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The UVM History Review is an annual publication of the University of Vermont History Department. It seeks to publish scholarly essays written by UVM students and alumni.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear readers,

It is our pleasure to present you with the thirty-fourth issue of the University of Vermont History Review. This annual journal showcases exceptional historical research and writing from undergraduate and graduate students. The five articles featured, though wide in focus, each address social history through unique and innovative methodologies. Importantly, they also question, challenge, or otherwise reexamine simplified narratives that have obscured our understanding of the past—narratives that shroud the experiences of those who are often left out by history. For example, this issue reevaluates both the drug trade in modern China—specifically through the intersection of opium, the state, and organized crime—and the symbolic and legal importance of *Somerset v. Stewart* as a vital point in the process of the British abolitionist movement. The below articles also discuss the global movement for women’s rights in the so-called “conservative” 1980s, the appropriateness of applying the term “slave narrative” to the written and spoken words of previously enslaved individuals, and impoverished Vermonters who were sterilized under the state’s eugenical policy of the 1930s, returning our attention to these topics with fresh and insightful analysis.

As Executive Editors, we first and foremost wish to extend our sincere gratitude to the members of this year’s editorial board. While juggling multiple rounds of meticulous review, university coursework, and their own busy lives, each member went above and beyond to make this year’s History Review possible. We would also like to thank the authors of the included articles for crafting their work with care and nuance. Their attention to these histories did not go unnoticed, and we are proud to feature their work in this year’s issue.

We further wish to extend our gratitude to our faculty advisor, Melanie Gustafson, for her constant guidance and support through the editorial process. Last but not least, we would like to express our deep appreciation to Shari Dike for her handling of the financial matters necessary to print and distribute UVM’s own historical journal.

We hope you enjoy the 2023–2024 *UVM History Review*,
Ian Price & Jocelyn Rockhold

Are the Narratives of Slaves Really Slave Narratives? A Comparison of Antebellum Authorship and Oral Histories

Brooklyn Howe

Primary sources are essential to the work of contemporary historians and give voice to the people of the past. This paper will examine three of them: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* by Frederick Douglass; *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* by Harriet Jacobs; and a selection of interviews of ex-slaves conducted by the Federal Writers Project (FWP) under the Works Progress Administration (WPA). *Narrative* and *Incidents* are both book-length autobiographies written before the Civil War—1845 and 1861, respectively—to promote the abolition of slavery by exposing its horrors to northern audiences. Douglass and Jacobs had both grown up in slavery before escaping to the north as adults, and their legal freedom was purchased afterward by abolitionist friends.¹ The WPA interviews, on the other hand, were conducted between 1936 and 1939 for the purpose of preserving an oral/folk history of slavery. The men and women interviewed were children before and during the Civil War, and were emancipated legally with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. All these works are conventionally labeled as “slave narratives” though, as we shall see, the moniker may not be a particularly fitting one.

The first section of this paper will be a historiographical discussion regarding the use of ex-slave narratives in academic study, including the language used when engaging with those sources. Subsequent sections of the paper will examine *Narrative*,

¹ Though Jacob’s freedom was bought secretly and against her will; Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself: With Related Documents*, ed. Jennifer Fleischner, Bedford Series in History and Culture (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2010), 172–174.

Incidents, and the WPA interviews in turn, going over their publication histories and major themes. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* were chosen because they were penned by the most well-known man and woman within the emancipation narrative genre. They offer differing vantage points from which to view slavery; though they both sought abolition, their respective genders undeniably changed how they experienced the peculiar institution. With over 3,500 published WPA interviews, a thorough analysis of every single one is beyond the scope of this paper. I have attempted to concentrate my efforts on interviews conducted in Maryland and North Carolina, where Douglass and Jacobs had lived while they were enslaved. However, because the interviews are organized in volumes based on the subject's contemporary residence, and not where they had lived in slavery, some of the interviewees quoted in this paper were from other southern states like Georgia and Virginia.

Oppression, material need, religion, the desire for personhood, and liberty of the body and mind are threads that underlie all of the following stories. When put in conversation with each other, these sources bring the picture of American slavery more clearly into focus. They are, however, unique in several ways, and are done a disservice when they are lumped together into the catch-all category of "slave narrative," a genre title which is neither historically nor literarily appropriate.

Historiography and Language of Ex-Slave Narratives

Historians Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates define "a slave narrative [as] only those written works published before

1865, after which time de jure slavery ceased to exist.”² Usually, however, narratives written after the end of the Civil War and oral interviews of ex-slaves collected into the twentieth century fall under the umbrella of “slave narrative” as well. However porous the definition, the stories of ex-slaves were, until relatively recently, a vastly underutilized source among historians.

With the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment and the abolition of slavery, the abolitionist motivation to publish personal accounts of life under slavery vanished. Of course, some former slaves continued to write memoirs for their own use, but the mass market for book-length narratives dried up; the war was too traumatic and the future was too bright.³ By the end of the nineteenth century, many Americans in both the North and the South were ready to bury the bloody shirt and reconcile their wartime and Reconstruction differences. Enough time had passed since the Civil War that historians began to turn serious attention to it. Authors like U.B. Phillips published paternalistic histories that painted slavery and the antebellum South in rosy colors, claiming that slavery had been a relatively benign, civilizing force for blacks. The word of the former slave, of course, did not factor into Phillips’ research. In the 1920s and 1930s, largely black students and scholars at Fisk, Southern, and Kentucky State Universities began interviewing ex-slaves to fight back against historical interpretations that were apologetic toward slavery.⁴ The Federal Writers’ Project, a facet of the Depression-era Work Projects Administration, also conducted interviews of the formerly enslaved for the purpose of preserving folklore and

² Charles Twitchell Davis and Henry Louis Gates, eds., *The Slave’s Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), xii.

³ John Ernest, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

providing primary source material for researchers in various disciplines.

However, neither published autobiographies nor interviews were utilized by historians until the Civil Rights movement of the mid-twentieth century inspired a renewed interest in African American history (in white historians; black historians had never dropped the topic). The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* went back into print in 1960, more than a century after its initial publication.⁵ More attention was given to the WPA interviews in the 1970s, and the autobiographies of women like Harriet Jacobs were successfully integrated into the narrative cannon in the 1980s.⁶

In recent years, there has been considerable debate regarding appropriate and inappropriate language in the context of historical study, especially when it pertains to slavery. In both academia and public life, there has been a push to use “enslaved person” in the place of “slave.” “Enslaved person,” so the argument goes, restores personhood and agency to the real men, women, and children who were objectified under the legal status of slave. “Slave,” then, becomes an internal identity rather than the involuntary, external condition implied by “enslaved person.”⁷ However, certain connotations might be lost were “slave” to fall entirely out of use. “Slave” invokes images of brutality and a lack of autonomy, both of which were historical realities that ought not to be glossed over. Because people in bondage were *both* slaves (a legal status and condition of life) and enslaved (human beings with feelings and desires), both terms will be used interchangeably in this paper.

⁵ Ernest, *The Oxford Handbook*, 30.

⁶ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 17.

⁷ Katy Waldman, “Slave or Enslaved Person?” Slate, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2015/05/historians-debate-whether-to-use-the-term-slave-or-enslaved-person.html> (accessed September 6, 2023).

Similarly, there is concern about the use of “slave narrative” to describe the stories of former slaves, especially those of antebellum authors who produced published books. In “Let’s Stop Calling Them Slave Narratives: Anagrammatical Blackness in Our Academic Discourse,” English professor Joseph Coulombe argues that, because authors like Frederick Douglass, Charles Ball, and Solomon Northrup did not identify themselves as slaves, the modern reader should not do so, either.⁸ In addition, the term “slave narrative” was not used by nineteenth century authors; rather, “slave narrative” was first used in the title of the 1941 publication of *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves*.⁹ There is also the overlooked detail that, when these antebellum narratives were written, their authors were either fugitive slaves or entirely free, not living and working as slaves. Although “slave narrative” does serve as an effective shorthand for a category of primary sources—most people would have an idea of what one means by the term—it is not a historically precise label and does not distinguish between antebellum emancipation narratives and other sources produced by, or with the help of, ex-slaves. Neither is it accurate literarily, as, in the vein of Davis and Gates, it should only apply to antebellum publications by former slaves with a very particular structure and purpose. Therefore, although there is nothing *morally* wrong with using the pervasive “slave narrative,” the more precise “ex-slave narrative” or “emancipation narrative” (as these stories usually describe the

⁸ Joseph L. Coulombe, “Let’s Stop Calling Them Slave Narratives: Anagrammatical Blackness in Our Academic Discourse,” *College English* 85 no. 2 (2022): 118.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 113; U.S. Library of Congress, Work Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves*. (Vol. 1. Washington D.C.: GPO, 1941).

author's escape from slavery) will be used in this paper, except in direct quotes from other authors.

Antebellum Emancipation Narratives

The emancipation narratives of the Antebellum era are a central component of nineteenth century American literature. Between ca. 1830 and 1865, the ex-slave narrative became a full-fledged genre with a distinct format. According to Davis and Gates, “the slave narrative, with a very few exceptions, tends to exhibit a highly conventional, rigidly fixed form that bears much the same relationship to autobiography in a full sense as painting by numbers bears to painting as a creative act.”¹⁰ Essentially, although the ex-slave narrative is autobiographical, it is written for a specific purpose and does not take many creative liberties. The point was to convey to a northern audience the realities of slavery to promote abolition. To accomplish this goal, most antebellum ex-slave narratives shared a similar structure.

Black authors, firstly, had to prove that they were real people and that their stories were true. Some variant of “written by himself/herself/themself” usually appears as part of the title, and the first section of narrative is dedicated to their own birth and details about their family. With the author's existence established, the truth of their account needed to be verified. In addition to assertions of truth by the author in the narrative itself, ex-slave narratives had extra documentation attached, usually in the form of a preface written by a prominent white abolitionist, but sometimes in manumission papers and other relevant documents obtained since the author's escape from slavery.¹¹ Frederick Douglass, for example, included a copy of his marriage

¹⁰ Davis and Gates, *The Slave's Narrative*, 150.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

certificate in the text of his *Narrative*.¹² And, although the amount of detail varied from narrative to narrative, all of them included the author's escape from slavery. While serving their abolitionist purposes, they are stories, ultimately, of emancipation.

The narratives written by former (and often fugitive) slaves, in an attempt to show slavery as it was, tended to have an episodic structure.¹³ It is not that black authors were incapable of assigning their own interpretation and meaning to their experiences as enslaved persons, but doing so would, in readers' minds, taint the factual snapshot of slavery they claimed to be portraying. It was important not only to give a truthful, static account of the South's peculiar institution, but to shock the readers into support for abolitionism. As a result, ex-slave narratives regularly included graphic descriptions of master-on-slave violence. Violence could take the form of slave punishment and torture, emotionally agonizing depictions of slave auctions, or murder. These violent experiences, whether experienced or witnessed by the narrative's author, are spun as an essential ingredient in making a slave; the emphasis is on the dispossession and subjugation of the enslaved person.¹⁴

The narratives of both Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs follow this pattern. In Douglass' narrative, a slave named Bill Demby runs to a nearby river to avoid being whipped by the fittingly named Mr. Gore, an overseer. After warning Demby to come out of the water, "Mr. Gore then, without consultation or deliberation with any one [sic], not even giving Demby an

¹² Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: With Related Documents*, ed. David W. Blight 2nd ed., The Bedford Series in History and Culture (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003), 114.

¹³ For a detailed outline of a standard ex-slave narrative, see Davis and Gates, *The Slave's Narrative*, 152–153.

¹⁴ Ernest, *The Oxford Handbook*, 237.

additional call, raised his musket to his face, taking deadly aim at his standing victim, and in an instant poor Demby was no more. His mangled body sank out of sight, and blood and brains marked the water where he had stood.”¹⁵ Jacobs tells the story of Jacob, the son of a friend, who was whipped before escaping for several weeks. Upon his recapture, his master:

decided, after the overseer should have whipped him to his satisfaction, to have him placed between the screws of the cotton gin, to stay as long as he had been in the woods.¹⁶ This wretched creature was cut with the whip from his head to his feet, then washed with strong brine, to prevent the flesh from mortifying, and make it heal sooner than it otherwise would. He was then put into the cotton gin, which was screwed down...Every morning a slave was sent with a piece of bread and bowl of water, which were placed within reach of the poor fellow. The slave was charged, under penalty of severe punishment, not to speak to him...[four days later] The overseer was sent to examine into it [smells coming from the barn]. When the press was unscrewed, the dead body was found partly eaten by rats and vermin.¹⁷

While ex-slave narratives share many similarities within their genre, the road to publication could vary immensely. In his excellent book, *Fugitive Texts: Slave Narratives in Antebellum Print Culture*, Michaël Roy points out that the material culture of

¹⁵ Douglass, *Narrative*, 57.

¹⁶ Fleischner notes that Jacobs was likely referring to a cotton press, not a cotton gin.

¹⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 73.

emancipation narratives is just as interesting (and important) as their content.¹⁸ Some black authors were able to partner with groups like the American Anti-Slavery Society to get their books out to a wide readership. After the financial panic of 1837, however, these societies stopped funding book publications, switching to relatively inexpensive abolitionist pamphlets instead.¹⁹ Book-length emancipation narratives, then, by necessity, had to be self-published and promoted. Lecture tours, for example, were a common way for formerly enslaved authors to distribute their work. In Frederick Douglass' case, after giving a lecture on slavery in general or his *Narrative* in particular, he would bring out a stack of books and sell them to interested lecture-goers. Douglass also provided copies of the book to newspapers, along with transcripts of the lectures. Book reviews and lecture transcripts could then appear together in public print, hopefully promoting more sales.²⁰

We can see, then, with minor variations, that the emancipation or ex-slave narrative is a highly specific genre of antebellum literature. It is an established format that is not broad enough to encompass all that today falls under the umbrella of “slave narrative.”

Frederick Douglass: More than an American Slave

Frederick Douglass is probably the most well-known African American author of the nineteenth century, and his first book, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* is a central pillar of the emancipation narrative

¹⁸ Michaël Roy, *Fugitive Texts: Slave Narratives in Antebellum Print Culture*, trans. Susan Pickford (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2022).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

canon. Renowned for both his writing and oration, Douglass was an ardent abolitionist and activist for women's and civil rights from his escape to freedom until his death in 1895. He published two additional autobiographies, *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855 and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* in 1881, but Douglass' *Narrative* is the prime example of the narrative genre discussed in this paper and will, therefore, be the only one examined in detail.

Three short years after his escape from Maryland in 1838, Frederick Douglass became a lecturer for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, traveling the lecture circuit to speak out against the oppressive institution of slavery. He was such a skilled speaker, however, that a notable portion of his audiences doubted the fact that he had ever been enslaved. To combat this false perception and establish his credibility, Douglass wrote his first autobiography. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass explains:

They [the public] doubted if I had ever been a slave. They said I did not talk like a slave, look like a slave, nor act like a slave, and that they believed I had never been south of Mason and Dixon's line...I resolved to dispel all doubt, at no distant day, by such a revelation of facts as could not be made by any other than a genuine fugitive...I was induced to write out the leading facts connected with my experience in slavery, giving names of persons, places, and dates—thus putting it in the power of any who doubted, to ascertain the truth or falsehood of my story of being a fugitive slave.²¹

²¹ Roy, *Fugitive Texts*, 63.

Douglass' *Narrative* was likely written in just a few short months between October 1844 and April 1845; the book was published in May by Moses A. Dow and Leonard Jackson in Boston. Douglass then promoted his book in daily lectures until August 1845. Networks of abolitionist readers helped distribute the work.²² By 1860, on the eve of the Civil War, *Narrative* had sold over 30,000 copies and been translated into French and German.²³

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (note "written by himself" in the full title) opens with a preface written by William Lloyd Garrison, prominent abolitionist and editor of the newspaper the *Liberator*. As expected, Garrison vouches for Douglass' sincerity and trustworthiness in writing his story. It is bursting with praise for the author's oratory, and now literary, prowess, as well as for blacks in general for enduring slavery better than white people ever could.²⁴ When magazine editor and author Margaret Fuller later reviewed the *Narrative*, she criticized Garrison for being "overemphatic," clashing with Douglass' more "temperate" tone.²⁵ Tasteful or not, Douglass needed the validation of authoritative whites to promote his story as truthful.

The actual text of *Narrative* begins, as expected, with Douglass' account of his birth, family, and early childhood. Contemporary scholars suggest that Douglass was born sometime in February 1818, but Douglass himself did not know his exact birth date. "By far," he wrote, "the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant." Not properly knowing one's age was a flagrant disparity between black and white children, who "could tell their

²² Roy, *Fugitive Texts*, 66.

²³ Douglass, *Narrative*, 18.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

ages.”²⁶ Douglass explained that his father was white, possibly his master, and that his mother, Harriet Bailey, lived on another plantation and never got to see her son more than a few times. Thus, *Narrative* opens immediately with violence: the sexual violence against Harriet Bailey and the domestic violence of forcibly separating families. Douglass rounds out his first chapter with an episode of physical violence against his aunt, who was whipped for being absent from the plantation in the company of another master’s slave. Douglass reports that “It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it.”²⁷ Violent action, then, witnessed or received, initiated a child into slavery.

Douglass’ *Narrative* follows the prescribed form of antebellum ex-slave narratives with descriptions of his various masters, living spaces, and work; graphic violence on his and neighboring plantations; and the story of his escape from slavery in Maryland in the typical episodic structure. Throughout the autobiography, though, Douglass repeatedly returns to the relationship between literacy, manhood, and liberty. He views literacy in particular as an integral component of his freedom.

Over several chapters, Douglass chronicles his journey to literacy. Sophia Auld, wife of Douglass’ master, taught him the alphabet and some basic spelling. Douglass was about twelve years old at the time. Instruction ended, however, when Hugh Auld found out and put a stop to it. Mr. Auld was not alone in believing that slaves who could read, write, and think would

²⁶ Douglass, *Narrative*, 41.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

“become unmanageable” and “forever unfit...to be a slave.” He would not allow that to happen to Douglass. This was a revelation to Douglass, who now understood that with education came power. He wrote that “the very decided manner with which he spoke, and strove to impress his wife with the evil consequences of giving me instruction, served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering...In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.”²⁸

Douglass picked up reading and writing piecemeal, trading bread to poor white children in exchange for a quick lesson or clandestinely flipping through the pages of *The Columbian Orator*, a rhetoric textbook first published in 1797.²⁹ Douglass was sincerely appreciative of the children who helped him learn to read but refused to name them to protect their safety. When Douglass finally achieved his goal, however, he was greatly depressed and even suicidal. Reading and writing had “given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy.”³⁰ Later on in his *Narrative*, Douglass expands on his gloomy outlook, noting that “to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason. He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery; he must be made to feel that slavery is right; and he can be brought to that only when he ceases to be a man.”³¹ Now that his “moral and mental vision” had been brightened by literacy and

²⁸ Douglass, *Narrative*, 64.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 67. The book’s full title is *The Columbian Orator: Containing a Variety of Original and Selected Pieces Together with Rules Calculated to Improve Youth and Others in the Ornamental and Useful Art of Eloquence*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

thoughts of his own, Douglass was grasping at manhood, which entailed both personhood and liberty from enslavement and illiteracy.

Literacy on its own did not make someone a man, of course; plenty of women were literate. Neither did liberty nor personhood. After all, plenty of free people were illiterate and free male children were people but not yet men. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, (white) manhood was based on character traits like self-control, honor, and strength, but also on material possessions and citizenship. Because slaves had the legal status of object property and had no possessions or citizenship of their own, they could never really be men.³² Douglass repeatedly emphasizes that slaves are people who only behave like slaves because they are absolutely brutalized into doing so. As soon as a slave is given their freedom, they have the chance to reclaim their personhood, or, in Douglass' case, his manhood. By the end of *Narrative*, Douglass has in his possession a job, a wife, and a home, which shows that he also has economic independence and authority, the essence of being a man in the antebellum United States.³³ Douglass' autobiographical *Narrative* itself feeds his independence and manhood; he had a good amount of control over his life story and received income from its sale.

Of course, a central component of the ex-slave narrative is the escape to freedom. Douglass recounts in great detail his first escape attempt, which took place in April of 1836. He and two of his uncles planned to row up to the top of the Chesapeake Bay in a canoe and then finish the journey out of Maryland on foot. The plot was discovered, and the men were briefly imprisoned.³⁴ In stark contrast, aside from his fundraising efforts and a comment

³² Ernest, *The Oxford Handbook*, 266.

³³ *Ibid.*, 263, 272.

³⁴ Douglass, *Narrative*, 98–101.

on the people he would be leaving behind in Baltimore, Douglass tells us nothing at all about his successful escape in September 1838. He merely writes that he wishes to keep the people who helped him safe and preserve the route and methods he used for other slaves to use in the future. Interestingly, Douglass also criticizes “our western friends” for boasting about their role in conducting fugitive slaves along the underground railroad, which:

has been made most emphatically the *upper-ground railroad*...they stimulate him [the slave catcher] to greater watchfulness, and enhance his power to capture the slave. We owe something to the slaves south of the [Mason-Dixon] line as well as to those north of it; and in aiding the latter on their way to freedom, we should be careful to do nothing which would be likely to hinder the former from escaping from slavery. I would keep the merciless slaveholder profoundly ignorant of the means of flight adopted by the slave.³⁵

Douglass’ *Narrative*, flavored with the themes of liberty, literacy, and manhood, contains all that one would expect from an emancipation narrative: assurances of truth in title and text, biographical information, recounted tales of violence against Douglass himself and against other slaves, his escape from Maryland, and a static, episodic structure. It is a prime example of the literary genre.

³⁵ Douglass, *Narrative*, 106–107.

*Incidents in the Life of a Narrative: Harriet Jacobs and the
Female Perspective*

Just before the Civil War, in January 1861, Harriet Jacobs' book *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, was published after years of writing. The narrative was so vulnerable and sentimental that, until Jacobs' correspondence with Lydia Maria Child was discovered, few scholars believed that *Incidents* was a true story or that Jacobs was even the real author.³⁶ In many ways, *Incidents* fits neatly into the mold made for ex-slave narratives. It was self-published with an introduction by an authoritative white person (Lydia Child) and an episodic structure ("Incidents") which conveys autobiographical information, graphic content, and an escape story. However, Jacobs' story is unique in a few ways: firstly, although *Incidents* was intended to promote abolition just as Douglass' and other ex-slaves' narratives were, the book was written by a woman, for women, and, really, about women. In her preface, Jacobs asserts the truth of her story and apologizes for her educational deficiencies, then writes:

But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions [sic] of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. Only by experience can any one [sic] realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations.³⁷

³⁶ Davis and Gates, *The Slave's Narrative*, 262.

³⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 26.

Incidents is also unique in that Jacobs writes relatively openly—and repeatedly—about sexual harassment and assault, a topic that would have been shocking to mid-nineteenth century sensibilities.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself has an interesting publication history. Jacobs was unsure if she even wanted to write her story. However, with the encouragement of her abolitionist friend Amy Post, Jacobs eventually came to the conclusion that “God has helped me or I never would consent to give my past life to any one [sic] for I would not do it with out [sic] giving the whole truth if it could help save another from my fate it would be selfish and unchristian in me to keep it back situated as I am I do not see any way that I could put it forward...now is the time when there is so much excitement everywhere.”³⁸

Even after Jacobs decided to write her book, the road to publication was long. She initially hoped to get Harriet Beecher Stowe as her editor, but the famous author was more interested in incorporating Jacobs’ story into her current project, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which contained documents defending the best-seller from accusations that the story was wholly fictional and an inaccurate depiction of slavery. Jacobs, in “a spirit of rivalry,” staunchly opposed the suggestion; she needed her story to be a stand-alone book. Near the end of an 1853 letter to Amy Post, Jacobs wrote, “she [Stowe] might have written to enquire if she liked Mrs [sic] Willis [Jacobs’ employer] wrote her a very kind letter [begging] that she would not use any of the facts in her key saying that I wished it to be a history of my life entirely by itself which would do more good and it needed no romance but if

³⁸ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 225. Jacobs’ later writing shows vast and improvement from this letter to Amy Post, which was written with no punctuation ca. 1852.

she wanted some facts for her book that I would be most happy to give her some she never answered the letter.”³⁹ Jacobs instead began writing *Incidents* little by little near the end of 1853 with Lydia Maria Child as her editor. As a house maid, Jacobs had very little time to spend on her own projects; she also wrote in secret to avoid offending Mr. Willis, who leaned pro-slavery.⁴⁰ Jacobs finished the manuscript in 1857. Child, in addition to editing the document, arranged publication contracts for Jacobs. *Incidents* was submitted to Philips and Samson in Boston in 1859, but both men died before the contract could be fulfilled. Jacobs and Child then turned to another Boston publisher, Theyer and Eldrige, in 1860, but they went bankrupt. Taking matters into their own hands, Child purchased the stereotype plates from Theyer and Eldrige for Jacobs to print and bind it herself in January 1861.⁴¹ Like Douglass, Jacobs travelled around to personally distribute her book, though unlike Douglass, Jacobs’ poor health prevented her effectiveness in this area. As a result, few people outside abolitionist circles ever read *Incidents*, though the narrative was praised within those groups. Her narrative’s release was also overshadowed by the outbreak of the Civil War in April.⁴²

As aforementioned, one of the major themes in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is female sexuality in the context of slavery. Under the protection of pseudonyms, Jacobs (as Linda Brant) recounts her master’s, Dr. Norcom (Dr. Flint), repeated attempts to make her his concubine.⁴³ The harassment started, according to Jacobs, around the time she turned fourteen or fifteen. Through his speech and written notes, Jacobs wrote, “He

³⁹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 227.

⁴⁰ Davis and Gates, *The Slave’s Narrative*, 265.

⁴¹ Roy, *Fugitive Texts*, 147–151.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴³ In this paper, the people in Jacobs’ *Incidents* will be addressed by their real names. Aliases will appear in (parenthesis).

peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him—where I saw a man forty [thirty-five] years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature.”⁴⁴ Jacobs writes of her isolation, not having any legal protection, and feeling like she could not confide in anyone for fear of Dr. Norcom’s retaliation against her family. He was a skilled manipulator, repeatedly orchestrating ways to be alone with Jacobs. Norcom physically attacked Jacobs for the first time after making her confess her desire to marry a free black man. Treating gaslighting as an art, the doctor reminded Jacobs that he was a good, merciful man for not killing or selling her, as he had every right to do, after this event and many others. It is unclear from Jacobs’ writing whether or not she was ever actually raped by her master, but, as he was “to my knowledge, the father of eleven slaves” and Jacobs wrote to Amy Post of “cruel wrongs” that “I might have made plainer I know—woman can whisper,” in tandem with the sexual language she used throughout *Incidents*, it is reasonable to assume that she was.⁴⁵

Despite the horrific pressures imposed on Jacobs by Norcom, she did not write herself as a passive victim. Jacobs chose to have children with Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, a white lawyer, in the hopes that he would buy the family he had with her and emancipate them. “It seems less degrading to give one’s self [sic], than to submit to compulsion,” Jacobs wrote. “There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment.”⁴⁶ Still, Jacobs struggled to reconcile her need to resist her master’s advances with ideals of female virtue, which

⁴⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 52.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 59, 230.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 79–80.

in the nineteenth century was synonymous with virginity. While writing that her relationship with Sawyer was a “painful and humiliating memory” and admitting that she “did wrong,” Jacobs also argues that enslaved women should not be held to the same sexual standards as white women.⁴⁷ White women were protected by law and custom, but slave women were not considered women and were subject to the whims of their masters. They did not usually have the power to resist. Jacobs was unable to follow the prescribed feminine ideal of marriage and children with a household to manage; she was prohibited from marrying the unnamed black man of her choice—not that a marriage to him would be legally recognized anyway because of Jacobs’ status as a slave—and though she achieved motherhood by her own means, they were not socially acceptable ones as Jacobs and Sawyer were an unmarried interracial couple. For Jacobs, social and religious messages regarding sexual purity clashed with her deep desire for bodily and sexual autonomy. Autonomy and resistance to Dr. Norcom’s advances won out.

Another notable theme in Jacobs’ book is her scathing critique of religion, which is not unique but is particularly prominent in *Incidents*. Spurred on by the 1831 Nat Turner rebellion, slave owners and white pastors decided that religious instruction for their slaves would “keep them from murdering their masters.”⁴⁸ When they preached Christianity to their slaves, they emphasized obedience and submission and discouraged slaves from practicing African medicine. Jacobs, however, who was herself very religious, saw through the tailored sermons and the professed faith of the slave masters. They put their best spiritual feet forward when visitors from the north came to see for themselves what slave plantations looked like, but, left to their

⁴⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 80–81.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

own devices, masters had a faith that was “a garb put on for Sunday, and laid aside till Sunday returned again.”⁴⁹ Jacobs angrily lamented southern hypocrisy, writing:

There are thousands, who...are thirsting for the water of life; but the law forbids it, and the churches withhold it. They send the Bible to heathen abroad, and neglect the heathen at home. I am glad that missionaries go out to the dark corners of the earth; but I ask them not to overlook the dark corners at home. Talk to American slaveholders as you talk to savages in Africa. Tell *them* it is wrong to traffic in men. Tell them it is sinful to sell their own children, and atrocious to violate their own daughters. Tell them that all men are brethren, and that man has no right to shut out the light of knowledge from his brother. Tell them that they are answerable to God for sealing up the Fountain of Life from souls that are thirsting for it...There is a great difference between Christianity and religion at the south.⁵⁰

Jacobs skillfully and passionately turns the stereotype of the savage African and the childlike slave on its head and demands that white southerners recognize their own savagery. Passages like this, criticizing white people’s lack of true Christianity, are embedded all over *Incidents*.

Unlike Douglass, Jacobs discusses her escape from slavery in detail. Rather than running from her North Carolina plantation to the north, Jacobs spent the night in a nearby swamp

⁴⁹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 75.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 98–99.

and then hid in the attic of one of her grandmother's friends. She hoped that, because she was no longer there to manipulate, Dr. Norcom would be more willing to sell her six and three-year-old children to their father.⁵¹ A few weeks later, in August of 1835, when the search for Jacobs died down, she moved into hiding in her grandmother's shed. Sawyer did, in fact, purchase the children and Jacob's brother in 1837, and they were sent to live with their great-grandmother. Jacobs lived in the crawlspace above her grandmother's shed until 1842, nearly seven years after her initial escape. Finally, when Sawyer sent the children to live in New York with his cousins, Jacobs seized the opportunity to escape to Philadelphia by boat and, from there, took a train to New York to reunite with her children, Joseph and Louisa.⁵²

Jacobs was thankful to be out of reach of Dr. Norcom, though the discrimination against blacks in the north frustrated her. Referencing the segregated train to Philadelphia, Jacobs wrote, "This was the first chill to my enthusiasm about the Free States...it made me sad to find how the north aped the customs of slavery."⁵³ The Norcoms made repeated attempts to retrieve Jacobs, which sometimes necessitated flight to Massachusetts, but Jacobs considered herself emancipated and refused to set aside income from her job as a housekeeper to purchase her legal freedom. As Jacobs put it:

The money I had earned, I was desirous to devote to the education of my children, and to secure a home for them. It seemed not only hard, but unjust, to pay for myself. I could not possibly regard myself as a piece of property. Moreover, I had worked many years without wages...My

⁵¹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 114.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 172–174.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 178.

children certainly belonged to me; but though Dr. Flint had incurred no expense for their support, he had received a large sum of money for them. I knew the law would decide that I was his property, and would probably still give his daughter a claim to my children; but I regarded such laws as the regulations of robbers who had no rights that I was bound to respect.⁵⁴

Like Douglass' *Narrative*, Jacobs' *Incidents* fits the emancipation narrative mold in both content and form. Even so, Jacobs adapts the format to fit her intended audience of northern women. She uses raw, emotional vulnerability and depictions of sexual harassment and abuse to heighten the shock factor, typically conveyed via stories of physical violence. Her emphasis on how family and feminine sexuality shaped her experience as an enslaved woman makes *Incidents* a particularly striking picture of slavery "as it was" and a remarkable ex-slave narrative.

A Folk History of Slavery: The WPA Interviews

As the Civil War receded further and further into the past, the people who lived through it, including former slaves, began to die off. Although the idea of interviewing ex-slaves was not unique to the 1930s, the interviews conducted under the WPA between 1936 and 1939 became the most prominent and extensive collection of them. The Work Projects Administration—changed from the Works Progress Administration in 1939—was a component of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal

⁵⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 198. A reference to the 1857 *Dred Scott* case in which the Supreme Court determined that slaves did not become free when taken into a free state. Furthermore, black people, free or slave, were not U.S. citizens with rights.

program that strove to provide an income to unemployed households across the United States during the Great Depression. The WPA created thousands of jobs in construction, history, and the arts. One of the WPA's primary programs was Federal Project Number One, under which was the Federal Writers' Project. As the name implies, it was meant to employ out-of-work writers. It was from the Federal Writers' Project that the ex-slave interviews emerged. The interviews were conducted at the state level, collected by the FWP, and forwarded to the Library of Congress, where the interviews were edited, collated, and published in 1941 as *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*.

The purpose of these interviews was to preserve the memories and experiences of the formerly enslaved and to enrich folk history in the United States. It was also meant to provide researchers in many fields of study with primary sources. In one of the opening volumes of *Slave Narratives*, B.A. Botkin, chief editor with the Library of Congress, noted that the interviews "constitute an invaluable body of unconscious evidence or indirect source material, which scholars and writers dealing with the South, especially social psychologists and cultural anthropologists, cannot afford to recon without."⁵⁵ Historians are notably absent. Although historians would fall under the inclusive "scholars and writers," the fields of study Botkin chose to emphasize were more scientific in nature. The implication there is that "A Folk History of Slavery" is not true history, but rather an entertaining and informational cultural resource. Former slaves, and possibly black people as a whole, in this case, are the object of study, not slavery as an institution. Perhaps the use of "Slave Narratives" as part of the main title (again, the first recorded use of the term) is an indication of publishers' attitudes

⁵⁵ Work Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives*, Vol. 1, viii.

toward the WPA interviews: quaint stories about a dead institution.

Although there was no way to effectively regularize the interview process in every state, some standards were suggested by the project's administrative team to make it a little more uniform. It directed interviewers to verify dates as much as possible, to make two or more visits to build trust and obtain more information, and to record the interviews in the subject's own words. Part of preserving interviewees' words was capturing a sense of their accent. Standard English spelling was ignored in interview transcripts when a misspelling would better suit what had been spoken; at the same time, these misspellings were somewhat standardized so they could be better understood by (white) readers. A suggested list of dialect spellings to avoid is included in the introductory volume of *Slave Narratives*. Some of these included "Ah" for "I," "bawn" for "born," "whi" for "white," and "uster" for "used to."⁵⁶ The questions asked by interviewers were also somewhat standardized. A suggested list of questions was provided to interviewers that focused on material living conditions, elements of folklore, emancipation, and the subject's life after the Civil War. Interviewers did not have to ask all the questions, however, and were encouraged to incorporate their own to make the interview flow naturally.⁵⁷

The WPA ex-slave interviews have received a disproportionately large amount of criticism regarding their validity as primary sources. The biggest complaint lodged against the interviews is their convoluted veracity. Most of the former slaves interviewed were in their eighties or older—were their minds sound? Were their responses real memories or a conglomeration of hazy recollections and outright fictions?

⁵⁶ Work Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives*, Vol. 1, xxx.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, xxxi–xxxii.

Notably, most of the thousands of published interviews were conducted by white interviewers in the institutionally segregated south. Might an ex-slave, bound by social convention, and, even, fear, alter their responses to fit the situation? Or, in the throes of the Great Depression, did the subject men and women give their interviewers what they thought they wanted to hear in the hopes of receiving payment? Interviewer Sadie Hornsby noted that, “when asked if he [interviewee Alex Pope] liked to talk about his childhood days, he answered: ‘Yes Ma’am, but is you one of dem pension ladies?’”⁵⁸ Similarly, John Beckwith of North Carolina told his interviewer, “I got a job dar [in Raleigh] an’ eber’ since den I’se wucked fer myself, but now I can’t wuck an’ I [illegible] dat yo’ would apply fer my ole aged pension fer me.”⁵⁹ This is in contrast to the emancipation narratives of Douglass and Jacobs, whose writings are today regarded as true, but, at the time of their publication, required multiple assurances from both author and editor regarding the veracity of the narratives. Many antebellum Southerners decried the accounts of former slaves, as well as white abolitionists, as exaggerated or entirely false. The prime example of this is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, whose characters and story were fictional but served, like *Narrative* and *Incidents*, to draw northern attention to slavery’s very real cruelties. Ex-slave narratives and oral histories like the WPA interviews both struggled—or struggle, in the case of the latter—to be seen as true, but sensationalism and forgetfulness are two different issues from two different centuries.

Soumya Kambhampati’s bachelor’s thesis, “I Ain’t Tellin’ White Folks Nuthin’: A Quantitative Exploration of the Race-Related Problem of Candour in the WPA Slave Narratives,” describes the results of a word frequency analysis conducted on

⁵⁸ Work Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives*, Vol. 13, 172.

⁵⁹ Work Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives*, Vol. 14, 90.

the interviews that quantitatively show differences in truthfulness between responses given to black and white interviewers. Using computer models and some manual analysis, Kambhampati shows that words connected to poor treatment, like “beat,” “whip,” and “breeding,” appear more frequently in responses where the interviewer was black.⁶⁰ This suggests a greater willingness to discuss mistreatment with black interviewers and a hesitancy to be as open with white officials. Over the decades, historians have come up with a few ways to deal with these candor issues in the WPA interviews. A key reading strategy in handling the interviews is to look for contradictions in the interviewees’ responses.⁶¹ For example, a former slave might say their master was good to them, and later describe specific punishments meted out to the enslaved on the plantation. A woman named Addie Vinson, who had been enslaved in Georgia, for instance, told her interviewer that “Marse Ike Vinson was sho good to his Niggers,” but shortly thereafter said that “When dey beat my Aunt Sallie she would fight back, and once when Uncle Randall said somepin he hadn’t oughta, dat overseer beat him so bad he couldn’t wuk for a week. He had to be grez all over evvy day wid hoalin’ ointment for a long time ‘fore dem gashes got well.”⁶² Vinson’s more detailed recollection of her aunt and uncle’s beatings are likely more truthful than her generalization of a good master. Another technique used by former slaves to obscure their narrative was evasion, telling stories that are entertaining, but do not answer a given question or are entirely irrelevant. Andrew Boone of North Carolina, himself a former WPA employee, opened his interview with a description of his

⁶⁰ Soumya C. Kambhampati, “‘I Ain’t Tellin’ White Folks Nuthin’: A Quantitative Exploration of the Race-Related Problem of Candour in the WPA Slave Narratives” (Bachelor’s thesis, Yale University, 2018), 16.

⁶¹ Ernest, *The Oxford Handbook*, 113–114.

⁶² Work Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives*, Vol. 13, 103–104.

breakfast that morning and a complaint about “de big show,” possibly a circus, coming to town. “It’s de Devil’s work. Yes sir, it’s de Devil’s work.”⁶³

Once a reader knows what to look for, however, the WPA interviews become a valuable resource. They give voice to people who may not have had the will or means to write their stories themselves, and provide perspectives from women and children—who are historically underrepresented groups. It is also important to consider that these former slaves were human beings, and human beings are complex. It is reasonable to assume that anger or hatred could coexist with a degree of affection for the people and places of childhood. One must remember, too, that every primary source ever produced by a human being is prone to the same types of pitfalls; bias, agendas, and inconsistencies are occupational hazards of the historian, and it is wholly unfair to disregard such a treasure trove of memory because it might be a little hazy.

Although there was certainly variation in what questions were asked and who asked them, the attempt at standardization across the WPA interviews made for certain similarities across the collection. The material conditions of slavery were one such pattern. Interviewers wanted to know what the ex-slaves ate and how much food they had, what they wore, where they lived, and what kind of bedding they used. Most recalled their parents hunting or gardening to supplement food rations. Some slave quarters were little cabins, while others were more barracks-like. Straw mattresses and quilts were common bedding, but “Pillows? What you talkin’ ‘bout? You know Niggers never had no pillows dem days, leaseways us never had none.”⁶⁴ Several interviewees said that they were always given enough clothes to wear, usually

⁶³ Work Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives*, Vol. 14, 131.

⁶⁴ Work Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives*, Vol. 13, 99.

a set each for winter and summer. Shoes were of particular interest. Multiple interviewees talked about going barefoot in the summer and stuffing shoes with paper in the winter because the shoes could not last all year. Richard Macks remembered that on his Maryland plantation, “if she [the plantation mistress] or the one who did the measuring got the shoe too short or too small you had to wear it or go barefooted.”⁶⁵ Though food, bedding, and clothes were not central to Douglass’ and Jacobs’ narratives, they did write about those things to some degree. Where the interviewed former slaves emphasized having their needs met, however, the antebellum authors emphasized the meagerness of the rations. Douglass wrote that many slave children were “almost naked,” and Jacobs had “a vivid recollection of the linsey-woolsey dress given me every winter by Mrs. Flint. How I hated it! It was one of the badges of slavery.”⁶⁶

The WPA interviews frequently contain accounts of slave holidays, usually around Christmas and the new year. Many of the former slaves talked about the end-of-year festivities with fondness, as that was when clothing rations, and sometimes money, were handed out by the plantation masters. As Marylander James V. Deane put it, “Christmas morning we went to the big house and got presents and had a big time all day.”⁶⁷ Others were more hesitant to praise the days off, noting that they ended with the planters’ tradition of buying and selling slaves on New Year’s Day. Jacobs elaborated on the sentiment, writing, “O, you happy free women, contrast your New Year’s Day with that of the poor bond-woman! With you it is a pleasant season...But to the slave mother New Year’s Day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children

⁶⁵ Work Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives*, Vol. 16, 54.

⁶⁶ Douglass, *Narrative*, 48, and Jacobs, *Incidents*, 36.

⁶⁷ Work Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives*, Vol. 16, 8.

who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns.”⁶⁸

Accounts of the end of the Civil War are prevalent in the WPA narratives as well. Whereas Douglass and Jacobs experienced the war as free adults living in the north, many of the interviewees were enslaved children living on southern plantations as the Union army rolled through the region. Ex-slaves consistently report that the “Yankees” confiscated food, tools, personal valuables from the big house, and anything else that might be of use to them. Reactions to the Union’s presence in the South were all over the board. Some slaves were overjoyed to learn that they had been emancipated. Others feared the invading army; one man remembered, “I was afraid of de Yankees ‘cause de Rebels had told us dat de Yankees would kill us. Dey tole us dat de Yankees would bore holes in our shoulders an’ work us to carts. Dey tole us we would be treated a lot worsen den dey was treating us. Well, de Yankees got here but they treated us fine.”⁶⁹

The WPA interviews are not “slave narratives” in the formal sense. Although they are valuable historical resources that convey the stories of former slaves, have an episodic feel because of the interview question as an organizational structure, and, depending on the questions asked, may have similar content to ex-slave narratives, the WPA interviews fall far short of inclusion in the genre. Periodization aside, it is a collection of interview transcripts that do not, as individual units or as a whole, tell a cohesive story about a former slave moving from bondage to freedom. The WPA interviews, while giving the reader a picture of slavery, are not meant to shock readers at all, much less shock them into political action. These are the two most central tenants

⁶⁸ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 40.

⁶⁹ Work Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives*, Vol. 14, 136.

of the emancipation narrative as a literary genre. The interviews, then, are not ex-slave narratives but oral histories *about* ex-slaves.

Conclusion

We can see American slavery as an institution that inherently robbed people of their identities and personhood, or at least tried to. Slaves had to build their own sense of self, whether through literacy, their family, or through other means. Whatever the material conditions of the enslaved—and it did somewhat vary, as revealed in the WPA interviews—production and protection of the self were key elements of the enslaved experience. Douglass wrote after a physical altercation with an overseer that his “battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free...I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact.”⁷⁰ Jacobs, too, asserted slaves’ inherent personhood: “They [Southerners and pro-slavery Northerners] seem to satisfy their consciences with the doctrine that God created the Africans to be slaves. What a libel upon the heavenly Father, who ‘made of one blood all nations of men!’”⁷¹ Even decades after the abolition of slavery, some former slaves protected themselves from a perceived (or real) threat to their person by molding their verbal recollections to fit the expectations of an interviewer. Although Douglass, Jacobs, and the WPA interviewees experienced slavery in different ways, their differing perceptions fill out our understanding of slavery.

⁷⁰ Douglass, *Narrative*, 89.

⁷¹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 69. Jacobs is referencing Acts 17:26.

Still, with all their similarities, these sources do not sit well together under the clumsy category of “slave narratives,” *Narrative* and *Incidents* because the terms “emancipation narrative” or “ex-slave narrative” are more exact, and the WPA interviews because they are not emancipation narratives at all. Douglass’ and Jacobs’ writings are part of a cohesive literary genre while the WPA interviews are distinctly oral history, though accessible in transcript form. These kinds of sources can, and even should, be used together in historical study. However, acknowledging their differences in form, purpose, and context can enrich our understanding of slavery as much as understanding their similarities. It also prevents us, intentionally or unintentionally, from confining black stories to a single box.

Unshackling the Past: The Legal Journey to the Abolition of Slavery in England

Charles Murphy

“No trace of slavery ought to mix with the studies of the freeborn man.” - Plato

“It is the true duty of every man to promote the happiness of his fellow creatures to the utmost of his power.”¹ - William Wilberforce

Throughout history, the institution of slavery has transcended any specific group, region, or period. Indeed, enslavement had become an entrenched and accepted element of countless civilizations across humanity's past. Stemming from the unquestionable human quest for power and wealth, various forms of slavery emerged across history. From Plato and Aristotle to the early Christian fathers to Luther and Calvin, the predominant belief was that some people were born to be free, and others were born to be slaves.² Throughout Western civilization, slavery was an economic institution of high importance; it was the basis of the ancient Greek economy and raised Rome, a small town in the Italian peninsula, to a thousand-year empire. In more modern times, African slavery provided great luxuries for the Western world. How, then, did the West's moral and legal justification for the institution of the transatlantic slave trade become obsolete?

Although slavery had been heavily entrenched in the British Empire and the world at large, Britain would become the

¹ Plato, eds. J. Ll. Davies and D. J. Vaughan, *The Republic of Plato, Translated Into English, with an Introduction, Analysis, and Notes* (Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1852).

² William Palmer, “How Ideology Works: Historians and the Cast of British Abolitionism.” *The Historical Journal* 52, no. 4 (2009): 1039–51.

leading international force in the oppositional force of the enslavement of people in 1807. For decades, scholars have disagreed on the main processes and factors that contributed to the monumental shift away from slavery in Britain. Many have attributed it to the small number of humanitarian abolitionists in the British Empire during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.³ Commonly emphasizing the religious and humanitarian motives of reformers, early English abolitionism historians have regarded Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce as saints—selfless humanitarians tirelessly pursuing ending slavery for over three decades despite bitter personal attacks against them.⁴ However, many historians since have challenged this conception. In his 1944 book, *Capitalism and Slavery*, Eric Williams, a seminal abolitionist scholar, sparked a wider debate about the true motivations of Britain’s abolitionist history.⁵ Williams argued against the idea that abolition and emancipation exemplified disinterested philanthropic altruism and held that capitalism as an economic modality replaced slavery on an economic basis.⁶ Williams further claimed that only once European elites accumulated the vast surplus capital from slavery—which they needed to bankroll their industrial revolution—did they turn to abolition. However, what is commonly overlooked by Williams, and the historiography of British abolitionism in general, are the important shifts that occurred within the context of legal challenges and judgments in

³ Palmer, “How Ideology Works,” 1042.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1039–51.

⁵ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press Books, 2014).

⁶ Barbara L. Solow and Stanley L. Engerman, *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Britain during the late eighteenth century—a context that served as a pivotal factor in Britain’s achievement of abolition in 1807.

The paramount significance of law in the dissolution of slavery cannot be understated. It was through the mechanisms of legal discourse and jurisprudence that slavery was not only challenged but redefined. Lawsuits such as *Somerset v. Stewart* (1772), along with parliamentary acts and common law precedents, not merely reflected prevailing moral sentiments but were instrumental in shaping them. The multifaceted role of law in shaping society and reflecting its evolution is captured by University of Michigan legal reviewer Arthur Lyon Cross’s assertion that:

The law embodies the story of a nation's development through many centuries, and it cannot be dealt with as if it contained only the axioms and corollaries of mathematics. In order to know what it is, we must know what it has been and what it tends to become. We must alternately consult history and existing theories of legislation...Precedents survive in the law long after the use they had once served is at an end and the reason for them has been forgotten.⁷

Law is not merely a set of rigid rules, but a narrative that becomes a tapestry of a nation's growth and moral progression. As such, understanding the abolition of slavery requires an appreciation of legal history. The rulings from court cases, notably *Somerset v. Stewart*, did not merely express the state's stance on slavery but actively shaped public opinion, leading to an incontrovertible

⁷ Arthur Lyon Cross, “English History and the Study of English Law,” *Michigan Law Review* 2, no. 8 (1904): 649–69.

decree that the practice was illegal. In crystallizing the moral judgments of a few into law, the British legal system effectively legitimized the humanitarian values championed by abolitionists like William Wilberforce and Granville Sharp, making the renunciation of slavery a definitive state policy. To fully grasp the shift towards the abolition of slavery, it is crucial to examine pivotal court cases and the principles of English common law which allowed for this discussion and shift in legal opinion. When a small group of anti-slavery protesters emerged in Britain in the late eighteenth century, they were able to act on legal cases, fully leveraging the British common law principle to shift state opinion and the public against the legal ownership of slaves.

The Enslavement of Africans

From the mid-sixteenth century onward, Britain operated and profited from the largest slave system in human history. According to the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, “between 1543 and 1810, British slave traders loaded more than 3.2 million Africans aboard ships destined largely for the Caribbean” sugar plantations and the Americas.⁸ With the establishment of several permanent American colonies, the institution of slavery became fundamental to the colonies' economic success. The tobacco, sugar, and—eventually—cotton that fed a growing consumer society in Europe demanded large labor forces to plant, grow, harvest, and process them. Demand for resilient labor in the colonies grew, as indigenous populations in the Americas were decimated by European disease, colonial wars, and forced labor policies. Moreover, the limited populations of many of the European imperial slave trading states could not provide enough

⁸ “Iberian Slave Trade,” Slavery and Remembrance, accessed November 29, 2023, <http://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/?id=A0146>.

free laborers to cultivate staple crops in the Americas during the sixteenth century. Thus, a system of African slavery and the transatlantic slave trade became the necessary outlet to provide adequate quantities of labor.

The slave trade expanded market opportunities for European ports, connecting them to burgeoning markets in the Americas. Harvard economist Barbara Solow suggests that the magnitude of the slave trade's contribution to national income and investment was significant; indeed, the slave system expanded profits for investors, introduced more raw materials, and provided more economic opportunity for the Empire in foreign and domestic markets.⁹ The financial advantages of the slave trade were unquestionably reflected in Britain's home economy, as it was a significant employer that directly supported various sectors, including finance, shipbuilding, and related industries. The economic ripple effects extended to urban centers across the nation, where the trade in slaves or the industries associated with it generated considerable wealth, as seen in the prosperity of cities like Glasgow.¹⁰ The availability of jobs related to the slave trade also catalyzed demographic changes within the nation; it raised, for example, the city of Liverpool from a struggling port to one of the richest and most prosperous trading centers in the world.¹¹ Britons also gained access to various goods through the slave trade, obtaining commodities at lower prices that would not have been possible without the connections established by this transatlantic commerce. The slave trade, in

⁹ Barbara Solow, "Caribbean Slavery and British Growth: The Eric Williams Hypothesis." *Journal of Development Economics* 17, no.1, (1985): 99–115.

¹⁰ Ellora Derenoncourt, "Atlantic Slavery's Impact on European and British Economic Development," Working Paper, (2018). Cited with permission from the author.

¹¹ According to Derenoncourt, "Atlantic Slavery's Impact," 10% increase in slave voyages is associated with 1.2% faster city growth.

essence, was not just a channel of commerce but a foundation upon which Britain fortified its economic strength.

Pro-slave trade forces in Britain were entrenched in the institution and the profits it brought. The Council for Sugar Plantations argued in support of the institution that “in every variation of our administration of public affairs...in every period of our history, in almost every variation of our policies, each side and description of party men have, in terms, approved this very trade [African slave trade], voted its encouragement, and considered it as beneficial to the nation.”¹² Similarly, the Committee of Merchants Trading to Africa argued that the slave trade brought extensive advantages to Britain, claiming that nearly every branch of commerce in the nation benefited from it, asserting:

The effects of this trade to Great Britain are beneficial to an infinite Extent...[and] there is hardly any branch of commerce in which this Nation is concerned that does not derive some advantage from it...were this country to agree that [the slave trade] shall be abolished, it would deprive us of the benefit of fitting out annually, a great number of ships, to a very great detriment to our manufacturers, and terminate in the ruin of our British Settlements in the West Indies.¹³

Indeed, proponents of slavery were concerned with retaining the economic, social, and political capital gained from the trade. The strong support for slavery among British elites highlighted their

¹² Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 31.

¹³ David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman, “The Importance of Slavery and the Slave Trade to Industrializing Britain,” *The Journal of Economic History* 60, no. 1 (2000): 123–44.

moral indifference to the inhumanity of the trade, prioritizing economic benefits over ethical considerations.

*Somerset v. Stewart Case: The Courtroom as a Crucible
for Abolition*

Prior to landmark legal decisions, the abolitionist movement in Britain, while morally driven, struggled to effect significant change against the entrenched institution of slavery. The early efforts of religious and activist groups like the Quakers, Methodists, and the Clapham sect—despite their dedication and growing networks—often found their impact limited without the support of legal precedents that could challenge the status quo at a systemic level.¹⁴

As colonial slave masters returned home to England, which they often did, they brought along some of their African slaves as personal servants. In fact, it became quite fashionable for rich ladies and gentlemen to be attended by young black boys, and by the latter part of the eighteenth century, there were about 14,000 of these African slaves in England.¹⁵ They were usually well treated compared to their counterparts in the Caribbean, but

¹⁴ Hannah Jones, "British Citizens Campaign for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1787–1807," Global Nonviolent Action Database, accessed December 11, 2023, <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/british-citizens-campaign-abolition-slave-trade-1787-1807>.

¹⁵ Art can give historians a detailed perspective on the common principles of the time. Many paintings and portraits from this period include African slaves, as a sign of status and wealth, for example see Unknown Artist, *Sir John Chardin*, 1711, oil on canvas, 138 x 138 cm.; The actual number of slaves in eighteenth-century England is not known. Estimates ranged from 20,000 in London alone to 10,000 in the country as a whole. The estimate of 14,000 or 15,000 for England and Wales has come to be accepted by historians. For a discussion, see Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 68.

the fear of being sold was always with them. Proponents of slavery were considerably worried that African slaves in England who became Christians through baptism would be made free. In fact, “By the end of the fifteenth century it was commonly held throughout Western Europe that Christians should not hold fellow Christians in slavery.”¹⁶ This situation drew the attention of a British scholar and devout Christian, Granville Sharp, who had spent his life's work acting as a humanitarian voice in law and society. In 1813, *The Belfast Monthly Magazine* described Sharp: “If any man of the present age deserved the name of philanthropist, it was Granville Sharp. His whole life was one continued struggle to improve the condition of mankind, sometimes by his literary labors, and at other times by more active services.”¹⁷ Sharp would be highly influential in the legal case that established precedents against the lawful ownership of slaves in Britain.

The *Somerset v. Stewart* decision in 1772 stands as a landmark judgment of British law and signals the movement towards the abolition of slavery in Britain. The case revolved around James Somerset, an enslaved African man who was taken to England with his master Charles Stewart in 1769. Two years later, in October 1771, Somerset ran away from his master. After evading slave hunters employed by Stewart for 56 days, Somerset was caught and put in the slave ship *Ann and Mary*, to be taken to Jamaica and sold.¹⁸ The incident came to the attention of Granville Sharp, who, after years of abolitionist support, had been

¹⁶ Philip Neri, “Baptism and Manumission of Negro Slaves in Early Colonial Period,” *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 51, no. 3/4 (1940): 220–32.

¹⁷ “Account of the Late Granville Sharp., Esq. a Distinguished Patriot and Philanthropist,” *The Belfast Monthly Magazine* 11, no. 62 (1813): 209–19.

¹⁸ Ruth Anna Fisher, “Granville Sharp and Lord Mansfield,” *The Journal of Negro History* 28, no. 4 (1943): 381–89.

seeking a definitive case to test the legality of slaveholding in Great Britain. The humanitarian Granville Sharp arranged for Somerset to sue for his right of habeas corpus, as British abolitionists gathered a team of five lawyers to advocate for Somerset in court.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Stewart's defense was funded by British plantation owners in the West Indies. Both the planters and abolitionists recognized that the case's decision would have significant repercussions. Lord Mansfield, the Lord Chief Justice, was the presiding judge of the King's Bench during the Somerset case. Mansfield was one of the most powerful jurists of his time, ruling on many of the most contentious cases of his era. In the court proceedings that followed, Francis Hargrave, a member of Somerset's counsel, summarized the conditions of the case within "An Argument in the Case of James Sommersett a Negro: Lately Determined by the Court of King's Bench: Wherein It Is Attempted to Demonstrate the Present Unlawfulness of Domestic Slavery in England. To Which Is Prefixed a State of the Case" in this way:

The case before the court, when expressed in few words, is this. Mr. Steuart purchases a negro slave in Virginia, where by the law of the place negroes are slaves, and saleable as other property. He comes into England, and brings the negro with him. Here the negro leaves Mr. Steuart's service

¹⁹ The ACLU writes of habeas corpus (The Great Writ) that it is "a fundamental right in the Constitution that protects against unlawful and indefinite imprisonment. Translated from Latin it means 'show me the body.' Habeas corpus has historically been an important instrument to safeguard individual freedom against arbitrary executive power." From "What You Should Know About Habeas Corpus." American Civil Liberties Union, last modified April 27, 2007, <https://www.aclu.org/documents/what-you-should-know-about-habeas-corpus>.

without his consent; and afterwards persons employed by him seize the negro, and forcibly carry him on board a ship bound to Jamaica, for the avowed purpose of transporting him to that island, and there selling him as a slave. On an application by the negro's friends, a writ of habeas corpus is granted; and in obedience to the writ he is produced before this court, and here sues for the restitution of his liberty.²⁰

The plaintiff, Stewart, explicitly rested his case on Somerset's status as his slave rather than a personal servant. By doing so, Stewart essentially forced the court to directly confront whether slavery was lawful in England.²¹ Stewart's argument gave Somerset's counsel, Sharp, and their supporters the opportunity they were looking for: a decisive case based on British legal precedent against the legality of slavery in Britain. To accomplish a positive ruling, Somerset's counsel formed their argument around several precedents. Hargrave argued that the introduction of a new form of slavery into England would be unlawful, as the only formerly legal slavery in England was a defunct form of serfdom and eighteenth-century English contract law did not allow people to enslave themselves.²²

Importantly, Hargrave, along with the rest of Somerset's counsel, saw his case as not merely the concern of Somerset, but of the British national community as a whole. His counsel argued

²⁰ Francis Hargrave, *An Argument in the Case of James Sommersett a Negro, Lately Determined by the Court of King's Bench: Wherein It Is Attempted to Demonstrate the Present Unlawfulness of Domestic Slavery in England*, (London: W. Otridge, 1772).

²¹ William R. Cotter, "The Somerset Case and the Abolition of Slavery in England," *History* 79, no. 255 (1994): 31–56.

²² Hargrave, *An Argument*.

that if the right claimed by Stewart to the detention of the slave was upheld, every individual, foreign and native, would have the discretion to lawfully import chattel slavery into Britain:

Secondly, I infer that the law of England will not permit a new slavery, from the fact of there never yet having been any slavery but villenage, and from the actual extinction of that ancient slavery. If a new slavery could have lawfully commenced here, or lawfully have been introduced from a foreign country, is there the most remote probability, that in the course of so many centuries a new slavery should never have arisen?²³

Centuries-old precedents in British labor law informed this section of the Counsel's argument. The eleventh-century Domesday Book revealed that slaves comprised 10% of the recorded population in 1086. Two decades prior to the Domesday Book, William the Conqueror implemented a series of laws that inadvertently set the stage for a significant societal transformation, one of which prohibited the sale of any man out of the country.²⁴ Whatever Williams' reasons for enacting this law, within a generation, the institution of slavery had nearly died out in England. This was solidified by the church at the national synod at Westminster in 1102, in which the church denounced simony, clerical marriages, and slavery.²⁵ William's edict and information from the Domesday Book explains how villenage—a form of serfdom where individuals were bound to the land and

²³ Hargrave, *An Argument*, 46.

²⁴ "Domesday Book," The National Archives, last modified July 27, 2022, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/domesday-book/>.

²⁵ "Synods of Westminster," *1911 Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed December 10, 2023.

subject to the will of the lord, not slavery—was legal in England. Somerset's counsel appealed to this sentiment in *Somerset v. Stewart*.

Somerset's counsel presented arguments against the introduction of new slavery in England based on longstanding English common law principles and doctrines. They contended that the principles of English contract law supported the assertion that new slavery would be unlawful.²⁶ Their argument rested on a multi-volume work by John Rushworth, a noted seventeenth-century lawyer and former Member of Parliament. A key passage in Rushworth's work recounts a case from the Elizabethan era where a man named Cartwright, having brought a Russian slave to England, faced legal scrutiny for attempting to whip him. The resolution of this case was significant; it declared that the principles of England were inherently incompatible with the practice of enslaving another human being.²⁷ Rushworth compared this previous case to the trials of John Lilburne, who was punished by the Court of Star Chamber for distributing seditious literature. Lilburne's numerous trials and his insistence on the rights of Englishmen to a fair trial, the right to remain silent, and protection against self-incrimination contributed to the development of common law. These legal precedents, set by Lilburne, emphasized the importance of individual rights and the rule of law. Abolitionists later invoked this legal judgment to argue against the legality and morality of slavery. The trials of John Lilburne demonstrate that English law at the time did not

²⁶ John Rushworth, *Mr. Rushworth's Historical Collections: From The Year 1628 To The Year 1638, Abridged And Improved (1706)* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010).

²⁷ "Slavery and Cartwright's Case Before Somerset," *Legal History Miscellany*, last modified February 3, 2022, <https://legalhistorymiscellany.com/2018/10/10/slavery-and-cartwrights-case-before-somerset/>.

recognize property rights in humans or allow slavery, and this became an important legal precedent in the abolitionist movement.²⁸ Rushworth's collection states that if true, the account clearly shows the slave became free upon reaching England. Any other interpretation does not make sense, since English law permitted whipping villeins (serfs), so it would have allowed punishing this slave too if slavery were legal.

Several important milestones in the evolution of the English common law tradition also occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which informed Lord Mansfield's ruling in 1772. In the early sixteenth century under Henry VII, the concept of *stare decisis*, or precedent, began taking form as a key principle guiding judicial decisions.²⁹ By the end of the sixteenth century under Elizabeth I, common law had become recognized as a distinct national legal system centered on the judgments and case law established at Westminster.³⁰ The seventeenth century similarly brought huge social upheavals that impacted law; turbulent periods of civil war, restoration, and revolution brought ideological shifts in views on rights and political authority. Jurists like Sir Edward Coke asserted common law's independence from monarchical decrees, contributing to concepts of constraint on absolute rule.³¹ Landmark events like the Habeas Corpus Act of

²⁸ Hargrave, *An Argument*.

²⁹ Thomas R. Lee, "Stare Decisis in History, Decisis in Historical Political Perspective perspective: From the Founding Era to the Rehnquist Court," Scholarship@Vanderbilt Law, last modified April 4, 1999, <https://scholarship.law.vanderbilt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1962&context=vlr>.

³⁰ John Baker, "Royal Prerogative and Common Law under Elizabeth I," In *The Reinvention of Magna Carta 1216–1616* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

³¹ "Edward Coke's Contribution to English Common Law," Adam Smith Institute, February 1, 2019, <https://www.adamsmith.org/blog/edward-okes-contribution-to-english-common-law​>.

1679 enshrined due process rights in common law, while the Bill of Rights of 1689 embedded civil liberties. The Act of Settlement of 1701 ensured judicial independence by insulating courts and judges from crown interference.³² By the turn of the eighteenth century, English common law had evolved from a decentralized medieval tradition into a recognized unified system of jurisprudence with a sophisticated legal profession and a growing body of rights and precedents, forming the basis for modern Anglo-American law.

After testimony on five separate days in a courtroom packed with planters, abolitionists, and black Somerset supporters, Lord Mansfield made his judgment. Wary of the broader social and economic implications as well as the potential to spark political and social unrest if he met a conclusive ruling, Lord Mansfield was reluctant to provide a definitive ruling. Despite his reluctance to issue a definitive ruling, it became unavoidable. His decision had profound impacts.³³ His ruling, in part, read:

The state of slavery is of such a nature that it is incapable of being introduced on any reasons, moral or political, but only by positive law, which preserves its force long after the reasons, occasions, and time itself from whence it was created is erased from memory. It is so odious that nothing can be suffered to support it but positive law. Whatever inconvenience therefore may follow from the decision, I cannot say this case is

³² "Judicial Independence | Definition, Scope, & Facts," Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified July 25, 2014.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/judicial-independence>.

³³ Cotter, "The Somerset Case," 31–56.

allowed or approved by the law of England, and therefore the black must be discharged.³⁴

Mansfield's ruling rested largely on the grounds that common law, or natural principles, did not support slavery. Only English positive law could justify the forcible repatriation of a slave since such an act of dominion must be sanctioned by English law, and in the absence of such applicable 'positive law,' the individual in question 'must be discharged.' While Mansfield avoided an outright ban on slavery, his unsympathetic framing toward slavery's standing reinforced that English common law would not actively enable bondage. This implicit negation of slavery's lawfulness had a cultivating effect on public opinion that fueled the organized abolitionist campaign.

*Public Opinion Post-Somerset Case: A Shift Towards
Abolitionism*

Somerset v. Stewart in 1772 marked a turning point, where the court's decision to assert the illegality of slavery on English soil provided a legal precedent that invigorated the abolitionist cause. This judicial support lent credence to the movement, bolstered the morale of the campaigners, and signaled to the public and to the state that the movement had a foundation in English common law. The success of *Somerset v. Stewart* thus became a catalyst, transforming the abolitionist stance from a minority opinion into a national conversation, aligning public sentiment with the principles of human dignity and freedom. It was after such legal affirmations that the movement gained momentum, eventually leading to the broader legislative actions that culminated in the

³⁴ "The Somerset Case," English Heritage, accessed December 3, <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/kenwood/history-stories-kenwood/somerset-case/>

abolition of the slave trade and slavery in the British Empire in 1807.

Although the 1772 court decision was limited in scope, as it applied only to the specific circumstances of the case and did not outright ban slavery, the Somerset ruling handed significant moral victory to those advocating for emancipation by confirming that slavery lacked a firm legal basis within Britain. Importantly, the language used in Lord Mansfield's verdict stressed England's long "abhorrence" toward slavery, with no positive law ever establishing its legitimacy.³⁵ In the wake of the trial's ruling, over 5,000 copies of the judge's decision were circulated, allowing activists to trumpet snippets that implied England's laws did not permit slavery.³⁶ Though legally ambiguous, the popular interpretation held that the Somerset precedent essentially outlawed domestic slavery. This perception proved vital for abolitionists to stoke public support for abolition and the expansion of it to the greater world.³⁷ Moreover, the decision supplied the legal ammunition that leading abolitionists needed to put public pressure to end the slave trade. The verdict thereby armed advocates with increasingly persuasive ethical arguments that made campaigning against slavery more respectable and tenable. Over time, this erosion of pro-slavery legitimacy contributed toward lasting legislative victories.

In the years following the Somerset v Stewart ruling, English public opinion on slavery began to shift significantly, as evidenced by various articles and commentaries of the era. A notable instance is a 1788 article from *The Times*, wherein University of Cambridge scholars explicitly opposed the slave

³⁵ "The Somerset V Stewart Case," English Heritage.

³⁶ Jason M. Kelly, "Anti-Slavery Movement, Britain," *The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 1–7.

³⁷ "The Somerset V Stewart Case," English Heritage.

trade, aligning it against core British values of liberty and branding it as 'tyranny'.³⁸ Their call for a 'reform of the human heart' mirrored the growing humanitarian sentiment against slavery, paralleling the legal statements expressed in the Somerset case. Another *Times* article from 1804 reported on a House of Commons debate that culminated in an agreement to gradually abolish the slave trade within four years. The language used, labeling the trade as 'enormous and detestable atrocities' and 'the greatest of all sublunary evils', signifies a heightened repudiation of slavery, indicative of an escalation in opposition.³⁹

Felix Farley's Bristol Journal in 1787 provides clear insight into the abolitionist mindset post-Somerset. The *Journal* not only criticized the slave trade for disrupting African societies but also challenged the commercial justifications of the trade by declaring it ruinous and hazardous. Remarkably, it referred to African slaves as 'people,' a significant departure from the dehumanizing language typically used in pre-Somerset literature.⁴⁰ These journalistic sources collectively emphasize a growing recognition of the ethical and humanitarian issues inherent in the slave trade sparked by Lord Mansfield's ruling. They reflect a paradigm shift in public discourse, from viewing slavery as a necessary evil to a moral abomination. This change in public sentiment, influenced in part by the *Somerset* ruling, set the stage for the eventual passage of the Slave Trade Act of 1807.

Though not revolutionary in an immediate legal sense, *Somerset* held symbolic importance for eroding indifference toward abolition and building its political viability in popular imagination. In doing so, the ruling struck an early decisive blow against the prevailing complacency toward human bondage. The

³⁸ "Political Reflections," *The Times*, February 14, 1788.

³⁹ "House of Commons Debate on Slave Trade." *The Times*, May 31, 1804.

⁴⁰ "Reflection in the Slave Trade and its Probable Consequences," *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, July 21, 1787.

legacy of *Somerset v. Stewart* stems less from its narrow judicial specifics than its role in cultivating fertile ground for abolition's ascension. By undermining slavery in Britain, even imperfectly, the case helped set in motion cultural changes that eventually overwhelmed legislative obstacles. Though the verdict only freed a single African, its aftershocks contributed to freeing millions.

*The Influence of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade
and William Wilberforce*

With the court's influence and power behind them, abolitionists gained traction within the public sphere to establish groups such as the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. The group's founding marked a pivotal moment in the advancement of the movement into public discord. On May 22, 1787, a group of twelve determined individuals convened in a modest printing shop and bookstore located at 2 George Yard in the City of London to form this influential organization. Among the twelve founders, the majority—nine in total—were Quakers. The remaining three founders were Anglican, including the prominent abolitionist advocate Granville Sharp. In the wake of the *Somerset* decision, the members of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade rallied supporters, organized boycotts, and petitioned Parliament to fight against the grave injustice of slavery.⁴¹ The pioneering work of these activists expanded British popular support for the abolitionist cause.

The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade strategically employed William Wilberforce as their parliamentary spokesperson, recognizing his eloquence,

⁴¹ "Foundation of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade," History of Information, accessed December 4, 2023, <https://www.historyofinformation.com/detail.php?entryid=4156>.

conviction, and influential position in the House of Commons.⁴² Wilberforce, deeply committed to the abolitionist cause, became the embodiment of the movement in Parliament, using his skilled oratory and legislative acumen to advocate for the end of the slave trade. Wilberforce's role in the Society was pivotal, as he was not merely a mouthpiece, but a passionate advocate who believed fervently in the moral imperative to end slavery. His annual motions and relentless lobbying in Parliament were central to keeping the issue of the slave trade at the forefront of the national conversation. His involvement gave the abolitionist movement a much-needed legitimacy and a powerful voice within the British political system. A charismatic master rhetorician, one of Wilberforce's many notable pathos-driven speeches included:

I will not accuse the Liverpool merchants: I will allow them, nay, I will believe them to be men of humanity; and I will therefore believe, if it were not for the enormous magnitude and extent of the evil which distracts their attention from individual cases, and makes them think generally, and therefore less feelingly on the subject, they would never have persisted in the trade. I verily believe therefore, if the wretchedness of any one of the many hundred Negroes stowed in each ship could be brought before their view, and remain within the sight of the African Merchant, that there is no one among them whose heart would bear it.⁴³

⁴² "Foundation of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade."

⁴³ "William Wilberforce Speech Against the Slave Trade," Biography Online, last modified March 6, 2019, https://www.biographyonline.net/politicians/quotes/wilberforce-speech.html#google_vignette.

Under his leadership, the Society effectively mobilized public opinion and harnessed the growing humanitarian spirit of the time. They organized petitions, produced abolitionist literature, and orchestrated a campaign to inform and influence both the public and members of Parliament about the brutal realities of the slave trade.⁴⁴ Wilberforce's unwavering commitment to the cause, despite facing numerous setbacks, including personal health issues and strong opposition from pro-slavery interests, was a testament to his dedication. The Society's strategy of using Wilberforce as a figurehead was a calculated move that paid dividends. His ability to present a compelling moral argument against the slave trade, coupled with his political acumen, made him an ideal candidate to lead this legislative battle. The culmination of his efforts, alongside those of his colleagues in the Society, was the passage of the Slave Trade Act in 1807, which marked a significant milestone in the fight against slavery in the British Empire.

Conclusion

The journey from widespread acceptance to the near eradication of slavery is a testament to the profound adaptability and evolution of both human society and law. The shift from Plato's assertion that the marks of slavery should not stain the pursuits of the free would be replaced with William Wilberforce's call to advance the happiness of fellow beings. A combination of economic, legal, and moral forces drove the significant changes accomplished during the nineteenth century. Eric Williams' perspective in *Capitalism and Slavery* provides an economic lens,

⁴⁴ Hans Martin Gribbestad, "The Aftermath of *Somerset v Stewart* (1772): A Study of Contemporary Journalism, Change in Attitudes and the (De Facto) Status of English Slavery," (bachelor's project, Lektorutdanning i Historie, Masterstudium, May 2020), supervised by John Kwadwo Osei-Tutu, 13.

suggesting the transition from slavery to capitalism was a calculated evolution driven by Britain's industrial needs.⁴⁵ Moreover, the argument that humanitarian efforts alone dismantled slavery fails to consider the broader legal and economic contexts. The legal system, particularly through pivotal cases like *Somerset v. Stewart*, mirrored and molded society's emerging ethical stance. The *Somerset* case presided over by Lord Mansfield marked a turning point; while it didn't outright ban slavery, it established the principle that English common law could not endorse slavery without explicit statutory support. Though focused on one man's freedom, this ruling helped inspire a broader national ethos that rejected the enslavement of any person.

As legal battles in the 1770s began to challenge the status quo, the common law tradition of England, renowned for its principle of *stare decisis*, became an unexpected ally in the fight against slavery. The legal philosophies of jurists like Sir Edward Coke provided a sturdy foundation for the principles that fueled the abolitionist movement. The journey from the *Somerset* case to legislative milestones like the Habeas Corpus Act and the Bill of Rights wasn't direct, but it was decisive. These laws, woven into the fabric of modern Anglo-American jurisprudence, stand as monuments to the enduring struggle for human rights and dignity. *Somerset v. Stewart* wasn't just about the fate of one man; it was a catalyst for a broader cultural and legal shift that paved the way for the abolition of slavery. The legacy of this case is not in its legal minutiae but in its symbolic power, contributing to a movement that would eventually emancipate millions, and echoes of this transformation continue to inspire and guide our collective pursuit of justice and equality.

⁴⁵ Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*.

Opium, Heroin, and the State in Modern China: Comparing the Trafficking Networks of U.S. Merchants, Shanghai Gangsters, and the Nationalist Party Military

Henry Schmidel

The opium poppy, *Papaver somniferum*, originated in Europe. From there it migrated to the eastern Mediterranean—where it was long used for medicinal and ceremonial purposes—and the cultivation of the plant spread as far as China by the seventh century C.E., if not far earlier.¹ The seed pod of the plant, in the period between when it flowers and dries out, can be cut to extrude a latex which contains its active ingredients: the chemicals morphine, codeine, and thebaine. The potency of these substances has made opium and its derivatives among the most abused (and most profitable) drugs in the world. In his groundbreaking book *The Politics of Heroin*, Alfred McCoy writes of opium, “we can discern three distinct phases in its history—first among ancient societies, as folk and formal medicine, traded locally for little profit; then, starting in the seventeenth century, as a recreational drug and global commodity; and finally, in the twentieth century, as the prohibited narcotic heroin smuggled long distances for great profit.”² The purpose of this paper is to examine three drug smuggling organizations which trafficked in opium or heroin both in and around China at different points from the early-nineteenth century to the late-twentieth. This crosses between McCoy’s second and

¹ Benjamin Breen, *The Age of Intoxication: Origins of the Global Drug Trade* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 157–58; Alfred W. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003), 4.

² Edward R. Slack, *Opium, State and Society: China's Narco-Economy and the Guomindang, 1924–1937* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 4.

third periods of opium history, and will thus be useful in understanding the evolution of the trade as the world moved into modernity.

The American “China Trade” and Russell & Company

Opium had been in China for hundreds of years by the time the Portuguese began shipping it there in the sixteenth century, and it wouldn't be until the early nineteenth that the trade really began to take off under British (later joined by American) merchants. Its importation was formally banned by the Qing Government of China a number of times; the earliest notable example of which was in 1729, when two hundred chests of opium were brought into the country. Opium was typically eaten, and it is thought that the practice of smoking opium in a pipe, alone or with tobacco, was brought by the Spanish during their control of Taiwan in the seventeenth century.³ There wasn't a large market for the drug when the first U.S. ship arrived at the Chinese port of Canton in 1784. But, over the next few decades, production, consumption, and traffic of opium would all increase tremendously, with American merchants at the helm.

The opium that American and English merchants were bringing to China was not, of course, grown in their own countries. Opium to be sold in Canton (now Guangzhou) was typically purchased in Smyrna (now Izmir) in the Ottoman Empire, and in British-controlled India, which produced both Malwa opium (from an inland region in western India) and Bengal opium (from not only to Bengal proper but the entire

³ Charles C. Stelle, “Americans and the China Opium Trade in the Nineteenth Century” (doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1938), 2–3.

Ganges River Basin).⁴ The British East India Company (EIC) administered much of India at this point, and was steadily ramping up opium production in Bengal for global shipment. Despite this, the so-called “Honorable Company” strictly forbade sale of opium in Canton by any East India Company ship—an attempt to stay on the good side of the Qing officials. With only a few Portuguese traders and a small number of non-EIC English merchants (called “country” merchants) as the competition, the field was primed for U.S. traders to dominate the sale of opium in Canton.⁵

The earliest recorded trade in the drug by U.S. merchants at Canton was in 1806, when the ship *Entan* arrived from Smyrna with “forty-six chests and fifty-three boxes of opium.”⁶ As was required under the Canton system, the ship anchored at Whampoa (the modern-day island of Pazhou, also referred to as Huangpu) where it was then inspected by the port’s customs commissioner, known as the Hoppo (pinyin: Hubu).⁷ This position was unique, as it was personally appointed by the emperor, not by the governor, and the term of service was a non-renewable three years. The Hoppo would measure the vessel and inspect the cargo to determine the port charge, a number which would be further enlarged by the various fees and cumshaws (a payment

⁴ Jacques M. Downs, “American Merchants and the China Opium Trade, 1800–1840,” *The Business History Review* 42, no. 4 (1968), 421; Charles C. Stelle, “American Trade in Opium to China, 1821–39,” *Pacific Historical Review* 10, no. 1 (Mar. 1941), 57.

⁵ Stelle, “Americans and the China Opium Trade,” 4–5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15–16.

⁷ Many of my sources used antiquated transliterations of Chinese words and names. To make this paper as coherent as possible, I have tended to use whichever transliteration appeared most often in the works written on that period. However, I recognize that these are outdated, and have attempted to include an updated pinyin transliteration whenever an outdated version is used.

somewhere between a bribe, tip, and service charge) levied upon the ship. Historian Jacques M. Downs writes, “the total cost of entering and leaving the port of Canton came to something between three to seven thousand dollars per ship—probably the highest port charges in the world at the time.”⁸

Given that Western traders were so willing to face these high fees, it should come as no surprise that the profits from trade in Canton were remarkable. In 1818, the Americans collectively imported an estimated \$9.8 million worth of goods to the city, and exported \$9 million.⁹ At this point, it is important to draw a distinction between the traders’ personal wealth and the general flow of money from one state to another. For the merchants, the sheer volume of trade conducted is what made them their profits. It didn’t matter if they were importing or exporting more, because their gains came off the top of whatever was shipped, no matter to whom. On the other hand, the general direction in which silver moved mattered a great deal to the states themselves. Though a simplified explanation, it remains generally true that prior to around 1804, China was siphoning silver from the European countries, and selling them far more in silks, teas, and other goods than was being purchased in return. Three years later, by 1807, China was purchasing so many goods that Chinese traders were forced to export silver specie—an act banned by the emperor—and were beginning to drain the Qing treasury.¹⁰

⁸ Jacques M. Downs, *The Golden Ghetto: The American Commercial Community at Canton and the Shaping of American China Policy, 1784–1844* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1997), 24; In this period, dollars or the \$ symbol refers to Spanish silver dollars.

⁹ Downs, *The Golden Ghetto*, 358.

¹⁰ Heu Kew, “Memorial from the sub-censor Heu Kew, against the admission of opium. Oct. 1836,” in *Documents Relating to Opium and China*, republished from *The Chinese Repository*, (Canton: 1837).

There are three main factors behind this shift. The first is that, for reasons Downs described in 1997 as “not yet adequately explained,” China began purchasing English (and Indian) goods in growing quantities, especially cotton.¹¹ The second factor is that this list of goods being imported also included opium, which East India Company ships were still not permitted to carry. Cotton was, of course, plentiful in the United States due to the slave labor regime in the South, and U.S. ships were unfettered by the East India Company’s restrictions on opium trading. While American traders would never surpass the British in sheer volume of goods shipped to China, the access to cheap cotton and the ability to freely carry opium would provide a major opening and market niche for U.S. firms. Supported by these increasing imports is the third factor: the replacement of silver with financial instruments in trade.

Trade in Canton was managed by a small group of licensed merchants, known individually as *hong* (pinyin: *hang*) merchants, and collectively as the Cohong (pinyin: *Gonghang*). They were generally regarded by the Western traders as shrewd and honest, and some became close friends with their American counterparts. The individual *hong* merchants were not restricted to trade with any particular nation, and this opened an opportunity for Americans to avoid the problems of shipping risky and cumbersome silver specie to China.

As the British were leaving China with more silver than the Americans were bringing in, U.S. traders realized that they could instead ship bills of exchange—slips of paper similar to modern-day bonds—for trade with British sailors or their *hong* intermediaries. Simply put, a merchant in the U.S. would purchase a bill of exchange from the agent of a bank, usually one based in London, and would use it as payment for goods or

¹¹ Downs, *The Golden Ghetto*, 108.

services. The recipient of the bill could then bring it to the bank, and after a waiting period—typically ninety days—the balance would be remitted to their account, plus interest. Bills of exchange didn't have named recipients like a modern bank check does, so one could also choose to pass it off to another recipient in another round of trade, and so on. This made the situation much easier for the Americans, as they no longer had to ship specie, which was expensive, took up a great deal of space, and did not bear interest like a bill of exchange.¹²

Initially, the U.S. traders armed with bills of exchange would find an English merchant who had received silver as payment for their goods and offer to trade the bill for the silver. The English merchants would readily accept, because silver was very frustrating to ship across the world compared to paper bills of exchange. The American trader who had purchased the silver could then use it to purchase Chinese goods. As this system developed and became standard, *hong* merchants began accepting bills of exchange from the Americans, knowing that they would have ample opportunity to pass them off to the British.¹³

What matters most about this system is that it relied on China exporting more silver than it imported, and that arrangement laid primarily on the back of the opium trade. Historian Dael Norwood writes:

Even those not directly involved in the opium trade relied on its infrastructure to do business. Olyphant and Company, an American commission firm staffed by committed evangelicals who proudly refused to deal in the drug, nonetheless still paid for their teas and silks

¹² Dael A. Norwood, *Trading Freedom: How Trade with China Defined Early America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 65.

¹³ Norwood, *Trading Freedom*, 65.

using bills made liquid by the illicit flow of opium. Opium underwrote their business just as much as the new and fiercely exploitative labor regimes powered the expansion of the textile industry in Europe and the cotton frontier in North America. “Everyone trading” at Canton, Robert Bennet Forbes explained to his wife Rose, depended on bills to “get money” for purchases.¹⁴

That is to say, it is exceedingly unlikely that the China trade as we now know it could have existed without opium. None of the vast fortunes and infrastructural and philanthropic works the trade paid for in America are clean of the drug and its consequences on the Chinese people.

Now that the importance of opium smuggling has been established, the methods by which it occurred warrant discussion. Paul A. Van Dyke carefully detailed these in his article “Smuggling Networks of the Pearl River Delta before 1842: Implications for Macau and the American China Trade,” published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Hong Kong Branch*.¹⁵ He covers the three major smuggling systems, located in Portuguese-controlled Macau, in Canton, and on the island of Lintin (pinyin: Lingding). The earliest Canton smuggling routes were quite simple: all ships arriving at the harbor in Whampoa were boarded and supervised by a pair of tidewaiters—low-level customs officials—who were meant to ensure no cargo was unloaded before inspection by the Hoppo.¹⁶ These tidewaiters

¹⁴ Norwood, *Trading Freedom*, 65.

¹⁵ Paul A. Van Dyke, “Smuggling Networks of the Pearl River Delta before 1842: Implications for Macau and the American China Trade,” *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 50 (2010): 67–97.

¹⁶ Van Dyke, “Smuggling Networks,” 73–75.

could often be bribed, and contraband could be unloaded to waiting smugglers before the Hoppo arrived.

Licit cargo was transported to Canton on boats operated by the *hong* merchants and would be inspected at three tollhouses along the twelve-mile trip. Every chest was inspected, and the triple-tollhouse system effectively curbed smuggling on these cargo boats. However, as ship captains and supercargoes (the sales managers for the ship) lived in Canton at their nation's factories—a confusing name for what is in fact a warehouse and apartments—they were allowed unmolested travel from Whampoa to Canton on small craft called flag boats. No chests of cargo were allowed, but low amounts of contraband could be smuggled in with their personal effects.¹⁷ This, as one might imagine, was an extremely ineffective system when attempting to smuggle hundreds of chests of opium, each weighing 133½ pounds. There were other options, such as smuggling on the boats of the compradors who supplied provisions to ships in port, or on the boats of the tidewaiters themselves, but they suffered similar problems with a greater fee attached.¹⁸

In an attempt to streamline the process and reduce the bribes incurred by both the Western smugglers and their comprador associates, an arrangement was made such that the island of Lintin, located in the Pearl River Delta outside the river's first customs checkpoint, would be converted into a supply and docking station for traders. As a part of this, massive storeships were permanently moored there as opium warehouses. The process, quoted from historian Sibing He, was as follows:

Before proceeding to the official anchorage at Huangpu with legitimate cargo, incoming vessels

¹⁷ Van Dyke, "Smuggling Networks," 73–75.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

first stopped under the lee of Lingding Island to unload the illegal drug onto the storeship anchoring there. To sell the opium, American traders signed contracts with the Chinese buyers in Canton. After the Chinese placed their orders and paid for it in silver coins, the Chinese smugglers transported the drug from the storeship to shore on small boats. Some of these boats carried as many as 100 chests of opium, each containing one picul or 133 1/31 [sic] pounds, enough to supply 8,000 addicts for a month.¹⁹

The island was not only outside of the checkpoints set up to control the cargo of merchant ships, but also laid in between the Xiangshan and Xinhui counties, which meant that neither one's administration felt it was their responsibility to police there.²⁰ The most notable of the storeships was the aptly named *Lintin*, operated by Robert Bennet Forbes on behalf of the American firm of Russell & Company.

Smaller opium traders who could not afford to own a storeship of their own would consign their drug with Russell & Co. on the *Lintin*, for a fee of \$5 per chest.²¹ Free of contraband, they would sail to Whampoa, from where they would arrange for the sale of that opium to smugglers. These smugglers would later arrive at the *Lintin*, present the bill of sale for the opium, and leave a bribe of \$1 per chest to be passed on to Chinese officials by the

¹⁹ Siping He, "Russell and Company, 1818–1891: America's Trade and Diplomacy in Nineteenth-Century China," (doctoral dissertation, Miami University, 1997), 98–99.

²⁰ Van Dyke, "Smuggling Networks," 81.

²¹ He, "Russell and Company 1818–1891," 99.

Lintin's captain on their behalf.²² This was an extremely profitable business for everyone involved. As captain of the storeship, Robert Bennet Forbes was earning \$30,000 per year just in fees, and the bribes incurred by both the merchants bringing the drug from Turkey and India and their smuggler counterparts were significantly lower.²³

The storeships didn't just hold contraband. Due to insufficient rice production within China, the government changed regulations so that any ship docking in Whampoa with a cargo of just rice would pay minimal port fees. Thus, the *Lintin* Island storeships began buying all of a ship's freight and loading them up with rice. This allowed smaller merchants, for whom the high fees would be a discouragement or whose cargo would not be able to cover the fees, access to Whampoa and Canton.²⁴ Their cargo could then be sold to a larger ship filled entirely with freight for sale or smuggled to the mainland independently.²⁵

The most important American firm in Canton from its founding in 1806 until 1830 was Perkins & Company. Owned by brothers Thomas H. and John Perkins, it was managed in Canton by their nephew, John Perkins Cushing. Cushing later employed their other nephews, brothers Thomas Tunno Forbes, Robert Bennet Forbes, and John Murray Forbes. To give a sense of the way this younger generation felt about their elders, and the financial impact of China trade in general, R. B. Forbes wrote in his autobiography that their uncle Thomas H. Perkins:

Stands also with the Lowells, Jacksons,
Appletons, and Lawrences, these far-seeing

²² "Opium Accounts, 1831," *Forbes Family Business Records* Vol. H-7, Baker Memorial Library Special Collections, Harvard Business School.

²³ He, "Russell and Company 1818-1891," 99.

²⁴ Van Dyke, "Smuggling Networks," 84-85.

²⁵ Stelle, "Americans and the China Opium Trade," 43.

pioneers who were the advance guard in leading the American energy to new and diversified industries. The stone quarries of Quincy, with the first railroad on New England soil, the coal and industries of Pennsylvania, as well as the manufactories of New England, connect his name with these earliest enterprises, some of them even in their failures laying the foundation of future success; others, enduring moments of Anglo-Saxon courage, foresight, and brains.

Colonel Perkins died on the 11th of January, 1854, but he still lives on in the hearts of many, and his name, with that of his brother James, is forever identified not only with the history of our commerce and manufactories, but also with those beneficent institutions which they helped to rear, and which are still bearing good fruit—the Asylum for the Blind, the Massachusetts General Hospital, the Boston Athanæum.²⁶

This quotation serves as a good example of some important facts that can easily go overlooked when studying the China trade. First, it exemplifies the depth with which the merchants in China were intertwined with the economies of the United States, particularly that of New England. Second, despite close friendships with many of the *hong* merchants and some traders ardently supporting the Union in the U.S. Civil War and the abolitionist movement—most notably John Murray Forbes—these people remained concerned with “Anglo-Saxon courage,

²⁶ Robert Bennet Forbes, *Personal Reminiscences* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1882), 334.

foresight, and brains” when celebrating their predecessor, who began his career as a slave trader. And third, it’s important to be aware of the lasting impact these merchants have made upon the United States, and the world at large. Massachusetts General Hospital, founded in part by Thomas H. Perkins, today holds the largest research program at any hospital in the United States.²⁷

When John Perkins Cushing took over Perkins & Co. in 1806, the business’s commissions side—where other merchants would pay to have their goods shipped by Perkins & Co.—grew far more rapidly than Cushing was able to manage. To compensate, Cushing encouraged associates of his in New England, led by Samuel Russell, to create a commission house that could take over this side of his business; it was incorporated in 1818 as Samuel Russell & Company. Russell arrived in Canton in 1819 and quickly began building his firm’s reputation and business.²⁸ Working with Cushing and the *hong* merchants Consequa and Houqua, as well as illegally selling outside the Cohong monopoly, Samuel Russell & Co. expanded rapidly.²⁹ When the company’s charter ended in 1824, some of the earlier partners left and the firm was re-established under the name Russell & Company.

By the late 1820s, Perkins & Co. was running smoothly, and Cushing returned to America, leaving the eldest Forbes brother, Thomas Tunno, in charge at Canton. Thomas Tunno Forbes drowned to death on August 9, 1829, and papers were found in his office giving Russell & Co. control over all Perkins business in the event of an accident. This temporary arrangement seemed to work well, and as Cushing had no desire to return to China, he proposed a merger of the two companies, which went

²⁷ Martha Bebinger, “How Profits From Opium Shaped 19th-Century Boston,” *WBUR* (Boston, MA), July 31, 2017.

²⁸ Forbes, *Personal Reminiscences*, 335–36.

²⁹ He, “Russell and Company 1818–1891,” 45–47.

into effect in January of 1830. To defend his interests, Cushing installed Augustine Heard as a partner and John Murray Forbes as a clerk at the company. Also, unbeknownst to John Murray Forbes, Cushing wrote a clause entitling Forbes to partnership in the company in 1834.³⁰ The Cushing-Perkins-Forbes family would remain dominant in the firm until its collapse in the 1890s.

By this point, Russell & Co. was the most powerful American merchant company in China, averaging \$133,000 in yearly profits in the mid-1830s, and this wealth afforded a great deal of political power to the Boston group at its helm.³¹ Siping He writes, “as the largest American firm in East Asia, Russell and Company did not merely conduct business but also sought to orchestrate U.S. foreign policy towards China.”³² Until 1855, the U.S. Consul in a city would also be a merchant, and Russell & Co. partners and allies held consulships for decades. Massachusetts congressman Caleb Cushing (another cousin of John Perkins Cushing) had been appointed Ambassador to China in 1843, an act which caused one New York merchant to write the Secretary of State and express “his concern that because of the nurturing relationship among the Forbes, Perkins, and Cushing families, they would not only benefit from enhanced trade with China but would also profit handsomely from dealing in opium.”³³ This fear would prove to be correct.

In 1843, the Forbes brothers lobbied Secretary of State Daniel Webster to get their cousin Paul Siemen Forbes installed as consul at Canton, rescuing him from “a failed business venture

³⁰ Forbes, *Personal Reminiscences*, 340–43.

³¹ He, “Russell and Company 1818–1891,” 80–81.

³² Siping He, “Russell and Company and the Imperialism of Anglo-American Free Trade,” from *Narratives of Free Trade*, ed. Kendall Johnson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 88.

³³ He, “Russell and Company and the Imperialism of Anglo-American Free Trade,” 91.

in South America.”³⁴ That same year, Commodore Lawrence Kearney, commander of the U.S. Naval presence in the region, wrote to Ambassador Cushing warning of “the involvement of consular merchants in the opium traffic,” a traffic he was expressly ordered to prevent.³⁵ On his arrival a year earlier, Kearney had written that “the United States does not sanction ‘the smuggling of opium’ on this coast, under the American flag, in violation of the laws of China. Difficulties arising therefrom in respect to the seizure of any vessel by the Chinese, the claimants certainly will not, under my instructions, find support.”³⁶ This notice was largely ignored, and in 1844, Houqua and John Murray Forbes forced the resistant partners of Russell & Co. to grant the newly minted consul entry into the company.

The year 1844 was significant not just for Paul S. Forbes, but for Ambassador Cushing and all the U.S. merchants in China, as it was the year Cushing signed the Treaty of Wanghia (pinyin: Wanxia), the American follow-up to the British Treaty of Nanking (pinyin: Nanjing). In preparation for this, Ambassador Cushing wrote to Paul S. Forbes from Macau and asked him to arrange a meeting with the American merchants in Canton in order to discuss their demands on the Chinese and strategize for a post-treaty system.³⁷ The treaty allowed the Americans the same extraterritorial privileges China had granted other nations, and even included an article on the trade in opium, which stated that Americans who dealt in opium would face no U.S. protection if arrested and could thus be freely punished by the Chinese government. However, Americans could now stay in their own

³⁴ He, “Russell and Company 1818–1891,” 78, 169.

³⁵ He, “Russell and Company 1818–1891,” 114.

³⁶ Stelle, “Americans and the China Opium Trade,” 84.

³⁷ “Letter from Caleb Cushing to Consul Paul S. Forbes, March 1844” *Forbes Family Business Records* Box 2, Folder 10, Baker Memorial Library Special Collections, Harvard Business School.

self-administrated districts governed by U.S. law, under which it was not illegal to sell the drug.³⁸ In a document that initially reads as a show of support for Chinese crackdowns on opium smuggling, Ambassador Cushing and the U.S. merchants had in fact fully neutered China's already weak power to prevent the trade.

The role of the Chinese people in the opium trade must also be discussed. Much like the anti-opium merchants at Olyphant & Co., the entire Cohong was attached to the use of bills of exchange, a practice inextricably connected to the sale of opium—some went further than that. Houqua, the *hong* merchant who was closest with the Forbes-Perkins-Cushing family, was a Chinese subject, and therefore restricted by Chinese law from dealing in the drug. Despite that, letters from J. & T. H. Perkins & Co. (the name for the American affiliate of Perkins & Co. of Canton) often read as follows: “Our friends Houqua & Perkins & Co. have recommended in very strong terms the purchase of a large quantity of opium,” proving in writing Houqua's affiliation with the drug.³⁹ Furthermore, in his later years, Houqua would delegate all of his personal trade to Russell & Co. and appoint John Murray Forbes to manage his overseas investments—all the while knowing that their cut of his profits would certainly go towards the purchase of more opium.⁴⁰

The Hoppo and other Canton officials also benefited greatly from the smuggling operations at Lintin island. Since many ships disguised themselves as rice ships at Lintin, the Qing officials could report to the emperor that imports of rice were increasing, granting them favor for subsequent appointments. Similarly, since the smuggling of opium vastly increased trade in all goods, these officials were incentivized to cover up the extent

³⁸ He, “Russell and Company 1818–1891,” 166.

³⁹ Stelle, “Americans and the China Opium Trade,” 28.

⁴⁰ He, “Russell and Company 1818–1891,” 76–77.

of the trade in reports to Beijing, which increased their own status but likely prevented stronger state actions to curb addiction and smuggling.⁴¹

The Green Gang, Opium, and Heroin in 1900s China

By the early twentieth century, the opium trade in China was largely controlled from within by Chinese citizens. As Europe began to distance itself from opium trading, the networks that the European colonists had developed remained in place, now controlled by crime syndicates in the Chinese treaty ports, most significantly Shanghai. The organizations that developed in Shanghai eventually moved to Hong Kong and established the city as the second most important heroin manufactory in the world, after Marseille. Alfred McCoy writes in *The Politics of Heroin*:

In the early 1970s almost all of the gangsters belonging to Hong Kong's dominant heroin syndicates were members of the Chiu chau dialect group [a transliteration of the Cantonese name for the Chaozhou or Teochew dialect]...A group of Chiu chau became opium *compradores* [in Shanghai] soon after the Municipal Opium Monopoly was established in the 1840s. Although the franchises for distribution of opium and management of the settlement's smoking dens were formally leased to Western (mainly British) merchants, the Chiu chau *compradores* actually policed the smoking dens and sold the opium. Despite their relatively low status, the Chiu chau

⁴¹ Van Dyke, "Smuggling Networks," 85–86.

“prospered” from the traffic until 1918, when pressure from the new Chinese Republican government and the British Foreign Office finally forced British merchants to give up their franchises and close the dens.⁴²

As the British divorced themselves from opium, the Chaozhou lost their protection and were forced to compete with the Green Gang syndicate, which was powerful in the French concession of the city. The Chaozhou would eventually be subsumed by the Green Gang under the leadership of a man named Du Yuesheng. With Du at the helm, this syndicate became one of the largest manufacturers of heroin, a legitimate part of nationalist Guomindang (GMD) government, and allies in the fight against the Communist Party (CPC).

The Green Gang under Du rocketed to the top of the drug trade. While still learning to produce heroin in their own labs, the syndicate sold imported pills of the drug—advertised as “anti-opium pills”—in Shanghai. Sanxing Gonsi (Three Prosperities Company), the company through which Du and the Green Gang sold these pills, was protected by both French and Chinese security forces.⁴³ Green Gang chemists became ever more proficient through the 1920s, and eventually the syndicate began growing and shipping vast amounts of opium and morphine base down the Yangtze River, from the provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan, and transforming it into heroin in their Shanghai labs. This opium was shipped on GMD gunboats and passed through several Nationalist government checkpoints, where it was taxed like any other good. Ironically, it was often referred to as “anti-

⁴² McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin*, 263.

⁴³ Slack, *Opium, State, and Society*, 24.

opium medicine” despite being, in fact, pure opium.⁴⁴ In 1925, Historian Edward R. Slack notes, the *lijin* (transit tax) station in Yichang alone collected a revenue of over 8,000,000 Spanish dollars.⁴⁵

A major step forward in the relationship between the Green Gang and the GMD was their assistance in the Nationalist takeover of Shanghai. As the GMD forces approached in 1927, the city’s communists were ready to rise up and help them take the city from its warlord ruler. GMD leader Chiang Kai-shek, fearing that his troops were too sympathetic to this communist force to wipe them out, cut a deal with Du; the Green Gang syndicate slaughtered the city’s labor movement, and in return Chiang granted Du the rank of Major-General.⁴⁶

In 1931, Chiang would further promote Du, giving him the title “Chief Communist Suppression Agent for Shanghai.”⁴⁷ This was not a surprising appointment, as Du and the Green Gang were intimately connected with the Guomindang’s far right—most importantly the Central Club Clique (CC Clique)—led in Shanghai by former Green Gang member Wu Xingya. Du was particularly connected to a CC Clique sub-group called the Action Club, which “was greatly influenced by the Italian Fascist Party and German National Socialism, and whose purpose was to

⁴⁴ Brian G. Martin, “The Green Gang and the Guomindang State: Du Yuesheng and the Politics of Shanghai, 1927–37,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 1 (1995): 66–67; Alan Baumler, *The Chinese and Opium under the Republic: Worse than Floods and Wild Beasts* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 112, 124, 258. See chapter 5, note 3.

⁴⁵ Slack, *Opium, State, and Society*, 22.

⁴⁶ Martin, “The Green Gang and the Guomindang State,” 65–66; Brian G. Martin, *The Shanghai Green Gang: Politics and Organized Crime, 1919–1937* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 104–108; McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin*, 265.

⁴⁷ Peter Andreas, *Killer High: A History of War in Six Drugs* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020), 153.

promote fascism within the Guomindang,” and conducted “special service operations against Communists, leftist, liberals, and sundry other enemies of the Guomindang regime.”⁴⁸ The Clique’s assassination program is “reported to have contributed to the elimination of 4,500 Communists” between July of 1933 and July of 1934.⁴⁹ Much of this was paid for by profits from the GMD’s Opium Suppression Bureau.

The Opium Suppression Bureau, much like the “anti-opium pills” and the “anti-opium medicine” discussed above, was not in fact charged with the suppression of opium and heroin in China. Instead, it served to expand and enforce a monopoly on the opium trade, in which farmers and dealers were taxed heavily, in addition to the formalization of the *lijin* transit taxes. Anyone who was caught smuggling was tried in separate Bureau-controlled courts, and the military received “50 percent of the proceeds from any illegal opium they seized.”⁵⁰ In late 1927, this monopoly moved from being state-enforced and controlled by private merchants to being entirely state-controlled, and in 1931 the *lijin* was abolished in order to settle dissent, a change which cost the recipient central and local governments a total of \$100 million in revenue.⁵¹

For the next few years, the GMD policy drifted away from opium suppression as a way to generate wealth for the state and began to focus on a six year plan to eradicate opium use through gradual weaning of users. This was short-lived, and on June 15, 1935, Chiang Kai-shek restructured the system of opium suppression under a new agency, the General Commission for Opium Suppression. This commission was run directly out of his

⁴⁸ Martin, *The Shanghai Green Gang*, 164–66.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 164–66.

⁵⁰ Baumler, *The Chinese and Opium*, 113, 128.

⁵¹ Baumler, *The Chinese and Opium*, 128; Slack, *Opium, State, and Society*, 97.

office and was intended once more to generate revenue for the state through the controlled sale of opium. Less than a month later, on July 1, Du Yuesheng was appointed to the Shanghai Municipal Opium Suppression Committee.⁵² Du had been involved in the state-run trade as early as 1930, when documents show him colluding with T.V. Soong, then Minister of Finance, to transport and sell government-owned opium through the Green Gang networks.⁵³ By 1937, the relationship between Du and Chiang was so close that “Du gave Chiang an American fighter aircraft for his fiftieth birthday that bore the name *Opium Suppression of Shanghai* on its nose.”⁵⁴

During the Second World War, the Green Gang continued to function as a GMD intelligence service in Shanghai—by this point occupied by the Japanese—while also beginning to move their operations to Hong Kong to ensure that their business remained viable. According to Alfred McCoy, “large elements of the [Green] Gang formed the basis of Chiang Kai-shek’s most powerful secret police agency, the Statistical and Investigation Office under the command of the controversial General [Dai] Li.” McCoy goes on to describe how “an OSS emissary to China in 1942, Michigan professor Joseph Hayden, described [Dai] Li as ‘the leader of the Chinese ‘gestapo,’ the hatchet man of the Generalissimo [Chiang] who utilizes assassination by poison and dagger and by subtler methods removes possible opponents from his path and that of his chief.’”⁵⁵ At the same time as they were performing assassinations for the Guomindang, the Green Gang were arranging their new heroin labs in Hong Kong, and were

⁵² Slack, *Opium, State, and Society*, 109–10; Andreas, *Killer High*, 153.

⁵³ Slack, *Opium, State, and Society*, 125.

⁵⁴ Andreas, *Killer High*, 153.

⁵⁵ McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin*, 268.

easily able to move their headquarters to the city after the Chinese revolution.⁵⁶

After the war, Du Yuesheng began to fall out of favor with Chiang Kai-shek and the Guomindang elite. Over the course of his years working with Dai Li, Dai had built up a series of independent contacts within the Green Gang, and thus Du had lost his usefulness. In 1948, Du's son was arrested by the Generalissimo's son, Chiang Ching-kuo, in an anti-corruption effort.⁵⁷ The following year Du left Shanghai for Hong Kong, where he died in 1951. After his death, the Green Gang-Chaozhou alliance that Du had negotiated crumbled and the Green Gang began to fade into obscurity, with many of its master chemists jumping ship to work for the Chaozhou.⁵⁸

In order to understand the importance of these master chemists, it's necessary to understand the chemistry—and therefore production—of heroin. Heroin's scientific name is diacetylmorphine, and it is made by combining morphine base with acetyl acid. To get that morphine base, “opium is mixed with lime in boiling water. A precipitate of organic waste sinks to the bottom. On the surface a white band of morphine forms. This is drawn off, reheated with ammonia, filtered and boiled again until it is reduced to a brown paste.”⁵⁹ The first batch of heroin produced is highly impure, and is referred to as “number one” heroin. After this, through a highly volatile process of refinement, the heroin can be clarified into numbers two, three, and four. Number three heroin is anywhere between 3 and 60% pure, typically brown, and makes up most of what would be seen on the

⁵⁶ Andreas, *Killer High*, 163.

⁵⁷ Kathryn Meyer and Terry Parssinen, *Webs of Smoke: Smugglers, Warlords, Spies, and the History of the International Drug Trade* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 226.

⁵⁸ McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin*, 270.

⁵⁹ “Transforming Opium Poppies into Heroin,” *PBS Frontline*.

street. Number four heroin is white, and typically found at a purity of above 80%. Because it contains so little of the drug's active ingredients, lower quality no. 3 heroin needs to be taken intravenously—though at above roughly 30% purity it can be smoked. Most of the heroin in America before the 1990s was less than 10% pure.⁶⁰

The same could not be said about Hong Kong. Because so much heroin was produced in the city, there was an abundance of no. 3 heroin, at levels of above 40% purity, and nearly a quarter of Hong Kong addicts used heroin above 50% purity. What this means is that Hong Kong addicts, as early as the 1940s, had access to heroin at a level of purity unparalleled in nearly any other part of the world.⁶¹ But, after the Communists took power and outlawed the growing of opium in China, where was the opium and morphine base for these Hong Kong labs coming from?

The GMD, CIA, and Opium in the 1950s

The answer to this question lies south across the border from Yunnan province, in the countries of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand. While opium had been grown here for some time,⁶² the industry boomed after the GMD and their Green Gang associates were forced out of mainland China.⁶³ By the late 1950s, this “Golden Triangle” was producing 50% of the world's illicit opium: 700 tons per year.⁶⁴

As mentioned above, it was not only opium that got pushed over the border; huge numbers of Guomintang soldiers

⁶⁰ “Transforming Opium Poppies into Heroin,” *PBS Frontline*.

⁶¹ McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin*, 271–72.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 95.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 123–24.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

and loyal Nationalist civilians ended up there as well, primarily in Myanmar. More specifically, these units were the GMD's 93rd and 193rd Divisions, commanded by General Li Mi and collectively called the "Yunnan Anticommunist National Salvation Army" (YANSA).⁶⁵ They were camped on the border, awaiting orders to invade China from the south in coordination with the ongoing Korean War, as part of a plan called Operation Paper.⁶⁶ The plot relied on heavy involvement from Civil Air Transport (CAT, later renamed Air America), an airline founded after WWII by General Claire Chennault. In 1948, control of CAT was overtaken by the CIA's Office of Policy Coordination, the division of the agency responsible for covert action as opposed to intelligence-gathering. During the Korean War, CAT was notable for airlifting troops and supplies to the Korean peninsula.⁶⁷ Operation Paper was approved by Truman sometime in late 1950, despite the protests of Director of Central Intelligence Walter Bedell Smith, who opposed the sort of covert operations that would become standard practice under his successor, Allen Dulles.⁶⁸ After the program was approved, CAT worked closely with another CIA front company, the Southeast Asia Supply Company (SEA Supply) to ship weapons to the YANSA forces and additional CIA associates in Bangkok. Often, these weapons were taken directly from U.S. military weapons depots in Japan.⁶⁹ When they finally invaded, Li's forces were handily defeated by the Communists at every turn, eventually

⁶⁵ Richard Gibson and Wenhua Chen, *The Secret Army: Chiang Kai-shek and the Drug Warlords of the Golden Triangle* (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons Asia, 2011), 58.

⁶⁶ Peter Dale Scott, *American War Machine: Deep Politics, the CIA Global Drug Connection, and the Road to Afghanistan* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 63.

⁶⁷ Scott, *American War Machine*, 74–76.

⁶⁸ Gibson and Chen, *The Secret Army*, 60.

⁶⁹Ibid., 62.

returning to Myanmar and attempting to build a base of support there.⁷⁰

No matter how devoted soldiers might have been to their cause, they also needed to be paid, and the YANSA forces in Myanmar were going to be financed with opium. As Yunnan province's opium cultivation wasn't fully eliminated until around 1955, traders would regularly come across the border to sell their products in Myanmar or Thailand, and the YANSA forces would raid them and steal the opium for their own.⁷¹ The U.S. Defense Department had financially supported the 93rd Division for a number of years, but in April 1952 that money was cut off—presumably a response to their failure during Operation Paper.⁷² In response, Li Mi's forces expanded out across Myanmar's border states in an attempt to rebuild a financial and ideological base for their eventual *reconquista*. Alfred McCoy writes:

The KMT [GMD] occupation centralized the marketing of opium, using hundreds of petty traders who combed the Shan [Northern Myanmar] highlands. The KMT also required that every hill tribe farmer pay an annual opium tax. One American missionary to the Lahu tribesman of Kengtung State, Rev. Paul Lewis, recalled that the KMT tax produced a dramatic rise in the amount of opium grown in the highland villages he visited.⁷³

⁷⁰ McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin*, 169–71

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁷² Gibson and Chen, *The Secret Army*, 116–17.

⁷³ McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin*, 173.

This opium was used to finance the purchase of arms and ammunition for the YANSA forces, most often in Chiang Mai, Thailand:

Almost all of the KMT opium was sent south to Thailand, either by mule train or aircraft. Soon after their arrival in [Myanmar], the KMT formed a mountain transport unit, recruiting local mule drivers and their animals. Since most of their munitions were carried overland from Thailand, the KMT mule caravans found it convenient to haul opium on the outgoing trip from [their base at] Mong Hsat and soon developed a regular caravan trade with Thailand. Burmese military sources claimed that much of the KMT opium was flown from Mong Hsat in “unmarked” C-47s flying to Thailand and Taiwan.⁷⁴

The “unmarked” planes McCoy references here could only belong to Civil Air Transport, which was co-owned by the CIA and the Taiwanese government. It had American pilots, and it can be assumed that covert flights such as these were not authorized on the orders of Taiwan alone. The U.S., by way of the CIA, was thus supporting this Nationalist narco-state growing in northern Myanmar. Further evidence of this is the discovery by Myanmar soldiers of “the bodies of three white men who bore no identification other than some personal letters with Washington and New York addresses” after a battle between the Myanmar Army and the YANSA in March 1953.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin*, 173.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

From 1951 to 1954, the YANSA narco-state operated a university, the “Yunnanese Peoples Anticommunist and Resisting Russia Military and Political University” (Yunnan Anticommunist University). Through this university, the YANSA intended to build a class of ideologically motivated civil servants to govern after a successful recapture of southern China and a well-trained officer class to lead the invasion and act as a security force. As Myanmar’s army grew ever closer to the YANSA territory, the university lessened its focus on civil service and ramped up military training.⁷⁶

While the Defense Department faucet had been turned off shortly after the failed Yunnan invasions, the CIA was materially supporting YANSA via CAT until at least March of 1953, when the unidentified American bodies were found.⁷⁷ After this point, Allen Dulles’ CIA—Dulles having been appointed Director of Central Intelligence in February of that year—attempted to remove the GMD forces from Myanmar and airlift them to Taiwan on CAT planes, thereby dissolving YANSA.⁷⁸ This plan took many months and was impeded by Li Mi’s limited control over his widespread forces, a problem exacerbated by the ever-shrinking shipments of money and supplies from both Taiwan and America. While YANSA had always engaged in drug trafficking, the loss of the Defense Department money had caused many YANSA units to increase their involvement in the opium trade.⁷⁹ U.S. attention to the issue of GMD forces in Myanmar had disappeared by the mid-1950s, and over the next few years the army steadily rebuilt itself as the “Yunnan Anticommunist Volunteer Army” (YAVA), at this point funded solely by the

⁷⁶ Gibson and Chen, *The Secret Army*, 98–100.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁷⁸ McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin*, 175.

⁷⁹ Gibson and Chen, *The Secret Army*, 118.

Republic of China in Taiwan through the National Security Bureau, headed by Chiang Ching-kuo.⁸⁰

This force remained in Myanmar until 1961, after which the government in Taipei recalled its top officers and YAVA fell apart, dispersing across the Golden Triangle—primarily into northern Thailand—as three separate armies. One of these armies, called the First Independent Unit and staffed by National Security Bureau General Ma Ching-kuo and 400 intelligence officers, “remained under the overall supervision of...Chiang Ching-kuo, in Taiwan, [and] financial support for its intelligence operations inside China and [Myanmar] was continued.”⁸¹ The other two armies, called the Third Army and the Fifth Army, lost that financial support, and began a further increase of opium trafficking to maintain their finances.⁸² While the First Independent Unit did not need to support itself with the opium trade, the Fifth Army’s “troops were allowed to use the First Independent Unit’s listening posts as opium trading centers” in return for assisting with raids across into China.⁸³ Through to the 1970s, the YAVA remnants based in Thailand were the dominant traffickers of opium produced in Myanmar, transporting it to their own heroin labs in Thailand and Laos.⁸⁴ While their operations decreased over time, especially after the Thai government approved naturalization for large swathes of the remaining GMD forces, the Third and Fifth Armies continued to be major trafficking organizations in the Golden Triangle through to the 1990s, and splinter groups are still involved in trafficking to this day.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Gibson and Chen, *The Secret Army*, 165–66.

⁸¹ McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin*, 352.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 352.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 355.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 371.

⁸⁵ Gibson and Chen, *The Secret Army*, 307–308.

It is clear why Russell & Company or Du Yuesheng sold opium: for profit. That was clearly why the GMD engaged in it too; they used the earnings to finance their operations in the Golden Triangle and southern China. But what was the American objective when allowing CAT to transport opium for YANSA? At this point, the U.S. had long been the world's largest consumer of illicit drugs, and one could be sure that the opium and heroin trafficked by the GMD would make its way to American cities.⁸⁶ In his book *American War Machine*, Peter Dale Scott posits a few theories as to why this trade was permitted. First, that the rise in the opium trade helped to integrate Southeast Asia into the global capitalist system, of which America is the hegemon. This was a twentieth-century version of the way opium and bills of exchange were used by Russell & Co. and other U.S. merchants to expand trade with China and enable further resource extraction. In that vein, Scott argues that an increase in trafficking prompted the opening of Myanmar's tungsten deposits to American exploitation. Finally, it goes without saying that YANSA and YAVA furthered the promotion of anti-communism in the region through the creation of a U.S.-aligned, anti-communist guerilla force that could pay for itself, keeping it out of Washington, D.C. budgets.⁸⁷

Conclusion

In giving the test cases of Russell & Company, the pre-war Green Gang, and the GMD narco-state in Southeast Asia, I have attempted to illustrate the ways in which organized crime, the business class, and the state have historically coalesced around opium and opiates as a way to achieve both financial success and

⁸⁶ Benjamin Y. Fong, *Quick Fixes: Drugs in America from Prohibition to the 21st-Century Binge* (New York: Verso, 2023), 2–3, 204–208.

⁸⁷ Scott, *American War Machine*, 80–81.

other domestic and foreign policy goals. This is not a phenomenon exclusive to China, and a paper like this one could be written about nearly anywhere that drugs are produced, trafficked, or sold.

In the nineteenth century, the China traders used their family connections to influence U.S. foreign policy and thus be granted much greater access to the Chinese market. In the process, they fundamentally—and later explicitly—legalized their trade in opium through the extraterritorial privileges gained in the Treaty of Wanghia. The wealth these traders brought back to the United States paid for the construction of hospitals, libraries, factories, and railroads. At the same time, the officials in Canton were using the opium trade not only to increase their personal wealth, but to make political gains by demonstrating an increase in trade, rice imports in particular.

In the twentieth century, Du Yuesheng and the Green Gang gained an incredible level of power in the nationalist government. They integrated themselves into its military actions with the massacre of communists in 1927 and filled the ranks of an intelligence and security service in later years, thereby aiding in the war effort against the Japanese and any other anti-GMD groups that Chiang wanted purged. This relationship allowed the Green Gang to transport vast quantities of opium down the Yangtze River to Shanghai, where their chemists were freely allowed to manufacture and sell heroin. The tax on the transport of this opium provided large sums of money to the Nationalist government, incentivizing the trade's continued growth. While the United States was relatively uninvolved in the Green Gang's traffic in opium and heroin, it certainly benefited from their intelligence-gathering on behalf of the GMD during the Second World War, and the Hong Kong heroin manufactories played a large role in the American drug market in later years.

Finally, the CIA-backed Chinese Nationalist army in Myanmar provided the United States with an ally in the region that it could rely on to fight the perceived threat of Communist China in the early Cold War, as well as an opportunity to increase resource extraction by American corporations. In return, the GMD was able to support an army that could serve as a second front in an imagined invasion of the Chinese mainland, and strengthen their relationships with the CIA's covert action division, which could be a very useful friend in that reconquest. While opium was being grown and trafficked by YANSA for the entirety of the army's existence, this trade only increased after the U.S. began to cut off its support.

In summary, the networks by which drugs are trafficked across the globe are more complex than some would have you believe. Instead of the "cops and robbers" attitude many hold, there has historically been state involvement in the drug trade, and their actions serve not only financial purposes, but also political ones. As the consumption of and deaths from the use of opium and its derivatives continues to rise, re-examining and reframing the drug's history has become especially important.

The (Inter)National Organization for Women: How American Feminism Went Abroad in the 1980s and 1990s

Rhiannon Brown

As her speech came to a close at the 1992 Silver Anniversary/Global Feminist Conference, the president of the National Organization for Women, Patricia Ireland, set the tone for the days and years to come in the fight for women's equality. Ireland oversaw one of the most influential feminist organizations in the United States, and she spoke to audiences of women during a time few consider as an era of intense feminist activism. The 1980s and 1990s are frequently regarded as decades in which the liberal activism of the 1960s and 1970s supposedly dissipated; the elections of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan are often interpreted as significant gains for conservative power. This was anything but the case, however, for women continuing the fight to maintain and expand upon their rights.

As the Anglo-American political realm shifted to conservative leadership, feminism continued to thrive in the 1980s and into the 1990s. The National Organization for Women (NOW) remained active in the fight for women's equality on a national and international scale. On the domestic level, they helped elect a record number of women to office in the United States. NOW also aided in protecting the right to abortion from conservative opposition that sought to overturn the 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade*, which guaranteed the Constitutional right to abortion. The organization further contributed to the international movement for women's rights in the late 1980s and into the 1990s. They held conferences in the United States and invited feminist groups from other countries to participate, culminating in a celebratory conference in 1992. NOW's leaders also participated in the United Nations' 1995 World Conference on Women, the milestone conference considered by contemporary

feminist leaders as the defining moment in the international feminist movement of the 1990s. At this conference, feminists produced the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, a key document that continues to serve as the official agenda for global policy on women's empowerment and gender equality. From their correspondence with Irish feminists on severe censorship of abortion in their country to hosting a Global Feminist Conference in 1992, NOW's leaders expanded their resources to put the organization on the international map in the fight for women's equality.

The following will consist of a two-part analysis of the National Organization for Women and global feminism during the 1980s and 1990s. The first part will examine existing scholarship on global feminist movements, conferences, and relationships in this period. The 1980s and 1990s are becoming a new focus of historical inquiry as we uncover more about the decades' histories each day. Early historians of the 1980s, like Sean Wilentz in *The Age of Reagan*, argue the decade was a period of conservative triumph following the decline in liberal success over the 1970s.¹ The current body of scholarship, however, is lacking due to this common interpretation of the decade as one of conservative ascendancy. Recently, historians have complicated this narrative by examining the work of progressive groups and individuals in the period. Secondary material on NOW's leaders and their role in global feminism is almost nonexistent, but there are several works on global feminism and the United Nations' role in this movement that are important to consider in this discussion. These works provide a new and exciting history of American feminism and how these

¹ Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974–2008* (New York, NY: Harper, 2008), 5.

women and their allies played a role in the larger, global movement for women's equality.

The second part of this paper focuses on how NOW's leaders functioned on an international level during the latter half of the 1980s and into the 1990s. This will entail a look at conferences they held, as well as statements from these leaders regarding their stance on international women's rights and how they contributed to the movement. This section relies heavily on archival material gathered from the organization's collections at the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University. Harvard's archives provide crucial evidence that the 1980s and 1990s have more to them than meets the eye. These materials show that despite being an American-based organization, NOW's leaders were working for international women's rights inside and outside the United States. This can be seen through their correspondence with several feminist groups in Ireland, England, and beyond; as well as in various materials detailing the planning and execution of NOW's Silver Anniversary/Global Feminist Conference held in 1992.

Both parts of this paper will present a picture of what American feminism looked like on a global scale in the second half of the 1980s and into the 1990s. Whether it be American feminists in NOW who were working to protect constitutionally guaranteed rights or Irish feminists who advocated for the repeal of the Eighth Amendment, feminist history of the 1980s and 1990s is in the beginning stages of its historiography.² Key pieces of work exist on several factors of international feminism during this time which range from the United Nations' role in this movement to how American organizations broadened their focus to include other countries and their movements for women's

² A 1983 adoption that established equal rights to life of the pregnant woman and the unborn. "What Is the Eighth Amendment?" Irish Council for Civil Liberties, April 25, 2018, <https://www.iccl.ie/her-rights/what-is-the-eighth/>.

equality. The goal of this paper is not only to argue that there is more to this period, but also to motivate others to consider the 1980s outside the prominent interpretation as the “Age of Reagan.”³ NOW provides one avenue through which this argument can be made, but it remains crucial to consider other groups of people that have often been neglected in mainstream understandings of feminism in the United States and abroad. As historian Sarah Maza argues in her influential book *Thinking About History*, “every time we reframe part of the historical picture to take account of another set of people, the whole image changes.”⁴

Before we begin, there is an important historiographical problem that needs to be addressed: the “wave” metaphor. The history of American feminism has been broken down into four waves, with the first beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century and the fourth wave continuing into today. The idea of these “waves” first emerged in the 1960s to differentiate the contemporaneous movement from the “woman movement” of the mid-nineteenth century, which pursued a full agenda for women’s rights that included access to the ballot amongst several other demands.⁵ The second “wave” refers to the movement of the 1960s and 1970s which challenged women’s roles in society, especially in the family, by advocating for equal treatment under the law and the freedom of choice across all aspects of life. This period included both the “liberal” branch of the movement, which was represented paradigmatically by NOW, and the “radical”

³ Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, 5.

⁴ Sarah Maza, *Thinking About History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 44.

⁵ Nancy Hewitt, “From Seneca Falls to Suffrage? Reimagining a ‘Master’ Narrative in U.S. Women’s History,” in *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, ed. Nancy Hewitt (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 17.

branch (or “women’s liberation”) that was characterized by groups such as the Redstockings and the small, generally home-based, “consciousness-raising” efforts that emerged across the U.S. by the early 1970s.⁶ The third “wave,” which is typically argued to have begun in the 1990s, built on the work of previous decades and specifically tackled sexual harassment in the workforce while advocating for more women in positions of power. The fourth “wave” is more difficult to define—indeed, some argue it does not exist at all—but it can be traced to 2017 with the #MeToo movement and the Women’s March on January 21, 2017, the day after Donald Trump’s inauguration. This culminated in the largest mass political march in American history, and the fourth “wave” is considered the current women’s movement still going on today.

Though these “waves” appear to break up feminist history in a pedagogically digestible way, they have become problematic for several reasons. They neglect years of history in between and before the “waves” ever began, as well as women and their allies who did not fit into the mainstream movements of these “waves.” Decades worth of history are missing due to the continued use of this model. To move forward with this differentiation of feminist movements in the United States will continue to take away agency from feminists and their allies who worked before, during, and after these “waves” to build platforms for each of them to flourish. As Maza argues, “Excuse me: we were there too, and it did not happen like that for us.”⁷ My paper complicates the second and third “waves” by assessing NOW’s role in global feminism during the 1980s and early 1990s.

⁶ Nancy Hewitt, “Introduction,” in *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, ed. Nancy Hewitt (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 1.

⁷ Maza, *Thinking About History*, 37.

Several leading works written about NOW and American feminism focus heavily on the second “wave” and major legal wins from Title VII of the Civil Rights Act and its inclusion of sex to the win in the landmark Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. However, this scholarship fails to acknowledge feminist activism that occurred afterward or any activism outside the United States. On the international level, the United Nations held its first world conference on women in 1975, followed by two more throughout the 1980s and its biggest landmark conference in 1995. Yet this history is missing an in-depth analysis. Second “wave” feminist history—and its mainstream and radical branches—has received significant attention from scholars.⁸ The following historiographical discussion explains the importance of these works and how they set the framework for examining the environment in which NOW and the United Nations operated during the 1980s and 1990s.

Lee Banaszak’s edited anthology *The U.S. Women’s Movement in Global Perspective* brings together original essays regarding the United States’ movement alongside those in other countries and explores how these movements have impacted each other. Chapter five, “The Politics of Decision Making in the National Organization for Women,” written by Maryann Barakso, specifically examines NOW’s leaders by exploring several aspects of the organization: from difficulties they faced with decision-making between their local chapters’ interests and the national level’s interests, to their smaller grassroots activism at local chapters. Barakso describes NOW’s leaders’ investment in electoral politics as a sign of their growing interest in the political realm and larger issues, as compared to their previous

⁸ For example, see an examination of the mainstream branch in Katherine Turk, *The Women of NOW* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 2023); and Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), examines radical feminists of the 1960s and 1970s.

stance on zero alignment with any politician or party.⁹ She argues that several reasons can contribute to a social movement organization's choice to participate in politics, but for NOW's leaders, it was their own political culture and values that affected the leadership and members' decision-making. This was due to shifts in the macropolitical environment during this time of a significant conservative presence that actively attempted to roll back on advances made throughout previous decades.¹⁰

The internal politics of NOW are crucial to consider when studying any aspect of the organization's history because they highlight "the extent to which rank and file group members influence associational behavior."¹¹ NOW was, and continues to be, a massive organization with thousands of members, and thus thousands of opinions. People on the ground molded the culture of it, and in turn, influenced the decisions their leadership made regarding what issues to prioritize and what actions to take. Concerns from members were heard at the national level about women abroad who were struggling in similar and different ways to women in the United States. This is an important aspect in this history, because it shows how NOW came to consider international women's rights and participate in global feminist movements and conferences.

The book also contains other pieces referencing the American women's movement on a global scale, but the preface to the book makes the biggest claim. Written by Banaszak, she argues that it is important to bring together the United States'

⁹ National Organization for Women, *The National Organization for Women's 1966 Statement of Purpose* (Washington D.C.: 1966), 4.

¹⁰ Maryann Barakso, "The Politics of Decision Making in the National Organization for Women," in *The U.S. Women's Movement in Global Perspective: People, Passions, and Power*, ed. Lee Banaszak (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 113.

¹¹ Barakso, "The Politics of Decision Making," 124.

women's movement and those in other countries, since this can inspire further research on the subject. More importantly, this can also lead to new and original interdisciplinary work, because "in reality we are less divided than our subfield specialization might imply...our scholarly work is spread over different values, which usually reflect either an American, comparative, or women's studies focus."¹² In her view, having specialties is not necessarily a negative, but we can move beyond our specialties—across different periods and geographies—to work together to bring gender into the conversation, uncovering an even more fascinating history. Highlighting gender, in this case, will unveil a picture not seen previously amongst the conservatism of the 1980s and 1990s.

Continuing the discussion of the American side of this movement is Lisa Levenstein's book *They Didn't See Us Coming: The Hidden History of Feminism in the Nineties*.¹³ Though her book essentially skips over the 1980s and follows the timeline of the "wave" metaphor, it is a seminal work on feminism of the 1990s. Levenstein argues feminism reemerged in the 1990s in an unexpected way due to new global connections and relationships between feminist groups in the United States and abroad. She specifically points to the 1995 United Nations' World Conference on Women as the moment when prominent American feminist groups realized they were not the most organized or innovative, and could learn from newly established coalitions with feminists abroad.

In the 1990s, feminists began to organize in ways different than their predecessors due to the availability of entirely new

¹² Lee Banaszak, "Preface," in *The U.S. Women's Movement in Global Perspective: People, Passions, and Power*, ed. Lee Banaszak (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 4.

¹³ Lisa Levenstein, *They Didn't See Us Coming: The Hidden History of Feminism in the Nineties* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2020).

resources that came with the accessibility of the Internet. Levenstein calls it the moment “the infrastructure for what would become online feminism” was born.¹⁴ These Internet-based avenues increased both outreach potential and global connectivity for the movement for women’s rights. Levenstein’s analysis of the internet’s role in changing feminist discourse and strategies is also important because it provides scholars with a concrete differentiation that signified the shift in how feminists were growing and changing with the world around them. It became much easier and faster to communicate with feminists all over the world to further each other’s causes and shed light on these issues. This work is crucial in its analysis of the role the U.N. conferences and the internet played in fostering global feminist coalitions.

Building on the United Nations conversation is Myra Ferree and Aili Tripp’s anthology *Global Feminism: Transnational Women’s Activism, Organizing, and Human Rights*.¹⁵ In this work, the authors explore the opportunities and obstacles that transnational feminist work presents to activists, and chapter two examines the United Nations in this context. Written by Margaret Snyder, “Unlikely Godmother: The U.N. and the Global Women’s Movement” looks at how the global feminist movement is rooted in women’s movements from around the world, but also in the United Nations and how the organization transformed into “women’s guardian and advocate.”¹⁶ The U.N. held four World Conferences on Women

¹⁴ Lisa Levenstein, *They Didn’t See Us Coming*, 46.

¹⁵ Myra Marx Ferree and Aili Mari Tripp, eds., *Global Feminism: Transnational Women’s Activism, Organizing, and Human Rights*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006).

¹⁶ Margaret Snyder, “Unlikely Godmother: The U.N. and the Global Women’s Movement,” in *Global Feminism: Transnational Women’s*

over the course of twenty years beginning in 1975. The first conference was held in 1975 to go along with International Women's Year. Located in Mexico City and attended by 133 governments and 6,000 non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives, this pioneering conference defined a World Plan of Action for the Implementation of the Objectives of International Women's Year, which outlined a comprehensive framework for advancing the rights of women through 1985. The second conference occurred five years later in Copenhagen. 145 governments attended the 1980 conference with the goal to review the previous five years' work and build on them with a significant focus on employment, education, and housing. The U.N. and the delegates from the 145 governments put forth a Program of Action to create stronger measures for protecting women's rights to child custody and inheritances. The third world conference was in Nairobi and occurred another five years later in 1985 with 157 governments in attendance and 12,000 participants at a parallel NGO forum. This conference built on the previous two by establishing concrete measures for countries to overcome obstacles they faced in their attempts to implement the previous decades' action plans.¹⁷

These three conferences set the groundwork for the turning point in the global agenda for women's equality that would occur at the Beijing conference in 1995, where 189 countries participated and over 30,000 attended an NGO forum in Huairou.¹⁸ The significance of this conference was the document

Activism, Organizing, and Human Rights, ed. Myra Ferree and Aili Tripp (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 33.

¹⁷ United Nations, "World Conferences on Women," U.N. Women–Headquarters, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/intergovernmental-support/world-conferences-on-women#mexico>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

it produced: the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. This was adopted unanimously by 189 countries, setting the official agenda for women's empowerment worldwide. It is still considered the key global policy regarding gender equality. The Declaration set objectives and actions for advancing women's rights and gender equality in twelve crucial areas of concern that delegates of the conference worked together to establish. These twelve areas include women and poverty, education and training of women, women and health, violence against women, women and armed conflict, women and the economy, women in power and decision-making, institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, human rights of women, women and the media, women and the environment, and the girl-child.¹⁹ All twelve categories cover several aspects of inequality women disproportionately face around the world, from economic inequality to discrimination against young women.

Snyder argues that the U.N. received this title of "unlikely godmother" through these conferences and the documents they produced because they provided a platform for establishing action plans and legislation for all countries to follow. These conferences also served as environments for feminists from across the world to meet and discuss the issues they faced in their home countries in a way that had never been accomplished before. This analysis of the U.N.'s role in global feminism goes beyond the idea of feminism being unique to each country and instead focuses on how "women's subordination is often an element of larger subordinations such as colonialism, apartheid, and economic domination."²⁰ Women's equality is more than just establishing equal rights, it is also about looking at the systems that cause these inequalities. Snyder discusses how all four of the

¹⁹ United Nations, "World Conferences on Women."

²⁰ Snyder, "Unlikely Godmother," 33–34.

U.N. conferences impacted the growing global feminist movement, but also how they were connected to the growing backlash of this international movement for women's rights. This backlash, like the condition of the United States and conservative frustration with liberal strides in the 1970s, mainly came from religious fundamentalist groups who began working together in the face of threats to their traditional values.²¹ The National Organization for Women was fighting this same kind of backlash in the United States and their common experiences with women from around the world helped create a way to explore new ways of fighting it at home and abroad. Through their World Conferences on Women, the U.N. became the guardian of these rights and provided an avenue for the accomplished feminists to protect their rights through the action plans and declarations produced over the course of the twenty years these conferences were held.

The final work in this series is *To Beijing and Beyond: Pittsburgh and the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women*, edited by Janice Auth.²² The oldest of any of the works presented here, *To Beijing and Beyond* contains several pieces about the importance of the 1995 U.N. World Conference on Women, from personal anecdotes to analyses of the conference's success. Auth's piece in Chapter One traces the history of these U.N. conferences and how each one impacted the global women's movement. She argues the 1995 conference in Beijing was the culmination of the previous conferences in 1975, 1980, and 1985, but also a starting point for moving into the twenty-first century.²³

²¹ Snyder, "Unlikely Godmother," 54.

²² Janice Auth, ed., *To Beijing and Beyond: Pittsburgh and the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women*, (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998).

²³ Auth, "A History of United Nations Women's Conferences," in *To Beijing and Beyond*, 10.

Following Auth's contribution is Margaret Galey's article in chapter one, "The Significance of the U.N. World Women's Conferences." Galey closely examines each conference's impact on governments and intergovernmental relations, transnational relations, and consciousness-raising at individual and group levels in countries around the world. Each conference produced a major document that identified a set of goals and strategies for governments, international institutions, NGOs, and individual people to help do their part in advancing women's status worldwide.²⁴ Producing these documents reflects:

The adoption and subsequent reaffirmation of successive plans with similar, if not identical goals and action recommendations helps legitimate the advancement of women on agendas of the U.N. and its specialized agencies and programs and all of its member governments.²⁵

Feminists and their allies from all over the world combined their resources under one roof to discuss how they could collectively work to meet the common goal of advancing women's equality.

These feminists came from all different backgrounds with their own ideas and conceptions about feminism, but one young woman remembered a moment that stuck with her for the rest of her life. In Chapter Four, Susan Homer recalled how her college selected her to attend as Chatham College's student representative and the experience's positive and motivational impact on her life afterward. She describes her meeting with former Congresswoman and director of the United States

²⁴ Margaret Galey, "The Significance of the U.N. World Women's Conferences," in *To Beijing and Beyond*, 15.

²⁵ Galey, "The Significance of the U.N. World Women's Conferences," 15.

delegation to the conference, Marjorie Margolies-Mezvinsky, and the significance of their conversation: “That a member of the U.S. delegation would take time to just talk and listen demonstrated to me the weight that governments were placing on the youth perspective.”²⁶ Young women’s concerns and values were important at these conferences because any action plan put forward outlined the future for young women, like Homer, and how their lives could change. They are crucial participants and Margolies-Mezvinsky understood the value of this conversation and what it represented to her and other young women like her, because feminism during this time was not necessarily seen as a popular movement to support.

Feminism was thought of as “out of fashion” in the 1980s, and people did not want to be labeled as a feminist due to misconceptions about them being angry and pushy women.²⁷ Yet, a younger generation of women had access to a new kind of feminism which evolved from that of the 1960s and 1970s. Stemming directly from the institutionalization of women’s studies and the rise of the internet that Levenstein discusses, campuses and classrooms became “incubators for a new generation of women by offering a space in which students could debate the meanings of feminism and its implications for life choices.”²⁸ Women were reconsidering feminism and the strategies and approaches of the movement in an academic setting that encouraged debate and discussion. They may not have all been involved in organizations such as the National Organization for Women, but the general pattern was a reconsideration of what

²⁶ Susan Homer, “Inspiring Young Women to Action and Advocacy,” in *To Beijing and Beyond*, 129.

²⁷ Sara Evans, “Feminism in the 1980s: Surviving the Backlash,” in *Living in the Eighties* ed. Gil Troy and Vince Cannato (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 85.

²⁸ Evans, “Feminism in the 1980s: Surviving the Backlash,” 92.

feminism meant and how women from all over the world could work together through these discussions and debates—whether it be in the classroom or at a U.N.-sponsored conference—to keep moving forward and expand their rights.

All four of these works and the scholars who contributed to them provide important insights into the discipline regarding global feminism in the 1980s and 1990s. However, one factor is still missing in these stories: the National Organization for Women. Although NOW is touched on in Banaszak’s work, the organization is still not considered in the international context, but rather as the American part of the movement. The history of global feminism and NOW’s role in this movement is not only exciting but also crucial to the entire history of the organization. NOW was founded in 1966 following frustrations with the Presidential Commission on Women and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s failure to enforce Title VII of the Civil Rights Act—which prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, national origin, and more importantly for them, sex. NOW was a small group of women coming from different backgrounds, but throughout the 1970s, they grew into one of the leading and most influential women’s rights organizations in the United States. They continue to be the main, liberal feminist organization in the country and work within the current system of government to make changes. They focus on several issues, but some of their top priorities include reproductive rights, constitutional equality, and economic equality.

As a leading feminist organization, they have participated in several election campaigns, conferences, protests, and marches throughout their history, yet most scholarship written on them focuses on their work during the second “wave” of feminism. Katherine Turk provides an in-depth analysis of the organization in *The Women of NOW* by focusing on three influential leaders of

the organization. Her examination is primarily on the organization's work during the women's liberation movement and makes little mention of their activism during the 1980s. The book is a fascinating read, but for a book-length study on the organization, the lack of consideration for NOW following the 1970s is frustrating. NOW spent most of the 1980s regrouping in the face of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) loss in 1982. The ERA became their priority as they dumped almost all their resources into this issue and even launched a National ERA Campaign task force in 1979.²⁹ However, due to a passionate anti-ERA conservative movement, the amendment fell three states short of ratification by the deadline in 1982. When it failed to pass, they were left asking themselves: "what now?" "What happened?" "How do we move forward?"

Throughout the decade, NOW's leaders spent most of their time reconsidering their agenda, priorities, and strategies in the face of such a heavy loss. They became heavily involved in electoral politics and maintaining constitutionally protected rights for women. The growing polarization of national politics also forced NOW to latch on to the Democratic Party as the Republican Party became more socially conservative following the election of Ronald Reagan. NOW supported and endorsed presidential candidates, such as Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro in 1984, and increased the use of their Political Action Committee, or NOW PAC, which was newly established in 1977. They even had an Advisory Coalition on the Democratic Platform and suggested wording for the 1988 Democratic Platform.³⁰ As

²⁹ National Organization for Women, *Highlights: National Organization for Women*, National Organization for Women – Highlights, accessed July 26, 2024, <https://now.org/about/history/highlights/#1986>.

³⁰ Democratic Platform Planning, 1988, MC666, Box 359, Folder 5, *Additional Records of the National Organization for Women, 1970–2011*.

the decade progressed and their presence in national politics grew, they still found themselves asking the same question: how can we be more inclusive?

One of the biggest criticisms the organization received was that it did not consider the experiences of women of color, lesbians, impoverished women, and other marginalized women during the 1960s and 1970s. In 1985, they hired one of the country's leading, authoritative voices on women's rights: Loretta Ross. Her time as Director of the Women of Color Program of NOW transformed the organization, and she helped them build coalitions with other feminist organizations. Ross was adamant that NOW needed to build these coalitions and organize with other feminist groups instead of leading the charge themselves, which was a tactic the organization had not historically done due to their long-term policy of not forming coalitions with other organizations.³¹ In an interview with Joyce Follet, Ross commented on her start at NOW and her interaction with the organization's leaders saying,

What it seems to me what y'all need is not a way to bring more women of color into NOW, because I see them coming and leaving endlessly. It's like a revolving door. What y'all seem to need is a way to make NOW more attractive to women of color so that women of color don't just keep coming and going and coming and going, but stick. And there are some institutionalized practices that I've

Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

³¹ Jennifer Nelson, "'All this that has happened to me shouldn't happen to nobody else:' Loretta Ross and the Women of Color Reproductive Freedom Movement of the 1980s," *Journal of Women's History* 22, no. 3 (2010): 148.

observed that may be part of the reason why women of color don't stay.³²

Ross's work culminated in the first national conference on Women of Color and Reproductive Rights in 1987 that was built on the work she did to establish these coalitions with other feminist groups in the United States in hopes of producing greater change for all women. Ross and the organizers of the conference affirmed that when "NOW has reproductive rights as a national priority, then our reproductive rights agenda must be broadened and refocused to specifically target and include the concerns of women of color."³³ This indicated a significant change from their previous stance on reproductive rights in the 1970s that consisted of a narrow agenda exclusively pertaining to abortion rights. This narrow agenda conflicted with the perspectives of feminist women of color who sought a reproductive rights platform that was anything but exclusive to abortion. Ross's tenure at NOW and the changes the organization made regarding their platform for racial justice and reproductive rights shows how NOW's leaders were reconsidering race as a feminist issue in ways the organization had never done previously, but also how these leaders were working to slowly transform their organization.

In response to Black and other women of color feminisms that were growing in numbers at this time under Ross's leadership, NOW's leaders also expanded their platform and coalition building to include movements outside the United

³² Loretta Ross, interview by Joyce Follet, transcript of video recording, November 3, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, 186.

³³ "Between Ourselves: The First National Conference On Women Of Color And Reproductive Rights," 15–17, May, 1987, MC666, box 329, folder 4, Additional Records of the National Organization for Women, 1970–2011, Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute, Cambridge, MA.

States. On April 9, 1989, NOW organized their second March for Women's Equality/Women's Lives in Washington D.C. and set a record of 500,000 participants in protest of the Supreme Court's consideration in reversing *Roe v. Wade*.³⁴ The march was successful as the Court did not reverse the *Roe* decision, but the march was also significant for another reason—NOW invited feminists from around the world to participate and speak at a panel discussion following the march. In attendance were women from Brazil, Canada, Japan, West Germany, and more.³⁵ The panel took place on April 11th at the French Embassy in Washington D.C. and was the organization's first large-scale international organization of feminists in this manner. Other feminist groups from around the world who could not attend held their own marches and protests on April 9 in Paris, São Paulo, Stockholm, and several other cities to stand in solidarity with the organization and its goal to protect abortion rights for women in the United States and around the world.³⁶

This advocacy and coalition building by NOW with other feminist organizations around the world over the next few years culminated in their Silver Anniversary Celebration/Global Feminist Conference in January 1992. From January 8 to 12, NOW chose to dedicate its twenty-fifth anniversary to global feminism. They hosted the event in Washington D.C. at the

³⁴ National Organization for Women. *Highlights*.

³⁵ March for Women's Equality/Women's Lives 1989 International Participant Advertisement, 11 April 1989, MC 666, Carton 91, Folder 21, *Additional Records of the National Organization for Women, 1970–2011*. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

³⁶ Global Marches and Protests in Solidarity for the March for Women's Equality/Women's Lives 1989, 11 April 1989, MC 666, Carton 91, Folder 22, *Additional Records of the National Organization for Women, 1970–2011*. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Washington Hilton Hotel. The event lasted four days and included a comedy night, a presidential gala dinner, and a concert at the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts. The event's thirty-page program contained information on working group sessions NOW held at the conference to provide a forum for discussion on several issues from reproductive rights to economic equality and more. Participants could join these groups and sit down with feminists to discuss, debate, and find solutions for these issues, not only in their own countries, but also at a united, international level. NOW leaders and members gave several speeches over those four days, and different workshops were held on several issues from lesbian rights to grassroots organizations.³⁷ These workshops expanded on the working group sessions by providing a larger platform for discussion of how they could combat the issues they debated in the smaller groups.

The goal of the entire event was to bring feminists from around the world together to not only celebrate this important milestone for the organization, but to work together to develop new strategies, relationships, and plans for enhancing women's equality around the world. In a 1991 newsletter promoting the conference, then-President Patricia Ireland encouraged members to attend by providing information on the schedule of events while promoting the overall goal of the forum as an opportunity for members of NOW and feminists from around the world to work together to address feminist issues and to gain new perspectives from other women. NOW's leadership felt this environment would give women an opportunity "to share ideas and strategies and to discuss the dramatic world struggles and

³⁷ Silver Anniversary/Global Feminist Conference Event Program, 8–12 January 1992, MC 666, Box 341 91, Folder 13, *Additional Records of the National Organization for Women, 1970–2011*. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

events facing us” in a way they had never done or experienced before.³⁸

One of the most influential documents from the conference was Ireland’s speech on January 10 which kicked off the day’s events. Her moving speech touched on everything from thanking the participants for traveling to attend the conference, to how far these women had come to get to this point in their movement, to Ireland’s personal experiences in the workforce and in NOW. She specifically addressed her time as a flight attendant and how that experience impacted her life and contributed to her desire to advocate for women and equality in the workforce:

When I was flying, and probably still to this day, the advertising of that industry invited sexual harassment. And it historically fits a context where women have been valued for their sexuality. Are we sexually attractive? Are we fertile? Can we produce a male heir? Sounds like old stuff but it’s really just as current as sexual harassment that places value on women for their role as sexual beings rather than on our job performance.³⁹

³⁸ NOW Advertisement for Silver Anniversary/Global Feminist Conference Event Program, 8–12 January 1992, MC496: M-152, Carton 27, Folder 33, *Records of the National Organization for Women, 1959–2002 (inclusive), 1966–1998 (bulk)*. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

³⁹ Patricia Ireland, “Patricia Ireland Speech at Global Feminist Conference,” 10, January, 1992, MC496: M-152, Carton 27, Folder 35, *Records of the National Organization for Women, 1959–2002 (inclusive), 1966–1998 (bulk)*. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Sharing her own life experience with discrimination was Ireland's way of resituating herself down from the top as president of NOW to the boots on the ground of the movement by arguing that at the end of the day, they had all experienced this discrimination; they were here to fight it at all corners of the world.

Ireland then moved to discuss the state of the country and the world following the conservative opposition of the 1980s. She discussed how they fought right-wing assaults on abortion and elected more women to office than ever before, but there was still work to be done in the face of the ERA's failure to pass and the disproportionate access to abortion. She brought these American phenomena to the international perspective when she said:

The news is also unfortunately, from around the world, that the backlash is worldwide. We've heard from our sisters in other countries about the takeover by religious fundamentalists of all persuasions. This backlash knows no boundaries, and our fight back can know no boundaries. We are going to fight back and we are going to take power!"⁴⁰

The conservative backlash of the decade was not a uniquely American problem; it spread to several countries and even intensified in others.

One prominent example can be seen in the Republic of Ireland. For years, the country struggled with its relationship with the Catholic Church and its restrictive views on abortion and reproductive rights. In 1983, the Eighth Amendment to the Irish Constitution was ratified and read that: "The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal

⁴⁰ Patricia Ireland, "Patricia Ireland Speech at Global Feminist Conference."

right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right.”⁴¹ The amendment treated the fetus as a constitutionally protected person separate from the mother, entitled to its own legal representation and right to life. The amendment’s passage sparked outrage across the country and the world, resulting in NOW correspondence with feminists in Ireland and elsewhere on the issue. The National Abortion Campaign, an organization based in London that advocated for Irish abortion rights, sent out a mailing asking for support and donations towards the Irish cause. NOW was one of the recipients.⁴² The memo included a section outlining the history of abortion illegality in Ireland, starting with the Eighth Amendment and moving forward to the 1989 Irish Supreme Court case *SPUC v. Grogan*, which ruled all information, discussion, and comments about abortion illegal. The lawsuit stemmed from Irish college students disseminating information about abortion facilities in England and British magazines including advertisements about abortion services and any articles on abortion for Irish editions of the magazines.⁴³ The difference in the Irish movement, as compared to the American movement for abortion rights was that, in the Irish case, it became a censorship issue. Americans were able to talk about and distribute information on abortion and reproductive resources, but in Ireland, if someone was caught doing this, they could have been arrested.

⁴¹ Fiona De Londras and Mairead Enright, *Repealing the 8th: Reforming Irish Abortion Law* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2018), 1.

⁴² National Abortion Campaign, “Press Release,” 1990, MC 666, Box 364, Folder 15, *Additional Records of the National Organization for Women, 1970–2011*. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Irish feminists were present at NOW's conference in 1992 and in a participant list from the event, NOW listed four Irish organizations and their representatives who attended the conference: from the Council for the Status of Women was Kathleen O'Sullivan; from the Joint Women Committee on Women's Rights was Seamus Killeen; from Employment Equality was Sylvia Meehan; and from the Equal Opportunities Commission was Mary Clark-Glass.⁴⁴ Though it does not specifically mention this in any of the available sources on working groups at the conference, it can be presumed based on this history and the correspondence between NOW and these organizations, that these four participated in working groups, discussions, and workshops on abortion. This conference was a culmination of the work NOW had done in the 1980s to build coalitions with feminists from around the world to further all their causes. Whether it be fighting bans on abortion in Ireland or discussing discrimination in the workforce, NOW hoped this conference would build a network of feminists from around the world to fight injustice.

Moving forward five years and back to the United Nations, NOW was present at the milestone conference in 1995. They received two delegate positions to the NGO forum of the conference and over 200 members of the organization from across the country attended in hopes of expanding "our involvement with the global community of women and women's rights supporters and to provide a positive feminist influence in the official deliberations over the adoption of the conference

⁴⁴ National Organization for Women, "Global Feminist Conference Working Groups and Facilitators and Participants," 8–12 January 1992, MC496: M–152, Carton 27, Folder 30, *Records of the National Organization for Women, 1959–2002 (inclusive), 1966–1998 (bulk)*. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

‘Platform for Action.’”⁴⁵ The NGO forum in Huairou was equally as important to the conference due to the inclusion of these other organizations that were not tied directly to their governments. Their participation at the forum was crucial for several reasons, the most important of which was contributing to the overall conference’s success. As stated in a member’s planning notes for the conference, “NGOs were the people who made the document happen; we will hold the government accountable.”⁴⁶ As remarkable as the production of the Beijing Declaration is, it was left to organizations like NOW to voice their support and feedback and eventually enforce it to hold their home governments and those around the world accountable for following it.

NOW’s attendance at the conference was not met with total support. Due to frustrations at home with the White House, members expressed their concerns with the attendance of Hillary Clinton, then First Lady of the United States, at the conference. In a mailing sent out to members on August 24, 1995, NOW leadership addressed their organization’s attendance at the upcoming conference and the concerns regarding Hillary Clinton’s attendance. NOW’s national Secretary, Karen Johnson, was quoted in the mailing saying:

We are happy that the First Lady is attending because this is a world conference on women and not on China...more relevant, more painful sanctions can be levied against China than the

⁴⁵ National Organization for Women, “NOW Delegation to Participate in NGO Forum, Fourth World Conference on Women,” 1995, MC 666, Box 430, Folder 12, *Additional Records of the National Organization for Women, 1970–2011*. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

absence of the First Lady from the World Conference...The eyes of the world will be on China, its government and its people simply by the conference being there. But clearly our mission is to devise effective means of promoting women's equality and expanding women's rights—including in China. That should be, and is, our focus and purpose.⁴⁷

NOW's participation at this groundbreaking conference is a significant milestone in its history because it represented the culmination of all the rebuilding and work it did over the previous decade to build the coalitions that brought it to the international stage. NOW contributed directly to the Declaration and its presence at the NGO forum showed how American women were resilient and stood for all women around the world.

In the words of Patricia Ireland, "We're courageous and we're resourceful, and we're resilient and we will never give up, and we will never be defeated."⁴⁸ The National Organization for Women has worked diligently since its founding in the fight for women's equality and continues to do so today. From its involvement on the home front fighting to protect and expand on women's constitutional rights to organizing and participating in global conferences, NOW's history is fascinating and provides an important perspective in the history of American feminism. Although there is a lack of secondary material regarding NOW's role in international feminism, the evidence is there. Its history of global activism is captivating and deserves scholarly attention. NOW's 1989 celebration of its twenty-fifth anniversary was not solely about the organization, but a celebration dedicated to

⁴⁷ National Organization for Women, "NOW Delegation to Participate in NGO Forum, Fourth World Conference on Women."

⁴⁸ Patricia Ireland, "Patricia Ireland Speech at Global Feminist Conference."

global feminism by bringing women together from around the world to take part. Their participation at the U.N.'s 1995 Beijing conference, which set the agenda for the global women's movement, also shows their role and contribution to the global feminist movement as the leading mainstream feminist organization in the United States. This history reminds us of the importance of considering the organization's activism outside the "waves" of feminist history and how opening new doors can unveil a new and captivating story. This approach can be used to examine any era of American feminism because "crucial aspects of *any* history would be overlooked, incomprehensible, or impoverished absent careful consideration of gender relations."⁴⁹ However, while the inclusion of gender in any history remains an important perspective and the backbone of my argument, it is also important to consider how several factors that intertwine with gender also need to be considered in historical analysis, especially race.

The United Nation's milestone conferences proved to be turning points in the overall movement for women's rights across the world, but there is a significant discrepancy between rights and realities. These documents produced by the U.N. and conference participants are groundbreaking and prove there is a devoted movement of women and their allies who are dedicated to empowering all women across the world. However, these documents produced at these conferences fell on not just the U.N., but organizations, like NOW, at home to hold their governments accountable and every country is not always convinced of these movements because women are still struggling to overcome barriers to equality today. Race also remains an equally important factor in the international women's movement as women of color in the United States, for example, have been disproportionately

⁴⁹ Maza, *Thinking About History*, 37.

affected by maternal mortality. Black women are 3.3 times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women, and contraceptive use among women aged 15 to 49 years old is statistically more common among white women (67%) compared to Black women (59.9%).⁵⁰ When we move to include gender, race, and other factors that impact a person's life experience in our analysis of a period, we can broaden our understandings of a history and give groups of people who have been marginalized in popular histories the space in history they deserve.

⁵⁰ Madeline Y. Sutton, et al. "Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Reproductive Health Services and Outcomes, 2020," *Obstetrics and Gynecology* 137, no. 2, (New York, NY: 2021): 228.

**Accounting for Those Sterilized: An Analysis of Eugenic
Sterilization Certificates Filed Under Vermont’s 1931
*Act for Human Betterment by Voluntary Sterilization***

Richard Witting

There are moments in Vermont’s past that challenge the state’s image of rural simplicity and bucolic exceptionalism.¹ Forefront in contemporary reassessments of that image is the state’s participation in the eugenics movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the policies and practices the state enacted based on that ideology. Most egregious of these policies were the eugenical sexual sterilization operations codified in Vermont’s 1931 law, *Act for Human Betterment by Voluntary Sterilization*.² In total, 252 of these sterilizations were documented between 1931 and 1952. Who and how many people this law targeted, however, has never been closely assessed, which has led to speculation about the scale and focus of this

¹ For a discussion of the Vermont image see Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1997). For other points of critique of Vermont’s past, see Elise A. Guyette, *Discovering Black Vermont: African American Farmers in Hinesburg, 1790–1890* (Burlington, VT: University of Vermont Press, 2010); Harvey Amani Whitfield, *The Problem of Slavery in Early Vermont, 1777–1810* (Barre, VT: Vermont Historical Society, 2014); and Robert M. Vanderbeck, “Vermont and the Imaginative Geographies of American Whiteness,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96, no. 3 (2006): 641–59.

² General Assembly for the State of Vermont, *An Act for Human Betterment by Voluntary Sterilization*, No. 174, Montpelier: 1931. The law passed the Senate 22 to 8; House 140 to 75; signed by Governor Wilson, March 31, 1931. For a full summary of Vermont’s eugenical policies and practices see Charlene Galarneau, “Eugenics in Vermont: A Chronology of ‘State-sanctioned Eugenics Policies and Practices,’” (Government Work Group Project, Burlington, VT, 2021).

program.³ This paper analyzes the sterilization certificates filed with the state when these operations were performed to begin a more accurate accounting of those sterilized under this law. Access to these certificates has only recently been made available through the Vermont State Archives & Records Administration (as of 2021), and this paper is the first to begin analyzing patterns within this data.⁴ This analysis considers in which “populations and communities” those sterilized may have been placed by the state and if that placement led to their sterilizations.⁵ It also begins a reassessment of where accountability should be placed by considering the role of doctors, surgeons, and hospitals in determining the need for, and performance of, these operations. In addition, a closer biographical investigation of forty-four

³ Previous academic scholarship on the Vermont eugenics movement does not attempt to address the specifics of who was sterilized. Kevin Dann, who wrote the first piece on the subject, speculated without citation that “gypsies” and “Abenaki” may have been the targets; see Kevin Dann, “From Degeneration to Regeneration: The Eugenics Survey of Vermont, 1925–1936,” *Vermont History* 59, no. 7 (1991): 16. Nancy Gallagher took the stance that it was not her place to investigate those targeted but repeated statements by those claiming to be Abenaki that it had targeted them; see Nancy L. Gallagher, *Breeding Better Vermonters: The Eugenics Project in the Green Mountain State*, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999). Mercedes de Guardiola rejects the value of the certificates for a number of reasons that this paper attempts to address; see Mercedes de Guardiola, “*Vermont for the Vermonters*”: *The History of Eugenics in the Green Mountain State* (Barre, VT: Vermont Historical Society, 2023), 142. She also emphasizes a distancing from focusing on individual victims, citing a respect for their descendants’ privacy. Regarding Native American claims, she largely splits the difference between evidence-based scholarship and those claims but does little to engage with the body of literature that has refuted these claims.

⁴ De Guardiola, *Vermont for the Vermonters*, 142.

⁵ References the language of General Assembly for the State of Vermont, *An Act Relating to Creating the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Kevin Christie, Harold Colston, Thomas Stevens, H. 96 No. 126, Montpelier, VT: Vermont Statutes Online, 2022.

sterilized individuals—whose names are not redacted on the certificates—was undertaken and compared with state and institutional census population data.

Findings suggest a few conclusions, some incongruent with general views about who the targets of Vermont's eugenical policies were. Roughly two-thirds of the total individuals were institutionalized in state facilities, two-thirds were female, and nearly all had been essentially classified as disabled in contemporaneous terms. Within the cohort of forty-four people examined more closely, additional patterns emerged, including: young men involved in crime, middle-aged women with over five children, and women charged with “morality crimes.”⁶ Nearly all were racially white, “native” born, and English speaking.⁷ Lastly, poverty appears to be the most frequently shared trait among these people sterilized under this law.

An additional analysis of census data and annual reports from state welfare institutions—where a majority of those sterilized resided—suggests race, ethnicity, foreign birth, and religion did not appear to be significant factors regarding who was institutionalized or sterilized under the 1931 law. Non-white people appear to have rarely been institutionalized, likely because Vermont was a virtually all-white state in this era.⁸ Catholics may also have been of below average representation in these institutions, possibly due to local Catholic anti-sterilization sentiment, papal condemnation of the practice, and a separate

⁶ Morality crimes are here defined, in the rational of the time, as: adultery, incest, having children outside of marriage, having a sexually transmitted infection, or being overtly sexual.

⁷ The 1930, 1940, and 1950 U.S. censuses divided people between “native-white,” “foreign-white,” “negro,” and “other races.”

⁸ *Population—Vermont, 1930*, Census Bureau; *Population—Vermont, 1940*, Census Bureau (Washington, DC, 1940); *Population—Vermont, 1950*, Census Bureau (Washington, DC, 1950).

Catholic social service network in Vermont which removed a portion of Catholics from state-run social welfare systems and institutions.⁹

This analysis also finds no evidence that Native Americans—specifically Abenaki people—were targeted by this law or were disproportionately institutionalized at this time. Nor that Franklin County, home of the original group that in the 1970s began erroneously claiming an Abenaki heritage, was geographically a focus of the sterilization program.¹⁰ These conclusions further refute the popular narrative that the state of Vermont sponsored “mass sterilizations”—or any sterilizations—

⁹ This conclusion is based on data from the forty-four who we were able to investigate closer. This is drawn from census records for 1930 and 1940, as well as information from the Department of Public Welfare and Department of Health biannual state reports for 1930–1945. For history on Catholic Social Services in Vermont see Lorenzo D'Agostino, *The History of Public Welfare in Vermont with a Foreword by Ernest W. Gibson* (Winooski Park, VT: St. Michael's College Press, 1948); and Paul M. Bresnahan, “The History of Catholic Social Service in the Diocese of Burlington, Vermont,” Master’s thesis, (Catholic University of America, 1959). Local anti-sterilization sentiment can be found in newspapers as well; see “Bill Attacked,” *The Vermont Tribune*, March 4, 1931, 5; and “The Right to Mutilate,” *Burlington Daily News*, March 6, 1931, 4. For the Pope’s decree against sterilization see Pius XI, *Casti Connubii* [Encyclical Letter on Christian Marriage], The Holy See, December 31, 1930.

¹⁰ Regarding claims of Abenaki heritage, see Darryl Leroux, “State Recognition and the Dangers of Race Shifting,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 46, no. 2 (2023); The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs, Department of the Interior, *Summary under the Criteria and Evidence for Final Determination against Federal Acknowledgement of the St. Francis/Sokoki Band of Abenakis of Vermont*, Carl J. Artman, Montpelier, VT, 2007; The Office of the Attorney General of the State of Vermont, *State of Vermont’s Response to Petition for Federal Acknowledgement of the St. Francis/Sokoki Band of the Abenaki Nation of Vermont*, William H. Sorrel and Eve Jacobs-Carnahan, Montpelier, VT, 2002.

of Native people.¹¹ These conclusions also suggest that this narrative—which has inspired both an official apology from the State of Vermont to those who “now identify as Abenaki,” and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to provide reparations to these groups—is not supported by evidence, and that these efforts have been troublingly misascribed to a group that was not the target of this law. Furthermore, this analysis aims to begin a needed foregrounding of the largely impoverished, female, and disabled people who were operated on under this law, that continue to be overlooked as the state focuses reconciliation efforts on unsupported claims of an “Abenaki genocide.”¹²

¹¹ Members of these groups have claimed since the 1990s that thousands of Vermont Abenaki were sterilized, hundreds of their children kidnapped, and that Army trucks abducted whole Abenaki communities. See, for example, Charles Delaney II, “Victims Left Out,” *The Burlington Free Press*, Nov. 4, 1995, 7; Ariel Singer, “An Act for Human Betterment by Voluntary Sterilization: The Effect of Culture on Biology in Turn-of-the-Century Vermont,” Serendip Studio, 2005, https://serendipstudio.org/sci_cult/evolit/s05/web2/asinger.html; “Outrage Voiced as Sterilizations by State Come to Light”, *The Boston Globe*, August 15, 1999, 30; Mariella Squire-Hakey, “Yankee Imperialism and Imperialist Nostalgia,” in *American Mixed Race: The Culture of Microdiversity*, ed. Naomi Zack (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1995), 221–28; Marge Bruchac, “It was Dangerous to Reveal Ancestry...”, *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, May 12, 1995, 8; *Dee Brightstar on Forced Sterilization of Abenaki in “Vermont,”* 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGRigj8pydc>. This topic was thoroughly debunked in: The Office of the Attorney General of the State of Vermont, *State of Vermont’s Response*, 66–77.

¹² See Vermont House of Representatives, *Joint Resolution Sincerely Apologizing and Expressing Sorrow and Regret to all Individual Vermonters and their Families and Descendants who were Harmed as a Result of State-sanctioned Eugenics Policies and Practices*, by John Killacky et al., No. R-144, Montpelier, VT, 2021, for ambiguous wording about Abenaki communities. See also section later in this article titled: *A Closer Look at*

Considering the Certificates

Foundational to this study are the certificates filed when sterilizations were performed under the 1931 law. 256 such sterilization certificates, dated between 1931 and 1952, are currently in the possession of the Vermont State Archives & Records Administration (VSARA). 252 of these certificates are signed and dated by surgeons, suggesting that these operations were completed.¹³ Currently, access to the identities of those who were sterilized is limited, with the patient's name and their guardian's name redacted unless the VSARA was able to confirm the person has been deceased for over fifty years.¹⁴ Forty-four unredacted certificates are fully available, and a closer survey of these individuals' information is included in this paper.

Despite the law's title, *Act for Human Betterment by Voluntary Sterilization*, it is questionable that these operations were truly voluntary, and it can be assumed many were coerced,

Forty-four Sterilized Individuals. Regarding the intended mission of the TRC as a bridge between the state apology to reparations see State Representative Tiffany Bluemle's statement in Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs, *VCNAA February 26th, 2021 Meeting Minutes*, by Carol McGranaghan et al., Montpelier, VT, 2021; regarding the conditions those with disabilities faced in state institutions see Holly Allen and Erin Fuller, "Beyond the Feeble Mind: Foregrounding the Personhood of Inmates with Significant Intellectual Disabilities in the Era of Institutionalization," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2016).

¹³ Sterilization Certificates, undated-1952, Record Series N400.1825.1103.14, Container Number PW-00001, Vermont State Archives Records Administration (VSARA), Middlesex, VT. At times, this paper uses the 252 total number of signed sterilization certificates when discussing operations performed, and when considering exams, it may use the 256 total certificates number, which includes both signed and unsigned certificates.

¹⁴ Title 1: General Provisions, Subchapter 003: Access to Public Records, 1 V.S.A. § 317, Vermont State Assembly, (updated 2023). Communications with VSARA state the fifty-year expiration.

as was frequently the case in state sterilization programs.¹⁵ Yet, in the procedural details of the certificates, a number of safeguards were placed to ensure a level of oversight and accountability. Each certificate required the signature of six people: the person to be sterilized, their guardian, a notary, two doctors that had examined the person, and the surgeon that performed the operation. However, around 40% of the certificates were not signed by a guardian. Of those signed, the most frequent guardian types listed were “natural” and “legal,” with less common types including “mother,” “father,” “brother,” and “husband,” as well as one “Overseer of the Poor.” The certificates were often signed at three different times in the process: when the person was examined, when the form was notarized, and when the operation was performed. The multiple people involved, and number of interactions with the certificate, potentially gave the person several opportunities to protest if they did not consent to the operation; however, it is possible that those in positions of power over the individual may have been able to circumvent these safeguards.

The certificates also included information identifying the person, the type of operation, their age, marital status, and medical diagnosis. The person’s residency was also listed, as well as the location where the operation took place. While sex is not listed, the two types of sterilization operation imply the persons’ sex: salpingectomy (or tubal ligation) for females, and vasectomy (vasoligation) for males.¹⁶ Lastly, the form lists four possible

¹⁵ See Mark Largent, *Breeding Contempt: The History of Coerced Sterilization in the United States* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019).

¹⁶ A vasectomy is a surgical procedure for male sterilization where the two tubes that carry sperm from the testicles to the penis are cut and sealed. After a vasectomy, semen no longer contains sperm capable of fertilizing an egg.

diagnostic reasons for sterilization. In the words of the certificate, “that [he | she] is an [*idiot* | *imbecile* | *feeble-minded* | *insane*] person and likely to procreate [*idiot* | *imbecile* | *feeble-minded* | *insane*] persons if not sexually sterilized.”¹⁷ The bottom of the certificate also contained instructions reasserting that the person must voluntarily submit to the operation, and that the certificate must be filed by the surgeon. One key loophole to this procedure of consent, however, was that when a person was committed to the state, the state might become their legal guardian. However, evidence suggests the state still sought to acquire consent from the patients and their guardians.¹⁸

Salpingectomy is the surgical removal of one or both fallopian tubes. Fallopian tubes are structures that allow eggs to travel from the ovaries to the uterus.

¹⁷ The terms “idiot” “imbecile” “feeble-minded” and “insane,” which now are only used as offensive terms, were used clinically during this time. “Insane” was a label placed on people we would now classify as mentally ill. This was generally understood to be an acquired, rather than an inherited, condition. Hence the “insane” could in theory be cured. “Idiot,” “imbecile,” and “feeble-minded” were considered congenital—and hence heritable—traits of lower intelligence and genetic defectiveness. “Idiot” and “imbecile” referred to those with severe disabilities, while those called “feeble-minded” were considered “borderline” or nearly “normal.” These terms are used in this paper only in their historical context and not as valid clinical terms.

¹⁸ Many of the sterilization cases at the Brandon State School also retain written narrative between the patient and the school about consenting to the operation; these may be found at VSARA along with the certificates. On roughly 10% of the certificates, not all of the information is filled out. For example, some of the categories that required options to be crossed out (such as diagnosis) were not always done. Previous authors have dismissed the value of the certificates as a source of data—for example, de Guardiola, “*Vermont for the Vermonters*,” 8—yet they are still the single window into the only known application of a wholly eugenical policy in the state.

Assessing the Total Number of Sterilizations

To account for the effect of this law, there are two fundamental questions: how many people were sterilized, and do the certificates reflect the actual number of people sterilized? At a minimum, it appears that 252 surgical sterilizations were documented between 1931–1952. The number of people in Vermont sterilized in this period and how many of those people were *eugenically* sterilized, however, are not as easily determined.¹⁹ Sterilizations performed with a “eugenical” purpose,²⁰ though sanctioned by this law, were not otherwise illegal.²¹ In other words, someone could lawfully request these operations (salpingectomy or vasectomy) as a form of birth control, as many people frequently do.²² This type of operation could be called a “contraceptive sterilization” rather than a eugenical one, as it does not imply the person is genetically defective, just that they didn’t want to have children. Though one could request a sterilization, it is unknown if doctors were always willing to perform them. No other records could be found that tracked contraceptive sterilization operations in this period, so the ability to compare the access to, and frequency of, elective

¹⁹ This 252 number is based on VSARA sterilization records. For a deeper look at sterilization terms and definitions see Largent, *Breeding Contempt*.

²⁰ A “eugenical purpose” means that the operation is happening because the person is deemed genetically “defective,” and reproduction would pass on these theoretical defective traits.

²¹ Inquiries with the Vermont Law and Graduate School and a review of the laws in Vermont in this time found no laws against banning or restricting sterilization.

²² Erika Dyck, *Facing Eugenics: Reproduction, Sterilization, and the Politics of Choice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013); Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Fixing the Poor: Eugenic Sterilization and Child Welfare in the Twentieth Century* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020).

sterilizations is limited.²³ Additionally, sterilizations also occurred as a byproduct of other operations wherein sterilization was not the goal, such as receiving a hysterectomy to remove cancer.²⁴ It is also possible that, as was the case with abortions in states where they were illegal, a doctor might recommend a sterilization as “therapeutic” to preserve a person’s mental health.²⁵ This was referred to as a “psychiatric abortion” and sterilization was at times also discussed using similar language.²⁶ Again, a lack of medical data from this era makes these other forms of operation impossible to assess further.

The possibility that sterilization operations not defined as eugenical were performed in state facilities seems likely and could be a way in which operations were performed outside of the 1931 law. Again, however, without records of these operations, this cannot be confirmed, nor can we ascertain if they were requested, coerced, or forced. No cases were found of people

²³ Inquiries with the Vermont Medical Association, Silver Special Collections, UVM Medical Library, and VSARA all found that medical information of this kind for this period does not exist.

²⁴ No medical records have been found of such operations from this period, and it is suggested they do not exist.

²⁵ For discussion of therapeutic abortion, see Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Christopher Tietze, “Therapeutic Abortions in New York City, 1943–1947,” *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* 60, no. 1 (1950): 146–52; Charles Gardner Child, *Sterility and Conception*. Vol. 1. (New York, NY: D. Appleton and Co., 1922), 119–203; E. W. Anderson, “Psychiatric Indications for the Termination of Pregnancy,” *Postgraduate Medical Journal* 34, no. 388 (1958): 69; Felicia Kornbluh, *A Woman’s Life Is a Human Life: My Mother, Our Neighbor, and the Journey from Reproductive Rights to Reproductive Justice* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2023).

²⁶ For one example of this, see Herbert L. Packer and Ralph J. Gampell, “Therapeutic Abortion: A Problem in Law and Medicine,” *Stanford Law Review*, (1959): 417–455.

suing or filing a complaint about being sterilized against their will, though it is questionable that people from vulnerable populations would have had the means to pursue such legal action.

If sexual sterilization was not otherwise illegal, it is worth questioning what the purpose of the 1931 *Act for Human Betterment* law was. First, it gave the state and its institutions a legal method to recommend and implement sterilization on those in the state's care. It also offered a method and guidelines for how and to whom these operations could be applied and offered legal protection against lawsuits. Therefore, if state institutions were following the law, then the number of operations performed by the state should be accurately reflected. Internal communications between officials within the departments suggest relatively accurate accounting of operations performed and certificates filed, however, memos also suggest that sterilizations at times happened for medical purposes with little explanation of what that meant.²⁷

The law also gave anyone wishing to promote the sterilization of another person a legally protected pathway for them to do so. This might have included social workers, private doctors, overseers of the poor, or orphanages; as well as relatives with legal guardianship over people deemed unable to care for themselves. It is worth considering what may have motivated someone to want to have another person sterilized; and if they may have prioritized their interpretation of what was best for that person, and the "public welfare," first and then found a diagnosis to justify that decision. Notably, as discussed below, the diagnosis of "feeble-minded" was very loosely applied to people for things

²⁷ Brandon State School, Administrative Records, VSARA, referenced in de Guardiola, "*Vermont for Vermonters*," 144.

such as involvement in crime, being impoverished, uneducated, or “immoral.”²⁸

Another perspective to consider is that while some of these operations may have been coerced, others may truly have been voluntary and even sought out by the patients. Reproductive control in this period was limited; abortion and birth control were restricted, and consent was not legally protected. It is also possible the state or a town would have paid for these operations, potentially offering a rare avenue for reproductive choice for those impoverished.²⁹

*Total Eugenic Sterilizations by Year: A Comparison of
Notable Sources*

Published literature, sterilization data, and periodicals were reviewed to assess if the number of sterilization certificates on record are representative of the number of state eugenic operations performed, and if other sources suggested different numbers. Most secondary sources on sterilizations in the state draw their data from larger eugenic organizations, who themselves drew their data from the Vermont Department of Public Welfare. Hence, they show similar totals. This confirms, however, that the number of certificates on file seems to reflect

²⁸ For context, “Feeble-mindedness has been defined as a state of mental defect existing from birth or from an early age and due to incomplete or abnormal development in consequence of which the person affected is incapable of performing his duties as a member of society in the position of life to which he is born,” as written by Henry Herbert Goddard, *Feeble-Mindedness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1920), 4.

²⁹ It appears that the state could pay for the operation, with prices for the exam and operation set by the 1931 law; however, it is unclear if that was usually the case. See Section 3 in General Assembly, *An Act for Human Betterment*.

the number known then. A review of newspapers also revealed two articles that reported sterilization totals which are discussed here.

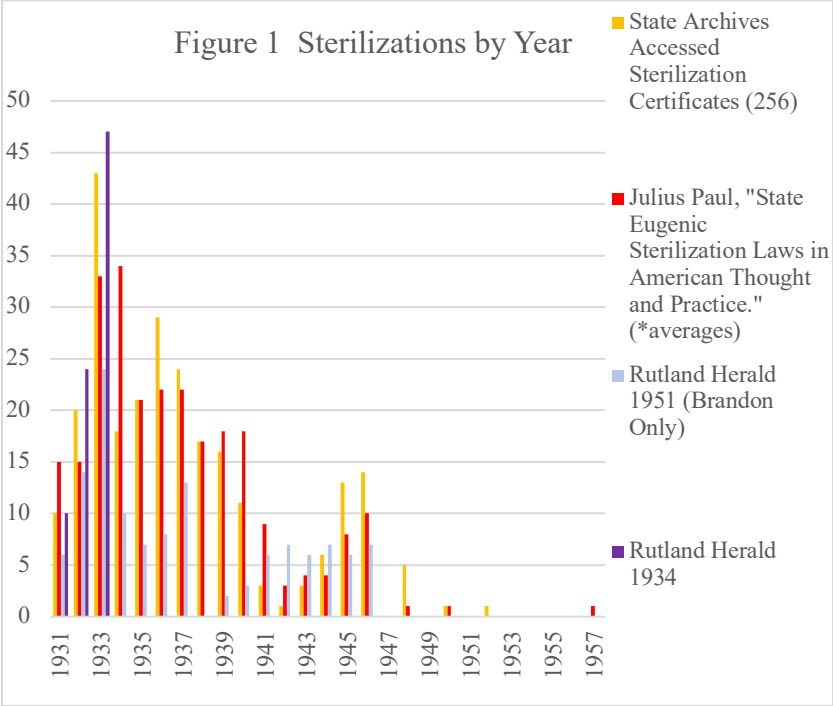


Figure 1 (above) compares the total from the sterilization certificates to three notable sources. The first is an unpublished manuscript by Dr. Julius Paul, which is a frequently cited source for data on total sterilizations in Vermont.³⁰ Paul gathered his data

³⁰ For information on Jules Paul see Christine Davis Mantai, "Julius Paul: Political Science," Fredonia.edu, September 30, 2008,

from the national eugenics organization known as the Human Betterment Project, later known as Birthright Inc., and Vermont's state biannual reports (the statistics here have been split evenly for a rough sense of yearly estimates).³¹ The other two bars represent two contemporaneous newspaper articles where, in 1934 and 1951, the state provided sterilization totals performed up to those points.³² Most of the individual state officials from institutions who were interviewed in these news reports gave lower total numbers than those on the certificates, likely because they were only able to speak about known operations performed in state facilities, and not those done in private practices.

A few conclusions can be drawn by this comparison. First, these sources roughly mirror the certificate totals and provide some confidence of a complete record of eugenical sterilizations in Vermont. They also show a similar pattern and general time range during this period. Additional reports from eugenics organizations that tracked sterilizations across the country also stayed within this range, again agreeing with other known sources. Specifically, a report by the Human Betterment Project, which tracked national sterilization information, stated that 161 sterilizations occurred in Vermont between 1931 and 1937, with certificate data similarly placing the number at approximately

<https://www.fredonia.edu/news/julius-paul-political-science>.

The same figures and writing in this hard-to-get manuscript are found in his published piece, Julius Paul, "State Eugenic Sterilization History: A Brief Overview," in Jonas Robitscher, ed. *Eugenic Sterilization* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1973), 30.

³¹ Efforts were made to find these reports in in the interest of comparison, but none were found.

³² "Few Sterilizations Done in Vermont," *Rutland Herald*, November 12, 1951, 10 [See *Appendix II* for full article]; "Eighty-one Sterilizations Operations Performed in State Under 1931 Law," *Rutland Daily Herald*, January 18, 1934, 2.

163.³³ Therefore, if additional sterilizations were performed by those with eugenical motives, they were not reported in the state or to outside eugenic surveys.

Looking at the shape of the data in Figure 1, we see most of these operations were performed in the first six years after the law was passed, and then declined soon after. When paired with world events, we see a dip in the number of sterilizations during the years prior to World War II, with a slight rise after the onset of the war, then a sharp decline at the end of the war. Scholars of eugenics note that Adolf Hitler's adoption and application of eugenics, notably against racial groups, combined with patriotic sentiments against Germany and German views, caused a decline in public support for eugenical ideas in the U.S.³⁴

The passing of the 1931 law and the start of sterilizations in Vermont also coincided with the hardest years of the Great Depression, which followed on the heels of Vermont's Great Flood of 1927. In those years, social services and the state budget were strained from higher rates of poverty and unemployment. It is possible that the primary motivation for fiscally conservative lawmakers was to use this law as a means to curb the expenditure of public welfare to impoverished families. The decline could also reflect the efforts of the New Deal, with pressure to find a eugenic solution waning as jobs returned and the state's budget rebounded. Additionally, as mentioned in a 1951 article by the *Rutland Daily Herald* [see *Appendix II*], changing knowledge about heredity and mental health—as well as nationally publicized cases of sterilization abuse, fear of lawsuits, and increasing public sentiment against eugenics—may have dissuaded the continued application of this law.

³³ Human Betterment Foundation, *Human sterilization today*, (Pasadena, CA: Human Betterment Foundation, 1938).

³⁴ For example, see Gallagher, *Breeding Better Vermonters*.

It is also worth noting Figure 1 presents the information differently than the most commonly cited chart on sterilizations in Vermont, which comes from a University of Vermont (UVM) hosted website by Sociologist Lutz Kaelber titled “Eugenics: Compulsory Sterilization in 50 American States.”³⁵ While not technically inaccurate or intentionally misleading, at a glance, Kaelber’s chart appears to show cumulative sterilizations over time which, if misinterpreted as an accumulation, could suggest some 1,600 sterilizations occurred, when in fact there are only 252 documented.

Significantly inflated sterilization numbers have directly been put forth by those who claim the eugenics program in Vermont included mass sterilizations targeting Native Americans of the Abenaki Tribe. No credible evidence or testimony has ever been put forward, nor was any found in this research, to support the claim that anyone of Native ancestry was sterilized under this law in Vermont, or that those who promoted the law intended it to target Native people. The number most often cited in these erroneous claims is 3,400 Abenaki, often specifically stated as being women—seemingly a statistical impossibility as there were only between 16 and 36 “Indians” recorded in the censuses in Vermont for this period, and there was no permanent Abenaki community in Vermont.³⁶ The likely source of this erroneous statistic is a 1976 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) which concluded that 3,406 sterilizations of Native women by the Indian Health Service had been performed without

³⁵ Website hosted by Lutz Kaelber, “Vermont,” [uvm.edu](https://www.uvm.edu/~lkaelber/eugenics/VT/VT.html), accessed June 26, 2024, <https://www.uvm.edu/~lkaelber/eugenics/VT/VT.html>.

³⁶ *Population—Vermont, 1930; Population—Vermont, 1940; Population—Vermont, 1950.*

proper consent in the whole United States for the period of 1972–1975.³⁷

Sterilizations by Sex and Age

This section analyzes demographic patterns of age and sex, how they relate, and changes in sex ratio over the period in which these operations were performed. It also notes a few potential patterns and questions the incompleteness of the record-keeping with regards to a segment of these certificates which are lacking age. According to the certificates, the youngest person sterilized was 13 and the oldest was 38 (Figure 2, below). The age group most often sterilized were those between 15 to 23, with fewer operations performed on those under 14 and older than 24. In total, 175 (68%) of those sterilized were female, and 79 (31%) were male.³⁸ Figure 3 (below) considers if there was a change in the targeting of one sex over another over time. The data, however, does not suggest this. Overall, there are a few notable patterns in age, sex, and association with the “insanity” diagnosis. Vasectomies were performed on younger males, with 29 being the oldest age, while females continued to be sterilized later, into their late thirties.

³⁷ This statistic is first stated in Charles Delaney II, “Victims Left Out,” *Burlington Free Press*, November 4, 1995, 7; it is then cited by Lutz Kaelber’s UVM page which has since been updated, though earlier versions can be accessed via the Wayback Machine. Kaelber’s site was then cited on a number of Wikipedia pages and other articles.

³⁸ Sex was determined by type of operation: 174 salpingectomies and 1 hysterectomy were understood to be female, and 79 vasectomies were understood to be on males. Not all sterilization forms included what operation was performed 2 out of the 256 certificates did not list the type of operation.

Figure 2 Sterilizations by Age and Sex.
 [Known Age: 169 / Unknown: 86 (77 Female, 9 Male)]

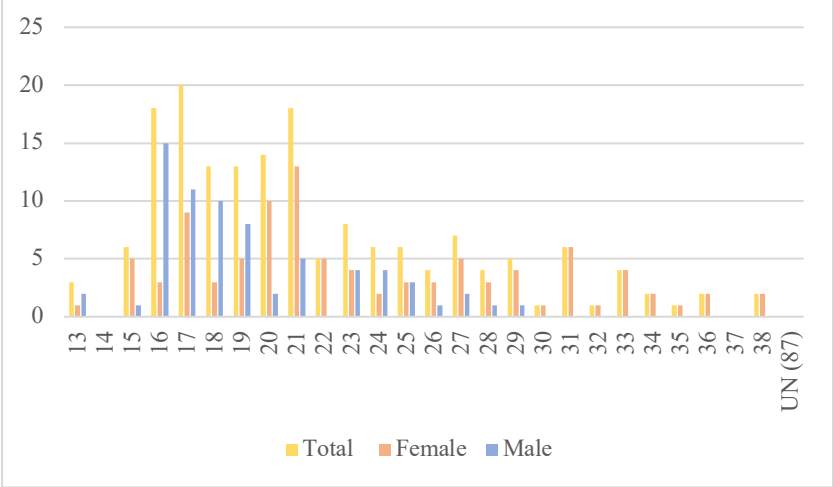
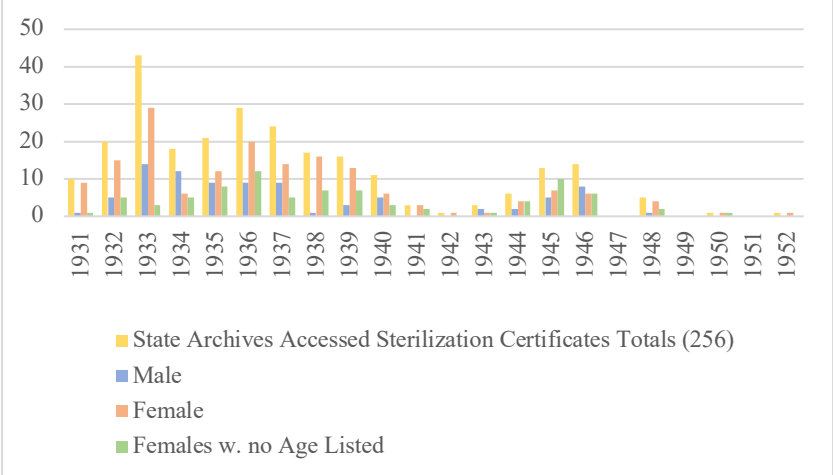


Figure 3 Yearly Sterilization Totals by Sex



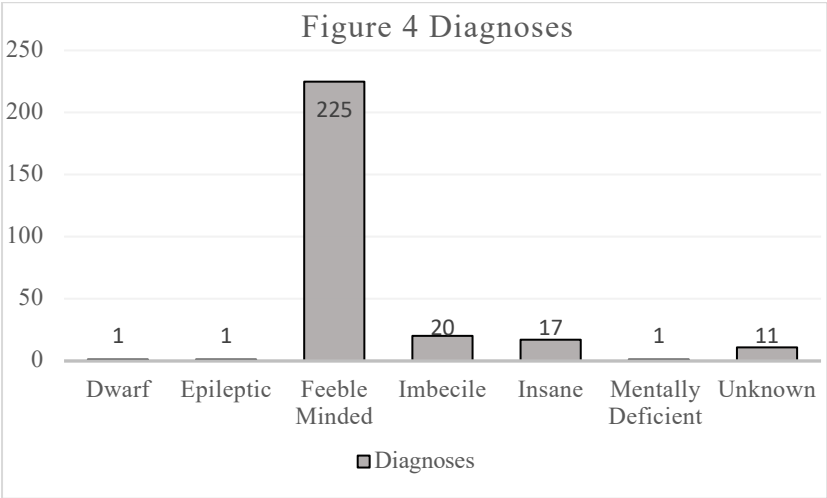
There is a notable amount of missing data for age and marital status. Age is listed on 170 (66%) of the certificates, while 86 (34%) of the certificates omit the persons age—77 (90%) of the certificates omitting age belong to female subjects. Whether the omission was intentional or simply clerical is a matter worth considering. Most of the certificates that omit age also omit marital status.³⁹ Doctors, notaries, institutional and surgery locations also varied within this group, which doesn't suggest a clerical choice or failing in accounting by any one specific institution. Instead, it begs the question of whether these omissions were intentional, perhaps to hide the patients' identities. The relatively few patients diagnosed as "insane" (16) were also frequently lacking marital status and age on their certificate.

Sterilizations by Diagnosis

This section analyzes the demographics of the diagnosis criteria on the sterilization certificates and considers what this may have shown regarding who was sterilized under this law. Figure 4 (below) shows that the majority of sterilized individuals had been labeled as "feeble-minded" with very few having other diagnoses. In general, those labeled "feeble-minded" were considered the most "functional" of those diagnosed. Their targeting might hence reflect institutional aims to rehabilitate and reintegrate patients into society, prioritizing sterilizations for those deemed "high functioning." Institutionalization was also a significant factor that reflected certain diagnoses. Considering the data raises questions about the criteria for these diagnoses and their

³⁹ One possible clerical reason for this omission may be that both of these demographic details (age and marital status) are listed on the reverse side of the certificate, and they may simply be missing from the forms, and hence the data set. Further inquiry with the VSARA could confirm if this is the case.

application across different demographics. As shown in Figure 4, of the four diagnoses possible on the certificates, most were diagnosed as “feeble-minded” (81%), followed by “imbecile” (7%), then “insane” (6%).⁴⁰ The fourth category, “idiot” is not indicated on any certificates. Families who could afford private care may have kept family members with mild conditions out of state-run institutions, therefore, poverty and lack of education likely played a higher role in this diagnostic category than in others.



Institutionalization was also understood to be expensive, but deemed necessary if a person could not be cared for on their own, or if they were a danger to others. Sterilizations, therefore, may have been prioritized for those who it was believed could lead a functional life with training. However, it was also assumed

⁴⁰ In addition, there was one epileptic, one “mental deficient,” and one dwarf diagnosis each. A few had no data; a few had multiple diagnoses; these were split into the total for calculation purposes.

they were unable to care for children and were perceived as likely to pass on their condition to children who would then need support.

“Imbeciles” were considered “lower performing” and were more likely to stay in institutions for the rest of their lives, so they may not have been prioritized for eugenical sterilization, which would be reflected in the low levels of “imbecilic” subjects sterilized. The “insane” were theoretically curable, or had acquired their diagnosis in life through experience and not through inheritance. This may suggest why few “insane” people were sterilized and few operations were performed in relation to asylums. In these ways, sterilizations may have been understood as individual investments in specific persons, rather than as a punitive action targeting groups.⁴¹

Newspapers note a fear that sterilized people—unburdened with the fear of pregnancy—would be more likely to engage in “immoral” sexual behavior after receiving a sterilization procedure, thereby increasing the spread of venereal diseases.⁴² Further, this may have influenced doctors’ choice of patients with certain perceived social traits. “Feeble-minded” may have also been the diagnosis most likely given by those looking to assist people in acquiring sterilizations for contraceptive and family planning purposes who potentially could not otherwise afford it. This was known to be the case in other states where poor families at times used these laws and facilities to their benefit.⁴³

More work could be done to understand how the “feeble-minded” diagnosis was measured, and if these diagnoses

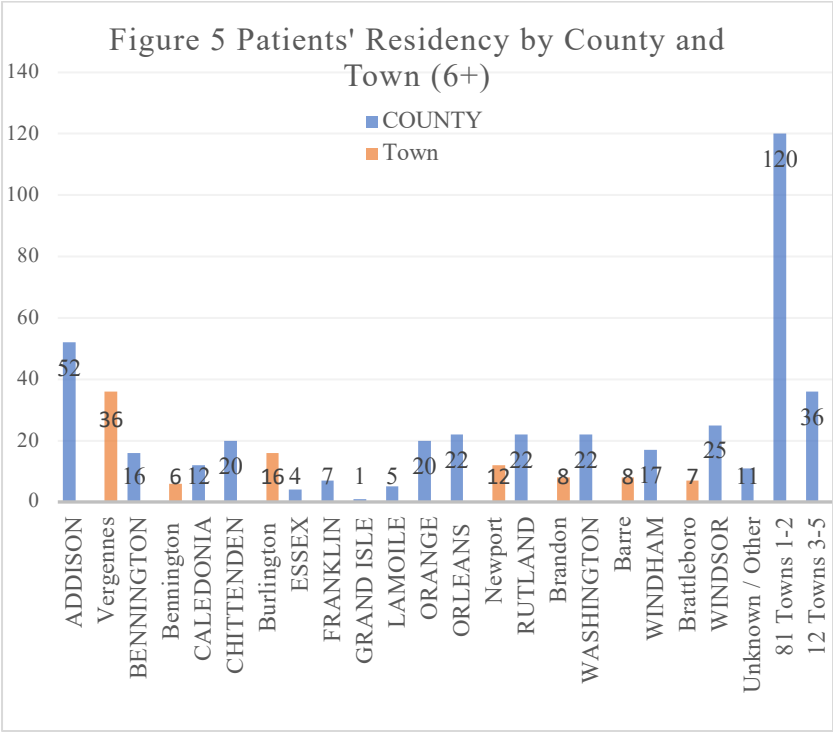
⁴¹ Peter Martin Duncan and William Millard, *For the Classification, Training, and Education of the Feeble-Minded, Imbecile, & Idiotic* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1866).

⁴² For example, see “The Sterilization Bill,” *Burlington Daily News*, February 6, 1931, 4; and “Bill Attacked,” *The Vermont Tribune*, March 4, 1931, 5.

⁴³ Ladd-Taylor, *Fixing the Poor*.

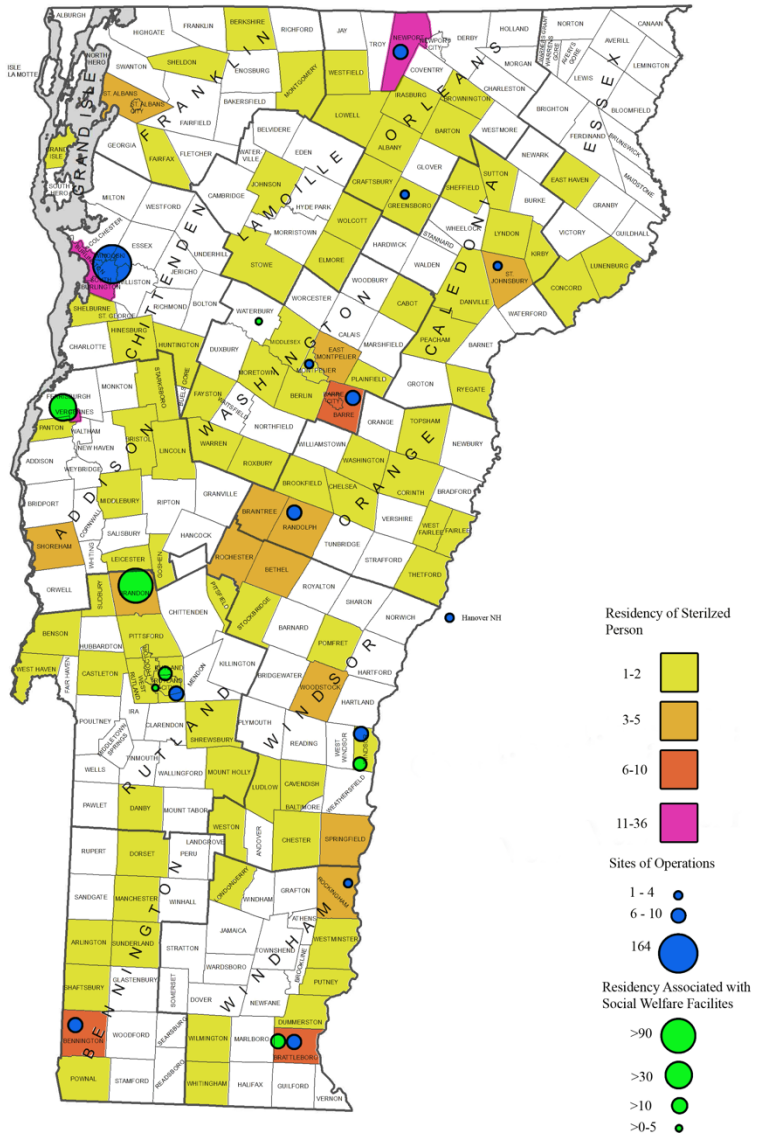
had been placed on people with actual disabilities, or if it reflected the prejudices of the Protestant elite. Without a better understanding of these diagnoses, we cannot measure the extent to which this law was applied to the mentally ill and disabled, or the poor and uneducated.

Sterilizations by Residency⁴⁴



⁴⁴ Figure 5 includes towns (orange) from which six or more people were sterilized. 81 towns had 1 to 2 people sterilized, and 12 towns had 3–5 people sterilized.

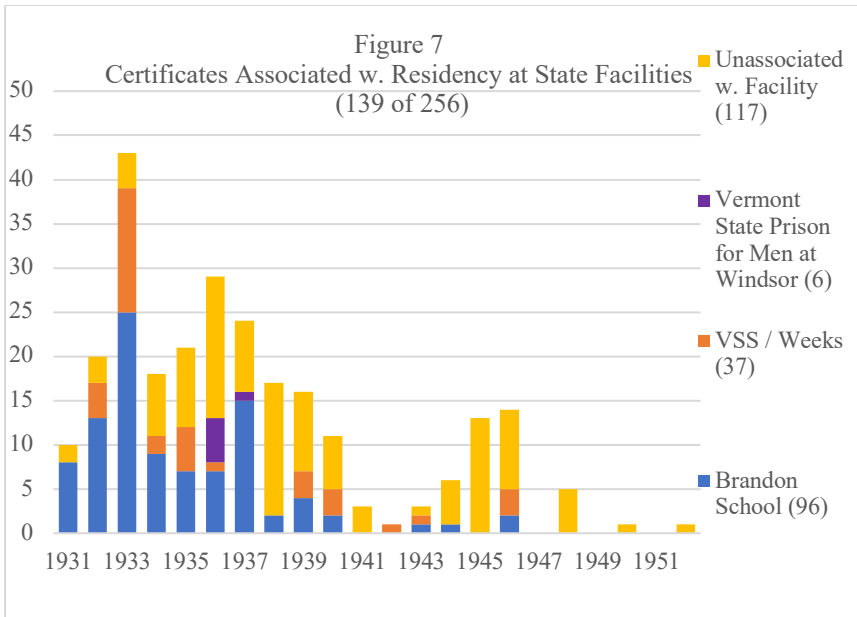
FIGURE 6



An analysis of sterilization patterns by residency was undertaken to reveal any key insights into regional distribution and potential hotspots for these procedures. One significant issue is the inconsistency of residencies listed on the certificate—when a person was a ward of the state, their certificate may have reflected their home residency, or that of a state institution. For instance, certificates for those committed to the Brandon State School listed both home and institutional residency; while those at the Vermont Industrial School, however, recorded only “Vergennes,” the town where the institution was located. Despite these inconsistencies, the data shows a relatively even geographical distribution of sterilizations proportional to population, with expected higher numbers in larger cities such as Burlington, Rutland City, Newport, Bennington, Brattleboro, and St. Albans. Smaller towns generally had 1–2 sterilizations each, including Swanton, the center for those who would later identify as “Vermont Abenaki.” In fact, Franklin County—in which Swanton is situated—had one of the lowest county totals, with 7 sterilizations reported, or 2.7% of the total.

Sterilizations Associated with Social Welfare Institutions

This section analyzes the data on sterilizations performed on those committed to Vermont institutions, focusing on the Brandon State School for Feeble-Minded Children. It discusses how certificates and reports help identify those likely sterilized, importantly finding that most sterilizations were performed in hospitals, not at institutions. Also considered are the role of superintendents and doctors, national trends, and local policies. Findings again highlight some discrepancies in reported numbers, actual sterilizations, and institutional relations, though these numbers stay within a consistent range. Further investigation into state facilities and organizations involved in the eugenics movement could possibly dial in these totals.



A majority (54%) of the certificates appear to be associated with patients or inmates in Vermont’s public welfare system—specifically the Brandon State School for Feeble-Minded Children, where data suggest that 96 (38%) of the patients may have been institutionalized at the time of their operation.⁴⁵ Founded in 1913 as the Vermont State School for Feeble-Minded Children, the Brandon State School began with the purpose of providing a place for children with disabilities to receive special care, training, and education.⁴⁶ Prior to its opening, children were sent to the state asylum, to a poor house, or to the Vermont Industrial School (which was intended for

⁴⁵ Due to residency at a state facility not being mandatory on the certificates, these totals are not precise; however, they are confirmed to be roughly in this range by supporting sources discussed in text.

⁴⁶ D’Agostino, *The History of Public Welfare*.

delinquent children). By the 1930s, however, the Brandon State School had become overwhelmed and crowded, and an ideology emerged that split the children there into two categories. Those labeled “low grade,” the “imbeciles” and “idiots,” who had severe disabilities and needed assistance, were relegated to low quality custodial care, while those labeled “high grade” were given training and education so they could eventually be released and live independently. These “high grade” individuals were more often labeled as “feebleminded,” and it was to this group that sterilization was most often applied.⁴⁷ By far the single largest geographic clustering of people sterilized were those at the Brandon State School. The 1951 *Rutland Herald* article notes 125 sterilizations for the Brandon State School, but also states that Brandon students, for a time, were transferred to the Vermont Industrial School when Brandon was overcrowded, and, therefore, may have been sterilized while in residence there. If this is the case, it might explain why the certificate data suggests approximately 35 people were sterilized from the Vermont Industrial School, while only ten were reported in the *Rutland Herald* article.⁴⁸

Thus, the most likely people to be sterilized under this law were people committed to the Brandon State School. Even though names of the majority of these people are redacted in the data set, biannual reports and census data from these institutions give us an additional lens on who was in the population of these institutions. As is addressed above, only the Brandon State School listed the person's home residency in addition to their current residency at the school. The other institutions either listed only

⁴⁷ Allen and Fuller, “Beyond the Feeble Mind;” Mercedes de Guardiola, “Segregation and Sterilization,” *Vermont History* Vol. 87, No. 1 (2019): 59–86.

⁴⁸ This comingling of the population is noted in “Few Sterilizations Done In Vermont,” *Rutland Herald*, and was suggested by the superintendent.

the individual's current town of residency (potentially at an institution) or only their hometown and not that of the institution. Through an examination of the signatures of notaries and doctors on the certificates, the data suggest that certain operations were associated with the specific facilities in which those signatories were employed.

It is also worth clarifying that none of these facilities appear to have had surgical staff or operating rooms in which to perform these surgeries, which predominantly took place only in hospitals. A newspaper report from 1951 in the *Rutland Herald* also gives a candid look at the numbers of sterilizations, allowing for a comparison with the data in the sterilization records.⁴⁹ In this article, titled "Few Sterilizations Done in Vermont Institutions," the *Herald* interviewed the superintendents of the major public welfare institutions—this following a disputed report which had stated 220 people had been sterilized in Vermont.⁵⁰ In total, the superintendents reported 146 sterilization operations, with the certificates at this time estimating approximately 150.⁵¹ This suggests the overall number of sterilizations reported up to that point are reflective with the sterilization data currently available in the VSARA.

What caused this high rate of sterilizations at Brandon and its subsequent sudden decline? As mentioned, a number of national trends may account for this,⁵² but there is another more local possibility. Truman J. Allen, superintendent of the Brandon

⁴⁹ "Few Sterilizations Done In Vermont," *Rutland Herald*.

⁵⁰ Clarence J. Gamble, "The prevention of mental deficiency by sterilization, 1949," *American Journal of Mental Deficiency* 56, no. 1 (1951): 192–197.

⁵¹ The number 150 presented here is my estimate based on information from the certificates; however, only full access to biographies would conclusively answer the question of how many originated at these state facilities.

⁵² See earlier section *Total Eugenic Sterilizations by Year: A Comparison of Notable Sources*.

State School from 1918 to 1937, was a dedicated eugenicist who emphasized the importance of reforming “high grade” people over caring for “low grade” imbeciles.⁵³ Two doctors for the Brandon State School, Dr. F. S. Briggs and Dr. J. W. Estabrook, signed almost all of the 96 certificates associated with the Brandon State School. Following Allen’s death in 1937, sterilizations at the Brandon State School fell precipitously. Census data also suggest a very high rate of sterilization of inmates at the Brandon State School’s sister facility, the “Rutland Colony,” an offshoot of the school that housed around 20 women.⁵⁴ If this is the case, it may emphasize that individuals in positions of authority may have played a large role in sterilization policies rather than a systemic adoption of this law.

The Vermont Reform School, later renamed the Vermont Industrial School (VIS), and then the Weeks School, was established in Vergennes in 1865 to separate young criminals from the general prison population. A person under the age of 16 could be committed there for almost any crime, including truancy. While no certificates name this school, the *town* of Vergennes, where the VIS was located, was disproportionately listed as residency on certificates (see Figure 5)—more than any town or city in Vermont.⁵⁵ Vergennes, with a population of fewer than 1,600, was not a major population center in the state, yet the number of sterilizations with Vergennes listed as residency far outstrips all other towns and cities. This suggests that residency

⁵³ Allen and Fuller, "Beyond the Feeble Mind."

⁵⁴ Herbert C. Chamberlain, "The Rutland Colony for Girls at the State School for the Feeble-minded," (unpublished manuscript, 1927).

⁵⁵ It is worth noting that as we do not know where those sterilized via the Vermont Industrial School originally came from, we do not know whether they might otherwise be grouped regionally, ethnically, or in any other way. If the unredacted records ever become available, it would be possible to ascertain whether this Vergennes bubble reflects any specific eugenic pattern.

at the VIS, in Vergennes, contributed to this number.⁵⁶ An estimated 39 (or 15%) of sterilizations originated there. As mentioned in the 1951 *Rutland Herald* article, the student population of the VIS and the Brandon State school at times overlapped—and combined—and added together these schools’ sterilization numbers are very close to the estimated total stated by officials in the 1951 *Rutland Herald* article.⁵⁷

Only one certificate states it is from the Vermont State Hospital (VSH)—alternately known as the Vermont State Asylum for the Insane, Waterbury Asylum, or Waterbury Hospital—with the residency and place in which this operation was performed listed as Burlington. The town of Waterbury, where the VSH was located, is not listed as a residence on any certificates, though, as noted, residency at facilities was not a standard category on the certificates. The VSH had the largest population of any institution (at times over a thousand patients) and would have been the facility most likely equipped to perform a surgery on site.⁵⁸ However, a statement by Rupert A. Chittick, superintendent of the Vermont State Hospital, in the 1951 *Rutland Herald* article, said that 11 sterilizations had been performed on patients there.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ The Vergennes certificates list three doctors associated with that school. One of these doctors also ran a private practice and was a longstanding member of the Vergennes school board system. Therefore, it is possible that he might have been selecting or targeting people from the community via the school system; however, no additional evidence was found to support that theory.

⁵⁷ In “Few Sterilizations Done in Vermont,” the *Rutland Herald*’s total of the schools combined is 125; this paper’s estimate is 131.

⁵⁸ D’Agostino, *The History of Public Welfare*, 208–209. I was unable to confirm their surgical facilities and capabilities of performing these operations on site, but they did not appear to have a surgeon on staff.

⁵⁹ “Few Sterilizations Done in Vermont,” *Rutland Herald*. While some evidence allows for speculative interpretations of the records to explain this

The overall low number of sterilizations performed on those at the VSH raises the question: why would the largest state institution account for the lowest number of sterilizations? Statements in the 1951 *Rutland Herald* article clearly articulate a view that sterilization of those with mental disorders were “of no use” because “insanity” was not heritable, and that sterilization did not aid in recovery from mental illness. With the absence of the VSH in the sterilization certificates and no mention of sterilization in the facilities’ biannual reports, it therefore seems a tentative conclusion that eugenical sterilizations in this period were not being performed at the State Hospital.⁶⁰ However only a more thorough investigation could rule out the possibility. The hospital would later be investigated for abuses in the following decades, and often had frequent turnover of staff and superintendents.⁶¹ Additionally, the question of definition would need to be further explored—were *therapeutic* or *medical* sterilizations happening that were simply not being officially classified as *eugenical*?⁶²

Four patients had Brattleboro listed as their residency, which could reflect the privately run Brattleboro Retreat. All four

number, further speculation might expand to include operations performed in the nearby Washington County towns of Barre (11), Montpelier (2), and Randolph (12)—all of which had facilities close to Waterbury that were able to perform sterilizations. The listing of Brattleboro (13) as residency might also include patients from Waterbury.

⁶⁰ De Guardiola, “*Vermont for the Vermonters*,” 144, takes an expansive view of the absence of certificates, citing a newspaper article—“Eight Cases of Sterilization,” *The Brattleboro Reformer*, December 18, 1931, 70—that mentions one operation at Waterbury as possibly suggesting more missing operations. However, only one operation is reported, which is consistent with the 1951 *Rutland Herald* article.

⁶¹ See Marsha R Kincheloe and Herbert G. Hunt, *Empty Beds: A History of Vermont State Hospital* (Barre, VT: M. Kincheloe, 1989).

⁶² See earlier section, *Assessing the Total Number of Sterilizations*, for a discussion of therapeutic or medical sterilizations.

of these patients also listed Brattleboro as the location of their sterilization, possibly at the Brattleboro Memorial Hospital, which opened in 1904. Brattleboro was listed as the location for a total of 13 surgeries. This would suggest a possible range from 4 to 13 potential sterilizations associated with the Brattleboro Retreat. The “insane” diagnosis made up relatively few of the certificates—seventeen out of 252. Two of those seventeen people with the “insane” diagnosis had Brattleboro listed as their residency. By contrast, the “insane” diagnosis made up almost half of those sterilized in Brattleboro (6 of 13). In the 1951 *Rutland Herald* article, the Superintendent of the Brattleboro Retreat (who took that position in 1949) stated that no operations had happened since he’d begun working there, and he had only heard of one in the past.⁶³ This suggests that the practice of eugenical sterilization had ceased in Brattleboro by 1949.

Evidence suggests sterilizations associated with the Windsor State Prison for Men—located in the town of Windsor—took place despite only one notation of the institution on the sterilization certificates. In total, five certificates list Windsor as the location of the surgery. We might gather they were prisoners, though the residencies of the subjects varied. Subjects were often from locations further afield, including one person from Boston. All were males. Two of these names were unredacted (having died over fifty years ago), and it was found that both men had criminal records, though nothing indicates they were otherwise disabled. Two doctors, Dr. William Krause and A. L. Patch, performed most of the exams and surgeries on these individuals. Five of these surgeries happened in 1936, which is notable because of a story that emerged in early December of that year regarding prisoners at Windsor Prison *requesting* sterilization who, besides being criminals, were otherwise considered “of

⁶³ “Few Sterilizations Done in Vermont,” *Rutland Herald*.

normal mind.”⁶⁴ The warden from the Windsor facility at the time requested clarification of the law from the state’s Attorney General to determine whether these prisoners that were allegedly requesting sterilization were eligible under the 1931 law, and if the state would pay for these operations.⁶⁵ The answer given was no, the state would not pay for them in this case, as the threat of begetting “defective” children was a *requirement* of the 1931 law. Being a criminal did not constitute a “defective” mental state.⁶⁶ Considering the timing of this operation and these sterilizations, it is unclear if these prisoners were sterilized before or after asking for clarification of the law.

Other state facilities are not noted or represented in the certificates. Some suggest that children were sterilized under the direction of the Vermont Children’s Aid Society (VCAS).⁶⁷ The VCAS was an active supporter of eugenics and directly aided eugenics programs by providing them with information on families and giving recommendations as to who should be investigated for the Eugenics Survey of Vermont.⁶⁸ An investigation of the VCAS and state-run orphanages should be undertaken to assess their participation in this program, though records may not exist for them.⁶⁹ There is no limiting age specification written into the 1931 sterilization law. The Marble Valley Regional Correctional Facility for women in Rutland could not be associated with any sterilizations, even though

⁶⁴ “Voluntary Ask for Sterilization,” *The Burlington Free Press*, December 4, 1936, 2.

⁶⁵ “Vermont News of the Week,” *The Bethel Courier*, December 10, 1936, 7.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ De Guardiola, “*Vermont for the Vermonters*,” 146–147.

⁶⁸ For more information about the Eugenics Survey of Vermont, see Gallagher, *Breeding Better Vermonters*.

⁶⁹ As per the certificates, three 13-year-olds are the youngest of those reported as having been sterilized—children by modern standards. These sterilizations took place at the Brandon and Weeks facilities.

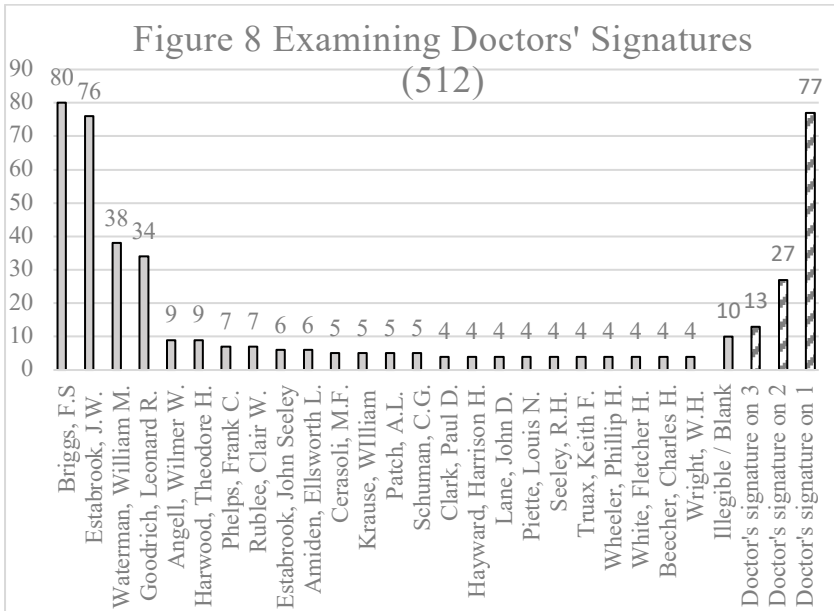
Superintendent Lena Ross had known eugenic sentiments. 11 sterilizations took place in Rutland, but most were vasectomies, and therefore not associated with females.

Doctors, Surgeons, and Surgical Facilities

Previous studies on Vermont eugenics have largely placed blame for the harm enacted by state policies on the thought leaders of the time—notably Henry Farnum Perkins, UVM zoology professor and director of the Eugenics Survey of Vermont—as well as other key figures in state government. However, in the case of sterilizations as the most tangible outcome of the eugenics movement in Vermont, it was ultimately doctors and hospitals that determined the need for, and performed, these operations. One pattern that clearly emerges is staff from the Burlington Hospitals, and the UVM College of Medicine, were deeply involved in these operations.⁷⁰ This paper only begins to explore the role these doctors and hospitals played in driving these operations. A closer mapping of those individuals and investigation into their personal records, if they exist, could reveal much about their motives, sentiments, and roles in this program. As the 1931 sterilization law required doctors to retain duplicate copies of the sterilization certificates, it may be possible that more evidence of these surgeries exists in private or hospital records.

⁷⁰ University of Vermont and State Agricultural College, College of Medicine, *Vermont Bulletin*, Vol. 29, Burlington, VT: University of Vermont, 1932.

Examining Doctors⁷¹



The signatures of the examining doctors on the certificates allow us to see who was most directly involved in these sterilization operations. Recall that each sterilization certificate required two examining doctors' signatures for a total of 505 signatures across the 256 certificates (7 signatures are absent). In total, 141 doctors performed exams under the 1931 law, but just four of these doctors carried out 228 of these exams (approximately 45%). These four doctors performed between 34 and 80 exams each. Two of these four doctors, J. W. Estabrook and F. S. Briggs, were based in Brandon; Estabrook was the doctor for the Brandon State School, and Briggs was the Rutland County Health Officer. Leonard R. Goodrich, meanwhile, was the physician at the

⁷¹ Due to the number of signing doctors, not all are included in Figure 8.

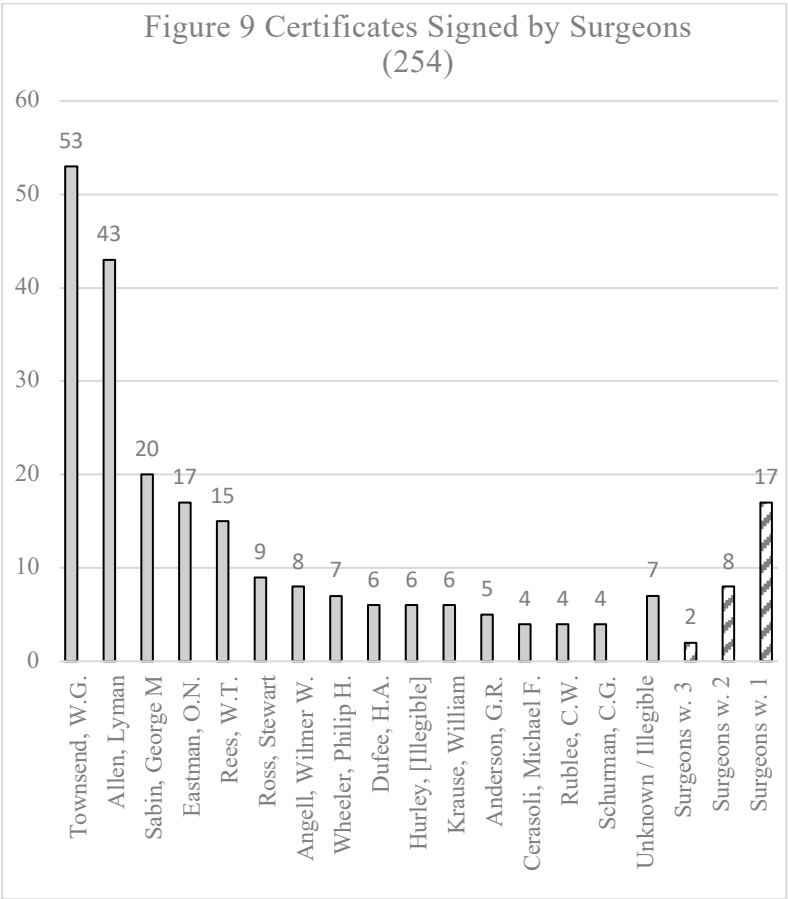
Vergennes Training School, and William M. Waterman was a physician in Vergennes. Twenty doctors carried out a moderate number of exams, between 4 and 10—or 114 total (approximately 22%). A striking fact, however, was that the remaining 170 exams (33%) were performed by 117 doctors, each completing between 1 and 3 exams, with seventy-seven of these doctors performing only one. This illustrates that four doctors, all associated with state facilities, performed nearly half of all the exams. 20 doctors performed an intermediate number of exams (4–10), while 89% were performed by doctors who did three or fewer exams. It is unclear why so many doctors only used this law a few times, though it might suggest a few scenarios. First, these small-town doctors may have only had a few people in their region for whom this law seemed applicable. It is also possible this law was seen as a trend, and only briefly used. Conversely, doctors may have recommended this surgery before and after 1931, but only briefly categorized them as eugenical operations. Finally, it is plausible, of course, that the operations continued, but they ceased filing the reports.

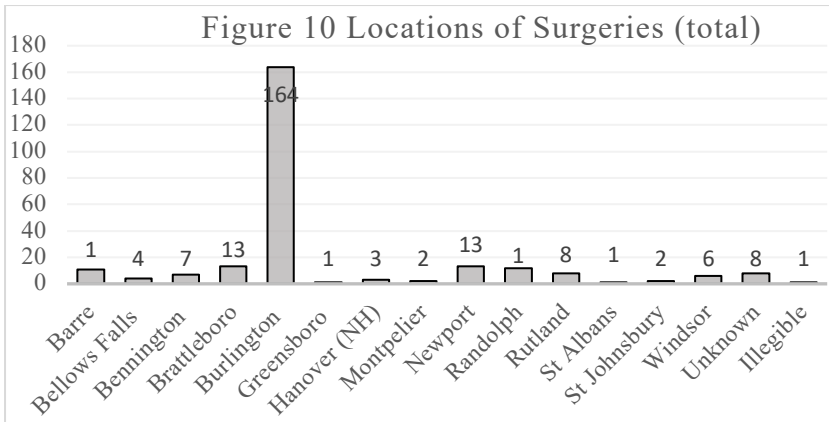
*Surgeons and Hospitals*⁷²

By comparison to the large number of examining doctors, only forty-four surgeons performed sterilization operations, with the majority of surgeries, 148 (58%), performed by just five surgeons. Ten surgeons performed between 2 and 3 operations. This may be because there were limited surgical facilities in which these operations could be performed, or these operations required special training. As shown in Figure 10, surgery location—when combined with data on the employment of doctors who performed the surgeries—points to Burlington as the

⁷² Figure 9 does not include all signatures due to volume.

place where the vast majority of these operations occurred. Most of the patients from the Brandon State School and Vermont Industrial School were operated on in Burlington. Further investigation would be needed to determine to what extent medical facilities in Burlington—such as the DeGoesbriand Hospital, Fletcher Allen Hospital, Fanny Allen Hospital, or the University of Vermont and State Agricultural College (UVM) College of Medicine—were the sites of these operations.





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If the sterilizations completed at the UVM College of Medicine were driven by the need to teach these operations, this may have driven a demand for patients. Also, the affiliation between Henry Farnham Perkins, director of the Eugenics Survey

of Vermont, and UVM surgeons and facilities may have directly impacted sterilizations. That said, it seems more plausible that surgeons may have been less culpable regarding eugenic sentiments than the examining doctors who assessed the patients and determined that they were “defective.” Many of the surgeons in Burlington who performed these operations were found to also have taught at the UVM College of Medicine and often held positions of authority in the Vermont State Medical Society. Whether these surgeons also reviewed and actively evaluated the decision to sterilize is currently unknown. A much closer scrutiny of relations between these facilities, UVM, the College of Medicine, Perkins, and the Eugenics Survey of Vermont should be undertaken.

In some instances, physicians were both examining doctors and operating surgeons, though this was not usually the case. Twenty-six surgeons performed 75 (14%) of the 512 exams. 29 exams (11%) were given by physicians who then performed the sterilizations on the patient. The top five surgeons—who completed 58% of the total operations—performed 8 exams, none of which were on an individual they also operated on. Eight of the doctors who performed an intermediate number of exams (3–9) also performed an intermediate number of surgeries (3–9), possibly suggesting that physicians at smaller hospitals not associated with state facilities performed both exams and surgeries.

Looking closer at facilities with smaller numbers of surgeries and atypical cases might reveal discrete stories and trends. For example, many of these smaller facilities only performed salpingectomies, most often on married women. Sterilizations in Rutland and Windsor Counties, by contrast, only happened in the later years, 1936–1948, and were predominantly vasectomies performed on adult men (aged 19–25). Curiously, a few operations were recorded as taking place in Lebanon, New

Hampshire. One operation was also performed in Greensboro, Vermont, despite there not being a known surgical facility there—showing that surgeries outside of facilities were possible, but seemingly the exception. Looking at the geographic distribution of sterilizations performed over time did not reveal much, other than that as soon as the law was passed, the hospital in Burlington was immediately ready to perform surgeries on patients from the state facilities.

A Closer Look at Forty-Four Sterilized Individuals

While most of the 256 certificates are redacted, those regarding individuals who are known to have died over fifty years ago are not. The names of forty-four of these sterilized individuals are unredacted and available in the public record and published on the VSARA website.⁷³ In the summer of 2023, I conducted a basic biographical survey using newspaper searches, vital records, and census data on each of these individuals to learn more about them beyond the aggregate data on the certificate forms. The Eugenics Survey of Vermont records were also examined to see if their names were present.⁷⁴ Below are observations I made from this research; however, an editorial decision to not publish the names of those sterilized in this paper means that citations are not included, and these observations are not comprehensive. Though they are not present in this analysis, the names can be found on

⁷³ The State of Vermont has classified the sterilization certificates as medical records, so following HIPPA rule, only for individuals who died over fifty years ago is full information available, including their name. Though they are unredacted, we have chosen not to use their names in this paper lacking consent from their descendants.

⁷⁴ The ESV records are not digitized and contain thousands of records. For this report institutional records found in boxes PRA-00007 and PRA-00008 were examined, as well as the index in boxes PRA-00042 to PRA-00047, which may be found at VSARA.

the VSARA website and the data can be found in the above mentioned locations. It is vital to note their earlier deaths make this cohort more likely to be shorter lived or born earlier. This group all died before 1973, so certain patterns might prove different from those who were born later and/or lived longer. Having been born between 1895–1928 and sterilized between 1931–1952, it is not surprising that only one child of these individuals was found to still be living.

From these individual biographies, several key findings emerged, though each warrants further investigation. Two women—both with preexisting health conditions—died as a result of the sterilization operation, despite the law stipulating that the operations should not risk the patient's health. Newspaper announcements of hospital admittance and discharge for sterilization were common, and were found for ten of these individuals, all women. Nine records were found in the Eugenics Survey of Vermont, with seven possibly also having family members in the Survey. At least eight of the women had over five children, six had illegitimate children (three of whom sued for bastardy), and six families were separated by the state. Fifteen individuals would have been categorized as "sexually immoral" due to involvement in rape, incest, adultery, or having syphilis, and five males were incarcerated for crimes. Six were committed to the Waterbury State Hospital, with four noted as having mental health diagnoses. Five had epilepsy, and one had Huntington's Chorea. Fourteen received some form of public financial support, thirteen were associated with Catholic records and seventeen with Protestant records (including Methodist, Congregational, and Baptist). Seven individuals had at least one parent born in Canada, with one also born there; four of these were French Canadian. Four others had parents born in Italy, Ireland, Finland, and Poland. Despite many indicators of poverty, five individuals had notable public lives, suggesting they were not severely

impaired or impoverished, and indicating that the law might have been used for contraceptive or therapeutic purposes and was actively sought out by some.

Based on an unpublished analysis of the forty-four unredacted individuals compared to the population of Vermont represented in the 1930 Census, recent immigrants (first and second generation) are statistically *underrepresented* compared to the general population.⁷⁵ Again, none of these individuals were found to have Native American—or more specifically Abenaki—heritage; however, two had relatives who began claiming Abenaki heritage in the 1980s–1990s, though these claims remain unsupported by evidence. One person's race was variously listed as "negro," "dark," "black," "mulatto," and "mixed" on vital documents, while another's race was recorded as "white," "negro," and "colored." The rest were predominantly listed as white, reflecting the general Vermont population at the time.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Jules Lees and Kristian Brevik, "Statistical Analysis of Sterilization Certificates Cross-referenced with the 1930 Census" (unpublished manuscript, 2024). This report examines whether immigrant and non-white Vermonters were disproportionately targeted by Vermont's 1931 eugenical sterilization law by cross-referencing 44 publicly available names from sterilization certificates with the 1930 Census. Analysis of nativity data showed a statistically significant difference (p-value = 0.035), where "Native whites" [born in the U.S.] with "Native parentage" [parents born in the U.S.] (34/42) are overrepresented in the Sterilization Records compared to those with recent immigrant ancestry (8/42). The odds ratio for this analysis (2.26, 95% confidence interval: 1.03-5.67) indicates that "Native whites" with "Native parentage" are 2.26 times as likely to appear in the Sterilization Records compared to individuals who were foreign born or with one or both parents foreign born based on the available sample. Conclusions from the analysis of racial data are highly unreliable as they are dependent on the way that a single individual's race was recorded over time.

⁷⁶ Lees and Brevik, "Statistical Analysis of Sterilization Certificates."

Considering Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

Race, ethnicity, and religion are not categories on the sterilization certificates, and were often not recorded on institutional records or Eugenic Survey forms. The absence of a race category, however, does not imply an egalitarian view of race by eugenicists or state institutions. Rather, the absence likely reflects the demographic reality of a state that was overwhelmingly white. For example, in state and town vital records at this time, “race” or “color” were often not filled out unless a person was *not* white. In the 1930 Census, Vermont’s total population of 359,611 (99.81%) was recorded as white. Only 656 people (0.29%) were not white—568 were listed as “negro” and 36 “Indian.”⁷⁷

As previously mentioned, the largest percentage of people sterilized resided in a state institution. The racial demographics of state institutions can be seen in the 1930 Census, where, of the roughly 1800 people institutionalized, 18 are listed as “negro”, and none as “Indian.”⁷⁸ Based on this data, Black people appear to represent only 1% of the state's institutionalized population yet were only 0.1% of the statewide population in 1930. While this suggests that Black people were overrepresented in the institutionalized population, the actual number of individuals committed was low. With such small numbers of BIPOC people in the state, in its institutions, in the Eugenics Survey of Vermont, or among the sterilized, these populations were simply not large enough to be a focus of these programs.

Regarding ethnicity, French Canadians were the most common immigrant ethnicity in the state at this time. More work is necessary to determine if there is a point in the assimilation process in which immigrant families, including those from

⁷⁷ *Population—Vermont, 1930.*

⁷⁸ The 18 listed were split between VIS (6), BTS (2), Brandon Rutland Colony (1), VSH (5) and Windsor Prison (4).

French Canada, stop defining themselves, and being defined as, “ethnic others.” As noted, a preliminary survey of census data suggests French Canadians may be underrepresented in state facilities compared to the total population. Catholics had their own social service network, which likely decreased the number of French Canadians in these facilities.⁷⁹ Additionally, no one of Native American—or indeed Abenaki—ancestry within 4 generations was found among the forty-four unredacted individuals.⁸⁰ Combined with their near complete absence from the state, and from eugenics discourses both inside and outside of the state, it would appear Native Americans were never an overt or intentional target of this program.

It should be noted that the low number of sterilizations and institutionalizations during the Vermont eugenics era of people who were non-white, of non-European ethnicity, or immigrants should not be misinterpreted to mean these groups did not face elevated discrimination. The opposite is true, and racial prejudice often went hand in hand with eugenical thinking. However, the statistical whiteness of Vermont would nearly nullify a program focused on these groups, while the overt and clearly intended targets appear to have been largely the disabled and poor who were placed in state institutions.

⁷⁹ An added challenge in determining how to categorize a person of mixed heritage was the possibility of marriages between Catholics and Protestants in Vermont; only a deeper study could better consider the question of ethnicity. Initial finds looking into rates of interfaith marriage found 40%–55% of Catholic Marriages in the U.S. between 1930–1950 were mixed faith marriages; see Robert B. Hepps and Elaine Dorfman, “Interfaith Marriage and Social Participation,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 5, no. 4 (1966): 324–33. Additionally, nearly half of Vermonters in 1936 belonged to no religious denomination, see T. F. Murphy, *Religious Bodies: 1936, U.S. Government Printing Office*, (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1941).

⁸⁰ Lees and Brevik, “Statistical Analysis of Sterilization Certificates.”

Conclusion

As in the past, the image of Vermont tomorrow will be shaped by the history made in Vermont today. It is a cautionary tale that the Progressives of the eugenics era got it so wrong while trying to do right, harming those they sought to help. Currently, Vermont and the broader United States are in a stage of self-reflection about our past regarding abuses to vulnerable populations and marginalized communities. This is good work. Forefront in that process is a well-needed reassessment of our history of racism, which current Progressives in Vermont are making good faith efforts to address. In 2021, the Vermont Truth and Reconciliation Commission (VTRC) was established to assess historic and current discrimination, including against those harmed by the state's eugenical policies and practices—the most egregious of which was the 1931 law this paper focused on. Much of the impetus for this effort, however, originated from lobbying efforts by self-identified “Vermont Abenaki” groups to leverage stories of their claimed genocide for further concessions, sympathy, and influence. This belief—that state sponsored eugenical sterilizations targeted Native Americans, specifically of the Abenaki Tribe—is incongruent with all the data analyzed in this paper, and nothing was found to suggest it is based in fact.

Beginning in the 1970s, a community of historically impoverished white Vermonters, many of French-Canadian heritage, began to reimagine themselves as Abenaki—perhaps in part to access much-needed resources.⁸¹ Lacking proof of these

⁸¹ Jane S. Baker, 1976 Report to Governor Thomas P. Salmon of the State of Vermont Regarding the Claims Presented by the Abenaki Nation with marginal comments by Gordon Day, Dr. Gordon M. Day Papers, Box 566, f.1, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec.

claims, a story of being “in hiding” emerged.⁸² When scholars in the 1990s began to look at the history of the Eugenics Survey of Vermont, “persecution by eugenics” became the new explanation for that lack of evidence.⁸³ Over time, these group’s aspirations to become legally recognized as Abenaki took root, and have been supported by well-meaning Vermont governors, legislators, and academics—notably anthropologists and archeologists.⁸⁴ Multiple reports have demonstrated these claims to be unfounded.⁸⁵ Recently, contemporary legal scholars, historians, genealogists and Indigenous rights activists have begun to push back on and unravel this mythology, revealing the harm and

⁸² This theory seems to originate from an amateur genealogist named John Moody who is often cited, yet never produced or published evidence for peer review; see John Moody, "Missisquoi: Abenaki Survival in their Ancient Homeland" (unpublished, 1979).

⁸³ See The Office of the Attorney General, *State of Vermont's Response*.

⁸⁴ For Archaeology see William Haviland, *the Original Vermonters*; and John Moody, "Balance: An Overview of Abenaki and Indigenous Peoples, Burial/Site Protection, Repatriation, and Customs of Respect, Looting, and Site Destruction in the Abenaki Homeland, and Relations between Archeology, Ethnohistory, and Traditional Knowledge," *The Journal of Vermont Archeology* 12, no. 1 (2011); Regarding gubernatorial support: in 1975 Governor Thomas Salmon declared them a tribe by executive order, which was rescinded the following year when a new governor took office. In 2012, Governor Shumlin was key in supporting legislature to grant these groups state recognition as Native American Indian tribes. For legislators’ support, consider the lobbying and passage of the state recognition in 2012, as well as the state apology to these groups in 2021 for harm to them by “eugenic polices an practices.”

⁸⁵ Department of the Interior, *Summary under the Criteria and Evidence for Final*; The Office of the Attorney General, *State of Vermont's Response*; Darryl Leroux, “State Recognition and the Dangers of Race Shifting.”

distortion this rewriting of history is causing to actual Abenaki and Native communities.⁸⁶

The findings examined here show that those effected by this law were primarily white people who were often struggling with poverty, which does not reflect key assumptions set out in the VTRC's mandate or the views of the "Vermont Abenaki."⁸⁷ This shouldn't be surprising, however; UVM Professor Henry Perkins, who directed the Eugenics Survey of the 1920s–1930s directly stated "pauperism" was the link in his findings, with 552 of the 2700 individuals surveyed being wards of Vermont towns or the state.⁸⁸ The evidence reviewed in this paper suggests the

⁸⁶ For the national issues of indigenous race-shifting and the harm it causes, see Kim Tallbear, "Native 'Identity' Fraud is not Distraction, but the Final Indian Bounty," Unsettle. March 27, 2022, <https://kimtallbear.substack.com/p/native-identity-fraud-is-not-distraction>. For local pushback, see Julia Furukawa, "Review of genealogies, other records fails to support local leaders' claims of Abenaki ancestry," New Hampshire Public Radio, May 22, 2023, <https://www.nhpr.org/nh-news/2023-05-22/review-of-genealogies-other-records-fails-to-support-local-leaders-claims-of-abenaki-ancestry>; Shaun Robinson, "A false narrative': Abenaki leaders dispute the legitimacy of Vermont's state-recognized tribes," VTDigger, Nov. 14, 2023, <https://vtdigger.org/2023/11/14/a-false-narrative-abenaki-leaders-dispute-the-legitimacy-of-vermonts-state-recognized-tribes/>; 11/14/2023; Beyond Borders UVM Conference 2022, accessed July 24, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8t3LxwhBhI>; Elodie Reed, Josh Crane, Sabine Poux, "Why are Abenaki Nations challenging the legitimacy of Vermont's state-recognized tribes?," Vermont Public, Oct. 19, 2023, <https://www.vermontpublic.org/podcast/brave-little-state/2023-10-19/vermont-recognized-tribes-canada-abenaki-first-nations-odanak-wolinak>.

⁸⁷ Though the TRC is not limited to eugenics, the language does not address poverty and focuses on "...individuals who *identify* as Native American or Indigenous...Black individuals and other individuals of color; individuals with French Canadian, French-Indian, or other mixed ethnic or racial heritage;" General Assembly, *An Act Relating*, no. 128.

⁸⁸ "Vermont is Advised to Widen its Program of Social Service," *Burlington Free Press*, Jan. 20, 1927, 2.

sterilizations that followed the passage of the 1931 law, itself originating from the Eugenics Survey of Vermont, targeted exactly who Vermont's eugenicist had overtly stated were their targets—disabled and impoverished Vermonters. Nearly all of them were white.

Ironically, elevating the state sponsored “Vermont Abenaki” reimagination of history, which repurposes eugenics trauma to justify claims to an Indigenous Abenaki identity, has directly overshadowed the stories of those who, facing this poverty and disability, were sterilized under this law: victims who should be the at the heart of our state’s current efforts at reconciliation. While it is not supported by evidence that Abenaki were the targets of these programs, intergenerational trauma from these punitive social welfare systems may be at the heart of their desire to adopt a new native identity as a way to feel pride for their community: a story we would not otherwise sublimate simply for historically impoverished Vermonters of French-Canadian heritage.⁸⁹ In this way our current efforts at reconciling with this past repeats the erasure of the disabled people and economically marginalized communities, who were the overt, intended, and actual targets of these programs.

⁸⁹ Regarding the repurposing of trauma; Darryl Leroux, “State Recognition and the Dangers of Race Shifting.”

[Appendix I: Sterilization Certificate, Front/Back]

We, V. W. Waterman and L. R. Goodrich, physicians and surgeons legally qualified to practice in the State of Vermont, hereby certify that on the 27th day of September, 1933, we examined [REDACTED] a resident of Vergennes, Vermont, and decided:

- (1). That s he is an ~~idiot~~ ~~feeble-minded~~ ~~insane~~ person and likely to procreate ~~insane~~ ~~feeble-minded~~ ~~insane~~ persons if not sexually sterilized; (Strike out inappropriate words)
- (2). That the health and physical condition of such person will not be injured by the operation of ~~castration~~ ~~salpingectomy~~; (Strike out inappropriate word)
- (3). That the welfare of such person and the public welfare will be improved if such person is sterilized;
- (4). That such person is of sufficient intelligence to understand that s he cannot beget children after such operation is performed.

Signed in duplicate this 27th day of September, 1933.

V. W. Waterman
L. R. Goodrich

STATE OF VERMONT,)
Addison County.)

At Vergennes this 27th day of September, 1933, personally appeared V. W. Waterman and L. R. Goodrich and made oath to the truth of the above certificate by them subscribed.

Before me, F. Lucile Anderson
~~Notary Public~~ Notary Public.

I, [REDACTED], the person named in the above certificate, hereby request that the surgical operation of ~~castration~~ ~~salpingectomy~~ be performed on me. (Strike out inappropriate word)

Dated this 27th day of September, 1933.

I, [REDACTED], the ~~natural~~ ~~legal~~ guardian of [REDACTED] the person named in above certificate, request that the surgical operation of ~~castration~~ ~~salpingectomy~~ be performed upon ~~her~~ ~~her~~. (Strike out inappropriate word)

[REDACTED]
Natural ~~Legal~~ Guardian.

I, Sydney Allen, a physician and surgeon legally qualified to practice in the State of Vermont, hereby certify that on the 28 day of September, 1933, at Burlington, Vermont, I performed the surgical operation of ~~castration~~ ~~salpingectomy~~ on [REDACTED] the person named in the above certificate. (Strike out inappropriate word)

Sydney Allen MD
Physician and Surgeon.

DIRECTIONS. The applicant must sign a request that the operation be performed, if of sufficient intelligence, otherwise the natural or legal guardian of such person must sign. The applicant must voluntarily submit to the operation. The physician and surgeon performing the operation must decide that the welfare of such person and the public welfare will be improved by such operation. The physician and surgeon must mail one of the duplicate certificates to the Commissioner of Public Welfare, Montpelier, Vt., and keep the other. These blanks can be obtained from the Commissioner of Public Welfare.
Sterilization Act of 1931.

CERTIFICATE

STERILIZATION OF



Age 20 years.

~~Married~~

Single.

[Appendix II: Key Newspaper Article Cited: Rutland Herald,
November 12, 1951]

Few Sterilizations Done In Vermont Institutions

BY BETTY M'WHORTER.

MONTPELIER, Nov. 11.—Though Dr. Clarence J. Gamble, Milton, Mass., geneticist, has stated that 210 mentally deficient persons have been sterilized in Vermont, records at state institutions account for only about two-thirds that number.

According to estimates made from records at Brandon State school, Waterbury State hospital and Weeks school at Vergennes, about 146 persons have been sterilized at these three institutions since Vermont's present sterilization law was enacted in 1931.

With the exception of two cases at Waterbury, there have been no such operations at state institutions in the past five years.

This is explained by Commissioner of Institutions Timothy C. Dale, who said that the trend in recent years has been away from sterilization.

At one time, he said, it was considered the answer to all feeble-mindedness, but today psychiatrists do not consider this the case.

Dale compared the sentiment for

sterilization some years ago and the subsequent decline of interest, to the cycle of popularity of shock treatments for mental disease.

Shock treatments were popular 35 or 40 years ago, he said, but many persons were injured in the process and their use dropped off. In the last 15 years or so, they have become popular again.

However, there is no evidence that the trend is leading back to sterilization, according to opinions of Dale and institution heads, who are agreed that it is not the answer to problems of mental deficiency.

There is no single state agency where records of all sterilizations done at state institutions are kept, and Dale and institution heads themselves were curious as to how Dr. Gamble arrived at his figure of 210 sterilizations in Vermont.

"He must have had information I never heard of," Dale remarked.

Under the state sterilization law, copies of the sterilization papers are to be filed with Dale's department, formerly the Department of Public Welfare, later the Depart-

were performed in the next six years, and none in the past five years. There are no records to indicate the sex of persons sterilized.

Dale said that since some mentally deficient persons were sent to Weeks school during the years when Brandon was over-crowded with a long waiting list, it was possible that a few sterilizations might have been performed there.

According to Harrison C. Greenleaf, superintendent at Weeks school and acting superintendent at Brandon, who gave out figures for both institutions, there have probably been about 10 sterilizations in the history of Weeks school. There are no recent records, he said.

Sterilization is not a factor in placing girls who are trained to leave Brandon and earn their living, Dale said. Because of a careful program which requires girls to be placed with responsible families and kept under supervision, the problem of girls becoming pregnant has not affected placement.

Dr. Rupert A. Chittick, superintendent of the state hospital, who describes himself as "not enthusiastic" about sterilization, considers it a matter to be considered in connection with the individual patient and not as a cure-all.

If it seems essential for a particular person, and by doing it we can

get that person back into the community with safety then it seems worthwhile, he said.

He says he does not consider it a cure-all, particularly when for every person sent out from an institution sterilized there are 50 "out in the hills making more."

At Waterbury, a man and 10 women have been sterilized since 1931, four of them since 1948, according to Dr. J. L. P. Forrest, a psychiatrist on the hospital staff.

Ten of these persons were mental deficient and one was an epileptic who had the operation performed for economic reasons, he said.

He commented that one of these patients had a baby after undergoing the operation.

Dr. Forrest, one of the veteran state hospital staff members, pointed out that sterilization is not a solution to state hospital problems, since psychiatrists now know that mental illness is not hereditary. Patients who recover can be discharged to resume their normal life, while those who do not are kept at the institution.

Four operations have been performed since Dr. Chittick became superintendent in 1944, two of them in 1945, one in 1948 and one in 1950.

Because of "certain tendencies" on the part of these patients, Dr. Chittick said, it was felt that they would be better able to "make a go of it"

outside the hospital if the operation were performed.

Dr. J. Butler Tompkins, psychiatrist and superintendent of the Brattleboro Retreat, a private institution which also cares for an overflow of state patients from Waterbury, said that no sterilization had been done at Brattleboro since he had been there, and he knew of only one patient, a girl, who had been sterilized.

He, too, pointed out that the hereditary aspect is not so great nowadays in mental deficiency, and that even in cases where whole families are mentally deficient, the operation would be of little use unless the whole family were sterilized, since all members carry the same genes.

"It really doesn't get to the heart of the problem," he said.

Surgeons are reluctant to perform the operation, Dr. Tompkins explained, because they may become open to legal action and criticism.

It is difficult to get the permissions involved, the operation is open to criticism from various sources, and the whole country is mentally set against that sort of thing, he said.

It has been done more in Europe than here, but it has not been thoroughly tried any place.

He pointed out that the practice had been more extensive in Germany under Hitler than elsewhere.

but there, when it became mandatory, the doctors stopped making diagnoses which would lead to sterilization.

The present law, which requires the consent of the patient and an examination by two doctors, states the following policy:

"It shall be the policy of the state to prevent procreation of mentally defective and insane persons, when the public welfare and the welfare of such persons likely to procreate, can be improved by voluntary sterilization."

Author Biographies

Brooklyn Howe is a graduate student from Battle Ground, Washington in her second year of the M.A. program. She studies the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century United States, focusing on the Civil War and Reconstruction. Her research interests include women's history, dress history, and social/cultural history, but her main focus is on historical memory—how the events of the war and its aftermath were remembered, memorialized, and taught. Before attending the University of Vermont, Brooklyn earned her bachelor's degree in history from Corban University in Salem, Oregon. She plans to move back to the Pacific Northwest after graduation and pursue a career in museum or archival work.

Charles Murphy is a senior undergraduate student in history at the University of Vermont. He possesses a strong passion for late European history, and his academic pursuits are deeply rooted in studying the nuances of Imperialism, the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and the History of the Holocaust. Charlie is interested in exploring the complex consequences of these historical phenomena on modern society and global politics. Combined with a public policy analysis minor, Charlie hopes to bring his knowledge of history to foster a more productive discourse on pivotal social issues. Charlie would like to offer a special thanks to Professor Sean Stillwell for his advice and critiques on the piece that appears in this volume.

Henry Schmidel is a senior graduating with a B.A. in history and minors in English and philosophy. In the fall, he will be returning to UVM to pursue his M.A. in history. He is interested in studying U.S. covert action, international drug trafficking, and the way that these are represented in film and television. Outside of

school, Henry enjoys watching movies, and is currently reading a biography of Orson Welles. He grew up in northeast Massachusetts, and hopes to become a teacher somewhere in New England after finishing his degree.

Rhiannon Brown is a graduate student in her final year of the M.A. history program under the direction of Dr. Felicia Kornbluh. She grew up in Ramsey, New Jersey and attended Montclair State University for her undergraduate. At MSU, she received her B.A. in History and NJ Teacher Certification in Social Studies and was a member of the Women's Lacrosse team. At UVM, she is the head coach of the Women's Club Lacrosse team and worked as a research assistant for Dr. Kornbluh during the Fall 2023 semester. Her research interests include twentieth-century U.S. with a focus on gender, sexuality, and feminism. When she isn't researching U.S. feminism, Rhiannon is most likely watching the New York Rangers compete for the Stanley Cup or *Friends*. She also enjoys reading in her free time and is currently reading Matthew Perry's memoir.

Richard Witting is a Burlingtonian (if he is anything) who has worked as a chef for over thirty years in Vermont. Questions about food, food history and culture led Richard back to school, where he received a BA in Anthropology at UVM in 2016. Returning to UVM in 2021, to pursue a Master's in History, Richard intended to study the history of food in Vermont, however his research into the state's Indigenous history led him into the emerging critical scholarship in that field. From this work Richard has focused on early twentieth century Vermont history, and the claims regarding who was the target of Vermont's Eugenics program. This has led him to do extensive working in the state archives, town and county records offices, old newspapers and probate records. Richard has also become a vocal

advocate for the Abenaki Nations of Odanak and Wôlinak 1) who are struggling to not be further erased from Vermont's history or 2) who are struggling for representation in their ancestral homeland.

Editor Biographies

Ian Price completed his second year as a graduate student in the Department of History's Master of Arts program, studying modern German history with a focus on colonialism and memory. A Sacramento native, he graduated from UCLA with honors before coming to UVM, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in history with a focus on the Russian Revolution of 1917. This academic year he had the privilege to work as a Teaching Assistant for Professors David Lightbody and Andrew Buchanan and as a Staff Assistant at the Miller Center for Holocaust Studies. Last summer, the Miller Center sent Ian to Berlin to study German at the Humbolt Institut. This summer, he plans to complete an extended essay exploring how the Nazis instrumentalized the memory of Germany's colonial past for their own ends. Besides history, Ian enjoys hiking, painting miniatures, and playing tabletop roleplaying games with family and friends.

Jocelyn Rockhold is a second-year graduate student at UVM. Her research interests include modern Britain, film censorship, and permissive society. During her time at UVM, she completed a thesis about John Trevelyan of the British Board of Film Censors after conducting archival research in London. She served as a Graduate Research Assistant for Writing in the Disciplines and as a Teaching Assistant for Dr. Susanna Schrafstetter. In her spare time, Jocelyn likes to watch Denver Nuggets basketball and hang out with her beloved cats, Sonny and Archie.

Nathan Colgrove is a second-year graduate student in the M.A. History program at the University of Vermont. He graduated with his B.A. in History from Saint Michael's College in 2021 where he also had minors in Medieval Studies and Latin. Continuing in these interests at UVM, he has sought to take classes that focus

on the Middle Ages. He has also incorporated a handful of courses on the Holocaust and fascism into his program of studies. Working with Professors Charlie Briggs and Steven Zdatny, he has held two teaching assistantships. Currently, he is writing a thesis that focuses on the Roman Republic of 1849. His research centers on themes of historical memory, the political instrumentalization of history, and the formation of national identity. When Nathan is not studying, he enjoys teeing off at the local golf and disc golf courses.

Meghan Hessler is a senior and Accelerated Master's Program student from Montclair, New Jersey. She is graduating in May 2024 with majors in History, Sociology, and Philosophy, and will be staying at UVM for another year to complete her master's degree in history. Her focus of study is, most broadly, modern German history and the history of the Holocaust. More specifically, she is interested in researching the evolution of professional and 'lay' perspectives on crime through the Nazi period as well as the criminalization of Jews, homosexuals, and other victims of Nazi terror. At UVM, Meghan has worked as a Staff Assistant at the Miller Center for Holocaust Studies at UVM and a writing tutor at the Undergraduate Writing Center. She has co-run A Different Voice philosophy club at UVM for the last two years, aiming to provide 'non-philosophers' a space to engage in discussions of meaningful and relevant philosophical topics.

Monica O'Brien is a rising junior from Long Island, New York majoring in History and minoring in Political Science. Her academic interests include Medieval European history, gender studies, and political theory and she plans to receive a Masters in Education to teach Secondary History. Aside from her academics, Monica enjoys reading, watching movies, and playing games

with her friends. She looks forward to completing the next half of her college career back in Burlington.

Jacob Shore is a first-year graduate student in the University of Vermont History M.A. program, studying late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American History. Prior to UVM, Jacob graduated from UMass Amherst with a B.A. in History, and went on to teach high school History and Social Studies in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom for three years. At UVM, Jacob has worked as a Teaching Assistant for Dr. Andrew Buchanan's Global Environmental History Course. His research investigates how patterns of immigration, class dynamics, and race consciousness shaped the formation of regional and collective identities in turn-of-the-century New England. Outside school, Jacob likes to adventure by bike, foot, or ski, seeking out Vermont's prettiest hardwood slopes in the winter and secret swimming holes in the summer.

Abigail Sterner is a first-year graduate student in the History M.A. program. Originally from out West (Arizona & Washington state), she graduated from the University of Miami in 2022 with a B.A. in History and minor in Political Science. Her primary area of study includes modern Irish history, with a particular emphasis on radicalism, revolutionary movements and cross-cultural solidarity. In addition to serving on the *History Review*, she has worked as a Graduate Teaching Assistant for Professors Sarah Osten and Melanie Gustafson. In her almost-nonexistent free time, Abby enjoys baking, a good book, and going on long runs in the chilly Vermont weather. She plans to write her thesis on radical Irish republicanism, martyrdom, and revolutionary solidarity in modern twentieth-century social movements.

Tora Ueland completed her MA in history at UVM in 2024, with a focus on Antebellum and Civil War America. Her Master's project investigated slave punishment, torture, and medical experimentation in the Antebellum South. In 2022, she completed her BA in history at West Virginia University, summa cum laude, with minors in forensic science and English. In 2021, Tora's undergraduate research capstone, "The Experiences of Black Soldiers During the Civil War: A Microhistorical Case Study of the Demus Family," was published in the West Virginia University Historical Review. Originally from Salem, Massachusetts, Tora worked as a tour guide and reenactress for half a decade, pursuing her love for American history, crime history, and education. These passions carried through her work as a graduate Teaching Assistant at UVM. Tora enjoys reading, collaging, painting, and spending time with her tuxedo cat, Bellatrix.

Emma Wapshare is a rising senior in UVM's History and Film & Television Studies programs. By the spring of 2025, Emma will have her Bachelor's in both Film & TV studies, as well as History. Emma has been awarded honors in both film and history, being named UVM's Fellow of the Stowe Story Labs as well as joining the National History Honor Society, *Phi Alpha Theta*. Going into her fourth year at UVM, Emma's studies center on World War II and the Holocaust, with a particular focus on the perpetrators of the Holocaust.



The University of Vermont