



THE WHITE HOUSE  
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## WHITE HOUSE HISTORY | *Timelines : White House Workers*

### 1790s | *The Small Staff of the Adams White House Includes No Slaves*

By the time John and Abigail Adams became the first residents of the White House in November 1800, they had employed a steward, John Briesler, for nearly two decades. As the 1790s gave way to the 1800s, Briesler and his wife, Esther, formed the core staff of the White House.

Including the Brieslers, there were only four servants. Mrs. Adams calculated that she could have easily used thirty to run the “castle,” but the government did not pay for the president’s domestic help: John Adams was responsible for the workers’ wages. And compared to George Washington’s uniformed servants at the Presidential residence in Philadelphia, the Adams staff appeared neither adequate nor elegant.<sup>1</sup>

Washington had brought slaves to Philadelphia from Mount Vernon, his Virginia home.<sup>2</sup> President Adams and Mrs. Adams were opposed to slavery. John Adams wrote in 1801, “[M]y opinion against it has always been known... [N]ever in my life did I own a slave.”<sup>3</sup> A letter from Abigail Adams to her husband, written in 1776, gives her views: “I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be Equally Strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> William Seale, *The President’s House* (Washington: The White House Historical Association, 1986), 86.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from John Adams to George Churchman and Jacob Lindley, January 24, 1801, in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1854), vol. IX, 92-93.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March - 5 April 1776 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society.

Read more: Dennis J. Pogue, “George Washington and the Politics of Slavery,” *Historic Alexandria Quarterly* (Spring/Summer 2003): 1–10.



## 1800s | *Dumbwaiters in Place of Servants*

When Thomas Jefferson entertained informally, he ordered five small serving stands to be placed at strategic points around the room. These “dumbwaiters” were small tables, equipped with shelves placed at varying heights. Some might hold salads and wine; others would accommodate cutlery and serving utensils. Servants brought in hot food, but did not remain in the room during the meal. Conversation could flow freely, without the possibility that workers might overhear sensitive information and repeat it outside the White House.<sup>1</sup>

Margaret Bayard Smith visited both the White House and Jefferson’s Virginia home, Monticello, during the first decade of the 19th century. She writes that the dumbwaiter “contained everything necessary for the progress of the dinner from beginning to end, so as to make the attendance of servants entirely unnecessary.”<sup>2</sup>

Smith also describes an apparatus that Jefferson installed at both Monticello and in the White House:

“A set of shelves were so contrived in the wall, that on touching a spring they turned into the room loaded with the dishes placed on them by the servants, . . . and by the same process the removed dishes were conveyed out of the room.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> William Seale, *The President’s House* (Washington: White House Historical Association, 1986), 104-105; Margaret Bayard Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society, Portrayed by the Family Letters of Mrs. Samuel Harrison Smith (Margaret Bayard)*, From the Collection of Her Grandson, J. Henley Smith, ed. Gaillard Hunt (New York: Scribner, 1906), 388.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 387.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Read more: Robert L. Self and Susan R. Stein, “The Collaboration of Thomas Jefferson and John Hemings: Furniture Attributed to the Monticello Joinery,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 33 (1998): 231–248. Stuart D. Hobbs, “The Adena Dumbwaiters: A Glimpse into Jefferson’s Executive Mansion?” *White House History* 17 (2006): 44–49.

## 1810s | *Benjamin Latrobe expresses his indignation to Dolley Madison about her servants*

Benjamin Henry Latrobe, Architect of the Capitol and Surveyor of Public Buildings under Jefferson, had advised the Madisons about changes to the White House even before they arrived in 1809.<sup>1</sup> He continued to consult with Mrs. Madison about her household until about 1813.<sup>2</sup>

Latrobe once visited the White House in Mrs. Madison’s absence, to make sure that the curtains had been laundered. He discovered that they had not, and demanded to know why. He wrote to Mrs. Madison that a housekeeper, Mrs. Swiney, “told me, that on attempting to obey me she was informed, that you are so displeased with my conduct . . . that you intended I should do nothing more for you. . . . As this information could only come from your servants, I ought to presume that it was false. . . . [It] would be an insult to you to suppose . . . that such intelligence would be conveyed to a man of character, . . . at second hand, by a servant.”<sup>3</sup>



**(con't)**

Dolley Madison replied, "I shall be strict in my examination of the servants, when I return, as I wish to know those, who have taken the liberty to mis-represent me."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> William Seale, *The President's House* (Washington: White House Historical Association, 1986), 119.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Henry Latrobe to Dolley Payne Todd Madison, 27 August 1813, in *The Dolley Madison Digital Edition*, ed. Holly C. Shulman. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Henry Latrobe to Dolley Payne Todd Madison, 8 September 1809, in *The Dolley Madison Digital Edition*, ed. Holly C. Shulman. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Dolley Payne Todd Madison to Benjamin Henry Latrobe, 12 September 1809, in *The Dolley Madison Digital Edition*, ed. Holly C. Shulman. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004.

### **1820s** | *The President and his steward meet with a calamity*

John Quincy Adams hired Antoine Michel Giusta as his valet after they met in Belgium in 1814. Giusta was a deserter from Napoleon's army. During the time John Quincy Adams and Louisa Catherine Adams were living in London, Giusta married Mrs. Adams's maid. Antoine and his wife had managed the Adams' households from the time the Adamses returned to the United States in 1817.<sup>1</sup>

The Adamses moved into the White House in March 1825. In June, Antoine Giusta, now the White House steward, accompanied the President on what was to have been a pleasant excursion on the Tiber Creek. Their canoe was not in good condition, however, and was soon half full of water. A northwest wind kicked up, and Adams and Giusta jumped overboard, losing hold of the canoe. They swam to the opposite shore. Giusta had already shed his clothes, but the President gave his own wet garments to Giusta, who went in search of help. Adams and Giusta each lost several items of clothing, as well as the canoe, but they returned to the White House unharmed.

John Quincy Adams recorded the day's adventures in his diary entry for June 13, 1825:

"I attempted to cross the river with Antoine in a small canoe, with a view to swim across it to come back. He took a boat in which we had crossed it last summer without accident. The boat was at the shore near Van Ness's poplars; but in crossing the Tiber to the point, my son John, who was with us, thought the boat dangerous, and, instead of going with us, went and undressed at the rock, to swim and meet us in midway of the river as we should be returning. I thought the boat safe enough, or rather persisted carelessly in going without paying due attention to its condition; gave my watch to my son; made a bundle of my coat and waist-coat to take in the boat with me; put off my shoes, and was paddled by Antoine, who had stripped himself entirely naked. Before we had got half across the river, the boat had leaked itself half full, and then we found there was nothing on board to scoop up the water and throw it over. Just at that critical moment a fresh breeze from the northwest blew down the river as from the nose of a bellows. In five minutes' time it made a little tempest, and set the boat to dancing till the river came in at the sides. ...



**(con't)**

... I jumped overboard, and Antoine did the same, and lost hold of the boat, which filled with water and drifted away. We were as near as possible to the middle of the river, and swam to the opposite shore. Antoine, who was naked, reached it with little difficulty. I had much more, and, while struggling for life and gasping for breath, had ample leisure to reflect upon my own indiscretion. My principal difficulty was in the loose sleeves of my shirt, which filled with water and hung like two fifty-six pound weights upon my arms. I had also my hat, which I soon gave, however, to Antoine. After reaching the shore, I took off my shirt and pantaloons, wrung them out, and gave them to Antoine to go and look out for our clothes, or for a person to send to the house for others, and for the carriage to come and fetch me. Soon after he had gone, my son John joined me, having swum wholly across the river, expecting to meet us returning with the boat. Antoine crossed the bridge, sent a man to my house for the carriage, made some search for the drifted boat and bundles, and found his own hat with his shirt and braces in it, and one of my shoes. He also brought over the bridge my son's clothes with my watch and umbrella, which I had left with him.

“While Antoine was gone, John and I were wading and swimming up and down on the other shore, or sitting naked basking on the bank at the margin of the river. John walked over the bridge home. The carriage came, and took me and Antoine home, half dressed. I lost an old summer coat, white waistcoat, two napkins, two white handkerchiefs, and one shoe. Antoine lost his watch, jacket, waistcoat, pantaloons, and shoes. The boat was also lost. By the mercy of God our lives were spared, and no injury befell our persons.” --The Diary of John Quincy Adams, 1794–1845, edited by Allan Nevins. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951: 348–359. Previously published as *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*, edited by Charles Francis Adams.

<sup>1</sup> William Seale, *The President's House* (Washington, D.C.: White House Historical Association, 1986), 166.

Notes on this text: Adams describes his waterlogged sleeves as “56-pound weights.” This is probably a reference to the 56-pound weights used in Celtic/Scottish athletic events that date to the 16th century.

### **1830s** | *A British traveler's observations*

Martin Van Buren was sometimes criticized for his kingly airs, but during his administration the White House was sparsely staffed. The 1840 census of Washington, D.C., indicates that only two or three white servants, and about five free “colored persons,” resided in the Executive Mansion, although others may have lived elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

The British writer James Silk Buckingham (1786–1855), a former Member of Parliament, toured the United States during the 1830s. His account of a White House reception in 1838 suggests that the President's House was not at all regal, and his recollections seem to confirm that, at least on the night of March 8, Van Buren had only a small contingent of aides: “there were neither guards without the gate or sentries within nor a single servant or attendant in livery anywhere visible,” Buckingham wrote.<sup>2</sup>

Buckingham found that the few servants he saw were polite and agreeable, even as they helped nearly 3,000 guests to their carriages at the end of the evening. He did not hear “any angry word . . . exchanged between the drivers and servants in attendance.”<sup>3</sup>



**(con't)**

*Read more of Buckingham's account:*

“On Thursday, the 8th of March, we had an opportunity of attending the first drawing-room held by the President since his accession to office. . . .

“ . . . The official residence of the President is a large and substantial mansion, on the scale of many of the country-seats of our English gentry, but greatly inferior in size and splendour to the country residences of most of our nobility. . . . The whole air of the mansion and its accompaniments, is that of unostentatious comfort, . . . and therefore well adapted to the simplicity and economy which is characteristic of the republican institutions of the country. . . .

“The President received his visitors standing, in the centre of a small oval room.

. . . The introductions were made by the City-marshal. . . . The President, Mr. Van Buren, is about 60 years of age, is a little below the middle stature, and of very bland and courteous manners; he was dressed in a plain suit of black; the marshal was habited also in a plain suit: and there were neither guards without the gate or sentries within nor a single servant or attendant in livery anywhere visible. . . .

“ . . . [W]hen the parties retired, which was between eleven and twelve o'clock, there was not half so much bustle in getting up the carriages, which were very numerous, as is exhibited at a comparatively small party in England; nor was any angry word, as far as we could discover, exchanged between the drivers and servants in attendance.”

—James Silk Buckingham, *America, Historical, Statistic, and Descriptive* (London & Paris: Fisher, son, & co., [1841]), 285–288.

1 William Seale, *The President's House* (Washington, D.C.: White House Historical Association, 1986), 212.

2 James Silk Buckingham, *America, Historical, Statistic, and Descriptive* (London & Paris: Fisher, son, & co., [1841]), 287.

3 *Ibid.*, 288.

### **1840s** | *Mrs. Polk receives unwelcome advice about her servants*

James K. Polk and Sarah Childress Polk lived in the White House from 1845 to 1849.

Anson and Fanny Nelson, admirers of Mrs. Polk, published this story many years later:

“An elderly lady, who had been present at [a White House] dinner-party, called on Mrs. Polk and said, ‘May I take the liberty [to] make a suggestion to you, Madame?’ The dining-table at the White House was adorned with a long mirror, . . . called the plateau, reflecting the light of the candelabra. . . . The table extended about a foot beyond the plateau, and this space was covered with a long napkin, which upon the removal of the dishes for dessert was rolled up by the servants, and formed a bulky bundle of linen. . . .



**(con't)**

... The lady's suggestion was that the long napkin should be cut into short pieces, for the convenience of the servants. 'I seldom noticed these things,' said Mrs. Polk, 'and did not know when the napkin was rolled up and taken off, being engaged in conversation; . . . ' [Mrs. Polk] said that the servants knew their duties, and she did not undertake the needless task of directing them."

—Anson and Fanny Nelson, *Memorials of Sarah Childress Polk, Wife of the Eleventh President of the United States* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph Co., 1892), 110–111.

### **1850s** | *Plumbing in the White House is not for the convenience of the servants*

References to the installation of plumbing fixtures began to appear in architectural plan books in the 1840s. Plumbing systems were already known in large hotels and grand mansions by 1833, when water was first piped into the White House. Sometime within the next year, a "bathing room" was established in the east wing. Interim upgrades appear to have been made during the 1840s, by which time a toilet was probably in place on the main floor.

In 1853, a permanent bath tub, with hot and cold running water, replaced the portable painted tin tubs in the President's quarters. But there were no toilets, showers, or tubs for the servants. "Running water, not yet considered a necessity, was available only where it could increase the servants' efficiency—in the pantry on the main floor, in the hall of the basement, in the upstairs hall. [. . .] Servants bathed in tin tubs in the west wing, hauling water in buckets from one of the pumps. Privies, one for men and one for women, opened off the covered passages that ran between the house and the wings."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> William Seale, *The President's House*, (Washington, D.C.: White House Historical Association, 1986), 197–200, 317.

Read more: Richard L. Bushman and Claudia L. Bushman, "The Early History of Cleanliness in America." *Journal of American History* 74 (March 1988): 1213–1238. Maureen Ogle, *All the Modern Conveniences: American Household Plumbing, 1840–1890*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. Maureen Ogle, "Domestic Reform and American Household Plumbing, 1840–1870," *Winterthur Portfolio* 28:1 (Spring 1993): 33–58. William Seale, *The President's House*. Washington: White House Historical Association, 1986.

### **1860s** | *An uneasy reaction to a White House memoir*

One of the most important 19th-century accounts of life in the White House was *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*. *Behind the Scenes* was the memoir of Elizabeth Keckley, dressmaker to Mary Todd Lincoln. Keckley (her name on some documents is spelled "Keckly") was an independent businesswoman, and not technically a member of the White House staff. Her memoir, published in 1868, gives many details of Mrs. Lincoln's personality and behavior. The book also contains the text of personal letters Keckley apparently received from Mrs. Lincoln.



## (con't)

Keckley herself seemed aware that her book might raise a public outcry. Her preface states, “If I have betrayed confidence in anything I have published, it has been to place Mrs. Lincoln in a better light before the world [. . .].”<sup>1</sup>

Behind the Scenes did meet with a great deal of criticism, and even a parody, whose title, Behind the Seams, lampooned Keckley’s profession as a seamstress. One reviewer called Keckley’s book “the latest, and decidedly weakest production of the sensational press.”<sup>2</sup>

In the 20th century, Behind the Scenes has been reprinted many times. Scholars have evaluated the narrative from various angles. Some believe it to represent the voice of a brave and talented woman who bought herself out of slavery and designed gowns for a fashionable first lady. Others believe that Keckley’s unscrupulous editor tricked her into lending him Mrs. Lincoln’s letters, which he then included in the book.

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*. 1868. (Oxford: Oxford University Press rpt., 1988), xiv.

<sup>2</sup> Review of Behind the Scenes, Putnam’s Magazine July 1868: 119, quoted in Carolyn Sorisio, “Unmasking the Genteel Performer: Elizabeth Keckley’s Behind the Scenes and the Politics of Public Wrath,” *African American Review* 34 (Spring 2000): 19.

Read more: Jennifer Fleischner, *Mrs Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly*. New York: Broadway Books, 2003. *Elizabeth Keckley, Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*. 1868. Reprinted with an introduction by James Olney: Oxford University Press, 1988. Carolyn Sorisio, “Unmasking the Genteel Performer: Elizabeth Keckley’s Behind the Scenes and the Politics of Public Wrath,” *African American Review* 34 (Spring 2000): 19–38.

## 1870s

The frigate *United States* left Port Mahone, Minorca, arriving in New York City on December 25, 1834. On board was an orphan boy about seven years of age, Valentino Melah, a native of Messina, Sicily. His fortunes would lead him into the hotel business in Manhattan (the Astor House), New Orleans (the St. Charles), Long Branch, New Jersey (the Stetson), and his own establishment in Yonkers, New York.

It was from the Stetson in Long Branch, where President Ulysses S. Grant had a resort home, that Melah came to Washington to be the White House steward.

Newspaperwoman Mary Clemmer Ames observed in 1871 that Melah was known around Washington as the “Silver Voiced Italian.” Ames credited him with the signature White House recipe for a smooth and “aristocratic” stew that lent untold elegance to the 29-course State dinners for which he was renowned.

But President Grant was a man of simple tastes and careful economy. By 1871 he had begun to ease Melah out. Valentino Melah left Washington for Yonkers and New York City, then Chicago, where he died in 1872.



**(con't)**

Read more: Mary Clemmer [Ames], *Ten Years in Washington* (Hartford: Worthington, 1874), 171–172. Also see Emily Edson Briggs, *The Olivia Letters, Being Some History Of Washington City For Forty Years As Told By The Letters Of A Newspaper Correspondent* (New York and Washington: Neale): 204–205.

### **1880s** | *Three Ushers Foil an Assassin*

Thomas F. Pendel was a White House doorman from the Abraham Lincoln administration to the turn of the 20th century. By the time Chester A. Arthur succeeded James A. Garfield in September 1881, Pendel had experienced the assassinations of both Lincoln and Garfield.

Even before Arthur moved into the White House, a man who “seemed perfectly rational” came to the Executive Mansion, asking to see the new President. Pendel sent him on his way, but two weeks later he returned.

Another usher, Mr. Allen, approached the chap, who handed Allen a note. Allen walked over to Pendel and said, “Tom, that man is crazy.”<sup>1</sup>

Chief Usher Eldon Dinsmore tried to persuade the visitor to come along with him to see President Arthur; but the fellow sensed he was being deceived, and he attempted to bolt.

“Dinsmore grabbed him by the collar,” recounts Pendel, “and as he did so, the man’s hand went down to his hip-pocket.” Allen went for the pocket “and drew out . . . a six-shooter, with every barrel loaded.” Pendel confiscated the gun. The “ugly customer” was packed off to police headquarters, and “that was the last we ever saw of him.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thomas F. Pendel, *Thirty-Six Years in the White House* (Washington: Neale Publishing, 1902), 123–124.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 124–125.

### **1890s** | *The Electric Career of Ike Hoover*

A group of physicians and surgeons meeting in Washington 1891 was treated to a reception at the White House on the evening of September 24. President Benjamin Harrison moved among the gathering, and “extended a hearty grasp to each of the doctors.”<sup>1</sup> The event included “lively airs” by the Marine band, and a chance to wander through the conservatory and reception rooms.

The guests also had the exciting opportunity to experience the latest technology in the White House. In a front page article on September 25, 1891, the *Washington Post* reported that as a special treat for the doctors, “The East Room . . . was darkened, and the electric lights were turned on. The brilliant effect was greatly admired.”<sup>2</sup>



**(con't)**

Back in May, the *Post* had remarked on the progress of electrifying the Executive Mansion. “The men are still at work putting in the electric lights, and when they are through,” the *Post* declared, “there will be nearly 1,000 incandescent lamps in the White House.”<sup>3</sup>

One of the young men on the installation job had reported for duty on May 6. He was nineteen-year-old Irwin H. Hoover, known as “Ike.” In his memoir, Hoover recalls,

“In due time I got down to the job of wiring and installing the electric appliances. The wonderful old chandeliers, built for gas, were converted into combination fixtures and the candle wall brackets were replaced by electric fixtures in the fashion of the time. . . . The Harrisons were all much interested in this new and unusual device that was being installed; so much so, that we got quite well acquainted with them.”<sup>4</sup>

Hoover had been told he would not be needed after May 15, but the next day he received an offer of full-time employment as White House Electrician. He hesitated to take the job because the salary was so low, but accepted the offer and became, “like the electric lights, a permanent fixture.”<sup>5</sup>

Ike Hoover spent 42 years working at the White House, advancing from electrician into the ushers’ ranks. During the Taft administration he was appointed Chief Usher, and he held this job until he died in 1933.

1 “Now Ready to Depart; . . . Brilliant Scene in the East Room of the White House,” *Washington Post*, September 25, 1891: 1.

2 *Ibid.*

3 “Again at the Capital,” *Washington Post*, May 16, 1891: 1.

4 Irwin Hood Hoover, *Forty-Two Years in the White House*, 1934. Westport: Greenwood (reprint,) 1974: 6.

5 *Ibid.*

### **1900s | Mrs. Jaffray Makes Some Changes**

Historian William Seale identifies a “strange hierarchy” that had developed among the White House domestic staff by the first decade of the 20th century. At mealtime, the “top-ranking men,” black and white, were seated together in a pantry, where they dined upon the President’s leftover food. Maids ate in the servants’ dining room with the footmen. This group was also racially mixed. Servants farther down the ladder, such as scrubwomen, sat at yet another table.<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth Jaffray joined the White House staff in 1909 under the Tafts. Hiring Mrs. Jaffray represented a major change in White House management: substituting a female housekeeper for a male steward. Mrs. Jaffray claims to have “immediately ordered that all the colored servants, regardless of rank or position, should eat at a single table and at a given hour.” When objections arose, Mrs. Jaffray threatened the complainers with dismissal.<sup>2</sup>



**(con't)**

The New York Times presented this racial separation of servant tables as a positive move, because “the same consideration is shown for one set of workers as for another. There are still two tables, the white and black being served separately, but the quality of the food is the same for both.”<sup>3</sup> The Times credited the first lady, not Mrs. Jaffray, with this solution. Although not acceptable today, Mrs. Taft and Mrs. Jaffray’s mandated “separate but equal” eating arrangements were viewed by the mainstream press as representing fair treatment of employees.

<sup>1</sup> William Seale, *The President’s House* (Washington, The White House Historical Association, 1986), 741–744.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Jaffray, *Secrets of the White House* (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1927), 19–20.

<sup>3</sup> “All Servants Equal by Mrs. Taft’s Rule,” *New York Times*, Oct. 11, 1909: 9.

Read more: Helen Herron Taft, *Recollections of Full Years*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1914: 349. Rene Bache, “A Busy Day with the Wife of the President,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 5, 1909, M6.

### **1910s | A White House Worker Remembers: President Wilson’s Grief and Joy, 1914–1915**

White House staff in the Woodrow Wilson administration experienced both the death of Wilson’s first wife, Ellen Axson Wilson, on August 6, 1914; and Wilson’s second marriage, sixteen months later. Chief Usher Ike Hoover recalls this sensitive period in the life of President Wilson, and its effect on the White House as a home and workplace.

After Ellen Wilson’s death, writes Hoover, “the place [became] strangely lonesome and different. Mrs. Wilson had . . . endeared herself to all.”<sup>1</sup> The President, comments Hoover, “accepted the inevitable with a grace and a charm that was inspiring to all about him.”<sup>2</sup>

Within a few months, Wilson began seeing a widow, Mrs. Edith Bolling Galt.<sup>3</sup> By the summer of 1915, notes Hoover, “Everyone about the place still had sweet memories of [the first Mrs. Wilson], and yet their sympathies were with the President in his new enterprise. . . .”<sup>4</sup>

The couple married on December 18, 1915. Ike Hoover records that Wilson had to arrange for the marriage license “in the regular way. . . . He had to pay his fee of a dollar out of his own pocket, and answer all questions just like the humblest citizen.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Irwin Hood Hoover, *Forty-two Years in the White House*, 1934 (Westport: Greenwood Reprint, 1974), 60.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Hoover, 62.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

Read More: William Seale, “The White House Staff,” in *The President’s House*. Washington: White House Historical Association, 1986, 818–822.



## 1920s | *A White House maid remembers a moment of panic*

For evening receptions, Grace Coolidge favored gowns with trains. Columnist Vylla Poe Wilson remarked in January 1926, “Mrs. Coolidge does not let the fact that she wears a train . . . interfere with the careful line of the gown itself. . . . [It] is never allowed to drag the gown.”<sup>1</sup>

Maggie Rogers, who served as Grace Coolidge’s maid, regularly ensured that the First Lady’s costume was in order before the Coolidges greeted their guests. One night, as Mrs. Coolidge came down the grand stair, the first lady tossed her train over her arm. Rogers could not see the train. She was seized with anxiety, fearing that it might be caught on something, or that it had been left upstairs. Just then, Mrs. Coolidge let the train fall to the floor. Rogers straightened the flowing fabric, and the Coolidges went into the Parlor. But the experience left Rogers “[panicky] for the rest of the evening.”

Howard Chandler Christy painted this portrait (to right) in 1924. It hangs in the China Room of the White House. Mrs. Coolidge wears a red dress with a train. The First Lady presented this dress to Maggie Rogers; her daughter, Lillian Rogers Parks, wore it often.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Vylla Poe Wilson, “Fashions of Capital Women,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 17, 1926: S5.

<sup>2</sup> Lillian Rogers Parks, *My Thirty Years Backstairs at the White House* (New York, Fleet, 1960), 189.

## 1930s | *Royal Visitors: The Butler’s Role at a State Dinner*

Prior to the 1939 visit of the queen and king of England, Eleanor Roosevelt received a State Department memorandum, listing various rules of protocol. Mrs. Roosevelt became concerned about the order in which the Roosevelts, and the queen and king, should be served at the state dinner honoring the royal couple.<sup>1</sup>

“I told Franklin,” Mrs. Roosevelt recalled, “that British protocol required that the head butler, [Alonzo] Fields, stand with a stop watch in his hand and, thirty seconds after [the president] and the king had been served, dispatch a butler to serve the queen and myself.

. . . I [mentioned] the White House rule that the president was always served first.”<sup>2</sup>

The president declared, “We will not require Fields to have a stop watch. The king and I will be served simultaneously and you and the queen will be served next.”<sup>3</sup>

Fields did not use a stopwatch. The evening was a success, but the armchairs ordered for the occasion were apparently too low for the queen. Fields recalls that, after she was seated, she requested her favorite cushion. Fields sent for it, and, as the queen lifted herself up, the head butler “gently slipped the pillow on the chair.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, *This I Remember* (New York: Harper, 1949), 186.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*; Alonzo Fields, *My 21 Years in the White House* (New York: Coward McCann, 1960), 74.



## 1940s | *A White House Usher Remembers Winston Churchill*

After the United States entered World War II, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was a frequent guest in the Roosevelt White House. Although the Prime Minister's visits were associated with weighty issues, White House workers remembered Churchill with delight and amusement. "The most colorful visitor ever to appear at the wartime White House was Winston Churchill," J. B. West records in his memoir.<sup>1</sup> West was Assistant Chief Usher during the War, and he relates many stories about the Prime Minister. One of these concerns Churchill's well-known fondness for cigars.

Churchill's meetings in the U.S. between December 22, 1941 and January 14, 1942 had a code name, the Arcadia Conference. For security reasons, the Prime Minister's arrival in the White House on December 21 for the Arcadia Conference was kept under wraps. The Secret Service had given instructions that no one was to enter the halls between 2:00 and 3:00 p.m. on the 21st, but the staff did not know who was coming. When the pungent odor of tobacco wafted down the corridor, "It didn't take long," says West, "for the cigar smoke to announce Mr. Churchill's presence."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J. B. West, *Upstairs at the White House* (New York: Coward, McCann, 1973), 38.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

## 1950s | *The White House Usher on the Role of Television*

"Largely through television," notes historian William Seale, the White House "is the best known house in the world, the instantly familiar symbol of the Presidency, flashed daily on millions and millions of TV screens everywhere."<sup>1</sup>

J. B. West was Assistant Chief Usher at the White House from 1941 to 1957, and Chief Usher from 1957 to 1969. During the Eisenhower administration, West had an inside view of television's role as both a communication tool for the President and a form of entertainment and relaxation for the First Family.

West refers to television as "the electronic novelty." The White House had two TV sets, and West recalls that the Eisenhowers embraced TV wholeheartedly. In 1953, the White House press secretary announced that the President had decided to admit television and radio into his press conferences.<sup>2</sup>

West comments that President Eisenhower's "wide smile, his proud, erect posture, his direct manner were magically carried to homes around the country by the TV cameras."<sup>3</sup>



**(con't)**

According to West, Ike and Mamie Eisenhower regularly watched the evening news while having their meals on tray-tables. He notes that Mrs. Eisenhower's enjoyment of *As the World Turns* "initiated the Television Era in the White House."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> William Seale, *The President's House* (Washington, D.C., White House Historical Association, 1986), 1052–1053.

<sup>2</sup> "Press Talk TV Explained," *New York Times*, Jan. 26, 1953: 11.

<sup>3</sup> J. B. West, *Upstairs at the White House* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1973), 159. <sup>4</sup> Ibid.

### **1960s | A White House Worker Remembers November 25, 1963**

President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy had developed a bond with White House doorman Preston Bruce. The slain President's brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, invited Bruce to walk with members of the Kennedy family to JFK's memorial service at St. Matthew's Cathedral. Here are some of Bruce's recollections:

"My heart ached to see Mrs. Kennedy march up the avenue, straight-backed, holding her children by the hand. . . .

"[After the service], I stood at the bottom of the steps near Mrs. Kennedy, Caroline, and John-John as the pallbearers carried down the casket. As it passed by, John-John raised his small hand and gave a crisp salute. It was his third birthday and his mother had arranged ice cream, cake, and candles to go with his supper that evening.

"[At Arlington Cemetery], I struggled to keep my composure. I could see the head of . . . General Charles de Gaulle of France, . . . and I could have . . . touched Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. Mrs. Kennedy had done me a great honor to include me in this company.

"At last the bugle sounded taps for John Fitzgerald Kennedy, a brave young man I'd learned to love."

—Preston Bruce, *From the Door of the White House*. New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1984, 104–105.



## 1970s | *The White House Chefs and the Nixon-Cox Wedding Cake*

In March 1971, President Richard M. Nixon announced the engagement of his daughter Patricia to Edward Cox. The details of the wedding preparations soon appeared in newspapers. As the June date drew closer, media attention began to focus on the wedding cake.

White House Chef Henry Haller and his colleagues, White House Pastry Chef Heinz Bender and New York pastry specialist Maurice Bonté, were now in the spotlight. The cake was to be a marvel of engineering and enchantment. Its base layer would be at table height, and feature the intertwined first initials of the couple. The confection was to soar to a height of close to seven feet.

Henry Haller served as spokesman for the White House kitchen as the cake became an ever more prominent news feature. At the beginning of June, the White House released a recipe for a scaled-down version of the cake. Food writers for major U.S. newspapers tried the recipe, and announced that the batter overflowed the pan.<sup>1</sup> Haller stayed up late testing and retesting the cake formula, and declared the recipe to be accurate.<sup>2</sup>

Haller, Bender, and Bonté had reason to celebrate on June 12, 1971. The Nixon-Cox wedding cake was picture-perfect.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Booth Conroy, “Cake Mess?” *Washington Post*, June 3, 1971: B1; Raymond A. Sokolov, “Warning! It May Not Work,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1971: 36.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Sokolov, “The Great Cake Controversy, Continued: The Making (and Then Remaking) of a Recipe, Step by Step.” *New York Times*, June 4, 1971: 17.

<sup>3</sup> James M. Naughton, “The President and the Cake Pass Tests,” *New York Times*, June 13, 1971: 76.

## 1980s | *A “Family” Reunion*

A reunion picnic on June 24, 1983, was the scene of hugging, kissing, and backslapping, as former White House domestic staff greeted one another with laughter, emotion, and plenty of memories.<sup>1</sup>

The 1980s began a series of reunions of former White House workers. Retired chief usher J. B. West was the organizer of the 1983 event. Lillian Rogers Parks, a former maid and seamstress, shared stories with the widow of Arthur Prettyman, valet to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Heinz and Shirley Bender recalled their White House romance, which bloomed when he was the pastry chef and she was a housekeeper. “After he made Tricia Nixon’s wedding cake, we got married and had no cake, but I forgave him,” Shirley Bender told a reporter.<sup>2</sup>

Hoping to see “a lot of old friends,” Luci Johnson Nugent, daughter of President Lyndon B. Johnson, arrived with her daughter.<sup>3</sup> ...



**(con't)**

Howard Arrington recounted his favorite story about the shower jets that President Johnson had ordered him to install: “He wanted [them] to hit all parts of his body with the same force. . . . Rex Scouten in the usher’s office got in the shower to test it out, and it pinned Rex right to the wall.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Gamarekian, “Reunion Echoes Bygone Years at White House,” *The New York Times*, June 25, 1983: 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

### **1990s | “Workers at the White House”**

Coinciding with the 200th anniversary of the White House, the Festival of American Folklife featured a program entitled “Workers at the White House” on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Between June 25 and July 5, 1992, more than thirty former White House employees participated in small panel discussions, and took questions from delighted audiences of Festival visitors.

The group’s chain of living memory extended as far back as 1909. Contributing stories about their White House experiences were plumbers, maids, chefs, butlers, ushers, and doormen, as well as calligraphers, stonecarvers, and police officers on the White House beat. Panelists recounted amusing anecdotes about the presidential families, and about world leaders such as Winston Churchill; and they recalled serious matters such as racial discrimination in the White House, and the making of blackout curtains during World War II.

“Workers at the White House” grew into a traveling exhibition, circulated by the Smithsonian Institution during 1993. It also resulted in a video, and an illustrated booklet. Marjorie A. Hunt, who coordinated these efforts, summarized their theme as an examination of “the relationship between occupational culture and place, [and] the distinctive ways in which the White House, as a unique occupational setting, shapes work experience.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Marjorie A. Hunt, “Making the White House Work,” in *Workers at the White House* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies, Smithsonian Institution, 1993), 6.

