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Maternal Mortality and Gender Differences in Adult Mortality in Early New England

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Published estimates of adult mortality and life expectancy in early America are based on poor data, faulty methods, and small numbers of cases. Estimates for women are especially difficult to make and are often inaccurate. This study relies on the remarkably complete and reliable demographic data available for the graduates of Yale College and their wives to examine gender differences in mortality and life expectancy. Because these data are nearly complete, mortality differences can be estimated without significant measurement bias. The results indicate that women married to Yale graduates suffered higher mortality during their peak childbearing years relative to their husbands, but lower mortality afterwards. Much of the difference in mortality under the age of fifty appears to be related to maternal mortality, but gender differences in mortality from other causes such as tuberculosis also appears to be important. This study also examines perceptions of the risk of death in childbearing among white women in early America and suggests that while religion provided an interpretive framework that may have overemphasized the risk, the cumulative risk of death from maternal causes was nontrivial and rightly feared by pregnant women, who took active measures to mitigate their fears and eventually to reduce their fertility.