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## "To Barter Their Souls for Gold": Female Clerks in Federal Government Offices, 1862-1890

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"I, being a lady and an entire stranger, shrink from making an appeal to you for work, but necessity compels me to lay aside all modesty and reserve."<sup>1</sup> So

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<sup>1</sup> S. S. Kelty to John W. Noble, Feb. 18, 1892, file 1890-2208, Applications and Appointments Files, Appointments Division, Records of the Office of Secretary of the Interior, RG 48 (National Archives). Application files maintained by the Treasury Department in the four post-Civil War decades and by the Department of the Interior from 1879 to 1905 constitute the major sources for this essay. The Department of the Interior (which in the nineteenth century included the Patent Office, Pension Bureau, Census Office, General Land Office, and Bureau of Education, among others) and the Treasury Department were two of the largest federal agencies and the primary employers of women during this period. These application files contain personnel dossiers which document the lives and work histories of thousands of federal employees. Letters written by female applicants not only requested jobs, but also discussed family and financial problems and sometimes delineated the specific situations or crises that brought them into the federal labor market. In describing their qualifications, female job aspirants furnished information on their education and previous work experience, often revealing as well their family background, social status, and perception of what being a clerical worker entailed. This study is based on a reading of more than 2,000 files of such female applicants. The social and demographic profile of these women is based on statistical analysis of all women who applied for clerical jobs in the Treasury Department in 1862/1863 (the years when women first worked in Washington's bureaucracy) and 1870 and all women who applied for clerical jobs in the Interior Department in 1880 and 1890. In 1862/1863 there were 128 women who applied; in 1870 there were 401; in 1880 there were 598; and in 1890 there were 812. (These totals include 115 women who applied for jobs but who may not have been successful in their quest for work. When I examined these women separately I found that they did not differ significantly, in social or demographic characteristics, from the women who clearly did receive jobs.) To augment the data available in the federal application files, I also searched the 1880 District of Columbia manuscript population census schedules for the 598 women who applied for work in 1880. I successfully located 256 of them, and all information on household structure is based on an analysis of these 256 women. The following figures provide a rough indication of how many women clerked in all Washington federal offices in the years 1862/1863, 1870, 1880, and 1890, and indicate what proportion of the total number of female clerks I have accounted for in my analysis. There are only 176 women clerical workers listed in the entire 1863 official register of federal employees. See *Register of Officers and Agents, Civil, Military, and Naval, in the Service of the United States, on the Thirteenth September 1863* (Washington, 1864). The 1870 census reported that 943 women were "Officials and Employees of

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wrote Sally Kelty in 1892 as she applied for a clerking job in the United States Census Office. In the three decades after the Civil War, Kelty and thousands of other middle-class women turned away from nineteenth-century norms that restricted a respectable lady to the domestic sphere and became clerical workers in federal government offices.<sup>2</sup> These women created the first large-scale female clerical labor force in the United States.

The first women to enter federal offices, members of America's burgeoning middle class, had imbibed the dominant domestic ideology that prescribed limited female roles and passive female personality traits. When economic and family difficulties impelled such women to take jobs as government clerks, they found themselves forced to contradict conventional rules of behavior. In accommodating to their new positions as government workers these women did not reject, but rather tried to expand, the traditional ideology to fit their changed circumstances. In the process they significantly transformed their own lives and attitudes. By examining in detail who these women were, why they chose to work as clerks, and the effects of work experiences on their attitudes, this essay explores the reciprocal relationship between social reality and ideology in the lives of many nineteenth-century women.

When the Treasury Department first hired female office workers in 1862, clerking was an exclusively male occupation. In the next thirty years, expansion of the federal bureaucracy and growth of the tertiary sector of the economy increased the need for clerical workers and attracted large numbers of women to government and private clerical jobs. By the early 1890s, women held nearly 5,600 of the 17,600 positions in the executive departments in the nation's capital, and at the turn of the century 104,000 comprised 29 percent of the clerks in the United States.<sup>3</sup> The women who worked in federal govern-

Civil Government" in Washington; many of these women probably worked in other than a clerical capacity—as printer's assistants and charwomen, for example. The 1880 census reported 1,412 women clerks in government offices. In 1890 there were, according to the census, 3,741 female clerks, copyists, stenographers, and typists in Washington. Francis A. Walker, *The Statistics of the Population of the United States . . . Compiled from the Original Returns of the Ninth Census (June 1, 1870)* (Washington, 1872), 727; U.S. Census Office, *Statistics of the Population of the United States at the Tenth Census (June 1, 1880)* (Washington, 1883), 801; U.S. Census Office, *Report on Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890*, (Washington, 1897), Part II, 307-09.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the development of the ideology of separate sexual spheres, see Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly*, XVIII (Summer 1966), 151-74; Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, 1977); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven, 1973); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs*, 1 (Autumn 1975), 1-29.

<sup>3</sup> Janet Hooks, *Women's Occupation through Seven Decades* (Washington, 1947), 74-77. It is difficult to ascertain the precise number of female workers in Washington federal offices, for published documents offer varied findings. Lucille Foster McMillin noted that in 1893 there were 3,770 women and 8,377 men employed in the departments at Washington, but she perhaps included only Civil Service employees in this count. Lucille Foster McMillin, *Women in the Federal Service* (Washington, 1939), 12. The larger figures cited in my text were furnished to a congressional commission by heads of the departments in October 1893. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Organization of the Executive Departments and Other Government Establishments at the National Capital, and Information Concerning the Persons Employed Therein*, 53 Cong., 1 sess., 1893, H. Rept. 88, p. 208. These disparate figures refer, moreover, only to em-

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ment offices from 1862 to 1900 opened the field of clerical work to other members of their sex.

These pioneering female clerks came from native-born, white, middle-class families: they were the daughters, widows, and wives of doctors, lawyers, ministers, and other government clerks. At least 65 percent of their fathers worked as professionals, white-collar workers, small businessmen, or federal clerks. Less than 7 percent of female clerks' fathers earned their living through manual labor, and nearly all of these were skilled craftsmen such as carpenters, stonecutters, or engravers.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, some of these women came from old, established, and at one time very wealthy families. Others represented families that were becoming members of the new middle classes: men and women who would not only staff the expanding federal bureaucracy but would also fill the growing number of white-collar positions throughout industrializing, urban America.

While the presence of the federal bureaucracy and the absence of heavy industry may have made Washington a city with an unusually high percentage of white-collar workers, the special occupational structure of the city does not explain the social-class background of the women who entered government offices.<sup>5</sup> Forty-three percent of female clerks who assumed their positions

ployees, not to clerical workers. My own count of clerks in the Treasury and Interior Departments listed in the official register of federal employees for 1891 revealed 1,573 women and 3,468 men, indicating that the ratio of female to male clerical workers was about the same as the ratio of female to male employees. *Official Register of the United States, Containing a List of the Officers and Employés in the Civil, Military, and Naval Service on the First of July, 1891* (2 vols., Washington, 1892).

<sup>4</sup> Of the 1,639 women who applied for work in my sample years, there were 279 for whom I could gather information regarding occupation of fathers. Some of these data come from the women whom I traced to the 1880 census and who were living with their fathers. In other cases, however, I learned about the father's occupation only from the applicant's letter. When asking for work, women would sometimes describe their family background and mention their father's position. Since many women entered the labor market after their fathers had died, some of this information refers to previous occupational status of fathers. The exact breakdown on father's occupation is: professional and high white-collar jobs, 34.3 percent; low white-collar jobs (including government clerks), 31.3 percent; skilled manual laborers, 5.7 percent; unskilled laborers, 1.1 percent; unspecified government jobs (most of which were probably clerical positions), 26.2 percent; and farmers, 1.8 percent. The data on occupations of husbands reveal much the same pattern: over 75 percent held professional or white collar positions, and only 5 percent worked in manual jobs. There were, however, only 82 out of 450 ever-married women for whom I could obtain information on occupation of husbands. Female clerks were almost all white; only 7 of 1,639 female clerks who applied in the sample years were black. Data on birthplace of parents come from those women in the 1880 sample year who were located in the 1880 manuscript census schedules. Of the 248 women for whom I have this information, only 14 percent had mothers who were immigrants and 18 percent had fathers who were immigrants. The greatest number of these immigrant parents came from England, Canada, or western Europe.

<sup>5</sup> The occupation tables in the 1870 and 1880 published census reports are unfortunately not broken down by race, and the population of the nation's capital included a large percentage of blacks (33 percent in 1880 and 32 percent in 1870). Therefore, it is not possible to assess accurately the structure of occupations for white men in these years. The 1890 published census reports do, however, simultaneously delineate occupational and racial categories. In 1890 as many as 35 percent of native white men born of native parents worked in unskilled manual occupations in the nation's capital. Thus it is clear that Washington did include a sizable white, working-class population in this period, despite the striking absence of female clerks whose fathers occupied such positions. Walker, *Ninth Census*, 97; U.S. Census Office, *Tenth Census*, 384; U.S. Census Office, *Eleventh Census*, Part II, 544.

between 1862 and 1890 lived someplace other than Washington prior to taking government jobs. Middle-class women flocked to the nation's capital to become clerks. While one of every five had previously lived in the neighboring states of Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, all other regions of the country, New England, the South, the Midwest, and the Far West also contributed women to the federal clerical labor force.<sup>6</sup>

Education affords an index to middle-class origins that is even more persuasive than fathers' occupation. Federal women clerks had been well educated, most having enjoyed the advantage of a secondary education. Ninety-four percent had remained in school at least through the age of sixteen, and an impressive 13 percent had continued their formal education into their twenties.<sup>7</sup> About one quarter of these women claimed private school tutelage, usually in a seminary or female academy. These figures indicate that the women who worked in government offices came from families that had at one time been able to forgo the wages of female children and in some instances to pay for their daughters' private education as well.

Many federal female clerks had probably grown up without expecting to work for a living, but after the Civil War they found it necessary to enter the paid labor force. The reversals they experienced did not, however, destroy their commitment to middle-class respectability. Lucy Wilson, a clerk in the Pension Office in the mid-1880s, expressed horror at the thought that anyone suspected her true financial plight. In a letter describing the dire state of her finances, she hastened to add: "There is no living soul who knows my condition. I am cheerful in the presence of others, make a respectable appearance and people imagine I have the world on a string. Only *I* know."<sup>8</sup> For these women social class status was as much a product of perception as of income or wealth.

Recognition that women clerks came from middle-class families adds an important dimension to our understanding of women's work in the nineteenth century. Recent historical scholarship on the labor force activities of working-class and immigrant women has explained their wage-earning behavior as contributions to a "family economy." In discussing the middle class, however, historians have emphasized women's exclusion from productive economic functions as those activities moved from the home to the market,

<sup>6</sup> Twenty-one percent had been living in Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, or Virginia; 3.2 percent came from the southern states of Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and West Virginia; 8.1 percent from the Midwest, including Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan; 4.6 percent from New England; and 5.3 percent from the states and territories west of the Mississippi River.

<sup>7</sup> By comparison, published census statistics on school attendance for the year 1890 reveal that only 42 percent of native whites aged fifteen to nineteen were attending school. The Census Office chose not even to report the percentage of people over the age of twenty attending school, since the numbers were so small. U.S. Census Office, *Eleventh Census*, Part II, xxviii.

<sup>8</sup> Lucy K. Wilson to Col. Keogh, Sept. 25, 1881, file 1881-1847, Applications and Appointments Files, Appointments Division, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior.

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their growing participation in reform, educational, and organizational activities, and the importance of their role within an increasingly separate and isolated domestic sphere. Indeed, historians have accepted as real those nineteenth-century standards that declared the presence of non-wage-earning wives and daughters to be the hallmark of middle-class status.<sup>9</sup> While leisure may reflect the ideal to which middle-class women aspired, it does not describe the real-life situations of many nineteenth-century households. The middle-class family frequently placed upon the shoulders of its female members heavy financial burdens which, in the context of late nineteenth-century American society, required that they leave the domestic sphere and enter the paid labor force.

In Washington a great many people with middle-class background and values faced severe family and economic problems. Moments of crisis brought respectable, comfortable, and even established families to the verge of economic disaster and pushed middle-class women into the federal job market. During the three post-Civil War decades, the primary motivation for a woman's entry into the government's labor market remained economic: she and her family needed the wages she could earn. Definitions of need, however, varied widely, ranging from procuring food and shelter to bolstering the middle-class status of parents, siblings, or children.

Economic burdens fell to middle-class women at all stages in their life cycles. When necessary, daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers became federal workers. Not surprisingly, single women comprised the majority of female federal clerks, for families looked first to their unmarried female members for financial assistance. Approximately two-thirds of the women who applied for

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the role of working-class women within a family economy, see Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work, and Family* (New York, 1978). On the lives and work experiences of working-class and immigrant women in the United States, see Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880-1930* (Ithaca, 1977); Milton Cantor and Bruce Laurie, eds., *Class, Sex, and the Woman Worker* (Westport, Conn., 1977); Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Worker City, Company Town: Iron and Cotton-Worker Protest in Troy and Cohoes, New York, 1855-84* (Urbana, 1978); Carole Turbin, "And Are We Nothing but Women: Irish Working Women in Troy," in *Women of America: A History*, ed. Carol Ruth Berkin and Mary Beth Norton (Boston, 1979); Susan J. Kleinberg, "Technology and Woman's Work: The Lives of Working-Class Women in Pittsburgh, 1870-1900," *Labor History*, 17 (Winter 1976), 58-72; Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States, 1900-1930* (New York, 1979). For a discussion of the activities of middle-class women see William L. O'Neill, *Everyone Was Brave: The Rise and Fall of Feminism in America* (Chicago, 1969); Barbara J. Berg, *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism, the Women and the City, 1800-1860* (New York, 1978); Keith E. Melder, *Beginnings of Sisterhood: The American Woman's Rights Movement, 1800-1865* (New York, 1977); Mary P. Ryan, *Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present* (New York, 1975); Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, Ohio, 1976); and Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge, 1959). Daniel Rodgers discusses the image of "idle womanhood," which was held up as the ideal for middle-class women. Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (Chicago, 1978), 182-209. For more on the evolution of middle-class women's important role within the domestic sphere, see Sklar, *Catherine Beecher*, and Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*. For a discussion of the need to reappraise our view of nineteenth-century middle-class women, see Mary Beth Norton, "The Paradox of 'Women's Sphere,'" in *Women of America*, ed. Berkin and Norton.

work in 1862-1863, 1870, and 1880 had never been married, with the proportion increasing to 73 percent in 1890.<sup>10</sup>

Various economic circumstances prompted single women to apply for government clerkships. Young, single women frequently entered the labor force when their fathers lost their jobs, fell ill, or died. For example, Ellen Neale applied for a job in the Department of the Interior in 1890, one month after the death of her father. Nineteen years old at the time, she defended her efforts to secure a federal clerkship: "I am the daughter of the late Judge Neale of Virginia and at his death . . . I was left the sole support of a helpless, invalid mother and invalid sister, with two little sisters and brothers to support and educate. Being a large family we lived up to my Father's income during his life, so that we are left with absolutely nothing, excepting the heritage of his noble name and memory."<sup>11</sup> Unemployment of the father, even if temporary, could result in the same economic disaster as his death or illness. In the Rhea family, sixteen-year-old Lillie, the eldest of six children, sought a job because her father, a bookkeeper, had lost his position in the Census Office. In the meantime her family lacked resources to purchase even "daily necessities."<sup>12</sup>

Even in families where the male breadwinner had accumulated enough to bequeath a comfortable estate, unforeseen economic reversals could result in penury. The Civil War precipitated financial problems for many among the first generation of women clerks. Cordelia Emmons, who became a clerk in the Treasury Department in 1865, described her unfortunate family's situation: "I . . . have been, during the last four years, reduced from ease and comfort to destitution. I am a Marylander by birth, but have passed half my life in the city of Philadelphia. There my father died, but from time to time before his death, he invested his means advantageously [in] the South. From a part of this I received my maintenance, but with the breaking out of the war my income ceased and it is very doubtful if I ever again [will] derive any benefit from it."<sup>13</sup> With her father dead, and no male wage earner in her family, the sudden loss of a previously secure income brought Emmons into government employ where she remained for more than ten years. Unsuccessful business ventures also created economic hardships and propelled many women into government

<sup>10</sup> The proportion of never-married women who applied for work in each of my sample years was:

Year	Proportion of never-married women (percent)
1862/1863	64.4
1870	61.1
1880	64.7
1890	73.0

<sup>11</sup> Ellen Neale to the Secretary of the Interior, Nov. 12, 1891, file 1890-2075, Applications and Appointments Files, Appointments Division, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior.

<sup>12</sup> Lillie Rhea to Robert Walker, Sept. 17, 1880, file 1880-1886, *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Cordelia Emmons to the Honorable Secretary of the Treasury, Dec. 26, 1865, file of Cordelia Emmons, Applications and Recommendations for Positions in the Washington, D.C., Offices of the Treasury Department, 1830-1910, entry 210, Records of the Division of Appointments, General Records of the Department of the Treasury, RG 56 (National Archives).

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clerkships. Laura Robinson explained in her 1881 letter of application: "A few years ago I enjoyed all the luxuries of an elegant home, but commercial disaster, which as you know has ruined so many men, compels me now to seek assistance from strangers."<sup>14</sup> Such situations reveal the precarious financial status of many middle-class nineteenth-century families—comfortable and successful one year, reduced to poverty the next.

The picture of an insecure middle class emerges more sharply in an examination of the single women who became government clerks even when they resided with fathers who were healthy and employed. Twenty-seven percent of the single women who applied for jobs in the Department of Interior in 1880 shared households with an employed father. Many of these men held jobs that placed them on the lower edge of the middle class, positions as clerks or bookkeepers drawing salaries insufficient to support families adequately in high-cost Washington.<sup>15</sup> Some fathers called upon their daughters, usually in their late teens or early twenties, to become government clerks and contribute to the support and education of younger children. Mamie Sandidge, for example, began clerking in 1890 while her father also worked for the government. She wanted to help her parents rear and educate her siblings.<sup>16</sup>

Financial difficulties sometimes required that even young, single women from more comfortably placed middle-class families become wage earners. Some women whose fathers held better-paid or more prestigious jobs claimed they needed government positions in order to help extricate the family from a difficult, but temporary, economic crisis. Ada Collins's father, an editor of the *Washington Evening Star*, wrote to the secretary of the interior in 1880 asking employment for his daughter to "relieve me from a temporary but uncomfortable financial squeeze."<sup>17</sup> Similarly, twenty-year-old Mary McKee, daughter of the assistant librarian of the Senate, applied for work in 1889. An influential friend, intervening on her behalf, noted that "in a recent campaign [McKee's father] published and practically gave away his book called 'Protection Echos,' which was very much used by the Committee and speakers during the campaign. He is now financially embarrassed, growing out of this publication, and desires to get a position for his Daughter in your Bureau. He only desires a place for a short time for her." McKee worked in the Census Office for four years to help her father overcome his "financial embarrassment."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Laura Robinson to Mrs. Hayes, n.d., file 1880-725, Applications and Appointments Files, Appointments Division, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Interior.

<sup>15</sup> All information on structure of households is based on women whose applications were found in the records of the Interior Department in the year 1880 and then located within the 1880 manuscript census. An analysis of the 201 single women within this group revealed that 54 lived with fathers who were gainfully employed. Of these 54 fathers, 24 percent held professional or high white-collar jobs, 56 percent held low white-collar jobs or were small businessmen (this group included men who were government clerks, who represented 30 percent of the entire 54 men), 15 percent were skilled manual laborers, and 4 percent were unskilled laborers.

<sup>16</sup> John J. Heard to Robert Porter, Jan. 9, 1890, file 1890-1543, Applications and Appointments Files, Appointments Division, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior.

<sup>17</sup> W. R. Collins to Gen. F. A. Walker, Dec. 16, 1886, file 1880-2420, *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Wm. W. Dudley to Hon. R. P. Porter, July 1, 1889, file 1890-2234, *ibid.*

The labor of a daughter could allow her family to maintain its respectable economic and social standing, or an unmarried woman's employment might enable her family to improve its status. The income from a daughter's salary sometimes permitted the family to purchase property or accumulate savings. When Maggie Loftus faced possible loss of her \$720 per year job in the Census Office she appealed, stating that "my father was a Union soldier having served his country faithfully in the late war, and we have but recently purchased a little home, and if I am deprived of my position this we must lose."<sup>19</sup> Maggie's salary allowed the Loftus family the added security and status of property ownership. In other instances an adult daughter assumed financial responsibilities so that a brother might attend college or professional school. Gertrude Bourne, for example, described her family's situation in 1890: "I am twenty years of age and am anxious to earn something for my support and to assist my family. My father was recently a sergeant in the 2nd Rhode Island Regiment and has recently obtained employment at the Springfield armory. He has a large family to support—there are nine of us—and the pay he receives barely provides the necessaries of life. I also have a brother in the War Department but he is over twenty-one years of age and is studying law, so the principal help he can give us at present is in relieving my father of the cost of his support; and I am anxious to be employed in Washington so as to be near him and do what I can do to help educate my brothers and sisters."<sup>20</sup> In these families the promise of intergenerational upward mobility rested on the earning power of single women clerks.

Despite nineteenth-century rhetoric that cast sons in the role of providers and daughters in the category of those "provided for," economic burdens fell upon young women as well as young men. Unmarried daughters worked along with sons to help support the family or took over the role of breadwinner when their brothers proved unable, or unwilling, to do so.<sup>21</sup> Among the female clerks who shared households with adult brothers in 1880, as many as 30 percent worked in federal offices while at least one brother remained unemployed.<sup>22</sup> Take, for instance, the case of Marion Porter who in 1885, at the age of eighteen, graduated from a private seminary in Washington. Her father worked in the Adjutant General's Office, but in early 1889 he allegedly suffered a severe mental breakdown and deserted Marion, her mother, and three siblings, leaving them nearly destitute. That summer Marion began to work for the government. Her seventeen-year-old brother, however, "continued studying for the University, friends having secured him a scholarship and are supporting him." The other daughters remained "absolutely without support save from Miss Marion's salary."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Maggie Loftus to Hon. A. F. Childs, Oct. 7, 1890, file 1890-3472, *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Gertrude Bourne, April 25, 1890, file 1890-1583, *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Hattie Wood to Carl Schurz, March 1880, file 1880-1322, and G. H. Ourty to Mr. Teller, May 10, 1882, file 1880-812, *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Seventy-six percent of the women applicants to the Interior Department in 1880 who were located within the 1880 manuscript census did not have adult brothers. Of the sixty-one women who did have adult brothers, eighteen of these women had one or more unemployed adult brothers.

<sup>23</sup> Mr. Hill, June 12, 1894, file 1890-2080, Applications and Appointments Files, Appointments Division, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior.

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Many of the same circumstances that brought single women into the federal labor market also pushed widows into government clerkships. From 1862 to 1890 widows comprised between 13 percent and 28 percent of the government's clerical labor force.<sup>24</sup> The death of a wage-earning husband, like the loss of a father, created severe crises for middle-class women and often reduced them from comfortable situations to penury. Mrs. William Pemberton's distress, although more eloquently expressed than most, was typical:

I like many others although surrounded by poverty and its blasting effects, was neither born nor reared in poverty, nor was my early married life seared by such a curse. I never knew want or never had a wish ungratified. . . . I have sacrificed piece after piece of furniture (which was very dear to me from association) to pay rent and to buy bread. Now to day finds me even worse off. I have neither money, coal or wood, and nothing to eat but mush without meat or butter, what is left for me to do. I will not beg, I cannot steal, I cannot depend on what the world calls friends for help, they might for a while aid me, but how soon would they too grow weary. I never until now thought there was an excuse for women to barter their souls for gold, it is such an hour as this when the strongest become weak, make one fearful leap accepting the present, postponing the future. What is sadder than widowhood.<sup>25</sup>

The hope of securing their families within the middle class impelled less desperate widows to become clerks just as it had driven young single women into the work force. Many widows recognized that maintaining the status of the family often required that they try at all cost to keep their children in school. Amanda Doty, for instance, worked in the Census Office in 1881 but lost her job within the year. In 1882 she asked to be reinstated, saying "I have been waiting for more than a year for a position. . . . I have been dependent on the charity of friends since my husband's death three years ago. I have three children to educate and provide for." Without employment, she noted, she could not purchase the necessary Latin and Greek books to help her son prepare for Princeton.<sup>26</sup> These widows held fast to their middle-class values and struggled valiantly to maintain their families' social status.

Federal clerking jobs also attracted married women, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine their numbers with much certainty. It appears that some women concealed their marital status. Societal norms questioning the propriety of married women's employment, as well as departmental restrictions against hiring more than one member of a family, prompted many wives to apply for jobs as single women. Rumors in the Patent Office in the mid-1870s hinted that many of the allegedly unmarried women workers were wives of clerks in the same office. Mrs. Whittlesey, the wife of a clerk R. H. Whittlesey, apparently had accepted her \$900 per year job under the name of Miss E. M. Fisk. The official who investigated the scandal reported that "Mr. Whittlesey says that his wife signs this name although it is the name of her sister.

<sup>24</sup> Of the 1,639 women in my sample, 16.9 percent of those in the 1862/1863 group were widows, 28.3 percent of the 1870 group were widows, 18.2 percent of the 1880 group were widows, and 13.1 of the 1890 group were widows.

<sup>25</sup> Mrs. Wm. Pemberton to Hon. Henry M. Teller, April 23, 1882, file 1879-758, Applications and Appointments Files, Appointments Division, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior.

<sup>26</sup> Mrs. Amanda Doty to Wm. Dudley, Sept. 13, 1882, file 1881-203, *ibid.*

He also says that it was placed on the roll at the suggestion of the Commissioner [of Patents] who thought it would be better to appear by that name than to have it appear that two in the same family were drawing pay from the office."<sup>27</sup> Anonymous letters sent to Treasury Department officials in the 1860s and 1870s suggest that this practice was not limited to the Patent Office.<sup>28</sup> Since there is no way to know how many women lied, the data on married women are inexact: married female clerks represented at a minimum 6 percent and perhaps more than 13 percent of the women in federal clerical jobs during this period.<sup>29</sup>

Married women who desired government clerkships encountered problems that did not so significantly affect their unmarried coworkers. Although all middle-class women faced prohibitions against entering the public sphere, married women who relinquished their domestic roles received special condemnation. Besides deserting their homes, married working women were indicted for depriving widows, orphans, or male breadwinners of jobs. An anonymous accuser enumerated a litany of such charges against Mrs. Swan, an employee in the Treasury Department in the mid-1870s: "1st. Her husband is in the Navy Department and is competent to care for her and family. 2nd. She has an infant at home about one year old which requires the care of a mother. 3. Her husband owns the property which they occupy at present. 4. Children four in number growing up without the care of either parent during the day. 5. All the cares of her house including washing and ironing etc. imposed on her husband's mother an old lady 65 years old. 6. She holds her place in the Office against her husband's will."<sup>30</sup> Intense competition for government jobs in Washington added economic justification to the widespread moral and social sanctions against the employment of married women.

In the mid-1870s various departments responded to such complaints by prohibiting the employment of more than one member of a family. The government did not, however, specifically exclude married women from its work force. Instead the judgment, or whim, of a particular department head or

<sup>27</sup> A. Bell to Z. Chandler, Dec. 23, 1876, Miscellaneous Letters Received, Appointments Division, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior.

<sup>28</sup> Mrs. Anna Sander et al. to Appointments Clerk, Feb. 12, 1876; "Justice" to G. S. Boutwell, Dec. 6, 1869; and Anonymous to Secretary of Treasury, Oct. 19, 1874, Correspondence of the Division, entry 208, Records of the Division of Appointments, General Records of the Department of the Treasury.

<sup>29</sup> In addition to the problem of women lying about their true marital status, there are other variables which make these figures inexact. Although only 6 percent of the women responded "married" in their applications to the Treasury Department and the Interior Department in these years, another 5 percent signed their letters "Mrs." but never mentioned their marital status. Some of these women were undoubtedly widows, but since describing oneself as a widow was a definite advantage and increased the chances of getting a job, there is a great likelihood that many of these women were in fact married with husbands still living. Moreover, some women who were single, widowed, or divorced when they began to work continued in government employ after marrying. The figure of 13 percent represents all of these women combined with the 6 percent who responded "married." Examination of these figures at each point in time reveals that in 1862/1863 there were 18.6 percent who worked at some time while they were still married; in 1870 the figure dropped to 8 percent, then rose to 15.3 percent in 1880 and dropped to 11 percent in 1890.

<sup>30</sup> "Justice" to Secretary of the Treasury, Oct. 24, 1874, Correspondence of the Division, Records of the Division of Appointments, General Records of the Department of the Treasury.

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bureau chief determined whether or not a married woman could be hired. In many offices married women were the first to lose their jobs in case of a reduction of the work force, and single women often found their positions in jeopardy if they married. This was especially true in the 1860s and 1870s. The third auditor wrote to the secretary of the treasury in 1877 reporting that Emma Fuller, a highly paid, \$1,600 per year clerk in his office, had married a clerk in the Patent Office and "being further advised that it is not Miss Fuller's intention to resign, I have the honor to recommend her removal." Under threat of dismissal, Fuller quit her job a few days later.<sup>31</sup> But not all officials were so eager to fire married women, and some women continued to work after marriage. Widow E. A. McPheeters feared in 1868 that if she remarried she would lose her job, but when she explained to Treasurer Francis Spinner that her future husband could not afford to educate her sons, "[he] advised me to marry promising that my name should be changed on the payroll and my place secured."<sup>32</sup> Throughout the four post-Civil War decades the government's ambiguous policy, rather than outright prohibition, made job hunting difficult for married women.

Although married women faced unique problems, their motivations for working in many cases paralleled those of unmarried women. Like single clerks and widows, financial crises within the family compelled many married women to exchange roles as full-time childrearers and housekeepers for positions within the clerical labor force. Most married women who entered government offices did so when their husbands became ill or unemployed. For example, Nellie Grant was twenty-seven years old when she began to work in the Census Office in August 1890. She lost her job in a reduction of the work force ten months later and within a year applied for reinstatement on the following grounds: "My husband is in ill health having consumption and heart disease and is not able to work . . . but little. . . as a wife it is my duty to help him which compels me to seek work to help support us."<sup>33</sup> A husband's business reversals or chronic unemployment could also precipitate a wife's entering the labor force. In some cases couples came to Washington initially to seek work for the husband but found job opportunities for the wife instead. Other women had worked for the government before marriage and reentered federal employ when their husbands fell ill or lost their jobs.<sup>34</sup>

Dire financial stress does not entirely account for the presence of married women in clerical jobs. The relationship between work and marriage appears to have been complex, with various factors inducing married women to work. In some situations the ultimate financial success of a middle-class man rested on the ability of his wife to become a government worker. Sometimes the wife

<sup>31</sup> J. W. Grew to John Sherman, Dec. 17, 1877, file of Emma Fuller, Applications and Recommendations, Records of the Division of Appointments, General Records of the Department of the Treasury.

<sup>32</sup> E. A. McPheeters to Hugh McCulloch, Oct. 6, 1867, file of Mrs. E. A. McPheeters, *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Nellie Grant to J. W. Noble, July 15, 1892, file 1890-3267, Applications and Appointments Files, Appointments Division, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Viola Hunter to Sec. Kirkwood, July 9, 1881, file 1881-1255, and E. W. Leavenworth to F. Walker, Sept. 26, 1880, file 1881-124, *ibid.*

took on the responsibilities of supporting the family during those lean years while her husband was establishing himself within a profession. Mary Whitehead, for example, had worked in the General Land Office for ten years when in 1892 she married an attorney. She argued that although now married, she could not afford to lose her \$1,000 per year job because her husband "is laboring to build up a practice that we hope will, in time, enable me to resign my position."<sup>35</sup>

Many married women worked in government offices not to help husbands or children, but to provide financial assistance to parents, siblings, or more distant relatives. Marriage did not necessarily relieve middle-class women of the economic burdens of their families of origin. Mrs. M. A. Naylor, dismissed in 1868 from a \$900 per year job in the Register's Office, petitioned for reappointment. She contended that although her husband worked in the Pension Office she needed her position: "[My] mother and five children are left without support since the death of my father in 1867 [and] look to us for assistance. My salary since entering the department has been exclusively devoted to them, by my discharge their support is cut off."<sup>36</sup> Emma Whelply worked in the Treasury Department for more than nine years during which time her husband also clerked in the Pension Office. She explained that she "applied for the position in order to provide for my [widowed] Sister and her children and my entire salary has been applied to their support—being their only legitimate means."<sup>37</sup>

Husbands were not necessarily more likely to assume a wife's personal debts than to undertake her family's support. Financial obligations incurred while still single kept some middle-class women in the labor force after they had married. Kate Wing, daughter of a judge, had worked in the Treasury Department for eight years when she married a Mr. Hunter in 1891. A senator intervened on her behalf: "she asked [me] if she should marry—if it would prevent her holding her position—and was told it would not. She was somewhat in debt—and desired to retain her position long enough to enable her to pay said debts—and expected to do so. . . . If she had not been told she would retain her place, she would have *postponed* her marriage till she could have paid off her debts—which were caused by the long and severe sickness of her sister."<sup>38</sup>

A married woman's decision to enter the federal clerical labor force could precipitate major changes in the life of her family. Some couples even lived separately so that the wife could obtain a government job. The opportunities for employment of middle-class women in Washington induced more than one married woman to leave her husband in another city and journey to the nation's capital to find work. Both Emily Cilley and Martha Hutcheson lived

<sup>35</sup> Mrs. Gourick to S. W. Lamoreus, April 13, 1893, file 1880-440, *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Mrs. May Naylor to D. H. Browning, Dec. 3, 1868, file of Mrs. M. Naylor, Applications and Recommendations, Records of the Division of Appointments, General Records of the Department of the Treasury.

<sup>37</sup> Emma Whelply to Hugh McCulloch, Nov. 4, 1867, file of Emma Whelply, *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Francis B. Stockridge to A. B. Nettleton, Oct. 4, 1891, file of Kate Wing Hunter, *ibid.*

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and worked in Washington while their ailing husbands maintained residences in Ohio.<sup>39</sup> Some nineteenth-century couples apparently considered temporary separation an acceptable, if undesirable, solution to economic problems.

Other married women entered federal offices with an entirely different motivation—to gain sufficient financial independence to separate permanently from their husbands. The \$900 average annual salary paid to female clerks, while still below what most male clerks earned, represented one of the highest salaries available to women in this period. Female public schoolteachers in the District of Columbia earned by comparison between \$400 and \$700 per year, with a few making as much as \$800.<sup>40</sup> A thrifty woman could live respectably, but not luxuriously, on her government salary. To women trapped in unhappy marriages, federal employment held out the possibility of self-support and the option of separation or divorce. Twenty-four-year-old Charlotte Cross, for example, applied in 1866 for a job in the Treasury Department. Her husband had joined the army in 1863, and she had spent the war years teaching school in Buffalo, New York. When he returned at the end of the war, she found he had changed: "Warm-hearted, social, and easily influenced he proved too susceptible to the temptations and many allurements of camp life, and like many of our brave and noble soldiers yielded to the demon intemperance, rendering him unfit for work, for society, and too soon unworthy of a wife's care, forgiveness, or endurance." She decided to leave "home, friends, position and occupation to rid myself of him. . . . I have become fully convinced that while I live with him I shall have him to support, and this I can never think my duty. I should feel unworthy the name of woman, to support a husband who is able and capable to support himself and wife, and shall never do so, even though I should come to beggary, no never." Cross journeyed to Washington where she began a fifteen-year stint as a government clerk.<sup>41</sup> In a variety of circumstances married women thus chose to enter the federal labor force. Marriage did not necessarily constitute the end of a middle-class woman's wage-earning experience in the nineteenth century.

Whether married, single, or widowed, middle-class women risked the potential opprobrium of society when they became government clerks. The ideology of separate sexual spheres, which had developed in the first half of the nineteenth century, dictated a specific, limited role for native, respectable, middle-class women. Woman's sphere revolved around her home. Her primary responsibilities were to care for the physical, moral, and religious needs of her family and to make her home a safe, quiet, Christian refuge from the competitive, aggressive, public world. The job of teacher, seen as an extension of

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Matthia Martin, John G. Rinehard, A. W. Thurman, and Joseph Olds to Joseph Outhwaite, Sept. 27, 1893, file 1890-3366, and Emily Cilley to Robert Porter, Dec. 10, 1889, file 1890-280, Applications and Appointments Files, Appointments Division, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior.

<sup>40</sup> Board of Trustees of the District of Columbia, *Third Report: 1876-1877* (Washington, 1877), 28-31, 174-80.

<sup>41</sup> Charlotte Cross to Capt. Johnson, Feb. 4, 1868, file of Charlotte Cross, Applications and Recommendations, Records of the Division of Appointments, General Records of the Department of the Treasury.

women's natural domestic role, was by the late 1830s considered an acceptable occupation for genteel, unmarried women who did not yet have children of their own. By the post-Civil War era this domestic ideology allowed women to participate in certain other public arenas, such as the church, charity or settlement house work, and moral reform. Respectable middle-class women were warned, however, not to venture beyond the household, classroom, or church.<sup>42</sup>

The women who became government clerks had imbibed these values and had tried to conform to these standards. Prior to government employment many had engaged in other, more acceptable occupations. A large number had previously taught school, but had found the wages inadequate. At the age of eighteen Rosalie Mace left home to accept a teaching job in a private seminary. Within a year she applied for a federal job saying that the school had paid her such a meager salary that she found herself "unable to do more than pay my expenses." She needed higher wages in order to help her ailing father support the family.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, married women and widows had taken in boarders, thus remaining safely within the domestic sphere while attempting simultaneously to earn some money. This too, however, proved an unstable livelihood. Fanny Smith, a widow with three daughters, wrote in 1880: "I have been treated so badly by [boarders] going off without paying that I had to give it up and am now in debt with no means of getting out except by having employment. My children and myself are in need of actual necessities in the way of clothing."<sup>44</sup> Social class background prohibited these women from seeking employment either in factories or as domestic servants, areas which had by the 1860s become predominantly the domain of working-class, immigrant women.<sup>45</sup> Having exhausted the limited options, middle-class women hazarded society's disapproval and ventured into the public sphere as government clerks.

Societal attitudes confirmed many women's worst fears. Almost immediately after the Treasury Department hired its first female office workers in 1862, rumors began to fly about the immoral women in the departments in Washington. Allegations of immorality derived partly from the fact that in these offices men and women worked in close physical proximity, a situation unlike other middle-class work experiences. In his 1869 book *The Sights and Secrets of the National Capital*, John B. Ellis discussed the "treasury courtesans," and although the author admitted that the "black sheep are greatly in the minority," he maintained that they "are still believed to be numerous."<sup>46</sup> Throughout the rest of the century many women in federal offices faced charges (often made by anonymous accusers) of being strumpets, keeping or

<sup>42</sup> See Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*; Sklar, *Catherine Beecher*; Flexner, *Century of Struggle*; O'Neill, *Everyone Was Brave*; Ryan, *Womanhood in America*; Welter, *Dimity Convictions*.

<sup>43</sup> Rosalie Mace to Robert Porter, Sept. 21, 1889, file 1890-1447, Applications and Appointments Files, Appointments Division, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior.

<sup>44</sup> Mrs. Fanny C. Smith to General Francis A. Walker, April 21, 1880, file 1880-1216, *ibid*.

<sup>45</sup> See Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community*; Walkowitz, *Worker City*; Kleinberg, "Woman's Work."

<sup>46</sup> John B. Ellis, *The Sights and Secrets of the National Capital* (Chicago, 1869), 387.

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frequenting houses of ill repute, and engaging in adultery with male coworkers. This image of immoral female clerks persisted in the public mind. According to historian Constance McLaughlin Green, during the Wilson administration city officials attempted to clean up Washington's notorious red-light district. When a well-known madame was called before the judge and asked how she pleaded, she responded: "Your Honor, everybody knows I run the second best house in the city. . . . the Treasury runs the best."<sup>47</sup>

Female clerks realized that in becoming government employees they had crossed the boundary of what many considered to be acceptable behavior. Consequently, nearly every woman's job application contained repeated assurances that the candidate was "of good moral character" and from a "respectable and worthy" family. Besides emphasizing virtue and purity, applicants took great pains to demonstrate the requisite amount of passivity, reserve, and helplessness demanded of well-bred, nineteenth-century ladies. Miss M. L. Burroughs wrote in 1879: "If you only knew how long I've been trying for a position, without success, and still persevering, I am sure you would through pity and compassion help me—It is so embarrassing (at least I find it so) for a girl to be compelled to seek employment alone. I sometimes wish that my eyes could close in silent death."<sup>48</sup> Similarly Martha J. Brooks portrayed herself as a helpless female in her 1890 letter of application: "I . . . battling all alone and failing in strength because of sacrifices too harrassing to mention, fall on my knees today imploring the coveted privilege to work in your great 'bee hive'. . . . Help me! I'll work with a soul of iron to shield my best of good mothers. . . . throw around hungry-hearted, helpless me the wide mantle of your protection."<sup>49</sup> Various factors could account for the continued use of this rhetoric. Statements that echoed the dominant nineteenth-century concept of "true womanhood" may have reflected genuine feelings, or they may have been a means of compensating for an unorthodox, and by definition unwomanly, entry into the public arena. Alternatively, applicants might, with good reason, have felt that a shy, helpless, needy female stood a better chance of getting a job than a coarse, aggressive one. In fact, all these interpretations are probably valid. Women undoubtedly knew which characteristics were most likely to win them jobs, and they were also genuinely concerned for their reputations as moral, upright ladies.

Women clerical workers were products of a culture that defined women as domestic, submissive, and passive, and they had for the most part assimilated these values. They struggled, therefore, to minimize the contradictions between their roles as respectable middle-class wives, daughters, and mothers and their roles as government clerks by presenting clerical work as an extension of domestic responsibilities: they worked to help their families. Many women tried to stretch the domestic ideology as far as possible by claiming that the needs of their families justified even so bold an action as entering government

<sup>47</sup> Constance McLaughlin Green, *Washington: Capital City, 1879-1950* (Princeton, 1963), 168.

<sup>48</sup> M. L. Burroughs to Mr. Clark, March 24, 1879, file 1879-1041, Applications and Appointments Files, Appointments Division, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior.

<sup>49</sup> Martha J. Brooks to Gen. John W. Noble, Sept. 22, 1891, file 1890-1993, *ibid.*





Martha Brooks who in 1890 begged that "helpless me" might be given a position wrote again exactly one year later, but now she used a quite different tone. Complaining bitterly that her salary had been cut from \$900 to \$720 per year, she asked that her former salary be restored. "I feel constrained to believe that you will say I shall have what I justly deserve—for great fire, I know my average and record as far as *correctness*, diligence, conscientiousness, and faithful observance of every regulation in office is concerned is second to none. The comparers pronounce my work good, and I never have a piece brought back to me for correction. I could not send in a soiled or careless sheet, but strive every day to improve on the last."<sup>53</sup> Wilhelmine Smith, after being ranked thirteenth out of 226 men and women competing in the civil service examination, received a temporary \$900 per year position in the Pension Office. Although the appointment lasted only three months, she managed to be reinstated later that year, but at a lower salary. She explained that "returning to the offices, the humiliation to which I was subjected, could only have been endured for the sake of my children."<sup>54</sup>

While much of these women's anger undoubtedly stemmed from their acute need for wages, the case of Elizabeth Stoner shows that egos as well as pocketbooks suffered when a female clerk received unfair treatment. In 1862 Stoner filled one of the first four positions ever offered to a woman in the Treasury Department. She worked for thirty-two years, supporting two invalid sisters during much of this time. In 1894 Stoner lost her job, learning after her dismissal that charges of dereliction had been made about her performance as clerk. She immediately wrote to the secretary of the treasury asking that these charges be removed from her record. "I beg leave to say that I have been misrepresented on my record. . . . As to not attending to the duties of my office when present . . . I did the work assigned me accurately and well and was current and my desk was clear every evening. I was in the room under eight of Mr. Bradley's predecessors—and as far as I know gave satisfaction. . . . I did not know, until a few days ago that my record was the cause of my dismissal. I was told it was long service under Republican influence. . . . I beg most earnestly that my record be re-adjusted, it means so much to me—and I ask it in the name of simple justice."<sup>55</sup> Even with financial concerns no longer relevant, pride in work well done and her reputation as an efficient clerk remained important to Stoner.

The career of Jane M. Seavey offers an excellent example of the way in which the older values associated with nineteenth-century domesticity continued alongside new attitudes produced by the work experiences. When the Civil War broke out, Seavey was thirty-two years old and teaching in a small woman's college in a "secessionist neighborhood" in Tennessee. She desired to leave immediately for the North, "but the pecuniary embarrassment of

<sup>53</sup> Martha J. Brooks to John W. Noble, Sept. 26, 1892, file 1890-1993, *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Mrs. W. M. Easby Smith to C. Schurz, Feb. 1, 1881, file 1880-262, *ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Stoner to Mr. Van Sanden, Oct. 26, 1894, file of Elizabeth Stoner, Applications and Recommendations, Records of the Division of Appointments, General Records of the Department of the Treasury.

those who had charge of my means prevented me." The war and Union blockade contributed to the collapse of the college, and with it Seavey's source of income. In 1862 she finally arrived in Boston but found herself "entirely without the means of support, dependent on the kindness of friends, and most keenly feel[ing] the necessity of obtaining remunerative employment."<sup>56</sup>

In January 1863 Seavey received an appointment in the Internal Revenue Bureau at \$600 per year. Within six months she had been put in charge of the recording room within the bureau and wrote complaining that the "duties . . . have become more than one person can faithfully perform." She requested that a friend be appointed assistant superintendent. Furthermore she asserted that her own work had become "arduous and exceedingly responsible, yet the salary had [remained] only that of a recording clerk." She therefore requested that her wages be increased to \$1,200 per year and that her assistant be paid \$1,000.<sup>57</sup> Seavey remained in the Internal Revenue Bureau for thirty-one years during which time she was promoted to the highest classified clerkship, a \$1,800 per year position. During her years in office Seavey introduced a new system of organizing the work in her section, a method of filing adopted throughout the Treasury Department and used as a model for other agencies as well.

In 1894 Seavey lost her job, ostensibly because of a change in the appropriations for her office. Some evidence suggests, however, that complaints regarding her "domineering" and "overbearing" behavior might have caused her to be discharged. Seavey's dismissal bought protests from numerous people, including former Treasury officials, and four years later she was reinstated at a salary of \$1,200. It is significant that these protests stressed not only her excellent record as an employee, but also the fact that she had over the years contributed "substantial assistance to some of her relatives who still look to her for assistance," and that consequently she is "currently without the means of support."<sup>58</sup> In 1906 Seavey still worked in the department, but the commissioner of internal revenue asked that her salary be reduced to \$1,000. He insisted that this recommendation was "made upon the request of Miss Seavey and at her earnest desire. She feels that, while her health is reasonably good and she is still able to perform her official duties in a creditable manner, yet at her advanced age (78) she cannot handle the same class of work nor accomplish as much as when she was in her prime. She therefore wishes that some one younger than she, in years and service, performing a higher and better class of work, should receive the compensation accorded her. Miss Seavey has been and still is a valued and honored clerk in this bureau."<sup>59</sup>

Although Seavey's career was undoubtedly longer and more successful than that of most female clerks during the late nineteenth century, it mirrored the experiences and attitudes of many of her co-workers. Her class background and

<sup>56</sup> J. M. Seavey to Joseph Holt, Oct. 11, 1862, file of Jane M. Seavey, *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> J. M. Seavey to J. J. Lewis, June 8, 1863, *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Horatio King to John G. Carlisle, Dec. 3, 1894, *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> John M. Yerkes to Sec. of the Treasury, May 3, 1906, *ibid.*

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the conditions under which she entered government employ were typical. Once in the job she very quickly acquired managerial and clerical skills and simultaneously became dedicated, ambitious, and proud of her work. Nevertheless, at the end of her long and successful career, she still displayed the altruism and reserve reminiscent of the older nineteenth-century standards of female virtue.

What began for many women as a desperate attempt to preserve their families' social and economic positions within the middle class became the beginnings of new, unplanned careers as government clerks. As members of the middle class, these women had been schooled in traditional nineteenth-century norms which closely circumscribed proper female behavior. Most had ventured no further from the domestic sphere than its extension, the classroom. Yet, when the need arose, women of this class left that sphere and entered the public, wage-earning world. In many cases, women worked as clerks for only a year or two; in other instances careers in government offices lasted a decade or more.

As important as the time spent in offices was the transformation in attitudes that even a short experience as a clerical worker could begin to effect. In the last half of the nineteenth century these attitudes did not so much displace as merge and coexist with the women's previous values. The strong tenets of domesticity with which these women had been imbued were not discarded in a few short years. Even at their most militant, women clerks often couched their demands in terms that reflected the old views of female propriety: Stoner "begged" and did not "insist" that her thirty-year record as an excellent clerk be set straight. Nevertheless women clerks began to embrace a new self-image. However strongly influenced by the prevailing notion that genteel, respectable women should remain passive, dependent, and helpless, they soon began to recognize their ability to succeed in what had previously been a man's world. While continuing to hold fast to their positions as proper, respectable middle-class ladies, they simultaneously developed and asserted an important sense of themselves as competent, dedicated, resourceful workers.