

Walter Lichtenthaeler Conwell

August 14, 1884 — October 7, 1967

Walter L. Conwell, Professor of Civil Engineering, Emeritus, died in Tompkins County Hospital on October 7, 1967, after a brief illness. He was eighty-three years of age.

Professor Conwell was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, the son of W. Lord and Sarah Frances Lichtenthaeler Conwell. Although the family lived in Nashville, Tennessee, during his early school years, he returned to this part of Pennsylvania later in his youth; and throughout his life he maintained an interest in the colorful folklore and customs of the Pennsylvania Dutch country.

He entered Cornell in 1905 at the age of twenty-one, having interrupted high school to work in industries such as the Reading Iron Works and the Reading Railroad. During this period in industry, he became acquainted with Cornell engineers—perhaps from afar, as he viewed the exalted position of the engineer in relation to his own job in the company. In any case, this contact, along with family encouragement, urged him toward the faraway goal of Cornell. In preparation, he traveled to Ithaca in 1903 and entered Ithaca High School as a special student for completion of his high school requirements.

After his college freshman year he left for two years to earn funds for the continuation of a college career. This time he turned west. With a year of Cornell engineering behind him he was able to obtain employment with a surveying crew of the Southern Pacific Railroad, working in the rugged Sierra Nevada mountain terrain of California. During the winter he returned to the fountains to try his hand at prospecting. It seems likely that the self-reliance which was so characteristic of him was formed and nurtured in these early years of hard work.

Walter Conwell returned to Cornell and received the degree, Civil Engineer, in 1911. He was immediately appointed an instructor in civil engineering and continued as a member of the faculty until his retirement in 1953.

At the time he was a student, one of the most active areas in the College was the Department of Railroad Engineering—in fact, it had been a significant part of civil engineering at Cornell from the earliest days. Although Walter Conwell was trained in this tradition and had worked on a number of railroad projects before and during his college years, he was one of the first to foresee the need for a new approach to highway engineering, in terms of route location, of materials, and of construction methods. As a young instructor he established the first courses in highway engineering at a time when the automobile was still limited mainly to local transportation. Soon

thereafter a highway materials laboratory was constructed, largely by the direct labor of Walter Conwell and his students.

For many years he spent his summers traveling to highway projects in all parts of the country in order to study design and construction in the field. His courses were constantly enriched with a steady input from his field studies. Throughout his teaching career he was a strong advocate of close association between engineering education and the practicing profession.

In 1916, at the age of thirty-two, he began drilling with the Faculty Military Company, and in 1917, with the entry of the United States into World War I, he took a leave of absence from Cornell for war service. He served with distinction as an artillery officer in France, achieving the rank of major. Following the armistice, he was assigned to duty as superintendent of buildings and grounds for the American Expeditionary Forces University in France.

A letter of commendation from the President of that University says, in part “. . . you have had a position involving many responsibilities and filled with many duties which to a person of less even temper would be received in the way of an annoyance.” This could be said also of his long service to Cornell, which he resumed in 1919 and continued without interruption until his retirement in 1953.

Although he concentrated on teaching in the years following his return, his administrative abilities were called upon at various times by both the University and the College. He served on a number of regular and special committees, often as chairman. For many years he was a member of the old Athletic Council and helped to shape the long-range athletic policies of the University during the changing era of the 1930's. He also served on the Board of Directors of the old Cornell Cooperative Society (the present Campus Store) from 1927 to 1947.

In 1930, Dexter Kimball, Dean of the College of Engineering, appointed him chairman of the administrative committee for the School of Civil Engineering which administered the work of the School during a four-year period when the directorship was vacant.

With the beginning of the war emergency in 1940, Professor Conwell helped to organize and administer the special training programs established by Cornell. Subsequently he was appointed director of the Engineering, Science, and Management War Training Program operated by Cornell University for the United States Office of Education in various industrial areas in the state. His relations with that Office, with the large teaching staff assigned to the Program, and with the industries served, brought great credit to the University in a difficult period. It was said by

the Washington Office that the organization and operation of the Cornell Program served as a model for others established across the nation.

During the war years, S. C. Hollister, Dean of the College of Engineering, had planned for the continuation of the development of the College of Engineering interrupted by the war—development of program, of facilities, and of staff. It was clear that the College would require administrative assistance for both planning and operation; therefore, on February 1, 1945, Walter Conwell was appointed Assistant Dean of the College of Engineering.

In this position he undertook various responsibilities in the increasingly complex administrative functions of the College, and his sound judgment contributed substantially to the operation of the College in this transitional period. His principal role was in the area of budgetary planning and control, and it was here that he won a reputation for efficient and impartial handling of the affairs of the College and its divisions. He demanded good business practice and judgment of his associates, but he was equally generous with advice and assistance. His work was consistently motivated by an attitude of support for the progressive development of the College.

In later years, Walter Conwell was often described as “a gentleman of the old school,” and for his friends this was a simple description composed of both affection and respect. In his manner, his dress, his integrity, his generosity, his sincerity, he was indeed a gentleman. He was good friend and neighbor, too. With no family responsibilities of his own, he undertook the role of Samaritan for many of the elderly retired faculty whom he knew and who were less mobile than he.

His affection for Cornell and Ithaca was deep and genuine. He was fond of recalling that in his years at Cornell he had known or met many of the great persons associated with the University from its earliest days to the present—including Andrew Dickson White.

For almost fifty years, Walter L. Conwell served as teacher, administrator, counselor—and sometimes as critic—but always with complete devotion and loyalty to the College, to Cornell, and to his country. His years covered wars and depressions, good times and bad, during which great changes took place in education as in the world. He neither resisted change, nor did he submit to change for the sake of change, but tried to perform his job as he saw it in response to the needs of the times and the aspirations for the future. He served well.

Donald English, Solomon C. Hollister, John F. McManus