Maid in Silence: The Hidden History of Bryn Mawr’s Housekeepers

I distinctly remember my first day here at Bryn Mawr. As a freshman diving headfirst into Customs Week, everything about college was new and slightly terrifying. Everything, that is, except for Sandy. I met our housekeeper Sandy immediately upon entering Merion dorm, my new home. She exuded warmth -- pumping my mom’s hand vigorously and enveloping me in ginormous hug that instantly made me feel at home. Sandy has been that same kind, welcoming presence from my very first day here, and although I no longer live in Merion, I can still look forward to my daily hug and cheerful “hey baby!”. It is clear to me as a student that the warmth and support of our housekeeping staff, not to mention the daily work they put in keeping our campus beautiful, are an integral addition to the spirit of community that we cherish so strongly here at Bryn Mawr. Recognizing a population that I cared for deeply but knew little about, I was encouraged to do research about maids like the one whose room in Denbigh I occupy a century later. It is a shame but also perhaps understandable that Bryn Mawr’s housekeepers are poorly represented in the historical documents of the college – a point I quickly realized during my search. In this paper, I will chronicle my own successes as well as difficulties in uncovering the history behind this group of under-recognized staff members.

I began my search broadly, looking closely at *Offerings to Athena* by Anne L. Bruder, which explores that last 125 year of Bryn Mawr’s history from the perspective of its students. While the book claims to cover “richly diverse” topics, it was limited in its discussion of maids, devoting a mere two pages to the topic (Bruder back cover). I would like to note here that while there were other mentions of maids, and specifically those personal servants belonging to students, I will be speaking exclusively about those who served as permanent staff members of the college and thus focusing solely on the information dedicated to this population. Surprisingly, these two pages represent the largest piece of historical text that I found regarding the subject. The piece, entitled “Bryn Mawr’s Maids”, which features two articles reprinted from the *College News* and the *Bryn Mawr Alumnae Bulletin*, focuses mainly on the theme of educational opportunities open to the maids. A short, un-cited newspaper clipping announces that “classes in English, Arithmetic, reading, writing and psychology will be held for the Maids every Monday and Thursday evening” (Bruder 103). While I was initially struck by what seemed to be Bryn Mawr’s holistic support and dedication to their staff, this clip is followed by an alumnae article dating back to 1926 which states that the College attracted a “fine type of colored girl” whose ability to take classes “proved a valuable contact and experience for both teachers and pupils” (Bruder 103). While these educational opportunities could be interpreted as a representation of Bryn Mawr’s early approach towards equality and fair treatment, the wording used by each article demonstrates the clear class and race disparities that ran rampant between staff and students during the time. Additionally, upon close reading, I have determined the tone of these pieces to exude the idea that Bryn Mawr was doing these “servants” a favor (Bruder 103). In fact, while the subject of the articles claimed to be the maids, often they were skewed to place focus and praise on the students. The bulletin article even goes so far as to assert that many of the maids pursued the provided educational opportunities due to the direct “influence of students and intellectual stimulus of the Bryn Mawr atmosphere” thus eradicating any indication of these maids’ agency in taking responsibility for their own educational impetus (Bruder 103).

While these articles were generative in providing hidden clues toward determining the treatment and perception of maids on campus, specifically in the time frame of the early 1900s, they lacked first-hand accounts by the women in question. I was also left wondering about the daily duties of the maids, which was not discussed. In an attempt to find answers to my remaining questions, I turned to the internet.

I started with a simple Google search of “Bryn Mawr College maids”. Having been informed by fellow students about the importance of using the language of the period, I also tried other search variations including “Bryn Mawr College housekeepers” and “Bryn Mawr College servants”. The most striking result of these searches was the lack of available information. One of the few relevant results brought me to an article entitled *Residing in the Past: Space, Identity, and Dorm Culture at Bryn Mawr College*, part of the Albert M. Greenfield Digital Center for the History of Women’s Education. Ironically, this page revolved around naming the absence of documentation regarding Bryn Mawr’s maids and porters, calling them the “forgotten hands”. Although not necessarily helpful in furthering my search for historical documentation, the article solidified my hunch that the information I would be able to glean on my topic of interest was limited.

In addition to this small piece, my search resulted in five photographs from the Bryn Mawr College Special Collections *Triptych* website. While each picture featured a maid, they varied widely in content and depiction.



http://triptych.brynmawr.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/BMC\_photoarc/id/2394/rec/30

This photograph, entitled “Maids and Student,” is the only out of the five that depicts both maids and students in the same frame. This photograph stands out from the rest in that the maids are foregrounded, thus placing the viewers’ focus on them. It is also the only photograph that is a close up of the maids – all other are full-body shots. The zoomed quality of this photo functions to highlight each woman’s facial expression, which, as the description notes are “all smiles”. There is a sense of warmth to this photo which is brought about by the way the light hits each face (likely an intentional choice of the photographer) as well as the physical closeness of the group. The maids don’t seem to be wearing uniforms, and thus the sole point of distinction between them and the student lie in age and race. Although we are limited in our knowledge of context and time period, this picture paints a narrative, providing clues into the relationship between students and maids. The composition of the photo suggests a closeness that was not touched upon in the textual documentation, thus adding an intriguing layer to our understanding of the role of Bryn Mawr’s housekeeping staff.



 http://triptych.brynmawr.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/BMC\_photoarc/id/2407/rec/35

I quickly discovered, however that the tone of the first photograph varied drastically from the few others I found. The above photograph, entitled “Two Maids at a Telephone Booth,” tells a very different story from the three smiling women we saw earlier. Here, the young woman at the center looks caught off guard by the photographer. She does not smile, and in fact wears a melancholy expression. Contrasting the previous photo, there is no use of light to indicate the woman as the subject. Instead, it is a very impersonal angle, capturing this moment from afar. The women featured are clearly maids – although younger than those above, they wear distinctive uniforms which indicate their position. While perhaps less positive than the previous photo, “Two Maids at a Telephone Booth” can still provide us with many clues towards the experience and treatment of housekeepers at Bryn Mawr. The two women here appear as merely part of the landscape – nothing indicates that they were intentionally the subjects of the photo. It is as though the physical distance of the photographer is indicative of the social distance felt between the College’s staff and students, a notion which is supported by the evidence gleaned from *Offerings to Athena*. While no cohesive conclusion can be reached through analyzing these two very different photographs, they each provide a very telling view into the complicated relationships and experience of Bryn Mawr’s housekeeping staff and therefore can be seen as valuable components of the existing documentation.

My difficulty in finding much historical representation of maids at Bryn Mawr was at first incredibly frustrating. I decided, however, that it would be more fruitful to work within what Claudine Hermann calls the “respectable value of the void” – a void which I found still exists today (Kalamaras 4). While I had previously been interested in the *historical* representations of maids, internet searches quickly revealed that there is even little public information about *current* Bryn Mawr housekeeping staff. Although every Bryn Mawr professor and many administrative staff member are recognized with online bios that can be easily accessed through the Bryn Mawr College website, other staff members such as those in housekeeping are awarded with none of the same intimacy. Instead, a list entitled “Faculty/Staff by Name” announces each housekeeper with their name, the title of “utility housekeeping” and a general phone number. Coupling my discovery of the lack of historical documentation of Bryn Mawr’s housekeeping staff as well as the fact that there continues to be little documentation of the same group even today, I was inspired to engage in some form of activism to create history that can be referenced by generations of Mawrters after me who may be interested in the same topic.

Unfortunately, I soon discovered that in trying to create history, I would be faced with many institutional walls keeping me from doing so. I brainstormed many ideas: I wanted to interview members of the housekeeping staff and create an oral record that could be archived by Special Collections. My questions would include those regarding daily tasks, relationships with students and other staff and likes and dislikes about the job. These interviews would be coupled with photos of the housekeeping staff, capturing them in many aspects of their daily routine. As I soon learned, though, this route would be made impossible due to the need for Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission. With the length time scheduled to work on this research project, putting my idea up for review would not be an option.

Additionally, as discovered last year during our ESem final workshop, also conflicting with my desire to begin a conversation is the inability for staff to speak openly and honestly without fear of losing their jobs. This anxiety could inhibit the depth of the interview or in fact prevent the staff from engaging in an interview at all, especially if their words were to be recorded and published.

Attempting to find a crack in these walls, I have envisioned a project that will establish concrete documentation featuring Bryn Mawr’s housekeepers without necessitating the intervention of IRB. I adapted my idea from Bryn Mawr’s use of Napkin Notes in the dining halls, a practice in which students write words of appreciate on napkins and then pin them up for Dining Services workers to see and respond to. These Napkin Notes have begun to be archived by Special Collections, thus giving future Mawrters a clue into menus of past years and the relationship between Dining Services permanent staff and students. My plan mirrors the form and function of Napkin Notes, but I would like these words of gratitude to be displayed in each dorm and aimed towards the permanent housekeeping staff there. Although I won’t be able to instate this idea in the context of this research project, I have determined that the avenue of showing appreciation through a physical medium that could then be archived is one of the least institutionally problematic routes that can be taken to “create history” while also celebrating a chronically underrepresented group on campus.

Although I am disappointed in my inability to establish this project immediately, I am confident that I can make it can happen during my time here. Lamenting the fact that I could not “create history” as I had wished from the beginning, I will attempt to do so in another way. I will be placing this work online so that my research can be added to the little that exists already regarding the maids and housekeepers who have served and continue to serve Bryn Mawr. Knowing the type of dedicated intellectuals that are attracted to Bryn Mawr, I leave it with the confidence that another Mawrter will pick up where I have left off and continue my effort to create a lasting trail honoring the men and women who contribute so crucially and wholeheartedly to the Bryn Mawr community.

Sources

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*Maids and Student*. N.d. Photograph. Bryn Mawr College Special Collections, Bryn Mawr.

*Two Maids at Telephone Booth*. N.d. Photograph. Bryn Mawr College Special Collections, Bryn Mawr.