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American Child Bride

*A History of Minors and Marriage
in the United States*

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Introduction

When Susie King Taylor published her 1902 memoir, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, narrating the story of her escape from slavery and subsequent service as a nurse during the Civil War, the book made little mention of her 1862 marriage. Susie Baker, as she was then called, had been fourteen when she wed Edward King, a soldier in the unit alongside which she served on Saint Simon's Island, Georgia, then occupied by Union forces. Taylor's age readers must intuit for themselves by reading forward from the year of her birth, provided at the beginning of the book. And perhaps it is unsurprising that Taylor does not focus on her marriage or her age at the time of that marriage; the autobiography's chief purpose was to highlight the service of African Americans at a time when many were celebrating memories of the Civil War and erasing the history of slavery (and of black Union soldiers). Her marriage was incidental to this story. But it is also the case that marrying at the age of fourteen was not at all uncommon for a newly freed girl like Susie Baker, or indeed for many others throughout the nation in the middle of the nineteenth century. Susie King Taylor may well have glossed over her youthful marriage because it simply was not noteworthy in 1862 or in 1902.¹

By contrast, when country star Loretta Lynn published her autobiography, *Coalminer's Daughter*, in 1976, the story of her marriage at thirteen was one of the book's central episodes, as it was in the narrative of her life in country music. Indeed, in Lynn's own words, her early marriage was part of what characterized her home, Butcher Holler, Kentucky, as being in "the most backward part of the United States." The early marriage would also feature prominently in the subsequent 1980 film, for which Sissy Spacek won an Academy Award.

By the late twentieth century many Americans perceived early marriage as being both uncommon and backward, something that might have happened long ago in the wilds of Appalachia, but surely not elsewhere in the United States. Lynn capitalized on her early marriage to appear as “country” as possible. The autobiography is written in a folksy, down-home dialect; it was how she marketed herself as genuine. In fact, it turns out that in talking about her marriage (in the autobiography and elsewhere), Lynn had misrepresented her age. Reporters for the Associated Press revealed in 2012 that Lynn had lied about the date of her marriage and thus her age at the time of that marriage: she had been fifteen, not thirteen. Contemporary readers may think the difference inconsequential (she was still plenty young, after all), and Lynn may well have lied in order to appear younger now (not then), necessitating a backdating of the marriage. The fact remains, however, that her early marriage was remarkable and in many people’s minds characteristic of a particular place: the poor and rural South. This was not inaccurate, but neither was it the whole story.²

This book tells two interrelated narratives: the first is about people in the United States, most of them far more ordinary than Susie King Taylor and Loretta Lynn, who married as minors, which is to say below the age of eighteen. And the second is of Americans’ perceptions of how and when marriage at early ages is appropriate or inappropriate. That latter story also means looking at when some adults have taken it upon themselves to regulate the marriage of young people by changing laws to prevent their marriages, reforming families to try to discourage the practice, or trying to annul their children’s marriages because of their age. Broadly speaking, then, this is a history of child marriage in the United States, a phenomenon that Americans tend to associate with other countries, places we usually perceive as backward or “third world” in part because they allow children to marry.

The marriage of legal children, in fact, has been relatively common throughout U.S. history. The U.S. Census Bureau did not link age with marital status till 1880, which makes national figures unavailable before that time. But in that year 11.7 percent of fifteen-to-nineteen-year-old girls were wives (the census did not specify exact age and marital status till 1910). That number dipped in 1890 and then increased incrementally through the 1920s to 12.6 percent in 1930. Youthful marriage decreased, as did the overall marriage rate, during the Great Depression. It then rose again dramatically after World War II but has been declining since the early 1960s. That said, people below the age of eighteen continue to marry to this day. A 2011 study published in the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics estimates that about 9 percent

of contemporary American women were married before they turned eighteen. Many of those women are now older, having married in the 1950s or 1960s, but they are not women of the distant past; they live among us today. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that the probability of marrying by age eighteen in the contemporary United States is 6 percent for women and 2 percent for men.³

If early marriage has been a part of everyday life for millions of Americans, why have we come to think about it as a bizarre exception to the rule? The answer lies within the history of childhood itself. In order to think it strange for a child to marry, we must see “childhood” as a stage of life separate from adulthood, cordoned off from adult rights and responsibilities. Although earlier Americans did recognize this, the precise line of when childhood ended and adulthood began was much fuzzier for them, emerging in something close to its current form only by the end of the nineteenth century. In part this was because both chronological age and our own ages—the numbers we call ourselves—were far less important to early Americans. Many people in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and indeed nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not know when they were born and had only vague understandings of how old they were. For many, precise ages were not an important part of their self-understanding. Marrying at younger ages in such a world would be far less noteworthy than it would be for us. But earlier Americans also reckoned age differently than we do. They did not believe, for instance, that there were particular ages at which a person should go to school (especially if there were no schools), start working, or get married. These things happened when a person was large enough or able enough or financially prepared enough, and those moments might come at different times for different people.⁴

For most of American history there was no distinction between the marriage of two minors or that between one party who was older (sometimes considerably so) and one who was younger. Once contracted, marriage has been, and largely remains, a one-size-fits-all institution. Culturally and socially, however, observers may react very differently to these phenomena, understanding the former as perhaps foolhardy, whereas the latter could be dangerous or exploitative. Contemporary observers may recoil when an older man marries a girl below the age of eighteen because they suspect him of pedophilia. Marriage, in this analysis, is simply a back door to that which is illegal outside of it, especially when divorce is widely available; the man can simply divorce the underage girl when he tires of her (or when she ages). These concerns are not invalid, but they were usually not shared by Americans before the twentieth century, who

were far more concerned that premarital sex led to the ruin of girls who would be unable to marry and might thus be destined for lives of prostitution. Before the 1920s, most people also did not share our understanding of pedophilia, the sexual predilection of some adults for children. Because of this, most objections to the marriage of girls (or boys) would not have been framed around the issue of sex or sexual exploitation. Instead, early critics of youthful marriage worried that it robbed girls of girlhood or that it might lead to divorce. Although I never dismiss the very real imbalance in power that characterized marriages with great age disparities, in this book I also explain why earlier Americans did not necessarily see this as a problem and offer historical context for how and when Americans came to see man-girl marriage as sexually suspect.

The phrase from the title of this book—“child bride”—is useful because it binds together two nouns that many think should be incompatible. It neatly conveys discomfort and disbelief rather than having to articulate those feelings explicitly. In the United States a child should not be a bride because we reserve the institution of marriage for adults, indeed demand adulthood for its fulfillment. Children who marry sacrifice their childhood and make a mockery of our understanding of marriage. But that has not always been the case. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the first printed instance of the phrase “child bride” in 1843; a search of American newspapers from the nineteenth century reveals its regular use beginning only in the 1870s and 1880s (the same is true of “child wife” and “boy husband,” two other phrases that once enjoyed some popularity). This was not because there were no children marrying before 1843. Rather, the practice was just not particularly remarkable.

The phrase “child bride” also perversely expresses the legal power of the institution of marriage, which really *can* transform a child into something adultlike, a bride. This was because earlier Americans had a functional, rather than a chronological, understanding of childhood. Before the middle of the nineteenth century, many Americans believed that marriage could transform a child into a wife who was legally and socially an adult because of marriage. Her marital status trumped her chronological age.⁵

In order for the phrase “child bride” to generate the reaction it implicitly demands, we need to believe two things. The first, as we have seen, is that children, defined through chronological age, are fundamentally ill-suited to marriage—that they are too young for what marriage requires of them, not just sex but also the emotional maturity to be spouses and perhaps parents. The second belief is that marriage, if not always a union of equals, is at the very least a partnership between people who can both be presumed to contribute to its

health in similar and complementary ways. Stephanie Coontz has memorably described the historical change in understanding the marital relationship as being a transition from “obedience to intimacy.” Both beliefs—about childhood as a stage of life and about marriage as a particular love relationship—developed relatively recently, beginning in the eighteenth century, starting first among the nascent middle class, and gaining widespread adherence by a majority of Americans only in the early twentieth century. Before the eighteenth century, children as young as eight or nine married in America, and children in their teenage years have been marrying in the United States since then. The practice is most common today in rural areas, where it remains hidden from most urban and suburban dwellers, who tend to assume that teenage marriage is a relic of the past.⁶

So why focus on child *brides*? In the vast majority of marriages where one party is a legal minor, that minor is a girl. The reasons for this have remained relatively consistent over time and reflect Americans’ concerns about female fertility and their belief that marriage is a gendered institution where females are dependent on males; youthful brides facilitate both ends. This remains the case today, when most marriages (between parties of any age) involve a man who is older than his bride, even if only by a couple of years. The marriage of girls became objectionable only when some Americans (at first only a small minority) began to believe that girls, like boys, deserved the opportunity to grow up and make the choice of a marital partner only after achieving adulthood. And when some came to believe that marriage was supposed to be a union of equals. Both changes in belief occurred haltingly over the nineteenth century. Without those beliefs, girl marriage is not particularly objectionable, largely because it so closely resembled the marriage of adult women throughout much of American history. The beliefs that make us see child marriage as repugnant (to girls *and* to marriage) themselves have a history, one that I tell in this book.⁷

It is also the case, however, that throughout American history, boys have generally had far fewer reasons to marry young than girls. Unlike men, women were largely defined through their marriages; opting for an appropriate mate early on in life might be the best chance a girl would have. With employment options for women few and pay generally dismal, marriage was often a way out of the natal home when no other escape existed. Boys and men experienced few of these advantages precisely because they were the ones expected to work for pay on reaching adulthood (or as a means of proving adulthood itself). For men, marriage represented an extra responsibility: the support of a wife and, in an era before reliable birth control, children. The imbalance between child brides and boy husbands is thus a reflection of cultural expectations for girls *and* boys.

Wives were expected to be dependents, husbands to be breadwinners. The first status has no age qualification; the latter generally does, because men needed either to inherit their father's estate or to establish themselves in some sort of job.

The growing revulsion over time against child marriage is also partially a story of perceived American exceptionalism and a belief in the onward march of "civilization." Since the early nineteenth century many Americans have believed that child marriage is practiced only in other places—India, Afghanistan, various African nations—or, if in the United States, only by religious sects where multiple girls are married to one older man against their will. These versions of child marriage—forced unions arranged by parents, sometimes the exchange of a dowry, brides below the age of twelve—are indeed different from what usually happens in the United States, where marrying girls have tended to be in their teens and have usually themselves made the decision to marry. But characterizing child marriage as foreign (whether nationally or religiously or both) also allows Americans to ignore youthful marriage in their midst. From early nineteenth-century reports by Christian missionaries in India to contemporary scandals over fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints in Colorado and Utah, Americans have represented youthful marriage as something practiced only by backward people who live elsewhere or deliberately flout the law if they live here.⁸

The truth is that many thousands of girls below the age of eighteen will marry legally in the United States this year. Almost all states have minimum marriageable ages below eighteen (with parental consent); many have various exceptions to their minimum marriageable ages that allow girls as young as fourteen to marry. In 2010, the U.S. Congress failed to pass the "International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act," and as of this writing the United States remains one of only two nations (Somalia is the other) not to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and one of seven not to have ratified the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, one plank of which explains that the marriage of a child below eighteen shall have no legal effect. If child marriage is a problem, it is our problem as well.⁹

And much of American resistance to outlawing youthful marriage altogether stems from attitudes toward sex. Throughout U.S. history Americans have supported a legal regime that codifies the belief that sex and childbirth belong within marriage, no matter the ages of the couple contracting it, even if, especially if, they have already had sex. Even as the United States has decriminalized sex outside of marriage (what used to be called fornication) and made illegitimacy largely meaningless as a legal category, American laws continue to promote the notion that sex and childbirth should occur within marriage,

even if those having sex are teenagers. Americans' acceptance of early marriage demonstrates their great faith, however misguided at times, in the powers of marriage, another consistent theme of this book. Throughout most of American history, marriage was seen as transformative. It made illicit sex licit. It legitimized offspring. Actions performed outside of marriage that were dangerous, debasing, or immoral were transformed into safe, respectable, and moral within marriage. But marriage exists only because human beings invented it and continue to believe in it. As Havelock Ellis observed in the early twentieth century, sexual intercourse "cannot become good and bad according as it is performed in or out of marriage. There is no magic efficacy in a few words pronounced by a priest or a government official." Yet for those who believe in it, this is *exactly* what marriage provides. I am not arguing that marriage is not real—clearly it is—but rather that its realness depends on continued belief in its existence, which is codified in the law. For people to be transformed by marriage, for sex to be legitimate in marriage, for women to be protected in marriage, one must believe that marriage does these things. Legal scholar Ariela Dubler refers to this constellation of beliefs as "the marriage cure." The marriage of legal minors strains those beliefs, and yet it remains legally valid. At key moments in the past when children married, it forced those around them to rethink what marriage could really do to and for the people who entered it. It made them confront the differences between their idea of marriage and the lived reality of actual husbands and wives. Almost everyone in these debates agreed that children were deserving of protection; how to ensure it was at issue.¹⁰

And for every person like Havelock Ellis who doubted the powers of marriage, there were many more who hoped to rehabilitate it. Reformers in the past who sought to combat the scourge of child marriage that they discovered in their midst were, as this book demonstrates, often at least as invested in "protecting" the institution of marriage as they were in advancing the cause of women or saving children from supposed harm. Campaigns about child marriage in the United States are inextricably bound up in fears about the fate of marriage as a supposed building block of society. As a group of social reformers from Cleveland who professed to be especially worried about children put it in 1926, allowing children to marry would "weaken and cheapen the institution of marriage itself." Amid the controversy over same-sex marriage, a look at the history of child marriage in the United States reveals much about our investment in marriage as an institution that we believe transforms the individuals who enter it, bestowing on them the mantle of full adult citizenship. Today's opponents of same-sex marriage may well be less distressed at what

married gay people actually gain through marriage (tax breaks and so forth) as what their married status symbolically grants them: the respect accorded to adult citizens. Historical struggles over child marriage reveal that marriage has always been about the privileges of adulthood, demonstrating the ways that the symbolic power of marriage continues to be a vehicle for discrimination against those who are unable, or choose not, to enter it.¹¹

The narrative of this book could be read as a triumphal march forward from a moment when children married because no one valued childhood and adult wives were treated like children anyway to one where we do not allow children to marry because we protect them and we understand the institution of marriage differently than early Americans did. There is some truth to this account, in part because the incidence of youthful marriage declined over the twentieth century (the 1950s excepted). Nevertheless, I hope to complicate this arc in a number of significant ways.

The first and most obvious fact obscured by such a narrative is that large numbers of American girls have married before turning eighteen well into the twenty-first century. Those who would congratulate themselves on successfully protecting American youth from marriage should think again. In the history of child protection that began with the early modern legal recognition that children were incapable of rational consent and should thus be protected from adult decisions and responsibilities, marriage remained an enormous exception to the rule. For most of American history, girls have been able to consent to the one contract that, for most of its history, was presumed to last a lifetime. This is because in most cases where a belief in a protected childhood has run up against fears of nonmarital sex, preventing illegitimacy and sex by single girls has trumped childhood. State law has codified the belief that the institution of marriage can “solve” the problem of teenage sex and pregnancy.¹²

Second, the long and varied history of children marrying, indeed the explicit sanctions for the practice throughout most of American history, demonstrate that it is difficult to find just one “traditional” marriage to which nostalgic defenders of the institution would have us return. It is not just that girls as young as twelve could marry within the bounds of the law in the recent past, a practice to which most of us would not want to return. It is also that the incidence of youthful marriage has itself *not* been on a slow and steady decline from the colonial era to the present. Indeed, it saw one of its great revitalizations during the 1950s. Although there are real and persistent changes in marriage over time, there are also variations that defy our expectations. So not

only are those who espouse the triumphal story of marital progress partially incorrect, so too are those who embrace a narrative of marital declension: it is simply not the case that marriage once existed in only one form that has now been adulterated by feminism and interracial and same-sex marriage.

Last, although readers may find it difficult to think about youthful marriage as anything other than exploitation, historically many children saw real advantages in the institution. It was one of the few ways that they could escape their parents' homes if they so desired. Most state law and most judges in those states held that it legally emancipated them from their parents. Marriage also legalized the sex that young people might want to have with each other or that young girls might have with their older husbands, exempting those husbands from prosecution for statutory rape. Marriage went a long way toward legally turning children into adults, and depending on the situation they found themselves in, this was an appealing prospect for many youth. None of these claims is without its counterargument, of course (all of which I explore), but seen from the perspective of children themselves, marriage could offer distinct benefits.¹³

Absent specific evidence to the contrary (and I do detail instances of coercion herein), I have taken children at their word when they have consented to become married. This is not to say that I think the decisions sound, but as childhood studies scholars have argued for some time, the history of children was long written in a way that discounted the choices—good, bad, and otherwise—that they made. Children themselves had agency, even when they made terrible decisions. Readers may occasionally balk at the notion that a child of twelve or fourteen really could “choose” to get married. Indeed, one way that we define childhood is that, by virtue of their age, children are incapable of making such choices. Most of these children, however, with some notable exceptions, believed that *they* were making choices. Exploring how and why they did so—often in the face of pressure and coercion and circumscribed options—helps us to understand the history of American childhood and the ways that children have been at the center of debates about marriage, sexuality, and the regulation of both.¹⁴

In earlier eras the marriage of girl children was also less problematic than it is today because waiting longer to marry would not have enlarged most girls' opportunities in any significant way. Marrying early has circumscribed children's lives in direct relation to the degree to which children actually *were* protected and women's autonomy *was* promoted. Both of these are trends that have increased over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however haltingly and unevenly. When neither existed—that is, when children were

expected to take on adult responsibilities early in their lives and when women had few opportunities aside from wifehood—marrying early did not make a bride's life significantly different from her peers who married later. What she began at fifteen her sister would, almost inevitably, begin at nineteen or twenty. Either way it was unlikely to be a life of self-determination or autonomy.

There is an exception to this argument, and it has to do with the physical obligations of marriage and the physiological harm they may cause to girls. Even historical critics of youthful marriage rarely framed their arguments explicitly in opposition to the sex that young wives would be expected to have and the children they would bear before they had reached physical maturity. They sometimes hinted obliquely at these aspects of youthful marriage, and because historians have demonstrated that girls actually reached menarche later in the past than they do today, these were, and are, valid concerns. But because they were so rarely the focus of early marriage's critics, I have found almost no evidence of young wives of the past who wrote about the sexual burdens they faced.¹⁵

If early marriage largely resembled later marriage for many women in the past, at least in the realm of the law, in a world transformed by feminism, this is no longer the case. Today contemporary American women can postpone marriage as long as they like and enter into (relatively) egalitarian marriages with supportive husbands (or wives). Because of this, for anyone who favors contemporary women's autonomy and independence, marrying as a minor looks like a terrible idea. At best, it limits women's opportunities, tethering them to the home before they have gained a sense of whether that is what they want out of life. But the disadvantages of marrying as a minor in earlier eras were far less pronounced than they are now, in part because before the mid-twentieth century, marriage, by definition, limited women's opportunities no matter their ages. Until relatively recently, it simply made less difference whether a woman married young or quite young; her role in life would be similar. The only real "out" was not to marry at all, and that was an option generally available to a minority of women.¹⁶

Today, by contrast, when women have far more opportunities for meaningful autonomy, marrying early cuts short almost all of those options. But, crucially, that is predominantly true for women who are in a position to take advantage of those opportunities. Where marriage as a minor remains most common today—among poor and rural Americans—many girls believe that marriage at some age is their lot in life, regardless. Postponing it may have little overall consequence. Marriage itself has undergone a remarkable transformation in the past two hundred years, becoming much more egalitarian for many spouses. Because of who marries as a minor today and why they do so, most young wives are unable to

take advantage either of this new marital equality or of the option of not having marriage define one's life chances. Studies show that those who marry today as legal minors are much more likely to suffer adverse health consequences, including depression, than those who marry as adults (effects that might have been found among young brides in the past if anyone had asked). What the studies do not show is whether these health risks are associated with the early marriage itself or the circumstances that led to it. Either way, we should note that poverty (and its consequences: shoddy education, including sex education, and lack of access to contraception) and unequal opportunities make early marriage a symptom of much larger problems rather than the primary issue.¹⁷

This book proceeds chronologically from the founding of the United States in the late eighteenth century through the very recent past, each chapter taking up a different subject or issue related to the marriage of minors. Some chapters focus on the laws that allowed or prevented children from marrying or the way the courts interpreted those laws; others document reform efforts to curb the practice; still others explore particular marriages or the nationwide reaction to them. Most combine the methods and sources of legal, social, and cultural history to demonstrate how and why young people married, as well as the ways that adults (who made the laws) sought to regulate the practice. Four chapters are dedicated to the antebellum period, two to the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, and four to the twentieth century.

To tell this story, I must explain some terminology. I use the word “marriage” to refer to the legal institution where two people make a contract with the state (and sometimes a church) to remain united until death or divorce. I do include some marriages that did not exist as a matter of civil law but were treated as marriages by all around them: Indian marriage, slave marriage, and polygamous marriage. By and large, however, this is a history of civil marriage. Although religion factors into this story at times—priests authorizing marriages, ministers performing them; religious organizations opposing early marriage and the divorce they feared sprang from it—because marriage is regulated by state governments, this is not primarily a religious history. Even when religious officials performed marriages, they were doing so “by the power vested in them” by the state, and all the major religious denominations performed marriages within the bounds set by the state (the exception being polygamous Mormons, who usually did marry according to the laws of *their* state). The states allowed or prevented children from marrying, and reformers primarily called on the states when they wanted to curb the practice.¹⁸

The use of the word “child” is more complicated, in part because it has different definitions in the realm of the law, medicine, and culture, and of course those definitions have changed over time. Legally anyone below the age of eighteen is a child today in the United States (except in Alabama and Nebraska, where the age of majority is nineteen, and Mississippi, where it is twenty-one).¹⁹ The word “minor” is a synonym for child in this instance. The law defines minors (or “infants” in the law) as being legally dependent on their parents. Although historically they have been subject to certain duties or entitled to certain privileges that precede legal majority (like the duty to serve in the military, for instance, or the right to marry), only majority brings with it full legal personhood. I have chosen to focus this book on those below the age of eighteen, because that is our current legal definition for childhood, but I recognize that that number is arbitrary. It could have been seventeen or twenty or twenty-one, which was the age of majority for most of American history. Though the age of eighteen might be arbitrary, it has become meaningful to Americans, not just legally, but also culturally. Contemporary Americans *believe* that the age of eighteen is special and that those below it are not yet adults. That process is itself, of course, historical; codifying the age of eighteen in the law is what has made us think that those below it are children. The law itself does not simply recognize that which already exists, it creates certain kinds of subjects, including children. Marriage law has been integral to this process.²⁰

The word “child” has meanings aside from those in the law; the fields of medicine and psychology have contributed to these understandings in meaningful ways. When not quoting from sources (which sometimes use the word in other ways), I employ the word “child” to speak of those who have not yet reached their teens. I reserve the words “adolescent” and “teenager” for those past age twelve when I write about the twentieth century, when the words themselves were first coined and entered the vernacular (“adolescent” in the early 1900s and “teenager” in the mid-twentieth century). Before those moments I use the words “youth” or “young people” to refer to similarly aged people. At all moments I have attempted to be as specific as possible about a young person’s age. Although I frequently reference the average age of first marriage and document statistics demonstrating marriages of those in certain ranges provided by various authorities (fifteen to nineteen, for instance), at all other times this a book about those who married below the age of eighteen.²¹

It is also helpful to recognize that the word “child” has two meanings in the English language: a person below a certain age, and the offspring of another. One is defined by age, the other by filiation. As historian Nara Milanich has

pointed out, in Spanish there are two separate words for these two meanings (*niño/a* and *hijo/a*), which allow a specificity that sometimes gets blurred in English. In the realm of the law this is particularly evident. Does a child require consent to marry because she is fourteen and thus ineligible for marriage or because she is still legally under the control of parents who may not want her to leave their home? The answer depends on the context and the particular law. Although a father's right to his children is dependent on their ages (it ends at their majority), children also have duties and obligations because they are *his* children, not just children by definition of age. I have tried, in the pages that follow, to identify which version of the "child" was being regulated because that has changed over time. In the nineteenth century the state was more likely to regulate the child as a person who belonged to his or her parents. Around the turn of the century states more often saw themselves as having a vested interest in children as defined by chronological age: children could claim some rights on their own behalf, but they were also increasingly regulated as a class of people based on that status. By the middle of the twentieth century, a liberationist notion of "children's rights," which pushed back against those regulations of children-as-minors, had fully come into its own. These are different versions of "the child," however, so paying attention to which child was being regulated can tell us much about the anxiety that produced the regulation.²²

I have called this book *American Child Bride* even though we would today likely describe most of the brides we will meet in these pages as teenagers or adolescents. Yet from the moment that it entered Americans' vocabulary, the phrase "child bride" has regularly been applied to those in their teens and even twenties. Priscilla Beaulieu Presley's biographer called her book *Child Bride*, for instance, even though Priscilla married Elvis Presley when she was twenty-one (she had begun dating him at fourteen). The phrase encompasses the discomfort that Americans feel about young people marrying, even when those young people may not be, by one definition or another, "children." This book is a history of how and when that discomfort developed and how the practice continued nevertheless.²³

One final caveat: this is largely a book about marital beginnings. It is not a study of what happened to the marriages of those who contracted them while still legally children. Marriage is mostly regulated at its beginning; we do not issue licenses and do not have ceremonies (at least until recently) for the continuation of marriages solemnized years earlier. There is much more discussion about who is fit to *enter* a marriage and when, but not who is fit to continue it (though there has been, admittedly, a lot of discussion about

who might exit a marriage and why). Marital beginnings therefore present an opportune moment to see what Americans have thought marriage was for and what Americans believed it could do for those who contracted it.²⁴

That said, each chapter does begin and end with one marriage that I take to be in some way representative of the issue or the era discussed in that chapter; readers will learn at the end of the chapter what happened to the couple they met at the beginning. In the spirit of this before-and-after approach, and before we meet our next couple, let me recount that Susie and Edward King remained married until Edward's untimely death only four years after they wed, just before Susie gave birth to a son. Susie King moved north to Boston in the 1870s and remarried, to Russell Taylor, in 1879. Taylor died in 1901, leaving Susie King Taylor a widow again at the age of fifty-three. Following a trip to the South in the 1890s to nurse her dying son, where she witnessed injustices perpetrated against southern blacks, Taylor became an eloquent spokeswoman against segregation and on behalf of memorializing African American service during the Civil War. She died in 1912, and today her memoir is taught in classrooms across the country.²⁵

Loretta and her husband, Oliver "Doolittle" Lynn, had six children and remained married for more than fifty years, until his death in 1996. He was an enormous supporter of her early career. But the marriage was not without its problems, Doolittle's cheating among them. Loretta documented much marital strife in her songs, including the classic "You Ain't Woman Enough (To Take My Man)." Loretta Lynn's recording career now spans more than five decades, embodying a working-class feminist sensibility that continues to resonate with listeners. She was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1988 and awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2013.²⁶

The stories of Taylor and Lynn were far more celebrated than most marriages contracted by young people. In addition to being relatively common throughout U.S. history, the marriage of minors has usually been far more ordinary. And it is by no means a thing of the past. Just as I was finishing this book, the *New York Times* published an op-ed entitled "America's Child-Marriage Problem," documenting the many thousands of girls, and more than a handful of boys, who were married in the twenty-first century, largely thanks to exceptions in state marriage laws that allow judges to consent to such marriages, as well as parents who force or coerce their children into wedlock. Our shock that this phenomenon continues today, however, has everything to do with the changed ideals of childhood and marriage that have made it seem as if child brides should be, must be, a thing of the past. It is to that past that we now turn.²⁷