"Young clean catholic general maid seeking a situation": EVIDENCE OF DOMESTIC SERVICE IN THE OTTAWA ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

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Abstract

The typical image of a Victorian household usually involves a large staff of domestic servants in uniform. Although this image does not represent the majority of households, there was still a large number of young women taking up "situations" in middle- and upper-class households. In late nineteenth century Ottawa women advertised weekly in the newspaper, either to hire a servant, or the opposite, to find a position in a suitable home. An archaeological collection found at Laurier House National Historic Site is associated with the domestic servants working for the family of jeweller John Leslie between 1878 and 1896. Leslie was the original resident of Kininive, the house now known as Laurier House, built in what was then the new fashionable suburb of Sandy Hill. The material recovered has enabled us to shed a light on everyday life below-stairs in a middle-class Victorian home in Ottawa.

Résumé

L'image typique d'une maisonnée Victorienne comprend habituellement une grande équipe de domestiques en uniforme. Quoique cette image n'est pas tout à fait représentatrice de la réalité, un grand nombre de jeunes femmes étaient neanmoins engagées comme domestiques dans des foyers des classes moyenne et supérieure. À Ottawa au XIXe siècle, des femmes annoncaient chaque semaine dans les journaux qu'elles étaient à la recherche d'une servante ou encore, d'une position de servante dans une maison respectable. Une collection archéologique retrouvée au Site Historique National de la Maison Laurier a été associée aux domestiques ayant travaillé pour la famille du joallier John Leslie entre 1878 et 1896. Leslie était le propriétaire de Kininvie, la maison connue aujourd'hui sous le nom de La Maison Laurier, bâtie dans ce qui était à cette époque la nouvelle banlieue en vogue : Sandy Hill. Le matériel retrouvé a permis une meilleure compréhension de la vie quotidienne des domestiques travaillant dans une maisonnée de la classe moyenne à Ottawa à l'époque Victorienne.

Domestic servants (Fig.1) are often associated with the typical image of the Victorian period. The majority of households did not, however, have a large staff of servants as it is often assumed.

In major Canadian cities such as Montreal, Quebec City, Toronto and Halifax, 80 to 88 percent of the households who benefitted from the services of domestic help had no more than two servants working for them (Lacelle 1987:82); it was also probably the case in Ottawa. However, it is believed that a Victorian household would have needed a minimum of three servants to be "complete in all its functions", i.e., a cook, a housemaid and a parlourmaid (Horn 1990:21-22). In a household where young children are present, a nursemaid would also be needed (Horn 1990:22). In a household where two people were hired, a cook would take care of the meals and a maid-of-all-work take over the cleaning and run the errands (Lacelle 1987:91).

The typical domestic servant in 1871 was a young, single woman in her early twenties who could read and write (Lacelle 1987:79); it is most likely that the situation remained the same throughout the 1870s, and

A COLLECTION OF PAPERS PRESENTED AT THE 33RD ANNUAL MEETING OF THE CANADIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION.
Edited by Jean-Luc Pilon, Michael W. Kirby and Caroline Thériault
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ISBN 0-9694868-4-7

even longer. Many of the women entering domestic service were immigrants, mainly from England, Scotland and Ireland (in that order); this was especially true in the last two decades of the 19th century as the demand for hired help increased while the offer decreased because women were then tempted to chose other forms of occupation made possible by industrialization (Leslie 1974:95-98). Young women of the working-class had, in the late 19th century, other options than domestic service, which made it easier for them to leave a "situation" if they wished. Employers thus found it difficult to keep their servants and came to accept and get used to the constant change of maids "below-stairs" (Leslie 1974:90).

General availability was the servant's primary duty to her employer. It would be as important, if not more important, for a servant to be able to take orders well than to fulfill a number of specific tasks (Leslie 1974:83). The words of an employer illustrate this idea: "My servant is hired to do whatever she is told and to be at any time subject to my command" (quoted in Katzman 1981:150). To be a good servant, one had to be "clean, celibate, obedient, respectable, hard-working and an early riser" (Leslie 1974:83).

An archaeological collection found at the Laurier House National Historic Site here in Ottawa was associated with domestic servants. The collection was dated to between ca. 1878 to 1895, i.e., while retired jeweler John Leslie lived in the house with his family. The house (Fig. 2) is situated at 335 Theodore Street, now called Laurier St. East. Leslie had named his house Kininvie in honour of his ancestral home in Scotland. John Leslie was a successful jeweler with a shop on Sparks Street (Fig. 3). The family was composed of John Leslie and his wife Eliza, their son James and their daughter Jennie, both in their early twenties when they moved into the house. John Jr. had died of tuberculosis a few years before the family moved into their new home.

Given his social and economic status, one would assume that John Leslie had a few servants working for him. Politician Edmond Allen Meredith lived in Sandy Hill in the 1870s. In the publication *The Private Capital*, it is mentioned that "For a family like the Merediths, not to have, at the very minimum, a cook, nursemaid and an all-round manservant was quite unthinkable". When we take into consideration the fact that Edmond Allen Meredith lived in the very fashionable Sandy Hill until the late 1870s and that John Leslie moved into that same prestigious area in 1879, we can assume that it would also have been unthinkable for John Leslie — a successful jeweler — to have less than the domestic help mentioned above (the nursemaid may not have been a necessity since no young children lived in the house). People with higher income brackets were to be mostly found in Sandy Hill (Taylor 1986:84). This is one more reason why the Leslies could have afforded — economically — domestic help but it is also one more reason why they could not have afforded — socially — to do without a certain number of servants. The Victorian middle-class, because of their economic success, "now created a great demand for household servants as the symbol of and the reward for their success (...) " (McBride 1976:19). In certain circles, social acceptance was based on the number of servants one could afford to employ (Horn 1990:18).

The local newspapers seem to have played a key role in helping housewives recruit servants as well as helping servants find a situation. (Fig. 4). The following heading was found in the want ads section of the Ottawa Daily Citizen on Friday May 3rd 1878:

> "Masters wanting servants, or servants wanting places, can advertize their wants under this heading in the Morning and Evening Citizen free of charge. No such advertisement to exceed twenty words, or is to be inserted more than twice."

The 1871 census informs us that an Irish-born servant named Helen Cook worked for the Leslies (N.A.1871:12). Although the Leslies did not live at Kininvie then, this information tells us that they hired

Figure 1. "Science at a Discount", Canadian Illustrated News, 28 December 1872.

Figure 2. Laurier House, *ca*. 1885.

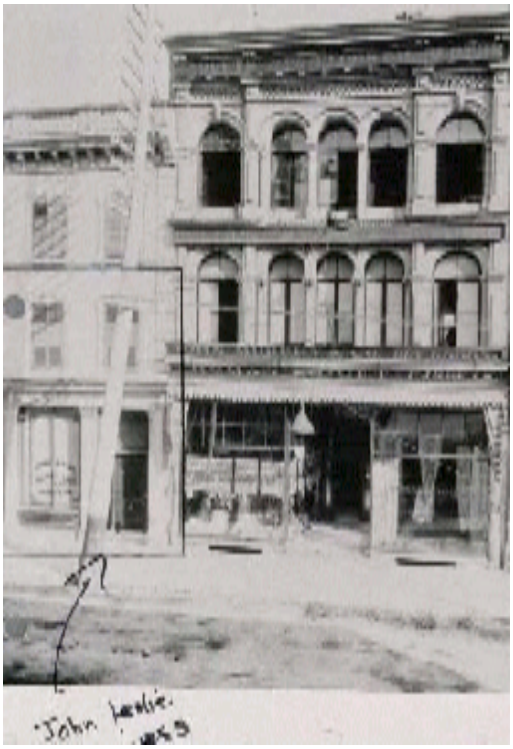

Figure 3. John Leslies' jewellery shop on Sparks Street. *ca.* 1890-1891.

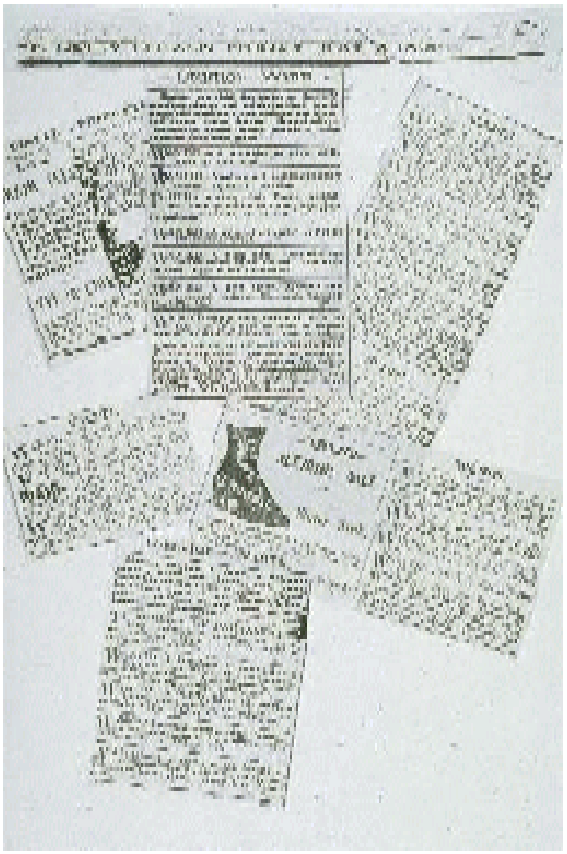

Figure 4. Collage of Want Ads from the following Newspaper: Ottawa Citizen, May 3 1878, p.4; Ottawa Citizen, February 12 1878, p.4; Ottawa Citizen, March 8 1888, p.1; Ottawa Citizen, 20 February 1888, p.2 Ottawa Citizen, 24 January 1888, p. 2. (Photo by R. Chan)

servants. We also know from the Ottawa city directories that one domestic by the name of Celena Benson lived at 335 Theodore St. in 1888 (N.A.1888-1889:125). No other servant was listed that year or any other year as a live-in servant at the Leslies while their neighbours had at least one general servant. In the wealthiest sections of Montreal, Toronto, Halifax and Quebec City, 90 percent of the servants lived in the houses in which they served (Lacelle 1987:73). It is very likely that the situation was similar in Sandy Hill, one of Ottawa's wealthiest areas. Celena Benson may have stayed only for a year or so since keeping the hired help would have been difficult in Victorian Ottawa (Gwyn 1985:51-52), as it was in many other Canadian cities. The Leslies may have also employed outside help that did not work for room and board, but rather worked in return for a wage and lived outside their place of work.

In a picture of Kininvie dated to ca. 1894 or 1896, members of the Leslie family as well as the household staff are posing in front of the house (Fig. 5). Three female servants can be seen, i.e., two on the lawn with the family and one on the front steps. According to an interview with John Leslie's grand-daughter, Mrs. Dorothy Caldwell, the servants on the photograph are: Ettie Lowe (on the steps), Maggie King and a nurse. Ettie Lowe was a housemaid/nurse to Jennie and Thomas Code. Maggie King was a cook and the nurse, for whom no name was given, was hired at the birth of Allan Code (in the carriage in the picture).

In 1996, plans were made for the restoration of the foundation of the house. When the plans for restoration of the foundations were given to Archaeological Research in the fall of 1996, two test excavations were planned on the north and east sides of the house. These would enable the architect to inspect the condition of the foundation, which was leaking and enable archaeologists to determine the extent of future archeological requirements should the entire foundation require repointing.

In the test unit on the north side, beneath the former porch (Fig. 6) or verandah a midden was discovered. A back hoe had cut through the features in the 1980s but the artifacts from this disturbance mended with those still in their depositional layers on the east and west sides of the back hoe trench. The stratigraphy at this site (Figs. 7, 8) is like an archaeology text book with three former surfaces, including the surface at the time of construction which is found one metre below the present grade. The presence (Fig. 9) of certain artifacts as well as the absence of others in the collection has helped us draw an image of daily life for the Leslies' servants. And oh ! Surprise, the artifacts show that the servants' principal activities were cooking and cleaning!

Artifacts related to cooking and the kitchen in general were numerous.

A variety of baking dishes as well as a pudding bowl, a mixing bowl and five teapots were used in the kitchen to prepare and cook the foods and beverages that were going to be served to the Leslie family and occasional guests as well as the servants themselves. We know from these objects that baking dishes (Figs. 10, 11) were often used; several foods and recipes could be baked in these vessels. A smaller one (Fig. 12) suggests that single portions were also individually baked. Several recipes could have been prepared in the mixing bowl.

Given the popularity of puddings at the Victorian table, it is not surprising to find a pudding bowl in the Leslie collection. Puddings were, to the Victorians, the most common dessert and were served, in different fashions, at almost every dinner or luncheon (Williams 1985:122, 170; Davies 1992:127). The pudding bowl in this collection is plain in style and would have produced a plain looking pudding. It was therefore meant for the Leslies' everyday meal, or even for the servants' meals.

Figure 5. Leslie family and domestic staff posing on front lawn at Kininvie, *ca*. 1896.

Figure 6. North wall at Laurier House, showing the position of the former porch or verandah.
(Photo C. Phillips)

Figure 7. Stratigraphy of north wall, midden.
(Photo C. Phillips)

Figure 8. B. Leskovec at work. (Photo C. Phillips)

Figure 9. Surface of lot 99H2R12. (Photo C. Phillips)

Figure 10. Rockingham yellow ware baking dish.
(Photo R. Chan)

Figure 11. Vitrified white earthenware baking dish.
(Photo R. Chan)

Figure 12. Individual vitrified white earthenware baking dish.
(Photo R. Chan)

Figure 13. Yellow ware Teapot. (Photo R. Chan)

Figure 14. Vitrified white earthenware sauce tureen. (Photo R. Chan)

Figure 15. American Majolica pitcher.(Photo R. Chan)

Figure 16. Vitrified white earthenware dinner plate, wheat pattern. (Photo R. Chan)

Figure 17. Vitrified white earthenware dinner plate. “The Lorne” pattern. (Photo R. Chan)

Figure18. Vitrified white earthenware cup, wheat pattern. (Photo R. Chan)

Figure 19. Vitrified white earthenware saucer, wheat pattern. (Photo R. Chan)

Figure 20. White earthenware storage jar. (Photo R. Chan)

Figure 21. “Rutherford” glass fruit jar. (Photo R. Chan)

Figure 22. Glass jelly tumbler. (Photo R. Chan)

Figure 23. Flavouring extract bottle, “JOHN DAVIS & Co. DETROIT”. (Photo R. Chan)

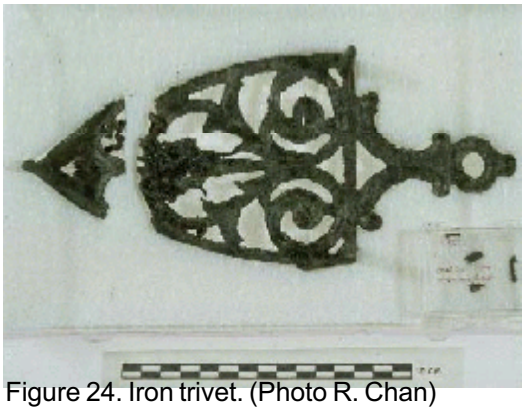

Figure 24. Iron trivet. (Photo R. Chan)

Figure 25. Champagne bottle (found containing an oil-resin mixture, possibly a varnish). (Photo R. Chan)

Figure 26. Bottle, “THOMPSON’ S EYE WATER”. (Photo R. Chan)

As for the teapots (Fig. 13) they were without a doubt used in the kitchen for preparing and serving the servants' tea or, for preparing tea that was to be poured in a fancier teapot meant for the Leslies. The teapots in this collection never would have been used in the presence of guests at tea or dinner, and were very unlikely used at family dinners. Not only did Leslie's financial status allow him to have the very best, but "the very best" in terms of tea and coffee services (among other things) was easily accessible to John Leslie because we know from period advertisements that he sold tea sets in his jewelry store.

The servants may have been provided with tea by the Leslies, or they may have had to buy it themselves, as it was often the case (Horn 1990:109). Servants who were not provided with tea and could not afford to purchase it would reuse the leaves previously steeped for their masters' tea.

The vessels in this collection used to serve food and drinks at the table also appear to have been used in the kitchen, and most probably for the servants' meals. The platters used to bring several food dishes to the table, the vegetable dish and the sauce tureen (Fig. 14) are very plain in appearance. Plain white earthenware vessels as well as vessels decorated with the wheat pattern were the cheapest wares available for the period. Thus it is almost impossible that these were used to serve dishes at the Leslies' table, even for family meals.

An American Majolica pitcher (Fig. 15) was also most likely used in the kitchen, despite its decorative aspect. Although early American Majolica pieces were items of luxury, the poor manufacturing of this particular piece reveals that it dated to the period when mass produced copies were numerous and cheap. In the mid-1880s, majolica pieces were offered in return for coupons contained in certain commercial food products such as baking powder, cereal and tea (Rebert 1981:14). Needless to say that a vessel that could be acquired in return for coupons would not be used at the table of a middle-class family such as the Leslies. It would have been, however, a welcomed addition to the servants' kitchen.

Seventeen dinner plates and six breakfast plates were decorated with various moulded relief patterns including: the wheat pattern (Fig. 16), prairie shape, forget-me-not, Sydenham, Chinese border, triple border and "the Lorne" (Fig. 17) patterns. They were all manufactured by different potters, suggesting the absence of an actual dinner set. The fact that the twelve plates bearing the wheat pattern exhibit several different variations of the popular pattern reinforces our supposition. Such a variety suggests that the plates were left-overs from their masters' sets or purchased second-hand. They could also have been new pieces purchased at discount prices. Vessels bearing defects could be purchased at lower prices, as could pieces from an incomplete dinner set. The last two hypotheses appear more likely however, as moulded-relief white earthenware never had the potential to be considered "good china" at the table of people like the Leslies.

The tea-ware (Figs. 18, 19) was also found in a variety of wares and styles. The fact that there is no unity in wares, styles and patterns in the twenty-two cups and sixteen saucers suggests once again the absence of a specific set. We believe that the individual pieces were, as the dinner ware, leftovers from one of the Leslies' older sets, bought second-hand or at discount prices.

Several food storage containers such as ceramic storage jars (Fig. 20), glass fruit jars (Fig. 21) and jelly tumblers (Fig. 22) reveal that there was much preserving, pickling, cooking and baking activities in the Leslies' kitchen. The products of home canning performed in the Leslies' kitchen surely allowed them a little variety in their plates during the winter months! But we can easily imagine the amount of work and time that was spent yearly on canning foods for the winter. It appears that, although commercially canned foods in the

late 19th century were readily available (Green 1983:64-65), the Leslies did not consume a lot of commercially prepared foods. The only commercial food products identified were two bottles of flavouring extracts (Fig. 23), a bottle of olive oil and an unidentified sauce bottle.

A large part of the servant's work concerns cleaning. Cleaning the home and doing the laundry in the late nineteenth century had, as cooking did, daily, weekly and seasonal rhythms (Green 1983:75). An iron trivet (Fig. 24) that would have been used for a sad iron was recovered. Ironing at home for a family like the Leslies, which had included up to four adults and one child, would certainly have occupied an entire day and would have necessitated a great number of implements (Dudden 1983:142). The ironing was generally done the day after the washing was done and at least three flat irons were to be used for each person ironing (Dudden 1983:142). It is also feasible that the Leslies had their laundry (washing and ironing) done outside the home or that they hired a laundress for one to two days a week, as it was often the case in Victorian middle-class households (Katzman 1981:16, 52). There was certainly a demand for that kind of service in late 19th century Ottawa, particularly in districts like Sandy Hill. Ads like these ones were found in the want ads of the newspapers: (Fig. 4)

> Wanted - A laundress to take home a family washing weekly (*Ottawa Citizen*, 12 February 1878, p.4).
> Wanted - A plain cook. One who understand washing and ironing (*Ottawa Citizen*, 3 May 1878, p.4).
> Wanted - Washing and ironing done by the day (*Ottawa Citizen*, 3 May 1878, p.4).

Laundresses seeking employment also advertised. This ad was found:

> Wanted -A situation as a laundress or to do housework by the day (*Ottawa Citizen*, 20 February 1888, p.2)

Since washing and ironing was such an arduous task, certain employers made sure they advertised that the servant they needed to hire would not have to take care of it, as this ad clearly demonstrates:

> Wanted - A good general servant; small family; no washing (*Ottawa Citizen,* 24 January 1888, p.2)

The Leslies could also have opted for their washables to be sent to one of the many commercial laundries of Ottawa; they were as many as eleven in 1890. Commercial laundries did not only offer washing services. We know from different period documents that some provided clients with ironing and starching services.

Whether the laundry was done by the regular domestics, by a professional laundress or sent out to a commercial laundry, an iron would have been needed at home. Accounts of servants' weekly chores as written in household service studies clearly illustrate that even when a laundress came weekly to take care of the laundry, the regular servant took care of the ironing (Katzman 1981:121-122). And even if the washables were sent to a commercial laundry that also dispensed ironing and starching, ironing jobs would be sufficient around the house to justify the need of at least one iron. Certain literary advisers also suggested that, while the good family clothes would be sent out to be washed, domestics would take care of servants' clothes, towels, etc. (Dudden 1983:143).

Few household products were represented. An oil-resin mixture found in a champagne bottle (Fig. 25) and believed to be a varnish used for paintings and fine woodwork was most likely used for touch ups and is not a surprising find when we take into consideration that the house, as any other middle-class house of the same period, would have been filled with wood furniture and oil paintings. Advice literature on housekeeping often included instructions on how to care for wood-works and paintings as part of their house-cleaning chapter (Anonymous 1883:431-432). A small quantity of hardened linseed oil was found in an ironstone tea cup. The uses of linseed oil were so numerous that it is nearly impossible to know what specific task it was used for. However, given the fact that the oil was in a tea cup and that the collection appears to be servant-related, one particular use needs to be taken into consideration. The 1883 *Practical Housekeeping* offers the following advice in a chapter dedicated to the kitchen:

> "COVERING FOR JARS. — A good water-proof paper for covering jars used in preserving, etc., may be made by brushing over the paper with boiled linseed oil and suspending it over a line until dry" (Anonymous 1883:467).

The absence of commercial household products, except for one amber-coloured bottle, may be due to the fact that the servants prepared their own cleaning products with the ingredients that they had at hand. Recipes for home-made household products were plentiful in housekeeping guides such as *Practical Housekeeping* and *The Household Guide or Domestic Cyclopaedia* (Anonymous 1883:436-444; Jefferis and Nichols 1972 (1894):361-379). Home-made household products were probably less expensive than the commercial products. However, the reasons for preferring home-made products may not all be of a financial nature. Housewives and servants may very well have had their own personal favourites when it came to household product recipes. Since specific recipes were often used for specific types of chores, preparing mixtures would have allowed a greater versatility than relying on store-bought products.

Although several bottles and a vial have been associated to medicine, only one patent medicine can be directly linked to an ailment. Thompson's Eye Water (Fig. 26) was used to soothe irritated eyes. As irritating substances such as dust, dirt, cinder and sand were often the cause of sore eyes, we believe that this product was most likely used by the servants working at Kininvie. They would be in contact with the irritating substances almost constantly especially when cleaning up the house: dusting the furniture, sweeping the carpets, emptying the grate, dust box, coal box, etc.

The study of the archeological collection found at Laurier House has allowed the study of the material culture related to Victorian domestic servants. The activities identified bring no surprise. The artifacts found were related to cooking and cleaning, i.e., the activities that domestic servants were hired to fulfill. Unfortunately, no personal artifact allowed us to learn more about aspects of their lives other than their usual chores.

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