



The Longfellow Washington Bulletin

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The “Servant Problem” in the History of a Historic Home

Life in any historic mansion like the Longfellow House—Washington's Headquarters National Historic Site required a skilled staff of live-in domestic servants. Yet it is often hard to find information about these people. What were their names? How did they live? What became of them?

We can still see traces of the Longfellow family staff in the House. The kitchen and laundry room have the most

obvious evidence: a 1901 range, a work table, a three-basined sink. The attic rooms for the female servants, now unfurnished, show how closely they lived to the family and each other. And we are fortunate that the Longfellows left records about some of their household employees. This issue of the *Bulletin* delves into the work of domestic servants over the span of the House's history.

A “Very Excellent” Dinner Party in 1845

On December 20, 1849, Henry Longfellow recorded in his journal, “We had a nice dinner party to-day...A whole table full of authors and authoresses! We fed them upon canvasback ducks, quail, Roman punch, three kinds of American wines, Sparkling Catabwa, Gabella and Scuppermong. It was very charming.”

The nine guests at table included poet James Russell Lowell, Swedish author and reformer Fredika Bremer, actress Charlotte Cushman, and politician Charles Sumner. In her own diary, Bremer called the Longfellows' dinner party “very excellent,” and she had gone to several that week.

The ease with which Henry Longfellow noted the dinner party belies the amount of work that went into it, on top of the everyday labor of running the House. Someone had to shop for and cook and serve the meal, wash and polish the table settings, launder the tablecloth and sweep the carpet. Someone had to haul the coal or wood that heated the stove and the House that December evening. If guests arrived by carriage, someone had to drive and look after the horses. Someone had to open the door in the Blue Entry to let those guests in and take their coats.

In December 1849, the Longfellows employed four domestic servants for those tasks. Their work behind the scenes was essential to maintaining the family's upper-class standard of living.

Mary Patten, the cook, had the most direct role in the dinner. Her domain was the kitchen, where she prepared the ducks and quail for the guests' enjoyment. She cleaned the kitchen after finishing the meal, perhaps with assistance from the maid. Patten's length of service and indications of previous work for the Appleton family suggest that she was the leader of the household staff, certainly supervising the other women.



The maid-of-all-work, Bridget Marr, also had a direct hand in entertaining. She would have kept the House clean for the family and their guests. Because she was the only maid working in the House at the time, this would have required cleaning every room, making all the beds, and emptying chamber pots and washbasins. It is possible she or Mrs. Patten was responsible for part of the laundry; the Longfellows had laundry done both in-house and sent out. In December, Marr would have been responsible for preparing the fireplaces to provide heat for the rooms in use. Both Patten and Marr worked over twelve hours a day at least six days a week to keep the household running.

Two other servants had support roles for that evening's entertainment. Nurse Ellen May took care of five-year-old Charley and four-year-old Erny, keeping them out of the way of the party. The gardener, John Mears, probably lent a hand in household tasks during winter. —Kate Hanson Plass

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For more information, please visit:

www.friendsoflongfellowhouse.org for additional information linked to this issue, including color photographs and before-and-after images of other restored artifacts.

www.nps.gov/long for information on visiting the House and events there, as well as photographs, descriptions, and finding aids for its collections, garden, and archive.

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Since 1996 the Friends of the Longfellow House–Washington’s Headquarters, a not-for-profit volunteer group, has worked with the National Park Service to promote educational visitor programs, scholarly access to collections, publications about the Longfellow–Washington site’s history, and advocacy for preservation.

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The Longfellow–Washington site became part of the U.S. National Park Service system in 1972. Built in 1759, the House’s many layers of history, its garden and grounds, and its extensive museum collections reflect the birth and cultural flowering of the nation. The House served as headquarters for General George Washington early in the Revolutionary War. From 1837 to 1950 it was the home of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, America’s most popular poet, and his family.

From Servitude to Independence in the 1700s

The Longfellow–Washington mansion could not have been built without the labor of enslaved people. We do not know who constructed the house for John Vassall when he came of age in 1759, but his funds came from slave-labor plantations on the island of Jamaica. People of African origin harvesting sugar cane provided Vassall, his wife Elizabeth, and the seven children they had in Cambridge with a comfortable lifestyle.

Part of the Vassalls’ lifestyle included domestic workers in their home, at least some and perhaps all of them slaves—or, as colonial Massachusetts law referred to them, “servants for life.” Unfortunately, we have no documents about those people except for one family.

That family was headed by Anthony or Tony, born about 1713 in the Spanish Caribbean and bought by Henry Vassall, John’s uncle, as a coachman. In 1742 Henry married Penelope Royall, daughter of Isaac Royall of Medford. Penelope came to Henry’s house in Cambridge (now 94 Brattle Street) with several slaves, including a child named Cuba, probably born the Royall estate (now the Royall House and Slave Quarters). Eventually Tony and Cuba married and began to have children. Around the time that Henry Vassall died in 1768, Penelope sold Cuba and her children to her nephew John across the street while keeping Tony as her property.

In September 1774 John Vassall,

a Loyalist, took his wife and children into Boston. Penelope Vassall later joined him behind the British army lines. They left Tony and Cuba and possibly other servants in Cambridge to look after their estates. While Penelope eventually returned to her house after the war, John and Elizabeth Vassall never saw Massachusetts again after 1776.

The war cast Tony and Cuba and their children into a legal limbo. Were they still property, and if so whose? Or had they become free? Tony continued to work the Vassall farmland, as well as doing work at the Royall house, and received payments from the officials administering those estates in their owners’ absence.

In 1778 the Massachusetts government moved to confiscate John Vassall’s property. Tony petitioned the state, arguing that the Vassall estate would have supported him in his old age and his family did not deserve to be thrown off it. The legislature voted to pay him a £12 pension, and in 1783 the state courts ended slavery in Massachusetts.

Tony and Cuba and their children took the surname Vassall and settled in their own house in Cambridge. Tony Vassall became a farrier, working with horses. In 1791 he may have gone to work as a driver for Andrew Craigie, new owner of the John Vassall house, but that job lasted only two months. In the new republic Tony Vassall was no longer a domestic servant but an independent businessman.



Service at Washington's Headquarters

On July 7, 1775, five days after the Continental Army's new commander-in-chief arrived in Cambridge, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress appointed "a committee to procure a steward for his excellency General Washington" and to find "two or three women, for cooks." The congress sought "some ingenious, active, and faithful man," plus "some capable woman, suitable to act in the place of a house-keeper, and one or more good female servants."

Recent research has identified that steward at headquarters as Timothy Austin of Charlestown, a fifty-seven-year-old church deacon and leather-dresser. He probably brought his wife Lydia and his thirty-year-old daughter Mary, child of his first marriage. The Austins had lost their home in June when the British army burned Charlestown in the Battle of Bunker Hill. Working at headquarters gave them a place to live and an income, as well as a way of supporting the Continental cause.

Another refugee from Charlestown who found work at the House was seventeen-year-old Elizabeth Chapman. In April, Austin paid her for six months' work. After the war she married Ozias Goodwin, a ship's captain from Connecticut who became a successful Boston merchant.

Most of the Cambridge staff stayed in Massachusetts when the headquarters moved south, but a free black woman named Margaret Thomas remained on the general's domestic support staff throughout the war.

Did you recognize the piece of furniture pictured on the last page of this *Bulletin* next to the address panel? It is a commode, and its top hinges up to reveal a seat with an inset enamel chamber pot. The House did not have indoor plumbing until after Henry Longfellow's death.



In July and August 1843 Nathan Appleton bought two lots of bedroom furniture from Boston furniture maker George Archbald for his daughter Fanny and her new husband. That order included "2 Chamber Cupboards" for \$45—most likely the two commodes still in the House today in the second-floor bedrooms.

In 1843, the Longfellows' maid earned about \$1.42 per week. At that wage, it would have taken her almost four months to afford one of the commodes that she was responsible for cleaning daily. —K.H.P.

Signs and Signals

Visitors to the House do not see the servants' quarters in the attic on regular tours, but they can spot signs of those workers' presence in the remnants of the call bell systems.

The oldest system consisted of a series of wires and pulleys that connect to bells hanging in the servants' dining room and the kitchen. The Longfellows, and perhaps the Craigies before them, rang those bells via pull cords in different rooms. On hearing a bell and seeing which one was ringing, the staff member would respond to the appropriate room.



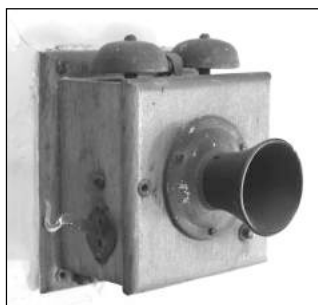
Late in Alice Longfellow's lifetime, she had a second call bell system installed. Made by the American Telephone & Telegraph (Bell) Company, this early telephone intercom system can be seen on the kitchen's south wall and on a wall in Alice Longfellow's second-floor bedroom. It let

Alice speak directly to the cook and other staff in the kitchen.

Alice probably also owned this portable electric call bell, dating to the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. It consists of a wooden box holding a battery, a bell, and a cord with a push-button mechanism in the end. A person could carry this device to any room or outside and use it to ring for people to come there, as long as they were within earshot.



Finally, in the late 1920s or early 1930s Harry Dana installed a set of chimes at the bottom of the back stairs leading up to his rooms. This unit was produced by J.C. Deagan, Inc., for railroad dining cars and intended to summon passengers for meals. Harry asked tenants to ring the chimes before walking upstairs to his private rooms so as not to interrupt him while he was working or entertaining. The chimes have been removed, but visitors can still see one of the brackets that held them to the wall. —D.D.



Meet a Friend: Mirit Lerner Naaman

In 2001, having finished her B.A. in history, **Mirit Lerner Naaman** came to Cambridge from Israel as her husband pursued his Ph.D. at Harvard. She enrolled in the Museum Studies program at the Harvard Extension School, which brought her to the Longfellow–Washington site. Eventually Naaman wrote her Master’s Thesis on the Longfellow family’s domestic servants. Her 2010 report “In the Shadow of Fame: Documenting Domestic Service at the Craigie House” is our most comprehensive source of information about the House staff in the 1800s and early 1900s. We talked to Naaman at her home in Maryland about that research.



Therefore I couldn’t write about their personal points of view, and I had to really dig to find the family’s view of them. I wanted to but couldn’t really explore the relationships between them and the family. I could only look at the number of years some of the servants worked at the House and assume they might have had good relationships.

It was also really hard to see what happened to these people after they left the House. Did the next generation go up the social ladder? In most cases I couldn’t find that.

What was your biggest surprise?

How did you come to the House?

In a class on the history of architecture, we took a tour of the House. I liked it so much I offered to do an internship there. My first project was cataloguing the books belonging to Henry Longfellow. Getting to know this great person through his book collection was fascinating. It was also quite a challenge for me to work with books in so many languages. I also took a couple of great classes with the historian Susan Porter, focusing on historic houses, and I decided that was going to be my field. I became especially interested in the history of daily life.

When you set out to study the Longfellow family servants, what sources did you use?

I looked through the family papers, especially Fanny’s journals to learn about life at the House, and for comments about the servants. I used Henry and Alice’s account books to get the names and employment information of the servants. I looked for whatever information about those people that I could find in the House, and then I went to other archives: the New England Historic Genealogical Society, Ancestry.com, the Massachusetts Archives, the Middlesex Probate and Family Court, and the Cambridge Historical Society—for census, vital, naturalization, and court records, passenger lists, city directories, more. I visited the Boston Public Library for newspapers. At the time, the 1930 U.S. Census was the latest available.

I wanted to find information about the servants as individuals. Unfortunately, most of them left little at the House beyond their names, and many had very common last names. I interviewed one elderly descendant of a servant—I was lucky to be able to talk to her.

What was your biggest challenge in doing the project?

It was a lot of detective work. Although most servants were literate, they did not leave any personal papers behind.

That was the Girard family. Ellen May was a fourth cousin of Louisa May Alcott. Henry Longfellow probably knew the family and brought her to work at the House. She was like a transitional figure between nurse and governess as the boys were growing older, so more respected and closer to the family. She worked there for three years, 1850 to 1853.

Then Ellen married Louis Girard, who had worked at the House as a gardener. They settled in Cambridgeport and had two kids. They helped to look after the House when the Longfellows were away.

I was hoping to find more detail about the Girards, but there was very little. Their son married a woman with a child, but he had no children of his own. Their daughter had one child who died young. Then in her will the daughter ordered that all her jewels and family papers and photographs be destroyed. She even wanted her parents’ bodies dug up and cremated with her, but that didn’t happen. So at least I was able to find the family graves in the Cambridge Cemetery. That was an intriguing story, but almost all that is left are those graves. To this day, I am curious why she was so keen on not leaving any trace behind her, but I doubt that secret will ever be known.

Did you come away from the project with any lessons?

I really sympathized with all the servants. Right now I’m working in the home, and when I get tired I think about those people for perspective. Before 1870, most servants worked well over twelve hours a day, six or seven days a week. They lived in tiny rooms, probably not heated. Throughout history, domestic servants who worked in the households of notable creators usually remained unknown and unnoticed, despite their indirect contribution to the creative process. Obviously, no such creator could work without the support of others who cleaned, cooked, and babysat for him or her. I am gratified that I was able to shed some light on the Longfellows’ domestics, and hope that others will undertake similar projects at other historic houses.

Fanny Appleton Longfellow, Household Manager

Having servants relieved Fanny Longfellow of the burden of daily chores, but it also created work for her in hiring, managing, and occasionally firing her staff. In 1846 she lamented, “Oh that there could be some patent, self-oiling machine for domestic work.” Fanny had assistance from her husband: the account book noting recorded servants’ wages contains both their handwritings, and Henry wrote several times of going into town “about a servant.”

In 1876 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow sent a friend this Latin “Epitaph on a Maid-of-all-Work”:

*Hic jacet ancilla
Quae omnia egit,
Et nihil tetigit
Quod non fregit.*

His brother Samuel later translated that as:

Here a maid-of-all-work
Her rest doth take;
When alive, she touched nothing
She did not break.

There is no evidence of which maid in the household inspired these lines.

Fanny Longfellow also had a great deal of support in hiring staff from a network of friends and acquaintances. Surviving correspondence indicates particular help from her cousin-by-marriage Maria Goodwin, who sought recommendations and interviewed prospective employees in Boston. They went through this hiring progress fairly regularly: during Henry and Fanny Longfellow’s eighteen years of married life, the average tenure of a maid was just over six months and that of a cook was just under nine (excluding the service of Mary Patten).

Managing the household was not an easy task for Fanny Longfellow. She complained on one occasion to a friend, “I am not one of those terribly fussy housekeepers—but still the weight of a big house and of several servants is something so distasteful to my mind that I feel it...” Although she did not do the physical labor that her servants did, she still felt “the dreadful responsibility of winding up the daily household machinery.”

Fanny worried about the impact of servants on the family budget. In November 1858, following the previous year’s financial panic, Fanny complained, “...our household expenses seem to absorb every thing, tho’ we live simply enough...& yet the four servants are a great expense.” At the time, the staff consisted of Mary Keany (cook, \$32.50 per quarter), Kate Kearny (probably maid, \$26 per quarter), Rachel Kearnahan (nurse, \$26 per quarter), and Thomas Baldwin (gardener and handy man, \$60 per quarter). As the family’s wealth grew, they added more employees.

Mary Patten worked ten years for the family before her likely retirement in 1855, the longest of any servant. Patten

was born about 1793 in Ireland. By the 1820s she was apparently in Boston working for Nathan Appleton because Fanny stated in 1846 that “my cook is one who lived many years with my father, through much of my child hood.” Patten came to Cambridge shortly before the birth of the Longfellows’ second child. One of her side duties was raising cows that provided milk for the children. In 1849, young Charley gave Patten a valentine depicting a cow-yard.

In 1847, while Henry and Fanny and their children were at their summer home in Nahant, Henry’s brother Samuel spent a night at the House. He wrote, “I found Mrs. Patten keeping watch & ward. She had moved her bed down into the blue corridor & placed an axe on the table beside it, ready for any body to kill her who might make midnight entrance. But no tragedy of that, or any, kind occurred during my short stay.”

Having such a loyal employee did not relieve all of Fanny’s concerns, however. In an undated letter fragment she complained that her cook “is unfortunately excellent, *except as a cook*, & therefore remains in my household a daily despair & yearly satisfaction!” But she had to conclude about Patten, “for auld lang syne & a kind heart I put up with many imperfections.”

After Fanny Appleton’s death in 1861, her oldest daughter Alice Longfellow took on most of the duties of managing the household. In 1872 Edith, the next daughter, complained about having to step into Alice’s shoes while she was away: “Housekeeping is horrid! I don’t fancy it at all

The Longfellows were not immune to Yankee biases affecting how they thought about the people who sought to work for them. In 1850 Henry wrote to his publisher, James T. Fields: “Patrick Cummings called on me today; and not wishing to tell him to his face that ‘no Irishman need apply,’ I told him to call on you tomorrow. Will you be kind enough to say, that I shall not need his services, this being the way least likely to give offence. His recommendations are good so far as character goes; but no farther.” Asking his publisher to deliver such news seems unusual, but this was not the only time Henry expressed worry about hiring Irishmen. Nonetheless, in that year his household staff included handy man John Mears, born in Ireland.

though to tell the truth I have not really tried yet for Papa or Annie generally conclude what to have for dinner. My encounters with the cook, which have only as yet been two in number[,] have not been at all formidable. I generally forget to order the pudding but that only makes it the more exciting.” Edith grew up to manage a household with her husband nearby while Alice oversaw the family home until her death.

—Kate Hanson *Platt*

The Faces of the Household



Henry and Fanny Longfellow sat for photographic portraits at many times in their lives, beginning with daguerreotypes. They also bought photographs of some of the nurses and governesses who looked after their children. However, they did not ask their domestic staff to sit for such portraits.

The development of everyday photography, not requiring an expensive trip to a studio, allowed many twentieth-century domestic workers to be recorded on film for posterity.

Even so, we do not always know these people's names. On the left is Alice Longfellow seated on the balcony of the House with a young woman, evidently a nurse. Unfortunately, this image is undated, and the nurse's name is not attached.

We know of the name of the man on the right. That is Michael Gaffney, "the care-taker and gardener," as someone has carefully written on this portrait in the archives.



Recent Happenings at the House: The Longfellow Memorial Rededication



As shown above, on October 29, 1914, the city of Cambridge held a public ceremony to dedicate a memorial to Henry W. Longfellow in Longfellow Park, across Brattle Street from the poet's house. That land had been owned by the Vassall family in the 1700s. Henry W. Longfellow acquired it over time and preserved it from development, and his family donated it to the city through the Longfellow Memorial Association.

The park was designed by Charles Eliot in 1887 and refined by Paul Rubens Frost in 1914. The Longfellow Memorial, created by sculptor Daniel Chester French and architect Henry Bacon, consisted of a bronze bust of Longfellow in front of a marble bas-relief depicting six characters from his poems. (The original of that bust is now at the Cambridge Public Library while a reproduction braves the weather in the park.)

This fall, on October 4, the Longfellow–Washington site and the Cambridge Historical Commission rededicated the memorial after a century with a new ceremony full of poetry and neighborhood pride. The poet's great-granddaughter Frances Appleton Wetherell (shown at right with other descendants and park Superintendent Myra Harrison) spoke for the family in stating: "Our mother, grandmother, and cousin dedicated this monument 100 years ago, so it is a great privilege and pleasure for us to be here today to re-dedicate this beautiful monument."



Caring for the House Today

No one lives inside Longfellow House—Washington’s Headquarters today, but the site still needs a staff of trained and dedicated workers to maintain it and the treasures it contains. Those staffers are no longer cooks and maids and nurses. They’re curators, archivists, horticulturalists, and interpretive rangers who explain the site’s history to visitors.

As dedicated as those National Park Service employees are, they need support to keep the House looking its best and to provide interesting programs for visitors. That support is the job of the Friends of Longfellow House—Washington’s Headquarters.

The Friends group provides the funds for annual Summer Festival on the Longfellow lawn, and for lectures about Washington and preserving historic artifacts throughout the year. Sometimes there is a need for special preservation projects not covered by the year’s federal budget, such as conserving rare objects or restoring healthy plants to the garden, and we raise the money to make those projects happen.

By joining the Friends or renewing your membership today, you can help to preserve this House and its history for visitors. Together we can serve the

A Recipe for Chicken “Gombo”

In early 1845 Fanny Longfellow received a “gombo” or gumbo soup base from her sister-in-law Mary Longfellow Greenleaf and the following recipe for using it to make a poultry and seafood soup:

Put a Table-spoon-full of butter & flour into a pot and let it brown over the fire, then fry in this a chicken or small turkey which has been cut into pieces & salted, until it is well browned. Then fill the pot with boiling water and let it boil slowly for four or five hours. Half an hour before dinner put in 40 or 50 oysters. When ready for dinner remove the pot from the fire and stir into it half a tablespoonful of the Gombo. Do not put it near the fire after the Gombo is in but send to table immediately with a dish of boiled rice, which, in serving, is to be put into the plate first and the soup put upon it. Some add, before the boiling, an onion cut into slices, a little chopped parsley, and some bits of ham, and pepper.

Fanny reported that her cook Lucy Rylie produced “a very palatable soup” with this recipe, but she had hoped for a more exotic flavor. She therefore planned to have Rylie try a similar recipe using three times the “gombo.”

House with the same diligence as the hard-working people profiled in this issue of the *Longfellow—Washington Bulletin*.

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Spotlight on an Object: Symbol of a Trusty Servant

On the door to Alice Longfellow's second-floor bedroom is this curious brass knocker. At first glance it appears to be in the form of an anthropomorphized fox, but closer examination reveals a much more unusual creature with cloven feet and a pig-like snout. The figure is a representation of a *hirvocervus*, a being that combines the physical attributes of a man, deer, pig, and donkey.

The figure is equipped with articles emblematic of its role as an ideal servant. In its proper left hand are tools relating to domestic work, including a broom and dustpan or ash shovel. It also wears a shield on its left arm and a sword on its back, items symbolic of the servant's role as a protector. Finally, a padlock hangs from the figure's mouth, representing the servant's ability to keep its master's secrets. The whole image is summed up by the words below its feet: "Trusty Servant."

The origins of this strange creature can be traced back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, but this particular *hirvocervus* is modeled after a sixteenth-century painting that hangs in a hallway at Winchester College in England. The shield above the figure's head features the arms of the Bishopric of Winchester.

The door knocker dates to the early twentieth century, and Alice Longfellow might have acquired it during one of her trips to England. She visited Winchester in 1904, and perhaps viewed the painting that inspired the knocker's design.

Like the bells discussed inside on page 3, this knocker shows a shift over the preceding century in how the House's internal signal system worked. The earliest bell system summoned servants, who were supposed to be quietly unnoticed and completely discreet. This knocker, in contrast, was an alert for Alice Longfellow that a trusty servant was at her bedroom door.

—David Daly



In This Issue:

Domestic Staff

This lovely cylindrical piece of furniture made of oak can be found beside the large bed in one of the Longfellow family's bedrooms. It is not a bedside table. What is it? See page 3 inside.



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