GEOGRAPHY AT A NORTHERN OUTPOST: The College at Farmington, Maine

Graduates Leave Their Stamp on the World

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THE COLLEGE AT FARMINGTON, MAINE*

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*The state supported institution established at Farmington, Maine in 1864 has had many different names. Three distinct labels represent this pattern of change. Until 1945, normal was always part of its name and suggests a variety of two-
three year programs for the training of teachers. The 1945-1968 names contained college and indicated a four year
bachelors degree was offered. University is attached in 1968 to indicate a link to the statewide system and access to a
large network of resources.

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Cover: The collection of postage stamps symbolizes the diverse geographic impact Farmington graduates have had on
the world.

• Stanley Steamer issued in 1985 in honor of America’s most successful steam automobile. Its inventors,
  Frances E. and Freelan O. Stanley, both attended the college and the latter graduated in 1871.
• John F. Stevens issued by Canal Zone in early 1960’s and Panama Canal issued in 1998 as part of the Celebrate
  the Century Series. Stevens graduated in 1873 and later proved to be a vital player (Chief Engineer) in the
  canal’s construction.
• Lighthouse issued in 1970 to honor Maine’s Sesquicentennial. Harold King, class of 1899, became
  Commissioner of the U.S. Lighthouse Service.
• Peace Corps issued in 1999 as part of the Celebrate the Century Series. U.M.F. has more graduates who have
  entered the Peace Corps since its creation in 1961 than any other small public institution in the U.S.

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Fig. 1. Farmington is located at the southern edge of Maine's "North Woods" and contains the elements of a classic New England village; fertile ground for "Home Geography."
Since its establishment in 1864 as Maine’s first public institution of higher education, the college at Farmington has offered instruction in geography. The early courses were taught by faculty who had limited training in the subject, however, enthusiasm and energy were high. Jennie Hayden, Lillian Lincoln and Virginia Porter were long term faculty members providing stability to the discipline during the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. Others, such as Jefferson Porter who taught the closely related topic, surveying, spent brief periods on the faculty before moving on. The arrival of Charles Preble (Wesleyan) in 1921 signaled the beginning of a new era, a full time “professional” geographer was on staff. Myron Starbird (1949) and Albert Mitchell (1963) enabled broader coverage of geography while also reinforcing Clark University’s imprint on Farmington. Faculty hires since the mid-1960’s have been dominated by mid-west Ph.D.’s and today the three geographers are all Big Ten graduates. The University of Maine at Farmington has evolved into a regional institution with missions in both liberal arts and education and offers the only geography degree in Maine. The institution has produced individuals that have revolutionized the world’s transportation geography (John Stevens, the Stanleys, Harold King and Edmund Hayes) and it is the nation’s leading small public college in number of alumni entering the Peace Corps. Geography at Farmington is a success story within the context of a small isolated campus that has drawn on a variety of individuals for strength and it may mirror many of the discipline’s historical trends in New England’s former normal schools.

Key Words: history of geography, Maine, home geography, global impact

The establishment of a normal school, Maine’s first higher educational institution, in 1864 at Farmington launched the state into the teacher education business (Fig. 1). Preparation of teachers for the largely small rural schools scattered throughout Maine had been a challenge since Europeans began developing the region. Well into the 19th century, the majority of people hired as teachers had little more than a basic elementary school education. If one could read, write, spell, do a little math, keep order and agree to a poverty wage, teaching opportunities were many. Have times changes? The institution’s mission was to provide qualified teachers to fill these posts. Although pedagogy was of great significance, a balanced offering in content areas was also demanded. Both of these objectives found geography a useful subject to include in curriculum. During the 1860’s, the thinking of Swiss educator, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi greatly influenced the development of normal school programs. He argued that students learn best through direct observation (Mallett 1974:18). Local “home” geography offered teachers a strategy for utilizing community natural and cultural settings as instructional laboratories. Geography also represented a broadening experience for students as they studied about global systems and patterns.

Early Era: 1864 - 1921

From inception, geography had a place in the normal school offerings. A review of the Catalogue and Circular from 1867 to 1921 indicates geography was offered on a continuous basis (Farmington Normal School). During the period, instructors were hired who taught geography in addition to other subjects. These years witnessed a variety of individuals, Susan Melcher, Marion Woodbury and Laura Curtis, who handled the topic for short stints. From 1874 to 1881, Jennie Hayden provided instruction. Her seven year tenure was followed by two brief appointments, Elizabeth Bell and Holmes Bailey. In 1885 both Lillian Lincoln (Fig. 2) and Lutie Luques were teaching courses in geography. Lincoln would continue to teach physical geography until her transfer to the model school (elementary laboratory school) in 1896. Luques and Ella Longfellow (for 1890-91) provided instruction in the other aspects of geography during the same period. Melvin West taught geography from 1894 to 1900.

In 1906 Alma Bradbury and Edda Locke were teaching the discipline and continued to do so until 1908, when Virginia Porter joined the faculty to teach geography as well as grammar, English, composition, reading and penmanship (Fig. 3). Porter was an enthusiastic promoter of “home” geography as encouraged by the Pestalozzi approach. She often led excursions into the countryside around Farmington to introduce students to physicsography. Her May 29, 1914 field trip to the Maine and New Hampshire Granite Corporation quarry at North Jay (10 miles from campus) is a classic. The outing included a review of the area’s physical character as well as the extraction and preparation of the product (Porter 1914:19-20). She remained on staff until 1921. In addition to the geography courses, there were a number of allied offerings that students with interests in spatial and man-environment themes could take. Rolston Woodbury and N.T. True were teaching geology in the 1860’s and 70’s. Charles Warner, Jefferson Potter, Dennis Cole and Wilbert Mallett handled surveying and natural science from 1885 to the mid-1890’s. George Purtleing and Arthur Thomas taught agriculture on a
fairly regular basis from 1906 to the mid-teens (Mallett 1974).

The educational background of the faculty varied with many having only three year degrees from normal schools. Several were products of the Farmington institution; Luques, Lincoln, Longfellow and Mallett. Purington held a bachelor’s degree from Bowdoin College. Others had earned graduate degrees; Warner, M.A. (Colby College); Potter, M.A. (Brown University); Mallett, M.A. (Bowdoin College); and Thomas, M.A. (Colby College). A few of the instructors continued to improve their skills and knowledge after joining the faculty. Mallett studied at Clark University under G. Stanley Hall (Mallett 1974). Others moved on to positions elsewhere; Potter to Clark (Story and Wilson 1899:536); and Cole to Westfield, Massachusetts High School (Mallett 1974).

Geography instruction in the early period concentrated on both world and regional approaches as well as local landscape analysis. In addition, students were able to obtain field skills in surveying and problem solving. This educational experience, for the most part, produced elementary teachers who went into classrooms throughout Maine and the rest of the nation. However, success was also found in other professions. Five individuals that came out of Farmington’s normal school during the early era were leaders in transforming the world’s transportation geography. The Stanley twins, Freelan (Class of 1871) and Frances (attended but did not graduate), developed the Stanley Steamer, a successful steam car that for a time challenged gasoline powered automobiles. In 1906, one of their race cars set a world speed record of 128 miles per hour and in 1907 their Flying Teapot was clocked at 197 miles per hour before it crashed (Mallett 1974). Their work did much to introduce the public to the adventures of motoring.

John Stevens (Class of 1872) completed his formal education at Farmington and following a brief period as a teacher, took a job surveying in Maine. Within a few years he found himself on a survey crew in Minnesota. James J. Hill was building the Great Northern Railroad empire and hiring men to help him do it. Stevens headed the exploration effort to find a suitable rail route through the northern Rockies. His success assisted in opening the northwest to eastern U.S. markets. In 1905, Panama Canal construction was far behind schedule and President Theodore Roosevelt was looking for a way to make things move. He sought advice from Hill who recommended Stevens. The canal project was reorganized under Stevens and completed. In 1917, Stevens was asked by President Wilson to oversee maintenance of the Trans-Siberian Railroad on behalf of the Kerensky Government. However, he stayed on following the Bolshevik victory and did not return to the states until 1925. In 1927, he was elected President of the American Society of Engineers. His last major project was the 7.8 mile Cascade (railroad) Tunnel, longest in the Western Hemisphere, at Stevens Pass in the Cascade Mountains of Washington. The pass is named in his honor (University of Maine at Farmington 1995). (Fig. 4)

Harold King (Class of 1899) pursued a career in the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey and became Commissioner of the Lighthouse Service in 1936 (Alumni Archives, undated). Edmund Hayes (Class of 1867) became one of four members of the Union Bridge Company which constructed the innovative cantilever bridge to span the swift Niagara River (Mallett 1974).

Despite the many successes in education, government and business that emerged from this early period, some individuals just didn’t catch on to this stuff called geography. Exam results from the 1920-21 academic year included the following answer in response to the question asking for directions for travel from Duluth to Montreal. “From Duluth to Montreal you must go up the Pacific Ocean, Strait of Gibraltar, up into Chesapeake Bay and up around the western part of Maine” (Anonymous 1921:25). Middle Era 1921 - 1963

The hiring of Charles Preble in the fall of 1921 ushered in a new era in the evolution of geography at Farmington Normal. (Fig. 5) Until then, the subject had been taught by faculty without extensive formal training in geography. Preble, a graduate of Wesleyan, came to Farmington to teach biological science, nature study and geography. After joining the faculty, he continued to spend summers at Clark University studying geography (Mallett 1998). He soon established a reputation for his nature tours and field geography trips, many of which started at six in the morning. One can build a reputation around starting time as well as quality of experience. The fact that they were popular should not be attributed to the early hour! Preble focused on physical geography and encouraged students to think in the context of both local “home” geography and global concerns. During his career at Farmington which lasted until 1949, he maintained a high level of activity on behalf of geography in Maine and New England including the publication of a number of articles on geographic education. He should be considered Farmington’s first professional geographer. Virginia Porter continued to offer selected geography courses until her retirement in 1939. Thus, the Preble/Porter duo provided a broader foundation in the discipline than had been possible prior to 1921.

The retirement of Porter left Preble as the sole geography teacher at Farmington from 1939 to 1949.
Fig. 2. Lillian Lincoln

Fig. 3. Virginia Porter

Fig. 4. John Frank Stevens memorial located on University of Maine at Farmington campus

Fig. 5. Charles Preble
Fig. 6. Myron Starbird

Fig. 7. Albert Mitchell

Fig. 8. Eldred “Red” Rolfe (far right) leading students into the Maine forest

Fig. 9. Faculty and students at Indiana Dunes on way to 1995 AAG meeting in Chicago. Faculty: standing second from left, Cathleen McAnenny; seventh from left, Elizabeth Frederic (part-time); and eighth from left, Paul Frederic.
His ability to carry the courses was proven by the steady demand for geography (Mallett 1998). One of his students during the early 1930's was Myron Starbird (Class of 1931) who would play a critical role in the story of geography at Farmington. (Fig. 6)

In 1945, a state legislative act proclaimed the Farmington Normal School a Teachers College and mandated it as a four-year bachelor degree granting institution (Mallett 1974). This placed additional demands on the faculty to provide a greater mix of courses. By 1949, Preble had been at Farmington twenty-eight years and had performed with distinction. Into his shoes that year stepped Myron Starbird who had acquired a master's degree from the University of Maine. Starbird took over all geography courses and soon began work on a Ph.D. at Clark (Mallett 1998).

Starbird's devotion to Farmington and geography was an ideal mix for growth of the program at the college. As a native of the community with some study time under Preble, he knew the "home" geography and his deep ties with Clark gave him the intellectual skills to prepare students for graduate school in geography as well as the more customary careers associated with Farmington alumni. During the 1950's and early 1960's, four of his students entered Ph.D. programs in geography; Albert Mitchell (Class of 54); Benjamin Howett (Class of 59); Franklin Hodges (Class of 61) and Eldred Rolfe (Class of 62). All headed for Clark except Rolfe who departed from this traditional tie and chose Michigan State University (Alumni Office Archives, undated). These individuals returned to academic positions in Maine with Mitchell and Rolfe at Farmington, Hodges at the University of Southern Maine and Howett at the University of Maine at Augusta. The institution at Farmington was now contributing, in an identifiable fashion, to the education of professional geographers.

Modern Era 1963-1999

The author was part of the freshman class in the fall of 1962 and joined the faculty in 1978, thus a significant source of information for the modern era comes from his recall. Starbird had developed a close working relationship with college President Ermo Scott who took over management of the campus in 1953. This, coupled with his popular course offerings, made it possible to present a strong argument in support of a second geographer. In 1963, Albert Mitchell, Clark Ph.D. candidate, was hired. (Fig. 7) The College at Farmington now had two full-time geographers and was able to offer students a more extensive list of courses. It was possible to obtain the basic elements of an undergraduate geography major. These two instructors not only increased offerings, they pursued linkages with other geographers in the region. Starbird served as Secretary-Treasurer of the New England-St. Lawrence Valley Geographical Society (NESTVAL) (1963-65) and Mitchell was its President (1973-75). In 1965 geography became a separate, two line department (Mallett 1974:246). Eldred Rolfe (Ph.D., Michigan State) joined the faculty in 1966 to bring the department to three. This additional line made it possible to offer a geography concentration in the new graduate program (Master's in Education). In addition, an applied geography (land planning) track was introduced. This was a period of rapid expansion that saw both increased programs and new resources. It was also marked by the merger of all the former teacher colleges with the University of Maine to form a system. The campus name became University of Maine at Farmington (UMF) in 1968.

The late 1960's was a time when students and faculty worked together to take advantage of this new improved major called geography. Course offerings grew, field trips became more frequent and students were convinced that the door was open to new career options in both applied and academic geography. A cluster of five students from this half-decade went on to earn Ph.D.'s in geography; Terence MacIntosh (Class of 1965) Michigan State University; Paul Frederic (Class of 1966) University of Illinois; Robert Mathies (Class of 1966) University of Georgia; Wesley Thomas (Class of 1967) University of Cincinnati and Ernest Metivier (Class of 1969) University of Kentucky (Alumni Archives).

The late 1960's and early 70's were complicated by splitting Farmington's mission into dual tracks of undergraduate teacher training and liberal arts. All graduate programs were abolished during the early 1970's in response to pressure from the system's two largest campus, Orono and Gorham, which wanted control of higher degrees. Starbird retired in 1974 and was replaced by John Damron, Ph.D. University of Oregon, who remained through the 1977-78 academic year. Paul Frederic was hired as his replacement. Mitchell passed away in 1992 and his line was filled by Jian-yi Liu, Ph.D. Minnesota, for 1992-93. Cathleen McAneny, Ph.D. Michigan State, was appointed to that position in 1993. Richard Kujawa, Ph.D. University of Iowa, held a temporary appointment 1987-89 while Frederic served as Executive Director of the Maine Land Use Regulation Commission (Geography Program Files, undated). In addition, a number of part-time faculty have filled in for people on various types of leaves or sabbaticals. The post-Starbird years have been a time of diversity of people and ideas for the geography program.

Campus administrative reorganization in the early 1980's resulted in the consolidation of seventeen small academic departments into seven and geography became part of Social Sciences and Business with
Mitchell serving as Chair until 1991, however, programs were not lost. In the early 1990’s a two year planning degree was phased out to be replaced in 1996 by a four year environmental planning and policy major which is also managed by the geography faculty. As has been the case for three decades, there are two tracks in the geography program, geography and planning, in addition to a concentration for education majors.

The University of Maine at Farmington program involves a strong traditional classroom format and field work. For the 1978-79 academic year, Farmington ranked seventeenth nationally in percent of student body enrolled in geography courses (28 percent) at colleges with only undergraduate programs and sixteenth in number of majors (52) (deSouza et al. 1981). Internships and field research involved a wide variety of opportunities (Fig. 8). Relationships with local and state agencies as well as a number of private enterprises provided rich environments for students to test. Joint field courses were developed with other University of Maine System campuses during the 1980’s and continued for several years (Frederic, et al. 1988). During the past decade, students have been involved in the NESTVAL paper and geography bowl competitions. There has also been a growing inclination for them to attend the national Association of American Geographers (AAG) meetings. (Fig. 9)

These professional enrichment experiences are more frequent since the formal establishment of a geography and environmental planning club in 1995 which has access to campus activity funds controlled by the Student Senate. Guest speakers have become more regular and recent ones include two AAG Past-Presidents (Robert Kates and Judy Olson) as well as Past-Treasurer, Joseph Wood.

Faculty continue to participate in a variety of professional research and service agendas in addition to teaching. Rolfe has focused on Maine as a research environment and just completed his second three-year term as Chair of the Department of Social Sciences and Business. McAneny is involved with medical and social geography and Frederic is concerned with rural resource management problems. All three have been active in NESTVAL (Frederic as President; McAneny as Pre-College Outreach Coordinator; and Rolfe as Maine Representative) and Frederic and McAneny hold or have held AAG Council/Committee positions.

Frederic was the first UMF faculty member to be appointed to Farmington’s Libra Professorship, an endowed chair (1990-91). In 1997 the Maine Geographic Alliance office and coordination was transferred to UMF. Its mission of improving K-12 geography education represents a new opportunity for the Farmington geographers.

Expanded international linkage and new equipment are other trends during the modern era. Faculty and students are taking advantage of opportunities in Canada, Europe and Africa to broaden their horizons. Frederic has spent sabbaticals in Canada and Namibia (including a visiting faculty appointment) and McAneny has lectured in France. During each of the past several years, UMF has hosted French geography majors for the academic year and has sent a number of its geography students to LeMans. Two of our graduates were from The Gambia. In 1996 the geography program received a $38,000 National Science Foundation matching grant to purchase ten computer work stations plus digitizers, scanners and software. McAneny has led the effort to upgrade the geography laboratory.

This period has generated a variety of graduates who have pursued successful careers. Many have entered public service in federal, state or local governments. Others have found employment in the private sector or education. Deborah Richard (Class of 1978) obtained a Masters from the University of Oregon and served as Acting Commissioner of the Maine Department of Environmental Protection during the early 1990’s. Others earned degrees from the University of Arkansas, Harvard University, State University of New York at Albany, University of Toledo, University of Vermont, University of Connecticut, Shippensburg University, Oregon State University and Louisiana State University.

In addition to program majors, students from throughout the campus find themselves in geography courses. The impact of various service offerings is difficult to determine. One measure might be the number of students who have their global horizons expanded. UMF is a small (approximately 2,000 enrollment) state institution with both liberal arts and education programs which draws about 90 percent of its students from Maine, one of the nation’s most rural states. However, UMF is the only public institution in the top twenty small colleges/universities (under 5,000 undergraduates) providing Peace Corp Volunteers to that agency since it was established in 1961. Some 231 alumni have joined the Corps which ranks UMF seventeenth. The list is topped by the University of Chicago (519) and Dartmouth College (482) (Gearan 1997). Both have strong traditions in geography. This seems to be a departure from the old days of “home” geography. It is possible that those undergraduate lectures about far away places with strange sounding names spark a bit of adventure and challenge. Maybe this new generation is closer to Stevens, King and the Stanleys than we are sometimes ready to admit. Think global, act local in lots of different places, and change the world!
Summary

Farmington’s public institution (normal school, college, university) evolved over time from a fragile center for training teachers on the northern edge of New England forest into a balanced undergraduate campus offering both education and liberal arts degrees. During its history, geography has been a major player in the story. The early mission was to prepare people to teach in Maine’s largely rural schools. An understanding of basic global geography was useful but a sound grasp of local “home” geography was critical in introducing pupils to the complex interactions of humans and nature. Although a large number of teachers were produced, a group of individuals that revolutionized the world’s transportation geography also emerged from this academic environment. Fast cars, railroad wonders, ships across land, safe shores and bridges over rough waters were presented to the world by early Farmington alumni. From 1921 to 1963 professional geographers were on the faculty and the discipline became more focused in both content and skill development. The program’s ties with Clark University were established and some graduates entered graduate schools in geography.

During the past three and a half decades, geography has become recognized as one of the most successful programs at UMF. Its students have moved into careers in education, planning, business and government service. Many have obtained graduate degrees. Faculty members, more diversified in terms of both interests and academic background, are active in research and professional service. International ties, internships, field work and additional equipment have enriched opportunities for geography and planning majors. In addition to majors, geography faculty reach many other students in service courses and some are likely influenced by their work. UMF is the country’s leading small public university in providing graduates to the Peace Corps. The institution’s alumni are doing their share to improve global conditions and geography is proud to be part of that effort.

Geography at Farmington is a success story within the context of a small isolated campus that has drawn on a variety of individuals for strength and it may mirror many of the discipline’s historical trends in New England’s former normal schools.

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