



EMILY BINGHAM, PH.D.

## SEEING THE HELP Perspectives on the History and Culture of Domestic Service in the United States

Drawing from a popular Centre College course and significant recent scholarship on domestic workers and employers across three centuries, this year's Ormsby lectures highlight a sensitive and dynamic relationship in America's social history. Emily Bingham attributes the success of Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* (2009) and its subsequent film adaptation as well as the BBC's *Downton Abbey* to a fascination with power relationships between workers and employers in domestic settings. The home, grand or modest, resonates for us all and exists in tension with our notions of work. Domestic service's close involvement with exploitative class and racial systems produced generations of memories, some painful, many rich. The great number of Americans who have either performed or benefited from such labor and its ongoing place in society make it ripe for discussion.

"Seeing the Help" opens chapters in the American experience from eighteenth-century household production, to the consuming, middle class household, to the outsourcing of what was once paid domestic work. Emily Dickinson

and her Irish maid Margaret Maher, Brutus Clay's Bourbon County slave hiring system, striking laundresses in World's Fair Atlanta, and Japanese Issei and their employers in California, and Norman Lear's sitcom, *The Jeffersons*, and the needs of aging Americans for care feature in a story reaching into the twenty-first century.

Participants are asked to watch *The Help* (2011, dir. Tate Taylor) in advance. It will serve as a reference point throughout the series.

Emily Bingham is an independent historian whose book, *Mordecai: An Early American Family* tells the story of three generations from the Revolution to the Civil War. She received her B.A. from Harvard and her Ph.D. from University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She writes and teaches in Louisville.

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Photo of domestic workers in 1920's Louisville.

Real Life: Louisville in the twenties. Lesy, Michael. New York: Pantheon Books, 157.