

Albert Charles Phelps

World War Memorial Professor of Architecture

April 8, 1873 — July 4, 1937

On July fourth of the present year, Cornell University lost by the death of Albert Charles Phelps a great student and an outstanding teacher. He gave thirty-eight years of his life to this Institution with little if any thought to his own advancement or personal fame. During all of these years he was a teacher of the History of Architecture.

With each succeeding year he grew in wisdom and that kindly tolerance for a differing point of view—a differing point of view based upon accurate study and honest conviction. Of careless thinking or of pseudo-scholarship he was a biting critic. He had a passion for accuracy and for honesty. He set for himself a high standard, scorning all sophistry or compromise. In his mind the end never justified the means, and at any such suggestion he would flash into sudden anger. His mind was quick to penetrate to the gist of the question. His intimate colleagues all remember that low chuckle engendered by the implications unintendedly inherent in a remark of some fellow faculty member.

He was a modest man, a very quiet man who probably never realized the extent to which his influence moulded and gave direction to the growth of the College of which he was a member. He joined that faculty at a time when professional education was to too large an extent vocational training. He gave to that College thirty-eight years of unwavering devotion to the ideals of high scholastic attainment and honesty of thinking. In his mind the aims of professional education and of broad scholarship, were identical.

Looking back at the earlier years of his long service one may dimly appreciate the steadfast and unswerving patience, the self-forgetting patience of the man who set himself an ideal none too well understood in those beginning years of his work at Cornell.

His was a mind too big to be confined within the artificial boundaries of an administration division and with each added year, his influence reached out beyond his own College walls.

The last month of his life set in relief as none others had, his self-forgetting patience and integrity. He then knew that his future was but a succession of days of increasing pain. This future he never mentioned to his friends in tone of complaint, but only as it was necessary in his mind for the discharge of some duty or the finishing of some uncompleted task.

Albert Charles Phelps was born in Lockport, Illinois on the eighth of April, 1873. He graduated from the University of Illinois with the degree of Bachelor of Science in 1894. Later in the year of 1897 he studied at the Bavarian Technical School in Munich. He travelled and studied in Europe in 1902 and in 1903 received the degree of Master of Architecture from his Alma Mater. In 1898 he received his architectural licence from the State of Illinois.

He came to Cornell in 1898 as an instructor, being made an assistant professor in 1903, and full professor in 1913. In 1910 he was appointed World War Memorial Professor of Architecture. In 1901 he joined the American Institute of Architects and in 1930, in recognition of his contribution to the profession, he was made a Fellow of the Institute.

He was the director of architectural tours abroad, first for the Institute of International Education of the Carnegie Foundation and later for the Bureau of University Travel, spending many of his summers in this work. He was an occasional lecturer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and contributor to various professional publications.

This brief schedule of the events of his professional life is the one his own modesty wrote. He did not care for public display or for public honors. He gave himself so wholeheartedly to the task of the teacher in all its minute details that little of the vast knowledge which he amassed found its way into print.

His codified notes, which he left to his College are a vast mine of information to which he was ever adding. They are the evidence of what he did to fit himself to be the better teacher, but invaluable as they may prove, they cannot transcend the value of the continuing influence of the memory of his ideals.

No written testimonial can be a lasting memorial of any man but those intangibles which Albert Charles Phelps left behind will endure.

Source: Fac. Rec. p. 2001 Resolutions of the Trustees and Faculty of Cornell University, November, Nineteen Hundred And Thirty-Seven