

As the Bidens pack up, a look at their mark on the vice president's residence

By **Jura Koncius** January 11

Jill Biden's house is bursting with boxes, packing tape and crates.

Like five vice presidential families before them, Joe and Jill Biden are moving out of the Victorian house at 1 Observatory Circle in Northwest, the official vice-presidential residence, to make way for a new family. Vice President-elect Mike Pence and his wife, Karen, are scheduled to move in Jan. 20.

"It's like a typical move of any family," Jill Biden said over the phone this week as artworks were carefully being crated up. "This morning I was trying to find something to wear, and I opened a drawer and forgot I had already packed everything in it."

Except there is nothing typical about this family or this 1893 house, which was designated by Congress as the official residence of the vice president in 1974. As vice president and second lady, the Bidens created a colorful, comfortable, art-filled setting on the woodsy Naval Observatory grounds, a backdrop for meetings and receptions with lawmakers, foreign leaders, schoolchildren and military families.

Joe Biden and Jill Biden brought their personality and a bit of the feel of the family's Delaware home to this high-profile house. "The blue color on the dining room wall is the same color we have in our dining room at home," Jill Biden said. Art on loan from the National Gallery and other sources, plus pieces from many Delaware artists, hung throughout the house. "I wanted it to feel warm and comfortable," she said. "I didn't want people to walk through the front door and feel like they can't sit on the sofa."

Back in 2009, the Bidens enlisted New York designer [Victoria Hagan](#) to help them settle in and personalize the rooms, using furniture that was already there, pieces from the residence's official collection and a redecorating budget from private funds provided by the Vice President's Residence Foundation. Hagan, who donated her

design services, used American fabric vendors for the upholstery and window treatments.

“It wasn’t necessarily about the decorating, it was about helping them feel comfortable and putting the bits and pieces together so they could entertain in a public, formal way, as well as have their own private moments,” Hagan said. “It’s a very welcoming home and not pretentious.”

Dick and Lynne Cheney and their interior designer, Frank Babb Randolph, had used a neutral color scheme of creams and celadons. The Bidens chose a more vibrant backdrop on the main floor for the large foyer, dining room, living room, library and sunroom. “We chose a palette that reflected them: a strong sapphire blue in the dining room, deep forest green in the library and daffodil yellow in the living room,” Hagan said. In the library, where the vice president held many meetings, striped wallpaper set off shelves of books and framed photos, a crackled leather sofa and club chairs upholstered in green plaid flannel. Upstairs, Hagan worked on the second-floor master bedroom suite and the four bedrooms on the third floor, which would often be the site of grandchildren’s sleepovers.

Over the eight years, the rooms were tweaked and refreshed. One of Hagan’s latest projects was a newly remodeled apple-green sunroom, which sparkles with light and has views of the garden. It’s the room the Bidens love the most. “I love to go in that room and sit on the couch and grade papers or have meetings,” Jill Biden said. “Often they put a round table in there and we would have dinner or lunch.” This is where the Bidens hosted the Pences for a pan-seared sea bass lunch soon after the election, after giving them a house tour.

Biden said she barely remembers the details of her own 2008 tour with the Cheneys. “There is so much going on in your life that you come in and just have a quick visit. Once we left, we said, ‘Gosh, how many bedrooms does this house have?’ I think that Karen Pence probably had the same reaction. She has called me a couple of times for more details.”

The house is full of reminders of previous vice presidential occupants. You can find studio pottery by Joan Mondale; the Mondales were the first vice presidential family to live in the house. The heated pool and pool house were built during the Quayle years. The Gores planted native and indigenous trees and shrubs. The Cheneys revamped the galley kitchen upstairs. “Each person has added something to make the home better for the next family,” Biden said.

The Bidens will be leaving a number of things behind, including 75 place settings of blue, white and gold Lenox china featuring the vice-presidential seal and a lattice pattern. Carlos Elizondo, the Bidens’ social secretary and residence manager, helped them come up with the perfect antique English cabinet to hold it. Outdoors, there’s a tall tree where Joe Biden surprised his wife with a message one year: a plaque that says “Joe Loves Jill, Valentine’s Day 2010.”

They are also proud of the Family Heritage Garden of the Vice President they created in 2012, just off the front

lawn. The idea came to Jill Biden when she saw the White House Children's Garden, which commemorates presidential children and grandchildren. "I thought, What a good idea to preserve a historic sense for our residence," she says. She and Elizondo came up with a design for a garden with a fountain in the middle. They contacted each family, compiled the list of names and even included pets.

The Bidens' pet stone bears the name of their late cat Daisy and German shepherd Champ, who will be moving to Delaware with them next week.

"Of all of us, Champ is going to have the hardest time leaving this place," Jill Biden said. "Champ has a built-in family here 24 hours a day with all the staff and security guards that keep little dog biscuits on hand for him."

Although they will mainly live in Delaware now, Biden said, they will rent a house in Washington, as she will continue to teach as a full-time English professor at Northern Virginia Community College, and they want to be able to visit often with their grandchildren here.

What will she miss? "I will miss the serenity of this place," Biden said. She thinks about the many times that she and her husband sat in the cool and quiet of tall trees and flowers. "When times get tough, and there were some pretty tough times for the Bidens, you could sit outside and reflect," she says. "It was very healing."

The house and grounds were always a respite from the fast pace of Washington life. "Which is one thing the Pences will probably be surprised at," Biden says, "how truly hectic life is here each and every day."

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