

[The Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory \(1910-1939\)](#) ^[1]

By: Lawrence, Cera R. Keywords: [Eugenics](#) ^[2] [Reproductive rights](#) ^[3]

From its founding in 1910 until it closed its doors in 1939, the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) at [Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory](#) ^[4] in New York was the center of the American Eugenics Movement. Charles Davenport, a geneticist and biologist, founded the ERO, and served as its director until 1934. Under the direction of Davenport and his associate, superintendent [Harry H. Laughlin](#) ^[5], the influence of the ERO on science and public policy waxed during the early twentieth century until the beginning of World War II. The ERO is important to the history of [embryology](#) ^[6] because it played a key role in the application of scientific theories about heredity to the formulation of social policies about human reproduction.

Davenport became the director of the Biological Laboratory at Cold Spring Harbor in 1898. In 1904 he convinced the [Carnegie Institution of Washington](#) ^[7] (CIW) to fund the Station for Experimental Evolution, located on the same campus. Davenport was excited by the potential social benefit of studies in human heredity, as was his wife, [Gertrude Crotty Davenport](#) ^[8], also an embryologist and geneticist.

With a grant from Mary Harriman, the widow of railroad magnate Edward Henry Harriman, Davenport founded the Eugenics Record Office in 1910. In 1917, the Carnegie Institution began funding the ERO, and continued to provide its primary funding source until the ERO closed in 1939. John D. Rockefeller, John H. Kellogg, and other private wealthy philanthropists also provided funding for the [organization](#) ^[9].

Aside from publishing the movement's journal, *Eugenical News*, the ERO had two main directives. The first was to serve as a data repository for the trait pedigree records of hundreds of thousands of Americans. The second was to offer a training institute for [eugenics](#) ^[10] field workers. A total of 258 field workers were trained between 1910 and 1924, most of whom had bachelor degrees in biology, though many had advanced degrees.

A large number of the field workers were women. For graduates of institutions of women's higher education, becoming a field worker in [eugenics](#) ^[10] was one of the few career options open at the time. Many of the field workers trained at the ERO went on work as [eugenics](#) ^[10] specialists at hospitals, asylums, and other state-run institutions.

The field workers gathered data from individual persons on a variety of physical, mental, and moral or behavioral traits—all of which were believed to be biologically heritable. Such traits were listed in the *Trait Book*, a publication created by Davenport with the assistance of psychologists Edward L. Thorndike and Robert M. Yerkes.

Many field workers were sent to examine residents of institutions for the insane, the mentally disabled, orphans, and the poor. The reason for this was twofold. First, the chief concern of [eugenics](#) ^[10] was to prevent the genetic propagation of such conditions. Second, orphanages and mental hospitals provided a large, readily available sample source.

The ERO also archived a massive amount of data in the form of voluntary questionnaires, such as the Record of Family Traits and the Family Tree Folder. These questionnaires were created and published by Davenport and his colleagues, and were filled out by families who were interested in recording their ancestors' histories. The ERO produced pedigrees—family trees showing lines of descent and possession of traits—for every family for whom it had information. Those who were proud of their family's accomplishments in the arts or in academia were keen to have their heritage recorded.

ERO field workers collected some of the first family histories of circus performers, who were remarkable due to physical oddities. The archive of the ERO's files at Cold Spring Harbor contains pedigrees of dwarfism, gigantism, and other traits sketched out on the backs of performer's calling cards. These activities led to the first Mendelian study of albinism, published by Charles Davenport in the *Journal of Human Heredity* ^[11] in 1923.

Beside Davenport, the other personality behind the ERO was [Harry H. Laughlin](#) ^[5], who had been superintendent of schools in Kirksville, Iowa, and a one-time agriculture teacher and expert in animal husbandry. Laughlin was highly interested in and knowledgeable about breeding experiments, especially the breeding of chickens and thoroughbred horses. Through correspondence, Davenport and Laughlin supported each others' interests in studying the possible benefits of a eugenic approach to human breeding. Upon founding the Eugenics Record Office, Davenport asked Laughlin to move to Cold Spring Harbor to be the superintendent. Laughlin accepted the position and served as superintendent from 1910 to 1921.

During his tenure at the ERO, Laughlin also served as the [eugenics](#) ^[10] expert to the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, testifying in support of immigration restriction laws based on data from the ERO. Laughlin also used the ERO's

data to support his model [sterilization](#)^[12] laws, which were subsequently adopted by more than 30 states and were used as the model for Germany's 1933 [sterilization](#)^[12] laws.

In both cases, later review of the data presented by Laughlin showed that he badly misrepresented or skewed the scientific value of the ERO's records. Laughlin's zeal for forced eugenic [sterilization](#)^[12] and highly restrictive immigration laws became an embarrassment for the Eugenics Record Office and the American scientific community when public support for eugenic policies waned in the later 1930s.

According to historian Diane Paul, only a few US geneticists, among them [Thomas Hunt Morgan](#)^[13] and [Herbert Spencer Jennings](#)^[14], spoke out against the research being done by the ERO and its field workers. However, Morgan and Jennings were the exception rather than the rule among US scientists. The Eugenics Record Office was by and large seen as an important center of scientific activity, and was respected by most contemporary scientists until the late 1930s.

Research produced by field workers from the ERO was instrumental in the passage of numerous eugenic [sterilization](#)^[12] laws, including the statute that created the Oregon Board of Eugenics in 1917, and the Virginia Sterilization Law of 1924 upheld by the US Supreme Court Case *Buck v. Bell* (1927). The Carnegie Institution closed the Eugenics Record Office in 1939 in the face of increasing criticism.

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Subject

[Eugenics](#).^[18] [Eugenics](#)^[19]

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