

# John C. Gebhard

*May 18, 1898 — August 11, 1992*

Jack Gebhard, professor of civil engineering, emeritus, died on August 11, 1992 at McLean, Virginia. He had enjoyed good health and mental vigor until a few days before his death. His wife, Jean Hall Gebhard, Cornell '19, died in 1986.

Jack's father immigrated to the United States from Germany, his mother from Hungary. They settled in New York City where his father became a stationary engineer. Jack was born in Manhattan, attended Stuyvesant High School, and received a four-year scholarship to Cornell in 1915. In 1919 he graduated with the degree of Civil Engineer, finishing first in his class and winning the Civil Engineering School's coveted Fuertes medal.

Jack had two careers. He spent the first two-thirds of his professional life as an officer in the United States Navy and the last third as a member of Cornell's Civil Engineering Faculty.

In 1921, after an engineering apprenticeship in the Bethlehem Steel Corporation, he competed for, and received, a commission as Lieutenant (jg) in the Civil Engineer Corps of the Navy. There followed tours of duty in Naval installations throughout the United States, the Virgin Islands, and the Philippines. His work was in planning, design, construction, and operation of the Navy's shore establishment. During World War II, as a senior Captain in the Corps, he supervised the construction of the vast Sampson Naval Training Center, airfields, docks, and submarine base in Puerto Rico, and a network of airfields for the Pensacola Naval Air Training Base. After the War he had a tour as design manager in the Navy's Bureau of Yards and Docks.

Jack retired from the Navy in 1949 and in the same year returned to Ithaca to join the faculty and teach construction engineering and administration. He retired as professor emeritus in 1965.

The post World War II years in the Engineering College were a time of change. The five-year undergraduate program was being developed in all its schools. In Civil Engineering the character of the faculty was changing as older men retired and were replaced by young ones of a different breed, and the School was moving to revitalize graduate and research programs that had languished in the war years. Jack was the oldest of the new men, and both old and new were fortunate to have him for he soon proved to be a voice of reason and maturity in the clash of academic generations and cultures. His professional credentials were impeccable. And he had the qualities that the best military officers seem to have: knowledge and respect for order and rules, and the wisdom to know when to overlook the rules.

He was a true teacher, both for his students and younger colleagues. He spent long hours in personal talks with each. But he instructed and helped without forcing his will, ideas or methods. His calm and assured approach to problems inspired them to try to set their own goals for personal progress.

Jack always stressed the need for both “specialists” and “generalists” in the practice of civil engineering. The group in Construction Engineering and Administration that he headed was charged with helping students understand elements of the general business of civil engineering that are essential to the success of any specialized technical project. When he came, the group was behind the times. Much of his Cornell career was devoted to trying to find ways to make it responsive to evolving professional needs and, at the same time, to maintain a respected place for it in a faculty of increasing specialization. Time ran out on him however. After he retired the effort ceased, victim of changing educational objectives. His group was disbanded at about the same time, but twenty years later the void left by its absence was apparent and the case was again taken up by the establishment of an Engineering Management program in Civil Engineering. As in many cases, the vision and the contributions of an individual become clear only in retrospect.

Jack was a successful man. The features which accounted for his success were his orderly mind, scholarly bent, devotion to duty and gentility in his relations with people. But he was also a keen, energetic individual who moved decisively. His accomplishments in the differing roles of naval officer and university professor are a tribute to his adaptability and reasonableness. He was capable of great institutional loyalty. The National Anthem and the Cornell Alma Mater held great meaning for him.

Jack had strong convictions about community responsibility. He was at heart an environmentalist before the movement gained public support. His service as chairman of the Cayuga Heights Zoning Board of Appeals drew accolades from Mayor Marcham. His neighbors knew him as an individual of great warmth once his natural reserve was laid aside. He had a green thumb and his lawn was second to none. The squirrels and blue jays at his bird feeder offended his sense of fair play. He was for the little guys, the chickadees and nuthatches that frequented the rhododendrons in his back yard. Hence the electric grid he devised to study the conditioned reflex of animals in response to electric shock. This was the sum of Jack’s inconsiderateness.

Even simple neighborhood matters were deserving of careful deliberation. Jack concluded that in a friendly neighborhood not everyone need own a wheelbarrow, extension ladder, and the like. His were available, always in good order, and neatly stored. Upon moving to Virginia in 1970, he left the barrow and appointed a neighbor

its custodian, to continue it in neighborhood service. Over the years this came to represent and symbolize Jack's spirit of sharing and of being a good neighbor, always with modest reserve and gentility.

Throughout both careers, Jack had the steadfast support of his wife Jean, a wise, charming, considerate person. Their devotion to each other found expression in many ways including poems and love notes that continued until her death.

Jack was not a church goer, but he left one with the feeling that here is a spiritual man. At his request, the only service for him was a family one at the Arlington National Cemetery. But two years before his death he wrote the rector of New York's Saint Georges Church to express appreciation for the help the church school had given him to "get started in this world" seventy five years earlier.

Jack is survived by his son John, Cornell '51, three grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. He rendered over four decades of distinguished service to the Navy and to Cornell. The tradition of both institutions has been enriched by Jack's influence as have a host of friends. He will be remembered for his accomplishments and his integrity, inquiring mind and warmth of personality.

*Jack Rogers, Edward Smith, William McGuire*