



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 the White House, the stately building has been hemmed in by the State Department and U. S. Treasury on the east, and War Department and Navy Department on the west.

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



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

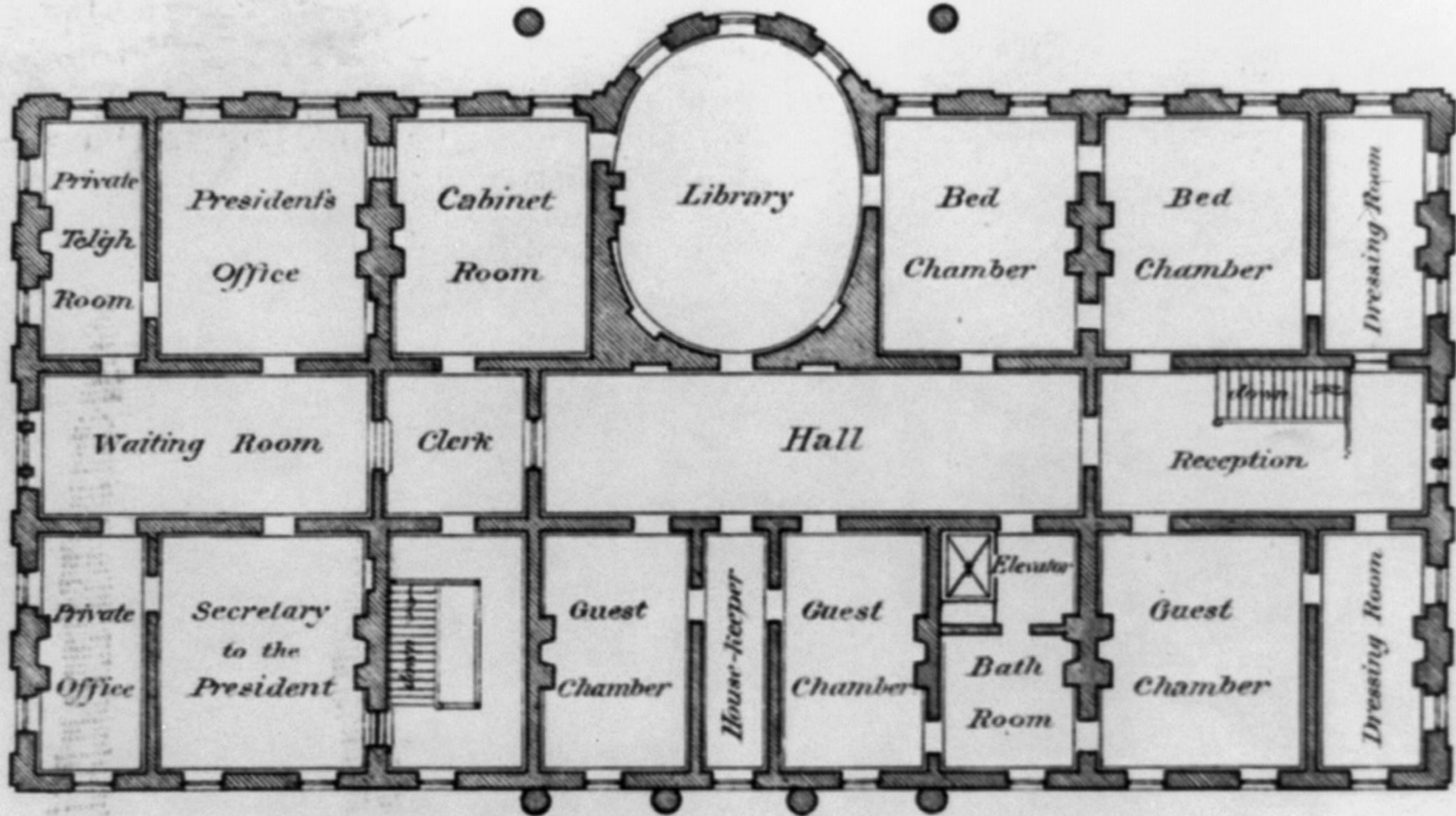


Jefferson's east colonnade and a greenhouse were eliminated when the Treasury building was enlarged in the 1850s. President Franklin Pierce (1853-1857), had a greenhouse built on top of the west colonnade.



Over the next forty years, the greenhouses on the west side of the White House proliferated.

The White House, 1889



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" as a tribute to George Washington and America's founders.

WEST GARDEN

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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.





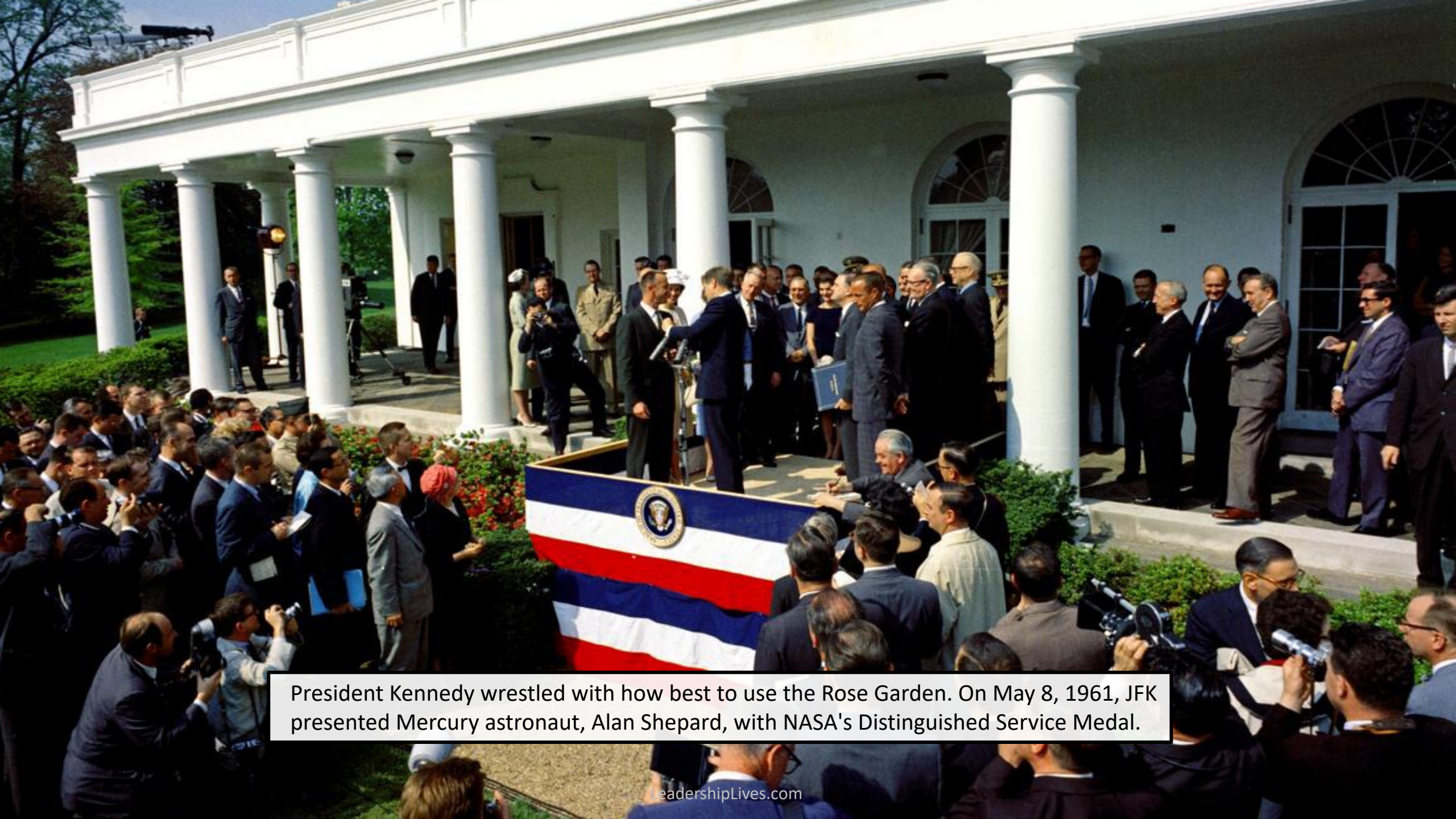
President Truman speaks to foreign journalists, May 1951.

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

A large group of men, mostly in dark suits, are posed for a group photograph on the White House lawn. They are arranged in several rows, with some standing slightly behind others. The White House building is visible in the background on the left, and a large green tree stands behind the group. The scene is outdoors on a sunny day.

First Board of Trustees meeting for Eisenhower Exchange Fellowships November 17, 1953.

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.

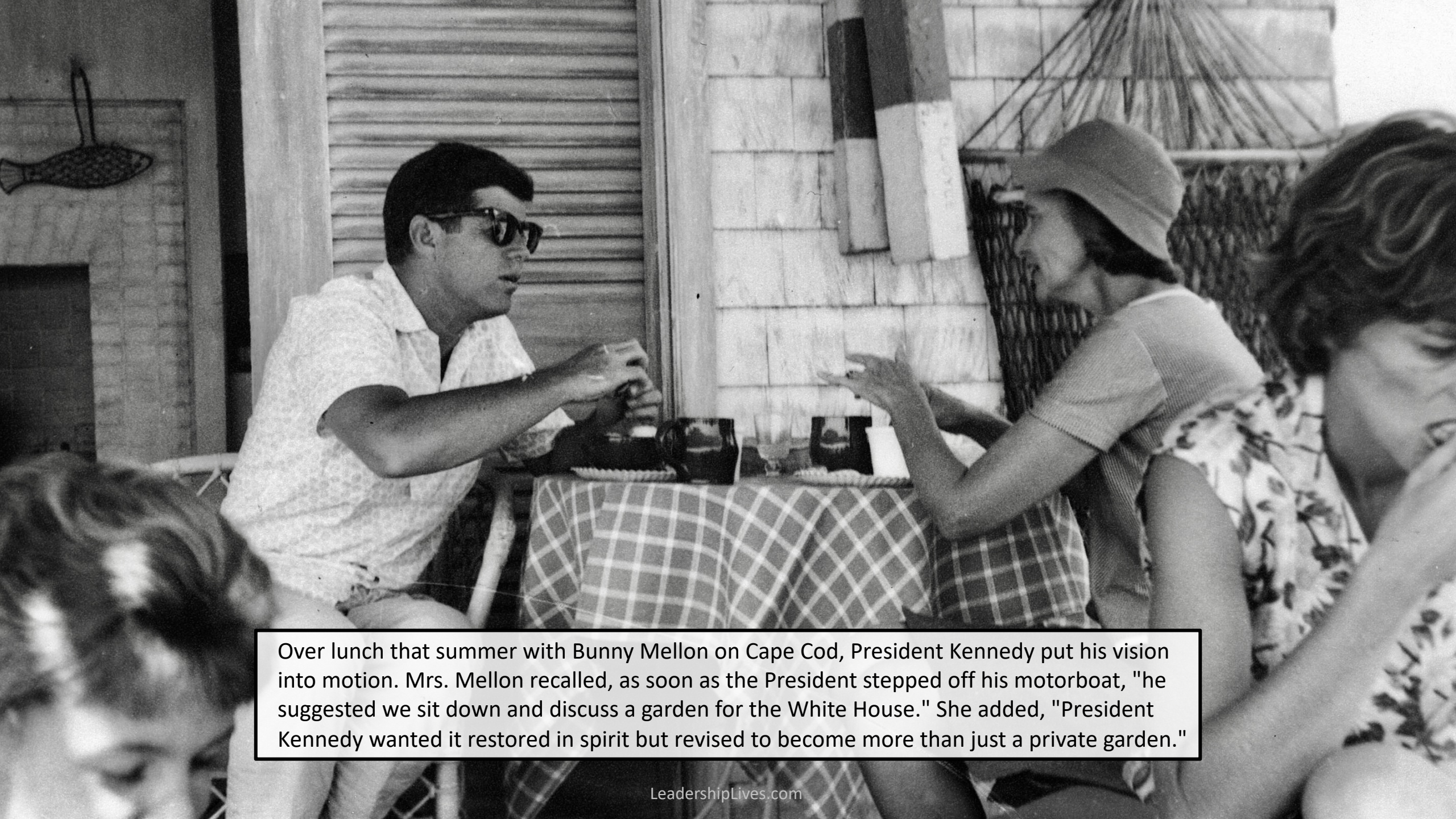


A month later, President Kennedy returned from a state visit to France impressed by the beautiful gardens he had seen. He decided the White House should have a similar garden – "a green theater" – for announcements and celebrations.

Versailles



The Rose Garden, July 27, 1961

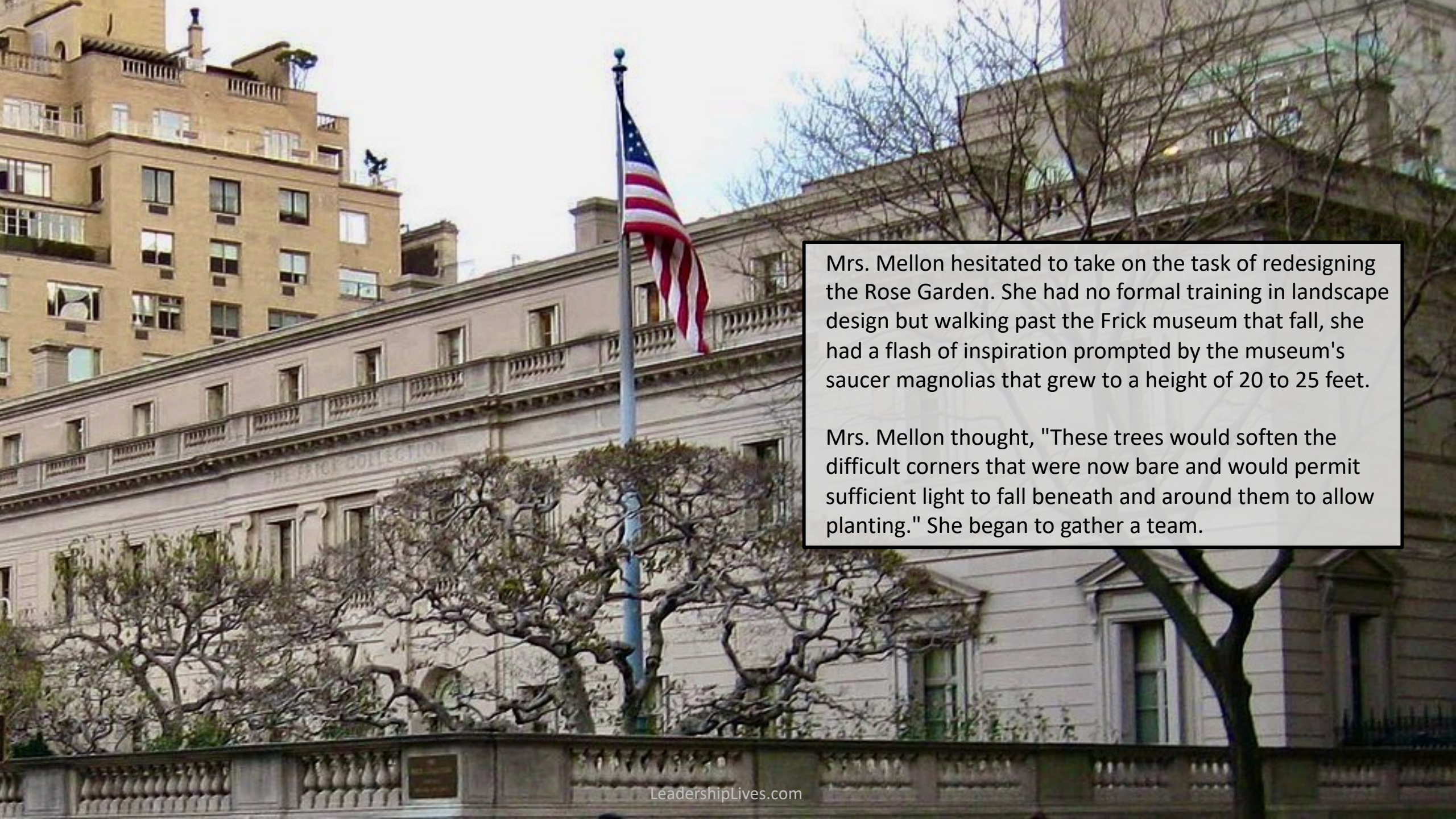


Over lunch that summer with Bunny Mellon on Cape Cod, President Kennedy put his vision into motion. Mrs. Mellon recalled, as soon as the President stepped off his motorboat, "he suggested we sit down and discuss a garden for the White House." She added, "President Kennedy wanted it restored in spirit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



Mrs. Mellon hesitated to take on the task of redesigning the Rose Garden. She had no formal training in landscape design 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.

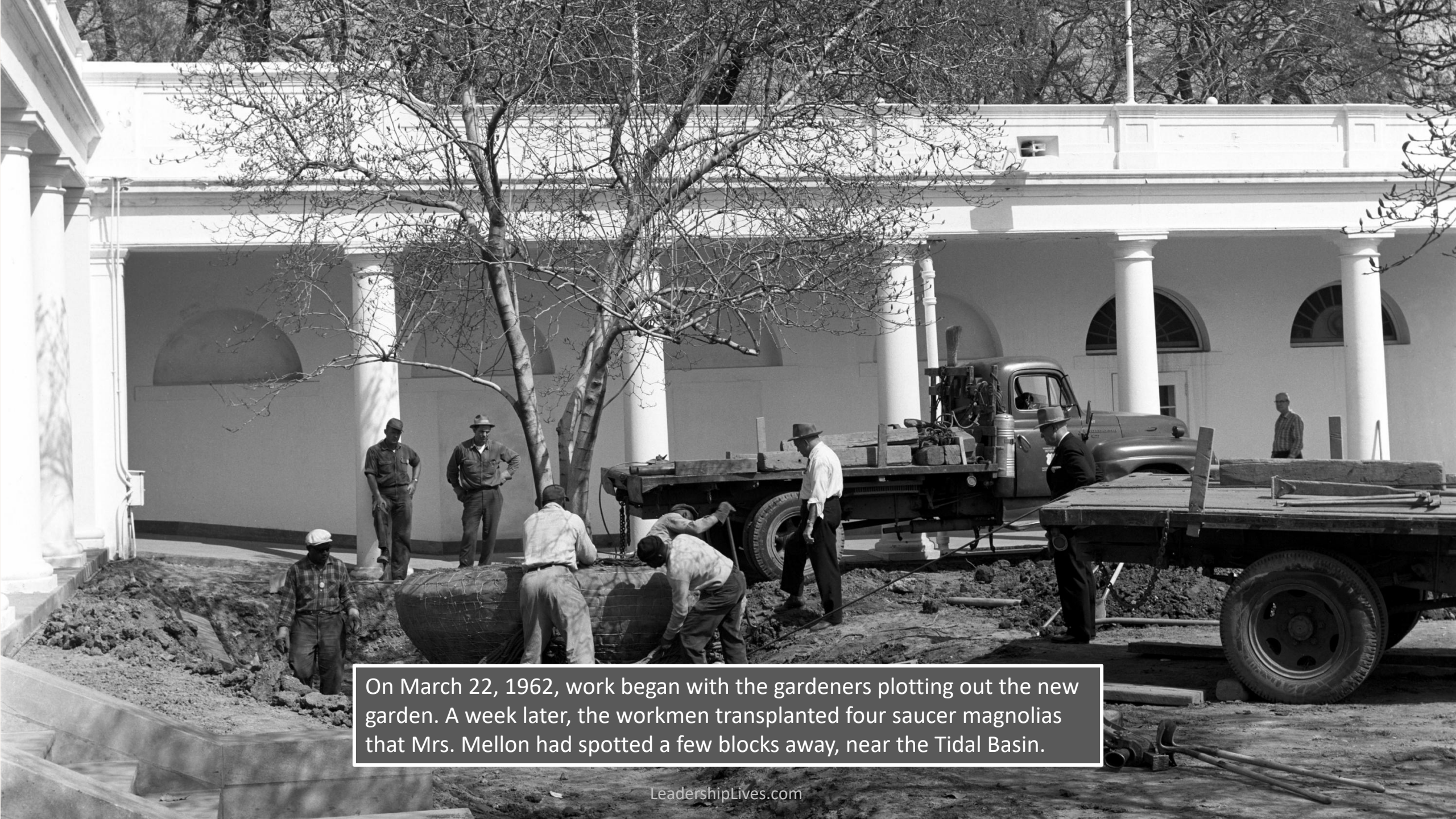


In search of talent, Mrs. Mellon began visiting the National Park Service gardens in the Washington, D.C. area.

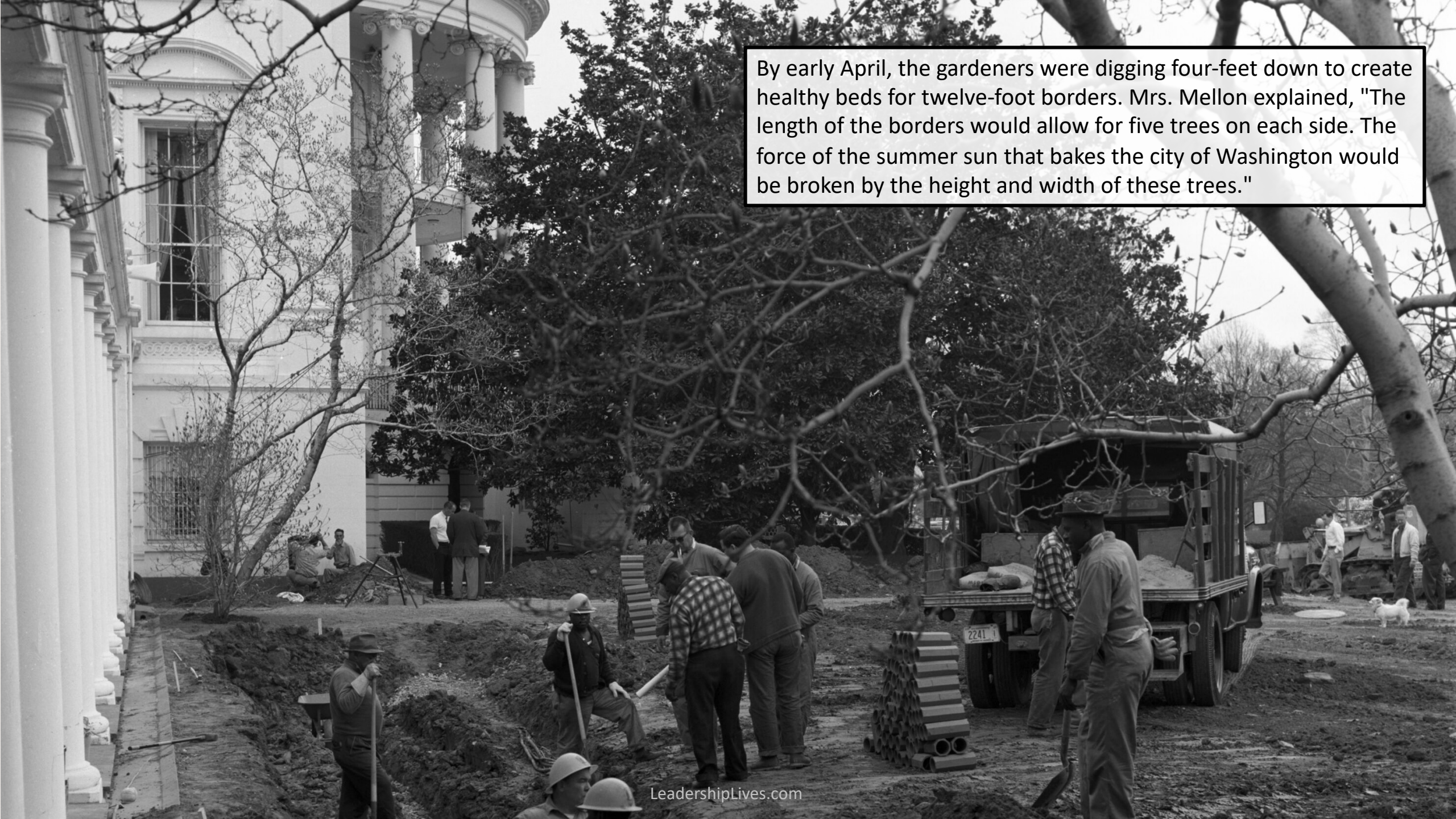
At Kenilworth Park and Aquatic Gardens, she met head horticulturist, Irvin Williams and "felt almost immediately that he was the right man to direct and oversee the new garden at the White House..."

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 J. B. West, Chief Usher of the White House.



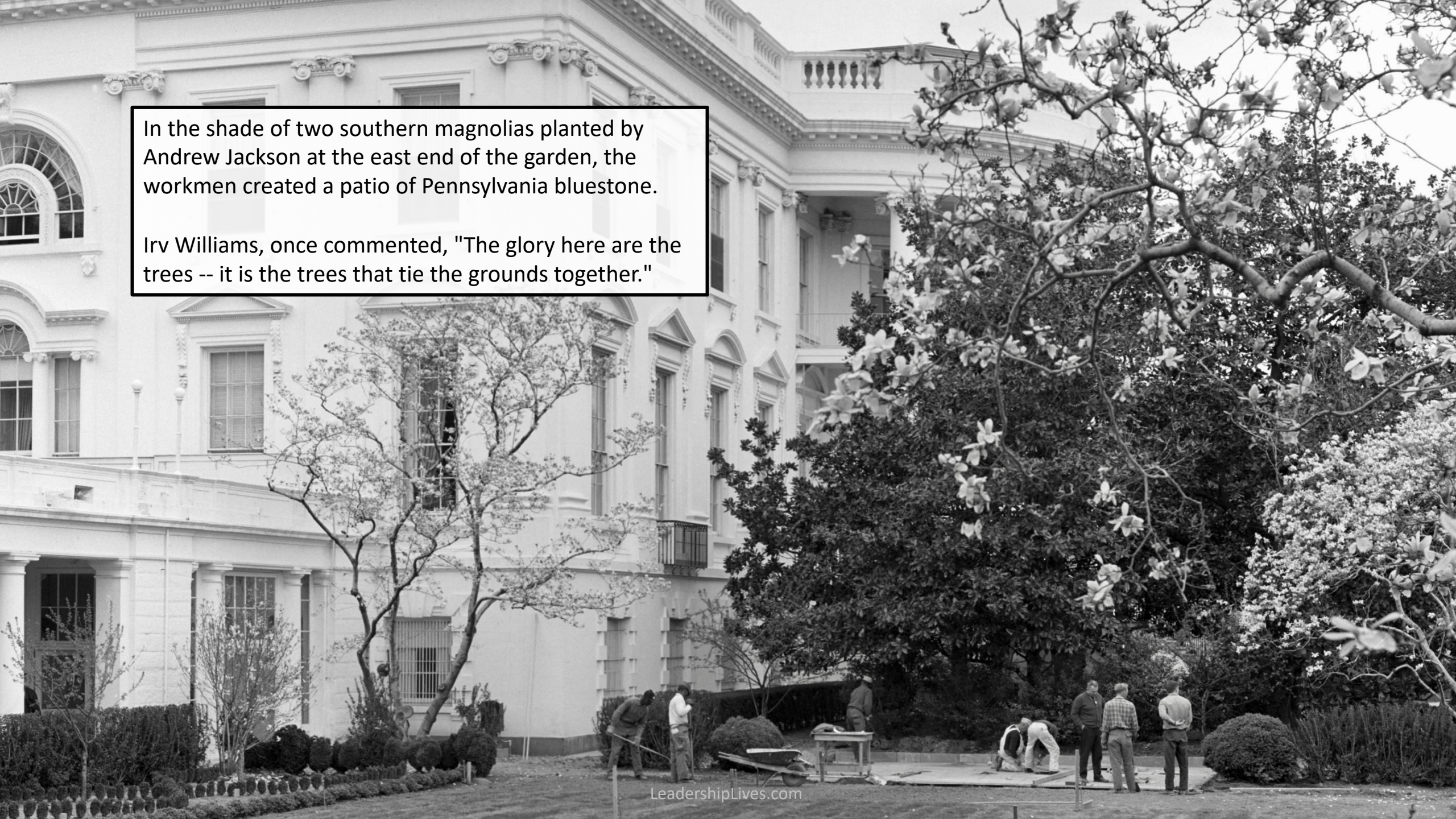
On March 22, 1962, work began with the gardeners plotting out the new garden. A week later, the workmen transplanted four saucer magnolias that Mrs. Mellon had spotted a few blocks away, near the Tidal Basin.

A black and white photograph showing a construction site in front of a large, classical-style building with prominent columns. Several workers are visible, some wearing hard hats. A large truck is parked on the right, and a small dog is visible in the background. The scene is partially obscured by bare tree branches in the foreground.

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 grounds. In the background, the White House building is visible with its iconic columns and windows. In the foreground, several workers are engaged in landscaping work. They are creating a patio area using Pennsylvania bluestone. Two large, mature trees are prominent: one on the left and a larger one on the right. The workers are positioned around the patio area, some standing and some kneeling. A wheelbarrow and other tools are visible on the ground.

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 commented "there are approximately 150 to 200 different varieties [of flowers]. This would include all three changes of the garden per season."



June 20, 1962

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"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.

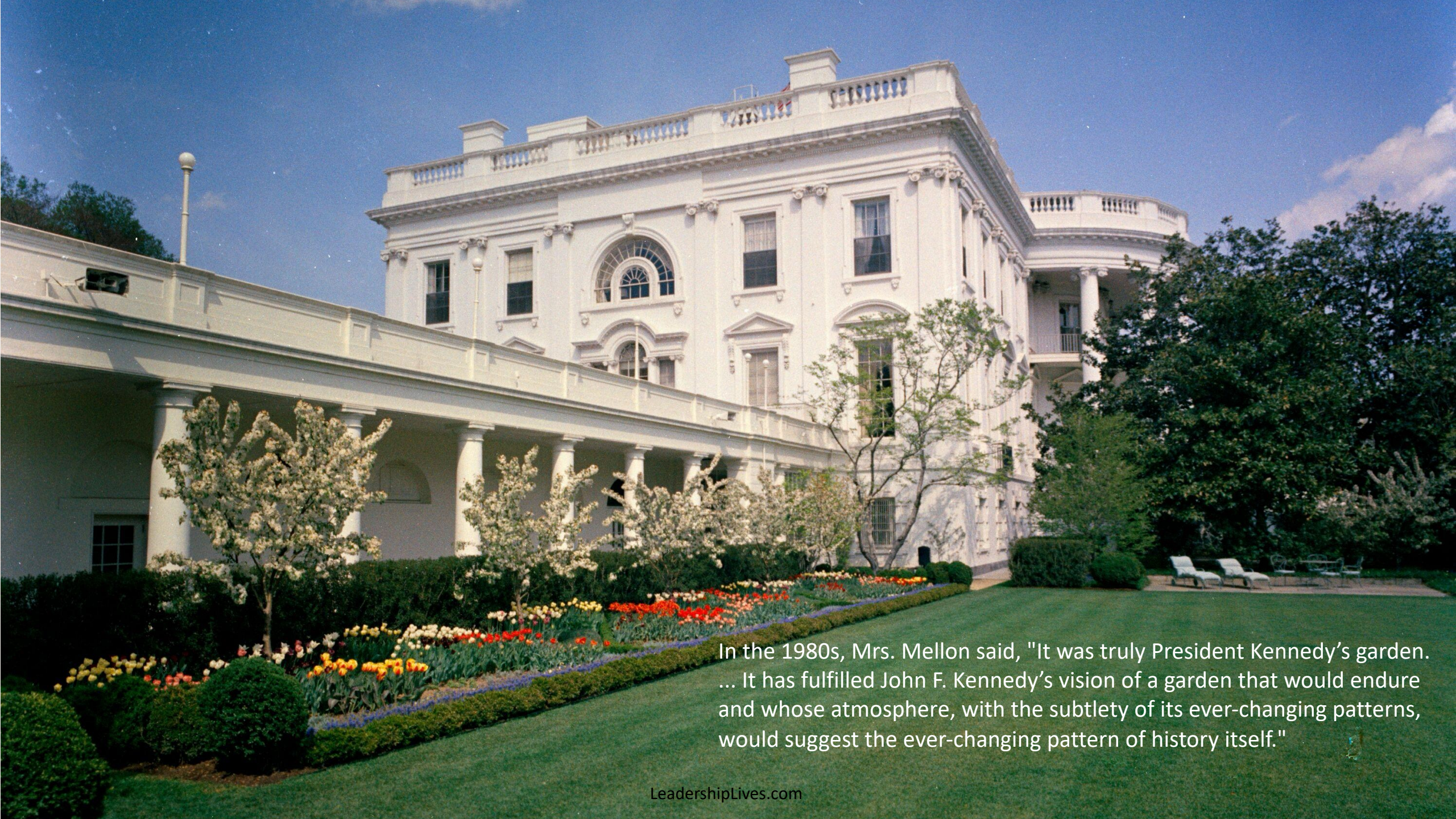




April 24, 1963



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."



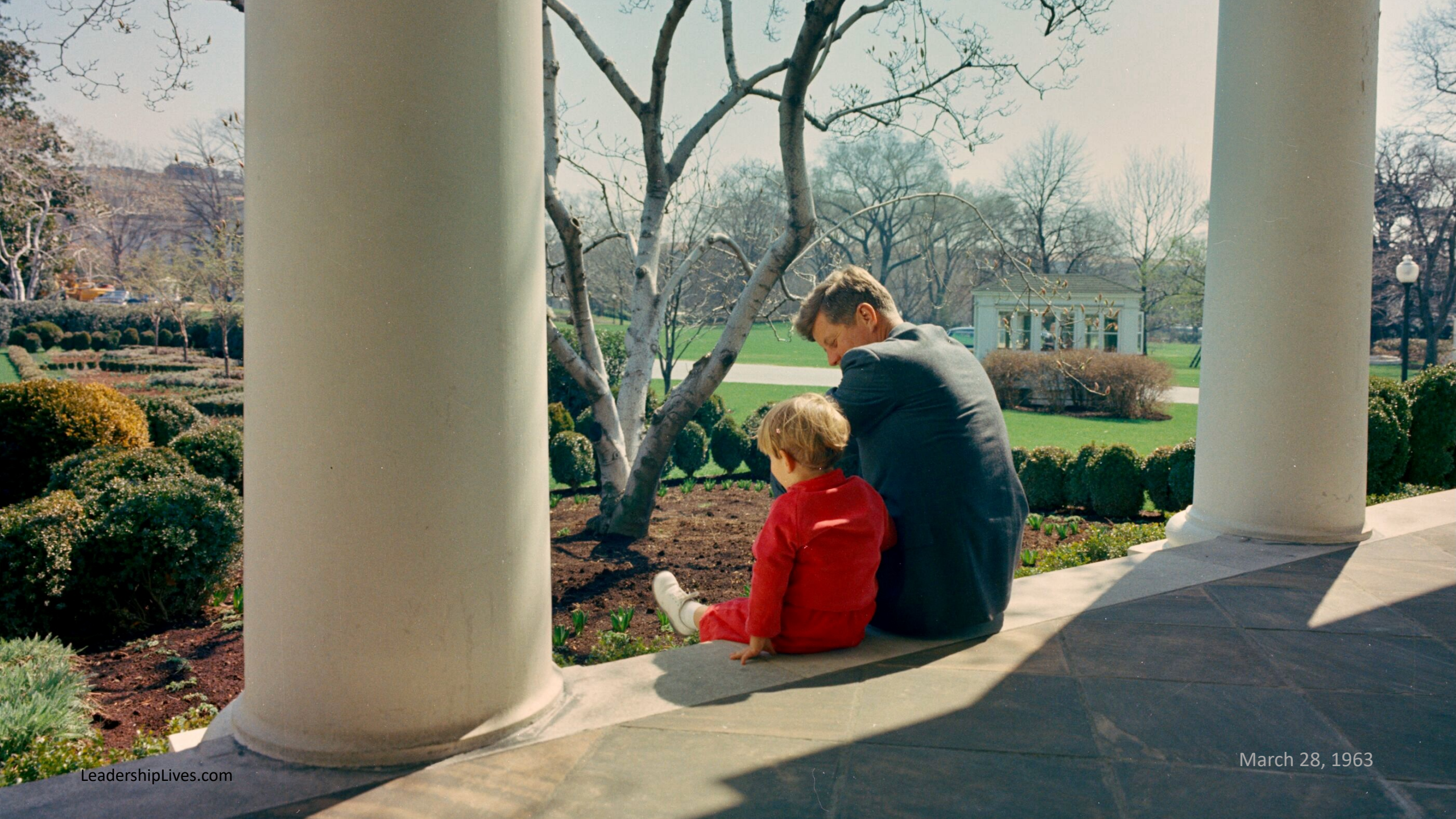
The Rose Garden, Spring 2015



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



March 17, 2020



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THE WHITE HOUSE ROSE GARDEN – IMAGE CREDITS

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Trees Blooming in the Rose Garden, March 17, 2020. The White House from Washington, DC, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Washington City, 1821 flanked by the second set of office buildings. Anne-Marguerite Hyde de Neuville, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

The President's House, 1831. colorized. Scan by NYPL, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

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Theodore Roosevelt and Family, 1903. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons, colorized.

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Southwest garden, which replaced the West Colonial garden, colorized by ChatGPT. Harris & Ewing, photographer. (1914) White House, Washington D.C. District of Columbia Washington D.C. United States, 1914. [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016865465/>.

Truman Speaking to Foreign Journalists, May 3, 1951. National Park Service. Public Domain, colorized.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower is shown in this photograph in the White House Rose Garden with the 31 members of the first meeting of the board of trustees of the Eisenhower Exchange. Public Domain, colorized.

Presentation of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Distinguished Service Medal to astronaut Commander Alan B. Shepard, Jr., Robert Knudsen. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

Palace of Versailles. Wandernder Weltreisender, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Andrew Jackson's Southern Magnolia. Robert Knudsen. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston.

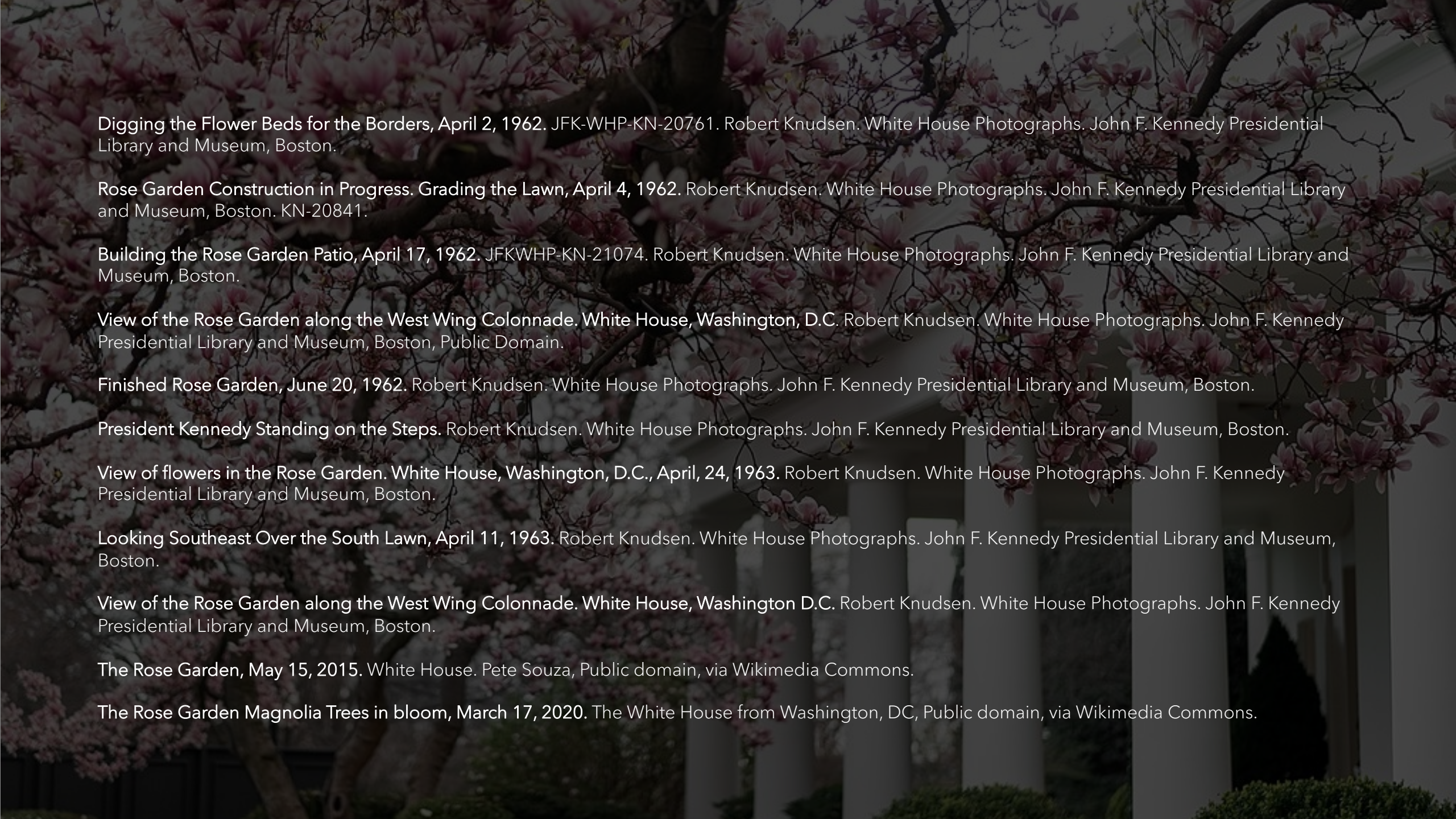
JFK and Bunny Mellon at Cape Cod. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

President John F. Kennedy greets the first group of Peace Corps Volunteers going to Tanganyika and Ghana, in the White House Rose Garden. Peace Corps. Color image, August 28, 1961. Official photographer of the US government. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Frick Museum. Jim Henderson, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Kenilworth Park and Aquatic Gardens. Carol M. Highsmith, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Planting the Saucer Magnolia in the Northwest Corner. Construction work in progress in the Rose Garden, White House, Washington, D.C., March 30, 1962. Robert Knudsen. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston.



Digging the Flower Beds for the Borders, April 2, 1962. JFK-WHP-KN-20761. Robert Knudsen. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston.

Rose Garden Construction in Progress. Grading the Lawn, April 4, 1962. Robert Knudsen. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston. KN-20841.

Building the Rose Garden Patio, April 17, 1962. JFKWHP-KN-21074. Robert Knudsen. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston.

View of the Rose Garden along the West Wing Colonnade. White House, Washington, D.C. Robert Knudsen. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Public Domain.

Finished Rose Garden, June 20, 1962. Robert Knudsen. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston.

President Kennedy Standing on the Steps. Robert Knudsen. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston.

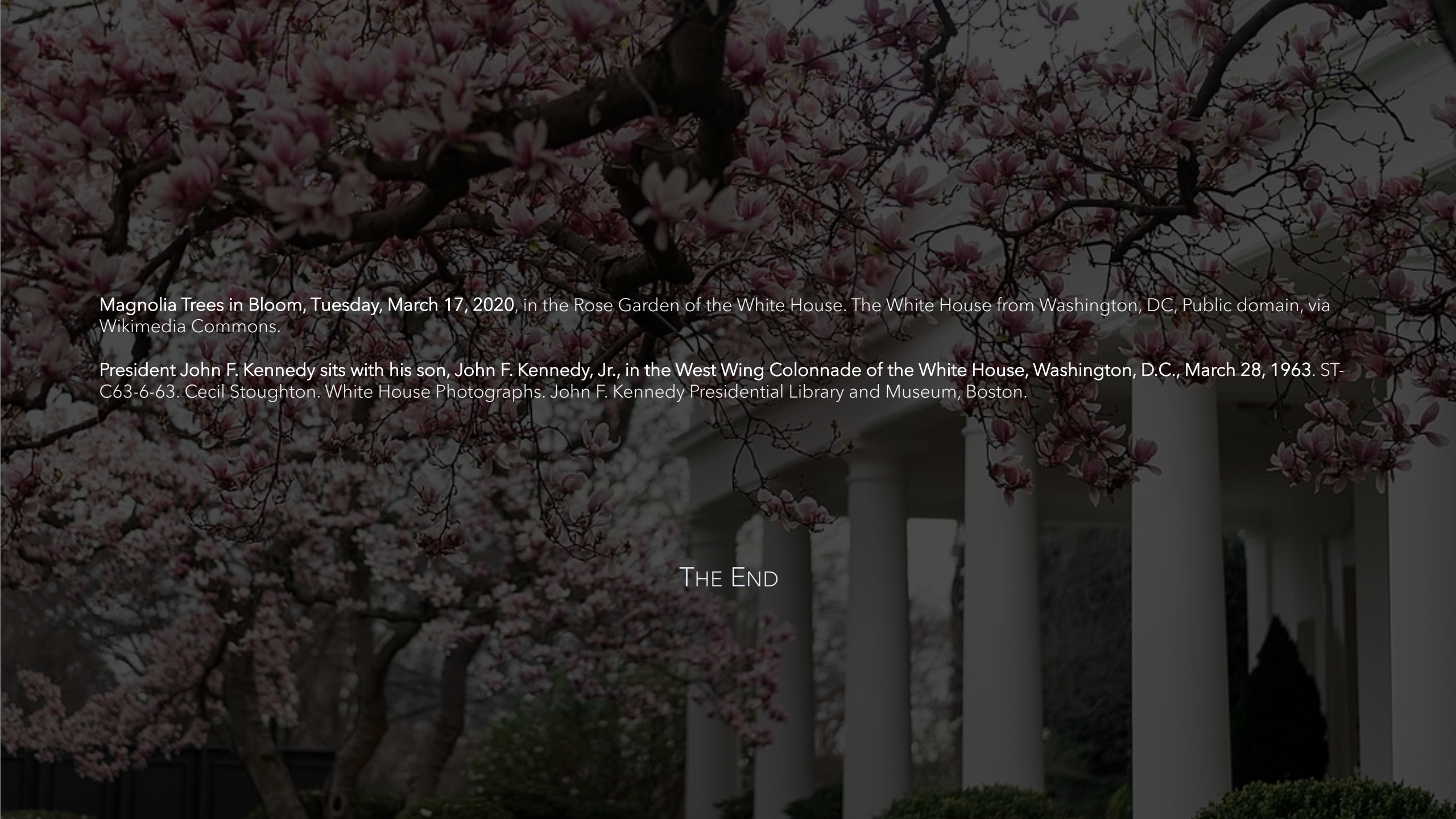
View of flowers in the Rose Garden. White House, Washington, D.C., April, 24, 1963. Robert Knudsen. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston.

Looking Southeast Over the South Lawn, April 11, 1963. Robert Knudsen. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston.

View of the Rose Garden along the West Wing Colonnade. White House, Washington D.C. Robert Knudsen. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston.

The Rose Garden, May 15, 2015. White House. Pete Souza, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

The Rose Garden Magnolia Trees in bloom, March 17, 2020. The White House from Washington, DC, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



Magnolia Trees in Bloom, Tuesday, March 17, 2020, in the Rose Garden of the White House. The White House from Washington, DC, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

President John F. Kennedy sits with his son, John F. Kennedy, Jr., in the West Wing Colonnade of the White House, Washington, D.C., March 28, 1963. ST-C63-6-63. Cecil Stoughton. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston.

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