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Studying Historical Family Change in Nineteenth-Century New Bedford

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The past ten to fifteen years have seen a revolution in our understanding of the nature of family life in the past. The recent tenth anniversary of the *Journal of Family History* marked one signpost of this revolution. Research in historical family change has compelled historians, sociologists, and other scholars to re-examine their notions of family life in the past, and their understanding of the relationships between large-scale social change and family life. In this article, I will explain a little about how scholars carry out such research. I use New Bedford as a case study of research in historical family change.

In spite of the importance of family change, until recently we have known remarkably little about the topic. Sociologists studying family change had tended to focus on the relationship between large-scale processes such as industrialization, urbanization, or modernization, on the one hand, and family life, on the other hand. We had relatively little real evidence about historical family change. However, despite the paucity of evidence, scholars invented fairly elaborate descriptions of family life in the past and explanations of the relationships between social change and family change. Many of these descriptions and explanations turned out to be myths.

Perhaps the best known set of myths had to do with ship ties outside the immediate family. With industrialization, smaller, two- or three-generation nuclear families increasingly prevailed. Kinship ties outside the immediate family declined in importance as relationships within the nuclear family became more intense. Industrialization also meant a shift from production in the home, either agricultural or handicrafts, to factory work. The family became a center for consumption, but lost its role in production. People had to leave the home to go to work. The family increasingly specialized in emotional support, personality stabilization, and socialization.

Although not completely wrong, these views are oversimplifications, and in some cases pretty far off the mark. Nonetheless, these myths apparently made sense so few noticed the lack of evidence for them. The developing study of family history changed that. In studying family history, sociologists, anthropologists, and some economic historians work alongside historians. Their research has produced some startling findings, especially from the point of view of the old myths.

Research now indicates that small, nuclear households predominated in pre-industrial western Europe, Japan, the United States, and parts of eastern Europe, for at least the last several hundred years. The widespread extended family now seems mythical. Research by the British sociologist Michael Anderson suggests that kinship ties did not weaken with industrialization. In fact, industrialization in Great Britain increased family members' dependence on kin outside the household and led to an increase in household size and complexity. From this research emerges a far more complex picture of historical family change.

This new picture pushes us to abandon or significantly revise long-held myths. It also suggests the need for further research. Several years ago, I decided to carry out such research. I focused on New Bedford, Massachusetts. Many know of the city's whaling history, but some forget its later pre-eminence as a cotton textile manufacturing center. In 1855, 314 whaling ships from New Bedford plied their trade. By 1885, the number had diminished to 85. The value of the catch declined from over five million dollars in 1855 to about one and one-half million in 1885. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, New Bedford industrialized rapidly and intensively. By 1880 industrialization in New Bedford was well under way, making it an excellent case study for examining the relationships between industrialization and family life.

In my research on New Bedford, I examined many aspects of family life and family change, but in this article I focus on issues related to household structure. I wanted to measure average household size and composition in New Bedford in 1860 and again in 1880. I wanted to know how big families were. With whom did people live? Did they live with other kin or non-relatives? Were nuclear families predominant, or did they increase during industrialization? I was especially interested in how a family's economic standing affected its size and composition. To find out these things I constructed what social historians call a "collective biography" of New Bedford's population in both 1860 and 1880.

Collective biography is a technique for reconstructing the lives of a whole population, including those who would otherwise remain unknown. Until fairly recently historians had slighted the lives of common people—those who did not often leave written records and were not involved in momentous events. However, recently social historians and historical sociologists have begun to document the lives of these anonymous Americans. This research on New Bedford illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of the approach, as well as the kinds of records and techniques on which it depends.

First, I had to choose some sub-groups in the population
for study. Using standard statistical techniques, I drew random samples of the New Bedford population for 1860 and 1880. Each sample had about 400 households. I got the names of the people in my sample from the federal census manuscripts, the most valuable records for this kind of research. In the nineteenth-century, the census enumerators went to each household, asked for information, and filled out the census forms. These forms, the census manuscripts, are now available in microfilm. The United States has conducted the census since 1790, but not all censuses are available or useful. Not until 1850 did the census collect complete information on the entire population. Fire destroyed the 1890 manuscripts. In addition, recent census manuscripts are not open to researchers, due, ostensibly, to privacy concerns. Nonetheless, the available census manuscripts constitute rich sources of data about the nineteenth-century United States, so I used the 1860 and 1880 census manuscripts.

The information on the census manuscripts includes, at least, the names and ages of household members, their place of birth, occupation, whether children were attending school, and various other information. Notice the "at least." The same information does not appear on each census. This leads to major problems for researchers, and makes using other kinds of records mandatory.

Two examples of changes in the available information will illuminate the problems with these records and ways to surmount the problems. Because I wanted information on household composition, I needed to know the relationships between people living in the sample households. These relationships are not listed in the 1860 census manuscript, but, by reading the instructions to the census manuscripts to the tax records, I was able to gather more complete information on families' economic status.

Linking records this way helps in constructing a collective biography. Another example, related to occupation, illustrates the value of yet another source, the city directories. I have included page 114 of the 1879/80 New Bedford City Directory with this article. Take a look at the page. Notice John Fulham, the fourth name from the bottom. The surname is actually Fulham. The census gives much more complete information, but the city directory provides more detail in one area. The census manuscripts listed occupations, but often in a fairly general way. For example, according to the census, John Fulham "works in a cotton mill." However, the directory tells us that John Fulham was a weaver at the Wamsutta Mills. Both sources refer to the same John Fulham, even though the spellings of the last names differ, because of the addresses. In case you are wondering, the 1880 tax records tell us that Fulham owned no real estate or personal property, and confirm his last name and address.

You can see that drawing on several sources enables us to construct a fairly detailed portrait of these nineteenth-century families. By the way, this does not imply that we should ignore traditional sources, such as newspapers, diaries, letters, and local histories. Combined with these sources, they round out our picture of particular times and places.

I put the samples together using the census manuscripts for 1860 and 1880, and the city directories for 1859 and 1879/80. These records have shortcomings in addition to those already mentioned. They give us no sense of the interior life or emotional texture of family life. In addition, they are undoubtedly inaccurate to some extent. However, without them we would know nothing at all about these families. We need to use them, while remaining conscious of their weaknesses. Looking at a few specific nineteenth-century families will make the contributions of these records clearer, as well as introduce us more directly to family life in late nineteenth-century New Bedford.

Emma Carrol lived in New Bedford in 1860. This 40 year old woman lived with her 9 year old son William. Both had been born in Massachusetts and William had attended school during the year. No occupation is listed for Emma Carrol, nor did she own any real estate or personal property. She is not listed in the 1859 city directory. We don't know much about Emma Carrol, but what we do know can lead us to some important questions. Were female-headed families common in the nineteenth century? What were their economic circumstances like? Perhaps we can find out if the conditions of female-headed families in the past were similar to those today. Female-headed households and the "feminization of poverty" receive much attention today. Maybe this kind of historical research can shed light on the dynamics of the relationships of families. By the way, this does not imply that we should ignore traditional sources, such as newspapers, diaries, letters, and local histories. Combined with these sources, they round out our picture of particular times and places.

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between female-headed households and poverty in contemporary America.

We have much more complete information on the Dammon family. Silas Dammon, 39, a shipwright, or ship carpenter, lived in New Bedford in 1860. Born in Maine, he had married Hannah, 37, a woman born in Rhode Island. Their eight children ranged from Thomas, a seaman aged 18, to five month old Arthur. Silas Dammon owned real estate valued at $1000 and lived at 83 Smith St. Although the Dammon family was large, it was a nuclear family and thus fairly simple in structure. By the way, both the Carrol and Fulkham families were also nuclear. The Dammon family can lead us to further questions. Were many families this large? Did the average size of families decline from 1860 to 1880, and if so, by how much? Can we isolate specific factors that accounted for changes in household size?

William O. Russell's large family had a more complex family structure. The household had ten members. In addition to Russell, 49, his wife Sarah, and their seven children, Catherine Mooney, a 25 year old domestic servant born in Ireland also lived with the family. Russell's children were William T. (24), Frederick (21), James (18), Henry (16), George (14), Adelaide (9), and Edward (5). William T. was a seaman, Frederick was a clerk, and the three youngest children attended school.

I was able to link the Russell family to the city directory. In fact, William O., William T. and Frederick are all listed. The directory listing for William O. raises a problem. In the census, William O. was listed as a Custom House Inspector, and Frederick listed as a clerk, with no indication of where he worked. However, according to the city directory, William O. was proprietor of William O.

Russell Clothing Store, and Frederick was a clerk in that store. Both listings of William O.'s occupation are probably correct. He may have been appointed a custom house inspector after the directory was published, and continued to own the store. Frederick may have run it for him. Despite the Russells' evident prosperity, the tax records indicate that they owned no real estate or personal property.

Although no family members beyond the nuclear family lived with the Russell family, Catherine Mooney's presence does make this a somewhat complex family. When non-relatives live with a family, we call this an augmented family, a fairly common type in the nineteenth century.

John Cranston headed a more complex, extended family. John and his wife Sarah were both 38. Their seven children ranged from Henry, only six months old, to 14 year old John. In addition to these members of the immediate, nuclear family, William Cranston, John's 78 year old father lived with the family. Two non-relatives completed this household. We may wonder if this was a common type of family. How likely were people to live in extended households in 1860? Did the percentage of extended families decline over the next twenty years, as some perspectives would suggest? You can see that each family we look at raises further questions. Before considering the answers to these questions we should consider a few cautions.

Remember that, strictly speaking, we are guessing about the family relationships in these 1860 families. Catherine Russell was listed immediately after William O. Russell. She shared his last name, and she was within 30 years of his age. Therefore, following our rules we infer that she was his wife. The inference seems pretty safe, but it is an inference and could be wrong. Let's consider the Hunt family, from the 1880 sample.

John Hunt, 25, lived with Nancy Hunt, also 25. Also living with them were Samuel Hunt, 21, and Ruth Hunt, 15. How are these people related to each other? We would infer that Nancy was John's spouse, and perhaps the others were his siblings, or cousins. However, because this family is from the 1880 sample their family relationships are listed so we need not make inferences. In fact, John and Nancy were siblings, evidently twins. Samuel and Ruth were also their siblings. Had this family been in the 1860 sample, we would have erred in inferring their relationships. The Hunts remind us of the need for caution in this type of research.

Finally, we can consider Joseph Hocklaw's household, also from the 1880 sample. Hocklaw headed an extended family with two separate and complete nuclear families within it. Joseph Hocklaw was 63, three years older than his wife Amelia. Their son Thomas lived with them, as did their daughter Amelia Snyder and her husband Arthur Snyder. Joseph Hocklaw had no occupation listed; perhaps he was retired. Amelia Hocklaw was keeping house, and the other three worked in a cotton mill.

Unfortunately, I could not locate this family in the 1879/80 city directory and therefore do not know what cotton mills they worked in or what specific jobs they held. All had been born in Prussia. This reminds us of the importance of immigration in late-nineteenth-century New Bedford. Many of the immigrants worked in the cotton textile factories.

We have looked at several families. All lived in late nineteenth-century New Bedford, but their circumstances differed and we have different amounts of information about each. Thinking about such nineteenth-century New Bedford families leads to important questions. How representative of other New Bedford families were these? Did family size decline during the period of industrialization? Did the likelihood of living in simple, nuclear families increase? Were immigrants more likely to live in certain types of households? To answer these questions we need to look at a different kind of evidence. Rather than just looking at each of these families we need to aggregate the evidence derived from them to see what we can learn from it.

Putting the evidence about these families together into a collective biography gives us a broader sense of social life in the past. We gain access to social patterns and structures that have now disappeared. For example, we can find out the distribution of occupations, ethnicity, and fertility, and we can begin to understand the relationships between these various areas of nineteenth-century New Bedford social life. In addition, understanding social life in the past often helps us understand contemporary social patterns.

Traditional perspectives on family change would lead us to expect a reduction in average family size. This seems to have occurred. In 1860, mean household size in New Bedford, according to the sample, was 4.9. By 1880, that had dropped to 4.3. Thus, we are less likely to find large households like the Cranstons and Russells in 1880. This leads to further questions. How did the composition of households change? Did the numbers of certain categories of family members diminish from 1860 to 1880? Did the overall distribution of household types change? Did nuclear households become more predominant in 1880?

We have seen that average household size declined by
slightly over one-half person per family from 1860 to 1880. Almost all of this decline came from reductions in the average number of children under nine years old and in boarders. The first reduction fits well with an overall decline in fertility that occurred over the course of the nineteenth-century. We'll return to that. It's harder to figure out the decline in boarders, but looking at the changing distribution of household types in the accompanying table may help us.

This table reveals some surprising changes. The percentage of no family households, households consisting of one person or a number of unrelated persons, increased very little. The percentage of nuclear families increased by about 6%, and was clearly the dominant type in both 1860 and 1880. Augmented and extended family percentages changed more dramatically. Augmented households decreased by one half, and the percentage of extended households almost doubled.

Describing these changes is one thing, explaining them another. Some might suggest that perhaps the decline in boarding reflects fewer single men and women looking for somewhere to live, but this does not seem to be the case. Rather, there was apparently an increase in large boarding houses and hotels. People were more likely to board in such institutional households and the practice of individual families taking in boarders declined.

In regard to the increase in extended households, one might surmise that the influx of immigrants to New Bedford helps to explain it. Perhaps the immigrants were more likely to move in with other family members, since their housing and resources were probably limited. This view makes sense, but it's wrong.

The major increase in extended households occurs in families with native-born household heads. Immigrants were more likely to head nuclear families. Their nuclear families tended to be larger, but they were nuclear. The reason that native-born household heads were most likely to head extended households seems related to the level of their resources. Extended households, especially those with young children and elderly non-working parents, usually placed a heavy burden on the working members. Many native-born heads could afford this type of household. However, that

America. This assimilation process is seen as slow, evolutionary, and inevitable. Despite the wide acceptance of this explanation, I find another more compelling.

A new perspective emerging in the study of historical family change emphasizes the level of resources available to families. On this view families engage in strategic behavior that families engaged in to ensure their survival given certain levels of resources. This family strategy or family economy suggests that there is no slow, inevitable, evolutionary process leading to changes in fertility. Rather, families chose various behaviors, including whether to have children, depending on their resources. With less demand for child labor, and with household heads increasingly able to support their families on their own wages, the need for large families declined. I have already mentioned the possible connection between a family's level of resources and the likelihood of its being extended.

My research indicates that the changing distribution of household types, as well as fertility levels and family size, in New Bedford was closely tied to the level of available resources. In fact, during the period 1860 to 1880, social class seemed to have become important and ethnicity less important in determining various aspects of family life in New Bedford. In other words, cultural values became less important and the economic situation more important. This surprises many who emphasize ethnic differences.

A complex picture of family emerges in late-nineteenth century New Bedford, with some expected and some surprising developments. As I continue this research, I hope to move beyond describing historical family in New Bedford, and become able to explain it more completely. I hope this article has given you a sense of what this kind of research is about and of its importance.

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