Following the Civil War, the South was devastated and had no industry. Only 10% of the nation’s manufacturing took place here. Georgia Tech was created to help solve this problem. When Tech opened its doors in 1888, mechanical engineering was the only discipline we taught.

John Saylor Coon was the youngest charter member of ASME when it was founded in 1880. He came to Tech at its opening in 1888 and taught here for 35 years.

Coon arrived at GT as the internal debate was heating up at ASME over whether engineering education ought to be characterized by the study of scientific theory or focused instead on manual shop training.

He recognized that industrialization required not only machinists trained in shops, but also engineers who could apply a rational, orderly education in math and science to the problems of industrial machines and processes. He designed a model curriculum at GT that essentially answered the ASME debate by emphasizing rigorous academic coursework and using shops as labs where the academic concepts of the classroom were applied to practical problems.

Coon was a pioneer of mechanical engineering education, and the combination he devised of theoretical knowledge and practical experience is still embedded in Georgia Tech’s character and culture today, more than 100 years later. Our faculty and students are known both for the rigor of their education and for their knack for solving practical problems in creative ways.