

Memorial to Thomas McDougall Hills 1881–1970

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Thomas McDougall Hills was born in Pittsburgh on February 19, 1881, the son of Oscar A. and Louise Freer Hills. He was educated in the public schools of Wooster, Ohio, and the Preparatory Department of The College of Wooster. He attended that college from 1898 to 1902, receiving the degree of Bachelor of Philosophy. This was followed by graduate study at the University of Chicago, 1903-1907, and at the University of Berlin in 1908.

In 1902-1903 he was an instructor of botany in the Preparatory Department, College of Wooster, and he served as a summer assistant at the University of Chicago in 1906.

He was Professor of Geology at Toledo University, in 1908-1909, and from 1910 to 1920 he was Assistant Professor at Ohio State University. In 1917-1918 he set up, and was in charge of, the Department of Observation in the School of Military Aeronautics at Ohio State.

He came to Vassar College in 1920 as Professor of Geology on the John Guy Vassar Foundation, and as the Chairman of the Department of Geology and Geography, holding those positions until his retirement in 1948.

At Vassar, his teaching was noteworthy for its emphasis on the field of nature as the proper laboratory of geology. His instituted real field trips to the important areas in the Hudson Valley, replacing the previous boat rides up and down the river. He also started the program of summer field instruction, with pack trips into the Bitterroot and Bighorn Mountains.

His mechanical ingenuity and deftness with tools led to the invention and construction of many teaching devices and exhibits, some of which have been widely adopted elsewhere. The large maps, now on the walls of the geology building, some drawn to unusual projections, were conceived and executed by him.

His style and ability in teaching endeared him to generations of Vassar students, some of whom are active professionally in geology today. They all knew him as "Uncle Tom," and, as an uncle may do, he spanked some of them when they got out of line.

He was a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and of The Geological Society of America. He served as Vice President of the Ohio Academy of Science in 1916, and twice was President of the New York State Geological Association.

From 1925 onward he was a ruling Elder of the First Presbyterian Church of Poughkeepsie. In 1945 he was a member, and later a Life Member, of the Board of Trustees of the Vassar Brothers Hospital; from 1942-1945 he was Chairman of the Dutchess County Chapter of the American Red Cross.

He was married in 1907 to Mary Wolfhegel, who died in 1968. Their daughter, Claudia (Mrs. Maxwell Gosse), also predeceased him, leaving his grandchildren, Monica M. and Thomas A. Gosse.

At a memorial service following his death on June 28, 1970, one of those who paid tribute said of him, "Above all, he was a Christian gentleman," a sentiment to which all who knew him will agree.

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