

Paul W. Gates

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Paul Wallace Gates, the John Stambaugh Professor, Emeritus, of History, was born in Nashua, New Hampshire, the son of a Baptist minister, grew up in Maine, and graduated from Colby College in 1924. He received his Master's degree at Clark University, and his Ph.D. degree at Harvard University in 1930, after a year at the University of Wisconsin.

Gates taught at Cornell for thirty-five years, coming to Ithaca from Bucknell University in 1936 as an Assistant Professor and retiring in 1971. He was Goldwin Smith Professor of American History from 1950-59, before occupying the Stambaugh chair. During his Cornell career, he also taught as a Visiting Professor at Harvard and the University of Wisconsin, among other universities. He also held a number of distinguished national fellowships, and spent a year as a visiting scholar at the Henry E. Huntington Library.

Gates focussed his research on the development of the American west, particularly the nation's land distribution policies. He wrote ten books, edited four others, and published seventy-five articles, book chapters, and other scholarly essays, attracting much attention, and then renown, as his generation's leading historian of his subject. His first book, *The Illinois Central Railroad and its Colonization Work* (1934), based on his doctoral dissertation, won the David A. Wells Prize at Harvard. This was followed by studies that are classics of their genre: *The Wisconsin Pine Lands of Cornell University: A Study in Land Policy and Absentee Ownership* (1943); *Fifty Million Acres: Conflicts Over Kansas Land Policy, 1854-1890* (1954); *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture, 1815-1860* (1960); and others, culminating in his *magnum opus*, the 828 page, *The History of Public Land Law Development* (1968), a work undertaken at the behest of the Public Land Law Review Commission, an agency of the federal government seeking to evaluate and plan the course of America's future land distribution and conservation policies. As recently as October 1998, a panel of scholars at the Annual Meeting of the Western History Association extolled the merits of this magisterial volume before an enthusiastic audience of both young and mature scholars.

Gates's publications spanned the years from 1931-96, when he contributed an autobiographical sketch to a collection of his writings. His work fundamentally reshaped our understanding of how the western United States developed within the orbit of free wheeling capitalism that had little sentimentality or commitment to what Gates believed was originally intended to be a "democratic system of land disposal." In a recent review, Professor Walter Nugent of Notre Dame wrote that "Gates's corpus is one of the greatest in American historical scholarship in this century."

Gates was a single minded professional whose work habits were extraordinary. He frequently was the first person in Olin Library in the morning and often among the last to leave at night, Saturday, and usually, Sunday, included. He appeared there each day well into his nineties, working away in his fifth floor study. His productivity and increasing recognition brought him many professional honors including the Presidency of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, the national professional society of American historians, in 1961-62. He was also the President of the Agricultural History Society, and held high office in a number of other professional organizations.

In the classroom, Gates taught well attended undergraduate courses on the American West with a booming voice that at first frightened everyone within earshot, but he particularly excelled as a graduate teacher and mentor. His seminars were famous for their intensity, rigor, and the superb work produced in them. He encouraged his students to take interdisciplinary graduate fields ranging from agricultural economics and rural sociology, to government, and city-regional planning. He directed 23 doctoral dissertations at Cornell and many of his students went on to distinguished careers of their own; several, like their mentor, attained the highest reaches of the profession.

Professor Gates chaired the History Department for ten years, from 1946-56, (and served again, as acting chair in the Spring of 1963). He took an active role then, and subsequently, in the buildup of the department from a quite small group pursuing a limited range of subjects to its eventual much larger size and command of a much broader field of historical knowledge. He also played a vigorous role in expanding the Cornell library's collections in American history and led the efforts to establish the regional history research collection in Olin.

Although he preferred the classroom and the library to any other venue, for years Professor Gates participated in an interdisciplinary lunch with colleagues from across the campus, seated daily in a large alcove at one end of the old Faculty Club. They always found, he later remembered, a great deal to disagree about. He served a term as Secretary of the University Faculty (1957-60), and was asked to be a candidate for the Dean of the Faculty, an honor that he declined in order to return to his teaching and research.

Always interested in public affairs, Gates was a life long political activist, civil rights advocate, and ardent civil libertarian. He served in the Agricultural Adjustment Administration during the New Deal, testified as an expert witness in Indian land claim cases, helped lead the New York State branch of the Progressive Party in 1948, and spoke out in the cause of conservation. He took the lead in the founding of a consumer cooperative in Ithaca and served for many years as Secretary of the Varna volunteer fire department.

Gates was married for more than sixty years to Lillian Cowdell Gates whom he met in graduate school and who pursued a scholarly career of her own, publishing several books and articles, alone and in conjunction with

her husband. They had four children and seventeen grandchildren. Lillian Gates died in 1990. Professor Gates subsequently married, in 1991, Olive Lee, a retired college librarian, who survives him. He died in Oakland, California where he lived in brief retirement.

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