



**“Shedding New Light on Rural Electrification:
A Revisionist View of Successful Efforts
(including those pursued at Alabama Poly-
technic Institute) to Energize Farms
in the 1920s and early 1930s”**

Traditional histories of rural electrification usually glorify New-Deal efforts of the 1930s to bring electricity to farmers, enabling them to enjoy modern amenities like their urban cousins.

Though not disparaging the productive work pursued by the Rural Electrification Administration (REA), created in 1935, this talk challenges the standard narrative by highlighting extensive electrification efforts undertaken in the 1920s and early 1930s by utility companies, farmers, and previously unrecognized agricultural engineers. Working at land-grant colleges, such as Alabama Polytechnic Institute (now called Auburn University), these academic engineers served as intermediaries between farmers and utility managers, and they helped quadruple the number of rural homesteads nationally that obtained electricity in the years between 1924 and 1931. (Not incidentally, a rigorous experiment to determine how to electrify farms in Alabama began in 1924, a cooperative project that included API agricultural engineer M.L. Nichols and the Alabama Power Company.)

The talk will also include an explanation of why the traditional historiography of rural electrification has remained so prevalent and popular. It suggests that historians may have paid inadequate attention to the context of the pre-Depression era, when government rarely became involved in enterprises undertaken largely by business organizations. More significantly, perhaps, historians found the standard narrative appealing because it contains colorful characters and a good-versus-bad storyline.

Wednesday, October 5, 2016

5 – 6:30 p.m.

112 Thach Hall

Richard F. Hirsh
Professor of History of Technology
and Science & Technology Studies
Virginia Tech

