

Anniversaries

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NATIONAL ACADEMY OF EXACT, PHYSICAL AND NATURAL SCIENCES OF ARGENTINA

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The National Academy of Exact, Physical, and Natural Sciences has celebrated 150 years of supporting Argentine science. Although the first attempt to establish the Academy of Natural Sciences was made by Bernardino Rivadavia (1780–1845) in 1823, it did not continue. It wasn't until 1874 that Juan María Gutiérrez (1809–1878), the rector of the University of Buenos Aires, presented its regulations to the authorities, who approved its founding. Although he was not a trained geologist, Gutiérrez did some research and published several articles in palaeontology.

From its early years, geology played an active role in its leadership. Eduardo Aguirre (1857–1923), the first Argentine professor of Geology and Mineralogy, who taught the subject at the University of Buenos Aires for more than 30 years, influenced the direction of the Academy from 1883 until his death in 1923. His merits and dedication led to his election as president of the Academy in 1902, a position he held for four years. Shortly thereafter, he was appointed vice president for the period 1918 to 1922. He was responsible, from 1900, for the publication of the annals of the Argentine Scientific Society, where not only the scientific contributions of the academics were published but also the activities of the Academy.



Figure 1. Juan María Gutiérrez, founder of the Academy (left) and Eduardo Aguirre, president of the Academy (right)
Source: ANCEFNA (National Academy of Exact, Physical and Natural Sciences of Argentina)

Throughout those years, numerous geologists participated in the Academy. A significant milestone was the establishment of a Natural Sciences award in 1928, in collaboration with the municipal authorities of Buenos Aires. The first recipient of the “Eduardo Holmberg Prize” from the Academy in these disciplines was Dr. Pablo Groeber (1885–1964) in 1929 for his work “Fundamental Lines of Neuquén Geology.” Groeber was a prominent geologist who taught for several decades at the universities of Buenos Aires and La Plata, making pioneering contributions to the understanding of the Argentine-Chilean Andes, earning recognition as one of the great masters of Andean Geology.

The Academy has played a significant role in promoting Argentine science. The three Argentinians who have received Nobel Prizes in science—Bernardo Houssay (1887–1971), Luis Federico Leloir (1906–1987), and Cesar Milstein (1927–2002)—were members of the Academy and participated in its management. Notably, in 1957, the Academy developed a project to create an institution to promote scientific development, especially by supporting young talent, which was approved by the executive branch the following year. This project, led by Dr. Bernardo Houssay within the Academy, resulted in the creation of the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (Conicet) in 1958, a pioneering institution that remains a cornerstone of scientific activity in Argentina.

Over the years, numerous geologists associated with the Academy have made significant scientific contributions. Among them was Dr. Franco Pastore (1885–1958), the first geologist to graduate in Argentina, who conducted the first studies on the petrographic characteristics and evolution of the Sierras Pampeanas basement. Several of his pioneering works were published in the Academy's annals. He was responsible for the first synthesis of the History of Argentine Geology and Mineralogy, published in 1925.

In 1928, Enrique Hermitte (1871–1955) joined the Academy. He was one of the founders of the current National Geological Service in 1904. During the first 20 years under his leadership, systematic mapping of the country was promoted and consolidated. In his inaugural lecture, he presented the development plan for “The Geological–Economic Map of the Argentine Republic” at a scale of 1:200,000, which laid the foundation for understanding Argentina's geology for several decades.

Another prominent member was Professor Martín Doello Jurado (1884–1948), a professor of Geology and Paleontology at the University of Buenos Aires until his death in 1948 and director of the Argentine Museum of Natural Sciences “Bernardino Rivadavia.”

Another distinguished scientist with an intense involvement in the Academy as a full member was Horacio J. Harrington (1910–1973), who earned his first doctorate in Buenos Aires and a subsequent one at the University of Oxford. In those years, Dr. Harrington was a proponent of continental drift at a time when the concept of continental movement was considered unserious and lacking scientific support. Through his classes in Buenos Aires and his seminars abroad, such as at Columbia University, invited by Marshall Kay (1904–1975) in 1950, he defended the common evolution between South America and Africa, providing evidence used by Alexander Du Toit (1878–1948) in his classic book on Continental Drift.

We must not forget Dr. Horacio H. Camacho (1922–2015), a geologist who dedicated more than sixty years to teaching Palaeontology at the University of Buenos Aires, making significant contributions as an emeritus academic. He is considered one of the masters in the study of South American fossil invertebrates, which he documented in his two widely disseminated books on the subject throughout Spanish-speaking America.

Nearly a hundred years after the presidency of geologist Eduardo Aguirre, another renowned geologist, Dr. Victor A. Ramos, held that position. He is noted for his studies on the tectonic evolution of the Andes.

In this brief overview, we can appreciate how the Academy of Exact, Physical, and Natural Sciences has played a crucial role in the development of science in Argentina, particularly in supporting and promoting Earth Sciences from its inception.



Figure 2. The historic “Manzana de las Luces “ in downtown Buenos Aires where the National Academy of Exact, Physical, and Natural Sciences was born 150 years ago. Source: AGN (Archivo General de la Nación)

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