

## ***What Happened to Carter's White House Solar Panels? They Lived On.***

The panels, removed under Ronald Reagan, found new homes from Maine to China. And their legacy still reverberates.



*President Jimmy Carter at a dedication ceremony for the White House solar array on June 20, 1979. (Bill Fitz-Patrick/Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum/NARA)*

By [Austyn Gaffney](#)

It was a novel idea at the time, but one that made sense: In 1979, President Jimmy Carter had 32 solar panels installed on the roof of the White House.

They were removed just seven years later, under President Ronald Reagan. But that wasn't the end of their story. They were picked up at a bargain price by a small college in Maine, where they continued to generate power for years, and eventually ended up scattered around the United States and China.

When the panels were first set up on the roof of the West Wing, energy independence was a big issue in America. An oil embargo imposed by Arab countries in 1973, in part to pressure the United States over its support for Israel in a brief war that year, had sent shock waves through the American economy.

“This dependence on foreign sources of oil is of great concern to all of us,” Mr. Carter said at an event to introduce the solar array. “No one can ever embargo the sun or interrupt its delivery to us.”

It was a decade before the first congressional hearing on climate change. “There’s no doubt Jimmy Carter was well ahead of his time,” said Ernest Moniz, the energy secretary under President Barack Obama and now chief executive of Energy Futures Initiative, a nonprofit group focused on renewable energy.

In 1986, the Reagan administration had the panels removed during work on the White House roof. They were never reinstalled.

The rejected panels, which had been used to heat water in the White House, were shipped to the suburbs of Washington, where they languished in a Virginia warehouse for years. Then, in 1991, Peter Marbach, a director at Unity College in Maine, was trying to figure out how to dig the school out of a financial hole. He spotted a picture of the panels in a magazine and decided he wanted to bring them back to life.

“It was a combination of utter disbelief and anger that Reagan had taken them down, and a simultaneous crazy ‘lightbulb’ idea to get the panels and draw attention to Unity’s mission as an environmental college,” said Mr. Marbach, who is now a landscape photographer based in Oregon.

He wrote a letter to Mr. Carter to ask for his blessing. The former president promptly responded with a handwritten note saying it would please him very much to see the panels put to use again.



*The 1979 dedication ceremony. (Billy Shaddix/Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum/NARA)*

Within six weeks, Mr. Marbach had removed the seats from a blue bus used by Unity's soccer team and driven down to Virginia. He rode a golf cart through a building that reminded him of the warehouse scene in "Raiders of the Lost Ark." He found the panels piled haphazardly in a corner among a jumble of crates and surplus furniture. Some were broken. But Mr. Marbach loaded all the ostracized panels into the bus and brought them home to Maine.

Unity College paid the United States government an administrative fee of \$500 for the panels, which [cost about \\$28,000](#) when first installed.

Half ended up on the roof of the Unity College cafeteria, heating water. The other half, which didn't fit on the building, were stored in a former chicken barn and used for spare parts.

While acquiring the panels was "more symbolic," Mr. Marbach said, they did help the college save money. They [remained in place until 2010](#), after they'd reached their end of lives.

Since then, at least six have continued on their journey beyond Maine.

In 2007, one to two panels were driven in the back of a pickup truck from Unity College down to the Carter Library in Atlanta by a team of documentarians making a film on Mr. Carter's solar legacy called "A Road Not Taken."

In 2009, [another was donated](#) to the National Museum of American History in Washington. A Smithsonian spokeswoman said that panel remains on display today.

The Solar Science and Technology Museum in Dezhou, China, acquired another panel in 2010. In the same year, [another was donated](#) to the Solar Energy Industries Association. Others are held by NRG Systems, Inc., a clean energy manufacturer in Vermont, by the U.S. Department of Energy, with the rest still held by Unity College, which has changed its name to Unity Environmental University.

Mr. Carter seemed to know that the transition to clean energy would face obstacles.

"A generation from now, this solar heater can either be a curiosity, a museum piece, an example of a road not taken or it can be just a small part of one of the greatest and most exciting adventures ever undertaken by the American people," he said in 1979.

But even though the panels didn't last long at the White House, Mr. Carter's decision to support renewable energy helped position the United States for the [clean power boom currently underway](#), experts said.

“It was fundamental to the development and the growth of the use of solar energy in the U.S.,” said Frederick Morse, a senior Energy Department official under Mr. Carter and Mr. Reagan and now chief executive of SolStor Energy, a solar development company.

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[Austyn Gaffney](#) is a reporter covering climate and a member of the 2024-25 [Times Fellowship](#) class, a program for journalists early in their careers. [More about Austyn Gaffney](#)

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