In the summer of 1854, Robert R. McBurney migrated from Ireland to the United States. Not even eighteen years old when he arrived in New York’s harbor, he was on his own and without support of a family, like so many other young men who moved from overseas or the near and far countryside to one of the growing urban centers in America. Robert McBurney would remain unmarried and without children for the rest of his life. Many Americans viewed bachelors such as him as a special species deserving extra attention because they were without the guidance and control of a family. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, bachelors epitomized the social and cultural transformations of a thriving urban and modern world, simultaneously bringing forth new ways of living and new strategies for their control and containment.

Half a century later, Robert McBurney’s former colleagues and fellows would stress how charming a man he was even though he had never gained the reputation of being a “ladies’ man”2. He had never conquered a woman’s heart but had made a fabulous career in New York’s Young Men’s Christian Association. This bachelor displayed “a knowledge of young men’s hearts” more profound than anybody else’s. According to Henry Orne, his successor as head of New York’s YMCA, the young men associated with the city’s Y became McBurney’s “family”, and like a good father, he gave them guidance and advice3. The YMCA was one of several homosocial groups gaining momentum in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries4. On the one hand, the YMCA was designed as a Protestant

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2 John Glover, secretary of the international committee of the YMCA, during a memorial service for Robert McBurney at 18 April, 1899, acc. to Lawrence L. Doggett, Life of Robert R. McBurney (Cleveland 1902) 267 [henceforth Doggett, Life of Robert R. McBurney].
3 Henry Orne, 18 April, 1899, acc. to Doggett, Life of Robert R. McBurney 268–269.
4 A Ladies Christian Association was founded in New York in 1858 only seven years after the first YMCA, finally turning into the YWCA in 1866, but the men’s and the women’s sectors operated strictly segregated.
antidote to urban vice, which seemed particularly attractive and dangerous to young and unmarried men between age 15 and 40. At the same time, the YMCA stood for a specific type of male bonding, generating its coherence not only through homosocial forces, but also through its homoerotic appeal. By the turn of the twentieth century, the YMCA had become one of the most famous cruising spots in the “gay male world”, as described by historian George Chauncey.

As a distinctly modern and urban phenomenon, bachelors were exposed to meticulous observation and definition by contemporary commentators. From the moment they appeared as an identifiable social group, their ambiguity and equivocality led their study and classification by adherents of the new disciplines of sociology and sexology. As we shall see, researchers defined multiple sexual differences and categories, creating inclusions and exclusions that revealed much about contemporary assumptions about modern, urban society, as well as significant aspects of the new modern order itself. By using the term “modern”, I do not refer to a teleological process nor to an ethical judgement, but to a historically specific social and cultural configuration, defined by shared values, practices, and systematizations. Thus, the sexual and social sciences belong as much to modern culture as does the bachelor and his way of life in the emerging urban environment that I will describe in this chapter through the lens of Robert McBurney’s life.

McBurney’s biography was shaped by numerous experiences which illustrate the lives and environments of unmarried urban men in the second half of the nineteenth century. He migrated to the city, where he experienced varied housing conditions and had diverse homosocial and homoerotic ties as a New York bachelor. In private and in his work, he enjoyed the company of like-minded men from the YMCA executive staff, as well as from the many young men living in the city and spending their time at the Y, young men whom he was eager to guide and enlighten with his experience. As we will see, some of McBurney’s fellows would become critical of his homosocial world, which they perceived not simply as a firewall of protection against urban vice, but potentially also as a hotbed of homoerotic entanglements and therefore a part of the deeply disturbing modern urban swamp itself. Thus, the YMCA and the world of the bachelor seemed to threaten a socio-cultural order that was deemed morally sane. They represented sexual, cul-

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tural, social, and political dangers that needed to be contained and tamed by the simultaneously emerging social and sexual sciences and their corresponding practices and patterns of definition and control⁶.

Bachelors before the “Age of the Bachelor”

According to historian Howard Chudacoff, “the age of the bachelor” only began after the Civil War, with “the peak years of bachelor subculture in America” occurring between 1880 and 1930⁷. However, numerous unmarried men lived in the United States before the Civil War. In those early years, the stereotype of the bachelor was that of a bizarre and whimsical fellow, sometimes good-natured and sometimes coarse, rarely equipped with enough talent to live a fulfilling social life. Private and public spheres were hardly separated in bachelor life, a problematic matter in Victorian culture. Focused on himself, exhibiting little sense of the public good, and not controlled by a family, the bachelor was depicted as an irresponsible man who wasted time in coffee houses or – even worse – in the subculture of the saloon, where he became prone to violence and laziness. Often lonesome and misanthropic in old age, the bachelor was considered a sexual, social, and political menace, someone not sufficiently equipped for the life of a good citizen. An exception to the rule was the celibate, a discarnate figure in popular stereotype, who had dedicated his life and body to the community. In this case, being without wife and family meant having a very particular type of freedom, which made a man an even more virtuous citizen than a good family man might ever become. We will later see how the concept of the celibate social worker was mobilized with regard to Robert McBurney, whose life was described as being “the most useful of all lives – an example most precious to our young men”, but who, at the same time, had to face skepticism from some of his fellows⁸.

Let us take a glance at the social history of unmarried men before “the age of the bachelor”. Due to immigration patterns and notions of individual freedom, many young (and also not so young) men sought their fortunes in different parts of the

⁷ Chudacoff, Age of the Bachelor 5.
United States without ever creating a family. On the frontier, numerous working and living options existed outside the family pattern. Westward expansion attracted a disproportionate number of men in many Western regions who gathered in railroad and mining towns and similar male-dominated environments. In frontier cities in the mid-nineteenth century, 30–70 percent of the workforce consisted of unmarried men. For California mining cities, this figure was even higher. But also in the rapidly growing cities of the West and East Coasts, such as San Francisco, Boston and New York, a third of the male population was unmarried. In the age group between 25 and 35 the share of the “bachelors” rose up to 50 percent. They mostly lived in particular lower- and working-class neighborhoods, such as Manhattan’s Lower East Side, where about three quarters of the residents were male and unmarried. Without doubt, the bachelor from the Early Republic to the Civil War was hardly an eccentric bohème or a grouchy misanthrope, but much more likely a poor migrant, worker, or adventurer, who could not afford a family or who avoided or deserted it.

Modern Cities, Modern Men

Only in the final third of the nineteenth century did Americans pay more attention to the bachelor as a social, cultural, political and sexual phenomenon. In this period, a variety of observers scrutinized bachelors as being a driving force in the profound changes that American society was experiencing. In 1868, the renowned magazine *The Nation* asked why single life had become so popular – a topic that captured not only the attention of mothers and daughters (which suggests that bachelorhood was attractive primarily to men), but also of philosophers, statisticians, social commentators, and many more. The author of the article, J. Bixby, explained this phenomenon in part by stressing well-known reasons such as the westward migration of young men. Yet, Bixby also delved into new territory by alluding to “the growing self-assertion, masculinity, independence” of many young women, which made matrimony less attractive to young men. Besides a dynamic women’s movement, he described growing trade, communication, and wealth as reasons, along with burgeoning desires and amusements. Modern cities would offer “new gratifications and pleasures”, physical, spiritual, and aesthetic stimuli which were more profoundly and easily enjoyable for bachelors: “The city is the habitat of the single. The country town or even the small city is an uncongenial clime for the species. The single must have public amusements and public resorts, and these only flourish in great cities.”

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10 *Chudacoff*, Age of the Bachelor 21–44.


12 *Bixby*, Single Life 191.
Single life and urban temptations appeared mutually interdependent. Not only was the unmarried man in need of a big city, but the big city made being single more attractive. For those who were bound to a home and a family, the city lost its potential rewards. Of course, Bixby warned, cities might also draw men into a swamp of evil amusements because cheap substitutes for matrimonial pleasures were easily available. Here, Bixby referred to prostitution and the custom of “slumming” that would become even more popular in the following decades. Members of the middle and upper classes came for brief visits to sexualized zones in disreputable neighborhoods to enjoy the pleasures of an exciting and exotic night life. Historian Kevin Mumford described these spaces of interaction across the boundaries of race and class as “interzones”.

Thus, already by 1868, the image of the urban bachelor had solidified, though it would go through many twists and turns in subsequent decades. The so-called bohème who seemed to throw traditions and social habits overboard emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, gradually becoming a clichéd character in urban imagery, until the 1920s, when the bachelor was “an object of desire or ridicule, but a fact of American life”, as cultural historian Tom Lutz relates in his book *Doing Nothing*. Cooking recipes for single men began to appear in magazines, newspapers, and books, as did fashion advice for single men-about-town. For a brief time, a special bachelor magazine appeared on the market, illustrated with drawings of relaxed and smoking men and good-looking girls. “Single blessedness” was a frequent topic in popular periodicals – admired and praised, or rejected and ridiculed as “grotesque misconception of the true status of the bachelor”. Either way, the bachelor resounded throughout modern discourse. By 1934, the renowned sociologist Ernest W. Burgess summarized the bachelor as “peculiarly a phenomenon of modern times”. Bixby’s brief article in *The Nation* sixty-six years earlier had already described this new lifestyle as a phenomenon identified with urban modernity.

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14 Bixby, Single Life 190, explicitly writes about “modern civilization”. Also, Kevin White, The First Sexual Revolution. The Emergence of Male Heterosexuality in Modern America (New York 1993) [henceforth White, First Sexual Revolution].


16 George Ade, Single Blessedness and Other Observations (Garden City, N.Y. 1922) 17; Burgess, Sociological Aspects 118. See the magazine “The Bachelor Book”, published between March and November 1900 in Chicago. Furthermore, brief books with aphorisms for and by bachelors existed that associated the bachelor with an easygoing, brisk lifestyle, such as Howard K. Jerome, The Reflections of a Bachelor (New York 1911). On the popularity of the bachelor in contemporary writings see Snyder, Bachelors.
pleasures as sign of a progressively refined taste in an advancing civilization. The rising number of unmarried men did not appear problematic to him. On the contrary, he favored such adaptions of social and cultural norms to modern times. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many commentators agreed with Bixby’s diagnosis of the bachelor as a peculiarly modern phenomenon, but only a minority shared his optimistic tone. Even though bachelor life seemed tempting in many respects, with its promise of “exotic” pleasures, most social commentators feared a loss of order, guidance, and social and familial control. They conceived of the bachelor as a downside of modernity. The census data of 1890 were interpreted to reveal the threat of the bachelor to a stable social order: 41.7 percent of all men older than 15 years and about 20 percent of all men around 40 years of age were still unmarried. In 1890, Chicago had 170,000 single men, a number which would more than double by 1920. Even though the share of bachelors in the overall urban population slightly diminished in this period due to the massively growing city population, large concentrations of unmarried men lived in big cities like Chicago and New York, and their presence was disturbing to many social commentators.

The attention given to bachelors was nourished by the bourgeois fear that specific socio-cultural patterns would emerge that would satisfy the needs of single men, negating the functions and attractions of the Victorian middle-class family. Mostly cheap restaurants provided nourishment, barbershops and public bathing houses were facilities for hygienic care, saloons, clubs, pool halls, dance halls, and amusement parks were places of recreation and for the satisfaction of sexual pleasures. Men could meet women at these places who were not necessarily prostitutes but still available (though urban brothels were also commonplace). Many of the women belonged to the growing group who worked in industry or retail. These young women had often escaped from the control of the family and had greater leeway but still had too small an income to enjoy the public pleasures of a modern urban nightlife. So-called “charity girls” at times traded sexual favors for a night in town. As early as in February 1866, a memorandum by the New York YMCA pedantically listed the dangers of the metropolis: 653 pool tables, thirteen theatres, an unknown number of amusement arcades and lotteries, 7,786 bars, 223 music halls with 1,193 bar girls, who were reputed to offer sex for money or other gratifications and who served about 29,900 customers per day. On top of that, there were 730 real brothels in town, with 3,400 women offering their bodies for sale. As stressed by YMCA director William E. Dodge, brothels and the dubious “boarding houses” often were unfortunately the only places in town welcoming young men with open arms. Dodge pleaded for the YMCA as a counterweight to these forces of evil.

17 Chudacoff, Age of the Bachelor 48–55, offers more statistical information.
Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, bourgeois moral-reform groups attempted to counteract the new sexual liberties of this “first sexual revolution”\(^{19}\). Besides the YMCA, Anthony Comstock’s crusade against obscene literature, which started in the 1870s, anti-prostitution movements such as New York’s Committee of Fourteen’s are only famous examples of such efforts, which occurred in numerous cities besides New York\(^{20}\).

**Robert R. McBurney and the New York YMCA**

A closer look at the story of the YMCA and Robert McBurney will make the fuzziness of this cultural configuration even more apparent. On the one hand, the New York YMCA and especially “Brother McBurney”, as he was called by Anthony Comstock, supported Comstock’s crusades financially and spiritually. The New York YMCA even buttressed Comstock’s activities by creating the notorious Committee for the Suppression of Vice, led by McBurney and his YMCA colleagues Cephas Brainerd, Morris K. Jesup, and Charles E. Whitehead\(^{21}\).

This is only one of many examples of McBurney fighting in the front line against urban vice. On the other hand, he was a life-long bachelor and therefore deemed a questionable character. After all, the life of single men was considered a substantial challenge to a stable social and cultural order. Let us, therefore, focus more narrowly and at more length on McBurney, his life, and the interzones he traversed.

Robert McBurney was not yet eighteen years old when he came from a Northern Irish small town to New York City in the summer of 1854. These were the final years of the wave of massive Irish immigration to America, when sometimes up to 50 percent of all immigrants to America were Irish; in 1854 those were still 101,606 from a total of 427,833. More than half of them were without job skills, about 20 percent were classified as “laborers”, another 20 percent as “farmers”. Men exceeded women by 65,000, most of them 15–40 years old\(^{22}\).

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\(^{19}\) *White*, First Sexual Revolution.

\(^{20}\) On Comstock see *Nicola Beisel*, Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian America (Princeton, N.J. 1997), and *Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz*, Victoria Woodhull, Anthony Comstock, and Conflict Over Sex in the United States in the 1870s, in: Journal of American History 87/2 (2000) 403–434; on the Committee of Fourteen and the battle against prostitution and various types of sexual exchanges from 1905 onwards see *Clement*, Love for Sale. One manifestation of this agitation was the federal Mann Act of 1910, intended to fight forced prostitution of white women, but also intended to hold young women’s growing liberties in check; see *Mary E. Odem*, Delinquent Daughters. Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885–1925 (Chapel Hill, N.C. 1995); *David Lan-gum*, Crossing Over the Line. Legislating Morality and the Mann Act (Chicago, Ill. 1994).


As a young Irish lad without proper job training who stayed in one of the urban centers at the East Coast after his arrival in America, McBurney was the prototype of a young male immigrant, who was greeted in the United States with growing anxiety. With neither money nor job, McBurney was a stranger in town and lonely, wrote the YMCA official L.L. Doggett in 1902 in his biography of his colleague and friend. The loneliness of young immigrant men was a crucial topos in bachelor discourse at the turn of the century. Upon his arrival in America, McBurney was not at all predestined either for the life of an urban “bohème” or of a celibate social worker. His more likely fate was as a single man with neither sufficient means nor proper guidance, who made a living as day laborer and lived as a “lodger” in one of the cheap and over-crowded lodging houses in New York’s notorious and disreputable Bowery district in the Lower East Side. Yet, McBurney’s biographer retrospectively described his early years in New York as an apprenticeship that provided him with training and experience he would need in his later life: “He knew young men – their temptations, their struggles, their needs, their possibilities, their peril. He had been alone in a great city, he had been without money, and almost without friends. He knew what it was to need work, he knew what it was to overcome temptation.”

McBurney belonged to the fortunate group of young strangers, who were “taken by the hand” by a good friend (in his case a former teacher from his Irish hometown who had migrated to New York earlier) to the YMCA upon the day of his arrival. The New York branch of the Young Men’s Christian Association had only existed for two years, and it had been founded to set a Protestant counterweight to the devastating erosion of the moral order which YMCA founders perceived to be caused by migration, urbanization, and industrialization. The Y was a counterweight in the city; it reacted to the temptations of urban life by providing an inner city meeting point for young men that offered fun and Christian education at the same time. Character building was the Y’s ultimate object. The strategy was to substitute the lack of familial conduct with friendly and wholesome Protestant guidance in a purely homosocial world. As historian Justin H. Pettegrew observes, the Christian clubhouse would replace the saloon and provide young men with the ability to develop proper means of self-conduct.

23 Doggett, Life of Robert McBurney 20–21.
24 Here, I am paraphrasing the John D. Gustav-Wrathall, Take the Young Stranger By the Hand. Same-Sex Relations and the YMCA (Chicago 1998) [henceforth Gustav-Wrathall, Young Stranger].
25 Pettegrew argues that the mid-nineteenth century saw the beginning of a masculinization of American Protestantism which then would have gone hand in hand with the development of a concept of the political as emerging from male-male relationships; Justin H. Pettegrew, Rescuing Young Men from the “Ruin of the City”. Religion, Masculinity, and the Founding of the Chicago YMCA, 1853–1858, in: Journal of Illinois History 10 (2007) 191–212. A similar argument is made by Clifford Putney, focusing on the emerging body culture and its interaction with a Protestant youth movement, men’s movement, and the YMCA. Putney,
In his early years in New York, McBurney learned the trade of a hatter and then made a living as a clerk. Upon his arrival, he became a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Mulberry Street and began to teach Sunday School. He also helped out in the YMCA, located only two blocks away on the second floor of the Stuyvesant Institute on South Broadway. Thus, he cruised through an urban space that was still part of the Bowery with its crowded tenement houses, where, as his biographer wrote, “the gates of sin stood wide”. The area was filled with theaters, saloons, and other places of temptation, seduction, and violence; the Bowery had the reputation of merging with the loneliness of young men to create a dangerous and explosive social blend.

In 1862 Robert McBurney’s life took another turn. After eight years in New York, he found a position as librarian at the YMCA, a change that his biographer described as the dawn of a period when he began to learn the art of governing from experienced men and prepared to dedicate his life to the progress of young men. Up to this point, recalled his mentor Cephas Brainerd, McBurney had been a subdued character. The leadership qualities he soon exhibited had not yet been evident. Learning from men of older generations, receiving guidance from “strong and leading characters”, and experiencing homosocial bonds beyond family ties were described as immensely important in McBurney’s education as a leader of young men.

"Being attractive to young men", which McBurney himself described as his greatest asset, convinced him to make the YMCA the great task of his life. Likewise, it was the attractiveness of young men to him that made the Y so important and the work so pleasant. Obviously, running into a “young English sailor boy” in the YMCA on Christmas’ Eve in 1863 was a crucial moment in his life. His friends and colleagues stressed that this sailor boy was representative of thousands of young men who had been lonesome, sad, and homesick before they found their way to the YMCA and enjoyed McBurney’s warm-hearted affection.

A few years later, a new and more professional board of directors appointed McBurney as secretary of the New York YMCA. At this point of his career, he also moved in with his mentor Cephas Brainerd and his wife at 190 East Nineteenth Street, where he spent the next four years. This move put some distance between him and the notorious Bowery, and it confirmed McBurney’s social climb. Brainerd was senior member on the board of directors. Friends and colleagues noted that the two men experienced a most “intimate and mutually influential”


28 Doggett, Life of Robert McBurney 51, 58, 59.
29 Doggett, Life of Robert McBurney 92–95.
friendship during this period. Howard Chudacoff emphasizes how common it was among bachelors of higher social status to live as boarders with close friends, mentors, or kin.30

The next step on the social ladder was a “bachelor apartment”, which would make McBurney’s difference from the workers, lodgers, and loafers of the Bowery and the Lower East Side even more manifest. Such an apartment symbolized the life of an urban bohème. A bohemian lifestyle seemed disreputable and dangerous and attractive, appealing and exotic at the same time. Around the turn of the century, the bachelor apartment was the apex of bachelorhood and signified the ability to create a specific type of domesticity, cosiness, and intimacy even without a family, something unachievable for a boarder or a lodger. Commentators stressed, with a hint of envy, that unmarried men in “bachelor apartments” were “better housed than any other class of persons in town”. Usually, apartments of this kind had a small bedroom and a large salon, which contained enough space for the arts and memorabilia which high-class bachelors had a reputation for collecting. Such apartments generally had no kitchen, since almost every block in New York provided unmarried men with bars and restaurants of different quality and style. Well-to-do bachelors could have meals delivered. In 1870, the first building of this kind was the Stuyvesant Apartments on Eighteenth Street, in a prosperous new quarter uptown from the Bowery and its problems. This building was just one block south of where McBurney lived with the Brainards.31

According to his friend, Richard C. Morse, McBurney had dreamed for a while of his own bachelor apartment.32 In 1870, the YMCA’s board of directors had a new building – renamed the McBurney YMCA in 1943 – constructed at 23rd Street and 4th Avenue. The five-floor building contained a library and lecture rooms, bathing facilities and a gym, all of which served to foster the social, intellectual, moral, and physical development of young men.33 The building was crowned by a little tower, which captured McBurney’s imagination and provided a fantastic view of the streets of Manhattan, including all its young drifters. It was impossible to dissuade McBurney from his plan of moving into a personal apartment in the tower, even though the board of directors worried that the dissolution of the boundary between the YMCA and McBurney’s private life would seriously harm his health. Yet, McBurney was not the only one who moved into the YMCA building. Several, mostly younger members of the staff who were described as the secretary’s “special friends” took rooms on the floor below McBurney’s tower.

30 Doggett, Life of Robert McBurney 88; Chudacoff, Age of the Bachelor 81–82.
32 Richard C. Morse: My Life With Young Men. Fifty Years in the Young Men’s Christian Association (New York 1918) 327 [henceforth Morse, Life].
apartment. His longtime companion Richard Morse commented on the closeness of their lives as follows: “I took the room below, and then we came together in the closest relations we had ever had. I helped him and he helped me in every possible way. Eugene Peck came into the work as his assistant, and after him Henry Webster. We were all together, aware of course, of one another’s failings as well as of one another’s excellencies . . . We never thought of separating; it was essential that we should be together.”

The living arrangements at the YMCA reflected the organization’s hierarchy, with McBurney at the top, the rest of the Y staff one floor below, and the young men staying in the building’s temporary residences on lower floors. This pattern reflected the homosocial structure of the YMCA, with experienced members as first among peers, guiding the others and passing on their knowledge and experience to the group. At the same time, in several respects the tower apartment stood for McBurney’s recent “upward mobility”: The social climb went along with a step-by-step move from downtown to midtown Manhattan and then to the top floor of the new YMCA building.

The McBurney tower apartment was an ideal bachelor apartment, consisting of a smaller bedroom and a larger living room. McBurney had developed into the archetype of a bohème bachelor in even more respects: He diligently took care of the way he dressed, and he enjoyed a living comfort and cosiness that was considered characteristic of bachelors. Besides his many books, he decorated his rooms with all sorts of bric-a-brac that he collected in antique shops of the neighborhood, such as old prints, thick rugs, and antique furniture. In general, well-to-do bachelors had a reputation for loving a heavy and often “oriental” atmosphere, merging notions of the bohème bachelor with the urban homosexual and the cosmopolitan connoisseur. McBurney was a male consumer, depicted as living at the fringes culturally, socially, sexually, and last but not least territorially. The image of the bachelor corresponded with a dynamic orientalism, with its distinctive sexualization of the Orient, which reconfirmed both the bachelor and the East as beyond the normative. It might be a coincidence that in the spring of 1892 McBurney’s one and only longer vacation trip took him to Palestine, which was not only the promised land of Christianity, but also the embodiment of the stylistic dreams of a bachelor life.

Soon, the tower rooms at 23rd Street and 4th Avenue became famous in Y circles nationally as a place of rendezvous. According to his biographer and other sources, McBurney dedicated his life not only to the young men of the city, but also to a nationwide network of YMCA leaders from all parts of the country. As he became one of the country’s most experienced Y secretaries, he supported col-

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34 Morse, McBurney 18; Doggett, Life of Robert McBurney 117.
35 Richard Morse at the memorial service for Robert McBurney, 19 April, 1899, acc. to Doggett, Life of Robert McBurney 259–260.
leagues in other cities in word and deed like a father: “He was as watchful as a father over his fellow-secretaries”, wrote Doggett. “He encouraged them, and whenever he thought they needed it, he reproved them.” In his apartment, McBurney also hosted friends overnight, reports Morse. Jacob T. Bowne from the Y’s international committee confirmed that he was always welcome whenever he had business to do in New York. Bowne, John Glover, also from the international committee, and George Hall, secretary for the state of New York, all stressed that they had the most fruitful conversations with McBurney in the morning hours while he shaved or dressed. The intimacy among the men is well expressed by one of Hall’s memories: “The best time to see him was in the morning. I found it a good plan to come to his room – not too early – and wake him up. While he was dressing his mind was free and he could advise.”

Sometimes, this companionship was even more intimate, for instance when men took care of their sick friends or when they went for fishing and camping trips into nature. Above all, their closeness is expressed by their mourning and tenderness in cases of separation or loss. In 1889, for example, a young member of the New York Y staff named H.P. Andersen moved from New York to North Carolina because of a pulmonary disease. McBurney is reported to have shed tears. Andersen himself stressed that “he showed to me that day a heart of love that no one has shown me except my own mother”. Yet, friends stressed that nothing surpassed the pain McBurney felt when in June 1883 his long-time companion Richard Morse finally married at the age of forty-two. For six years, Morse had lived with McBurney in the Y, and Jacob Bowne recalled “the struggle through which he passed when Mr. Morse was married. He seemed to feel as if he were left alone.”

The “Gay Male World” of the YMCA

Obviously, homosocial life at the YMCA was full of homoerotic moments and connotations. Each biographic or autobiographic entry provides ample material for queer readings. Many quotations that appear on the preceding pages are characteristic of the flow and diction of texts that scholars would identify as “queer”. Writings by and about McBurney abound with references to his love for “unruly boys”, his “attractiveness to good-looking young men”, his “tender-

37 All the statements are from the memorial service for McBurney on 19 April 1899, acc. to Doggett, Life of Robert McBurney 259–267.
38 Morse, Life 196–198. Even though this marriage lasted thirty-four years, it covers not more than two pages in Morse’s biography; on Bowne see Doggett, Life of Robert McBurney 262.
ness”, and the “temptations” of his job. He was constantly “looking after young fellows” who were the one and only source of meaning in his life. Contemporary commentators stressed that it was “wonderful” how much “he touched and influenced young men”40. The sources also contain numerous references to mutual affections between YMCA secretaries and intimate moments in their lives, such as waking each other in the morning, sharing a morning shave, embracing affectionately, or sharing a night in McBurney’s tower apartment. This closeness that was obviously possible among men would have been totally inappropriate between a bachelor and a woman or a girl. For a girl, just being in a bachelor apartment (not to speak of staying over night) was dubious at best and perhaps the beginning of her social downfall 41.

The historical context seems to confirm the queerness of these expressions. Let us recall the neighborhood where Robert McBurney spent so many years of his life. The Lower East Side and the Bowery had the reputation as a hotbed of heterosexual sin, where men met charity girls or bought the services of female prostitutes. As George Chauncey emphasized in Gay New York, by the 1870s the Bowery began to develop also into an area of male-male sex and a gay world. We do not know for sure, but it is most likely that Robert McBurney knew the gay bars, joints, and hotels in his neighborhood. Anything else would be surprising, because there were so many of them that he could hardly have missed them when he strolled down Mulberry Street, Bleecker Street, or the Bowery. He had spent years in boarding and lodging houses which were a largely homosocial world. Since the 1860s he had moved away spatially and socially from the boarding houses and the Bowery, but his YMCA position and his social circles necessitated maintaining some contact with his old neighborhood. Although uptown by about a mile, the YMCA at 23rd Street and 4th Avenue was still within range of the centers of urban vice, both downtown and in the seedy Tenderloin district, which stretched north from 23rd Street. McBurney’s constant efforts to seek and save young men gave the Bowery an unbroken attraction on him. Third, we know that many middle-class men from further north in Manhattan who were either married or had sufficient means to afford the intimacy of a bachelor apartment drove down to the Bowery regularly to go slumming or become at least temporarily part of New York’s gay male world 42.

Above all, the YMCAs themselves developed into hot spots of this gay male world. Founded as Protestant counterforce to the attractions of urban vice, the Ys rapidly turned into promising meeting points for men who desired men. Chauncey describes this transformation as starting in the 1890s, when New York YMCAs began to set up dormitories. Historian John Wrathall concurs that the

40 Doggett, Life of Robert McBurney 134.
41 Snyder, Paradise 274–275.
42 Chauncey, Gay New York 33–45. During the 1920s and 1930s, Chicago School sociologists researched such drifting between different neighborhoods and the double life of many men; Chad Heap, The City as a Sexual Laboratory. The Queer Heritage of the Chicago School, in: Qualitative Sociology 26/4 (2003) 457–487 [henceforth Heap, City].
YMCA turned into sexual laboratories for young men in the final decade of the nineteenth century. Yet, a quarter century earlier the new sports and bathing facilities in the New York YMCA had attracted numerous young men from around the city. While this very much pleased the board of directors, the sports and bathing facilities generated new spaces for homoerotic moments and sexual encounters among men. This homoerotic space seems to have helped to prompt the staff’s concern with devising and enforcing rules for the gymnasium and the bathing facilities. Right from the building’s opening in 1870, a special subcommittee oversaw these matters.

In the 1880s, members of the New York staff themselves became the focus of national criticism. As a letter from 1886 shows, Y secretaries from the Midwest noted with alarm a degree of homoeroticism among the New York YMCA staff. The conflict emerged on the occasion of Robert Weidensall’s fiftieth birthday. Weidensall, director of the international committee of the YMCA, lived in New York and was in close contact with McBurney. Reverend John C. Brandt, general secretary of the Indianapolis YMCA, despised the male closeness in New York. Brandt deplored Weidensall’s career and lifestyle in a letter to the coordinator of Weidensall’s birthday celebration. Wrathall provides several possible explanations for this letter. Brandt’s allusions obviously created feelings of uneasiness among Weidensall and other YMCA secretaries, who considered them inappropriate for the public ear and even for their personnel records. The original, handwritten version of Brandt’s letter openly disapproves of Weidensall’s bachelor life among men, describes him as immature, and cites the bad influence of other, notorious bachelors such as “Morse & McBurney” on Weidensall. But a typewritten version of the letter omits these passages. Indeed, someone jotted “omit” in the left margin of the original:

Weidensall is fifty is he? Just think of it. It seems but yesterday when we all thought we were boys. Isn’t there some mistake? Why he is not even married yet. ... Here he comes and says he is fifty and this important business of life is not yet attended to. It ought to have been done at least twenty-five years ago. I am sure you will agree that we would not have thought this of one so conscientious and devoted to every known duty as this dear Brother of ours has always shown himself to be. But here is another sad example of the influence of Associates. If in the early days of our association work we could have kept Weidensall away from Morse & McBurney and altogether under good wholesome western influence all this might have been different. It is some encouragement that Morse has seen his error repented and is now trying to undo the mischief of nearly a life time. But McBurney seems to be as obdurate as ever. Here he is right along side of Weidensall. Fifty years and no wife yet. I think some of you Chicago Brethren ought to lay aside all other matters for a year if necessary and teach these boys a thing or two. These young gentlemen should be shown up in their true light. They will

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44 Acc. to Doggett, Life of Robert McBurney 96–97.
be the ruin of the country if they are not stopped. You see already how...many of our brightest and best are going in the same wretched way. Brandt’s denunciation contained numerous references to themes that became highly visible in the sexual and social-science discourse of the following decades: Life among men and a same-sex orientation were described as signs of immaturity; male cohabitation and desire as spreading like a disease; individual lifestyles were deemed as closely related to the development of a culture and a nation; life in the Midwest, especially its small towns and rural areas, was presented as chaste and pure by comparison to the decadent atmosphere of New York. Deleting this paragraph may have been motivated by various reasons: First, a eulogy was read during Weidensall’s birthday celebration, composed of quotations from Brandt’s and other letters. Obviously, double-sided references to the life among boys and men were deemed inappropriate for a larger public. A purged, typed version of the letter would have provided some protection against unwanted quotations and allusions. Secondly, Weidensall was eager to create a clean, well-ordered historical record. He began to organize his personal papers at the beginning of the twentieth century, when sexual-science discourse gained momentum, pointing a figure at homosocial behavior, and the number of unmarried YMCA secretaries began to shrink. Retrospectively, he might have considered his bachelor life and Brandt’s criticism of its homoerotic implications as potentially damaging to the memory of his life and career with the YMCA. He preferred to have a biography without sexual ambiguities and to keep hints of his possible “life among young men” hidden in the closet. Obviously, Weidensall preferred to be remembered as celibate social worker who refrained from matrimonial pleasures in the name of his Christian mission, rather than as sexual traveler between two worlds and part of the modern gay male world. If this speculation is true, it must be an accident that the handwritten letter survived in Weidensall’s personal archives. Anyhow, the various complications surrounding the survival of Brandt’s original letter and its subsequent editing show that contemporaries noticed the homoerotic connotations of a life among men. Leading figures in the YMCA movement took note of such behavior, which they either decried or sought to cover up, depending on how they were involved.

As mentioned before, nineteenth-century YMCA secretaries were often single. This is particularly true for New York, where two out of four leading staff members remained unmarried for their lifetimes, while Richard Morse married at the age of forty-two. Around the turn of the century, the YMCA began to im-

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45 Quoted in John D. Wrathall, Provenance as Text. Reading the Silences around Sexuality in Manuscript Collections, in: Journal of American History 79/1 (1992) 165–178 [henceforth Wrathall, Provenance]. The letter from John B. Brandt to W.W. Vanarsdale, April, 14, 1886, is in Business Correspondence, Robert Weidensall Papers, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota. See also Gustav-Wrathall, Young Stranger 70–90, 72–75.

46 Morse called his autobiography, “My Life With Young Men”.

47 Sedgwick, Epistemology.

48 Wrathall, Provenance, and Gustav-Wrathall, Young Stranger 70–90.
prove the living and working conditions for married men with the explicit intention of raising their number among the staff. Obviously, the Y was concerned about the sexual, social, and emotional stability of older bachelors living among young men. Bachelors now seemed prone to immaturity and negligence, as the Brandt letter suggested already in 1886. By the 1930s, finally, almost all the Y secretaries were married. Nevertheless, during the same period of the early twentieth century, the YMCA became famous as a prime gay cruising spot, part of a vibrant and sexually loaded nightlife that extended from Greenwich Village to the Tenderloin district and then uptown to Harlem. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, not only jazz music, but also cabarets, shows with “pansy acts”, and “drag balls” attracted numerous New Yorkers, no matter whether they considered themselves queer or straight. During the same decades a sexual and social-science discourse gained momentum, becoming commonplace in New York and creating new conditions for the perception of McBurney, his friends and colleagues. This sexual science discourse and its relevance to the contemporary understanding of the bachelor shall be briefly presented in the final section of this chapter.

Sexual and Social Sciences as a Modern Strategy of Regulation

In 1886, the year that a Midwestern YMCA leader announced his uneasiness regarding male life in New York, Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s book, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, was published in Stuttgart. Seven years later, the first American edition of the book appeared. And in 1900, Random House in New York published Havelock Ellis’s *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*. In September 1909, Sigmund Freud synthesized his sexual theories in five lectures at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. Even though Freud was not yet a star in the United States, for a couple of years the reception of his work had been on the rise. Psychologists as renowned as William James had been interested in Freud for years already. Representatives of American psychology and medicine, as well as members of the press and the public, were eager to hear what Freud had to say. His trip to America proved a catalyst for the reception of his work among American researchers and the public alike. Beginning in the 1910s, the influence of psychoanalysis and sexual sciences expanded in the United States. The influence was especially visible in large cities such as New York. Freud himself regularly complained about the widespread, but superficial reception of his work in America.

49 Gustav-Wrathall, Young Stranger 70–90.
Krafft-Ebing’s, Ellis’s and Freud’s concepts varied substantially, and they represented only three positions in a large, dynamic field. Since the 1880s, a substantial number of voices had contributed to the creation of a field of knowledge known as “sexuality” or “sexology”. These voices were diverse, but they shared several common features. First, they were expressions of the modern idea that objective and impartial knowledge of things, people, and their relations could be identified with the intention of transforming disorders of desire and behavior into proper patterns. Second, these many voices came together to form a powerful field of sexual knowledge that remained rich and multifaceted. Sexology and the social sciences focused on and interacted with the sexual and social diversity evident in urban centers by the second half of the nineteenth century. Third, the observation of sexual diversity went hand in hand with an effort to differentiate sound, healthy, and “normal” desires on the one side from multiple types of pathologies on the other. Sexual science concepts diffused into popular culture and everyday life, where they came to guide and instruct Americans. These seemingly easy-to-use sexual theories invited Americans to analyze themselves, to observe the own behavior, and to seek to determine and interpret their innermost secret desires. In the 1920s, for example, an American publisher planned a popular source book with short pieces of Freud’s writings on psychoanalysis and sexual sciences that people would use in a do-it-yourself, self-help fashion, an approach that Freud abhorred as superficial.

This sexual discourse developed in two directions. First, it revolved around a description and understanding of sexual variations which gained apparent validity through constant reiteration. Secondly, this discourse put these variations in relation to a sexual and social “normal”, which led to the reaffirmation of the nuclear family as the normative ideal in the center of American society and culture. This reaffirmation was now based on sociological and psychological analyses that seemed modern, scientific, and therefore true.

The discursive definition of sexual diversity and variation merits a closer look. In the 1890s, an understanding of sex drives was emerging which dissolved the close ties between sexual desire and reproduction that had been predominant up to this point in time. The concepts of “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” began to emerge. Initially both were related to sexual desires and activities outside
of the ideals of romantic love, monogamous matrimony, and reproduction. Therefore, both were considered as describing sexualized beings beyond the normal. Homosexuality was understood as an abnormal desire directed at the same sex, heterosexuality as directed at the other sex. As Dorland’s Medical Dictionary from 1901 told readers, heterosexuality meant “abnormal or perverted appetite toward the opposite sex”. Thus, until the first decades of the twentieth century, heterosexuality signified non-normal, pathological sexual desires. Yet, at the same time it expressed a consumer’s attitude towards sex that was in harmony with the paradigms of an emerging modern consumer society. The image of the urban bachelor took shape precisely amid this ambiguity: He embodied a modern culture dominated by the search for consumption and pleasure, even with regard to the innermost desires. At the same time, it was precisely this consumption-pleasure-desire nexus that experts deemed problematic and even pathological, because the bachelor’s sex led to a sphere beyond monogamous matrimony and had, therefore, the potential to be socially destabilizing. This was deemed true no matter if the bachelor’s behavior inclined toward homosexuality or heterosexuality.

Freud made his own contributions to this particular form of linkage between the sexual and the social. Freud’s thought was based on recognition of a libido, a force that sought satisfaction in numerous ways. Even so, his thinking was highly normative, for instance when he explained to his readers which types of desires and satisfactions were considered adequate, proper, and – above all – conducive to cultural progress. Desiring the opposite sex with a focus on a partner’s sexual organs indicated a successful, healthy sexual development from early childhood to maturity. Freud considered everything else, particularly oral and anal lust and satisfaction, to be immature for an adult, less developed, less civilized, something that should have been left behind in childhood, and therefore pathological.

Freud’s model of sexuality concurred with most competing sexual theories in deeming the nuclear family as the one and only social and cultural sphere that would provide the child with an environment for a proper development. According to Freud and his contemporary sexologists, only a nuclear family would nurture a child through the complex process of acceptance and rejection, of desire and rivalry, of grappling with incestuous lust and patricide in order to form the sort of desire for the opposite sex that seemed the basis of individual normality as well as

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54 Sigmund Freud, Three Contributions to Sexual Theory (New York 1910), first published in German in 1905.
of a stable culture and civilization. Only rarely did Freud use the term “heterosexuality”, but his writings contributed a great deal to its emergence as a key term in the definition of opposite-sex desires as normal and healthy, particularly when such desires were acted out through the creation of a family. From this perspective, the bachelor may have been the embodiment of a modern order, shaped by urbanization, industrialization, consumerism, sexual diversity, and scientific thinking, and yet at the same time, he stood at the fringes of this order. In the same decades around the turn of the century which Chudacoff describes as the “age of the bachelor”, sexual sciences emerged and shaped the knowledge and even the certainty that only the nuclear family was a fertile ground for a healthy sexual development and the seedbed for enduring social and cultural stability.

In 1934 Vanguard Press in New York published a volume that analyzed the bachelor from multiple scientific viewpoints as “peculiarly a phenomenon of modern times”, as the Chicago sociologist Ernest W. Burgess wrote in his contribution to the book. The title clearly indicated the book’s focus on “the sex life of the unmarried adult”. The editors sought to understand the bachelor, his sexuality, and his meaning for modern society by gathering expert voices from multiple fields of modern, scientific knowledge. Sociology, economy, anthropology, literature, medicine, psychology and several other disciplines were represented in the book. Both topic and approach made the book a peculiarly modern effort, which Erich Fromm praised in a review as “highly remarkable”. All in all, stressed psychologist Ernest R. Groves in his essay, the volume expressed a finding based on Sigmund Freud’s writings, “that sex has a larger meaning for the human career than appears on the surface”. In recent decades, Chicago School sociologists had paid more and more attention to sexuality. They had conducted interdisciplinary research projects that had contributed to understanding the relation of “sexual” and “social pathologies”, as the title of one of Burgess’ classes at the University of Chicago indicated. The modern city was the laboratory of their research. In numerous studies, the Chicago School strove for the definition of “urban personality types” according to their relation to the sexual.

This research suggested that the bachelor was one of the crucial personality types of the modern, urban world. His sexual life was perceived as possibly homosexual, though not necessarily so. According to Burgess, homosexuality was caused by a combination of social, psychological, and biological factors. The urban environment itself spurred many new, specialized types of sexual desires and interactions, including those that involved only brief and peripheral exchanges between people in the city. Burgess analyzed the rise of the bachelor as expression of modern, urban life, characterized by a specific type of popular cul-

ture, a larger equality among the sexes, and, last but not least, more leeway for individuals. At the same time, Burgess identified a disproportionate share of unmarried men and women among criminals, lunatics, disabled, and those afflicted by venereal diseases. Thus, he nourished the understanding that bachelor status went along with a higher likelihood of malfunctioning in society. Therefore, Burgess concluded, even though a widespread acceptance of sexuality and desires outside the boundaries of matrimony existed, marriage still remained the culturally and socially preferred type of sexual relationship. 

A year later, in 1935, the so-called Committee for the Study of Sex Variants was formed in New York. Sponsored with funds from the prestigious Rockefeller Foundation, this project brought together social scientists, urban researchers, and eleven medical doctors from endocrinology to psychiatry, who were to cooperate on an analysis of the obvious sexual plurality in New York. The idea was to research the variations of sexual behavior in their medical, psychological, and social dimensions. The research team was dominated by experts from the medical profession, who seemed best suited to come to terms with the twists and turns of thirty-three individuals whose biographies were under consideration. The project provided the interviewees with an opportunity to make their voices heard, but even so, they were observed, described, classified, and presented in a sexual taxonomy in a way that threatened to depersonalize their stories.

In 1941, the New York study was published in two volumes covering over 1,000 pages. It displayed how modern social, medical, and sexual-science research participated in shaping “the homosexual” as “a species”, to paraphrase Michel Foucault’s famous dictum: observed, analyzed, categorized, standardized, registered as deviant and psychopathological. According to the head of this research group, psychiatrist George Henry from the Payne-Whitney Psychiatric Clinic, the gay male world was populated by a deviant sex type. In accordance with Freudian theory, Henry described this sex type as never having reached maturity and as being a side product of the modern world, with its increasingly complex demands for the creation of functional families. If families emerged from this sexually deviant context at all, they were mostly dysfunctional, and the developmental deficits and pathologies were transmitted over the generations. The only viable antidote was support for functional nuclear families, which were deemed as pro-


58 Foucault, Wille zum Wissen 58. This is not of course meant to imply that sexualized subjects did not exist before the nineteenth century or that there existed only one specific homosexual identity since the late nineteenth century. It hints much more at historic specific mechanisms of specification and classification which came along with the description of manifold and diverse desires. On the controversial debate on Foucault’s “act of polemical bravado” see Sedgwick, Epistemology 44–48, and David M. Halperin, How to Do the History of Homosexuality (Chicago 2002) 10–14, 104–137.
viding children with parental role models who could teach them proper, “natural” sex roles. Sexual pathology, dysfunctional families, and social chaos were understood as mutually interdependent, a mélange described and explained by modern science.

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Modern life appeared to be urban, diverse and highly ambiguous – culturally, socially, and sexually, with bachelors like Robert McBurney at its center, with their distinctive way of living and their fuzzy and conspicuous desires. Such bachelors lived beyond the boundaries of Victorian families in every respect. The YMCA confirms the ambiguity of the modern world: Created as institution to counteract urban vice and modern desires, it turned into a hotspot of gay male life and culture. As the example of Robert McBurney shows, the same person could shape history in both ways. Bachelors (and the YMCA) were neither an effect nor a cause of modernity; they emerged hand in hand with it. Even though single life existed before the mid-nineteenth century, it took center stage only with the advent of modernity. The same is true for concomitant strategies of sexual regulation, which were meant to create order from chaos and fuzziness, especially since sexual ambiguity threatened momentous social consequences. Like bachelorhood, the sexual and social sciences emerged as part of the modern configuration; they put forth specifically modern strategies for the creation of a new order from a chaos, which was itself “peculiarly a phenomenon of modern life”.

Summary