“Send No More Women:”
Female Servants in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia

EARLY IN THE SPRING of 1773, Captain William McCulloch guided the ship Friendship from Belfast to Philadelphia. On May 5, two notices appeared in the Pennsylvania Gazette. The first announced that along with a general assortment of spring goods were a few barrels of Irish beef and Scotch herring. The second reported that the ship’s cargo included 250 servants. Dry goods could be purchased at James Stuart’s store on Second Street; the human cargo could be surveyed on board the ship. There potential buyers could select the servants they wanted, negotiate terms of indenture, and pay the captain. Rachel Walker was a passenger on board the Friendship; her indenture was purchased by Walter Shea, a Philadelphia merchant. Margaret McKiven, in return for cash paid to the captain, was assigned to serve Patrick Bevin of Southwark. Walker and McKiven were now the property of their masters and they began their lives as Pennsylvania indentured servants.

Although we can only imagine how these two young women must have felt as they began their new lives in America, we might reasonably suppose that they left their homes and families in Ireland in hopes of escaping a desperate poverty, of seeking some alternative to the increasingly difficult lives of their mothers and sisters before them. Perhaps, like many of their contemporaries, they had already moved from the countryside to seek work in the cities, to labor as domestic servants in the homes of wealthy families. Most likely, they cherished dreams of a better life than they had known, a modest prosperity,

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1 Pennsylvania Gazette, May 5, 1773
2 Record of Servants and Apprentices Bound and Assigned Before Honorable John Gibson, Mayor of Philadelphia, December 5, 1772—May 21, 1773, Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, XXXIV (1910), 218
stalwart husbands, homes and perhaps servants of their own. They could not have known as they stepped off the ship *Friendship* in the spring of 1773 that although they were part of a growing proportion of women who would work as servants in Philadelphia, merchants were warning their agents abroad to "send no more women." Nor could they know that they were about to enter not a promising world of opportunity but an unusually exploitative productive system. Indentured servants were treated little better than chattel and often after years of service, they were left as poor and vulnerable as when they began. Whatever illusions may have heightened the hopes of Rachel Walker and Margaret McKiven, they were about to enter a world in which they were more likely to end up in the poor house or a city hovel than to achieve the modest prosperity of their dreams.

Domestic labor in France and England is a story of peasant women and their urban migration. Young women forced to migrate out of economic necessity sought work in factories and domestic service. Domestic labor paid a sufficiently high wage to draw young women, and these women were able to experience some mobility. The nature of their work left them with virtually no free time. As a result, they had little opportunity to spend their wages and many were able to accumulate small savings. Women often worked only briefly at their domestic jobs, met available men, and married. The history of female indentured servitude in Pennsylvania was a constant struggle for subsistence beginning in the Old World and continuing in the new. Women, like McKiven and Walker, emigrated from Ireland, Germany, and England. They, like thousands of indentured servants who arrived before them, lacked the resources to pay for their passage. By signing an indenture for a specified number of years, the costs of their transportation were paid, and after their term of service expired, they were free to seek new world opportunities. However, unlike their European counterparts, Philadelphia servants could not choose between factory and domestic labor. Philadelphia remained a pre-industrial city

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until well into the nineteenth century. Women could choose only between low paying domestic labor or lower paying menial jobs.  

Throughout the eighteenth century, domestic service became increasingly feminized. Until late in the eighteenth century, indentured labor in Philadelphia was a primarily male institution. Females constituted less than one quarter of the servant population from the founding of the colony until the middle of the century. As the need for domestic labor rose in Philadelphia, the proportion of female indentured servants increased. The growth of the female indentured servant population does not signify a change in the role of female laborers. Rather, it reflects the altering class composition of Philadelphia society and a growing demand for domestic labor. The proportion of women began to climb just before the Revolution, and by 1795 female servants comprised approximately 40% of the servants in Philadelphia. By the


7 Marianne Wokeck found that the post-1760 migration to Pennsylvania from Germany included fewer families and thus proportionately more men to women. "The Flow and Composition of German Immigration to Philadelphia, 1727-1775," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, CV (1981), 265-66. However, Wokeck notes that there was a general decline in immigration of Germans beginning prior to the Seven Years War and continuing to the Revolution. Although the German servants dominated the immigration into Pennsylvania during the mid-eighteenth century, the Scots-Irish dominated the immigration of servants after the Seven Years War until the Revolution. Clues to the changing proportion of women are found in the indenture records of the City of Philadelphia, scattered passenger lists at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and immigration records. For the proportion of women 1718-1731, (14%), Jack and Marion Kaminkow, A List Of Emigrants From England To America, 1718-1759 (Baltimore, 1964). Although Wokeck determined the ratio of men to women arriving in Pennsylvania from Germany, it is not possible to determine from the data how many of the passengers arrived as servants. In 1745, 17.4% of the servants indentured in Philadelphia were women. List of Servants Bound and Assigned Before James Hamilton, Mayor of Philadelphia,
end of the eighteenth century, the character of indentured servitude had changed from an institution dominated by males to one in which female domestic labor played an important role. However, the proportion of female servants rose at a time when the institution of indentured servitude was in sharp decline.

Indentured servants were imported into Pennsylvania to fulfill the needs of a society that was chronically labor short. However, labor tasks were sex specific and most were reserved for men. During the earliest years of the colony, male servants were needed to build homes, clear land, and erect shops. As the colony grew and Philadelphia prospered, male servants were in demand to assist the growing urban artisan class. Construction workers provided homes for the immigrant streams; ship carpenters, caulkers, sawyers, coopers, joiners, and carters filled the needs of a mushrooming trading sector; and butchers, bakers, shoemakers and blacksmiths provided necessary services for the growing population. Male servants could be found working in virtually every sector of the economy and the cry for “stout laboring men and boys” was heard often during the colonial period.

Merchants instructed their captains and European correspondents to send no more women. In 1754, Thomas Willing wrote to his agents requesting a cargo “with 20 to 30 man and boy servants. . . .The servants should not be above 30 or less than 16 years old and no women.” In a letter to their ship captain, merchants James and Drinker requested that “if servants are dealt in avoid women altogether or as much as possible.” In 1764, merchant Benjamin Marshal warned his agent Thomas Murphy that “the less women the better as they are very

1745-1746, AM 3091, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. By 1772, the proportion of women servants rose to 30.5%. List of Servants and Apprentices Bound and Assigned before John Gibson, Mayor of Philadelphia, May 1771–May 1773, AM 3795, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. In the post-Revolutionary period, 1787–1795, the proportion of women rose to 39%. Registry of Redemptioners, 1785–1831, 2 vols., AM 3791, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. As the ratio of women to men climbed, the numbers of servants in Philadelphia dropped dramatically. Although it is difficult to document, domestic service most likely followed the pattern of labor generally. Masters preferred to hire rather than buy the time of a domestic worker. Thus, the pool of domestic servants came less from immigrant servants than from native born women who either resided in Philadelphia or migrated from the countryside.
troublesome." In the same year, Marshall wrote to another agent, Barnaby Eagen, that "stout laboring men and Tradesmen out of the Country with Young boys and Lads answer best, Women are so troublesome it would be best to send few or none as there is often so many Drawbacks on them."  

The sources never really say what was so troublesome about women servants. Perhaps because women worked as domestic servants and lived in close contact with their masters' families, prospective owners were selective and required more detailed references than most female servants could provide. In 1769, merchant Thomas Clifford warned his captain to "avoid so much as possible bringing women servants [for] 'tis not easy to get good places for them... without a character reference." Perhaps too, the voyage was more difficult for women. Merchants James and Drinker advertised the arrival of the ship Anna in 1769 and reported that all was in good order except that "several women servants if not all [are] bad with the itch." In a letter the following month, they referred to the same cargo and wrote that "but one of the women sold, the other three [are] at the hospital to be cured of convulsion Fits and the Itch and [we] shall be glad to get clear of them at any rate. Pray keep clear of the Sex in all further supplies of servants."  

Life for Pennsylvania's servants whatever the sex was not easy. Although they came voluntarily, servants left families, friends, and familiar communities, and traveled for weeks across the ocean, with little idea of what to expect in the New World. For the servants bound as married couples, the harshness of servant life may have been tempered. The stresses caused by leaving one's homeland may have been eased by sharing the journey with family members and by serving an indenture with a sympathetic partner. However, Eleanor Bradbury and her family had the misfortune of being separated upon arrival. Eleanor and her

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9 Sarah Maza suggests that women servants may have been in less demand because of the hostility they engendered from male masters. In a paper devoted primarily to exploring the servant subculture in eighteenth-century France, she suggests that the same hostility and distrust communicated to servants from masters may also account for masters' discomfort particularly with female servants. "Life on the Threshold The Subculture of Service in Eighteenth-Century French Towns," presented at the Northeastern Section meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, October 8, 1982, Rutgers University

10 Salinger, "Colonial Labor in Transition," 170
three sons were sold to a Maryland owner, while her husband Roger and their daughters remained in Pennsylvania and served Bucks County yeoman Randolph Blackshaw. Not surprisingly, Roger Bradbury never appeared in the Pennsylvania records as a freeman. Evidently, he left Pennsylvania after serving his time and rejoined his family.  

The attitudes of middle and upper class Philadelphia families toward domestic labor, the nature of domestic work and the master-servant relationship are difficult to assess. The diary of Elizabeth Drinker provides one window for viewing household labor relations. This wealthy Quaker wrote almost daily for over half a century. Her journal entries constitute an elaborate ledger of household work for both free and bound servants, and a unique testimony to the difficulties of the master-servant relationship. Often Elizabeth Drinker’s thoughts were consumed by how the current servant would work out or where she might find a suitable replacement for a servant who had just left.

Drinker’s diary suggests, for example, that free domestic laborers moved often from job to job. In the forty years between 1760 and 1800, fifty different women worked for the Drinker family. Only eight (14 percent) of the women who worked for Drinker stayed for more than one year. Because indentured servants were bound to the Drinkers for a specified number of years, they remained for longer periods. Polly Neugent served almost three years; Sally Dawson was bound for eight years. In contrast, hired servants tended to work for shorter periods—they averaged a little more than three months in the Drinker employ. Betty Burge came to the Drinkers on October 17, 1796, but five months later she left—much to the relief of Elizabeth Drinker. Mary Brookhouse was hired on a temporary basis, from 1778 to 1779, when the household chores were heavy. She spent a day in June cleaning house, assisted for a week in the kitchen, and worked most of August 1779. She arrived before noon and left after the mid-day meal. Clearly,

11 Salinger, “Labor and Indenture Servants,” Chapter 4
12 The Elizabeth Drinker Diary is at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Hereafter referred to as Drinker Diary
13 Servants averaged 3 2 months. The exceptions were Abey Spier—eight years, Sally Gardner—five and a half years, Janey Boon—three years and nine months, and Sussanah Swet—one year and one month
servants like Burge and Brookhouse could not depend on steady employment.

Although the length of employment differed, Elizabeth Drinker used the same criteria and methods for choosing both hired and indentured servants. She, of course, considered references and interviewed all potential employees. Most important, however, she required all servants to work for a trial period. When Sally Dawson was nine and a half years old her father brought her to the Drinkers. After a fifteen day trial period, she was indentured to serve the Drinkers for eight years.\textsuperscript{14} Hired servants also worked for a trial period after which the suitable employee was given the terms of the salary and the range of duties. Occasionally servants were hired for one job but performed another. Lisey Plummer was hired as a wet nurse to "suckle baby." However, her milk supply was never adequate and she agreed to stay instead as a baby nurse.\textsuperscript{15}

The hiring process for bound and free servants was comparable; the servant experience was not. Masters exercised far more power over indentured servants. When hired servants caused Drinker trouble, she often complained and lectured to them. Her final recourse was always to fire them as she did Caty Peterson: "dismist my maid this afternoon, on her return home after 2 or 3 days of frolocking."\textsuperscript{16} Similarly, if hired workers found it difficult to work with their mistresses, they could choose to leave. Sally Smith was given a warning by Elizabeth Drinker, but Smith took the initiative and quit.\textsuperscript{17} Clearly, hired servants were not in as subordinate a position as bound servants. Like indentured servants they were at the whim of their employers. However, they retained control over their labor and could seek more favorable employment if the work situation became intolerable.

Indentured servants did not have that option. Both masters and servants were bound by the terms of the contract. When Sally Dawson behaved amiss, Drinker apparently reached the end of her patience. She disciplined Dawson with a whipping.\textsuperscript{18} The power owners had over

\textsuperscript{14} Drinker Diary, December 5, 1793.
\textsuperscript{15} Drinker Diary, October 7, 1782.
\textsuperscript{16} Drinker Diary, January 10, 1780.
\textsuperscript{17} Drinker Diary, November 17, 1781 and November 24, 1781.
\textsuperscript{18} Drinker Diary, June 12, 1796.
indentured servants could extend beyond the actual period of indenture. Nancy Oat left the Drinkers in May 1775; two years later she returned to demand her freedom dues—money due to her at the end of her service. Apparently Oat received nothing because a month later her father visited the Drinkers to request the money. Finally, in November 1777, Nancy Oat apologized for her conduct and presumably received her dues. Whatever infraction she had committed jeopardized her freedom dues. Had she been a hired servant, she could have left without the same monetary risk.

The nature of domestic work in Philadelphia made servants indispensable in large families. Domestic servants performed an endless round of chores, were compelled to do disagreeable and potentially dangerous tasks, and were required to be available twenty-four hours a day. Not only were servants involved in routine tasks, but the demands placed upon them depended upon work cycles, the seasons, and the work environment. Common tasks included child care and servants were hired as wet nurses, baby nurses, as well as to tend the children. Household chores were completed within a standard pattern. A day of clothes washing was invariably followed by a day at the ironing table. The cooks prepared three meals a day plus tea. In the Drinker household, the family of six often constituted a minority at the table. With visitors and boarders, it was not unusual to have twelve to fifteen people for the main meal.

Space was so limited in eighteenth-century homes that privacy for servants or family members did not exist. The chamber maid slept at the foot of her mistress’s bed. Servants were called upon to assist their masters in the middle of the night in case of illness or when the fire alarm sounded. They were also awakened and summoned from their beds to respond to the most trivial of concerns—a barking dog or a

19 Drinker Diary, September 22, 1777, October 13, 1777, and November 17, 1777
20 In France and England after 1800, middle class families expected to have domestic servants and budgeted their financial resources accordingly McBride, The Domestic Revolution, 18, Patricia Branca, Women In Europe Since 1750 (London, 1978), 101 Not only did these servants help shoulder the burden of domestic chores, they provided families with a status symbol. The importance of status in Philadelphia must still be determined However, the nature of domestic work in large families makes it clear that servants were essential Branca, Women In Europe, 101
21 For example, Polly Campbell was hired to "tend the children" Drinker Diary, June 2, 1771
22 Drinker Diary, August 11, 1794
scary noise. Winter exacerbated the effect of the close quarters. The Drinkers closed up the cold back rooms of their house and with the entire household, four children, two parents, five servants and any boarders, crowded into the front chambers. Also during the winter, servants in the Drinker home were required to rise before the family to stoke the fires. The family was spared the hardship of dressing in a cold house or having to wait for their hot morning beverage.\textsuperscript{23}

Summer brought its own demands. The Drinkers, like many upper class Philadelphia families, vacated the city during the summer months. Servants usually spent three or four days preparing the summer home for occupancy. Drinker reported that "My Nancy and Jacob went to Frankford to clean the home," and then they helped with the move.\textsuperscript{24} Sally Brant worked in the city as a maid. But in 1794, while the Drinkers were at their summer plantation, Sally helped turn the hay.\textsuperscript{25}

The Drinkers left town not merely because they required a change of scenery, but to escape the virulent summer epidemics. The epidemic season impinged on servants' lives in terrifying ways. Molly Rhoades, the Drinkers' youngest daughter, had a maid who died in 1799 presumably of yellow fever. When Elizabeth Drinker insisted that her own maid, Judea, go to assist her daughter, Judea refused. She apparently feared for her own safety and did not want to work in a home where yellow fever had been present. Drinker finally persuaded Judea to go although the method of persuasion is unclear.\textsuperscript{26} In addition, servants were often required to remain in the fever ridden city to protect their masters' vacant homes. Patience was left behind to tend the house while the family and all of the other servants escaped the city.\textsuperscript{27} No one wanted to leave a large home unattended and the task fell to the servants.

Free domestic servants had few legal options if they were treated in unfair ways. A body of law existed in Pennsylvania to protect indentured servants. It is difficult, however, to assess the relationship between the law and the reality of servants' lives. Once indentured servants were the legal property of their owners and masters were taxed for

\textsuperscript{23} Drinker Diary, January 17, 1796.
\textsuperscript{24} Drinker Diary, July 28, 1772.
\textsuperscript{25} Drinker Diary, July 31, 1794.
\textsuperscript{26} Drinker Diary, June 25, 1799.
\textsuperscript{27} Drinker Diary, July 21, 1799.
their servants and exercised enormous control over their servants’ lives. Virtually every imaginable behavior was controlled by a corresponding statute. One required servants to work all day six days a week. Others prohibited servants from indulging in sex, marrying without consent, or purchasing liquor. Servants were required to serve additional time for running away. The laws did include provisions to protect servants and changes in the code reflect the growing complexity of the institution. If masters were “tyrannical” or abusive, they could be warned not to provoke the servants. Masters could not sell their servants out of the province without the servant’s consent and authorization from two justices of the peace. In 1729, as the tide of immigration to Pennsylvania increased, all sales and assignments of servants were to be made before the mayor or city recorder. When the terms of the indenture were completed, masters were required to award their servants freedom dues. During the first years of the colony, men and women were entitled to fifty acres of land. Later, freedom dues generally consisted of clothes, tools and occasionally small amounts of cash. In 1765, a major piece of legislation, passed to regulate the servant trade from Germany, forbade separating married couples and required that the importers take precautions to insure the health of their passengers.28

In theory, Pennsylvania also had an extensive legal system to protect servants from abuse suffered at the hands of their masters. But servants sought the assistance of the courts only rarely. Many servants were probably unaware that a court system existed which could work to protect them. Others lived in remote areas with restricted access to the courts. Still others may have been inhibited by the added service that could be required if the court determined that an accusation against a master were unfounded.29

Rather than use the legal system, indentured servants tended to choose other means to protest or express their impatience with indenture. The most common was running away. This was a serious offense. If caught, the servant faced stiff penalties and not only had to spend five additional days for every day lost but had to reimburse the master for any expenses incurred in the capture. Since few servants had money, the normal result was extended service. Eleanor Fing ran away from her

29 Salinger, “Labor and Indentured Servants,” 279-281
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Philadelphia owner Charles Masie. Masie petitioned the court for redress. He claimed that Fing was absent from work for eleven days and he spent six pounds apprehending her. She was required to serve six months after the expiration of her indenture. 30

Women chose to abscond from servitude for a variety of reasons. Some escaped to rejoin husbands or family. In 1767, Rose O'Bryan, a sixteen year old Irish servant, ran away from her owner Jacob Kaiser. He speculated that she had not left the city since “she says she is married to a taylor that lived in the same house she formerly belonged to. . .who sold her about twelve months ago.”31 Christiana Weeks, an English servant, had been in the colony only three months when her owner advertised that she was missing. Since Christiana had a certificate of marriage to Nathaniel Weeks, her master assumed that she was headed toward New York to reunite with him.32 Mary Cotney, an Irish servant, was thought to have left her service to seek out her husband in Boston.33 Mary Musgrove apparently ran away because she was “remarkable fond of a sweetheart.”34

Occasionally, servants ran away because masters made their lives so unstable. Transferred from owner to owner, they chose to flee rather than suffer yet another master. Carolina Bosinger, a thirty year old Dutch servant, was purchased originally by Peter Miller. He sold her to John Hill. Hill assigned her to George Snider who sold her to John Great from whom Arthur Broades purchased her.35

The master-servant relationship was extremely demeaning for women and may have caused many women to abscond. Some sense of this relationship is gleaned by the language masters used to describe their runaways. Jane Jacobsen escaped repeatedly and her owner could find no kinder description of her than “stout fat woman.”36 Runaway Catherine Caisey was similarly described as a “chunky, fat lump.”37

30 Philadelphia County Court of Quarter Sessions Docket, volume 4, 1774, 34.
31 Pennsylvania Gazette, June 25, 1767.
32 Pennsylvania Gazette, October 19, 1774.
33 Pennsylvania Gazette, November 15, 1775.
34 Pennsylvania Gazette, December 27, 1786.
35 Pennsylvania Gazette, August 4, 1779. See also, January 26, 1774 and August 10, 1774.
36 Pennsylvania Gazette, April 5, 1775. Jane Jackson may have been caught only to run away again. July 19, 1775.
37 Pennsylvania Gazette, July 17, 1776.
Perhaps masters indulged in derogatory language in order to underscore their servants' inferiority while legitimizing their own positions of authority. These attitudes were no doubt communicated to the servants, and some responded by running away. In either case, some masters clearly had very little respect for their servants and did not spare ridicule.

Masters claimed that pregnancy was the most common reason women servants ran away, and often assumed that if their servants ran away they must be pregnant. Of the women who were pregnant, many were married or had a loving partner. Ann Carson fled from her Philadelphia master in search of John Herson. Carson was “supposed with [his] child.” They had traveled to Pennsylvania on the same ship but she was indentured to a Philadelphia master and he to a Lancaster County resident.38 Sarah Clarke, who was married to a soldier in Ireland, came to Pennsylvania in the fall of 1775. She too looked “very suspicious of being with child.”39 Before Catherine Kennedy ran away, she confessed to her owner that “she was with child.”40

Women servants who became pregnant while under the indenture paid a stiff price. In January 1777, Margaret Sexton delivered two female mulatto children. Her owner, Hugh McCullough, petitioned the court to compensate him for the loss of her service while she recovered from the birth, and for the charges paid for nursing and attendance while she was lying in. Sexton’s term of service, which was to expire in 1779, was extended by the court for two more years. In addition, the overseers of the poor bound her children to serve McCullough.41

Merchants no doubt had the troublesome nature of pregnancy in mind when they inveighed their agents to send no more women. In the Elizabeth Drinker household, pregnancy caused the most distress in her relationship with her female servants. Elizabeth Drinker first suspected that her servant Sally Brant was pregnant on August 8, 1794. This possibility distressed Drinker, who admitted that “for a week past [she] labored under great anxiety of mind on account of our poor little

38 *Pennsylvania Gazette*, September 7, 1774. See also, March 29, 1775 and June 14, 1775.
39 *Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 29, 1775.
40 *Pennsylvania Gazette*, September 20, 1775. Also, December 27, 1775.
41 Philadelphia County Court of Quarter Sessions Docket, volume 4, September 1779, 150.
and I fear miserable S[ally] B[rant]. 'Tis possible I am mistaken though I greatly fear the worse.’ Moreover, Elizabeth Drinker was clearly angry over Brant’s pregnancy. “I could not have thought,” Drinker lamented, “that a girl brought up from her 10th year with the care and kindness that S[ally] B[rant] has experienced from our Family, could be so thoughtless.” The situation was not helped by the fact that Sally Brant showed little remorse and “appears to be full of Glee as if nothing ailed her.”

Part of Sally Brant’s pregnancy took place while the family was living at Clearfield, their summer home. Elizabeth Drinker was so embarrassed by her servant’s pregnancy that when the family returned to the city they did so without Sally: “what could I do with S[ally] B[rant] in her present appearance with a crowd of company?”

A few weeks after the baby was born, Sally Brant returned to work in Philadelphia, but without the baby who was left with a hired nurse. Not only did Elizabeth Drinker prevent Sally Brant from caring for her baby, she did not even allow Sally to name the child as she wished. Sally planned to give the child its father’s surname, but this so horrified the Drinkers, that they named the child Catherine Clearfield, after their summer home. Joe, the father, tried on several occasions to visit Sally and to see his child, but Henry Drinker warned him that if he ever “found him sculking about our neighborhood he would lay him by the heels.” Joe never saw the baby, nor did Sally ever see her again—the infant died.

Sally Brant was required to serve additional time to make-up for the expenses incurred as a result of her pregnancy, the time she lost while she recovered from the birth, as well as the nurse’s salary. Sally might have found this punishment particularly onerous since she had no say in hiring the nurse and she may have thought the nurse responsible for her baby’s death. Elizabeth Drinker expressed sadness at the news of Catherine’s death and thought perhaps they should have tried to raise the baby in their home. Yet Drinker philosophically surmised that all had probably worked out for the best.

A year later, on June 15, 1796, Elizabeth Drinker noted that Sally

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42 Drinker Diary, August 20, 1794; and, September 30, 1794.
43 Drinker Diary, September 27, 1794.
44 Drinker Diary, February 14 and 26, 1794.
45 Drinker Diary, July 2 and July 6, 1795.
“left us before tea, ’tis eight years this month that she has been with us.” Sally Brant's pregnancy and the baby's death must have had a tremendous emotional impact on both servant and mistress. However, in the diary, the tragedy was measured by the disruption of the household, the breakdown of the master servant relationship, and Elizabeth Drinker's sense of offended propriety.

Life for Pennsylvania's female indentured servants was as varied as the number of masters. Some masters were abusive and their servants ran away. Others found it necessary to sell their servants, and as a result often separated married couples. Families like the Drinkers appear to have treated their servants even handedly. And yet, this did not prevent difficulties; hired servants left, and a steady stream of female employees flowed through their home. But still, the majority of all women servants did not run away nor did they appear in the colonial court records as defendants or plaintiffs. Most served out their terms, received their freedom dues and entered colonial society as free persons.

The experience after servitude, for most of Pennsylvania's female servants, is unfortunately lost from view. However, for the women who arrived in Pennsylvania during the first years of settlement, a surprising number of sources provide glimpses of their lives as free persons.

Of the sixteen women who served indentures between 1683 and 1686 and who could be traced, all married. Ten married former servants. Hannah Mogridge and Cicely Wooley married fellow servants before their indentures were completed. Elizabeth Day and Jeremiah Osbourne served the same owner and married as soon as they were free. Servants who married other servants did have some advantages. Alice Dickenson and Edmund McVeagh, for example, were able to begin married life with a combined “head land” of 100 acres. Although they sold rights to the land in 1703, they requested a survey on an additional 250 acres of land purchased in Dublin Township the previous year. James Sutton and Hannah Falkener received 100 acres of land at the end of their service. By 1718 they were renting 45 acres at one penny sterling per acre. The Suttons appeared in the County Commissioners' report as owing money; they had apparently run away with a debt of two shillings and six pence on their estate. Even with their 100 acres of

Drinker Diary, June 15, 1796.
combined freedom land, they were unable to keep ahead of the bill collector, and by 1728, had left the area never to appear again in the Pennsylvania colonial records.47

The six women who did not marry former servants fared better. Jan Worral married Samuel Dark at the Middletown Quaker meeting in December 1686, two months after achieving her freedom. Dark served as constable from Bucks County in 1686 and was later sent as a representative to the Provincial Assembly. Elinor Barber arrived in Pennsylvania with her owner Griffith Jones in February 1681. In May 1689 she married merchant James Thomas who, by 1701, owned at least 400 acres and paid tax on one of the highest assessments in the 1709 tax list.48

Tracing the post-servitude experiences of eighteenth-century servants is more difficult. Elizabeth Drinker provides information on a few of her former servants, both indentured and hired, who visited with her many years after they had ceased to serve her. Mary Brookhouse appeared at the Drinker’s door, twenty-one years after she worked for the family, and demanded money.49 Brookhouse’s request clearly upset Drinker. Also clear, however, is that Mary Brookhouse was reduced to begging in her later years.50 Betty Burge worked for the Drinkers at some time prior to 1796. In October of that year she was rehired. Three years later she called upon Elizabeth Drinker and reported that she was indisposed. She had injured herself falling out of a wagon and she wanted Henry Drinker, Elizabeth’s husband, to recommend her to the overseers of the poor. “I gave her some victuals and some money,” Drinker recorded, “but I don’t expect H[enry] D[rinker] will give her a good character, he can’t, tho’ perhaps she may be recommended as a proper object of charity.” Betty Burge drops from sight after this entry, but obviously her work as a domestic servant did not spare her from needing charity later in her life.51

Polly Moore came to the Drinkers with a similar tale of woe. She reminded Elizabeth Drinker that she had worked for them eleven years

48 Salinger, “Labor and Indentured Servants,” 74-75.
49 Drinker Diary, August 24, 1799.
50 Drinker noted that Brookhouse died just three months later at the age of 63. Drinker Diary, November 10, 1799.
51 Drinker Diary, October 17, 1796; and November 2, 1799.
before. In the interim, she had buried two husbands and one child. She was not asking for anything, but Elizabeth Drinker commented that she was as "poor as Job's turkey. . .and [she] gets a living for herself and child as well as one can." The only servant who returned with a hopeful tale was Polly Neugent. She had served a four-year indenture with the Drinkers. Elizabeth Drinker seemed genuinely glad to see her and described Neugent as having four children, all daughters. In addition, Drinker reported that she had "an industrious husband." But soon after she visited, Neugent's fortune changed. She called again, a year later, to solicit business for her husband, a blacksmith. In 1797, Grace Biddle came to the Drinker's door for aid. She had worked for them eleven years before. Her husband had just died and she needed help. It would seem that a stream of former servants appeared at Drinker's door to request aid.

Service in the Drinker household probably represents the best situation available to women in Philadelphia. To be a servant in a Quaker family may have carried its own set of burdens, but it was no doubt a favorable work environment. Quaker families were governed by a code of ethics to treat their servants just as they would their children. Familial language was appropriate and although discipline was acceptable, it was never to be doled out in anger. In addition, servants were never to be overworked or oppressed.

Service in the Drinker household would have been potentially more pleasant than in non-Quaker families. Elizabeth Drinker was quite maternal toward her servants and did pay the going rate for their work. In addition, servants were not forced to attend the Quaker meeting. She reported that one of her servants attended chapel while another worshiped at the Presbyterian church. In this light, however, the experiences of the women in the Drinker household are especially poignant. If the women who served the wealthy Quaker family fared so poorly after gaining freedom or leaving its employ, others must have been truly desperate.

52 Drinker Diary, January 12, 1799.
53 Drinker Diary, March 4, 1795.
54 Drinker Diary, June 8, 1796.
55 Drinker Diary, May 2, 1797.
57 Frost, The Quaker Family, 140.
The admission dockets of the Guardians of the Poor reveal that servant women all over Philadelphia shared the likelihood of bleak futures with the women who worked for the Drinker family. Indeed, women carried more than their share of the burden of poverty in late eighteenth-century Philadelphia. They constituted a disproportionate number of the population of the poor house. Although more men were admitted and discharged, the population of the poor house contained a significant sexual imbalance. Almost two-thirds of the residents were women. Unlike Boston, however, the poor women of Philadelphia were not primarily war widows. Pennsylvania never participated in colonial wars to the same extent as Massachusetts. In 1742, a “staggering 30 percent of [Boston’s] married women had no spouses to contribute to the support of their households.” Since the Quaker capitol took a traditionally pacifist role and only rarely recruited sizeable numbers of men to fight, the origins of female poverty must lie elsewhere.

The fact that they were women made them vulnerable in specific ways. Thus, the large female population of the poor house reflects that some women sought its refuge as a maternity hospital. Mary Bowgh, pregnant by her master and “destitute of necessaries,” was admitted to the poor house to lie in. In this same month, four other women were admitted with the same need. It is not surprising that many women who bore illegitimate children in Philadelphia were forced to do so in the poor house. And these women tended to remain for relatively long periods. Some, like Sussanah Jones, remained only for a month. Jones lay in almost immediately after being admitted but ran away exactly one month later. More typical however, is Mary Owen. She arrived in the poor house on March 10, 1788, laid in, and remained for more than two months.

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58 The mean sex ratio was 73.8 for the years 1787 to 1790. These are the only years for which the total poor house population is given. Admission Dockets of the Guardians of the Poor, City Archives Philadelphia.
60 Guardians of the Poor, December 4, 1787.
61 Guardians of the Poor, December 1787.
62 Guardians of the Poor, December 20, 1787 and January 20, 1788; March 10, 1788 and May 23, 1788. From the period when the Guardian of the Poor Daily Occurrence Docket begins in November 1787 to December 1800, a number of women were admitted as “pregnant.”
The poor house also doubled as an immigrant aid home and often provided recent arrivals with their first housing in Philadelphia. Ann Larky had been imported into Philadelphia from Londonderry. Since she was pregnant, she gained admission to the poor house and her importers were liable for her costs. In January 1794, four women were admitted into the poor house directly from their ship. They had lately arrived from Belfast on the brig Susannah and all were ill with ship’s fever. The ship Swift arrived from Ireland in August 1794 and soon after a few of its passengers were admitted with ship’s fever. They were “very ill, helpless, and Destitute.”

More important, however, the disproportionate number of women in the poor house is further indication that poverty continued to be a reality in late eighteenth-century Philadelphia. The causes of these difficulties have been well documented elsewhere. Once on the bottom of the economic ladder in Philadelphia, upward movement was virtually impossible. Women like Mary Johnston, the people from a Southwark cellar, and wives left by husbands reveal most saliently how few options were available to the struggling poor. Johnston was brought to the poor house by the constable who discovered that she was “about to Drown her Child on Sunday.” Eight persons were brought into the poor house in July 1794. All were suffering from a fever “and they are all brought in, from the same cellar or Hoval in Plumb Street Southwark.” The men, women and children in this group were “sick, helpless and destitute” shut away in some cellar and temporarily baled out of their misery by the city’s overseers. Junius Down and her three week old baby were left “destitute and distressed” when her husband died suddenly. Ann Wilson and her six week old baby had just arrived from Ireland when they sought relief in the poor house. Her husband

Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott found that women “who bore illegitimate children were often those with no ties to their family of origin.” Women, Work, and Family (New York, 1978), 39. Most illegitimate births did come from the poorest members of the community. They were the most vulnerable and were least able to enforce marriage

63 Guardians of the Poor, March 5, 1788
64 Guardians of the Poor, January 14, 21, and 23
65 Guardians of the Poor, August, 11 and 12, 1794
66 For the best and most important treatment of this see, Gary B Nash, The Urban Crucible (Cambridge, Mass., 1980).
67 Guardians of the Poor, June 30, 1788.
68 Guardians of the Poor, July 19 and 26, 1794.
had gone into the country in search of work and in a distressed state they were admitted into the poor house. 69

In addition, the large number of women residing in the poor house reflects the difficulties faced by many indentured servants who had served their time with families like the Drinkers and who had no place to go or means of support when they were freed. On November 17, 1788, Margaret Harrison requested admission into the poor house. She had served an indenture with Peter Souder in the Northern Liberties and arrived at the poor house door destitute and “severely poxed.” Elizabeth Burrage, who worked off and on for the Drinkers, entered the poor house after a fall on March 6, 1789. She returned in May 1790 because she was ill and remained in the poor house for almost two months. Nancy Dougan who came to Pennsylvania from Ireland, entered the poor house sick soon after she finished serving her indenture. 70 Alice Brady had been bound several years ago to Widow Sutor. She arrived at the poor house “neglected and distressed.” 71 Susannah Kirk served an indenture with Abner Lukens and since her freedom worked “at service for six years past with different families in this city.” She was admitted into the poor house sick and incapable of “helping herself.” 72

The names of former servants roll off the pages of the admissions docket. They arrived in the colony, served their time, and landed in the poor house sick, destitute, totally without resources.

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Indentured servitude was an entirely different institution for men and women. “Send no more women” indicates that merchants who imported servants into the colony were aware of the problems. In Pennsylvania the jobs performed by women were in less demand. Although the proportion of female servants rose during the late eighteenth century, implying an increased demand for domestic servants, women always remained in the minority of the servant population. In addition, the proportion of women rose at a time when the entire institution of

69 Guardians of the Poor, December 11, 1797.
70 Guardians of the Poor, August 19, 1796.
71 Guardians of the Poor, November 15, 1797. Margaret Fisher served her time with Frederick Stall a Philadelphia rope maker. She arrived at the poor house sick and venereal. February 18, 1800.
72 Guardians of the Poor, July 16, 1800.
indentured servitude was in sharp decline. By the late eighteenth century, Philadelphia masters preferred to hire cheap free workers rather than purchase the time of an indentured servant.

The costs exacted from women by the system were also far greater than for men. Indentured servitude was one stage in the life cycle of immigrant women. The servant experience paralleled the fate of other laboring class women on both sides of the Atlantic who endured the years of late adolescence and early womanhood as servants in the homes of middle and upper-class families. Women served their time during their reproductive years. However, celibacy was required. If servants became pregnant, the whole system was disrupted. The law supported the masters and they demanded to be repaid for work time lost. Servants were severely penalized even to the extent of jeopardizing the freedom of their newborns. The welfare of mother and child was the last issue considered.

Clearly, the system did not work as well for women. And yet, in spite of the obvious difficulties, many continued to immigrate to Pennsylvania to serve indentures. For women on the bottom of the social order, few other options were available. Their desperate need to leave their poverty in the Old World or their struggle with subsistence underlay their entrance into an unusually exploitative production system. After they completed their indentures and entered the free labor market, it was clear that indentured servitude had not launched them on their way up the economic ladder. For them, serving an indenture or working as a free domestic servant provided a passage to the New World and a ticket into the Poor House.