

Frances A. Johnston

June 22, 1901 — May 27, 1984

Frances Johnston's association with Cornell began in 1946, when, as an assistant professor, she joined the Department of Food and Nutrition in the New York State College of Home Economics. At that time her responsibilities were primarily with research and the graduate nutrition program. Her active professional career with the college continued for the next nineteen years. During that period, and afterwards as a professor emerita, she exerted a profound and lasting influence on the caliber and scope of nutrition programs at Cornell.

Professor Johnston was born in Troy, Ohio, where she received her high school education. After a year at Mt. Holyoke College, in Massachusetts, she completed her Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry in 1923 at Western College, in Ohio. In 1926 she received the master's degree in home economics-nutrition from the University of Chicago, where her primary interest was in the factors affecting appetite in preschool children. Following graduation she accepted a position for one year with a biochemist in the Northwestern Yeast Company, in Chicago. During the summer of 1928 she taught at Wittenberg College of Wittenberg University, and from 1928 until 1936 she held the position of assistant professor at Wesleyan College, in Delaware, Ohio.

Returning to Chicago to study for her Ph.D., she worked with Dr. Lydia J. Roberts on the iron requirements of children. She received her doctoral degree in 1941 and remained in Chicago as a research associate until 1946, when she joined the faculty of the Department of Food and Nutrition at Cornell. She was promoted to associate professor in 1949 and to professor in 1955, holding simultaneously a membership on the faculty of the School of Nutrition. At the time of her retirement, in 1965, she was made a professor emerita.

Professor Johnston remained in Ithaca after her retirement until 1979, when she moved to Scottsdale, Arizona, where she died on May 27, 1984, at the age of eighty-two.

Continuing her research on iron requirements after coming to Cornell, she focused primarily on young children, adolescents, and young adults. Extending her research to include the availability of iron from selected foods, her studies were among those used in the evaluation and establishment of the recommended dietary allowances for iron by the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Research Council. Her research also included studies on the effect of adaptation to long-term low-calcium intakes on human calcium requirements. She continued her research on human requirements to include the requirement for Vitamin B₆, an area in which very little research had been done previously.

Professor Johnston's work was conducted primarily with human subjects, although in her later research she also used experimental animals, particularly for pilot work needed to establish methods and to select metabolic products for analysis. Research using human subjects presented particular problems in that she had to develop methodology for both the conduct of the study and analytical procedures. Her work led to improvements in the methods and procedures needed for work with human subjects. In 1977 the Division of Nutritional Sciences remodeled the laboratory area in which she had pursued her research and dedicated it as the Frances A. Johnston-Charlotte A. Young Human Metabolic Research Unit in honor of two of the faculty members who had advanced human metabolic studies at Cornell.

Professor Johnston's original career choice had been chemistry, but she found that there were more opportunities for women in nutrition. In her research she was able to combine both interests. Her high laboratory standards and attention to detail provided excellent training for her students. She participated actively in her laboratory work, instructing the students and technicians personally in the various methods used. Although her studies were so well planned they almost seemed to run by themselves, nevertheless she made it a point to be present at every meal to determine the progress of the study and to encourage the subjects on the strict dietary regimens. During one summer, when she conducted studies with adolescent girls, she obtained the cooperation of colleagues in providing the girls with diverse activities, thus helping to assure the success of the study. Because of her concern for others both academically and personally, she received excellent cooperation from her students and from her human subjects alike.

During her active career at Cornell Professor Johnston was adviser to some thirty graduate students at both the M.S. and Ph.D. levels. Most of her teaching and research responsibilities were with the graduate program. In addition to the students in her laboratory, she worked with all nutrition students in the various seminars offered. Although reserved, she came to know her students well, and many remember the short afternoon break for tea that she routinely prepared. She was often affectionately referred to by her students as Miss J. Because of Dr. Johnston's dedication and teaching abilities, her students received excellent training professionally and in interpersonal relationships. Many have assumed leadership positions in academia in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere.

Professor Johnston was also quick to offer support to new faculty members when they joined the department and was open to the pursuit of new ideas and programs. She was also ready to help to assure the success of a new venture. She did not hesitate to establish her own ideas in a quiet and gracious way, but she was also able and anxious to encourage the development of others.

During the period of her distinguished tenure at Cornell, she published some fifty scientific papers, most of which were co-authored with her students. In 1951 she received the Borden Award from the American Home Economics Association for her outstanding research in nutrition. She was a member of several professional societies: the American Institute of Nutrition, the American Home Economics Association, the American Dietetics Association, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, as well as honorary societies including Sigma Xi, Phi Kappa Phi, Omicron Nu, and Sigma Delta Epsilon.

Each year, with other colleagues in the department, she prepared Thanksgiving dinner for those faculty and graduate students who were too far from home to share the holiday with their families. This hospitality might include as many as twenty-five or thirty sitting down together on the festive occasion. Professor Johnston was also generous with her lake cottage, and visits there provided a welcome relief from the hot summer days for many faculty members.

Because she was a person who was deeply interested in the community in which she lived, upon retirement Dr. Johnston became very active in many community projects, contributing both financially and with personal involvement. She worked quietly but effectively, and her example influenced the community. She was forward-looking, quickly recognizing community needs and encouraging and supporting the activities of others while taking little credit for herself. Shortly after retirement, as a member of a committee of the Presbyterian Church, she became one of the principal organizers of the Meals on Wheels program in Ithaca, a joint project involving the Tompkins County Health Department, the hospital dietary department, and local churches who supplied the volunteers. She approached the project as she would a research project and evaluated similar programs in other areas in the state and nationwide. The organization and structure of the program was uncomplicated but provided for emergencies. The program was effectively instituted in 1967 and is still in operation in much the same way today. Those who were associated with her in her community endeavors speak of her as a friendly, warm, outgoing but quiet person who had a profound impact on the organizations to which she contributed.

Both during her active professional life at Cornell and as a professor emerita, Frances was a good friend and benefactor of Cornell. She established a Nutrition Research Grant in 1950 and made gifts to support research in both the Department of Food and Nutrition and later in the Division of Nutritional Sciences. Some of this support is still available. Many graduate students can be grateful for her generosity in supporting graduate fellowships: the Katharine Wyckoff Harris Fellowship for students in human nutrition, food, and food-service programs and the Grace Steininger Fellowship. She made a generous commitment that will help the building expansion in the

Division of Nutritional Sciences and has established a major trust for the benefit of the University, for which she was honored in 1982. The American Association of University Women named a scholarship in her honor in 1980.

Professor Johnston was predeceased by a brother, Edward, and is survived by her sister-in-law, a niece and nephew in Arizona, as well as six great-nephews, two great-great-nephews, and one great-great-niece.

She will be remembered by her friends and colleagues as a gracious, thoughtful, considerate, and unassuming person with a pleasant sense of humor; by the community for her encouragement, recognition, and support of community endeavors; and at Cornell for her research contributions and her continued interest and support in the development of an outstanding nutrition program.

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