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## **Crisis In The Family: Connecticut And The Nation**

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From the earliest colonial days, until the present, Americans have considered the family the most fundamental institution in society. When it is threatened, we believe, our whole society is threatened. Yet the American family has undergone many changes since the 17th century; its size has changed, its social function has changed and the roles prescribed for its individual members have changed. Throughout our history these changes have been accompanied by a deep sense of uneasiness and fear that the whole society is on the verge of collapse.

We are experiencing such a moment today, when we have a high divorce rate, numerous one-parent families, two-income families, and a bewildering variety of other forms. Colonists at the close of the 17th century experienced such a time as well, when Puritan values began to lose their hold on the population, and the patriarchal father found that he could no longer direct the lives of his children as easily as had his father. Practically the whole of the 19th century was an other such time when, to many, the rapid changes brought about by such familiar landmarks in our national history is industrialization, urbanization, democratization, westward expansion, and the growth of industrial capitalism seemed capable of rending the whole social fabric.

Though these themes are commonly presented in textbooks, the change in the family is not. The effect of this lack is to perpetuate a myth about the American family which each new generation can call upon, that it is the most stable of our institutions, the last to change. Our national tendency toward nostalgia enhances the myth, and we still cling to images of grandma and grandpa down on the farm, where all the children grow up happy and in touch with nature. If you think Dick, Jane, and Spot and their visits to the country died with the attempt to reform textbooks in the aftermath of the sixties, watch the ads on television where three-generational groups set up their picnic table in the open air and crunch breakfast cereal together. Needless to say, few children in our schools today, in fact few adults, have actually experienced the myth; its perpetuation, however inadvertently, through our presentation of American history, may be a real disservice to those of our students who do not come from conventional homes. An introduction to how the family has changed in America may help them to deal with the changed conditions that affect them daily. As well, a study of the family can introduce them to some exciting current history and provide them with some techniques through which they can begin to see themselves as part of the historical process.

In what follows I present exercises of varying lengths that you can use to engage your students in the study of the 19th-century family and will suggest how what they discover can be applied to their own lives. While the

exercises are primarily useful for more sophisticated students studying American history, many of them can be adapted for use with less sophisticated students.

## I.

You can use this lesson when you have finished studying the colonial period. In the mid 18th century, before the Revolution, Benjamin Franklin, expressing his optimism about the wonderful abundance of American life, predicted that the American people would double their numbers every twenty years.

Ask your students to calculate how many children would have to be born to each family to make Franklin's prediction come true. Remind them that they have to include the mortality of the parents in their calculations. Tell them also that they have to account for the number of people who never marry or who die before they reach adulthood. They also have to consider the number of women who find that they are unable to have children or whose married partner dies.

*Example* : You can start with an initial population of 100. Half of them are women. Those fifty women have to produce 200 children in twenty years. If all the women produced an equal number of children, and all the children lived, the number of children necessary would be four. However, ten percent of the women don't marry. Eliminate five women. Ten percent of the women who do marry prove to be infertile. Eliminate another five women. Finally, ten percent of the women lose their husbands before they can produce children. Eliminate another ten percent. You are left with thirty-five women. These women could produce 200 children if each bore 5.7, or between five and six children each. However, ten percent of the children, or twenty, die as infants, and another ten percent do not live into adulthood to produce children of their own. Add another twenty. You now have 240 births necessary. Remember, though, that of the 200 children, half of which will be female, that you want, thirty percent will not be able to do their share of reproducing. You need an additional sixty children to ensure that the population can continue to double. So, you need 300 children. Divide that number by the available thirty-five women. Each woman must bear between eight and nine children.

When they have produced a figure ask them whether it is the same as the average family size of today. You may also wish to point out to them that in the 19th century, even with the influx of immigrants, which Franklin had not predicted, the total population did not keep up with his hopes.

## II.

Even more dramatic than Franklin's hope was the view of the Scottish economist and author of *The Wealth of Nations* , Adam Smith, who said of America:

Those who live to old age, it is said, frequently see there from fifty to a hundred, and sometimes many more descendants from their own body. Labor is there so well rewarded that a numerous family of children, instead of being a burden, is a source of opulence and prosperity to the parents.

Ask your students to figure out the number of children that the original couple would have to have, and then the number of children that each child would have to have in order to produce Smith's minimum figure. Use the same qualification as for I. or let students figure them out themselves.

Have the students write down the number of children and grandchildren that their grandparents have. If their grandparents are still living ask them to total up the number of descendants the original couple can claim. How close does the figure approximate Adam Smith's figure? Encourage students to speculate on the

significance of the difference. Is it true today that children are a source of opulence and prosperity to parents? What role does Smith implicitly assign to children? How has this role changed?

In working out these exercises I come up with a figure of between eight and nine children. Between seven and eight is the figure that demographic historians estimate was the average for number of children in the American family in 1800. The figure dropped throughout the century and in 1900 the average figure was between three and four. Today the average number of children in the American family is between two and three.

### *III.*

You can begin to introduce the changing size and function of the family as a subject of study after students have done some preliminary reading in the history of the 19th century. When they become acquainted with the general themes of industrialization, urbanization, immigration, democratization, and the beginnings of the westward expansion ask them to speculate about the changes in people's lives that these larger changes must have occasioned. The Connecticut census returns will be our focus.

Point out to students that historians today are aware, as were observers at the time, that native born American parents were having fewer children in the 19th century. Ask them what difference fewer children in individual families would make, to the children who were born, to the father and to the mother. Ask them if they can think of any reasons why this phenomenon may have been occurring.

You can construct an exercise to prove whether in fact native-born Connecticut women were following the national trend. Though the census can be initially frightening in its complexity, a little guidance can generate a great deal of enthusiasm for using it as a research tool, especially for the more mathematically inclined student. Take the figures for the total population of Connecticut from 1790, when the first national census was taken, to 1860, the last antebellum census. Look for the figures for native-born children between the ages of zero and ten. Subtract thirty percent from the total number of women of childbearing age as either being single or unable to bear children. Divide the number of women into the number of children. The answer will constitute the average figure of children born to women. There are many reasons why this figure cannot be taken as a reliable estimate: ask your students to think about what the reasons might be. Even with the necessary qualifications, the figures should get smaller from 1790 to 1860. Students will then have some proof that Connecticut women were following the national trend.

### *IV.*

When you have been able to determine that native born Connecticut women had proportionately fewer children per decade during the period from 1790 to 1860, you can pose the second question: so what? Why should this demonstrable fact have excited any alarm? Did the immigrants really pose a serious threat? Though the census can be used to determine the average size of immigrant families for some decades, this lesson allows students to use their own families for research.

It seems to be something of a commonplace in American history that immigrants have big families. Certainly 19th century observers believed this was the case. Is this true?

Many of your students will be the children of first, second, or third generation immigrant parents. Ask them to construct a family tree, with the help of their parents, as far back as they can go. Is the first generation of children born to immigrant parents larger than that born to the second generation? Does the family size get

progressively smaller until it approximates the norm for American families? If so, it fits in with a generalization growing out of an investigation by the United States Immigration Commission in 1911. That commission determined that though the women of foreign born parents did tend to have twice as many children as the daughters of native born parents, their children in turn had fewer children, until the size of their families was indistinguishable from those of native stock. Why should this be so? Encourage students to feel that speculation is possible. Nobody yet knows the answers to all these questions and further questions will eventually help in explaining this intriguing phenomenon.

V.

Demographers who study changes in the population as a whole deal in large abstractions. If population shifts occurring over a long period of time seem to affect everybody, the tendency is to find a reason for them that transcends the choices made by any single individual. Forces beyond anyone's control, such as plagues, famines, increased food supply, availability of land and new economic activities for the population at large cause the birth rate to decline or rise; individuals are the victims or the beneficiaries of forces of which they may not even be aware. And there is, at least for the modern world, an inverse ratio between the improvement of conditions and the decrease in fertility.

Students may find these abstractions difficult, though some may enjoy getting a general sense that such issues as family size and its change over time are the legitimate concerns of serious historians.

Ask each student to write the number of children in his or her family on a slip of paper. Tabulate the results. Though you can expect a range you can establish the average size for your class; as well, you can find the category into which the largest number of families fall. The two to three child family is today's norm. Why do most families fall into this category? Why do some diverge from it? Students may be able to speculate that not only do economic forces play a part, but values also help to determine family size.

VI.

Demographers searching for an explanation to why there is such a high degree of conformity in family size in a given period, have suggested that an ideal family size becomes customary, or normative. People come to feel that a certain number of children is the right number. Too large a variation would make them feel deprived or overly extravagant. Construct a questionnaire for your students to administer to their parents or to other adults they know who have children, asking them why they had the number of children they did. Discuss the answers in class and see if there is a common theme.

VII.

From the perspective of western history as a whole, that is, the history of western Europe and of America as an offshoot of European culture, the lowering of the American birth rate in the 19th century looks like a case of America catching up with European fertility patterns. To describe the phenomenon demographers use the term "demographic transition" simply signifying the transition to smaller families which began to occur in Europe in the 17th century and in America a hundred years later. From the demographer's point of view the important question is not why the American family got smaller, but why the colonial family was so large in the first place.

Some general answers have been given. The Puritans believed in a sense of mission; they believed that God had called them to found a "city on a hill" and they took seriously the duty to populate the new world. For

many colonists the land and opportunity unknown to them in Europe, coupled with the real need for laborers to tame the wilderness, encouraged large families among all classes of society. And as historian Edmund Morgan has argued, the Puritans found the new world to be better than their wildest expectations and, as they secularized their culture, they continued to believe that “God casts the lines of election in the loins of Godly parents.”

With the transition to industrial society and the growth of urban centers beginning in the early 19th century, change takes the place of remembered stability. The function of the family changes as does the role prescribed for individual members. Children must be socialized, but the understanding of their adult role is changing. Work is moving outside the home and the division of labor dividing the tasks of men and women is growing greater. The family is no longer the primary producer and necessities have to be bought. Children have to make their own way in the world. In such an atmosphere, it could be supposed, the need and desire for large numbers of children diminishes and instead of being “a source of opulence and prosperity to the parents” as Adam Smith had said in the late 18th century, children become an economic burden.

Some classes would be affected by these changes more than others. Most of America remained rural in the 19th century. One would expect to find the smaller families in the urban centers, and the rural areas still characterized by large numbers of children.

Have your students take another look at the census. Take the figures for the urban and rural counties in Connecticut. Look again for the number of women of childbearing age and diminish the number by thirty percent. Find the number of children born in the decade and divide the number of women into the number of children to find the average figure. If Connecticut follows the general pattern established for the nation, students will discover that there is no significant difference.

It is now generally accepted that the decrease in family size among native born American women, and among second generation immigrant women, affected the whole of the country in the 19th century. The general pattern of decrease has been established by demographers examining select areas of the country, urban, rural, eastern, western, highly industrialized, unindustrialized, and the startling conclusions indicate that the decline occurred everywhere. Women on the farms and on the frontier had as few children as women in the cities.

Sociologist Donald Bogue summed up the situation in a book published in 1959. He calculated the rate of reproductive change from 1830 to 1910 and found that the reproductive rate was twenty-nine percent for the period from 1830 to 1840, and thirteen percent for the period from 1900 to 1910. The change, or halving of the reproductive rate, took place during the decades when epidemics were being brought under control, when antiseptic surgery was introduced, and when public health improved through the regulation of water and sewage. Fewer people were dying. To explain why the population did not soar during these decades, Bogue pointed out that the birth rate had to drop even more rapidly than did the death rate. Noting also that the birth rates fell everywhere, he concluded that “. . . the association between city living and declining fertility had not been adequately demonstrated.”

## **Section Two**

The population of America continued to grow throughout the 19th century though not at the same rate that it had in the colonial period. Most text book coverage of population makes clear that westward expansion, urbanization, industrialization, and immigration produced population changes. But few, if any, general texts deal with the statistical fact of nationwide fertility decline. The significance of this fact for understanding the

social history of the 19th century has been brought to the attention of historians in general by the historians of women, who question its meaning for understanding the lives of 19th century women. Surely it makes a difference in your life if you have eight children or four. The historians of women have also discovered that throughout the 19th century women, on the average, not only had progressively fewer children, but they stopped having children earlier than had colonial women, and both they and their husbands were beginning to live longer. This means that women could expect, as colonial women had not, to live in company with their husbands for some time after their last child left home. We are used to this pattern today, when most American parents expect to live twenty or thirty years after the last child has left the nest (we even have a term for this part of the lifecycle in the “empty nest syndrome”) but in the 19th century such additional time in one’s life was new. What did this mean for the women experiencing it?

Historians of women also wonder both why and how these demographic patterns developed. We have had explanations for the decline in mortality through advances in public health, but what about the decline in fertility? Did the decline just happen? Did the forces working for change in the society bring it about? Were women primarily responsible for it?

To say it just happened is obviously inadequate. To say, as many do, that fertility decline was caused by industrialization or urbanization, or a combination of both can only be a partial explanation when we recognize that the decline was characteristic of all regions at about the same time, whether they were industrializing or not. To say that it was due to modernization, or the appearance of the modern personality type, eager to exert conscious control over his or her life, may provide questions for inquiry, but it does not provide answers.

The historians of women have suggested some controversial hypotheses to explain both why fertility declined and how it was brought about. While acknowledging the changes which affected the entire population, they also point to two areas of activity which affected women directly: the rise of the feminist women’s rights movement, and the development of the culture of domesticity.

The first of these was characterized by women’s desire to secure political, social, and economic rights equal to those possessed by men; the second was characterized by a belief in the moral superiority of women and in the particular and unique strengths they possessed in their role as wives and mothers. Though these movements are often set in opposition to each other, adherents to both agreed that women possessed strengths which gave them social responsibility.

When historians attempt to view both movements in the context of fertility decline they question whether both movements don’t represent a significant increase in the power of women. In other words, they assume that having fewer children is advantageous to women; don’t the facts suggest that in having fewer children women were gaining power? And since more women absorbed and believed in the culture of domesticity than in the fight for suffrage and other rights, does this not suggest that the home, and the role that women played in it as mothers and wives, was the springboard for the acquisition of power?

If women were gaining more power in the home, as evidenced by their declining fertility, how, in an era before contraceptive information was either technologically advanced or accepted as morally legitimate, could they have exerted this control?

No one yet knows for sure. Historians conclude, rather vaguely, that women began to experience a change in values that made smaller families desirable. Having once adopted a new value structure, women took whatever steps were necessary to bring their lives into conformity with it. In the 19th century the available means included postponement or avoidance of marriage, unreliable contraceptive techniques, abortion, and

sexual restraint.

One would expect that if women were changing their lives and increasing their power through the use of any of these means to control and limit fertility that there would have been some response from the rest of society. In this case the expected turns out to be true.

The following essay gives a brief narrative of societal responses to declining fertility in the nation, in New England, and in Connecticut. To what extent concern over declining fertility was also an expression of concern over the changing roles of women, and of general concern over vast changes in the society I leave up to you and your students to determine.

*I.*

When the ninth census of the United States was issued in 1870, the director felt obliged to apologize for what he had to report. The population had not reached the expected 40,000,000; rather, it hovered a little above 38,000,000. The director tried to explain the disappointing news: newly emancipated slaves were moving to the cities and in the process were having fewer children; many soldiers, of course, had died from war-related wounds and diseases; the war had also disrupted marriage patterns among the entire population; and the war had checked the influx of immigrants into the country. Furthermore, he continued:

A fifth cause may be alluded to, namely, the notorious growth habits of life in many sections of the country which tend strongly to reduce the rate of national increase, and which, if persisted in, will make the showing of another census hardly so satisfactory as the present, even without a devastating war to account for the loss of hundreds of thousands in hospitals and on the battlefield. No one can be familiar with life in the eastern and middle states generally, and in the western cities, and not be aware that children are not born to American parents as they were in the early days of the country. Luxury, fashion, and the vice of "boarding" combine to limit the increase of families to a degree that in some sections even threatens the perpetuation of our native stock. The tendency is not one that requires to be brought out by statistical comparisons. It is patent, palpable, and needs no proof. <sup>1</sup>

Indeed, as the census director suggested, the tendency of American parents to have fewer children had been noticed by others. For several decades prior to 1870 visitors to America and Americans themselves had begun to notice the growth of "luxury" and "fashion" replacing the agrarian values believed to lie at the heart of American society. The terms were ill defined but they were always associated with the habits of life that one picked up in the city. Taken together, "luxury" and "fashion" signaled a drastic change in values, away from those associated with the home, with morality, with community, and with the search for eternal salvation, toward immediate goals and rewards, selfishly pursued and individually enjoyed. American men and women, but particularly American women, according to these observers, were guilty of seeking all their rewards at the immediate moment.

The connection between declining fertility and these social vices associated with city living, was made and brought to public attention by two groups in society. The first group were the American doctors who had been trained in the major medical colleges of the day. The second group were the New England clergy who took their cue from the doctors and asserted their position as moral guardians. There was a third group, the women's rights advocates, though their contribution was inadvertent. They happened to be making their demands for rights at the same time that doctors and clergymen were calling attention to the declining size of the family. And they were a visible target. From the 1840s on American doctors began accusing American women of refusing to have children. Others took up the call and accused the women's rights advocates of wanting to destroy the family. By the 1860s the public discussion had picked up considerable heat. By 1874,

when the Connecticut debate reached a climax, both cause and culprit had been thoroughly discussed.

Why did the issue of declining fertility and the moral and social evils alleged to be connected to it come to a head in the 1860s? The reason seems to lie in the nature of what the doctors were saying. They believed, on evidence, that induced miscarriage, or abortion, was widespread, and that the users were not the poor and the outcast; they were otherwise respectable Protestant married women of America.

Doctors had actually begun to campaign against abortion as early as the 1820s and their early efforts had met with legislative success. Connecticut passed its first abortion law, the first in the nation, in 1821, and other states followed Connecticut's example. These early laws, however, were aimed not at women, but at practitioners of abortion, and women were not considered culpable in an abortion case. There are two reasons for this legislative approach.

In the first place, the state of medical knowledge in the 1820s regarding pregnancy was limited. It was difficult to determine with any accuracy whether a woman was pregnant until the fetus moved in the womb, usually at about the fourth month. Though the common law of England, adopted in America, made interference with a pregnancy after "quickening" a criminal offense, a woman was legally free to do whatever she wanted prior to that stage in her pregnancy when movement could be detected. On the other hand, should a woman die either from having taken poison to induce miscarriage, or procured an abortion through the use of instruments, there was a visible culprit: the person who had provided the poison or used the instruments. The availability of a culprit points to the second reason for legislation directed at abortionists.

In the Jacksonian period the state of the medical profession was chaotic. <sup>2</sup> The licensing of doctors had begun in the 1700s but one effect of democratization during Jackson's presidency had been to reverse the licensing trend. The result was that in the 1830s and 1840s there were practically no restrictions on who could call himself or herself a doctor. Consequently, there were numbers of practitioners, more or less qualified, hawking a wild variety of cures. For the group of doctors who had been trained in the medical colleges this situation was less than desirable. They, the "regulars," stood to benefit from enforced restrictions which would eliminate some of the competition. The "regular" doctors came from the families of the elite and they were in touch with the elite in politics. With ready access to legislators they could push for the kind of legislation that would help them. In this atmosphere of competition the first anti-abortion legislation was passed.

By 1860 all states had some form of abortion legislation and again Connecticut was in the vanguard, revising its law in that year to make abortion at any stage in a pregnancy, now understood to begin with conception, a criminal offense and to make the woman who attempted one liable to criminal prosecution. Though abortion was now a criminal offense, those concerned with the issue did not perceive that the law was effective.

The crisis in the American family hit New England in 1866 with the publication of Dr. Horatio Storer's book, *Why Not? A Book for Every Woman*. Storer, a "regular," and a Boston gynecologist, submitted his manuscript as a prize essay to the medical faculty at Harvard University. Harvard named it the winner and saw to its publication.

Storer pronounced in *Why Not? A Book for Every Woman*, that abortion was both frequent among American women and disastrous. Women could expect nothing from it but possible death, continuous ill-health, inevitable disease later in life, and probably insanity. <sup>3</sup> Why, he asked, would anyone submit to such horrors? The reasons, he maintained, could be found in all corrupt societies throughout history. They included "unbridled desire," "selfishness and extravagance," and "an absence of true conjugal affection." <sup>4</sup>



Though Storer accused men of being generally immoral, the weight of his attack fell on women who gave in to the “demands of fashion,” bringing the whole society down with them. Even prostitution, he said, would be less disastrous to health. <sup>5</sup>

Women, however, were not fully responsible; they were at the mercy of their bodies:

If each woman were allowed to judge for herself in this matter, her decision upon the abstract question would be too sure to be warped by personal considerations, and those of the moment. Woman’s mind is prone to depression, and indeed, to temporary actual derangement, under the stimulus of uterine excitation, and this alike at the time of puberty and the final cessation of the menses, at the monthly periods and at conception, during pregnancy, at labor, and during lactation . . . <sup>6</sup>

Women needed advice and direction, and who was in a better position to give it to them than the doctors who understood them?

Turning to another theme, Storer noted that “. . . the standard size of families is not on the average what used to be seen,” <sup>7</sup> adding that three or four children was now the norm, in contrast to what it had been a few generations ago. He drew out the implications of this observation by calling attention to the large open spaces of the country,

Shall they be filled by our own children or by those of aliens? This is a question that our own women must answer; upon their loins depends the future destiny of the nation. <sup>8</sup>

Storer’s arguments were persuasive, not only because he attacked abortion directly as a crime against the unborn child and against the nation, but because he raised the level of apprehension about the dangers involved to a high pitch, and most persuasively, because he buttressed his arguments with scientific and authoritative proof. Doctors, he claimed, knew about these things. But what did they know?

In the 1850s and 1860s the “regular” American doctors, like Storer himself, had found a specialty which would enable them to compete through their publications with the more established doctors of Europe and, at the same time, would help them to rid themselves of the competition at home. This specialty was gynecology, and out of its development emerged the 19th-century “scientific” understanding of women. By the mid 1800s, it is generally understood, regular doctors had succeeded in driving midwives, most of whom were women, from the profession, and through their continuing efforts to enforce licensing laws and encourage legislation favorable to them, they were eventually to be successful in eliminating other ‘irregular’ practitioners, so that, in essence, they would have women to themselves. Along with their efforts to eliminate competition, went the development of what was to become the normative and accepted “scientific” view of women. Dr. Charles Meigs of Boston, a leading force in the movement a generation before Storer, had summed up this new view of woman in 1848. He said that woman’s:

intellectual and moral perceptivity and forces . . . are feminine as her organs are. Beyond all these, you shall have to explore the history of those functions and destinies which her sexual nature enables her to fulfill, and the strange and secret influences which her organs, by their nervous constitution, and the functions, by their relation to her whole life-force, whether in sickness or health, are capable of exerting, not on the body alone, but on the heart, the mind, and the very soul of woman. The medical practitioner has, then, much to study, as to the female, that is not purely medical but psychological and moral rather; such researches will be a future obligation lying heavily on you . . . <sup>9</sup>

Storer, in 1866, took these obligations very seriously.

Meigs' ideas, popularized by writers like Storer and others who published in medical journals and who wrote for the public at large, took hold. In the early decades of the 19th century those who opposed the extension of rights to women usually did so on the basis of the Bible's injunction to women to be subordinate. With the doctors, and the general spread of their ideas, and with the general reliance that cultural leaders of the nation were coming to place on science, the opposition came increasingly from those who described woman as so much the victim of her biological nature that she was clearly unfit for any kind of endeavor outside the home. From the doctors' view of women as determined by their wombs flow the writings of antagonists to women's political rights, to rights to higher education, to entrance into the professions, and a host of others. At the same time, then, that women were arguing for the extension of those rights, and for the role of moral leaders, masculine antagonists were busy constructing a scientific edifice that would make it impossible to take those demands seriously.

Storer's book was widely read and his views popularized. One popularizer was the Reverend John Todd, a Yale graduate and, in the 1860s, Congregationalist minister in Pittsfield, Mass. Todd's theology was orthodox but his methods were revivalist. A self-appointed guardian of New England morals, he had written widely on the dangers to morality to be encountered in American society. After having explored these dangers as they would be met by men, he turned his attention to women in 1867.

In that year Todd published two pamphlets in which he addressed the question of female morality. The first of these was entitled *Women's Rights*, the second, *Serpents in the Dove's Nest*. Todd began with a general attack on the lax morals of both men and women, but quickly focused attention on women. They wanted a revolution to change their lot in life; they demanded equality in everything, but clearly they were not equal, not in weight, height, or strength, and God did not intend them to be equal. Woman, he said, "has a physical organization so refined and delicate that it can never bear the strain which comes upon the rougher, coarser nature of man."<sup>10</sup> Her life was controlled by laws governing her physical nature. He said, ". . . you, dear ladies, cannot do (what) . . . God don't (sic) ask you to do."<sup>11</sup> Here were the insights of the doctors taking route in the religious mind.

Man, said Todd, wanted children: "He is disappointed if he has none. He is willing to toil, to run the risk of poverty and want, to support them . . ." <sup>12</sup> Women do not. The consequences would spell disaster. The native population was diminishing fast; only three or four children were being born, while "our foreign population have large families . . ." <sup>13</sup> He predicted that at the current rate the American family would entirely disappear. And why? Because women were addicted to "winter gaieties" and to "summer trips and amusements." <sup>14</sup> For Todd the solution lay in a return to the recognition of woman's subordinate role, as ordained by God. <sup>15</sup> Such a return was presumably to be led by those who best understood God's will, His ordained ministers.

Todd excerpted that part of his larger pamphlet which dealt directly with abortion, subtitled it "Fashionable Murder," and published it in the leading Congregationalist journal of the day, the *Congregational and Boston Recorder*. Leaders in Congregational churches all over New England were alarmed and undertook to study the situation in their own states and parishes. Reluctant to take the doctors' evidence at face value, they conducted their own brand of demographic research.

Maine was the first state to report. Interested parties there checked the state census and found that the school population had dropped by an alarming 19,000 between 1865 and 1868 when the study was conducted. The person in charge of the study, W. Johnson, groaned:.

Have we ceased to be a producing people? Formerly large families were common. Have habits of living, diet, want of ventilation, intemperance, or lewdness influenced to this result? Are the vital forces expended in brain labor, and lost to physical reproduction? Are the modern fashionable criminalities of infanticide and feticide creeping into *our* state community? <sup>16</sup>

The answer seemed to be a frightening yes, and other congregations around New England came in with the same findings and conclusions.

Reverend William Clarke of Litchfield gave the report for Connecticut at the general meeting of Congregationalists in the summer of 1868. He remarked that “the diminished rate of increase of our native New England population” <sup>17</sup> had attracted attention, but he attempted to offer an explanation for it. Noting that figures were only available for Massachusetts, he said that the immigrant birth rate was the same as the native even though immigrants constituted only one-fifth of the population. There was, however, a reason. In New England the native population was older because the younger men and women had migrated west. <sup>1</sup>

Turning his attention to a more general issue, he observed:.

Moreover, when the family has been constituted, there are many who find sufficient reason for desiring that the number of children should be limited. <sup>19</sup>

Clarke came to the point:

Now it is not to be denied that parents may have some regard to such prudential considerations as have been mentioned, in regulating, by proper means, the size of their families. <sup>20</sup>

And what is more:.

We may not set our friends and neighbors down as without excuse because they do not propagate their species to absolutely the greatest extent in their power. <sup>21</sup>

Children, he felt, should not suffer from want of means to provide for them. Furthermore, he found value in recognizing that there were other things to be considered beyond size of families. He wanted families in which “. . . health and cheerfulness be not lost..the peace of parents be not vexed, and their comfort destroyed with excessive cares.” <sup>22</sup>

Clarke did not deny the evidence for abortion, nor did he hesitate to label the practice as both immoral and criminal, but he just did not believe that women like the ones he knew could be the ones vilified by the likes of Storer and Todd. Nor was he so afraid of an immigrant take-over. He ended his report by proclaiming that even if New Englanders cannot maintain numerical supremacy, they still have a cultural mission:

. . . to make our culture so true, our religious faith so pure, and the nobleness and force of our character so great, that we shall still avail, if not to fill the land with our sons and daughters, at least to leaven it with that right influence which has been our best gift in the past, and which is the only hope of the future. <sup>23</sup>

Clarke came under attack in the pages of the *Congregationalist and Boston Recorder* in February, 1869 from Dr. Nathan Allen, a medical man from Lowell, Massachusetts, and something of an amateur demographer. Allen accused Clarke of issuing “an explanation, defense, and apology” <sup>24</sup> for gross immorality and queried:

. . . is it possible that this crime does not prevail in the 'land of steady habits', and needs there no exposure, rebuke, or condemnation? <sup>25</sup>

In direct refutation of Clarke's implicit belief in the goodness of Connecticut people, Allen said that the divorce rate in Connecticut was double what it was in any other New England state. He judged: "It represents a state of things in Connecticut in this respect, worse than in infidel France in her darkest days." Furthermore, the 1866 School Report for Connecticut had shown that ". . . the relative number of children has been steadily diminishing for the last 40 years." <sup>26</sup>

He concluded on a somber note, discounting Clarke's more optimistic one:

Should changes in population continue to take place here similar to what have occurred in the past years, how long will it be before some of the principle cities, if not whole states in New England, will come more or less under the government and influence of a foreign class . . . A longer career of prosperity and a nobler destiny . . . should await our New England people. <sup>27</sup>

Clarke answered a month later:.

Was I to stand by and see my countrywomen, the best part of New England yet, weighed in a balance with their foreign sisters, in a matter deeply involving true womanhood . . . ? <sup>28</sup>

As a corrective to rash accusations made against women, he went on to draw attention to more general considerations:

It is an ordinance of nature that there shall be many small families; and this is true even in cases where the average size is large. <sup>29</sup>

To support this view, Clarke revealed that he had carried out a study of Litchfield families, using genealogical records and reconstituting families up to the year 1800. In the 1000 families he had found, 316 of them had seven or more children, and 396 of them had three or fewer. In fact, whereas Allen had credited the colonial family with seven or eight children, he had determined the average to be 5.3. Some people, he said, may feel that exaggerated figures are necessary to attack "and overcome certain great and prevalent evils of our day." Clarke did not approve of such tactics.

But in concluding, Clarke was forced to agree that the prevalence of ads, rumors, and doctors' evidence had convinced him that abortion was widespread, and he thanked Storer for speaking out so plainly on the issue.

Allen replied again. In defense of his own use of statistics, he said that, after all, none of them were reliable, and the study of family size is still ". . . a field that has never yet been thoroughly explored." <sup>30</sup> He also maintained that women's general ill health was a partial explanation of reduced fertility. By accepting Storer's view, that women were not suffering from inferior health, Allen maintained, Clarke was in fact, condemning women, since if health was not the reason, then deliberate motive must be. And the motive, however arrived at, was "to prevent or destroy human life." <sup>31</sup> On the other hand, through his examination of women's organization, by which he meant the interrelationship between the different parts of the body, he had found that though women were guilty of choosing abortion, there were biological explanations which served a little to remove the total moral condemnation. Allen had written on this whole question of women's organization before. <sup>32</sup> In his view the body was like an intricate machine, composed of several interrelated parts, which he

identified as temperaments. What had been happening since the turn of the century was that these parts were getting out of joint. The muscular temperament, developed in women through domestic labor, was atrophying as women devoted more time to school in their youth and to managing servants in their adult years<sup>33</sup> “Domestic labor,” he had contended, “is regarded by them as *menia*; . . . ”<sup>33</sup> The lymphatic system was malfunctioning due to new styles in clothing which compress the lungs and heart, and education was drawing blood to the brain, exciting the nervous system at the expense of the other temperaments.<sup>34</sup> The sad result of all these changes, Allen maintained, was that women found, in their adult years, that they could not and would not bear children. They were guilty of course, but equally guilty was the whole corrupt society that worked these changes on the unsuspecting young.

On this question of women’s health Catharine Beecher, an educational and moral reformer of considerable fame in the antebellum period, daughter of the equally famous early 19th-century preacher, Lyman Beecher, and now a woman full of years, had something to say. Beecher did not participate in the debate in the Congregationalist journal but in 1871 she published a collection of her speeches given in Boston, Hartford, and New York, which showed her awareness of the issues.

As an opponent of woman’s suffrage, Beecher recognized the connection people were making between women’s rights and fertility decline but she saw these both as symptoms rather than casual connections. She believed that the real cause of all the social difficulty lay in the state of women’s health. She had in fact conducted a survey of women’s health throughout the nation in the 1850s and she called fresh attention to her findings. Women suffered from a variety of ailments and the number of healthy women was appallingly small: “In Hartford, Connecticut, I can think of only one,”<sup>35</sup> she had observed.

But the cause of ill health was not fashion, immorality, tight clothing, or any of the other explanations being offered. It resulted from the fact that society undervalued woman’s role. Woman’s role, as she understood it, encompassed the duties of household manager, provider of food, nurse and teacher, but these were not light tasks: “Woman, as mother and as teacher,” she said, “is to guide the immortal mind.”<sup>36</sup>

Men, in her view, were the ones who shunned marriage for their own selfish reasons. Can the ballot, she asked, force men to marry?<sup>37</sup> Those who did marry encouraged their wives to pursue lives of leisure, devaluing the domestic labor necessary to keep the home running.

Who will perform this devalued labor, she asked.:

The bogs of Ireland the shanty tenement houses the plantation huts the swarming poverty stricken wanderers from Europe, China, and Japan are coming to reply.<sup>38</sup>

What was her solution? Women’s work needs to be.:

. . . elevated to an honorable and remunerative science and profession, by the same methods that men have taken to elevate their various professions.<sup>39</sup>

Catharine Beecher’s sister, Isabella Beecher Hooker, was the organizer of the woman’s suffrage movement in Connecticut and a leading spokesperson for what was to become, in the late 1870s, the Voluntary Motherhood movement. This movement proclaimed the right of the woman to choose when, and when not, to become pregnant. The day after she had read John Todd’s piece in the *Congregationalist and Boston Recorder* Hooker had penned a reply, but the journal had chosen not to publish it. In 1874 she published it, along with some

other pieces, in a separate book.

In her response to Todd she began immediately with a discussion of male and female sexuality, pointing out that men were drawn to women for sex, while women are drawn to men out of the desire for children: “. . . women,” she said, “are feebly endowed with this (sexual) passion . . .”<sup>40</sup> No such distinction had been made by previous participants in the debate. Addressing herself to women’s experience, she wrote:

. . . for the larger part of her married life she is either positively distressed by the apparently necessary demands of her husband upon her, and irresponsible to them, or kept to a cheerful response by a self-abnegation and regard for his comfort, not to say fear of his moral aberration, which is a positive drain upon her health and strength.<sup>41</sup>

Hooker avoided direct confrontation with the issue of abortion. What was at issue for her was the whole question of male sexual mores and their effect upon the morality and health of women. Not unaware of the condition of American women’s health as it had been discussed by her sister, she attributed ill health to the difficult situation in which women had been placed by their husbands, for her, a hazardous moral position, and in developing her theme she called for a new approach to marital sexuality, one in which the women directed the object and the frequency of sexual relations. She said:

. . . a great part of the physical and moral deterioration of the present day arises . . . from the fact that children are not conceived in the desire for them, and out of the pure lives of their fathers, as well as their mothers; . . . far worse misfortunes might befall our race than decreasing families, so long as children are born to such an inheritance . . .<sup>42</sup>

Hooker was not in favor of contraceptive measures to prevent conception, and she certainly did not condone abortion. Rather, she preached sexual restraint in marriage, the avoidance of intercourse unless both partners clearly intended pregnancy to be the desired result. She pleaded for mothers to educate their sons in general restraint, including dieting and bathing, and in knowledge of womanhood, so that they would not tax their wives in body and spirit.<sup>43</sup> She alluded to a Jewish practice of sexual restraint for half the month, mentioned that modern science is also aware of the value of restraint, and pushed her point home: “. . . the quality of offspring is far better testimony than the quantity.”<sup>44</sup> She concluded her piece by urging her readers to have children:

But, you must not invite these little ones to your home any oftener than you can provide for them in body and in spirit, and for the health and strength of the mothers who are to bear them.<sup>45</sup>

Concern over the declining size of the American family did not end with the cessation of this part of the debate in Connecticut. In fact, concern reached a crescendo in the early 1900s when Presidential candidate Teddy Roosevelt raised the spectre of “race suicide” to warn nativeborn Americans that they were losing ground to immigrants and in danger of a world defeat from other nations where, Roosevelt inaccurately believed, the birth rate remained high. But by 1874, when Isabella Hooker published her reactions and views, all the non-political groups that were to continue to participate had been heard. Was the concern real? Did it address itself to a serious issue in the lives of Americans, rebuilding their society in the post-Civil War years? Was the evidence accurate? Were the causes given the true ones? Were the effects realized? Were the solutions offered by the various participants the right ones?

That there was a crisis extending far beyond the boundaries of the American family seems painfully clear.

That the family became an issue is perhaps indicative of the personal way in which the process of general social change was experienced by those intimately affected by it.

## *II.*

You will need two to four days for this exercise. Ask your students to read the essay in I. above, or summarize the content of the debate in Connecticut for them. The best way to make a summary is to use the following categories: evidence; causes, effects, solutions. List the main participants in the debate: Storer, Todd, Clarke, Allen, Beecher, and Hooker. Your goal is to help students determine the differences each participant had regarding each of the categories.

You can think of the best way to reach this goal. You may want to divide the students into groups, giving each group a different person, and when each group has finished its discussion, carry out a general class discussion; or you may want to assign six students a particular person and then stage a debate.

Here are some useful questions:

How valid was the evidence for fertility decline?

What proof was there that the causes given were the real ones?

Do you think that the effects imagined were justified?

How likely were the solutions offered to be successful?

If you want to try a debate choose six students whom you think are best able to carry it off successfully. After all the students have read or been introduced to the material in the essay, give these six additional time to prepare their cases. You can prepare the rest of the class by assigning two or three students to be foreign observers and two or three others to be representatives from the press. The remainder can consider themselves well-informed citizens. When all have had a chance to prepare, conduct the debate. Remind them that 19th century people tended to be formal with each other and to observe the principles of mannerly discussion.

On the day after the debate have the press give their reports. You can also hear from the foreign observers and if time allows, give the participants a chance to respond.

## *III.*

The purpose of this exercise is to encourage students to make connections between the information provided in the essay and other changes in the society. How well can they see connections between the fear over fertility decline and immigration, westward expansion, the loss of cultural leadership in New England, women's rights, urbanization, industrialization, the professionalization of medicine, and secularization? Of course you can cut this list to make it more manageable and concentrate on the themes most important to you.

Divide students into groups, assigning a theme to each group. When they have had enough time to discuss among themselves ask them to report to the class on the relationship they see. Was fertility decline really a serious issue? Why, from the perspective of each of the other themes should the decline have caused such a stir?

#### IV.

For this exercise you do not need to use the essay. Use the introductory material in Section II to provide students with a general sense of why historians are interested in the family and what historians of women have to say today about fertility decline. The exercise is aimed at making them more aware of the importance of cultural images.

The general feeling among historians of women today is that American women affected by the changes which were affecting the whole country, experienced a change in values which made smaller families desirable to them. Much of the change can be traced through an examination of the cultural images which were available to them over the course of the 19th century. In the years immediately after the Revolution, the dominant image, available in the popular literature of the day, was the “lady” who was genteel, flirtatious, subtle in her ability to hide her intelligence from men, and eager to entertain and live the life of luxury. The image created in the 19th century was quite different. The woman of the ladies’ magazines was dutiful and subservient, but she was also a firm manager of her home, an authority figure, though a loving one to her children and a moral guide to her husband. This image, apparently, was far more attractive to 19th century women than was the role model available to them in the real life figure of the woman’s rights activist. They modelled their lives, or attempted to, after the pattern of the woman as a moral leader.

Suggest to students that in a highly literate society, as New England was in the 19th century, images of appropriate behavior described in words had a great appeal. Popular magazines were the television of the 19th century. Ask students to watch the ads on television for a few successive evenings. Have them distinguish between products being advertised for men to buy and those being sold to women. Have them observe everything they can about the man or the woman drinking the beer or washing the clothes, their clothing, their manner of authority or submissiveness, their reaction to the product being pushed.

Though children today seem to be quite capable of viewing the commercials cynically, ask them to take them seriously. What are those images telling us about how we should behave, what we should do with our time, and what our values should be? If you are a woman, wouldn’t you like to be both a supreme court judge and a person who could be counted on to turn out clean laundry rather than that dingy stuff? If you are a man, wouldn’t you like to be sensitive, caring, and rich, and also have a few beers with Jimmy Breslin?

You can point out that cultural images may not describe what we actually do, but they do stir us up to think about what we might like to do and be, especially when we see them over and over again. In this way students can get a sense of the role that prescriptive literature has played in the lives of people in the past. No society has ever lacked for such literature, whether oral, written, or visually presented, and in the 19th century there was certainly no shortage.

#### V.

You do not need to use the essay for this exercise. When students know something in general about the condition of women in the 19th century you can make their historical understanding deeper by having them focus on the condition of women today. A good time to assign this exercise is when a vacation is coming up.

Ask students to observe and take notes on the actual roles played by each member of their families. Who defers to whom? How are decisions made? Who earns the money? Who decides how money will be spent? Is housework shared or is there a division of labor? If so, on what is it based? Is authority shared? How are feelings expressed? What is the relationship of each member of the family to the outside community? Do



family considerations take precedence over considerations coming from the outside, or is it the other way around?

When students have observed their families for a week or so you can have them write up their findings or discuss them in class.

You might have some difficulty in turning their attention back to the 19th century but when they have had an adequate time to report ask them to compare the 19th century family to their own. Let them speculate freely on what changes in the lives of individuals and in the society were most likely to produce change in the family.

VI.

This exercise raises the question of whether studying the family might be a better way to understand the transformation that has occurred in social roles of men and women than is the study of the women's rights movement. You do not have to use the essay but you should make use of the introductory material.

The question raised today, in the context of renewed attempts to exert social control over women's reproductive activity, is whether women have a right to control their own bodies. Do women have the right to choose when and when not to bear children?

Discuss this general question with your students first. Then you can introduce the historical issue that was debated in the 19th century. Finally, summarize the findings of contemporary women's historians for them. Ask them to debate whether they think gaining control over fertility was a sign that women were gaining power.

VII.

Try this final exercise on any advanced students you have who are preparing for the Advanced Placement exam. After you have concluded your study of the Civil War excerpt and put together some of the selections from the primary sources that appear in the essay. Give them to your students and have them take a class period to define what issue they detect. This will sharpen their skills for the Document-Based Question.

## Notes

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1. *The Statistics of the Population of the United States, Embracing the Table of Race, Nationality, Sex, Selected Ages, and Occupations* . Vol. I, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872, p. XIX.
2. Information of the state of the medical profession in the 1800s is taken from G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life* . New York: Harper and Row, 1976, and James C. Mohr, *Abortion in America* , New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.
3. Horatio Storer, *Why Not? A Book for Every Woman* . Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1866, pp. 6ff.
4. Storer, p. 16.
5. Storer, p. 61.
6. Storer, p. 75.
7. Storer, p. 62.
8. Storer, p. 85.

9. Quoted in Barker-Benfield, p. 83.
10. Reverend John Todd, *Woman's Rights* . Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1867, p. 8.
11. Todd, p. 8.
12. John Todd, *Serpents in the Dove's Nest* , quoted in Barker-Benfield, p. 205.
13. Todd, in *Serpents in the Dove's Nest* , in Barker-Benfield, p. 203.
14. Todd, *Serpents in the Dove's Nest* , in Barker-Benfield, p. 190.
15. Quoted in Barker-Benfield, p. 207.
16. Quoted in Nathan Allen, M.D., "Comparative Decrease of Children," *The Congregationalist and Boston Recorder* . February 4, 1968, p. 39.
17. W.B.Clarke, "Report on the Decrease of the Native Population," *Minutes of the General Association of Connecticut* (Congregationalist). June 16-18, 1868, Hartford: Case, Lockwood and Brainard, 1869., p. 55.
18. Clarke, pp. 55-57.
19. Clarke, p. 64.
20. Clarke, p. 64.
21. Clarke, p. 64.
22. Clarke, p. 64.
23. Clarke, p. 67.
24. Allen, "Comparative Decrease . . . ," p. 39.
25. Allen, p. 39.
26. Allen, p. 39.
27. Allen, p. 39.
28. Rev. W. B. Clarke, "Dr. Allen's Statistics," *The Congregationalist and Boston Recorder* . March 4, 1869, p. 71.
29. Clarke, "Dr. Allen's Statistics," p. 71.
30. Nathan Allen, "Vital Statistics," *The Congregationalist and Boston Recorder* . April 8, 1869.
31. Allen, "Vital Statistics."
32. See Nathan Allen, *The Law of Human Increase* . New York: Moorhead, Simpson & Bond, 1868.
33. Nathan, *The Law of Human Increase* . p. 23.
34. Nathan, *The Law of Human Increase* . pp. 33 ff.
35. Catharine Beecher, *Woman Suffrage and Woman's Professions* . Hartford: Brown & Gross, p. 129.
36. Beecher, p. 28.
37. Beecher, p. 45.
38. Beecher, p. 48.
39. Beecher, p. 52.
40. Isabella Beecher Hooker, *Womanhood, its Sanctities and Fidelities* . Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1874, p. 13.
41. Hooker, p. 14.
42. Hooker, p. 15.
43. Hooker, pp. 17-22.
44. Hooker, p. 24.
45. Hooker, p. 45.

# Bibliography

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## Primary Sources

The sources used to prepare the narrative essay can all be found listed in footnotes to the essay. In working out possibilities for exercises in Section I, I used the printed United States Censuses available in the Connecticut State Library in Hartford. Many public libraries also have copies of the printed census and statistical abstracts are available. Use your librarian to help you locate what you need. The census was compiled for every decade beginning in 1790. Though there is not a great deal of consistency in categories from one decade to the next, it is possible to determine for some decades the number of women of childbearing age and the number of children born in the decade. Also the number of foreign born residents were enumerated. And population is broken down by county and town. Students will need direction and patience.

## Secondary Sources: General Works

### I. Abortion, Contraception, and the Development of Medicine:

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Fryer, Peter. *The Birth Controllers* . New York: Stein and Day, 1966. (Lacking in a feminist perspective and so a little out of date now, but gives a good account of the development of the philosophy and practice of contraception in the 19th century; stresses connections between the U.S. and Britain. For teachers and advanced students.)

Gordon, Linda. *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* . New York: Grossman Publishers, 1976. (Provides a feminist perspective and is especially good on the period after the 1870s. For teachers and advanced students.)

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### II. Demography

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### IV. Family

Calhoun, Arthur W. *A Social History of the American Family* . vol. II, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960. (Early attempt to write family history using literary sources; now outdated in approach, but contains useful quoted material. First published in 1945. Read when you have nothing else to do. For teachers.)

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#### V. Women

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James, Edward T. Janet James and Paul Boyer, *Notable American Women, 1607-1950*. 3 vol., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974. (Excellent biographical guide to American women; a must for your library. Brief but pithy biographies reflecting new scholarship on women and extremely useful for students doing brief or extended research. Gives further bibliographical information on women cited.)

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Cott, Nancy F. and Elizabeth H. Pleck, eds., *A Heritage of Her Own* . New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979. (Contains many excellent articles on demography, family history and women's history. Useful for teachers and students doing research. Note Cott on divorce, Wells on 18th century demographic history, Lerner on professionalization of medicine, and Smith on the relation between family limitation and female power.)

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Frazier, Thomas R., ed. *The Private Side of American History: Readings in Everyday Life* . vol. II, 2nd ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979. (Many good articles dealing with women and social history. Note Kennedy for introduction to the scare over fertility decline. Good for teachers and for students with an interest in social history.)

Hartman, Mary and Lois Banner, eds. *Clio's Consciousness Raised* . New York: Harper and Row, 1974. (Excellent selections dealing with women's health, cultural values, work, and family limitation. Note Gordon on voluntary motherhood. For students and teachers.)

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