

THE FIRST SEEDS OF VIRGINIA'S
STERILIZATION ACT OF 1924:
JOSEPH T. MASTIN AND THE STATE BOARD OF
CHARITIES AND CORRECTIONS

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The infamous 1927 U.S. Supreme Court case, *Buck v. Bell*, served as a test case to determine the validity of the Virginia Sterilization Act of 1924, which provided for the sterilization of “mental defectives” under the care of various state hospitals and institutions.¹ Upholding the constitutionality of the Virginia law, the case and Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes’ assertion that “[t]hree generations of imbeciles are enough” within Carrie Buck’s family has been the subject of increasing scholarly and public attention in recent years.²

The philosophical and ideological backdrop of the 1924 Virginia Act and *Buck v. Bell* was rooted in the theory of eugenics spawned by the emergence of Social Darwinism within American thought roughly between the years 1890 and 1930. Originally defined in 1883 by British scientist Francis Galton the term “eugenics” denoted a theory that hereditary or genetic factors rather than environmental impacts created many of society’s problems: crime, poverty, and those with mental and physical impairments or disabilities. The goals—to root out these societal ills, to promote the “fittest of the fit” and thereby enhance the virtues of American society—led to Progressive reform movements, particularly in the South. This intellectual construct was quickly adopted by many professionals in the United States, such as physicians, public health experts, and charitable and religious organization leaders, and gradually permeated public thinking.³

¹ *Buck v. Bell*, 274 U.S. 200 (1927); *Virginia Acts of Assembly*, 1924, ch. 394. The Virginia legislature on the same day passed the Racial Integrity Act, also rooted in eugenic thought. See *Virginia Acts of Assembly*, 1924, ch. 371.

² *Buck v. Bell*, 274 U.S. at 207. See Adam Cohen, *Imbeciles: The Supreme Court, American Eugenics, and the Sterilization of Carrie Buck* (New York: Penguin, 2016); Paul Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck v. Bell* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2008).

³ Gregory Michael Dorr, “Defective or Disabled? Race, Medicine, and Eugenics in Progressive Era Virginia and Alabama,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era* 5.4 (October 2006): 360–363; Paul A. Lombardo, “Three Generations, No Imbeciles: New Light on *Buck v. Bell*,” *N.Y.U. Law Review* 60.1 (April 1985): 30, fn.2. The literature on eugenics in general and by state is vast. For a popular history of eugenics in the United States, see Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America’s Campaign to Create a Master Race* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 2003); for a nuanced scholarly treatment, see Paul A. Lombardo, ed., *A Century of Eugenics in America: From the Indiana Experiment to the Human Genome Era* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2011).

The eugenic reform movement focused on the perceived danger of the burden of the “feeble-minded” on society. A loose catch-all term, feeble-mindedness referred to mental defects ranging from those with below normal intelligence to those incapable of rational thought which prevented such persons from performing their respective roles in society. The existence of the feeble-minded was often associated with social ills such as poverty, alcoholism, illegitimacy, and crime. A condition recognized as incurable, notably vague and subjective in diagnosis, and coupled with concerns of sexual immorality, the dangers ascribed to the feeble-minded led Progressive reformers to utilize scientific methods and current social welfare programs and governmental agencies, and create new entities, to address the issue. In the views of Progressive reformers, societal stability trumped philanthropy and individual rights, and segregation and sterilization eventually served as the primary means of control.⁴ The purpose of this essay is to describe Virginia’s initial response to this perceived threat from the feeble-minded which eventually led to the 1924 sterilization act and to *Buck v. Bell*, and the corresponding role of Virginia Methodism’s social welfare pioneer, Reverend Joseph T. Mastin.⁵

Tilling the Soil

Virginia initially recognized the need for a single advisory board to serve as connective tissue among the array of private and public institutions which provided “care, custody or training of the defective, dependent, delinquent or criminal classes” in the state, and to annually inspect, examine, and collect reports from each one. Accordingly, in 1908 the General Assembly established the State Board of Charities and Corrections. Not designed as an official administrative entity with executive powers, the State Board nevertheless exercised potent powers by providing advice and recommendations to the governor and the legislature based on inspections and information collected from such institutions on the “dependent, defective and delinquent classes.” These institutions included jails, almshouses, insane hospitals, reformatories, penitentiaries, and prison farms. Pertinent public policy measures would then be developed and implemented based on the State Board’s annual reports and recommendations in order to increase the “efficiency of

⁴ Henry Herbert Goddard, *Feeble-Mindedness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: MacMillan, 1926), 4; Cohen, *Imbeciles*, 6; Lombardo, *Three Generations*, 15–17; Dorr, “Defective or Disabled?,” 366–368; Gregory Michael Dorr, “Assuring America’s Place in the Sun: Ivey Foreman Lewis and the Teaching of Eugenics at the University of Virginia, 1915–1953,” *The Journal of Southern History* 66.2 (May, 2000): 285; Sharon Leon, “‘A Human Being, and Not a Mere Social Factor’: Catholic Strategies for Dealing with Sterilization Statutes in the 1920s,” *Church History* 73.2 (June, 2004): 386–387.

⁵ This essay focuses only on the initial work of Rev. Mastin which contributed to the eventual enactment of Virginia’s sterilization law. Paul Lombardo describes in detail in his writings the activities of a group of political colleagues (Aubrey Strode, Irving Whitehead, and Albert Priddy) who actively worked together with the singular purpose to ensure the passage of the law and promote its use as a test case for U.S. Supreme Court consideration. Their separate activities will not be described here. See, e.g., Lombardo, “Three Generations.”

public officials and [bring] institutions for the care and custody of the dependent, defective and delinquent classes up to a high and modern standard.”⁶

Governor Claude A. Swanson subsequently selected a five-member board. The first order of business was to select a secretary to lead the State Board's day-to-day activities. Richmond Methodist minister and superintendent of the Virginia Conference Orphanage, Joseph T. Mastin, was appointed, pursuant to the recommendation of Dr. William Francis Drewry, superintendent of the Central State Hospital in Petersburg and influential social reformer.⁷

A missionary and social reformer at heart, with considerable administrative acumen, Mastin exhibited the traits and experience necessary to effectively run the State Board and carry out its legislative purpose and objectives. Drewry previously worked together with Mastin and other institutional and religious reformers to organize the State Conference of Charities and Correction in 1900 to begin collecting and analyzing information on social conditions within Virginia. Mastin contributed to this work by visiting jails and almshouses and reporting on their harsh conditions to the members of the State Conference. Based on their work and growing awareness of the social distress of many Virginians, the members began lobbying for a governmental agency to support their work with state funding and legislative muscle. The State Conference influenced Governor Andrew Jackson Montague to make this recommendation in both the 1904 and 1906 legislative sessions, as did his successor, Governor Swanson, whose support in the 1908 session finally resulted in approval of the State Board.⁸

Mastin's selection as secretary, however, was not just based on his work with fellow members of the State Conference. His roots in social reform ran deep throughout his ministry, grounded in his conviction that Jesus' work among the poor and marginalized, especially exemplified in St. Luke's gospel, demanded the same of his followers.⁹

Early in his ministerial career—after leaving Randolph-Macon College in 1875 and being admitted on trial to the Virginia Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South—Mastin heard the call to serve in the Missouri mission field. Unable to garner an appointment to go west, his subsequent appointments within Virginia provided a number of opportunities for social work in his home state. Mastin considered his appointment in 1888 to the Nottoway Charge as his true apprenticeship and crucible in social work and reform. The nearby new railroad town of Crewe had no church, so with vocal opposition yet grudging permission from his Nottoway congregation,

⁶ *Virginia Acts of Assembly*, 1908, ch. 276; Arthur James, *Virginia's Social Awakening: The Contribution of Dr. Mastin and the Board of Charities and Corrections* (Richmond, VA: Garrett and Massie, 1939), 4–5, 164; Lombardo, *Three Generations*, 17.

⁷ James, *Virginia's Social Awakening*, 2–6; Samuel C. Shepherd, Jr., *Avenues of Faith: Shaping the Urban Religious Culture of Richmond, Virginia, 1900–1929* (Tuscaloosa: U Alabama P, 2001), 149.

⁸ James, *Virginia's Social Awakening*, 2–3; Shepherd, *Avenues of Faith*, 149–150.

⁹ Shepherd, *Avenues of Faith*, 150.

Mastin and his wife established a church, organized a YMCA, and attacked the myriad of social issues confronting a burgeoning industrial town. His appointment to Norfolk in 1892 provided him the opportunity to work with the women and staff at the Florence Crittenden Home for unwed mothers, and his subsequent appointment to Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church, South, led him to implement a temporary shelter program for indigent men in downtown Richmond. His initial efforts in this urban ministry eventually led to the creation of the Methodist Institute which provided a variety of assistance programs for the poor and needy in Richmond, and then formation of the Trinity Institutional Church to serve as the umbrella organization for all city missions. Remaining in Richmond and serving as superintendent of the Virginia Conference Orphanage, he eliminated the institution's debt, constructed new facilities, and raised awareness of the plight of orphans in his travels across the state, until his selection to lead the State Board.¹⁰

Mastin's next sixteen years leading the State Board and its successor agency, the Department of Public Welfare, sparked a flurry of social reform initiatives across the Commonwealth. The primary areas of investigation for Mastin and his small staff included poor relief, the needs of dependent children, the conditions of jails, the juvenile court system, and state prisons and crime. He also applied his administrative skills to coordinating and consolidating the hodgepodge of local and state agencies, charitable organizations, and other institutions overseeing these activities. The State Board's work also bore fruit by serving both as a model for Virginia's other private and public entities in their own reform efforts and as a catalyst for the promulgation of a myriad of state reform laws.¹¹

First Seeds Planted

The State Board's broad mandate under the 1908 act also specifically included inspection, evaluation, and reporting on those public and private institutions housing and caring for "mental defectives," as well as those mental defectives, or "feebleminded," residing in Virginia but noninstitutionalized. Along with the other areas of investigation under the purview of the State Board, statistics were to be compiled on defective classes "both in and out of institutions" and an annual report was to be submitted to the governor.¹²

The first step included gathering general information on the extent of fee-

¹⁰ Edgar J. Nottingham, III, "Reflections Concerning the Life of the Rev. J. T. Mastin, Pastor and Leader in Virginia's Social Awakening," *Virginia United Methodist Heritage* 20.1 (Spring 1994): 14, 16–17; Henry Lee Robison, Jr., "Joseph Thomas Mastin," in W. D. Keene, Jr., ed., *Memoirs—200 Years! Soldiers of the Cross, 1785–1987* (Decorah, IA: Amundsen, 1988), 671–672; Shepherd, *Avenues of Faith*, 143–144, 149.

¹¹ Shepherd, *Avenues of Faith*, 150–152; Nottingham, "Reflections," 20–22. See James, *Virginia's Social Awakening*, for a detailed treatment of Mastin's work, practical results, and legislative response in the form of laws and funding mechanisms. The total body of Mastin's social reform work and helmsmanship of the State Board is beyond the scope of this essay, but is important to illustrate his spiritual convictions throughout his ministry and as a contextual framework for his actions related to the "feebleminded."

¹² *Virginia Acts of Assembly*, 1908, ch. 276.

blemindedness within Virginia for both children and adults. To that end, letters and questionnaires were distributed to physicians across Virginia to ascertain the "number of epileptics, idiots, feeble-minded, and cripple children (under 16 years of age) in their care." Reports eventually trickled back to the State Board from 443 physicians with 731 feeble-minded persons identified.¹³

In addition, Mastin enlisted the help of the state's Department of Public Instruction to send out pamphlets to 135 city public schools and their teachers with questions to test for mentally deficient students. Schools were considered low-hanging fruit due to teachers' familiarity with their students and home conditions. Piggy-backing off of similar pamphlets developed by the State of New Jersey, a "Diagnosis for Mental Deficiency" provided guidance to teachers and school administrators to identify feeble-minded students and to potentially deem them unfit for public education. Markers of feeble-mindedness, evaluated collectively, included "blinking, twitching of the mouth, squinting, nervous movements of hands and feet . . . irregularities of gait . . . spasms, fits, hysterical crying and laughing . . . cold and clammy hands." In addition, other markers included "imperfections of speech, sight or hearing . . . excessive exaggeration, falsehood, and poor moral sense" and the "inability to keep up in studies" dependent on age within the class. The State Board noted that physicians ideally should have completed the questionnaires, presumably having consulted the teachers who knew the evaluated students, but that the initial data collection proved sufficient for the time being. The "trial test" results included answers from 82 schools with 17,830 out of 31,640 students identified as feeble-minded based on the diagnosis criteria.¹⁴

Mastin and the State Board recognized the inadequacy of almshouses as safe havens for the feeble-minded based on their concurrent investigations into these institutions as part of the State Board's broader mandate. Accordingly, the establishment of a state-run institutional structure for the care of the feeble-minded was suggested, particularly for females. Not altogether altruistic in making this suggestion, the State Board noted in a New York example that the "progeny of one feeble-minded woman" cost the state more than the potential expense to provide a home for such women in Newark.¹⁵

The 1910 General Assembly session responded to Mastin's reports and the State Board's work by directing Mastin to continue his investigation into the feeble-minded, other than the insane and epileptic, and report his results and recommendations to the next session.¹⁶ Mastin did so, collecting more information from his widespread investigations and noting again the results of the 1909 teacher survey and the need for standardized records to track

¹³ *First Annual Report of the State Board of Charities and Corrections* (Richmond: Superintendent of Public Printing, 1909), 23.

¹⁴ *First Annual Report*, 33–34.

¹⁵ *First Annual Report*, 216–217. This suggestion focused narrowly on non-delinquent feeble-minded persons. Delinquent feeble-minded, or those disposed toward criminality, were considered sufficiently housed in jails and penitentiaries (James, *Virginia's Social Awakening*, 164).

¹⁶ *Virginia Acts of Assembly*, 1910, ch. 83.

the feeble-minded. He further hinted at the need for feeble-minded institutions given his discovery of feeble-minded children being housed in scattered reformatories and insane hospitals. He also stressed, perhaps recalling his experience overseeing the Virginia Conference Orphanage, standardized recordkeeping for all children's institutions in Virginia, not just those housing the feeble-minded.¹⁷ In addition, Mastin distributed another letter requesting information on the feeble-minded to 3,850 physicians and "ministers of the gospel." Based on the number of direct responses to his letter and arbitrary assumptions of how the remainder would have responded, he estimated 6,000 feeble-minded people resided in Virginia.¹⁸

In May, 1911, Mastin and the State Board organized and hosted the Virginia Child Welfare Conference in Richmond, the first conference of its kind in the South. The forty-two speakers, the majority Virginians, had backgrounds in medicine, science, education, public health, and social work. The four day conference, with 200–300 daily attendees, addressed a wide variety of issues related to the welfare of children of all races within the Commonwealth.¹⁹ A number of topics targeted eugenics and feeble-mindedness, the effects of heredity, and the problems associated with "backward" and illegitimate children. The conference committee, including Mastin's good friend and fellow reformer Dr. William Drewry, drafted concluding resolutions encouraging the General Assembly to establish an institution for the feeble-minded and provide the State Board with additional funds and powers in order to "protect the State against dependent, delinquent and defective persons"²⁰

Mastin proceeded to incorporate some of the conference session materials and thoughts in his third annual report, as well as additional information and statistics gathered across Virginia on the feeble-minded. He also included case studies of family histories and report abstracts from other states and England in order to "familiarize ourselves with the results of the latest investigations of feeble-mindedness" Cobbling together information and analyses from subject matter experts and writers and speakers associated with the National Conference of Charities and Correction, Mastin's report generally defined feeble-mindedness as the lack of normal mental capacity. However, the overarching definition was further categorized into idiots and imbeciles. Idiots denoted "extreme stupidity" and described those who were incapable of working or taking care of themselves. Imbeciles suffered a lesser condition, able to take care of their persons and work with supervision, but

¹⁷ *Second Annual Report of the State Board of Charities and Corrections* (Richmond: Superintendent of Public Printing, 1910), 33–34.

¹⁸ *Third Annual Report of the State Board of Charities and Corrections* (Richmond: Superintendent of Public Printing, 1911), 11, 15–17.

¹⁹ *Third Annual Report*, 107–108.

²⁰ *Virginia and the Welfare of Her Children: Addresses and Discussions Child Welfare Conference, Richmond, VA, May 22–25, 1911* (Richmond: Superintendent of Public Printing, 1911), 12–15, 19–22, 70–73, 93–98, 106–108, 121.

incapable of earning their own livelihoods.²¹

With its definitions, case studies, statistical narratives, and expert opinions, one common thread throughout the report aligned with Progressive and eugenic thinking at the time, namely, the incurable and hereditary nature of feeble-mindedness with its consequential and disturbing costs and burdens on society. Mastin and the State Board concluded from this array of collected information and analyses that the feeble-minded needed to be housed in institutions dedicated to their care and receive appropriate education and vocational training. Furthermore, here sterilization of the feeble-minded was suggested for the first time—sterilization of feeble-minded men and the prevention of childbearing by feeble-minded women, with marriage licenses only being issued to couples based on evidence they possessed normal minds.²²

Mastin's findings and conclusions garnered the support of the Virginia Medical Society, which also called for segregated housing, care, and education for the feeble-minded. The General Assembly responded in its 1912 session by establishing a colony for feeble-minded women in Lynchburg, associated with its already-existing epileptic institution. Those women admitted were to be indigent, of childbearing age between 12 and 45, and deemed imbeciles, not idiots.²³ The General Assembly eventually expanded the authority of the Lynchburg colony to include feeble-minded men and provided for the establishment of a separate colony for African-American feeble-minded at Central State Hospital in Petersburg, although funding for the latter colony failed to materialize.²⁴ Tapping into the nineteenth-century social purity movement which focused on sexual misconduct, social hygiene, and the growing view that most prostitutes were feeble-minded, Mastin also investigated the ills associated with prostitution and continued to advocate for marriage and childbearing prevention solutions for the feeble-minded.²⁵

Eyeing the mounds of information, statistics, case reports, expert analyses, and recommendations gathered and communicated by Mastin and the State Board since 1908, the 1914 General Assembly enacted an additional law. Although the legislature authorized the continuance of investigations into feeble-mindedness, it also directed Mastin to present to the 1916 General Assembly a "comprehensive, practical scheme for the training, segregation and the prevention of the procreation of mental defectives."²⁶

Mastin's 128-page report, *Mental Defectives in Virginia*, was indeed

²¹ *Third Annual Report*, 11–14, 19–30.

²² *Third Annual Report*, 6–7, 27–28.

²³ *Virginia Acts of Assembly*, 1912, ch. 196; James, *Virginia's Social Awakening*, 165–167; Lombardo, *Three Generations*, 18.

²⁴ *Virginia Acts of Assembly*, 1914, ch. 346, and 1916, ch. 106. James estimates an average daily attendance at the Lynchburg colony in 1913 of 134.9 feeble-minded and epileptics, and 185 feeble-minded and 382 epileptics attending in 1922. See James, *Virginia's Social Awakening*, 167–168.

²⁵ Lombardo, *Three Generations*, 15–18; Leon, "A Human Being, and Not a Mere Social Factor," 385.

²⁶ *Virginia Acts of Assembly*, 1914, ch. 147.

comprehensive.²⁷ Replete with materials and information extracted from the State Board's annual reports, primary investigations, and raw data and statistics generated over the previous five years of the State Board's existence, the report re-hashed and amplified the inseparable ties between heredity and feeble-mindedness and their social offspring: insanity, epilepsy, poverty, juvenile delinquency, prostitution, crime, and drunkenness. Mastin concluded the report with a summary of the "evils" of feeble-mindedness and the State Board's proposed remedies and governmental plan of action to cleanse Virginia of those evils. Many of the recommendations were recycled versions contained in previous reports.

The *Mental Defectives in Virginia* report ultimately reflected the standard Progressive reformist view of striking a balance between the desire to care for and protect the feeble-minded *class* with the desire to eliminate societal ills and costs and their root causes. Ignored and forgotten in this balancing process was the feeble-minded *individual*. The message conveyed by Mastin and the State Board to the General Assembly in *Mental Defectives in Virginia* succinctly illustrated this point: "Only by striking at the fountain head, i.e., by segregating or sterilizing all feeble-minded child-producers, can we hope to dry up the springs of this evil" in Virginia society.²⁸

Virginia's legislative body listened and acted. For the first time it legislatively defined a "feeble-minded person" and bestowed additional powers on the State Board. Those powers include developing and maintaining a registry of all feeble-minded persons across the state; instituting proceedings for their protection, commitment and care; licensing and inspecting private institutions housing the feeble-minded; providing instruction and guidance to parents of feeble-minded children; and coordinating the placement and care of feeble-minded children turned over to the State Board by the courts. The General Assembly further directed state courts to provide procedural safeguards for those who are potentially deemed feeble-minded, and to be admitted to an institution for the feeble-minded. It also provided for the establishment of a school at the Lynchburg colony. In 1918 it further codified into law Mastin's and the State Board's recommendation to prohibit the marriages of the feeble-minded.²⁹

Exhibiting caution, however, the legislature omitted any mention of sterilization measures as proposed by Mastin and the State Board. Accounting for, segregating, and caring for the feeble-minded class in Virginia took priority. But the first seeds had been planted. Dedicated work to nurture and cultivate the seeds of sterilization in Virginia as a means of social policy as first planted by Mastin and the State Board fell to others, which ultimately

²⁷ See generally *Mental Defectives in Virginia: A Special Report of the State Board of Charities and Corrections to the General Assembly of 1916, on Weak-Mindedness in the State of Virginia, Together with a Plan for Training, Segregation and Prevention of the Procreation of the Feeble-minded* (Richmond, VA: Superintendent of Public Printing, 1915).

²⁸ *Mental Defectives in Virginia*, 2-7, 110-119.

²⁹ *Virginia Acts of Assembly*, 1916, chs. 104, 312, and 1918, ch. 300; James, *Virginia's Social Awakening*, 170-171.

led to the 1924 passage of the Virginia Sterilization Act.³⁰

Conclusion

Mastin continued to work vigorously to fulfill the State Board's legislative mandates for the remainder of his tenure at its helm until 1922, and subsequently as Commissioner of its successor, the Department of Public Welfare, until his retirement in 1926. But his activities and those of the State Board focused on the objectives provided in the 1916 act as to the segregation and care of the feebleminded, not sterilization, as well as the broader areas of prison reform and juvenile and domestic court reform.³¹

He also actively ministered to the city of Richmond and the state in addition to his duties as the State Board's secretary and in retirement by serving as trustee for both Randolph-Macon College and the Interdenominational Religious Work Foundation to promote state religious activities; serving as chaplain of the Virginia State Penitentiary; collaborating to establish the Trinity Institutional Church in providing various social services for Richmond, including work relief for African Americans, child welfare and educational services, and clothing distribution; and preaching whenever asked to do so. Residing in the Virginia Conference Orphanage the last few years of his life, his death on September 2, 1943, sparked an outpouring of praise for his ministry and labor in social reform efforts in Virginia and adulation as the "father of social work in the South."³²

The Reverend Joseph T. Mastin's lifelong ministry in the Methodist Church, Virginia state government, and the Progressive social reform movement certainly exhibited his love for his fellow man and his fierce conviction and striving to emulate and embody Jesus' example of serving society's poor and the marginalized. As the old adage goes, he practiced what he preached and believed, more so than most at the time. But how do we today align that conviction and life of service with his active work in promoting the segregation and sterilization of the "feebleminded," some of the most poor and marginalized in early twentieth-century America?

³⁰ See Lombardo, *Three Generations*, 12–15, 91–102, 288–292, for a description of the activities of lawyer and politician Aubrey Strode to ensure passage of Virginia's Sterilization Act of 1924. Strode presented the bill to establish the Lynchburg colony for epileptics in 1906, and Albert Priddy served as the colony's first superintendent. Together with Irving Whitehead, defense attorney for Carrie Buck—a "feebleminded" resident of the Lynchburg colony who was eventually sterilized—they worked to test the Virginia act in the court system, leading to *Buck v. Bell*. Virginia did not repeal the 1924 act until 1979, with a documented number of those sterilized reaching 8,300 (Lombardo, *Three Generations*, 293–294).

³¹ James, *Virginia's Social Awakening*, 173–174; Nottingham, "Reflections," 20–22; Robison, "Joseph Thomas Mastin," 672.

³² Robison, "Joseph T. Mastin," 672–673; *Virginia Religious Work Journal* 3 (Summer, 1944), Dr. Mastin Notebook, Trinity United Methodist Church Archives, Richmond, VA; *Virginia Public Welfare* 21 (October, 1943), Dr. Mastin Notebook; J. T. Mastin Letter, Trinity Institutional Church, June 5, 1939, Trinity Miscellaneous, 1815–1988, Notebook, Trinity United Methodist Church Archives, Richmond, VA; H. D. Mollart, *History of Trinity Methodist Church, 1790–1941*, Trinity Miscellaneous, 1815–1988, Notebook.

I propose that it is easy for us today and ultimately dangerous, to tread down the often slippery slope of presentism and anachronism when evaluating the past and its actors. In doing so, we expose ourselves—through our present actions, deeds, and accomplishments—to a potentially similar evaluation by following generations. Accordingly, we must proceed with caution. But it is also critically important for us not to ignore the distasteful, uncomfortable, tragic, or horrific aspects of our history.

Eugenic thinking in Joseph Mastin's lifetime is one of those aspects of our history we cannot ignore. Social Darwinism and eugenics permeated social reform movements, religious organizations, universities, and state governments, and fueled the impulses of its adherents to improve society and eradicate pain and suffering.³³ Eugenics and the promotion of segregation and sterilization were rooted in faulty scientific assumptions, and our perceptions of that movement are now colored by the rapid advancements in scientific knowledge and understanding. But many individuals and their families were often tragically affected by this Progressive reform movement and essentially ostracized within society by virtue of being labeled "feeble-minded" by their own government and fellow citizens. Regardless, Mastin firmly believed his work benefited Virginia society and the feeble-minded themselves, grounded in Christian love for humanity.

His address to the 1916 session of the National Conference of Charities and Correction in Indianapolis succinctly summarized his beliefs:

Mental defectives lack foresight and will power. They cannot plan wisely; they cannot overcome ordinary temptations. And they reproduce their kind. Therefore, they must not be accorded the liberty that is enjoyed by a normal person. For just as the welfare of the social group makes it necessary to restrict the rights of normal individuals, so the common good demand that guidance be substituted for freedom in the case of those who are not normal. The right of the defective, then, is not the right to live as he pleases, but the right to live the fullest life possible under proper guidance. But the right is just as sacred as our own and we must see that he has it. To deny it is a social crime as well as a violation of the commandment, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."³⁴

³³ See Dorr, "Defective or Disabled?," 362–369; and Leon, "'A Human Being, and Not a Mere Social Factor,'" 384–390. According to Leon, one religious organization opposed to the use of segregation and sterilization as social policy was the National Catholic Welfare Conference. The Methodist Church was not one. See "Book of Resolutions: Repentance for Support of Eugenics," United Methodist Church, Amended and readopted 2016, <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/repentance-for-support-of-eugenics> (last accessed February 17, 2019).

³⁴ Joseph T. Mastin, "The New Colony Plan for the Feeble-Minded," in *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction, Forty-Third Annual Session* (Chicago: Hildmann, 1916), 243.