

# Names in Stone IV

With this issue of TCNJ Magazine, as a part of our institution's 150th anniversary, we continue the series of articles about the past, present, and future of the College. In each issue we will focus on some of our named buildings to highlight their origins and the people for whom they are named.

## Armstrong Hall and a man who taught 'practical arts'



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Fred O. Armstrong was a farm boy at heart. Born into a Huntington, IN, pig farming family in 1898, he concentrated on industrial arts in high school, served briefly as an Army private in World War I, and in 1922 graduated from Indiana State Normal School in Terre Haute (now Indiana State University) with plans to teach in high school. He then came East, and taught for a while in North Jersey while earning a master's in education at Columbia University.

When, in 1931, the College was beginning its move from the Clinton Avenue campus in Trenton to Ewing, Armstrong found work as an "instructor in practical arts," that is, preparing

young men (mostly) to teach metal shop and woodworking in secondary school. It was a two-person department at the time, operating from two rooms in the Trenton complex. By 1935 the College's relocation was complete and he had moved into six rooms in the basement of Green Hall, and attained the title of professor and head of the Industrial Arts Department, a position he held until retiring in 1958.

During his time at the College, his department's mission remained largely the same, although the growth of the automobile industry, machine tools, and new printing techniques required many new skills to be passed on to the young

men and women, most of whom were preparing to teach. By the time he retired, the faculty had grown to four, and the program had been moved out of Green Hall into a new "temporary" one-story wood building near what is now Eickhoff Hall.

That structure was home to industrial arts until a fire of undetermined origin gutted it in January 1960, prompting plans for an entirely new building.

Both Armstrong's faculty colleagues and students remember him as a versatile and popular teacher, a friendly and gregarious man but a quiet and soft-spoken leader. He was rarely seen without his shop coat, even at home,

according to his son, Fred Armstrong Jr., a retired Bell Laboratories engineer now living in Neptune. His son recalls living with his older sister and parents in Pennington for many years, until his mother, Gladys, died in 1944. The elder Armstrong remarried a vivacious musician the following year and bought a 32-acre farm in Hopewell Township, where they lived for five years, raising pigs, sheep, cattle, and thousands of chickens. It was here, his son recalls, the Armstrongs often entertained students and faculty at parties, and gave a number of students room and board at the farm in return for tending the animals.

During this period, and after he retired, Armstrong kept busy buying a number of rundown houses and living in them while renovating them for



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resale. "Whenever I came home from college (at Lehigh), he and my stepmother would be living somewhere else," his son recalls, citing homes in Pennington, Whitehorse, and in Tinicum, PA. In his later years, the elder Armstrong maintained a small foundry in which he turned out replicas of old hardware and other metal objects that he sold in New Hope and Lahaska, PA, craft shops. It was in Lahaska that he died of a heart attack in 1966.

Construction had begun on the new industrial arts building in October, 1961, as part of a building program that was to produce a new residence hall, gymnasium, dining hall, mathematics and science building, music building, and power plant addition. *The Signal* reported the industrial arts building would overlook Lake Ceva, would be named for Fred Armstrong, would provide 36,000 square feet of space, and was expected to cost \$501,000. It went into full operation for the 1964-1965 school year. Faculty who were there say its faults were soon evident. Few liked its "factory" look and uninsulated metal walls, the heating system banged incessantly, and the lack of air conditioning posed frequent problems, according to recent retiree Robert Weber, professor of technology studies.

The academic program, however, saw steady growth, and by 1966 the faculty numbered 15 in the renamed Department of Industrial Education and Technology. Courses were far more numerous, including drafting, electronics, radio, printing, metals, design, and power mechanics. In 1981 the College established a School of Industrial Education and Engineering Technology. Soon thereafter, an addition in the early 1980s corrected some of the

flaws in the original building, and gave some impetus to an effort to bring formal engineering programs to campus.

That proved to be a highly delicate matter, however, complicated by opposition from other engineering schools in the state, a building that was still not quite adequate for a fully developed school of engineering, and competing interests on campus between supporters of pure engineering and technology education. It took until the mid-1990s, when a second, even larger addition was completed, to resolve those conflicts and produce the Armstrong Hall of today.

Were he still alive, Fred Armstrong could hardly imagine his name on a School of Engineering in which some 30 faculty offer a variety of fully accredited programs in engineering and technology education to about 400 undergraduates.

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