

Multigenerational families in nineteenth-century America

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ABSTRACT. Revisionist historians maintain that the aged in nineteenth-century America and north-western Europe usually preferred to reside alone or with only their spouse. According to this interpretation, the aged ordinarily resided with their adult children only out of necessity, especially in cases of poverty or infirmity. This article challenges that position, arguing that in mid-nineteenth-century America coresidence of the aged with their children was almost universal, and that the poor and sick aged were the group most likely to live alone. The article suggests that the decline of the multigenerational family in the twentieth century is connected to the rise of wage labour and the diminishing importance of agricultural and occupational inheritance.

In the first half of the twentieth century, policy analysts and social scientists identified a dramatic transition in the living arrangements of the aged, from multigenerational families in the nineteenth century to separate residence of the aged and their adult children in the twentieth. The creators of the American Social Security program, for example, routinely explained the growing need for old-age assistance as a consequence of the decline in multigenerational families. Thomas H. Eliot, Counsel for the Committee on Economic Security, which drafted the Social Security bill, put it this way:

In the old days, the old-age assistance problem was not so great so long as most people lived on farms, had big families, and at least some of the children stayed on the farm. It was customary when the old people got too old to do their share of the work they would stay on the farm and the sons or daughters would keep them there in the home. That pattern changed slowly but continuously from the early part of the century as more and more of the young,

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rural population left the farms. The three generation household (aged parents, children, and grandchildren), perfectly common 50 years ago, had begun to become very rare indeed. By the time people got old, the children had already left and gone to the city. There was no one to take care of them. Hence, an increase in the problem of the needy aged.¹

Nelson A. Cruikshank, another early advocate of Social Security, explained that before the 1930s most people thought ‘all a family needed for a secure old age or to ride out a period of depression was a quarter section of good land and a couple of sons to help farm it, or even a couple of daughters through whom able-bodied sons-in-law might be acquired’. And Ewan Clague, who joined the Social Security Board in 1936, wrote that earlier in the century, ‘old people simply lived on the farm until they died ... consequently, the modern old-age problem hadn’t developed’.²

In the 1960s, scholars using quantitative analysis began to challenge the assumption that multigenerational families predominated in the past. When Peter Laslett discovered that few households in pre-industrial England included extended kin, the impact of the new findings on sociological thought was swift and dramatic. Beginning in the late 1950s, some sociologists and anthropologists had already begun to criticize the theory that industrialization was inevitably accompanied by a shift from extended to nuclear family structure. With the new historical evidence that the first industrial nation had predominantly nuclear families long before industrialization, the old interpretation crumbled. By the mid-1970s, the theory of long-run stability in Western family structure had found its way into every one of the basic sociology textbooks.³

The effect on historians was equally exciting. Exploding the myth of a transition from extended to nuclear family structure was a potent demonstration of the power of social science methods in historical analysis. The discovery was a key stimulus for the development of the New Social History of the 1960s and 1970s, a movement based on the use of quantitative methods to study the lives of ordinary people in the past. Hundreds of historians worldwide turned to the study of family history, and sought to understand the economic, social, and ideological underpinnings of the pre-industrial nuclear family.

Today, there is a broad consensus among family historians and sociologists that for the past several centuries adult children and their parents have ordinarily resided in separate households throughout north-western Europe and North America. According to this revisionist interpretation, the aged lived together with their children only when they had no other alternative, and such living arrangements were ordinarily a form of old-age assistance.

This essay uses new sources and methods to challenge the revisionist interpretation of multigenerational families in the nineteenth century. As

more and more information about family patterns in the past has been uncovered, it has become increasingly clear that a static interpretation of family history is untenable. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of the living arrangements of the aged in the United States. This article argues that multigenerational families were almost universal among the aged population of the mid-nineteenth century. Moreover, under the pre-industrial economic system, multigenerational living arrangements offered benefits to both the older and the younger generation. The article concludes that the rise of wage labour since the later nineteenth century undermined the multigenerational family by reducing the incentives for the young to reside with their parents.

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS OF THE AGED IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY
AMERICA

The Historical Census Project at the Minnesota Population Center has developed a consistent series of data on family and household composition spanning the past 150 years. This database – called the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) – combines historical samples of census-enumeration forms combined with recent census microdata samples created by the U.S. Census Bureau. This project is now nearing completion; it lacks only the 1890 and 1930 census years, giving us a nearly continuous record of family composition over the past 150 years.⁴

The results are striking, and they contrast sharply with the unchanging picture of family structure presented by many family historians. The key changes over the past 150 years are summarized in Figure 1. In the mid-nineteenth century, about 70 per cent of persons aged 65 or older lived with their children or children-in-law. In addition, about a tenth of the elderly lived with other relatives – mainly grandchildren, siblings, nephews, and nieces. Another tenth lived with non-relatives; most of these were boarders, but some were household heads who kept boarders or servants. Only 11 per cent of the elderly in 1850 lived alone or with only their spouses, and only 0.7 per cent lived in institutions such as almshouses and homes for the aged.⁵

After 1860, residence with children began to decline. Increasingly, the elderly began to live alone, with their spouses only, or in old-age homes. The trend was gradual until 1920, but then began to accelerate. The decline in residence with children was most rapid during the period from 1940 to 1980, when more than half the total change took place. By 1990, less than 15 per cent of the aged lived with their children, while 6.8 per cent lived in institutions and almost 70 per cent alone or with their spouses only.

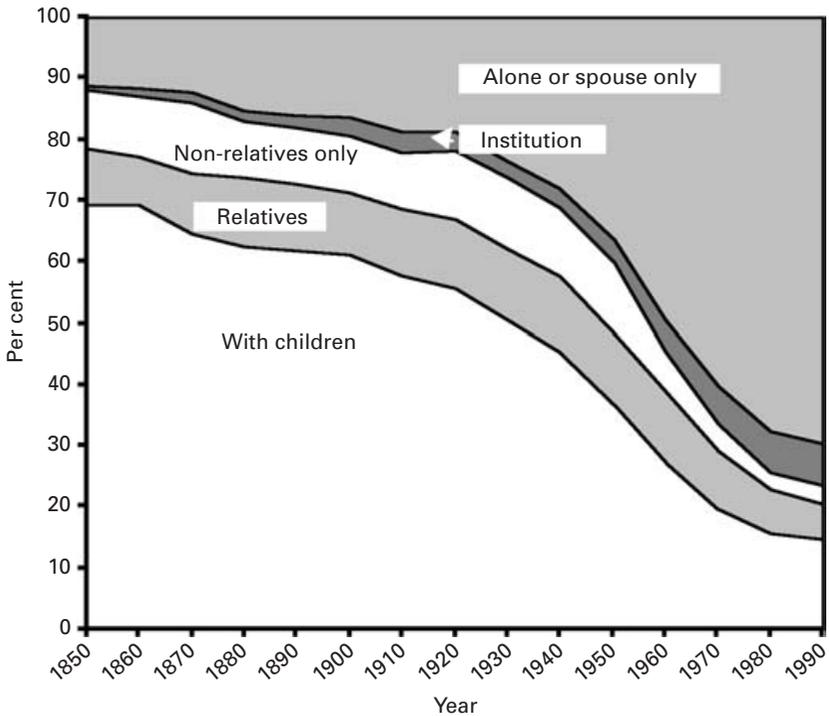


FIGURE 1. Distribution of living arrangements of white individuals and couples aged 65 or older, United States, 1850–1990. (Source: S. Ruggles, M. Sobek et al., *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 2.0*, Minneapolis, Historical Census Projects, University of Minnesota, 1997, hereafter IPUMS [available at <http://ipums.org>].)

The timing of change in the living arrangements of the elderly was not greatly influenced by sex or marital status. Among whites, widows, widowers, and married couples all lived mainly with children in the nineteenth century, as shown in Figure 2. Widows were slightly more likely to reside with children than were widowers, but the difference was not great and the shift to residence alone or in institutions during the twentieth century was common to both. Elderly blacks, however, shown in Figure 3, were considerably less likely than were whites to reside with their children in the nineteenth century. This was particularly true for unmarried black men, fewer than 50 per cent of whom lived with their children.

Among the 30 per cent of free aged (whites and free blacks) who lived without children in 1860, about a third had children listed adjacently on the census form. Since census enumerators walked from house to house, most of these children were probably living next door.⁶ Thus, 80 per cent

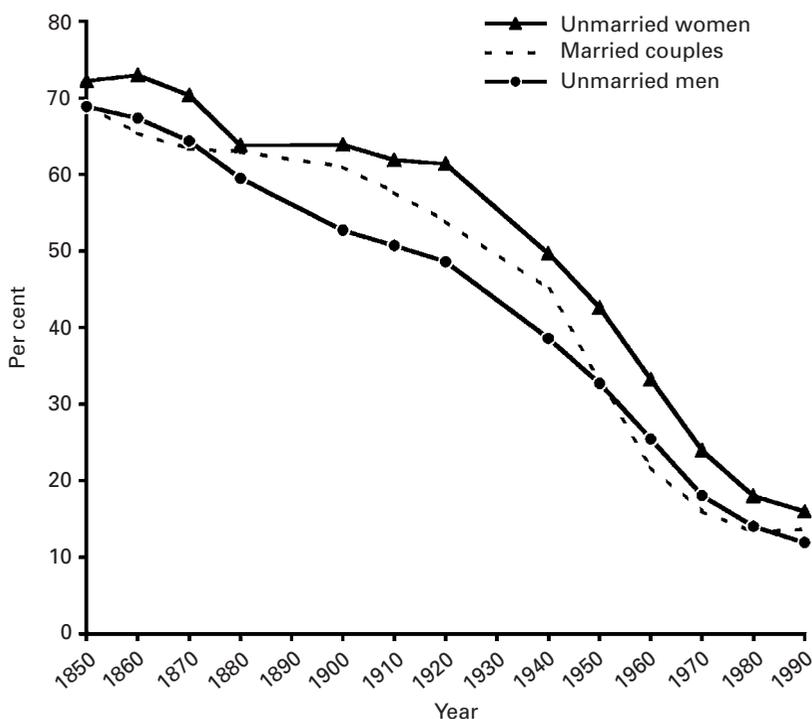


FIGURE 2. Percentages of elderly whites residing with own children, by sex and marital status, United States, 1850–1990. (Source: IPUMS.)

of the aged population either resided with children or in an adjacent dwelling. The high percentage of aged who resided with or adjacent to children in the nineteenth century is especially striking when we consider that not all of them had the possibility of residing with their children. About 7 per cent of the aged had never married, and with few exceptions this meant that they had no children with whom to reside. Another 8 per cent married, but the marriage produced no children. Some 5 per cent of the elderly had children, but all of them had died. Taking all this into account, then, somewhere on the order of a fifth of the aged in 1860 had no living children. About eight in ten elderly persons resided with or immediately adjacent to their children in 1860; thus, as near as we can measure, the practice was essentially universal.⁷

Despite the universality of the aged living with or adjacent to their children, the consensus of historians and sociologists is that the elderly in the past always preferred to live alone, just as they do today. Virtually all scholars agree that multigenerational families were only resorted to in

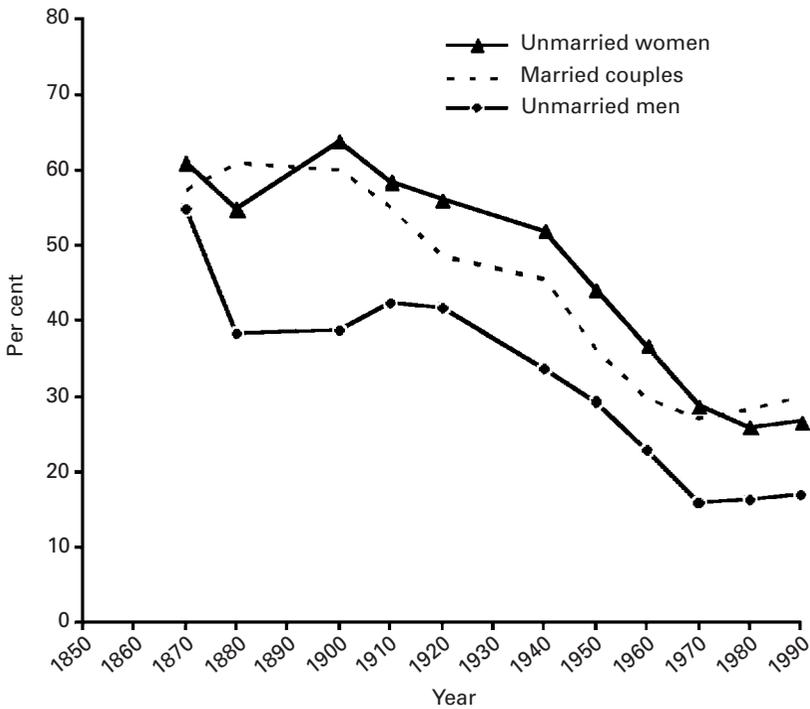


FIGURE 3. Percentages of blacks aged 65+ residing with one of their own children, by sex and marital status, United States, 1870–1990. (Source: IPUMS.)

cases of dire necessity. Tamara K. Hareven, the most prominent analyst of the history of generational relations, is representative of the mainstream of historical opinion:

Aging parents and children [in the nineteenth century] rarely coresided in multigenerational households ... Despite this overall commitment to residence in nuclear households, common to members of various ethnic groups and native-born Americans alike, nuclear households expanded to include other kin in times of need, during periods of accelerated migration or housing shortage. The most notable extension of the household occurred when elderly parents and especially widowed mothers were unable to maintain themselves in their own residences. In such cases, aging parents had an adult child return to live with them, or they moved into a child's household.⁸

These ideas derive directly from Laslett's work. Ironically, Hareven was among the first to discover that the elderly in the past usually resided with their grown children. Because she was already firmly convinced by Laslett's argument that there had always been a strong preference for nuclear

family composition, she downplayed the significance of the finding. She maintained instead that three-generation families were rare before the industrial revolution and were only resorted to in cases of necessity, 'primarily when elderly parents were too frail to maintain a separate residence'. Other historians and sociologists who have written on this subject in recent years agree with Hareven. Nineteenth-century elderly people only moved in with their children, they argue, when they were widowed, infirm, or impoverished and had no other alternatives.⁹

DEMOGRAPHIC CONDITIONS AND MULTIGENERATIONAL FAMILIES

The findings from the IPUMS do not contradict the earlier view that most households in the past were nuclear in structure. The percentage of households containing extended kin has limited relevance for the analysis of the living arrangements of the aged. The low percentage of households with multigenerational families in the past was not a reflection of the residential preferences of the elderly. In fact, there were profound demographic constraints on family composition in the pre-industrial world, which meant that few households had the potential to include elderly parents.¹⁰

Before the twentieth century, life expectancy was short but generations were long. Figure 4 shows the long-run trend in generation length, measured as the average age of parents at the birth of their children. With late marriage and minimal fertility control, nineteenth-century Americans bore children late in life, at an average age of about 33. The trend in life expectancy at birth is given in Figure 5. Early death together with long generations sharply limited the average period of overlap between adult children and their parents. In other words, many people did not live with their parents simply because their parents were dead.

High fertility also limited the potential number of multigenerational families. The long-run trend in the total fertility rate is presented in Figure 6. Women who survived through their childbearing years had over six children in 1850, compared with only about two children today. The large number of children in each family in the nineteenth century affected the potential number of multigenerational families because married brothers and sisters almost never resided together. Thus, when an elderly parent did survive, they usually lived with only one of their grown children. Because fertility was high, the typical elderly parent living with a grown child also had three or four other surviving children who all lived in households of their own. Thus, many adults did not reside with their parents just because their parents were already living with one of their brothers or sisters.

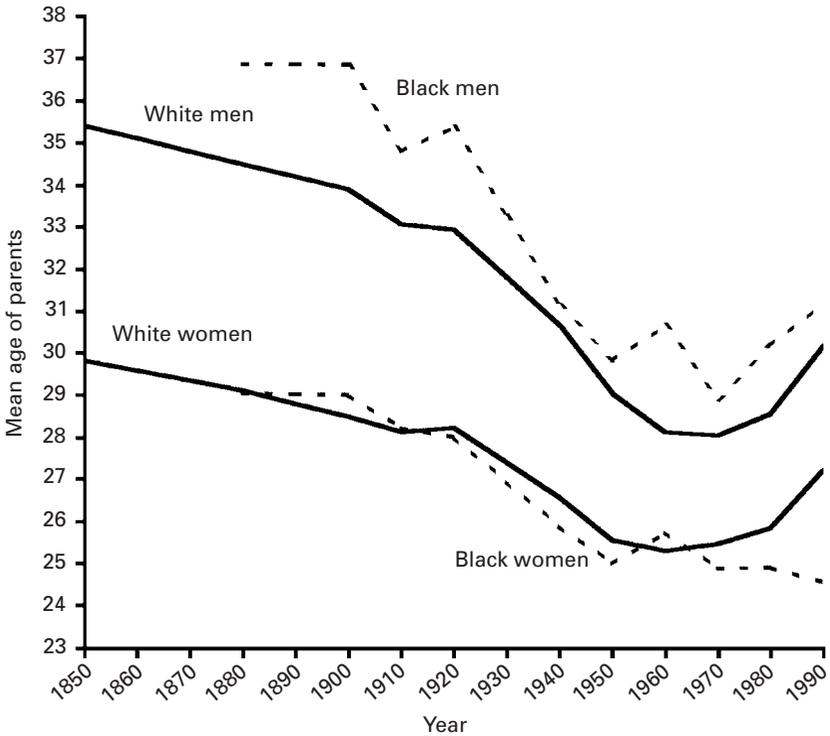


FIGURE 4. Average age of parents at the birth of their children, by sex and race, United States, 1850–1990. (Source: IPUMS.)

Long generations, short life expectancy, and high fertility in the nineteenth century meant that there was a small population of elderly people spread thinly among a much larger younger generation. Under these circumstances, the percentage of households with elderly kin was necessarily small.

This point is easily demonstrated. Figure 7 shows the maximum potential percentages of households with elderly kin in each available census year from 1850 to 1990. These potential percentages illustrate what would have happened if every elderly person moved in with relatives. The measure is calculated by counting the number of elderly individuals and couples residing without kin – whether they are in households of their own, in nursing homes, or in boarding houses – and shifting them into households with relatives. Of course, a few of the elderly had no living relatives, so the percentages are slightly overestimated. In 1850, some 12 per cent of white households had the potential to include elderly kin; by 1990 this

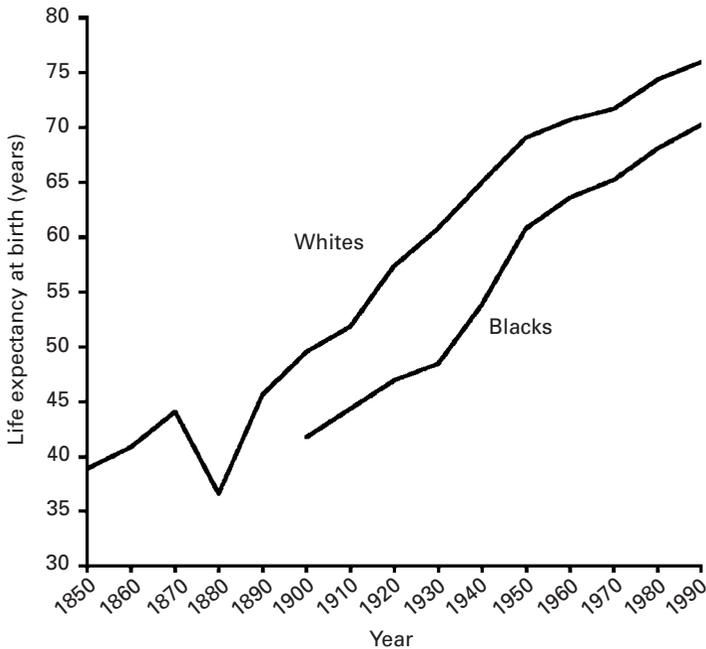


FIGURE 5. Life expectancy at birth by race, United States, 1850–1990. (Note: No good estimates are available for blacks before 1900. Source: Michael R. Haines, ‘The population of the United States 1790–1920’, National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 56, 1994.)

figure had almost tripled. Blacks always had a smaller potential percentage of households with elderly kin, owing mainly to their higher mortality. Blacks also had a smaller increase in the potential for households with elderly relatives, from 11 per cent in 1880 to 23 per cent in 1990. Among both whites and blacks in all census years, only a minority of households had the potential to include elderly kin, and in the nineteenth century the demographic constraints on such households were especially severe.

The actual percentages of households with elderly kin can be measured directly in each census year. As shown in Figure 8, the frequency of such households was quite stable for whites from 1880 through 1940 and then declined; among blacks, the decline occurred two decades later. If the actual households with elderly kin in Figure 7 are compared with the potential households with elderly kin in Figure 8, we can see a dramatic shift in residential preferences. Figure 9 shows the observed households with elderly kin as a percentage of the potential households with elderly kin. Among whites, this percentage declined steadily, from 80 per cent in 1880

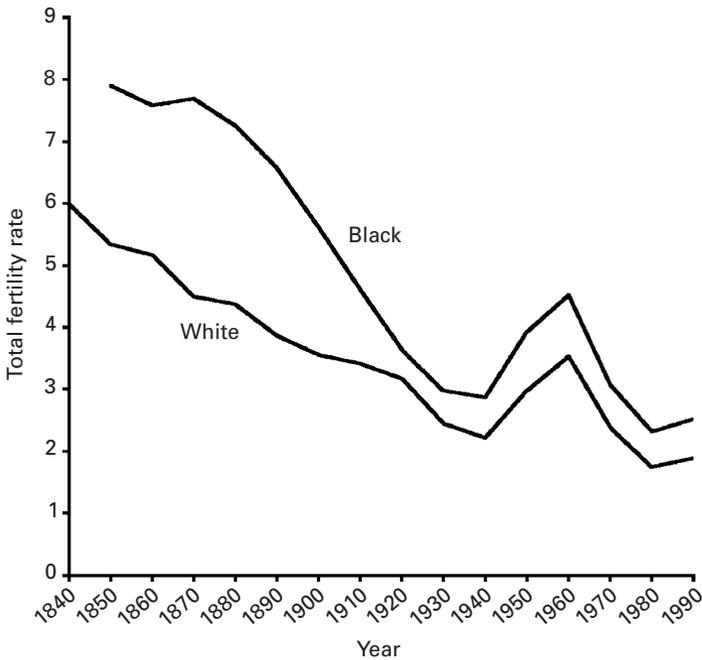


FIGURE 6. Total fertility by race, United States, 1840–1990. (Source: J. David Hacker, ‘The human cost of war: the American population in the Civil War era’, unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1999; Michael R. Haines, ‘The population of the United States 1790–1920’, National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 56, 1994.)

to 14 per cent in 1990. The general trend was the same among blacks, but the degree of change was significantly smaller.

This exercise demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of nineteenth-century households could not have included elderly kin even if every elderly person had moved in with relatives. In the twentieth century, the demographic opportunities to form multigenerational families expanded dramatically, but as the century wore on fewer and fewer people took advantage of those opportunities.¹¹

THE FORMATION OF MULTIGENERATIONAL FAMILIES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

The best evidence suggests that in the nineteenth century multigenerational families were usually formed when one child remained in the parental home after reaching adulthood to work on the family farm or

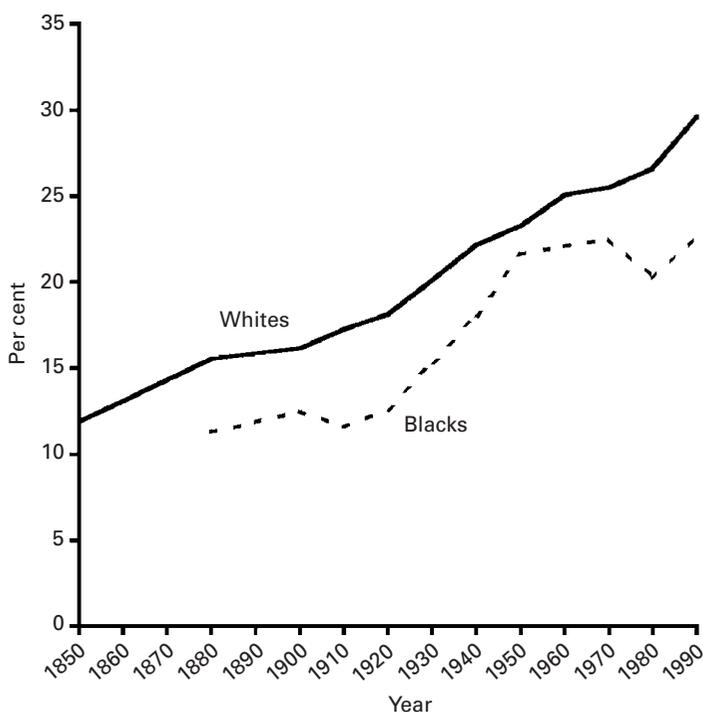


FIGURE 7. Potential percentages of households including elderly kin, United States, 1850–1990. (Source: IPUMS.)

business with the anticipation of eventually inheriting. Even though most households did not include multiple generations at any given moment, the great majority of families went through a multigenerational phase if the parents lived long enough. According to this interpretation, the multigenerational family was a normal stage of the pre-industrial family cycle. Families were typically multigenerational only for a brief period after the younger generation reached adulthood and before the older generation died.¹² This multigenerational phase nevertheless played an essential role in the functioning of the pre-industrial family economy. It ensured continuity of the labour supply on farms and for other traditional livelihoods and provided economic security in old age. The two generations were interdependent; the elders needed their children to continue to operate the farm, but as long as the elders held the property they were ultimately in control. With the replacement of the pre-industrial family economy by a wage-labour system, the incentives for multigenerational families disappeared.

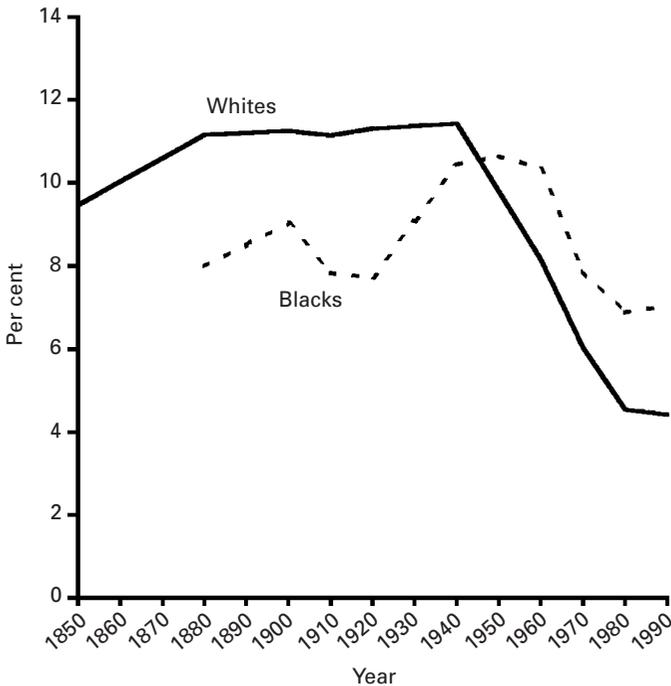


FIGURE 8. Actual percentages of households including elderly kin, United States, 1850–1990. (Source: IPUMS.)

Most other historians working in this area have a very different interpretation of the formation of multigenerational families in the nineteenth century. Kertzer has dubbed the dominant interpretation the ‘Nuclear Reincorporation Theory’.¹³ The theory states that all children ordinarily left home when they got married. Then, when the elderly parents became widowed, infirm, or impoverished, they moved into the household of one of their children. Thus, most historians maintain, the elderly in the multigenerational family was usually the dependent generation, and the younger generation took in their needy elders because of altruism. This theory allows family historians to reconcile their belief that a nuclear family system predominated in the nineteenth century with the empirical finding that the elderly ordinarily resided with their children. It also provides a neat explanation for the decline of multigenerational families in the twentieth century: with rising incomes, more and more of the elderly could afford to maintain themselves, and did not have to move in with their children.

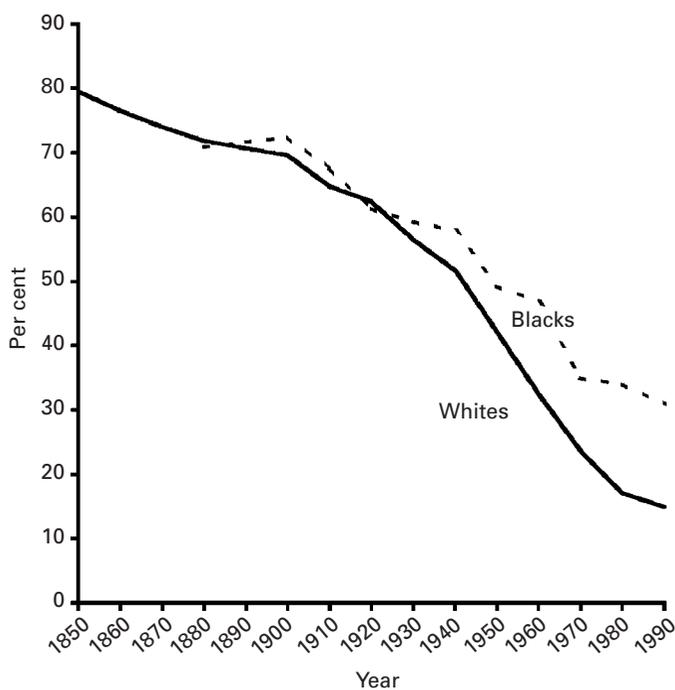


FIGURE 9. Actual households including elderly kin as a percentage of potential ones, United States, 1850–1990. (Source: IPUMS.)

It matters who moved in with whom, because the formation of multigenerational families sheds light on the motivations of both generations, and has powerful implications for the disappearance of the multigenerational family in the twentieth century. It is difficult to study the formation of families in the nineteenth century, because our sources are limited. Qualitative sources – such as letters and diaries – provide many examples both of children remaining with their parents and of the elderly moving in with their children, but they cannot tell us which pattern predominated. Nor can the available quantitative sources answer the question unambiguously. The census is a cross-section of the population at a given moment, so it cannot directly tell us how multigenerational families came about. But the quantitative evidence does provide some revealing clues.

If children established independent households upon reaching adulthood and their parents moved in with them later, that implies that parents and children ordinarily resided separately for a period. Thus one would expect to find that the proportion of persons residing with children would

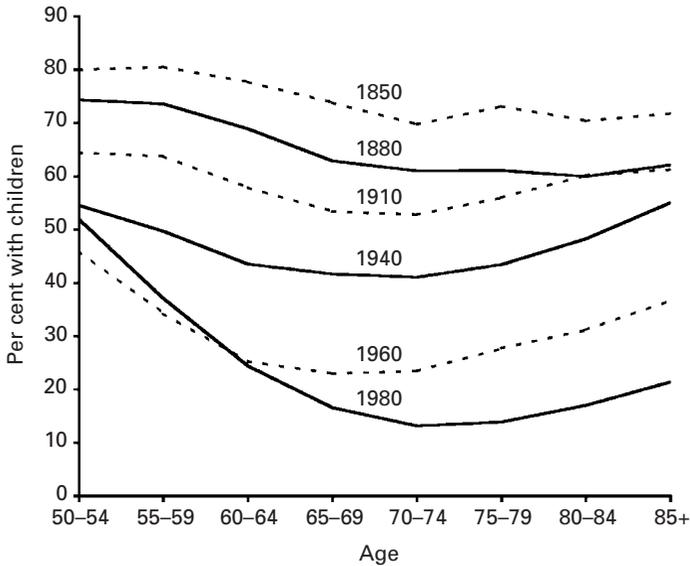


FIGURE 10. Percentages of white persons residing with one of their own children, by age, United States, 1850–1990. (Source: IPUMS.)

decline in late middle age as the children left home, and then increase again in old age as the parents moved in with their children. By contrast, if the co-resident child had never left home, one would expect no increase in co-residence of the elderly with increasing age. Figure 10 shows the percentage of whites residing with their children by age for selected years from 1850 to 1980. In recent census years, there has been the expected rise in co-residence among the very old. This pattern is most clearly evident in 1960, when persons aged 85 or over were 60 per cent more likely to reside with children than persons aged 65 to 69. The hypothesis that multigenerational families were formed when dependent elderly moved in with their children fits reasonably well with the evidence from the twentieth century. But in 1850 and 1880, there was no increase in co-residence with increasing age. This finding is consistent with the interpretation that the elderly did not typically move in with their children for support; instead, the children never moved out.

Headship patterns offer a second clue to the formation of multigenerational families. The federal census directed enumerators to list the head of household first on the census schedule, so enumerators had to identify which individual was the head. It seems implausible that dependent elderly who moved into the household of a child for assistance would assume the household headship. On the other hand, in families where the

child remained in their parental household after marriage, we know that the child often assumed headship when the father retired or died. Thus, when the elderly are listed as head, we can reasonably assume that they did not move in with their children; if a child is listed as head, however, that does not necessarily mean that the household was formed independently by the child. The proportion of the elderly listed as head can therefore reasonably be regarded as a lower-bound estimate of the proportion remaining in their own households.

In every census year between 1850 and 1900, over 75 per cent of elderly men residing with a child were listed as the household head. This suggests that in multigenerational households including elderly men, the older generation ordinarily retained authority. It is doubtful that many of these elderly men had moved in with their children because they could no longer support themselves; it is far more plausible that the younger generation remained in the parental household after reaching adulthood. About one-third of unmarried elderly women in multigenerational households were listed as household heads, but this does not mean that the elderly mother necessarily moved in with her children after she was widowed. In many cases, property and authority shifted to the male heir upon the death of the father.

Even if most multigenerational families were formed when children remained in their parental home after reaching adulthood, there is evidence that some elderly people did move in with their children. The clearest indication comes from information on marital status. Although both the married elderly and widowed elderly ordinarily resided with children, the widows did so slightly more frequently than married couples. In 1880, the earliest year for which we have full information on marital status, about 68 per cent of elderly widows lived with one or more of their children compared with only 63 per cent of married couples. This suggests that a significant minority of elderly widows either moved in with a child when their husbands died, or that a child who had previously left home moved back upon the death of the father.

The censuses demonstrate unequivocally that the great majority of the nineteenth-century elderly who had a living child resided with a child. Did the parents move in with their children, or did the children remain in their parental household after reaching adulthood? The evidence on headship and on the age pattern of co-residence indicates that in most cases the children were remaining in their parental household. Still, some elderly clearly did move in with children in old age. The most plausible interpretation is that both patterns were fairly widespread: usually adult children remained in their parental households, but occasionally the elderly – especially widows – did move in with their children.

PARENTAL WIDOWHOOD AND THE MARRIAGE OF CHILDREN

Only a minority of married elderly persons in the nineteenth century resided with married children. More often, married elderly resided with unmarried children and unmarried elderly resided with married children. About 17 per cent of married couples in the mid-nineteenth century resided with married children; by contrast, 56 per cent of widowed elderly resided with married children.

Some analysts have interpreted this pattern as evidence supporting the nuclear reincorporation hypothesis. They reason that married elderly resided with their unmarried children, but that the younger generation departed upon marriage and established independent households. Then, when the older generation became widowed or infirm, they moved in with their married children. But the evidence on headship and on the age pattern of co-residence suggests that nuclear reincorporation was not the dominant mechanism of multigenerational families.

There is an alternate interpretation of the association between parental widowhood and the marriage of children. The most important determinant of marriage for the younger generation in multigenerational families was not the marital status of the parents, but rather property ownership of the children. As illustrated in Figure 11, members of the younger generation in multigenerational households seldom married before they obtained property. Historians have long argued that in pre-industrial Western society marriage was contingent on economic circumstances: young couples were usually forced to delay marriage until they were economically independent.¹⁴

The younger generation in multigenerational families could obtain the family property either by inheritance or gift. It appears that only a minority of nineteenth-century male property holders transferred their property to their children while they were still alive, although it clearly did happen from time to time.¹⁵ In 80 per cent of multigenerational households with a surviving father between 1850 and 1870, all the property was in the hands of the father, but in the other 20 per cent of cases, the younger generation held at least some of the property. When the father died, the property was usually split between the widow and the children. Widows were almost always entitled to a share of the family property, whether or not their husbands left wills, and this no doubt helped to protect their position in the family.¹⁶ The largest share of land, however, ordinarily went to the co-resident child.

It is clear, then, why the death of a father was associated with marriage of the younger generation. In most cases, the children had to wait for the death of the father in order to inherit, and in most cases they could not

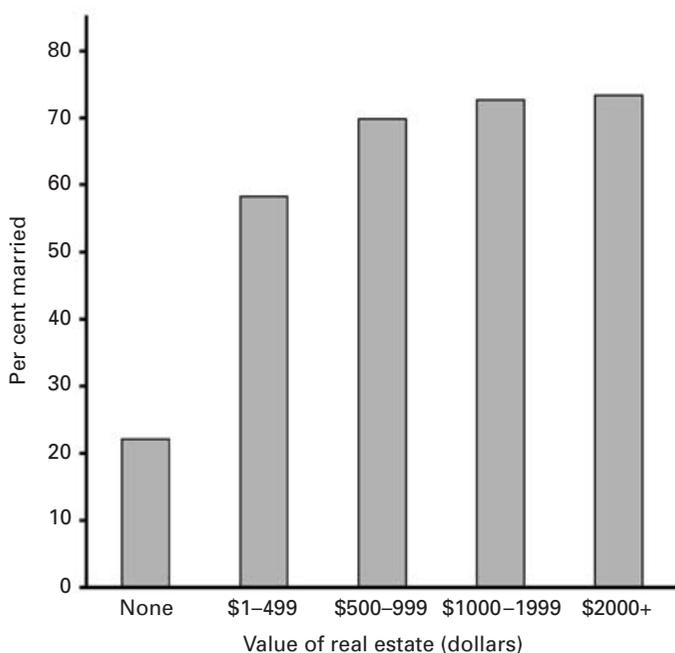


FIGURE 11. Percentages married by value of real estate owned, white persons residing with elderly parents, United States, 1850–1990. (Source: IPUMS.)

marry without the inheritance. But widowed men were also more likely to reside with married children than were married men. Maternal death did not ordinarily lead to an inheritance when the father survived. Thus, we would not expect the adult children of widowed men to be in any better position to marry than were the adult children of married men. Why, then, did widowed men tend to live with married children, while married men lived with single children?

The answer is connected to the rigid sexual division of labour in nineteenth-century households. Some essential tasks – including food storage and preparation, housekeeping, and clothing manufacture and repair – were only performed by women. It was therefore essential to have an adult woman in every household, and the need for an adult woman was especially critical in farm households. Thus, if an elderly man living with an unmarried son was widowed, he had two options: he could either remarry himself, or he could provide the resources for his son to marry. In most cases, he did the former: in 1910, the earliest year for which we have information, about 63 per cent of ever-widowed men had remarried.

When for whatever reason the patriarch did not remarry, however, he had little choice but to allow his son to marry.

If an elderly man living with an unmarried daughter became widowed, there was much less need to allow the daughter to marry. As long as the father was fit to carry out the male tasks, the family could survive with one adult man and one adult woman. The result of this pattern is evident in Figure 12, which shows the percentages of children married by sex and by sex of parent. In families with a widowed father and a daughter, only 38 per cent of the daughters were married in 1850–1860. By contrast, in families with a widowed father and a son, 64 per cent of the sons were married. This dramatic difference in the percentages married between sons and daughters supports the interpretation that the ability of the younger generation to marry was contingent on the resources provided by their parents.

SICKNESS, WEALTH, AND THE LIVING ARRANGEMENTS OF
THE AGED

The evidence on the formation of multigenerational families does not resolve the issue of the reasons for their composition: was it a mutually beneficial arrangement, or was it a system of old-age support resorted to only out of necessity? To assess whether or not the elderly lived with their children because they were dependent on them, we must explore evidence on sickness and wealth.

Most historians agree that the nineteenth-century elderly lived with their children for one of two main reasons: either they were too sick or frail to care adequately for themselves in their own residence, or they were too poor to afford a place of their own. The nineteenth-century censuses provide sufficient information to test both of these hypotheses.

The 1880 census included a unique inquiry: ‘Is the person on the day of the Enumerator’s visit sick or temporarily disabled, so as to be unable to attend to ordinary business or duties? If so, what is the sickness or disability?’ This question cannot be expected to capture all cases of frailty, but the responses are full of entries like ‘Old age and rheumatism’, ‘enfeebled by years’, ‘helpless from age and infirmity’, and ‘dotage’. Even if the question is not perfect, it is the most comprehensive question on health ever to appear in an American population census. If ill-health were a significant motivation for the elderly to reside with their children in the nineteenth century, we would expect to find that sick elderly would reside with children more frequently than did healthy elderly.

It turns out that sickness and disability were not associated with multigenerational family composition. Among elderly persons listed with a

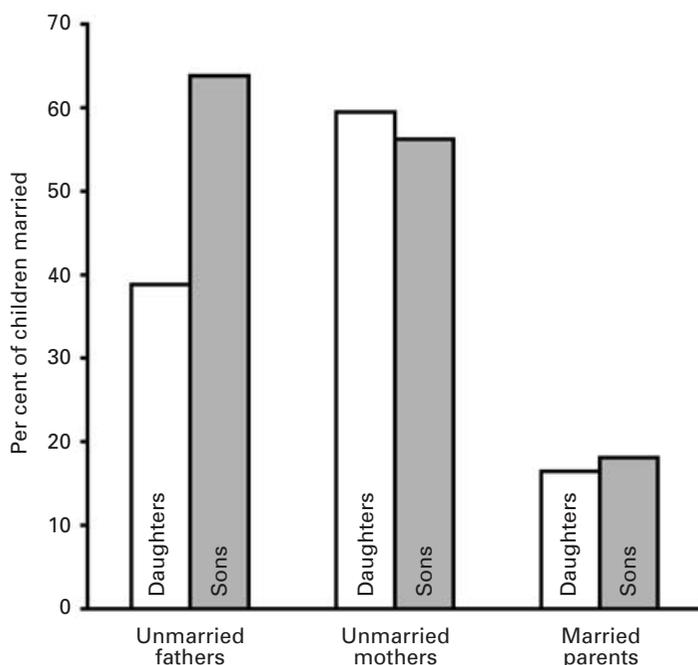


FIGURE 12. Percentages of sons and daughters married, by sex and marital status of elderly parents, persons residing with elderly parents, United States, 1850–1860. (Source: IPUMS.)

chronic illness in 1880, 56.0 per cent resided with a child; by contrast, 60.5 per cent of healthy elderly resided with a child.¹⁷ The same pattern prevailed for women and men alike among both blacks and whites. If anything, then, sickness among the elderly actually *discouraged* residence in multigenerational families. This makes sense if the younger generation was usually dependent on the older generation, since chronically ill elderly persons probably had less to offer as incentive to stay around.

The US censuses also provide good information on wealth. In the mid-nineteenth century, the census included a question on the value of real estate owned by each individual.¹⁸ The relationship between value of property and living arrangements is given in Figure 13. The wealthiest elderly were the ones most likely to reside in multigenerational families. This is exactly what would be expected if the younger generation ordinarily remained on the family farm with the hope of eventually inheriting; if the parents had little property the children had little incentive to remain behind. If the nineteenth-century multigenerational families were mainly formed to assist destitute elderly parents, however, it would be expected that the wealthy would be the group most likely to live alone.

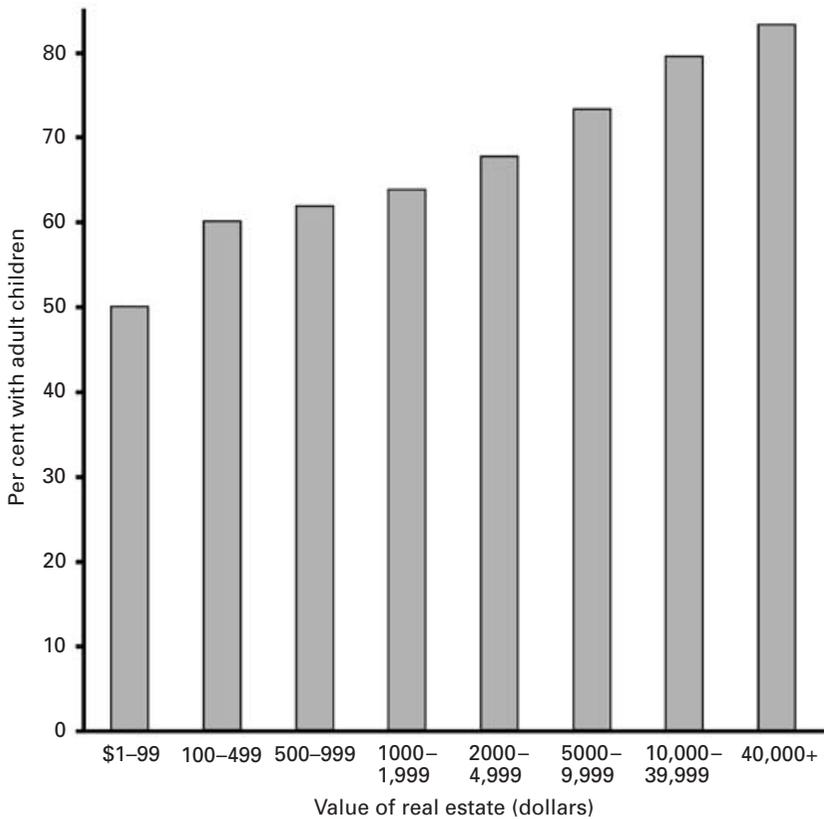


FIGURE 13. Percentages of the elderly residing with adult children by value of real estate held, United States, 1850-1990. (Source: IPUMS.)

Other indicators of socio-economic status confirm the finding that high economic status was associated with multigenerational family composition in the nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century, middle- and upper-income families almost always had live-in domestic help. Several historians have argued that dependent elderly kin – particularly mothers or mothers-in-law – in the nineteenth century took the place of servants, by providing child-care services and helping with housekeeping in exchange for their maintenance. Thus, one might expect to find that multigenerational households had fewer servants than other households. In fact residence with servants was strongly associated with residence in multigenerational families. In households with multiple servants in 1880, for example, 73.2 per cent of aged persons resided with their children. By

contrast, in households with no servants just 59.8 per cent of the aged had coresident children. This relationship was virtually as strong for women as for men. The reason is simple: it was the rich who most often resided in multigenerational families.

The only indicator of socio-economic status consistently available for the entire period from 1850 to 1990 is occupation. Unfortunately, this measure is only available for a minority of elderly. For nineteenth-century women, occupational information is seldom available and even when it is it often provides little insight into economic well-being. Moreover, with the rise of the wage-labour system, men began to retire when they reached old age. Thus, by 1920 occupational information is unavailable for 37 per cent of elderly men. Despite these limitations, the occupational data is invaluable because it provides our only means of tracing the long-run trend in the relationship between economic status and multigenerational family composition.

The IPUMS census database classifies the occupational information in all census years into 280 job titles defined by the Census Bureau for the census of 1950. To analyse the living arrangements of the elderly, four occupational groups were defined based on the median income of persons with each occupational title in 1950. Category one is the lowest, and it includes all titles with median incomes that fell in the bottom quarter of the 1950 income distribution, such as domestic servants, newsboys, waiters and waitresses, laundresses, and farm labourers. Category two, which represents the second quarter of the income distribution, includes cashiers, stenographers and typists, apprentices of various sorts, telegraph messengers, shoe repairmen, barbers, and teamsters. The third category includes most of the skilled artisans, such as bakers, blacksmiths, carpenters, mechanics, plumbers, and tailors as well as skilled factory workers, policemen, and bookkeepers. The highest quarter of the income distribution has the engineers, lawyers, doctors, academics, stockbrokers, and other managers, officials and proprietors.

The relationship between the four occupational categories and residence with adult children is given in Figure 14. The analysis is restricted to elderly employed males. Farmers are also excluded because their occupation is a poor indicator of their economic status. The results are striking. From 1850 to 1920, there was a clear association between high economic status and residence in multigenerational families: the better paying the job, the more likely was coresidence with children. From 1940 to 1970, however, this relationship gradually diminished, as the percentage of multigenerational families in the highest economic group declined by comparison with the lowest group. By 1980, the transition was complete: the better the job, the lower the likelihood of residence with children.

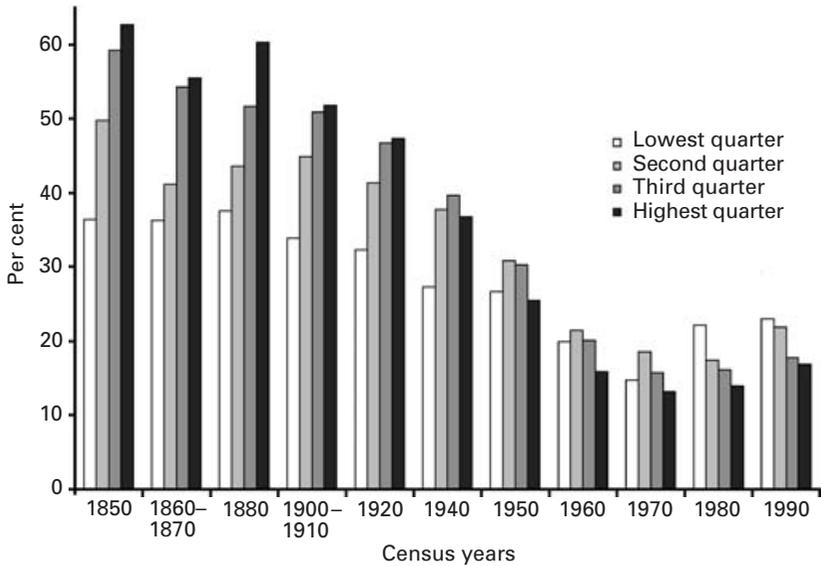


FIGURE 14. Percentages of elderly employed men residing with adult children, by occupational rank, United States, 1850–1990. Notes: elderly defined as 65+; 1850–1860, restricted to whites only; low-density samples [1860, 1870 and 1900, 1910] combined to obtain sufficient cases in all occupational groups. (Source: IPUMS.)

Taken as a whole, the evidence on the class patterns of multigenerational family composition in the nineteenth century is irresistible. Multigenerational families in the nineteenth century were not a refuge for the poor; on the contrary, they were especially characteristic of the rich. The poor elderly, who had little to offer their children, were the group most likely to end up living alone.

THE DECLINE OF THE MULTIGENERATIONAL FAMILY

The evidence presented in this article clearly shows that multigenerational residence was the norm among the aged population in America in the mid-nineteenth century. This arrangement made sense under the pre-industrial economic system. The multigenerational family system of mid-nineteenth century America provided clear benefits for both the older generation and the younger generation. Elderly farmers needed an adult child or child-in-law to do heavy work when they were no longer capable of doing it themselves. The younger generation eventually inherited the farm.

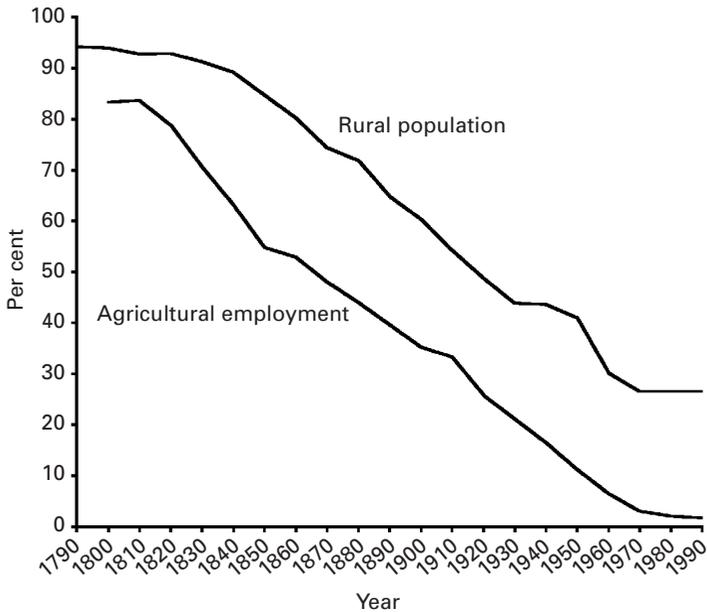


FIGURE 15. Percentages of the population that was rural, and of the labour force employed in agriculture, United States, 1790–1990. (Sources: Agricultural employment 1790–1840: S. Lebergott, *Manpower in economic growth: the American record since 1800* [New York, 1964]; agricultural employment 1850–1990, IPUMS; percentages rural: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical statistics of the United States: colonial times to 1970* [Washington, 1975].)

In pre-industrial America, the economy was based on farming and wealth derived from the land. Land was concentrated in the hands of men, who inherited it from their fathers and passed it on to their sons. Those men who did not work in farming – such as merchants, artisans, and craftsmen – were generally self-employed. This system was destroyed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by a fundamental transformation of the economy. The gulf that separates the late twentieth century from the early nineteenth century is apparent in Figure 15, which shows the estimated percentages of the population residing in rural areas and the percentages of the labour force engaged in agricultural pursuits from 1800 to 1990. Agriculture and craft ceased to be the dominant occupations; they were eclipsed by the enormous growth of jobs in commerce, manufactures and industry. This shift in the economy undermined the economic logic of the pre-industrial family.

Wage labour undermined the family economy through two mechanisms. First, rising opportunities attracted young men off the farm or away from the family business. Second, when those life-long wage-earners

aged, they had no need for their children to remain and operate the family business, and they had no incentives to offer for the next generation to stick around.

Thus, the decline of the multigenerational family since the mid-nineteenth century should be regarded as an indirect response to economic transformation, which shifted the balance of power within the family and reduced incentives for coresidence. With the growth of new job opportunities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many young men left the farm in favour of the high wages, independence, and excitement offered by town life. The declining importance of farming in turn meant that fewer and fewer parents could offer the incentive of agricultural inheritance to keep their grown children from leaving home. Moreover, without the labour demands of the farm, fewer and fewer elderly had reason to try to keep their children at home. Many of the other traditional self-employed village occupations – such as those of blacksmiths, cabinetmakers, and shoemakers – were rendered obsolete by industrialization, and the disappearance of such businesses reinforced the effects of the decline of agriculture.

Other explanations for the shift in the living arrangements of the aged have been proposed, and the mechanisms of change will continue to be investigated and debated. But the transformation of the family cannot be explained unless historians move beyond the simplistic generalization that the nuclear family structure was always preferred in the pre-industrial West. Coresidence of the aged with their children in the nineteenth century was not merely a form of old-age support, resorted to only in cases of dire necessity.

ENDNOTES

- 1 T. A. Eliot, 'The legal background of the Social Security Act', presented at a general staff meeting at Social Security Administration Headquarters, Baltimore, Maryland, on February 3, 1961. Available at <http://www.ssa.gov/history/eliot2.html>, accessed 7 March 2003.
- 2 N. H. Cruikshank, 'A philosophy for social security', Third Robert M. Ball Lecture, Baltimore, 12 December 1978; E. Clague, 'Factors contributing to the passage of the Social Security Act', lecture delivered at a general staff meeting at the Social Security Administration Headquarters, Baltimore, Maryland on 20 July 1961. Also see J. D. Brown, 'The genesis of social security in America', Princeton, N.J., 1969. All three papers are available at <http://www.ssa.gov/history/officials.html>, accessed 7 March 2003. Some of these ideas can be traced to the nineteenth century; see for example F. Le Play, *L'organisation de la famille selon le vrai modèle signalé par l'histoire de toutes les races et de tous les temps* (Tours, 1895); E. Durkheim, *The division of labor in society*. (Glencoe, Ill., 1960 [1893]); also see, for mid-twentieth-century antecedents, L. Wirth,

- 'Urbanism as a way of life', *American Journal of Sociology* **44** (1938), 1–24; R. Linton, 'The natural history of the family', in *The family: its function and destiny*, ed. R. N. Anshen (New York, 1959); T. Parsons, 'The kinship system of the contemporary United States', *American Anthropologist* **45** (1943), 22–38; T. Parsons and R. F. Bales, *Family, socialization, and the interaction process* (Glencoe, Ill., 1955); T. Parsons, 'The social structure of the family', in Anshen ed., *The family*. In addition to these older theorists, my interpretation owes much to L. Berkner, 'The stem family and the developmental cycle of the peasant household: an eighteenth century Austrian example', *American Historical Review* **77** (1972), 398–418, and Berkner, 'The use and misuse of census data in the historical study of family structure', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* **5** (1975), 721–38.
- 3 P. Laslett and J. Harrison, 'Clayworth and Cogenhoe', in H. E. Bell and R. L. Ollard eds., *Historical essays 1600–1730: presented to David Ogg* (London, 1963); P. Laslett, *The world we have lost* (London, 1965). In addition to the textbooks, Laslett's interpretation provided a key underpinning for M. J. Bane's popular and influential book, *Here to stay: American families in the twentieth century* (New York, 1976).
 - 4 S. Ruggles, M. Sobek et al., *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 2.0*, Minneapolis: Historical Census Projects, University of Minnesota, 1997. The data are available freely at <http://ipums.org>. The current samples for 1860, 1870, 1900 and 1910 are comparatively small, with between 100,000 and 365,000 cases each. Data are presently being entered to raise the density of these samples to a minimum of 1-in-100, which is the standard for most other census years. S. Preston of the University of Pennsylvania created the original samples for 1900 and 1910.
 - 5 The estimates for the period 1850–1870 are based on imputed family relationships, since explicit relationships were not recorded by the census in those years. The IPUMS allocates family relationships for the period 1850 through 1870 by means of a probabilistic procedure that takes account of 21 individual and family characteristics. When the same procedure is applied to the censuses from 1880 through 1940, where explicit information about family relationship is available, it yields measures of family composition that fall within a percentage point or two of the same measures based on reported relation-to-head. However, we expect that the allocated relationships may blur differentials between population subgroups to some extent. For a description of the procedures, see S. Ruggles, M. Sobek et al., *IPUMS-98 User's Guide* (Minneapolis, 1997), Volume I, available at <http://ipums.org>.
 - 6 This estimate is based on examination on the census microfilm of approximately 500 elderly people residing without children randomly selected from the 1860 sample. It was common for nineteenth-century farmers to build a second house on the property. The second house was usually smaller than the first; it might house a newly married child, and could also serve as a retirement home for the older generation.
 - 7 The estimate of the percentage never-married is based on persons aged 85+ in 1880; the estimate of childlessness is based on persons born before 1820 as reported in the 1900 and 1910 censuses; the estimate on child mortality is based on microsimulation together with empirical evidence on the clustering of child deaths; see S. Ruggles, 'Confessions of a microsimulator: problems in modeling the demography of kinship', *Historical Methods* **26** (1993), 161–9 and S. Ruggles, 'The effects of demographic change on multigenerational family structure: United States whites 1880–1980', in A. Bideau, A. Perrenoud, K. A. Lynch and G. Brunet, eds., *Les systèmes démographiques du passé* (Lyons: Centre Jacques Cartier, 1996), 21–40.
 - 8 T. K. Hareven, 'Aging and generational relations: a historical and life course perspective', *Annual Review of Sociology* **20** (1994), 442.

- 9 T. K. Hareven, 'Introduction: Aging and generational relations over the life course', in T. K. Hareven ed., *Aging and generational relations over the life course: a historical and cross-cultural perspective* (Berlin, 1996), 1–2. On the pervasiveness of this viewpoint in the literature, see for example D. S. Smith, 'Life course, norms, and the family system of older Americans in 1900'. *Journal of Family History* 4 (1979), 285–98; 'Historical change in the household structure of the elderly in economically developed countries', in R. W. Fogel, S. B. Keisler, and E. Shanas eds., *Aging: stability and change in the family* (New York, 1981), and 'Accounting for change in the families of the elderly in the United States, 1900–present', in D. Van Tassel and P. N. Stearns, eds., *Old age in a bureaucratic society: the elderly, the experts, and the state in American history* (Westport, Conn., 1986); D. Costa, 'Displacing the family: Union army pensions and elderly living arrangements', *Journal of Political Economy* 6 (1997), 1269–92; C. Elman, 'Intergenerational household structure and economic change at the turn of the twentieth century', *Journal of Family History* 4 (1998), 417–40; K. McGarry and R. F. Schoeni, 'Social security, economic growth, and the rise in elderly widows' independence in the twentieth century', *Demography* 37 (2000), 221–36; E. Kramarow, 'Living alone among the elderly in the United States: historical perspectives on household change', *Demography* 32 (1995), 335–52; E. A. Hammel, 'The elderly in the bosom of the family: *la famille souche* and hardship Reincorporation', in D. I. Kertzer and P. Laslett eds., *Aging in the past: demography, society and old age*, (Berkeley, 1995), 107–27; R. Wall, 'Elderly persons and members of their households in England and Wales from pre-industrial times to the present', in Kertzer and Laslett eds., *Aging in the past*, 81–106; R. Schoeni, 'Reassessing the decline in parent–child old-age coresidence during the twentieth century', *Demography* 35 (1998), 307–13. The idea that extended families were a refuge for the poor in the nineteenth century is also widespread in the work of the first generation of quantitative social historians, for example M. Anderson, *Family structure in nineteenth century Lancashire* (Cambridge, 1972); T. K. Hareven, 'The dynamics of kin in an industrial community', in John Demos and S. S. Boocock eds., *Turning points: historical and sociological Essays on the Family* (Chicago, 1978); T. K. Hareven, *Family time and industrial time: the relationship between the family and work in a New England industrial community* (New York, 1982); M. B. Katz, *The people of Hamilton, Canada West* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975); J. O. Foster, *class struggle in the Industrial Revolution: early industrial capitalism in three English towns* (London, 1974); J. Modell, 'Patterns of consumption, acculturation, and family income Strategies late nineteenth-century America', in T. K. Hareven and M. Vinovskis eds., *Family and population in nineteenth century America* (Princeton, 1978).
- 10 The idea of demographic constraints on multigenerational families was first proposed by M. Levy, 'Aspects of the analysis of family structure', in M. Levy et al. eds., *Aspects of the analysis of family structure* (Princeton, 1965). The first empirical estimates of the effect were published by A. J. Coale in the same volume: 'Estimates of average size of household', in Levy et al., *Aspects of the analysis of family structure*. Since then, analysts have used a wide variety of approaches to address the problem, and have obtained a wide variety of results; see D. V. Glass, 'London inhabitants within the walls 1695', *London Record Society* 2 (1966), introduction; T. K. Burch, 'Some demographic determinants of average household size: an analytic approach'. *Demography* 7 (1970), 61–70; E. A. Wrigley, *Population in history* (London, 1969); Brian Bradley and Franklin Mendels, 'Can the hypothesis of a nuclear family be tested empirically?', *Population Studies* 32 (1978), 381–94; K. Wachter, E. Hammel, and P. Laslett, *Statistical studies in historical social structure* (New York, 1978); W. Post, F. Van Poppel, E. VanImhoff, and E. Kruse, 'Reconstructing the extended kin-network in the

- Netherlands with genealogical data: methods, problems, and results', *Population Studies* **51** (1997), 263–78. My own work on the problem, using microsimulation, life-table, and demographic decomposition approaches, includes 'Availability of kin and the demography of historical family structure', *Historical Methods* **19**, 3 (1986), 93–102; *Prolonged connections: the rise of the extended family in nineteenth century England and America* (Madison, Wisc., 1987); 'Confessions of a microsimulator, 161–9'; 'The transformation of American family structure', *American Historical Review* **99** (1994), 103–28; and 'The effects of demographic change on multigenerational family structure', 21–40.
- 11 One additional potential demographic influence on multigenerational families deserves mention. The decline of fertility since the nineteenth century might be expected to help explain the decline of multigenerational families, but that appears not to be the case. The average number of children per elderly person was much higher the late nineteenth century than in the late twentieth century. One might think that the more children to choose from, the easier it would be to find one with whom to reside. The 1900 census provides information on the number of surviving children for each woman, so we can directly assess the effects of family size on the likelihood of residing with children. As D. S. Smith has pointed out in 'Life course, norms, and the Family System of Older Americans in 1900', 285–98, the percentage of elderly women residing with children did not vary much according to the number of their surviving children. Perhaps the obligation for at least one child to reside with parents was so strong that coresidence was insensitive to family size. Whatever the explanation, it is doubtful that fertility decline can help explain the decline of the multigenerational family.
 - 12 This conceptualization owes much to Berkner; see Berkner, 'The stem family and the developmental cycle'.
 - 13 D. Kertzer, 'Toward a historical demography of aging', in Kertzer and Laslett eds., *Aging in the Past*, 363–83.
 - 14 The seminal work on this is J. Hajnal, 'European marriage patterns in perspective', in D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley eds., *Population in history* (Chicago, 1965), 101–38.
 - 15 See for example S. Gross, 'Family, property, community: persistence and accommodation among German Americans in rural Stearns County, Minnesota, 1860–1920', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota (1993).
 - 16 In most states, if the father died without a will, all children and the surviving widow were ordinarily entitled to shares of the inheritance. In some states, the share for sons or for the eldest child was larger than that for other children. A minority of adult decedents – perhaps a quarter to a third – left wills, but doubtless among elderly men with multiple children the proportion was much higher; see C. Shamma, M. Salmon and M. Dahlin, *Inheritance in America from colonial times to the present* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1987).
 - 17 This difference is significant at the .001 level.
 - 18 About two-thirds of elderly individuals and couples responded to the property question. The elderly without any property listed cannot be assumed to be poor; many had owned property, but had apparently already transferred their property to their children: half of the elderly without property listed were living with a family member who did have property. The elderly without listed property were almost identical to the propertied elderly with respect to the percentage residing with children. This results, probably, from two countervailing factors. Some elderly had no property because they had already transferred their property to their children; these elderly ordinarily resided with their children. Other elderly had no property listed because they were truly impoverished, and this group rarely resided with their children.