

The Shanachie



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Lockwood-Mathews Mansion Museum

Irish servants in a Connecticut Downton Abbey

In 2012, our historical society initiated a project to focus attention on a much-neglected segment of Connecticut Irish history: Irish women servants.

We set about to collect everything we could — family memories, diary entries, photographs, newspaper articles, census data — that would shed light on the lives of the thousands of Irish young women who found jobs in service.

In the past couple years, we have neglected the good start we made on this project. But this past autumn we have been drawn back to it by an amazing institution in Norwalk. The Lockwood-Mathews Mansion Museum is a Downton Abbey look-alike. And as is the case with Downton Abbey, the Lockwood-Mathews home had a large servant staff, most of them Irish.

'Finest dwelling in America'

From 1864 to 1869, railroad baron LeGrand Lockwood spent \$1.1 million — \$16 million today — to build a grand 48,000 square foot residence on a 35-acre tract on West Avenue in Norwalk. His mansion stood four stories and comprised more than 60 rooms. One Connecticut newspaper rhapsodized, "It is probably the finest private dwelling in America, being made of solid blocks of granite, and finished inside with rosewood, mahogany, cedar of Lebanon ... Over 50 kinds of marble are used in the floors, and one door, composed of many hundred kinds of wood, etc., cost \$3,000 ... There are three acres of hot-houses."

Lockwood was devastated financially by the gold crash of 1869 and died in 1872 at the age of 52. The mansion was purchased by the Charles Mathews family of New York City in 1876 and remained in that family until 1938.

Today Lockwood-Mathews Museum has a



Lockwood-Mathews Mansion Museum — 295 West Ave., Norwalk, just off I-95 — is a treasure-filled relic of America's Gilded Age. The mansion was built in the 1860s and is every bit as grand as the more publicized mansions in Newport, R.I. It is also a landmark of Irish America because from the 1860s until the 1930s, Lockwood-Mathews Mansion was both the workplace and the home of a large staff of servants, most of them Irish. In 2016, visitors to the museum will be treated to a rare glimpse into the lives of these Irish immigrants in an exhibit titled, "The Stairs Below: The Mansion's Domestic Servants." Often overlooked in historic home museums, the servants quarters at Lockwood-Mathews have been renovated and are as they were more than a century ago. Tours of the quarters during 2016 will feature exhibits filled with pictures and text that explain everything from the servants' clothing and daily chores to their wages and relationships with the families they served. Information on visiting the mansion and arranging guided tours is available on www.lockwoodmathewsmansion.com or by calling (203) 838-9799.

small but talented staff that does an excellent job of recreating life as it was in the Gilded Age. The latest project of the Lockwood-Mathews staff, led by Executive Director Susan Gilgore — the project that introduced us to this Downton Abbey in our midst — has been to renovate the servants' quarters. The renovation was com-

pleted in October 2015 and celebrated with the opening of a wonderful exhibit that will run until Oct. 30, 2016. The exhibit is titled, apparently with Downton Abbey in mind: *The Stairs Below: The Mansion's Domestic Servants, 1868-1938*. The exhibit provides an in-depth view in words, photographs and artifacts of servant life in the home of

two of America's richest families in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The rich in those times had almost as many servants as family members living in their mansions. The 1870 census lists 11 family members. The family included LeGrand Lockwood and his wife Ann, their children and grandchildren. The 1870 staff included 10 servants, six of them Irish natives: Margaret Doyle, age 40, cook; Ellen Coly, 45; Ann Murray, 45; Mary Sullivan, 40; Margaret Murphy, all servants; Edward Murray, 30, gardener.

In 1880, the Mathews family had 10 members, whose needs were served by a staff of seven, all of whom were Irish-born: Catherine Gorman, age 40, nurse; Ann Murry, 26, cook; Catherine Barry, 39, seamstress; Catherine Connell, 26, laundress; James Dallas, 23, butler; Thomas Galligan, 32, coachman; Hannah Locyhlan, 27, servant.

Other Irish immigrants worked as servants in the 70 years the Lockwood and Mathews families occupied the mansion. In connection with the exhibit now on display, curator Kathleen Motes Bennewitz has compiled a list of all the servants. The Irish among them, in addition to those above, include:

James Hannan, 1896, employee; John Kelly, 1907-1910, butler; Hugh McCaffrey, 1899, laborer; Catherine Sullivan, 1930s, cook; Ellen McIlhoney, 1884, housemaid; Edward Ladrigan, tended horses.

Also, John Farrell, 1900-1925, gardener; Mary Farrell, John's wife; John M. Farrell, son of John and Mary, 1925-1935, gardener; Joseph Francis Farrell, son of John and Mary, 1920s-1930s, gardener; Nora Farrell, wife of Joseph, 1930s, chambermaid; Thomas Goggins, 1897-1947, coachman, chauffer, valet; James P. Goggins, 1931-1938, caretaker.

An exhibit as grand as the manor

The exhibit which the Lockwood-Mathews staff has put together provides a wealth of information about the servants themselves. It does so against the backdrop of the grandeur of the mansion. The information extends far beyond the names of servants and their duties.

For example, the exhibit reveals that the Mathews family even considered the religion of servants when contemplating pur-

chasing the Lockwood mansion. Florence Mathews, the granddame of the family, once stated, "For some time, Father had been looking for a country place ... So many large places were isolated and lonely, that it greatly increased the domestic problem — servants simply would not stay. But Norwalk had a Catholic Church nearby, and a village only a mile away at each side of us."

Thus did the Mathews acquire a grand residence a stone's throw from St. Mary's Church where the mainly Catholic servants could both worship and socialize. Even if it was a bit self-serving, the family's choice of location was extraordinary in Connecticut, a state where nativism flourished in the mid-19th century. Florence Mathews was so interested in good relations with her staff that during the summer months, she would have floral arrangements from the mansion's abundant gardens delivered to St. Mary's Church as well as her house of worship, Grace Episcopal Church.

The exhibit also depicts and discusses every aspect of domestic service and thanks to the restoration of the servants' quarters does so in an atmosphere that takes visitors on a magical tour of the life of both those who served and those who were served in the Victorian Age.

One panel in the exhibit focuses on the hours and duties of the servants. The accompanying text explains: "With nearly 50 rooms to keep clean at the mansion, plus the decorative woodwork, glass panels, fine furnishings and art worth to care for, housemaids had their hands full ... Keeping house was full-time, all-encompassing work. In reality, it involved hours of manual labor and the task of a maid was not an easy one. They worked 10-hour days with only a Sunday morning or afternoon off ... A house of this unusual size required more than one maid for each floor. Both the Lockwood and Mathews families employed one live-in chambermaid as well as female workers who 'lived out' to assist with cleaning the mansion."

"A regular schedule of weekly, and seasonal, cleaning was in place and several hours of daily dusting, sweeping and tidying were expected per floor. At work by 6 a.m., the housemaid opened up the first floor rooms, swept and dusted the halls, drawing, library and reception and sitting rooms and scrubbed sinks and lavatories.

"Sometimes the main staircase was included in her day's work, followed by polishing silver, cleaning gas globes or sweeping down walls with the cloths, soft brooms and feather brushes she kept for those purposes.

"At dusk, the maid drew down the shades, lit the gaslights — more than a hundred in the mansion — and tended the coal- or wood-burning fireplaces, always moving about the room as noiselessly as possible."

The tour of the mansion with pictures and text along the way illustrates such facts as how tiring the servant's work was. One text panel explains, "A significant portion of the mansion's 48,000 square feet was allocated for service purposes. Following a servant's route through the mansion and counting the steps taken, helps grasp the toil and drudgery of their 10-hour days and taxing routines in such a large and opulent residence ...

Staircases, grand and hidden

"Central to the plan are the grand staircase, used by family and guests and the service stairway, hidden from view to keep the movement and chores out of view of the family and guests. This narrow stairway circulates from a ground floor service hall to the upstairs family spaces, bed chambers and children's rooms; it also leads directly to the servants quarters located between the first and second floors ... Communication among the floors — from family to staff — was limited to speaking tubes and a call bell system. If Mrs. Lockwood rang, her lady's maid would immediately respond. To remain unobtrusive, the maid took the service stairs to access a web of narrow hallways that led directly to her lady's chamber."

The exhibit also provides photographs, colorful advertisements for various 19th century household products and for employment agencies that matched Irish women and American families in search of help.

"Word of mouth and personal references," explains one exhibit panel, "were the most successful channels of matching employers with employees looking for better wages and working conditions. 'Intelligence offices' were another. From 1870 until 1893, John and Mary Honnecker at 2 Wall Street ran the main intelligence

office in Norwalk. John Honnecker and his sons also operated a bakery at the same address. John was a German immigrant; his wife, Mary O'Grady Honnecker, was an Irish immigrant.

One exhibit panel illustrates the wages of servants vs. those of factory workers and discusses the fringe benefits of living in that balanced somewhat the wage differential that otherwise favored factory work.

Servant-family relations

Despite all the architectural, social and economic barriers that separated them, the families that owned the home and some of its servants became great friends. Such was the case with the Mathews family and Thomas Goggins, a native of England of Irish descent. The Mathews hired Goggins in 1897 as a chauffeur and a valet. Goggins worked 41 years for the family. He became such a friend that Charles T. Mathews, a son, and architect, built Goggins a home on a nearby street.

In 1906, when the Mathews purchased their first car — a Bridgeport-made Locomobile — Goggins was sent to a driving school for six weeks of training behind the wheel.

In later years, Goggins drove the lady of the mansion, Florence Mathews, for a drive every afternoon in her 1927 Lincoln. His nephew once reminisced how "Uncle Thomas would run home first to put on his chauffeur uniform before he would get her... They would drive around the town talking along the way."

A far less satisfactory experience both for Florence Mathews and for one of her workers, Ellen McIlhoney, was an incident that occurred in May of 1912.

Ellen McIlhoney was a widow about 47 years old. She was born in Ireland and had immigrated in 1881 when she was only 16. Her husband apparently was the Thomas McIlhoney who was listed in the 1897 Norwalk city directory as a coachman for J. Thornton Prowitt, an executive in a family-owned hardware, painting and bicycle dealership.

Thomas McIlhoney lived at 21 Cross St.,

the same address shown as the residence of Ellen McIlhoney on the 1910 U.S. census for Norwalk. The census returns list her as an unemployed widow and the mother of five sons. The sons all were born in Connecticut and were living with her. They included: Edward, 21, a weaver in a silk mill; William, 18, an apprentice in a silk mill; Thomas, 16,



The file of the McIlhoney-Mathews trial in 1914 includes a small photo of the Circe statue. The photo is faded and fuzzy, but contains in good detail all the elements which prompted a lawsuit: the marble statue of the Greek goddess, Circe; the basin in which the statue stood in the Lockwood-Mathews Mansion, and the blocks beneath the basin which gave way and caused the statue to fall upon Ellen McIlhoney.

a clerk in a market; John, 13, and James, 12.

Ellen was a 'living out' or day servant in the Mathews household. On May 7, 1912, she was given the task of cleaning a statue under a large dome in the Lockwood-Mathews mansion. The statue was of Circe, a Greek goddess of magic. The statue was anything but magic for Florence and Ellen.

The marble statue stood in a large basin that was decorated with floral arrangements. The basin itself stood on wooden blocks. As McIlhoney was stepping into the

basin the wooden blocks gave way and the statue tipped over and fell upon her.

The events following that accident were undoubtedly one of the few times that an immigrant Irish servant took the owner of a mansion to court.

For some reason, perhaps because there were negotiations that failed, the legal action was delayed for a year. Then, on May 6, 1913, attorneys John J. Walsh and James T. Hubbell filed in Superior Court in Bridgeport papers asking that Ellen McIlhoney be awarded \$10,000 for injuries that included severe bruises about the body, severe injuries to her right leg, dislocation of a rib and muscular strain of the chest and back. McIlhoney's lawyers charged that "as a consequence ... she became and still is physically weak and disabled."

McIlhoney, said Walsh and Hubbell, was a woman of no education, who has always had to earn her living by manual labor and "is totally unfamiliar with the construction of houses or the construction of foundations necessary to support a heavy weight inside a dwelling house ..." They added that she was paid \$1.50 a day by Mathews.

On the day of the accident, they charged, the basin tipped over "because two of the wooden supports under the legs of the basin had because of their decayed condition and faulty construction and the negligence and lack of care regarding the same, on the part of the defendant, become displaced, and were not under the legs so that ... the basin tilted, throwing the plaintiff

down and out of the basin upon the floor, and causing the statue to fall upon the plaintiff, whereby the plaintiff suffered great bodily injuries from which she is still suffering."

They charged that McIlhoney had no way of knowing of the decayed condition of the basin while Mathews had a legal responsibility to ensure that her employee had a safe workplace. They said she was negligent in allowing the basin to be "in a defective condition and of insufficient strength."

Another long delay followed and it was not until February 1914 that a jury was selected and the case was heard in Superior Court in Bridgeport before Judge Howard D. Curtiss.

The first argument that Leo Davis, the lawyer representing Mathews, brought up was that the accident actually happened prior to the date claimed and that the lawsuit was not filed until more than a year after it happened and therefore was not lawful.

He also claimed "the bare fact that the statue fell over on the plaintiff in the absence of any proof of negligence on the part of the defendant would not justify a judgement for the plaintiff, and that if McIlhoney could have discovered "by the use of the ordinary powers of observation of an ordinary individual ... the dangerous condition of this basin then she not be awarded damages." Davis also argued, "You are not

justified in finding a verdict for the plaintiff unless it is proven that (the blocks supporting the basin) were moved by this defendant or by some person in her employ ... and that she knew or ought to have known that said blocks were moved."

Finally, Davis told the jury, "The wealth of one party to the case with the poverty of another or the financial condition of either of them are not to be considered by you in any way in arriving at a verdict and if you find for the plaintiff you must find only actual damages allowing such reasonable amount for pain as you think best, but punitive or vindictive damages must not be awarded under any circumstances in this case."

The jury deliberated for four hours on Feb. 18, 1914, then returned with its verdict. The jury foreman, Bayard M. Cole of Stamford, announced: "In this case the jury find the issue for the plaintiff Ellen McIl-

honey, and therefore find for the plaintiff to recover of the defendant \$950 damage."

The damages were far less than the \$10,000 that McIlhoney's lawyers sought. The court accepted the verdict but Mathews lawyer filed a motion to set aside the verdict and order a new trial.

"Said action," the trial records dated March 21, 1914, state, "came thence to the present time when the parties appeared and were fully heard upon such motion, which motion the court denied it."

Sources: *Norwich (CT) Aurora*, Feb. 28, 1872. *Middletown Daily Constitution*, May 24, 1875. 1910 U.S. Census, Norwalk. 1897 *Norwalk City Directory*. Connecticut State Library: RG3, Fairfield County Superior Court, Civil Files, 2-10A, No. 7647, *Ellen McIlhoney vs. Florence Mathews*, Feb. 18, 1914. *Bridgeport Evening Post*, Feb. 18, 1914.

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with the past;
we have handed
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to the future."

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