



WHITE HOUSE WORKERS HISTORY PROJECT GLOSSARY

This document provides definitions for commonly used phrases as well as job descriptions for roles included in the White House Workers History Project.

If you have additional questions, please email whwhp@whha.org.

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GENERAL TERMS

Executive Residence: The “Executive Residence” or “Residence” refers to the historic mansion at the center of the White House complex, where first families live, dine, and entertain. It includes the Ground and State Floors, subbasements, and Private Quarters, differentiating the first family’s home from workspaces in the East and West Wings.

Executive Residence Staff: The terms “Executive Residence staff,” “EXR,” or “Residence staff” are used today to denote the career staff who maintain the Executive Residence at the White House, including butlers, housekeepers, chefs, doormen, florists, curators, electricians, plumbers, storekeepers, engineers, and others.

Foreman: White House trade shops (electrical, carpentry, painting, plumbing, etc.) typically fall under the purview of a foreman, or supervisor, who manages the team and daily operations and projects in said shop.

Hiring Out: Many slave owners in early Washington, D.C. chose to hire out enslaved people for contract labor positions either quarterly or by the year. As was typical with hiring-out, enslaved workers received no compensation for their labor; instead, payment was given to their owners. For example, in 1801 President Thomas Jefferson hired out an enslaved man named John Freeman from a slave owner named Dr. William Baker. Jefferson paid Baker \$8.00 per month for Freeman’s work at the White House as a dining room servant.

Indentured Servant: An individual bound by a contract (or indenture) to work without pay for a period of time. This was an arrangement often used in the American colonies and early United States as a way to pay off travel expenses for a transatlantic journey. Indentured servants received some basic housing and provisions, and they often worked in harsh conditions for years to pay off their debt.

Livery: Many early presidents directed certain highly visible staff members (often coachmen, footmen, butlers, and waiters) to wear livery, or uniforms, that used colors associated with their household or family. For example, President George Washington had many of his servants wear matching red and white coats. The tradition of livery stemmed from aristocratic households in medieval Europe. Livery gradually disappeared from the White House by the early twentieth century, although uniforms continue to be worn by many members of the White House staff.



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Mulatto: By today's standards, this is an outdated and derogatory term. However, in a historical context the term was often used to classify people of mixed White and Black or African-American ancestry. It appears consistently in research related to White House workers. For more information on harmful language, visit our "About the Project" page.

On Assignment/On Detail: Many employees at the White House were technically employed by other government agencies (ex. Department of the Interior, Department of the Treasury) but assigned to the White House. Historically, the president's staff remained small because Congress appropriated it as such. However, as executive departments grew in size and support, workers could be detailed to the White House to assist as needed or by request.



CALLIGRAPHERS

Calligrapher: The White House hires calligraphers to create formal handwritten documents for both ceremonial and administrative duties. These calligraphers create official items such as invitations, place cards, commissions, proclamations, and other presentation documents using pen and ink. Their work involves precision, clear writing, and attractive presentation, often using decorative lettering or designs that fit the event. Calligraphers may also design layouts for printed materials or create decorative lettering for displays as needed. They work within the Social Office at the White House.



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CURATORS

Curator: In 1961, First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy hired the first White House Curator. Later that year, Congress passed legislation to preserve "the museum character" of the Ground Floor and State Floor of the White House. These efforts to transform the White House into a museum culminated with Executive Order 11145, which formally established the role and responsibilities of the position of White House Curator.

Utilizing their subject expertise in fine and decorative arts, curators conduct research, organize exhibits, acquire and loan items, and manage the use and preservation of historic art and artifacts in the White House. The White House Curator leads a department of assistant curators, collections managers, and registrars who oversee the care of the objects and artworks, as well as document and inventory the White House Collection each year.



GARDENS, GROUNDS, AND FLOWER SHOP

Florist: A team of florists works in the White House Flower Shop, designing arrangements made of fresh flowers and greenery for public and private areas of the White House. The team is supervised by a Chief Floral Designer, a role which originated under First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy. The Chief Floral Designer or Chief Florist plans and manages these elaborate designs in collaboration with the first lady, social secretary, and other White House staff.

Gardener: Gardeners maintain and oversee the White House gardens and grounds. In the nineteenth century, this included a series of greenhouses attached to the White House, later removed in 1902 to make room for today's West Wing. Gardeners' responsibilities include, but are not limited to, landscaping and caring for the ornamental and practical gardens at the White House. White House gardeners often oversee a team of grounds laborers. Over the years, care for the White House Grounds has shifted between departments and government agencies, but today, the gardens and grounds are the responsibility of National Park Service employees.

Grounds Laborer: Throughout history, laborers have served on the White House Grounds, maintaining outdoor spaces, performing manual labor, and landscaping. Historic titles include yardmen and water boys, who watered plants at the White House. Today, National Park Service grounds employees perform these jobs and report to the White House gardeners.

Kennel Master: The White House Kennel Master (sometimes also called the Master of Hounds, Dog Keeper, or Dog Boy) was charged with the care of presidential pets. Their duties included walking, feeding, and training first dogs, handling pets at public events and during presidential travel, and managing unusual animals gifted to the White House. In recent decades, care of the first family's pets typically falls to a variety of employees, rather than a designated Kennel Master.



HOUSEKEEPING AND LAUNDRY

Floorman: Though this term is not often used today, the role of a floorman (or floor polisher) was to sweep, polish, vacuum, and maintain the cleanliness of the White House floors.

Head Housekeeper: The role of head housekeeper has evolved over time. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the head housekeeper and steward jointly managed the White House, but this arrangement varied by presidency. Over time, the head housekeeper took on more responsibilities, overseeing the domestic staff, running errands and shopping for food, planning menus in tandem with the first lady and head cook, and keeping the household budget. During the William Howard Taft presidency, the position of steward was eliminated, effectively making the head housekeeper the manager of the household (much like the modern chief usher). Irwin H. Hoover modernized the role of chief usher as we know it today. By the time of his passing in 1933, the role of chief usher slowly consolidated more of these responsibilities, and housekeepers increasingly focused on traditional housekeeping duties such as cleaning, making beds, and vacuuming, as is the case today.

Laundress/Laundry Attendant: Throughout history, presidential households have employed laundresses (also known as washerwomen in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) to launder clothing, bedding, and other textiles. Prior to the invention of modern washing machines, it was a labor-intensive process that often included hauling and boiling water, scrubbing pieces by hand, and then pressing and folding the clean items. The role was historically filled by young women, many of whom were free and enslaved Black women or European immigrants.

By the late twentieth century, most linens were sent out for laundering, with a small number washed in-house. Today, a small space in the basement of the White House is used for this purpose.

Maid/Houseman/Housekeeper: This job usually involves cleaning and organizing rooms, moving furniture, and keeping both public and private areas tidy. Tasks can include sweeping, dusting, washing linens, and helping with clothing and personal items.

The specific responsibilities depend on the job and the time period. Some staff work mainly in ceremonial or public areas, while others focus on the Private Quarters. In the past, these roles were often held by women, but today both housemen and housekeepers work on staff, reflecting broader trends in domestic and service work.



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HR, FINANCE, AND IT

Accountant: Accountants and other members of the finance team manage aspects of finances including costs related to events and the Executive Residence budget.

Computer Systems Manager: The Computer Systems Manager oversees the operation of all technical devices, virtual and in-person meetings, and information technology usage within the Executive Residence.

Human Resources Administrator/Administrative Assistant: The Human Resources Administrator manages the onboarding and offboarding of Executive Residence Staff and assists with the administrative needs of the team.



KITCHEN, DINING ROOM, PANTRY, AND STOREROOM

Butler: White House butlers serve food and beverages to the first family and their guests, set tables for dinners, teas, and receptions, maintain the general cleanliness of White House dining rooms, and fulfill other requests as needed.

Executive Chef/Cook: The White House Executive Chef manages the White House Kitchen and oversees a team of sous chefs and pastry chefs. They are responsible for the planning of menus and preparation of meals at private and public functions.

The title “White House Executive Chef” was created by First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy in 1961. Many talented cooks and chefs managed the White House Kitchen prior to the creation of this official role. Typically, this distinction refers to the level of education, with “chefs” being professionally trained at culinary academies, and “cooks” being self or informally taught. However, these titles are sometimes interchangeable in White House history, and there are also deep social and racial connotations to the choice of phrasing. As White House food historian Adrian Miller notes, “Indeed, many African Americans throughout early American history were called cooks when they might have properly been called chefs.”

Some presidents and first ladies have elected to bring their own personal cook or chef to the White House to either replace or work in tandem with the Executive Chef. They often cook personal, informal meals for the family, while the White House Executive Chef manages food for formal events such as State Dinners.

Executive Pastry Chef: The White House Executive Pastry Chef is responsible for the design and execution of desserts and pastries for White House social events, including State Dinners, as well as the daily management of the White House Pastry Kitchen and its team of pastry chefs.

Food Coordinator: The Food Coordinator works closely with the Chief Usher and other departments to oversee shopping for groceries, coordinating meals, and managing food budgets.

Maître d’: The maître d’hôtel, often shortened to maître d’, is the head butler on the dining room staff and the face of hospitality at the White House. They oversee a team of butlers and pantrymen and women (as well as external contractors and part-time/on-call staff) and assist with the planning of major White House events.



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Pantryman/woman: The duties of a pantryman or woman include managing food supplies, shining silver, washing dishes, cleaning and organizing the pantry spaces, and assisting with some food preparation. At some points in history, this role was called “dishwasher.”

Scullion/Kitchen Maid/Kitchen Man/Kitchen Assistant/Kitchen Helper: All of these terms have been used at various times to describe those who assisted a chef or cook in the White House Kitchen. A scullion or scullery maid historically cleaned pots and pans, lit fires, and may have assisted the other domestic staff during mealtimes or helped with basic tasks like preparing vegetables and fruits. This title is no longer used.

Kitchen assistants and kitchen maids took on a similar role and also helped with food preparation. In past centuries, these roles were typically filled by young women. There was often a strict hierarchy in the kitchen with the head cook at the top, followed by second or third cooks, kitchen maids, and then helpers or scullions.

Storekeeper/Storeroom Manager/Purchasing Agent: The White House Storekeeper is responsible for purchasing, inventorying, and storing food and supplies for the first family. Any food served in the Residence or at Camp David is billed directly to the first family by the White House Chief Usher.



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OPERATIONS, FACILITIES, AND EVENTS

Attendant: Attendants at the White House help keep daily operations and events running smoothly. They take care of the spaces used by staff and guests, ensuring everything is clean and in order. Their work can include monitoring certain areas, assisting visitors, and supporting official events or tours. Sometimes, they help manage guest needs, control access to rooms, or assist with setting up and taking down at events.

Checker: Typically, this title refers to an individual checking coats, bags, or other accessories for guests at White House events. Often, these roles are filled by part-time staff or contractors.

Facilities/Maintenance: The facilities team oversees the safe management and upgrade of the Residence.

Operations Aide: Individuals in this role are responsible for social event preparations at the White House, including moving and rearranging furniture, laying rugs, placing stanchions and ropes, setting up stages and lighting, carrying and placing chairs, and more. This role requires individuals to be skilled in moving not only everyday items but also historic furnishings and fine and decorative arts pieces.



TRADES

Carpenter: Carpenters construct furniture, stages, display cases, and other items for use onsite, and take on other tasks as needed including laying tile, installing windows and doors, repairing floors and locks, and more.

Electrician: Electricians ensure that lighting, power systems, and electrical equipment operate safely and efficiently in both public and private settings. They install wiring, fixtures, and control systems, test circuits, wind clocks, and fix or troubleshoot equipment when needed. They are also on hand to power White House events.

Engineer: The role of engineer at the White House has evolved over time, but often entails the maintenance of systems including HVAC, plumbing, refrigeration systems, and movie theater operations.

Fireman: The role of fireman no longer exists on the White House staff, but firemen formerly maintained the heating systems inside the White House, particularly the many fireplaces throughout the Residence (hence the term fireman). As various other heating systems were installed in the White House over the course of the nineteenth century, such as boilers, firemen helped maintain those systems as well. Throughout the early twentieth century, engineers gradually replaced firemen in this role.

Movie Operator: In the early and mid-twentieth century, the White House occasionally employed electrical staff whose primary job was to maintain and operate the movie equipment used to project films inside the White House, including in the movie theater built in the East Wing in 1942. By the end of the twentieth century, this job became the responsibility of engineers.

Painter: Painters are responsible for various painting responsibilities at the White House, including painting the interior and exterior of the building, hanging paper, glazing windows, and finishing or refinishing historic furnishings, picture frames, doors, or other architectural details.

Plumber: Plumbers oversee and maintain White House water systems, including bathrooms, kitchens, and outdoor fountains and water features.



TRANSPORTATION

Chauffeur: In 1909, President William Howard Taft brought the automobile to the White House, preferring cars to the traditional horse and carriage, and hired the first White House Chauffeurs. They drove presidents, first ladies, and administration staff in automobiles from the White House Garage. Their job required exceptional driving skills, caution, and discretion. The head chauffeur, assigned to the president, was often also called the Superintendent of the White House Garage. Today, the United States Secret Service primarily oversees presidential transportation in coordination with multiple agencies.

Coachman: Prior to the invention and popularization of cars, presidents, first families, and their staff traveled primarily by carriage. The White House Coachman drove a variety of horse-drawn carriages, often while wearing formal livery (uniforms). They also oversaw the White House Stables, the presidential horses, and the team of grooms, postilions, hostlers, and stablehands who worked there. Coachmen typically lived onsite above the Stables with their families.

Footman: Typically, a footman was responsible for assisting during meal service, delivering messages, answering the door, carrying luggage, and traveling with the carriage. They wore livery (a uniform) as they had a visible role in the household. At the White House, footmen were associated mostly with travel (often accompanying carriages), while most of their other duties fell to doorkeepers, ushers, and butlers, among others. Sometimes, footmen were listed among the staff in the White House Residence, the Stables, or the Garage, and duties varied between work locations. For example, a garage footman typically carried baggage and packages, retrieved cars for use by the chauffeur, opened and closed gates for automobiles, and took on other general tasks in the garage as needed.

Groom/Stablehand/Hostler: In a stable, the groom (sometimes also called the hostler or stablehand) cared for the horses. Their duties included cleaning the stalls and bringing in hay, as well as feeding, brushing, shoeing, saddling, and exercising the horses. Their duties might also include tending to equine equipment like saddles and harnesses and general maintenance of the stables and carriages.

Porter: Typically, a porter in a household assisted with travel-related tasks. They were often responsible for carrying luggage and other heavy packages, unpacking bags for visitors, and other tasks of that nature. A “baggage man” performed similar duties.



Postilion: A postilion rode a pair of horses pulling a coach, unlike a coachman who rode atop the box on the carriage itself. Postilion could be a dangerous job due to their proximity to the horses.

Washer: Washers were charged with the cleaning of automobiles in the White House Garage. This included washing, polishing, and drying the exteriors and interiors of the vehicles as well as upkeep of the garage itself.



USHERS, STEWARDS, AND DOORKEEPERS

Chief Usher: The chief usher is the general manager of the White House, overseeing construction and renovation projects, maintenance, food service, as well as the administrative, fiscal, and personnel functions of the residence. The chief usher manages the White House Residence staff of approximately 80-90 people, consisting of butlers, maids, housekeepers, chefs, cooks, doormen, florists, curators, electricians, plumbers, storekeepers, engineers, and others. A team of assistant ushers helps them with these duties.

Doorkeeper/Doorman: Doorkeepers didn't just open and close doors – they coordinated the president's schedule, managed access to the White House and the Executive Offices, maintained order, and ushered visitors into the Executive Mansion. Since part of their responsibilities entailed security, many White House doorkeepers were former policemen, military service members, or bodyguards. Modern White House doormen deliver mail, messages, and packages within the White House, open doors and operate elevators, carry luggage, and direct guests.

Steward: Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the steward and the head housekeeper jointly managed the White House, but this arrangement varied by presidency. The steward often greeted first families and their visitors, oversaw social events, inventoried White House property, and managed domestic staff and public funds. In some ways, this role was a precursor to the modern role of "chief usher." During the William Howard Taft presidency, the position of steward was eliminated, effectively making the head housekeeper the manager of the household.



VALETS, LADY'S MAIDS, AND FIRST FAMILY ATTENDANTS

Barber: A barber's primary responsibilities revolve around grooming – this includes hair cutting or trimming, dyeing, shaving or facial hair trimming, and other services. Early presidents often relied on valets or body servants to perform a range of personal duties that included maintaining the president's appearance and grooming. Before the Civil War, many of these barbers were enslaved, and even after emancipation, the profession continued to be dominated by African American men throughout much of the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, presidents generally continued to visit or employ their own personal barbers, some of whom worked out of a small barbershop established in the basement of the West Wing.

Governess/Tutor: A governess was hired to privately educate children of the house. The role of governess was typically filled by a woman who taught basic subjects like reading, writing, math, and languages. A tutor held a similar role. In the nineteenth century, they tended to be men responsible for academic instruction, lessons of civility, and preparing boys for entrance exams to elite academies and universities. Tutors and governesses were paid for out of pocket by the president and first lady and sometimes resided at the White House.

Lady's Maid/Waiting Maid/Dressing Maid/Personal Maid: A lady's maid was one of the most important roles on a first lady's domestic staff. They oversaw her wardrobe and appearance, which typically included dressing them, preparing and mending clothing and accessories, and styling their hair. They traveled with the presidential party and waited on the first lady as needed. This role differed from a housemaid, who was responsible for cleaning. Today, the role has been replaced by personal stylists, assistants, and hairdressers.

Nanny/Nurse: A nurse or nanny tends to the care of children in the household. Traditionally, this role has been filled by women and is paid for by the president and first lady. These individuals often reside at the White House.

Valet: The president's valet (sometimes also called a body servant, manservant, or body man) was historically one of the most important roles on their domestic staff. They traveled with the president, assisted with their wardrobe and personal effects, and often acted as confidantes and companions. For much of history, these personal attendants were free or enslaved Black men; today, responsibility for the role falls to the U.S. military.