

# RHODE ISLAND YEARBOOK



The Warwick Story . . . Whatever Happened to Miss Rhode Island? . . .  
The Glorious Fourth By George Howe . . . Rhode Island Exodus . . .  
Distinguished Doorways . . . History Section The 19th Century Part II



# The Servant Problem In 1845

By GRACE ABBOT FLETCHER

**M**Y great grandfather listed his housemaids on the inside cover of an 1845 diary. Girl after girl came and went, sometimes "leaving in haste, half-corned." I don't wonder that they needed to keep tipsy! For \$1.25 a week they were expected to cook, bake, wash, iron, clean, and no doubt, baby-sit. From the building of the house in 1789 until installation of a cook stove in 1842, fireplaces supplied the means of heating and cooking. The original great hearth, with its cranes and deep oven, were walled in behind the cook stove.

Down in the cellar were the coal and wood. I hope there was a "boy" to lug these up the steep stairs. Bins of vegetables, sides of beef and mutton which hired men "salted down." There were shelves and shelves of preserves, jellies, canned food, and dry bins for potatoes, onions, carrots and beets.

Those poor girls! I picture them fetching the ingredients for dinner, cutting and peeling at a beautiful mahogany table, then stirring the kettle over the hot stove.

They had to mop the floor, sweep heavy carpets, or beat rugs out on the clothes-line. They dusted the endless brick-a-brac on "whatnots" and mantles.



*Wheaton-Abbot Homestead. Miller Street, Warren.*

My great grandma complained to her husband, away at sea, that Bridget had spent all the morning ironing one tablecloth and a pair of pillow shams. Today I hold back a door with her iron, its handle bent forward from hours of leaning on, while hot, by a strong arm and shoulder. The tablecloth is heavy linen with long fringe that needs to be brushed fluffy after each laundering. The pillow shams are a yard square, with elaborate monograms in their centers, and a ruffle on each to be fluted by a special iron.



And what about the slops? I found washstands and commodes equipped with heavy china, decorated in gilt and even lustre.

The privy, a drafty three-holer where the contents were dumped, was a long, long walk down the side of the house, under an arbor of wisteria and a tunnel for cold wind.

I figure that waste water from the kitchen and bedrooms went into the garden to help nourish vegetables, fruit trees and grapevines.

Quite desperate for help at one time, the family arranged to import two sisters from Vermont. Here is the plan for their trip which would take only four or five hours today.







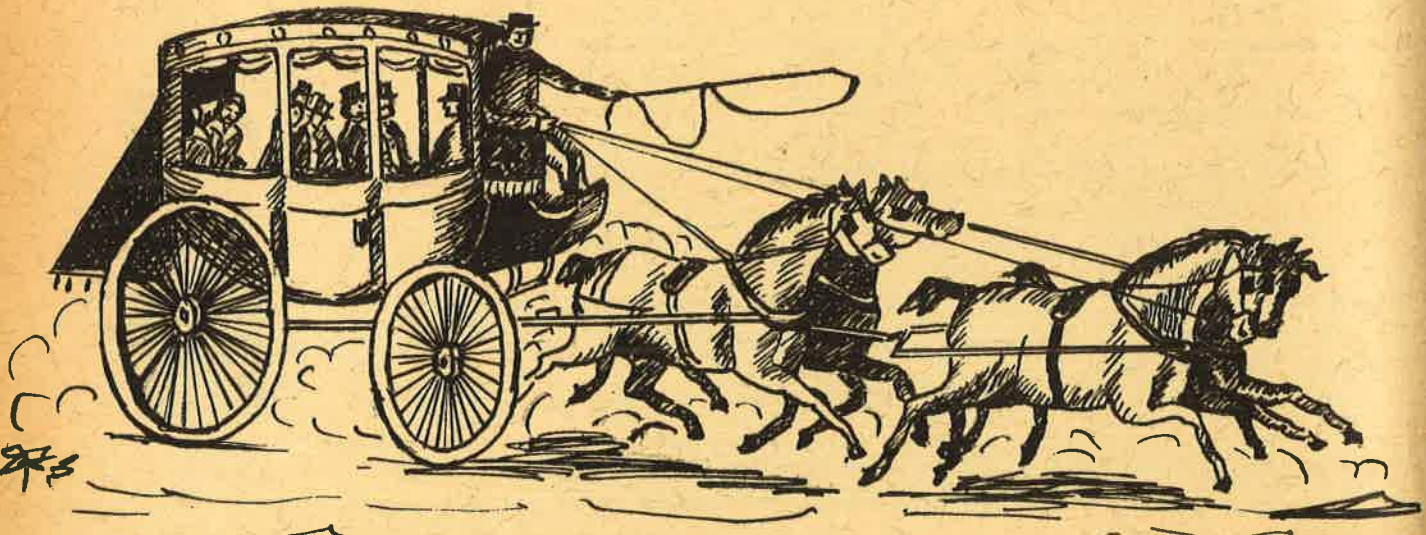
		(One person)
Tuesday	Stage from Lyndon to Haverhill . . . . .	\$1.75
	Supper and lodging at Haverhill . . . . .	.50
Wednesday	Stage from Haverhill to Hanover . . . . .	1.50
	Breakfast at Hanover . . . . .	.37½
	Stage from Hanover to Keene . . . . .	3.00
	Dinner at Charlestown . . . . .	.37½
	Supper and lodging at Keene . . . . .	.50
Thursday	Stage from Keene to Worcester . . . . .	2.50
	Breakfast and dinner on the way . . . . .	.75
	Supper and lodging at Worcester . . . . .	.50
Friday	Stage from Worcester to Providence . . . . .	2.25
	Breakfast between Worcester and Providence . . . . .	.37½
	Dinner at Providence . . . . .	.37½
	Stage from Providence to Warren . . . . .	.75
		\$15.50

Grandpa wrote the girls: "This is about what it would cost me . . . I noticed the boatmen between Haverhill and Hanover paid but one dollar, whereas I paid one and a half. The girls shall have, however, all that they can save out of the \$15.50, \$31.00 for both."

From logs and ships' letters one can feel the compassion which a sea captain felt for his seamen. Their spiritual and physical welfare were ever under his watchful eye. Not so his domestic help. The latter were not his friends. I think today we could make them happier and more cooperative. But if we were as cold or hot, as tired and harassed as our ancestors often were, perhaps not.

I must alter my mental lens and picture the beautiful home with its gracious living. The maids served afternoon tea in Oriental cups, with a gay "tea cozy" over the Canton teapot to keep it hot. There was family singing in the "keeping room." Little children were taught to perform before their elders.

Today this charm is slipping away, and so is the servant problem. Today we don't have any "girls"!



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