

## INTRODUCTION

Since President John Adams and First Lady Abigail Adams first moved into the White House in 1800, hundreds of individuals have worked behind the scenes to help the White House fulfill its roles as a home, office, museum, and stage. Witnesses to history, White House workers are a close-knit community and serve the needs of the first family in various capacities. 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 stories, traditions, memories, and skills of the dedicated people who have operated, maintained, and helped preserve this iconic American building.

## CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

Today, a Chief Usher manages a household staff of approximately 90 full-time domestic and maintenance employees who work together to operate and preserve the 132-room White House, including the Executive Residence, East Wing, and West Wing. These White House employees come from various racial and ethnic backgrounds and serve as butlers, housekeepers, engineers, chefs, electricians, florists, ushers, doormen, carpenters, and plumbers. **Image 1**, to the right, features a florist



*Image 1. A florist working outside the East Tradesman Entrance to the White House preparing floral arrangements for a State Dinner in honor of Mexican Felipe Calderon and his wife, Margarita Zavala (2010).*

preparing arrangements outside the White House for a State Dinner. View **Image 2**, in the chart below, to see a photograph of the State Dining Room where White House staff prepare and serve State Dinners.

When John and Abigail Adams became the first residents of the unfinished White House, however, they brought only five workers with them. Refer to **Image 3**, in the chart, to see a modern painting of First Lady Abigail Adams supervising the hanging of laundry in the unfinished East Room.



According to surviving documentation, at least nine presidents relied on enslaved labor at the White House. Early presidents, including Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe, brought enslaved workers to the White House. One of these enslaved laborers was Paul Jennings. Jennings worked in President James Madison's household and was one member of a group of enslaved workers and staff that saved the famous portrait of President George Washington before the British burned the White House during the War of 1812. In 1865, Jennings wrote the first White House memoir, *A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison*, where he also detailed the role of enslaved workers and other White House staff in rescuing the portrait.

Enslaved individuals worked alongside paid Black freemen, white laborers, and European servants. President Jefferson employed the Frenchmen Étienne Lemaire, Honoré Julien, and Jean Sioussat, as well as five Irish servants. Belgian Antoine Michel Giusta worked as a valet during President John Quincy Adams' administration. Sicilian Valentino Melah served as White House steward during the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant. In 1909, several Filipino staff members came to the White House during William Howard Taft's administration.



*Image 4. President Harry Truman, First Lady Bess Truman, and their daughter Margaret eating Christmas dinner with Mrs. Truman's family in the White House Family Dining Room (1947).*

administration. If you look closely, you can see four household staff members standing in the background.

Each day in the life of a White House worker brings something new. Workers must be flexible as historical events, technological advancements, and changes in politics and society impact an individual's job. 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."

**Image 4**, to the left, is a photograph of Christmas dinner at the White House during the Truman

# THE WHITE HOUSE AT WORK

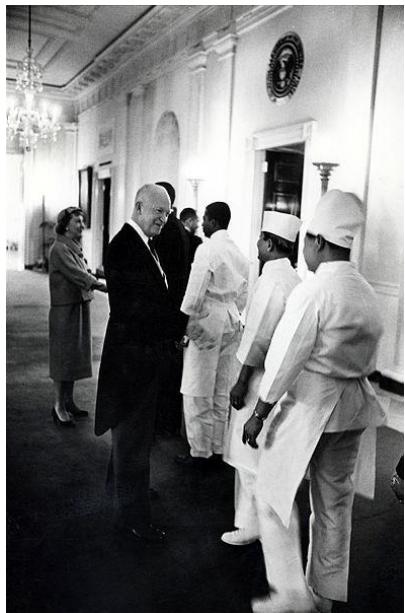


White House workers often develop close relationships with the first family. White House Usher Nelson Pierce taught Caroline Kennedy how to do cartwheels and read stories to her brother, John F. Kennedy Jr. Butler Eugene Allen and President Gerald Ford shared a birthday on July 14<sup>th</sup> and Allen was often included in the president's birthday celebrations. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, 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!" **Image 5**, to the right, is a photograph of White House groundskeeper Dale Henry on the South Lawn playing with Barney and Spot, President George W. Bush's dogs. **Image 6**, in the chart below, features First Lady Nancy Reagan sampling treats baked by the White House kitchen staff, including French-born White House Executive Pastry Chef Roland Mesnier and Swiss-born White House Executive Chef Henry Haller.



*Image 5. Dale Haney, the White House groundskeeper, on the South Lawn with dogs Barney and Spot (2002).*

As they go about their daily tasks, White House workers are also witnesses to history. Russell Free, a White House 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." The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, Texas in 1963 devastated the residence staff. "It was sad, very sad," recalled Preston Bruce, a White House doorman between 1953 and 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.'" Refer to **Image 7**, in the chart below, to see a photograph of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy walking with Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Senator Edward Kennedy during President Kennedy's funeral procession.



*Image 8. President Dwight D. Eisenhower and First Lady Mamie Eisenhower shake hands and say farewell to members of the White House staff on January 20, 1961, before the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy.*

forget those folks and start over.” **Image 8**, to the left, pictures President Dwight Eisenhower and First Lady Mamie Eisenhower saying goodbye to members of the White House staff just before the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy.

Their knowledge and expertise, accumulated over years of experience, provide a valuable link between the past and present. At a dinner in honor of 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary 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.” View **Image 9**, in the chart, to see a photograph of President Bill Clinton giving remarks in the East Room during the celebration.

While White House workers endure times of grief, war, and political tension, they also form close relationships with the first family and with other staff members. 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. The influence of hundreds of dedicated workers has left a lasting mark on the White House and kept 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue running for over 200 years.



## IMAGES

*Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing*

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		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/1112849.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/1112849.tif.info</a>
2	Tourists in the State Dining Room, July 1962	1962	James E. Russell	White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1113336.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1113336.tif.info</a>
3	Abigail Adams Supervising the Hanging of the Wash in the East Room	1966	Gordon Phillips	White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20Adams/127.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20Adams/127.tif.info</a>
4	Christmas Dinner at the White House	1947	Unknown	Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Harry%20S%20Truman/1540.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Harry%20S%20Truman/1540.tif.info</a>
5	Dale Haney on the South Lawn with Barney & Spot Bush	2002	Maggie Knaus	George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/George%20W%20Bush/5736.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/George%20W%20Bush/5736.tif.info</a>
6	Nancy Reagan Sampling Treats in the	1982	Joseph H. Bailey	White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/R">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/R</a>



	White House Kitchen					<a href="#">onald%20Reagan/166.tif.info</a>
7	Jacqueline Kennedy Leading Robert Kennedy and Edward Kennedy from the White House Portico	1963	Unknown	John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1527.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1527.tif.info</a>
8	The Eisenhowers Exchange Farewells with White House Staff	1961	Edward Clark	White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Dwight%20D%20Eisenhower/2193.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Dwight%20D%20Eisenhower/2193.tif.info</a>
9	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		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Bill%20Clinton/4220.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Bill%20Clinton/4220.tif.info</a>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## Book

- *Creating the Sweet World of White House Desserts: A Pastry Chef's Secrets* by Roland Mesnier with Mark Ramsdell at the White House History Shop. [Click here.](#)

## Collections

- “The Working White House” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- “White House Military Social Aides” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

**Podcast**

- “The 1600 Sessions: The Sweet World of White House Desserts” by the White House Historical Association. [Listen here.](#)

**Research Initiative**

- *Slavery in the President’s Neighborhood* by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

**Videos**

- “The Enslaved Household of Thomas Jefferson” by the White House Historical Association. [Watch here.](#)
- “Working at the White House” by the White House Historical Association. [Watch here.](#)

**SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES****For all learners:**

- 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 with our “White House Cookies” Anywhere Activity. [Click here.](#)

**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.](#) You can also learn more about Jennings’ memoir [here](#).



- White House staff diaries, memoirs, photographs, and interviews with retired workers offer first-hand accounts of the working White House. Thomas F. Pendel started working as a White House doorman during President Abraham Lincoln's administration and continued until the early 1900s. Read Pendel's 1902 White House memoir, *Thirty-Six Years in the White House*. [Click here.](#)

**For younger learners:**

- White House staff hold many different jobs. They are butlers, doormen, florists, chefs, electricians, and more. Which White House job sounds the most interesting to you and why? Write or draw your response.
- 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?