Lincoln’s Hired Girls

As newlyweds, Abraham and Mary Lincoln did not have much money and lived in rental properties for well over a year after they were married. During that time, Mrs. Lincoln took on the sole responsibility for care of their home while Mr. Lincoln worked to establish his law career. In 1844 they were able to purchase a small cottage at Eighth and Jackson Streets and were later able to arrange for hired help to assist with the intense work that went along with maintaining a home and caring for a family, including a baby son. Most middle class families had hired help and for the Lincolns the assistance was especially needed during the next seventeen years that saw the birth of three more sons; the expansion of the home to double its size; and, the rise of Mr. Lincoln from successful attorney to president-elect. The Lincolns employed help that reflected the population of Springfield, including recent immigrants from Ireland and Portugal as well as African Americans and white employees who had lived in the United States for many years.

The hired girl was not always a girl. Some were women. Their ages ranged anywhere from eight to seventy five years old. Most of the women were single or widowed. The average pay was between $1 and $1.50 per week. Depending upon the hired help’s living situation, a portion of their pay went towards room and board. The general jobs performed by these women would include laundress; cook; governess or child care provider; seamstress; and, servers. Other duties were more menial, including making fires, emptying chamber pots, cleaning lamps, and carrying water from the well and cistern. The length of time worked by these women varied. Some worked for a period as short as two weeks and some as long as ten years.

1850 census entry for the Lincoln household listed:
Abraham Lincoln, 40 yrs old
Mary Lincoln, 28 yrs old
Robert Lincoln, 7 yrs old
Catharine Gordon, 18 yrs old

Some of the hired help lived with the Lincoln family. When the 1850 Census was taken, Catharine Gordon, an 18 year old woman from Ireland, was listed as a resident. The 1860 Census revealed that Mary Johnson, a woman of Irish descent resided at the Lincoln home. Other hired help that worked for the Lincolns did their work and returned home to their own families. The Lincoln neighborhood and Springfield were very diverse with neighbors and friends of many different backgrounds.
**NO IRISH NEED APPLY.**

Written and sung by Miss KATHLEEN O'NEIL.

WANTED.—A smart active girl to do the general housework of a large family. One who can cook, clean plates, and get up fine linen preferred.


I'm a simple Irish girl, and I'm looking for a place,
I've felt the grip of poverty, but sure that's no disgrace.

This song by Kathleen O’Neildecilies the prejudice against the Irish in England and offers a hopeful message for something better in the United States. This song was based upon ads in the newspapers which stated “NINA” or, No Irish Need Apply.

**In November of 1849, 130 people came to Springfield, from Madeira, Portugal to escape religious persecution. This group of exiles established a new Presbyterian church, called Second Portuguese Presbyterian Church and made Springfield home. Charlotte Rodrioguis was six years old when she arrived in Springfield with her father, Joseph in 1849. Eleven years later, from May until August of 1860, she was a seamstress for Mary Lincoln. She labored from 7 AM until 6 PM working on dresses that Mary Lincoln wore while entertaining guests during Lincoln’s candidacy and while he was president-elect. Charlotte married Manuel De Souza in 1860, and lived to the old age of 92.**

The Lincoln’s Irish hired help, like so many of their fellow countrymen, had immigrated to the United States in the beginning of the nineteenth century due to harsh conditions in Ireland. Some Americans were fearful of this immigrant group. They were distrustful of their Catholic faith and thought that would bring Irish traditions and influence to the households in which they were working.

One Irish immigrant, Mary Fagan, recalled her time at the Lincoln home. She remembered that she was taken out of school and worked for the Lincolns for 2 weeks when she was 8 years old, and during that time she saw jelly, pig feet, and celery for the first time in her life.

Mariah Vance worked for the Lincoln family for ten years.