

Charles E. Coates (1866-1939)

Charles Edward Coates was born in Baltimore, MD. He attended John Hopkins University, received a BA and then began graduate studies in Chemistry with Ira Remsen. His dissertation was on sulfobenzoic acid, a starting material for the synthesis of saccharin - perhaps a prophetic precursor to his career in sugar chemistry. He spent two years in Germany and completed his PhD in 1891.

He came to LSU in 1893 as only the third faculty member with a PhD and was assigned space in a blacksmith's shop that had been condemned by the US government. He transformed the laboratory and created a new era in chemical education at LSU. He also became the University's first football coach.

Coates is quoted as saying, "Chemistry is just as pure when applied to the solution of a problem touching the welfare of mankind as when applied merely to intellectual attractions." He had a particular commitment to Louisiana Agriculture. When the Audubon Sugar School moved to LSU in 1897, Coates was the obvious choice to lead it. The School attracted students from around the globe and the program is viewed by the some as the progenitor of Chemical Engineering education in the USA.

With the reorganization of the University in 1908, Coates became Dean of the Audubon Sugar School and Head of Chemistry, positions he held until his retirement in 1937. For 23 years he was Chairman of the Division of Graduate Studies. However, he forwent becoming Dean of the Graduate School to serve as Dean of the College of Pure and Applied Science. Coates campaigned relentlessly for better facilities and chemical literature. When LSU moved to its current campus location in 1926, the new Chemistry building was named Charles E. Coates Hall. The first PhD at LSU was awarded to one of Coates' students in what would have been considered Chemical Engineering. Chemical Engineering became a separate department upon reorganization following Coates' retirement. Coates' son Jesse became the first Chair of Chemical Engineering.

In his personal life, Charles E. Coates married Ollie Maurin in 1901 and they had four children: Charles Hunter, Victor Maurin, Jesse and Caroline Pennock.

A nephew of Coates, George Hunter Coates, was a student at LSU and lived with his aunt and uncle in Baton Rouge. He graduated in 1918 and went on to found Coates Energy. In gratitude to his uncle, George Coates established the Dr Charles E. Coates Memorial Fund at LSU that supports graduate student research and travel to this day.

Reference: a lecture delivered by Professor James G. Traynham to the HIST Division of the ACS in 1996, in turn extracted from documents of the Coates Family.



Portrait of Charles E. Coates by Ella Miriam Wood of New Orleans, LA (1959)