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James Wormley: The Black Businessman Who Built a Hotel for Washington's Most Powerful Men

The Black Entrepreneur Who Built a Hotel Where America's Most Powerful Men Came to Do Business



William Spivey Follow 12 min read · 1 day ago

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While researching the background of the Compromise of 1877, I ran across the extraordinary story of James Wormley. Long before his hotel became the meeting place for the politicians who negotiated the Compromise of 1877, James Wormley had established himself as one of the most successful Black businessmen in Washington, D.C. His story was one of ambition, hard work, entrepreneurship, and an extraordinary ability to build relationships in a society determined to limit opportunities for Black Americans.

The story of James Wormley contains an irony that deserves far more attention than it has received. In February 1877, some of America's most powerful white politicians gathered at his Washington hotel to negotiate an agreement that would help determine the country's future and end Reconstruction. The agreement they reached would ultimately contribute to the abandonment of millions of Black Americans in the South, many of whom had only recently secured the rights of citizenship, voting, and political participation.

But the man who owned the hotel was not simply a businessman fortunate enough to have an attractive property in the nation's capital. James Wormley was a remarkable entrepreneur who had built his reputation and fortune over several decades, establishing a business empire that served presidents, senators, diplomats, wealthy travelers, and some of the most influential people in American politics. He had accomplished this at a time when Black Americans faced extraordinary restrictions on their economic opportunities, even in Washington, a city that had become an important center of Black political and intellectual life.

To understand how Wormley came to own one of Washington's most distinguished hotels, we must go back to the beginning of his life.

James was born on January 16, 1819, in Washington, D.C., into a family of free Black Americans. His parents, Lynch and Mary Wormley, had arrived in Washington from Virginia in 1814, seeking better economic opportunities and a degree of freedom that was increasingly difficult to maintain in the slaveholding South. They had left behind a society in which even free Black people faced restrictions on their movements, employment, and legal rights.

Their decision to move to Washington was not without complications. Although they were free, establishing themselves as Black business owners required navigating a legal system that did not treat Black Americans as equals. Lynch Wormley had to secure legal documentation establishing his freedom before he could conduct business in the District. He eventually established a carriage and livery business along Pennsylvania Avenue, an advantageous location near some of the city's leading hotels and government buildings.

The business provided transportation for politicians, businessmen, government officials, and wealthy visitors. It also introduced the Wormley family to the people who would eventually become important customers and acquaintances. Young James grew up watching his father operate the business, learning the importance of customer service, reliability, and reputation.

He began working for his father at an early age, driving a horse-drawn carriage, commonly called a hack. The job gave him more than a paycheck. Transporting Washington's political and business leaders meant spending time with people who controlled the city's institutions and economy. He learned their habits, their expectations, and the importance of discretion. His customers came to trust him, and that trust would become one of his most valuable business assets.

Wormley also built a reputation for his personal presentation and his ability to make people comfortable. He understood that wealthy customers expected more than transportation. They expected punctuality, courtesy, and service that made them feel important. Those lessons would eventually distinguish his restaurants and hotel from competing establishments.

In 1841, at the age of 22, he married Anna Thompson, who was originally from Norfolk, Virginia. They would raise four children: William, James Thompson, Garrett, and Anna. The family would eventually become involved in the hospitality business, with Wormley's wife operating a candy store alongside his early catering establishment. But before establishing himself as an entrepreneur in Washington, Wormley took an unusual detour.

In 1849, he joined the thousands of Americans heading west in search of gold in California. The California Gold Rush drew people from across the country and around the world, offering the chance of fortunes to those willing to take the risk. Wormley was approximately 30 years old and had a family, but he was willing to venture beyond the familiar surroundings of Washington.

He did not necessarily strike gold in California. Instead, his travels provided another kind of education. He worked as a steward aboard Mississippi River steamboats and eventually on larger vessels. The experience exposed him to the hospitality business on a much larger scale. He learned to manage dining services, prepare meals for demanding customers, supervise service, and anticipate travelers' needs. It was an education that would prove more valuable than a claim to a gold mine.

When Wormley returned to Washington, he brought a combination of experience few competitors possessed. He understood the transportation business, had developed relationships with influential customers, and had acquired practical knowledge of food service and hospitality. He put those

abilities to work as a steward at the elite Metropolitan Club, where he served some of the capital's wealthiest and most influential men.

The Metropolitan Club was an important stepping stone. It allowed Wormley to refine his understanding of high-end dining and hospitality while expanding his network of potential customers. He was no longer simply the young carriage driver who transported politicians around Washington. He was becoming the person those same politicians trusted to feed them, entertain their guests, and provide a comfortable place to conduct business.

His growing reputation mattered because the hospitality industry was not an easy place for a Black entrepreneur to compete. Hotels and restaurants were overwhelmingly controlled by white businessmen, and racial discrimination limited the opportunities available to Black customers and business owners. Wormley had to demonstrate that his establishment could meet the expectations of a clientele accustomed to the finest accommodations. He did so by concentrating on quality.

By the late 1850s, he had established a catering business on I Street near 15th Street, close to the White House. His wife operated a candy store next door. The family was beginning to build something larger than a single business. The catering operation attracted prominent customers, while the restaurant that followed gave Wormley a permanent location to build his reputation.

His restaurant became a gathering place for influential Republicans, including Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner and Henry Wilson, who would later become vice president under President Ulysses S. Grant. These were not casual customers. Their political influence extended far beyond Washington. Sumner, in particular, became a close friend. Their relationship was built on mutual respect, and Sumner recognized Wormley's business accomplishments and his commitment to Black advancement.

Wormley also developed a reputation for discretion. Washington was a city where political conversations frequently occurred over meals and behind closed doors. A successful restaurant owner who could be trusted not to repeat private conversations had an advantage. His customers knew they could conduct business in his establishment without worrying that their discussions would become public. That reputation helped turn his restaurant into something more than a place to eat. It became an informal extension of Washington's political world.

From Washington entrepreneur to international reputation

Wormley's business ambitions extended beyond the capital. In 1868, his reputation earned him an extraordinary opportunity when Maryland Senator Reverdy Johnson was appointed the United States minister to Great Britain. Johnson selected Wormley to accompany him to England as his personal caterer.

It was an unusual appointment for a Black American during that period. Johnson was not simply hiring someone to prepare meals. He was entrusting Wormley to represent his household and provide hospitality in a foreign country where the quality of entertainment and dining was an important part of diplomatic life. Wormley accepted.

His time in England and France broadened his knowledge of international cuisine and introduced him to European standards of hospitality. One particularly memorable episode involved his decision to transport Chesapeake Bay diamondback terrapins across the Atlantic. He kept the animals alive during the voyage and served them to British society as an unusual culinary delicacy.

The terrapin dishes attracted considerable attention and helped establish his reputation among London's elite. His culinary accomplishments also

extended to Paris, where he studied French cooking and became familiar with the standards of service expected in the finest European establishments.

The experience was important for another reason. Wormley was no longer competing solely with other Washington restaurant owners. He had demonstrated that he could provide hospitality at an international level.

When he returned to the United States, he brought that reputation with him.

The opportunity to serve international visitors also came to his doorstep. In 1867, the Japanese diplomatic delegation visiting Washington had been accommodated at Wormley's establishment for an extended stay. The delegation's six-week visit was a significant endorsement of his ability to provide the kind of accommodations and service expected by foreign dignitaries.

That was an extraordinary accomplishment. Washington had larger and better-known hotels, including the Willard and the National. Yet an important foreign delegation had selected the establishment of a Black businessman.

British novelist Anthony Trollope had also stayed at Wormley's establishment during his 1861 visit to America. In his travel account, he described lodging at Wormley's home, whom he identified as a Black man, and expressed his satisfaction with the accommodations.

These endorsements were valuable because they came from people whose opinions carried weight in political, diplomatic, and social circles. Wormley was building a brand long before the term entered business vocabulary.

Building one of Washington's finest hotels

By the end of the 1860s, Wormley had accumulated enough capital, experience, and influential relationships to make his next major investment. He wanted something more ambitious than a restaurant or boardinghouse. He wanted a hotel that could compete with Washington's finest establishments.

In 1869, he acquired a building at the southwest corner of 15th and H Streets NW, just two blocks from the White House. He subsequently expanded the property, and in 1871 the Wormley Hotel opened its doors.

The hotel was a substantial undertaking. It was a five-story establishment with approximately 150 rooms, a restaurant, a bar, and other amenities. It became known for its elegant dining room, excellent service, and sophisticated accommodations. Its menu featured Chesapeake Bay seafood and specialties such as terrapin dishes and turtle soup.

Wormley understood that a hotel catering to wealthy travelers had to offer more than attractive rooms. It needed to provide an experience that distinguished it from competitors. He invested in the building, its furnishings, its employees, and its dining operation. His attention to detail helped establish the hotel as a premier destination in Washington.

The establishment also benefited from its location. It was close to the White House, the Treasury Department, and the offices where the nation's political business was conducted. Senators, members of Congress, cabinet officials, diplomats, military officers, and wealthy visitors could stay at the hotel while remaining close to the center of government.

Wormley's personal relationships were another important asset. He knew many of the men who occupied positions of power, and they knew him. His reputation was well established, so prominent visitors sought him out rather than choosing a hotel based on size or location.

His business eventually expanded beyond the main hotel. The original properties on I Street became an annex, providing additional accommodations. He also owned a farm and country residences in the Tenleytown area of Washington, along with property that included a racetrack.

The hotel was not merely a successful business. It was evidence that a Black entrepreneur could build an establishment capable of competing with the most prestigious white-owned businesses in the nation's capital.

More than a businessman

Wormley's success mattered because he did not separate his economic accomplishments from his responsibilities to the Black community.

He maintained relationships with prominent Black leaders, including Frederick Douglass and John Mercer Langston. He also stayed close to Charles Sumner, whose political career was closely tied to the abolitionist movement and the fight for civil rights.

Wormley supported public education for Black children in Washington. In 1871, he and Sumner worked to secure congressional funding for a public school serving African American children. The resulting school became known as the Wormley School.

This was an important achievement. Although slavery had ended in the District of Columbia in 1862, Black Washingtonians continued to confront discrimination in education and employment. Access to quality public education was essential to the community's ability to take advantage of the new opportunities emancipation created.

Wormley understood that education was an investment in the next generation, just as surely as his hotel was an investment in his family's future.

His family also reflected the possibilities he had worked to create. His son James Thompson Wormley attended Howard University and became the first graduate of its School of Pharmacy in 1870. He subsequently established a pharmacy in Washington. Another son, Garrett, worked in the catering and confectionery business. His eldest son, William, later served as a United States marshal. The Wormleys were building a family business tradition that extended into several professions.

Wormley and Senator Sumner also shared a remarkable personal connection. Sumner gave him his personal copy of the Thirteenth Amendment, signed by more than 150 individuals. It was a meaningful gift from a man who had spent much of his political career fighting slavery.

Wormley treasured the friendship. When Sumner died in 1874, Wormley was among those close to him during his final days.

The hotel and the Compromise of 1877

By 1877, the Wormley Hotel had become one of Washington's most recognizable establishments. Political leaders could meet privately there, away from the formal settings of Congress and the White House. That reputation would make it the setting for one of the most consequential political negotiations in American history.

The presidential election of 1876 had produced a disputed result. Democrat Samuel Tilden had won the popular vote and appeared to have secured an electoral college majority, but Republicans challenged electoral votes in

several Southern states. The dispute threatened to leave the country without a clearly established president as Inauguration Day approached.

Representatives of the Hayes and Tilden political camps began negotiating a settlement. On February 26, 1877, a group of white political leaders met at Wormley's Hotel to work out the terms of an agreement.

The Republicans wanted the Democrats to accept Rutherford B. Hayes as president. Southern Democrats wanted federal troops withdrawn from the remaining Reconstruction governments in South Carolina and Louisiana.

The resulting arrangement became known as the Compromise of 1877, although historians still debate how much of it was a formal bargain.

The agreement helped secure Hayes's presidency and facilitated the withdrawal of federal troops from the South. That withdrawal effectively ended the federal government's military support for Reconstruction governments and left Black Southerners increasingly exposed to political violence, voter intimidation, and the restoration of white Democratic control. The irony is difficult to ignore.

The politicians who gathered at Wormley's Hotel were conducting business in an establishment owned by a Black American who had built his fortune through hard work, entrepreneurial skill, and relationships with some of the very men who occupied the highest positions in government.

Wormley had demonstrated that Black Americans could compete successfully in an economy that routinely denied them equal opportunities. He had created employment, accumulated property, supported education, and established an internationally recognized business.

Yet the political settlement tied to his hotel helped end the federal protection that had made Reconstruction possible.

There is no reason to assume Wormley approved of the agreement simply because the negotiations took place in his establishment. Nor should his hospitality be confused with endorsement of his customers' political decisions.

His accomplishment was building a business that could serve people regardless of their political affiliations. The decisions those people made were theirs.

A legacy that deserves to be remembered

James Wormley died in Boston on October 18, 1884, at the age of 65. He had traveled there seeking medical treatment for kidney stones and died following surgery at Massachusetts General Hospital.

His death received considerable attention in Washington. His body was returned to the capital, where his funeral attracted prominent figures from government and business. In a particularly telling tribute, competing Washington hotels lowered their flags to half-staff to mark his passing.

That gesture spoke to the standing he had achieved. His competitors were not simply acknowledging the death of another hotel owner. They were recognizing a man who had earned a place among the city's most respected businessmen.

His estate was reportedly valued at more than $100,000, a substantial fortune for the period. His sons continued operating the hotel after his death, preserving the family business for another decade. The establishment eventually left the family's ownership, and the building was replaced in 1906.

Today, the site is at 1500 H Street NW, in the heart of Washington's business district.

Wormley's story deserves to be remembered for reasons that extend well beyond the political agreement that took place in his hotel. He was born into a family that understood the importance of establishing economic independence in a society that placed enormous obstacles in the way of free Black Americans. He learned a trade, traveled, developed new skills, cultivated relationships, took calculated risks, and built a business that attracted an international clientele.

He was also a husband, father, community advocate, and supporter of public education. His accomplishments created opportunities for his children and helped advance other Black Washingtonians.

Perhaps the most important part of his story is that he did not become successful by waiting for society to recognize his equality. He built something so successful that the people who controlled Washington's political and economic institutions had to recognize his ability, even if they were unwilling to extend the same opportunities to other Black Americans.

James Wormley had created a business that brought presidents, senators, diplomats, businessmen, and foreign dignitaries through his doors. He had earned the confidence of people who wielded enormous political influence. And he had done it while living in a country that was still struggling to accept the full citizenship of Black Americans.

The Compromise of 1877 would become the defining historical event associated with his hotel. But it should not define his life. James Wormley built the hotel. The politicians made the compromise. And the businessman whose success made their gathering possible deserves to be remembered for considerably more than the address where they met.

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