

Irving Porter Church

Professor of Applied Mechanics and Hydraulics

— May 8, 1931

In the death of Professor Irving Porter Church, Cornell University has lost one of her most distinguished graduates and most valued teachers. His whole career was spent in the service of his Alma Mater.

Graduated in 1873, a member of the instructing staff since 1876, he gave to Cornell the benefit of his exceptional training as a mathematician and of his rare qualities as a teacher. When he retired in 1916 he had taught here forty years, first as assistant and associate professor of Civil Engineering and later as professor of Applied Mechanics and Hydraulics.

He enriched the literature of his profession by works of lasting merit in which his keen analytical mind, his matchless gifts of exposition are strikingly illustrated. His pupils have attained eminence in every field of engineering.

The alumni of the College of Civil Engineering expressed their appreciation of his services shortly after his retirement when they presented to the University a portrait of their teacher and the Irving P. Church Fund to purchase books for the library of the College.

Another high honor came to him in 1919 when he was awarded the Benjamin G. Lammé gold medal “for accomplishment in technical teaching and actual advancement of the art of technical training.” This medal, given by the Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education, was a tribute of the whole profession to the man who had been called “the father of mechanics” on account of his epoch-making book *The Mechanics of Engineering*.

The essential doctrine of this book as well as of his teachings was that all good design must be based on the principles of mechanics.

His students were unanimous in praising his qualities as a teacher; clarity of presentation, rigor of demonstration, unlimited patience, unfailing courtesy were outstanding characteristics. They remember with especial gratitude that he spared neither his time nor his labor in helping them individually to understand difficult questions and to solve what seemed to them insoluble problems.

Their respect for the teacher was equaled only by their admiration and affection for the man whose quiet manner and self-effacing modesty won the hearts of all who knew him.

Science was only one aspect of his versatile personality. Nothing in the realm of literature and art was indifferent to him. He read good books. He displayed a peculiar and persistent interest in modern languages. Although he made only one short trip abroad he spoke well and understood both French and German. He loved and practiced the arts. Painting was one of the favorite diversions of his later years, and his home was filled with his copies of great masterpieces.

He was very fond of music. He played the violin. Until the very last he found solace in listening to melodies that had always enchanted him.

This unassuming and retiring man whose life was so full of work and who seemed absorbed in his many avocations found time to interest himself in the activities of the city. No good cause, no work of community interest or of social service appealed to him in vain. He gave generously and cheerfully. His acts of kindness to humble folk, his interest in deserving students, his love of children are remembered by all who knew him.

His last illness had kept him confined to his home for two years, without depriving him of the companionship of his family and his friends. Those who called on him found him always resigned, serene, and smiling. To the end he was deeply interested in everything that concerned the University. He ever remained the gentle, friendly, and human soul that his colleagues and pupils will ever mourn and remember.

Source: Faculty Records, pps. 760, 1699. Resolutions of the Trustees and Faculty of Cornell University, September, Nineteen Hundred And Thirty-One