The In-Laws

Stepfamilies before Blending

Sitting in a sunlit reading room at the Massachusetts Historical Society, I pored over letters I knew from genealogical records and internal evidence were the material remains of a stepfamily. The letters were full of the typical familial references used in the eighteenth century and today: mother, father, sister, brother. I noticed fine pencil markings gently correcting these references, however. Mother became stepmother and son became stepson, and so on. The editor, perhaps a descendant organizing family records for donation, made the corrections based on more modern sensibilities. Why was the accuracy of the letters so important? Was respect for the "real," now dead, mother the motivation for the editor? What strong motivation made someone deface an historical document in this way?

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I share his/her desire for precision, at least as a researcher. If everyone is named Father and Mother, then who is who? In other words, how does one find stepfamilies in the past? There were actually a number of alternative names used to refer to family members. For example, a stepfather could be a stepfather, but he could also be referred to as a father-in-law or even a father. Accuracy aside, these naming patterns could reflect relative familial closeness.

These inscriptions in eighteenth-century documents remind us that stepfamilies are not a new familial structure or a pathological symbol of the so-called

deteriorating, modern, American family. They are as old as the hills. George Washington was both the father of our country and a stepfather to two children. To be sure, in early America, death, not divorce, created stepfamilies, but regardless of how they were formed, stepfamilies were common then as now. Today, according to a recent survey, 42 percent of us say we have some sort of step-relationship. Purveyors of "family values" still use our negative feelings about stepfamilies to further their agenda, however. Now children raised in remarried families come from "broken" homes. Americans, nonetheless, idealize a past when families remained "intact."

The topic of stepfamilies has attracted sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, even literary scholars interested in fairytales, but few historians. Historians seem to assume that, at best, these families were somehow the same as other families or, at worst, were as troubled as the fairytales suggest. Stepfamilies were unique in some ways. In fact, they became more distinctive as ideas about the form of an ideal, middle-class family changed at the end of the eighteenth century. If to be middle class meant to have a certain kind of family structure, one centered on children and run by an idealized mother, how could a *supposedly* evil stepmother, for example, do the job? New comparisons of stepfamilies to first-marriage families made stepfamilies clearly the inferior form, especially stepmother families.

"Haughty Stepmother Standing Over Cinderella Washing the Floor," wood engraving, William H. Thwaites, illustrator. Page one of "Cinderella" taken from Popular Fairy Tales, James Miller, publisher (New York, 1871). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

The idea of a stepfamily itself is closely linked to nuclear families as well as to the white middle class. Nuclear families were inherently fragile. When a partner died, particularly in early America, the surviving member needed help. Informal marriages and complex living arrangements among the poor, as well as Native and African traditions of polygyny, often proved more resilient than the nuclear family. They often managed loss of a spouse without the collapse and complete reconstruction of the family system. The very idea of a stepfamily, therefore, I would argue, is a profoundly white, middle class notion in early

America.

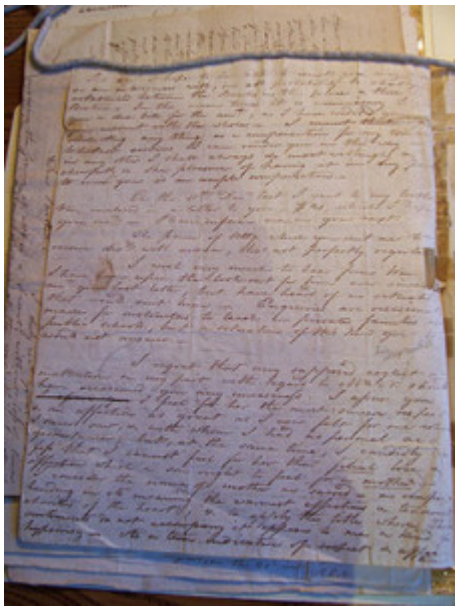
For the white, middle class population, stepfamilies were rooted in bereavement. The “step” label linguistically derived its meaning from the word *stepbarne*. A stepmother or stepfather was someone who took on the care of a child that was grieving—an orphan. Over time this label took on a negative connotation, particularly for stepmothers, or stepdames as they were sometimes called. A stepmother became a generic term in early modern England for a terrible mother, whether she was remarried or not. A woman who murdered her own child, for instance, would be characterized as a stepmother. By the eighteenth century, “step” was used almost always with reference to a stepmother. Stepmothers tried to “step” into the role of a dead mother. Sentimental ideology assured their failure.

In addition, during the Revolution a new cultural character emerged exemplifying the negative image of stepmothers. Britain, the Mother Country, morphed into the Revolutionary character of Stepmother England; her wickedness, not a metaphorical remarriage, earned her the title of stepmother. “Farewell! Farewell, infatuated, besotted stepdame.” So John Adams enthused to his beloved Abigail after signing the Declaration of Independence, echoing references to stepmother England that had begun to appear in the American press during the French and Indian War. The year after that costly war ended, England had turned to her colonies to both foot the bill and to house the large British army. As Americans began rioting in the streets over “taxation without representation,” the press followed suit with a campaign against Stepmother England. One writer in the *New York Gazette* warned his countrymen that their new, wicked stepmother country would only stop her unjust behavior once she had “STAMP[ed] on thy bowels.” The Stamp Act had exposed her as she “cast off the mask” of an indulgent mother. She had become a “cruel step-mother, unbounded in her malice” who had clearly “resolved to stamp them to the earth.” The colonies, now cast as “insolent, undutiful and rebellious” stepchildren by their formerly supportive mother, suffered as their inhuman stepmother drained, vampire-like, their “vital blood.” Unlike the pure venom aimed at stepmothers or stepdames, stepfathers were spared much of this vitriol.

“In-law” was the formal term in early America for those individuals we now refer to as step-relatives. An “in-law” meant just that: a mother or father “in-law” only. This label in a will or a court record made for accuracy, but in other contexts the term could have a sharp edge.

For example, Mary Pilkington’s *Mentorial Tales*, first published in London in 1811 and later available in the United States, included a story titled, “The Amiable Mother-in-Law; or, Prejudice Subdued.” Pilkington considered that “Of all the antipathies natural to childhood, that against mothers-in-law, in general, is the most forcibly imprest; and the little tongue, that scarcely can lisp in broken accents, is taught to express its hatred of the name.” In this story, the widower in question chose for his next wife a family friend and “a great favourite” of one of the daughters. Unfortunately, “From the moment that

one of the daughters lost her amiable parent," her caretaker gave "the account of stepmothers' cruelty" so that "her infant mind imperceptibly became prejudiced against the character, long before she knew what the word prejudice could mean." In fact, "The very sound of mother-in-law excited in her bosom a sensation bordering on contempt and hate." Although the woman had carefully cared for her stepdaughter after her mother's death, the girl's ignorance "prevented her mind from being improved, and prejudice has supplied the place of experience, and taught her to indulge opinions, which the liberal and intelligent must despise." This stepmother began the hard but ultimately successful work of subduing her stepchild's prejudice. In this more explicitly didactic version, the author hoped that "those young persons who have unfortunately been prejudiced" against stepmothers could take this as a cautionary tale.



Letter from Richard Norton to Jacob Norton, March 1, 1817. Original manuscript from the Jacob Norton Papers. Collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Richard Norton announced to his father, Jacob Norton, that he could not love his stepmother as he had his mother. A latter-day editor helped him make the distinction between a stepmother and a mother in this "corrected" manuscript. Click image to enlarge.

Often people made no distinction between biological and step-relations, at least in how they referred to these individuals. Stepmothers were simply mothers and stepfathers were simply fathers. The death of a parent rather than divorce made this transition easier with no one left to hold the revered titles. Mother and Father were in fact the monikers expected in a properly functioning and properly mended sentimental family. This may have been the most common pattern of naming stepparents, but these terms for some still carried a remnant of their former meaning. Using them to refer to stepparents sometimes felt like a betrayal to a dead parent.

Richard Norton, a budding lawyer studying in Virginia, confided to his newly remarried father in 1817 that the idea of a stepmother rather than the actual woman his father had chosen irked him. He would never call her mother. “I feel for her the most sincere respect &, an affection as great as I ever felt for one whom I never saw, & with whom I had no personal acquaintance; but, at the same time, I candidly confess that I cannot feel for her that filial love & affection which a son ought to feel for a mother—I consider the name of mother as sacred—as comprehending in its meaning the warmest affections & tenderest charities of the heart, & to apply the title where these sentiments do not accompany it appears to me a kind of hypocrisy.” The hapless Mrs. Norton never had a chance to win her stepson over. Richard died young, never meeting his “new mother.”

A stepchild comfortable with using the terms Mother or Father to refer to a stepparent could result in a dizzying complexity when parents and stepparents were both the subjects of the same conversation. Mather Byles saw himself as having two mothers. He was a Congregationalist minister turned Anglican, loyalist, and eventually exile. Finding himself at the end of the Revolution in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Mather was far from his aged father of the same name in Boston. His half-sisters, Katherine and Mary, “rocked the Cradle of reposing Age” for his father. When Mather’s father finally died at the age of eighty, he wrote to his half-sisters about his grief. Although they were all moved, they were also resigned to the senior Byles’s passing, given his advanced age. The sisters worried about the estate, however. Mather assured them that he would help them with the specifics. “Rest satisfied, my dear Sisters, that in the Settlement of our Fathers Estate I have no Interest distinct from your’s. Let us convince the World, by our Example, that such Matters may be easily accommodated upon the plain Principles of Equity, Candor, & mutual confidence: & Nothing, in my Opinion, can be plainer than this; that ‘it would be highly unjust to blend the personal Property of our two Mothers with that of our Father.'” For these children of a stepfamily the idea of two mothers seemed natural, both women deserving the revered title.

My examination of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American newspapers revealed that “stepbrother” and “stepsister” were almost never used. A simple “brother” or “sister” referred to one’s sibling and that included stepsiblings, half-siblings, and even one’s in-laws. The siblings often found common cause, and that was certainly society’s expectation. The bad feelings of a divorce perhaps being absent smoothed the road. The issue of inheritance was also clear—one inherited from one’s natural father. Stepparents were not obligated to leave their stepchildren a legacy or even support them. Without a battle over resources, the brothers and sisters of stepfamilies seemed to find friendship more often than conflict.

The children of John Lay of Lyme, Connecticut, demonstrated their ingenuity when confronted with the unusual circumstance of two children from two marriages, both named John. It was not unusual to find parents naming a child after a dead sibling. What was unusual in the Lay family was that John had a

son, John, in his first marriage who survived his mother's death and his father's remarriage. Nonetheless, when his father remarried, he named a son from this second marriage John as well. When the father John died he distinguished between these two children in his will: "My son John which I had by my former wife" and "John whom I had by my present wife." When another child, the brother and half-brother of the "Johns," died he also needed to distinguish between the two men. Peter Lay left a legacy to "John Lay, my younger Brother" or "my brother John Lay Junior" as well as to "my Elder brother John Lay" or "John Lay Senior." Both "Johns" were his brothers. One was older, his half-brother, and one was younger, his biological brother. It is clear such creativity was preferable to using a term to clarify the relationship. Brother was better than half-brother.

Does naming still reflect emotion in stepfamilies? I began this essay by mentioning that our first president was a stepfather. I'd like now to turn to the family of our first divorced president, Ronald Reagan. How did the moniker of "step" work in this modern presidential family? Patti Davis lost her half-sister, Maureen Regan, to melanoma at the age of sixty. According to a *Newsweek* article at the time, Davis, the daughter of Ronald Regan's second marriage, felt Maureen resented her relationship with their father. The half-sisters went through "years of distance and tension." "Many times we just seemed angry at each other." But over time, according to Patti, their relationship changed for the better. "I don't know when Maureen and I dropped the word 'half' and began referring to ourselves as sisters; it's only important that we did." The name they chose for one another reflected their feelings. The term "step" implied conflict echoing a not-so-distant past.

Families today do not reflect the cultural ideal of heterosexual, first-marriage couples with children. We are more varied than ever. Cohabitating couples and same-sex marriages join with stepfamilies as the overwhelming majority of families today. Why do we cling to an ideology about family structure that was contested since the nation's founding? Blended families sound like they combined effortlessly. "In-law" has its own baggage in modern America. Mother and Father as alternatives work less well with stepfamilies of divorce, with two individuals still alive and carrying the same name. Maybe we should reclaim "step" and make it a neutral term? People in stepfamilies still struggle with cultural prejudice and work to name their relationships in part to reflect their feelings. We have not broken free from this familial past or the prejudice that stepfamilies (particularly stepmothers) still endure.

This article originally appeared in issue 15.2 (Winter, 2015).

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America (2014).