The Department of Geography and Geographic Information Science is undergoing constant change. Just one year after amending our name to reflect an increased focus on geographic information science, we have moved out of Davenport Hall, home to geography since the department officially became an academic unit in 1945. We are temporarily stationed in the Computing Applications Building, but will join the School of Earth, Society, and Environment’s other two departments—atmospheric sciences and geology—in the renovated Natural History Building (NHB) in 2017, a move that will strengthen interdisciplinary links among SESE faculty, students, and researchers. As we look forward to the move into NHB, we also reflect on geography’s history in Davenport Hall.

Davenport Hall was originally home to the College of Agriculture, and the central section was used as a stock pavilion. Important agricultural discoveries were made in Davenport, especially in the field of crop sciences. Dr. Fred Kolb, professor of crop sciences, takes his “Principles of Plant Breeding” class on guided tours of Room 328, the former office of Edward Murray East (PhD 1907). Dr. East, considered the father of modern plant breeding, was the co-inventor of hybrid corn. “Some classes really get into it. They walk in there and look around like they’re visiting a shrine. You can see the heavy safe they used for seed storage, and one of the racks still has a ‘Department of Agronomy’ label on it. Presumably, this is where they discovered the gene that makes sweet corn sweet,” said Kolb.

Our future move to the Natural History Building harkens back to this department’s roots as a subfield of geology. Through the 1920s, geography faculty offices were scattered in small portions of NHB’s second and fourth floors, while geology and the Natural History Museum occupied the rest. Space was at a premium, to say the least. Seven geography faculty members shared 1,400 square feet of space, and another three were squeezed together into just 130 square feet of shared space. Dr. Jerome Fellmann, who served as the Department of Geography’s head from 1974-77 and authored an invaluable history of the department, noted that “[g]eographers, if not wholly content, were at least quiescently resigned to the subordinate role of their discipline within the Department of Geology during the 1920s.”

Advances in the discipline, along with steady increases in faculty hires and student enrollments, made clear the need to establish geography as a separate discipline from geology. Our first official name change came in 1934, when the Department of Geology officially became the Department of Geology and Geography. Another boost for geography came in 1936, when University of Illinois president Arthur Willard announced that certain geography courses would satisfy both the physical and social science general education requirements for undergraduates. However, it was Dr. Joseph Russell, the namesake of our department’s seminar room and graduate student fellowship, who oversaw the most significant changes to the department.

In 1945, Dr. Russell was appointed the first official department head of the newly-established Department of Geography, and one of his first acts was a bold request for 16,500 square feet of space for faculty, instruction, and laboratory use. He made clear in a 1950 letter to the chairman of the space committee of the college the need for “ample and continuously available space for instructional work in cartography, a number of special-purpose laboratories and additional classrooms, adequate and safe storage...for manuscript maps, cartographic supplies and field equipment, and field instruments.”

In response, geography was granted the first floor of Davenport Hall, which (Davenport Hall continued on page 4)
admittedly needed some work.

Dr. Fellmann notes: "first floor space was there—a sprawling maze of vermin-infested temporarily-partitioned cubby holes and open areas, housing the Photographic Services department." Considering its condition, the director of the University Physical Plant was somewhat skeptical, but agreed that geography could use the first floor of a renovated Davenport Hall, as long as they pardoned some dust in the process.

Reconstruction plans were formally drawn in 1956, and geography graduate students were moved (temporarily) to Altgeld Hall's east reading room until the first round of Davenport renovations were completed in the summer of 1957. Altgeld Hall was actually a vast improvement, considering graduate students were previously working in Davenport's dirt floor basement. Geography Professor Emeritus John Jakle (department head, 1990-94) recalls "they were down in the dungeon."

To accommodate an academic unit, Davenport's entire center section had to be gutted, and three floors were installed to house faculty, graduate students, and classrooms. The basement was also lowered and paved for graduate student office space. Dr. Jakle illustrates Dr. Russell's relentless work to ensure geography's future: "Dr. Russell was able to convince the University to give us larger offices for drafting tables, map cases, and plenty of room to unroll big maps. As a result, we had plush accommodations in Davenport. We were even able to install a darkroom for wet photography, and provide an office for the staff cartographer, who had been working over in the Main Library."

Dr. Fellmann notes, "the third floor...was designed to contain a large cartographic laboratory with attached area for ancillary equipment (including a printing press); a classroom equipped with tables and floor electrical outlets especially designed for air photo and map interpretation studies."

Geography officially moved back into Davenport in June 1957, claiming more space as renovations and upgrades continued. In 1970, a floor was installed above the main entrance's majestic yet creaky stairwell, cutting access to the third floor except by stairs at either end of the hallway. In 1996, an elevator was finally installed in the main hallway. The new floor created valuable laboratory space for soil analysis and remote sensing equipment, which at the time was quite bulky. Allocation of this third floor lab space has changed over the years, and was most recently home to Professor Shaowen Wang's CyberInfrastructure and Geospatial Information Lab.

While most of the Department of Geography and Geographic Information Science has relocated to the Computing Applications Building, economic geography Professor Geoffrey Hewings still resides in the former cartography lab and darkroom (Room 318 and 318A), a space just large enough to host his bustling Regional Economics Applications Lab. Professor Emeritus Bruce Hannon has also retained his first floor office.

The Department of Geography has gone through many changes, including our incorporation of Geographic Information Science into our name and academic mission. As we leave Davenport Hall and its memories behind, we look forward to collocating with the School of Earth, Society, and Environment in the substantially upgraded Natural History Building. This collaborative arrangement of three distinctive departments housed in an integrative school echoes our department's history, and moving to state-of-the-art space in one of the most historic buildings on the Quad will strengthen research and education in geography and GIScience through the next century. *