

Hugh Hammond Bennett

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"Father of Soil Conservation"

Hugh Hammond Bennett (April 15 1881-7 July 1960) was born near Wadesboro in Anson County, North Carolina, the son of William Osborne Bennett and Rosa May Hammond, farmers.

Bennett earned a bachelor of science degree an emphasis in chemistry and geology from the University of North Carolina in June 1903. At that time, the Bureau of Soils within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) had just begun to make county-based soil surveys, which would in the time be regarded as important American contributions to soil science. Bennett accepted a job in the bureau headquarters' laboratory in Washington, D.C., but agreed first to assist on the soil survey of Davidson County, Tennessee, beginning 1 July 1903. The acceptance of that task, in Bennett's words, "fixed my life's work in soils."

The outdoor work suited Bennett, and he compiled a number of soil surveys. The 1905 survey of Louisa County, Virginia, in particular, profoundly affected Bennett. He had been directed to the county to investigate its reputation of declining crop yields. As he compared virgin, timbered sites to eroded fields, he became convinced that soil erosion was a problem not just for the individual farmer but also for rural economies. While this experience aroused his curiosity, it was, according to Bennett's recollection shortly before his death, Thomas C. Chamberlain's paper on "Soil Wastage" presented in 1908 at the Governors Conference in the White House (published in *Conference of Governors on Conservation of Natural Resources*, ed. W.J. McGee [1909]) that "fixed my determination to pursue that subject to some possible point of counteraction."

In addition to supervising the soil surveys in the southern United States, a position he assumed at the bureau in 1909, Bennett accepted opportunities to study soils abroad and in U.S. territories. He worked in Costa Rica and Panama (1909), Alaska (1914), and Cuba (1925-1926) and served on the Guatemala- Honduras Boundary Commission (1919).

Bennett wrote steadily and increasingly about soil erosion in the 1920's in an array of journals from popular ones such as *North American Review* and *Country Gentleman* to scientific ones such as *Scientific Monthly* and the *Journal of Agricultural Research*. Eventually he succeeded in arousing national attention where others had failed. Among his writings of the 1920's, probably none was more influential than a USDA bulletin coauthored with William Ridgely Chapline titled *Soil Erosion: A National Menace* (1928). In it Bennett expressed the motivation for his later actions: "The writer, after 24 years spent in studying the soils of the United States, is of the opinion that soil erosion is the biggest problem confronting the farmers of the Nation over a tremendous part of its agricultural lands." The bulletin was not a manual on the methods of preventing soil erosion; rather it was intended to draw attention "to the evils of this process of land wastage and to the need for increased practical information and research work relating to the problem."

In answer to the need for action on soil conservation, Bennett promoted research with immediate applicability to conservation problems on the farm. Largely in response to Bennett's campaign for soil conservation, Representative James P. Buchanan of Texas attached an amendment to the 1930 appropriations bill authorizing the USDA to establish a series of soil erosion experiment stations. Bennett selected the sites for some stations and designed their research programs.

The availability of New Deal funds for emergency work programs meant that some of the funds could be directed to soil conservation. Bennett successfully argued that single practices such as the terracing of land would not succeed and that a comprehensive program to address numerous conservation problems on farmlands was needed. Having made himself the recognized expert on soil erosion, he became the director

of the Soil Erosion Service in the Department of the Interior in September 1933. The agency worked with farmers to demonstrate soil conservation methods in watershed-based demonstrations.

Wanting the work to have a firmer legislative foundation, Bennett successfully promoted the passage of the Soil Conservation Act of 27 April 1935, which created a Soil Conservation Service at the USDA, Bennett served as its first chief until his retirement in 1951. The agency's work and staff spread nationwide in cooperating with nearly 3,000 locally organized conservation districts. The Brown Creek Soil Conservation District covering parts of Anson and Union counties in North Carolina was the first district recognized, on 4 August 1937.

As Bennett guided the young agency, his concepts proved wise. Various disciplines, not just one, would contribute to designing conservation methods and practices for the farm, and, by the same token, no single effective conservation practice existed. Conservation farming meant rearranging the operations of the farm in the interest of conservation and productivity. Soil conservationist worked on the land, directly with farmers, to develop conservation farm plans for the benefit of the land and the farmer.

Bennett possessed the energy and single-mindedness of an evangelist in his promotion of soil conservation. He steadily wrote articles about soil conservation and was a welcome and inspiring speaker not only at farm-field demonstrations, but also at scholarly gatherings. A contemporary, Santford Martin, noted that he "combined science with showmanship." Before congressional committees, Bennett employed tactics such as pouring water on a table to show the effect of rain on unprotected, bare soil. When a dust storm moving eastward in the spring of 1935 arrived over Washington, D.C., as he was testifying before a congressional committee on the bill that would create the Soil Conservation Service, he used the duster to dramatic effect to demonstrate the need for soil conservation. His crusading zeal brought many converts to soil conservation and made him the embodiment of the movement, the father of soil conservation.

The recipient of several honorary degrees, Bennett was also president of the Association of American Geographers in 1943 and was awarded the Frances K. Hutchinson Award by the Garden Club of America in 1944; the Cullum Geographical Medal by the American Geographical Society in 1948; and the Distinguished Service Medal by the USDA and the Audubon Medal by the National Audubon Society, both in 1947. He was a fellow of the American Society of Agronomy, the American Geographical Society, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the Soil Conservation Society of America. Upon his retirement, the *Raleigh (N.C.) News and Observer* opined that Bennett might come to be "recognized as the most important North Carolinian of this generation" (18 Jan. 1951).

An Episcopalian, Bennett had married Sarah Edna McCue in 1907. She died in 1909, leaving him one daughter. He married Betty Virginia Brown in 1921; they had one son and lived for many years at "Eight Oaks," a historic mid-nineteenth-century home in Falls Church, Virginia. Bennett died in Burlington, North Carolina, where his son was then living.

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Bennett's papers are in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; the Archives of American Agriculture, Iowa State University, Ames; and in RG 114, Records of the Soil Conservation Service, National Archives, College Park, Md. Books written or co-written by Bennett include *Soils of the United States* (1913), *Soil Reconnaissance in Alaska, with an Estimate of the Agricultural Possibilities* (1915), *The Soils and Agriculture of the Southern States* (1921), *The Soils of the Cuba* (1928), *Soil Conservation* (1939), and *Elements of Soil Conservation* (1947). For works about Bennett see Wellington Brink, *Big Hugh: The Father of Soil Conservation* (1951); Jonathan Daniels, *Tar Heels* (1941); and Robert J. Morgan, *Governing Soil Conservation* (1951). An obituary is in the *New York Times*, 8 July 1960.