

Wilder Dwight Bancroft

October 1, 1867 — February 7, 1953

Professor Bancroft was associated with Cornell University for fifty-eight years. Coming to Ithaca at a time when physical chemistry was emerging as a major branch of the science, he was the guiding spirit that created here an outstanding center of teaching and research in this domain. He played an important role in the development of physical chemistry in this country through his own contributions and through his students who became leaders in teaching and research, as well as in the application of physico-chemical principles in chemical industry.

Wilder Bancroft was born in Middletown, Rhode Island, the son of Louisa Mills and John Chandler Bancroft. He was a grandson of George Bancroft, American historian and statesman, who was responsible for founding the U. S. Naval Academy at Annapolis. After taking his A.B. at Harvard University in 1888 he remained there for a year of post-graduate work and then studied abroad at the Universities of Strasbourg, Leipzig, Berlin and Amsterdam. He received his Ph.D. at Leipzig in 1892 and returned to Harvard in 1893 as instructor in chemistry.

In June 1895 Wilder Bancroft married Katherine Meech Bott of Albany, New York, and in the autumn of that year the couple came to Cornell. Two years later he purchased from Charles Evans Hughes the house at No. 7 East Avenue, which he lived in for fifty-five years. The Bancrofts were gracious hosts and entertained many guests. They played a lively part in the social affairs of the community and rarely missed any party, dance or dinner. He was an enthusiastic participant in and follower of sports, especially football, baseball and golf. The Bancrofts had five children, three of whom are now living in the University community.

Wilder Bancroft came to Cornell as Assistant Professor of chemistry and in 1903 became Professor of physical chemistry. He was named World War Memorial Professor of Physical Chemistry in 1919 and appointed Professor Emeritus in 1937. He was a brilliant theorist and a forceful exponent of new ideas arising from the application of physico-chemical concepts to chemical problems. The difficulty of securing publication of new and unorthodox ideas in the conventional scientific journals led him in 1896 to found the *Journal of Physical Chemistry*, which he edited and supported personally for more than thirty-five years. This journal, which grew to be one of the leading publications in its field, was absorbed by the American Chemical Society in 1932.

His imaginative and unconventional approach and his vigorous presentation of new ideas led naturally to lively controversies with his colleagues, in the scientific journals and at scientific discussion meetings. He was a master of the art of argument and rarely was he obliged to retract. He read omnivorously and seemed to remember

everything that he had ever read. He was familiar with all of the significant published work in his own field and well abreast of developments in other fields. Apart from many scientific papers and reviews published in the current journals, he wrote two books which were outstanding in their influence: *The Phase Rule* (1897) and *Applied Colloid Chemistry* (1921). He was a pioneer in the latter field and was awarded the Nichols Medal for his contributions to colloid chemistry. The 18th National Symposium on Colloid Chemistry held at Ithaca in 1941, honored him by designating the meeting “The Wilder D. Bancroft Symposium.”

At one time Bancroft caused a minor tempest in the scientific teapot by the bold assertion that experimental observations are too often wrong or misleading. He expressed the view that an experimental result appearing to be at variance with a promising new theory should be critically re-examined and, if need be, repeated before the theory should be abandoned. Although he was handicapped physically in his later years as the result of an automobile injury, he remained alert and active mentally until the end of his life.

During the course of his life he received many professional honors. He served as president of the American Chemical Society (1910) and twice as president of the American Electro-chemical Society (1905, 1919). He was elected to membership in the National Academy of Sciences and was an honorary member of the Chemical Society (London), the Polish Chemical Society and the Societe Chimique de France. He was the recipient of honorary degrees from Lafayette University (1919), Cambridge University (1923) and the University of Southern California (1930).

Wilder Bancroft will be remembered as a scientist of pioneering spirit and as a man of great personal charm and wit.

J. R. Johnson, C. C. Murdock, F. C. Prescott