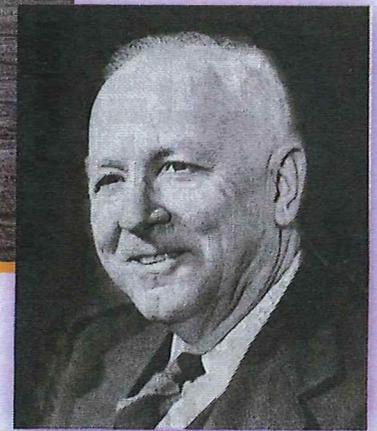


North Carolina native "Big Hugh" Hammond Bennett (here, working in an eroded field, and lower right) helped Americans become aware of the problems of soil erosion. He pushed for the preservation of topsoil through methods such as crop rotation, terracing, and contour plowing. Images courtesy of the North Carolina Division of Soil and Water Conservation.

*Abridged from an article used by permission of the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services*



**EROSION:** the gradual destruction of something by natural forces such as water, wind, or ice; the process by which something is eroded or worn away



**H**ugh Hammond Bennett must be included among the elite of North Carolina's native sons. Described as "the father of soil conservation," he is perhaps best remembered for arousing a nation to the potential perils of soil erosion.

## The Father of Soil Conservation

*by Dr. Maurice Cook\**

Bennett was born April 15, 1881, in Anson County. He studied geology and chemistry at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

By accident, Bennett took a job as a soil scientist after graduation. He saw an announcement for a Civil Service examination to be a chemist in the Bureau of Soils at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The job would pay \$1,000 a year—good money at the time for someone fresh out of school. His appointment as chemist was delayed, and department officials asked Bennett if he would accept a temporary assignment in soil survey fieldwork. He agreed.

Bennett started his career in Tennessee in

July 1903, classifying and mapping soils by individual types, and noting observations of their productivity. He liked the work, particularly because it took place outdoors.

Bennett's observations of soil erosion made him realize the larger risks. During work in Virginia in 1905, he and W. E. McClendon came up with the term "sheet erosion," which described the way that wide areas of soil slowly washed away with every rainfall. The men noted how fields that had

been farmed for a long time no longer had topsoil. These fields grew hard and rocky due to erosion. After this discovery, Bennett dedicated himself to stopping soil erosion. He published many reports, but most people ignored them because his ideas contradicted popular belief.

The North Carolinian grew disappointed that others did not see the dangers of erosion. (These include destruction of soil nutrients, crops, farmland, and grazing areas, as well as

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impact on nearby bodies of water.) But he was not discouraged. Bennett moved out of the field to Washington, D.C., in 1918. At this point, he began to speak and write more forcefully about the issue.

In 1928 Bennett wrote Circular 33: *Soil Erosion, A National Menace* with the help of W. R. Chapline of the U.S. Forest Service. The bulletin proved to be widely accepted. After more than 25 years, Bennett finally saw results from his efforts. Soil erosion became, for the first time in the nation's history, an official concern.

President Franklin Roosevelt, in promoting his New Deal agenda, encouraged Congress to establish a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) "to carry out reforestation and other conservation projects in the national forests and national parks." Lawmakers provided \$5 million for erosion control on private and public lands, with work to be administered by the federal Department of Agriculture. Bennett became the head of the newly created Soil Erosion Service in September 1933, when agents started surveying land in cooperation with the CCC.

In 1934—just as workers completed the first national survey of soil erosion—windstorms hit the drought-stricken Great Plains. The term "Dust Bowl" was born. On May 12, 1934, a major storm in the Midwest blew great clouds of dirt all the

way to the East Coast. Bennett later described the event as a turning point in the battle to focus public attention on the erosion problem.

Bennett became the first chief of the newly created Soil Conservation Service, a permanent USDA agency, in 1935. Still, getting the conservation program off the ground proved difficult. After two years, Bennett realized farmers needed to be more involved. He is credited with creating local soil conservation districts to involve farmers and other interested people in promoting conservation's best practices. Fittingly, the first conservation district in the nation, the Brown Creek Soil Conservation District, was established in Bennett's home county in August 1937. Today, North Carolina has 96 conservation districts that cover every county.

Bennett retired in 1952 and passed away in 1960. He left a rich legacy for all who follow in the soil science profession.

(Top) Windstorms in the drought-stricken Great Plains inspired the term "Dust Bowl" in the 1930s and increased the urgency of Hugh Bennett's work. (Above) Bennett, who advised on projects around the world, and a colleague study North Carolina soils. Images courtesy of the North Carolina Division of Soil and Water Conservation.



## THINK ABOUT IT

How has the soil or geology of your county impacted its people and history? Who else in North Carolina history has acted to confront an environmental challenge?