GEOGRAPHY AT MOUNT HOLYOKE FEMALE SEMINARY AND COLLEGE, 1837 – 1984

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Mount Holyoke's recognition of the importance of geography dates back to its founding in 1837, when Mary Lyon listed among the prerequisites for the entering class the "aquaintance with [and] good knowledge of Modern Geography," and the required studies for the first year curriculum consisted of Ancient Geography, English Grammar, and Ancient and Modern History. In the early 1820s, when Mary Lyon was still a student, the Reverend Joseph Emerson had impressed upon her the importance of geography. At his Byfield Seminary she had studied from Worcester's Geography and Ancient Atlas, and had the basic elements of geography drummed into her by the rote learning method prescribed in Reverend Emerson's own Geographical Tickets.¹

Ten years after Mount Holyoke was founded "a good knowledge of ... Modern Geography and of Mitchell's Ancient Geography" was still required for admission.² In the Seminary catalogue, however, a notation of flexibility said that "in some special cases, Latin and Ancient Geography may be deferred till after admission... and two years (instead of the normal one) be spent in the Junior Class to make up the deficiency." During the next twenty years the geography requirement was continued and the reading list expanded until, for some unknown reason, the requirement was dropped in 1869–70. The geographical hiatus continued until 1883, when candidates for admission were required to have a thorough knowledge of Arnold Guyot's Physical Geography.³ Fourteen years later, Miss Louise Frances Cowles of the geology department introduced geographic elements into her geology courses. Finally, in 1904, Mignon Talbot, the new chairman of the geology department, reinstated geography courses. That year the courses offered by the Department of Geology included Commercial Geography — "A study of the climatal and physiographic regions of the earth with relation to commercial products and their distribution," taught by Dr. Talbot. The next semester she taught Meteorology and Physiography, a "field-work" course which dealt with weather and topographic maps. By 1917, these two courses were combined and gradually evolved into Principles of Geography.

Although geography courses continued to be offered regularly, the curriculum developed very slowly over the ensuing years. It was not until 1923–24 that the geography "minor" was elevated to its status as a viable "major" within the Department of Geology. In 1930, the department was reconstituted as the Department of Geology and Geography.

The first geographer to accept an appointment at the College was Helen Borchers who in 1919 added two regional courses to the curriculum and the following year introduced an advanced course in Map Interpretation. With the arrival of Alice Foster, the newly revised Principles of Geography treated for the first time human problems of the various climate regions, and Economic Mineralogy became
Conservation of Natural Resources, thereby recognizing and emphasizing the role of resources as factors in national development.

The establishment of the combined department in 1930 acknowledged the academic contributions made by geography during the previous twenty-six years, and with academic "status" finally achieved, provided a significant turning point. Dr. Talbot, still department chairman, wrote: "[My aim] is that geography should take its place as a recognized collegiate study and we feel that the college body is beginning to realize that there are other aspects of the subject than the economic which is not stressed here. The study of the physical characteristics of our earth is so closely bound up with the historical and economic development of the peoples which have lived and are now living on the globe that, more and more, students of history, of economics, of sociology, and of religion are coming to recognize their need for a geographic background."4

That same year the dynamic Julia M. Shipman, with a Ph.D. in geography from Clark University, came, bringing with her a vitality and wealth of experience. She had taught in both public and private schools and had spent two summers studying at Oxford and Columbia. During her early years at Mount Holyoke the geography enrollments doubled and she introduced many new courses. In subsequent years she taught additional courses at Hartford College (in the Mount Holyoke in Hartford program), traveled around the world, taught for a semester at Ginling College in Nanking, China and served the Department of the Interior during World War II. Her distinguished service to the College ended with her retirement in 1947.

In the mid-thirties, the department became embroiled in that inevitable struggle which occurs among academic departments—the use of classroom space. According to College records, the so-called "Tower Room" in Clapp Laboratory had been designated, ever since the completion of the building in 1923, as a geology/geography seminar room. Some years later a member of the English department had asked Miss Talbot for temporary use of the room and she had acquiesced. In ensuing years, however, other members of the English department began to use the room and Miss Talbot's efforts to regain it for geology and geography met with increasing resistance.

In January 1936, Geology Professor Robert Balk, who succeeded Miss Talbot as chairman, reopened the matter, "as all other departments in the building had their own attractive seminar rooms." At his request, President Wooley called a meeting with Miss Ball, head of the English department, and Dr. Balk. "After our position had been explained," he wrote, "both Miss Wooley and Miss Ball admitted that he had perfectly good arguments. But at the point where normally only honest and logical decisions should have been made, i.e. to have the room returned to this department for full use, Miss Ball saw fit to burst into tears, and implored Miss Wooley to consider how fond the English department had become of this charming room! To such an outburst of emotion, a man is supposed to yield with a bow. Should he insist that plain common sense and justice come before a show of tears, he would be accused of being ungentlemanlike. Nobody could see the sense of fairness in the suggestion that the matter might be settled by giving the English department for a number of years the use of, say, the seminar room of the physiology, or zoology department, so that each of the science departments might equally cooperate with the English department. There, then, the matter has rested since."5

During World War II, consciousness increased enrollment in the introductory geography course to one hundred students and created a new interest in Latin American geography. The Army Map Service requested that the department offer a course on "Military Map Making" and repeated the request the following year. Initially, no credit was granted for the course, but at the second request, both the College and the Army relented. As Professor Balk commented, "The war brings a variety of subjects to the fore that are rarely remembered in peace time, and cartography is one of them." Cartography was taught in two sections, one for the AMS students and the other as part of the general education curriculum. Enthusiasm of the twenty-two students and three faculty enrolled in the courses was reported to be exceptional and those students who completed the course were offered cartographic jobs in Washington. Less positive academic aspects of the war were the temporary elimination of field trips due to the gasoline shortage and the loss of qualified teaching staff—both faculty and graduate teaching assistants—to armed services. At the end of the war, the department acquired from the military both airphotos with stereoscopic viewers and declassified OSS maps.

Shortly after the war, in 1947, Minnie Lemaire joined the department (Fig. 1). Miss Lemaire, who like Julia Shipman had received her Ph.D. from Clark University, specialized in various aspects of the physical geography of rural New England. She was also a specialist in regional geography, particularly of Latin America. During her tenure, students' interest in geography increased and with the new interest came some new problems. The introductory course enrollments had to be restricted to sixty-six students due to the lack of adequate laboratory space. A small classroom was renovated and converted to a seminar room and library, and Miss Lemaire's interest in climatology led to the installation of meteorological recording apparatus which was wired into an instrument panel in the geography lab. All the instrumentation was thus available for the compilation of the weather data so necessary for the teaching of basic climatology lab exercises and local weather prediction.

The Korean War and the accelerated pace of military planning by NATO stimulated interest in applied geography, and related activities in this country brought a sharp rise in the number and variety of professional opportunities available to geography graduates entering federal employment. At the same time a large number of research projects, subsidized by federal funds and by private industry as well, were available in graduate schools.

During 1951, Minnie Lemaire, having been instrumental in attracting an Army Map Service project, was responsible for the preparation of military gazetteers of Czechoslovakia and Austria for NATO. Students, instructors, and others associated with Mount Holyoke were employed for the bulk of the work which entailed over 70,000 entries. The following spring, at the request of the AMS, Applied Cartography was added to the curriculum. The AMS provided all manuals, maps, templates, photographs, overlays, and other essential materials. Mary Jacob, who came to Mount Holyoke in 1972, has continued the teaching of cartography and has introduced the techniques of computer mapping to students. Computer Cartograph has become a regular part of the geography curriculum. In July 1959, the department undertook a year-long project with the Army's Quartermaster Research and Engineering Command which involved the testing of a mathematical model for "line of sight" measurements in the various physiographic provinces of the United States.
The implications of urbanization were recognized early by the department and, because of the growing interest in city planning and related regional development problems, a program of urban field study was initiated during 1955-56 and expanded the following year to include student projects in Chicopee, Ware, and the Quabog River basin. Such student research eventually led to Miss Lemaire’s course in Regional Development (1963). Miss Lemaire also introduced a course in which education majors enrolled with teachers from the South Hadley school system with the intention of not only serving the aims of the College, but improving the teaching of geography in the schools. She established the Four College Latin American Studies faculty seminar in 1965, and taught Geography of Latin America until her retirement in 1973.

Peter Enggass joined the department in 1965, having received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan, and became the first ever full-time male geography instructor. Shortly thereafter, at the urging of President Gettell, he helped organize the Urban Studies program (1967). Over the years he has introduced many new courses on regional, political, and cultural geography, as well as various topical seminars.

Revision of the General Education requirements, in addition to the inauguration of the Urban Studies program, necessitated major curriculum planning and course revision during 1969-70. The shift of geography’s introductory course from the physical to the social sciences, in order to satisfy the College’s “distribution requirement,” kept Mount Holyoke abreast of those institutions where geography is a major contributing discipline. As a result, the department instituted a team-taught basic course, Cultural Geography. This course has attracted many students and has proven to be extremely beneficial to the major. The addition of a climatologist at the University of Massachusetts made specialization in this area readily available to the students. Mary Jacob (Ph.D., Syracuse University) added a new dimension to the department. Her emphasis on developing countries in South Asia and Africa preceded the College’s recent commitment to the teaching of Third World perspective. She has assumed the teaching of many of these courses, and introduced many others as well. Software programs are being purchased that will make United Nations and World Bank data available to students, and computer-assisted mapping and data retrieval techniques are being introduced in many geography courses.

The last decade’s seminars have recognized and emphasized current problems of worldwide importance: population and world food supply, energy and the environment, urbanization, agrarian reform, arid lands, and cultural diffusion. As geography is a dynamic, contemporary discipline, the content of future seminars will reflect the latest trends in the study of the human relationship to the land.

Today, geography at Mount Holyoke is at its strongest, both in terms of student interest and its role in the interdepartmental curriculum of the College. The department, which is combined with geology, has a geography faculty of 2.4 full-time equivalent positions. Twelve courses are offered each academic year with an average total enrollment of between 300-350 students—more than double the enrollment of twenty years ago. These higher figures reflect, in part, the increased enrollment in political geography, a core course in the new International Relations major, together with the Third World course requirement.
Mount Holyoke

Due to the multifaceted nature of geography, our courses have drawn students from the various regional studies programs at the College, as well as students from the neighboring schools in the Connecticut Valley—Amherst, Hampshire, Smith, and the University of Massachusetts. At the same time, majors have been able to avail themselves of those geography courses taught at the University which Mount Holyoke is unable to offer due to the limited size of the department.

Finally, the role of the geography program is becoming an integral part of the overall College curriculum. With physical geography and computer cartography attracting new students from the sciences and courses stressing Africa, Asia, and Third World development drawing students from the other four schools across “the Notch,” the future of geography at Mount Holyoke seems more secure at this moment than at any time in its long history.

NOTES

6. Ibid.