

Entanglements of Eugenics, Public Health, and Academic Medicine: Reckoning with the Life and Legacies of Victor C. Vaughan

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SUMMARY: Victor C. Vaughan (1851–1929) was a noted medical educator, microbiologist, and active proponent for the idea of eugenics. Vaughan spent his career at the University of Michigan, where he served as Medical School Dean for many years. He lectured widely on the importance of “race betterment” and actively supported passage of state legislation that led to over 3,000 sterilizations in the state of Michigan. After his death, Vaughan’s name was applied to student organizations, endowed chairs, buildings, and more. This paper considers how the use of Vaughan’s name not only reflected Vaughan’s support of eugenics but also gendered and racialized ideas about what it means to be a physician. We conclude that the use of any name from the past carries meanings about what our values are in the present and that, if there was ever a moment to celebrate the life of Victor Vaughan, that moment has passed.

KEYWORDS: Victor Vaughan, University of Michigan, eugenics, onomastics, student societies

In 1929, medical students at the University of Michigan Medical School, in Ann Arbor, formed a new student society to promote attention to the history and philosophy of science. They elected to name this society after Victor C. Vaughan. This choice of name probably came as no surprise to contemporary observers. Vaughan (1851–1929) recently had died, after a long career as a distinguished public health leader, physician, and, from 1891 to 1921, dean of the University of Michigan Medical School. He was the recipient of four degrees from the University of Michigan (M.S. 1875, Ph.D. 1876, M.D. 1878, and LL.D. [honorary] 1900). After studying in Robert Koch's Berlin laboratory in the 1880s, Vaughan returned to Michigan to pioneer the first systematic teaching of bacteriology in the United States. He then went on to spearhead state support for university-based scientific research in the form of a new State Hygienic Laboratory. He helped lead national investigations into two major infectious disease outbreaks, a typhoid fever epidemic during the 1898 Spanish-American War and the 1918 influenza epidemic. He steered the University of Michigan Medical School to become one of the first medical schools in the United States to adopt a new, science-based curriculum, even as the school shared the campus and resources with a state-mandated Homeopathic Medical College (for which Vaughan had little patience or respect). Representing the American Medical Association (AMA), he helped found the National Board of Medical Examiners in 1915. All of these activities made Vaughan a highly regarded national figure in medicine and public health. He published

extensively, lectured far and wide, and maintained extensive networks with other leaders in medicine, public health, and social reform.¹

And Vaughan was an ardent supporter of the principles and practices of eugenics. He regularly spoke on the critical role of “race betterment” for the advancement of humankind and voiced strong opinions about precisely who should be allowed to procreate. But the medical students who chose his name for their society in 1929 probably viewed Vaughan’s support for eugenics as simply one of many facets of his distinguished professional career, and perhaps not even one of the most important. Many other observers at the time shared this viewpoint. When Vaughan died, few of his eulogists even mentioned his advocacy for eugenics. Vaughan’s towering presence in and influence on American medicine and public health positioned him as an ideal honorific figure for aspiring young physicians to emulate.

Yet ninety years later, in 2019, another group of aspiring young physicians at the University of Michigan Medical School chose to remove Victor Vaughan’s name from the society. Their decision was prompted by expressions of concern by members of another student

¹ Horace W. Davenport, *Victor Vaughan: Statesman and Scientist* (Ann Arbor: Historical Center for the Health Sciences, 1996); Richard Adler, *Victor Vaughan: A Biography of the Pioneering Bacteriologist, 1851–1929* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2015); Powel H. Kazanjian, *Frederick Novy and the Development of Bacteriology in Medicine* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2017); Dea H. Boster and Joel D. Howell, *Medicine at Michigan: A History of the University of Michigan Medical School at the Bicentennial* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

group, the Black Medical Association. Also in 2019, an endowed professorship once named for Victor Vaughan at the University of Michigan also dropped his name. Why? Why was Vaughan's name, once a source of honor, distinction, and pride, now deemed no longer appropriate? How did these decisions about the unacceptability of Vaughan's name reflect broader changes in onomastic practices in medical schools, academia, and the larger community?

We explore these questions in this article through an examination of the life and legacy of Victor C. Vaughan, using them as a window through which to illuminate the ways in which preventive medicine and eugenics were entangled in the twentieth century. We start by examining Vaughan in the historical context of early twentieth-century medicine and medical education in the United States, and by considering his role in the initial phases of the eugenics movement. Vaughan was largely an active enabler of eugenics, not a leading instigator. Even so, it is hard to imagine the passage of Michigan's far-reaching sterilization laws without considering his advocacy and his fixation on what he saw as the critical importance of race betterment. Indeed, it's hard to overstate just how broadly Vaughan thought eugenics ideas should impact early twentieth-century society. As he told Michigan students in 1913, eugenics "should influence our daily lives, form a basis for our ethical judgements, determine our political activities, and be a strong motive in our religion."²

In our contemporary moment, Vaughan's eugenic message and moralistic judgments are clearly anachronistic. They illustrate how putatively objective science can become freighted with prejudices and bigotry. But perhaps more importantly, they reveal how discriminatory ideas

² "Makes Plea for Race Betterment," *The Wolverine*, July 3, 1913, 1.

about who was “fit” and who was “unfit” could be widely infused into modern life. Even if Vaughan did not start by expressing such a broad vision of “human betterment,” the eugenic principles he espoused came to be used against people with disabilities, against immigrants, against women, against people of color. From his helm at the University of Michigan, Vaughan helped to build structural inequalities and discriminatory ideas into modern medicine and medical education. As the current reckoning with racism and the ugly ghosts of the past unfolds, and as historians of medicine grapple with long shadow of eugenics and scientific racism, it is an opportune time to reflect on the careers of men such as Vaughan, and to ask if institutions like the University of Michigan, committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion, can, in good conscience, continue to wear his name on their honorific sleeve. Furthermore, reassessing Vaughan’s memorialization at Michigan can serve as a stepping stone for raising salient questions about how we choose to remember and narrate the history of medicine, how we choose to place specific individuals in the pantheon of twentieth-century medicine, and how medical historians can promote critical thinking in medical education.³

In this essay, we briefly note Vaughan’s other areas of activity, but our principal focus is on his stalwart support of the doctrines of eugenics and race betterment. We take advantage of archival holdings that do not appear to have been previously used for historical work to examine

³ The legacies of many prominent medical figures from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are being examined and reexamined. One of the most prominent is doubtless William Osler, about whom a recent conference at McGill University offered useful insights. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBc_fTK2LcM&feature=youtu.be.

precisely how Vaughan used his position to promote race betterment, and in so doing elaborate on an aspect of Vaughan's career that has previously received scant attention in the historical literature. Rather than centering our discussion on the deep and rich history of eugenics, we draw from that history to contextualize what Victor C. Vaughan did, and how he has been seen. We then turn to issues of memory and naming, considering when and how student societies take up names, examining criteria for the un- and renaming of buildings and sites that bear eponyms of acknowledged racists and eugenicists. We conclude with reflections on how the broader push at many institutions of higher education, including medical schools, can inform more liberatory, inclusive narratives of the history of medicine, accounts that are cognizant of who is remembered and who is forgotten. These accounts can contribute to a broader mission to create more inclusive and antiracist medical education.

Vaughan and Race Betterment

Vaughan came of age in the late nineteenth century. He witnessed dramatic increases in both the apparent efficacy of health care and the social standing of physicians, especially allopathic physicians, who enthusiastically embraced a new, "modern" medicine. To modernize twentieth-century medicine meant, above all, to make that medicine scientific. It meant to embrace the notion of "progress," based on the idea that knowledge changes and likely will continue to change. That process probably seemed most evident in the laboratory sciences, especially those associated with microbiology and the germ theory of disease, which held out potential for treatment of some major infectious diseases. Vaughan was an early enthusiast for the germ theory of disease and ushered new scientific ideas about microbiology into the medical school

curriculum. Later in his career Vaughan was a national leader in investigating major outbreaks of infectious disease such as typhoid fever and influenza.

But there were other new scientific ideas being discussed, ideas that could also be part of medicine's newly claimed modernity, such as up-and-coming ideas about heredity. These concepts seemed to offer humankind effective tools with which to solve a host of perceived social problems in the name of "human improvement," using rational, scientific approaches to inform attempts to remedy an increasingly complex urban society.⁴ This impulse served to align early twentieth-century health sciences with ideas of eugenics and race betterment. Vaughan seems to have found the ideas of eugenics and race betterment especially compelling, seeing as he turned to them early in his ascent to national prominence. In 1902, even before any eugenics organizations had formed officially in the United States, and while the idea of eugenics was still incipient, in his presidential address to the American Academy of Medicine in Saratoga Springs Vaughan praised the potential of science for the "betterment of the race."⁵ This was no casual comment for Vaughan. Over the next few decades, until his death in 1929, he enthusiastically advocated eugenics before a wide range of audiences. He delivered lectures to people training to be doctors at the university medical school in Ann Arbor and to people training to be schoolteachers at the Michigan State Normal School, down the road in Ypsilanti (the Normal

⁴ Garland E. Allen, "The Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor, 1910–1940: An Essay in Institutional History," *Osiris* 2 (1986): 225–64.

⁵ Victor C. Vaughan, "Religion and Science," *Bull. Amer. Acad. Med.* 6 (1902): 57–75, quotation on 67.

School later became Eastern Michigan University) as well as to groups of established schoolteachers. Vaughan shared implications of these ideas for personal decision making, advising female students at the University of Michigan “don’t marry a man unless you wish your children to be like him.”⁶ In one of his talks, titled “Sex Attraction,” Vaughan ominously warned of the “alarmingly large class of morons” who “constitute a menace to the betterment of the race.” The solution to this problem, Vaughan asserted, was control of the reproductive act. Such control, he stated, offers “the possibility of the unlimited improvement of the race” and allows people to be a “coworker with the Creator in the uplift of the race.”⁷

Perhaps Vaughan’s clearest and most specific explication of the larger implications of his thoughts can be found in a collection of twelve university lectures on eugenics that were presented during the 1912–13 academic year. In his talk, titled “Eugenics from the Point of View of the Physician,” Vaughan was explicit about just how and by whom reproduction was to be controlled: “Negative eugenics can succeed only by the help of legal enactments. There must be laws preventing the marriage and reproduction of the unfit.”⁸ He went on to say that “the State will not permit the reproduction of the weak-minded, the insane, the alcoholic and the criminal,

⁶ “Makes Plea for Race Betterment” (n. 2), 3.

⁷ Victor C. Vaughan, *Sex Attraction: A Lecture Given at the Michigan State Normal School, July 1919* (St. Louis: C.V. Mosby, 1920), 28, 10–11.

⁸ Victor C. Vaughan, “Eugenics from the Point of View of the Physician,” in *Eugenics: Twelve University Lectures*, ed. Mortin A. Aldrich et al. (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1914), 41–77, quotation on 57.

and will deny parenthood to those suffering from diseases which cripple offspring. This prohibition will be enforced by segregation or by sterilization, or by both.”⁹

Vaughan resided in a state whose political leaders were especially eager to claim the tools of science and efficiency to claim “progress” as a reason to justify control of human reproduction. In 1897, Michigan had been the first state in the United States to propose a bill mandating eugenic sterilization, the Act for the Prevention of Idiocy. This bill was aimed at “perverts” and criminals” and intended to ensure that “such persons shall cease to reproduce their kind.”¹⁰ It included procedures and methods that presaged common elements of later eugenics legislation and drew support from the medical community.¹¹ However, objections were raised about the bill’s constitutionality; it failed to pass the Michigan Senate, but by only six votes.¹²

⁹ Ibid., 74.

¹⁰ Paul A. Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck v. Bell* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 20.

¹¹ Mark A. Largent, *Breeding Contempt: The History of Coerced Sterilization in the United States* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 66–69; “Asexualization of Criminals and Degenerates,” *Michigan Law Journal* 6 (1897): 289–316.

¹² E. S. Gosney and Paul Popenoe, *Sterilization for Human Betterment: A Summary of Results of 6,000 Operations in California, 1909–1929* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 15.

Other states learned from these legal challenges and designed legislation that became law; by the 1910s, fourteen states, including Michigan, had passed compulsory sterilization laws.¹³

In his “Point of View of the Physician” lecture, Vaughan explained precisely how he would incorporate eugenic injunctions in Michigan. It is worth emphasizing that Vaughan viewed eugenics not as an isolated intervention but as part and parcel of an overarching, integrated system of public health. In Vaughan’s scenario, a medically trained health officer would be responsible for each region of the state. The officer would address traditional public health issues, such as water quality, vaccination, and sanitation. But the health officer also would be charged with identifying people with inheritable defects, specifically “alcoholism, feeble-mindedness, epilepsy, insanity, pauperism and criminality.” These conditions were precisely the characteristics that were named in the state’s next attempt at eugenics legislation. Vaughan believed that people with a family history of these defects “should be excluded from the list of those to whom is granted the privilege of exercising the highest, holiest, most important function of the race—parenthood.”¹⁴

How much of a family history? Vaughan applied a straightforward three-generation rule as to how a family’s history should be assessed. “In order to boast of good stock it is necessary to have the history of at least three successive generations. Among these there should be none of the defective unit characters mentioned above.” Vaughan was also firmly opposed to interracial

¹³ Jeffrey A. Hodges, “Dealing with Degeneracy: Michigan Eugenics in Context” (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 2001).

¹⁴ Vaughan, “Eugenics from the Point of View of the Physician” (n. 8), 60.

marriages. “The bad of each side becomes dominant, and the mongrel whether man or beast, is no credit to the pure blood on either side of the house.”¹⁵ When he expounded on the dangers of hereditary defects and miscegenation, Vaughan echoed eugenic ideas that had become pervasive among many academic and medical leaders at the time.

As eugenics became more popular, and as Vaughan’s enthusiasm became increasingly well-known, Vaughan gave an increasing number of public talks. They covered topics such as “Eugenics, or Race Betterment” and “Eugenics and the Future Man.”¹⁶ Some talks were given on the Ann Arbor campus of the University of Michigan to audiences that crowded the auditorium “to its utmost capacity.”¹⁷ Vaughan also traveled outside of Ann Arbor and talked to groups throughout southeast Michigan. For example, he opened the nineteenth annual meeting of the Michigan Academy of Science with a talk on eugenics and took the same talk to the Unitarian Men’s Club in Detroit’s First Congregational Church.¹⁸ Some of his talks were published by the

¹⁵ Ibid., 60, 64.

¹⁶ “Makes Plea for Race Betterment” (n. 2); “International Relations Class to Meet,” *Michigan Daily*, December 14, 1916.

¹⁷ “Dean Vaughan Addresses the Student Body on ‘Eugenics,’” *Michigan Daily*, January 11, 1913. The article notes that Vaughan was to give the same talk to the University of Wisconsin and the University of Minnesota.

¹⁸ “Dean Vaughan’s Lecture on Eugenics to Open Series of Addresses,” *Michigan Daily*, April 2, 1913; “Dean Vaughan Talks before Unitarians,” *Michigan Daily*, April 19, 1916.

state department of public health.¹⁹ Vaughan supported general eugenic initiatives beyond his home state. He mailed his lecture on “Race Betterment” not only to local legislators but also to officials in other states. He readily offered his backing for what he termed an “important” national eugenic plan for the prevention of hereditary blindness.”²⁰ When Vaughan was elected president of the AMA and gave his presidential address to the 1914 annual meeting in Atlantic City, he took care to stress the key role of the medical profession for “the betterment of the race.”²¹ Vaughan was thus promoting eugenic ideas to a wide range of audiences, both local and national.

Some of the most receptive audiences were found among educators and in classrooms. In the first decades of the twentieth century, courses on eugenics and race betterment were all the rage at universities, from the Ivies to normal schools. Vaughan’s lecture on “Eugenics from the Point of View of the Physician” was included in a 1914 volume of university lectures published

¹⁹ Victor C. Vaughan, “Eugenics or Race Betterment,” *Michigan Public Health Bulletin* 8 (1913): 3–24.

²⁰ The Alabama State Board of Health requested Vaughan’s lecture on April 11, 1919, which he sent on May 6. A request for support from Lucien Howe of Buffalo, New York, is dated March 28, 1921. Vaughan replied on March 31. Medical School Records 1850–2010, box 34, folder “Correspondence 1921,” Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

²¹ Victor C. Vaughan, “The Service of Medicine to Civilization,” *JAMA* 42 (1914): 2003–12, quotation on 2009.

because of the high demand for eugenics content in educational settings.²² Michigan offered courses on heredity and eugenics, as did Columbia, Cornell, Harvard, Brown, Northwestern, and the University of Wisconsin. By the late 1920s, there were close to four hundred eugenics courses offered in colleges and universities in the United States.²³ This educational fervor extended to U.S. high schools. An analysis of forty-one textbooks used in biology and social science courses between 1914 and 1938 demonstrates that the topic of eugenics was included in 87 percent, and more than 70 percent endorsed eugenics as a “true science.” Most of these books recommended the standard eugenic approach that the “fit” reproduce often and that the “unfit” be prevented from reproducing. Some went a bit further and explicitly endorsed immigration restriction and involuntary sterilization.²⁴ The extent to which eugenics became a standard element of academic curricula at multiple levels is one marker of the extent to which it was widely seen as a legitimate application of accepted scientific ideas.

²² Vaughan, “Eugenics from the Point of View of the Physician” (n. 8).

²³ “Report of the Committee on Formal Education of the American Eugenics Society, Inc,” American Eugenics Society, 1928, box 1, Leon Fradley Whitney Miscellaneous Reprints [not his own], American Philosophical Society, cited in “C.C. Little Building Name Change Request,” 6, <https://president.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/03/CC-Little-Building-Name-Change-Request-Final.pdf>.

²⁴ Steven Selden, *Inheriting Shame: The Story of Eugenics and Racism in America* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999).

But Vaughan was doing more than simply lecturing in the classroom, offering public talks to interested audiences, or supporting the incorporation of eugenics into curricula. He was happy to offer eugenic advice in specific cases. People who could not come to his talks wrote to Vaughan for personal reproductive advice. For example, on June 13, 1921, a gentleman from Iron Mountain, Michigan (about five hundred miles away from Ann Arbor, in the state's Upper Peninsula), wrote to Vaughan because he was considering marriage. He asked Vaughan, given his own family history as well as that of his prospective bride, "what chance would our children have of being normal?" He was doubtless reassured by Vaughan's expert advice that he could "marry without apprehension."²⁵

By the early twentieth century, Vaughan was rapidly becoming a giant in the medical world—he had already received many national accolades, had been named to major honorific societies, and was becoming a national "go-to" expert on many sorts of infectious diseases and other public health concerns. When state legislators wanted to translate public health policy into state law, they naturally turned to Vaughan. The boundaries between medicine and public health were quite fluid, and Vaughan's position as medical school dean fit well with public health advocacy. Vaughan had become a respected member of both the medical and the public health communities. His framework for medical school education in hygiene became the basis for a

²⁵ Victor Vaughan from and to Mr. GM, Medical School Records 1850–2010, box 34, folder "Correspondence 1921," Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

new program for public health at Michigan.²⁶ Vaughan had served as a member of the Michigan Board of Public Health off and on since 1883. In the early 1910s, serving as its president, Vaughan pushed the group to help shape public policy. In 1912 he served on a Board of Health committee on health legislation. That committee appears to have been strikingly successful in transmitting its message to state lawmakers. In 1913 the Michigan legislature passed more health-related bills than it had for many years, including legislation on a variety of public health topics, including sewage, water, and the sale of ice cream.²⁷

Eugenics was certainly one of the public health initiatives receiving attention. In 1911, the Board of Health had created a commission to establish the extent of feeble-mindedness in the state. Two years later the legislature considered “An Act to authorize the sterilization of mentally defective persons.” Secondary sources suggest that Vaughan was among those campaigning for

²⁶ “University of Michigan Medical School: Annual Announcement, 1921–1922” (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1921).

²⁷ The Michigan Department of Public Health Bulletin for 1913 describes no fewer than nineteen public-health-related acts that had been passed by the legislature. Other departmental bulletins of the period do not have such lists of legislation, lending support to the idea that the board was prioritizing legislative actions in 1913. “Forty-First Annual Report of the Secretary of the State Board of Health of the State of Michigan for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1913” (Lansing: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford, 1914), 28–48.

the bill, although we don't know details of his activities.²⁸ We do know that Vaughan corresponded with state legislators in support of later versions of a "Eugenics Bill." In response to a state representative who had been receiving telegrams "frantically protesting against passage of this bill," Vaughan offered his opinion. The bill is "a good one . . . I doubt whether a better bill could be proposed." Vaughan offered to do what he could to assist in its passage.²⁹

Michigan became the seventh state to pass an act authorizing mandatory and involuntary sterilization of "mentally defective persons maintained wholly or in part by public expenses in public institutions."³⁰ The law thus applied exclusively to people living in state institutions. Only one person actually was sterilized before the Michigan Supreme Court declared the law to be unconstitutional. Nevertheless, the law was amended two years later to include the

²⁸ Randall Hansen and Desmond King, *Sterilized by the State: Eugenics, Race, and the Population Scare in Twentieth-Century North America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 84. The precise role Vaughan played in passage of this law is not clear, in part because most legislative records were lost in a fire in 1951. See Hodges, "Dealing with Degeneracy" (n. 13), 143.

²⁹ March 1921, correspondence with E. B. Manwering. The inquiry had originally been sent to the president of the University of Michigan, Richard Burton, who was ill and passed the letter along to Vaughan. Medical School Records 1850–2010, box 34, folder "Correspondence 1921," Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

³⁰ Public Act 24, Public Cts of Michigan 1913, cited in Hodges, "Dealing with Degeneracy" (n. 13), 143.

“feeble-minded.” Another law was passed in 1929 that enlarged the groups targeted for sterilization to include prisoners.³¹ Following this final version, the law began to have a widespread impact in the state. In the decades to follow, at least 3,786 sterilizations were carried out on Michigan residents.³² Most were on people deemed mentally deficient, but the law was also applied to the mentally ill, “sexual deviants,” and people suffering from epilepsy.

Ultimately, Michigan was the fourth highest sterilizing state in the country, following California, Virginia, and North Carolina, and a significant contributor to the more than sixty thousand sterilizations performed in the United States between 1907 and the 1970s.³³ We lack detailed demographic information about the people who were sterilized in Michigan, although preliminary research at the Sterilization and Social Justice Lab, based at the University of Michigan, suggests that the vast majority of these people were white, low income, and classified as intellectually or physically disabled.³⁴ They were sterilized because they were deemed “unfit” to reproduce and incapable of being productive citizens in a state characterized by extensive

³¹ Jeffery A. Hodges, “Euthenics, Eugenics, and Compulsory Sterilization in Michigan: 1897–1960” (Master’s thesis, Michigan State University, 1995), 26.

³² Hansen and King, *Sterilized by the State* (n. 28), 86. Another source lists 3,070 citizens sterilized in Michigan by 1950. Hodges, “Euthenics, Eugenics, and Compulsory Sterilization” (n. 31), 25.

³³ Jonas Robitscher, *Eugenic Sterilization* (Springfield, Ill.: Thomas, 1973).

³⁴ The Sterilization and Social Justice Lab is an interdisciplinary research team studying the history of sterilization in the United States. For more information, see www.ssylab.org.

agriculture, industry, and factory work.³⁵ Michigan's sterilization patterns were similar to those in other midwestern states, such as Minnesota, where eugenics ideas worked to stigmatize people labeled as disabled or unfit for a wide range of prejudicial reasons and where eugenics was integral to the development of the welfare system.³⁶

Because many hospitals and medical institutions were racially segregated during this time period, most of the institutions that performed sterilizations, perhaps ironically, excluded Blacks. But over the twentieth century perceptions about people whose reproduction ought to be constrained become more racialized and likely to target people of color. The fact that sterilization rates were disproportionately higher among Native Americans and "undesirable" immigrants reflected the decidedly racist views of eugenicists who developed and promoted distorted views about which races had more desirable characteristics.³⁷ Racism and xenophobia

³⁵ Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Fixing the Poor: Eugenic Sterilization and Child Welfare in the Twentieth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

³⁶ On Minnesota, see Ladd-Taylor, *Fixing the Poor* (n. 35). Another interesting point of comparison for Michigan is Canada, especially the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia, which both passed sterilization laws. See Erick Dyck, *Facing Eugenics: Reproduction, Sterilization, and the Politics of Choice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

³⁷ Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics: Hereditarian Attitudes in American Thought* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1963); Kenneth Ludmerer, *Genetics and American Society: A Historical Appraisal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972); Hodges, "Euthenics, Eugenics, and Compulsory Sterilization" (n. 31), 58–59.

certainly existed before the advent of the eugenics movement, but it was amplified through eugenic sterilization programs, as seen in the disproportionate sterilization of Mexicans in California in the first half of the twentieth century.³⁸

The beginning of desegregation in the 1950s and 1960s was accompanied by markedly increased institutional sterilization rates for Blacks, including Black women in North Carolina.³⁹ Preliminary analysis from the Sterilization and Social Justice Lab shows that between 1950 and 1966 Black women in North Carolina were sterilized at more than three times the rate of white women and more than twelve times the rate of white men. This pattern reflected and perpetuated the racist stereotypes that Black women were not capable of being good parents and that poverty was best managed with reproductive constraint.⁴⁰ While eugenics was initially couched in the

³⁸ Nicole Novak, Sioban Harlow, Sharon Kardia, Kate O'Connor, Natalie Lira, and Alexandra Minna Stern, "Disproportionate Sterilization of Latinos under California's Eugenic Sterilization Program, 1920–1945," *Amer. J. Pub. Health* 108, no. 4 (2018): 611–13.

³⁹ Khiara M. Bridges, "White Privilege and White Disadvantage," *Virginia Law Rev.* 105 (2019): 449–82.

⁴⁰ Laura Briggs, *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018); Hodges, "Euthenics, Eugenics, and Compulsory Sterilization" (n. 31), 58–59; Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (New York: Knopf, 1985); Alexandra Minna Stern, "'We Cannot Make a Silk Purse Out of a Sow's Ear': Eugenics in the Hoosier Heartland," *Indiana Mag. Hist.* 103 (2007): 3–38.

language of fitness and disability, over time it changed into a harsh tool used to promote racist ideas and practices.

The Expanding and Shifting Eugenics Movement

Vaughan was only one of a broad mix of people who encouraged eugenics—the group included prominent politicians, doctors, lawyers, educators, clergy, and many others. A partial list of supporters includes some of the most influential leaders of U.S. medicine, including William H. Welch (dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine), Ray Wilbur (president of Stanford University and U.S. secretary of the interior), Royal Copeland (U.S. senator from New York, as well as a graduate of the University of Michigan Homeopathic Medical School), and Hugh Cumming (U.S. surgeon general). Vaughan shared an enthusiasm for eugenics with his local counterparts at Michigan, including Clarence C. Little, who was university president from 1926 to 1929 and served as president of the American Eugenics Society.⁴¹ Even as Vaughan was lecturing about the virtues of eugenics to Ann Arbor audiences, so was Udo Wile, professor of dermatology. In 1916, in his capacity as chairman of the eugenics committee of the Michigan State Medical Society, Wile urged the passage of a eugenics law that would require premarital health certificates.⁴² Vaughan also was accompanied by A. S. Warthin, a pathology professor at

⁴¹ Joshua Hasler, “Eugenics and the University: Reasserting C.C. Little into the History of Eugenics, Higher Education, and the University of Michigan” (B.A. thesis, University of Michigan History Department, 2018).

⁴² “Dr. Wile Urges State Eugenics Laws,” *The Wolverine*, August 17, 1916.

Michigan, who noted the destructive effects of alcohol, pollutants, and venereal disease on human “germ cells” and lectured on the need to support “eugenics and the betterment of the race.”⁴³

Supporters of eugenics gathered for conferences and formed a variety of organizations. In 1912, the First International Eugenics Conference was held in London, England. The five-day event drew considerable attention and acclaim. The president, Leonard Darwin, son of the naturalist whose evolutionary theories were central for the eugenicist mission, declared that “conscious selection must replace the blind forces of natural selection” and declared one of the movement’s leading goals to be to “stamp out feeble-mindedness from future generations.” The conference was attended by such luminaries as Winston Churchill (then Britain’s Lord of the Admiralty and future prime minister), Charles Eliot (president emeritus of Harvard), and Alexander Graham Bell (inventor of the telephone). Back in the United States, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* praised the conference as “an event of great importance.” The existence (and prominence) of the conference serves as a marker of the seriousness with eugenics was taken in an international context.⁴⁴

Vaughan did not attend this international conference, but he was engaged with eugenics closer to home, especially with the Race Betterment Foundation. John Harvey Kellogg, the cereal magnate who created the Battle Creek Sanitarium, used money from his cereal fortune to

⁴³ “Dr. Warthin Makes Care of Body Basis of Ethics,” *The Wolverine*, July 10, 1913.

⁴⁴ “The International Eugenics Congress, an Event of Great Importance in the History of Evolution, Has Taken Place,” *JAMA* 59 (1912): 555–56.

create the Race Betterment Foundation in 1911. Based in Battle Creek, Michigan, the foundation was one of the first organizations in the United States to promote eugenics and played an important role in facilitating the growth of eugenics networks both nationally and internationally. The foundation's goals and orientation reflected the Seventh-day Adventist beginnings of Kellogg's interest in cleanliness, moral purity, and what he called "biologic living."⁴⁵ Kellogg was fond of the term "euthenics," which he proposed as a form of eugenics that included attention to self-improvement through diet, exercise, and a regimented lifestyle. Kellogg's neologisms were part of his brand. They also reflected the particular contours of U.S. eugenics movements in the early twentieth century, a period before hard-line Mendelian theories came to predominate and when "softer" theories, mostly drawn from the French scientist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, held sway. Indeed, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, U.S. eugenicists entertained beliefs in the power of environmental factors to improve both individuals and populations, which translated into an emphasis on personal improvement and support for public health measures intended to stamp out infectious diseases such as typhoid or gonorrhea. This more fluid stage of eugenics eventually was superseded by an increasingly hard-line and racist doctrine that viewed heredity in fatalistic terms as immutable and thus alterable only through

⁴⁵ Brian C. Wilson, *Dr. John Harvey Kellogg and the Religion of Biologic Living* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

harsh measures such as segregation, sterilization, immigration restriction, or, most horrifically, euthanasia.⁴⁶

It is important to remember that Vaughan stepped onto the stage of race betterment during these initial decades, when eugenics resonated strongly with the emerging objectives of “preventive medicine.”⁴⁷ Vaughan helped to organize the inaugural 1914 Race Betterment Foundation Conference. His talk at that conference, “The Importance of Frequent and Thorough Medical Examinations of the Well,” encapsulated many aspects of Kellogg’s eugenics model and was representative of the early phase of eugenics. In this lecture, Vaughan told the fictive dream of one Dr. Smith, who practiced medicine in a midwestern city and was besieged with sick patients as he traveled from clinic to clinic. Diabetes, typhoid, gonorrhea, bronchitis, cancer—all these ailments made Dr. Smith “impatient of the slow pace of with which the race

⁴⁶ Kathy J. Cooke, “The Limits of Heredity: Nature and Nurture in American Eugenics before 1915,” *J. Hist. Biol.* 31, no. 2 (1998): 263–78.

⁴⁷ Nathaniel Comfort, *The Science of Human Perfection: How Genes Became the Heart of American Medicine* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012); also see Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016) and Stern, *Telling Genes: The Story of Genetic Counseling in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

moves towards physical, mental and moral betterment.”⁴⁸ From the imaginary perspective of Dr. Smith, Vaughan wished for social and environmental amelioration and enhanced personal hygiene and called on doctors to recognize the “possibilities of preventive medicine.”⁴⁹

At this conference, Vaughan spread his intertwined message of preventive medicine and eugenics alongside a host of who’s who in American medicine and reform. Other attendees included Charles Davenport, who in 1910 founded the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) in Cold Spring Harbor, New York, as well as Harry Laughlin, the ERO’s first director, and Yale economist Irving Fisher. The founder of the Tuskegee Institute, Booker T. Washington, spoke on the subject of “The Negro Race.” Interestingly, Washington’s talk explored relations between members of different races and the value of Black people for American society but did not delve into issues of eugenics.⁵⁰ Vaughan joined Davenport on the Central Committee for the Second Race Betterment Foundation conference, held at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco in 1915. However, by all appearances Vaughan did not travel west for this gathering. He was decidedly absent from the final Race Betterment Conference, organized by University of Michigan president C. C. Little and held again in Battle Creek, in 1928. By that time, Vaughan was at the twilight of his life. Nevertheless, based on his earlier lectures, it seems

⁴⁸ Victor C. Vaughan, “The Importance of Frequent and Thorough Medical Examinations of the Well,” in *Official Proceedings of the National Conference on Race Betterment* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Race Betterment Foundation, 1914), 90–96.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵⁰ *Official Proceedings* (n. 48).

more likely than not that he would have supported the proposals for expanded eugenic sterilization and harsh immigration laws that characterized that conference.⁵¹ Vaughan did sit on the council and board of the American Eugenics Society, the primary eugenics organization in the United States, from 1923 until his death in 1929, as that organization moved increasingly away from a softer to a harsher model of eugenics, although what role Vaughan played in shaping the society's policies is not clear.⁵²

Although eugenics was widely seen as a fundamental good for public health and social hygiene from the 1910s through the 1930s, it was not universally praised. The same Michigan sterilization bill that Vaughan championed in 1911 was opposed by another University of Michigan faculty member, psychiatrist Albert Barrett, chair of the Department of Nervous and Mental Diseases, who represented the Detroit Society of Neurology and Psychiatry in arguing that the bill was potentially too broad and harmful as written.⁵³ Nor did the University of Michigan Homeopathic Medical College seem to share Vaughan's enthusiasm for eugenics; when mentioned in national homeopathic publications eugenics was referred to as a "passing

⁵¹ *Official Proceedings of the National Conference on Race Betterment* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Race Betterment Foundation, 1928).

⁵² Alan Mehler, "A History of the American Eugenics Society, 1921–1940" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1988), <http://www.ferris-pages.org/ISAR/dissertation.htm>.

⁵³ Sterilization Bill, 1911, box 2, Albert Barrett Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

fad.”⁵⁴ On a national level, even as the eugenics movement gained strength, there were increasingly voices raised in opposition. The power and breadth of these voices makes it clear that proponents had to deal with serious opposition. The Catholic Church was notable in its disagreement, with Catholic legislators playing key roles in the demise of some eugenics laws. On the last day of 1930, Pope Pius XI made Church opposition to eugenics quite clear, especially eugenic sterilization, in the papal encyclical *Casti Connubii* (Of Chaste Marriage).⁵⁵

Critiques of eugenics in the 1920s were not based in ethics alone. Some argued that the science just did not work.⁵⁶ Indeed, the crude and simplistic approaches of eugenics may have stalled the growth of medical genetics in the United States.⁵⁷ Even though he had been a member of the scientific advisory board for the ERO, as early as 1924 the noted Harvard geneticist William Ernest Castle expressed serious doubts about eugenics in his textbook *Genetics and Eugenics*, where he advocated caution in not overstating how much was understood. Castle also distanced himself from the legal enforcing of mandatory sterilization that was at the heart of much of the eugenics movement and urged that the practical application of eugenics should be

⁵⁴ Edward H. Williams and Ernest B. Hoag, “Jury Trial and the Medical Expert,” *North American J. Homeop.* 72 (1924): 169–78, quotation on 173.

⁵⁵ Mehler, “History of the American Eugenics Society” (n. 52), 117; Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Stern, *Eugenic Nation* (n. 47); Lombardo, *Three Generations* (n. 10).

⁵⁶ Lombardo, *Three Generations* (n. 10), 52–53, 155–56, 181–82.

⁵⁷ Ludmerer, *Genetics and American Society* (n. 37) and Haller, *Eugenics* (n. 37).

“limited to such eugenic measures as the individual will voluntarily take.”⁵⁸ Over time, the politics of the movement became even more apparent, and by the 1940s a “cloud of opprobrium” hung over the field as a scientific enterprise.⁵⁹ What had been positive excitement about the field dissipated to some extent after Nazi Germany explicitly adopted U.S. ideas about eugenics as a rationale for actions before and during the Second World War.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, eugenic ideas persisted (and continue to persist today). Even eugenic sterilizations, which had become part of institutional practices, continued in many states until the 1970s. While today the term “eugenics” is generally seen as abhorrent or distasteful, ideas that found resonance in the eugenics movement have certainly not gone away and persist, albeit sometimes in a repackaged form.⁶¹

⁵⁸ William E. Castle, *Genetics and Eugenics: A Textbook for Students of Biology and a Reference Book for Animal and Plant Breeders* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1924), 374–75.

⁵⁹ Ludmerer, *Genetics and American Society* (n. 37), 166.

⁶⁰ Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America’s Campaign to Create a Master Race* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003).

⁶¹ Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Stern, *Eugenic Nation* (n. 47).

Honoring Vaughan

When Vaughan died in 1929, he was widely eulogized. Memorials to him focused on his work in microbiology and his support for building a newly scientific medical school. None of the memorials appear to have used the word “eugenics,” perhaps reflecting the nonchalant acceptance of the field by 1929, but perhaps, more importantly, because Victor Vaughan was far better known for his prominent roles in infectious diseases and medical education than he was for his roles in eugenics. A single memorial address did note his “influence and vision in race progress and betterment.”⁶² But few observers equated Vaughan’s pioneering work in modern medicine and public health with eugenics, despite the powerful and early overlaps between the two during the heyday of Vaughan’s career. One set of tributes appeared in a special issue of the *Journal of Laboratory and Clinical Medicine*, for which Vaughan had served as the first editor-in-chief. Contributors focused on Vaughan as a scientist, educator, and leader in the field of laboratory medicine. The journal editors also chose to reprint a chapter from Vaughan’s autobiography that he had left out of the published edition (supposedly for reasons of space) on his views of slavery from his boyhood in Missouri. In that chapter Vaughan categorized the

⁶² “Memoir: Victor C. Vaughan,” *Regents Proceedings* 149, <http://faculty-history.dc.umich.edu/faculty/victor-c-vaughan/memoir>. The *Michigan Alumnus* also noted Vaughan’s retirement, “Retirement: Victor C. Vaughan,” *Michigan Alumnus* 342, <http://faculty-history.dc.umich.edu/faculty/victor-c-vaughan/retirement>, and his death, “Memorial: Victor C. Vaughan,” <http://faculty-history.dc.umich.edu/faculty/victor-c-vaughan/memorial>.

enslaved people into two groups based on their skin color and regretted that—in his opinion—the excellent work habits manifested by the enslaved did not continue after emancipation.⁶³

The journal special issue also included a laudatory account of a new society founded at the University of Michigan Medical School in 1929 to promote attention to the history and philosophy of science—the medical student society that was named in Vaughan’s honor. The senior medical student who wrote about the Victor Vaughan Society explained that named societies “perpetuate the names and ideals of men by taking the names of these men unto themselves.” For almost a century, University of Michigan students used the Victor Vaughan Society to remember and idealize Victor Vaughan and the values he exemplified.⁶⁴

As historians of commemoration have pointed out, the selection of individuals for commemoration usually has as much to do with those who are doing the remembering as with the individuals who are being remembered. Public memory reflects power, structures, and statements by leaders about what should be retained from the past and carried into the future.⁶⁵ Vaughan’s specific relationship with eugenics, which he embedded in his active pursuit of what

⁶³ Victor C. Vaughan, “Negro Slavery in Missouri as I Saw It,” *J. Lab. Clin. Med.* 15 (1930): 902–11; Victor C. Vaughan, *A Doctor’s Memories* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1926).

⁶⁴ Robert Curry, “The Victor C. Vaughan Society,” *J. Lab. Clin. Med.* 15 (1930): 900–901.

⁶⁵ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992); Michael Kammen, *Mystic Cords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1991).

he considered scientific modern medicine, was virtually forgotten not long after his death (when many in medicine and science were retreating from some of the more extravagant claims of the field). Instead, Vaughan's contributions to laboratory science, medicine, and public health seemed to symbolize the power of his type of medicine. Vaughan's name was taken up in a variety of places in addition to the medical student society. In 1938, a five-story medical student dormitory on the site of the former Homeopathic Hospital, overlooking the Huron River Valley, was opened and named for Victor Vaughan.⁶⁶ During the Second World War Vaughan had an army hospital named after him, the Vaughan General Hospital in Hines, Illinois—now the site of a VA hospital.⁶⁷ A lectureship at the University of Michigan was created in his honor in 1943.⁶⁸ During the height of the war the U.S. Navy was building many ships that needed to be named,

⁶⁶ Francis Shiel, "Victor C. Vaughan House," in *The University of Michigan: An Encyclopedic Survey*, ed. Walter A. Donnelly, Wilfred B. Shaw, and Ruth W. Gjelsness (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958), 1727–28.

⁶⁷ "Three Alumni Are Honored in Naming of Hospitals of UA Army," *Michigan Alumnus* 56, <http://faculty-history.dc.umich.edu/faculty/victor-c-vaughan/three-alumni-are-honored-naming-of%E2%80%A8-hospitals-us-army%E2%80%A8>.

⁶⁸ University of Michigan, *Proceedings of the Board of Regents* (1942–45), 340. The original term was for five years; it is not clear just how long this lectureship lasted.

and so they named a ship after Vaughan, the S. S. *Victor Vaughan*, launched at Portland, Oregon, in September 1943.⁶⁹

Back in Ann Arbor, members of the medical student society that bore Vaughan's name were busy pursuing the history of medicine. The Victor Vaughan Society was created 1929, not long after the 1925 founding of the American Association for the History of Medicine. By the 1930s medical history was becoming an identifiable scholarly field. As the history of medicine started coalescing, its intellectual purpose and emphasis revolved around examining and exalting the histories of great men from the past. In 1932, students in the Victor Vaughan Society offered their own contribution to this project. They published a volume titled *Builders of American Medicine*, a collection of twelve biographical sketches of great men in the history of medicine.⁷⁰ The next year, the preeminent medical historian Henry Sigerist, newly named director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for the History of Medicine, published his influential biographical volume, *The Great Doctors*.⁷¹ The biographical theme was continued within the Victor Vaughan Society. In years to come, most of the society's meetings centered on telling and retelling the stories of great medical men. Not only is it telling to see which medical men were memorialized

⁶⁹ "Former Dean Honored as New Ship Is Launched," *Michigan Alumnus* 166, <http://faculty-history.dc.umich.edu/faculty/victor-c-vaughan/former-dean-honored-new-ship-launched%E2%80%A8>.

⁷⁰ Victor C. Vaughan Society, *Builders of American Medicine* (Ann Arbor: G. Wahr, 1932).

⁷¹ Henry E. Sigerist, *The Great Doctors: A Biographical History of Medicine*, trans. Eden Paul and Cedar Paul (New York: Norton, 1933).

in print or discussed at meetings, but also the very choice that the chapters and meetings should be devoted to praising “Great Doctors” illustrates one large characteristic of the field of medical history until a seismic shift in the 1960s and 1970s toward more “bottom-up” histories that began to explore race, class, gender, and patient perspectives.

The great doctors of the past were all male, as were the great medical men of the present with whom medical students of the Victor Vaughan Society were invited to network. The gendered nature of this world was not subtle. The Victor Vaughan Society grew out of the medical school’s Galens Honorary Society, of which Vaughan had been an honorary member. Founded in 1914, the Galens society was firmly ensconced in an ethos of white men. The issue was not an absence of women in the school. The University of Michigan was the first major medical school in the United States to admit women, in 1870, and the national honor association Alpha Omega Alpha was founded to include both men and women in 1907. The Galens society, however, was created around a somewhat different, more explicitly gendered purpose. It was organized to offer medical men the opportunity to develop close relationships with the faculty. And here the word “men” was meant to be taken quite specifically, for the rules stated explicitly that “no women shall be members.” This masculinity was perhaps nowhere more acutely expressed than in an annual skit, performed since 1918 and known for its bawdy humor.⁷²

⁷² Galens Medical Society records: 1914–2001, Bentley Historical Library, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/b/bhlead/umich-bhl-9859?byte=1025980;focusrgn=bioghist;subview=standard;view=reslist>.

The Victor Vaughan Society offered senior male medical students, chosen by their classmates, an opportunity to create an “old boys’ network” through close relationships with faculty. For decades, participants in the Victor Vaughan Society went to evening meetings at faculty members’ houses to present their historical reports on great men to themselves and to their medical school faculty mentors. Refreshments were usually provided by the faculty members’ wives. The society also sponsored annual trips to places canonized in a decidedly Western and Eurocentric model of medical history, including the Pasteur Institute in France and the Koch Institute in Germany. In describing the activities of the Victor Vaughan Society, members stressed the honor of the name of the organization and the opportunity for students to mingle casually and converse with faculty in their homes. While formal presentations may have focused on medical history, as the 1959 medical school yearbook explained, “We feel that we are not merely dealing with curious antiquities, but are gaining the respect for the evolution of medicine which will make us more adequate physicians.”⁷³ These networking and mentorship opportunities were clearly intended for a particular kind of student. Perusal of the Victor Vaughan Society membership in the medical school yearbook *Aequanimitas* does not reveal any women or people of color as members until 1968, and very few for the next decade. Women were finally admitted to the Galens Honorary Society in 1971. Over subsequent decades the Victor Vaughan Society became a more diverse society. It lost some of its unique role in allowing students to network with powerful faculty, but still retained the name of a leading figure

⁷³ *Aequanimitas*, 1958–59, e17.

from the past who seemingly exemplified praiseworthy scientific achievement at the medical school.

Questioning Legacies

When the University of Michigan Medical School launched a new curriculum in the mid-2010s, it created four student houses, each named after a prominent historical figure. Historians of medicine at the university were consulted to ensure that the names were appropriate and inclusive.⁷⁴ Even so, there was little discussion about the broader pantheon of lingering commemorative names from the past. “Victor Vaughan” remained firmly attached to the medical student historical society until early in 2019, when members of the Victor Vaughan Society reached out to the Black Medical Association to discuss the possibility of doing some sort of joint activity during Black History Month. Members of the Black Medical Association were concerned about any collaboration with the society, given Vaughan’s support of the eugenics movement and forced sterilization. Out of respect for its members, the Black Medical Association decided not to collaborate with the Victor Vaughan Society. This rejection caused members of the Victor Vaughan Society to consider whether they wanted to retain their original name. Ultimately, the society decided to drop “Victor Vaughan” and change its name to the

⁷⁴ The M-Home houses are named for William Henry Fitzbutler, Jonas Edward Salk, Alice Hamilton, and Amanda Sanford.

Society for the History and Philosophy of Medicine, with the explanation for the name change noted on the medical school website.⁷⁵

One complicating factor in the case of Vaughan is that the connection between the eugenics he advocated in the 1910s and 1920s, and the racist eugenics later directed at Black people and other people of color is more circuitous than baldly direct. It was certainly not as blatant when compared with other eugenicists more well known to historians of medicine, such as Davenport and Laughlin. While Vaughan's racist beliefs were manifest in his comments about interracial marriage and freed slaves, he did not brandish the vicious racism of the eugenics proponent Madison Grant, well known for his 1916 racist tract, *The Passing of the Great Race*. When Vaughan wrote and spoke about eugenics, racial differences were not the centerpiece of his comments. Rather, Vaughan directed his eugenic energies on strategies to improve, even perfect, human health, in ways that stratified society into the fit and the unfit. What should not be lost, however, is that his ideas strengthened the bedrock of white supremacy, misogyny, and class privilege that characterized the early twentieth century. His actions, even if couched in more universal language, worked to deepen and reinforce stratification and inequality. After Vaughan's death, eugenic sterilization programs began disproportionately to affect people of

⁷⁵ Personal communication with Mankaah Acho; "Society for the History and Philosophy of Medicine," <http://chm.med.umich.edu/students/victor-vaughan-student-society/>; "Who Was That? The People Behind the Names of Michigan Medicine Places and More," <https://www.uofmhealth.org/news/archive/202008/who-was-people-behind-names-michigan-medicine-places-and>.

color and immigrants. Vaughan might not have overtly advocated eugenic racism. But he helped lay the groundwork for state-sponsored involuntary sterilization, and for specific ideas of human fitness and unfitness. He thus helped to codify categories of human worth that were encoded into racism and discriminatory practices, and became more pronounced as the twentieth century unfolded.

In the recent context of questioning Vaughan's legacy and his role in promoting structural inequalities, it also made sense to rethink the endowed chair in the history of medicine that had been named for Vaughan in 2001. When the offer to endow the chair was made, there was less appreciation of the history of eugenics in general, and of Vaughan's particular role in this history. Since then, the historical literature has deepened.⁷⁶ In addition, new research has shed additional light on Vaughan's association with eugenics and offered specific examples of his involvement.⁷⁷ Furthermore, by the late 2010s there was increased awareness of the importance of thinking critically about the use of names for honorary purposes.⁷⁸ Thus, at the request of the chairholder, in 2019 the Board of Regents changed the name to the Elizabeth Farrand Chair (Farrand, 1852–1900, was a librarian at the University of Michigan who wrote a

⁷⁶ Stern, *Eugenic Nation* (n. 47); Kline, *Building a Better Race* (n. 61), Hansen and King, *Sterilized by the State* (n. 28); Black, *War Against the Weak* (n. 60).

⁷⁷ Hodges, "Euthenics, Eugenics, and Compulsory Sterilization" (n. 31).

⁷⁸ Noah Remnick, "Yale Grapples with Ties to Slavery in Debate over a College's Name," *New York Times*, September 11, 2015.

history of the university before she went to medical school and then practiced around Port Huron, Michigan).⁷⁹

On any university campus, place-names of antecedents and donors are widely visible and well-known, on buildings, halls, classrooms, and galleries. To this day, Victor Vaughan's name sits on a building near the University of Michigan hospital, a former dormitory that was initially opened in 1938 and has now become a modest office building. (Another building, at the University of Michigan School of Public Health, is also known as the Vaughan Building, but that name is in reference to Victor Vaughan's son, Henry F. Vaughan.) Such university place-names have been increasingly scrutinized over the past several decades, as institutions have reckoned with the institutionalized memories of a range of racists, Confederates, and bigots whose eponyms too often populate campus landscapes. Numerous committees have considered the historical legacies of these leaders and their names and debated if buildings should be unnamed and/or renamed. These critical conversations have grappled with the pervasive role of eugenicists in mid-twentieth-century higher education. In 2020 alone, major universities such as Indiana University, Stanford University, the California Institute of Technology, and the University of Southern California all decided, usually following a review process and committee recommendation, to remove the names of eugenicists such as David Starr Jordan and Robert A. Millikan.⁸⁰ Other questions have been raised about names such as Woodrow Wilson at Princeton,

⁷⁹ University of Michigan, *Proceedings of the Board of Regents* (2018–19), 475.

⁸⁰ Michael Hiltzik, "Confronting a Racist Past, Caltech Will Excise Names of Eugenics Backers from Campus," *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 2021; Giuliana Viglione and Nidhi Subbaraman,

Abraham Flexner at the AMA, and Margaret Sanger at Planned Parenthood. In England, University College London recently renamed two lecture theaters and one building that previously had displayed the names of Francis Galton, who coined the term “eugenics” in 1883, and his colleague Karl Pearson, who had held a eugenics professorship for many years.⁸¹

Similar actions have been taken at Vaughan’s home institution, the University of Michigan. In 2016 the university president created a President’s Advisory Committee on University History. Led by a former chair of the history department, former dean of the college, and director of the Bentley Historical Library, the committee laid out eight relevant principles to consider when evaluating any request to change the name of a building, including principles of pedagogy, interpretation, and the need for due diligence. The guidelines also emphasize the importance of context and consistency, and the need to take contemporary effects of building names into account.⁸² Bearing these principles in mind, the committee has considered several requests for name changes. Perhaps the most relevant for thinking about Vaughan is the case of

“Universities Scrub Names of Racist Leaders—Students Say It’s a First Step,” *Nature* 584 (2020): 331–32.

⁸¹ “UCL Renames Three Facilities That Honoured Prominent Eugenicists,” *Guardian*, June 19, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jun/19/ucl-renames-three-facilities-that-honoured-prominent-eugenicists>.

⁸² Memo from Terrence McDonald to Mark Schlissel *in re* “Committee Views on Possible Review of University Space Names,” January 6, 2017, <https://president.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2017/01/PACOUH-memo-on-naming-1-13-17.pdf>.

University of Michigan president C. C. Little (1926–29), whose name was attached to a science building in 1968. As discussed above, Little was actively engaged with the national eugenics movement. He played a leadership role in the founding of the American Eugenics Society in 1922 and served as a director of that society (1923–39) and as president (1929).⁸³ He also was the primary organizer of the 1928 Race Betterment Foundation conference in Battle Creek, Michigan, and used university stationery and stature to showcase and advertise this eugenics conference. Furthermore, Little promoted eugenics well into the 1930s, after a good number of earlier supporters had changed their minds. (In the 1950s Little served as chief scientific officer of the Tobacco Research Council, where he used his position to promulgate doubt about the link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer.)⁸⁴ An undergraduate student in the college, writing an honors thesis on Little, initially raised concerns about the building name. This led the President's Advisory Committee on University History to undertake an extensive review, including two public fora organized by faculty and students. At the conclusion of their study, the commission recommended that Little's name be removed. The recommendation was accepted, and Little's name has been taken off the building. The name of Andrew Winchell, whose 1880s writings in support of racist ideas are still used by white supremacists today, also was taken off a

⁸³ Letter from Terrence McDonald to Mark Schlissel, January 9, 2018, <https://president.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/03/CC-Little-Letter-Comm-Findings-for-RAR-March-2018.pdf>.

⁸⁴ Allan M. Brandt, *The Cigarette Century: The Rise, Fall, and Deadly Persistence of the Product That Defined America* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

dormitory building.⁸⁵ Questions have been raised about other place-names, including a building carrying the name of former university president James Angell, who supported exclusionary immigration policies, and an edifice recognizing the former football coach and athletic director Fielding H. Yost who, like Little and Vaughan, was affiliated with the Race Betterment Foundation. Moreover, as athletic director Yost treated students of color in discriminatory and harmful ways.⁸⁶ In the context of this scrutiny of campus place-names, several articles have also questioned the continued use of Vaughan's name.⁸⁷

The case of Victor Vaughan calls attention to questions of how we grapple with influential historical figures whose past work and values appear tarnished in the light of today's sensibilities. Memorials, including commemorative names, were built to celebrate and elevate the past and to suggest continuity into the future. Yet that same purpose has angered many who

⁸⁵ Letter from Terrence McDonald to Mark Schlissel, September 13, 2017, <https://president.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/03/Winchell-Attachments-for-RAR-March-2018.pdf>.

⁸⁶ Lauren Love, "Committee Recommends Yost Name for Removal; Feedback Sought," *University Record*, May 24, 2021, <https://record.umich.edu/articles/committee-recommends-yost-name-for-removal-feedback-sought/>. The committee's report has been published at <https://pacouh.umich.edu/yost-name-review/>.

⁸⁷ Arikia Millikan, "A Dark Medical History," *Michigan Daily*, February 12, 2008; Jackie Charniga, "Looking in the Mirror: The Push to Change History on Campus," *Michigan Daily*, February 21, 2017.

want to see change, especially with respect to racial injustice and medical racism. In this light, symbols from the past take on new significance. Over the past decade or so, these questions have become ever more salient as U.S. battles over how to deal with histories of racism, slavery, inequality, and unjust power have reached a feverish pitch. The Black Lives Matter movement has heightened sensitivity to the reality of structural racism and emboldened calls for systemic change in education and medicine.

Given the heightened awareness of the power of place-names and commemoration across a range of societal arenas, and especially in light of ongoing scholarship in the history of eugenics, often on the local level, it is not surprising that historians are engaged in lively debates about commemoration. Historians have been instrumental in creating new forms of memorialization, including historical plaques in Indiana and Virginia that pay tribute to the thousands of people involuntarily sterilized in those states.⁸⁸ Historians also have been on the leading edge of debates about the virtues and pitfalls of unnamings and renamings. For example, at Caltech, noisy pressure from students, shocked to learn about their institution's deep ties to the Human Betterment Foundation (which unabashedly advocated for eugenic sterilization in the 1930s and 1940s), prompted the institution to consult with foremost historians of science and medicine, like Daniel Kevles, to inform decisions about potential name removals. More and

⁸⁸ On the Indiana plaque, see <https://www.in.gov/history/state-historical-markers/find-a-marker/1907-indiana-eugenics-law/>; for Virginia, see <https://dnalc.cshl.edu/view/15731-Carrie-Buck-roadside-marker.html>. Legal historian Paul Lombardo played a leading role in the development of this plaque and its placement.

more, scholars exploring these thorny questions are turning to evolving best practices for historical meaning making and commemoration. These approaches generally seek to promote justice and inclusion while avoiding the sanitization of histories that should not be forgotten. Historians are drawing guidance from projects with accessible digital presences, such as Universities Studying Slavery at the University of Virginia and Hard Histories at Johns Hopkins University, which document how racism and discrimination shaped those institutions in far-reaching ways.⁸⁹

All of these changes are taking place in a country that is rapidly becoming more diverse; according to census projections, by midcentury no single ethnic or racial group will compose a majority of the U.S. population. In this shifting landscape, higher education, including medical education, is striving to fulfill goals of inclusion, address long-standing racial and health inequities, and be truly demographically representative of the larger community. At the same time, the medical field and U.S. society in general are becoming more aware of entrenched white privilege and white supremacy.

The medical world is replete with allusions to the past. Historians play an important role in crafting narratives about the past. They help to create the act of remembering, which is itself a statement about what is important. How should medical historians think today about Victor Vaughan? Should we continue to honor proponents of eugenics, such as Vaughan, by affixing their names to buildings, societies, and endowed chairs? Vaughan clearly made changes to the

⁸⁹ For more information on these two projects, see <https://slavery.virginia.edu/universities-studying-slavery-uss-the-birth-of-a-movement/> and <https://hardhistory.jhu.edu>.

medical world that we can still celebrate. He helped move microbiology into the university, both locally and nationally, assisted in responding to two serious outbreaks of infectious disease, worked on a standardized system for promoting qualified medical practitioners, and had an influence on U.S. medical education that one author labels as second only to William Welch.⁹⁰

Yet Vaughan was an ardent eugenicist who advocated sterilization laws in support of an ableist and exclusionary vision of American society. While not widely known as a national eugenics leader, Vaughan played a far-reaching role in his home state of Michigan. Vaughan enabled eugenics, helped to build and enlarge eugenic networks, and lent his stature to the eugenic cause. Vaughan's supporting role in American eugenics reflects the extent to which the intertwined relationships of eugenics, medicine, and public health has been forgotten, in part because those relationships complicate historical narratives that posit a clean break between eugenics and genetic science, on one hand, and between eugenics and public health, on the other. Those influences might be underappreciated as well because during the first two decades of the twentieth century, when Vaughan was leaving his biggest mark, eugenics had not hardened into strict Mendelianism and allowed room for environmental factors and the "biologic living" promoted by Vaughan's fellow Michigander, Kellogg.

Vaughan was certainly not the only person to support eugenics; indeed, Michigan eugenics legislation might well have passed absent his support. But given Vaughan's continued vocal encouragement of bills for state-sponsored sterilization, combined with his position as a

⁹⁰ John M. Barry, *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History* (New York: Viking, 2004), 58, 134.

thought leader and as someone in a leadership position in the state public health department and at the state's most prominent medical school, he must bear some responsibility for the nearly four thousand Michiganders who were eventually sterilized in the name of eugenics.

Critics of calls to eradicate memorials such as statues of Confederate soldiers sometimes complain that removing memorials means forgetting the past. But there is a difference between remembering and honoring. New York educator Jill Strauss used the removal of the statue—but not the pedestal—of gynecologist J. Marion Sims for a critical exercise in remembrance. The city of New York had chosen to remove the statue of Sims because of his history of operating on slave women (by definition without their consent) to further his surgical career. The empty pedestal that remained provides an opportunity for students to engage with the history of race, slavery, medicine, medical experimentation, and memory itself.⁹¹

Conclusion

Historical analysis can help us better understand that the decades of celebration of Vaughan's legacy as a towering giant in medicine and public health were consonant with the maintenance and perpetuation of the exclusionary white male vision of academic medicine that made Vaughan possible. He fit very well into a particular moment of history. Vaughan symbolized a brand of medicine that thrived in a world in which eugenics seemed rational and scientific, and in a world dominated by the sorts of people eugenics posited most desirable. That world was

⁹¹ Jill Strauss, "Contested Site or Reclaimed Space? Re-memorizing but Not Honoring the Past on the Empty Pedestal," *History & Memory* 32 (2020): 131–51.

normative in the 1910s and 1920s. After his death, Vaughan's name and legacy were used to further the white, male power legacy for a specific group of medical students. Involvement in the history of medicine allowed these medical students to build connections to senior male faculty in the medical school. Even as medical schools started to become more inclusive in the 1950s and 1960s, Vaughan's name continued to mark a society that advantaged some medical students over others. As historians today, we ought to remember Vaughan's career, in all of its complexity, as we also acknowledge that the onomastic landscape of our universities reflects our values and enunciates whose name deserves to be affixed on a particular site. Public names serve a pedagogic purpose. Our choices have meanings. They carry values, of both the past (the person whose name is being used) and the present (the values of the people who are making the choices). If we are serious about uncovering and reckoning with the structural inequalities, often connected to race and gender, that afflict medical fields and medical education, then we must make judicious decisions about which historical figures represent the present and signal toward the future.⁹²

Medical schools were and remain racialized organizations that for over a century have reproduced and sustained racial inequality, in part through organizations such as the Victor Vaughan Society.⁹³ The underrepresentation of Black people is an ongoing problem, one that can

⁹² Ayah Nuriddin, Graham Mooney, and Alexandre I. R. White, "Reckoning with Histories of Medical Racism and Violence in the US," *Lancet* 396 (2020): 949–51.

⁹³ Max Jordan Nguemeni Tiako, Eugenia C. South, and Victor Ray, "Medical Schools as Racialized Organizations: A Primer," *Ann. Internal Med.* 174 (2021): 1143–44.

be traced to specific past decisions.⁹⁴ While removing names will not solve these problems, the process of examining the deeper meanings embedded in names such as Vaughan's helps to remind us of the persisting structural inequalities that require sustained attention.

Yes, we should remember the unquestioned achievements of people such as Victor C. Vaughan. But honoring Vaughan by putting his name on a society, or a professorship, or a building does not allow for selectivity in terms of what part of his career we choose to commend, and what parts we do not. In addition, we cannot let the removal of offensive names from societies or buildings substitute for the hard work needed to address continued structural inequalities in medicine. If we want our communities to live up to cherished principles of inclusion and diversity, and be welcoming to all, then there is little to no room for eugenics and its proponents. If there was once a moment to celebrate the career of Victor C. Vaughan, it has long passed.

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⁹⁴ Kendall M. Campbell, Irma Corral, and Jhojana Linares, "Projected Estimates of African American Medical Graduates of Closed Historically Black Medical Schools," *JAMA Network Open* 3, no. 8 (2020): e2015220, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.15220>.

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