



Ficklin, John Woodson: Papers, 1946-1994

Finding Aid Type

Donated Collections

Disclaimer

Record Type

Textual

Biography

Biography

John Woodson Ficklin (1919-1984) served forty three years on the domestic service staff at the White House. His final position was as the White House Maitre d', the most senior service staff position at the executive mansion.

John Ficklin, one of ten children, was born on a farm in rural Rappahannock, Virginia. His father was a former slave. Both he and his older brother Charles moved to Washington, DC and worked as butlers and housemen for wealthy families in the Georgetown neighborhood. At some point, they both met Sam Jackson, Jr. whose father was a butler at the White House. Through him, Charles and John Ficklin both began part-time work assisting out as housemen/butlers when White House special events required extra help. This was just before and during the early years of World War II.

John Ficklin enlisted in 1941 and in the Army medical corps in the South Pacific. In the meantime, his older brother Charles was hired as a full-time butler at the White House. Charles managed to get John the chance at a White House job which he chose over other options in 1946.

Charles was soon promoted to head butler and then maitre d'. He retired in the mid-1960s and John Ficklin was promoted to maitre d'. The Ficklins' younger brother, Samuel, was an engineer at the Bureau of Engraving, but he also worked as an as-needed, part-time butler at the White House.

Ficklin worked for nine presidents from Franklin Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan, but diplomatically refused to name a favorite of any of them. He was present when Mrs. Kennedy returned to the White House from the assassination of her husband in Dallas in 1963. Ficklin assisted Mrs. Kennedy with all the funeral and family arrangements, not returning to his home for over a week. Mrs. Kennedy asked him to be an usher at the funeral services for President Kennedy.

During his tenure, Ficklin assisted with the planning and execution of three White House weddings: Patricia Nixon Cox, Luci Baines Johnson Nugent and Lynda Byrd Johnson Robb. He worked with all the First Ladies in planning meals and state dinners and worked with numerous White House Social Secretaries.

Mr. Ficklin participated as a mystery challenger on the CBS Goodson-Todman game show, *What's My Line?* ([Youtube](#)) on November 6, 1960. Ficklin included a reference to the "upcoming" election in one of his responses which was the clue the panel used to make his connection to the White House. Ficklin made an appearance on another Goodson-Todman show, *To Tell the Truth*, appearing on April 30, 1962. ([Youtube](#)) Ficklin earned a combined \$1075.00 for these two appearances.

After his retirement, Ficklin and his wife Nancy were special guests at the state dinner for Shaykh Isa bin Sulman Al Khalifa, the Amir of Bahrain on July 19, 1983. Ficklin sat at the table with First Lady Nancy Reagan. This was the first occasion of a White House service staff member attending a State Dinner. Some of Ficklin's experiences were used in the movie, *The Butler*, although the movie is based on another maitre d', Eugene Allen.

Ficklin retired on May 28, 1983 and passed away on December 16, 1984 from cancer. Ficklin and his wife had two sons, J Woodson Ficklin and John Wroly Ficklin. Woodson Ficklin died in 2009 after a year long cancer illness. The Honorable John Wroly Ficklin retired in 2016, after 40 years of service at the National Security Council. He held the position of Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs.

Scope and Content Note

This collection consists of historical materials related to John Woodson Ficklin's career in the White House.

This collection was donated by John Wroly Ficklin, John W. Ficklin's son. The majority of the donation consists of museum objects and audiovisual materials. The objects are multiple large framed photographs, pens, oversize Christmas cards and other types of artifacts. For storage and preservation these items were removed and now make up a separate Ficklin objects collection housed and administered by the museum staff at the Library. An item-by-item list of all of the objects transferred to this separate collection is at the end of this inventory.

The remaining material makes up the John Woodson Ficklin Papers at the Reagan Library. The material is dated from 1946 through 1994. The material has been arranged within two series: White House Maitre D' Textual Materials, 1947-1994 and White House Maitre D' Audio-Visual Materials, 1946-1984.

The material that post-dates Ficklin's death is from his son John Wroly Ficklin. This includes his email to the *Washington Post* correcting Wil Haygood's contention that Eugene Allen was the first maitre d' to attend a state dinner. Haygood, the author of *The Butler: A Witness to History*, and an associate producer on the movie adaptation of his book, wrote an article about being on the movie set in *WP*, July 28, 2013. He states that Allen was "the first butler in the history of the White House to be a guest at a state dinner." Ficklin's son included a series of email exchanges with the *WP* copy chief who promised a printed correction.

This post-mortem material also includes an interview with John Wroly Ficklin about his father's career in *Footsteps: African-American History: Blacks and the White*

House, 2002; the announcement of the donation of this collection to the Reagan Library and selected images from the collection in *Washingtonian*, July 2014; a Smithsonian Institution Folklife/Cultural studies project program with a photo of Ficklin *Workers at the White House*, 2002; and Christmas cards for John Wroly Ficklin and his family from President George H.W. Bush and President George W. Bush.

Series List

SERIES I: WHITE HOUSE MAITRE D' TEXTUAL MATERIALS, 1947-1994 (1.1.1.ft.; Box 1-3)

This series consists of thank you letters to Ficklin on numerous topics and events; notes on Ficklin's health, notes on the death of Ficklin's brother Charles, retirement congratulations notes; 25th anniversary congratulations to John Ficklin; Christmas cards; invitations; and general correspondence to Ficklin in his capacity as head butler and later as Maitre d'Hotel. Correspondents include Presidents Truman, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter; First Ladies Mamie Eisenhower, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis; Lady Byrd Johnson, Patricia Nixon, Betty Ford, Rosalyn Carter and Nancy Reagan; Presidential children including Luci Johnson Nugent, Lynda Johnson Robb, Tricia Nixon Cox, and Susan Ford; and White House Social Secretaries Bess Abell, Lucy Winchester, Gretchen Poston, and Mabel "Muffie" Brandon.

Also included is material on the state dinner attended by Ficklin and his wife, Nancy. It includes the guest list, the menu, the program and both Ficklins got autographs on the back of their menus from all of the guests at their respective tables. This series also has random items which may or may not have had significance for Mr. Ficklin including the event program for the visit of Pope John Paul II to the White House in 1979; a poster on the surrender of the Japanese in World War II; invitation to the opening of the John F. Kennedy Library and the christening of the *U.S.S. John F. Kennedy*, information on the John Quincy and Louisa Adams portraits; a White House dinner menu from 1953 and a White House luncheon menu from 1969; an assortment of table place cards; a single catering bill; and a florist card from the White House to Ficklin.

The series also contains two scripts/proposals for programs on the White House staff and possible input from Ficklin; invitations to White House weddings and to Susan Ford's wedding in California; programs and items from memorial services for President Kennedy and President Johnson; correspondence with former butlers/maitre d's John Pye and Alonzo Fields; publications on the White House, and numerous news clippings about Mr. Ficklin, his life and domestic service work at the White House.

Last Modified Date

2024-05-16

SERIES I: WHITE HOUSE MAITRE D' TEXTUAL MATERIALS, 1947-1994 (1.1.1.ft.; Box 1-3)

This series consists of thank you letters to Ficklin on numerous topics and events; notes on Ficklin's health, notes on the death of Ficklin's brother Charles, retirement congratulations notes; 25th anniversary congratulations to John Ficklin; Christmas cards; invitations; and general correspondence to Ficklin in his capacity as head butler and later as Maitre d'Hotel. Correspondents include Presidents Truman, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter; First Ladies Mamie Eisenhower, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis; Lady Byrd Johnson, Patricia Nixon, Betty Ford, Rosalyn Carter and Nancy Reagan; Presidential children including Luci Johnson Nugent, Lynda Johnson Robb, Tricia Nixon Cox, and Susan Ford; and White House Social Secretaries Bess Abell, Lucy Winchester, Gretchen Poston, and Mabel "Muffie" Brandon.

Also included is material on the state dinner attended by Ficklin and his wife, Nancy. It includes the guest list, the menu, the program and both Ficklins got autographs on the back of their menus from all of the guests at their respective tables. This series also has random items which may or may not have had significance for Mr. Ficklin including the event program for the visit of Pope John Paul II to the White House in 1979; a poster on the surrender of the Japanese in World War II; invitation to the opening of the John F. Kennedy Library and the christening of the *U.S.S. John F. Kennedy*, information on the John Quincy and Louisa Adams portraits; a White House dinner menu from 1953 and a White House luncheon menu from 1969; an assortment of table place cards; a single catering bill; and a florist card from the White House to Ficklin.

The series also contains two scripts/proposals for programs on the White House staff and possible input from Ficklin; invitations to White House weddings and to Susan Ford's wedding in California; programs and items from memorial services for President Kennedy and President Johnson; correspondence with former butlers/maitre d's John Pye and Alonzo Fields; publications on the White House, and numerous news clippings about Mr. Ficklin, his life and domestic service work at the White House.

Box 1

Status	Title
OPEN	<i>A Great New Beginning: The 1981 Inauguration Story</i> (Housed in Box 3)
OPEN	25th Anniversary 1971 (1)(2)
OPEN	Christmas
OPEN	Backstairs at the White House
OPEN	Card, Johnson Family 1966
OPEN	Christmas
OPEN	Catering Expenses
OPEN	Event Programs (1)(2)
OPEN	Flower Gift Card
OPEN	<i>Footsteps: African American History: Blacks and the White House, 2002</i>
OPEN	Formal Surrender of the Second Japanese Army Poster
OPEN	Gate Passes
OPEN	Identification
OPEN	Inauguration
OPEN	In Memoriam
OPEN	Invitations (1)(2)
OPEN	<i>JET Magazine, August 15, 1983</i>
OPEN	<i>Life Magazine, Winter 1978</i> (Housed in Box 3)
OPEN	Kennedy Library
OPEN	Media Correspondence
OPEN	Personal Correspondence, 1947-1974

Status	Title
OPEN	Personal Correspondence, 1975-1978
OPEN	Personal Correspondence (Undated)
OPEN	Place Cards
OPEN	Press Clippings (1)-(4) (Housed in Box 3)

Box 2

Status	Title
OPEN	Pye, John
OPEN	Seating Arrangement OAS Delegation 1972
OPEN	State Dinner 1983 (1)-(3)
OPEN	<i>The Living White House, 1970</i>
OPEN	<i>The Living White House, 1978</i>
OPEN	The Portraits of John Quincy Adams
OPEN	<i>The View from the White House</i>
OPEN	<i>US News and World Report, June 2, 1975</i>
OPEN	<i>USS John F. Kennedy</i> Christening
OPEN	Vice-President Official Portraits
OPEN	<i>Washingtonian, July 2014</i>
OPEN	Wedding Invitations (1)-(3)
OPEN	"Workers at the White House"
OPEN	White House Staff Picnic Photo 07/04/1981
OPEN	Winchester, Lucy
OPEN	Envelopes, Originals

Box 3 (Oversize)

Status	Title
OPEN	<i>A Great New Beginning: The 1981 Inauguration Story</i>
OPEN	<i>Life Magazine, Winter 1978</i>
OPEN	Press Clippings (1)-(3)