



Black Families and Workers of Rock Hill/Connemara

This site’s history goes beyond stories of white landowners Memminger (1838-1888), Gregg (1889-1900), Smyth (1900-1942), and Sandburg (1945-1967). It encompasses the lives of African Americans who lived and worked here. Black people, enslaved by the Memmingers, helped build most of the buildings around you. From 1838 to 1853, laborers constructed the main home, detached kitchen, and two small living quarters for enslaved cooks, maids, butlers, and farm workers. The kitchen served as their dining area.

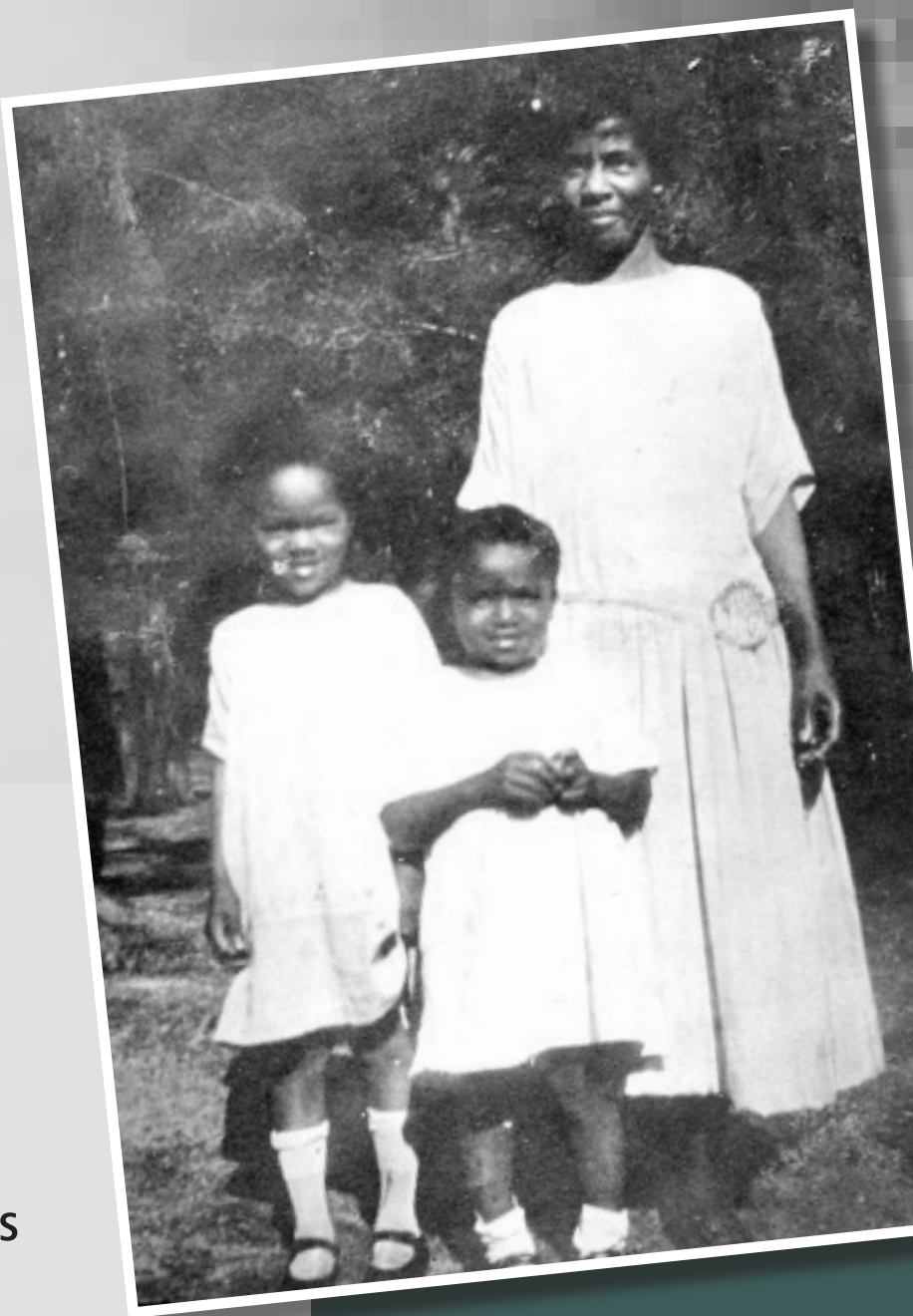
After the Civil War (1861-1865), the Smyths hired Black people as domestic employees, chauffeurs, and groundskeepers. The Smyths converted one of the enslaved quarters to the “Wash House” for laundry. During the Sandburg era, the detached kitchen became a garage. One previous enslaved quarters was renamed “Swedish House,” due to its decorative trim, and was used for storage. The former “Wash House” sheltered goat kids.

Little is known about this estate’s Black workers and the National Park Service is seeking to change this. Sharing their stories provides a more complete history of the property and aligns with Sandburg’s legacy as a writer and activist. Please contact us if you have any information to share related to this history.



Scan QR code
to learn more.

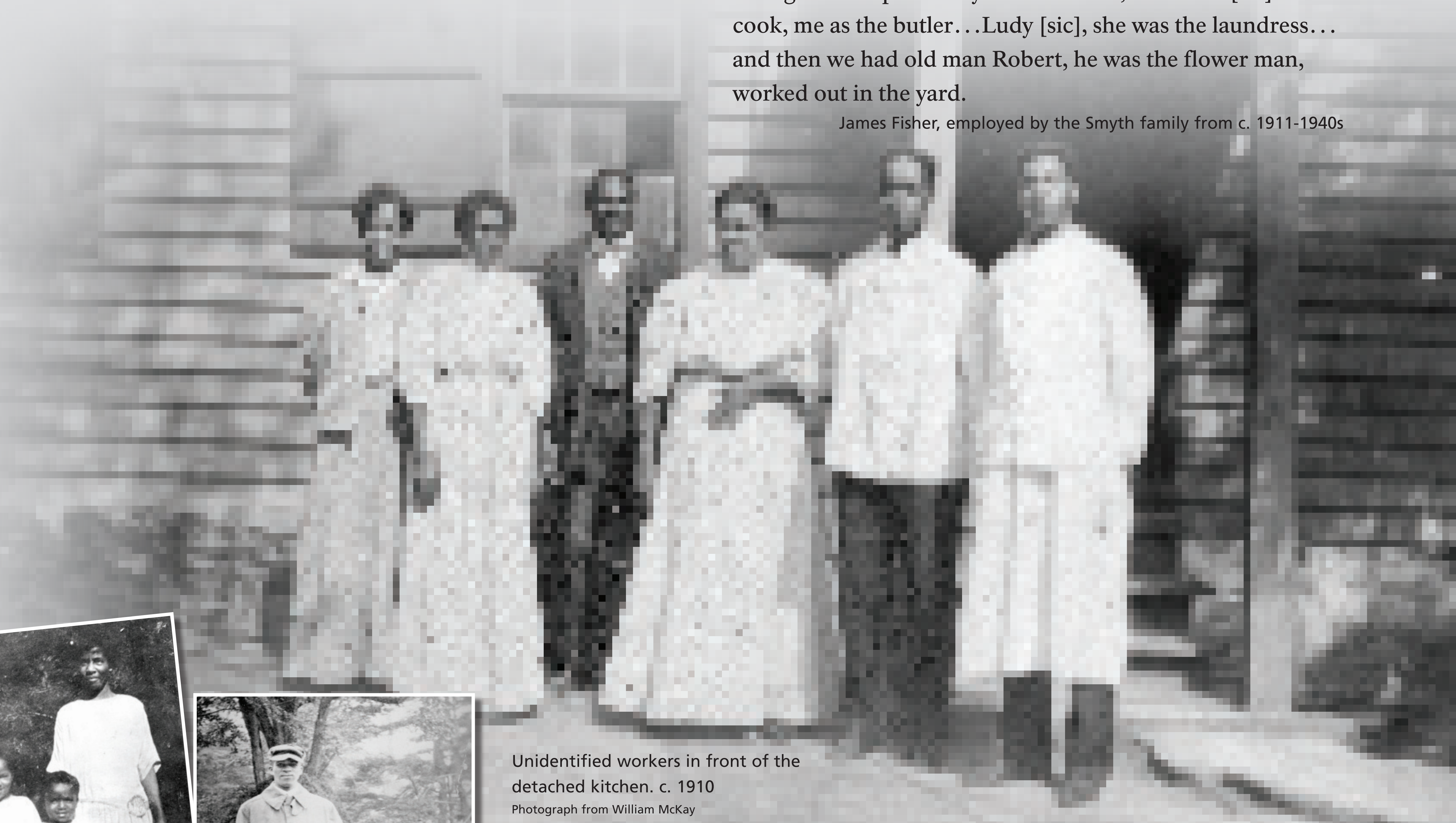
Carrie with daughters
Mary and Benny
Photograph from the Ballard Family Collection



James Melvin Fisher
Photograph from the Ballard Family Collection

I can name them to you. There was Paul, the coachman, George was Captain Smyth’s chauffeur, Plummer [sic] was the cook, me as the butler...Ludy [sic], she was the laundress... and then we had old man Robert, he was the flower man, worked out in the yard.

James Fisher, employed by the Smyth family from c. 1911-1940s



Unidentified workers in front of the detached kitchen. c. 1910
Photograph from William McKay

Low wages for African Americans compelled entire families to work. James Melvin Fisher, a World War I veteran, worked as the Smyth’s valet and chauffeur. His wife Carrie worked as a maid. Per the 1930 census, the Fishers’ daughters Mary (age 10) did chores and Benny (age 8) was a servant. The family lived in the “Swedish House.”

