

## David Starr Jordan (1851-1931) <sup>[1]</sup>

By: Briggs, Jill Keywords: Eugenics <sup>[2]</sup>

David Starr Jordan studied [fish](#) <sup>[3]</sup> and promoted [eugenics](#) <sup>[4]</sup> in the US during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In his work, he embraced Charles Darwin's theory of [evolution](#) <sup>[5]</sup> and described the importance of [embryology](#) <sup>[6]</sup> in tracing phylogenetic relationships. In 1891, he became the president of [Stanford University](#) <sup>[7]</sup> in Stanford, California. Jordan condemned war and promoted conservationist causes for the California wilderness, and he advocated for the eugenic [sterilization](#) <sup>[8]</sup> of thousands of Americans. Like many American eugenicists of the early twentieth century, Jordan combined ideas of Mendelian genetics and of Darwinian [natural selection](#) <sup>[9]</sup> to form a basis for limiting or encouraging reproduction in certain individuals and groups based on their perceived hereditary fitness. Like other eugenicists, Jordan's attempt to control the reproductive fate of entire populations marked an episode in the history of reproduction and biology in which its concepts increasingly influenced the social and cultural contexts.

Jordan was born 19 January 1851 in Gainesville, New York, to Huldah Lake Hawley and Hiram Jordan. His parents were farmers and teachers from an English Puritan background. They had five children, of which Jordan was the fourth. His father, an abolitionist, and his mother, a religious person, influenced Jordan's later ideas about pacifism and what he considered to be his obligations as a public figure. In his early years Jordan tended the [sheep](#) <sup>[10]</sup> on the farm and helped make maple syrup. During this period, he explored his interests in plants and in astronomy. Jordan later took the middle name Starr to indicate his interests in astronomy and to honor his mother's reverence for Unitarian minister, Thomas Starr King.

By special exemption, Jordan attended an all-female school at the nearby Gainesville Female Seminary, in Gainesville, New York, at fourteen years of age. After three years, at the age of seventeen, Jordan began teaching elementary school in South Warsaw, New York. In March 1869 he received a scholarship to attend the newly inaugurated [Cornell University](#) <sup>[11]</sup> in Ithaca, New York to study botany or animal husbandry. In 1872, Jordan obtained a Master's in Science in botany, instead of a Bachelor's degree, because of his extra undergraduate work as an instructor in botany.

At Cornell, Jordan became class president, class essayist and class poet. He studied with Charles Frederick Hartt, a geologist and student of [Louis Agassiz](#) <sup>[12]</sup> who specialized in the geology of Brazil; with Burt Green Wilder, a comparative anatomist and neurologist; and with Albert Prentiss, the chair of botany who encouraged his students to conduct studies of local flora. His work with these men, some of whom opposed Darwin's theory of [natural selection](#) <sup>[9]</sup>, led him in 1873 to the [Anderson School of Natural History](#) <sup>[13]</sup> on Penikese Island, off the coast of Massachusetts. He studied there for several summers with the anti-Darwinian [Louis Agassiz](#) <sup>[12]</sup>, but Jordan came to accept the theory of [natural selection](#) <sup>[9]</sup> through his own studies of zoology. Despite their difference of opinion, Agassiz inspired Jordan to study [fish](#) <sup>[3]</sup>.

Afterwards, Jordan focused on science education. He had teaching stints at Lombard College

in Galesburg, Illinois, and at Appleton Collegiate Institute in Appleton, Wisconsin. In 1874, he taught high school science at Indianapolis High School in Indianapolis, Indiana, and, in 1875, he became a professor of biology at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana, where he remained until 1879. He later became a professor of [natural history](#) [14] in 1879 and then president in 1885 of [Indiana University](#) [15] in Bloomington, Indiana, at the age of thirty-five. He remained president until 1891.

Jordan, influenced by Agassiz, rejected the traditional style of science education that emphasized rote learning and memorization. He instead encouraged hands-on instruction and student choice in electives. This new style of education attracted the attention of Leland Stanford Jr., the founder of [Stanford University](#) [7], who asked Jordan to become president of the institution in 1891. Jordan worked at Stanford as president and then chancellor until he retired in 1913, promoting science education and Darwinian [natural selection](#) [9], as well as the importance of field naturalism to biology. At Stanford, Jordan promoted his vision of a civil society, which included the conservation of wilderness, the education of young people, the promotion of science, and the principles of eugenic breeding.

In his scientific work, Jordan primarily studied [fish](#) [3] and [fish](#) [3] [embryology](#) [6]. He wrote greater than 600 articles on the study of [fish](#) [3], and he served as an expert on national and international commissions on the conservation of North American [fish](#) [3]. In this work, Jordan frequently detailed the embryonic forms of fishes and described the potential of [embryology](#) [6] to indicate the links between species and genera. For example, in *Fishes*, published in 1907, Jordan defended the link between the classes of chimaera (*Holocephali*) [16] and sharks (*Elasmobranchii*) [17] by detailing the commonalities found in their embryonic stages.

In his earlier writings on [evolution](#) [5], including his 1898 co-authored *Footnotes to Evolution: a series of popular addresses on the [evolution](#) [5] of life*, Jordan said that he was influenced by Ernst Haeckel's concept of the Biogenetic Law. This concept, Jordan believed, showed that the study of [embryology](#) [6] revealed the stages of evolutionary progression from simple organisms to those of greater complexity. Jordan also relied on Darwin's theory of [evolution](#) [5] to argue that [natural selection](#) [9] can generate the development of complexity in some organs, while other organs remain simple. Furthermore, in *Evolution and Animal Life: an elementary discussion of facts, processes, laws and theories relating to the life and [evolution](#) [5] of animals* (1907), in a chapter titled "Factors in Ontogeny," Jordan argued that the study of the causes that initiate and control development, including the [fertilization](#) [18] and maturation of the [germ cells](#) [19], are likely to contribute to our understanding of [evolution](#) [5].

Jordan also played a crucial role in the formation and funding of the first [eugenics](#) [4] [organization](#) [20] in the US, the Eugenics Committee of the American Breeders Association. The Committee was established in 1906 under the direction of Charles Davenport, and based at [Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory](#) [21] in Cold Springs, New York. Historian Alexandra Minna Stern has argued that the Committee gained the funding from a wealthy widow, Mrs. E.S. Harriman, who supported [eugenics](#) [4] research through the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) at the [Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory](#) [21] in Cold Spring Harbor, New York, largely due to Jordan's reputation. The Eugenics Record Office collected the hereditary information, or pedigrees, of families in the US. State officials used these studies to justify strict immigration quotas and [sterilization](#) [8] legislation in the 1920s.

Jordan continued to work to reform education and later co-founded and directed the Sierra Club, an environmental [organization](#) [20] founded in 1882 in San Francisco, California. During

the 1910s, Jordan was part of a group that later historians called the Progressive Reformers. These reformers, often holding different political views, shared a faith in scientific solutions to perceived economic and social problems. Jordan argued that war destroyed the best genetic stock of a generation, and that a loss of wilderness contributed to the degeneration of the Anglo-Saxon cultural and biological superiority that had made them the leaders in the US. Jordan was also concerned with the poor condition of California's mental health institutions. Jordan and fellow eugenicists argued that the hereditary fitness of the upper classes would soon be swamped by the uncontrolled breeding of the lower classes and the mentally ill. After his retirement from [Stanford University](#) [7] in 1913, Jordan focused his efforts on publicizing the perceived dangers of Mexican immigration in the national *Eugenical News*. These ideas led him to advocate for breeding regulations based on eugenic principles and the implementation of immigration quotas in California.

In 1928, Jordan joined others, including philanthropist Charles Goethe, to found the Human Betterment Foundation, based in Pasadena, California. This [organization](#) [20] was committed to the [sterilization](#) [8] of people they called the genetically unfit—especially inmates of state mental health facilities—and to the dissemination of model legislation and reports on the positive outcomes of [sterilization](#) [8]. These studies culminated in a publication produced by agriculturalist Paul Popenoe and financier Ezra Seymour Gosney entitled *Sterilization for Human Betterment: a summary of results of 6000 operations in California, 1909-1929*, published in 1929. Eugenicists used the results published in that book to advocate for the expansion of [sterilization](#) [8] legislation in places like Germany and the Scandinavian countries. Jordan remained a member of the Human Betterment Foundation and a proponent of [eugenics](#) [4] until his death in Palo Alto, California on 19 September 1931.

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## Publisher

Arizona State University. School of Life Sciences. Center for Biology and Society. Embryo Project Encyclopedia.

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## Format

Articles <sup>[48]</sup>

## Last Modified

Wednesday, July 4, 2018 - 04:40

## DC Date Accessioned

Wednesday, June 26, 2013 - 21:48

## DC Date Available

Wednesday, June 26, 2013 - 21:48

## DC Date Created

2013-06-26

## DC Date Created Standard

Wednesday, June 26, 2013 - 07:00

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