

## A Brief History of the Geography Department at Mary Washington

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What I think I'll do is tell a story – or a few stories – about Geography and Geographers at Mary Washington. The story begins with me, but it's not about me.

Back in the fall of 1964, I was 26 years old, with a wife and three children, and another one on the way. I was also a student in the Ph.D. program at Boston University. One afternoon I was in an Air Photo lab session, taught by Franklin Erickson, who was also the Department Chair. Part way through the lab, the Department Secretary knocked on the door, and informed Dr. Erickson that he had an important phone call. He disappeared for a few minutes, and when he returned he told me that there was someone on the phone who wanted to talk with me. It turned out that the caller was Sam Emory, who had begun the Geography program at Mary Washington just five years earlier. Sam asked me if I was interested in coming down to Fredericksburg to be interviewed for a job.

What had happened was this: Sam had gotten approval to add a third person to what was then the Geography and Geology Department, which consisted of Sam and a geologist by the name of Sam Bird. He had advertised the position in the usual places, but had gotten very few applications, and none from anyone who, he thought, could do the job. Sam's father and Franklin Erickson had once been colleagues in the Geography Department at the University of North Carolina, and in desperation he had called his father's old friend to inquire if he knew of any capable graduate students who might be willing to work at Mary Washington. Dr. Erickson immediately thought of me, not so much because he thought that I was all that capable, I suspect, but because he knew that I was almost broke and would have to leave the

program and get a job at the end of the spring semester. In a word, Sam was desperate, and so was I.

A few days later I came to Fredericksburg, interviewed with Sam Emory and Sam Bird, the Dean, and the President, and flew home that night. I didn't think that the interviews went all that well, in part because I admitted that the only Geology course that I could possibly teach was Geomorphology. They really wanted someone who was more of a combination Geographer and Geologist. But a week or two later I received an offer to join the Mary Washington faculty at the princely salary of \$7,200. I accepted immediately. Beggars can't be choosers, they say, and at this point Sam and I were both beggars.

Sam loved politics of all sorts, and was undoubtedly disappointed when he found that the beggar he had hired detested politics, particularly at the departmental and institutional level. But what he did get was a guy who was willing to teach a wide variety of courses – seven different ones in my first year – and to go about his business in a workmanlike way, doing the best he could to teach classes ranging in content from Weather and Climate to Historical Geography. Between the two of us, we offered thirty-nine credits each year, and when we added Sam Bird's geology classes into the mix, we had more than enough courses to offer a major. I'm not sure that we had even a single major when I first started, and we certainly didn't have a cohesive program, but little by little, students began to choose our little department for their major. Sam had wanted to offer a Geography major almost from the time he arrived at Mary Washington, but didn't really have the staff to do it until he got me. We were strange bedfellows (and office mates – in Combs Hall at the start) – a Southern gentleman and the son of a university professor, from North Carolina, and a brash young Yankee and the son of an auto mechanic, from New England. There were some awkward

moments, but we made it work, and Sam's dream of developing a real Department, and an attractive major, began to be realized.

In 1969 we hired Jim Gouger as our third Geographer. Those of you who knew Jim will not be surprised to learn that when I arrived at the airport to pick him up, Jim was not there, having missed his flight because he was too slow in getting started. But we overcame this bump in the road, and Jim joined the crew. By now we had moved from Combs to the basement of Monroe, leaving Sam Bird behind, and the three of us shared a single office, which was great because we could exchange ideas, and terrible because we were often in each other's way.

Jim Gouger's arrival breathed fresh life into the Department, on many fronts. He developed new courses in Cartography, Air Photo Interpretation, the History of Geographic Thought, and, with some help from me, in Human Environment. Because Jim was a night owl, the Cartography lab was in active operation until well after midnight, seven days a week, and soon it became a gathering place for majors – as much a social as an academic venue – which promoted a strong sense of belonging, of togetherness. The lab is in a different place now, but its multiple function remains. Jim also took the lead in organizing a chapter of Gamma Theta Upsilon, the Geography honorary society that continues to the present. He encouraged students to conduct independent research, both here in Virginia and abroad – early on, two of his students did their work in Central America, something that was almost unheard-of at the time. Jim was also instrumental in bringing students to the annual meetings of the AAG's Southeastern Division, another tradition that continues today. And once he learned that I was personally familiar with the American West, he prodded and prodded until I agreed to teach a Wyoming-based field course, which became the foundation for other field

programs that came later, in Europe, Latin America, South Africa, and Australia, as well as places closer to home, and for which Mary Washington is justifiably well-renowned. Until Jim joined the department, almost no Mary Washington geographers attended graduate school. But when students had opportunities to conduct independent research in Wyoming and elsewhere, and to meet other geographers – both graduate students and faculty – at the SEDAAG meetings, the number who went to graduate school grew exponentially. It was around this time that Mary Washington's Geography Department was rated as the second-best undergraduate Department in the country, an honor for all of us, students and faculty alike, but most of all it was a testament to Jim Gouger, whose imagination, enthusiasm, and ability to get things done, had pushed us forward.

And then, in the mid-1970s, along came Dick Palmieri. Dick was brought in to expand and strengthen our Asian offerings. He did this, and did it well, but he also saw that our major program lacked structure and cohesiveness. Until then, the major had been sort of an aimless mish-mash in which students took a certain number of courses, and could graduate without necessarily being exposed to a sensible mixture of the systematic, regional, and technical approaches which define the field. Dick undertook the task of re-shaping the major, and as the process played out, we added a Cultural course (now called Human Geography), which Dick was eminently qualified to teach, and a Physical course. Sam Emory and I were probably the best prepared to teach the Physical course, but our plates were already overflowing, so Dick developed and taught this course by himself, and created the foundation for today's introductory Physical offerings. By the time that Dick was done, and we others had added our two-cents worth, we had a good major program that required all students to

take certain basic, fundamental courses, and still allowed them to branch out into areas of their particular interests.

Sadly, neither Sam, nor Jim, nor Dick is with us today. Dick died in 1997, and in the past few months both Sam and Jim have passed away. As we look back at the time when they were here, we often remember, with wry smiles, some of their eccentricities. Who doesn't remember, or hasn't heard about, Jim Gouger's late night air photo final exams, complete with a model train chugging around the cart lab, and Willie Nelson singing Christmas carols? Or the time when Jim became so angry about some slight that he threw a computer out the window? Or how about Dick Palmieri creating exams with impossible questions, such as what state's license plate was attached to an automobile in a certain picture in a text book (the state was Alabama), and at the same time assuring doubtful students, in his Boston accent, that "*you'll do fine,*" while knowing all along that they would not?

These things are fun to remember. But we must also remember that Sam Emory created this Department from scratch, hired professors who expanded its scope, and guided it with steady professionalism for more than half of its existence; that Jim Gouger introduced a lot of the special things that give today's Department its identity; and that Dick Palmieri added rigor and structure to a program that was in need of both.... None of us here tonight – neither faculty, nor alumni, nor current students - would be who we are, or where we are, or what we are, without the enormous contributions of this trio of pioneers. As we celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Department, we should be grateful for what these guys created, and promise ourselves that they, and their legacy, will never be forgotten.

Thank you.