

*New Branches on the Tree:  
Household Structure in Early  
Stages of the Family Cycle in  
Worcester, Massachusetts,  
1860–1880*

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THIS ESSAY attempts to link family history to urban history by examining the ways in which families adjusted to change in a growing city, Worcester, Massachusetts, between 1860 and 1880.<sup>1</sup> The analysis reveals that there were important contrasts between living arrangements of families in chronologically close but distinctly different stages of development, namely, families of newlyweds who had not yet produced children and those of young parents who recently had born a first child. It also emphasizes the importance of the context in which family development took place. Some recent studies of family and households have included comparisons between rural and urban areas, between industrial and commercial communities, and between 'modern' and 'pre-

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<sup>1</sup> Some data for this paper have been prepared from a coding system used by the Comparative Cities Project, directed by the author and by R. B. Litchfield under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, 1972–1974.

modern' societies.<sup>2</sup> Further work requires an even sharper focus, however, because one of the crucial issues in the field of family history involves analysis of how external conditions affected household organization and how interactions developed between the family process and community change. A budding but still small nineteenth-century city like Worcester provides an arena for such an examination.

Nearly a century of sociological research has asserted that the modernization of Western society left the family as an isolated unit. Theorists in Europe and America have posited that the division of labor accompanying industrialization, the new forms of social organization such as clubs, unions, and fraternal associations that resulted from urbanization, the new responsibilities of schools, hospitals, and other public institutions created by the new bureaucratic state, and the new popular diversions produced by science and technology for mass consumption all combined to break down traditional family functions and ties. No longer did the family alone have responsibilities of education, welfare, entertainment, and consolation. Moreover, it was believed, modern society's demands and inducements for social and geographical mobility splintered the traditionally large and compact extended family of the past and reduced families into isolated nuclear units removed from and less frequently in contact with other kin.<sup>3</sup>

Since the 1960s, however, a number of students have been trying to undermine the nuclear family theory, if not to detonate it. Peter Laslett has shown that there is nothing new

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Maris Vinovskis and Tamara K. Hareven, 'Marital Fertility, Ethnicity, and Occupation in Essex County, Massachusetts, 1880,' presented at the MSSB Conference on the Family in the Process of Industrialization, Williamstown, Mass., July 1974.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Louis Wirth, 'Urbanism as a Way of Life,' *American Journal of Sociology* 44 (July 1938):1-24; Talcott Parsons, 'The Kinship System of the Contemporary United States,' *American Anthropologist* 45 (Jan.-March 1932):22-38; and Ralph Linton, 'The Natural History of the Family,' in Ruth Nanda Anshen, ed., *The Family: Its Function and Destiny* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), pp. 18-38.



about nucleation; the nuclear family was widespread and predominant long before the so-called modern era.<sup>4</sup> Marvin Sussman and Lee Burchinal have shown that in our current society, parents, children, and other relatives help each other with loans, gifts, advice, childcare, and other services more extensively than many people have suspected.<sup>5</sup> Michael Anderson has analyzed an industrializing town of nineteenth-century England and found that people there took assistance from their relatives when it was advantageous to do so.<sup>6</sup> And Tamara Hareven has posited the theory that many families attach extra members at certain stages of the family cycle.<sup>7</sup>

On the surface, Worcester in the middle and late nineteenth century seems to have been a place where conditions promoted general nucleation in family structure. Worcester cannot claim to be representative of all American communities, but it does typify a common nineteenth-century experience. Although it had existed as a regional crossroads of south-central Massachusetts throughout most of the eighteenth century, Worcester began to blossom as an industrial center with the opening of the Blackstone Canal in 1828. The canal gave local manufacturers advantageous transportation connections, and the arrival of railroads in the 1840s brought more industrial concerns. By the 1860s the city could boast of

<sup>4</sup> Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965); see also Laslett, *Household and Family in Past Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

<sup>5</sup> Marvin B. Sussman, 'The Isolated Nuclear Family, Fact or Fiction?' *Social Problems* 6(1958):333-40; Sussman and Lee Burchinal, 'Kin Family Network: Unheralded Structure in Current Conceptualizations of Family Functioning,' *Marriage and Family Living* 24(Aug. 1962):231-40; Bert N. Adams, *Kinship in an Urban Setting* (Chicago: Markham Publishing Company, 1968); and Reuben Hill et al., *Family Development in Three Generations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Anderson, *Family Structure in Nineteenth Century Lancashire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971). See also Howard P. Chudacoff, 'Newlyweds and Family Extension: First Stages of the Family Cycle in Providence, Rhode Island, 1864-1880,' presented at the MSSB Conference on the Family in the Process of Industrialization, Williamstown, Mass., July 1974.

<sup>7</sup> Tamara K. Hareven, 'The Family as Process,' *Journal of Social History* 7(Spring 1974).

a broad range of industries based upon wire and shoes (mostly men's boots), but also including textiles, machines and machine tools, ladies' corsets, envelopes, and reed organs.<sup>8</sup> The population mushroomed from 7,497 in 1840 to 24,960 in 1860, and to 58,291 in 1880. The bulk of this growth consisted of native and foreign migrants, geographically mobile people who often traveled singly or in nuclear families. By 1880 only 59.5 percent of Worcester's residents had been born in Massachusetts, and only 43.6 percent had parents both of whom had been born in the United States. Irish accounted for most of the foreign stock, but there were also a number of immigrants from Canada, England, Germany, and Scandinavia.<sup>9</sup>

Table 1

CHARACTERISTICS OF  
WORCESTER POPULATION

	1860	1880
Average no. of children per family	2.12	2.09
Average no. of boarders per household	0.46	0.46
Average no. of servants per household	0.16	0.14
Average family size	4.20	4.18
Average household size	4.83	4.69
Percent family type		
single person	1.5	2.3
nuclear	83.3	81.1
extended	15.3	16.7

<sup>8</sup> See James E. Mooney, ed., *Worcester, Massachusetts, Celebration: 1722-1972* (Worcester, 1972); D. Hamilton Hurd, ed., *History of Worcester County, Massachusetts* (Philadelphia: J. W. Lewis & Co., 1889), 2:1598-1657; Ellery Bicknell Crane, *History of Worcester County, Massachusetts* (New York and Chicago: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1924), 2:605-15; and Charles Nutt, *History of Worcester and Its People* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1917), 2:1067-80.

<sup>9</sup> Carroll D. Wright, *The Census of Massachusetts, 1880* (Boston: Wright & Potter Printing Co., 1883), pp. 85-87.



Beneath the growth and change, there seems to have been some continuity in family organization. The figures from Table 1, assembled from 1860 and 1880 census samples consisting of over 2,000 individuals and 450 families each, reveal very little change over time. The average sizes of families and households are quite similar, with only very small and insignificant decreases in 1880. Family type seems quite consistent with accepted theory. In each year over four-fifths of Worcester families were nuclear in form, certainly a significant proportion.

Underlying these general patterns, there was considerable variation and change, particularly at different points along the family cycle. For example, in the two earliest stages, there were significant and revealing differences in household structures. These stages encompass those young couples who were newly married and as yet childless and those who had recently born their first child. The experiences of these new branches of family trees can yield considerable insight into the effects of community change as well as the means of adaptation to change.

In order to examine the living conditions of young families, I have taken special samples from the federal manuscript censuses for Worcester in the years 1860, 1870, and 1880. These samples consist of individual and household information about those couples reported as having been married in the previous year (the twelve months before the census, which was taken in June) and those who had only one child, apparently their first, under one year of age.<sup>10</sup> For each sample, I recorded the age, occupation, place of birth, and relationship to head of household of both husband and wife as well as characteristics of the household in which they lived, such as whose house

<sup>10</sup> The child in these cases might not have been the couple's first; the couple might have had a child that did not survive until the census enumeration. Since this study examines mainly household patterns, the problem of infant mortality presents fewer problems of analysis than might occur under other focuses such as fertility or child spacing.

(their own or someone else's), the number of kin in the house, the number of non-kin (boarders and servants), and the type of household. This information was then computerized, and a number of tables were generated that made various comparisons between newlywed and first-child families and between different years.

Table 2

		AVERAGE AGES FOR SAMPLED GROUPS			
		<i>Newlyweds</i>		<i>1st children</i>	
		<i>busb.</i>	<i>wife</i>	<i>busb.</i>	<i>wife</i>
1860					
	Native	25.3	20.3	28.4	25.0
	Foreign	25.9	23.4	27.7	25.0
1870					
	Native	27.2	23.8	27.7	24.7
	Foreign	26.7	23.9	27.9	25.5
1880					
	Native	26.2	22.8	27.4	25.0
	Foreign	26.0	23.3	29.0	25.3

In some respects, the data for these special groups showed little change over the years. As Table 2 indicates, the age at marriage changed hardly at all over time. (Because the newlyweds in this table were people married in the previous twelve months, the real ages at marriage would be somewhat lower than those presented.) Native-born brides and grooms tended to marry somewhat earlier in 1860, but these figures may be random deviations because of small sample sizes. Also, the ages at which parents were having their first children showed few variations. (Again, actual ages would be slightly lower because the children involved were up to one year old.) Marriage ages and ages at first childbearing are higher than might have been suspected. This is not unusual. Migration, job insecurity, and a number of other social and

economic factors often delayed marriage and childbearing in the nineteenth century, particularly in eastern urban areas.

Upon closer examination, however, some consistent differences begin to emerge. For example: Did a husband and wife live in their own household—that is, one in which the husband was head—or did they live in someone else's household as boarders or relatives of the head? Two patterns emerge. First, the proportion of Worcester newlyweds living independently in their own household declined considerably, from 84.5 percent in 1860 to 63.5 percent in 1880. In other words, in 1860, the chances that a newlywed husband was head of his own household were very good, about six to one. In 1880, however, the chances would have been greatly reduced. Meanwhile, the proportion of first-child couples living independently remained high and relatively stable—between 91 and 94 percent from 1860 through 1880. Clearly, something was happening to housing opportunities for newlyweds that separated their experiences from those of young families with first children.

Table 3

SUMMARY OF HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURE  
OF SAMPLED GROUPS

	<i>Newlyweds</i>			<i>1st children</i>		
	1860	1870	1880	1860	1870	1880
1. Nuclear	79.4	60.6	44.8	81.2	80.7	78.5
2. Extended vertical	4.1	8.4	16.4	9.4	6.0	7.7
3. Extended lateral	3.1	7.6	11.3	5.2	6.4	10.3
4. Extended vertical and lateral	10.3	7.6	13.9	2.0	4.3	2.6
5. Boarding	3.1	15.9	13.2	2.1	2.6	0.9

Data on the household structures of the two types of families reinforce the distinctions more clearly. Table 3 divides



the households into five categories. The first, nuclear, refers to the major type—spouses, with or without children, living with no other people. Vertical extension refers to those sampled couples who lived with the husband's or wife's parents. Lateral extension means that the couple lived with one or more brothers and sisters. Where there was vertical and lateral extension, parents as well as brothers and sisters lived in the same household as the sampled couple. The fifth category refers to those cases in which the newlywed or first-child family boarded with people who were not related to either the husband or wife.

The table reveals that over the three sample years, proportions of first-child couples in the various household categories fluctuated only slightly. The nuclear type was and remained by far the most predominant form. There was a slight rise in the incidence of extended households in 1880 if we add together categories 2, 3, and 4, but generally not enough to be remarkable.

Living patterns of newlyweds show significant changes, however. Between 1860 and 1880 the proportion living in nuclear households was halved while the proportions living with kin or as boarders rose dramatically. While in 1860 four-fifths of all newlyweds either lived alone or with servants or boarders in their household, by 1880 this category accounted for only a minority of newlywed households.

A breakdown of household analysis into ethnic groups yields more differences, although dividing the samples reduces the numbers involved in each category so that it is difficult to identify significant contrasts. The general trend, however, remains the same. Proportions of families with first children in each household category remained relatively stable over time. The Irish tended to live more frequently in nuclear households than other groups. In 1880, for example, 92 percent of first-child Irish families were nuclear, while 75 to 80 percent of comparable native-born and other foreign house-



holds were in this category. Few other contrasts appear for first-child families. All groups of newlyweds, on the other hand, had declining percentages of nuclear households. Proportions of native-born newlyweds in nuclear families fell from 60 percent in 1860 to 38 percent in 1880; of Irish, from 95 percent to 60 percent; and of other foreigners, from 81 percent to 60 percent.<sup>11</sup>

In order to assess the relationship between occupation and household structure, the two types of samples were divided into three occupational groups: nonmanual, consisting of professionals, proprietors, and white collar occupations; skilled, mainly artisans and tradesmen; and semiskilled and unskilled, factory hands and general laborers. Such divisions provide only rough proxies for class or status, but in the absence of other information, they offer the most available measures. From 1860 through 1880, first-child families of all three groups remained predominantly nuclear, usually around 80 percent. Among newlyweds, the trend toward living with other people moved in different ways. In 1860, half the nonmanual newlywed households were nuclear and half were extended. By 1880, only a quarter were nuclear, half were extended, and a quarter were boarders. This seems to have occurred because over this period more doctors, lawyers, clerks, and retailers boarded with their employers or partners. In 1860, three-quarters of newlywed households with skilled worker husbands were nuclear, and 90 percent with semiskilled and unskilled husbands were nuclear. By 1880,

<sup>11</sup> While American-born newlyweds tended to live more frequently in vertically extended households between 1860 and 1880 (i.e., a rise of from 8 percent to 22 percent in the proportion of newlyweds coresiding with one or the other of their parents), Irish and other immigrant newlyweds lived more in laterally extended households (i.e., a rise from 3 percent to 16 percent). This contrast highlights differences in migration experiences. Native young families, either born in Worcester or migrating relatively short distances, seem more likely to have had parents living in the vicinity or were more likely to have brought parents with them. Foreign migrants, coming from farther origins, were more likely to have left parents behind while migration was more an experience of their same generation. Thus they went to live with, or took into their households, brothers and sisters.

nuclear proportions among both manual groups had dropped to 50 percent, and proportions living in extended families for both had risen to 40 percent.

In review, then, between 1860 and 1880 in Worcester, there was little outward change in the living arrangements of families just beginning to bear children, but newlyweds were finding it increasingly difficult to live alone and independently. There was a large decline in the proportion of newlyweds living in nuclear households, and, inversely, an increase in the frequencies of newlyweds living with others or taking others into their households.

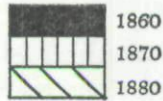
What factors might explain these patterns? What do the changes reveal about life in the community? A suggestive clue to an explanation lies in some general data about the housing conditions of the sampled groups. In order to derive some estimate of population density and crowding, I recorded the total number of households inhabiting the building in which each sampled family lived. Thus if a newlywed or first-child family lived in a single-dwelling-unit house, the number would be one. If there was a multiple-unit situation, such as a duplex or apartment house, the value would be two, three, or whatever.

As the graph which summarizes patterns of housing reveals, conditions changed over time quite remarkably, especially for newlyweds. The graph for recently married couples shows a clear decline in the proportions living in one- and two-unit buildings and a steep increase in the proportion living in places of three or more units—from 20 percent in 1860 to over 40 percent in 1880.<sup>12</sup> A more drastic decline in one-family houses occurred among first-child families, although the proportion of two-unit buildings remained more stable, and the increase in buildings of three or more units

<sup>12</sup> Note that the bottom axis of the graph represents separate dwelling units within buildings, not the total number of families within buildings, which could have been higher if more than one family shared a unit.

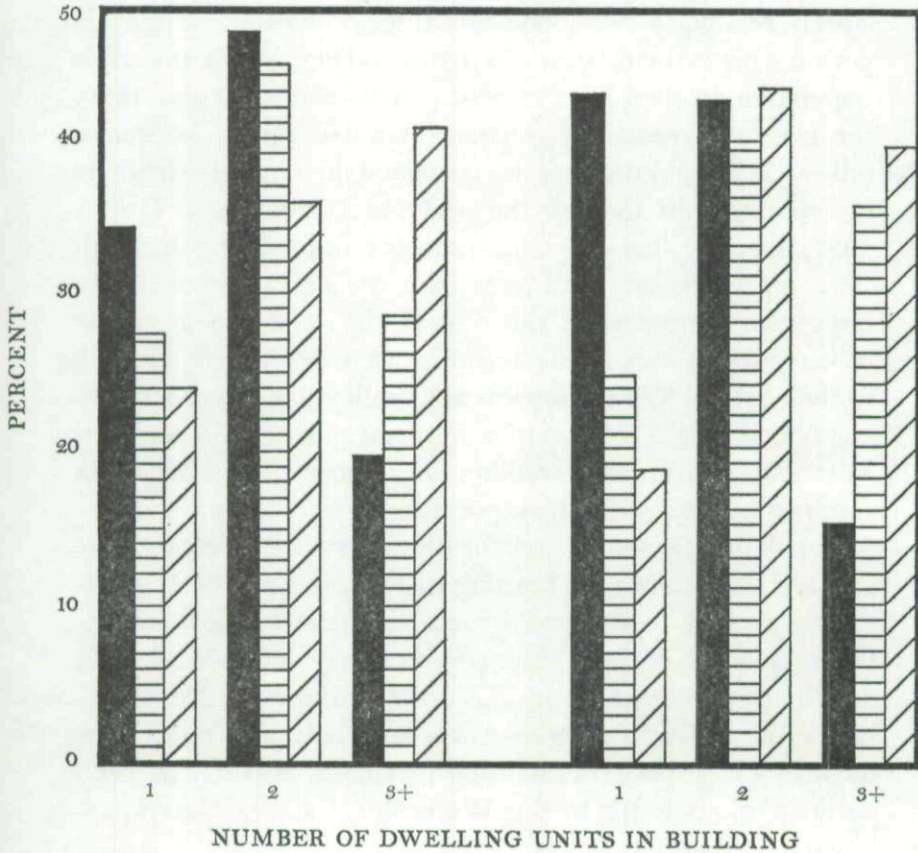


HOUSING PATTERNS OF SAMPLED GROUPS



NEWLYWEDS

FIRST CHILDREN



seems to have occurred more radically between 1860 and 1870 than continuously, as was the case with newlyweds. These patterns suggest that unless people's subjective tastes somehow shifted between 1860 and 1880 so that they began

to prefer multiple-unit housing, something happened to the housing supply in Worcester that forced people to live more closely packed together.

Because source materials are limited and because all the complexities of human motivations are not known, it is difficult to formulate a comprehensive causal model that would explain the changes. Yet the housing situation seems to be closely related to two forces affecting Worcester during this period. One is the process of growth and lag. While the city's population swelled by 233 percent between 1860 and 1880, the land area remained constant at about thirty-six square miles—in fact, Worcester has remained the same size from its incorporation in 1848 to the present. Moreover, as late as 1887, the city had only one horsecar line, slicing through town on Main Street. Because industry and commerce were largely concentrated in the central city, and because mass transportation was undeveloped, most workers had to walk to their jobs.<sup>13</sup> While horsecar and trolley lines were stretching boundaries of other cities outward during this period,<sup>14</sup> Worcester remained a walking city whose settled area was confined by pedestrian transportation.

Population pressures and the disappearance of vacant land strained and altered the housing market. In the 1880s, builders responded to demand by erecting the famous (or infamous) three-deckers, inexpensive types of multiple-unit dwellings so characteristic of Worcester and other New England cities.<sup>15</sup> But the three-decker was only a late development in a long period of housing problems. As early as 1869 an anonymous letter to the Worcester *Evening Gazette* as-

<sup>13</sup> Roger Roberge, 'The Three Decker: Structural Correlate of Worcester's Industrial Revolution,' (M.A. thesis, Clark University, 1965), pp. 25-32.

<sup>14</sup> Howard P. Chudacoff, *The Evolution of American Urban Society* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), pp. 64-85.

<sup>15</sup> Roberge, 'The Three Decker,' pp. 25-32. See also Arthur Krim, 'The Three Decker and Urban Architecture in New England,' *Monadnock* 44(June 1970):45-55; and Peter Barnett, 'The Worcester Three Decker: Form and Variation,' *Monadnock* 48(June 1974):21-33.



serted that although the city was prosperous and healthy, 'our great want today is that of residences.' The writer complained that Worcester's employment opportunities had grown more rapidly than its housing supply, and he urged manufacturers to construct more residences.<sup>16</sup>

More residences were built in the early 1870s (although they mainly used up more of the scarce inner city land and forced prices higher), but then conditions were further disrupted by the second force affecting Worcester, economic hard times.<sup>17</sup> In September 1873 the bubble of national prosperity burst when the powerful banking firm of Jay Cooke and Company failed, precipitating a drop in security prices, a wave of bankruptcies, and ultimately an epidemic of unemployment. Even before the fall of Cooke, irresponsible railroad speculation, overexpansion in industry, and reduced European demand for U.S. farm products had weakened American financial structures. The system collapsed in 1873, and the nation entered a five-year depression in which national income plummeted and commodity prices declined more precipitously than in any other depression before or since.<sup>18</sup>

The consequences spread to Worcester slowly. Early in 1874, Mayor Edward L. Davis, in his inaugural address to the City Council, referred to the national situation with concern but expressed optimism that, like previous financial crises, the period of hardship would be very brief.<sup>19</sup> A year later, Mayor Clark Jillson noted with pleasure that the community was still enjoying prosperity.<sup>20</sup> He may have been

<sup>16</sup> Worcester *Evening Gazette*, January 16, 1869.

<sup>17</sup> The 1875 Massachusetts state census showed that the total number of dwellings in Worcester increased by 24 percent between 1870 and 1875 while the total number of families increased 23 percent. Carroll D. Wright, *The Census of Massachusetts, 1875. I: Population and Social Statistics* (Boston: Albert J. Wright, 1877), p. 24.

<sup>18</sup> Richard B. Morris, ed., *Encyclopedia of American History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 536-40

<sup>19</sup> Worcester *Evening Gazette*, January 5, 1874.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, January 2, 1875.

whistling in the dark, however, because by 1876 a grim mood had gripped the city. One letter writer to the *Gazette* described local business as 'depressed' and warned that the city had not yet 'touched bottom.'<sup>21</sup> An article the next day soberly cited figures showing that during 1875 the number of business failures in the northeastern states had doubled over those of 1874.<sup>22</sup> In his inaugural address in 1877, Mayor Charles B. Pratt observed that he was entering office 'at a time of very general and unexampled depression' and added that 'the mechanical interests of our city are paralyzed. . . . Other businesses . . . languish.'<sup>23</sup> Pratt continued his laments through 1878 and into 1879. The cloud finally lifted that year, and in his annual address to the City Council early in 1880, Mayor Frank H. Kelly expressed joy at 'the revival of business so long depressed.'<sup>24</sup>

The depression had struck the housing industry with brutal force. Although direct data on Worcester are unavailable at present, a number of national and regional studies suggest that the impact everywhere was severe and that Worcester was no exception. For example, several studies of long-term urban housing trends show that nationally there was a steady and drastic decline in the annual figures for the numbers of residential building permits issued and actual houses constructed between 1871 and 1879.<sup>25</sup> In the five most urbanized counties of Ohio, the number of dwelling units produced annually rose steadily after 1860 to a peak of 4.4 million in 1873 and then plummeted to 1.9 million by 1878.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, January 12, 1876.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, January 13, 1876.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, January 1, 1877.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, January 5, 1880.

<sup>25</sup> William Newman, *The Building Industry and Business Cycles* (privately printed, 1935), pp. 7-24; Miles Colean, *American Housing: Problems and Prospects* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1944), p. 186; Manuel Gottlieb, 'Estimates of Residential Building, United States, 1840-1939,' Technical Paper 17, National Bureau of Economic Research (1964), p. 65; and John R. Riggleman, 'Building Cycles in the United States, 1875-1932,' *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 28(1932): 174-79.

<sup>26</sup> Gottlieb, 'Residential Building,' p. 65.



In San Francisco, Oakland, and Los Angeles, the annual numbers of subdivisions recorded and deeds filed dropped sharply between 1875 and 1880.<sup>27</sup>

Several studies have identified clear and strong correlations between the movements of housing indices and those of general business conditions during this period—although there is also agreement that building cycles manifested more radical and longer movements upward and downward than general business cycles.<sup>28</sup> Thus in San Francisco the annual number of deeds recorded followed the same pattern as annual bank clearings, a handy index of local economic conditions. If this correlation is valid, there would be good cause for believing that Worcester duplicated the trend of other cities because Worcester's annual bank clearings declined quite consistently from 1875 through 1879.<sup>29</sup>

Economic decline bore down especially upon the work and living patterns of common people, locally as well as nationally. The 1880 Worcester census sample revealed that some 40 percent of the city's manual laborers had been unemployed for at least part of the previous year. A study of prices and wages undertaken by the 1880 federal census, which used considerable information from various Massachusetts companies, showed that the average daily wage of a non-farm laborer dropped from \$1.57 in 1870 to \$1.28 in 1880, a decline of nearly 20 percent. And most likely the 1880 figure was somewhat higher than what it would have been in 1876, 1877, or 1878. The average daily wage of a carpenter decreased by 26 percent between 1870 and 1880, and that of a

<sup>27</sup> Lewis A. Maverick, 'Cycles in Real Estate Activity,' *Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics*, 8(May 1932):192-99; and Maverick, 'Cycles in Real Estate Activity: Los Angeles County,' *Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics*, 9(Feb. 1933):52-56.

<sup>28</sup> Maverick, 'Real Estate Activity,' pp. 197-99; and Riggelman, 'Building Cycles,' pp. 174-79.

<sup>29</sup> Worcester *Evening Gazette*, January 4, 1879; January 1, 1880; and January 1, 1881.

textile worker fell by 15 percent.<sup>30</sup> It is true that many commodity prices dropped even more severely. In Worcester, for example, between 1870 and 1879 the average price of a pound of cheese fell from \$0.23 to \$0.16; that of a pound of chicken, from \$0.30 to \$0.19; a peck of beans, from \$1.12 to \$0.72; a cord of wood, from \$8.00 to \$6.25; and a gallon of kerosene, from \$0.47 to \$0.20.<sup>31</sup> The incidences of unemployment and debt, however, more than offset the commodity price declines. The extent of hardship was reflected in the annual police reports, which recorded the numbers of homeless and penniless people who lodged in the police station. In 1869 the police department housed a total of 2,231 persons free of charge, an average of a little over six people nightly. In 1876, however, the police lodged 4,761 needy persons, an average of thirteen nightly and an increase over 1869 of 113 percent.<sup>32</sup>

Although direct relationships are elusive, the juxtaposition of housing trends and economic conditions with household structures points to the family as an adaptive agent in an uncertain world. Furthermore, the mode of adaptation varied between different stages of the family cycle. In Worcester, the tightening vise of housing shortages and economic decline affected the living patterns of childless newlyweds more directly than it affected young couples with first children. Changing conditions in the community clearly reduced the proportions of first-child couples living in one-family houses, but the groups in this second stage of the family cycle retained a strong nuclear trend, choosing not to live with other people in the same household. This latter characteristic closely resembled the experiences of young couples in Provi-

<sup>30</sup> Figures drawn from Stanley Lebergott, 'Wage Trends, 1800-1900,' in *Trends in the American Economy in the Nineteenth Century: Studies in Income and Wealth*, Vol. 24 by the Conference on Research in Income and Wealth, a Report of the National Bureau of Economic Research (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960).

<sup>31</sup> Worcester *Evening Gazette*, January 6, 1870; and January 6, 1879.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, January 4, 1870, and January 2, 1877.



dence, Rhode Island, during the same period. My recent study of patterns there revealed that newlyweds frequently lived with other people shortly after marriage but moved into more independent and isolated households once their first children were born.<sup>33</sup>

Like their counterparts in Providence, Worcester newlyweds increasingly lived with other people, kin and non-kin, between 1860 and 1880. The reduced isolation of newlyweds suggests that housing and economic conditions in the community made family independence more difficult for these young couples. Indeed, the proportion of newlyweds living in the home of either set of parents rose from one in ten in 1860 to nearly one in four by 1880. (Contrary to findings elsewhere, the Worcester data showed no evidence that newlyweds tended to live more frequently with the wife's kin than with the husband's. In Worcester, and also in Providence, the frequencies of shared residence with either side of the family were nearly equivalent.) But the trend toward dependence was not completely one-way. The proportion of newlyweds taking brothers, sisters, and parents into their households almost doubled over the two decades, from 7 percent to 13 percent.

Thus there seems to be evidence of a kind of flexible exchange between family members, a 'functional interaction,' as Michael Anderson calls it, where families tried to minimize discomfort by looking to their kin for assistance.<sup>34</sup> Childless newlyweds often have flexible but precarious situations. Their movements, responsibilities, and options are not anchored by children, but they may not have the income, resources, or acquired household goods to maintain complete independence. It would appear, then, that in times of stress newlyweds might try to reduce their potential economic problems by sacrificing privacy and living with others, par-

<sup>33</sup> Chudacoff, 'Newlyweds and Family Extension,' pp. 19-27.

<sup>34</sup> Anderson, *Family Structure*, p. 151.

ticularly their parents. In addition, older parents, with reduced incomes and with space to spare, could also gain emotional as well as tangible advantages from sharing space with their married children.

Similar reasoning can apply to the incidence of boarding. The exchange of space in return for rent or labor between non-related persons was a widespread phenomenon of nineteenth-century urban life. The exchange seems to have occurred most frequently between older household heads whose children had left home and younger persons, single and married, in need of housing.<sup>35</sup> Such an experience certainly occurred among Worcester newlyweds; between 1860 and 1870 the proportion of newlyweds who boarded increased by five times.

Thus the Worcester case shows that household organization did not remain static during an era of rapid change. Rather, household structures in the earlier family cycle stages fluctuated over time, between stages, and in response to contextual factors such as housing supplies, physical growth of the city, and economic uncertainty. Much more work lies ahead, but it is clear that the dynamic interactions between family life and the community offer illuminating insights into the ways that society bends and molds.

<sup>35</sup> John Modell and Tamara K. Hareven, 'Urbanization and the Malleable Household: An Examination of Boarding and Lodging in American Families,' *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 35 (Aug. 1973):467-79.



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