

When Speaking About Me, “Don’t Talk too Long and Don’t Tell the Truth”

A biography of Mr. Alonzo Fields (1900-1994).

for the West Medford Afro-American Remembrance Project

Interviews with:
Mrs. Mayland Fields
Mr. Oscar Greene
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Oscar Greene remembers one of his first interactions with Alonzo Fields very fondly. He was at a function at Tufts University when he recognized the tall figure in the middle of the long food line as Alonzo. Oscar went up to Alonzo, introduced himself, and asked how long it took for him to write his book, *My 21 Years in the White House* (1960). Alonzo stepped out of line, answered Oscar's question, and after speaking with him for a few minutes, walked back to the end of the line and started his wait all over again.

While this seemingly insignificant story is not a tale of presidents and the glory of the White House, it is a story about Alonzo Fields and the type of man he was. Never one to put his needs or desires before those of anyone else, he was able to win over friends, colleagues, movie stars, and heads of state with his unassuming and loyal character. After spending twenty-one years in the White House, he could easily have left with a chip on his shoulder or an enormous ego, but Alonzo left with neither. Doing the things he did neither made him special nor better than anyone else. To him, it did not matter that he was serving presidents or entertaining the most powerful people in the world. He was simply doing his job.

Alonzo Fields was born in 1900 in the small all-Black community of Lyles Station in Southern Indiana. His father ran a general store and his mother a boarding house inhabited by railroad hands. His father was also the leader of the Colored brass band, giving Alonzo a musical awareness from the very beginning. Because of this strong influence throughout his childhood, Alonzo developed a passion and deep affection for music that would last his entire lifetime. He was so passionate about his music that he left Indiana in 1925 to enroll in Boston's New England Conservatory of Music in a program that would train him to be a public school music teacher. In

a typically Alonzo fashion, he wanted to use his gifts to give back to his community.

While in Boston, he met and became employed by Dr. Samuel Stratton, the President of Massachusetts Institute of Technology. A keen relationship developed between the two, and Dr. Stratton became Alonzo's sponsor. In return for Alonzo's service in the Stratton household as a butler, Dr. Stratton would pay the tuition for the New England Conservatory and Alonzo was free to use the Stratton's piano to practice his singing. This symbiotic relationship was a perfect match for both people. It looked as though Alonzo was heading towards realizing his dream of pursuing a career in music. But fairy tale endings do not come that easily, and this fairy tale came crashing to a halt with Dr. Stratton's sudden death in 1931. When reporters came to his door to interview him about the death of his good friend Thomas Edison, Dr. Stratton had not yet heard the news. Tragically, Dr. Stratton dropped dead right at the scene.

The death of his sponsor also marked the death of Alonzo's sponsorship. Jobless and without a means to continue his musical studies, his future was anything but clear. He saw his music literally slipping away from his hands. This was the era of the Great Depression and excess was not an option, especially with a wife and child for whom to provide. During his stay in Boston he had met the woman who would become his wife, a woman named Ednaⁱ from West Medford, and had become the adopted father to her young daughter from a previous marriage, Virginia. With these familial responsibilities and the extreme economic hardships of the times, music was not a feasible option, especially for a man as selfless as Alonzo Fields. So Alonzo set off in a new direction to find the means to provide for his family. He did so, however, with the regretful feeling of what could have been had he been able to pursue his music. Alonzo's good friend, Oscar Greene, commented on, about Alonzo's choice not to continue his music: "*That*

was his dream. That never materialized and he was haunted by that right to his grave.”

After hearing about Dr. Stratton’s death, Mrs. Herbert Hoover remembered a young man named “Fields” who had waited on her during her visit to the Stratton household. She called him up and offered him a job at the White House. Knowing that this was not a chance to pass up, Alonzo packed up his life and moved his family to Washington, D.C., leaving his unrealized dreams to fade away behind him.

Upon his arrival in the White House, he did not get as warm a welcome as he could have hoped for, at least from his fellow butlers. The rest of the butlers were all people of color from the South, who did not appreciate this “foreign” Yankee presence. One man in particular, Robert Neal, was very sure that Fields, as they called him in the White Houseⁱⁱ, was not going to last. When Fields was dressed in his tuxedo for his first night of work, Neal joked, “Since Fields has his uniform, you might as well take him into the dining room tonight for dinner. As you know, Mrs. Hoover doesn’t like men as tall as he is. You might as well get it over with so he can be on his way back to Boston tomorrow.” When Fields walked into the dining room, Mrs. Hoover recognized him immediately, and welcomed him to the White House. Little did Neal know that this was only the first night in what would become a prestigious career spanning two decades and four presidencies.

After serving in the White House during the end of the Hoover administration, Fields stayed on to work for the incoming President Roosevelt after his inauguration in 1933. If the traditional styles of President Hoover and Alonzo Fields were a perfect match, then the styles of President Roosevelt and Alonzo were anything but. Out was strict formality at all times and in was a more laid back, less uptight White House. The Roosevelts were a new breed of First

Families who did not believe in full protocol for every situation. Every meal with the Hoovers was a ceremonious affair, even if it was just the two of them. FDR and Eleanor, however, were much more liberal pair, relaxed in their entertaining. The dinner courses would sometimes be served out of order and people could come and go as they please, a huge taboo under Hoover. Fields had to be on his toes to keep up with this new, unconventional president.

Fields was also on his toes for other reasons during the Roosevelt administration. He was at the service of President Roosevelt during World War II, in what were some of the most precarious times in the history of this country. Oscar Greene recounted a story that “Lonnie” (as he was known by his friends in West Medford) told him about being at President Roosevelt’s side on December 7, 1941:

Lonnie was also the only servant in the room on Pearl Harbor Day when Roosevelt found out Pearl Harbor had been bombed. He said [the President] broke down completely, and asked to see the Japanese representative... Lonnie said “ I stood there and FDR insulted that man something awful.” All the racial slurs and everything came out. And he said [later] that afternoon he met with all the heads of government and he was Roosevelt of all. He was in charge, completely changed in a few hours.

The “Roosevelt of all” was the Roosevelt America had come to know and love. The caring voice coming through the radio during the famous “Fireside Chats,” the Roosevelt who had lifted the nation out of its deepest depression, and the Roosevelt who would eventually lead America through one of its bloodiest wars. That is the Roosevelt to whom America was accustomed. But

Alonzo saw what no one else in America saw: the weak side of FDR. Even though he was in a wheelchair throughout his entire presidency, no one ever saw him as feeble because of his disability. But on that day, Alonzo saw the giant stumble, if only for a moment. Not many people in the country, or in the world for that matter, could ever say they saw Franklin Delano Roosevelt break down.

Alonzo was a silent witness not only to this awful day but to many other matters of national security. Being the only domestic allowed in the war room, he was privy to the most classified information. Mr. Greene remembers a story told to him by his friend, shortly after Pearl Harbor, when the fear of a Japanese attack on the West Coast was a frightful possibility. At the time, the government planned to use a line extending southwards from Chicago as the “line of last resort.” They were going to mobilize all the police forces in the country and station them along that line so that if the Japanese invaded, they could push no farther to the East. Fields was hearing that the United States government was prepared to, in effect, sacrifice over half of the country. That is how scared they were. How could he react to this? He was not trained in international politics; he did not know about war plans and field strategy. But to Alonzo Fields, it did not matter the situation; his job was to make sure his employers were as comfortable and well looked after as possible, while maintaining the utmost composure. His feelings were not important at a time like this; breaking down and letting emotion show would only slow down and hinder the effectiveness of his work.

During the trying years of the Second World War, Fields came across many of the world leaders who came through the White House. Above all, he developed a keen relationship with Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Frequently traveling to Washington to discuss war plans with

Roosevelt, and later Truman, the obdurate Churchill became a fixture at the White House. He personally requested that Fields be his man during his visits and grew to trust him very deeply. Adele Travisano remembers how it was obvious from looking at Lonnie's face when he reminisced about Churchill that he was proud to have been befriended by such an important world leader. She recounted a story Lonnie told her:

He said, "Fields, I want to ask you something. I [want to] know if I can count on you"
And Lonnie said, "Well, certainly Mr. Prime Minister I will do whatever I can." [The
Prime Minister] said, "In years hence when someone says, 'Was Winston Churchill a
teetotaler?', I want you to come to my defense." And Lonnie said, "Mr. Prime Minister I
will defend you to the last drop."

Devout loyalty to his employers helped Alonzo Fields gain the trust and deep affection of those for whom he worked.

Race also played an obvious part in his daily interactions in the White House. When Alonzo began working, segregation was prevalent among the White House staff. The demarcations and instances of discrimination between the white and Black serving staffs were clear. Change came with Roosevelt, who made the entire serving staff Black so they would not have to deal with issues of race. Furthermore, Alonzo experienced the racism of those coming into the White House. Senators from the South would see him in a dining room or wave him down during a meeting, addressing him as "boy." It is hard to imagine anyone—racist or not—calling a 6 foot 3, 250 pound man "boy". Oscar Greene remembers Lonnie telling him a

particularly powerful story about race that concerned an interaction with General George C.

Marshall:

General Marshall...was at that time...Chief of Staff of the Army, Navy, Marines and all of it. And he came in and he didn't see Lonnie. He rushed in to see the President, and he said "Mr President, we gotta do something about these niggers." ...Then Roosevelt gave him the eye and he turned around and saw Lonnie and he shut up. [Marshall] revealed himself. The biggest man, all the power of the services and still he can't get over certain things in his life.

Thus at a time when it was still acceptable to refer to African Americans in hostile, hurtful ways, before *Brown vs. the Board of Education* and Martin Luther King, Jr., Alonzo Fields was working as a chief butler in the White House, interacting daily with the President of the United States. This disparity is hard to grasp.

While Alonzo Fields had a great deal of respect for all the presidents he interacted with, there is one who always held a special place in his heart: President Truman. The Trumans were down-to-earth people. When they moved to the White House following the death of President Roosevelt in 1945, they did not bring with them the usual entourage of personal servants and assistants that most presidents brought from home. Their humble Independence, Missouri background was very evident. Truman's gentle, kind nature instantly attracted Fields to the new Commander-in-Chief. Years later when Fields was to have his portrait painted by Adele Travisano and hung in Medford City Hall, she asked him if he would like to be painted next to

any of the presidents he served. Immediately, he responded with Truman's name. Travisano explained that Alonzo was so quick to choose Truman to accompany him in the portrait "*because of the way he could tell that he was really friends with Truman. Truman said to him 'We are both civil servants.'* He did not put himself above Lonnie. Lonnie wanted Truman because Truman would talk to him." Lonnie expresses those exact sentiments in his biography: "Which one of the Presidents did I understand and which one did I think understood me as a person? I must say the answer is President Truman. I always felt that he understood me as a man, not as a servant to be tolerated..." (1960: 185)

Mrs. Mayland Fields, Alonzo's wife, whom he married after Edna's death, remembers a fond story that Alonzo always told about President Truman:

Every time [Truman would] see [Lonnie] in the lobby or in the elevator he would say, "Hey Fields how are you doing?"...and he would say, "I am fine Mr. President". And then one morning he and Mrs. Truman were, you know, going out somewhere, and he said, "Hello Fields, how are doing?" and he said to her, "Did you say hi to Fields?"... "Oh hey Fields, how are you this morning," she said. And [Lonnie] says, "I am fine". And then later on in that afternoon Truman says, "Hey Fields how are you doing? and he says "I am fine." So she was with him and he says, "Did you say hello?" and she said, "I spoke to him once this morning and that was enough." He would speak to him every time and he would have something to say.

This not only speaks to the character of President Truman, but also to the respect Alonzo Fields

garnered from people by being himself. The President of the United States felt compelled to greet Alonzo– the man who served him every single one of his meals–each time he saw him.

The end of the Truman administration and the election of President Eisenhower in 1952 provided the perfect opportunity for Fields to leave his post at the White House. Not only was there going to be a transition in power and a change in staff, but his dear wife Edna was very sick. She had been going between Boston and Washington for years to see a doctor for her illness and was now too sick to leave her hospital in Boston. Fields decided to come up and be with her. He requested a transfer in the Civil Service up to the Boston area, which was granted. Upon his departure, President Eisenhower made sure Fields knew that he could call him if the job did not work out. With that, his time at the White House came to an end.

As he left the White House for the final time as an employee, he realized that if he ever wanted to return, it would be as a visitor. Quite a strange feeling, especially for someone like Alonzo who had put his heart and soul into his work there. The following excerpt from his book illustrates how he was feeling at the time of this final departure:

It was then I thought that, after all these years, I was really leaving the White House. I walked out the gate on Pennsylvania Avenue, shaking hands with the officer on duty. Then I crossed over the street to the park where I waited for my bus.

As I stood there I looked at the old house, all lighted up, and thought of the many exciting occasions in which it had been my honor and pleasure to have a part. I have often thought how, when we are a part of something, we do find fault and complain and say “I sure will be happy when the day comes that I can walk out of this place.” But,

comes the day, somehow it is not always a day of rejoicing. I knew I would soon miss all the responsibilities I so often had complained about. (1960: 182-3)

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Life for Alonzo Fields after the White House took a drastic turn. Upon his arrival in Boston, he spent most of his time with Edna, who was in and out of the hospital as she underwent 13 operations. They moved back into Edna's hometown of West Medford. During this time, he also wrote and published his book, *My 21 Years in the White House* (1960). While in the White House he had kept an extensive journal in his own shorthand. Mayland Fields recalls why and how he kept these notes:

He would take notes...and that is how he wrote his book...He had his own little cryptic shorthand...[no] one else would understand. Truman encouraged him to...he says... "Fields when you get out of here you ought to write a book." So he would put notes down...you know different things. And he would keep it down [and]...that is how he was able to remember it all.

From this collection of notes about the meals he prepared, the world leaders he waited on, and the lessons he learned during those twenty-one years of service at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Alonzo composed his unique biography, which was published in 1960.

In 1973, Edna passed away after her long bout with illness. It was understandably hard for Alonzo to see her go. She had been with him through his years at the White House and even worked there with him as a cook. But after a period of mourning and reflection on his lost

partner, it was time for Alonzo continued with his life. He became very involved in public speaking, a good way to clear his mind from the hard times he had just gone through. After his book was published, many church groups and community organizations asked him to come and speak about his exciting experiences. He was very honored to do so, and took much pride in telling the stories of presidents, state dinners, foreign diplomats, and the daily toil of the White House.

In trying to figure out what to speak about during his talks, he consulted Oscar Greene. Mr. Greene lived in West Medford and had become friendly with Alonzo after he left Washington. He recalled how his dear friend Lonnie felt about his busy speaking schedule:

He enjoyed the speaking. It got him out, he was single and you could feel the loneliness. We men don't mind attention at all. We accept that readily. He had a story to tell. One time he said he was getting tired of it, but he did it all the way up until just before he died...He told the good stories, he did not tell the bad experiences. He asked me once about the prejudice he encountered and the hurt he suffered from certain high officials that he wanted to talk about, and I told him no. People don't come to hear that.

It was part of the burden Alonzo had to bear due of the job he had. To the outsider, the White House is an exciting hub of activities, full of important people, grandiose events, and a great deal of history. To hear that the White House was actually quite a racist work environment and that Alonzo actually endured some emotional hardships at the hand of those he was trying to serve does not mesh with preconceived notions of the glory of working in the White House.

During this time Lonnie became acquainted with another “West Medford girl” named Mayland McLaughlin. They had actually met decades earlier, before Alonzo moved to Washington, D.C. Mayland remembers seeing Lonnie around town when she was just a teenager:

[He was] a tall, nice looking man...The lady across the street was supposed...to be dating him. Her name was Edna...He ended up marrying her. And of course he was not looking at me. I was only about fourteen. He is nineteen years older than I am. So then I heard [the girls] all talking about this tall handsome man. I looked down...I said “Hm” ...I put my skates on and went on with my friends skating.

While in her youth she may not have been drawn to Alonzo, that certainly was not the case later in her life. They were reacquainted at a party in the late 1970s. Over dinner they both recounted tales of their recent travels, he to China and she aboard the cruise ship *Queen Elizabeth II*. Having both recently lost spouses, the two had an immediate connection and a very deep bond formed between them.

They married in 1980, when he was 80 and she was 61. Moving in together in West Medford, Alonzo made sure to talk about issues surrounding money, first and foremost, to get them out of the way. Mayland recalls him saying:

“I want you to keep [the house] in your name. Do not put my name on it. Now I want to know my...obligations...so we get everything straight so we never had to talk about this

again...What do you expect me to do?"... I said, "Oh well you can take care of the taxes. And you can...take care of the...the lights and the food bills and you can care of everything except the telephone." He said, "Well what is the matter with the telephone." I said "Because...my daughter is...away...and I have friends in California and different places and when I get on that phone I do not want anyone looking at me. I want to talk as long as I want. But he was that kind of person...he did not try to take advantage of anyone. He did not want nothing from anyone. He wanted to always do his part.

The two remained happily married for the rest of Alonzo's life.

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By 1994, Alonzo Fields was dying of leukemia. Oscar Greene went to visit him in the hospital during those last days. During his visit, the man who would never ask for anything from anyone had one dying wish for his friend: Alonzo asked him to give the eulogy at his funeral. Moved by the request, Oscar quickly agreed, while, in the back of his mind, he knew how hard it would be to eulogize such a great man. Lonnie had one requirement for his eulogy. He told Oscar, "*Don't talk too long and don't tell the truth.*" Initially taken aback by the abruptness of the request, Oscar soon realized that it was a typical Alonzo gesture. Even on death's doorstep, Alonzo Fields remained his modest self. He did not want to bother others with a long, dreary eulogy; it is almost as if he did not want people to notice that he was gone. It was just what he was trained to do as a civil servant in the White House. Be there, ready to help at a moment's notice, but otherwise just fade away into the background, watching. Always watching.

Works Cited

Fields, Alonzo. *My 21 Years in the White House*. New York: Coward-McCann, Inc, 1960.

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- i. The author regrets that he was unable to learn the maiden name of Mrs. Edna Fields.
 - ii. At the behest of Mrs. Mayland Fields, the author will use the name “Fields” to refer to Alonzo Fields during his White House years, and “Lonnie” to refer to him during the time he resided in West Medford.