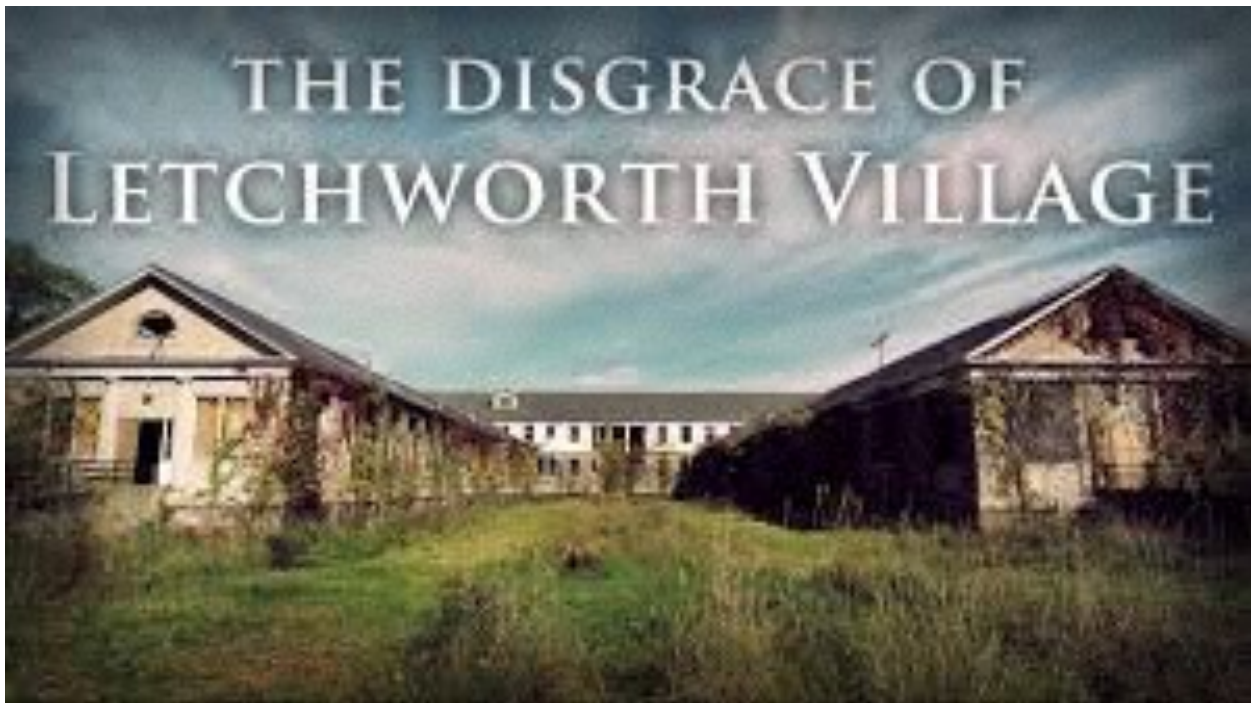


## THE RISE AND FALL OF LETCHWORTH VILLAGE



Here's how I described the scene after my first visit to Letchworth Village in 2014:

*Abandoned brick buildings scattered around the haunted campus appear to be in terminal decay — overgrown with weeds and vines, keep out signs and graffiti written on boarded up doors and windows, paint crumbling, roofs caved in. More than a century ago the Village was designed to be the last-word in care for the mentally ill but now nature is reclaiming its place. It's a melancholy, almost sinister landscape. The only signs of human life are an occasional dog-walker or jogger, or a passing patrol car. The deserted buildings bear mute testimony that something bad once happened here.*

Throughout history people with mental illness were viewed with fear and misunderstanding and often subjected to social stigmatization or worse. The cause of madness was attributed to such things as divine punishment, possession by demons, phases of the moon, religious ecstasy — and the belief was that such people were not fit for polite society. So the insane, the “feeble-minded,” even epileptics, were placed in dismal places — out of sight and mind. A change in thinking began during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when a novel theory was advanced that if the deranged and demented were treated with kindness, some could be transformed into respectable citizens, but still should be prevented from mingling with the public as much as possible.

The culprit lurking behind the scene was the pseudoscience of eugenics that dominated social and scientific thinking ever since the word (which means “well born”) was coined in 1883 by Charles Darwin’s brilliant half-cousin Francis Galton. Galton also was the first to employ the phrase “nature versus nurture” and in that dynamic he was definitely on the side of nature. When Darwin’s “Origin of the Species” appeared in 1859, it broke down barriers that had always distinguished *homo sapiens* from beasts of the field.

Evolution opened a new way of thinking and a decade later, in the introduction to his own book, Francis Galton suggested that intelligence was heritable and could be passed on just like physical characteristics -- such as hair color or height. Moreover, the human race could be improved upon by attention to selective breeding like with race horses or flowers. Those with superior physical and moral traits should be encouraged to be fruitful and multiply, while the rest – “the unfit” - should be discouraged or prevented from reproducing.

Beyond biologic considerations, there also was a social agenda. Galton believed in the superiority of Europeans as compared to what he called “the lower races.” Specifically, he wrote that Jews were only capable of “parasitism” upon the civilized nations and that the behavior of negroes was “so childish, stupid and simpleton-like, as frequently to make me ashamed of my own species.” Elitists felt threatened in various ways, but now science seemed to offer hope. So-called “positive” eugenics encouraged superior people to propagate while “negative” eugenics — what became known as “Social Darwinism” — could help natural selection along through policies of immigration restriction, prohibition of interracial marriages and sterilization of undesirables.

In 1910 Winston Churchill supported a compulsory sterilization law for “the feeble minded.” Although it didn’t pass, he said that such people should be segregated “so that their curse died with them and was not transmitted to future generations.” George Bernard Shaw wrote that “Plutocratic inbreeding has produced a weakness of character...Being cowards we defeat natural selection under cover of philanthropy: being sluggards, we neglect artificial selection under cover of delicacy and morality.”

In this country, Teddy Roosevelt said, “We have no business to permit the perpetuation of citizens of the wrong type.” Birth control advocate Margaret Sanger deplored “reckless procreation and indiscriminate breeding” and warned that “human weeds” were choking the garden of humanity.” Which human weeds? “Hebrews, Slavs, Catholics and Negroes.” To her mind, grounds for sterilization included such conditions as hereditary deafness, blindness, immorality and masturbation. Sanger’s slogan was “more children for the fit; less for the unfit.” Outspoken people like these luminaries thought that at stake was the preservation of the human species – or at least their kind of human species.” Charles Darwin, himself, ap-

proved of his cousin's ideas, but felt that implementing them would be impractical.

During the 19th century the gadfly who provided the sting in America for the so-called "asylum movement" had been Boston's Dorothea Dix (1802-1887). She was a deeply religious mistress of a school for poor girls who became so physically and emotionally exhausted that in 1836 she travelled to England hoping for a cure. While there she was exposed to a burgeoning lunacy reform movement and when she returned home, revived from depression, Dix took it upon herself to assess the situation in her home state. Wherever she looked she found large numbers of insane people in jails or poor houses or wandering the streets – and concluded that government should play a central role in providing humane care for those who were unable to care for themselves. Dix kept meticulous records, sometimes embellishing the facts to suit her agenda, and she was skillful in dramatizing her message. Dorothea Dix reported to the New York State legislature about the horrible condition of the insane. This is how she introduced herself to Massachusetts legislators in 1843:

I come as the advocate of helpless, forgotten, insane, idiotic men and women, of beings sunk to a condition from which the most unconcerned would start with real horror, of beings wretched in our prisons, and more wretched in our almshouses.

Some said that Dorothea Dix "gave madness a human face." Her insistence upon institutional care for the mentally ill struck a chord among those who were committed to the creation of a better society. Largely as a result of her lobbying, in 1848 both houses of Congress passed a bill granting 12 million acres of public land for the construction of asylums. Although it was vetoed by President Pierce, as a result more than thirty state

mental hospitals were founded or enlarged -- most of them according to the design of a Philadelphia psychiatrist by the name of Thomas Kirkbride.

Thomas Kirkbride believed that the asylum's physical environment, itself, was an integral part of treatment and he often used the phrase "building as cure." The Kirkbride Plan called for fortress-like structures placed on large tracts of land with long wards connected to a huge central administrative wing -- patients were separated according to their diagnostic classification. Thomas Kirkbride believed that mental illness was a product of advanced civilization and that the more "childlike" dependent races -- e.g. Indians and African-Americans -- suffered less frequently and did not need asylum care. As he wrote, "The idea of mixing up all color and classes...is not what we want in our hospitals for the insane."

Kirkbride also extolled the therapeutic value of what he called "pleasure gardens" and although pastoral settings might have been soothing, the giant impersonal Kirkbride buildings were not. In time, critics began complaining that these behemoths had not lived up to their expectations and emphasis shifted to a European innovation known as the "Cottage Plan" which grouped smaller one or two-story units on large tracts of land to simulate a home-like rural village but the inhabitants were kept far removed from populated areas.

William Pryor Letchworth was born in 1823 into a Quaker family. He made his fortune in the saddle and harness industry and retired at age 50 to devote his life to bettering the lot of the afflicted. In 1867 he organized and became the first president of the New York State Board of Charities which during the next decade launched a series of investigations of state-run orphanages and reformatories which uncovered evidence of corruption, abuse and neglect and mobilized public opinion.

In 1880, at his own expense, Letchworth spent seven months traveling through Europe to gather new ideas about caring for mentally disturbed and epileptic people and when he returned home he published his findings. Letchworth agreed with enlightened European methods of allowing patients more freedom and he deplored impersonal custodial care. He advocated a meaningful life for asylum inmates which would include appropriate education and training in simple tasks. Some of these ideas were implemented in 1894 when he established the Craig Colony for Epileptics in Sonyea, N.Y. but Letchworth also had a utilitarian motive – as he wrote: “In colonizing epileptics, society is relieved in some measure of a dangerous element and the public safety promoted.” How strange that sounds today -- epileptics a public danger!

Like Dorothea Dix before him, Letchworth lobbied legislators to appropriate money for a three member study commission which reported that in New York State there were more than 3,000 inmates in four overcrowded asylums. They recommended constructing a new facility which could accommodate up to 3,500 patients, one acre for each inmate. After evaluating many sites, a large tract was selected which stretched from the Hudson River to the Ramapo hills and in 1908 the State bought thirty-three contiguous farms. Although it was rocky land, there were good water resources and it was readily accessible to bus and rail lines -- and when William Pryor Letchworth lay terminally ill in 1909, what initially was to be called the “Eastern New York State Custodial Asylum” was renamed “Letchworth Village Home for the Feeble Minded and Epileptics.”

Once the land was purchased, architect Welles Bosworth was brought in to consult about the general layout. At the time Bosworth was occupied on the other side of the Hudson transforming a treeless site in Pocantico Hills into a lush estate for John D. Rockefeller -- what's now known as Kykuit. Many years later, Bosworth recalled that he'd recommended “Jefferson's

colonial style, with little Doric columns and pediments, knowing that it would always conform with tradition and never become distasteful with change of styles in years to come....From the start it broke with tradition and became a milestone in the path of progress.”

To fully appreciate the rise and fall of Letchworth Village, one would have to consider three phases: the early years of hope and growth, a middle period of stagnation and gradual decline and then a long slide into ruin. My focus here will be on the place’s prehistory and roughly its first quarter century. I’ll describe three of the founders in some detail – each of them earnest, public-spirited citizens, intelligent and philanthropic, but influenced by a flawed understanding of the nature of mental illness and how it should be managed. Letchworth Village wasn’t unique – in fact, what happened there was the norm in similar institutions throughout the country and the world. With all of this in mind, now let’s consider three of the first generation of the Village’s leaders: Franklin Butler Kirkbride, Mary Averell Harriman and the Superintendent Dr. Charles Sumner Little.

**FRANKLIN BUTLER KIRKBRIDE** was one of Thomas Kirkbride’s three sons. When the senior Kirkbride was a fledgling physician, he was appointed as superintendent of the Pennsylvania Hospital for the Insane and after his wife died young, he married one of his former patients whom he’d treated for recurrent suicidal depression “through kindness and Christian faith.” Eliza Butler bore him four children and after Thomas Kirkbride died, she went on to be active in educational and social welfare in Philadelphia. No doubt, his parents’ example had much to do with Franklin Kirkbride’s compassion for the mentally ill. He chose not to follow his father or two brothers into a medical career but, instead, became a wealthy and influential New York investment banker.

**In 1907 Governor Charles Evan Hughes appointed Franklin Kirkbride to the New York State study commission on mental illness and when Letchworth Village was approved, he served as Secretary of its Board of Managers and later as its long time president. No doubt his heart was in the right place, but Kirkbride also was an enthusiastic eugenicist and in 1912 when he spoke at the First International Eugenic Congress in London, his message was right out of Frances Galton's playbook:**

**Our "comprehensive plan" concerns itself with more than the individual life – we have begun to care for posterity...A study of either town or country shows the dwarfed intellect, the perverted instinct, the weakened body, and the preventable disease in every community. In some places they have run riot to the almost entire extinction of the finer and higher types....Parentage is altogether too much a matter of private adventure and the individual family is altogether too irresponsible. As consequence, there is a huge amount of avoidable privation, suffering and sorrow, and a large proportion of the generation grows up stunted, limited, badly educated, and incompetent in comparison with the strength, training and beauty with which a better social organization could endow it.**

**MARY AVERELL HARRIMAN was appointed to the Board of Managers in 1913 and remained active in that capacity for the remainder of her life. He left his estate of more than \$70 million to his wife making her the richest woman in America. Included was 30,000 acres of land west of the Hudson River near their home in Arden from which Mary donated 10,000 acres plus a \$1 million endowment for management to New York State on the condition that it would forgo plans to move Sing Sing prison to Bear Mountain near her home – not in Mary's immense backyard. On October 19, 1910 their eighteen year old son Averell (the future Governor of New York) hand-**

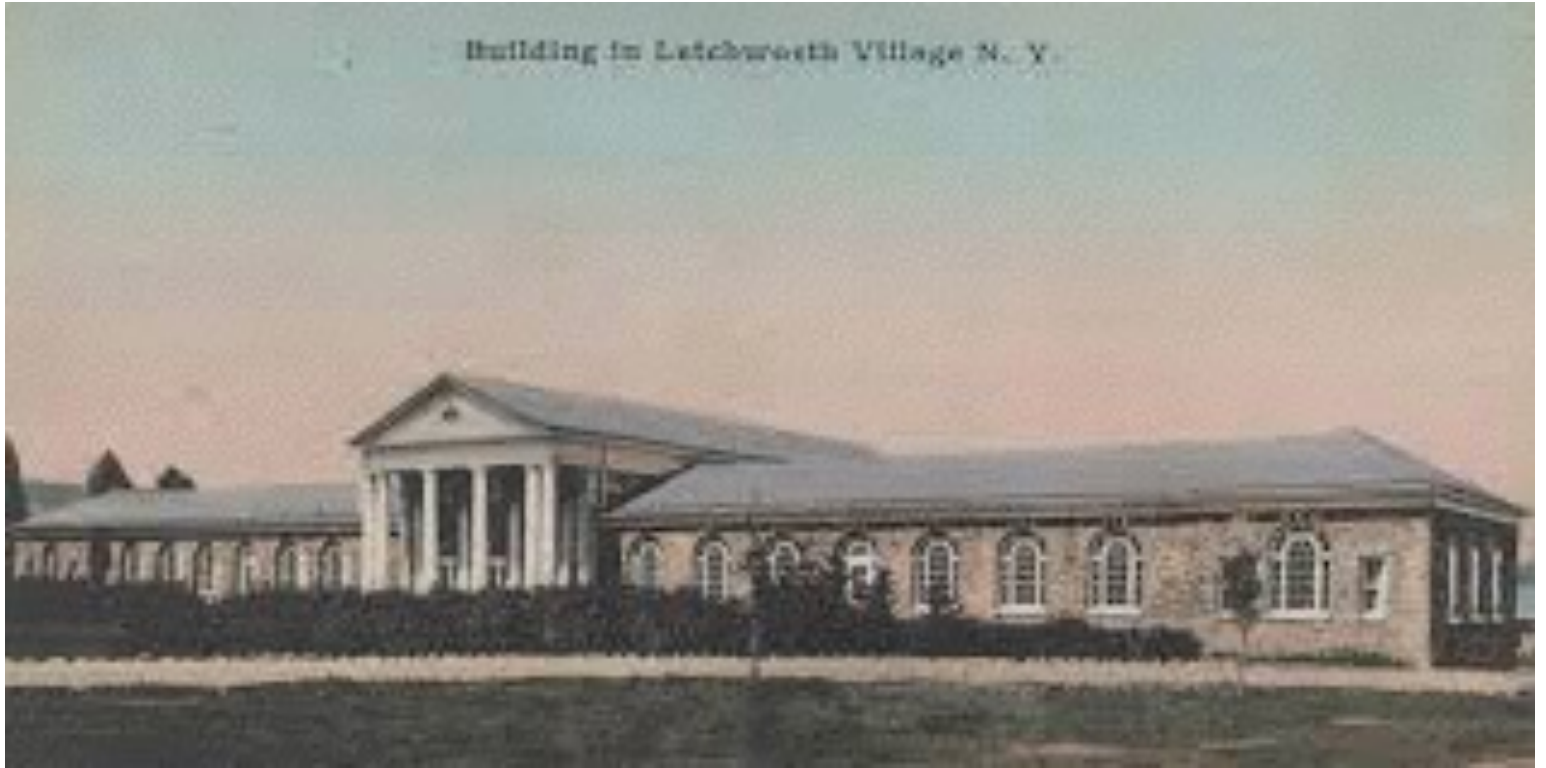


ed over a million dollar check in a ceremony that initiated Bear Mountain and Harriman State Parks.

Two weeks later Mary Harriman financed another new venture — the Eugenics Record Office in Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island that soon would become the epicenter of the American movement that was headed by Charles Davenport. When the Harrimans first met Davenport in 1907, they were impressed with his ideas about improving the human race by better breeding methods; indeed, Edward Harriman was an avid race horse breeder. Mary became the principle supporter of Davenport's activities, but she wasn't content to merely contribute money and then let others do the work. Instead, she was a hands-on leader who was concerned with every detail of the programs that she supported — at Letchworth Village this particularly involved eugenics research. She financed a training school for fieldworkers who then would fan out to gather “pedigrees” of feebleminded people that would be “sacredly guarded” in a central registry in Cold Spring Harbor. In 1911 when Davenport gratefully dedicated his book about heredity and eugenics to his benefactor Mary Harriman, she replied to him:

Your book is certainly a nice starter not only in eugenics but for a proper understanding of the great...responsibility towards the American people. The decay of the human race before death is so much more terrible than after death, and the debasing of moral life by the degeneration of the physical system so appalling, so I am glad to have my name added to those hoping to stem the tide...we were meant to be wholly pure beings and an understanding of the laws of nature must help to keep us pure.

Building in Litchworth Village N. Y.



**When Mary Harriman joined the Village’s Board of Managers, a guiding principle was “to limit the propagation of genetically inferior stock by segregation.” Beginning in 1915 she arranged to have Charles Davenport assign two of his best field workers to the Village’s staff; their work would include research on “pedigrees” of so-called “Jackson-Whites” — now a politically incorrect term — that referred to backward and inbred people who lived in the neighboring Ramapo hills.**

**The third important leader was DR. CHARLES S. LITTLE. A native of New Hampshire, he graduated from Dartmouth in 1893 and then stayed on for medical training. He starred on the football team for seven years – four as an undergraduate and three more during medical school — and was known to all by his nickname “Squash.” Dr. Little began his career as an alienist in several small New England asylums and in 1902 New Hampshire selected him to organize a small facility in Laconia. His vision was for it to be at the**

same time a “home, school and laboratory” and his work attracted wide attention. In 1910 when Squash Little was appointed superintendent of what would become Letchworth Village, for the first several months he lived in a shack while he familiarized himself with the rocky countryside and planned every aspect of the campus. He argued against the massive institutions popularized by Thomas Kirkbride and, like William Pryor Letchworth, he favored the colony approach:

When an institution becomes so large that the superintendent who is directly responsible to the management, to the public and to the State authorities, cannot supervise to nearly the last detail everything that goes on in that institution, it is primarily a failure....Financially, it is still to be proven that an institution of four or five thousand patients is maintained any more cheaply than the one of a thousand or eight hundred.

There would be six independent groups of buildings, each kept at least two hundred feet apart so that “inmates of one grade could not come in contact with those of another grade.” They’d be divided about equally between boys and girls, each sex divided into three groups – one for “idiots”, one for “imbeciles” and one for “morons.” Dr. Little explained:

[The last two groups] are largely of a hereditary nature and present a chance of making decent citizens by proper training and establishing proper habits. The idiots on the other hand, are practically all caused by organic brain disease or injury. They do not propagate their kind and are not capable of any particular improvement, I can see no reason why this group should not be cared for in the county homes or in the city institutions, leaving our State institutions free to do the work which is really going to benefit the State.

**Squash Little was physically imposing and friends recalled how during his early years at the Village, he'd enjoy stripping to the waist and wrestling or sparring with the burliest laborers or firemen. He was liked by those who worked for him, but could be fearsome to bureaucrats and when his ideas met resistance he could be belligerent:**

**As long as I am Superintendent, the only buildings that will go up here are those that I want. If buildings of another type are wanted, you will have to get another Superintendent, but I am not going to resign; you will have to fire me.**

**On July 11, 1911, 63 boys were transferred from Randall's Island to the new facility and immediately put to work clearing land and assisting on construction. The first of four permanent buildings opened in 1915 and capacity increased to 380 patients. In their annual report the next year, (1916) the Board of Governors noted, "The plan of development of Letchworth Village has stood the test of criticism, and the fact that other States are following the ideas developed here is an indication of their soundness." New York's Governor Charles Whitman, acknowledged, "the State recognizes its obligation and the development of this splendid institution marks the last word in the care and treatment of the feeble-minded." But more than kind words were needed, appropriations had to be made to complete the job.**

**After a brief hiatus during World War I, Dr. Little redoubled pressure on legislators to follow through with promised state support. Still needed was a hospital and an administration building, salaries needed to be increased and infrastructure improved. Dr. Little's annual report was explicit:**

**The need for infirmary buildings to house our several hundred idiots...is one that can not be put off much longer, as the public demands better care for this unfortunate class than we are able to**

**give at present... Capable physicians are no longer seeking positions in institutions and they never again will seek them unless salaries are doubled, homes provided and their work arranged so that they can keep in touch with the world.**

**Progress was slow but steady and when Governor Franklin Roosevelt toured the campus in 1930, the Board of Managers could report near completion of the original plans.**

**As early as 1914, America's eugenics leader Charles Davenport began making frequent trips from Cold Spring Harbor to the Village -- usually it took about two hours by boat from New York City to Bear Mountain and then he'd stay overnight. And for six years during the mid-1920s Davenport came almost every month to conduct anthropometric studies on what he described as "the lowest kind." He measured height, weight, skull-size and gathered data about teeth, hair and skin pigmentation on 100 Letchworth boys and their families as part of a study of the relationship between physical and mental development.**

**Although Superintendent Little was a strong advocate for his patients, he was a confirmed eugenicist. Concerning the controversy of nature vs. nurture, he wrote, "The question of environment versus heredity can be argued by those who are interested, but as environment plays no part in the breeding of the lower animals, why should it in the higher?" And while Letchworth's leaders weren't officially involved in promoting the full eugenics agenda, they were willing collaborators. Davenport wrote to Dr. Little that "the Village offers an exceptional opportunity for such study" and in 1921 when the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Congress of Eugenics was held at the Museum of Natural History, among the exhibitions were photographs of two dozen naked patients from Letchworth Village. Described as "a freak show" with their physical features displayed for all to see, it was a sensation.**

One of Charles Davenport's research interests required chromosomal analysis in order to study the hereditary basis of mental retardation. Although he'd published several papers about his animal experiments, to expand upon this work, human experimentation would be necessary -- and he knew where he could find appropriate material. In 1929 Davenport wrote to Superintendent Little:

The only way to test this hypothesis would be to examine the chromosomes connected with the dividing cells of a Mongoloid. The only suitable organ where one is sure to find cell divisions is in the testis. The only way to get the tissue in suitable condition for fixation of the chromosomes so they can be observed is by castration. In carrying out this consideration to its logical end, one is led to inquire whether you would approve asking the parents or guardian of a Mongoloid child whether they would permit and authorize unilateral castration for the sake of throwing light upon this problem.

Dr. Little felt that obtaining written consent probably was unnecessary, but acknowledged that the "greatest diplomacy" would be necessary. He told Davenport that because "there might be adverse criticism if the surgery became publicly known, it should be indicated that the operation would be performed for therapeutic purpose." They selected a 13 year old boy with Down's Syndrome whose father had died and mother was described as being of "low mentality." She was told that her son's behavior and general health would be improved by castration -- as Dr. Little noted that the boy exhibited "a rather marked eroticism and this probably bothers him some as it doubtless does his attendants."

After the Village's medical director obtained dubious "consent," Dr. Little felt that it would be prudent if the procedure were not performed by a member of his own staff so he arranged for it to be done by a visiting sur-

geon who'd done experimental research on animals. Testicular material was sent to a pathologist who Davenport described as "the best man in the country" for doing chromosomal cytology. Whether or not anything useful was found was never reported.

Eugenicists had more on their minds than research on dwarfs and isolation of the "misfits in society." Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century involuntary sterilization had become the treatment of choice to achieve "better Americans" by selective mating -- as Margaret Sanger put it, "weeding out." Between 1906 and 1916, 42 involuntary sterilizations were performed in New York State, but none were done at Letchworth Village. Nevertheless, when New York's law permitting coercive sterilization was repealed in 1920, Dr. Little remained adamantly in favor of the practice:

There is no question but that the lower strata of society is reproducing its kind all out of proportion to the middle and upper classes upon whom we depend for the stability of our government. To meet this situation steps should be taken to protect society before it is overwhelmed by this growing menace. A step in this direction might be made if careful histories were obtained of every inmate of a jail, prison, poorhouse, reformatory and institutions for the feeble-minded, and if that history should show degenerate and criminalistic antecedents, sterilization should be performed. A beginning at least might be made in lessening the poisonous stream that is undermining the foundation of this government.

Dr. Little was hardly a lone voice in Rockland County's wilderness and momentum for involuntary sterilization was rekindled in 1927 when the United States Supreme Court upheld a Virginia ruling that Carrie Buck, a seventeen year old resident of a state asylum who had a child out of wedlock, should be sterilized because she was "a probable potential parent of

socially inadequate offspring.” In justifying the Court’s decision in *Buck v. Bell*, Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. famously concluded with these words:

It is better for the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit for continuing their kind. The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes. Three generations of imbeciles [meaning Carrie Buck’s family] are enough.

Much later it turned out, that Carrie Buck had not been promiscuous but had been raped nor was she “a third generation imbecile” as Holmes suggested — in fact, she went on to become an honors student in high school. But as a result of *Buck v. Bell*, twenty states adopted sterilization laws despite emerging evidence which refuted the theory that most kinds of mental illness were caused by a single gene defect. The American Eugenics Society summarized the outcome of the Supreme Court’s decision this way: “Anyone who is a potential parent of socially worthless offspring, especially ‘white trash,’ may be coercively sterilized or aborted if the state wishes.”

Charles Davenport’s right-hand man at Cold Spring Harbor was a zealot by the name of Harry Laughlin who once said “to purify the breeding stock of the race is the slogan of eugenics...The mothers of unfit children should be relegated to a place comparable that of the females of mongrel strains of domestic animals.” Laughlin publicly suggested that there were perhaps eleven million unfit Americans -- approximately 10% of the population -- who were an economic and moral burden...and a “constant danger” on the 90%. The menace could be averted by surgically cutting off the capacity of “the 10%” to pass their bad seeds to their offspring.



Harry Laughlin wouldn't stop there - after the lowest 10% were fixed, then on to the next 10%, and so forth! By the 1970s more than 65,000 Americans had been sterilized against their will – what one victim described as “sexual murder.” Most were poor people, disproportionately black and confined to state institutions – especially in California. It was a deplorable example of how flawed science could become politicized, perverted and lead to shameful outcomes.

Obviously, the most egregious abuses would occur in Nazi Germany whose leaders insisted that they were merely following the American example. Indeed, in 1936 the University of Heidelberg awarded an honorary degree to Harry Laughlin for his work in the science of “racial cleansing.” Adolf Hitler had read translations of the books of American eugenicists while in prison and wrote in *Mein Kampf* that “as a result of modern sentimental humanitarianism we are trying to maintain the weak at the expense of the healthy.” Joseph Goebbels was more explicit: “Our starting point is not the individual and we do not subscribe to the view that one should feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty or clothe the naked --our objectives are entirely different; we must have a healthy people in order to prevail in the world.”

From its beginning, one of Letchworth Village's strongest supporters was the psychologist Henry Goddard who was in charge of research at a similar colony in Vineland, New Jersey. When Goddard took the job at Vineland to set up the first laboratory for studying mental retardation, he went to Europe to learn what was new there and he brought back scales that were developed by Alfred Binet to classify mental patients. These were modified and became known as IQ tests and then Goddard launched a national movement for mass intelligence testing. Using this data, he coined the term “moron” to go along with idiots and imbeciles.

When Goddard's workers tested new immigrants at Ellis Island, they reported that 79% of Italians, 83% of Jews and 87% of Russians were "feeble-minded. The conclusion was that "We are now getting the poorest of each race." Of course, the tests were totally unfair: How could a rabbi from Poland, just off the boat, know who won the World Series? Another modification of the IQ tests during World War I was to study nearly two million Army recruits – the result: more than half met the definition of morons; in blacks it was 87%.

One of the psychologists who supervised the army tests was Carl Brigham who wrote an influential book based on these "facts" and claimed Nordic superiority. Brigham called for highly selective immigration and in 1924 his work was used to justify Congress passing strict immigration laws which imposed harsh quotas against nations with "inferior stock." As a result, immigration from Europe slowed to a trickle and millions were trapped -- as historian Stephen Jay Gould wrote, "The eugenicists battled and won one of the greatest victories of scientific racism in American history." Years later, Carl Brigham denounced his own work; he went on to head the College Board Examinations and developed the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT.) Enough said.

By 1942 Letchworth Village's population had grown to twice its recommended size. There was overcrowding, understaffing and inadequate funding; patients were malnourished and neglected and during the War years the situation only worsened. In 1972 a devastating television series by investigative reporter Geraldo Rivera focused primarily on Willowbrook State Hospital on Staten Island but also on Letchworth Village. Rivera characterized conditions at both facilities as "the last great disgrace." Although that may have been the beginning of the end, it was a long decline and it wasn't until 1996 that the last residential cottage was closed and patients were dispersed to group homes around the county.

**Letchworth Village's decline reflected financial and political factors as well as the availability of effective new drug treatments, but the facility was built on a shaky foundation of flawed science and intolerance on the part of the haves against the have nots – so the seeds of its destruction were sewn from within – and from the very beginning.**



**One of Mary Harriman's last acts before her death was to arrange for the famous photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White of Fortune Magazine to take pictures at the Village (see above.) Recently returned from her historic visit to Russia, Bourke-White was broke and, no doubt, she must have appreciated the contract. She spent two days at Letchworth in 1933 and one of her iconic shots also was ironic -- considering the current condition of the campus. It was displayed in the Annual Board of Managers Report to the New York State Legislature (1935) and also in various promotional materials. In Bourke-White's photograph the front of the Charles Sumner Little Administrative Building appeared to shine forth in full Jeffersonian glory -- but today that same facade is disintegrating. The contrast can be understood as a metaphor for the arc of Letchworth Village's rise and fall — what began with such high hopes and good intentions ending in ruin.**

Wide acceptance of eugenics early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a perfect example of the synergy between medical practice and social, cultural and political attitudes – both reflecting and contributing to one another. Of course the times were different and we know so much more now, but even today pseudoscientific follies sometimes are accepted as being rational – and just like a century ago, “good” people still are capable of doing bad things. In 2003 James B. Watson, who won the Nobel Prize for co-discovering the double helix of DNA, was forced to resign his position as Director of the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory after 40 years when on a BBC interview he used the rhetoric of his predecessors about the “stupid lower 10%” being due to hereditary factors rather than to “poverty and things like that.”

By the 1950s more than half a million psychiatric patients resided in overcrowded and underfunded state institutions like Letchworth Village. But then, in a spirit of optimism and as a result of new antipsychotics like Thorazine and Reserpine the giant asylums were shuttered or converted. Most of their residents were sent to half-way houses and community mental health centers in the hope that early intervention, as well as improved social conditions would create a mentally healthy America.

Although this approach may have been successful in many respects, there still is a hard-core of severely impaired people -- many of whom wind up in jails or on the streets -- and its been estimated that at least one-third of homeless people have various mental illnesses. We've come a long way, in the past century but some of the same problems remain. No doubt some good things were accomplished at Letchworth Village and, as I've emphasized, those were very different times. However, in our country today there still is prejudice against “the other” – whether they differ from us by race, religion, nationality, economic status or mental health. This is reflected in political rhetoric and resistance against immigration reform, raising the minimum wage and, yes, providing basic health care for everyone.

**If it's possible, I suggest that some fine day you take a field trip and drive through the haunted campus of Letchworth Village — and then ask yourselves, what have we learned?**

