

*Eugenics in Vermont:  
A Chronology of "State-sanctioned eugenics policies and practices"\**

(part of a larger project in progress)

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*Introduction*

Joint House Resolution 2, the proposed apology by the General Assembly of the State of Vermont for its part in eugenics, reads as follows (excerpted, emphasis added):

Whereas, on June 21, 2019, the University of Vermont issued a formal statement of sincere apology for its "unethical and regrettable" eugenics role, and the General Assembly, on behalf of the State of Vermont, should issue a similar apology, now therefore be it

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives:

That the General Assembly sincerely apologizes and expresses its sorrow and regret to all individual Vermonters and their families and descendants who were harmed as a result of **State-sanctioned eugenics policies and practices**, and be it further

Resolved: That the General Assembly recognizes that further legislative action should be taken to address the continuing impact of State-sanctioned eugenics policies and related practices of disenfranchisement and ethnocide leading to genocide.

Eugenic sterilization as authorized by the 1931 "Act for Human Betterment by Voluntary Sterilization" (Act 174) is the best known of Vermont's "State-sanctioned eugenics policies and practices." Yet many other eugenics policies and practices were State-sanctioned and should be understood as such in any official State apology.

Other eugenic policies and practices include the involuntary institutionalization of children and adults in multiple State established and funded hospitals, schools, and prisons. The term "institutionalization" brings to mind what happened to these individuals but tends to obscure the resultant, often devastating, damage done to families and communities.

The quest for "human betterment" and societal improvement through the prevention and/or segregation of "delinquents, dependents, defectives" undergirded a multitude

of late 19<sup>th</sup>-/early 20<sup>th</sup>-century social welfare policies (aka “social legislation”). Private social service organizations such as the Vermont Children’s Aid Society and the Vermont Conference of Social Work were deeply involved in legislative activities and in the work of the Eugenics Survey of Vermont (ESV) directed by Henry F. Perkins.

From Nancy Gallagher’s *Building Better Vermonters* (emphases added):

“While the draft board results offered a rationale and the eugenics literature suggested a methodology, **the Vermont Department of Public Welfare provided the point of entry and the point of departure for Perkins’s eugenics field studies of Vermonters.**”

.....

“Perkins’s utopian vision of merging eugenics with progressive social reform in Vermont would have remained simply a pipe dream **without the support of a constituency of sympathetic Vermont leaders.**” (Gallagher, 41)

The briefly annotated chronology below delineates some of the major State-sanctioned policies and practices that promoted eugenics. Eugenics relied on the natural sciences - initially genetics and heredity, and later on the social sciences - sociology and social work, to produce knowledge (data) that could, ostensibly, predict and promote human and social well-being. In practice, certain groups deemed “less than” were targeted for control including indigenous communities, French Canadians, persons with disabilities, and low income families.

One tragedy of this “Progressive Era” is that significant harm was done in the name of human betterment. This historical trauma persists and is further perpetuated by present-day policies and practices that presume that some human lives are better than or lessor than others.

*A Chronology of State Institutions, Agencies, and Acts with Eugenics Involvement Authorized and/or Funded by the Vermont Legislature*  
(with a few notes on private organizations and national events added for context)

- 1791 University of Vermont and State Agricultural College (UVM)
- Institutional home for Henry F. Perkins, Department of Zoology faculty member, and the “Eugenics Field Station” established by Perkins
  - UVM President Guy Bailey enabled UVM to serve as fiduciary intermediary between private benefactors/funders of EVS (1925-1936).
  - Bailey also served on EVS’s Advisory Committee.
- 1836 Brattleboro Retreat, private mental hospital supported in part with State funding

- 1865 Vermont Reform School in Vergennes (renamed Vermont Industrial School in 1900; renamed "Weeks School" in 1937; closed in 1979)
- "In the early 1920s, social workers began pedigree studies of families of children at the Vermont Industrial School. Professor Perkins reportedly brought his Heredity class to VIS for "field work" in eugenics, and many of the Eugenics Survey's genealogies of so called "degenerate" families originated with children at this institution.... The Eugenics Survey investigated some V. I. S. inmates in its "Study of the Brandon School Waiting List." Charles W. Wilson, Superintendent 1917-1931, "endorsed the Eugenics Survey as a member of its advisory committee and gave its field workers full access to student records." (<http://www.uvm.edu/~eugenics/vis.html>)
- 1890 State Hospital for the Insane at Waterbury established.
- 1912 "An Act to Provide for the Care, Training, and Education of Feeble-Minded Children," (to create a school for feeble minded children). Passed and signed.
- 1912 Vermont State School for Feeble Minded Children in Brandon  
Opened 1915. State-supported residential school. State initially appropriated \$25,000. (Renamed Brandon State School,1929; Renamed Brandon Training School, 1956). Closed 1993.
- 1912 "An Act to Authorize and Provide for the Sterilization on Imbeciles, Feeble-minded and Insane Persons, Rapists, Confirmed Criminals, and Other Defectives"
- Legislature passed bill and recommended by outgoing Governor John A. Mead, MD. Vetoed by incoming Governor Allen Fletcher due to concern about its constitutionality. (Gallagher, 53)
- 1915 Act 92 Child Welfare Act...defines "delinquent children."
- 1919 Vermont Conference of Social Work formed Vermont Children's Aid Society -
- "whose officers and about half its directors subsequently formed the advisory committee of the Eugenics Survey of Vermont" (Gallagher, 59)
  - The Vermont Children's Aid Society hired professional social workers including Harriett Abbott who later became EVS's first field investigator.
- 1923 Vermont Department of Public Welfare is created; gathers and consolidates records on hundreds of families.
- 1925 Henry F. Perkins forms the Eugenics Survey of Vermont and hires social worker Harriett Abbott to use and augment Vermont Children's Aid Society and State Social Service Exchange records to create family pedigree charts of

degeneracy to “support a campaign for legalized sterilization” (Gallagher, 71).

- 1925 Perkins also forms an ESV Advisory Committee composed of Vermont academic leaders, the Superintendents of State institutions: the Vermont State School for Feeble Minded, Vermont State Hospital for the Insane, Vermont Industrial School, Riverside Reformatory for Women, and Vermont State Prison; and the Commissioners of the Vermont Department of Public Welfare and the Vermont Department of Education, as well as the Secretary of the Vermont State Board of Health. Leaders in the Vermont Children’s Aid Society also participated as Advisory Committee members. (Gallagher, 179-180)
- 1927 “An Act Related to Voluntary Eugenical Sterilization,”
- Passed Senate, defeated in House.
- 1927 SCOTUS opinion, *Buck v. Bell* upheld State of Virginia sterilization law
- 1928 Vermont Commission on Country Life is formed.
- 1931 “An Act for Human Betterment by Voluntary Sterilization” (Act 174)
- Passed Senate, 22 to 8; Passed House 140 to 75; Signed by Governor Wilson, March 31, 1931.
- 1931 *Rural Vermont: A Program for the Future* published by Vermont Commission on Country Life  
Noting (p 295), “Vermont this year adopted a program of voluntary sterilization of certain defectives. Its marriage laws also take cognizance of the danger to the state of marriage of defectives by forbidding a clerk to issue a marriage license to certain enumerated classes.” (citing Public Acts of the 1929 General Assembly, State of Vermont. Permanent No. 51.)
- 1931 Henry Perkins serves as President of the American Eugenics Society (1931-1934). Though Perkins was an AES leader, there is no evidence that he had direct or indirect involvement with Adolph Hitler or the Nazi eugenics program.
- 1936 Eugenics Survey of Vermont ends as the ideology and practices of eugenics are increasingly challenged both scientifically and socially.

\*Primary source for information: Nancy L. Gallagher, *Breeding Better Vermonters: The Eugenics Project in the Green Mountain State* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999).