
Eugenics

Background

In 1869, British scientist Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, published *Hereditary Genius*. In the book, he proposed that arranged marriages between carefully selected partners would help create a superior race of humans. Galton later coined the term *eugenics* to describe the practice of selective breeding among humans.

The American Eugenics Society, founded in 1926, took up Galton's ideas. Its founders and officers included steel magnate J.P. Morgan, Kellogg's Cereal Company founder John H. Kellogg, Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger, and University of Vermont zoology professor Henry Perkins. Other Vermont supporters of Eugenics were Calvin Coolidge, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, many government officials, and professionals from the fields of medicine and social work. In Vermont, the Catholic Church registered a formal protest against eugenics. Eugenecists advocated the use of birth control to achieve its goals, and Catholic teachings opposed this.

Eugenics gained a powerful hold on the minds on many Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. Pro-eugenics speakers presented their case in lecture halls, books, and newspapers, they used legislators and colleges as tools to prove their case. Eugenecists even sponsored "Fitter Families" contests at agricultural fairs. In these contests, families would be judged like livestock for their superiority. Propaganda at such events warned that "Some People are Born to Be a Burden on the Rest."

The eugenics movement claimed to promote noble ideals, including the elimination of poverty and genetic disease. Yet in practice, eugenecists often unfairly targeted the poor, immigrants, nonwhites, people in institutions, and the disabled, who were judged unfit to reproduce. Among the prominent supporters of eugenics was Adolph Hitler, who employed it as a rationalization for genocide.

Vermont's laws for dealing with poverty went back to 1797, when the state put towns in charge of caring for their own poor and disabled. Newcomers arriving in a town could be "warned out" if the townspeople felt it likely these newcomers could not support themselves. Poor farms and poorhouses developed as institutions to place the poor, disabled, and mentally ill—often in terrible conditions.

In 1925, University of Vermont Professor Henry Perkins, who later served as president of the American Eugenics Society, organized the Eugenics Survey of Vermont. The Eugenics Survey was not scientific, but relied instead on people's reputations in the community to identify particular families as "degenerate." Those with learning disabilities or poor school records were often classified as "feebleminded," and also considered unfit. Members of the survey team focused much of their attention on families of Abenaki and French-Canadian descent. These people were targeted not because of their ethnic background, but because eugenecists considered them a burden on society and considered their lifestyle inappropriate and unhealthy to children.



Zoology Professor Henry Perkins of the University of Vermont, founder of the state's eugenics movement

photo: University of Vermont

From 1925 to early 30s the eugenics "philosophy" moved a focus on the hereditary to allow for environmental issues such as poverty affecting people and causing societal problems. In 1928, Perkins stopped attempting to identify "pockets of degeneracy" in Vermont families. Still, the Eugenics Survey of Vermont provided impetus for the passage of "A Law for Human Betterment by Voluntary Sterilization."

Signed into law by Governor Stanley Wilson in 1931, this law was intended to reduce poverty and cut the cost of government social services by preventing the poor and disabled from producing more children, who, it was believed, would not be able to care for themselves. Although the law stated that sterilization would be "voluntary," in practice it largely was not. People who had been confined to prisons or other institutions were offered freedom in exchange for their consent to be sterilized.

An unknown number of Vermonters were sterilized under this law. The impact of the law on the Abenakis was particularly dramatic. Many even hid their heritage to avoid being persecuted.

About This Segment

Produced by Nora Jacobson, this segment details how the collapse of Vermont's agricultural economy in the 1800s led to emigration and a stagnant state population. It also created a concern that the "best and brightest" had left Vermont, leaving a degraded genetic stock behind. As a result, Vermont's leaders began two major efforts to reverse the decline. First, the state worked to promote tourism and bring in wealthy outsiders to vacation and purchase summer homes here. Second, eugenecists tried to identify "degenerate" families and prevent them from producing more children.

Note to Teachers: Topics addressed in this segment may not be appropriate for younger students. All teachers should preview the segment before sharing it with their classes. Teachers of lower grades may wish to focus on the first section of the segment (about 4 minutes in length), which deals with issues of poverty in Vermont and attempts to improve the state's economy using tourism. Activities provided for grades 4-5 cover this section only.

In addition, use of terms such as "crazy," and "retarded" are used in vernacular context. It is important to point out to students that such terms are not acceptable.

Before Viewing

- Why is it often harder for people in rural areas to make a living?
- Why do young people who live in Vermont often migrate to other places?
- When young people leave a rural area, what problems can it cause for those who remain behind?
- What responsibility does society have to care for the poor and people with disabilities?

Vocabulary

ACLU: American Civil Liberties Union; an organization dedicated to the defense of people's civil rights

emigration: leaving one country or region and settling in another

eugenics: improvement of the human race by selective breeding

sterilization: using surgery to make a human or animal incapable of reproducing

poor farm or poor house: an institution to which poor people or people with disabilities were confined, often against their will

pseudo science: a practice that is said by some to be based on scientific principles, but in fact is not

After Viewing

- What caused the stagnation of Vermont’s economy and population growth in the 1800s and early 1900s?
- What two major methods did people use to try to improve the economy and increase the population of Vermont?
- Which of these methods was more successful—and why?
- What impact did UVM professor Henry Perkins’ eugenics survey, the Vermont sterilization law, and the work of other social reformers of the time have on Vermont and its people?

Grades 4-5

My Reasons for Leaving It is 1850. You are twenty years old and living on a Vermont farm. You have made the decision to emigrate to a city and need to share this decision with your family. With a group of classmates, write a script for a scene in which you reveal your decision. In the scene, you can tell your family members where you are going and why. Have some family members express their reasons for supporting your move, and others express reasons for opposing it. When you have finished your script, act out this scene for your class.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (3-4:1; 5-6:1); Develop a hypothesis (3-4:2; 5-6:2); Design research (3-4:3; 5-6:3); Conduct research (3-4:4; 5-6:4); Develop reasonable supporting explanations (3-4:5; 5-6:5); Make connections to research (3-4:6; 5-6:6); Communicate findings (3-4:7; 5-6:7); Understand how cultures change (3-4:13; 5-6:13; Interaction/interdependence between humans, environment, and economy (3-4:18; 5-6:18) Make economic decisions (3-4:20; 5-6:20)

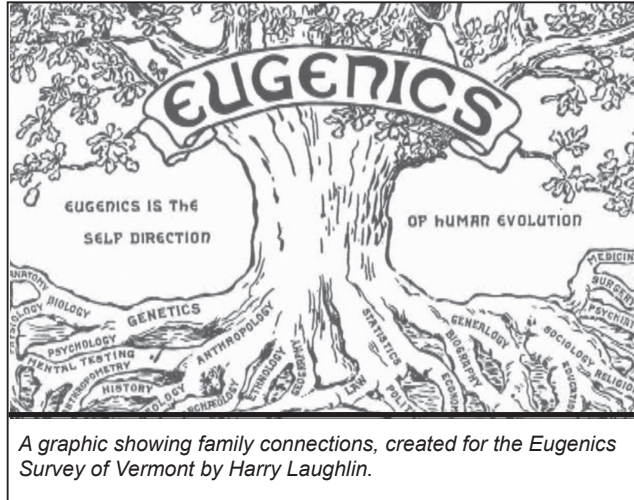
Come Back to Vermont In the 1800s and early 1900s, many young Vermonters left the state in search of opportunity elsewhere. In the early 1900s, the Vermont government began a campaign to lure newcomers to the state. They told people about Vermont’s beauty, its people, and the availability of cheap land and homes. Imagine you are working for the Vermont government in 1911. Design a poster that will lure newcomers to your state—or maybe even convince those who have left to return.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (3-4:1; 5-6:1); Design research (3-4:3; 5-6:3); Conduct research (3-4:4; 5-6:4); Develop reasonable supporting explanations (3-4:5; 5-6:5); Make connections to research (3-4:6; 5-6:6); Communicate findings (3-4:7; 5-6:7); Understand how cultures change (3-4:13; 5-6:13; Interaction/interdependence between humans, environment, and economy (3-4:18; 5-6:18) Make economic decisions (3-4:20; 5-6:20)

Grades 6-8

Hidden Roots Joseph Bruchac’s young adult novel *Hidden Roots* tells the story of Harold, an 11-year-old boy living in upstate New York in the 1960s. With the help of his Uncle Louis, Harold uncovers his family’s hidden Abenaki heritage and learn how the Vermont eugenics movement forced the family to keep those



A graphic showing family connections, created for the Eugenics Survey of Vermont by Harry Laughlin.

roots hidden. To learn more about the impact of eugenics on the Abenaki, read this book and create a response to it in the form of an essay. In your paper, point out the impact of eugenics on Harold’s family, as well as your own opinions on the subject.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (5-6:1; 7-8:1); Design research (5-6:3; 7-8:3); Conduct research (5-6:4; 7-8:4); Make connections to research (5-6:6; 7-8:6); Communicate findings (5-6:7; 7-8:7); Understand how humans interpret history (5-6:9; 7-8:9); Understand how access affects justice, reward, and power (5-6:17; 7-8:17)

Statistics and States The University of Virginia Historical Census Browser allows researchers to compare census date for all states from 1790 to 1960. Use the browser to do some research. How did the population of Vermont change from 1830-1930? How does the change compare to changes in the populations of Maine, Massachusetts and New Hampshire? Create a graph showing your findings. Then give a hypothesis for differing growth rates. Remember that census takers could easily overlook some populations that lived in isolated areas, or those who lived more nomadic lifestyles. Also, because of government initiatives such as sterilization laws, some people did not want to be counted in the census. Be sure to address these issues in your report.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (5-6:1; 7-8:1); Design research (5-6:3; 7-8:3); Conduct research (5-6:4; 7-8:4); Make connections to research (5-6:6; 7-8:6); Communicate findings (5-6:7; 7-8:7); Understand how humans interpret history (5-6:9; 7-8:9); Interpret geography/solve geographic problems (5-6:11; 7-8:11); Understand how cultures change (5-6:13; 7-8:13); Interaction/interdependence between humans, environment, and economy (5-6:18; 7-8:18)

Too Dependent on Tourism? The effort to attract tourists to Vermont that began in the early 1900s was eventually successful. Today, Vermont’s economy depends upon tourists—but is it too dependent on them? Should we instead focus more on building up our economy by developing more businesses that are not tourist related? Do research to find out more about Vermont’s economy. Then hold a debate. One side can defend the importance of Vermont’s tourist economy. The other side can take the position that we need to develop jobs by other means. Both sides should weigh the effect that tourism and other economic development projects have had on Native American and other communities, including displacement from their traditional lands.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (5-6:1; 7-8:1); Develop a hypothesis (5-6:2; 7-8:2); Design research (5-6:3; 7-8:3); Conduct research (5-6:4; 7-8:4); Develop reasonable supporting explanations (5-6:5; 7-8:5); Make connections to research (5-6:6; 7-8:6); Communicate findings (5-6:7; 7-8:7); Understand how humans interpret history (5-6:9; 7-8:9); Interpret geography/solve geographic problems (5-6:11; 7-8:11); Human interaction with the environment (5-6:12; 7-8:12); Understand how cultures change (5-6:13; 7-8:13); Understand issues of human interdependence (5-6: 16; 7-8:16); Interaction/interdependence between humans, environment, and economy (5-6:18; 7-8:18); Make economic decisions (5-6:20; 7-8:20)

Grades 9-12

Then and Now In a discussion with your classmates, talk about the issue of stereotyping and peer groups in your school and community, and how this effects community members. After discussing these issues, engage in a writing exercise. First, write as a person who has been stereotyped or negatively targeted in the present day. Tell about the effects on your life, the parts of yourself you are forced to hide, and how you might make the situation better. Then, imagine that you are an Abenaki child of the early 20th century who has been forced to hide his or her ethnic background because of the eugenics movement. Write a story about your life that shows how you have been affected by hiding your heritage, what you think you have

lost because of it, and how you might improve the situation. Then compare the two situations. What issues have stayed the same over time? What issues have changed?

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (9-10:1; 11-12:1); Develop a hypothesis (9-10:2; 11-12:2); Design research (9-10:3; 11-12:3); Conduct research (9-10:4; 11-12:4); Develop reasonable supporting explanations (9-10:5; 11-12:5); Make connections to research (9-10:6; 11-12:6); Communicate findings (9-10:7; 11-12:7); Connect past with present (9-10:8; 11-12:8); Understand how humans interpret history (9-10:9; 11-12:9); Understand past, present and future (9-10:10; 11-12:10); Understand how cultures change (9-10:13; 11-12:13); Understand issues of human interdependence (9-10: 16; 11-12:16); Understand how access affects justice, reward, and power (9-10:17; 11-12:17); Interaction/interdependence between humans, environment, and economy (9-10:18; 11-12:18)

Eugenics and Genocide Created with good intentions, eugenics led to disastrous consequences. Among those was the Holocaust, in which Adolph Hitler’s Nazi Germany murdered over six million Jews, homosexuals, people with disabilities, and others judged to be undesirable, all in the name of creating a “master race” of humans. Do research to find out the influence of eugenics on the genocide committed during World War II, and present a report to your class in the form of a paper, photo essay, podcast, or video.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (9-10:1; 11-12:1); Design research (9-10:3; 11-12:3); Conduct research (9-10:4; 11-12:4); Develop reasonable supporting explanations (9-10:5; 11-12:5); Make connections to research (9-10:6; 11-12:6); Communicate findings (9-10:7; 11-12:7); Understand how humans interpret history (9-10:9; 11-12:9); Understand how cultures change (9-10:13; 11-12:13); Understand various forms of government (9-10: 15; 11-12:15); Understand issues of human interdependence (9-10: 16; 11-12:16); Understand how access affects justice, reward, and power (9-10:17; 11-12:17)

Poverty in Vermont Today For more than 100 years, people in Vermont have worked to reduce poverty and the negative social effects that accompany it. Eugenics did more harm than good, but other efforts have had more impact. Do research to gather information about poverty levels and accompanying issues such as homelessness and hunger in Vermont today. Then find out about efforts being undertaken to alleviate poverty in our state, and how successful those efforts are. Share your research in the form of a written report, and make it available online to those who wish to learn more about the fight against poverty in Vermont and how they can help.

It is important to remember that not all people agree on a definition of poverty. Some people believe that having a lot of material things is necessary to live a happy life, while others do not. It is also important to remember that many efforts to alleviate poverty do not have their desired effect, and can even impact people they are trying to help in negative ways. For government and aid organizations, taking steps to end poverty means making decisions for or about other people. When it comes to creating solutions, it is important for all voices to be heard.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (9-10:1; 11-12:1); Develop a hypothesis (9-10:2; 11-12:2); Design research (9-10:3; 11-12:3); Conduct research (9-10:4; 11-12:4); Develop reasonable supporting explanations (9-10:5; 11-12:5); Make connections to research (9-10:6; 11-12:6); Communicate findings (9-10:7; 11-12:7); Understand how cultures change (9-10:13; 11-12:13); Act as citizens (9-10:14; 11-12:14); Understand issues of human interdependence (9-10: 16; 11-12:16); Understand how access affects justice, reward, and power (9-10:17; 11-12:17); Interaction/interdependence between humans, environment, and economy (9-10:18; 11-12:18); Interconnectedness of government and economy (9-10:19; 11-12:19); Make economic decisions (9-10:20; 11-12:20)

Career Corner: Archivist

Governments, organizations, and individuals need help organizing historical records such as paper documents, computer files, and artifacts. Archivists keep track of everything from photos and publications to legal documents and survey maps. They also help people search through these holdings to learn more about the past. Before computers became common, archivists mostly worked with physical objects. Today, archivists must know how to create and use computer databases that help them organize and retrieve information. If you like history and are good at organizing things, you might consider exploring a career as an archivist.

RESOURCES

Links

Vermont Eugenics: A Documentary History: uvm.edu/~eugenics

Information on Compulsory Sterilization in the United States: uvm.edu/~lkaelber/eugenics

The Digital Archive on the American Eugenics Movement: eugenicsarchive.org

SourceWatch information about the American Eugenics Society:
sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=American_Eugenics_Society

The Abenaki Nation of Missisquoi, St. Francis/Sokoki Band: abenakination.org

The Elnu Tribe of the Abenaki: elnuabenakitribe.org

The Koasek Traditional Band of the Koas Abenaki Nation: koasekabenaki.org

The Abenaki Tribe at Nulhegan-Memphramagog: abenakitribe.org

Oyate.org: An online source of books about Native Americans for children

Books

Bruchac, Joseph, *Hidden Roots*. Scholastic, 2004. (grades 5-8)

A young boy uncovers his family’s Abenaki roots, hidden as a response to the eugenics movement and sterilization programs.

Gallagher, Nancy L., *Breeding Better Vermonters: The Eugenics Project in the Green Mountain State*. University Press New England, 1999.

Pilkington, Doris. *The Rabbit-Proof Fence*. Miramax, 2002.

The story of the effects of eugenics on Aboriginal and mixed race families in Australia, specifically the author’s mother and two other young girls. The three girls are forcibly moved to a resettlement camp to be re-educated as culturally white, then they escape the camp and journey toward freedom.