

William W. Hambleton (1921–2012)

Director of the Kansas Geological Survey and State Geologist of Kansas

by Rex Buchanan

William W. Hambleton was born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, on September 10, 1921. He received his B.S. in chemistry from Franklin and Marshall College in 1943. From 1943 to 1946, he served with the 84th Infantry Division in Europe, winning a bronze star. In 1947, he earned an M.S. in geology from Northwestern University, and in 1951 a Ph.D. in geology with a minor in physics from the University of Kansas (KU).

Bill Hambleton joined the faculty in the Department of Geology at KU in 1951 as an assistant professor. In 1956, he became assistant director of the Kansas Geological Survey (KGS), a division of KU. In 1962, he became a professor in the KU Geology Department and associate director of the KGS. In 1970, he became the state geologist of Kansas and director of the KGS, a position he held until his retirement in 1985. He also served as an associate dean of the graduate school at KU in 1967–68 and associate dean of faculties for academic program development at KU from 1968 to 1970.

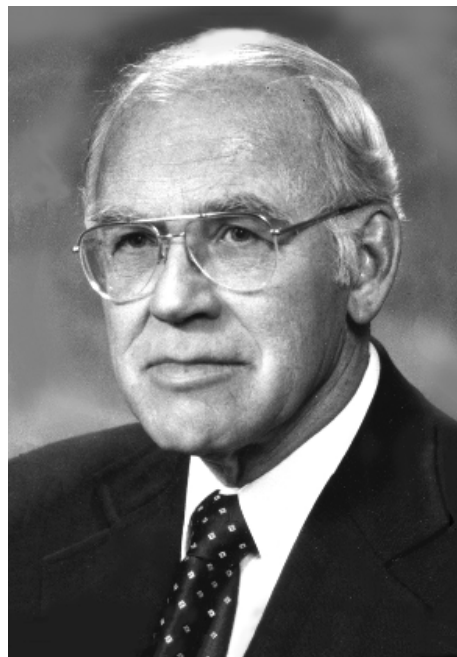
In addition to his professional positions, Hambleton was a member of a variety of national and university boards and committees, including the American Geological Institute, the Interstate Oil Compact Commission, the Kansas Water Authority, Association of American Petroleum Geologists, and many others. Hambleton published widely, particularly on topics related to natural resources and public policy.

Hambleton is particularly remembered at the KGS for his interest in quantitative methods and his encouragement of the application of such methods to the geosciences, including the creation of a Mathematical Geology Section, the application of computer techniques to geoscience issues, and the introduction of computerized methods of cartography. He often credited a 1959–60 sabbatical at Lamont Geological Observatory at Columbia University for piquing his interest in this topic.

Within the state of Kansas, he was especially active in public policy issues. In the late 1960s, the Atomic Energy Commission began studying the possibility of disposing of high-level radioactive waste in salt and identified a salt mine in Lyons, Kansas, as a possible location. Hambleton and the KGS became deeply involved in studies related to salt-emplacement of high-level waste and eventually expressed a series of technical reservations, which, combined with burgeoning political opposition, led the AEC to give up on the Kansas location (Walker, 2009). As a result, Hambleton became active in various nuclear waste and energy boards and commissions, including a technical advisory committee on nuclear waste management for the executive office of the president and committees at the National Research Council, the National Academy of Science, and the U.S. Department of Energy. On a state level, he became an energy advisor to Kansas Governor Robert Docking (in office during the Lyons episode) and later Governor Robert Bennett and was for a time the acting head of the Kansas Energy Office.

He was equally active in state water issues, though that is perhaps less well-remembered today. The 1970s marked a time of recognition of declines in groundwater levels in the Ogallala aquifer of western Kansas. Hambleton was active in conversations that eventually led to the creation of groundwater management districts, the Kansas Water Office, and the Kansas Water Authority. Before this time, much KGS effort in water was undertaken cooperatively with the U.S. Geological Survey. Through hiring actions and eventually construction of a building named for Hambleton's predecessor as director (Frank Foley), Hambleton pushed the KGS to develop its own identity in groundwater research. In particular, the KGS developed groundwater modeling expertise that it brought to bear on Ogallala issues, expertise that did much to cement KGS relations with groundwater management districts and other state water agencies.

Hambleton was also influential in terms of physical changes in the KGS. In the early 1970s, he led funding



efforts that resulted in the construction of the current KGS headquarters, Moore Hall, named after R.C. Moore, a previous director of the KGS and invertebrate paleontologist who clearly influenced Hambleton's thinking. Before construction of Moore Hall, the KGS had been located in Lindley Hall, the same building as the KU Geology Department, and many activities of the KGS and the department were deeply intertwined. But Moore Hall was constructed on KU's west campus, and that physical separation led to a much clearer line of demarcation between the KGS and the department. In 1982, Hambleton used connections with the state's oil and gas industry to develop funding for an addition to Moore Hall and expansion of the KGS Wichita facility. The addition to Moore Hall was dedicated in 1987 and named after Hambleton.

Under Hambleton's leadership, the KGS grew, both in terms of budget and staff and in terms of its visibility within state government and the university. Hambleton clearly enunciated several priorities (Hambleton, 1987), including application of numerical approaches to geology, management of geologic data, support for geophysics, and enhanced priority for water issues. He developed a management philosophy that included support for international visitors at the KGS (he loathed the idea of parochialism). He was a strong believer in planning, routinely developing and revising five-year plans. He was immensely proud of what the KGS had become and worked as its tireless advocate within state government and within the university.

Upon retirement in 1985, Hambleton devoted considerable attention to arts issues. He was a docent in the Spencer Museum of Art at KU and chair of the Friends of the Spencer advisory board. He was a member of the KU Friends of the Theatre Advisory Board and was recognized with Lawrence's Arts Commission Phoenix Award for Volunteers in the Arts. In addition, he continued to be interested in and engaged in the long-term well-being of the KGS, serving on the KGS Advisory Council, though careful to offer advice only when asked for it.

William Hambleton cared deeply about his adopted state of Kansas and the things the geosciences could offer it. He defined the role of the KGS in state government as an essential source of information, insisting that the KGS was best positioned as a non-regulatory arm of state government and a budget line item at KU. He pushed the KGS to anticipate state issues, then develop the methods and information necessary to help deal with those issues. He hired a generation of researchers, encouraged them to pursue their passions, to focus on Kansas problems but be engaged with the world beyond. Many of these scientists remain at the KGS and KU, still doing good things. William Hambleton had a profound impact and continuing influence on the Kansas Geological Survey, the University of Kansas, and the state of Kansas.

Hambleton passed away in Lawrence on October 4, 2012. He is survived by his wife, Nancy, and two children, Ann and Jeff.

References

- Hambleton, William W., 1987, Selected Speeches, Kansas Geological Survey.
- Walker, J. Samuel, 2009, The Road to Yucca Mountain: The Development of Radioactive Waste Policy in the United States, University of California Press.