

Eugenics and Euthenics at the “Great Minnesota Get-Together”

Sarah Pawlicki and Laura Leppink

Title Slide (Sarah Pawlicki and Laura Leppink)

First, we want to thank Bess Williamson for arranging this presentation; we are so grateful to have this opportunity to share our research with all of you and have a conversation about the histories embedded in this case study!

Both of us are co-founders of the group REPAIR. REPAIR is based out of the University of Minnesota, a land-grant university on stolen Dakota lands. To that point, we'd like to encourage folks in the audience to check out the organization Makoce Ikikcupi: The Dakota Land Recovery Project, which is an opportunity for settlers to help finance the Dakota Nation buying back parcels of their ancestral homelands.

Today we are presenting our work on Eugenics and Euthenics at the “Great Minnesota Get-Together.” The image on this slide is an undated black and white photograph of the Minnesota State Fair entrance gate with people in the foreground.

My name is Sarah Pawlicki; I'm a white settler with brown eyes and brown hair in a buzzcut. I'm wearing a dark brown shirt under an orange blazer, and my background is a white slatted screen and a white floral curtain. I'm a PhD candidate in history, studying the intersections of religious and labor history in the context of disability, queer, and Indigenous studies.

My name is Laura Leppink; I'm also a white settler with blue eyes and long blond hair. I am wearing an orange wool sweater. I am an access assistant, public historian, and heritage conservationist at the University of Minnesota with interests in institutional, disability, and place-based histories.

REPAIR Slide (Laura Leppink)

We first want to share a little background about us and about the REPAIR Disability Heritage Collective. Our collective's logo is featured on this slide. Our logo is a line drawing in orange that can be perceived as both a small person sitting under an archway or as a keyhole in a stylized door.

REPAIR stands for Rethinking Equity in Place-based Activism, Interpretation, and Renewal, which reflects our mutual commitment to inclusive historic representation and historic preservation as reparative work supporting place-based advocates for justice. In preservationist Sarah Marsom's words, "if historic preservation is not accessible, it is neither relevant nor revolutionary."

REPAIR emphasizes holistic interventions in preservation planning, documentation, interpretation, accessibility, administration, and maintenance and is motivated by knowing that no single person associated with a historic site can make the needed changes alone. Disability has too often been framed as an issue only relevant to a small minority of individuals, requiring an institutional response only from designated access specialists. However, if, as feminist theorist Alison Kafer posits, disability is best understood through a political/relational model in which "the problem of disability is located in inaccessible buildings, discriminatory attitudes, and ideological systems that attribute normalcy and deviance to particular minds and bodies," dismantling inaccessible systems through political action becomes a mission in which all can take part. Thus, REPAIR strives to address the access needs of people with disabilities in the present day while simultaneously advocating for documenting and addressing disabled people's historic experiences and perspectives in site interpretation.

We stand on the shoulders of giants and are inspired by works that include, but are not limited to, Sins Invalid's "10 Principles of Disability Justice," Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Stacey Park Milbern's "Disability Justice: An Audit Tool," MASS Action's "Readiness Assessment" and "Toolkit," and Sarah Marsom's work on dismantling historic preservation.

Major Themes (Sarah Pawlicki)

Our presentation today revolves around these key themes and questions.

First, we discuss the respective goals of eugenics and euthenics throughout the early 1900s, and describe how these fields were gendered disciplines. Eugenics - defined as the practice or advocacy of controlled selective breeding of human populations to supposedly improve the average person's genetic condition - was a racist and ableist ideology that continues to inform contemporary discourse. Euthenics focused instead on external, environmental factors as the key to "human betterment." Both fields shared the same ultimate goal, but saw the path to that goal differently.

Second, we analyze how eugenic ideas were spread via institutional, formal education and popular education. The task of implementing eugenic policies across the state of Minnesota required widespread public buy-in; how did eugenicists try to amplify their message?

Finally, we focus on the Minnesota State Fair to ask: How and why did the Minnesota State Fair circulate eugenic ideologies in a popular entertainment setting? A place-based history of the Minnesota State Fair shows how eugenic ideas were foundational to the fair's chosen location, professed mission, and intended audience.

REPAIR's Interpretive Methods (Laura Leppink)

In the words of our collaborator Perri Meldon, "[e]very historic site, house museum, and national park unit have disability histories to tell." Ultimately, compassionate interpretation of the historic experiences of disabled folks enhances our sense of belonging in public spaces.

In order to start dismantling ableism in historic preservation we have to understand what it looks like in the world around us. Drawing on abolitionist scholar T.L. Lewis' definition, we understand ableism to be "[a] system that places value on people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence, excellence, and

productivity. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, colonialism, and capitalism. This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable and worthy based on a person's appearance and/or their ability to satisfactorily [re]produce, excel and 'behave.' You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism."

As we come to this work, we realize that all of these different facets of identity and history are operative all the time. We believe that moving issues of human ability and disability to the center of our thinking offers an essential corrective to interpretive visions pitched toward the most able-bodied, affluent, employable, autonomous, and privileged individuals. Drawing on Sins Invalid's first Principle of Disability Justice as well as Gail Dubrow and Donna Graves' article "Taking Intersectionality Seriously," we understand the experience of disability is complicated by race, gender, sexuality, and class, which necessitates the use of intersectional and multidisciplinary lenses to understand how ableism operates systemically and identifying interventions required to make historic properties and their respective disability stories accessible.

REPAIR's work engages with disability studies to illustrate how different models of disability, ranging from the social model to the medical model are reflected in the built environment and landscape. The social model of disability highlights how people are disabled by their environments, making it a natural lens through which to view place based history.

Mapping Project Background (Sarah Pawlicki)

With limited time today, our presentation will focus on our more tangible work related to mapping and interpretation of sites important in disability history. This slide features a draft image by REPAIR's graphic designer Morgan LaCasse of our collective's future website, which will be made public in mid-March of this year. REPAIR's goal of "putting disability history on the map" is central to our project. Over the past couple of years REPAIR has utilized StoryMap case studies, such as the one we are sharing to you all

today on Eugenics and Euthenics at the Minnesota State Fair, to reimagine place-based history interpretation through the lenses of disability justice and critical disability studies.

Why StoryMaps? (Laura Leppink)

StoryMaps can make place-based history accessible without demanding travel to a physical site. Particularly in the midst of a pandemic that makes travel a calculated risk, digital place-based interpretation provides COVID-safe options for sharing public history. StoryMapping also offers opportunities for creating content for multiple audiences. Particular case studies - focused on a single site - can be written for different grade levels, different communities, and with different goals in mind. Their relative brevity can make the genre more flexible and adjustable depending on the imagined audience using the website. We were also excited by the ability to include multimedia content in our Storymaps. Particularly when trying to envision an accessible, engaging website for a wide community of disabled people with varying access needs, the capacity to present textual, audio, photographic, and video content alike mattered to us as we selected a platform from which to expand our work.

We were excited by the chance to fill in gaps in traditional historic preservation methods by using an online platform for site interpretation. Places that no longer exist in the built environment - that have been torn down or fallen victim to neglect - can still be commemorated and interpreted via digital platforms. Exciting and cutting-edge work is being done in historic preservation that encourages us to rethink and reimagine concepts that have, in the past, been integral to conventional historic preservation practices. For example, “authenticity” and “integrity” can both be categories that generally reflect privilege in their initial construction, maintenance, and historic designations. For communities with fewer socially-granted privileges, their community spaces were frequently rented, transient, or less architecturally ornate than those of wealthy white folks.

Instead of highlighting single sites, digital platforms are conducive to showing how places were networked and interconnected. For example, research into the Minnesota

Eugenics Society - one of the primary entities at the crux of this presentation - revealed how the Society was connected to Twin Cities' churches, private medical practices, the University of Minnesota's anthropology department and medical school, Stillwater Prison, and more.

From the Ground Up: Locating the Minnesota State Fair (Sarah Pawlicki)

The Minnesota State Fair has taken place at several locations since its origin, and all of its locations were and are firmly rooted in Indigenous, Dakota land. The image on this slide shows an illustration of a Dakota village located on a hillside sloping down toward a lake - a fitting picture, given that Minnesota's name is derived from the Dakota phrase Mni Sota Makoce, or "the land where the waters reflect the clouds."

In the mid-nineteenth century, in the midst of the chaos of the U.S.-Dakota War provoked by colonial invasion, occurring at the same time as the U.S. Civil War, the Minnesota State Fair was held at Fort Snelling at Bdote. Fort Snelling was a settler military outpost which became the site of a concentration camp incarcerating Dakota people. Bdote is a sacred place to the Dakota nation, making their imprisonment there particularly painful. The Minnesota State Fair's entertainments were encircled by Fort Snelling's barracks and outbuildings, a reminder of the United States's military occupation of Dakota lands. Dakota people were, by governmental decree, forced out of Minnesota and prohibited from returning to their homeland. Another Native polity, the Ho-Chunk, were also exiled from Minnesota. The Ho-Chunk were uninvolved in the U.S.-Dakota War, but lived on highly desirable farmland. Minnesotan politicians and investors were eager to purchase the land, and took advantage of white settlers' prevailing hostility toward all Native people to violently banish the Ho-Chunk from the state as well.

The Minnesota State Fairgrounds moved around after the U.S.-Dakota War. The current fair site, located in Falcon Heights, once housed the Ramsey County Poor Farm, where impoverished Minnesotans could go to exchange their labor for a place to stay. Poor

Farm's grounds were donated to the Minnesota State Agricultural Society for the purpose of hosting a state fair in 1885.

Agricultural colonialism was at the root of the Minnesota State Fair's purpose, as white settlers sought prizes for their agricultural output grown on Dakota land. The Minnesota State Agricultural Society encouraged competition to determine who was producing the "best" livestock, the "best" fruits and vegetables, the "best" preserves and fancywork. It was only a matter of time before that attitude spread to ideas about the display of the "best" human beings the state of Minnesota had to offer. The Minnesota Eugenics Society president Charles Dight wrote in a letter to the editor to the Star Tribune: "In the live stock exhibit at the Minnesota state fair a 'scrub cow' is placed beside two fine Holstein cattle for contrast and to show that by wise selection in breeding, a superior stock can certainly be produced that will yield more and better milk and increase the farmers' income. A question which I asked several exhibitors of stock and which always caused a smile was this: Where on the fair grounds is the building in which is exhibited a fine type and superior strain of human beings, pure bred men and women - human thoroughbreds?"

Why State Fairs? (Laura Leppink)

The image on this slide is a notice that appears in the 1915 Annual Report on the Minnesota State Fair which reads "Are you interested in babies? Will you help us improve the most important crop raised in the State of Minnesota? Help save the lives of Minnesota babies. Enter your baby or help enter your neighbor's baby in the Health Contest at the Minnesota State Fair."

State fairs play an important role in defining and reinforcing ideas and rules about citizenship. Especially in the Progressive era, state fairs were a site of patriotic boosterism. Reminding citizens of the state's best and most valued features and encouraging both state and national pride was a primary motivator behind the development of state fairs.

Educating the public about these standards and ideals of citizenship was central to why the Minnesota Agricultural Society, founded in 1854 four years before Minnesota was granted statehood, viewed the fair as a critical educational institution and resource for the general public. The definition of citizenship, carefully crafted by the predominantly white men and later white women in power in the territory and state, was confined to white settlers and their agricultural way of life and civilization. From its inception the Minnesota State Fair was a colonial institution. It sought to further the efforts of white settlers and teach Minnesotans how a proper citizen looked and acted.

These notions of settler colonialism and white supremacy were perpetuated over time through new ideologies and dovetailed well with the rise of eugenics following its introduction by Francis Galton in his 1883 book *Inquiries into Human Fertility and Its Development*. With inseparable ties to racism, misogyny, classism, and settler colonialism, eugenics offered an effective approach to reinforce the positions of those in positions of power across the state, and the Minnesota State Fair was the steadfast venue in which to share these ideas with the (white) public.

The early eugenics movement of the early 1900s informed the development of the Minnesota State Fair. In the 1908 Annual Report of the Minnesota State Agricultural Society titled “The Minnesota State Fair of 1908, and the Future,” the opening address was by Dr. Frank A. Weld, president of the State Normal School at Moorhead, and his speech was titled “The State Fair as an Educational Institution.” Weld’s address offers a clear picture of the role and place of non-white people in the state, and by default places like the Minnesota State Fair. Weld outlined the role the Minnesota State Fair played in the development of Minnesota, stating, “the Minnesota State Fair has been, since its inception, a medium of expression, and, as the state has gained in power of material resources, moral fiber, and intellectual acumen, this expression of effort, material and intellectual, has come to assume gigantic proportions. The growth of the State Fair as an institution has been consistent with the continued and marvelous development of the state.”

Much like the University of Minnesota, the Minnesota State Fair also predates statehood. While institutions such as the U of M were not accessible to many Minnesotans, the State Fair offered an alternative educational space for “all” Minnesotans to partake in shaping the future of the state. And to reiterate, that the meaning of “all” for the Agricultural Society of Minnesota, however, only meant colonizers. Later in his address, Weld reinforces this notion by describing an indigenous person as “[t]he lazy Indian who fled in terror from the great fire ship had possessed in peace for centuries these same fertile prairies. Yet he had obtained from them a few paltry tufts of Indian corn,” later explaining that “It was left for a more progressive race to develop the resources of this territory. The white man came, and he wrung from reluctant nature abundant crops.” Although not referenced explicitly, the promotion of white superiority and its supposed benefits to the state reveal how eugenics and scientific racism made their way into general discourse.

Gendered Grounds (Sarah Pawlicki)

The image on this slide is a map showing the Minnesota fairgrounds in 1923, the year Charles Dight founded the Minnesota Eugenics Society.

White men dominated the conversation in legislative and academic contexts, which in turn was translated through their stewardship of the agricultural society and state fair. Middle-to-upper class white women directly advocated for eugenics in the sphere in which they had the greatest authority: the home. As the protectors of social and cultural values through their crucial role of mothering the next generation, women could participate in eugenic marriages designed to produce “race betterment,” surround their infants with tools designed to produce “better babies,” and educate their children about the significance of “sex hygiene” so they, too, would make eugenically informed reproductive choices. The home economics movement emphasized women’s capacity to affect child development outcomes through “nurture” as a more hopeful complement to primarily male geneticists’ emphasis on “nature” as a fixed outcome.

The home economist Ellen Swallow Richards originated the term “euthenics” to encapsulate the movement’s relationship to ideas about human progress rooted in the eugenics movement. Richards defined euthenics as “the betterment of living conditions, through conscious endeavor, for the purpose of securing efficient human beings.” This “betterment” would occur in stages. In her words: [quote]

“Eugenics deals with race improvement through heredity.

Euthenics deals with race improvement through environment.

Eugenics is hygiene for the future generations.

Euthenics is hygiene for the present generation.

Eugenics must await careful investigation.

Euthenics has immediate opportunity.

Euthenics precedes eugenics, developing better men now, and thus inevitably creating a better race of men in the future.”

Euthenics advocate Ellen Swallow Richards, 1912

The 1914 Minnesota State Fair was a pivotal moment for women’s participation in fair planning, and marked the formation of the Public Welfare Department. The committee included six women, and was chaired by Mrs. Bertha Dahl Laws as Superintendent of the Department of Public Welfare. The divisions of the department included a Rest Cottage, Program and Entertainment, Household Economics, Baby Health Contest, Day Nursery, Emergency Hospital, Child Welfare Exhibit, and Health Exhibit. Beyond her role in chairing the Public Welfare Department for the Minnesota State Fair, Dahl Laws was also known as a prominent lecturer and writer on domestic science and industrial education, giving talks across a number of states and even in Canada. She was listed as a faculty member and lecturer on Domestic Science at the Northern Normal and Industrial School as well as the Mankato Normal School, which is now Minnesota State University.

In her report, Dahl Laws addressed the need for dedicated space and attention to educating the public about health and welfare. She pointed out that “the welfare of men,

women and children of the great state of Minnesota seems to be of small interest to the state, if one is to judge by the absence of any building dedicated to [that] work on the State Fair Grounds.”

The Woman’s Building (Laura Leppink)

In partial answer to Dahl Laws’ complaints, the Women’s Building was constructed on the State Fair’s grounds. This slide shows a postcard of the Woman’s Building - a large brick building with ornate and classical detailing, and a whopping ten American flags flying from its roof. The crowd surrounding the building is shown to be full of well-dressed people - men and women - out to enjoy a day’s entertainment at the Fair.

The Women’s Building was a hub for domestic science displays intended to interest the modern woman. Blending education with entertainment was a key part of the formula for engaging audience members. It featured displays of new technology for taking care of a household, baking competitions, needlework exhibits, and fashion displays. “Better baby contests” were a prominent pathway for both educating the public about what factors composed a “better baby” and for instilling “winners” of the better baby contests with pride in their genetically excellent progeny.

Women’s Building Busy Place at Fair (Sarah Pawlicki)

There are two images on this slide. The upper left image on this slide is a newspaper clipping which reads “Women’s Building Busy Place at Fair; Exhibits Are Varied.” The lower right image is a newspaper clipping showing three women demonstrating how to use various kitchenware at the state fair.

Bertha Dahl Laws was at the heart of efforts to refine the entertainments and educational materials available to Minnesota’s citizens in the Women’s Building. In her efforts to more permanently establish spaces to learn about human welfare she spoke at the 1914 Minnesota Agricultural Society meeting on the state fair and noted: “The importance of horticulture—fruits and vegetables—to the state is being more and more

appreciated, and the beautiful horticultural building on the State Fair grounds convinces one that this is realized. But, the value of human lives seems to be underestimated.”

Law’s analysis pushed the Agricultural Society to acknowledge how their choices for the State Fair’s built environment, forms of entertainment, and educational opportunities determined what Minnesotans valued in the moment as well as for the future of their families, communities, and the state.

At the Fair, Bertha Dahl Laws resented that the significant exhibits (like those on child welfare programming and eugenic charts drawn up by Dr. A.C. Rogers of the Faribault School for the Feeble-Minded) were “sandwiched” between displays showing women new ways to prepare jello and use yarn. It seemed to her that this kind of proximity lessened the importance and impact of the serious work being done at the Minnesota State Fair’s Women’s Building.

This kind of normalizing - making the rudiments of eugenics seem as mundane and palatable as displays of cookery innovations - was part of what made the ideological work of “better baby contests” so powerful.

Minnesota Eugenics Society (Laura Leppink)

The Minnesota Eugenics Society, led by Charles Dight, was entirely composed of white men. As indicated by the debate over euthenics and eugenics, though, the formal membership rolls aren’t necessarily reflective of white women’s actual engagement with eugenic ideologies. For instance, it is likely that many of the wives of Minnesota Eugenics Society members were also ardent eugenicists, but simply expressed their enthusiasm for the cause in the domestic sphere, rather than in the formalized, public sphere.

Dight’s ideology was widespread, popularly acceptable in mainstream venues, and extensively networked. The map pictured on this slide shows the addresses of

Minnesota Eugenics Society members across the state, as well as significant locations in the movement, including places like the University of Minnesota's Anthropology building, the Faribault School for the Feeble-Minded, and the Minnesota State Fairgrounds. The majority of Minnesota Eugenics Society members were embedded in academia, medical institutions, or in the prison system.

The reach of the Minnesota Eugenics Society can be exemplified by member Frederick Kuhlman. Kuhlman found numerous venues in which to promote eugenic ideology including as the superintendent of the Minnesota State School for the Feeble-Minded, professor in Educational Psychology at the University of Minnesota, Director of the Division of Research under the State Board of Control, and even as participated as one of the physicians for the Minnesota State Fair Better Baby Contests.

Minnesotan Mothers with their Better Babies (Sarah Pawlicki)

This slide shows a picture of Minnesotan mothers with their babies, sitting on steps of a house, preparing to determine how their progeny ranked in terms of genetic excellence. Charles Dight spoke to the role fairgrounds and better baby contests could play in a November 13, 1923 *Minneapolis Star* letter to the editor: "Baby shows at county fairs should be held and whole family groups should be encouraged to compete with special reference to developing hereditary soundness and fine quality, these to be determined by physical and mental tests which should include character - kindness being one of the most important and valuable characteristics. Other most essential traits for good general behavior are conscience, caution, reasoning ability or good judgment."

Given the prevailing contemporary heteronormative, gendered social roles of the day, women were tasked with the primary responsibility for reproducing a "fit" generation of babies capable of perpetuating the kind of "race betterment" program Dight envisioned. Dahl Laws agreed that it was vital to instruct women how to bring up their children right, observing in the 1914 Minnesota State Fair Annual Report: "I think the State Fair should be a leader in the state help of Minnesota. So many people, too, never reach our excellent educational systems. They stay right in the home. Then the only teacher,

doctor and nurse is the mother in the home. So we have to train the one important factor in civilization, the mothers of Minnesota.”

Glass Cage (Laura Leppink)

The spaces designed to house the better baby contests communicated their purpose, intended audience, and underlying logics. The Minnesota Department of Public Welfare reported in 1915, in a synopsis of the work done under Bertha Dahl Laws’ leadership: “The most striking feature of the work of this department was, undoubtedly, the baby health contest and the child welfare exhibit. The contest was conducted in a glass cage, 20x20, in the center of the Woman’s Building. Three sides were of glass, the fourth side opening into two dressing rooms. Each baby was examined in full view of the public. The physicians and the nurses in their white uniforms were the only ones allowed in this cage.”

The better baby contest, by dint of its centralized location in the Woman’s Building, served as the core feature of the Woman’s Department. The large “glass cage” used to host better baby contests emphasized that they were intended to be educational (hence being performed in front of any interested speculators who happened to be walking by). White-coated medical professionals lent the competition an air of scientific authority, bolstered by the appearance of Dr. A.C. Rogers, the superintendent at the Faribault School for the Feeble-Minded, who delivered lectures about eugenics at the Women’s Building.

Circulating Eugenics (Sarah Pawlicki)

Minnesota Eugenics Society president Charles Dight conceptualized eugenics using a structural, design-based metaphor. He stated in a 1933 radio lecture that: “Heredity is the great power that it is because it fixes during the nine months of life before birth, the structure of the brain, through whose nerve cells the mind acts. Heredity, figuratively speaking, is the architect of the house your mind must live in.” According to him, the fundamental building block of eugenics had to be genetics. There was only so much

external factors (like the environment or education) could do in terms of “race betterment.” Embedding eugenic ideas into popular venues was critical to making this radical change to U.S. society.

Eugenicists knew that their ideology could not be confined to the figurative ivory tower if they were to produce the results eugenicists wanted. Leaders of the eugenics movement were preoccupied with how they could most efficiently circulate their ideas to popular audiences. Dight wrote in a *Star Tribune* letter to the editor: “A wider spread and profound interest must be stimulated in the recognition and analysis of the biological factors in civilization, and existing knowledge must be placed in the hands of teachers, preachers, lecturers in a suitable form to retail to the public.” Only widespread buy-in from a broad sector of the public would make the “race betterment” programs he envisioned a possibility. State fairs were considered to be an excellent venue for popularizing eugenic ideologies through a combination of education and entertainment.

Fairgrounds were a convenient way to capture the attention of big audiences. It was one wing of the Minnesota Eugenics Society’s educational programming, alongside formal institutionalized higher education (like at the University of Minnesota), radio lectures, and home economic workshops. Dight stressed that “The essential facts of eugenics should become as familiar as the multiplication table.” Keeping eugenics at the forefront of public consciousness - through popular media and popular entertainments like the State Fair - was critical to the quest to make the pillars of eugenics ubiquitous across the state.