2026

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DEWART

EVOLUTION OF PERSPECTIVES ON INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

IN 1840S–1930S AND THE SIGNFICANCE TODAY

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Reader,

When we began our project just a few weeks ago, we were originally motivated by a simple but deeply unsettling question: In what ways do modern discussions of disability resemble eugenic thinking in America from a century ago?

In a time marked by so much return to past ideas and practices, we were inspired to investigate how the recent negative focus on people conceptualized as burdensome has affected the language and practices surrounding disabled Americans today.

We started our exploration by comparing eugenic materials from the height of the American eugenic movement (1910-1930) with modern-day medical pamphlets and public health messaging in order to highlight the dangerous way that eugenic thinking has re-entered scientific and social spaces. As our research unfolded, however, we realized that such comparisons felt incomplete without understanding the social, scientific, and economic foundations that preceded America's eugenic era, as well as the later rise of disability studies which has shaped the modern day language and understanding of disability profoundly.

Thus our project shifted from focusing in only on the "eugenic period" in America to tracing broader historical changes in thinking about disability itself. At this time, we also focused in on intellectual disability, a condition for which historical and modern day conceptualization and treatment is particularly extreme.

As we constructed our timeline, we found a less explored but incredibly rich moment in history—the moment in which people with intellectual disabilities began to draw sustained government attention and the subsequent rise in systems of oversight and control that followed. This period began in the 1840's and culminated in the same eugenic era that we originally began looking at.

Over the course of our project, we drew on three secondary sources and a substantial amount of primary images and texts to craft our understanding of the shifting perspectives and treatment of intellectually disabled Americans from 1840-1930. While clear-cut boundaries in history do not exist, and individuals going against the grain were not uncommon, we identified three major shifts in public thinking in this time which are reflected in legal proceedings. From the 1840s to the 1860s intellectual disability transformed from a local problem to a state issue as the conception of "idiocy" changed from a permanent disorder to a curable condition. From the 1860s through the mid-1890s, however, institutionalization gradually shifted in purpose, from rehabilitation to long-term segregation, as reformers grew discouraged by the realized difficulty of "improving" intellectually disabled persons. By the 1900s, as scientific attention focused increasingly on heredity, intellectual disability became framed as a social threat, with eugenic methods arising as the solution.

When examining these general shifts in the context of historical happenings, we came to understand that scientific thinking and the way that science is employed simultaneously shapes and results from economic conditions, and social and legal trends.

We hope that through reading the timeline we have crafted and by examining some of the primary sources we have chosen to highlight that you too gain an understanding of how changes in thinking generally follow changes in technology, the economy, and scientific thinking and how powerful the voices of advocates, reformers, and critics can be.

We hope you enjoy!

Katja and Lucy

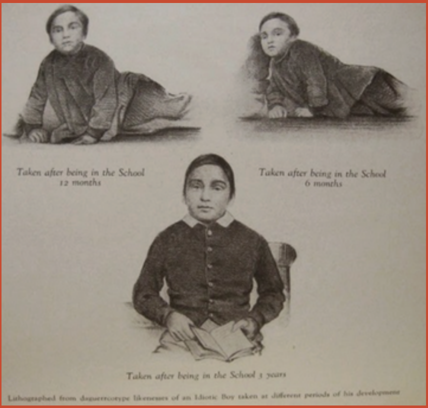
"B5unqdp2 | Search." Wellcome Collection, 2025, wellcomecollection.org/search/images?query=b5unqdp2#. Accessed 14 Mar. 2026.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Throughout this zine, we use both modern inclusive language and historically accurate terminology to describe the intellectually disabled people we discuss. This choice reflects our effort to preserve and illustrate the significant shifts in language that occurred during the period we studied. It is not, however, an endorsement for the use of this language in modern day settings.

Additionally, we recognize that that the historical content we exhibit throughout this zine may contain offensive language, negative stereotypes or inaccurate representations. We do not endorse the views expressed in such materials and instead hope that readers view these primary sources as we do—as context to enable scholarly analysis.

IDIOCY: PERMANENT → EDUCABLE



Elwyn and the History of Intellectual Disability | Historical Society of Pennsylvania. https://hsp.org/blogs/archival-adventures-in-small-repositories/elwyn-and-the-history-of-intellectual-disability. Accessed 16 Mar. 2026.

FAMILY/LOCAL PROBLEM → STATE RESPONSIBILITY

1840S-1860S

BETWEEN 1840 TO THE MID-1860S, AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS OF INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY SHIFTED FROM A PRIVATE FAMILY CONCERN TO A BROADER SOCIAL ISSUE REQUIRING INSTITUTIONAL AND STATE INTERVENTION. PREVIOUSLY, INDIVIDUALS LABELED "IDIOTS" WERE TYPICALLY CARED FOR WITHIN FAMILIES OR PLACED IN ALMSHOUSES SUPPORTED BY THE LOCAL COMMUNITY (TRENT). HOWEVER, RAPID INDUSTRIALIZATION AND ADVANCEMENTS IN TRANSPORTATION AND COMMUNICATION DISRUPTED TRADITIONAL NETWORKS OF CARE, SUBSEQUENTLY TRANSFORMING THE DEMAND FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED CITIZENS (IRVING).

ALONGSIDE THIS WAS A CHANGE IN THE CONCEPTION OF IDIOCY. IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY, IDIOCY WAS A MEDICAL DIAGNOSIS USED TO DESCRIBE A CHILD WITH A PRESUMED PERMANENT MENTAL DEFICIENCY (IRVING). HOWEVER, BY THE 1840S, IDIOCY BECAME INCREASINGLY UNDERSTOOD AS A POTENTIALLY CURABLE CONDITION. COMBINED WITH THE REPORTED SUCCESS OF EUROPEAN MODELS OF "IDIOT EDUCATION", AMERICAN REFORMERS BEGAN TO ARGUE FOR THE REHABILITATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED INTO CONTRIBUTING CITIZENS THROUGH THE CREATION OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS (IRVING). TWO INDIVIDUALS, SAMUEL GRIDLEY HOWE AND DOROTHEA DIX, LED THE MOVEMENT TO PROMOTE SPECIALIZED SCHOOLS AS HUMANE AND SCIENTIFIC SOLUTIONS FOR CHILDREN WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES. THEIR EFFORTS LED TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE FIRST SCHOOL FOR IDIOTIC CHILDREN IN MASSACHUSETTS IN 1848. OTHER STATES FOLLOWED MASSACHUSETTS' EXAMPLE, AND SCHOOLS FOR IDIOTS WERE ESTABLISHED IN NEW YORK, PENNSYLVANIA, CONNECTICUT, OHIO, KENTUCKY, AND ILLINOIS BY THE END OF THE CIVIL WAR. WITHIN THESE SCHOOLS, SUPERINTENDENTS EMPHASIZED PRACTICAL LABOR SUCH AS FARM WORK, DOMESTIC TASKS, AND SMALL-SCALE INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION AS A MEANS OF PREPARING STUDENTS TO CONTRIBUTE TO FAMILY OR COMMUNITY LIFE (IRVING).

WHILE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS EAGERLY PUBLISHED STORIES OF STUDENTS THEY REFORMED, BEHIND-THE-SCENES MANY SCHOOLS WERE MAINTAINING CARE OF CHILDREN AND ADULTS WITHOUT THEIR RELEASE INTO THE COMMUNITY. AFTER THE (ECONOMIC) PANIC OF 1857, RISING UNEMPLOYMENT REDUCED DEMAND FOR MARGINAL LABOR AND ENCOURAGED LOCAL OFFICIALS TO PRESSURE INSTITUTIONS TO RETAIN RATHER THAN DISCHARGE STUDENTS (TRENT). THUS, WHILE MID-NINETEENTH-CENTURY REFORMERS ENVISIONED EDUCATION AS A PATHWAY TO PRODUCTIVITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION FOR INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED PEOPLE, THE GROUNDWORK FOR MORE RESTRICTIVE SYSTEMS OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION WAS ALSO BEING LAID DURING THIS PERIOD.

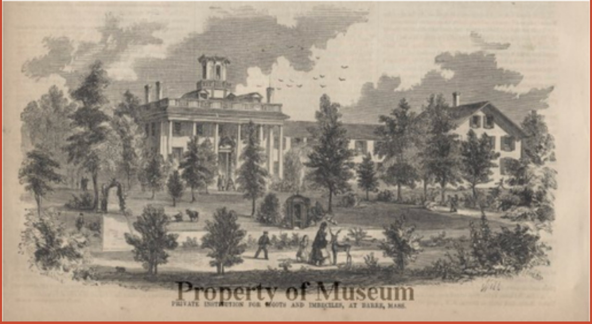
1841 – DOROTHEA DIX ADVOCATES FOR THE SEPARATION OF IDIOTS FROM CRIMINALS

1845 – AS A RESULT OF THE SOCIAL MOVEMENT LED BY DOROTHEA DIX, THE FIRST ASYLUM FOR THE MENTALLY ILL WAS BUILT IN TRENTON, NEW JERSEY. OTHER STATES FOLLOW

1848: THE FIRST SCHOOLS FOR IDIOT CHILDREN ARE ESTABLISHED BY SAMUEL HOWE AND HERVEY B. WILBUR

1852: HERVEY B. WILBUR CLASSIFIES "IDIOCY" INTO FOUR TYPES. THE ABILITY TO BE EDUCATED WAS CENTRAL TO HIS DEFINITIONS.

1857: THE FINANCIAL PANIC OF 1857: BROUGHT ABOUT INCREASED PRESSURE FOR SUPERINTENDENTS TO TAKE, NOT DISCHARGE, IDIOTS



“2007.36.1 - Newspaper | the Viscardi Center.” Pastperfectonline.com, 2025, museumofdisability.pastperfectonline.com/archive/88ECBE63-80D7-41FB-B1DD-099812733800. Accessed 16 Mar. 2026.

This 1856 drawing depicts a "Private Institute for Idiots and Imbeciles, at Barre, Mass." The expansive grounds and school-like architecture of the institution showcase the focus on “moral treatment” and education of idiots at this time.

“The New-York State Asylum for Idiots, Syracuse. Wood Engraving by W.(?) Sebald.” Wellcome Collection, 2025, wellcomecollection.org/works/tmqxfe4b. Accessed 16 Mar. 2026.

While a new focus on educating idiots grew popular in the 1840s-1860s, asylums, which were residential institutions aimed at remedying mental illness and sometimes intellectual disability, also began to crop up. This wood engraving made during the 1850s depicts one such asylum with visually appealing landscaping and a fence, presumably to keep residents in. Its particularly revelaing htat this same asylum ws demolished in the 1870s.

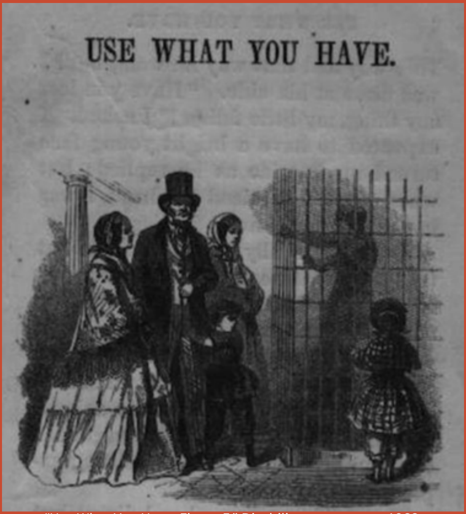
1861 – 1865: THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR BROUGHT PHYSICAL DISABILITIES INTO THE LIGHT OF AMERICAN SOCIETY.

1860ISH: "SEGUIN CLAIMED TO BE ABLE TO "IMPROVE" IDIOTIC CHILDREN BY UNBLOCKING THEIR NORMAL DEVELOPMENT. MORE SCHOOLS FOR IDIOTS OPEN FOLLOWING SEGUIN'S MODEL

1864: THE FIRST COLLEGE FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES OPENS IN THE UNITED STATES

1865: NEW YORK, PENNSYLVANIA, CONNECTICUT, OHIO, KENTUCKY AND ILLINOIS ALL HAVE SCHOOLS FOR IDIOTIC CHILDREN

1866: THE FIRST CLINICAL DESCRIPTION OF DOWN SYNDROME IS PUBLISHED BY JOHN LANGDON DOWN.

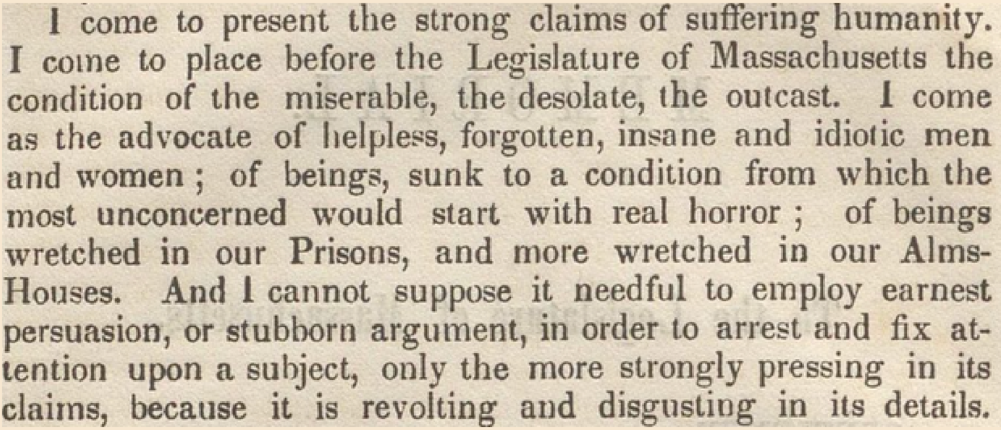


"Use What You Have, Figure 5." Disabilitymuseum.org, 1862, www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/catcard.html?id=205.

This 1862 illustration depicts a well clothed family looking at a distressed unidentifiable figure trapped behind bars that resemble a cage. The caption "use what you have" is likely a call to similarly privileged Americans to improve the conditions of custody for mentally ill and intellectually disabled persons that people like Dorthea Dix advocated for.

"The Idiot School - NYPL Digital Collections." Nypl.org, 2026, digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/577bbf60-c55e-012f-c3c9-58d385a7bc34?canvasIndex=0.

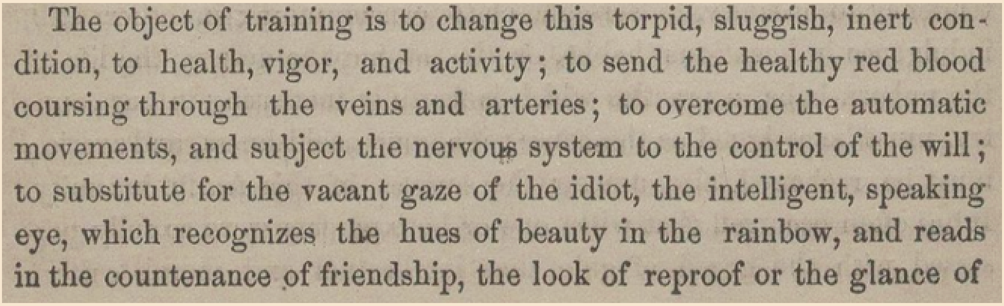
"The Idiot School" dated 1867 depicts idiot children being educated in reading. This is representative of the view of schools for idiots as places for education and improvement.



I come to present the strong claims of suffering humanity. I come to place before the Legislature of Massachusetts the condition of the miserable, the desolate, the outcast. I come as the advocate of helpless, forgotten, insane and idiotic men and women; of beings, sunk to a condition from which the most unconcerned would start with real horror; of beings wretched in our Prisons, and more wretched in our Alms-Houses. And I cannot suppose it needful to employ earnest persuasion, or stubborn argument, in order to arrest and fix attention upon a subject, only the more strongly pressing in its claims, because it is revolting and disgusting in its details.

MEMORIAL TO THE LEGISLATURE OF MASSACHUSETTS (1843)

In 1843, Dorthea Dix wrote a Memorial to the legislature of Massachusetts which protested the conditions of care for intellectually disabled and mentally ill people in prisons and alms-houses and demanded that the state legislature stop imprisoning these persons and improve the living conditions at almshouses. Within the piece, Dix includes many of her notes from visits at these institutions, detailing the use of chains and cages to hold people with intellectual disability and mental illness. Dorthea Dix began her career in education in 1821, running a school for young children in Boston at just 19. When she fell ill and was forced to retire from this position, she traveled to Europe where she met European reformers for the care of the mentally ill. When she returned to America, she brought these ideas of reform with her. This memorial is her first piece arguing for better legislation for the care of this population. Two years after presenting this memorial to the legislature of Massachusetts, the first American asylum—focused on the treatment rather than confinement of mentally ill people—was established in New Jersey due to Dix’s efforts. Three years later, Dix would help her colleague Samuel Howe establish the first school for idiotic children in Massachusetts. Figures like Dix were fundamental to the reforms enacted during the period of 1840-1860. This primary source reveals how advocates like Dix pitied idiotic persons (“helpless”, “forgotten”, “miserable”, “desolate”, “outcast”) and pushed states toward “better” systems of management through arguments relying on observations of care (“I tell what I have seen”) and the logic that management of mentally challenged persons should be given attention.



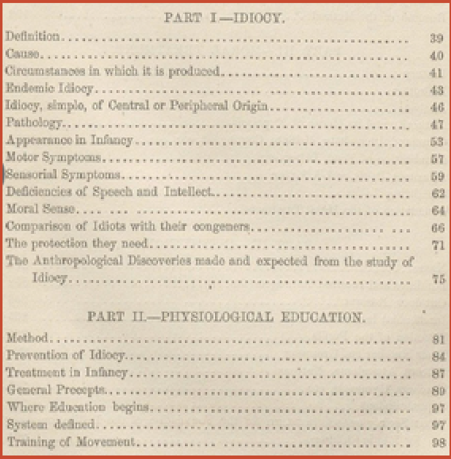
The object of training is to change this torpid, sluggish, inert condition, to health, vigor, and activity; to send the healthy red blood coursing through the veins and arteries; to overcome the automatic movements, and subject the nervous system to the control of the will; to substitute for the vacant gaze of the idiot, the intelligent, speaking eye, which recognizes the hues of beauty in the rainbow, and reads in the countenance of friendship, the look of reproof or the glance of

IDIOTS AND THE EFFORTS FOR THEIR IMPROVEMENT (1856)

“Idiots and Efforts for their Improvement” is an academic report that discusses the historical and current education and treatment of individuals with intellectual disabilities. This report was both published in Barnard’s American Journal of Education and included in the Report of the Commissioners on Idiocy to the General Assembly of Connecticut in May of 1856. It was written by Linus Pierpont Brockett, a medical doctor who was interested in history and also published many works with a focus on the Civil War and general United States history. Within the text, Brockett explores the function and efficacy of institutions and asylums as well as the various methods and techniques used to educate and improve the lives of individuals with intellectual disability. Throughout the text, Brockett reveals his support for idiot education, especially programs that follow Dr. Eduoard Seguin’s model. He views the current state of schooling and resources as the next and greatest frontier The representative quotation above reveals how Brockett held great hope for the improvement of idiocy and how central physical activity was thought to be for educational success. The use of the words “torpid”, “sluggish”, “inert” to describe idiocy showcases the general disdain for idiocy as a condition during this time. However, the belief that intelligence and friendship were possible for idiots through education centered on overcoming automatic movements and controlling the nervous system showcases the dual hope and belief that idiots could become “normal.” The publication of this piece in both an academic journal and a report to the Connecticut state assembly further showcases how academic developments were utilized by activists to argue for increased state support of schooling for the intellectually disabled. As revealed by the successes in establishing institutions for idiots, these efforts were largely successful.

IDIOCY AND ITS TREATMENT BY THE PHYSIOLOGICAL METHOD (1866)

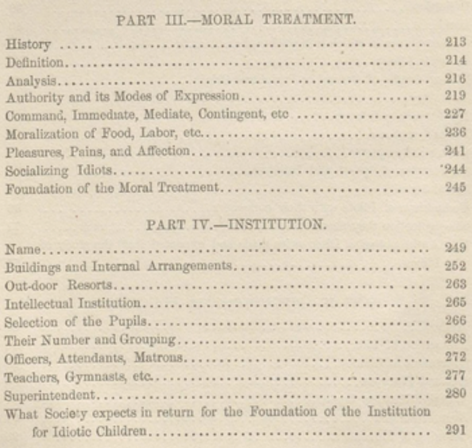
Eduoard Seguin was a French physician and educator who was greatly influential over the conception of idiocy and the methods of educational institutions for the intellectually disabled in both Europe and America. When Seguin immigrated to America in the mid-1840s he promptly implemented the "physiological method" of idiot education which he had been developing in his native country. The reported success of his methods to cure idiocy by strengthening the nervous system gained great popularity. In 1866 Seguin published his book "Idiocy and its Treatment by the Physiological Method" which reviews the origins, goals, and ideal implementation of his approach. Written for educators, caregivers, and health professionals, the book reveals the scientific perception of idiocy and idiot education. The chapters included within the book are particularly revealing of the conception of idiocy.



PART I—IDIOCY.

PART II.—PHYSIOLOGICAL EDUCATION.

In Part I-Idiocy, Seguin details the origin of idiocy, pathology, motor and sensorial symptoms, and moral sense among the idiot population. This shows how idiocy was viewed primarily as a medical issue requiring study. Within the section on "Moral Sense," Seguin writes, "idiotic children are, in their institutions, equal in order and decency, in true lovingness, if not in loveliness, to any collection of children in the land" (64). This reveals Seguin's positive outlook on idiotic children. Part III-Moral Treatment supports the education of idiot children in a loving and positive matter. Seguin states, "We must beware of too much isolating the naturally isolated idiot" and encourages sending a behaving idiot to "church, to the museum, meetings, shows, and even theatres" within the city (243). This suggests that at the time, Seguin and his supporters envisioned educational institutions and the treatment of idiots with the goal of positive reform rather than removal from larger society. The inclusion of Part I V-Institution showcases Seguin's understanding that his scientific and educational knowledge could and should be used to influence state policy on the development of institutions for idiots. His use of the term "Institution" which he defines as "temporary" as compared to asylums which are more permanent is representative of the lasting hope of reform of idiots during the mid-nineteenth century. Importantly, this is Seguin's last major work on the intellectually disabled. In the decade prior to his death in 1880, Seguin's focus had shifted to broader education for all americans and the clinical application of thermometers in tracking disease.



PART III.—MORAL TREATMENT.

PART IV.—INSTITUTION.

OP-ED ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF CURE

In both the 1840s and our present day the conception of intellectual disability and the treatment of intellectually disabled individuals has been greatly influenced by the possibility of “cure”.

Early institutional reformers of the mid-19th century such as Samuel Gridley Howe alongside physicians such as Edouard Seguin promoted the belief that intellectual disability could be ameliorated through education and thus that schools were a morally and economically worthy investment. Implicit in their argument was the idea that “idiots” deserved state sponsored support precisely because they could be transformed into independent and productive citizens. The earlier moral responsibility to care for intellectually disabled persons on the basis of their humanity and membership in the community was thus overshadowed by a new and stronger conviction to elevate people to a state of usefulness that would benefit both themselves and broader society.

The hope that education could transform intellectually disabled individuals into “normal” citizens was, of course, not realized. Schools for “idiots” improved their student’s abilities, but were largely unable to return them to communities as normal productive members. The new framework for valuing human life on the basis of potential for usefulness, however, remained. By the late 1860s, Americans had grown increasingly critical of their taxpayer funds being used to support services that cared for, but did not reform idiots. They argued that funding should instead be spent on the education of children who could grow and contribute meaningfully when provided with support. This way of thinking which arose alongside emerging scientific theories of heredity and the growing influence of biological determinism eventually led Americans into the eugenic era in which disability became something to prevent rather than cure.

Today, we developed tools (gene editing, stem cell therapy, brain-technology interfaces, etc.) that have created a new possibility for the “cure” of intellectual disability. Unlike the educational methods of the mid-1800s, this technology may truly be able to change the intelligence of individuals with developmental differences.

Beyond the question of whether we would want to use this technology to “improve” the lives of individuals with intellectual disabilities at all, we must once-again face the question of who should receive therapeutic intervention.

Beyond the question of whether we would want to use this technology to "improve" the lives of individuals with intellectual disabilities at all, we must once-again face the question of who should receive therapeutic intervention.

In their book Disability Worlds, Rayna Rapp and Faye Ginsburg argue that contemporary societies are shaped by a "doubled telos of modernity." On the one hand, an expansionary telos seeks to broaden the circle of care by extending medical treatment, rehabilitation, and social support to an ever-growing circle of people, including those with disabilities. On the other hand, an exclusionary telos operates through technologies and policies that aim to optimize populations by preventing, eliminating, or marginalizing lives considered too costly in order to provide the best care to the most people. In this way, our modern society has become defined by the simultaneous drive to include more people in systems of care that can improve their lives and desire to use scientific and technological tools to reduce the number of people who require that care. This reality requires that every expansion of care rewrite categories of exclusion to redefine which lives are "worth improving"(Rapp & Ginsburg).

These tensions have created the conditions for prevention, as a way to eliminate those lives not worthy of investment, to once again enter the discourse. This time, our prenatal testing technologies make specific prevention possible, and have created the opportunity for a new form of eugenics to take place—that which specifically eliminates individuals with intellectual (or other) disabilities too extreme to warrant care.

The history of intellectual disability should remind us that focusing on intervention in the name of cure, and re-opening discussions of prevention, reshapes how societies judge the value of different human lives. As we move forward in this era of technological advancement, we should do the philosophical work that should have been done in the mid-19th century: we must reconsider the value of care without cure and question whether a life is truly less worthy of support simply because it cannot be "improved" by current technologies.

"Special Olympics Celebrates 50 Years!" SpecialOlympics.org, 3 Aug. 2018, www.specialolympics.org/our-work/50th/. Accessed 16 Mar. 2026.

1870S-1890S

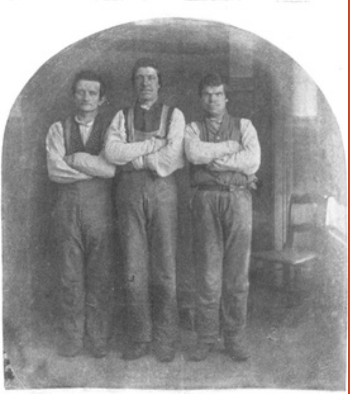
SOMETHING TO BE CONTROLLED
EDUCATION → ASYLUM

FROM 1870-1890, CARE OF THE INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED TRANSFORMED FROM EDUCATIONAL TO CUSTODIAL IN NATURE WITH THE NOTION OF LIFELONG SEGREGATION AND INSTITUTIONAL EXPANSION AT ITS HEART. THIS SHIFT ULTIMATELY EMERGED DUE TO THE FAILURE OF THE ORIGINAL EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS WHICH, DESPITE INSISTENCE OF BEING BENIGN AND TEMPORARY, FAILED TO SET CLEAR GOALS FOR THE DISCHARGE OF THEIR STUDENTS (IRVING). THIS REALITY COUPLED WITH THE LEGAL MINORITY STATUS OF THE STUDENTS AND THE DIFFICULT POST-CIVIL WAR STATE OF AMERICA PROMPTED A PUSH TO CONTROL AND KEEP INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED CITIZENS OF SIGHT.

THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE CIVIL WAR CAUSED INCREASED CRITICISM OF EXCESSIVE GOVERNMENT SPENDING IN A TIME MARED BY WIDESPREAD POVERTY. THIS CRITICISM MANIFESTED ITSELF IN GREATER OVERSIGHT TO ASSESS THE EFFICACY OF CHARITABLE GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS. UPON A DEEP-DIVE INTO THE OUTCOMES OF EDUCATION FOR IDIOTS, STATES ULTIMATELY REALIZED THAT “IDIOCY” COULD NOT BE “CURED.” AS A RESULT OF THE REALITY NOT MATCHING EARLIER OPTIMISM REGARDING THE REFORM OF DISABLED INDIVIDUALS, THE EARLIER GOALS OF EDUCATION AND REFORM WERE REPLACED IN FAVOR OF HIDING INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED PEOPLE AWAY. ADDITIONALLY, AS CRITICISM OF THE“BURDENSOME” EXISTENCE OF INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED PEOPLE MOUNTED, DISABILITY INCREASINGLY BECAME SOMETHING TO BE FEARED AND AVOIDED.

National Library of Medicine, Prints and Photographs. “Two Female Asylum Inmates.” Disabilitymuseum.org, 1886, www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/catcard.html?id=637.

AS THESE BELIEFS EVOLVED, SO DID THE RHETORIC TOWARDS DISABLED PEOPLE, PARTICULARLY REPLACING “THE IDIOTIC CHILD” IN PROFESSIONAL AND POPULAR LITERATURE WITH THE TERM ‘FEEBLEMINDEDNESS.’ WITHIN THIS NEW DESIGNATION WAS THE NOTION OF THE FINANCIAL AND SOCIAL WEIGHT THAT DISABLED INDIVIDUALS POSED TO THEIR FAMILIES AND SOCIETY MORE BROADLY. BY THE START OF THE 20TH CENTURY, THE FOCUS HAD ALMOST ENTIRELY SHIFTED FROM EDUCATION AND FUTURE RETURN TO THEIR COMMUNITIES TO LIFELONG SEGREGATION AND CUSTODIAL CARE.



Parrish, Joseph. “Three Male Asylum Inmates.” Disabilitymuseum.org, 1886, www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/catcard.html?id=636..

A PROMINENT NEW VOICE IN THE CARE FOR THE DISABLED WAS DR. ISAAC NEWTON KERLIN, SUPERINTENDENT OF THE PENNSYLVANIA TRAINING SCHOOL FOR FEEBLE-MINDED CHILDREN. KERLIN WAS THE SELF-PROCLAIMED AMERICAN AUTHORITY ON "IDIOCY" WHO ESTABLISHED THE ASSOCIATION OF MEDICAL OFFICERS OF AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS FOR IDIOTIC AND FEEBLE-MINDED PERSONS. IN HIS CREATION OF THE ASSOCIATION, HE SIGNALED A SHIFT FROM PREVIOUS MODELS OF CARE (IRVING 148). KERLIN PERPETUATED INCREASINGLY NEGATIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE DISABLED, FOCUSING ON THE NOTION OF HEREDITY AS “FEEBLEMINDEDNESS” BECAME CONCEPTUALIZED AS A PERMANENT CONDITION. THE NEWLY UNDERSTOOD PERMANENCE OF DISABILITY PROMPTED THE DESIRE TO INCREASINGLY TRACK HEREDITY AS IT WAS A POTENTIAL CAUSE. KERLIN’S SHIFT TO DAMAGING PROTO-EUGENIC BELIEFS WAS REPRESENTATIVE OF THE ULTIMATE BUILD UP TO THE EUGENICS MOVEMENT OF THE 20TH CENTURY. ULTIMATELY, THE SUPERINTENDENTS AT THE CENTER OF THE CUSTODIAL INSTITUTIONS BECAME THE MOST OUTSPOKEN ADVOCATES FOR THE EUGENICS MOVEMENT FOR THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY THAT WOULD PROFOUNDLY CHANGE THE TREATMENT OF BOTH THE INTELLECTUALLY AND PHYSICALLY DISABLED.

1871: PENNSYLVANIA BECOMES THE FIRST STATE TO CHANGE ITS STATUTE TO ALLOW ADULT IDIOTS TO ATTEND SCHOOLS

1876: FORMATION OF ASSOCIATION OF MEDICAL OFFICERS OF AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS FOR IDOITIC AND FEEBLE-MINDED PERSONS WITH THE GOAL OF SHARING EXPERIENCE ON "MANAGEMENT, TRAINING, AND EDUCATION OF IDIOTS AND FEEBLE-MINDED PERSONS" YEARLY

1882: THE FIRST FEDERAL IMMIGRATION ACT PROHIBITED U.S. ENTRY TO ANY "LUNATIC, IDIOT OR ANY PERSON UNABLE TO TAKE CARE OF HIMSELF OR HERSELF WITHOUT BECOMING A PUBLIC CHARGE"

1883: EUGENICS IS COINED BY SIR FRANCIS GALTON IN ESSAY IN EUGENICS

1891: IN UNION PACIFIC RAILWAY V. BOTSFORD THE SUPREME COURT REFUSED TO ORDER A PLAINTIFF TO SUBMIT TO A PHYSICAL EXAMINATION BY THE DEFENDANT'S DOCTOR.

1894: THE ROME CUSTODIAL ASYLUM FOR UNTEACHABLE IDIOTS IN UPSTATE NEW YORK, OPENED

National Library of Medicine, Prints and Photographs. "Two Cobblers in an Asylum." Disabilitymuseum.org, 1886, www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/catcard.html?id=560..

This portrait displays two cobblers in an asylum. Their work as cobblers is representative of the greater use of manual labor in asylums in the late 19th century. While initially regarded as a moral treatment, inmate labor became part of the profit-driven focus of these institutions.

Rogers, Charles E. "Elm Hill." Disabilitymuseum.org, 1898, www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/catcard.html?id=1710. Barre Historical Society.

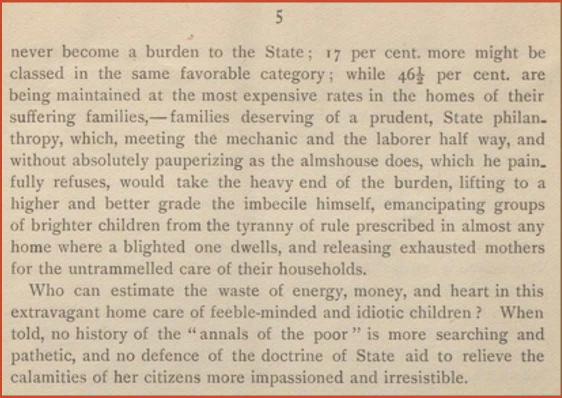
This image shows the Elm Hill Private School for Feeble Minded in Barre, Massachusetts. Elm Hill was a leading institution in the care for those with cognitive disabilities

In addition to the institutionalization of the late 19th century was the notion of the "freak show" and the use of the disabled for entertainment purposes. The perspective and treatment of the disabled as a spectacle built on the notions of otherness that ultimately contributed to practices of custodial care and segregation

Morris. "Waino and Plutano." Disabilitymuseum.org, 1870, www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/catcard.html?id=924. Syracuse Univ. Library, Special Collections.

FINDINGS IN THE ARCHIVE: THE WORK OF DR.ISAAC NEWTON KERLIN

In his “Provision for Idiotic and Feeble-minded Children” in 1886, Kerlin formally reported on the status of intellectually disabled children in America.



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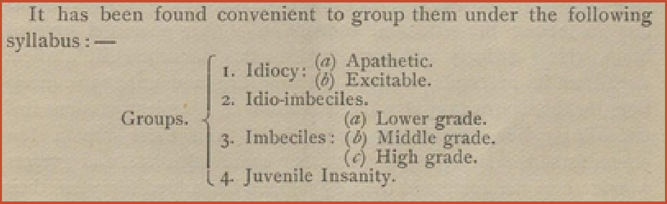
never become a burden to the State; 17 per cent. more might be classed in the same favorable category; while 46½ per cent. are being maintained at the most expensive rates in the homes of their suffering families,—families deserving of a prudent, State philanthropy, which, meeting the mechanic and the laborer half way, and without absolutely pauperizing as the almshouse does, which he painfully refuses, would take the heavy end of the burden, lifting to a higher and better grade the imbecile himself, emancipating groups of brighter children from the tyranny of rule prescribed in almost any home where a blighted one dwells, and releasing exhausted mothers for the untrammelled care of their households.

Who can estimate the waste of energy, money, and heart in this extravagant home care of feeble-minded and idiotic children? When told, no history of the “annals of the poor” is more searching and pathetic, and no defence of the doctrine of State aid to relieve the calamities of her citizens more impassioned and irresistible.

The first section addresses the “Numbers and Distributions of the Idiotic Population.” Kerlin’s focus on the quantification of the number of the disabled is reflective of the general desire to assess the population and subsequently control it. Following his assessment of the number of disabled, Kerlin moved into examining the socioeconomic breakdown. Notably, he pointed out that 46 ½ percent of the disabled population placed a signficant financial burden on their “suffering families.” He continued on to emphasize the “waste of energy, money, and heart” that went into the care of feebleminded and idiotic children. The notion of the waste of resources that intellectually disabled children were responsible for is indicative of the shift in perspective that occurred in the latter half of the 19th century that prioritized segregation and ultimately sterilization to control the population of the intellectually disabled.



It has been found convenient to group them under the following syllabus:—

Groups.
- 1. Idiocy: (a) Apathetic. (b) Excitable.
- 2. Idio-imbeciles.
- 3. Imbeciles: (a) Lower grade. (b) Middle grade. (c) High grade.
- 4. Juvenile Insanity.

Following his numerical assessment, Kerlin addressed the “Degrees and Grades of Idiocy.” The different categories and levels within them directly preceded the development of intelligence tests such as the Binet-Simon scale. The purpose of the qualitative examination of the intellectually disabled was to provide greater authority for their control.

At the end of his Provision, Kerlin addressed the specific function of institutions for the intellectually disabled, specifically noting the importance of segregation from the greater population in preventing their reproduction. Kerlin wrote, “Supported by an influence of this sort, our institutions might present such an array of facts as to be convincing of the truth, and converting to better forms of living,—to natural marriage, normal birthhood, and noble child-culture” (Kerlin 19-20). Kerlin additionally stressed the role of the state in assisting the prevention of reproduction. Such a point underscores the methodological shift in the treatment of the disabled which would ultimately take the form of forced sterilization beginning in the 20th century.

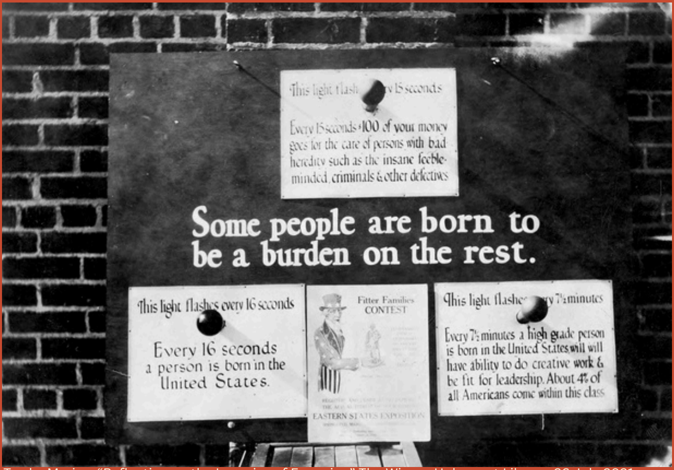
1900S-1930S

SOMETHING TO BE PREVENTED
THREAT TO SOCIAL HARMONY, FINANCIAL BURDEN, HEREDITARY DANGER
EUGENICS AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION

FUELED BY THE PROTO-EUGENIC BELIEFS AND THE GROWING PERCEPTION THAT DISABLED INDIVIDUALS POSED A SOCIAL BURDEN, INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY OR "MENTAL RETARDATION" BECAME RECONSTRUCTED AS THE "MENACE OF THE FEEBLEMINDED" IN THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY (NOLL & TRENT 3). AT THE SAME TIME, THE APPLICATION OF MENDELIAN HEREDITY TO UNDERSTAND INHERITANCE BECAME CENTRAL TO THE SOCIAL CONTROL OF THE DISABLED. IN OTHER WORDS, "EUGENICS BECAME THE LINKAGE BETWEEN UNDERSTANDING AND CONTROL, AND FEEBLEMINDEDNESS BECAME ITS PRINCIPAL SUBJECT" (NOLL & TRENT 3). THE WORK OF PROMINENT EUGENICISTS SUCH AS CHARLES DAVENPORT AND HENRY H. GODDARD, PARTICULARLY GODDARD'S RESEARCH ON THE KALLIKAK FAMILY, EMPHASIZED THE SUPPOSED ROLE OF HEREDITY IN THE PREVALENCE OF INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY AND ADVOCATED FOR SEGREGATION AND ULTIMATELY STERILIZATION. THE FIRST STERILIZATION BILL WAS PASSED IN INDIANA IN 1907 WITH SIMILAR BILLS PASSED SOON AFTER.

CONSEQUENTLY, THE IMPORTANCE OF DIAGNOSTIC REFINEMENT BECAME CRUCIAL, ADDING THE CATEGORY OF THE MORON AS THE MOST THREATENING OF THE "FEEBLEMINDED." COMPLEMENTING THIS NEW CATEGORIZATION WAS THE INTRODUCTION OF THE INTELLIGENCE TEST DESIGNED TO IDENTIFY THE "FEEBLEMINDED." THE TEST ALLOWED FOR A PRECISE DIFFERENTIATION BETWEEN THE CATEGORIES OF "IDIOT," "IMBECILE," AND "MORON" AS WELL AS LOW AND HIGH GRADES FOR EACH (NOLL & TRENT 3). IN PART DUE TO THE FOCUS ON DIAGNOSTIC REFINEMENT, THE RECORDED POPULATION OF THE INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED GREW SIGNIFICANTLY. THE PERCEIVED GROWTH OF THE DISABLED POPULATION ESCALATED SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONCERNS REGARDING THEIR CARE. ADDITIONALLY, THE SUPPOSED IMMORALITY OF THE INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED, PARTICULARLY THEIR PROMISCUITY, AMPLIFIED CONCERNS OF THEIR CONTINUOUS REPRODUCTION. NOTABLY, THE BEAUTY OF "FEEBLEMINDED" WOMEN AND THEIR ABILITY TO "SEDUCE" MEN OF GREATER BIOLOGICAL STANDING WAS UNDERSTOOD TO BE AN ISSUE. THE REMEDY FOR SUCH ISSUE WAS COMPULSORY STERILIZATION.

THE RHETORIC AND TREATMENT OF THE DISABLED WAS AT THE FOREFRONT OF GROWING CONCERNS OF THE OVERALL FITNESS OF THE AMERICAN POPULATION IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY. THIS WAS UNDOUBTEDLY INFLUENCED BY THE ECONOMIC CHALLENGES AND GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT AT THE TIME.



Turda, Marius. "Reflecting on the Legacies of Eugenics." The Wiener Holocaust Library, 26 July 2021, wienerholocaustlibrary.org/2021/07/26/reflecting-on-the-legacies-of-eugenics/.

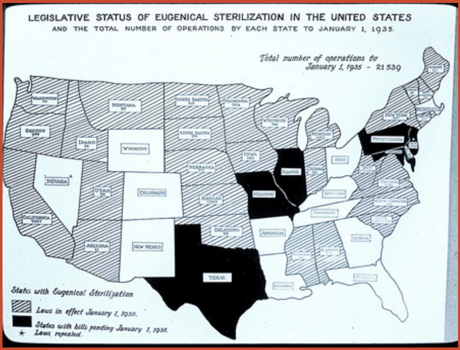
1907: INDIANA PASSED THE FIRST EUGENIC STERILIZATION LAW TARGETING PEOPLE WITH COGNITIVE DISABILITIES. 24 STATES FOLLOW

1912: THE KALIKAK FAMILY BY HENRY H. GODDARD WAS PUBLISHED. GODDARD DIRECTLY LINKED DISABILITY TO IMMORALITY, TYING BOTH TO GENETICS.

1924: THE COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA PASSED A LAW ALLOWING FOR STERILIZATION WITHOUT CONSENT OF INDIVIDUALS THAT WERE DETERMINED TO BE "FEEBLEMINDED, INSANE, DEPRESSED, MENTALLY HANDICAPPED, EPILEPTIC AND OTHER."

1927: THE SUPREME COURT DECISION IN BUCK V BELL DETERMINED THAT THE FORCED STERILIZATION OF INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES WAS NOT A VIOLATION OF THEIR CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS.

1939: WWII BEGINS, AND ADOLF HITLER BEGINS THE T-4 PROGRAM WHICH SYSTEMATICALLY KILLED PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL AND PHYSICAL DISABILITIES.

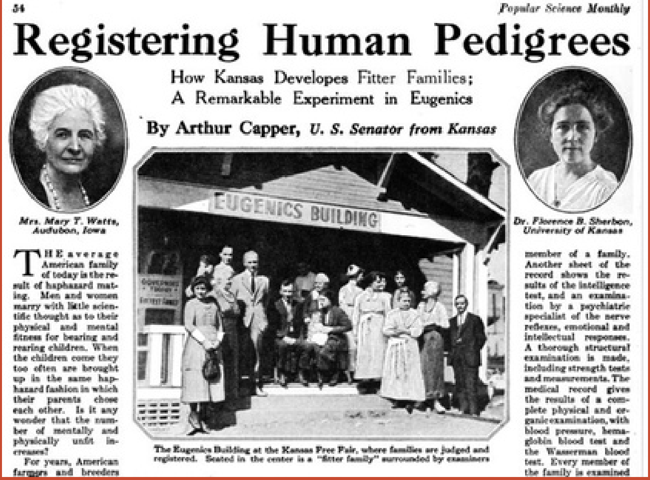


Berger, Knute. "U.S. Mishandling of COVID Echoes the 20th Century Eugenics Movement." Cascade PBS, Dec. 2020, www.cascadepbs.org/opinion/2020/12/us-mishandling-covid-echoes-20th-century-eugenics-movement/. Accessed 16 Mar. 2026.

This map notes the legislative status of eugenic sterilization in the United States in early 1935. Almost every state had laws in effect or bills pending. Such a point underscores the prevelence of sterilization in American society at the time and the overall attitude towards supposed intellectual deficiencies.

Fair, Alexandra. "The Sterilization of Carrie Buck." Origins, Oct. 2022, origins.osu.edu/read/sterilization-carrie-buck.

Carrie Buck, the individual at the center of the Buck v. Bell case, and her mother are pictured. Purportedly "feebleminded," Carrie Buck and her infant daughter were forcibly sterilized on the grounds of the heredity nature of "feeblemindedness."



54 *Popular Science Monthly*

Registering Human Pedigrees

How Kansas Developes Fitter Families;
A Remarkable Experiment in Eugenics

By Arthur Capper, ***U. S. Senator from Kansas***

Mrs. Mary T. Watts, Audubon, Iowa

Dr. Florence B. Sherbon, University of Kansas

THE average American family of today is the result of haphazard mating. Men and women marry with little scientific thought as to their physical and mental fitness for bearing and rearing children. When the children come they too often are brought up in the same haphazard fashion in which their parents chose each other. Is it any wonder that the number of mentally and physically unfit increases?

For years, American farmers and breeders

The Eugenics Building at the Kansas Free Fair, where families are judged and registered. Seated in the center is a "fitter family" surrounded by examiners

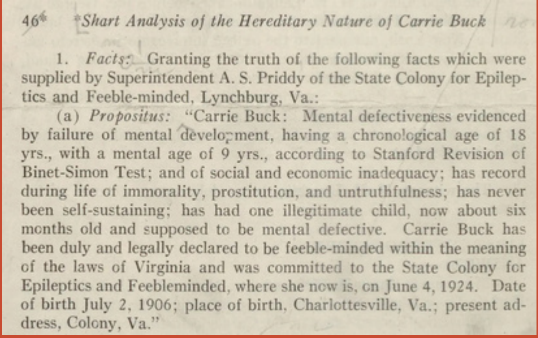
member of a family. Another sheet of the record shows the results of the intelligence test, and an examination by a psychiatric specialist of the nerve reflexes, emotional and intellectual responses. A thorough structural examination is made, including strength tests and measurements. The medical record gives the results of a complete physical and organic examination, with blood pressure, hemaglobin blood test and the Wasserman blood test. Every member of the family is examined

Berger, Knute. "U.S. Mishandling of COVID Echoes the 20th Century Eugenics Movement." Cascade PBS, Dec. 2020, www.cascadepbs.org/opinion/2020/12/us-mishandling-covid-echoes-20th-century-eugenics-movement/. Accessed 16 Mar. 2026.

The treatment of the disabled was a reflection of the greater eugenics movement that took both positive and negative forms. The positive form directly built on the importance of heredity and the notion of "good" genetic stock. Experiements such as the one described in the newspaper clipping emphasized the importance of building a fitter family.

THE CASE OF CARRIE BUCK (1926)

The case of Carrie Buck and the compulsory sterilization of her and her infant daughter encapsulates the perspective towards the disabled in the first half of the 20th century. Moreover, it is a remarkable case study of the failure of the categorization of the supposedly "feebleminded" which falsely determined the hereditary feeblemindedness of the Buck family.

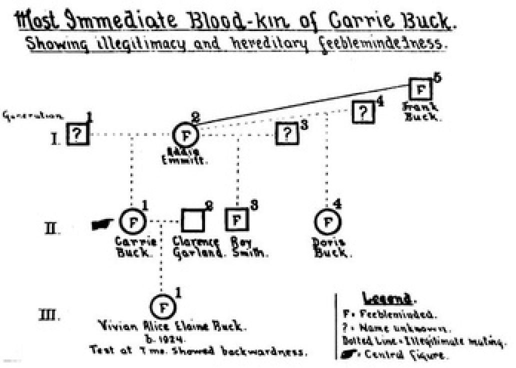


46* *Short Analysis of the Hereditary Nature of Carrie Buck*

1. *Facts:* Granting the truth of the following facts which were supplied by Superintendent A. S. Priddy of the State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded, Lynchburg, Va.:

(a) *Propositus:* "Carrie Buck: Mental defectiveness evidenced by failure of mental development, having a chronological age of 18 yrs., with a mental age of 9 yrs., according to Stanford Revision of Binet-Simon Test; and of social and economic inadequacy; has record during life of immorality, prostitution, and untruthfulness; has never been self-sustaining; has had one illegitimate child, now about six months old and supposed to be mental defective. Carrie Buck has been duly and legally declared to be feeble-minded within the meaning of the laws of Virginia and was committed to the State Colony for Epileptics and Feebleminded, where she now is, on June 4, 1924. Date of birth July 2, 1906; place of birth, Charlottesville, Va.; present address, Colony, Va."

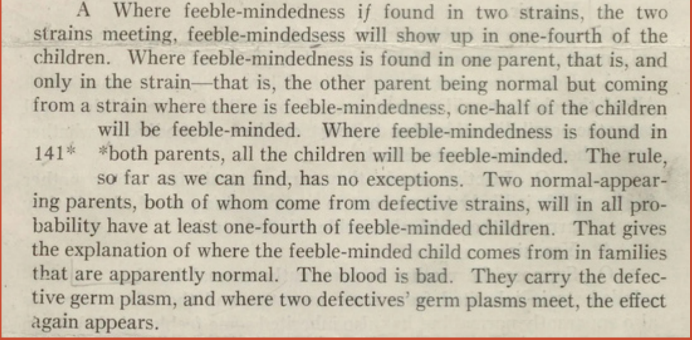
Central to Carrie's case was her classification as a "feebleminded" individual. In the deposition of Harry H. Laughlin, superintendent of the Eugenics Record Office, Laughlin determined Carrie to have a mental age of 9 per the use of the Binet-Simon intelligence test. It is alarmingly obvious, however, that Buck's supposed "feeblemindedness" was simply a cover for her unsavory social situation. It is extremely important to note that Carrie was initially committed to the Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feebleminded after she was raped by a relative of her foster family and became pregnant. The notion of her "social and economic inadequacy" and life of "immorality, prostitution, and untruthfulness" that Laughlin hammered on about was not her inherent character or physiology but rather a product of discriminatory thinking that devalued the poor and uneducated. Furthermore, the situation of Carrie Buck illuminates the way in which supposed intellectual disability was used as a cover for the oppression of the lower classes.



Lombardo, Paul A. "Carrie Buck's Pedigree." Journal of Laboratory and Clinical Medicine, vol. 138, no. 4, Oct. 2001, pp. 278–82, https://doi.org/10.1067/mlc.2001.118091.

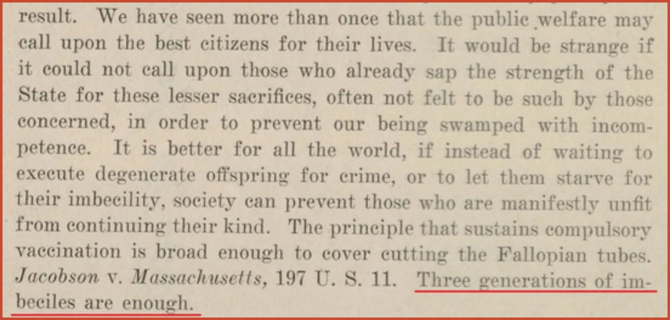
Additionally important to Carrie's story was the perceived heredity of "feeble-mindedness." A pedigree of Carrie's family shows the supposed "feebleminded" status of Carrie's mother, father, siblings, and baby daughter. While noting the mental status of her relatives, a primary focus of the pedigree is the illegitimacy of her familial line. Carrie's mother, Emma Buck, had multiple children out of wedlock. Such focus is evidence of the use of "feebleminded" to explain the disagreeable aspects of the Buck family line.

Source of testimony & depositions on this page and the following: Zarr, Christopher. "'Three Generations of Imbeciles Are Enough' – the Case of Buck v. Bell." Education Updates, 5 Apr. 2017, education.blogs.archives.gov/2017/05/02/buck-v-bell/.



A Where feeble-mindedness *if* found in two strains, the two strains meeting, feeble-mindedsess will show up in one-fourth of the children. Where feeble-mindedness is found in one parent, that is, and only in the strain—that is, the other parent being normal but coming from a strain where there is feeble-mindedness, one-half of the children will be feeble-minded. Where feeble-mindedness is found in 141* *both parents, all the children will be feeble-minded. The rule, so far as we can find, has no exceptions. Two normal-appearing parents, both of whom come from defective strains, will in all probability have at least one-fourth of feeble-minded children. That gives the explanation of where the feeble-minded child comes from in families that are apparently normal. The blood is bad. They carry the defective germ plasm, and where two defectives' germ plasms meet, the effect again appears.

The testimony of Arthur H. Estabrook was additionally used to emphasize the notion of heredity in Carrie's case. His assessment made note of the results of the mating of a "feebleminded" individual. His evaluation of heredity in the case of Carrie Buck and her family gave further prominence of the pseudoscientific perspective towards the inheritance of "feeblemindedness," subsequently justifying the compulsory sterilization of individuals like Carrie.



result. 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. Three generations of imbeciles are enough.

It was ultimately decided that the compulsory sterilization of the intellectually disabled was not a violation of their Constitutional Rights. In his majority opinion, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes stressed the responsibility to control the reproduction of individuals whose future offspring would continue to represent a strain of resources and emphasized the reduced burden to the "best citizens" in society. Disability became synonymous with social ills, and the medium for both blaming America's problems on the less fortunate and justifying the suppression of them. The contempt towards intellectual disability is made obvious by the desire to eliminate it from the population at all costs. Wendell's infamous words "Three generations of imbeciles are enough" immortalized such opinion. It is both interesting and disappointing when discovering that Buck v. Bell was never formally overturned by the Supreme Court. Such a fact underscores the complex legacy of eugenics in the United States and the pervasiveness of both the rhetoric and frameworks of eugenics.

The Justices of the Supreme Court in 1926, including Oliver Wendell Holmes. Source: "Taft Court 1930." Oyez, www.oyez.org/courts?court=Taft%20Court.

OP-ED ON THE LEGACY OF THE AMERICAN EUGENICS MOVEMENT

It is undeniable that the American eugenics movement served as a template for the treatment of disabled individuals in Nazi Germany that would manifest into their systematic euthanasia beginning in the 1930s.

The Aktion T-4 program targeted both the physically and intellectually disabled, two groups deemed worthy of persecution, racially impure, and a threat to the body politic. The program initially targeted disabled children and then adults. Framed as "mercy killings," the mass murder of the disabled emphasized the supposed positive benefit to society, specifically in the maintenance of the health of the nation. Children were placed in special hospital wards and killed by medical overdose; adults were gassed. In a horrifying abuse of their medical authority, nurses and doctors assisted the Nazi regime in their systematic killing of the disabled.

The Kaufbeuren "euthanasia" facility bears remarkable resemblance to American asylums.

Emmi G. was a 16-year-old schizophrenic who was sterilized before she was killed in 1942 through an overdose of tranquilizers.

Irmgard Huber was the chief nurse at Hadamar "euthanasia" killing center.

The techniques used to kill the disabled were later reproduced to carry out the mass extermination of Jews as well as other populations deemed racially inferior. Overall, eugenic ideology pervaded all areas of thinking in the Third Reich. The ideas motivating the targeting of groups such as the disabled were united by the Nazi fantasy of racial purity and race science. It is this unifying factor that ultimately led the Nazis from persecution to mass murder and genocide. The understanding of the influence of American eugenic beliefs on Nazi ideology and practice has profound implications. While American professionals sought to distance themselves from Nazi policies, their denunciation was incomplete in their continued perpetuation of harmful eugenic beliefs. Eugenic practice did not stop following the moral outrage in the face of WWII. Rather, forced sterilization peaked decades after the Second World War, particularly targeting women of color.

The legacy of the American eugenics movement and the ultimate transformation to the forced sterilization of large numbers of men and women across a variety of racial backgrounds remains a stain in American history. The continued targeting of individuals on the basis of inferior identification, whether percieved disability, criminality, or race, has existed across time and space. This ultimately demonstrates the continuity of the eugenics movement as something that does not disappear but rather takes on a new form and constantly adapts to the greater sociopolitical context. We may ask the question: what form will it take next?

Source of all three images: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Euthanasia Program and Aktion T4." Ushmm.org, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 7 Oct. 2020, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/euthanasia-program.

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