

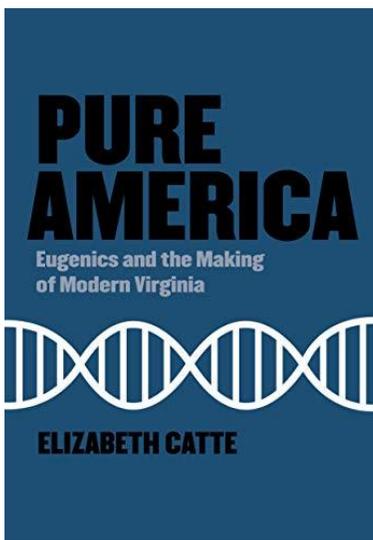
The CommUUnicator

Newsletter of the Unitarian Universalist
Fellowship of Waynesboro

Staunton's Sordid History

By Savannah Fersner

I'm sure most of us are familiar with The Villages at Staunton, the beautiful condominiums located just outside of Staunton's historic downtown district. Many of us may also know that those same condominiums were once a prison, and before that, the original campus of Western State Hospital. What's less widely known, however, is the role that Western State Hospital played in the national eugenics movement.



Recently I read a fascinating book on this subject titled *Pure America: Eugenics and the Making of Modern Virginia*. Author Elizabeth Catte, a resident of Staunton, delves into the all-too-recent and sordid local history of eugenics.

Pure America begins with a deep dive into the development of eugenics less than a hundred years ago. So how did it begin? A small handful of bigoted men with political power decided to use made-up rhetoric to control the poor and people of color. These men made it their mission to designate poor people as "imbeciles" and people of color as

"inferior." They then used this designation to allow them to legally commit these folks to two institutions: the Lynchburg Colony and the Western State Lunatic Asylum. Once these marginalized individuals (and often their entire families, too) were forcibly committed, the next step was nearly always sterilization. Sadly, forced sterilization in this era was not at all a secret. Rather, it was a process that had legal basis and was consistently justified by the powers that be as a way of maintaining the "purity" of the population.

As if all of that weren't horrific enough, Catte also traces the way that the legacy of eugenics still lingers in Virginia today. Many laws from the peak eugenics era are only just now being acknowledged or repealed. For instance, as recently as 2019, Virginia required that anyone applying for a marriage license state their race. This was a remnant of the era in which state officials were obsessed with tracking what they deemed as the "intermingling" of races.

Overall, *Pure America* is a disturbing and enlightening glimpse into just one state's horrific history. Sadly, similar books could most likely be written about the other 49 U.S. states as well. As Catte reveals in this book, this sort of deeply disturbing era in history is not only incredibly recent but also too often gets completely glossed over as an aberration -- rather than something that still deeply influences our lives today.

Recently I found myself in possession of two copies of this book and will be donating one to the UUFW Chalice House Library. If you're interested in reading *Pure America*, please let me know and we can coordinate your checking it out from the library.

The UUFW Playground is Complete!



After many hours of planning, organizing and building, the UUFW playground is finally complete! The playground has two slides, two swings, a little picnic table, a bridge and an upper play area. A huge thanks goes to everyone who helped, but especially to Pat Donovan, Wayne Nolde and Steve Lay, who put in countless hours to get this complex playground put together. The playground will be a place where children can play for years to come and will be particularly enjoyed this summer at OWL summer camp. Please stop by and take a look. Have a swing or a trip down the slide! Following the Flower Service on April 9, everyone is invited to come to the playground for a dedication.

Community News

“When Green is not Good: Nuisance and Harmful Algae in the Shenandoah River Watershed” is a free science talk by guest speakers from the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality and JMU’s Department of Biology. It will be held at 7:00 p.m. on March 14 in the Wayne Theater, in Waynesboro. It is presented by [Friends of the Middle River](#). For more information click on the link.



Our monthly Red Wagon collection for area food banks and our own pantry box continues. All of us can play a role in alleviating food insecurity in the local area.

Don't forget to “spring forward” this weekend!

