

The Fullers' Household Staff, 1896-1910

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Before the Fullers came to Washington, they employed mostly Irishwomen as domestic staff, at least according to the 1870 census for Chicago where they were living. One of them, Catherine Colford, may have been a younger sister of another Irishwoman, Ellen Colford, who worked in Fuller's household a decade earlier. Melville Fuller was widowed in 1864 and then remarried in 1866 to Mary Ellen "Molly" Coolbaugh, one of the daughters of the wealthy Chicago banker William Findley Coolbaugh. Melville went on to establish a successful law practice that continued until he was appointed chief justice of the U. S. Supreme Court and moved to Washington.

The Fullers first lived at a rented residence on Belmont Place, upper 14th Street, and then they rented a mansion on the corner of 18th and Massachusetts Avenue that had been



1800 Massachusetts Avenue, known as the Van Wyck Mansion.
Image Washington Chronicles.

constructed a decade earlier by Senator Charles Van Wyck and known as the "Van Dyck Mansion." They lived there for seven years until Molly Fuller purchased 1801 F Street in April 1896 from the executor of Sallie Carroll's estate.¹

The 1890 census did not survive; consequently, we do not know how many people served in the household of the chief justice during the time they spent at the mansion on Massachusetts Avenue. It was one in which Mrs. Fuller became a recognized hostess in Washington society,

and during which four of her daughters were married. The year 1891 was especially eventful, as two daughters were married: first, her second eldest daughter by Fuller, Mildred, was married to Hugh C. Wallace, a lawyer from Tacoma, Washington,² and second, Grace, Molly's eldest step-daughter, was married a wealthy businessman from Chicago, Archibald Lapham Brown.³ Both marriages took place at St. John's Church, followed by elaborate receptions at the Fullers' residence that included a dinner for several hundred invited guests. President and Mrs. Harrison, Levi Morton, the vice president, most of the Supreme Court justices, cabinet members and many other top Washington people attended Mildred's wedding. A similar crowd appeared three months later when Grace married. To provide such lavish entertainments, Mrs. Fuller must have relied on extra help in addition to her household staff. In 1896, the last year they were at the Van Wyck mansion, Catherine Fuller was married to Theodore Beecher, a lawyer from Buffalo. The weddings of three other daughters during the period 1891-1896, Paulina Cory Fuller, Mary Ellen Coolbaugh Fuller and Maud Fuller, were held contrary to the wishes of their parents and took place away from Washington.⁴

Heavy duty work must have fallen upon the household cook as she coped with a steady round of dinners, teas, soirees musicales, receptions, and coming-out teas that the Fullers' social calendar required or as special occasions for their younger daughters. In 1900, more weddings took place. Throughout the decade, the Fullers were frequently visited by their daughters and their children, as well as relatives and friends from Chicago. After 1896 they were more comfortably installed in the extra space that the house on F Street afforded, especially after the addition of the west wing was completed in 1896. The cook, according to the 1900 census, was a Black woman named Julia Cross who had been born in Virginia in 1870. She was not, as one might suspect, the oldest of the four Black, non-Irish born women working in the household at that time. The oldest was Aurelia Gay, 55, born in South Carolina, and another was Maizy Williams, 32, born in Maryland. Sadly, no information about any of these women outside the Fuller household has yet been found. Nor do we know the path that each may have taken to get to the home of the chief justice. Did Mrs. Fuller go through an agency or hire the staff herself? Since there are no advertisements in the papers placed by Molly seeking cooks or servants, we would guess she went through an agency or took referrals from friends.



1801 F Street in 1900, as it looked during the Fuller years.
Courtesy DC History Center.

Aurelia Gay had been hired as the “family nurse,” according to the job description in the census, and may have been tasked with looking after the various children who lived with them – their teen-aged son, Weston, and youngest daughter Fanny⁵ as well as an older sister, Pauline Fuller, who had eloped eleven years earlier and tended to live with the Fullers while estranged from her husband, Matt Aubery, whom she finally divorced in 1895. Living with her and with the chief justice’s family were her two children by Matt, Melville, aged, 11 and Mildred, aged 10. Other grandchildren stayed with them off and on. The chief justice is said to have been very fond of his grandchildren and was more than once pictured with them in local and national newspapers. Sadly, one of them, Thomas Bates Wallace, the promising elder son of his daughter Mildred, died while staying at 1801 F Street in 1907.⁶ The Fullers’ eldest daughter, Mary



Chief Justice Fuller with unidentified grandson 1903, photo by Gilbert, published in the *Washington Times*, March 12, 1903, and often used in newspapers. Courtesy Bowdoin College Rare Books Library.

Coolbaugh Fuller, suffered an undiagnosed chronic illness, and when she visited her parents in Washington, she may have needed special care. In other words, there would have been plenty of need for a nurse in the Fuller household.

A fourth servant in the 1900 census was Julia V. Brooks, whose qualities Mrs. Fuller may have appreciated as being more than mere cleaning woman and serving maid. She had been with the Fullers for many of their Washington years. She appears to have been working for them while they were living in the Van Wyck mansion in 1891. The chief justice wrote in a letter to Molly in 1893 that when he had returned from Richmond, he found “Julia” there to open the house for him.⁷ In 1898, she appears as one of three witnesses of the will that Mrs. Fuller made out at the end of December.⁸ That fall Molly had not been in good health, according to a newspaper report in January 1899, prompting an extended visit to Italy and France with two of her daughters.⁹ The illness had no doubt encouraged her to draw up a will and to ask Julia to serve as a witness.

Julia, almost alone among Fuller servants, has a documented existence outside 1801 F Street. She may have left service there in 1903 when she married a young man about town named John Burk Edelin. Their marriage was reported in *The Colored American*, along with photographs of the bridal couple:



“A June Wedding,” from *The Colored American*, June 27, 1903

“A pretty nuptial knot was tied last evening...,” the write-up began. “The interested parties were Miss Julia V. Brooks, a Marylander, ...and Mr. J. B., Edelin, one of our best-known businessmen.... After the ceremony, the happy couple took the 6:30 train for Philadelphia and Germantown where they will spend a few weeks, the guest of the bride’s sister, Mrs. Charles Miller, and other relatives. During their honeymoon trip they will visit Atlantic City, Cape May, and other resorts on the Atlantic coast.”¹⁰

Julia had been born in Brandywine, Maryland in 1871, the daughter of Henson Brooks and his wife Julia Ann. The town was known earlier as “Nottingham,” which lay on the edge of the Bowie family plantation, “Mattaponi.” Interestingly, both Henson and Brooks are names that appear on the 1864 slave census of nearby Sprigg family “Northampton Plantation,” where Sallie Sprigg Carroll grew up. (Sallie was the previous owner of the Fullers’ house on F Street.) Julia’s mother, born in 1832, is buried in the Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church graveyard in Brandywine.

Burk Edelin was a member of the “Capital City Club” which later became known as the National Colored Personal Liberty League, which met at 340 Pennsylvania Avenue. This establishment was also known as Philadelphia House, an eatery and bar that primarily served Black customers.¹¹ Edelin served as the Liberty’s League vice president, and John C. Bowie as president, working in the anti-Temperance movement. The two became among Washington’s best known “mixologists,” as bartenders were known at the turn of the twentieth century when

cocktails became popular.¹² According to the 1920 census, Edelin worked as a valet for a congressman on Capitol Hill after Prohibition became effective law in the District of Columbia in 1917 and his job as a mixologist must have disappeared.

After marrying, Julia found employment at the Bureau of Printing and Engraving, working there in 1920 as a “charwoman.” She may have been among the agitators during the 1920s for better jobs at the Bureau, then a highly segregated work environment.¹³ Julia continued to work at the Bureau until she retired, and when she died in 1952, the Bureau posted a notice in the *Post* mourning her loss.¹⁴ She and Burk had no children, but they took in from four to six boarders during the three decades they owned a house in Washington.¹⁵ They are both buried in Mt. Olivet Cemetery that is run by the Catholic diocese.

Molly Fuller died suddenly in 1904 during a vacation in Sorrento, Maine, where the Fullers kept a summer home. The chief justice was devastated by her loss. Following her death, he cut back on his social schedule and rarely entertained. His youngest daughter, Fanny, took charge of managing the household until she married in 1906. In the final years of the chief justice’s life, she and others of her sisters who lived in Washington or nearby moved into the house to keep him company and manage his daily living.

The household staff in the year 1900 was replaced by the year 1910 with three new faces, all Black women: Alice Clark, Minnie McKinney, and Hattie Edwards. At fifty-eight, Alice was the oldest in the group. She was born in Virginia before the Civil War, married, and was widowed. A woman with the same name, working in the household of the young banker, Lawrence A. Slaughter, in 1920 was also from Virginia and widowed, and her duties were listed as “nurse.” If it is the same Alice Clark, she may well have been employed as a nurse in the Fuller household a decade earlier. The feebleness of the chief justice in his final year on the court – bordering on senility – was noticed even by President Taft, and Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes chided himself for not tipping off the family about his condition.¹⁶ Alice may have been a much-needed helping hand in the chief justice’s final years.¹⁷

Regarding two other Black servants, Minnie McKinney and Hattie Edwards, we are unable to track them in non-census sources. The chief justice went to Maine at the end of the 1910 court season and died in his summer house at Sorrento of a heart attack in July. He was seventy-seven. The funeral was held in the Episcopal church there and later his interment took

place in Chicago in Graceland cemetery next to his wife, attended by many of the justices and members of his family.

¹ On Senator Charles Van Wyck, Stephen Hansen, *Washington Chronicles*, <https://www.washingtonchronicles.com/p/charles-crazy-horse-van-wyck>.

² *Evening Star*, January 1, 1891, p. 4

³ See *Sunday Herald and Weekly National Intelligencer*, April 5, 1891, p. 13. Grace died of typhoid in 1893; Brown married Hester Wentworth in 1894 at a wedding attended by the President and Mrs. Cleveland.

⁴ Mary Fuller was married in Rome in 1892 to Colin Manning after Mrs. Fuller went to Europe in an attempt to dissuade her (*Evening Star*, February 18, 1892); Maud married William Delius, a German emigrant, against the wishes of her parents, in a ceremony in Colorado (*Denver Post*, April 6, 1905, p. 6 for an account of his life); Pauline, the third eldest, also lacked her parent's approval and eloped in 1889, provoking a national scandal carried in many newspapers (for example, *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago), March 21, 1889, p. 1).

⁵ He played in a tennis tournament in Washington in 1901 (*The Washington Post*, October 1, 1901, p. 7) and again in 1902 (*The Washington Post*, September 24, 1902, p. 8) but then is never mentioned again in newspaper accounts nor in biographies of the chief justice. He died in 1921 and was buried in the Fuller family plot in Graceland Cemetery, Chicago.

⁶ *Lexington Intelligencer*, December 21, 1907.

⁷ Melville W. Fuller Papers, Library of Congress, Family Correspondence, Boxes 1, Melville Fuller to Molly Fuller, October 3, 1893.

⁸ Source: Illinois, US Wills and Probate Records, Record of Wills, Book 68-69, 1910, Book 70, 1910-11. She signed as "Julia V. Brooks."

⁹ *Evening Star*, January 18, 1899, p. 7

¹⁰ *The Colored American*, June 27, 1903, p. 4.

¹¹ John Ferrari, *Historic Restaurants of Washington D.C.* (Charleston: The History Press, 2013), 103.

¹² <https://punchdrink.com/articles/century-old-mixologist-club-revisited-washington-dc/>; and <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/going-out-guide/wp/2013/05/03/original-sources-the-black-mixologist-club/>.

¹³ On the situation at the Bureau of Engraving after World War I, Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove, and "Rosebud Murrye and 'New Slavery,'" <https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/roundtable/rosebud-murrye-v-new-slavery>. The authors are the co-authors of the recent book of Washington's history, *Chocolate City* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

¹⁴ *Evening Star*, December 12, 1952, p. 38.

¹⁵ According to census records.

¹⁶ Willard L. King, *Melville Weston Fuller*, reprint (Ehrsham Press, 2007).

¹⁷ She ended her days living as a roomer in the house of George Thornton. She died in 1937, leaving five nieces, and was buried in Columbian Harmony Cemetery (which later was shabbily treated, with some gravestones ending up in the Potomac River: https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/headstones-black-cemetery-potomac-river/2020/10/25/3586f0d4-0d7a-11eb-8074-0e943a91bf08_story.html).