

Shailer S. Philbrick

May 11, 1908 — August 19, 1994

After a short illness, Shailer Philbrick died on August 19, 1994, at Tompkins Community Hospital, ending almost thirty years of association with Cornell University.

Shailer was born in Columbia, Missouri on May 11, 1908. He was educated at DePauw University where he first came in contact with the Cornell influence. While at DePauw, he worked as an assistant to Professor Ernest R. Smith, a former student of Cornell Professor G.D. Harris and a member of Harris' 1914 and 1915 expeditions to the Atlantic Coastal Plain on his boat, the *Ecphora*. Shailer received his A.B. in Geology in 1930 and was elected to both Phi Beta Kappa and Sigma Xi. He continued his studies at Johns Hopkins University, receiving a Ph.D. degree in 1933. His dissertation dealt with contact metamorphism of the Onawa pluton in Maine, a work that provided what is now considered a classic description of that area (*Am. J. Sci*, 5th Series, V. 31, pp. 1-40, 1936). Portions of the resulting paper were republished many times in subsequent metamorphic petrology texts.

During the fieldwork for his dissertation, Shailer found it necessary to prepare his own topographic map of the heavily forested research area lying between the villages of Monson and Katadin Iron Works, Maine. In the process, he laid out the route of that portion of the Appalachian Trail and described it in the original trail guidebook. In his memory, his family is preparing a plaque to be placed on an overlook along the Appalachian Trail in his dissertation area, and a brochure to explain the geology to passing hikers.

Shailer's professional career began when he joined the United States Geological Survey as a Junior Topographic Engineer in 1934 and worked out of the Craftsbury and Lyndon, Vermont offices. The next year he moved to the Soil Conservation Service in Zanesville, Ohio. In 1936, he joined the Department of the Army, Corps of Engineers, as a civilian employee. During his thirty years with the Corps, mostly working out of the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania office, he rose from GS-5 to GS-14, and he had a major role in many Corps projects. He was in charge of the geologic and foundation investigations and planning for three locks and dams on the upper Ohio River and six locks and dams on the Monongahela River. For one of these, the Youghiogheny Dam, he designed the landside portion of the spillway which required a cut slope of 310 feet, the highest such slope in the area at that time. For details of his many contributions during his time with the Corps of Engineers, please refer to "Memorial to Shailer

S. Philbrick (1908-1994)” by Brian H. Green and R.E. Gray; *Environmental and Engineering Geoscience*, V. 1, No. 1 (Spring), 1995, pp. 125-126.

His teaching career began toward the end of his tenure with the Corps, first as a Visiting Lecturer in Geology at Northwestern University in the fall of 1960. In 1963-64, he was a Visiting Professor at Cornell University. Then in 1966, with Professor Storrs Cole nearing retirement, Professor George Kiersch, the new department chairperson, asked Shailer to become a full-time faculty member. Thus, forty years after working with Ernest Smith, Shailer came to Professor Smith’s old university.

Professor Kiersch was quite familiar with Shailer’s work and first met him in 1955 when Philbrick was chair of the Engineering Geology Division of the Geological Society of America. Philbrick’s first stay at Cornell in 1963-64 was as a temporary replacement for Kiersch who was on leave that year. Kiersch described Philbrick as, “...an imminent pioneer in his chosen field of applied and engineering geology” (letter to A.L.B., Sept. 22, 1994).

He quickly applied to his new career the same energy, vitality, and dedication that had been his trademark with the Corps of Engineers. One of his teaching assignments was the introductory geology class. In only two years, Shailer’s knowledge, his ability to communicate this knowledge, and his engaging personality, resulted in dramatic enrollment increases in those courses. In fact, as enrollment reached 250 in one semester, he lectured in a room so large that he failed to notice the attractive blonde woman student in a rear seat who faithfully attended for the entire semester before revealing herself as his beloved wife, Billie, in a wig!

While at Cornell, Philbrick’s paper “Kinzua Dam and the Glacial Foreland” was selected by the Association of Engineering Geologists for the Claire Holdredge Award for its outstanding contribution to the Engineering Geology profession. Also, from 1966-75, he was a consultant to the Buffalo (NY) District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and participated in their Niagara Falls preservation project. He was appointed Emeritus Professor upon his retirement December 31, 1972. For many years Shailer provided excellent geological engineering expertise to his local community as a Trustee of the Village of Cayuga Heights and a member of the Southern Cayuga Lake Intermunicipal Water commission. He was a deacon and member of the First Presbyterian Church of Ithaca.

He was an active member of many professional societies and charter member of several, including The American Institute of Professional Geologists (AIPG). His AIPG registration number in 1964 was 274. He was a founding member of the Pittsburgh Geological Society in 1944 and served as its president in 1947-48. He was also a member of the Society of Economic Geologists, a Fellow in the Geological Society of America, and was Chair of

the Engineering Geology Division of the Geological Society of America in 1955. The Association of Engineering Geologists made him an honorary member in 1986.

He is survived by his wife of 58 years, Elizabeth (Billie); two children, John W. Philbrick and Anne P. Isenbey, both of Poughkeepsie, New York; four grandchildren; a brother; and a sister. His daughter, Margaret P. Maurer, and a brother predeceased him.

In accepting the Honorary Member Award of the Association of Engineering Geologists, he spoke about his profession: "Let us always bear in mind our duty to provide factual information and to call the shots as we see them even if this runs counter to the views and desires of our employers. An honest geologist is the first requirement now and in the future." These are words of wisdom that he lived by and shared with his many students at Cornell. The citation for his award concluded: "Shailer S. Philbrick, through his distinguished practice, teaching and writing, has set an outstanding example of professional excellence in engineering geology."

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