Reckoning with Our History: Eugenics in Wisconsin

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Who am I?
The UW-Madison Public History Project aims to recover and acknowledge the history of exclusion on campus through the voices of those who experienced and resisted it.
Final Products

Exhibit  Website
Place-Based Interpretations  Educational Tools

Reckoning (noun)

1. The action or process of calculating or estimating something
2. A person’s view, opinion, or judgement
3. A bill or account, or its settlement
The History of Eugenics in the United States

Sir Francis Galton, Courtesy of the Library of Congress.
Charles Darwin, Courtesy of the Library of Congress.
The History of Eugenics in the United States

Poster created by the American Eugenics Society displayed in eugenics education pavilions at state fairs.

The History of Eugenics in the United States

Eugenic Sterilization Map ca. 1935, Courtesy of the Eugenics Archive.
Eugenics Proponents in Wisconsin

CLUBS TO IMPROVE RACE.

The first eugenics club organized in any American university has just been started at the University of Wisconsin. R. A. Baker, Bowy, Wis., a graduate student at the university, has been elected president, and the club starts out with a membership of forty.

The meetings of the club, which will be held twice a month, will be devoted to lectures and discussions of questions pertaining to the physical, mental and moral improvement of the human race.


Leon J. Cole, Courtesy of the UW Archives.

"What kind of philanthropist is he who, though he gives his millions to charity (well intentioned but perhaps misdirected) dilutes and contaminates the very structure of our commonwealth by importation of the scum of Europe to enable him to amass the millions?

...The danger would, perhaps, not be quite so great if there were not the possibility of the control of affairs falling ultimately into the hands of these undesirables;

...With political control in the hands of the inferior, there will be little chance for eugenic legislation."

Eugenics Proponents in Wisconsin

Edward Alsworth Ross donated this book to the UW Libraries. The book is still available to be checked out.

Edward Alsworth Ross, Courtesy of the UW Archives.

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Eugenics Proponents in Wisconsin

Handwritten notes on a speech titled “The Wisconsin Idea” given by Charles Van Hise. Courtesy of the UW Archives.

Charles Van Hise, Courtesy of the UW Archives.

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Eugenics Proponents in Wisconsin

Eugenics are the “best means of conserving the human resources.

Sterilization “might be the proper method.”

“[h]uman defectives should no longer be allowed to propagate the race.”

-- Van Hise Speech, “Conservation of Natural Resources”

Charles Van Hise, Courtesy of the U.W. Archives.

Eugenics Proponents in Wisconsin

“[w]e know enough about the breeding of animals so that if that knowledge were applied to man, the feeble minded would disappear in a generation, and the insane and criminal class be reduced to a small fraction of their present numbers.”

-- Van Hise Speech, “The Idea of Service”

Charles Van Hise, Courtesy of the U.W. Archives.
Eugenics Proponents in Wisconsin

"1. … relief of overburdened families. The idiot child takes a major portion of the mother’s time and robs other children of the care which is their due;

2. curtailment of the increase of feebblemindedness and epilepsy by the sequestration of feebbleminded women of child-bearing age;

3. education of the imbecile to this highest sphere of usefulness."

-- Superintendent Wilmarth, First Biennial Report
The History of Eugenics in Wisconsin

- 1907 – Wisconsin law prohibits the marriage of epileptic, feeble-minded and insane persons, a misdemeanor for such 'defectives' to have sexual intercourse as well as to marry and for anyone to unite such persons in marriage.

- 1913 – Wisconsin law legalized forced sterilization for the epileptic, 'wayward', degenerate, undesirables, at the discretion of institutional medical professionals.

Points of Reflection

“Men of their time”

“Noble” ideas & noble men

Eugenics and genocide

These ideas continue today!
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**Resources**

The Eugenics Archive, Eugenicsarchive.ca

Scott Gordon, “The Painful History Of Eugenics In Wisconsin,”
[https://www.wiscontext.org/painful-history-eugenics-wisconsin](https://www.wiscontext.org/painful-history-eugenics-wisconsin)

Wisconsin Eugenics, [https://www.uvm.edu/~lkaelber/eugenics/WI/WI.html](https://www.uvm.edu/~lkaelber/eugenics/WI/WI.html)

“Children of Misfortune: 100 Years of Public Care” Anne Rugg, 1983