During the last third of the nineteenth century, no dramatic event or theory suddenly transformed prevailing perceptions of the elderly's position in society. Many Americans continued to acknowledge the aged's worth and to idealize their usefulness.\(^1\) Some writers, in fact, sought to demonstrate that novel ideas inspired and popularized by Charles Darwin's monumental *Origin of Species* (1859) warranted assigning the aged a favorable place in society. Inferring that Darwinism lent support to the romantic claim that old age represented the culmination of life, Americans sometimes blended a mixture of antebellum notions and current scientific belief about evolution, and argued that the elderly deserved respect because their contributions were unique and their achievements distinctive.\(^2\) Hence, once again we find the resilience of positive opinions about old people's presumed value despite the ceaseless reworking of the normative and intellectual foundations of American culture at large.

Nevertheless, with growing frequency after the Civil War, Americans began to challenge nearly every favorable belief about the usefulness and merits of age that had been set forth by republican and romantic writers and that still appeared in contemporary literature. Instead of depicting the elderly as stately and healthy, more and more observers described them as ugly and disease-ridden. Instead of extolling the aged's moral wisdom and practical sagacity, popular and scientific commentators increasingly concluded that old people were incapable of contributing anything to society. By the outbreak of World War I, if not before, most Americans were affirming the obsolescence of old age.

The period roughly between 1865 and 1914, therefore, constitutes an important transition in the history of ideas about growing old. (More precise dating is impossible because the flowering of predominantly unfavorable perceptions about old people's worth occurred in medical and business

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circles, among other groups, at different moments and developed at dissimilar rates.) It is not the first time that definitions of the aged’s usefulness altered; there had been subtle continuities and changes since at least the 1790s. Nor did scientists or essayists discover any liability or disadvantage associated with old age that earlier observers had not already catalogued. But the era does mark a watershed in which the overall estimation of old people’s worth clearly changed.

How, then, do we account for this significant change in perceptions? Why did Americans after the Civil War conceptually strip the aged of roles once described as essential and assign them no new functions to compensate for the loss? It is tempting to say that the answer lies in the shift from romanticism to realism. That is, the evanescence of the romantic sensibility, especially its emphasis on subjective experience, its pious overtones, and its idealistic world view, was eventually displaced by a more objective, secular, and dispassionate perspective. However, this shift taking place in high culture is too diffuse and its timing is too imprecise to explain satisfactorily how and when new ideas arose in the specific sphere of defining older people’s roles and places in American life. And while negative opinions about the elderly’s worth were consonant with the pessimistic version of Social Darwinism articulated during the latter decades of the nineteenth century, they were neither solely dependent upon nor derived from it.

The obsolescence of old age cannot be fully understood by referring to broad cultural tendencies alone. Rather, it is necessary to delineate and explain the interplay of a particular set of attitudes and circumstances, which vitiated the generally complimentary concepts of older people’s status and caused new ones to emerge. As I shall show, the unprecedented disesteem for the elderly reflected and resulted from the impact of new scientific, bureaucratic, and popular ideas converging with innovations in medical practice, the economic structure, and American society itself.

“‘It’s Not Old Age, But Length of Life, Which All Men Desire.’”

One of the reasons why antebellum America had considered elderly men and women useful was because they exemplified the rules of conduct then considered the surest way of enjoying a ripe old age. Although the aged remained living proof that adhering to prescribed modes of behavior enhanced the possibility of a long life, writers after 1865 gradually became less willing to claim that the elderly possessed the most efficacious means of promoting longevity. Specialized scientific knowledge seemed to promise even greater success than enlightened common sense in increasing life expectancy and preventing disease.
Efforts to improve public health and to promote hygiene received tremendous support after the Civil War. States began creating and authorizing boards of health to establish and regulate more sanitary living standards and to investigate the causes and prevent the spread of contagious diseases. The discovery of different bacteria and the reformulation of the germ theory in the latter half of the nineteenth century, moreover, provided a sounder rationale for combating disease than had been available to earlier sanitary reformers. In addition, observers asserted that reductions in infant and child mortality and increases in life expectancy could be attributed to better infant care and improvement in nutrition at early ages as well as to advances in caring for the sick and infirm. Success in applying new ideas and techniques led Americans to believe not only that people were living longer than ever before but also that more gains could be expected in the future. Improved life expectancy, writers increasingly concluded, "depends on no mysterious law of development. . . . It is the necessary result of agencies so obvious and so powerful in our civilization that we need statistics not so much to prove their existence but to measure their results."

Physicians, biologists, and sanitary engineers, therefore, assumed a greater and highly technical role in studying and advancing the principles conducive to increasing longevity and improving hygiene. Americans after the Civil War still acknowledged the importance of moral and sensible deportment, but they steadily preferred to rely on the advice of experts rather than the insights of experience. As more and more Americans deferred to the collective wisdom of professionals, the value of older men and women as promoters of healthful living decreased.

And yet, through the articles and ideas they contributed to magazines like Harper's and Popular Science Monthly as well as their own professional journals, scientists and doctors did more than displace the elderly from their long-standing societal function as examples of healthful lifestyles. Advances in American medical theory and practice during the last third of the nineteenth century also legitimized the invidious distinction people were making between desiring a long life and wanting to grow old. The practical question was "not whether we can push the natural age of man to ninety or one hundred years, but whether we can keep our bodies so pure and active, and so preserve the integrity of our mental powers, that between fifty and ninety, our place will not be in seclusion, but in some degree, at least, in the full tide of world's activities." In contrast to earlier medical opinions, scientists gradually concluded that the debilities of age were not simply the result of natural decay, but stemmed from more deplorable causes.

It is important to note that the first important changes in medical ideas about old age occurred across the ocean, especially in France and Germany. Many researchers designed their investigations on the principle, circulating
in Europe since the second quarter of the nineteenth century, that it was important to correlate localized pathological lesions with symptoms in identifying particular diseases. Such studies received added impetus after 1858, when Rudolph Virchow demonstrated that one could actually observe pathological lesions in cells under a microscope. Virchow not only improved the possibility of refining localized pathology but also endeavored to synthesize the prevailing concept of pathology with an older and more holistic theory of pathology by stressing the need to observe the total bodily reaction to specific, localized diseases.

The most influential work on old age published in Europe during the 1860s and 1870s was Jean-Martin Charcot's *Leçons cliniques sur les maladies des vieillards et les maladies chroniques* (1867), a systematic study of the relationship between old age and disease among inmates at a large public hospital for women in Paris. Charcot's major finding was that there were some diseases that arose from the general physiological modifications of an aging body, a second group of diseases that existed at other periods of life but presented special characteristics and dangers in old age, and a third class of diseases from which old people seemed to be immune. His clinical work indicated that the degeneration and weakening of the cells of specific organs and vessels during the latter stages of life caused specific diseases. Hence, Charcot documented both the importance of identifying localized structural lesions and recognizing that the bodily reactions associated with diseases at other ages did not always manifest themselves in old age: "In old age, the organs seem, as it were, to become independent of one another; they suffer separately, and the various lesions to which they may become subject are scarcely echoed by the anatomy as a whole."

Charcot's work was not a radical departure from existing ideas about diseases in old age; Charcot acknowledged, for example, that scientists had been studying the pathological manifestations of old age for more than a century. Nor was he the first to gather together in a systematic manner evidence indicating that specific diseases existed in old age. At the time of its publication, however, Charcot's work was considered the most extensively researched exposition based on the belief that one could understand diseases in old age only by clinically investigating localized structural lesions. Charcot's publication was not only accepted as the standard monograph on the subject but also was well circulated; a second edition was published in 1874. It is significant for my purposes that Charcot's study of the diseases of old age was the only European work of its kind to be translated into English. In 1881, William Tuke translated Charcot's lectures for the New Sydenham Society in London, and two New York doctors published an American edition the same year. For the majority of doctors in the United States who were not bilingual, the English translations of
Charcot’s lectures provided their first full-length contact with current European ideas about the pathological aspects of growing old.

The timing of the translations themselves, moreover, gave Charcot’s work an importance as a model for future research in the United States far beyond its actual merits. By 1881, American medical theory and practice had advanced sufficiently to permit doctors to engage in research using the same theoretical framework and clinical techniques on which Charcot had based his inquiry. An increasing number of physicians during the post–Civil War period were familiar with the concepts, methodology, and instruments necessary to study structural pathology. Doctors and scientists interested in doing research received professional encouragement and rewards for their work and could associate with medical faculties and hospitals willing to support pure research. Medical schools at Harvard, Pennsylvania, Columbia, Johns Hopkins, and Michigan and hospitals in metropolitan centers and elsewhere began to receive greater financial support from the private sector to underwrite research. Thus, when the first English editions of Charcot’s work appeared, the American medical profession was predisposed to accept and then develop its premises and findings.

This does not mean, of course, that American doctors after the Civil War suddenly embraced all new medical ideas or rushed into laboratories to look at lesions under microscopes. Most doctors, in fact, were more inclined to continue the antebellum practice of recommending ways to postpone the effects of old age than they were to devote years to investigating its causes. Articles on old age in popular and scientific journals as well as in family medical guides typically offered practical advice on personal habits, diet, and exercise. Prescribed medications further demonstrate the persistence of traditional practices: homeopaths and other sectarian physicians still offered recipes for home remedies to cope with minor ailments; some orthodox doctors continued to recommend opium as an analgesic for the elderly.

Nevertheless, new ways of conceptualizing, researching, and treating diseases in old age began to circulate with increasing frequency and significance in the United States during the last decades of the nineteenth century. For example, once American doctors began to accept new European ideas about senile pathology, they needed precise, not general, terms to define its manifestations. “Senility,” which was once simply a synonym for “old age” as a stage of life, now referred specifically to the “weakness and decrepitude characteristic of old age.” The word gradually gained pathological connotations; it is suggestive that the American biologist Charles Sedgwick Minot noted in his definition of “senility” for the Reference Handbook of Medical Science (1885) that he chose to “follow Charcot closely.” Doctors also enlarged their lexicon to describe diseases peculiar to old age. These new definitions underlined the growing interest
in defining the pathological aspects of old age as unique and localized entities. In addition, more and more American investigators following in the direction elucidated by Charcot began to research and operate on the ailments and diseases of old age. Case studies of senile gangrene, senile bronchitis, senile pneumonia, and senile chorea among other disorders appeared in medical journals. Refined clinical observations of localized lesions also facilitated surgeons’ efforts to relieve the suffering of their aged patients.

Some research proved to be controversial and unsuccessful. For example, Dr. Charles E. Brown-Séquard, a French-American scientist chiefly known for his research on the nervous system and adrenal glands, attributed senility to “diminishing action of the spermatic glands,” and reasoned that injecting semen into the blood stream of old men might restore lost vigor. In 1889, at the age of seventy-two, Brown-Séquard injected himself with a mixture of water, semen, and testicular fluids and claimed, “I regained at least all the strength I possessed a good many years ago.” The effect lasted four weeks. Brown-Séquard’s formula appeared on the market within months as “Pohl’s Spermine Preparations.” Despite the enthusiasm greeting the initial findings, general interest waned after high expectations were not met. The seminal experiment was not rejuvenating: the drug’s effect wore off quickly and did not restore complete physical strength. It also was not totally effective: Dr. Brown-Séquard died five years later even though he injected himself regularly with his mixture. Brown-Séquard had not discovered the elixir of life; by studying an aspect of senile pathology, he only had devised a way to excite the nervous system. But his failure neither deterred other scientists from pursuing new lines of inquiry nor discouraged them from publishing revolutionary ideas about the nature of disease in old age.

Indeed, around the turn of the century, Elie Metchnikoff, a bacteriologist working in Paris, believed that he had discovered the cause of old age: poisonous microbes accumulating in the intestines produced toxic reactions that, he claimed, caused the human organism to degenerate and eventually to die. He recommended as an antidote that people drink sour milk, because the lactic acid in it prevented putrefaction in the intestinal tract. Metchnikoff noted that sour milk was a staple in the diet of Bulgarians, who were thought to be Europe’s healthiest and longest-lived people. Popular confidence in this panacea was somewhat shaken by the scientist’s death at seventy-one. Subsequent research, moreover, invalidated Metchnikoff’s hypothesis that a pathologic phagocytosis caused senescence.

Elie Metchnikoff’s significance in the history of medical ideas about old age, however, transcends both his particular theory and his specific therapy for degeneration in old age. Metchnikoff built his theory on Charcot’s work, but differed from his predecessor on one essential point: “The senile degeneration of our organism is entirely similar to the lesions induced by
certain maladies of a microbiotic origin. Old age, then, is an infectious, chronic disease which is manifested by a degeneration, or an enfeebling of the noble elements, and by the excessive activity of the microphages." Whereas Charcot verified the existence of a senile pathology, Metchnikoff characterized old age as an atrophy sui generis.

Metchnikoff's assertion that old age itself was a chronic, infectious disease was well publicized and had a significant, and sometimes paradoxical, impact on medical research and popular thinking at the beginning of the twentieth century. Some researchers, sharing Metchnikoff's opinion that old age was a curable disease, hoped to eradicate toxic disturbances located in various parts of the body. Sir Victor Hursley, for example, concentrated on the degeneration of the thyroid gland; Dr. Arnold Lorand stressed the simultaneous deterioration of several ductless glands. However, many doctors doubted that scientists could ever cure old age precisely because they agreed with Metchnikoff that it was a progressive disease. Nihilism flourished among those believing that "the ravages of years remain as irreparable in the twentieth century as they were in the time of Solomon."

The general public, meanwhile, kept informed of debates and developments in the medical sciences by reading articles on old age in encyclopedias and popular journals. Regardless of their optimism or pessimism about the advances made or anticipated in aging research, all these articles confirmed that experts had not yet succeeded in making old age more healthy and attractive, and thus they provided a scientific basis for dreading the coming of age: "If there is any disease in the world it is this. No one looks forward to it with eager anticipation. Nobody welcomes it, nobody enjoys it. . . . It is a disease, that is to say it is essentially a pathological condition. . . . But for it there exists no therapy, no cure." Contrary to previous judgments, attaining old age no longer seemed either a remarkable or a desirable achievement.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, therefore, specialists had not only superseded the elderly as experts in health matters but had also convinced the general public that old people suffered incurable pathological disorders. The ultimate result of living a long life, medical evidence confirmed, was often more deleterious than useful. Consequently, new scientific theories and data forced people to reevaluate their opinions about the elderly's value in other capacities.

"Not All of the Centenarians
Are Paragons of All the Virtues."

Scientists, almanac compilers, philosophers, and other commentators increasingly challenged the antebellum assumption that surviving to old age proved a person's inherent goodness and sagacity. "Survival was a
precondition of progress, but it did not insure progress or define its essence. . . . Survival was a brute fact, not a moral victory.” Thus people became less inclined to claim that wisdom necessarily improved with age. In fact, they claimed to have data confirming that old age was a dreadful stage of life ravaged by diseases and debilities that eventually destroyed all cerebral powers.

Research published after the Civil War seemed to demonstrate, contrary to earlier opinions, that people’s intellectual faculties declined with age. Sir Francis Galton, an English biologist and statistician, and an American named George M. Beard conducted research in the 1860s and 1870s indicating that people’s mental capabilities were greatest between the ages of thirty and forty-five. Significantly, they attributed the decline in intellectual accomplishments after sixty to pathological disorders common to old people. Subsequent studies corroborated their findings. According to W. A. Newman Dorland’s *The Age of Mental Virility* (1908), for example, man’s creative power developed steadily to the age of sixty and then fell off. “While in the vast majority of cases [of people over sixty] declining physical and mental ability progressed pari passu to the cessation of life, there loom up, amid the general wreck of bodily and cerebral powers some striking instances of remarkable vitality and virility, standing out, like beacon lights of hope, far beyond the period of normal decay.” Writers cited such evidence, which was consistent with current theories about senile pathology, to substantiate the idea that old age corroded the mental capacities of most men and women.

Many observers claimed, moreover, that old people often compounded their difficulties by making themselves inaccessible to new ideas or alternate ways of doing things. In *Principles of Psychology* (1890), for instance, William James argued that people became more and more enslaved to familiar conceptions and established ways of assimilating ideas as they grew old: “Old-fogyism, in short, is the inevitable terminus to which life sweeps us on.” James’s reference to “old fogyism” is suggestive. Although the word “fogy” was occasionally used before the Civil War, it did not yet refer exclusively to old people. According to the lexicographers of Webster’s dictionary, who cited it for the first time in the 1880 edition, a “fogy” was a “dull old fellow; a person behind the times, over-conservative, or slow:—usually preceded by old.” By the latter decades of the nineteenth century there was a special term to describe old people who would not, or could not, keep up with the times.

The very factors that accounted for old people’s declining mental capacities and decreasing ability to absorb new information seemed to explain their unpleasant personality traits. As George Beard explained, “The querulousness of age, the irritability, the avarice are the resultants partly of habit and partly of organic and functional changes in the brain.”
They also provided plausible reasons for questioning an earlier assumption that people invariably gained in moral stature as they aged. "Not all of the centenarians," one commentator pointedly observed, "are paragons of all the virtues."

Old people's unwillingness to conform to cultural conventions, in turn, confirmed the evolving contention that their behavior was not always exemplary. Physicians recommended, for example, that men over fifty and women over forty-five curtail their sex lives. They justified abstention with medical evidence couched in moral tones. Dr. John Harvey Kellogg contended that seminal fluid deteriorated in old age: "Even at its best, its component elements could only represent decrepitude and infirmity, degeneration and senility." The children of old men, he claimed, were feeble and died prematurely. Women, on the other hand, should recognize that menopause signaled the end of sexual activity. Older people who defied the dictates of nature could expect to suffer the consequences. "When the passions have been indulged and their diminishing vigor stimulated, a horrid disease, satyriasis, not infrequently seizes upon the imprudent individual, and drives him to the perpetration of the most loathsome crimes and excesses." Others claimed that emotional numbness, loneliness, physical pain, mental anguish, and economic difficulties often drove the elderly to desperate measures. Dr. Elie Metchnikoff, for example, reported that elderly men committed suicide more frequently than young men and that the aged poor were more likely to take their lives than those who were financially secure.

Contemporary medical research and everyday observations, therefore, persuaded Americans to reject the antebellum notion that being old intrinsically bestowed better judgment or guaranteed moral behavior. "Years do not make sages;" the New England Almanac for 1872 informed readers, "they make only old men." Reaching this verdict, however, did not automatically lead to the deduction that old people were physically, mentally, or morally incapable of contributing to society. The conviction that old age was a period of economic obsolescence arose primarily in the minds of observers and participants in big business.

"The Superannuated Man"

The rise of large-scale business and organizations is one of the major factors affecting life in late nineteenth-century America. Although the slow transition from an agrarian to an industrial-based economy had already begun, the big business corporation as well as a variety of other economic institutions and government offices did not grow in size and scope until after the Civil War. These new structures had a profound effect: "Corporate
structures gradually altered the meaning of property, the circumstances and motivations of economic activity, and the careers and expectations of most citizens. Accompanying the evolution of these organizations was the emerging idea that bureaucratic principles should be employed to ensure that workers performed tasks competently and punctually and to establish channels of authority and responsibility. Efficiency had become the sine qua non of any successful enterprise by the turn of the century. Consequently, impersonality symbolized a bureaucratic order in which functions and procedures, not particular men, were indispensable.

Precisely because the rise of large corporate structures and the formulation of bureaucratic principles were incremental processes, Americans did not instantly or completely overturn favorable assessments of the aged’s worth in the marketplace. Some writers as late as 1900 still affirmed that old people had vital roles to play. Even if the elderly were not actively directing operations, their experience assured them a place as consultants; at the very least, they could perform ancillary tasks. And yet, observers of the emerging industrial order did become more articulate over time in describing how new conditions and ideas were reducing Americans’ dependence on older workers’ seasoned experience to ensure economic success.

In the search for increased efficiency, begotten in modern time by the practically universal worship of the dollar... gray hair has come to be recognized as an unforgivable witness of industrial imbecility, and experience the invariable companion of advancing years, instead of being valued as common sense would require it to be, has become a handicap so great as to make the employment of its possessor, in the performance of tasks and duties for which his life work has fitted him, practically impossible.

An unmistakable shift was occurring in perceptions of the elderly’s value in the labor force.

A new trend in discharging employees after they had attained a certain age provides one of the clearest indications that ideas about old people’s usefulness were changing. The practice had precedents: some states had set retirement ages for judges in the antebellum period. And yet, infirmity, debility, or an employer’s displeasure were the only reasons why older workers had normally been forced to quit their jobs; age per se had not been a decisive factor in leaving the labor force before the Civil War. Then, between 1861 and 1915, the federal government and especially private industry began to design and implement policies that discharged workers because they were considered too old to stay on the job.

The first federal retirement measure became law in December 1861, when Congress passed an act requiring any naval officer below the rank of vice admiral who was at least sixty-two to resign his commission; the retirement age for naval officers was raised to sixty-four in 1916. The earliest
policy applying to sailors entitled them to retire, because of age or infirmity, on half pay after twenty years of service. There was no fixed age for retirement for sailors until 1899, however, when a minimum age (fifty), not a maximum limit, was imposed. A measure passed in 1869 permitted, but did not require, a federal judge to retire after serving ten years and reaching the age of seventy on a pension equal to his salary at the time of retirement. "An Act to promote the efficiency of the Revenue-Cutter service" (1902) required all incapacitated officers to be dropped from service by the president; all officers were required to retire at sixty-four. Because these were the only retirement policies instituted at the federal level by World War I, it is fair to conclude that the practice of retiring government officials was still in the embryonic stages and affected only a limited number. Nor were there any uniform standards in the measures established: specific acts set different retirement ages for each group; receiving a pension was not always contingent on having served a certain number of years.

Retirement policies in the private sector also were in the formative stages. Transportation companies inaugurated the earliest pension programs. In 1875, the American Express Company permitted workers past sixty to receive some compensation upon retirement. The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad retirement policy (1884), which stipulated minimum age (sixty-five) and service (ten years) requirements, has been called the "pioneer in this country in the movement to pension its employees." There was considerable variation in the pension programs instituted. For example, although most corporations did not require workers to contribute to pension funds, contributory programs did exist. The age of retirement and the number of years of service required for an employee to be eligible for a pension also differed from company to company. Nevertheless, it is apparent that an increasing number of firms appreciated the need to establish some sort of policy to remove older workers from the labor force. Although only eight companies instituted programs between 1874 and 1900, twenty-three others began policies between 1901 and 1905, and twenty-nine more offered employee retirement pensions between 1906 and 1910. Ninety-nine additional corporations initiated policies between 1911 and 1915. The idea of requiring people to retire or offering them the option to do so because they had attained a particular age was gaining acceptance in the private sector.

Disesteem for older employees' worth clearly motivated a company's decision to exact mandatory retirement. As F. Spencer Baldwin, an economics professor at Boston University, explained:

It is well understood nowadays that the practice of retaining on the pay-roll aged workers who can no longer render a fair equivalent for their wages is wasteful and demoralizing. The loss is twofold. In the first place, payment of full wages to
workers who are no longer reasonably efficient, and in the second place, there is the direct loss entailed by the slow pace by the presence of worn-out veterans, and the consequent general demoralization of the service.\textsuperscript{45}

From management's viewpoint, retirement systems improved efficiency and morale by removing expendable workers. From a larger perspective, it was claimed that corporations that offered job security, merit promotions, and adequate compensation in old age "inevitably attract the highest grade of men and women, and obtain from them the most efficient work."\textsuperscript{46}

The meanings of "retirement" and "superannuation" changed to embrace the policies implemented by large-scale organizations. The primary sense of "retire" in 1828—to withdraw from public notice—had become obsolete according to the lexicographers of the 1880 edition of Webster's American Dictionary. Instead, they attributed a new meaning to the verb: "retire" among other things meant "to cause to retire; specifically to designate as no longer qualified for active service; as to retire a military or naval officer." An additional definition was added to the verb "superannuate": "To give pension to, on account of old age, or other infirmity."\textsuperscript{47} Note the derogatory attitude toward old age displayed in both definitions. Retirement now meant that people reached a stage of their careers at which they were no longer qualified for gainful employment because of age. Reaching old age entitled a person to a pension just as other disabilities qualified workers for special considerations.

The unprecedented devaluation of older workers' usefulness was felt even more deeply and pervasively in the marketplace than was signified by new retirement policies and dictionary definitions. Many writers commented on "the tendency—visibly increasing in this country—of relegating the older and middle-aged men to the oblivion of an 'innocuous desuetude.'"\textsuperscript{48} Laborers and craftsmen over forty-five who were worn out or displaced by machines found reemployment opportunities limited. Taking an inferior job was not always a satisfactory solution, writers warned, since workers rarely regained steps taken backward.\textsuperscript{49} If employment prospects were poor for those in their fifties, they were even worse for people in their sixties. "The things that most promote the welfare of the wage-earning class militate most against old age employment. . . . The old man today . . . slow, hesitating, frequently half-blind and deaf, is sadly misplaced amid the death dealing machinery of a modern factory."\textsuperscript{50} The evidence reveals similarly negative sentiments about older workers outside the factory gates. Civil Service employees over sixty were said to retain only "partial efficiency" despite years of service; older clergymen, lawyers, or doctors, it was said, were rarely offered new opportunities for service or advancement.\textsuperscript{51} While recognizing that men often ceased working more abruptly than women, commentators noted that society often made both sexes feel superfluous. "We soothe our souls and say to ourselves, 'Grandmother is comfortable and content.' We rarely ask if grandmother is useful and happy."\textsuperscript{52} Writers
described their contemporaries as treating older women as if they were baubles with only negligible jobs to fulfill.

Thus by the turn of the century, even those who asserted that the elderly could contribute something to society admitted that they no longer reflected the opinions of most Americans. Changing circumstances and new priorities seemed to have diminished the aged's worth as veterans of productivity and enhanced the purported value of youth. "Not all the sandwich men in our large cities or the sitters in our public parks are victims of intemperance or shiftlessness; they are, in many cases, the product of an industrial and economic system that thrives only on young blood." This observation was not confined to the economic sphere. Modern conditions, people increasingly believed, required youth, not age, to assume the roles of advancing society and putting life into perspective.

"Old Age, Like Death, Is Merely Incidental."

Although Americans after the Civil War generally considered it axiomatic that the human condition improved as society progressed, this did not mean that the human life cycle necessarily followed the same pattern of development. "The dominant aspect of evolution was to be not the genesis of species, but the progress of Civilization."

Progress had a dual nature. Blessed with infinite possibilities, civilization was ultimately evolving to its most perfect culmination. Human development, on the other hand, was finite. The retrogression and eventual demise of man was viewed as a necessary and inevitable law of nature that insured the continual unfolding of mankind's destiny.

This concept of evolutionary progress had ominous implications for the aged. New scientific theories and economic realities convinced Americans that individuals declined in old age as human existence marched on. Because they perceived the elderly to be afflicted with pathological disorders and no longer able to keep up with the pace, it is not surprising that writers claimed old people had lost their grasp on the meaning and nature of societal development. Presuming it to be a law of nature that an individual's connection with societal progress relaxed with the coming of age, Americans gradually discounted the value of old people's insights and claimed that young people were in the best position to understand the meaning of life.

Old men cherish a fond delusion that there is something mystically valuable in the mere quantity of experience. Now the fact is, of course, that it is the young people who have all the really valuable experience. It is they who have constantly to face new aspects of life, who are getting the whole beauty and terror and cruelty of the world in all its fresh and undiluted purity. . . . Old age lives in the delusion that it has improved and rationalized its youthful ideas by experience and stored-up wisdom, when all it has done is to damage them more or less—usually more.
More and more people came to the conclusion that digesting a lifetime of experience in old age served little purpose. Circumstances seemed to be changing too rapidly to warrant copying the practices of the past; the elderly often imitated or reiterated earlier insights anyway. Youth's enthusiasm, versatility, self-confidence, and pluck, it was said, more than compensated for the lack of seasoned experience. Psychologist G. Stanley Hall captured the heightened sense of importance attached to "youth" as a vital social asset in his monumental work, *Adolescence* (1905): "Despite our lessening fecundity, our over-schooling, 'city-fication,' and spoiling, the affectations we instill and the repressions we practice, [youths] are still the light and hope of the world." Historians point to the economic, educational, and religious changes occurring in the latter quarter of the nineteenth century as factors leading to the tremendous value placed on youth. Because of young people's ambiguous relationship to a society that simultaneously abhorred and participated in the quest for power and order affecting every aspect of existence, radicals and conservatives alike could agree on the appropriateness of that stage of life as a symbol of regenerative power.

Consequently, Americans after the Civil War increasingly challenged the antebellum notion that youth should heed the wisdom of age, and proposed instead that youth was the most exalted stage of life. "As a rule the energy which moves the world in the right direction is that of young men, and correspondingly and naturally the only deference and respect worth having or that can bring satisfaction and happiness to the recipient go to them."

This is not the first time in American history, of course, that people celebrated young men and women's zest and potential. Furthermore, pages of advertisements for hair dyes or "physical culture rejuvenation" programs and advice columns recommending that older women wear brighter clothes or stop knitting in the far corner of the parlor represent variations on an age-old phenomenon: many Americans have been trying to look and act younger than their years ever since Ponce de Leon first searched for the fountain of youth. And yet, while it would be incorrect to claim that the cult of youth instigated or even necessitated the depreciation of age, it is clear that the changes in the social as well as economic structure of society, coupled with new ideas about the meaning of progress and experience, forced Americans to reevaluate the relative merits of both age groups and to reach a new verdict. "The whole world is charged with youth," most were concluding by the turn of the century. "Old age, like death, is merely incidental."

The association of death with age as well as the implication that both were incidental to the twentieth-century world of the young is tantalizing. Before we can accept such an observation as representative of the period, far more research must be done on the history of attitudes toward death per se. Nevertheless, primary resources and recent scholarship do suggest that new attitudes toward death may have exaggerated Americans' exultation of
youth and denigration of age. Advances in science and technology did not mitigate youth’s fear of death, but they apparently lessened the risk of dying young: actuarial statistics computed at the time indicated that the death rate was declining after the Civil War for all age groups under fifty. Improvements in sanitation and public health promised more favorable mortality rates for all but the elderly. Writers reasoned, moreover, that the potential problems of overcrowding and cultural stagnation in a world “over-shadowed by too many hoary Methuselahs” made the elderly’s demise societally beneficial. In addition, there was an acceptable biological explanation for death among the aged: life was finite because wornout tissues became increasingly vulnerable to pathological disorders and decay. There was even psychological evidence suggesting that the old, unlike the young, were reconciled to dying. According to a study conducted in 1896 on the relationship between old age and death, a majority of old people thought life was most enjoyable in youth, but would not care to live life over and longed for death.

Hence, theories propounded and evidence presented by biologists, statisticians, public health experts, and psychologists among others confirmed that old people were in the best position to understand the meaning of death. Had the republican and romantic assumptions about the need for all people to come to grips with their own mortality continued to prevail, Americans might still have recognized that old people’s perceptions on dying were a valuable asset. But unlike their predecessors, people tended to ignore the potential usefulness of old people’s proximity to death. Perhaps they had no other choice, given their belief that youth had a monopoly on all valuable experiences. As William James noted in The Varieties of Religious Experience (1901), the reality of death poignantly reminded people that “old age has the last word: the purely naturalistic look at life, however enthusiastically it may begin, is sure to end in sadness.” Because the aged had the last word about the inevitability of death, they were excluded from a world awed by the vitality of youth, a world that increasingly chose to deny the existence of death. “Slowly and with difficulty the septuagenarians climb the steep hill leading to the great temple of youth. . . . They beat at the doors, and alas! these do not open. They crave only admittance, and a stool in a quiet corner, but the ruthless revellers turn a deaf ear.” The young refused the old admission into their world. Youths no longer considered it vital to acknowledge the wisdom and talents of age; they discounted its worth, feared its association with death and excluded it from their midst.

Because of changes after the Civil War in societal patterns and cultural trends, Americans by the outbreak of World War I no longer claimed that
the elderly exclusively fulfilled roles that would guarantee them respect. As efforts to increase life expectancy and improve hygiene became more technical and successful, specialists gradually replaced the aged as promoters of healthful longevity. New ideas about pathological disorders weakening the intellectual capacities and moral faculties at advanced stages of life, which the elderly’s own seemingly aberrant behavior confirmed, undermined older people’s functions as guardians of virtue. Science alone, however, did not condemn the elderly to uselessness. Americans increasingly perceived that the rise of large-scale organizations and the implementation of new bureaucratic principles not only reduced the need to tap the aged’s assets but also accentuated their handicaps. In fact, the growing belief that society was changing at a progressively quicker rate further reduced the estimated value of the elderly’s cumulative experience; “youth” was thought to be most attuned to modern conditions and most capable of ensuring continued progress. Thus, the stage of life once characterized as the culmination of human existence had become obsolescent.

The unprecedented devaluation of old people’s worth is fraught with irony. For it was the lingering romantic notion that every stage of life was unique that encouraged writers, faced with different circumstances and armed with new ideas, to revise the value system implicit in earlier conceptions of the stages of life. Observers between 1865 and 1914 increasingly explained that the heightened worth of youth arose in response to, and as a product of, a new realistic era. Yet writers justified youth’s importance by appropriating the assets previously ascribed to the old. Hence, they increasingly contended that the elderly lacked the very experience, wisdom, and power that earlier generations had once claimed made it sensible for youth to honor, or at least heed, age. Perhaps even more ironically, this new, objective, tough, vigorous realism was premised in part on the denial of death. Death had not lost its sting, of course, but new ideas and conditions prevailing in society did enable contemporaries to reach the conclusion that the reduced probability of dying young was a clear indication of the march of progress in the United States. Hence, more and more Americans in the last decades of the nineteenth century overcame death by ignoring it in youth and associating it with age.