Urbanization and the Female-headed Household,
Middletown, Connecticut, 1790-1850

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INTRODUCTION

Between 1750 and 1850, Middletown, Connecticut grew from a young agricultural settlement to a young urban/industrial center. Henry Whittemore, in _History of Middlesex County, Connecticut_, with biographical sketches of its prominent men, described the growth of the town from the 18th century:

There was nothing here to invite a rapid immigration. The country was rough, and the labor of subduing the forest and bringing even small portions of the soil under cultivation was great. Markets for that which was produced here were distant and difficult to reach. Imports were small; and were mostly limited to articles of necessity; for the luxuries of the present day were hardly known here two centuries since. The people were self-reliant. Not only was their food the product of their own industry, but the materials for their clothing were produced on their farms, and they were clad in raiment of domestic manufacture. Their implements of husbandry were made by themselves, or by the few mechanics who settled among them, and though simple in their construction, they were well adapted to their uses. In short, every comfort by which they were surrounded was the product of their own industry, and little wealth which some of them were able to accumulate was the result of their own frugality. Their strong religious convictions had prompted them to seek these then inhospitable forests, and their rigid intolerance of any infraction of their moral code, or system of faith, preserved among them for many generations a simplicity of life which is less prominent in the present cosmopolitan age (1884), and an enforced assent and obedience to the prescribed dogmas of their church which have come to be regarded almost as historical curiosities.

Later on in the _History_, Whittemore gave a more detailed description of at least the changing economic scene in Middletown from the end of the eighteenth century through the
nineteenth:

With the close of the Revolutionary war, a new era commenced in the history of Middletown. From being a place of the greatest commercial importance on the banks of the Connecticut River, and the center of the great West India trade...it was soon to become the great manufacturing center of the state. The busy scenes of long ago—when the shout of the mule driver was heard along the streets, trying to force the obstinate brutes on the decks of the West Indiamen, and the rattle of the draymen's cart, delivering his loads of sugar, etc., would be occupied in conveying the loads of wool, iron and other raw materials to the manufactories, and return loaded with heavy cases of manufactured goods.

It's obvious from these descriptions that Middletown experienced a revolution from an agrarian-based economy and society to a manufacturing-based economy and society. Agriculture provided the greatest source of employment in Middletown from its earliest settlement through the mid-nineteenth century. Data derived from the 1820 and 1840 U.S. census manuscripts showed that agriculture employed as many people as manufacturing and commerce combined. The 1820 and 1840 censuses split Middletown into two geographic regions: "Middletown City" and "Middletown Parrishes." Assumably, the "City" referred to the commercial center and the "Parrishes" referred to the area outside of the city. While this paper focuses primarily on Middletown—the "City", it necessarily used information from both sections of the census in order to depict the overall economic situation of "Middletown."

The very fact that the census divided Middletown into rural and urban regions signified that it was in the process of becoming an industrial-commercial/urban community. Steven
Peretz in "A Demographic Profile of Early 19th Century Middletown, Connecticut: A Statistical Analysis" compiled information about urban and rural Middletown indicating that 25% more individuals listed on the 1840 census manuscript, lived in the urban section than on the 1820 census manuscript.5

I could not resist enclosing the following description of Middletown discovered in the Weekly News and Advertiser, "Our City, Our Time and Progress". The article was titled "Middletown Advantages":

"No place within our knowledge (and it is somewhat extensive at this point) offers so many inducements to families retiring from the din and bustle of a large city and seeking a quiet and pleasant transition from a city to the country is generally too great a change for those accustomed to the life of the former; they miss the society and the amusements to which they have been accustomed; and we apt, finally to become disgusted with the monotony and perfect stillness of the latter. Our place offers the happy medium, populated with sufficient density to afford a choice of associates, with as good society as can be found anywhere...Ours is in fact the "rus in urbe" of the Latin Poet, a truly rural city."6

Middletown was urbanizing in the nineteenth century. The above portion of the article gave evidence that people were moving to Middletown and participating in its different activities—"the society and the amusements." The article continued to describe the different components of the Middletown community: the churches where every "Christian has here a place to worship...schools for both sexes...the press." as well as its Hotel, Dance Hall, Steam Ferry Boat, Railroad and Airline.7 The differentiation of these different services into various social organisms defined Middletown as an urban center.
While agriculture constituted the backbone of the Middletown economy; commerce added to the city's prosperity as the nineteenth century progressed. Middletown, close to the mouth of the Connecticut River, partook in busy overseas trade, especially with the West Indies, until the American Revolution and the Embargo and the war of 1812 caused a major suspension of this trade. This curtailment and the American need for firearms during the war, forced Middletown to become a manufacturing center. By 1850, the resultant Manufacturing Revolution contributed to the increasing development of manufacturing companies (hardware and textile, for example) in the area, and typical of industrial stirrings nationwide.

During the course of its urban and industrial growth, Middletown did experience growing pains. As the population increased, and as the amount of resources decreased, they caused crisis in the basic unit of economic production—the family. Families could no longer sustain themselves and provide work for all of their offspring. Consequently, propertyless sons and dowryless daughters were sent from their parent's homes to other occupational and geographical locations.

All of the just presented information contributed to the background of my exploration of Middletown households headed by women during the years 1790, 1820 and 1850. People migrated during this period (1790-1850), out of economic necessity, to cities. Many, mostly men, moved out west to take advantage of the abundant opportunities of the wild frontier.
The fact that men migrated from the Middletown area, taken with the fact that this option was not so acceptable for women and the fact that the Revolutionary war created many widows explained why women did indeed head any households in Middletown from 1790-on.

This paper looks at these women—female household heads—in 1790, 1820 and 1850. Interestingly the characteristics of the women listed on the 1850 census were so similar in some respects and so different in others from those listed on the 1790 census. I plan to identify some of these similarities and differences and also to explain their existences in relation to the development of Middletown as an urban community.
The statistical overview of women who headed Middletown households in 1790, 1820 and 1850 was interesting, especially when examined alongside a similar statistical overview of men who headed Middletown households.

In 1790, women headed 11% of the households; men headed 89%.
In 1820, women headed 21% of the households; men headed 79%.
In 1850, women headed 13% of the households; men headed 87%.

By placing this data in an historical framework, it was possible to attempt to reason the existence of the these percentages of female-headed households. For one, the American Revolutionary War claimed many husbands, leaving widows to takeover as household heads. Thus, it wasn't unusual to find women heading 11% of Middletown's households in 1790.

The 10% increase in female-headed households thirty years later could be attributed to the growing notion among Americans, after winning independence from England, that they could determine their own destiny. Women too held these thoughts and where seventy years earlier they would never have thought of living unmarried, or at least in an extended family network headed by a man, in 1820, it was a possibility for women to head their homes. Secondly, the Embargo of 1812 caused an economic depression in Middletown. Statistics revealed that Middletown men between the ages of 20-29--marrying age--then migrated out of Middletown in pursuit of better financial opportunities. With fewer men to head the households, more women did.
The 10% decrease in female-household heads from 1820 to 1850 could be the result of the return of prosperity to Middletown, brought about with the birth of manufacturing, and a consequential decrease in the number of migrants from Middletown. Also, the 1850 U.S. census manuscript listed the household members’ origins of birth. While no statistical picture has been formulated, foreigners came to Middletown from New Brunswick, England, Scotland and Ireland between 1820 and 1850. Only two immigrant women headed their households in the census. The immigrants in general tended to live in more extended family and kin networks than native Americans, most likely because a household of this nature gave them the security and support that would help them adapt to their new urban environment. Men headed these traditionally styled households.

I'm hesitant to attribute the existences of certain percentages definitely to the just listed reasons. I've concentrated my research this far on identifying who these Middletown women were and only reasoned broadly about the reasons why. I was also more secure in my reasoning until I analyzed the percentages of male-to-female-headed households next to the percentage of men and women in the population.

In 1790, women composed 51.7% of the total population; men composed 49.3%.
In 1820, women composed 35% of the population; men composed 65%.
In 1850, women composed 51% of the population, men composed 49%.

Between 1790 and 1820, the number of female-headed households
increased by 10% while the number of women in the population decreased by 16.7%. Further research must be done in these years to figure out why this disparity occurred.

The U.S. census manuscripts for 1790, 1820 and 1850 provided the information necessary to identify the Middletown women who headed their households. The very nature of the census changed to provide an accurate record of the evergrowing and diversifying American population.

The 1790 census and the 1820 census listed the names of the head of the households and recorded the number of free white males, free white females, unnaturalized citizens and slaves that lived within the household. In 1790, the free white males were divided into age groups; free white females were not. In 1820, both free white males and free white females were delineated in age groupings. In 1850, the census identified the dwelling house (in order of visitation) and the family or families (in order of visitation) that lived within that house by number. It further listed the names of all the household members, their ages and their sexes. "Head of the household" in this paper refers to the "head of the household" on the 1790 and 1820 censuses, but to the "head of the family" on the 1850 census.

The 1790 census included the residents of what the later census divided into "Middletown City" and "Middletown Parishes." The City had been newly incorporated in 1784 and there as yet did not exist a need in the census to distinguish it from the remainder of Middletown. This difference in the
census manuscripts did not alter any of my formulations since the 1790 served primarily as a foundation for research focused on the first 50 years of the nineteenth century.

The census manuscripts supplied valuable information about the ages of the Middletown household heads and the nature of their households (to be looked at apart from their household heads.) The 1790 census did not list the ages of Middletown female residents. The 1820 census, however, did record them under the following age groupings: 0 to 10; 10 to 16; 16 to 26; 26 to 45; 45 and up. I definitely figured the ages of 32% of the women who headed their households that year. 24% were young, between the ages sixteen and twenty-six; 31% were aged between twenty-six and forty-five; 49% were aged over forty-five years. Another 16.6% of the women could be aged anywhere from twenty-six on up since their household listed women under both of those age groupings.

The 1850 census manuscript wonderfully listed the ages for all of Middletown's residents next to their name. For ease in comparison, I grouped the 1850 women into the same age groups listed on the 1820 census. Only about 4% were young, between the ages sixteen and twenty-six; 29% were aged between twenty-six and forty-five; 68% were aged over forty-five years. In 1850, more women heads of households were older than forty-five years.

Definitely determining the marriage statuses of Middletown women proved to be the most difficult task in this research. I credited the tax list and the probate records as reliable sources for this purpose, but did not rely on the
census list. Unfortunately, not many female heads of households in 1850 left wills or held property. They left me little information in the Probate Records. I have rejected any conclusions I drew from the census manuscripts for both 1820 and 1850. I ventured marriage statuses for 69% of the 1820 female household heads, but only 14% of the 1850 female household heads.

I've become more conservative in my guesswork over the year and also found many more outside references in Whittemore's *History of Middlesex County* and Atkin's *Tales to the women and families* that lived in 1820 than in 1850. I also used the Barber Vital Records to see if I could locate names from the 1820 census and correlate their records. Unfortunately, the accuracy of these vital statistics declined after 1820. As a result, I could not rely on them.

I can say about the women who headed Middletown households in 1820 and 1850 that they were *not* married. Of the 69% of the women I assigned marriage statuses in 1820, none were married. I looked at the households headed by women in 1850 to see if any men living in those households had the same surname as the household head and was aged within a marriagable range, indicating they were married. I found no such households. In this respect the census served reliably and valuably.

If a woman was married, she didn't head her household, neither in 1820 or 1850. A small percentage of single women headed their households. In 1820, 14 women were known single
ladies; in 1850, 4 women were single. A large number of women were widowed. In 1820, 44 (more than half) of the women were widows; in 1850 13 were definitely widows. I couldn't find evidence indicating that a woman listed as head of her household in 1820 was divorced. Divorce did occur in 19th century New England. One man, newly divorced from his wife, notified the community that he was no longer responsible for her actions.

Upon looking at the property holdings of the Middletown female household heads, the major components pertinent to their identity will have been discussed. For both years, 1820 and 1850, the city tax lists and Probate Records provided accurate pictures of how much and what types of property the Middletown women owned. The 1850 census also listed the "Value of Real Estate owned" by the Middletown residents.

Middletown women during these years paid taxes on all real property and certain personal properties. In 1850, a smaller percentage of women household heads paid taxes than in 1820. In 1850, 15.3% of the women paid taxes, while in 1820, 34.5% of women paid taxes. The average woman household head in 1850 paid more taxes than the average taxpayer (male and female) that year. The average woman household head in 1820 paid less taxes than the average taxpayer that year.

The average female household head in 1850 paid $134.19 in taxes, whereas the average taxpayer paid $73.62. The average female household head in 1820 paid $52.78, while the average taxpayer paid $83.00.
In 1850, fewer people owned more property than in 1820, indicating a change in the type of people who lived in Middle-town as it became more urban. The city with its different activities offered immigrants from both the neighboring countryside and abroad more work opportunities—especially as unskilled laborers. The increase in the number of female household heads who did not pay taxes, revealed that these women did not own real property or personal property. They had no money nor savings.

The contrasting nature of the Probate Records between women in 1820 and in 1850 substantiated the reality that women who headed their households in 1850 were basically impoverished. Understandably the percentage of women listed in the Probate Records coincided with the percentage of women who paid taxes in 1820 and 1850. The Probate Records represented women who owned taxable property and died in Middle-town. Either these women left wills designating the further ownership of their property or they died leaving enough property to warrant administration through the court system. In 1850, Probate Records listed some form of information about one quarter of the women heads of households that year. They listed slightly less than one-third of the women household heads in 1820.

The 1850 census proved itself a marvelous tool in figuring out what type of women owned property. Seventeen women on the census owned real estate whose value averaged $2400 per woman. Real estate valued from $200 to $10,000. The
average woman checked on the list aged 59 years 3 months. By cross-checking references to these women in the Probate Records, I discovered that a number of them were widowed. In general, the Probate Records have shown that after 1800, husbands often left property to their wives. These few older widows unmistakably possessed a good deal of property in 1850. The same few names listed on the census as property-holders appeared often, once on the tax list and once in the Probate Records.

Two new types of women lived in Middletown, Connecticut come the mid-nineteenth century. Widows, middle-aged and older, rich and poor emerged after the Revolutionary War to become established components of the community, and a couple of single women, young and poor poked themselves into the community. Over 70 years, the Middletown community had accepted, voluntarily or not, the self-supporting woman.

Before the American Revolution, the widow, if she was older, went to live with other family members. If she was younger, she re-married. More and more often during the nineteenth century, they remained in their own homes. After President Fisk of Wesleyan University died in 1839,

His widow survived him forty-five years, living in pathetic seclusion alone, in a house on one corner of the college campus.14

Widows like Mrs. Fisk were well-enough off financially that they needed not work. Those widows unable to remarry, maybe because they were too old or had too many children to be disregarded by another husband, worked. These women had to maintain their families and did so by taking over the
management of their husband's businesses. Mehitable Hall tried this for three years after her husband's death. Mrs. Bigelow ran the tavern in Middletown after Mr. Bigelow's death.

The widow, especially if she inherited an estate or business from her deceased husband, did not have to remarry or join another household. In fact, institutions such as St. Luke's Home for Destitute and Aged Women replaced the family in caring for older, husbandless women.

A poor woman, who was a descendant of a prominent family, who was left without a home, and was compelled to accept the shelter of the poorhouse... (a group) hired the upper part of the Sage house, on Cherry Street, and there they place this unfortunate old lady and one or two other.15

Widows, managing on their own, paved their way into the work force during the nineteenth century, allowing the emergence of the self-supporting, young, single woman into 19th Century Middletown society. Before 1850, only tokens of them existed as heads of households, but shortly afterwards, their numbers must have increased. In 1864, the Connecticut Industrial School for Girls had been incorporated to give "a good common education" to "viciously inclined girls between the ages of eight and sixteen", to teach them

those branches of industry that will render them self-supporting. To accomplish this latter object, as soon as they become proficient in one department, they are transferred to another, and as soon as they are fitted to earn their own living, they are "placed out".16

Even earlier, in 1850, the Russell Manufacturing Company, whose three mills contained 15,000 spindles and
consummed 3,100 bales of cotton per year, to produce 1,200,000 pounds of double and twisted yarn, employed "over 1,000 men, women, boys and girls..., earning from one dollar to three dollars per day."17

While opportunities finally existed in the Middletown community, in the schools and factories, for women to work, and met the demand for single women and girls who could not be supported at home18, they did not totally encourage the single working female to gain economic independence. Ivy Pinchbeck in Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution 1750-1850 explained the plight of the self-supporting woman in an early industrial society:

The fact that women had so long worked as assistants to their husbands and fathers was largely responsible for their bad economic position. Because their labor was subsidiary, it was cheap, and because they would perform useful service in many ways without technical training, they were often denied apprenticeship and the rank of skilled workers. So long as they were contributors to, and participants in a family wage, however, this system was not necessarily oppressive; but as soon as women became dependent on their own exertions the hardship of their position was at once apparent. By tradition their wages tended to remain at a supplementary level and they found themselves excluded by lack of training from skilled and better paid work.19

As already seen, the Middletown community was forced in some ways to accept women as household heads. Its rapidly urbanizing and industrial community met their demand for jobs. A majority of these single women went on to marry but not without further supporting the whole question of economic independence for women.20

Just as the position of Middletown women changed in
response to the growing forces of urbanization and industrialization, so did the households that they headed change. Working once more with the 1790, 1820 and 1850 U.S. census manuscripts, I figured the following Middletown data:

In 1790, 3.4 people lived in the average female-headed household.
In 1820, 4.0 people lived in the average female-headed household.
In 1850, 4.9 people lived in the average female-headed household.

In 1790, 5.7 people lived in the average household (male and female-headed.)
In 1820, 5.7 people lived in the average household.
In 1850, 5.9 people lived in the average household.

The numerical composition of the average household, headed by a man or a woman changed very little over sixty years. On the other hand, the average size of the female-headed household increased by 1.5 people. Let's further look at the 1850 households to explain this increase.

In general, the households headed by women were either small--2 or 3 people--and resembled the 1790 household composition, a widow and a sister, a mother and a daughter, or several widows probably comprised these households, or large--over 6 people--comprised of children, possible relatives, and even unrelated persons born in the same country as the household head or sharing a trade with another household member. The average size of the female-headed household might have increased from 1790 to 1850 as biology became less important in defining who belonged to a given household.

The word "household" as used in the paragraph immediately preceding, did not really mean "household" all of the people
living in one house, but meant "family"—parents, their children, immediate relatives and any accompanying domestics. The 1850 census called households in its customary meaning "dwellings" and further numbered the "families" within those dwellings. So far, I have called the heads of "families" in 1850, heads of "households." Because they were listed in order of visitation, and the census did not provide any further information, it was impossible to identify any head of "dwelling."

While more than one family lived in a dwelling, they were not spatially isolated conjugal. Rather, the dwelling functioned as one large family network while its members by birth belonged to smaller family units. The dwellings operated more like boarding houses. The average size of a dwelling was large—between 9 and 9.5 people. Only three members lived in one dwelling, while almost twenty from four different families lived in another.

32 dwellings contained at least one female-headed family and only one dwelling contained only female-headed families. This type of household, resembling an extended family, but actually composed of all sorts of people, served the new needs of the city population. Immigrants from various countries and from the American countryside sought out fellow countrymen or kin to live with in the city. Labourers lived in the same dwelling as a widow and her sister who could prepare their meals and do their laundry. Widows and single women in their forties, fifties and sixties could afford to
maintain their households instead of living with kin by taking other families into their homes. The members of the different families in a given dwelling became "surrogate kin" who "served as important sources of support and adaptability to the new urban environments." 22

The 1850 census at first impression, suggested a strikingly different picture of Middletown society than did the 1820 census. The names were totally different, the entire form of the census was more complex. Residents were no longer just descendents of the early Puritans, but migrants from home and abroad. Household members often didn't seem to relate to one another and different families of various natures lived under the same roof. But these foreign-looking elements did not enter Middletown to transform the nature of the community. As Middletown industrialized and urbanized, it provided opportunities for strange and different elements--people, institutions, households, women, etc.--to assume new positions in the community without abandoning the old positions.

Men in 1850 still headed the majority of Middletown households, and they married and their wives worked at home. However, the husbandless female population of Middletown, as seen in this paper, had ventured into new positions in both the community as working women and the household as their heads.
Endnotes


4. Ibid. p. 2.


7. Ibid. vol. 1, No. 1, p. 1.


11. Ibid., p. 21.


15. Ibid., p. 108.

16. Ibid., p. 108.


19. Ibid., p. 2.

20. Ibid., p. 313.

Bibliography

Barbour Collection of Vital Records, Town of Middletown, Conn. at Connecticut State Library, 1651-1854 (microfilm).


First, Fourth and Seventh Census of the United States (1790, 1820, 1850) Connecticut Photostat Copy, 1924, Middlesex County Population.


Middletown, Connecticut Probate Records.


