

James Flack Norris: The Man and the Award

The James Flack Norris Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Teaching of Chemistry pays tribute to outstanding contributions to the field of chemical education and in so doing honors the memory of a distinguished teacher of chemistry: James Flack Norris.

The Award: The Norris Award is one of the oldest national awards of the American Chemical Society and is presented annually by the Northeastern Section. The recipient is selected from an international list of nominees who have served with special distinction as teachers of chemistry at any level and whose efforts have had a wide-ranging effect on chemical education. The award has been given for a wide variety of achievements: for outstandingly effective textbooks, lecture demonstrations, or laboratory experiments, for editing the Journal of Chemical Education, for developing the Chemical Educational Material Study Project, or for new ways to teach laboratory courses in chemistry. Always, and this is of the utmost importance, the specific achievement must be coupled with dedicated teaching of chemistry at the graduate, undergraduate, or high school level. The award consists of a citation and an honorarium.

The Man: James Norris was born in 1871 in Baltimore. He was the fifth of nine children and attended schools in that city and in Washington, D.C. His collegiate career started at Johns Hopkins University, from which he graduated with an A.B. degree, Phi Beta Kappa, in 1892. He was strongly attracted by the great Ira Remsen and consequently decided to carry out his graduate studies at Johns Hopkins where he investigated complex compounds of selenium and tellurium. In 1895 he obtained his Ph.D. After graduation, Professor Norris served in the Chemistry Department of M.I.T. In 1904 he then moved to the newly founded Simmons College to become its first Professor of Chemistry and to head its School of Science. He remained at Simmons until 1915 except for 1910-11 when, feeling the need for more physical chemistry, he spent a sabbatical with Fritz Haber at Karlsruhe. After one year at Vanderbilt University, Norris returned to M.I.T. where he remained for the next 24 years as an enthusiastic and successful teacher of chemistry. On February 4, 1902 he was married in Washington, D.C. to Anne Bent Chamberlin, daughter of an Army Captain. They had no children. Professor Norris died in Cambridge, Massachusetts on August 4, 1940.

In 1916 Norris was a member of the Naval Consulting Board and during World War I he served as a Lt. Colonel in the Chemical Warfare Service. After the war, he served for ten

years as vice chairman and chairman of the Division of Chemistry and Chemical Technology of the National Research Council. Although serious when the occasion called for it, the debonair Norris was known as “Sunny Jim” to a host of friends who found him a jovial companion.

His activities in the ACS were many: Chairman of the Northeastern Section in 1904 and President of the National Society in 1925 and 1926. As President of the Society, he did much to improve and clarify the finances of the society. He was also active in the National Research Council and in IUPAC, serving as vice president of the latter from 1925-28. He was an honorary member of the Rumanian Chemical Society and of the Royal Institute of Chemistry in Great Britain. In 1937, he received the gold medal of the American Institute of Chemists for “outstanding service as a teacher and as an investigator.”

Norris was one of the first chemists to study the structure-reactivity relationship of organic compounds on a systematic basis. Between 1912 and 1922 he authored four influential textbooks in inorganic and organic chemistry. The income from those texts, at least in part, formed the foundation of the bequest from Mrs. Norris to the Northeastern Section in 1948. The purpose of this bequest, to quote the will of Mrs. Norris, is “to keep green the memory of James Flack Norris.”

The Norris Fund has grown over the years with judicious management by the Trustees of the Northeastern Section. From its income the Section sponsors two James Flack Norris Awards: the James Flack Norris Award in Physical Organic Chemistry, administered by the National ACS, and the James Flack Norris Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Teaching of Chemistry. Tonight’s recipient joins a distinguished group of predecessors.

**Taken from the biographical memoir of James Flack Norris by John D. Roberts and from the biography of James Flack Norris given by Joseph Bornstein at the presentation of the James Flack Norris Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Teaching of Chemistry.*