

Edwards women (neighbors/servants) talk

1. Start (1 min)

Basic gist

About the museum

2. The Benjamin S. Edwards Family (1 minutes)

The family that this presentation, and my work at the SAA, revolves around is the Benjamin S. Edwards family. Our focus in our interpretation is on the immediate family that lived within Edwards Place – Benjamin, Helen, Helen Maria, Alice, and Mollie.

This family owned Edwards Place from 1843 until 1913, when it passed into the hands of the Springfield Art Association. So, the girls were raised here, and they lived to see Enos Park neighborhood grow and change along with their family.

Benjamin was the youngest son of Governor Ninian Edwards and the first man from Illinois to graduate from Yale – graduating with a law degree. While attending Yale, he met Helen Dodge through her brother Richard, and they married and came back to Illinois. Helen was also born in Illinois, but she grew up most of her childhood in New York. When in Springfield, Helen became friends with Mary Todd, and they remained friends throughout their lives. The Edwards' had one son who died in infancy, and three daughters who lived through adulthood.

3. Work the Edwards family women did (5 min)

The Edwards women were from a higher social class in Springfield in the 19th century, and as such they wouldn't have been expected to work outside the home. In fact, it would have been inappropriate, to say the least. That's not to say that they were discouraged from practical occupation – many women took part in “fanciful utility,” crafting things thought appropriate for their “station.” For example, they hired out a seamstress who came a couple times a year to make their clothing, but they would mend and sew small things, and were adept at the occupation. Women of any class would know how to sew. Women like the Edwards' would be much more used to using that skill for embroidery and other types of decorative embellishment.

During the 19th century, the ideas of the home and of family were becoming sentimental, and the ideal for women was viewed as being able to be home to make that atmosphere as relaxing and pleasing as possible. She spent her time in the type of utility that would help make that so. A woman's “sphere” was that of family and private life, in essence, the home. For upper and middle class women, her running of the household (ideally with servants to carry out the actual physical labor) and beautification of the space was not just a goal, but a necessity.

For Helen Edwards, she experienced a view into the side of women who did not have servants. When she and Benjamin first moved to Springfield, they weren't able to get anyone as live-in help for a bit. Helen was, in essence, doing all the chores we now associate with pioneers – churning butter and the like. – Churning butter story. As the mistress of Edwards Place, she was an

exacting and harsh employer – one wonders whether she was this way as part of her personality, or whether it was her own experience with the work that gave her the attitude she had.

It was also a point of pride that an upper- or middle-class woman could cook. Helen Edwards was known for her chicken salad, Mary Lincoln for her white cake. I have to wonder how it was in a well-run kitchen, when the mistress of the house came back to bake, with likely much less experience than the cook who worked in there every day.

Some excerpts from the Edwards' letters:

"I gave Miss E. a very handsome papier mache work box, large, and finished it as well as I could in a short time – pins, needles, cord, wax, emery, crochet needles, stiletto, good scissors, thread, box of sewing silk, pen knife, pencil, paper cutter, gold thimble, etc. I liked it very much, and wished somebody would make me just such a present." – HDE to HME 10/14/56

"Ben gave her a toilet set; I ... a ruffled apron and a needle book, a little pincushion from Mrs. Ferguson, and a marble cake from Sarah."

4. Edwards Place neighbors (5 minutes)

Edwards Place was built without surrounding neighbors, but by the heyday of the house, around 1860, Benjamin and others had sold off enough land to bring neighbors all around the house. They had a diverse neighborhood, with a mix of black and white folks and immigrants, many working class but with professionally occupied neighbors a couple of streets to the east.

5. One point I want to make about the neighbors is that many women were not listed in the city directory I used to find them – women were mostly only listed in the directory if they were head of household. So, a woman may have worked outside the home, but that wouldn't have been listed in the resource I used. In addition, further research into the male neighbors didn't lead me much further – records for people who are not wealthy like the Edwards' are woefully missing or incomplete. The women I did find lived on their own with their children, and a number of them were widowed.

6. However, most women, even working class, did *not* work outside the home, if they could help it. They may work as young, unmarried women, but part of that American dream was that they could take care of their own home once married. Black women held positions outside the home more often, because they more often had to continue to work after marrying due to lower wages and other factors.

I should say, too, that women were not educated on the level that men were, for the most part. Even the Edwards girls, who went to schools as children and who were encouraged to expand their minds, were not college-educated. This shows another expectation that women wouldn't need formal education for their duties as wives and mothers.

5. Edwards Place servants (1 min)

We have records for 40 servants who came through and worked at Edwards Place, but that number was probably much larger, as our records are mostly from letters in the 1860s-1870s, as well as the census from various decades.

We don't know what every servant did at Edwards Place, but we do have a number of jobs listed that were done. And some servants did more than one of these jobs at a time. There were three listings of gardener, 1 stable boy, 5 laborers, 1 errand runner, 5 maids, 2 housekeepers, 4 seamstresses, one who tended the chickens, 4 cooks, 1 minding the children, and 1 nurse.

6. What being a servant would have been like at Edwards Place (3 min)

Most servants during that time were placed using a service, but the Edwards' got some of their servants through connections, like sisters Mary and Annie Sage or Aunt Ellen Bonner and niece Ellen Riley. Mrs. Edwards had very high standards for servants, because she had had to learn a lot of the work herself when she first moved to Springfield. She even said, "In those days it was almost impossible to get servants. I had brought a woman from St. Louis but found her so intemperate that in less than a year I was obliged to discharge her and my trouble in housekeeping began. I knew nothing of cooking and shed many a tear over my first attempts." She often complained about her servants, including Bridget who she said wasn't frugal enough, using too much butter and eggs. She was also overly fastidious about the cleanliness of the servants' living quarters – she was fearful of bug infestations, so they were washing the beds often to prevent them.

Helen usually kept at least two female and one male servant, according to Eliza Condell, her granddaughter, who said, "When I lived with Grandmother she always kept two maids and a man. There was a time when she kept more help. I said to her once that it must have been nice to have so many servants. She said that it wasn't, that when there were so many, they made more work." She also said, "During all those years Grandmother had a cook, maid, laundress, and a man...sometimes there was adequate help, and sometimes there was none at all."

Servants had to start early – Mr. Edwards liked to be at the office by 7 in the morning and wanted breakfast with the family. The House Servant's Directory even said, "for an hour before the family rises is worth more to you than two after they are up." They were also up late, finishing chores. They had to be ready for a variety of situations – the Edwards' were known for entertaining, so there were often quite large dinners to prepare for, and sometimes without more than a day's notice.

Servants were given room and board, plus \$1.50-\$2.50 a week. Servants' spaces were kept as separate as possible from living spaces of the house. There is a servants' hall with a separate staircase from the front of the house and the servants' quarters were in the attic. There are two little rooms under the eaves; one even has the remnants of a call bell above the door. Even though this was a rest space for the women servants, they could be called at any hour of the day.

7. Fanny Pilcher (5 min)

Fanny Smith was born possibly around 1850 in Ireland. I don't believe she lived in Springfield until the 1860s, when she worked for the Edwards family at Edwards Place. She left Edwards Place to work at "Mrs. Condell's", probably Eliza, Moses Condell's mother. Moses married one of the Edwards daughters, so that could have been the connection. According to Helen Edwards, who employed Fanny, she did not consider her a nice girl, but still kept tabs on her in a way through their housekeeper/cook Bridget Kelly, also from Ireland.

A Fanny Smith married William Pilcher in March 1867 – he was almost 20 years her senior and came up to Springfield from Kentucky. In quick turn, they had two children. We know most about this time period from a short paragraph in a letter written from Helen Edwards to her daughter, Helen Condell. She wrote, "Do you remember Fanny Smith?...I heard today, or rather this evening, that about a year ago, she married a man, by the name of Pilcher, she lives in a little bit of a room...Bridget went to see her, and says "she has two little bits of babies, a terrible breast, and not a bit of any kind in the house to eat," that she did not know that any one could be so poor. I suppose her husband is one of the worthless idlers of the family...she must not be left to suffer from want. I cannot but be sorry for her."

After this mention, I didn't see anything about the Pilchers again until 1885. It seems at this point that William had developed a penchant for addictive substances. There was an article in the Daily Illinois State Journal about his taking a "large dose of morphine". He admitted to stealing morphine from a burned pharmacy and drinking at least three bottles. His reasoning – his wife "spends all his money." Fanny was asked about the situation, and said simply that that was what William did whenever he drew his \$36 pension every three months (this boils down to about \$423 every month in today's money).

This was probably not long before Fanny decided to file for divorce from William. One reason for this filing was because he had already taken their son and wouldn't allow her to see him – making the suggestion that they were living apart at the time. Fanny took back her filing in 1887. There was only one small line in the paper about it. And I never saw anything after to show that she tried again, even though William alleged in the Daily Illinois State Journal that she wanted him to deed her his grocery store/saloon and "now wants to get rid of him." When that was reported, he issued a correction, saying "It is not true that she is in the habit of drinking intoxicating liquors. She is now, and always has been, a most exemplary wife and mother."

8. Ann Collins Campbell (5 min)

Ann Collins Campbell was born in Ireland around 1839. She was the only one out of 5 Collins children to be born in Ireland, the rest having been born in Illinois. The Collins family came to Illinois during a surge of Irish immigration. Ann was an exception to a rule – many young women coming to Springfield during this time from Ireland came on as domestic help to a middle- or upper-class home. Around 25% of Springfield homes had domestic help at that point in time. But Ann wasn't one of them – she had her own business.

Ann was a dressmaker by trade. She started out as a general seamstress. During the time she worked for the Edwards', she was transitioning her title. It seems that there was a bit of a difference in occupation – and prestige – that came with listing one's occupation as a seamstress or dressmaker. A seamstress was often considered less specialized and less trained, and

consequently paid much less than a dressmaker...and given less respect. She would have gained independence and respectability from this move, and this is probably when she was able to open her own shop, not far from her home. Her shop was downtown, where many people would be able to pass by and utilize her services.

I don't know how Ann met her future husband, Alexander Campbell. Regardless, they were married on November 25, 1878. There was an article in the Daily Illinois State Journal celebrating the nuptials – “An event long anticipated, and one in which a great many citizens were interested, was the marriage of Mr. Alexander Campbell...to Miss Ann Collins.” They were married in a Catholic ceremony, with Father Kane, another Enos Park resident, telling them “the marriage relation was an ordinance of God; that, though the State permitted separation and remarriage, it was not a civil act, but a sacrament of the church.” The article also listed ALL of the gifts they received and who they received them from.

Alexander worked at the Springfield Iron Works, better known as the “rolling mill” at that time. They produced railroad rails, and later railroad splice bars and bar iron, at a 45-acre plant from the 1870s to 1900s and Alexander had around 1000 colleagues there. It was one of the huge industries that influenced the development of the Enos Park neighborhood in which the Campbell's lived – the other being the Illinois Watch Factory. Unfortunately, after their marriage, it seems that Ann quit her business, as there is never another mention of it in any city directories or newspapers. It's always possible she kept up some of her business, but it was also common for married women to settle into running a household, and it would have been another elevation in status for her to not work outside the home. It's a question I've not yet been able to answer, as I haven't been able to find any more mentions of the happy couple after their illustrious union in 1878.

9. Closure

This presentation was meant to highlight the women's work that made Edwards Place into the grand home that it was in the 19th century – noting the contributions made by family, staff, and neighbors to the function of the house. Edwards Place was capable of becoming the social and political center it was through women's labor in the domestic sphere.