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Culture, the Revolution, and the Beginnings of the American Fertility Transition

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The usual history of family limitation begins with Margaret Sanger fighting for the decriminalization of birth control information. Sanger struggled to rescue women from ignorance about reproduction by establishing birth control clinics. Through hard work and coalition building, she and her followers eventually saw the legalization of birth control and abortion by the early 1970s.

But birth control, family planning and a desire for small families did not begin in the early twentieth century. Rather, crude birth rates in the United States peaked in the 1760s and have been falling ever since. My recent work is less interested in locating the point of time when family limitation produces measurable results, although I do include such statistical evidence as can be generated for the eighteenth century. Rather, I am concerned with discovering the point at which wives or couples saw small families as a positive good rather than as a misfortune. Examining women's writings, portraits, law, religion, medicine and more—even real estate ads—can shed light on a fertility transition that is cultural and political as well as economic. The beginnings of family limitation are not to be found in Progressivism or in the Sixties, but in the ideas and values emerging from the American Revolution—liberty, reason, sensibility, independence, and equality.

So what did the Founding Fathers (whoever might count in that category) think about contraception and abortion, population growth, family size, childbearing and childrearing? What was the original intent—if any—of the Founding Fathers?

Let's start with a few numbers. The signers of the Declaration of Independence came from large families. Those who were delegates to the Second Continental Congress in 1776 came from families with an average of 7.3 children. The first response of these revolutionaries to rising expenses was to demand local control over tax and land policies and their next step was to fight a war against a recalcitrant Parliament and King for failing to heed those demands. That it might have been less costly to have fewer children did not immediately occur to either voters or politicians.

Those same Founding Fathers who risked their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor in publicly breaking from Great Britain on July 4, 1776 would also break from the childbearing pattern of their parents' generation, fathering in their turn an average of only slightly more than six children over their lifetimes (even with Carter Braxton of Virginia's eighteen).

And just eleven years later those Founding Fathers who met once more at Philadelphia, this time to draw up the Constitution of 1787, produced an average of just 4.9 (legitimate) children over the course of their lives, quite similar to the record of the members of the first Supreme Court, who had an average of 4.8 children, and the first President, Vice-President, and Cabinet secretaries, who averaged 5.1 offspring.

Who was behind these changes? These politicians were nearly completely mute and perhaps clueless on the subject. Gynecology was not something men were supposed to meddle with. Pregnancy and birth were largely in the world of women, politics in the

world of men, and only the rarest of circumstances brought gynecological issues into the purview of the government. We need to look beyond the founding fathers to find another revolution in eighteenth-century America, a revolution led primarily by women, one that would begin to transform women's lives, reshape marriage and provide opportunities for daughters and then begin to change the nation as a whole.

Before the American Revolution the colonists were noted for their large families. For example, Quaker families in England had an average of 5.1 children; and in British North America, 7.4. Why were birth rates so high that the population was nearly doubling every 20 years from births alone?

There are many reasons to have children. American colonists celebrated large families for some of the same reasons that humans have always celebrated reproduction. Childbearing helps define adulthood and shapes images of femininity and masculinity. Sons and daughters have been valued as cheap labor, as affectionate companions, as lovable responsibilities, as playthings, as sources of pride and accomplishment, as offerings to the gods or to the state, or as guarantors of a kind of immortality, among many other reasons.

Generation is of interest to more than just mothers and fathers. Kin, ethnic, religious, cultural, and national groups have a stake in either the survival or growth of specific populations. Expanding populations mean bigger markets. Large groups can preserve beliefs and cultures and overwhelm enemies. Not surprisingly, moralists, theologians and politicians often attempt to enforce particular interpretations of marriage and parenthood that can promote specific interests and institutions through large families.

While some reasons for having large families are nearly universal, others were heightened in the British colonies. It was widely believed in the 17th and eighteenth centuries, that children were a source of wealth, particularly since there was a shortage of labor. Children could be productive from early ages. Colonists married early, breastfed infants for shorter periods than most Europeans and so had shorter intervals between births, and celebrated large families.

If they lived, children were valuable assets. Children would grow up to provide for their parents through their service and labor. As Poor Richard advised in 1739, “Let thy Child’s first Lesson be Obedience, and the second may be what thou wilt.” All children were debtors: they were expected to work and thereby reward their parents, repaying them for their upbringing. Childbearing long remained overwhelmingly pragmatic and, for parents, self-interested.

It did not cost much to raise children since most got minimal educations and minimal supervision when not at work. Except among the well-to-do, they wore cast off clothing, slept in the same beds as the other children and ate whatever was served to the rest of the family. One more mouth did not significantly burden most family incomes, even if women bore the brunt of the care and nursing of infants and toddlers. Relatively cheap land and high wages meant grown children could be provided for without too much difficulty.

Women gained their husband’s approval as well as local renown by bearing as many sons as possible, even if being constantly “barefoot and pregnant” was often counterproductive—women weakened from vitamin, calcium and iron deficiencies after repeated pregnancies. They suffered debilitating injuries or infections during and after

childbirth and they more often died young than did men. Babies were stillborn or failed to thrive when born to physically exhausted women. Infants sickened because they were weaned too early or passed on to wetnurses when their mothers were once again pregnant.

Despite the serious costs of multiple pregnancies, colonists promoted a high fertility regime, quoting with approval the biblical commandment to “increase and multiply.”

Patriarchal assumptions and masculine identity were at stake in attitudes about fertility. Exceptionally prolific fathers gained fame. Richard Buffington, in 1739 at Chester, Pennsylvania, was “a patriarch indeed, [and] had [once] assembled in his own house 115 of his own descendants.” That Buffington’s wife contributed to this exceptionally large family was not worthy of mention. Procreation and patriarchy were intimately linked. Large families were sources of pride, congratulation, and competition for men. Lineages counted only the male line.

Having many children was ideal. Not all children were equally valuable or valued, however. The goal was to bear sons, not daughters. Most women, like their husbands, favored their sons over their daughters, giving them more and better food, more clothing and more education and other opportunities.

Jane Colden congratulated her son on his wife’s second pregnancy. She hoped that “her daughter-in-law would soon be] the Joyful mother of another son.” Only the birth of sons was deemed worthy of congratulation. Heads of household routinely forgot to report their youngest daughters to census takers. Even in family portraits, boys outnumbered those of girls by 50 percent.

Sons continued the family line, they might improve the family's status through an advantageous marriage to a woman with a large dowry. They provided for their widowed mothers. Of course, not even all sons were equal. The first-born son commonly received a larger share of the family's estate, a better education and more opportunities, especially in courtship and marriage. Colonial women endorsed high fertility, favored their sons over their daughters, and were praised for upholding patriarchy.

There were very practical reasons in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for high fertility. Given the high death rates among children—both in the countryside and in the city nearly one in five children died in the first year of life--having many offspring helped ensure that a few would survive to care for their parents in sickness and old age. And in an age when only minimal, and degrading, social services existed for the sick, the disabled or the elderly, offspring provided the best insurance against destitution or incarceration in the local almshouse.

Abundance was welcome and children were undoubtedly loved, but this was not a sentimental age. Women could be as callous towards children as men could be about women and children. If parents have "a crop both feeble and redundant," wrote Anne Grant, "they must carefully weed and prop." That is, parents should get rid of the unpromising children and help the more likely ones. Eliza Chadwick, recalled that "My father was no doubt disappointed as to my sex and oftimes wished me a boy." Daughters were only second best and Eliza would be given away to an uncle when she was about 11.

A comment by Edward Shippen in 1760 sums up the tangle of values in colonial America: his wife "Peggy this morning made me a Present of a fine Baby, which tho' of

the worst Sex, is yet entirely welcome.” Wifely sacrifice, male preference, pride in a large family of dependent children and a fatalistic hope for the future are combined in this notice of Peggy Shippen’s birth.

Yet attitudes on family size and a preference for sons versus daughters began to change as protests rocked the British Empire starting in the 1760s.

During the Revolution, women engaged in political debate, some helped enforce the non-importation agreements, others picked up guns to protect property and family, while servant and enslaved women seized opportunities to run away and gain their own liberty.. But very few women and even fewer men urged or even imagined equal rights for women—even in New Jersey where wealthy, unmarried women could vote but not hold office from 1776 to 1807.

Some historians have found nothing in the revolutionary era that benefited women. The majority of women could not vote, hold property if married, attend any college or most schools, work in most trades or any profession, have custody of children, protect themselves against physical abuse, among many other social, political and legal liabilities. These customs and laws existed before the revolution and after. Women even had to assert that they were fully human. In the eighteenth century women were called “the Sex” a subset of humanity governed, not by reason but by their bodies.

But during the protests of the Revolution some women began to protest their lowly status. Susanna Hopkins wrote, “Do not you, my friend, think the person very contracted in his notions who would have us women to be nothing more than domesticated animals?” A female poet railed against women’s confinement to the “domestic arts, producing only children and tarts.” Women had to prove that they were

not simply physical beings—a higher sort of livestock, but that they were rational, talented, and capable. Women began planning the size of their families controlling births and limiting the amount of time spent in childbearing.

American women, wrote Esther DeBerdt Reed in her 1780 broadside, are “Born for liberty, disdaining to bear the irons of a tyrannic Government.” Women had innate natural rights that limited overbearing authority in both marriage and politics. In her own marriage DeBerdt Reed wished to limit her family to two children, a girl and a boy and was able to convince her husband of the wisdom of this change.

Other women came to similar conclusions. When Sally Redwood Fisher considered her ninth pregnancy one too many in 1787, her husband was not convinced, remarking that “the World would not be so well peopled as it is, if these Matters were left to the Choice of women.” But his defensive recognition that women were perceiving excessive childbearing as a burden and that they were imagining alternate choices was in itself an indication of changing attitudes.

Ann Warder was enraged in 1786 that “our worthy & much to be pitied sister Polly Emlen” had a “Husband who execed the desription of my Pen for Insinsibility--Her Children are presented Yearly which, keep her in constant Ill health, this with his improper example & want of resolution render the two eldest Boyes like Tyrants.” Tyranny, insensibility, a lack of self-control, and the physical damage done by annual childbearing were inseparably linked. She later added, “What a pity if girls dont know better that there Mothers should not teach them.” For Warder, and for many other women, sensibility, self-control, and responsibility should be brought to bear on the timing and number of births as the duty of husbands, fathers, wives, and mothers.

Women's social and kin networks spread revolutionary ideas on women's essential equality, but while the founding fathers turned to largely secular philosophers, many, perhaps most, women turned to religion. Evangelical ministers had already undermined the biblical emphasis on maximizing fertility by insisting that all that emphasis on being fruitful and multiplying in the Bible was about enhancing faith and good works and not about demanding more pregnancies. The humorous adoption of the phrase "Lords of Creation"--used to assail the pompous presumptuousness of the masculine sex--provides one example of the circulating language of laughter, protest and reformation. The catchphrase encapsulated the message of Genesis:1:27: "God created man in his own image, . . . male and female created he them. And God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and have dominion over . . . every living thing." This biblical creation story presents the alternative to the Eve-as-Adam's-spare-rib myth. There was additional support in the New Testament. In Mark 10:5-6 Jesus reminds his followers that "from the beginning of creation God made them male and female." In Eden and in the gospel, men and women were ordained by God as equals.

Those who stressed an original equality believed that the egalitarian message of these biblical verses was later lost. Susanna Wright wrote ca. 1778 that "Since Adam, [men], (With no superior virtue in their mind)/Assert their right to govern womankind./But womankind call reason to their aid,/And question when or where that law was made." Increasing numbers of women decided that men's attempts to act as the "Lords of Creation" were blasphemous. They reverted, with laughter at the ignorant, to what they understood as the true meaning of the Bible: man and woman were equally in God's image and in earthly dominion. "The lords of creation/men we call," wrote one

schoolteacher, “ And they think they rule the whole/ But they’re much mistaken after all/For they’re under Woman’s control..” Creation belonged not to patriarchs nor to lineages, but to women.

Identifying favorite children or enforcing inequalities among children became less acceptable and a strong preference for sons alone was moderated by the post-war period. George Calvert asserted that he preferred his daughter to his newborn son, saying “I do not admire him so much as my dear little daughter. She is the sweetest little girl in the world and a blessing to her father” a statement the editor of this letter considers merely an affectation. Still, the fact that he made the attempt indicates that parental standards were changing. The birth of a daughter could even be greeted with great enthusiasm. “Joy Joy” exclaimed Dolley Madison to her brother and sister-in-law in 1811, “are you sure it is a girl? . . . I tell you plump, that I shall be sick if, in your haste to write, you have mistaken.” The fertility transition from large to small families occurred within a context of revolutionary anti-authoritarianism that could stress the emotional bonds between parents and children, reject any self-interested parental benefit from child labor, and enhance the importance of daughters.

Girls benefited as familial wealth was redistributed more equally. An English traveler noted with surprise in early nineteenth-century Pennsylvania, “Females generally have a share of the patrimonial estate, and primogeniture, and the preference in favor of males, will soon be unknown.” And a male orator in New Jersey proclaimed on the Fourth of July, 1800, that “Our daughters are the same relations to us as our sons; we owe them the same duties.” Parents were obligated to their children—all of them. One consequence of treating all children more equally would be that the costs of childbearing

become ever greater. By 1810, Elizabeth Fisher was asking, “Can children, be they ever so kind, repay their mother for what she has to undergo, in body and in mind, in bringing them up till they are able to do for themselves?” Her answer was forthright, “I say they cannot.” Raising children could be emotionally fulfilling, but the financial and physical toll of constant childbearing was increasingly seen as excessive. Children were not sources of wealth nor were they to be comforts to their parents: rather they were expensive investments in family formation and in creating an intimate domestic sphere where women could exercise the self restraint, promote bodily integrity, and assume the responsibilities that characterized adults. Fewer births and smaller families helped make this possible.

By 1790 an ideal family of four children had become a widespread goal, even if the herbal medicines, attempts at celibacy and other available methods of controlling births had very high failure rates. Still, despite high failure rates and unwanted pregnancies and a post-Revolutionary backlash against women in politics, girls schools proliferated, dowries disappeared, and women soon had sufficient free time to establish Sunday schools, host Bible study groups, support missionaries, and petition the government to demand better treatment of the insane, or prisoners, or schoolchildren, or prostitutes. The most radical would come to demand an end to slavery and eventually, women’s suffrage.

There was a radical new definition of spousal relations and power dynamics in the family during the revolutionary era. Yet, the new United States was hardly homogenous. Religious, ethnic, linguistic, racial, regional, economic and political differences fragmented women as well as men.

It was, as far as can now be recovered, the women of the middling and moderately wealthy ranks of society—women reared and married to artisans, shopkeepers, farmers, professionals, and some smaller merchants—who led in the movement to restrict births within marriage during and after the Revolution. These women were literate, even if their spelling was often atrocious. They could afford books and magazines, could pay the postage that kept friends informed of new developments, and had sufficient leisure time (perhaps because of the labor of a household slave or servant) to become engaged in church, politics and reform activities, among other outlets for their energy and intellect. Their descendents also preserved at least some of their papers. Urban women, eastern women, and women in long-settled areas tended to support family limitation by the last third of the eighteenth century. So did women from mainstream religions: Anglicans, Methodists, Quaker, Unitarians, and urban Lutherans, Reformed and Presbyterians. The poorest women had the fewest children, although it is not clear if this is because they wanted small families or because their poverty forced married couples to live apart for substantial portions of their lives. In the regions where slavery was being gradually abolished, free women were more inclined to assert control over their bodies. After all, to have no control over your body was a form of enslavement.

Others resisted. Husbands were more reluctant than wives—giving up the privileges of patriarchy was not easy. Minority groups tended to resist new ideas on family size—the very wealthy who were feeling threatened by democratic stirrings from the lower sort, and many Germans, Scots-Irish and other minority groups who sought to preserve their ways of life through large families .. Slaveowners surrounded by the simmering resentment of those held in bondage favored having many sons and continued

to assert ideals of hierarchy, authority and inequality. The enslaved whose fragile families were vulnerable to sale and separation tended to have large families, too. Sometimes reproduction was forced on bound women by their masters, but larger kin networks also provided a bit of security in a world where they had little control. Some recently arrived immigrants continued to practice old world family and fertility patterns. On the western and northern edges of settlement, in the hill country of the Appalachian Mountains, cheap labor was needed to wrest crops out of untilled land and soldiers were needed to wrest land from native peoples.

Still, the new ideas first developed during the years of protest and revolution continued to spread-- even among those who were initially reluctant. The nine children that the average woman bore in colonies (if she married at 20 and lived to 50) had dropped to 8 at the turn of the nineteenth century, fell more dramatically to five by 1850, then to 3.5 by 1900 (this in spite of the Comstock laws), and has been hovering around 2.1 recently.. Margaret Sanger, whether she knew it or not, was continuing a long tradition of women's advocacy. The founding fathers listened to their wives and learned to appreciate the values of egalitarian marriages, limited childbearing, and more equitable treatment of sons and daughters. And the founders left contraceptive and abortive decisions to women. Yet, how far a rejection of patriarchy should go, how to define family or women's rights and how to assess the morality of birth control techniques divide Americans, sometimes violently. The revolution begun in the late eighteenth century is not over.