

# Inaugural Ball

On May 7, 1789, one week after the Inauguration of George Washington in New York City, sponsors held a ball to honor the new President. It was not until 1809, however, after the Inauguration of James Madison at the Capitol in Washington, D.C., that the tradition of the Inaugural ball began. That night, First Lady Dolley Madison hosted the gala at Long's Hotel. Four hundred tickets sold for \$4 each. In 1833 two balls were staged for President Andrew Jackson, one at Carusi's Assembly Rooms and the other at Central Masonic Hall. William Henry Harrison attended all three of the 1841 Inaugural balls held in his honor.

The Inaugural ball quickly turned into an anticipated highlight of Washington society, and its location became a prime topic of discussion and angst. Organizers wanted a building that could accommodate large numbers of guests. A temporary wooden building was erected in the city's Judiciary Square in 1849 for one of Zachary Taylor's Inaugural balls. By the time of James Buchanan's Inauguration in 1857, the idea of multiple balls was abandoned for one grand ball that could accommodate thousands of guests. Again, a temporary ballroom was built in Judiciary Square for the occasion. Food purchased for Buchanan's ball included \$3000 worth of wine, 400 gallons of oysters, 500 quarts of chicken salad, 1200 quarts of ice cream, 60 saddles of mutton, 8 rounds of beef, 75 hams and 125 tongues.

In 1865, the ball following Lincoln's second Inauguration took place in the model room of the Patent Office—the first time a government building was used for the celebration. The Inaugural ball for Grant's 1869 Inauguration was held in the north wing of the Treasury Building. Apparently there was not enough room there for dancing,

and a snafu in the checkroom forced many guests to leave without their coats and hats. So for Grant's 1873 Inauguration, a temporary building was again constructed in Judiciary Square.

Grant's second ball proved a disaster, however. The weather that night was freezing cold, and the temporary structure had no heat or insulation. Guests danced in their overcoats and hats, the food was cold, they ran out of coffee and hot chocolate, and even the caged decorative canaries froze.

Later Inaugural balls were held at the National Museum building (now the Smithsonian Arts and Industries building) and the Pension Building, which became the favorite venue from 1885 through 1909.

In 1913, the city's Inaugural organizers began planning the ball to celebrate Woodrow Wilson's Inauguration, again to be held at the Pension Building, but President-elect Wilson thought otherwise. He felt the ball was too expensive and unnecessary for the solemn occasion of the Inaugural, and asked the Inaugural committee to cancel it. The city of Washington had not missed an Inaugural ball since 1853, when a grieving President Franklin Pierce—mourning the recent loss of his son—asked that the ball be cancelled. Although some D.C. residents felt very disappointed by Wilson's request, others felt relieved. The Pension Building was often closed for over a week in preparation for the ball, causing the government's business there to shut down.

President-elect Warren G. Harding also requested that the Inaugural committee do away with the elaborate ball (and the parade as well) in 1921, hoping to set an example of thrift and simplicity. The committee complied, and instead, the chairman of the Inaugural ball committee hosted a huge private party at his home. Subsequent Inaugurations followed this trend, with charity balls becoming the fashion for the Inaugurations of Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

President Harry Truman revived the official ball in 1949. Organizers

for Dwight D. Eisenhower's 1953 Inaugural ball added a second event due to the great demand for tickets. Four years later, Eisenhower's second Inauguration featured four balls. Kennedy attended five in 1961. President Carter attempted to strip the balls of their glitz and glamour in 1977, calling them parties and charging no more than \$25 each, but by the second inaugural of President William Jefferson Clinton in 1997, the number of balls reached an all-time high of fourteen. George W. Bush's inaugural in 2001 saw the number of official balls decline to eight, and his second inaugural in 2005 was celebrated with nine official balls. President Barack Obama attended ten official balls for his first inaugural in 2009.

Today, the official Inaugural balls are planned by the Presidential Inaugural Committee.