

Eugenics, from the Greek for “well-born,” originated in Sir Francis Galton’s Inquiries into Human Faculty in 1883. Galton envisioned a method of improving “the inborn qualities of a race.” Based on the theory of natural selection developed by his cousin, Charles Darwin, eugenics was intended to influence human evolution, with particular attention to the trait of intelligence, by replacing “Natural Selection by other processes that are more merciful and not less effective.” In 1907 Indiana became the first of thirty-two states that passed eugenic sterilization laws.

Sterilization laws were called into question in the landmark case of Buck v. Bell, heard by the United States Supreme Court in 1927. The Supreme Court upheld Virginia’s eugenics law by a vote of 8-1. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes concluded, “The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the fallopian tubes . . . Three generations of imbeciles are enough.” In 1924 Carrie Buck, pregnant at age seventeen, had been committed to the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded. Research later indicated that Buck and her daughter were of average intelligence.

The North Carolina General Assembly of 1929 authorized sterilizations of patients or inmates of public institutions for whom the operation was considered to be in the best interest or for “the public good.” That year the county boards of commissioners were given authorization to order sterilizations at public expense of “any mentally defective or feeble-minded resident” with consent from the person’s next of kin or legal guardian. In 1933 the Eugenics Board was created to review sterilization requests for all individuals. The board consisted of the commissioner of the Board of Charities and Public Welfare, the secretary of the State Board of health, the chief medical officer of the state institution for the feeble-minded or insane, the chief medical officer of the State Hospital in Raleigh, and the attorney general.

During a eugenics hearing a prosecutor would present the board with evidence as to an individual’s status as mentally diseased, feeble-minded, epileptic, or a danger to society. In the case of inmates of a prison or psychiatric institution, the prosecutor would be the head of the institution or his appointee. Non-institutional cases were prosecuted by the county superintendent of welfare or other county official. The prosecution submitted documents including a medical history and a “social history” which would make a hypothesis as to the individual’s sexual promiscuity and likelihood of procreation. An individual, or a parent or guardian, could also apply for voluntary sterilization.

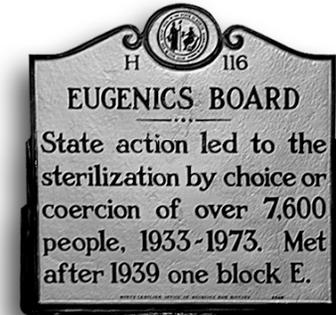
The board members broadly interpreted the science of heredity, hoping that eugenics would solve a wide variety of societal problems including abuse, neglect, poverty, and illegitimacy. By the 1940s, the science behind eugenics had been discredited, but public policymakers in North Carolina held fast to the position that sterilization “protected” the poor and helped to break the cycle of poverty. After 1945, the numbers of non-institutional sterilizations increased, many of whom were “uncontrollable” teenaged girls. Some scholars point to the relative inaccessibility to methods of birth control to the lower classes, making publicly-funded sterilization a viable alternative.

In 1972 the Eugenics Board became the Eugenics Commission and the following year, the General Assembly transferred to the judicial system the responsibility for sterilization procedures due to mental illness or mental retardation. The Eugenics Commission was abolished in 1977. During the period of state mandated sterilizations in North Carolina, over 7,600 people were surgically altered either by choice or coercion.

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Dedication and Unveiling of the Eugenics Historical Marker



June 22, 2009 - 5 p.m.
Caswell Building
200 West Jones Street, Raleigh



Welcome
Secretary Linda A. Carlisle
North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources



The Occasion
Representative Larry Womble
North Carolina House District 71



Invocation
Dr. Rev. William J. Barber II
President, North Carolina NAACP



Special Guests
Mr. Robert W. Eaves, First Gentleman
representing Governor Beverly Eaves Perdue
Mr. Willis C. Lynch
Ms. Nial Ramirez



The Marker
Ms. Ansley Wegner
North Carolina Office of Archives and History

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The Honorable Walter Dalton
Lieutenant Governor of North Carolina

Speaker of the House Joe Hackney
North Carolina House District 54

President Pro Tempore Marc Basnight
North Carolina Senate District 1

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Health Disparities

Ms. Elaine Riddick
Eugenics Victim

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Representative Earline Parmon
North Carolina House District 72

Representative Larry Womble
North Carolina House District 71



Unveiling of the Marker
Representative Womble
Representative Parmon
Eugenics Victims