

[How one man kept Mass. from sterilizing the disabled](#)

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Not too long ago, [a vast network](#) of Massachusetts state schools and hospitals locked away tens of thousands of intellectually, developmentally and mentally disabled people. This is a topic I've studied for many years, and on occasion, people show me objects they believe were used to sterilize inmates, to prevent people with disabilities from having children.

They're not necessarily wrong to think so. Massachusetts could easily have become a major hub for sterilization in America — there was significant support from philanthropists, doctors, politicians, social workers, and other reformers for the state to be so. But Massachusetts never legalized sterilization of the disabled, largely because of the actions of one man: Dr. Walter E. Fernald. At a moment where [eugenic ideas are common](#), supports for disabled people [are being stripped](#), and our politics seek to [demonize disability](#), it is a story that tells us how much one person's commitment to their values can shape the lives of others.

In 1911, it looked Massachusetts was poised to join dozens of other states that were [introducing and passing laws](#) ordering the forced sterilization of so-called "defectives." The sudden explosion of these laws was no accident. In the first decade of the 1900s, new discoveries about genetics were used to give a veneer of respectability to the pseudo-sciences of eugenics and intelligence testing. Both fields gained a huge following [among middle-](#) and [upper-class](#) Americans who believed their station in life was pre-ordained by their biological superiority, and that their social responsibility was to intervene on behalf of nature to ensure that only the best traits were passed down to the next generation.

To accomplish these eugenic goals, they pushed for the segregation and sterilization of the disabled, and over time, they extended their definition of disability to include everything from sexual promiscuity to race.

These ideas were particularly appealing in Massachusetts, a center for American medicine, technology, and business. From high-society to the [halls of Harvard](#), eugenics drew supporters including the prominent neurologist [William Bullard](#), I.Q. testing pioneer [Robert Yerkes](#), and [Alexander Graham Bell](#), the Washington-based former principal of the Boston School for Deaf-Mutes and inventor of the telephone.

Walter E. Fernald kept company with them all — he was no mere follower of eugenics; he was

one of the movement's prominent voices.

In 1887, Fernald was the superintendent of the Massachusetts School for the Feeble-Minded, the [nation's first public institution](#) for so-called "idiots" and "imbeciles." He moved the school from Boston to Waltham where he intended to build a utopian community for disabled people. By 1900, he was widely recognized as the world's leading expert on intellectual and developmental disabilities, but he was also taking a dark turn.

As a proponent of eugenics, Fernald developed a concept he called "[defective delinquency](#)," which argued that some disabled people expressed their disabilities through criminality and vice. This idea underpinned the work of Fernald's friend and junior colleague, the psychologist Henry Goddard, who brought the I.Q. test to America. Goddard used it on a captive and abused population of disabled children to falsely confirm the existence of people with "defective delinquency" who Goddard termed morons. Fernald used Goddard's work, as well as his own influence and prominence, to persuade states and nations build institutions like his own. He increasingly advocated for the lifetime segregation of disabled people.

Which brings us to May 1911 and a meeting of some of the eugenics movement's [most powerful leaders](#) in Monson, Mass., including Harry Laughlin, superintendent of the influential Eugenics Record Office and aide to the nation's leading eugenicist, Charles Davenport. At that conference, Laughlin joined doctors and philanthropists to develop a platform that would have made Massachusetts the world's testing ground for "[purging the blood of the American people](#) of the handicapping and deteriorating influences of these anti-social classes." It was [a message carried by](#) philanthropist and publisher Bleecker Van Wagenen to the First International Eugenics Congress in London in 1912.

Fernald was not at the meeting, and for a very important reason: He vehemently opposed eugenic sterilization.

Early in his career, Fernald had patients who masturbated so violently they could injure or kill themselves. He had agreed to the surgical castration of a handful of his patients at the request of their families. For the rest of his life, he was haunted by the catastrophic psychological impact of the procedure on his patients. He was also horrified by the story of an intellectually disabled woman who was sterilized by another Massachusetts doctor. The woman's caretakers assumed that sterilization was a "cure-all." Abandoned, she was raped by men from all over town who then spread sexually transmitted diseases.

The 1911 meeting was a catalyst, a turning point, for Fernald. As the eugenicists grew louder in their calls for sterilization, Fernald felt increasingly estranged from them, casting a methodical and increasingly critical eye at whether their scientific claims held up to scrutiny. Fernald was powerful and politically savvy, but he knew that if he started a public fight with eugenicists, he would be outnumbered. Instead, he began to wage a quietly relentless campaign to block their calls for sterilization at every turn. Given Massachusetts' large Catholic population, he raised the

specter of the Church getting involved, which opposed all forms of sterilization.

Meanwhile, he quietly conducted [a first-of-its-kind study](#), tracking down inmates who had managed to break free from his institution to see how they were faring. Contrary to his earlier claims and the drumbeat of propaganda from eugenicists, it turned out, the former inmates were leading lives no different than non-disabled people. At the same time, Fernald began demonstrating, in scientific studies, that many intellectual and developmental disabilities were caused by disease and injury, not heredity.

In 1915, Fernald [testified as an expert witness](#) in New York on behalf of Frank Osborn, whose release from a state institution was conditional on being sterilized. Going toe-to-toe with Charles Davenport, Fernald's testimony was so devastating that the court struck down the validity of New York's sterilization law and the state legislature repealed it. Harry Laughlin wrote that it "set back eugenical progress among [New York's] institutions by 10 years." For the next decade, sterilization laws ground to a halt everywhere in America.

[Fernald's] legacy haunts our present, where intellectually and developmentally disabled people live lives of isolation, poverty and abuse.

But Fernald died in 1924 and without a powerful opponent, Laughlin and Davenport helped drive a case to the Supreme Court in 1927, [Buck v. Bell](#), in which the Court reinstated many state sterilization laws, once again legalizing the practice. Still, Fernald's legacy on sterilization held firm in Massachusetts, where the practice was never embraced by the state.

Nonetheless, while rulings have undercut *Buck v. Bell* over the last half century, it has never been overturned. Like the ruling, the ideas of eugenics were never fully repudiated in American life. Today they live on, regardless of party or politics [in hidden](#) and [overt ways](#), to the continued detriment to the lives of disabled people. Fernald's life shows us how little it would take to turn the tide against these ideas. Indeed, at the time of his death, he was calling for a near-total dismantling of the institutional system he had developed and championed, arguing that instead of policing the disabled we should crack down on communities who were bad to the disabled people who had a right to live in them.

Faced with a growing sense that he had gone in the wrong direction, Fernald was willing to methodically test his ideas, demonstrate their faults so that others would not repeat them, and change his views based on what he had learned. He was willing to do it with conviction, even if it meant pushing back against very the people who were once his allies. His legacy haunts our present, where intellectually and developmentally disabled people live lives of isolation, poverty and abuse. It demands to know why America still holds onto ideas about disabled people that should have been abandoned so long ago, why the non-disabled still turn to institutionalization rather than building the welcoming communities he hoped they could create, and why this country resists the spirit of change needed to truly begin that work.