

Determinants of Age at Marriage in Colonial Perquimans County, North Carolina

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COLONIAL America has recently become the focus of many community studies that have given us a greatly improved sense of early demographic patterns. Evidence from New England suggests, for example, that ages of males at first marriage were quite similar to those in England, while New England women apparently married at ages several years younger than those of their English counterparts. Studies of the Chesapeake offer a significantly different picture, with average marriage ages for the native-born of both sexes often falling well below the New England level.¹ Beyond these broad outlines it is still unclear how marriage ages differed between and within regions.

The information so far assembled suggests that a variety of forces combined to determine marriage ages in colonial America. The most general and common explanation, for both a particular marriage age and any marked fluctuations, is the sex ratio. For the seventeenth-century Chesapeake a factor of special importance was the flood of young servants who were usually forced to delay marriage until their indentures were up or until they were able to purchase their freedom. Several historians of New England, most notably Philip Greven, have argued that paternal pressures, often connected with land shortages, forced young men and women to delay marriage.² In the seventeenth-century Chesapeake, such pressures had a less pronounced impact. Many young men and women

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¹ See the sources to Table II below.

² See Philip J. Greven, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1970); Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York, 1976), 78; and Daniel Scott Smith, "Parental Power and Marriage Patterns: An Analysis of Historical Trends in Hingham, Massachusetts," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, XXXV (1973), 419-428.

were immigrants whose parents were thousands of miles away,³ and the high Chesapeake mortality rate meant that many other parents did not live long enough to see their children marry.⁴ When parents did survive, they apparently tried to control their children's actions, but the abundance of land made this more difficult than in New England.⁵ This article attempts to test the effect of paternal death and the availability of land on ages of first marriage in Perquimans County, North Carolina.

Perquimans County is located in northeastern North Carolina. During the period with which this study is concerned, it stretched from the Albemarle Sound to the Virginia line. The oldest surviving North Carolina deed indicates that at least three Englishmen were living in that area in 1661.⁶ In 1670, when the county began political life as a precinct of Albemarle County, an estimated fifty families resided within its borders.⁷ By 1710 the population had risen to one hundred fifty families and although the county had not yet built any schools, it had both a Quaker meetinghouse and an Anglican church.⁸

Most of Perquimans's settlers moved south from Virginia to take advantage of Carolina's ample supply of land. The surviving tax lists indicate that landholdings were fairly evenly distributed; most families owned substantial plots but only a few had exceptionally large holdings.⁹ The tax lists do not reveal how much land was actually under cultivation or what was produced. Though it seems clear that the Albemarle farmers

³ Lorena S. Walsh, "Till Death Us Do Part: Marriage and Family in Seventeenth-Century Maryland," in Thad W. Tate and David L. Ammerman, eds., *The Chesapeake in the Seventeenth Century: Essays on Anglo-American Society* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1979), 126-152. Walsh notes that Maryland immigrants usually broke all ties with their families when they left for America (p. 131).

⁴ Walsh and Russell R. Menard, "Death in the Chesapeake: Two Life Tables for Men in Early Colonial Maryland," *Maryland Historical Magazine*, LXIX (1974), 211-227; Darrett B. and Anita H. Rutman, "'Now-Wives and Sons-in-Law': Parental Death in a Seventeenth-Century Virginia County," in Tate and Ammerman, eds., *Chesapeake Essays*, 153-182.

⁵ Menard, "Economy, Population, and Society in the Chesapeake Colonies, 1607-1730" (unpubl. MS), 33; Allan Lee Kulikoff, "Tobacco and Slaves" (unpubl. MS), 30.

⁶ William L. Saunders, ed., *The Colonial Records of North Carolina . . .*, I (Raleigh, N.C., 1886), ix, 19; Perquimans County Historical Society, *Yearbook* (Hertford, N.C., 1970), 4.

⁷ Perquimans Co. Hist. Soc., *Yearbook* (1970), 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹ The median landholding increased from 150 acres in 1697 to 300 acres in 1695 and 400 acres in 1716. During this period the wealthiest 10% owned roughly 33% of the land, and the wealthiest 20% owned 40-50%. Colonial Court Records, Document Box 190, North Carolina State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, N.C., hereafter cited as N.C. St. Archs.; "Miscellaneous Items Taken from Loose Papers among the Records of Albemarle County at Edenton," *North Carolina Historical and Genealogical Register*, I (1900), 301-304.

engaged in a limited trade in corn, tobacco, and pork, the poor roadways, shallow rivers, and dangerous coastline helped create a "small-scale farm economy primarily self-sufficing and essentially local and isolated."¹⁰

The available evidence indicates that North Carolina had a balanced sex ratio and few indentured laborers, two factors that affected marriage patterns generally. Several tax lists include indentured males, aged sixteen and older, in the households of their masters, but few men appear in this category.¹¹ Headright records from 1663 to 1694 reveal a fairly even ratio of 139 men to 100 women among the 715 immigrants to Perquimans whose gender was recorded. Moreover, 65.3 percent of these newcomers arrived in the same group as a relative or a person sharing the same last name. This suggests that many people settled in family groups.¹² Because these migrants were entering a native-born population that had a fundamentally even sex ratio, the resulting imbalance must have been slight.

Several sources hint at the lives of Perquimans's inhabitants. For demographic data I have relied on a county register that records births, marriages, and deaths throughout the colonial period,¹³ complemented by records of a Quaker monthly meeting¹⁴ and by a lengthy genealogical study of the county by Mrs. Watson Winslow.¹⁵ These sources reveal the marriage ages of 144 men and 120 women born before 1740. Since trends in quantitative data may be sensitive to the methods by which the data are manipulated, I have computed four types of averages (see Table I). Conclusions drawn from the evidence therefore rest on a firm empirical basis.

¹⁰ Lewis Cecil Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860*, I (Washington, D.C., 1933), 44.

¹¹ The 1720 and 1721 tax lists name tithes, aged 16 and older, who lived in another man's household. Most of these can be identified as sons, other relatives, or slaves. This suggests that the number of indentured servants must have been small (Colonial Court Recs., Document Box 190, N.C. St. Archs.).

¹² Secretary of State, Albemarle Book of Warrants and Surveys, 1681-1706, N.C. St. Archs., partially transcribed by W. P. Johnson in *North Carolina Genealogy*, XXI (Raleigh, N.C., 1970), 2653-2656, 2721-2729, 2761-2767, 2857-2866, 3057-3066, 3139-3146. As early as 1670 the Perquimans population was referred to as "fifty families" (Perquimans Co. Hist. Soc., *Yearbook* [1970], 8).

¹³ The original register is in Colonial Records 077.605.1, N.C. St. Archs. It is also printed in *NCHGR*, III (1903), 199-220, 363-410.

¹⁴ William Wade Hinshaw, *Encyclopedia of American Quaker Genealogy*, I (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1936), 1-91, 179-205. There is a possibility of bias in relying on this source if Quakers acted differently from non-Quakers. But Quakers made up a sizeable percentage of the population. Further, the Perquimans Quakers were virtually all converted after they settled in North Carolina. This suggests that their religion was not coupled with longstanding customs that would have affected marriage ages.

¹⁵ Mrs. Watson Winslow [Ellen Goode (Rawlings) Winslow], *History of Perquimans County as Compiled from Records Found There and Elsewhere* (Raleigh, N.C., 1931). For a discussion of the accuracy of this source and of the demographic file as a whole see James M. Gallman, "Mortality among White Males in Colonial North Carolina," *Social Science History*, IV (1980), 295-316.

TABLE I
AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE IN PERQUIMANS COUNTY

Year of Birth	Men						Women					
	All Ages			Ages 18-29			All Ages			Ages 16-29		
	N	Mean	Median	N	Mean	Median	N	Mean	Median	N	Mean	Median
Before 1680	36	24.1	23	34	23.4	23	20	18.65	18	17	19.35	18.5
1680-1699	14	26.1	24.5	12	24.6	24	24	20.7	19	22	22.45	19
1700-1719	40	24.1	23	34	22.8	22.5	29	22.3	21	26	20.4	21
1720-1740	54	22.9	22.5	52	22.7	22	47	20.3	20	46	19.9	19.5
17th C.	50	24.7	24	46	23.7	23.5	44	19.75	19	39	20	19
18th C.	94	23.4	23	86	23.1	22.5	76	21	20	72	20.2	20
Totals	144	23.9	23	132	23.1	23	120	20.6	20	111	20.1	19.5

Source: Perquimans County demographic file (described in text).

Table I suggests that the marriage ages of males increased slightly in the late 1600s and decreased for men born after the turn of the century. The fluctuations in the mean are eliminated if we ignore the men who married in their thirties and forties (7 percent). The medians both for all ages and for ages eighteen through twenty-nine reinforce the conclusion that male marriage ages did not shift greatly over the entire period. Overall, male marriage ages hovered in the twenty-three-to-twenty-four age range, with a slight downward dip for men born after 1700.

Similarly, the mean marriage age of women apparently rose at first and then declined. In 1737 John Brickell wrote a lengthy description of his travels to North Carolina. It appeared to him that women there "marry generally very young, some at thirteen or fourteen; and she that continues unmarried until twenty is reckoned a stale Maid, which is a very indifferent character in this country." This statement is clearly inaccurate for Perquimans women; the records show none marrying at age thirteen and only two each marrying at fourteen and fifteen. Since most were still unmarried at twenty, 51 percent of these women would have been "stale maids" before they wed.¹⁶

Comparable studies, summarized in Table II, provide context for the Perquimans findings. Men of New England towns, with the exception of Bristol, Rhode Island, apparently married several years later than Perquimans men, a pattern mirrored by Middle Colony Quakers. The female marriage ages in Perquimans were similar to those found in Bristol and Plymouth but generally lower than in Hingham, Andover, and Dedham. The Chesapeake data indicate that immigrants married quite late—at older ages than those exhibited in the New England studies—while the marriage ages of the native-born were consistently below the northern ages and, among women, often several years below the Perquimans level. The evidence from England and Europe is quite varied, with the mean ages ranging from the late teens to the early thirties. However, Katharine Gaskin's comprehensive tabular summary of the results from forty British and European studies reveals only a single set—eighteenth-century women in one French study—where the marriage ages were as low as those in Perquimans.¹⁷

¹⁶ John Brickell, *The Natural History of North Carolina . . .* (Murfreesboro, N.C., 1968 [orig. publ. Dublin, 1737]), 31. Although this account appears under Brickell's name, many of his observations, including his description of female marriage ages, may have been taken from John Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina; Containing the Exact Description and Natural History of that Country . . .* (London, 1709). See Percy G. Adams, "John Lawson's Alter-Ego—Dr. John Brickell," *North Carolina Historical Review*, XXXIV (1957), 314.

¹⁷ Gaskin, "Age at First Marriage in Europe Before 1850: A Summary of Family Reconstitution Data," *Journal of Family History*, III (1978), 23-36. The only study that Gaskin includes which described marriage ages below the Perquimans level is of Ducs et Pairs, France. See C. Levy and L. Henry, "Ducs et Pairs sous l'Ancien Regime," *Population*, XV (1960), 807. That study found an average female marriage age of 19.4 during the first half of the 18th century.

TABLE II
17TH- AND 18TH-CENTURY MARRIAGE AGES

Community	Period	Men		Women	
		N	Mean	N	Mean
Hingham, Mass.	married before 1691	77	27.4	97	22.0
	married 1691-1715	76	28.4	84	24.7
	married 1715-1740	125	27.0	157	23.8
	married 1741-1760	117	26.0	135	22.8
Andover, Mass. (1620-1790)	1st generation	19	26.8	14	19.0
	2nd generation	104	26.7	81	22.3
	3rd generation	224	27.1	210	24.5
	4th generation	294	25.3	282	23.2
Plymouth, Mass. (N=650)	born before 1600		27.0		
	born 1600-1625		27.0		20.6
	born 1625-1650		26.1		20.2
	born 1650-1675		25.4		21.3
	born 1675-1700		24.6		22.3
Dedham, Mass.	1636-1736		25.0		23.0
Bristol, R.I.	married before 1750	37	23.9	32	20.5
	married after 1750	71	24.3	54	21.1
Middle Colony Quaker wives	born before 1731	80	26.5	80	22.0
Eastern Shore, Md., immigrants	born 1610-1652	32	29.2	11	24.7
Charles Co., Md. immigrants	born 1610-1659	60	30.3	20	25.0
	born 1640-1679	40	24.1	15	17.8
Somerset Co., Md., natives	born 1648-1669	30	23.1	44	16.5
	born 1670-1711	25	22.8	32	17.0
Lower Western Shore, Md., natives	born 1680-1699	48	23.1	29	18.2
	born 1700-1719	72	23.7	72	18.5
	born 1720-1749	100	25.9	64	21.4
Middlesex Co., Va., natives	born by 1710	184	24.7	203	20.6

Sources: For Hingham, Mass., Daniel Scott Smith, "The Demographic History of Colonial New England," *Journal of Economic History*, XXXII (1972), 177; for Andover, Mass., Greven, *Four Generations*, 33, 34, 119, 206-208; for Plymouth, Mass., Demos, *Little Commonwealth*, 193; for Dedham, Mass., Lockridge, *New England Town*, 66; for Bristol, R.I., Demos, "Families in Colonial Bristol, Rhode Island: An Exercise in Historical Demography," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XXV (1968), 55; for Middle Colony Quakers, Robert V. Wells, "Quaker Marriage Patterns in a Colonial Perspective," *ibid.*, XXIX (1972), 418; for Eastern Shore, Md., Russell R. Menard, "The Demography of Somerset County, Maryland: A Preliminary Report" (unpubl. paper, Stony Brook Conference on Social History, 1975), Table 11; for Charles Co., Md., Lorena S. Walsh, "Charles County, Maryland, 1658-1705: A Study of Chesapeake Social and Political Structure" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1977), Table 6; for Somerset Co., Md., Menard, "The Demography of Somerset County, Maryland"; for Lower Western Shore, Md., Allan Kulikoff, "Tobacco and Slaves: Population, Economy, and Society in Eighteenth-Century Prince George's County, Maryland" (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1976), 437-438; for Middlesex County, Va., Rutman and Rutman, "'Now-Wives and Sons-in-Law,'" in Tate and Ammerman, eds., *Chesapeake Essays*, 160.

The relatively even sex ratio in Perquimans suggests that a shortage of partners did not limit the marriage choice. Therefore, we should consider the possibility that economic factors made men and women postpone marriage. As we have seen, it has often been argued that when parents were living and economic opportunities were limited, marriage ages tended to be high. Consequently, the Chesapeake—with both a high mortality rate and an abundance of land—had far lower marriage ages than New England or Europe. In Perquimans, mortality rates were not quite as high as in the Chesapeake,¹⁸ but the accessibility of land minimized the chances for parental control.

Although this article is concerned with the marriage patterns of both men and women, the following pages will center on the influence of paternal death and the availability of land on the marriage decisions of males. This is not to suggest that determinants of male marriage ages are intrinsically more important than determinants of female marriage ages (as far as population is concerned, the exact opposite is true), but rather that the determinants were quite similar. In a society with an even sex ratio, a shift in the marriage age of one sex will probably lead to a similar shift for the other. If the limiting factor were parental life span or accessibility of land, the effect on women would have been no greater than that on men. And if, as I shall argue, the demand for labor made economic independence readily attainable for young men, then the impact would have been largely on male marriage ages. The experience of daughters was clearly different from that of sons, but the consequences of the difference for marriage ages in Perquimans were not great.

The link between mortality and marriage ages has been discussed since Malthus. One theoretical argument that has been advanced is that in pre-industrial society marriage followed inheritance. Periods of low mortality were also periods of high marriage ages and therefore low fertility, creating a homeostatic demographic balance.¹⁹ In colonial New England the high marriage ages were, indeed, complemented by extremely low mortality rates. If these characteristics were truly connected, sons of deceased fathers would have married earlier than sons of living fathers.

In his work on Hingham, Massachusetts, Daniel Scott Smith argues that throughout the eighteenth century the sons of men who lived past age sixty married later than the sons of those who died before that age. Smith suggests that living fathers offered their grown sons some sort of incentive—financial or other—to delay marriage.²⁰ Russell Menard's

¹⁸ Gallman, "Mortality among White Males," *Soc. Sci. Hist.*, IV (1980), *passim*.

¹⁹ Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* . . . (London, 1798); E. A. Wrigley, "Fertility Strategy for the Individual and the Group," in Charles Tilly, ed., *Historical Studies of Changing Fertility* (Princeton, N.J., 1978); G. Ohlin, "Mortality, Marriage, and Growth in Pre-Industrial Populations," *Population Studies*, XIV (1961), 190-197; Richard A. Easterlin, "Population Change and Farm Settlement in the Northern United States," *Journal of Economic History*, XXXVI (1976), 45-75.

²⁰ Smith, "Parental Power and Marriage Patterns," *Jour. Marriage and Family*, XXXV (1973), 424-425.

study of Somerset County, Maryland, provides a sharp contrast in that he finds nearly identical mean marriage ages for men, whether their fathers were alive or dead. The mean age for Somerset women, however, was a year *less* when fathers were living, a phenomenon that Menard attributes to social controls on orphaned teenage women who could not gain parental consent to marry.²¹ Lorena Walsh observes that the early female marriage ages in seventeenth-century Maryland meant that parents were more likely to live to see their daughters wed and that because potential brides were so young, parental intervention was sometimes called for. She adds, however, that parents rarely tried to place economic sanctions on their children.²² Daniel Blake Smith notes that in Charles Parish, Virginia, sons of living fathers were nearly four years older on average at the birth of their first children than sons of deceased fathers. This finding leads him to infer that early paternal death meant increased autonomy, resulting in lower marriage ages.²³

Perquimans resembled Somerset County more than either distant Hingham or nearby Charles Parish. Table III shows male marriage ages, divided to reveal the impact, if any, of fathers' deaths on sons' marriage ages. Both the median and the mean ages indicate that sons of deceased fathers married slightly later than sons of living fathers. The differences are quite small, but the crucial point is that this evidence joins Menard's in undermining the view that the death of a father hastened the marriage of his son. Indeed, the suggestion is quite to the contrary. The data indicate that early paternal death acted to *raise* the marriage age of the son. Two explanations come to mind. The first is that men who lost their fathers early in life did not inherit sufficient property to marry (their fathers' accumulation of wealth having been cut short) and therefore had to wait until they had earned enough on their own. A second, more plausible explanation is that young men who lost their fathers were placed in positions of familial responsibility. A man in his early twenties might have been free to marry while his father lived, but if his father died he would have had to turn his attention to his mother, if she survived, to the family farm, and to his unmarried brothers and sisters.

The second interpretation is supported by the distribution of cases in Table III. In column 2, 68 percent of the observations are concentrated in ages twenty-one to twenty-five. By contrast, the marriages of men whose fathers died early (column 1) are spread fairly evenly over ages eighteen to

²¹ Menard, "Economy, Population, and Society," 30.

²² Walsh has argued that in 17th-century Maryland, parents who were still alive did try to control their children's marriages ("Charles County, Maryland, 1658-1705: A Study of Chesapeake Social and Political Structure" [Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1977]), but more recently she has noted that even when they survived, parents rarely tried to maintain economic sanctions on their sons, although she does find evidence that young women experienced parental restraints ("Till Death Us Do Part," in Tate and Ammerman, eds., *Chesapeake Essays*, 134).

²³ Smith, "Mortality and Family in the Colonial Chesapeake," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, VIII (1978), 425.

TABLE III
MALE MARRIAGE AGES IN PERQUIMANS COUNTY COMPARED TO FATHERS'
DEATHS

<i>Age of Son at Marriage</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>Number of Cases in which Son's Age at Father's Death Is Unknown</i>	<i>Total</i>
	<i>Number of Cases in which Father Died before Son Reached Age 24</i>	<i>Number of Cases in which Father Died after Son Reached Age 24</i>		
18	3		1	4
19	2	4	2	8
20	5	4	7	16
21	3	6	5	14
22	5	13	3	21
23	9	5	4	18
24	5	7	3	15
25	4	5	5	14
26	3	2		5
27	1		1	2
28	3	3	2	8
29	5	2	2	9
30	2		2	4
33	1		1	1
34			1	1
37	2			2
41		1		1
42			1	1
Totals	53	52	39	144
Median	23	22	23	23
Median (ages 18-29)	23	22	22	23
Mean	24.4	23.3	23.8	23.9
Mean (ages 18-29)	23.5	22.9	22.6	23.1

Perquimans County demographic file (described in text). A comparison of the marriage ages of sons of living fathers with sons whose fathers were dead yields very similar results. Only four fathers died after their unmarried sons reached 24. (These sons married at ages 25, 28, 29, and 29, respectively). Moving these to Column 1 would have very little impact on the results.

thirty, with only 49 percent falling in the twenty-one-to-twenty-five span. This suggests that, although young men in Perquimans who had living fathers followed a conventional selection process, those who had lost their fathers were constrained by a variety of other factors, with a wide range of results. The three men who married at age eighteen may have found themselves with inheritances and no surviving family members, and therefore unusually early marriages may have been both possible and

desirable. At the same time, thirteen men who lost their fathers before they—the sons—were twenty-four (and in Charles Parish apparently would have married young) failed to wed until they were twenty-eight or older. Something, perhaps increased familial responsibilities, made them delay. Whatever the reasons, it is clear that early paternal deaths led to a flat distribution that contrasts sharply with the concentrated distribution for sons whose fathers died later. The contrast emphasizes the dangers of relying on an average without considering the individual figures from which the average is derived.

Table IV shows again the lack of pattern in the actions of sons of deceased fathers. It distinguishes the fifty-seven men who married after their fathers died and shows the number of years that each waited before marrying. The fact that the median waiting period was an extremely high eight years suggests that Perquimans males did not leap into marriage at the first opportunity. But the median is inflated by including men who, being still quite young when their fathers died, had to wait several years before considering marriage at all. To deal with this problem, Table IV also shows the number of years after age twenty-one that these men waited before marrying. The figures yield a reasonable median of two years. (Ten of the young men married before age twenty-one, perhaps because of external pressures to marry early rather than to delay.) The key point in this second set of figures is that twenty-two men (38.6 percent) were free of paternal restrictions for five years or more after their twenty-first birthdays before they finally married. Clearly, some set of forces was present that made them put off marriage, apparently forces that affected sons of deceased fathers more strongly than the sons of living fathers.

The 105 cases in Table III clearly indicate that paternal death affected the marriage decisions of many young men, but the range of possible circumstances tends to blur the analysis. In six families, brothers appear in both column 1 and column 2. A closer look at four of these households enables us to gauge more clearly the impact of a father's death on his children's marriage ages.

Evidence for John Morris's family is especially valuable because the marriage ages of seven children are known. Four married before John died, each at a fairly young age: Aaron at twenty, Joseph at twenty-one, Elizabeth at eighteen, and Mary at nineteen. The other two sons, John, Jr., and Zachary, and the third daughter, Hannah, married at twenty-nine, thirty, and thirty-eight, respectively, with the oldest of the three, John, Jr., waiting until his mother as well as his father had died. It is hard to ignore this abrupt rise in marriage ages after the father's death, although an explanation is not apparent. John, Jr., may have postponed marriage in order to care for his mother, but there is no obvious reason for the delays of Zachary and Hannah.

The children of Zachary and Elizabeth Nixon followed a similar pattern. The precise marriage dates of the two oldest sons are unknown, but the records show that one was married by age twenty-two, and the other well before he turned twenty-four. Like their brother Zachary, who married at

TABLE IV
YEARS BETWEEN FATHER'S DEATH AND SON'S MARRIAGE IN PERQUIMANS

Age of Son at Marriage	Years Waited													Totals	
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	>11		
18				1					1						3
19		1												1	2
20				1					1					2	5
21					1					1				1	3
22	1	1				2				1				3	9
23	1	1	2		2									2	5
24		1		1										3	5
25		1		1										3	5
26							1		1						3
27						1									1
28															4
29	1			1		1				1				2	4
30														3	7
>30										1				1	2
Totals	3	3	4	1	5	4	4	2	3	3	2	2	2	21	57
Years Waited after age 21	16	6	8	5	5	3	1	5	3	2				3	57
Median Marriage Age									24						
Median Marriage Age (18-29)									23						
Mean Marriage Age									24.6						
Mean Marriage Age (18-29)									23.8						
Median Years Waited									8						
Median Years Waited after 21									2						

Source: Perquimans County demographic file (described in text).

twenty-one, they married both before the mean age and before their father's death. The two children who were still single when their father died married at much more advanced ages, Mary at forty-one and Barnabe at twenty-nine. Elizabeth, their mother, far outlived her husband; perhaps Mary and Barnabe put off marriage in order to care for her.

The Skinner family history was quite similar. Three of Richard Skinner's sons—James, Samuel, and Joshua—married during their father's lifetime, at ages twenty-one, twenty-two, and twenty-one, respectively, but John, who was twenty-one when his father died, waited until age thirty. Unfortunately, we do not know the death date of Richard's wife, Sarah, but we do know that she survived her husband, and we may surmise that John delayed his marriage as long as his widowed mother lived.

There is less information on John White's family, but the pattern remains unbroken. Abraham married at twenty-three, before his father died; his younger sister Rachel waited until age thirty-two, and their brother John until thirty-three. It should be noted that when her father died Rachel was twenty-six, already well past the normal marrying age. Rachel's mother, Elizabeth, had died in 1716, and although John remarried in 1717 it is conceivable that Rachel served as a surrogate mother to her younger siblings, John, born 1713, and Rebecca, born 1716. Interestingly, Rebecca, the youngest, was twenty-one and perhaps ready to be on her own when Rachel finally married in 1737. But by the time John married, Rebecca was thirty, both his parents were dead, and his step-mother had long since remarried.²⁴ John delayed his marriage well past the time when there remained an obvious need for him to care for other family members.

The evidence of these families reinforces the conclusion that, in Perquimans, a father's death led to later marriage ages for his surviving unmarried sons. It seems clear also that daughters' marriage plans were affected by early parental death. The suggestion that orphaned children were placed in positions of increased responsibility is generally plausible, but in some instances there appears to have been little or no remaining family to be responsible for.

Another possible explanation for the marriage delays of the younger children in these families is that they were not left sufficient wherewithal to enable them to marry early, because the property had been divided among the older children. If this were so, a similar pattern should appear for families in which all the sons married after their father's death. However, in five of eight families where marriage ages are known for two or more sons who married after their father's death, the oldest actually married at a later age than the youngest, and in another case they married at the same age. Further, it appears that youngest sons were financially able to marry long before they did so. In 1752 twenty-nine-year-old Zachary Morris bought 190 acres, twelve years after he had been named in

²⁴ This assumes that Rebecca survived childhood, although we have no record of her after her birth.

his father's will, and he married the next year.²⁵ We do not know where the purchase money came from, but it was very likely from his father's estate; if Zachary had had to earn it himself, he presumably would have saved up enough to marry some time before he chose to buy such a large piece of land. Barnabe Nixon received a plantation and one-quarter of a gristmill in his father's 1739 will; he was then fifteen, but he did not marry until he was twenty-nine. John Skinner inherited 150 acres from his father in 1752 but delayed marriage until 1761, when he was thirty.

Perquimans, then, lends no support to the notion that sons of living fathers often had to delay marriage. Living fathers were apparently ready and able to provide for sons who wished to marry in their early twenties. This finding calls into question the applicability of the hypothesis that Greven advanced for Andover, Massachusetts. The sons of living Perquimans fathers had a mean marriage age of 22.9, while the mean marriage age for all Andover males remained at nearly 27 for the comparable period. Parental intervention was so inconsequential in Perquimans that early orphanhood and inheritance actually pushed marriage ages upward. To lose one's father was to face pressures and responsibilities that interfered with, and often delayed, the marriage choice. Theoretically, fathers in Perquimans were just as anxious to have their sons' labor as were fathers in Andover: judging from the high price of slaves in Perquimans, labor was very scarce.²⁶ But Perquimans fathers did not, or could not, exert this sort of pressure on their sons because the land there, unlike the land in Andover, was so readily available that it did not constrain the decision to marry.²⁷

Table V shows the number of years that young men waited to marry after they first acquired property. This table, similar in format and results to Table IV, was compiled by determining the earliest date at which each man is known to have held property and the number of years between that date and his marriage. In most of these fifty-two cases the property was land. In twenty-three instances it came from a parent, either by will or gift; in nine, from a friend or relative; in two, by patent. In the other eighteen cases there is evidence that the person owned land in a certain year, but not that he received it in that year. In eleven of these the evidence is a record of buying or selling land; in two others it is a tax list; and for each of the remaining five men I have evidence of sufficient wealth to suggest that he probably owned land or could have if he had so chosen. One unmarried

²⁵ Perquimans County, Records of Deeds, C.077, 40003 (microfilm), N.C. St. Archs.

²⁶ See n. 29 below.

²⁷ The link between the availability of land and the decision to marry is difficult to establish. The following discussion of land accessibility during Perquimans's first century is not intended to prove, or disprove, the hypothesis that in pre-industrial societies young couples could not marry until they owned sufficient land. Rather, I hope to demonstrate that, whether the hypothesis is true or false, the need for land could not have been a substantial barrier in the marriage decision in Perquimans.

man was taxed for seven polls, and two others for three polls each, an indication that they may have owned slaves or indentured servants. In the final two cases there is evidence of substantial estates of £20 and £27.

These property-holding men actually married slightly later than the average, with a mean age of 24.1 and a median of 24. The median lapse between the first evidence of owning property and the date of marriage is a rather high 4.5 years. Even the adjusted median of two years waited after age 21 contradicts the assumption that men married as soon as they received property. As in Table IV, the crucial point here is that values are widely scattered. The distribution, coupled with a mean age that is slightly higher than the total mean of all 144 cases, suggests that property acquisition was not the central factor in the timing of the decision to marry.²⁸ Land was readily available at low prices, and the scarcity of labor was such that a son could easily save enough to purchase a plot of land for himself and his intended bride.²⁹

While the Chesapeake studies demonstrate that high marriage ages did not prevail everywhere in colonial America, the evidence from Perquimans County provides a more rigorous test of the effect of parental death and the availability of land on marriage patterns. Although the mortality rate was somewhat lower, and the sex ratio was more nearly even than in the Chesapeake, Perquimans's marriage ages were quite similar to those of Virginia and Maryland. Property was easily acquired; paternal withholding would therefore have been an ineffectual barrier to marriage. The analysis of the impact of paternal death reinforces this assumption. Sons of living fathers actually married at somewhat below the mean age, and, more important, orphaned sons followed far more diverse paths than young men who had yet to receive their inheritances. The indication is that as long as their fathers survived, young men could act as they chose—thinking chiefly of their own concerns—while unmarried men who lost their fathers had to respond to a wider range of external pressures that might accelerate the marriage decision but would usually lead them to put

²⁸ For 34 of the 52 cases recorded in Table V the evidence is specific that the man received property rather than bought, sold, or owned it. This subsample shows precisely the impact of a sudden acquisition of land. In these 34 cases the mean age of marriage was 24 years and the median was 23.5, both slightly higher than the figures for the total sample. In the 22 cases where we know that land was received before the son reached 20, the mean marriage age was still 23.8.

²⁹ Many indicators clearly demonstrate that any able-bodied young man could become a small-property owner within a few years. Land prices were low throughout the period. See Gray, *History of Agriculture*, 393-394, 404, and Perquimans Co., Records of Deeds, C.077, 40001 (microfilm), N.C. St. Archs. Slave prices were consistently high, suggesting a shortage of labor that would have led to high wages. See Gray, *History of Agriculture*, 369; Richard Nelson Bean, *The British Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, 1650-1775* (New York, 1975); Saunders, ed., *N.C. Colonial Recs.*, 693; J. Bryan Grimes, *North Carolina Wills and Inventories* (Raleigh, N.C., 1912), 474; and Perquimans Co., Records of Deeds, C.077, 40001 (microfilm), N.C. St. Archs. In addition, large amounts of land were unowned in

off marriage for a time. These results strongly suggest that a combination of scarcity of land and low mortality was necessary to keep marriage ages high. Young men stayed at home when drastic family circumstances dictated, but as long as their fathers survived, sons rarely chose to remain with their families past their early twenties.

the early 18th century (Winslow, *History of Perquimans County*, 449-450, and U.S. Census Office, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860*, comp. Joseph C. G. Kennedy [Washington, D.C., 1864], 108). Finally, a detailed analysis of the 1720 tax list reveals very few adult white males who had no land or property (Colonial Court Recs., Document Box 190, N.C. St. Archs.).