

Anson E. Marston

May 31, 1864 - October 21, 1949



Anson Marston was an American civil engineer, university professor, college dean, and highway commissioner. He was a director (1920-1922), vice president (1923-1925), and president (1929) of the American Society of Civil Engineers, member of the National Research Council (1919-1922), and president of the American Association of Land Grant Colleges in 1929.

Born in Seward, Illinois, he was the son of George Washington Marston and Sarah (Scott) Marston. He grew up on a Midwestern farm and worked for other farmers in his neighborhood. After elementary school in Rockford, Illinois, he attended Berea College in Kentucky (1884-1885), then earned a civil engineering degree from Cornell University in 1889, and has honorary degrees from the University of Nebraska, Michigan State College and Iowa State University (1948).

At Cornell, Marston was influenced by instructor Robert H. Thurston, the first director of the Sibley School of Engineering at Cornell, who shaped many young engineers. There, Marston also befriended and roomed with F. E. Turneure, a friendship that persisted into adulthood.

Upon graduation from Cornell, Anson Marston began his engineering career with railroads, including work in Michigan and Illinois and with the Missouri Pacific Railroad, assisting with projects in Arkansas and Louisiana. Returning to the Midwest, Marston joined the faculty of Iowa Agricultural College in Ames in 1892. In his first decade in Ames, Anson Marston focused on sanitary research and campus problems such as water and sewage issues. He also began to examine road and building materials, including road-paving stones and building stones.

As a construction engineer, he developed a reputation for excellence and precision. This attracted the attention of his friend and former classmate, F. E. Turneure, dean of engineering at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In April, 1904 Turneure nearly hired Marston away from Ames. As a counter, Iowa State College President Albert B. Storms offered Marston a deanship and a promise to create an engineering research station. In late April, in a decision that proved transformative for the college and the state, Anson Marston elected to remain at Iowa State. Anson Marston directed work at the Engineering Experiment Station in Ames from 1904 to 1932.

Anson Marston trained generations of civil engineers at Iowa State; his greatest legacy to the state of Iowa was his training of highway engineers. The first two chief engineers of the Iowa State Highway Commission, Thomas H. MacDonald and Fred White, studied under Marston for their senior theses, and numerous design engineers and county engineers learned civil engineering from Marston. In the first nine years that the civil engineering degree was offered in Ames, the number of students grew from 27 in 1897 to 278 in 1905.

As the automobile age dawned in the state and farm machinery became larger and larger, Marston believed that local road officials did not possess the training, expertise, or vision to manage the road system. He directed students to examine improved roads during the early 20th century and then lobbied for a separate state agency to oversee the public roads. Anson Marston asserted that professionally trained engineers relying on scientific and technological proficiency ought to direct the work. He also argued that road contractors should not control the design and construction of the state road system, a system that, unfortunately, led to inefficiencies and graft.

Anson Marston advocated the creation of a professional, independent state highway commission and defended it in its earliest days. Marston helped locate the Iowa State Highway Commission in Ames, initially on the campus of Iowa State, and later at its present location. It is the only state department with its main office in a city other than Des Moines. He served on the commission from its founding in 1904 to 1927, chairing it from 1913. Anson Marston continued to work with graduate students into the 1930s, with 11 assigned to him as late as 1933. He remained on the Iowa State faculty in an emeritus position until his death on October 21, 1949. On a rainy afternoon on U.S. Highway 30 near Tama, his brother Walter Marston lost control of his automobile; Anson Marston was thrown from the passenger seat and died from his injuries.

References:

1. Prabook - <https://prabook.com/web/anson.marston/1050791>
2. Iowa State University - <https://www.ccee.iastate.edu/alumni-friends-industry-partners/hall-of-fame/anson-marston/>