

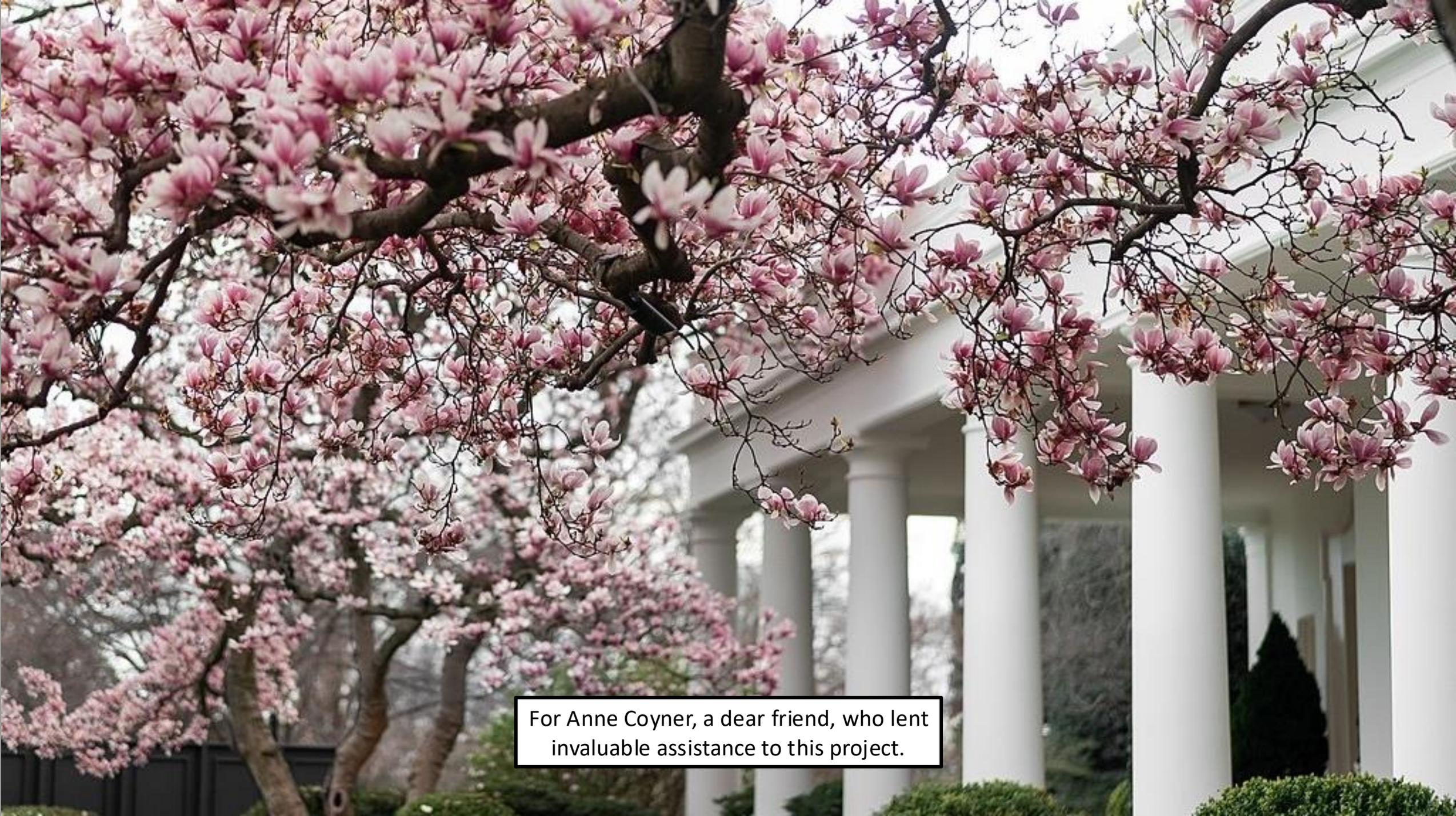


---

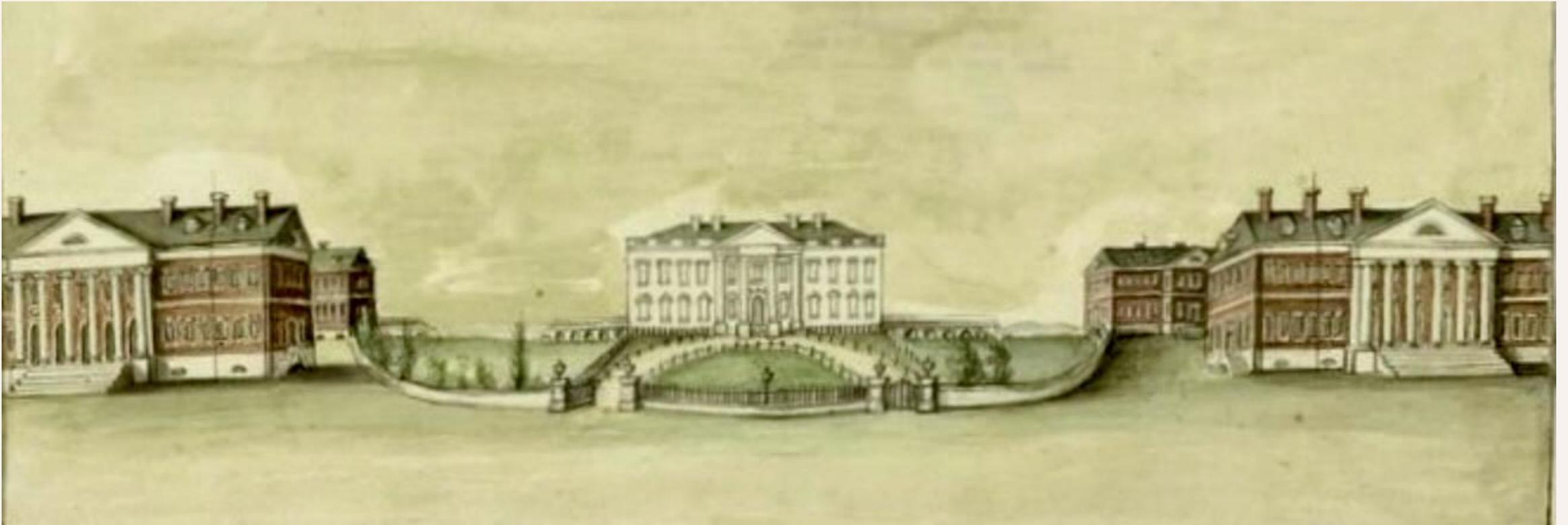
# The White House Rose Garden

BY MARGOT MORRELL

BUNNY MELLON'S GIFT  
TO AMERICA



For Anne Coyner, a dear friend, who lent invaluable assistance to this project.



From the earliest days of America's White House, the stately building was hemmed in by the State Department and the U. S. Treasury on the east, and the War Department and the Navy Department on the west.

Anne-Marguerite Hyde de Neuville,  
*Washington City* ca. 1821.



When Thomas Jefferson took office in 1801, the White House's stables were two blocks away. President Jefferson had colonnades built that stretched east and west, to serve as stables and storage facilities.

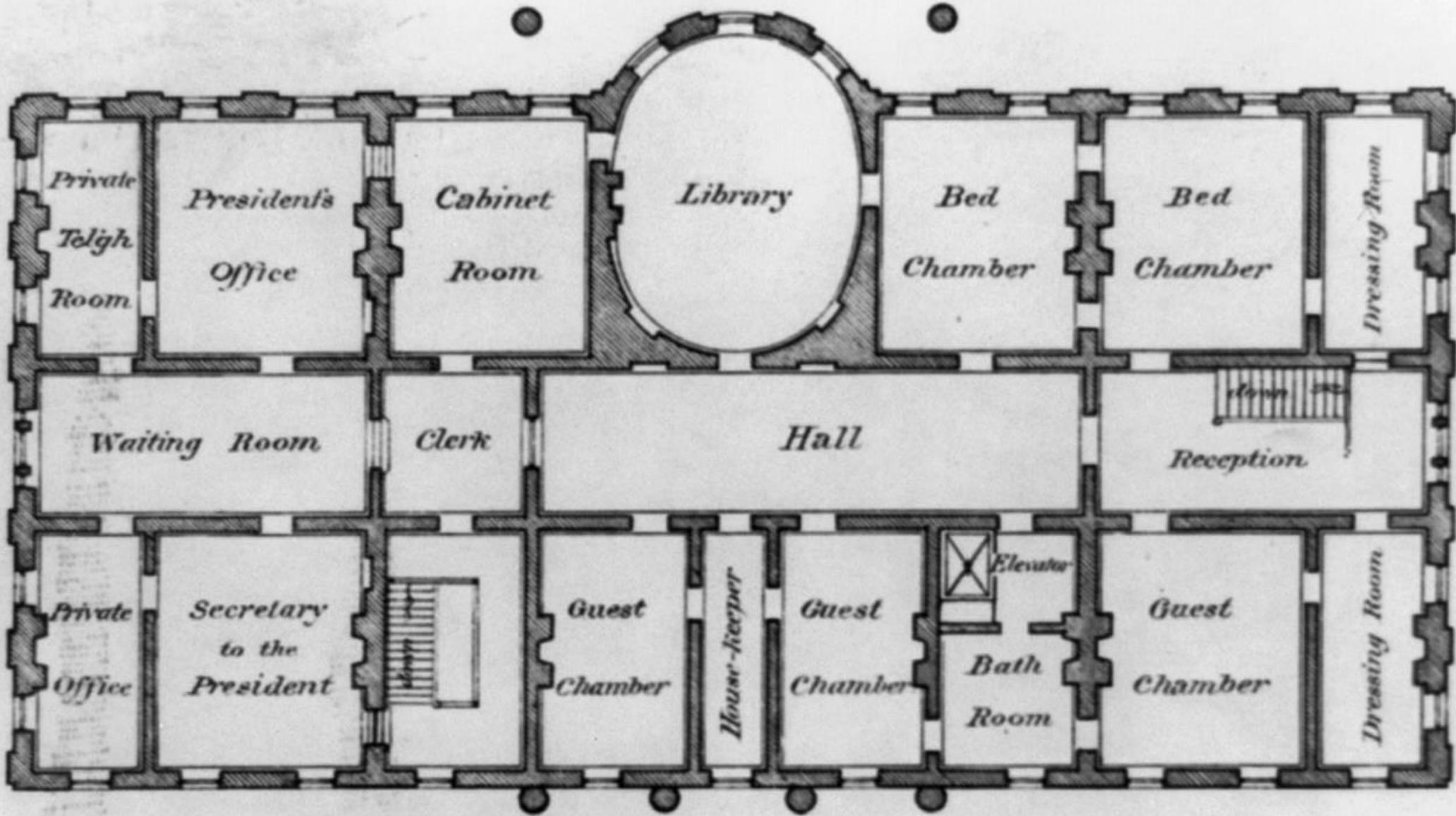


When the Treasury building expanded in the 1850s, Jefferson's east colonnade and a greenhouse were eliminated. President Franklin Pierce (1853-1857), had a greenhouse built on top of the west colonnade.



The White House, 1889

Over the next forty years, the greenhouses proliferated.



Throughout the 1800s, the second floor of the White House was used for the President's executive offices *and* the First Family's living quarters. The First Ladies' pleas for more space and privacy were ignored.

- EXECUTIVE-OFFICES -  
 - AND-PRESIDENTS-FAMILY -  
 - APARTMENTS -



Then, in 1901, when President William McKinley was assassinated, Theodore Roosevelt, his wife, and their six children moved into the White House. Something – finally – had to be done.



The Roosevelts hired New York's leading architect, Charles McKim of McKim, Mead and White. McKim moved the greenhouses south toward the Washington Monument and built a separate building for the President's offices. Journalists marveled that no one had thought of this elegant solution before. McKim used Jefferson's colonnade to connect the White House to the West Wing.

Rose Garden, ca. 1909

In place of the greenhouses, Mrs. Roosevelt built what she called a "Colonial Garden."

WEST GARDEN

LeadershipLives.com

Woodrow Wilson's wife, Ellen, did not care for Mrs. Roosevelt's Colonial Garden. In 1913, working with landscape architect, George Burnap of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, Mrs. Wilson, a trained artist, redesigned the space. Their plan was for an elaborate "President's Walk" which included an avenue of shade trees and beds of roses. When they ran short of funds, the project was scaled back but their plan remained intact for almost 50 years.





President Truman speaks to foreign journalists, May 1951.

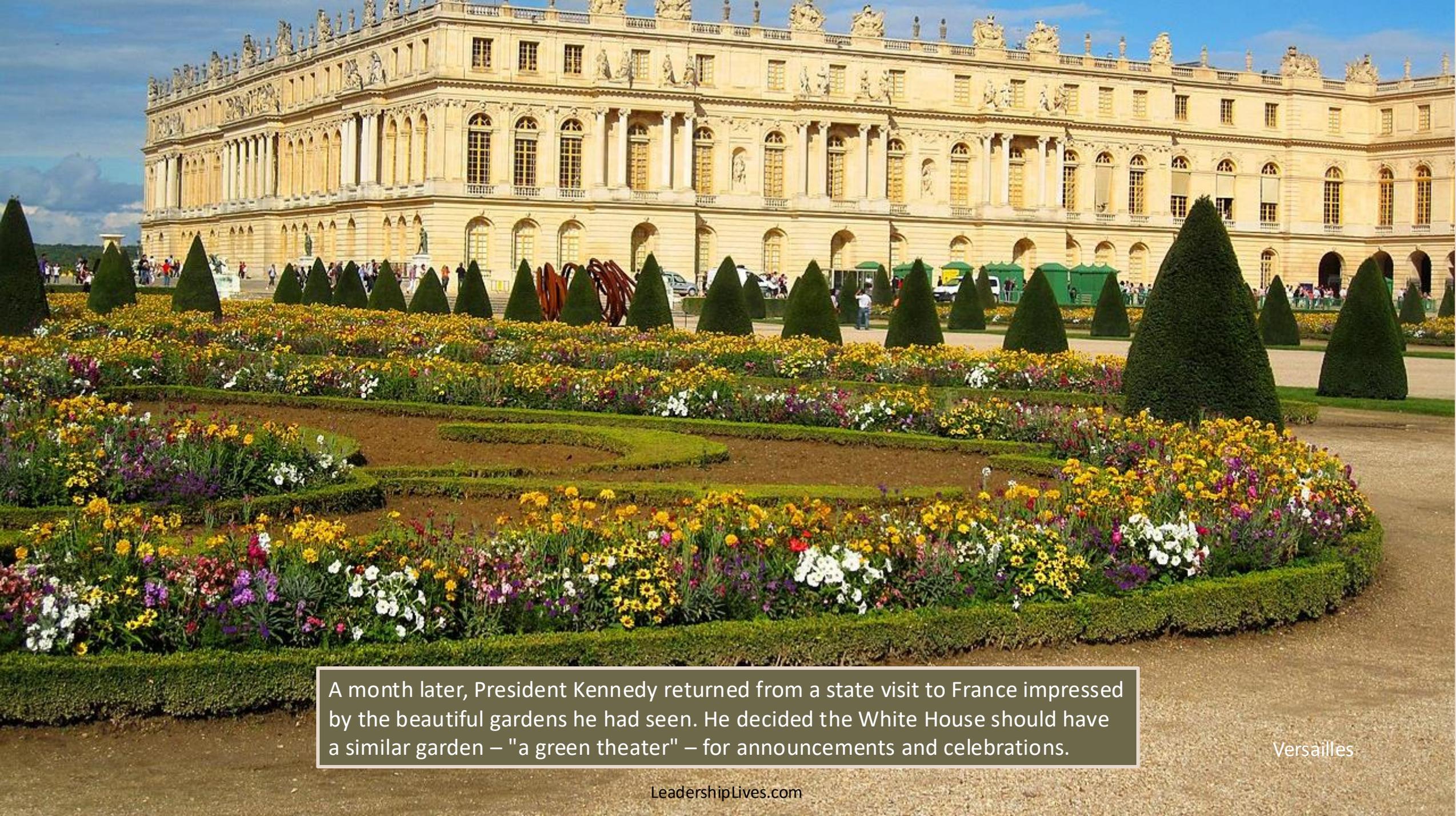
By the Truman administration, it was clear the space should be redesigned to accommodate the large gatherings presidents often held in the space.



President Eisenhower had several rose beds removed to create more space.



President Kennedy wrestled with how best to use the Rose Garden. On May 8, 1961, JFK presented Mercury astronaut, Alan Shepard, with NASA's Distinguished Service Medal.

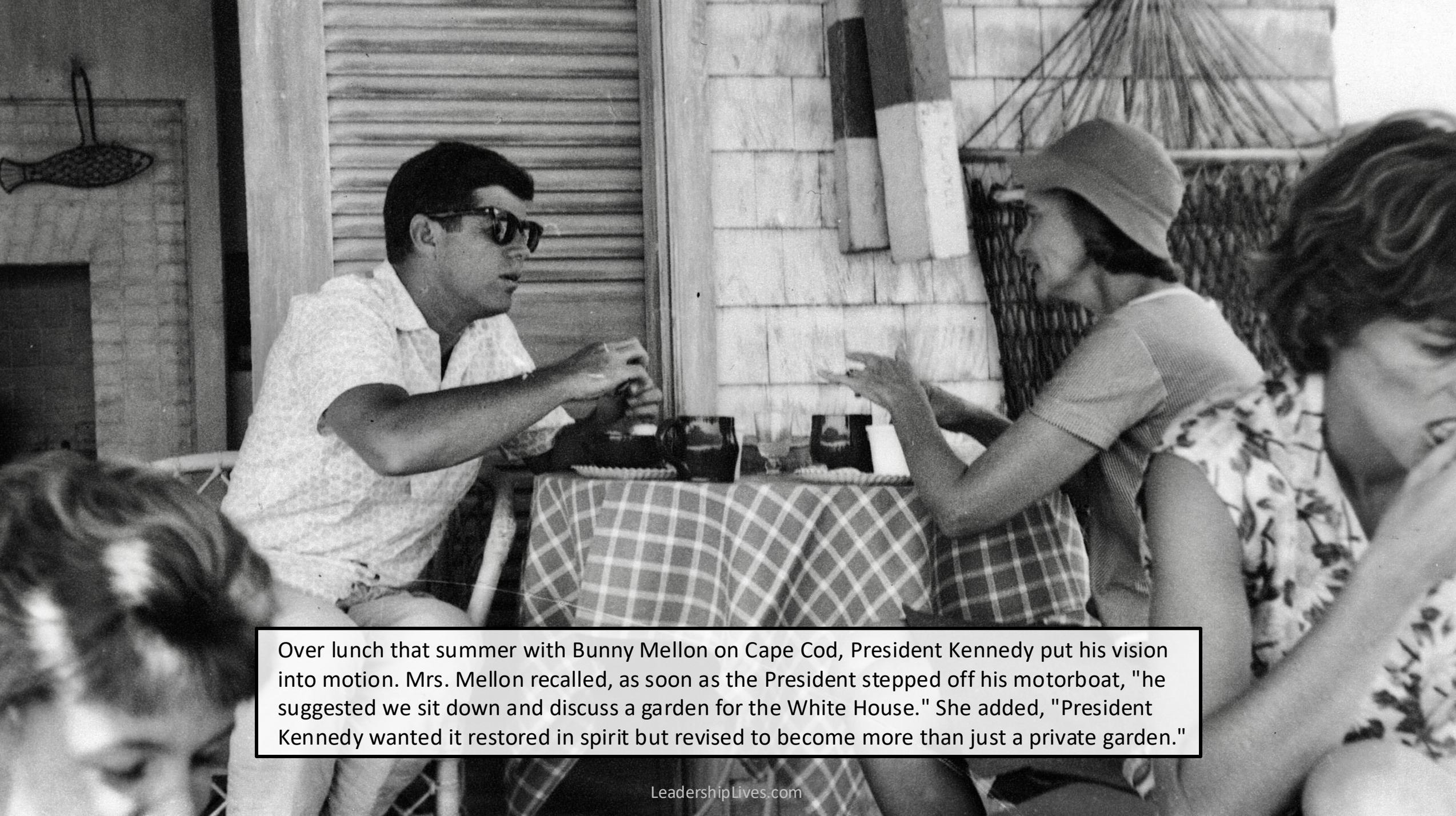


A month later, President Kennedy returned from a state visit to France impressed by the beautiful gardens he had seen. He decided the White House should have a similar garden – "a green theater" – for announcements and celebrations.

Versailles



The Rose Garden, July 27, 1961

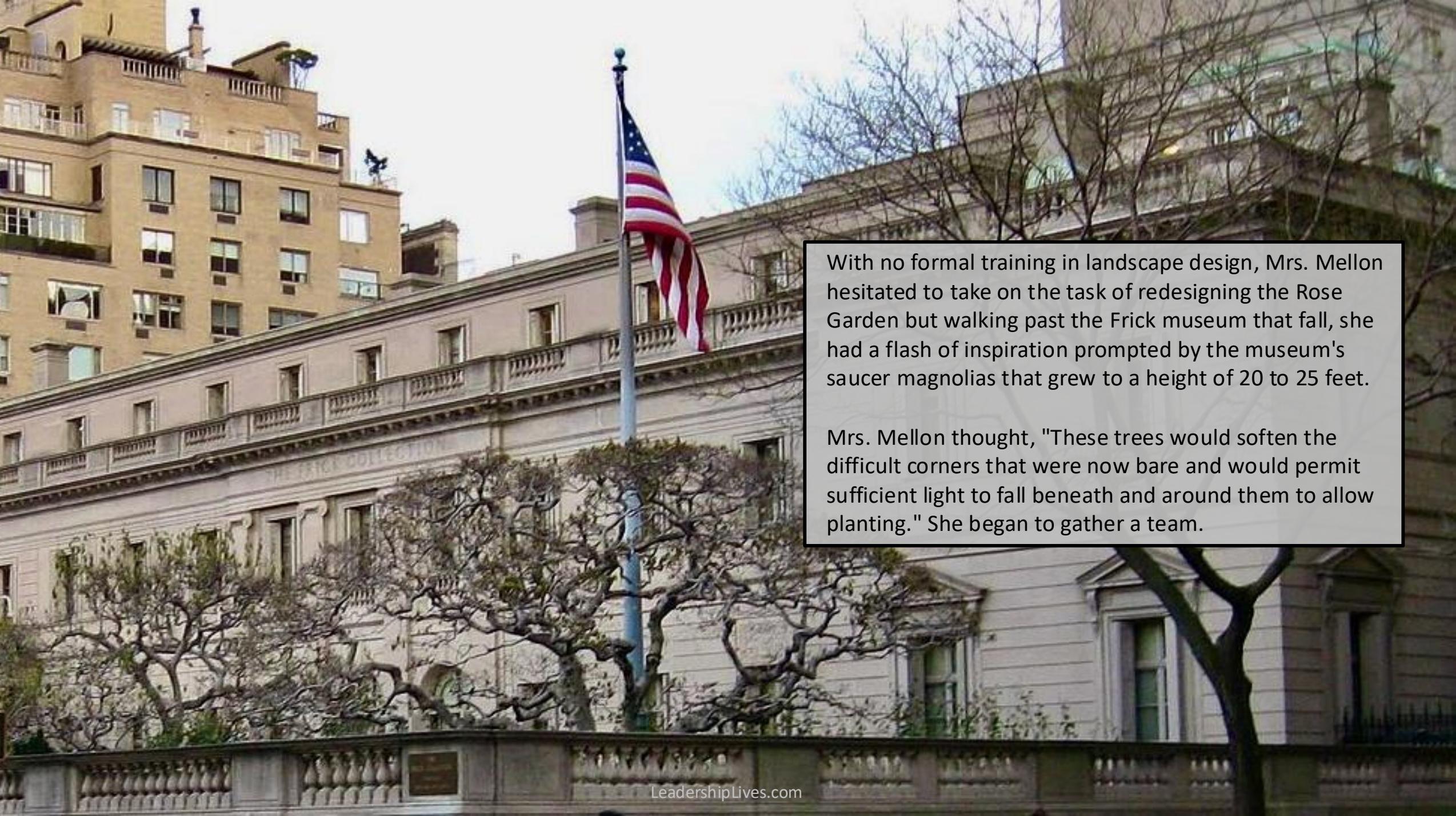


Over lunch that summer with Bunny Mellon on Cape Cod, President Kennedy put his vision into motion. Mrs. Mellon recalled, as soon as the President stepped off his motorboat, "he suggested we sit down and discuss a garden for the White House." She added, "President Kennedy wanted it restored in spirit but revised to become more than just a private garden."



Later that month, President Kennedy delivered a short but powerful speech to "the first members of the Peace Corps to be graduated from the school and, also the first group to go overseas." The next day the volunteers were flying to Ghana and Tanganyika to do, in Kennedy's words, "important and valuable work."

The President appears to have already implemented some of Mrs. Mellon's suggestions for the best use of the space.



With no formal training in landscape design, Mrs. Mellon hesitated to take on the task of redesigning the Rose Garden but walking past the Frick museum that fall, she had a flash of inspiration prompted by the museum's saucer magnolias that grew to a height of 20 to 25 feet.

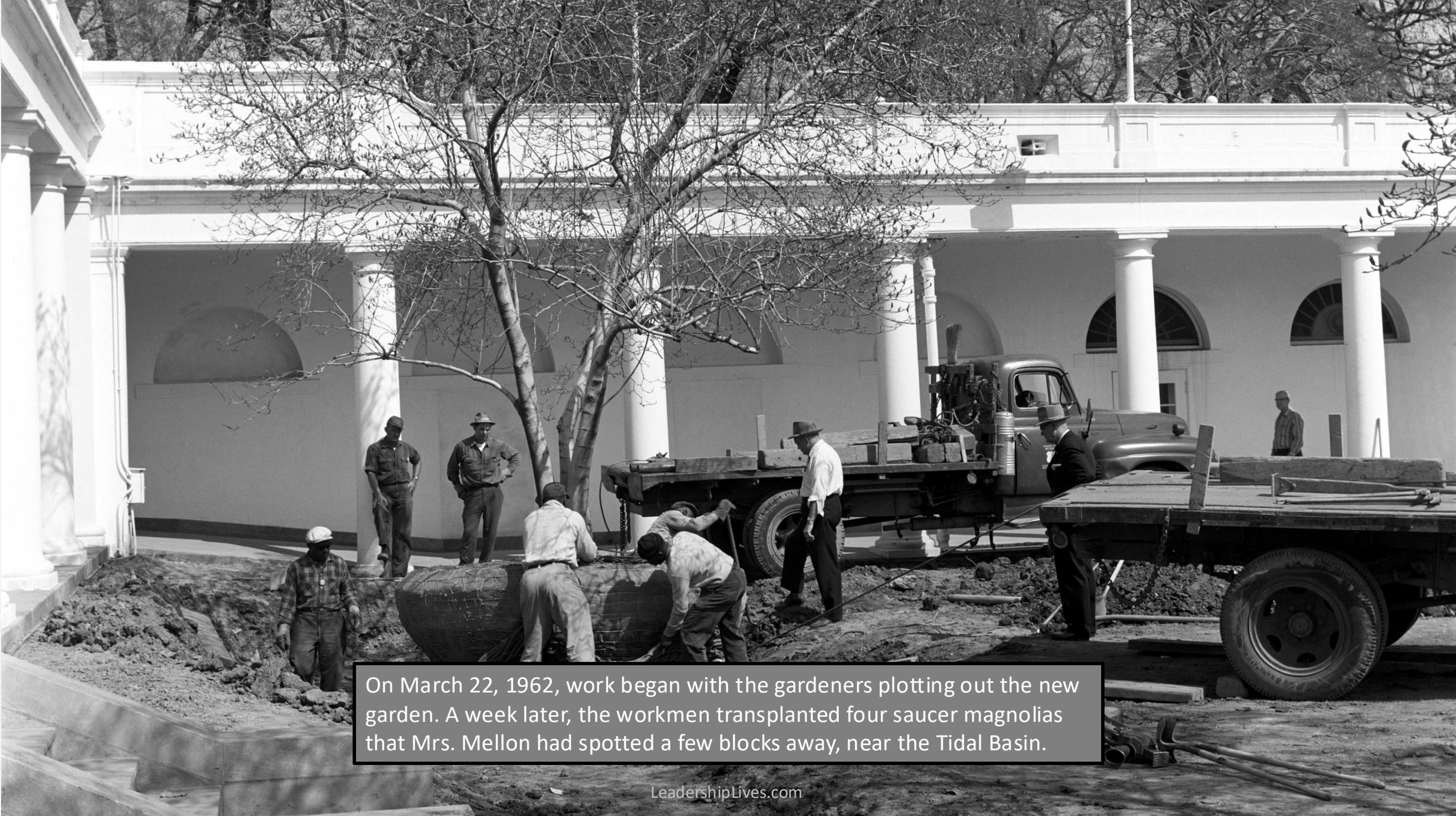
Mrs. Mellon thought, "These trees would soften the difficult corners that were now bare and would permit sufficient light to fall beneath and around them to allow planting." She began to gather a team.



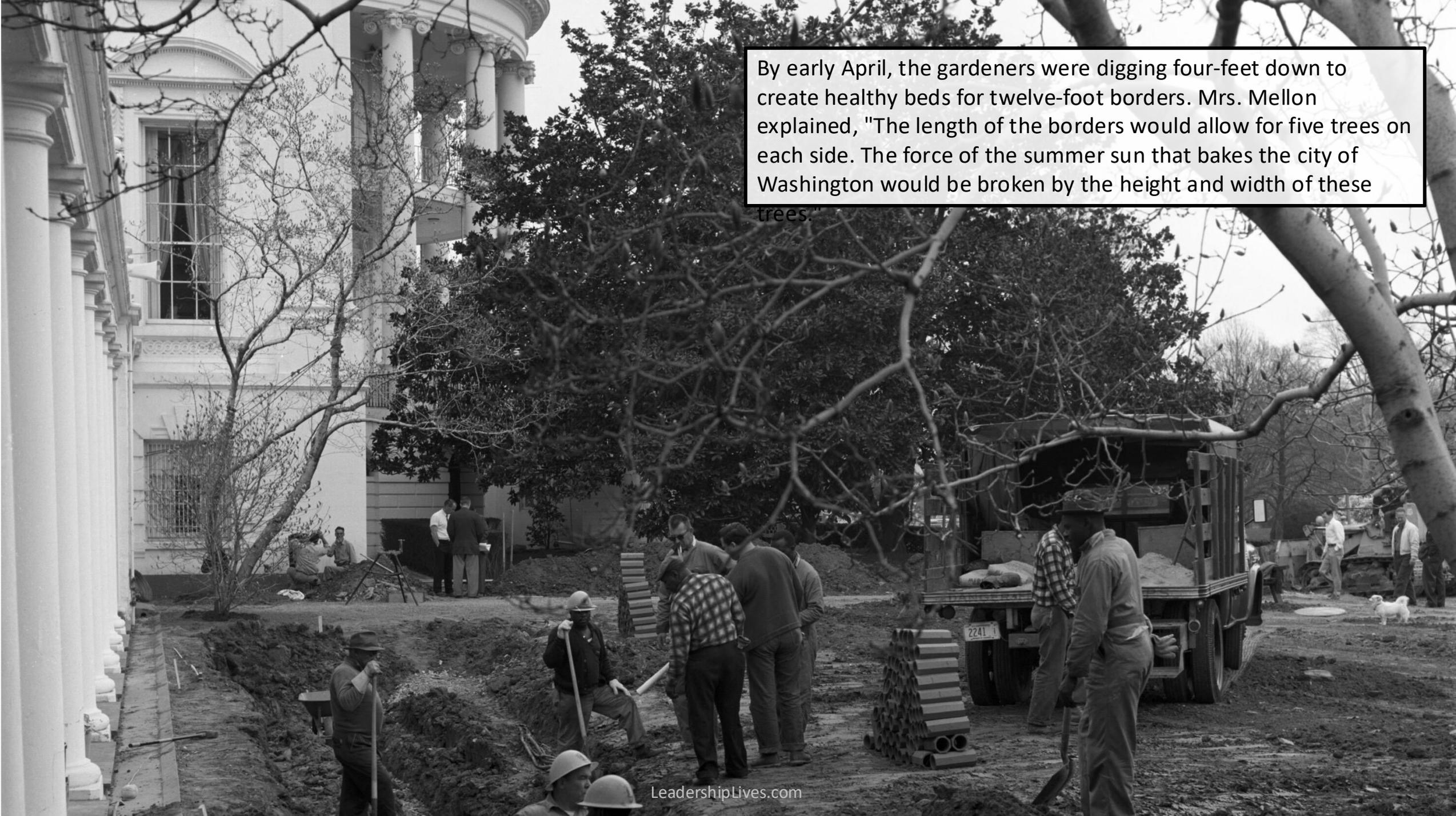
In search of talent, Mrs. Mellon began visiting the National Park Service gardens in the Washington, D.C. area. At Kenilworth Park and Aquatic Gardens, she met head horticulturist, Irvin Williams and "felt almost immediately that he was the right man to direct and oversee the new garden at the White House..."

Irvin Williams went on to serve as White House Gardener until he retired in 2008. In 1965, he recalled, "I first met him [JFK] in the late fall of '61 when we were first planning the renovation of the garden, which was to take place in the spring of '62. I met him along with Mrs. Mellon."

Mrs. Mellon completed her team with renowned Georgetown landscape designer, Perry Wheeler, and the Chief Usher of the White House, J. B. West.



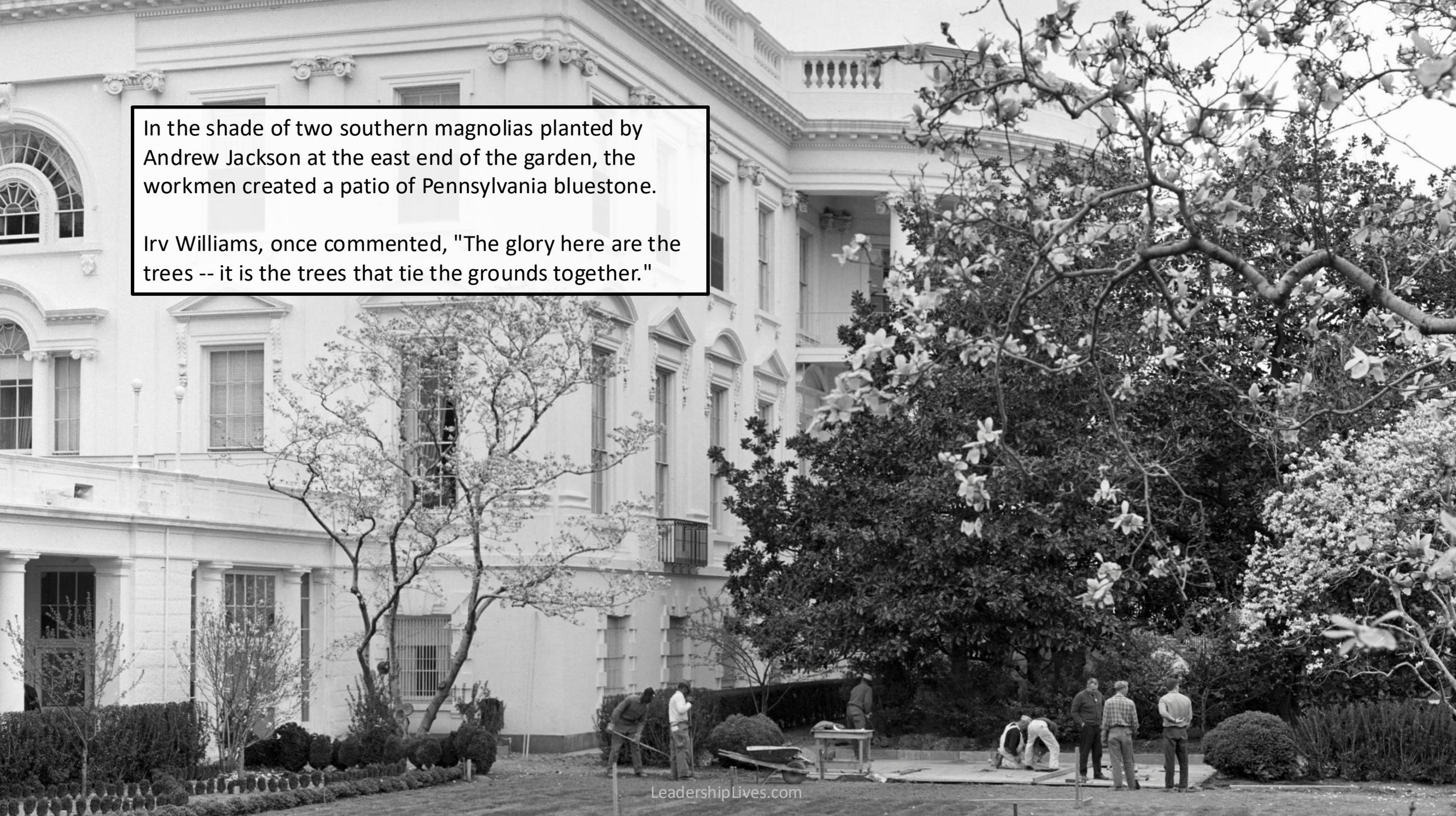
On March 22, 1962, work began with the gardeners plotting out the new garden. A week later, the workmen transplanted four saucer magnolias that Mrs. Mellon had spotted a few blocks away, near the Tidal Basin.



By early April, the gardeners were digging four-feet down to create healthy beds for twelve-foot borders. Mrs. Mellon explained, "The length of the borders would allow for five trees on each side. The force of the summer sun that bakes the city of Washington would be broken by the height and width of these trees."



Next, the workmen graded the lawn and renovated the steps to create "a stage" for the president to deliver his remarks.

A black and white photograph of the White House. In the foreground, a group of about seven men are working on a patio area. Some are kneeling, some are standing, and one is using a wheelbarrow. The patio is made of large, rectangular stones. To the left, there is a large, leafy tree. To the right, there is a large, flowering magnolia tree. The White House building is in the background, showing its iconic architecture with columns and windows. The sky is overcast.

In the shade of two southern magnolias planted by Andrew Jackson at the east end of the garden, the workmen created a patio of Pennsylvania bluestone.

Irv Williams, once commented, "The glory here are the trees -- it is the trees that tie the grounds together."



By mid-May 1962, the work was finished. In Irv Williams' 1965 Oral History, he mentioned "there are approximately 150 to 200 different varieties [of flowers]. This would include all three changes of the garden per season."



June 20, 1962

"Actually, I think that she [Bunny Mellon] was asked by the President to design him a garden there, which would be the type of garden that all could enjoy and yet would have space enough for him to greet these groups of which he met so many."

Irvin Williams  
Chief White House Gardener  
Oral History, March 19, 1965

Years later, referring to President Kennedy, Williams told a journalist, "Now there was a man who was interested in gardening."

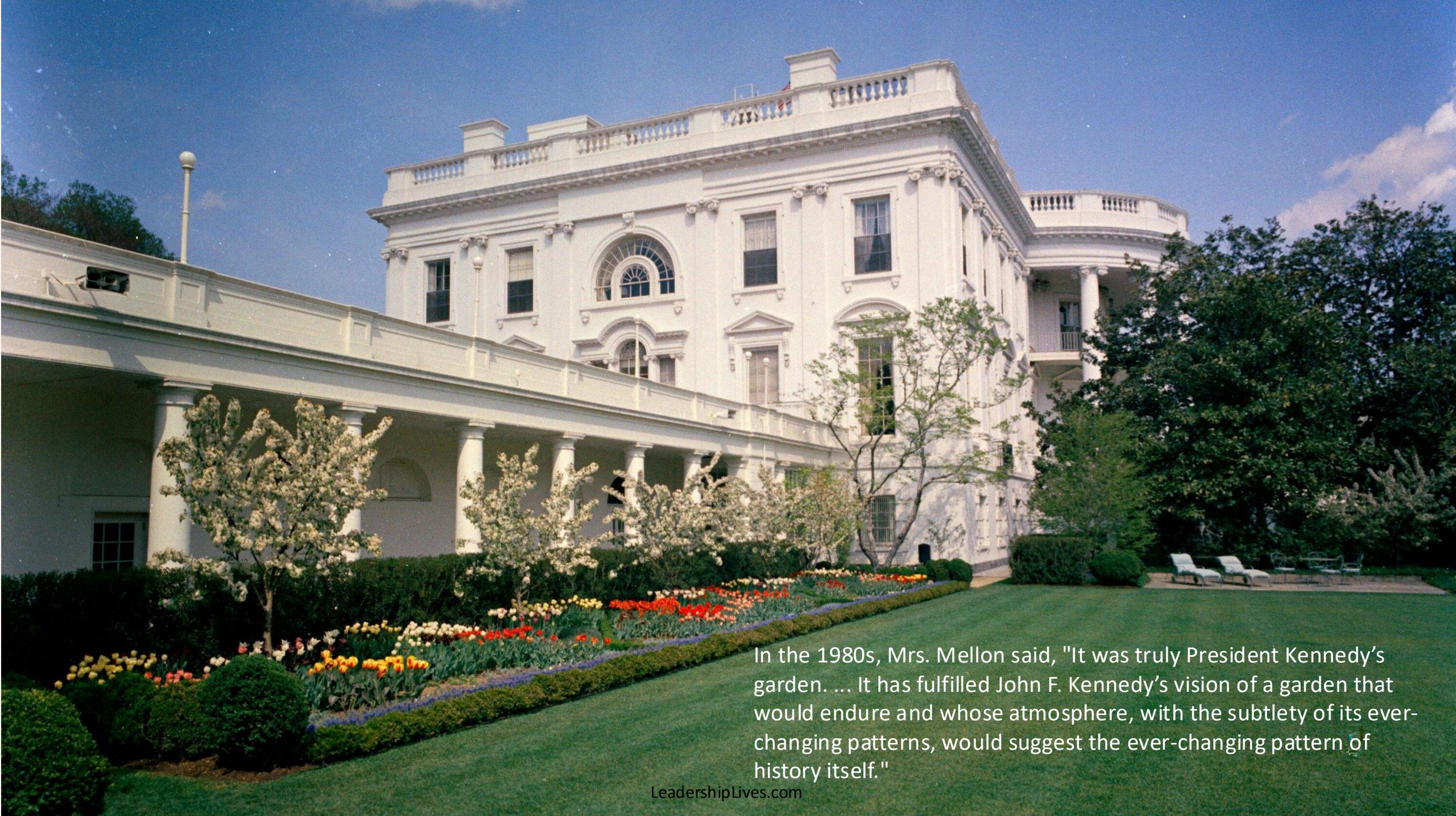
Jacqueline Kennedy stepped back from any involvement in the renovation of the Rose Garden so that the President could completely own the project.







Looking southeast, across the South Lawn of the White House,  
April 11, 1963.



In the 1980s, Mrs. Mellon said, "It was truly President Kennedy's garden. ... It has fulfilled John F. Kennedy's vision of a garden that would endure and whose atmosphere, with the subtlety of its ever-changing patterns, would suggest the ever-changing pattern of history itself."



The Rose Garden, 2015



As Mrs. Mellon foresaw, the saucer magnolias, "gave life to what had been a cold, bleak space."

March 17, 2020

LeadershipLives.com



March 17, 2020

