

A Century of Mathematics in America

Part I



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Volume 1

A Century of Mathematics in America

Part I

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Preface

In the year 1888, Thomas S. Fiske and some of his colleagues at Columbia University founded the New York Mathematical Society. As the organization grew to national scope, the name was changed in 1894 to the American Mathematical Society. Since that time, the Society has grown to represent a large and diverse group of mathematicians and to exert a strong influence on the progress of mathematical research throughout the world.

Observing the approach of the Centennial year, the AMS Committee on the Publication Program decided to mark the occasion with the publication of appropriate historical materials. The Committee on History of Mathematics was appointed to organize and oversee the collection of suitable materials, and to continue a program of publication of mathematical history beyond the Centennial year. The members of the latter committee were Peter Duren (Chairman), Richard Askey, Bruno Harris, and Uta Merzbach.

In August 1987, the Committee on History sent a letter to a group of distinguished senior American mathematicians, consisting of past Presidents of the AMS and others thought to have an interest in some aspect of mathematical history. Each was invited to contribute “an autobiographically oriented historical article” discussing some aspect of American mathematical history over the past century.

The response exceeded all expectations. The outpouring of enthusiasm was almost overwhelming. A large variety of topics emerged, additional writers were suggested, and materials appropriate for reprinting were identified. The result is a two-volume collection of historical articles, both newly written and reprinted, glimpses of America’s mathematical past. This volume begins with two reprinted accounts of the early days of the Society by Thomas Fiske. Other subjects are mathematicians, institutions, organizations, books, computers, political events, refugees, war work, social currents, meetings, working conditions, and of course mathematics itself.

The great diversity of the articles seemed to defy coherent organization. A rough chronological ordering was attempted, with some groupings by topic.

Articles received too late for inclusion in this volume have been assigned to Volume II.

The editors would like to acknowledge the very substantial contribution by Mary Lane, Director of Publication of the AMS, to the shaping of these volumes. Her advice, encouragement, and direct participation in the editorial work were invaluable.

But above all, we want to thank the writers. They responded to the call, put aside other projects, and produced fine papers in remarkably short time. All readers present and future will appreciate their efforts.

Peter Duren
Richard Askey
Uta Merzbach