The Children of Eugenics in North Carolina

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Elaine Riddick was a fourteen year old girl living in Edenton, North Carolina in 1968. She was a poor African-American daughter of alcoholic parents in the segregated southern town. She became pregnant after being raped by a man from her neighborhood. Social workers attracted to her condition referred her case to the state's Eugenics Board. The board concluded that Elaine was feebleminded and doomed to promiscuity and recommended her to be sterilized. Her illiterate grandmother consented to the procedure marking only an "X" on the consent form. After giving birth to her son, her fallopian tubes were cut and cauterized to prevent any future pregnancies. Elaine struggled to shed the label of feebleminded and has never forgiven the state for the unwanted procedure. The reasoning behind the decision of the Eugenics Board can best be summed up in a 1950's pamphlet created by the Human Betterment League of North Carolina. The pamphlet advocates procedures like Elaine's were to protect future generations and the community at large from the procreation and spread of feeblemindedness. They argue that it would be crazy to expect a moron to run a train or a feebleminded woman to teach a school. Yet, Elaine was not a feebleminded woman or the bearer of future morons. Elaine Riddick was a normal child.

Many of those who were sterilized were normal citizens. Many of them were young women guilty of nothing that would warrant such a procedure. Young males were also sterilized although not to the same extent as females. This paper focuses on the sterilization and experiences of those young females and males. The eugenics sterilization program in North Carolina was not discriminate in terms of age. The records show that children as young as ten rs

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old were determined unfit to bear children. More than two thousand people ages eighteen and younger were sterilized.\(^3\) There are numerous documented accounts of young children who underwent sterilization, most of the time without consent or knowledge of what was happening to their body. The paper will address these children by first explaining the history and ideology of eugenics in North Carolina. This ideology was facilitated through a network of feeder institutions where sterilizations were performed on many of these children. These alarming incidents inside were often based on arbitrary testing, and a lack of regard for the patient's will. Which makes it necessary to examine informations on the methods of testing and consent. The conclusion addresses how these children and the state have tried to come to terms concerning their roles in the events that played out between 1929 and 1974. It should be noted that I use the term children much like the modern conceptions of the term and classify anyone eighteen years old or younger as a child.

Eugenics in North Carolina

During the first half of the twentieth century the American eugenics program promoted and implemented policies of sterilization aimed at reducing those deemed biologically unfit.\(^4\) By the 1950s, eugenics was to some degree a southern phenomenon. The middle of that decade showed sterilizations in Virginia, Georgia, and North Carolina combined to nearly account for about three-fourths of the sterilizations within the United States. These figures are distorted slightly due to the fact that North Carolina's forced sterilization program targeted both institutional and non-institutionalized individuals. Other states limited sterilization to inmates and those residing in mental health facilities, whereas any resident of North Carolina could be

sterilized. Overall, North Carolina had one of the best documented and vigorous sterilization programs within the country.

The history of state-sanctioned eugenic sterilization in North Carolina began in 1929. The General Assembly authorized the governing body or executive head of any penal or charitable public institution to sterilize any patient or inmate when it was determined to be in the public’s best interest. By 1933, the General Assembly formally established the Eugenics Board of North Carolina to review petitions for the sterilization of individuals. In the late 1940s, the Department of Public Welfare began to promote increased sterilization as one of several solutions to poverty and illegitimacy.

In a report issued in 1938 by the EBNC they explain, “eugenical sterilization is a means adopted by organized society to do for the human race in a humane manner what was done by Nature before modern civilizations, human sympathy, and charity intervened in Nature's plans.” The report argues that “sterilization is intended for those who are feebleminded and the mentally diseased who would be likely to transmit their defects to their children or who are entirely incapable of rearing children.” North Carolina eugenicist believed they could improve the human race if allowed to sterilize those classified as poor, alcoholics, or physically disabled.

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6 Ibid., 852.
7 Public Laws and Resolutions Passed by the General Assembly at Its Session of 1933, in the North Carolina Digital Collections.
11 Ibid.
12 Lisa Armstrong, "Sterilized by the State." Essence 42, no. 12 (2012): 74
During the early to mid-nineteenth century, North Carolina and thirty-one other states passed eugenics sterilization laws based on epilepsy, sickness, or feeblemindedness. The term feebleminded lacked any clear meaning, and served as a useful catch-all giving the state wide latitude to sterilize individuals deemed unworthy of reproduction. North Carolina practiced the longest of these states, sterilizing more than seventy-six hundred individuals between 1929 and 1974.\textsuperscript{13} When the program started the majority of those sterilized were white females. Women accounted for approximately eighty-five percent of that figure. By the late 1960s sterilization of men dwindled and the number of females sterilized rose to ninety-nine percent of which, African-Americans constitute thirty-nine percent. By the late 1960s, they represented sixty percent of sterilizations even though they only made up twenty-five percent of North Carolina’s total population.\textsuperscript{14} Surprisingly, the eugenics program in North Carolina expanded after World War Two unlike many other states who were horrified by the atrocities of Hitler’s Nazi Germany. North Carolina ranked third overall in the United States for the total number of people sterilized by program's end.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Institutions of Sterilization}

Training schools frequently served as gateways to eugenic sterilizations. Over the life of the North Carolina eugenics program at least twenty-nine hundred institutional sterilizations were carried out, many of them inside of these schools.\textsuperscript{16} For hundreds of youth among the thousands in North Carolina institutions, being sterilized by the state was almost guaranteed. They were branded feebleminded and the sterilization was a necessity in order for release from

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\textsuperscript{13} Armstrong, "Sterilized by the State," 74.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 78.
\textsuperscript{15} Kaebler, “Eugenics/sexual Sterilizations in North Carolina.”
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the institutions. This was heavily encouraged by the eugenics board. One such school that adhered to this policy was the Goldsboro training school. The Goldsboro training school opened in 1957, and was the first facility in the nation dedicated to the support and treatment of mentally handicapped African-Americans. Renamed the O'Berry School in 1959, this institution had several students who experienced sterilization. According to the head of the O'Berry School Vernon Mangum, "We would say this person is ready to return to the community, the community would say, 'no, we can't accept her back because she'll get pregnant and there'll be another child on welfare." Magum commented that most of the sterilizations at the O'Berry center were on the mentally retarded. He remembered that none of the boys at his school were sterilized because they did not do the childbearing. The O’Berry school may not have done this, but sterilization of boys did happen in other institutions across the state.

Across North Carolina, boys and girls who broke the law as well as ones who were simply promiscuous or truant were sent to reform schools like that of Stonewall Jackson Training School in Concord, North Carolina. Most of the boys sent to Jackson were there due to minor scrapes with the law, not because of mental illness. Within the general population most sterilizations was performed on females and this was largely no different in children. One specific instance where this statistic did not hold true was within the walls of Stonewall Jackson. Until 1948, there was no practice of sterilization on boys but by the summer that slowly changed. According to a memo in the school's file, "most of these boys are ready for discharge but cannot leave until action is taken on the authorization of the eugenics board." Seven boys set to leave

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18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
the Jackson institution were designated as feebleminded by intelligence tests of the time, deeming sterilization necessary. Of these seven boys six were unable to escape the operating table and each of them underwent vasectomies. Between July 1948 and June 1949, the first and last vasectomies of Jackson School were carried out. The focus of male sterilization began to vanish behind the wall of Jackson, but in other institution sterilizations on boys and girls was only just beginning.

The Caswell Training School opened in 1911. Caswell was North Carolina's only school for the mentally retarded until 1958. Located in Kinston, North Carolina, the school was intended to house the feebleminded and decrease their threat to society. Essentially, the School was a holding tank for children who were mentally disabled, delinquents, or unwed mothers. The majority of children inside the walls of Caswell were from the most impoverished and socially isolated sections of the white North Carolina population. Admission was based largely on class, as low economic status went hand-in-hand with institutionalization. The state eugenics board required sterilization before a student could leave Caswell and return to their family. A 1935 EBNC report stated that "none of the inmates of Caswell Training School should be released before being sterilized, except in the few instances were normal children have been commited through error." By 1914, the focus of the institution became the sterilization of girls. Caswell sterilized about fifty people per year (mostly girls) by the middle part of the 1950s. The process of sterilization would not halt, continuing all the way until the 1968. In all there were 597 sterilization operations performed at Caswell from 1929 to 1968.

20 Begos and Railey, “Detour: In ‘48 state singled out delinquent boys.”
21 Kaebler, “Eugenics/sexual Sterilizations in North Carolina.”
23 Kaebler, “Eugenics/sexual Sterilizations in North Carolina.”
24 Begos, “Sterilization Was Often the Way.”
In 1969, Castella Jefferson was fifteen years old and her parents sent her to Caswell after she started running away from home and paying more attention to boys. It was at Caswell that she underwent sterilization. It was not until several years later while trying to get pregnant that she learned what had happened to her there. Castella was not unique in comparison to most girls sent to Caswell, she was only a small part of a long tradition of sterilization. Caswell would extend this tradition to its male population as well. Unlike the O’Berry School, sterilization there was not gender specific as many boys experienced eugenics first hand.

Willis Lynch was frequently in trouble for fighting as a child, and by age eleven he was sent to Caswell. Lynch’s time there was difficult and he underwent a strict discipline policy intent on teaching him how to behave while in attendance. Three years after he was first committed he was taken to a nearby hospital. Lynch remembered being put to sleep and then awaking in pain, not knowing what had been done to him. The Eugenic Board’s records show that Lynch had been determined feebleminded on the basis of an IQ test. He was only fourteen years old when the board elected to sterilize him. Later in his life he discovered state documents that revealed he had been given a vasectomy. Lynch’s experience highlights the seriousness of the board to halt the spread of feeblemindedness from generation to generation by targeting both boys and girls. Institutions like Caswell were the places where this contaminated lineage could end. Feeblemindedness was a hereditary problem that could be demonstrated through case studies of whole families. These studies document the seriousness of the situation and why it was so crucial to sterilize so many children like Jefferson and Lynch.

25 Carmon, “For Eugenic Sterilization Victims, Belated Justice.”
The children of those labeled feebleminded were considered a serious threat to society. These children were not only unsafe but also a heavy financial burden on the taxpayers. A small family of Wake county North Carolina described in an EBNC report shows how the family was viewed and how the offspring were fed to the institutions. The 1938 report cites an unfit family given the surname “Wake” after their county residents. The family was studied by the State Board of Public Welfare to demonstrate the results of the feebleminded bearing offspring. Joe Wake, a suspected feeble-minded man, married Mary, a feebleminded woman in 1895. They had eight children, five of whom were known to be feeble-minded. The record of the Wake family also includes specifics about each individual: Joe spent at least two years in the county workhouses and Mary reportedly had the mental age of an eight year old. The first and third of the Wakes children died in infancy. Sam Wake was the second child, and served multiple jail terms and workhouse sentences. He was known to be a burglar and eventually disappears from the record. The Wake's fourth Sue, fifth Anne, sixth Bess, and seventh Tom were sent to the Children's Home Society in Greensboro in 1910. Sue was arrested and sent to Caswell Training School in 1919. She remained there until 1930 when she ran away. Anne and Bess arrived at Caswell several years before Sue, and remained there at least until 1938 when the report was written. Tom remained in foster home in South Carolina until 1920. Then he was sent to South Carolina Training School for the Feebleminded. The final child Jesse was given away in 1911 at the age of three. In 1922, he was living with a farming family near Raleigh. State psychologist examined him, finding him feebleminded. The report concludes that by 1922 the family had cost the public at least twenty thousand dollars. This estimate comes from the cost of institutional
care provided by Wake County and the State. The report argues that for the cost of one hundred dollars, the father and mother of these feebleminded children could have been sterilized.28

The EBNC and other advocates invested a large amount of time and money into understanding and preventing those like the Wake family from harming the human race any longer. The Wake children and others in institutions would have witnessed first-hand the elaborate methods of testing created to categorize their existence. Once these test concluded feeblemindness, consent to the sterilization appeared to be irrelevant.

**Testing and Consent**

Every child that was chosen for sterilization was reviewed by the eugenics board prior to the passing of judgement. The board would read the file of an individual and pay close attention to one specific factor: intelligence quotient. The EBNC relied almost always on IQ scores to determine an individual’s potential for contaminating the gene-pool. They typically used the Stanford-Binet IQ test to qualify the level of a person's intelligence. The Stanford-Binet IQ test involves a one-on-one examination that has to be administered by a trained professional. It takes more than an hour to give, and the scoring takes longer still. The test was created in 1905, and modified in 1916 when it was given the name Stanford-Binet. Some researchers had doubts about the Stanford-Binet test, and its ability to accurately determine mental ability. The Eugenics Board itself even had doubts about the test, though it still continued to view the test as something that could reveal elaborate detail about a person's potential.29

One study carried out by A.M. Jordan on school children demonstrates the outcomes and expectations of the test. Jordan was a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel

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Hill. Using money from Winston-Salem textile tycoon James G. Hanes, Jordan administered the Stanford-Binet test to about ten thousand children. Jordan used a score of sixty as the dividing line between retarded and normal instead of the standard seventy. Even with this lower figure the results were not what Jordan or Hanes expected. The researchers found that the children tested in Winston-Salem had lower average IQs than children from other cities. The African-American children tested showed even lower scores than the white students. Individual test confirmed that around sixty percent of the children who tested below seventy actually had an IQ level that low. The other forty percent had been scored too low by the test. To Jordan this may have just been a study for academic purpose, but to others like Hanes it may have been more. Hanes and other wealthy supporters of eugenics may have also been trying to use the test to promote further sterilization based on scientific evidence. The study should have been able to identify a distinct and obvious type of individual unworthy of procreating. This outcome disappointed Hanes and other advocates of eugenics. They were hoping to find concrete proof concerning their theories of human eugenics. Thankfully, this was only a test and typical Eugenic Board sterilization orders were not carried out. If this would have been for practical rather than academic purposes the results would have been horrifying. The board would have needed to sterilize more than 740 of the Winston-Salem children tested.30

The intelligence test along with occasional minor factors was the consistent method of evaluation in North Carolina. In several state institutions these test were being administered to children. Those unfortunates being evaluated were often lower-class, uneducated children. When

30 Deaver, “City's Kids Put to the Test in ’48.”
the results deemed it necessary for sterilization, that was only half of the process. It was also necessary for the state to obtain some form of consent, however legitimate.

Nial Cox Ramirez resided in the small river town of Plymouth, North Carolina. She was one survivor of sterilization who spoke about the board's policy of consent. Ramirez was an eighteen year old who had just had her first child. She was given the choices of signing the consent form to be sterilized, or have welfare payments for her mother and siblings cut off. Trying to cope with the financial burden of a newborn and the poverty of her family she had to make a choice. Ramirez was sterilized on February 10, 1965, just three months after giving birth to her baby.31

The sterilization of so many children raises questions concerning how consent was given or whether consent was even needed at all. It seems almost impossible to imagine a parent wilfully consenting to such a procedure. Even in instances when parents did consent the consent was often forced by way of threats. One effective threat was to withhold the child from the parent. The mother of a seventeen year old girl identified only as Peggy realized this while her daughter was held at the State Home and Industrial School for Girls in Moore County. In 1938, the EBNC held a hearing to determine the child’s fate. Peggy's mother feared that if she was not operated on she would never come home. Having no real choice she half-heartedly agreed to the procedure.32 Doctors during this hearing argued for sterilization and frequently played a role in influencing parents to consent. The doctors argued that it was in the best interest of their child to have the them sterilized.33 It should be noted that a small number of sterilizations may have been voluntary, but determining what sterilizations were truly voluntary seems impossibly because the

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31 Kevin Begos and John Railey, “Sign This or Else,” Winston-Salem Journal, December 9, 2002.
32 Begos, “Sterilization was often the way out.”
33 Boggs, “For the Public Good: The Shameful History of Forced Sterilization in the U.S.”
records do not fully explain how consent was obtained and the legitimacy of claims in the records that consent existed appears questionable.\textsuperscript{34}

Sterilization candidates or their legal guardians had to consent to a sterilization. If they failed to do so, the Eugenics Board would call a hearing at which family members could voice their opposition to the sterilization. This appeal process may have been available for the children and parents, but it was a sham. The state sterilized these individuals without any regard for voiced concerns or the individual’s well-being. The entire illegitimacy of the appellate process puts into question most of the sterilizations. If, following the hearing, the board still felt that sterilization was needed, they could authorize the surgery against all objections.\textsuperscript{35} Some families realized the futility of fighting and decided to flee.

In 1934, the Orange County Department of Public Welfare filed petitions for sterilization of Emily Bodwin, and two of her six children. IQ test had been administered to all of the Bodwin family and found them all to be feebleminded, and in need of sterilization. The Bodwins refused consent and left the county. Over the next decade and a half state authorities filed petitions in order to sterilize the children. They eventually succeeded in sterilizing four of them. In 1937, authorities in the Bodwin’s new county of Chatham filed a new sterilization petition for the oldest daughter Laura. Emily Bodwin had since died and her husband overwhelmed with the care of his children consented. He also consented to several of his children being moved to state training schools (the record never shows but there exist a high possibility each of these children also being sterilized while institutionalized). Three years later, authorities petitioned sterilization for Laura's younger sister Pamela. Their father did not consent to this as he felt Laura's

\textsuperscript{34} Daren Bakst, \textit{North Carolina’s Forced-Sterilization Program a Case for Compensating the Living Victims.} Raleigh, NC: John Locke Foundation, 2011.

\textsuperscript{35} Boggs, “For the Public Good: The Shameful History of Forced Sterilization in the U.S.”
sterilization had damaged her health. The Eugenics Board called a hearing and against the father's objections authorized the surgery.\textsuperscript{36} What happened to the Bodwin family shows just how far the EBNC was willing to go. It appeared as though running from sterilization in North Carolina was impossible.

**Conclusion**

The state legislature abolished the sterilization program in 1977. Involuntary eugenics laws were repealed in 2003.\textsuperscript{37} This appeared to be the end of a sad chapter of state history on the surface, but for many it was impossible to forget what had happened. Thousand of those sterilized were still alive when the program finally ended. Most of them were children, now left with the scars, stigma, and thoughts of how life may have been different. Several members of state government, and advocacy groups felt it was necessary to compensate each of these individuals for the inestimable suffering.

Governor Bev Perdue established the North Carolina Justice for Sterilization Victims Foundation as a Division of the North Carolina Department of Administration in 2010. The goal of the foundation was to provide justice and compensate victims who were forcibly sterilized by the EBNC.\textsuperscript{38} After hearing accounts from EBNC victims Perdue commented, "It's hard for me to accept, to understand, to even figure out how these atrocious acts could be carried out in this country. This is not a good day for us, to hear the stories. It's not a happy day for North Carolina."\textsuperscript{39} Perdue and others felt it was high time to make amends for the damage done by the


\textsuperscript{39} WRAL, "Victims of NC Forced Sterilization Program Tell Their Stories," June 22, 2011.
state. North Carolina and six other states have offered formal apologies for their sterilization programs. North Carolina has been the only one to set up a process to compensate the victims.

The work of the governor and other supporters of compensation have driven the North Carolina House and Senate leaders to reach an agreement on a budget that included ten million dollars to be divided among victims of the state's eugenics program. Victims were initially scheduled to be paid on June 30, 2015, but legislators changed the schedule with a provision in the latest budget. The initial payment to verified victims will be based on the number of qualified recipients and the number of pending claims. The ten million dollars will then be divided by this figure. Once the appeals have been exhausted, a second payment will be sent out dividing up the remaining funds.\(^{40}\)

North Carolina has fifteen hundred to two thousand living victims of the sterilization, meaning that even more money may be necessary for compensation.\(^{41}\) Only about 170 victims who are still alive have been verified. The low number of victims who have revealed themselves reflects the continuing stigma of being sterilized and parallels the situation in Germany, where for many decades victims were reluctant to come forward due to the stigma and shame attached to their experience. Many of these identified are just like Elaine Riddick or Willis Lynch, children at the time of sterilization. Riddick was offered fifty thousand dollars for compensation by the Governor's task force. The offer only enraged her, "is that what they think my life is worth? How much are the kids I never had worth? How Much?" She said she plans to refuse the money recommended by the state. When asked of her bitterness she replied, "of course I'm still bitter. The state wants me to lie down like a dog and just take it." Riddick’s word echo the

\(^{41}\) Simpson, "North Carolina to compensate sterilization victims."
feelings of those sterilized during the eugenics programs extensive run: "I was just a child who
was raped," she says, "and then the state raped me all over again." 42

42 Zucchino, “Sterilized by North Carolina, She Felt Raped Once More.”


