Masters of a Craft: 
Philadelphia’s Black Public Waiters, 1820–50

Abstract: This essay surveys the work of black public waiters in nineteenth-century Philadelphia and considers how they transformed menial domestic jobs into lucrative businesses. The work of public waiters in this era helped develop a catering trade for which the city became well-known. Sources such as print culture, financial records, censuses, and directories reveal a transitional period in which public waiters negotiated a new role. From the 1820s through the antebellum era, as public waiters developed entrepreneurial catering businesses, they also helped build the black community, effect social mobility, and change eating culture.

“Philadelphia was, is, and will e’er be, the best,” swears Dolly Fudge in a letter to her Aunt Polly Flirt Fillen in the satirical book The Fudge Family in Washington, published in 1820. Dolly spins rhapsodic memories of eating in Philadelphia, and her recollections extend beyond delectable dishes. Although Washington dining has disappointed her thus far, Dolly still hopes that her future dining experiences might somehow live up to those in the past. “May I have the good luck

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on such servants to hit, As Shepherd and Bogle, that quite matchless pair, Who’re the best that we have.” Randol Shepherd and Robert Bogle, two of Philadelphia’s most celebrated public waiters, had earned reputations that could not be contained by city or state limits.¹

In the early republic, Philadelphia’s free black community, cultured bourgeoisie, and rich foodways traditions combined to make the city a unique geographical location that provided fertile ground for the growth of the professional black catering industry in the United States. In fact, many credit Robert Bogle with beginning the process of professionalization that enabled black public waiters to transform the menial domestic task of waiting table into a lucrative business of orchestrating the social events of the white bourgeoisie.² A variety of occupations might lead a person into the catering trade, in whose development both men and women played an important part; this essay, however, specifically examines black male public waiters and their role in Philadelphia’s eating culture.³

The private waiter and the public waiter served almost identical roles, and contemporaries often used the word “waiter” to refer to either one. Both private and public waiters performed an array of duties beyond serving at table. They might carry luggage, act as a valet, or deliver messages in addition to serving meals. They differed in that private waiters held a post in a single household or business establishment, such as a hotel, and answered to one employer; in contrast, the public waiter contracted with any number of individuals, households, businesses, and organizations whenever these clients needed a complete service staff or a supplement to an existing staff

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² Shepherd’s first name is variously spelled Randal, Randall, and Randell.
⁴ I use “bourgeoisie” and “social elite” in a similar sense to Sven Beckert and Julia Rosenbaum, understanding that bourgeoisie is not a term this group would have used for itself, but that it describes a largely urban group that “combined familiar forms of economic might and political power with a new form of cultural clout” and “did not work with their own hands, nor . . . [of necessity] work for wages.” Sven Beckert and Julia B. Rosenbaum, eds., The American Bourgeoisie: Distinction and Identity in the Nineteenth Century (New York, 2010), 1–2.
for a range of public and private events. As early as the first quarter of the nineteenth century, as Dolly Fudge attests, Philadelphia's black public waiters had earned a reputation as the best in the business.

Too often, foodways scholars have not considered service within the operation of eating culture, as though food magically appears at the table with no intermediary link between the kitchen and the dining room. The work of black men in the dining room is further obscured, as it fails to fit neatly into the scholarship of those who have studied various elements of eating culture and service work. Women's history scholars have focused heavily on immigrant women and on the perceived transition from productive to non-productive domestic labor among native-born white women. Scholars of material culture and consumption tend to emphasize aesthetic practice and conceptualize the dining room as a site of bourgeois pleasure. Recent scholarship has added to our knowledge of the work of waiters, but the lives and work of antebellum public waiters remain largely invisible. Uncovering black male public waiters’ experiences brings attention

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5 When contemporaries did differentiate, they used public waiter and sometimes public servant for much of the nineteenth century. Although black and white women, especially after midcentury, did serve as waiters in private homes and establishments, I have as yet found no female public waiters. White men may have also served as public waiters, but black men dominated the field to such an extent that “public waiter” was generally synonymous with waiters of African descent in this period.

6 Warren Belasco, Food: The Key Concepts (New York, 2008), 10. Expanding on Belasco’s understanding of the term food chain, I use foodways as an analytic and descriptive term addressing all of the choices and processes that connect people and food from production to consumption, as well as the meanings people give to food at any point on the chain. The food chain comprises porous and dynamic categories that are constantly in flux. Eating culture addresses a particular site within the broader concept of foodways. Eating culture encompasses the systems, rituals, and meanings that people have built into the activity of eating and is, therefore, also a site of cultural production that mirrors larger societal beliefs and systems.


8 For instance, Kenneth Ames, “Death in the Dining Room,” chap. 2 in Death in the Dining Room and Other Tales of Victorian Culture (Philadelphia, 1995), 44–96; Susan Williams, Savory Suppers and Fashionable Feasts (Knoxville, TN, 1985); Louise Conway Belden, The Festive Tradition: Table Decoration and Desserts in America, 1650–1900 (New York, 1983).

to foodways in the early national period, reveals an important part of the development of the professional catering trade, supplies a missing link in our understanding of eating culture, and enables us to better comprehend the breadth of African American contributions to the nation’s foodways and history.\(^\text{10}\)

The shift that began the transformation of the public waiters into caterers happened primarily in the 1820s and 1830s. During this time, black public waiters’ entrepreneurial endeavors moved beyond attendance at dinner. They began to provide various combinations of cooking, tableware, and waitstaff as well as their advice and event management skills. By midcentury, many major cities in the United States had a cadre of black caterers. In 1855, the famous Philadelphia cooking and etiquette expert Eliza Leslie advised her national audience, “In preparing for a party, it is well (especially if you have had but little experience yourself,) to send for one of the best public waiters, and consult him on the newest style of ‘doing these things.’ A respectable coloured man will be found the most efficient for this purpose.”\(^\text{11}\) Even though Leslie used the older terminology of public waiter, by 1860 the word caterer had gained popularity, and people used the word catering to denote and recognize a profession.\(^\text{12}\) Black public waiters such as Robert Bogle and Randol Shepherd raised their work to a high art, leveraged the cultural capital of Philadelphia, and utilized the power dynamics at work in the dining room to establish their authority. In

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\(^{10}\) The public waiters have appeared as part of larger synthetic works such as Walker, *History of Black Business*, 133–38, and Harris, *High on the Hog*, 118–22. For a concise review of scholarship pertaining to African Americans and food, see Psyche A. Williams-Forson, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006), 3–4, 225n6, 226n7–10.


\(^{12}\) Harris, *High on the Hog*, 118. A search for “caterer” in the America’s Historical Newspapers database yielded results that show a trend from sporadic and more general use of the term up to 1842 to more regular and particularized use thereafter. In the years 1775 to 1842, the word appears a total of 2,324 times. That number jumps to 9,375 for the period 1843 to 1860 and to 17,420 for the years 1861 to 1877.
doing so, they subverted their assigned position, mediated class for themselves and their clients, and transformed a job into a profession.

It is no accident that Philadelphia served as the epicenter of the burgeoning black catering business. Nicknamed “the Athens of America” for its refined culture, the city served as the literal and figurative center of the new nation from 1790 to 1800. In addition to its status as an early political center, the city garnered fame for its reputed religious toleration, its institutions of formal and informal learning, and its craftsmanship in silversmithing and furniture making. The city also claimed prestige as a center of trade and the culinary arts.13

Trade, agriculture, and an expansive culinary repertoire went hand in hand. Philadelphia enjoyed close ties to the Caribbean due, in part, to a Quaker network that traversed the Atlantic. Bustling trade and the city’s proximity to the state’s western farmland provided abundant foodstuffs to the city and enabled Philadelphians to revel in a well-deserved reputation for exemplary markets. As foreign dignitaries and domestic statesmen met, dined, and entertained, they did so in a city that could lay claim to more than its fair share of culinary capital. Whether haute cuisine for ambassadors and politicians or cuisine ordinaire served in the streets by hucksters and vendors, a host of food service personnel supplied fare to please discriminating palates.14

Philadelphia fostered the emergence of a distinctive black community. An influx of refugees from the Haitian Revolution, as well as fugitive and free black people from points south—especially Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia—joined the existing community, drawn in part by the 1780 gradual abolition act passed by Pennsylvania’s legislature. The free black population of Philadelphia fairly tripled between 1790 and 1800 and totaled over twelve thousand by 1820, making the city home to the largest population of free people of African descent in the antebellum North.15


Those persons who entered food service became part of a foodways tradition that combined Anglo, German, French, African, and Caribbean influences and produced Philadelphia’s particular eating culture. As men of African descent searched for work in the city, many of them found it in Philadelphia’s dining rooms.

Philadelphia experienced a building boom at the end of the eighteenth century. Even President George Washington struggled to commandeer the services of the city’s busy carpenters in 1790. He needed to have the renovations on the rented Morris House complete in time for his family’s arrival in the capital city. Washington’s plans involved improvements to the dining room in his new residence. He was not alone. As a separate room for eating gained architectural and cultural currency, many of the city’s bourgeoisie also added to or renovated their domestic spaces in order to include dining rooms.16

Republicanism, the ideology that Americans embraced in the early republic, emphasized the responsibilities between individual citizens and society. Cities could be dislocating places, as historian Dell Upton observes, and urbanites sought “a sense of context, a view of the whole within which the self was situated.” Such context “maintained perspective and maximized social effectiveness.”17 As Upton argues, everyday experiences helped city dwellers to identify and embrace their place within civic society. The daily experience of dining and the development of its attendant spaces, such as the dining room, could aid them in this process.18

The evolution of British North America’s dining rooms began in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as colonists expanded their homes. During this time, colonists sought to differentiate between quo-

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18 Upton, 1.
tidian and special activities. Social elites enjoyed a specific room for dining well before the middling sort were able to do so. However, as the eighteenth century progressed, the ability to serve meals in a dining room, away from the common tasks of food preparation, drew within reach of a greater number of people. Denoting gentility, the dining room developed into one of the most important rooms for entertaining—and proper entertaining required the attendance of waiters who understood the art of dining and its significance.¹⁹

“There is not any part of a servant’s business that requires greater attention and systematical neatness, than setting out his dinner table. . . . It is a branch of a servant’s business wherein he can show more of his ability than in anything else that he may have to encounter,” wrote Robert Roberts, a man of African descent, in his 1827 manual for male domestic servants.²⁰ Whether waiters served in a private capacity as domestic servants, plied their trade in a hotel, or embodied the entrepreneurial spirit of the public waiter, they carried out similar duties. Showcasing their expertise in those tasks could increase a waiter’s financial and cultural capital, as Roberts knew firsthand. Born in South Carolina in 1777, Roberts served as a butler and domestic servant to Boston financier Nathan Applegate. Roberts’s exemplary work led to a post with Christopher Gore, who most famously served as a senator and governor of Massachusetts. Given the breadth of his experience, waiters could count on Roberts for sage advice.²¹

A waiter might not follow Roberts in every particular, but he needed to know what might be required of him and how to perform his tasks to perfection if he hoped to grasp opportunities to advance. According to Roberts, in order to plan how best to conduct a dinner, the wise waiter first consulted the cook for the bill of fare to see if there were any special instructions regarding how the food should be presented and served. Next, the waiter laid the cloth and set the table so that all was straight and even. Then the sideboard and side tables had to be set with glasses, silverware, and plates that would be needed in the course of the dinner.

²⁰ Robert Roberts, The House Servant’s Directory, or A Monitor for Private Families (Boston, 1827), 44.
The best waiters did more than make sure the correct quantity of necessary things graced the sideboard and tables. They paid attention to the visual display to contribute to the refined atmosphere the bourgeoisie so desired. According to Roberts, a well-set sideboard could make a “magnificent appearance” that “[struck] the eyes of every person who [entered] the room, with a pleasing sensation of elegance.” During the dinner, the waiter uncovered all of the dishes, handled the removes and their replacements, poured beverages, and did his best to “exert [his] skill and ability, until the company [was] all served round.” Then he stood at various strategic points in the dining room in order to observe everything and to attend to any signal from the hosts, guests, or other waiters. After the dessert, the waiter might still need to serve tea and coffee. His direct contact with guests might have ended, but his work would only be complete once the room was cleared, glasses, plates, and silverware washed, and the dining room restored to order.

The bourgeoisie carefully cultivated the environment in the dining room, understanding that the proper objects, rituals, and performances could reinforce one’s place within the social order. Historian John Kasson characterizes proper dining room deportment as both a test and a “great initiation ritual.” The dining room proved a locale in which social reputations and relationships were built, confirmed, and sometimes destroyed. It was all well and good to have a room set aside for eating and the requisite accoutrements, but one had to know how to use them properly. Philadelphian Sidney George Fisher wrote in his diary on June 1, 1838,

Mr. Bradford came in at 3 and dined with me. . . . How important are some things, which many persons regard as trifles. Manners & personal habits for instance. Mr. B today ate with his knife, smacked his lips, wiped his face & mouth with a red silk handkerchief instead of a napkin &c., and I was so much annoyed and disgusted that, tho I respect the man & do not dislike his conversation, I was glad to get rid of him.

Perhaps Mr. Bradford had not dined in sufficiently genteel society—or perhaps the Bradford house did not have napkins and forks. As historian

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23 Roberts, 55–56.
Barbara Carson points out, “the relationship between possession of goods and behavior is one of mutual dependency. Without the acquisition of specific things, some performances are impossible.” In order to execute a flawless performance, both diners and waiters had to know their roles and be experienced at performing them.  

Luckily, a growing number of manuals could help them navigate the harrowing trial of dining room etiquette. The authors of these guidebooks showed a particular concern over the ways in which the senses of sight, sound, touch, and taste affected the dining room space and shaped the performance that both diners and service staff enacted there. In republican fashion, the writers envisioned an idealized space, orderly and harmonious, and believed their prescriptions would help individuals do their part in maintaining that order for the good of all concerned.

The waiter, serving in the public area of the home, required dress and deportment equal to the task. Sidney George Fisher required his man Elias to be “nicely dressed” even for family dinners. “I hate an ill-dressed, slovenly waiter,” he declared. Roberts suggested “a good superfine blue body coat, blue cassimere trowsers, and a yellow cassimere vest” for winter and at least “two or three suits of light clothes for the summer season . . . black bombazine . . . preferable.” He also advocated “tight shoes or thin pumps”—after all, it was impossible to have a “quick, but light and smooth step” in “heavy shoes or boots.” Eliza Leslie considered it a mark of both self-respect and respect for one’s employers to “put on a clean collar before dinner, and a clean white apron; taking care that no part of [the waiter’s] dress [be] either dirty or ragged.” Moreover, she felt a “round jacket” to be more appropriate than a “long coat” and approved when the shirt collar appeared above the cravat, “as the want of something white about the neck will give any man (even a gentleman) a dingy and dirty appearance.”

The waiter needed to be agile and dexterous without appearing to be rushed or flustered. Roberts warned his readers, “You must not seem to be in the least confusion, for there is nothing that looks so bad as to see a man in a bustle, or confused state, when he has the management of a party. He should always take hold of his work as if he understood it, and never seem to be agitated in the least.” Composure depended on more than preparedness or efficiency, although they certainly helped. Rather,

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according to Roberts, it was “the beauty of a servant . . . to go quietly about the room.” The waiter’s calm demeanor and polished appearance added to the visual aspect of the dining room performance.28

Behavior manuals contained rules that governed the senses of sound and touch. The authors admonished their readers that “you cannot eat too quietly” and expected that waiters should hardly be heard at all. Mrs. L. G. Abell expected “perfect silence, unless to answer a question, or to offer the article served,” and Roberts counseled his fellow servants to “be careful not to make any more noise than you possibly can.”29 Servers placed items on trays, also known as waiters, to transport them from kitchen to dining room and back. According to Eliza Leslie, the waiter should wear gloves and carry a tray in one hand to receive or dispense items while holding a napkin in the other. Although a napkin or pair of gloves would protect the hands from hot surfaces, this was not Leslie’s main concern. She remonstrated, “We have seen the rim of a plate very disagreeably marked by the thumb of a dirty-handed waiter, who had no napkin.” Moreover, as gloves prevented skin-to-skin contact between waiters and guests, they could serve as a reminder of social divisions.30

To nineteenth-century diners, a tasteful meal was fashionably and elegantly displayed in the proper order, in the proper way, in the proper amounts, and at the proper time. According to culinary historian Andrew F. Haley, diners measured the value of a meal “in the abundance of dishes, the quality of the conversation at the table, and the social status of the guests.” Sight, sound, touch, and taste—mediated in the dining room through the skill of the waiter—worked together to create the perfectly refined space. The right public waiter could help his clients achieve an elevating and tasteful experience.31

The day before she was to give a dinner party for author Harriet Martineau in 1835, Margaret Bayard Smith, a Philadelphia native who had moved to Washington, DC, after her marriage, sent for Henry Orr, whom she called “the most experienced and fashionable waiter in the city.” She sought his advice. Was bouilli still in fashion? Orr assured her that

28 Roberts, 56–57, 50.
29 Upton, Another City, 66; A Lady, True Politeness: A Hand-Book of Etiquette for Ladies (Philadelphia, 1848), 50; Mrs. L. G. Abell, Woman in Her Various Relations: Containing Practical Rules for American Females (New York, 1851), 113; Roberts, House Servant’s Directory, 52.
30 Leslie, House Book, 262.
a bouilli at the foot of the table would be “indispensable.” Negotiation ensued, as they did not agree on everything. He assented to her request for potatoes and beets instead of “stew’d celery, spinage, salsify, cauliflower,” although he warned her that “they would not be genteel.” She acquiesced to most of his dinner choices “with the exception of one or two things.” The next day, Smith turned her kitchen, dining room, and two servant girls over to Orr for his direction and “sat quietly in the front parlour as if no company was expected.” The results pleased her. Smith reported to her sister, “Dinner went off very well.”

Public waiters plied their trade in clients’ workspaces as well as in clients’ homes. For instance, the managers of the Pennsylvania Saving Fund Society (PSFS) had hired a number of different public waiters to provide limited refreshments during meetings up through the 1820s. As the savings bank flourished, the managers wanted their surroundings to reflect their growing stature. They moved out of the office on Decatur Street to a Walnut Street location that included a kitchen and dining room. They began purchasing a steady stream of china, glassware, and silverware and settled on the services of public waiter George Johnson. A seasoned waiter, Johnson had served at Wistar parties, the 1824 Lafayette ball, and the city dancing assemblies. Previously, he had proffered his services to the PSFS as an attendant and provided a few items such as beer or ice cream. By the early 1830s, he supplied his services and those of two to four other waiters to present a meal that might consist of oysters, chickens, tongue, salad and celery, potatoes, and bread and butter, as well as ale. Such a meal, which included the attendance of public waiters, would total almost twenty

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33 Philadelphia Saving Fund Society Board Meeting Minutes, Nov. 1, 1825, The Pennsylvania Saving Fund Society (PSFS), Collection 2062, Record Group 1, Subgroup 2, Series B, v.441, Hagley Museum and Library (Hagley), Wilmington, DE.

dollars. As they professionalized their activities in the 1820s and 1830s, public waiters took on an ever greater role in arranging special events, as Orr did for Margaret Bayard Smith, and offered a growing range of services, as Johnson did for the managers of the PSFS.

If the right atmosphere in the dining room, created through the skill of a public waiter, could cement one’s social place among the elite, then a badly executed dining experience could spell disaster for an aspiring member of the bourgeoisie. In the novel *The Garies and Their Friends*, Charlie Ellis, a young African American, is hired as a footman by a white woman, Mrs. Thomas. In her eagerness to “be at the head of the *ton,*” Mrs. Thomas gives “grand dinners and large evening parties.” Charlie thwarts her desire, orchestrating a series of mishaps in hopes that he will be released from her employ. At one of her dinners, Charlie “accidentally” manages to snatch the wig from her head as he removes the cover from a soup tureen. Unable to face her guests’ laughter, Mrs. Thomas flees the scene and retires to her room. The scene might be humorous in fiction but was decidedly less so in real life.

Hosts were just as likely to create problems for themselves as poorly trained or badly behaved servants might. Roberts noted that there were “some families that think a servant ought to wait on eight or ten at dinner, but I tell them they are much mistaken; for this is too many for one man to wait upon to do it to perfection.” As dinners and serving rituals grew more elaborate, hosts and hostesses often thought—incorrectly—that simply hiring more waiters should solve the problem. Roberts explained, “You will always find that the more help there is to wait on table, the more confusion there is, especially if their different offices are not pointed out before dinner. . . . They are chiefly in each other’s way, and this causes a great confusion in the course of dinner.”

What were the bourgeoisie to do?

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36 Frank J. Webb, *The Garies and Their Friends* (New York, 1857), 55–58. Thanks are due to P. Gabrielle Foreman for introducing me to this text and to Julie Winch for bringing this scene to my attention.

Enterprising black public waiters provided the answer: a head waiter who would “conduct” the dinner and bring his own men, who were trained together and used to working with one another. Thus, many public waiters would become what I call waiter-caterers. A waiter-caterer had moved beyond contracting his own labor into engaging and directing the labor of others, such as cooks and waiters. He might supply tableware and other services more directly related to the dining experience and eschew tasks that might be more suited to a valet, such as blacking boots. By building and directing a team, the waiter-caterer achieved more than an orderly dining room. He transformed his work into cultural and symbolic capital as he orchestrated an experience for diners who understood that the better the show, the more refinement the host or hostess could claim, and the more exalted their position in the social hierarchy. 

Although the bourgeoisie dined as part of a performance they engaged in for one another, the truth is that the waiters, their clients, and guests were involved in a mutual performance—one in which power could be contested. Since the bourgeoisie equated spatial order with social order, Upton notes, any “violations of spatial order were in turn interpreted as disruptions of social order.” Therefore, the bourgeoisie sought to emphasize the division between service and dining, between private and public spaces. For women working with public waiters, the architecture of gender remained difficult to destabilize. Although important actors in the catering trade, women remained offstage, generally confined to the kitchen and related food preparation areas. In addition to serving the interests of the white bourgeoisie, this gender divide may have also enabled black women to bolster their own sense of respectability and class order. They may have had to work, but cooking allowed them to remain physically and visually separated either in their own kitchens at home or in the food preparation areas of their clients’ establishments. They could avoid the appearance of working outside of the home, and as employees of public waiters, they would not be domestic servants of white people.

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38 Although they often continued to call themselves waiters, by this point, these men had become more than public waiters as described earlier, but not quite the modern caterer that they would become after the mid-nineteenth century. Further, not all public waiters made the transition to waiter-caterer or caterer; thus, I continue to use the terms waiter and public waiter.

39 Upton, Another City, 66.

For the public waiters, elites’ attempts to reinforce social mores and social order instead created a space with the potential to unsettle the very order that they sought to impose. The bourgeoisie set up their dining rooms for dinner parties in a way that reflected their conceptions of social order. Diners sat around the table, placed in the center of the room, while waiters operated on the margins. Waiters’ movements disrupted the spatial manifestations of bourgeois ideologies. First, the dining room was arguably the only room in the house or establishment in which servants occupied the same space as their employers for an extended period of time. Second, the dining room functioned for the waiters as a hybrid space where the public and private met. They moved between and connected the separate areas of service and dining. Third, the spatial organization placed the diners under the surveillance of the waiter, positioned to see and hear everything. This location on the margins proved a position of power from which waiters could negotiate their status.

Not everyone recognized the margins as a place from which power could be drawn. Both black and white men served as waiters during the nineteenth century. Yet for many black men, waiting was increasingly one of the only occupations open to them. As racial animus worsened through the 1830s, free African American men found it increasingly difficult to obtain the apprenticeships that would lead to work in skilled trades. When Theodore Hershberg analyzed an 1837 census of free African Americans in Philadelphia conducted by the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, he noted that “five occupations accounted for 70 percent of the entire male workforce.” The unskilled labor pool he identified included laborers, porters, waiters, seamen, and carters. Laborers topped the list at 38 percent of the entire workforce, while waiters accounted for 11.5 percent. Because white men had more job opportunities, they may not have thought about being a waiter in a private home as a permanent position—or, if they became waiters in hotels, they may have had more chance to advance to positions...
of greater responsibility or prestige. Thus, white waiters may not have been as attentive to exploiting the lines of power within the dining room as black waiters were.\footnote{Leonard P. Curry, The Free Black in Urban America, 1800–1850: The Shadow of the Dream (Chicago, 1981), 19; Theodore Hershberg, “Free Blacks in Antebellum Philadelphia: A Study of Ex-Slaves, Freeborn, and Socioeconomic Decline,” in African Americans in Pennsylvania: Shifting Historical Perspectives, ed. Joe William Trotter Jr. and Eric Ledell Smith (University Park and Harrisburg, PA, 1997), 137.}

Positioned on the edges of dining rooms, public waiters gathered information that proved crucial to their ability to showcase their worth to their clients. Reexamining the exchange between Margaret Bayard Smith and Henry Orr illuminates the ways in which Orr revealed and deployed his knowledge. Orr advised Smith based on his attendance at another dinner. Smith envisioned a more modest entertainment and rejected his advice. Orr replied, “Why to be sure, ma’am, her’s \[sic\] was a particular dinner on account of that great English lady’s dining with her.” Orr related what Harriet Martineau ate, whom she talked to, and what was said during that dinner. He took particular notice of her taste, a fact that may have influenced the earlier part of the conversation regarding what Smith should serve Martineau at the dinner Smith planned to give for the author. Smith, an experienced hostess, did not change her mind, but it is easy to see how a public waiter like Orr could be a valuable ally to the bourgeoisie as they jockeyed for position among themselves through their social performances. The waiter could choose what he would reveal and to whom. He could decide what was appropriate and judge his clients’ performance accordingly, as when Orr told Smith, “Mrs. Forsyth the other day, \textit{would} have a plum-pudding, she will keep to old fashions.” Perhaps to avoid being labeled old-fashioned, Smith decided against puddings and took Orr’s recommendations about what dessert to serve.\footnote{Margaret Bayard Smith to Maria Kirkpatrick, Feb. 4, 1835, in Hunt, Letters of Margaret Bayard Smith, 359–67.}

Mobility between different dining rooms set public waiters apart and proved even more important to the transformation of their work than waiters’ position within a dining room. Orr could be a reliable advisor because he participated in a great number of bourgeois dinners. In the exchange with Smith, he could speak to the environment in at least three different homes: the furnishings, décor, and tableware, who the guests were, what food was served, what was enjoyed and what rejected or requested.
The waiter-caterer was an entrepreneur and a free wage earner, neither a domestic servant bound to one home and perhaps loyal to a master nor an enslaved body to be used as an ornament to power, whose services were coerced and often uncompensated. He decided whom he would serve and how much it would cost. In an atmosphere that put so much emphasis on the environment and performance in the dining room, knowledge was power indeed.

Waiter-caterers fully realized their growing power. Although, as Roberts averred in his manual, there were many servants “that make great pretensions to conducting a party or dinner, who yet never knew the first principles of properly waiting at table,” waiter-caterers knew their business, and they let their clients know it. As exemplified by Robert Bogle, they were professionals. John Jay Smith wrote about a house party he had hosted, recalling, “I suggested to his second colored gentleman that the fire was insufficient, but the remark reached Bogle’s ear. He thereupon came up to his employer with a magisterial air of absolute ownership, with a reply which confounded me at once, that ‘the room is warm enough!’” Smith acquiesced. Bogle’s “air of command was inimitable. Self-esteem and consequence were the predominant features. Nothing could exceed his importance, and . . . everybody, from the master who employed him to the scullion in the kitchen, was in awe of him.”

And rightly so. The waiter-caterer could keep the bourgeoisie from being embarrassed either by their servants or themselves.

In Eliza Leslie’s fictional short story “Mr. and Mrs. Woodbridge,” the happiness of newlyweds Charlotte and Harvey is threatened by Charlotte’s ignorance. Attempting to emulate fashionable entertaining, the couple hosts a dinner for Harvey’s friends. Charlotte, however, has fired the cook and economized to the point that a new cook cannot be engaged, the comestibles are inedible, and the Madeira undrinkable. Caesar, the Woodbridges’ waiter, is nearly as scandalized as Harvey and the guests. Leslie described his thoughts during the “unhappy dinner”:

He prided himself greatly on his skill and alertness in the art of waiting on company, on his savior faire in arranging, on his dexterity in executing, and in the harmonious but unquestionable authority with which he could give

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a tone to the movements of the apt and well-tutored “coloured gentlemen,”
that on similar occasions had always been employed to assist him.\textsuperscript{44}

Caesar, perhaps even more than the guests, is contemptuous of Charlotte. He
knows better than his employers the rituals and rules that should govern a proper dinner. He is also clearly aware of how essential his own work
and knowledge, and that of the public waiters who should have been hired,
are to a successful outcome. If Charlotte had heeded Caesar’s advice, the
Woodbridges would have avoided the catastrophe.

Mary Ewing wrote to a relative in 1830 about a wedding at which she
was a guest, “Bogle, the celebrated waiter attended—he knows his business
so well all passed off in style.”\textsuperscript{45} Her statement illustrates not only that
the waiter-caterers gained recognition for their professional skill but also
that their work had direct connections to notions of style. In other words,
Bogle’s knowledge, proficiency, and experience did not just enable the
event to proceed without mishap; rather, his active oversight and participa-
tion meant that the event was carried off in a fashionable way, bringing
renown to him and cachet to his clients.

Members of the bourgeoisie were always anxious about their reliance on
the labor of their servants, for republican citizens were supposed to abhor
dependency. The assertiveness of waiter-caterers did nothing to mitigate
their anxiety. Nor did white people always appreciate what they perceived
as waiters’ pretensions to gentility, a status many considered impossible
because of race and class. During the nineteenth century, Edward Clay
began drawing a series of popular racist cartoons, \textit{Life in Philadelphia}, in
which he lampooned what he considered to be black people’s attempts at
refinement. Eliza Leslie ridiculed such aspirations subtly by including a
story in her \textit{Behaviour Book}, “apropos to the talk of coloured people,” that
coupled blackness with stupidity and ignorance, mere paragraphs after lav-
ishly praising the ability of public waiters. Leslie did the same when she
placed quotation marks around the phrase \textit{coloured gentlemen} in referring
to public waiters in “Mr. and Mrs. Woodbridge.” Even Margaret Bayard
Smith considered her meeting with Henry Orr a “scene which amused
me,” and she related it to her sister as a “diversion.” However, even as

\textsuperscript{44} Eliza Leslie, “Mr. and Mrs. Woodbridge,” in \textit{Mr. and Mrs. Woodbridge, with Other Tales, Representing Life as It Is and Intended to Show What it Should Be} (Providence, RI, 1841), 74.
they attempted to keep black waiter-caterers in their place, the importance with which the bourgeoisie had imbued the social ritual of dining undermined those attempts. They needed the waiter-caterers—those “presiding geniuses,” as Eliza Leslie called them—to ensure their own proper social performance and to corroborate, in essence, their gentility itself.\textsuperscript{46}

Waiter-caterers did not have mere pretensions to gentility, as many of their white clients believed. Rather, they too claimed the gentility of middle-class status. For many African Americans, middle-class status meant much more than economic security. It represented a commitment to the black community, whose members were both free and enslaved—to serve its interests, to be its spokespersons, to invest time and money in its future. As businessmen, waiter-caterers such as Robert Bogle, Randol Shepherd, and Scipio Sewell had an important role to play in the community.\textsuperscript{47} All three men, for instance, were members of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas and had at various times served on the vestry, its lay governing board. Bogle also belonged to the Philadelphia chapter of black Freemasons. Black Philadelphians trusted these men and elected them to represent their interests. Participants in an 1817 meeting at Bethel Church chose Shepherd to be one of the men who would present black Philadelphians’ rejection of African colonization to white politicians. Attendees of the first annual convention of free black people in 1830 elected Sewell to its governing board. By the 1830s, each of these men could claim to be in the “higher classes of colored society.”\textsuperscript{48}


\textsuperscript{47} See Walker, \textit{History of Black Business}, 395; Minton, “Early History of Negroes in Business in Philadelphia”; and John Sibley Butler, \textit{Entrepreneurship and Self-Help Among Black Americans: A Reconsideration of Race and Economics} (Albany, NY), 41–149, for the important roles that black businesspeople and entrepreneurs played in the black community from the colonial era through the antebellum era as leaders and abolitionists. Erica Ball, \textit{To Live an Anti-Slavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class} (Athens, GA, 2012), 1–9. Ball argues that middle-class black men and women did not use respectability as a “narrow political strategy or a public political performance”; rather, it was key to their republican and anti slavery self-identity—a deeply personal politics.

If the presence and visibility of its higher classes reassured African Americans of their ability to prove to the city and the nation their fitness for full citizenship, it had the opposite effect on the white Philadelphians with whom they shared the streets. Black citizens of Philadelphia faced mounting challenges. Racial violence, including a series of race riots, escalated throughout the 1830s. It should not be surprising that the rioters targeted the emblems of black self-sufficiency and success. Then, over black residents’ vociferous protests, the Pennsylvania legislature voted in 1837 to disenfranchise the state’s black male citizens. In 1838 a mob burned down newly built Pennsylvania Hall, intended as a meeting place for abolitionist activities. The country had also entered a recession, making the end of the 1830s and the beginning of the 1840s a difficult time for many. Even those who had eschewed service positions out of a republican disdain for dependent labor took up what were considered low-status jobs. In this moment of transition, waiter-caterers, holding on to their hard-earned respect, continued to assert that they were not servile bodies but masters of a craft.49

As public waiters entered this more difficult era, they relied on old tactics and developed new ones. They built economic capital, putting their money in savings banks such as PSFS. They continued to create social capital by maintaining a web of associations that supported their work. They met through church, beneficial societies, or masonic lodges. They worked with each other, as Scipio Sewell and George Johnson did when they joined forces from 1837 to 1839. The proliferation of hotels and eating houses or restaurants meant that a greater number of black men might work as a waiter in one of those establishments before becoming a waiter-caterer or restaurateur, as Henry Minton did.50 They could turn to a new manual, Tunis Campbell’s 1848 *The Hotel Keepers, Head Waiters, and Housekeepers’ Guide*, which addressed the work of those laboring in private

households as well as in contemporary public eateries. Campbell, a free black man and abolitionist born in New Jersey in 1812, made a living as a waiter and hotel steward.

Campbell encouraged waiters to “make themselves acquainted with every thing with which they may be practically associated. . . . Then waiting becomes what it ought to be—a science, which every man who seeks employment must first study, the same as any other profession.” Like Campbell and Roberts before him, waiter-caterers sought to distinguish themselves from what Campbell termed “cheap help,” especially important as men swelled the ranks of waiters in the 1840s. For instance, they might wear a uniform of sorts, but eschewed livery. They prided themselves not only on their knowledge and skill but also on their distance from the ranks of dependent labor. Campbell’s book expresses the professionalism that marked the transition of the public waiter into the caterer and distinguished what many considered the unskilled work of the domestic from the skilled work of the master tradesman.

As the bourgeoisie came to terms with the waiter-caterers, a group of men who refused to stay in the subordinate position into which the upper classes had tried to place them, the white elite used language that showed they understood the influence of this new cohort. Nicholas Biddle, at one time president of the Second Bank of the United States, appreciated fine food and the arts of genteel hospitality. His account books show that he patronized a number of Philadelphia’s purveyors of fine dining and hired public waiters such as George Johnson and Robert Bogle. Biddle wrote a slightly tongue-in-cheek ode in Bogle’s honor in 1829. The first lines read,

Bogle! Not he whose shadow flies
Before a frighted Scotchman’s eyes,
But thou of Eighth near Sansom, thou
Colorless colored man, whose brow,
Unmoved, the joys of life surveys,

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50 Sewell and Johnson receipts, PSFS, Collection 2062, Record Group III, Subseries 2, Box 51, Folders Food, Supplies and Services 1837, 1838, and 1839; “The Late Henry Minton,” New York Globe, June 2, 1883.
51 Tunis G. Campbell, Hotel Keepers, Head Waiters, and Housekeepers’ Guide (Boston, 1848), 58. Campbell (1812–91) went on to be active in politics during the Civil War and Reconstruction, serving in the Georgia state senate.
Untouched the gloom of death displays,
Reckless if joy or grief prevail—
Stern, multifarious Bogle—hail!\(^{53}\)

Many have understood this as a reference to skin color, but what did it mean for Biddle to call Bogle a “colorless colored man” in the context of a poem acknowledging his mastery over his profession and clients? What might it mean in the context of a society that espoused the so-called one-drop rule? This is more than an observation on skin tone. Rather, Biddle used a common trope, Bogle’s “colorlessness,” that points to white people’s struggle to reconcile mastery, dignity, and consequence with a racist worldview that understood all black people to be debased, lacking in intelligence and industry.\(^{54}\)

Eliza Leslie told her *Behaviour Book* readers that on the morning of a party, one’s “presiding genius . . . will bring with him (at whatever hour you indicate,) his ‘young men,’ as he calls them; (if coloured youths, they are too genteel to answer to the name of boys) and these are his apprentices that he is training for the profession.”\(^{55}\) The language in Biddle’s *Ode* is a paean to individual force of personality, while Leslie’s words grant respect not based on individual attributes but on association with a particular profession.

Leslie’s words are striking in the context of the times. By 1855 black men still found it difficult to get jobs, let alone to choose between menial and skilled ones, and it was common for them to be disrespected by being called “boys.” Yet Leslie wrote that, if they were waiters being trained under a caterer, then they were too genteel for this epithet. Perhaps in her eyes this seemed a small concession in the face of the greater structural and social barriers erected against full black equality. After all, it was one thing to invite waiter-caterers into one’s home as workers and recognize them as professionals—it was quite another to invite them in as guests and recognize them as social equals.

Still, the bourgeoisie did not just use their words. They acted, continuing to hire black waiter-caterers even though they had many choices with

\(^{53}\) Nicholas Biddle, “An Ode to Bogle” (Philadelphia, 1865). Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Biddle also references public waiters George Johnson and Randol Shepherd in the “Ode,” a fact that is rarely noted.

\(^{54}\) Biddle, “Ode to Bogle.”

regard to food service—more every year, in fact. By the 1860s, the managers of the PSFS had worked for over thirty years with a series of black public waiters, from Robert C. Gordon in 1827, to George Johnson, Scipio Sewell, Walter Carroll, William Chew, James Newman, and, in 1865, caterer Francis Teagle. The Mutual Assurance Company looked to Scipio Sewell and, in the second half of the nineteenth century, to caterer Andrew F. Stevens. Both organizations combined the services of waiter-caterers with the cuisine of the Augustin family, who represented another branch of the black catering business.\footnote{Receipts, PSFS, Collection 2062, record group 3, subseries 2, box 51 and box 52, folders Food, Supplies and Services 1827 to 1860, Hagley; Scipio Sewell and Andrew F. Stevens receipts, Mutual Assurance Company (Green Tree) Records (Collection 2189), boxes E88–E90, Bills and Expenses folders, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; “Death of an Aged Caterer,” \textit{Philadelphia Inquirer}, Jan. 3, 1883. The Augustins, whose roots stretched back to Saint-Domingue, were primarily a family of cooks—both the men and the women in the family. Evidence suggests that the Augustins did not generally serve as public waiters on their own behalf prior to opening their restaurant at 1105 Walnut Street in 1864, although they might have individually contracted out as waiters for other public waiters.}

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Philadelphia caterer had become synonymous with a man who, according to W. E. B. Du Bois, “wielded great personal influence, aided the Abolition cause to no little degree, and made Philadelphia noted for its cultivated and well-to-do Negro citizens.”\footnote{Du Bois, \textit{Philadelphia Negro}, 35.} These men stood at the apex of their profession and were part of a host of shrewd and savvy businessmen and women who used every advantage they could discover or manufacture in order to succeed.\footnote{A study of Philadelphia city business directories from the 1820s through the 1890s shows that \textit{Gopsill’s Business Directory} first instructed readers looking for public waiters to “see caterers” in 1881. Philadelphia business directories contained the heading “public waiter” as late as the 1890s.}

More than a few caterers remained small-scale entrepreneurs, but some turned their concerns into big enterprises. In 1860, a heading for public waiters appeared in the business directory located at the back of \textit{McElroy’s Philadelphia City Directory}. Five names appeared under the heading, and although only two of them had the “col’d” designation printed after their listing, all five were, in fact, men of African descent.\footnote{\textit{McElroy’s Philadelphia City Directory for 1860} (Philadelphia, 1860), 1299. It is curious that so few names are listed, especially when men designated as public waiters and caterers are found in the individual listings of the directory. Holmes, Newman, Jones, and Morris are designated “colored” in their individual listings, while only Tingley and Newman are so recognized in the business listing.} A brief examination of this sample of a larger cohort shows some of the diversity within the catering trade as it developed in the city up to the Civil War. James
Newman had been born in Delaware, and Philip Holmes and Henry Jones in Virginia; George Tingley had been born in either Maryland or Virginia, while Morris had been born in either Delaware or Pennsylvania. Jones and one person in Holmes’s family were formerly enslaved. The 1837 PAS census shows that James Newman and George Tingley lived next door to each other in Acorn Alley. Both men were involved in freemasonry. The census noted that the families worshiped in the First and Second African Presbyterian, St. Thomas Episcopal, and First Colored Wesley Methodist churches. For a subsequent census of African Americans conducted in 1847, in which Tingley does not appear, only the Newmans reported that all members of the family could read and write. Almost everyone in the other households could read, but writing skills proved more elusive. Still, each family had at least one member who could write.\footnote{Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (Orthodox) Representative Committee, Philadelphia African American Census 1847, Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College, June 12, 2017, accessed Feb. 1, 2018, \url{https://github.com/swat-ds/datasets/blob/master/1847census/1847census.csv#L923}; Ancestry.com, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, African-American Census, 1847 [database online], accessed Feb. 1, 2018; “Committee to Visit the Colored People,” census facts collected by Benjamin C. Bacon and Charles Gardner (4 vols.), 1838, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers (Collection 490), Historical Society of Pennsylvania; First Colored Wesley Methodist Church, July 1854, in Ancestry.com, Pennsylvania and New Jersey, Church and Town Records, 1669–2013 [database online], accessed Feb. 1, 2018; “Grand Lodge Election of the Officers,” Christian Recorder, Jan. 11, 1862; “Obituary,” Christian Recorder, June 8, 1861.}

When their names appeared in the 1860 directory, Morris categorized himself as a caterer, Tingley as a confectioner; the other three listed themselves as waiters in the individual, alphabetized section.\footnote{McElroy’s Philadelphia City Directory for 1860, 451, 493, 709, 737, 996. In McElroy’s city directories from 1856 to 1860, Morris also advertised as a furniture dealer and barber and Newman as a whitewasher in their individual listings. Morris had a son of the same name who may also have followed his father in barbering, waiting, and catering.} Jones had purchased a building at 250 South Twelfth Street, and when he placed an advertisement in the \textit{Press} in 1861, he titled himself “caterer.” Jones promised his customers satisfaction based on “his long experience in business.”\footnote{“Terrapins, Oysters Stewed and Fried, and Chicken Salad,” Philadelphia Press, Nov. 9, 1861.} When he died in 1875, one of his obituaries reported that

for thirty years past he has been engaged in the business of private caterer, and has long been recognized as foremost among his class for his fidelity to his engagements, his quiet politeness and his excellent management of the social entertainments which were constantly entrusted to him, not only in Philadelphia, but in most of the neighboring cities. His life has
been characterized by great industry, undeviating integrity, and high moral qualities. The largest confidence has always been reposed in him and was never abused.\(^{63}\)

Clearly, he had more than delivered on his promises. Ten years after Holmes, Jones, Morris, Newman, and Tingley appeared under the heading “Waiters, Public,” a Philadelphian throwing a party could peruse a list of eighty-six names; I positively identified sixty-two men, and all of them, save one, were of African descent. The tradition begun by black public waiters in the early days of the new republic would live on well after the nomenclature changed finally and completely to the appellation “caterer.”\(^{64}\)

Philadelphia’s first public waiters witnessed all the ways in which rhetoric about freedom, equality, and republican citizenship often fell short. These failures only lent urgency to their need to find ways to circumvent the challenges they faced as free black men in the United States. They found that they could overcome the shadow of dependency that hung over occupations born out of service work, but they could not quite outpace the specter of race-based logics that dogged them in a nation where slavery continued to exist. Still, they succeeded in effecting transformation in many important ways.

We are used to thinking about the margins as a place of powerlessness; waiter-caterers turned that kind of thinking to their advantage. In the margins, they used their entrepreneurship to change individual lives. Many of their descendants would enjoy the benefits of education, culture, and wealth, becoming part of a nationally networked, elite black society. They also changed their communities through acts of philanthropy, big and small. They accomplished this as they built economic capital, putting money into savings banks and investing in real estate; as they developed relationships with influential men and women in both white and black worlds; and as they accrued knowledge that they used to become arbiters of culture. Under their discerning eye and through their skillful and strategic dispensing of advice, waiter-caterers shaped ideas about taste for countless diners—and, because taste was tied so intimately to distinction in social standing, they helped to shape ideas about class.


\(^{64}\) *Gopsill’s Philadelphia Business Directory for 1870* (Philadelphia, 1870), 387. Sixty-one were of African descent, and one was white. The identity of twenty-four could not be confirmed.
The bourgeois dining room, designed to be elevating for diners, was not only transformative for public waiters but also transformed by them. In this place, silver forks were used instead of steel, people ate off French china rather than earthenware, and eating became dining. Just as the bourgeoisie used the power in the dining rooms for their ends, so too did the public waiters of African descent use it for theirs. Black public waiters embraced the legacy of Robert Bogle and leveraged the potential they had recognized, seized, and transformed in order to assert their right to be not boys, but men; to be more than waiters—to be caterers.

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