



5-20-2011

## The Back of the House as Viewed from the Front of the House: Sarah Davis and the Irish Domestic Servants of Clover Lawn from 1872 to 1879

Gina C. Tangorra  
*Illinois Wesleyan University, gtangorr@iwu.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing>

---

### Recommended Citation

Tangorra, Gina C. (2011) "The Back of the House as Viewed from the Front of the House: Sarah Davis and the Irish Domestic Servants of Clover Lawn from 1872 to 1879," *Constructing the Past*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing/vol12/iss1/14>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by editorial board of the Undergraduate Economic Review and the Economics Department at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@iwu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@iwu.edu).

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

---

## The Back of the House as Viewed from the Front of the House: Sarah Davis and the Irish Domestic Servants of Clover Lawn from 1872 to 1879

### Abstract

This paper details the experience of Irish servants in late nineteenth-century Bloomington who were employed at Clover Lawn (the David Davis Mansion). The house on Clover Lawn was divided into three regions: public, private, and the servant quarters. The division between front-of-the-house, back-of-the-house is the American equivalent of the British “upstairs-downstairs” arrangement. This paper examines the connection between the design of the home and the established middle-class domestic system, the cultural and social differences between the servants and the Davis family, and the impact the Irish domestic servant population had on the growing Bloomington community, in order to gain a better overall understanding of the solidification of the middle-class.

## The Back of the House as Viewed From the Front of the House: Sarah Davis and the Irish Domestic Servants of Clover Lawn from 1872 to 1879

Gina Tangorra

The house is the shell of the home, the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace which abides within its walls. Therefore everything that concerns the house is important, and no detail is insignificant<sup>1</sup>

In June of 1871 the Bloomington *Pantagraph* announced that the house under construction on Clover Lawn would be ready to be occupied by the Davis family in September of that year. The new home on Clover Lawn carried greater significance than a mere commercial enterprise. The mansion had a “novel and attractive” design which reflected more than the personal individual preferences of the Davis family.<sup>2</sup> The members of the Davis family were part of a refined and genteel class of Americans, and their home served to showcase their separation from those who lacked refinement.<sup>3</sup> The particular style of Davis house reflected the cultural and spiritual values of the genteel American middle-class. An important component of these values and, concurrently, the lifestyle of the middle-class inhabitants of the new house, were the house’s servants. Between the years 1872 and 1879, there were approximately eight servants who lived and worked inside the Davis family home, not to mention the several outdoor workers and part-time help who served an important function during this period of time.<sup>4</sup> Most of the domestic servants and many of the other hired workers were Irish immigrants—a significant factor in determining the experience of these servants in the late nineteenth century.

By the late nineteenth-century, the American middle-class had established a well developed ideology that was self-justifying and self-promoting. There was an emphasis on the role of the woman as a positive force within the space of the home.<sup>5</sup> In many ways, Sarah Davis embodied this doctrine. As the manager of her home, she was a moral authority over the physical space of the home and those who lived within the home. In 1859, Sarah Davis wrote to her brother, “I have been very busy for two weeks past trying to renovate the old home—and its

---

<sup>1</sup>Margaret E. Sangster, editor’s introduction to *House and Home: A Practical Book on Home Management*, by Mary Elizabeth Carter (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1904), 9.

<sup>2</sup>“Judge Davis’s New Residence,” (June 27 1871)

<sup>3</sup>Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 404. “Great mansions, books, fine dress became instruments of power, a superior culture to parade before the eyes of a deferential population whose compliance was necessary to the continuation of authority.” David M. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 147. The Victorian home functioned as an “imaginary shield protecting the middle-class family from the evils and ugliness of the outside world.”

<sup>4</sup>While there are various, usually interchangeable, terms to describe domestic servants, I will refer to the Davis family servants as “domestic servants” or “servants.” I will also group Willie Fitzgerald with the female domestic servants who lived in the Davis Mansion. According to Lucy M. Salmon, in the 1880 census, men like Willie Fitzgerald would have been classified as “laborers” although Salmon’s research grouped men employed in the house as “domestic servants.” Lucy M. Salmon, “A Statistical Inquiry Concerning Domestic Service,” *American Statistical Association* 18, 19 (June, September 1892): 95-96, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2276481> (accessed 25 March 2010). It is difficult to determine exactly how many servants there were during this period as Sarah generally referred to the servants by their first names only and many of them had the same first names. The census data from this period also is inconclusive, as, for example, Willie Fitzgerald is not listed as an employee of the family.

<sup>5</sup>Margaret Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget: Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic Service in America, 1840-1930* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 61.

inhabitants too.”<sup>6</sup> The cult of domesticity, as it is now referred to, promoted defined roles for both the female employee and her female domestic servants.

The mistress of the home, with the help of her domestic servants, was expected to create a tranquil haven in which the master of the house could relax. However, the Irish servant was often perceived as, paradoxically, a disruption of this idealized space. “Your Humble Servant,” an article in *Harper’s New Weekly* written by Robert Tomes, asserted that the ineptitude of “Bridget” creates “chaos” within the home. Tomes goes on to describe the uncouth, uncivilized practices of many Irish domestic servants.<sup>7</sup> The presence of the Irish servant in a middle-class home signified that the family was refined, and yet the Irish servant’s lack of refinement made it difficult for the domestic system to function according to the rules of the cult of domesticity. The study of the relationship between Sarah Davis and the servants, then, shows how the middle-class cult of domesticity functioned. It reveals the ways in which this ideology was more complex in practice than it appeared on paper. An understanding of the experience of the Davis family’s domestic servants, their role in the Victorian middle-class lifestyle, and their impact on the Bloomington community, creates a better overall understanding of the solidification of the middle-class.

As the majority of the Davis family servants were of Irish origin, how did these women and men come to be over 3,000 miles away from home? A variety of factors, including reoccurring potato crop failures, the Great Famine, and a population that far outpaced the available resources, increased the flow of emigration out of Ireland and into countries such as England, the United States, and Australia.<sup>8</sup> After the Great Famine, an increasing number of single Irish women emigrated west. This phenomenon coincided with the emergence of a middle-class population which was striving to assert itself culturally. The domestic servant, especially the Irish domestic servant, became a necessary part of the rise of the middle-class in America.<sup>9</sup> The Irish immigrants who migrated inward would have hoped to begin a new life, with more economic and social opportunities in the relatively unsettled western and mid-western United States.<sup>10</sup> When the railroads came to the mid-west, Bloomington was advantageously positioned between Chicago and St. Louis.<sup>11</sup> According to the 1879 *History of McLean County*, the building of the Illinois Central and Chicago & Alton Railroads in Bloomington in 1853 provided not only the means of traveling but also a demand for labor, a demand which was met

---

<sup>6</sup>Sarah Davis to George Walker, Bloomington, IL, June 18, 1859, Davis Family Papers, Transcripts provided by Illinois State Historical Society, David Davis Mansion State Historic Site, Bloomington IL. . I use Sarah Davis’s correspondence for information on the servants who were employed by her family. While the letters are an invaluable source, it should be noted that they contain an inherent bias. We can see Sarah’s interpretation of people and events, but we do not have access to the servants’ interpretation. I will also use the following abbreviations for the Davis correspondence: S.D.=Sarah Davis; D.D.=David Davis II; F.W.=Fannie Walker.

<sup>7</sup>Robert Tomes, “Your Humble Servant,” *Harper’s New Weekly* 29, no. 169(June 1864): 55, <http://digital.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=harp;cc=harp;rgn=full%20text;idno=harp0029-1;didno=harp0029-1;view=image;seq=66;node=harp0029-1%3A9;page=root;size=s;frm=frameset> (accessed 20 April 2010).

<sup>8</sup>I am basing this summary of the Great Famine and its effect on Irish immigration from Margaret Lynch-Brennan’s work, *The Irish Bridget: Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic Service in America, 1840-1930* and *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States*, edited by J.J. Lee and Marion R. Casey (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup>Katzman 146, 148.

<sup>10</sup>Lawrence J. McCaffrey, “Diaspora Comparisons and Irish-American Uniqueness,” in *New Perspectives on the Irish Diaspora*, edited by Charles Fanning (Carbondale: Southern University Press, 2000), 22.

<sup>11</sup>Mike Matejka, “Building a Railroad: 1850s Irish Immigrant Labor in Central Illinois,” in *Irish Immigrants in McLean County Illinois*, edited by Greg Koos (Bloomington, IL: McLean County Historical Society, 2000), 8.

by large numbers of Irish immigrants.<sup>12</sup> The railroads drew an initial workforce of Irishmen that once settled, encouraged other Irish immigrants to settle in Bloomington as well.

From these general conclusions about Irish immigration to the U.S. after the Great Famine, it is tempting to draw parallel conclusions about the Irish servants who worked for the Davis family during the 1870s. By examining census records for Bloomington in 1870, it becomes clear that Irish women and girls mainly undertook the professions of “house keeper,” “laundress” and “domestic servant.”<sup>13</sup> This “propensity for domestic service” is consistent with the national trend.<sup>14</sup> According to the 1880 census, Mary Welsh and Bridget Hayes, servants in the Davis household, were second generation Irish immigrants. As both women were in their early twenties at the time of the census, it is likely that they were born either during the last years of the Great Famine or immediately following. Moreover, Katie Murry, another maid employed by the Davis family, was thirty years old in 1880 and was born in Ireland. The Great Famine seems to be an appropriate motivation for the parents of Mary Welsh and Bridget Hayes, as well as Katie Murry, to leave Ireland and emigrate west. Other earlier Davis servants, namely Mary Whalen and Katy Walsh, were born in Ireland.<sup>15</sup> Willie Fitzgerald was either born in Ireland or the son of Irish immigrants.<sup>16</sup> While many Irishmen labored on the railroads in Bloomington, others ranged in occupation from “coal miner,” and “blacksmith,” to “teamster.”<sup>17</sup> There was a “cook” and three men who listed their profession as “servant.” However, the work that Willie Fitzgerald did as an employee of the Davis family most likely fell under the category of

---

<sup>12</sup>William, Le Baron Jr., *The History of McLean County, Illinois: Containing A History of the County—its Cities, Towns, &c., Portraits of Early Settlers and Prominent Men; General Statistics...Miscellaneous Matters, &c., &c* (Chicago: Wm. Le Baron, Jr. & Co., 1879): 388, Google Books, <http://books.google.com/books?id=9kgWAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA784&dq=history> (accessed February 14 2010).

<sup>13</sup>*1870 Census of McLean County Citizens Born in Ireland*, McLean County Historical Society, Bloomington, IL. 1860, 1870, 1880 census records of “Irish and Their families in McLean County” are available at the McLean County Historical society. Explanation of this statistic: I totaled the number of Irish females (either from Ireland or Irish descent) living in Bloomington, IL between the ages of 14 and 80 who listed their profession as “chamber maid,” “domestic,” “domestic servant,” “house keeper,” “keeps house,” “laundress,” “servant” and “wash woman.” I then divided the total number of Irish females living in Bloomington between the ages of 14 and 80. This came out to 704/966, or 72.88% who worked in these professions. The problem with the census record data is that it is not clear if all of these women are actually Irish as some were probably just married to an Irish man. Also, it is not clear how many of the women who labored in the profession of laundry or “kept house” worked out of their homes rather than in their employer’s homes.

<sup>14</sup>Katzman, 70.

<sup>15</sup>From this point on, I will use the name “Katie Walsh” to designate the “Katie” referenced in Sarah Davis’s letters between mid-April 1873 and early 1874. There is census data indicating that “Katy Walsh” was a maid in the Davis household in 1870. The name Katie Walsh is used throughout the *Volunteer Manual* and the educational programs at the David Davis State Historic Site and has been generally established as the Katie described in the letters. However, there is a photograph from the 1870s of, according to oral history, “Kate Foley and her sister.” There is a Katie Foley listed as 23 years old in the 1880 census. This may be the maid who worked in the Davis Mansion in the mid-1870s. For the sake of clarity, as the data at this point is inclusive, I decided to use “Katie Walsh.”

<sup>16</sup>There is no “Willie Fitzgerald” or “William Fitzgerald” listed in the 1870 or 1880 census. I did not find anyone over the age of 10 who was named “Willie” either.

<sup>17</sup>*1870 Census of McLean County Citizens Born in Ireland*. By my calculation, in 1870 there were 49 Irish males in Bloomington who worked for the railroad as engineers, firemen, brakemen, section bosses, conductors, clerks, locomotive builders, a carpenter and a shop foreman. The other Irish men who worked for railroads are most likely an indeterminate number counted in the census under “laborer.”

“laborer.” The category of “laborer” is by far the largest for Irish men employed in Bloomington.<sup>18</sup>

There is only one entrance in the front of Clover Lawn, the entrance used mainly by visitors to the house. Upon entering the imposing front doors, the visitors found themselves in the vestibule. Once inside the vestibule, it was evident that the design of the house and the role of the servants were intricately connected. The vestibule was a transitional space between the outside corrupt world and the inside tranquil haven of the Davis home.<sup>19</sup> This space not only served to showcase the middle-class Victorian values that the Davis family aligned themselves with, but was also a space that was characterized by the servants. When a visitor came to the house, one of the maids would let the visitor into the vestibule and take their calling card. The maid brought the calling card to Sarah Davis to determine if she was “at home” or not. Thus, an important function of the servants, like the vestibule, was to act as a buffer between outsiders and the family. The calling card ritual was one aspect of the complex etiquette that the Davis family, and other families of their social standing, faithfully followed. The visitor, if Sarah was receiving, would follow the maid, up a step, into the front hall. The front hall is full of signifiers which indicate the Davis family’s connection with European culture and identification with American middle-class values. The hall is a space which also clearly and deliberately divided the house into three distinct sections. To the right of the hall is the private family space of the house. To the left is the public entertaining space. The closed set of doors at the end of the hall marks the boundary between the private and public areas of the house and the living and work spaces of the servants.

Not only did the architect, Alfred Piquenard, design the house with these clear divisions, but authors writing on domestic matters conceptualized these divisions as representative of social distinctions within the home. The parlor, on the public side of the house, was a “testament to the family’s refinement” and a physical manifestation of the cult of domesticity.<sup>20</sup> The assertion of “spiritual superiority,” along with the values of good taste, etiquette, and the family, can be seen in the material items in the Davis parlor. The Beecher sisters’ 1869 *The American Woman’s Home* discussed the aesthetics of home decoration, which “contributes much to the education of the entire household in refinement, intellectual development, and moral sensibility.”<sup>21</sup> In this sense, the parlor functioned as a didactic tool which promoted certain values to those who lived and worked in the home.

While the parlor was clearly designed as a space which promoted the values of the mistress of the house, the maid performed an important role in allowing the room to function as

---

<sup>18</sup>1870 *Census of McLean County Citizens Born in Ireland*. There were 450 men listed as laborers, compared to the 23 blacksmiths, 33 carpenters, 20 coal miners, and 28 teamsters. Between the ages of 14 and 80, there were 921 Irish men living in Bloomington in 1870. That means that 48.86% listed their occupation as “laborer.” In contrast (and this is a skewed sample), only 3/921, or .33% were servants. I did not include the man who was a cook, as male cooks in this period often worked in restaurants and were not domestic servants.

<sup>19</sup>The avenue leading up to the house, along with the male workers on the grounds, also served to insure privacy and convey the status of the family. Bushman, noting that this was a goal of many genteel homes, writes, “To the scene created by the house, its porch, and its surrounding trees and shrubbery, the architectural authors attributed a mood of calm and retreat.” Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 262.

<sup>20</sup>Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 251. See also Katzman’s discussion of the feminine role in the domestic sphere. “In middle-class families, women came to dominate—and to be dominated by—the domestic sphere.” See also Lynch-Brennan, who asserts that the parlor was “the ultimate symbol of domesticity.” Lynch-Brennan, 62.

<sup>21</sup>Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman’s Home or Principles of Domestic Science...* (1869; reprint, Hartford: Stowe-Day Foundation, 1975), 84.

such. All the things the parlor held (the piano, the urns, the inlaid table, the chandelier) would have been cleaned, polished, and dusted by the maids of the house. Many of the Irish domestic servants would not have encountered the objects in the parlor before coming to America.<sup>22</sup> This, in part, led to the tension between the housewife and her servant. It is ironic that labor in service was, and is, considered “unskilled.”<sup>23</sup> There *were* skills involved in the position of domestic servant. *The American Woman’s Home* emphasizes that “Good servants do not come often to us; they must be *made* by patience and training....”<sup>24</sup> In terms of the Davis family servants, there is no indication that Sarah encountered this sort of difficulty while she lived in the new house. In earlier years, her frustration with her servants’ lack of skills is more evident.<sup>25</sup> It is possible that Mary Whalen, Bridget, Katie Walsh, Julia and others were trained servants and had experience under previous employers. Whatever the case may be, the domestic servants who lived and worked in the Davis family home came into daily contact with the parlor and would become familiar with the arrangement of the objects and materials within the room.

The Davis family servants, unfortunately, disappear as soon as they leave the pages of Sarah Davis’s letters, making it difficult to determine how or if they assimilated into American culture. There are only hints, or clues, as to their lives after working for the Davis family. Sarah Davis wrote about the suitors of her servants. In one letter, she told her husband, “Mr Hoag is visiting Mary [Whalen] tonight.”<sup>26</sup> In another, “I have just been showing Thomas McGraw over the house—he having taken dinner with Bridget and this being the first time he has been to our new home” and that “Katie appears with a new ring on her forefinger—and as she was rather more chipper than usual—she may have dreams of a pleasant future.”<sup>27</sup> Mary Whalen left the Davis family employ in late 1872, Bridget finished her work for the family in late 1876, and it is possible that Katie only worked part time after January 1874 as a new maid, “Julia,” began her employment in January of 1874.<sup>28</sup> What happened to Mary Whalen, Bridget and Katie Walsh, along with the other domestic servants, is a mystery. It seems likely that many would have married, as Sarah Davis seems to expect they would get married and Lynch-Brennan concludes that the goal for most, if not all, Irish domestic servants was marriage.<sup>29</sup> While we do not know

---

<sup>22</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 12, 21, 69.

<sup>23</sup>Katzman and Diner refer to domestic service as “unskilled” or equate it with unskilled labor. See, for example, Katzman, 229, 263, 273, Hasia R. Diner, *Erin’s Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century*, (Baltimore : John Hopkins University Press, 1983), 40, 70, 143.

<sup>24</sup>Beecher and Stowe, *The American Woman’s Home*, 315.

<sup>25</sup>Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, Il, November 12, 1855. “—Bridget my assistant is not trained to habits of neatness and order, but has lived in a hotel till she is almost spoiled for a tidy housekeeper—I bake my bread and pies—wash milk pans, etc.—in addition to the other duties that devolve upon me as housekeeper—.” Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, IL, December 11, 1864. “and I have at present a girl of 23 perhaps—who is just beginning to work—...She is a pleasant tempered willing girl—irons very well—not as orderly as the Shakers—and a moderate cook—but the best I can do at present. It keeps me looking every where—and anxious lest meals should not be ready in time—milk attended to thoroughly (by the way I have taken this under my direction now as butter is quite an object) and things generally be kept going. I dont fancy this kind of life—but she is better than many.”

<sup>26</sup>Sarah Davis to David Davis, Clover Lawn, November 24, 1872.

<sup>27</sup>Sarah Davis to David Davis, Bloomington, November 30, 1873.

<sup>28</sup>See Sarah Davis to David Davis, Bloomington, December 5, 1872, S.D. to D.D., Owl’s Nest, December 3, 1876, and S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, IL, November 30, 1873.

<sup>29</sup>I make this claim based on Sarah’s connection between Katie’s ring and her future, as well as her comment on Mr. Hoag and Mary Whalen’s relationship. Sarah notes, “She [Mary] really begins to appear old, and looks somewhat bent—I wish if the man is a kind one, that he would marry her.” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 24, 1872. Lynch-Brennan, 142-143.

if Katie Walsh designated a space in her home to represent the cultural values of domesticity that she had seen in the Davis home, she was, at least, exposed to these values.

### **The Separation Between The Domestic Employee and Employer**

In the Davis Mansion, the distinction between the parlor and the kitchen was not as well defined as Spofford hopes or Lynch-Brennan implies. In the domestic system which the Beecher sisters, among others, describe, the mistress of the house and the servants know their place. There is a rather telling anecdote about the “proper place” of a servant that is relayed at the Davis mansion. According to the anecdote, one of the maids asked Sarah Davis if she could be married at the house. Presumably touched, Sarah graciously offered the maid the use of the parlor for the ceremony. The maid refused and stated that she wanted to be married in the kitchen instead. It is possible that this story is true, although I have not come across any letters detailing this incident. It is also understandable that the maid would feel uncomfortable getting married in the room in which Fanny Walker, Sarah’s niece, had been married. What is interesting about the story, whether it actually occurred or not, is it is told today. In this anecdote, although Sarah Davis has less strident views on the subject, the maid clearly knows her place; that is, in the kitchen.

However, Sarah Davis’s correspondence reveals that the space between the kitchen and the parlor was not the unfathomable gulf that we would assume. Part of this is due to practicality. Servants, as discussed earlier, necessarily were in the parlor and the other areas of the house to clean and to serve. Sarah Davis also was a presence in the kitchen. She liked to bake and to make preserves. In April of 1874, Sarah wrote to David, “Bridget and I have made two lovely sponge cakes which I have just taken from the pans.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, a housewife’s active involvement in the kitchen may have not been that unusual. Carter, for example, gave advice to housewives who wish to cook in their kitchen.<sup>31</sup> There is one letter which undermines the concept of the dogmatic stratification of roles of the housewife and the servant. Sarah, writing to her husband, described how:

Just as I finished the last sheet, I heard a rap at the kitchen door—I found a woman and child who wished to see Ann. She was in her room half asleep but came down in her stocking feet. I then went to look after the fire in the parlor—and saw two girls whom I took for more of Ann’s friends and I went upstairs—when I heard Emma let in Mary Hanna & Mary Longstreth.<sup>32</sup>

This letter seems to indicate that in practice, the system of etiquette regarding the answering of the door may not have been very practical. Although this letter dates from mere months before the family moved into their new home, it is probable that this situation would not have occurred in the new house and that etiquette was more strictly observed. However, even in the new

---

<sup>30</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 15, 1874. For an example of preserve-making see S.D. to F.W., Bloomington, August 29, 1872.

<sup>31</sup>Carter, 154-155. “Every housekeeper who likes to go into her kitchen to do nice cooking should have her own utensils....”

<sup>32</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, February 25, 1872.



mansion, Sarah Davis spent time in the kitchen. When her daughter Sallie and her friends were gathered in the parlor, Sarah “retired to the kitchen and read—.”<sup>33</sup>

The structure of the Davis Mansion was a result of the increasing emphasis on the separation of the classes and an attempt to define a hierarchal system that existed within class boundaries. For all of America’s claims of social and political equality, there was a hierarchy among domestic servants who worked not only for aristocratic families, but for middle-class employers as well. Throughout her time in Bloomington, Sarah Davis had several “helpers” who acted as her companions. These included Miss Buckley and Ada Patterson. These women were of the same social class as Sarah Davis, yet for financial reasons were in need of genteel employment. A seamstress, such as Miss Lake, provided a service for the Davis family, yet there were clear social differences between her position and that of an Irish domestic living in the Davis Mansion. She stayed in the southeast chamber when she worked for the family, a room that Sarah referred to as “Miss Lake’s room.”<sup>34</sup> She ate meals with the family and their guests.<sup>35</sup> She also was referred to as “Miss Lake,” a sign of respect and of her social position, as domestic servants were referred to by their first names.<sup>36</sup>

Within the ranks of domestic servants, there also existed a hierarchical distinction between different positions. A cook, as was the Bridget who was employed in the 1870s, had more value than a mere maid-of-all work, as was Mary Whalen.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, Bridget also functioned as a laundress. Soon after hiring Bridget, Sarah informed David that “Bridget washed today and dried the clothes in the attic. It is pleasant not to employ a washer woman from outside the house.”<sup>38</sup> Much earlier, Sarah had remarked to her sister that in Bloomington, “Washing is very expensive when it is done out of the house.”<sup>39</sup> However, it does not appear that the Davis family paid Bridget more than the other maids. After Mary Whalen was let go, Sarah complained to her husband, “I am surprised that Bridget should put on airs about wages. We always gave Mary too much.”<sup>40</sup> Perhaps Bridget felt she should be receiving more for her specific skills and for the fact that she was making the domestic situation in the Davis family more convenient.

The contrast between the different groups of females who worked for the Davis family shows a hierarchy that functioned within the domestic system of the house. How did the servants in this system rank with servants of other systems? In many cases, the assumption was that the servants’ status reflected the status of their employers.<sup>41</sup> In England, for example, during a house party where there were servants from different households, the servants were called by their employer’s names when they were below stairs. It seems probable that there would have been a special status attached to the servants who worked for the Davis family, perhaps, even, a sense of pride.

---

<sup>33</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, January 21, 1872.

<sup>34</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, December 14, 1876[?], S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, December 10, 1873.

<sup>35</sup>S.D. to F.W., Bloomington, October 13, 1873, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 24, 1874.

<sup>36</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 79.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid. 91.

<sup>38</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 4, 1872.

<sup>39</sup>Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, IL, January 10, 1842.

<sup>40</sup>S.D. to D.D., Scranton, PA, April 4, 1873.

<sup>41</sup>Collins, 28. “Domestics often flaunted a privileged position and the association with ‘their family’ amongst their peers.” See also, Daniel E. Sutherland, *Americans and Their Domestic*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1981), 86.

## Domestic Servant Labor

Margaret Lynch-Brennan discusses, along with Harriet Spofford, the difficult profession of the domestic servant who was employed by the average middle-class American family.<sup>42</sup> The typical middle-class American home had only one maid who had to fulfill the roles of cook, laundress, cleaner, server, and sometimes even, nurse. This situation can be seen in letters written in the period when the Davis family lived in the I-House. Sarah Davis's earlier letters detail the workload of her maid-of-all work, Catharine. As David Davis did not employ a "boy," Catharine was in charge of the milking, "runs off errands, helps me to tend the fire & does a great many 'odds and ends.'"<sup>43</sup> With the Davis family's rise in status, there was an increase in the number of servants they employed inside the home. After 1872, there was at least one maid, often two, a cook, and Willie Fitzgerald. The female servants who worked between the years 1872-1879 would have had an easier work load as there were more workers, and because there were male workers inside and around the house to deal with difficult tasks, such as hauling coal. The typical work day for a female domestic servant working in an American middle-class home was at least ten hours long, and a full two hours longer than the work day of other women employees.<sup>44</sup> Usually, maids were given Thursday evenings off and half-days on Sundays, and American housewives apparently begrudged even this time off.<sup>45</sup>

The Davis family servants, like many other domestic servants, worked long hours. Sarah described how the days began early in the household, stating, "I rise with the sun or a little before to start the female part of the household."<sup>46</sup> Rising so early meant that a significant amount of work was completed by the afternoon. The work day of the Davis family servants continued past dinner and into the evening. Sarah mentioned the servant's activities at night, including Willie's job of bringing last-minute letters to be mailed to town.<sup>47</sup> Willie Fitzgerald appears to have had different work days, as his duties differed from the female domestics in the home. They were certainly long work days, but perhaps were more clearly defined than the female domestic's working hours. In the Davis correspondence, there is a hint that Willie had a set number of hours he was supposed to work. In 1871, Sarah remarked, "Willie has improved his hours and gives me no trouble."<sup>48</sup>

While the work days of the servants were similar to the typical work day of a domestic in this period, the designated days off of the servants in the Davis Mansion differ from the average. As evident in the letters Sarah wrote, the female servants appear to have alternating Sundays off.<sup>49</sup> Willie Fitzgerald, on the other hand, seems to have had every Sunday off. This is implied through Sarah's mention of Willie's atypical behavior. She wrote, "Willie is at home this evening an unusual thing for him on Sunday night."<sup>50</sup> Rather than grudgingly allotting them

---

<sup>42</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 105-106, Spofford, 36-37.

<sup>43</sup>Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, IL, January 10, 1842.

<sup>44</sup>Katzman, 110.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 114. However, Katzman argues that "the regular day out was somewhat less regular, and less frequent than the Thursdays and Sundays off associated with service." Katzman, 114, Spofford, 136. Spofford urged employers to consider all the work their servants did, and to be reasonable about their leisure time and to not call upon the servants "for the little odd jobs and errands that arise" while it is their time off.

<sup>46</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 19, 1873.

<sup>47</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, October 30, 1873, S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, October 9, 1875, (Past 5 p.m. Sunday).

<sup>48</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, November 19, 1871.

<sup>49</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 16, 1873, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 24, 1872.

<sup>50</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, December 3, 1871.

designated time off, Sarah Davis was flexible with her servants. If there was a funeral, or an emergency, or if the servant wished to attend an event pertaining to their Catholic or Irish heritage, Sarah allowed them to finish their work early and take the necessary time off.<sup>51</sup>

Lynch-Brennan and Katzman, among others, discuss the high demand for domestic servants—a demand that the new population of single, female Irish immigrants was ready to fill.<sup>52</sup> The high demand for servants also signified that Irish domestics could receive competitive wages. Harriet Spofford asserted that “Bridget” received “three dollars and a half” per week and that her board “would probably be four dollars a week.”<sup>53</sup> It appears that the Davis family paid their female servants \$3 to \$4 a week.<sup>54</sup> This is relatively high, considering the wages of other work available to women and the cost of living.<sup>55</sup> It is difficult to compare Willie Fitzgerald’s income to other men employed in similar situations, as “no universal custom prevails, as with women employes [*sic*], in regard to adding to the wages paid in money, board, lodging, and other personal expenses.”<sup>56</sup> However, Lucy M. Salmon’s findings indicate a general trend in which male domestics were paid more than female domestics.<sup>57</sup> When considering the income of the Davis family servants, it is important to remember that domestic servants did not have to buy their own food or pay for their board.

It is fairly easy to gain perspective on how American middle-class families, like the Davis family, viewed their homes, their occupations, and their society. It is more difficult to determine the same with domestic servants as they left so little behind in terms of written sources. Houses like the Davis Mansion are viewed as cultural symbols, and are discussed in terms of the cultural significance of the people who inhabited them. How would the servants who lived at the Davis Mansion have viewed the house? The thirty-six rooms of the house which so impressed the author of the *Pantagraph* article all had to be kept clean, maintained, and warm in the winter. One of Sarah Davis’s letters informed her husband of their friends’ first impressions of their home. “Mary R. told Fanny she thought the whole house was beautiful,” Sarah wrote, “The older ladies thought it would require a great deal of help in keeping it clean.”<sup>58</sup> This letter reveals that while creating a refined space was desirable, it also created issues of practicality. Each year the entire house had to be cleaned top to bottom.<sup>59</sup> In a letter to her husband, Sarah

---

<sup>51</sup>See for example, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 20, 1872, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 18, 1872. Also, Bridget was allowed to attend her brother’s wedding, for example. S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 21, 1874 and S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, October 26, 1874.

<sup>52</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 84, Katzman, 97. He stated, “the demand for servants always exceeded the supply...”

<sup>53</sup>Spofford, 83, 84.

<sup>54</sup>The source for this, according to the 1994 M.A. thesis “Irish Women in Bloomington-Normal During the Nineteenth-Century: A Community Study” completed by Cynthia Baer, is a “daybook.” I have been unable to locate this source. Also, in a video interview of a Mrs. Williams, former maid, conducted in 1980, the interviewees assert that in 1872, Sarah Davis paid her servants \$1 a week. However, this is a very low figure compared to national averages. Interestingly, Mrs. Williams recalled receiving \$13 a week during her employment in the late 1920s. Interview of former maid, Mrs. Williams, 1980[?], Collection, David Davis State Historic Site, Bloomington, IL.

<sup>55</sup>See Salmon, 104 and the accompanying tables comparing the wages earned in various occupations undertaken by women, 107.

<sup>56</sup>Salmon, 100.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 99, 101.

<sup>58</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 1, 1872.

<sup>59</sup>See for example, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 24, 1874. Sarah wrote, “The weather continues too cool for much house cleaning, and I am resolved to take things as easily as possible this Spring.” This implies that major cleaning was done every spring.

detailed one such undertaking in November of 1874.<sup>60</sup> The carpets, as apparently there was no carpet sweeper, had to be pulled up and beaten.<sup>61</sup> Beds had to be meticulously aired out and remade each morning.<sup>62</sup> The sink had to be regularly scalded, and washing dishes was a laborious process.<sup>63</sup> Preparing a meal or a formal tea, including the preparation and clean-up, was also time consuming.<sup>64</sup>

As the Davis Mansion was the workplace for the servants, the servants would have viewed the house through a different lens than the family. The mansion may have been a signifier of the status of the Davis family, but it also was a space in which the servants ate, slept, entertained visitors, and above all, performed labor. The kitchen, in particular, functioned as a nerve center for the work that was undertaken in the home. The Davis family kitchen also contained a variety of new technologies and tools, such as the coffee grinder, the egg beater, and improved butter churners, which were a reflection of the emphasis on a systematic, regulated manner of performing kitchen labor.<sup>65</sup>

These advancements in the kitchen theoretically would have saved Bridget, the cook, time and effort.<sup>66</sup> It should be noted, however, that Ruth Schwartz Cowan proposes that these new advancements actually made the job of cooking more strenuous and time consuming (especially as there was a tool to measure time so precisely). Now that there were specific tools for specific jobs and readily available ice which allowed more exotic food to be kept, it created the potential for more complicated recipes, and thus more work.<sup>67</sup> According to literature of the period, many kitchens were “dungeon-like,” and thus ill-suited for work.<sup>68</sup> The Davis kitchen, in contrast, is much more open with three large windows which let in copious light and additional windows above the back door and in the two pantries. Especially as Sarah did spend time in the

---

<sup>60</sup>S. D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 14, 1874.

<sup>61</sup>Sarah described the process of beating or shaking out carpets to clean them. In April of 1875, she wrote, “The house is necessarily being full of dust from the coal—but I shall rest this week—and then get help to clean the rooms, and take up the carpets—which will all have to be shaken.” S. D. to D.D., Bloomington, IL, April 22, 1875. Interestingly, Lynch-Brennan asserts that the carpet sweeper “began coming into broader use by 1880.” Lynch-Brennan, 107.

<sup>62</sup>See detailed instructions on the proper airing of bedding and making up of beds in Beecher and Stowe, 369-370. Sarah Davis referenced the process of airing out a bed. In 1866 she wrote, “I will (while my bed is airing)—try to finish this letter.” S.D. to F.W., Bloomington, May 7, 1866.

<sup>63</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 371. “A sink should be scalded out every day, and occasionally with hot lye.” Detailed instructions on the washing of dishes are on pages 371-372.

<sup>64</sup>A formal tea at Maymont House required 14 hours and 45 minutes from start to finish of domestic servant work. Catherine Dean, Review of “From Morning to Night: Domestic Service in the Gilded Age South.” Traveling exhibition. *The Journal of American History* (June 2006): 151.

<sup>65</sup>See Lynch-Brennan, 107-109, for a detailed list of typical new technologies.

<sup>66</sup>See Katzman, 127-134 for a more detailed discussion of the benefits of technological advancements and its effects on domestic work.

<sup>67</sup>See Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1983), 12-13, <http://books.google.com/books?id=dH3QF6t2hJIC&printsec=frontcover&dq=more+work+for+mother&cd=1#v=onepage&q&f=false> (accessed March 20 2010). Creating more work certainly was not the goal of housewives nor something that they were not concerned about. Carter discussed how a housewife should be considerate of her cook and not make messes in the kitchen. She spoke of the importance of “reducing the amount of work in the kitchen to a minimum instead of multiplying it beyond reason.” Carter, 151.

<sup>68</sup>See for example, Beecher and Stowe, 228. They discuss the importance of light and ventilation in contrast to “gloomy” kitchens. Carter, also, discusses the importance of light and ventilation in the kitchen. Carter, 148.

kitchen, the kitchen was not the nightmarish, hot, stifling space that is evident in some of the literature of the time.

Even the areas of the house where the “dirty” work was done, that is the spaces below stairs and out of sight of guests and family members, were not dark and dreary. There are three 4 feet by 4 feet windows in the laundry room, for example. It appears that laundry was done once a week on Tuesdays.<sup>69</sup> One set of clothing and linens took fifty gallons of water, weighing 400 pounds, to be washed. There were three sinks, with corrugated sides. This eliminated the need to haul water for laundry, which was difficult physical work and was necessarily repeated several times a day.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, there was a floor drain in the room which allowed the laundress to pour waste water directly into the drain instead of hauling the water outside. Wet laundry was often hung outside, and in her letters, Sarah detailed the difficulties in drying clothes outside.<sup>71</sup> If the weather was unseasonable, then clothes would be hung in the drying room or the attic. One could imagine the weight of a basket of wet clothes, carried up three flights of stairs. Ironing clothes was another important task, and skill.<sup>72</sup> Often Sarah had to hire outside help to do laundry and to iron.<sup>73</sup> It is possible that the maids may have had to do their own laundry separately from the family and guests’ laundry.<sup>74</sup> Besides the washing of clothing and linens, soap and lard making was another activity that was conducted in the laundry room. Making soap was a long, laborious process that was completed once a year. Sarah hired outside workers, usually Ann to help with the unpleasant task.<sup>75</sup> Catharine, another hired woman, helped to make lard.<sup>76</sup> While the laundry room may have been, for the time, a technologically advanced and relatively cheerful space, it still represented the difficulty and undesirability of the work that took place in that room. Overall, it took many hours of labor and much physical effort to keep the house running smoothly and up to Sarah’s high standards.

Besides the physical labor involved in cleaning, cooking, washing, ironing, soap and lard making, the maids were required to serve the family and the family’s guests. The act of serving was one of the most grating aspects of working as a domestic servant. In the novel *Bessy Conway*, Sally and Bridget vehemently object to having to wait on their employer’s guests. Bridget stridently informs Bessy, “Company indeed! it’s bothered we are with her old company!”<sup>77</sup> While none of the maids at the Davis Mansion appeared to be outright insolent, it

---

<sup>69</sup>“It rained Sunday night and Monday but cleared up Tuesday morning with a high wind—As it was our washing day we found it dangerous to put out the clothes to day—as two old sheets proved, the hems being almost torn off—” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 15, 1871. “Mary helps Anne with the ironing & of course they have it done Tuesday.” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 1, 1871. “Washing to be put off till Wednesday to give time for the visit tomorrow.” S.D. to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, October 26, 1874.

<sup>70</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 11.

<sup>71</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, March 3, 1874.

<sup>72</sup>Haskell devoted an entire chapter to “Washing, Starching, Ironing, and Folding Linen,” revealing how complicated and exacting the process of laundry was. Mrs. E.F. Haskell, *Civil War Cooking: The Housekeeper’s Encyclopedia*, ed. R.L. Sheep, (1861; reprint, Mendocino, CA: R.L.Shep, 1992), 12-24.

<sup>73</sup>See, for example: “I have engaged Mrs Fitman [?] to come tomorrow to do their ironing—.” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 21, 1871. “I have Mrs. Kelly to wash today—.”S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, January 3, 1874. “I had Ann to help iron today so as to have Julia free to take care of the house.” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, October 20, 1874.

<sup>74</sup>In the video interview of Mrs. Williams, she recalls that laundry was done on Thursdays, but that she and Bridget (the cook) were not allowed to do their laundry with the family’s laundry. Williams, interview.

<sup>75</sup>“Ann has been with me two days making hard soap—and will come next week to make the soft soap—.”S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 18, 1874.

<sup>76</sup>“Catherine is coming to take charge of the lard—.” S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, January 7, 1874.

<sup>77</sup>Sadlier, 75.

is clear from other first-hand accounts that the act of serving was monotonous and tedious at best.<sup>78</sup> In order to serve dinner in the Davis Mansion, the maid, or maids, waited in the China Closet. There was a pass-thru between the China Closet and the kitchen, the purpose of which was so that the cook could pass the meal through the opening to the China closet to the maid. There was no direct route from the kitchen to the dining room. The decision to have a pass-thru instead of a door emphasizes the Davis family's value of privacy and the separation between the public areas and the work areas of the house. The China Closet serves as a transitional space occupied by the servants, much like the vestibule. It was a buffer between the guests in the dining room and the sights, smells, and sounds of food preparation. The food, and the maid, appeared to the guests as if by magic. Moreover, the maid had to act not only as if she were invisible but also deaf and mute. She was present, but not acknowledged.

The manner in which the act of serving food was completed was an integral part of the social etiquette surrounding the dining experience and conveyed the gentility of the guests and their hosts. Carter asserted, "However simple the table when ready and during a meal's progress, it will express the degree of refinement reached by the presiding genius. After a meal again will it silently testify as to the breeding of the family."<sup>79</sup> While not physically demanding work, it must have been draining work to act invisible and to wait through the long formal dinner. Formal dinners at the Davis Mansion were important events as they helped establish and strengthen the network of political and social alliances that were a vital part of the Davis family's wealth and connections. Without the serving maid and cook, however, the maintenance of the veneer of gentility and refinement would have proved impossible.

### **Living Conditions for Domestic Servants**

Another component to employment in the Davis Mansion is the fact that the domestic servants not only worked at the house but they lived there as well. There were two "back rooms" in the house, which are located in the working quarters of the house: above the kitchen, behind a door, and down two steps which separate the rooms from the other guest and family chambers on the second floor. The use of these two rooms is not definitely known. Sarah often referred to these rooms as the "back rooms," which implies that they could have been used at times for extra guest rooms. Moreover, there are two rooms, but (including Willie Fitzgerald) there were at least three live-in servants. It is possible that two of the female servants shared the room in the northwest corner while Willie Fitzgerald occupied the room next door. It is also possible that Willie's room was actually in the attic, as there is architectural evidence that a room was in use there shortly after the house was built. Whatever the case may be, the two rooms in the back of the second floor are important because they reveal what living conditions were like for Davis family servants.

The back rooms in the Davis family home are slightly smaller in size than the other chambers on the second floor. They have high ceilings, which is consistent with the rest of the house. There are three windows, which are slightly smaller than the windows in the other

---

<sup>78</sup>The only exception to this dates from a much earlier period. There was an African-American servant named Catharine, who Sarah considered to be disrespectful. Sarah wrote to David that Catharine "has no respect for any white person living." Sarah Davis to David Davis, Lenox, Massachusetts, October 25, 1847. See Mrs. Williams's account of the act of serving in the David Mansion. Williams, interview.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 171.

chambers. The back chambers were decorated in a simpler manner than the front of the house, were heated by stoves rather than central heat. An important feature of the rooms is the sink, which is not simply a basin, but instead has running hot and cold water. This is consistent with the rest of the chambers on the second floor, all of which have similar sinks.

The existence of the sinks may be evidence that these rooms doubled as guest bedrooms, but they also are evidence of the desirability of living in this space. It also was unusual for the advanced system of plumbing evident in the Davis Mansion to exist in central Illinois in this time. It would have been rare for a domestic servant to work for a family that had this advanced plumbing, and to have had ready access to this plumbing in their room. Moreover, there is evidence found during the restoration of the Davis Mansion that there existed a Water Closet inside the closet in Willie's room and the room in the attic. It is possible that there also was a W.C. inside the closet of the female servants' room as well; however, any evidence of this had been destroyed long before the restoration. This is highly significant because access to indoor facilities was rare indeed. Even the servants at The Breakers, a building dating from a slightly later period and with more technological advancements, had to share a bathroom with several other servants.<sup>80</sup> In summary, the servant's rooms, while clearly indicative of their lower status and not of the same caliber as the other chambers in the house, were relatively comfortable, private, and very convenient in terms of personal hygiene.

It is true that Sarah did not expressly refer to the two chambers in the back of the house as the "servants' rooms." However, she did refer to "Willie's room" and "Bridget's room."<sup>81</sup> This, interestingly, delineates the rooms as their spaces. What would the servants have filled these spaces with? Unfortunately, not much description of these rooms during this period exists. We do know that the servants, especially Mary Whalen and Bridget, regularly corresponded with family members and friends.<sup>82</sup> It is likely that they kept writing instruments in their rooms, and letters from their loved ones.<sup>83</sup> It is a possibility that domestic servants in the Davis household who were natives of Ireland, like Katie Murray, sent money along with their letters home.

Finally, the large closets in the servant's rooms would have held clothing. This was important especially in the female servants' room. Caricatures of Irish female servants of the period depict grotesque women dressed in ridiculously fashionable clothes, trying to ape their betters.<sup>84</sup> There was often tension between the servants and their employers, who resented the servants' attempts to mimic high fashion and did not know their proper place.<sup>85</sup> Domestic servants during this period did not have a uniform, per se. Maids were expected to keep their

---

<sup>80</sup>Collins, 17-18.

<sup>81</sup>I wonder if "Bridget's room" might actually be "Bridget's room," which would make sense if one room was designated for the female servants. It is certainly possible, however, that only Bridget was living in the room at the time. S.D. to D.D., November 15, 1874.

<sup>82</sup>For example, "Mary was out when I came home yesterday—but came in with rosy cheeks and quite excited, saying she had a letter—and must go to Chicago today. Her cousin wrote her that she had better come up and see about some money she lent to a man who had just sold his house—" S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 18, 1872. Bridget also must have corresponded with her family members, as Sarah mentioned that Bridget's sister lived in Wisconsin and she had been invited to live there. See S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn "At Home Tuesday 10 P.M.," November 10, 1874.

<sup>83</sup>Sadler, 271-272.

<sup>84</sup>For example, "A Long-Felt Want Supplied—Puck's Hand-Book of Etiquette for 'Help,'" January 16, 1889.

<sup>85</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 76.

hair and dress neat and modest.<sup>86</sup> The standard requirement of dress for female servants in middle-class households was a dark dress, a white apron, and a white cap, and it is probable that the Davis family servants wore similar clothing.<sup>87</sup> The Davis servants still had a “uniform” in the sense that their clothing was designed to designate them as servants and separate them from their social superiors. This is why it was so troublesome (and threatening) for employers to see their maids wearing the same style clothing as themselves. If their clothes were the same, who could then tell the difference between the two of them? Unlike many other employers, Sarah did not complain about the dress of her female (or male) servants. She provided clothing for them, which is a manner of controlling what they wore.<sup>88</sup> This corresponded with *The American Woman’s Home’s* instructions that employers should “exercise a parental care” over the servants in terms of their dress.<sup>89</sup>

Overall, prescriptive literature of the period recommended that the maid be treated as if she was a human being, instead of feudal chattel, and given plenty of light, space, and fresh air.<sup>90</sup> Rather than filled with unwanted, dilapidated items, the “servants’ rooms should be furnished in accordance with the general house-furnishings of, and the manner of living adopted by, the family that they are serving.”<sup>91</sup> Servants should be given “comfortable rooms” which should be, “if not, of course so luxurious, at least proportionately as decent and cheerful as their daughters’ sleeping-rooms are....”<sup>92</sup> The servants’ rooms in the Davis Mansion reflect the advice offered in the prescriptive literature of the day on how to furnish the servants’ rooms. The rooms of the servants as they are displayed today in the Davis Mansion are bare of any the personal items, or personality, of their former occupants. This is a very visual reminder that the servants have long been pushed into the background, even in the current era’s new emphasis on and interest in domestic servants. However, much like the items in the parlor, dining room, and chambers emphasize the Davis family’s values, the items the servants would have had in their rooms reflect their cultural and religious heritage, as well as displaying their value of family.

Besides sharing a work and living space, many of the Davis family servants shared a cultural, religious, and social background. There was mainly a sense of camaraderie among the Davis servants. Sarah Davis’s letters reveal glimpses of not only the dynamics of the servants in her household, but also their lives outside of the house. She described how the servants spent time together after working hours. In November 1874 she wrote, “The servants in town are being entertained at Durley Hall with the Hibernicon in a new dress—Willie and Julia went last night.”<sup>93</sup> The Irish panorama was one form of theater that was a popular phenomenon of the

---

<sup>86</sup>See in Carter, “On the Hiring of Servants,” and Beecher and Stowe, 330. This ideal is contrasted in *Bessy Conway* in the form of Sally, who likes to wear “gew-gaws” and “flaunting attire.” Sadlier, 73. Sally, naturally, comes to an untimely end as she unwisely marries a husband who is an alcoholic and does not work.

<sup>87</sup>O’Leary, *At Beck and Call*, 168.

<sup>88</sup>Sarah mentioned in a letter that “Ann McGirls daughter had made some dresses for Bridget and Katie sews very neatly—” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, January 25, 1874. It is also interesting that while a servant’s dress was an important issue at the time and the emphasis was on modest and plain clothing that Sarah wrote to her husband: “I bought a couple of red shawls for 2 dollars each for the girls which pleased them very much.” S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, April 29, 1879.

<sup>89</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 330.

<sup>90</sup>See Beecher and Stowe, 369-370, and Carter, 112-122. Carter also cites a lecture of Professor Robert Erskine Ely, in which he claimed that domestic service is “still in the pall of feudal darkness. And it is the women who keep it so, and the women who must eventually emancipate it.” Carter, 127.

<sup>91</sup>Carter, 112.

<sup>92</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 329, Spofford, 158.

<sup>93</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn “At Home Tuesday 10 P.M.,” November 10, 1874.



period. The Davis family servants appear to have been drawn to portrayals of the Irish experience. In 1872, Sarah noted, “A show in town called the ‘Hybernian’ a sort of panorama of Irish life as near as I can find from Willie, has been attracting the Irish.”<sup>94</sup> Besides attending the theater together, the Davis family servants went to see popular spectacles in Bloomington.<sup>95</sup> The Davis family servants also went to events and ceremonies that reflected their shared culture and religion. Being Roman Catholic, they attended church together, especially on days which carried special religious significance. Sarah informed David, “Mary Anne & Willie have gone to church—this being ‘November Day’ as Mary says.”<sup>96</sup> Sarah also described the events which surrounded St. Patrick’s Day in Bloomington. She wrote, “Monday was observed by the Irish with the usual ceremonies of St. Patrick’s day...and all the servants went down to look at the Procession and Ann and Willie went to the Ball in the evening.”<sup>97</sup> The social activities of the Davis family’s Irish Catholic servants were typical of the social activities of other Irish domestic servants of the period.

While a significant portion of their social lives occurred outside of the Davis Mansion, Sarah Davis did allow aspects of her servant’s personal lives to be conducted within the borders of her home. The kitchen functioned not only as a center for work, but also as a center for social activity among the servants. One of Sarah’s letters presents a kitchen scene illustrating the servant community in her home. She wrote, “Pat and Joe sat here for an hour or two to night and such laughter as came from the kitchen was quite amusing. Even the quiet Anne was heard to make a sound. Every thing seems serene to night—and the trio at the kitchen table are talking [?] a game of whist or some other equally attractive.”<sup>98</sup> The female domestic servants were also allowed to entertain their Irish suitors in the kitchen. Mr. Hoag paid Mary Whalen a visit on one of her Sundays off.<sup>99</sup> Thomas McGraw visited the house at least on two occasions and had dinner with Bridget at least once.<sup>100</sup> Katie Walsh was being courted in 1873, and it is likely that part of this courtship was conducted in the kitchen of the Davis Mansion.<sup>101</sup> In their choice of suitors, the female domestic servants in the Davis family appear to have followed the trend of other Irish female domestics, who preferred Irish men or men of Irish descent.<sup>102</sup> What is more unusual about these courtships is that Sarah Davis was tolerant, even encouraging, of them. In the case of Thomas McGraw, Sarah showed off her new home to him and was interested in his experiences in Ireland.<sup>103</sup>

Besides visitors of the romantic variety, the Davis family servants received calls from family and friends. Ann was visited by two female friends and a “woman and child.”<sup>104</sup> Katie

---

<sup>94</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, January 21, 1872.

<sup>95</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, December 14, 1871.

<sup>96</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 1, 1871.

<sup>97</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 20, 1872.

<sup>98</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, December 13, 1871.

<sup>99</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 24, 1872. My reasoning for claiming Mr. Hoag is Irish is based partly on another letter: “Some of the Catholic Orphan from Chicago were expected to day—and Mary went over to the Depot with Mrs. Tracy and Mrs Hoag [?] and four other women, who were anxious to take one apiece—.” S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, IL, October 19, 1871. The other women in this letter are Irish, and “Hoag” is not a common last name.

<sup>100</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 16, 1872, S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, November 30, 1873.

<sup>101</sup>Sarah does not reveal any specific information about Kate’s beau, only the detail that she had a new ring on her forefinger. S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, November 30, 1873.

<sup>102</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 146.

<sup>103</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, November 30, 1873.

<sup>104</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, February 25, 1872.

Walsh received visits from her sister, Eliza.<sup>105</sup> The Davis family servants also made calls to friends and family. Sarah observed that Irish servants “don’t like to be... where they are unable to go out evenings.”<sup>106</sup> Sarah mentioned several times when her servants were “out.”<sup>107</sup> These details reveal that there was a network of friends and family among the Irish community in Bloomington. They also suggest that family was important, as it was for Irish servants in general.<sup>108</sup> Bridget received time off to visit her ailing cousin in Bloomington and to attend her brother’s wedding.<sup>109</sup> Sarah remarked that Bridget is “really a mother to all her family.”<sup>110</sup> Her admiration of Bridget (and toleration of her absence) is understandable considering Sarah Davis placed such a high value on family. Although they had a more tolerant employer than many, the social world of the Davis family servants was fairly typical for an Irish domestic servant.

### The Domestic Servant Problem

According to the newspapers, literature, cartoons, and letters of the period, it is clear that there was a “servant-problem;” one that was “much-bruited.”<sup>111</sup> The relationship between the employer and the servant was often a contentious one, and often one in which employer and servant could not relate to each other. Sarah Davis’s relationship with her servants is interesting because it was familial. In fact, Sarah Davis considered her servants as part of the family.<sup>112</sup> When they were sick, she nursed them back to health with Boneset and Hop tea and lozenges.<sup>113</sup> She gave her hired help turkeys and chickens for Thanksgiving and during the Christmas season.<sup>114</sup> Sarah Davis also gave her domestic servants monetary gifts. At the same time she gave turkeys to the hired men working on the estate, she told David Davis that she also “Gave Miny and Willie our servants 5 dollars cash and shall give the same to Bridget when she gets

---

<sup>105</sup>See, for example, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, October 19, 1873.

<sup>106</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 2, 1872.

<sup>107</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, October 29, 1871, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, December 3, 1871, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, December 14, 1871, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, January 28, 1872, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 22, 1872, S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, IL, October 16, 1873, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 21, 1874, S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, October 9, 1875. “George” refers to Sarah and David Davis’s son, George Perrin. It seems likely that Bridget was friends with the cook at Bellemont house., George’s family residence.

<sup>108</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 91-92, 121.

<sup>109</sup>S. D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 9, 1873, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 21, 1874.

<sup>110</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 21, 1874.

<sup>111</sup>Carter, 127, 126. Katzman, in fact, stated that the “servant problem was the bread and butter of women’s magazines between the Civil War and World War 1.” Katzman, 223.

<sup>112</sup>See, for example: “The Bishop of the Catholic Church was in town and I saw very little of part of my family.” Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, October 22, 1864. “Fan and the servants were the part of our family which were represented at Church.” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 26, 1871. “We have a small family today without Mary—.” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 18, 1872.

<sup>113</sup>“Mary was not well yesterday—Seemed to be taking cold—I gave her Boneset and Hop tea—and she lay in bed yesterday but is bright today.” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 15, 1872. “Willie has taken cold, so my Bonnet & Hop remedy will come into use again tonight—.” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 16, 1872. “Bridget and Willie have hard colds—John has gone to George’s—so that I have not seen him to give him a box of the Lozenges you so kindly sent.” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 31, 1874.

<sup>114</sup>“I bought a Turkey for Mrs Werty, and carried it to her—and brought one home for Joe—which pleased him very much—They are selling in town for 10cts a pound—as they are plenty just now. I sent down tonight for one for Mrs Maclean, but don’t know as Willie found one. I shall try to have two chickens killed in the morning to send Mrs Thomas—.” S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, November 25, 1874. “Got a turkey apiece for Mike, Pat, Joe and Ned Welsh.” S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, January 1 1875[?].

home.”<sup>115</sup> Sarah also informed David that she “proposed to Bridget to pay her part wages if she chose not to stay here, or work out... I told her I would give her \$20 toward paying her fare there if she chooses to go.”<sup>116</sup> During a visit to her daughter and son-in-law in Toledo, Sarah purchased two red shawls for Katie Murry and Minny, her servants at home.<sup>117</sup> Sarah Davis’s sense of fondness for her servants seems to have been reciprocal. On returning from a trip, Sarah noted that “Mary was really glad to see me and much disappointed that I did not come on Saturday.”<sup>118</sup> After another trip, Sarah informed David that “Willie was glad to see me—and Bridget also—.”<sup>119</sup> In April of 1879 Sarah wrote, “The girls were delighted to see me—” after a trip to Toledo.<sup>120</sup> Sarah Davis also described one night when “Willie and I sat up to see the moon eclipse—and did not retire till two o’clock. The evening was lovely.”<sup>121</sup>

As an employer, Sarah Davis was flexible with the work hours of her servants, allowing them to sleep in or take care of personal issues even if it inconvenienced her. Sarah also showed concern over her servant’s future. She hoped that Mr. Hoag, “if he is a kind one,” would marry Mary Whalen, that Katie Walsh would have a “pleasant future,” and Willie Fitzgerald would be find some stability in his work, instead of being aimless.<sup>122</sup> Another interesting aspect of the dynamics between Sarah Davis and her servants is that she worked *with* them on certain tasks, such as baking, cleaning and making preserves. Even as late as 1877 it appears that Sarah Davis actively participated in household labor. “What with being ‘Bridget’ part of the day—,” she informed her sister, “...I feel somewhat weary—.”<sup>123</sup> However, this is certainly more evident in earlier years. As the Davis family rose in prominence, Sarah Davis employed more servants, and, thus, had to complete less physical work.<sup>124</sup> The dynamics of the Davis household are best summed up by Sarah Davis’s comment to her husband that “We get on very nicely in the house—the servants all showing a desire to do as I wish.”<sup>125</sup>

### **The Role of the American Housewife**

While her relationship with the servants had a familial air, there still was a distinct gulf between Sarah Davis and her domestic servants. Her position as their employer and the “keeper” of the house, necessarily created distance between her and her servants. It was the responsibility

---

<sup>115</sup> S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, January 1 1875[?].

<sup>116</sup> S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn “At Home Tuesday 10 P.M.,” November 10, 1874.

<sup>117</sup> “I bought a couple of red shawls for 2 dollars each for the girls which pleased them very much.” S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, April 29, 1879.

<sup>118</sup> S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 18, 1872.

<sup>119</sup> S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, IL, April 16, 1873.

<sup>120</sup> S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, April 29, 1879. Although this may have been in part due to the presents Sarah brought them. There is also the sense that the Davis family servants felt fond of other members of the family. “Julia said this morning she missed your ‘cherry voice,’” Sarah informed David. S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, October 19, 1874.

<sup>121</sup> S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, October 26, 1874.

<sup>122</sup> S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 24, 1872, S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, November 30, 1873, and S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, February 21, 1872: Sarah was glad Willie was going to be working for Lyman as well as the Davis family, and wrote “What a good thing it will be if he settles down to work.”

<sup>123</sup> S.D. to F.W., Owl’s Nest, Bloomington, January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1877.

<sup>124</sup> See for example, Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, IL, November 12, 1855: “—Bridget my assistant is not trained to habits of neatness and order, but has lived in a hotel till she is almost spoiled for a tidy housekeeper—I bake my bread and pies—wash milk pans, etc.—in addition to the other duties that devolve upon me as housekeeper—” compared with her letters about “overseeing” the physical labor.

<sup>125</sup> S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, January 11, 1874.

of the American housewife, as the housekeeper, to ensure the household ran smoothly. As housekeeper, Sarah determined the menu and consulted with Bridget, the cook, about meal preparation.<sup>126</sup> She would have taken inventory of the kitchen supplies and the food items stored in the pantries.<sup>127</sup> Sarah Davis also described the hard work that went into managing the servants and the household labor. In 1874 she informed David Davis, “I have had a busy week—overseeing the making of drapes and the making of soap—.”<sup>128</sup> The separation between Sarah and her servants was also evident in her ‘maternal’ attitude toward them. While her monetary gifts to her domestic servants reflect her familial relationship with her servants, it also can be seen as an example of Sarah acting in the role of benevolent mistress. The money she gave her servants seems consistent with the money she often gave to various charitable causes.<sup>129</sup> While they worked in service, the lives of a servant and their employer were interconnected. The domestic situation in households like the Davis family relied on a balance of a maintained distance and affection between employee and employer, which was especially necessary when there was conflict between the housewife and the domestic servant.

As a housekeeper, there were certain tools Sarah Davis used which enforced this distance. Each room in the main floor, as well as the upstairs chambers, was equipped with call bells. There is also evidence that the call balls would have rang in the back chambers, where the servants slept. This indicates that theoretically, the servants would have to be available day and night. What is significant about this bell is that the employer does not verbally communicate with the maid. The second form of communication in the house is the speaking tube, leading from the upstairs hallway to the kitchen and to the laundry room. This is a two-way system, in which a handle would be turned and the user would whistle into the tube. This system would have been used between the servants, rather between Sarah Davis and the servants. This also is a much more efficient form of communication. The speaker could communicate their message immediately without having to summon the listener to the room. The contrast between the two communication systems reveals the levels of separation between the employers and the servants.

### **Attitudes Regarding Irish Catholic Domestics**

Just as there was a distance in terms of familiarity that indicated a social divide, there were cultural differences between the Davis family and their servants. However, the most negative response that the cultural differences between Sarah Davis and her servants provoked was the occasional sense of frustration, or failure to comprehend some of the actions of the servants. This is evident in Sarah Davis’s earlier years in Bloomington, when she complained to her brother about her servants’ desire to “enter a Convent.”<sup>130</sup> Sarah was also bemused by Katie Walsh’s actions on Halloween. She informed David:

---

<sup>126</sup>See for example, “Bridget is just in to ask ‘what is for breakfast.’” S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, March 27, 1874.

<sup>127</sup>See for example: “and I sent down to replenish my larder—.” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 16, 1872.

<sup>128</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 24, 1874.

<sup>129</sup>For one example of Sarah’s charitable contributions: “I started with Sallie and Willie and the wife of Professor Jacques, who had come for the \$10—due on my subscription to the ‘House for poor girls’—and to inform me she has had 5,500 already promised her—and now could call for the money. We went to hunt for Mr Taggart’s house—.” S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, November 21, 1874.

<sup>130</sup>Sarah Davis to Daniel Rogers Williams, Bloomington, IL, June 18, 1859.

Friday night was Halloween, and both girls were out from our kitchen—Katie informed me yesterday—that she took eight apples from a tub of water with her teeth—and took a burning candle in the same way from the end of a stick which was kept in motion. She did not seem to understand what these things were done for—and I am in happy ignorance of the subject.<sup>131</sup>

The Irish servants in the Davis family employ attended Roman Catholic mass, most likely at Holy Trinity Church.<sup>132</sup> The Davis family, however, was Protestant.<sup>133</sup> Margaret Lynch-Brennan argues that the issue of religion was the greatest point of contention between the Protestant employer and the Roman Catholic servant.<sup>134</sup> Irish Catholic domestic servants often would not work for a family if they were not allowed to attend mass or a Catholic church was too far away. When Sarah's relative, Sue Betts, was trying to hire a new servant, she ran into difficulty. "As yet she has been unable to procure a girl," Sarah wrote, "Good Catholics don't like to be so far from Church..."<sup>135</sup> While it is evident that the Davis servants' Catholicism was important to them, there seems to have been more of a sense of curiosity about the religion of the servants (and vice versa) than animosity. Sarah Davis informed David Davis, "Bridget was anxious to go and I took her with me. She said it was the second Protestant funeral she ever attended."<sup>136</sup> Even when her servants' attendance at church could be an inconvenience and an annoyance, Sarah's response was not an extreme expression of antagonism.

Mary Whalen is representative of the difference in cultural ideals between Irish women and American women. Sarah Davis described Mary Whalen's disagreeable character, writing that "Bridget says she thinks her character has gone abroad—and that people are afraid of her. She is very crabbed sometimes to Bridget and I shall not take her back to live with us after we break up."<sup>137</sup> Margaret Lynch-Brennan argues that one of the problems that resulted from the cultural differences between the American middle-class housewife and the Irish servant girl was that what the employer interpreted for insolence, the servant girl saw as assertiveness.<sup>138</sup> This

---

<sup>131</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 2, 1873.

<sup>132</sup> In 1871, Sarah informed David Davis: "Mary Anne & Willie have gone to church—this being 'November Day' as Mary says—They fasted on fish yesterday, and Friday they fast of course. Mary helps Anne with the ironing & of course they have it done Tuesday. I fear they are to have the long meeting—that was to come off in October—Fanny says it is to be held in the basement of their new Church—" S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 1, 1871. This date matches the information on the Holy Trinity website about the church's ongoing renovations in the late nineteenth century: "In the spring of 1869, a new church was framed and enclosed on the site of the current rectory, with the interior work scheduled to follow. A tornado completely destroyed the unfinished building. Since the structure was not insured, recovery from this natural disaster was long and difficult. Eight years later in July 1878, Bishop John Spalding dedicated the new church at the corner of Main & Chesnut." The Holy Trinity Catholic Church, "The History of the Holy Trinity Catholic Church," <http://www.holytrinitybloomington.org/?PageID=History>, (accessed February 14 2010). St. Patrick's Catholic Church, whose congregation was mainly Irish, was not built until 1892. St. Patrick's Catholic Church, "St. Patrick's Catholic Church," <http://www.historicsaintpatricks.org>, (accessed February 14 2010).

<sup>133</sup>While not a member of a church, Sarah Davis did have Protestant beliefs. She wrote in 1872, "I have gone to my belief in the doctrine of Predestination." S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, February 15, 1872.

<sup>134</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 175-176. "The Irish Catholic experience in domestic service from 1840 to 1930, however, appears to be distinguished from the experience of all other domestic servants, in at least one respect—only Irish Catholic women appear to have dealt with discrimination on the basis of religion in this occupation."

<sup>135</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 2, 1872.

<sup>136</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, March 25, 1874.

<sup>137</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, December 5, 1872.

<sup>138</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 35-39, 71.

may have been the case with Mary Whalen. Being assertive was a quality highly admired in Irish culture, but did not lend itself to the subservient and submissive attitude American employers expected.

For all of the cultural and social differences between the Davis family and their Irish servants, there were some similarities as well. These similarities appear in the values of both groups. Like the Davis family, and other middle-class families in America, Irish immigrants valued education and literacy. Moreover, Irish immigrants placed a high value on the family.<sup>139</sup> This can be especially seen in Sarah Davis's description of the relationship between Katie Walsh and her sister, and Bridget's position as "mother" to her family.<sup>140</sup> While not belonging to the middle-class, Irish immigrants in the nineteenth century had a middle-class mentality in that they too believed in the American Dream of social mobility and prosperity.<sup>141</sup> Working as a domestic servant exposed the Irish domestic servants to middle-class values, taste, and etiquette. The experience of the servants in the Davis household then, in a sense, contributed to their "Americanization."

Compared to the issues and concerns expressed by many on the subject of domestic service, the Davis Mansion was an excellent place to be employed. However, no matter how desirable it may have been to work for the Davis family, a servant's position was by no means stable. In the nineteenth century, the agreement between an employer and a domestic employee was a "verbal one" and was not legally binding.<sup>142</sup> This was the case in the Davis household.<sup>143</sup> While a verbal agreement allowed a servant to leave her position when she chose, it also allowed an employer to fire her without warning and to take advantage of the vagueness of the agreement to require less time off and more work. While Sarah Davis, and Sallie Davis before her marriage, did leave the house for months at a time, the servants were not completely discarded. It is true that while they were gone, the servants were essentially unemployed.<sup>144</sup> When the family "broke up" as Sarah put it, sometimes servants were let go, as was Mary Whalen in 1872. Sarah did lend the servants she wished to remain under her employ to friends and family. Bridget, for example, worked for Ella Davis during the winter of 1874.<sup>145</sup>

Besides the uncertainty of finding and keeping a position, a domestic servant also faced the uncertainty of hazards on the job. There was no pension system or worker's compensation, so if a servant became too old to work, or was injured on the job, they could be let go. Domestic work was often back-breaking work. The weight of wet laundry, heavy pots, scrubbing, early mornings and late nights, and repetitive tasks carried out in a "continual warfare with dirt and

---

<sup>139</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 91-92, 121-127.

<sup>140</sup>For references to Katie and her sister: S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, October 19, 1873 and S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 2, 1873. For examples of Bridget and her family, see: S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 21, 1874, S. D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 24, 1874, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn "At Home Tuesday 10 P.M.," November 10, 1874, S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, January 1 1875[?]

<sup>141</sup>Lawrence J. McCaffrey, "Diaspora Comparisons and Irish-American Uniqueness," 22.

<sup>142</sup>Katzman, 106.

<sup>143</sup>This makes it difficult to find exact data on when servants were hired or let go, how much they were paid, and what the exact conditions of employment were. It is possible that this information is contained in a "daybook," which I have been unable to locate.

<sup>144</sup>Willie Fitzgerald was an exception, as he stayed in the house to do maintenance work. See George Davis to David Davis, Bloomington, February 24, 1875.

<sup>145</sup>"Ella would like Bridget this winter—but I have not spoken to her on the subject." S. D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 14, 1874. "Bridget says she will live with Ella I am absent." S.D. to D.D., November 15, 1874.

discomfort,” all took a physical toll.<sup>146</sup> This issue can be seen in Sarah Davis’s concern about Mary Whalen, who “really begins to appear old, and looks somewhat bent.”<sup>147</sup>

Moreover, servants did not get paid overtime, or garner higher wages for working at night, nor were allowed significant vacation time. Their lives, while they were in service, were largely dictated by the schedule and convenience of the family.<sup>148</sup> The female servants had relatively less control over their situation than did women who worked in factories or shops.<sup>149</sup> This seems to have been largely the case with the Davis servants, although as mentioned before, Sarah Davis was flexible with their time off.

For all the difficulties that came with undertaking the role of servant, Irish domestic servants did have some benefits. Because of the high demand, Irish domestics were able to garner competitive wages. The Davis family servants were no exception to this.<sup>150</sup> Moreover, they were able to make certain demands which employees had to follow if they wished to retain their services. After letting Mary Whalen go in late 1872, Sarah Davis wrote, “I shall not call for my new maid till Monday as Bridget says some don’t like to begin on Saturday.”<sup>151</sup> Overall, the uncertainties and the benefits involved in being a domestic servant in nineteenth-century America can be seen in the situation of the Davis family servants.

As the writer of the *Daily Pantagraph* noted, the house on Clover Lawn was indeed both “convenient” and “appropriate.” The new technologies and conveniences in the home made life more efficient and comfortable for the Davis family and their servants. The house also contained all the necessary genteel elements which reflected the family’s status and was designed in a manner which achieved the desired separation between the family and the servants. The relations between the servants and the Davis family, as well as the dynamics of the household, reflect the indicated “solution” to the “servant-problem” offered by *The American Woman’s Home*. Beecher and Stowe concluded that American women “must thoroughly understand, and be prepared to *teach*, every branch of housekeeping; they must study to make domestic service desirable, by treating their servants in a way to lead them to respect themselves and to feel themselves respected....”<sup>152</sup> Sarah Davis assumed the role of parent, if not teacher, in her relationship with her servants. She respected her servants, and they in turn appear to have respected her as well. While I would not go as far as to claim that Sarah viewed herself as bringing middle-class “civilization” to the lower class servants who worked for her, she does embody the concept of the “benevolent mother” promoted by *The American Woman’s Home*.<sup>153</sup> The presence of domestic servants in the household was necessary in order for Sarah to assume this role, and yet their presence also points to a tension present in the ideology of the middle-class household. The middle-class defined itself by establishing difference, that is, the difference between the lower orders, who were not refined, and the aristocracy, who did not have the work

---

<sup>146</sup>Spofford, 37.

<sup>147</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 24, 1872.

<sup>148</sup>Carter makes this point in her exploration of why working in service was so repulsive for many Americans that they would rather work in worse conditions (e.g. a mill or a factory). Carter, 132-133.

<sup>149</sup>Katzman, 116-117.

<sup>150</sup>Although, as mentioned before Sarah was not happy about this phenomenon. She was not alone in her complaint that servants were “paid too much.” Beecher and Stowe discuss this complaint, and the law of supply and demand as justification for higher wages for servants. Beecher and Stowe, 328.

<sup>151</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, April 18, 1873.

<sup>152</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 334.

<sup>153</sup>See Tonkovich for a more detailed discussion of *The American Woman’s Home* and the role of the “domestic goddess” in the home who was supposed to teach her servants the “finer points of American domestic practice.” Tonkovich, introduction to *The American Woman’s Home*, xi, xxvi.

ethic of the middle-class. Thus, Sarah's notation that Katie "may have dreams of a pleasant future," and her remark that she hoped Mr. Hoag would marry Mary Whalen, carries a sense of ambiguity. These instances indicate a certain level of concern on her part, but also that this concern ends when her duty as their employer is fulfilled. Once the servants are gone from her household, she rarely mentions them again.<sup>154</sup>

Besides fulfilling a specific role in the Davis family household, the servants also were a part of the Irish immigrants who had an impact on Bloomington, in terms of their unique culture and their introduction of Catholicism into a community which was unfamiliar with both. While the Irish experience, and the Irish domestic experience, in America may parallel the experience of other immigrant groups,<sup>155</sup> the Irish were unique in terms of their distinct culture and socio-political history. These aspects, including their relationship with Sarah Davis, are evident in the records left behind by the Davis family. However, there is much more that is left buried.

The Davis Mansion displays photographs and portraits of the Davis family friends and family, but there are no displays of photographs of the servants who continue to remain invisible. We have Sarah Davis's voluminous correspondence, but none of Mary Whalen's or Bridget's. Sarah Davis's letters are so important because they are full of daily life in the mansion, which is full of the servants. Their lives are viewed through the filter of Sarah's voice, and at times, her letters give teasing glimpses at things we will never be able to determine. What deed did the family give Willie Fitzgerald?<sup>156</sup> Did Mary Whalen marry Mr. Hoag? Why did Ann receive such an impromptu visit? Were the children of Bridget able to "avoid household labor"?<sup>157</sup> Despite these frustrations, Sarah Davis's letters, the Davis Mansion itself, and the many works written on the domestic servant and the American employer, allow one to construct a narrative of servant life at the Davis Mansion. This narrative relates the rise of the middle-class in America, something that would never have been possible without the hands and feet of the Irish domestic servants.

---

<sup>154</sup>One exception to this is Cecilia O'[?] Connor, who was George Perrin Davis's nurse, and who, although she moved away from Bloomington, still returned to visit Sarah nearly every year until Sarah's death. See Burke, "Irish in McLean County," 22 and also a letter in which Sarah references "Mrs Connor": Sarah Davis to David Davis, Bloomington, January 11, 1874.

<sup>155</sup>See Lynch-Brennan, Chapter 7, "Was Bridget's Experience Unique," 151-176.

<sup>156</sup>"Willie Fitzgerald has his deed signed and delivered. I told him to take good care of it. He said he would get his Mother to put it in her trunk." S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, October 20, 1875.

<sup>157</sup>Katzman, 70.