

Making the White House Work

Marjorie A. Hunt

“I didn’t feel like a servant to a man. I felt I was a servant to my government, to my country.”

— Alonzo Fields, maitre d’

For nearly two centuries, since the time of John Adams, the White House has been the home of American presidents. A powerful national symbol, it is a uniquely private and public place — at once a family residence, a seat of the government, a ceremonial center and an historic building and museum.

Over the years, hundreds of people have worked behind the scenes to make the White House function, preparing family meals, serving elaborate State Dinners, polishing floors, tending the grounds and welcoming visitors. Today, a household staff of 96 full-time domestic and maintenance employees — including butlers, maids, engineers, housemen, chefs, electricians, florists, ushers, doormen, carpenters and plumbers — work together under one roof to operate, maintain and preserve the 132-room Executive Mansion.

In celebration of the 200th anniversary of the White House, the “Workers at the White House” program explores the skills and folklife of former White House workers — their occupational techniques, customs, values, experiences and codes of behavior. It examines the distinctive ways in which the White House, as a unique occupational setting, shapes work experience.

The living memory and firsthand experiences of the workers participating in this program span almost a century, 15 presidential

administrations, from the presidency of William Taft to that of George Bush. Several have worked at the White House for over 30 years, serving as many as ten first families. Lillian Parks, a 95-year-old former maid and seamstress, started working for President Hoover in 1929 and served through the Eisenhower administration; her memory of the White House goes back to 1909, when her mother, Maggie Rogers, joined the staff as a maid for President Taft. “I was 12 years old when I first started going to the White House with my mother,” she says, “and I’ve been in and out of the White House ever since.”

The oral histories and personal experiences of these workers offer valuable insights into how larger patterns of social change in the nation affected employees’ daily routines and work relationships. Alonzo Fields, a 92-year-old former maitre d’ who joined the staff in 1931, comments eloquently on what it was like to encounter segregation in the White House and how this situation changed over his 21 years of service. “They had separate dining rooms — Black and White. We all worked together, but we couldn’t eat together....Here in the White House, I’m working for the President. This is the home of the democracy of the world and I’m good enough to handle the President’s food — to handle the President’s food and do everything — but I can not eat with the help.” Preston Bruce, a share-

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Maitre d' Alonzo Fields and his staff of butlers, including Samuel Ficklin, John Pye and Armstead Barnett, stand ready to serve a tea during the Roosevelt administration. Photo courtesy Alonzo Fields



Maitre d' Alonzo Fields greets President and Mrs. Truman. Photo courtesy Harry S. Truman Library

cropper's son from South Carolina who worked as a doorman for 22 years, tells of the thrill he felt in seeing the struggle for civil rights from inside the White House. Others speak of how the various approaches of first families affected their ways of serving guests, conducting social events and interacting with staff.

All of the employees describe working at the White House as a unique experience where work, with its variety of staged events and backstage support for them, has a strong "performative" element. Butlers and chefs, for example,

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talk about how it is different from working in a luxury hotel or for a wealthy family, citing everything from security concerns to the high standards demanded by the realization that one's performance reflects on the president and the nation. "This is the president's house. You are serving the world, entertaining the world. It's got to be right," said Alonzo Fields. "You're working for the highest office in the land," said doorman Preston Bruce. "You know that whatever you do is going to affect the family upstairs." To work at the White House was to serve as a guardian of the national honor — this ethos informed work performances and behavior at every level.

While first families are only temporary residents at the White House, the household staff

“It’s not a hotel, it’s not a private home, it’s not a museum. But on the other hand, it’s all those things together.”

— Alfredo Saenz, butler



Chef Henry Haller prepares a dinner in the White House kitchen. Photo courtesy the White House

are permanent employees. Many have been there for over 30 years. For these workers, the transition from one administration to the next is a difficult and challenging time. On Inauguration Day, they must say farewell to a family they have served for years and begin adjusting to new ways of doing and acting, new likes and dislikes, new routines of work. “You had to adapt. That’s the thing that’s paramount,” said maitre d’ Alonzo Fields, who experienced the dramatic shift in the White House from the formal elegance of the Hoovers to the exuberant informality of the Roosevelt family. Workers not only had to learn new routines, but had to build new relationships. “You must earn their trust,” said Mr. Fields.

When a new president goes in there, he doesn’t know his way around, and he’s watching you. And you must assure him — you must assure him by body language — that you have no interest other than in him, in the presidency. You don’t care who’s president — you’re working for the public. You’re a servant to the public, just like he is.

Each job at the White House — butler, carpenter, calligrapher or cook — has a unique set of challenges, skills, tasks and responsibilities. Workers take pride in their abilities — the mastery of special techniques, the knowledge of work processes, the exercise of proper decorum. For a butler, serving a State Dinner requires not only precise timing and efficiency, but the ability to conduct oneself with social grace. “It’s the presentation,” said butler Norwood Williams. Door-men take pride in the way they treat people, prizing their ability to remember names and make White House guests feel comfortable. “I had my own style of receiving guests,” said Preston Bruce. “I remembered everybody. I greeted all the



Plumber Howard Arrington crafted the elaborate metal stand for Tricia Nixon’s wedding cake. Photo courtesy Richard M. Nixon Library

“We knew everybody. It was like a close-knit family. We worked together and saw each other everyday. Everyday you’d be crossing someone’s path or working together on a project. And that’s one of the hardest things — to leave that.”

— Eugene Allen, maitre d’



White House workers get together for a party during the “Truman days.” Photo courtesy Alonzo Fields

guests when they came to a State Dinner. If a person came more than one time, I didn’t have to ask his name.”

Workers speak of efforts to devise innovative systems for accomplishing tasks and the satisfaction of adding their own personal touch to the performance of their jobs. Preston Bruce, for example, perceived a need for a more efficient way to give escort cards to guests coming to formal events at the White House. Working together with carpenter Bonner Arrington, he designed a special table of the right height and size to hold all of the cards. Nearly 20 years later, it is still known as “Bruce’s Table.” Alonzo Fields tells of the challenge he faced trying to figure out how to produce “double-header” teas for Mrs. Roosevelt.

Mrs. Roosevelt, she had teas — five or six hundred a tea, twice in the same afternoon. There’d be a tea for 500 at

four o’clock and a tea for 500 at five o’clock. Now, you’ve got to serve those people and get them out of there. And there’s no one there to tell you how to do it.

So one time I spoke to Mrs. Roosevelt. I said, ‘Madam, how do you want this tea served?’

She says, ‘Oh, I don’t know. I’ve been told it can’t be done. But that’s what I want.’

....Now, I had traveled. I had played in bands. I had played in circus bands, and I had seen the tents and the rings torn down within five seconds and a new group come on in that same ring....And I said, ‘I’ll just produce this like I would a three-ring circus!’ And that’s what I did.

For everyone at the White House, qualities

Housekeeper Shirley Bender inspects a guest room. Photo by Joseph Scherschel, courtesy National Geographic Society

of discretion and loyalty, the ability to adapt to the different styles of successive first families, and a willingness to perform multiple duties were key work skills.

“Hear nothing, know nothing, see nothing, and keep everything to yourself! That’s the best quality of a good butler,” said Alonzo Fields. “You’ve got to be flexible,” said former maitre d’ Eugene Allen. “You cannot get set in your ways, because your way is not the way it works!”

At the White House, a spirit of mutual support and teamwork pervades the workplace. Employees from many different units join together on a regular basis to help each other prepare for special events or accomplish tasks in daily work routines. A prime example of this cooperative spirit is a State Dinner, which requires the coordinated efforts of chefs, doormen, butlers, florists, carpenters, ushers and many others. “Everyone works like a team,” said part-time butler Norwood Williams: “You have a crew that comes in and moves furniture and sets up tables. You have the cleaning staff, the storeroom person, the chefs, the flower shop. Even the carpenters’ shop — they had to make some of those tables. You know how everyone pitches in at a circus? That’s the way it’s done.”

Workers share stories of how they help one another meet the diverse responsibilities of their unique workplace. Plumber Howard Arrington, for example, proudly tells of how he was able to assist a pastry chef by using his metal-working skills to craft an elaborate structure to support Tricia Nixon’s wedding cake.

Lillian Parks recounted an experience with a related set of themes.

I never knew from one day to the next what I’d be doing. One time, a fellow on the first floor said, ‘We need you downstairs to sew a drapery in the Green Parlor.’ Well, I picked up my needle and thread and I went down there. So they had this 11-foot ladder in there, and the drapery in the Green Room — way up at the top — was coming off. Now, I went up the ladder — two steps from the top — and all I had was this needle and



thread to hold me up there. And the housekeeper looked in there, and she said, ‘This I don’t want to see!’ And she left. And Washington, the fellow who was holding the ladder, he had a coughing spell! He started to cough and he had to walk away....So you wonder why I’m still living!

In recollections by the household staff, themes of home, family and tradition run strong. Employees often speak of themselves as a “family” and of the White House as a “second home.” Many of the workers are related and have held jobs passed down through generations. As a close-knit occupational community, workers share skills, customs and traditions that grow out of common experience and that are shaped by the unique demands, pressures and conditions of the workplace. They tell stories with job-related themes — about how they came to work at the White House, their first day on the job, their greatest challenges, funny incidents, memorable characters and relationships with first families. They share nicknaming traditions and take part



Eugene Allen, head butler and maitre d' at the White House for 34 years, sorts silverware in the pantry. Photo courtesy Gerald R. Ford Library

in employee customs like the annual Christmas party, the golf team and staff reunions. “We had a lot of fun with nicknames,” said Lillian Parks. “Melvin Carter, he was small, and everybody used to call him ‘Squirt.’ I was ‘Maggie’s Little Girl’ or ‘Mama.’ And Traphes was ‘Paddlefoot’ because he walked right flat-footed.” “We had code names for the Presidents,” writes Alonzo Fields in his published memoirs. “President Hoover, because he seldom smiled, we called ‘Smiley.’ President Roosevelt I gave the name ‘Charlie Potatoes’.... President Truman, because of his outspoken manner, we coded as ‘Billie Spunk.’ Mr. Fields, himself, was nicknamed “Donald Duck” by the butlers who worked for him because of the way he sputtered and yelled when something went wrong. “We had a good time,” said Lillian Parks. “People would say some of the funniest things, make you die. And *do* some funny things. There was never a dull day.”

At the White House, workers often pass along knowledge of work techniques and routines, traditions of service and decorum, and other codes of behavior through word of mouth and by imitation and example. Experienced “old-timers” teach new generations of workers by telling stories and jokes, sharing personal experience, and demonstrating work methods. A critical body of accumulated knowledge and wisdom

resides in these workers who, over decades of change — as first families come and go — remain a key source of continuity at the White House. Acknowledged authorities on everything from where tea napkins are stored to how to welcome visiting dignitaries, they provide a valuable link between past and present. “When a new administration comes in they’re just as in the dark as anybody else — they don’t know what to do. So as butlers, we have been there. We can kind of carry them along; we can help them along,” said John Johnson, a butler at the White House for 30 years. And Lillian Parks related, “After I retired, the usher called me and said, ‘Lillian, I wish you’d come down here and straighten this house out!’ It was all kind of mixed up.... You see, I grew up in there. I knew how things worked.” Through traditions of teaching and learning, a culture of White House work is humanized, maintained and adapted.

At the Festival, White House workers will come together to share their life and work with the public. Through their stories, values and experiences, they add a rich, human perspective to the historical record of a national institution.

Further Readings

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