

I

The Historical Framework

THIS IS a study of individuals and of families. It is a collective biographical, or prosopographical, analysis of twenty of the "founding families" of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. It traces the evolution of these families from their founders through successive generations, beginning in the late revolutionary period and ending in the early twentieth century. The purpose of the study is to describe the internal composition of this group of families to determine the degree to which they formed a clearly defined, coherent upper class, and the extent to which they were able to maintain their status over time. The study therefore examines first, the social character and composition of the founding families; second, their position within the larger society; and third, the career patterns of family members.

Although the study is concerned with the status of founding family members within their own socioeconomic circles, it is also rooted in the history and development of Allegheny County itself. The resources and opportunities of the region shaped and directed the destinies of these families. They changed and were themselves changed by their physical, economic, and cultural milieu. Many of them chose to leave the area permanently. An important aspect of this study is that it traces those outmigrants and contrasts them with those rela-

tives who maintained their roots and connections in Allegheny County.

Although initially indistinguishable as a group from the larger population in terms of their social and cultural characteristics, by the end of the nineteenth century the majority of the founding families had formed a distinct group easily distinguishable from the rest of the population. As we shall see, they began the 1800s as a heterogeneous group, socially distinct from one another. But by the end of the century their descendants, or more accurately, those who had utilized their advantages most successfully, had formed an identifiable and homogeneous upper class. In tracing the careers of the family founders and their descendants, the social mechanisms that they employed in order to achieve and maintain elite status will be examined. These mechanisms relied on the assistance of associates and other family members, since one seldom enters the ranks of the elite merely on one's own efforts and accomplishments. One must first be launched from a strategic position from which the family contacts and associations with successful individuals can be employed. The launch which the individual receives has been called the "main chance," "takeoff," or even a "break," all implying a sudden departure from a previous, less desirable position on the socioeconomic scale.¹ Once this "main chance" is successfully negotiated, the rising individual realizes what I call the "accumulation of advantages" (a theme carried throughout this book), a combination of achievement, opportunity, and the psychological readiness to promote oneself to even higher levels.

Most of the rich who are descended from wealthy ancestors were born with the accumulation of advantages already firmly established; the main chance had already been made for them. It should be noted, however, that while wealth is certainly an important element in the attainment of elite status, one's position is not measured simply in dollars and cents. The accumulation of advantages manifests itself in many ways: socially, educationally, in mate selection, and so forth, not solely in the economic sphere.

Nor does the accumulation of advantages operate to the

same degree for all who have realized the main chance; rather, it yields its benefits in proportion to one's position within the socioeconomic order. As C. Wright Mills has said, "Opportunity is limited by [one's] position within the stratification of the society."² The accumulation of advantages, therefore, determines how much of society's benefits are accessible: one's ascent in this scale means that society will offer additional benefits.³

Once the ascent has been realized, the accumulation of advantages performs a maintenance function, that is, it prevents downward social mobility. Since the major portion of this study is concerned with those generations following the family founders, the ability of the accumulation of advantages to prevent downward mobility is of great importance. From this some speculations concerning the nature of American society may be ventured.

Popular American beliefs have traditionally compared American society to a European counterpart. Without an aristocratic inheritance by which classes may be defined, entrance into the American elite is theoretically possible for anyone with the opportunity, ambition, and good fortune to make enough money. This openness to penetration from below, based on achievement, has resulted in popular suppositions of American equality. But equality does not dictate equal chances of success—the cards are decidedly stacked in favor of some. Once success is achieved, the rewards of success are enjoyed by succeeding generations. The offspring of the successful are given a push on the road to success that is not granted to the lowly. Thus success for some is achieved partially through the efforts of others.

Achievement results in an individual becoming a member of the elite. The term *elite* therefore refers to occupational success. A member of the elite is functionally (occupationally) prominent, but not necessarily extremely wealthy or included in the social upper class. Families who have continued to be occupationally prominent often find acceptance into the social upper class in later generations.

America's supposedly open society, as opposed to Eu-

rope's supposedly closed one, permits the individual either to fall from a high position or rise from a low one. Since class is based upon achievement in America, not upon nobility, class status can be lost as well as gained. In reality, the upward and downward mobility of succeeding generations serves as an indicator of the openness of the class structure as well as the effectiveness of the accumulation of advantages in maintaining one's status against fresh competitors.

The openness and fluidity of American society must be considered in "the long run," that is, the period extending beyond the first generation which achieved, was rewarded, and became elite. Clearly America does reward achievement; the important consideration for the historian is the character and composition of succeeding generations and their relationship to the rest of society. If there is no downward social mobility, then American society is closed and approximates popular notions of European society. If, in the long run, there is downward social mobility from elite status in the same amount and extent as exists in the rest of society, then the society is open. If, in the long run, there is some downward social mobility from elite status but not to the amount and extent as exists in the rest of society, then there is a class structure that has continuity and denies equal opportunity to achieve to the more ambitious but less privileged. This elite, that is, the rewarded group, by virtue of reward, occupies an elevated position creating inequality of condition but not necessarily inequality of opportunity. Over time it becomes an upper class.

In order to establish the degree of openness of the upper class, whether inclusion is based on achievement or heredity, one must study both the original elite and subsequent generations. This is a major part of this study. More specifically, my object is to examine the extent to which the accumulation of advantages was a factor in preventing downward social mobility in the long run. This process must be observed in as broad a context as possible, in the group's internal development and in its interaction with the rest of society. The findings should contribute to our understanding of American society.

There are essentially two tests that can be performed to determine the degree to which the class structure is open or closed. The first measures the extent to which those born below a given class—in this study, the upper class—are able to move up and be accepted into that class. The second measures the extent to which those born in a given class—in this study, again, the upper class—are maintained there, presumably by the accumulation of advantages, or fall from it. To date, the study of upward mobility has attracted the interests of social scientists far more than downward mobility.

But social mobility has been both upward and downward; those who study upward mobility exclusively may well be misled in their interpretation of society. This is especially true of the United States which, historically, has undergone rapid growth not only in its population, economy, and territory, but also in technology. Many menial, low-status occupations were eliminated and skilled, higher-status occupations were created, contributing to an uneven but universal rise in the standard of living and an upward shift in the class structure. In view of the enormous increase of opportunity at the top, it is small wonder that social scientists have found that a significant proportion of the population was able to raise its social status and that the upper class was open to penetration from below. Consequent to this dramatically increasing number of positions at the top, some individuals would inevitably rise to fill them. However, it is not necessary for those individuals already at the top to be displaced. If the upper class were closed to downward mobility, it would merely slow the rate of rising individuals. If individuals who have achieved upper-class status or have been born to it can decline, the society is fluid. It is possible that in a historical study of American society, downward mobility is the more reliable of the two indicators if any judgment is to be made concerning its openness.⁴

The large number of studies of the elite has failed to reach any real consensus on the question of the openness of American society. Despite the use of the latest social science techniques, historians have arrived at contradictory conclusions concerning upward or downward social mobility. In their ef-

forts to reach accurate conclusions, historians have compiled mountains of information from censuses, city directories, wills, county histories, and biographical encyclopedias as well as from the more traditional sources such as diaries, newspapers, personal correspondence, and family biographies.⁵

Probably the classic quantitative historical study of the upper class remains the pioneering work, *Philadelphia Gentlemen: The Making of a National Upper Class*, by E. Digby Baltzell. Baltzell uses a sociologist's functional analysis to describe the upper class in Philadelphia. His sample forms a part of what he calls an American business aristocracy of colonial stock and Protestant affiliation. Baltzell presents a multidimensional view as he examines their family backgrounds as far back in American history as the data permit, and their changing "neighborhood" relationships, religious affiliations, educational practices, and club memberships. He also analyzes their public roles and those of their families in politics, journalism, the professions, letters, art, and philanthropy.⁶

Although the subtitle implies a historical approach, only three of the fifteen chapters are historical in nature. Of the three, only "Neighborhood and Class Structure" develops the theme historically, describing upper-class neighborhoods and geographically plotting their locations and movements from the colonial era to 1940. The other two chapters are concerned with the founding of particular families in the period immediately preceding or immediately following the Civil War. Baltzell then compares these earlier families with the upper class of 1940. There is, however, no continuum of treatment through the intervening generations. The fact that elite families of the pre- and post-Civil War periods have a descendant who was in *Who's Who in America* and the *Social Register* in 1940 should not be surprising; surely of all the descendants of the family founders, some should be able to "maintain" themselves.⁷

The treatment of the family founders as compared to the 1940 upper class is ahistorical. Baltzell takes the elite group of the upper class from the *Social Register* in 1940 and demonstrates that they had well-established ancestors before 1900 (many before 1865). To argue backward, that because the up-

per class in 1940 had upper-class roots before 1900 it must be a coherent, self-sustaining elite, does not necessarily prove the thesis of upper-class continuity. Baltzell is dealing only with a small, select portion of the descendants of the nineteenth-century elite who maintained their position through 1940. The argument becomes a self-fulfilling one. What he proves is that these individuals who were in the upper class in 1940 had this advantage. In order to establish whether there is a strong line of continuity and cohesion within the upper class over generations it is necessary to argue progressively, not retrogressively, by taking an upper-class group at the beginning, and determining whether its descendants were able to maintain their favorable position. In this way one can establish a historically valid argument for Baltzell's thesis: that there has always been an elite, and that its composition over generations has remained stable.

Though Baltzell purports to demonstrate the development of a nationwide upper class, the entirety of his group are Philadelphia residents in 1940. Since the group has meaning only in a particular locality, anyone who migrates is "lost" from the group and is not considered, even though the author is ostensibly concerned with the development of a national, not a local, upper class. The group has a logic and a meaning only in Philadelphia.⁸

In contrast to Baltzell, this study of the founding families of Allegheny County is chronologically progressive in tracing succeeding generations. It also attempts to follow all descendants of the family founders, whether they stayed in Allegheny County or migrated from it. The multidimensional view used so successfully by Baltzell is in this study not confined to a single point in time. Rather it is applied consistently over the entirety of the period. The considerations of historical development and geographic mobility add important dimensions to the study of the founding families of Allegheny County.

My approach is similar to Baltzell's in its multidimensional treatment of individuals, that is, in viewing them in terms of occupation, religious affiliation, education, and so on. We

differ, however, in both the spatial and time dimension; Baltzell's main thrust is the individual in a particular time, 1940, and a particular place, Philadelphia. My study treats individuals over an extended period of time and, once the group is established in Allegheny County by 1820, follows them wherever they go.

Since almost all social mobility studies are concerned with a particular area, those who leave are simply categorized as "lost," or largely unsubstantiated conjectures are made concerning their fate. As Stuart Mack Blumin admits, rates of mobility within a given city "cannot be generalized to the nation at large until more is known about the relationship between vertical mobility and migration."⁹ It is here that a study of the founding families of Allegheny County can make a major contribution. To the extent that it is possible, those who do leave are followed.

While Baltzell finds elite antecedents to the Philadelphia upper class in 1940, he gives no indication of the number of descendants who had lost elite status. Others have studied the rates of downward mobility using quantitative analysis. Their findings differ markedly over a broad spectrum with respect to time and place and have resulted in divergent interpretations concerning the degree of openness of American society. These historians can be broadly defined by two opposing schools of thought: those who find relatively little downward mobility, inferring a closed society; and those who find significantly higher rates of downward mobility and thus infer a more open society.

Prominent among those whose findings support elite continuity, with little downward mobility, is Edward Pessen. Concerning antebellum society in New York City, Philadelphia, Brooklyn, and Boston, he claims that with few exceptions the rich inherited and held onto their wealth and connections. Pessen did find continuity among elite families, but he did not include all descendants in these families, only the successful.¹⁰ All of the offspring were followed in Lee Benson's study of the Philadelphia economic elite of the 1800s. This approach revealed a fluid society with much upward and downward

mobility.¹¹ Frederick C. Jaher found in his study of the "upper strata" in Boston, New York, Charleston, Chicago, and Los Angeles that the degrees of continuity "were defined by local historical circumstances." The Boston and Charleston elite experienced a high degree of persistence, while in the dynamic economy of New York City, successive waves of new elites changed the character and composition of that city's upper class. Chicago's burgeoning population also brought a newly rich elite which attempted to reproduce the social stability of older eastern cities. In Los Angeles, however, the upper class never achieved stability, having been overwhelmed by hordes of movie stars and motion picture tycoons. Jaher attempts to view the upper strata as a whole over time, including each new economic elite.¹²

The different conclusions derived from these studies of upper-class continuity are largely dependent upon whether or not the researcher has a geographical focus, which determines whether he or she is concerned with the persistence of individual families or upper-class structure. This study of Allegheny County's founding families focuses on the continuity of the original elite families, regardless of the composition of the entire upper class. Indeed, in succeeding generations following the original family founders, geographical placement in Allegheny County is no longer of primary importance. Thus, the total composition of the upper class in Allegheny County is not significant in this study of family persistence.

In most studies, the findings are, in large part, predetermined by the sampling techniques employed. An example of this is William Miller's analysis of the social origins of America's corporate elite of 1910. Although he finds that 80 percent of the corporate presidents and board chairmen studied had fathers who were businessmen or professionals, his selection of men in the older, less dynamic enterprises, such as textiles and railroads, predisposed the findings to reveal a higher degree of continuity.¹³ Because my study is not wedded to any occupational group, the family founders represent a wide spectrum of businesses and professions.

John Ingham's study of the iron and steel elite focuses on a

particular industry in six cities. Due to the fact that he studied this industry in a period of enormous technological change and growth, he discovered a high degree of continuity as family members were pulled into the corporate network. His study included a wide range of considerations: it avoided a narrow geographical focus by researching six different cities, it followed all descendants, and it was multidimensional in terms of the criteria employed in determining success.¹⁴

Given the methodology employed by Ingham, it is surprising that his findings are sharply in conflict with those of Burton Folsom, who happened to study one of the same cities in the same time period.¹⁵ Whereas Ingham's study of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries revealed a high degree of corporate continuity, Folsom found few successful sons succeeding successful fathers. The difference in their conclusions may be explained by their definitions of success. Ingham pronounced the sons successful if they were elevated to the board of their respective corporations; Folsom insisted that they retain those positions of responsibility through a period of corporate mergers in order to be deemed successful.

In considering the findings of Ingham and Folsom in their studies of Bethlehem, there appears to be an explanation for the differing conclusions reached by historians studying downward mobility other than just differences in time and place. The selection of the elite and the criteria imposed in deciding what constitutes downward mobility play a vital role.

The particular character of this elite is also of immense importance. For Folsom's Scranton elite, there was virtually no room for upward mobility, only downward mobility, as his group was at the very pinnacle of wealth and power. Since they were an industrial elite in a time of extremely rapid technological change, it was necessary for their children to advance quickly to preserve their places in the socioeconomic order. By contrast, the founding families of Allegheny County, originating in a preindustrial elite, had at least some room to rise even within elite circles. Moreover, with their fortunes not resting solely on continued technological innovation, their positions

may have been less precarious although they were even less able to rest on the achievements of the family founders. Stability, family connections, and caution, all of which ultimately contributed to the decline of Folsom's Scranton elite, could be used to advantage by the founding families of Allegheny County.

Among the earliest sources that substantiate Fowler's index as being truly an elite index is "Prominent Citizens of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania," published as a part of the *Harper's Magazine* in 1817.¹ Of the 146 people listed, 31 percent are also in Fowler's index. However, the almanac included only city residents—Fowler's covered all of Allegheny County—and was published long before Fowler's. 1811 cited that date as the first year that the city's population was reported. The list of names in the almanac was compiled by the city's first mayor, James Smith, and was published in the *Pittsburgh Courier*. The list of names in Fowler's index was compiled by the city's first mayor, James Smith, and was published in the *Pittsburgh Courier*. The list of names in Fowler's index was compiled by the city's first mayor, James Smith, and was published in the *Pittsburgh Courier*.