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The acquisition of land for the mansion cost $9,500 in 1912. The building and materials totaled $62,000, which would equate to several million of today’s dollars, of which some $20,000 was appropriated for furnishings and finishes. Nearly 80 feet wide and 200 feet long, the 25-room mansion is constructed of solid brick, faced with Bowling Green limestone to complement the Capitol building.

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The architectural design of the Governor's Mansion was a product of its time — the post Civil War Gilded Age of "conspicuous consumption." The building reflects the grand spirit of people who had tremendous resources and had not yet experienced a severe economic depression or World Wars. Great care was spent on the design and craftsmanship of every aspect of the Governor's Mansion. The attention to exquisite decorative details executed in high-quality craftsmanship. Historians have speculated that the beginning of World War I interrupted the original construction before the interior and gardens could be completed. The mansion is elegantly proportioned with a front portico that includes four pairs of fluted Ionic columns rising over 20 feet. A stone balustrade and terrace make an impressive entrance to the historic building. The Kentucky Governor's Executive Mansion was listed on the National Register of the Historic Places in 1972. The interior of the mansion reflects the eclectic interest in French Neo-Classicism typical of the Beaux-Arts period. The formal reception rooms all open off of gracious cross hallways. The state dining room, with a large semicircular bay and tall windows, provides distinguished guests a wonderful view. Most light fixtures and decorative features, such as the ornamental plaster and mantels, are original to the building. From the center cross-hallway, double stairways wind gracefully upward to the second floor private living quarters. The Governor's Mansion is both, a private home and a public building. It serves as the center of the first family's ceremonial, social, and political activities and is the proud possession of every Kentuckian. Some of Kentucky's most well known and celebrated names in the arts and entertainment have performed in, or visited the Mansion as well. For several years the very popular In Performance at the Governor's Mansion was recorded for KET public television in the Mansion's Ballroom, showcasing the talents of artists such as Rosemary Clooney, Jean Ritchie, Lionel Hampton and the Governor's School for the Arts among others. The Executive Mansion contains many furnishings and works of art which are of museum quality from previous administrations. Several items of furniture and decorative arts have a long association with the mansion. These include the state dining room table and chairs from the first A.B. (“Happy”) Chandler administration, the Italian bombé chest in the Sun Parlor, and the large pier mirrors on the stair landing. The late 19th century mirrors were moved from the Old Governor's Mansion and may be among the oldest items on display. The silver regency card-tables in the state dining room are associated with the Commonwealth's first governor, Isaac Shelby. The exquisite and regal USS Kentucky Battleship silver pieces in the State Dining Room and Family Dining Room are on loan from the Kentucky Historical Society. This is a small portion of the entire set on permanent display at the Kentucky History Center located in downtown Frankfort.

By the 1980s, two world wars, the Great Depression and limited state funding had not been kind to the graceful mansion over the years, and action was desperately needed to preserve it from an uncertain fate. Between 1980 and 1983, the non-profit Save the Mansion Foundation, headed by then First Lady Phyllis George Brown, raised the funds necessary to return the Kentucky chief executive's residence from its perilous state to its original grandeur. The non-profit foundation also funded purchases of museum quality pieces of fine early 18th century Louis XVI French furniture, colorful and rare 19th century Japanese porcelain, and included a formal front garden complete with fountains based on the original unrelied 1913 drawings of the mansion grounds. Several noted historians were involved in the project, including historic interior specialist William Seale. The mansion is known as "the people's house"—perhaps for traditions such as these... When a new first family moves into the Governor's Mansion, one of the first signs of community they experience is a knock on the door and a hearty welcome from the town's folk. Tradition suggests the welcoming party bring a silver tray of food to present to the newest members of the community as a welcoming gift. This happens even before the newly elected Governor is ceremonially sworn in. There are other traditions related to the Governorship and the Governor's Mansion. It is customary for the outgoing Governor to invite the Governor-elect and his family to dinner at the Mansion shortly after the election and during the time of transition. There is also the tradition of the first spouses. The custom has the First Lady of the previous Governor leave for the spouse of the incoming Governor, a platter of baked ham with beaten biscuits and a white cake on the dining room table. If the walls of the Governor's Mansion could talk, we would undoubtedly hear many exciting stories - stories that tell of family celebrations and personal heartaches, political deals that resulted in triumphant victories and bitter losses and, of course, plenty of the kind of gossip that seems to thrive in Frankfort.
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