

*Angels' Heads and Weeping
Willows: Death in
Early America*

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MOST RECENT studies of America's past can be placed into one of two distinct and sometimes hostile camps. Traditional historians have continued to rely almost exclusively on literary sources of information. As a result, their work has focused on the ideology and attitudes of early Americans. On the other hand, a small group of historians, borrowing heavily from the other social sciences, have undertaken to recreate the behavioral patterns of American society in the past. Though these two approaches are potentially complementary to each other, there has been very little effort made to integrate them.

This bifurcation of approaches to the study of American history is quite evident in the recent efforts to analyze the role of death in America. Traditional historians have begun to examine the writings of early Americans in order to recreate their attitudes and images of death. Historical demographers have exploited the censuses and vital records to calculate the incidence and timing of death in early America.

This paper was presented as a public lecture at the American Antiquarian Society on May 22, 1974, while the author was the Rockefeller Fellow in the History of the Family Program at Clark University and AAS. The author is deeply indebted to Andrew Achenbaum, Georgia Bumgardner, Ronald Formisano, Tamara Hareven, John Hench, Kathryn Sklar, Mary Vinovskis, and John Zeugner for their helpful comments and suggestions.

But no one has attempted to explore systematically the relationship between attitudes toward death and the actual levels and trends in mortality in early America. In part, this is the result of the assumption by most historians that the attitudes toward and the incidence of death in America were identical.

In this essay we will demonstrate that most colonists did not accurately perceive the extent of mortality in their society. We will suggest some of the reasons for their misperception. Hopefully this essay will encourage other scholars to integrate attitudinal and behavioral approaches to the study of American history.

Most of us have certain preconceived notions about death in colonial America. We envision the early settlers of our country facing such a multitude of hazards that death at a fairly early age was practically inevitable. We also imagine that persons surviving to old age were quite rare and extremely fortunate in having escaped the continuous waves of famine and pestilence which swept through the population. The idea that high mortality rates prevailed in colonial America has been reinforced by the numerous instances of entire families or communities perishing in the hostile environment of the New World.

Nearly all of us are familiar with the tragic experiences of the Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth on November 11, 1620. Though only one of the 102 passengers aboard the *Mayflower* perished at sea, the eleven-week journey had left the rest of them weak, exhausted, and unprepared for the coming winter. Bradford noted their ordeal in his diary: '. . . But that which was most sadd & lamentable was, that in 2. or 3. moneths time halfe of their company dyed, espetially in Jan: & February, being the depth of winter, and wanting houses & other comforts; being infected with the scurvie & other diseases, which this long vioage & their inacomodate condition had brought upon them; so as ther dyed some times 2. or 3.

of a day, in the foresaid time; that of 100 & odd persons, scarce 50 remained. . . .¹

Even those settlers who survived the rigors of the first year in the New World faced unforeseen epidemics which took very heavy tolls of the inhabitants—especially in urban areas such as Boston and Salem. In 1721 there was an outbreak of smallpox in Boston in which over fifty percent of its eleven thousand inhabitants contracted the disease. In that year the Boston death rate soared to an incredible 103 deaths per thousand population. Thus, over ten percent of the city's population died within the space of one year.² Only the very small percentage of the people daring enough to try the new technique of inoculation managed to escape the high death rate among those who had smallpox.³

Smaller communities were not safe from the terrors of epidemics. For example, in the parish of Hampton Falls in New Hampshire the 'sore-throat distemper' in 1735 nearly decimated the population. This epidemic, later identified as diphtheria, resulted in the deaths of 210 persons—or over one-sixth of the entire population of that parish. The outbreak of diphtheria caused fatalities particularly among young people—ninety-five percent of those who died in Hampton Falls were under the age of twenty. Nearly twenty families buried all of their children that year.⁴

Any person still skeptical of the existence of high mortality in early America would certainly be convinced by one of the

¹ William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, Harvey Wish, ed. (New York, 1962), p. 70. For a more detailed discussion of the experiences of the Pilgrims, see George D. Langdon, Jr., *Pilgrim Colony: A History of New Plymouth, 1620-1691* (New Haven, 1966).

² On the extent of mortality in Boston, see John B. Blake, *Public Health in the Town of Boston, 1630-1882* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952).

³ Blake, *Public Health*, pp. 74-98; John Duffy, *Epidemics in Colonial America* (Baton Rouge, 1953), pp. 16-112.

⁴ Duffy, *Epidemics*, pp. 117-18; Ernest Caulfield, 'A History of the Terrible Epidemic, Vulgarly Called the Throat Distemper, as It Occurred in His Majesty's New England Colonies between 1735 and 1740,' *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine* 11 (1938-39), 219-72, 277-335.

few extant life tables for that period—the Wigglesworth Life Table of 1789. Edward Wigglesworth, Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard, became interested in life tables when he was advising the Massachusetts Congregational Charitable Society on how to establish an annuity fund for the widows of ministers. At that time there were no life tables available for the United States from which to estimate the life expectancies of the ministers and their wives. Therefore, Wigglesworth collected bills of mortality from various New England towns with the active cooperation of the newly established Academy of Arts and Sciences in Boston. From the sixty-two bills of mortality returned, Wigglesworth constructed a life table in 1789. He calculated that the average person in New England could expect to live only 35.5 years—thus reinforcing our grim image of health conditions in early America.⁵

Most writers have argued that death rates in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England were very high, and there is also a consensus that life expectancy improved significantly in the first half of the nineteenth century. This interpretation is based on a comparison of Wigglesworth's Life Table of 1789 and Elliott's table of 1855 for Massachusetts. On the basis of these two tables, it appears that the average person in the Commonwealth could expect to live an additional 4.3 years by 1855.⁶

⁵ Edward Wigglesworth, 'A Table Shewing the Probability of the Duration, the Decrement, and the Expectation of Life, in the States of Massachusetts and New Hampshire, formed from sixty two Bills of Mortality on the files of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, in the Year 1789,' *Memoirs of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 2, pt. 1 (1793):131-35. For an analysis of the gathering of that data as well as its utilization, see Maris A. Vinovskis, 'The 1789 Life Table of Edward Wigglesworth,' *Journal of Economic History* 31 (1971):570-90.

⁶ Warren S. Thompson and P. K. Whelpton, *Population Trends in the United States* (New York, 1933), pp. 228-40. A more recent interpretation of mortality trends by Yasukichi Yasuba argues that death rates probably were increasing just prior to the Civil War because of the increase in urbanization and industrialization. Yasukichi Yasuba, *Birth Rates of the White Population in the United States, 1800-1860: An Economic Study*, The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, vol. 79, no. 2 (Baltimore, 1962), pp. 86-96.

Thus, the traditional picture of mortality in early America is one of high death rates in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries followed by a marked improvement in the nineteenth century. A sociologist has recently summarized the extent of mortality in early America as follows:

Although precise statistical evidence is lacking, the little that scientists have been able to compile from various anthropological and archaeological sources indicates that throughout most of his existence man has had to contend with an extremely high death rate. The brutally harsh conditions of life in the pre-industrial world made human survival very much a touch-and-go affair. A newborn infant had no more than a fifty-fifty chance of surviving to adulthood; the average life expectancy of primitive man was probably not much in excess of twenty-five or thirty years. Even more significant, the survival situation was not a great deal better as recently as the middle of the eighteenth century. Early records for the state of Massachusetts, for example, indicate that average life expectancy in colonial America was still somewhat less than forty years.⁷

Most studies of Puritan attitudes toward death have accepted the notion that death rates in early New England were very high. In fact, the imminence of death in Puritan society is often used by historians to explain the preoccupation of early Americans with the process of dying.

Recent work in historical demography, however, raises serious questions about the validity of the traditional view of death in early America. During the last ten years historical demographers have used family reconstitution techniques to provide a very different interpretation of mortality levels in New England.⁸

⁷ Edward G. Stockwell, *Population and People* (Chicago, 1968), p. 26.

⁸ Philip Greven, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1970); John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York, 1970); Susan L. Norton, 'Population Growth in Colonial America: A Study of Ipswich, Massachusetts,' *Population Studies* 25(1971):483-52; Kenneth A. Lockridge, 'The Population of Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736,' *Economic History Review*, 2d ser. 19(1966):318-44; Daniel Scott

This recent work verifies that death rates were very high in urban areas in colonial New England. Boston deaths averaged thirty to forty per thousand population during the years 1701 to 1774. Furthermore, there were large fluctuations in the death rates in Boston. Most of the sudden rises in the death rate in 1702, 1721, 1730, and 1752 were the result of epidemics that ravaged that busy seaport (see fig. 1).

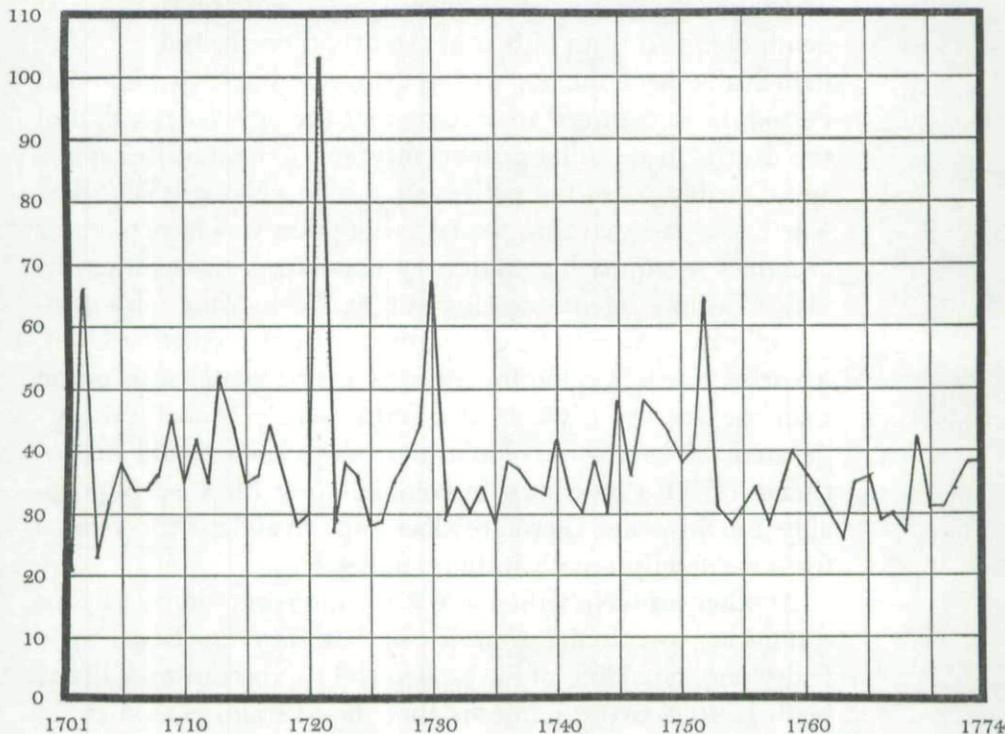
The newer work also shows that death rates in urban areas such as Boston or Salem were not typical of the rest of the population. In most rural communities, the settlers who managed to survive the hardships of the early years could look forward to many more years of life in the New World. Though data on mortality levels are very scarce for the colonial period, historical demographers have been able to provide some estimates by relying on the reconstitution of families from the vital records of the community. On the basis of detailed investigations of Andover, Dedham, Hingham, Ipswich, and Plymouth, it now appears that life expectancy was much higher in rural New England than was previously believed. These communities experienced death rates of fifteen to twenty-five per thousand rather than the higher mortality rates in Boston or Salem. Since most people in America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries lived in small, rural communities, not unlike these five Massachusetts towns, it is likely that most Americans did not have the same frequent encounter with death that residents of commercial centers did.

Since most seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Americans

Smith, 'The Demographic History of New England,' *Journal of Economic History* 32(1972):165-83; Maris A. Vinovskis, 'American Historical Demography: A Review Essay' *Historical Methods Newsletter* 4(1971):141-48; Maris A. Vinovskis, 'Mortality Rates and Trends in Massachusetts before 1860,' *Journal of Economic History* 32(1972):184-213.

These generalizations only apply to the New England area. Mortality rates in the colonial South were considerably higher according to some of the recent work in that area. Irene Hecht, 'The Virginia Muster of 1624/5 as a Source for Demographic History,' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser. 30(1973):65-92; Lorena S. Walsh and Russell R. Menard, 'Death in the Chesapeake: Two Life Tables for Men in Early Colonial Maryland,' *Maryland Historical Magazine* 69(1974):211-27.

Figure 1
 NUMBER OF DEATHS PER THOUSAND
 POPULATION IN BOSTON, 1701-74



SOURCE: John B. Blake, *Public Health in the Town of Boston* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), pp. 247-49.

were English or were at least influenced by an English heritage, it is useful to compare the death rates in the New and Old Worlds. Generally, death rates in America were lower than in Europe. Death rates for infants in Andover and Ipswich were significantly lower than those in Europe, while infant mortality rates in Salem were comparable to those in Europe. Similarly, death rates after the age of twenty were lower in most Massachusetts communities than in Europe.

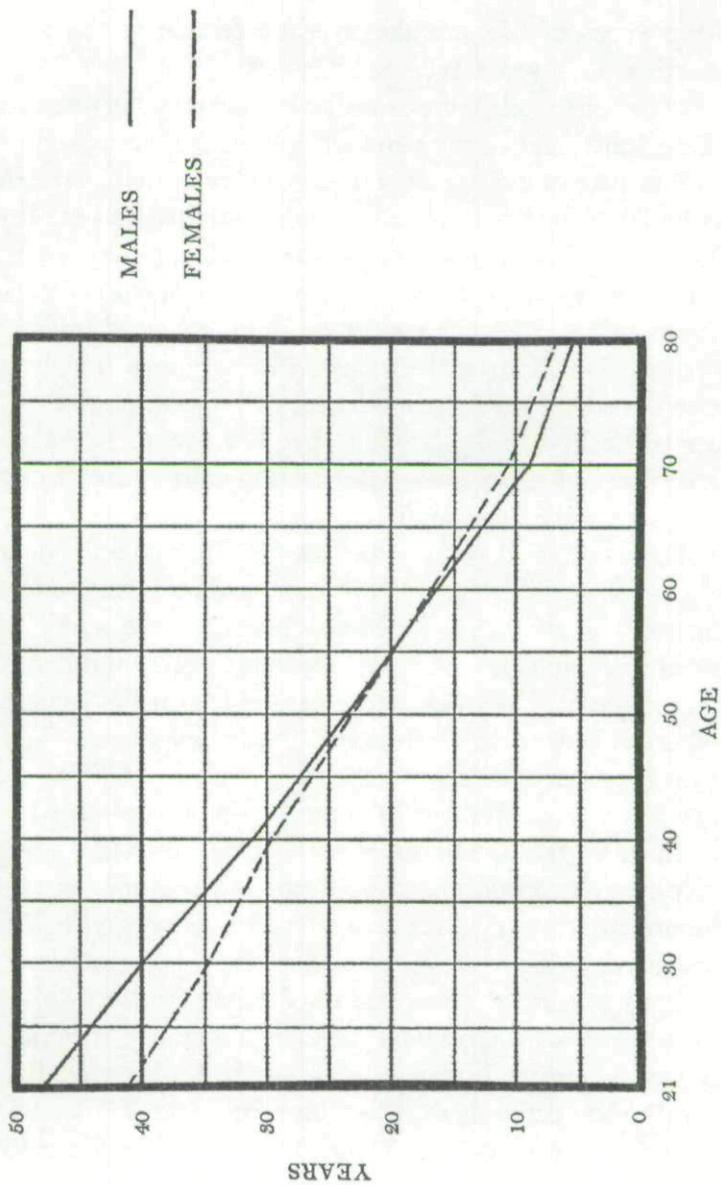
These findings appear to be in direct contradiction to the expectation of life according to the Wigglesworth Life Table of 1789. A detailed examination of that life table, however, reveals serious methodological flaws in its construction and coverage. Wigglesworth's table is based only on the ages at death obtained from bills of mortality. Since he did not have data available on the population who were liable to die in that period, he was forced to assume that the age-distribution of the deaths in the bills of mortality approximated the actual age-distribution of the entire population. Though Wigglesworth realized that this crucial assumption was incorrect, his attempts to adjust his stationary population model must be viewed as intelligent guessing at best. Furthermore, his sample of towns was not representative of the entire region. Most of his data came from towns which were more urban than the area as a whole and consequently probably exaggerated the extent of colonial mortality. As a result, his estimate of life expectancy in colonial New England is probably too low and therefore does not invalidate the results from the family reconstitution studies.⁹

Another problem with many of the interpretations of living conditions in colonial America is that they are based on a faulty understanding of life tables. If the expectation of life at birth is 40.0 years, it means that the average person could expect to live that long. It does not mean, however, that once this average person had reached age twenty-one that he had only nineteen years remaining. When an individual had survived the perils of early childhood and the rigors of early adulthood, his or her chances of continuing to live were actually increased.¹⁰ For example, the average male at age twenty-one in seventeenth-century Plymouth could expect another

⁹ Vinovskis, 'The 1789 Life Table of Edward Wigglesworth.'

¹⁰ For an introduction to the use and interpretation of life tables, see Louis I. Dublin, Alfred J. Lotka, and Mortimer Spiegelman, *Length of Life: A Study of the Life Table* (New York, 1949).

Figure 2
 LIFE EXPECTANCY OF ADULTS
 IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY PLYMOUTH



SOURCE: John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York, 1970), p. 192.

48.2 years of life and the average female at the same age another 41.4 years (see fig. 2).

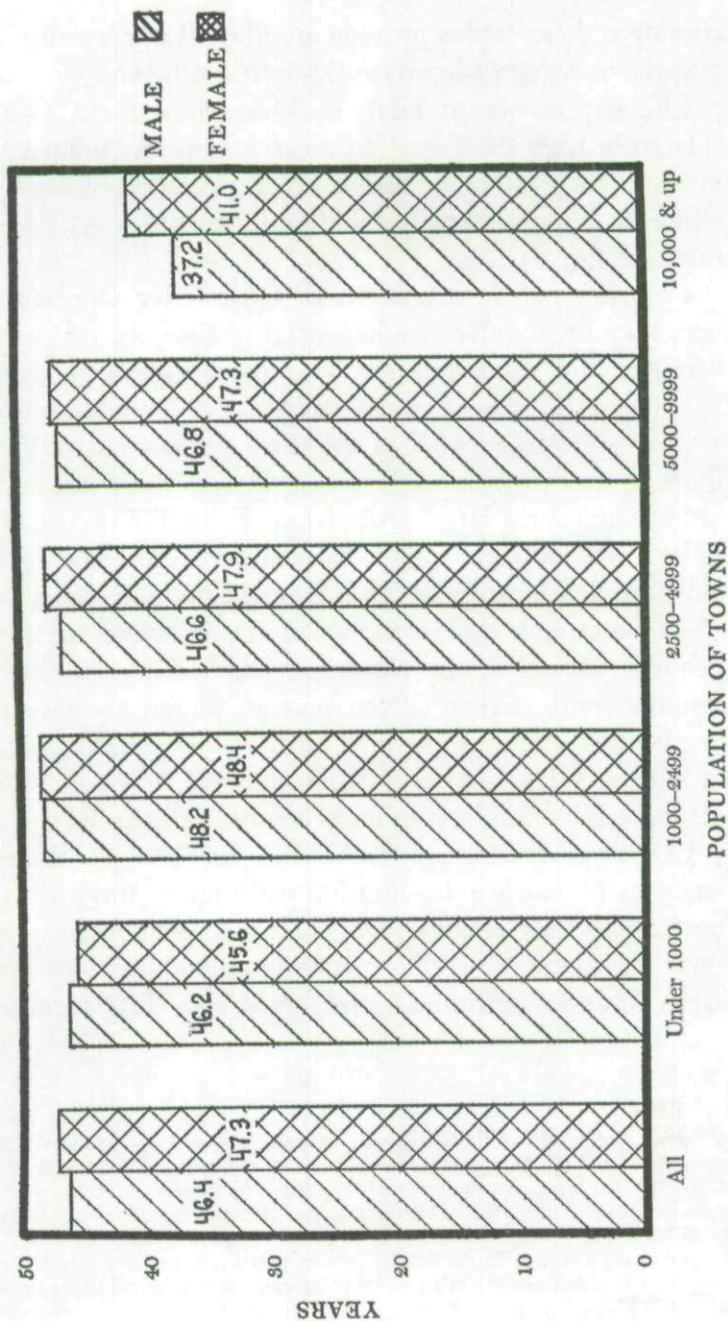
Most of the differences in life expectancy between colonial Americans and Americans of today are due to the much higher rate of infant and child mortality in the past. Adults in colonial New England often could anticipate lives almost as long as each one of us today—especially if they were male. The average male at age twenty-one in seventeenth-century Plymouth had a life expectancy only one year less than the typical American male today. The average female at age twenty-one in seventeenth-century Plymouth, however, could expect to live 14.6 years less than her counterpart today—in large measure because maternal mortality rates in colonial America were very high.

Death rates in early America did not remain constant. In the seventeenth century there were large rural-urban differences in mortality in Massachusetts since small agricultural communities such as Dedham, Plymouth, Andover, Hingham, and Ipswich had relatively high life expectancies whereas Boston and Salem had much lower ones. The eighteenth century witnessed the convergence of these rates as mortality rose slightly in some of the smaller towns while death rates fell in Salem. Boston continued to have very high death rates throughout the eighteenth century. In the early nineteenth century there was a further convergence as Boston death rates dropped to around twenty per thousand while mortality in rural areas remained fairly steady.¹¹

In order to analyze the level of mortality in nineteenth-century America in more detail and to look especially at the rural-urban differences, life tables for various Massachusetts towns in 1860 have been calculated from the federal census and the state vital records. Since the only previous life table for this period that might be of use to us, Elliott's Life Table of 1855, is inadequate because of several methodological short-

¹¹ Vinovskis, 'Mortality Rates and Trends.'

Figure 3
LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH IN MASSACHUSETTS TOWNS IN 1860



SOURCE: Maris A. Vinovskis, 'Mortality Rates and Trends in Massachusetts before 1860,' *Journal of Economic History* 32(1972):211.

comings, these tables provide an unusual opportunity to assess the presence of death in mid-nineteenth-century society.¹²

Life expectancy at birth in Massachusetts in 1860 was relatively high compared to most European countries. The average male at birth had a life expectancy of 46.4 years while the average female could look forward to 47.3 years of life (see fig. 3).

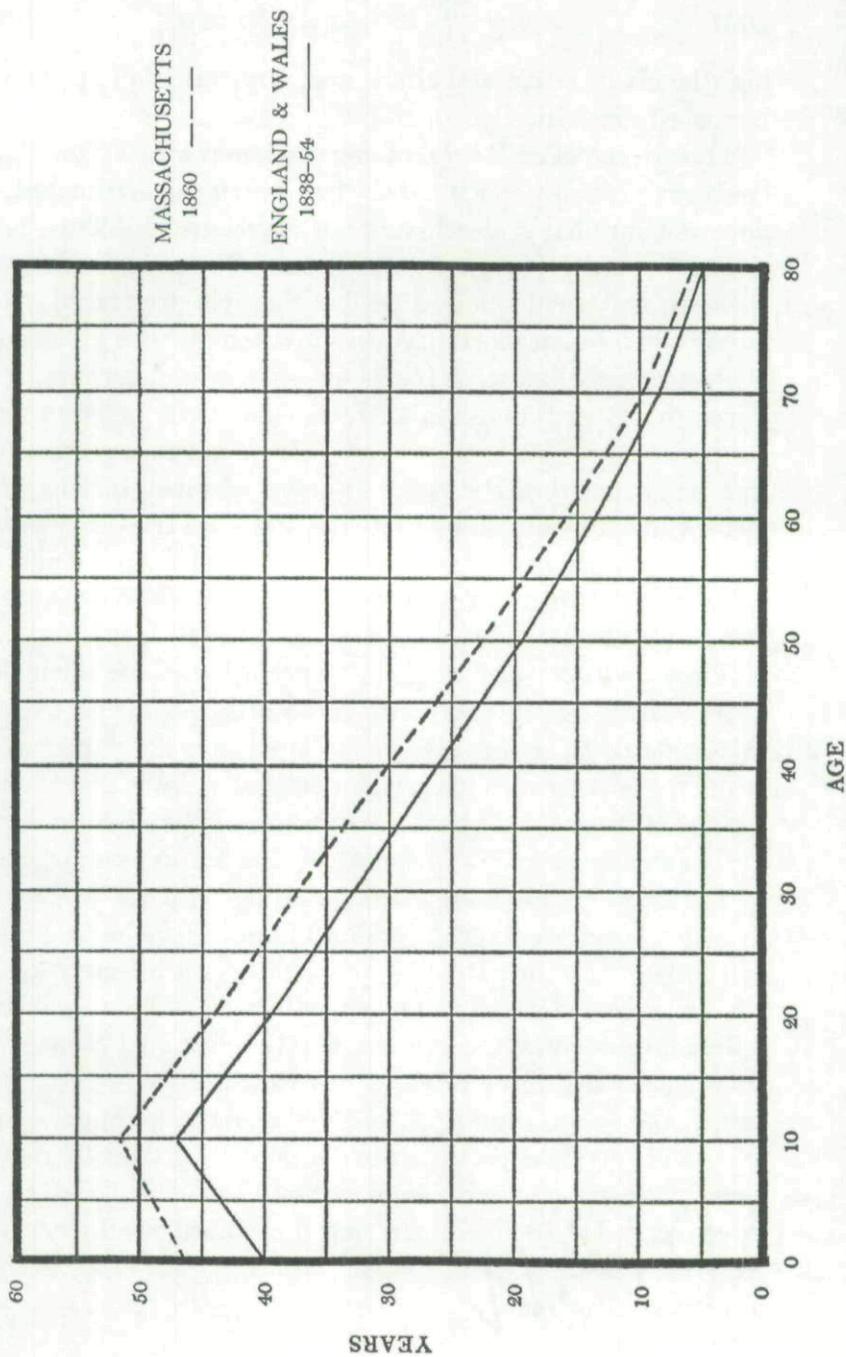
Contrary to the assertions of most other scholars, there was very little difference in mortality between rural and urban areas in Massachusetts. The major difference according to town size was between towns with populations under 10,000 and those with populations over 10,000. Furthermore, socioeconomic differences among these towns could not account for a large proportion of the differences in mortality. In a multiple regression analysis where the age-standardized death rate was the dependent variable and a variety of socioeconomic characteristics of those towns were the independent variables, the resultant equation for the state accounted for less than fifteen percent of the variance in the death rates. Put more simply, our detailed statistical analysis of mortality levels among Massachusetts towns in 1860 displayed a remarkable similarity amongst themselves.¹³

Compared to England and Wales in 1838-54, life expectancy in Massachusetts in 1860 was significantly higher for both males and females (see fig. 4). It is interesting to observe the generally similar pattern in life expectancy for both areas. If an American, English, or Welsh child survived the

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.* The results of this regression analysis have not been published yet. However, the use of the 1860 standardized mortality in a regression analysis of fertility differentials in Massachusetts is reported in Maris A. Vinovskis, 'A Multivariate Regression Analysis of Fertility Differentials among Massachusetts Towns and Regions in 1860,' a paper presented at the Conference on Early Industrialization, Shifts in Fertility, and Changes in the Family Structure at Princeton University, June 18 - July 10, 1972 (forthcoming in a volume of the conference proceedings to be edited by Charles Tilly).

LIFE EXPECTANCY IN MASSACHUSETTS IN 1860 AND IN ENGLAND AND WALES IN 1838-54



SOURCES: Maris A. Vinovskis, 'Mortality Rates and Trends in Massachusetts before 1860,' *Journal of Economic History* 32(1972):211; Louis I. Dublin, Alfred J. Lotka, and Mortimer Spiegelman, *Length of Life* (New York, 1949), p. 346.

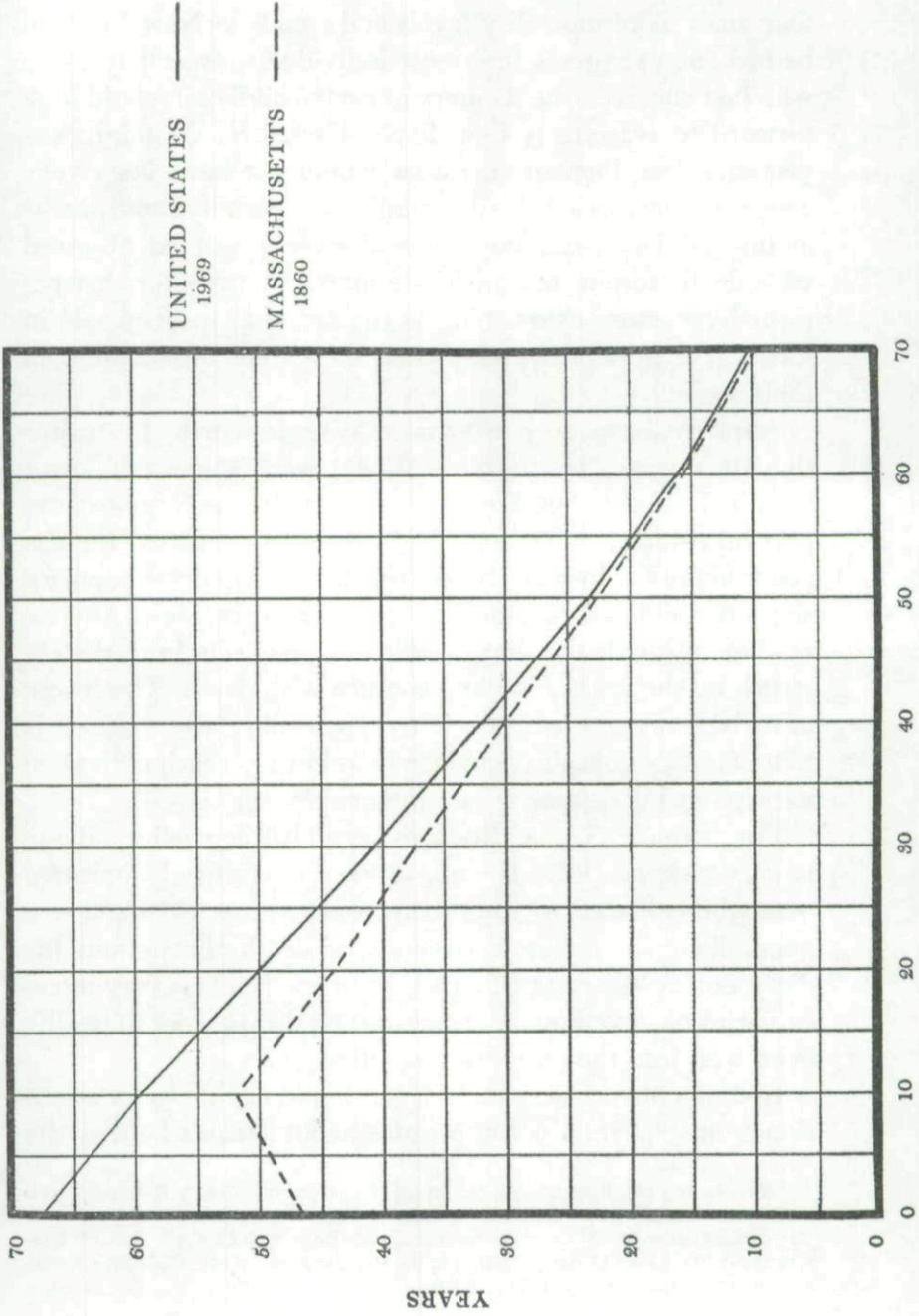
high levels of infant and child mortality, his life expectancy increased dramatically.

Though the overall level of mortality in colonial New England was probably much lower than previously estimated, it does not mean that death was not a serious problem—particularly for the young. Adults in rural New England could anticipate reasonably long lives but their children faced much worse odds. Infant mortality rates in colonial America ranged from 115 per thousand births in seventeenth-century Andover to 313 per thousand for females and 202 per thousand for males in seventeenth-century Salem. In other words, ten to thirty percent of the children never survived for the first year of life. In the United States in 1974, on the other hand, the infant mortality rate was 16.5 per thousand—or almost ten times less than that of the colonial period.

The higher mortality rate among children in the past can be illustrated by comparing the expectation of life for males in Massachusetts in 1860 with those of males in the United States in 1969 (see fig. 5). At the later ages the expectation of life for both groups is very similar, but there is a very substantial difference at birth. The average male child at birth today can expect to live to age 67.8; if he survives to age ten, he increases his total life expectation by only 1.8 years. On the other hand, the average male child in Massachusetts born in 1860 could anticipate 46.4 years of life; if he survived to age ten, his total life expectancy would increase by 16.6 years.

In addition, since the average family in colonial New England usually had three times as many children as we have today, there was a high probability that most families would experience the loss of at least one child during their lifetimes. The combination of high infant mortality rates and high birth rates increased the likelihood that the typical family in early America would have had to deal with the death of a member of their nuclear family.

LIFE EXPECTANCY IN MASSACHUSETTS IN 1860 AND IN U.S. IN 1969



SOURCES: Maris A. Vinovskis, 'Mortality Rates and Trends in Massachusetts before 1860,' *Journal of Economic History* 32(1972):211; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *The American Almanac: The U.S. Book of Facts, Statistics & Information, 1973* (New York, 1973), p. 56.

Our analysis of mortality levels and trends in New England before 1860 suggests that most individuals, especially those who had survived the dangers of early childhood, could look forward to reasonably long lives. Therefore, we might expect that our Puritan ancestors would not have been very concerned or worried about mortality—especially about deaths among adults. Yet New England society seemed obsessed with death despite the moderate mortality rates for that period. Even more astonishing is the fact that most people in those days greatly overestimated the extent of mortality in their society.

Some colonists, such as Edward Wigglesworth, did realize that death rates in the New World were somewhat lower than in England. But even Wigglesworth, the foremost expert on colonial mortality, seriously underestimated the expectation of life in early New England. The general populace seemed convinced that death rates were very high. Anyone reading through the diaries of these people is immediately struck by the fascination and concern with death. The image of early American society one receives from these writings is that of a very unhealthy environment in which each individual anticipates his demise at any moment.¹⁴

For example, Samuel Rodman began to keep a diary at age twenty-nine in 1821. He was a very scientifically oriented man who collected weather data from 1812 to 1876 and was generally calm about discussions of death throughout his diary during the next thirty-eight years. But it is very interesting to observe how he misperceived the dangers to his life even well into the nineteenth century.

Rodman often mentions how he should devote more attention to his spiritual needs because he anticipates he may die

¹⁴ Various scholars have commented on the preoccupation of early Americans with the issue of death in their writings. For example, see Charles Allen Shively, 'A History of the Conception of Death in America, 1650-1860,' (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1969); Lewis O. Saum, 'Death in the Popular Mind of Pre-Civil War America,' *American Quarterly* 26(1974):477-95.

at any moment. In 1838 he celebrates his birthday by noting in his diary that 'this is the 46th anniversary of my birth. I have lived therefore already considerably beyond the average of human life.'¹⁵ Three years later, he repeats the general theme: 'I should not conclude this note without attesting to the fact that this is my 49th anniversary, and that I have entered on my 50th year. It seems a matter of surprise that I have lived so long, and without yet any material change. I have actually passed beyond the period of youth and middle age and may justly be classed among the old.'¹⁶

If Rodman had had the benefit of our life tables for 1860, he could have taken comfort in the fact that he was likely to survive at least another twenty years at age fifty. The intriguing question is why Rodman, an unusually intelligent and perceptive man, should have underestimated so greatly the extent of longevity in his society. Why did he and so many other diarists of the period feel that death was imminent when in fact the death rates for adults in their communities were not very high?

Perhaps the misperceptions of the extent of mortality in New England society were due to the unusual life experiences of those individuals who kept diaries. Maybe they were less healthy and/or came from families which had experienced higher mortality than the rest of the population. Keeping a diary might be part of an attempt to introduce order and stability in a life that was constantly overshadowed by the presence of death.

In the case of Samuel Rodman, this interpretation does not appear to be valid. Despite his frequent anticipations of dying, he managed to survive to age eighty-four and his wife lived to be eighty-two. Though two of their eight children did die early, at ages one and three, the remaining six lived to

¹⁵ Zepharriah Pease, ed., *The Diary of Samuel Rodman: A New Bedford Chronicle of Thirty-Seven Years: 1821-1859* (New Bedford, Mass., 1927), p. 180.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

the ages of twenty-three, sixty-one, seventy-seven, seventy-eight, eighty-seven, and ninety-one. One might properly object that these figures are misleading because Samuel Rodman had no way of knowing how long he or his offspring would survive. Perhaps he was merely reacting to the much higher mortality of his parents and siblings. Yet his father lived to age eighty-two and his mother to age ninety-five. Furthermore, his sisters survived to the ages of thirty-one, sixty, seventy-eight, and eighty-one while his brothers died at ages twenty-four, sixty-eight, and eighty-one.¹⁷ In other words, whatever indications of low life expectancy that Rodman had, they probably did not come mainly from the experiences of his immediate family.

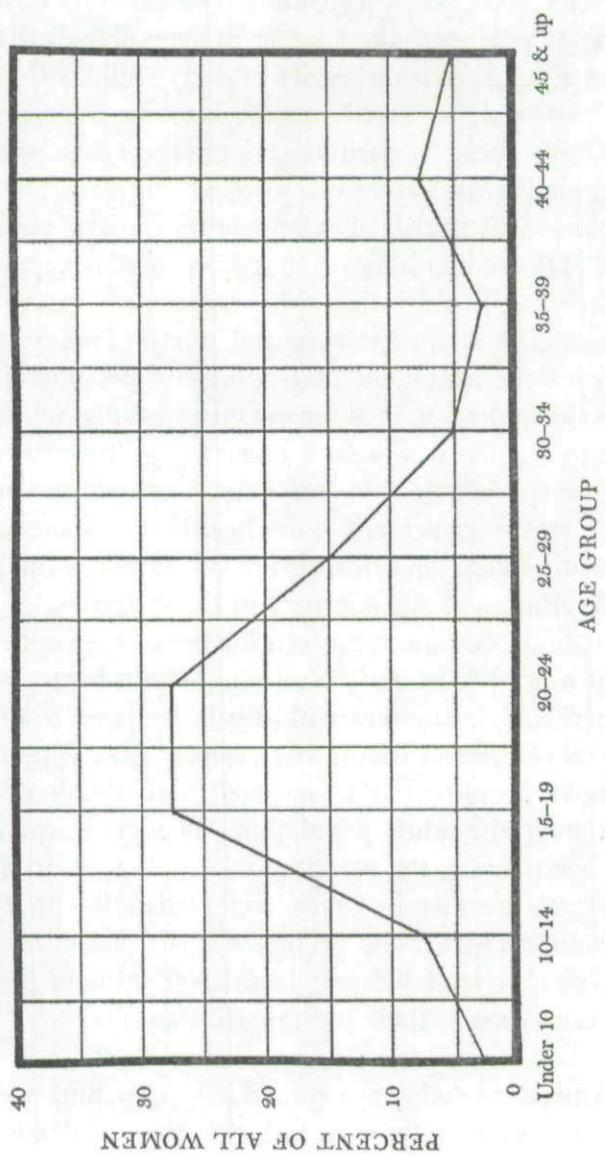
Though our analysis of Rodman's own longevity suggests that his anticipation of imminent death probably was not based on his own physical frailty, we should be careful not to generalize about the relationship between personal health and preoccupation with death among diarists on the basis of just one individual. Kathryn Kish Sklar has coded data from published diaries of seventy-one American women who lived in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These data are of particular interest to us because many historians have remarked on the preoccupation of women with items about health and death in their diaries. We already know that women who kept diaries were more educated than the rest of the population and probably came from more affluent backgrounds. Using her data, it is possible to calculate age at death for forty of these women.¹⁸ Therefore, one is now able to estimate the life expectancy of these women who kept diaries.

Of the forty women, the average age at death was 56.4 years. This compares very favorably with the expectation of

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ I am deeply indebted to Kathryn Kish Sklar of the University of California, Los Angeles, for allowing me to use her data for these calculations.

Figure 6
 DISTRIBUTION OF AGES AT WHICH WOMEN
 BEGAN TO KEEP THEIR DIARIES IN THE
 EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES



SOURCE: Calculated from data on American diaries collected by Kathryn Kish Sklar of the University of California, Los Angeles.

life at birth for Massachusetts women in 1860 of 47.3 years. This is a very misleading comparison, however, because most women did not begin to keep diaries until they had already survived the perils of early childhood (see fig. 6).

Instead, we need to take into consideration the ages at which these women began their diaries before calculating their life expectancies. Now we can compare their expectation of life to that of women in the general public (see fig. 7).

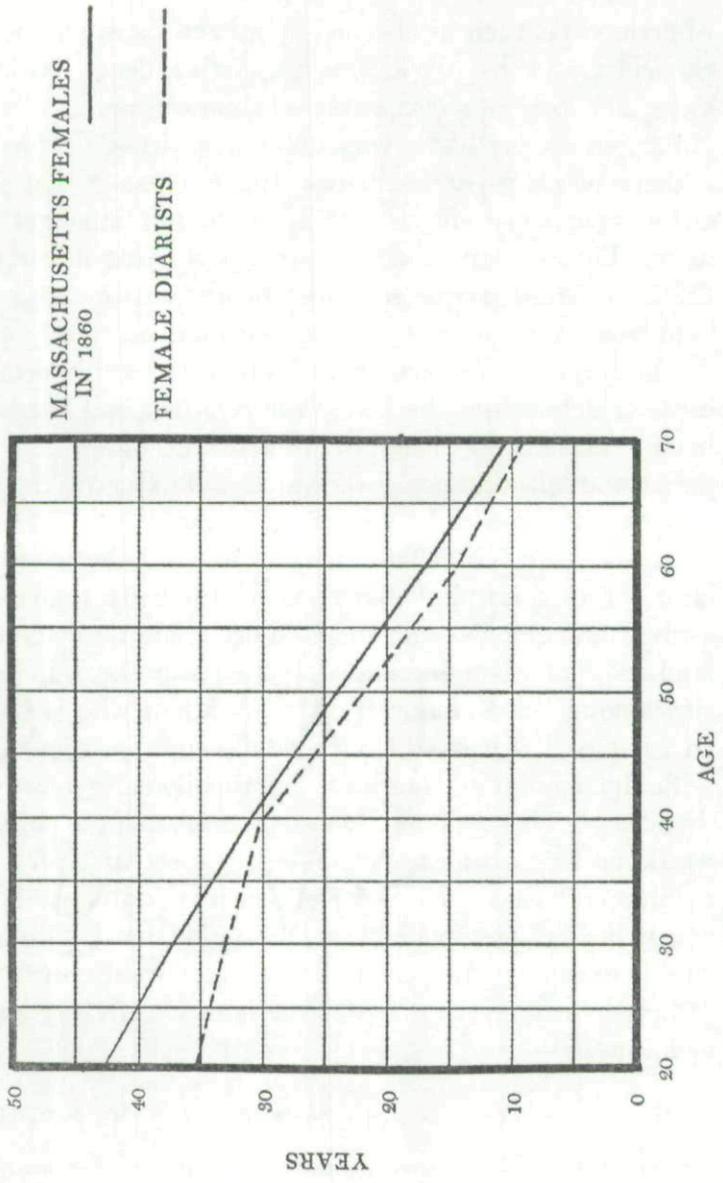
The results indicate that women who kept diaries were in fact less healthy than Massachusetts women in 1860—particularly at ages twenty and thirty. Though this does reinforce the argument that unhealthy people were more likely to keep diaries, it is important to bear in mind that the average woman who kept a diary at age twenty could expect to live another 35.5 years. Thus, most women who kept these diaries were actually quite healthy and their own prospect of dying in the very near future was not very likely despite their utterances to the contrary in those diaries.

Since we cannot account for the misperceptions of the level of mortality in early New England in terms of the colonists' personal encounters with death, we need to look at the general context of life in that period to see what factors encouraged people to imagine such high death rates—especially among the adult population. Though death is a biological phenomenon, the reactions of people to it are largely defined by the manner in which society handles its dying. It is my contention that the great emphasis placed on death in early New England led people to overestimate the extent of its occurrence in their communities and lives.

Americans today are remarkably unwilling to discuss death. Our society refuses to face the issue of death openly—thus, death has replaced sex as the major taboo. Geoffrey Gorer in a very insightful essay has argued that 'In the 20th century there seems to have been an unremarked shift in prudery;

Figure 7

LIFE EXPECTANCY OF MASSACHUSETTS FEMALES IN 1860 AND EIGHTEENTH- AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY FEMALE DIARISTS



Source: Calculated from data on American diaries collected by Kathryn Kish Sklar of the University of California, Los Angeles.

whereas copulation has become more and more mentionable, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon societies, death has become more and more unmentionable as a natural process.¹⁹

Puritan society had a very different attitude toward death—there was a great fascination and interest in that subject and people were encouraged to discuss it amongst themselves. Furthermore, the very process of dying in early New England forced people to come to terms with death rather than being able to pretend that death did not really exist.²⁰

The location in which an individual dies is important because it determines the access his relatives and friends will have to him during that time. In addition, the place where a person dies also influences the amount of exposure the rest of society will have to the process of dying.

Today there is a debate over whether it is better to die at home or in a hospital. Some elderly actually prefer to die away from home in order to avoid becoming burdens to their families. Yet when one dies at home he or she is in familiar surroundings and among friends. A patient who is hospitalized is largely removed from the help and care of his family.

Public opinion in America has gradually shifted away from the idea of dying at home. Less than a third of the public now would prefer to have someone die at home. In 1968 a public opinion poll asked: 'Do you feel that if an individual is dying and is beyond any available medical aid, that it is more desirable to remove the person to a hospital or other institution, rather than have them remain at home?' The replies were as follows:²¹

¹⁹ Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief, and Mourning* (Garden City, N.Y., 1965), pp. 192-99.

²⁰ For analyses of the reactions of Puritans to death, see David E. Stannard, 'Death and Dying in Puritan New England,' *American Historical Review* 78(1973):1305-30; Shively, 'History of the Conception of Death.'

²¹ Glen M. Vernon, *Sociology of Death: An Analysis of Death-Related Behavior* (New York, 1970), p. 110. For a more general discussion of American attitudes toward death, see Richard G. Dumont and Dennis C. Foss, *The American View of Death: Acceptance or Denial?* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972).

	<i>N</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Yes, this is best for all concerned	669	34.1
No, death should be at home if at all possible	553	28.2
Undecided	692	35.3
No answer	47	2.4

This change in attitudes has been accompanied by a shift in the actual location of dying. In 1963, fifty-three percent of all deaths occurred in a hospital and many others in nursing homes or as a result of accidents outside the home.²² As a result, most Americans today do not often see the process of dying firsthand. This isolation from death is compounded by the development of 'retirement cities' in the United States where the elderly are in effect segregated from the rest of society. As Robert Fulton has so aptly put it, 'Here for the first time modern man is able to avoid almost entirely the grief and anguish of death. By encouraging the aged members of the society to congregate in segregated communities, familial and friendship commitments are made fewer by time and distance, and emotional and social bonds are loosened. Physically and emotionally separated from those most likely to die, the modern individual is freed of the shock he would otherwise experience from their death. Herein may lie a form of man's "conquest" of death.'²³

The colonists died mainly in their own homes since there were few hospitals or other institutions in which the aged could be placed. In the absence of a specialized nursing profession, relatives and neighbors attended to the needs of the dying—thus increasing the amount of contact between the living and the dying.

The homes of the early colonists were very small com-

²² Robert L. Fulton, 'Death and the Self,' *Journal of Religion and Health* 3(1964): 354.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

pared to today—especially those built in the early years of settlement. According to the probate inventories, the average number of rooms per house in rural Suffolk County, Massachusetts, rose from 4.3 in 1675–99, to 5.7 in 1700–19, and to 6.0 in 1750–75.²⁴ Thus, there was relatively little privacy available in these homes to shield the dying person from the rest of the family even if the colonists had desired to isolate him.

Finally, since there were no funeral homes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the dead person remained in his own home where friends and neighbors could view him. As the art of embalming was still in its infancy in colonial America, very little effort was made to preserve or repair the dead body. People were forced to see the dead persons as they were rather than having them cosmetically preserved or improved to enhance their appearance in death.²⁵

The funeral itself encouraged people to come into intimate contact with death. At first funerals in colonial America were simple affairs since there was an effort to avoid the excesses of English funeral practices. One contemporary observer of early colonial funerals described them: 'At Burials nothing is read, nor any funeral sermon made, but all the neighborhood or a goodly company of them come together by tolling of the bell, and carry the dead solemnly to his grave, and then stand by him while he is buried. The ministers are most commonly present.'²⁶

Gradually funerals became more elaborate and expensive. The practice of distributing gifts of gloves, rings, or scarfs to participants at funerals was a custom brought over from Eng-

²⁴ For a description of the development of embalming in America, see Robert W. Habenstein and William M. Lamers, *The History of American Funeral Directing* (Milwaukee, 1955).

²⁵ David H. Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England* (Charlottesville, Va., 1972), p. 39.

²⁶ Thomas Lechford, *Plain Dealing or News from New England*, ed. J. Hammond Trumbull (Boston, 1867), pp. 87–88.

land and which flourished in New England in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The practice quickly became excessive as the quality of the gifts distributed was supposed to reflect the social status of the deceased. At the funeral of Governor Belcher's wife in 1736, over 1,000 pairs of gloves were distributed. Ministers, who usually received gifts at all the funerals they attended, often accumulated large quantities of such items. For example, Andrew Eliot, minister of the North Church in Boston received 2,940 pairs of funeral gloves in his thirty-two years in the pulpit. Rather than allow such gifts to overwhelm his household, Reverend Eliot sold them to supplement his modest salary.²⁷

As the costs of these funeral items rose, there were numerous attempts by the General Court as well as individual citizens to curtail funeral expenses. None of the proposed measures, however, succeeded because our colonial ancestors were just as determined to have extravagant funerals then as we are today.²⁸

But these social aspects of funerals provided still greater encouragement for people to attend them. It was expected in the small rural communities of New England that everyone would attend the funerals of any of their townsmen. Given the death rate of that period, it was likely that in a small village of a thousand inhabitants, there would be at least ten to twenty-five funerals each year. Since most burials were handled by the neighbors and friends rather than by a professional undertaker, the significance of each funeral became even more important to the living. Thus, there was a constant reminder to the entire community of the presence of

²⁷ For a description of the extravagant expenditures on early funerals, see Alice Morse Earle, *Customs and Fashions in Old New England* (New York, 1894).

²⁸ Though Jessica Mitford argues that the excesses in funeral expenditures are only a recent phenomena, there is ample evidence that often the colonists also spent large sums on their funerals. Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death*, paperback ed. (Greenwich, Conn., 1963).

death whereas today most of us are not affected by the deaths of anyone except very close friends or relatives.

Finally, the practice of giving funeral sermons became established by the early eighteenth century. Ministers now used the occasion of the gathering at the grave to preach to the living the importance of coming to terms with the inevitability of death. Increasingly these sermons were published and distributed to the congregation as a remembrance of the departed and a reminder of the frailty of life.²⁹

The awareness of death by an individual in colonial America did not end with the lowering of the body into the grave. The grave as well as the burial place continued to further the notion of the shortness of life on earth for the survivors. Scholars such as Harriette Forbes, Allan Ludwig, and Dickran and Ann Tashjian have already explored the artistic and symbolic implications of the early gravestones that are dotted throughout the countryside. Rather than simply repeat their insightful analyses of the meaning of these early artifacts, we will try only to reconstruct how these images of death might have influenced the perceptions of our ancestors about the extent of mortality in their communities.³⁰

Before 1660, graveyards in New England were quite plain. Often people were buried in convenient locations near their homes rather than being interred in burial grounds near the churches. We can understand this casual attitude toward the burial site better if we recall that in England the common practice had been to bury many different individuals on the same plot of land. No effort was made to keep a separate spot for each person who died—rather bodies were buried with the expectation that someone else would share that same

²⁹ On the evolution of Puritan attitudes and practices at funerals, see Shively, 'History of the Conception of Death.'

³⁰ Harriette Merrifield Forbes, *Gravestones of Early New England and the Men Who Made Them, 1653-1800* (New York, 1927); Allan I. Ludwig, *Graven Images: New England Stonecarving and Its Symbols, 1650-1815* (Middletown, Conn., 1966); Dickran and Ann Tashjian, *Memorials for Children of Change: The Art of Early New England Stonecarving* (Middletown, Conn., 1974).

area as soon as the previous occupant had been decomposed sufficiently. Thus, the church of St. John the Baptist in Widdford, Hertfordshire, buried nearly 5,000 people in a plot of less than half an acre in area. Usually these early English burials did not include even placing the deceased in a coffin.³¹

Gradually the burial places became more important to the Puritans as a reminder of the presence of death. As efforts were made to preserve the memory of those who had departed, gravestones were used to identify the bodily remains as well as to provide inspiration for the living. Partly for ornamental reasons but mainly for instructing the living, colonial gravestones began to depict the reality of death.

These symbolic illustrations of death were significant reminders of the frailty of life in a society in which many of its citizens were illiterate and therefore unable to read the messages about death from the inscriptions on the gravestones. These grim symbols of death were meant to remind the living that the day of judgment was coming and that all would be called upon to account for their lives.³²

The symbolic messages of the early New England gravestones were usually simpler and plainer than those on the religious art works of Europe at that time. The Puritans were very anxious to avoid duplication of symbols that were commonly identified with the Roman Catholic Church. The imagery of the early New England gravestones ranged across a wide variety of themes—from emblems of death to symbols of resurrection. Furthermore, there was an evolution in gravestone imagery over time—from the vivid and often harsh depiction of death by the use of death's heads to the more cheerful and subtle representations of death by winged cherubs and weeping willows in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.³³

³¹ Habenstein and Lamers, *History of American Funeral Directing*, pp. 91-191.

³² On the extent of illiteracy in early New England, see Kenneth A. Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England* (New York, 1974).

³³ Ludwig, *Graven Images*; Tashjian, *Memorials for Children of Change*.

Probably the single most important factor in reminding early New Englanders of the presence of death was their religion which placed such great emphasis on death and an afterlife for those who had been saved. Ministers preached with great frequency about death and the demise of any member of the congregation was seen as an opportunity to remind the living of the proper ways of serving God.³⁴

Ministers tried to encourage everyone in their congregations to think about the meaning of death. Thus, Cotton Mather in his work *A Christian Funeral* advises the survivors that 'when any Person known to me Dies, I would set my self particularly to consider; *What lesson of goodness or Wisdom I may learn from any thing that I may observe in the Life of that Person.*'³⁵ And in his *Death Made Easie & Happy*, Mather implores his readers to remind themselves each day that 'he is to die shortly. Let us look upon everything as a sort of Death's-Head set before us, with a *Memento mortis* written upon it.'³⁶

In the early decades of settlement, church leaders were relatively matter-of-fact about the presence and inevitability of death. But as the children of the original settlers gradually turned away from the church, there was a widespread fear that their errand in the wilderness might fail. Ministers now seized upon the terrors of death to persuade their sinful townsmen to return to God's way. Thus, Solomon Stoddard in his *The Efficacy of the Fear of Hell to Restrain Men from Sin* wrote, 'Many seem to be Incurable and Obstinate in their Pride and Luxury and Profaness . . . they are afraid of Poverty, and afraid of Sickness, but not afraid of Hell; that

³⁴ On the importance of religion during this period, see John Higham, 'Hanging Together: Divergent Unities in American History,' *Journal of American History* 61 (1974):5-29. For a very useful analysis of the role of liberal clergymen in emphasizing death in the mid-nineteenth century, see Ann Douglass, 'Heaven Our Home: Consolation Literature in the Northern United States, 1830-1880,' *American Quarterly* 26 (1974):496-515.

³⁵ Cotton Mather, *A Christian Funeral* (Boston, 1713), p. 27.

³⁶ Cotton Mather, *Death Made Easie & Happy* (London, 1701), p. 94.

would restrain them from sinful Practices, Destruction from God would be a Terrour to them.³⁷

Increasingly these ministers directed their message to young children. From a very early age, Puritan children were admonished to think of their impending doom in hell unless they were saved by God's grace.³⁸ This message can be seen in an anonymous broadside of that period:

My Cry's to you, my Children . . .
Be wise before it be too late.
Think on your latter end.
Though you are young and yet you must die,
and hasten to the Pit.³⁹

People were also encouraged to keep diaries in which they recorded their spiritual progress and failings. There seems to have been much emphasis on continually thinking about the shortness of one's own life. Therefore, it is not surprising that the death of anyone in the community often stimulated these diarists to reflect on their own precarious situation even though the actual conditions of life in that society were much healthier than they imagined.

Perhaps now we are in a better position to account for the misperceptions of early New Englanders of the level of mortality in their society. They came from England where mortality rates were very high. Their expectations of continued high mortality in the New World were reinforced by the difficulties of the early years of settlement, the uncertainty of life due to the presence of periodic epidemics, and the particularly high mortality of their children. Though their chances of survival in America were actually much better than those of

³⁷ Solomon Stoddard, *The Efficacy of the Fear of Hell to Restrain Men from Sin* (Boston, 1713), p. 10.

³⁸ The best account of death and young children in early American society is by David E. Stannard, 'Death and the Puritan Child,' *American Quarterly* 26(1974): 456-76.

³⁹ Quoted in Shively, 'History of the Conception of Death,' p. 52.

their relatives and friends in the old country, they usually did not realize this fact because of the great emphasis that was placed on death by their religion. The continued reminder of the shortness of their lives whenever anyone died made it difficult for the average person to comprehend the changes in the overall mortality level that had occurred. Furthermore, their incessant preoccupation with death helps to explain why most scholars of colonial history thought that there was such a high death rate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Since most of these historians relied only on literary evidence, there was no reason for them to suspect that the colonists had incorrectly assessed the living conditions in early New England.

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