

**NELSON, Sara L.** January 17, 1903–March 6, 1995.

GEORGIA STATE COLLEGE FOR WOMEN (BS 1926), CORNELL UNIVERSITY (MS 1930, PhD 1939).

Sara Louise Nelson was born in Oglethorpe, Georgia, the daughter of Mattie (Trussell) (1872–1910) and John Pendleton Nelson (1856–1932), both natives of Georgia. It was a second marriage for her father, who was described as a dry goods merchant in 1900, but who later was a teacher and then county superintendent of schools for about the last twenty years of his life. She had one brother, Robert (b. 1898) and at least two older half-brothers.

Sara Nelson received her elementary and secondary education in the public schools of Oglethorpe, Georgia. She then attended Georgia State College for Women (now Georgia College and State University), which had been the two-year Georgia Normal and Industrial College until shortly before her entrance in the summer of 1922. Nelson continued her studies there during the regular school year and all summers until June 1926, when she received her bachelor's degree with a major in mathematics and a minor in chemistry. A year earlier she had received a collegiate normal diploma.

For three and a half years Nelson taught mathematics, chemistry, and history in two high schools in Georgia. She attended the summer session at Cornell University in 1929 and then resumed her studies there in February 1930. She continued in the summer of 1930 and received her master's degree in September, having studied mathematics and geology and physical geography.

In fall 1930 Nelson joined the faculty at her alma mater, the Georgia State College for Women, where she was to spend the rest of her career except for leaves for further graduate study. She was an instructor for two years before being promoted to assistant professor.

Nelson again took courses at Cornell during the 1933 summer session and then returned for full-time study in 1937. She had requested and received some financial support from Georgia State College for Women. The president also reassured her of her position when she returned. At Cornell she held a tuition scholarship 1937–38 and an Erastus Brooks fellowship in 1938–39. Although she studied mainly with Virgil Snyder, Snyder retired in 1938, and Robert J. Walker became the chair of her doctoral committee. She received her doctorate in 1939 with a major in geometry, a first minor in algebra, and a second minor in analysis.

When Nelson returned to Georgia State College for Women in 1939, she was promoted to associate professor; in 1942 she was promoted to full professor and became department chair. Nelson was particularly interested in the training of teachers and attended an NSF summer workshop on that subject in 1963. She remained as department chair until her retirement in 1968, a year after the school became coeducational and was renamed Georgia College at Milledgeville. Nelson was also active in the school's alumni association and served as its president from 1943 until 1947 and again from 1978 until 1980. In 1987 the association honored her with The Georgia College Alumni Heritage Award.

Nelson was a member of the Georgia Academy of Science; Phi Kappa Phi, an honor society for excellence in scholarship; and Pi Gamma Mu, an honor society in the social sciences. The pastor of the First United Methodist Church of Milledgeville, where she taught Sunday School for many years, referred to her as “the mother of the Wesley Foundation [Campus Ministry] from its infancy to its maturity” (Funeral meditation by Harold Lawrence, provided by David J. DeVries).

Sara Nelson died in a local Milledgeville hospital at the age of ninety-two in 1995 and was buried in the Oglethorpe Cemetery. She was survived by three nieces. The Sara L. Nelson Fund for Mathematics and Science Education was established at the college.

**Organizational affiliations:** AMS, MAA, Sigma Delta Epsilon.

**Thesis and dissertation:**

**1930** A projection of the normal rational quartic curve of four space. MS thesis, Cornell University, directed by Virgil Snyder. Typescript.

**1939** Cremona transformations belonging to a family of cubic curves. PhD dissertation, Cornell University, directed by Virgil Snyder (retired 1938) and Robert John Walker. Typescript with erratum. Abstract: *Cornell University. Abstracts of Theses* for 1939, 211–13.

**Publications:**

**1942** Review of *Intermediate Algebra*, by Neil McArthur and Alexander Keith (London: Methuen and Co., 1942). *Amer. Math. Monthly* 49:328.

**1943** Review of *Mathematics in Daily Use*, by W. W. Hart, Cottell Gregory, and Veryl Schult (Boston: D. C. Heath and Co., 1942). *Amer. Math. Monthly* 50:384.

**Abstract:**

**1941** Cremona transformations belonging to a family of cubic curves. *Amer. Math. Monthly* 48:423–24 #9. Presented to a meeting of the MAA, Chapel Hill, NC, 28–29 Mar 1941. Based on PhD dissertation.

**References to:** AmMSc 7–8, 9P–11P; WhoAmW 1.

“Sara Nelson.” (Obituary) *Milledgeville (GA) Union Recorder*, 6 Mar 1995.

**Other sources:** PhD dissertation vita 1939. correspondence with David J. DeVries, Georgia College and State University; Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library; US Census 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930 GA.

Last modified: July 20, 2009.