



George Henry Perkins (*Vermont*)

Laurence R. Baker (*Vermont State Geologist*)

George Henry Perkins, born in Cambridge, Mass., in 1844, became the first professional to hold the position of state geologist of Vermont, and was appointed by Gov. Josiah Grout September 7, 1898, and reappointed each biennium by subsequent governors until he died in office September 12, 1933, at the age of 89. A petition in 1898 suggested Perkins for state geologist as “a man most eminently fitted by character, profession,

and training” (Bassett, 1976, p. 20) for the job. Over 150 signatures, representing half the towns, and all the counties and principal villages of Vermont, had been gathered and given to the governor.

In the eyes of most Vermonters, the title of state geologist was honorific. No one deserved this honor more than Perkins, who had been interpreting popular science to rural Vermonters for a generation. Perkins steadily preached, at farmers’ institutes all over the state and during the winter “short course” in agriculture on the campus of the University of Vermont, that the science provided at UVM could help the farmer.

He was a professional by his training, teaching, and research, although only a part-time geologist. He had graduate training as a natural scientist at the Sheffield Scientific School of Yale University. Perkins was a specialist in mollusks. His 1869 Ph.D. (the fifth ever granted by Yale) was accomplished with a thesis describing the snails and shellfish of the New Haven area. Since 1869 he had taught geology, along with other biological sciences, at the University of Vermont. He took the seniors on geological trips to Boston (1883) and New York (1884) and his geology class to Ausable Chasm. He had published, up to his appointment in 1898, five articles in the realm of earth science. Three were on Winooski marble, one on Illinois geodes, and one, in a field bordering meteorology and surficial geology, a short piece entitled “Notice of a Recent Landslide on Mount Passaconaway” (New Hampshire).

Besides being the first professional, Perkins established the Vermont Geological Survey as a continuing program of state government. The act of 1886 initiated the practice of publishing annual summaries of answers to a questionnaire, but his predecessor had only minimal cooperation from quarry and mine operators and did not publish a complete series. The act of 1896 asked for only one report, in 1898. Perkins, however, by delivering a 64-page report based on visits to 75 marble, granite, and slate quarries

in less than 6 weeks after his commission was signed, showed that he was the man to keep on that job.

The state geologist did conceive of a systematic survey, and started one without special appropriations. The completion of 1:62,500-scale or 15-minute (1 inch to the mile) topographic maps of most of southern Vermont and the Lake Champlain strip by 1900, and most of the Champlain Valley by 1920, encouraged additional work on the west side of the state.

He was the center for the study of Vermont geology, and he put a good deal of his accumulated knowledge into his reports. A detailed, 70-page chronological summary of previous work, his third bibliography, appeared in his 1922 report. This shows which of his special studies appeared in the bulletins of the U.S. Geological Survey and in the learned journals. It also shows that both in quantity and quality the Vermont state geologist's report was the primary outlet for Vermont studies. Each report continued and expanded previous annual summaries of stone and mineral workings, referred to the testing of hundreds of ore samples, and to "the very large correspondence which [prevents] ... the office from being a sinecure" (Bassett, 1976, p. 23). Soon after the germ theory of disease spread from Europe in the 1880's, Dr. C.S. Caverly's Vermont Board of Public Health pioneered in raising public consciousness of the dangers of water pollution. To this movement Perkins contributed a landmark study, "The Drinking Waters of Vermont."

From about 1908 on, the state geologist tried to attend the meetings of the Geological Society of America, the Geological Section of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the Association of American State Geologists whenever they were near enough for his small budget to stand the expense. He attended at least five meetings of the AASG, from 1912 to 1921, all in the Northeast. As one of the senior geologists in the United States, he presided at the Christmas 1918 meeting of AAAS geologists in New York City, in the absence of the president. Perkins's 18 biennial reports were bound in covers of marble, for his first and last reports glorify the Vermont Marble Co., the producer most cooperative with the state geologist. His 1933 report on marble is an imposing volume of nearly 400 pages. One might wonder how a man laid up with rheumatism, lecturing to his students from his easy chair in the sun room, could have made the necessary investigations. It appears, however, to be his own compilation, updating the section of his first report by fitting together all the work of 35 years.

As geology was not his only interest, he had always done what seemed necessary at the moment, if it meant preparing four widely different courses, being helpful in answering letters, encouraging a boy curious about a rock, or gently promoting the theory of evolution. As his burdens were lifted, he became what he always wanted to be: a religious philosopher.

He was a peace-loving man, preeminently a conciliator, and a giver of approval. One professor who had known him on the faculty for 28 years wrote in the memorial issue of the University of Vermont *Alumni Weekly* that in all that time he had only once or twice heard Perkins speak a word of adverse criticism, and then in the gentlest tone of voice. One keeps such a man in office, who has found so much good in so many.

Biography adapted from Fleetwood (1902) and Bassett (1976).