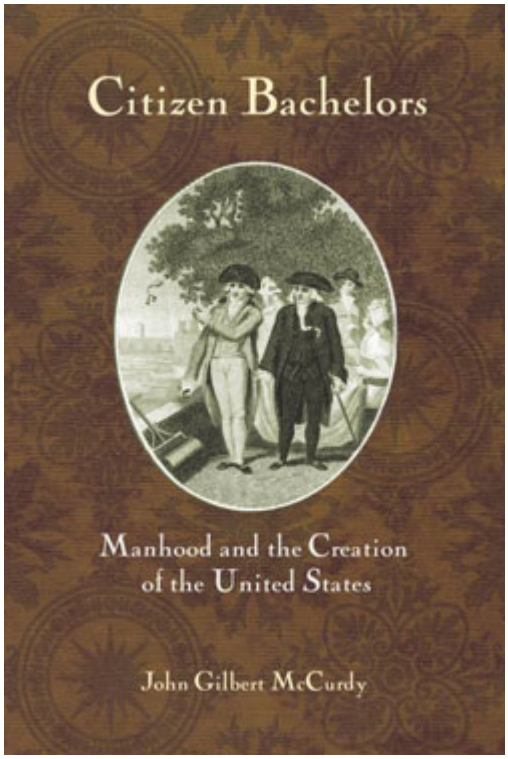
Single Men in Early America



John McCurdy's study explicitly challenges earlier interpretations of bachelors' experiences in early America that often describe single men in pejorative ways such as immature and unmanly. This has been the result, McCurdy argues, of approaching bachelors in the context of examining marriage and family relationships and thus stacking the deck against them since their lives then naturally seem abnormal and peripheral in comparison. To remedy this, McCurdy advocates placing bachelors within the wider scope of early American history, investigating their role in cultural, economic, and, especially, political transformations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In so doing, he demonstrates that marriage alone was not the defining factor for single men. Mastery also played a vital and even more important role. Single men who owned property, supported themselves through a respectable occupation, or established their own households often possessed the full rights of manhood denied to both propertyless single men and impoverished husbands and fathers.

McCurdy begins with an examination of attitudes towards bachelors in sixteenth-century England and seventeenth-century America. Though colonists were initially heavily influenced by English legal and cultural traditions concerning unmarried men, both demographics and challenges inherent in establishing settlements in New England and the Chesapeake contributed to new conceptions of bachelorhood in America. In the mid-sixteenth century, England's first laws codifying distinctions between unmarried men demanded that every unmarried man place himself under the authority of a master who often served the dual role of employer and head of household. In Puritan New England, courts likewise attempted to regulate young, single men, encouraging them to seek

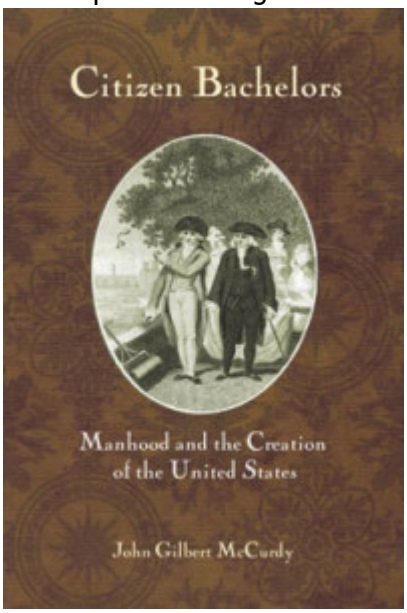
employment with an established master who would adopt him into his household. These family government laws propped up the local economy while simultaneously providing for surveillance of young men to ensure moral behavior, but declined over time as bachelors and others advanced the right of the individual to be responsible for himself. In the Chesapeake, on the other hand, the concept of the free and autonomous bachelor emerged with fewer legal interventions, in large part due to the skewed sex ratio that made maintaining English ideals for family life impractical. Unlike the New England experience, where young, single men faced a high likelihood of marriage, bachelors in the Chesapeake often remained unmarried into their thirties or beyond. In both regions, ideals of masculine autonomy eventually contributed to the creation of a new bachelor identity.

In the next chapter, McCurdy explores bachelor laws in eighteenth-century America, ultimately arguing that lawmakers recognized the masculine autonomy asserted by bachelors and, especially, the various legal obligations they fulfilled. Though the specific laws varied from colony to colony, McCurdy identifies a general consensus that bachelors were in a unique position to fulfill certain duties for the good of the community—or to suffer specific penalties—since their marital status did not make them accountable for supporting a family. In particular, bachelors were subject to conscription and paying certain taxes while married men were more often exempt. Similarly, married men sometimes enjoyed immunity from prosecution for debt and some crimes. As McCurdy explains, lawmakers believed that men who fathered children had fulfilled a patriotic duty, which they continued to pursue by providing for their families. This led colonists to strike a balance between familial obligations and civic ones, determining that bachelors were thus in a better position to shoulder more responsibility when it came to providing funding and security for the colonies.

Laws that shifted such burdens to bachelors indicated changing attitudes about unmarried men: They were no longer dependents that needed to be overseen by a master who provided supervision similar to that offered by a parent. At the same time, many colonies still did not grant bachelors the same opportunities to participate in the body politic that were granted to married men. Propertyless single men faced bachelor taxes in several colonies, but did not qualify to vote, hold office, or serve on juries. McCurdy stresses that such taxes, as well as other obligations and penalties that weighed disproportionately on unmarried men, helped to create a new bachelor identity by bringing single men into contact with the state. The general public may have simply interpreted a bachelor as a man (rather than a dependent) who could pay taxes and serve in the military, but such demands increasingly politicized bachelors to grasp other rights that were deemed privileges of manhood.

McCurdy next examines literary representations of bachelors by seventeenth-century English political and economic writers as well as Benjamin Franklin and other eighteenth-century Americans. Literature supplemented laws in establishing a distinctive bachelor identity that depicted single men as

autonomous and masculine as opposed to earlier depictions of them as dependents who could be classed with single women. Not all representation were so positive; many literary works rendered them as irresponsible partakers of luxury and vice who did not live up to their civic duties of strengthening the state through responsible fatherhood. While some English authors suggested coercive bachelor taxes as a means of controlling bachelors and encouraging them to marry, satirists like Richard Steele and Joseph Addison opposed punitive measures in favor of publishing stories of reformed bachelors in the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*.



Americans, through imported versions of Addison and Steele, first encountered stories of ridiculous bachelors who ultimately yielded to moral suasion and married before eventually hearing from local authors who formulated their own concerns that single men perhaps opted for selfish luxury and unrestrained sexuality rather than acting in the best interests of the nation. Such men were perhaps too independent. Still, American authors did not favor the English plan to force bachelors into marriage and assess financial penalties against those who refused. In contrast, Franklin suggested that the abundance of land in America was an important resource for convincing single men to marry. Rather than be threatened with pecuniary losses, they could enhance their financial position by taking a wife and fathering children who would then assist in productively working the countryside. While serving the needs of the nation and bringing supposedly unruly bachelors under control, such proposals offered tangible benefits to single men who yielded some of their independence as a result of marrying.

Given these cultural representations of bachelors, what were the actual experiences of single men in early America? McCurdy notes that neither laws nor literature necessarily provided authentic depictions of what it meant to be a single man. In the fifty years before the Revolution, American bachelors enjoyed several benefits that had not been available to single men who came before them. For instance, many experienced increased mobility as they pursued their occupations, opting to board with women rather than remain within the

family home or affiliate themselves with a head of household who served a dual role as master and fictive father. Bachelors also developed rich homosocial networks, including participation in clubs, that yielded an increased sense of independence. Being free of the financial obligations of supporting a family enabled many to participate more fully in the transatlantic consumer revolution. In general, bachelors became more economically independent in this period.

The liberties seized by eighteenth-century bachelors included new attitudes toward sexuality. Single men found ways to explore sexuality, whether engaging in liaisons with women themselves or sharing stories with other men about their experiences. Letters, diaries, and club minutes all included innuendo and humor that more than implied that single men were not celibate. This is not to say that such freedoms negated certain duties and expectations. McCurdy argues that bachelors certainly enjoyed the freedoms that the transitional period between the constraints of childhood and the responsibilities of married life presented, but even as they increasingly pursued opportunities for romance and sexual play, many continued to wait to marry until they had achieved sufficient economic success to support a family. Rather than internalize the criticisms consistently communicated in contemporary satires of single men, they celebrated the emergence of a distinct bachelor identity in the middle of the eighteenth century, an identity that promoted autonomy and independence both economically and socially.

As bachelors experienced these gains, they also increasingly advocated for political independence. McCurdy traces this theme throughout *Citizen Bachelors*, but most fully addresses it in a final chapter examining single men in the age of the American Revolution. Literary depictions of bachelorhood reached a nadir during the 1770s and 1780s as authors engaged in allegorical strategies of depicting single men as unpatriotic, selfish Anglophiles addicted to imported British luxuries. Supposedly lacking the self-control and sense of sacrifice inherent in marrying and supporting a family, they did not merit the benefits of citizenship. Other writers, also suspicious of unmarried men, diverged, playing on earlier laws that placed greater obligations of military service on bachelors to argue that military service could provide an alternate path to manhood and mastery.

Single men objected to such formulations and laws that forced greater obligations on them than their married counterparts, including special poll taxes and harsher punishments for crimes. As Americans debated the nature of citizenship in the last third of the eighteenth century, bachelors stepped forward to demand equal treatment. This movement found expression during the debates to extend the suffrage to all taxpayers in the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776. Although this move enfranchised many voters, McCurdy stresses that propertyless single men comprised the most numerous new faction. As an unintended side effect, paying taxes that singled out bachelors now qualified single men to vote.

As public discourse increasingly emphasized individual rights in a republican system of government in the decades that followed the Revolution, almost all of the bachelor laws enacted during the colonial period disintegrated by 1800. McCurdy also suggests that single men did not only gain politically, but that they simultaneously experienced greater freedom in their personal lives during this period. Many conceived of bachelorhood as something other than a period of courting women and a prelude to marriage, choosing instead to pursue occupations and interests they found fulfilling even if those activities did not necessarily prepare them to be husbands.

In the end, McCurdy concludes that even though lawmakers and authors on both sides of the Atlantic attempted to place constraints on bachelors in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America, single men were not as marginalized nor their experiences as bleak as we might have previously imagined. The family was indeed a central institution in early America, but exceptions existed. Many bachelors embraced the single life, finding fulfillment in their occupations, participation in homosocial revelries, and sexual experimentation. As modern Americans contemplate the founding generation’s vision of the nation and its citizens, we must realize that they renounced colonial-era strategies for coercing single men to marry and support families. New attitudes toward bachelors in the Revolutionary era resulted in white men, regardless of marital status, becoming entitled to the same political and economic rights. As McCurdy sums up, “Americans granted that there were certain individual rights that should not be subjected to the will of the majority” (202).

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