

Penn State Planted Seed Of Historic Ag Legislation

UNIVERSITY PARK — On March 2, America celebrates the 100th anniversary of the Hatch Act — landmark legislation which helped transform the nation into the world's breadbasket and marked the beginning of federal funding for scientific research at American universities.

But Congress might never have approved the act had not a Pennsylvania governor earlier rebuffed a Penn State president's request for a state version of the act.

"The farming communities of this state are absolutely indifferent about the existence of The Pennsylvania State College and do not believe it of any use," declared Governor Robert Pattison in July 1883.

He was explaining to Penn State President George W. Atherton why he vetoed a bill that would have established an agricultural experiment station at the college.

Farmers dismissed scientific agriculture—the application of

scientific knowledge to the production of food and fiber—as "book farming." They preferred to work the land according to the ways of their forefathers.

The problem was that these ways were often grossly inefficient, based as much on phases of the moon as on logic.

Atherton believed an experiment station would persuade farmers to abandon superstition. It would produce scientific results skeptical farmers could see and touch about the best crop varieties, most effective fertilizers, and most nutritious animal feeds.

Stung by Pattison's veto, Atherton took his fight for an experiment station to the national level. With the help of presidents of land-grant colleges throughout the nation, he won.

His victory was the Hatch Act, which provided \$15,000 annually to fund an experiment station in each state, in most cases affiliated with the state's land-grant institution.

In the century since its enactment, the Hatch Act has helped make American agriculture the world's most productive. Federal support for experiment stations has risen steadily, surpassing \$300 million in the last fiscal year and including \$6.2 million for the experiment station at Penn State.

"These funds have helped support about 250 projects involving more than 300 scientists in disciplines ranging from biophysics to plant pathology," said Lamartine F. Hood, dean of Penn State's College of Agriculture and director of the experiment station.

By contrast, the University's experiment station had a staff of four scientists in 1887.

"Many of our projects directly benefit not only the agricultural industry but the general public," said Hood. He cites as an example Penngift Crownvetch, a ground-cover plant that the station released in 1953.

"Crownvetch has been widely adopted as a roadside conservation plant," Hood noted. "In Pennsylvania alone, we estimate it now saves taxpayers \$1.6 million yearly in costs associated with mowing, weed control, and preventing soil erosion."

The Hatch Act also marked the first time the federal government guaranteed continuous financial aid for scientific research at American colleges and universities. That aid has grown tremendously and supports investigations in many fields besides agriculture.

Penn State's share of total federal research appropriations, for example, has increased from \$15,000 to \$83 million in the past 100 years.

The Hatch Act also assured the survival of America's land-grant colleges. When Congress created the land-grant system in 1862, one of its goals was to promote greater agricultural efficiency through

the application of scientific techniques.

Yet farmers, unconvinced of the value of science, had little faith in land-grant colleges. The Hatch Act changed their attitude and gave the colleges the grass roots political support they needed to survive.

Ironically, George Atherton, who was so instrumental in shaping the Hatch Act, is nearly forgotten.

He helped convince the U.S. Commissioner of Agriculture to call a meeting of land-grant college presidents in 1885. Gathering in the stifling summer heat of the nation's capital, the presidents chose Atherton and two others to work with sympathetic congressmen in drafting the proposed legislation. Atherton and his colleagues guided the bill through several drafts before Missouri Rep. William Hatch introduced the measure in the fall of 1886.

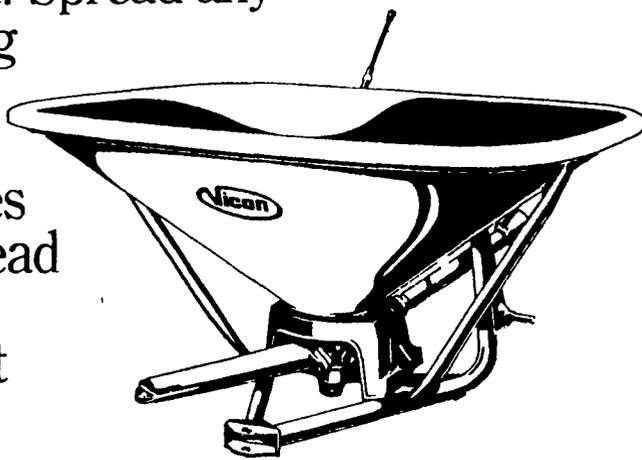
"George Atherton is unknown beyond Penn State, and even here he is remembered only for the imprint he left on this institution," noted Penn State archivist Leon Stout. Among the archives Stout oversees are about 20 cubic feet of Atherton's letters and other papers.

"Researchers have barely touched the surface of this extensive collection," said Stout. "Perhaps the Hatch Act centennial will spark greater interest in it, and Atherton's role as a national leader will get the attention it deserves."



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