



*The
Residence*

INSIDE THE
PRIVATE WORLD OF
The White House



KATE ANDERSEN BROWER

The Residence

Inside the Private World of The White House



Kate Andersen Brower



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Dedication

FOR BROOKE BROWER, MY HUSBAND, AND THE ONE WHO MAKES ME BELIEVE THAT ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE.

AND FOR OUR JOYOUS BABIES, GRAHAM AND CHARLOTTE.

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Main Cast of Characters

James W. F. “Skip” Allen	Usher, 1979–2004
Reds Arrington	Plumber, Plumbing Foreman, 1946–1979
Preston Bruce	Doorman, 1953–1977
Traphes Bryant	Electrician, Dog Keeper, 1951–1973
Cletus Clark	Painter, 1969–2008
William “Bill” Cliber	Electrician, 1963–1990; Chief Electrician, 1990–2004
Wendy Elsasser	Florist, 1985–2007
Chris Emery	Usher, 1987–1994
Betty Finney	Maid, 1993–2007
James Hall	Part-time Butler, 1963–2007
William “Bill” Hamilton	Houseman, Head of the Storeroom, 1958–2013
James Jeffries	Kitchen Worker, Part-time Butler, 1959–Current
Wilson Jerman	Houseman, Butler, 1957–1993; Part-time Doorman, 2003–2010
Jim Ketchum	Curator, 1961–1963; Chief Curator, 1963–1970
Christine Limerick	Executive Housekeeper, 1979–2008 (hiatus between 1986 and 1991)
Linsey Little	Houseman, 1979–2005
Roland Mesnier	Executive Pastry Chef, 1979–2006
Betty Monkman	Curator, 1967–1997; Chief Curator, 1997–2002
Ronn Payne	Florist, 1973–1996
Nelson Pierce	Usher, 1961–1987
Mary Prince	Amy Carter’s Nanny
James Ramsey	Butler, end of Carter Administration–2010
Stephen Rochon	Chief Usher, 2007–2011
Frank Ruta	Chef, 1979–1991 (hiatus between 1987 and 1988)
Tony Savoy	Operations Department Staffer/Supervisor, 1984–2013
Bob Scanlan	Florist, 1998–2010
Walter Scheib	Executive Chef, 1994–2005
Rex Scouten	Usher, 1957–1969; Chief Usher, 1969–1986, Chief Curator, 1986–1997
Ivaniz Silva	Maid, 1985–2008
Herman Thompson	Part-time Butler, 1960–1993

Gary Walters	Usher, 1976–1986; Chief Usher 1986–2007
J. B. West	Usher, 1941–1957; Chief Usher, 1957–1969
Lynwood Westray	Part-time Butler, 1962–1994
Worthington White	Usher, 1980–2012
Zephyr Wright	The Johnsons' Family Cook

Introduction

Living in the White House is like being on the stage, where tragedies and comedies play alternately. And we, the servants of the White House, are the supporting cast.

—LILLIAN ROGERS PARKS, WHITE HOUSE MAID AND SEAMSTRESS, 1929–1961, *MY THIRTY YEARS BACKSTAIRS AT THE WHITE HOUSE*

Preston Bruce was sitting in his Washington, D.C., kitchen with his wife, listening to the radio and having lunch—the one meal they ate together every day—when an announcer interrupted with an urgent message: *the president has been shot.*

He jumped up from his chair, cracking his knee on the table and sending dishes crashing to the floor. A minute or so later came another announcement, the voice even shriller: *The president has been shot. It has been verified that he has been shot. His condition is unknown.*

This can't be happening, thought Bruce. He threw on his coat, forgetting his hat on the bridge. It was a November day, and jumped in his car, tearing out of the driveway. His wife, Virginia, was left behind, standing in their kitchen, shell-shocked amid the shards of broken dishes lying on the floor.

The normally unflappable Bruce was weaving through downtown traffic at fifty-five miles an hour—“I didn't realize how fast I was going,” he would say later—when he suddenly heard a police siren blaring behind him. An officer on a motorcycle pulled up alongside him at Sixteenth Street and Columbia Road, jumped off his bike, and walked over to the driver's door.

“What's the hurry?” He was in no mood for excuses.

“Officer, I work at the White House,” Bruce said breathlessly. “The president has been shot.”

A stunned pause followed. Not everyone had heard the devastating news. “C'mon,” the startled officer said, jumping back onto his motorcycle. “Follow me!” Bruce got his own police escort to the southwest gate of the White House that day.

Most Americans who were alive in 1963 remember exactly where they were when they learned that President Kennedy had been shot. For Bruce, though, the news had a special impact: Kennedy wasn't only the president, but he was also his boss, and—more important—his friend. Preston Bruce was the doorman at the White House, and a beloved member of the staff. Just the morning before, he had escorted the president, the first lady, and their son, John-John, to the marine helicopter on the South Lawn, which would carry them to Air Force One at Andrews Air Force Base. From there the Kennedys would leave for their fateful two-day, five-city campaign tour of Texas. (John-John, who was just four days shy of his third birthday, loved helicopter rides with his parents. He went only as far as Andrews; when he was told he couldn't accompany his mother and father all the way to Dallas, he sobbed. It was the last time he would ever see his father.)

“I'm leaving you in charge of everything here,” President Kennedy shouted to Bruce, above the whirl of the helicopter's engines on the South Lawn. “You run things to suit yourself.”

A descendant of slaves and the son of a South Carolina sharecropper, Bruce had become an honorary member of the Kennedy family. He watched movies with them in the White House theater and looked on as the president played happily with his children. He winced when Kennedy bumped his

head on a table while chasing John-John, a rambunctious toddler, around the Oval Office. (JFK's desk was one of John-John's favorite hiding places. Bruce would sometimes have to fish him out from underneath before important meetings.) Tall and thin in his midfifties, with a shock of white hair and a bright white mustache, Bruce wore a black suit and white bow tie to work every day. He was devoted to his job, which included the delicate assignment of seating nervous guests at state dinners that he designed a table nicknamed the "Bruce Table," with a slanted top that made it easier to arrange table place cards. His invention would be used for decades.

On November 22, as he raced toward the White House, Bruce was in disbelief. "To this day I can still feel the shock that ran through my whole body," he later recalled.

After arriving at the executive mansion, he had only one thing on his mind. "I would wait for Mr. Kennedy." He huddled around the TV with other workers in the crowded Usher's Office. The news confirmed fears shared by every White House staffer. "In most of our minds," he wrote years later, "you're always aware that it was completely possible that any president that ever left that eighteen acres could come back just like President Kennedy."

When Jackie Kennedy finally returned to the White House at 4:00 A.M. wearing the iconic bloodstained pink wool suit and clutching the arm of her brother-in-law Robert F. Kennedy, she was ghostly white and eerily calm. "Bruce, you waited until we came," she said softly, as though she was trying to comfort him. "Yes, you knew I was going to be here, Mrs. Kennedy," he replied.

After a short service in the East Room, he led the first lady and the attorney general up to their private residence on the second floor. In that quiet moment in the elevator, standing next to the two people who had been closest to JFK, Bruce finally broke down sobbing. Jackie and Robert joined him, folding their arms around one another, they cried together until they reached the second floor. When Jackie got to her bedroom she told her personal maid and confidante, Providencia Paredes, "I thought they might kill me too." Then she finally took off the suit caked in her husband's blood and bathed.

Exhausted, Bruce spent what was left of that night sitting upright in a chair in a tiny bedroom on the third floor. He took off his jacket and bow tie and unbuttoned the collar of his stiff white shirt, but he wouldn't let himself give into exhaustion. "I didn't want to lie down, in case Mrs. Kennedy needed me." His allegiance was reciprocated. Shortly after the funeral, the first lady gave him the tie his husband had worn on the flight to Dallas. "The president would have wanted you to have this," she told him. (JFK had switched ties just before getting into the motorcade, and had the old one in his jacket pocket when he was shot.) Robert Kennedy pulled off his gloves and handed them to his stricken friend: "Keep these gloves," he told Bruce, "and remember always that I wore them to my brother's funeral."

The White House doorman refused to leave his post to return home to his wife until November 24, four days after the assassination. Bruce's devotion to his job, and to the first family, may seem remarkable, but nothing less is expected from those who work in the residence.

AMERICA'S FIRST FAMILIES are largely unknowable. Their privacy is guarded by West Wing aides and by a team of roughly one hundred people who stay deliberately out of sight: the White House residence staff. These workers spend much of their time on the second and third floors of the fifty-five thousand-square-foot building. It's here that the first family can escape the overwhelming pressures of the office, even if just for a couple of precious hours while they eat dinner or watch TV. Upstairs, as tourists shuffle below on the first floor and amateur photographers gather at the perimeter fence with cell phone cameras, they are free to conduct their personal lives in private.

Unlike the slew of political aides who have eagerly given interviews and published memoirs after leaving the White House, the maids, butlers, chefs, ushers, engineers, electricians, plumbers, carpenters, and florists who run America's most famous home have largely preferred to remain invisible. One worker told me that his colleagues share a "passion for anonymity." As a result, the unseen backstairs world of the White House staff has remained rich with intrigue.

I first became aware of that world when, as a member of the White House press corps, I was invited to a luncheon that Michelle Obama held for fewer than a dozen reporters in an intimate dining room on the State Floor of the White House. Dubbed the Old Family Dining Room after Jack Kennedy created a separate dining room on the second floor that is used more routinely by current first families, the room is tucked away across from the formal State Dining Room, where I had covered dozens of events. I had never seen this private side of the White House; indeed, I didn't even know the room existed. Access to many areas of the residence is heavily restricted; reporters and photographers covering formal events, such as East Room receptions and state dinners (now often held in an impressive white pavilion on the South Lawn), are kept cordoned off from White House guests. And for these large gatherings, the White House staff is often augmented by the hiring of part-time butlers and waitstaff.

So I was surprised, on the day of the first lady's luncheon, when a handler ushered us into the relatively small and cozy Old Family Dining Room, and an elegantly dressed gentleman offered us champagne on a gleaming silver tray. The menu included salad with vegetables from the White House garden and fresh pan-roasted rockfish elegantly presented on Truman china. Each course was served by a butler who clearly had a rapport with the first lady. *This is all very Downton Abbey*, I thought. The experience left me wondering: Just who were these people, so intimate with the world's most powerful family?

As a White House reporter for Bloomberg News, I worked in one of the many tiny windowless cubbies located below the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room. The cramped basement space is a constant whirl of activity as reporters race back and forth covering events, talking to sources, and rushing back to their computers to file stories. During my time covering the White House, I traveled around the world on Air Force One and on Air Force Two (the vice president's plane)—filing reports from Mongolia, Japan, Poland, France, Portugal, China, and Colombia—but the most fascinating stories turned out to be right in front of me every day: the men and women who take care of the first family who share a fierce loyalty to the institution of the American presidency. Each staffer who has served at the White House has borne witness to history, and each has incredible stories to share.

The White House is the country's most potent and enduring symbol of the presidency. Its 132 rooms, 147 windows, 28 fireplaces, 8 staircases, and 3 elevators are spread across the 6 floors—plus hidden mezzanine levels—all tucked within what appears to be a three-story building. The house is home to just one famous family at a time, but the members of the building's supporting cast are its permanent tenants.

The residence workers bring a sense of humanity and Old World values to the world's most famous eighteen acres. Rising at dawn, they sacrifice their personal lives to serve the first family with quiet, awe-inspiring dignity. For them, working in the White House, regardless of position, is a great honor. Elections may bring new faces, but they stay on from administration to administration and are careful to keep their political beliefs to themselves. They have one job: to make America's first families comfortable in the country's most public private home.

In the course of their work, many of these men and women have witnessed presidents and the families during incredibly vulnerable moments, but only a handful of residence workers have

published memoirs of their time at the White House. This book marks the first time that so many have shared what it's like to devote their lives to caring for the first family. Their memories range from small acts of kindness to episodes of anger and private despair, from stories of personal quirks and foibles to moments when their everyday work was transcended by instances of national triumph and tragedy.

From playing with the Kennedy children in the Oval Office to witnessing the first African American president arrive at the White House; from being asked by Nancy Reagan to return each of her twenty-five Limoges boxes to the same exact spot after cleaning, to giving Hillary Clinton a moment of privacy during her husband's sex scandal and impeachment, the residence staff see sides of the first family no one else ever glimpses.

Though they gave me unprecedented access to their stories, recent and current residence workers follow a long-established code of ethics that values discretion and the protection of the first family's privacy above all else. Unlike most people in power-obsessed Washington, D.C., who tell each other where they work almost before offering their names, staffers avoid mentioning their extraordinary jobs. They inherited that code of honor from the previous generations who kept FDR's paralysis private by ushering guests into the room for state dinners only after the president was seated and his wheelchair rolled out of view—and who made sure that stories of JFK's philandering never left the White House gates.

Residence workers have such privileged access, in fact, that current White House aides did not want them speaking with me. One former staffer told me in an e-mail, "I think you will find that anyone who is still employed will not want to speak to you because they do not want to lose their jobs—yes, this is a reality. We were trained to keep what goes on inside the WH, inside the WH."

But while at first some of them were reluctant to share their experiences working in "the house," as they call it, all were incredibly gracious. Black and white, men and women, chefs, electricians, and maids, dozens of retired staffers invited me to sit across from them at their kitchen tables or to talk with them on their living room sofas. (I was pregnant with our second child at the time, which prompted lots of kind inquiries into how I was feeling and whether I wanted something to eat.) Before long, they were happily recounting decades of memories working for several presidents and the families. Many seemed oblivious to the fact that they had led remarkable lives with front-row seats to history. Their recollections were not always consistent; where many staffers had fond memories of the families they served, others told less flattering stories.

Getting them to talk wasn't always easy. Some opened up to me only after I mentioned the names of their colleagues whom I'd already interviewed. Others were guarded until we met in person, like Chief Electrician William "Bill" Cliber, who told me fascinating stories about Richard Nixon in his final days in office, and Executive Housekeeper Christine Limerick, who talked about her painful decision to temporarily leave her post because she was sick of taking abuse from a certain first lady.

Some people, like George W. Bush's favorite butler, James Ramsey, wanted to talk only about their positive experiences. Ramsey even said he was worried that the government would take away the pension he worked his entire life to earn if he shared anything negative (though there is no evidence that that would have happened). He was full of genuine love for the families he served. He passed away in 2014, but I feel fortunate to have gotten to know him and other staffers who died before they could see their stories told.

I've talked to people who worked at the White House during the time known as Camelot—including the first residence staffer to be informed of President Kennedy's assassination—and to butlers, doormen, and florists who served the Obamas. I've listened to the sons and daughters

presidents describe what it's like to grow up in the White House. And I have had candid conversations with former first ladies Rosalynn Carter, Barbara Bush, and Laura Bush, as well as many high-level White House aides. Most were genuinely eager to help bring attention to the people who work quietly and diligently behind the scenes.

Despite their sacrifice and hard work, the residence staff assiduously avoids the spotlight—and not just in a metaphorical sense. “There’s an unwritten rule that we stayed in the background. If there was a camera we always ducked under it, over it, or around it,” insisted Usher James W. F. “Skip” Allen. Yet the workers I interviewed had a blend of intelligence and character that made me want to learn more about their lives. Many of them also had a wry, even wicked, sense of humor. After our interview, retired butler James Hall made sure to walk me out—very slowly—through the crowded lobby of his retirement home. He wasn’t just being polite, he admitted; he wanted to make sure everyone saw him with a younger woman. “It’s like *Peyton Place* around here!” he said, laughing.

My research took me beyond Washington and its suburbs. Allen had retired to a sprawling six-thousand-square-foot nineteenth-century farmhouse in Bedford, Pennsylvania. We ate chicken salad sandwiches by his pool during a light drizzle as he described the close relationship between the president and the staff (“It would be nothing out of the ordinary for a president to acknowledge somebody’s birthday”) and the weight of the job (“Name a president. Nobody leaves the White House looking younger than they came in”).

While they are overlooked in the pomp and circumstance of presidential events and state visits, White House workers are vital to the public and private lives of the American presidency. “In a way, my family and I always thought of them as cohosts with the president and the first lady,” Tricia Nixon Cox, the older of President Nixon’s two daughters, told me. “They made everything very beautiful and warm.”

Sometimes they even help the world’s most famous couple weather storms and feel normal again—if only for a few hours. At the height of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, several staffers told me Hillary Clinton appeared tired and depressed. They said they felt sorry for her, knowing she craved the one thing she couldn’t have: privacy. One staffer, Usher Worthington White, recalled clearing tourists out of the White House and keeping her Secret Service agents at bay so that the first lady could enjoy a few short hours of solitude by the pool. Having the chance to help Mrs. Clinton “meant the world to me,” White said.

Residence workers sometimes get to witness the sheer joy a newly inaugurated president feels upon reaching the highest peak in American politics. In 2009, after the inaugural balls were finally over, the Obamas were settling in for their first night in the White House. But they still weren’t quite ready for bed when White was dropping off some late-night papers. When he got upstairs to the second floor he heard something unusual.

“All of a sudden I heard President Obama say, ‘I got this, I got this. I got the inside on this now’ and suddenly the music picked up and it was Mary J. Blige.” The new residents had shed their formal wear; the president was in shirtsleeves and the first lady was wearing a T-shirt and sweatpants. The president grabbed the first lady, White recalls, and suddenly “they were dancing together” to Blige’s hit “Real Love.” The usher paused a moment as he told the story. “It was the most beautiful, loveable thing you could imagine.”

“I bet you haven’t seen anything like this in this house, have you?” Obama asked as the first couple danced.

“I can honestly say I’ve never heard *any* Mary J. Blige being played on this floor,” White replied. He isn’t sure how long the Obamas stayed there dancing, but it was clear that they intended

savor the moment.

MANY FIRST FAMILIES say they think of the residence staff as the true tenants of the White House. President Carter has called them “the glue that holds the house together.” One staffer called his colleagues “a group of people who eat, sleep, and drink the White House.”

The White House employs approximately 96 full-time and 250 part-time residence staff: ushers, chefs, florists, maids, butlers, doormen, painters, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, engineers, and calligraphers. In addition, about two dozen National Park Service staff take care of the White House grounds. The residence workers are federal employees who serve at the pleasure of the president.

The center of activity for the White House staff is the Usher’s Office, located on the State Floor next to the North Portico entrance. The chief usher is in charge of the funds allocated by Congress to run the house, including the cost of heating, lighting, air-conditioning, and the staff’s salaries. In 1941, when there were sixty-two people on the residence staff, the annual budget was just \$152,000. Fast-forward through almost seventy-five years of added staff, operational costs, inflation, and more, and the annual budget now hovers around \$13 million. (This cost is separate from the \$750,000 required to repair and restore the White House every year.)

The job of the chief usher is akin to the general manager of a major hotel, but with only one tenant to serve. He or she manages the entire residence staff, working closely with the first lady. Reporting to the chief usher is a deputy and a team of ushers responsible for overseeing the various departments—“shops,” such as the Housekeeping Shop or the Flower Shop. The ushers serve as contacts for visitors, including the first family’s house guests, and they keep records of the president’s movements within the house, which eventually get transferred to the presidential libraries for posterity.

The job of chief usher in today’s White House is so complex that it demands the kind of rigor and discipline generally associated with the military. Before U.S. Coast Guard Rear Admiral Stephen Rochon was appointed chief usher by George W. Bush in 2007—becoming the eighth person, and the first African American, to serve in the role officially—he sat for eight interviews for the job, driving back and forth to the White House from his Coast Guard station at Norfolk, Virginia. His final interview was with the president in the Oval Office. Bush wondered whether Rochon would be happy with the new, misleadingly modest title.

“What do you think about this chief usher business?” Bush asked him.

Rochon replied: “Well, Mr. President, what’s in a title?”

Apparently, a lot: When Rochon was hired, the post was renamed White House Chief Usher and Director of the Executive Residence, a decidedly more impressive job description. Since October 2011, the job has been held by Angella Reid, the former general manager of the Ritz-Carlton in Arlington, Virginia—the first woman and the second African American to hold the position.

No matter how august the title, the goal is simple: to provide whatever the first family needs. For Chief Usher J. B. West, that included feverishly searching the house for Caroline Kennedy’s lost hamsters and calling in dozens of experts in an unending quest to satisfy President Johnson’s demand for better water pressure in his shower. Jacqueline Kennedy called West “the most powerful man in Washington, next to the president.”

From the highest staff position to the most entry-level one, getting hired to work at the White House is not as simple as answering an ad or applying online. “The jobs in the White House are not advertised,” said Tony Savoy, head of the Operations Department until 2013. “Nearly everyone interviewed had a family member or a friend who recommended them for the job. You’re vouching for

the person you're bringing in." Most workers stay on for decades, some even for generations: one family, the Ficklins, has seen nine members work in the White House.

Every administration names a social secretary. The post has traditionally gone to a woman—until 2011, when Jeremy Bernard was named to the position by the Obamas, becoming both the first man and the first openly gay social secretary. The social secretary acts as a conduit between the first family and the residence staff, and between the West Wing and the East Wing. The position involves supervision of seating for state dinners and formal events at the White House, with the secretary distributing worksheets to the residence staff showing how many people are expected and what rooms will be used for the event.

The social secretary often gets pulled between competing worlds. Letitia Baldrige, who served in the post during the Kennedy administration, showed the president letters disapproving of John-John's long hair—which the first lady loved. When the president insisted he get a haircut, Jackie Kennedy didn't speak to Baldrige for three days.

Residence workers can make the social secretary's job of navigating endless parties and following time-honored traditions much easier. Julianna Smoot, who served as the Obamas' social secretary from 2010 to 2011, credits the team of White House calligraphers, who sit in a small office down the hall from the Social Office in the East Wing, with saving her from one embarrassing oversight during her time there. One day in the late summer of 2010, one of the three calligraphers—who are responsible for creating a massive number of invitations to White House events—approached Smoot and asked, "Have you thought about Christmas?"

"It's in December. Can't we talk about it when we get closer?" Smoot said. Christmas seemed far away, and there were so many events to work on before then.

"We're actually behind on planning by now," the calligrapher told her worriedly.

Smoot was shocked. "Of course I wouldn't know that!" she recalled later. "It was this panic moment! We had to come up with a theme *and* the Christmas card. I think the reason we had Christmas in 2010 was because of the calligraphers."

The social secretary sometimes delivers bad news to the residence staff on behalf of the first lady, who usually wants to stay above the fray. When Laura Bush hired Lea Berman as her new social secretary, it fell to Berman to take Executive Chef Walter Scheib aside and tell him to stop serving "this country club food" to the family. Scheib said he'd just been following orders and besides, much of what he prepared could hardly be called "country club food." In fact, it was far from highbrow. "The president wanted a peanut butter and honey sandwich then by god we made the best damn peanut butter and honey sandwich we could," Scheib says, adding, "This is what the president wants, be careful what you call it." When Berman started showing him dog-eared pages of Martha Stewart cookbooks, the chef was enraged.

Christine Limerick oversaw about twenty staffers in the Housekeeping Shop, which she managed from 1979 to 2008 (she took a hiatus between 1986 and 1991). Six worked on the second and third floors in the family's private living quarters, including several maids and a houseman who vacuumed and moved heavy furniture. Two staffers handled the laundry exclusively and the rest took care of the tour areas and the Oval Office, and they were supplemented by additional workers when there were house guests and big events, such as state dinners.

The White House also employs a team of florists, led by a chief florist, who prepare arrangements daily in the Flower Shop, located in a small space on the Ground Floor, nestled under the driveway of the White House's North Portico. The florists are responsible for coming up with unique arrangements that suit the first family's taste. During the holidays and around state dinners the florists call

volunteers to help; the Obamas often use outside event companies from Chicago to help stage elaborate state dinners and decorate for Christmas. The chief florist focuses on the public spaces and helps oversee all of the arrangements; the members of the Flower Shop share responsibility for decorating the entire complex, from the private quarters on the second and third floors to the West Wing, the East Wing, and the public rooms. No corner of the White House is overlooked.

Reid Cherlin, who was a spokesman for President Obama, remembers being awed by their work. “What always struck me was the flowers. Coming in in the morning in the West Wing, if you came in at the right time, the florists would be putting new bowls of peonies out,” he said. “There’s something about putting fresh flowers in a place where no one is necessarily going to be. It’s one thing for them to be on the coffee table in the Oval Office, it’s another thing to be sprucing things up in areas where people aren’t even going to congregate.”

Everyone works together to make the residence look as perfect as possible, said Bob Scanlan, who worked in the Flower Shop from 1998 to 2010. “If a flower was down in an arrangement, it wasn’t unusual for the housekeeper to come in and say, ‘You guys might want to take a look at the Red Room, there are petals on the table. I picked them up but it looks like they’re dropping still.’ We kept an eye out for each other because everything reflects on everybody.”

The residence is served by around six permanent butlers, and dozens of part-time butlers who come in on a regular basis to help with state dinners and receptions. Of the six full-time butlers, one is designated as the head butler, or the *maître d’*. The task of tending to the president’s more personal needs is handled by valets, who are always close at hand. There are typically two valets who work in shifts. They are military personnel who take care of the president’s clothes, run errands, shine shoes, and work with the housekeepers. For example, if the president’s shoes need to be resoled, a valet alerts a member of the Housekeeping Shop. When the president goes to the Oval Office in the morning, a valet stands close by in case he needs anything, including a cup of coffee, breakfast, or just a cough drop. When the president travels, a valet packs for him and often rides in a backup vehicle in the motorcade, carrying a spare shirt or tie in case the commander in chief spills something and needs a quick change of clothes.

On the very first day after his inauguration, George W. Bush was shocked when he met his valets. Laura Bush says, “These two men come and introduce themselves to George and say, ‘We’re your valets.’ So George went in and talked to his dad and said, ‘These two men just introduced themselves and said they were my valets, and I don’t *need* a valet. I don’t *want* a valet.’ And President Bush (George H. W. Bush) said, ‘You’ll get used to it.’” And he did. Sooner or later, any president must have an occasion to be grateful for the luxury of not having to worry about packing a spare shirt.

RESIDENCE WORKERS ARE there to alleviate the burdens of daily life for the first family, who generally have no time to cook, shop, or clean. They also serve under the highest possible security—what other household has a team of snipers keeping constant watch on the roof?—and must accustom themselves to a job with little privacy. Many observers have noted that living in the White House can be like spending time in a prison—though, as Michelle Obama notes, “It’s a really nice prison.”

Longtime White House maid Betty Finney (nicknamed “Little Betty” because of her tiny frame) says that the high level of security helps make the people who work there, and the family, feel safe. “You know the snipers are up there to protect you. Why not feel at home?” she said. “You’d wonder where they were if you didn’t see them!”

Recent security lapses, however, expose the vulnerability of this potent symbol of America

democracy and the family who call it home. They also show how multifaceted and critical the job of residence worker can be. As the nation's first black president, President Obama reportedly faces three times as many threats as his predecessors. In 2014, former residence workers were horrified when a man armed with a knife was able to scale the White House fence, sprint across the North Lawn, and actually make his way deep into the mansion's main floor, bypassing several Secret Service officers before he was eventually tackled by an off-duty agent. In another terrifying incident in 2011, a maid inadvertently became a sort of private investigator when she was the first person to notice a broken window and a chunk of white concrete on the floor of the Truman Balcony. Her discovery led to the realization that a man had actually fired at least seven bullets into the residence several days before (The Secret Service knew a shooting had occurred but wrongly concluded that the shots were fired by rival gangs in a gunfight and that they were not aimed at the executive mansion.) White House maids are trained to be "very observant," and they know to report anything out of the ordinary, Limerick says, especially if it could endanger the first family.

Certainly there's nothing ordinary about life in the residence, no matter how hard the staff work to make the president and his family feel at home. Beyond the very real security concerns, the White House bears precious little resemblance to a normal American household. The Reagans' son, Ron, told me about a visit he and his wife made to see his parents. When they arrived too late for dinner, they decided to rummage through the kitchen in the private quarters, looking for eggs and a frying pan. When a butler heard them rattling around late at night, he rushed in, looking concerned.

"Can I help you? Don't you want somebody to do that for you?" he asked earnestly.

"No, thank you," Reagan replied. "But can you tell me, where are the eggs? Where do you keep the frying pan?"

The butler didn't look pleased. The last thing the staff ever wants is to feel useless. In the end, Reagan had to ask the butler to bring up eggs from the Ground Floor kitchen; there were none in the Reagans' family kitchen.

"They really, *really* do want to do what they do. They don't want to just stand there."

Hillary Clinton was another first family member who sometimes wanted to be able to fend for herself. She designed an eat-in area in the second-floor kitchen so that her family could have the meals together informally.

"I knew I'd done the right thing when Chelsea was sick one night," she said. That night, she recalled, the staff "went crazy" when she went to make her daughter scrambled eggs.

"Oh, we'll bring an omelet from downstairs," the butler told her.

"No, I just want to make some scrambled eggs and applesauce and feed her what I would feed her if we were living anywhere else in America."

Though the first family may sometimes wish they could forget about the majesty of the residence, many of the workers said they took solace in it. "If you're having a little bit of a bad day with a member of the first family or their staff, you step away from it and you look at the house," said Limerick. "If I would see the White House lit up at night I'd think, *I actually work inside the building, and I've had the wonderful privilege to do that*. It could set my mind straight and I could deal with the next day."

THE WHITE HOUSE is the physical embodiment of American democracy. It sits on eighteen acres in downtown Washington, grounds that are cared for year-round by the National Park Service. The main building, known formally as the executive mansion, is divided into public and private rooms. The

mansion may look like it only has three floors, but its design is deceptive: the building actually contains six floors, plus two small mezzanine levels. In addition to two belowground floors, there is the Ground Floor, where the main kitchen, the Flower Shop, and the Carpenter's Shop are located; the State Floor, also called the first floor; the two mezzanines, which house the chief usher's office and the Pastry Kitchen; and the second and third floors, which are the first family's private quarters. The staff kitchen and storage areas are located in the basement levels. The East Wing and the West Wing have their own hidden floors, the most famous of which is the Situation Room, located underneath the West Wing. It has become a symbol of the gravity of the presidency, where the commander in chief gathers with advisers to handle major crises and conduct secure calls with foreign leaders.

The residence staff has its own cafeteria, dining room, lounge, and storage areas in the basement mezzanine (actually a full floor), located under the North Portico. Their cafeteria is separate from the main kitchen on the Ground Floor where meals are prepared for the first family and for formal occasions, including state dinners. (In addition, there is the small kitchen on the second floor of the residence that is exclusively used to prepare intimate family meals.) White House workers have traditionally gathered in the basement cafeteria to eat, talk, and unwind. For years, this was where the staff came to enjoy traditional Southern home cooking, including fried chicken, corn bread, and black-eyed peas, lovingly prepared by a team of African American cooks, including a woman named Miss Sally, who always wore elaborate hats when she wasn't working and loved to tease her colleagues—sometimes swearing like a sailor—when she served them. While the basement cafeteria was discontinued recently in an apparent cost-saving measure—much to the chagrin of the workers—it is still a gathering place, where workers bring their own food and sit down to eat and catch up.

Occasionally even top political aides come downstairs to dine with residence workers. Reggie Love, Obama's former personal assistant—known as his “body man”—grew so close to some of the butlers that he would eat with them on weekends in the kitchen when the cafeteria for West Wing staffers, known as the Navy Mess, was closed. Love left the White House in 2011, but he still plays cards with the White House butlers when he's in town.

THE WEST WING is home to the Oval Office and to the president's political staff. The East Wing houses the offices of the first lady and her staff. Walking between the two wings is roughly the equivalent of walking across a football field.

Every morning members of the staff have to roll out the carpets and put out ropes and stanchions in the tour areas on the Ground Floor and the State Floor. Every afternoon, after thousands of people have walked through, they have to clean, remove the stanchions, and roll down the carpets, so that when the first family wants to spend time on the State Floor it won't look so glaringly like a tourist destination.

“I didn't appreciate until I worked there that the president and the first lady aren't that far removed from all the public tours. They're just a floor above,” said Katie Johnson, President Obama's personal secretary from 2009 to 2011. Her responsibilities included keeping the president on schedule and coordinating with the first lady and the residence staff. Johnson was the person assigned with the unenviable task of telling the East Wing staff if the president was going to be running late for dinner with his family.

The residence feels “like a very, very fancy New York apartment,” she said candidly. “There's all this stuff going on outside and around but once you're inside, it's your home.”

Katie McCormick Lelyveld, Michelle Obama's first press secretary, would sometimes sit in a

office adjacent to the beauty parlor on the second floor. She remembers how quiet those floors were compared to the hubbub below. “There aren’t dozens of people flitting about in the personal home space. They very much try to treat it as a personal home. Agents aren’t standing inside there, they’re standing outside.”

“The White House is built on a human scale,” says Tricia Nixon Cox. One day, after a welcoming ceremony on the South Lawn, a visiting European prince turned to her and said, “It really is a house. He was astonished by the scale of the executive mansion, compared with the palaces he knew. “To him, it looked small!”

It may be less imposing than some royal palaces, but it is far from modest. The large Entrance Hall on the north side opens to the eighty-foot-long East Room at one end and the State Dining Room, often used for state dinners in honor of foreign heads of state, at the other. There are three rooms in between: the Green Room, the Blue Room, and the Red Room.

The first family’s private rooms on the second and third floors are linked by one main corridor on each floor: sixteen rooms and six bathrooms on the second floor, another twenty rooms and nine bathrooms on the third. Maids and valets have sometimes been housed on these floors, as well as presidential children. The guest rooms do not have numbers on their doors, but they are known among the residence staff by their room numbers, just like at a hotel. Each week, each of the White House maids is assigned a roster of rooms to clean. And they all hate Room Number 328.

“It’s the hardest room to clean!” says Maid Betty Finney. Room 328 has a sleigh bed, “and they’re incredibly hard to make! When you make a bed you want it to look neat, and that was a hard, hard job trying to get that thing neat. We all knew it had to be done, we just dreaded it.”

Each main floor boasts an oval-shaped room: the Diplomatic Reception Room on the Ground Floor, where President Roosevelt delivered his fireside chats and from where the first family usually enters the residence; the Blue Room on the State Floor, which overlooks the South Lawn and features a cut-glass French chandelier and vivid blue satin draperies; and the Yellow Oval Room on the second floor, leading to the Truman Balcony. This last was once a library with a private passage to President Lincoln’s office, now the Lincoln Bedroom, created so that Lincoln could avoid the hordes of people waiting to see him in the Treaty Room; it’s now a presidential study. The West Wing, where the Oval Office is located, would not be built until decades later. Until then, the residence served as the president’s home and his office.

There are four staircases in the executive residence: the Grand Staircase, which goes from the State Floor to the second floor; a staircase by the president’s elevator, which goes from the basement to the third floor; a spiral staircase by the staff elevator that goes from the first-floor mezzanine where the Pastry Shop is located, to the basement; and the fourth staircase, the true “backstairs” which runs from the second floor by the Queens’ Bedroom (an elegant rose-colored room named for royalty who have stayed there) to the east end of the third floor. Maids sometimes use this staircase when they need to clean rooms on the second floor and want to avoid interrupting the first family. It allows them to walk all the way up to the third floor and circle back down.

The White House was designed by the Irish-born architect James Hoban, after winning a competition devised by President George Washington and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. The house’s design was inspired by Leinster House, an eighteenth-century Georgian mansion in Dublin that is home to Ireland’s Parliament. Early residents complained that it was too big, a critique rarely heard now that state dinners sometimes have to be prepared for hundreds of guests in the cramped kitchen and almost every guest room is crammed with friends and family around the inauguration.

George Washington had predicted that Washington, D.C., would rival the beauty and grandeur of

Paris and London, but at first the city lagged far behind such picturesque European capitals. In 1800 when President John Adams and his wife, Abigail, became the first residents of the White House there were only six habitable rooms, and the Adamses brought just four servants with them. Their new home was far from complete, and Washington was such a swampy, isolated outpost that the first family got lost for hours between Baltimore and the capital. Once they finally arrived they had to enter on wooden planks; the front steps had not yet been installed. A laundry and stables dotted the area now occupied by the West Wing, and city officials even closed down a brothel operating out of the shacks of the construction workers building the White House. (Carpenters and stone carvers were so upset by the move that the brothel was relocated to a more inconspicuous part of town.)

“We have not the least fence, yard, or other convenience,” Abigail wrote to her daughter. “The principal stairs are not up, and will not be this winter.”

When Abigail Adams moved into the White House, she estimated that at least thirty servants would be needed to run it properly. (Nearly one hundred people work there today.) In early administrations the first families often brought their own maids, cooks, and valets, paying the personal staffs themselves. In recent decades some first families have brought a loyal employee or two from their prepresidential lives, but they mostly rely on the expertise of the residence staff.

In 1814, toward the tail end of the War of 1812, the British burned the White House to the ground. President James Madison asked Hoban to help rebuild the mansion, already a national icon. Since then, each president has sought to leave his mark on the physical building. The mansion was subjected to various Victorian embellishments during the nineteenth century, but in 1902 Theodore Roosevelt hired famed New York architects McKim, Mead & White to renovate it in keeping with its original neoclassical style. Roosevelt had the third story outfitted with guest rooms and tore down a series of giant glass conservatories—used to grow fruits and flowers for the first family—to clear a path for the expansion known as the West Wing. Later that year, Roosevelt moved his office from the second floor of the residence into the West Wing; his successor, William Howard Taft, added the Oval Office, completed in 1909.

The last major renovation came during the Truman administration, when the roof was literally caving in and the house was found to be in serious danger of collapsing. Things had gotten so dangerous that once, when the first lady was hosting a tea for the Daughters of the American Revolution in the Blue Room, the chandelier—which was as big as a refrigerator—swayed wildly above the unsuspecting guests, in part because the president was taking a bath above them on the second floor. In addition, the leg of one of Margaret Truman’s pianos actually plunged through the rotted flooring of her sitting room during a particularly spirited practice session. Truman replaced the mansion’s original wood framing with a new steel structure and added a second-floor outdoor space overlooking the South Lawn that became known as the Truman Balcony, still a favorite spot for first families to relax.

No modern White House resident has transformed the White House more surely than Jacqueline Kennedy, who launched a very public effort to restore the interior (she hated the term *redecorate*) aimed at making it the “most perfect house” in the country. She asked her friend the philanthropist Rachel “Bunny” Mellon to redesign the Rose Garden and the East Garden, replacing Mamie Eisenhower’s pink with soft white and pale blue. She augmented the work of the White House staff by bringing in top interior decorator Sister Parish to help in the restoration, combing the house for “treasures” and jettisoning “horrors.” “If there’s anything I can’t stand, it’s Victorian mirrors—they’re hideous. Off to the dungeons with them,” Jackie joked, insisting that “everything in the White House must have a reason for being there.” She enlisted Henry Francis du Pont, a collector of ear-

American furniture and an heir to the family fortune, to chair the White House Fine Arts Committee which she created within a month of moving into the residence. Members of the committee were responsible for searching for museum-quality pieces around the country and for persuading the owners to donate them to the White House. She also established the Curator's Office, ensuring that the house's furnishings and artwork would be properly inventoried and cared for. When she gave the first ever televised tour of the mansion, in 1962, it was watched by eighty million people and helped make her one of the country's most popular first ladies. She was only thirty-two years old at the time.

The White House of today still bears Jackie Kennedy's stamp. She took a building that had long seemed drab and made it fashionable, bringing to the job a blend of historical sensitivity and contemporary elegance. She breathed a new Continental style into the White House staff, hiring French chef René Verdon and appointing Oleg Cassini as official couturier. And her attention extended to the private quarters: when the Old Family Dining Room downstairs felt too formal to serve as a gathering place for her young family, she took a second-floor space that had been Margaret Truman's bedroom and remade it as a kitchen and dining room for them.

Today the staff talks about the house with a reverence they usually reserve for their favorite first families. One residence worker said that every time he gave friends a tour of the White House he would end it by telling them to look around and soak it all in: "You have walked through exactly the same space as every president since John Adams was president."

Each time, he said, "It was thrilling."

THE WHITE HOUSE staff delights in knowing every inch of the mansion, its little-known corners and historical secrets. The underground locker rooms where butlers keep their crisp tuxedos and maids house their uniforms (pastel shirts and white pants) are just a short distance from a bomb shelter under the East Wing that was built for President Franklin Roosevelt during World War II; this room is now the President's Emergency Operations Center, built to withstand a nuclear detonation. The tube-shaped bunker is where the president may be taken in case of an attack. The Ground Floor Map Room was once a billiards room before it was transformed into the president's top secret planning center during World War II; it was there, surrounded by maps tracking the movements of American and enemy forces, that FDR contemplated the invasion of Normandy. Few people were ever granted the authority to glimpse inside. "When the room was to be cleaned," wrote Chief Usher J. B. West, "the security guard covered the maps with cloth, standing duty while the cleaner mopped the floor." Decades later, Bill Clinton used this room to give his televised grand jury testimony during the Lewinsky affair; and today it is used as a holding area for holiday party guests waiting to be photographed with the president and first lady in the adjoining Diplomatic Reception Room.

Other rooms tell different stories spanning centuries of American history. Abigail Adams used the grand but drafty East Room—the largest room in the White House, with ceilings more than twenty feet high—to hang laundry. The room, which later served as a temporary home for soldiers during the Civil War, now serves as the setting for most presidential press conferences. The State Dining Room, often used for highly choreographed state dinners in connection with the signing of significant military and trade agreements, was once Thomas Jefferson's office. The Green Room, now a formal sitting room on the State Floor, began as Jefferson's bedroom and breakfast room; James Monroe used it as a card parlor, and Abraham Lincoln's beloved eleven-year-old son, Willie, was embalmed there with candles illuminating his face as camellias were placed in his hands. The small Victorian-style Lincoln Sitting Room on the second floor was used as a telegraph room in the late nineteenth century; during

the darkest days of Watergate, Richard Nixon sought refuge amid its heavy drapes and dark furnishings, spending hours there with music blasting, a fire blazing in the fireplace, air-conditioning cranked up as high as it would go.

On the third floor there's a sanctuary hidden from view on the roof of the South Portico with 180-degree views of the Mall and the Washington Monument. It was designed by First Lady Grace Coolidge as her "Sky Parlor." Now known as the Solarium, the airy hideaway serves as the first family's family room. It's here where young Caroline Kennedy attended kindergarten, where President Reagan went to recuperate after being shot in an assassination attempt, and where Sasha and Malia Obama giggle with friends during sleepovers.

NONE OF THE residence workers I interviewed minded being called a "domestic." There's nothing demeaning about working in the White House, in *any* capacity. "When you can't afford it yourself and you're surrounded by the finest pieces of furniture and Americana in the entire country every single day, that's kind of cool," says Florist Ronn Payne.

To Executive Pastry Chef Roland Mesnier, preparing elaborate desserts for five presidents was the pinnacle of his career. "The White House is the top of the top. If it's not the top at the White House, when is it going to be the top?"

It is this distinct commitment to service, and pride in their role, that allow America's first families to work and live in the White House complex with confidence and security, and to enjoy precious moments of peace. The stories of these residence workers offer a glimpse at our presidents and their families as they live within the confines of the office, literally and symbolically. Their incredible stories—some heartwarming, some hilarious, some tragic—deserve a place in American history.

CHAPTER I

Controlled Chaos

The transformation in the household from one Administration to another is as sudden as death. By that I mean it leaves you with a mysterious emptiness. In the morning you serve breakfast to a family with whom you have spent years. At noon that family is gone out of your life and here are new faces, new dispositions, and new likes and dislikes.

—ALONZO FIELDS, BUTLER AND MAÎTRE D', 1931–1953,
MY 21 YEARS IN THE WHITE HOUSE

It's the only time I ever had a job quit me.

—WALTER SCHEIB, EXECUTIVE CHEF, 1994–2005

Once or twice a decade, on an often bone-chillingly cold day in January, Americans are riveted by the public transfer of power from one president to the next. Hundreds of thousands of people flood the National Mall to watch the president-elect take the oath of office, in a serene and carefully choreographed ceremony that Lady Bird Johnson called “the great quadrennial American pageant.”

Behind the scenes, however, this peaceful ceremony is accompanied by an astounding number of complex logistics. Laura Bush calls the “transfer of families” a “choreographic masterpiece, done with exceptional speed,” and its successful execution depends on the institutional knowledge and the flexibility of the residence staff. The hum of White House activity starts even earlier than usual on Inauguration Day, with workers coming in before the break of dawn. By the time their day has come to an end, a new era in American history has begun.

The White House belongs to the outgoing family until noon, when the new president's term begins. On the morning of the inauguration, the president hosts a small coffee reception for the new first family. Just before the first family departs, the staff crams into the opulent State Dining Room where they have served so many state dinners, to say good-bye to the family. They are often overcome by the range of emotions they feel—trading one boss, and in some cases a friend, for another in the span of just six hours. In many cases they have had eight years to grow close to the departing family; they have seldom had any time to get to know the mansion's new residents. There is rarely a dry eye in the room—even though many may be excited about the future.

“When the Clintons came down and Chelsea came with them, they didn't say a word,” Head Housekeeper Christine Limerick recalled about Inauguration Day 2001. “I'll get emotional about this now—[President Clinton] looked at every person dead on in the face and said, ‘Thank you.’ The whole room just broke up.”

During the farewell, residence workers present the family with a gift—sometimes the flag that flew over the White House on the day that the president was inaugurated—placed in a beautiful hand-carved box designed by White House carpenters. In 2001, Limerick, Chief Florist Nancy Clarke, and Chief Curator Betty Monkman gave Hillary Clinton a large pillow made from swatches of fabrics that she had selected to decorate different rooms in the house.

There is very little time for reflection. At around eleven o'clock in the morning, the two first

families leave the White House for the Capitol. Between then and approximately five o'clock in the afternoon—when the new president and his family return to rest and prepare for the inaugural balls—the staff must complete the job of moving one family out and another family in. In that rare moment when the eyes of Washington and the world are trained away from the White House toward the Capitol, the staff is grateful that the public's attention is temporarily diverted from the turbulent activity within the residence walls.

Since employing professional movers for one day would require an impractical array of security checks, the residence staff is solely responsible for moving the newly elected president in and the departing president and his family out. No outside help is allowed. Throughout the day, even as the staff continue to perform their traditional roles, the residence workers also serve as professional movers with just six hours to complete the move. The job is so large, and so physically demanding, that everyone is called in to help: pot washers in the kitchen help arrange furniture, and carpenters can be found placing framed photographs on side tables. The move is so labor intensive that on the day of the Clintons' arrival one staffer sustained a serious back injury from lifting a sofa and was unable to return to work for several months.

For Operations Supervisor Tony Savoy, Inauguration Day is the most important day of his career. The Operations Department usually handles receptions, dinners, rearranging furniture for the taping of TV interviews, and outdoor events, but during the inauguration they are the team that “moves 'em in and moves 'em out,” Savoy says. The trucks carrying the new family's belongings are allowed through one set of gates, and dozens of residence workers from the Operations, Engineering, Carpenters, and Electricians shops race to remove furniture from the trucks and place them precisely where the first family's interior decorator wants them. “The best transition is when they don't lose anything and get to stay another four years, Savoy joked, masking the very serious anxiety that comes with this astounding task.

In the six hours between the departure of the first family and the arrival of the newly elected president and his family, the staff has to put in fresh rugs and brand-new mattresses and headboards, remove paintings, and essentially redecorate in the incoming family's preferred style. They unpack the family's boxes, fold their clothes perfectly, and place them in their drawers. They even put toothpaste and toothbrushes on bathroom counters. No detail is overlooked.

Florist Bob Scanlan helped with the transition from Clinton to George W. Bush in 2001. As transitions go, the Bushes' was relatively easy, since they knew the territory better than most. George W. Bush was a frequent visitor to the residence when his father was president. The Bushes were used to being surrounded by a large staff, and Laura Bush recognizes that they “had a huge advantage” over other first families because they had spent so much time at the White House when the first President Bush (“old man Bush” as the staffers affectionately call him) was in office. “The only other family that had that were John Quincy and Louisa Adams.”

Bill Clinton was well aware of the Bush's familiarity with the house and its staff and joked that Bush even knew where to find the light switches. Clinton, on the other hand, had been to the White House only a handful of times before his inauguration: once, as a teenage member of the American Legion Boys Nation, when he was photographed shaking President Kennedy's hand; once as a guest of the Carters in 1977 (which also marked Hillary Clinton's first visit); and several times for the National Governors Association dinners during his terms as governor of Arkansas. Before they moved in, Hillary said she had only been to the second floor once, when Barbara Bush gave her a tour after her husband won the election. She had never even seen the third floor. When they moved in, Hillary delved into the history of the house, asking curators to compile a book showing how every room

looked through history back to the earliest photographs and drawings.

In the modern era, however, Barack Obama is the president who found the transition the most challenging. He moved with his family from their home in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood directly into the White House. The Obamas were even less accustomed to a household staff than the Clintons: they had one housekeeper in Chicago, but not a nanny, leaving their daughters, Sasha and Malia, with Michelle's mother, Marian, during the campaign. Without the benefit of growing up the son of a president—or living in the relative luxury of a governor's mansion—it took time for Obama and his family to grow comfortable with their new lives.

ON JANUARY 20, 2009, 1.8 million people huddled together in twenty-eight-degree weather to watch Barack Obama become the first African American to take the oath of office. It was not only the largest crowd that had ever attended a presidential inauguration, it was also the largest attendance for an event in the history of Washington, D.C.

Most Americans had never heard of Barack Obama until 2004, when, as an Illinois state senator, he delivered an electrifying keynote address at the Democratic National Convention. His meteoric rise left the Obamas with very little time to prepare for life in the White House. Knowing this, the residence staff wanted to help ease their transition. It must have felt surreal to Obama when the chief usher turned to him and said, "Hello, Mr. President, welcome to your new home," as he walked through the imposing North Portico doors for the first time as president. During brief moments of quiet time that afternoon and evening, between parade watching on Pennsylvania Avenue and the first inaugural ball, the Obamas grazed on a buffet in the Old Family Dining Room where no detail was overlooked.

That day was the result of months of careful advance planning. For residence workers, the transition to the next administration begins about eighteen months before the inauguration, when the chief usher prepares books for the incoming president and first lady (with the added challenge of not knowing who they will be) that include a detailed White House layout, a list of staff, and an overview of allowable changes to the Oval Office.

Gary Walters, who served as chief usher from 1986 until 2007, started gathering information on the candidates during the primaries, well before a general election candidate is selected. It was particularly difficult when President Ford, President Carter, and President George H. W. Bush lost their bids for a second term. "The ownership is of the family that's there but you have to be watching out for what's going to occur," Walters said.

In December, after the election and before the inauguration, Walters would arrange for the incoming family to get a guided tour of the White House from the current first lady. It's then that the incoming first lady would be presented with a book containing the names and photographs of the people who work in the residence. The book helps the first family learn the names of everyone who works in the house and is partly a security measure, so that if they see anyone unfamiliar they can alert the Secret Service.

The departing first family pays for their personal things to be moved out of the White House. The incoming president also pays for bringing belongings into the mansion either out of the new first family's own coffers or from funds raised for the campaign or transition. It is the job of the incoming family to coordinate with the Secret Service to get their personal effects to the White House the morning of the inauguration.

One logistical challenge that comes with every inauguration is the transfer of the incoming first

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