

# Lives of Domestic Workers at the William Trent House, Trenton, NJ (1860–1920): Research Overview, Methodology, and Public Engagement Proposals

For the William Trent House Association

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## Overview

The goal of this project is to investigate the lives of domestic workers residing at the William Trent House roughly between 1860 and 1920 (then known as Woodlawn), based initially on a list of individuals purported to have lived and worked for the Stokes family.

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of replicable methodology used to meet that goal.

## Methodology

Preliminary research drew upon a range of commonly used historical resources, including microfiche at NJ State Library, artifact repositories, such as The Trentoniana Room at the Trenton Public Library, and selected reference databases, including that of The Trenton Historical Society and the Princeton University Firestone Library, in order to assess the scope and availability of relevant material. As this initial survey clarified both the breadth of the subject and the limits of certain sources, the research focus was refined.

Exploratory analysis of **U.S. census records** then became central to the project. These records successively marked head of household for the given years as: Edward H. Stokes, 1860–1895; Mrs. Permelia Stokes, 1900; and Edward A. Stokes, 1910–1915, and provided the names of domestic servants who lived and worked at the residence.

The census enumerations included both federal and state records—primarily 1860, 1870, 1880, 1885, 1895, 1900, 1910, and 1915—and revealed demographic details related to name, age, gender, birthplace, occupation, household composition, and patterns of residence.

The results were mixed: some entries were absent or contradictory, others were sparse, while a smaller subset revealed discernible threads that guided further research. Appendix A contains more details on demographic data obtained from Census records on domestic servants working at Woodlawn between 1860 and 1915. Methodological considerations encountered in using these records are noted below.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Appendices C and D offer examples of contradictory information about birthdate, age, and date of immigration for Bridget Coleman and of misspelled names. According to Trent House records, the name

- Human error accounts for discrepancies, inaccuracies, or omissions in the handwritten notes of the census taker and/or by the recorder of data into the typed “details” page for each occupant record—making it necessary, at times, to review both images and typed “details” records for corroboration and clarification.
- Resident Name Variants: Spellings differ across records (e.g., Sarah Lanning/Sanning/Lannino; Edward Stokes/Stoles), and these are reflected in the appendix.
- Individuals may be included on more than one census record for the same year.
- Street name inclusion and variations occur due to changes in census recording practices and municipal naming conventions across enumerations: Warren n Market, Warren Street, and South Warren Street, with the house eventually listed consistently as 539.
- 1885 New Jersey State Census: Provides names and general age categories but does not specify each person’s role or employment relationship within the household.
- 1890 Census Gap: The 1890 U.S. Federal Census population schedules are largely unavailable due to destruction by fire in 1921, resulting in a gap for that year.
- Shift in Head of Household: Following Census enumerations 1860, 1870, 1880, 1885, 1890, and 1895 and due to Edward H. Stokes’ death in 1899, Mrs. Permelia Stokes is listed as head of household for the 1900 census; Edward A. Stokes assumes the head of household designation in enumerations 1910 and 1915.

It is worthwhile to note that the US Federal Census takes place every decade; US State Census takes place every 5th year of each decade; other countries have their own practices—British censuses were conducted in the first year of each decade.

As individuals were discovered and traced by name and other distinguishing features, primarily through other census years and within other households, research expanded to include the people who were most important to them, their families.

**City directories and newspapers**, chiefly found through [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) were consulted to corroborate census data, clarify employment trajectories, and provide additional context for the domestic workers’ lives, illustrating how city directories can extend the demographic and

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originally associated with Sarah Lanning was Sarah Lannino. The US Census data collected in NJ and related to the Stokes family accurately identify her as Sarah Lanning, while the US Census data collected in KS lists her as Sarah Sanning, an error in the spelling of surname that affected all family members in that record, including Sarah’s father and head of household Ralph Lanning listed as Ralph Sanning.

occupational profiles developed from census research. These sources offered substantive clues to the servants' histories. For example, Appendix B contains detailed information about **Sarah Rowland**, highlighting the rise of the Stokes' former chambermaid to a prominent entrepreneur, and **Bridget Coleman** whose employment shifts from domestic worker to institutional worker and eventually to retirement.

**Newspapers** are a critical resource to help find missing persons. In an age where women cast off their names and replaced them with a Mrs. followed by the husband's given and surname, newspapers that reported on men often gave hints as to who their spouses might be. In Appendix E newspaper articles helped to overcome female erasure in historical records, as in the examples below about **Sarah Rowland**.

Her brother Thomas' burial rites announcement — The Times (Trenton, New Jersey) · Wed, Mar 17, 1937 · Page 24—included “*Surviving are... and three sisters, Mrs. Theodore DeVoe, Mrs. Sarah Allen, and Mrs. Rose MacCrellish.*” This indicates that Sarah married, taking the surname Allen.

Trenton Evening Times (Trenton, New Jersey) · Mon, Aug 25, 1913 · Page 7 revealed “*Jasper Allen and Miss Rowland Wed, **Miss Sarah Evans Rowland** of Brunswick Avenue and Jasper H. Allen, the produce dealer, were united in marriage Saturday afternoon... Mr. and Mrs. Allen will reside in their attractive home on the Lawrenceville Road... Both are prominent in religious circles. The bride being a valued teacher in the junior department of the Fifth Presbyterian Sunday School. Mr. Allen has the distinction of being a deacon and, likewise, treasurer of Central Baptist Church.*”

And an article from Trenton Evening Times (Trenton, NJ, Fri, April 03, 1908 · Page 14 attests “*Church Supper Well Attended: Fifth Presbyterians Open New Sunday School Building—Musical Program is Much Enjoyed*” and states “*Table 4—Mrs. A.W. Bothers, Mrs. J. Saums, Mrs. Edward Wagner, **Miss Sarah Rowland**, Miss Ethel Evans, Mrs. Phillips...*” were in attendance.

From this point, moving backward, other articles about the Fifth Presbyterian Church and general social outings revealed Sarah, the person, her activities in the community prior to her wedding, and also about the years following her marriage and unto her death.

**Maps** provide a spatial framework of neighborhoods and industry that would have shaped the daily lives of domestic workers. The 1872 *City of Trenton, Mercer Co., N.J.* map offers insight into local merchants, points of recreation, and other amenities that may have been relevant to household operations and residents' routines. **Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps** further situate workers in relation to family residences and the broader economic landscape of the city. These resources complement Census and City Directory data and help to unlock the narrative by clarifying the physical environment in which domestic workers lived and labored.

## Outcomes and Implications

Sketches of lives find shape via data points on Census records, city directories, and newspaper narratives.

## **Sarah Lanning**

Sarah Lanning was born on May 7, 1849. According to the 1850 census, she lived in Monroe, Middlesex County, New Jersey, with her parents, Ralph Lanning, 31, and Diannah Lanning, 27, an immigrant from England. Ralph was a farmer. The household included two sons, Aaron, 5, and George, 3, as well as Diannah's brother George, 21, also a farmer.

By the 1860 census, the family had relocated to Macoupin County, Illinois. Aaron, age 15, was a farmer and attended school. George, 12; Sarah, 11; Sims, 10; Mary, 8; and John, 7, were all listed as attending school, while Cornelia, 5; Amanda, 3; and Ella, 2, remained at home with their mother. An unrelated adult, John Brown, 28, a farmer from Switzerland, was also part of the household.

In 1870, the Lanning family was recorded in Scott Township, Linn County, Kansas. Ralph continued farming, and Diannah kept house. Aaron and George no longer appeared in the household. Sims (Harry), nearly 20, and John, 16, were listed as farm laborers, while Mary, 18, was recorded as a schoolteacher. The remaining children—Cornelia, 14; Amanda, 13; Ella, 10; and Hallie, 8—attended school.

Sarah was listed without an occupation. Within weeks of the census enumeration, she appeared in Trenton, New Jersey, residing in the Fourth Ward of Mercer County in the household of Edward and Permelia Stokes, now the William Trent House. There, her occupation was recorded as nurse, caring for three children: Marion, 7; Edward A., 5; and John, one month old.

The household included several other domestic workers, among them a governess, cook, chambermaid, a young woman of Sarah's age without a recorded occupation, and a laborer from Ireland.

Later census records show that by 1872, Sarah had returned to Kansas, where she married Daniel Goode, a farmer, and the couple had two children, Arthur and Grace.

## **Sarah Rowland**

According to the 1861 England and Wales Census, Sarah Rowlands was born in 1860 in N, Shropshire, England. She was the daughter of Thomas, 37, a farm laborer, and Sarah, 34. She had a sister, Mary, 7, and a brother, John, 4.

By 1871, when Sarah was 10, the family had expanded to include siblings: Martha, 6, Robert, 3, and Rose Ann, 1. Mary was not included in the household record.

In 1873, the family immigrated to the United States.

City Directory and Census records placed Sarah in Trenton, New Jersey, by 1874, first boarding on South Warren Street, when she was 13, and then residing as a chambermaid at 539 S. Warren, the home of Edward H. Stokes. She was 19 years old.

Later records place her with family members. At a time when potteries densely filled the Trenton area based on Sanborn maps, her brother and brother-in-law were potters, and Sarah herself is reported to have worked as both a decorator and an electrical specialist in that field before changing her career trajectory altogether.

According to Trenton City Directories, from 1905 through 1912, Sarah Rowland worked as a masseuse from her home on Brunswick Avenue, when massage, as a part of the established facial treatment of the day, was prized.

Her social life centered around the Fifth Presbyterian Church, and by the time she married Jasper H. Allen, “the produce dealer,” in 1913, she was a “valued teacher in the junior department of the ... Sunday School.” Although Sarah was widowed in 1923, she remained deeply connected to her family and community. She died in her home on January 8, 1941.

### **Bridget Coleman**

It is unclear when Bridget Coleman immigrated from Ireland to the United States; dates recorded on census records provide conflicting information, with no weight given to any one year. However, she would have been a young woman in her 20s and was most likely born in May 1868. She lived with and worked as a servant for the Stokes family by 1895 and continued in that role into the 1910s.

City Directories from 1915 to 1927 place Bridget at the New Jersey School for the Deaf—as an assistant, domestic, or housemaid, possibly interchangeable designations—and note that she lived there. However, according to the 1915 State Census and the 1920 Federal Census, she also lived with her sister Mary Coleman, a dressmaker and head of household. At least in 1920, Rose Stellbacher also lived with them (Rose was the live-in cook for the Stokes household in 1910).

From 1931 until at least 1935, Bridget’s residence is recorded as 214 Mercer. Enumerations for 1931, 1932, 1934, and 1935 provide no occupation; however, the 1933 City Directory notes that she was retired. Bridget remained single. She clearly forged a good reputation and long-lasting relationships among her peers and employers.

### **Lingering Questions**

Several questions arose that might be investigated further:

- How did responsibility for education shift from households to private and eventually public institutions as Trenton grew in population and affluence? What do census records and brief biographical sketches—particularly of women—reveal about changing expectations of schooling, labor, and civic participation?
- How were leisure and recreational spaces in Trenton distributed across industrial, residential, and commercial areas, and to what extent did people of different social and economic backgrounds share—or occupy separate—venues of entertainment?

What do newspapers, maps, and local notices reveal about who was publicly visible in these spaces, and whose social lives remained largely undocumented?

- What role did church attendance and community engagement play in providing social networks, reputation, and status for women in their private and professional lives?
- As Trenton positioned itself as an industrial and commercial center in the early twentieth century—captured in the Chamber of Commerce’s 1910 adoption of the slogan *Trenton Makes, the World Takes*—what entrepreneurial or independent income-generating opportunities were available to women, and how did they establish, train for, or sustain such work outside traditional factory or domestic service roles?
- To what extent did unmarried immigrant women working in domestic service form informal support networks—through siblings, co-residence, and shared employment—that functioned as alternatives to traditional family structures?
- What did “retirement” mean for domestic servants in the 1930s, particularly single women without children, and how were aging, economic security, and housing managed once paid employment ended?

## **Moving Forward: Proposed Public Engagement and Interpretation**

### **Salon Evenings & Afternoons: Gilded Age Recreation at Home**

- Curated readings of contemporaneous newspaper articles (domestic advice, occupational instruction, accidents, curiosities, and short recreational pieces), delivered with theatrical emphasis and contextual framing.
- Literary readings of prose and poetry from the era, including Maupassant’s *The Necklace*, followed by discussion and refreshments.
- Optional participatory poetry: attendees write or share short compositions in a parlor-style social setting.
- Interactive parlor games inspired by the period: Charades, Dumb Orator, Tableaux Vivants, and improvisational word games like Peter Coddle’s *Trip to New York*.
- Oral storytelling of ghost tales, folklore, and song contemporaneous to the late 19th–early 20th century, aimed at adult audiences.

### **Fashion and Photography – Hats On!**

- Exploration of the importance of hats as social markers in the Gilded Age, highlighting etiquette, class, and gender norms.

- Easter parade-style event with historical hat artifacts and period-appropriate discussion.
- Photography contest featuring images of extant historic haunts and architectural features in Trenton.

### **Jewelry & Stories: Pearls, Brooches, and *The Necklace***

- Display of period-appropriate jewelry (pearls, brooches, pins) alongside
  - Reading of Guy de Maupassant’s *The Necklace* (1884).
  - Discussion of societal pressures, wealth display, and personal identity in the late 19th century.
  - Optional handling of reproduction pieces for tactile engagement with material culture.

### **Lawn Parties, Socials, and Suppers**

Fundraising antics of local church communities during the Gilded Age that formed the basis for social networking and climbing—food highlights and goals, i.e., the creation of a children’s society, public safety issues, parades, etc.

### **Video & First-Person Interpretation**

- First-person portrayal of the three women in period garb.
- Documentary-style videos exploring artifacts, spaces, and historical context.

### **Picture Book**

- Style: Simple, memorable language with visual cues; highlight routines, relationships, and community.
- Features: Illustrations of work, play, school, and church; perhaps a “day in the life” format or three parallel narratives (Sarah Lanning, Sarah Rowland, Bridget Coleman).
- Purpose: Introduces historical concepts in an accessible way, grounding abstract ideas like labor, social networks, and community in tangible, visual stories.

### **Historical Children’s Chapter Book (*Little House* / *Birchbark House* Style)**

- Style: Narrative-driven, immersive, period-accurate, richly detailed daily life.

- Content: Expand on the picture book stories—include family, immigration, schooling, work routines, leisure, and social dynamics.
- Purpose: Encourage empathy, historical understanding, and connection to self, community, world, based on research; could serve as a teaching tool or companion to the or a board game.

### **Period Recipes & Household Foods**

- Collection of simple recipes from contemporaneous newspapers and household manuals, illustrating foods served to guests and linking domestic labor, social life, and daily routines.

### **Hands-On Maps, Games, & Manipulatives**

- Incorporation and construction of **Period Games** like jump rope, hand-clapping rhymes, ball-and-jacks, and/or hopscotch to link industry, education, and daily life to movement and musical memory.
- **Sanborn Map Puzzles:** Tag-board cutouts allow visitors to reconstruct industrial, residential, and commercial layouts of Trenton, exploring spatial relationships of work, schooling, and leisure.
- **Board Games:** Modeled after Life or Candyland, highlighting daily routines, recreation, transportation, schools, opera house, and other haunts.
- **Clock of Duties:** Repositionable stickers representing typical work and recreational tasks across a daily schedule for domestic workers.
- **Paper dolls:** Represented in style of Gilded Age paper dolls to represent fashion and context of the period and the household.
- **Dollhouse of Trent House/Stokes Household:** To recreate and represent the spatial layout, domestic spaces, and daily routines of the Stokes household prior to reconstruction, including rooms, furniture, and artifacts based on historical records, allowing hands-on exploration of household organization and servant life.

## APPENDICES

**For copies of these appendices, write [trenthouseassociation@verizon.net](mailto:trenthouseassociation@verizon.net).**

Appendix A: Census-Derived Demographic Data for Domestic Workers at Woodlawn (1870-1915)

Appendix B: City Directories

Appendix C: Bridget Coleman – Comparison of Census-Derived Demographic Data (1895\_1900\_1910)

Appendix D: Sarah Lanning – Comparison of 1870 NJ and KS Census-Derived Demographic Data

Appendix E: Newspaper Clippings

Appendix F: Maps

Appendix G: Sarah Lanning – 1850 to 1880 NJ, IL, and KS Census-Derived Demographic Data