Fig. 1. University of Virginia Rotunda, by Ralph W. Holsinger, ca. 1920–1939. Courtesy of Holsinger Studio Collection, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.
Eugenicists, Sentimentalists, Activists: Social Theory at the University of Virginia, 1926–1960

by Jeffrey L. Hantman

Introduction

On May 2, 2002, Governor Mark R. Warner issued an apology for the Commonwealth of Virginia’s active support for eugenics throughout much of the twentieth century. Eugenics was a worldwide scientific and social movement of the twentieth century that asserted that new knowledge of genetics and inheritance should encourage society to control reproduction to improve the human species. Eugenicists perceived positive and negative differences in mental ability and character that they typically associated with race and class. These differences were thought to be inherited rather than produced by social or economic factors. People considered to have good heredity were encouraged to have more children, while people considered to have poor heredity were discouraged or prevented from having any children.2

The pseudo-science of race-based eugenics theory, policy, and practice also restricted equal access to health care, freedom of choice in marriage so as to keep races “pure,” and agency of the individual to self-identify in terms of state-defined racial categories. In the cruelest manifestation of eugenics policy, eugenicists empowered by state law employed forced sterilization to

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prevent individuals speciously classified as “unfit” from passing their genes on to future generations. Over a fifty-year span from 1927 to 1979, approximately 8,000 people were involuntarily sterilized in Virginia.

The apology issued by Governor Warner in 2002 for these practices was the first such apology offered in the nation. In his brief three-line statement he concluded with a variant on the oft-repeated warning about the lessons of history: “We must remember the Commonwealth’s past mistakes in order to prevent them from recurring.” Unfortunately, Warner’s vague call to remember the Commonwealth’s “past mistakes” missed an important opportunity to redress a wider problem: The lessons of the eugenics era should extend beyond the particular and speak to protecting more broadly against abuses in research and policy—both medical and social.

The role of the University of Virginia (hereafter “the University” or “U.Va.”) in the teaching and practice of eugenics in its Hospital, in the School of Medicine curriculum, and in the liberal arts curriculum is well known (figure 1). Eugenics was widely considered to be a progressive science in the early part of the twentieth century and held the status of a scientific consensus. In other words, its logic, teachings, and practice were paradigmatic and thus blinded scholars and policy makers to alternative ways of thinking. In that context, eugenicists at the University of Virginia from the medical school to the liberal arts were empowered for decades, from the 1920s to the 1960s, to dominate the curricula with eugenics-based teaching. The Commonwealth’s endorsement of eugenics fostered racial inequality, the fear of racial mixing, and the support of white supremacist ideologies in health care and social policy, and these conditions were promoted through research and teaching at the University.

But one must question whether the eugenics paradigm was truly a consensus science. In fact, well-known and strong opposing voices challenged the consensus across the United States and Europe. They included attorney Clarence Darrow; English scientists and philosophers J. B. S. Haldane, Julian Huxley, and G. K. Chesterton; and leaders of the Roman Catholic Church. In academia, faculty at Columbia University, the University of Chicago, and Howard University also challenged eugenics teachings, led by professors Franz Boas, Robert Ezra Park, and the so-called Howard Circle. These voices were clear and audible from the classroom to the U.S. Congress. Recognizing today the presence of these opposition voices recasts the faculty’s attempt to exclusively support eugenics and white supremacist teaching at the University of Virginia as a chosen racist ideology instead of a blind adherence to a dominant scientific paradigm.
Eugenics at the University of Virginia was falsely cloaked in the language of progressive and cutting-edge science, language that supported the racist goals of university administrators. Associate Professor Lisa Woolfolk recently stated this most clearly: "Eugenics confirmed the University's reputation as a progressive institution that centered on its Southern heritage. In this way UVA could boldly march into the scientific future (eugenics) while remaining firmly ensconced in its white supremacist past." At the University, supporters of eugenics and white supremacist teaching included Presidents Edwin A. Alderman (1861–1931) and John L. Newcomb (1881–1954), University of Virginia Hospital director Paul B. Barringer (1857–1941), University of Virginia School of Medicine dean Harvey Ernest Jordan (1875–1963), anatomy professor Robert Bennett Bean (1874–1944), and College dean and biology professor Ivey Foreman Lewis (1882–1964) (figures 2–1).

Together these faculty members created eugenics research and education programs at the University and throughout the state, and in doing so, trained university students as well as high school and college teachers in eugenic racism. They also collaborated with nationally renowned eugenics investigators and presented their work at international eugenics meetings.

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Fig. 2. Edwin A. Alderman, by Underwood & Underwood, undated. Courtesy of Visual History Collection, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

Fig. 3. John L. Newcomb, undated. Courtesy of Visual History Collection, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.
Fig. 4. Paul Brandon Barringer, by Holsinger Studio, undated. Courtesy of Holsinger Studio Collection, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

Fig. 5. Harvey Ernest Jordan, by Ralph W. Holsinger, ca. 1920–1939. Courtesy of Holsinger Studio Collection, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

Fig. 6. Robert Bennett Bean, by Ralph W. Holsinger, ca. 1920–1939. Courtesy of Holsinger Studio Collection, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

Fig. 7. Ivey Foreman Lewis, by Ralph W. Holsinger, ca. 1920–1939. Courtesy of Holsinger Studio Collection, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.
Fully immersed in race science, these men contributed directly and indirectly to ethnically contemptuous laws and policies designed to maintain a culture of white supremacy and exclusionary white privilege.\textsuperscript{10}

The early twentieth century's best universities taught and practiced—and now apologize for—the teaching of eugenics, though many of those same universities simultaneously offered a strong critique of eugenics from the social sciences. At the University of Virginia, however, the upper administration chose to select and pursue new hires who would adhere to the racist ideologies that were dug in across the Hospital and the College. Yet, in two cases, the University sought social scientists who were heavily trained in scientific fieldwork, and the faculty hired candidates—Floyd Nelson House (1893–1975) and Eric R. Wolf (1923–1999)—who did not support the supposed eugenics consensus. These professors came from graduate programs that were deeply committed to fighting eugenics; their own professors had been the voices of protest since the early twentieth century. House and Wolf continued that trend, bringing anti-eugenics avenues of thinking to the University and later offering support to the civil rights movement from both academic and activist standpoints. Opponents to eugenics and its racist legacies would have faced formidable opposition, but their very existence challenges the idea that a consensus paradigm of race-based science could explain the adoption of eugenics policies, practices, and curricula.

The National Critique: Franz Boas, Robert Park, and the Howard Circle

The leading critical voices of eugenics in the early twentieth century were internationally known and respected scholars who valued their roles as public intellectuals. They included such luminaries as Franz Boas at Columbia University, Robert Ezra Park at the University of Chicago, and members of the so-called Howard Circle of social scientists at Howard University, including E. Franklin Frazier, Alain Locke, and Ralph Bunche.\textsuperscript{11} Their critiques of eugenics and race theory were broadcast widely to the public, to Congress, in the courts, in the popular press, and in the training of graduate and undergraduate students. Notably, the second- and third-generation students of those outspoken and anti-eugenicist professors found academic posts and gained influence in national organizations, though segregation at the University of Virginia prevented the hiring of Howard's noted African American faculty or their students.

President Alderman would have looked to very few schools to model a modern research university. Top-ranked research universities with hospitals and medical schools taught both eugenics and a critique of eugenics. But if
President Alderman sought to build the University of Virginia into a top-flight research university, he left out one significant and well-funded part of the modern curriculum: social theory on race. Instead, only the racist and white-supremacist teachings of eugenics predominated and shaped the University’s curriculum.

Modern universities in the early twentieth century routinely added departments of anthropology and sociology (replacing rural sociology) to their curriculum. Countless books have been written by and about the schools of thought that Boas and Park created and that reached the best American universities. Chicago and Columbia were regarded to have the best sociology programs in the United States and would have been the most likely sources for a new social theory professor at the University of Virginia.

Cultural anthropology at Columbia under Franz Boas taught that race is a social construct, not a biological one (figure 8). Historian Charles King powerfully summarizes the Boasian perspective and critique of eugenics:

American ideas about race are a rationalization for something a group of people desperately want to believe: that they are higher, better, and more advanced than some other group. Race was how Europeans explained to themselves their own sense of privilege and achievement. Insofar as races existed, at least as far as Europeans typically understood them, it was through an act of cultural conjuring, not biological destiny.12

Boas published in The Nation and spoke on national radio broadcasts. He published popular books that took direct

Fig. 8. Franz Boas, ca. 1915. Courtesy of Canadian Museum of Civilization.
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Robert Ezra Park, often identified as a founder of the Chicago school of sociology, began his career as a journalist and kept his commitment to reaching a public audience throughout his switch to academic study (figure 9). Park had done his graduate studies under John Dewey and took influence from psychologist William James. Park taught for two years at Harvard University, from 1904 to 1905, followed by nine years at the Tuskegee Institute. After Tuskegee, Park taught at the University of Chicago from 1914 to 1933. In 1936, he affiliated with Fisk University and taught there until 1943, one year before his death.

His work explored race issues as a product of race relations, migration, social movements, and social disorganization.

Sociologists who studied under or were influenced by Park at Chicago, along with the social scientists who constituted the Howard Circle at Howard University, including E. Franklin Frazier, Alain Locke, and Ralph Bunche, emphasized “race relations” as opposed to Boasian “race culture.” The relational approach saw environmental and economic processes as principal points of analysis and legal argument in developing critiques of race-based discrimination. The Chicago school and the Howard Circle looked at social relations, migration, and discrimination as factors more important in determining racial identity than the nonscientific arguments of the eugenicists.

In other words, these schools of thought, and the individuals associated with them, did not agree on all points—an important factor to note. Furthermore, Lee Baker argues that a multidisciplinary approach characterized
the study of race relations at Howard. In contrast, eugenics dominated the curriculum of the University of Virginia in the first half of the century, unchecked by a multidisciplinary approach.

Scientists and Sentimentalists

In the administrations of U.Va. presidents Edwin A. Alderman (1905–1931) and John L. Newcomb (1931–1947), eugenics research, teaching, and policy in the Hospital and College received explicit support. President Colgate W. Darden Jr. (1897–1981) later supported state policies of segregation and states’ rights in his term as president (1947–1959) (figure 10). Alderman and Newcomb yielded an enormous amount of influence to Ivey Lewis, chair of the Biology Department and later dean of the College. Hiring of new faculty during that time hinged on whether a scholar was considered a “scientist” or a “sentimentalist.”

Eugenicists accepted hereditarian determinism, a belief that, between individuals and groups, differences in intelligence, morality, and the ability to learn and improve society were shaped by genetics rather than social and environmental factors. Subscribers to this theory thought these behaviors were measurable and objective, and both eugenics and hereditarian determinism were deemed to be the cutting edge and future of the modern scientific university. By extension, scientists who practiced within these fields were looked upon with favor.

Sentimentalists, on the other hand, were thought to be subjective, not scientific, and they applied their research to social policies that encouraged change, self-improvement, and the relief of suffering. At the

Fig. 10. Colgate W. Darden Jr. (detail of James B. Conant and Colgate W. Darden Jr. on Lawn), by Ralph R. Thompson, 1952. Courtesy of Visual History Collection, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.
University of Virginia, sentimentalists were defined negatively, and the sentimentalism of anthropology, in particular, undercut any claim to science in the eyes of the University's presidents and deans. Though Franz Boas considered anthropology to be a science, and he himself a scientist, the duality that a scholar and teacher could be both a scientist and a sentimentalist did not seem possible at U.Va. The Virginia eugenicists, however, were wrong.

A “Sentimentalist” at U.Va.: The Hiring of “Scientific” Sociologist Floyd Nelson House

Were there so-called sentimentalists at the University of Virginia? A national change in university curricula in the first three decades of the twentieth century created an opportunity for some to arrive in Charlottesville. In an effort to modernize, departments of rural sociology with strong ties to agricultural economics increasingly became departments of sociology, or jointly sociology and anthropology.

In 1926, the University created the Department of Sociology and conducted its first search for a professor in that discipline. What direction would the department take? The first hire would be a significant one. A committee conducted the search, but President Alderman and Ivey Lewis played the largest roles in the hire. This was an unlikely hiring duo by today’s norms, as Lewis, who would go on to hold decanal positions from 1934 to 1953, did not hold a position beyond professor of biology in 1926. But as Alexander S. Leidholdt observes, “Alderman frequently sought and nearly always followed Lewis’s advice regarding faculty and administrative appointments. [Lewis] consistently recommended against hiring applicants who might critically examine southern traditions, advocate environmental interventions to social problems, or disconcert the flourishing community of eugenicists he helped to install at the University, a number of whom lived near him on the Lawn.” As often noted, Lewis and Alderman claimed to be committed to professionalizing the University and encouraging progress and modernization in curriculum and educational policy. Those terms were not neutral; they translated to support of eugenics-based medical and social science.

Lewis made his position on race in the social sciences disturbingly clear, in his own words:

There is a lot of sap headed thinking about it [race relative to heredity], mostly based on the silly notion that all men are brothers and therefore alike in their potentialities. Actually there is no biological principle better established than that of inequality of races, and yet sociologists, especially the Jewish ones, are loud and
effective in their denial of any racial differences, even saying there is no such thing as race.\(^\text{17}\)

Alderman and Lewis did not want a sentimentalist on the faculty at U.Va. Lewis especially did not want to consider “the Jewish ones,” a phrase that targeted Boas and his students, many of whom were Jewish.\(^\text{18}\) In rejecting Boasian anthropologists, the University instead turned to recent or new PhDs in sociology.

Preceding the search to fill the new sociology professorship, Lewis wrote to Alderman with a warning: “The Social Sciences suffer in public estimation from dilettantism, and I think it would be a mistake to put in as full professor of sociology any man who has not been thoroughly trained in the best thought of his times in theory, principle and practice of his subject.”\(^\text{19}\) If there was to be a sociology professor at the modern University of Virginia, Lewis wanted one from a highly regarded program with an emphasis on empirical research. This narrowed the search to a very few doctoral programs.

Historians of sociology agree that Chicago and Columbia were the two best programs of the still-young field, but by the mid-1920s, Chicago stood alone at the top.\(^\text{20}\) The reality of that ranking is of less concern here than the perception by U.Va.'s search committee and administrators that Chicago's program was stronger—that is, more scientific—because of its encouragement of statistics and applied field studies.\(^\text{21}\)

Chicago sociology was part of a joint Department of Sociology and Anthropology. The sociology wing made European social thought and inquiry a focus, and thus sociology was well connected to intellectual influences in the anthropology wing. Martin Bulmer's history of the Chicago sociology school notes that “during the 1920s, with Edward Sapir and Robert Redfield, anthropology was important as a cross-fertilizing influence.”\(^\text{22}\)

Fay Cooper Cole and Edward Sapir, both students of Franz Boas, were influential anthropologists on the faculty of the joint Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Chicago. A survey conducted among twenty-five sociologists who had been at Chicago in the 1920s asked participants which professors, in fields other than sociology, influenced them the most. Participants recalled Sapir as the second-most influential professor across the university.\(^\text{23}\) Interestingly, an earlier founder of the Chicago Sociology Department identified anthropologist Boas as having more influence on him than any sociology professors. Understanding race, racial difference, and race-based inequality through a cultural, historical, and social lens shaped by Boas and Park was a shared commitment for Chicago PhD candidates at that time. This was the same program that U.Va. declared to be the strongest science-based sociology program in the United States.
The University of Virginia hired Floyd Nelson House from the University of Chicago in 1926 (figure 11). He had earned his PhD in 1924 and taught on the Chicago faculty for one year. When House accepted the offer from U.Va., he noted that "his courses at U.Va. would involve fieldwork and asking questions." While that seems standard practice today, conducting empirical fieldwork and challenging existing norms were not standard in the 1920s. But House had been trained in both practices within the program of environmentalist and liberal sociology taught by Robert Park. Correspondence in the Floyd House Papers housed at U.Va. shows that House and Park were very close, both as professor-student and as colleagues, a relationship that continued until Park's death in 1944. Indeed, as a young professor at U.Va., House followed the direction of his mentor's research and his own ideas of social justice.

Publications by House in the 1920s and 1930s strongly supported the relational ideas of Park and the cultural work of Boas in critically looking at race and race categories in the United States. In 1935, House published an article for the American Journal of Sociology on the study of race relations. The phrasing of "race relations" conveys the intellectual move away from the eugenics focus on racial types to the dynamics of socially or culturally constructed race relations and inequality. A year later, in 1936, House published a textbook on The Development of Sociology. House credited Boas with defining modern ideas on race, and the book's chapter on "Race and Nationalities, Race Relations, and Prejudice" drew heavily on Boas's work. House wrote that the "facts of culture" constitute a distinct realm and are self-determining. No theory of race, heredity or evolution will account for them." Finally, House credited anthropologists Margaret Mead and Robert Redfield with writing about non-Western people in the context of their interactions with colonial
pressures—the emphasis on power relations and forced assimilation that House saw as a focus shared by anthropologists and sociologists.25

In hiring House, the University of Virginia had remarkably backed the candidacy of a professor with ideas about race and the study of race that opposed its own. He was, to use the U.Va. administrators’ term, a sentimentalist. By his own published self-description, House was not a scientist, and he was ignorant of statistics.26

House’s Impact and Involvement at the University

Floyd Nelson House arrived at the University of Virginia in 1926, the same year that the horrific eugenics primer, *Mongrel Virginians: The Win Tribe*, by Arthur Estabrook of the well-funded Carnegie Institution’s Eugenics Records Office and sociologist Ivan E. McDougle of Sweet Briar College, was published.27 This infamous book was a study based on pseudo-scientific labeling of what was deemed to be “unfit” antisocial or socially destructive behavior in one particular community, located approximately sixty miles from the University of Virginia in Amherst County (figure 12). *Mongrel Virginians* was predetermined to illustrate social problems caused by miscegenation and was used to support the Virginia Racial Integrity Act of

![Fig. 12. Amherst Indian School Chapel and Teachers Cottage, by Jackson Davis, 1914. Courtesy of Jackson Davis Collection of African American Photographs, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.](image-url)
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1924. All too familiar pseudo-medical labels like “feeble-minded” and “promiscuous” from the eugenics era were placed on individuals whose identities were not kept anonymous.

House recruited Bertha P. Wailes (1894–1987) into U.Va.’s graduate program in sociology. Wailes grew up in the region where Estabrook and McDougle had conducted their community study. She had been an undergraduate student at Sweet Briar College where McDougle taught, and she knew the people he perniciously described in Mongrel Virginians. Despite the researchers’ promise to maintain the anonymity of the community and its members, the pejorative language of the book and its thinly veiled descriptions were transparent.

House chaired Wailes’s master’s thesis committee, and they brought a then-modern sociological perspective to challenge the concept and conclusions of Mongrel Virginians. Wailes wrote in the preface of her thesis: “I wish to express my appreciation to Dr. E. N. House at whose instigation this study was undertaken for his numerous helpful suggestions.” She directly critiqued eugenics and explicitly defended an environmental and economic basis for the dysfunction with which eugenicists had labeled the community. Wailes defended her thesis in 1928. In it she argued against the strong eugenics tide at U.Va. Wailes made an explicit argument that racism and lack of access to schools and jobs were the sources of inequality and poverty in the community, not genetics or “mixed ancestry.” With this study, Floyd House and Bertha Wailes brought a new perspective to bear on the eugenics-driven curriculum at U.Va., if anyone had been listening.

In his 1928–1929 Report to the Registrar, House stated that “the new course in social origins [elementary anthropology] being given by Professor Hoffer this fall has some fifteen undergraduate students enrolled—a fact which is some indication of the incipient student interest in this special subject.” He added a special request for funding for a professor of sociology and anthropology specifically to confront mixed-race, “backward” people in Virginia. The request was not met.

In other avenues, Floyd Nelson House oversaw and promoted the Phelps Stokes Fund for the study of the Negro in the South. Phelps Stokes was a nonprofit fund established in 1911 that sought to connect emerging leaders and organizations in Africa and the Americas with resources to help them advance social and economic development. The University of Virginia was one of two institutions awarded Phelps Stokes funds.
In a letter sent to President Newcomb, reporting on the effect of the fund, House lamented the lack of interest in the subject shown by the mostly male, southern, white graduate students. His unpublished memoir indicates deep frustration with the lack of interest in the program at the University of Virginia. House found U.Va. a difficult place to teach. In an earlier letter to Robert Park written in 1926, he confessed, “I really don’t have any very definite impressions of the prospects of my new work here yet. The faculty seems to be of an average range of capacity, but very individualistic. I sense little spirit of cooperation in teaching or research. The students seem to me to be more difficult to wake up and interact with than any I have dealt with heretofore.”31 Ten years later, House wrote to another sociology colleague and offered a brief confirmation that little had changed: “Sociology does not draw Virginia students—all men and the kind they are.”32 It seems that House’s liberal sociology, influenced by anthropology, had marginalized him on the Grounds of the University of Virginia.

House did find, however, another avenue for his liberal teaching and research in the local community. He directed his engaged activist efforts in concert with organizations beyond Grounds. In 1943, House became president of the newly organized Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Society, renamed the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church, Unitarian Universalist, in 1946 (figure 13). House was president of the church until 1950. In his correspondence and notes, House wrote that he had delivered a paper on civil rights at another Virginia church, but that civil rights meetings were also taking place at his own church. With respect to eugenics and later Massive Resistance, he aligned with Boas and Park and opposed the dominant perspective in the U.Va. administration. In one unpublished conference paper, delivered to a Civil Rights Meeting of Churches, he asked rhetorically, “What have the colleges to say?” He answered that “sociology as a discipline has no official position, but it should.”33

During the era of Massive Resistance in Virginia, in an effort to defy the Supreme Court ruling of Brown v. Board of Education (1954) and to maintain segregation, Governor J. Lindsay Almond Jr. ordered nine all-white public schools to close in 1958. These schools had had suits brought in federal court for black students to be admitted; an elementary school and the city high school in Charlottesville were among the nine. In Charlottesville, disagreement among whites pitted pro-public school parents against those who backed white-only private schools or academies. Many churches in Charlottesville were asked to use their school rooms or basements for white-
only instruction. The Unitarian Universalist Church refused, which the Charlottesville branch of the violent and threatening White Citizens’ Council viewed as a hostile response.34

Over the years, other activist efforts continued at the church. The first meeting of the local chapter of the Virginia Council on Human Relations, a pro-integration organization supported by the Southern Regional Council, was held in the Unitarian Universalist Church in 1956. By the early 1960s, the church founded an integrated preschool, and church members became involved collectively in the movement to integrate public swimming pools.35

The Creation of a Joint Department

When the University of Virginia administration decided to follow a national trend after World War II and created a joint Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Floyd Nelson House became chair of that department and continued in that post for fifteen years. He was responsible for the hiring of new anthropologists between 1949 and the early 1960s,
conducting searches in archaeology and cultural anthropology, but not physical anthropology. Physical anthropology had close ties to eugenics in the early twentieth century, and physical anthropology journals were outlets for some of anatomy professor Robert Bennett Bean’s most explicitly racist writing. To this day, the Department of Anthropology at U.Va. has never considered hiring a physical anthropologist, and that may be a legacy both of Bean’s work and of House’s Boasian critique.

In 1955, House hired Eric R. Wolf, the first cultural anthropologist at U.Va. Half a century had passed since the creation of anthropology departments inspired by Boasian approaches at universities across the country. Wolf’s hire came twenty-seven years after the first request House made to add anthropology to the U.Va. faculty. And it was a quarter century after U.Va.’s southern regional peer institution, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, added anthropology to its curriculum. The late hire reflected the lingering climate of concerns about the impact of sentimentalists on the faculty at U.Va.

Eric R. Wolf at the University of Virginia: 1955–1960

Eric R. Wolf was an ethnographer who conducted fieldwork in peasant villages in Mexico and Puerto Rico (figure 14). He earned his PhD in 1951 at Columbia University and then moved to the University of Illinois. Wolf was contractually on the sociology and anthropology faculty at the University of Virginia from 1955 to 1961, but during that time he took a leave-year to teach at Yale University and another two-year leave from 1959 to 1961 to accept an appointment at the University of Chicago. In 1960, Wolf accepted a tenure-track position at the University of Michigan, and his connection to U.Va. came to an end. Wolf’s time at U.Va. was relatively short, but it coincided with the Massive Resistance movement and an important era in civil rights history.37

Wolf’s upbringing in Europe is an important element to consider in context of his experience in Charlottesville. Wolf was born into a Jewish family in Vienna in 1923. His father sent him to England as a teenager for two years, following the Nazi occupation of Austria. In 1938, England ordered “potential enemy aliens,” such as the young Austrian Jew, to internment camps. Intellectuals there organized lectures, and Wolf was drawn for the first time to the social sciences and most notably to the work of sociologist Norbert Elias. Elias’s publications were known for an interest in long-term change and explanations of that change, with regard to regional change in social organization and state formation. Wolf was only fifteen years
old when he listened to Elias at the internment camp near Liverpool.

The Wolf family was able to immigrate to New York City in 1940. In the summer of 1941, Wolf enrolled in the leftist, unionist, and civil rights–committed Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. The Highlander Folk School provided a training ground for southern labor organizers and civil rights activists. During the 1930s and 1940s, the school was instrumental in unionizing textile, timber, and mine workers throughout the region, often working in concert with national organizations such as the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).38

Wolf served in the U.S. Army during WWII. On his return to New York, he earned his bachelor’s degree in sociology and anthropology in 1946. Wolf studied at Queens College with his first anthropology professor, Hortense Powdermaker, who had published on race in the American South.39

With these life experiences, Eric Wolf was better prepared for living and teaching in Virginia than someone less sophisticated in understanding regional cultures and histories. The lessons offered by the Highlander School, Elias, and Powdermaker all provided Wolf with insights into a regional social structure and history he had barely seen firsthand. He brought his understandings of power, inequality, deep history, internal colonialism, slavery, and peasantry with him to Virginia. He saw the South imprisoned in both its economy and its dogged adherence to the Lost Cause.
narrative of the region. To him, the racism, inequality, and violence that sprang from the Lost Cause were clear.

In 1987, years after his arrival at U.Va., Wolf reflected on the importance of his experience at the Highlander School in relation to his adjustment to life in Virginia:

[T]he Highlander Folk School, the experience of eastern Tennessee . . . allowed one to see something of the underbelly of the South in ways that I had never, ever imagined. This was just after the New Deal effort to better economic circumstances through farm administration aid, and the TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] that had been built, and so on. But you could still see that the people were terribly poor and oppressed.

Concerning the students and intellectual atmosphere at U.Va., Wolf recalled:

I was the only anthropologist, in a very different setting. Urbana [Illinois] was very big and drew high school graduates from everywhere in the state. Virginia was much more aristocratic, Southern, more limited. I think that move was very good for me, partly because it got me out from under [thesis adviser Julian] Steward's aegis, to do my own thing, but also because, I think, there may not have been more than 12 people using the library; it was a very good place to sit down and work on my own materials.

Massive Resistance

Eric Wolf's time in Charlottesville coincided with the era of Massive Resistance, a time of racial violence and its ever-present threats. Senator Harry F. Byrd Sr., the Virginia General Assembly, and the University of Virginia were committed to maintaining segregation in the late 1950s and early 1960s (figure 15). The state not only tolerated but encouraged the threat of violence. Byrd's concept of massive resistance to federally mandated integration of Virginia schools was about maintaining states' rights and protecting and defending the state from outsiders. Wolf certainly would have been seen as an outsider. The governor insisted on closing public schools rather than integrating them, and at the same time, U.Va. president Colgate Darden supported research that buttressed the benefits of states' rights.

Charlottesville was home to an active chapter, under various different names, of the White Citizens' Council. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote that the White Citizens' Council targeted black and white people supportive of civil rights, and that members of the Council "must be held responsible for all of the terror, the
mob rule, and brutal murders that have encompassed the South over the last several years.” In Charlottesville, the White Citizens’ Council chapter was headed by John Kasper (1929–1998), a Ku Klux Klan member who took a militant stand against racial integration during the civil rights movement.

John Bell Williams, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Mississippi, came to Charlottesville in August 1957. He was a national spokesman in support of segregation. His presence and oratory brought more than a thousand people to Lane High School auditorium in Charlottesville one summer night. Editorials in the *Richmond News Leader* specifically blamed Jewish agitators for stoking the fear of violence, alongside the work of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). In September 1957, Arkansas governor Orval E. Faubus broadcast a national speech in which he said that federally mandated integration of the schools would mean “the destruction of our school system, our educational processes, and the risk of disorder and violence that could result in the loss of life—perhaps yours.” Violence was openly threatened.

These words were heard clearly in Charlottesville, where at least four cross-burnings were reported and threats were made to stores, restaurants, churches, and private homes of anybody who supported integration and pro-integrationists. In 1960, swastikas were painted on Cabell Hall at the University of Virginia, on the one synagogue in the city, on the Hillel House, and on a private home owned by a Jewish family. St. Paul’s Memorial Episcopal Church was defaced with Nazi symbols, and Westminster Presbyterian Church was threatened as they allowed meetings of pro-integrationists. Each of the people and events cited above were mentioned
by Eric Wolf in his correspondence with his father in New York and with his closest friend, anthropologist Sidney Mintz, in New Haven. That correspondence provides some insight into an anthropologist’s personal perspective and activism.

**Wolf as Activist Anthropologist: 1955–1959**

Over his career, Eric Wolf earned a reputation as an activist anthropologist, “engaged with the world beyond the academy.”49 Any action in Charlottesville would have been a courageous act given all the pro-integrationist and outsider labels he wore or had attached to him. Wolf’s correspondence, archived at the University of Michigan, offers insight into what he saw and experienced in Charlottesville between 1955 and 1959. In his letters, one can see Wolf’s efforts to bring an anthropological perspective to racial and class tensions in Charlottesville. As Floyd House had realized before him, Wolf did not find the University of Virginia a sympathetic place to base a program of resistance to white supremacy and white supremacists. As Stephen Railton writes powerfully about the late 1950s on the Grounds of the University:

> Even so, the environment at UVA in the late 1950s exalted conformity—though the students called it “tradition.” The suit jackets and ties that students wore to all classes and public events as a kind of uniform were the outward and visible sign of a community that was comfortable with the world that they found themselves in, and devoted to the rituals of the previous generations of students. “Gentleman” was a word that resonated much more deeply with them than “intellectual” or “artist.”50

Instead, Wolf allied with pro-integrationist groups organized in Charlottesville. On occasion, as reflected in his letters, he brought an anthropological perspective to a public audience and to his own reckoning of events. Other faculty from the joint Department of Sociology and Anthropology also spoke out, including Lambert Molyneaux (1907–1994), an associate professor of sociology who debated a member of the arch-segregationist group Defenders of State Sovereignty in Charlottesville in July 1955.51

In 1956, Mintz wrote to Wolf and asked where things were going, as it “sounds as if plenty of trouble is ahead.”52 Wolf’s summary can be seen in this response, almost a year later:

> The other day a letter even appeared in the local newspaper calling for secession. And while no one in his right mind would advocate this policy, the shadow of the Reconstruction Period is still heavily present in most people’s minds. The present government of the state seems
Wolf and his wife Katherine (Katia) (1920–2004) joined the Charlottesville-based Council on Human Relations, an organization formed in 1956 to work for improved race relations in the area. The Council held a series of speeches and panel discussions on matters of race relations, often on University Grounds or involving University faculty. Some events were held at the School of Medicine and cosponsored by the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, still chaired by Floyd Nelson House. Wolf delivered a paper to the Council entitled “History of Race Prejudice” and, according to Katia, provided the lecture with particular reference to the South.54

At a later meeting on November 16, 1956, Wolf spoke on the topic of “Modern Races Being Part of the Same Species,” shockingly a necessary topic to outline. He also joined with University of Virginia Hospital psychologist Arthur Bachrach (1923–2011) and neurologist and psychiatrist David C. Wilson (1892–1980) each making their best scientific case to fight race-based prejudice and segregation. In a striking reversal of the early twentieth-century teaching of eugenics by School of Medicine faculty in the College, Wolf delivered six lectures on cultural anthropology in the medical school.55 A third program in which the Wolfs participated was a panel discussion in March 1958 entitled “When Desegregation Comes to Charlottesville.”

The local media reported on the Council on Human Relations meetings and the contents of their talks. After a presentation of “Modern Races Are Variations of the Same Species” in 1956, a letter to the editor of the Charlottesville Daily Progress newspaper immediately followed.56 In that letter, a self-described segregationist expressed shock at what was being said at the Council on Human Relations meetings. He wrote, “I only hope this [letter] will warn some of the people of Charlottesville of what is going on to undermine the white race.” The author encouraged white citizens to follow who spoke at these meetings and who attended, in order “to see who is stabbing you in the back. Let’s find out who our enemies are.”57

These activities and exchanges were ongoing between 1956 and 1958. Eric and Katia Wolf had been in Charlottesville for no more than a year and a half.
at that point. In 1957, Wolf attended a meeting of a white supremacist organization at Lane High School (figure 16). He took these alarming field notes, as written to his father in August 1957:

Sunday night I went to a meeting of the Defenders of State Sovereignty and Individual Liberty, the names by which the local White Citizens Councils are known. I went just to listen and look at the audience. The meeting was called to protest integration in the schools and filled the auditorium at Lane High School with well above 1,000 people. Not just poor whites, but the middle class backbone of the town or so it seemed to me.

The speeches were properly inflammatory, the main speaker being [Rep.] John Bell Williams of Mississippi who combined his considerable talent of a southern folksy story teller with the bombast of a courtroom lawyer. He warned against any obvious violence, open violence, but the tenor of the thing was that "we in Mississippi know how to handle integration cases. We haven't had any applications or complaints as yet."58

Williams, of course, was inferring that in Mississippi, state-tolerated violence and threat of violence was at a level high enough to deter free speech
in support of civil rights and school desegregation. Wolf concluded the letter to New York with the observation that “there is a lot of this sort of thing going on and—I am afraid—will go on in the future.”

In 1959, Eric Wolf accepted a visiting appointment at the University of Chicago, and from there he moved on to the University of Michigan. A brilliant scholar, he would later receive a MacArthur Fellowship—a so-called genius grant—and many book awards and honors. Throughout his career, he continued his activist work, notably contributing his leadership in protesting the Vietnam War, from his anthropology office at Michigan and at the City University of New York (CUNY)—Lehman until his death in 1999.

Meanwhile, Floyd House remained on the U.Va. faculty until 1963, during which time under a new dean of the College he created both a sociology wing and an anthropology wing, the latter housing an international focus and three cultural anthropologists by the time of his retirement. He passed away in 1975.

Conclusion

In the introduction to the abstract of his comprehensive dissertation study of the eugenics movement in Virginia, Gregory Michael Dorr writes, “Perhaps no state adopted eugenics—the science of human hereditary improvement—as fully as Virginia.” At the University of Virginia, support for eugenics research and policy by Presidents Alderman and Newcomb fell in line with that adoption, and as a result, eugenics, segregation, and white supremacist ideologies completely dominated at U.Va. throughout the first half of the last century.

But Dorr also observes that countervailing arguments to race-based theories of social hierarchy and white supremacy, propounded by anthropologist Franz Boas, existed almost from the beginning of the eugenics movement. The work of Professors Floyd Nelson House and Eric Wolf and the scholarly traditions that they brought to the University of Virginia demonstrate that there was, in fact, opposition to and therefore no consensus on eugenics and segregation. Still, they were not heroes. They were scholars and teachers who wrote and lectured from the perspective of their disciplines against eugenics and segregation. They were heard in the classroom and in public settings.
Each achieved only limited success in bringing about change to U.Va. and Charlottesville, but it is important to note that their voices could be heard in their own times by those who were open to listening. The engaged scholarship of House and Wolf, spanning 1926 to 1960, serves as a reminder that any university’s quest to be modern or cutting-edge must include a concern for equality and ethics and social effects within and beyond the university.

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NOTES


4. See, for example, Gregory Michael Dorr, *Segregation's Science: Eugenics and Society in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008).


14. The College was renamed the College of Arts and Sciences in 1946. Preceding that, Lewis's title was simply “dean of the College.”
