

Easter Egg Rolls: A history of the somewhat odd practice

By Alex McKay

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When I was a kid, Easter meant a sundress and a matching hat (the hat being the most important part). Being a little country mouse at my grandparents' house in Baker, West Virginia (population 1,262) *and* an only child meant there was no Egg Roll. There was only *me*, and rolling an egg across my grandfather's prized gardens would not have ended well for me or the peonies.

Perhaps that is why I get so excited about Morven Park's ***Easter at the Park***. Our annual event, held in the Park's formal gardens and the adjacent Croquet Lawn, is a lot less solitary. Park staff and volunteers will arrive early to hide over 3,000 eggs filled with assorted candies, stickers, and sundries. The day culminates with an egg roll down the front lawn of the iconic Morven Park mansion.

In preparation for this year's festivities, I decided to do a little research on the origins of our very popular, but somewhat odd, practice of rolling eggs down a hill.

The history of the "egg hunt" is a debate that I am not sure I want to be a part of. (Don't believe me? Google it. The history of egg hunting is a scary part of the internet.) The Egg Roll, on the other hand, is a very American tradition that I am willing to dip my toe into.

While Nicolas Cage may have used the White House Easter Egg Roll as a mere cover to go through the President's desk in *National Treasure II*, the actual event is one of America's most beloved annual festivities.

Most people believe that First Lady Dolly Madison hosted the first egg roll. Others think the tradition began with informal egg rolls during the Lincoln administration. Either way, by the 1870's, Washingtonians from all social levels celebrated Easter Monday on the Capitol Grounds.

Concern for the landscape forced Congress to pass the "Turf Protection Law" in 1876, banning the rolling of eggs on the Capitol lawn. After being shooed away by the Capitol Police in 1878, children wandered up to the White House to see if President Rutherford B. Hayes would permit them to use the low hills on the South Lawn of the White House. By 1880, the Evening Star reported that the event had taken "absolute possession of the grounds south of the White House."

President Grover Cleveland became the first president to greet young egg rollers when they marched into the East Room and asked for an audience with the leader of the free world. Though the children destroyed the East Room carpet with hard boiled eggs and broken shells, President Cleveland was charmed and continued to grant the egg rollers free range of the house and grounds during both of his administrations.

The event evolved and changed over the years and with each new president in the White House. In 1889, President Benjamin Harrison invited the United States' Marine Corps Band to play at the event, an annual tradition that continues today. The band, led by John Philip Sousa himself, honored the occasion in 1929 by playing "Easter Monday on the White House Lawn" for the first time.

In 1933, Eleanor Roosevelt greeted guests both on the White House Lawn and on the radio, allowing kids across the country to feel as if they were part of the event.

In 1974, Pat Nixon added both the Egg Roll Race (using spoons borrowed from the White House kitchen) and the White House Easter Bunny. The President and Mrs. Reagan introduced the wooden eggs, making them the official keepsakes of the day. Arguably, the most well-known Easter Bunny was Sean Spicer. He took on the role while serving as a media and public affairs representative under George W. Bush. Before that, the most noteworthy public figure to wear the bunny suit was the wife of President Ronald Reagan's Attorney General, Edwin Meese III. Ursula Meese played the bunny for six seasons.

If you were thinking of attending this year's Easter event at the White House, you are out of luck as the public lottery for tickets has closed. The good news is that there are still a few tickets left for Morven Park's *Easter in the Park*. [Get your tickets soon](#) – this event always sells out!

See you at the Park!

Sources:

The White House Historic Association: <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/>

The White House Archives for the Clinton and Bush Administrations:

<https://clintonwhitehouse2.archives.gov/WH/glimpse/Easter/index.html> and <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/easter/history.html>

CNN: <https://www.cnn.com/2017/03/03/politics/sean-spicer-easter-bunny/index.html>