

“THE BURDEN OF FEEBLE-MINDEDNESS:”  
THE HISTORY OF EUGENICS AND STERILIZATION  
IN MASSACHUSETTS

Reid Grinspoon

In the first 30 years of the 20th century, the United States underwent significant economic and social change. Industrialization altered how people worked and lived. Large numbers of rural people moved to the cities, and immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe flooded into the country. With these changes, many states saw rises in urban squalor, crime and poverty. Reports of increasing criminality, immorality, alcoholism and “feeble-mindedness”—a loosely defined term describing various degrees of mental retardation—caused concerned citizens to turn to a new field of “science” that promised a remedy to social ills: eugenics.

The term “eugenics” (which literally means “good birth”<sup>1</sup>) was coined in 1883 by English scientist Sir Francis Galton, and referred to the science of genetics and heredity with the aim of creating a superior human race, one without the problems caused by “inferior” people. Eugenicists worked to encourage healthy and fit people to procreate (positive eugenics) and to prevent the birth of the unfit in society (negative eugenics). Eugenics was adopted

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Reid Grinspoon will start at Harvard in the Fall of 2013. At Gann Academy in Waltham, Massachusetts, he wrote this paper as an independent study in the 2011/2012 academic year.

by many American doctors, biologists, and Progressives around the turn of the 20th century as a method by which to improve society and prevent the degeneration of the American “stock.” The center of eugenic activity in the United States was the Eugenics Record Office (ERO), located in Cold Spring Harbor, New York. This office compiled family genealogies and conducted eugenical studies, publishing eugenics pieces such as “The Trait Book,”<sup>2</sup> a manual that listed undesirable traits and assisted field workers in identifying those who were eugenically unfit. Other groups, such as the American Eugenics Society<sup>3</sup> and The American Breeders Association,<sup>4</sup> were dedicated to the study and propagation of eugenics. At this time, states began passing marriage laws preventing idiots, imbeciles, and others deemed unfit from legally marrying,<sup>5</sup> increased the sizes of mental institutions, and implemented a still more extreme eugenic measure: surgical sterilization.

As eugenic beliefs gained a foothold, many states began allowing “asexualization” surgeries to be performed on the mentally retarded, the insane, and criminals. In 1907, Indiana became the first state to allow the compulsory sterilization of institutionalized patients in the name of eugenics.<sup>6</sup> In 1927, the legality of eugenic sterilizations was upheld by the United States Supreme Court in the landmark case of *Buck v. Bell*.<sup>7</sup> Eventually, 31 other states followed Indiana’s lead and implemented sterilization laws of their own.<sup>8</sup> California led the nation in sterilizations, performing more than 20,000 surgeries during the period in which sterilization was legal.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, more than 60,000 people were sterilized in the name of eugenics in the United States.<sup>10</sup>

In Massachusetts, eugenic thought was embraced and accepted. In fact, the state was home to eugenic family competitions,<sup>11</sup> marriage laws preventing the partnerships of the “unfit,”<sup>12</sup> and a system of institutions used to house “defectives” to prevent them from procreating.<sup>13</sup> However, despite the presence of pro-eugenic and pro-sterilization attitudes, Massachusetts, unlike the majority of states, did not pass eugenic sterilization legislation. In 1934, a bill legalizing compulsory eugenic sterilization was brought before the state legislature, but it failed in both the House and

Senate. Legalization of compulsory sterilization never gained the popularity in Massachusetts that it did in other states for several reasons, including disagreement within the scientific community as to the merit of the claims made by eugenicists, the social objection to mandated sterilization and its societal ramifications, and Catholic opposition to sterilization and other essential elements of eugenics. These factors helped to ensure that coercive eugenic sterilization never became legal in the Commonwealth.

### Eugenics in Massachusetts

Many in Massachusetts shared the belief that society's problems could be alleviated through the application of eugenic principles to the population. Because eugenics promised to improve society during a time of great change, the movement became quite popular. Adherents were not limited to certain areas of the state or certain groups of people. Eugenics was discussed, popularized and celebrated in a range of places, from fairgrounds to state-run schools for the retarded, and its supporters included a diverse group of people, from Harvard biology professors to pastors.

Harvard University, an academic center and a top scientific institution in Massachusetts and the United States, counted among its faculty many eugenicists and believers in hereditarianism (that a person's heredity determined his life and human potential). Many of the most influential eugenics advocates in Massachusetts and throughout the country had roots in and connections to Harvard University. Included among the ranks of Harvard eugenicists were former university president Charles Eliot, who helped to sponsor the First International Eugenics Congress,<sup>14</sup> and William E. Castle, who taught a course at Harvard entitled "Genetics and Eugenics"<sup>15</sup> and wrote: "Feeble-mindedness is inherited as a simple recessive Mendelian unit-character.... The evidence presented... renders it, I think, beyond question."<sup>16</sup> Edward M. East, another eugenicist affiliated with the university, displayed his belief in eugenics in an article from *The Journal of Heredity*:

[I]t is probable that 1 person in 14 carries the basis of serious mental defectiveness in one-half of his or her reproductive cells [which] understates rather than overstates the facts...It will be a different future if a stupid government persists in refusing to countenance rational parenthood among those least fitted to reproduce the race, the while shutting one eye and winking the other at what has become a national practice among those best fitted to build a greater America.<sup>17</sup>

Even Charles B. Davenport, arguably the most important man in the development of eugenics in America, had a strong connection with the university. Davenport, the founder and head of the Eugenics Record Office,<sup>18</sup> earned his A.B., A.M., and Ph.D. from Harvard,<sup>19</sup> and taught zoology at the university from 1891 to 1899.<sup>20</sup> Harvard graduates also founded the Immigration Restriction League, an organization that aimed to limit the immigration of the eugenically less fit to the United States.<sup>21</sup> Harvard was a hub of eugenics, a home for foreign eugenicists (one foreign eugenicist who worked at Harvard, William McDougall, attributed his “failures” to the fact that he was an “F1 hybrid” between a Saxon and a Mediterranean ) and a haven for academics to develop their own eugenic beliefs.<sup>22</sup> Its presence and prestige in Massachusetts certainly increased the popularity and prominence of eugenic thought in the Commonwealth.

Harvard, however, was not the only place in Massachusetts where eugenics was popular. Eugenics was adopted, preached, and in some cases, implemented, by many citizens of the Bay State who had no connections to Harvard. One of the most important eugenics advocates in Massachusetts was Dr. Walter Fernald. Fernald was an expert on mental retardation and served as the superintendent of the Massachusetts State School for the Feeble-Minded, an important mental institution in Eastern Massachusetts.<sup>23</sup> Fernald was also the Massachusetts Medical Society’s delegate at the Second International Eugenics Congress<sup>24</sup> and headed the Commission to Investigate the Question of the Increase of Criminals, Mental Defectives, Epileptics, and Degenerates.<sup>25</sup> He publicized his belief in eugenics in works such as “The Burden of Feeble-Mindedness,” writing that the feeble-minded are a “parasitic, predatory class” who produce defective children and thus should not be allowed to procreate.<sup>26</sup>

Eugenics also had some grass-roots popularity among the people of Massachusetts who were unaffiliated with academia or state institutions. A number of Bay-Staters participated in the “Fitter Family Competitions” that were held at the popular Eastern States Exposition in West Springfield.<sup>27</sup> These competitions, sponsored by the American Eugenics Society,<sup>28</sup> aimed at finding eugenically ideal families. Family genealogies were studied, participants were physically examined, and eventually the “most fit” families were declared winners. Through these competitions, the American Eugenics Society was able to spread to the public information and propaganda about the “menace” of feeble-mindedness, social problems and the supposed hereditary bases of these issues.

Eugenics also counted supporters among the religious clergy in Massachusetts. Reverend C. Thurston Chase, a pastor at the Central Congregational Church in Lynn, managed to convince Lynn’s Methodist, Episcopal, Congregationalist and Baptist clergy not to marry a couple if they could not produce evidence of eugenic fitness.<sup>29</sup> Reverend Kenneth C. MacArthur (a Harvard graduate<sup>30</sup>) of the protestant Federated Church in Sterling was another clergyman in support of eugenics. His family won the “average family” category in a eugenical Fitter Family contest at the Eastern States Exposition in 1925,<sup>31</sup> and his sermon on eugenics won second place in the 1926 American Eugenics Society’s eugenic sermon contest.<sup>32</sup> MacArthur also served as the secretary of the Massachusetts State Eugenics Committee and secretary of the American Eugenics Society’s Committee on Cooperation with Clergymen.<sup>33</sup>

### Out-of-State Support for Sterilization

Many proponents of Massachusetts eugenic sterilization legislation did not live in Massachusetts. Some, such as Harry Laughlin of the Eugenics Record Office, believed there should be a universal law that all states could implement to allow eugenic sterilization. Laughlin thus wrote a model eugenic sterilization

law that was aimed to stand up to opposition in court and be applied around the country.<sup>34</sup> Other out-of-state supporters were well known eugenicists such as H. H. Goddard, Director of Research at the Training School for Feeble-Minded Girls and Boys in New Jersey.<sup>35</sup> Goddard feared for the well-being of the people of Massachusetts, threatened as they were by the feeble-minded, claiming: "In the state of Massachusetts there are at least 14,000 feeble-minded people. It would require 10 institutions the size of Waverly [the Massachusetts State School for the Feeble-Minded]"<sup>36</sup> to keep the sexes effectively segregated. Later in the same article, Goddard advocated for the sterilization of those deemed unfit, asking "Is it not best to begin hunting these defective children wherever they may be found?"<sup>37</sup> Many prominent out-of-state sterilization enthusiasts were from California, the state in which sterilization was most popular.<sup>38</sup> Dr. Elmer E. Stone, the medical superintendent of the Napa State Hospital, showed his support for sterilization legislation in a letter to Harvard professor and eugenics supporter Dr. George Washington Gay: "I have not yet collected statistics sufficient to give you a detailed account [of the effectiveness of sterilizations] but can assure you that I am heartily in favor of the plan, and it is my opinion that that this is one of the means which will lessen the number of commitments to our Institutions."<sup>39</sup> Dr. E. Scott Blair, medical superintendent at the Southern California State Hospital, had a similar message for Dr. Gay: "I thoroughly believe in the operation both in the male and female cases and believe it to be one of the best methods of handling the ever increasing number of mental defectives."<sup>40</sup> Finally, Dr. James Ewing Mears, a Philadelphia physician who had visited Harvard one summer and eventually attempted to endow the school with a fund to teach eugenics, was outspoken in his desire for sterilization legislation:<sup>41</sup>

Is it asking too much, is it requiring more than is due, when the State, through carefully considered legislation, which in every detail shall safeguard the inalienable rights of the individual, seeks to protect itself against the degrading influences of the continually growing stream of transmitted pollution, which saps the mental, moral, and physical vitality of its citizens, by asking the parents and guardians of

the irresponsible defectives to yield their consent to the performance of an operation which in some instances may prove to be curative and in many be palliative, by abrogating the sexual perversions and thus establishing conditions favorable to mental and moral cultivation, and in all, through its far-reaching results, is able to render them impotent to do harm? Failing to obtain this consent, has not the State the right to adopt such measures in the interest and in the protection of its citizens? Nay, further, is it not compelled to so act in the performance of its full duty to its citizens?<sup>42</sup>

Dr. Mears was unlike many of his fellow asexualization enthusiasts, however, because of the method for sterilization he desired. While most of these doctors advocated for vasectomy as a means to prevent procreation, Dr. Mears was a supporter of what he claimed to be a more extreme procedure, called “ligature of the spermatic cord.”<sup>43</sup> While vasectomy renders the patient infertile, it does not destroy his sexual abilities. According to Dr. Mears, ligation of the spermatic cord destroys all sexual abilities, similar to castration. Dr. Mears’s reason for supporting such a procedure was his belief that if the feeble-minded were allowed to have sex without the fear of pregnancy (as would be the case if they received vasectomies), they would spread immorality.<sup>44</sup> These non-Massachusetts doctors were prominent in medical and institutional circles and their backing of sterilization created an atmosphere of support for sterilization supporters within the state.

### Massachusetts Support for Sterilization

There also existed a group of “homegrown” Massachusetts sterilization enthusiasts who supported such legislation. Among these supporters was Dr. Everett Flood, the superintendent of the Massachusetts School for Epileptics in Palmer. Flood was alleged to have castrated 26 patients at his institution during the early 20th century and reported good results.<sup>45</sup> Although the operation was not legal, it gained approval from the Board of Control of Institutions.<sup>46</sup> Flood also served on the Massachusetts Commission to Investigate the Question of the Increase of Criminals, Mental

Defectives, Epileptics, and Degenerates.<sup>47</sup> Another Massachusetts eugenicist, William E. Castle, believed that the feeble-minded should be sterilized if institutional segregation was not possible.<sup>48</sup> As eugenic ideas became more prominent, support for eugenic legislation was also present in *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, which became the official publication of Massachusetts Medical Society after 1921, and in 1928 was renamed *The New England Journal of Medicine*.<sup>49</sup> The journal was often home to articles and editorials advocating for sterilization and sterilization legislation. In one such article, Dr. Samuel Woodward spoke of his belief in the necessity of sterilization:

I picture a gloomy future for our distant successors unless suitable provisions were made by the State for more extensive segregation or the passage of laws which would permit of the sterilization of the majority of these unfortunates.<sup>50</sup>

Dr. Woodward went on to discuss the strain on institutions and how the state facilities were massively underprepared to handle the number of feeble-minded in the community.<sup>51</sup> Another piece published in the journal, an editorial, spoke of how scientists needed to seriously consider the practicality and necessity of sterilization:

One far reaching scheme, which if feasible would probably carry with it the most satisfactory results of all, we have heretofore left almost unmentioned in our columns. We refer to sterilization. There are so many reasons, sentimental and moral, which might possibly be advanced as valid objections to such a plan that we have been slow to espouse the cause of those ultra-eugenicists who would treat the human race exactly as the animal breeder does the stock which he wishes to make physically perfect. However, it would seem that public opinion is rapidly approaching the view point of the animal breeder, and if the lay mind is ripe for such drastic measures we see no reason for the scientists to object.<sup>52</sup>

The editorial, while wary of possible objections to sterilization, ultimately claimed sterilization to be acceptable, concluding that:

[The feeble-minded] cannot be reformed of their bad habits because they are incapable of reform. It seems almost self-evident that any plan which does not make the individual feeble-minded person seriously ill or unhappy would be justifiable in ridding the race of his defective blood.<sup>53</sup>

Another Massachusetts sterilization supporter was Samuel R. Meaker, a professor of gynecology at Boston University. Meaker, in an address to the Harvey Society, spoke about sterilization and eugenics, stating that the reason for sterilization is “self-evident” and that it is more effective when performed in males.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps the most visible Massachusetts native in support of eugenic sterilization was Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., the Supreme Court Justice who voted for the compulsory sterilization of Carrie Buck in the 1927 case of *Buck v. Bell*. In his ruling, he made very clear his belief in the necessity of eugenic sterilization:

We have seen more than once that the public welfare may call upon the best citizens for their lives. It would be strange if it could not call upon those who already sap the strength of the State for these lesser sacrifices, often not felt to be such by those concerned, in order to prevent our being swamped with incompetence. It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind. The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes. *Jacobson v. Massachusetts*, 197 U.S. 11, 25 S. Ct. 358, 3 Ann. Cas. 765. Three generations of imbeciles are enough.<sup>55</sup>

Although Holmes’s opinion was for sterilization to be legal in Virginia, it is still significant that such a prominent Massachusetts resident felt so strongly about the sterilization movement. These Massachusetts residents were among a larger group who believed in the necessity of legalized eugenic sterilization.

### Opposition to Forced Sterilization

While eugenic sterilization had advocates in Massachusetts and was popular around the country, there still existed a strong anti-asexualization movement in Massachusetts. The opposition to sterilization primarily came from three avenues: scientific objection to the tenets of eugenics, social opposition to both castration and vasectomy (the means of sterilization), and religious opposition to eugenics and birth control methods. These three

anti-sterilization fronts helped to ensure that Massachusetts did not enact compulsory sterilizations.

Despite its championing by some top academics and physicians, eugenics was certainly not accepted by all in academia or medicine. In fact, many biologists and other scientists refuted the claims of eugenicists. Such anti-eugenical beliefs were often as visible as their pro-eugenic counterparts, and were showcased in the same scientific publications. The scientific objections to eugenics can be divided into two categories: the belief that the human knowledge of heredity is too limited to attempt to improve the gene pool through drastic measures, and the belief that natural selection must be completely natural and not engineered.

One line of scientific objection to eugenics rested on the fact that scientists did not know for certain the role that heredity played in the transmission of feeble-mindedness, pauperism, drug addiction, and other supposedly genetic traits. A *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* editorial from 1915 pointed out the limits of knowledge concerning genetics and heredity:

In spite of the universally accepted hereditary nature of most defective conditions, little is known of the method or scheme of transmission. It is for this reason that this form of euthanasia by sterilization of defectives is opposed by many scientific and race-proud people. It must be remembered that not all the offspring of known defectives are necessarily defective...<sup>56</sup>

The editorialist noted also that sterilization laws only applied to those within institutions, neglecting to prevent the procreation of the majority of the unfit who were not in state institutions. He concluded:

To sanction this procedure in known defectives would consistently be to sanction it in individuals who, while themselves not defective, come from defective stock, or in individuals of grossly bad environment and great fecundity. The question is a new one, with scientific knowledge still meager, and it will, therefore, perhaps be better until more is known about the ethnic tendencies of the human race, to go slowly with radical innovations. Euthanasia and eugenics, in whatever forms, are yet but ideals—perhaps only fetid[s]hes.<sup>57</sup>

Like this editorialist, some Massachusetts scientists did not accept the simple Mendelian explanation for feeble-mindedness. They believed that something as complex as human intelligence could not be determined by a single unit character. One such scientist was Elmer Earnest Southard, a Harvard neuropathologist.<sup>58</sup> Southard, despite the contact he had with Charles Davenport and his position on a eugenics subcommittee at the American Breeders' Association,<sup>59</sup> grew to believe that eugenicists were oversimplifying complex causes: "I am entirely sure... that the hereditary hypothesis has been greatly overdrawn in the field of feeble-mindedness."<sup>60</sup> Another *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* editorial from 1916 discussed the lack of knowledge about heredity and the rush by some eugenics supporters to support sterilization:

It is the opinion of those best informed in the matter that the question of sterilization was entered into rather too hurriedly, before in fact it was definitely known just what part heredity played in the propagation of criminals.<sup>61</sup>

Some scientists could not accept the eugenic reasoning that many, if not all, traits were simple unit characters, and thus rejected eugenics and its proposed policies.

Additionally, some Massachusetts figures rejected eugenics because they thought evolution to be a natural process, one in which human interference would not be beneficial. A 1911 editorial in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* warned against trying to breed a superior race of humans because inbreeding would lead to species degradation, thus defeating eugenics' goal of creating a superior race of humans:

Now it is a fairly well-established fact that any living strain bred exclusively from its own like tends after a certain time to retrograde. Barring a few exceptional instances, it seems impossible for a high grade of evolution to be maintained long in a pure stock without retrogression or extinction.<sup>62</sup>

A similar editorial stated that although the defectives were outbreeding the fit, this reality was just the natural course of evolution, and not a bad thing in any way:

Lamentable though it may appear, racial experience indicates that the constant perishing of valuable stocks is not an irretrievable calamity. This is the price of evolution, as “as blood is the price of admiralty.” Through all past time, natural process has succeeded in steadily advancing the quality of its product from crude material.<sup>63</sup>

These doctors acknowledged the appeal of eugenics, yet strongly believed that only natural selection would lead to the creation of the fittest humans, and that eugenic interference would have either a negligible or detrimental effect on the overall quality of the germ plasm.

The push for a sterilization law also met opposition from dedicated believers in eugenics who were wary of the social ramifications of sterilization. Many of these people agreed that the unfit should be prevented from procreating and propagating their defective genes, yet disagreed that sexual sterilization was the best method for achieving this. One such person was Dr. Walter Fernald, the head of the Massachusetts State School for the Feeble-Minded in Waltham. Fernald strongly believed in eugenics, yet was opposed to sterilization as a remedy. Fernald believed that sterilization by vasectomy would lead to a class of defectives who, knowing they could not reproduce, would go around spreading immorality and sexually transmitted diseases:

The presence of these sterile people in the community, with unimpaired sexual desire and capacity, would be a direct encouragement of vice and a prolific source of venereal disease. Sterilization would not be a safe and effective substitute for permanent segregation and control.<sup>64</sup>

Fernald instead advocated for institutional segregation for the unfit, ensuring they did not procreate and preventing them from damaging society.<sup>65</sup> Fernald’s opinions are echoed in the 1911 work “The Report of the Commission to Investigate the Question of the Increase of Criminals, Mental Defectives, Epileptics, and Degenerates” (Fernald was a member of the commission):

It is hard to understand how this expedient could be resorted to in large numbers of cases without being a direct encouragement of sexual vice. If the seducer or libertine could truly promise immunity from the natural consequences of his act, could this possibly become

a means of diminishing crime? Would it not tend to make such sexual vice much more frequent, and would not such immunity from the natural consequences of the act tend to enormously spread venereal disease?...The commission does not believe that it has yet been demonstrated that this operation is an efficient substitute for permanent segregation and control of confirmed criminals and defectives.<sup>66</sup>

Dr. George Washington Gay, a Harvard professor, was of a similar opinion. He believed that there were some benefits to sterilization, but that it also had drawbacks that rendered segregation the better option:

Surgical sterilization is safe and efficient in preventing procreation, but it does not diminish immorality or the spread of social diseases... It [segregation] is the only method thus far suggested that affords absolute control of irresponsible persons.<sup>67</sup>

Dr. Gay was more in favor of sterilization than Fernald, declaring that “vasectomy has been performed upon several hundred males in Indiana with no ill results, but with much satisfaction to all concerned, victims and patients alike.”<sup>68</sup> However, he, like Fernald and other Commission members, (excluding the aforementioned Dr. Flood, who had performed sterilizations and thought them to be successful) did not advocate that it become mandatory state policy because of the risk it posed to increase immorality and sexually transmitted diseases. Another pro-eugenic, anti-sterilization voice can be found on the editorial board of the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*. A 1913 editorial claimed that there were probably close to 10,000 feeble-minded people in the state, and that “[s]egregation is undoubtedly the only rational or, in fact, possible solution of the problem.”<sup>69</sup> The writer does not mention sterilization as a possible solution, despite its use elsewhere by 1913. The fact that these esteemed eugenic supporters opposed eugenic sterilization laws diminished the chance that a law would be passed. Dr. Fernald, Dr. Gay, and the others were all prominent, and by throwing their weight against a sterilization law, they convinced others in their field that legal forced sterilization would be a bad idea.

The final front of the anti-sterilization movement in Massachusetts was the Catholic Church and its opposition to eugenics

and any form of birth control, including sterilization. The Catholic Church voiced its opposition to eugenics in the 1930 encyclical of Pope Pius IX, *Casti Connubii*. The encyclical outlined the opinion of the Church on eugenics, eugenic laws, and sterilization, basically issuing a prohibition on birth control and eugenics of any sort, and specifically state-mandated eugenic sterilizations:

70. Public magistrates have no direct power over the bodies of their subjects; therefore, where no crime has taken place and there is no cause present for grave punishment, they can never directly harm, or tamper with the integrity of the body, either for the reasons of eugenics or for any other reason.<sup>70</sup>

Additionally, according to the Catholic pamphlet “Sterilization and Public Policy,” “Christians [Catholics], accordingly, have not only a right but a duty to resist the legislative sponsoring of such projects, and to work for their repeal where they have been enacted.”<sup>71</sup> (Despite the fact that this booklet was printed in the 1960s, it cites the ideas and rhetoric that would have been used earlier in the century, before the creation of the Massachusetts bill.) Even Catholics who supported some eugenic ideas did not support sterilization. In his book *The Church and Eugenics*, Reverend Thomas J. Gerrard acknowledged that some aspects of eugenics were potentially advantageous,<sup>72</sup> yet expressly prohibited sterilization (interestingly, he cites Dr. Fernald’s school as a model of eugenic segregation).<sup>73</sup> In addition to being against sterilization, Catholics in Massachusetts were also numerous. During the early 20th century Catholicism was the largest religious denomination in Massachusetts.<sup>74</sup> Because the majority of Massachusetts residents at this time were Catholics, it is fair to assume that a large section of the Massachusetts population thus did not support mandating sterilization based on clearly articulated religious grounds.

All the arguments and opinions raised by both sides on the sterilization debate remained only hypothetical until 1934. In that year, a State Representative from Taunton name Harold Cole proposed a bill before the State Legislature to allow for the sterilization of “idiots, imbeciles, feeble-minded or insane persons” being held in state and county institutions.<sup>75</sup> The bill was very similar to the Virginia sterilization bill which had been passed

into law, borrowing some of the same language.<sup>76</sup> The bill was voted down in the House 150 to 29, and later killed in the State Senate.<sup>77</sup> Many of the arguments made by legislators discussing the bill echoed the earlier points made for or against compulsory sterilization. For instance, Representative Cole took the position of Henry H. Goddard when he claimed that “Massachusetts is faced with a real problem, and it cannot be laughed aside. This problem has been dealt with in 27 other States of the country, four of them, Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Connecticut, New England States.”<sup>78</sup> He later claimed that the cost of institutional care for such people was skyrocketing, and invoked Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. in his statement that “three generations of imbeciles are enough.”<sup>79</sup> Those who opposed the bill took the same position as the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* articles from the 1910s, claiming that doctors did not know enough to make sterilization a legitimate and valid operation: “Our knowledge of heredity and mental functions is too limited at present to grant authority to any board or pseudo experts who shall be expected to declare with certainty that a certain man or woman is the potential parent of a mental defective.”<sup>80</sup> Perhaps most significant to the bill’s failure, several articles articulating the Church’s anti-sterilization policy appeared in *The Pilot*, the official newspaper of the archdiocese of Boston, just days before the sterilization law was voted on in the State Legislature.<sup>81</sup> The failure of this bill was a victory for the social, scientific, and religious opponents of sterilization.

## Conclusion

The eugenics movement in Massachusetts had supporters across the social landscape, from blue-collar people enjoying Fitter Family competitions at the Eastern States Exposition to Harvard intellectuals to clergymen to legislators. Many people, both within and from outside the state, believed that eugenics was a true science and that its principles should be applied legally to the populace for the good of society. However, despite such support, Massachusetts remained one of the minority of states that

never legalized the forced sterilization of those deemed eugenically unfit. The inability to pass such a law was due largely to three main bases of opposition: scientists who disagreed with eugenics, eugenicists who disagreed with sterilization, and Catholics who were opposed to eugenics on moral grounds. At the same time as this bill's failure, support for eugenics was starting to falter, as more and more scientists began to challenge its assumptions. The eugenics movement in America was dealt the largest blow about 10 years later, when the world began to learn of the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany in the name of eugenics. Never again would there be support for eugenics in the Bay State.

The failure of eugenic sterilization in Massachusetts is an interesting and stark example of how local culture can shape policy. Despite the fact that Massachusetts doctors, politicians, and voters had the same information, and were exposed to the same rhetoric as those in California, North Carolina, and Virginia (and all the other states that legalized sterilization), they decided to vote against mandated asexualization. The unique combinations of people and institutions in the Bay State ensured that it would remain in the minority of states opposed to legalized forced eugenic sterilization.



<sup>1</sup> Daniel Kevles, preface to In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) p. ix

<sup>2</sup> Paul Lombardo, Three Generations, No Imbeciles (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008) pp. 34–35

<sup>3</sup> Kevles, p. 59

<sup>4</sup> The head of the ABA, Bleecker Van Wagenen, believed that defective people should be removed from the gene pool. Lombardo, Three Generations, No Imbeciles, pp. 42–43; Ruth V. Schuler, “Some Aspects of Eugenic Marriage Legislation in the United States,” The Social Service Review 14, no. 2 (1940) pp. 304–305

<sup>6</sup> Lombardo, Three Generations, No Imbeciles, pp. 24–25

<sup>7</sup> “Virginia Eugenics,” The University of Vermont, (accessed May 21, 2012) <http://www.uvm.edu/~lkaelber/eugenics/VA/VA.html>

<sup>8</sup> Lombardo, Three Generations, No Imbeciles, p. 294

<sup>9</sup> “California Eugenics,” The University of Vermont, (accessed May 21, 2012) <http://www.uvm.edu/~lkaelber/eugenics/CA/CA.html>

<sup>10</sup> Lombardo, Three Generations, No Imbeciles, p. 294

<sup>11</sup> Christine Rosen, Preaching Eugenics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) p. 113

<sup>12</sup> Schuler, “Some Aspects of Eugenic Marriage Legislation in the United States,” pp. 304–305

<sup>13</sup> Walter Fernald, “The Burden of Feeble-Mindedness,” Boston Medical and Surgical Journal 166, no. 25 (June 20, 1912) pp. 911–915

<sup>14</sup> Kevles, p. 63

<sup>15</sup> Jason Jonathon Jones, “Eugenics at Harvard” (Bachelor’s thesis, Harvard University, 1992) p. 18

<sup>16</sup> William E. Castle, review of Feeble-mindedness, Its Causes and Consequences by H.H. Goddard, in Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology 10, 3 (August 1915) p. 214, as seen in Jones, p. 24

<sup>17</sup> Edward East, “Hidden Feeble-mindedness,” Journal of Heredity 8 (May 1917) pp. 216–217, as seen in Jones, p. 42

<sup>18</sup> Kevles, p. 45

<sup>19</sup> Oscar Riddle, “Biographical Memoir of Charles Benedict Davenport, 1866–1944,” in Biographical Memoirs National Academy of Sciences 25 (1947) pp. 75–78, as seen in Jones, p. 8

<sup>20</sup> Announcements of the Department of Zoology, 1893–94, Harvard University and Announcements of the Department of Zoology, 1895–96, Harvard University, as seen in Jones, p. 8

<sup>21</sup> Jones, p. 92

<sup>22</sup> William McDougall, “William McDougall,” Carl Murchison, ed., History of Psychology in Autobiography International University series in Psychology 1 (1930) p. 192, as seen in Jones, pp. 86–87

<sup>23</sup> C. Macfie Campbell, “Walter E. Fernald (1859–1924),” Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences 60, no. 14 (December 1925) pp. 624–626

<sup>24</sup> Massachusetts Medical Society, “Stated Meeting of the Council, October 5, 1921,” Boston Medical and Surgical Journal 815, no. 17 (October 27, 1921) p. 508

<sup>25</sup> “Recommendations for the Prevention of Degeneracy,” Boston Medical and Surgical Journal 164, no. 12 (March 23, 1911) p. 428

<sup>26</sup> Walter Fernald, “The Burden of Feeble-Mindedness,” Boston Medical and Surgical Journal 166, no. 25 (June 20, 1912) pp. 911–915

<sup>27</sup> Rosen, p. 113

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113

<sup>29</sup> “Pastor Adopts Eugenics, Won’t Perform Marriage for the Physically Unfit,” New York Times (May 26, 1913) p. 1

<sup>30</sup> Rosen, p. 171

<sup>31</sup> “New and Notes,” Eugenics 3 (April 1930) p. 149, as noted in Rosen, pp. 170–171

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 170–177

<sup>33</sup> Rosen, p. 171

<sup>34</sup> Lombardo, introduction to Three Generations, No Imbeciles p. xii

<sup>35</sup> “Henry Herbert Goddard,” last Modified July 25, 2007, <http://www.indiana.edu/~intell/goddard.shtml>

<sup>36</sup> Henry H. Goddard, “The Menace of Mental Deficiency from the Standpoint of Heredity,” Boston Medical and Surgical Journal 175, no. 8 (August 24, 1916) pp. 269–271

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 269–271

<sup>38</sup> “California Eugenics,” The University of Vermont, (accessed May 21, 2012) <http://www.uvm.edu/~lkaelber/eugenics/CA/CA.html>

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<sup>42</sup> J. Ewing Mears, M.D., LL.D., “Asexualization as a Remedial Measure in the Relief of Certain Forms of Mental Moral, and Physical Degeneration” in The Problem of Race Betterment ed. J. Ewing Mears, et al. (Philadelphia: Wm. J. Dornan, 1910) p. 12

<sup>43</sup> J. Ewing Mears, “The Value of Surgical Procedures in the Solution of The Problem of Race Betterment” in The Problem of Race Betterment, pp. 26–28

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34

<sup>45</sup> Martin W. Barr, Mental Defectives: Their History, Treatment, and Training (Philadelphia: P. Blakiston’s Son and Co., 1904) p. 196

<sup>46</sup> J. Ewing Mears, “The Law, The Protector of the Community, and the Benefactor of the Defective Subject,” in The Problem of Race Betterment, p. 36

<sup>47</sup> The Commission to Investigate the Question of the Increase of Criminals, Mental Defectives, Epileptics, and Degenerates, Report of the Commission to Investigate the Question of the Increase of Criminals, Mental Defectives, Epileptics, and Degenerates January, 1911 (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1911) n.p. (hereafter “Report of the Commission”)

<sup>48</sup> William Castle, Genetics and Eugenics: A Text-book for Students of Biology and a Reference Book for Animal and Plant Breeders (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920) p. 291, as noted in Jones, p. 28

<sup>49</sup> “About NEJM Past and Present,” The New England Journal of Medicine (accessed July 2, 2012) <http://www.nejm.org/page/about-nejm/history-and-mission>

<sup>50</sup> Samuel B. Woodward, “Eugenics and the Feeble-Minded,” The New England Journal of Medicine 200, no. 10 (March 7, 1929) pp. 509–510

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 509–510

<sup>52</sup> “Sterilization of the Unfit,” The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal 168, no. 15 (April 10, 1913) pp. 548–549

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<sup>54</sup> “Dr. Samuel R. Meaker Addresses Harvey Society” The New England Journal of Medicine 204, no. 13 (March 26, 1931) pp. 688–689

<sup>55</sup> Buck v. Bell 274 U.S. 200, 47 S.Ct. 584 (1927)

<sup>56</sup> “Modern Euthanasia,” Boston Medical and Surgical Journal 173, no. 27 (December 30, 1915) p. 1008

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 1009

<sup>58</sup> Jones, p. 75

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 76

<sup>60</sup> Elmer Southard, “An Attempt at an Orderly Grouping of the Feeble-Mindednesses (Hypophrenias) for Clinical Diagnosis,” Journal of Psycho-Asthenics 23–4 (1918–19) p. 113, as noted in Jones, p. 84

<sup>61</sup> “The Sterilization of Criminals,” Boston Medical and Surgical Journal 175, no. 17 (October 26, 1916) p. 612

<sup>62</sup> “Nature and Eugenics,” Boston Medical and Surgical Journal 164, no. 20 (May 18, 1911) pp. 725–726

<sup>63</sup> “Education and Eugenics,” Boston Medical and Surgical Journal 173, no. 11 (September 9, 1915) pp. 398–399

<sup>64</sup> Fernald, p. 12

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<sup>66</sup> Report of the Commission, p. 40

<sup>67</sup> George Washington Gay, “What Can be Done to Better the Race,” The Boston Herald (May 1, 1913)

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<sup>70</sup> Pius XI, Casti Connubi, Encyclical on Christian Marriage, Vatican Website, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/pius\\_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_31121930\\_casti-connubii-en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_31121930_casti-connubii-en.html), (accessed July 2, 2012) sec. 70

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<sup>78</sup> “Sterilization Bill Meets Opposition: Cole’s Measure Aimed at Feeble-Minded,” The Boston Globe (January 24, 1934)

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In our pre-romantic days, books were seen as key to education. In a **1786** letter to his nephew, aged **fifteen**, [President Thomas] Jefferson recommended that he read books (**in the original languages and in this order**) by the following authors: [history] Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Anabasis, Arian, Quintus Curtius, Diodorus Siculus, and Justin. On morality, Jefferson recommended books by Epictetus, Plato, Cicero, Antoninus, Seneca, and Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, and in poetry Virgil, Terence, Horace, Anacreon, Theocritus, Homer, Euripides, Sophocles, Milton, Shakespeare, Ossian, Pope and Swift. Jefferson's plan of book learning was modest compared to the Puritan education of the seventeenth century as advocated by John Milton.

E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Knowledge Deficit*  
Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006, pp. 9-10