

# Elizabeth Drinker and Her “Lone” Women: Domestic Service, Debilities and (In)Dependence Through the Eyes of a Philadelphia Gentlewoman

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In the spring of 1790, fifty-eight-year-old Betty Burrage left her cramped lodgings in the Philadelphia suburb of Northern Liberties. After much walking, she finally reached her destination, the sprawling two-story brick structure, which comprised the Philadelphia almshouse located at the corner of Spruce and Third Streets. Widowed, out of work, and in failing health, Betty once again took up temporary residence alongside the other people who made up Philadelphia’s sick poor.<sup>1</sup>

Once she had recuperated from her current spate of sickness, Betty Burrage was able to return to the business of seeking work. Following

1. Daily Occurrence Docket, May 18, 1790, Guardians of the Poor (hereafter Daily Occurrence Docket), Philadelphia City Archives (hereafter PCA). The following narrative of servant woman Elizabeth Burrage is a partial reconstruction of her life drawn from Elaine Forman Crane, ed., *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker* 3 vols. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991) and the Daily Occurrence Docket of the Guardians of the Poor (PCA). On Northern Liberties, see Susan Edith Klepp, “Philadelphia in Transition: A Demographic History of the City and its Occupational Groups, 1720-1830,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1980), 19-22; on the almshouse, see Billy G. Smith, *The “Lower Sort”: Philadelphia’s Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 38. Unfortunately, surviving records do not reveal how long Burrage had been married or when she became a widow, although we do know that she was approximately seventy-eight years old when she died in 1810. However, other studies have found that half of all married women in early America became widows during mid-life, usually around the time they entered their forty-eighth year. In this regard, Betty followed the pattern set by the majority of her widowed peers (eighty percent) by remaining in the widowed state rather than remarrying. Since the first extant record of Betty appears in 1790, when she was fifty-eight years old, we do know that she spent at least the last twenty years of her life in widowhood. See Klepp, “Philadelphia in Transition,” 64-70, 83-95, 123; and Lisa Wilson, *Life After Death: Widows in Pennsylvania, 1750-1800* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 1-2. The example of Betty Burrage’s life supports conclusions drawn by Carole Shammas, who found that, while most women (90-95%) married at some time during their lives, “nowhere near that proportion were married at any given point in time.” “The Female Social Structure of Philadelphia in 1775,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (hereafter *PMHB*) CVII, no. 1 (January 1983): 69.

in the steps of hundreds of laboring-class women, she turned to domestic service as her best option for a poor woman with modest skills and no assets. Like others, Betty drifted from position to position, staying "but a short time at one place."<sup>2</sup> For the next two decades, Betty's life fluctuated between sporadic employment, dependency upon the charity of former employers, and lodging in the city's poorhouse. Suffering from the infirmities of old age and prone to a "disagreeable temper," she found it difficult to secure a long-term position. In 1801, Betty Burrage enquired whether her previous employers, the wealthy Quaker merchant Henry Drinker and his wife Elizabeth, "wanted her as help in the Kitchen" of their three-story, Front Street home. The answer was "No." Betty was now sixty-nine years old<sup>3</sup>

The last seven years of Betty's life were particularly hard. Appearing to prospective employers as an obviously "infirm Old Woman," she was unable to obtain work. One rainy summer evening in 1803, she pounded on the door of the Drinker household for the final time. "Wet to the Skin," and suffering a cut on her face from a fall, Betty "beg'd very hard for a nights lodging" and promised not to trouble her former employers again. Four years later, Betty contracted consumption and gained readmission to the poorhouse, where she convalesced for one month. Finally, in April of 1811, Elizabeth Burrage entered the poorhouse for the last time, dying there two months later on 13 June 1811 at the age of seventy-eight.<sup>4</sup>

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The experience of Betty Burrage as a member of Philadelphia's "lower sort" and sometime domestic servant during the late eighteenth century is unusual only in the amount of detail preserved in written records. Her story captures the nature of domestic service and the problems it posed for the thousands of laboring-class women who relied on it as a

2. *Drinker Diary*, April 28, 1797 (2:912).

3. *Drinker Diary*, Oct. 17, 1796 (2:853); Nov. 30, 1796 (2:863); Feb. 28, 1801 (2:1389); and Elizabeth Evans, *Weathering the Storm: Women of the American Revolution* (New York: Paragon House, [1975] 1989), 152.

4. *Drinker Diary*, Jan. 6, 1803 (3:1615); Aug. 4 and 5, 1803 (3:1673); Daily Occurrence Docket, April 8 and May 12, 1807, PCA; and Alms House Admissions and Discharges, April 5 and June 13, 1811, Guardians of the Poor, PCA.

vital source of employment in early America. But the challenge of ascertaining the difficulties embedded in the lives of women like Burrage is considerable. To charge that getting at the truth of laboring-class lives is a frustratingly elusive quest, much like "hailing someone who has just gone around the corner and out of earshot," is merely to admit a truism long acknowledged by historians.<sup>5</sup>

Even more difficult is grasping specific historical evidence that will shed light on serving women in early America, one of the most historically marginalized groups of people if ever there were one. These women were caught up alongside men in the swift changes wrought on eighteenth-century economic and labor systems and yet have remained hidden, both then and now, rarely associated with either the male world of independent wage-earners or the family life of their employers. It is largely through the eyes of such individuals as Elizabeth Drinker that we catch a tantalizing glimpse into the life of the cantankerous, debilitated, and all-too-commonplace Betty Burrage.

Married to successful merchant Henry Drinker in 1761, Elizabeth Drinker was matron of one of the more prominent Philadelphia Quaker households, mother to five surviving children, and mistress to numerous indentured and waged women servants.<sup>6</sup> Remarkably, she kept a diary throughout her long adult life, devoting more time to writing as she grew older and increasingly reflective. With a dogged commitment to inscribing her daily activities, observations, and typically blunt opinions within the pages of her diary, Drinker has left invaluable information about the many "lone" women, as she called them, who crossed her doorway seeking employment. It is through Drinker's eyes that we can begin to understand the uncertain nature of servitude and security for laboring-class women in an age that otherwise celebrated economic and political independence.<sup>7</sup>

The changes brought to domestic service force us to reconsider many of our current perceptions about the position of women in eighteenth-century society. First, the preponderance of solitary women, especially

5. Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 320. Schama is making a general statement here about the nature of historical inquiry, in which historians need to recognize the unavoidable gap that exists between the present and the past.

6. *Drinker Diary*, 1:88, note 2 and lxiv; the Drinkers had nine children, four of whom died prematurely.

7. For Drinker's reference to widowed serving women as "lone" women, see her diary entry regarding Caty Mullen on Nov. 19, 1793 (1:528-529).

elderly, widowed women like Betty Burrage, compels us to rethink the proposition that the family, particularly for women, guaranteed that old age would be a time of support and economic stability for the elderly. Historians have shed light on preindustrial family life and its implications for older adults in such a way as to underscore its distinctiveness from modern society. Carole Haber, for example, has argued that old age was an "ambiguous stage of existence" in the eighteenth century, with no clear lines drawn between the working and the retired. Late marriage coupled with high fertility and mortality rates created an environment for the elderly in which they were typically surrounded by adult children, ensuring them assistance and continuity at a time in their lives when they were no longer self-sufficient. The family, therefore, traditionally functioned to integrate the aged into society.<sup>8</sup>

It has further been argued that women in particular drew comfort and support from their children as they advanced into their twilight years. Widows could maintain the status and identity that they adopted upon marriage by transferring their dependency from their deceased husbands to their children, particularly their adult sons.<sup>9</sup> According to this model, continuity and comfort characterized old age for the majority of eighteenth-century widows. Yet the growing population of poor, laboring-class women like Betty Burrage reveals that a different trend emerged by the post-revolutionary era for an increasing number of women, one marked by instability for those who lacked the security afforded by a supportive family.<sup>10</sup>

Hundreds of women like Caty Mullen were drawn to urban centers in the expectation of earning a living, yet found that urban life offered few safety nets for elderly women of the "lower" sort. Mullen immigrated to Philadelphia from Ireland as a poor, young widow, accompanied by her two small sons. After laboring "industriously for their and her own maintenance," she apprenticed them and, years later, witnessed their entrance into artisanal life as free men, working at their trades "with reputation." Caty nurtured the hope that "they would be her support in

8. Carole Haber, *Beyond Sixty-Five: The Dilemma of Old Age in America's Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 10-11.

9. Terri L. Premo, *Winter Friends: Women Growing Old in the New Republic, 1785-1835* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 2-3, 24-29.

10. Haber, *Beyond Sixty-Five*, 17-20. Premo acknowledges that old age was a time of alienation for poor women who lived outside the family sphere, yet she concludes that "interdependency and continuity" distinguished aging women's lives in the early republic. Premo, *Winter Friends*, 21, 182.

the decline of Life," which she was rapidly approaching. Unfortunately, the tiny family of three contracted yellow fever, as did thousands of other city inhabitants, during Philadelphia's infamous outbreak of 1793.<sup>11</sup> Cary Mullen survived the fever, but her sons did not. Now, "in great trouble," and forced upon the charity of strangers, Mullen "may be truly call'd a 'lone Woman.'" Vulnerability brought on by old age and solitary life exacerbated the harsh realities of poverty, further severing many women from their tenuous footing in society. "How uncertain are all human prospects," observed Drinker.<sup>12</sup>

The emergence of domestic service as a lifetime "career" for urban America's burgeoning population of self-supporting women also challenges historians' tendencies to understand the past in terms of gendered dichotomies: public and private, independence and dependence. The experience of women who labored throughout their lives as domestic servants refutes such simplistic dualisms. For these women, life in the early republic was inherently unstable, built as it was on a foundation of contradictions that frustrate our attempts to put them in their proper "place." That society expected them to be dependent as women and yet also self-sufficient members of the laboring class compounded their difficulties at securing stable employment in the changing world of domestic service. For them, the status of independent wage earner was just as marked by bouts of unemployment and appeals for poor relief as by versatility in the practiced art of earning a living. The economic security that was a hallmark of the autonomous individual was elusive, as serving women realized only a qualified independence on the margins of society.<sup>13</sup>

Domestic service began to diverge dramatically, evolving into a waged occupation distinct from the "art and mystery of housewifery," of which it had long been a part. Traditionally, colonial girls had served in the homes of others, apprenticing in necessary skills prior to marrying and

11. Approximately 5,000 people, ten percent of the city's population, died during the 1793 yellow fever epidemic, which broke out during the summer of that year. See J. H. Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949; New York: Time Incorporated, 1965), xiv.

12. *Drinker Diary*, Nov. 19, 1793 (1:528).

13. For similar assessments of the general difficulties that confronted Philadelphia women in the eighteenth-century economy see Smith, *The "Lower Sort"*, and Karin Wulf, *Not All Wives: Women of Colonial Philadelphia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000). For similar trends in New England, see Elaine Forman Crane, *Ebb Tide in New England: Women, Seaports, and Social Change, 1630-1800* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), especially chapter 3.

establishing households of their own, or, in eighteenth-century parlance, "going to housekeeping." The status of "servant" was typically understood to be a temporary one, demarcating a specific stage in a young woman's preparation for adulthood and marital responsibilities. In this regard, service was a fundamental conduit for the practical arts foundational to female education.<sup>14</sup> Those who formed the vast sector of society referred to as the "lower sort" also relied on indentured servitude, but for different reasons. For them, binding a young child to a financially stable master for seven or more years alleviated an extra mouth to feed, which possibly could mean the difference between living at—as opposed to below—the subsistence level. Despite such crucial differences between those who understood service as a form of female education and those who viewed it as an economic necessity, what both populations had in common was a reliance upon service as a temporary means of binding out children and young adults alike. Nevertheless, females made up less than one-quarter of the indentured servant population in part due to the limited demand for their labor.<sup>15</sup>

As the indenture system declined by the end of the eighteenth century, however, domestic service, once centered on bound labor, adapted to Philadelphia's nascent waged labor system, which in turn was stimulated by a developing market economy and an abundance of free laborers.<sup>16</sup>

While girls under the age of twenty-one comprised the majority—albeit limited in number—of bound servants, rising numbers of substantially adult women swelled the growing ranks of waged domestics.

14. See Wulf's brief discussion in *Not All Wives*, 103-04. For discussion of the concept of "going to housekeeping," see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), chapter 4; and, for the early nineteenth century, Anya Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic: Elizabeth and William Wirt and the Companionate Ideal* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), chapter 2.

15. A study of the Constables' Returns to the Assessor found that nearly all bound servants in Philadelphia were less than twenty-one years of age in 1775, a large number of whom were under age fifteen. Shammass, "The Female Social Structure of Philadelphia in 1775," 81. On women as a percentage of the indentured servant population, see Sharon V. Salinger, "Send No More Women: Female Servants in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *PMHB* CVII, no. 1 (January 1983): 31. On the steady erosion of indentured servitude in Pennsylvania, see Salinger's work: "Colonial Labor in Transition: The Decline of Indentured Servitude in Late Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *Labor History* 22 (1981): 165-191; "Artisans, Journeymen, and the Transformation of Labor in Late Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *William and Mary Quarterly* 40 (January 1983): 62-84; and "To Serve Well and Faithfully": *Labor and Indentured Servants in Pennsylvania, 1682-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

16. Salinger, "To Serve Well and Faithfully," chapter 6.

Due to the dearth of records, it is difficult to ascertain with any precision how many women servants found employment in the growing arena of free labor. Yet it is clear that, as waged work expanded, so too did Philadelphia householders' preference for older, hired, and inexpensive female domestic help. For example, in 1775 the comparatively affluent Chestnut Ward contained more than twice as many hired maids as bound. Overall, more than one quarter of the women living in this ward consisted of waged servants.<sup>17</sup>

One factor that contributed to the mounting population of laboring-class women turning to waged service was Philadelphia's maritime economy. In a major port city like Philadelphia, where the leading occupational group, merchant seamen, called thousands of men away from their families for months at a time, wives like thirty-three-year-old Phoebe Robeson were to be found in abundance as well. Forced to find a means of self-support while her husband, John, was at sea, Robeson turned to service, working in the Colonel Bayard household as a live-in maid.<sup>18</sup> This presence of growing numbers of employment-seeking women hastened the process of economic and labor development as more women perceived domestic service as a feasible means of self-support or an essential component of a struggling family economy.

Another trend that added to Philadelphia's laboring-class population was in-migration from neighboring towns and countryside as men and women both looked to the major urban center as a beacon of employment opportunities.<sup>19</sup> Extant documents indicate that it was commonplace for prospective maids to travel to Philadelphia from the countryside or nearby towns. Elizabeth Drinker, for one, frequently noted that women in her employ had family members "in the country."<sup>20</sup> Typical was Polly Bitton, who journeyed from her father's home in neighboring

17. Shammass, "The Female Social Structure of Philadelphia in 1775," 71-73; 80, note 17; and 80-82. Shammass has found that even a poor area of the city like east Mulberry Ward contained 227 female servants per 1000 families (half of whom were waged laborers)—double the amount found nation wide in 1900.

18. Smith, *The "Lower Sort"*, 4; Daily Occurrence Docket, May 7, 1801, PCA.

19. See Debra M. O'Neal, "Mistresses and Maid: The Transformation of Women's Domestic Labor and Labor Relations in Late Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Riverside, 1994). Chapter 3 in particular examines this issue of women's in-migration to Philadelphia.

20. See, for example, *Drinker Diary*, Aug. 19, 1778 (1:321). Although most societies circumscribe the movements of females, young single women have always played an active role in short distance migration from the country to the city. See Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 8-9.

Bucks County to work in Philadelphia. When she hurt her arm seriously enough to interfere with her duties in 1795, she returned to her rural home to convalesce. Over the ensuing ten years, Bitton married and had a child. While it is not known whether she continued as a maid during this time, she did turn once again to service after her husband abandoned both her and their child in 1805.<sup>21</sup> Jane Moran of Duck Creek Cross Roads, Delaware, was fifty years old when she arrived in Philadelphia with the goal and the money to establish herself as a shopkeeper near the New Market. Her endeavor, however, ended in failure some years later, a common outcome for many modest women entrepreneurs. Out of capital and with no other resources at her disposal, she followed the steps of hundreds of women in her situation and "went to Service."<sup>22</sup>

Women like Bitton and Moran had few avenues for employment when they unexpectedly had to support themselves. Domestic service was one of the few waged occupations open to women prior to industrialization, yet it was one increasingly fraught with new challenges and contradictions. Ironically, while servants gained greater autonomy and wages under the free labor system, they lost certain securities offered by the older system of indenture. The predictability of food and lodging, for example, were oftentimes given over to seasonal employment and abrupt dismissal, two commonplace features of domestic service by century's end. The availability of positions not only fluctuated with the economy, but also tightened during the summer, when many members of the gentry class—the predominant sector of the servant-employing population—left the city for their summer estates, adding a seasonality to domestic service similar to other forms of waged labor. Drinker, for example, turned away Sarah Tucker, who inquired about a job in the fall of 1803, informing her that no further servants would be needed "till the cold weather set in."<sup>23</sup>

Consequently, the move to a waged-based system transformed servi-

21. *Drinker Diary*, Jan. 20, 1795 (1:642) and Aug. 20, 1805 (3:1856). Abandoned and widowed women in England and France also frequently turned to domestic service. Theresa M. McBride, *The Domestic Revolution: The Modernisation of Household Service in England and France 1820-1920* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publisher, 1976), 71.

22. Daily Occurrence Docket, July 31, 1801, PCA. Patricia A. Cleary argues that most female shopkeepers "merely survived, scrambling for alternate sources of income." See her "She merchants' of Colonial America: Women and Commerce on the Eve of the Revolution," (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1989), 122.

23. *Drinker Diary*, Oct. 10, 1803 (3:1694); Elaine F. Crane, "The World of Elizabeth Drinker," *PMHB* CVII, no. 1 (January 1983): 15-16. Similar trends existed in the modern period. See Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift*.



tude in subtle and unanticipated ways, having immediate and adverse repercussions for women laborers. In particular, it eradicated the former personal relationship between mistress and maid, which had been so defining to women's household labor. As employers, mistresses began to eschew their roles as mentors in lessons of domestic duties and life, fundamentally altering the mistress-maid relationship and consequently what it meant to be a servant. By the Revolutionary era in particular, women of gentry society started measuring the behavior and work habits of their women employees according to new dictates of efficiency and virtue that they, themselves, sought to embrace and emulate. As a result, serving women frequently received dismissal for lacking, in their employers' eyes, the feminine qualities essential to the job. Across the growing divide of class and character, elite women viewed their female domestics as necessary but less-than-perfect and, ultimately, dispensable.<sup>24</sup>

Though evidence is scant, sources do reveal that some maids were able to overcome the numerous hurdles that they confronted and to amass a sizeable pocket of money. Mobility up and out of service was possible for some. A remarkable example, at least in Elizabeth Drinker's experiences with serving women, is Anna Duffey. In 1804, Duffey arrived in Philadelphia "from [the] back woods" seeking a domestic position; Drinker hired her after a second interview, agreeing to start Duffey on October 30 at seven shillings six pence, or \$1.00, per week (£19½ per annum). Duffey worked in the Drinker household for over eighteen months, until mid-May, 1806. During that time, she "took up," or spent, scarcely one quarter of her wages, \$17.75. Being, in Drinker's estimation, a "saving managing body," Duffey arranged for Drinker to hold on to the remainder of her wages, creating in effect her own savings account through her employer.<sup>25</sup>

When Anna Duffey decided on May 13, 1806 to leave service for something better, Drinker settled the remainder of her employee's wages, "62¼ dollars." Duffey, who explained that she also "ha[d] money due to her in the back woods, she says 100 Dollars," rented a house with a mind to "keep shop and take lodgers."

24. O'Neal, "Mistresses and Maids," chapter 2.

25. *Drinker Diary*, Oct. 22, 1804 (3:1774); Oct. 27, 1804 (3:1775); Oct. 30, 1804 (3:1777); and May 2, 1806 (3:1925). See also Crane's treatment of Duffey and Sally Dawson in "The World of Elizabeth Drinker," 17-18.

It is unclear what happened to Duffey after this point, as the trail of information grows thin. However, later that same year, 1806, a woman called on Drinker "to enquire the character of Anna Duffey."<sup>26</sup> Drinker made no further mention of the residence Duffey had apparently rented in order to set up a lodging house, but it is likely that the woman calling on Drinker for a character reference of Duffey was a prospective employer; Duffey most likely had to return to service at least for a short time. However, the Philadelphia county census for 1810 includes a Southwark householder with the same name who counted two adult males, possibly lodgers, as a part of her household.<sup>27</sup> If this was the same Duffey, then it would appear that she ultimately was successful with her lodging house, at least by 1810. Anna Duffey evidenced self-restraint and ambition, earning her the praise of her employer as well as a place in the property-owning sector of Philadelphia society and the annals of servant success stories. Yet, based on most surviving accounts regarding female servants, Duffey was atypical.

Elizabeth Stewart more accurately exemplifies the predominant experience for the older woman servant who found employment in Philadelphia. In 1761, seventeen-year-old Stewart left her native Ireland, traveled across the Atlantic Ocean, and stepped ashore at Marcus Hook, not far from Philadelphia. After three years in this small village, Stewart traveled up river to Philadelphia, where, over the course of the next twenty-one years, she married David Stewart and bore two children. When David died in 1802, he left his then forty-one-year-old widow without any visible means of support. Her children apparently were in no position to assist their mother for, after pondering her limited options, Stewart sought a position as a housemaid. In the ensuing year, she held a succession of positions, each of short duration, in a number of Philadelphia households. By the year's end, she was working for merchant Abraham Kintzing of Front Street. Her job with Kintzing, however, suddenly came to an end, forcing her, "now poor and destitute," to apply for admission to the city poorhouse in January of 1803.<sup>28</sup>

26. *Drinker Diary*, May 13, 1806 (3:1929) and Nov. 1, 1806 (3:1977).

27. Crane, "The World of Elizabeth Drinker," 17-18.

28. Daily Occurrence Docket, Jan. 13, 1803, PCA. The 1801 city directory shows two David Stewarts: one, a mariner in Spruce Street, and the other, a house-carpenter in Fifth Street, but it is not known whether either of these men were Elizabeth Stewart's husband. Cornelius William Stafford, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1801* ([Philadelphia]: William W. Woodward, 1801). Information on Abraham Kintzing is found in James Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory, City & County Register for 1803* (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, [1803]). The Daily Occurrence Docket, after 1800, notes the age of many of the women admitted into the poorhouse, thereby providing specific examples of older women domestics.

Like many before her, Stewart had taken part in the growing migration to the city from both abroad and surrounding areas. Her life followed the predominant female life cycle, as she married, had children, and met the familiar specter of early widowhood. Short-term domestic work was her inheritance, the only protection she had against complete dependence on public charity. Far from being unique, Stewart's fate was a reminder that early American society expected able-bodied women, regardless of their age, to earn their own keep if their families were unable to provide for them. While domestic service offered women of meager means a well-beaten path to employment, the promise of even modest financial security was elusive.

Domestic service as wage labor, then, not only acquired many attributes which brought few benefits to female laborers, but also collided in particular with the lives of older and widowed women like Elizabeth Stewart, a growing number of whom were thrown back on their own endeavors for earning a living. The state of widowhood grew more difficult for many women. Widowhood was not simply a common fate in early America, but a prolonged state for many, unlike widowers who typically remarried.<sup>29</sup> The odds of a lengthy marriage were smaller still for women of the lower classes, whose average marriage lasted only twelve years due to high morbidity.<sup>30</sup> Pennsylvania women were not unique with regard to their protracted widowhood; studies have indicated that widows in Massachusetts faced a similar situation. While some husbands bequeathed enough of their estates to their wives to enable them to avoid outside work, not all widows were so well situated. For those, domestic service was one of the few employment options.

Because of the paucity of records on the laboring-class population, we are unable to determine the number of women, particularly those who were older, who relied on domestic employment to support themselves. Surviving documents do provide ample evidence, however, that older women were highly visible in Philadelphia's servant pool. Elizabeth Drinker herself frequently relied on the labor of older women such as Betty Burrage. Moreover, she often noted in her diary the general age of prospective maids, observing on one occasion, for example, that "a

29. Klepp, "Philadelphia in Transition," 120-123.

30. Klepp, "Philadelphia in Transition," 106, 120-123, 280; and Wilson, *Life After Death*, 1-2, 172.

woman and a girl" each sought employment from her daughter, Nancy Skyrin.<sup>31</sup>

More specifically, as the pool of prospective servants grew, so too did employers' selectivity regarding the quality of the labor they hired. Philadelphia newspapers confirm that wealthy householders like Drinker and her daughter were discriminating in their servant-employing habits, as they often correlated age with experience. Advertisements reveal a growing demand for skilled "house-keepers" to perform a wide range of domestic duties that extended beyond the customary requirements of housemaid. One prospective employer sought a "Sober, middle-aged cleanly woman" who understood "marketing and plain cooking." Another sought a "sober elderly Woman—a native of this city" both to "do the business of a small family, and to take the charge of a house and furniture, during the absence of the family for the summer season." Such employers frequently sought out older women who not only held a wide range of skills and accomplishments, but also possessed a level of maturity and responsibility not likely to be found in less experienced young women or girls.<sup>32</sup>

Recognizing the advantage that they held with their "advanced" years and proven skills, some women in search of domestic positions took the initiative and placed notices themselves stressing their age and accomplishments. "WANTS A PLACE, A MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN, as a House-keeper in a small family, who can be well recommended." Another advertised that she was an "elderly reputable woman, who [could] be recommended for her oeconomy and care." For some, the difficulties of seeking work at a vulnerable stage of their lives and competing with younger women for domestic positions could be offset by desirable qualifications of experience and maturity. Yet the marketability of such traits was often overshadowed by limitations imposed on these women by their personal circumstances—circumstances that were, ironically, connected to their "advanced" age. The personal papers of women like Drinker reveal that, in employers' eyes, older women were prevalent, yet problematic, sources of labor.<sup>33</sup>

Similar to these women who took up domestic positions in the homes of Philadelphia's gentry population, many others found employ-

31. *Drinker Diary*, Oct. 26, 1801 (2:1459).

32. *Pennsylvania Packet* (Philadelphia) April 26, 1773; and Feb. 14, 1774.

33. *Ibid.*, Mar. 2, 1772; and May 17, 1773.

ment in the same homes as day laborers. Whereas domestics largely performed a wide array of general household tasks, women working as day help carried out specific duties, serving as an additional pool of "specialized laborers" for the urban household.<sup>34</sup> Most specifically, "doing days work" referred to those women who worked out of their own homes or, more frequently, worked in employers' homes on a day-to-day basis while maintaining their own living quarters elsewhere. They supplemented their family incomes or supported themselves by honing their skills in one area of the more arduous or tedious aspects of housework such as washing, ironing, white washing, cooking, and sewing.

As urban housewives, particularly those of the upper classes, spent comparatively less time in home manufacturing and agricultural pursuits and more time in consumer-oriented activities such as shopping, they grew increasingly dependent on the emerging cash economy, purchasing those items that an earlier generation had produced for themselves. Nonproductive housework was a part of this trend towards urban consumerism, itself spurred on by a rising standard of material living for the gentry which demanded, for example, routine washing. While women have long exchanged such labor for cash, what was new by the late eighteenth century was the rapidity and extent to which the urban household reorganized around such hired help and labor specialization. The prevalence of day help dramatically underscores the extent to which domestic labor had become a cash commodity whose demand varied in accordance with the larger market cycle.<sup>35</sup>

Women who lacked capital eagerly looked to Philadelphia's urban labor market, knowing that they would find demand for their labor or particular domestic skill, be it of the mundane sort, such as washing, or a task specially crafted to meet the fashion-conscious desires of the gentry. One black woman, born into slavery outside of Philadelphia, expressed her desire "to go to Philadelphia and purposes to wash & iron" upon receiving her freedom.<sup>36</sup> Another newly manumitted black woman, along with her daughter, stated her intention of moving to

34. Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 35.

35. Boydston argues that women who performed housework for wages were dependent upon market cycles. *Home and Work*, 37-38. Evidence of day help is found widely in such diverse sources as diaries, account books, household receipt books, newspapers, poorhouse records, city directories, and census records.

36. S. H. Young to Hannah Haines, Northumberland, Sept. 26, 1803, in Hannah Marshall Haines, Wyck Papers, Correspondence, American Philosophical Society (APS). Hereafter cited as Wyck Papers.

Philadelphia with the hope that her reputation as “a very good cook, and seamstress” would provide her with an income.<sup>37</sup>

Other women also sought to make themselves marketable by transforming their general domestic abilities into something more specialized. Sarah Brown made a living at “scowering” clothes and cleaning gowns in 1753. By 1755, the Widow Brown was “in the business of SILK-DYING,” which included dyeing silk stockings, gloves and leather breeches. Possessing a “Cullender, and the most convenient tools for that business, required in America,” Brown boasted that her work was “as neat as in London.” Ann Scotton made stockings “of all sorts, whether silk, cotton, or worsted, in the neatest manner” from her home in Front street. Two years later, Scotton relocated to Second Street, but continued to graft, repair, and run stockings “in the neatest manner” as well as mend gentlemen’s jackets and breeches. Grace Price catered to the increasingly sophisticated culinary appetite of Philadelphia’s gentry elite. After laboring as a live-in cook, during which time she learned “every Branch of Cookery, Pastry, Confectionary, &c.,” Price moved into “the Widow Arie’s, the Sign of the Sloop,” situated on the corner of Chestnut and Water Streets. From her lodgings there, she hired out as a fashionable cook “to decorate any publick or private Entertainment—done in the genteelist and politest Manner, either in the English or French Taste.”<sup>38</sup>

Women possessing expertise in any one area of domestic business found demand for their skills in the increasingly complex, specialized, and consumer-oriented households of upper-class Philadelphians. Such skills allowed many women to be self-supporting and to enjoy a modest means of independence in an urban economy that otherwise was largely unsympathetic to propertyless women.

The examples of Brown, Scotton, and Price indicate the ability and ingenuity of certain women to navigate the terrain available to them between live-in domestic and entrepreneur on a more elaborate scale. However, more typical, at least for women of the laboring class, were those who offered more modest skills such as washing. Washer Judath went into homes such as Drinker’s to wash and iron clothes, working as many days as it took to complete the chore, and returned home each

37. M. L. Nowve[?] to Hannah Haines, Aug. 15, 1816, Wyck Papers, APS.

38. *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia), Aug. 2, 1753; May 30, 1754; May 15, 1755; and April 8, 1756.

night.<sup>39</sup> Usually, women who labored as day help under these terms were hired to assist with the more arduous tasks of housework like washing and ironing—tasks that could be easily performed separately from the activities of other domestic laborers and were not a part of the daily routine. Molly Brookhouse, who found occasional work in the Drinker household when the servant staff was smaller than normal, reported for work “before dinner” and left in the afternoon, assisting in the kitchen and in general cleaning. When Elizabeth Drinker had a particularly hectic week of housing several lodgers, Molly worked every day that week. Nany Silas ironed by the day, as did washer Alice Wright. When Wright was hired two days in a row to do the washing for Drinker’s daughter Nancy Skyrin, she took the unusual step (for a washer) of lodging with her employer for the one night, “it being a long way to her [Wright’s] house.”<sup>40</sup> Cary Roberts hired out as a whitewasher, working intermittently over the course of a week or two until completing her assignment.<sup>41</sup> As elite women adopted higher expectations about the furnishings and cleanliness of their homes, they readily turned to this growing pool of women laborers who made their living by day work.

Women such as these turned to day work rather than live-in domestic service for a variety of reasons, including the higher wages that they could earn for utilizing their specialized domestic skills. But the flexibility of day work was perhaps its most valued characteristic, affording older women with realistic employment possibilities. Flexibility, the ease with which an occupation could be adapted to meet the ever-changing family needs and situation of a woman, distinguished day work from live-in domestic work, which claimed dominion over most of a servant’s existence, the mistress expecting her maid to be available on a twenty-four hour basis. In day work, women were able to safeguard a modest but crucial level of autonomy simply by avoiding the demands that arose from living with one’s employer. One woman who intended to take on washing or “days work of any kind for a living”—hardly an easy or particularly attractive prospect—expressed an appreciation for the adaptability that such work offered. She explained how

39. *Drinker Diary*, June 21, 1806 (3:1939).

40. *Drinker Diary*, June 23, 1762 (1:91); June 12, 1778 (1:310); Sept. 30, 1778 (1:329); Aug. 9, 1779 (1:358); and Nov. 18, 1799 (2:1239).

41. *Drinker Diary*, May 14, 1800 (2:1300); May 20, 1800 (2:1301); May 12, 1801 (2:1410); and May 22, 1801 (2:1413).

"she now prefers [such work] to a place in a private family as it would leave some part of her time at her own disposal."<sup>42</sup> Even though dependent upon others for her livelihood, the woman who hired out as day help was, in effect, her own mistress—at least while not on the job. She could, more easily than a live-in maid, exercise control over her own identity, life, and residence, even if that residence was merely rented lodgings in another's home, as was usually the case.

Consequently, doing "day's work" accommodated the family requirements of both married women and widows with dependent children. By virtue of their separate residences, women day laborers were able to juggle their work with their family responsibilities with qualified success. Sophia Fitzpatrick supported herself and her daughter Catherine through "washing of cloaths." Sarah Bordly moved to Philadelphia after being manumitted by her Maryland owner, Robert Thompson, in 1798. For two years she maintained herself and her three-year-old daughter Anna as a washerwoman. It is not known whether they took in washing or went into employers' homes to do so.<sup>43</sup> The essential factor, however, was that they were not discouraged from work because of their children. "Black Judath," mentioned above, did washing and ironing in employers' homes accompanied by her son, Michael.<sup>44</sup> Employers probably sanctioned children in these instances because their presence was temporary, as most washers only worked in any given household one or two days at a time. By contrast, live-in maids, as discussed below, were at a distinct disadvantage if they had dependents.

Women often supplemented day work by operating boardinghouses and other enterprises as a means of piecing together an existence on the lower rungs of society.<sup>45</sup> The two sources of income were highly compatible since they both functioned out of the home, proving particularly beneficial for those women with dependent children. Moreover, either source of money could help sustain a woman if the other had temporarily dried up. Mary Ritchie, for example, used her house in Cooper's Court both as a boardinghouse and as a site for her sewing.<sup>46</sup> In 1785, enterprising Margaret Woodby opened her "red frame house"

42. S. H. Young to Hannah Marshall Haines, Northumberland, Sept. 26, 1803, Wyck Papers, APS.

43. Daily Occurrence Docket, July 23 and Dec. 2, 1800, PCA.

44. *Drinker Diary*, June 21, 1806 (3:1939).

45. Out-workers also frequently turned to sharing rent in order to meet the high cost of living at the turn of the century. Smith, "The Lower Sort", 160-162.

46. Edmund Hogan, *The Prospect of Philadelphia and Check on the Next Directory* (Philadelphia, 1795); hereafter Hogan, [1795] *Directory*.



in Coomb's Alley to the public and offered a rich variety of "Cheese-cakes, Pudding, Jumbles, Jellies, Pies, Tarts," as well as custards. Her business was apparently thriving five years later when census-takers listed this black householder as a cake-baker. At that time, 1790, her household consisted of herself and five other free blacks. The ages and relationships of these inmates to Woodby are unknown, although it is possible that some of them were either employees or perhaps lodgers whose rent supplemented Woodby's cake-baking business. By 1795, Woodby, still situated in Coomb's Alley, had included the occupation of washer among her repertoire of cash-earning enterprises.<sup>47</sup> Other washwomen, like Susannah Cook, ran boardinghouses to augment the limited wages available through day work. The widowed Cook lived conveniently in the city center and rented her rooms to artisans, like cordwainer William Aitkin.<sup>48</sup> Widows like Woodby and Cook carved out lives for themselves and their dependents by capitalizing on a variety of modest opportunities available to independent women in the pre-industrial city.

Despite its malleability, however, day work was, ultimately, an unstable source of employment and thus contributed greatly to the largely insurmountable difficulty of achieving social mobility. "Doing days work," by its very nature, was temporary, intermittent. Although day labor was a component of the broader task-oriented world of general household labor, housewives like Drinker only used it sporadically, preferring to hire out for chores that were not part of the regular daily routine of running an urban household. Thus, day help were usually hired only to perform one specific task with no guarantee of future work, except by reputation. Sally Nicholsson made up a bed tick in March 1800, while Polly Sharpless mended a sofa in January of 1802.<sup>49</sup> A woman's ability to sustain herself through such work was therefore highly contingent upon her ability to line up a string of jobs. Long periods of inactivity were costly and threatened a woman's ability to sustain

47. *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia), Nov. 30, 1785; U.S. Census Office, *Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790: Pennsylvania* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1908); and Hogan, [1795] *Directory*. The 1790 census identifies Woodby as a "Negro Cake Baker" with a household of six individuals listed as "other free persons," the category reserved for free blacks.

48. Cornelius William Stafford, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1797* (Philadelphia, 1797) and Smith, "The Lower Sort", 27. According to Smith, Cook earned about three dollars a week at washing, "half the wages of an unskilled male laborer."

49. *Drinker Diary*, March 31, 1800 (2:1287) and Jan. 4, 1802 (2:1484).

herself. Moreover, some jobs, such as white washing, were seasonal and contributed significantly to laboring women's fluctuating incomes. Elizabeth Drinker frequently hired Caty Roberts to white-wash the house only during the spring months of April, May, and June. Roberts worked, for example, "4 days on and off," receiving nine shillings and four-and-one-half pence per day for her efforts.<sup>50</sup> It is not known how Roberts supported her self during the remaining nine months of the year. The brevity of such jobs, furthermore, could be aggravated by poor quality of work. A black woman by the name of Mary labored at white-washing for three days when Drinker dismissed her for work "badly done"; another white-washer was hired to complete the task.<sup>51</sup>

Weather could also be an adverse factor in such women's lives, frequently prohibiting them from showing up for work and thus costing them time as a short-term job became protracted due to inclement weather. Drinker's daughter Sally Downing hired seamstress Betsy DeChamps in September of 1799 to make, among other items, a jacket and trousers for Downing's four-year-old son Henry. Apparently expected to work daily in the Downing household, DeChamps failed to show up one day. "The weather no doubt prevented her," observed Drinker.<sup>52</sup> Simple and uncontrollable factors compounded the limitations of day work to provide economic security for laboring-class women.

The features that created the unstable nature of specialized day work had their parallels in domestic service. Despite signs that employers sought out "elderly reputable" women possessing "oeconomy and care"—and that a growing presence of laboring-class women existed to meet that demand—employers often viewed such women as problematic. Maids, of course, often left households of their own accord; marriage prospects, for instance, pulled away more than one young woman.<sup>53</sup> But just as often, servants' departure came at the command of employers who frequently pointed to two troublesome characteristics of their older female employees: family responsibilities and debilitating health problems. Marriage, dependent children, and ill health grew in proportion

50. See representative entries in *Drinker Diary* for Roberts' extensive employment pattern with Drinker from 1800 through 1803: May 14, 1800 (2:1300); May 20, 1800 (2:1301); June 20, 1800 (2:1311); April 16, 1801 (2:1401); May 12, 1801 (2:1410); May 22, 1801 (2:1413); June 19, 1802 (2:1525); and July 11, 1803 (3:1666). Quote taken from June 19, 1802.

51. *Drinker Diary*, June 10, 1803 (3:1657) and June 13, 1803 (3:1658).

52. *Drinker Diary*, Sept. 19 1799 (2:1212); Sept. 21, 1799 (2:1213); and Sept. 23, 1799 (2:1214).

53. See, for example, *Drinker Diary*, Mar. 28, 1771 (1:152).

to the numbers of women seeking employment throughout much of their lives, clearly becoming issues in mistresses' eyes and, consequently, impediments to stable employment. Employer ambivalence toward adult women workers added substantially to the general job insecurities and the burden of being self-supporting, both of which compounded the difficulty of life for women at the bottom of eighteenth-century society. Consequently, waged service frequently locked women into a vicious cycle of short-term employment with intermittent periods of poverty and dependency upon public relief, not progress toward the security ostensibly found in marriage or property-ownership. Rather than being a stage in a woman's life, servitude emerged at the close of the century as a life-long "career" for many women, often providing them with enough support to get by, but rarely enough to exchange service for a more stable life.

The demands of a maid's personal life—marriage, pregnancy, and children—often acted as employment obstacles, which resourceful women could navigate around, but which undermined the attempts of many others to obtain domestic positions. Flying in the face of republican strictures, which held that married women were to devote their entire attention to managing their homes and tending their husbands and children, the reality of life for laboring-class women necessitated work, frequently outside of the home, in order to secure the survival of their families. Most employers, however, preferred to hire domestics as live-ins in order to have them available day and night. Under such conditions, it was often difficult for married women or those with young children to perform fully the duties expected of household servants. Due to this incompatibility between marriage and domestic service, most maids were single.<sup>54</sup> While there was no law similar to that under the indenture system prohibiting a waged servant from marrying, service attracted primarily independent women who conformed to the precedent of prior labor patterns by delaying marriage or turning to service only when widowed. Consequently while writers in the early republic argued for the importance of marriage, servant women often labored in a prolonged state of singlehood, living outside the idealized bonds of the republican community. Nonetheless, numerous married women did turn to service as a primary means of employment. They had to maneu-

54. This predominately single population of serving women included deserted wives as well as widows.

ver between two mutually exclusive demands—tending two families—with limited success.

One area of employer conflict for married servants was over their daily departures at the end of their workday. At first glance, this issue appears not only obvious but also innocuous. After all, it is not surprising that mistresses would prefer that their servants were available through the evenings as well as every day. But the issue brings up a deeper area of conflict over expectations regulating authority and power imbedded in the mistress-maid relationship. A case in point is Elizabeth Drinker's dealings with a free black woman named Mary. In 1799, Mary worked for the Drinkers "on & off, for a week or upwards." She received her dismissal, "not for any fault," stated Drinker, "but she could not be here but *when it suited herself*, being a married woman."<sup>55</sup> Drinker perceived a conflict of duty between her own domestic needs and Mary's personal life, which frequently curbed the maid's workday and prohibited her from being available throughout the night and early morning. Yet clearly something in Mary's ability to work "*when it suited herself*" rankled Drinker. Mary possessed the freedom and autonomy to "suit herself" and act her own mistress with enough frequency to disgruntle her employer. While society dictated that all women submit to expectations governing female dependency, middling- and upper-class women, in their capacities as mistress, were granted authority over other household dependents – typically children, servants, and slaves. In Drinker's eyes, Mary was a servant, and thus dependent upon the will of her employer. Yet, in the increasingly complex and ambiguous world of domestic service, Mary was a free laborer – as well as a freedwoman. She knew it and acted upon it, enjoying moments of independence to tend her own affairs. That power over employment ultimately resided in Drinker's hands should not obscure the blurring of boundaries between female dependence and autonomy as broader social and economic developments shaped domestic service.<sup>56</sup>

Elizabeth Drinker, perhaps subconsciously, was reacting to the recognition that times were changing and so, too, were her servants. Married domestics like Mary only added to her ambivalence about servants. A week after she dismissed Mary in 1799, Drinker hired another black

55. *Drinker Diary*, Nov. 18, 1799 (2:1239); emphasis added.

56. For further discussion of mistress-maid conflict, see O'Neal, "Mistresses and Maids," chapter 2.

woman, Jane Gibbs, who was probably single because she was able to reside within Drinker's home. Nonetheless, with a near chronic "servant problem" which made finding and maintaining "suitable" servants a time-consuming endeavor, elite women like Drinker could not avoid hiring married women.<sup>57</sup> Most likely Drinker rehired Mary half a year later, for she had in her employ by June, 1800, a "black Mary" who served her even though she was married and "never lodge[d] here having a husband." A month later, Drinker hired Patience Edwards, whom she hired on the recommendation of her washer, Alice Wright. Edwards, a "young widdow," was also a day servant and may have been supporting young children, for, as Drinker reported, she "goes home at night as Mary did." These women servants, even when they were not dismissed due to their inability to provide round-the-clock service, experienced special employer scrutiny by virtue of their married status.<sup>58</sup>

Elizabeth Drinker's dealings with three serving women in May of 1806 reveals the complex web of issues—both subtle and overt—which revolved around the hiring of married domestics. For Judath, service in the home of Henry and Elizabeth Drinker was, ironically, a viable option as she spent much of her time in a state of singlehood when her husband, a sailor, was at sea. Under these conditions, Drinker was willing to hire a woman who was both married and had a young son. When Judath gave notice to her mistress that she "expects her husband every day," Drinker hired another maid, Elenor Foster, to replace Judath. However, when Foster informed Drinker the next day that she had accepted another offer, Drinker took the news with great equanimity, letting her "off easily" rather than challenging her broken word. Drinker mused to herself that "she [Foster] calls herself a widow, but we understand her husband is living." Rather than setting idle gossip to the pages of her diary, Drinker was more likely confirming in her own mind why she was better off without Elenor Foster, who evidently was married and might prove to have conflicting responsibilities. Foster, no doubt aware of possible stigma attached to being a married domestic, believed she was more employable disguised as a widow.<sup>59</sup>

Fortunately for Drinker, Judath, who was unsure when her husband would actually arrive, agreed to stay "till her husband returns from the

57. *Drinker Diary*, Nov. 18, 1799 (2:1239).

58. *Drinker Diary*, June 20, 1800 (2:1311) and July 16, 1800 (2:1318).

59. *Drinker Diary*, May 19 and 20, 1806 (3:1931).

sea." Upon his arrival four days later, Judath left the Drinkers' employment and returned home with her son in tow; "Judath and little Michel leaves [sic] us this evening." Working occasionally as a maid served Judath's needs for self-support while her husband was gone, although it may have been *because* her husband was absent that she was able to hire out at all. The following month, Judath was again to be found working in the Drinker household, but this time "doing days work, as she calls it, washing and Ironing, her little Michel with her." While waged labor offered this married woman only periodic access to an income, it did provide some flexibility, allowing her to work both as a live-in and a day laborer depending, most likely, on her husband's work patterns. One black woman, however, was less fortunate when she "came to hire" on the same day that Judath agreed to stay temporarily. The woman confessed to her prospective mistress that she was married and had a child. "I believe she wont do," Elizabeth Drinker noted, as she declined to hire a woman with blatantly divided duties.<sup>60</sup>

Because of the brevity of Drinker's comments in her diary, one must speculate on the full rationale behind the reactions to married serving women that informed her hiring decisions. It is not readily apparent that the presence of children alone was the issue—although their ages may have been—since Drinker hired one woman with a child and turned away two, one with a child and the other without. The whereabouts of the unnamed woman's husband is not given, but it seems likely that at least one advantage that Judath possessed over her was her more likely availability to serve as a live-in servant during her husband's absences. And while it appears that Foster did not bring with her the troublesome issue of children, Drinker did have reason to believe that she also had a husband present in the area who might make demands of his wife. Again, the desirability of hiring Judath, whose husband was typically absent, over Foster, whose husband apparently was not, was clear to Drinker as she navigated her own course through the often tedious process of staffing her servant needs. The implications of such decisions for the three married serving women are also quite clear. One

60. *Drinker Diary*, May 20, 1806 (3:1931); May 24, 1806 (3:1932); and June 21, 1806 (3:1939). Drinker, perhaps in dire need of a maid after all, hired Foster on the day Judath departed without recording why. See May 24, 1806 (3:1932). Two days before Judath's departure, another prospective maid arrived at Drinker's door: "Amy Ivins a good looking woman came to offer her service"; Drinker does not reveal whether she hired Ivins, but there is no further mention of her. See the entry for May 22, 1806 (3:1932).

obtained definite, albeit intermittent, employment; one brought a cloud of suspicion with her regarding the nature, if not the fact, of her marriage; and the last was turned away at the door, receiving a resounding "No" to her request for a position. The examples of all three women underscore the tenuous nature of domestic service for married women, with or without children.

Sole responsibility for dependent children was yet another stumbling block to gainful employment for countless women domestics. Typically, women often delayed marriage and motherhood until their late twenties due to the difficulties of establishing financial independence. Younger maids, then, were less likely to have dependents than older women of the laboring class. However, the problem of providing for children grew proportionally with the rising number of older women who turned to domestic work. By the late eighteenth century, the number of laboring widows like Patience Edwards and Maria Johnson, who were in the middle of their childbearing years, grew significantly.<sup>61</sup> Increasingly, independent women, whether single, widowed, or married to absent husbands, bore complete responsibility for their children's welfare in a labor environment that fostered financial dependency rather than economic stability.

Confronted with motherhood, maids typically had no recourse other than to place their children under the care of others, regardless of their desire to keep their families intact. Under the indenture system, masters viewed children of servants as both an extra expense, which added to the overall cost of maintaining female servants, and as a nuisance, which detracted from servant performance.<sup>62</sup> The solution that the servant-holding class had long settled on was to bind children out to other families, thus effectively transferring the costs of their room, board, and education to others. Under the wage system, employers held views similar to masters of bound servants. Denied the opportunity to enjoy "all the happy consequences resulting from the persevering assiduity of mothers," domestics were frequently compelled to absent their children before they tried to find live-in work.<sup>63</sup>

61. Klepp, "Philadelphia in Transition," 67-68, 83-95. Klepp argues that the rise in pre-marital conception and birth rates in the eighteenth century was partly due to young widows who lacked parental or spousal supervision.

62. Salinger, "Send No More Women," 40-42.

63. Quote found in Ruth H. Bloch, "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785-1815," *Feminist Studies* 4, no. 2 (June 1978): 112.

However, the burden of placing out children now fell to the women servants themselves, employers having relinquished such responsibilities with the shedding of the indenture system. Some were fortunate to have relatives in Philadelphia who could assist them. Others were forced to leave their children at substantial distance "in the country." Lydia Atkinson's son remained with her father in Wilmington so that she could take a position in Philadelphia. It was only after several months of work that she was given time to visit her child.<sup>64</sup> Margaret Cunningham, whose house carpenter husband left her a widow at age thirty, had six children "out in the country" so that she could work for a Captain Carroll in Branch Street in 1801.<sup>65</sup> Cunningham, like the others, was forced to accept long-distance motherhood as a part of the employment conditions that governed domestic service.

For those who lacked family support, the alternative was to approach either individual householders or the Overseers of the Poor with a request to bind out their children, thereby freeing themselves up for employment. Drinker's diary reveals that women readily turned to both sources for assistance. Attempting to bind out one's child personally was one way a woman could retain some control over the fate of that child. After arriving in Philadelphia from the "lower Counties" in 1795, Rebecca Gibbs successfully placed her twelve-year-old daughter, Patience, into the household of John Skyrin; Patience's life as an indentured servant had some semblance of stability as she served the Skyrins for nine years, not departing from their household until the age of twenty-one in 1804.<sup>66</sup> Mary Scott, responsible for both an infant and a young child, was not so fortunate. In 1798, she petitioned Elizabeth Drinker to take her two-year-old daughter "till she was 18 years of age, that she [Scott] might go out to service with her other Child," a boy of seven months. Drinker declined to take in the child, however, due to the girl's extremely young age, thus further complicating Scott's ability to "go to service."<sup>67</sup>

As Scott's experience demonstrates, finding a readily available family willing to take children as indentured servants could be time consuming with no guarantee of success. Ann Campbell suddenly found her-

64. *Drinker Diary*, July 9, 1806 (3:1945) and Oct. 26, 1806 (3:1976).

65. Daily Occurrence Docket, June 18, 1801, PCA.

66. *Drinker Diary*, April 28, 1795 (1:674) and July 13, 1804 (3:1755).

67. *Drinker Diary*, April 5, 1798 (2:1018-1019). See also Wulf, *Not All Wives*, 100, 158-159.



self and her fourteen-month-old turned out of their house in Cherry Alley in 1802 by her abusive husband, a shoemaker, who then absconded. Campbell lacked family or friends who could provide shelter, obliging her "to hire at service as housemaid to Lawyer Erwin." Unable to keep her child with her, Campbell applied to the Overseers of the Poor for her child's admission to the poorhouse, where the institution took responsibility for binding the child out. While she forfeited the ability to see her child settled in a home of her choice, Campbell gained, in a more timely fashion than Scott, the freedom to step immediately into a domestic position. Women took such measures, however, as last resorts in a world that increasingly produced myriad ambiguities in the meaning of female independence.<sup>68</sup>

Poor health was simply an additional factor fueling laboring-class women's on-going struggles to support themselves. Those suffering from persistent illness typically found themselves on a journey out of service and into the poorhouse. Good health, a precious commodity in the eighteenth-century world of the "lower sort," was vital to maintenance of stable employment.<sup>69</sup>

Servants rarely faced dismissal simply due to short-term illness. For example, on at least two occasions, physical problems such as an injured back temporarily threw Patience Edwards out of work, but on each occasion she was able to regain her position.<sup>70</sup>

Alice Wright, Drinker's long-term washerwoman, was able to work around periodic bouts with illness and "flux" with more ease than most live-in servants since she had a husband who was able to help provide for and nurse her. In addition, due to her stable working relationship, she was able to turn to the Drinkers for assistance when she fell seriously ill in 1800. Evidently, Wright's financial plight and fragile health caught the attention of a member of the Female Society for Assisting the Distressed, and she sought to provide Wright with further help. Wright, aided by so much support, improved and carried on in the washer busi-

68. Daily Occurrence Docket, Dec. 29, 1802, PCA.

69. For an innovative and fascinating analysis of the gendered construction of pain and its role in defining the self in early America, see Elaine Forman Crane, "'I Have Suffer'd Much Today': The Defining Force of Pain in Early America," in Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Fredrika J. Teute, eds., *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 370-403, especially pages 392-398.

70. *Drinker Diary*, June 11, 1801 (2:1418); June 17, 1801 (2:1420); Dec. 5, 1802 (2:1596); and Dec. 31, 1802 (2:1603).

ness. By February 1803, however, her health failed dramatically, as she suffered from swollen legs, "her stomach also, and one breast very much enlarged." A few days after a group of "5 young Doctors" hovered over Wright, Drinker received hopeful word that the patient was improving, but to no avail. Within a few weeks' time, Wright, one of Drinker's "humble servants," was near her end. She died a few days later, her family lacking the financial resources to purchase her "Windingsheet and other things to bury her," which Drinker supplied.<sup>71</sup>

Serious or prolonged illness placed servants' jobs in jeopardy, forcing many out of service. Consumption was endemic in the eighteenth century, a "wasting" disease, which particularly afflicted members of the urban laboring class.<sup>72</sup>

It brought servant woman Nelly to the brink of unemployment in 1787. Serving in the household of Margaret Hill Morris, Nelly was so weakened by the lingering disease that Morris came to the conclusion in June that Nelly was not "fit for service." The situation had severely worsened by the end of the following month. "[P]oor Nelly is still in my family, – I believe she will die of consumption some time or other." Fortunately Nelly did recover and was able to continue on in service – however, not in the employ of Morris. By November, tentatively possessing "pretty good health," Nelly was serving a widowed shopkeeper and her children instead. While extant records do not state whether Morris relinquished Nelly's services due solely to her debilitated condition, a revealing observation of Morris's indicates that the health of the servant woman was still an issue. Writing to her sister Sarah Dillwyn, Morris observed, "As to Nellys going to the Ws – I doubt it will hardly suit, as she keeps but one Maid, and that ought to be a pretty sturdy one."<sup>73</sup>

A few years later, a similar situation echoed that of Nelly's involving yet another maid in the Morris household. "I shall be obliged to give up my good Girl DH to go to the Country this Summer," wrote Morris to another sister, Milcah Martha Moore. "[S]he has an obstinate cough which may probably end in Consumption—I have been obliged to dis-

71. *Drinker Diary*, Nov. 18, 1796 (2:861); Aug. 7, 1799 (2:1196); Nov. 25, 1800 (2:1357); Dec. 22, 1800 (2:1363); April 6, 1801 (2:1398); Feb. 2, 1803 (3:1622); Feb. 4, 1803 (3:1623); Feb. 23 (3:1629); Feb. 25, 1803 (3:1630); and Feb. 26, 1803 (3:1630). For information on the Female Society for Assisting the Distressed, see *Drinker Diary*, 2: 1363, note 153.

72. Smith, *The "Lower Sort"*, 47–48.

73. Margaret Hill Morris to Sarah Dillwyn and husband, George, June 9, July 25, and Nov. 15, 1787; n.d., Edward Wanton Smith Collection, Haverford Quaker Collection, Haverford College (hereafter QC).

miss her from my Nursery for many mo[nth]s past."<sup>74</sup>

For older women in particular, signs of infirmities associated with advancing age and years of exhausting labor meant loss of employment in an occupation such as domestic work, which placed considerable physical demands on women. Physical limitations and pain—perhaps arthritis—brought on by old age proved to be a stumbling block in one woman's ability to work as a spinner. Employer Margaret Hill Morris observed that the "poor old Woman" was only able to sit at the spinning wheel for half a day and tried to make up the remainder of her service to Morris through knitting.<sup>75</sup>

The struggles of Betty Burrage, the widow who frequented Drinker's steps, also poignantly illustrate this problem. An "Elderly Woman" by her sixties, Burrage faced on-going difficulties securing domestic work in part due to her age coupled with failing health. She was still "going to service" even as she approached seventy rapidly "untwisting the thread of life."<sup>76</sup>

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Many women domestics like Betty Burrage spent their remaining years locked into lives spiraling out of their control, pulled downwards by the burdens of age and ill health, which reinforced other daily complications of being self-supporting women in the eighteenth century. The result for growing numbers of older servants was an existence largely spent oscillating between occasional work and poor relief. The admission records to the Philadelphia poorhouse, replete with references to women who spent years at service, augments our knowledge of laboring-class women gleaned from the writings of servant-employing women like Elizabeth Drinker. These records paint a bleak portrait of serving women working for a succession of employers year after year, a fluctuating pool of laborers for whom the new urban economy meant

74. Margaret Hill Morris to Milcah Martha Moore, April 7, 1794, Edward Wanton Smith Collection, QC. Morris complained a few months earlier of yet another maid, Polly. Polly was "so poorly," wrote Morris, "I was glad to let her go," Margaret Hill Morris to Milcah Martha Moore, Feb. 7, 1795, Edward Wanton Smith Collection, QC.

75. Margaret Hill Morris to Hannah Moore, n.d., Edward Wanton Smith Collection, QC. Due to the circumstances, Morris complained that she did not know what to give the spinner in terms of payment.

76. *Drinker Diary*, Oct. 17, 1796 (2:853); Nov. 15, 1800 (2:1354); and Feb. 28, 1801 (2:1389). See also Aug. 12, 1797 (2:952) and Nov. 2, 1799 (2:1233).

living on the margins of society.<sup>77</sup>

Widow Rosannah Davis, after seven months in the poorhouse with a sore leg, left thinking that her leg had healed sufficiently that she would be "able to work out at Service for a living." She found employment with merchant John Mease in Norris Alley, but her leg "getting bad again in the [way?] of her service as a house Maid," she asked her employer for an order of readmission to the poorhouse in 1800.<sup>78</sup> While it is not known whether Davis recovered and reentered the work force, Alice Cravan retired out of service to the poorhouse. An "elderly decent looking Woman," Cravan worked as a housemaid and cook for Samuel Hodgson of Arch Street for one year before her advanced years prohibited her from working. In his 1801 recommendation to the Overseers, her employer explained that she had "conducted herself during that time in an approving orderly manner, but age and infirmities" obliged him to remove her to the institution.<sup>79</sup> Likewise, elderly Margaret Yankin left her last position in 1795 suffering a lame arm and general ill health. Her "retirement" in the poorhouse lasted just two months, as she died on Christmas day that same year.<sup>80</sup>

These individual profiles reveal the problematic nature of domestic service for laboring-class Philadelphia women within the context of a rapidly changing world. On the one hand, the growing population of older, self-supporting women that developed in this urban center was able to take advantage of the rising demand for household workers. The rapid expansion of the market economy and consumerism helped to fuel task specialization within the upper-class household. This process reshaped domestic work and brought greater employment opportunities to women laborers than previously. On the other hand, domestic serv-

77. Twice as many as men, for example, petitioned the Overseers of the Poor for relief prior to the Revolution. Smith, *"The Lower Sort"*, 170. Smith further argues that women in early America, as now, were economically more vulnerable than men and consequently comprised a majority of society's poor.

The presence of a sexual imbalance within the poorhouse population has still largely gone unnoticed by historians because of the attention given to the sex of people *entering* the institution rather than those *remaining* for prolonged periods. A sample of five years of the Daily Occurrence Dockets between 1788 and 1796, for example, reveals that, while women comprised but an average of forty-six percent of those entering the poorhouse, the mean sex ratio for the years 1787 to 1790 was 73.8. While men and women both entered the poorhouse for a variety of reasons, women remained residents for a much longer time, pointing to their greater dependency and vulnerability. See O'Neal, "Mistresses & Maids," 244-246; Salinger, "Send No More Women," 45, note 58; and Wulf, *Not All Wives*, 165.

78. Daily Occurrence Docket, Mar. 13, 1800, PCA; Stafford, *Philadelphia Directory for 1801*.

79. Daily Occurrence Docket, June 1, 1801, PCA.

80. Jacob Hiltzheimer Diary, Oct. 19, 1795, APS.

ice remained one of the few doors to waged work open to women prior to industrialization. A tenuous form of employment, service augmented a meager family income but fell far short of being a viable means of self-support. The family responsibilities and challenges of old age which these women struggled under, coupled with the low wages and sudden dismissals endemic to domestic work, compounded the hardships of life as independent wage-earning women. Moreover, the preponderance of solitary, widowed women like Betty Burrage, who so often vexed Elizabeth Drinker, offers a stark contrast to our assumption that marriage and family guaranteed women old age accompanied by support and economic stability. On the contrary, the growing population of poor women of the "lower sort" reveals that a different trend emerged by the post-Revolutionary era for an increasing number of women, one marked by instability for those who lacked the security afforded by supportive family members.

The pervasive experiences discussed above are rife with other implications for women as domestic service underwent the transition from bound to wage labor. This analysis has centered on serving women and the ways in which the realities of servitude competed with longstanding expectations about marriage and motherhood. The Anglo-American world had erected a long tradition of idealizing and fostering female dependency and submissiveness in their roles as daughters, wives, mothers, and perhaps especially, as young bound servants. Social and economic developments by the late eighteenth century had shaped domestic service, however, into a system that replaced binding contracts with freedom of choice, albeit choice constrained by the local labor market, for women—mistresses and maids alike. It was now possible for female domestics not only to choose employers but also to enter the married and maternal states without breaking the law, as was the case under the indenture system. They revealed a spirit of independence and skillful dexterity as they learned to become their own mistresses. However, if such features signaled victories for laboring-class women in the struggle to improve their lot, then the victories were largely Pyrrhic. Employers, as well as society in general, maintained most of the traditional attitudes that governed notions of household hierarchy and female dependency. Consequently, cultural norms as well as the legal system checked the spread of female independence. Ironically, the advancement of waged labor into the household largely undermined the ability of laboring-class women to enjoy steady employment and consequently handicapped their ability to shore up savings and "retire" from service to a more sta-

ble life. Rather, domestic service emerged as a life-long but increasingly problematic occupation that locked modestly independent women into impoverished, unstable lives.

Finally, the emergence of domestic service as a lifelong "career" challenges the manner in which historians think about gender and its application to concepts such as public and private, independence and dependence. Assumptions about neatly drawn gendered spheres are brought into question by the experiences of Philadelphia women who labored as domestic servants. For them, little distinction existed between public and private—although they found employment within domestic space. Rather, their lives revolved around a continual shifting from one position to the next, interspersed with periods in the city's streets, markets, and poorhouse, the "public" and the "private" blending, merging, and coexisting. Despite their participation in the public body of waged laborers, these women continued to eke out a marginal existence at best, constrained by the numerous economic and social mores placed on them as women. As a consequence, life in the "public" sector specifically, as well as in the new republic more generally, offered serving women but a tenuous and problematic independence that poorly reflected the natural rights secured to men.