FIFTY YEARS OF AMERICAN MATHEMATICS

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It is indeed a great honor to participate in this semi-centennial celebration of the founding of the New York Mathematical Society in 1888, which became in 1894 the American Mathematical Society. As one of the speakers I have set myself the challenging task of tracing our mathematical development under the auspices of the society during the years which have passed. Obviously in such a coup d'oeil only the principal factors involved can be alluded to, and the point of view adopted must necessarily be more or less personal.

At the very outset it is well to recall the general mathematical background of our country at the time when the society came into existence. In colonial days scientific and mathematical knowledge had a certain definite standing, largely for its practical value but in part also for its own sake. George Washington was a scientifically minded gentleman farmer for much of his life, and in his youth was a skilled surveyor, familiar with trigonometry; Benjamin Franklin discovered experimentally the electrical nature of the lightning discharge, theorized concerning electricity as a fluid, and had enough mathematical interest to devise ingenious magic squares; Thomas Jefferson regarded geometry and trigonometry as “most valuable to every man,” algebra and logarithms as “often of value,” while he classed “conic sections, curves of the higher orders, perhaps even spherical trigonometry, algebraic operations beyond the 2d dimension, and fluxions” as a “delicious luxury”; in his later years Jefferson spent much of his time in mathematical reading, and was ever a true friend of mathematics. The interest in science and mathematics continued to be genteel and amateurish among American scholars and devotees until towards the middle of the last cen-
Editor's Summary

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