HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK
FOR CORNELL COOPERATIVE EXTENSION IN NEW YORK STATE

“The New York plan for county agent work had become well established before the passage of the Smith-Lever Act. It aimed to put the responsibility for the organization, management, and conduct of the work on the farmers themselves. To this end, the farmers were expected to form a(n) … association, which should be non-partisan and non-sectarian and open to all farmers who desired to join, and should contain not less than ten percent of the farmers in the county. The association would furnish the farmers of the county (1) means of collective action, (2) local machinery for carrying on Extension work, (3) organized local direction and support for such work, and (4) a local clearing house for all activities and organizations promoting agriculture and country life....

To carry on Extension work, the association would unite with the State college of agriculture and, through it, with National and State Departments of Agriculture in the formation of a county [association], which would thus be a cooperative institution both in management and financial support.”

The above quotation from A History of Agricultural Extension Work in the United States by A.C. True, reflects the Cornell tradition of Freedom With Responsibility and the philosophy of Liberty Hyde Bailey, which many identify as the cornerstone of the organization of New York State Extension. Carl L. Becker, Cornell historian, best expressed the tradition of freedom with responsibility:

“Cornell has a character, a corporate personality, in this sense, an intellectual tradition by which it can be identified. The word which best symbolizes this tradition is freedom … it is less the amount than the distinctive quality and flavor of the freedom that flourishes at Cornell that is worth noting.

... The catch was that, since I was free to do as I pleased, I was responsible for what it was that I pleased to do ... bound by some inner sense of responsibility, by some elemental sense of decency or fair play or mere selfish impulse of justifying myself ....”

This tradition of freedom with responsibility was extended to the county Extension agents.

Liberty Hyde Bailey, dean of the College of Agriculture, writing about Extension in his publication, The Holy Earth, says the following about The Democratic Basis in Agriculture:

“It is very important in our great experiment in democracy that we do not lose sight of the first principle in democracy, which is to let the control of policies and affairs rest directly back on the people.

... I should prefer for such work as investigating [research] and teaching in agriculture, a dispersion of the initiative and responsibility, letting the coordination and standardizing arise very much from conference and very little from arbitrary regulation ...

... the question ... is not the most efficient formal administration, but the best results for the people ... The college may be the guiding force, but it should not remove responsibility from the people of the localities.

... If we cannot develop starting power in the ... people, we cannot maintain it elsewhere. The greatness of all this rural work is to lie in the results and not in the methods that absorb so much of our energy.”
The principles for Extension work flowing from this philosophy were based on beliefs stated by Maurice C. Burritt and Howard E. Babcock, early agriculture Extension leaders.

1. That practically every community has within itself the inherent ability and leadership to discover and to bring about the solution of its own problems.

2. That the self-help principle underlies all good organizations.

3. That there must be great participation of farm people in giving local direction to Extension service programs, organization, and in securing county funds for this purpose.

Through a partnership of men and women at the county, state, and national level:

4. That there should be a public partnership between local associations … and the college for the conduct of county agent work—that respect and confidence must be mutual, and power and authority substantially equal.

5. That the county (association program) should be for educational purposes only.


Martha Van Rensselaer believed that educational programs for farm women would lead to improvement of home and community. She supported principles of self-help and freedom of initiative for women requiring full recognition of an equal status for women. These beliefs have continued.

STRENGTHENING THE URBAN CONNECTION: NEW YORK CITY PROGRAMS

Recognizing the need for connection with the land-grant university in urban areas, the first Cooperative Extension program in New York City was established in 1948 with funds from the Federal Agricultural Marketing Act.

The Cornell Cooperative Extension office in New York City continues today, with a main office in Manhattan affiliated directly with Cornell Cooperative Extension Administration at Cornell University. The lead college overseeing New York City programming is the College of Human Ecology.

BRANDING “CORNELL COOPERATIVE EXTENSION”

In 1987 a statewide Cooperative Extension marketing committee recommended to the Director of Extension that “Cornell” be added to the “Cooperative Extension” name. This recommendation was received and adopted. “Cornell Cooperative Extension” is the official name of the organization, including county Associations.