

HELP WANTED

By Ellen Knight¹

A century and more ago, the help-wanted section in *The Winchester Star* was dominated by ads for maids. The jobs were filled, to a large extent, by immigrant women.

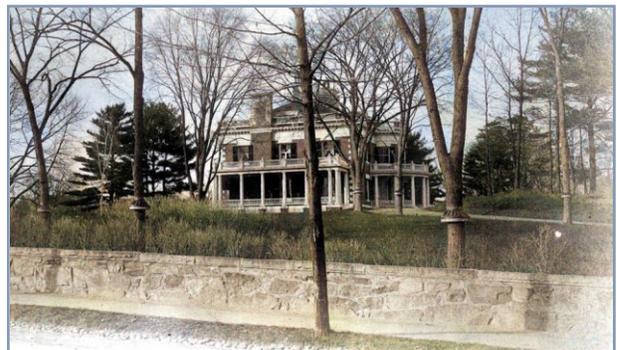
Given the limited options for women, especially those not speaking English, household service could have been the best choice for immigrants, preferable to the work they had at home in factories or fields. In fact, it was often the opportunity they needed, as unskilled and possibly uneducated women, to transition into American life.

Domestic jobs were generally plentiful. Help with housework was nearly indispensable for any woman of means in the early 20th century. It was not just that housework was burdensome but also that wifely duties in many middle- and upper-class families included assuming a place in community affairs, which required both entertaining and involvement in activities outside the home.

Winchester did not have any homes using servants to an aristocratic level. Butlers were a rarity. Most homes with servants had one or two live-in servants—often a cook and maid—or maybe three. There were, however, some exceptions.

The Edwin & Francesca Ginn family possibly employed the largest staff. In 1900, when they lived in Rangeley Park, there were eight servants (6 female), three Irish, two American, two Canadian, and one English.

In 1910, the Ginn household on Bacon Street included 6 staff (5 female) for the main house. The estate also had a separate gardener's house and a carriage house where a Swedish chauffeur and his wife lived for decades.



The Ginn Estate formerly on Bacon Street



The six who worked in the main house immigrated from Ireland (parlor maid), Norway (cook and kitchen maid), Finland (laundress), Canada (chamber maid), and Sweden (butler).

The Ginn Carriage House on Ginn Road

Up on Arlington Street, live-in help enumerated at the William & Bertha Schrafft estate increased over the years from 1 Norwegian maid in 1920 to 2 Swedish maids throughout the 1920s and 1930s up to five women (3 maids, 1 cook, and 1 waitress, all Swedes) in 1940.



The Schrafft House

If the Thomas Lawson family maintained the same staff in Winchester which they had in Cohasset, Boston, and Scituate, they could have had a half dozen servants, including maids, laundress, cook, nurse, and gardener.² Mostly would likely have been Irish and African-American.

But the Samuel and Ella Esther McCall home on Myopia Hill never had more than 3 servants enumerated. Only one live-in servant, a black woman, appears in the 1920 census. But the limitations of the censuses are revealed by the knowledge picked up from newspapers that McCall owned a car and employed a chauffeur (not enumerated) and Mrs. McCall employed a cook. Nevertheless, the McCalls appear to have had a modest staff, and a newspaper reporter with the *Boston Post* was actually impressed in 1915 that Mrs. McCall would answer her own door.³

SWEDISH PREFERRED

Domestic servants can be difficult to trace. They often came and went, appearing in one record and disappearing from view, possibly explained by the handwriting and spelling of foreign names, failure of those responding to the local censuses to include their help, name changes due to marriage, and just plain moving on.

Most foreign-born domestics in early 20th-century Winchester were Irish. The next immigrant groups most often employed in the home were Canadian, Swedish, and English. None were Italian.⁴ The focus below on Swedes is deliberate, to direct some attention to an understudied and seldom remarked group. Also, some help-wanted ads actually specified “Swedish preferred.”

Swedes were numerous enough that the Baptist Church held services in the Swedish language for four years (1915-1919). At their height in 1930, native Swedes numbered 179, though their American-born children more than doubled the number of residents with Swedish roots. As a group, they may not have been as visible as other minorities since the closest Scandinavian churches and clubs were in Woburn, but individuals could be found in just about every area of the town.

They came to America because of economic, religious, and political conditions at home, as well as the attraction of vaunted American freedoms. An additional motive for Swedish women was the decline of marriage prospects due to the emigration of many men.

The seven Swedish residents recorded in the 1880 federal census, including one man working in a shop, one in a tannery, one wife, and four single women working as servants, set a pattern followed in later censuses—more women than men, the majority of men employed in the factories or tanneries with others in trades such as house painting or upholstery, and more single women than married, the single women (and a few married ones) being in service in private homes.

“As domestic servants in America,” Scandinavian history authority H. Arnold Barton wrote, “they were delighted to find, they were not required to do heavy outdoor work, they had rooms of their own, had regular days off, and were paid weekly. They could dress as fashionably as their mistresses, were treated as members of the families they worked for and like 'ladies' by American men, who showed them a courtesy and consideration to which they were quite unaccustomed at home.... The young women immigrants thus tended to adopt American speech and customs more quickly and easily than their male counterparts.”⁵ In Winchester, in fact, Swedish maids constituted one of the early 20th-century adult-education classes formed to teach English.



Anna Strinden

Among those servants who went from service to marriage was Anna Emilia Katarina Strandin. Born in 1876 in Stockholm, she was one of 12 children, only three of whom survived to adulthood. She was only 16 when she left her grandparents' home to sail for America. Her first destination was Lynn, but by 1900 she was one of two Swedish servants (plus an Irish coachman) at 100 Cambridge St.

That same year she married another immigrant, Karl Gustav Möller, a machinist boarding with a Swedish family on Harvard Street in the Plains. The Millers moved to Woburn, where Anna became the mother of four children. In 1919, she died at Winchester Hospital from an embolism while awaiting an operation, survived by descendants who have proudly posted their family trees online.

Whether Winchester servants were treated as family is unknown. Statistics do not track the social distance between employer and employee. It is entirely credible that employees could be like family. It can be demonstrated that some relationships lasted for years, even decades.

When the Handel Pond family left the east side for Cambridge Street, Matilda Gustafson went with them. By 1910, her sister Hannah had joined the household. These women stayed with the Ponds as housekeeper and cook through 1935, when they retired to their own home on Oneida Road.

Over at the Schrafft mansion, one maid, Maria Elizabeth (Johnson) Tyberg, remained for 20 years (1923-1943), apparently finding security there. After arriving in Boston in 1899, she married in 1902. When she applied for citizenship in 1924, the whereabouts of her husband were reported as “unknown.”

FEW TRACES

Housework often being tedious, the story of those who did it has understandably been neglected. The low social status of domestics doubtless has also caused them to be overlooked.

There is also the paucity of surviving material, which makes an obituary such as that for Bertha Clements, a native Canadian who worked for David N. Skillings, stand out for providing a tiny glimpse. She had, it says, many friends who knew her as kind and generous and states she was long a familiar figure in town “noted as a skater and as an enthusiastic bicyclist.” Leaving no immediate family, she was buried in the Skillings’ own lot at Wildwood Cemetery.⁶

Each immigrant had a story, a part of larger stories. Finding the story of national diversity among Winchester’s people may take one to its industries, churches, and neighborhoods, but may well start in its homes.

¹ This article © 2021 by the author is a revision of an earlier article by author Ellen Knight published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Jan. 20, 2021. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² The largest staff was recorded in the 1920 census when the widowed Lawson and children lived in a 22-room mansion in Scituate named Dreamwold in Scituate. Nine servants were enumerated: three maids, two cooks, a laundress, waitress, nurse, and gardener. Jeannie Lawson was assessed for several lots in Winchester while Thomas Lawson was assessed for 366 Main Street.

³ Elizabeth Burt, “Mrs. McCall and Mrs. Coolidge,” *Boston Sunday Post*, Nov. 7, 1915.

⁴ This information is based principally on the federal censuses.

⁵ Barton, H. Arnold (1994), *A Folk Divided: Homeland Swedes and Swedish Americans, 1840–1940*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

⁶ Clements’ ethnicity may have been African-American; however, the censuses from 1900 to 1940 record different ethnicities—black, mulatto, white, black, and “Indian.”