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# 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

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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



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Maintain as strictly as you will conventions and distances—that demarcation of social frontiers which permits one to remain in his place and to observe the law of differences.  
—Charles Wagner, *The Simple Life* (1904), 178.

The girls are a great help in the care of the house.

—Sarah Davis to David Davis, Clover Lawn, March 2, 1872.

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 article goes on to detail the particular attributes of the house and remark that the “internal arrangement is convenient and appropriate.”<sup>1</sup> What is interesting about the reporter’s description is his inclusion of both the public rooms and the utilitarian rooms in the house. This suggests that it was recognized that each area of the house had a certain function. The China Closet, for example, was just as necessary as the Carrara marble fireplace in the parlor. In the introduction to the 1904 *House and Home: A Practical Book on Home Management*, Margaret Sangster asserted, “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>2</sup> The importance the family placed on the construction of this house can be seen in the length of time it took to complete and the final cost. Originally projected to cost \$30,000 (as the *Pantagraph* reported), the final cost totaled \$75,000. The house was not finished in September 1871, but rather later in October of 1872. This was certainly not an undertaking made for any sort of economic profit. While there were likely more funds available for the enterprise as Congress had repealed the national income tax in 1872,<sup>3</sup> Judge David Davis, known

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<sup>1</sup> “Judge Davis’s New Residence,” *Daily Pantagraph*, June 27, 1871.

<sup>2</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>3</sup>Wayne Andrews. *Architecture, Ambition, and Americans: A Social History of American Architecture*. (New York: The Free Press, 1964), 153.

for his sound business sense,<sup>4</sup> would have never invested in this house if it had been a business venture. Instead, 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>5</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>6</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>7</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.

The design of the Davis Mansion on Clover Lawn was a manifestation of the division between the middle-class Davis family and the lower orders, including the population of Irish immigrants, and served to demarcate the servants’ correct place within the space of the house.

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<sup>4</sup>Biography of Judge Davis in *The David Davis Mansion Volunteer Manual* (Springfield: Illinois State Preservation Agency, 1993), 11. General information about the David Davis Mansion and its occupants included in this paper come from the *Volunteer Manual*.

<sup>5</sup>“Judge Davis’s New Residence,” (June 27 1871)

<sup>6</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>7</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.

The voluminous Davis family correspondence, especially Sarah Davis's letters, are an invaluable source as they provide the reader with a window into the domestic system of the Davis Mansion and how the servants functioned within the home and the community of Bloomington, Illinois.

The evidence found in the Davis correspondence both supports the literature written on domestic service and the Irish-American experience and qualifies it. In his 1978 pioneering study of domestic labor, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America*, David M. Katzman argues that rather than economic factors, race, ethnicity, defined gender roles, and the larger social constructions of the period had the greatest influence on domestic labor. His examination of the personalized relationship between employee and employer, as well as the words of domestic employees themselves, indicate that domestic servants were necessary to maintain the middle-class lifestyle but, as a result, there was a stigma attached to servant labor. Hasia Diner's 1983 work, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century*, finds that the female Irish domestic servants who worked in middle-class households generally ceased to work in domestic service after they married and had a strong sense of the defined role for a woman. She concludes that these women, rather than Irish male politicians, were the integral factor in the assimilation of the Irish immigrants into the American middle-class. Moreover, Margaret Lynch-Brennan's 2009 *The Irish Bridget: Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic Service in America, 1840-1930* is a narrative detailing the experience of the Irish female domestic servant, an experience that paralleled (except for the level of antagonism directed against Irish Catholics) the experience of other female immigrants who worked in domestic service in America.

The domestic system of the house on Clover Lawn in many ways resembles the conclusions drawn by Katzman, Diner, and Lynch-Brennan. There is evidence that suggests the female Irish domestic servants married and left domestic service, and that the Irish Catholic servants were involved in the Irish community of Bloomington and, in this way, contributed to the

overall shaping of Bloomington. However, Sarah Davis's letters indicate that while the social, cultural and religious differences between herself and her servants created a separation, her relationship with her servants was familial. Although there was a stigma attached to domestic service and domestic labor, Sarah Davis's active participation in the household labor as well as her familiarity with her servants suggests that she did not feel such an extreme sense of superiority over them.

By the late nineteenth-century, the American middle-class had established a well developed ideology that was self-justifying and self-promoting. American families like those of Abraham Lincoln and Judge David Davis defined themselves in terms of what they valued. These tenants included the principle of the self-made man (or woman), individualism, literacy, education, refinement, and the overarching doctrine of separate spheres for men and women. There was an emphasis on the role of the woman as a positive force within the space of the home.<sup>8</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 inhabitants too."<sup>9</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 prescriptive literature of the period, including Mary Anne Sadlier's 1861 novel *Bessy Conway: Or the Irish Servant Girl in America*, Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1869 *The American Woman's Home*, Harriet Prescott Spofford's 1881 *The Servant Girl Question*, and Mary Elizabeth Carter's 1904 *House and Home: A Practical Book on Home Management*, present the ideal servant and their employer and how the cult of domesticity was meant to function. *The*

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<sup>8</sup>Margaret Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget: Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic Service in America, 1840-1930* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 61.

<sup>9</sup>Sarah Davis to George Walker, Bloomington, IL, June 18, 1859.

*American Woman's Home*, in particular, “imagined a domestic refuge...from the cutthroat competition of the world of business and politics.”<sup>10</sup>

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. “The master of the house returns from the cares and vexations of his day's business,” Tomes wrote, “seeking repose in his home, but only finds disquiet.”<sup>11</sup> Tomes goes on to describe the uncouth, uncivilized practices of many Irish domestic servants. 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.

Moreover, the house on Clover Lawn built in 1872 points to certain incongruities that existed within the middle-class ideology. While the Davis family identified with the middle-class and had middle-class values, the material evidence of the house indicates a connection to a New England and European aristocracy. The Davis servants who worked in what is now referred to as “The Davis Mansion” reflect this tension. On the one hand, Sarah Davis seems to have consciously strived to not be pretentious and was on familial terms with her servants. On the other hand, the larger house required more servants than in the old Davis family residence, the I-House. Consequently, there were stratified roles within the servants who worked in the house. Tomes, likewise, noted this phenomenon. While middle-class Americans promoted political democracy, they were in many ways “socially in bondage to Great Britain” and its hierarchical

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<sup>10</sup>Nicole Tonkovich, introduction to *The American Woman's Home*, by Catherine E. Beech and Harriet Beecher Stowe (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), xvii.

<sup>11</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).

domestic system.<sup>12</sup> 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>13</sup> The Great Famine, lasting from 1845-1852, resulted in the immigration of nearly one million Irish as well as the death of one million more. There was a significant population of Irish immigrants in the eastern cities of America, including New York. Studies of immigration trends show that Irish immigration in this period tended to be chain-immigration, meaning that emigrants tended to follow the example of previous emigrants and settled in areas that had inhabitants of similar backgrounds. These factors, which many scholars have explored in detail, all contributed to the influx of Irish immigrants in America.

At the same time that large numbers of Irish immigrants were coming to America, there was a rise in the demand for labor. 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

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<sup>12</sup>Tomes, "Your Humble Servant," 57.

<sup>13</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).



domestic servant, became a necessary part of the rise of the middle-class in America.<sup>14</sup> Many scholars, including Margaret Lynch-Brennan, have focused on the Irish presence in large cities in the eastern United States and very little attention has been given to the Irish who settled further west. 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>15</sup> When the railroads came to the mid-west, Bloomington was advantageously positioned between Chicago and St. Louis.<sup>16</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 by large numbers of Irish immigrants. The Irish workmen who worked for the rail companies “induced the settlement of many of the best class of Irish, men of education and means, who cast in their lot with their country men, forming in the aggregate a very valuable element of the total population of the city.”<sup>17</sup> However, the Holy Trinity Catholic Church interprets the Irish immigrant experience in Bloomington in rather more negative terms. The Church claims that “As refugees from the famine in Ireland..., the immigrants were perceived as general purpose beasts of burden. With some exceptions, most would remain poor throughout their lives which tended to be brutish and short.”<sup>18</sup> While these two statements are contradictory, what they do agree on is the importance of Irish immigrant labor in Bloomington and the impact of the Irish on the

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<sup>14</sup>Katzman 146, 148.

<sup>15</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>16</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.

<sup>17</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>18</sup> The Holy Trinity Catholic Church, “The History of the Holy Trinity Catholic Church,” <http://www.holytrinitybloomington.org/?PageID=History>, (accessed February 14 2010).

Bloomington community as a whole. 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>19</sup> This “propensity for domestic service” is consistent with the national trend.<sup>20</sup> According to David Katzman, “the number of female domestic servants rose from 960,000 to 1,830,000” between the year 1870 and 1910.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, “Women entering the United States often found no other work than household labor.”<sup>22</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. Unfortunately, the census records do not indicate which area of Ireland their families originated from nor their previous professions—information that would be helpful in determining possible

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<sup>19</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>20</sup>Katzman, 70.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 46.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

reasons for their decision to come to Bloomington, Illinois.<sup>23</sup> Other earlier Davis servants, namely Mary Whalen and Katy Walsh, were born in Ireland.<sup>24</sup> Willie Fitzgerald was either born in Ireland or the son of Irish immigrants.<sup>25</sup> While many Irishmen labored on the railroads in Bloomington, others ranged in occupation from “coal miner,” and “blacksmith,” to “teamster.”<sup>26</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 “laborer.” Lucy M. Salmon’s study of domestic service found that while, by her calculations, in 1889 eighteen percent of domestic servants were male, only twelve percent were listed in the 1880 census. In the official census, those that Salmon categorized as “domestic servant” were considered “laborers.”<sup>27</sup> This phenomenon most likely is true for the 1870 census as well. The category of “laborer” is by far the largest for Irish men employed in Bloomington.<sup>28</sup> The

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<sup>23</sup>Of course, we do not know if Bridget Hayes’s or Mary Welsh’s parents immigrated to the U.S. many years before the Great Famine. However, as there were several minor potato crop failures throughout the early nineteenth century (example), it is highly likely that their parents were motivated to come to America for many of the same reasons that victims of the Famine left Ireland.

<sup>24</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>25</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>26</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.”

<sup>27</sup>Salmon, 95-96.

<sup>28</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.

vagueness of the term “laborer” reveals the difficulty in determining how many men, specifically Irishmen, worked as domestic servants.

The increase in work available for the Irish immigrant population, along with the increase in wealth of prominent Bloomington residents like the Davis family, accounts for the existence of an Irish domestic servant population in Bloomington. When the Davis family began occupation of the mansion on Clover Lawn, Mary Whalen, Bridget [unknown last name], and Willie Fitzgerald were already employed by the family.<sup>29</sup> They, like the Davis family, would have had to adjust to the differences between the old I-House and the new Italianate Style Mansion. The new home also reflected the changes in the developing city of Bloomington. As the general population increased, it became more prevalent for families like the Davis’s to separate themselves from the general populace through the design of their houses. One significant structural difference between the I-House and the new mansion was the presence of the vestibule, a material signifier of the raised status of the Davis family. The vestibule also indicated that the role of the servants had become more defined.

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>30</sup> Here, it was possible to access the front porch through an inner door. The presence of nature, something highly valued by the Victorians, was felt in this room. Elements of nature, including the plants that would have been

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<sup>29</sup>On the whole, Sarah Davis employed a larger number of domestic servants than she did during the earlier years in the old house. Perhaps she was anticipating the move to the larger mansion, which by necessity and as a reflection of the Davis family’s status required more servants.

<sup>30</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.

displayed, were spiritual as they “speak an eloquent language, potent and uplifting, albeit voiceless.”<sup>31</sup> The theme of nature is evident through the more neutral, natural colors and the eclectic geometrical shapes. 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. More than a functional piece of furniture, the hallstand is a very visual indicator of these values and the family’s refinement. The majestic stag’s head adorning the hallstand, for example, is a reference to the English aristocracy who kept stags for their own personal use on their grand country estates. 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. In *The Servant Girl Question*, Harriet Prescott Spofford in 1881 referred to the “parlor” and the “kitchen” when speaking of the dynamics of the relationship

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<sup>31</sup>Carter, *House and Home*, 86.

between “mistress” and “servant.”<sup>32</sup> 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>33</sup> As Richard Bushman notes, “Creating parlors as a site for a refined life implied spiritual superiority.”<sup>34</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>35</sup> In this sense, the parlor functioned as a didactic tool which promoted certain values to those who lived and worked in the home. The intricate Carrara marble fireplace emphasized the connection between the Davis family and European aesthetics.<sup>36</sup> “Glass” curtains, gracefully hanging from the valences to the carpeted floor, frame the ornate moldings on the ceiling and showcase the Davis family’s refinement. The Grecian urns on the fireplace mantle indicate an allusion to antiquity and Sarah Davis’s good taste. The presence of the piano in the parlor was a symbol of the feminine gentility and an instrument whose skill a housewife and her daughters should learn.<sup>37</sup> The prints of Correggio’s *The Mystical Marriage of St. Catherine* and Raphael’s *Madonna and Child and St. John and the Baptist* hanging next to the entrance of the dining room

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<sup>32</sup>“Yet so far as the disagreement between the parlor and the kitchen can be reformed at all....” Harriet Prescott Spofford, *The Servant Girl Question* (1881; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1977), 23.

<sup>33</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>34</sup>Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 183.

<sup>35</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.

<sup>36</sup>Elizabeth O’Leary discusses middle-class Americans’ “embrace of European social and artistic conventions.” Elizabeth L. O’Leary, *At Beck and Call: The Representation of Domestic Servant in Nineteenth-Century American Painting* (Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 161.

<sup>37</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 62. Sallie Davis played the piano when she was being courted by suitors. See Sarah Davis to David Davis, Clover Lawn, January 21, 1872.

emphasize that this is a feminine space and showcase the values of the maternal and the home. Moreover, the prints are hung from two wires which meet at a nail, forming a triangular shape. The Beecher sisters recommend this arrangement, noting the aesthetics of this form. As Sarah Davis attended the Beecher's Hartford Female Seminary school, it is highly likely that in hanging her pictures, she was consciously striving to emulate the style that the Beecher sisters recommended, as well as the sentiment behind it.

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 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. Spofford summarized, sympathetically, the situation of "poor maid" who has "just transferred from her sheiling" and is "among implements never heard of, without skill, without instruction, hot-tempered, without self-control, and without the habits of indoor labor. . . ."<sup>38</sup> Lynch-Brennan, likewise, notes that many of the Irish domestic servants would not have encountered these objects before coming to America.<sup>39</sup> *The American Woman's Home* makes this point, as well, urging the recognition of the fact that many domestics "come to us, as a class, raw and untrained."<sup>40</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>41</sup> There *were* skills involved in the position of domestic servant. Harriet Spofford was a champion, along with Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, of the new schools for the training of domestic servants.<sup>42</sup> *The American Woman's Home* emphasizes that "Good

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<sup>38</sup>Spofford, 19.

<sup>39</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 12, 21, 69.

<sup>40</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 318.

<sup>41</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>42</sup>Spofford, 141-142.

servants do not come often to us; they must be *made* by patience and training....”<sup>43</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>44</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 parlor, moreover, was the room in which an important feminine social ritual was performed. Tea, and the taking of tea, had long been a reflection of delicacy and refinement. *The American Woman’s Home* points out that “The tea-kettle is as much an English institution as aristocracy or the Prayer-Book.”<sup>45</sup> Tea was certainly important in the American home. Tea-making was the role of the “high-born ladies” who presided over the process and ensured that the “due rites and solemnities are properly performed.”<sup>46</sup> In several letters, Sarah Davis mentioned going to tea or having guests over for tea.<sup>47</sup> It was a part of the rhythm of her life. In *The Irish Bridget*, Lynch-Brennan emphasizes the importance of tea for the Irish. She explains that tea was

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<sup>43</sup>Beecher and Stowe, *The American Woman’s Home*, 315.

<sup>44</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>45</sup>Beecher and Stowe, *The American Woman’s Home*, 188.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>47</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 28, 1871, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, December 10, 1871, S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, March 15, 1873, S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, November 29, 1874, S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, November 25, 1875: Copy of letter to Kingsley (for Sallie’s wedding on December 22, 1875).



another point of contention between the mistress of the home and her servants, whose idea of hospitality (that is, making free use of the family's tea for her own guests) highly offended the mistress.<sup>48</sup> It is interesting, then, that despite the cultural and social differences between the American housewife and the Irish domestic, their attitude toward tea was strikingly similar. It would be pure speculation to imagine how Mary Whalen (as she was the spunkiest of the Davis servants) felt about serving a beverage that represented the gulf between her and the person she was serving. Perhaps this thought did not even enter her mind. Perhaps, even, Sarah allowed her servants to drink the family's supply of tea with their own callers. What is important is that the parlor, and the rituals that occurred in the parlor, were observed by the maids. Lynch-Brennan notes that when maids married and moved into homes of their own, they designated a specific room in the house as the parlor and often arranged this room to emulate the parlor of their employer.<sup>49</sup> They might even have included a tea service, further indicating their identification with the "respectable people of society."<sup>50</sup> Thus, the parlor was significant not only as a part of the cult of domesticity, but also as part of the history of social mobility. It was a manner in which the Irish maid assimilated into American culture and American values.

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>51</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

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<sup>48</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 9.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 153-154. Concurrently, social workers in Boston argued that a woman who worked in domestic service "almost universally establishes a better type of home life when she marries than if possible for the factory or shop girl." Quoted in Katzman, 141.

<sup>50</sup>Bushman and Stowe, 183.

<sup>51</sup>Sarah Davis to David Davis, Clover Lawn, November 24, 1872.

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>52</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>53</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>54</sup> While we do not know 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**

Do we understand, ourselves, what is the proper place of a hired ‘help’ in our families?  
—Harland, 373.

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. *The American Woman’s Home* emphasizes how the Irish and German servants, unlike their earlier American counterparts, “did not claim a seat at the table or in the parlor.”<sup>55</sup> Mary Anne Sadlier’s 1861 *Bessy Conway or, the Irish Girl in America*, was popular didactic novel that chronicled the trials and tribulations of the Irish servant girl’s experience in America and the dangers and pitfalls

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<sup>52</sup>Sarah Davis to David Davis, Bloomington, November 30, 1873.

<sup>53</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>54</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.

<sup>55</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 320.

of Protestant American culture, or “these great Babylons of the west.”<sup>56</sup> Bessy, the exemplary Irish Catholic maid, dutifully carries out her chores in the kitchen, resides in her room and is only rarely placed by the author in any other area of the house. The other slovenly servants, the cook Bridget and the housemaid Sally, use the kitchen as a place to plot methods to take advantage of their employers and to escape into the outside world with their rakish beaux. When an unsuitable suitor comes to visit Bessy, he appears at the front door and must be dealt with by Bessy’s employer:

“Mr. Hubert,” said the lady, after returning his haughty bow, “was it my servant you wished to see—if so, you should have applied at the basement door.”

“Madam!” said Herbert with an angry flush on his cheek, “I am not accustomed to apply at basement doors.”

“That may be, sir, but if you have business with any of the servants it is there you must see them, not here.”<sup>57</sup>

In this exchange, it is evident that the separation between the front door and the basement door reflects the proper separation between the position of mistress and maid. 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.

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<sup>56</sup>Mrs. J. Sadlier, *Bessy Conway, or, the Irish Girl in America* (New York: D. & J. Sadlier & Co., 1861), iii.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 69-70.

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>58</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>59</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>60</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 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>61</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. The Breakers, a seventy room summer house dating from a slightly later period than the Davis Mansion, functioned as a place for the Vanderbilt family to distance themselves from

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<sup>58</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>59</sup>Carter, 154-155. “Every housekeeper who likes to go into her kitchen to do nice cooking should have her own utensils....”

<sup>60</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, February 25, 1872.

<sup>61</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, January 21, 1872.

the hectic, outside world. To accomplish this, it required nearly thirty servants, each of whom had a specific function and a specific place in a hierarchal system.<sup>62</sup> At *The Breakers*, it was highly unlikely that Mrs. Vanderbilt would spend time in the kitchen, much less open a back door for the guests of her servants. The Vanderbilts were among the ranks of American families who “emulated” the European system of domestic service.<sup>63</sup> A servant’s rank corresponded with their assigned bedchambers. The butler and the housekeeper had the two most desirable rooms, with fireplaces, windows, and privacy, while the lower maids most likely had to share chambers, much smaller windows, and had less privacy.<sup>64</sup> This hierarchy is closely connected to the European and English hierarchy that existed among European domestic servants. The study of *Servant Life at the Breakers* points out that European servants were more desirable because they knew their “place,” and were less likely to question their subservient role.<sup>65</sup> The contrast between the attitudes of American and European servants was not lost on the so-called reformers of domestic service. *The American Woman’s Home* notes that the “servants in England are vastly better trained than with us.”<sup>66</sup> Catherine Beecher admires the “stable” (and by implication, stasis) of the English system, conveniently forgetting that she was the granddaughter of a blacksmith and that as a middle-class woman, her value system was based on the concept of the self-made man (or woman) and the ability to rise above their current situation in life.

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

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<sup>62</sup>Holly Collins, *Servant Life at the Breakers: A Room with a View* (The Preservation Society of Newport County, 2001), 5,28.

<sup>63</sup>Katzman, 118.

<sup>64</sup>Collins, 9,11. Although the Butler’s chamber’s isolated location afforded more privacy, it consequently was far from bathing facilities, which would have been inconvenient.

<sup>65</sup>Collins, 28.

<sup>66</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 188.

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. Miss Buckley, Sarah wrote to her sister, was “a young lady who has been with me some time. She came to assist me in sewing before I was sick—and I have not given her up, as she has no home—and there seems no great demand for her work at this season. She has aided me in the care of the house—which has been a great relief to my lame shoulders—.”<sup>67</sup> Miss Buckley and Ada Patterson paid calls with Sarah, assisted with the sewing and mending, and served as nurses.<sup>68</sup> 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>69</sup> She ate meals with the family and their guests.<sup>70</sup> She also was referred to as “Miss Lake,” a sign of respect and of her social position. As Lynch-Brennan notes, domestic servants were referred to by their first names.<sup>71</sup> This seems to complicate or blur the distinction between the servants and the employers, as Sarah Davis referred to close friends and family members by their first names as well. Her use of the first names of the servants seems to indicate that the servants are an extension of the family. However, the use of first names contributes to their later anonymity. It is much easier to find “Miss Lake” in the census records than “Bridget.”

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

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<sup>67</sup> Sarah Davis to George Walker, Bloomington, IL, February 14, 1858.

<sup>68</sup> Sarah Davis to George Walker, Bloomington, IL, November 15, 1859. “Miss Buckley a young lady who is assisting me in sewing—aids in making beds etc.” Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, October 22, 1864. “Ada Patterson has been a kind devoted nurse, and I am very grateful to her.”

<sup>69</sup> S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, December 14, 1876[?], S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, December 10, 1873.

<sup>70</sup> S.D. to F.W., Bloomington, October 13, 1873, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 24, 1874.

<sup>71</sup> Lynch-Brennan, 79.

than a mere maid-of-all work, as was Mary Whalen.<sup>72</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>73</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>74</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>75</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>76</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.

### **Domestic Servant Labor**

man’s work is from sun to sun, but woman’s work is never done.  
—Spofford, 129.

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid. 91.

<sup>73</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 4, 1872.

<sup>74</sup>Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, IL, January 10, 1842.

<sup>75</sup>S.D. to D.D., Scranton, PA, April 4, 1873.

<sup>76</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.

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>77</sup> While it was a much larger house and there was more work to do, the servants at The Breakers had an easier job because the work was shared by many and everyone had a specific task. 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>78</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>79</sup> Usually, maids were given Thursday evenings off and half-days on Sundays, and American housewives apparently begrudged even this time off.<sup>80</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

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<sup>77</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 105-106, Spofford, 36-37.

<sup>78</sup>Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, IL, January 10, 1842.

<sup>79</sup>Katzman, 110.

<sup>80</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.



to start the female part of the household.”<sup>81</sup> The practice of early rising was a virtue extolled by the Beecher sisters and it is likely that Sarah followed this practice due to their advice.<sup>82</sup> Rising so early meant that a significant amount of work was completed by the afternoon. Mary Elizabeth Carter described how maids would spend time in their rooms between their completion of chores and the preparation for dinner.<sup>83</sup> Like other domestic servants of the age, the servants employed by the Davis family also appear to have had time off in the afternoons. Sarah implied this practice in a letter, which describes how Sarah had to wake Ann in the middle of the afternoon, who “was in her room half asleep.”<sup>84</sup> 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>85</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>86</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. In one letter she mentioned, “This was Katie’s Sunday in & she cooked some oysters very nicely.” In another letter, Sarah stated, “This being Mary’s Sunday—Bridget made some of her

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<sup>81</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 19, 1873.

<sup>82</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 191, 195.

<sup>83</sup>Carter, 113-114.

<sup>84</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, February 25, 1872.

<sup>85</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>86</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, November 19, 1871.

nice waffles and I had Mr Pierpont and Fanny to sup with us.”<sup>87</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>88</sup> Rather than grudgingly allotting them 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. After St. Patrick’s Day in 1872, Sarah described how her servant was allowed to finish the laundry early in order to participate in the day’s festivities.<sup>89</sup> Sarah also described a monetary emergency concerning Mary Whalen, stating, “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—Mary has his note for the money—so she started today at 8 o’clock on the Central Road and hopes to be back Saturday.”<sup>90</sup> Bridget also seems to have been given a lot of leeway. Sarah wrote, “Bridget’s brother is to be married on Sunday—and I have promised to let her go out on Friday and stay till Monday of next week—so as to assist him in preparing.”<sup>91</sup> Later that year, Sarah mentioned, “I let Bridget go to her father’s Saturday—and allowed her to stay till this morning. She has just come in...”<sup>92</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>93</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 16, 1873, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 24, 1872.

<sup>88</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, December 3, 1871.

<sup>89</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 20, 1872.

<sup>90</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 18, 1872

<sup>91</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 21, 1874

<sup>92</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, October 26, 1874

<sup>93</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 84, Katzman, 97. He stated, “the demand for servants always exceeded the supply...”

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>94</sup> Spofford also suggested that the servants who attend training schools should be given a certain wage based on their performance in school.<sup>95</sup> It appears that the Davis family paid their female servants \$3 to \$4 a week.<sup>96</sup> This is relatively high, considering the wages of other work available to women and the cost of living.<sup>97</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, in regard to adding to the wages paid in money, board, lodging, and other personal expenses.”<sup>98</sup> However, Lucy M. Salmon’s findings indicate a general trend in which male domestics were paid more than female domestics.<sup>99</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. In fact, *The American Woman’s Home* implies that the financial cost of domestic servants outweighed their worth. Beecher and Stowe claimed that “In the present state of prices, the board of a domestic costs double her wages, and the waste she makes is more serious matter still.”<sup>100</sup> Moreover, they point out that service can be a “calling which gives a settled home, a comfortable room, rent-free,

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<sup>94</sup>Spofford, 83, 84.

<sup>95</sup>Spofford, 143.

<sup>96</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>97</sup>See Salmon, 104 and the accompanying tables comparing the wages earned in various occupations undertaken by women, 107.

<sup>98</sup>Salmon, 100.

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

<sup>100</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 318.

with fire and lights, good board and lodging, and steady, well-paid wages....”<sup>101</sup> The implication is that despite the so-called demeaning work and the stigma attached to service, in terms of financial benefit, working as a domestic service was better than many of the alternatives available for single women of a certain class. In the case of the Davis family servants, the work load was certainly not easy, but lighter than many of their counterparts, and wages were higher. Moreover, working for the prestigious Davis family would also give prestige to the servants who worked for the family.

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>102</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>103</sup> In a letter to her husband, Sarah detailed one such undertaking in November of 1874.<sup>104</sup> The carpets, as apparently there was no carpet sweeper, had

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<sup>101</sup>Ibid., 322.

<sup>102</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 1, 1872.

<sup>103</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.

<sup>104</sup>S. D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 14, 1874.

to be pulled up and beaten.<sup>105</sup> Beds had to be meticulously aired out and remade each morning.<sup>106</sup> The sink had to be regularly scalded, and washing dishes was a laborious process.<sup>107</sup> Preparing a meal or a formal tea, including the preparation and clean-up, was also time consuming.<sup>108</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. At the time it was constructed, the kitchen in the Davis Mansion was state of the art. There was an ice-box, also known as a “refrigerator,” which kept food cold and allowed more exotic foods to be prepared. The range was the best quality available at the time and had six burners, two ovens, and two warming ovens. This range was safer to use than earlier versions, although the possibility of a dangerous and debilitating burn still existed.<sup>109</sup> Lynch-Brennan points out that the stoves in American households were very different from what the typical Irish immigrant would have used in Ireland.<sup>110</sup> This often caused difficulties for the Irish cook and her employer, as the Irish cook found herself trying her “utmost

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<sup>105</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>106</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>107</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>108</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>109</sup>One of Sarah’s servants in the family’s old home suffered from a kitchen accident. Sarah wrote to her sister, “...I have at present a girl of 23 perhaps—who is just beginning to work—after a six months cessation from the effects of a burn.” Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, IL, December 11, 1864.

<sup>110</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 12.

to understand the strange ties and mysteries and the unknown implements connected with it, and pretty generally failing to do so....”<sup>111</sup> The Davis range also decreased the workload of the cook, as she did not have to haul the ashes. There was an ash sifter which sent the ashes to the laundry room in the basement, which would then be hauled by one of the men or used for making soap. The stove still had to be blackened each day to prevent rust, which would have taken around one hour. The soapstone sink in the kitchen had running hot and cold water. Near the door currently hangs a clock. As a piece of material culture, the clock is significant. In rural Ireland, clocks were “prominently displayed,” implying that there was an association of refinement with the keeping of time.<sup>112</sup> According to *The American Woman’s Home*, “A clock is a very important article in the kitchen, in order to secure regularity at meals.”<sup>113</sup> Katzman discusses how the clock was part of an effort to make domestic work more efficient and systematic; in effect to make the house function like a factory.<sup>114</sup> Order, and regulated work became important. The theme of order is evident in *The American Woman’s Home*, and is part of the solution to what the authors viewed as domestic problems. 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>115</sup>

These advancements in the kitchen theoretically would have saved Bridget, the cook, time and effort.<sup>116</sup> It should be noted, however, that Ruth Schwartz Cowan proposes that these new

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<sup>111</sup>Spofford, 37.

<sup>112</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 6.

<sup>113</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 373.

<sup>114</sup>Katzman, 136.

<sup>115</sup>See Lynch-Brennan, 107-109, for a detailed list of typical new technologies.

<sup>116</sup>See Katzman, 127-134 for a more detailed discussion of the benefits of technological advancements and its effects on domestic work.

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>117</sup> According to literature of the period, many kitchens were “dungeon-like,” and thus ill-suited for work.<sup>118</sup> Harriet Spofford criticized the fact that the windows in most country kitchens have “lively views of the barnyard.”<sup>119</sup> Carter pointed out that a housewife cannot expect to have a “cheerful” cook in a “cheerless, gloomy kitchen.”<sup>120</sup> The author of the 1873 “The Morals and Manners of the Kitchen” noted that the monotony of the work and “confinement in a half-dark kitchen” led to the moral degradation of the Irish cook.<sup>121</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 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

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<sup>117</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>118</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.

<sup>119</sup>Spofford, 38.

<sup>120</sup>Carter, 149.

<sup>121</sup>“The Morals and the Manners of the Kitchen,” *The Nation* 16.392 (January 2 1873):7.

week on Tuesdays.<sup>122</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>123</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. Sarah described to David one instance, in which “Bridget hung out some of the washed clothes yesterday in the yard—by her own desire. A moment since she came rushing in saying, she was sorry she asked me , as the rope had left a ‘track’ on each piece, and she never would ask again and would not have hung them out at all if I had not been quite willing—It amused us very much.”<sup>124</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>125</sup> Often Sarah had to hire outside help to do laundry and to iron.<sup>126</sup> It is possible that the maids may have had to do their own laundry separately from the family and guests’ laundry.<sup>127</sup> Besides the washing of clothing and linens, soap and lard making was another activity that was conducted in the laundry room. Making soap

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<sup>122</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>123</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 11.

<sup>124</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, March 3, 1874.

<sup>125</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>126</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>127</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.



was a long, laborious process that was completed once a year. Sarah hired outside workers, usually Ann, an African American woman, to help with the unpleasant task.<sup>128</sup> Catharine, another African-American woman, helped to make lard.<sup>129</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.

Work days were long at the mansion, and must have been filled with interruptions in the form of the insistent annunciator bell, the whistling of the speaking tubes, and deliveries at the back door. While employed at the Davis Mansion, Willie Fitzgerald acted as chauffer, all around handy-man, and went to town on errands.<sup>130</sup> According to Daniel E. Sutherland, before 1870 it was typical to have one man in the home who fulfilled a variety of functions including, butler, valet, footman, and coachman. In this way, men like a Willie Fitzgerald allowed a middle-class American family to have an “air of ease.”<sup>131</sup> The maids, including Mary Whalen, Katie Walsh, Julia, and Minnie, were responsible for answering the front door, making beds, folding the linen, serving tea to callers, serving dinner, cleaning, polishing and assisting the cook. Typically, the duties of a housemaid were varied and various. According to Elizabeth Haskell’s 1861 *The Housekeeper’s Encyclopedia*, maids were expected to

make up the beds, do all the other part of the chamber-work, sweep and dust the parlors; wipe the paint, etc...she sets the tables, waits at dinner, cleans the silver, and assists in the ironing.... The next thing in order is the sweeping and dusting of hall and stairs; and lastly, the porch or portico. After this, a pail of clean suds should be prepared, and every spot of soil on the paint be removed, wiping each place wet with the suds, with a soft dry cloth. If

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<sup>128</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>129</sup>“Catherine is coming to take charge of the lard—.” S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, January 7, 1874.

<sup>130</sup>See for example: “No one went to town yesterday but Willie—who took my Basket to the Express office to go to Farmer City for Butter.” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 1, 1871. “After dinner Willie took me in the buggy to town—.” S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, April 24, 1873.

<sup>131</sup>Daniel E. Sutherland, *Americans and Their Servants: Domestic Service in the United States from 1800 to 1920* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 90.

any spots are to be seen on the carpets, let them be rubbed out; and if the windows are dusty, or fly-specked, cleanse them...<sup>132</sup>

The cook, while often in a higher wage bracket than a maid, did not necessarily have the more desirable job. Mary Elizabeth Carter, indicating the level of tediousness associated with repetitive, difficult labor, remarked, “at best the cook leads a wearisome treadmill life.”<sup>133</sup> In the Davis Mansion, Bridget, the cook, worked to prepare meals, wash dirty dishes, and to launder clothing and linens. The prescribed daily routine of a cook is described in detail by Haskell:

In the morning, she should be the first person astir in the house, and unless she has a scullion or chore-boy to do it for her, clean her grate or stove thoroughly, make the fire, sweep and dust her kitchen, and wipe off the stove; while the fire is kindling, should go to her room, wash, arrange her hair, and dress neatly, and then proceed with her breakfast... While the family are at breakfast, she should wash all the dishes and kettles soiled in the preparations for breakfast. If fowls are to be dressed for dinner, they should be killed, or any other preparations for dinner may be commenced....<sup>134</sup>

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>135</sup> While none of the maids at the Davis Mansion appeared to be outright insolent, it is clear from other first-hand accounts that the act of serving was monotonous and tedious at best.<sup>136</sup> In order to serve dinner in the Davis Mansion, the maid, or maids, waited in the China Closet.

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<sup>132</sup>Haskell, 34.

<sup>133</sup>Carter, 150.

<sup>134</sup>Haskell, 32-33.

<sup>135</sup>Sadlier, 75.

<sup>136</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

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. In the original architectural plans, there was a door instead of a pass-thru between the kitchen and the China Closet. The final 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 existence of the China Closet also reflected the advice given in the prescriptive literature of the day. As Carter pointed out, "nobody in other parts of the house wants to be reminded of the culinary region by cooking smells."<sup>137</sup> 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. She had to patiently and silently wait, for "No matter how inattentive a guest may be the waitress never speaks when on duty."<sup>138</sup>

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>139</sup> There was a ritual in the serving of dinner. Preparation for the formal meal was meticulously executed, and time consuming.<sup>140</sup> Once the guests had arrived and were stationed in the parlor, the maid would announce that dinner was

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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>137</sup>Carter, 149.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid.,183.

<sup>139</sup>Ibid., 171.

<sup>140</sup>See Haskell, 26, for example.

ready from the doorway separating the parlor from the dining room. After serving the initial courses, the maid would stand to the left of the person seated at the head of the table (David Davis when he was home), and place a stack of plates near his left hand. The head of the table would carve and place meat on a plate and hand the plate to the waiting maid. The maid would then serve the person to the left of the head of the table. This was repeated until everyone was served. Then the maid would go back into the China Closet and close the door until she was summoned for the next course.<sup>141</sup> There is a window in the China Closet, but as it most likely would have been dark outside during evening meals, the small space would have been quite dark with only two glass globes high overhead, and the light from the kitchen and under the door of the dining room providing illumination. 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**

she who does the hardest work shall have the hardest sleep.  
—Spofford, 41.

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

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<sup>141</sup>Carter devoted an entire chapter to the “Training a Maid in Table-Setting” and to “Training a Maid for Waiting on Table” described in meticulous detail the proper table-setting and serving procedures. Carter, 165-171, 172-185. See especially Carter, 180 on serving the roast. Mrs. Williams’s account of the serving experience in the Davis Mansion corresponds with Carter’s instructions on serving. Williams also described hating to wait in the small, confining “cubby-hole” of the China Closet. Williams, interview.

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.

A servant’s room was cause for complaint in this period. Carter described the maids’ room as frequently being a “most uninviting, dreary place” and *The American Woman’s Home* stated that the servants’ “rooms are the neglected, ill-furnished, incommodious ones.”<sup>142</sup> Reports depicted this space as cramped, “dark and dismal,” located sometimes in the attic, sometimes behind stairs, and sometimes there was no designated room and the maid had to (in the tradition of Cinderella) sleep in the kitchen.<sup>143</sup> The research done on the servants of The Breakers indicates that the size of the room, window height, and the amount and type of furniture were significant indicators as to the status of the servant and the desirability of their living conditions.<sup>144</sup> Privacy, in fact, is a central component to the concept of a bedchamber. Mary Elizabeth Carter emphasized the importance of privacy, and its relation to individuality, found in the bedchamber.<sup>145</sup> Carter also stated that if two maids share a room, each should be given their

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<sup>142</sup>Carter 127, Beecher and Stowe, 323.

<sup>143</sup>Spofford, 37, 39. In fact, Spofford created an analogy between the Irish domestic servant and Cinderella, emphasizing “but there is no fairy godmother!” Spofford, 59.

<sup>144</sup>Collins, 9-19.

<sup>145</sup>Carter, 79.

own furniture and separate closet spaces.<sup>146</sup> She asserted that maids “ought to have some closet room and good locks and keys to their bureau drawers, their bedchambers, and to their closet doors. The servant’s room is ‘her castle’—it is the only place she may call her own.”<sup>147</sup>

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 chambers. These windows are roughly 2 feet wide and 8 feet tall, compared to the 3 feet by 8 feet windows in Sallie Davis’s room. The back chambers, unlike the other section of the house, are not heated by central heat. However, they would still have been quite warm in the winter due to their position above the kitchen and the stoves in the rooms which are connected to the main chimney. Unlike the rest of the house, these rooms had area rugs instead of wall to wall carpet. Before the family moved into their new home, Sarah wrote to David, “I have to alter some carpets for the back chambers—but shall not try to move till the weather is cooler—.”<sup>148</sup> While the carpets in these rooms would have been worn, they would have been of good quality as they came from the old I-House. In the current interpretation of these rooms, there is wallpaper covering the wall instead of the more expensive stenciled painting. The windows did not have the elaborate window treatments of the other rooms, most likely due to the fear that servant’s would be careless and start a fire. While this shows a bias on the part of the design of the house, the windows do have shutters which allows for privacy and control over the amount of light coming into the room. The view from the windows, however, is apparently a bad or typical view for a servant’s room, as it looks out at the barnyard.<sup>149</sup> In contrast, Sallie Davis’s room overlooks a garden. An important

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<sup>146</sup>Ibid., 113.

<sup>147</sup>Carter 121.

<sup>148</sup>S.D. to her brother, Clover Lawn, August 10, 1872.

<sup>149</sup>See Spofford, 38.

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. Cleanliness was important. There was an implied connection between “dirtiness” and immorality.<sup>150</sup> Cleanliness was, in effect, next to godliness.<sup>151</sup> *The American Woman’s Home* discussed the subject of cleanliness at great length.<sup>152</sup> The work also stated that “Domestics should be furnished with washing conveniences in their chambers, and be encouraged to keep their rooms and persons neat and in order.”<sup>153</sup> In her novel, Mary Anne Sadlier described Mary, a newly hired Irish maid, whose “looks were much in her favor, and there was a certain air of smartness about her and also of neatness that made her a very promising servant.”<sup>154</sup> Margaret Lynch-Brennan has found that there was often a difference in hygiene between Irish domestics and their American employers due to lack of indoor running water in Irish rural areas of this period.<sup>155</sup> Likewise, 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,

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<sup>150</sup>O’Leary, *At Beck and Call*, 125. O’Leary uses Phyllis Palmer’s conclusions about the link between dirtiness and sexuality, quoting Palmer’s assertion that “The ‘slut,’ initially a shorthand for ‘slattern’ or kitchen maid, captures all these personifications [sexuality, immorality, laziness, and ignorance].”

<sup>151</sup>Katzman discusses how morality was linked with personal hygiene. Katzman, 170.

<sup>152</sup>Beecher and Stowe, *The American Woman’s Home*, 150-157. The chapter asserts that “Both the health and comfort of a family depend, to a great extent, on the cleanliness of the person and the family surroundings.” Beecher, 150.

<sup>153</sup>*Ibid.*, 371.

<sup>154</sup>Sadlier, 64.

<sup>155</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 11. Carter also pointed out that Americans should be more understanding of the faulty hygiene of their domestics, as there was a time when Americans did not bathe as frequently. Domestics should be trained to have proper hygiene. Carter, 114.

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>156</sup>

Another interesting feature of these two spaces is the closet in each room. The closets are of surprisingly large dimensions, especially compared to the closets in the other rooms. The closet in the female servants' room is 3 feet deep and 7 feet long, while the closet in Willie's room is 3 feet 9 inches deep and 8 1/2 feet long. In contrast, the closet in Sallie's room (which has built-in drawers) is 4 feet deep and 5 feet 3 inches long, the closet in the Pink Chintz chamber is 3 feet 6 inches deep and 7 feet 10 inches long, and the closet in the Parlor Chamber is 3 1/2 feet deep and 8 feet long.<sup>157</sup> Closets were a relatively new concept in this period and the fact that these rooms were built with closets indicates how advanced the design of these rooms were. Moreover, a closet provided the servant with space to put their belongings and a modicum of privacy as well. However, the closets in the back chambers do not have key holes, while all the closets in the rest of the Davis Mansion do have key holes. The furniture in the room now is representative of an earlier period, suggesting that the servants would have received hand-me-down furniture. There is one bed in each room. The current interpretation of the female servants' room is that two female servants would have shared the bed. It is interesting to note, however, that *The American Woman's Home* strongly urged separate beds for domestic servants and where there was not

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<sup>156</sup>Collins, 17-18.

<sup>157</sup>Measurements are my own.



enough room for two single beds, to keep a “truckle-bed” under the bed.<sup>158</sup> The rooms are shown with bureaus and a trunk that have locks. While these are not the exact furniture pieces that the servants would have used, it is possible that they had similar pieces that locked. The doors leading into the room could be locked as well. This is unusual, as it was assumed that servants did not have the same right to (or need of) privacy as their employers. 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>159</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>160</sup> It is likely that they kept writing instruments in their rooms, and letters from their loved ones. Irish immigrants, particularly single Irish women, sent more substantial indications of their regard for their families in the form of remittances. According to Hasia Diner, the remittances of single Irish women in America were a “staggering contribution to the Irish economy.”<sup>161</sup> In *Bessy Conway*, Bessy saves her family in Ireland from destitution with

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<sup>158</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 370-371. Likewise, Carter stated that “Where it seems necessary for two maids to occupy one bedchamber, each should be provided with individual furniture, beds, bureaus, dressers, and, if possible, their closets should be separate.” Carter, 113.

<sup>159</sup>I wonder if “Bridget’s room” might actually be “Bridgets’ 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>160</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>161</sup>Diner, *Erin’s Daughters*, 52.

her wages earned in America.<sup>162</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. Lynch-Brennan describes the British effort to eradicate “Irishness” through national, compulsory schools in Ireland.<sup>163</sup> As a result, even inhabitants of rural Ireland learned to read and write English.<sup>164</sup>

Just as there were many works of literature aimed at the American housewife, there were many pamphlets and novels written during this period for the Irish servant living in America. *Bessy Conway* was one such work, and a highly successful novel as evidenced by its six American editions in the nineteenth century.<sup>165</sup> It is certainly possible that the Davis servants would have read this novel, or a similar work. As the servants were practicing Roman Catholics, and Sarah was (remarkably) tolerant of their alien faith, it is also likely that there would have been icons and rosaries displayed in their rooms. Lynch-Brennan asserts the religious iconography on display in an Irish servant’s room could have included a “Saint Brigid’s cross hung over the interior front door, a fount of holy water hung in the deep window well, and rosary beads either hung in the same place or hung from a shelf at the side of the door, or from the dresser.”<sup>166</sup> Furthermore, “Prints of the Sacred Heart of Jesus... and images or prints of the Blessed Virgin Mary, particularly as the Madonna and Child” could have been displayed on the walls.<sup>167</sup> She also describes, after Spofford, the practice of placing a shamrock plant in native Irish soil on the windowsill of their room. Spofford, in particular, noted the importance of this. An employer

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<sup>162</sup>Sadlier, 271-272.

<sup>163</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 43.

<sup>164</sup>It should be noted that David Katzman’s research into the level of education of domestic servants conflicts with Lynch-Brennan’s findings. Katzman argued that “Ireland had offered little educational opportunity to the women who had migrated to the United States, and many came without the ability to read or write.” Katzman, 231.

<sup>165</sup>According to Charles Fanning, this was “more than any other Sadlier novel with an American setting.” Charles Fanning, *The Irish Voice in America: 250 Years of Irish-American Fiction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 143.

<sup>166</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 6.

<sup>167</sup>*Ibid.*

should allow her Irish maid to “hang her Palm-Sunday branch and her picture of the blessed Virgin, to make a little home to herself.”<sup>168</sup> Lynch-Brennan also discusses the importance of photographs. She found in her case studies of Irish domestic servants that the servants regularly asked for pictures of family and friends and sent pictures of themselves to their family and friends.<sup>169</sup> The Davis family servants may have done likewise, and possibly displayed pictures in their rooms.

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>170</sup> Secondary literature also comments on the tension between the servants and their employers, who resented the servants’ attempts to mimic high fashion and did not know their proper place.<sup>171</sup> Irish female servants were also criticized for spending most of their money on fashionable clothes. Mary Anne Sadlier, in particular, is critical of the propensity for spending wages on ornate clothing, for, “What prospect is it for a man earning a few dollars a week to marry a dress-up doll of a girl without a cent in her pocket or anything better to begin housekeeping with than a couple of showy flare-up dresses, a bonnet to match, and a stylish sunshade?”<sup>172</sup> Domestic servants during this period did not have a uniform, per se. Maids were expected to keep their hair and dress neat and modest.<sup>173</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

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<sup>168</sup>Spofford, 39.

<sup>169</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 121-122.

<sup>170</sup>For example, “A Long-Felt Want Supplied—Puck’s Hand-Book of Etiquette for ‘Help,’” January 16, 1889.

<sup>171</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 76.

<sup>172</sup>Sadlier, 163.

<sup>173</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.

it is probable that the Davis family servants wore similar clothing.<sup>174</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>175</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>176</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>177</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>178</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>179</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

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<sup>174</sup>O’Leary, *At Beck and Call*, 168.

<sup>175</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>176</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 330.

<sup>177</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>178</sup>Carter, 112.

<sup>179</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 329, Spofford, 158.

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 has not been much attention given to the relationship between domestic servants living in the same household. Lynch-Brennan discusses the social circle of the Irish domestic servant, but not her working relationship with her fellow Irish maids.<sup>180</sup> This issue is implicitly addressed in *Bessy Conway*. Bridget and Sally are co-conspirators who support each other in their devious endeavors, while Bessy, the "good girl" is alienated from them.<sup>181</sup> Often times, the female domestic servant would be the only servant living in a middle-class home. Spofford pointed to the loneliness of the Irish maid, who was often young and working in a house where there were girls her own age.<sup>182</sup> At The Breakers, there were approximately thirty servants living and working together. While they were surrounded by co-workers, the servants were separated by the stratified domestic system. A maid, for example, was not on the same level as the housekeeper in terms of their work or living space, and they most likely would not have been friends. In contrast, the servants at the Davis Mansion were more on equal footing with each other. Bridget, the cook, appears to be older and more experienced than the other maids in the household, yet she was not as separated from them as the housekeeper of

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<sup>180</sup>See Lynch-Brennan, Chapter 6, "The Social World of Bridget," 121-150.

<sup>181</sup>Sadlier, 23. 78. Bessy's good work ethic offends her co-workers, who have "hunted" Bessy "out of the kitchen."

<sup>182</sup>Spofford, 47-48.

The Breakers was from the maids working beneath her.<sup>183</sup> There was mainly a sense of camaraderie among the Davis servants. In a letter to her husband, Sarah described how her servants worked together. She informed him that “Ann has been with me two days, and is to come today to clean the walls of the back hall. I have had Willie wash the ceiling to the kitchen—and the females washed the sides—It took them a whole day four of them—but they are much improved—as they were very black—.”<sup>184</sup> Sarah Davis also described the working relationship of her servants. “Ann and Willie agree nicely,” Sarah wrote to David Davis.<sup>185</sup> She mentioned, perhaps slyly, in another letter that Willie Fitzgerald “and Julia like to work together.”<sup>186</sup> While Sarah was dubious about Mary’s pleasantness, “Bridget seems to feel sympathy for Mary in spite of the waffles—Says she is getting old and feeble—So they may get on well.”<sup>187</sup> It was important that the servants work together in harmony in order for the household to run smoothly. When Sarah was contemplating the arrangement of her household while she was gone, she remarked, “I think it would not do to take a stranger in the house as I am to be away this winter—as there might be war among the inmates of the house—.”<sup>188</sup>

### **The Domestic System**

Men may have the superior mind of the universe,— we are not inclined to dispute it,— but they have surely directed that superior mind to other avenues than those opened by the habits of keeping a household well disciplined and well disposed, linen room and china closet in order, beds neat, carpets swept, moths repressed, store room stocked, cellar fresh, and a whole interior from top to bottom in fit and decent array.

—Spofford, 97.

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<sup>183</sup> Sarah refers to Bridget 1874 as an “old girl” compared to Katie. S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 21, 1874. Bridget was also left in charge of the household when Sarah left for short trips. (Chicago for example). S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 7, 1874.

<sup>184</sup>S. D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 14, 1874.

<sup>185</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 15, 1872.

<sup>186</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 7, 1874.

<sup>187</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 5, 1872. Sarah wrote, “Bridget does nicely—and Mary is about pleasant as usual. Poor Mary no doubt has her own trials.” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, October 30, 1872. However, Sarah also did remark that Mary “is very crabbed sometimes to Bridget.” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, December 5, 1872.

<sup>188</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, November 18, 1875.

A unique aspect about the living situation at the Davis Mansion was Willie Fitzgerald's presence inside the house. While not unusual in an aristocratic, upper class household such as The Breakers, it would have been more unusual in a middle-class household to have a male servant live inside the home. The Beecher sisters, as well as Harriet Spofford, present the household as a female space, concerned with domestic matters. The male (usually the master of the house) tends to disrupt the smooth running of the household or intervene when he is clearly out of his element. While the master of the house may criticize the running of the household, he is "Ignorant, indeed, of the sacred rites and mysteries" involved in the domestic sphere.<sup>189</sup> The crises that Spofford envisions were less likely to happen at Clover Lawn because Judge David Davis lived in Washington D.C. most of the year. As the primary occupants of the mansion were Sarah Davis, her daughter, her companions, and the female servants, the household was feminine. Not only is it unusual that Willie Fitzgerald lived inside the home, but he adds an interesting dynamic to a mainly feminine realm. He also was a reminder of the outside world which the inner, domestic household was supposed to protect against. One of the reasons that Willie most likely had a room inside the David Mansion was that there was no "man of the house" with David Davis living in Washington D.C. Sarah would have felt safer with Willie close at hand. Moreover, as chauffeur and in the position of running errands in town, Willie served as a connection between the domestic sphere and the "corrupt" masculine world of commerce. Willie also worked outside the house, and appears to have worked for friends of the Davis family, including Lyman Bett's land.<sup>190</sup> Factors such as the different ages of the servants, Willie Fitzgerald's male gender, and their various personalities and temperaments, all influenced the relationship between the servants who worked and lived together in the Davis Mansion. Despite

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<sup>189</sup>Spofford, 97.

<sup>190</sup>See, for example: "They had been out to the farm to see Willie who is ploughing." S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 31, 1874. "and Lyman is to let Willie till his this year." S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, February 21, 1872.

these differing factors, it appears that the servants worked and lived together in cooperation, and even formed a camaraderie that existed beyond the walls of the house.

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>191</sup> *The Great Hibernicon* was performed in St. George's Hall in Melbourne in August 1874, and advertised as a "beautiful dramatised panorama, depicting life and scenery in the Emerald Isle."<sup>192</sup> The Durley Hall (1872-1891) was financed by Judge Davis and designed by Alfred Piquenard. It was named after William Durley, one of the earliest residents of Bloomington and a friend of David Davis. Durley Hall was a venue for live theater that appealed to all classes in Bloomington, and in this instance, the servants.<sup>193</sup> The Irish panorama was one form of theater that was a popular phenomenon of the period. Harriet Spofford noted the importance of servants being allowed to attend a panorama, indicating that it was a form of entertainment that appealed to the masses<sup>194</sup> 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>195</sup> Besides attending the theater together, the Davis family servants went to see popular spectacles in Bloomington. Sarah wrote to David, "Mary and Ann and Willie are all out

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<sup>191</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn "At Home Tuesday 10 P.M.," November 10, 1874.

<sup>192</sup>"St. George's Hall" *The Argus (Melbourne, Vic: 1848-1954)*, Thursday 13 August 1874, <http://newspapers.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/8932795?searchTerm=Great+Hibernicon> (accessed December 8 2009). This is interesting because it illustrates the commonalities between the Irish immigrants in Australia and the Irish immigrants in America.

<sup>193</sup>"Durley Hall once center stage of city's theater scene." *The Pantagraph.com*, [http://www.pantagraph.com/news/local/article\\_2b30a33a-8462-11de-b02f-001cc4c002e0.html](http://www.pantagraph.com/news/local/article_2b30a33a-8462-11de-b02f-001cc4c002e0.html) (accessed 23 February 2010).

<sup>194</sup>Spofford, 41.

<sup>195</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, January 21, 1872.



tonight—The two last have gone to witness the performance of a professor Martini—who is giving a slight of hand exhibition.”<sup>196</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>197</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>198</sup> St. Patrick’s Day parades, along with other Irish-American festivals, became venues “where Irishness in a multicultural society would be celebrated through the public display of visual symbols of ethnic identity and the presentation of the performing arts, particularly music and dance.”<sup>199</sup> Likewise, Lynch-Brennan notes the importance of dancing in the social life of the Irish in rural Ireland and in America and concludes that many Irish domestic servants participated in Irish dances in their new homes.<sup>200</sup> In this way, 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

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<sup>196</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, December 14, 1871.

<sup>197</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 1, 1871.

<sup>198</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 20, 1872.

<sup>199</sup>Mick Moloney, “Irish-American Festivals,” in *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States*, eds. J.J. Lee and Marion R. Casey (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 427.

<sup>200</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 131-134.

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>201</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>202</sup> Thomas McGraw visited the house at least on two occasions and had dinner with Bridget at least once.<sup>203</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>204</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>205</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. She informed David that Thomas McGraw “went to Ireland last winter—found both parents alive, and some of his uncles—had a good visit, but prefers this country to the Green Isle—He says the grass was as green in the Winter there as it is here in the Summer.”<sup>206</sup> According to Daniel Katzman, many employers did not allow their servants to have

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<sup>201</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, December 13, 1871.

<sup>202</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>203</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 16, 1872, S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, November 30, 1873.

<sup>204</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>205</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 146.

<sup>206</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, November 30, 1873.

“followers.”<sup>207</sup> This is also an issue in *Bessy Conway*, as Sally the housemaid tries to pass off her mustachioed beau as her innocent brother. Her employer, Mrs. Hibbard, objects and tells Sally that “brothers with black moustaches were not at all desirable about the kitchen.”<sup>208</sup> Sarah seemed to be tolerant of her female servants having beaus because she expected them to marry and then leave her employ. When Sarah recorded Mr. Hoag’s visit to Mary Whalen, she had been considering letting Mary go.<sup>209</sup> Sarah wrote to her husband that Mary “really begins to appear old, and looks somewhat bent—I wish if the man is a kind one, that he would marry her.”<sup>210</sup> Marriage, then, would remove Mary from the back-breaking work of being a domestic servant. In 1873, due to the appearance of a new ring on Katie Walsh’s finger, Sarah also came to the conclusion that Katie was to be married.<sup>211</sup> Sarah’s summation about Mary Whalen and Katie Walsh’s situation corresponds with Hasia R. Diner’s assertion that Irish female servants “rarely sought work after marriage” and Lynch-Brennan’s belief that most Irish domestic servants expected to work for a limited period, and then marry and have a home of their own.<sup>212</sup> The expectation that working as a maid was a transitory step into marriage is also evident in *Bessy Conway*. The conclusion of *Bessy Conway* coincides with Bessy Conway’s marriage to Henry Herbert, the local landowner’s reformed, but still handsome, son.

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>213</sup> Katie Walsh received visits from her sister, Eliza. However, while the servants were allowed to have

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<sup>207</sup>Katzman, 115.

<sup>208</sup>Sadlier, 77.

<sup>209</sup>By December, she had officially decided. S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, December 5, 1872.

<sup>210</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 24, 1872.

<sup>211</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, November 30, 1873.

<sup>212</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 143, Diner, 52.

<sup>213</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, February 25, 1872.

visitors, it did not excuse them from their duties. During one visit, Katie's sister "took dinner with her and is now helping her to do her work—."<sup>214</sup> The Davis family servants also made calls to friends and family. Sarah observed that Irish servants "don't like to be so far from Church and where they are unable to go out evenings."<sup>215</sup> Sarah mentioned several times when her servants were "out:" "Willie dined out;" "Ann & Willie are out this evening—;" "Mary and Ann and Willie are all out tonight—;" "Mary was out to dinner;" "Mary Whalen went out to supper;" "Bridget and Katie were out also partying—;" "Bridget's brother is to be married on Sunday—and I have promised to let her go out on Friday and stay till Monday of next week—so as to assist him in preparing;" "and Bridget made a call at George's after dinner."<sup>216</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>217</sup> Bridget received time off to visit her ailing cousin in Bloomington and to attend her brother's wedding.<sup>218</sup> Sarah remarked that Bridget is "really a mother to all her family."<sup>219</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.

Not all of the servants who worked for the Davis family lived in the mansion at Clover Lawn. Mary Whalen, Bridget, Katie Walsh, Willie Fitzgerald, Ann and Julia came into contact

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<sup>214</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, October 19, 1873.

<sup>215</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 2, 1872.

<sup>216</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>217</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 91-92, 121.

<sup>218</sup>S. D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 9, 1873, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 21, 1874.

<sup>219</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 21, 1874.

with a variety of people who were hired to work part-time inside the house. They also would have come into contact with the hired men who worked on the grounds, but did occasionally go inside the house. Willie Fitzgerald, especially, would have interacted with these men as his job required him to work outside and inside. Thomas, Pat, Mike, Joe [Fitzgerald?], Ned Welsh, and John were some of the hired Irishmen who worked on the grounds and helped maintain the Clover Lawn estate.<sup>220</sup> Sarah also referred to James, “a young German who lives with us”, in early 1878.<sup>221</sup> In the mid-1870s Sarah hired Catharine, an African-American, to help with the butchering of the hogs and the making of lard.<sup>222</sup> Ann, another hired African-American, was hired to help make the soap, and would stay in the house during the period needed to complete the job. Ann also occasionally helped with the ironing. When there was a particularly large cleaning effort, Sarah hired Ann to help complete the task.<sup>223</sup> Mrs. Kelly and Mrs. Welsh were laundresses whom Sarah employed when she needed extra help with the laundry. Mrs. Kelly also worked for Sue, Sarah’s cousin.<sup>224</sup> Mrs. Fitman and Mrs. Thomas were women who assisted in extra household work and are mentioned throughout Sarah’s letters. Sarah also hired Mrs. Werty as a “housekeeper” for when she was away for long periods of time.<sup>225</sup> While Mrs. Kelly, Mrs. Welsh, Mrs. Thomas and possibly Mrs. Fitman were Irishwomen, Ann and Catharine were not—they

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<sup>220</sup> See for example, S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, IL, October 26, 1871, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 7, 1871, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 15, 1874, S.D. to D.D., November 18, 1874.

<sup>221</sup> S.D. to her brother, Washington, April 8, 1878.

<sup>222</sup> S. D. to D.D., Bloomington, January 7, 1874, S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, December 2, 1874.

<sup>223</sup> “Ann and Willie cleaned the windows on the lower floor.” S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, October 9, 1875; “I had plans to send for Ann to make some hard soap for me this week,” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 31, 1874, “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>224</sup> “I shall try to get along with Mrs Fitman and not send for Mrs Welsh [?] as I have been in the habit of doing,” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, December 10, 1871, “I get Mrs Fitman to wash and she takes both their clothes and mine,” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, October 29, 1871, “but Mrs Kelly the Irish woman who washes for [Sue] thinks she may get one for her,” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, February 18, 1872.

<sup>225</sup> “Yesterday went to see Mrs. Werty who will come here for the winter.” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn “At Home Tuesday 10 P.M.,” November 10, 1874.

were African American. Lynch-Brennan describes the tension between Irish immigrants and African Americans, due in main part to economic competition.<sup>226</sup> There did not seem to be any sort of resentment, or ill will, between the African American women and the Irish servants at the Davis Mansion. While it is most likely that the other female domestic servants who lived in the home, such Julia and Ann, were Irish, it is possible that they were German, or Swiss, or even Scottish.<sup>227</sup> Sarah Davis and her friends and family, including Sue Betts, Ella Davis, Fanny Pierpont (née Walker), and Mary Robinson, all employed mainly Irish servants.<sup>228</sup> However, Sue Betts did have a German servant, and in earlier years Sarah Davis employed a “Scotch” girl and, possibly, a Swiss maid.<sup>229</sup> The composition of servants at the Davis Mansion, then, was not completely heterogeneous. Yet, Sarah’s letters give the impression that there was no conflict and, in fact, the servants all worked together smoothly. As we do not know how the servants felt about working with people of different cultural and racial heritages than themselves, it is difficult to determine the accuracy of Sarah Davis’s outside and surface interpretation of the interaction between them.

### The Domestic Servant Problem

There is real comfort,—excuse me, my dear Mrs. Sterling,—but it is refreshing to a wearied soul to know that you have felt some of our tribulations. It seems to me, at times, that there is no other affliction worthy the name when compared with what we endure from the ‘Necessary Evil.’

—Harland, 372.

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<sup>226</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 118-120.

<sup>227</sup>However, this is highly unlikely as Ann attended the Catholic church with Willie Fitzgerald and Mary Whalen. S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 1, 1871. Julia also went to *The Hibernicon*, an Irish play, with Willie. S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn “At Home Tuesday 10 P.M.,” November 10, 1874.

<sup>228</sup>Sarah described Sue Bett’s dilemma in finding a “good Catholic girl.” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 2, 1872, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 16, 1872, S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 18, 1872. Sarah also wrote that Mary Robinson’s maid, Eliza, was Katy Walsh’s sister. S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, March 8, 1874.

<sup>229</sup>“Sue gave up her German girl & is now alone.” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, December 10, 1871. In 1852 Sarah considered hiring a “Swiss girl.” Sarah Davis to David Davis, Bloomington, IL, November 10, 1852. Sarah Davis also described her Scottish servant: “I have a good Scotch girl about 22 years of age.” Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, March 10, 1846.

What is more clear from Sarah Davis's letters is her relationship with her servants. The domestic situation in Clover Lawn created a unique dynamic as the family and their servants lived in such close proximity. 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>230</sup> *The American Woman's Home*, in fact, viewed the state of domestic servants as resulting in "embarrassments" for the mistress of the home.<sup>231</sup> During this period, self-designated reformers attempted to fix the domestic situation in America. In order to do this, servants had to be converted to the "manners and morals of America's upper and middle classes."<sup>232</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. In the 1871 *Common Sense in the Household*, Marion Harland included a dialogue among employers who complain about what they have to "endure from the 'Necessary Evil.'"<sup>233</sup> Sarah Davis's relationship with her servants is interesting because it was familial. She certainly did not, as some employers of the day did, "trample upon them as soulless machines."<sup>234</sup> Sarah Davis considered her servants as part of the family.<sup>235</sup> When they were sick, she nursed them back to health with Boneset and Hop tea and lozenges.<sup>236</sup> She gave her hired help turkeys and chickens for Thanksgiving and during the

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<sup>230</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 I." Katzman, 223.

<sup>231</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 222.

<sup>232</sup>Sutherland, 146.

<sup>233</sup>Harland, 372.

<sup>234</sup>Harland, 373.

<sup>235</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>236</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

Christmas season.<sup>237</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 home.”<sup>238</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—She will not stay here—but either work out, or visit her sister in Wisconsin if she can have company. I told her I would give her \$20 toward paying her fare there if she chooses to go—It will cost \$26 to go & come.”<sup>239</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>240</sup> In the close of the letters she wrote to her sister Fanny Williams who was living in New England, she asks Fanny to “Give a kind remembrance to Catharine and Bridget—,” who were servants of her parents.<sup>241</sup> There is also an interesting letter to her brother, in which Sarah revealed, “Just now I am alone but as we are house cleaning I do not get lonely.”<sup>242</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

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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>237</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[?].

<sup>238</sup> S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, January 1 1875[?].

<sup>239</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn “At Home Tuesday 10 P.M.,” November 10, 1874.

<sup>240</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>241</sup>Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, September 29, 1862. See also: “Give a kind remembrance to Catharine and tell me how Bridget gets on in her new home.” S.D. to her Sister (not Fanny), St. Augustine Florida, January 15, 1868. “A kind remembrance to Catharine Amy and Theodore not forgetting S.” S.D. to F.W., Bloomington, July 27<sup>th</sup> 1872.

<sup>242</sup>S.D. to her brother, Bloomington, October 30, 1877.



on Saturday.”<sup>243</sup> After another trip, Sarah informed David that “Willie was glad to see me—and Bridget also—.”<sup>244</sup> In April of 1879 Sarah wrote, “The girls were delighted to see me—” after a trip to Toledo.<sup>245</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>246</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. In 1864, Sarah described how the extra baking completed in order “that the girls might take the day—about used me up—.”<sup>247</sup> She allowed Mary Whalen to go to Chicago without forewarning in order to deal with what Mary perceived as a financial emergency.<sup>248</sup> Bridget was also gone on matters concerning her own family.<sup>249</sup> The day after Halloween in 1874, Sarah wrote, “Today I let the servants sleep till nearly 8—.”<sup>250</sup> 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>251</sup> Another interesting aspect of the dynamics between Sarah Davis and her servants is

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<sup>243</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 18, 1872.

<sup>244</sup> S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, IL, April 16, 1873.

<sup>245</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>246</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, October 26, 1874.

<sup>247</sup>Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, IL, December 26, 1864.

<sup>248</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 18, 1872.

<sup>249</sup>“Bridget left to assist her cousin, whose family was sick with scarlet fever.” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 9, 1873. “Bridget’s brother is to be married on Sunday—and I have promised to let her go out on Friday and stay till Monday of next week—” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 21, 1874. Sarah also allowed Bridget to attend a family party over another weekend. S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, January 1 1875 [?].

<sup>250</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, November 1, 1874.

<sup>251</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.”

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>252</sup> However, this is certainly more evident in earlier years. In December of 1871, Sarah described a large-scale cleaning undertaking:

Mrs Fitman came today and Ann and she cleaned the two front chambers and hall—Willie put down the carpet in the parlor chamber very neatly—and tomorrow he is to nail up the one in Fanny’s room—She begged me not to have it done till she came home but I know it will be pleasant to find it in order—The day has been warm and sunny and Mary washed my spreads—Ive blacked the chamber stove and helped shake the carpets—so you see I pressed all into service—”<sup>253</sup>

As the Davis family rose in prominence, Sarah Davis employed more servants, and, thus, had to complete less physical work.<sup>254</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>255</sup>

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

Good housekeeping lies at the root of all the real ease and satisfaction in existence.  
—Spofford, 99.

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. Harriet Spofford, Catharine Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Lydia Maria Child, stressed the importance of the

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<sup>252</sup>S.D. to F.W., Owl’s Nest, Bloomington, January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1877.

<sup>253</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, December 6, 1871, “Thursday Evening.”

<sup>254</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>255</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, January 11, 1874.

mistress of the house being a skilled housekeeper. Housekeeping was “one of the great arts of life....”<sup>256</sup> It was the responsibility of the American housewife, as the housekeeper, to ensure the household ran smoothly. In her 1844 work, Child advised the “economical” housewife to “Count towels, sheets, spoons, &c. occasionally; that those who use them do not become careless.”<sup>257</sup> If the housekeeper was having difficulties with her servants, it was largely her fault. Harland put it this way: “good mistresses are apt to make good servants...”<sup>258</sup> The skill of running a household was seen as a requirement for marriage. In 1862, Sarah Davis discussed this issue with her sister:

... Mr. Taft is soon to marry Miss Raymond. Lucy is finely educated and amiable and if she is a good housekeeper I feel that she will be the one for him.

Cousin Harriette was so good a manager that Mr. Taft would not know what to do with a poor one. I think she was quite remarkable in that respect. She made purchases kept accounts and was a helpmate indeed. How thankful you and I ought to be that without these qualities we are so dear to our husbands.<sup>259</sup>

Just as the literature of the day recommended the training of domestic servants, the literature also urged American housewives to train their daughters, who were future housewives.<sup>260</sup> In *The American Frugal Housewife*, Lydia Marie Child wrote, “One great cause of the vanity, extravagance and idleness that are so fast growing upon our young ladies, is the absence of *domestic education*.”<sup>261</sup> Sarah understood the importance of training a housekeeper. Referring to her daughter and niece, in 1872 Sarah informed David, “I hope to teach Sallie and

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<sup>256</sup>Spofford, 98.

<sup>257</sup>Lydia Maria Child, *The American Frugal Housewife* (1844; reprint Toronto Dover, 1999), 8.

<sup>258</sup>Harland, 379.

<sup>259</sup>Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, September 29, 1862.

<sup>260</sup>For example, see Spofford, 105. She wrote that American daughters must learn the “main essentials of housework which entitle them to consider themselves possessed of the knowledge concerning what is required in housekeeping....”

<sup>261</sup>Child, 92. She continued, “By domestic education, I do not mean the sending daughters into the kitchen some half dozen times, to weary the patience of the cook, and to boast of it the next day in the parlor. I mean two or three years spent with a mother, assisting her in her duties, instructing brothers and sisters and taking care of their own clothes. This is the way to make them happy, as well as good wives; for, being early accustomed to the duties of life, they will sit lightly as well as gracefully upon them.”

Fanny enough of housekeeping to direct their servants, if they have any.”<sup>262</sup> Sarah expressed her concerns to her sister about Sallie’s ability to run a household. “Her bringing up has been so unlike mine being an only daughter & having few demands made upon her time by household cares—” Sarah wrote, “that she is more intellectual than practical perhaps but I trust she will fulfill her mission and be ready to accommodate herself to circumstances.”<sup>263</sup> As housekeeper, Sarah determined the menu and consulted with Bridget, the cook, about meal preparation.<sup>264</sup> She would have taken inventory of the kitchen supplies and the food items stored in the pantries.<sup>265</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>266</sup>

An important aspect of housekeeping was how she positioned herself in relation to her servants. Her attitude towards the servants was often paternal (or rather maternal) in the sense that she often assumed the superior point of view.<sup>267</sup> When she discussed the servants’ performance, she wrote:

The girls have done well and Willie has with one or two exceptions—I gave him a pair of boots one morning to clean—and he did them not willing or well. I took them out to Mike and requested him to polish them over—which so mortified Willie that he felt constrained to make an elaborate apology—and has done his best to make amends ever since—.<sup>268</sup>

This is in keeping with Catherine Beecher’s assertion that the way in which to groom a “good” and “steady” servant is through the “manifestation of a friendly and benevolent interest in their

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<sup>262</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 16, 1872.

<sup>263</sup>S.D. to F.W., Washington, January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1875.

<sup>264</sup>See for example, “Bridget is just in to ask ‘what is for breakfast.’” S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, March 27, 1874.

<sup>265</sup>See for example: “and I sent down to replenish my larder—.” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 16, 1872.

<sup>266</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 24, 1874.

<sup>267</sup>Katzman also discusses the “maternal” role of the American housewife. Katzman, 153.

<sup>268</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, October 23, 1874.

comfort and improvement. This is exhibited in bearing patiently with their faults; in teaching them kindly how to improve....”<sup>269</sup> Likewise, Elizabeth Haskell instructed the American housekeeper to “Take interest in the moral welfare of your help....”<sup>270</sup> Sarah’s courteous attitude towards her servants is a reflection of her gentility, and her gentility is what separated her from the lower orders, including her servants.<sup>271</sup> 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>272</sup>

There is also a sense that it was necessary for the American housewife to condescend to her Irish domestic servants. Harriet Spofford guided the American housewife to try to understand her servant, and to make allowances for her different cultural and social background<sup>273</sup>. Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe noted that the “daughters of Erin” were foreigners living and working on foreign soil, and that housewives should imagine how it would be for their own daughters moving to a foreign land and working in service.<sup>274</sup> One of the characters in Marion Harland’s imagined dialogue speaking on the subject of servants remarked, “You will allow that, as a general thing, they are quite as industrious as their mistresses, and control their tempers almost as well.”<sup>275</sup> Elizabeth Carter counseled housekeepers to follow the motto, “Put yourself in

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<sup>269</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 329.

<sup>270</sup>Haskell, 3.

<sup>271</sup>Carter associated gentility with treating one’s servants with courtesy. She speaks of the “white hand” of a woman who lived in a “grand establishment” and who had a “lovely demeanor to all her servants.” Carter, 141-142.

<sup>272</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>273</sup>Spofford, 43-50.

<sup>274</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 327.

<sup>275</sup>Harland, 373.

her place.”<sup>276</sup> Sarah Davis seems to have followed the advice of the prescriptive literature. As stated before, she was flexible, but she did not let her servants take advantage of her.<sup>277</sup> This was a serious concern of the day, and one discussed in detail in the literature of the day.



Figure 1. “Our Self-Made ‘Cooks’—From Paupers to Potentates.”<sup>278</sup>

This cartoon found in *Puck* in 1881 illustrates an Irish servant, whose apparel has transformed from rags to riches, and who clearly holds the upper hand over her hapless employer (Figure 1).

*She* owns the kitchen, and the employer apparently has no right to interrupt her visit with her

<sup>276</sup>Carter, 125.

<sup>277</sup>There is one example from earlier years in which Sarah was aware that there was a fine line between charity and being taken advantage of. “Con’s wife (my main stay) has given up business—on account of ill health. She has had falling of the womb for some months and latterly has been unable to keep moving. She will be here I suppose during the severe cold of the winter—and when the weather is mild may stay with her brother—whose house is not very warm. It is a charity to keep her on this account as a severe cold affects her back—which is now quite lame.” Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, IL, December 11, 1864.

<sup>278</sup>Frederick Opper, “Our Self-Made ‘Cooks’—From Paupers to Potentates,” *Puck* (January 30, 1881), Michigan State University Museum Virtual Exhibitions, <http://museum.msu.edu/exhibitions/Virtual/ImmigrationandCaricature/7572-129.html> (accessed April 2 2010).

beau. Harland discussed this “curious reversal of the rights of employer and domestic” as well, in which the maid holds the authority over the mistress.<sup>279</sup> *The American Woman’s Home* instructed employers not to make “pets” out of their employees.<sup>280</sup> Harriet Spofford asked, “After all, then, is it really Bridget who rules our households?”<sup>281</sup>

The life of the mistress was in part dictated by the maid; if the domestic system did not run smoothly, it made their lives more difficult. Spofford, commenting on how society functioned, noted that “if the employed cannot be independent of the employer, neither can the employer be independent of the employed.”<sup>282</sup> The domestic situation of Mrs. Bishop, Sarah’s friend, illustrates how the mistress depended on her servant. Sarah wrote that Mrs. Bishop’s ability to attend a Theodore Thomas concert was “contingent on her kitchen maid’s not having this week” off.<sup>283</sup> Sarah Davis’s difficulties with her servants added stress to her life. While by the time the Davis family had moved into their new home Sarah does not appear to have had any major problems with her servants, in earlier years she did. Catharine, a servant employed in 1844, had to be punished for “deception.” This punishment consisted of Catharine being confined to her bed for “four hours” and Sarah and a friend spending “most of the day in baking and doing Catharine’s work.”<sup>284</sup> Sarah’s frustrations with Catharine, who was not “stable” or “respectful,” resulted in her decision to find another domestic servant.<sup>285</sup> However, her problems with servants did not end there. In 1852, Sarah complained to David:

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<sup>279</sup>Harland, 382.

<sup>280</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 326.

<sup>281</sup>Spofford, 34.

<sup>282</sup>Spofford, 7.

<sup>283</sup>S.D. to F.W., Bloomington, October 13, 1873.

<sup>284</sup>Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, IL, January 17, 1844.

<sup>285</sup>Sarah Davis to David Davis, Lenox, Massachusetts, October 25, 1847.

M [atilda] has gone down to her Sister's. I asked her when she would be at home. She replied she did not know whether she would be back to night or not. I am heartily sick of her and am making enquiries for a girl. Yesterday I told her I had work for her, and she went off with Delia and staid in the Avenue more than two hours. I cant and wont hear it. I feel like turning her off to day—if I had some one to rely on. This is not a new thing with me as you are aware—but my control is at end—and tis time to seek for a new help...Mrs. Birdsall is not able to do a thing in a sick room without giving out.<sup>286</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. This is one form of communication inside the mansion. When the call bell was activated, the wire would slide an arrow in the annunciator panel in the kitchen, indicating to the servant in which room they were required. Sarah, or another family member or guest, could use the call bell to summon a servant, but the servant could not immediately communicate back. The servant would have to come to the room they were summoned to, hear the request, leave to complete the request, and then return to the room. In the master bedchamber, there were two call bells: one leading to the kitchen, and the other leading to one of the back bedrooms, where a servant would have slept. This indicates that theoretically, the servants would have to be available day and night. In the dining room, there was a call bell that was activated by a foot, signaling the next course was to be served. What is significant about this bell is that the employer does not verbally communicate with the maid. Elizabeth Haskell, describing the proper method of serving dinner, asserted that “a bell should be used, instead of calling a servant by name, when she is needed to wait upon the table.”<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>286</sup>Sarah Davis to David Davis, Bloomington, IL, August 27 1852. Sarah was also pregnant at this time.

<sup>287</sup>Haskell, *Civil War Cooking: The Housekeeper's Encyclopedia*, 5.



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. The person at the receiving end of the tube could answer and converse in a normal tone of voice. 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.

As the servants were necessarily in all the areas of the Davis Mansion, every door and certain pieces of furniture had locks. In the house on Clover Lawn, the locks on the sideboards and closets represent a distrust of the servants. Moreover, these locks maintained a semblance of privacy for the Davis family, and reflect the fact that the servants, especially when they were first hired, were virtual strangers. The locks also indicate Sarah's skill as a housekeeper. Harriet Spofford pointed out that if there were no locks on the China, it presented an unfair temptation to the servant.<sup>288</sup>

Another distancing element evident in Sarah's letters is her attitude toward the position of servant. The literature of the period explains how working in service was very undesirable, and that American women would rather work for less pay in other jobs than to work in service for a family. The author of "The Morals and Manners of the Kitchen" thought it was a "contemptible" to see the "American sewing-girl killing herself in a garret at \$3 a week, out of devotion to 'the principle of equality.'"<sup>289</sup> There was a stigma attached to the word "servant" as well. According to the 1828 edition of Noah Webster's dictionary, the definition of "help" included "a hired man

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<sup>288</sup>Spofford, 72, 78.

<sup>289</sup>"The Morals and Manners of the Kitchen," 7.

or woman; a servant.”<sup>290</sup> Harriet Spofford argued that it as “false pride” to refuse to be called a servant; indicating that there were many who objected to the term.<sup>291</sup> In her work, *Common Sense in the Household*, Marion Harland recounted one maid’s reaction on being complimented for being a “faithful servant” by her employer. The outraged maid indignantly replied, “I’ll never believe a person has a good heart, or deserves to be called a Christian, who names an honest, respectable girl who tries to do her duty, a *servant!* ‘A faithful servant!’ says she; ‘as if she was a queen and myself a beggar!’”<sup>292</sup> Moreover, “Bridget,” and the derivative “Biddy,” were often used to delineate all Irish female domestics.<sup>293</sup> In one letter, Sarah Davis wrote, “What with being ‘Bridget’ part of the day—....”<sup>294</sup> Her use of quotations around the name Bridget seems to indicate that she is speaking of an Irish servant in general. She has, as many others of the period did, combined an entire demographic into one, recognizable, “other” group that was clearly separate from the American middle-class. The stigma of service, and more specifically, the stigma of being an Irish domestic servant, was a further distancing element between Sarah Davis and her servants.

### Attitudes Regarding Irish Catholic Domestics

It is that we do not think highly enough of them as a class; that we are apt to regard their work as degrading and themselves as automata; that too frequently we feel about them as if they were a different race from ourselves as though they were chimpanzees.

—Spofford, 13.

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<sup>290</sup>Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of English Language* 2 vols (New York: S. Converse, 1828), <http://1828.mshaffer.com/d/search/word,help> (accessed March 23 2010).

<sup>291</sup>Spofford, 11.

<sup>292</sup>Marion Harland, *Common Sense in the Household: A Manual of Practical Housewifery*, (New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1871), 372.

<sup>293</sup>Spofford, for example, generally used “Bridget” to refer to all Irish domestic servants, the author of “The Morals and the Manners of the Kitchen” uses “Bridget” to represent all Irish cooks, and Lynch-Brennan focuses on the ubiquity of the term “Bridget” in her work.

<sup>294</sup>S.D. to F.W., Owl’s Nest, Bloomington, January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1877.

## CONTRASTED FACES.

“Look on this picture, and then on that.”—SHAKESPEARE.



Fig. 747. - FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE.



Fig. 748.—BRIDGET MCBRUISER.

Figure 2. “Contrast of Irish face (Bridget McBruiser) with Anglo face (Florence Nightingale)” 1866 <sup>295</sup>

The cultural and social differences between the Irish servant and an American housewife were often perceived in terms of racial differences as well. In this period, the Irish were viewed as being inferior to the Anglo race.<sup>296</sup> Spofford, in the above passage, alludes to the idea that some American housewives viewed their Irish servants as being a “different race” than themselves. The image in Figure 2, which de-humanizes the Irish “Bridget,” helps to illustrate the more extreme American (and English) response to the Irish immigrant servant.

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:

“My good girls are about to enter a Convent. One left me to prepare last week and Bridget goes next week. I have no one engaged as yet. It is a great disappointment to lose Biddy. She had promised to remain for the Summer and I had depended on the promise. To go into a Convent seems the height of an Irish girls ambition.”<sup>297</sup>

<sup>295</sup>Unknown artist, “Contrast of Irish face (Bridget McBruiser) with Anglo face (Florence Nightingale,” 1866, History Cooperative, [http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/90.1/images/kenny\\_fig04b.gif](http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/90.1/images/kenny_fig04b.gif) (accessed April 2 2010).

<sup>296</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 163.

<sup>297</sup>Sarah Davis to Daniel Rogers Williams, Bloomington, IL, June 18, 1859.

Sarah was also bemused by Katie Walsh's actions on Halloween. She informed David:

“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>298</sup>

The Halloween rituals that Katie Walsh performed are found in *The Book of Days*, a popular book of the period which described “old fireside ideas in general.”<sup>299</sup> In 1874, Sarah described the “young people's” celebration of Halloween. She wrote, “It being Halloween the young people roasted chestnuts on a shovel having named them—and finally walked hand in hand to the lower garden to pull stalks of corn in order to carry out some ancient customs which are described in the ‘Book of Days’.”<sup>300</sup> While it is likely that the “young people” Sarah referred to were gathered at a party Sarah described in the letter, it is also possible that the Davis family's Irish servants would have completed many of these same rituals, especially as Katie Walsh followed those in *The Book of Days*.

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<sup>298</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 2, 1873.

<sup>299</sup> Robert Chambers, ed. Preface to *The Book of Days: The Book of Days: A Miscellany of Popular Antiquities in Connection with the Calendar, Including Anecdote, Biography, & History, Curiosities of Literature and Oddities of Human Life and Character* (London: William and Robert Chambers, 1869), <http://www.thebookofdays.com> (accessed February 23, 2010). According to *The Book of Days*: “As to apples, there is an old custom, perhaps still observed in some localities on this merry night, of hanging up a stick horizontally by a string from the ceiling, and putting a candle on the one end, and an apple on the other. The stick being made to twirl rapidly, the merry makers in succession leap up and snatch at the apple with their teeth (no use of the hands being allowed), but it very frequently happens that the candle comes round before they are aware, and scorches them in the face, or anoints them with grease. The disappointments and misadventures occasion, of course, abundance of laughter. But the grand sport with apples on Halloween, is to set them afloat in a tub of water, into which the juveniles, by turns, duck their heads with the view of catching an apple.” Ibid., 519-510.

<sup>300</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, November 1, 1874. From *The Book of Days*: “It is a custom in Ireland, when the young women would know if their lovers are faithful, to put three nuts upon the bars of the grate, naming the nuts after the lovers. If a nut cracks or jumps, the lover will prove unfaithful; if it begins to blaze or burn, he has a regard for the person making the trial. If the nuts named after the girl and her lover burn together, they will be married’ . . . . Other rites for the invocation of spirits might be referred to, such as the sowing of hemp seed, and the winnowing of three wechts of nothing, i. e., repeating three times the action of exposing corn to the wind. In all of these the effect sought to be produced is the same the appearance of the future husband or wife of the experimenter.” Ibid., 519, 521.

The Irish servants in the Davis family employ attended Roman Catholic mass, most likely at Holy Trinity Church.<sup>301</sup> The Davis family, however, was Protestant.<sup>302</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>303</sup> Harriet Spofford reinforces this point when she asserted that Catholics and Protestants are “naturally so antagonistic, and the interests so utterly apart, union is hardly possible, there is always something foreign in the household, and there is disintegration at the very foundation of home...”<sup>304</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>305</sup> As *The American Woman’s Home* points out, the Irish working in service in America had “no home but their church, and no shield but their religion...”<sup>306</sup> It was evident that their “religion exerts an influence over them that is not to be

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<sup>301</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>302</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>303</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>304</sup>Spofford, 160. For an in-depth analysis of the Irish and the Roman Catholic Church in America, see Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The Irish,” in *Making the Irish American*, 483-489.

<sup>305</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 2, 1872.

<sup>306</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 322.

trifled with.”<sup>307</sup> Spofford claimed that while the Irish servants were “strangers in a strange land, the church is father and mother, home and country too!”<sup>308</sup> *Bessy Conway* urges Irish servant girls to faithfully attend mass and maintain their religious beliefs, even if it is inconvenient and is contrary to their employer’s wishes.<sup>309</sup> Ultimately, Bessy, the ideal Irish Catholic, is rewarded for her piety by the end of the novel.

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>310</sup> In 1864, Sarah wrote to her sister that “The Bishop of the Catholic Church was in town and I saw very little of part of my family—as they went to Church in the morning and did not appear till after five in the afternoon. Then started without washing the supper dishes.”<sup>311</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.

Sarah Davis’s more tolerant attitude may have come from the assertion in *The American Woman’s Home* that the while “office of the American mistress” is a “missionary one,” the American housewife should not interfere with the religious inclinations of her servants.<sup>312</sup> Sarah

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<sup>307</sup>Ibid.

<sup>308</sup>Spofford, 60.

<sup>309</sup>Sadlier, 79-81, 152, 206. Mrs. Hibbard, Bessy’s new employer, insists that those in her employee join the family in their Protestant prayers, and dismisses Bessy when she refuses. Ibid., 207.

<sup>310</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, March 25, 1874.

<sup>311</sup>Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, October 22, 1864. There does seem to be a difference between the earlier years and later years in terms of Sarah’s attitude towards her servants’ practice of Catholicism. It may be that she has mellowed in later years. She implies this sentiment in a letter commenting on her daughter-in-law’s decision to let her cook go: “Ella has given up her cook for some reason—but it seems quite content—and says she will not be in a hurry till she can find a girl to suit her—old people are more ready to overlook than young ones.” S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn “At Home Tuesday 10 P.M.,” November 10, 1874.

<sup>312</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 332.

Davis may have been tolerant of her servants' practice of Catholicism, but she nonetheless did have strong opinions about the Irish and the "Papists." In an explanation of her views on African-American suffrage, Sarah wrote, "and as to that it is really worse for the Irish to vote—as they are so much under the control of one power. The blacks will not vote as a unit—and cannot do the same amount of harm."<sup>313</sup> After noting the St. Patrick's Day ceremonies that her servants had participated in, Sarah remarked, "I read in a book called 'Almost a Priest' and got so excited that I did not go to sleep at an early hour."<sup>314</sup> *Almost a Priest: A Tale that Deals in Facts*, was written by Julia McNair Wright in 1870. The novel urged Americans to "bestir ourselves against this giant evil of Romanism," which was a potent threat "sapping all the foundations of a pure and strong political, family and individual life."<sup>315</sup> The juxtaposition between the rather neutral description of the "usual ceremonies of St. Patrick's day" and the fact that she could not put down an anti-Catholic tirade reveals that she, like many other contemporary American Protestants, had reservations about Irish Catholics and "popery."<sup>316</sup>

Sarah Davis's political opinions appear to be separate from how she viewed the Irish Catholics living in her home. The Davis family members, along with their friends, were Republicans who believed in the principle of the self-made man and the importance of the individual.<sup>317</sup> It is possible that Mary Whalen was an active supporter of the Democratic Party,

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<sup>313</sup>S.D. to D.D., St. Augustine, Florida, January 23, 1868. See Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Irish," in *Making the Irish American*, 478-383, for a detailed discussion of the Irish connection with the Democratic Party.

<sup>314</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 20, 1872.

<sup>315</sup>Julia McNair Wright, *Almost a Priest: A Tale that Deals in Facts* (Philadelphia: McKinney and Martin, 1870), 5, [http://books.google.com/books?id=3\\_0gAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=almost+a+priest&cd=1#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=3_0gAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=almost+a+priest&cd=1#v=onepage&q&f=false) (accessed March 20 2010).

<sup>316</sup>It is possible that other people in Sarah's social circle would have read *Almost a Priest* or other novels by Wright. According to the publishers of *Almost a Priest*: "The great favor with which Priest and Nun has been received by the public (fifteen thousand copies already having been sold) leads us to believe that this book will receive a hearty welcome throughout the land." Wright, 6.

<sup>317</sup>See "Talking Points: David Davis Mansion Interpretation" (January 15, 2009), in *David Davis Mansion Volunteer Manual*, 12.

which would have created an interesting situation.<sup>318</sup> Judge David Davis was a Republican in this period, and like his wife, was wary of the “Irish vote.” The Irish in New York City, besides voting Democrat, “thoroughly controlled” the Democratic Party by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>319</sup> Daniel Moynihan argues that “Apart from building their church, this was the one singular achievement of the nineteenth-century Irish.”<sup>320</sup>

Besides representing political differences, Mary Whalen also 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>321</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>322</sup> This 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. According to Carter, the necessary requirements for a servant were, “honesty, sobriety, cleanliness, and amiability.”<sup>323</sup> *The American Woman’s Home* describes the “distasteful” mannerisms and “self-opinionated” character of many immigrant domestic servants.<sup>324</sup> Moreover, the stereotype of the Irish immigrant, and the Irish domestic servant, of the period was that they were lazy, ignorant, had an attitude, and “put on

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<sup>318</sup>Dr. Marcia Young was told this by a former Site Manager of the David Davis Mansion.

<sup>319</sup>Moynihan, 478.

<sup>320</sup>Moynihan, 478.

<sup>321</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, December 5, 1872.

<sup>322</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 35-39, 71.

<sup>323</sup>Carter, 138.

<sup>324</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 316. They most likely had Irish domestic servants in mind when this was written, although she does not explicitly refer to “Irish” immigrants in this passage.



airs.” This is especially evident in a cartoon illustrated by Frederick Opper, “The Irish Declaration of Independence.”



Figure 3. “The Irish Declaration of Independence” 1883.<sup>325</sup>

“The Irish Declaration of Independence” depicts a grotesque Irish cook, asserting her “independence” and apparently refusing to work, although her employer begs. There is a stark contrast between the delicate, refined appearance of the housewife and the brutish, almost slovenly appearance of the cook. Images such as this one were prevalent in the period. There was a popular vaudeville show performed by the Russell Brothers which was a “broad comic routine in which they spoofed two Irish servant girls.”<sup>326</sup> While these characterizations are exaggerated accounts, they reflect the perceived character flaws of many Irish servants.

There is really no indication that Sarah Davis saw these flaws in any of her servants after the family moved into their new home. In earlier periods, she certainly criticized the work done by her servants and sometimes seemed to resent what she saw as being overly generous with her

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<sup>325</sup>Frederick Opper, “The Irish Declaration of Independence,” *Puck* (May 9, 1883), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, <http://www.hsp.org/files/irishdeclaration.jpg> (accessed April 4 2010).

<sup>326</sup> Robert W. Snyder, “The Irish and Vaudeville,” in *Making the Irish American*, 408.

servants to the point of her inconvenience.<sup>327</sup> While a servant was necessary in creating a refined home, a servant's incompetence could also destroy the materials which represented the family's gentility. In 1848 Sarah wrote, "I dont care about Ann's going into my parlor to clean—you know she is a slacker and may soil the paper."<sup>328</sup> One later incident seems to hint at the supposed Irish propensity for putting-on airs. In 1872, Sarah wrote to Davis:

Mary was desirous to have Willie take her and Ann in the buggy. I told her we wanted it but Willie could take the old carriage and brown horses—she said the carriage was broken. On enquiring of Willie—I found the curtains were torn and they were too proud to ride in it. I did not offer the best one so Willie got a livery buggy.<sup>329</sup>

Interestingly, Sarah's tone is one of amusement rather than annoyance at her servants' expression of pride. The cultural and social gap between the Davis family and their servants is evident in Sarah's letters, but does not appear to have been the difficult problem it was for many other households in America.

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. Lynch-Brennan notes that the Irish immigrants placed a high value on education and urged their children to attend school and succeed.<sup>330</sup> Due in part to the emphasis on education, many daughters of Irish immigrants did not have to work in domestic

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<sup>327</sup>"Rachel & I spent most of the day in baking and doing Catharine's work for she had to be in bed four hours as a punishment. I fear she took some lessons in deception the past—summer." Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, IL, January 17, 1844. "Mary the girl I left is still with me. I like her pretty well tho she irons poorly." Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, IL, September 14, 1859. "Con's wife (my main stay) has given up business—on account of ill health... It is a charity to keep her on this account as a severe cold affects her back—which is now quite lame." Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, IL, December 11, 1864.

<sup>328</sup>Sarah Davis to David Davis [?], Guilford, Connecticut, August 15, 1848.

<sup>329</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, January 26, 1872.

<sup>330</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 155.

service.<sup>331</sup> In this way, children of Irish parents were able to assimilate into American culture and society. As Irish immigrants, or children of immigrants, it is likely that the Davis servants valued literacy. When Sarah described the activities of the family to her husband, she included the fact that “Mary is reading in the kitchen.”<sup>332</sup> Sarah also referenced the instance when Mary Whalen received a notable letter.<sup>333</sup> In comparison, the middle-class Davis family certainly valued education and the improvement of minds, as reflected especially in the built-in bookcase in the downstairs Sitting Room/Library. Sarah Davis enjoyed reading, and often discussed the books she read with her husband and she requested him to send more books from Washington D.C.<sup>334</sup>

Moreover, Irish immigrants placed a high value on the family.<sup>335</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>336</sup> Photographs were a way in which Irish domestic servants, living in their employer’s home, could feel close to their loved ones.<sup>337</sup> It is likely that the Davis family servants had photographs of family and friends.<sup>338</sup> Like their servants, the middle-class Davis’s valued the family. The Sitting Room, with its wood-burning fireplace, relaxed furniture, and objects that carry personal and specific significance to the Davis family,

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<sup>331</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 156. Katzman, 70. Katzman asserts that “Whatever effects the cultural matrix had on the Irish-born woman’s propensity for domestic service, the next generation—the first to be born in the United States—had adapted sufficiently to avoid household labor.”

<sup>332</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, February 18, 1872. This is interesting, since according to census information Mary Whalen is supposed to have been illiterate. Perhaps this indicates a prejudice against immigrants.

<sup>333</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, April 18, 1872.

<sup>334</sup>*David Davis Volunteer Manual*, 19.

<sup>335</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 91-92, 121-127.

<sup>336</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>337</sup>Lynch-Brennan discusses the importance of photographs for Irish domestic servants as well. Lynch-Brennan, 122.

<sup>338</sup>There does exist one such photograph, purportedly of an Irish maid who worked for the Davis family named Kate Foley and her sister taken during the 1870s.

reflected this value of the family. Sarah Davis also treasured photographs of those she loved and who lived far from Bloomington. In 1877, Sarah thanked her sister, Fanny for sending her a picture:

My dear sister,... I cannot tell you how much I thank you for your picture which arrived Monday of this week and is so like you that I stop every time I pass it, to gaze on the dear resemblance of one I love so well. You could not have given me anything I should prize so much.<sup>339</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>340</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.”

While the Irish domestic servants were certainly influenced by the culture of their American employers, the Irish left their mark culturally on America as well. Harriett Spofford characterized this cultural influence as the Irish “conquest of America.”<sup>341</sup> America, it seemed, had been invaded by Irish female “pioneers” through its “closets and drawers, among our dusters, mops, and dishes.....”<sup>342</sup> Sarah Davis’s Irish servants made her aware of and brought her into contact with certain Irish cultural traditions. Katie Walsh introduced her to the Irish tradition of snap-apple, as well as exposing her to the rituals involved in the celebration of Halloween.<sup>343</sup> The servants’ attendance at parades and balls also allowed Sarah to have, so to speak, an insider’s

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<sup>339</sup>S.D. to F.W., Bloomington, August 12, 1877.

<sup>340</sup>Lawrence J. McCaffrey, “Diaspora Comparisons and Irish-American Uniqueness,” 22.

<sup>341</sup>See the chapter entitled, “The Conquest of America” in Spofford, 24-35.

<sup>342</sup>Spofford, 29, 25.

<sup>343</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 2, 1873.

perspective on St. Patrick's Day.<sup>344</sup> In fact, St. Patrick's Day was, and is, "in a category unto itself when it comes to the public presentation of ethnic symbols in the Irish diaspora."<sup>345</sup> The Irish immigrant involvement in the Roman Catholic Church made an impact on the community of Bloomington in the nineteenth century. Even if she did not consciously acknowledge this, Sarah Davis's Irish Catholic servants presented a contrast to the exaggerated caricatures of Irish Catholics that Sarah would have been familiar with, including the portrayal of "evil" Roman Catholics in *Almost a Priest*. This is a clear difference from Sarah Davis's matter-of-fact description of Roman Catholic religious observances, including a letter written in 1871 in which Sarah informed her husband that "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."<sup>346</sup>

Sarah also mentioned the various Catholic organizations that were making an impact on Bloomington. "The Temperance Movement has reached us—," Sarah wrote in 1874.<sup>347</sup> While predominantly an American Protestant movement, there were Irish Catholic temperance groups that were organized in Ireland and eventually became visible in the U.S., including Bloomington. *The History of McLean County* discussed the importance of the various temperance societies in Bloomington. The specific movement Sarah referred to was a woman's temperance movement organized on March 16, 1874.<sup>348</sup> However, Le Baron emphasized that among the temperance movement in Bloomington were the "powerful" Irish temperance organizations, including the Father Matthew Total Abstinence and Benevolent Society and the St. Patrick Total Abstinence

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<sup>344</sup>See letters discussing St. Patrick Day's festivities: S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 20, 1872 and S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, March 15, 1874.

<sup>345</sup>Moloney, "Irish-American Festivals," 428.

<sup>346</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 1, 1871.

<sup>347</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, March 15, 1874.

<sup>348</sup>Le Baron, *The History of McLean County*, 380.

and Benevolent Society.<sup>349</sup> In the same letter in which she remarked on the temperance movement, Sarah also noted that “—Tuesday is St. Patrick’s Day—& the Societies of the Catholics will no doubt be out if the day is fine.”<sup>350</sup> Throughout the 1870s, the Holy Trinity Church was under construction and Ann, Willie Fitzgerald, and Mary Whalen, if not other Davis servants, were members of the church. The parishioners of the Holy Trinity Church were involved in a fund-raising effort carried out through the “Societies of the Catholics” that Sarah Davis mentioned. Lynch-Brennan discussed the Catholic parishes’ fund-raising efforts, which included fairs that were especially popular in the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>351</sup> The Holy Trinity Church Fairs were organized by female parishioners and held annually in the church basement beginning in 1871, and it is probable that the Davis family servants attended these popular events.<sup>352</sup> According to J.J. Burke, the pastor of St. Patrick’s Church in Bloomington from 1892-1901, the construction of Holy Trinity Church was evidence of the religious devotion and sacrifice of the Irish Catholics in Bloomington.<sup>353</sup> Emphasizing the significance of the Irish Roman Catholic Church in America, Daniel Moynihan argues that the Irish establishment of the Catholic Church is “incomparably the most important thing they have done in America.”<sup>354</sup>

Another important aspect of the Irish immigrant experience was the growing sense of Irish nationalism, which was a movement (ironically) rooted in the Irish immigrants’ experience in America. The Great Famine, and the consequent displacement of over one million Irish to countries including the United States, greatly influenced Irish immigrant attitude towards

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<sup>349</sup>Le Baron, 380-381. Lynch-Brennan also mentions the importance of the Irish temperance societies in America. Lynch-Brennan, 16-17.

<sup>350</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, March 15, 1874.

<sup>351</sup>Lynch-Brennan, 140.

<sup>352</sup>Mark T. Dunn, “Irish-American Organizations in Bloomington in the 1880s,” in *Irish Immigrants in McLean County Illinois*, 48.

<sup>353</sup>J.J. Burke, “Irish in McLean County,” in *Irish Immigrants in McLean County Illinois*, 24.

<sup>354</sup>Moynihan, 483.

nationalism.<sup>355</sup> A highly indicative example of Irish immigrant nationalism can be seen in *Bessy Conway, or, the Irish Servant Girl in America*. The author of the novel, Mary Anne Sadlier, was married to James Sadlier, the manager of a Catholic publishing house, D. and J. Sadlier. Mary Anne Sadlier “established herself as the most insistent and prolific Irish Catholic voice” in American literature.<sup>356</sup> The Sadliers were staunch nationalists who used print to promote the nationalist cause. In *Bessy Conway*, Bessy triumphantly returns to Ireland and marries the reformed local landowner’s son, who has conveniently and appropriately converted to Catholicism. Since the Great Famine, the English Herbert family has lost power and “were only beginning to reap the crop of curses and maledictions which they had been sowing ever since they became Irish landlords,” while Bessy’s father, a simple cottager, has gained power.<sup>357</sup> The marriage between Bessy and Henry Herbert in pastoral Tipperary, and their decision to remain in the country, is highly symbolic and reflective of a nationalistic, idealized Ireland. Irish nationalism also caused the Americans to view Irish immigrants through a certain, almost romanticized, lens. Harriet Spofford referred to the Irish as a “gallant race” and viewed the Irish past as a “wild romantic history”<sup>358</sup> This mentality is evident in Sarah Davis’s letters as well. In a letter to her sister, she described her meeting of a hospitable Irish couple who made a favorable impression on her. Sarah wrote:

Mrs. Campbell called before dinner also David Walker—although the day was stormy. Mr. Campbell was once a merchant. He and his wife are natives of Ireland—highly cultivated and refined people with true Irish hearts.<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>355</sup>Charles Fanning, ed. *The Exiles of Erin: Nineteenth-Century Irish-American Fiction* (Chester Springs, Pa: Dufour Editions, 1997), 6.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>357</sup>Sadlier, 291, 315.

<sup>358</sup>Spofford, 27, 60.

<sup>359</sup>Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Planter’s House St. Louis, January 3, 1862.

Sarah's reference to "true Irish hearts" implies that she is holding the Campbells up to some previously idealized standard. Another way in which Sarah Davis and her family were exposed to Irish nationalism was through *The Book of Days*, a popular book which contained information about traditional Irish customs.<sup>360</sup> The work presented an idea of an older way of life that valued the Ireland and Scotland in the romantic poems of Robbie Burns and Sir Walter Scott.<sup>361</sup>

The Irish immigrants in America also left their impact on theater on a nation-wide level. Through the various forms of popular theater performed in the nineteenth century, "the stage Irishman became part of American popular culture."<sup>362</sup> Sarah Davis described attending a performance of an Irish play in 1875. She wrote, "Thursday night went to hear the play of 'Shaughraun.' It is an Irish play and I enjoyed it. The writer of the play took one of the parts, and was the most perfect actor."<sup>363</sup> *The Shaughraun* was a melodramatic play written by, directed by, and starring Dion Boucicault, the "most prominent figure in American theater in the middle decades of the nineteenth century."<sup>364</sup> It was first performed at Wallack's Theatre, NY on November 14, 1874 and was highly successful. Boucicault played the main role, the character of Con "The Shaughraun." The Irish for "Shaughraun" is *seachránái*, and means wanderer or vagabond. In the play, Con is an Irish poacher and an anti-authority, anti-establishment figure.

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<sup>360</sup>George Perrin received an 1864 edition of *The Book of Days*. It is inscribed: "George Perrin Davis, December 25, 1864, from his parents." Property of the ISHL, located at the David Davis Mansion State Historic Site.

<sup>361</sup>*The Book of Days* was first published in 1832. From the 1869 edition: "It was stated to be the desire of the Editor—while not discouraging the progressive spirit of the age, to temper it with affectionate feelings towards what is poetical and elevated, honest and of good report, in the old national life ; while in no way discountenancing great material interests, to evoke an equal activity in those feelings beyond self, on which depend remoter but infinitely greater interests; to kindle and sustain a spirit of patriotism, tending to unity, peace, and prosperity in our own state, while not exclusive of feelings of benevolence, as well as justice, towards others. It was desired that these volumes should be a repertory of old fireside ideas in general, as well as a means of improving the fireside wisdom of the present day." Chambers, Preface to *The Book of Days*.

<sup>362</sup>Mick Moloney, "Irish-American Popular Music," in *Making the Irish American*, 387.

<sup>363</sup>S.D. to D.D., Stockbridge, MA, March 22, 1875. *The Shaughraun* was also produced fairly recently, in the Irish Repertory Theater in 1998 and in 2008 at The Storm. See the review of *The Shaughraun* by Wilborn Hampton, "The Plot Keeps Thickening Like a Well Made Irish Stew," directed by Charlotte Moore, Irish Repertory Theater, *The New York Times*, November 21, 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/11/21/theater/theater-review-the-plot-keeps-thickening-like-a-well-made-irish-stew.html?pagewanted=1> (accessed December 92009).

<sup>364</sup> Mick Moloney, "Irish-American Popular Music," 386.



The play is a fairy tale, and at the same time highly political as it had Fenian sympathies. On March 25, 1875, three days after Sarah saw the performance, *The New York Times* described the play as exhibiting “fresh romance exhilarating wit, sparkling dialogue, admirably-woven plot, and fertile invention...”<sup>365</sup> *The Shaughran* became Boucicault’s best known work, and during the decade of 1870, garnered “enormous commercial success” across America.<sup>366</sup> Overall, Irish popular theater was a way in which middle-class Americans, like the Davis family and friends, came into contact with Irish entertainment as well as Irish culture, or an Americanized version of Ireland. Irish immigrants affected American culture (whether American families like the Davis family knew it or not) at both the local and national levels, and the Davis family servants were a part of this phenomenon.

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>367</sup> This was the case in the Davis household.<sup>368</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. Carter asserted that the “root of most of our domestic friction lies in the utter indifference of average employers as to what becomes of those in their

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<sup>365</sup>“Wallack’s Theatre,” *New York Times* March 21, 1875, <http://proquest.umi.com.proxy.iwu.edu/pqdweb?did=79962306&sid=9&Fmt=1&clientId=44404&RQT=309&VNam e=HNP> (accessed December 9 2009).

<sup>366</sup>Mick Moloney, “Irish-American Popular Music,” in *Making the Irish American*, 386.

<sup>367</sup>Katzman, 106.

<sup>368</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.

service when they no longer need them.”<sup>369</sup> Under these terms, Sarah Davis was not an “average employer.” 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>370</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>371</sup>

There was also a high level of turnover among domestic servants in this period. According to Lucy Maynard Salmon, the average time of turnover in 1897 was one year and a half.<sup>372</sup> In contrast to this statistic, Carter considered it a mark of a good mistress, and a good servant, if a servant remained in one position for an extended period of time.<sup>373</sup> Between the years 1872 and 1879, there were at least eight servants living in the house on Clover Lawn. Willie Fitzgerald was certainly employed the longest in this period, but there was a higher level of turnover among the female maids. In earlier years, Sarah Davis described her frustration with a particular servant, who she would then let go.<sup>374</sup> Likewise, Ella Davis, Sarah’s daughter-in-law, and Sue Betts, Sarah’s cousin, appeared to have a penchant for changing servants.<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>369</sup>Carter, 159.

<sup>370</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>371</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.

<sup>372</sup>Salmon, 109-110.

<sup>373</sup>Carter, 122, 130. See also her discussion of the “staying” trait of the ideal servant and the “retaining qualities” of the ideal employer. Carter, 158- 159.

<sup>374</sup>See for example, Sarah’s decision to “hire out” Catharine; Sarah Davis to David Davis, Lenox, Massachusetts, October 25, 1847 and Sarah’s decision to let Matilda go and find a new maid; Sarah Davis to David Davis, Bloomington, IL, August 27 1852.

<sup>375</sup>See: S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn “At Home Tuesday 10 P.M.,” November 10, 1874 and S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, December 10, 1871.

Another concern in this period was the difficulty in finding good servants. As she was in charge of domestic matters, the housewife was often responsible for the hiring of domestic servants.<sup>376</sup> From the Davis correspondence, it is evident that this was the case with Sarah Davis and her female friends and relatives. Sue Betts in particular had a difficult time finding a servant. Sue's decision to "give up" her German domestic servant in December 1871 resulted in a drawn-out process to find a new Irish servant. On March 16, 1872, Sarah wrote that Sue "gets on quite well with her new girl."<sup>377</sup> However, after Sue had finally employed a new servant, she let her go a week later. After trips to visit her family in earlier years, Sarah Davis sometimes brought servants back from New England.<sup>378</sup> In Bloomington, she, like her friends and relatives, found her servants through word of mouth and in the Irish community.<sup>379</sup> Mary Robinson, a good friend of Sarah Davis, appears to have hired Eliza, Katie's sister, on the recommendation of Sarah.<sup>380</sup> When Sue was having trouble finding an Irish servant girl, Sarah Davis wrote that she was "unable to procure a girl for Sue—but Mrs Kelly the Irish woman who washes for her thinks she may get one for her."<sup>381</sup> Sarah also described an incident in which an Irish servant girl came to the house looking for work in the area. Sarah wrote, "An Irish girl who has lived with Clifton

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<sup>376</sup>Katzman, 153.

<sup>377</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 16, 1872.

<sup>378</sup>Sarah Davis to Fannie Walker, Bloomington, IL, May 7, 1866, Davis Family Papers, Transcripts provided by Illinois State Historical Society, David Davis Mansion State Historic Site, Bloomington IL. Catharine, a servant of Fannie Walker, came with her family to work for the Davis family in the summer of 1866. 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>379</sup>See for example, "I must go out in pursuit of a girl—or we shall be minus before we are aware." Sarah Davis to Daniel Rogers Williams, Bloomington, IL, 18 June 1859. Also, "Mr. Robinson brought me an Irish girl from St. Louis by the name of Catharine Phillips." Sarah Davis to David Davis, Bloomington, IL, May 9, 1848. The Robinsons were friends with the Davis family. The hiring of servants will be discussed in more detail later.

<sup>380</sup>Katie had been employed by Sarah Davis before Eliza was hired by Mary Robinson. Moreover, Sarah continued to report on the progress of Eliza and was concerned about how she was getting along with the Robinson family, indicating perhaps that Sarah had recommended her for hire. See for example, the letter remarking that Mary Robinson and her daughter "continue to be pleased with Katie's sister." S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 2, 1873.

<sup>381</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, February 18, 1872.

Moore called yesterday to know if I knew anyone who wanted a girl—She left Clinton because she did not favor Mrs Moore—. ”<sup>382</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. This issue can be seen in Sarah Davis’s concern about Mary Whalen, who “really begins to appear old, and looks somewhat bent.”<sup>383</sup> Sarah hoped that Mr. Hoag would marry Mary, as she needed to be married, because soon she would no longer be able to complete the heavy physical labor required of domestic service. Kitchen fires were also a very real danger to domestic servants.<sup>384</sup> In 1864, Sarah wrote to her sister that “...I have at present a girl of 23 perhaps—who is just beginning to work—after a six months cessation from the effects of a burn.”<sup>385</sup> 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 discomfort,” all took a physical toll.<sup>386</sup> Acknowledging the hard work of her servants, Sarah informed her sister that “we may have an early meal—as Bridget is to have the afternoon & evening after dinner. Katie takes hers tomorrow. This will give them a good rest from their labors of yesterday.”<sup>387</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

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<sup>382</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, March 15, 1872.

<sup>383</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 24, 1872.

<sup>384</sup>For a short discussion of the dangers of household fires and Irish domestic servants, see Maureen Murphy, “Bridget and Biddy: Images of the Irish Servant Girl in *Puck* Cartoons, 1880-1890,” in *New Perspectives on the Irish Diaspora*, 158.

<sup>385</sup>Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams, Bloomington, IL, December 11, 1864. As the technology for stoves improved, the danger of being burned lessened, but did not disappear.

<sup>386</sup>Spofford, 37.

<sup>387</sup>S.D. to F.W., Bloomington, November 28, 1873.

dictated by the schedule and convenience of the family.<sup>388</sup> The female servants had relatively less control over their situation than did women who worked in factories or shops.<sup>389</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. In one letter, Sarah referenced a servant's lack of control over their time. She told her husband, "but Willie was going to a show—having been disappointed the night previous as Sallie had to be sent for at Mr Robinson's."<sup>390</sup> While it is not clear if the Davis family servants were given a set block of time for vacation, it must have been the practice among the women Sarah knew to give their servants a specified amount of vacation time.<sup>391</sup>

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>392</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>393</sup> While it would be logical to assume that the Irish domestic servant and the American housewife would achieve some balance in the power dynamic, the issues that were inherently part of the system of domestic service in nineteenth-century American households did not simply disappear. In the early twentieth century, long after the Sarah Davis's servants were no longer working for the family, Mary Elizabeth Carter ominously predicted that a "'servants' union' looms upon the horizon" due

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<sup>388</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>389</sup>Katzman, 116-117.

<sup>390</sup>S.D. to D.D., Clover Lawn, November 9, 1873.

<sup>391</sup>S.D. to F.W., Bloomington, October 13, 1873.

<sup>392</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>393</sup>S.D. to D.D., Bloomington, April 18, 1873.

to the oppressive treatment of the domestic servant.<sup>394</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. Due to the design of the home and the ideology that the Davis family largely followed, the experience of the servants at Clover Lawn from 1872 to 1879 was in some ways typical of the experience of countless other Irish domestic servants, but in other ways it was unique. The servants were paid well, there was some flexibility to their work hours, and they had excellent living and working conditions.

Moreover, 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>395</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

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<sup>394</sup>Carter, 133. While there have been some organizations of domestic servants which serve to guarantee certain rights, it is still largely the case today that many employers pay their domestic servants “under the table” and many domestic servants come from an immigrant class that works for less than minimum wage. See Lynch-Brennan, 180-181.

<sup>395</sup>Beecher and Stowe, 334.

embody the concept of the “benevolent mother” promoted by *The American Woman’s Home*.<sup>396</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 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>397</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>398</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.

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<sup>396</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.

<sup>397</sup>One exception to this is Cecilia O’Conner, who was George Perrin’s nurse, and who, although she moved away from Bloomington, still returned to visit Sarah nearly every year until her death. See Burke, “Irish in McLean County,” 22 and also a letter in which Sarah references “Mrs O’Conner”: Sarah Davis to David Davis, Bloomington, January 11, 1874.

<sup>398</sup>See Lynch-Brennan, Chapter 7, “Was Bridget’s Experience Unique,” 151-176.

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>399</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>400</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.

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<sup>399</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>400</sup>Katzman, 70.



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