



Domestic Servants

Personal Lives

In their leisure time, domestic servants likely enjoyed the same hobbies and pleasures as people in other jobs during this era. Sewing, reading, playing musical instruments, chatting over tea, or having evening gatherings in their employer's kitchen or servants' hall were common diversions, and may have occurred here at Lucknow. A space like the servants' hall, set aside solely for the enjoyment and rest of the servants, would have been a luxury that existed in only the wealthiest homes. Though the servants' hall was a spot to rest and have a meal, note that the intercom, telephone, and home alarm system were in this space so a servant's break might be frequently interrupted.

For many servants in the early 20th century, Sunday would have been a typical day off to attend church, a local festival, or perhaps go to the movies.

Unfortunately, domestic service workers battled the social stigma attached to their job titles, a problem which had persisted for centuries. Service was considered by some to be a disgraceful and dishonorable profession. For the most part, its workers endured a low social status in American society.



A group of domestic servants, probably early 1920s.



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We don't know for sure what it was like to live and work at Lucknow as a domestic servant, but first person accounts from people in domestic service during this era, as well as historic documents and photographs, help illustrate the experience.

By the twentieth century, domestic servants had more personal freedom than they had in previous eras. The so-called "feudal arrangement" that some employers placed their servants under, although still present, was lessening as the 20th century progressed. Still, live-in servants, including those at Lucknow, were likely to have less personal freedom and privacy than those that lived in their own private homes. For example, as a housekeeper or maid, you many have been expected to tend to your employers at any hour of the day, wait up for them late at night if you were expecting them home from a trip, or answer the door or telephone, no matter what time of day it rang.

Evidence of a service bell system exists at Lucknow, as well as a telephone in the Servants' Hall. Interphones were installed throughout the house, including in the Servants' Hall and outside the Maids' bedrooms upstairs. One might be summoned at any time of day, whether "on the clock" or not.



Communication system in Servants' Hall

Above: Interphone
Below: Telephone





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Living Quarters

Because we don't have any first-hand accounts of servants' lives at Lucknow, we must examine the spaces in which they lived and worked to better understand their experiences in this house. Historical accounts from domestic workers in other early twentieth century homes also help us to understand Lucknow's staff.

At Lucknow, there were four bedrooms set aside for live-in servants, as well as a servants' hall for resting and eating. These living quarters were all placed close to the kitchen, which would have been the home's primary workspace. There were additional living quarters for estate staff in the stables and the gatehouses just down the hill.



Maid's bedroom on second floor of Lucknow.

In other homes, especially those older than Lucknow, attics and basements were common living spaces for servants. In this home, there are two bedrooms on the second floor, as well as two rooms in the walkout basement. While servants' quarters were kept separate from the family spaces, an effort was made to make Lucknow's servant quarters comfortable and pleasant; all have central heating and large windows for light and ventilation. Each room offers views of the lake or mountains, just as the owners' rooms do. In the Servants' Hall and Maids' Corridor, a cheerful blue and white wallpaper decorated the walls.



While a pleasant living space doesn't necessarily imply Lucknow's domestic servants were happy and well-treated, it does indicate that some thought was paid to their well-being during the planning of this home.

Left: Servants' Hall at Lucknow.



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Life at Lucknow

Were Lucknow's servants happy in their positions? We just don't know. Living in the same house as your employer would have greatly reduced your privacy and personal time, with likely and frequent interruptions and calls for assistance. Servants living and working at Lucknow, which is in a fairly remote location, may have felt alienated being so far from friends and family. Making new friends and finding entertainment (during an evening or day off) may have been a challenge as well.



Image right: Example of maid's uniforms in the late 1910s or early 1920s.

The maid to be correctly dressed should be supplied with well-fitting uniforms of washable cotton for the morning, of black or gray material for the afternoon and evening, with plenty of white aprons and collars and cuffs

Who Worked at Lucknow?

The research is ongoing, but in the 1910s and early 1920s, we believe there were many servants working here. In 1924, a real estate ad for Lucknow suggested that the interested buyer plan for the same amount of staff the current owner employed: "three servants in the house, a combination gardener and houseman, a combination chauffeur and stable man, and a man to care for what cows are necessary to furnish milk and cream, to keep the roads in repair and in winter to cut the wood and ice necessary for the year."

By 1930, the US census documented a few estate staff working on the property and just one servant still living in the house with the Plants – Martina Malmquist. It's very likely Ms. Malmquist, identified as 54 and single, helped with housework, cooking, laundry, and acted as a general assistant to the Plants. By the 1940 census, only the Pattersons and the Fries are documented as living on the property, working as farm and estate caretakers.



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The Staff at Lucknow

While it was common in the 19th and 20th centuries for households to have one domestic servant, Lucknow probably had a much larger and complicated hierarchy of household employees in the 1910s and early 1920s. Butlers and housekeepers were considered indispensable for large, wealthy households – Lucknow may have had both. These two positions would have been the highest and most trusted in the house, with the most access to the family. The housekeeper would have been the administrator, supervising all the other staff (but would have been only slightly above the butler in rank).

Other staff may have included a valet, footmen, a lady's maid and other lower ranking maids, a laundress, as well as kitchen staff managed by a chef or cook. Living elsewhere on the property, there were probably stable hands, a chauffeur, and property caretakers.

There was no fixed rate or minimum wage for this work, and some servants in the US received very little or no pay in exchange for room and board. The ultra-wealthy did tend to pay higher wages in the hopes of recruiting the “best servants.”

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as more skilled positions became available, domestic servant wages suffered in comparison. In a field that was already considered unappealing to American workers, it was becoming more and more difficult to recruit qualified domestic servants – the job simply wasn't attractive to many unskilled workers.



Domestic servant, 1920s.



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Working at Lucknow

Lucknow is exceptional in that it was a home designed to make work for household servants easier (something that was paid little attention in other houses of the era). Few architects – or employers – would have concerned themselves enough to make comfortable living and working spaces for household staff.

Here at Lucknow, the staff had a Servants' Hall for resting and eating, a bright kitchen with ventilation and large screened windows, a dumbwaiter for transporting supplies up and down from the basement, refrigeration (which negated the tasks of supplying and maintaining large blocks of ice), a modern and easy to clean coal range, and central vacuuming throughout the house.

The work of Lucknow's servants wouldn't have been easy by any stretch of the imagination. However, the home's state of the art technologies and comparatively pleasant work and living spaces may have made this a more desirable home to work in than others. It is very likely that Mr. Plant incorporated certain workplace design principles used at his state-of-the-art shoe factory to make his home a more efficient workplace.



Kitchen servants, circa 1910s.



Lucknow's modern (for the time) coal burning range, manufactured by the Cyrus Carpenter Company of Boston. This range was "self-cleaning" in the sense that coal ash and dust could be emptied directly into a container in the basement, without creating a mess in the food preparation area.