

INTRODUCTION

Ever since John and Abigail Adams moved into the President’s House in 1800, hundreds of individuals have worked behind the scenes to help the White House fulfill its roles as a home, office, and museum. White House staff serve the many needs of the first family in a variety of occupations. They prepare family meals, serve elaborate State Dinners, maintain the grounds, and much more. There is no such thing as a “typical” day in the White House. Explore the dedication and skills of the residence staff, their cohesion as a community, their special relationship with the first family, and their experiences as witnesses to the nation’s history.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

Since 1800, countless men and women have served in many capacities to assure the smooth running of the White House. Today, a Chief Usher manages a household staff of full-time domestic and maintenance employees who work together to operate and preserve the 132-room Executive Mansion (**Image 1**). Whatever their background, employees at the White House form a tight-knit team, helping each other prepare for special events or accomplish daily tasks (**Image 2**).



Image 1

President John Adams moved to the President’s House with four hired servants for the sixteen rooms which were operating when he first arrived (**Image 3**). Prior to the Civil War, southern presidents brought their enslaved servants to work alongside free African Americans and white laborers at the White House. One of these enslaved workers was Paul Jennings, who worked in President James Madison’s household and helped First Lady Dolley Madison rescue the portrait of

George Washington before the British burning of the White House in 1814 (**Image 4**). He later wrote the first memoir about life in the White House, *A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison*.

Working in the White House is not like working anywhere else. Members of the residence staff take pride in their abilities and recognize that by serving the first family their individual and collective



Image 5

efforts also serve the nation. Maître d'hôtel and butler Alonzo Fields, who worked at the White House from 1931-1953, stated, "This is the President's House. You are serving the world, entertaining the world. It's got to be right." Workers must fulfill a variety of duties, face unpredictable national and world events, and adjust to changes in politics and society (**Image 5**).

Workers often develop close relationships with the first family (**Images 6 & 7**). Usher Nelson Pierce taught Caroline Kennedy how to turn somersaults; he also read stories to her brother, John F. Kennedy Jr. Because he shared a birthday with President Gerald Ford on July 14th, butler Eugene Allen was often included in the president's birthday celebrations. Allen reflected on one of his favorite memories – when First Lady Betty Ford stated at President Ford's birthday party, "It's Gene's birthday too!"

In addition to becoming close to the first family, workers also have the opportunity to witness history firsthand. Russell Free, who served as an engineer from 1964-1986, observed, "When you first go to work at the White House, you are all eyeballs. . . You're actually drinking in history and current events." When President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, in 1963, it devastated the residence staff. "It was sad, very sad," recalled Preston Bruce, who served as a White House doorman from 1953 to 1976. "When we came back from Arlington, Robert Kennedy pulled

off his gloves and said to me, ‘Keep these gloves and remember always that I wore them to my brother’s funeral’” (**Image 8**).

While first families are only temporary residents at the White House, the household staff are permanent employees. Many have worked at the White House for over thirty years, serving as many as ten first families and creating continuity at the White House. Lillian Rogers Parks, a maid and seamstress who retired just before President and Mrs. Eisenhower left office, observed, “When the old family goes out, you felt lost for just that flash. And then at 12 o’clock when the other family comes in, you took on a new perspective. You just had to turn over; you had to forget those folks and start over” (**Image 9**). The White House staff must work through presidential transitions, both expected and unexpected, to keep the house running smoothly. Their knowledge and expertise, accumulated over years of experience, provide a valuable link between the past and present.

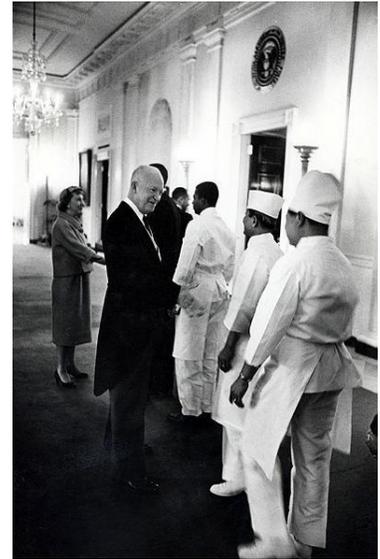


Image 9

No other workplace is both a symbol of the nation and the private residence of an American family. As Calvin Coolidge observed, presidents come and go, but those who care for the White House stay. They have seen the White House grow and change, and their stories and experiences add a rich, human perspective to its history. At a dinner in honor of the two hundredth birthday of the White House in 2000, former President Gerald Ford paid tribute to the permanent staff of the White House residence: “To everyone who aids, comforts, and inspires a president and his loved ones,” he said, and offered a toast “from our families to the White House family, to all you do to make this old house a home” (**Image 10**).

IMAGES

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Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	Florist Outside the East Tradesman Entrance	2010	Samantha Appleton	Official White House Photo by Samantha Appleton		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/1112849.tif.info
2	Tourists in the State Dining Room, July 1962	1962	James E. Russell	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1113336.tif.info
3	Abigail Adams Supervising the Hanging of the Wash in the East Room	1966	Gordon Phillips	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20Adams/127.tif.info
4	The Splendid Mrs. Madison: In the Elliptical Saloon 1810-1814	2009	Peter Waddell	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/James%20Madison/9308.tif.info
5	Christmas Dinner at the White House	1947	Unknown	Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Harry%20Truman/1540.tif.info

THE WHITE HOUSE AT WORK



6	Dale Haney on the South Lawn with Barney & Spot Bush	2002	Maggie Knaus	George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/George%20W%20Bush/5736.tif.info
7	Nancy Reagan Sampling Treats in the White House Kitchen	1982	Joseph H. Bailey	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Ronald%20Reagan/166.tif.info
8	Jacqueline Kennedy Leading Robert Kennedy and Edward Kennedy from the White House Portico	1963	Unknown	John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1527.tif.info
9	The Eisenhowers Exchange Farewells with White House Staff	1961	Edward Clark	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Dwight%20D%20Eisenhower/2193.tif.info
10	President Bill Clinton Gives Remarks at Dinner Celebrating the 200th Anniversary of the White House	2000	Unknown	William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Bill%20Clinton/4220.tif.info



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **Collection: The Working White House.** Hundreds of individuals have worked behind the scenes at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue to ensure the White House can run smoothly as a home, office, museum, and stage for important events. [Click here.](#)
- **Podcast: The Sweet World of White House Desserts.** Join former White House Executive Pastry Chef Roland Mesnier as he recounts his 25 years working in the White House on this episode of *The 1600 Sessions*. [Listen here.](#)
- **Collection: White House Military Social Aides.** These aides assist the President with diplomatic protocol at state events, government functions, and other significant social events, often acting as “assistant hosts” at the White House. [Click here.](#)
- Lean more about enslaved White House workers with the **Slavery in the President’s Neighborhood Initiative**. This initiative from the White House Historical Association explores the complicated past and paradoxical relationship between slavery and freedom in the nation’s capital. [Click here.](#)
- **Book: *Creating the Sweet World of White House Desserts: A Pastry Chef’s Secrets*** by Roland Mesnier with Mark Ramsdell, available online from the White House History Shop. [Click here.](#)



SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For Younger Learners

- Which White House job sounds the most interesting to you and why? Write or draw your response.
- The White House Kitchen, Pastry Kitchen, and Chocolate Shop are able to turn out delicious meals and treats of all sizes and for all occasions. Try your hand at a cookie recipe from former White House Executive Pastry Chef Roland Mesnier – get started here:
- James Ketchum, a former White House Curator, once said that “The White House is just like a small town. You have a florist shop, a small electrical shop, a carpenter’s shop, a movie theater, a swimming pool – all under one roof.” Compare and contrast the White House and a small town. After your investigation, do you agree with James Ketchum?

For Older Learners

- Learn more about Paul Jennings, the enslaved man who worked in the Madison White House by reading an article on the White House Historical Association’s website “Paul Jennings: Slave, Freeman, and White House Memoirist.” [Click here.](#)
- Read Thomas F. Pendel’s 1902 memoir, *Thirty-Six Years in the White House*. Pendel was a White House doorman from the Abraham Lincoln administration to the turn of the 20th-century. [Click here.](#)