



The Skinner Family in 1880

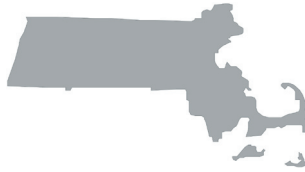
Front: Ruth Isabel, Nancy, William, Katharine, and Joseph
Back: Elizabeth, Sarah Allen Skinner, William Skinner, and Eleanor.

Source: All photographs in this article are courtesy of Wistariahurst Museum Archives, Holyoke, Massachusetts.

PHOTO ESSAY

“A Million Things to Get Done”:
The Skinner Family Servants of Holyoke

KATE N. THIBODEAU



Editor’s Introduction: *The previous article described the events of May 16, 1874. On that day, the Williamsburg Dam gave way, destroying four mill villages, including the one around William Skinner’s silk mill known as “Skinnerville.” Although his mill was demolished, the Skinner family home survived the flood with minor damage (see photo on p. 13). Only four Skinnerville residents were among the flood’s 139 victims. None were silk workers who all evacuated the mill after being warned to “run for the hills” just moments before the disaster.¹*

Within weeks, the Holyoke Water Power Company offered Skinner a prime canal site on which to rebuild his mill. They gave the land rent-free for five years and also offered him an entire city block to house his mansion for only one dollar. Skinner immediately relocated to Holyoke, Massachusetts. His new mill began expanding its product line by manufacturing many types of silk braid and cloth.

¹ Elizabeth M. Sharpe provides a great deal of information on William Skinner and his mill village, named Skinnerville: see *In the Shadow of the Dam: The Aftermath of the Mill River Flood of 1874* (NY: Free Press, 2004).

William Skinner's move to Holyoke in 1874 was fortuitous and ultimately wildly lucrative. With an unlimited source of cheap water power and inexpensive immigrant labor, his business grew to 2,500 employees and \$6.5 million in sales by 1902. Skinner's sons were instrumental in this tremendous business expansion. Though they had sales offices throughout the United States, all manufacturing took place in Holyoke. Silk and satin were the earliest fabrics and remained the company's mainstay until the mill's closing in 1961.

In previous issues of the Historical Journal of Massachusetts, we have explored the lives and working conditions of Skinner Mill workers, notably Anna B. Sullivan, who became a union organizer in the 1930s.² In this Photo Essay, we explore the lives of another group of workers, the servants whose seemingly invisible labor maintained the lavish home that the Skinner family christened Wistariahurst.

Author: *Kate N. Thibodeau was the curator at Wistariahurst Museum and Holyoke's official "City Historian." She re-created a "Servant's Tour" photographic exhibit after original research done by intern Kristin McCammen. Enchanted Circle Theater, an arts non-profit in Holyoke, Massachusetts, wrote the Servant's Tour script based on this research of the history of the estate. The concept of "servant's tours" and incorporating the voices and views of family servants has become popular at other historic sites and elite homesites, including The Breakers Mansion in Newport, Rhode Island.*

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The Industrial Revolution transformed the lives of women workers in the nineteenth century. As an urban center, Holyoke offered many more opportunities for women than did rural areas. In industrial Holyoke, a growing class of capitalists employed a growing working class in both their mills and in their homes.³

Maintaining Wistariahurst, the Skinner family homestead and mansion, required the labor of many. These women and men worked daily to keep

² See L. Mara Dodge, "Anna B. Sullivan (1903-83): The Formative Years of a Textile Union Organizer (Holyoke, MA)," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Vol. 36 (Summer 2008): pp. 184-225. For more on the Skinners, see Kate Navarra Thibodeau's popular history, *Holyoke: The Skinner Family and Wistariahurst* (MA: Arcadia Publishing, 2006) and William F. Hartford, *Working People of Holyoke: Class and Ethnicity in a Massachusetts Mill Town, 1850-1960* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

³ Thomas, Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work, New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution* (NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 205.

the household running smoothly. Servants kept the grounds impeccably landscaped, the rooms perfectly cleaned, the horses groomed, the automobiles in good running order, and the tables set to serve sumptuous feasts. This staff, which at times numbered ten or more, remains largely a mystery to historians and archivists. Though their work was invaluable to the family, their names, faces, and stories were rarely recorded by Skinner family members. Some servants devoted their entire working lives to Wistariahurst, while others stayed only a brief time. Like detectives, we search for clues about their lives and work. We find hints of them in letters and journal entries. Very occasionally, we catch glimpses of them in old photos, where they may appear in the background or in motion, serving meals, caring for the grounds, or hanging laundry.

NURSES

Before 1930, wealthy families commonly hired trained nurses to attend the ill and elderly in their homes. The nurse provided round-the-clock care to the patient, administering medicines and therapies prescribed by the doctor. She might also cook meals for those on restricted diets, change bed linens, and bathe the infirm. In 1895, Hulda Klemm graduated from Holyoke Hospital's first nursing class. In 1906, she was hired to care for the elderly Sarah Skinner during a long illness in the last years of her life.

A trained nurse commanded respect and was given a high level of responsibility. Klemm took on the role of resident caretaker when other members in the household became sick. In 1907, Sarah Skinner wrote her daughter, "She [Belle] is



Holyoke Hospital Nursing School

Class of 1895: Hulda Klemm
is in the middle.

poorly enough yet but we have Klemm taking care of her and as we have confidence in her so think all will be well done.”⁴

At times, however, Klemm was asked to perform duties she clearly regarded as beneath her. Sarah Skinner expressed her frustration in a letter:

I am getting disgusted with her but I suppose I should with anyone but it does seem to me that she ought to be willing to do lots of little things for me or Belle that do not strictly speaking belong to a trained nurse for now I need but very little of a trained nurse’s work.⁵

After Sarah’s death in 1908, Klemm stayed on to provide care for Belle and later for the younger children. By the 1930s, she had been promoted to head housekeeper and managed Wistariahurst until her death. In 1950, Katharine Skinner Kilborne recorded her passing:

On Sunday morning January 29, 1950 Miss Klemm, the housekeeper and very dear friend of mine and my children, was found dead, lying peacefully on the floor. My family and children were her whole life. She was “faithful unto death.”

NANNIES AND NURSEMAIDS

The arrival of a baby in a wealthy family usually prompted hiring a nurse who tended to stay in the home until a few weeks after delivery to care for both the mother and newborn.⁷ Some nursemaids stayed on to serve as nannies. Unlike the family nurse, the nanny or nursemaid was not usually a trained professional. More often, she had a long relationship with a particular family and was “promoted” to the job of nursemaid. The position of a nanny was a live-in job. These women were on-call twenty-four hours a day and were expected to travel with the family. Nannies provided childcare and offered some educational instruction. Their uniform consisted of a plain dress and apron.

⁴ Wistariahurst Museum Archives, Skinner Family Collection, Box 4, Folder 6. Sarah Skinner letter to Katharine Kilborne Skinner.

⁵ Wistariahurst Museum Archives, Skinner Family Collection, Box 4, Folder 6.

⁶ Wistariahurst Museum Archives, Skinner Family Collection, Box 37, Folder 1.

⁷ Faye E. Dudden, *Serving Women, Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), p. 30.



**Robert Stewart Kilborne, Jr., in carriage, 1905,
with an unknown nursemaid attending.**

Katharine Skinner Kilborne (1873-1968) hired many women to assist her with the care of her children. When she gave birth to her first child, Robert Stewart Kilbourne, Jr., in 1905, both her mother and sister insisted that she hire a nurse to assist her with the baby. Sarah Skinner wrote to Katharine: “While you have a good nurse let her take the whole care [of the baby] and when you get strong and perfectly well take him into your room if you like.”⁸ Although Eleanor “Nellie” Wright had started working for the Skinner family as a chambermaid, in 1908 she was promoted to the position of nursemaid to Robert. Unlike most maids, Nellie worked for the Kilborne family for many years. Katharine’s children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren affectionately referred to her as “Nellie-Belle.”

⁸ Wistariahurst Museum Archives, Skinner Family Collection, Box 4, Folder 3.



Hattie Riley's Gravesite (1818-1926)

Forestdale Cemetery, Holyoke, MA.

“In Remembrance of 47 Years of Faithful Service.”

HOUSEKEEPERS

The position of housekeeper was the highest-ranking position for women among household staff. The housekeeper managed the work of all the female workers, except the cook. She often carried the keys to the house and its contents. She hired and fired staff and received her orders directly from the lady or man of the house. The housekeeper earned the most money and occupied the nicest servant's room in the house.

The Skinners had several housekeepers, including two who worked for the family for almost fifty years. Hattie Riley, from Harrogate, England, spent forty-seven years in the service of the Skinners, beginning as a maid. She was later promoted to head housekeeper. She was regarded as an indispensable member of the household. Near the end of her life, Hattie suffered from both physical ailments and senility. The Skinner family helped arrange for her care at a local hospital and, after her death, buried her in the family plot at Forestdale Cemetery. Hattie is the only servant who is buried with the family. Her obituary declared that, “She

was a very complete example of devoted loyalty, and at the same time of efficiency.”⁹

WAITRESSES

Waitresses occupied a special place in the household system, having the responsibility of serving meals to the family and their guests. Where a butler was employed, the waitress worked under his supervision. Otherwise, the waitress was responsible for the butler’s pantry and for the family’s silver, china, and crystal. In either case, she was expected to know every detail of table service for casual or formal meals. Her presence at mealtimes, wearing a neat uniform with apron, signaled a refined and elegant dining experience. Her evening uniform consisted of a black dress with white apron, cuffs, and collar. Like other household staff, she was liable to overhear many private, or at least gossip-laden, conversations. Advice manuals instructed waitresses to turn a deaf ear to any conversation at the dining table.



Waitresses with children in the breakfast room, c. 1900

Three waitresses, caught in motion, appear to be in attendance.

⁹ Obituary, Hattie Riley, *Holyoke Daily Transcript*, Tuesday, December 14, 1926.

The waitresses' skills were put to the test at formal events, where the meal was served "Russian style," popular in the early 1900s. It required the waitress to ensure that every course was served at the right time, on the correct dishes, and with the correct utensils.

The Skinner family relied on their waitresses, even at fairly informal picnics. At these events, the waitress wore a daytime uniform: a striped cotton dress of light color with a white apron. As this photo reveals, even the picnic blanket is laid with an elaborate floral centerpiece and china dishes. Wealthy families took every comfort with them for a picnic, including their servants.



**Waitresses serve at Robert Stewart Kilborne, Jr.'s
birthday picnic, c. 1900.**

LAUNDRESSES

Laundresses served a vital, if less public, function in the household. The laundry room was just off the kitchen and the laundress spent most of her time there. Like the kitchen maid, the laundress worked under the supervision of the cook. In 1911, William Skinner noted in his journal,

“Belle ‘fired’ the laundress to keep peace with the cook.”¹⁰ It was far easier to find a new laundress than to replace a skilled cook.

Even into the 1950s, Katharine Skinner Kilborne employed a part-time laundress, Rose Barselou, who lived just a few blocks away. Barselou entered through the servants’ entrance. She recalled that someone would always come get her at 9:00 a.m. each morning for daily devotional. Although she was not required to go, nor was she even Catholic, she would “just pretend.”¹¹

MAIDS

Large households employed a wide variety of maids, depending on the family’s needs. The Skinner family regularly employed at least one live-in maid. In addition, there was frequently an upstairs maid, a chambermaid, one or more lady’s maids, and a parlor or downstairs maid. The housekeeper supervised and instructed each in her particular duties. The chambermaid took charge of the bedrooms; she aired the beds every day, straightened the rooms daily, and fully cleaned them every week. The chambermaid was often responsible for attending to the family’s clothing and doing any necessary sewing repairs. The upstairs maid worked on the upstairs rooms. The downstairs maid, also called a “maid-of-all-work,” cleaned the downstairs living rooms, moving from one room to the next every day, so that each was cleaned thoroughly on a weekly basis.

The Skinners frequently complained about maids who refused to do work outside their regular duties, did their work poorly, or did not stay long. In 1913, William Skinner recorded that “Belle fired Martha a second girl — she was no good.”¹² The ability to change jobs gave maids some power and control over their working lives. Many maids saw their work as temporary, allowing them to earn money until they got married or were trained for a more respectable career. William Skinner recalled one such maid who worked for Belle in 1912, “Hannah Sharkey, the upstairs girl, told me today she was leaving upon Belle’s return to become a trained nurse.”¹³ Most maids stayed only a year or so, often moving on to another job with better pay or working conditions.

¹⁰ Wistariahurst Museum Archives, Skinner Family Collection, Box 16, Folder 5.

¹¹ Phone interview with museum intern Kristin McCaman, June 2000.

¹² Wistariahurst Museum Archives, Skinner Family Collection, Box 16, Folder 5.

¹³ Wistariahurst Museum Archives, Skinner Family Collection, Box 16, Folder 5.



(Left to right) Emma Peoples, Ada Peoples (cook), and Charles Linderme (chauffeur) worked at Wistariahurst in the 1950s.

COOKS

The cook commanded her domain of the kitchen, controlling all food preparation — from ordering produce, meat, fish, and groceries to cooking all meals and supervising the kitchen maid. In a household like Wistariahurst, the cook was expected to make all the most succulent and fashionable dishes. She cooked three full meals every day, baked bread and pastries, and supplied enough food for the family and the staff. The cook usually did not live in the house, however, and most had families of their own.

Though the cook worked without much supervision, she had to be careful not to anger the lady of the house. In 1908, Belle Skinner fired a cook named Elizabeth when she found that she had regularly gone into her room and tried her perfume. In 1911, William Skinner wrote in his journal, “Kitten [Katharine] is having much trouble with her cook Mary Bresnahan — she feeds the neighborhood and is dirty.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Wistariahurst Museum Archives, Skinner Family Collection, Box 16, Folder 5.

The last cook at Wistariahurst, Ada Peoples, held the job for over ten years. Though the family fondly remembered her dishes of broiled chicken and fried bananas, we know very little about her personal life and have few pictures of her. Like many of the household staff, Ada remains largely a mystery.

The cook was assisted by a kitchen maid. She prepared simple dishes, helped with the baking of bread, and was responsible for keeping the kitchen clean. This job required no special skills and was often a way for young domestics to learn the art of cooking. The kitchen maid served at the pleasure of the cook. Poor relations between the two could make for a very bad work environment.

In 1908, there was a great deal of trouble in the kitchen as cooks and kitchen maids were hired and fired. Belle Skinner wrote her sister: "I have not bothered you with the tale of my struggle to get a kitchen maid and I won't go into it now. But my third 'effort' arrives Tuesday evening. She is one of the Abinger girls . . . I have hopes that she and Elizabeth will be able to agree."¹⁵ If things did not go smoothly in the kitchen, the maid would be fired; a good cook was far harder to come by.

CHAUFFEURS

At Wistariahurst, the position of chauffeur carried with it a great deal of responsibility and power. The chauffeur supervised the male staff of the household, a responsibility usually given to the butler or "first man" in other wealthy families. At Wistariahurst, however, it was the chauffeur who hired and fired the male staff and was responsible for maintenance and security on the grounds.

Most of Wistariahurst's chauffeurs held the job for many years. George Brakey worked from the 1890s until his death in 1928. Although Brakey served as the Skinners' chauffeur for almost thirty years, their relationship was not without conflict. For a time, Brakey had a somewhat tempestuous relationship with William C. Skinner. William described him as "shiftless" and "lazy."¹⁶ In 1909, he was on the verge of firing Brakey but decided to let him "stay until spring anyway."¹⁷

¹⁵ Wistariahurst Museum Archives, Skinner Family Collection, Box 21, Folder 5.

¹⁶ Wistariahurst Museum Archives, Skinner Family Collection, Box 16, Folder 5.

¹⁷ Wistariahurst Museum Archives, Skinner Family Collection, Box 16, Folder 5.



Chauffeur Walter Brakey with unknown women in a car, c. 1940.

During this time, the family replaced their horse and carriage with an automobile. Chauffeurs were valued for their ability to keep automobiles running reliably. After William Skinner taught him how to drive, Brakey came to love driving above all else. Thereafter, he refused to do work not related to driving. In 1909, William wrote in his journal, “Belle has been having a row with George because he was so shiftless, as not to clean out the chimneys — he grows lazier each day — all he wishes to do now is drive an auto.”¹⁸

Walter Brakey “inherited” the position of chauffeur upon his father’s death in 1928, a short time before his high school graduation. Like George, Walter was the first man of Wistariahurst. He was responsible for the maintenance and security of the grounds as well as for driving. Chauffeurs also traveled extensively with the family. William C. Skinner’s chauffeur, Alfred, regularly traveled between New York, Holyoke and Europe.

BUTLERS

The Skinner family employed a butler to personally serve them and their guests rather than to run the household. They also regularly employed a “second man” who worked under the butler. The “second man” would

¹⁸ Wistariahurst Museum Archives, Skinner Family Collection, Box 16, Folder 5.

answer the door, attend to guests, and assist with meal service. In 1912, the Skinner's second man, James Turner, took ill within just a few days of starting work. William Skinner ordered him sent to New York for treatment. Another second man, Fisher, was not so fortunate; Belle fired him for being "too fresh."¹⁹



Unknown groom or butler with Robert Stewart Kilborne, c. 1907.

¹⁹ Wistariahurst Museum Archives, Skinner Family Collection, Box 21, Folder 6.

GARDENERS

Like many large estates, Wistariahurst's extensive grounds required the constant attention of a crew of gardeners supervised by a head gardener. At Wistariahurst, Belle Skinner was in charge of all garden direction. She undertook elaborate landscaping projects throughout the 1910s and hired a professional gardener to assist her. Belle was quite authoritative when it came to landscaping. In 1911, Belle wrote her sister about her troubles with the gardener.

I have given Robert [de Schuyler] a "dressing down" each day — a *real* dressing down, I mean, and his Belgian hair is now standing on end with rage. But I have had to show him that it is I who is at the *head* of the garden and not he.²⁰

In the 1930s and 1940s, the Skinners employed trained gardener, Anthony Niedbalski, known as "Tony Bosky," to supervise their gardens. Tony worked six days a week and maintained both the formal garden and a "Victory" vegetable garden during World War II. Tony died tragically in 1946 when he fell from a tree. His family recalled that he asked to be buried with seeds from Wistariahurst in his pocket.²¹

PERSONAL COMPANIONS

The personal companion, or "maid-companion," was a complex position in an elite family. The personal companion served the woman of the household and was not responsible to any other member of the family or staff. She dressed in her regular attire and accompanied her mistress on all her travels. Both Belle Skinner and Katharine Skinner Kilborne employed personal companions who stayed with them for many years.

Belle Skinner (1866-1928), who never married, hired Prudence Lagogue in 1910 to travel with her to Europe as her maid. Prudence became Belle's companion, living with her in France, New York, and Holyoke. The two formed a close relationship as Prudence accompanied Belle on her travels throughout the United States and Europe. Prudence assisted Belle in her humanitarian effort to help reconstruct a French village, Hattonchatel, which had been destroyed in the First World War. She also attended to

²⁰ Wistariahurst Museum Archives, Skinner Family Collection, Box 21, Folder 6. Belle Skinner letter to her sister Katharine Kilborne.

²¹ Anonymous family member, interview with museum intern Kristin McCaman, June 2000.



Prudence Lagogue with parrot, c. 1915.

This photo was included in a scrapbook that belonged to Robert Stewart Kilborne when he was a boy. His scrapbook often captured Prudence's participation in family picnics and outings.

Belle's correspondence, managed her social calendar, and did her hair every day. Prudence served as "personal companion" until Belle's death in 1928. She stayed on at Belle's chateau in Hattonchatel, where she oversaw the finances of the chateau and village, until her death in 1967.

In contrast, Katharine Skinner Kilborne (1873-1968) employed Eleanor "Nellie" Wright as her personal companion after her husband's death in 1950. Nellie had started with the Skinner family in 1908 as a chambermaid and was later a nursemaid to Katharine's first son. For many years, Nellie worked for the Kilborne family as maid and chaperone to their daughter. Nellie lived at Wistariahurst in the 1950s and moved with Katharine to New York City in 1959. Nellie assisted Katharine in her daily activities for the last eighteen years of Katharine's life. Nellie never married and moved back to the United Kingdom, her home country, in 1968 upon Katharine's death. Katharine declared in her will that Nellie be given the annual interest from a bequest of \$30,000. Family members recalled her as being unfailingly loyal to Mrs. Kilborne.²²



**Nellie Wright, who worked for the Skinner family
for over sixty years, serves cake, c. 1940s.**

²² Katharine Skinner Kilborne's will, Wistariahurst Museum Archives, Skinner Family Collection, Box 36, Folder 7.



**Belle Skinner and Prudence Lagogue tour
Hattonchatel, France, in the early 1920s.**

Belle had been born in Skinnerville and may have been deeply impacted by the destruction she witnessed as a young child. Belle attended Vassar College (as did her two older sisters) and graduated as class president in 1887. During World War I, she became interested in contributing to the war relief effort in France, donating large quantities of clothing, shoes, and money to this cause. In 1919, driving through the ravaged eastern French countryside, she decided to adopt the ancient medieval town of Hattonchatel (population 250), whose infrastructure had been almost completely destroyed during the war. She financed and oversaw the town's reconstruction — from the rebuilding of the chateau, town hall, library, and school, to the installation of a modern water system. Belle and Prudence also spent much of the year living in Hattonchatel. The townspeople called Belle “Marraine” — “godmother.” For her humanitarian efforts, the French government bestowed upon her the Médaille de la Reconnaissance Française in 1919. Belle Skinner died in France in 1928 at the age of 62.

HJM

Seeking Future Photo Essays: If you have seen a recent photography exhibit featuring an intriguing aspect of Massachusetts history, please let us know.