

# Workers at the White House

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*A Photo Essay by Roland Freeman*



*“It was just like a big family, a real big family.”*

– Lillian Rogers Parks

In celebration of the 200th anniversary of the White House, the Festival of American Folklife presents a program about the occupational lives and folklore of White House workers. Through living presentations and demonstrations, this program reveals a human dimension of the White House, through the skills, values and experiences of the men and women who worked there. The following pages feature a few of the many employees — maids, butlers, engineers, chefs and others — who have helped to make the White House work and who will be sharing their lives and stories with visitors to the Festival.

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*Roland Freeman is a documentary photographer who does research in Black culture throughout the African Diaspora. Since 1972, he has been a field research photographer for the Smithsonian’s Festival of American Folklife.*

*“I grew up in the White House. I was 12 years old when I first started going there with my mother, and I’ve been in and out of the White House ever since.”*



Lillian Rogers Parks, a 95-year-old former maid and seamstress, first began working in the White House with her mother in 1909, during the Taft administration.



Alonzo Fields, age 92, served as the chief butler and maitre d' at the White House for 21 years from the Hoover to the Eisenhower administration.

*“When I was directing a dinner, I’d seat the President and step back and then give a nod to the men to start the service. From then on I was directing an orchestra. I had my strings here and my wind instruments in the back and I was directing. And people would watch and they’d marvel at it, they really did.”*

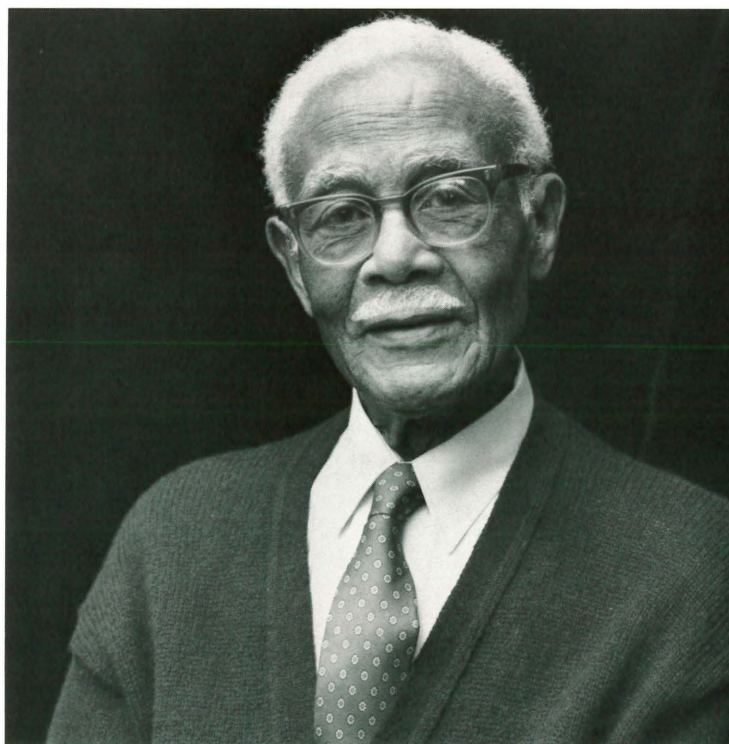




Eugene Allen started working in the White House as a pantryman for President Truman in 1952 and rose through the ranks to become chief butler and maitre d'. He retired in 1986 after serving 34 years with eight first families.

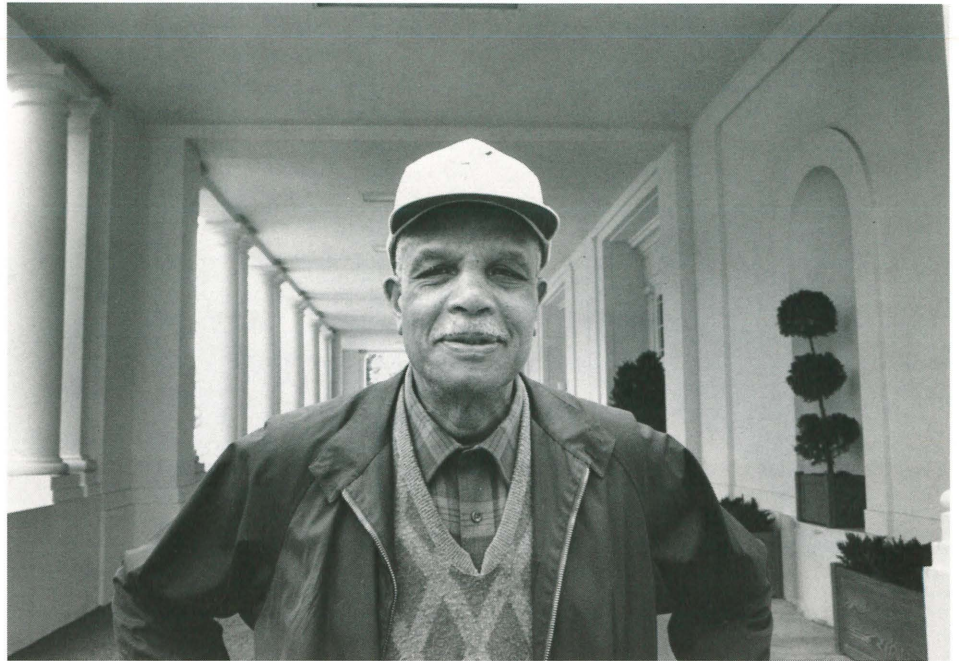
*“The word doorman is a misnomer. I didn’t run outside and open doors and that was it. I greeted you and welcomed you to the White House. I made a show that I knew everyone that came in. And that made them feel a lot better.”*

*“I thought I knew how to serve, but the White House is different. Other places you can make mistakes and you don’t feel so bad, but you don’t feel like making mistakes for the President and First Lady.... All that was in the back of your mind when you were setting up for any activity.”*



Preston Bruce, a sharecropper's son from South Carolina, served as a White House doorman from the Eisenhower to the Ford administration.

*“My job was to see that every floor was clean, every speck of dust was removed, that there was not a single flower petal on a mantle or table. And I was proud of that. I’d walk the House and walk and walk, just to make sure it was right.”*



Benjamin Harrison worked as a houseman for 32 years from the Eisenhower to the Reagan White House. He retired in 1988 as house foreman.



Norwood Williams, a mail messenger from the Eisenhower to the Carter administration, still works as a part-time butler at the White House, a job he has performed for over 35 years.

*“The messenger’s job is to get it there. We are the conveyor belts. If they don’t get it, they can’t act on it.”*





*“We chefs have a saying,  
‘The guests must wait for the soufflé.’  
But at the White House, the soufflé  
waits for the guests.”*

Henry Haller, who served as executive chef from the Johnson to the Reagan administration, was known for his ability to adapt to the likes and dislikes of five different first families.

*“There’s no place like  
the White House. All the things  
you do for a family out of your  
line of work — anything they  
wanted, from fixing a pocket-  
book to moving furniture.”*



Former plumber Howard Arrington learned his trade in the White House, starting as a plumber’s helper in 1946 and working his way up to become chief plumbing foreman, a position he held for 19 of his 34 years of service. He is pictured here with his grandson, Russell Pellicot.

*“When you first go to work at the White House, you are all eyeballs. Honestly, for the first month, your eyes are as big as teacups. You just drink — you’re actually drinking in history and current events.”*



Russell Free worked as an engineer from the Nixon to the Reagan administration.



Samuel Ficklin worked as a part-time butler at the White House for half a century and served 10 presidents before retiring in 1991. His brothers, John and Charles Ficklin, were former White House maitre d's.

*“What makes me feel good is when people come back to the White House and they remember me.”*





William Bowen, a part-time butler, first started working at the White House with his father in 1957. Together they span 70 years of service to first families.

*“You start in a white coat at the door. You just maybe pass a few drinks. You don’t have enough skills to serve the tables or set up. You have to gradually work up to that — before you can put your tux on, before you are considered a butler.”*

*“One day you’re an electrical expert, the next day you’re a plumbing expert, and God only knows what you’ll be the day after that — in the usher’s office you were involved in all phases of the operation and maintenance of that 132-room house.”*

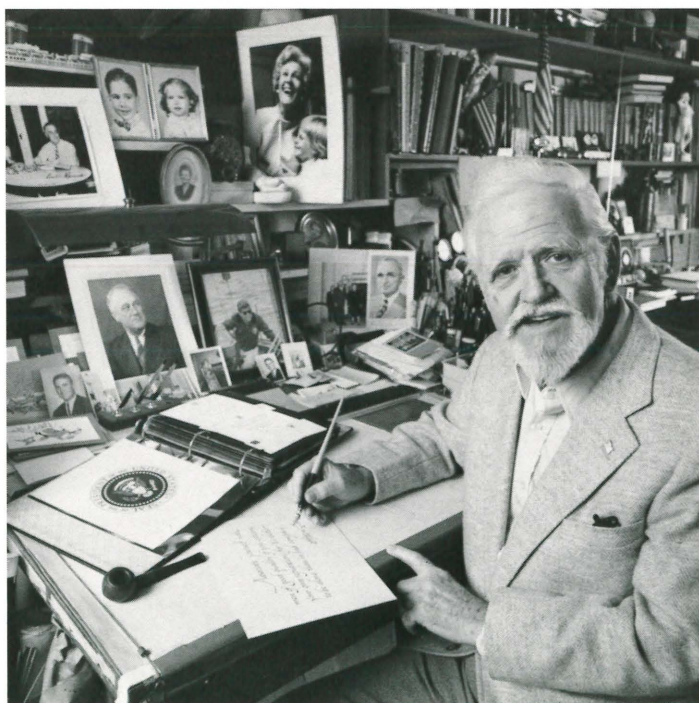


Nelson Pierce worked as an assistant usher from the Kennedy to the Reagan administration.

*“When I’d get in a cab and say, ‘Take me to the White House,’ they’d say, ‘To the White House — at this time of night?’ They thought I was telling a story. And they’d sit there and wait ‘til I walked through the gate.”*



Born and raised on his grandfather’s farm near Lynchburg, Virginia, 80-year-old former butler Armstead Barnett lived at the White House for four years during the Roosevelt administration.



Sanford Fox, a master of protocol and social ceremony, worked as a calligrapher and head of the social entertainment office from Presidents Roosevelt to Ford. He carried on White House traditions that he learned from his predecessor and teacher, Adrian Tolley, who first joined the staff in 1915.

*“Each family that comes in has their own style, their own way of doing.”*