Samuel Calvin was born in the village of Wigton Bay, Scotland, on February 2, 1840. He was reported to be able to read Greek and Latin by age 7. When he was 11, his family emigrated to New York, then to northeastern Iowa. In his early years, he was a teacher and an excellent carpenter and cabinet-maker, which probably served him well in later years when he needed to house his prodigious specimen collection. He attended Lenox College in Hopkinton, IA, and later became an instructor of mathematics there.

In 1864, Calvin joined the 44th Infantry Regiment, Company C, but was mustered out due to illness, with no report of any action. On his return, he married Louise Jackson in 1865. They had a son, William, and a daughter, Alice.

Calvin became the superintendent of schools for Delaware County in 1867, then the principal for Dubuque schools in 1869. He succeeded C. A. White as Professor of Natural History at the University of Iowa in 1873. Initially, he taught physiology, botany, zoology, and geology, but was later able to focus on geology. He was Iowa’s first systematic geologist, helping to make the first bedrock and landform maps of Iowa. He was particularly interested in the Devonian rocks and fossils of eastern Iowa and the Aftonian interglacial epoch, and was an expert on Pleistocene fauna.

In addition to his teaching duties, he became State Geologist when the state geological survey was established on a permanent basis in 1892. 17 volumes of the survey’s annual reports were completed under his direction. He was one of the founders of the journal American Geologist in 1888, and was its editor-in-chief until 1894. He was a member of the Geological Society of America, and was elected its president in 1908. He was a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and its president in 1894. He was also president of the Iowa Academy of Science in 1908. Cornell College gave him an MA in 1874, and an LLD in 1904; Lenox College gave him a PhD in 1888.

“Professor Calvin’s scientific training, like that of some of his most noted contemporaries, was obtained largely in contact with the natural world, and he
was thus untrammeled by preconceived conceptions or too great dependence upon working hypotheses, which often hamper independent effort in scientific research.” (Bohumil Shimek in Calvin's obituary)

Calvin respected the importance of teaching, and was noted for his ability and skill with lectures and writing. As the chief geologist for the state of Iowa, he was focused on its significance for industry and agriculture, but he was also aware of the growing necessity for conservation. He was invited to attend Theodore Roosevelt’s conservation conference at the White House in 1908.

Calvin was an avid photographer. He left an archive of over 5000 glass plate negatives (now housed in the Calvin Photographic Collection at UI) of a wide range of geological locations and specimens, as well as documentation of geology at the university.

Samuel Calvin passed after a brief illness on April 17, 1911, while still active as the department chairman and state geologist.

“Fifty years ago, and for many continuous years thereafter, I saw a man go forth; in an open wagon, sometimes borrowed, more often hired, sometimes his own, traversing the roadless, bridgeless prairies of northern Iowa; enduring the heat of August suns, chilled by the damp of night, shelterless, tortured by mosquitoes, drenched by wild thunderstorms that made terrible the midnight hours; breakfasting at dawn and toiling until his campfire burned beneath the evening star. From Lansing to Clarinda, from Dubuque to Mason City, to Winterset, to Ottumwa; athwart the state, across the state, around the state he moved; climbing all rocky heights of nature’s carving, pondering the talus of every open quarry, every wall of crumbling rock or sliding shale, wading the creek beds and tracing the banks of larger streams, away from home for weeks together – I knew such a man. In such fashion, and not otherwise, did he win the rich experience and world wisdom presently brought in such overflowing measure to service of the state of Iowa!”

(T. M. Macbride on the occasion of the dedication of the Calvin Memorial Portrait at the State Historical Department, 1922)
Figure 3. Professor Samuel Calvin and class at the State Quarry, Iowa, April 22, 1899. Note the number of women in the group.

IN HIS OWN WORDS
Calvin, S., 1893, Cretaceous deposits of Woodbury and Plymouth counties, with observations on their economic uses: Iowa Geol. Surv., v. 1 (1893), p. 147-161.
(Calvin’s memoriam lists over 70 publications, not including many for the Iowa Geological Survey.)

REFERENCES
“Samuel Calvin (geologist)” – Wikipedia listing includes links to his photographic collection.

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