Geography has been a part of Rutgers University from its earliest Colonial era years as Queens College. After the Revolutionary War, geographer Simeon DeWitt, class of 1776, was employed by the Continental Army to survey much of central and western New York State. Surveying and map-making continued to be taught at various periods during the 18th and 19th centuries because they were particularly important skills for a young country undergoing territorial expansion.

The Rutgers Department of Geography formally came into existence as a separate academic unit after World War II (1949). Isaiah Bowman, recently retired President of Johns Hopkins University and "master of the art of seeing things whole", gave the inaugural address (Geographical Interpretation, Geographical Review, Vol. 39, pp. 355-370). New geography departments were very much in vogue at that time since geographers in war-time public service had demonstrated the practical value of their knowledge about peoples and places and their skills as analysts of environmental processes.

The first geographer appointed at Rutgers and the founder of the department was Andrew Hill Clark. Clark subsequently became the dean of American historical geographers and his legacy is memorialized in our Andrew Clark Prize for outstanding undergraduate students. Initially, there were 11 majors and an undergraduate Geography Club that held bi-weekly meetings attended by up to 65 students. Majors were expected to complete a year long course in physical geography, a semester of cultural geography, a course on the discipline's history and philosophy, and a selection of courses about foreign regions. Photographs from that era also show students and faculty "roughing it" in winter field camps under canvas.

By 1951 the faculty had grown to four and Guido G. Weigend was appointed as department head. Professor Weigend, a native of Austria who could look debonair while striding down the corridor in hob-nail boots, was a marvelous administrator and talented scholar who is currently our longest surviving faculty member. During his first year, Weigend also hired Professor Emeritus John Brush, who now holds the record for length of service as a department faculty colleague (35 years). The John E. Brush Map Library is named in his honor and he continues to serve as an unofficial department historian, most recently in a videotaped interview that is a valuable part of the department's archives.

Graduate studies in Geography at Rutgers began in 1956 and the first Masters degree was awarded in 1958. Course offerings and student enrollments expanded throughout the 1960s. Each year between 7 and 21 Bachelors degrees and 3 to 9 Masters degrees were conferred. A Ph.D. program was approved in 1964 and the first doctoral graduate (Peer O. Muller) received his degree in 1970. Thereafter, there was a significant growth in geographers on the university faculty with the total eventually numbering between 20 and
25. Not all of these were affiliated with the Department of Geography but all participated in the university-wide Graduate Program.

Today, there are 10 faculty in the Geography Department and another 15 in the Graduate Program. We teach several thousand undergraduate students each year and typically have between 70 and 75 majors. Approximately 60 outstanding graduate students from all over the world are enrolled in graduate studies. Two thirds of these are Ph.D. students and there are equal numbers of men and women in the graduate program. Although most graduate students come from the United States we also educate nationals from 15 foreign countries. These include: Argentina, Canada, China, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, India, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Singapore, Sweden, Turkey, Ukraine and the United Kingdom.

The department's main research and teaching strengths are concentrated in three substantive areas: nature and society interactions, urban geography and geo-spatial mapping and analysis. We also provide strong support to the university's African and Central and East European area studies programs. At the graduate level we are co-founding members of interdisciplinary certificates in: Quaternary Studies and Human Dimensions of Global Environmental Change as well as the pending Geo-Spatial Analysis Certificate.

The Geography faculty is internationally renowned and publishes a large number of books and articles every year. Faculty serve on the editorial boards of top professional journals and have also founded several (e.g. Global Environmental Change; Environmental Hazards). They have won prestigious awards for research and public service, ranging from three Guggenheim Fellowships to the President of Poland's Order of Merit and the New Jersey Historical Commissions Award of Recognition. Faculty also serve as advisors to key federal and state agencies, as well as the National Research Council and the National Science Foundation.

Although the Rutgers Department of Geography's primary mission is research and teaching on topics of national and global significance our members are also intimately involved in matters of vital concern to the welfare of New Jersey. Among others these include: economic development, urban rejuvenation, water supply, natural hazards and coastal management. For example, the New Jersey State Climatologist is a member of our faculty whose work serves a variety of public and private user groups throughout the state. A continuing commitment to outreach and public service is also reflected in the new collaborative faculty-student project on the Great Raritan Flood which focuses on the regional impacts and consequences of New Jersey's most costly natural hazard to date (Tropical Storm Floyd, September 1999).

The department of Geography can be justifiably proud of its accomplishments during the first fifty years. Today it attracts the best students from throughout the country and abroad and has an outstanding track record in geographical education and training. Several of our students have won Fulbright Fellowships and a recent Ph.D. graduate has
received a MacArthur genius award. More than 50 alumni now serve on the faculty of universities throughout the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and other parts of the world. As we enter our second half-century the department's goals are to reinforce and enhance its status as a center of excellence for research and education in existing areas of strength and to take the lead in tackling new intellectual issues of societal importance such as those that attend the fast developing field of geographical information. We invite you to join and support us in these exciting endeavors.

(assembled by Prof. James Kenneth Mitchell)