

Neil E. Gordon

The value of the Gordon Research Conferences for the scientific community demonstrates the foresight of Neil Elbridge Gordon and the inherent value of his many original ideas. Wayne State University continues to reap the benefits of its association with Dr. Gordon in a variety of ways. He was an accomplished organizer who "...would engage the best talent... regardless of any possibility that their scientific achievements might overshadow his own" (Reinmuth 1949).

GORDON'S BEGINNINGS

Gordon grew up on a farm in New York where he attended Homer High School and graduated after two years. He obtained his B.S. in Mathematics from Syracuse University in 1911 and his M.S. in 1912. The next year he met Hazel Mothersell, and the couple married in 1915 (Gordon 1985, 1-50).

When he witnessed students' enthusiasm for science after he established a Science Club at a school where he worked, he decided that teaching chemistry was the job of the future. He worked on his methods for teaching science, and in 1916, began the Ph.D. program in Chemistry at Johns Hopkins University. He received his Ph.D. in 1917 (Gordon 1985, 48).

His professional career began at Goucher College, a small women's college in Baltimore. Here he taught Physical Chemistry from 1917 to 1919. A flip comment made by the Chair of the Chemistry Department inspired Gordon to seek employment elsewhere. (Gordon 1985, 52).

In the Fall of 1919, he began working at the State Agricultural College at College Park. In 1920, the Agricultural College merged with branches of the School of Dentistry and School of Pharmacy in Baltimore to become the University of Maryland. In 1921, the President of the University promoted Gordon to full professor and asked him to be Department Chair and State Chemist (Gordon 1985, 53-58).

SECTION AND JOURNAL OF CHEMICAL EDUCATION

In the spring of 1921, while attending his first American Chemical Society (ACS) meeting, Gordon heard Dr. Edward Ellery deliver a paper concerning the undergraduate and research (Gordon 1943). Impressed with the paper, he saw the relevance of professional discussion of chemical education. With what was to become known as his characteristic "bull-dog tenacity" (Whitehouse 1942), he pursued, refined, and garnered support for this vision. By the fall of 1921, Gordon was Secretary of the newly created Section on Chemical Education of the ACS and in 1924 became editor of the *Journal of Chemical Education*. (Gordon 1943). After the first several issues of the fledgling journal were published, it caught the attention of Francis P. Garvan, a wealthy man devoted to the

advancement of chemical education in the United States and President of the Chemical Foundation.

Garvan financed a “Chair of Chemical Education” position at Johns Hopkins University and Gordon occupied this Chairmanship from 1928-1936. While at Johns Hopkins, Gordon continued work as editor of the Journal of Chemical Education (a position he held until 1933) and initiated and maintained over 32 fellowships for the National Fellowship Plan (Office of the President 1935).

GIBSON ISLAND CONFERENCES

The contribution for which Gordon is best known started as his, “...experiment in graduate work for the summer session of 1932, in order to provide a unique opportunity for teaching and industrial chemists to confer with authorities of national and international repute on ‘Recent Developments in Chemistry’ ...”(Staff writer, 1932). Coinciding with the summer session, this was to be a series of conferences, lasting several weeks with each week, “devoted to a particular phase of chemistry.” (Staff writer 1932).

The idea behind these conferences was to bring leaders in science together in small informal groups and to the meetings in a relatively isolated location, away from the pressures and “day-to-day life distractions” (Parks 1956). The next year, the conferences were held on Gibson Island, a privately incorporated island in the Chesapeake Bay inhabited by wealthy individuals who appreciated the income the scientists brought to the island during the Depression.

Although the announcement for the second conference on “Recent Developments in Chemistry” in 1933 does not mention Gibson Island specifically, it does include the following statement, “...Cottages on the shore of the Chesapeake Bay...are available for those who wish to combine a summer vacation with scientific study and discussion.” (Staff writer 1933).

Additional evidence that the conferences we now know as the Gordon Research Conferences were held on Gibson Island initially in 1933 comes from a letter written in December of 1932 to Dr. Joseph S. Ames, the President of Johns Hopkins University from the President of the Gibson Island Company which states, “...The Gibson Island Company has been advised by Dr. Neil E. Gordon of the plans which he and the Department of Chemistry of Johns Hopkins University have under consideration with respect to conducting the University’s summer courses in chemistry on Gibson Island...the Gibson Island Company is totally in accord with these plans...” (Office of the President 1932). In 1947, the conferences became known as the Gordon Research Conferences (Gordon Collection 1947).

HOOKER SCIENTIFIC LIBRARY

Although the accomplishments of Gordon mentioned thus far are impressive, they were not enough for Gordon. The seed for his next endeavor was planted at the 1936 Spring ACS National Meeting in Kansas City, MO. This meeting is where he heard about the Hooker Scientific Library (Kresge-Hooker Science Library Associates 1947). This library,

built by sugar chemist Samuel Cox Hooker, includes over 21,000 volumes, 18,820 volumes being bound periodicals—many going back to the initial date of publication. With many titles in foreign languages, the library includes material in pure chemistry, physics, metallurgy and other scientific disciplines (Browne 1939).

Wishing to purchase titles for his new employer, Central College in Fayette, MO, Gordon went to New York to see the library. After seeing this library, he became entranced not only with the collection itself, but with Hooker's desire that the library be useful for "the entire chemical world" (Kresge-Hooker Science Library and Associates 1947, Johnson 1941). While Hooker's heirs had had three offers from industry to purchase the collection for \$100,000, they held on to the collection because Hooker had wanted the collection go to a college or university. In a few days, Gordon not only convinced the heirs to sell the library for \$70,000.00, he got a second party to pay for it and a third party to pay for the library's move from Brooklyn to Missouri (Kresge-Hooker Science Library and Associates 1947)!

WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

In February of 1942, George Calingaert records Gordon's interest in the position as head of the Chemistry Department at Wayne University (Whitehouse 1942). Individuals serving as references regarding Gordon's suitability for this position made the following comments: "Gordon is the best man I know of to head a department of chemistry..." (Whitehouse 1942a); "Dr. Gordon...has the ability to get results..." (Whitehouse 1942); "...Dr. Gordon is a very resourceful person...in everything that he tries, whether successful or not, his relentless zeal reminds one of John Brown" (Whitehouse 1942).

At Wayne, he wished to build a, "...chemistry [department]...worthy of the highest national recognition..." (Henry 1949). As part of this vision, he encouraged faculty to publish, started a Master's program for candidates from local industry, and started a PhD program (Wayne University, Department of Chemistry, September 1942; Wayne University, Department of Chemistry, October 1942; Wayne University, Department of Chemistry, November 1943; Wayne University, Department of Chemistry, April 1944)

As a leader he found ways to attract young talent. Nobel Laureate Herbert C. Brown articulated this best in a letter to Gordon in 1946 where he stated "Professor Kharasch [of the University of Chicago]...feels certain that under your leadership the Chemistry Department at Wayne will become one of the most active in the country. His enthusiasm has infected me—I hope that I can be of service in aiding you to give Wayne an important place in the chemical world." (Whitehouse 1943).

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