



# THE WORKING

## *White House*

200 Years of Tradition and Memories

Developed by The White House Historical Association and the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Organized for travel by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service.

  
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THE WHITE HOUSE  
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## *A legacy of excellence*

Ever since John and Abigail Adams first 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 seat of government, family residence, ceremonial center, museum, and historic building. As witnesses to history and active participants in the nation’s story, White House workers form a close-knit community, sharing a distinctive work culture and workplace.

The White House has long depended on workers whose origins can be traced to many nations and cultures. In the 19th century, residence staff from Europe worked alongside slaves who were brought to Washington by southern presidents prior to 1860. Between 1890 and 1940, several waves of African American migration from the South brought an influx of newcomers to the nation’s capital. Some found jobs at the White House and established decades-long careers at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.





Many White House workers came to their jobs with experience in hotels and resorts, in large town or country houses, or in the railroad industry as conductors and porters. Their poise, polish, and professionalism served these individuals well in the White House. Others obtained employment through family connections among the White House residence staff. Whatever their background, employees quickly had to learn the ways of the Executive Mansion: what to do and when to do it, who was in charge, how to offset a crisis, and how to adjust to the first family's tastes and preferences.

There is no such thing as a "typical" day in the White House. Workers must fulfill a variety of duties, deal with unpredictable national and world events, and adjust to more gradual changes in technology, politics, and society. Each day in the life of a White House worker brings something new. And whenever members of a new first family arrive, White House workers must help them understand how the household has previously functioned, while also adapting to the incoming family's style and traditions.

*The Working White House* explores 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.

Far left: Chief Usher J.B. West meets with Lady Bird Johnson and incoming First Lady Patricia Nixon shortly after the presidential election, 1968. *Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library*. Left: Valet Daniel Spriggs (far left) keeps vigil at James Garfield's deathbed after the president is shot, 1881. *Kiplinger Washington Collection*. Above: White House culinary staff gather for a portrait before an official dinner, 2005. *White House Photo*. Cover: Maintenance worker Lawrence Thompson prepares the Blue Room for tour groups, 2001. *The White House Historical Association*.

# A chronology of service

“When you first go to work at the White House, you’re all eyeballs... You’re actually drinking in history and current events.” — Russell Free, engineer, 1964–86



Jean Pierre Sioussat, doorkeeper, Jefferson administration  
*The White House Historical Association*



Jerry Smith, butler, cook, doorman, and footman, Grant to Theodore Roosevelt administrations  
*Library of Congress*



Henry Pinckney, steward, Theodore Roosevelt administration  
*Kevin Clay Pinckney*



Elizabeth Jaffray, housekeeper, Taft to Coolidge administrations  
*Library of Congress*



Thomas Pendel, doorkeeper, Lincoln to McKinley administrations  
*The White House Historical Association*



Winnie Monroe, cook and nursemaid, Hayes administration  
*Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center*



Irwin “Ike” Hoover, electrician and chief usher, Benjamin Harrison to Franklin D. Roosevelt administrations  
*The Riverside Press*



Lillian Rogers Parks, maid and seamstress, Hoover to Eisenhower administrations  
*Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library*



Elizabeth McDuffie, maid, Franklin D. Roosevelt administration  
*AP/Wide World Photos*



Clara Richardson, maid, Eisenhower to Carter administrations  
*The White House Historical Association*



Shirley Bailey, housekeeper, Nixon to Carter administrations  
*The White House Historical Association*



Gary Walters, chief usher, Reagan to George W. Bush administrations  
*The White House*

“Our responsibility is to the presidency, not to the president.”

— Gary Walters, chief usher, 1986–2007

- 1789–97 George Washington
- 1797–1801 John Adams
- 1801–09 Thomas Jefferson
- 1809–17 James Madison
- 1817–25 James Monroe
- 1825–29 John Quincy Adams
- 1829–37 Andrew Jackson
- 1837–41 Martin Van Buren
- 1841 William Henry Harrison
- 1841–45 John Tyler
- 1845–49 James K. Polk
- 1849–50 Zachary Taylor
- 1850–53 Millard Fillmore
- 1853–57 Franklin Pierce
- 1857–61 James Buchanan
- 1861–65 Abraham Lincoln
- 1865–69 Andrew Johnson
- 1869–77 Ulysses S. Grant
- 1877–81 Rutherford B. Hayes
- 1881 James A. Garfield
- 1881–85 Chester A. Arthur
- 1885–89 Grover Cleveland
- 1889–93 Benjamin Harrison
- 1893–97 Grover Cleveland
- 1897–1901 William McKinley
- 1901–09 Theodore Roosevelt
- 1909–13 William H. Taft
- 1913–21 Woodrow Wilson
- 1921–23 Warren G. Harding
- 1923–29 Calvin Coolidge
- 1929–33 Herbert Hoover
- 1933–45 Franklin D. Roosevelt
- 1945–53 Harry S. Truman
- 1953–61 Dwight D. Eisenhower
- 1961–63 John F. Kennedy
- 1963–69 Lyndon B. Johnson
- 1969–74 Richard M. Nixon
- 1974–77 Gerald R. Ford
- 1977–81 Jimmy Carter
- 1981–89 Ronald Reagan
- 1989–93 George H. W. Bush
- 1993–2001 Bill Clinton
- 2001–09 George W. Bush

1790
1800
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2000
2010

**1801–09**  
Thomas Jefferson's 12-person household staff includes his personal slaves and European servants.

**1800**  
John and Abigail Adams move into the unfinished executive mansion with four servants, all paid from Adams's own pocket.

**1830**  
Federal Census records 14 slaves living in the White House during Andrew Jackson's administration.

**1845**  
The Polks reorganize household, changing management procedures in place since Dolley Madison's day and solidifying the role of steward.

**1860**  
Federal Census lists 10 servants at the White House, most born in Great Britain.

**1870–1909**  
White House domestic staff reflects racial mix of many upper-income mid-Atlantic American households. Servants dine together, segregated by job category rather than race.

**1909–1930s**  
Helen Taft requires servants of different races to eat at separate tables, a policy reversed by Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt.

**1960s–present**  
Concept of executive chef is introduced and continues to the present. Cristeta Comerford, appointed in 2005, is the first woman to hold this position.

Abigail Adams Supervising the Hanging of the Wash in the East Room, by Gordon Phillips, 1966.  
*The White House Historical Association (White House Collection)*

Chief cook Dolly Johnson in the White House kitchen, c. 1902. *Library of Congress*

Cristeta Comerford, 2005. *White House Photo*

“It’s like a whole family here. We all work together.”

— Ricardo Sanvictores, butler, 1972–2003

Coward-McCann

Fleet Publishing

# *A position of honor*

Since 1800, the White House has depended upon the men and women who have served in many capacities in the executive residence.



Long-time doorman Preston Bruce, who worked at the White House from 1953 to 1978, often observed that his job title was misleading. During the 19th century, doormen, or doorkeepers, were indeed posted at the entrances to the White House. But Bruce did not simply open the door to visitors. Rather, he oversaw the intricate protocol of greeting, escorting, and seating guests at official White House functions.

In the early 1800s, the White House steward performed the functions of maître d' (short for maître d'hôtel—literally, “master of the hall”) and general manager. The steward’s powerful yet delicate post required communication with politicians and officials as well as with the family and servants. By the end of the 1840s, these duties gradually came under the direction of the chief usher (a position established in 1897) and housekeeper.

By the 1960s, the chief usher was in charge of a maintenance staff of 27, with the housekeeper supervising a household staff of 32, including three stewards. Today, the chief usher oversees the 95-person household staff of butlers, maids, housekeepers, chefs, cooks, doormen, housemen, florists, electricians, plumbers, storekeepers, and engineers. The chief usher also is in charge of construction, maintenance, and remodeling, as well as administrative, fiscal, and personnel functions.

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Above: Doorman Roland Harley with President and Mrs. Reagan, 1981. *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*.  
Left: White House doormen, 1889-93. *Library of Congress*.

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