



Mead Memorial Chapel

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September 27, 2021

NEWS



Middlebury Chair of the Board of Trustees George Lee and President Laurie Patton sent the following message to the Middlebury community on Monday, September 27, 2021.

Dear Middlebury Community,

This past spring, the Vermont Legislature made a public apology for its former legislation authorizing the forced sterilization of at least 250 Vermonters as part of the implementation of a eugenics policy in the first decades of the 20th century. The move had bipartisan support from legislators and followed the examples of other states in coming to terms with this painful part of our nation's history.

That statement by the state legislature raised a question for us at Middlebury about the role played by Governor John A. Mead, Class of 1864, whose gift established Mead Memorial Chapel, in advocating and promoting eugenics policies in Vermont in the early 1900s. It compelled us to ask whether it is appropriate to have Mead's name so publicly and prominently displayed on the Middlebury campus, especially on the iconic chapel, a place of welcome for all.

After a careful and deliberative process, Middlebury's Board of Trustees has made the decision to remove the Mead name from the chapel, for the reasons we will describe below.

We want to stress up front that this was a process involving deep reflection and discussion. No issue like this should be undertaken lightly or often.

Eugenics and Governor Mead

Eugenics is a subject that should strike us at our core, requiring that we confront our values, our history, and some difficult choices around legacy and accountability. Based in early 20th-century notions of racial purity and "human betterment," eugenics policies sought to isolate and prevent the procreation of so-called "delinquents, dependents, and defectives" to bring about a more "desirable" society. Such policies were enacted through the involuntary confinement of community members in state schools, hospitals, and other facilities—and the unconscionable practice of forced sterilization.

According to ample scholarly research in this area, victims of Vermont eugenics included people who were poor; who suffered from mental illness, incurable diseases, and physical disabilities; so-called "illegitimate children," French Canadians, Abenakis, women more than men, those who were illiterate, and people of mixed racial ancestry. All were targets. Eugenics

policies separated families, caused untold individual suffering, and left lasting physical and emotional scars.

It is difficult for us to write these words. However, because of this painful history, it was important for Middlebury to follow its established process for these kinds of considerations and commission a working group to look into the question. Specifically, the president asked the group to examine the role that Governor Mead had in these policies, and what implications that had for us and for the iconic building named after him on campus. She asked the group to conduct its work with a generosity toward the historical context of the time, as well as rigor in historical analysis.

Our Deliberations

The working group approached its assignment with care and deep reflection, recognizing the complexities involved: the immorality of eugenics practices; the political and philosophical practices and conventions of the time; the awareness that the chapel—and the ceremonies and events that for decades have taken place within it—has deep personal, spiritual, and cultural meaning for generations of Middlebury people, and still does so today.

The president also asked them to consider the actions of other states and universities that have acknowledged eugenics in their own histories. They also considered the archival research in these and related areas by many historians and policy experts, including Middlebury students, faculty, and staff.

Following its review, citing his central role in advancing eugenics policies that resulted in harm to hundreds of Vermonters, the working group determined that “the name of former Governor Mead on an iconic building in the center of campus is not consistent with what Middlebury stands for in the 21st century.”

The group advised that “the President recommend to the Board of Trustees to remove ‘Mead’ as part of the building’s name.”

Our Decision

The president received the working group's recommendation this summer. Following our institution's protocols, she forwarded the recommendation to the Prudential Committee of the Board of Trustees, which, according to its charter, has authority to act on behalf of the full board. The Prudential Committee voted unanimously that Middlebury should remove the Mead name. We want to stress again that this is an action we do not take lightly and do not expect to undertake often.

We are communicating this news to you now that we are back on campus so we can allow these questions the community conversation they deserve, which was not possible over the summer months. While the history of eugenics in Vermont, and Mead's instigating role, are well documented, they have not been widely discussed or acknowledged.

History and Timeline: The Gift and Eugenics Policies

Sharing some of the historical context that we studied over the summer might be helpful here. John Mead graduated from Middlebury in 1864. He became a physician, industrialist, Vermont governor, and a College trustee. The building's name honored him and his wife, Mary Madelia Sherman, when they gave \$74,000 in 1914 to create a new, prominent chapel (of marble and wood, with bell tower and spire) on the highest point on campus. The effort was a key piece of President John Martin Thomas's vision for a grander Middlebury. Thomas wanted a structure that would express "the simplicity and strength of character for which the inhabitants of this valley and the state of Vermont have always been distinguished."

In many ways, visual representations of the chapel have become synonymous with the College. The working group was conscious of this, as well.

In 1912, two years before the chapel gift was made, in his outgoing speech as governor, John Mead strongly urged the legislature to adopt policies and create legislation premised on eugenics theory. His call to action resulted in a movement, legislation, public policy, and the founding of a Vermont state institution that sterilized people—based on their race, sex, ethnicity, economic status, and their perceived physical conditions and cognitive disabilities. John Mead's documented actions in this regard are counter in every way to our values as an

institution, and counter to the spiritual purpose of a chapel, a place to nurture human dignity and possibility, and to inspire, embrace, and comfort all people.

Educational Task Force and the Way Forward

Our purpose in all these deliberations must have our educational mission at the center. This is not about erasing history, but just the opposite—engaging with it so we can learn from it. The working group advised that we convene a representative committee of community members to consider the opportunities for reflection and education this moment provides. That Educational Task Force will be appointed in October and be made up of members with diverse points of view. It will work with a variety of departments and groups on campus and develop recommendations for how we can acknowledge and educate about Middlebury’s decision to first honor a member of this community, and then remove that honor. It will also consider whether and how the chapel should be renamed.

We will continue to reflect together about these broader issues in several ways, which you will hear about throughout the year. As we do that, we will hold two distinct and equally essential principles in mind: 1) a generosity of spirit toward and genuine curiosity about historical context, and 2) an understanding that many voices have not been, and need to be, represented in our historical record. Our educational efforts might include signage, architectural installations, public art—with the goal of encouraging constructive dialog and debate around not only the issue of the chapel name, but also its wider implications as a complex issue of our time. Students, faculty, and staff already have begun to think about this work.

Moving forward from here, and as the Educational Task Force takes shape, we will refer to the chapel as “Middlebury Chapel” or “the chapel.”

We want to thank the student, faculty, staff, alum, and administrative members of the working group: Provost Jeff Cason, Dean of Admissions Nicole Curvin, Chief Diversity Officer Miguel Fernandez, Vice President for Advancement Colleen Fitzpatrick, Vice President for Communications David Gibson, Alumni Association President Janine Hetherington ’95, Director and Curator of Special Collections Rebekah Irwin, Student Government Association

President Roni Lezama '22, Associate Professor of History Joyce Mao, Executive Vice President David Provost, and General Counsel Hannah Ross, chair.

We know that this decision may come as unexpected news to some. It may take some time to absorb. We are intensely aware of the profound feelings that the chapel evokes, and the special place it holds in the life of Middlebury and the lives of Middlebury people. The significance of those memories remains at the core of our Middlebury experience, no matter what the name of the building is. The meaning it has brought—and will continue to bring to so many—will inspire us all for generations to come.

We thank the Vermont Legislature for their bipartisan example and look forward to communicating with you in the weeks and months ahead. We invite you to join us in our efforts.

The strength of the hills will remain with us.

Sincerely, and on behalf of the Middlebury Board of Trustees,

George C. Lee
Chair, Middlebury Board of Trustees

Laurie L. Patton
President

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