

# When Computers Were Women

JENNIFER S. LIGHT

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J. Presper Eckert and John W. Mauchly, household names in the history of computing, developed America's first electronic computer, ENIAC, to automate ballistics computations during World War II. These two talented engineers dominate the story as it is usually told, but they hardly worked alone. Nearly two hundred young women, both civilian and military, worked on the project as human "computers," performing ballistics computations during the war. Six of them were selected to program a machine that, ironically, would take their name and replace them, a machine whose technical expertise would become vastly more celebrated than their own.<sup>1</sup>

The omission of women from the history of computer science perpetuates misconceptions of women as uninterested or incapable in the field. This article retells the history of ENIAC's "invention" with special focus on the female technicians whom existing computer histories have rendered invisible. In particular, it examines how the job of programmer, perceived in recent years as masculine work, originated as feminized clerical labor. The story presents an apparent paradox. It suggests that women were somehow hidden during this stage of computer history while the wartime popular press trumpeted just the opposite—that women were breaking into traditionally male occupations within science, technology, and engineering.

Dr. Light recently completed her Ph.D. in the history of science at Harvard University; beginning in the fall of 1999 she will be assistant professor of communication studies at Northwestern University. She thanks Peter Buck, Herman Goldstine, Rachel Prentice, Sherry Turkle, John Staudenmaier, and four anonymous reviewers for their contributions to this article. An early version of the article was presented at "Gender, 'Race,' and Science," a conference at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, 12–15 October, 1995.

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1. History has valued hardware over programming to such an extent that even the *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* issue devoted to ENIAC's fiftieth anniversary barely mentioned these women's roles. See *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 18, no. 1 (1996). Instead, they were featured two issues later in a special issue on women in computing.