Women's Work: African American Main Line Domestics

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In an era of increasing separation and segmentation, millions of Americans recently engaged in a shared experience. Sunday evenings found them watching the very popular Masterpiece Theater series *Downton Abbey* on PBS. People watched the aristocratic Crawley family facing the vicissitudes of a changing world.

Part of the pleasure of watching this well-produced drama was in its ability to allow viewers the opportunity to imagine what life would be like when lived on such a grand scale. *Downton Abbey* was a popular cultural vehicle to satiate our collective appetites for knowledge of how others live. Peruse the shelves of local libraries and you will find numerous books documenting the glories of Main Line mansions of the past. House tours remain popular fundraising events. Grand homes are done up in opulent styles. Interior designers create rooms that speak to people's aspirations. Rooms are shown sporting Chesterfield leather sofas, crystal chandeliers and fine moldings. These things are offered as visual suggestion of the good life.

Those who study history know that the world as depicted in *Downton Abbey* was once a reality for wealthy Main Liners. African American women domestics worked in the opulent homes that the Main Line was known for. To expand our understanding a perhaps less familiar aspect of local history, we shall explore the connection between African American domestics and the White women of privilege for whom they worked.

Philadelphia's Main Line has been the subject of Philip Barry plays and has been the setting for films starring Cary Grant and Gene Kelly. The mansions of the Main Line were the unique creations of architects, landscapers and interior designers. It has been said that the Main Line is not a mere destination but that it is more a "state of mind." The inhabitants of these homes wished to recreate the lifestyle of the English gentry. To achieve this end, cooks, chauffeurs, maids and gardeners were needed. African American women domestics often did the work of housekeeping in these fabulous homes. No examination of the history of these homes would be complete without an acknowledgment of the work domestics did on the Main Line.

The book *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* was written by scholar Jacqueline Jones. Jones asserts that White middle class women benefited in certain ways from the labor that African domestic workers provided in the homes of those who engaged them. The work domestics did allowed White women of means a measure of freedom. Middle and upper class White women were able to enter the labor market in certain genteel professions if they so desired. They now had the leisure to shop for new consumer goods. The most privileged White women used their time to engage in reform causes. White women of a certain class were liberated from the work of housekeeping.

Scholar Jones also notes that White women of all classes lived in a rigid patriarchal society, and due to this fact, the ability to express their autonomy was severely limited. As a consequence of this state of affairs, the homes of women of privilege became places where they were able express a greater measure of control. These women sometimes had a hierarchical, class-based world view within which it was acceptable to enforce a significant level of control over the lives of the domestics in their employ.

Domestics were typically paid very little. Even among lower middle class Whites, it was considered an "affordable necessity to have help." White families who employed domestics viewed having "help" as a mark of social distinction. The late Mildred Burruss, a former Main Line domestic, reported that at times she earned $4.00 per week for her services.

With the benefits White women derived from having domestics care for their homes in mind, we shall now consider the benefits African American women derived from being domestics. African American women domestics often engaged in this work to supplement a husband's income. The additional income could be used to bring relatives North, buy a home, or educate future generations of a family. Just as there were benefits for African American women doing this work, there were drawbacks as well. The work was physically hard and the hours long. Domestics sought creative ways to balance the demands of work with the responsibilities of caring for their own homes and loved ones. Burruss speaks of

this challenge. She recalls working on the holidays. She states, "you would try and have everything done by one o'clock. You learned to cook your own meals as much as possible beforehand." Burruss continues to describe her work as a Main Line domestic. "At times, I could run the vacuum cleaner, wash and iron clothes, look after the small children, and clean rooms." Burruss goes on "... at times I would work from 8 until 4 with a lunch break. When I did a 'days work,' sometimes the White woman would provide a sandwich. They would pick you up from your home and take you to their home to work. I was treated nicely. I came here to work, make money and improve myself. I am not ashamed of the work I did."

Domestics relied on those that had experience in the field to show them the way. Burruss reports "when I came here from Arkansas in 1939, other 'Colored' maids showed me what to do. In one house I worked in had a cook and a maid. They were pretty old at the time and I was brought in to help them with their work. In the bigger houses the help lived in."

Domestics could work for prominent people. Such is the case with Marjorie Smith. Smith's daughter, Quetta Cunningham, reveals that her mother worked for the prominent Judge Curtis Bok. She goes on to report that the Upper Merion home was grand. "My sister and I would sometimes go with our mother. She cleaned." Decades later Cunningham recalls the striking staircase, the home's doors and the stunning music room. Famed artist Wharton Esherick did extensive and innovative work on the house. Smith went on to buy a home in Rosemont where she and her husband raised a family.

Domestic work involved cooking, cleaning and caring for children. However, it also often included the task of laundering. In the past, the work of washing and ironing items was done outside the homes of the wealthy. A woman engaged in this work would take soiled items into her home to be washed and ironed. Although financial returns from this work were modest, the work had significant appeal for African American women. Women could do this work in their own homes and stay in close contact with their small children while they worked. Laundry women were respected within their African American communities for their ability to earn a wage and their ability to maintain connections to their children. Christine Hill relates that women in her family did this work. "I remember seeing those wash tubs and a mangle. It was work women did. People did laundering. It was how people made a living." Hill spent time in a family home in Bryn Mawr. As the twentieth century progressed, the profession of laundering declined with the widespread use of automatic washing machines and dryers in the homes of middle class people.

The Main Line's wealthy homeowners had the means to live in splendor. However, an army of workers was required to maintain this lifestyle. The labor of African American women domestics was important to those individuals of means who wished to live in comfort.

Historian Darlene Clark Hine in her book, *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women In America*, sheds light on how important domestic work was to African American women. Hine posits that in the years following Emancipation, many African American women were domestics. So extensive was this condition that nearly every girl except for the most affluent among the race knew at some point she was to do domestic work. African American women could become wage earners and this fact drew many into the profession. Domestic work was difficult. The possibility of sexual harassment was real but African American women faced these challenges and moved forward.

Throughout history women have found strength when they unite. Main Line domestics formed the Berwyn Thimble Club for the purpose of offering support and fellowship to one another. The club was active for decades, and was still in existence during the 1940s. The war years saw tremendous change in all aspects of American life. Employment opportunities would expand for African American women as the country was nearly at the mid-point of the last century.

Members of the Berwyn Thimble Club on an outing to the Star Social Club in West Chester, PA. Mildred Burruss may be seen seated on the right in the front row. *Courtesy of Penny L. Washington*

Cheryl Mullenbach's book *Double Victory: How African American Women Broke Race and Gender Barriers to Help Win World War II*, sheds light on American life during the war years. She notes that labor unions of the time sought to speak for workers. However few unions permitted African American members and even fewer allowed African

American women within their ranks. Despite the racism and sexism African American women were drawn to seek work in war industries. The ability to earn higher wages than what could be earned doing domestic work was a strong inducement.

Working conditions somewhat improved for those women still earning a living as domestics. Employers were forced to offer higher wages because African American women were beginning to have other options as a result of changes brought on by the war. Attitudes were changing.

The gains of the Civil Rights Movement expanded educational and employment opportunities for many. Domestic work ceased to be seen as a desirable option for young African American women. The next generation of African American women would hold jobs as teachers, nurses, secretaries, and federal workers in unprecedented numbers as the decades of the twentieth century drew to a close.

Today, much of the the work domestics once performed is carried out by cleaning services, caterers, and nannies.

The African American domestics who worked on the Main Line lived lives that greatly contributed to the comfort and well-being of their employers. African American domestics are seldom considered when studies are done of the history of the Main Line. However these women contributed to the economic advancement of their families and communities.

It has been written that the lives of Black women were a prism through which the searing rays of race, class, and gender were focused and refracted. The creative among them transformed that light into a brilliant spectrum of light, hope and possibility. The most creative act any of us will ever do is to make a life, not just a living. The Main Line domestics made a life and left a legacy of progress in the history of their stories.

Materials Consulted:

Darlene Clark Hill
A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women In America
Published by Broadway Books
New York, New York, 1998

Jacqueline Jones
Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present
Published by Basic Books
New York, New York, 1985

Cheryl Mullenbach
Double Victory: How African American Women Broke Race and Gender Barriers to Help Win World War II
Published by Chicago Review Press
Chicago, Illinois, 2013

Oral Histories:

Mildred Burruss
Christine Hill
Quetta Cunningham

Dedicated to:

The women in my family who worked as domestics. You left a legacy of dignity.

"Because Black History Matters"

Mazie Beatrice Hall (July 18, 1902–January 1, 2006)
Miss Hall was a highly-respected educator and an accomplished civil rights advocate, active in many community service organizations, including Second Baptist Church in Wayne, during her 103 years. In July of 2000, the Supervisors of Tredyffrin Township dedicated the Mazie B. Hall Park in the Mt. Pleasant area. A portion of her collection of African American memorabilia and literature, including a letter from noted historian Carter G. Woodson and over 500 books, was transferred to the Mazie Hall African American Heritage Room in Warner Library at Eastern University. The remainder may be found in the Mazie B. Hall Collection within the Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection at Temple University. **https://library.temple.edu/scrc/mazie-b-hall-collection**