

# The Corner Sink: An Artifact Study

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Built in 1872 by the Davis family and currently maintained by the state of Illinois, the David Davis Mansion provides an excellent example of the architecture and values of the Gilded Age. Throughout the house, visitors can see nature motifs, expression of familial values, strict divisions between public and private life, and new technology such as running hot water and heating systems.

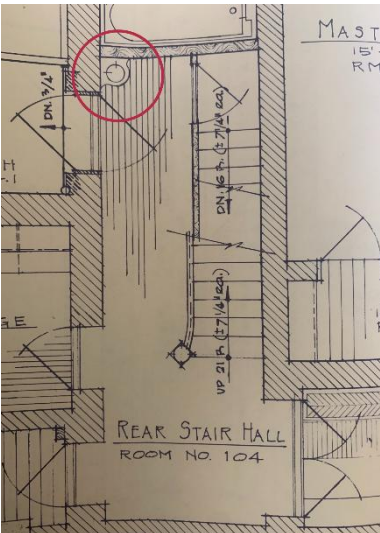
Though the mansion is asymmetrical by design, the house has several odd features, perhaps most notably a step in one of the servants' bedrooms that was not contained in the original floor plans and seems to correct for a building error.<sup>1</sup> Another unconventional feature is the sink in the hallway in the rear of the house. Though this feature may seem strange, at least one other Gilded Age home has a similar set-up (the Ramsey House in St. Paul, Minnesota).



The bowl of the sink and the artificial marble counter was made by L. Waefelaer & Company. The faucets are brass, made by Hayden, Gere, & Company based out of New York.<sup>2</sup> The plumbing in the sink is made of lead, and the outer cabinet is made from walnut. At some point during renovations of the mansion in the early 1900s, the sink became disconnected from the main plumbing line and it remains inoperable to this day.

The blueprints of the mansion originally show the sink as contained in an entirely separate room, seemingly with the sole purpose of housing the sink (the room depicted has no other features). However, this room was never constructed, as the square footage was needed to make room for the lavish master bathroom.<sup>3</sup>

The historic structures report notes that this "small sink [was] located in the Northeast corner and was used by the servants."<sup>4</sup> Since it is in the hallway behind the servant's stairs, it makes sense that servants would more often use this sink as opposed to members of the Davis family or guests. Its location right next to a door leading outside suggests that servants or hired field hands coming into the house were expected to wash their hands prior to entering.



## HANDWASHING AND HYGIENE IN THE PAST

Dating back to ancient Greece, handwashing was a part of religious and ceremonial rituals. However, the practice of handwashing for hygienic purposes only became popular after germ theory and its implications were more widely accepted by the late 19th century.

The predominant theory for much of the 1800s was called miasma theory, in which diseases were caused by poisonous vapors. The research of certain individual doctors and scientists, as well as pressing hygiene concerns during the civil war and during the rapid growth of certain cities helped sway public opinion away from miasma theory and towards germ theory: the idea that certain diseases were caused by microorganisms smaller than anyone could see without a microscope. The initial stages of this research involved making the correlation between dirtiness and disease.

On an individual level, scientists began to study the workings of hospitals in the mid-nineteenth century and discovered that handwashing was linked to better results for

From the top: An image of the corner sink, a detail, and a current floor plan showing the sink's location.

<sup>1</sup> Floorplan, David Davis Mansion.

<sup>2</sup> For examples of work by Hayden, Gere, & Co., see [this 1877 catalog](#) with examples of their products.

<sup>3</sup> David Davis Mansion, Historic Structures Report, III-16.

<sup>4</sup> David Davis Mansion, Historic Structures Report, III-9.

patients. Ignaz Semmelweis and Oliver Wendall Holmes drew conclusions from their respective hospitals in Austria and Boston. In 1847, Semmelweis noticed that the maternal mortality rates were much higher at a hospital where surgeons and students did not wash their hands between performing autopsies and delivering babies. Semmelweis attributed this to “cadaverous particles” and a bad smell, and subsequently recommended that surgeons wash their hands with a chlorinated lime solution. The mortality rates dropped.<sup>5</sup> In 1843, Holmes drew a similar conclusion, saying that doctors were “angels of death” if they did not wash their hands.<sup>6</sup> Despite the evidence, Semmelweis and Holmes faced backlash and mocking for their beliefs. The doctors at Semmelweis’s hospital pushed back and eventually stopped their handwashing and Semmelweis himself was fired.<sup>7</sup> Neither Semmelweis’s nor Holmes’s work would gain traction until Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch made their contributions to the acceptance of germ theory in the late nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, these early medical studies provided a basis for germ theory and understanding the importance of handwashing.

On a much wider scale, the Civil War had a huge impact on the way that people spoke about and understood sanitation. About twice as many soldiers died from disease and complications from their injuries than from the fighting itself. There were few doctors at the start of the war (there were only six medical schools in the US at the time), and during the war the number of doctors grew by necessity. These doctors lacked medical expertise on the battlefield and had to adapt to the conditions, with mixed success. Medicines such as quinine, morphine, and chloroform were useful; other remedies contained poisons like arsenic or mercury. Doctors also pioneered new surgical techniques at this time, though infection during or after surgery was a constant risk.

The conditions of the soldiers’ camps made ideal environments for disease. Overcrowding, poor sanitation, lack of immunity to disease, inadequate screening procedures for recruits, and poor diet and sleep contributed to the spread of illness. Malaria, yellow fever, typhoid, dysentery, and measles all affected union and confederate armies alike. Eventually, regulations were passed that included requirements for



An illustration of Ignaz Semmelweis washing his hands in chlorinated lime water before operating on a patient.

Summary of Losses During the War of the Rebellion

STATES AND TERRITORIES.	Killed and Mortally Wounded.	Died of Disease.	Died as Prisoners of War.	Deaths from Accident, etc.	Deaths All Causes Except Battle.	Total Deaths.
Alabama.....	50	228	22	5	40	345
Arkansas.....	305	1,254	8	25	121	1,713
California.....	108	344	...	62	59	573
Colorado.....	153	120	...	25	25	323
Connecticut.....	1,947	2,542	526	101	238	5,354
Dakota.....	2	4	...	...	...	6
Delaware.....	383	356	75	21	47	882
District of Columbia.....	41	150	44	10	45	390
Florida.....	18	189	...	...	8	215
Georgia.....	...	13	...	...	2	15
Illinois.....	9,884	21,065	1,721	1,028	1,126	34,834
Indiana.....	7,243	16,663	1,152	791	853	26,672
Iowa.....	3,540	8,498	515	227	221	13,001
Kansas.....	757	1,633	36	104	115	2,630
Kentucky.....	2,478	6,383	860	454	599	10,774
Louisiana.....	214	624	15	26	56	945
Maine.....	3,184	5,257	541	118	238	9,393
Maryland.....	909	1,160	647	98	168	2,883
Massachusetts.....	6,115	5,530	1,483	257	557	13,942
Michigan.....	4,448	8,269	1,268	339	429	14,753
Minnesota.....	626	1,677	159	43	79	2,584
Mississippi.....	3	66	...	1	8	78
Missouri.....	3,317	9,243	225	487	613	13,885
Nebraska.....	35	159	1	23	21	239
Nevada.....	2	29	...	1	1	33
New Hampshire.....	1,903	2,427	294	76	132	4,882
New Jersey.....	2,573	2,415	419	134	208	5,754
New Mexico.....	73	144	...	19	41	277
New York.....	19,085	19,835	4,710	914	1,990	46,534
North Carolina.....	43	216	49	3	49	390
Ohio.....	11,388	19,365	2,356	1,168	922	35,475
Oregon.....	11	21	...	7	6	46
Pennsylvania.....	15,265	11,782	4,119	636	1,381	33,183
Rhode Island.....	460	648	84	69	60	1,321
Tennessee.....	744	4,085	1,150	375	422	6,777
Texas.....	12	101	1	6	21	141
Vermont.....	1,809	2,597	486	70	262	5,224
Virginia.....	10	16	13	2	1	42
Washington.....	...	12	...	5	5	22
West Virginia.....	1,247	1,878	617	150	125	4,017
Wisconsin.....	3,802	7,464	604	212	219	12,301
Indian Nations.....	107	775	...	10	126	1,018
Regular Army.....	2,283	2,552	549	197	116	5,798
Colored Troops.....	2,894	29,638	98	376	3,621	36,847
Veteran Volunteers.....	1	82	...	...	9	106
U. S. Volunteers*.....	12	202	...	11	18	243
U. S. Sharpshooters.....	263	247	25	6	11	552
Veteran Reserve.....	27	1,424	...	131	90	1,672
Generals and Staffs.....	85	142	...	10	1	239
Miscellaneous—Bands, etc.....	16	200	2	1	13	232
<b>Total.....</b>	<b>110,070</b>	<b>199,720</b>	<b>21,866</b>	<b>9,058</b>	<b>15,814</b>	<b>359,528</b>

\*Ex-Confederates.

*Compendium of the War of the Rebellion* (1908) by Frederick H.A. Dyer, showing causes of death for all recorded Union soldiers in the Civil War. Dyer served the Union as a drummer boy before spending some forty years compiling statistics for every Union unit. He remains the most cited Civil War statistician with his exhaustive work still appreciated by many scholars, historians, and authors. How many of these deaths could have been avoided through using hand-washing as a simple hygiene method?

<sup>5</sup> For more about Semmelweis’s work on handwashing, see [this article](#): “Historical perspective on hand hygiene in health care” from the WHO Guidelines on Hand Hygiene in Healthcare.

<sup>6</sup> There are numerous forerunners to Semmelweis and Holmes who began to draw the links between cleanliness and health, and [this article](#) gives a good overview of their contributions.

<sup>7</sup> For more about Semmelweis’s work and the resulting backlash, see [“The Doctor Who Championed Hand-Washing and Briefly Saved Lives”](#) from NPR.

<sup>8</sup> Pasteur showed that organisms in the air caused putrefaction and fermentation. Koch discovered the organisms responsible for tuberculosis and cholera. For a brief overview of these contributions, see [“Germ Theory”](#) from Britannica and [“The little-known history of cleanliness and the forgotten pioneers of handwashing”](#) by Peter Poczai and Lazlo Karvalics.

drainage, tent location, refuse burning or burying, cooking, and bathing.

These requirements would later be put into practice in rapidly growing cities in an effort to curb the spread of disease, with Massachusetts establishing the first Board of Health in 1869 and a National Board of Health founded in 1879.<sup>9</sup> Both of these governing bodies only had limited effectiveness at the time.<sup>10</sup> Despite the medical studies in support of germ theory and the Civil War placing an emphasis on sanitation, these ideas about hygiene were slow to be implemented around the United States. Miasma theory still held traction in many areas, and some doctors did not regularly use sterilization processes until the 1900s.

It is important to note that wealthy people during the Gilded Age would likely have been aware of these trends in the medical field. Throughout the nineteenth century, the number of magazines and journals printed for the public grew rapidly. Topics for these publications initially focused on personal improvement, enlightenment, and family entertainment, but expanded to all manner of information, including science and medicine. These journals and magazines provided a space for professionals to highlight new contributions, as well as share their own opinions about developments in medical research. Some articles offered specific medical recommendations geared towards doctors. Others advised the general public about how to keep a clean home.<sup>11</sup> The Davises likely had access to some of these magazines, and may have been influenced by them when designing their new home.

#### THE DAVIS'S HEALTH/UNDERSTANDING OF GERM THEORY

The Davis's attitudes towards health and hygiene are typical of the Gilded Age: a combination of an awareness of the initial stages of germ theory and remnants of early European ideas about miasma theory and humors of the body.

We can tell that the Davises were concerned about their health through their letters to one another. Much of the correspondence between Sarah and David, as well as among their friends, included sections devoted to updates about people's physical well-being: it was just as much news as any other local event. Sarah writes to her cousin that "He [David] took cold in one eye—and the lid is still swollen but he is improving," to briefly share the news of David's ailment.<sup>12</sup> Other issues take the bulk of a letter to describe the news of health (or lack thereof). One of the Judge's friends wrote to David about their mutual friend Lyman:

*"I really think Lyman is in poor health, he cannot endure much hardship takes cold as the weather changes or if he exercises a little more than usual or is out after dark he seems debilitated & weak & rather in low spirits I have had him take about 3 times a day some of Townsends Purifier of the Blood made of Roots & other ingredients—My candid opinion is that he had better close up his business in Bloomington quit store keeping come into york state & buy a Farm in a healthy location &c work some ride on horseback &c &c live plain a change of climate would I think with proper exercise & some stimulating drinks from Roots &c buy such a course he might regain his health..."<sup>13</sup>*

The author goes on to describe land for sale and the workings of his friend's farm in the same letter, but clearly had a strong opinion about Lyman's health and what he ought to be doing better. By reading these letters, we can more closely examine the Davis's attitudes towards health and well-being.

The Davises harbored popular beliefs about imbalanced humors in the body causing sickness. In 1847, Sarah wrote to David that she had "a pain in my heels just where they touch the floor—the pain goes up the back and then makes me sick at the stomach—I think it is caused by bile—you know Hannah More thought sin and bile were two great sources of evil in the world."<sup>14</sup> Sarah specifically attributes her illness to imbalanced bile, rather than any other cause.

The Davises also wrote about the correlation between the air or miasma and health. In fact, Sarah took several trips out of central Illinois when she was ill with the idea that the fresh air would help her. Her father William Perrin Walker shows

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<sup>9</sup> For more information on sanitation during the Civil War, see Robert F. Reilly's article "[Medical and surgical care during the American Civil War, 1861–1865](#)"

<sup>10</sup> See "[200 Years of American Medicine \(1776-1976\)](#)" for an overview of American medicine innovation, as well as a discussion of early public health initiatives.

<sup>11</sup> For information about the rapid growth of magazines and periodicals during the Gilded Age, see "[History of Publishing](#)" from Britannica. The sections about women's magazines and literary and scientific magazines are most relevant.

<sup>12</sup> Davis Family Papers, [1871-12-26 Bloomington IL](#).

<sup>13</sup> Davis Family Papers, [1852-09-19 Sullivan NY](#).

<sup>14</sup> Davis Family Papers, [1847-07-28 Glendale CT](#).

these beliefs in an update to David: “Sarah was evidently improved & benefitted by her Sea location & we have great hopes she will fully recover her health—though she was decidedly gaining before she left home—all my fears are, that the sea air will be too bracing for her, to bring on her cough...”<sup>15</sup>

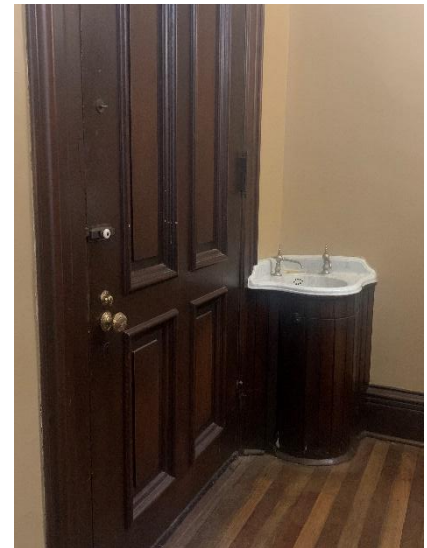
However, the Davises also subscribed to more recently emerging ideas about medicine and germ theory. Sarah recognized the potential for contagious disease when she wrote in a letter to David, “Mary R had symptoms of measles if not the disease (...) it would be astonishing if we do not get them.”<sup>16</sup> Additionally, David wrote to Sarah about the importance of cleanliness in the home for good health: “there is nothing like white washing inside & outside for purification & health. The more chloride of lime that is thrown about the better.”<sup>17</sup>

It is clear that the Davises thought about their health on a regular basis, and it would make sense that they designed their home with amenities that took their health into consideration (i.e., indoor plumbing, sinks for handwashing, transom windows to better control climate, etc.).

#### WHO USED THE CORNER SINK

The Davises had three full time servants: a maid, a cook, and a handyman/carriage driver that all lived in the mansion and its associated buildings. For other work, domestic or agricultural, the Davises hired laborers specifically for the task at hand. This made more sense for the Davises than hiring a full permanent staff, particularly as David Davis was gone to Washington DC for large stretches of time and Sarah would leave to visit her family for months at a time.

While it’s difficult to know the personal details of many of these hired servants, Sarah’s letters to David illuminate how the hired servants were involved in the everyday functioning of the mansion. Sarah often wrote about her garden, and the instructions she gave to the many seasonal workers, including Joe, Thomas, Pat, Mike, and John, among others. Additionally, Sarah wrote about the assistance she provided to these workers, sharing that she cooked food for them to receive from the rear of the mansion (kitchen).<sup>18</sup> Presumably, the servants would wash their hands in the corner sink before going to the kitchen for food.



A view of the corner sink, showing its location, just inside an exterior door, and in close proximity to the kitchen.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The Davises built their mansion in 1872, just after the Civil War and right when miasma theory was beginning to give way to germ theory. The Davises included a sink in their own bathroom, as well as in each of their guest rooms, ensuring that their visitors had access to this amenity. They also built the sink in the back hallway for servants' use. The Davises were clearly concerned with the health of not only their immediate family, but also their wider social circle. The sinks in the mansion show the Davises attitude towards health concerns, as well as the broader movement during the Gilded Age towards personal hygiene and handwashing.



A sink in a bedroom located in the servant’s quarters (*left*) and a sink in the master bath (*right*). The David Davis Mansion has a total of seven bedrooms. The six bedrooms on the second floor each have their own sink for private use. In addition, there is a sink in the public second floor bathroom, one in the bathroom attached to the first floor master bedroom, and the corner sink mentioned in this paper, totaling nine sinks inside the mansion which were used strictly for hygiene purposes. Cleanliness was clearly a priority for this Gilded Age family.



<sup>15</sup> Davis Family Papers, [1847-09-03 Lenox MA](#).

<sup>16</sup> Davis Family Papers, [1852-05-05 Bloomington IL](#).

<sup>17</sup> Davis Family Papers, [1849-05-18 Paris IL](#).

<sup>18</sup> Davis Family Papers, 1872-04-14, Bloomington, IL. Print, from Red Binder in DDM visitor’s center.