Old Age in the New Land

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Old Age in the New Land: The American Experience since 1790.
Selected Bibliography

Books


Humphry, George Murray. *Old Age: The Results of Information Received Respecting Nearly Nine Hundred Persons Who Had Attained the Age of Eighty Years, Including Seventy-Four Centenarians*. Cambridge: Macmillan and Bowes, 1889.


Lathrop, Reverend S. G. *Fifty Years and Beyond; or, Gathered Gems for the Aged*. New York: F. H. Revell, 1881.


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Periodicals

*Years surveyed are indicated in parentheses.*


*American Journal of Psychology*, Urbana, Illinois (1887–1940)

*American Journal of Sociology*, Chicago (1895–1940)

*American Magazine*, New York (1876–1940)


*Atlantic Monthly*, Boston (1857–1940)

*Boston Weekly Magazine*, Boston (1802–41). Several magazines by this title were published independently between 1802 and 1841.

*Brother Jonathan*, New York (1842–43)

*Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine*, Philadelphia (1837–40)

*Catholic World*, New York (1865–1940)

*Charities [and the Commons]*, New York (1897–1909)

*Commonweal*, New York (1924–40)

*Current Literature*, New York (1888–1912)

*Current Opinion*, New York (1912–25)

*Everybody’s*, New York (1899–1929)

*Forum [and Century]*, New York (1886–1940)


*Godey’s Lady’s Book*, Philadelphia (1830–98)

*Good Housekeeping*, New York (1885–1940)

*Graham’s*, Philadelphia (1826–58). Once known as *Atkinson’s Casket*.

*Harper’s Bazaar*, New York (1867–1940)
Because words such as “senility” and “retirement” have meant different things at different times, dating changes in dictionary definitions help to reveal broader, long-term changes in prevailing perceptions of old age. I have traced the meanings of
various words in (successive) editions of twenty different popular and scientific dictionaries. Especially helpful were the particular revisions made over time in An American Dictionary of the English Language (originally compiled by Noah Webster) and A Dictionary of Medical Science. Dictionaries that did not have revised editions also provided valuable clues. Needless to say, I relied heavily on information in historical dictionaries, including the Oxford English Dictionary; Mitford M. Mathews, A Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951); and Eric Partridge, A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English, 6th ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967).

In addition, I systematically searched for pertinent material (under references such as “age,” “longevity,” “old age,” “pensions,” “retirement,” and “senility”) in all of the American- and/or British-published encyclopedias in the University of Michigan library system. Many contained no listings for any of my “key” words, a fact that is significant in its own right. Some apparently pirated articles from their rivals. Nevertheless, analyzing data in successive editions of the eighteen encyclopedias listed in my dissertation proved enormously helpful. I highly recommend that researchers use the Encyclopedia Americana, Encyclopaedia Brittanica, The Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, and The New American Cyclopedia.

I also utilized a fine collection of American almanacs housed in the William L. Clements Library on the Ann Arbor campus. The Clements Library has almanacs for selected years from many small communities settled east of the Mississippi. Perhaps more important, however, are the two series that enjoyed a remarkable longevity: Nathan Daboll and David Daboll’s The New England Almanack and Farmer’s Friend (1833–1900) and Robert Thomas’s The Farmer’s Almanack (1800–1923).


Government Publications

The decennial federal census provides an extraordinary wealth of information about the state of the nation in general and the status of elderly Americans in particular. To be sure, I sometimes combed volumes of tables that almost answered a seemingly simple question only to realize that someone had published the wrong
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data. Other problems with this source have already been noted. Nevertheless, with patience and persistence I found that the 1880, 1900, 1920, 1930, 1940, and 1970 censuses in particular yielded many details about the aged's demographic and socio-economic characteristics at a given point in time. Researchers should also canvass the seemingly infinite number of special reports published by the census bureau. State censuses—especially those published by Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island—are indispensable. And, when appropriate, researchers should utilize the manuscript reports on which these censuses are based.

Series published by other federal and state government agencies should be mentioned briefly. For instance, researchers interested in public service retirement systems, institutions caring for the elderly, or public old-age relief and insurance programs before Social Security, should consult the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics bulletin, nos. 447, 489, and 561, respectively. In studying the relatively recent past, the first-rate studies and reports conducted by several branches of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (especially the Social Security Administration and the National Institute on Aging) merit careful reading.

Those who attempt to reconstruct the evolution of old-age policies will quickly find themselves overwhelmed by the amount of data that should—much less could—be digested. The classic bibliographic aids for penetrating this nation's legal thicket proved enormously helpful. I strongly recommend consulting Benjamin Poore's *The Federal and State Constitutions*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1972) and Francis Newton Thorpe, ed., *The Federal and State Constitutions, Colonial Charters and Other Organic Laws, 1492–1908*, 7 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1909), which expedite efforts to study the extent of old-age discrimination/entitlement in these specific statutes. And while the time and energy spent reading committee reports and congressional hearings is rarely pleasant, these sources are readily accessible and incredibly insightful.

An Agenda for Future Research

Although the first published monographs on the history of old age have uncovered important continuities and changes in the meanings and experiences of being old by analyzing a variety of sources and studying trends over a relatively lengthy period of time, readers should note that there is a lot of room in this new area of research for a great deal more historical work. Some current controversies will have to be resolved, a few should be dismissed as spurious, and still others need to be redefined in light of new evidence and more sophisticated conceptual frameworks. Indeed, my own research in the field thus far suggests many key topics and issues that deserve intensive and extensive examination in the future.

For example, we need to learn far more than we currently know about the actual socioeconomic characteristics and behavioral patterns of older Americans between the Revolutionary and Civil wars. (Undoubtedly, much of this information will emerge from careful case studies of local communities.) Furthermore, we ought to retrace the historic record of groups within the population over sixty-five years old.
Because the particular opportunities and problems of men and women in past times diverged in many important respects, it is necessary to investigate more systematically any long-term variations in the circumstances and conceptions of aged men and older women. More attention must be paid to the ways that major developments in the history of the elderly foreign-born depart from those of the native-born. Age-specific regional, ecological, class, and occupational differences merit fuller consideration. In light of current national problems and priorities, it is clearly imperative that we carefully assess the extent to which the situation of older blacks and other minority-group members has differed from the modal conditions of the aged white population in the past. Above all, we must sharpen the distinctions we already make between the history of age and the history of aging; as we continue to engage in longitudinal analyses of particular stages of life, we also should investigate the distinctive life-course experiences of those who age(d) at different points in time and in divergent societal surroundings.

Considering items on the "new social history" agenda leads, in turn, to suggesting topics that might interest cultural and intellectual historians. As I hope this present work illustrates, a rigorously eclectic approach to the subject matter is in fact vital: we cannot simply study the actual behavior of historical men and women from womb to tomb; we also need to understand how definitions of the life cycle as well as the special assets and liabilities attributed to each stage of human existence have evolved over time, and then attempt to synthesize the patterns we detect. Much remains to be done before we can piece together the whole puzzle. For example, cross-sectional and longitudinal comparisons are needed of the way the old were depicted in various media. We know very little about the portrayal of the aged in American literature, music, and folklore, and even less about the images of old age in painting, sculpture, graphics, movies, radio, and television. Scholars certainly should consider utilizing autobiographies, diaries, letters, oral histories, and other archival materials in exploring the range of attitudes about being old expressed by men and women in their later years. Furthermore, definitive research into the lives of gerontology's heretofore "unsung heroes" has not yet been done. Full-length biographies of J. M. Charcot, Lillien Martin, I. L. Nascher, Mabel Louise Nassau, Walter Pitkin, I. M. Rubinow, and Lee Welling Squier are certainly needed. Penetrating investigations of the ideas about old age set forth by eminent biological scientists such as Benjamin Rush, John Harvey Kellogg, and Elie Metchnikoff, by social scientists such as Eveline Burns, Abraham Epstein, and G. Stanley Hall, and by astute commentators such as L. Maria Child, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William James (to mention just a few) would be helpful.

Finally, prospective investigators will find that other students in the field have only started to blaze the whole frontier of social-welfare or "public" history as it broadly relates to the aged. As family historians among other social scientists begin to publish first-rate studies of the psychological, economic, and structural features of multigenerational relationships in the past, their research generates new questions. It is now apparent that careful analyses of long-term shifts in child-parent laws and inheritance patterns as well as imaginative probes into the ways that domestic architecture literally may have shaped family life should be attempted. Other issues must be pursued. For example, we should learn as much as possible about the evolution and effectiveness of earlier veterans programs before the remaining survivors of
World War II become eligible for and/or demand additional benefits. Indeed, historians have much to do right now in elucidating the intricate development and future direction of policies affecting the aged. They must ensure that the architects of the original Social Security Act and other old-age proposals as well as the pioneers in gerontological and geriatric research tape their oral histories before they die. They should join with other applied social scientists in assessing the cumulative impact of the vast institutional network that has profoundly affected the recent history of old age. They should also prepare to engage in comparative international research so that the historical record of old age in the United States can be placed in the broadest context possible.