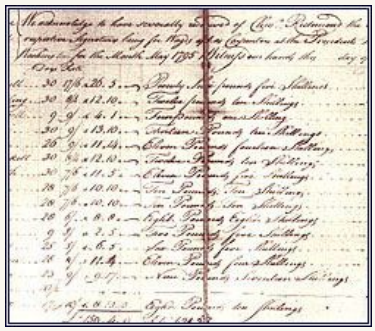


"Carpenter's Roll for the President's House." Wage rolls for May 1795 list five slaves Tom, Peter, Ben, Harry and Daniel, three of whom were slaves owned by White House architect James Hoban. *NARA*

1790s

Construction on the President's House began in 1792 in Washington, D.C., a new capital situated in sparsely settled region far from a major population center. The decision to place the capital on land ceded by two slave states–Virginia and Maryland–ultimately influenced the acquisition of laborers to construct its public buildings. The D.C. commissioners, charged by Congress with building the new city under the direction of the president, initially planned to import workers from Europe to meet their labor needs. However, response to recruitment was dismal and soon they turned to African Americans – slave and free – to provide the bulk of labor that built the White House, the United States Capitol, and other early government buildings.

A major concern in the construction of the new public buildings in this remote location was the acquisition of building materials, such as stone, lumber, bricks, hardware, and nails. Black quarrymen, sawyers, brickmakers, and carpenters fashioned raw materials into the products used to erect the White House. Master stonemason, Collen Williamson, trained slaves on the spot at the government's quarry at Aquia, Virginia. There slaves quarried and cut the rough stone that was later dressed and laid by Scottish stonecutters to erect the walls of the President's House. Sawyers listed on government payrolls, such as "Jerry", "Jess", "Charles", "Len", "Dick", "Bill" and "Jim" undoubtedly were slaves leased from their masters. Free and slave blacks burnt bricks used to line the stone walls in temporary ricks on the President's House grounds. Often working seven days a week during the high construction summer months alongside white workers and artisans, black laborers proved vital to the work force that created both the White House and U.S. Capitol.

Read more: William Seale, *The President's House*, White House Historical Association, 1986; Robert J. Kapsch, "Building Liberty's Capital," *American Visions*, February/March 1995, 8-10.

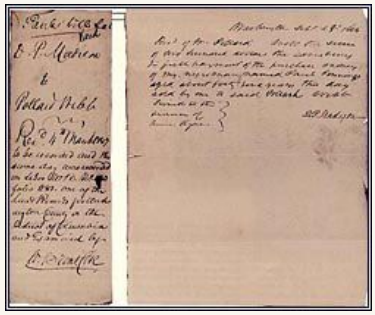
An early romantic view of the President's House from the Potomac River, ca. 1836-37. Jefferson added the distinctive east and west colonnades to the house.

1800s

The White House is a large structure and from its earliest days domestic operations have demanded a general manager. For this purpose **President Thomas Jefferson**, through his two administrations, relied heavily on his French steward Etienne Lemaire. There were two other white servants, Julien, a French chef, and Joseph Dougherty, an Irish coachman. The remainder of Jefferson's regular household staff, which numbered a dozen, included slaves from Monticello. Even under the best management this was a small staff. However, in the early years the president paid his household personally. The domestic "offices" and servants' quarters were located in the rooms of the basement. Kitchen staff, directly under the Entrance Hall, cooked busily all day providing food for servants, staff, and any guests who might be visiting.

Jefferson's style of living was simpler than that of many rich citizens along the eastern seaboard. His one concession to grandeur was to dress his menservants in livery, knee breeches, and gilt or steel-buttoned blue coats with crimson trimmings and lace edging. Although Jefferson wrote his daughter that he preferred white servants so that he could dismiss them when they misbehaved, he did care for his slaves. When a sickly child was born at the President's House (11 months after Jefferson's own grandson, James Madison Randolph) to slaves Fanny and Eddy in 1806, he provided for the nursing care of the baby and mother. Sadly, the child died before its second birthday.

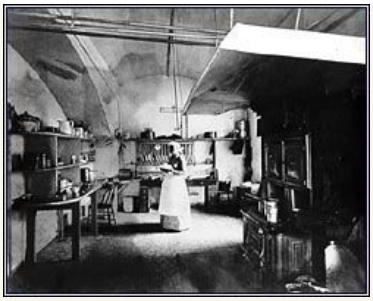
Read more: William Seale, *The President's House*, White House Historical Association, 1986.



Bill of sale that transfers ownership of Paul Jennings from Dolley Madison to Pollard Webb. *Collection of Michael R. Winston*

1810s

Paul Jennings, who was born a slave on **President James Madison's** estate at Montpelier in 1799, was a "body servant" who attended the president until his death in 1836. Jennings later purchased his freedom from Daniel Webster. Webster acquired Jennings from Pollard Webb who in turn bought the manservant from Dolley Madison in 1846. After meeting the terms of his agreement with Webster, Jennings became a free man and found work at the Department of the Interior. In 1865, Jennings published, *Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison*, the first memoir about the White House by one who had lived there. The publication remained obscure for many years because it was printed in a limited edition, but today it is acknowledged by scholars as a classic. It provided details about one of the most critical periods in the history of the city of Washington–the War of 1812–and the formation of the city's enterprising free Negro community in the antebellum period. It also recounted Jennings's involvement in a plan in 1848 to undertake a large-scale escape of slaves from the capital aboard the schooner Pearl.



White House Kitchen, c. 1890. A great kitchen in the basement story w as at the heart of the servant and w orkspaces of the White House throughout the 19th century.

1820s

The African American staff, and other servants, who lived at the President's House, most often had rooms in the basement. Open at ground level on the south, the basement (referred to as the ground floor today) had windows on the north facing a deep areaway that was entirely hidden from view. Visitors on the public tour of the White House walk through the long cross-hall of this space with rooms opening to the sides. Today the rooms are used as a Library, China Room, offices, and the formal oval Diplomatic Reception Room. However, this vaulted corridor once accessed a great kitchen 40 feet long with large fireplaces at each end, a family kitchen, an oval servants hall, the steward's quarters, storage and work rooms, and the servants' bedrooms. An inventory for the year 1826, during **John Quincy Adams**' administration, records the typical furniture used by servants in the first half of the 19th century. For example, the cook slept on a cot, and had a pine wardrobe and a pine table; other servants' rooms were similar, with cots and mattresses and "low post" bedsteads, blankets, and sheets; sometimes they had benches, chairs, and tables. Often the furniture was described as "worn out" or "in want of repair."

Read more: William Seale, *The President's House*, White House Historical Association, 1986; William Seale, "Upstairs and Downstairs: The 19th-Century White House," *American Visions*, February-March, 1995, 16-20.

A view of the Jackson White House in 1835.

1830s

President Andrew Jackson was a slaveholder who brought a large household of slave domestics with him from Tennessee to the President's House. Many of them lived in the servant's quarters, but the president's body servant slept in the room with him. Jackson's servants worked under Rachel Jackson's management at his Tennessee home for the better part of their lives and were country folk. Mrs. Jackson died before her husband began his first term. At the President's House these slaves came under the direction of the steward Belgian Antoine Michel Giusta, a holdover from the Adams administration. Most of the lower level white servants were replaced by slaves who wore the livery of blue coats with brass buttons, white shirts, and yellow or white breeches. Maids, who did not appear in the public rooms, used a long white apron, reaching to hems at the floor. Guista did not like Jackson or his black servants and left the president's service in 1834. Another Belgian, Joseph Boulanger, became the steward. Boulanger apparently did not live at the White House and when he was away, the black doorkeeper Jemmy O'Neil, a great favorite of Jackson's, kept the keys to the house. He had a porter's lodge to the right of the north door with a perspective onto the Entrance Hall where he monitored the comings and goings of the public.

Read more: William Seale, *The President's House*, White House Historical Association, 1986; William Seale, "Upstairs and Downstairs: The 19th-Century White House," *American Visions*, February-March, 1995, 16-20.

A slave coffle passing the Capitol grounds, 1815 published in A Popular History of the United States, 1876. *Library of Congress*

1840s

When **John Adams** moved into the White House in November 1800, one-third of the capital city's population was black. Few of these African Americans were free. However, with the end of the African slave trade in 1808 and the depletion of lands and decline of Tidewater tobacco plantations, free African Americans became more common and soon outnumbered the city's slave population. On the eve of the Civil War, the census recorded that the city of Washington had 9,029 free blacks and 1,774 slaves. Although free blacks outnumbered slave residents, slave sales were still common, and Washington became a flourishing center for trade in slaves bound for the lands opened by the Louisiana Purchase. The slave pens of traders were located near the Mall and at Lafayette Square within sight of the White House. The trade finally was outlawed by the Compromise of 1850 and abolition of slavery in the District came in 1862.

For free blacks in Washington, D.C. life was better than many places below the Mason-Dixon Line. Formal education was easier to acquire (black-established schools dated to 1807), property ownership was possible, and some government jobs (usually messengers and doorkeepers) were open to blacks. Most found work as laborers, servants, barbers, cooks, maids, and gardeners. However, municipal codes placed late night curfews on blacks and required them to register and to carry a certificate of freedom. Without this proof a black could be jailed as a runaway slave. The registration certificate was a precious document as it checked the over-zealous slave traders and kidnappers in the city. Although it was a hard life, free blacks persevered and by the time of the Civil War had established a flourishing African American community.

Read More: Henry Chase, "Black Life in the Capital," *American Visions*, February-March, 1995, 14-15; Constance Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital*, Princeton, 1967.

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