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978-0-521-10068-7 - *Avenues to Adulthood: The Origins of the High School and Social Mobility in an American Suburb*

Reed Ueda

Excerpt

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Introduction

In Paris, at the great World's Exposition of 1900, thousands of observers from all nations marveled in fascination at the educational achievements of democracy heralded in the American Educational Exhibit. They drew around the special showcase for the high schools of Somerville, Massachusetts, a Boston suburb. Exhibited there were "interior and exterior views" of the Latin High School, a display of the English High School "in all its cosmopolitan branches from art to science, from studio to laboratory," and a copy of a school yearbook.¹ The American high school represented by Somerville became a symbol of the civilizing and technological progress of modern times celebrated by the world's fair. How the American high school developed a consequential role in social change, widely recognized in late industrial society, is the subject of this community study of Somerville.

Historians and sociologists possess only a preliminary understanding of the public high school's role in the forming of the industrial social order.² This study, therefore, seeks to throw light on the function of the modern American high school in the currents of migration and social mobility generated by the industrial revolution. The high school served as a pathway for various social groups to white-collar and professional jobs. If so, did it serve to promote the formation of a middle class and to define its characteristics? Moreover, did it recruit the children of immigrants and manual workers into these forms of employment? This study reconstitutes the life courses of three generations of high school students to determine if John Goldthorpe's finding that education promoted the social mobility of British workers has an American parallel, or whether, as Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis argued, schooling reinforced the social inequalities of capitalist society.³ In the end, empirical evidence emerged providing some concrete elements of support to both these general theses.

The high school's role in the evolution of the civic life of the modern city is another focus of investigation. Support for this institution expressed the shifting balance of political power between natives and immigrants, businessmen and workers.⁴ The achievements of high school students served as a source of pride in the hometown. Above

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all, the high school acted as a symbol of community in a sprawling city of impersonalized social relationships.⁵

These developments are addressed from the perspective of students and their parents. The experience of youths who went to high school and its effects on their families and their adult lives form the mainspring of historical action. Family resources and strategies determined the extent of support given to secondary education for youngsters.⁶ The peer-group culture of the high school supervised the family to introduce students at an impressionable age to new values and habits that affected their aspirations in adulthood. The conformist pressures of high school youth culture catalyzed the sense of unique generational identity among turn-of-the-century adolescents.⁷ Finally, by using their education as a qualification for desirable jobs, high school students promoted the importance of meritocratic credentials for social advancement.⁸

Educators and policymakers are also discussed, but chiefly in relation to the influences of their social origins upon their public actions. This volume is a social history that treats the American high school as it was centered in a matrix of community and population. It seeks to counterbalance the tendency of historians to treat American education as a projection of an elite group of reformers and schoolmen.

The site of this study – Somerville, Massachusetts – evolved from a farming district into a commuter “streetcar suburb” of Boston between 1800 and 1930. It was a “zone of emergence” for mobile natives and immigrants who migrated from the central city by following the street railway lines to new homes. Somerville also grew from a heavy influx of immigrants from northern New England, Canada, Great Britain, northwestern Europe, and Ireland, who sought better living and working conditions in the American city.

Somerville had one of the highest and fastest growing high school attendance rates of the ten largest cities in Massachusetts in 1910. It is a logical choice as a historical laboratory for identifying the social, economic, and cultural forces that produced the first expansion in high school attendance at the turn of the century, when secondary schooling was popularized among the middle class and the upper working class.

Somerville offers unique advantages for the comparative study of the relationship between social structure and education because of the rich historiography of its locality. The development of the social structure of metropolitan Boston has been closely examined by Oscar Handlin, Stephan Thernstrom, Sam B. Warner, Jr., Elizabeth H. Pleck, and Peter R. Knights,⁹ and the evolution of public schooling in this area has been explored by Michael B. Katz, Stanley K. Schultz, Mar-

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vin Lazerson, Carl F. Kaestle, and Maris A. Vinovskis.¹⁰ These studies have reconstructed a broad historical context of urbanization and educational innovation against which the social impact of the high school in Somerville can be gauged.

Statistical data drawn from the U. S. federal census, the Massachusetts state census, and student records are used to reconstruct group behavior and patterns in the social structure. The conclusions reported here were reached with tentativeness and circumspection. Above all, this volume must be seen as an exploratory study. Undoubtedly, other researchers will refine the methods and interpretations presented here. Finally, this work is not designed to build models for social policy. Rather its purpose is simply to show that the historical significance of the American high school lay in how students and parents made it part of their lives in an urban milieu.

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When George O. Brastow took the oath as first Mayor of the newly chartered City of Somerville in 1872, he crowned an Algeresque career that coursed this Boston suburb's avenues to business success and political power.¹ The highest honor of the community he helped found in 1842 as a selectmen-run town went to the former country lad from the Massachusetts village of Wrentham. Brastow had risen an entrepreneur in Somerville's residential real estate boom and a Whig leader elected one of the town's first selectmen and school committeemen. Service in the Civil War interrupted his public career, but Brastow returned as a hero. The ambitious booster climbed to loftier heights as a Republican in state politics, winning terms as representative and senator, and serving as president of the Senate before his installation as mayor.²

In his inaugural speech, the sixty-one-year-old civic patriarch looked back fondly on Somerville's "small and humble" childhood as a rural district of Charlestown that was partitioned into a township in 1842. He catalogued the streets, railways, water and sewer lines, fire and police departments: the ligatures developed by the vigorous growth of the suburban population. Above all, Brastow placed the public schools at the forefront of the civic accomplishments he unfurled before his rapt audience. The public schools, proclaimed Brastow, always served as the advance agents of "progress in wealth and population." He praised the wisdom of his fellow citizens, who made Somerville highest among all Massachusetts towns in school expenditure per pupil for several years. Casting his eyes toward a glowing future for the city, the new mayor proclaimed that Somerville would continue to attract newcomers as long as "the high character of our schools" was sustained. Brastow pledged that his administration would do its utmost to keep the schools from receding "from their present high position."³

The citizens who heard their mayor's confident words knew from Somerville's short history that this formula had worked and could serve as an agenda for future prosperity. Somerville's emergence as a focal point for Boston's metropolitan growth was due to the development of a middle-income housing market concerted with a disci-

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plined sponsorship of a public school system. Opportunistic boosters such as George Brastow had coordinated these two factors to transform a farming village into a middle-class zone of urban growth.

The process of suburban development

When the new town of Somerville was formed in 1842,⁴ it became the youngest child of Charlestown, “that honored ancestor” of the communities fanning out along the Mystic River Valley in eastern Massachusetts. Settlers had filled the valley’s hilly farmlands since colonial times, carving out Woburn, Stoneham, Winchester, Burlington, Malden, Everett, Medford, and Arlington from Charlestown’s ample bounds that once covered the entire region.⁵ The west district of Charlestown that became Somerville, called by colonials “Beyond the Neck,” had been a sleepy countryside occupied by a handful of dairy farmers.⁶ At the time of its incorporation as Somerville it was still a sparsely populated hinterland containing fewer than 200 dwellings.⁷ The most notable feature of the infant town was the McLean Asylum for the Insane established there by the Massachusetts General Hospital.⁸

In the half century since the Revolutionary War, however, the sprouting of cities and manufactories in Massachusetts had gradually altered the character of West Charlestown’s economy.⁹ As Boston builders shifted from wood to brick structures to shelter its swelling population, brickyards sprang up in west Charlestown where the soil contained both superior clay and sand. For years brickmaking flourished as the chief industry of the district, as the kilns “smoked the days and illumined the nights.”¹⁰ Livestock raising and dairy farming also expanded, for the multiplying inhabitants of Boston and its spreading suburbs required more food supplies. Capitalizing on the development of textile and manufacturing in nearby towns such as Waltham and Lowell, entrepreneurs established a bleachery in 1821 that in 1845 employed 37 hands who processed \$315,000 in cotton goods.¹¹ Other businessmen opened a pottery plant, a grist mill, a distillery, a cordage manufactory, and a spike works in west Charlestown.¹² A historian of the region has identified it as part of Boston’s vital “fringe economy,” “an array of specialized village economies” in “scattered centers” marked by “the absence of dense settlement, the fuzziness of boundaries, the bucolic appearance of the landscape.”¹³

The district’s residents watched the first trains steam from the farms into Boston in 1835, when the Lowell railroad line was pushed through their pastures.¹⁴ Many who wished to preserve the rural character of

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the region opposed the railroad, which gobbled up a large swath of land spanning the town and pockmarked it with station depots. The next year, however, another railroad, the Charlestown line, laid down its tracks. Later incorporated as the Fitchburg Railroad Company, its cars carried ice to the piers of Charlestown for transshipment to sweltering ports around the world. The inhabitants of west Charlestown discovered quickly that the locomotive brought a large flow of commerce into their neighborhood that accelerated the pace of economic growth.¹⁵

Businessmen and clerks came to work in the offices along the tracks, while laborers from Ireland and British Canada flocked to the brickyards and railyards.¹⁶ The sons of farmers from depressed rural areas of northern New England drifted toward west Charlestown in search of employment.¹⁷ Population mounted and a sense of local interest intensified. Gradually, the people of west Charlestown began to see themselves as a separate community, but social tensions arose within. Protestant workers resented the unfamiliar Irish immigrants who moved from the center of Charlestown to crowd into their neighborhood. Resentment turned into furious violence when in 1834 they burned the Ursuline Convent near their homes. They had eyed the convent as a symbol of encroaching papism and the competition of Celtic laborers.¹⁸

West Charlestown was beginning to feel the tug of forces that were bursting the ancient fabric of Anglo-Saxon society in Massachusetts. The economy that appeared to rest securely on the cargo-filled traders sailed by New England merchants around the world¹⁹ was toppled by the contraction of Boston's hinterland market and the surpassing growth of rival entrepôts in New York City and Philadelphia.²⁰ The merchants shifted their enormous capital out of the collapsing sphere of commerce to reinvest in industry, railroads, and canals. The textile factories of Haverhill, Lowell, Waltham, and Fall River, empowered by \$100,000,000 of Boston finance capital,²¹ drew young farmwomen to operate the looms who were replaced later by immigrants from British Canada and Ireland.²² The spiraling demand for labor welcomed the arrival of the famine-starved Irish immigrant. In Charlestown itself, from 1830 to 1850, the flood of foreigners entering the city, composed mainly of Irish newcomers, grew almost nineteenfold.²³ Population doubled in Charlestown, in that period, from 8,783 to 17,216.²⁴ West Charlestown was a rural island encircled by surging waves of industrial expansion and urban migration.

Charlestown was polarized by social change into two different communities: The eastern half resembled a neighborhood of Boston and the western half remained mostly rural. Many Bostonians streamed

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over the Charles River Bridge into east Charlestown to take advantage of rents there that were half the price asked in Boston.²⁵ The building of the toll-free Warren Bridge linking east Charlestown and Boston hastened settlement.²⁶ That urban district, integrated with the social life of the sprawling metropolis, seemed increasingly alien to the people of west Charlestown.²⁷ After 1820, the wealthiest property holders among the outlanders, feeling they received inferior services and aiming to initiate real estate and industrial development, agitated for separation. When they gained incorporation as the new town of Somerville, in 1842, the delighted inhabitants celebrated with a festive banquet graced by dancing and saluted by cannon fire.²⁸

The township contained four square miles of hilly land with few improvements. The handful of schools Charlestown had supported were dilapidated; the roads suffered from years of neglect.²⁹ Not even a meetinghouse or church stood within the town's boundaries.³⁰ In colonial times, the founding of a parish usually was the precondition for the emergence of a new town, but Somerville lacked a religious institution to serve as the formative nucleus of community life.

Somerville was an overspill of the spreading metropolitan population with no coherent social form. What all Somerville residents had shared, however, was a desire to attain their own municipal status separate from Charlestown and neighboring communities. They resisted the political gravity of Boston that was pulling Brighton, Charlestown, Roxbury, and West Roxbury into its municipal boundaries.³¹

Like these towns, however, Somerville contained the potential to grow into a mixed community of commuters and locally employed workingmen. It lay within the "pre-streetcar metropolis," two to three miles from Boston, which could easily be linked to the city by commuter transport. Also, like the other towns outlying Boston, Somerville afforded inviting opportunities to venturesome capitalists as a site for manufacturing and commercial activity.³²

When Somerville was incorporated in 1842, the townspeople were employed in farming, brickmaking, and commerce. But "new times demand new manners and new men," announced advertisements placed in Boston newspapers by Somerville promoters wishing to attract laborers, mechanics, and businessmen to the infant town.³³ In 1845, entrepreneurs operated three cordage manufactories, a tin works, and a paint manufactory.³⁴ A line of the Boston and Maine Railroad joined Somerville with Boston in that year, giving Somerville two railroad linkages with the city. The capacious transport facilities of the town lured new industries. By 1855, several more manufacturing enterprises boosted the output of finished products pouring from So-

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merville. Two rolling mills churned out sheets of iron; a plant fashioned steam engines and boilers; a foundry produced thousands of brass tubes; and a glass factory employing 100 workers made window panes for the buildings spreading across the metropolitan area. From 1845 to 1855, the old bleachery increased its cloth output by fivefold and doubled its work force.³⁵ The Commonwealth's policy of granting general incorporation helped industrialists penetrate the field of enterprise.³⁶

As industries multiplied, the production of Somerville's chief agricultural goods slackened. Five thousand seven hundred bushels of potatoes were harvested in 1845, but only 1,400 bushels were gathered in 1855; hay production in those years dwindled from 985 tons to 630 tons. Brickmaking also tapered off from 27,566,000 bricks produced in 1845 to 17,000,000 bricks in 1855. Brickmaking employed 349 men in 1845, but engaged only 220 hands ten years later.³⁷ The fields and brickyards of Somerville gradually gave way to looming factory buildings and belching smokestacks.

The influx of newcomers seeking business opportunities was quickened by the growing industries, and also by the development in 1854 of commuter travel by hourly steam car to Boston.³⁸ In 1857, the Somerville Horse Railroad Company began service that carried passengers to main junctions in Somerville.³⁹

The rush of settlement forced the town's population upward at dizzying speed. From a rural village of 1,013 in 1842, its population climbed to 3,540 in 1850, to 8,025 in 1860, and to 14,685 in 1870.⁴⁰ In three decades, Somerville's population multiplied by over fourteenfold. As the newcomers filled to capacity the town's available dwelling places, a wave of housing construction mounted. Land held for generations by a single family began to change hands regularly. The Massachusetts industrial census of 1855 reported that in the past ten years, "a large part of the farms in this town have been cut up into house and building lots."⁴¹

The town's valuation was boosted by the rise of population and the construction of new buildings. From \$988,513 in 1842, the town's valuation leaped to \$2,102,631 in 1850, \$6,033,053 in 1860, and \$15,775,000 in 1870.⁴² With abundant unimproved land situated next to Boston and surrounding suburbs, the potential for housing development seemed limitless. Farmers holding large tracts, such as the Tufts family, began to speculate in real estate, as they realized the future of Somerville lay in residential development.⁴³

With the advent of the building boom, the town government initiated physical improvements to make Somerville an attractive alternative to life in the central city. The Charlestown Gas Company ex-

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Table 1.1. *Country of origin of Somerville's population, 1855, 1865*

	1855		1865	
	N	%	N	%
United States	4,171	72	7,050	75
English Canada	160	3	221	2
Ireland	1,305	22	1,729	18
England, Scotland, Wales	128	2	258	3
Germany and Holland	27	—	41	—
France	8	—	8	—
Italy	2	—	1	—
Other countries	5	—	32	—
Unknown	0	—	13	—
Total	5,806		9,353	

Sources: [Nathaniel B. Shurtleff], *Abstract of the Census of . . . Massachusetts . . . 1855 . . .* (Boston, 1857), pp. 118–19, Oliver Warner, *Abstract of the Census of Massachusetts, 1865 . . .* (Boston, 1867), pp. 72–3.

tended its pipes into Somerville in the 1850s, bringing convenient lighting to every part of the town.⁴⁴ The dependence of residents on wells ended in 1866, when arrangements were made with Charlestown to supply water from Mystic Lake.⁴⁵ Open drainage courses disappeared as the town undertook the construction of an extensive sewer network.⁴⁶

A beckoning suburb with inexpensive homes and thriving manufactures was spreading next to Boston. The town attracted newcomers from several foreign lands, especially Ireland, Great Britain, and English Canada, who toiled in the brickyards, the railyards, the factories, and the construction sites. In 1855, 1,305 Irish immigrants lived in Somerville, comprising 22 percent of the population; by 1865, 1,729 Irish immigrants made up 18 percent of the town's population (Table 1.1). Migratory laborers from Nova Scotia and Newfoundland boarded with families, while Scottish and Welsh artisans set up their own households.⁴⁷ Only a handful of blacks established residence in Somerville from 1850 to 1870.⁴⁸

The majority of newcomers, however, came from other parts of Massachusetts and neighboring states. Thirty-three percent of all adults in Somerville had come from other Massachusetts towns by 1875, and 26 percent had migrated from other states, chiefly from Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont.⁴⁹ Other arrivals were mobile craftsmen and white-collar workers who escaped from crowded Boston neighborhoods to build homes on the green hills of Somerville. From there, it

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was a short commute to shops, factories, and offices in the metropolis.

The bulk of Somerville's population growth was produced by the arrival of immigrants and natives from outside the town. By 1875, these people accounted for 85 percent of the population increase since incorporation. Natural increase generated a fraction of population growth and reflected different rates of childbirth between native and foreign-born mothers. Whereas native mothers gave birth an average of 3 times each from 1855 to 1865, immigrant mothers each gave birth almost 5 times.⁵⁰ The immigrants of Somerville, due to the coming of the "famine Irish," comprised a quarter of the town by 1865⁵¹ and were reproducing faster than the natives; but this natural increase was restrained by their high susceptibility to disease and devastating infant mortality.⁵²

The family was the basic unit of habitation in the industrializing town. Newcomers frequently arrived as married couples; many came with two or more children. The gender ratio was nearly balanced in 1850 and 1860, reflecting the preponderance of conjugal units in the population.⁵³ The newcomers found Somerville a place where children could be raised in pleasant surroundings, away from the disease and disorders of the great city. Also, they were still within a short ride on the railroad or street railway to office or factory. Somerville was a hospitable setting for middle-class family life. A town of families also was a town of children: In 1865, 3,297 of the town's 9,353 inhabitants were under fifteen years of age.⁵⁴

Household structure in 1850 varied according to property wealth and the occupation of the head of the family (Table 1.2)⁵⁵. Households headed by white-collar workers often contained more children than those headed by manually employed fathers. White-collar households also had the most servants and boarders, but few resident relatives. High-white-collar families owned several thousand dollars in property; they had ample resources to support many children and a servant staff.⁵⁶ Manual workers' households had fewer children, and often included relatives and boarders to generate income since they had little property and low wages.

At midcentury, household structure shifted unevenly into a gradual decline in size and complexity. From 1850 to 1860, in every occupational group, the average number of children shrank. White-collar households increased their servants and boarders, but workingmen's families reduced the numbers of resident relatives, servants, and boarders. The households of unskilled Irish laborers shrank in all components: They had fewer children and took in fewer boarders and relatives by 1860 (Table 1.3).