Since ancient times, efforts have been made to tax bachelors. Periodically, onerous financial burdens were placed upon unmarried men by the Greeks and Romans. And as early as 1695, Europe got into the act with, eventually, nearly every country there imposing some kind of levy upon men who had managed to avoid Cupid’s dart.

The reasons for these penalties were multifaceted. First, there were empty national exchequers that needed refilling, and tax revenues from bachelors would help that cause. Second, there was often a need to replace the men killed in Europe’s many wars, and this could best be done by maximizing the number of marriages. And finally, with so many widows created by combat losses, the state needed to find husbands for these women, who might otherwise end up needing government support.

The practice of taxing men for the right to remain single was not confined to Europe, of course. South Africa initiated such a charge in 1919 in an effort to get whites to match a burgeoning black population. And Argentina, for years, had a system in place that required a heavy tribute from those males who wished to avoid matrimony. With the idea of taxing bachelors popular across Europe and elsewhere in the world, it was inevitable that the concept should eventually reach American shores.

At least once (in 1913), legislation was introduced in Congress that envisioned taxing single men and putting the proceeds into pensions for widows and children. Under this bill (which never passed), widows with one child would receive $8 per month with $4 added for each additional offspring.

While the federal government gave just passing thought to leveling tithes upon unattached men, the matter received much more serious thought outside of Washington, D.C. Many legislatures across the country debated the merits of such an imposition, and at least four states—Georgia, Maryland, Montana and Wyoming—actually passed laws taxing the bachelors within their borders.

Beneficiaries of the money collected varied from place to place and even at different times. Generally speaking, the proposed and actual laws burdening the wallets of bachelors directed the fees thus derived on to beneficiaries such as orphans’ homes, widows’ pensions, schools, homeless children, people who had babies, the poor, and old maids.

Not surprisingly, there was pushback to these actions from the taxed. Some, seeking to ridicule the movement, suggested a companion tax on bustles. Others, looking at the fairness issue, said women who refused to accept a suitor’s hand should also have to contribute to the public treasury. Uniform justice or equal burden was certainly a weakness of the bachelor-tax movement, and the Montana Supreme Court declared such exactions illegal in 1922.

Michigan never imposed a tax on single men, but it was not for want of trying. In the very year Michigan became a state, Senator Edward D. Ellis of Monroe proposed that “every bachelor of the age of thirty years and upwards, shall be subject to an annual tax,
to be paid into the county treasury, of five dollars, for the benefit of old maids.” While this 1837 measure failed, it was just the beginning of an ongoing effort to encourage unmarried men to perform what some viewed as their social duty.

In 1848, 40 Michigan citizens petitioned the legislature “for the passage of a law taxing old bachelors, for the support of indigent females, widows and orphans....” While this request made it to a committee in the House of Representatives, it was not brought to a vote in that chamber.

The following year, a bill was introduced in the House to “tax bachelors for the relief of indigent widows and orphans,” but it, too, never made it out of committee. In 1850, some men and women of Oakland County petitioned the legislature, “praying for the passage of a law imposing a tax on that class of the lords of creation, usually called bachelors, for the education of orphan children.” This overture did not find a sponsor and thus went nowhere in the House.

The costs of fighting the Civil War caused legislators to seek imaginative ways of raising money to pay the bills. One member of the Michigan House introduced a bill designed to tax bachelors, but this proposal died in committee. Prospects for the measure would have likely been much brighter had it included an exemption for single men serving in the military.

Michigan’s efforts to make single men behave “responsibly” or suffer the consequences quieted down until 1897, when a bill was introduced in the House of Representatives to require bachelors over the age of 30 to pay an annual tax of $5. Another legislator threatened to introduce “a bill to provide a penalty for old maids refusing to accept first proposals from bachelors,” and this produced a standoff that killed both measures.

Despite the objections raised in the past, bills taxing bachelors more than 30 years old were introduced in the Michigan House in 1901 and 1911. Like their predecessors, these measures died almost upon arrival in the state capitol. If proponents of laws penalizing single men were to succeed, they needed additional facts to support their case.

Such evidence was provided by the Kalamazoo Chief of Police in 1916. He noted that “90 per cent of the criminals in Kalamazoo are bachelors.” He had worked in law enforcement for nearly 20 years, and during that time, he learned that “it’s the unmarried man and woman who break the laws; next comes the married men without children, and then the people with families to support.”

The police chief observed that there were between six and seven bachelors for every married man in jail, leading him to conclude that if any part “of the human family is a menace [to society] the bachelor is the class. The reason for this is not hard to find. A bachelor is generally selfish” for not taking responsibility for a mate.

Armed with this ammunition, advocates of the bachelor tax renewed their efforts in 1919. A Michigan legislator announced his support of a bill to require men ages 38 to 43 to pay an annual tax of 50 cents and men between ages 43 and 48 to pay 20 cents each year. There were exceptions, however, as he noted that “widowers between the ages of 30 and 40 and men who have obtained divorces will not be subject to the tax.”

The purpose of the contemplated law was not just to sic the tax collector on singles, but also to encourage romance. The sponsor of the measure said that “in order to stimulate interest in matrimony,” his submission provided that “any person subject to the provisions of [his] bill who marries, shall be paid a bonus of $2...”

This 1919 version of the bachelor levy did not gain traction, so another attempt was made in the next session of the Michigan Legislature. Thus, in 1921, a resolution was proposed in the House to place “a tax of $50 on old maids above the age of 28 and $100 on bachelors above that age, the proceeds to be used for the retirement of [veterans’] bonus bonds.” There was absolutely no support for this measure, and it was promptly buried by lawmakers.

The last known attempt to place a Michigan duty on marriage-free men came in 1935. In that year, a bill was introduced declaring that “all bachelors in this state of 21 years of age and upwards, except inmates of state and municipal institutions, shall pay an annual tax of ten dollars.” The measure went on to say that one-half of the funds derived would “be credited to the mothers’ pension fund and one-half...to the fund for the care of dependent children.”

Realizing that such an imposition would not be popular, the measure contained penalties for those individuals who tried to avoid payment. The bill ended by warning that “any bachelor failing to register as provided in this act shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor and upon conviction shall be liable to a fine not exceeding one hundred dollars or imprisonment in the county jail for a period not exceeding 90 days, or both....”

This bill came during the depths of the Great Depression. A large percent of Michiganders were living on the margins and, with very little income, many could not afford to get married even if they wanted to do so. Given the fact that many men in the state were bachelors due to economic conditions and not choice, there was no support for the measure and it was quickly dispensed with.

By now, the proponents of assessing bachelors had been at it in Michigan for nearly a century, and at no time in their struggle did they even come close to realizing their ambitions. Succeeding legislatures have apparently taken note of this fact and, for the past 77 years, have avoided trying to be matchmakers between single men and state tax collectors. ■