

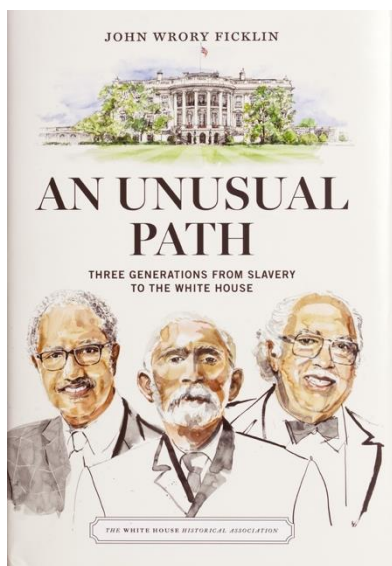
THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

AN UNUSUAL PATH

Three Generations from Slavery to the White House

By John Wroly Ficklin

On-Sale February 10, 2026



February 10, 2026 (Washington, D.C.) – The Ficklin family name has been associated with White House service for nearly a century. In fact, so many members of the Ficklin family once worked at the White House that the *Washington Post* quoted a butler who observed, “A Ficklin here, a Ficklin there, I see Ficklins everywhere.”

John Wroly Ficklin, who retired in 2015 after his own forty years of White House service, presents his family history with a heartwarming and inspiring new book, [AN UNUSUAL PATH: Three Generations from Slavery to the White House](#) (White House Historical Association; on sale February 10, 2026).

The story begins with the author's grandfather James Strother Ficklin, who was born enslaved in about 1854 and conscripted to serve as a water boy to Confederate army troops quartering in rural Virginia. Following Emancipation, he worked as a houseman, laborer, and in coal mining before purchasing 37 acres of land in Virginia where he farmed, produced molasses, and raised ten children.

John Woodson Ficklin, the seventh of those ten children, and the author's father, moved to Washington, D.C., as a teenager and like many African American men at the time, found work as a butler in the city. His older brothers Sam and Charles began working as butlers at the White House during the Franklin D. Roosevelt presidency and he soon joined them. Over the course of forty-three years in service at the White House, John Woodson Ficklin was promoted to the esteemed positions of head butler and maître d' hotel.

In the book, John W. Ficklin recounts his realization of the prominence of his father's job as he watched his dad serve as an usher at the funeral for President John F. Kennedy. Growing up, he worked part-time for his father, as staff at White House State Dinners and social events. During one summer picnic on the South Lawn, while transporting ice to the service tents he was delighted to hear President Jimmy Carter sing "Salt Peanuts" with Dizzy Gillespie. The author continued his service with an extended summer job as a messenger where, among other tasks, he transported documents from the Nixon White House to the Watergate Special Prosecutor's office. Eventually John went on to become the longest serving member of the National Security staff, faithfully serving seven U.S. presidents. Until his retirement in 2015, there had been a Ficklin in the White House since 1939, serving with every president from FDR to Obama. In just two generations, the Ficklins rose from slavery to the White House doors and beyond.

From the author's unique perspective, **AN UNUSUAL PATH** tells the story of three Ficklin men against a backdrop of American history. In her foreword for the book, Ambassador Susan E. Rice, notes "The Ficklin's ultimate legacy may be to remind us all of what America is capable of at its best...This family didn't just bear witness to history, their story *is* history."

About the Author

The Honorable John W. Ficklin's career spanned eight administrations, culminating in President Barack Obama appointing him to the position of special assistant to the president for National Security Affairs.

About the White House Historical Association

Founded in 1961 by First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, the White House Historical Association is the nonprofit, nonpartisan organization entrusted with preserving and sharing the history of the White House. Supported entirely by private philanthropy and the sale of educational books and products, the Association reaches millions of students, teachers, and lifelong learners through research and scholarship initiatives, public programming, and the authoritative titles published by its independent press. Throughout each presidency, the Association works with the Offices of the First Lady and the White House Curator to acquire and preserve historic objects for the White House Fine and Decorative Arts Collection. The Association also operates The People's House: A White House Experience, a free, immersive, educational museum in Washington, D.C., which welcomes hundreds of thousands of visitors annually. To learn more about the White House Historical Association, please visit WhiteHouseHistory.org.

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