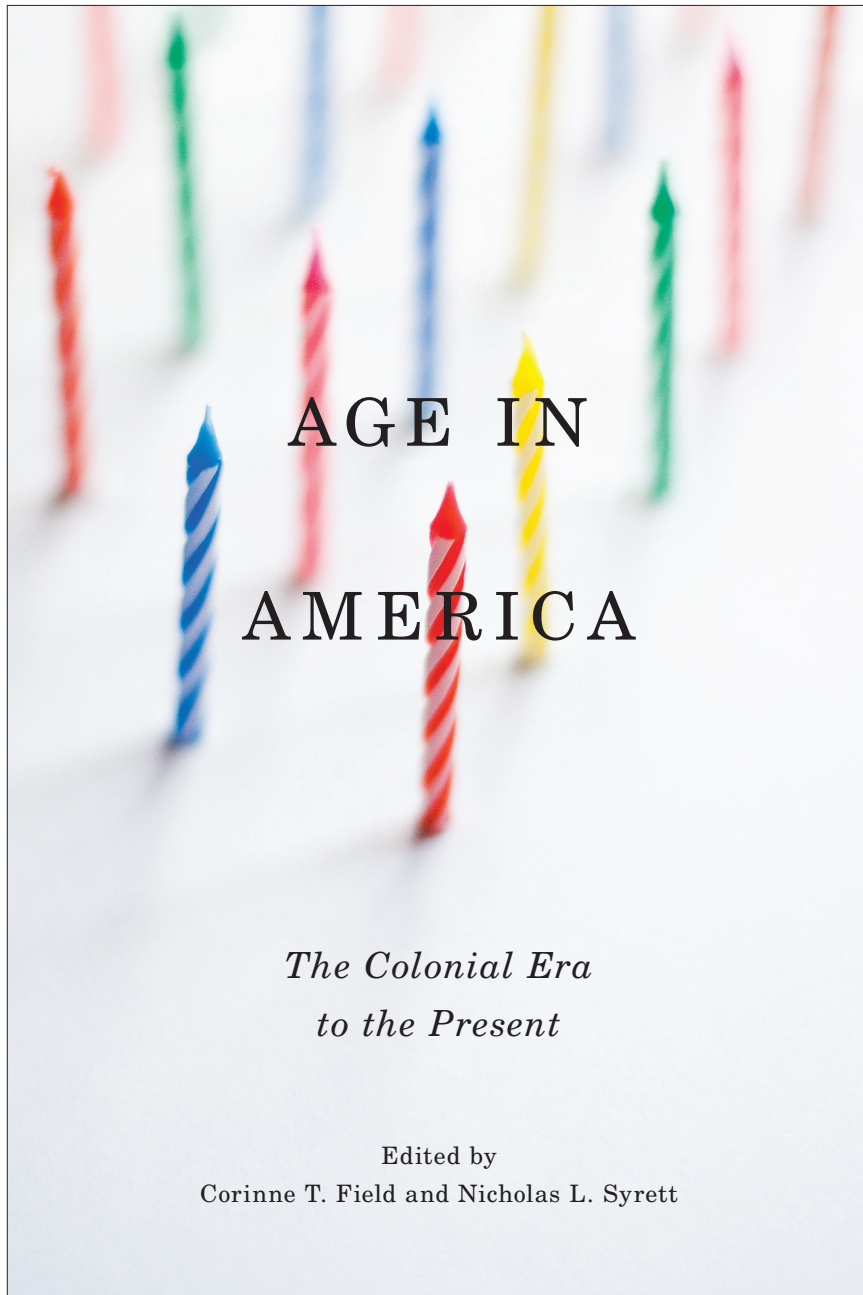


AGE IN AMERICA

THE COLONIAL ERA TO THE PRESENT

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



Sixteen. Eighteen. Sixty-five. In the United States today, we recognize these numbers as key transitions in the life course, precise moments when our rights, opportunities, and civic engagement change—when we become eligible to drive, cast a vote, or enroll in Medicare. Likely, we associate these chronological milestones with more subtle but no less pronounced changes in self-understanding—we recognize ourselves as more independent at eighteen, and worry that we are getting old at sixty-five. But these age markers themselves have a history; at a specific moment in the past Americans determined that eighteen, for instance, was the age at which citizens were capable of voting, imbuing that age with both symbolic and legal meaning. This book investigates how, when, and why age itself, as well as various specific ages, came to have significance in American culture.

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Introduction

SUMMARY

The introduction lays out the overall goals of this volume, which are: to demonstrate how and why particular ages—such as sixteen, eighteen, and sixty-five—have come to define rights, cultural expectations, and self understandings; to demonstrate that while age has mattered throughout American history, reliance on age intensified in the late nineteenth century; and to encourage a more rigorous engagement with age as a category of identity. The editors argue that age is both a biological reality and a social construction, and they insist that age always intersects with other categories such as class, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality.

The editors review the historiography of age thus far, demonstrating that most historians in a wide range of areas—the law, voting, labor, slavery, education, military service, sexuality, medicine, consumer culture, and retirement—have included discussions of age in their work, but have not generally focused on its significance in its own right. The editors point out two general approaches to the history of age: some scholars focus on the development of age consciousness, that is the belief that one’s age is an important part of one’s identity; others study age grading, that is the organization of institutions such as schools, juvenile courts, and government welfare programs around age-based criteria. The introduction ends with an overview of the chapters in this volume and a call for further research into the history of age as a paradigmatic example of how Americans have employed artificial distinctions to distribute rights and obligations in a heterogeneous population.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What examples do the editors offer to show that age is both a biological reality and a social construct?
- How is age similar to and different from other categories of difference such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality?
- What is the difference between age consciousness and age grading? What are examples of each?
- What methods have historians used to investigate the significance of age in American history?
- Why can we not simply assume that being eighteen or sixty-five in the nineteenth century meant the same thing that it does today?

Ann M. Little

“Age and Captivity in Colonial Warfare”

SUMMARY

By studying the fate of child captives taken during the northeastern border wars fought by the French, English, and Wabanaki between 1675-1763, Ann Little demonstrates that these three cultures shared assumptions about how children should be treated at different ages. In particular, people agreed that toddlers from age one to four required the most intensive care, that children at ages six or seven were ready to begin formal education, and that early adolescents between ages twelve and fourteen should gain greater autonomy. Though the English and French were more likely to record numerical ages than the Wabanaki, members of all three cultures used exact or approximate ages to determine how children should be treated as captives, religious converts, and subjects of civil law.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why have many historians assumed that chronological age did not matter in colonial America? What evidence does Little employ to show that age was important?
- Why did people in colonial America record children’s ages?
- Little argues that the Wabanaki were less likely than Europeans to record numerical ages. Given this, do you accept her argument that Wabanaki shared assumptions about age with Europeans? Why or why not?
- Little argues that the English, French, and Wabanaki all shared certain assumptions about the rights and responsibilities a child should assume around ages four, seven, and fourteen. Identify the shared assumptions defining each of these age-based stages. How do these assumptions differ from your own?
- Explain how the fate of European captives taken by the Wabanaki might differ if that person was age two, seven, or fourteen.

Sharon Braslaw Sundue

“Beyond the Time of White Children”

SUMMARY

Sharon Sundue’s essay is about the fate of young African Americans in Pennsylvania after the passage of that state’s gradual emancipation law in 1780, which freed slaves born after its passage once they reached the age of twenty-eight as well as slaves brought to the state after a period of six months’ residence. Sundue focuses on how the law built on longstanding beliefs about blacks’ neoteny—or the persistence of childlike traits into adulthood—in order to justify binding black children to servitude for seven years longer than white children could traditionally be indentured. Sundue argues that slaveowners manipulated the law—sometimes breaking it outright—in order to keep young people enslaved longer and that as a result, chronological age became a crucial tool that emancipated slaves could use in order to prove their fragile claims to freedom. Focusing on the records of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, Sundue demonstrates the ways that chronological age came to have special significance for young African Americans intent on proving that they were no longer obligated to serve their former masters.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How was Mary Burras breaking the law in trying to keep Charity and Deborah Pero as her slaves?
- Why do you think northern states passed gradual emancipation statutes instead of outlawing slavery altogether?
- Why does the author believe that Pennsylvania (and other states) bound young African Americans to servitude longer than white servants could be indentured?
- What sorts of fears did lawmakers have about former slaves once they were emancipated?
- Why were knowledge and proof of one’s age so important for newly freed slaves in Pennsylvania?

Corinne T. Field

“Age and Equal Citizenship”

SUMMARY

Focusing on debates over the right to vote in Massachusetts and New York between the Revolution and Reconstruction, Corinne Field argues that white male legislators, women’s rights activists, and black civil rights activists recognized chronological age to be an arbitrary but necessary barrier to full citizenship. Noting that every state barred minors under age twenty-one from voting in this period, Field shows that participants in suffrage debates recognized that this age-based barrier to suffrage was an artificial distinction rooted in human rather than natural law. Further, legislators acknowledged that many Americans did not know exactly how old they were. Nonetheless, all agreed that age-based qualifications for suffrage were necessary to prevent young children from going to the polls, a contingency that even the most radical champions of universal suffrage did not support. Precisely because Americans recognized age as an arbitrary but necessary barrier to political rights, legislators used the age qualification to prove that voting was not a natural right but a privilege that could be limited by other criteria such as race, sex, property, and residency.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why did nineteenth-century Americans set such importance upon age twenty-one?
- If teenagers fought in wars, why didn’t they demand the right to vote?
- How did state governments enforce age qualifications for suffrage in an era when many voters did not know exactly how old they were?
- If black men and all women aged along with their white male peers, why could they not claim the right to vote at age twenty-one? Given these restrictions, how did nineteenth-century Americans’ understanding of chronological age differ from our own?

Jon Grinspan

“A Birthday Like None Other”

SUMMARY

Jon Grinspan’s chapter explores the significance of young Americans’ twenty-first birthdays from the 1830s to the 1880s, arguing that for youth of both sexes and a variety of backgrounds and political persuasions, turning twenty-one was a watershed moment. For young men, especially during an era of widespread political participation, turning twenty-one represented the achievement of adulthood, the moment when they were now eligible to cast a ballot. Young women, by contrast, acknowledged the significance of the age for their brothers and male friends, and some bitterly railed against the ways that sex kept them from enjoying the same perquisites. In an era when the age of first marriage was increasing, when finding a job and entering upon a career were fraught with uncertainty and often felt beyond the control of many, the absolute certainty of this unearned promotion from boy to man was of immense importance to young men who turned twenty-one. Relying on letters and diaries, and in contrast to scholars who have claimed that Americans did not value age until later in the nineteenth century, Grinspan demonstrates that the age of twenty-one was of great significance to the young men and women who celebrated that birthday every year.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What was the significance of age twenty-one in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century?
- Why was voting such an important part of men’s civic and personal identities during this era?
- Why was the arbitrary nature of turning twenty-one such a great selling point?
- Why might young men and women during this era have felt particularly keen to recognize some important age marker?
- Why were birthdays other than age twenty-one such occasions for sadness?
- Why did age twenty-one decline in significance by the 1880s?
- What different sources do Grinspan and Field use to recover the significance of age twenty-one in nineteenth-century America? Do their conclusions reinforce or challenge each other?

SUMMARY

Nicholas Syrett’s essay is about the different ages at which states allowed men and women to marry. He demonstrates that, with and without parental consent, almost all states through the twentieth century allowed girls to marry before boys. He also shows that most western and Midwestern states lowered the age of majority for girls by three years, which made girls adults three years before boys in these states. Syrett shows that many nineteenth-century women’s rights advocates decried these lower ages of marriage because they robbed girls of their childhood and that, in the aggregate, allowing girls to marry and become adults before boys was just one way to maintain gender subordination through marriage. That said, allowing girls to marry and control their property before boys also gave some individual girls the ability to escape abusive home lives, inherit property, and control their own wages in ways that must have been individually empowering for them. Overall Syrett demonstrates that even feminists disagreed about whether allowing girls the opportunity to marry was actually beneficial for them, precisely because built into the laws were contradictory outcomes: the same law that infantilized girls vis-à-vis boys also allowed girls opportunities at younger ages than boys. Age was a legal tool with contradictory outcomes.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why did lawmakers allow girls to marry before boys in almost all states?
- What were some of the different ways that lawmakers could regulate the age at which young people might marry?
- Why did women’s rights advocates like Elizabeth Oakes Smith object to girls getting married? Would these be the same reasons you might object?
- What kinds of advantages might a girl see in marrying while she was still legally a minor?
- What is the age of majority? Why did many states lower the age of majority for girls by three years? Why is this significant?
- Why couldn’t the National Woman’s Party decide whether lower ages of majority and marriage were a good or a bad thing?
- How does Syrett’s study of marriage age differ from Field and Syrett’s focus on voting?

Shane Landrum

“From Family Bibles to Birth Certificates”

SUMMARY

This chapter begins in the early nineteenth century when Americans relied upon private documents, most often family Bibles, to record and prove their dates of birth. Shane Landrum argues that the push for universal birth registration came from late-nineteenth-century reformers seeking to improve public health and child welfare. By the 1910s, municipal and state governments had developed compulsory birth registration systems that provided a new generation of Americans with documentary proof of their ages in the form of birth certificates. Because the issuing of birth certificates grew out of public health efforts, however, access to these documents varied by region and race. Until well into the twentieth century, many Americans from the South, Southwest, and rural West, especially those who were nonwhite or Spanish speaking, lacked documentary proof of age.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How did government officials, judges, and employers ascertain people’s ages in an era before birth certificates?
- How did government agencies convince parents to register their children’s births?
- How did the availability of state-issued birth certificates alter ordinary Americans’ understanding of age?
- As more Americans gained access to birth certificates, what problems arose for those who lacked official documentation?
- What documents have you used to prove your age? In what situations have you been asked to provide documentary proof of age? Is that proof reliable?

James D. Schmidt

“Child Labor and Age Consciousness”

SUMMARY

James Schmidt demonstrates that the spread of age consciousness in nineteenth-century America was driven largely by the interlocking enforcement of child labor, compulsory school attendance, and truancy laws. Beginning in New England in the 1820s, middle-class reformers aimed to prepare children for democratic citizenship by keeping them in schools and out of work until a particular age. Working families resisted these reforms, insisting that the capacity to labor depended upon physical size and ability, not chronological age. During the late nineteenth century, as officials demanded conformity to age-based laws, working people engaged in various forms of resistance, often fabricating or conveniently forgetting their dates of birth. This very resistance, however, immersed working people in a new system of knowledge where calendar age mattered more than individual capacity.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How did compulsory attendance, truancy, and child labor law intersect to redefine the significance of chronological age?
- What strategies did working families use to evade or resist age-based child labor laws?
- Schmidt argues that over the course of the nineteenth century Americans adopted a “new epistemology of age,” that is a new way of understanding what age was and how it could be known. What exactly changed and why?
- How does chronological age define your own understanding of school and work?
- How does Schmidt’s study complement Landrum’s?

Yuki Oda
“A Day Too Late”

SUMMARY

Yuki Oda’s chapter examines the way that age played a role in whether or not immigrants could be admitted to the United States and naturalized as U.S. citizens. After 1921, age was often a crucial factor in the possibility for entering or remaining within the country, but it worked in different ways depending on race. For European immigrants, the crucial ages were either eighteen or twenty-one, depending on the definition of what constituted a minor child (it changed over time). Families that wanted their children to follow them to the United States needed them to do so before they became legal adults. But in order to make these claims, immigrants had to naturalize before they sent for their relatives. This increasingly meant that while parents waited to naturalize, some children grew too old to immigrate. In contrast to European immigrants, American citizen children of Asian descent who were born abroad risked losing their citizenship altogether if they did not begin to live in the United States before reaching a certain age. In both cases age intersected with race and ethnicity to define who could and could not enter the United States legally and who had the right to claim U.S. citizenship.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How did age come to have so much significance in immigration law during the 1920s?
- Why was age particularly important for families that practiced “chain migration”?
- Why were European and Asian immigrants treated differently under the law? How did this different treatment relate to other immigration laws?
- Why was Chin Bow’s right to enter the United States contested?
- What did Chinese Americans living abroad need to do by their thirteenth birthdays? Why?
- How did new immigration restrictions rely upon ideas about age and child labor analyzed by Schmidt and forms of documentation studied by Landrum?

William Graebner
‘Age and Retirement’

SUMMARY

William Graebner divides the history of retirement in America into four distinct phases. In the colonial and early national periods, people used functional age—what they could do and how they felt—to determine when to stop working. In the late nineteenth century, a few workers began to retire at a particular age due to the age-based provisions of private and public pension plans, particularly the benefits available to aging veterans of the Civil War. Age-based retirement did not become widespread, however, until the 1935 passage of the Social Security Act, which linked money with particular ideas about age sixty-five. Social Security kicked off the pension boom of the 1940s and 1950s when more workers became eligible for retirement benefits at a particular age. This era came to an end in the 1970s and 1980s, as legislators and courts attacked age discrimination and employers demanded greater flexibility from workers of all ages. To understand these shifts, Graebner argues that we need to analyze factors that “push” older people out of jobs—such as age discrimination and mandatory retirement—as well as programs that “pull” them into retirement—such as pension and Social Security payments.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What is the difference between functional age and chronological age?
- What are the major factors that “push” older people out of jobs? What are the major factors that “pull” them into retirement?
- How and why did age sixty-five become a normative age for Americans to retire? Is this still a widespread norm today?
- Which types of workers were most likely to receive age-based pensions in the late nineteenth century? In the mid-twentieth century? Today?
- Do you think American workers should retire at a particular age or should they be free to work as long as they want?
- How does Graebner’s study of retirement differ from Schmidt’s analysis of child labor?

Rebecca de Schweinitz
“The Proper Age for Suffrage”

SUMMARY

Rebecca de Schweinitz considers the various factors that led the United States to lower the federal voting age from twenty-one to eighteen in 1971. Contending that previous historians over-emphasized that notion that youth were “given” the vote because they were judged “old enough to fight” and thus also old enough to vote, de Schweinitz emphasizes a different set of factors that led Americans to believe it was appropriate that eighteen-to-twenty-year-olds should vote alongside those twenty-one and over. She argues, first and foremost, that the voting age was lowered because youth and their allies engaged in grassroots politicking to convince legislators and ordinary Americans that they were worthy. Furthermore, the growth of secondary education led to more meaningful connections between the age of eighteen and high school graduation as the moment at which young people embarked upon adulthood. Activists also emphasized the positive attributes of youthful political engagement and optimism, in some ways enacting the very idealism they pointed to as a reason to allow youthful people the vote. As a whole, de Schweinitz demonstrates not just how younger people gained the right to vote in 1970s America, but also how age eighteen had come to seem like the logical age at which young people should become adults.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How have previous historians explained the lowering of the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen?
- How did the very arbitrariness of age markers help the Vote 18 movement?
- How did eighteen become the “magic age” for voting?
- What kinds of arguments did Vote 18 advocates make on behalf of lowering the voting age? What was the role of high school in these arguments?
- How did Vote 18 advocates recast youth itself in positive terms? How did their opponents counter these representations?
- Compare de Schweinitz’s chapter to Field and Grinspan’s study. How did young people’s claims to political rights change over time?

Timothy Cole
‘Age, Alcohol, and Adulthood’

SUMMARY

Timothy Cole explains how reforms of the 1970s and 1980s redefined eighteen- to twenty-year-olds as legal adults who can't legally drink. In the early 1970s, state and federal governments granted eighteen-year-olds most of the rights of adults. Many states lowered their minimum legal drinking ages as well. While the new age of adulthood had widespread support, Cole contends that some parents, teachers, and politicians worried that they had lost too much authority over rebellious youth. Seizing on scattered evidence that young people were more likely than their elders to cause drunk driving accidents, legislators and reformers campaigned for a higher drinking age. Cole argues that efforts to raise the drinking age arose not from a concern with drunk driving per se but from a broader effort to control young people's behavior and shore up parental power. In 1984, Congress approved that National Minimum Drinking Age Act (NMDA), using highway funding as a mechanism to impose a drinking age of twenty-one. As Cole concludes, this reform created a new status for "individuals who were both 'adults' and 'underage.'"

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why did proposals to raise the drinking age from eighteen to twenty-one gain support in the 1980s?
- Why didn't reformers concerned with drunk driving back legislation that would apply to all drivers regardless of age?
- At what age do you think Americans become adults? Why?
- At what age do you think people should be able to drive? To vote? To drink?

Stuart Schoenfeld
“Age and Identity”

SUMMARY

Stuart Schoenfeld’s essay traces the rise of the bar and bat mitzvah in American Jewish life and consequently the growing significance of the age of thirteen in the lives of American Jews. He argues that in the twentieth century, especially, bar and bat mitzvah provide a place where American Jews perform their identity among family and friends. He begins his story with the Bible, demonstrating that both the age of thirteen and bar and bat mitzvah themselves are actually not to be found in the Bible. He then traces the emergence of the age of majority, and eventually thirteen itself, in the Mishnah and other legal and theological writings. Schoenfeld demonstrates the ways that the bar, and eventually bat, mitzvah began to be celebrated by ever greater numbers of people over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Americans increasingly debated the form and significance of, these celebrations, especially when they seemed to serve little religious purpose. One of the consequences of the immense popularity of bar and bat mitzvah and its meaningfulness for American Jews is the growing disjuncture between thirteen as a significant life marker for Jews and its lack of significance in the wider world, where other ages are more important as indicators of a transition to adulthood.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Where did the age of thirteen come from in Jewish ritual?
- What are the origins of the bar mitzvah?
- Why did age thirteen and bar mitzvah become controversial in the nineteenth-century United States?
- How and why did bat mitzvah for girls become established?
- In what ways can bar and bat mitzvah be seen as a reflection of changes in teen culture?
- In what ways is there a disjuncture between thirteen as being religiously significant but not so meaningful outside of a religious context? In what ways not?

Norma Cantú

“A Chicana Third Space Feminist Reading”

SUMMARY

Mixing personal reflection and feminist theory, Norma Cantú analyzes the broad significance of Mexican American rituals celebrating a young women’s passage into adulthood at fifteen—quinceañeras—and elderhood at fifty—cincuentaños. Cantú finds in these ritualized birthday celebrations a form of resistance through which Chicanas are able to occupy a transitional space, moving between life stages and cultures in ways that enable transformation. Cantú employs a Chicana Third Space Feminist approach, that is a mode of analysis that valorizes personal expressions developed in liminal spaces and transitory stages outside the mainstream of American culture. Through this lens, she recovers the long history of quinceañera celebrations as well as the more recent adoption of cincuentaños. She also explains why celebrations of men’s fifteenth and fiftieth birthdays have become more popular in recent years. By analyzing how particular individuals adopt established rituals, Cantú shows how quinceañeras and cincuentaños enable Mexican Americans to transform their self-understandings and place in their communities at age fifteen and fifty.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What is the theoretical concept of nepantla and how might this be applied to life stages as well as cultures?
- How do quinceañeras and cincuentaños differ from Anglo American birthday celebrations of age sixteen and sixty-five?
- Have you celebrated any particular birthday as a major rite of passage? How and why did this celebration transform your self-understanding or place in your community?
- What other rites of passage exist outside of the American mainstream? Are these rituals linked to a particular age?
- What commonalities can you find between the essays by Cantú and Schoenfeld? How are their stories different?

W. Andrew Achenbaum
“Delineating Old Age”

SUMMARY

W. Andrew Achenbaum’s essay is about elderly Americans who fall into the category of older age, those in their seventies, eighties, and nineties. Achenbaum argues that chronological age has increasingly become a poor means of identifying the capabilities and needs of this demographic group because there is such variability among them. Achenbaum begins in colonial America, showing that some older Americans were revered, but others fared poorly if they fell victim to disease, injury, or inability to work in ways similar to younger people. Through the antebellum era chronological elderliness itself was rarely the reason that older Americans were treated differently from their younger peers. By the turn of the century, however, Americans’ reliance upon chronological age, while by no means forcing people out of the workplace, had come to have greater significance in governing the treatment of elderly Americans. Federal programs like old age relief and pensions played a growing role in designating some workers as elderly. Achenbaum demonstrates that the growing reliance upon specific arbitrary ages for administering many programs over the course of the twentieth century provoked a backlash by late in the century. He concludes by pointing out that Americans would be wise to evaluate Americans based on their functional rather than their chronological ages.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why are issues around older Americans of such political importance in the twenty-first century?
- When and why did chronological age come to have more significance for elderly Americans in determining their work lives?
- What advantages did bureaucrats find in using age-based criteria to administer programs related to the elderly?
- What were the consequences of relying upon arbitrary ages for administering these programs?
- What is Achenbaum’s recommendation for how to help and accommodate the elderly in the contemporary United States?
- Where do Achenbaum and Graebner agree about the significance of age for elderly Americans? Where do they disagree?

Questions for Reflection

- How and why have the essays in this volume changed your understanding of chronological age?
- At the turn of the twentieth century, is chronological age becoming more or less significant?
- The editors argue that chronological age always intersects with other categories such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. Provide a particular example from one of the essays in this volume showing how a specific age mattered differently for Americans from distinct social groups.
- Have you ever been prevented from doing something because you were either too young or too old? How did you respond?
- At what ages do you think people should leave school, become financially independent, marry, and retire? Why did you choose these particular ages?
- When have you been asked to provide documentary proof of your age? Have you ever misrepresented your age?
- Are most of your friends similar to you in age or different? Why?
- What do you think you know about a person when you know his or her age? How might that have changed over time?

Supplemental Assignments

- Pick a significant age in American culture and research how it came to be important. Was there ever a moment at which this right or responsibility was available at a different age?
- Research the moment at which a particular age changed in your state (drinking, driving, voting, renting a car, sexual consent, marriage etc.) What kinds of debates did lawmakers or activists have about changing the age?
- How and when did age come to be significant in your life? Trace the ways in which you have been regulated, monitored, and evaluated based on your age.
- Research how age mattered in a different culture or time period not explored in this book. You might look at age qualifications in law, celebratory rites of passage, or age norms.
- Ask an older relative or friend to reflect upon which birthdays have been particularly significant for him or her and to explain why. Do you predict that the same age transitions will stand out in your own life. Why or why not?