

90 years after Vermont eugenics survey, lawmakers propose apology to those affected

By Amanda Gokee

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Chief Don Stevens of the Nulhegan band of the Abenaki nation at home in Shelburne last September. He sees an apology for Vermont's eugenics program as a starting point. File photo by Glenn Russell/VTDigger

A eugenics survey in Vermont sought to “breed a better Vermonter” by sterilizing and institutionalizing Indigenous people, French-Canadians, and people who were mixed-race, poor or disabled.

Ninety years after the 1931 survey got underway, lawmakers are proposing an official apology for the state-supported program that tore families apart.

Abenaki people in Vermont say the ripple effects of the eugenics movement are still felt today and an apology from the state is an important step in repairing the relationship.

“You have to at least acknowledge that there’s a wound there before it can heal,” said Chief Don Stevens of the Nulhegan band of Abenaki, one of the four tribes in Vermont that gained state recognition in 2011 and 2012.

While there are 253 documented cases of sterilization, some records have been lost or destroyed, according to historians who study eugenics in Vermont. They suggest that the scope of the eugenics movement reached beyond the existing records.

The eugenics movement broke up minority families in the state by putting some family members in institutions and removing children from families that were deemed “unfit.”

The survey set out to measure and target people who were supposedly delinquent, defective or mentally deficient, with the purpose of removing those traits from the gene pool in the state. Its goal was to protect Vermont’s “old stock.”

“This is painful for a lot of people, and we also see the effects today in those who are skeptical about getting Covid vaccines or working with medical professors at UVM,” Stevens said about the legacy of mistrust that has followed eugenics.

The eugenics survey was led by UVM zoology professor Henry Perkins, but required the support of the Legislature.

“The reason this is important, and became a priority for me, is because we are apologizing for something that we, our predecessors, in the General Assembly did,” said Rep. Tom Stevens, D-Waterbury.

Attempts to pass eugenics into law failed in 1912 and 1925, but by 1931, a law called the Act for Human Betterment through Voluntary Sterilization was on the books. It allowed sterilization, removing children from their families, and a public education campaign that historian Nancy Gallagher called eugenics propaganda.

According to Gallagher, that propaganda was about “making sure everyone in the state understood there were certain kinds of people that probably shouldn’t be part of Vermont.”

Eugenics was a widely supported policy at the time, both in Vermont and across the country. This kind of thinking ran through Nazi Germany, and Hitler’s genocidal campaign to eradicate Jewish people.

Gallagher said the “support and full participation” of the state government needs to be acknowledged in any apology coming from the state.

“Perkins could not have created this egregious program on his own,” said Judy Dow, an Abenaki historian and educator.

‘You’re a target’

The eugenics movement used information from the Department of Public Welfare and Vermont Children's Aid Society to target people who were seen as "undesirable." Because of the widespread support of governmental institutions, the eugenics survey had access to case records and lists of people who had been incarcerated.

Some 5,000 people were profiled in these efforts, a result of work with social service agencies across the state to compile confidential information on families.

Chief Stevens said his grandmother had to change her name three times to avoid sterilization and institutionalization. But eugenics was harmful to the family in other ways.

"It doesn't want you to raise your hand and say this is who I am, because you're a target," he said. After Stevens' grandmother survived eugenics, "she didn't want to talk about Indian things, or being French-Indian, because she was listed."

That silence meant that her knowledge and life experiences weren't passed down to her daughter or grandson.

After Stevens worked with UVM, it issued an apology in 2019 for its involvement in the eugenics program. Now, he hopes the Legislature will follow suit.

Rep. John Killacky, D-South Burlington, reintroduced the joint resolution proposing an apology; it had been tabled last session. While there was widespread support for the measure, the pandemic put it on pause.

Killacky said that it is morally right for the state to acknowledge what happened. “I think silence is complicity,” he said.

Killacky, who was director of the Flynn Center for Performing Arts in Burlington until 2018, said an exhibit of Abenaki art was his introduction to some Indigenous groups in the state. The exhibition stirred up emotions and memories of eugenics.

“There were people there that were crying because they were seeing pictures of their grandparents in full regalia,” Killacky said. Because of eugenics, many Indigenous people went to great lengths to hide their identities so they wouldn’t be targeted by the harmful program. Some went as far as burning all of their personal records as a protective measure.

“There was a period of extreme silence. They did not want to admit their lineage or anything if their family had been impacted,” said historian Nancy Gallagher.

The denials continued

And the difficult relationship with state government didn’t end when the eugenics survey came to a close. “Vermont had even denied that there were Abenaki people here into this century,” Killacky said.

One instance came after the Missisquoi tribe put in a bid for federal recognition that was not granted in the early 2000s. The 2002 state response under Gov. Howard Dean asserted that Abenaki tribes did not have a continued presence in Vermont.

“Abenaki people as a group were seen or portrayed as having mostly gone to Canada, to Quebec, which is still a lot of people’s impression — that they are not here, that they all left,” said Rich Holschuh, a spokesperson for the Elnu tribe.

“That all feeds into these kinds of tropes that are a part of colonialism and erasure,” he said. And Holschuh says that those tropes continue to do damage in attitudes that continue to this day.

“The eugenics programs and then the survey and its effects could be seen as a historical act, something that happened and let’s move on. But it’s not. It is a symptom; it is a part of a much, much vaster system,” Holschuh said.

This year, the state and country have been grappling with systemic racism and inequity in a visible way. Now, both lawmakers and residents hope that the time is right for this change.

“This place is really white,” said Killacky, who moved to Vermont from California in 2010. “It is a kind of assumption that whiteness isn’t ever questioned. I think right now it is being questioned, powerfully so, and I think it’s important that this privilege is being dismantled.”

Those assumptions link back to the eugenics program, when Henry Perkins and the state sought to better the so-called old Yankee stock.

“That concept of Vermont and the kind of people that Vermonters were was pretty exclusive did not include a lot of the people who are not the good old Vermont Yankee stock,” Gallagher said.

An apology would be the first step in a very different direction for the relationship between the state and indigenous people. Holschuh calls it a 180.

But, both residents and lawmakers agree that an apology is just the first step in what they hope will be a longer, more involved process. Even the joint resolution itself refers to the fact that there is more work to be done.

“The General Assembly recognizes that further legislative action should be taken to address the continuing impact of state-sanctioned eugenics

policies and related practices of disenfranchisement and ethnocide leading to genocide,” reads the draft introduced by Killacky.

The hope is that another bill being discussed this session, H.96, can pick up where the apology leaves off by creating a truth and reconciliation task force.

“It’s a starting point,” said Chief Stevens. “Not an ending point.”

Correction: An earlier version of this story stated incorrectly that UVM’s George Perkins Building had been named for a leader in the eugenics movement, and had been renamed.

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