

RIBBON CUTTING FOR THE SOUTHERN FOOD
AND BEVERAGE MUSEUM IN NEW ORLEANS
JUNE 7, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

Thank you, Ms. Williams (Mr. Brennan) for your most kind introduction, and particularly for the opportunity to return home to help cut the ribbon on the new Southern Food and Beverage Museum in this wonderful city.

Good morning to our elected officials, board of directors, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen! I feel very privileged to be your guest of honor, today, at this very significant moment in the history of our city. I also have the pleasure of introducing the White House Executive Pastry Chef, Bill Yosses, visiting New Orleans for the first time. And greetings to my friends & family here.

Most will agree there's no better place than New Orleans to showcase fine southern cuisine to visitors across our great Nation and from around the world. So I am grateful for the invitation to experience history unfolding, and to celebrate with you all at the Riverwalk.

Ms. Williams wrote to me in March about this beautiful new museum and the exhibit: "Eating in the White House – America's Food." In her letter she writes, "I know that you are from New Orleans, and having a native son from the White House would be a thrill for the city." Well, I'm

not sure if this humbled soul will thrill you all, today, but I can say that being here is indeed a thrill for me.

BACKGROUND:

Like many here, I have a true love for this city and a real passion for Creole/Cajun style cuisine, having come from a family of great cooks. I watched my grandfather perform magic in the kitchen as we grew up in the Uptown-Carrollton area of the city.

His great cooking skills taught by his mother were passed onto my dear mother, here in the audience. Hurricane Katrina may have sent her up the road in a hurry to Virginia, but she brought her masterful cooking skills with her. As a child I observed Mom relaxing in the kitchen while she enjoyed cooking for whoever walked through her front door.

I was destined to carry on the tradition of this long line of Southern cooks, which is why my lovely wife, Shirley, a Southern Maryland girl, gladly lets me have the kitchen.

What's incredible is I have the great privilege to oversee operations at the White House and its kitchens that prepare outstanding meals for the President of the United States and Leader of the Free World.

I'm often asked, "Did you ever imagine you would be running the most historic and beautiful house in

America?” “Not in my wildest dreams!” So before I talk about eating in the White House, Ms. Williams thought your might want to hear about my awesome job and my journey over a year ago to the most famous address in America at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

There were hundreds of very qualified people, who could have been offered this job with credentials similar to mine - so why me? The only explanation I have for my name surfacing at the right time and right place was that it happened by Divine Intervention, or perhaps, Divine Providence, defined as a superintendence of God over events in people’s lives -- a predestination, if you will.

The fact is I wasn’t looking for a job. Rather I was looking forward to retiring from the Coast Guard and return to New Orleans to relax after many years of a fast pace, high stress work environment, and write a book about the legacy of 7 daring Africa American lifesavers from the 1800s, who coincidentally began their service as cooks and stewards.

So while pondering on my final 100 days in uniform, and planning my retirement and change of command ceremony in Norfolk, VA, I dreamt of sitting on the porch of our turn-of-the-century Uptown New Orleans home, sipping an ice-cold Hurricane drink and eating a Fried Shrimp Po-Boy.

But my dreams vanished when my secretary transferred a life-altering phone call that put my little plans on hold, saying, “Sir, the White House is on the phone for you.” My first thought was, “What did I do wrong, and with only 3 months from receiving my retirement certificate?”

With some intrepidation I accepted the call from the gentleman in the Office of Presidential Personnel, David Clark, who asked if I would consider interviewing for Chief Usher of the White House.

My first response was, “What the heck is a Chief Usher?” I could only picture myself having to wear a little round cap, a short waist jacket, tight pants and a bowtie, with a flashlight to show folks to their seats. This was hardly what I had in mind after retiring as a Rear Admiral.

But the more he explained the position -- the more I became intrigued. I was told that if selected I would, in a sense, run the White House, subject only to the general direction of the President and the First Lady.

This would entail directing the preservation, renovation and restoration of all historic buildings, furnishings and priceless art in the 200,000 square feet of the entire White House complex and the 18 acres of beautiful grounds and gardens.

Specifically, in the 55,000 square feet of the original mansion commissioned by George Washington, I also

would be in charge of executing all private, ceremonial and official receptions, luncheons and dinners for the President and First Lady, and their special guests.

To accomplish this, he said, I would be expected to lead the activities of 95 full time and approximately 250 part time employees, including the ushers, curators, executive chef, executive pastry chef, florists, butlers, housekeepers, electricians, carpenters, plumbers, engineers, painters, operations staff, storekeepers, administrative staff, calligraphers and 22 National Park Service horticulturalists and gardeners.

The position was sounding more interesting, particularly since I have a passion for history, a love for restoring old homes in New Orleans, enjoy cooking, collecting art, and most importantly, interacting with people.

So with approval from the boss [my wife], instead of heading south to New Orleans, I was given a generous 2 days, Saturday and Sunday, to enjoy retirement before heading north to Washington, DC.

Undeniably, my great upbringing, terrific schooling here at Xavier Prep and Xavier University, a supportive family and friends, extensive leadership experience in the Coast Guard, and my faith in the Almighty - prepared me well.

But I never thought it all would lead me to entering the gates of the White House each day to say, “Good,

morning, Mr. President,” while walking with him through the Rose Garden to start his busy day in the Oval Office.

In the last of 9 White House interviews, I met with the President in the Oval Office, who asked how I felt about going from being RADM to Chief Usher. I responded, “What’s in a title, Mr. President. I’m just thrilled to continue in public service and to have the honor of serving the President of the United States!”

The next day, I was offered the job and asked to change the title that had existed since 1866, from “Chief Usher” to now “Director of the Executive Residence and Chief Usher,” reflecting the duties that have evolved over time. But my new staff insisted on calling me “Admiral.” Even my mother, who named me Stephen, calls me “Admiral.”

I remain in awe with being a part of living history. Not only do I coordinate with the First Lady about restoration projects and operations of the Executive Residence, but I also accommodate some very notable visitors: the Queen of England, Rev. Billy Graham, Sugar Ray Leonard, Tommy Lasorda, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Diana Ross, Dr. Benjamin Hooks, Prime Ministers, Presidents, Joint Chiefs of Staff, The Temptations, The Oak Ridge Boys, and parents of the brave Congressional Medal of Honor recipients, whose sons gallantly gave their lives to save the lives of their buddies in Iraq and Afghanistan; and recently being in the room with His Holiness, Pope Benedict the XVI.

The real joy of this job is that I work with some remarkable people, who are very dedicated to supporting the presidency. They are very proud of what they do, particularly the food and beverage staff of great chefs and butlers, some who have served for over 40 years in the White House.

Executive Chef Cristeta Comerford and her assistant chefs, Tommy and Tafari, and Executive Pastry Chef Bill Yosses and his assistant chef, Susie are the best in the world. And Staff Chefs, Rachel and Frankie, keep my Executive Residence crew happy with delicious meals to nourish their hard working bodies. I call them my Morale Officers. They all helped me bring a Mardi Gras feast to the White House staff, including Red Beans and Rice, Fried Shrimp Po-boys, Gumbo, Southern Fried Chicken, Fried Okra and King Cakes.

Uniquely, my staff knows how to leave politics to the East & West Wings, while providing the highest quality service to the President and First Lady, regardless of their political affiliation. This also came natural to me having served loyally under 7 Commanders-in-Chief for over 36 years in the military. I will have the honor of continuing this tradition of serving future Presidents just as my 7 predecessors did since the mid-1800s.

PAST AND PRESENT WHITE HOUSE KITCHENS:

So allow me to share with you some interesting tidbits about White House cooking and the kitchens, which have evolved since our second President and his First Lady occupied “The President’s Mansion.” We have come a long way from John Adam’s masonry open hearth cooking in 1800, to Thomas Jefferson’s coal-burning iron range with spits and tin reflecting ovens in 1809, to Millard Filmore’s first gas cookstove in 1850, to our state-of-the-art stainless steel ranges and ovens in 2008.

The White House has 4 kitchens: the main kitchen, pastry kitchen, staff kitchen, and 2nd floor private kitchen. The main kitchen, which many consider compact, is where the private meals are prepared for the First Family, along with all social and state dinners, and receptions with full canapés and beverages for 300+ annual events and over 50,000 guests each year.

Although somewhat modest in size, the main kitchen is equipped to prepare meals for over 1600 guests at one time. It has not been renovated since Nixon in 1971, except for equipment replacements. New designs are in the works to include updating our small pastry kitchen created during the Truman renovation when he gutted and rebuilt the entire White House between 1948 and 1952.

The Pastry Kitchen’s little Chocolate Shop is where the traditional White House Christmas gingerbread house is made each year. In 2007 it was made with 200 pounds of

gingerbread, covered with 300 pounds of white chocolate to the exact architectural detail of the White House.

PREFERENCES OF THE PRESIDENTS:

Each First Lady and President brings their own signature to the White House on the style of cooking and degree of elegance or simplicity for various events. While some intimate lunches and dinners are held in the private 2nd floor dining room, others are held in rooms on the State Floor such as the Red Room, Blue Room or Green Room.

The most elegant of events are held in the State Dining Room for dinners honoring heads of state from various countries such as the Queen of England with White tie and Tails, or the Prime Ministers of Japan and Australia with Black Tie.

Less formal events like this past Thursday's annual Congressional Picnic are held on the South Lawn, and the Cinco de Mayo social dinner in the Rose Garden.

Last year's Congressional Picnic featured celebrity Chef Paul Prudhomme with his famous Barbeque Shrimp, Gumbo, Jambalaya and southern fried chicken. It surely will be a tough act to follow for years to come.

Here are some interesting facts you might like to know on what it took to cook for the picnic this week for 1400 congressmen, senators and their families. To make the

potato salad we used 600 pounds of potatoes, 6000 boiled eggs (half were used for deviled eggs), 50 gallons of mayonnaise and 6 gallons of mustard. For the main menu we boiled 2400 corns on the cob, made 3000 corn dogs, fried 700 whole chickens, smoked 600 racks of baby-back ribs, and chopped 500 pounds of lettuce, to name a few.

The cake and cookies required 200 pounds of flour, 25 pounds of sugar, 245 pounds of butter, 5 pounds of baking powder and 105 quarts of buttermilk, which doesn't include ingredients used for the picnic 2 days before.

THE STATE DINNERS:

Our White House kitchens are the center of activity and more like private family kitchens, rather than hotel or restaurant kitchens. A weekly menu is made by the chef to prepare private meals for the First Family.

Preparing for a State Dinner is much more involved. They are the most formal of all White House events reserved only for official visits by a Head of State, described by many as a magical event. It's a spectacular evening held in the State Dining Room with entertaining in the East Room and reception on the entire State Floor.

Nothing is more thrilling than being invited to the White House for a State Dinner. The guests list is carefully coordinated between the State Department and various offices of the President and the First Lady.

Invitations and menus, handwritten by my calligraphers, only go to the most coveted list of foreign dignitaries, Members of Congress, press, prominent business leaders, celebrities, senior staff and friends of the First Family.

At the request of Mrs. Kennedy, the once traditional U-shaped large table for State Dinners was changed to accommodate 13 smaller round cabaret-style tables, seating 10 to 12 guests at each table to facilitate more engaging conversation.

Planning for State Dinners begins months in advance between the two governments, but the real planning occurs weeks in advance between the Executive Chef and the Social Secretary in order to plan the 4-course menu to present to the First Lady. They provide at least 3 choices for each of the 4 courses – the first course, the main course, the salad course, and the dessert course.

The next step for the Social Secretary is to schedule a date on the First Family's schedule for a menu-tasting with senior staff, usually scheduled a week and a half before the State Dinner. The First Lady is the final decision-maker for the menu and selection of china, flatware, flower centerpieces, table cloths and wines.

Two days prior to the dinner, the kitchen starts abuzz with the basic *mise en place* - *French for* "everything in

place” that will be used for the event, such as the chicken stock made from 100 pounds of chicken carcasses.

Tuesday is when most fresh produce is shipped overnight, and kitchen space becomes extremely limited. We are equipped with several walk-in refrigerators and freezers on the ground floor surrounding the main kitchen. The key words of the day are: preparation and organization.

Here’s an abbreviated menu the First Lady selected for the State Dinner for Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II:

The 1st Course: Spring Pea Soup and Dry Cured Ham on Toasted Southern Corn Grits with Fig Jam.

The 2nd Course: Dover Sole Almondine with Roasted Artichokes and Saddle of Spring Lamb.

The 3rd Course: Trio of Farmhouse Cheeses, Arugula and Mint Romaine with Champagne Dressing.

The 4th Course: Southern Style “English Rose” Sponge Cake with white Fluffy Coconut Frosting and Hot Chocolate Sauce on the side

Another White House favorite of the First Family, in addition to a **Southern Classic Coconut Cake**, is *The Double Chocolate Cake* served during the Christmas holidays, and it’s so good it flies off the table.

On the day of the State Dinner there's organized preparation, or as some will say, organized chaos among the butlers, housekeepers, ushers, chefs, florists, electricians, operations, the social secretary staff and others, but it all culminates into a perfect evening.

The dinner guests are seated promptly before the President enters. Toasts are made by the President and the Foreign Head of State, then dinner service begins after the guests are seated with the entry of 2 butlers to a table.

Now picture yourself in the State Dining Room as you listen to the President's Marine Orchestra and see around you 134 fellow guests, seated at round tables laden with elegant and vibrant flower centerpieces, Presidential seal linen naperies, tall candlesticks, beautiful White House China, gold flatware and glassware - all choreographed to perfect visual harmony.

Dinner concludes with service of the dessert course, and dessert or sparkling wine, and coffee. The President then invites his guests to join him in the East Room for entertainment lasting 15 to 25 minutes, then dancing and passed champagne begins, and lasts the night.

White House menus, today, feature American wines equal to any in the world. The use of selected wines with the appropriate courses at official dinners is a White House tradition. It's not uncommon for a formal meal of 4 courses, 3 wines, and toasts to last an hour from

beginning to end, rather than Thomas Jefferson's 3 to 4-hour dinners.

What our White House Food and Beverage Director and Wine Steward, Daniel Shanks prefers, are wines of youth and vigor that carry a strong impression of their presence, yet have balance and purity on the palate.

The first course wine, almost always a white wine, is poured just before guests enter the State Dining Room. The red wine or main course wine looks to the entrée for definition. Heavier, more richly flavored dishes call for Cabernet or Cabernet-Merlot blends.

The meal concludes with a dessert wine or sparkling wine reflecting the purpose of the event, the dessert chosen and time of year. We take great pleasure in matching the occasion, the guests, the menu, and the wines, using the vast resources of the American wine industry to draw such parallels. We may choose a Chardonnay from Napa Valley or a Pinot Noir from Oregon.

Americans want to know all about White House ceremonial meals, but we also want to know what our First Families eat for breakfast, how they like their steaks, if they eat all of their vegetables, and what flavor of ice cream they prefer. This is where I must plead ignorance to keep my job.

This wonderful historic house, known as the “Peoples House,” is also the most powerful visual symbol of our democracy in America, where the President and First Lady call their home.

Our mission is simple - to ensure that we exceed the highest expectations of the First Family in preparing food of the finest quality, taste and presentation with outstanding service in the most beautiful settings. So I come to work with a goal “to keep a smile on the First Lady’s face, everyday.”

Ladies and gentlemen, one seldom knows why God has put us on this earth, but it’s often manifested when we are in most need of blessings. New Orleans is still recovering from 3 years ago, but the Southern Food and Beverage Museum is a real blessing to this city and the region, which will certainly contribute to its recovery through highlighting its rich culture.

It’s obvious that SoFAB has something very special going on here, and you all should feel a tremendous sense of pride for opening the doors of your beautiful museum to the world. I commend you for this, and I congratulate you! Thanks, and God bless, you, and God bless, America!