

Service with the Swards: Frances Seward's Relationships with Domestic Workers
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Frances Seward, as the wife of New York State Senator, Governor, then Secretary of State William Henry Seward, was responsible for managing the personal and public operation of homes that hosted countless friends, family members, and political figures for decades. Like many women of her time and station, Frances relied on a staff of domestic workers to assist her in managing the day-to-day operations of home and family. Frances's letters reveal a range of attitudes toward the people in her employ, including a revolving door of Irish women and girls who often went unnamed, and an African American family whose lives entwined with the Seward family for decades. A comparison of Frances's attitudes with other contemporary accounts will show that Frances shared many common nineteenth century prejudices toward the Irish, while her support of abolition and attitude toward African American workers, along with her genuine personal attachment to the Bogart family, diverged from many contemporary attitudes.

The William H. Seward collection, including 350,000 pages of personal and family correspondence and other materials, provides a rare and important window into decades of everyday life in an upper middle-class nineteenth-century household. Most nineteenth-century letters were the result of separations, and the political life of William Seward led to extended separations and correspondence between him and Frances, while her sister Lazette Worden's residence forty miles away in Canandaigua provided another cause for years of written communication. The collection allows for an examination of France's attitudes toward her domestic help over time and covering topics including race, religion, and cultural difference, during a time period that included massive waves of Irish immigration as well as abolitionist

activism. The examination of France Seward and her relationships with domestic help, and their comparison with other nineteenth-century women, is important to the understanding of these sometimes contentious, sometimes familial relationships and what formed them.

When considering her letters, it is important for readers to remember that Frances, particularly when writing to her sister Lazette, revealed much more of her internal, evolving personal thoughts than she would ever have displayed in public. Like all human beings, Frances often struggled with her own thoughts and reactions, and sometimes chided herself in letters for being ‘uncharitable.’ Her perceptions of people and relationships with them also often reflected the culture around her, and while some of her statements may not be considered politically correct to today’s reader, Frances was fairly radical in many of her tolerant religious and racial attitudes in the mid-nineteenth century.

Frances Seward, as an employer of domestic workers, was heir to a long, evolving tradition of American service. Domestic help in the colonies and early United States consisted of slaves, indentured servants, and hired help, often from the ranks of the children of friends and families. Initially, the distinction of indentured servitude came with little to no lasting stigma, with an 1895 publication declaring, “No odium attached to his condition or person as to the slave’s, and when he proved worthy of consideration he might enjoy many of the social privileges that would have been accorded him as a free man.”¹ Over time, however, a strong stigma became attached to all servitude, and as Lucy Maynard Salmon wrote in 1905, “when the redemptioners gave place at the South to negro slaves the word ‘servant’ was transferred to this class, and this alone was enough to prevent its application to whites.”² W.E.B. Dubois also outlined the intertwined

¹ James Curtis Ballagh, *White Servitude in the Colony of Virginia*, (Baltimore; Johns Hopkins University Studies, 1895), p71, in Albert Matthews, *The Terms Hired Man and Help* (Cambridge University Press, 1900), p6.

² Lucy Maynard Salmon, *Domestic Help* (New York; The McMillan Company, 1901), in Albert Matthews, *The Terms Hired Man and Help* (Cambridge University Press, 1900), p7.

histories of domestic service and slavery, even after emancipation, “adding a despised race to a despised calling.” He argued that the despised image of domestic work was not limited to African Americans, explaining “Even when white servants increased in number they were composed of white foreigners, but with small proportion of native Americans. Thus by long experience the United States has come to associate domestic service with some inferiority in race or training.”³ Kathleen Brown related the resistance of domestic workers to being called ‘servants,’ and noted ‘Household management guru’ Catherine Beecher’s 1841 perception that “this refusal by domestics to accept a label they regarded as demeaning was accompanied by a host of behaviors that denied or undermined the social distance between employers and their employees.”⁴ Beecher argued that this offense was a symptom of American spirit, “a consequence of that noble and generous spirit of freedom, which every American draws from his mother’s breast, and which ought to be respected, rather than despised.”⁵

Nineteenth-century attitudes and terminology for servants in general changed, particularly in the North, as middle-class families less frequently hired other female family members or the children of friends in favor of white immigrant labor. Sociologist Judith Rollins explained, “From the mid-nineteenth century until World War I, non-Southern servitude went through a third, very distinct phase: immigrants replaced native born whites as the dominant group of servants, and employers, as a result, ‘consciously attempted to enforce social distance between themselves and their servants.’”⁶ Lucy Maynard Salmon explained, “Since the introduction of foreign labor at the middle of the [nineteenth] century, the word ‘servant’ has again come into

³ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 1899 reprinted in Phil Zuckerman, *The Social Theory of WEB Dubois* (Thousand Oakes: Pine Forge Press, 2004), p113.

⁴ Kathleen Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (Yale University Press, 2009), p271.

⁵ Kathleen Brown, *Foul Bodies*, p271.

⁶ Judith Rollins, *Between Women: Domesticity and their Employers* (Philadelphia; Temple University Press, 1985), p51.

general use as applied to white employees...also because of the growing class divisions.”⁷

Efforts to create distance, a distinct separation of classes, utilized phrases like “above their station” or “condition in life” to reinforce the lower-class position of domestic workers, and included suggestions in ladies guides for keeping domestic workers “in their place,” including the warning that “ Letting them drink, dress poorly or in flowers or frills, or have any control will cause them to disrespect you and harm them in society.”⁸ These negative connotations did not sit well with many domestic workers. Margaret Lynch-Brennan argued that an often ‘spirited’ Irish background caused resistance among Irish workers, but along with black domestic workers, their participation in American equality or spirit of freedom was hotly contested by many white, native born Americans, and American notions of equality did not apply to them.

Frances’s letters and the terminology she employed to discuss her domestic workers reveal a great deal about her attitudes toward race, class, and nationality. Frances did not use the term ‘servant’ throughout her letters, but instead focused most often on specific job types. She used terms like cook, house maid, nurse, and waiter to describe specific positions, and sometimes the more generic term ‘help’ when writing about the need to fill positions. The fact that Frances did not seek to reinforce class differences through the term ‘servant’ is a good indicator of Frances’s security in her position, where she did not feel the need to create an artificial sense of superiority over her employees. Frances’s identification as an abolitionist almost certainly made her more sensitive to the term ‘servant’ as it related to the legacy of slavery, as well.

While Frances was much more empathetic to the circumstances of African Americans than many of her contemporaries, her attitude toward the Irish was similar to those around her.

⁷ Lucy Maynard Salmon, *Domestic Service* (McMillan Company, 1897), in Albert Matthews, *The Terms Hired Man and Help* (Cambridge University Press, 1900), p7.

⁸ Florence Hartley, *The Ladies Book of Etiquette and Manual of Politeness: A Complete Handbook for the Use of the Lady in Polite Society* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1873), p237.

Prevalent views of the Irish in nineteenth-century America are reflected in Frances's letters. It is interesting to note that Frances did *not* believe she held any prejudice toward the Irish, as seen in an 1833 letter to Henry, who was to travel to Ireland: "So my next letter will be from the Emerald Isle. Well I have not Grandma's prejudices against the Irish and shall be glad to hear from that country of warm hearts and generous impulses."⁹

Religious differences were a common cause of antipathy toward Irish domestic workers. Historian Judith Rollins explained, "the Irish were particularly despised as "vulgar," "childlike," "barbaric," ignorant," "unclean," and, worst of all, not Christian."¹⁰ An 1852 letter to the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* asserted, "many families positively refused to take Irish girls at all...especially such as are Roman Catholic."¹¹ This writer alleged that these girls were only concerned with church attendance to keep up on gossip, rather than the state of their souls. Frances did *not* seem to share this perspective. An 1848 letter to Henry said, "My maidens in the kitchen are expecting to be absent a great part of this week in consequence of the visit of the Bishop—who is to be here Wednesday or Thursday—I shall try to hear him preach while he is here though I presume the little Church will overflow with the sons and daughters of the Emerald Isle,"¹² revealing a dislike for the Irish distinct from a dislike of Catholicism. William Seward also championed a cause of great importance to Irish-Catholic immigrants and courted the wrath of nativists as Governor of New York when he "recommended the establishment of schools in which [immigrant children] may be instructed by teachers speaking the same language with

⁹ Frances Miller Seward to William Seward, August 8, 1833

¹⁰ Judith Rollins, *Between Women*, p51-52.

¹¹ Margaret Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget: Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic Service in America 1840-1930* (Syracuse; Syracuse University Press, 2009), (Syracuse; Syracuse University Press, 2009), p115.

¹² Frances Miller Seward to William H Seward, January 17, 1848

themselves and professing the same faith,” an effort designed to remove a religious barrier to education created by the use of the King James bible as a text in public schools.¹³

A culture clash was evident between Frances and her Irish workers, however, and probably had some impact on Frances’s perception of her domestic workers’ attitudes. Prevalent racial attitudes dictated that African-American domestic workers show deference and subservience to their employers, and they were frequently compelled by lack of other opportunities to accept domestic service as a long-term career. African-American domestic workers had a long familiarity with being deemed a distinct and subordinate class of people. For Irish immigrants, however, this was not the case, as most did *not* see themselves as a distinct or lower class. Many went into domestic service out of necessity, but viewed it as a stepping stone on a quest for middle class status, and for women, to a marriage that would end the need to work outside the home.¹⁴ This perspective, along with a cultural tendency to be more assertive and outspoken, contributed to dissatisfaction with overly demanding work, being yelled at or spoken down to, and offense at being viewed as low class. As Margaret Lynch-Brennan explained, “The assertive behavior of Irish servant girls, rooted in Irish culture and exacerbated by their democratic notions of equality, defied their American employers’ expectations of submissive servant behavior. Irish servant girls most certainly did not accept the middle-class American view of them as the inferiors of the middle class.”¹⁵

For African-American domestic workers, failure to bend to the expectations of general white society could be injurious or fatal, and while there were many exceptions among the white population, it could be risky for black Americans to let their guard down. It is possible that, consciously or not, Frances and other members of the Seward family responded to the culturally

¹³ Walter Stahr, *Seward: Lincoln’s Indispensable Man* (New York; Simon and Schuster, 2012), p68.

¹⁴ Margaret Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, p155.

¹⁵ Margaret Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, p114-115.

ingrained deferential attitudes of black domestic workers more positively than the assertive, “cross,” and objectionable independence exhibited by Irish domestic workers. In a description of a situation that took place in 1839, Frederick Seward described black waiter York Van Allen as possessing, “the dignified courtesy which distinguishes his race,”¹⁶ affirming his positive attitude toward African Americans and attributing positive traits to the entire ‘race,’ but offering no speculation as to how those traits were culturally cultivated and imposed.

Frances and the Seward family were sometimes surprised by the conditions faced by African-American workers. In an 1850 letter, Frances described an incident that happened in Washington when their carriage, driven by a black worker named William, accidentally knocked over a “lower class” intoxicated white man, who was not seriously injured. Frances described how “a number of men rushed up and assailed William with the most abusive and threatening language.” Frances and Henry intervened and offered their protection, but were surprised at how limited even their power to help could be.

Henry told William that if they came for him he must tell them that Mr. Seward would be his bail—but this was not what William feared—Black men are punished without the form of a trial and the poor fellow was in bodily fear for two or three days... This little incident made me uncomfortable the whole day—had William been severely beaten there would have been no redress supposing the laws here to be such as they are in most of the slave states—is it not disgraceful to a civilized community.¹⁷

Frances also used her position as an employer to assist those leaving slavery. In an 1852 letter to Henry, Frances wrote, “A man by the name of William Johnson will apply to you for assistance to purchase the freedom of his daughter. You will see that I have given him something by his book. I told him I thought you would give him more. He is very desirous that I should

¹⁶ William Henry Seward, Frederick Seward, *Autobiography of William H Seward From 1801-1834, with a Memoir of His Life and Selections from His Letters from 1831 to 1846* (New York; D. Appleton and Company, 1877), p420-421.

¹⁷ 18500210FMS_LMW

employ his daughter when he gets her which I have agreed to do conditionally if you approve.”¹⁸

An 1891 article in the *Auburn Daily Herald* reported of the Seward home, “it is said that the old kitchen was one of the most popular stations of the Underground Railroad and that many a poor slave who fled by this route to Canada carried to his grave the remembrance of its warmth and cheer.”¹⁹ The Swards’ participation in the Underground Railroad was frequently facilitated by Nicholas and Harriet Bogart, who were African-American community leaders in Auburn and longtime employees of the Seward family.²⁰

Beyond her genuine desire to help ease the situation of slaves, freedmen, and black people in general, Frances had an obvious preference for black workers, believing them to be better employees. In an 1842 letter to her sister, Frances wrote, “I am glad to hear that your Irish girl runs over herself instead of running over you –I doubt whether she or any other would suit you as well as a colored girl –they work in a manner so entirely different from ours.”²¹

Frances was not alone in her affinity for African Americans. In an 1848 letter to Henry, Frances told him his friend Thurlow Weed had come to his defense over a newspaper article. “Weed has a (illegible) contradiction of the silly story of the “Union” about your partiality or preference for the colored race—I suppose our Irish have not heard it yet as John has said nothing about it”²² For Frances to be concerned that their Irish workers would hear of public commentary on her husband’s alleged preference for African Americans points to a strong possibility that there was existing tension about preferences at home.

¹⁸ 18520701FMS_WHS

¹⁹ *Auburn Daily Herald*, February 20, 1891, Seward House Scrapbook, cited in Wisbey and Haines, “Selected References to African Americans, Slavery, and the Underground Railroad in the William Henry Seward Papers and other Sources,” 2004, in Cayuga County Historian’s Office, “Sites Relating to the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism, African American Life,” 2004, p40.

²⁰ Cayuga County Historian’s Office, “Sites Relating to the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism, African American Life,” 2004, p37.

²¹ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, June 16, 1842

²² Frances Miller Seward to William H Seward, October 4, 1848

If the Seward family preferred African Americans, it may seem surprising they had so many Irish domestic workers, particularly at a time when the majority of black women went into domestic service. Elizabeth Johnson wrote, “After the outlawing of slavery there, many African Americans in New York City had become domestic servants, in which conspicuous function they served ambitious white citizens as coveted status symbols. Blacks who strove for the prestige of independent labor as artisans soon found themselves on an economic and social downward path.”²³ In their study of black women in Pennsylvania, Joe Trotter and Eric Smith explained, “Because census takers reported the jobs of so few women in 1850, it is impossible to measure with any precision whether their [black women’s] situation improved. Inasmuch as 112 of 120 in 1860 were cooks, domestics, servants, and washerwomen, precision would seem to make little difference.”²⁴ W.E.B. DuBois explained that after emancipation, “there went forth to hire a number of trained black servants, who were South and North; they liked their work, they knew no other kind, they understood it, and they made ideal servants.”²⁵ As a number of sources note, however, black domestic workers were often difficult to find, particularly in the North. As Enobong Hannah Branch described, “Although Black women were engaged in domestic service throughout the country, they dominated this occupation only in the South.”²⁶

Frances was not alone in her prejudices or in her difficulty finding domestic help that was *not* Irish. Professor John Morgan explained, “By 1850, 80% of the domestics in New York, for

²³ Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1991), p102.

²⁴ Ed by Joe Trotter, Eric Ledel Smith, *African Americans in Pennsylvania: Shifting Historical Perspectives* (Harrisburg; Pennsylvania State University Press 1997), p238.

²⁵ W.E.B. DuBois, “Servants,” *The Philadelphia Negro*, 1899 reprinted in Phil Zuckerman, *The Social Theory of WEB Dubois* (Thousand Oakes; Pine Forge Press, 2004), p113.

²⁶ Enobong Hannah Branch, *Opportunity Denied: Limiting Black Women to Devalued Work* (New Brunswick; Rutgers University Press, 2011), p53.

example, were Irish.”²⁷ As a result, Irish workers were often Frances’s only option. In an 1837 letter to Henry, Frances wrote, “We expect another Irish girl to night—there is none other to be had.”²⁸ In 1838, she wrote to Lazette, “We have an Irish woman in the kitchen whose greatest failing is intemperance though she has numberless of minor importance she will give place to the next best we can obtain so it goes —seven in six months.”²⁹ In 1841, Frances told Lazette, “Polly is good natured and willing to do all she can but so feeble in health that I require as little of her as possible —She is to leave me next week —then I have no resource but the Irish.”³⁰ Near the end of May in 1843, she wrote, “That intolerable Irish girl, at my suggestion left us last Wednesday,”³¹ Frances immediately hired another Irish girl, but within a few weeks wrote,

I find it no small affair to attend to the work in the kitchen and above stairs also —not one of the girls I have could get a meal of victuals upon the table without my assistance —They do not improve at all —the Irish girl in particular exhibits all the striking peculiarities of her nation which for a day or two she managed to conceal.³²

Apparently, Frances could not improve her, or gave up trying, as eight days later she wrote to Lazette, “I have exchanged my intolerable Irish maid for a coloured girl recently from Geneva who only came this morning.”³³ Apparently, this girl did not work out either, and unable to avoid the prospect, Frances wrote to Lazette in 1844, “I expect a new Irish maid to night.”³⁴ Failure to meet Frances’s expectations was a frequent cause of dismissal for servants of *any* race or background, however, illustrated by an 1838 letter to Lazette that said, “Of course we have no maid yet —have had two engaged one Irish and one a lady of colour —both disappointed me.”³⁵

²⁷ John Morgan, *New World Irish: Notes on One Hundred Years of Lives and Letters in American Culture* (Palgrave McMillan, 2011), p73.

²⁸ Frances Miller Seward to William H Seward, December 6, 1837

²⁹ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, May 20, 1838

³⁰ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, December 29, 1841

³¹ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, May 28, 1843

³² Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, June 11, 1843

³³ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, June 19, 1843

³⁴ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, September 11, 1844

³⁵ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, July 27, 1838

Historian Hasia Diner related an 1864 diary entry by Harriett Robinson, who fired an Irish servant, then recorded in her diary that she would, “wash my hands of the tribe called Paddy and mentally painted on my door posts ... 'No Irish Need Apply!'”³⁶ Like Frances, Robinson couldn't find other help and hired another Irish domestic worker, this one wanting \$2 a week, arguing that the work was too hard.³⁷ Frances wrote often about similar experiences of her friends and family, as well. In an 1842 letter to her sister Lazette, Frances wrote, “We called upon...Mrs Eleazer Hills who entertained me an hour with her trials with the inhabitants of the Emerald Isle.”³⁸

Frances had issues with the attitudes she perceived from Irish domestic workers, which appeared to be a common problem. Kathleen Brown described the experience of Emmaline Rice, writing, “Rice noted that she found it hard to ‘boss’ Irish women.”³⁹ The outspoken, spirited nature commonly attributed to Irish domestic workers frequently led to problems for Frances, who often described them as angry- “Clara has a new Irish woman in the kitchen who is very cross—Mary left the day before we came home,”⁴⁰ “Abbey is toiling in the kitchen with that ‘loud spoken’ Irish girl,”⁴¹ “I had been toiling with a noisy cross Irish girl which operation requires full health and strength,”⁴² and, “Clara toils in the kitchen with a very cross Irish girl.”⁴³ Since Frances worked closely with her domestic help, and often lived with them, a hostile attitude and challenges to her authority were understandably “intolerable,” and since Frances often kept employees whose work she found unsatisfactory because of their sweet nature, it is clear she

³⁶ Hasia R. Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore; Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983) p 89.

³⁷ Diner, *Erin's Daughters*, p90.

³⁸ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, June 16, 1842

³⁹ Kathleen Brown, *Foul Bodies*, p278.

⁴⁰ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, October 30, 1842

⁴¹ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, May 14, 1843

⁴² Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, September 22, 1844

⁴³ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, October 19, 1844

valued attitude as much as, if not more, than competence. In 1837, she wrote Henry, “We are again without a maid in the kitchen the last girl or old maid was too fiery a temper to answer our purpose -after she had spent one week in wrangling I dismissed her...I shall try this time for a Yankee the Irish have exhausted my patience. I must except Catherine who was very sweet tempered and obliging.”⁴⁴ Even while complimenting Catherine’s sweetness and lamenting her departure, Frances undermined the quality of her work and bemoaned the prospect of hiring another Irish girl. “Our Catherine is to leave tomorrow to go to her Brother in Ohio, he has written for her to come and help house for him. She is so good natured that I cannot help feeling sorry to part with her though she is not the best help in the world... I do not know who we shall have next but probably some Irish lass as there is none other in these times.”⁴⁵

Reluctance to perform specific types of work was a growing problem for Frances and other mid-nineteenth century employers. Frances Hartley’s Ladies Book of Etiquette noted that “All housemaids must now be upper housemaids: cooks must be cooks and housekeepers. The homely housemaid- that invaluable character in her way-is indeed difficult to be found; and at a time when cleanliness is at its zenith, the rarity is to discover anyone who will clean.”⁴⁶ Frances wrote, “Mary has left without notion and gone to another place – she did not like work on table which is the chief thing – Send me either white or black I would quite as soon have the latter – not less than 11 or more than 14 years of age – let it be understood that they are to wait upon the table.”⁴⁷

Frances not only expected certain services to be performed, she expected them to be done to her standards. In 1838 she wrote to her sister, “This is the last of our house cleaning of any

⁴⁴ Frances Miller Seward to William H Seward, December 16, 1837

⁴⁵ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, December 1, 1837

⁴⁶ Frances Hartley, *Ladies Book of Etiquette*, p237.

⁴⁷ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, September 2, 1844

magnitude—Our first woman left early Monday morning because I told Maria she might pound the shirts preparatory to washing. Mary was a poor washer and seemed to think this a pointed insult—she left without our exchanging one word.” In this instance, Frances expressed her prejudices about the Irish, saying, “We all felt relieved. I had told her previously that I should not want her through the summer—I very much doubt whether the low Irish can be taught to work at all as we do at least when they come to us with all their bad habits fully confirmed by years.”⁴⁸

Irish immigrants new to the country were often unaccustomed to American accents, the standards of work in the United States, and often coming from destitute rural areas, the very basics of American households. Historian Kathleen Brown explained, “Following the mass Irish immigration in the 1840s, American house book authors began to describe domestics hailing from Ireland as irretrievably other, a judgement that reflected on the poverty and rural origins of most migrants. Transplanted rural standards simply did not pass muster with American employers.”⁴⁹ Some domestic workers’ backgrounds in dirt floored homes with few amenities may have limited their previous experience with cleaning, cooking, and hygienic practices immediately upon their arrival, which Frances noted regularly when speaking of Irish servants’ time in the country.⁵⁰ As noted in 1873’s *The Ladies’ Book of Etiquette*: “Some attention is absolutely necessary, in this country, to the training of servants, as they come here from the lowest ranks of English and Irish peasantry, with as much idea of politeness as the pig domesticated in the cabin of the latter.”⁵¹ Frances wrote her sister in 1837 complaining of an inexperienced Irish girl as well as her lack of options, “Last Sunday our girl Mary got very much enraged and I dismissed her—we have now a raw Irish girl who cannot understand us or make

⁴⁸ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, June 8, 1838

⁴⁹ Kathleen Brown, *Foul Bodies*, p274.

⁵⁰ Margaret Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, p3.

⁵¹ Florence Hartley, *The Ladies Book of Etiquette*, p242.

herself understood by us—we have had a number of applications from girls this week who are out of place but do not suppose any of them better than the one we have.”⁵² Similarly, the year before Frances had complained to Henry, “Our help being a new Irish woman who has been in the country only one year, she came to us the same day you left we were glad to take her as Dave was wholly unsuccessful in his attempts to find a girl for us, she is good natured fat and slovenly perfectly ignorant of the art of cooking.”⁵³

Frances reflected the common perception of Irish workers as unclean, although it is impossible to tell if this assessment was just. “I have engaged a fat Irish girl to come next week – she says she can cook but in that I have no faith – Maria is desperate lazy and so untidy about her person that I am ashamed to have her open the street door.”⁵⁴ Frances Green, in her 1837 Housekeeper’s Book, related the importance of cleanliness in domestic workers, saying “Well dressed, that is to say, neatly dressed, clean looking, and well-mannered servants always impress a visitor with a favorable idea of the house; while, on the contrary, there is no one so free from hasty judgment, as not to be more or less prejudiced against the mistress of the house, by the untidy appearance or the awkward behavior of her domestics,”⁵⁵ indicating that Frances had legitimate social concerns over the appearance and hygiene of her workers.

In addition to the destitution and rural backgrounds that undoubtedly contributed to the “dirty” or unkempt appearance of some Irish workers, racial attitudes in the United States may have contributed to a stark contrast in the appearance of African-American workers. Robert Roberts, in his groundbreaking Guide for Butlers and Household Staff, said, “There is no class of people to whom cleanliness of person and attire is of more importance than to servants in genteel

⁵² Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, October 13, 1837

⁵³ Frances Miller Seward to William H Seward, July 23, 1836

⁵⁴ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, June 6, 1842

⁵⁵ Frances Green, *The Housekeeper’s Book: Comprising Advice on the Conduct of Household Affairs in General* (Bedford; Applewood Books, 1837, in Kathleen Brown, *Foul Bodies*, p273.

families.”⁵⁶ Black Americans had long experience with being considered inferior and unclean, and historian Kathleen Brown suggested that an awareness of this prejudice may have led to an increased focus on personal care that may not have been immediately imparted to newly arrived Irish workers. Brown explained “In a climate increasingly hostile to black people and more committed to views of race as an innate, embodied condition, [Robert] Roberts may have been more self-conscious of his own physical presence in a middle-class household than his white servant counterparts.”⁵⁷

More experienced Irish workers often came to Frances after beginning in New York City. A number of sources speak of the desire of white families to have domestic help as a status symbol, even when it strained their finances to a breaking point.⁵⁸ There is no doubt that some workers picked up on these insecurities, and moving from one household to another could reveal stark differences in the means of various families, particularly when comparing the amenities of urban households to small towns like Auburn. Frances discussed the previous employment and heightened expectations of one of her workers in 1843-

Wednesday morning our wary maiden departed I having in the mean time engaged the Irish woman recommended by John... The woman came Friday night I was with her in the kitchen yesterday and found her much more tolerable than the nation generally—she has lived in N. York some years of course is not so perfectly untaught as the girls we get here—she is quick about her work and neat about the cooking—perfectly well acquainted with a cooking stove—she wants a range built and the Croton river brought into a larger boiler, as Mrs Somebody with whom she lived in Murray Hill had these conveniences beside sundry other city notions equally reasonable.⁵⁹

While Frances seemed pleased with the woman’s skills, her sarcastic tone reveals her irritation at the insinuation that the Seward house was lacking in the amenities provided by her previous

⁵⁶ Robert Roberts, *Guide for Butlers and Household Staff* (Bedford; Applewood Books, 1827), p16.

⁵⁷ Kathleen Brown, *Foul Bodies*, p258.

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1991), p102.

⁵⁹ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, July 23, 1843

employer, where she had the advantage of running water from the Croton Reservoir and a modern range.

Longevity of service may also have contributed somewhat to Frances's preference for African-American workers. The turnover rate for domestic workers was high, and left Frances and many others scrambling regularly to find and train replacements. Local girls performing day labor and Irish-immigrant girls were more likely to leave service after a time to get married and have families. Kathleen Brown noted the "desirability of spinsterhood in a hired woman to reduce the conflicts with an employer's demands upon her."⁶⁰ African-American workers, however, frequently remained in their positions after marrying and having families, a situation that reflected the lower wages frequently provided to African Americans, requiring both adults in the family to work to support a family, as well as the different social values applied to African-American women, which assumed their morals were already compromised. There was also less respect for the family obligations of black women, particularly in the South. Although written after Frances's time, the 1912 reflections of a black domestic worker revealed the harsh separation from her own children in the service of a southern white family. "I frequently work from fourteen to sixteen hours a day. I am compelled by my contract, which is oral only, to sleep in the house. I am allowed to go home to my own children, the oldest of whom is a girl of 18 years, only once in two weeks, every other Sunday afternoon—even then I'm not permitted to stay all night."⁶¹ Frances, however, differed from her contemporaries in her demands on family time, frequently mentioning the absence of workers who were attending to their own families. She complained of the absences at times, but did not regularly prevent them.

⁶⁰ Kathleen Brown, *Foul Bodies*, p283

⁶¹ "More Slavery at the South," by a Negro Nurse, *Independent*, 25 January 1912, 196–200.

The long tenure of Harriet and Nicholas Bogart with the Seward family, throughout marriage and child-rearing, contributed to the strong relationship they had with Frances. Harriet Bogart worked for Frances's sister Lazette prior to her first marriage but returned after its end, and as described by Lazette's daughter Fanny, "remained our Harriet until persuaded into a second marriage by Nicholas Bogart."⁶² As Frederick Seward described, "Nicholas and Harriet Bogart... were two young colored persons, then newly married [1837], who were coming to Westfield, the one in capacity of coachman, the other as housekeeper. Their long and faithful service which then commenced, lasted, with occasional intervals, throughout Seward's life."⁶³ The Bogart family were close enough to the Swards to request favors. In 1837, Frances wrote to tell Henry,

Yesterday Harriet came- she wanted 3\$ in money to buy clothes for Willis- of course offered to work for pay when she became able. I let her have the money. How much do you pay Nicholas a month he has already had 10\$ beside \$5-25 for oats, he is almost as uncommunicative as William was- he seems to be honest and industrious so I will not quarrel with his surly humour, though I wish he had a little of Harriet's obliging disposition.⁶⁴

A matter written about by Frederick Seward in 1853 also illustrated the ability of the Bogarts to request favors, "When I was at home last month, Nicholas asked me to pay his taxes at the Comptrollers' Office (95 cents). I did, but I forgot to send him the receipt. Here it is. Will you hand it to him?"⁶⁵ In an 1866 letter to Fanny, Harriett Bogart wrote, "I thank you very much for your kindness to assist me if there should be any thing that you could do for me there is one request which I shall ask of your Dear father hoping that he will if it is consistent I will not trouble you with it only if you please ask him if he will grant me the request that I am under the

⁶² Frances Worden Chesboro, *Manuscript on the Underground Railroad*, Seward Papers, University of Rochester, 5, in Cayuga County Historian's Office, "Sites Relating to the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism, African American Life," 2004, p38.

⁶³ William Henry Seward, Frederick Seward, *Autobiography of William H. Seward*, p308.

⁶⁴ Frances Miller Seward to William Henry Seward, December 12, 1837

⁶⁵ Frederick Seward to Frances Miller Seward, June 7, 1853

paneful necessity of ask in of him.”⁶⁶ Harriet Bogart was reluctant to make this request, on a painful subject, and coming shortly after the assassination attempt on William Seward that left him and two of his sons badly injured, and the recent loss of his wife Frances. In a March 3, 1866 letter to Henry, Harriet requested that he help Willis, her son from her first marriage, obtain a pardon after being convicted of larceny. She wrote, “Mr Seward you have certainly done a great deal for Willis which I can never repay you for and now may I ask you if you will wright to the governor of that state for a pardon for him. I no he is unworthe but he is my son however unworthey.”⁶⁷ Henry did write to the Governor of Illinois, saying that Willis’s mother “is an exemplary and inestimable woman and has for more than thirty years been connected with my family by very affectionate relations,” and noted the exceptional nature of his request, saying, “only in one other instance have I asked , or recommended to the Governor of any state an exercise of clemency,”⁶⁸ in regard to the insanity defense of William Freeman.

Frances sometimes displayed frustration at the absence of domestic workers who left to care for sick family members, but she had great compassion for Harriet and Nicholas Bogart during their absences, although she missed their reliability, mentioning in 1840 that, “Harriet’s children [Frances and Sarah] had recovered sufficiently for her to come and take charge of the house-this was no small relief to my mind.”⁶⁹ In a 1841 letter, Frances wrote “Sarah is so very ill that I am reluctant to call upon Nicholas for anything- Dr Williams thinks she has the

⁶⁶ Harriet Bogart to Frances “Fanny” Seward, March 4, 1866

⁶⁷ Harriet Bogart to William H Seward, March 3 1866, from Wisbey and Haines, “Selected References to African Americans, Slavery, and the Underground Railroad in the William Henry Seward Papers and other Sources,” 2004, in Cayuga County Historian’s Office, “Sites Relating to the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism, African American Life,” 2004, p41.

⁶⁸ William Henry Seward to Richard Oglesby, March 12, 1866, from Wisbey and Haines, in Cayuga County, “Selected References,” p41.

⁶⁹ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, June 19, 1840

consumption-were she any other child I should not expect her to survive a week.”⁷⁰ Frances attended Sarah’s deathbed 1841, writing to her sister,

I have been part of the afternoon at Harriet's - Sarah has been dying since last evening—she breathed her last about 5 o'clock an hour after I left —she died easily but has suffered much with pain during her illness —Poor Harriet is much afflicted —Abby has just returned—I sent her to get a shroud and cap made knowing it was impossible Sarah could continue long.⁷¹

Frances also brought Harriet’s youngest child, Hattie, home with her to allow her mother to spend Sarah’s last hours with her undisturbed.

Frances expressed compassion for Harriett again in an 1842 letter to Lazette, saying, “Poor Harriet is going to lose her other child -Frances- She has I think a hopeless affliction of the liver and is evidently failing fast —her symptoms are much like Sarah’s.”⁷² Frances Bogart died two days later at 7 years old. Frances told her sister,

Poor Harriet and Nicholas have but one child left—Frances died last Wednesday morning to me very unexpectedly —was buried on Thursday I was not well enough to attend the funeral—Henry and the boys went- I went to see Harriet Friday —she grieves very much about her children— thinks little Harriet has symptoms similar to the others—this I hope is only a gloomy fancy which would very naturally result from her previous affliction.⁷³

Frances’s letters revealed no feelings of condescension or annoyance at an interruption of work, but the deep and sincere connection and understanding of both a family friend and a mother who had also experienced the loss of a child. On a happier occasion, Frances Seward attended the wedding of the Bogarts’ daughter Harriet in 1857, when she wrote to Henry, “Hattie Bogart vis Simpson had a beautiful wedding and party. I wish you could have been there.”⁷⁴

Frances attended Hattie Bogart’s church a few days later, writing “I have been to the Baptist

⁷⁰ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, December 22, 1841

⁷¹ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, December 29, 1841

⁷² Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, March 28, 1842

⁷³ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, April 3, 1842

⁷⁴ Frances Miller Seward to William H Seward, May 28, 1857

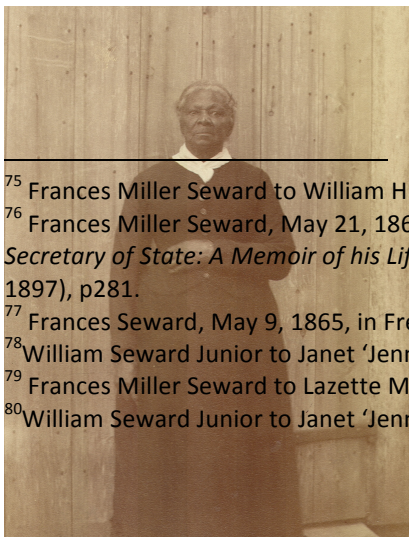
Church today to hear Hattie's husband Mr. Simpson preach did you ever see him? I think he is fine looking."⁷⁵ The Seward family's attendance at Bogart family funerals, weddings, and church sermons reveals something much deeper than a long-term, respectful employer/employee relationship.

The close ties and reliance of the Swards on the Bogart family were revealed in a letter from Fanny after the assassination attempt on her father. "Harriet is invaluable in father's room; she keeps well, and as bright and as merry as a bird, which is a great gratification to him."⁷⁶ Frances also described how Harriet "sat up all night with the nurses."⁷⁷ Harriet returned to Auburn in late May of 1865, possibly due to her own husband's illness as suggested in a telegraph William Seward Jr. wrote to his wife on May 24, 1865 asking, "How is Nicholas. Does he want Harriet to come home this week?",⁷⁸ as well as a letter from Frances to Lazette on May 26, explaining,

Harriet left so hurriedly this morning that I could send no word by her. I hardly know how she got ready with the few moments notice she had... We shall miss Harriet- you know how much - she has taken the entire charge of Henry the last two weeks - insisted of course but she had the responsibility... I hope Nicholas is better.⁷⁹

William Seward Jr. telegraphed his wife again just 18 days later, requesting Harriet's presence after Frances's subsequent illness. "Mother has been dangerously sick but is better now --She and father will go home as soon as he is able to travel- Harriet Bogart is very much needed here now & to go home with them cant [sic] she come on at once."⁸⁰ Harriet did go back to

Washington, leaving her husband in the care of Frances's sister



⁷⁵ Frances Miller Seward to William H Seward, May 31, 1857

⁷⁶ Frances Miller Seward, May 21, 1865, in Frederick William Seward, *Seward at Washington as Senator and Secretary of State: A Memoir of his Life with Selections from his Letters 1861-1872* (New York; Derby and Miller, 1897), p281.

⁷⁷ Frances Seward, May 9, 1865, in Frederick Seward, *Seward at Washington*, p281.

⁷⁸ William Seward Junior to Janet 'Jenny' Seward, May 23, 1865

⁷⁹ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, May 26, 1865

⁸⁰ William Seward Junior to Janet 'Jenny' Seward, June 11, 1865

Figure 1 Harriet Bogart c.1860
From the Collections of the Seward House

Lazette Worden and her family. Sadly, Frances did not make it home, and died just ten days after her son sent the request for Harriet's return. Harriet remained in Washington after Frances's death, certainly a great source of comfort to the Swards, and Lazette wrote to Henry in July requesting that he "Please say to Harriet that Nicholas is well & we are all taking good care of him."⁸¹ Eventually, Harriet returned to Auburn to be with her husband. When Fanny Seward fell ill in Washington in 1866, Harriet Bogart wrote to her, "I have thought of you and wished that I were near you when you were sick that I mite assist you- you wisht me not to think that you had forgotten me no Dearest fanny if I never should never hear from you againe I shold not think so."⁸² Fanny died from tuberculosis less than eight months later.

The lifelong ties between the Bogart and Seward families through sickness, death, birth, marriage, and tragedy revealed the capacity of both families to bypass social restrictions and conventions of race, class, and station by forming deep personal bonds and a lasting affection. Their willingness to come to one another's sickbeds, near or far, lasted throughout the lifetimes of Henry, Frances, and Fanny Seward, as Harriet and Nicholas Bogart outlived all three.

Peter Crosby, an Irish worker, was also a longtime employee of the family, and was remembered fondly by Frederick Seward, who described him as "an old servant of Judge Miller's, afterward employed by Seward in the care of horses and garden. Very fluent in conversation, he had an apparently inexhaustible store of reminiscences of his adventures, among which were some that are popularly supposed to belong to other men. He was a great favorite with the children."⁸³ Peter was criticized for being "unsteady in his habits," and his "storytelling" was frequently commented upon.⁸⁴ In a 1840 letter to Henry, Frances said, "I am assailed by so

⁸¹ Lazette Miller Worden to William H Seward, July 10, 1865

⁸² Harriet Bogart to Frances 'Fanny' Seward, March 4, 1866

⁸³ William Henry Seward, Frederick Seward, *Autobiography of William H. Seward*, p362

⁸⁴ William Henry Seward, Frederick Seward, *Autobiography of William H. Seward*, p362

many inquiries about your coming home every time I go out that I am tempted to do as Peter does, tell all manner of stories about your movements, rather than profess utter ignorance—”⁸⁵ His Irish origins were commented upon as well, and described by Fred, “He was, like most of those of his nationality, a warm sympathizer in the projected raids of the ‘Patriots’ upon Canada.”⁸⁶ In the spring of 1837, Frances wrote to Henry excited by the prospect of the Bogart’s return to Auburn after an absence, glad to take Harriet back into her house, and wishing she could hire Nicholas as well, in Peter’s place. “I should like much to have Nicholas here but although my patience is only tried by Peter’s delinquencies I know that Pa considers him necessary to his comfort and I would not undertake to supply his place in this respect.”⁸⁷ She disparaged Peter again in an 1838 letter, reinforcing her feeling that the Irish could not be improved. “In my extremity and against my better judgement I have consented to take Irish Mary again with a faint hope that she may have improved. I do not know what this hope is based upon certainly not my twelve years experience with Peter.”⁸⁸ Peter earned the family’s gratitude, however, and was applauded by Frances after a dangerous incident in which Fred fell off a horse, caught his foot in the stirrup, and was being dragged. Peter intervened, catching the horse and releasing Fred. Frances wrote, “Peter truly said that God’s blessing was on the child or he could not have saved him—We all feel indebted to Peter for the presence of mind which he exhibited had he permitted the horse to pass him it seems as if Frederick’s destruction must have inevitably followed.”⁸⁹

There are also numerous references to John Richards in Frances’s letters, an Irish handyman who served the Swards for about 7 years after the death of Peter Crosby in 1842. In

⁸⁵ Frances Miller Seward to William Henry Seward, August 23, 1840

⁸⁶ William Henry Seward, Frederick Seward, *Autobiography of William H. Seward*, p362.

⁸⁷ Frances Miller Seward to William Henry Seward, April 2, 1837

⁸⁸ Frances Miller Seward to William Henry Seward, April 18, 1838

⁸⁹ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, November 27, 1837

spite of his long tenure, Frances did not become close to John, and often applied the same criticisms to him that she had for her other Irish domestic workers. In 1843 she wrote, "John intolerably dirty and stupid,"⁹⁰ and in 1849 Frances expressed frustration over John's lack of availability, "I am sorry Pa did not let Mr Underwood hire a man-John's being there amounts to nothing-He has sufficient occupation with his own family and is useless to any one else."⁹¹

In spite of her frequently negative views, Frances was capable of great sympathy at times for her Irish domestic workers. In 1841, she wrote to Henry and described an injury sustained by one of her workers.

Elisabeth, the Irish girl, fell from the top of those high steps in attempting to get cherries –the steps fell over at the same time and she falling upon them cut one of her legs in the most shocking manner ... Briggs came and sewed up the wound which was 6 inches long and open to the bone ... I was obliged to hold and soothe the poor creature while she submitted to the operation of having it closed –fourteen long, deep stitches the Dr took in her quivering flesh–It was a terrible operation- she bore it remarkably well... Another Irish maiden has taken her place and assists in taking care of her.⁹²

Frances's letters contain regular references to 'Irish' Marys, Maryanns, Marias, Elizas and Bridgets, but a general lack of last names, irregularities in spellings, and the absence of other documentation often makes it difficult to tell if she is referring to the same person or different workers with the same first name. It is possible that Frances may have maintained some other Irish domestic workers for long periods of time, but if so, there is little evidence that any became as close with the Swards as the Bogart family. There *are* regular references to Eliza Freeman, who worked for the family for nearly twenty years, and was referred to as "Aunty Eliza" by Fanny.⁹³ Eliza's 1867 marriage led Lazette to comment "Eliza's wedding came off at the appointed time & was very satisfactory to all parties-The house seems lonely without her- She

⁹⁰ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, January 15, 1843

⁹¹ Frances Miller Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, December 21, 1849

⁹² Frances Miller Seward to William H Seward, August 1, 1841

⁹³ Frances 'Fanny' Seward to Lazette Miller Worden, June 18, 1865

has lived there so long, she seemed a part of the family.”⁹⁴ There is no mention of Eliza’s nationality, and her surname was common to Irish, English, and African Americans, so her background is unclear, but the Seward family’s attachment to her was obvious, revealing their disregard for separation of classes with those they were close to.

Frances Seward, writing candidly to her sister Lazette and other close family members, revealed complicated attitudes toward the domestic workers she employed. To some, particularly the Irish, she applied negative stereotypes and maintained a stiff employer/employee distance. To others, most notably the Bogart family, she extended the warmth and support of family friendship. While Frances’s attitude toward the Irish was shared by many of her contemporaries, her relationship with the Bogarts and attitude toward African American domestic workers contrasted sharply with commonly held prejudices of the mid-nineteenth century. The Seward family’s commitment to abolition and the assistance they offered to fugitive slaves and those trying to rescue family members from bondage illustrated their empathy for African Americans and their willingness to become involved in their personal issues. Frances’s death in 1865 eliminated any possibility for continued evolution in her feelings toward Irish domestic workers, and it is impossible to determine if she would have softened toward more of them as the result of positive individual relationships or general sympathy in the face of conspicuous hardships faced by many Irish workers. The willingness and ability of Frances and the Seward family to form close relationships with some of their domestic workers, however, is evidence of their departure from many contemporary views that servants should be kept distinct, at a distance, and in their place.

⁹⁴ Lazette Miller Worden to Augustus ‘Gus’ Seward, August 25, 1867