Being left alone for a few minutes/in the green room of the White House/ with the Chief Usher/Mr. Ike Hoover/whom I had known as a young girl/when my Uncle Theodore Roosevelt /was president/I turned to him and said/"Oh, Mr. Hoover/can you tell me anything about running the financial side/ of the White House-"/ T

Thus I faced the problem/ of the practical side/ of being in a house/ the size of the White House/ with its multitudinous public functions./

My predecessor/Mrs. Herbert Hoover/had just very kindly/shown me around the house/with the aid of her housekeeper/and secretary./ I was feeling bewildered/ but it was not the mere size/which was so appalling/ but a sense of the traditions/ which would make it extremely difficult/to make any changes/ and the realization/ that there were endless rules/ and customs/ which would complicate housekeeping/to a great degree./ I knew in a general way/that servants'/ wages were paid for/by the government/and the number of servants/ was more or less prescribed by custom/ but my husband had decreed/ that anything not absolutely necessary/must be curtailed./ I also knew/ that there was some kind of a fund/ for the official entertainments/ but what it actually covered/ was a mystery./

Mr. Ike Hoover/ who had doubtless explained to many Presidents' wives before/ tried to make it clear to me./ He told me/ that the President/out of his salary/ pays for all the food/ for all the servants/ and the family/ with their unofficial guests/ but anything/ which is an official entertainment/ where both political parties/were represented/ is paid for out of a government fund/ so that if the President/ invites a number of Senators for breakfast or lunch/ he must be sure/to not have them all of one political faith/ otherwise/ he will pay for the meal out of his own pocket./

And now for a little history of the White House./ As you know/ it was rebuilt in 1817/ after the British had burned it./ While numerous repairs and changes have been made since then/ it is substantially the same building/ that was built in 1817./ In a building over 117 years old/maintenance/ becomes a constantly increasing item./ Strange though it may seem/ pipes will leak at frequent intervals/ and rats/ and mice like old buildings/ regardless of tradition./ Two friends of mine/ sitting on the south porch at breakfast one summer morning/ tried to reassure themselves/ that a squirrel ran across the floor/ and refused to admit/ until they were safely upstairs/ that they had seen a large and stout rat/! These have since been exterminated/ but one has to keep constantly doing it!/

An appropriation is passed by Congress/ covering the salary of all personnel/ - gardeners/ guards/ plumbers/ carpenters/ etc./ and the budget is made yearly/ using the past experiences for estimating as closely as possible/ what will be needed for the maintenance of the house/ the purchase of furnishings/ rugs/ linens/ curtains/ glassware/ and china./ As a matter of fact/ there is usually little left out of the appropriation for refurbishing/ when the repair/ and maintenance items/ have all been taken care of./ Practically every two years/ the White House has to be completely painted/ and this is no task to be undertaken lightly/ and is a tremendous expense./

We found/ to our horror/ the first year that we occupied the White House/ that the stone cornice/ was loose all the way around/ and for the safety of those who might walk below/ it was absolutely necessary/ that it should be repaired./ Such things as that/ swell the cost of repair very rapidly/ and leave a very narrow margin/ for new things of any kind./ Anything bought for the White House in the way of linen/ is marked with the shield initials/ of the United States U.S. on a shield. The White House china is marked/ with the President's shield.
seal\textsuperscript{12} and the silver is all of the same pattern/ and marked/ as it originally was,/ “The President’s House”./

We have found it necessary/ to buy inexpensive doilies and napkins/ and plated spoons/ for large entertainments./ but this is a purely practical item/ and costs very little./

In addition to this yearly appropriation,/ Congress usually appropriates/ every four years/ a special fund/ so that an incoming administration/ may overhaul the house/ and make some definite improvements/ which need to be made./ This fund/ is about the only one/ that one can really\textsuperscript{14} spend [unclear word] for replacing furnishings./

The height of the ceilings,/ and therefore the size of the windows,/ makes curtains/ and draperies/ an extremely expensive item/ and all the little economies/ practiced/ in any private home/ are practiced/ in the White House/ - curtains are turned,/ rugs which are worn are sent to be rewoven or mended/ and much darning and general repair work/ goes on in the sewing room/ on the third floor./ all done by the maids/ four in all\textsuperscript{18}/ who have charge of the [unclear word, possibly “upstairs”]\textsuperscript{17} rooms./ two of whom/ these maids\textsuperscript{21} have been in the White House/ for a great many years./

The maintenance of the White House/ is under the supervision/ of the Department of the Interior./ National Park Service./ Repairs/ and furnishings/ supplies/ and payment of personnel/ are accounted for/ in the records of the Park Service.

The laundry of the bedrooms/ and the table linen/ is paid for/ as one of the items of maintenance,/ but personal laundry/ is paid for out of the President’s own pocket/ in exactly the same way/ as food for the family and the servants/ and private guests./ Stamps for personal letters,/ personal telegrams/ and telephone calls/ are all paid for by the President and myself./ Official communications must be signed by a secretary/ and the official mail/ must go out/ through the secretaries./

Any purchase for the White House./ if it is a large one./ must be handled through the Supplies and Warehouse Section/ of the National Park Service/ and specifications are prepared/ and formal bids received/ and contracts awarded/ to the low bidders./ For small purchases and emergencies/ the chief of the Supplies and Warehouse Section/ telephones/ or sends one of his assistants/ to the various stores/ to obtain informal bids/ on the articles to be purchased./ The President is authorized/ under the appropriation act/ to buy direct/ without securing bids or going through the Supplies and Warehouse Section./ if he so desires./ But as neither the President/ nor his wife/ have much time for personal shopping/ the more formal way/ is usually adhered to./

Immediately upon receiving anything for the White House./ the article is duly recorded/ and entered on an inventory./ All changes in White House property/ are accounted for on the inventory/ and presented annually to the President/ for his approval./ This/ is in accordance with a the\textsuperscript{23} provision of in a\textsuperscript{25} Section 9./ 36 of a certain\textsuperscript{27} Statute, 773-774, which reads:

“Hereafter the steward,/ housekeeper,/ or such other employee of the Executive Mansion/ as the President may designate,/ shall, under the direction of the President,/ have the charge/ and custody of/ and be responsible for/ the plate,/ furniture,/ and public property therein,/ and shall, before entering upon the duties of the office,/ give bond for the faithful discharge thereof./ said bond/ to be the sum of $10,000/ and be approved/ by the Secretary of War./ And hereafter/ a complete inventory,/ in proper book,/ shall be made annually/ in the month of June/ under the direction of the officer in charge of public buildings/ and grounds/ of all the public property/ in/ and belonging to/ the Executive Mansion,/ showing when purchased,/ its cost,/ condition/ and final disposition./ This inventory shall be submitted to the President/ for his approval/ and shall then be kept for reference/ in the Office of Public Buildings/ and Grounds,/ which shall furnish a copy thereof/ to the steward,/ housekeeper,/ or other employee responsible for the property.”

You may see by this/ that housekeeping in the White House/ is a little complicated./ When you buy any such things/ as a chair/ or table/ or even new hangings for the formal rooms,/ it is customary to request the advice/ of the Commissioner of Fine Arts./ This is a wise practice/ as it keeps these rooms harmoniously furnished./ but it does add/ to the complications/ when so many people are consulted./ Of course/ gifts are frequently sent to the White House./ either of furniture/ or china/ or hangings/ or rugs/ or paintings/ and these are at once referred/ to the Commission of Fine Arts./ for if they are to be
permanently placed in the White House, they have to be approved by the Commission of Fine Arts and accepted by an Act of Congress.

Now, as to the less formal duties of housekeeping, as far as possible, staple articles are bought wholesale and as the number of people in the White House is very great, a great many things are bought in large quantities.

A great many things are also sent in as presents, such as hams, game, fruit, candy [unclear word] etc. These are all passed on, of course, by the Secret Service and nothing is allowed to come to the President’s table which has not been carefully gone over. A large storeroom houses the supplies and the housekeeper keeps a complete list of things as they are given out to the kitchen. She also tries to buy fresh things as far as possible from the markets outside of around Washington and she does her shopping herself.

A very careful housecleaning is done during the summer months besides a complete inventory of furnishings taken every June, so one cannot be a light hearted and happy-go-lucky housekeeper in the White House for there is the weight of responsibility which always goes with handling anything which does not belong to you and which belongs really to the people of the United States. However, there is a certain pride in doing it all in a manner which will conform with the dignity of traditions and at the same time preserve the simplicity which should exist in a Democracy.

Transcribed by Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project staff
Proofread by Lee Febos, Matthew Girardi, Margaret Swenson, Olivia Kinhan, and Ikerighi David.
Transcribed from a script held in the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library

1 This quotation mark is a handwritten interlineation.
2 This quotation mark is a handwritten interlineation.
3 The letter “T” is a handwritten interlineation.
4 This is a handwritten interlineation.
5 The letter “A” is a handwritten interlineation.
6 This is a handwritten interlineation.
7 This is a handwritten interlineation.
8 This is a handwritten interlineation.
9 The words “U.S” through “shield” are a handwritten interlineation.
10 This is a handwritten interlineation.
11 This is a handwritten interlineation.
12 This is a handwritten interlineation.
13 This is a handwritten interlineation.
14 This phrase was circled, and an arrow indicated for it to be moved in front of the phrase “who have charge of the upstairs rooms.”
15 This is a handwritten interlineation.
16 The words “these maids” are a handwritten interlineation.
17 This is a handwritten interlineation.
18 The words “in a” are a handwritten interlineation.
19 The words “of a certain” are a handwritten interlineation.
20 The words “candy [unclear word]” are a handwritten interlineation.
21 This is a handwritten interlineation.