

Ellen Agnes Riley (1884 -1972)
White House Papers, 1926-1961
MSA 632-633, Size D

Introduction

This collection contains the papers of Ellen Agnes Riley, head of housekeeping at the White House in the latter half of the Calvin Coolidge administration, between 1926 and 1929. Her papers include correspondence, photographs, scrapbooks and diaries, as well as menus and account books, personal notes from the President and Mrs. Coolidge and other memorabilia from her time in the White House. The papers also include correspondence with Mrs. Coolidge and others after the White House years and remembrances of the White House years written by Ellen Riley later in her life. The collection was donated to the Vermont Historical Society by the State of Vermont Division of Historic Preservation. Originally the papers were donated to the President Calvin Coolidge State Historic Site by Ruth W. Bailey who obtained them from her sister J. Marjorie Bailey, a close friend (cousin?) of Miss Riley. The collection consumes two linear feet of shelf space and is shelved in two flip top boxes and one size D folder.

Biographical Note

Ellen Agnes Riley, known as “Ella” to her family and friends, was born 16 April 1884 in Rowley, Massachusetts. She was the eldest of three children and the only daughter of William J. Riley and Adell G. Carpenter Riley. Her father was born in Boston in 1859 to Irish immigrant parents, John and Abigail (Cushman) Riley. Her mother was born the only child of Willard Mason Carpenter, a milliner, and Mary A. Bailey Carpenter. Mary Bailey was descended from James Bailey, one of the early settlers of Rowley, Massachusetts, who arrived from England to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1640. Mary Bailey had 9 siblings, many of remained in and around Rowley.

Ella Riley grew up surrounded by many Bailey aunts, uncle and cousins. Her parents, William and Adell, had married in Rowley in 1883 and around 1906 moved to the nearby town of Ipswich. William Riley had been a shoe maker and later became a prominent leather salesman. He was active in Ipswich town affairs serving as treasurer, and in retirement was the secretary of the local Chamber of Commerce. As a child, Ella Riley was known as an adventurous outdoor girl. She loved animals and spent much of her free time roaming the Ipswich woods and fields with her Irish terrier. She became a member of the Appalachian Mountain Club and loved going camping and hiking. She attended local schools, finishing her education at the Women’s Educational and Industrial Union in Boston, and training as a dietician.

During World War I, Ella Riley served with the YWCA as the director of several hostess houses. While stationed at Norfolk Naval Base she met members of the Stearns family of Boston. The Stearns family owned the R.H. Stearns department store in Boston and, when the war ended, Frank W. Stearns invited Ella to organize and run their new employee cafeteria. Frank Waterman Stearns was the son of the founder Richard H.

Stearns and had served as president of the company since 1880. In 1915, Frank Stearns, an alumnus of Amherst College held a dinner honoring fellow alumnus Massachusetts State Senator and President of the Senate, Calvin Coolidge. Stearns became a staunch supporter and advisor to Coolidge sustaining a close relationship with him throughout the rest of his life and political career, even living in the Coolidge White House. Coolidge would write in his autobiography that no man understood him as well as Frank Stearns.

Ella Riley had been working for Stearns department store for seven years when Mrs. Stearns came to her and asked her if she would like to go to Washington to work as housekeeper for the White House. That night Ella attended a meeting of the Massachusetts Dietetic Association and opened the offer to the group. They laughed and told her the job was hers. An interview was arranged with Mrs. Coolidge and Ella went to Washington in May 1926 to meet the First Lady. Miss Riley (as Grace and Calvin Coolidge called her) was offered the position of head of housekeeping at \$150.00 a month and was told to keep the secret for six weeks. Having accomplished complete silence for this time the press was finally notified and on the eve of her departure for Washington the newspaper men were banging on the door the Riley family home in Ipswich. It was headline news in all the Boston area newspapers. "Miss Riley lands fine job in the White House" and "New Housekeeper for the White House" were some of the headlines to appear. On July, 1, 1926, secretly boarding a train, Ella headed to Washington, D.C., to begin her White House career.

Miss Riley would not be in Washington long. It was summer and time to honor the tradition of the Summer White House. This year the choice was White Pine Camp in the Adirondack town of Paul Smiths, New York. As soon as she arrived in Washington Miss Riley faced the daunting task of packing the household and moving to White Pine Camp for the summer. Miss Riley and over 100 other people including newspaper men, household employees, and the secret service would fill several train cars on the trip to camp. Once there a parade of dignitaries, politicians and prominent men would pass through needing to be fed and entertained, all orchestrated by Miss Riley. The President loved fishing and took all his guests out to fish as well. It became a craze among the staff, too. There was so much fish at camp she didn't know what to do with it all; however, she enjoyed camp and found it beautiful and thrilling. Her real work wouldn't begin until she returned to Washington.

Miss Riley arrived back in Washington in the middle of September 1926. In addition to her duties as head of housekeeping she received her appointment of "Custodian of the Plate, Furniture and Public Property of the Executive Mansion" signed by President Coolidge. She felt it showed his confidence in her and she was proud. Soon she settled into her routine of daily marketing with her carriage and driver and planning the meals for the Coolidge family and their special guests. The most important event of the 1926-1927 season was entertaining Marie, Queen of Romania. Her first thought was "what do queens eat?" She describes in a memoir that "the menu was very simple." They served: caviar, consommé royal, lobster newburg in pastry cases, filet of beef with mushrooms, potato balls, green string beans, cold turkey in aspic, a salad of lettuce, romaine, endive and cress, cheese straws, macaroon and cherry ice cream with maple

sauce, cakes and candies. In addition to marketing and planning Miss Riley also kept the accounts. She was very thrifty (a trait that made the thrifty President happy), even reducing household costs from 1926 to 1927.

Ella Riley helped the President and First Lady entertain heads of state, dignitaries and senators as well as many famous Americans of the time including: Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Ethel Barrymore, Evangeline Booth, Mr. and Mrs. Rockefeller Jr., Will Rogers and Charles Lindbergh (who gave her a plane ride). Miss Riley became close with the President and First Lady and regarded them as family. She carefully guarded their privacy and never revealed anything private, even in her letters home. She was often rewarded with private invitations to join the Coolidge family for musicals and movies after dinner. Miss Riley loved animals and was proud that the family trusted her with their beloved pets. When the family was away she was often left in charge of their many pets, dogs, cats, lion cubs and the raccoon, Rebecca, of whom she was very fond. She loved her job and living in the White House. Her rooms were right over the front door and she could sit in her window seat and watch all the comings and goings. She enjoyed an active social life with several lady friends. She rode horse back, played bridge, dined, went hiking and camping, and took in the movies (although she was not a fan of "the talkies") throughout her time in Washington. Her best friend was Mary Pollard, a cousin of the President. She spent much of her free time with her. Once when the President and First Lady were away she had a party with all her lady friends, staying up all night playing bridge, roaming the halls of the White House and eating cake, ice cream, and candy.

In 1927, the Summer White House was the State Game Lodge in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Once again they packed the household and moved west for the summer. Miss Riley found the trip very interesting. There were excursions to nearby towns and Indian reservations and she enjoyed the outdoor lifestyle, especially horse back riding. It was from Rapid City that summer that Coolidge announced he was not running for President again. After the move back to Washington in the fall Miss Riley's life continued as it had been with her busy career and social activities. Her carriage was soon replaced with an automobile as she made her marketing rounds. The summer of 1928 was spent at Cedar Lodge in Wisconsin. She once again enjoyed the many excursions to local attractions as well as shopping trips to Duluth and Superior. That summer Herbert Hoover was nominated for the presidency. In her memoirs Miss Riley described the last fall and winter in the White House as a "season crammed with interesting events, some of them very personal, others strictly official. It is not possible to even skim the surface of all the exciting events in which I had a share."

On March 4, 1929, Mrs. Coolidge waved to Miss Riley sitting in her window seat above the front door as she bid farewell to the White House. The Hoovers arrived and Miss Riley stayed until her replacement settled in. She left the White House on May 1st. Ella Riley returned to her parents' home in Ipswich and resumed her work in the restaurant business. By 1940, she had moved to Brookline, Massachusetts, and was employed by the restaurant at the First National Bank. Later, she opened a teashop on Newbury Street in Boston which she sold upon entering retirement in the late 1950s. She

stayed active in her retirement taking small trips, visiting with friends and enjoying teaching tricks to her pet parakeet "Sunny." She maintained a fond correspondence with Mrs. Coolidge until her death in 1957. Over the years, Ella developed a presentation about her years at the White House which she shared with various groups. Near the end of her life she was in a nursing home where she regaled the residents with stories of pet raccoons and Wild West Indians and her remarkable time working for the Coolidge White House. Ellen Agnes Riley died in June 1972 at the age of 88.

Scope and Content Note

The Ellen Agnes Riley White House papers are organized in five series created by the Vermont Historical Society. A previous item level inventory created by an intern and the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation is filed in folder 0.1. This inventory is organized by item type with brief content descriptions.

I. White House Career

This series contains the bulk of the collection. It begins with the correspondence between Ellen Riley and Mrs. Coolidge regarding the position at the White House. This series continues in detail to document the White House years through letters from Ella to her mother, Adell, diaries, notes, and account books. It includes private notes from Mrs. Coolidge regarding the needs of the President and his guests as well as detailed menus of what was served at the White House. In addition to notes there are also private letters from Mrs. Coolidge to Miss Riley when she left her job to have surgery. Other memorabilia from this time include a scrapbook and press clippings.

II. Post-White House Correspondence

With the exception of letters from Mrs. Hoover and Mary Jane McCaffree, Mrs. Eisenhower's secretary, the bulk of this section is letters from Mrs. Coolidge to Miss Riley from 1929 to 1956. They are personal, and from them we can learn about Mrs. Coolidge's daily life after the White House. They contain news of family and friends and arrangements for Miss Riley to visit as well as sentiments of fond memories from their time in the White House. There are a few copies of letters Miss Riley sent to Mrs. Coolidge.

III. Stories and Presentations

This section contains two stories written by Ellen Riley after the White House. One is the story of Rebecca the raccoon, one of the famous White House animals. Miss Riley was often left in charge of Rebecca and she grew very fond of the little raccoon. The second story is of the three Thanksgivings she spent in the White House. She details the many gifts that arrived at the White House for the Coolidges, including a little raccoon that was supposed to be eaten. She also describes how she decorated, what was eaten, and who visited for the occasions.

IV. Riley Family

This short series contains a long and detailed letter from Ella's brother, William Mason Riley, who went by his middle name Mason. He writes to her from his home in Seattle. In the letter, he describes in detail his service in Korea recounting dramatic events he experienced as a pilot. Also included in this section is a letter from a tombstone company in reference to Ella's maternal grandparents Willard and Mary Carpenter. It provides birth and death dates for both. It also mentions Mrs. Francis Riley who was most likely the wife of her other brother, Francis.

V. Photographs

The photograph section is large and covers a wide range of subjects. There are many pictures of the Coolidge family, including many picture postcards. There are also pictures of Miss Riley from a baby to her mature years. There are two pictures of her grandfather, Willard Mason Carpenter, as well as an unidentified tintype of a small boy, likely one of her brothers. There are snap shots of her time at the White House, her staff, the animals and the summer trips. Many of the postcards in the collection also chronicle the trips to the Summer White Houses as well as the Coolidge family homestead in Plymouth, Vermont. There are two framed pictures in this section. One is a photograph of the President signed to "Miss Ellen A. Riley best wishes Calvin Coolidge". The other is a sketch of Mrs. Coolidge with one of her white collies.

Related Collections

The Vermont Historical Society library holds a major collection of Coolidge Family Papers (Doc 215), which includes a collection of photographs taken during the White House years. Additional Coolidge family materials can be identified through the library's online catalog. One book of note in the library collection is *Grace Coolidge and Her Era* by Ishbel Ross (920 C7775 1988). This book contains several pages mentioning Miss Riley using this collection as a reference.

Inventory

I. White House Career

MSA 632:	1	Grace Coolidge, job offer letter
	2	_____, letters
	3	_____, Christmas greeting card
	4	_____, food preparation notes
	5	_____, housekeeping letter
	6	Housekeeping notes
	7	Letters to mother, Mrs. Adell Riley
	8	_____, _____, transcripts
	9	Diary, transcript
	10	Accounting and menus book

- 11 Scrapbook
Size D Large photograph portraits of Ellen Riley
- MSA 633: 1 President Coolidge travel itineraries
2 President's party pass
3 Press clippings

II. Post-White House Correspondence

- MSA 633: 4 Letter from First Lady Lou Henry Hoover
5 Letters, to Grace Coolidge, copies
6 _____, from Grace Coolidge
7 _____, from Mary Jane McCaffree, secretary of Mrs. Eisenhower

III. Stories and Presentations

- MSA 633: 8 "Raccoon Story"
9 "Thanksgiving in the White House"
10 Presentation scripts
11 *The Home Magazine*, "My Stay at the White House"
12 Press clippings

IV. Riley Family

- MSA 633: 13 Letter, from brother Mason Riley
14 _____, from A. J. Barton and Sons about family tombstone

V. Photographs

- MSA 633: 15 Coolidge family
16 Coolidge family pets
17 Ellen Riley
18 Ellen Riley family
19 White House staff
20 Cedar Island, Wisconsin
21 Post cards
22 Sketch of Grace Coolidge (framed)
23 Signed photograph of Calvin Coolidge (framed)

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