

Ownership Rights, Marriage Markets and Family Decision-Making: Evidence from U.S. Historical Data

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Abstract

In the nineteenth century United States, spinsterhood was a relatively rare phenomenon and female social status was determined by institutions regarding married women's rights. Under the legal rules of coverture inherited from colonial times, a married woman had her legal and economic rights vested in her husband, who would control and dispose of her earnings from labor and/or assets. By the 1840's, however, states began passing legislation that revised many of these restrictions. Using variation on the timing of these revisions across states and data from the IPUMS and on the life cycle of Union Army Veterans this paper examines the impact of changes in state-level legal institutions in the United States between 1850 and 1910 over two major aspects of the economics of the family: i) marriage markets and matching patterns; ii) family decision-making.

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