

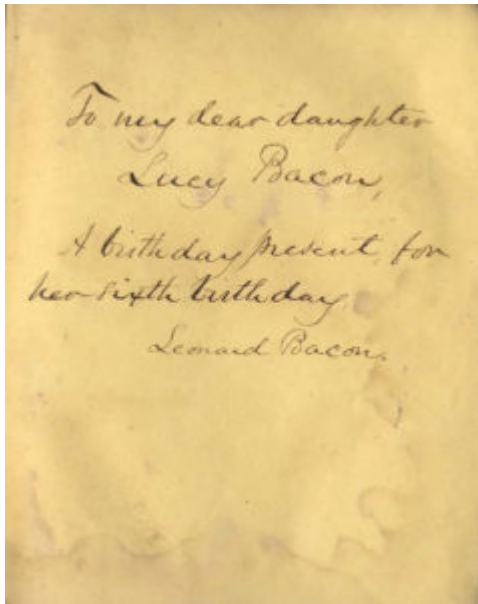
# What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Age in Early America?



Historians of early America often talk about age, especially when measuring an individual's maturity or defining a demographic group. But what does chronological age refer to in an environment where many people did not know their birth dates? When early Americans recorded age, was this an objective measure of years since birth, an individual's self-understanding, or a status imposed by a public official? The answer to these questions can tell us much about how people employ abstract social categories—not just chronological age, but also race, gender, and nationality—to determine who has access to particular rights and opportunities as well as who does not.

At the time of the American Revolution, many Americans did not know their birthdays. They left school, started work, and got married at widely varying ages. Death struck young and old alike. The pious measured their days not by secular time but by progress toward eternal salvation. Chronological age, in short, had little significance in people's daily lives. The law, however, demanded precise knowledge of age. From the beginning of European settlement, people had to meet age qualifications to testify in court, be held liable for a crime, sign a contract, will property, marry, and, if white and male, pay a

poll tax, serve in the military, vote, and run for political office. Laws and regulations spoke in terms of precise ages—sixteen years to pay a poll tax, twenty-one years to vote, forty-five years to end militia service, for example. But what did those numbers mean in a culture where many people did not know their birthdays? What exactly were public officials measuring when they demanded proof of age?



1. Inscription page, "to Lucy Bacon from her father Leonard Bacon," in *Sunday Hymns*, published by S. Colman (Boston, 1846). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Evidence from court cases, diaries, letters, and family records suggest that many people in early America did know their exact date of birth. These individuals often owned a family register they could use to prove age, thus turning age itself into a kind of property owned by some but unavailable to others. Those without a recorded birthday could sometimes offer an approximation based on family stories that associated their birth with a memorable event. Still others had no knowledge at all of when they were born. In these latter two cases, officials charged with administering age qualifications had to determine chronological age based on shared knowledge of historical events or physical signs of maturity. For these people, documents stating age record a negotiation between citizens and the state: individuals offered personal testimony and public officials imposed a precise age. These official assessments appear as chronological age in written records, but in fact have little to do with age in the modern sense of stating an exact birth date. Nor do they reflect people's use of age as a measure of self-understanding. For some, age was a form of property secured by ownership of a family record. For others, it was a negotiation with the state. In either case, age functioned as a boundary to citizenship with which citizens had to contend.

Most people in early America recognized chronological age as an arbitrary

boundary to citizenship rights. As John Adams mused in May 1776, "What Reason Should there be, for excluding a Man of Twenty years, Eleven Months and twenty-seven days old, from a Vote when you admit one, who is twenty one?" The reason was obvious to most people—age qualifications were necessary because young children lacked the capacity to exercise rights and perform duties. Believing that age restrictions were necessary, the nation's founders retained age qualifications inherited from English common law and embedded new ones in American law. What they did not do was create a reliable system for registering births and documenting age. In the colonial period, some legislatures required ministers or town clerks to register births, recognizing that these records were essential for probate cases, but compliance and enforcement remained spotty at best. Massachusetts led the way over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in creating the first modern bureaucracy for recording vital statistics. By steadily raising fines on town clerks who failed to report births and deaths, and increasing fees paid to those who did, Massachusetts developed the most reliable birth registry in the new nation. Even there, however, infants born in rural areas and large cities often escaped the notice of any public official.

The most common technology for recording birth dates in early America was a private one: notations in the family Bible. This tradition, imported from England, was quite widespread because courts accepted birth records in family Bibles as evidence for probate. Historians Shane Landrum and Susan Pearson have found that some families with even small amounts of property kept such records, but many transient and impoverished people did not. As a result, having a family record was a mark of class privilege. The ability to document and prove age, like many other markers of identity such as whiteness or citizenship, was a sort of property, accrued by some, denied to others. Those able to purchase and maintain a private, family register could easily meet age qualifications in law. The poor, the transient, and the illiterate could not.



2. Engraving by Peter Maverick from artwork by Henry Williams, family register for the family of Mr. Daniel Lamb, of South Hadley, Mass., to the year 1799 (Newark, N.J., ca. 1809). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Indeed, by the early nineteenth century, publishers marketed increasingly ornate and costly Bibles and family records. As historians Georgia Brady Barnhill, Peter Benes, and François Weil have documented, many families aspiring to respectable, middle-class standing displayed illustrated genealogies in their homes. Girls attending female academies learned to paint or stitch handmade family records that could be displayed as markers of family unity and refinement. Engravers marketed family records illustrated with Republican and Christian symbols. Engraver Peter Maverick, for example, presented the allegorical figures of Charity with an infant and cornucopia, Hope holding an anchor and pointing to heaven, and a bird feeding its young beneath the sun's rays. Most of these surviving records show evidence of having been framed for display. By the 1830s, lithographers such as Nathaniel Currier and James Baillie pictured idealized bourgeois families celebrating births, consummating marriages, and mourning deaths. These ostentatious prints, paintings, and embroideries increasingly linked family record keeping with financial success.

In a further display of prosperity, some families began celebrating children's birthdays. In 1803, a Boston printer marketed the first American edition of British author Elizabeth Somerville's small volume, *A Birth Day Present, or, a New Year's Gift . . . For the Use of Young Persons, from Ten to Fifteen Years of Age*. At a time when children's birthday celebrations were still a novelty, this book offered a sort of how-to guide for organizing an event that would balance "a little entertainment of cakes and fruit" with moral lessons on self-improvement. By the 1830s, giving books to children on their birthdays was a common practice recorded in loving inscriptions such as "To my dear daughter Lucy Bacon, a birthday present for her sixth birthday." Receiving birthday presents underlined age itself as a form of property to be treasured. For privileged children such as Lucy, counting birthdays became central to their self-understanding as American citizens. The historian Jon Grinspan found that many white, middle-class youth in antebellum America used their diaries and letters to track their yearly progress toward age twenty-one when they would become adults and, if white and male, cast their first vote.

Beyond age twenty-one, however, most people did not celebrate their birthdays, as historian Howard Chudacoff has found. The main exception was family gatherings when an elder relative reached the biblical milestone of three score and ten. A person living to 100 might receive a special sermon in church and notice in the local paper. Most middle-aged adults, however, did not celebrate their birthdays until late in the nineteenth century when manufacturers of commercial greeting cards began to promote the practice. Many did, however, quietly remark upon the date in diaries or letters. These people, generally from educated, propertied families, displayed a high degree of age

consciousness. This did not mean, however, that they could reliably produce written proof of age.



3. Hand-colored lithograph, family register for the Bugbee family of Worcester, Mass., with “Family names – Born when and where – Married when where and by whom – Died when and where,” published by N. Currier (New York, ca. 1850). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Children’s birthday parties and ornate Bibles were effective displays of bourgeois respectability, but they were not reliable means of documenting age. Fires, floods, and carelessness could easily destroy family records along with other forms of property. Young adults who moved West might leave their birth records with parents many states away. As a result, even literate and propertied Americans often found themselves in middle or old age without any proof of their birthdays. To guard against such loss, some families purchased Bibles for each of their children, filling the family record pages and leaving space for the next generation. The American Tract Society, founded in 1825, released relatively inexpensive Bibles with printed family record pages. These mass-produced registers enabled more family members to retain copies, but private registers always remained vulnerable to loss. While it is impossible to quantify what percentage of American families maintained a Bible record or other private registry of births, enough of these documents survive that we can safely assume that many—though by no means all—propertied Americans from stable families possessed some written record of their age by the 1830s.

Detailed birth records also existed for those who were themselves property. Slave owners diligently wrote down the births and deaths of enslaved people because age was an important factor in establishing the monetary value of chattel property. Some slave owners employed Bibles for this purpose, as when Floyd County, Virginia, resident Gabe Wells recorded “Births of my Black Folks” in one section of a family record and his white relatives in another. Mary Ragland Stamps Rice, plantation mistress of The Oaks in Charlotte County, Virginia, used a recipe book to record the ages of enslaved people. She wrote precise birth years for most, but also noted when age was an approximation: “Old Sam about 68 . . . John aged 14 when purchased.” The last entry hints at



the uncertainty of age in a market where slave traders had incentives to lie about chronological age in order to inflate prices. As historians Marie Jenkins Schwartz and Wilma King have documented, slaves received the highest valuations in their late teens and twenties. If John was a large child, a slave trader may have passed him off as older than he was. The ages recorded in plantation account books thus reflect the self-interest of those who sold and owned slaves, not the self-understanding of enslaved people themselves.

Indeed, slave owners generally kept the capacity to record age—both written records and literacy skills—from enslaved people. When representatives of the Works Progress Administration interviewed former slaves in the 1930s, many reported that they did not know their date of birth. Fugitive slave Frederick Douglass first raised this issue in his 1845 *Narrative*, asserting that slave owners desired slaves should “know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs.” Douglass explained that preventing this self-knowledge was part of a larger effort to dehumanize enslaved people. As a free man, Douglass chose February 14 as his birthday because his mother had called him her “valentine.” In 1888, when he was old and famous, admirers organized a gala celebration for his seventy-first birthday. He reminded them that, properly speaking, he “never had a birthday . . . Birthdays belong to free institutions.” With deep insight, Douglass pointed out that chronological age in nineteenth-century America functioned primarily as a measure of citizenship status, a qualification possessed by some but denied to others. By inventing a birthday, Douglass solidified his identity as a free man but learned nothing of his own birth.



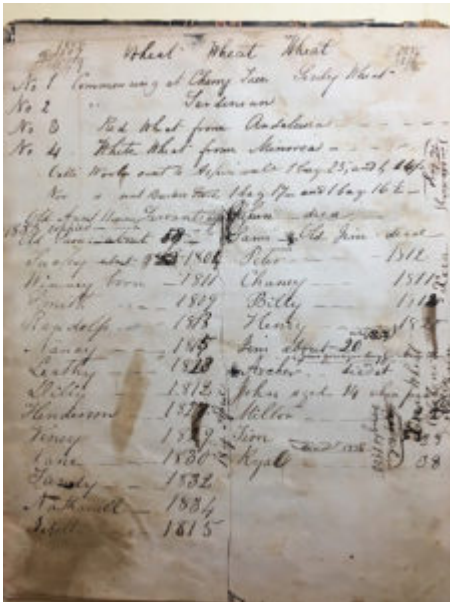
4. Sample page from a church register featuring the families of Merrill, Leach, Messure and Oaks. From the Jonathan Fisher Papers, 1791-1826, mss. boxes F (box 1 folder 2), American Antiquarian Society, Worcester Massachusetts.

In contrast to Douglass, some fugitive slaves knew their date of birth. Harriet Jacobs, for example, had access to literacy and a close-knit family, both of which facilitated knowledge of her age. She organized her narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* around particular birthdays. After the Civil War, freed people dedicated themselves to reuniting family members and, as part of that effort, began to keep their own records of births and deaths. Printers capitalized on this new market by releasing family records with illustrations

of black families. Like Douglass, the families who purchased these records laid claim to birth dates as a mark of freedom.

In sum, births were most likely to be written down if they occurred in families with property or in those owned as property. What of the large population of poor and working-class people in between? Historian James Schmidt has demonstrated that well into the early twentieth century, many poor, working-class, and rural Americans of all races and ethnicities did not know or could not prove how old they were. How then did people meet the numerous age qualifications they faced in law? Records of military service, marriages, and elections offer evidence that for people without birth records, chronological age was not so much a knowable fact as it was a matter of negotiation with authority. People testified to their ages, but public officials also assessed their appearance to determine if the testimony seemed credible. Those with no written proof of age remained particularly vulnerable to having an age assigned to them by someone else.

For those who did not own a record of their age, negotiating age with the state became an established tradition during the colonial period. Tax assessors, militia captains, court officials, and ministers marrying young couples, among other public officials, all had to determine a person's age in order to carry out their responsibilities. In cases where a person did not know or could not prove age, public officials balanced personal testimony with their own judgment. In her carefully researched study of boy soldiers during the American Revolution, Caroline Cox documented that recruiters directed to enlist boys over sixteen often accepted "stout" lads of fourteen or fifteen. Size and capacity mattered more than proof of age. With regards to child marriage, Nicholas Syrett found that young people often traveled to counties where nobody knew them and successfully convinced a minister they were of age. Once a marriage was consummated, courts rarely invalidated the bond even if a parent or guardian produced proof that a child was underage. As part of his study of elections in early America, political scientist Richard Franklin Bensele demonstrated that young men provided sworn testimony as to their age but could be challenged by election officials and bystanders. In contested cases with no written proof of age, judges sought witnesses who could name well-known events that occurred around the time of a person's birth. Officials also looked to physical evidence of maturity, most often the growth or lack of a beard. Based on scattered evidence, Bensele estimated that overall roughly ten percent of voters did not know their own age, though in some areas such as rural Kentucky far more lacked this knowledge.



5. Mary Ragland Stamps Rice, receipt book, 1848, accession No. 15794, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.

What these histories reveal is that state and federal governments created age qualifications for citizenship long before all citizens knew or could prove their ages. As a result, public officials developed elaborate mechanisms for investigating and, if necessary, inventing ages. Individuals offered their own testimony, but the ultimate power to determine age remained with officials administering the rights and obligations of citizenship. As with gender, race, and other categories of citizenship, age was subject to visible scrutiny by the state. Personal claims could be either validated or delegitimated by those in power.

The administration of Revolutionary War pensions offers a particularly vivid illustration of how public officials scrambled to determine age before any standardized identity documents existed. In 1832, Congress granted pensions to all surviving veterans without regard to need or disability. The Pension Bureau in Washington directed local courts to process applications, printing a standard form with questions to be answered under oath by the applicant and two character witnesses. As part of a general effort to combat fraud, the pension bureau showed a remarkable interest in both determining applicants' ages and whether or not they had written proof of age. Directing court officials that "the age of the claimant must invariably be mentioned," the Bureau demanded that court officials ask "Where and in what year were you born?" and "Have you any record of your age? and, if so, where is it?" This curiosity about written records is remarkable, for it appears as an effort to test whether or not age claims could be documented and if so, how. The results showed that many people could state an age but had no written documentation to prove it.

Payment of a pension was based on service, not age, but these records nonetheless reveal in remarkable detail how people tracked their own ages in early America. Historian Caroline Cox productively used these records to



document the youth of boy soldiers, but pension records open a much broader window on understandings of age. A statistical sampling of these records could reveal the extent of age consciousness for a large sample of older men in the 1830s. What interests me here is not quantification, but the ways in which individuals testified to their age and how they knew it. Interestingly, many admitted that they only knew what family members had told them. For example, Abraham Aarons, applying in Adair County, Kentucky, told the court that he was "born in Lancaster County state of Pennsylvania on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 1759 agreeable to the information of his parents which he believes to be true and correct[,] he never having heard speak of any other." Other individuals came from towns in New England that had kept some record of births and pointed to this official document as proof of age. For example, Nathan Abbot told the Middlesex County Court he "supposes that his birth is recorded in the Town Records" of Andover.

People who knew the month and year of their birth often claimed to have gained that knowledge from the record in a family Bible, though in many cases the Bible itself had been lost. Thus, Paul Findley, testifying in Abbeville, South Carolina, reported that he was born in January 1762 and "has no doubt relative to it from the fact of his having seen the record of his age in his father's family Bible at the age of sixteen or seventeen years, which Bible is now lost or otherwise destroyed." His older brother, John Finley, also a veteran, provided a more detailed account of how the Bible had been lost. He told the same court that "he has not the original record of his age, that it was burned by the Tories during the Revolutionary War." Also testifying in Abbeville, David Pressly reported that "he was born in the city of Glasgow in Scotland on the 13<sup>th</sup> of January one thousand seven hundred sixty four and brought from there to America when he was an infant in the nurse's arms." Pressly clarified that "the record of his age was in a Bible belonging to his cousin David Pressly who is dead." He did not know what had become of the Bible.

Anticipating that many veterans would have no written proof of age, the Pension Bureau designed a specific process through which those with public authority could certify the applicant's claim as credible. Directions specified that the applicant supply "two respectable persons—one of whom should be the nearest clergyman, if one lives in the immediate vicinity of such applicant, who can testify, from their acquaintance with him, that they believe he is of the age he represents, and that he is reputed and believed in the neighborhood to have been a Revolutionary soldier." The pre-printed form provided for this purpose read, "we believe him to be [blank] years of age." The witnesses thus had to specify a chronological age. They could not simply say he was old, though some qualified their answer by saying they believed the applicant to be "about" his stated age. The clerk of the court also had to certify the applicant's age. Three people thus had the authority to accept or reject a veteran's personal testimony as to his age.

Relying on witnesses and court officials ensured that an applicant appeared to be roughly the age he claimed, but could not wipe out all fraud. What it did

accomplish was to create a process for categorizing citizens by age before the development of birth registration. This system enabled people to testify as to their own self-understanding of age, but also empowered "respectable persons," particularly clergy and court officials, to accept or reject that testimony and, if needed, assign a credible age to someone who did not provide one. In processing claims, the Pension Bureau generally accepted whatever age had been entered by the district court. These documents thus reveal in detail how age was a negotiation, a balancing of personal testimony with public authority.

Today, we assume that most Americans have a birth certificate stating their true age. We recognize that people might lie about their age or even obtain a fake identification card, but we suppose that beneath these falsehoods there exists a reliable record. It is worth remembering, however, that age-based qualifications for citizenship preceded and in no way depended upon documentation of age. This should give us pause when we think about the "truth" of other identity categories such as sex, nationality, or race. Just as people lacked written proof of age in early America, they also lacked proof of race or sex. Many people assumed these categories were obvious, easy to read on people's bodies, and essential to daily life in ways that age was not. But we know some people chose to "pass" as something they were not, while others did not fit neatly into one race or sex category. These people might find a race or sex assigned to them in much the same way that officials assigned age. Age appeared to people in early America as the most arbitrary qualification for citizenship, but that very recognition reveals the arbitrariness behind other categories as well.

### **Acknowledgements:**

I would like to thank Anna Mae Duane and Nicholas Syrett for their insightful comments on this essay. I am also grateful to Jaclyn Penny at the American Antiquarian Society and the staff of the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia for help locating exemplary copies of early family records.

### **Further Reading:**

Peter Benes, "Decorated New England Family Registers, 1770-1850," In *The Art of the Family: Genealogical Artifacts in New England*, eds. D. Brenton Simons and Peter Benes (Boston, 2002): 15-59.

Georgia Brady Barnhill, "'Keep Sacred the Memory of Your Ancestors': Family Registers and Memorial Prints," in *The Art of the Family: Genealogical Artifacts in New England*, eds. D. Brenton Simons and Peter Benes (Boston, 2002): 60-74.

Richard Franklin Bense, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York, 2004).

Howard P. Chudacoff, *How Old Are You? Age Consciousness in American Culture* (Princeton, N.J., 1989).

Caroline Cox, *Boy Soldiers of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2016).

Jon Grinspan, *The Virgin Vote: How Young Americans Made Democracy Social, Politics Personal, and Voting Popular in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2016).

Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106:8 (June 1993): 1710-91.

Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2nd ed (1995; Bloomington, Ind., 2011)

Shane Landrum, "From Family Bibles to Birth Certificates: Young People, Proof of Age, and American Political Cultures," in *Age in America: The Colonial Era to the Present*, edited by Corinne T. Field and Nicholas L. Syrett (New York, 2015), 124-47.

Susan J. Pearson, "'Age Ought to Be a Fact': The Campaign Against Child Labor and the Rise of the Birth Certificate," *Journal of American History* (March 2015): 1144-65.

James D. Schmidt, *Industrial Violence and the Legal Origins of Child Labor* (New York, 2010).

Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

Nicholas L. Syrett, *American Child Bride: A History of Minors and Marriage in the United States* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2016).

François Weil, *Family Trees: A History of Genealogy in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013).

This article originally appeared in issue 17.2 (Winter, 2017).

---

Corinne Field is an assistant professor in the Department of Women, Gender & Sexuality at the University of Virginia. She is the author of *The Struggle for Equal Adulthood: Gender, Race, Age, and the Fight for Citizenship in Antebellum America* and co-editor with Nicholas Syrett of *Age in America: The Colonial Era to the Present*.