Women’s Work: Mapping Female Domestic Servants in 1880 Manhattan with Microdata

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Nineteenth Century New York City Spatial History: Gergely Baics

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Introduction

Manhattan, 1880—the city is evolving rapidly and bursting at the seams. From 1870 to 1880 the New York City population shoots from 942,292 persons to over 1.2 million, a 28 percent increase.¹ As city life expands, the dynamics of the home also change drastically, particularly for women. Prior to massive urbanization, young women were largely expected to live with their parents until marriage, to help at home and work on the farm. However, in the city this labor is no longer necessary. More women begin to enter the workforce, but there are only a few occupations available to them. The most important occupation for American women in 1880 is, by far, domestic service. In 1880, 40.7 percent of female wage earners are domestic servants. When excluding agricultural workers, that proportion goes up to 53.4 percent.² Hiring a young woman to work in the home as a chambermaid, cook, child nurse, laundress, or waitress is common practice among middle class families in urban centers. In 1880, 15 percent of the U.S. population resides in the 50 largest cities, but they employ a disproportionate 32 percent of all servants, and 49 percent of all laundresses.³ One in four families in New York City have a domestic servant in 1870.⁴ Therefore, the lives of female domestic servants are a crucial component of understanding the changing gender and labor dynamics of the rapidly industrializing city in the Gilded Age.

Unfortunately, we still know relatively little about these female domestic servants. At the time, many domestic servants lived in the home of their employer and so would never appear in a

³ Ibid., 59.
city directory. Most historians attempting to study nineteenth century domestic workers must rely on U.S. Census data. The 1880 census, which has recently been geocoded, provides us with an opportunity to see where each domestic servant lived in the city. In general, mapping gender can be difficult because women do not typically cluster together the way that people of similar incomes or ethnicities tend to. Domestic servants are one avenue from which we can begin to visualize the gendered nature of the city. The goal of this project is to begin to uncover the gendered fabric of the city and to tell a story of laboring women by mapping female domestic workers.

**Data and Methods**

The data used for this project are a 100 percent sample from the 1880 census in Manhattan. Every person and building have been geocoded and put into shape files by Professor John Logan’s Urban Transition Historical GIS Project at Brown University. However, as with most historical data, they are not completely clean or codified. First, thousands of respondents have no occupation indicated. It is important to note that those women with missing occupations are probably disproportionately domestic workers. Nineteenth century social statisticians and suffragettes worried that there was an underrepresentation of female labor in the U.S. Census because male enumerators would assume that female respondents did not work, and would not ask.\(^5\) Additionally, researchers worried that women would not self-report their occupation if it was casual, temporary, or part-time.\(^6\) Francis Amasa Walker, the 1880 Census Superintendent cautiously allowed supervisors to hire female enumerators. He stated, “it is clear that in many regions such appointments would be highly objectionable; but the Supervisor is not prepared to

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\(^6\) Ibid.
say that localities may not be found where a canvass of the population by women could be conducted without any disadvantage.”

This glowing endorsement did not drastically increase the number of female enumerators. In New York City, there were only between one and ten female enumerators for the 1880 census. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that most of the measures of female occupations in this study will be low estimates.

A second issue with the data are the occupational category names, which are were not recorded as systematically as one would hope. For example, the occupation of cigar makers was coded in at least 10 different ways, from “segar maker” to “works on cigarettes.” For domestic servants—a more nuanced and less concretely defined occupational category than cigar makers—there were over 50 labels in the dataset that could reasonably fall within the realm of domestic work. These included housekeepers, chambermaids, laundresses, and more. I chose, for this study, to limit the analyses to those occupational categories which had the largest number of women, and in which I suspected that the women would most likely be living within the homes of their employers. For this reason, I have simply included women whose occupations were listed as “servant,” “domestic servant,” “d. servant,” or “domestic.”

David Katzman, in his book Seven Days a Week, sometimes includes laundresses in his analyses. I have decided to show laundresses separately, because more often these women did not live in their employer’s home but picked up the laundry and washed it in their own homes.

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8 Ibid.
9 In future iterations of this study, I would like to include “housekeeper” in the definition of domestic servant. “Housekeeper” was also a large category, and I suspect that most of these women also lived in the homes of their employers.
Given the limitations of these data, I take two approaches to identifying where female domestic workers were located within the city. The first approach is to map where those women who identified as domestic servants live (as defined above). Because, to the best of my knowledge, this dataset has not been used to map domestic workers before, it is unclear if my definition of domestic servants is reliable. To supplement the findings of the first approach, I provide a second method. The areas with more domestic servants should have a higher density female population. I map both female and male population density to highlight the subtler differences in gendered population distribution to see if these areas align with the areas with higher domestic servant density. For these maps, I limit the population to ages 15-64, so that the population which could be domestic servants is captured. If anything, this age range is on the “older” side. A sizeable portion of domestic servants would leave work when they married, so there would be fewer older women in the domestic servant workforce. Meanwhile, nearly 10 percent of all female servants in 1880 were 10 years or younger.\textsuperscript{10} It would be wise to redo this study with a younger population, possibly ages 10 to 35, to see if the results change.\textsuperscript{11}

**Mapping Domestic Workers: Results**

To provide a broader context of the general population distribution in Manhattan in 1880, I produced a simple population density map at the block level (Figure 1). The total population of each block was estimated by summing together the total population of each building on the


\textsuperscript{11} Note to Gergely: I did actually map ages 10-35 but did not include it in this paper because I think the data were too sparse to sustain an argument. Because the building shapefile has separate variables in about two-year increments for ages 10 to 35, I had to remove all of the observations that had missing values for any of those variables. Once this was cleaning was done, the sample size was small, and did not adequately represent Manhattan.
block. This population was then normalized by the acreage of each block to obtain a standardized population density on the block level. The map shows what we would expect—there is higher population density in lower-income neighborhoods and in more residential areas like the Lower-East Side and the West Village. The Manhattan shorelines are more densely populated than the center of the island; laborers generally lived and worked in industries along the rivers. Meanwhile, the more commercial and bourgeois parts of the city are less densely populated. Wall Street is noticeably sparse because, like today, while many people work in the Financial District, few live there. Likewise, population density is noticeably sparser following Broadway up to the bottom of Central Park. These areas closer to Broadway were more commercial, hosting stores, theaters, and hotels, rather than permanent residencies. The people who did live in these areas permanently were wealthier, and did not suffer the extremely tight living conditions like the tenement houses in the Lower East Side, for example. We can also see that the Upper-East Side is more heavily populated than the Upper-West side, which reflects the earlier development of the eastern side of the island. Additionally, we can see Harlem developing on the northeastern edge of the island.

The distribution of female domestic workers within the city runs counter to the distribution of the rest of the city in many ways. Figure 2 is a map of female domestic servant population density in 1880. It is easy to see that this map is almost an inverse of Figure 1 in several areas. Female domestic workers are not as highly concentrated in the Lower-East side or the West Village. Rather, there is a higher density of female domestic servants in the middle of the island, especially in the area we would now call midtown. There are also darker spots reaching up the Upper East Side. These are all wealthier, fancier neighborhoods. The domestic
servants did not live in these areas because they were wealthy, but because they were living in the homes of the wealthy and upper-middle class families for whom they worked.

It is useful to look not only at the density of domestic workers, but also at the propensity for women in a certain area to be in domestic service. Instead of female domestic servants per acre, Figure 3 shows the percent of the female residents who are domestic servants. In this map, the female domestic servant population is divided by the total population of women between 15 and 64 years of age. This map reveals interesting information about the relative differences in the propensity towards domestic service throughout Manhattan. It depicts a pattern similar to, but more dramatic than, Figure 2. Again, commercial and wealthier neighborhoods have a higher percent domestic service population. This contrast between the rate of domestic service in low and high-income neighborhoods is even more pronounced in Figure 3 than in Figure 2. Figure 3 also highlights some interesting locations that do not show up in Figure 2. For example, Wall Street is very light when we look at the number of female domestic servants per acre, but in Figure 3, we can see that in some parts of Wall Street, the majority of female residents were domestic servants. That is, of the few women who did live on Wall Street, a relatively large portion were domestic servants. This nuance is lost when looking at the sheer number per acre.\(^\text{12}\)

While these findings do seem to show what we would expect, the methodological basis and the data upon which they rely must be thoroughly investigated. Again, many women did not have any occupation recorded on the census, and it is not obvious that the selected occupational categories most adequately or completely represent domestic servants. However, if we map the

\(^{12}\) It would be interesting if future studies can investigate the social impact of being in a neighborhood with a higher rate of domestic service. Were female domestic servants more likely to think and act collectively when they were in areas where the other women were primarily other domestic servants? Or were they more vulnerable if they did not have more elite women there to advocate for them?
population distribution of women in general, we should be able to see the effect of the primarily female occupation in the same neighborhoods. If there is a higher concentration of women in the same areas where we saw concentrations of domestic servants, we can be more confident that this measure is accurately capturing the areas where domestic servants lived.

To address this, I first made separate population density maps of women and men in Manhattan. Again, the ages were limited to 15-64 years. Figure 4 shows the two maps side-by-side. Even in this layout it is very difficult to see any differences between the two. The only way to see the subtle difference is to overlay them on top of one another. This, however, does not mean that there are no significant gendered patterns of population distribution in the city—only that this method of female and male population densities cannot adequately reveal them.

In another attempt to visualize this, I created a map that shows the ratio of women to men (Figure 5). The average ratio of women to men was 1.0728, that is, on average, there were 1.0728 women for every man in 1880 Manhattan (among 15-64 year-olds). The map shows how many standard deviations the female to male ratio on that block is from the mean. Amazingly, the areas that had higher domestic servant population density in Figures 2 and 3 have above average female-to-male population ratios in Figure 5. In Midtown, and reaching up to the Upper East Side, we find the highest ratio of female to male residents. In these areas, the ratio of women to men were one to two standard deviations above the mean.

This evidence helps corroborate the findings about where female domestic servants were located. It suggests that I am not just picking up a higher concentration of domestic workers in Figures 2 and 3 randomly, but that it reflects real differences in where large numbers of women

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13 Another way could be to subtract the male population from the female population and map the difference.
lived and worked. Furthermore, Figure 5 shows how the domestic workers were essential to developing the gendered fabric of Manhattan. While the differences are subtle, and can only be visualized with some great effort, these domestic workers did visibly change the makeup of the Manhattan population.

A Point of Departure: Racial Transition in Domestic Work

It is important to note that, while the main focus of this paper is the gendered aspect of domestic service, this story is also one of immigration, race, and class. Domestic servants were disproportionately immigrants and native-born black women.\(^\text{14}\) Irish-born immigrants comprised 44 percent of all servants in New York City in 1880.\(^\text{15}\) These elements came into play when work was transferred from the unpaid labor of mothers, wives, and grandmothers to paid workers—immigrant and black working-class women. Clearly, domestic service is intertwined with the development of an urban middle class during an age of industrialization.\(^\text{16}\)

Laundering was one occupation where race, class, and gender seemed to collide. The work of laundresses overlapped with domestic servants, in that they would often work for wealthy and upper-middle-class families, but the typical laundress was unique from other domestic servants in several ways. The work was very labor intensive, and many maids-of-all-work refused to do it.\(^\text{17}\) Most importantly, laundresses were more likely to live outside of their employer’s home than other domestic servants. Many laundresses would pick up laundry from

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\(^{15}\) Ibid., 66.


\(^{17}\) Ibid., 83.
her employer, take it back to her own home, and wash it there.\textsuperscript{18} \textsuperscript{19} This meant that these women had more autonomy in determining their hours and how much they worked. Instead of their employer deciding their hours, the laundress decided how many employers to take on.\textsuperscript{20} It also meant that married women were more likely to work as laundresses because they could maintain their own home and continue to work. White women, both native-born and immigrant, were more likely to leave the labor force once they got married than their black counterparts, who were more likely to stay in the labor force. Laundering provided an alternative to live-in domestic work for black women. They could continue to upkeep their homes and work at the same time. In 1890, 70 percent of laundresses were black.\textsuperscript{21} In 1900 approximately one fifth of white women and two fifths of black women laundresses were married. The fractions for both groups increased over the next few decades.\textsuperscript{22}

I mapped laundresses to see if laundresses followed similar residential patterns to other domestic servants.\textsuperscript{23} Figure 6 shows the population density of laundresses per acre. Figure 6 looks somewhat sparse in comparison to the previous figures because there are more blocks that do not have any laundresses, but it still draws a picture that is easy enough to follow. Figure 6 tells us that laundresses did not follow the same residential patterns as other domestic servants. If anything, their population density generally followed the overall population patterns of Manhattan. There are more laundresses on the Lower-East Side and fewer in midtown and Wall-

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\textsuperscript{19} David Katzman, \textit{Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America.} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 84.
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\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 85.
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\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 73.
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\textsuperscript{22} David Katzman, \textit{Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America.} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 85.
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\textsuperscript{23} The following occupational categories were included for the analyses of laundresses: “laundress,” “wash woman,” “washer woman,” “washing,” “washing and ironing,” “washing woman,” “works at laundry,” and “works in laundry”
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Street. This tells us that, even if laundresses were working in the same homes as other domestic servants, they were not necessarily living in the same places.

The analysis of laundresses may begin to expose an area of potential future research. From 1880 on, domestic service became increasingly populated by black women. In 1900, 31.8 percent of domestic servants were white women, and 22.9 percent were black women, but by 1920, the share of black women in domestic service surpassed that of white women. In 1920, 39.4 percent of domestic workers were black women, and only 27 percent were native-born whites. Different scholars provide different explanations of this phenomenon. Daniel E. Sutherland argues in *Americans and Their Servants* that the racial shift in domestic servant composition happened because of changes in European immigration to the United States. During the turn of the 20th century, more immigrants started coming to the United States from Eastern and Southern Europe, as opposed to Western and Northern Europe. Sutherland argues that middle-class American housewives were less willing to hire immigrant Italians and Jews. While it is easy to believe that wealthy New York City mistresses held strong prejudices against Italian and Jewish immigrants, it is hard to explain why they would not hold similar biases against native-born black women.

Katzman provides another, more multi-faceted explanation. He argues that during the turn of the 20th century more white-collar jobs became available to white women, so they were able to leave domestic service to work in other occupations. As white women left domestic service for other jobs, they were not replaced by new white immigrants, but by black women who migrated from rural areas in the south to northern and mid-Atlantic cities. Furthermore, he

argues that child labor laws and compulsory education removed some of the youngest white females from the potential supply of domestic servant labor, but left black women, who were more likely to continue working after marriage. The trend towards live-out service, as seen with laundresses, fit better with the needs of black women, who had to continue to work while raising a family.

Claudia Goldin, in attempting to understand the origins of differences between the conditions of black and white women in America, looks at a sample of female workers from seven southern cities in 1870 and 1880. She disagrees with Katzman’s theory that black women were migrating to the city and replacing white women in domestic service jobs. She hypothesizes that black women who already lived in the city changed their labor practices and moved more into domestic service.

These explanations are all interesting, and are all probably, at least in some part, true. However, they mostly leave out the labor demand side of the equation. Christine E. Bose, in Women in 1900, argues that female domestic workers in 1900 lived in ethnic enclaves. She produces compelling evidence from the 1900 census, showing that employers tended to hire domestic servants of their own ethnicity. Sutherland’s focus on changes in the pattern of immigration may be overly simplistic, but he may have identified an important driver of the observed change. When there is a shortage of workers who match ethnically with the mistress of the household, whom does she hire? It would be interesting to look at the 1880 census to see if ethnic matching can be identified there, as Bose did with the 1900 census. If there is ethnic

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matching between female domestic servants and their employers, is it more or less significant than in 1900? Such an analysis would help us better understand the ethnic and racial dynamics behind changes in the composition and residence of domestic workers.

**Conclusion**

Studying domestic servants is one way in which we can understand changes in ethnic, racial, and gender relations in the urban center during the Gilded Age. Female domestic servants tended to live in neighborhoods with a very different socioeconomic composition than their own family backgrounds were likely to have been, and their presence in those neighborhoods shifted the overall gender balance of the residents. It is possible that they shared ethnic and racial characteristics with their resident employers. Further studies should expand on this area, to better understand the shift of domestic service to an occupation dominated by black women. This study showed that mapping female domestic servants can help us see the gendered nature of New York City in 1880. While gender can be difficult to see from a bird’s-eye view, by focusing on domestic servants, and mapping microdata, we gain a vantage point into the lives of the largest group of working women at the time.
Figure 1. Manhattan Population Density, 1880.

Figure 2. Female Domestic Servant Population Density, 1880.

Source: Ibid.
Figure 3. Percent of Female Population (Ages 15-64) that are Domestic Servants, 1880.

Source: Ibid.
**Figure 4.** Female and Male Population Density, Ages 15-64 in 1880

Source: Ibid.
Figure 5. Ratio of Female to Male Population, Ages 15-64 in 1880

Source: Ibid.
Figure 6. Female Laundress Density Per Acre, 1880

Source: Ibid.
Bibliography


