

**John Mason Clarke** (*New York*)

**William M. Kelly**

(*New York State Museum and Science Service*)

John Mason Clarke was born in Canandaigua, N.Y., on April 15, 1857. He attended Amherst College in 1873, where he studied under B.K. Emerson. Upon graduation from Amherst, he taught at several institutions, including the Canandaigua Academy (1877–79), Amherst (1879–80), the Utica Free Academy (1880–81), Smith College (1881–85), and the Massachusetts Agricultural College (1885). Clarke variously taught geology, mineralogy, zoology, and German.



John Clarke became associated with the New York State Geological Survey in January of 1886 when he started work under James Hall. Upon Hall's death in 1898, Clarke was appointed state paleontologist. In 1904, when Frederick Merrill, second New York state geologist after Hall, retired, Clarke was named state geologist and director of the State Museum and Science Division of the Education Department. He held these titles until his death. Clarke was elected to approximately 50 scientific and historical societies in the United States, Canada, England, Germany, France, and Russia. He authored or co-authored over 300 papers. His most important work was in the last volumes of *Paleontology of New York*, by Hall and Clarke. Clarke named 135 genera and 870 new species of fossils, specializing in brachiopods, eurypterids, trilobites, and sponges, mostly from the Devonian.

Clarke was the first president of the Paleontological Society in 1909 and was president of the Geological Society of America in 1916. He was awarded the Prix de Léonide Spindiaroff by the International Geological Congress in 1910 and the Thompson Gold Medal of the National Academy of Sciences shortly before his death, having been a member of the latter organization from 1909. Clarke also received gold medals from the Permanent Wild Life Protection Fund and the Philadelphia Academy of Sciences. He was awarded honorary degrees from the University of Marburg, Colgate University, the University of Chicago, Princeton University, Amherst College, and Johns Hopkins University.

Under the direction of John Clarke, New York entered into what has been called the "golden age" of geology and paleontology in the state. Research, sponsored both by the state and academia, was greatly encouraged and supported generously. Clarke favored various branches of science in addition to his own interests in paleontology and stratigraphy. He equally supported economic and purely scientific research. Under Clarke's direction the geological survey, in cooperation with university professors, mapped two-thirds of the bedrock of New York, cataloging rock structures, fossils, and mineral resources. Clarke was also interested in publishing large scientific works that would appeal to the general public. Thus were published E.H. Eaton's *Birds of New York* (two quarto volumes, 106 color plates) and H.D. House's *Wild Flowers of New York* (two quarto volumes, 264 color plates).

Unlike his predecessor James Hall, who was often tyrannical, Clarke was described as being firm and persuasive, a quiet, polite man of compromise. Clarke was very successful in obtaining gifts of artifacts and large amounts of money for building exhibits. Shortly after Clarke assumed his duties as director of the state museum, space for exhibits and storage for research collections became a critical problem. Exhibits were housed in eight separate buildings in Albany, and the research materials were stored in seven different buildings, with every corner, corridor, and stair landing jammed with boxes and cabinets of specimens. Clarke declared that the conditions were “intolerable” and began working in earnest on a new building for the museum. In 1915, the museum was moved into an entire floor of the newly constructed Education Building.

As state museum director and state geologist, Clarke was interested in the preservation of several geologically unique sites in New York. He arranged for these sites to be donated to the state museum and designated “scientific reservations” to be used as outdoor exhibits. Most of these were absorbed into the state park system in the 1950’s, but two of the smaller ones remain under the care of the New York State Museum.

In the last years of his life, John Clarke was inclined to look on the general, philosophic aspect of science. His *Life of James Hall* is in fact a history of geology in the United States during the time that Hall lived. He became interested in ceramics and the early history of the Pennsylvania Dutch, which had been hobbies but which he treated, and published upon, in a scientific manner. John Mason Clarke passed away on May 29, 1925, after a brief illness.

Biography adapted from New York State Museum (1926), University of the State of New York (1964), Fisher (1978), and Landing (2004).