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## Families and the Collar Line

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## Families and the Collar Line

### Abstract

[Excerpt] Social mobility studies begin with the assumption that movement from any blue-collar job to any white-collar job represents unmitigated betterment of an individual's or generation's social status. These studies represent this movement across the collar line in a linear fashion, following the movement from fathers' occupations to sons'. This is the basic method that Jiirgen Kocka suggested historians could use to illuminate "the relevant lines of distinction, tension and conflict segmenting and dividing the emerging working class internally" and the "outer boundary" of that working class, the visibility and rigidity of "the distinction between workers and those who own and control." However, the linearity of traditional social mobility studies conceals diversity among siblings within a single family and ignores altogether the significance of women's changing roles in the paid labor force.

### Keywords

Pittsburgh, social class, clerical work, blue-collar, white-collar, social mobility

### Disciplines

Labor History | Labor Relations

### Comments

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## Families and the Collar Line

“The file clerk is just as essential”

Social mobility studies begin with the assumption that movement from any blue-collar job to any white-collar job represents unmitigated betterment of an individual's or generation's social status. These studies represent this movement across the collar line in a linear fashion, following the movement from fathers' occupations to sons'.<sup>1</sup> This is the basic method that Jürgen Kocka suggested historians could use to illuminate “the relevant lines of distinction, tension and conflict segmenting and dividing the emerging working class internally” and the “outer boundary” of that working class, the visibility and rigidity of “the distinction between workers and those who own and control.”<sup>2</sup> However, the linearity of traditional social mobility studies conceals diversity among siblings within a single family and ignores altogether the significance of women's changing roles in the paid labor force.

By the 1890s and the early 1900s, we are no longer looking at an “emerging working class,” but at an existing class undergoing rapid transformation. At this time clerical occupations formed an increasingly large social category positioned precisely between “workers and those

1. See, for example, Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973); Michael B. Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); Clyde and Sally Griffen, *Natives and Newcomers: The Ordering of Opportunity in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Poughkeepsie* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959).

2. Jürgen Kocka, “The Study of Social Mobility and the Formation of the Working Class in the 19th Century,” *Le Mouvement Sociale* 111 (April-June 1980), 107.

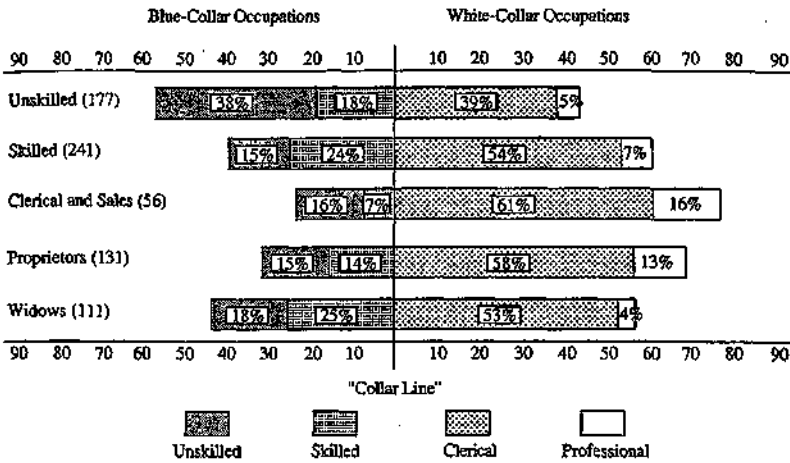
who own and control." Examining the occupations of all members of the families sending children to the Pittsburgh Commercial Department provides insight into both family strategies concerning education and the role played by clerical work in the families' economic and social situations. Within the families themselves we find a microcosm of the "internal divisions" and "outer boundaries" in the society at large.

The families of the Commercial Department students do not provide a picture of a sharp cleavage between white- and blue-collar occupations; rather, the members of these families are distributed on both sides of the collar line. The existing data allows examination of five different types of families. Social mobility studies would place two of these—those families headed by clerical and sales workers and those headed by proprietors—on the white-collar side of the scale. Unskilled and skilled manual workers would appear on the blue-collar side. The fifth group, made up of families headed by widows, is more ambiguous, since the absent fathers of these families could have been employed on either side of the collar line. All five types of families tended to have about four children living at home in 1900.<sup>3</sup>

A number of differences among these five types of families immediately become apparent. First of all, the children played different roles in different family economies. The two types of families in the most precarious financial positions, those of unskilled workers and widows, sent more of their children into the labor market than did the other families. In fact, fully half of the widows' children were employed in 1900, as opposed to 38.5 percent of unskilled workers' children. Thirty percent of skilled workers' children and 29 percent of proprietors' children worked in the labor market; only 24.8 percent of white-collar workers' children did the same.

The children in these families also demonstrated different patterns of job choices. Figure 1 portrays graphically the apportionment across the collar line of children's occupations for these five types of families. Since these are families of Commercial Department students, it is not surprising to find that a large portion of the children in every type of family found employment in clerical or sales positions. What is more startling—and more interesting for our purposes—is that the collar line runs through this generation in each type of family. Siblings gained employment on both

3. Unskilled manual workers' families and proprietors' families were the largest, with averages of 4.4 children, while widows' families and white-collar workers' families were smallest, with 4.0 and 4.1 children, respectively. Skilled manual workers' families averaged 4.2 children.



Percentage of children employed in different occupations in each type of family  
 Note: The number in parentheses is the number of employed children in each family type.

Figure 1. The collar line in five types of Commercial Department families, 1900

sides of the supposed social chasm between white-collar and blue-collar occupations. This suggests that the meaning of "social mobility" for the members of each of these families, families in which at least one child sought clerical training, is much more complex than simply "upward" or "downward." For these young people, the collar line began at home.

A more detailed examination of each of these five family types reveals the complex interaction between family organization around the collar line and more traditional indices of economic and social status. The following portraits explicate possible reasons individuals enrolled in Pittsburgh's Commercial Department and begin to suggest the sources of the ambiguous class position of clerical workers at the turn of the century. This ambiguity is apparent even in families whose parents were on the white-collar side of the collar line. We will begin with these families.

William A. Munson enrolled in the Commercial Department in 1900, at the age of sixteen. The oldest son of a native-born telegraph operator, he left the program in 1902 after attending for twenty months. In several ways William was typical of Commercial Department students from the families of white-collar clerical and sales workers. These families sent more boys than girls to the program, and their children of both sexes were

more likely than average to leave school without graduating (see tables 8 and 9).<sup>4</sup> These and other characteristics suggest that white-collar parents responded to the Commercial Department's practical curriculum and at the same time tried to maintain "middle-class" standards.

These white-collar families present a more homogeneous class and ethnic identity than any other group in the program. Forty percent of these families had children employed in white-collar occupations and another 14.5 percent had children in professional positions. Only 16 percent of them had children employed in unskilled or skilled blue-collar occupations, a much lower rate of "collar-line crossing" than other occupational categories in the program. Not surprisingly, given the nativity of clerical workers in general, over 70 percent of these students were the native-born children of native-born parents (see table 10).

White-collar parents could judge the efficacy of the Commercial Department by comparing it against the realities of their own work lives. While 64 percent of the students from white-collar families never graduated from the program, that figure does not imply blanket criticism of its curriculum.<sup>5</sup> Understanding as they did the actual lines of promotion and opportunity within the city's offices, the business-ownership rhetoric of the program would have rung hollow for these white-collar parents and their children. They appreciated more the practical aspects of the curriculum, recognizing the importance of technical skills such as bookkeeping and accounting. Although the "self-paced" design of the program makes it difficult to determine exactly, many of the nongraduating students in this group, like William Munson, may have opted for skipping the "Actual Business" portion of the course, knowing that technical skills would serve them better in the work force than would pretending to be business partners and bank presidents. Furthermore, since their fathers already worked in office jobs, they had contacts for clerical jobs which might prove at least as useful—if not more useful—for gaining employment than a diploma from the Commercial Department.<sup>6</sup>

4. Young men made up 63 percent of Commercial Department students from white-collar families over the course of the 1890s, while men made up 57 percent overall. Only the small group of professionals' families had a higher percentage of men (65 percent). See table 8. Thirty-six percent of the children from white-collar families graduated from the program, 41 percent of all students. See table 9.

5. The only higher percentage of nongraduates was for children of professionals, 71.7 percent of whom did not graduate. A lot of these transferred into the Commercial Department from the Academic Department, so their failure to graduate probably means they transferred back.

6. Chapter 6 discusses this phenomenon from the vantage point of the eventual jobs these students held.

Table 8. Sex of students attending Commercial Department, 1890-1903, by parental occupation (absolute numbers and percentages)

	Unskilled		Skilled		Clerical and sales		Proprietors		Unknown*		Total**	
Male	296	58.7%	524	57.1%	222	63.1%	314	59.0%	192	46.0%	1,780	57.1%
Female	<u>208</u>	41.3	<u>394</u>	42.9	<u>130</u>	36.9	<u>218</u>	41.0	<u>225</u>	54.0	<u>1,340</u>	42.9
Total	504		918		352		532		417		3,120	

Notes: Weighted for sampling difference: women graduates = 1, others = 2. Two out of 18 (11.1 percent) of the valid cells have expected cell frequency less than 5.0. Minimum expected cell frequency = 3.006. Chi square = 32.86200 with 8 degrees of freedom. Significance = 0.0001. Cramer's V = 0.10263. Number of missing observations = 4.

\*This category approximates the number of families headed by widows. Figures in text are those for families headed by the mother.

\*\*This includes figures for categories not explicitly considered here. These include occupations as foremen ( $N = 206$ ), in public service ( $N = 92$ ), professional ( $N = 92$ ), and agricultural ( $N = 7$ ) occupations.

Table 9. Graduation status of Commercial Department students, 1890-1903, by parental occupation (absolute numbers and percentages)

	Unskilled		Skilled		Clerical and sales		Proprietors		Unknown*		Total**	
Graduate	224	44.6%	412	44.9%	128	36.2%	238	44.9%	137	32.9%	1,286	41.2%
Enrollee	<u>278</u>	55.4	<u>506</u>	55.1	<u>226</u>	63.8	<u>292</u>	55.1	<u>280</u>	67.1	<u>1,832</u>	58.8
Total	502		918		354		530		417		3,118	

Notes: Weighted for sampling difference: women graduates = 1, others = 2. Two out of 18 (11.1 percent) of the valid cells have expected cell frequency less than 5.0. Minimum expected cell frequency = 2.887. Chi square = 34.20943 with 8 degrees of freedom. Significance = 0.0000. Cramer's V = 0.10475.

\*This category approximates the number of families headed by widows. Figures given in text are those for families headed by the mother.

\*\*This includes figures for categories not explicitly considered here. These include occupations as foremen ( $N = 206$ ), in public service ( $N = 92$ ), professional ( $N = 92$ ), and agricultural ( $N = 7$ ) occupations.



Table 10. Nativity of students attending Commercial Department in 1900, by parental occupation (absolute numbers and percentages)

	Unskilled		Skilled		Clerical and sales		Proprietors		Unknown*		Total**	
Native-born, native-born parents	16	19.8%	84	51.5%	34	70.8%	51	58.0%	30	50.8%	247	48.7%
Native-born, foreign-born parents	47	58.0	75	46.0	9	18.8	27	30.7	29	49.2	214	42.4
Foreign-born	15	18.5	1	0.6	3	6.3	8	9.1	0	0.0	32	6.3
Black	<u>3</u>	3.7	<u>3</u>	1.8	<u>2</u>	4.2	<u>2</u>	2.3	<u>0</u>	0.0	<u>14</u>	2.8
Total	<u>81</u>		<u>163</u>		<u>48</u>		<u>88</u>		<u>59</u>		<u>507</u>	

Notes: Weighted for sampling difference: women graduates = 1, others = 2. Thirteen out of 32 (40.6 percent) of the valid cells have expected cell frequency less than 5.0. Minimum expected cell frequency = 0.442. Chi square = 96.76443 with 21 degrees of freedom. Significance = 0.0000. Cramer's V = 0.25223. Number of missing observations = 199.

\*This category approximates the number of families headed by widows. Figures in text are those for families headed by the mother.

\*\*Foremen ( $N = 35$ ), public service ( $N = 17$ ), and professional ( $N = 16$ ) occupations not included here.

The proprietors who sent children to the Commercial Department must have had a very different reaction to the program's small-business rhetoric, though one no less bounded by their own experiences. Although the occupational group "proprietors" includes owners of a wide range of enterprises, Thomas Weist comes close to being a typical Commercial Department student from a proprietorial family. A first-generation German-American, Thomas's father, John M. Weist, owned and operated a small tobacco dealership. The shop was located on the ground floor of the multiunit building owned and inhabited by the Weist family in the city's 17th ward. Thomas enrolled in the Commercial Department in 1898 and graduated in 1901, after twenty-eight months in the program. He was the third child and second son in a family of six children. In 1900 his older brother, Edward, worked as a laborer in one of the neighborhood's iron foundries, and his older sister stayed at home without participating in wage earning of any kind. The three youngest children, ranging in age from six to fourteen, all attended school. By 1905 the Pittsburgh city directory listed John Weist as the owner of a "notions" store, rather than as a tobacconist. The image of the Weist establishment—a small storefront selling various items to the local ethnic neighbors—is representative of many other Commercial Department proprietors who owned corner groceries, saloons, tobacco shops, confectioneries, or notions or dry-goods stores.

In Pittsburgh as in other industrial cities, such small businesses had deep roots in their neighborhoods. These included economic ties with local customers and social connections based on the ethnicity and class origins of the shopkeepers.<sup>7</sup> The ethnic backgrounds of Commercial Department families reveal as much. Compared to other students in the program, proprietors' children were more likely to be of German (26 percent) or eastern or southern European (15 percent) heritage (see table 11). These figures reflect the established role of small businesses in serving ethnic communities, providing specialized consumer goods and service in a common language. Pittsburgh's retail shopkeepers also shared class ties with their customers. Children in proprietors' families, as the case of the Weist family demonstrates, worked at a range of occupations, depending on the variations in their financial circumstances and on their ties with different social groups. Almost 37 percent of the proprietors'

7. See, for example, Herbert G. Gutman, "Class, Status, and Community Power in Nineteenth-Century American Industrial Cities," in Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 257, on economic and social connections of shopkeepers in Paterson, New Jersey.

Table 11. Ethnic background of students attending Commercial Department in 1900, by parental occupation (absolute numbers and percentages)

	Unskilled		Skilled		Clerical and sales		Proprietors		Total*	
United States	21	22.6%	80	49.1%	29	63.0%	29	39.2%	191	42.7%
German	12	12.9	25	15.3	5	10.9	19	25.7	69	15.4
Irish	40	43.0	28	17.2	1	2.2	10	13.5	99	22.1
British	13	14.0	27	16.6	4	8.7	5	6.8	54	12.1
East and south European	6	6.5	1	0.6	4	8.7	11	14.9	28	6.3
Other	1	1.1	2	1.2	3	6.5	0	0.0	6	1.3
Total	93		163		46		74		447	

Notes: Weighted for sampling difference: women graduates = 1, others = 2. Thirty-one out of 54 (57.4 percent) of the valid cells have expected cell frequency less than 5.0. Minimum expected cell frequency = 0.013. Chi square = 125.42250 with 40 degrees of freedom. Significance = 0.0000. Cramer's V = 0.23689. Number of missing observations = 259.

\*Foremen ( $N = 29$ ), public service ( $N = 23$ ), professional ( $N = 14$ ), agricultural ( $N = 1$ ), and unknown ( $N = 4$ ) occupations not included here.

families had children employed in manual, working-class occupations, slightly more than did the skilled workers' families. Proprietors also had children in nonmanual occupations; 53 percent of the families had children in white-collar jobs, and 13 percent had children in professional positions. While the small businesses represented among the Commercial Department students often had close ties to working-class neighbors and customers, they also embodied petit-bourgeois notions of success through individual effort and independence.

For these families the Commercial Department's blend of practical clerical skills and small-business rhetoric spoke convincingly to their own needs. The proprietorial families sent young men and women to the school at a ratio equal to that of the program as a whole. While quite a few of the men transferred from the academic program (20 percent), not many of the women entered the Commercial Department from the Normal School (7 percent). These figures suggest that their parents were not interested in just any vocation for their children; Commercial Department skills were useful both in the wider job market and in the parents' businesses.<sup>8</sup> In addition, more of the proprietors' children than average remained in the program until they graduated.<sup>9</sup> For these students the "actual business" portion of the curriculum recreated and, for most of them, augmented their parents' experiences of buying, selling, renting, and hiring.

The students from families headed by clerical and sales workers or business proprietors, then, responded to the Commercial Department from the context of their parents' own varied experiences of the white-collar world, though other experiences surely must have come into play, including their own siblings' experiences in professions and in blue-collar jobs.

Traditional social mobility studies would place the families examined so far in the white-collar category. The next group, widows' families, would not appear in these studies at all, since most studies focus on male mobility patterns. The examination of widows' families explicitly introduces gender to the equation. Children from widows' families make up too large a group within the Commercial Department (14 percent) to ignore simply because no male head of household existed to attribute his occupational status to the family. This category includes families across

8. See chapter 6 on the different work experiences of proprietors' children.

9. Forty-five percent of these students received diplomas, compared to only 41 percent of the entire student body. See table 9.

the spectrum; some fathers had been white-collar workers, and others had been blue-collar.

Mary Ellen McCarthy's situation was typical of that of widows' children in the Commercial Department, sixty percent of whom were girls. Mary entered the program in 1899 and graduated in 1902. Her presence in the program, and the presence of other widows' daughters, suggests that young women were particularly attracted by the program's clearly vocational nature. Widows would view the training of the Commercial Department in a different light than other mothers; having experienced the transience of marriage and the economic trials of widowhood, they sought vocational skills for their daughters.

Rose McCarthy had not been a widow for long, her youngest child being only four years old in 1900. The oldest daughter, who was twenty-three, was "at home" that year, presumably having reached wage-earning age while her father was still alive. Although it is impossible to tell what role the father's death played in the decision to send Mary, the second daughter, to the Commercial Department, the program's training might have had new meaning to the recently widowed mother. While the census did not list Rose McCarthy as gainfully employed, widows generally participated in wage earning more often than other Commercial Department mothers.<sup>10</sup> Employed mothers worked at sewing or cleaning or kept boarders, none of which provided attractive options either in terms of wages or working conditions. The chance for one's daughter to gain office skills had dual significance for these widows. On one hand, of course, clerical daughters could eventually contribute more money to the family coffers. On the other hand, clerical training could also be a form of insurance, providing daughters with a means of self-support should they someday find themselves once again without male economic support.

Despite these concerns for their daughters' futures, the Commercial Department widows were generally not in desperate economic straits; such a situation would have required immediate employment by their daughters, not education for future employment. As with almost three-quarters of the Commercial Department widows, Mary's mother, Rose, owned the home the family lived in. Thus relieved of rent, and generally of mortgage payments as well, these widows relied on their oldest children to support the family—and to finance the education of younger sib-

10. Thirty-nine percent of the widows in the Commercial Department sample reported employment in the 1900 census, compared to 3 percent of all mothers (including the widows). In a comparative sample of families with teenagers in 1900, 21 percent of the widows and 4 percent of all mothers were employed. (See Appendix, Description of Data.)

lings.<sup>11</sup> Mary was the middle child of seven; two older brothers worked in 1900, one as a machinist and one as a clerical worker. Twenty-four percent of widows' families included children employed as unskilled workers, while 38 percent contained children in skilled positions, and almost 60 percent had white-collar workers in the family. In fact, reflecting their precarious financial position, widows' families were more likely to include wage-earning children than any other group.

These brief sketches of different types of families have illustrated some of the constellations of information young people brought with them to the Commercial Department. The varied economic and social backgrounds of these students affected the way they were likely to view clerical training and employment. Widows' daughters sought safeguards against sharing their mothers' precarious fates, while the sons of white-collar workers planned on following in their fathers' footsteps. The children of proprietors, both large and small, saw in their families' businesses practical applications of the Commercial Department's skills. The majority of the program's students, however, came from blue-collar working-class families. How did clerical education fit into their lives? In other words, what role did the collar line play in determining the "outer boundaries" and "internal divisions" of Pittsburgh's manual working class?

Charles Robert Hobson entered the Commercial Department in the fall of 1898. He was fifteen years old at the time and had graduated from Saint Paul's parochial school. His father, a laborer, had been born in England and emigrated to the United States in 1880 along with his wife and their three oldest sons. While Charles's grandparents had also been born in England, he had Irish great-grandparents. Charles himself was the first of the Hobson children born in the United States. By 1900 he had eight siblings: three older and two younger brothers, and three younger sisters. His maternal grandparents also lived with the family in their rented home in Pittsburgh's 6th ward. During his last year in the Commercial Department, four of Charles's brothers were employed. Of his three older brothers, one was a bookkeeper, one a railroad conductor, and one a day laborer like their father. One of Charles's younger brothers was also employed in 1900, as an office boy. His youngest siblings, ranging in age

11. Sixty percent of the widows owned their homes outright, whereas only 16 percent were paying off mortgages. In the comparative sample of families with teenaged children, 58 percent of the households headed by widows lived in rented homes. Almost 44 percent of the widows' Commercial Department students were the youngest children in their families.

from six to fifteen and including all three girls, were attending school. Charles left the Commercial Department without graduating at the end of the 1899-1900 school year.

Charles Hobson's classmates entering in 1898 included Mary Martha Sweeney, who also lived in a rented dwelling in one of the crowded downtown wards. Mary's father, Dennis, worked as a watchman. Though he had emigrated from Ireland in 1854 at the age of fourteen, by 1900 Dennis Sweeney was still not a U.S. citizen, though he had applied for citizenship. Mary was the only girl in the Sweeney family, though she had three older brothers and one younger brother. An aunt from Ireland also lived with the family. In 1900 Mary's father was unemployed for six months, and two of her three older brothers were also out of work for some part of the year. Her oldest brother, a theater usher, did not work for three months, while the next brother found employment as a day laborer for only one month of the year. Mary's third brother worked as a bartender throughout the year, while her younger brother, fourteen years old, neither attended school nor was employed. In 1901, at the age of eighteen, Mary Sweeney graduated from the Commercial Department.

In many ways Mary Sweeney and Charles Hobson represent the Commercial Department students from unskilled workers' families. Fifty-eight percent of these students, like Charles and Mary, were the native-born children of foreign-born parents (see table 10). Furthermore, most of those foreign-born parents were Irish or of Irish descent: over 40 percent of the students from unskilled workers' families were of Irish heritage (see table 11). Not surprisingly, then, the unskilled workers' children, like Charles Hobson, were more likely than others to enter the program after attending parochial schools. Almost 16 percent of unskilled workers' children came to the program from parochial schools, compared to just 8 percent of all students (see table 12). At least 35 percent of the Irish-American Commercial Department students had first attended the city's parochial schools.<sup>12</sup> The Irish fathers represented in the high school program, even those who had lived in the United States for some time, still found themselves at the turn of the century in occupations characterized by arduous labor, little skill, and low pay, as did Irishmen in Pittsburgh's work force as a whole.<sup>13</sup> The motivations of unskilled workers in

12. Some of these students transferred to the Commercial Department from other branches of high school. An indeterminate number of these probably attended parochial grammar schools earlier.

13. In 1890 Irish-born men made up 41.5 percent of Pittsburgh's laborers; in 1900 men of Irish parentage made up 26 percent of the city's laborers: U.S. Department of the

Table 12. Type of school previously attended by students enrolled in Commercial Department, 1890-1903, by parental occupation (absolute numbers and percentages)

	Unskilled		Skilled		Clerical and sales		Proprietors		Unknown*		Total**	
Ward grammar	341	67.9%	677	74.1%	255	72.0%	352	66.4%	265	64.2%	2,136	68.7%
South Side High School	25	5.0	33	3.6	13	3.7	14	2.6	13	3.1	116	3.7
Parochial	79	15.7	51	5.6	8	2.3	44	8.3	31	7.5	243	7.8
Normal Department	26	5.2	49	5.4	14	4.0	15	2.8	18	4.4	140	4.5
Academic Department	27	5.4	88	9.6	56	15.8	85	16.0	75	18.2	406	13.1
Other	4	0.8	16	1.8	8	2.3	20	3.8	11	2.7	67	2.2
Total	502		914		354		530		413		3,108	

Notes: Weighted for sampling difference: women graduates = 1, others = 2. Thirteen out of 54 (24.1 percent) of the valid cells have expected cell frequency less than 5.0. Minimum expected cell frequency = 0.151. Chi square = 249.10341 with 40 degrees of freedom. Significance = 0.0000. Cramer's V = 0.12661. Number of missing observations = 16.

\*This category approximates the number of families headed by widows. Figures in text are those for families headed by the mother.

\*\*Foremen ( $N = 206$ ), public service ( $N = 90$ ), professional ( $N = 92$ ), and agricultural occupations not included here.



sending their children to the Commercial Department become clearer when considering these dynamics of ethnicity and economic status.

Unskilled workers would have viewed clerical training and ultimate office employment for their children as an avenue of escape from the narrowed choices of poverty. Economic necessity surely would have influenced their decisions. On one hand, these families often needed the immediate earnings of children for the family to survive. On the other hand, clerical work represented a leap in social status impossible for the heads of these families. With upward advancement cut off or halted for unskilled fathers, they strove to gain such upward mobility for their children.

Over half of the unskilled workers whose children attended the Commercial Department were listed in the school records as laborers. The others worked at a range of unskilled occupations, from teamsters and drivers to mill workers and unskilled factory workers. In good times unskilled workers such as these generally earned between \$7.00 and \$12.00 a week in Pittsburgh.<sup>14</sup> During the depression of the 1890s, these wages dropped and unemployment soared. The same decade also marked the first appearance of substantial numbers of southern and eastern European immigrants in the city. By the turn of the century, observers such as the investigators for the Pittsburgh Survey focused their attention on these groups.<sup>15</sup> The new-immigrant unskilled workers had become a "social problem" and therefore a target of investigation. While those investigations have proved crucial in understanding the dynamics of immigration and industrial change, they provide little insight into the Commercial

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Interior, Census Office, *Report on Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890*, pt. II (Washington, 1897), table 118, pp. 712-713; U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Special Reports: Occupations at the Twelfth Census, 1900* (Washington, 1904), table 43, pp. 680-681. Also, see David N. Doyle, "Unestablished Irishmen: New Immigrants and Industrial America, 1870-1910," in Dirk Hoerder, ed., *American Labor and Immigration History, 1877-1920s: Recent European Research* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), p. 195.

14. Peter R. Shergold, *Working-Class Life: The "American Standard" in Comparative Perspective, 1899-1913* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), pp. 240-241.

15. See, for example, the following sections from Pittsburgh Survey volumes: Margaret Byington, *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town* (1910; rpt. Pittsburgh: Center for International Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 1974), pp. 131-168; John A. Fitch, *The Steel Workers* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1910), pp. 140-149; Paul Underwood Kellogg, ed., *The Pittsburgh District: Civic Frontage* (New York: Survey Associates, 1914), pp. 3, 98-103, and throughout; Paul Underwood Kellogg, ed., *Wage-Earning Pittsburgh* (New York: Survey Associates, 1914), pp. 33-95; Elizabeth Beardsley Butler, *Women and the Trades: Pittsburgh, 1907-1908* (1909; rpt. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984), pp. 20-26.

Department students. Only 6.5 percent of the students from unskilled workers' families came from eastern or southern European backgrounds; 23 percent had native-born parents or grandparents, and 70 percent were of Irish, German, or British (including Scotch and Welsh) heritage (see table 11). These were not the "problematic" unskilled workers upon whom settlement house workers expended their energy; rather, they were a forgotten strata of the work force, relatively privileged vis-à-vis many other unskilled workers but definitely less well-off than the city's skilled workers.<sup>16</sup>

Information on sibling employment bears testimony to the intermediate situation of Commercial Department students from unskilled workers' families. Even though they could afford to send one child to the high school, families like the Hobsons and the Sweeneys needed the immediate earnings of other children to finance the undertaking. Like widows' children, siblings of these students were more likely to be employed in wage-earning capacities than siblings of other students. Furthermore, as figure 1 demonstrates, more of the unskilled workers' family members worked at blue-collar jobs than at white-collar jobs, the only group in the Commercial Department sample for which this was true. Forty-two percent of these families included children working in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs, and over a quarter of the families had children in skilled trades. At least one child held a clerical or sales job in 44 percent of these families. The family members sent to the Commercial Department were unlikely to be the oldest or second-oldest children in the family. As in both the Hobson and the Sweeney families, the earnings of older siblings helped support younger children's education.

Home ownership patterns illustrate the impact of ethnicity on the economic circumstances of these unskilled workers. Stephan Thernstrom has argued that the "land hunger" of Irish immigrants often stood in the way of their children's upward occupational mobility.<sup>17</sup> Irish families represented in the Commercial Department, however, successfully combined both goals. While over half of the unskilled workers' families represented in the Commercial Department rented their residences, sixty-two percent of the Irish families owned their homes, and over two-fifths of them had no outstanding mortgages. In contrast, three-fourths of the Irish

16. Shergold, *Working-Class Life*, pp. 225-227; he, too, focuses on the new immigrants. The Pittsburgh Survey volumes cited in note 15 exemplify the contemporary concern with the new immigrants.

17. Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth-Century City* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), p. 156.

families in a comparative sample of households containing teenagers in 1900 rented their homes.<sup>18</sup> Commercial Department families, then, were a relatively elite group within their communities, both as Irish-Americans and as unskilled workers.

Mary Sweeney graduated from the Commercial Department in 1901 despite the unemployment of other family members, while Charles Hobson, enjoying a more stable family economy, failed to graduate. Mary and Charles shared a common Irish heritage, both with each other and with almost half of the other unskilled workers' children in the Commercial Department. This ethnic heritage influenced the kinds of decisions they made, but only within a context of the general economic background they shared with all the students from unskilled workers' families.

While the Commercial Department's unskilled Irish families illustrate a numerically important group, a similar confluence of ethnicity and economic characteristics shows up in one of the school's smallest groups as well. Blacks made up only 3 percent of the Commercial Department's students. Over the fourteen-year span of the enrollment records, eight students' records included the notation "Colored," but these eight individuals were not the only black students in the program. Howard Emanuel Rickmond, for example, entered the Commercial Department in the fall of 1897. He gave his father's occupation as janitor and his address as 1513 Sarah Street, South Side. Howard stayed in the program for a little over one academic year, making quite adequate grades before he left the school in the autumn of 1898. Howard's school record made no mention of his race. However, his sister, Ella, entered the department in 1901, transferring from the South Side High School, and her records listed her as "colored." Perhaps Howard's skin was exceptionally light, and he could "pass" for white, for two other black students entering the program in 1897 had their race duly noted. Ella's skin color might have been more obvious, or perhaps her race was known on the South Side and transferred downtown along with her. The 1900 census lists fifteen of the Commercial Department students in that year as black.

Just as the program's Irish students were generally better off than other Irish in Pittsburgh, so the black students came from families in better economic situations than most of the city's black population. While most (nine of the fifteen) of their fathers worked in manual occupations, and seven of these in unskilled jobs, this represented a percentage below that

18. Only 16.3 percent of the Irish families in the comparative sample owned homes without outstanding mortgages.

for Pittsburgh's black community.<sup>19</sup> Half of the program's black students came from families holding mortgages on their homes, a much higher rate than for the student body as a whole. The siblings of black Commercial Department students most often found employment in manual working-class occupations. Over half of the black families included children employed in unskilled jobs, while a third of them had children in skilled trades. Another third had children employed in white-collar jobs or professions, mostly as teachers.

It is not surprising to find black teenagers enrolled in high school at this time; many people—both contemporaries and later scholars—have noted an emphasis on education within black families. But the Commercial Department did not provide a general education; it gave individuals skills that were applicable to a narrow group of jobs, jobs generally not open to blacks at the time.<sup>20</sup> Considering the limited number of job opportunities for young blacks, their presence in the Commercial Department, like that of unskilled workers in general, highlights the program's role in the city as a provider of employment opportunities to those otherwise unable to attain them.

Whether they were black, Irish, or of some other ethnicity, the children of unskilled workers in the Commercial Department brought their own characteristic aspirations to the program. Better off economically than the majority of the city's unskilled laborers, the members of these families still sought to improve their situations. They compared themselves not only to downtown office workers, but also with the skilled workers who ideologically dominated Pittsburgh's working-class community just as their offspring numerically dominated the Commercial Department.

Skilled workers' children made up the largest single category within the Commercial Department. Social mobility studies place the collar line between the "low-level white-collar" and "skilled manual" groups. Some of these studies found that individuals from the skilled manual group tended to remain in that group, a tendency Stephan Thernstrom attributed

19. John Bodnar, Roger Simon, and Michael P. Weber, *Lives of Their Own: Blacks, Italians, and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900-1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), p. 64.

20. Bodnar, Simon, and Weber, *Lives of Their Own*, pp. 35-36; Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage, 1980), pp. 472-476; August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto*, 3d ed. (New York: Hill & Wang, 1976), pp. 173-181. Bodnar, Simon, and Weber say clerical positions closed almost entirely to blacks by 1930, and that there were few earlier (p. 242). In addition, they found that the number of black-owned businesses in Pittsburgh actually declined between 1900 and 1920 (p. 133). But, of course, no one knew beforehand that this would happen.

to "the downward pull exerted by the working-class family."<sup>21</sup> An examination of this group, then, gets to the heart of the social meaning of the collar line—the social organization of class—at the turn of the century.

For skilled workers clerical training and employment for their children represented an affirmation of their social standing. Enjoying a relatively privileged place within the working class as a whole, these workers more than others could express choice in investing in their children's commercial education. They made their decisions from a position of greater strength, both economically and socially. Children's contributions to the family economy were less likely to be crucial. Daughters felt little economic pressure to enter the waged labor force. Sons faced a real dilemma in deciding between the status and benefits of their fathers' skilled crafts and those of clerical work. Both economic and social factors must be considered in order to understand the presence of so many skilled workers' children in the high school's program.

In the fall of 1900 Harry Williamson Redman entered the Commercial Department. Two years later his sister, Florence, would do the same. Their father was Jacob Thomas Redman, a Pennsylvania-born railroad conductor. A widower, he headed a family of six children. When Harry, his second and youngest son, entered the high school program, his two oldest daughters stayed at home, probably taking care of their younger siblings as well as a maternal uncle living with the family. The oldest Redman son, Jacob, Jr., worked as a clerk. The family rented a home in the comfortable, working-class 23rd ward. Harry attended the Commercial Department for almost two full years before dropping out; his sister remained only five months, leaving the program after receiving an exam grade of only 65 percent.

Garfield Evans enrolled in the Commercial Department in January 1901, and his time there overlapped with both of the Redmans. He remained in the program for three school years until his graduation in 1904. Garfield, who lived across the Monongahela River, attended the South Side High School before transferring to the main Fifth Avenue program. His father, James Evans, worked as a sheet roller in one of the South Side steel mills—perhaps the huge Jones & Laughlin complex just a few blocks from the home he owned in the 25th ward. James had been born in Wales and immigrated to the United States in 1866, at the age of twenty-two. In 1900 all four of his children, three boys and a girl ranging in age from ten to twenty-seven, were attending school.

21. Thornstrom, *Other Bostonians*, p. 97.

Garfield Evans and the two Redman children were only 3 of over 900 children of skilled workers who passed through the Commercial Department between 1890 and 1903. These young people came from the most privileged families of Pittsburgh's working class. In fact, these workers constituted a "labor aristocracy" in Pittsburgh in the late nineteenth century. Following Eric Hobsbawm's schema, historians of the British working class have delineated a labor aristocracy in that country based on its steady work and high wages, its autonomy and authority at the workplace, its role in organizing the working class economically and politically, its ability to improve its situation, and its position within the larger community as a link between unskilled workers and the lower middle class.<sup>22</sup> The examples of Jacob Redman and James Evans demonstrate these same qualifications in Pittsburgh's skilled workers.

As a railroad conductor Jacob Redman received at least \$3.00 a day in wages, a respectable amount that maintained his family at a standard of living above that of the average worker. Like many others in his line of work, Redman worked steadily in 1900. He was virtually guaranteed employment by the railroad, having worked his way up through the seniority system from brakeman to conductor. He probably belonged to one of the Railway Brotherhoods, which protected his seniority rights and provided him with insurance in case of accident or ill health. At one of the top rungs of the trainmen's promotional ladders, a conductor commanded respect from those beneath him on the train and in the yards and from his superiors. As the most visible railroad employee, he also occupied a privileged position in the public eye.<sup>23</sup> This public perception reinforced

22. Eric Hobsbawm, "The Labour Aristocracy in Nineteenth-Century Britain," in *Labouring Men* (New York: Basic Books, 1965), pp. 272-315. See Geoffrey Crossick, *An Artisan Elite in Victorian Society: Kentish London, 1840-1880* (London: Croom Helm, 1978); John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974); Robert Q. Gray, *The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); as well as the essays in Eric Hobsbawm, *Workers: Worlds of Labor* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 214-272. In recent years more attention has been paid to the application of the category to the U.S. working class as well. See Andrew Dawson, "The Paradox of Dynamic Technological Change and the Labor Aristocracy in the United States, 1880-1914," *Labor History* 20 (1979), 325-351, and Dawson, "The Parameters of Craft Consciousness: The Social Outlook of the Skilled Worker, 1890-1920," in Hoerder, ed., *American Labor and Immigration History*, pp. 135-155.

23. An average daily compensation of \$2.97 is listed for conductors in the region including Pittsburgh in U.S. Interstate Commerce Commission, *13th Annual Report on the Statistics of Railways in the United States for the Year Ending June 30, 1900* (Washington, 1901), p. 41; see Shergold, *Working-Class Life*, for information on the standard of living supported by these wages. There were two competing Railway Brotherhoods in Pittsburgh,

his desire to present a "respectable" image, while his economic status gave him the wherewithal to do so.

But the skilled iron and steel workers, like James Evans, stood at the pinnacle of Pittsburgh's working class. As a sheet roller Evans might have earned as much as \$8.50 a day for 12 hours of work, the highest possible for skilled work. Work was steady only as long as the iron and steel trade prospered, but the wages were also high enough to sustain a family through intermittent unemployment. In 1900 Evans enjoyed full employment. At the workplace itself he oversaw the work of helpers and laborers; his was the responsibility to control both men and machines in attaining the proper thickness for the resultant sheet metal. Rollers had organized unions since the 1860s, and though the debacle of the Homestead strike on the eve of the 1890s depression had seriously damaged their union, it was making a mild comeback by the turn of the century. To a large degree the staying power of the union was dependent on the skilled workers' shared ethnic bonds as well as on their workplace experiences. Thus union reports included updates on its members' participation in such activities as Welsh *eisteddfods*, or singing competitions.<sup>24</sup> The union provided men like Evans not only with job security and insurance measures, but also with vehicles through which they expressed their own sense of dignity and worth.

Few skilled workers experienced the economic and social status of iron rollers like Evans, and not all exhibited the social characteristics of the labor aristocracy as clearly as did railroad conductors like Redman. But they did enjoy a standard of living and a level of control over their work which far exceeded that experienced by Pittsburgh's unskilled workers. And by sending their sons and daughters to the high school's Commercial Department, all these skilled workers lived out what Hobsbawm called the labor aristocracy's "prospects of advancement" for their children.<sup>25</sup> Enrolling their children in the Commercial Department reflected both the privileges of their elite status within the working class and their recogni-

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both of which included conductors: the Switchmen's Union and the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen (Kellogg, *Wage-Earning Pittsburgh*, p. 125). Contemporary novels and other literature provide insight into the social status of conductors: for example, see Frank Beers, *The Green Signal or Life on the Rail* (Kansas City: Franklin Hudson, 1904).

24. Fitch, *Steel Workers*, p. 53; David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 22-23, 34. See the *National Labor Tribune*, 12/29/1898, for example (hereafter cited as *NLT*).

25. Hobsbawm, "Labour Aristocracy," p. 273.

tion of the limits of that status. Through the 1890s these limits became increasingly clear, as the labor aristocracy underwent changes of crisis proportion.<sup>26</sup> Economic downturn, union defeats, technological changes and increased division of labor, and an influx of new-immigrant groups all played a part in the decisions these workers' families made about their children's futures.

The sons and daughters of skilled workers attended the Commercial Department in about the same proportions as the program's entire student body, 57 percent boys and 43 percent girls (see table 8). Like the children of unskilled workers, they were more likely to graduate from the program than were other students.<sup>27</sup> Young men and young women from the families of skilled workers had almost identical graduation rates.

Almost three-quarters of these students entered the Commercial Department after attending the city's public grammar schools, more than any other occupational group. To a large extent this reflects the identification with and support of the public schools by Pittsburgh's skilled workers, a connection explored in more detail in the next chapter. Skilled workers' children were less likely than average to have attended parochial schools, especially when compared to unskilled workers' children. Only 6 percent of skilled workers' children first attended parochial schools, compared to 8 percent of all Commercial Department students and 16 percent of students from unskilled workers' families (see table 12).

The ethnic backgrounds and nativity of the skilled workers help explain these differences. While almost half of all unskilled workers' children were of Irish descent, only 17 percent of skilled workers' children were. In fact, some 52 percent of all skilled workers' children were the native-born children of native-born workers (see tables 10 and 11). However, 67 percent of the boys' parents were native-born, compared to only 47 percent of the girls' parents. Of those with foreign-born parents or grandparents, girls were more likely to be of British (including Scotch and Welsh) or Irish stock. These ethnic differences are discussed again later in this chapter with the analysis of different family strategies that lay behind decisions to enroll a son or a daughter in the Commercial Department.

Family employment patterns provide insight into the economic situation of the families of these skilled workers. While children in these families were less likely than unskilled workers' children to be gainfully employed, they came closer to balancing white-collar and blue-collar employment. Almost 40 percent of these families had children employed

26. Hobsbawm, *Workers*, pp. 266-268.

27. Forty-five percent of skilled workers' children graduated, compared to 41 percent of the entire student body and 45 percent of unskilled workers' children. See table 9.



as white-collar workers in clerical or sales positions. Another 22 percent included children working in skilled trades, while only 15 percent had unskilled or semiskilled workers in the family. The relatively low incidence of children's employment suggests that immediate economic concerns were not prime motivating forces in educational decisions for these families; investing in white-collar education or training in a skilled trade was more important than immediate earnings, particularly with the low unemployment rates in these families. Only 10 percent of the skilled workers found in the 1900 census experienced any unemployment that year, compared to 23 percent of the unskilled workers.

Why did these skilled workers send their children to the Commercial Department in the first place? Traditional social mobility studies provide a quick and easy answer: they were searching for a way to boost their children out of blue-collar employment and into "superior" white-collar occupations. But did these workers share the assumption that white-collar occupations were indeed superior? Authors of social mobility studies often gloss over this question, ignoring evidence that for skilled workers the line between all blue-collar manual occupations and all white-collar nonmanual occupations was not a crucial one.<sup>28</sup>

What values lay behind the self-perception of skilled workers and their views of other social groups and occupations? I chose to call these workers a labor aristocracy not only because the term aptly describes their material circumstances, but also because it implies a world view conditioned by both their identification with the working class and their own elite position within that class. Skilled workers displayed their distinctive ideology in their publications, the actions of their organizations, and in this case, the efforts they made to ensure that their children enjoyed secure futures. Pittsburgh's labor aristocrats were proud of their skills and saw those skills as the productive basis for the city's economic strength. They were also aware that their personal success depended on group solidarities. Their unions and trade councils provided them with even greater economic security and the means to regularize their workplace control. At the same time, acting and speaking through such organizations, they saw themselves as spokesmen for the entire working class; their unions, cooperatives, and political organizations were meant to be models for the formation of a more truly democratic republic.<sup>29</sup>

28. For example, see Thernstrom, *Other Bostonians*, pp. 93-97.

29. This capsule of skilled workers' ideology comes from reading publications such as the *NLT* and *The Carpenter*, as well as from secondary works such as David Montgomery, "Workers' Control of Machine Production in the Nineteenth Century," in Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor*

In their rhetoric and actions, then, labor aristocrats reveal a level of class consciousness traditionally thought to be negligible in the United States.<sup>30</sup> But did the fathers of Commercial Department students share these values? Or did they embody the antithesis of class consciousness, seeking to remove their families from the working class by assuring their children's upward mobility into clerical positions? A survey of Pittsburgh's labor movement in the 1890s reveals the activities of a number of the parents of Commercial Department students. These men played active roles in union affairs and working-class politics. For example, Frank Bonsall, a painter whose daughter Irene attended the Commercial Department between 1897 and 1899, was elected secretary of the Pittsburgh Building Trades Council in February of 1898 and later that year ran for the third district legislative seat on the United Labor ticket.<sup>31</sup> John Pierce, a rougher for Jones & Laughlin, sent his son to the Commercial Department in the mid-1890s. He had served as a school director for Pittsburgh's 24th ward in the 1880s and ran for the ward's select council seat in 1898, at which time he was a trustee of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers (AAISW), which later employed him as a full-time organizer.<sup>32</sup> Also in 1898, four years after his son graduated from the Commercial Department, glassblower John Schlicker, treasurer of the Knights of Labor Local Assembly 300, was involved in an intricate dispute over control of the Window Glass Workers' Association.<sup>33</sup> Other fathers played similar roles in Pittsburgh's union life. Many more partici-

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*Struggles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 9-31; Montgomery, "Labor and the Republic in Industrial America: 1860-1920," *Le Mouvement Sociale* 111 (April-June 1980), 201-215; Shergold, *Working-Class Life*; Francis G. Couvares, *The Remaking of Pittsburgh: Class and Culture in an Industrializing City, 1877-1919* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1984); Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); and Dawson, "Parameters of Craft Consciousness."

30. This is not to say that their class consciousness was unproblematic. As we will see, here and in chapter 5, the labor aristocrats' self-perception as the moral, cultural, and political leaders of the working class often led to actions belying their supposed sense of class solidarity. This issue is a common one in studies of labor aristocracies. For the mixed messages of British skilled workers' actions, for example, see James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards' Movement* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1973).

31. *NLT*, 2/3/1898; 9/15/1898.

32. *NLT*, 1/27/1898. Pierce appears in some capacity in the *Proceedings* of the AAISW's national conventions every year from 1889 to 1906. The 1900 city directory listed him as an "organizer."

33. *NLT*, 9/15/1898, 12/15/1898; "Official Records of Window Glass Workers' L.A. 300, K. of L.," pp. 503, 580, Joseph Slight Papers Microfilm Edition, Ohio Historical Society (roll 7).

pated as rank-and-file members, such as William Hughes, a roller at Republic Iron Works, whose daughter Minnie recited a poem at a district meeting of the AAISW, or Henry Briggs, who made it a practice to visit the *National Labor Tribune* offices every December with a Christmas gift.<sup>34</sup> These men represent the tip of the proverbial iceberg; the high rates of unionization among Pittsburgh's skilled workers suggest that most of these parents participated at some level in the city's union movement and its related associational life.

Why, then, did these workers choose to send their sons and daughters to the Commercial Department to prepare them for employment as clerical workers? The relatively high income of skilled workers meant that there was usually no overwhelming need for the economic contributions of working daughters. Pride in their trades and in their privileged position within the working class suggests that sons would more likely follow their father's trades before crossing the collar line into the office. The answer lies in the rapid economic changes of the 1890s, changes that not only created the burgeoning number of office occupations but also transformed many of Pittsburgh's skilled trades. This transformation led to a crisis within the labor aristocracy, a crisis in which skilled workers' privileges within the workplace were eroded and their social status appeared threatened as well.

This crisis had four main components, all integral to the development of monopoly capitalism. First, entire industries declined in importance in Pittsburgh's economy. In the glass industry, for example, the formation of the U.S. Glass Company in 1891 put family-owned companies out of business in the city. In addition, the consolidated company could afford to take advantage of new technologies that were not dependent on the Pittsburgh region's original natural advantages for glass manufacturing. Other artisan industries, such as tailoring, were simply pushed out of business by large-scale, ready-made production and sales. Second, in Pittsburgh as elsewhere, corporate emphasis on smoother production and higher profits led to numerous attempts to break the shop-floor power of skilled workers through combinations of new automated technologies and a more intense division of labor. This dual process affected virtually every skilled trade. Glassblowers and many iron and steel workers faced technological innovations that dampened or even eliminated the power of

34. Another Hughes daughter, Gladys, was in the Commercial Department, *NLT*, 7/28/1898, 11/24/1898, 12/8/1898; Briggs's son was in the Commercial Department, *NLT*, 12/29/1898.

their skills; tailors saw their craft divided into minute steps done by the piece in factories filled with young women and recent immigrants; machinists faced the increasing use of specialized machine tools to divide the skills of the former "all-round" craftsmen; even carpenters found portions of their work transferred to planing mills, leaving them simply to assemble prefabricated pieces.<sup>35</sup>

Third, employers pressed their new advantages in order to destroy the power of the skilled craft unions where they could. While workers struggled to maintain their shop-floor control over the work process, the new corporations used their immense economic power to crush workers' organizations. In Pittsburgh this was vividly demonstrated by the 1892 Homestead Strike, when the Carnegie company wiped out union power in steel, leaving some union men blacklisted and many more working under conditions strictly and totally determined by the company. Finally, these skilled workers, faced with economic threats at the workplace, found themselves addressing a related issue in their communities. Increasingly the workers filling the new unskilled and semiskilled positions created by automation and division of labor were the new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Skilled workers saw these immigrants used by the corporations to undermine their economic power in the workplace; at the same time the new immigrants were also changing the complexion of community life in many of Pittsburgh's working-class neighborhoods. Fearing a real decline in their privileged economic status, these skilled workers sought to bolster their social status by distinguishing themselves from the new immigrants.<sup>36</sup>

35. Josephine McIlvain, "Twelve Blocks: A Study of One Segment of Pittsburgh's South Side, 1880-1915," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 60 (1977), 364; Glenn E. McLaughlin, *Growth of American Manufacturing Areas: A Comparative Analysis with Special Emphasis on Trends in the Pittsburgh District* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, Bureau of Business Research, 1938), p. 315; George E. Barnett, *Chapters on Machinery and Labor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926); Pearce Davis, *The Development of the American Glass Industry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949); John William Larier, Jr., "The Glass House Boys: Child Labor Conditions in Pittsburgh's Glass Factories, 1890-1917," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 48 (1965), 355-364; U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, "Conditions of Entrance to the Principal Trades," Bulletin no. 67, by Walter E. Weyl and A. M. Sakolski (Washington, 1906), pp. 681-780; Dawson, "The Paradox of Technological Change"; Montgomery, "Workers' Control of Machine Production"; Bob Reckman, "Carpentry: The Craft and Trade," in Andrew Zimbalist, ed., *Case Studies on the Labor Process* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), pp. 85-92; David M. Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich, *Segmented Work, Divided Workers: The Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 128-135; Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, pp. 9-57.

36. David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); James Livingston, "The Social Analysis of Economic History and Theory:

These dramatic changes in their economic and social position led skilled workers to develop new strategies for their sons' and daughters' futures. For while the late-nineteenth-century corporations eroded much of the material basis for their privileged position within the working class, these same corporations also created the new office occupations. Clerical jobs, in flux through the 1890s and early 1900s as much as were the skilled manual trades, occupied a similar economic and social position. For the sons of Pittsburgh's skilled workers, clerical work was an alternative to the newly problematic conditions in their fathers' trades. For daughters, office positions provided remunerative work with a social status that could reinforce their families' otherwise declining position within the working class. A close look at a few of the students in the Commercial Department illustrates these strategies.

Charles Auth entered the Commercial Department in 1900. His father, Conrad, was a Pennsylvania-born glassblower of mixed German and English heritage and national treasurer of the Glass Bottle Blowers' Association (GBBA).<sup>37</sup> Glassblowers like Auth made up almost 3 percent of the skilled workers represented in the Commercial Department. Conrad Auth, his English-born wife, five sons, and one daughter lived in a house with a fully paid mortgage near the glasshouses on Pittsburgh's South Side. Charles was the youngest son. His two oldest brothers held manual jobs; one was a glassblower like his father, and the other was an unspecified "steelworker." During the year ending with the federal census taking of June 1900, Conrad Auth and his glassblowing son had both been unemployed for twelve full months. Even as treasurer of his national union, Auth, Sr., did not receive a salary, although he did sometimes

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Conjectures on Late Nineteenth-Century American Development," *American Historical Review* 92 (1987), 69-95; A. T. Lane, "The British and American Labour Movements and the Problem of Immigration, 1890-1914," in Kenneth Lunn, ed., *Hosts, Immigrants and Minorities: Historical Responses to Newcomers in British Society 1870-1914* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), pp. 343-367; David Montgomery, "Immigrant Workers and Managerial Reform," in Montgomery, *Workers' Control*, pp. 32-47; Bruce Laurie, Theodore Hershberg, and George Alter, "Immigrants and Industry: The Philadelphia Experience, 1850-1880," *Journal of Social History* 9 (1975), 219-267; James R. Green, *The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980), pp. 3-31; Gordon, Edwards, and Reich, *Segmented Work*, pp. 141-144.

37. In the 1890s Conrad Auth had been president of the Pittsburgh branch of the GBBA (J. C. Lucey, ed., *The Trade Unions of Pittsburg and Allegheny, Their History and Biographical Sketches of Prominent Union Officers and Friends of Labor* [Pittsburgh: Duncan, 1895], p. 8). Auth served as national treasurer of the GBBA from at least 1900 until his death in 1911 (Glass Bottle Blowers Association, *Proceedings of the Glass Bottle Blowers Association of the United States and Canada, Composed of Glass Bottle Blowers, 1900, 1902, 1903, 1904, 1906, 1908, 1909, 1910, 1911* [Obituary on p. 119]).

receive per diem payment and costs for time spent on union business.<sup>38</sup> Auth's steelworker son had been unemployed for seven months of 1900. Faced with this dramatic experience of the precariousness of the skilled trades, the Auth family switched to a new plan for their three younger sons. When fifteen-year-old Charles entered the high school's program, his other two brothers worked as clerks, one for a plumbing business and the other as a grocery clerk. Unlike their older brothers, neither of these young men employed in white-collar jobs had any periods of unemployment in 1900. Since the family had paid off the mortgage on their home, their economic situation had not always been so bleak as it was in 1900. Nonetheless, the pattern of employment in the family demonstrates a change in strategy for the sons' futures over the course of the 1890s.

But fathers did not have to be in such dire personal straits to follow the same path. James Evans, the Welsh sheet roller introduced earlier, experienced no such catastrophic unemployment. Even as late as 1907 his job in the mill would not be affected by new automated technology. All around him, however, other skilled workers faced increasing automation, and Evans had witnessed in his own working life the return of the 12-hour workday and the 7-day week in the Pittsburgh mills. He probably agreed with the furnace boss who told Pittsburgh Survey investigator John Fitch in 1907, "I'm gettin' along, but I don't want the kids ever to work this way. I'm goin' to educate them so they won't have to work twelve hours."<sup>39</sup> And while Evans most likely participated in the AAISW's economic and social activities, he had witnessed the dissolution of much of the union's strength in the 1890s and might not have wanted his sons to be dependent on it. Twenty-five iron or steel rollers sent children to the Commercial Department between 1890 and 1903, mostly sons undoubtedly hoping to find more secure employment than did their fathers.

Tailors also sent disproportionate numbers of sons to the Commercial Department. One of these was Joseph Zinsmeister, a first-generation German-American, whose son Theodore attended the program in 1900. As an officer of the Pittsburgh local of the Journeymen Tailors' Union (JTU) during the 1890s, Zinsmeister would have been very aware of the havoc wreaked by the subdivision of the work process in his trade. Factory work had begun to replace custom tailoring in the 1870s, and by the 1890s the trend had accelerated. At the national level Zinsmeister's union would later engage in a jurisdictional dispute with the United

38. See, for example, GBBA, *Proceedings . . . 1900*, p. 277.

39. Fitch, *Steel Workers*, p. 52; David Brody, *Steelworkers in America*, pp. 35-38; quotation in Fitch, *Steel Workers*, p. 12.

Garment Workers over the distinction between custom-made and factory-made products. The JTW attempted to keep its apprenticeship system intact, but fought a losing battle against the encroachment of factories and piecework.<sup>40</sup> In these circumstances even a loyal union man like Zinsmeister looked elsewhere for his son's future.

Machinists have provided the textbook case of "deskilling" through technological change and the subdivision of the labor process ever since the trade was first studied at the turn of the century. A 1906 federal study found that "probably no craft has undergone such rapid disintegration within recent years as that of the machinist." Around the same time, investigators for the Pittsburgh Survey found that only about a third of the city's machinists still worked as "all-round mechanics," while the rest were simply specialized "machine hands." And though the International Association of Machinists had been strong in the city through the 1880s, specialization of the craft had weakened it considerably by the opening of the twentieth century.<sup>41</sup> These developments in the machine trades probably explain why Michael Hefferman, an Irish machinist, sent his son, John, to the Commercial Department in 1895. But he also sent his daughter, Margaret, and the implications of that decision are somewhat different.

Pittsburgh's labor aristocrats did not generally expect their daughters to work for wages. From at least the 1870s on, being a truly "worthy workingman" meant being able to support one's family on a single male wage. The ideal union man had a wife at home maintaining the household, and healthy children attending public schools, or if they were older sons, apprenticed to honorable trades. In fact, as Alice Kessler-Harris has pointed out, these workers developed a working-class version of the idea of "separate spheres" for men and women. According to this view wives stayed home as good housekeepers, and daughters stayed home in order to become good housekeepers. Thus, after posing the question, "What Shall Be Done With Daughters?" Pittsburgh's working-class press recommended: "Teach them to make bread. Teach them to make shirts. . . . Teach them how to wash and iron clothes. . . . Teach them all the mysteries of the kitchen, the dining-room and the parlor."<sup>42</sup>

40. Lucey, *Trade Unions of Pittsburgh and Allegheny*, p. 26; *NLT*, 12/29/1898; U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, "Conditions of Entrance," pp. 691, 704.

41. U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, "Conditions of Entrance," p. 686; John R. Commons and William M. Leiserson, "Wage-Earners of Pittsburgh," in Kellogg, *Wage-Earning Pittsburgh*, p. 140.

42. Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 84; *NLT*, 10/11/1879.

Skilled workers often invoked this vision of the working-class nuclear family as a collective goal, an argument for unionization and higher pay for male workers. But they also presented it as a goal for which individuals should strive. Articles and editorials in the *National Labor Tribune* raged against female and child labor: "Women and children are not made to drudge in shops and factories."<sup>43</sup> Organized skilled workers had two main complaints against such drudgery. On one hand, female labor was often used in combination with automation and piecework systems to undermine skilled male labor. On the other hand, such employment was in fact "drudgery." Long hours of numbing, poorly paid work in Pittsburgh's factories, or servile dependence on the city's upper class in domestic positions, hardly seemed consonant with the social status of the labor aristocracy.

The increase in clerical positions open to women at the end of the nineteenth century invited a new and different outlook on daughters' employment. Clerical work embodied the values of this privileged stratum of Pittsburgh's working class. The characteristics of "conspicuous employment"—education, clothing, ascribed prestige—reinforced the labor aristocracy's social status, relative both to other, less fortunate, members of the working class, and to the upper classes. Two of the largest groups of skilled workers in the Commercial Department illustrate this fact: carpenters, and those men at the apex of the railroading hierarchy, conductors and engineers.

Carpenters made up 13 percent of the Commercial Department skilled fathers, conductors and engineers another 12 percent. Both groups sent disproportionate numbers of daughters to the program. Seth Rogers, a native-born railroad engineer, sent his daughter, Lila, to the Commercial Department in 1898; another of his daughters worked as a clerk in the courthouse in 1900. Florence Bolton, daughter of a native-born carpenter and occasional building inspector, attended the high school's program in the two years before Lila Rogers. Two of Florence's older sisters worked as schoolteachers. Both of these fathers worked in trades overwhelmingly dominated by native-born men like themselves.<sup>44</sup> As clerical workers

43. *NLT*, 2/3/1877.

44. In 1900 46 percent of both carpenters and "steam railway employees" were native born of native-born parents. In 1910 61 percent of locomotive engineers were native born of native-born parents (figures for Pittsburgh). U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Occupations at the Twelfth Census* (Washington, 1904), pp. 678-683; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910: Population: Occupation Statistics*, vol. IV (Washington, 1914), pp. 590-591.



their daughters would be employed in settings similarly dominated by women of the same background.

The Commercial Department, however, also enrolled many native-born daughters of Irish and British skilled workers. These families would have had views similar to those of native-born workers. The family of the English carpenter, Henry E. Charles, and his Irish wife, Catherine, sent at least three of their six daughters to the high school program. Still renting an apartment as late as 1910, the Charles family would have considered clerical employment or teaching their only options for bringing in additional wages and at the same time maintaining or possibly even boosting their social standing. Daughters' clerical employment can thus be seen as one of many attempts by native-born and old-immigrant group workers to define themselves in opposition to the city's new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. When Elizabeth (Bessie) Mooney, for example, attended the Commercial Department, her Irish-born father, a steel mill heater, headed a family that included his sister-in-law, who worked as a servant. For the Mooney family, as for many others, clerical training for a daughter represented a chance for family members to move further away from the unskilled occupations filled by recent immigrants.

For both daughters and sons clerical employment fit into skilled workers' views of their own importance to the economy. Despite erosions in position and power, skilled workers at the turn of the century still would have argued that it was their labor that created the industrial wealth of the nation. But they also understood that the wealth they produced and distributed was now controlled in the corporate offices downtown. These workers paid careful attention to developments in the corporate world, hoping to gain insight into their own economic futures. For example, throughout the spring and early summer of 1901, the *National Labor Tribune* detailed the moves into Pittsburgh of U.S. Steel's component offices and staffs upon the creation of the giant corporation.<sup>45</sup> Though clerical workers obviously wielded little power in those offices, they nonetheless worked at the very center of the economic developments of the day. The fathers of these young people might well have agreed with the writer who proclaimed that "the file clerk is just as essential to the steel business, under modern conditions, as the puddler."<sup>46</sup> A child

45. *NLT*, 4/25/1901, 5/9/1901, 7/11/1901. Just a year earlier the *NLT* had bemoaned the move to New York City of the offices of the American Steel Hoop Company as a loss to Pittsburgh's financial importance (*NLT*, 6/28/1900).

46. Lee Galloway, *Office Management: Its Principles and Practice* (New York: Ronald, 1919), p. ix.

working as a file clerk, then, might be an extension of the economic, as well as social, position of a puddler—or other skilled worker—as a father.

The examples in this chapter demonstrate the most vivid cases of the late-nineteenth-century crisis of the labor aristocracy and the ways in which the public high school's Commercial Department provided one avenue of response to that crisis. Other skilled workers experienced the 1890s in different ways: not all started at the same heights of skill and remuneration; few saw their crafts undergo the same intense division of labor as did machinists, or the complete mechanization of tasks that affected glassblowers; only a handful experienced as brutal a crushing of their union as did the steelworkers after Homestead. However, they all shared at least some of the characteristics described here—characteristics that earn them the descriptive title “labor aristocracy” and that reflect the transformation of their working and living conditions. Furthermore, these skilled workers, whether of native-born, British, German, or Irish stock, lived in close-knit working-class communities in which their shared social status brought them together in class, ethnic, and civic organizations.