

Birth certificates have always been a weapon for white supremacists

Policing the color line through vital documents.

By Susan Pearson

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The Trump administration's decision to revive and expand the Bush and Obama-era practice of denying U.S. passports to Latinos born in South Texas should come as no surprise. From his assault on Barack Obama's citizenship to his allegations that Mexican immigrants are criminals and rapists to his promise to institute a Muslim ban, Donald Trump has made it abundantly clear that he believes the only true Americans are white.

But long before Trump rode to prominence promoting birtherism, birth certificates were an important instrument for policing the racial boundaries of citizenship. In the Jim Crow era, states used these seemingly innocuous public records to ensure that the rights of citizenship were accessible to white Americans — and no one else.

The best example of this comes from the career of Walter Plecker. Plecker, the state registrar of vital statistics in Virginia from 1912 to 1946, worked with the white-supremacist Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America to persuade the state legislature to pass the 1924 Racial Integrity Act.

The act not only forbade marriage between any white person and any “colored” person, but also defined a person white only if they had “no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian.” The law also made it a felony to falsely register a person's race on a birth, death or marriage certificate. This law would later be overturned by the landmark 1967 Supreme Court ruling in Loving v. Virginia. But for nearly a half-century, it was the law of the land in Virginia.

Plecker was obsessed with white racial purity, a cause he clearly connected to his belief that the United States was white man's country. In a 1924 speech before the American Public Health Association, Plecker claimed that when the English, Dutch and Scottish landed on the shores of North America, they came "to found a civilization of the highest type, not to mix their blood with the savages of the land, not to originate a mongrel population." The fatal error, he believed, was made in 1619 when the Dutch introduced African slaves to North America. "The problem is not slavery," he told his audience, "but the presence of the negro in what should be a white man's land."

For his part, Plecker dreamed of the day when all the descendants of Africans in the United States would return to Africa. He wanted to make America great again — 1618 great.

Barring that, however, he believed that legislation such as the Racial Integrity Act — combined with proper use of registration documents such as birth certificates — could prevent "amalgamation" and the destruction of Anglo-Saxon civilization. White Americans had to be on guard, Plecker explained, because the "mongrel" offspring of racial intermixture would try to pass themselves off as white and have their children registered as white on their birth certificates. They would, in effect, make an illegal border crossing.

Plecker's office made his opinions official state policy. He and his clerks policed the boundaries of race, scrutinizing birth, death and marriage certificates for what they considered to be fraudulent attempts to pass as white or Native American (anyone having 1/16 or less of Indian ancestry was allowed to marry a white person). Plecker identified several Virginia counties that he believed were home to large "mixed blood" populations and assembled a list of surnames from suspect families.

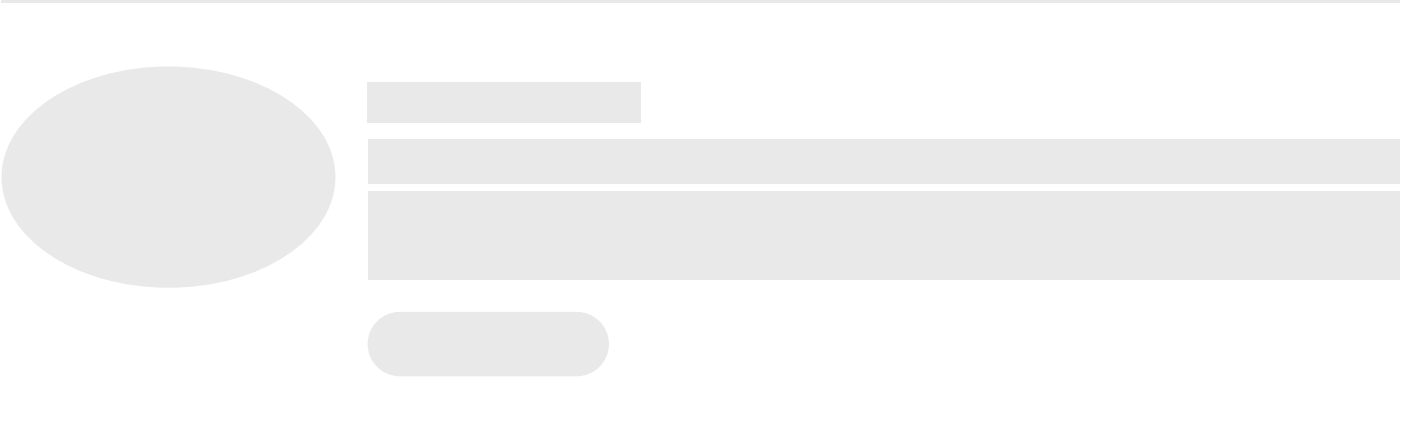
Like the State Department today, Plecker considered births attended by midwives in these areas as particularly dubious. Whenever a baby from a suspect family on his list was registered for a birth certificate, Plecker flagged the certificate. He wrote to doctors, midwives and parents demanding they provide proof that the family had no "negro blood."

In one letter to a midwife in 1924, Plecker warned that she had signed a birth certificate for a "white" baby from a family he considered "mixed." He wanted her to provide more information about the baby's ancestry. "These people are mixed and can't be listed as white," he admonished. "Even though he [the father] may be white in appearance he has any mixture of negro blood . . . he cannot be classified as white . . . Neither can his child be considered as white."

Plecker reminded birth attendants that falsifying race on a birth certificate was punishable with jail time. He withheld birth certificates until parents or birth attendants, or the registered people themselves, agreed to "correct" their race, a process that always moved in one direction: from "white" to "colored." If a person refused to agree to reclassification, or if the birth had been registered before the RIA took effect, Plecker issued the certificate with a note appended to the back, explaining that, according to his office, the person was not really white.

Virginia’s use of birth certificates to police racial purity had severe consequences. Plecker’s office corresponded with schools, hospitals, welfare agencies and other government entities to provide guidance about how to classify individuals so they could enforce state-sanctioned segregation. Though being re-classed from white to colored did not transform citizens into foreigners, as Trump’s passport denials threaten to do, it did transform them into second-class citizens. When access to employment, schools, marriage, voting, public accommodations, military service, jury duty and more could all be restricted by race, as was the case in the Jim Crow era, Plecker’s use of voter registration turned thousands of Americans into strangers in their own land. Indeed, that was the point.

Like the Trump administration today, Plecker’s reclassification scheme merged racism and xenophobia with a seemingly uncontroversial commitment to ensuring that our vital documents tell the truth. But like the present policy, only the (allegedly) nonwhite from certain areas, usually born to certain kinds of health-care providers, raised suspicion. And then as now, the underlying assumption was that only whites deserve the full rights and privileges of citizenship.



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