

AROUND 1900, most Black women needed to work to survive, but rigid racial hierarchies limited their options. Nearly 40 percent of the Black women living in Newburyport worked as domestic servants. They often toiled 12 to 18 hours a day and were on-call seven days a week raising children, cleaning, and cooking. Servants wore white, high-collared, long-sleeved dresses as uniforms so their role was immediately recognizable.



Caroline Cottrell and Gayden Morrill c. 1895
Courtesy of the Museum of Old Newbury

Employers often said their live-in servants were “part of the family.” For many workers, however, the bond was complicated, and turnover was common. Frequent articles in the local newspaper complained about the problem of finding enough women to fill these roles, but did not mention the servants’ long hours, low pay, dependence, and isolation.

Caroline C. Cottrell (1856–1918) was born into slavery in North Carolina and freed after the Civil War. Later, her parents moved the family to Chattanooga, Tennessee, where she likely met Mary R. Hamilton, future wife of banker Frank F. Morrill. Cottrell’s name is listed as a witness on their 1884 marriage certificate. After the Morrills settled in Newburyport, Cottrell joined them as their live-in servant at 209 High Street. She worked for the family for decades and helped raise their only child, Gayden W. Morrill, who later became Newburyport’s mayor.

Although domestic work often fractured servants’ home lives and family ties, Caroline was able to maintain connections with her relatives down south. Caroline mailed a postcard to her niece and namesake Carrie in Chattanooga in 1913 that subsequent generations kept tucked inside the family bible. Caroline also sent home a photo of herself in Newburyport with Irish-born servant Maggie Reardon, whom she described as her best friend.

On her 62nd birthday, Caroline died in Newburyport of stomach cancer. The pastor of the old Baptist Church, which is located up Green Street, conducted the funeral service, and she was buried in the Morrill family cemetery plot in nearby Amesbury. Frank Morrill traveled to Chattanooga to deliver her two trunks of possessions and life savings to her brother Albert. She had accumulated over \$2,500 in U.S. Liberty War Bonds – the equivalent of more than \$50,000 today, a remarkable sum for a servant to save and pass on to her own family.

Text by Geordie Vining, Kabria Baumgartner, Cyd Raschke, and Kristen Fehlhaber (2023)

Remembering the Women Who Raised America

In the early 20th century, hundreds of Black and immigrant women lived and worked as domestic servants in the homes of Newburyport’s wealthy families, yet their stories were rarely preserved or told. Here, we recognize Newburyport resident Caroline C. Cottrell.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Caroline's signature in a book
Courtesy of Jim A. Morrill

Caroline C. Cottrell on back porch of Morrill house at 209 High Street
Courtesy of the Museum of Old Newbury and Caroline's great-grandnephew John N. Miller

1913 postcard from Caroline to niece Carrie
Courtesy of John N. Miller

BACKGROUND IMAGE:
Caroline C. Cottrell inside the Morrill house
Courtesy of the Museum of Old Newbury