

University of North Carolina at Asheville

“Attractive Morons Abound in the Community:”  
The Eugenics Board, The Human Betterment League, and  
State-Sanctioned Sterilization in North Carolina 1929-1977

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Department of History in Candidacy for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts in History

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Asheville, North Carolina  
April 2011

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In a report on the activities of the Eugenics Board of North Carolina published in 1935, eugenic sterilization is described as “a means adopted by organized society to do for the human race in a humane manner what was done by Nature before modern civilization, human sympathy and charity intervened in Nature’s plans.”<sup>1</sup> Between 1929 and 1977, the state of North Carolina funded the sterilization of around 7,600 of its citizens. What began as a questionable means of treating mental illness became a rigorous program of social purification that was driven by the desire of the state’s elite to curtail the reproductive ability of those who were deemed “manifestly unfit” for procreation.<sup>2</sup> With the help of the Human Betterment League, a privately funded organization, the state perpetuated its eugenics program longer than most of the other thirty states that once had similar programs. Although the state’s stringent eugenics program was framed as an attempt to protect those who were mentally unable to protect themselves, it was more accurately a paternalistic move toward social control by stripping those who were perceived as socially inadequate of their reproductive rights. The anxiety that upper class North Carolinians felt toward the rapidly multiplying lower class led them to support state funded eugenic sterilization. Although altruism may have been at its heart, North Carolina’s eugenics program targeted citizens who were low on the socio-economic scale and who exhibited other signs of social dysfunction. The impetus for sterilization was often no greater than poverty, promiscuity or lack of education. Naturally, it is nearly impossible to draw distinct lines between gender, race and class. However, the vast majority of the people who were sterilized using state funds in North Carolina, especially in the program’s later years, were perceived to bear some sort

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene R. Brown, *Eugenical Sterilization in North Carolina: A Brief Survey of the Growth of Eugenic Sterilization and a Report on the Work of the Eugenics Board of North Carolina Through June 30, 1935*, <http://worldcat.org/oclc/5390736/viewonline> (accessed October 26, 2010), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes quoted in Paul Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court and Buck v. Bell* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 36.

of social ill that could be understood as a threat to the welfare of the state as a whole. During this time, the state's elite sought to prevent the lower class from reproducing by supporting state-sanctioned sterilization.

The threat that the feeble-minded person's genetic material presented to the public was the fear that enforced the opinion that sterilization was a fool-proof way of stopping the genetic deterioration of the state's citizens. In a pamphlet called *The ABC of Human Conservation* by Marian Olden, there is a photo of two attractive, healthy-looking young women, with the caption, "Attractive morons abound in the community. Girls like these who come from defective stock yet who are trained sufficiently to pass for normal are the greatest menace to the race when returned to the community without the protection of sterilization" (See Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> This pamphlet exhibits the threat that the feeble-minded presented. They could not always be detected by sight, and that was the danger—they could easily procreate with someone of higher intelligence and as Olden points out, "Marriage does not merely unite two individuals, it unites two family lines, as the offspring generally prove."<sup>4</sup>

Although the state of North Carolina was not alone in its practice of eugenic sterilization, it became an example of a successful program that was working toward the elimination of feeble-mindedness and social dysfunction. The story of the state's eugenics program remained largely unknown to the general public until December of 2002, when North Carolina Governor Mike Easley became the third governor in the United States to issue a public apology for sterilizations performed under eugenics programs. He created a committee to consider monetary reparations for victims of sterilization and required that the State Archives make some of the

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<sup>3</sup> Marian S. Olden, *The ABC of Human Conservation*, publication #31, (Princeton, NJ: Birthright, 1946), Human Betterment League of North Carolina, Inc. Records, Chapel Hill, NC, page #.

<sup>4</sup> Olden, 7.

Eugenics Boards' documents accessible on the Internet. North Carolina became the first state to offer state funded education and health benefits to survivors of sterilization.<sup>5</sup> The governor's actions, however, did not occur spontaneously. Several years earlier, a professor of history and women's studies named Johanna Schoen was granted a rare opportunity to view the records of the Eugenics Board, including every petition that was considered by the Board. As she sifted through boxes of hearing transcripts, Schoen recognized her unique responsibility as a researcher and deliberated carefully for months before deciding how to proceed with the knowledge she held.<sup>6</sup> In the midst of the "emotionally devastating experience" of sorting through each petition, Schoen was contacted by journalist Kevin Begos. After deciding that he would present the information in a way that would tell a complete story, she offered him access to her previously unpublished research.<sup>7</sup>

On December 8<sup>th</sup> through December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002, a series of articles entitled "Against Their Will" was published in the *Winston-Salem Journal*, bringing public attention to the story of eugenics in North Carolina.<sup>8</sup>

To date, Johanna Schoen is the preeminent scholar on the eugenics program in North Carolina. Since the *Winston-Salem Journal* ran its series of articles and Governor Easley issued his apology, she has published a monograph on the topic entitled, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare*. A year before the series "Against Their Will" was published, Schoen wrote an article entitled, "Choice and Coercion:

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<sup>5</sup> Kevin Begos, "Against Their Will," *Winston Salem Journal* (December 8, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Johanna Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 243.

<sup>7</sup> Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare*, 243.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin Begos, "Against Their Will," *Winston Salem Journal* (December 8, 2002).

Women and the Politics of Sterilization in North Carolina” in *The Journal of Women’s History*.<sup>9</sup>

Schoen’s work is crucial to understanding the history of the Eugenics Board of North Carolina and their role in state-sanctioned sterilizations. She took on the responsibility of synthesizing the boxes of information and produced a monograph that lays the groundwork for scholars to come behind her and approach the more nuanced pieces of the story. Although she presents general information as well as specific, her contribution examines how women were affected by the Eugenics Board’s actions. 6,057 women were sterilized between 1929 and 1968 compared with 1,084 men, and more women were sterilized nationwide. This discrepancy creates the basis for Schoen’s argument that women were specifically targeted to be sterilized as a result of skewed gender politics.<sup>10</sup> It is true that the language and practices of the Eugenics Board had a distinctly gendered edge, but there are many other aspects of the eugenics program in North Carolina that deserve equal attention. To date, Schoen is the only scholar to explore this topic specific to North Carolina in much depth.

There is, however, scholarship that discusses eugenics in the South.<sup>11</sup>

Susan Cahn wrote a monograph called *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age*, published in 2007, that examines the journey of adolescent girls from the 1920s to the 1960s, including the impact of eugenics.<sup>12</sup> Another scholar, Edward Larson, wrote *Sex, Race, and*

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<sup>9</sup> Johanna Schoen, “Choice and Coercion: Women and the Politics of Sterilization in North Carolina, 1929-1975,” *Journal of Women’s History* 13, no. 1 (March 2001): 132-156.

<sup>10</sup> Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Steven Noll, *Feeble-Minded in Our Midst: Institutions for the Mentally Retarded in the South 1900-1940*. Steven Noll, “The Public Face of Southern Institutions for the ‘Feeble-Minded’,” *The Public Historian* 27 (Spring 2005). This monograph and article by Steven Noll discuss the role of institutions for the feeble-minded in the South, which pertains to the history of eugenics because such institutions often directed patients to sterilization.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Kahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age*, (London: Harvard University Press, 2007).

*Science: Eugenics in the Deep South*, a book that discusses the connections between eugenics movements in the South and the struggle to define race and class after the Civil War.<sup>13</sup>

The scholarship on eugenics from a national perspective is voluminous, but is rarely specific to one state. One monograph by Steven Selden, called *Inheriting Shame: The Story of Eugenics and Racism in America* discusses the ways that African Americans were involved in sterilization programs across the nation.<sup>14</sup>

After exploring the existing scholarship, it becomes clear that the reasons for the success of North Carolina's eugenics program have not been examined in much detail. The practice of state-sanctioned sterilization in North Carolina was closely related to class tensions in the first half of the twentieth century. The influence of private interests through the Human Betterment League of North Carolina on public policy and practice is where this contribution to the scholarship on the topic is unique and deserves exploration.

In 1883, Sir Francis Galton, cousin of renown naturalist Charles Darwin, coined the term "eugenics," which means "well-bred," and thus began what Dr. Paul Lombardo calls the "science of good breeding."<sup>15</sup> Eugenists sought to scientifically prove that mental illness, physical deformities and social ills were hereditary in order to perpetuate the practice of state-sanctioned sterilization as a measure of precaution for the future of the human race. Aside from mental illnesses that were medically diagnosable, eugenists argued that social ills such as promiscuity, poverty, criminality and illegitimacy were hereditary through a "germ plasm" that existed as a

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<sup>13</sup> Edward J. Larson, *Sex, Race, and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Steven Selden, *Inheriting Shame: The Story of Eugenics and Racism in America* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> *The Lynchburg Story: Eugenic Sterilization in America*, DVD, Directed by Stephen Trombley (New York: Filmmakers Library, 1994).

part of the human body but was invisible. By sterilizing those who would pass on this “germ plasm,” eugenicists hoped to eliminate the social ills that it caused.<sup>16</sup>

In the early 1900s, the science of eugenics gained popular support and came into practice in some institutions across the nation. In 1907, Indiana became the first state to pass a law that allowed for state-funded sterilization of patients in mental institutions, followed by Wisconsin and California in 1909.<sup>17</sup> In 1927, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in favor of compulsory sterilization in the case *Carrie Buck versus Dr. James Hendron Bell*. Famous Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes stated that, “It is better for all the world if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime or 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... Three generations of imbeciles are enough.”<sup>18</sup> In the years following this decision, thirty states passed sterilization laws and sought to eliminate mental illness as well as social ills by preventing the “manifestly unfit” from reproducing.

In 1929, the North Carolina General Assembly passed an “act to provide for the sterilization of the mentally defective and feeble-minded inmates of charitable and penal institutions of the state of North Carolina.” The law stated that the sterilization may be performed if it was considered “best in the interest of the mental, moral or physical improvement of the

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<sup>16</sup> *The Lynchburg Story: Eugenic Sterilization in America*.

<sup>17</sup> Steven Noll, *Feeble-Minded in Our Midst: Institutions for the Mentally Retarded in the South 1900-1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 36.

<sup>18</sup> 1933 Law quoted in Lombardo, 36.

patient or inmate, or *for the public good.*”<sup>19</sup> According to this law, the decision to sterilize a patient “for the public good” was left up to the doctors at the institution and neither the patient nor the patient’s relatives had to give consent or be offered the opportunity to appeal the decision. This open-ended clause gave North Carolina’s sterilization law a particularly social edge. In 1933, the General Assembly edited the law to require consent of the individual or their next of kin to be sterilized.<sup>20</sup> The 1933 sterilization law also created the Eugenics Board, a group of North Carolinians who were charged with authorizing sterilizations.

The Eugenics Board was created as a part of the state’s Public Welfare Department. The Board met monthly to sift through petitions and either approve or reject requests for sterilization. The members of the Board were the Commissioner of Public Welfare, the Secretary of the State Board of Health, the Superintendent of the State Hospital in Raleigh, the State Attorney General and a fifth position that would be a “chief medical officer of an institution for the feeble-minded or insane not located in Raleigh” that was “to be designated from time to time by the four other members.”<sup>21</sup> Moya Woodside, a sociologist who studied sterilization laws and practices in North Carolina said in her 1950 book, *Sterilization in North Carolina: A Psychological and Sociological Study* that “the aims of the Eugenics Board are primarily those of social welfare. Eugenic considerations are ever-present as is the problem of feeble-mindedness in North Carolina.”<sup>22</sup> Woodside, like most of the supporters of the North Carolina sterilization law, picked

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<sup>19</sup> North Carolina General Assembly, *Act to provide for the sterilization of the mentally defective and feeble-minded inmates of charitable and penal institutions of the state of North Carolina*, 1929, [http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm4/item\\_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/p249901coll33&CISOPTR=308&CISOBX=1&REC=17](http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/p249901coll33&CISOPTR=308&CISOBX=1&REC=17) (accessed October 26, 2010) (italics added).

<sup>20</sup> Noll, *Feeble-Minded in Our Midst: Institutions for the Mentally Retarded in the South 1900-1940*, 67.

<sup>21</sup> Brown, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Moya Woodside, *Sterilization in North Carolina: A Social and Psychological Study* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1950), 19.



up on the clause in the state's law which stipulated that a citizen could be sterilized "for the public good."<sup>23</sup>

In her pamphlet, author Marian Olden claims that "human conservation requires control of both quantity and quality."<sup>24</sup> This statement captures the fear that supporters of sterilization sought to quell. In North Carolina, the fear that people with less than desirable genetic material would eventually be the majority created anxiety among upper class citizens. By encouraging this fear of the less educated, the poor and those who were dependent on social aid, the state's sterilization program gained popular support among the elite and caused it to carry a social weight that other programs did not.

The close relationship between the Eugenics Board and the Department of Public Welfare made the goal of controlling the lower class by sterilization particularly attainable in North Carolina. When the Eugenics Board was created in 1933, the General Assembly did not appropriate them any money, so the Department of Public Welfare funded their activities for two years.<sup>25</sup> Several positions on the Board were to be filled by people who worked for the Department of Public Welfare. Most interestingly, North Carolina was the only state that allowed both doctors and social workers to petition the Board for sterilizations.<sup>26</sup> This brought the practice of eugenics into the realm of social welfare and led to the sterilization of those who were considered to have a lower intelligence than normal, often because they exhibited some sort of

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<sup>23</sup> North Carolina General Assembly, *Act to provide for the sterilization of the mentally defective and feeble-minded inmates of charitable and penal institutions of the state of North Carolina.*

<sup>24</sup> Olden, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Brown, 12.

<sup>26</sup> Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare*, 89.

social ill. In order to present a petition to the Eugenics Board, a social worker had to obtain a “statement of mental deficiency,” a social history of the patient and their family, the consent of the person to be sterilized or their next of kin, and the name and address of the surgeon who would perform the operation.<sup>27</sup> However, “mental deficiency” was loosely defined and could include any social misconduct. A social history could focus on a family’s poverty and mental illness, and an individual or their family could easily be coerced into consenting to an operation by their social worker.<sup>28</sup> As long as a family member consented, minors in North Carolina did not have to be informed of what their operation entailed.<sup>29</sup>

The access to lower class individuals that social workers had allowed the eugenics program in North Carolina to broaden its focus from only those who were institutionalized to the greater population. However, the responsibility that these social workers held was not always fully realized. Ed Chapin, director of the Department of Public Welfare in Mecklenburg County in the 1960s said in a 2002 interview, “I never participated in, that I recall, a training program about sterilization. It was just something you picked up.”<sup>30</sup> The Eugenics Board operated far away from the individual social worker, who may never have understood the scale on which socially-based sterilizations were occurring.

According to the Eugenics Board:

“Any mentally diseased, feeble-minded or epileptic inmate or patient of the state county institutions, or any mentally diseased, feeble-minded or epileptic resident of a county, not

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<sup>27</sup> Woodside, *Sterilization in North Carolina: A Social and Psychological Study*, 11.

<sup>28</sup> Kevin Begos and John Railey, “Sign This Or Else,” *Winston-Salem Journal* (December 9, 2002), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Woodside, *Sterilization in North Carolina: A Social and Psychological Study*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Ed Chapin quoted in Kevin Begos, “Lifting the Curtain on a Shameful Era,” *Winston-Salem Journal*, December 8, 2002, 7.

an inmate of a public institution, may be sterilized when the provisions of the law have been complied with and if it is believed to be for the best interest of the mental, moral or physical improvement of the patient, inmate or non-institutional individual; or when it is believed to be for the public good; or when such patient, inmate or non-institutional individual would be likely, unless sterilized, to procreate a child or children who would have a tendency toward serious physical, mental or nervous disease or deficiency.”<sup>31</sup>

This portion of the sterilization law lays out the main reasons that a person could be targeted for sterilization. In the eyes of the upper class, someone who held an inferior social position and was supported by state funds was perceived as a threat to the financial interests of the tax-paying citizens of the state. The belief that sterilization would alleviate the monetary burden of the poor is clearly outlined in the Eugenics Board’s 1935 report that discusses a family living in Wake County:

“At the end of 1922 it was found that the family had cost the public at least \$20,000. The present estimate based on the cost of institutional care shows that they have cost the public of Wake County and North Carolina not less than \$30,000. For the cost of about \$100, the father and mother of these children could have been sterilized.”<sup>32</sup>

By relying on state funds and continuing to have more children, families like this would continue to be a financial burden to the state unless they were sterilized before they had the opportunity to procreate.

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<sup>31</sup> Eugenics Board of North Carolina. “Sterilization—The North Carolina Program,” 1954, <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/p249901coll33&CISOPTR=221&REC=10> (accessed October 26, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> Brown, 11.

Financial concerns were not the only reasons for supporting sterilization. It was also thought that the state's genetic material was being diluted by those who were less intelligent as they produced children. In an article that was reprinted and distributed in order to gain support for sterilization, Dr. W.I. Prichard stated that, "their presence in the population at large is none the less expensive both in direct costs and in lowered efficiency in industry, in crime and delinquency, and in the deterioration of citizenship."<sup>33</sup>

In order to ensure that people of inferior birth, like the women in Marian Olden's pamphlet could be sterilized legally, there had to be a term that classified them as mentally deficient under a medical diagnosis (see Figure 1). The moniker "feeble-minded" became a blanket term for individuals who did not have a legitimate diagnosable mental illness, but who displayed that they were of inferior genetic material. Any number of "defects," including "insanity, epilepsy, convulsions, paralysis, sexual promiscuity, syphilis, gonorrhoea, tuberculosis, alcoholism, criminality, suicidal tendency, pauperism, drug addiction, congenital blindness, acquired blindness, congenital deafness, acquired deafness, dumbness, or extreme nervousness" could qualify someone for a designation of "feeble-minded" and make sterilization a viable option.<sup>34</sup> Sexually deviant behavior could easily qualify a person as feeble-minded, including having sex out of wedlock, engaging in interracial sexual activity or inciting lustful feelings in a family member.<sup>35</sup> It was also not out of the question for children who were conceived as a result of sexually deviant behavior to be sterilized because they were assumed to suffer from hereditary feeble-mindedness. Young girls who exhibited signs of feeble-mindedness were considered

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<sup>33</sup> W.I. Prichard, M.D., "Sterilization of the Mentally Deficient in Virginia," *The American Journal of Mental Deficiency*, Vol. LIII no.4, 1949, Human Betterment League of North Carolina, Inc. Records, Chapel Hill, NC, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Brown, 29.

<sup>35</sup> Begos, "Lifting the Curtain on a Shameful Era," 6.

“particularly in need of the protection of sterilization because they cannot be expected to assume adequate moral or social responsibility for their actions.”<sup>36</sup>

Because feeble-mindedness was such a broad diagnosis, it was defined differently by various people and at various times. It was generally understood that “feeble-minded” fell under “mental retardation”<sup>37</sup> and that “morons” were the least deficient, followed by “imbeciles” and “idiots.”<sup>38</sup> In order to test for feeble-mindedness, some states, including North Carolina, required a score of greater than seventy on an IQ test.<sup>39</sup> In Florida, a person was feeble-minded if they were “irresponsible or requiring restraint (but not insane).”<sup>40</sup> It was a common belief that “the feeble-minded remain forever young and therefore in constant need of supervision and protection”<sup>41</sup> and that “because the mind of a feeble-minded person never develops beyond that of a child, there is no possibility of curing this condition.”<sup>42</sup>

Between July of 1929 and June of 1968, the North Carolina Eugenics Board approved the sterilization of 5,036 citizens listed as “feeble-minded,” compared to 1,665 who fell under the

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<sup>36</sup> “What Do You Know About Sterilization?” (Winston Salem, NC, Human Betterment League of North Carolina, 1945), <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/p249901coll33&CISOPTR=211&REC=7> (accessed October 26, 2010).

<sup>37</sup> “The Eugenics Board Cases Handled 1964-1973,” [http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm4/item\\_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/p249901coll33&CISOPTR=290&CISOBX=1&REC=14](http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/p249901coll33&CISOPTR=290&CISOBX=1&REC=14) (accessed November 1, 2010).

<sup>38</sup> J. David Smith, *Minds Made Feeble: The Myth and Legacy of the Kallikaks* (Rockville, MD: Aspen Systems Corporation, 1985).

<sup>39</sup> Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare*, 83.

<sup>40</sup> Florida law quoted in Noll, “The Public Face of Southern Institutions for the ‘Feeble-Minded,’” 27.

<sup>41</sup> Charlotte Lowe, “Intelligence and Social Background of the Unwed Mother,” *Mental Hygiene* (October 1927), 2.

<sup>42</sup> Clarence J. Gamble, “Why Fear Sterilization?” *Hygeia*, The American Medical Association, 1948, Human Betterment League of North Carolina, Inc. Records, Chapel Hill, NC, 2.

category of “mental disease.”<sup>43</sup> In 1945, when most states were still sterilizing far more people under the designation “insane” rather than “feeble-minded,” North Carolina listed 1,051 as feeble-minded and only 350 as insane.<sup>44</sup> The extremely high numbers of people listed as feeble-minded that were sterilized in North Carolina exhibit how the program was aimed at social cleansing, and how class anxiety that led people to fear for future generation’s genetic viability contributed to high rates of sterilization in the state.

It is unusual that so rigorous a sterilization program would not be met with strong public opposition, and it is here that North Carolina presents an interesting case. On a national scale, there were arguments against eugenics, some by scientists, and others by religious institutions and leaders, mostly within the Catholic Church.

Scientists utilized the argument that nurture was more important to the development of a child than nature, rendering the solution of sterilization useless.<sup>45</sup> However, in North Carolina, these scientific opinions were easily oppressed and never gained much attention.

The Catholic Church presented the most united front in opposition to eugenic practices worldwide. In 1931, Pope Pius XI said that “those who act this way are at fault in losing sight of the fact that family is more sacred than the state. Public Magistrates have no direct power over the bodies of their subjects.”<sup>46</sup> This opinion was upheld in an editorial written by Reverend Martin Collins, a Catholic clergyman, in which he states that “behind this idea of sterilization is

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<sup>43</sup> “Historical Data on Eugenical Sterilization in North Carolina.” <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/p249901coll33&CISOPTR=289&REC=1> (accessed November 2, 2010), 31.

<sup>44</sup> “U.S. Maps Showing the States Having Sterilization Laws in 1910-1920-1930-194, Publication No. 5.” (Princeton N.J.: Birthright Inc, 1947), <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/p249901coll33&CISOPTR=188&REC=9> (accessed October 26, 2010).

<sup>45</sup> Selden, 107.

<sup>46</sup> Pope Pius XI quoted in Begos, “Lifting the Curtain on a Shameful Era,” 4.

the implied supposition that only those of social standing, economic complacency and with a certain amount of formal education should be allowed to propagate. One thing is for certain and that is that the birth controllers will be punished. Perhaps one form of punishment will be for them to see the poor and the 'feeble-minded' inherit the earth."<sup>47</sup> However, the words of those like Reverend Martin Collins were not heard in North Carolina, perhaps because of an overall lack of a Catholic presence in the state. Moya Woodside cited that in 1936, there were only 10,000 Catholics in the state, compared to 568,000 Baptists and 442,500 Methodists.<sup>48</sup> Because the most outspoken religious organization that opposed sterilization lacked a base in North Carolina, organized opposition remained almost entirely silent.

Because there was no larger institution to support those who opposed sterilization, individuals were left to stand up for themselves and their family members. However, people generally did not know that the Eugenics Board existed until someone they knew was affected by its actions. In these cases, people took advantage of the right to attend their hearings. Although the Board rarely listened, the hearing transcripts show that people did stand up and ask—sometimes beg—to be spared sterilization. One man said in defense of his daughter's right to reproduce, "God didn't call for Adam and Eve to go out and get sterilized."<sup>49</sup>

The practice of sterilization might also have gone unnoticed by the general public

During the 1950s and 60s, there was a major shift in the way that North Carolina's sterilization program functioned. As drugs were developed that were designed to treat mental illness, there was a significant decrease in the number of institutionalized people and in the number of sterilizations performed within those institutions. Scientific evidence mounted against the effectiveness of sterilization as a means of treating mental illness, and eugenicists began to lose credibility. This change in treatment of mental illness helped to highlight the discrepancy in North Carolina. As institutionalized sterilizations decreased, the number of people who were sterilized outside of institutions grew rapidly. Before World War II, sterilizations across the nation were at an all time high. After the war, sterilizations nationwide began to decrease. However, in some southern states, sterilizations remained constant and in some cases, increased. In 1944, North Carolina, Virginia, and Georgia contributed only 24% of sterilizations nationwide, but in 1958, the same states sterilized 76% of the nation's total.<sup>50</sup> After the war, most states were put off by eugenics simply because of the reports of sterilization as a part of the work of health courts under Nazi rule.

In order to counteract the negative sentiments surrounding sterilization, supporters and activists in North Carolina made a conscious effort to change the language that surrounded the program. The focus of sterilization became protection rather than punishment or treatment. It was presented as an option that was offered as a means of releasing people from the burden of parenthood and improving their quality of life as a result. Clarence Gamble, a famous proponent of eugenic sterilization, says in an article published in a magazine called *Better Health* in 1947



protection and not a sacrifice.”<sup>51</sup> The paternalistic language that surrounded sterilization after World War II was ubiquitous, and was included in almost every discussion of sterilization that was meant to convince people of its viability. Marian Olden assures readers of her pamphlet that “sterilization is a protection, not a punishment,”<sup>52</sup> and a pamphlet about North Carolina’s selective sterilization law assures readers that “Mental defectives who are sterilized may marry and lead satisfactory lives. Often they may become reasonably self-supporting if they are spared the responsibility of parenthood.”<sup>53</sup>

After the war, people started describing sterilization as a means of protecting the children that would be born to feeble-minded people—not only from hereditary mental deficiency, but from being raised in an environment that would not be conducive to their healthy development. In a pamphlet mailed to citizens of North Carolina, the point is made that “you wouldn’t give responsibility to a person of little intelligence—yet each day the feeble-minded and mentally defective are entrusted with the most important and far-reaching job of all... The job of PARENTHOOD!”<sup>54</sup> Another pamphlet asks, “was anything gained by the birth of these children doomed from the start to empty, meaningless lives in institutions for mental defectives?”<sup>55</sup>

Another way that the language around sterilization shifted after World War II was evident in the petitions presented to the Eugenics Board. Instead of framing a woman’s mental

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<sup>51</sup> Clarence J. Gamble, “Better Human Beings Tomorrow,” *Better Health*, North Carolina Social Hygiene Society (October 1947), <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/p249901coll33&CISOPTR=238&REC=3> (accessed October 26, 2010), 1.

<sup>52</sup> Olden, 4.

<sup>53</sup> “You Wouldn’t Expect...” (Winston Salem, NC: Human Betterment League of North Carolina, 1950), <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/p249901coll33&CISOPTR=201&REC=8> (accessed October 27, 2010).

<sup>54</sup> “You Wouldn’t Expect...”

<sup>55</sup> “What Do You Know About Sterilization?”

state in medical terms such as “nervous” or “hysterical,” women were described in social terms, as lazy and incapable of performing household duties.<sup>56</sup>

As North Carolina faced the decision of whether or not to continue its eugenics program, organizations statewide, including the Human Betterment League of North Carolina, sought to convey the necessity of the program to the state’s elite by utilizing tactics that were aimed at ameliorating common fears and misconceptions about sterilization.

One of the most common of these concerns stemmed from eugenics being referred to as a practice that was utilized in Nazi Germany. In Charles W. Phillips’ article “A Moral Basis for Eugenic Sterilization,” published in *The Christian Register*, he reassures readers that “there is some evidence that the laws of eugenic sterilization were used to eliminate production of Jews. Here is the main point: These laws did not create the philosophy of hate.” He goes on to say that “to argue against all use of sterilization because it was used by the Nazis is no more logical than to say that we should not cook with gas because Hitler employed it in his exterminating gas chambers.”<sup>57</sup>

Often readers were reminded of the safety of the operations that were carried out under sterilization laws. One pamphlet says that “it is comparable to an operation for appendicitis.”<sup>58</sup> The statement “It is not barnyard castration!” is repeated in several pamphlets, assuring the reader that all sexual function will remain intact and that the sterilized person will be able to enjoy sex as much as before.<sup>59</sup> <sup>60</sup> In fact, one author says that “in almost every instance, the

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<sup>56</sup> Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare*, 112.

<sup>57</sup> Charles W. Phillips, “A Moral Basis for Eugenic Sterilization,” *The Christian Register*, 1953, Human Betterment League of North Carolina, Inc. Records, Chapel Hill, NC, 2.

<sup>58</sup> “Sterilization—The North Carolina Program,” 2.

<sup>59</sup> Gamble, “Better Human Beings Tomorrow,” 1.

removal of the haunting fear of an unwise pregnancy vastly improved the relationship between partners.”<sup>61</sup>

The author of many of these pamphlets that encouraged citizens to support North Carolina’s sterilization program was Clarence J. Gamble, M.D., a doctor from Massachusetts who advocated strongly for the continuation of eugenic sterilization in the United States after World War II. Unlike most mid to late twentieth century eugenicists, Gamble continued to try to prove a solid genetic basis for the inheritability of feeble-mindedness.<sup>62</sup> He subscribed to the theory of “germ cells” in the 1950s, long after it had been scientifically disproven.<sup>63</sup> In 1950, he and another doctor published a book about sterilization techniques that was distributed in fifty medical schools across the country.<sup>64 65</sup> Gamble believed that “mental deficiency is a recessive gene,” so it was necessary to sterilize those who had feeble-mindedness in their families in case they married and had a child with someone else who carried the recessive gene.<sup>66</sup>

In 1944, Clarence Gamble wrote a poem which he presented to the Human Betterment League of North Carolina for their use in their efforts to continue the sterilization program in the state. The poem told the story of a couple, both mentally deficient, who were sterilized before

<sup>60</sup> “You Wouldn’t Expect...”

<sup>61</sup> Gamble, “Why Fear Sterilization?,” 2.

<sup>62</sup> Clarence J. Gamble, “What Proportion of Mental Deficiency is Preventable by Sterilization?” *The American Journal of Mental Deficiency*, Vol. 57, 1952, Human Betterment League of North Carolina, Inc. Records, Chapel Hill, NC, 1.

<sup>63</sup> Gamble, “Why Fear Sterilization?,” 2.

<sup>64</sup> Robert Latou Dickinson and Clarence James Gamble, “Human Sterilization: Techniques of Permanent Conception Control,” 1950, Human Betterment League of North Carolina, Inc. Records, Chapel Hill, NC.

<sup>65</sup> *The Human Betterment Newsletter*, The Human Betterment Foundation, Vol. III, No. 3, 1952, Human Betterment League of North Carolina, Inc. Records, Chapel Hill, NC, 2.

<sup>66</sup> Clarence J. Gamble, “What Proportion of Mental Deficiency is Preventable by Sterilization?” 2.

they were married and were “very thankful that they lived in NORTH CAROLINA.”<sup>67</sup> The poem concluded with the statement, “Because they had been STERILIZED, the taxpayers of/North Carolina had/Saved/THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS/And the North Carolina MORONS/LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER.”<sup>68</sup> The Human Betterment League never used the poem because they felt it was in bad taste. However, Clarence Gamble served as “medical consultant” to North Carolina’s Human Betterment League for twenty years.<sup>69</sup>

In 1947, a “group of concerned citizens” formed this Human Betterment League of North Carolina, and after it was officially incorporated by the state, the first meeting was held in Winston-Salem.<sup>70 71</sup> The original charter of the organization stated that the objectives of the Human Betterment League of North Carolina were as follows:

- “1. The study and the care of the insane and feeble-minded in North Carolina.
2. The encouragement of the best treatment and training of such patients; and the assurance of measures which will prevent such mental handicaps.
3. Since no child can be brought up satisfactorily by an insane or feeble-minded parent, the League will donate a part of its efforts to the solution of this important problem.

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<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare*, 57.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare*, 103.

<sup>69</sup> Gamble, “Why Fear Sterilization?,” 1.

<sup>70</sup> “Our Seeds Sprouted,” 1972, Human Betterment League of North Carolina, Inc. Records, Chapel Hill, NC, 1.

<sup>71</sup> Certificate of Incorporation of the Human Betterment League of North Carolina, Inc., 1947, Human Betterment League of North Carolina, Inc. Records, Chapel Hill, NC.

4. The League shall, in addition, educate the public in the field in order to assure the best possible care of the insane, the feeble-minded and the children of these groups.”<sup>72</sup>

One of the charter members of the League was a woman named Alice Gray, who had previously worked alongside noted social activist Margaret Sanger to have the postal ban against dissemination of information about birth control lifted, which eventually enabled the main action of the League: sending pamphlets, articles and other publications that advertised the benefits of sterilization to the citizens of North Carolina.<sup>73</sup> In the first ten years of its existence, the League mailed 578,680 pieces of literature across the state.<sup>74</sup> In an article published in 1976 that chronicled the work of the League, it was stated that “the program consisted entirely of mailing out literature” for the first several years. In order to gain support for the sterilization program, the Human Betterment League mailed pamphlets, articles, and scholarship on sterilization to “upper class university faculty members, graduate students, physicians, nurses, ministers, public officials, welfare workers and civic leaders.”<sup>75</sup> These people were chosen carefully as members of society who were wealthy and would be alarmed by the threatening messages that the League disseminated, and who often had a hand in the process itself. The mailing list was no mistake; the League intended to reach whoever would be most effective in helping to continue the state’s sterilization program.

The League utilized public media to spread their ideas as well, but not always in a straightforward way. In 1965, Mr. H.C. Bradshaw, editor of the *Durham Morning Herald’s*

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<sup>72</sup> Original Charter of the Human Betterment League, 1947, Human Betterment League of North Carolina, Inc. Records, Chapel Hill, NC, 5.

<sup>73</sup> “Our Seeds Sprouted,” 1.

<sup>74</sup> “Our Seeds Sprouted,” 1.

<sup>75</sup> “Our Seeds Sprouted,” 2.

editorial page, joined the League.<sup>76</sup> Articles and editorials published in newspapers across the state, including the *Winston-Salem Journal-Sentinel*, the *Raleigh News & Observer*, the *Asheville Citizen* and the *Charlotte Observer*, helped to dissuade opposition in a public forum and ensured that elite North Carolina citizens thought of sterilization as a necessary part of public welfare.

The directors and members of the Human Betterment League were a consistently rotating group of affluent women, professors at state universities and medical schools, newspaper editors and doctors.<sup>77</sup> <sup>78</sup> The League had a membership program to raise money and awareness, and paying members voted on the Board of Directors each year.<sup>79</sup>

When the privately-funded Human Betterment League was created in 1947, Clarence Gamble provided a sum of five hundred dollars to help the group get started. In later years, his donations were often the most generous that the League received.<sup>80</sup> Another major contributor to the League's efforts was longtime Board of Commissioners member and Mayor of Winston-Salem from 1921 to 1925, textile magnate James G. Hanes, "whose interests in human welfare were as seamless as the hose he manufactured."<sup>81</sup> Hanes also served as the treasurer of the Board for twenty-five years.

The League had many members and supporters who were simultaneously serving as public officials. However, the League's direct influence on public policy makers was not limited

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<sup>76</sup> List of New Members, 1965, Human Betterment League of North Carolina, Inc. Records, Chapel Hill, NC, page #.

<sup>77</sup> Original Charter, 11.

<sup>78</sup> Board of Directors List, 1967, Human Betterment League of North Carolina, Inc. Records, Chapel Hill, NC.

<sup>79</sup> Original Charter, 1.

<sup>80</sup> Original Charter, 16.

<sup>81</sup> "Our Seeds Sprouted," 1.

to its membership. In 1948, at a meeting that Clarence Gamble attended, he suggested that the League send letters to the counties that were utilizing North Carolina's sterilization laws and commend them on their contribution to the betterment of the human race.<sup>82</sup> In 1959, Ethel Speas, then secretary of the Eugenics Board was the guest speaker at the annual meeting of the League, again showing the close relationship that the League shared with the Eugenics Board.<sup>83</sup>

In the years after it was formed, the Human Betterment League gave North Carolina's sterilization program the leverage that it needed among the state's elite to continue well after World War II. By maintaining an elite and wealthy membership in the state, the Human Betterment League was able to affect public policy and maintain support for the eugenics program well into the 1960s in North Carolina. For a privately-funded group of elite citizens to spend their time and energy on adamantly supporting public policy that was aimed at maintaining their own social superiority further proves that North Carolina's eugenics program was driven by class-related anxiety and was perpetuated by the power that those elite members held over public policy.

On June 8<sup>th</sup>, 1977, the North Carolina General Assembly abolished the Eugenics Board and left cases of sterilization up to local courts.<sup>84</sup> This act came as a response to declining numbers of sterilization candidates, and questions of morality among government leaders and Board Members. In 1976, the Human Betterment League changed its focus to genetic counseling and later changed their name to the Human Genetics League. In a 1976 article, the League stated

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<sup>82</sup> Original Charter, 40.

<sup>83</sup> Human Betterment League of North Carolina Annual Meeting Agenda, November 2, 1959, Human Betterment League of North Carolina, Inc. Records, Chapel Hill, NC.

<sup>84</sup> North Carolina General Assembly, *Act to repeal G.S. 143B-151 and G.S. 143B-152 so as to abolish the Eugenics Commission. Session laws and resolutions passed by the General Assembly; Session Laws 1977, chapter 497; S.L. 1977, c. 497, 1977*, [http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm4/item\\_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/p249901coll33&CISOPTR=310&CISOBX=1&REC=6](http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/p249901coll33&CISOPTR=310&CISOBX=1&REC=6) (accessed October 26, 2010).

