

The American Family: Past and Present

By Rebecca Baggaley

Some family trees have beautiful leaves, and some have just a bunch of nuts. Remember, it is the nuts that make the tree worth shaking. -Author unknown

What is the History of the Family?

My family has a history, and your family has a history. And so does The Family. From the colonial era, to the industrial revolution, to the new millennium, the American family has changed and evolved.

Why Study the History of the Family?

The history of the family is shrouded in myths, misconceptions, and misleading generalizations. I have found the history of the family an eye-opening window on the past. It has helped me in my genealogical research and coming to know and understand my ancestors as real people who lived ordinary and extraordinary lives.

For example, historians tell us that:

- It was only in the 1920s that, for the first time, a majority of American families consisted of a breadwinner-husband, a home-maker wife, and children attending school.
- The most rapid increase in unwed pregnancies took place between 1940 and 1958, not in the libertine sixties.
- The defining characteristics of the 1950s family--a rising birth rate, a stable divorce rate, and declining age of marriage--were historical aberrations, out of line with long term historical trends.
- Throughout American history, most families have needed more than one breadwinner to support themselves.

First, we'll debunk some myths about the "traditional American family."

Second, we'll discuss 3 general time periods and the way historical events affected the family.

Third, we'll briefly discuss today's family—we're not as different as we think we are.

Remember:

17th century = 1600s

18th century = 1700s

19th century = 1800s

20th century = 1900s

21st century = 2000s (today)

So "the mid-nineteenth century" means about 1850.

Myth: Over the generations Americans moved around more.

Fact: Americans moved around less and less in those very years and less and less over recent decades. Furthermore, modern Americans change homes and neighborhoods less often than Americans did in the mid-twentieth century and less often than Americans did in the early nineteenth century.

Myth: Americans turned away from religion.

Fact: Proportionately more twentieth-century Americans belonged to churches than belonged in prior centuries. Rates of membership fell a bit after the 1950s, but participation in churches still remained more widespread than in earlier eras.

Myth: Americans became more violent.

Fact: Criminal violence fluctuates sharply in the short term—historically low in the 1950s, rising

rapidly in the 1960s through 1980s, and then declining almost to 1950s levels by 2000. Early-twenty-first-century Americans have a lower risk of being assaulted or killed than Americans had in the nineteenth century or before.

Myth: American families have traditionally had one breadwinner.

Fact: It was only in the 1920s that, for the first time, a majority of American families consisted of a breadwinner-husband, a home-maker wife, and children attending school.

Agricultural Era c. 1600-1800

The Agricultural Era: New England Colonies

Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Hampshire

“The Puritan family is important because its heritage figured significantly in the founding religious, political, and legal systems of the United States.” (Browning et al. 74)

The family was first & foremost a unit of production.

Educated children—literacy & religion

Transmitted occupational skills

Cared for elderly & infirm

The family was the primary unit of social control.

Every individual was expected to be a part of a household, and the head maintained “surveillance over the behavior of all members, ruling the home with an iron hand and an all-seeing eye.”

Legally, the father was the primary parent.

Patriarchy

"Puritans organized their family around the unquestioned principle of patriarchy. Their religion taught that family roles were part of a continuous chain of hierarchical and delegated authority descending from God." (Steven Mintz & Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* [1988], 9).

Women

The colonial period also exhibited degrees of egalitarianism. For example, women could engage in business outside the home.

Coverture—upon marriage, a woman's legal identity was absorbed in her husband's

Marriage: 1600s

Prerequisites to marriage:

1. Economic self-sufficiency (land)
2. Consent of a girl's father before courtship

Marriage: 1700s

Love replaced arranged marriage as a social ideal, and individuals were encouraged to marry for love.

Death, divorce, and remarriage

Early New England settlers viewed marriage as a civil contract, not a religious contract. Divorce was permissible, and both husband or wife could petition for it.

Desertion was much more common than divorce.

The average length of marriage was less than 12 years, due to high mortality rates. One-third to one-half of all children lost at least one parent before the age of 21; in the South, over half of all children 13

and under had lost at least one parent

Children

- Women could expect to bear at least six children and delivered children at fairly regular intervals averaging every twenty to thirty months, often having the last child after the age of forty.
- High infant mortality rate: 10-30% of all children did not live through their first year; less than 2/3 lived to age 10.
- Samuel Sewall: 7 of his 14 children died before age 2; only 3 of the 14 would outlive their father
- Puritan preacher Cotton Mather saw 8 of his 15 children die before age 2
- In the colonies children were often "put out"--sent to live with another family to be a servant or learn a trade. The new family cared for all needs--shelter, food, clothing, education and religious instruction--just as if the child were a biological family member.

Premarital Sexual Relations

England, 16th & 17th centuries: 20% brides pregnant

New England, 17th century: less than 10%

New England, mid 18th century: more than 40%

The Agricultural Era: Middle Colonies

Delaware, Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey

High death rate and an unbalanced sex ratio made it impossible to establish the kind of stable, patriarchal families found in New England

During the 17th century, half of all marriages were broken within eight years

Most families consisted of a complicated assortment of step-parents, step-children, wards, and half-brothers and half-sisters

Not until the late-18th century could a father be confident about his ability to pass property directly to his sons

Religion

Religious differences also contributed to divergent family patterns. Not nearly as anxious as the Puritans about infant depravity, Quaker families in Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey placed a far greater stress on maternal nurture than did Puritan families.

Quakers also emphasized early autonomy for children. They provided daughters with an early dowry and sons with sufficient land to provide a basis for early independence.

Patriarchy

Between 1690 and 1760, as the death rate declined, the sex ratio grew more balanced, and marriages survived longer, a more stable set of patriarchal family relationships began to emerge in the Chesapeake colonies.

The nature of patriarchy was quite different in the Chesapeake than in New England. Outwardly, relations between fathers and children were even more hierarchical than in New England, with many southern sons addressing their father in letters as "Sir" or "Dear Sir."

Marriage

- Age difference between husbands and wives was far greater in the southern colonies. Before 1700, a man would usually marry in his mid-20s while most women married by 17. The female age of first marriage rose during the eighteenth century, but remained far lower than in the northern colonies.

- Cohabitation, bigamy much more common
- Required services of Anglican clergyman (except Maryland), but in practice this rule was often not enforced
- Common-law marriage began in wide-open living conditions of the South
- Premarital sex: many women who did formally wed were already visibly pregnant
- Charles Boschi, parson of St. Bartholomew's Parish in SC from 1745--1747, reported that all except two or three of the brides whom he had married were pregnant
- Penalties for sexual offenses were much milder than in the North; fines were common

Women

Women's rights developed more slowly—less education

Because the death rate was higher and widows were more likely to be left with young children, women received greater protections for personal and real property.

“Southern chivalry” towards upper-class women; expected to maintain premarital chastity & marital fidelity

Children

Over half of all children 13 and under had lost at least one parent

Extended Family

The high death rate contributed to a society which attached relatively more importance to the extended kinship network and less to the nuclear family.

Even in the 20th century, southern families are more likely to use surnames as first names, underscoring the continuing importance of extended family identity.

Slave Families

Slave marriages were not legally acknowledged

The threat of family breakup hung over the head of every slave family. Nevertheless, the stable two-parent nuclear family was the norm.

When slave families were separated, there was a strong network of extended family which cared for children.

Industrial Era: c. 1800-1970

Transition from Agricultural to Industrial, cont.

Rapid population growth=land plots too small to be farmed viably=weakened paternal control over inheritance

New kind of urban middle-class family emerged, as workplace moved away from household

New emphasis on family privacy; expulsion of apprentices from middle-class home

Men: Breadwinners

- Fathers became more psychologically separate from family
- Fathers were breadwinners, wives & children were economic dependents
- Many men were unable to meet the pressures of an emerging market economy. In a changing economy--lacking modern bankruptcy and limited liability laws, life insurance, and secure forms of investment--a man's economic position was much less stable than in the past.
- Technological displacement, mounting economic competition, economic vacillations, and opportunities for success or failure--all increased in frequency. If economic change increased opportunities for success and advancement, it also heightened the chances of failure.
- Not surprisingly, per capita consumption of alcohol doubled or tripled in the first decades of the

nineteenth century, offering men a way to cope with increasing economic and social stresses.

Women: Republican Mothers

In the new United States, there was a deepening conviction that women, who were free from the corrupting influence of business and politics, had special ability to mold the character traits in children on which a free society depended. This idea, known as republican motherhood, led to expanded educational opportunities for women and an insistence that women's rights be recognized. By the mid-nineteenth century, the socialization of children became increasingly self-conscious, rational, and mother-dominated.

Mothers replaced fathers as primary parent

More young women attended school & worked outside a family unit before marriage

Married woman's productive tasks were assumed by unmarried women working in factories

New division of domestic roles—wife assigned to care full-time for children & home

Marriage

Opportunities for non-agricultural work=children could marry earlier

New pattern of marriage based on companionship & affection

Divorce

1900: USA had highest divorce rate in the world

1 in 10 children lived in single-parent home

Hundreds of thousands of children spent part of their childhood in orphanages because their parents could not support them

35-40% of children lost a parent or sibling before age 20

Children

Children stayed home far longer than in the past

Ideal of “protected” childhood offered fewer opportunities to express their growing maturity, resulting in a harder transition from childhood to youth & adulthood

From 1800 to 1900 the birth rate fell dramatically, from 7-10 children to only 3 (middle class mothers)

Divorce

In 1867, the country had 10,000 divorces, and the rate rose steadily: from per thousand marriages in 1870, to per thousand in 1880, to per thousand in 1890.

Working Class Families

Cooperative family economy

Older children were expected to defer marriage, remain at home, and contribute to the family's income

Paternal authority reinforced by the nature of employment (foremen hired relatives)

In mid-1910s the "family wage" economy began, allowing a working-class male breadwinner to support family on his wages alone

Slave families

Between 1790 and 1860, a million slaves were sold from the upper to the lower South and another two million slaves were sold within states. As a result, about a third of all slave marriages were broken by sale and half of all slave children were sold from their parents.

Working-class Families

While the urban middle-class family emphasized a sole male breadwinner, a rigid division of sexual roles, and a protected childhood, urban working-class families emphasized a cooperative family economy. Older children were expected to defer marriage, remain at home, and contribute to the family's income. It was not until the 1920s that the cooperative family economy gave way to the family wage economy, which allowed a male breadwinner to support his family on his wages alone. Contributing to this new family formation were the establishment of the first seniority systems; compulsory school attendance laws; and increased real wages as a result of World War I. The New Deal further solidified the male breadwinner family by prohibiting child labor, expanding workmen's compensation, and targeting jobs programs at male workers.

1930s: The Great Depression

During the Depression, unemployment, lower wages, and the demands of needy relatives tore at the fabric of family life. Many Americans were forced to share living quarters with relatives, delay marriage, and postpone having children. The divorce rate fell, since fewer people could afford one, but desertions soared. By 1940, 1.5 million married couples were living apart. Many families coped by returning to a cooperative family economy. Many children took part time jobs and many wives supplemented the family income by taking in sewing or laundry, setting up parlor groceries, or housing lodgers.

1940s: World War II

World War II also subjected families to severe strain. During the war, families faced a severe shortage of housing, a lack of schools and child-care facilities, and prolonged separation from loved ones. Five million "war widows" ran their homes and cared for children alone, while millions of older, married women went to work in war industries. The stresses of wartime contribute to an upsurge in the divorce rate. Tens of thousands of young people became latchkey children, and rates of juvenile delinquency, unwed pregnancy, and truancy all rose.

1950s: The Traditional Family

Average age of marriage for women dropped to 20; Divorce rates stabilized & the birthrate doubled. The images of family life that appeared on television were misleading; only 60% of children grew up in a male-breadwinner, female homemaker household. The democratization of the family ideals reflected social and economic circumstances that are unlikely to be duplicated: a reaction against Depression hardships and the upheavals of World War II; the affordability of single-family tract homes in the booming suburbs; and rapidly rising real incomes.

1950s: Seeds of Radical Family Change

Youthful marriages, especially among women who cut short their education, may have contributed to a rising divorce rate in the 1960s. The compression of childbearing into the first years of marriage meant that many wives were free of the most intense child-rearing responsibilities by their early or mid-30s. Combined with the ever rising costs of maintaining a middle-class standard of living, this encouraged a growing number of married women to enter the workplace. As early as 1960, a third of married middle-class women were working part- or full-time. The expansion of schooling, combined with growing affluence, contributed to the emergence of a separate youth culture, separate and apart from the family.

Service Era: c. 1970 to Present

"The fundamental contrast between early Americans and today's Americans in their circumstances of life, the material and social conditions that influence culture and character, can be captured by the word "more." Modern Americans have more of almost everything: more time on Earth, more wealth, more things, more information, more power, more acquaintances, and so many more choices. Not more of absolutely everything—twenty-first-century Americans, for example, have fewer siblings and cousins—but generally, more Americans gained more access to more things material, social, and personal. Americans began as a "people of plenty," in historian David Potter's words, but became even more so. And, over the generations, more of those who had been outside the circle of plenty and outside the culture of independence which that plenty sustained joined it. In this sense, more Americans became more American."

--Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*