Family Formation and Age at Marriage in Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec 1854-1891

Peter Gossage*

This article attempts to understand linkages between structural economic change and patterns of family formation in Quebec in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its focus is on marriage age, a demographic variable which, as European studies have shown, is sensitive to economic conditions and opportunities, and an important determinant of family size and structure. Men and women who married for the first time in late nineteenth-century Saint-Hyacinthe married two to three years younger than the provincial average. This pattern echoes that of the early capitalist wage workers studied by the proponents of the proto-industrial model in Europe.

Cet article cherche à élucider les relations entre les modifications structurelles de l'économie et les modalités de formation des ménages au Québec dans la deuxième moitié du 19e siècle. Il étudie plus particulièrement l'âge au premier mariage, une variable démographique qui, comme les historiens européens l'ont montré, est sensible aux conditions et aux possibilités de l'économie, et détermine largement la taille et la structure des ménages. Les hommes et les femmes qui se mariaient pour la première fois à Saint-Hyacinthe, vers la fin du 19e siècle, étaient en général deux à trois ans plus jeunes que la moyenne provinciale. Cette tendance est comparable à celle des premières générations d'ouvriers salariés étudiées par les tenants du modèle de la proto-industrialisation.

Marriage and family formation are important themes in the growing historical literature on family and population. Marriage is, of course, among the most important transitions experienced by individuals, past and present. It sets up the material and symbolic conditions for the daily lives of a majority of people in most societies. It establishes complex webs of social interaction involving not just husbands and wives but wider networks of kin and community. For these reasons, and because it creates the context for socially

---

* Peter Gossage is completing his Ph.D. at the Université du Québec à Montréal and has been teaching at McGill University.

This is a revised version of a paper first presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association in Victoria, in May 1990. The research presented here was funded in part by fellowships granted by the Fondation de l'Université du Québec à Montréal and by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I thank them for their support. I also thank Neil Sutherland and Danielle Gauvreau for useful comments and criticism.

sanctioned reproduction, marriage deserves the attention it has received from social historians.[1]

An important question for researchers in this area concerns the age at which young men and women married. Individual marriage ages are determined by a wide range of factors, including cultural tradition, social norms and material circumstances. They can be influenced by economic opportunity and by household circumstance, by personal choice and by family and community pressure. Even more fundamentally, marriage ages are determined by gender: in virtually every society that has been studied, women marry several years earlier than men.[2]

European historians and demographers have pointed to marriage age as a kind of lynch pin between structural economic change and population growth. Research into the proto-industrial phase of capitalist development has suggested that new opportunities for waged labour in cottage industry removed economic obstacles to early marriage in certain regions. Earlier marriage, through its influence on birth rates, induced rapid demographic growth in those regions and, as the new economic structures spread, in Europe as a whole.[3]

---

1. I adopt John Hajnal's definition of marriage as "...entry into a union which is regarded as appropriate for the bearing and rearing of children in the society in question." In many societies, including our own, this would include consensual unions or 'common-law marriages', which are extremely hard to trace in historical records. The problem does not arise to any extent in a study of nineteenth-century Quebec, where most reproduction occurred within legally and religiously sanctioned unions. John Hajnal, "European Marriage Patterns in Perspective" in D.V. Glass and D.E.C. Eversley, *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1965), p. 105. For a small sample of the literature around marriage, *see* Peter Laslett, "Characteristics of the Western Family Considered over Time" in Laslett, ed., *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations: Essays in Historical Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 12-49; Bengt Ankarloo, "Marriage and Family Formation" in Tamara K. Hareven, ed., *Transitions: The Family and the Life Course in Historical Perspective* (New York: Academic Press, 1978), pp. 113-133; John R. Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Peter Ward, *Courtship, Love and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century English Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).

2. John Hajnal, "European Marriage Patterns", p. 102.

3. Franklin Mendels first formulated the relationship between proto-industry, marriage age and demographic growth. *See* Mendels, "Proto-industrialization: The First Phase of the Industrialization Process", *Journal of Economic History*, 32:1 (1972), pp. 241-261. Many others have since published evidence that supports his view. *See*, for example, David Levine, *Family Formation in an Age of Nascent Capitalism* (New York: Academic Press, 1977); Rudolf Braun, "Early Industrialization and Demographic Change in the Canton of Zürich" in Charles Tilly, ed., *Historical Studies of Changing Fertility* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 289-334. There is also localized evidence to support the opposing view: that proto-industry had no effect on marriage age and that the mainspring of European demographic growth in the Early Modern period must be sought elsewhere. *See* Paul Spagnoli, "Industrialization, Proletarianization and Marriage: A Reconsideration", *Journal of Family History*, 4:4 (1979), pp. 230-247; Christian Vandenbrooke, "Le cas flamand : évolution sociale et comportements démographiques au 17^{e}-19^{e} siècles", *Annales E.S.C.*, 39:5 (1984), pp. 915-935; Myron P. Gutmann, "Protoindustrialization and Marriage Ages in Eastern Belgium", *Annales de démographie historique* (1987), pp. 143-173.

Proponents of the proto-industrial model have been able to build on an understanding of the "European Marriage Pattern" first outlined by John Hajnal in 1965. For most of the Modern period, Western European populations were characterized by a unique marriage pattern which featured relatively high marriage ages (above 23 years for women) and similarly high rates of permanent celibacy (10 to 20 percent for women).[4] The best explanations of this pattern hinge on the contingent nature of the relationship between matrimony and economic autonomy. In Western societies, family formation was not possible until a couple had acquired sufficient capital to set up an independent household. The late marriage ages found in pre-industrial communities, then, were related to the limited number of economic *niches* for newly formed households. Earlier marriage in the nascent capitalist era also reflected a multiplication of economic opportunities, even if those opportunities were in waged labour rather than in land-holding or craft production.[5]

For men in societies characterized by the Western European pattern, including Canada, the link between economic autonomy and family formation was clear. Men had to acquire sufficient land to feed a family, or perhaps the mastery of a craft, before they could contemplate marriage. Joanne Burgess has recently demonstrated the strength of this relationship among leather craftsmen in pre-industrial Quebec. Focusing on Montreal's shoemakers, saddlers and tanners, she has shown the pattern of contingency that existed

4. John Hajnal, "European Marriage Patterns", p. 108. Ellen Thomas-Gee has identified 19th-century Canada as an example of the Western European pattern. Marriage ages and permanent celibacy rates were, despite regional variations, relatively high and certainly comparable to the figures published by Hajnal for Western Europe at the turn of the 20th century. Ellen M. Thomas-Gee, "Marriage in Nineteenth-Century Canada", *Canadian Revue of Sociology and Anthropology*, 19:3 (1982), pp. 311-325. Since the Western European pattern emerged prior to 1600, one should not be surprised that it was transported to this country, even though frontier conditions produced imbalanced sex ratios and, therefore, anomalous marriage ages in the earliest period. Lorne Tepperman has argued that marriage ages are culturally determined and were extremely resistant to transatlantic migration. *See* Lorne Tepperman, "Ethnic Variations in Marriage and Fertility: Canada 1871", *Canadian Revue of Sociology and Anthropology*, 11:4 (1974), pp. 324-343. Neither of these Canadian studies treats the relationship between economic opportunity and marriage age in any depth.

5. Though waged labour provided a certain degree of economic freedom, and therefore removed obstacles to early marriage, it also forced newly formed families to accept a more or less permanent proletarian status, and all the long-term insecurity that goes with it. This position is stated most clearly in David Levine, *Family Formation in an Age of Nascent Capitalism*. The link from economic opportunities to marriage is well explained by Louise Tilly and Joan Scott: "Marriage was, among other things, an economic arrangement, the establishment of a family economy. It required that couples have some means of supporting themselves and, eventually, their children. For peasant children, this meant the availability of land; for artisans, the mastery of a skill and the acquisition of tools and perhaps a workshop. Wives must have a dowry or a means of contributing to the household. Among families with property, these resources most often were passed on from generation to generation." Tilly and Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), p. 24. These conditions, of course, would change with the appearance of mature industrial capitalism in the 19th century.

between the mastery of one of these trades — a process that took a good deal of time — and family formation in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.[6]

For a woman, marriage had other implications. Invariably, it brought a change in the nature of her participation in the family economy. In pre-industrial societies — whether in peasant agriculture or in the urban craft economy —, marriage usually entailed the establishment of a new household production unit, centered on the married couple.[7] In industrializing communities, married women usually withdrew from the formal labour market in favour of reproductive work and domestic management in the household.[8] Most importantly, in demographic terms, marriage meant the onset of socially sanctioned sexual relations and child-bearing. A woman's marriage age was a crucial element in this equation since it determined the number of years she spent at risk of becoming pregnant. The implications for family size and structure need hardly be emphasized.

My own interest in the historical study of marriage and family formation is part of a more general concern with the fundamental socioeconomic changes that were re-shaping Quebec in the second half of the nineteenth century. The rise of industrial capitalism and the growth of wage-labouring populations in Montreal and in a number of smaller manufacturing towns were

6. Joanne Burgess, "Work, Family and Community: Montreal Leather Craftsmen, 1790-1831" (Ph.D. thesis, history, Université du Québec à Montréal, 1986). One should not underestimate the contribution of the wife to the household capital either. European societies were replete with dowry-like customs, which constituted the bride's family's contribution to the establishment of the family economy. Though dowry was not a Quebec tradition, a systematic reading of marriage contracts would probably reveal a wide range of measures which had a similar function.

7. Allan Greer has described gender roles and work on the peasant farms of 18th- and early 19th-century Quebec, while Joanne Burgess has examined Montreal craft households in a similar period. Both found husband and wife performing well defined tasks which were essential to the continued operation of the household production team. To paraphrase Greer, in craft and peasant communities, the family household was the fundamental unit of artisanal and agricultural production. Allan Greer, *Peasant, Lord and Merchant: Rural Society in Three Quebec Parishes, 1740-1840* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), pp. 25-34; Joanne Burgess, "Work, Family and Community", especially Chapter 6, "The Craft Family Economy".

8. Bettina Bradbury makes essentially this point with respect to the working-class women of Montreal. In the Sainte-Anne and Saint-Jacques wards, in the period from 1861 to 1881, for example, only 1 to 5 percent of married women reported wage work to the census taker. Bradbury, "The Working-Class Family Economy: Montreal, 1861-1881" (Ph.D. thesis, history, Concordia University, 1984), Chapter 5. *See also* Bonnie Smith's book on Northern France, where she argues that bourgeois wives lost important productive functions in the course of that region's 19th-century industrialization. Bonnie G. Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoises of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

crucial developments of the period after 1850.[9] The idea that these changes had an important impact on the family and on demographic behaviour runs through this paper, despite recent research which demonstrates the perdurance of family cohesion in the face of structural economic change.[10] While certain continuities have been conclusively demonstrated, it is still worth investigating the notion that some aspects of family structure — perhaps especially the demographic as opposed to the affective and community aspects — were significantly affected by industrial capitalism and, more specifically, by the exigencies of industrial waged labour.[11]

This paper, then, represents an attempt to understand linkages between structural economic change and patterns of family formation in Quebec in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its focus is on marriage age, a demographic variable which, as European studies have shown, is sensitive to economic conditions and opportunities and an important determinant of family size and structure. The data is drawn from a broader study of family formation and demographic behaviour in Saint-Hyacinthe: a study in which household strategies, family size and marriage patterns are being explored against the backdrop of a local example of Quebec's 19th-century industrial development.

---

9. The processes of economic transformation in Quebec are well documented, and run parallel to changes occuring in Western Europe and other parts of North America in the same period. It would be spurious to discuss them at length. The best economic history of Quebec in the period is Jean Hamelin and Yves Roby, *Histoire économique du Québec, 1851-1896* (Montréal : Fides, 1971). *See also* Robert Armstrong, *Structure and Change: An Economic History of Quebec* (Toronto: Gage, 1984). Certain authors focus on Quebec's industrial "lag" with respect to other regions of North America, thereby minimizing the very substantial structural changes that did occur. *See*, for example, Albert Faucher, *Québec en Amérique au 19e siècle : essai sur les caractères économiques de la Laurentie* (Montréal : Fides, 1973); and John McCallum, *Unequal Beginnings: Agriculture and Economic Development in Quebec and Ontario until 1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980). A general survey which covers the main social and economic transformations of the period is Paul-André Linteau, Jean-Claude Robert and René Durocher, *Quebec: A History, 1867-1929*, trans.Robert Chodos (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co., 1983).

10. Much of this work has been inspired, at least in part, by the efforts and ideas of Tamara K. Hareven, who has repeatedly demonstrated the tenacity of family ties in extremely turbulent social and economic contexts. *See*, for example, Tamara Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time: The Relationship between the Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Among the many good Canadian studies which incorporate this view are Bettina Bradbury, "The Working-Class Family Economy", and France Gagnon, "Parenté et migration : le cas des Canadiens français à Montréal entre 1845 et 1875", *Communications historiques/Historical Papers* (1988), pp. 63-85.

11. For a recent statement of a similar position, based on a case study of a French industrial town, *see* Elinor Accampo, *Industrialization, Family Life and Class Relations: Saint-Chamond, 1815-1914* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1989).

Context and Methodology

Saint-Hyacinthe grew into a small manufacturing town in the second half of the 19th century. Located some 50 kilometers east of Montreal, the village on the Yamaska river became a significant regional service center as soon as the Saint Lawrence and Atlantic Railway connected it to the metropolis in 1848. As yet in the 1850s, however, and through the early 1860s, very little industrial development or sustained population growth had occurred. Civic leaders, imbued with the spirit of municipal boosterism, complained of industrial stagnation. Far from attracting migrant industrial workers, the city also failed even to retain its natural increase: between 1861 and 1871, Saint-Hyacinthe's population grew by less than 100 persons, from 3,695 to only 3,746.[12]

This situation had already begun to change in the late 1860s, however. In 1866, industrialist and inventor Louis Côté established Saint-Hyacinthe's first factory, setting the stage for its subsequent industrialization. The local manufacturing sector experienced considerable growth during the 1870s and 1880s. By 1891, Saint-Hyacinthe was fourth among all Canadian cities in terms of value of production in the boot and shoe industry, behind only Montreal, Quebec and Toronto.[13] Other labour intensive "light" industries — including an important knitted goods factory — were established in the town in this period, and a significant but smaller metallurgical sector expanded. The city's population exceeded 5,000 in 1881, 7,000 in 1891, and 9,000 by 1901. Though they mask a territorial annexation in 1888, these figures reflect primarily the growth of an industrial labour force in Saint-Hyacinthe. From about 300 in 1871, this segment of the population grew to about 800 in 1881, almost 1,500 in 1891, and to perhaps 2,500 by the middle of the 1890s.[14] Most of these newcomers — participants in Quebec's late 19th-century "rural exodus" — had come to Saint-Hyacinthe seeking waged labour, in a period when other French Canadians migrated to New England's textile towns or to Montreal.

Saint-Hyacinthe was selected as the object of this case study precisely because it experienced substantial industrial development in the later 19th century, and especially because of the importance of its wage-labouring

---

12. Ronald Rudin, "Saint-Hyacinthe and the Development of a Regional Economy", York University, Department of Geography, Discussion Paper no. 15, Toronto, 1977; Rudin, "The Development of Four Quebec Towns, 1840-1914: A Study of Urban and Economic Growth in Quebec" (Ph.D. thesis, history, York University, 1977). Other accounts of Saint-Hyacinthe's late 19th-century industrialization are found in Mgr C.P. Choquette, *Histoire de la ville de Saint-Hyacinthe* (Saint-Hyacinthe: Richer et fils, 1930); Laurent Lapointe, "La formation de la Banque de Saint-Hyacinthe et le développement économique régional (1850-1875)" (Masters thesis, history, Université de Montréal, 1976); Louise Voyer, *Saint-Hyacinthe : De la seigneurie à la ville québécoise* (Montréal : Éditions Libre Expression, 1980).

13. Jacques Ferland, "Évolution des rapports sociaux dans l'industrie canadienne du cuir au tournant du 20^{e} siècle" (Ph.D. thesis, history, McGill University, 1985), p. 132.

14. Ronald Rudin, "The Development of a Regional Economy", p. 12.

population. As a way of understanding the local demographic situation, a family reconstitution study was conducted for the parish of Saint-Hyacinthe-le-Confesseur in the period 1854-1919.[15] Family reconstitution in urban settings, of course, poses special problems, the most important of which is scale. The Catholic population of the parish of Saint-Hyacinthe, for example, increased from just under 4,500 in 1861 to almost 7,000 thirty years later. For purposes of family reconstitution, even over a relatively short period, this is a very large population indeed. Rather than using the traditional, exhaustive reconstitution technique, then, I decided to reduce the size of the study group by concentrating on three sets of couples who married at three different stages of the town's development. Accordingly, three marriage cohorts were selected, and their marital and reproductive behaviour was traced through the Saint-Hyacinthe parish registers and the local manuscript census schedules for 1861, 1871, 1881 and 1891. The demographic careers of the 289 couples married from 1854 to 1861, the 277 couples married from 1864 to 1871, and 340 of the 450 couples married from 1884 to 1891 were, thus, reconstituted.[16]

This approach is extremely useful for the study of demographic behaviour at the local level. With respect to age at marriage, however, it implies a heavy reliance on declarations of age found in the manuscript census and in

15. The parish of Saint-Hyacinthe-le-Confesseur was created in 1852 as the episcopal seat for the new diocese of Saint-Hyacinthe. It was intended primarily to serve the religious needs of the town of Saint-Hyacinthe. Its boundaries encompassed the town in its entirety, as well as some more thinly settled tracts of land on either bank of the Yamaska, downstream from Saint-Hyacinthe. Ultimately, the urban population of Saint-Hyacinthe spilled over the parish boundaries, particularly into the parish of Notre-Dame-du-Rosaire, part of which was annexed by the city of Saint-Hyacinthe in 1888. But from 1854, when the parish register was opened, to the creation of the parish of Christ-Roi in the lower part of the town in 1927, the Cathedral of Saint-Hyacinthe-le-Confesseur served the needs of the great majority of the town's residents, over 90 percent of whom were French Canadian and Catholic. Studying the population of the Catholic parish of Saint-Hyacinthe-le-Confesseur, then, is a rather good way of studying the population of the town of Saint-Hyacinthe. It has the added advantage of incorporating a small rural population, which can be referred to as a point of comparison.

16. The 1854-61 and 1864-71 cohorts include all couples married in the parish in those years. The third cohort constitutes a 75 percent systematic sample of the marriages celebrated between 1884 and 1891. This procedure was adopted to keep the sizes of the three cohorts approximately the same (around 300). The periods were selected to correspond to progressive stages in the town's industrialization. The last year of each period corresponds to a census to facilitate linkage from marriage acts to these documents. The level of about 300 couples per cohort was chosen with the full knowledge that the number of reconstituted families would ultimately be much smaller. Because of various forms of mobility (including matrimonial exchange between parishes and simple out-migration) and attrition due to mortality, the number of couples available for analysis was expected to be closer to 100 per cohort. Without going into the precise figures, and depending on what aspect of family formation is under investigation, this prediction turns out to have been fairly accurate. The "marriage-cohort" method was suggested to me by Raymond Roy, Danielle Gauvreau and other researchers during a visit to the Centre Interuniversitaire de Recherches sur les Populations at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (SOREP) in April of 1987. I owe them my thanks. A similar technique was used by Elinor Accampo in her study of Saint-Chamond. Elinor Accampo, *Industrialization, Family Life and Class Relations.*

death certificates. Since any uncritical use of such declarations involves unacceptable risks, some discussion of the way these data were collected, tested and ultimately used is necessary. Most of this discussion has been relegated to an appendix.[17] But to summarize the method briefly, most of the marriage ages examined here are careful approximations, based on anywhere from one to five declarations of age. For each declaration, an implied birth year was calculated by subtracting the stated age from the date of the event (census or burial). In cases where more than one age declaration was available, the implied birth years thus generated were compared to each other, their consistency evaluated, and where necessary, a selection made.[18] These birth-year estimates were assigned codes which reflect their reliability, defined in terms of the amount of age information available and its internal consistency. Most of the analyses given in the paper will use these estimation codes as a sorting criterion. Each set of marriage ages will be presented twice, once using all the available age information, and a second time using only those marriage ages which are the most reliable.[19]

Men's Marriage Ages

Table 1 gives the male mean age at first marriage in the parish of Saint-Hyacinthe-le-Confesseur for the three periods under review. The most striking thing about the men who married in the parish is their youth. Looking only at the best available age values, the average age at first marriage for men in Saint-Hyacinthe ranged between 23.2 years in 1854-61 and 24.2 years in 1884-91. In contrast, as Table 2 indicates, the singulate mean age at first marriage for men in all of Quebec increased from 26.5 years in 1861 to 27.2 years in 1891.[20] Men in Saint-Hyacinthe, then, consistently married some three years earlier than the provincial average.[21] There is also a trend in this data which merits emphasis: by the 1880s, men were marrying about a year later

17. *See* appendix, "On the Use of Declared Ages".

18. Note that there are some 53 marriage partners for whom any manipulation of age declarations was unnecessary because we already had — mainly through good fortune — access to precise birth dates. *See* appendix, "On the Use of Declared Ages".

19. It was possible to generate marriage ages for 502 of the 912 husbands and 527 of the 912 wives in the three cohorts. Over half (54 percent) of these calculated ages are what I refer to in the tables and in the text as 'best values'. This is to say that they are either based on known birth dates (5 percent) or on two or more census or burial declarations that match to within a tolerance of two years (49 percent). Fuller explanations are available in the appendix to this article.

20. The 'singulate mean' is a measure of the average age at first marriage which can be calculated on the basis of aggregate census data. Since it is based on an uncritical use of census age declarations, it can be considered a somewhat less reliable measure than the cohort means used in this paper. *See* John Hajnal, "Age at Marriage and Proportion Marrying", *Population Studies*, 7:3 (1953), pp. 11-136.

21. They also married one to two years earlier than the Canadian-born men in a multi-denominational collection of parishes in mid 19th-century Ontario. *See* Peter Ward, *Courtship, Love and Marriage*, Appendix A-1, p. 179.

than they had done in the 1850s. In this respect, the young men in this parish were behaving similarly to men in other regions of Quebec and Canada.[22]

Table 1 Men's Mean Age at First Marriage, Parish of Saint-Hyacinthe 1854-1861, 1864-1871 and 1884-1891

	Best Values			All Values		
	Mean	St. Dev.	N	Mean	St. Dev.	N
1854-1861	23.2	3.6	65	23.3	4.5	122
1864-1871	23.7	4.7	93	24.2	5.7	128
1884-1891	24.2	5.3	53	24.0	6.0	140

Note: 'Best Values' — At least two age declarations (census or burial), two of which yield birth-year estimates that agree to within a tolerance of two years.
'All Values' — All husbands for whom any age-information is available.

Sources: Parishes of Saint-Hyacinthe-le-Confesseur, St-Joseph, Christ-Roi, Sacré-Cœur, Registres des baptêmes, mariages et sépultures, 1854-1948. Manuscript census for Saint-Hyacinthe, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891.

Table 2 Singulate Mean Age at First Marriage for Men Quebec (total), Montreal and the Saguenay Region 1852-1891

	Quebec (total)	Montreal	Saguenay
1852	25.5	25.5	24.6
1861	26.5	26.5	25.3
1871	26.8	26.2	25.4
1881	26.8	26.5	25.4
1891	27.2	27.9	25.9

Source: Christian Pouyez, Yolande Lavoie *et al., Les saguenayéens : Introduction à l'histoire des populations du Saguenay, XVI^e-XX^e siècles* (Sillery : Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1983), Tableau 6.10, p. 270.

These figures on men's marriage ages are broken down by occupational category in Table 3.[23] The figures for the 1850s are hard to interpret. But a clear pattern of social differentiation emerges in the figures for the 1860s and

22. Historians and demographers have had a great deal of difficulty explaining the 'enigma' of rising marriage ages in later 19th-century Canada. For a review of the literature concerning English Canada, *see* Peter Ward, *Courtship, Love and Marriage*, pp. 54-55.

23. These categories require a comment. The first category, 'Agriculture', is made up almost exclusively of farmers, though one or two gardeners have been included here as well. The second category, labelled 'Urban Manual' in the tables, should more properly be called 'Non-Agricultural Manual'. It includes all non-agricultural manual workers, except general labourers, for whom a third category has been set up. I thought it necessary to distinguish labourers from other manual workers because of the difficulty in determining whether a 'journalier' worked in agriculture or in an urban trade or industry. The final category, 'bourgeois', includes all non-manual occupations whether in commerce, the professions, services, transportation or manufacturing.

persists into the 1880s. One can think of this pattern as three-tiered. Labourers married earliest in the 1860s and the 1880s, with average ages of between 19 and 23. Slightly older were urban manual workers, whose mean marriage age ranged from 22 to 24. The third tier includes farmers and non-manual workers, who married substantially later: the mean age of grooms in these two categories in Saint-Hyacinthe was between 25 and 28 years.

Table 3 **Men's Age at First Marriage by Occupational Category Parish of Saint-Hyacinthe 1854-1861, 1864-1871, 1884-1881**

	Best Values			All Values		
	Mean	St. Dev.	N	Mean	St. Dev.	N
1854-1861						
Agriculture	23.7	4.7	19	23.2	4.5	30
Urban Manual	22.8	2.9	29	23.0	3.4	56
Labourers	24.5	4.3	8	24.7	4.6	14
Bourgeois	22.8	1.5	5	25.0	5.0	11
1864-1871						
Agriculture	25.1	5.4	20	26.0	6.1	26
Urban Manual	22.7	3.8	37	24.0	6.2	53
Labourers	22.6	5.1	13	21.6	4.9	17
Bourgeois	25.3	5.1	19	25.2	4.6	26
1884-1891						
Agriculture	27.0	4.6	6	26.2	6.2	17
Urban Manual	23.1	3.7	36	23.4	6.1	91
Labourers	19.5	0.7	2	21.2	2.2	9
Bourgeois	27.9	8.5	9	26.1	5.9	23

Note: The 'Urban-Manual' category includes all non-agricultural manual workers, except 'journaliers'. The 'Bourgeois' category includes all those who declared non-manual occupations, whether in commerce, the professions, public service or otherwise.

Sources: Parishes of Saint-Hyacinthe-le-Confesseur, St-Joseph, Christ-Roi, Sacré-Cœur, Registres des baptêmes, mariages et sépultures, 1854-1948. Manuscript census for Saint-Hyacinthe, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891.

In Saint-Hyacinthe, then, farmers and men who practised non-manual occupations married some three to four years later than urban manual workers. Urban manual workers (those that declared a specific, non-agricultural manual occupation) married a year or two later than 'journaliers'.

To get a better sense of the longitudinal trends in men's marriage ages, we can briefly examine each occupational category separately. Unfortunately, the data in the 'bourgeois' category are slightly ambiguous. If we consider all age values, the mean age seems to have been consistently high, and rising only

marginally in the period. The picture painted by the 'best values', however, is of a much lower initial level and a much sharper increase.[24]

The trends in the other three occupational categories are clearer. Farmers married about three years later in the 1880s (26-27 years old) than they had done in the 1850s (23-24). This may well have had to do with the changing structure of agriculture in the period. Arguably, as farms in the region became bigger and more commercialized, access to farming as an occupation became increasingly difficult. Here, then, is an example of a restriction on economic opportunities exerting an upward pressure on men's marriage ages.[25]

In contrast, the marriage ages of urban manual workers remained very low indeed in this interval. Looking at 'all values', the mean age at first marriage for husbands in this category hovered between 23 and 24 years throughout the period, with an extremely slight upward trend. 'Best values' give the impression of a marginally lower and very stable mean marriage age: around 23 years. Reasons for this pattern of earlier marriage in the urban working class are not hard to imagine. Young men employed in the local leather and knitted-goods factories needed fewer material resources in order to marry. They formed families on the basis of access to a wage rather than an accumulation of capital or skill. Since their wage-earning potential was not appreciably higher in their late twenties than in their early twenties, urban manual workers reached a point where they could "afford" to marry earlier than farmers or bourgeois.

Finally, though by the 1880s we are looking at only a handful of labourers, it is clear that their marriage ages had been in sharp decline since the 1850s. Considering all age values, the mean age at first marriage for 'journaliers' fell from 24.7 in the 1850s, to 21.6 in the 1860s and, finally, to 21.2 in the 1880s. This shift may be related to the changing structure of economic opportunity for 'journaliers' — or day-labourers — in Saint-Hyacinthe. In the 1850s, a labourer who married in the parish was quite likely to have been an agricultural field worker — perhaps a prospective farmer awaiting his opportunity to acquire land. Later marriage under these circumstances would not be surprising. By the 1880s, on the other hand, a 'journalier' in Saint-Hyacinthe was probably a waged labourer in one of the new industrial concerns. His behaviour — with respect to the timing of family formation — would therefore be inclined to resemble that of other non-agricultural manual workers, who by and large married early.

---

24. The ambiguity for the 1850s is probably the result of the very small number of cases, and it seems likely that marriage ages for men engaged in non-manual occupations were consistently high (above 25 years) and rising perceptibly in the second half of the nineteenth century.

25. On the other hand, one might argue that Saint-Hyacinthe's farmers were simply conforming to the pan-Canadian trend toward later marriage, a pattern that needs an explanation that goes beyond local or regional economic factors.

The ages at which men first married suggest a clear pattern of social differentiation in Saint-Hyacinthe in the second half of the nineteenth century. As we have seen, the trend toward delayed marriage that shows up in the aggregate data was in fact limited to husbands who were engaged in agriculture or in non-manual occupations. The average age at first marriage for non-agricultural manual workers in Saint-Hyacinthe remained extremely low. And general labourers were marrying earlier at the end of the period, when industrial work was available, than they had been at the beginning, when it was not.

This pattern of substantially earlier marriage in the urban manual and labourer categories fits well with our assumptions about the link between family formation and economic autonomy. Professionals, merchants and others in non-manual occupations needed time to establish themselves in business, or to acquire the education necessary to practice medicine or the law. Farmers might need to delay marriage until they could acquire sufficient capital (in the form of land, livestock and equipment) to support a young family. Clearly, these economic obstacles to early marriage did not operate in the same way within the urban working class. As a result, urban manual workers did not share in the trend toward later marriage which affected men working in other sectors of the economy. General labourers — propertyless and wage-dependent by definition — were behaving like the urban manual workers by the 1860s, and marrying even earlier by the 1880s.

This analysis of male marriage ages seems to support the hypothesis that propertylessness removed constraints on early marriage, even in a situation — such as later nineteenth-century Quebec — where overall marriage ages were increasing. The fact that most of Quebec's population was still rural and agricultural in this period, of course, needs to be kept in mind when comparing figures from an industrializing town like Saint-Hyacinthe to those from the province as a whole.

Women's Marriage Ages

Table 4 gives mean age at first marriage for the women in the three cohorts for whom this value could be calculated. Like their husbands, these Saint-Hyacinthe women married at a very early age: about three years earlier than the provincial average. Looking only at the best available data for the moment, women's mean marriage ages in the parish were between 21.2 and 22.2 years in each of the three periods examined. These averages are well below the singulate mean age at first marriage for Quebec women, which was between 24 and 25 years through most of this period (*see* Table 5). They are also slightly below the threshold of 23 years which Hajnal has stated as the lower limit of the "European marriage pattern".[26] Saint-Hyacinthe women, then, married very early by Western European (and North American) standards.

26. *See* above (footnote 5).

Table 4 Women's Mean Age at First Marriage, Parish of Saint-Hyacinthe 1854-1861, 1864-1871 and 1884-1891

	Best Values			All Values		
	Mean	St. Dev.	N	Mean	St. Dev.	N
1854-1861	21.7	5.2	81	21.2	5.5	148
1864-1871	21.2	6.3	100	22.4	6.2	141
1884-1891	22.2	5.8	76	22.7	6.8	175

Note: 'Best Values' — At least two age declarations (census or burial), two of which yield birth-year estimates that agree to within a tolerance of two years.
'All Values' — All wives for whom any age-information is available.

Sources: Parishes of Saint-Hyacinthe-le-Confesseur, St-Joseph, Christ-Roi, Sacré-Cœur, Registres des baptêmes, mariages et sépultures, 1854-1948. Manuscript census for Saint-Hyacinthe, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891.

Table 5 Singulate Mean Age at First Marriage for Women Quebec (total), Montreal and the Saguenay Region 1852-1891

	Quebec (total)	Montreal	Saguenay
1852	23.7	23.1	18.9
1861	24.5	25.4	21.2
1871	24.9	25.0	22.3
1881	24.8	24.2	23.2
1891	24.7	25.8	23.1

Source: Christian Pouyez, Yolande Lavoie *et al.*, *Les saguenayéens : Introduction à l'histoire des populations du Saguenay, XVI^e-XX^e siècles* (Sillery : Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1983), Tableau 6.10, p. 270.

It is also evident from Table 4 that women in the parish were marrying slightly later towards the end of the period than they had been near the beginning. The timing and magnitude of this shift, however, is somewhat unclear. If one assumes that the 'best values' yield the better approximation of overall trends, then, it appears that women's mean marriage age actually declined in Saint-Hyacinthe between the later 1850s and the later 1860s. Such a movement may correspond to high levels of nuptiality in the parish, which was perhaps less seriously affected by emigration than other regions of Quebec.[27] After 1871, Saint-Hyacinthe women shared in the trend toward delayed marriage which was characteristic of Quebec as a whole. They

27. I have calculated nuptiality rates of between 8 and 9 per thousand for the parish between 1861 and 1891. Jacques Henripin and Yves Péron give a rate of 7.4 per thousand for the Catholic population of Quebec between 1851 and 1930. This constitutes a decline from earlier levels (8.5 per thousand between 1766 and 1850) which is explained by Henripin and Péron in terms of higher rates of emigration. Jacques Henripin and Yves Péron, "La transition démographique de la province de Québec" in Hubert Charbonneau, ed., *La population du Québec : études rétrospectives* (Montréal : Boréal Express, 1973), p. 36.

continued to marry some two years earlier than the provincial average, however, and some three years earlier than Montreal women.[28]

A woman's class position affected the timing of her transition to married life. This can be demonstrated by examining the occupations of her husband and father. Table 6 compares the wife's marriage age to the husband's occupational category. Despite some slight ambiguities, a familiar pattern emerges clearly enough: the brides of men in non-manual occupations were consistently older than women who married manual workers. This relationship was certainly present from the 1860s on. The mean marriage age for the wives of bourgeois men was over 25 years in the 1860s: some three or four years higher than in the population as a whole. The gap had narrowed slightly by the 1880s; but at 24 or 25 years, the average age of the wives of bourgeois men was about two years higher than the mean for all Saint-Hyacinthe women.

Table 6 **Women's Age at First Marriage by Husband's Occupational Category, Parish of Saint-Hyacinthe 1854-1861, 1864-1871, 1884-1881**

	Best Values			All Values		
	Mean	St. Dev.	N	Mean	St. Dev.	N
1854-1861						
Agriculture	22.0	5.5	22	21.0	5.9	36
Urban Manual	21.0	4.9	35	21.1	5.3	66
Labourers	22.6	5.9	11	23.2	5.3	21
Bourgeois	23.4	4.9	10	21.2	6.1	14
1864-1871						
Agriculture	21.5	4.8	22	22.5	5.3	30
Urban Manual	21.2	4.9	40	21.5	4.7	55
Labourers	21.3	5.1	12	21.3	5.8	18
Bourgeois	25.5	9.1	23	25.1	8.8	32
1884-1891						
Agriculture	20.3	4.4	9	22.9	7.4	22
Urban Manual	22.3	6.2	50	21.8	5.7	109
Labourers	19.5	2.6	4	22.1	7.9	8
Bourgeois	23.7	5.7	13	25.1	8.5	36

Sources: Parishes of Saint-Hyacinthe-le-Confesseur, St-Joseph, Christ-Roi, Sacré-Cœur, Registres des baptêmes, mariages et sépultures, 1854-1948. Manuscript census for Saint-Hyacinthe, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891.

28. According to Ward's figures, Canadian-born women in Ontario experienced a sharper rise in marriage age in this period, starting from a lower initial level in the 1850s. Ward, *Courtship, Love and Marriage*, Appendix A-1, p. 179.

Table 7 **Women's Age at First Marriage by Father's Occupational Category, Parish of Saint-Hyacinthe 1854-1861, 1864-1871, 1884-1881**

	Best Values			All Values		
	Mean	St. Dev.	N	Mean	St. Dev.	N
1854-1861						
Agriculture	20.2	3.8	17	19.7	4.2	30
Urban Manual	19.0	2.4	7	18.2	2.5	19
Labourers	22.0	4.6	5	19.1	5.3	11
Bourgeois	20.1	2.3	8	20.2	2.1	10
1864-1871						
Agriculture	24.3	8.4	35	24.0	7.6	47
Urban Manual	19.7	3.1	23	19.8	3.3	31
Labourers	20.0	2.8	7	21.2	4.8	13
Bourgeois	23.8	5.4	13	24.7	6.1	20
1884-1891						
Agriculture	23.5	6.3	13	24.4	8.3	40
Urban Manual	20.6	3.7	31	20.7	3.8	61
Labourers	19.7	3.4	6	20.9	6.4	11
Bourgeois	24.1	8.2	19	24.4	8.1	44

Sources: Parishes of Saint-Hyacinthe-le-Confesseur, St-Joseph, Christ-Roi, Sacré-Cœur, Registres des baptêmes, mariages et sépultures, 1854-1948. Manuscript census for Saint-Hyacinthe, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891.

The suggestion that bourgeois women married later than women from the popular classes can be further supported if we examine the occupations of the fathers of women who married in the parish during the three study periods. Though the numbers are smaller (we have more occupational data for husbands than for wives' fathers), the trends revealed in Table 7 corroborate those presented in Table 6. From the 1860s on, the daughters of men engaged in non-manual occupations and in agriculture were marrying three to four years later than the daughters of urban manual workers and 'journaliers'. As with male marriage ages, there is a striking pattern of differentiation among the four occupationally-defined categories. In the 1850s, women's marriage ages were uniformly low. Looking at all available values, the mean age in each category was between 18 and 20 years in this early period. In the 1860s, whether we consider 'all values' or 'best values', there was a new pattern in which, on average, the daughters of farmers and non-manual workers married around age 24, while the daughters of urban manual workers and general labourers married between age 20 and 21. This pattern persisted in the 1880s, except for the fact that the mean for daughters of urban manual workers — now the largest single group — had risen by perhaps a year in the interval. In almost every other respect, the figures were precisely what they had been twenty years earlier: daughters of bourgeois and farmers married at an average age of about 24 (with considerable dispersion around the mean), while women from

an urban manual or labouring background married, on average, at 20 or 21 (with a good deal less variation from the central tendency).

This analysis demonstrates that bourgeois women, like the bourgeois men they most often wed, were generally several years older than working-class brides. It also shows that daughters of farmers married later than the daughters of urban manual workers, and by a similar margin. One possible explanation of this pattern may be that many of the farmer's daughters who married in Saint-Hyacinthe were recent migrants to the town. Young single women who had come from the countryside in search of employment in domestic service, commerce or industry might be expected to marry later than non-migrant women.[29] Another explanation might simply be that farmer's daughters very often married farmers. As I have suggested, young men engaged in agriculture needed time to acquire the capital necessary to start up a farm household. For a couple to delay their marriage under such circumstances would not be surprising.

A final observation that must be made is that this socially differentiated pattern was just emerging in the period under review. By the 1860s, the propertied elements in this community had begun to behave quite differently from the working class, at least as far as marriage ages were concerned.[30] Surely, the new economic structures appearing in the period and the emergence of well-defined bourgeois and wage-labouring elements in the local population had much to do with this change. Further analysis of the family-reconstitution data is needed to determine whether this degree of social differentiation can be detected for other demographic variables, such as fertility.

So far, we have considered a woman's marriage age only as a function of her socio-economic status. There were, of course, many other influences on a woman's choice about when and whether to marry. One of these was participation in the formal labour market. Quebec's 19th-century parish registers, however, are all but silent on the subject of women's paid labour. Of all the brides in the three cohorts, there are only nine for whom I have both an

29. This was the case in mid 19th-century Buffalo, New York, for example. *See* Laurence Glasco, "Migration and Adjustment in the Nineteenth-Century City: Occupation, Property and Household Structure of Native-Born Whites, Buffalo, New York, 1855" in Tamara Hareven and Maris Vinovskis, eds, *Family and Population in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

30. One has to be rather careful with this, particularly where the 'urban manual' category is concerned, since many of the men in this category — particularly in the 1850s and 1860s, though to a much lesser degree in the 1880s — might have been small independent craftsmen. Assuming that their daughters were from an 'unpropertied' background, then, may be incorrect. On the other hand, one might also assume that the value of the property owned by, say, a carter or a blacksmith, would have been considerably less than the value of a substantial farm, or an important commercial establishment.

age at (first) marriage and an indication of labour-force participation prior to the wedding.[31] Their behaviour does not look exceptional when one considers the three teachers who married in the 1860s at ages 20, 22 and 24 respectively, or the 21 year-old tannery worker who married at the beginning of the 1890s. On the other hand, a pattern of delayed marriages seems to emerge when one looks specifically at the five seamstresses ('couturières') in the group. Spread across two cohorts, these five women had an average age at first marriage of 26 years. Three of these women, Arzélia, Sophronie and Victoria Tremblay were sisters whose parental household situation was particularly bleak. Their father, a labourer, had died in 1874 when they were between 8 and 16 years of age. In 1881, they were living with their widowed mother and two single women, aged 27 and 49. All six women in the household gave the occupation 'couturière' to the census taker.[32] None of the three Tremblay sisters would marry before age 25.

The case of the Tremblay sisters illustrates not only the possible impact of women's waged labour on marriage ages, but also familial circumstances which might either prevent a woman from marrying, or delay the event.[33] One such circumstance was poverty. Young women who could contribute their domestic labour and bring in a wage were valued assets in working-class households. A daughter's contribution to the family economy would become even more important in the event of parental death or disability. In households where the principle wage earner — generally the husband/father — died or became too ill to work, the labour of older daughters (and sons, for that matter) was essential to the family's survival.[34] Many women in these situations may have declined or hesitated to form new families because they knew that their labour was indispensable to the continued existence of the old.

---

31. These indications are in four cases occupational mentions in the marriage acts; in five instances where I have been able to situate women in their parents' households prior to marriage, the information comes from the census. Four of the wives were from the 1860s cohort: three of these were teachers ('institutrices') prior to their weddings and one was a seamstress ('couturière'). The remaining five all married in the 1884-91 cohort. Four were seamstresses and one worked in a tannery.

32. This probably meant that they were all industrial out-workers, either in the clothing trade or in the local boot and shoe industry, which employed women working in their homes to sew together certain components of their products. The importance of out-work in the local economy is a subject which has yet to be fully studied.

33. Louise Tilly, studying the cotton-textile town of Roubaix, France, in the period 1872-1906, puts the relationship in these terms: "There was a tension between generational interests in families. Parents wished to keep their children in the household as wage earners, which tended to push marriage age up." Louise Tilly, "The Family Wage Economy of a French Textile City: Roubaix, 1872-1906", *Journal of Family History*, 4:4 (1979), p. 386.

34. Some of the effects of parental death or disability on Montreal households in the 19th century are discussed in Bettina Bradbury, "The Fragmented Family: Family Strategies in the Face of Death, Illness and Poverty, Montreal, 1860-1885" in Joy Parr, ed., *Childhood and Family in Canadian History* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1982), pp. 109-128.

Labour-force participation prior to marriage, poverty and parental death or disability may well have influenced women's marriage ages in Saint-Hyacinthe. The three Tremblay sisters provide an example, for they were forced into a very poorly paid sector of the labour market by a form of poverty which was related to the death of their father. All three factors combined to keep them out of the marriage market until a relatively advanced age.

Marriage Ages Compared

One final line of analysis is in order before concluding this discussion of marriage ages. We have seen that on average, men married about two years later than women. But this tells us nothing about the relative ages of any two marriage partners, except that the husband was likely to be somewhat older. It would be interesting to know whether wives in certain occupationally-defined groups were likely to be closer in age to their husbands and to see whether these age differences varied over time.[35] To find out, it is necessary to examine age differentials on a couple-by-couple basis.[36]

The Saint-Hyacinthe data on the difference between a man's age at first marriage and that of his bride is found in Table 8. As with men's and women's marriage ages, a clear pattern of social differentiation emerges. The age difference between farmers and their brides underwent negligible change in this period. It was relatively high — on the order of 3.5 to 4 years — for each of the three study groups. This is also true of the bourgeois group, where the average age differential was at least 4 years in each of the three periods. In the urban manual group, however, differences in age between husband and wife were always narrower than among bourgeois and farmers. Stable at 3.1 years in the 1850s and 1860s, they had declined to 2.2 years by the 1880s. The numbers for labourers and their wives, though very small, are even more interesting. They declined from a level comparable to that of farmers (3.6 years) in the 1850s to a level below even that of urban manual workers (1.3 years) in the 1880s.

---

35. Laslett considers a relatively narrow age differential, with women marrying men younger than themselves fairly frequently, to be a component of the traditional western marriage pattern, which he characterizes as "companionate". Peter Laslett, "Characteristics of the Western Family". Jean-Pierre Bardet provides some very interesting data for Rouen. He demonstrates that bourgeois men were older in general at their first marriage than men from the popular classes, but that the women they married tended to be younger than the women who married manual workers. The age-gaps in the bourgeois group, then, tended to be wide: "Les notables choisissent des jeunesses; les ouvriers s'unissent à leurs contemporains." Jean-Pierre Bardet, *Rouen aux 17^e^ et 18^e^ siècles : les mutations d'un espace social* (Paris : Société d'édition d'enseignement supérieur, 1983), p. 256.

36. Only those couples where both parties were marrying for the first time, where age information is available for both parties, and where the husband's occupation is known can be included. It is also necessary to use all the available age data since restricting the analysis to 'best values' reduces the size of the data set to an unacceptable degree.

Table 8 Mean Difference between Husbands' and Wives' Marriage Ages First Marriage for Both Parties by Husband's Occupational Category Using All Available Age Values, Parish of Saint-Hyacinthe 1854-1861, 1864-1871, 1884-1881

	Mean	N
1854-1861		
Agriculture	3.7	30
Urban Manual	3.1	55
Labourers	3.6	13
Bourgeois	4.1	11
1864-1871		
Agriculture	3.8	25
Urban Manual	3.1	48
Labourers	2.1	16
Bourgeois	4.0	21
1884-1891		
Agriculture	3.5	13
Urban Manual	2.2	85
Labourers	1.3	6
Bourgeois	4.3	22

Sources: Parishes of Saint-Hyacinthe-le-Confesseur, St-Joseph, Christ-Roi, Sacré-Cœur, Registres des baptêmes, mariages et sépultures, 1854-1948. Manuscript census for Saint-Hyacinthe, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891.

As with men's and women's marriage ages, then, the difference in age between bride and groom seems to have been socially specific. The pattern of differentiation, as with the ages themselves, was much clearer in the 1860s and 1880s than it had been in the 1850s. From the 1860s on, labourers and urban manual workers were considerably closer in age to their wives than non-manual workers and farmers: roughly the pattern identified by Bardet for Rouen. Whether this is an index of a fundamental change in the nature of marriage within the urban working class — perhaps a hint of a more 'companionate' form of marriage in this segment of society — is an open question which only further research could answer.

Conclusions

Men and women who married for the first time in later 19th-century Saint-Hyacinthe, then, did so early. The average age for women was between 21 and 23 years; for men, it was 23 to 25. These values are two to three years below figures for Quebec as a whole in the same period.

These averages should not be allowed to mask important variations over time, and among the various occupational groups. Several kinds of social differentiation with respect to age at marriage had developed by the 1860s. On average, men in the bourgeois and agricultural categories waited several years

longer to form families than 'journaliers' and urban manual workers. Similarly, the daughters of farmers and non-manual workers married considerably later than the daughters of urban manual workers and 'journaliers'. And increasingly during the period, urban manual workers moved closer in age to their brides, while age differences in the non-manual and agricultural categories remained wide.

These patterns suggest a strong relationship between economic autonomy and family formation. Farmers and their brides (very often the daughters of other farmers) needed access to sufficient land to support a family before they could contemplate marriage. Whether that land was acquired through purchase or through some form of inheritance (such as inter-vivos transfers), a waiting period might well be involved. Similarly, professionals and others in non-manual occupations needed time to acquire an education or sufficient capital to go into business on their own account. Certain bourgeois standards, moreover, would have to be met in the new household; many 19th-century marriage contracts — increasingly middle-class instruments — required the husband to support the wife at a level consistent with her class background.[37] That meant saving, and saving took time.

A woman's socio-economic background influenced her marriage age as well. Here, however, the link to economic autonomy is less clear. What seems to be emerging by the 1860s is a new social norm of later marriage among women from propertied backgrounds. But whether these women were simply waiting for their prospective husbands (in most cases from a similar background) to acquire the capital necessary for family formation, or whether there was a more subtle mechanism at work is not immediately clear.

What is very clear, on the other hand, is that men who worked in urban manual trades married very early throughout this period, as did women whose husbands and/or fathers worked in such occupations. This is not a pattern that one would expect if the urban manual workers marrying in Saint-Hyacinthe in this period had been independent craft producers, whose long apprenticeships had exerted upward pressures on marriage age in pre-industrial societies, Quebec included. Nor does it fit particularly well with aggregate trends toward later marriage which have been documented for Quebec and other parts of Canada in the later 19th century. Rather, it is a pattern which echoes that of the early capitalist wage workers studied by the proponents of the proto-industrial model in Europe. While marriage ages among Saint-Hyacinthe's manual workers did not fall as opportunities for waged labour became more abundant after 1865 (in fact it is hard to imagine them marrying much earlier than they had in the 1850s), they did manage to resist the pressures toward delayed marriage which affected other groups in the community.

---

37. This is my own observation, based on a reading of several hundred marriage contracts written in Montreal in the 1840s. This research is reported in Bettina Bradbury, Peter Gossage, Jane Greenlaw, Evelyn Kolish, Alan Stewart and Jennifer Waywell, "Régimes matrimoniaux : le droit et la pratique à Montréal, 1820-1845" (forthcoming).

Manual workers in industrializing Saint-Hyacinthe had two things in common with the cottagers of Early Modern Europe: their dependence on a wage for survival and their pattern of extremely youthful marriage. In this paper, I have tried to establish a causal link between these two characteristics. As the European literature shows, early marriage can be expected under proletarian conditions because a whole range of obstacles to family formation is removed. Though the structural economic conditions that characterized small towns in later 19th-century Quebec were not strictly proto-industrial, a similar relationship of contingency between economic autonomy and matrimony certainly existed. This relationship can be read in the socially differentiated patterns of family formation that are evident in Saint-Hyacinthe from the 1860s through the beginning of the 1890s. There can be no doubt that these differentials were related not only to individual choices, but to a particular set of economic constraints and opportunities located in a larger context of structural economic transformation.

Appendix

On the Use of Declared Ages

The parish priests who wrote Catholic marriage acts in 19th-century Quebec made no mention either of the age of the bride and groom or of their birth dates.[1] Under these circumstances, and assuming that one has adopted the marriage cohort approach to family reconstitution, there are two options. Given sufficient time and resources, it is possible to trace the baptism acts of all the husbands and wives in the cohorts, using standard genealogical techniques. Otherwise, one must make careful use of the age declarations found in the manuscript census schedules and burial acts. This is the option that was adopted for the present study. The procedure was as follows.

Firstly, all available age declarations for each husband and wife were collected from the census and from burials. Individual age-information dossiers were thus generated as part of the process of reconstitution.

Secondly, each individual's age dossier was examined carefully, with a view toward generating the best possible estimate of his or her birth year. A dossier might contain no information at all: this was in fact the case for 410 of the 912 husbands in the three cohorts and for 385 of the wives. It might also contain a precise birth date: this was mainly true of individuals who entered the third cohort as husbands or wives and who were sons or daughters of couples in the first two cohorts. Some birth dates have been recovered in other ways, but the total is still only 53 of the 1,824 marriage partners in the three cohorts. A little more than half of the dossiers contained from one to five age declarations. These had to be handled with the utmost care.

Before any decisions were made, a number of tests were undertaken. Those dossiers where precise birth dates **and** one or more declarations were available were given special attention. Of 32 census declarations that could be tested in this way (all but one from the 1891 census), 17 were exactly accurate (to the year), 27 were accurate to within plus or minus one year, and none of the remaining five declarations was more than three years off the mark. Twenty-two burial declarations were assessed in a similar way, with equally encouraging results: 15 were accurate to the year and a further 5 showed discrepancies of only one year.

Census and burial declarations were also examined for evidence of rounding. Ages ending in zero were found in the census more frequently than one would expect if no rounding had occurred, especially among older

1. They did indicate whether the principles were above or below the age of majority, and this information can be of some help in verifying age declarations found elsewhere.

individuals. Fifteen percent of husbands and wives in their thirties and forties declared ages ending in zero (based on 704 declarations) while 19 percent of those aged 50 and over did the same (227 cases).[2] Accordingly, census declarations ending in zero were treated as fragile, especially where older people were concerned.

Finally, special attention was paid to the extent to which the various declarations in a dossier corroborated each other. Birth years were calculated from each declaration and then compared visually on a case by case basis. The principle applied here was that while a single age declaration might be wildly inaccurate, two or more declarations that indicated roughly the same birth date were extremely unlikely to be so.

Once these tests were completed, individual decisions were made about the likeliest birth year, and codes were assigned to reflect how those decisions were made. These birth-year estimation codes consist of two parts: a one-digit hierarchical code that broadly reflects the quality of the estimate, and a three-digit code that carries further information about the estimate, including the total number of declarations in the dossier, the range of possible birth years implied by these declarations, and the criterion applied in the final decision. In a general way, and in accordance with the principle stated in the preceding paragraph, the **modal** value was selected where it was clear, though more arbitrary criteria had to be introduced where it was not.

For present purposes, we can restrict our attention to the one-digit hierarchical codes, which provide a quick summary of the age information used in this paper. There are five codes, given here in descending order of the reliability of the birth-year estimates to which they pertain:

0 – Birth date is known; no need to estimate birth year.

1 – Two or more declarations, where any two yield estimates having a range of 0-2 years.

2 – Two or more declarations, where two yield estimates having a range of 3 years.

3 – Two or more estimates, where no two yield estimates with a range of less than 4 years.

4 – One declaration only.

Types 0 and 1 are what I refer to in the text as 'best values', meaning either that a precise birth date is known or that there is close agreement between two or more declarations in the dossiers. A slight majority (553 of 1,029) of the marriage ages used in the present study are of these more reliable types. A small minority (46) are of types 2 and 3, while the rest (430, or almost 42 percent) are based on only one declaration. The distinction between 'best

2. Interestingly, no such trend was detected in the burial ages.

values' and 'all values' is maintained throughout the present text to reflect the more tenuous nature of type 2, 3 and 4 marriage-age estimates while not losing this information entirely.

In summary, then, marriage ages calculated from census and burial declarations are a reasonably sound body of information if approached carefully. In a handful of cases where declarations could be compared to precise birth dates, the accuracy of the stated ages was found to be rather good. Where series of declarations were available, there seemed to be a high degree of internal consistency among the stated ages. The methods just explained are therefore a viable alternative to full family reconstitution in the measurement of age at marriage and other demographic phenomena in late 19th-century Quebec.