



Age Norms  
and Intercultural  
Interaction in Colonial  
North America



JASON EDEN AND NAOMI EDEN



"Jason Eden and Naomi Eden expand the intellectual domain of age studies in their important, revisionist study of the varieties of (old) age in colonial North America. Not only do they compare the age-based status of tribal elders to conditions among the young and middle-aged in Native American communities, but they also explore the ways that age norms affected perspectives and relations across racial, ethnic, and gender lines." —**W. Andrew Achenbaum**, University of Houston

"This is a timely and compelling book on an unfairly neglected subject—the importance of age as a category of analysis. This insightful and novel work combines both extremes of the life course: old age and youth. Jason Eden and Naomi Eden's work epitomizes the benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration in awakening important new historical insights. This wide-sweeping consideration of the intersection of biological realities with cultural preoccupations about youth and old age across racial and power differences shows us the complicated early America we too often forget." —**Rebecca Brannon**, James Madison University

"*Age Norms and Intercultural Interaction in Colonial North America* offers compelling evidence for the authors' claim that age matters as a historical category of analysis. The work is ambitious in scope and employs creative use of source material to successfully describe how Native Americans, enslaved Africans, and colonial Europeans were treated because of their age, and how that treatment mattered as the three groups forged a new world together. This book's accessible language and straightforward organization make it an important reference for students and scholars alike."

—**Kristen Lashua**, Vanguard University

This interdisciplinary study examines how age norms shaped the experiences of Europeans, Native Americans, and African Americans in colonial North America. Jason Eden and Naomi Eden explore how diverse population groups conceptualized the human life course and how they adhered to culturally specific sets of beliefs about the young and old. By utilizing evidence drawn from a variety of secondary and primary sources, the authors also show that, as various cultural groups interacted in colonial North America, their views of specific age cohorts evolved and clashed in important ways.

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# Age Norms and Intercultural Interaction in Colonial North America



# Acknowledgments

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Several authors, teachers, and mentors triggered and sharpened our interest in the subject of human aging. I (Jason) began to think seriously about age as a historical category of analysis when I was a graduate student at Northeastern University. In a class titled "American Education in Historical Perspective," Dr. Anthony Penna introduced me to the importance of age categories in United States History and helped me better understand how rigid approaches to age and education contributed to my own frustrating experiences as a child in school. Later, while earning my doctorate in History at the University of Minnesota, I (Jason) further honed my thoughts about age while enrolled in graduate seminars led by Dr. Sara Evans and Dr. Jean O'Brien. Studying the lives of diverse populations of older women led me to critically assess how age, as well as race and gender, shaped their experiences. For me (Naomi), age became increasingly important as a subject of study when I enrolled in the Gerontology graduate program at Saint Cloud State University. Dr. Rona Karasik and Dr. Phyllis Greenberg introduced me (Naomi), and ultimately both of us, to a dynamic and ever-growing body of secondary literature in this important interdisciplinary field. Many of these books and articles have found their way into our consciousness, as well as



our citations, and our approach to history would be radically different without them. While earning my (Naomi) second master's degree, this time in Marriage and Family Therapy at Saint Cloud State, I learned about how traumatic experiences, family systems, and childrearing practices can profoundly shape the human lifecourse. As a licensed therapist who has worked with a variety of clients, my clinical practice and historical research have informed and shaped one another in deep and significant ways. I owe my supervisors and clients a debt of thanks for these experiences.

On a somewhat more practical level, participants at various workshops and conferences improved our work on this subject. These include a conference held in 2007 at Seattle University, titled "Intersections of Race and Gender: (Re)Imagining the Family"; a conference held in 2010 at Boston College, titled "Global Religious Exchanges: The Biennial Boston College Conference on the History of Religion"; and the 2015 Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians, which was titled "Taboos." The Early Modern Atlantic Studies Workshop, held at the University of Minnesota, also provided crucial feedback at several stages of the project. Dr. Kirsten Fischer, Dr. Katherine Gerbner, Dr. Sarah Chambers, Dr. Edward Griffin, Demetri Debe, and Joanne Jahnke Wegner all offered extremely helpful commentary on portions of this book. Brian Hill, Eric Kuntzman, Chris Fischer, an anonymous reviewer, and editorial staff at Lexington Books provided encouragement, guidance, and feedback as well. This is our first book, and it is a collaborative and interdisciplinary project, so I am sure we tested their patience at times with our questions and naiveté, but we hope that the final product has been worth it.

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# Introduction

In colonial North America, long before European elites began articulating precise ideas about racial difference, they developed specific notions about the capabilities and tendencies of humans belonging to particular age groups. Children, youths, and older adults received special attention as groups possessing certain characteristics. Children were supposedly rebellious, but also uniquely capable of learning. Youths were in the “prime of life” but were prone to sexual sin, drunkenness, and recklessness. Older adults were wise but also frail, senile, stubborn, and peevish. Supposedly, these age cohorts were different than “normal” adults. In addition to facing ostracism, members of these age groups lost or received various opportunities and legal rights simply because of their age. The sad truth of the matter is that many, if not most, Americans today share such age-based assumptions and stereotypes and they readily, without much introspection, also accept age-based discrimination. Today, social scientists define these sorts of beliefs and policies as “ageist.”

Age-based assumptions and policies remain pervasive in the United States today. They are so ingrained into the culture and institutions of the country, in fact, that few Americans question or challenge them. Americans accept that their society denies people opportunities and rights solely because of their chronological age. This is true even though a person’s age often has little relation to their actual moral character or ability.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of aptitude or individual merit, a person must be sixteen years old to drive, eighteen years old to vote, twenty-one to drink, and thirty-five to be eligible for election as president of the United States. Government agencies often require overwhelming evidence before allowing persons under eighteen to be emancipated from abusive parents. The federal government offers everyone over the age of sixty-five, regardless of their wealth or physical well-being, finan-



cial payouts in the form of Social Security checks. While using age as an indicator of ability or need might make American society more efficient in some respects, it also promotes a high degree of injustice. Why do Americans accept this? How did it come to be that a supposedly meritocratic society so readily accepts the sometimes arbitrary use of age as a determining factor when offering its rights and rewards to citizens? Furthermore, how is it that Americans have attempted to collectively discard arbitrary discrimination based upon race or sex, but continue to embrace or ignore ageism?

This book finds many of the answers to the above questions in the early history of what would become the United States. From the time when Europeans first landed, age-based assumptions have been a central part of American thinking. Preconceived notions about children, youth, and older adults—age cohorts often treated in a way as to set them apart as “other” or abnormal—led the first American colonists to develop age-based laws and customs that have survived to the present day. Throughout colonial documents there is abundant evidence that Europeans held numerous—and often negative—assumptions about children, youths, and older adults. The documents also show that Europeans used these assumptions when making economic and political decisions. Furthermore, age-based stereotypes affected not only European colonists. Native Americans and African Americans—groups who often had their own quite independent age norms—confronted European age-based assumptions in early North America as well.

Even as the United States currently faces numerous age-related challenges, including the budgetary ones associated with age-based entitlement programs, historians have been relatively slow to examine age as a category of analysis. There has been some interest in the historical experiences of children and youth, spurned by Philippe Aries’s path-breaking book, *Centuries of Childhood*. The number of studies on age-related issues is small, however, when compared to the level of interest in race, gender, and other topics.<sup>2</sup> Much of the literature dealing with age norms in early America has focused upon the extent to which European children occupied a special place in the hearts and minds of colonial Americans. Aries argued that, in pre-modern France, parents and caregivers viewed children as “miniature adults” rather than as a special group deserving of a particular type of care. The current consensus is that, in early America at least, this was not the case and European children did, in fact, have a special status. However, while much of the scholarship on colonial children focuses upon the positive benefits that resulted from adults viewing children as special persons, this study examines the ways in which early Americans, at times, denied children and youths rights or opportunities solely or mainly because of their age.<sup>3</sup> This study also examines how age-based assumptions affected Native American and African American children and youths, a subject largely ignored by other authors.<sup>4</sup>

While scholars have devoted a fair amount of attention to the experiences of children and youths in early America, the experiences of older adults remain woefully underanalyzed. During the 1970s, there was a burst of important work on old age in colonial New England, but this scholarship tended to focus almost exclusively upon European men. Authors, such as David Hackett Fischer and Andrew Achenbaum, found that Americans viewed older persons with veneration early in American history, but that over time this appreciation of old age disappeared. This perspective became known as modernization theory, and it suggested that, in agricultural societies, older men controlled access to the land and secured a privileged and respected position as a result. Commercialization and industrialization, however, both of which valued speed and efficiency more than control of the land, supposedly led to the development of negative views of older persons and a celebration of youth.<sup>5</sup> More recently, a few authors, including those who have studied European women's experiences in early America, have found that the situation was more complex. Historians have found that older women, as well as poor older men, faced numerous obstacles and negative perceptions in early America, long before industrialization. Even wealthy older men dealt with some types of ageism, including resentment-fueled claims among land-hungry youths that old people were stubborn, cranky, and unwilling to yield their claims to the land. Consequently, scholars have challenged modernization theory on numerous fronts. Likewise, this study finds that age-based suppositions plagued older European adults in early America, both rich and poor, in numerous ways.<sup>6</sup>

While older Europeans have received some attention from historians, there has been almost nothing written specifically about the experiences of older Native Americans and African Americans in early America.<sup>7</sup> The small amount of work that has been done is often ancillary to broader studies of slavery or families. The few conclusions hidden in the secondary literature consequently remain unconnected to a larger analysis of age norms in the general population. Race, not age, has been the central focus of scholarship on African Americans and Native Americans. This study includes race as an essential factor in its analysis but places its main emphasis upon age norms. In addition to incorporating and reanalyzing the findings of other scholars on this topic, this study will also draw its own conclusions from primary documents about how age-based suppositions affected older Indians and African Americans. Hopefully, this will deepen a long-neglected area of scholarly inquiry that is of contemporary significance as America's diverse population enters its older years. Scholars have either ignored these issues or underemphasized their relevance for understanding the whole of early American history.

Even though available sources are limited, due both to a scarcity of documentary evidence and to the bias of European authors, our research has

revealed much about how Native Americans and African Americans experienced the aging process. For one thing, our study indicates that many, although certainly not all, Native Americans and African Americans were aware of their chronological age. Although their level of awareness varied in terms of its precision, age shaped the experiences of Indian and African American children, youth, and older adults in important ways. One important, if somewhat unsurprising, finding is that the age-based assumptions of colonial officials at times exacerbated the struggles of Africans and Indians in North America. A form of "double-jeopardy" existed in certain situations, and younger and older members of marginalized groups suffered particular injustices due to pernicious combinations of racial status and age. At the same time, as was true in regard to gender norms and other issues frequently studied by scholars, African Americans and Native Americans selectively accommodated or resisted the attempted imposition of European age norms. Even as perceptions of age could change in early North America, there was a remarkable degree of persistence regarding views of children, youth, and older adults, even in the face of considerable pressure to align with European expectations. Furthermore, colonists were surprised, and even at times amazed, by the age norms of Indians and African Americans, and those in positions of power at times accommodated the age preferences of others. In other words, there were examples of cultural negotiation in regard to age norms, with Europeans, as well as Native Americans and African Americans, demonstrating some flexibility in regard to both beliefs and behavior. We provide detailed analysis and evidence of these changes in subsequent chapters.

It might be legitimate to question why this study examines age norms in terms of their effects upon both young and old age cohorts, when so many people, including some scholars, tend to see ageism and age discrimination as issues only affecting older adults.<sup>8</sup> Given the historical reality that people in a variety of age cohorts, especially the young and the old, have struggled against various assumptions and perceptions, we would argue that it is helpful to study age norms as they affected a variety of age groups. Furthermore, while there is some scholarship that assumes ageism to be mainly an older person's issue, increasing numbers of social scientists in the burgeoning, interdisciplinary field of gerontology have advocated for an examination of aging across the human lifespan. More precisely, several scholars, when defining ageism, have shed an exclusive focus on older adults and have examined ageism's effects on other age groups as well.<sup>9</sup> Social scientists use the phrase "life course perspective" to describe this holistic approach to the study of aging. This study will follow their lead by examining how age-based assumptions affected children, youths, and older adults during the colonial period.

In addition to incorporating a life course perspective, this study will, like other scholarship, examine both the positive and negative types of age-based stereotypes that have existed. Negative ageism refers to derogatory stereotypes people have regarding persons of a certain age. For example, there is the belief that older persons are easily confused or frail or the notion that youths are irresponsible and reckless. These beliefs have shaped policies and behavior in various ways.<sup>10</sup> Another type of ageism is positive ageism. This involves assuming that people of a certain age are particularly adept or capable of certain tasks. This has created a burden of unfair expectations for others.<sup>11</sup> Whether positive or negative, ageism promotes inaccurate stereotyping and leads to injustice. As this study shows, both positive and negative beliefs about children, youths, and older adults shaped the early history of North America.

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Chapter 1 explores age norms within various Native American tribes who lived in eastern North America prior to 1492. The chapter addresses three age cohorts: children, youth, and older adults. This section goes beyond the often touted idea of “elders were respected” and explores how age, though measured, was not the only determiner of someone’s role or place within their tribe. We examine parenting techniques for children, the challenges and rituals common for youth, and the way accomplishments were important for elders’ status. We uncover different cultural norms about aging that will, among other things, assist readers in thinking afresh about age norms, development, and how societies conceptualize, ritualize and conform to or resist such norms.

Through an examination of the Southern Colonies in chapter 2, we highlight the importance of age demographics, which differed vastly from North America’s population today. Here, like in many chapters to come, we look at childhood, youth, and old age in historical and cultural terms. We discuss topics such as childhood sickness, work and discipline, the importance of marriage in establishing oneself as an adult, and the harsh physical attractiveness evaluations some older women received from their male contemporaries. Due to the sparsity of primary documents from this early time frame, the voice of elite men populates this chapter and the age norms of this era, even as this voice was intertwined with religious and cultural norms of the Europeans who colonized this region.

Religion, specifically Puritanism, comes to the forefront in chapter 3, which deals with age norms among the colonists in the New England region. Like other chapters, it examines gender differences in age expectations for the children in the colonies for work and play, rites of passage, and stereo-



types. We explore the numerous complexities of age norms throughout the developmental life course and uncover factors influencing the overall healthfulness (when compared to other colonies) of this colony. Puritan sermons, court records, and letters form the bulk of the source material and paint a picture of the complexities involved in forming age norms at a time when the European settlers both held on to and created new standards for living.

Through a variety of sources, including court cases and a grandmother's diary, an interesting picture of the nuances of age development in the Middle Colonies emerges in chapter 4. Quakerism had a profound influence on age norms for all stages of life in this region, from infancy to the grave. We address differences in educational ideals, power and discipline norms, familial ties, marriage and inheritance, remarriage after death, as well as the worth and value of a child's testimony. These colonies stand out for their heightened sense of egalitarian ideals, their close, and at times closed kinship networks, as well as their debates about education and discipline of children.

Chapter 5 further delineates the cultural differences between the English and the various Native American tribes as it explores cultural encounters via the lens of age norms and human developmental trajectories. We explore differing values about infants, child discipline, age and educability, age and vigor and strength, as well as age and sexuality and morality. We can see times when cultural accommodation occurred, times when one group reluctantly acquiesced to the other, and examples of groups resolutely holding onto their traditions and ideas, sometimes with perilous results. Age norms among European colonists and Native Americans shaped and were shaped by these interactions throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The graphic and heart wrenching realities of slavery in early North America are especially poignant when coupled with a developmental perspective in chapter 6. Here we see how age could be an insulative or an exacerbative factor for slaves, and we explore the traumatic lifestyles and incidents of young and old alike. When human beings became viewed as economic commodities, age-based ideas and stereotypes became more exaggerated and, at times, more brutal in their implications. Among other issues, this chapter examines what happened when a dominating group's age norms intermingled with the system of power, abuse, racial prejudice, and economics that was slavery in the colonial era.

At its core, this study focuses upon the early history of a developing American mind-set. Namely, an emerging idea that being an adult meant possessing certain attributes and to be younger or older was to possess different characteristics and abilities. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in their sermons, letters, and literature, Americans set forth a set of assumptions about children, youths, and older adults. Early Americans implemented these age-based beliefs in a variety of ways, through their laws, policies, and behavior. Age-based stereotypes shaped and continue to shape