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Establishing an Office for Agriculture

During the first fifty years of the Federal Government, no agency was created to be responsible for agriculture. It was not until March 3, 1839, that legislation was enacted, establishing the Agriculture Section of the Patent Office. One thousand dollars was appropriated to collect and publish agricultural statistics and for other purposes. The staff was one employee at that time.

Henry Ellsworth, Commissioner of Patents, was instrumental in procuring this first money. As a result he has been referred to as the "father of the Department of Agriculture." Under Ellsworth's guidance the reports of the Patent Office began to devote considerable space to agriculture.

Perhaps no commissioner did more than Charles Mason of Iowa to develop the early interests of the Federal Government in agriculture. An extensive landowner in Iowa and Wisconsin, Mason seemed to be well-fitted for the position. In December, 1855, he wrote: "My position is one which brings me into more immediate connection

with the bone and sinew of the country than any other person in the government." Later he said that it was generally conceded that the mechanical and agricultural branches of the Patent Office were "conducted much more to the satisfaction and advantage of the public."

In May, 1856, the House of Representatives ordered the printing of 210,000 copies of the agricultural section of the Patent Office report. Congress also authorized \$30,000 for the agricultural activities of the office.

Mason noted the next month that the agricultural activities of his office were greatly expanding, "fast swelling out into great importance." Among others he employed a person to investigate and report on grapes, "the most valuable agricultural production of the United States." He also developed plans to send to South America for sugar cane for sugar planters in the south.

In 1856 the Agricultural Committee of the House of Representatives was "concocting a bill" relating to an Agricultural Bureau. Mason wrote that it was "the intuition of some of the friends of agriculture that a department should be eventually established for . . . this purpose."

Mason thought this would be the result of the constant and rapid growth of his operations. However, a Department of Agriculture was not established until May 15, 1862, when President Abraham Lincoln signed the necessary legislation.