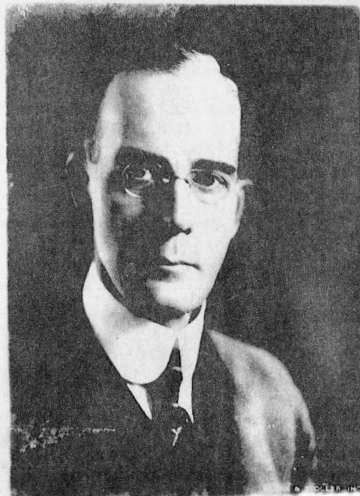


UVM art professor Michael Oatman, with pieces from his exhibit "Long Shadows: Henry Perkins and the Eugenics Survey of Vermont." The exhibit delves into a little-known chapter of Vermont history.

Pure Vermont

Social eugenics sounds like the stuff of Nazi Germany, but even in America – and Vermont – “Human Betterment” had its proponents.



T By Sally Pollak *Free Press Staff*

The 19-year-old woman has been arrested for prostitution. Her record includes an account of her sexual and criminal history. On psychiatric evaluation she is labeled in the “lower imbecile range, lacking in judge-

ment.”
“It seems quite probable she will go on becoming pregnant from time to time unless she is sterilized, which procedure is widely recommended,” writes the physician William Boyd Curtis.

The woman lived on North Winooski Avenue, and she may or may not have been one of the 200 or so Vermont residents who were subjected to state-sanctioned sterilization.

In 1931 – on April Fool’s day, as it happened – Gov. Stanley Wilson signed

“It’s about a bunch of people who had absolutely no power: the bottom of the barrel,” said Kevin Dann, the historian who unearthed the arrest record. “They were female, they were poor, more often than not they were uneducated and had already been labeled. Who would speak for them? They had no voice.”

Vermont was not alone, and in fact was late, in its legislation. Indiana passed a similar law, the country’s first, in 1907. Vermont’s bill was 25th.

TO BUILD A BETTER RACE

It is not known how many people were sterilized under the act, a version of which remains on the books today. A 1936 publication of the American Neurological Association names 97 Vermont sterilizations, 65 of them women. Dann and others put the total at the 200 or so Vermont residents who were subjected to state-sanctioned sterilization.

UVM found: “What is happening to the old Vermont stock?...What of the seedlings? How can Vermont stock best be conserved and made to continue to provide its share of leaders for the nation and builders of the state?”
– *Rural Vermont: A Program for the Future, 1931*

Soil, seedlings and weeds:

A REFLECTION ON EUGENICS

Testimony of Bruce S. Post
Committee on General, Housing and Military Affairs

Submitted February 4, 2020

Most of my life, I knew next to nothing about eugenics. That began to change in 2008. After retiring, I initiated research on a long-held fascination: the Green Mountain Parkway, part of a large National Park proposed for Vermont by the Franklin Roosevelt Administration. For years, I accepted the common myth about the Parkway: that it was to be built on the spine of the Green Mountains, and that it was defeated to preserve Vermont’s mountain environment. For me, that myth was shattered when I read a 1936 letter from Lt. Gov. George Aiken. Apparently, many Vermonters were more concerned about a different kind of environmental degradation: Jews using the Parkway to come to Vermont. Later, as Chair of the State Board of Libraries, I presided over a debate to change the name of the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Book Award because of Mrs. Fisher’s alleged involvement in the Vermont eugenics program. Today, I am here to share the gradual deepening of my knowledge of eugenics and to express my strong support for the objectives of J.R.H. 7.

Where are Vermont's stumbling stones?

LOOKING BEYOND THE MYTH OF VERMONT EXCEPTIONALISM



Stolpersteine or stumbling stone, Berlin, Germany, 2016

On New Year's Eve, 2016, I tripped over an uneven part of the sidewalk in the Charlottenburg area of Berlin, Germany. A brass plaque, embedded in the concrete and surrounded by small stones, lay at my foot. I asked our daughter who lives in Germany what this meant. She translated the words: "Here lived Philippine Goldemann, born Rothmann, birth year 1882, deported November 14, 1941, murdered in Minsk." The stumbling stone project was initiated in 1992 to literally put under the feet of the German people chilling reminders of Germany's Holocaust crimes. For the first time, I encountered an example of what the German people call "Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung" or working out the past, the long and painful process of confronting Germany's acts of genocide in World War II. Having learned how prominent Vermonters supported highly restrictive immigration practices and the sterilization of "defectives," I asked, "Where are Vermont's stumbling stones?", and of course, there were none.

Vermonters are more accustomed to hearing themselves described as exceptional people, exemplars for other Americans. A 2010 campaign ad by gubernatorial candidate Matt Dunne did just that, calling Vermont "the conscience of our country." We are somehow better, different. Yet, as historian Charlie Morrissey has written, "The trouble with Vermont is that Vermont is not different enough." It certainly wasn't when it came to eugenics.



PROLOGUE: A STATE OF DECLINE

A monument outside the National Archives states “What is past is prologue.” Before the eugenics movement flowered, Vermont experienced a century of decline. Many of its best and brightest - *the good seed* - fled the state for better pastures. Vermont stagnated. Many of those who stayed behind despaired over what was lost. Population leveled off, but its decline, ironically, was prevented by many of the immigrants who would be called “scum,” some of whose descendants might later be targets for sterilization. The passage below is from my article “Dear Little State Among the Dark Green Hills” (*Walloomsack Review*, 2017), borrowing from Lewis Stilwell’s classic *Migration from Vermont*.

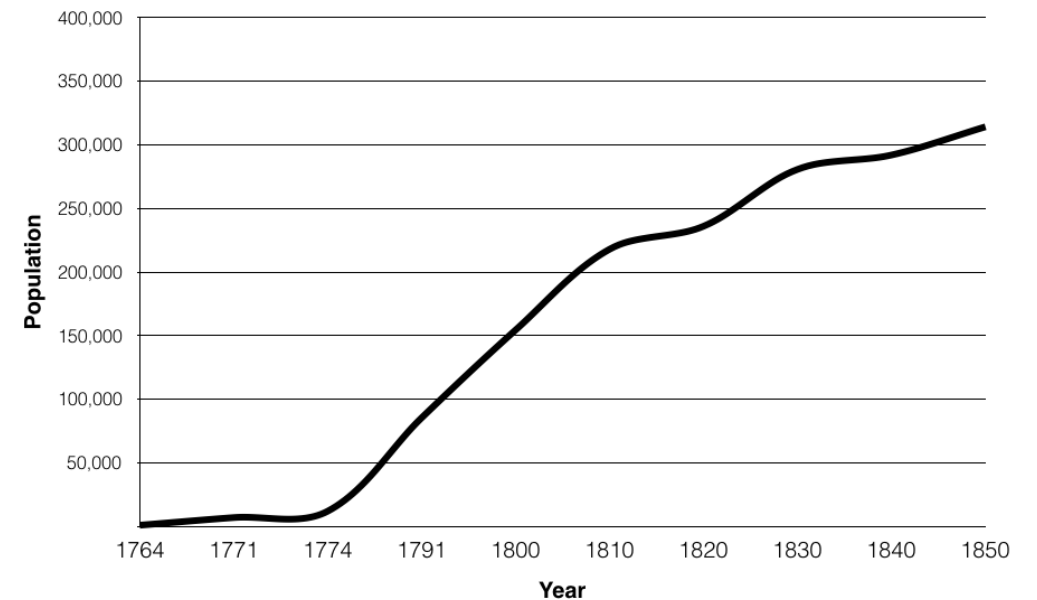
In the decade of the 1820s, the mournful bell of destruction tolled with accelerating frequency. Stilwell wrote what could have been an autopsy for much of the state: “The forests were dwindling. The great days of potash production ended as the clearings were completed. At the same time the lumber trade was shrinking.”

Nature, we are told, abhors a vacuum; so, too, in these circumstances, did landholders in the Green Mountains. Vermonters, having cut and burned their way from New Hampshire to New York, Massachusetts to Canada, crowned a new aristocracy – sheep – to replace Vermont’s toppled aristocracy of hardwoods.

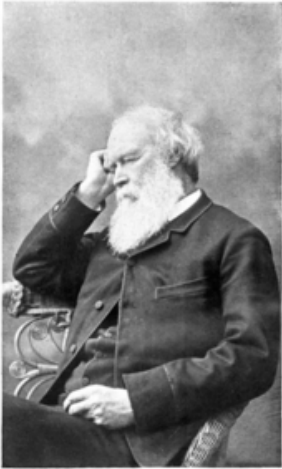
By 1840, 1,681,000 sheep destructively munched on our hills, outnumbering people six to one. They so thoroughly dominated Vermont agriculture that the Deep South’s reliance on King Cotton took second place to the sovereignty of sheep in Vermont. “Laissez les bon temps rouler,” say the French, “Let the good times roll.” Again, it was an illusion, and the good times stopped. Like lumber, potash and wheat before them, sheep were dethroned. Boom turned to bust, leaving behind another environmental wasteland.

That was not all that was left behind. As croplands wore out, grazing lands expanded. Yet, pasturing and grazing is less labor intensive than croppage. Thousands of Vermonters voted with their feet, heading north, south and west, leaving their native state for wherever “More, More, More” beckoned. According Stilwell, “by 1860, more than half of the towns in the state were losing population, and forty-two percent of the natives of Vermont were living in other states.”

Vermont Population Trends — 1764 to 1850



OUR SOIL: A CULTURE OF FEAR OF THE OUTSIDER

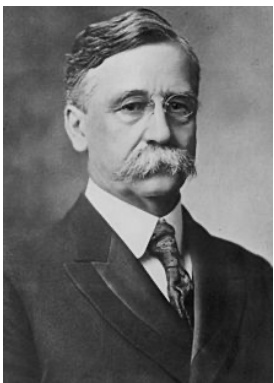


"For years the State was infested with an inferior class of these people, who plied the vocation of professional beggars.... They were an abominable crew of vagabonds, robust, lazy men and boys, slatternly women with litters of filthy brats, and all as detestable as they were uninteresting."

– **Rowland Evans Robinson** describing French Canadians in *Vermont: A Study of Independence*
(Robinson was a son of the Rokeby Robinson's, Vermont's leading abolitionists)

"Biological laws tell us that certain divergent people will not mix or blend,.... The dead weight of alien accretion stifles national progress."

– **Calvin Coolidge**, "Whose Country Is This?", *Good Housekeeping*, Feb, 1921



"When Hitler praised American restrictions on naturalization, he had in mind the Immigration Act of 1924, which imposed national quotas and barred most Asian people altogether. For Nazi observers, this was evidence that America was evolving in the right direction, despite its specious rhetoric about equality. The Immigration Act, too, played a facilitating role in the Holocaust, because the quotas prevented thousands of Jews, including Anne Frank and her family, from reaching America."

– Alex Ross, "How American Racism Influenced Hitler," *The New Yorker*, April, 2018

Vermont U.S. Senator William Dillingham helped devise immigration quotas that later influenced the Immigration Act of 1924, which was signed by President Calvin Coolidge.

THE GOOD SEED: OUR LEGACY AND OUR HOPE

All the quotes below are taken from *Rural Vermont: A Program for the Future* (The Vermont Commission on Country Life, 1931)

- “For more than a century, Vermont has been one of the most reliable seedbeds of our national life.
- The work in Eugenics led to the conviction that a comprehensive survey of the factors influencing life in Vermont was essential to the understanding of the human forces which make for progress in the state. Thus, the center of interest from the beginning was the people.
- Are there “pockets of degeneracy” hidden in our hills? How can the people of the state perform to best advantage their duty toward handicapped children? How can the lives of the blind, the mentally defective and other handicapped persons be made as cheerful and useful as possible. How can this portion of the population be kept at a minimum in the future?
- What of the seedlings? How can Vermont stock best be conserved and made to continue to provide its share of leaders for the nation and builders of the state.
- ... it is the patriotic duty of every normal couple to have children in sufficient number to keep up to par the ‘good old Vermont stock.’”



WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE ARE VERMONTERS? JUDGE THEM BY THIS PICTURE.

Scanned from *The Vermonter - The State Magazine*

GETTING RID OF THE WEEDS - GOV. STANLEY WILSON INAUGURATION, JAN. 1931



Governor Wilson's remarks regarding State institutions also seem to us fitting and timely. He recommends extensive repairs at the Soldier's Home at Bennington, to cost \$30,000, and a like sum for heating plant repairs and improvements at the Vermont Sanatorium at Pittsford. He says the State Hospital at Waterbury is getting overcrowded and that a fireproof building to handle at least 50 additional patients with attendants should be provided. The estimated cost of such a building, equipped, is \$125,000. Then the Governor added two important paragraphs which we quote:

"In this connection I call your attention to the fact that the number of our insane and feeble-minded is constantly increasing with a corresponding increase in the burden cast on the communities and the State. We are doing our duty about the care of these unfortunates, but practically nothing to prevent a further increase in their number. Medical science points out one definite course which has been followed successfully in some states.

"I believe it is folly to keep erecting more buildings for our feeble-minded and insane and yet disregard ordinary business and social precautions. The Supervisors of the Insane in their biennial report recommended the enactment of a properly safeguarded sterilization law. You will do well to give this matter serious consideration."

— Burlington Free Press - January 10, 1931

GETTING RID OF THE WEEDS - NEWSPAPER SUPPORT

Sterilization

The Senate committee on public health has presented to the Legislature a sterilization bill, along the lines recommended by Governor Stanley C. Wilson in his inaugural address. We have not yet had occasion to read the full text of the bill, but from the newspaper summary of it we would say that it was the sort of a bill which should receive the support of those who wish to see control of the increase in feeble-minded, insane and criminals from among our own population. This bill should be given careful study by those interested in this movement.

BURLINGTON, MARCH 20, 1931.

Aiding Defectives

The sterilization bill, which has passed the Senate, will be in the House this morning with a majority favorable report from the committee. It is probable that there will be real opposition to the measure on the floor of the House, because of considerable difference of opinion on the subject.

We have pointed out from time to time reasons why we believe this bill should pass. We have shown that hereditary insanity and feeble-mindedness is apparently increasing in Vermont, owing to the fact that it is impossible to segregate all those who should be in institutions and under supervision.

We have shown that our State hospital for the insane and school for the feeble minded are filled to capac-

Why Sterilization?

Undoubtedly one of the most controversial subjects before the Legislature at the present time is that of sterilization. The number of letters pro and con, which the various papers in the state have been receiving on this subject indicate this fact.

We will not undertake to summarize here all of the arguments made against sterilization. But some of them advanced at the public

Americans and Slums
(Bennington Banner)

An over Sunday item states that in the city of Troy the slums are found to have more Americans than people of alien races. The Banner has often remarked that while there are plenty of criminals and degenerates of foreign birth and foreign blood the worst crimes in Vermont, at least, are generally the work of persons of New England blood. This, however, should not lead the sons and daughters of recent European parentage to esteem themselves over highly for the reason that Vermont has many more New Englanders than the combined population of all recent arrivals. The greatest causes of crime are degeneracy, alcoholism and inbreeding. Germany is making an interesting experiment in curbing future crime by sterilizing young criminals regardless of sex and also the insane and degenerate people whose children might be expected to reproduce similar symptoms.

"We have not yet had occasion to read the full text of the bill, but from the newspaper summary of it we should say that it was the sort of bill which should receive the support of those who wish to see control of the increase in feeble-minded, insane and criminals from among our own population." – Burlington Free Press, February 4, 1931

"Sterilization is merely the remedy for calling a halt on transmission of diseases of the mind from one generation to another, just as vaccination and inoculation are remedies for stopping the spread of contagious diseases." – Burlington Free Press, March 5, 1931

"... we believe that sterilization is not only a safeguard to society, but that it is an actual aid to the mental defectives themselves." – Burlington Free Press, March 20, 1931

"Germany is making an interesting experiment in curbing future crime by sterilizing young criminals regardless of sex and also the insane and degenerate people whose children might be expected to reproduce similar symptoms." – Bennington Banner, May 1935

"I don't deal with a closed system of ethics. I'm not a philosopher, I'm not a theorist, and still less a theologian. To me morality today is the same as it was yesterday, and indeed the same as it was the day before yesterday; the same after Auschwitz, during Auschwitz and in times, even centuries and millennia before Auschwitz. It is the same for intellectuals and illiterates, for those who were in Europe at the time, and also for us Americans, struggling with our own problems whatever they might be.... There is no such thing in my mind as situational ethics. It is the same for everyone everywhere and we know it."

– Raul Hilberg, UVM's Holocaust scholar,
University of Oregon conference on Ethics After the
Holocaust, 1996

Bruce S. Post, a 1969 Norwich graduate, has worked for several members of the Vermont and other congressional delegations. He was Chief of Staff for U.S. Rep. John B. Anderson during Anderson's 1980 presidential campaign and also served as a researcher and speechwriter for U.S. Senator Hubert H. Humphrey in the 1972 Democratic presidential primaries. As Vermont Governor Richard Snelling's Director of Planning and Research, Bruce developed a comprehensive perspective on multiple issues facing Vermont.

He now writes and lectures on Vermont's environmental history. He is lead author of the *Mountain Manifesto* -- <http://mountainmanifesto.org> -- and his article "The Road to Paradise, Lost: The Defeat of the Green Mountain Parkway," appeared in the Bennington Museum's *Walloomsack Review*. His two-part series "A History of Vermont Environmentalism" was published in the *Review's* Spring and Autumn, 2017, editions. He also wrote on environmental problems in the former Soviet Union for the Johns Hopkins University's *SAIS Review*, and the *New York Times* published his letter on the effects of oil extraction in western North Dakota.

Governor Douglas named him to the State Board of Libraries in 2010, and he currently serves as its Chair. He also was on the board of Rokeby Museum and on the Green Mountain Club's history and archives committee.