

John Peleg Barlow

November 6, 1918 — November 17, 1985

Rhode Island terms itself “the Ocean State.” John Peleg Barlow, a native Rhode Islander, was among the earliest students in this country to undertake graduate study in the new science of oceanography. Following undergraduate work at the University of Rhode Island (where his father, a professor of entomology, had become well known as a colorful dean— “Buggy Barlow”), and after a wartime interruption for service in the European theater, in which he was wounded, John went to Harvard University. There, with some difficulty, but with the constant help of Alfred Redfield, his graduate adviser, he put together a program in oceanography that leaned heavily on the facilities and support of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute, since Harvard itself then had few appropriate resources in Cambridge.

While working on his doctoral project, John held the titles of visiting investigator and research fellow at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute. Harvard University awarded him master’s and doctoral degrees based on his work there. He received the latter in 1953. He then moved rapidly from the position of research associate in oceanography at the University of Washington to professor of oceanography at Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College. Cornell soon beckoned, and he joined this faculty in 1956. He taught oceanography at Cornell from 1956 to 1985, first in the Department of Conservation (now Natural Resources) and later in the Section of Ecology and Systematics when the Division of Biological Sciences was created.

John Barlow’s consistently focused research interest was to examine and explain effects of physical and chemical factors in the environment on the waxing and waning of populations of phytoplankters, those microscopic, usually photosynthetic, inhabitants of natural bodies of water, fresh or marine. In doing so, he was faced with the need to develop new methodology on occasion and constantly to learn more about the important consequences and significance to the human environment of discharges of nutrients or toxicants into natural waters. Thus, although retiring by nature, John Barlow found himself in the forefront of those who challenged the wisdom of siting a nuclear generator on the shores of Cayuga Lake and waged effective battle. He also served enthusiastically on a Cornell committee to investigate the feasibility of a marine field station at the Isles of Shoals and was a member of the initial faculty of the program Cornell established there.

During John’s tenure at Cornell his interests and abilities, increasingly recognized by his colleagues nationally and internationally, led to important opportunities in consulting and study. He was a Fulbright research scholar

at the University of Oslo; a consultant on the San Francisco Bay Project at the University of California, Berkeley; a research fellow at the University of Southampton, England; a visiting investigator at the Graduate School of Oceanography, University of Rhode Island; and a visiting investigator at the Institute of Microbiology, University of Amsterdam.

Never intimidated by contemporary pressures to publish, John unvaryingly wrote scientific papers of substantial content. They were solely his at first but increasingly coauthored with his students.

In teaching, Professor Barlow's forte was a one-on-one relationship. To the undergraduates in class, particularly those (the majority) who were opaque to occasional sallies of his characteristically dry New England wit, Professor Barlow's lectures could be demanding, even daunting. But to each of his twelve graduate students over the years (all of whom but one were doctoral candidates), to the many others for whom he served as a minor adviser, to undergraduate advisees in large numbers, and to his colleagues, John Barlow's door was always open, his time never limited, his insights sound, and his advice warm and generous. His personal standards were always of the highest level.

John's subtle humor occasionally made trouble for him. Early in his career he prepared a paper for oral presentation to a distinguished international symposium on estuaries. The paper presented his research into the effects of Long Island duck-farm effluent on the major south-shore embayments into which it discharged. Somehow ducks and John's reputation for wry humor led his audience to seeing meanings that were not intended in his sentences. Soon the entire gathering, perhaps also reacting to previous tedium, was in full mirth. John, realizing what was happening, joined his listeners in enjoying his own paper in a new light. At its conclusion he received a thunderous ovation.

On his retirement, in 1984, John and his wife, Caroline—their two children, Maria and David, having fledged—returned to ancestral property in Rhode Island. Unfortunately John's days and comfort were limited by a battle with cancer, which had been forced on him before retirement. He remained of good spirits to the end, and his final months were filled with reborn interest in the land of his roots and his youth.

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