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HIST 105.01

12/18/2015

Engineering Amherst: Eugenics at Sweet Briar College

Eugenics was a social philosophy that encouraged selective breeding among human populations in an attempt to create a better, more homogenous society in which to live. Eugenics encouraged reproduction in the desired population, and strove to or prohibit reproduction in the undesired population, such as those with physical or mental defects, criminals and deviants, and minorities, through laws and forced sterilization. The modern eugenics movement began in late 19th century in Britain and quickly spread to the United States. In many colleges and universities it was taught in the Biological and Social Sciences. Sweet Briar College incorporated eugenics into its academic program in 1918. In the following year, students were conducting eugenics fieldwork in Amherst County.¹ The research done by these students impacted not only the residents of the local community, but the national trend in eugenics as well.

The effects of the Progressive Era saw Southern women's colleges add the study of Sociology to their curriculum.² Sweet Briar College was no exception. Clark University alum, Dr. Ivan E. McDougale was hired by Sweet Briar to teach Sociology in 1919.³ With the addition of McDougale to the faculty, General Sociology was offered in the course catalog for the first time.⁴ By 1925, the Sociology Department listed more than five courses. Among these was "Population and Social Biology" which studied "the influences of heredity and environment; the production of great men and of defectives" and "eugenics." Also offered was a course entitled

¹ Segregation's Science: Eugenics and Society in Virginia, Gregory Michael Dorr.

² McCandless, "Preserving the Pedestal" McCandless argues that women's colleges, especially those in the South promoted studies in education and sociology which restricted them to employment in schools and social work.

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⁴ Sweet Briar College Course Catalog 1919-1920

“The Socially Inadequate” which explored varying methods of “dealing with the problems of dependency, defectiveness, and criminality.” This class undertook fieldtrips to a “local institution for the handicapped,” the State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded in Amherst, Virginia.⁵

McDougle’s classes and progressive attitude caught the attention of Harry H. Laughlin, the Superintendent of the Eugenics Research Office (ERO) in the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in New York, who notified Charles Davenport of the Sweet Briar professor.⁶ Charles Davenport suggested that McDougle team up with Dr. Arthur Estabrook, a fellow Clark alum, to conduct research on the “lost tribe” of Indians in Amherst County, Virginia. Davenport travelled to Sweet Briar to inspect the selected subject and the college facilities. It was decided that the college would become the headquarters to conduct a study to prove that miscegenation led to degeneration.⁷

McDougle enlisted the aid of at least twenty students to conduct research in Amherst County.⁸ To prepare students for field research, McDougle relied upon two books: *The Hill Folk: Report on a Rural Community of Hereditary Defectives* and *The Nam Family: A Study in Cacogenics* written by Davenport. The text on the Nam family was co-authored by Estabrook. Many of these young women were specially trained in eugenics research methods by Superintendent Laughlin of the ERO before the work commenced. In 1923, three juniors: Eleanor Harned, Martha Lobingier and Eleanor Watson were relieved of all classwork to work solely on this project and accompany him on numerous trips to Bear Mountain, one of the

⁵ In July 1983, the name was changed to the Central Virginia Training Center to reflect its geographic position in the state; Central Virginia Training Center: History www.cvtc.dbhds.virginia.gov/feedback.html

⁶ Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory is still in use today for medical research. It maintains an archive of the eugenics research done in the early 20th century.

⁷ *Segregation’s Science: Eugenics and Society in Virginia* authored by Gregory Michael Dorr explains the relationship between the ERO and Professor McDougle and training the Sweet Briar students received through the ERO; mentions texts McDougle used.

⁸ Letter from McDougle to Estabrook dated 1/27/24, Estabrook Collection, University of Albany.

poverty stricken areas of Amherst County.⁹ There they interviewed residents in order to gather genealogical information on the families. According to one letter from McDougle to Estabrook, it was here that the women proved most useful, for the people opened up to them, revealing more of their family histories than they had previously disclosed to McDougle.¹⁰

For the Sweet Briar students, involvement in the eugenics movement was not limited strictly to classes and field research. It was also reflected in their social activities on campus. On April 21, 1923 Sweet Briar held a “Better Baby” contest at the refectory on campus. The contest promoted a “collection of healthy and lusty babies.” As the national figures for infant mortality increased, Better Babies was a national campaign to encourage healthy, white families to have more children thereby increasing the socially accepted population.¹¹ Sweet Briar encouraged social reform through eugenics by stating in a June 1923 edition of the *Sweet Briar Magazine*, “Personally we are all for such improving and eugenic contests and we trust that in future years much may be accomplished by the continuation of this campaign for Better Babies!” In order to solidify their support to the movement, they chose Louise McDougle, Their professor’s infant daughter as the winner. This not only shows their commitment to eugenics, but also their commitment to their professor.¹²

As the students continued their research in Bear Mountain, McDougle and Estabrook began to compile the information they provided. Prior to 1878, no records appear as to race among marriage records in Amherst County, and these interviews were paramount to the

⁹ Eleanor Harned went on to engage in various forms of social work throughout her life such as the Davenport Visiting Nurses Association, and Junior Service League, Genevieve Blanding Circle of Kings' Daughters, and the Girl Scouts; Letter from McDougle to Estabrook dated 1/27/24, Estabrook Collection, University of Albany, NY.

¹⁰ Estabrook Collection. Box 1, Folder 3.

¹¹ Better Babies contests were held nationwide beginning in 1908.

¹² *Better Babies*, Sweet Briar Magazine, Volume 14, No. 5, June 1923.

research being conducted.¹³ McDougle and Estabrook studied the racial backgrounds, employment and economic history, and social habits of the inhabitants of Bear Mountain. In the initial phase of research, the information collected was used to classify residents into racial categories. Through the information collected by word of mouth, McDougle was able to identify current family members or ancestors who were black, white, Indian, or of mixed descent. When the genealogy of the family was in question, McDougle classified them based upon the color of their skin; any Caucasian of a darker skin tone was immediately thought to possess traces of black or Indian blood. McDougle called these people the WIN Tribe, an acronym for White, Indian, and Negro; a tri-racial community, which was regarded as a problem in 1920s Virginia.¹⁴ Their research culminated in a book entitled, *Mongrel Virginians* which was published in 1926.

The philosophy of eugenics declared that issues such as unemployment, poverty, alcoholism, and promiscuity were genetic traits passed down among generations. These were the “degenerates” described in the Sociology classes offered at Sweet Briar. In an attempt to better society, efforts were made by many groups to eradicate bloodlines of those deemed “unfit to reproduce.” In Virginia this was accomplished by enacting laws that prohibited marriage between whites and any minority groups and to prevent the production of degenerate offspring through sterilization. In fact, in 1924 two key pieces of legislation were passed in the state: the Racial Integrity Act and the Eugenic Sterilization Act.¹⁵

These two acts were catalysts in enforcing the philosophy of eugenics and producing a utopian society consisting of the wealthy elite and those who would serve and work for them. The Eugenic Sterilization Act was passed in order to remove degenerates and criminals from

¹³ Estabrook Papers, University of Albany, NY

¹⁴ *Managing White Supremacy*, J. Douglas Smith, 2002

¹⁵ *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia, 1920-1945*, Pippa Holloway, 2006

society, but also specifically focused on the removal of those with physical disabilities. It stated that, “both the health of the individual patient and the welfare of society may be promoted in certain cases by the sterilization of mental defectives.” The Racial Integrity Act not only prevented intermarriage between races, but also recognized only two races: white and black. If a person was found to have a single drop of black blood in their ancestry, they were registered as black; If it was decided that a person should be registered as black, they and their children lost the rights and privileges to be a part of the white communities. They were removed from the public education system and even their churches. In reality, this was a form of social engineering that disguised racism and discrimination behind a thin veil of the sciences. Spearheading the legislative effort to enact these laws were John Leslie Powell and Dr. Walter Ashby Plecker, the State Registrar of Virginia.¹⁶

Plecker published a series of articles in the Washington Star regarding “the Indian-Negro crosses in Virginia” in August 1923 after a lengthy correspondence with McDougle. This began a symbiotic relationship between McDougle and Plecker in which each provided the other with information regarding names of families whose blood lines may have been “tainted” with black blood. Using the information provided by McDougle, Plecker, a member of the Anglo-Saxon Club, aggressively pursued families who had previously registered at the courthouse as White.¹⁷ A fanatic about eugenics, he diligently sought to enforce the Racial Integrity Act and Amherst County was one of his primary targets.

Plecker sent messages to all courthouses and midwives in Virginia warning them that they must comply with the Racial Integrity Act by reporting all violations of registration. When Plecker discovered a name, provided to him by McDougle, registered in correctly as White, he

¹⁶ *Segregation's Science: Eugenics and Society in Virginia*, Gregory Michal Dorr.

¹⁷ *The Black and White World of Walter Plecker*, Warren Fiske, 2012

sent them threatening letters. One such letter was sent to W. H. Clark and stated, “I do not know your personally and have no positive assurance as to your racial standing, but I do know that an investigation has been made” and “found the Clark family to be one of those known to be mixed.” Following this statement, Plecker states the declarations of the Racial Integrity Act. He ends the letter by saying, “We are advising the school authorities that these people of mixed blood should not enter white schools.”¹⁸

Dr. Plecker sent a letter to the mother of another newborn who claimed her child as white. He informed the mother that the child’s father had traces of Negro blood, and therefore, could not be listed as white. In the letter, Plecker states, “This is to inform you that this is a mulatto child and you cannot pass it off as white. You will have to do something about this matter and see that this child is not allowed to mix with white children. It cannot go to white schools and can never marry a white person in Virginia. It is a horrible thing.” This letter shows the aggressiveness of which he went after anyone suspected of having non-white blood. As a white supremacist, Plecker’s prejudice stands front and center when he refers to the child as “it.” Many times, out of fear, the family complied with the demand.¹⁹

The Monacan tribe of Amherst County was perhaps the greatest casualty of Plecker’s with hunt. Using the narrow definition of the Racial Integrity Act which allowed only for the classifications of blacks and white, “Indian” was erased as a distinct race and identity in the state of Virginia.

Two stories highlight the destruction of the Monacan tribe caused by Plecker. Lacy Brahnam Hearl, a Monacan, was a child living at the foot of Tobacco Row Mountain in Amherst

¹⁸ Letter from Walter Plecker to W.H. Clark of Amherst County, 7/29/24

¹⁹ *The Black and White World of Walter Plecker*, Warren Fisk. Style Weekly, Charlottesville. 9/22/2004.

County in the 1920s. After the Racial Integrity Law was passed in 1924, many of her relatives left Virginia, as they began to lose their freedoms. No longer were they allowed to attend the movies or dances because they had now been labeled as “black.” Families that were listed as black with the county were also not allowed to attend public schools, or white churches. In fear of Plecker, many Monacans relocated out of state.

The repercussions of Plecker’s vigorous assault on the nonwhite communities of Virginia continued even after his death in 1947. Twenty-eight years after Dr. Plecker issued his list of racially “impure” surnames, Monacan Indians still felt the sting of his racism. In 1971 a Monacan woman gave birth to her son. To her surprise, his birth certificate listed him as “black.” The woman demanded that the hospital correct the birth certificate, listing her son as Indian, yet they refused. After speaking with attorneys who specialized in civil rights, the mother successfully won the correction. This is the legacy of Dr. Plecker and the work of Estabrook and McDougle; the impact of their research, work, and subsequent book had lasting effects on the local Monacan tribe.

Interestingly, Sweet Briar was frequently involved with the Monacans before 1919 when they hired McDougle. The students volunteered at the Monacan mission often, at times providing food or clothing, even education the Monacan children. By conducting the field research for McDougle and Estabrook, the student of Sweet Briar College nearly erased them from existence.

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