

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Cornell University Celebrates its Beginning

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

April 20, 2015

April 27th is Cornell's 150th anniversary.¹ On that day in 1865, Cornell was established as the land-grant university for the State of New York. Three years later, in October 1868, the University officially opened and President Andrew Dickson White was installed as the first president.

Among the university's inaugural faculty was a brilliant Scottish veterinarian named James Law, who had arrived with his family in July.² His presence was the culmination of the efforts of the university's benefactor and visionary, Ezra Cornell, a local farmer who insisted that a professor of veterinary medicine be among the first faculty; and of White, who travelled to Europe to recruit the man he later referred to as the "horse doctor."

Though other veterinary colleges had emerged prior to Cornell, notably the New York College of Veterinary Surgeons (1857), and the Ontario Veterinary College in Toronto (1862), Law is credited with graduating the first university-educated DVM in the US (Daniel Salmon, 1872). At the time, Law was the sole veterinarian on the faculty, and his academic home was in the agriculture department.³

It would be almost three decades before the State of New York legislature authorized the establishment of the New York State Veterinary College, and appropriated resources for the hiring of faculty and the construction of facilities.⁴ In the meantime, US veterinary colleges were established at Iowa State University (1879) and two other universities.⁵

Cornell's veterinary program retains a rare blend of public and private support and governance. New York State provides partial funding for the veterinary college as well as three other colleges,⁶ but allows the university, a private corporation, to administer the funds and academic programs through its board of trustees.

During the celebration of Charter Day next week, the vision of two very different men, the intellectual White, and the pragmatist and builder, Cornell, will be remembered for their vision and creativity.

As for veterinary medicine, who would have imagined that the center of veterinary education for this populous and influential state would be sustained, not in one of the five colleges that educated over 1,200 veterinarians in New York City over a 60-year period,⁷ but in a small

municipality in central New York where it is an integral part of a major world-class university with enormous vision and world-wide impact?⁸ We will also celebrate that on Charter Day.

¹ [Cornell University Celebrating 150 Years of Scholarship, Community, and Impact.](#)

² Smith, Donald F. James Law: He Helped Establish a University and Founded a Veterinary College, Part II. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. April 11, 2014.

³ The agriculture department did not become a state-supported college until 1904, ten years after the veterinary college was established.

⁴ The name was later changed to New York State College of Veterinary Medicine.

⁵ The University of Pennsylvania (1884) and the Ohio State University (1885).

⁶ The other three colleges are Agriculture and Life Sciences, Human Ecology, and Industrial and Labor Relations.

⁷ Smith, Donald F. New York City's Five Veterinary Colleges. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. July 18, 2013.

⁸ [Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine.](#)

KEYWORDS:

Cornell University
History of Veterinary Medicine
Charter Day
Ezra Cornell
Andrew Dickson White
James Law
Sesquicentennial

TOPIC:

Cornell University

LEADING QUESTION:

When was Cornell University established?

META-SUMMARY:

The beginnings of Cornell University will be celebrated on April 27, 2015.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.