

Howard E. Conklin

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Dr. Howard E. Conklin, Professor Emeritus of Agricultural Economics, resident of Longview, Bella Vista Drive, Ithaca, New York, died November 2, 2006 at Oak Hill Manor. Howard was a national leader in the field of land economics and took leadership throughout his academic career in seeking ways to keep productive agricultural lands available for use in farming in this increasingly urbanizing state and region of the country.

Howard grew up on a small dairy farm in the hill country of Allegany County, the eldest son of Monroe and Mabel Conklin of Ischua, New York. He often spoke of his heritage from life on a “hard scrabble” farm where producing enough feed for the cows and horses was usually as difficult as feeding the family. He understood rural poverty first-hand and spent his life trying to help citizens of the State and the Northeastern United States understand the value of the natural resources where they lived and the highest and best uses to which these lands could be put. Education was given high priority by his parents and they found ways to get him and his brother and sister to high school in the days before centralized, school systems and buses had come to rural Allegany County. Howard graduated from Cuba High School as its valedictorian when only 16, in 1933, at the bottom of the great depression.

Conklin entered the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell University in fall 1933, working his way through college like most of his contemporaries. These years opened the world of scholarship and agricultural science to him. He was most grateful for these years of social and personal development associated with membership in the fraternity of Alpha Zeta. He was an outstanding student academically, elected to Phi Kappa Phi, and graduated in 1937. He then accepted a graduate assistantship in agricultural economics at the University of California, Berkeley, where he completed his M.S. degree in 1939. Howard worked for two years in California as an employee of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In 1941, he returned to Cornell to enroll for a Ph.D. degree majoring in land economics.

He enlisted in the U.S. Army Signal Corps in 1942 and became an instructor in radio and long-line communication. His orders to go to the Pacific Front in 1945 were cancelled before he left the country. Mustered out of the Army in July 1946, he returned to Cornell and completed his Ph.D. degree in 1948. He was immediately appointed an Assistant Professor of Land Economics at Cornell; became an Associate Professor with tenure in 1951; and Professor in 1959. After many years of productive service to the College and University, he retired in 1982 and joined the ranks of Professors of Agricultural Economics, Emeritus.

Conklin added his own legacy of accomplishment in land economics to that of G.F. Warren, and F.F. Hill, who had pioneered work on public policy in land use in New York in the 1920s and 1930s. Conklin led the efforts in completing the land classification work started in the 1930s and then renewed efforts in working with the Governor's Office in Albany, first developed with Governors Alfred E. Smith and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Conklin's abiding interest was to support efforts by local landowners to maintain a strong voice at the local level (town or county) in decision-making about land use. He worked to document changes in land use through time, the movement of non-farmers into rural areas as landowners, and the economic viability of agricultural lands as technology changed.

Conklin's contributions to the debate over State land use policy in the post-World War II years were profound. His intellectual leadership turned long-standing land evaluation techniques to more contemporary concerns about population dispersion and urban encroachment in farming communities. The capstone of that effort was the production of a map showing grades of economic viability for farming areas across New York State. This map, and the economic intuition embedded in it, suggested territory where farming could succeed if protected from undue urban influence; this map was destined to guide policy thinking by adorning the walls of offices and conference rooms across New York State for years to come.

Working with successful farmers, rural landowners and public officials, Conklin spearheaded the creation of the Rural Resources Commission and the development of new institutional arrangements to encourage the continuation of farming. This included refining the concept of Agricultural Districts as a multifaceted approach to farmland protection. Enabling legislation was passed and signed into law in New York State in 1971. To form such a district, local residents, usually farmers, request it from county government. Hearings are held, areas proposed to be included, and boundaries established. Within these designated areas, commercial agriculture is designated as primary and landowners have the opportunity to realize a lower tax bill by applying for agricultural rather than full market value assessment. Over two-thirds of the farms in New York State, and about one quarter of New York State's land area has been included in designated agricultural districts.

The concept of agricultural districts in New York State received national attention in the 1970s and has been adapted to meet the needs for legislation to sustain commercial agriculture in other states, particularly in the Northeastern United States where suburban growth and urbanization has created great pressure on commercial farming. In 1979, Conklin received the American Agricultural Economics Association's inaugural award for "Distinguished Policy Contribution."

While Conklin saw the benefits of land use planning by citizens and local governments, he was also concerned about the application of State-level police power in controlling land use without appropriate citizen interaction and appeals. He was pleased that the Department's land use maps were used by State agencies in Governor Rockefeller's ambitious State Development Plans of the 1960s. Agricultural districts legislation was in part a response to what he saw as the potential dangers in granting too much power at the State level in land use decisions. His concerns were voiced effectively by county and town governments and local citizenry. He worked successfully with local groups in influencing the location of right-of-ways to preserve prime agricultural lands in locating the Interstate 88 highway between Binghamton and Albany. His concerns were always related to what he believed was in the best long-term use of these natural resources. Today, a key part of his legacy is a standing statewide commitment to minimize the impact of infrastructure development on commercial agriculture and farming communities.

One of Conklin's strengths was in working with graduate students on agricultural land use issues both within New York State and elsewhere in the world. He provided sophistication in sampling techniques using aerial photos to identify major farming areas and land use patterns in New York State. His initial state-wide maps coded in red, green and yellow, like a stop light, sent understandable signals to anyone interested in commercial agriculture. When satellite imagery later became available, the same kinds of current information became attainable to those with access to the necessary translation equipment. His students were among the pioneers in this process. Conklin was invited to work in a number of countries in Latin America on land use issues, often at the invitation of former students. His understanding of political decision-making was broadened by this experience to the benefit of both students and colleagues.

Howard Conklin will be remembered because of his enduring concerns for the welfare of those who make their living from the land and for the wise use of their resources. He left behind his willingness to listen carefully to those with limited resources and helped them to get a hearing. His students came away with a practical understanding of the art and science of political economy. His bibliography is large, replete with journal articles, research bulletins and publications; he left behind a worthy legacy.

He and Mary Chittick were married in 1940 and had three children: Lawrence, Glenn and Nancy (Brittain), all of whom survive him as well as five grandchildren, a brother, Gordon, and sister, Cecile Mapes.

Bernard F. Stanton, Chair; Nelson L. Bills, George J. Conneman