

I Painted the White House White

This Italian immigrant had an American dream; here's how he made it come true **By DEWEY D'AGOSTINO**



THIS FRIDAY, Jan. 20, President-Elect Kennedy and his family move into the White House. Every four years the No. 1 house in the nation is painted for the new President—and the 182 million Americans who look on it as partly their home, too.

Frankly, I'm very proud that I had the honor to paint the White House this time. As a painting contractor, I've dreamed about it for 20 years.

But I had a big surprise when I first started on the outside of the White House in November. I found out that it wasn't really white! Only the trim and columns were white. The rest was sort of a sand or limestone color.

So what did I do to get a true white color for the White House? I prepared a special mixture. I can't tell you what—that's my trade secret.

All I know is that even before the job was done, people around Washington started calling me "The Man Who Made the White House White."

The greatest compliment I got came from President Eisenhower himself. On Nov. 10, as he was leaving in his helicopter from the south lawn, he said to the crowd there, "Gee, the building really looks white now. It never looked this white before." Nineteen days later, he said to one of my painters, "Your firm is doing an excellent job. I don't want the painters to have any more interruptions. Don't stop on my account!"

I met President Eisenhower at the 1956 Inaugural Ball. I was one of four persons attending from Mercer County, N.J. When I saw the President, I said to him, "I'm going to paint your house some day." All that I remember him replying was "Thank you, thank you," and moving on.

Last May, when I was visiting Washington, I heard that the White House was going to be painted. I talked to my representative, Frank Thompson, Jr., to learn the requirements, then I went home to Trenton to prepare a bid. It came to \$23,800—\$177 below my nearest competitor—and \$1,200 less than the White House allotment.

Before I was awarded the contract, I had estimated 500 to 550 gallons of paint for the outside walls, the three police booths, and the black iron fence. Actually, I used 750 gallons because I did four or five coats in some places even though specifications called for only two. I kept throwing in such extras as using a torch to get off bad paint. After all, this job wasn't just for the money.

The contract allowed me 60 days, but I was so anxious to break all records that I finished it in 26. I was supposed to have 14 men, but I used 21.

I brought my foreman and three painters down from Trenton but hired the rest in Washington. Naturally, all the men had to be cleared for security. But I was very fussy with the fellows the union sent over. I insisted that every painter have an extra pair of clean overalls, and I supplied sterilized rags and ash trays. I sent one painter home because he needed a shave, haircut, and bath.

RIGHT AFTER John Kennedy was elected President, I got dozens of letters and wires asking me if I was going to paint the White House green. I thought this was in bad taste. That's not the way to welcome a new President. I got so mad I threw them in the wastebasket. If I had my way, though, I'd paint the lampposts and the canopy on the west wing green. Then they'd blend in better with the lawns and trees.

Now that the outside job is done, I'm going to offer to paint the new First Lady's bedroom, and Caroline's and young John's nursery. I would

charge \$1 each. I feel this is little enough to do for a country that has been so good to me—an immigrant born in Rome, Italy, 56 years ago who came to America in 1920.

The White House staff was very nice to work with. They told me that the White House is the oldest building in Washington. It was begun in 1792 and first occupied in 1800 while still unfinished. I heard it was designed by an Irishman in 1792 on a site recommended by a Frenchman, burned by the British in 1814—and now painted by an Italian immigrant in 1960. They said that President Theodore Roosevelt suggested to Congress that "White House" should be the official designation, and it was adopted.

But what I remember most is a prayer by John Adams, our second President and the first to live in the White House.

"I pray Heaven," he wrote, "to bestow the best of blessings on all who shall inhabit this house and may none but wise and honest men do so."

Dewey D'Agostino, here on the South Terrace of the White House, completed painting in a record 26 days.



COVER:

That's not the Masked Marvel with the pert young lady on our cover. He's a ski enthusiast caught by photographer Arthur Schatz wearing the latest in snow headgear. For more on this, see "Wild but Warm" (p. 15).

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