

The Age of Joseph Smith's Plural Wives in Social and Demographic Context

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"I have seen old men with white hair and wrinkled faces, go hunting after young girls...."

—John Hyde

Introduction

FOR THE MODERN reader, perhaps one of the most controversial and shocking aspects of nineteenth-century Mormon polygyny is the relatively young age of some plural wives. Latter Day Saints, especially leaders such as Joseph Smith, have been frequently charged with pedophilia or "statutory rape" by modern readers and critics.

Jon Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven* (2003), for example, discussed the "still pubescent girls" whom Joseph married.² Krakauer even went as far as to explain that Smith lied about receiving revelation to convince teenage girls to marry him and commented, "His way of getting laid doesn't reflect well on him."³ Lawrence O'Donnell, television commentator and actor on the HBO series *Big Love*, went even further when he practically screamed about "the Church's seventy year delight in polygamy and sex with young girls."⁴

Were Joseph Smith's marital ages collectively normal relative to their contemporaries? Did the Latter Day Saints' marriage patterns conform to marriage age patterns in other parts of the United States? We strongly suggest that Latter Day Saint marriage patterns and the age of Joseph's wives was well within the norm for their time and place on the nineteenth-century American frontier.

Joseph Smith's Wives

Various writers have not agreed on the number of Joseph's plural wives. Andrew Jenson's 1887 tally numbered twenty-seven, while Fawn Brodie added twenty-one to Jenson's list.⁵ A significantly higher number was given by Mormon writer, Stanley S. Ivins, asserting that Smith was married to some eighty-four women.⁶ Much more conservative was

2. Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: The Story of Violent Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 120.

3. Chris Nashawaty, "Jon Krakauer Gets Religion," *Entertainment Weekly* (July 18, 2003), 47, as quoted in Craig L. Foster, "Doing Violence to Journalistic Integrity," *FARMS Review* 16:1 (2004), <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/review/?vol=16&num=1&id=530> (accessed July 15, 2010).

4. Lawrence O'Donnell, Transcript of *The McLaughlin Group* (December 7, 2007) <<http://www.mclaughlin.com/library/transcript.asp?id=629>>; O'Donnell, Transcript of Hugh Hewitt Radio Show (December 11, 2007) <<http://hughewitt.rownhall.com/talkradio/transcripts/Transcript.aspx?ContentGuid=cb634a31-245d-47fd-b285-d81b269d10c>>; O'Donnell, "Romney and Me," *The Huffington Post* (December 13, 2007) <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lawrence-odonnell/romney-me_b_76764.html?load=1&page=3> (accessed July 15, 2010).

5. Fawn McKay Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 457. On Brodie's handling of the plural marriage evidence, see Todd Compton, "Fawn Brodie on Joseph Smith's Plural Wives and Polygamy: A Critical View," in *Reconsidering No Man Knows My History: Fawn M. Brodie and Joseph Smith in Retrospect*, ed. Newell G. Bringham (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1996), 154–94.

6. Stanley S. Ivins collection, Utah State Historical Society, Box 12, Ed. Ivins list was reproduced in Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Joseph Smith and Polygamy* (Salt Lake City: Modern Micro-

1. John Hyde, *Mormonism: Its Leaders and Designs* (New York: W. P. Fetteridge, 1857), 55.

Wife	Birth	Marriage	Age	Gap
Helen Kimball	22 Aug. 1828	1 May 1843	14.7	22.7
Nancy Winchester	10 Aug. 1828	30 Jun. 1843	14.9	22.6
Flora Woodworth	14 Nov. 1826	1 Mar. 1843	16.3	20.9
Fanny Alger	20 Sep. 1816	1 Apr. 1833	16.5	10.8
Sarah Lawrence	13 May 1826	1 May 1843	17.0	20.4
Lucy Walker	30 Apr. 1826	1 May 1843	17.0	20.4
Sarah Whitney	22 Mar. 1825	27 Jul. 1842	17.4	19.3
Emily Partridge	28 Feb. 1824	4 Mar. 1843	19.0	18.2
Maria Lawrence	18 Dec. 1823	1 May 1843	19.4	18.0
Malissa Lott	9 Jan. 1824	20 Sep. 1843	19.7	18.1
Zina Huntington*	31 Jan. 1821	27 Oct. 1841	20.8	15.1
Eliza Partridge	20 Apr. 1820	8 Mar. 1843	22.9	14.3
Sylvia Sessions*	31 Jul. 1818	8 Feb. 1842	23.5	12.6
Mary Rollins*	8 Apr. 1818	25 Feb. 1842	23.9	12.3
Louisa Beaman	7 Feb. 1815	5 Apr. 1841	26.2	9.1
Marinda Johnson*	28 Jun. 1815	1 Apr. 1842	26.8	9.5
Olive Frost	24 Jul. 1816	1 Jul. 1843	27.0	10.6
Elvira Cowles*	23 Nov. 1813	1 Jun. 1843	29.5	7.9
Hannah Ellis	1 Jan. 1813	30 May 1843	30.4	7.0
Almira Johnson	12 Oct. 1812	2 Apr. 1843	30.5	6.8
Presendia Huntington*	7 Sep. 1810	11 Dec. 1841	31.3	4.7
Agnes Coolbrith*	9 Jul. 1808	6 Jan. 1842	33.5	2.5
Desdemona Fullmer	6 Oct. 1809	1 Jul. 1843	33.8	3.8
Ruth Vose*	26 Feb. 1808	1 Feb. 1843	35.0	2.2
Delcena Johnson*	19 Nov. 1806	1 Jul. 1842	35.6	0.9
Lucinda Pendleton*	27 Sep. 1801	1 Jan. 1838	36.3	-4.2
Martha McBride*	17 Mar. 1805	1 Aug. 1842	37.4	-0.8
Eliza Roxey Snow	21 Jan. 1804	29 Jun. 1842	38.5	-1.9
Patty Bartlett*	4 Feb. 1795	9 Mar. 1842	47.1	-10.9
Elizabeth Davis*	11 Mar. 1791	30 May 1842	51.3	-14.8
Sarah Kingsley*	20 Oct. 1788	29 Jun. 1842	53.7	-17.2
Fanny Young*	8 Nov. 1787	2 Nov. 1843	56.0	-18.1
Rhoda Richards	8 Aug. 1784	12 Jun. 1843	58.9	-21.4

FIGURE 5.1: *Joseph Smith's Plural Wives*
 Notes: * (previously married), bold (broadly estimated date)
italics (estimates are within a month)

scholar Daniel Bachman who identified just thirty-one spouses for the Mormon leader.⁷ Todd Compton's thorough history of Joseph's plural wives continued Bachman's tradition of a more responsible analysis of the evidence, settling on thirty-three wives.⁸

Despite these caveats, Compton's list is recent, rigorous, and yields a higher percentage of teen brides and a greater age disparity than the more recent estimate offered by George D. Smith, which removes one teenage bride from Compton's list, and adds ten post-teenagers.⁹ While increasing the number of plural wives, these alterations lower the average age difference between Joseph and his wives by over two years (from 6.7 years to 4.6), and likewise decrease the percentage of teenage brides (30% to 21%). Since any attempt to ascertain the "normality" of Joseph's wives' ages is best served by a "worst case scenario" approach, we have elected to use Compton's tabulation. The wives and their known or estimated dates of birth and marriage are found in Figure 5.1. The gap signifies the age difference between Joseph Smith and the woman.

Joseph Smith's Critics

For the modern critic, Joseph's young wives are juicy fodder. Jon Krakauer's discussion of "still pubescent girls" marrying Joseph Smith was intended to be shocking, though it is not clear what kind of wives he would prefer early Mormon men to have married—pubescent means

film, n.d.), 41–41.

7. Daniel W. Bachman, "A Study of the Mormon Practice of Polygamy before the Death of Joseph Smith," (Master's thesis, Purdue University, 1975), 112–116.

8. Todd M. Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997). We have estimated some dates. Richard Anderson and Scott Faulring have contested four of these wives (fourteen- or fifteen-year-old Nancy Winchester and three non-teens) on the grounds of insufficient evidence. They likewise favor accounts which situate Fanny Alger's marriage in 1835 rather than early 1833. Also of note is an account by Fanny's uncle, which would place her likely birth date at least a year earlier than erroneous family group sheets report. Also see Levi Hancock, "The Life of Levi Hancock," Autobiography (1803–1836) Typescript, Harold B. Lee Library <<http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/LHancock.html>>. While ambiguous about the date, census records side with Levi's account regarding Fanny's birthplace.

9. George D. Smith, "Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy, 1841–46: A Preliminary Demographic Report," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27:1 (1994): 60–61.

"arriving at or having reached puberty." All females of sexual maturity remain "pubescent."¹⁰

Never one to be overburdened by historical details or interpretive nuance when discussing religion, vocal atheist Christopher Hitchens used candidate Mitt Romney's speech during the 2008 presidential primaries as an opportunity to describe Joseph Smith as a "serial practitioner of statutory rape."¹¹ Lawrence O'Donnell vehemently attacked Joseph in multiple venues as "a criminal who was....a rapist," and decried "the criminal, adulterous, rapist founder of" Mormonism.¹²

George D. Smith's *Nauvoo Polygamy* likewise emphasized what was called Joseph Smith's "interest in marrying teenagers." For example, the introduction to *Nauvoo Polygamy* mentioned that Joseph "was betrothed to teenage women as young as fourteen."¹³

Compton, whose book, *In Sacred Loneliness*, is a more careful study of the lives of Joseph's plural wives, may have, nevertheless, let his own views color his work¹⁴ when he noted rhetorically that when "looking at

10. *Merriam-Webster's Medical Dictionary*, (2002), s.v., "pubescent." See also *American Heritage Student's Medical Dictionary* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), s.v., "pubescent." We note too that to the modern clinician, pedophilia "involves sexual activity with a prepubescent child (generally age 13 years or younger)." *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994), 527 <<http://www.psychiatryonline.com/DSMPDF/dsm-iv.pdf>>.

11. Christopher Hitchens, "Holy Nonsense: Mitt Romney's Windy, Worthless Speech," *slate.com* (December 6, 2007) <<http://www.slate.com/id/2179404/>> (accessed July 15, 2010).

12. Lawrence O'Donnell, Transcript of *The McLaughlin Group* (December 7, 2007), Transcript of Hugh Hewitt Radio Show (December 11, 2007) <<http://hughhewittshow.com/talkradio/transcripts/Transcript.aspx?ContentGuid=cb634a31-445d-47fd-b285-d181b269d10c>>; O'Donnell, "Romney and Me," *The Huffington Post* (December 13, 2007) <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lawrence-odonnell/romney-me_b_76764.html?load=1&page=3> (accessed July 15, 2010).

13. George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: "...but we called it celestial marriage"* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2009), 226 and xii. In the book, Smith made references to Joseph Smith's marriages as "secret liaisons with women and girls" (55) and also a "tryst" (xi). He went so far as to call the plural marriages of Joseph Smith to Emily and Eliza Partridge a "celestial ménage-à-quatre" (180).

14. Reviewers who have seen Compton's treatment of Joseph's plural marriage as overly negative include Richard Lloyd Anderson and Scott H. Faulring, "The Prophet Joseph Smith and His Plural Wives," *FARMS Review of Books* 10/2 (1998); Alma G. Allred, "Variations on a Theme," (paper presented at Mormon History Association, 2 May 1999 [updated December 6, 1999]) <http://www.shields-research.org/Reviews/Rw-Sacred_Loneliness_Allred.htm>; Daniel W. Bachman, "Prologue to the Study of Joseph Smith's Marital Theology" (Review of *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*), *FARMS Review of Books* 10/2 (1998) <<http://farms.byu.edu/display.php?table=review&id=291>>; and Daniel W. Bachman, "Let No One... Set on

polygamy from our late-twentieth-century monogamous and feminist perspectives, one wonders why Latter Day Saint leaders did not see more clearly the problematic nature of such relationships and retreat from them."¹⁵ Compton made his own views of such relationships clear elsewhere, writing in response to Jerald and Sandra Tanner that "I strongly disapprove of polygamous marriages involving teenage women...."¹⁶

Unfortunately, Jon Krakauer, George D. Smith, and other commentators have fallen into the same trap. They impose their values upon another place and time and, when the marriage patterns do not conform to their modern worldview, they look upon and write about marriages with teenaged brides with an open-mouthed, shocked, or offended voice.

For example, Krakauer suggested in an interview that Mormons would be uncomfortable with how he portrayed their history, "They will not like the fact that I point out that Joseph Smith told fourteen-year-old girls 'God says you should marry me, if you don't...' His way of getting laid doesn't reflect well on him."¹⁷ In this case, as in many others, Krakauer's verbally evocative analysis is not impeded by factual detail. Informed readers are more apt to dislike his rather flippant analysis because (as Compton,¹⁸ and others have observed¹⁹) there is no evidence that the marriage with 14-year-old girls was consummated.²⁰

My Servant Joseph: Religious Historians Missing the Lessons of Religious History" (paper presented at the Mormon History Association, 2 May 1999) <http://www.shields-research.org/Reviews/Rw-Sacred_Loneliness_Bachman.htm>. For Compton's reply to Anderson, Faulring, and Bachman's FARMS articles, see Todd M. Compton, "Truth, Honesty and Moderation in Mormon History: A Response to Anderson, Faulring and Bachman's Reviews of *In Sacred Loneliness*," (July 2001) <<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Orade/7207/rev.html>>.

15. Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 455–456.

16. Todd M. Compton, "Response to Tanners," LDS Bookshelf mailing list, n.d., www.ldsmormon.com/compton.shtml (accessed July 28, 2009).

17. Chris Nashawaty, "Jon Krakauer Gets Religion," *Entertainment Weekly* (July 18, 2003): 47. 18. *Ibid.*, also see *In Sacred Loneliness*, 6.

19. Stanley B. Kimball, "Heber C. Kimball and Family, the Nauvoo Years," *Brigham Young University Studies* 15/4 (Summer 1975): 465.

20. For reviews of Krakauer's other historical gaffes, see Foster, "Doing Violence to Journalistic Integrity," and Paul McNabb (editor), and Richard E. Tuttle Jr., "Faulty History: A Review of *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith*," Foundation for Apologetics Information and Research, 2003 <<http://www.fairinfo.org/pubs/Krakauer.pdf>> (accessed July 28, 2009).

Long Term Marriage Trends

It is not surprising that moderns, even respected historians, would look askance at the early age of some of Joseph Smith's wives, given present-day marriage trends. The United States has historically had the highest marriage rate of any other country, and that trend continued into the late twentieth century.²¹ Despite this statistic, the United States—like the rest of the west—“has seen a dramatic retreat from marriage.” And, among those who do marry, there “have been substantial increases in the mean age at first marriage.”²²

Figure 5.2 shows various long-term marital statistics for white females in the United States²³ based on synthetic birth cohorts in census years.²⁴ The mean age at first marriage typically occurs at the age at which 60% of the marriage population has already married. The 50% (median), 25%, and 10% marks are also depicted. The mode is an estimate of the most popular marital age. The minimum age of eligibility is a benchmark defined by the Coale-McNeil model for nuptiality as “the earliest age of a significant number of first marriages.”²⁵ Lacking a more direct method, marriage statistics for 1800 to 1840 are projected from

21. Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 457.

22. Robert Schoen and Vladimir Canudas-Romo, “Timing effects on first marriage: Twentieth-century experience in England and Wales and the USA,” *Population Studies* 59:2 (2005): 135–23. For similar studies see Catherine A. Fitch and Steven Ruggles, “Historical Trends in Marriage Formation: The United States 1850–1990,” in *The Ties that Bind: Perspectives on Marriage and Cohabitation*, edited Linda J. Waite (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2000), 59–90; Warren C. Sanderson, “Quantitative Aspects of Marriage, Fertility and Family Limitation in Nineteenth Century America: Another Application of the Coale Specification,” *Demography* 16 (1979): 339–358; Michael R. Haines, “Long Term Marriage Patterns in the United States from Colonial Times to the Present,” *National Bureau of Economic Research* (Cambridge, MA), NBER Working Paper Series, (Historical Paper No. 80, 1996): 15–39; Catherine A. Fitch, *Transitions to Marriage in the United States, 1850–2000*, (unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Minnesota, 2005); J. David Hacker, “Rethinking the ‘Early’ Decline of Marital Fertility in the United States” *Demography* 40:4 (2003): 605–60.

24. See Technical Note 1. Raw data obtained from Steven Ruggles, J. Trent Alexander, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Matthew B. Schroeder, and Matthew Sobek. *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 5.0* [Machine-readable database]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010 <<http://usa.ipums.org/usa/>> (accessed March 18, 2010).

25. Ansley J. Coale, “Age Patterns of Marriage,” *Population Studies* 25:2 (1971): 206. See also A. J. Coale and D. R. McNell, “The Distribution by Age of the Frequency of First Marriage in Female Cohort,” *Journal of American Statistical Association* 67 (1972): 743–749.

Daniel Smith's proposal for a mean age of 21.0 years in 1800²⁶ and holding the minimum age constant at its 1850–1900 average of 13.6 years.

Figure 5.2 shows long term trends for white teenage brides as a percentage of census year marriage cohorts.²⁷ Marriage cohorts are age dependent, that is, sensitive to a society's age structure created from birth and death rates. Teenage marriage was over four times more common in Joseph Smith's America than it is today. The 1960 baby boom offers a close comparison, but nuptiality has been in rapid decline since.

This shift in marriage patterns, which has gone mostly unnoticed during the past half-century, is reflected in the higher age of first marriage among American men and women. The median age at first marriage has risen by over five years since 1970. It is now twenty-six for women and twenty-eight for men.²⁸ This later age of marriage for both males and females has become not only accepted but expected in twenty-first century America. While studies show that Latter Day Saints and conservative Protestants currently marry at a younger age than other religious and non-religious groups, they too appear to have been affected by the changing demographics.²⁹ Demographers call this the “second demographic transition.” In societies that “exhibit lengthy economic prosperity, men and women alike begin to lose motivation to marry and have children, and thus avoid one or both.”³⁰

26. Daniel S. Smith, “American family and demographic patterns and the north-west European model,” *Continuity and Change* 8:3(1993): 389–415.

27. See Technical Note 2 for details on how figs. 1 and 2 were made. A more advanced paper covering the methods used in this paper is David Keller, “Timely Statistics Vindicate the Prophet,” working paper (2010).

28. Ibid. Tellingly, Regnerus wrote in the same article, “Most young Americans no longer think of marriage as a formative institution, but rather as the institution they enter once they think they are fully formed.”

29. Xiaohu Xu, Clark D. Hudspeth, and John P. Bartkowski, “The Timing of First Marriage: Are There Religious Variations?” *Journal of Family Issues* 26 (2005): 585 and 588. Latter Day Saints and conservative Protestant women married at earlier ages than their Catholic and mainline Protestant counterparts. All married at a younger age than Jewish women. Of these, there was a more pronounced difference between those born before 1960 and women born after 1960, with those born before 1960 marrying at an even younger age than those born after 1960.

30. Mark Regnerus, “The Case for Early Marriage,” *Christianity Today* (August 3, 2009), <http://www.cctlibrary.com/ct/2009/august/16.22.html> (accessed December 30, 2009). Also see, Regnerus, “Say Yes. What Are You Waiting For?” *The Washington Post* (April 26, 2009), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/24/AR2009042402122.html> (accessed December 30, 2009).

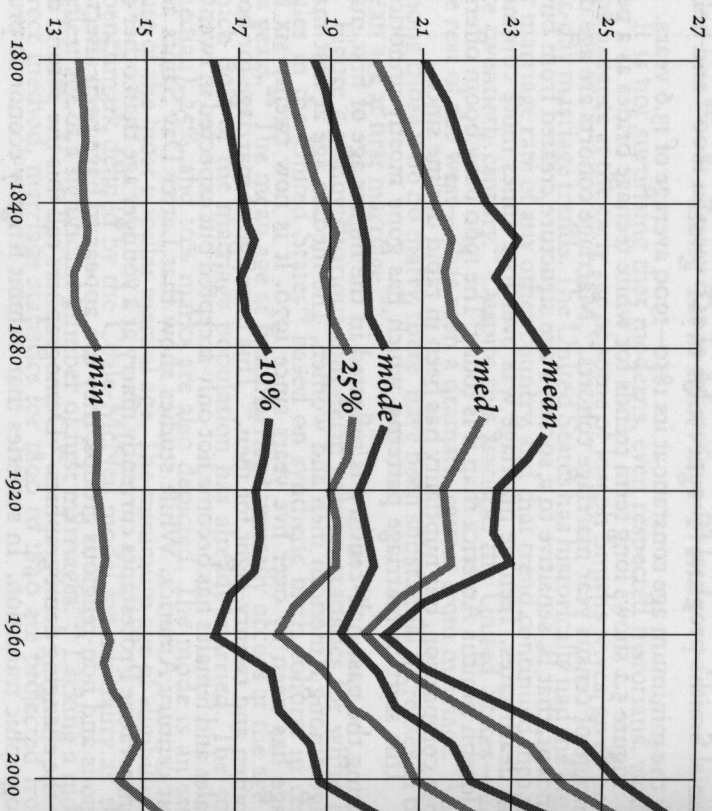


FIGURE 5.2: Age Independent Marriage Statistics from US Census

Unlike today, in the mid 19th century teenage brides seldom married someone near their own age. The average age difference between a husband and a wife in her mid-teens was typically 2–3 years higher than the overall average. Rolf and Ferrie³¹ charted the decline of the overall age gap from 4.55 years in 1850 to 2.30 years in 2000 after peaking at 4.96 in 1870. They also found the western frontier had an average gap that was two years higher than elsewhere between 1850 and 1880. Higher male to female sex ratios—due to higher male birth rates and life expectancy, as well as immigration³²—led to the larger age gaps observed in the 19th century.

31. Karen Rolf and Joseph Ferrie, "The May–December relationship since 1850: Age homogamy in the U.S.," Working Paper (September, 2008).

32. Albert Esteve and Anna Cabré, "Marriage Squeeze and Changes in Family Formation: Historical Comparative Evidence in Spain, France, and United States in the XXth Century," Paper presented at Population Association of America 2004 Annual Meeting, James Matthew

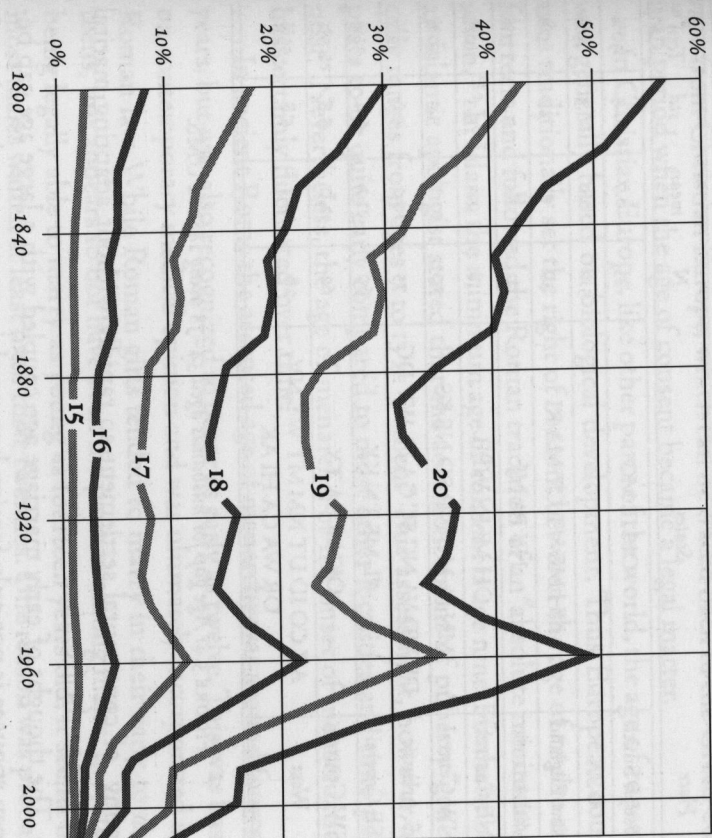


FIGURE 5.3: Age Dependent Cumulative Marriage Rates from US Census

Typically men would court across the entire eligible age spectrum younger than themselves. The economic stability of some older men was a factor that helped them be seen as attractive marriage partners. Figure 5.4 compares Joseph Smith's plural marriages to the marriages of his peers (aged 34–38) in various regions of the country according to the 1880 census sample. While on average Joseph Smith married older women than his 1880 peers, his wives' ages were more spread out. Though his percentage of teenage brides (30%) was slightly higher than a reasonable estimate for his peers in 1840s Illinois (20%), it was far from being historically high. One wonders if America could have met its "manifest

Gallman, "Relative Ages of Colonial Marriages," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 14:3 (Winter, 1984): 616–617, found in a study of communities in New Hampshire and North Carolina that

"roughly two thirds of the men" married women within a five year range.

Place	States	N	mean	std	Teen %
Joseph Smith	OH IL MO	33	6.7	12.5	30%
USA		512	10.0	6.5	19%
New England	NH ME VT CT MA RI	39	7.1	7.7	9%
Mid Atlantic	NY PA NJ	72	8.1	5.9	7%
NE Central	OH MI IN WI IL	118	9.4	5.3	10%
NW Central	MN IA MO ND SD NE KS	70	10.9	5.9	20%
S. Atlantic	DE MD VA NC SC GA FL WV DC	75	10.2	5.6	18%
SE Central	AL MS TN KY	60	11.2	6.4	22%
SW Central	OK AR LA TX	62	12.0	6.8	46%
West	AZ CO ID UT NM MT WY NV OR WA CA HI AK	20	14.3	5.8	55%

FIGURE 5.4: Age gap for husbands aged 34–38 using 1880 IPUMS.

destiny" of continental settlement so rapidly without adapting marital practices to the frontier.

The thought of early marriage age coupled with a large age gap between spouses is not only foreign but repulsive to most modern Americans.³³ Recent decades' increased awareness of the scourges of child abuse and pedophilia is proper, and can only heighten the modern reader's discomfort with this aspect of LDS history. Nevertheless, in spite of contemporary marriage patterns—as well as exclamations of shock and accusations of Mormon pedophilia from critics of the Church—the indisputable reality is that in a large portion of the world and throughout most of history, marriage at a young age has been the norm.

Biology-based Legal Tradition

Indeed, overall, the age of consent for marriage and sexual activity throughout history has coincided with the onset of puberty. Colonial America inherited customs regarding marital eligibility and statutory

33. According to Malini Karkal and S. Indira Rajan, "Age at Marriage: How Much Change?" *Economic and Political Weekly* 24:10 (March 11, 1989): 505, internationally and particularly in third-world countries, attempts are being made to raise the legal age of marriage in order to lower the fertility of the population. Nevertheless, most marriages "still take place around the age at menarche."

rape from Christian Europe, which can be traced back to the Greco-Roman period when the age of consent became a legal matter.

In Christian Europe, like other parts of the world, the age of consent was generally based on biological development. Thus European countries traditionally set the right of consent between the age of twelve and fourteen, and followed the Roman tradition of an "absolute minimum at seven."³⁴ In Islam, the minimum age of consent is age nine. Furthermore, an Islamic apologist stated that the commencement of puberty "genetically" ranges from ages 7 to 13 in women.³⁵ This assessment, however, appears to be quite early compared to most other localities and time-periods.³⁵ Nevertheless, the age of menarche, or the onset of menstruation, has certainly fluctuated over time.

In ancient Rome the accepted age of menarche was around fourteen years, but was also recognized to occur as early as twelve. This was based on contemporary medical opinion and was ultimately incorporated into Roman law. While Roman girls tended to marry in their early to mid-teens, this appears to not have been the pattern among males. In spite of being legally able to marry as young as fourteen years old, it seems that most males waited at least until their twenties. One reason was probably economic, since the men had to be able to provide for themselves and a family. Anecdotal evidence from the late Roman period of the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. "points to men in their late twenties marrying and women who were in their teens." In fact, "it was not unheard of for a man in his fifties or even sixties to marry a woman in her early teens."³⁶

Following the Roman precedent, early medieval manuscripts placed menarche around the range of twelve to fourteen years, and colloquial evidence affirms that was indeed the common age range.³⁷ In fact, canon law—said to be created by the monk Gratian (an ecclesiastical lawyer

34. Vern L. Bullough, "Age of Consent: A Historical Overview," *Journal of Psychology & Human Sexuality* 16:2/3 (May 2005): XXX. Between age seven and puberty, there could be consent to marriage but the marriage could not be consummated.

35. Bismillah al Rahman Al Raheem, "Islam Answers: Morality of Marrying Aisha at an Early Age," <http://www.muhammadith.org/earlymarriage/index.html> (accessed July 15, 2010).

36. Mathew Kuefler, "The Marriage Revolution in Late Antiquity: The Theodosian Code and Later Roman Marriage Law," *Journal of Family History* 32:4 (October 2007): 348. According to Kuefler early Christians greatly influenced fourth and fifth century Roman marriage laws.

37. J. B. Post, "Ages at Menarche and Menopause: Some Medieval Authorities," *Population Studies* 25:11 (March 1971): 84, 86.

and teacher who in 1140 published the first definitive collection of Roman Catholic canon law)—also followed Roman law in this matter.³⁸ British common law, which was in turn influenced by canon law, recognized the onset of puberty and the right to marry at age twelve for girls and fourteen for boys. As late as 1983, the Code of Canon Law (which is binding upon all baptized Catholics) decreed the minimum age of marriage to be sixteen for men and fourteen for women.³⁹

Beginning around 1500, "a retardation of menarche began throughout Europe." This was particularly the case in northern and western Europe. The delay in menarche's onset continued in Europe and other parts of the world until about 1830 when "there began a progressive decline in the age of menarche."⁴⁰

These changes in the age of menarche were reflected in the age at marriage over the centuries. "In most human societies...women have entered first marriages around puberty, at about fifteen or so."⁴¹ In some places and times brides were younger. As discussed above, in Europe the legal age of marriage from the Roman period onward was twelve for girls and fourteen for boys; the average age of marriage for girls ranged between thirteen and seventeen. In fact, because marriage tended to occur within a short time after the onset of menarche, and because this commonly occurred by age fourteen, a fourteen-year-old girl was regarded as an adult.⁴²

38. Vern L. Bullough, "Age of Consent," *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society*, <http://www.flags.org/childhood/A-Ar/Age-of-Consent.html> (accessed December 30, 2009). Gratian's collection, called the *Decretum Gratiani*, drew on older local collections, councils, Roman law, and the Church Fathers.

39. Fr. Jason Gray, "Canon Law vs. Illinois State Law on Marriage," (December 21, 2005), http://www.jgray.org/docs/IL_marriage.html (accessed on December 30, 2009).

40. *Ibid.*, 83. For example, according to Elise De La Rochebrochard in "Les âges à la puberté des filles et des garçons à partir d'une enquête sur la sexualité des adolescents," *Population* 54:6 (Nov-Dec 1999): 938, age at menarche in 1750 was almost 16 years old. By 1900, it was down to 14 years old and in 2000 had decreased to about 12.5 years.

41. Alan Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction, 1300–1840* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 214.

42. M. K. Hopkins, "The Age of the Roman Girls at Marriage," *Population Studies* 18:3 (March 1965): 309, 313. See also Paul Veyne, "The Roman Empire," in P. Veyne, *Histoire de la Vie Privée* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 20.

Throughout the Middle Ages, teenage marriage was common-place, "particularly among more elevated social groups."⁴³ The sixteenth century's shift to a higher age of menarche was accompanied by a corresponding increase in the age of marriage. This was particularly so in northwest Europe where there was a pattern of late marriage among both men and women, typically in the mid to late twenties on average.⁴⁴

Southern and eastern European marriage patterns did not follow those of northwest Europe. From an early time, and even into the twentieth century, marriages in these parts of Europe took place at a younger age. In Belgrade, Serbia, for example, where girls were regarded as marriageable between thirteen and fifteen, "A third of all girls of the age of fifteen, and over half of the girls age sixteen, already had husbands." Between 1650 and 1750, seventy percent of all women between the ages of fifteen and nineteen were married or widowed.⁴⁵

Although data are sparse for the US in the 19th century regarding the average age at menarche, it likely followed the lowest European trends.⁴⁶ Using post-1910 US data, Grace Wyshak⁴⁷ determined that the average age at menarche had dropped linearly at 3.2 month/decade, with a value of 13.1 years in 1920. If projected backward, this trend yields 15.2 years in 1840, a figure that closely matches an 1845 clinical survey in Birmingham,

43. Diana O'Hara, *Courtship and Constraint: Rethinking the Making of Marriage in Tudor England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 165.

44. *Ibid.*, 164. H. E. Hallam in "Age at First Marriage and Age at Death in the Lincolnshire Fenland, 1252–1478," *Population Studies* 39:1 (March 1985): 55, 59, also discussed an increase in age of marriage near the end of his study. He showed, however, that marriage ages in Lincolnshire tended to be higher than in other parts of England from a very early date.

45. Peter Laslett, "Age at Menarche in Europe since the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2:2 (Autumn 1971): 232, 229, and 227. According to Laslett in Belgrade, "husbands were, on the average, nearly ten years older than their wives... and [sought] out the youngest nubile girls to marry". Interestingly enough, the difference between northern and southern Europe, in terms of marriage patterns, existed even within the Russian Empire. According to Helena Chojnacka in "Nuptiality Patterns in an Agrarian Society," *Population Studies* 30:2 (July 1976). In the late 1800s Russia, girls aged fifteen to nineteen made up 15–25% of the married women in the southern part of Russia while only five percent of the married women in the northern part of Russia were ages fifteen to nineteen.

46. Other useful publications on 19th century menarche statistics include J. M. Tanner, "Menarchial Age," *Science* 214 (1981):604 and Peter Laslett, *Family life and illicit love in earlier generations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

47. Grace Wyshak "Secular changes in age at menarche in a sample of US women," *Annals of Human Biology* 10:1 (1983):75–77.

England.⁴⁸ As plotted above, the statistical minimum age at marriage was on the rise during the same period, somewhat countering the idea that two trends should always be correlated.

Though the distribution of the onset of menarche consistently follows the familiar bell shaped curve, the higher averages of the 19th century were partially offset by wider spreads—the bell became broader. If Mormon girls in 1840 Illinois roughly followed the Birmingham rates, 10% would have reached puberty before turning 13, 24% before age 14, and 45% before turning 15. Joseph's youngest wife, Helen Mar Kimball, married at an age by which 40% of the female population had already matured, though it is unlikely than even then the marriage was consummated. Nevertheless, Helen's parents would likely never have considered proposing the marriage if she was still prepubescent. Helen's own remarks are strong evidence of her maturity: "I had grown up very fast and my father often took me out with him and for this reason was taken to be older than I was."⁴⁹

Economic and Cultural Factors

Even today, marriage continues to be based not only upon biological factors, but also cultural and economic ones. For example, early marriage is particularly common in Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South Asia. In Afghanistan, Mali and Niger, half of all girls aged fifteen to nineteen are married, while more than half of the girls in Guinea and Yemen marry by age sixteen. In Nigeria, the national median age of marriage is seventeen but in Kebbe state the median age of marriage is as low as eleven years old.⁵⁰

While social and biological factors help determine the age at time of marriage, one of the major factors continues to be economic. The stability and financial certitude of the present and future generations are a prime consideration. Thus "early age at marriage in pre-industrial societies was

48. P. E. Brown, "The Age at Menarche," *British Journal of Preventive and Social Medicine* 20 (1966):9-14

49. Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, "Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo," *Woman's Exponent* 11 (1882-83). <<http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/HWhitney.html>> (accessed July 15, 2010).

50. Annie Bunting, "Stages of Development: Marriage of Girls and Teens as an International Human Rights Issue," *Social and Legal Studies* 14 (2005): 23.

a social measure to ward off the threat of failure in population replacement." Obviously, "women who marry young are exposed to conceptions throughout the most fecund years of their lives" which encouraged the early marriage patterns.⁵¹

Along with the basic criteria for survival, another economic factor which encouraged early marriages historically has been the potential availability of land. This is one of the reasons agrarian societies with ample land have traditionally seen younger marriages. Such was the case in the early North American colonies where both the British and French colonists temporarily bucked the western European pattern of late marriage. The marriage age of women in the American colonies was considerably lower than in their native Western Europe.⁵²

Marriage Age Patterns in the New World: From Frontier to Settled Regions

QUÉBEC

In Québec, Canada, for example, there was a serious dearth of marriageable women during the early years of settlement. To meet this lack, the French government transported in the "*Filles du Roi*" ("King's Daughters"). These mainly poor and orphaned young women had very little opportunity in their native France. Of the 774 women identified as "King's Daughters," seventy-six—almost ten percent—were between the years of twelve and fifteen. Almost forty-two percent of these women were age twenty and younger and eighty-two percent of the women were thirty years and younger.⁵³ But, by the eighteenth century, the average age of first marriage for women had risen to twenty years in Québec.⁵⁴

NEW ENGLAND

This same pattern was also seen in the American colonies. Of a necessity, marriages were entered into at an earlier age than in their land

51. Karkal and Rajan, 505.

52. Degler, 6.

53. Silvio Dumas, *Les Filles du Roi en Nouvelle-France: Études Historique avec Répertoire Biographique* (Québec, Québec: Société Historique de Québec, 1972), 67. The ages of 11.5% of the women could not be identified.

54. Gillian Hamilton and Aloysius Siow, "Marriage and Fertility in a Catholic Society: Eighteenth-Century Québec," 1. <http://repec.economics.utoronto.ca/files/UT-ECIPA-SIOW-99-01.pdf> (accessed March 21, 2009).

of origin, resulting in larger families to work the land and build communities. For example, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, was the "frontier" prior to 1741—during that period, over thirty-nine percent of the women were under age twenty at the time of their first marriage. By 1771–1800, however, the number of women marrying under age twenty had decreased to only twenty-seven percent.⁵⁵

Over time, as life became more comfortable and land less available, women began "marrying at increasingly later ages, shortening their child-bearing years and thus limiting the number of children they were likely to have." This was particularly the case in New England. By the 1830s, the *Universal Traveler* observed, New Englanders had come to "seldom marry at as early an age as is common elsewhere."⁵⁶

Nevertheless, New England, like other parts of the United States, continued to base its marriage laws on the "traditional English common-law nuptial-age demarcations" which allowed marriage at twelve for women and fourteen for men. These same statutes became a part of American common law, and "every American state adopted these age boundaries after the Revolution."⁵⁷ Over time, individual states altered these ages, moving the ages higher for both females and males. Even so, some states retained the old common law ages into the twentieth century.⁵⁸

As late as 1906, six states still retained a minimum age of twelve for girls. These states included Kansas, Missouri, and Rhode Island. In 1887, New Hampshire changed the permissible marriage age for girls from twelve to thirteen. Eight other states, including Iowa, Texas, and Utah,

55. Rodger C. Henderson, "Demographic Patterns and Family Structure in Eighteenth-Century Lancaster County, Pennsylvania," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 114:3 (July 1990): 357.

56. Jack Larkin, *The Reshaping of Everyday Life, 1790–1840* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 69. By the second generation in Andover the average age of marriage was twenty-two years. Of the sixty-six women in his study, twenty-two were married before the age of twenty-one, according to Philip J. Greven, Jr., in "Family Structure in Seventeenth-Century Andover, Massachusetts," in Michael Gordon, ed., *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective*, 3rd ed., (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 140.

57. Michael Grossberg, *Governing the Hearth: Law and the Family in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 106.

58. *Ibid.*, and "Marriage and Divorce in the United States," *The Albany Law Review* 43 (January–July, 1891): 869.

had fourteen as the minimum age for girls.⁵⁹ As late as 1905, fourteen was the legal marriage age for girls in Illinois. Interestingly, thirteen states, including Colorado, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Vermont had no fixed minimum marriage age.⁶⁰

THE SOUTHERN STATES

In spite of low or absent minimum marriage age laws in states such as Massachusetts, socio-economic factors encouraged a later age for first marriages. Industrialization and commercialization in New England and the Mid-Atlantic states increased "and by 1800 much of coastal North American society had fallen in line with the European pattern" of late marriages. This was a pattern repeated in many parts of the country as America moved westward—a frontier period of rapid expansion, dropping marriage ages, and large families would be followed by a return to the higher marriage ages of Europe and the long-settled New England states. Nevertheless, there were parts of the United States that continued to have a large number of early marriages.⁶¹

This was particularly true in the Southern states, especially in the back country, "an area that included a large portion of the population, [where] the pattern of early marriage and large families continued."⁶² From the time of the first settlements in the Chesapeake region and even up to the twentieth century, marriage happened at a much younger age than in Europe or even New England. Girls often married at age sixteen and younger.⁶³ For example, in Virginia "Betty Washington, a good-humored young woman who strikingly resembled her brother George, was just sixteen when she married young widower Fielding Lewis in May, 1750."⁶⁴

59. S.N.D. North, comp., and Desmond Walls Allen, ed., *Marriage Laws in the United States, 1837–1906* (Conway, Arkansas: Arkansas Research, 1993).

60. *Ibid.*

61. John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 88. Faragher discusses on p. 87 how the pattern of early marriage and large families continued in western Europe until the sixteenth century, at which point the pattern changed significantly. According to him, "Historians do not agree on the exact causes of this trend toward later marriage, but it seemed to characterize societies with increasing commercial life."

62. *Ibid.*, 88.

63. Michael Gordon, *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective*, 3rd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 16.

64. James S. Wansley with Anne M. Cooper, *Idols, Victims, Pioneers: Virginia's Women from 1607* (Richmond, Virginia: Dietz Press, 1976), 63.

There were three significant differences between the upper class women of the North and South in the early 1800s. In the South, where property and wealth was a primary factor in match-making, cousin marriage was prevalent, and the median age of marriage was dramatically lower for women. "Daughters of fifteen and sixteen were frequently married off by anxious parents, or at an impatient bridegroom's insistence. There was no stigma attached to having a child bride, although planters were aware of the [social] disadvantages young wives suffered."⁶⁵

Marriage patterns in the South, like the North, varied depending upon class and locality. Marriage patterns in the Appalachian Mountains and the southern frontier, for example, tended to have an even younger average age than the Chesapeake southern coastal regions: "Girls were thirteen to fifteen, on the average, when they married and the grooms were fifteen to eighteen."⁶⁶ Cousin marriage was also common on the southern frontier where people settled and then later moved on as in-tact "neighborhoods," a large group of people who lived within a certain proximity to each other and were connected by kinship, or at least kinship. Among some of these groups, interfamilial as well as intergenerational marriage took place, partly because the females married at a much younger age than their brothers.⁶⁷

Southerners carried their marriage traditions with them as they moved west into Arkansas, Missouri, Texas and points beyond. There is a plethora of anecdotal evidence of early marriages among emigrants moving west. One example among many was early Oregon settler Mrs.

65. Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 59 and 61. On p. 240 are the results of a sample group of Southern women born before 1759 and born after 1759. Of women born before 1759, 41.7% of all women were married between the ages of thirteen and nineteen. Thirteen percent of all women were married by age sixteen. The number of marriages involving young brides decreased among those born after 1759. Of all marriages, 28.9% were below the age of twenty. Almost seven percent of the women were sixteen or under at the time of marriage.

66. Dallas Bogan, "Early Appalachian Marriage Customs: Most Relationships Rearranged by Family Members," *History of Campbell County, Tennessee*, <http://www.ringgenweb.org/campbell/hist-bogan/marriage.html> (accessed July 21, 2009).

67. Russell M. Reid, "Church Membership, Consanguineous Marriage, and Migration in a Scotch-Irish Frontier Population," *Journal of Family History* 13:4 (1988): 401. According to Reid, the intergenerational marriage was made possible in part because sisters were able to marry and bear children at such a younger age than their brothers. Catherine Clinton in *The Plantation Mistress*, 60, stated, "The onset of adulthood—at least as signaled by marriage—was much earlier for women than for men in southern culture."

John Kirkwood, who described how she married Kirkwood after having only met him several times. Her brother was to be married the next day and John Kirkwood, visiting for the wedding, asked her to marry him at the same time. She later recalled, "I was nearly fifteen years old and I thought it was high time that I got married so I consented."⁶⁸

Mrs. Kirkwood was not alone. Memoirs suggest that fifteen was a typical age for women to marry during the earliest years on the Wil-lamette Valley frontier. One woman recalled that "in those days the young men began wondering why a girl wasn't married if she was still single when she was 16."⁶⁹ There appears to have been social pressure to marry young. Furthermore, "[a]necdotal evidence also reveals that young women who migrated to Oregon with their families during their teenage years were sometimes pressured to marry significantly older men, and at least a few young women married men they hardly knew."⁷⁰

This pattern of marriage was the same in other parts of the west, particularly during early settlement. In Colorado, for example, most women were married between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two.⁷¹ While many young women married after their arrival at their destination, some would marry on the trail or even before departing for the west. Juliet Adeline Boston, for example, married at age fourteen to John Sutton Petty in 1838. Their marriage took place in Anderson County, Kentucky, right before they moved west to homestead in Cass County, Texas.⁷²

Although Southerners brought a tradition of early marriage, at least for the women, there were other factors involved in marriage timing and mate selection. These centered on economic survival. "Across rural America in the mid-nineteenth century, men and women married at relatively young ages to secure land and a partner in labor. They could not afford to postpone marriage in search of the perfect mate. Uneven

68. Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982, 1992), 45.

69. Cynthia Culver Prescott, "'Why She Didn't Marry Him': Love, Power, and Marital Choice on the Far Western Frontier," *Western Historical Quarterly* 38 (Spring 2007): 29.

70. Ibid. According to Prescott, 28, historians Paul Burke and Donald DeBats have estimated the median age at first marriage of women living in Washington County, Oregon, in 1860 to be 17.4 years.

71. Julie Jones-Eddy, *Homesteading Women: An Oral History of Colorado, 1890–1950* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992).

72. Herbert C. Banks, *Daughters of the Republic of Texas: Patriot Ancestor Album* (Paducah, Kentucky: Turner Publishers, 2001), 219.

sex ratios and acute labor needs placed additional pressure on frontier women to marry early."⁷³

Two marriage models

Economics, perhaps even more than tradition, most influenced the age of the bride at the time of marriage. This factor is particularly obvious when studying the pattern of migration westward and settlement in America. There appear to have been two different models regarding age at marriage and family size in American history. The first model involved families that were on the vanguard of westward migration. These were the ones who lived on the frontier and were constantly pushing west looking for new land and economic opportunity. In essence, western migration and the American frontier produced conditions that encouraged "early and continuous marriage of pioneer women." Because "girls married young and were in a constant state of matrimony," these frontier families produced large families.⁷⁴ These people were upwardly mobile, but also restless, and their pattern of life was to move from free land to free land, or at least to where land was cheap. This type of economy promoted "early marriage, and higher marital fertility than in areas where land [was] relatively less abundant."⁷⁵ Early marriage was common among these pioneers, and it was the pattern that persisted. They usually married "in mid-adolescent years" and produced large families of six or more children because of the need for physical labor in clearing land and making a living.⁷⁶

The second marriage model reflected the lifestyle of families who lived in more settled areas of the country, such as New England and the Atlantic seaboard, as well as other parts of the country that were into the second or third generation of settlement. These families, believing themselves geographically and economically stable⁷⁷ and impacted by

73. *Ibid.*, 28.

74. James E. Davis, *Frontier America, 1800–1840: A Comparative Demographic Analysis of the Settlement Process* (Glendale, California: Arthur H. Clark, 1977), 52.

75. Guillaume Vandembroucke, "The American Frontier: Technology versus Immigration," *Review of Economic Dynamics* 11:2 (April 2008): 286.

76. *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 151–52.

77. *Ibid.*

"scarce land and low mortality,"⁷⁸ of a necessity married later and had fewer children.⁷⁹

Emigrants altered their marriage plan

Although women married at a later age along the Eastern seaboard, those who emigrated from these areas seem to have adopted the same pattern of earlier marriage on the frontier as their Southern counterparts. As the frontier continued to push westward, those in the vanguard married at a younger age and had larger families, despite the marriage patterns of the areas from which they came. "A trip westward was almost a demographic journey back in time; family sizes in communities further west mirrored those in much-longer settled places a generation or two previously. The women of Sugar Creek, Illinois, for example, were marrying four to five years younger on the average than those in Sturbridge or Deerfield, Massachusetts."⁸⁰

In Ohio of the 1820s "girls were generally married before they were seventeen."⁸¹ The same was later true for Illinois and the Midwest and "Oregon's women's ages at first marriage were comparable to those who settled in Sugar Creek, Illinois, earlier in the nineteenth century."⁸² For example, Hannah Elizabeth Totten, an early Kansas settler, married George Washington Thorne at the age of fifteen, the same age her own mother had married her father, Joseph Totten. Both of her parents were married in Iowa but were originally from further east.⁸³ In each locale, the age of brides at marriage slowly increased, due to economic and social progress, as well as changing views on the role of romantic love in

78. *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective*, 16.

79. *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 151–52.

80. *The Reshaping of Everyday Life*, 69. Most of the Sugar Creek settlers originally hailed from New England. But even emigrants from other countries who settled on the American frontier followed frontier marriage patterns rather than those of their old country. For example, "The fact that [Norwegian emigrants] were able to marry so quickly once they reached the American frontier is itself evidence of the new opportunities for demographic relaxation," according to Jon Gjerdle and Anne McCants, "Fertility, Marriage, and Culture: Demographic Processes Among Norwegian Immigrants to the Rural Middle West," *The Journal of Economic History* 55:4 (Dec 1995): 867.

81. *Frontier America*, 51–52.

82. Prescott, 29.

83. "Elizabeth (Totten) Thorne's Life on the Plains," Kansas Collection Articles, <http://www.kanecoll.org/articles/thorne.htm> (accessed August 1, 2009).

mate selection. "In Oregon and throughout the Far West, the children of early settlers increasingly matched their lives to eastern middle-class standards as frontier conditions faded. ... Second-generation Oregonians' rapid adoption of eastern expectations for marriage reveals the rapidity with which the West became incorporated into the American nation during the late-nineteenth century."⁸⁴

For example, by the time of the 1880 census, the common age at first marriage in the American Midwest, like the regions further east, had increased. At the time of the 1880 census, fewer than thirty-six percent of those married had done so by age nineteen. While this number was almost ten percent higher than New England's teen marriage rate, it was ten percent *lower* than it had been in the west when frontier conditions still prevailed.

Loss of the frontier and the rise of marriage ages

Figure 5.5 compares the 1880 marriage cohort cumulative distributions for white females by region. IPUMS classifies three quarters of the 1880 Midwest's marriage aged population as "rural." Marriage for female residents (min = 14.2, mean = 22.5) of rural areas where more land was available occurred substantially earlier than their urban counterparts (15.0, 24.3). (Recall that approximately 60% of age independent first marriages occur between the minimum and mean ages.)

The marriage patterns of the Northeast migrants settling in the Midwest (14.0, 23.1) highly resembled that of Midwest natives (14.3, 22.9), but sharply deviated from Northeast patterns (14.5, 24.5). In contrast, migrants from the South (13.8, 22.1) continued to marry significantly younger than the natives, and preserved all but earliest part of the Southern schedule (13.3, 22.2). From this limited information, it would appear that statistics from the Northeast where Joseph Smith was born and raised are the least suited to assessing the age of his plural spouses in 1840s Illinois. The Northeast had been settled for the longest period, and would be expected to have correspondingly higher ages at marriage. Yet, even emigrants raised under these conditions were quick to adapt to

the new circumstances in which they found themselves on the frontier, and marriage ages dropped accordingly.

Recent scholarly developments have enabled extraction of accurate marital statistics from the 1850–1870 censuses.⁸⁵ It is now clear that marital ages were rising sharply in the U.S., and even more so in the Midwest during this period. Figure 5.6 collects regional statistics for 1850–1870 including the mean, minimum age, and cumulative marriage rates for 14-year-olds. Some entries are calculated over an extended period as sample size dictates. For the entries based on the smallest sample sizes, we have reported the standard deviation of the margin of error. Moving backwards in time, one begins to see the Midwest's statistical picture morph toward the younger marriage rates found on the frontier.

Mormon Conformance to the Pattern

The Midwest is split into an eastern and western division by the census bureau, with Illinois assigned to the more populous eastern division. In settling Nauvoo and its surroundings, Latter Day Saints straddled the divisional boundary at Illinois and Iowa. The two areas the Saints had recently lived in, Ohio and Missouri, were also the most populated states in their respective divisions. By 1880, Illinois had gained a substantial population with a marriage pattern (14.5, 23.3) typical of the eastern Midwest (14.4, 23.3). In 1850, Illinois had marital statistics (13.8, 21.6) that took on intermediate values between the western (13.7, 21.1) and eastern division (13.8, 21.9). As sample sizes are relatively small for Illinois, we combined it with its neighboring states (IA, MO, KY, IN, WI, MI) and obtained even lower results (13.6, 21.5).

Our national assumptions stated earlier amount to the mean age rising almost 0.4 years per decade between 1800 and 1850. The data from 1850 to 1880 show that Illinois mean age was rising more rapidly than that of the U.S. Thus it is conservative to use the national trend to estimate the 1840 Illinois mean at 21.2 years. The regional trend for Illinois

85. Added records in the IPUMS database allow for more precise adjustments for under-imputed marital status. Though done on a national level earlier, J. David Hacker showed that regional analysis for 1850–1870 can be successfully done in "Economic, Demographic, and Anthropometric Correlates of First Marriage in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century United States" *Social Science History* 32:3 (Fall 2008): 307–345.

84. *Ibid.*, 45.

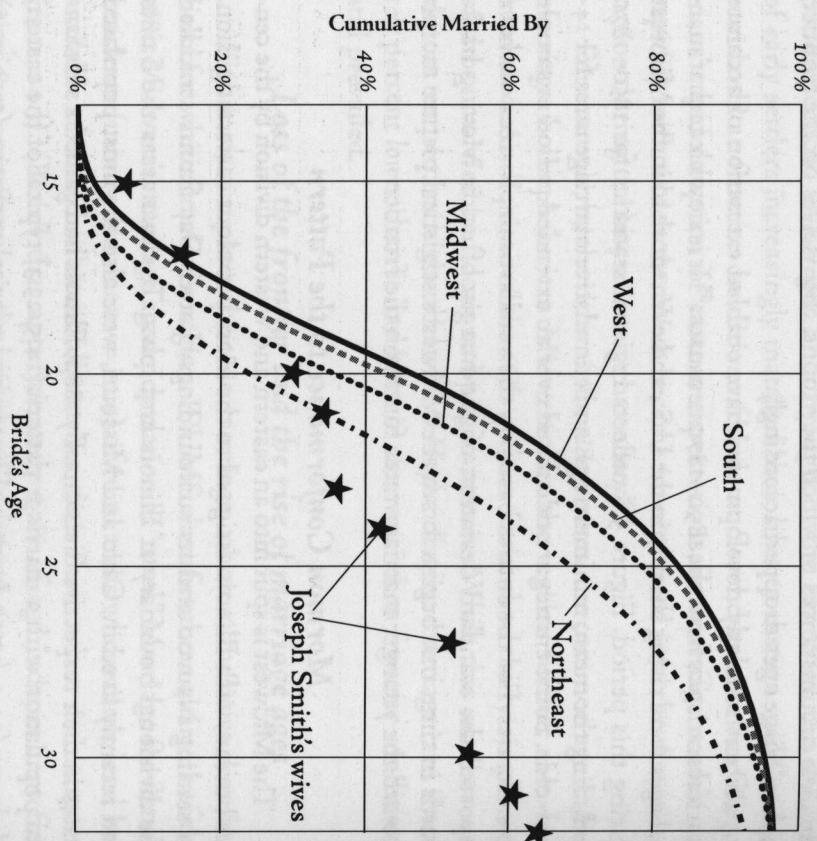


FIGURE 5.5: 1880 Marriage Cohort by Region

to become increasingly similar to the eastern Midwest division the further one goes back suggests that dropping the minimum age to 13.7 is reasonable. Under these projections the 1840 Illinois marriage cohort consisted of the following cumulative percentage of teens: 14 (1.9%), 15 (6.7%), 16 (15.6%), 17 (27.4%), 18 (40.3%), and 19 (52.6%).

While age-structure dependent, county records have their own sources of bias due to the difficulty of identifying remarriages. Figure 5.7 contains marriage rates of five randomly selected counties (four from Illinois or Iowa and one from late frontier Nebraska). We attempted to cross check marriage pairs in genealogical databases to eliminate higher order marriages, but much less than the expected 12% were removed be-

Place	Mean			Minimum Age			Rate 14 and Under		
	1850	1860	1870	1850	1860	1870	1850	1860	1870
New England	24.4	23.8	24.4	13.5	13.8	14.0	1.0%	0.8%	0.7%
Mid Atlantic	23.6	23.5	23.5	13.7	13.7	13.9	1.0%	1.0%	0.8%
Northeast	23.8	23.6	23.8	13.7	13.7	13.8	1.0%	0.9%	0.8%
NE Central	21.9	22.0	22.5	13.8	13.6	14.1	1.3%	1.6%	0.8%
NW Central	21.1	21.2	21.7	13.7	14.0	13.8	1.9%	1.2%	1.4%
Midwest	21.8	21.9	22.3	13.8	13.7	14.0	1.5%	1.6%	1.0%
South Atlantic	22.3	22.4	22.6	13.5	13.3	13.5	1.7%	2.2%	1.6%
SE Central	22.0	21.9	22.6	13.1	13.4	13.5	3.2%	2.1%	1.8%
SW Central	20.8±0.3			13.1±0.2			3.9±0.9%		
South	22.0	21.9	22.4	13.3	13.3	13.3	2.5%	2.3%	2.1%
West	19.0±0.5			13.4±0.3			4.6±1.8%		
USA	22.7	22.5	22.7	13.5	13.5	13.7	1.5%	1.6%	1.3%

FIGURE 5.6: Regional Marriage Activity.

fore charting.⁸⁶ This inadequacy, coupled with smaller sample sizes and local variations, is largely why county marriage rates sometimes trail the Illinois estimates for the 1850 and 1880 marriage cohort.

The data: sources and potential Mormon bias

The two Mormon data sets likely overlap somewhat, but the selection criteria go to different extremes. For the Nauvoo (1839–1845) set, all marriages with adequate dating information from a compilation by Susan Easton Black⁸⁷ were used, while “Skolnick⁸⁸” (1835–1845) includes only once-married couples.⁸⁸ Mormon monogamous marriages from a

86. See Technical Note 3.

87. Susan Easton Black, “Marriages in the Nauvoo Region 1839–1845,” on-line database, using sources: Lyndon W. Cook, *Civil Marriages in Nauvoo and some outlying areas (1839–1845)* (Liberty Publishing Co., 1980); with additional data from *Times and Seasons*, *The Wasp*, *Nauvoo Neighbor*, and “A Record of Marriages in the City of Nauvoo,” located at the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. <http://www.worldvitalrecords.com/indexinfo.aspx?ix=usa_il_nauvoo_marriages> (accessed July 15, 2010).

88. M. Skolnick, L. Bean, D. May, V. Arbon, K. De Nevers and P. Cartwright, “Mormon Demographic History I. Nuptiality and Fertility of Once-Married Couples,” *Populations Studies* 32

Kirtland data set⁸⁹ are not shown, but have a teenage marriage rate of almost 50% compared to 33% and 43% for the two that are shown.

While likely not statistically significant, Nauvoo actually had fewer teen brides than in some of the surrounding counties. In Lee County, Iowa, directly across the Mississippi River from Nauvoo, between 1837 and 1850, of the 313 recorded marriages, forty-five percent were women aged thirteen to nineteen. Twelve brides were under sixteen at the time of their marriage, including two thirteen-year-olds who married a twenty-year-old and thirty-three-year-old, respectively.⁹⁰

Of course, there were a number of Latter Day saints residing in Lee County until late 1846 and some moderns might suspect that the high number of young brides was reflective of Mormon culture, rather than frontier demographics. No such Mormon influence existed in Louisa County, Iowa, however, which was also situated on the Mississippi River two counties above Lee County. Mormon settlement here was almost non-existent, even though the country was opened for settlement at almost the same time as Lee County.

In non-Mormon Louisa County, between 1842 and 1852, fifty-one percent of marriages were to brides aged nineteen and younger. In fact, seventeen percent of the females married when they were sixteen and younger.⁹¹ Clearly, young marriage ages seen in Lee County are not a case of Mormons *skewing* the samples, but rather *conforming* to the dominant marriage trends in their frontier society.

(1978): 14. Marriage rates estimated from the published mean (21.35), standard deviation (4.26), and knowledge gained from 1910 about how the GLG shaping parameter changes when only once-marrieds are considered.

89. Milton V. Backman Jr. with Keith Perkins and Susan Easton, "A profile of Latter-day Saints of Kirtland, Ohio and members of Zion's Camp 1830–1839: vital statistics and sources, compiled in cooperation with the Department of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, in Family History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

90. Joyce S. Cowles and Karen Kester, *Lee County, Iowa Marriages v. 1* (Des Moines: Iowa Genealogical Society, 1987). There were a total of 328 women listed between 1837 and 1850. Of those women, fifteen were second marriages and were not included in the final figures. While there were a number of women who did not originally have an age recorded, most were identified using other sources. The ages of five brides were ultimately unidentifiable. 141 women were aged nineteen or younger while 167 women were aged twenty and older.

91. "Louisa County (Iowa) Marriages," 1842–1852, <http://iagenweb.org/louisa/LCmarriagep-age.htm> (accessed April 14, 2009). While there were a total of 100 marriages recorded during this time-period, two were second marriages and were not included in the final statistics.

The marriage records from Sangamon County⁹² and Cass County⁹³ come from the same general area, albeit later in the 19th century. These confirm the census suggestion of a rapid decline in teenage marriage rates. Though having a smaller total sample size (32) than encompassed by Joseph Smith's wives (33), the Hitchcock County⁹⁴ sample shows that even at such a late date it is possible to find frontier regions of the country with a higher percentage of 14 year old brides. As will now be seen, neither Joseph Smith or Hitchcock county were abnormal for their time.

Comparing Joseph Smith's plural marriages to the marriage patterns of the Illinois area

Figure 5.7 shows the frequency of Joseph's teenage wives by age compared to some contemporary marriage cohorts. In comparison with our estimate for 1840 Illinois, only Joseph's rate for fourteen-year-olds (6.1% vs. 1.94%) is higher, but not so much so that it is abnormal. Although tests for normality are somewhat arbitrary, we will adopt a rough standard of a 95% critical region. Suppose we were to randomly select a group of 33 brides based on 1840 Illinois statistics. We could repeat that processes until a large ensemble of such groups was generated. We wish to determine the expected percentage of those groups containing at least a couple of 14 year old brides. If Joseph Smith's cohort puts him in the top or bottom 2.5% (approximately 2 standard deviations from the mean in a normal distribution), then we would conclude his behavior was abnormal for his time and place.

Since Joseph's profile only ranks in the upper 87 percentile⁹⁵ for 14-year-olds, it is not statistically significant. The high cumulative rate can be adequately explained by the small sample size of 33. At the 95%

92. Eileen Gochanour, "Sangamon County, Illinois Marriage Applications — March 16, 1879 thru December 31, 1881," < <http://sangamon.ilgenweb.net/marr1879.htm> > (accessed July 15, 2010).

93. "Cass County [Iowa] Marriages," 1853–1881, < <http://iagenweb.org/cass/bmd/mar-1853-1881.htm> > (accessed July 15, 2010).

94. "Hitchcock County [Nebraska] Marriages, Courthouse records starting 26 Jan 1888," 1888–1898 < <http://www.usgenet.org/usa/ne/county/hitchcock/olres/marr1888.html> > (accessed July 15, 2010).

95. See Technical Note 4.

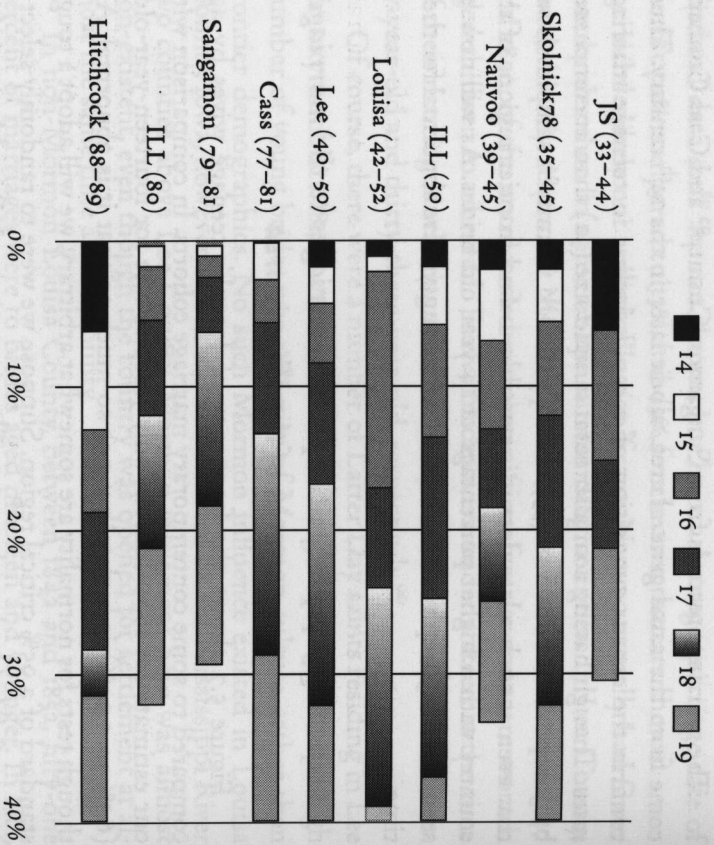


FIGURE 5-7: Teenage marriage rates for 5 randomly selected counties, Joseph Smith's plural wives, 2 Mormon data sets, and the Illinois census.

benchmark, Joseph Smith's cohort would be normal for any region with a cumulative rate of at least 0.75% for fourteen-year-olds. Plural marriage aside, Joseph Smith would have been normal in any of the four major areas of the US (Northeast, Midwest, South, West) until as late as 1880. Nationally, marriage at 14 years of age did not become that rare until 1980.

Contemporary anecdotal confirmation

Joseph's polygyny even provides us with an interesting test case of our statistical conclusions. Nine months after marrying seventeen-year-old Sarah Ann Whitney, Joseph arranged for Joseph C. Kingsbury to enter into "a pretended marriage," to disguise their polygamous arrange-

ment.⁹⁶ As Compton notes, "[o]utsideers would have suspected nothing unusual in the relationship" between Sarah Ann and her pretended husband. Yet, Kingsbury was born in 1812, and was thus only seven years younger than Joseph Smith. It is implausible that the LDS leader would have chosen a "front husband" for Sarah Ann who would have attracted unwanted attention. Thus, if the age differential between Sarah Ann and Joseph Smith was atypical, strange, or socially risky, it makes little sense to think that a relationship with Joseph Kingsbury would have been much more acceptable. The Prophet's choice of Kingsbury as his marital decoy demonstrates that such differences in age were not likely to attract comment.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated through an analysis of the relevant scholarly literature covering traditional, legal, sociological, and economic trends, that the relatively young marital ages among nineteenth-century Saints did, indeed, fit within the larger historical context of American society. This included Joseph Smith's wives, whose age at marriage was well within the norm for his time and place on the nineteenth-century American frontier.

Given the secrecy which attended Nauvoo polygamy, it would be unusual to find complaints about the bride's marriage age or the age differential during Joseph Smith's lifetime. But if Joseph had married only one of his polygamous wives in a typical monogamous marriage, both the statistical data and historical clues make it unlikely that their ages would have been much remarked upon. Modern historians, critics, or readers must consider marriage ages in the proper historical time *and* place—the American frontier—if they are to properly understand and characterize these relationships.

Technical Notes

1. Cohorts are arranged by segmenting the population into groups (usually by birth year) and then observing events in each individual's

96. Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 351–352; citing Joseph C. Kingsbury, "The History of Joseph C. Kingsbury," Marriott Library, MS 522, 13.

life history. A synthetic cohort can be used to approximate these life histories if the conditions found in a calendar year are assumed to remain constant over time. For example, the 1865 birth cohort in the 1880 census would synthetically have the same marriage statistics in 1881 as the 1864 birth cohort did in 1880, and so on. See Fitch (2005) 28–39 for more information about using synthetic birth cohorts.

2. From 1880 onwards, the IPUMS website provides complete information about marital status for each individual in its census samples. Further breakdowns by sex, age, race, and region are possible. From this raw data, synthetic birth cohorts can be formed and cumulative marriage rates (the percentage ever married divided by the total) calculated. Demographers often approximate two statistical measures, the singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) and the percentage ever married by age 50 (C_0), using Hajnal's method. The spread (or standard deviation) of the distribution about the mean marital age can be determined from optimally fitting the widely used Coale-McNeil model to the raw census data.

From 1850–1870 IPUMS imputes marital status from analyzing households. As this method underestimates actual cumulative marriage rates, Hacker (2003, 2008) has calculated correction factors for the different age groups. For 1800–1840 we assume that SMAM was 21.0 following the discussion in Smith (1993) and Haines (1996) and allow SMAM to drop linearly from its 1850 value. We also assume that the minimum age of eligibility of 13.6 held steady in the 19th century following Sanderson (1979), but using a slightly lower value based on our calculations. These two assumptions are sufficient to estimate the Coale-McNeil nuptiality schedule for 1800–1840.

An additional step was performed to make the cumulative marriage rates dependent on age structure in figs. 1–2. Reconstruction of a census year marriage cohort must take into account that the 19th century was characterized by high birthrates and deathrates. More technical details about our data analysis methods are available in Keller (2010).

3. The 1910 U.S. census was the first to include information about remarriage. About 12% of white brides under age 50 in the previous marriage year cohort were starting a second (or higher) marriage. Removing these brides lowers the mean age by over a year and matches the

cumulative rates found from adjusting synthetic birth year cohorts. Very few teenagers had adequate time to first be married, then be divorced or widowed, then go through a mourning period, and also court and marry a second husband.

4. The percentile (P) of randomly selected marriage cohorts of size $N=33$ follows a binomial distribution.

For two fourteen-year-olds in 1840 Illinois, $p = 1.94\%$ and:

$$p = \sum_{n=0}^1 \binom{33}{n} p^n (1-p)^{33-n}$$