

[Emma Wolverton \(1889–1978\)](#) ^[1]

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Emma Wolverton, also known as Deborah Kallikak, lived her entire life in an institution in New Jersey after psychologist Henry Goddard classified her as feeble-minded. He also wrote a book about Wolverton and her family that psychiatrists previously used to show that intellectual disability is hereditary. At the time, researchers in the psychology field, including Goddard, were working to understand differences in people's intellectual abilities. They used the term feeble-minded to refer to those they described as having lower intellectual functioning. While Wolverton spent nearly her entire life living and working in institutions for the feeble-minded, more recent investigations of her life show she was not what is now considered intellectually disabled. Wolverton's involvement in Goddard's research as Deborah Kallikak influenced twentieth century ideas around the heritability and treatment of those with disabilities.

Researchers, like Goddard, who studied Wolverton's life noted many themes associated with [eugenics](#) ^[5], disability, and heredity. Goddard, who was a psychologist and eugenicist in the early twentieth century, published his research on Wolverton and her family in his book, *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the [Heredit](#) ^[6] of Feeble-Mindedness* in 1912. Eugenics is the belief that one can improve the qualities of the human population, typically by discouraging those with purported undesirable traits to reproduce. In his book, Goddard claimed that a child can inherit feeble-mindedness, which psychiatrists now call intellectual disability, from their parents. Referring to Wolverton as Deborah Kallikak in his book, Goddard described her family in a way that supported eugenicists' claims that children could inherit intellectual disabilities and accompanying forms of anti-social behavior from their parents. Eugenicists were those who advocated for what was called [eugenics](#) ^[5], or the science of improving a human population by controlled breeding to decrease the occurrence of undesirable characteristics.

Wolverton was born in a homeless shelter in February 1889 to Malinda Wolverton, who was unmarried at the time. Wolverton's mother had worked as a domestic servant until her employer dismissed her due to her [pregnancy](#) ^[7]. Wolverton's father was unknown. Wolverton lived with her mother in poverty until she was eight years old. The teachers at the school she attended in New Jersey reported that Wolverton did not do well academically, believing she might be feeble-minded, a term that at the time referred to anyone whose intellectual functioning seemed to be below average. Because of that, Wolverton transferred to the Vineland Training School for Feeble-Minded Girls and Boys in Vineland, New Jersey.

At the Vineland Training School, Wolverton participated in numerous activities she would have done in a traditional elementary school. Wolverton studied various subjects including reading, writing, dressmaking, and woodworking. There, Goddard, who was the school's laboratory director, met Wolverton and began studying her. At the time of Wolverton's admission, the school's records described her as being of average height and weight and able to wash and dress herself. She could not read or write, but she could sew, carry wood, and fill a kettle. Teachers described Wolverton as excitable but not nervous, affectionate, and quite noisy. The records also included her family history, indicating that her grandmother was somewhat mentally deficient and her grandfather was likely an alcoholic and mentally deficient, though the records do not state how they obtained that information on Wolverton's family. At age ten, Wolverton could do some reading, writing, and counting, but her teachers noted her conduct was disruptive, impudent, and growing worse. By 1901, when Wolverton was 12 years old, she could play music by ear and grew better with math. But the records stated that she was not applying herself to her studies, and that she would be able to learn more if she would pay attention.

While Wolverton was growing up, Goddard continued to study her. In April 1910, Wolverton took an early version of the Stanford-Binet intelligence test, which was a test to measure levels of intelligence. Goddard reported that Wolverton's mentality was similar to that of a nine-year-old child, though she was actually twenty-one years old at the time she took the test. Goddard used Wolverton's results to classify her as what he called a high-grade feeble-minded person, referring to her as a "moron" throughout his report. He recorded similar results in follow-up tests in September and October of 1911, the year before Goddard published *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the [Heredit](#) ^[6] of Feeble-Mindedness*. Wolverton was then twenty-two years old. At the time, she still lived in a mental health institution and excelled in woodworking and dressmaking. While academic subjects were still difficult, she wrote many stories, though her spelling was poor.

Goddard continued to study Wolverton, which initiated his study into her family and ancestors, publishing his findings in his book, *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the [Heredit](#) ^[6] of Feeble-Mindedness*. Goddard invented the name, Kallikak, deriving it from a combination of the Greek words *kalos*, or good, and *kakos*, or bad. In the book, Goddard claimed that he traced Wolverton's family back to an early ancestor who had an illegitimate child with a feeble-minded girl he met in a tavern. Goddard claimed the resulting child was also feeble-minded and was the great-great-grandfather of Wolverton. However, Goddard also found that the same ancestor who had the illegitimate feeble-minded child later married a woman of normal intelligence and had children with her who were not feeble-minded. Goddard called the non-feeble-minded line of the family the *kalos* side and called the other, feeble-minded line the *kakos* side. Goddard used his findings as evidence that people could inherit mental ability, like

feeble-mindedness, from their parents.

The publication of Goddard's book in 1912 made Wolverton, according to science journalist Carl Zimmer, a celebrity at the Vineyard School. Wolverton remained at the school for two years after the book was published. In 1914, she left the training school and moved across the street to the New Jersey State Institution for Feeble-Minded Women, the mission of which was to keep residents from reproducing, believing that they could reduce the number of people born with disabilities because they believed it was a heritable condition. At that institution, Wolverton provided child care for the family of the assistant superintendent and served for a number of years as a nurse's aide at the institution's hospital. She learned to play the cornet, an instrument similar to a trumpet, and played it in the institution's band.

In 1925, when Wolverton was thirty-six years old, she was placed in charge of the gymnasium and helped to produce the plays that were some of the institution's activities. She made the costumes, constructed the sets, and maintained the props. She raised a long line of Persian cats, one of whom she named Henry after Goddard. Wolverton never saw Goddard after she left the training school in 1914, and Goddard himself left Vineland in 1918 to move to Columbus, Ohio, to head the Ohio Bureau of Juvenile Research. Wolverton accompanied a social worker at the institution, Helen Reeves, on annual trips, including a trip to the New York World's Fair in 1940. Throughout her life, Wolverton wrote cards and letters to friends, and even kept up a correspondence with the sister of Goddard's wife.

In 1957, when Wolverton was sixty-eight years old, psychologist Elizabeth Cooper Allen was an intern at the New Jersey State Institution for Feeble-Minded. Allen spent time with Wolverton, and though Allen was aware of the test results indicating Wolverton had the mentality of a nine year old, she wrote that Wolverton was not what she would consider to be a feeble-minded person. Allen wrote that she found Wolverton informative and interesting to talk to. In 1946, Goddard sent a Christmas card to Wolverton, though they had not had any contact since Wolverton left the training school in 1914. Wolverton told Allen that the best thing about the card was that it showed Goddard thought she had the intelligence to understand and read it.

Wolverton lived eighty-one of her eighty-nine years in institutions, first at the Vineland Training School, and then, from the age of twenty-five, at the New Jersey State Institution for Feeble-Minded. In her last years, Wolverton was offered the opportunity of leaving the institution. In severe pain due to arthritis, she declined, saying she was where she belonged, though she did not like the feeble-minded label. Later researchers disputed the claims made by Goddard, finding that Wolverton very likely did not have any sort of mental or developmental disability. She was hospitalized for the final year of her life and died in 1978.

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