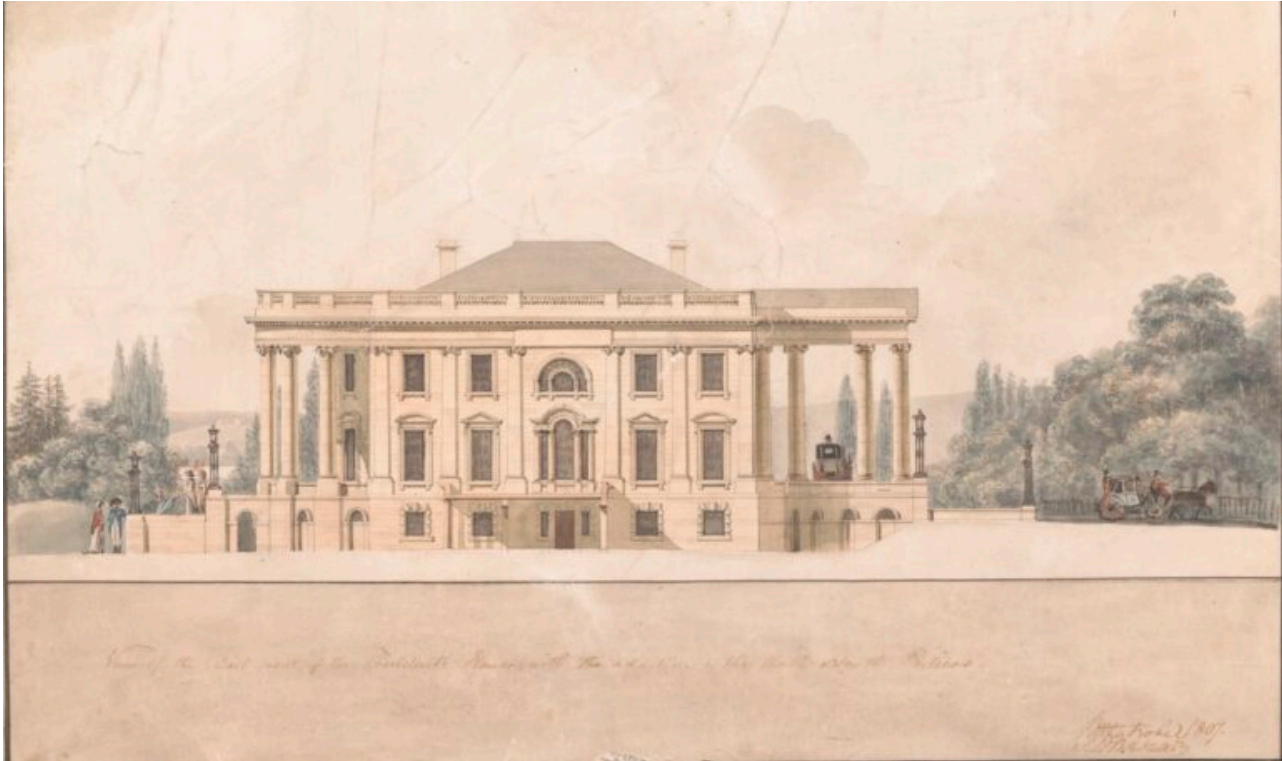


How to Party Like a President: The Dinners Behind the Dinner Records of Thomas Jefferson



George Washington and John Adams maintained tight social schedules during their presidential administrations: a gentlemen's levee on Tuesday, a drawing room for mixed company on Friday, and each Thursday a dinner held for deserving members of the political community. The routine gave order to each president's day, but for members of the developing Republican Party, its forms too closely mimicked those of the British royal court and reeked of monarchism. President Thomas Jefferson immediately eliminated the levees and drawing rooms, but he continued to give dinners—hundreds and hundreds of dinners at tables set for between one and twenty-one guests, and all refashioned to meet Republican sensibilities and his own personal style.

The dinners were not idle entertainment. Jefferson dined members of Congress because it built political camaraderie and helped keep him abreast of political and local affairs. He entertained the established families of Washington City because he appreciated his role in their social season. He entertained the foreign service and special guests to the city because as president of the United States he knew he represented his nation. Because these dinners were business, Jefferson began to keep meticulous records of his guests, beginning on opening day of the second session of the Eighth Congress, Nov. 5, 1804, and ending on Mar. 6, 1809, two days after the inauguration of his successor, James

Madison. In all, he recorded almost four hundred dinners in the five-year span, skipping only those periods, twice a year, when he travelled to Monticello.



Figure 1: Page four of Jefferson's dinner guest record (Feb. 13 through Dec. 31, 1806). Each sheet of the record measures approximately 8 inches by 10 inches; four sheets in total, written on front and verso in Thomas Jefferson's hand, eight pages total. *Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society.*

Caloy	Mon, Mar. 3.	Verplank
Morris O.	Galt	Verplank
Parke	2. McCreary	Risk
Fenner	Whipple	Williams N.Y.
Howland	3 S. Smith	Campbell Ten
	2 Bassett	Verplank
Feb. 22. Sat.	Whipple	Early
Burr	3 Goldsboro'	Nelson
Brudwell	Wed. Mar. 5.	Trigg
Varnum	2. Mad.	Baker
Dawson	2. Cutts	Tues. 25
Logan	2. Jackson	Richards
Wynne S.C.	2. U. Presid'	Clairborn
Bradley	1 Barlow	Sandford
Worthington	2. W. Brent	W. on 4.
	2 Beckley	Helms

Figure 2: Detail of the figure above. Jefferson attached a numeral with a surname to indicate multiple guests from one household and he crossed out the names of those guests who declined their invitation. *Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society.*

The guest lists are a sea of dinner dates and surnames. Their value for the president was to help him remember whom he invited and when. Their value for us lies in the names themselves. The inclusion of particular guests at any given dinner reflects what was happening in Congress, in the courts, in the military, and in foreign affairs. The lists confirm the presence of historical figures in the city and contradict assumptions (Dolley Madison was not his surrogate hostess and yes, Aaron Burr was at dinner several times after the Hamilton

duel). They speak to the relationship between Federalists and Republicans, the place of women in political society, and the uniqueness of time and place. They do not, however, tell us anything about the dinners themselves: no menus, no hints of conversation, no stray comments on an evening's success or failure.

This article attempts to remedy that absence by giving readers a look behind the scenes of a Jefferson dinner. If he were a lesser host with a lesser purpose, such details might be of little consequence, but Jefferson was a master politician who chose hospitality as a method for wielding power. For eight years, he skillfully combined traditional elite dining with an anti-monarchical ideology and Virginian sociability in a way that pleased his dinner guests and promoted his own agenda. For that reason, the mechanics of such an evening make a worthy study for readers interested in further exploring Jefferson's social politics. For the rest of us, the particulars of a Jefferson dinner provide not only a primer on the art of entertaining but also offer a glimpse into what it was like to party with the third president.



Figure 3: *Th. Jefferson* by silhouette artist John Marshal (unknown date). Courtesy of the [Library of Congress](#).

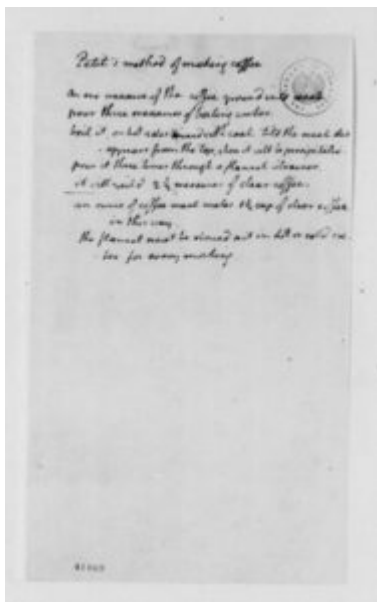
The Menu

The food served at the Jefferson's table was prepared by chef Honoré Julien. Steward Étienne Lemaire supervised the staff and oversaw the grocery shopping. Assisting Julien was, first, fourteen-year-old Ursula Granger Hughes, an enslaved young woman who stayed for a year before Jefferson returned her to Monticello. He replaced her with fifteen-year-old Edith (Edy) Hern Fossett, who arrived from Monticello in 1802. Fossett's sister-in-law, Frances (Fanny) Gillette Hern, joined her in 1806. Under Julien's tutelage, both Fossett and Hern became accomplished in French cookery.

The kitchen staff did not leave a record of the food they served, nor did

Jefferson, but occasionally a guest recorded their dinner in a journal or letter. Jefferson's secretary, Isaac A. Coles, wrote of a dinner served in 1807 to the president's cabinet: "Soup, Bouillie Bear [boiled boar], a quarter partridge with sausage & cabbage a french way of cooking them. Turkey, potatoes, rice spinnage [spinach] Beans—salad pickles—a ham of bacon in the center of the Table—second course a kind of custard with a floating cream on it, & at the bottom of the table, apples in closed in a thin toast a french dish, on each side four dishes & three in the middle 3 course olives apples, oranges & 12 other plates of nuts &c." Of a dinner given in 1802, Manasseh Cutler wrote that he and nine other Federalists were treated to rice soup, braised beef with gravy, mutton, ham, a loin of veal, "fried Eggs," "fried beaf," and a "Macaronie" pie that tasted of onions (and was not much liked by Cutler).

The main course never went without wine. One member of Congress counted eight varieties at his dinner. Guests drank what they wished while Jefferson played the benign host, neither encouraging consumption nor censuring it. As for dessert, it might be highlighted with ice cream in a warm pastry or a variety of pies, followed, after the cloth was removed, by a course of fruits, olives, and nuts. Sometimes the president brought out slices of the mammoth cheese, a 1,235-pound block of Republican goodness presented as a gift on New Year's Day 1802 and showcased in a room of its own.



Method for making coffee, given to Jefferson by his former *maitre d'hotel*, *Adrien Petit*, sometime before Petit returned to France in 1794. Courtesy of the [Library of Congress](#).

The Guests

Jefferson reserved the majority of his dinners for members of Congress at tables of between ten to fifteen guests. Sometimes seated among the legislators were high-ranking officials, a personal friend, or a distinguished visitor to

the city. Not recorded, but at the table on any given night, were his secretary, any residing houseguests, and his sons-in-law during the years when they served in Congress. The president invited congressional wives and grown daughters to dine at least once a season, sometimes twice. Women of the cabinet, of the judicial courts, and of the foreign legations also received invitations during the congressional season, as did the wives of prominent federal and district officials. On occasions of mixed company, Jefferson extended his hospitality broadly. He invited, for example, not only Secretary Robert Smith and his wife to dinner on January 11, 1805, but also their three houseguests. At that same table sat John Quincy Adams, his wife Louisa Catherine Adams, her mother, and three of her sisters.

Each year, Jefferson left for Monticello after Congress recessed in the spring, returning within six weeks to handle business and host his annual Fourth of July reception. During this time, he held a round of dinners for prominent residents of the city. Of the twenty or so dinners given each summer, about a half dozen included women, some of whom had dined with Jefferson during the congressional session. Summer and winter combined, the president's staff served well over 700 guest "plates" spread across eighty-nine dinners in the first twelve months of the records alone.



Figure 5: *Le coin de F. Street Washington vis-à-vis nôtre maison été de 1817*, an 1817 depiction of the corner of F Street and 15th NW by Anne Marguerite Henriette Hyde de Neuville, wife of the French minister. The couple lived a short walk from the President's House, which stands just beyond the Treasury Building depicted on the left. Courtesy of the [New York Public Library](#).

The Invitation

Jefferson normally sent invitations out a few days before an upcoming dinner, although he was not averse to issuing last minute requests to refill seats left vacated by declining guests. Congressman William Plumer noted one such incidence in 1803, and in 1807, local elite Anna Thornton wrote in her diary: "Had the carriage at the door to go to farm, [but] Dr. T received an invitation to dine with the president, therefore we staid." The invitations asked for an arrival time of "half after three." On congressional invitations, Jefferson added "or at whatever later hour the house may rise." His relaxed hospitality

differed from that of the first president whose dinners began promptly. "I have a cook," General Washington told late-arriving congressmen, "who never asks whether the company has come, but whether the hour has come."

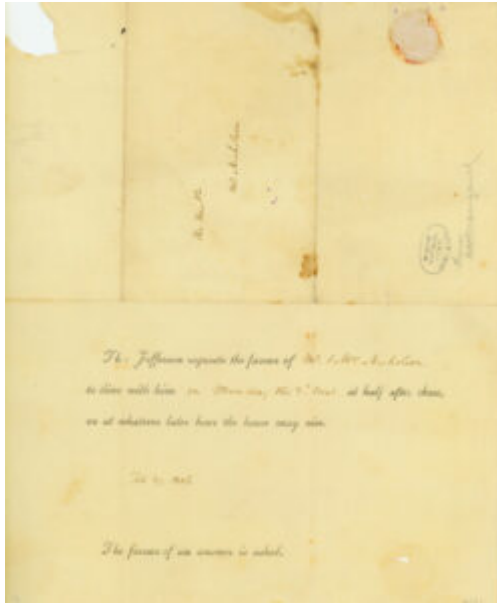


Figure 6: Invitation to Congressman Joseph H. Nicholson and his wife, Rebecca Lloyd Nicholson, for a dinner held on Mar. 3, 1806, with template filled in by Jefferson's secretary, Isaac A. Coles. The Nicholsons declined their invitation. Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#). Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society.

Whereas "The President of the United States" requested the pleasure of one's company on invitations issued during the Washington and Adams administrations, it was "Th: Jefferson" who did so during the third president's terms. Republican William Branch Giles maintained that Jefferson addressed invitations under his own name so as not to be obligated to invite "gentlemen of different politic's" or those who "abuse him in speeches in Congress," but Federalist Plumer thought the format excessive. "It is Th: Jefferson not the President of the United States that invites," he wrote, but "were he not the President I presume I should not be invited."

Jefferson sent out one, maybe two, invitations a season to Federalists who waited on him at the start of the congressional session. Republicans routinely received multiple invitations. Because he took pains to keep a peaceable table, the president initially invited Federalists and Republicans on separate evenings. Later, when there were fewer Federalists, he sprinkled them among tables of congenial Republicans.

The Dinner

Jefferson's guests entered the President's House through the north portal, which led directly into a large entrance hall. Francis Few, whose Uncle Gallatin was secretary of the treasury, dined at the executive mansion in 1808.

She wrote that upon arrival, a servant showed them into a room where they were greeted by Jefferson's secretary. "After a while the President made his appearance he bowed and the strangers present were named to him—he then took a seat himself and his example was followed by the gentlemen who since his arrival had been standing—he joined in the conversation but did not monopolize it—in about half an hour dinner was announced and we were handed into another room."

Jefferson designated two rooms of the President's House for dining, the "Public Dining Room" to the west of the north entrance and the "Common Dining Room" on the east side of the south portal (today's Green Room). Jefferson referred to the latter as the "Small Dining Room," although at approximately 28 by 23 feet it was large enough to hold, among other pieces, an "elegant side board," two glass cases for storing the silver and tableware, an "extra large Mahogany Dining Table in 6. pieces," fifteen dining chairs in black and gold, with thirty-four similar chairs awaiting use in an unfinished room.

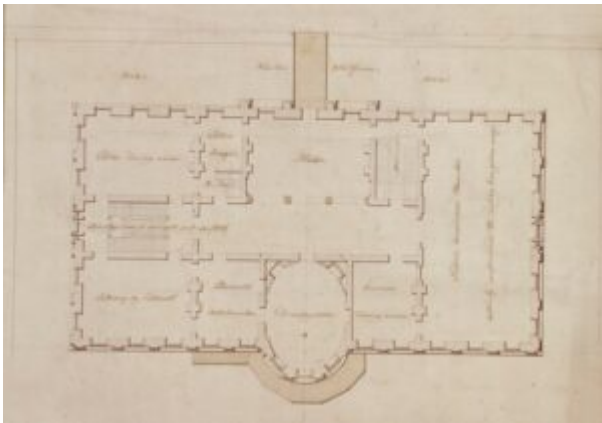


Figure 7: Plan of the principal floor of the President's House, 1803, drawn by Benjamin Henry Latrobe in 1807. The large "Public" dining room is in the upper left corner and the smaller "Common" dining room is to the right of the drawing room. Guests entered at the north portal. Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#). Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Much has been said about the president's use of dumbwaiters and round dining tables. The dumbwaiter that Jefferson employed was not the mechanical service elevator that we think of today. It was a free-standing tiered tray that acted as a portable sideboard for food and dinnerware, and a common feature in genteel homes. The small dining room included a large mahogany dumbwaiter and four smaller ones. At working dinners, a dumbwaiter near each guest cut down the flow of servants and helped ensure privacy. Later, Jefferson requested the installation of a revolving set of service shelves in a door frame near the state dining room and there may have been a set built for the Common Dining Room.

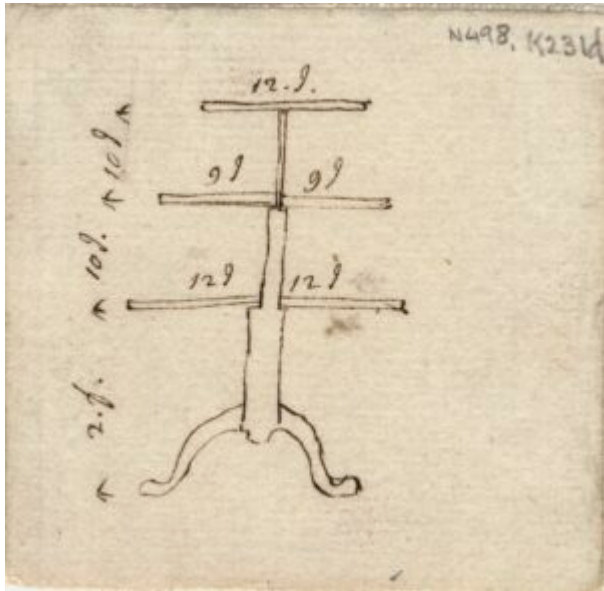


Figure 8: Thomas Jefferson's undated drawing of a three-tiered stand (dumbwaiter). Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Jefferson's friend, Margaret Bayard Smith, wrote three decades after the fact that the president's dinner guests "encircled a round or oval table where all could see each others faces." She may have meant the "oval breakfast table" recorded in the 1809 President's House inventory, but that is the only dining table, of several, designated by shape on the list. This author found no other guest who wrote of eating in the round. To the contrary, guests referred to the "foot" and "head" of the president's table in their writings and sometimes mentioned their being seated "above" or "below" another guest, both indicative of a traditional dining table.

At the dinner Frances Few attended, fourteen guests dined with Jefferson. They sat where they might at a large mahogany table prepared with an array of food and wines. "—without the least ceremony," wrote Few, "[the president] seated himself at the head of the table and immediately began to help himself and those around him." There was not "a profusion of Dishes on the table," wrote Catharine Akerly Mitchill of another dinner. "He gives, however, plenty of food, well cook'd, and served up in elegant stile. All the vegetables were in silver Basins or Dishes with covers. The rest was on China Dishes."

Benjamin Henry Latrobe reported that Jefferson had but three rules at his table: "no healths, no politics, no restraints." The first rule contradicted the dinner practice of President Washington who raised his glass "with great formality [and] drank to the health of every individual" round the table. "Everybody imitated him," wrote one guest, ". . . and such a buzz of 'health, sir,' and 'health, madam' . . . never had I heard before." In contrast, Jefferson neither issued toasts nor encouraged formalities. His relaxed style of entertaining, although less ceremonious than one might expect of a presidential dinner, encouraged intimacy and put guests *at ease*—a term used repeatedly by those describing their evening.



Figure 9: Benjamin Henry Latrobe's 1807 watercolor of the east front of the President's House with the imagined addition of covered porticos (completed in the 1820s). During the Jefferson administration, guests ascended stairs to the north entrance, which was graced by impressively grand pillars but did not include a porch (see figure 7). Courtesy of the [Library of Congress](#).

As to a rule of "no politics," John Quincy Adams wrote of a dinner conversation that moved from the contrariness of the French Revolution to the difficulty in finding fit characters for federal appointments. William Plumer, at a dinner in late 1806, listened as Jefferson commented on topics ranging from the Aaron Burr conspiracy to diplomatic affairs with Spain. It was not political conversation that Jefferson disapproved of at his table, but political arguments. He found no joy in a lively debate, either with his meals or elsewhere.

Louisa Catharine Adams recalled that after dinner everyone retired to the drawing room "in the french fashion, Ladies and Gentlemen together." More often, the ladies withdrew to the sitting room first, leaving the men to linger at the table before joining the women for tea and coffee. The crowd thinned at dusk, hastened by Washington's dark and ungraded streets. Evenings at the President's House were then reserved for a domestic time. During these hours Jefferson might be found playing on the floor with his grandchildren or discussing lunar observations with Prussian geographer Alexander von Humboldt—peaceable hours "in the society of my friends" before a new day and a new addition to his dinner records began.

Further Reading

The Papers of Thomas Jefferson introduced the dinner guest records in Volume 44 (1 July to 10 November 1804) and it continues to run portions of the records as they align chronologically with each volume. The papers of Samuel L. Mitchill and his wife, Catharine Akerly Cock Mitchill, are available online through the Clements Library, University of Michigan. The Anna Maria Bordeau Thornton

papers are available online through the Library of Congress, as is "The President's House, February 19, 1809, Furniture Inventory." Three more sources, *The Diary and Autobiographical Writings of Louisa Catherine Adams: 1778-1850*, *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale*, and *Miscellaneous Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, are not available online as of publication date. Information on the White House interiors was found in Patrick Phillips-Schrock, *The White House: An Illustrated Architectural History*. Information on Jefferson's staff, free and enslaved, was found in Lucia Stanton, "A Well-Ordered Household: Domestic Servants in Jefferson's White House," *White House History* (Winter 1806). The same issue includes Charles T. Cullen's "Jefferson's White House Dinner Guests," illustrated with scans of the dinner guest records.

This article originally appeared in May, 2022.

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