

to be independent persons in voluntary communities. The book finally turns to character, asking whether modern Americans think or feel differently than their ancestors did; are they, for example, more skeptical or more anxious? Strikingly, the answer is, much less than one might imagine. Yet more Americans gained cognitive skills and developed emotional habits which enabled them to more fully participate in the voluntaristic culture that characterizes America.

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I must first acknowledge the social historians upon whose findings this book is built. Their efforts to uncover the lived past were long and hard work. Having done some historical research myself (*America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone*), I can testify that working the archives requires serious discipline. I hope I have been faithful to their scholarship.

Research support for this book has been slim but steady, small annual grants from University of California, Berkeley's Committee on Research. It has funded, over much of two decades, many students to help me sift through the voluminous literature: John Chan, Cristina Cielo, Christine Getz, Graham Hill, Steven Kerr, Benjamin Moodie, Michael Pelton, Jon Pennington, Tom Pessah, Amy Schalet, Lisa Stampnitzky, Charles Stephens, Jennifer Utrata, Ann Wood, and Richard Wood. Avi Fischer and Leah Fischer provided a bit of help, too.

As this project matured into a book, I benefited from partial readings by Michael Hout, John Levi Martin, Peter Stromberg, Viviana Zelizer, and Sharon Zukin, and by sociology editors Karl Bakeman and Tim Sulivan. James T. Sparrow read and commented on the whole book; Paul DiMaggio did the same with such intensity and thoroughness that he could have asked for coauthorship.

Working with the University of Chicago Press team, led by legendary and exuberant editor Doug Mitchell and his assistant Tim McGovern, has once again been a delight. Mary Gehl edited a complex manuscript with diligence. Matt Avery gets credit for the design and Levi Stahl for the marketing campaign (and book naming).

Finally and fulsomely, I thank my family. My children, Avi and Leah, patiently watched me disappear into the study to work on this project from their toddler years to their adulthood. Ann Swidler played two roles. It will be clear to many sociologists that I have engaged and appropriated some of her ideas without giving full credit; you can learn something over one-third of a century of marriage. And she has unstintingly, enthusiastically sympathized with and supported all my efforts, small and large, from rooting for the Giants to this lengthy project. "A woman of worth . . . The heart her husband safely trusts in her, and he shall have no lack of gain."

1 The Stories We Tell

The former drover George C. Duffield, whose memoir of a cattle drive inspired the television series *Rarewhite*, recalled his mother's life on the Iowa frontier in the 1820s and '30s. She cared for the babies, cleaned the floors, made the beds, cultivated a garden, dressed turkeys, cured meat, made candles, preserved fruit, spun and knitted to make clothing, cut the children's hair, taught them to spell, and "did the thousand things for us a mother only finds to do." Hall of Fame ballplayer Cal Ripken Jr., whose Iron Man career inspired thousands of little leaguers, recalled his mother's life during the 1960s and '70s. Because his father was also a ballplayer, she did some of both parents' duties. She kept score at his games, coached his hitting, and bucked him up when he lost. When Cal Sr. was home, she joined in family basketball games (she "had a really good two-handed set shot"). On the road, she packed and unpacked, set up housekeeping, did the laundry, handled the family budget, and settled the children's quarrels. Ripken did not mention, as Duffield had, the food, clothing, barbering, and schooling that his mother took care of—that went without saying. He noted instead the emotional support and companionship she provided.¹

Such contrasting memoirs illustrate how greatly Americans' everyday lives changed over a century and a half—both in the mundane details of life and in their personal nature. This book asks how Americans' *culture and character* developed over the nation's history. The long answer to that question is complex, partial, and sometimes surprising. The short answer is that centuries of material and social expansion enabled more people to become more characteristically "American," meaning—among other things—insistently independent but still sociable, striving, and sentimental. Answering this question calls for a history that is not focused on presidents and politics but on ordinary people living ordinary lives, a *social* history. The question generates many detailed inquiries pursued in

the chapters that follow. How have longer life spans affected Americans' sense of control over their lives? How has greater wealth affected Americans' taste for luxury? Have more city living and faster communications enriched or depleted individuals' social ties? Have Americans become increasingly satisfied or more discontent?

Understanding the cultural and psychological path Americans have taken not only satisfies our curiosity, it helps us think about the path Americans should take. Historians, for example, have intensely debated the mindset of farmers in the colonial era. Did they try to shrewdly maximize their families' wealth, or did they simply follow traditional, local practices? Behind this question lies a broader one: were American farmers individualists from the earliest colonial days or did they become so only in the nineteenth century? Energizing this debate is the feeling that if early Americans subordinated their individual interests to those of the community, then more collective arrangements could work in America "again." If, on the other hand, early Americans calculatingly pursued their private interests, that would seem to imply—incorrectly perhaps—that Americans are self-interested by nature and suggest—incorrectly perhaps—that communitarian reforms are futile. What historians discover in, say, farmers' ledgers from the 1700s does not *logically* imply taking one political position versus another. But history is psychologically, rhetorically compelling. That is why political combatants wheel out their own versions of history: as artillery in battles for public opinion. As to this example, the historical record suggests that Americans' degree of self-interestedness has changed little over the centuries. In other ways, however, Americans' character did change; they seemed, for example, to become more sentimental.

The fundamental contrast between early Americans and today's Americans in their circumstances of life, the material and social conditions that influence culture and character, can be captured by the word "more." Modern Americans have more of almost everything: more time on Earth, more wealth, more things, more information, more power, more acquaintances, and so many more choices. Not more of absolutely everything—twenty-first-century Americans, for example, have fewer siblings and cousins—but generally, more Americans gained more access to more things material, social, and personal. Americans began as a "people of plenty," in historian David Potter's words, but became even more so. And, over the generations, more of those who had been outside the circle of plenty and outside the culture of independence which that plenty sustained—a culture which I will describe shortly—joined it. In this sense, more Americans became more American.

Before elaborating on these ideas, I need to address some conventional misunderstandings of American social history. I discuss several specific myths of the American past and a few habits of thought that currently cloud our views of that past.

MYTHS OF AMERICAN SOCIAL HISTORY

Much of what we "know"—and I include many sociologists such as myself in the "we"—is mythical. Some myths are mere folktales easily and often debunked, like the story that the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. Other myths are more subtle. For example, the familiar lament that families no longer take dinner together assumes that typical Americans had until recently shared such meals. However, this supposedly timeless tradition arose only among the middle class in the late nineteenth century. Similarly, people often regret that religious holidays are no longer sacred holy days. But such holidays, too, are often recent inventions or reinventions. Over two hundred years ago, for example, the American Christmas was more a carnival of excess than a religious experience. It was only around the end of the nineteenth century that the family-and-church Christmas that modern Americans consider to be traditional developed, thanks in some measure to *A Christmas Carol* and "'Twas the Night Before Christmas."²

More important than these sorts of misconceptions is the deeper, conventional wisdom about American history that academics, politicians, journalists, and writers of all sorts regularly invoke. Hardworking historians have in recent decades mined rich veins of archives, bringing to the surface stories of how Americans of the past really lived, revealing how much those conventional assumptions turn out to be myths or half-truths. Here are five illustrations.

* *Myth: over the generations, Americans moved around more.* The belief that residential mobility increased is one of my favorite myths, because it is so widespread, so contrary to fact, and yet so resistant to correction. Many learned essayists speak of "our increasingly mobile society" and the disorientation all this modern moving around supposedly creates. In 2001, for example, the editorial page of the *New York Times* attributed recent changes in American family life in part to "the ever-growing mobility of Americans." In 2008, an eminent psychiatrist explained a spurt in suicides by Americans "more frequent moves away from friends and relatives." In fact, Americans moved around *less and less* in those very years and less and less over recent decades. Furthermore, modern Americans

change homes and neighborhoods less often than Americans did in the mid-twentieth century and less often than Americans did in the early nineteenth century, the years of George Duffield's childhood.³

* *Myth: Americans turned away from religion.* Sage commentators sometimes mourn, sometimes celebrate, the decline of religion and the rise of existential doubt. In fact, proportionately more twentieth-century Americans belonged to churches than belonged in prior centuries. Rates of membership fell a bit after the 1950s, but participation in churches still remained more widespread than in earlier eras. Whether modern churchgoers remained believers or became skeptics is hard to determine, but evidence suggests that Americans have generally kept the faith.⁴

* *Myth: Americans became more violent.* The specter of violent crime haunts contemporary Americans and they typically believe that life was safer in earlier days. This perception is basically wrong. Criminal violence fluctuates sharply in the short term—historically low in the 1950s, rising rapidly in the 1960s through 1980s, and then declining almost to 1950s levels by 2000. In a longer view, early-twenty-first-century Americans run a notably lower risk of being assaulted or killed than Americans ran in the nineteenth century or before. The general culture of violence—including bar brawls; gang attacks; wife, child, and animal abuse; eye-gouging fights; and the like—dissipated.⁵

* *Myth: Americans became increasingly alienated from their work.* Many commentators assume that modern industry forced workers who had been independent craftsmen into specialized, repetitious, subservient, and disheartening jobs, pointing to, say, the unemployed artisanal carriage-maker forced to work on the automobile assembly line. This certainly happened to many individuals. But if we consider American workers as a whole, far more of them and their children gladly left the drudgery of farming or labor, such as stevedoring, to move into more stimulating jobs, such as industrial and clerical work, however imperfect those were. Americans' labor became less alienating.⁶

* *Myth: Americans became indifferent to the needy.* "We once took care of one another," some people say to indict modern selfishness and others say to indict the modern "hanny state." In fact, earlier generations did at best a mediocre job of caring for the needy. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Americans gave some assistance to longtime neighbors who were widowed, orphaned, or disabled through no fault of their own. However, the destitute who were strangers, newcomers, or morally sus-

pect instead received directions to leave town. In the twentieth century, growing affluence and a variety of government programs virtually eliminated starvation and radically reduced poverty. These and other signs indicate growing—not lessening—sympathy over the generations.⁷

Such mythic misunderstandings of American social and cultural history persist. Sometimes, they even determine public policy, say, about crime or poverty. The myths in part follow from the systematic ways that we—both scholars and the general public—think about history, about how we tell stories.

Habitual Stories

Nostalgia contributes to mythologizing the past. As individuals, we draw on the gauzy memories of our own childhoods; as a culture, we share a millennia-long grief about the loss of Eden. Scholars, even secular ones, are not immune. Polemicists of both the Right and Left share the yearning for a mythic past. Nineteenth-century continental writers who bemoaned the loss of *gemeinschaft*—the small and intimate community yet untainted by modernity—accepted the romantic images of rural life in that era's fiction and painting. Longing for a "world we have lost" spurs both reactionaries to call for a return to the past and radicals to call for a revolution against the present.⁸

We also have a habit of seeing our specific moment in history as an epochal turning point. Judeo-Christian tradition invests historical events with great import; each drives us closer to the End of Days. Here, too, secular thinkers share this inclination. Hegel and Marx, for example, "were convinced that the novelties of any particular era represented the fulfillment of some hidden purpose implicit throughout earlier historical progression." Such thinking leads us to exaggerate change, to read our time as the best of times or the worst of times, or even both at the same time (as Dickens labeled both the age of the French Revolution and his own era, about seventy years later). But this habit of thought misleads us. Most generations live, by definition, in ordinary times. Why not us?⁹

Another habit is to view the past as normal, natural, and eternal, thereby making today seem abnormal, unnatural, and changeable. Many traditions, like the family Christmas or mothers' spiritual role in the family, seem "immemorial" only because people cannot remember when those practices started. Many supposedly timeless folkways turn out to be recent developments, including the Zambian bride-wealth system, Maori creation myths, celebrations of birthdays, and Americans' renderings of customs from the "old country."¹⁰

We weave stories, creating the past perhaps as much as remembering it. Precolonial New England was a "forest primeval," for example, only in the romantic stories of nineteenth-century authors. (The natives had already heavily worked over the land.) Holidays, statues, and television docudramas are all about constructing what historians call collective memory. Intense struggles break out over how those memories ought to be constructed. For several years after 1968, partisans fought over whether Americans would remember Martin Luther King Jr. as a liberator, or as a troublemaker, or not at all. The institution of a national holiday settled that argument. It is no wonder that noisy disputes break out over school history books, for example, over how to best describe the lives of women or the conditions of slaves in the past.¹¹

It is no wonder, as well, that Americans of differing backgrounds remember the nation's history differently. In a survey conducted in the 1990s, almost all white respondents asked to describe "the American past" answered largely in terms of their own families' histories. Black respondents, in contrast, more commonly described the past in collective, *racial* terms. Ironically, although the black interviewees often talked about slavery and oppression, most of them said that the nation was making progress. White respondents, on the other hand, overwhelmingly said that their own families were doing fine but the nation was in decline.¹²

We typically tell and understand history as a set of stories ("narratives," academics say) rather than as just one thing happening after another. Stories provide coherence, plot, and dramatic tension; they tell us why things happened and what the moral is. The Civil War, for example, tested the proposition "that all men are created equal" and provided "a new birth of freedom," according to master storyteller Abraham Lincoln. One grand story about America is triumphal and romantic: Americans built a "shining city on the hill" by pioneering, gumption, democracy, welcoming immigrants, and so on. Disenchanted historians of the 1960s recast the American story as bitter and tragic: Americans' hopes were dashed by heroes undone, Indians murdered, Africans enslaved, workers repressed, immigrants deracinated, environments befouled, and so on. During the early 1990s, essayists dueled in the journals of opinion about a set of "national historical standards" that a team of historians had developed for teaching of fifth- through twelfth-grade history. Conservative critics saw the proposed content as too tragic, too critical. One of them wrote, "A nation grown cynical about its own history soon ceases to be a nation at all."¹³

The romantic and tragic versions of American history derive in part from greater epics of Western history. One epic is utopian: modern society is the summit of, or at least a station on the way to, Progress. The

other is dystopian: modern society is a pit into which we have fallen. Other possible sagas, such as seeing history as an endless cycle of pretty much the same thing over and over, make little sense to Westerners. Most Americans tacitly believe both stories, the optimistic and the pessimistic. (Regular people are not ideologically consistent—and why should they be?) Depending on the events of a particular day, we see progress or decline. In the last several decades, Americans seem to have increasingly seen decline.¹⁴

The Modernization Story

Many scholars have long held onto a specific story called "modernization theory": once, Western societies were "traditional"—small, simple, and intimate—and then sometime between the sixteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, material conditions, social arrangements, and cultural ideas changed radically, bringing forth "modern" society—large, complex, and impersonal. The many variants of this story all presume that a social revolution occurred—for example, the rise of manufacturing or the development of science—which had cascading effects. Societies are so tightly woven that changes in one domain radiated through others and eventually altered how people think and feel. The result, goes the theory, was a shift from tradition to "modernity."¹⁵

Criticisms of modernization theory fill the pages of academic journals. Critics attack, for example, its assumption that societies are tightly knit, or its image of earlier communities as simple and orderly. Of particular interest to us is the charge that modernization theory generally depicts twentieth-century America as the quintessential modern society, but America does not really fit the theory. Typically, the modernization thesis assumes that a people have had a feudal past, peasantry, and common heritage—think of a remote Alpine village. But none of these existed in early America. Often, critics imagined that they had buried modernization theory—only to see its ghost soon again roaming the halls of academe. It rises from the dead because it provides a powerful, all-encompassing story, one which corresponds to popular understandings and one which can tie together many historical strands.¹⁶

Indeed, historians bemoan all the loose threads that comprise the study of American social history. Especially since the 1960s, researchers have uncovered a treasure of detailed information about the past—about family patterns, neighborhoods, work, leisure, immigrants, slaves, farmers, homemakers, and the new middle class, each in particular communities and years. But this fortune became burdensome. "We were—and still are," wrote one historian in 1992, "snowed under by an avalanche

of information, much of it unassimilable into a coherent national narrative." And so historians ask: "how do we develop larger frameworks of meaning that help to grasp the . . . long-run historical change and continuity?" Modernization theory remains, mainly by default, the most common framework.¹⁷

Perhaps historians should be guided by no grand story at all and just tell what happened, one thing after another. But this is not really possible. No one is an unfocused lens; we all fix on certain issues, attend to some themes and not others. Similarly, try as we might to avoid reading some coherence, plot, or moral into history, eventually we must sum it all up and try to make sense of what happened. In the next two sections of this introduction, I outline the topics in American social history I have selected to explore and the summary story I have extracted.

THEMES AND THESIS

My purpose is to sketch how American culture and character changed—or did not change—over the course of the nation's history from the colonial era to the turn of the twenty-first century. This is, of course, an outrageously vast and absurdly ambitious goal. By necessity, therefore, I focus on only a handful of themes and give only brief attention to many other worthy topics, such as Americans' work lives and how they dealt with race. I am struck that underlying most social trends is the vast expansion, between the years shortly before George Duffield's childhood and the years of Cal Ripken, Jr.'s childhood, in how much more Americans had gained materially, socially, and culturally. How did having so much *more* in so many realms—more clothes, more comfort, more clubs, more religions, more acquaintances, and so on—alter how Americans thought, felt, and behaved?¹⁸ The specific themes are as follows.

* *Security*. By the middle of the twentieth century more Americans were freer from physical and economic threats than ever before. This development was uneven; for example, young Americans faced increased economic vulnerabilities at the turn of the twenty-first century. Still, the long span of American history brought average Americans a level of material security that even wealthy Americans in earlier periods could not achieve. How much that reality translated into feeling secure is less certain.

* *Goods*. From the start, Americans were a "people of plenty," and their collection of goods only accelerated. Observers have long said that all this buying and owning corroded American character and may have turned

Americans into a "consumerist" nation. The evidence suggests that in this respect, however, American character did not change. Americans today may be entranced by consumer glitter, but so were Americans centuries ago. Critically, mass production, mass distribution, and mass credit meant that more Americans could attain the goods that were part of the good life. Security and goods together created a foundation for the expansion of middle-class American culture.

* *Groups*. America began as an unusually individualistic society—more precisely, a *voluntaristic* society, as I explain below—and only became more so. More Americans participated in more groups of more kinds, including relatively new kinds of groups, such as clubs, work teams, and free-floating friendships. They not only took advantage of these social options to form new sorts of bonds, they also used them to maintain independence from and voice in each group. The broadest example is how women gained greater power in American households.

* *Public spaces*. American culture emphasizes the small, voluntary group, and the sparseness of early American settlement encouraged private life. But through roughly the nineteenth century, more Americans discovered and joined in a vibrant public life on city streets, in department stores, at amusement parks, and in movie houses. Then, as the twentieth century unrolled, Americans moved back into their private homes and parochial social groups. Americans' participation in politics followed a similar arc of greater and then lesser involvement in the public space.

* *Mentality*. For centuries, middle-class Americans worked on their "selves"—their characters—whether they were colonial landowners copying the British gentry or religious enthusiasts preparing their souls for salvation. As America became materially and socially richer, more people engaged in such self-perfecting. Americans became no smarter nor more rational than their ancestors, but they gained a set of cognitive and practical tools to operate in the world, tools that gave them greater command of their lives and themselves. Americans learned to restrain their disruptive emotions and cultivate their socially useful ones, like sympathy and sentimentality. The end result was probably somewhat better mental health and a bit more happiness.

What runs through these seemingly disparate themes is an argument: the availability and expansion of material security and comfort enabled early American social patterns and culture to expand and solidify, to both

delineate and spread an American national character. With growth, more people could participate in that distinctive culture more fully and could become "more American."

This claim is somewhat unusual among grand narratives about Americans. Writers more commonly describe modern American culture and character as a break with or even a reversal of the past—and usually for the worse. Many, usually in the mid-twentieth century, depicted modern Americans as having lost their ancestors' individuality, as having become sheep in a mass society. Others, usually in the late twentieth century, described modern Americans as self-absorbed, even selfish individualists who have torn apart the tight-knit communities of their ancestors. I am unpersuaded by assertions of revolutionary change in either direction and am more impressed by continuity over the centuries. (This, perhaps, is why Tocqueville's 1836 classic, *Democracy in America*, still speaks to us.) Americans came to live, think, and feel more intensely in ways distinctive to mainstream, middle-class American culture; they became more "American."

But what do I mean by mainstream American culture and character? By culture, I refer to the collection of shared, loosely connected, taken-for-granted rules, symbols, and beliefs that characterize a people. That culture is declared, sustained, and enforced by what sociologists call institutions, such as family, law, arts, and religion. By national character, I refer to ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that individuals typically share with others in their nation. A central feature of American culture and character is *voluntarism*.

Voluntarism

The first key element of voluntarism is believing and behaving *as if* each person is a sovereign individual: unique, independent, self-reliant, self-governing, and ultimately self-responsible. Free men of early America stressed the importance of attaining what they called "competency" or "virtue," the independence that came with having enough property to support a household on one's own. The second key element of voluntarism is believing and behaving *as if* individuals succeed through fellowship—not in egoistic isolation but in sustaining, voluntary communities. I describe American voluntarism in more detail in chapter 4, but here I point out a few of its implications and address some objections.¹⁹

In a voluntaristic culture, people assume that they control their own fates and are responsible for themselves. Contrast that notion to what most cultures have historically presumed, that individuals are only parts of a social whole, acting out roles determined by God or fate and by those

who rank above them (think, for example, of the medieval serf). A voluntaristic culture encourages people to examine and improve themselves, because they can and because their individuality is key to their fortunes. A voluntaristic culture implies procedural equality; each person is free in principle to join or leave the group and none can coerce another. Because success means doing well in voluntary groups, a voluntaristic culture also encourages individuals to strive for status. In several ways, then, many traits that outside observers have for generations described as particularly American—such as self-absorption, "can-do" confidence, egalitarianism, conformism, and status-striving—derive from a voluntaristic culture.²⁰

To be sure, observers have described many other ways that Americans stand apart, such as their intense faith, moralism, violence, and cheeriness. These distinctive traits may derive from sources other than voluntarism and may in some ways contradict voluntarism. It may be hard, for example, to square belief in a God who has a plan for everyone with belief that each individual is responsible for his or her own destiny, but people do. Cultures, as well as individuals, need not be and are not logically consistent. The core distinction of American culture, I am arguing, is its voluntarism.

Even in the eighteenth century, more Americans than Europeans participated in a voluntaristic culture. Visiting European gentry often complained in particular about all the equality they saw in America. Yet most Americans of that era were still not fully part of this culture. Most did *not* see themselves as autonomous self-creators nor as free to join or leave social groups; they saw the world more the way members of the servant classes in feudal Europe did. They were dependents without "competency": servants, slaves and descendants of slaves, subjugated natives, wives, children, the poor, the ill, the uneducated, and the newly arrived. Over the centuries, however, servitude nearly disappeared, and more Americans in these categories became part of the now-majority, middle-class or bourgeois culture of voluntarism.*

Voluntarism provides a frame for weaving together many threads in the story of American social change, but loose strands still remain. Other

* A note on language: this culture has been labeled "bourgeois," "middle class," "liberal," "individualistic," and "modern." There is certainly some overlap in these terms. I occasionally use the labels "bourgeois" or "middle class," because the bourgeois and the middle class—rather than the gentry or those people too subjugated to have "competency"—lived this culture the most and they promoted it to other Americans. The terms "liberal" and "individualistic" do not fit American culture quite as well, because they both fail to acknowledge the critical role of community. The term "modern" is often entangled with debates around modernization theory. When I use "modern," I simply mean "these days" rather than in earlier times.

things happened, ranging from the construction of a racial caste system to the multiplication of television sets, that shaped American culture and character. The expansion of voluntarism is a central story I tell, but it is not the only one that needs to be told.

Objections and Responses

After the 1960s, many American scholars, now focused by civil rights movements on diversity, objected to studies of national character. One historian wrote in 1988: "The concept of a national character has been shattered by the historical pluralism of the past two decades; like Humpty Dumpty it is beyond saving." Americans are too varied to have a national character or a common history. How, they asked, can one lump the experiences of men and women, black and white and Latino, worker and farmer, and so forth into one box? True: most societies are complex, pluralistic, and often conflicting, including that of early America. Nonetheless, out of this variety emerged a dominant social character, which I describe as voluntarist, which originated among Northeastern Protestants and then spread and gained power over time. Increasing proportions of women, youth, ethnic minorities, and the working class adopted that culture, even after sometimes resisting it. (Nineteenth-century Catholic institutions, for instance, tried to protect their immigrant members from the American culture's insistence on free thinking.) While many scholars emphasize the survival of ethnic diversity into the twenty-first century, what is sociologically striking is the extent to which the American mainstream has overflowed and washed away that diversity, leaving behind little but food variety and self-conscious celebrations of multiculturalism.²¹

Those skeptical about national character can point, for example, to the fact that homicide rates in Louisiana run about nine times higher than those in North Dakota, as large as a gap as that between the Ukraine and Iceland. They can also point to how much is shared across national borders, for example, the political similarities of English-speaking societies. Both arguments—that the United States is internally diverse and that it is in some ways similar to other nations—are valid challenges to the idea of a national culture. Nonetheless, important distinctions do coincide with national borders. All but a few small American states have homicide rates higher than those of other Western nations; so we can say that the United States is distinctively violent among affluent, Western societies. And American voting rates run substantially below those of comparable English societies; so we can say that Americans are distinctive that way, too. Discussing distinctive national character does make sense.²²

A different challenge to my description of American national character points out that voluntarism hardly applies to the extremely involuntary experience of slaves and their descendants unto this day. Does this not negate the claim of a singular, national character? No. All national cultures are complex and contradictory. The centrality in American life of this particular contradiction is precisely what earned its racial caste system the label of *The American Dilemma*. Nonetheless, in the centuries-old contest between the Northeastern culture of voluntarism and Southern hierarchical culture, it is clear which side has had history—and armies and wealth and ideological power—on its side, which side has long claimed national dominance. The victims of the defeated system, which was finally defeated only about a generation ago, are now and only too-slowly benefitting.

Skepticism about national character leads many scholars to also reject the common description of America as an "exceptional" society. For over a century, many historians influenced by Frederick Jackson Turner have sought to explain American history in terms of its special traits, such as an open frontier. Sociologists have wondered why the United States avoided the socialism of Europe and speculated that its wealth or ethnic diversity explains its distinction. But the notion of exceptionalism is now "in ill repute," according to an historian writing in 1995. The ill repute rests in part on linguistic confusion. "Exceptional" can mean "unusually good" or, in some renderings, being immune to the general laws of history. Both implications rankle many scholars. The common meaning of exceptional, however, is simply "unusual." In many ways, America is in fact noticeably unusual among major Western countries. Americans, for example, are the most accepting of economic inequality, the most religious, the most patriotic, and the most voluntarist of Westerners. All societies, of course, are exceptional in some fashion—not better, not worse, but distinct in their own particular ways. Much of America's history broadened and strengthened its distinctiveness.²³

Saying that American social history moved in the direction of deepening its national culture risks implying some sort of inevitability, of suggesting that history unfolded in some destined fashion. In truth, that social history involved starts and stalls and reversals, such as economic depressions and civil disorders. Some events stymied the widening of the American mainstream—the rise of Jim Crow, for example—and others accelerated it—like the economic boom after World War II. Moreover, Americans fought over these cultural patterns, in apocalyptic fashion on the battlefields of Antietam and Gettysburg, but also in more mundane ways, over issues such as public schooling, alcohol, and women's

rights. There was no inevitability. Still, the general trends toward greater security, increasing wealth, and more social groups meant that, in the long run, American voluntarism expanded.

EVIDENCE, CAVEATS, AND AUDIENCE

How do we *know* how American culture and character changed over the centuries? Too often, one picks up a book addressing this topic only to discover the author intently describing changes in how intellectuals *talked about* American culture and character. Ideas do matter, but typically the winds of intellectual ferment hardly disturb the deep currents of social transformations. (Can we, for example, take seriously the claim made by one author that quantum theory unsettled Americans' sense of security, given that most Americans do not believe in evolution, much less invisible quanta?) Difficult as it is, we must search for direct evidence of how average Americans thought, felt, and acted.²⁴

There is so-called hard evidence: the censuses, surveys, and administrative records that measure Americans' behavior and sometimes their opinions and feelings as well. But the farther back we go, before World War II and certainly before 1900, the more we must rely on so-called soft evidence, such as diaries, letters, memoirs, and news accounts. We must also infer people's thoughts, feelings, and behavior from the material aspects of their lives. For example, historians surmise that early Americans rarely invited guests into their homes, because those homes rarely had chairs. Others infer from tiny tombstones carved with only the word "Baby" that early American parents were emotionally distant from their newborns. Whether using a survey result from 2005, a young girl's diary of 1835, or kitchenware from 1685, researchers must be skeptical of all evidence, search for confirmation, compare it to others, and place it within a larger set of such data. With such an approach, historians have learned a great deal about how ordinary people lived—and even thought and felt—in the distant past. I have constructed this book largely from many of their richly detailed studies.²⁵

The sheer volume of what scholars have learned poses another complexity. The wide scope of this book necessitates compromises in depth. Each topic has an almost bottomless literature to which I cannot do justice; to be complete would require an encyclopedia. To charges that I have missed important pieces of scholarship, I plead no contest. But I hope that the literature which I have sampled fairly represents what historians know of these topics.²⁶

Such limitations also partly explain my focus on the American "mainstream." Because I am trying to describe changes in average Americans'

lives, I devote less attention to those whose experiences diverged from the average. The working and middle classes get more attention than either the elites or the destitute, Protestants get more attention than Catholics and Jews, Northerners more than Southerners, the native-born more than immigrants, and whites more than nonwhites. This necessarily means that readers can challenge some of my summaries as insufficiently attentive to class, regional, religious, racial, or ethnic variations.

My focus on the mainstream is not, however, just a practical expedient; there are also substantive reasons. First, the American middle class lives and promulgates the distinctive and dominant character of the society. To see national change, we need to look at these people. Second, much of this book's story is precisely about the widening of the mainstream, about the ways more Americans joined the broadening center. Few American adults, for example, held voting and property rights in the early 1800s; eventually most did. By the twentieth century, to take another example, far more Americans than ever before followed a common life course: attending school through late adolescence, taking a first full-time job, marrying, having children, seeing the children leave home, living as an empty-nest couple, and then retiring. Different categories of Americans varied greatly in how much and when they moved into the mainstream. Most notably, far fewer African Americans than European Americans could share this lifestyle. Nonetheless, clearly more and more Americans joined the mainstream culture.²⁷

These topics raise moral and political implications. Too often, grand narratives of American history serve political commitments. Sometimes, even matters of minute detail, such as how colonists dressed or how tall Civil War enlistees were, seem to signal the author's position on twenty-first century politics. One observer has remarked that "all of American history today is a plain where contestants for the soul of the United States quite openly wage war." The dispute is commonly not about the facts in question but how to label or "spin" them. For instance, middle-class women in the early twentieth century had more sexual experiences at a younger age than their mothers had had. Is that sexual "liberation" or sexual "licentiousness"? Was this empowering of or harmful to women? In the end, history does not unfold according to a political or moral logic that lines up all the changes into neat moral phalanxes. I hope to avoid entangling this historical account with political strings. In previous books, I have not hesitated to focus on the class and caste inequalities of modern America. While such themes also emerge in this book, the focus is elsewhere, on the expanding circle of American culture and character. There is an American cultural center; its assimilative pull is powerful; and it is distinctive—or "exceptional." The historical record speaks.²⁸

And to whom does it speak? This book addresses a few kinds of readers. I hope it informs nonhistorians, like my fellow sociologists, about the magnificent research trove unearthed by American social historians; we can benefit from an historical perspective. I also hope that historians will find an outsider's view of their research and the application of material from other social sciences useful. Most ambitiously, I hope that this book will brief general readers about the evolution of American culture and character and its implications. Because that general audience is so important, I have written the book for readers who have a basic familiarity with American history and a curiosity about the questions addressed here, but little time or patience for scholastic argument or detailed documentation. (Those, like me, who love the argument and the details can consult the endnotes.)

For all the focus on mentality and lifestyles, we must start with the basic material conditions of life. For example, Mrs. Ripken, busy as she was, could still be baseball coach, basketball playmate, and emotional guide to her children in ways that Mrs. Duffield, caught up with basic feeding and clothing of her children, could not. The next chapter addresses the fundamental question of how Americans' survival and security changed over our history.

2 Security

In early 1865, Abraham Lincoln was the most powerful man in the Western Hemisphere. He was also a man whose grandfather had been killed by Indians. He saw his infant brother die, he lost his mother when he was ten and his older sister when he was nineteen, and he grieved when Ann Rutledge—perhaps his sweetheart, perhaps just a friend—died of typhoid. He buried two of his four sons before they had reached the age of twelve and a third when he reached eighteen. He had a wife who was emotionally unstable, suffered depression himself, and would die prematurely and violently. This Job-like litany was perhaps severe even in the nineteenth century, but its like was familiar to Lincoln's contemporaries. For example, most parents of that era buried at least one child, an experience that mercifully few American parents faced a century later. Life was precarious.¹

Over the centuries, American life became much less precarious. The threat of arbitrary and unpredictable calamities from illness or injury or economic misfortune abated. Being able to count on food, shelter, and safety from one day to the next helped more Americans gain confidence in their own power and a sense of self-reliance. More Americans made plans, charted their careers, scheduled their childbearing, designed their children's education, arranged their retirements. Greater physical and economic security probably lowered Americans' feelings of anxiety. In myth, the past appears to be seemingly unproblematic, but the prospect of, for example, a crop-destroying blight probably once frightened Americans more than the specter of a job layoff does today.

Security grew neither smoothly nor without interruption. In some periods, during domestic wars, for example, it stalled or even slipped back. The early twenty-first century seems to be such a period. "A new insecurity has entered every mind, regardless of wealth or status," said United

means who devote time and effort to charitable work as aides or mentors in schools, for example, have an odd way of explaining why they do it. A minority tell researchers that they work to honor religious or moral obligations. Few speak of themselves as generous. Instead, these Good Samaritans tend to say that they find the work personally rewarding. Ironically, even as they are sacrificing themselves for others, they claim to be just satisfying themselves. They are not, of course, individualists even if they speak the language of individualism; they are American voluntarists.⁴

Over the centuries, observers, foreign and domestic, have described Americans as unusually individualistic, by which they have meant that Americans are, more than other people, loners, selfish, shrewd traders, self-interested, defensive, defenders of liberty, rebels, or all of the above—and, most relevant to this chapter, that they are detached from family, neighborhood, and other social groups. One usually quotes Alexis de Tocqueville here, but Englishman Simon Ferrall, who toured America around the same time as the French aristocrat did, will serve:

Perhaps there is nothing more remarkable in the character of the Americans than the indifference with which they leave their old habitations, friends, and relations. Each individual is taught to depend mainly on his own exertions, and therefore seldom expects or requires extraordinary assistance from any man. Attachments seldom exist here beyond that of ordinary acquaintances—these are easily found wherever one may go.⁵

Most human societies have treated individuals as components of a group, as “members [limbs] of the same body,” in John Winthrop’s terms. This “organic” understanding of persons seems strange to modern Americans. And it leads to behavior which also seems strange to modern Americans, such as marrying off young children, pursuing blood feuds, and conducting suicide missions. American culture is, by historical comparison, highly individualistic; it depicts society as comprised fundamentally of individuals, each unique, separate, and self-governing. Nonetheless, describing Americans as socially disconnected, the way Ferrall did, is a mistake. Americans are at least as socially engaged as are other Western peoples; they belong to as many or more groups and are as or more active in them. Americans also voice more loyalty to family, church, and nation than do other Westerners. In several ways, Americans are, by Western standards, relatively group oriented.⁶

What more accurately describes American culture than individualism is voluntarism. In the earlier and non-Western organic model, groups

constitute people. Individuals are born into tribes, lineages, caste grades, religions, villages, and households; people are defined by groups and forever committed to them. Kinship, tradition, incest and sometimes law and physical force keep people in their inbred groups, creating very tight communities. Being a noble or a peasant member of this or that tribe pretty much determines who one is. Repressiveness of such strong communities can create ambivalence in members—despite or perhaps because they are so mutually interdependent—are often suspicious, cold, and imperious toward one another.

In sharp contrast, Americans generally see “community” as ambiguous and uncomplicated virtue; politicians, left and right, extol community. Americans are unconflicted in their affection for community, at least in part, because they typically choose their communities rather than inherit them. America’s brand of individualism, as sociologist Ann Swidler suggests, may be thought of as the freedom to choose one’s communities. Americans have an unusually free choice of groups, churches, neighborhoods, clubs, and even families. (The great exception is one’s group. America fixed slaves, Indians, and their descendants into a caste. Few Americans can as yet choose to be black or white.) In general, an American joins and participates in groups, but in principle can be drafted into or obliged to stay in them. What is most notable about America is not radical individualism, the principle of going it alone, voluntarism, the principle that individuals choose with whom they associate.

To be sure, there is a strand of libertarian individualism in America expressed for example by Emerson—“No law can be sacred to me, that of my nature” and “Why should we assume [responsibility for] faults of our friend, or wife, or father, or child, because they sit around the hearth, or are said to have the same blood?”—and Thoreau, who, regarding the man who might care about helping widows and orphans, writes that “It is not a man’s duty . . . to devote himself to the eradication of even the most enormous wrong,” but just to “wash his hands of it; these are exceptional views.⁹

Mainstream American culture celebrates groups and community, but it also means to individual happiness. The evangelical Protestant conception of individualism is the paradigm. Its theology presumes a unique, self-determined individual and insists that no priest, saint, or ancestor can interfere with that person with God. (“You’ve gotta walk that lonesome valley/You gotta go there by yourself/Ain’t nobody here can go there for you/You

gotta go there by yourself.”) Crucially, however, the believer finds salvation in a group, a village, a desert, or a lonesome valley, but in a church, in a community of the faithful, testifying to his or her rebirth. This is the form of church, as political scientist James Block well illustrates in his book *The American Church*. The “new idiom of religion—combining the individualism of the American culture with the elective community—becomes the American character. The elective community parallel is the gated community. Virtually any community can join or leave, but residents must accept strict rules. The color that color they paint their homes, where they park their cars, and what they do in order to enjoy the benefits of the association. A third, more radical example is contemporary marriage. Easier to enter and easier to leave than it was generations ago, marriage remains to almost all Americans a path to personal fulfillment. As Emersonian as Americans are, they are committing themselves to churches, neighborhoods, and groups—but only insofar as they choose those groups and not to them. The individualism remains in the insistence on choice.¹⁰

Individualism or “covenantalism” is central to American voluntarism. Americans make this implicit contract by joining the group: I am free to leave, but while belonging I owe fealty to the group. One of the most striking aspects of this is the “love it or leave it” rule. Modern American marriage has this character: Americans believe that a person should be free to leave a group or not and should be free to choose to leave an uncommitted group or not, but so long as a marriage continues, the spouse is committed. (Americans have little taste for discreet adultery *à la* the French.) Many Americans switch religions or denominations, but they are at least as devoted to their newly chosen faiths as they were to their parents’ churches. This is also how local activism in the Chicago area understood their commitments to their towns, and how sociologist Richard Madsen:

For a community means to fulfill the social dimensions of one’s life through interaction with others. Belonging to a community is not, though, entail the sacrifice of oneself for the good of others. [A]n individual must resist the twin temptations of submerging himself in the group and of denying one’s responsibilities to the group.¹¹

American men do not feel obligated, for example, to stay forever—that is, to sacrifice the self—but when they move, they feel obliged to honor their new towns. This implicit contract helps explain why Americans are so often suspicious of that many observers have historically charged to Americans is part of the deal. It also helps explain why Americans

⁹ To postwar Germans, for example, the term “community” (*Gemeinschaft*) carried the whiff of Nazi *völk*-ish ideology. In South Asia, “communalism” brings to mind the murderous rampages between Hindu and Muslim zealots.

are neither anarchists nor free lovers—positions one would expect of true libertarians—and why they more often defer to groups and group leaders than other Westerners do.¹¹

With voluntarism comes equality. Historically, organic communities have been firmly hierarchical: patriarchs over households, lords over vassals, masters over apprentices, priests over laymen. Both the conditions of early America and the new ideas percolating there gave many subordinated colonists—women, children, servants, apprentices, small farmers, laymen—the longing, the license, and the leverage to demand greater equality. America's revolutionary generation made egalitarianism part of the call for independence. They challenged claims of divine or natural hierarchy. American democracy, in Tocqueville's words, "breaks the chain" of being from the king who rules by divine right to the lowest peasant "and frees each link." Too-strong assertions of equality unsettled many among the nation's founding elite. They rejected "unfair" inequalities based on birth or a king's favors, but they endorsed "fair" inequalities based on talent. The subordination of one man to another was wrong "*beside* that which arises from the difference of capacity, disposition, and virtue" (and, of course, race). They denounced radical "leveling." Equality in the American context is not equality of outcome, but equality of opportunity, treatment, and freedom. Nonetheless, this construction of equality still left average white men empowered to declare that they in fact were equal in "capacity, disposition, and virtue" and in rights. From early on, European visitors expressed shock at the presumptuous claims plain folk made for equal standing with their superiors; mere teamsters, for example, sat down at the dining table next to gentlemen and ladies; rough-hewn men even presumed to call one another gentlemen and to call gentlemen by their first names. Visitors saw equality as America's greatest "heresy."¹²

The heresy flourished on American soil. The vast expanse of available land and the shortage of laborers to work it gave average Americans the muscle to claim equality. The farmer who saw new land on the horizon could snort at the pretensions of the local gentry; the journeyman with several job options could challenge his master. Freedom to come and go gives individuals greater leverage to extract a better "contract," so that in the end groups serve members' interests rather than members serving groups' interests. Otherwise, people leave. Be it neighborhood, congregation, club, or, increasingly, marriage, if the group is "not working for you," you look for one that is.

I argue, following one school of historians, that cultural and material conditions in early America promoted voluntarism, this combination of individualism, group-orientation, contract, and egalitarianism. I also

argue that this voluntarism spread and deepened over the centuries. More Americans gained more access to more social groups under more voluntaristic terms; many—especially women and youth—parlayed this into greater independence. Of course, no one is truly apart from the group; even the hermit is a product of society and even the yearning for freedom is learned from a group. But the terms of the relationship changed. That change, power shifting from the group as exercised by its leader, to average members of groups, forms a central story line of this chapter.¹³

Voluntarism has its complexities, benefits, and costs. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow, drawing from his 1990s study of small support groups like Bible study classes, expressed one sort of concern: "The social contract binding members together asserts only the weakest of obligations. Come if you have time. Talk if you feel like it. Respect everyone's opinion. Never criticize. Leave quietly if you become dissatisfied. Families would never operate by following these operating norms." Yet in the voluntaristic society, families *do* operate to some degree by these norms. Either spouse can leave a marriage that is "not working"; by the age of eighteen, children can move out. This independence, Wuthnow would point out, cuts both ways. Someone who can walk out can be walked out on—by friends, or coworkers, or a spouse. It can be an insecure social world. Moreover, as the individual's options expand, so does his or her burden to choose well and to re-choose each day (see chapter 6). No wonder, then, that some people seek to "escape from freedom" and to be in groups such as fundamentalist sects that build a wall against the wider world, groups that try hard to remove the voluntarism from their voluntary associations.¹⁴

BORN LIBERAL? THE COLONIAL ERA

"Liberal" refers to the conviction, new to the modern world, that individuals ought to be politically, economically, and socially independent of rulers, traditions, and communities. The question mark signals a debate among historians over whether early American society already followed liberal principles of personal independence or whether America became liberal only generations later. For many of the debaters, the answer ostensibly has implications for twenty-first century politics. If America was always liberal, then individualism would seem a fixed part of its culture and institutions. But if America became liberal only later, then the chances for establishing more collective institutions—more like those of northwestern Europe—seem greater.

The affirmative side of the debate contends that the settlers brought with them ideas of individual liberty which were then germinating in Britain. Combine that culture with several features of colonial America—

dissent Protestantism, the virtual absence of feudalism, the social diversity of the colonists, the demand and high pay for workers, the yeomanry made possible by seemingly inexhaustible land, the scattering of households across that land—and a voluntarist society quickly forms. (This would be truer of the North than the South). The negative side in this debate contends, instead, that the settlers brought with them communal values from the villages of Europe, often settled in tight-knit groups of subsistence farmers, and struggled together to survive on the frontier. They were *not* individualists; liberalism came only later, when commercial markets expanded. The evidence leans to the affirmative side of this debate.¹⁵

Classic organic communities, in the mold of old European villages, were rare even among the earliest North American settlements. (The Puritans may be an exception; I discuss them shortly.) The past held a weak grip on individuals. Friedrich Engels wrote in 1887 that America was “where no medieval ruins bar the way, where history begins with the elements of bourgeois society.” And the present worked against strong communities. Most newcomers arrived as individuals; in the first generations, three-fourths of all white settlers between fifteen and sixty years of age came alone to America. Most came as indentured servants or deported criminals. They arrived free of the estates, lineages, villages, and churches into which they had been born and, several years later, the indentured became free of their New World masters, as well. Most of the other immigrants responded to publicity in Europe claiming that America offered white men the chance to become truly independent—rid of landlords with their game reserves and high rents, rid of nobles, creditors, bishops, and village elders. Once having paid off their debt for passage, settlers typically moved from place to place, usually to rural outposts so scattered that simply seeing other people was difficult. If they moved to towns, they usually settled among people of diverse nationalities, religions, and trades. Many lived in villages or towns with so much turnover, turmoil, and warfare that the communities could hardly have exercised the sort of social control found in the classic peasant village. Critically, they lived in far more equal conditions than Europeans did; by 1774, over 70 percent of white men owned land. As historian J. R. Pole has noted, “Much of the experience of life and work on the American continent operated to establish the primacy of the individual.”¹⁶

On the other hand, much of that experience also dictated cooperation. Frontier life, historian Darren Rutman points out, necessarily entailed a “web of reciprocal obligations and responsibilities.” Given limits of travel and communication, “how else was the world to be organized but on the basis of the small, direct, personal? . . . In cooperation lay the means for

the subsistence of the individual.” In rural New England, for example, farm wives bought, sold, traded, helped, nursed, and counseled one another. “Hallowell [Maine] women exchanged daughters the way they exchanged kettles and sleighs”; the girls went “from house to house, own, and kin’s, and neighbors, doing what was needed—spinning or washing, etc.—when needed.” When prominent New Hampshire farmer Matthew Patten logged his time, he found that he spent more of it on community business than working his land. In bartering, exchanging labor, managing commons, mounting a militia, providing emergency care, and satisfying other material demands, colonists needed their neighbors. Such cooperation, however, did not turn colonial neighborhoods into classic organic communities; mutual assistance entailed much more pragmatic and contractual arrangements. The Hallowell mothers, for example, kept careful accounts of their daughter exchanges. Hudson Valley farmers’ records from around the start of the nineteenth century tracked exchanges of work:

George Holcomb had threshed for William Douglas in March 1814, and noted that “Wm. Dixon with me for which Douglas indebted to me four days work and I am indebted to a days work to Dixon for his helping me today.” Not quite a fortnight later Holcomb “chopped for Wm. Dixon in answer to his threshing for me at Wm. Douglases a few days ago.”

Cooperation rested on carefully counting favors; it was not or not simply a matter of social duty, moral obligation, or neighborly feeling.¹⁷

People often kept books inside the family as well. The harsh demands of survival unified wives, children, indentured servants, apprentices, and others under the rule of the household head; sentiment came second. In seventeenth-century Andover, Massachusetts, fathers and sons commonly wrote contracts stipulating that the father would deed land to the son in return for a specified annual payment after the elder’s retirement. John Lovejoy bequeathed his home to his youngest son, Ebenezer, on the condition that Ebenezer provide his widowed mother “12 bushels of good and merchantable corne’ consisting of six of Indian, 3 bushels of wheat & three of Rye, 120 pounds of pork, 2 barrels of cider,” and so forth.¹⁸

The ideologies as well as the conditions of the New World also worked against organic communities. Stressing self-reliance was common long before Tocqueville wrote in the 1830s that Americans “look after their own needs. [They] owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody.” Religious thought, basically Reformed Protestantism early on and evangelicalism later, emphasized God’s direct relationship to the individual. Preachers during the eighteenth-century religious mobilizations told their audiences to seek God neither in an established church nor in

theology, but in their own hearts (and in the ministers' new church Colonial political writers harped on self-reliance as the prerequisite sustaining freedom and democracy. Slavery provided stark illustration what awaited those who lacked "competency," that is, independent colonists, even as they collaborated to defend their settlement cope with disease, were neither members of "one body" nor did think of themselves as such. In both circumstances and consciousness the new American society was considerably more "liberal," or voluntarist, than the Old World. This did not preclude it from becoming more so.¹⁹

the Puritan Anomaly

But, what of those Puritan fellowships? The Puritans of seventeenth-century New England have gained, in the words of one historian, a monopoly on publicity" about early America, such that even historians the words of another, "know more about the Puritans than any sane person should want to know." Although the Puritans still represent the central era in the popular imagination (Thanksgiving and all that) and their descendants shaped American letters (Emerson, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Adams, Dickinson, Frost, and so on), Puritan communities were atypical even within New England.²⁰

Puritan leaders certainly tried to "knit" all individuals together in the same body, in Winthrop's language. In the mid-1600s, at the zenith of their culture, Puritan villagers held land in common, belonged to a single and strong church, resisted the intrusion of outsiders, and closely supervised one another's behavior. Leading minister Cotton Mather claimed, "If the neighbor of an elected saint [church member] sins, the saint sins also" and so it is a duty to "admonish one another." And they did, by fierce gossip, defamatory and often obscene billboard court suits. Local magistrates strictly enforced moral codes. One, for example, ordered the execution of Thomas Graunger in Plymouth in 1634 for bestiality. In Windsor, Connecticut, 20 percent of the adults in a decade found themselves charged with an offense, usually a moral violation. Magistrates also supported the church by compelling Sabbath observance, paying ministers with tax money, and suppressing religious alternatives, to the point of executing and mutilating dissident Quakers. Mrs. Mary Dyer exasperated the Boston authorities by persistent turning from exile in Rhode Island to proclaim her religious dissent, until they finally hanged her in the Commons in 1660.²¹

Authorities reinforced the power of the household patriarch, for example, by pressing feuding couples to stay married, sometimes at

times. Even in relatively liberal Springfield, Massachusetts, the court ordered a woman whipped for repeatedly calling her husband in the 1640s. New England legislatures passed laws prescribing punishment (never carried out) for grown children who rebelled against their parents. Historian Jack Greene explained the Puritans' social coming to America:

Puritans hoped to substitute for the one in which they lived a condition of mutual surveillance to achieve a tight social regimen to suppress individual deviance and sin, exert tight control over the operations of the market, diminish acquisitiveness and the covetousness of the individual, and encourage every person in an appropriate calling, urge diligence and a careful use of time upon individuals, and encourage the rampant assertion of self in a concern for the next generation rather than this, and achieve a degree of communal unity virtually unknown in the fluctuating world of early modern England.

Puritanism was, wrote historian Michael Zuckerman, "a tool of true believers." Yet repeated efforts to suppress sin, heresy, dissent, and frequent court suits point to the large gap between ideal society the magistrates sought and the everyday reality of the colonies.²²

Large villages could not really be communities the way European villages were, much less the way the original Children of Israel were. Hierarchical groups into which generations of people were bound to one another. They were instead "intentional communities" by contract among a self-selected elite. Also, much of Puritanism, as historian Perry Miller has explained, rested on the idea of a covenant between God and man and one between man and society. These covenants was free choice: "The individual voluntarily chose to be civil and scriptural law, for the seventeenth-century Puritan that meaningful obedience could only grow out of voluntarism, never out of coercion." In a sense, the effort of Winthrop and other Puritan leaders to form their followers into one body ran counter to the grain of Puritanism itself. Even birth into the Puritan community did not guarantee full membership; choice did. In the early decades, the church required people to have and to describe a conversion experience before they could join. Townsfolk who rejected or were rejected by the church were not so much part of the community as they were subjects. Puritan magistrates, while they monitored much of the community, did not control, as premodern communities did, other behaviors. Puritan people grew and the crafts they performed. Indeed, the church accepted the pursuit of individual wealth even if it meant

growing inequalities. Finally, the Puritan model differed from peasant communities in persisting for only a few generations.²³

Historian Kenneth Lockridge's classic study of Dedham, Massachusetts, *A New England Town*, illustrates the optimal Puritan case. The signatures of the 1636 Dedham Covenant designed, in Lockridge's phrase, a "Christian Utopian Closed Corporate Community." In its first half century, most of Dedham's several hundred residents belonged to the church and thereby exercised citizenship in the town. They were "almost hermetically sealed off from the rest of the world"; few people moved in or out. Citizens farmed relatively equal amounts of farmland and jointly held title to the yet undeveloped plots. They obeyed the church leaders and, unlike some neighboring towns, lived "entirely free of . . . prolonged disputes." In its second half century, however, Dedham experienced land shortages and subdivision, widening inequality, an influx of strangers, the growth of outlying hamlets, and repeated conflicts. The community became more democratic but also more geographically, economically, theologically, and politically fractured.²⁴

Less secluded Puritan towns similarly grew more divided. Lawsuits and slander were commonplace, reaching one peak in the witchcraft accusations and executions of Salem in the 1690s. An eighteenth-century example is Concord, Massachusetts, home to the famed Minutemen. Factions there fought one another constantly before and through the Revolution. In 1776, to foster unity, sixty men of Concord's church came together for a day of "Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer" and pledged to renounce all slandering, "Pride, Ostentation & Vanity." But a year later, factionalism returned. Within a century of their communities' founding, residents of many Puritan villages turned to trade and commercial farming, petitioned for divorce, watered down the standards for church membership, accepted more religious diversity, fought over a variety of issues, increasingly eluded community punishment for their sins, and left town. By the late 1700s, New England "congregations were on their way to becoming . . . centers of worship that could maintain a measure of peacefulness simply because the discontented could leave and join, or form, another group [church] whenever they pleased." As religious voluntarism emerged more clearly, so did doctrines of individual belief and salvation. Indeed, the Puritans' descendants, as Emerson best illustrates, emphasized religious voluntarism, personal expressiveness, and self-reliance. The roots of such thought can be traced back to the original theology and contractualism of the Puritans rather than to the authoritarian ways they actually ran their communities.²⁵

Ultimately, the Puritans, as emblematic as they are, were an oddity. New England was the least commercialized, least mobile, most resistant

to immigration, and most densely settled region among the colonies; it was most like rural England. Colonial government in seventeenth-century New England, acting on behalf of the church, controlled private life more and longer than elsewhere—perhaps more than even in England. Americans beyond New England lived on scattered homesteads rather than in compact villages, which meant that they were less involved with neighbors than the Puritans were; they more commonly grew export crops and were thus more attuned to the outside world; their towns were less isolated, more diverse, and more tolerant than the Puritan towns were; and American communities outside of New England included more slaves, indentured servants, and tenants and so were originally less egalitarian than those in New England. For such reasons, most scholars probably agree with historian John L. Brooke that "historians have long since abandoned any interpretation grounding the American nation in Puritanism." Puritan efforts to create organic communities cannot represent early America and cannot challenge the "born liberal" thesis. Nonetheless and ironically, the Puritans' *ideology of contractualism*, rather than their practices, influenced American culture and helped develop American voluntarism.²⁶

Colonial Variations

If the story of the Puritan communities can be simplified as a "declension" from strict social control to greater voluntarism, the wider colonial story can be simplified as almost the opposite, the congealing of social control out of disorderly individualism—and then later a subsequent loosening into voluntarism. Only a few localities, say, Quaker and Mennonite settlements in Pennsylvania, were as tightly knit as the early Puritan villages. Salem, North Carolina, was one: a Moravian congregation owned the town, and church elders regulated residents' businesses. In many more places, however, the dispersion of homesteads weakened the community's sway over households; the shortage of women made family formation difficult; and most residents went unserved by any church. In the Chesapeake area, for example, the scarcity of women and the high mortality rate left many men unmarried and many children orphaned. In the South, informal liaisons often substituted for marriages. On the coasts of Georgia and the Carolinas, community commonly meant plantations of slaves with a few white supervisors. Even by 1724, only about one-third of white adults in coastal Virginia belonged to a church. And when Virginians did establish churches, their voluntaristic nature was evident: "Religion itself became more than ever a matter of choice. . . . [N]o longer did a particular faith simply 'come with the territory' as it had back in Europe." In sum, group life took time to form.²⁷

Rural colonials—and 95 percent of Americans at this time were rural—nonetheless needed one another. The paucity of roads left many small localities on their own. (London was across an ocean and the colonial capitals often seemed so irrelevant that some villages did not even bother to send representatives to the legislature.) Where neighbors were nearby, they exchanged labor in barn raisings, harvests, and emergencies; traded produce; bartered for craft items; rented out their animals and sons to one another; banded together during wars and Indian raids, gave medical help; and relaxed together. Over time, local communities coalesced in many regions. They built roads that connected farmsteads, and where roads crossed, up sprang hamlets and towns. More women arrived and settled the men down. Second and third generations matured, ministers started churches, and officials—some sent from London—instituted laws and courts. Groups formed and group influence over individuals intensified. Frontier isolation and strong individualism waned.²⁸

In many an emerging colonial village or town, neighbors and town elders came to monitor residents' lifestyles, actions, and words; they were "morally intrusive and coercively communalistic." In isolated communities, one's local reputation mattered. Authorities devoted much effort to punishing residents who defamed their neighbors and, especially, who defamed the authorities themselves. Court records from throughout the colonies abound with complaints filed by the insulted against those who called them rogues or cuckolded or loose women or witches. Penalties could be severe. A Virginia man in 1624 who castigated the governor was sentenced to broken arms and having his tongue bored. In many places, local officials decided the prices merchants could charge and the wages laborers would earn. Sumptuary laws tried to regulate residents' clothing to stop ordinary folk from passing as gentlemen and ladies. Authorities tried to control drinking, sex, and family life, prosecuting and sometimes exiling wastrels and transients, overseeing husbands' exercise of authority, supervising unwed mothers, and binding out orphans to work in local households. In the South, legislatures tightened control over slaves, ending what had been loose mixing of the free and the bound. Social organization developed, authority ascended to power, and the individual's latitude narrowed.²⁹

Churches were few and scattered; most colonials were "unchurched." Even in larger settlements, religious diversity and apathy left many people unconnected. In the late seventeenth century, for example, only about one in seven children born in Charles Parish, Virginia, was baptized. After 1680, established churches, notably the Anglicans in Virginia and the Congregationalists in New England, expanded and claimed more au-

thority. New evangelical sects emerged, especially on the frontier. Congregations, where they could be sustained, became important, as there were few other places for social life. Religious participation started to rise, foretelling what would later be, in some places, a mid-eighteenth-century religious frenzy.³⁰

Household authority tightened, too. By law and custom, authorities required every person to live in a household ruled by a free, adult male. Men's grip on their households varied, of course. Occasionally, a strong-willed woman might dominate a weak or alcoholic man, or neighbors might intervene to stop abuse of a wife. In New England, officials occasionally directed the patriarch to exercise more control over a rambunctious child or servant. On the other hand, Quaker families in the Delaware Valley were unusually egalitarian. For the most part, men governed firmly. Husbands controlled their wives' persons and property with only minor limitations, and fathers strictly ruled their children and stepchildren, working them at an early age or putting them out to labor on neighbors' farms. Control of land and dowries allowed fathers to constrict, if not determine, their sons' and daughters' marriage choices. (That was one reason colonial Americans tended to marry historically late, in their twenties.) Men could even direct their wives and children from the grave through detailed wills. Servants of various kinds—indentured immigrants, farmhands, maids, and apprentices, male and female, white and black, adult and child—shared a roof and broke bread with their masters; they were part of the household and ruled by the patriarch.³¹

The story of Rosina Schaeffer, a maid, although coming late in the eighteenth century, illustrates the power of the patriarchs. Jacob Hiltzheimer, the German immigrant whose diary I quoted in chapter 2, became an established figure in Philadelphia. He made these entries in 1786:

May 22. Our servant maid, Rosina, was impertinent to her mistress.

July 8. Had my servant maid, Rosina Schaeffer, taken to Lewis Weiss's,

Esq., [a justice of the court of common pleas] on account of her insolent behavior to my wife and myself. Mr. Weiss ordered her to the Workhouse.

August 9. Lewis Weiss, Esq., had my servant girl brought back from the Workhouse and asked her if she would go back to her master and behave as she ought to do. She answered, "No," upon which he ordered her back for another thirty days.

August 24. Went with Mr. Franck to the Workhouse, who there spoke to my servant maid Rosina (being her countryman [probably Durch]). She promised to behave better, upon which took her

home, after paying £1 19s. 6d. for her lodging and board for forty-eight days.

September 25. Sold my servant-maid, Rosina Schaeffer, to August Will for £20, and signed her over to him before Justice Farmer.

The feisty Rosina then seems to disappear from the scene.³²

Colonial Americans, most living on scattered homesteads, the fringes of small towns, or on plantations, generally dealt with relatively few, mutually dependent, and interconnected neighbors. Puritans aside, the earliest generations experienced perhaps chaotic levels of individualism. Eventually, groups formed and solidified—households, churches, villages. Most people lacked “competency” and true self-reliance; they needed and deferred to those who had competency. “It was difficult for men and women of the premodern world to conceive of equality,” wrote historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. “In the hierarchical structure which sustained the social order, one human being was of necessity almost always subject to another.” The authorities in each group—community, church, household—reinforced one another’s power. Even so, control of the individual was not nearly as complete or intense as that of the classical European community; America was still *comparatively* “liberal.” Then an expanding liberalism, an evolving voluntarism, broke loose in the late eighteenth century.³³

The Wider Revolution

As some of the colonial elite stirred rebellion against the British Empire, average Americans increasingly defied the authorities in their smaller communities. At one point, John Adams worried, “We have been told that our struggle has loosened the bonds of government everywhere; that children and apprentices were disobedient; that schools and colleges were grown turbulent; that Indians slighted their guardians, and Negroes grew insolent to their masters.” This may be too grand a claim for the Revolution; reports of uppity behavior mounted for decades even before the battle at Concord. One observer complained, for example, that “the poorest day-laborer on the bank of the Delaware holds it his right to advance his opinion, in religious as well as political matters, with as much freedom as the gentleman.” Some nongentlemen even asked to be called “Mister.” How much American nationalism drove social unrest and how much social unrest drove nationalism is uncertain and debated by historians, but the parallels are evident. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, Americans increasingly demanded to renegotiate the implicit contracts between person and group.³⁴

For instance, more wives resisted their husbands’ rule. Suits for divorce, albeit few by modern standards, increased sharply. Because the Puritans treated marriage less as a sacrament and more as a civil contract (contractualism again!), New England magistrates had long been more lenient than the British in allowing an occasional divorce. But wives filed more divorce suits and in them often drew on political rhetoric. They charged men with domestic tyranny and claimed that women, too, had the right to pursue happiness, to expect love. Tom Paine, pamphleteer of the Revolution, supported their cause, arguing that people had the right to find their one God-given mate, if necessary by trying more than one marriage.³⁵

Legal reforms following the Revolution granted women additional rights—for example, more control of the property they brought into a marriage—and better tools for claiming those rights. They also expanded the grounds for divorce to include verbal abuse, intemperance, and other poor treatment by husbands. Many more women, however, sought not to end marriages but to increase their leverage within them. They earned their own money churning butter or weaving, set up women’s benevolent societies, and pulled their husbands into church. Revolutionary ideology supported greater female assertiveness by extolling the Republican wife and mother as the nurturer of citizens and the guardian of virtue; it placed the woman’s contribution to the nation on almost the same plane as her husband’s. Early trickles appeared of what would later be a flood of nineteenth-century feminist sentiments: ideas of romance, of marriage as mutual friendship, and of a more spiritual sexuality. The emerging standards, concludes historian Carl Degler, established that “women, like men, had interests and lives that were separate and different from those of other members of the family.” Law and public opinion began shifting from viewing marriage as the absorption of one person by another (or even as a master-servant relationship) to viewing it as a love match between distinct and equal individuals. To be sure, only the glimmer of such change had appeared by 1800, and then mainly among the small, East Coast middle class, but it was on the horizon.³⁶

Children of the urban affluent received—or wrested—greater respect, personal attention, and affection. Customary gestures of deference, such as bowing to parents or standing at attention while they ate meals, passed out of favor. Youths claimed more sexual freedom and greater choice in spouses. (A Philadelphia minister in the 1790s was bemused that one marrying couple found it “very odd” that he required their parents’ permission.) To cite love as a reason for marrying, as young Americans increasingly did, observes Degler, “was the purest form of individualism; it subordinated all familial, social, or group considerations to personal preference.” Some youths demanded even more. Calvin Heaton, of North

Haven, Connecticut, tried in 1788 to attach his father's farm for £1,000, claiming that it was owed him in return for farmwork he had done since he had come of age. (Eighteen years later, Calvin was the wealthiest man in North Haven.) College students, for whom the college served as "parent," grew rowdier, the unrest culminating in the murder of a professor at the University of Virginia. Some journeymen and apprentices left their masters' households to become "free laborers," living on their own and asking to be paid in cash on an hourly or piecework basis. (And we should not forget rebellious Rosina.) Increasingly, slaves on tobacco and rice plantations worked apart from their masters in teams supervised by overseers and black drivers, which, however bitter the life, increased their solidarity and their distance from owners. In these myriad ways, households slowly loosened their hold on their members.³⁷

Religious Americans, disproportionately women, founded new congregations and divided older ones. Churches multiplied and democratized, especially during the First Great Awakening of the mid-1700s (and then again about a half-century later). Although most Americans still did not belong to a church, many joined one of a wildly diverse array of new evangelical movements, such as the Baptists and Methodists. Their lay leaders and circuit-riding preachers challenged the mainstream Anglican, Congregational, and Dutch Reformed denominations. The upstart sects appealed to folk spiritualism and growing democratic feelings in ways that ministers of the established churches could not. One of the latter reported, with great distaste, on a Baptist service he witnessed in the Carolina backwoods in the 1760s: "Extravagancies—One on his knees in a Posture of Prayer—Others singing—some howling—These ranting—Those crying—Others dancing, Skipping, Laughing and rejoicing. Here two or 3 Women falling on their Backs, kicking up their Heels, exposing their Nakedness to all Bystanders." "New-light" ministers preached that individuals should rely on "self-examination" and their own private judgments, no matter that "your Neighbors growl against you, and reproach you." They rejected the established churches' authority to interpret God and flattered their audiences by teaching that the humble were more attuned to God than were the elite. Evangelicals preached universal salvation rather than the election of the few and, above all, "the primacy of individual conscience." The springs of political dissent and religious dissent merged. By the time of the Revolution, the vocabularies of "the republican and evangelical traditions . . . became almost interchangeable."³⁸

Hannah Heaton, a farmer's wife in North Haven, Connecticut, and mother of Calvin, mentioned above, got caught up. She had never been particularly religious until 1741 when, at age twenty, she heard famed revivalist George Whitefield preach. She sought deeper faith but with

increasing frustration until one day she heard a voice and saw a vision; she had found "a new soul and a new body." For years, she recorded in her diary her struggles with satanic attacks on her faith, but also her feelings of God's reassurance. Despite her duties as wife and mother, Heaton immersed herself in private worship, dream interpretation, and religious readings. She refused to attend the required services at the official Congregational church in North Haven, because she felt the minister to be in error and in 1758 was fined for breaking the Sabbath. Heaton continued to resist conformity and in 1778 joined an evangelical church. Her intensity put off her religiously lax husband and estranged many people around her, but she nonetheless devoted her life to finding and expressing a personal faith. Similarly, Mrs. Lucy Mack Smith of New Hampshire decided, as others did, to follow her own reading of the Bible rather than the church's. She persuaded a minister to baptize her as, in effect, a Christian of her own personal denomination. Her son Joseph later founded the Mormon faith. The hold of the established churches—even in New England—was clearly weakening.³⁹

Establishment ministers responded by relaxing their Calvinism. They tempered the notion that only the chosen few would gain eternal salvation and allowed instead that even the most degraded individuals—even criminals condemned to execution—could persuade God to save their immortal souls. Americans built more and more-diverse churches, sects, and spiritual groups as "voluntary societies for personal identification and salvation." New congregations formed of like-minded individuals, serving individual needs, enthusiasms, and salvation. We'll later see how this accelerated over the next few generations.⁴⁰

Local communities' control also loosened—perhaps most dramatically around Massachusetts Bay, where that trend was viewed as a fall from grace. One sign of loosening was increasing crime and sexual license over the eighteenth century. On the eve of the Revolution, a third of the brides in some New England towns were already pregnant. Similarly, many New Englanders had surrendered to the practice of "bundling" (allowing courting couples to share a bed, albeit with a barrier between them). In the South and on the Western frontier, where local communities had been transient and loosely organized to start with, change was less stark. Yet whereas social groups had solidified and closed in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, they loosened and opened up in the late eighteenth century. Local politics involved increasingly more participation by common folk, more boisterous elections, and more crowd attacks on the authorities.⁴¹

Demographic and economic changes helped loosen the grip of household, church, and community on individuals. As populations grew, land

became scarcer; younger sons moved away, some west to new land and some to the growing towns. The proportion who lacked property grew. At the same time, the swelling rhetoric of equality and freedom gave white men everywhere language with which to declare their independence against patriarch, minister, gentry, and magistrate. Then, the Revolution broke the dam. "In thousands of different ways," wrote historian Gordon Wood, "connections that had held people together for centuries were strained and severed, and people set loose in unprecedented numbers. The Revolution shattered traditional structures of authority and common people increasingly discovered that they no longer had to accept the old distinctions." General Washington himself confronted these challenges to old distinctions. A member of the Virginia gentry, he saw the "leveling spirit" of Northerners and backwoodsmen in his own army as threatening disorder, but any efforts to enforce hierarchy on the troops stirred up rumblings of insurrection. Even though colonial America was already, by Old World standards, a voluntaristic society, by the late eighteenth century it was more so. And there was more to come.⁴²

SEARCHING FOR INDEPENDENCE AND INTIMACY: THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Population growth, urbanization, faster travel, restless moving, new kinds of work, and accumulating wealth provided more nineteenth-century Americans with more social groups to join and greater independence within each one; these changes widened and deepened voluntarism. And two relatively new sorts of groups emerged: workplaces and associations.⁴³

Rebalancing the Family

"Few topics have gripped historians of early America," wrote one scholar in 2006, "as powerfully as the post-Revolutionary demise of patriarchal authority. . . . [S]cores of studies have shown how colonial America's rigidly structured social relationships softened. . . . The upshot of this decline in starchy paternalism was a widespread bourgeois embrace of affection and benevolence." Professionals, merchants, manufacturers, and even some well-to-do farmers tacitly renegotiated family life. For Americans on the cutting edge, family was no longer to be a matter of ruler and ruled, but a loving partnership. In this partnership, he earns income, she maintains a nurturing home, and the children concentrate on learning how to be adults who can replicate this world. One author of family advice wrote in 1833, "While. . . the father is engaged in the bustling affairs of active life, the mother, with almost irresistible sway, is forming

the characters of the future." The emerging "nuclear" household of men of "competency" contained fewer people, often just parents and children and occasionally a widowed grandmother, spinster aunt, or a maid, but no longer farmhands, indentured servants, apprentices, boarders, neighbors' bound-out children, or orphaned relatives. The new family also had fewer children, but ones of higher "quality." Over the century, many in the middle class gradually adopted this model which scholars have variously labeled as bourgeois, domestic, separate-spheres, breadwinner, or Victorian. Most farmers, laborers, immigrants, and descendants of slaves—that is, most Americans—began emulating this model only generations later. (Typically, most had either been dependents in a large household or too poor to head anything but a small household.) Still, understanding the emergence of the middle-class, nuclear family in the nineteenth century is critical to understanding where American culture and character were headed.⁴⁴

In 1870, a contributor to the *New York Times* described the new family pattern in a column entitled, "The Domestic Sphere":

In certain respects woman is superior to man. . . . she is finer, softer, keener in perception, more delicate in sense, more scrupulous in almost every way. . . . Now, man, for the most part, takes—and properly takes—the lion's share of the toll, the cuffs, and the bruises of the world. . . . The just relation of the sexes is such that when the man's chief task for the day is done the woman's most important duty begins. It is the business of the woman to make a happy and sunny home. Hard as modern reformers may work to teach her to shirk it, this is her prime office.

Even women who seemed to challenge what was "her prime office" endorsed this ideal. Rhoda E. White, a daughter of Irish immigrants, rose to be the wife of a New York Superior Court justice, an influential activist, and eventually a close friend of Mary Todd Lincoln. In 1860, she wrote a letter to president-elect Lincoln in which she noted her political experience but insisted "I must not allow you to imagine me a *large virago-looking* woman politician, who belongs to a class (*I detest*) '*woman's rights*.'" White went on to describe herself as the small and "not *arwe*-inspiring" mother of eight children and detailed how she had personally educated them "while attending to my domestic duties." She clearly pro-tested too much.⁴⁵

The reaction of immigrants to the emerging family pattern illustrates its novelty. Pietist farmers from northern Europe who moved to the upper Midwest were shocked, historian Jon Gjerde reports, by the family life of Yankees. The immigrant patriarchs required everyone to sacrifice themselves in order to build up and pass on family estates. In their view,

the native-born neighbors permitted their wives "sit home" all day rather than work, indulged their children by sending them to school and then letting them move away, and finally surrendered the family farm to retire in town.⁴⁶

Finding one explanation for the emergence of the bourgeois family is difficult, given the intertwined economic, social, and ideological changes of the age; it is also unnecessary. Certainly, farming's decline changed many a man's role from the head of a small family business to a commuter bringing home a paycheck. (In 1820, 72 percent of American workers labored in agriculture; in 1900, only 37 percent did.) Rising income toward the end of the century freed many wives from weaving, selling home-churned butter, cooking for boarders, and similar homebound jobs. As I noted before, couples increasingly lived with fewer children, fewer relatives, and fewer nonrelatives, making for smaller and probably more intimate households. Advice books, novels, and ministers' sermons agreed that Americans—pointedly, men—should spend more time at home engaged in love, nurture, and religious practice. Architects designed houses to be shrines to Christian values and to serve as family redoubts; they recommended, for example, that children have their own rooms so as to draw them away from the streets. The bourgeois family was not "of the world," focused on the material; it existed instead, to summarize two scholars of family history, "for the sake of each [member's] emotional well-being and development."⁴⁷

This new prescription for family life called for new sorts of men. Stern, sometimes even abusive men ran most American households. George C. Duffield recalled, "the peace that passeth understanding" abode in our mother. Father, less filled with grace, enforced the rules of righteousness in the family, and to others outside, with stern exactness. . . . And my father's cabin was ruled as every other settler's." But in the new, emerging family, the father was to be not only a provider, sober and responsible, and a dispenser of strict justice, but also a loving husband and doting parent. Charles Cumming was such a man. The businessman moved his family to the Boston suburbs in 1877. He subsequently wrote many detailed notes about his children's development and managing the household in his wife's daybook. Although ahead of most men, Cummings foreshadowed the early-twentieth-century model of the middle-class husband who cared about and shared domestic duties, albeit under the supervision of the wife, who remained ruler of the home.⁴⁸

The Victorian family, for all the castigation it received later, empowered women. Freed of outside work and often freed of household drudgery by a maid, the middle-class mother managed the home, directed the family's social life, took on what had been the father's role of moral tutoring,

and presented the family to the world. (If the family experienced an economic setback, she typically contributed in ways that preserved her "national" role, such as cooking for boarders, rather than going out to work.) To assume that these women felt oppressed is to read our sensibilities back into history. Compared to the chattel-like status of her grandmothers or great-grandmothers, being queen of the home was a great improvement. Increasingly, the bourgeois wife also had the luxury to step outside the home and press her values in the public arena through women's clubs and movements. Sophisticated European visitors—not just Norwegian farmers complaining about their Yankee neighbors—remarked on the elevated position of American wives.⁴⁹

We can see women's increasing leverage in matters of sex and divorce. The Victorian model described women as too morally refined to have carnal thoughts, much less desires (reversing the previous century's image of women as lusty). This repression certainly constrained women. However, it also gave wives a way to control husbands' demands. With that and with crude but passable birth control methods, wives increasingly limited their pregnancies, thereby protecting their health and their time.⁵⁰

A still small but growing number of wives took advantage of more liberal divorce laws. Early in the century, legal divorces were difficult to get; they typically required approval from a state legislature or a high judge. Women requested them when just walking out on their husbands would not suffice, when, for example, they wanted to keep property that they had brought into the marriage. In the 1840s, Abraham Lincoln's law office handled only about a half-dozen divorces a year, typically for women who charged their long-absent husbands with desertion, brutality, adultery, or drunkenness. State governments then made divorces easier and cheaper. They lengthened the list of complaints women could file, eventually including emotional distress and mental cruelty. The soaring and world-high American divorce rate that followed soon attained the status of a "social problem." Conservatives condemned divorce as a defiance of God, a threat to society, and an expression of rampant individualism. (Compounding the outrage, judges increasingly gave women custody of the children, which had originally been the father's alone.) Women's advocates preferred to describe divorce not as a cause of social disarray but as the solution to loveless marriages. At the end of the nineteenth century, husbands still legally ruled over their wives and their wives' property, but they had suffered substantial erosion of their power. Easier divorce and other legal changes, combined with increasingly active feminist movements, led Susan B. Anthony and Ida H. Harper to announce in 1900 "a complete legal revolution during the past half century" in married women's rights.⁵¹

One of those rights middle-class wives claimed was love. Women suing for divorce increasingly charged that their husbands were cold and inattentive (rather than just abusive), indicating new expectations for marriage. Wives nurtured higher expectations in part because their material needs were increasingly secure. The wave of nineteenth-century romanticism and sentimentality, dramatized in heartthrob novels of gallant love, could then work up their hopes. (See chapter 6 for a general discussion of Victorian-era sentimentality.) One cleric complained as early as 1809 about novels that stress "the omnipotence of *love* over all obligations." Middle-class weddings inflated from modest ceremonies conducted at home to all-out, white-gown, church rituals, with reception and honeymoon — the culmination of romance. We have no statistics of course, but it is highly likely that more spouses more often expressed their love to one another. Those same Midwestern Yankee farmers who were disdained by European immigrants for indulging their wives in turn criticized those immigrants for having loveless marriages.⁵²

In the nineteenth century, most wives, of course, were yet to be mounted on a pedestal. Most rural, working-class, immigrant, and black women — that is, *most* women — did not even rule a separate sphere. They continued to work in the fields and in the mills, as servants, or as outworkers in their own homes. A rural woman wrote in 1874 of her "troubled life, unblest / From morn till night, I said, in fretful tone / 'Tis endless toil, and thankless toil, alone." Poorer women's unions often lacked the stability of legal sanction and sacrament. Even some middle-class women worked for pay outside the home, teaching school for example, and many still shared chores with kin, servants, and neighbors. Nevertheless, the emerging Victorian model of the woman's small domestic sphere increasingly formed the ideal that most women sought, even if they were yet unable to live it. Historian Susan Glenn has described the feelings of women who immigrated from Jewish villages in eastern Europe to New York City near the end of the nineteenth century. They came from a culture in which the exemplary wife supported the family while the model husband immersed himself in religious study. But the young newcomers embraced instead the American breadwinner ideal: the husband should work in the world and the wife should fashion the home. For many, only their daughters or granddaughters achieved this ideal.⁵³

Middle-class children of this era experienced the paradox of becoming both more enmeshed and more privileged in the family. Historically, fathers sent even young children out to work, or, more commonly, used them at home as laborers; parents treated children as miniature adults to be supervised rather than as fledglings to be nurtured. Historian Joyce Appleby describes how young men in the early 1800s often had to rebel

against their fathers in order to go to school or to otherwise move up in the world. But circumstances changed for the children of the growing middle class: there were fewer children in each family; new ideologies described children as unformed clay to be shaped by love rather than as sinful creatures to be tamed by discipline; families increasingly lived in exclusively residential neighborhoods; and new sorts of jobs made schooling important. These developments brought each child more attention, more pampering, and more free time. They were, in the view of many outsiders, spoiled. One French visitor commented that "if the children irritated me, the parents maddened me. Their attitude can only be described as capitulation." A New England woman recalling her antebellum childhood wrote that "we were watched over and guarded day and night, indulged in everything which [mother] could possibly procure for us, — wept over, prayed over, but never controlled." Working-class children, on the other hand, continued to labor for their families, less frequently as farmhands but more often as factory hands, street hustlers, or casual laborers. Theirs was, in the words of historian Steven Mintz, a "useful childhood" rather than the "protected childhood" of middle-class children.⁵⁴

At the same time, however, bourgeois parents tried to teach their sons self-reliance, for boys were to eventually strike out on their own and take the "cuffs and the bruises of the world." Mothers found help in this task from a growing number of advice books. One essayist gave parents this advice in 1816 on how to deal with their children's "follies and errors":

by *moral* means; by example . . . by cogent and convincing appeals to understanding, and affectionate appeals to the heart: — and not so much, certainly not altogether, by corporeal punishment. . . . One of the most important objects of domestic government is so to train up children that they may have a due government of themselves when they shall come to be grown up men and women.

French visitor Michel Chevalier wrote, "as soon as they have their growth, the Yankees whose spirit now predominates in the Union quit their parents, never to return, as naturally and with as little emotion as young birds desert forever their native nests." Middle-class girls, too, were destined to leave for good, sometimes with a brief detour to decorous work, but relatively quickly to homes of their own. Guiding them required instilling the domestic virtues of sentiment, nurturance, and discipline.⁵⁵

For such children, ultimately attaining the "competency" of a successful adult required, ironically, staying home longer, more parental supervision, and fewer escapades — a "protected childhood." Over the first half of the nineteenth century, the premarital pregnancy rate, a crude indicator

of youth's independence, dropped considerably. One interpretation is that direct parental control increased as more teens and young adults stayed home longer, especially to attend school. Another interpretation is that parents actually supervised less, but that young people were learning "due government of themselves." At the same time, with immigration to the growing cities, undisciplined working-class children seemed to pose mounting and visible problems. Some American philanthropists responded with "child-saving" initiatives, such as Sunday schools, orphanages, YMCAs, settlement houses, and compulsory education, seeking to teach those children, too, self-government.⁵⁶

Despite the growing empowerment of middle-class wives and children, the needs of the family, as determined by the head of the household, still trumped their interests. Both sexes, for example, expected women to defer their personal goals to care for others. Sarah Gillespie was a bright young woman from Iowa who in the 1880s repeatedly disrupted her teaching career to return home and nurse her often-ailing mother. In what was surely a common story, Sarah sacrificed much of her own life to her family duty. Also, women, although on an ever-higher pedestal and with more power than before, found that expectations for their performance also rose. Husbands, family, and community—and they themselves—expected them to make homes into "havens in a heartless world" and to lovingly mold children into superior adults. The emerging Victorian family model thus demanded intense emotional commitment from all.⁵⁷

It required the greatest concessions from men. The general loosening of control over wives and children, together with the liberation of slaves and the flight of household servants, also meant, wrote historian Carole Shammas, the "disintegration in the powers of the household head." New laws loosened men's hold on wives and wives' property. And as farming gave way to wage work, fewer fathers could use a promised bequest of land as a leash on their sons. Reform campaigns subverted men yet more. Activists tried to shut down saloons, gambling dens, and brothels, and to restrain men's sexual demands on wives—essentially to *civilize* men. Many states passed laws requiring saloon keepers to heed any wife's demand that they cease serving liquor to her husband. And men faced rising expectations of them. They now owed their wives and children attention and affection as well as material support. It took years for male behavior to change noticeably, but by the 1870s, reformers were praising men who went home after work to spend time with their wives and children. These domesticating pressures irritated many men and spurred some backlash, including a spurt of violence against wives. Nonetheless, at the end of the century, American men—mainly middle-class but increasingly working-

class also—exercised notably less household authority than their grandfathers had. Men's "contract" with the family had, in contrast to women's and children's, deteriorated. Fewer homes were ruled with, in George Duffield's words, a graceless father's "stern exactness."⁵⁸

Opened Communities

Steamboats, canals, improved roads, better-designed wagons, and then railroads comprised the transportation revolution that in the first half of the nineteenth century opened up most of America's communities. Faster, cheaper travel made communications and personal encounters much easier, which, among other things, expanded marriage opportunities. Drawing on centuries of local marriage records, historian Daniel Scott Smith documented how residents of Hingham, Massachusetts, a small town fifteen miles south of Boston, found more of their spouses beyond the city limits as time passed. About 35 percent of marrying couples in the 1700s involved a bride or groom not from Hingham; in 1950 about 75 percent did, with most of the change occurring in the nineteenth century. The transportation and communications revolutions connected more American communities more tightly to the wider world. Chapter 2 recounted this story in terms of what market expansion meant for economic security; here my concern is with its implications for the cohesion of local communities.⁵⁹

For generations, most American farmers had at least dabbled in colonial and transatlantic markets, but in the early nineteenth century many more grew more export crops for yet more distant customers. In addition, their wives took in work such as weaving and braiding palm-leaf hats, their daughters spent a year or two before marriage tending machinery in factories, and everyone bought more goods shipped in from many new sources. These developments focus our attention again on the "Born Liberal" question discussed early in this chapter: were Americans voluntarist from the start, or did they become so later? Many historians point specifically to the antebellum era as the moment when Americans fundamentally changed—and changed in two ways. One change, they argue, was psychological, that Americans became rational, calculating, self-interested seekers of profits (I address this suggestion in chapter 6). The other change, they argue, was social, that profit-seeking displaced local fellowship and undermined the "moral economy." (Moral economy refers to a culture in which community values override individual material ambitions.) Many Americans of the antebellum era, particularly those who felt injured by the new developments, described the changes around them in just such terms, as moral collapse.⁶⁰

In Salem, North Carolina, merchants and artisans in the 1830s and '40s faced growing competition from outside the community, but also growing opportunities. Both fear and ambition led them to challenge the church's restrictions on what they could make and sell and whom they could employ (including the church's injunction against using slaves). Eventually, church leaders conceded, loosened the constraints, and in 1856 finally dissolved their authority over businesses. Henry Leimbach, a local shoemaker, church elder, and loser in these struggles, commented during the 1830s debates: "Rough times, these. It appears there is little love among us any more. . . . Times are hard, and many people do not do as they wish others to do unto them." One of the winners in this transformation, on the other hand, spoke in a different, Emersonian language—"I relied on myself, I depended upon myself, I took care of myself"—the language of the ascending *laissez-faire* ideology.⁶¹

Many artisans found themselves outproduced and undersold by distant competitors. A resident of Salem in the 1830s noted that she preferred to order her shoes from Philadelphia because they "wear and fit better than any I have ever owned." She may have been one of those whom shoemaker Henry Leimbach had in mind when he referred to neighbors with "little love." Merchants had to compete with traveling salesmen and outside grain buyers. They made complex financial arrangements with out-of-town creditors. Farmers also encountered new challenges and opportunities. Eastern grain producers faced being undersold by Midwestern grain now arriving on canal boats. Other farmers found new markets in Europe for their crops, most notably for slave-produced cotton. The expansion and restructuring of the economy, including the removal of many legal restrictions on entrepreneurs, made new winners and losers. As I described in chapter 2, many Northern farmers sold out to their more successful neighbors and many farmers' sons had to either move west in search of new land or to become wage earners. In the cities, farm boys formed, together with immigrants, a growing laboring class toiling on wharves and in the warehouses. In the South, small-holding and tenant farmers fell further behind the plantation gentry. On the plantations themselves, mass production of cotton worsened conditions for the slaves. Inequality widened and that widening may explain the sag in Americans' physical well-being during this era.⁶²

The economy often required and the new transportation now enabled more Americans to move farther more often. Millions moved west; millions moved east. Migrants from the countryside and immigrants from Europe multiplied the population of American cities sevenfold between 1830 and 1860, to over 3.5 million people—12 percent of the population

nationwide. Mobility marked the century. In 1861, Abraham Lincoln bid farewell to the people of Springfield, Illinois, as he left to take up the presidency in Washington. He addressed them, "my friends . . . whose kindness . . . I owe everything." Yet most Springfield residents had only recently arrived in town; very few had been there over a quarter-century earlier to extend any kindnesses to the young Lincoln. Other communities all over the country experienced similarly high levels of coming and going. An English woman visiting New York City wrote in 1842 of May 1, the day when customarily all rental leases expired, "From the peep of day till the twilight may be seen carts, which go at a rate of speed astonishingly rapid, laden with furniture of every kind, racing up and down the city, as if its inhabitants were fleeing from a pestilence." Foreign observers before and after this era described Americans as constantly on the move—"almost nomadic" in the words of Englishman James Bryce—but mobility was probably at its greatest in the middle decades of the nineteenth century.⁶³

Migration brought diversity and disruption to America's towns and villages. Typically, an elite of merchants, lawyers, doctors, manufacturers, financiers, and, in the countryside, farmers with large holdings formed the leading circles in American communities. Such men, like Lincoln in Springfield, held both formal and informal positions of authority and they represented the town to the outside world. Their relatively settled lives, like their stately homes (many of which still stand), largely shape our images of the nineteenth century. But those images hide our view of most rural and small-town Americans, who were transient (their ramshackle dwellings crumpled long ago).⁶⁴

In the cities, relatively new white-collar workers, such as bookkeepers, secretaries, tellers, and clerks of various sorts (almost all men in those days), formed into a lower middle class. Artisans made up the core of the stable manual class, but some of them began to employ others and became nascent industrialists. At the same time, the numbers of seamen, teamsters, day workers, factory employees, and other wage laborers grew greatly. Distinct city neighborhoods defined by residents' occupation, age, ethnicity, and income coalesced out of what had been streets of mixed uses and mixed residents. In upstate Kingston, New York, for example, Irishmen who came in the 1820s to work on the canals clustered near the waterfront, forming "New Dublin," a neighborhood that soon gained a fearsome reputation. In Detroit during the midcentury, "transient and unattached males—young lawyers, traveling businessmen, petty clerks, hotel waiters, and manual workers of all kinds—who concentrated in boarding houses and similar places downtown helped create

a "bachelor subculture" served by "saloons, billiard halls, and brothels." New York's Bowery was the same writ larger. Repulsed by these urban scenes, many affluent middle-class men removed their families from downtowns, sometimes taking them as far as the new commuter suburbs, a ferry or long carriage ride away, thereby also reinforcing the domestic bourgeois family. As these residential enclaves developed, they demanded legal separation from the big city.⁶⁵

The emergence of distinct neighborhoods combined with the growing diversity, transiency, and inequality to undermine community consensus. As early as the 1820s, according to one historian, "the traditional community, where every aspect of society—geographic, social, political, and economic—overlapped, was dying out." The communities that still appeared to be tranquil and solidary were ones that growth passed by, such as upcountry New England villages and Midwestern towns where the trains never stopped. There, few newcomers arrived, many young people left, those who stayed intermarried, and one could imagine an *Our Town* familiarity. Elsewhere, however, growth was common and fragmentation proceeded. In Underhill, Vermont, the rapid influx of newcomers and the arrival of evangelical ministries between 1800 and 1840 led to repeated disputes over where in the sprawling township the Congregational and town meetinghouse should be located, disputes that drove at least a couple of ministers first to distraction and then out of the community. Cultural diversity often led to intergroup tension. In rural Ohio, immigrants from different regions of Germany escalated a dispute into a church burning. In 1844, riots between Protestants and Irish Catholics in Philadelphia left thirty or more dead in the streets—only one of several calamitous street battles among hundreds of less dramatic bloody brawls in the antebellum era. Certainly, community conflict had a long history, as we saw even in early Puritan towns. But the breadth and complexity of conflicts, and, more broadly, of estrangement from the local society, grew.⁶⁶

Expanding contacts with the outside, migration, growth, and diversity rearranged neighboring relationships. As before, neighbors depended on one another for practical everyday matters, for help in emergencies, and for some sort of social life; they exchanged labor at harvesting, responded to fires, helped nurse the ill, and attended church socials. George C. Duffield described how an Iowa settler would, upon killing a deer, bring neighbors around to share the venison. Such bonds may or may not entail emotional commitment. A German immigrant to rural Illinois wrote in 1851 that "the Americans living around us are thoroughly good neighbors, ready and willing to be of help" but also that when "doing business they have no conscience at all." Americans of this

era, as in the century before, saw a mixture of the practical and the social in relations with neighbors. The rare utopian settlement aside, Americans founded nineteenth-century communities as economic enterprises. Many were essentially real-estate speculations, bets on the caprice of weather and of railroad companies. As before, nineteenth-century neighbors tracked, calibrated, and enforced debts from their exchanges; failures to fully reciprocate led to acrimonious suits. In one critical development, however, Americans began untwining the strands that composed neighborhood ties. For example, common farmers started hiring outside help rather than neighbors to bring in harvests, and families started using professional undertakers rather than neighbors to prepare their dead for burial. We should not exaggerate the scale of these developments; farmers, for example, persisted in exchanging labor with their neighbors into the twentieth century. It would take generations for most Americans to see their neighbors as "only neighbors," as the people who just happen to live nearby but are neither practically nor socially critical. Yet the trend had begun.⁶⁷

Given this unwinding and the growing connections to the outside world, local communities lost some hold over their residents. As in Salem, North Carolina, town and church elders in many places lost their authority to set prices and wages. In many towns, leaders lost control over voting. At one time, American elections typically proceeded by town meeting or voice vote; in some cases, official records listed who had voted for whom. This system obviously put pressure on electors to conform to the wishes of local elites. Later, having voters drop colored party "tickets" into a box still made their decisions public. Adoption of the secret "Australian ballot" late in the century ended local elites' ability to monitor people's votes (and electors' chances to sell their votes). Various external connections and opportunities provided residents with more independence from their neighbors. They could shop for nicer shoes, they could seek nicer spouses, they could plead their rights in state courts, and they could more easily pick up and leave—which Americans of the era did in great numbers.⁶⁸

However, the loosening of local ties did not mean, as some read it, that Americans became isolated or without other forms of community. Historian Robert Wiebe has argued that the connecting of America's "island communities" to the wider world caused a loss of local control, a rise in alienation, and a backlash against modernity—a backlash, for example, of nativism. Perhaps, but Americans of the nineteenth century enthusiastically joined up with people in all sorts of groups: ethnic lodges, social clubs, lecture societies, fraternities, sisterhoods, and most especially, the prototype of the voluntary association, Protestant congregations.⁶⁹

Salvation through Solidarity

In 1800, most Americans, whatever their beliefs, remained "unchurched." But the religious stirrings that had begun in the late eighteenth century swirled into a tornado by the 1830s, reaching many of the poorest and most far-flung Americans. Young, energetic, and plain-speaking preachers for new denominations like the Methodist Episcopalians, Disciples of Christ, and dissident Baptists drew enthusiastic audiences. Slaves found Christ, even though masters tried to hide him; free blacks established their own congregations. Revivals and camp meetings brought thousands of Americans together in prayer. Mystical sects built experimental communities. Americans founded new religions, and immigrants brought yet other ones. And religiously imbued social movements, notably abolitionism and temperance, mobilized millions.

Religious diversity and religious competition fed one another. When the states disestablished official churches in the early 1800s, they released yet more rivalry among faiths. It was, wrote historian of religion Martin Marty, "a textbook example of free enterprise in the marketplace of religion, a competition in which the fittest survived," one in which backwoods ministers found that their "first enemy was neither the devil nor the woman but the Baptist." The Catholic Church, a church by birth and for life in Europe, had in America to fend off challengers seeking to raid its flock. One priest dispatched to Maryland complained in 1821, "There are Swarms of false teachers [Methodist preachers] all through the Country, in every School house, in every private house—you hear nothing but night meetings, Class meetings, love feasts &c &c." Among Protestant churches, older Calvinist denominations suffered defections, particularly by those of modest means who rejected elitist doctrines of predestination. Churches proselytized through missions, camp revivals, and aid to the spiritually and often materially destitute. Evangelical ministers generally scorned what they considered to be overeducated, overfed, and overly boring reverends of old-line denominations, and those reverends scorned what they considered to be uneducated, unkempt, and undisciplined backwoods preachers. Later in the century, even atheists came together in formal association. This ferocious competition made church allegiances a matter determined not by people's birthplaces or family histories nor even by their own pasts, but by their choice renewed each day. More Americans joined organized religion, but still not most. One observer estimated that all the churches in Boston in 1867 could accommodate but one-fourth of the residents. Only by about 1900 did most Americans become effectively "churched."⁷⁰

Ministers of the new religious movements typically preached an optimistic theology of individual conscience and democracy. Older ideas of predestination implied that the hierarchy of this world carried into the next, which in turn made average parishioners fear eternal damnation. The evangelists brought a much happier gospel. Two of their hymns convey the new message:

Can Christ our God a Moloch be,
Pleas'd with his creatures' misery?
Dooming nine-tenths of men that fell,
To burning flames and endless hell? . . .
Thy saving grace for all is free,
And none are doom'd to misery.

And:

Know then that every soul is free
To choose his life and what he'll be
For this eternal truth has giv'n
That God will force no man to heav'n.

An old-line Massachusetts minister complained that the laity had begun to "to think and act for themselves." Importantly, however, the evangelicals did not foster reclusive or solipsistic religion but instead the voluntary joining together of the faithful in revivals, camp meetings, and new churches—not the personal church of Lucy Mack Smith but the strong community of her son's Mormon church.⁷¹

The new congregations also provided sociability for millions of Americans whose predecessors had gone without. Especially in rural areas, people went to church to see, be seen, be entertained, meet the opposite sex, hear the news, and deal with issues of common concern, as well as to exercise their faith. Much the same happened in the expanding immigrant quarters of large cities. The Irish and Italians supported separate ethnic parishes; Jews formed synagogues with coreligionists who had come from the same regions of Europe. Black churches gave African Americans a critically important space free of white surveillance, and regionally based churches often comforted migrants—"Yankees" in Congregational and Presbyterian churches, for example, and Southerners in Baptist and fundamental sects. Some churches even provided members with secular benefits, such as burial and life insurance.⁷²

One gets a sense of the church's social role on the frontier from the diary of Kitturah Belknap. Born in Ohio in 1820, Belknap moved with her husband to Iowa at age nineteen and then on to Oregon ten years later.