

Vermont State Archives and Records Administration

The Papers of the Eugenics Survey of Vermont and the Vermont Commission on Country Life

Description and Inventory prepared by Nancy L. Gallagher under a grant from the Vermont Historical Records Advisory Board, March, 1998.

Content and Historical Significance of Records

The Eugenics Survey of Vermont (1925-1936) was a privately funded organization organized and directed by Henry F. Perkins, Chairman of the University of Vermont Zoology Department. Its purpose was to conduct studies of Vermont families and communities based on eugenics research models, to publicize its findings, and to support a program of social legislation that would allegedly improve the inborn quality of future generations of Vermonters. While the Survey supported many reforms in child welfare, education, and charities and corrections, its most enduring legacy is its role in the passage of Vermont's Sterilization Law of 1931.

During 1925-1928, the Eugenics Survey conducted extensive investigations on selected kinship groups in Vermont to develop "pedigrees of degeneracy" among Vermont's rural poor. The information extracted from social records, informants, genealogical investigations, and public welfare agencies in Vermont and surrounding states were publicized in The Eugenics Survey's Annual Reports of 1927-28 to enlist support for "negative eugenics" measures, namely sexual sterilization and expansion of institutions for the "feeble-minded."

In 1927, Harry Perkins expanded the survey into a comprehensive survey of all factors affecting rural life. The resulting Vermont Commission on Country Life, funded by grants from the Social Science Research Council and the Rockefeller Foundation, conducted a wide range of studies in rural life in 1928-1931. Its final report *Rural Vermont: A Program for the Future* (1931), became a working plan for rural rejuvenation and development and an important study documenting the perceived relationship between social, cultural, and economic forces in rural Vermont during the inter-war years.

In the 1930s, a comprehensive sociological study of Burlington under the leadership of Elin Anderson, Assistant director of the ESV and Instructor of Eugenics at UVM, was published in 1937 (*We Americans: A Study of Cleavage in An American City*, Harvard University Press). This study endures as an important source documenting the change in focus of the ESV from its studies of so called "degenerate" families in the mid-1920s to its concern in the 1930s with ethnic and religious tensions in Burlington neighborhoods, institutions, and economy.

After the Eugenics Survey closed in 1936, Professor Perkins transferred the records to the Robert Hull Fleming Museum at the University of Vermont, where he was curator, and secured funds for preservation and processing its archive from the Vermont Historical Records Survey of the Division of Professional and Service Projects of the W.P.A. A detailed inventory of the collection was completed in 1940, prefaced by Henry Perkins' essay on the the history of the Survey and its projects. In 1952 most of the archive was transferred to Vermont Public Record Division, where they were largely ignored and forgotten until the 1980s.

The Eugenics Survey of Vermont and the Vermont Commission on Country Life Papers consist of 37 cartons (43 linear feet) of manuscripts and publications. The collection includes official and private communications of Harry Perkins and the Survey staff within Vermont and with national outside agencies, records of proposed projects, meetings, and publicity campaigns, raw data from particular studies, and a substantial portion of the "Eugenics Survey Library" that Perkins

created. The collection is organized into two interrelated record groups, the Eugenics Survey and the Commission on Country Life.

The collection includes three types of records, all of which have historical importance to the state and the nation. First, the records of the organization itself, including minutes of meetings, memoranda, and correspondence, document the relationship between Vermont eugenics and progressive social reform efforts among leaders and institutions within and outside the state. Correspondence between Perkins and national leaders in eugenics during his years as president of the American Eugenics Society (1931-1934), reveal the internal tensions in the American eugenics movement during its the transition from the "old" or "mainline" eugenics to the "reformed" eugenics advocated by the AES after 1935.

The second type, the "case records," include information collected by social workers on specific families and groups in Vermont with the purpose of evaluating their social, intellectual, and economic worth to the state. These files were not open to the public until 1952, but were used by university students, social workers, and certain public officials during the interwar years. The files document in detail the manner in which personal information on particular families was collected and shared without their knowledge both within the state and between institutions in neighboring states. They also document with disturbing clarity the prejudices of some social workers, public officials, and local townspeople against ethnic minorities (particularly French Canadian and Native American) and poor and transient families. While case records of this nature are traditionally "confidential" and closed to the general public for 70 years, public access to these files have permitted descendants of the families studied to uncover some of their own family history, if with dismay over the Survey's exploitation of their family misfortunes. The Eugenics Survey contains no records of the implementation of the sterilization program in Vermont; by law, this authority fell under the jurisdiction of the Department of Public Welfare.

The third part of the collection, the Eugenics Survey's "library," includes original copies of period books, pamphlets, serials, and ephemera of the American eugenics movement, the birth control movement, mental health, rural sociology, and social welfare.

A bibliography of the library undertaken when the records were originally processed was never completed. Some books in the original library are presently in the UVM libraries.

Eugenics Survey of Vermont Papers: Collection Summary Description

Accession No: 5 **Location:** Box # PRA-7-22, 02167 **Dates:** 1925-1942

History: The Eugenics Survey of Vermont (1925-1936) was a privately funded organization organized and directed by Henry F. Perkins, Chairman of the University of Vermont Zoology Department. Its purpose was to conduct eugenical studies of Vermont families and communities and publicize its findings to support a broad range of social reforms in the state, particularly in the areas of child welfare, education, and charities and corrections. One such reform was Vermont's Sterilization Law of 1931. The ESV expanded its survey into the Vermont Commission on Country Life, whose final report *Rural Vermont: A Program for the Future* (1931), became a working plan for rural rejuvenation and development and an important study documenting the perceived relationship between social, cultural, and economic forces in rural Vermont during the inter-war years. In the 1930s, a comprehensive sociological study of Burlington under the leadership of Elin Anderson, Assistant director of the ESV and Instructor of Eugenics at UVM, was published in 1937 (*We Americans: A Study of Cleavage in An American City*, Harvard University Press). This study endures as an important source documenting the change in focus of the ESV from its studies of so called "degenerate" families in the mid-1920s to its concern in the 1930s with ethnic

studies of so called "degenerate" families in the mid-1920s to its concern in the 1930s with ethnic and religious tensions in Burlington neighborhoods, institutions, and economy.

Scope and Content of Records: The Eugenics Survey of Vermont Papers include most of the records created by the organization (1925-1936) and manuscripts documenting the processing and preparation of a guide to the collection during the years 1936-1942. The ESV records contain correspondence within and outside the organization, financial statements, reports and memoranda, published pamphlets and books used as source material, and raw and compiled data collected by social workers in their studies of Vermont families, towns, and institutionalized populations. The case files on individuals and families studied were considered by members of the ESV to be confidential. The ESV Office Index card files identify the original location of the contents of the collection.

Finding Aids: Box List (PRO computer), summary of series (attached), and the 1942 Inventory (Box PRA-22). The 1942 Inventory provides a detailed description of the history, activities, and records of the ESV. Harry Perkins supervised those hired by the Historical Records Survey of the WPA to complete the project and wrote most of the descriptions.

Eugenics Survey of Vermont Papers

Series: (Page nos. refer to 1942 Inventory, Box PRA-22) **Present Location:**

(Since 3/ 27/ 98)

1. Annual Reports (p.1) PRA-02617
2. Eugenics Survey of Vermont Office Index (p. 2) PRA-42-50
- Index of Individuals (arranged alphabetically) PRA-42-47
- Geographical Index (Counties, Towns, & Families studied) PRA-48
- Index of Books & Monographs PRA-48
- Index to ESV materials (inventory of collection) PRA-48
- Index of French Names and English "Corruptions" PRA-49
- Index for Key Family Study (by town and resident families) PRA-49
- Index of individuals in Ethnic Study of Burlington PRA-49
- Index of Informants (sources for studies of families and towns) PRA-50
- Index of VCCL Committees (by committee, county) PRA-50
3. Institution Records, 1925 (pp. 1-3) PRA-7
4. Families Suggested for Study, 1927 (pp. 10-11) PRA-7
5. Miscellaneous Data, Projects, Correspondence 1925-27 (pp.65-70) PRA-7
6. Statistics, 1925-28 (pp.70-84) PRA-7

7. National Committee of Mental Hygiene Study, 1926-27 (pp. 85-111) PRA-7
8. Riverside Reformatory Study, 1929 (pp.4-10) PRA-8
9. Information About Towns, 1929 (pp. 11-13) PRA-8
10. Key Family Study, 1928-1929 (pp. 17-23) PRA-8
11. Special Pedigrees Completed, 1926-1930 (pp. 33-42)
Pedigrees I-IV PRA-11
Pedigrees V-IX PRA-12
12. Special Pedigrees Incomplete, 1926-1930 (pp. 42-58)
Pedigrees X-XXIX PRA-9
Pedigrees XXX-LV PRA-10
13. Pedigree Charts, 1928 (pp. 58-59) PRA-02167
14. Unidentified Pedigrees, 1926-1930 (pp. 59-65) PRA-13
15. Brandon Waiting List, 1929 (pp. 14-28) PRA-14
16. Migration Study, 1930-31 (pp. 62-74)
Statistics for Waitsfield, Cornwall, and Jamaica PRA-14
Questionnaire Interviews, Waitsfield Residents & Emigrants PRA-14
Questionnaire Interviews, Cornwall, Jamaica PRA-15
17. Poor Relief Study of Burlington, 1935 (pp. 150-152) PRA-16
18. Ethnic Study of Burlington, 1932-1936 (pp. 152-194)
Statistics, Interviews, Notes, Sources used (1932-36) PRA-16
Questionnaire Interviews: Americans, French Canadians, Germans PRA-15
Questionnaire Interviews: French Canadians, Jews, Irish, Italians PRA-17
Statistical Tables (pp. 178-182) PRA-02167
19. Study of Adoptions, 1932-1937 (pp.195-198) PRA-17
20. Eugenics Survey Charts, 1925-1931 (pp. 199-200) Missing
21. Eugenics Survey Plates, 1927-1931 (p. 201) PRA-590

22. Pamphlet Library, 1911-1936 (pp. 203-205) PRA-18, 19, 20

23. Dr. Perkins' Correspondence, 1925-1936 (p. 206) Missing

24. Publication Data re. *We Americans*, 1937 (p. 207) PRA-21

25. Account Book, 1927-1937 (p. 208) PRA-22

26. American Eugenics Society, 1931-36 (pp. 209-213) PRA-21

27. Eugenics Congress, 1932-34 (pp. 214-219) PRA-21

28. Eugenics Research Association, 1931-36 (pp. 220-221) PRA-21

29. General, 1925-36 (pp. 222-236)

Adult Education PRA-21

Adult Education Campaign Tours PRA-21

Advisory Committee (memoranda, minutes of meetings) PRA-21

Advisory Council of A.E.S., 1932 PRA-21

Annual Reports (requests for) PRA-21

Birth Control PRA-21

Eugenics and Education in Eugenics PRA-21

29. General, 1925-36 (pp. 222-236), con'd.

The Family PRA-21

Human Betterment Foundation, Family Relations, 1932-36 PRA-21

Human Relations, 1935 PRA-21

Immigration, 1930 PRA-21

Interviews, 1932-35 PRA-21

Population, 1934-36 PRA-22

Population Association of America, 1932-33 PRA-22

Sex Hygiene and Social Hygiene, 1932 PRA-22

Dr. Perkins' Speeches, 1932-33 Missing

Sterilization, 1925-33 Missing

Sterilization, Dr. Popenoe's Report Missing

Vermont Conference of Social Work, 1925-35 PRA-22

Eugenics Survey Mailing List (Address Book), 1925-36 PRA-22

30. Eugenics Survey, 1936-1942 PRA-22

Guide to the collection (drafts & final copies) prepared 1936-1942, correspondence relating to collection processing, misc. reports ca. 1942

Vermont Commission on Country Life Papers Collection Summary Description

Accession No: 5 **Location:** Box # PRA-23-31, 02387 **Dates:** 1928-1936

History: The Vermont Commission on Country Life was organized by Prof. Henry F. Perkins, Professor of Zoology at the University of Vermont and Director of the Eugenics Survey of Vermont. Funded by grants from the Social Science Research Council and the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fund, the Commission conducted a state-wide study of the cultural, sociological, and biological factors influencing rural Vermont. Agricultural economist Henry C. Taylor was hired as Executive Director and over 200 volunteers were organized into various study committees. The final reports of the committees, published in *Rural Vermont: A Program for the Future* (Burlington: VCCL, 1931), was presented as a blueprint of progressive reforms for rural communities to implement in order to improve the quality of life in the country. The VCCL continued to meet throughout the 1930s to publicize the findings of the Commission, consider revisions, and support reforms in medical care, education, recreation, cultural life, and historic preservation projects.

Scope and Content of Records: The collection is generally organized into files that concern administration and general VCCL business and individual files of each committee. Administrative files contain official correspondence, minutes and reports of meetings, financial documents, address books and mailing lists, internal memoranda, and Newsletters. The Committee files, varying in length from several pages to over 2 linear feet, contain committee chair correspondence, minutes and reports, newspaper clippings collected by the committee, statistical compilations and some survey data, and printed source material (pamphlets, article) collected and used as reference by the committee.

Arrangement and Condition: The VCCL records had never been processed or arranged. Files of particular committees were distributed in various boxes, including those containing Eugenics Survey records. In the interest of provenance and user access, the the VCCL and ESV records were segregated into two distinct subgroups in 1998. The VCCL files are arranged according to the evident original order of their creators. Files and folders are clearly marked, though the folder tabs are brittle and their identity may be lost with careless use. Paper deterioration (especially of brittle folders and newspaper clippings) is the most serious problem.

Finding Aids: Accession box list, attached summary of files and their present location.