

# Herbert Joseph Davenport

Professor of Economics

— *June 16, 1931*

## **RETIREMENT STATEMENT**

Professor Herbert J. Davenport came to Cornell in 1916 at the ripe age of fifty-five years. Already he had published two stout volumes, “Value and Distribution” (1908) and “Economics of Enterprise” (1913), the earlier giving a detailed, penetrating, and systematic criticism of his predecessors’ contributions, the later embodying his own constructive theory. That they are among the outstanding contributions to American scholarship in a most difficult field, the field of systematic coherent abstract thought, and that they are marked by a rare combination of theoretic insight with hard common sense, no competent judge will deny.

Before Davenport came to this University he had had an indirect but significant relation to it. When the University of Chicago opened its doors, its department of economics was staffed with four men from Cornell, and ten years later when Davenport began his teaching of economics with an appointment at the university which held him there for six years, he found on its faculty two of the Cornell appointees, Laughlin and Veblen. To the former he dedicated his first and perhaps his most important book, saying that, much as Laughlin might differ from its conclusions, the book had been made possible “only through the freedom of thought and of teaching” which he had fostered. Davenport’s debt to Veblen, widely as they also differed, was even more intimate and personal.

During the thirteen years which were passed at Cornell before he reached the age of retirement, Davenport continued to write numerous articles on economic theory, incisive in style and constructive in content, but none the less his main service was in the classroom, the work which he best loved and in which his mastery and success grew with the years. Formal lecturing he disdained; with his students he trod the more congenial Socratic path of a cooperative search for truth, for the principles which underlie, for example, the simplest act of purchase and sale. Along this path he guided them until they seemed with him to discover what before was unknown, and in the process to gain confidence and zest in the unwonted exercise of their own powers of analysis and thought. His classroom was the arena for a conflict of ideas, and the teacher’s word of approval went not to the one who agreed with him but to the one who had wrestled well or even successfully against the elder thinker.

His power as a teacher was increased by his rugged, forceful personality, his kindly personal interest in all his students, his deep enthusiasm for his own theories, his conviction of their abiding importance and of society’s need of them for its salvation.

*Source: Resolutions of the Trustees and Faculty of Cornell University, October, Nineteen Hundred And Twenty-Nine*