

*“Housekeeping ain’t no joke ...”*

# *Victorian Huswifery with the Alcotts*

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## Introductory remarks

Allow me to introduce myself: my name is Susan Bailey. I am a lifelong Massachusetts resident and I’ve lived in Grafton for thirteen years. I have been passionate about Louisa May Alcott and her family since I was a child. Attracted to them as historical figures, I read every biography I could get my hands on. I did not start reading Alcott’s books until a few years ago, beginning with *Hospital Sketches* (a semi-fictional account of her Civil War nursing experience) and of course, *Little Women*, based on her family: Bronson (Mr. March), Abigail (Marmee), and her sisters, Anna (Meg), Lizzie (Beth), May (Amy) and Louisa herself (Jo).

Seven and a half years ago, I took this interest to the internet in the hopes of connecting with other Alcott enthusiasts; thus was born the “Louisa May Alcott is My Passion” blog. As a result of this effort I have met many wonderful fans, aficionados, teachers, scholars and authors, several of whom are now good friends. We share our love for the Alcotts through the blog and in lively conversations on Facebook. Each summer many of us gather from around the world at Louisa May Alcott’s Orchard House in Concord for the Summer Conversational Series. We characterize it as a week-long summer camp – the highlight of the season.

An unexpected by-product of this blog was my becoming an author. I am privileged to have written two books both published in 2015. One is a spiritual memoir about loss, grief and transformation which includes a chapter on Alcott’s influence on my life, known as *River of Grace*. The other is a devotional called *Louisa May Alcott Illuminated by The Message* in which I show the spiritual dimension of her writings. I am now working on a biography of Elizabeth Sewall Alcott, “Beth March” of *Little Women*. No major work has ever been devoted to this quiet and mysterious sister who died so young. I mean to prove that even the lives of the quiet and virtuous can be quite fascinating.

## About this topic

An offshoot of my five years of research into this book is the topic of today’s presentation – **Victorian Huswifery with the Alcotts**. As you will see, this family provides a unique opportunity to learn of domestic life in New England during the Victorian era. Many factors in the nineteenth century including the westward expansion and the Civil War caused much change in domestic life but none more than The Industrial Revolution. This period spawned an ideology of separate spheres whereby men inhabited the public sphere of politics, commerce and law while women remained in the private sphere of home and family.<sup>1</sup> As you will see, these roles were often blurred and even reversed as the Alcott family struggled with chronic poverty due to the philosophical beliefs of the parents. And while Louisa May Alcott did emerge in the male role of breadwinner due to the phenomenal success of her book *Little Women*, she too would embrace the feminine role all the while granting that role stature and dignity in her writing.

As a side note, I will not be including childcare in this discussion as it is a subject worthy of its own presentation.

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia “Separate Spheres,” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Separate\\_spheres](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Separate_spheres)

## Family beginnings

Louisa May Alcott's immediate family spanned nearly the entire nineteenth century. Her father, Amos Bronson Alcott was born in 1799 in Wolcott, CT while her mother, Abigail May was born in Boston in 1800. She died in 1877 and he in 1888, just two days before Louisa's passing. Bronson grew up poor on a farm in a small, rural town while Abigail was raised by a prominent and wealthy Boston family.

During their lifetime the family moved thirty times before settling in Concord at Orchard House where they would then live for twenty years. The last year of Mrs. Alcott's life set again in motion the family's nomadic predilection, moving back and forth between Orchard House, eldest daughter Anna's home (the former Thoreau house on Main Street in Concord) and Louisa's townhouse in Louisburg Square on Beacon Hill.

The family lived for many years in poverty due to Mr. Alcott's inability and/or refusal to earn a living wage; thanks to Louisa's commercial success as an author, their lives ended in wealth. They lived in every imaginable circumstance, from boarding houses to small antique farmhouses sometimes in the middle of nowhere. While in Boston between 1848 and 1855 they alternated between tenement slums in the winter and mansions vacated by rich relations in the summer. After two years in the New Hampshire village of Walpole, the family finally settled at Orchard House in 1858. Now a museum, it contains most of their possessions, looking much as it did when they dwelled within it. These varied experiences grant us views of domestic life from just about every angle.

## At the home of Amos Bronson Alcott

At the beginning of the 19th century the birthplace of Amos Bronson Alcott still resembled a pioneer settlement. To be self-sustaining was a matter of survival in these rural agricultural communities.

Biographer Odell Shepherd describes the family's daily activities:

*"They ground their own corn at the gristmill ... they spun, wove, dyed, and fashioned their own clothing. They made what simple tools they needed for the workshop, hearth, and field."*<sup>2</sup>

The Connecticut landscape consisted of hills and valleys with rocky soil to plow. Although farming was difficult, the family grew their own food. The skills that Bronson acquired while growing up would serve him well over his lifetime.

### *The colonial hearth*

The layout of Alcott's boyhood home was typical for a farmer's house at the turn of the century with the kitchen taking up half the space. According to Susan Strasser, author of *Never Done: The History of American Housework*, the kitchen would be the center of the house, having the largest hearth which was the only source of heat. Homes such as Bronson's would have a workshop and perhaps a bedroom, with a loft for the children. Kitchen hearths were built to be wider and deeper than the average fireplace in order to accommodate pots, reflector ovens and joints. This hearth would dominate a woman's daily life with constant tending to make sure the fire was kept burning; later she would clean out the ashes and wash down the brick. Pots were moved around to adjust the heat. At mealtimes, all would gather in this room to enjoy the fruits of her labor.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Odell Shepherd, *Pedlar's Progress The Life of Bronson Alcott* (Little, Brown and Company, 1937), 5-6

<sup>3</sup> Susan Strasser, *Never Done The History of American Housework* (Holt paperbacks, 2000), 33

Bronson Alcott recalls his parents working all day long and into the night even after the children went to bed in the loft. His mother would weave or spin while her son drew his letters on the floor in charcoal.<sup>4</sup> There was little time for play or for school although Bronson did attend. As children were needed for the labor of the farm, school attendance was spotty during certain seasons.<sup>5</sup> Bronson and his cousin William took to teaching themselves through their reading. Eventually Bronson would develop his own progressive ideas on education which would culminate with his Temple School in Boston in the 1830s.

## Abba's beginnings

By contrast, Abigail May, daughter of Colonel Joseph May, was born in a large frame house on Milk Street in Boston overlooking the harbor. As the family was wealthy, they employed servants.<sup>6</sup> As preparation for marriage and motherhood "Abba" was schooled at home in literature, music, languages and sewing – those things deemed necessary for a woman's education at the turn of the century. However she was encouraged to read freely as the house contained a fine library. Because of her close relationship with brother Samuel Joseph, she was able to read and discuss with him much of what he studied at Harvard University.

The family soon moved a few blocks over to Federal Court which is now the financial district of Boston. The home was generous in proportion and landscaped with a large garden and orchards. Boston, not yet a metropolis, resembled a pretty country town. Many residents farmed and cows grazed on the Boston Common until the 1830s.<sup>7</sup> Near the State House stood the grand mansion of Abba's uncle, John Hancock.

Her father Joseph May was a businessman who acquired a great deal of wealth only to lose it due to the actions of his business partner. In the aftermath Colonel May vowed never again to aspire to wealth but instead, to duty. He was a model (along with Bronson Alcott) for Mr. March in *Little Women* who also lost his fortune and taught his girls to deny themselves in service to others.<sup>8</sup> But unlike the Marches, the Mays were not poor. One Federal Court, although simple, was a hospitable home with many comforts.<sup>9</sup>

Homes such as One Federal Court had multiple fireplaces but the kitchen hearth would still be the largest. Hearths were not terribly efficient with heat (with it barely radiating beyond the hearth itself). In order to capture the heat, additional tools were required for various kinds of cooking. One would use a reflector oven or "roasting kitchen" (a boxlike utensil on legs) to roast birds. A Dutch oven would be used for baking rolls and biscuits; this oven had the appearance of a strong covered iron kettle on legs around which the fuel (wood or coal) was placed.<sup>10</sup>

These devices along with others were based upon Benjamin Franklin's original design of the Pennsylvania oven in 1742. His invention was the first to increase the efficiency of the fuel by using the heat that would normally go up the chimney. Strasser writes,

*"Smoke and combustion gases passed through flues that heated the plates, which in turn radiated heat into the room. Concentrated in the small space, the fire used all the air that entered the stove, producing a hotter and more efficient flame."*<sup>11</sup>

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4 Pedlar's Progress, 5-6

5 Ibid, 7

6 Eve Laplante, *Marmee and Louisa The Untold Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Mother* (Simon and Schuster; Reprint edition, 2013), 7

7 *Marmee and Louisa*, 11

8 Ibid, 15

9 Ibid, 15-16

10 *Never Done*, 35

11 Ibid, 53

Eventually homes would have large cast iron stoves built into their hearths. Even with such stoves, the job of tending the fire would still be an enormous one.

The work involved would have been essentially the same for Bronson Alcott's rural farm as it would be for Abigail May's fine Boston home; the difference would be in who performed the tasks – the family or the servants.

### *Cooking on the hearth*

Strasser describes the process of cooking in the hearth:

*“Only constant fire tending—poking, shifting logs, and adding wood—could keep a hot fire going in brick ovens and fireplaces. Wood had to be felled, chopped, and carried into the house; usually men and boys cut the trees down, but much chopping and wood hauling was woman's work as well. The job of cooking on those fires was hot and dangerous. Despite long-handled utensils, cooks had to bend and kneel and reach into the flames. Burning cinders flew from unscreened kitchen fires, skin and clothing scorched at the grate, and small children were seldom safe in their own homes. In the summer, heat from the fireplace could be nearly intolerable.”<sup>12</sup>*

Family writings bear witness to the scar from a serious burn on Abba's right hand which prevented the otherwise musically talented girl from playing the piano. Louisa's youngest sister Abbie May at twelve complained in her journal of a burn on her finger which made it difficult to write on that particular day.<sup>13</sup>

### **Marriage, family and work**

Abba and Bronson Alcott were married on May 23, 1830 after a three year courtship. They began their lives in Boston but soon moved to Pennsylvania where Bronson started a series of schools that inevitably failed; first in Georgetown where Louisa and older sister Anna were born and then in Philadelphia. They came back to Boston in 1834 where Bronson established his most successful venture, the Temple School. With the two girls ages 3 and 20 months, the family set up housekeeping in a boarding house not far from Abba's girlhood home and four blocks from the Masonic Temple where the school was housed. The family was able to employ a servant with the help of Colonel May.<sup>14</sup>

### *The boarding house option*

Choosing to board was an affordable option for single women and the genteel, finding homelike atmospheres and good cooking.<sup>15</sup> Living in a boarding house would decrease the amount of housework as meals would be taken in a communal dining room. Boarding houses also offered companionship and community as seen in *Little Women* with Jo's stay in New York. In chapter 33 Jo, who was employed as a governess at Mrs. Kirke's boarding house wrote home to Marmee and Beth that she had a “funny little sky parlor” and that she could take her meals with the children or at the “great table,” if she so chose. She and Professor Bhaer met at this boarding house and they married towards the end of the book. Except for the part about Mr. Bhaer, Louisa was recounting her own experience in Boston at Mrs. Reed's in a sky parlor much like Jo's.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 36

<sup>13</sup> *Marmee and Louisa*, 21; May Alcott Nieriker Journal September 1852-July 1863, MS Am 1817 (56), Houghton Library at Harvard University, 9

<sup>14</sup> *Marmee and Louisa*, 69

<sup>15</sup> *Never Done*, 149

<sup>16</sup> Louisa May Alcott (author); Joel Myerson (editor), Daniel Shealy (editor), Madeleine . Stern (associate editor), *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott* (University of Georgia Press, 1997), 79

## From urban to rural – “Concordia”

The Alcotts’ pattern of nomadic living began early. Even during Bronson’s success with the school, the family moved four times between 1834 and 1835, downsizing each time due to money troubles caused by spending far more than what they earned.<sup>17</sup> The colossal failure of the Temple School due to Bronson’s progressive educational techniques forced the family to flee Boston and remove to Concord in 1840.<sup>18</sup> This signaled a change from urban to rural living, a first for Abba. With his farming skills Bronson could provide food for the family, making them more self-sufficient. Still they could not make ends meet. Despite auctioning off the furniture and fine library of the school, the Alcotts left Boston with a debt of six thousand dollars.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Bronson’s reputation was in tatters making it impossible for him to be employed as a teacher. A rigid adherence to his principle of not earning money for its own sake (even if it was to provide for the family) placed that responsibility on Abba and eventually, their daughters. As employment prospects were limited for women, it caused an endless cycle of poverty for the family that lasted for nearly thirty years, finally to be relieved when Louisa took over as breadwinner.

Despite Bronson’s skills as a farmer, food choices and quantity were greatly limited, not only because of poverty but also because of their strict adherence to a vegan diet. As followers of Sylvester Graham, they abstained from meat, coffee, tea, and oftentimes, dairy. Living in a small rented cottage, they could preserve some fruits and vegetables in a root cellar. Their meals consisted of coarse brown bread, apples, squash and water.<sup>20</sup> Living in the country increased the workload especially now that a servant was no longer made available to them: wood needed to be chopped to keep the fire going, and water pumped and carried frequently into the house.<sup>21</sup> Abba had to prepare the meals over the open hearth while the older girls assisted with dish washing and table setting. Hand-me-downs from relations were remade into workable clothing. Anna, age 8, often tended the new baby Abbie May.

Necessities were bought on credit from local merchants while Abba continued to ask for assistance from her relatives and friends. Yet despite their own needs they continued to give away food and fuel to needy neighbors.

## Fruitlands

In 1843 Bronson along with English Transcendentalist Charles Lane decided to create a utopian society. A trend among reformers of the period, Brook Farm in West Roxbury was the most successful of these ventures. The Alcotts along with Lane and his young son William moved into a remote and ramshackle farmhouse in Harvard, MA. Nestled in a deep valley overlooking Mts. Monadnock and Wachusett, the community, dubbed a “consociate family” by Alcott and Lane, was called “Fruitlands.”

It was here where the Alcotts experienced the most primitive of living conditions. Rules were strict regarding food and dress. Along with adherence to the Graham diet, nothing could be taken from animals such as sheep’s wool, milk from the cow or eggs from chickens. Passionate in the cause of abolition, the small community vowed to use nothing produced by slave labor. Thus, the only acceptable material for clothing was linen (a poor choice against the winter elements). Because they arrived late in the planting season it is likely the linen was obtained from a merchant. Flax however was to be planted with the idea that fibers would be extracted and spun into cloth.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Marmee and Louisa*, 79, 84

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 93

<sup>19</sup> Harriet Reisen, *Louisa May Alcott The Woman Behind Little Women* (Henry Holt and Co., 2009), 44

<sup>20</sup> Martha Saxton, *Louisa May Alcott A Modern Biography* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 114, 119

<sup>21</sup> *Marmee and Louisa*, 86

<sup>22</sup> Wikipedia “Fruitlands (transcendental center)” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fruitlands\\_\(transcendental\\_center\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fruitlands_(transcendental_center))

Light was to be produced by candles made by hand likely using bayberry as opposed to tallow which involved animal fat. Because of Mrs. Alcott's poor eyesight, whale oil was eventually permitted for lanterns so that she could do her mending at night.

At its peak Fruitlands boasted thirteen members including the Alcotts and Lanes, but there was only one "beast of burden," as Abba dubbed herself.<sup>23</sup> She was responsible for all of the housework (although Bronson did assist at times with preparing their very plain meals). Between cleaning the ash from the hearths, replenishing the wood, tending the fires, cooking and baking, cleaning, laundry and mending clothes at night, her work was endless. Anna, then twelve, and Louisa, ten, assisted their mother by clearing the table, washing dishes, shelling peas, sewing, helping with the laundry, and ironing. During playtime they gathered berries. Anna looked after two-year-old Abbie May and assisted Mr. Lane with teaching the younger children.

### *Water needs*

Cooking, dishwashing, laundry and daily cold baths (another proponent of the Graham regimen) required vast quantities of water. At Fruitlands it had to be pumped by hand from a well and then hauled into the house, only to be hauled back out again and disposed of when the job was done. Filling, carrying and disposing of buckets of water required much physical strength and endurance. While it was hard in the summer heat, it was even more difficult in the winter when the ice had to be cracked to access the water.<sup>24</sup>

### *Laundry*

Doing laundry was an all-day affair. As a result most families (including the poor) hired a laundress who would either work in cooperation with the family or perform the task in her own home; this was recommended by the leading expert on housework in the day, Catherine Beecher (older sister to Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*).<sup>25</sup> Her many writings on "domestic economy" resulted in a book which she and her sister co-wrote called *The American Woman's Home*. Abba took Beecher's advice and employed such a woman to work with her and the girls at Fruitlands.<sup>26</sup>

Susan Strasser describes the work involved:

*"Without running water, gas, or electricity, even the most simplified hand-laundry process consumed staggering amounts of time and labor. One wash, one boiling, and one rinse used about fifty gallons of water – or four hundred pounds – which had to be moved from pump or well or faucet to stove and tub, in buckets and wash boilers that might weigh as much as forty or fifty pounds. Rubbing, wringing, and lifting water-laden clothes and linens ... wearied women's arms and wrists and exposed them to caustic substances. They lugged weighty tubs and baskets full of wet laundry outside, picked up each article, hung it on the line, and returned to take it all down; they ironed by heating several irons on the stove and alternating them as they cooled, never straying far from the hot stove."*<sup>27</sup>

As there was no stove at Fruitlands, irons (placed on trivets so that they could be removed safely) had to be heated close to the fire inside of the hearth.

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<sup>23</sup> John Matteson, *Eden's Outcasts The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father* (W. W. Norton & Company; Reprint edition, 2008)

<sup>24</sup> *Never Done*, 86-87

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 105

<sup>26</sup> Clara Endicott Sears, *Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915), 92

<sup>27</sup> *Never Done*, 105

Abba not only had her household duties but she helped out in the fields as well. Alcott and Lane were often away trying to recruit new members; during one of those times in September Abba and the girls gathered the grain into the barn without the help of animals to prevent it from being destroyed by inclement weather.<sup>28</sup>

Seven months into the experiment, Fruitlands was abandoned. In December of 1843 every member had left except the Alcotts and the Lanes. Meanwhile Bronson and Charles were involved in a power struggle which threatened the Alcotts' marriage. During the particularly severe winter it became obvious to Abba that the family would starve if they remained and warned Bronson that she would leave with the girls along with the furniture. Bronson reluctantly agreed to go with them rather than with Lane to the nearby Shaker community (which separated the men from the women and children from their parents).

## Back to Concord – the years at Hillside

After a year of recovery in nearby Still River the family purchased their first home thanks to Mrs. Alcott's inheritance from her father's estate along with help from Ralph Waldo Emerson. They were to live in Concord for three years, characterized by Louisa as the happiest time of her life.<sup>29</sup> The girls were 14, 13, 10 and 5. Bronson tended an extensive garden, assisted by the girls. They continued to be home schooled by their father and then by Sophia Foord, who also taught the Emerson children.

### *References and episodes in Little Women*

Much of part one of *Little Women* was taken from the family's time at Hillside (now known as The Wayside). Louisa was best known for taking episodes from real life and fashioning them into authentic stories that resonated with her audience. The amusing domestic escapades of Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy along with their servant Hannah would be something with which readers would be familiar.

In chapter 11, Louisa describes the attempts by Jo and Meg to prepare meals; the first was breakfast for their mother. It was series of blunders by very inexperienced cooks! Breakfast consisted of bitter boiled tea, a scorched omelet and biscuits speckled with baking soda; Mrs. March graciously thanked them and then proceeded to throw out the breakfast after her daughters left.

Dinner, served at the noon hour (and with invited guests) was even more of a mess. Between letting the fire go out, buying "bargain" food at the market (old vegetables, tart strawberries not yet ripened and a lobster that was too small), letting the cream sour by failing to refrigerate it, and salting rather than sugaring the strawberries, Jo's efforts proved disastrous. She and Meg came to understand their servant Hannah's saying that "Housekeeping ain't no joke." Laurie however lightened the mood, helping the girls to find the humor in the situation.

Meg and Jo were sixteen and fifteen respectively when these cooking mishaps occurred. It demonstrated their lack of experience with the kitchen, possibly because the March family had once been wealthy, plus the fact that they had Hannah (with Beth as help mate). In addition, Meg and Jo worked outside of the home to earn much-needed money.

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<sup>28</sup> *Marmee and Louisa*, 120-121

<sup>29</sup> *Louisa May Alcott The Woman Behind Little Women*, 90

## Domestic apprenticeship

In real life, the Alcott sisters were trained in domestic work far earlier and better than their fictional counterparts. We have already seen how Anna and Louisa assisted their mother at Fruitlands. Ten-year-old Lizzie's diary, written with great precision, details the many chores she performed during her apprenticeship. They included shelling beans, cleaning the knives (to prevent rusting), washing the dishes, sweeping, washing the hearth, sewing and tidying up her mother's chamber. She also worked side by side with her father in the garden.<sup>30</sup>

### *Washing dishes*

Like laundry, washing dishes involved a lot of water; Catherine Beecher provided complete directions in her book. The following was needed:

*"A swab, two of three towels, three dishclothes (for those progressively dirtier loads), two large tin tubs (one for washing, one for rinsing), a 'large old ... [tray] on which to drain the dishes,' a soap dish, hard soap, a slop pail, and two water pails constituted a 'full supply of conveniences.'"*<sup>31</sup>

By the mid 1840s when the Alcotts lived in Concord, soap could have been procured from a merchant but at the turn of the century it was made using waste grease and lye manufactured from ashes. Dishes were scraped, washed with soap, rinsed, wiped and put away. The nicer articles were washed first followed by the greasier dishes and utensils, and finally by the pots and pans. Fresh water had to be added to each load.<sup>32</sup>

Lizzie mentioned washing the dishes numerous times in her journal. Considering the harsh nature of the soap, one could imagine her quietly complaining about her chapped hands and how that made it difficult to practice the piano, just like her alter ego, Beth.

At least Bronson's innovations lessened the load of hauling water. After attaching one half of a free-standing cottage on the property to the kitchen he dug a well and installed a pump allowing water to be brought through a trap door right into the kitchen.<sup>33</sup> He also constructed an innovative shower with a system of pulleys located near the well; even Lizzie could operate it by herself.<sup>34</sup>

Lizzie continued her cooking apprenticeship later in Boston with her Grandmother Alcott when she was fifteen.<sup>35</sup> She became an accomplished cook and baker as indicated by appreciative family members.<sup>36</sup> With so little to work with as a result of the Graham diet and poverty, she was creative indeed. In chapter 10 Louisa depicted her sister's talents in a telling story submitted by Beth for the sisters' family newspaper the *Pickwick Portfolio*, summarizing the love and care that she put into food preparation for her family; it is titled "The History of a Squash:"

*"Once upon a time a farmer planted a little seed in his garden, and after a while it sprouted and became a vine and bore many squashes. One day in October, when they were ripe, he picked one and took it to market. A gorceman bought and put it in his shop. That same morning, a little girl in a brown hat and blue dress, with a round face and snub nose, went and bought it for her mother. She lugged it home, cut it up, and boiled it in the big pot, mashed some of it, with salt and butter, for dinner. And to the rest she added a pint of milk, two eggs, four spoons of sugar, nutmeg, and some crackers, put it in a deep dish, and baked it till it was brown and nice, and next day it was eaten by a family named March."*<sup>37</sup>

<sup>30</sup> unpublished diary of Elizabeth Sewall Alcott, Houghton Library at Harvard University, The Papers of Amos Bronson Alcott MS Am 1130.9 (25-27)

<sup>31</sup> *Never Done*, 89

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>33</sup> *Louisa May Alcott The Woman Behind Little Women*, 91

<sup>34</sup> Abigail May Alcott to Samuel Joseph May, June 8, 1845, MS Am 1130.9 (25), Houghton Library at Harvard University

<sup>35</sup> Abigail May Alcott to Samuel Joseph May, February 29, 1852, MS Am 1130.9 (25), Houghton Library at Harvard University

<sup>36</sup> *The Letters of Louisa May Alcott*, 24

<sup>37</sup> Louisa May Alcott (author); Daniel Shealy (editor) *Little Women: An Annotated Edition* (Belknap Press; Annotated edition, 2013), 155

In chapter 16, the girls describe the work they did around the house in letters to Marmee who was away in Washington caring for their sick father. Even though the girls were not well-trained in the kitchen, they did well with sewing, laundry and caring for the hearth. Meg taught Amy how to make button-holes. Beth mopped the floor, aired the rooms and wound the clock daily. Her most important job was the care of the fire holder. In an annotated version of *Little Women* editor Daniel Shealy explains the purpose of the fire holder and why thirteen-year-old Beth's conscientiousness was so important:

*"Beth is probably referring to a fire-starter holder also called a fire starter pot, which had been in use since colonial days. The holder was usually a cast iron or brass pot that held a flammable liquid, most likely kerosene in the 1860s. A pumice wand was left to soak in the pot, and then when it was time to start a fire the pumice was lit and held to the kindling. It was a safer and more convenient way to light the fire than using small matches. Since the kerosene was highly flammable it was important that Beth remembered to keep the holders closed."*<sup>38</sup>

Jo helps Hannah with the laundry and writes a poem:

#### A Song from the Suds

Queen of my tub, I merrily sing,  
While the white foam rises high,  
And sturdily wash and rinse and wring,  
And fasten the clothes to dry;  
Then out in the free fresh air they swing,  
Under the sunny sky.

I wish we could wash from out hearts and souls  
The stains of the week away,  
And let water and air by their magic make  
Ourselves as pure as they;  
Then on the earth there would be indeed  
A glorious washing day!

Along the path of a useful life,  
Will hearts-ease ever bloom.  
The busy mind has no time to think  
Of sorrow or care or gloom.  
And anxious thoughts may be swept away,  
As we bravely wield a broom.

I am glad a task to me is given,  
To labor at day by day,  
For it brings me health and strength and hope,  
And I cheerfully learn to say,  
"Head, you may think, Heart, you may feel,  
But, Hand, you shall work away!"<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Little Women: An Annotated Edition*, 235 (footnote)

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 234-235

After three happy years in Concord the family's debts caught up with them. Thanks to the efforts of Abba's Boston friends she was offered a salaried position as one of the first social workers in the city, distributing food and goods to the poor. The year was 1848 when they made the move; the next seven years would see their nomadic life resume and with a vengeance.

## **Life in Boston – domestic service**

Abba became the main breadwinner but could not bring in enough money to keep the family solvent. Thus the older girls were called upon to supplement what Louisa dubbed as “The Alcott Sinking Fund.” She and Anna took on those few options open to respectable women: teaching school, and working as governesses and domestic servants (mostly to richer relations and friends). Louisa hired herself out as a domestic servant which she recounted in her essay, “How I Went Out to Service.” This dramatized description of her experience demonstrates the difficulties of service (and her naiveté at eighteen). For seven weeks of the “hardest work of her life” she received a mere four dollars from her employer.<sup>40</sup>

Louisa's episode illustrates the difficulties of going out to service. One was the lack of a formal written agreement between employer and employee. This was due to the informal relationship between the two which was personal and sometimes intimate. It left the servant at the mercy of the employer's whim.

Although Louisa declared that service was better than being idle and dependent, she too found the experience degrading. There was a social stigma attached to being a servant. It also meant that her time was not her own – Louisa found herself at the beck and call of her employer day and night. It was only when she refused, out of pride, to blacken his boots that she discovered how spiteful he could be. Despite this humiliation she hired herself out again in the same year as a residential “second girl” doing laundry for her May cousins out in Leicester, MA.

## **Many different dwellings**

The Boston years were not only punctuated by the Alcotts' frequent moves but in the utter contrast of dwellings, alternating between tenement slums and the finer neighborhoods of Abba's wealthy relatives. Three quarters of the year saw them on the outskirts of the slums of the South End, an area being flooded by Irish immigrants. There are mentions in family writings of “cellar kitchens” and “dirty, dusty, noisy” streets.<sup>41</sup> It is impossible to know for certain whether cooking was done over the hearth or on a cast iron stove. Coal was available for fuel as well as wood. While most of the poor bought white bread from commercial bakers, the Alcotts continued to bake their Graham brown bread which was not available for purchase.<sup>42</sup> For two summers the family was permitted to live at the mansion of Abba's uncle, Samuel May. It is fair to say that the kitchen would be outfitted with the most up-to-date equipment.

With Mrs. Alcott working, the girls had to take on the lion's share of the housekeeping. Twelve-year-old Abbie May writes in her journal of 1852 of assisting Lizzie with meals, washing dishes and sweeping both inside and out. Sewing was an endless daily affair, always done in the company of others; often a family member would read aloud as they sewed and mended towels, sheets, and shirts for their father.<sup>43</sup>

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40 *Alternative Alcott*, “How I Went Out to Service,” 353

41 *Louisa May Alcott The Woman Behind Little Women*, 107; May Alcott Nieriker Journal, 1852, 15

42 *Never Done*, 23

43 unpublished diary of May Alcott Nieriker 1852-1863, Houghton Library at Harvard University, Louisa May Alcott additional papers, 1845-1944, MS Am 1817 (56)

## *Tending the fire*

No matter whether they lived in a mansion or a tenement, fires and stoves required the same effort. Strasser described tending the fire in this way:

*“First, dispose of the remains of the last fire: remove the stove lids; , gather the ashes and cinders into the grate; replace the lids; close the doors and drafts; dump the cinders and ashes into a pan below the grate and sift either in a sifter built into the stove or in a regular ash sifter (placed over a barrel); set a fire with shavings of paper, small sticks of wood, and a few larger pieces; reopen the drafts, light the fire, and add large pieces of wood or coal; now close the dampers. A good fire in a good stove ... would last four hours; rekindling meant raking ashes, adding more fuel, and readjusting dampers.”<sup>44</sup>*

## *Taking in boarders*

In 1853 after Hillside was sold to Nathaniel Hawthorne, the Alcotts moved up to Beacon Hill to 20 Pinckney Street. Mrs. Alcott gave up her social work and took in boarders with Lizzie assisting her. The eighteen-year-old took pride in her well-developed domestic abilities; when her mother went to Syracuse to visit her brother, Lizzie took over all the household duties, even insisting upon doing the laundry herself rather than hire a laundress, feeling she could do a better job.<sup>45</sup>

## **The move to Walpole**

In 1855 debt again forced a move out of Boston to rent-free accommodations in Walpole, NH. Here the family would live until 1857 in much the same way as they lived while at Hillside; it being nearly ten years later it is possible they had the use of the more efficient cast iron stove over a hearth.

It was at this time that Mrs. Alcott wrote down family recipes. While she listed ingredients there are few directions as to how to cook or bake the food; it was assumed that those skills were already acquired through trial and error. Unlike today where we can choose the exact temperature on our ovens and set a timer, cooking in the nineteenth century was far from an exact science. With hearths and cast iron stoves giving off heat erratically, cooking required constant supervision.

Anna and Louisa were home during the summer months and participated regularly in the Walpole Amateur Dramatic Company. That time would be marred by illness as scarlet fever struck Anna, May and Lizzie as a result of Mrs. Alcott's care of a desperately poor family where two of the children died of the fever. Lizzie assisted her mother and as a result, became dangerously ill. She came back from the brink of death but was never the same. This sad chapter in their lives was described in chapter 17 of *Little Women* where Beth tended the poor Hummels (with the baby dying in her lap) and she was subsequently struck down by the fever.

## **Return to Concord – Orchard House**

In late 1857, the Alcotts returned to Concord in the hopes that Lizzie, fading fast, would somehow recover. Bronson arranged for the purchase of Orchard House which was next door to their beloved Hillside (now called The Wayside by the Hawthornes). The house was in need of total renovation. Sadly Lizzie died before the work was completed.

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<sup>44</sup> *Never Done*, 41

<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Sewall Alcott to Abigail May Alcott, August 13, 1853, Houghton Library at Harvard University, MS Am 1130.9 (25-27),

Bronson threw himself into the restoration of the antique home, perhaps as a way of working through his grief. Much like he did with Hillside, he took an out building and attached it to the back of the house, creating a new kitchen over a well; it also added an upstairs bedroom which fledgling artist Abbie May (now calling herself “May”) took over, adorning it with drawings on the walls. Bronson took the ash-holes and ovens of the old kitchen and fashioned them into alcoves, creating a pleasant parlor.<sup>46</sup> The new kitchen was equipped with a cast iron stove. Bronson also crafted hangers attached to the wall that would swing out for the drying of laundry.

As family life at Hillside was the inspiration, Orchard House became the physical setting for *Little Women*. Written in Louisa’s bedroom, she crafted the book at a small half-moon desk overlooking the front yard, built by her father; it was a show of support even though it was not proper at the time for a woman to have her own desk.

*Little Women* was an unexpected runaway success which spawned three sequels (part two of *Little Women* called *Good Wives*, *Little Men* and *Jo’s Boys*), many other juvenile novels and short stories, and a wealth of money. Louisa used her fortune to take care of her family, especially her mother to whom she was especially devoted. Orchard House benefitted from this money with a furnace installed in the 1870s along with plumbing and a soap stone sink in the kitchen, and carpets throughout the home.

Despite the fact that the family lived for twenty years at Orchard House, Louisa never lost that restless nomadic spirit. She frequently fled back to Boston to write, living in upscale boarding houses and fancy hotels. Hotels had begun to offer such accommodations for the wealthy called the “American Plan,” not unlike the fine restaurants offered today in the best hotels.<sup>47</sup> This was something Louisa and her sister May took advantage of in 1869 at the fashionable Bellevue (with its own elevator) overlooking the gold dome of the State House.<sup>48</sup>

The family was going through significant changes. In 1870 Anna lost her beloved husband of ten years, John Bridge Pratt after a brief illness; he left behind two sons. After several trips to Europe sponsored by Louisa, May permanently relocated to Paris in 1876 in pursuit of her career as a professional artist. After a successful turn she died in 1879 six weeks after the birth of her first child, Lulu. Mrs. Alcott succumbed to congestive heart failure in 1877. Under Louisa’s care then was her elderly father, her oldest sister, her two nephews and her niece Lulu whom she had adopted at May’s request.

Between 1877 and 1885 the family rotated between Orchard House, the former Thoreau home on Main Street in Concord (which Louisa helped to purchase for Anna) and a townhouse in Louisburg Square on Beacon Hill which she leased in 1885. Orchard House was rented out but the newly built Concord School of Philosophy remained active under Bronson’s leadership until he was felled by a stroke in 1882; the school would close upon his death six years later. In the early 1880s Louisa began spending summers with the family in Nonquitt, MA, a charming South Shore resort; after selling Orchard House in 1883 she would purchase her own cottage “without the curse of a kitchen to spoil it,” instead taking advantage of the community dining hall within the cluster of cottages.<sup>49</sup>

At age 55 Louisa May Alcott died on March 6, 1888, just 2 days after father who was 88. Having been quite ill on and off for years after being treated with mercury for typhoid pneumonia during her Civil War nursing service, she had carefully put her affairs in order to assure that the family would be never be without. To guarantee that

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<sup>46</sup> *Pedlar’s Progress*, 470 -- the parlor has two alcoves and the study, one which is why I determined that the parlor was the original kitchen. Orchard House was built in the 1600s when kitchens traditionally dominated the space -- my conclusion is that the current parlor and dining room were once the large kitchen which dominated the home.

<sup>47</sup> Andrew Smith (editor), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America, Volume 2* (Oxford University Press; 2 edition, 2012), 290. The Bellevue utilized the “European Plan” whereby food and room charges were separate.

<sup>48</sup> *Never Done*, 148; *Louisa May Alcott The Woman Behind Little Women*, 274.

<sup>49</sup> Anne Morse Lyell (editor), *Nonquitt a Summer Album 1872-1985* (Barekneed Publishers, 1987, 96

continued profits from her books would go to the family, she adopted her nephew John Pratt, now known as John Pratt Alcott and passed the copyrights to him in her will.

## Conclusion

In the glorification of family life during the Victorian era women were normally relegated to the private sphere of the home while men were out in public as wage earners. Throughout the lifespan of the Alcotts, family life in nineteenth century America experienced considerable change as a result of the westward expansion of the country, the Civil War and the Industrial Revolution. As the century progressed, many technological changes freed women from domestic labors (if they were wealthy enough to partake of them as the Alcotts eventually were able to do). The Alcotts themselves evolved financially from poor to middle class to fabulously wealthy thanks to Louisa's success. As the breadwinner she assumed the public masculine role while still embracing domestic life as housekeeper and mother to Lulu. This overview of their various living arrangements over the course of eighty-plus years has hopefully given you equally varied glimpses into the life of the Victorian housewife.

Hannah in *Little Women* was correct in her assessment that "Housekeeping ain't no joke." The work was grueling, at times degrading and yet, it had its rewards. Louisa had found a way to make peace with the cares of the home by using the time to "simmer stories," writing them down when the chores were done. Like her sister Lizzie she took pride in her skills and even remarked in "How I Went Out to Service:" that "I do housework at home for love ... I like it better than teaching. It is healthier than sewing and surer than writing."<sup>50</sup> It was only when her health began to fail that she relinquished her domestic responsibilities to servants, saving her strength for writing in order to continue providing for her family.

Louisa May Alcott brought dignity to domestic work through her writing while at the same time, promoting broader opportunities for young women. Her ideas of feminism encouraged autonomy and independence through the pursuit of purposeful work (as in Jo becoming a writer) but at the same time, celebrated family and domestic life (as shown in both the March family and in Meg's married life with John Brooke). As a single working woman, mother, and breadwinner for her family, she embodied those broader ideas she hoped to impart to her readers.

The last stanza of Jo's poem, "A Song of the Suds," sums up Louisa May Alcott's philosophy perfectly:

I am glad a task to me is given,  
To labor at day by day,  
For it brings me health and strength and hope,  
And I cheerfully learn to say,  
"Head, you may think, Heart, you may feel,  
But, Hand, you shall work alway!"

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<sup>50</sup> *Alternative Alcott*: "How I Went Out to Service," 352

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