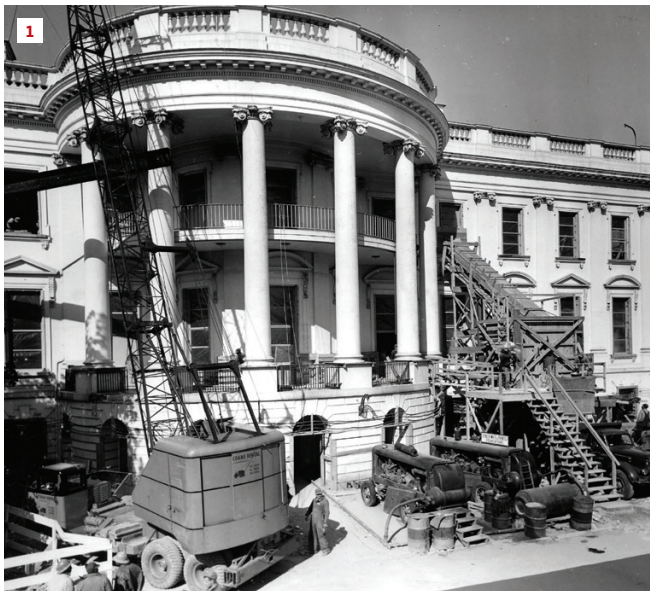
Then, in 1948, one of the legs of first daughter Margaret Truman’s piano broke through rotting floorboards in her second-floor sitting room and penetrated the ceiling of the family dining room below. A team of architects and engineers was summoned to secretly inspect

the structure. Truman knew the image of a collapsing White House was an apt metaphor for his plummeting approval ratings. He therefore didn’t want to publicize the sorry state of the building.

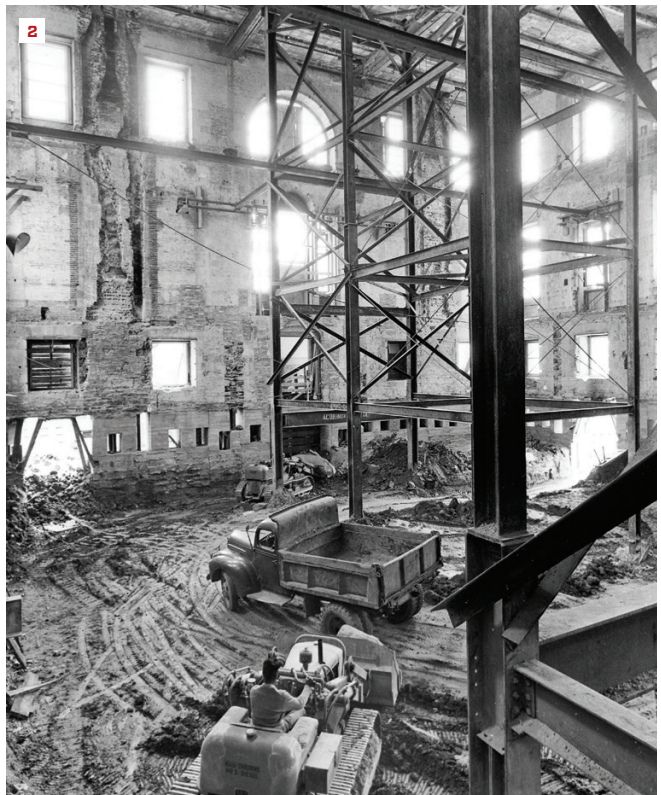
The inspectors determined that portions of the mansion were in imminent danger of collapse. As a result, the first family was moved to nearby Blair House for their safety, and thus began the Trumans’ three-year odyssey as displaced tenants. The first family wouldn’t return “home” until March 1952.

The restoration included leaving the historical structure’s facade intact, while completely gutting its interior. Within the remaining exterior shell, a steel superstructure was built above a new labyrinthine basement, which included a top-secret fallout shelter.

A good reference on this era is “The Hidden White House: Harry Truman and the Reconstruction of America’s Most Famous Residence” (St. Martin’s Press, 2013). In it, author Robert Klara sheds light on what may be the most complex and politically sensitive home-improvement project in American history.



Demolition began in late 1949 without fanfare (perimeter fencing was used to hide construction from the public). Steel shoring and debris was passed through openings in the left-intact facade (1). By mid-1950, the interior was removed, then a new basement was dug within the gutted shell. Roughly 1.1 million cubic feet of open space was created as a result (2).



Photos courtesy National Archives (Abbie Rowe, National Park Service)