

The Importance of Boarding for the Structure of the Household in the Nineteenth Century:

Moncton, New Brunswick, and Hamilton, Canada West

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As the number of nineteenth-century community studies proliferates, it is becoming increasingly clear that many of the preconceived ideas about the lives of people in the nineteenth century must be re-examined. One such issue is the structure of the family and household in preindustrial society. This research addresses a specific aspect of household structure — the nature and meaning of the boarding experience.

It has been suggested that boarding in the nineteenth century helped young people find “a home away from home”. Michael Katz argues that boarders became more or less a part of the family grouping. He suggests, therefore, that there is little distinction between relatives residing with kin and boarders. In his Hamilton study, Katz finds that in 1861 “a demographic comparison of relatives and boarders in Hamilton, [found that they] were quite like each other in most of the essential ways.”¹ Since there is no distinction between the two groups, Katz concludes that boarders, like kin, should be regarded as “an integral part of the household”.² This position is similar to that of Modell and Hareven who suggest that boarding provided a “family surrogate” for young people.³

Obscuring the distinction between relatives who reside with kin and boarders runs the risk of missing critical insights for the wider importance of nineteenth-century household structure. This blurring of the distinction is not supported by newer evidence. Katz’s data from Hamilton in 1861 has been compared with data collected by this author on Moncton in 1851, 1861, and 1871 in order to examine this issue.

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¹ Michael KATZ, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 230.

² *Ibid.*, p. 232.

³ John MODELL and Tamara K. HAREVEN, “Urbanization and the Malleable Household. An Examination of Boarding and Lodging in American Families”, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, X (August 1973): 470.

*The Case of Hamilton 1861 and Moncton 1851, 1861 and 1871*⁴

Hamilton, Canada West and Moncton, New Brunswick were vastly dissimilar places in the mid-nineteenth century. Hamilton was a booming commercial city. Moncton, on the other hand, was a small industrializing centre with a rapidly expanding shipbuilding industry. This boom of the 1850s turned into economic disaster by the 1860s. This transformation of the economy, as we shall see shortly, had important implications for household structure. Despite the enormous differences in these communities, they were remarkably similar in terms of the nature of boarders and of relatives who resided with kin.

The situation in Moncton Parish in 1851 and 1861 indicates that there was a marked dissimilarity between boarders and relatives. As Table 1 indicates, relatives were much younger than boarders with 43.2 percent of relatives under 15 years of age in 1851 as compared to 7.5 percent of boarders in 1851, with similar but less pronounced figures in 1861 (20.9 percent of relatives and 12.9 percent of boarders were under 15 years of age. These differences are significant at the .001 level). Similarly, only 28.3 percent and 36.6 percent of relatives were between 15 and 29 years old in 1851 and 1861 respectively, while 66.0 percent and 53.3 percent of boarders were in this age category. Thus, residing kin were far more likely to be young children than were boarders, while boarders were overwhelmingly young adults.

Table 1.

RELATIVES AND BOARDERS IN MONCTON
BY AGE, 1851 AND 1861

Age	1851		1861	
	Relative	Boarder	Relative	Boarder
0-4	16.4%	1.2%	6.4%	3.7%
5-9	16.4	0.9	6.8	6.4
10-14	10.4	5.4	7.6	2.8
15-19	10.4	14.2	18.1	8.3
20-24	13.4	25.3	10.0	24.8
25-29	4.5	15.4	8.4	20.2
30-34	7.5	9.0	4.8	10.1
35-39	0.0	4.8	2.0	8.3
40-44	0.0	6.3	5.6	4.6
45-49	1.5	6.0	1.2	0.9
50-54	6.0	5.4	2.0	0.9
55-59	0.0	1.2	3.6	0.9
60 and over	13.4	4.8	23.3	8.2
Total	99.9%	99.9%	99.8%	100.1%
N	67	332	249	109

⁴ The data for Hamilton are taken from Michael KATZ, *The People of Hamilton*. The data for Moncton are taken from Sheva MEDJUK, "Wooden Ships and Iron People: The Lives of the People of Moncton, New Brunswick 1851 to 1871" (Ph.D. dissertation, York University 1979). Both studies involve similar techniques of data analysis, e.g., transcribing census data onto computer tapes and tracing individuals from census to census by means of record linkages.

Conversely, an examination of the age group 60 years of age and older indicates critical dissimilarities between boarders and relatives. In this age category, we see substantially more residing relatives than boarders in both 1851 and 1861 (13.4 percent and 23.3 percent of relatives were 60 years of age and over in 1851 and 1861 respectively). It was not only the very young but also the elderly who dwelled in the households of kin. These were very likely people whose own nuclear family had dissolved.

If Katz's data on Hamilton are examined in a similar fashion, we can discern the same age dissimilarities between boarders and resident kin in Hamilton as in Moncton (Table 2). In Hamilton there were more young relatives (15 years of age and under) — 32.9 percent of them, compared to 16.5 percent of boarders.

Table 2.

RELATIVES AND BOARDERS IN HAMILTON, BY AGE, 1861

<i>Age Group 1-30</i>	<i>Relative</i>	<i>Boarder</i>
1-5	13.4%	6.8%
6-10	8.0	3.4
11-15	11.5	6.3
16-20	12.7	17.3
21-25	12.5	23.6
26-30	8.4	15.4
Total under 31	66.5%	72.8%
X ² = 152.1	significance = .001	

Also similar to the Moncton data, was the overwhelming number of boarders in the age group 16 to 30. For Hamilton in 1861, and for Moncton in 1851 and 1861, over half of all boarders were in this age group (Table 3).

Table 3.

RELATIVES AND BOARDERS IN HAMILTON AND IN MONCTON FOR SPECIFIC AGES

<i>Age</i>	<i>Hamilton, 1861</i>		<i>Moncton, 1851</i>		<i>Moncton, 1861</i>	
	<i>Relative</i>	<i>Boarder</i>	<i>Relative</i>	<i>Boarder</i>	<i>Relative</i>	<i>Boarder</i>
0-15*	32.9%	16.5%	43.2%	7.5%	20.9%	12.9%
16-30	33.6	56.3	28.3	54.9	36.6	53.3

* For Moncton the age categories are 0-14 and 15-29 years old.

Since Katz does not present an age distribution for relatives and boarders over 30 years of age, further direct comparison to Moncton is not possible. However, he provides us with means and standard deviations of the age distributions and from this we can glean insights. Katz calculates the mean age of relatives as 27.3 and of boarders as 26.3, clearly a not very substantial difference. However, the standard deviation for relatives was 21.3 and for boarders was 13.9. Not only

is the standard deviation for relatives large, but it is also substantially different from the standard deviation for boarders. The dispersion for relatives is thus much larger than that for boarders. Without the age distributions for relatives and boarders over 30 years of age, we are unable to account for this wide dispersion. If, however, we can generalize from the Moncton data, we can hypothesize that this dispersion is a consequence of both the very young and the elderly residing in the homes of relatives. This hypothesis is strengthened by Katz's conclusion that "relatives consisted primarily of young unmarried women with a solid minority of widows and orphans, boarders were most often young unmarried men".⁵

Table 4.

SEX OF RELATIVES AND BOARDERS, 1851 AND 1861

Sex	1851		1861	
	Relative	Boarder	Relative	Boarder
Male	43.3%	80.7%	38.8%	83.3%
Female	56.7	19.3	61.2	16.7
Total %	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
N	67	332	250	114

In addition to the age distinction, there was a marked distinction between boarders and relatives in Moncton in terms of their sex compositions (Table 4). In both 1851 and 1861 relatives were generally female, while boarders were overwhelmingly male. Also relatives were principally New Brunswick born, while boarders were very greatly overrepresented among the foreign-born⁶ (Table 5).

Table 5.

BIRTHPLACE OF RELATIVES AND BOARDERS, 1851 AND 1861

Birthplace	1851		1861	
	Relative	Boarder	Relative	Boarder
New Brunswick	92.5%	43.1%	71.6%	47.4%
Other	7.5	56.9	28.4	52.6
Total %	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
N	67	332	250	114

Finally, a critical distinction emerges with regard to the occupational sector of boarders and relatives. Relatives were principally not in the labour force at all, while boarders were to be found largely in the industrial sector (Table 6).

⁵ KATZ, *The People of Hamilton*, p. 231.

⁶ Foreign-born boarders emigrated largely from other Maritime Provinces (35.0 percent), Great Britain (33.3 percent), and Ireland (23.3 percent).

Table 6.

OCCUPATION SECTOR OF RELATIVES AND BOARDERS, 1851 AND 1861

Occupation	1851		1861	
	Relative	Boarder	Relative	Boarder
Not in Labour Force	82.1%	8.7%	69.4%	19.3%
Farming	3.0	2.1	5.6	4.4
Building & Manufacturing	6.0	53.0	4.8	35.1
Transportation	0.0	0.3	0.4	14.0
Dealing and Banks, Government & Public Service	0.0	3.6	5.6	21.0
Domestic & Personal	6.0	19.9	11.2	0.9
Industry Not Known	3.0	12.3	1.6	5.3
Other	—	—	1.2	—
Total %	100.1%	99.9%	99.8%	100.0%
N	67	332	250	114

Unfortunately, the 1871 data on Moncton do not clearly specify the relationship of individuals within a household. Thus, we are not able to extend the analysis to 1871 with the same accuracy. However, using the variables of "single related" and "single unrelated" which can be ascertained from the data, as roughly similar to relatives and boarders, we can gain some insights into the 1871 situation. All distinctions that were found between relatives and boarders in 1851 and 1861 also distinguished single related from single unrelated persons in 1871: related persons tended to be concentrated among the young and unrelated persons were generally 20-29 years old; related persons were more likely to be New Brunswick born than were unrelated persons; also related persons were predominantly female, unrelated persons were male. Finally, almost four-fifths of related persons were not in the labour force while only thirty-six percent of unrelated persons were not in the work force. Thus, we can conclude that the distinctions found in 1851 and 1861 were quite likely true for 1871 as well.

Parallel distinctions can be found in the Hamilton data. A clear distinction existed between boarders and relatives not only in terms of age but also in terms of sex — only 41 percent of relatives were male while 66 percent of boarders were male. In addition, while there was more similarity between birthplace of relatives and boarders in Hamilton than in Moncton, nevertheless, only 61 percent of boarders were born in Canada West as compared to 71.1 percent of relatives. Thus, like Moncton, the demographic profiles of boarders and of resident kin were markedly different.

The Importance of the Distinction between Boarders and Residing Kin

The reason that we have stressed the distinction between boarders and kin is that it is a critical factor in understanding the nineteenth-century Moncton economy. In 1851, boarders represented 12.5 percent of the population, and were largely male immigrants, age 15-29 years old and worked in industry (Table 7). While the socio-demographic profile of boarders was similar in 1861, their numbers shrank to 2.7 percent of the population. Relatives who lived in households with their kin,

on the other hand, were largely female native-born individuals under 20 years of age or over 60 years of age, and not in the labour force. Their proportion of the population also increased by almost four times from 1851 to 1861. The good economic conditions in 1851, it appears, favoured the immigration of young men who lived as boarders and worked in the growing shipbuilding industry. The much harsher conditions of 1861 discouraged boarders but encouraged relatives, primarily the very young and the very old unemployed females, to take shelter in the homes of their kin.

Table 7.

AGE DISTRIBUTION OF FOREIGN-BORN MALE BOARDERS IN
MONCTON, 1851 AND 1861

<i>Age</i>	<i>1851</i>	<i>1861</i>
0-14	1.1%	2.0%
15-29	49.4	48.0
30-45	27.0	32.0
45-59	17.8	6.0
60 plus	4.6	12.0
Total %	99.9%	100.0%
N	174	50

Further evidence for the importance of this distinction is gained from an examination of persistence rates. By tracing individuals from one census record to the next, we can ascertain who were the people who left Moncton and who were those to be found again a decade later. The overall persistence of the Moncton population from 1851 to 1861 was 50.2 percent. The persistence rate for boarders in the same period was only 12.1 percent. This extraordinarily high transiency of boarders lends support to the finding that boarders, because of their specific demographic profile (largely male, young and foreign-born) were immediately affected by the adverse economic conditions. These young men, who came to Moncton in the late 1840s and early 1850s were the least able to sustain the effects of the economic impact of the late 1850s and early 1860s. Having no kin ties to help them through these difficult times, they left, most likely in the hopes of better opportunity elsewhere.

Residing kin, on the other hand, were far more persistent with 43.9 percent of those found in 1851 appearing again in the census in 1861. These individuals were more able to turn to fellow kin in the community as times became increasingly difficult. In addition, since such individuals were primarily native-born, they most likely would have had stronger ties with the community. Finally, it can also be suggested that since relatives tended to be women, particularly the very young or the elderly, the alternative of simply moving out when times became hard was not as available to them.

In sum, the evidence presented clearly indicates that there was a very clear distinction between boarders and relatives on the basis of socio-demographic characteristics. The differences between boarders and relatives must not be ignored. Katz, like Modell and Hareven, in his attempt to advance the thesis that boarders

were like relatives in that they lived in intimate contact with other family members (that is, a "family surrogate" for the boarder) concludes that "the distinction between boarders and relatives should therefore be minimized, boarders and relatives should be recognized as an integral part of the household".⁷ Thus, Katz wishes to minimize those demographic differences between boarders and kin that his own data on Hamilton suggest. However, given the glaring distinctions that we have noted between these two groups, it is difficult to understand Katz's eagerness to ignore them.

On the other hand, this paper suggests that by ignoring these differences we mask distinctions that go beyond demographic profiles. It is precisely because of these differences that boarders and residing kin were differently affected by the economic climate. Boarders consisted largely of young mobile men who had come to seek their fortune in the booming shipbuilding industry of Moncton. These socio-demographic characteristics also helped explain their departure from Moncton when the shipbuilding industry failed. Residing kin, primarily young or elderly native-born females, not in the labour force were not as able to respond in this way.

It is, therefore, critical not to break down this distinction between boarders and resident relatives. By minimizing the differences between them we obscure the close relationship between household structure and economic conditions, as the case of Moncton illustrates. The boarding experience reflects a set of economic circumstances that are glossed over if boarders and relatives are considered as one. Boarding in nineteenth-century Moncton was the result of dynamic economic growth as households absorbed these boarders. The decrease in the number of boarders and the increase in the number of resident relatives between 1851 and 1861 reflect changes in the larger social structure. Changes in the larger economic order were felt in the structure and composition of the household. The household, it appears, adapted in various ways to the economic circumstances of the community. The distinction between boarders and resident kin is not simply a pedantic detail. Rather it provides us with a critical insight into nineteenth-century household structure.

⁷ KATZ, *The People of Hamilton*, p. 232.