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America vs. Europe

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## Below America's Stairs: Domestic Servants in the Gilded Age

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The Museum's visitors are always interested in how the so-called one percent lived back in the Gilded Age—parties, flowers, luxuries, and so on—but lately we've noticed this curiosity giving way to a positive deluge of questions about the less privileged: the Nickersons' live-in servants. Some show a touch more disappointment than usual that we no longer have a working kitchen on view, and many of our self-guided visitors have been so bold as to ask for a peek into the servants' quarters, a privilege typically reserved for tour-goers (our administrative offices are located in those former humble bedrooms). We happily oblige, of course.

I'd like to pretend I have no ideas about the cause of this new surge of interest, but should I just admit it?

I'm also a huge fan of Downton Abbey.



The cast of Downton Abbey's domestic staff. Image courtesy ITV.

The ITV period drama, for those who haven't had the pleasure of the addiction yet, is about an early 20th-century English estate, the inherited dwelling of the aristocratic Grantham family. They're an interesting lot, particularly with Maggie Smith as the Dowager Countess standing up for every old money stereotype you could think of, but what carries the show are the lives of the Grantham's housemaids, kitchen maids, butler, footmen, and the rest of the domestic servants who keep the place running (while managing, quite impressively, to keep up on the gossip of the noble family they serve).

There's this great scene in the first season that shows the era's belief in upholding a particular sort of servant-master relationship. (Spoiler alert, if you haven't seen it.)

Matthew Crawley, the blue-eyed, tow-headed cousin and new heir to the estate, arrives in the new household set up for him by the Granthams. There he meets Molesley, a valet of his own to attend to his every daily need. ("We don't need a butler or a valet," he tells his mother with vexation. A middle-class guy who introduces the concept of 'weekend' to the non-working Granthams, Matthew stands in for all of us modern viewers, doing our incredulity for us.)

We immediately see how it embarrasses Molesley that Matthew goes to grab his own cup of tea or insists on putting on his own dinner jacket and cufflinks. But when Matthew mentions to his uncle that he has no use of Molesley and would like to let him go, Lord Grantham gives him an impassioned speech: How could you take away a man's livelihood—nay, his dignity!—with your selfishness? And next time around, Matthew pretends he needs help dressing in order to save Molesley from humiliation and dishonor. Peace is restored.



Cousin Matthew Crawley, played by the British actor Dan Stevens. Photo by Nick Briggs, courtesy ITV.

Another great example of these classic roles is seen in William, the footman whose parents sent him to spend his life in service of the Granthams because it's a highly-respectable role for people of the peasant class he came from. And it's clear it's the highest he'll ever go.

All of that—the pride of a fine servant, a class ceiling, and that sense of permanence—is probably the biggest difference between American and English domestic service in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Though most people come away from Downton Abbey and other pop-culture examples of servanthood in Victorian England with the sense that this was transplanted to America for the Gilded Age nouveaux-riche, it's not true. Though an attempt was made to emulate English ways as some Americans acquired staggering sums of money and began a lifestyle to match, the systems wound up markedly different from one another.

Let's take Chicago's millionaire Marshall Field for a case study. He grew up on a farm in Massachusetts and never interacted with servants during his childhood, that in itself extremely different from someone like Downton Abbey's eldest daughter Lady Mary, who would after marriage inherit the very butler who raised her.

Field earned his merchant wealth and moved to Chicago and by 1870 kept six servants, as was expected of the brand-new millionaires who hoped to emulate European aristocracy. At his Prairie Avenue residence just 10 years later, not one of those servants remained; a new group of seven were recorded. Ten years after that, in the 1900 census in the same massive dwelling on Millionaire's Row, the domestic help had dwindled to four and yet



again, not one remained from the previous census. Based on historical evidence, we can expect that these servants quit or were dismissed far more often than every ten years, but probably only stayed in a residence for a year or two before moving on.



The Marshall Field residence at 1905 Prairie Avenue (demolished). DN-0003324, Chicago Daily News negatives collection, Chicago History Museum.

Wheaton John	32	m	N	Grain oil merchant
— Laura	30	w	N	Keeping house
— Beani	5	w	N	
— Alice	3	w	N	
Leaville June	18	w	N	Domestic servant
Campbell Maria	25	w	N	do do
Burns James	25	m	N	blackman

The 1870 census, identifying members of the John D. Vanderbilt household and their domestic servants. Image courtesy rootdig.com.

Field's staff on the censuses only ever included two Americans—a 22-year-old servant named David from Ohio and a groomer from Boston (his name was Miles). The rest were Irish, Scottish, English, Canadian, Swedish, and Norwegian. Most Americans, simply put, weren't interested in attaching themselves to a wealthy family for sustenance. It was Mark Twain who said that "whenever a man preferred being fed by another man to starving in independence, he ought to be shot," and many seemed to agree. Even the immigrants who came from cultures with servant-master systems would raise a second generation of Americanized sons and daughters who didn't seek these kinds of dependent positions.

A buzz topic emerged in the U.S. during the late 19th and early 20th century, called "the servant problem," or "the servant girl problem." Although great Gilded Age families like the Vanderbilts built massive homes that demanded an entire staff to keep them running, servants were hard to find, and even harder to keep.

Think about it: How would a system like we see in the Downton Abbey Grantham household survive in such a highly individualistic, capitalistic, and optimistic culture? Grantham inherited his wealth along a line of impossible-to-achieve nobility; Field was a farm kid who started as a salesman and worked his way up. Grantham's servants were confined to their class; Field's servants were, in the narrative of this nation, just as good as he was. They were working their way up, too. Working-class women would use domestic service as a launching point into the workplace, or they might quit after marrying up. Immigrants would find their own opportunities as well, participating in capitalism and education—pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, as the (very American) saying goes. Further, the wealthy Americans—themselves not far removed from humble circumstances—though they needed the servants to keep up their lifestyles, felt extremely proud of the equality possible in this country. Here's how an 1888 article in the Chicago Tribune put it:

**The servant problem is confessedly the most intricate in modern life. It is more intricate in the United States than in any European country. Our boasted democracy comes into the kitchen and claims for the servants rights and immunities never thought of in England or Germany. ... Caste solves some of the difficulties of the domestic problem. But it solves them in a way we neither desire nor can make practiceable. We must solve the entire problem in some other way; and that other way must include the recognition of the fact that in this country every woman is just as good as another so long as she conducts herself virtuously.**



Staff and servants of the Vanderbilts line the road of the North Carolina Biltmore Estate to welcome the newly wed George and Edith Vanderbilt. Photo by Carl Alwin Schenck, courtesy National Forests in North Carolina.



The cook prepares a meal at the Samuel M. Nickerson Mansion. The Richard H. Driehaus Museum.

So maybe Cousin Matthew would have felt right at home here in America. Who knows? While the servant system across the pond was designed to be somewhat difficult to budge—and it was, although it eventually did—on American soil it seemed more or less guaranteed to fail. The servant problem wasn't a problem at all, it was an import that didn't work. This was not a culture designed to house those permanent and defensible distinctions. (Note: I say 'defensible' because there is, of course, a caveat: this country has battled a series of culturally and systemically-upheld inequalities between blacks and whites and other immigrant or native groups, inequalities that make *Downton Abbey* footman William's situation not seem so far-fetched.) If we speak only of the live-in servant system, however, by the end of World War I this position had become an anomaly.

Starting on July 2, we're going to take you behind the scenes in an interactive living history tour that touches on some of these very issues of domestic servanthood and many more. So if you're interested in stepping into a pair of servants' shoes, take a look at our [Summer Servants' Tour over on our Programs page](#).

—Lindsey Howald Patton

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