

# Walter Francis Willcox

*March 22, 1861 — October 30, 1964*

Walter Francis Willcox died at his home, after a brief illness, October 30, 1964. On March 22 he had celebrated his one hundred and third birthday. At the time of his death he was the oldest living alumnus of Phillips Andover Academy, of Amherst College, from which he received degrees of A.B., A.M. and LL.D., and (it was believed) of Columbia University, from which he received the LL.B. and Ph.D. He was also the oldest Professor Emeritus of Cornell and the only one known to have a son also a Professor Emeritus of the same institution.

Born in Reading, Massachusetts, in 1861, he was the son of a Congregational clergyman. Both his mother and father hoped that he, too, would enter the ministry but, after a passing interest in Greek, he turned instead to philosophy. Even before completing his graduate work, however, he found his attention drawn to those human and social problems that were to be his principal concern for the rest of his life. Although he came to Cornell in 1891 on a temporary appointment as an instructor of philosophy, the following year he accepted a position in the Department of Economics, rapidly making statistics his special field and himself a recognized authority and important innovator in that subject.

In 1899 he was asked to serve as chief statistician of the Twelfth Census of the United States, a post that took him to Washington until 1901. Part of his assignment consisted in preparing the new apportionment tables for the Congress; this brought to his attention the alarming rate at which the House had been growing as new seats were added to provide representation for the country's expanding population, and the unsound method by which seats were apportioned. The House, he felt, could never realize its potentialities as a constructive political institution unless it were reduced to a manageable size—he considered three hundred the optimum number; but he also recognized the virtually insuperable obstacles in the way of any revision that would require incumbent representatives to vote some of their own seats out of existence. He did think, however, that it should be feasible to stem the previously unchecked growth of the body by a law fixing its existing size and providing for automatic reapportionment following each census. He even hoped that this technique might be used to reduce the size of the House by ten seats with each successive census. That proved too Utopian but in 1931, after a very long campaign, Congress finally did fix the size of the House at its existing 435 seats and also provided for regular reapportionment according to a plan Dr. Willcox himself had derived from the principle of “major fractions” originally formulated by Daniel Webster. Walter Willcox' contribution to this achievement received unprecedented tribute from Senator

Arthur Vandenberg, the sponsor of the bill, in a letter to Cornell President Jacob Gould Schurman. Some of Dr. Willcox' personal satisfaction in this accomplishment was diminished, however, when a group of Harvard mathematicians persuaded Congress to adopt a rival statistical formula for reapportionment. Never convinced of the validity of the "Harvard method," he continued throughout the remainder of his life to perfect and advocate his own system, and to urge to apparently hopeless cause of reducing the size of the House. His last appearance before a Senate judiciary subcommittee hearing on this subject was in 1959 when he was ninety-eight.

The role Walter Willcox played in national and international organizations can only suggest the nature and extent of his influence in the developing field of statistics. In 1892 he joined the American Statistical Association, becoming its president in 1912 and a fellow in 1917. In addition, he was instrumental in bringing the United States into effective membership in the International Statistical Institute, which he himself had joined in 1899. He served as the United States delegate to its session in Berlin in 1903, and to most of its subsequent biennial meetings in various capitals throughout the world until his final appearance at Paris in 1961. Having been a vice president of the Institute since 1923, he took the lead in reviving it after World War II, and served as its president at the first post war meeting, held in Washington, D.C., in 1947. From that time until his death he held the title of honorary president. In addition, he was a fellow of the Royal Statistical Society and an honorary member of the Statistical Society of Hungary, the Czechoslovakian Statistical Society, and the Mexican Society for Geography and Statistics. He served as a member or adviser of innumerable statistical commissions and boards, the Census Advisory Commission, the New York State Board of Health, the International Congress of Hygiene and Demography (1912), and the World Statistical Congress.

Although each of his four books—*The Divorce Problem, A Study in Statistics, Supplementary Analysis, 1897; Derivative Tables, Twelfth Census, 1906; Introduction to the Vital Statistics of the United States 1900-1930, 1933; and Studies in American Demography, 1940*—made a significant contribution, it was through his innumerable articles, letters to the editor, and personal written and oral communications that he exerted his surprising influence, not only in the fields of statistics and economics but in the general affairs of the nation. If his attention was habitually attracted by the "facts," he had an extraordinary instinct for the right facts and great persistence in calling them and the problems and injustices they represented to the attention of his fellow citizens. Characteristically he was one of the very first to study the economic and social conditions of our Negro citizens; and it has been widely recognized that the recent Supreme Court decision establishing the principle of equal representation in state as well as national government reflects his efforts and influence. Both the problems of world government and the

United Nations and the affairs of Ithaca and New York State were for him serious preoccupations. When on the occasion of his one hundredth birthday he was asked to comment on his life, he astonished his audience by saying, “If I were to start all over again I think I would go into politics. I don’t think I would have been so successful at that profession, but I would have enjoyed it more.”

In spite of his extensive professional interests and accomplishments and wide travels, the focus of his life, at least next to his family, was surely the University. Having come early enough to know most of the great personalities in Cornell’s early history and notably, all of its presidents from Andrew D. White to James A. Perkins, he had an insatiable interest in anything that pertained to the history, growth, or welfare of Cornell. From 1902-1907 he was Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, from 1916 to 1920 faculty representative on the Board of Trustees, and from 1931 Professor Emeritus.

An inveterate attender of faculty meetings, he also sought and made informal occasions for faculty discussion. He took a major part in reviving the Faculty Club after World War II, serving as its first president and making a substantial donation to its library. It was in one of the club’s small dining rooms, most fittingly named the Willcox Room, that he met regularly twice a week with luncheon groups. He himself had founded one of these groups nearly forty years ago, and modeled it after a “round table” which he had been invited to attend at the Library of Congress during his stay in Washington at the turn of the century. Although he always referred to it as the Becker luncheon group because, as he explained, he had begun it to serve as an occasion for Carl Becker’s conversation, it has long since been known to others as the Willcox group. Its members have included many of Cornell’s most distinguished citizens from Carl Becker to Liberty Hyde Bailey, Dexter Kimball, and Miss Francis Perkins, to mention a very few. We all, guests and new members, came to appreciate the unobtrusive skill with which the quiet figure of Walter Willcox drew out and directed the conversation.

Walter Willcox was throughout his long life not merely a distinguished economist and citizen; he was a model of a nineteenth-century gentleman and scholar concerned with the fate of his fellow man. He managed the rare feat of keeping his interest up to date without relinquishing his hold on his original values. As nearly as any one man could, he seemed to embody the ideal around which Ezra Cornell and Andrew White had established the University.

*Mario Einaudi, Felix Reichmann, Edward W. Fox*