Memorial to Charles Wythe Cooke
1887—1971

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The death of Dr. Charles Wythe Cooke in Daytona Beach, Florida, on Christmas Day 1971, ended his long and successful career as geologist, stratigrapher, and paleontologist. He is survived by his sister, Madge Lane Cooke. Cooke was born in Baltimore, Maryland, July 20, 1887. He was a bachelor.

He received the degree of Bachelor of Arts from Johns Hopkins University in 1908 and Ph.D. (in geology) in 1912. From 1911 to 1912 he was a Fellow at the university. In July 1910, while a graduate student, he received an appointment as Junior Geologist for summer work in the U.S. Geological Survey, beginning his long career in that organization. In the U.S. Geological Survey, he was Assistant Geologist, 1913 to 1917; Paleontologist, 1917 to 1919; Associate Geologist, 1919 to 1920; Geologist, 1920 to 1928; Scientist, 1928 to 1941; Senior Scientist, 1941 to 1951; and Geologist-Stratigrapher-Paleontologist, 1952 to 1956. He served as research associate in the Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C., from 1956 until his death. He was geologist in the Dominican Republic for the Geological Survey in 1919 and worked for the Tropical Oil Company, Colombia, South America, in 1920.

After completing his 40 years of service in the U.S. Geological Survey, Cooke retired on November 30, 1956. Also in 1956 he received the Meritorious Service Award of the Interior Department in recognition of his outstanding service. That citation in 1956 states:

His scientific work has been concerned with the paleontology, stratigraphy, and landforms (geomorphology) of the Coastal Plain, extending from New Jersey to Mississippi. In that area, and particularly the Southeastern States, he became a recognized authority in his field, and he has been of great service to his fellow geologists as a consultant and advisor. In his early years with the [U.S. Geological] Survey, he specialized in the study of the fossils and the formations of the Cenozoic deposits, publishing some ten papers on the former and some thirty on the stratigraphy and general geology. In his later years he continued his interest in these subjects and added specialization in the general study of the echinoids and interpretation of landforms of the regions. He has published eight papers on the echinoids, and about twenty papers on the landforms. He has written in cooperation with State surveys, papers on the geology of the Coastal Plain of South Carolina, of Georgia, and of Alabama, and the geology and geography of Florida. He has participated in studies made for the Survey in the Dominican Republic and in Puerto Rico. His total publications record exceeds ninety papers, many of them now standard reference works.
Cooke was a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; Fellow, The Geological Society of America; Fellow, Paleontological Society (editor of the Journal from 1937 to 1946; vice president, 1948); Geological Society of Washington; Washington Academy of Sciences; and the Cosmos Club.

In appreciation of his academic training at Johns Hopkins University, Cooke and his sister Madge donated more than $500,000 to the university.

I first became acquainted with Cooke's work in the southeastern states on groundwater investigations in Florida in 1930. The report gave the latest information on the geology of Florida. Not only his reports on the geology of the southeastern states, but also his reports on Pleistocene terraces and the eustatic changes in sea level during Pleistocene time were basic references on groundwater investigations in the Coastal Plain. Cooke was most generous with his time, and, in response to my request, led several informal field trips from Maryland to Florida for the benefit of young geologists working on groundwater investigations in these states. We frequently referred to him for advice on geological problems. In one report he correlated the Pleistocene terraces in the Mississippi Embayment with the terraces on the Atlantic Coast. He also recognized a terrace at 360 feet above sea level in the Mississippi Embayment.

In addition to mapping and describing the Pleistocene terraces, Cooke gave reasonable explanations for some of the features on the terraces such as the drainage and the Carolina Bays. Cooke was the outstanding authority on the geology of the Atlantic Coastal Plain during his time. For many years he and L. W. Stephenson were in the Coastal Plain section of the Geologic Branch of the Geological Survey. Cooke's work was chiefly in the southeastern states.

Watson H. Monroe, Geologist with the U.S. Geological Survey at San Juan, Puerto Rico, writes that:

I knew Wythe Cooke from about 1921 when he was my Scoutmaster in Washington, D.C. He was very much interested in youth and the outdoors during the several years he was Scoutmaster of Boy Scout Troop 39 in Washington, taking the scouts on canoeing trips on the Potomac, especially to Midriver Island. In 1929 and 1930, I was his field assistant in Georgia when he was acquiring information for the state geologic map of Georgia. His reconnaissance geologic maps and his maps of the coastal terraces have been criticized because they contain very sweeping, general contact lines, even in areas of considerable relief. Some places he had more detailed information, such as the location of bars and spits, but he did not show such features on his maps because as he explained to me, 'such detail on a reconnaissance geologic map tends to give the reader a false idea of the accuracy of the mapping.' His last overseas assignment was in Puerto Rico for three months in the spring of 1955, just before I arrived for detail mapping. His work in southern Puerto Rico corrected some gross errors of earlier workers, but it was never published. However, it has been useful to us in manuscript form.

Another of Cooke's co-workers, Garald G. Parker, senior scientist and chief hydrologist of Southwest Florida Water Management District, Brooksville, Florida, writes as follows:
Wythe (pronounced “with”) Cooke has been interested in Florida and the Coastal Plain province during his entire professional career and has done some of his most notable geologic research, particularly in paleontology, stratigraphy, and the Pleistocene terraces. He not only found time to work here during his working hours but also enjoyed spending much of his vacation time down here.

I first made Wythe's acquaintance during the Christmas-New Year’s holiday season of 1940 when he dropped in to the Miami, U.S.G.S. office to get acquainted with our new staff and to find out what we were doing. He was staying in a downtown Miami hotel for a week and took this as an opportunity to go out in the field with Nevin Hoy and me. I pointed out to him on this trip the wave-cut bench at +5-8 feet MSL along the Silver Bluff area and we traced it southward to and beyond Florida City. At this time I was tentatively calling it the “Miami Bench.”

Later in our Florida Geological Survey Bulletin No. 27, the name “Miami Bench” was changed to the “Silver Bluff Terrace.” Cooke was extremely interested in this “new” terrace and highly complimentary that I should have been the first to see it for the wave-cut bench that it was.

In succeeding years he returned again and again, sometimes for only a day or two, but in May 4-19, 1942, he and I spent 15 days in the field working on details of the paleontology and stratigraphy of the rock exposed in the canal walls, road cuts, rock pits, and spoil materials. During this trip Jake Stevens (SCS) took Wythe, Russ Brown, and me out in an air boat to visit some of the Everglade Island sites where we (Jake and I) were drilling test wells. Enroute, Jake supplied us with fishing tackle and we caught perhaps a dozen or more large black bass. Dr. Cooke enjoyed this diversion greatly and remarked that it was the first fishing that he had engaged in for many years. It was during this May 1942 trip that we decided to extend the Anastasia formation to the West Coast, there being particularly fine exposures of it in the coastal Collier, Lee, Charlotte and Sarasota Counties. One of the very best was on the Fort Myers Beach road about one quarter mile west of the Tamiami Trail (U.S. 41). This trip was so productive, and he and I hit if off so well together that we decided to put our ideas together and write a report up-dating the late Cenozoic of southern Florida.

Dr. Cooke was basically shy and retiring, but a delightful and athletically-inclined field man. On the traverse down the Caloosahatchee River from Ortona Lock to LaBelle one day, and from LaBelle to Olga the next day, we made the trip with a USGS row boat, but Wythe used the boat chiefly as a means of carrying supplies and equipment and to transport our rock and fossil samples. He stripped to a pair of swim trunks, and, with a pair of tennis shoes to protect his feet against the sharp rocks, swam the entire distance, going from rock outcrop to rock outcrop. It was during a time of extreme low water in the Caloosahatchee River, and we were able to examine, map, and correlate beds to a greater advantage than any previous explorers had.

Garald Parker continues:

Wythe’s academic training gave him a sound base in mathematics and physics that exceeded the training of most geologists I had ever known. I’ve always thought that it was this training and the application of science and logical thought, plus a strong body and energetic, keen mind, that enabled him to achieve so much. Men such as Dr. Cooke don’t come along very often and I feel that I was one of the most privileged to get to know him intimately and well. I’m sure that his coming along early in my professional career had a great and lasting good influence upon my thinking and attitudes toward science in general and geology in particular.
Another young geologist, Philip E. LaMoreaux, who is now State Geologist and Oil and Gas Supervisor of Alabama writes as follows:

C. Wythe Cooke, widely known in geological circles for his contribution on the study of echinoids and his work on the stratigraphic and geologic mapping of the Atlantic and Gulf Coastal Plain, has been to me a most congenial friend, teacher, and colleague until his retirement a few years ago. He was a soft-spoken, quiet man, considerate to all, and a substantial contributor to the literature of the geology of the United States and the world. He was even more important to some of us who, 30 to 40 years ago, were just beginning to "sink our teeth" into the problems of Gulf Coast geology. On many occasions he devoted part of his time in coming to the field and spending valuable teaching hours with us younger geologists just beginning our professional careers.

Harry E. LeGrand and I, along with Vic Stringfield and F. S. MacNeil, spent many an hour unraveling the intricacies of the geology of eastern and central Georgia. Through these conferences and with Cooke's cooperation and patience there evolved another generation of more detailed reports than the early reconnaissance reports by the first masters of the Coastal Plain geology. These masters, including Cooke, L. W. Stephenson, H. R. Aldrich, E. A. Smith, and others, laid the stepping stones, the foundations upon which we, a younger generation, could climb higher to a ladder to a more thorough understanding of the geology of the area.

Wythe Cooke was also a good friend, and I can remember many pleasurable hours sailing in a small sailboat or swimming in the Potomac. I can also remember a very hot argument one summer day at the base of Shell Bluff on the Savannah River when neither MacNeil nor Cooke would give an inch regarding the position of a marker bed in a geologic section exposed on a steep bluff of the river. Nothing would do but for Cooke and I to strip and swim out to the middle of the river and win his point in the argument. Wythe was an unusual physical specimen until the last few years of his life, with outstanding endurance and an ability to swim long distances with a steady stroke. As a geologist, he made a strong, steady contribution to the profession throughout his life.

We can follow with some of man's earthly statistics—when he was born, where he received his education, something about his contributions. These are all important milestones, but even more was his friendship and the fact that he took time to teach a young generation some basic facts about geology.

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