

[Harry Hamilton Laughlin \(1880-1943\)](#) ^[1]

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Harry Hamilton Laughlin helped lead the [eugenics](#) ^[4] movement in the United States during the early twentieth century. The US [eugenics movement](#) ^[5] of the early twentieth century sought to reform the genetic composition of the United States population through [sterilization](#) ^[6] and other restrictive reproductive measures. Laughlin worked as superintendent and assistant director of the Eugenics Research Office (ERO) at [Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory](#) ^[7] in Cold Spring Harbor, New York, alongside director Charles Davenport. During Laughlin's career at the ERO, Laughlin studied human familial ancestry, called pedigrees, and in 1922 published the book *Eugenical Sterilization in the United States*, which influenced [sterilization](#) ^[6] laws in multiple states. Laughlin's support of compulsory [sterilization](#) ^[6] to control the reproductive capacity of entire populations influenced the history of [eugenics](#) ^[4] and reproductive medicine.

Laughlin was born on 11 March 1880, in Oskaloosa, Iowa, to Deborah Jane Ross Laughlin and George Hamilton Laughlin. He was the eighth of ten children. Laughlin's father lived in Quincy, Illinois, where he worked as a teacher and president of Oskaloosa College in Oskaloosa, Iowa. Laughlin's father also was a local minister for the Disciples of Christ. The Laughlin family later moved to Kirksville, Missouri, where Laughlin's father became an English professor at Kirksville State Normal School, which later became Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri, and he was the minister of a local church from 1892 until his death in 1895.

Although Laughlin's four brothers became osteopathic doctors, Laughlin graduated in 1900 from Kirksville State Normal School with studies that focused on science education. He became the principal of a high school in Canterville, Iowa, and he married Pansy Bowen on 12 September 1902. The couple never had children. In 1905, Laughlin became school superintendent, but he left his post in 1907 to teach agriculture and nature studies at Kirksville State Normal School. In 1916, Laughlin received his master's degree in biology from [Princeton University](#) ^[8] in Princeton, New Jersey, and his doctorate in 1917 for work on mitotic stages in the division of onion root-tip cells.

As a faculty member at Kirksville State Normal School, Laughlin contacted Charles Davenport, the director of the Station for Experimental Evolution at [Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory](#) ^[7]. Davenport studied genetic inheritance with Gregor Mendel's theory of heredity and genetics, and he worked to apply that theory to [eugenics](#) ^[4] in the US. In 1910 he founded the Eugenics Record Office (ERO), which specialized in human pedigrees, at the Cold Springs Harbor Laboratory. Although Laughlin's doctoral thesis was on mitotic stages in the division of onion root-tip cells, his peers reported that he put in little experimental work. According to historians, Davenport noted this scarcity of experimental work, as Laughlin was said to strategically put together data to support his claims throughout his career. Laughlin studied agricultural breeding, thoroughbred race horses, and [sex determination](#) ^[9] in date palms, but Davenport asked Laughlin to become superintendent of the ERO. Laughlin worked as superintendent from 1910 to 1921, and he was assistant director of the ERO under Davenport from 1921 to 1939.

Davenport and Laughlin worked together to establish the Eugenics Research Association at Cold Springs Harbor Laboratory in 1913, where Laughlin served as secretary-treasurer after 1917. They started to co-edit *Eugenical News* in 1916, which outlined current events in genetics. As supporters of public education in [eugenics](#) ^[4] in the 1920s, the two kept in close contact with leading scientists in the US, such as Alexander G. Bell, David S. Jordan, Lothrop Stoddard, and Madison Grant. Laughlin was a member of the [American Eugenics Society](#) ^[10], an [organization](#) ^[11] that encouraged American [eugenics](#) ^[4] in the early twentieth century, from 1917 to 1939.

Although Laughlin suffered from epilepsy, his most prominent work focused on supporting widespread control of breeding in the populations he deemed inferior through immigration restrictions, physical sterilizations, and bans on interracial marriage (miscegenation). Those policies targeted people such as the physically handicapped, epileptics, mentally handicapped—then called feeble-minded—alcoholics, blind persons, and foreigners.

In June 1920, Laughlin testified before the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization in the United States Congress in Washington, D.C. He said that the extensive immigration from southern and eastern Europe between 1900 and 1920, primarily comprised of Italian and Jews, justified his attempt to survey all mental and charity institutions in the US. According to Laughlin, these immigrants diminished the genetic stature of the American people. After the testimony, committee chairman Albert Johnson appointed Laughlin to be the committee's Expert Eugenics Agent. The Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 soon followed, which restricted total immigration into the US to about twenty percent of previous levels. Evidence of Laughlin's views and values was

displayed in the quota for southern and eastern European immigrants, which accounted for nine percent of total allotted immigration. The 1924 law restricted the number of people who could migrate from a country into the US to two percent of the population.

Laughlin published *Eugenical Sterilization in the United States*^[12], published in 1922. It featured Laughlin's Model Eugenical Sterilization Law. Laughlin argued that the integration of inferior races of people in America was diminishing the quality of the American genotype. He said that the sterilization^[6] of such groups would not only lower taxes, by reducing the burden of caring for those he deemed defective, but it would also increase the safety of future generations. Laughlin said that parents inadvertently pass undesirable traits on to their children, creating new combinations of inferior traits in offspring. Laughlin supported eugenics^[4] as a biological science because it utilized biological concepts such as phenotypic expression of genotypes and sex linkage. Even still, Laughlin admitted that heredity was not an exact science like mathematics or engineering.

Laughlin's arguments in *Eugenical Sterilization in the United States* influenced the passage of the Virginia Sterilization Act of 1924, which legalized the sterilization^[6] of the mentally disabled in Virginia. The 1927 US Supreme Court case decision of *Buck v. Bell* upheld the notion that compulsory sterilization^[6] did not violate the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution. The Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment ensures that the government will not without due process deprive US citizens of life, liberty, and property. Before the *Buck v. Bell* case got to the US Supreme Court, Laughlin served at the trial court as an expert witness on behalf of the state of Virginia. By 1924, about three thousand people in the US had been sterilized due to statutes similar to the *Virginia Sterilization Act of 1924*^[13].

Laughlin presented his work at the Third International Congress of Eugenics at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, New York, in 1932. According to Laughlin, the pedigree was an exemplary model of what eugenics^[4] could produce if executed properly. To display how his research would better humankind or humanity, Laughlin discussed what he said were superior family characteristic of the Galton-Darwin-Wedgwood pedigree. *Charles Darwin*^[14]'s son, Leonard Darwin, a colleague of Laughlin, supported Laughlin's project. The pedigree displayed the family tree of Darwin: the eighteenth century doctor Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of nineteenth century naturalist *Charles Darwin*^[14], and Josiah Wedgwood, creator of the pottery company Josiah Wedgwood and Sons. The pedigree also delineated the lineage of Sir Francis Galton, cousin of *Charles Darwin*^[14].

Laughlin's work was supported on an international scale. Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime commended Laughlin on many accounts, primarily for his theory of excluding whole races from naturalization in general. The 1933 Sterilization Laws of Nazi Germany were sculpted after theories Laughlin had explicated in *Eugenical Sterilization in the United States*. The *University of Heidelberg*^[15] in Heidelberg, Germany, granted Laughlin an honorary master's degree in 1936 for his work. After his retirement from the ERO, Laughlin and his wife moved back to Kirksville where he died on 26 January 1943 at the age of 62.

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