

LESTER, Caroline A. April 6, 1902–December 29, 1996.

CORNELL UNIVERSITY (BA 1924, MA 1928), UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN (PhD 1937).

Caroline Avery Lester was born in Seneca Falls, New York, the daughter of Elizabeth (Campbell) (1868–1943), originally of Racine, Wisconsin, and Frederick William Lester (1870–1947) of Seneca Falls. Her mother had attended a school for young ladies in New York City, and her father, a surgeon, had received his MD from Columbia University in 1894. Her parents married in 1897. Other children of the marriage were Lora (1898–1984), a bacteriologist with a BA from William Smith College; John Campbell (1900–1984), a graduate of the US Naval Academy who retired as a rear admiral and then taught engineering at Penn State; and Agnes (1905–2000), who earned a BA from Cornell University in 1926.

Lester attended the First Ward School and the Mynderse Academy, public schools in Seneca Falls, from kindergarten until her high school graduation in 1920. Years later, in 1985, she reported that her first motivation to pursue an education in mathematics came from a high school teacher, Miss Reamer, who had studied engineering at Cornell. Lester majored in mathematics at Cornell University, which she attended on a free tuition scholarship from New York State. In 1924, the year of her graduation, she was elected to Pi Lambda Theta, a national honor and professional association in education, and to Phi Kappa Phi, a national honor society for all disciplines. After her graduation she taught for three years in high schools in New York State. During the summer of 1925 she studied education at Harvard University. In 1927 she returned to Cornell and enrolled with an intended mathematics major and an education minor. At the end of the academic year she received her master's degree in mathematics.

In 1929 Lester went to the New York College for Teachers (now the State University of New York at Albany) as an instructor and remained there except for subsequent leaves. She continued her graduate work in mathematics at the University of Chicago in the summers of 1933 and 1934 and was particularly motivated by A. A. Albert in algebra. Expecting to have a sabbatical leave for the year 1935–36, she applied to return to Cornell. Although accepted by Cornell, Lester decided not to return there. Instead, she went to Ohio State University in the summer of 1935 to work under C. C. MacDuffee and then followed him to the University of Wisconsin. She studied at Wisconsin the next two years while on leave from her job and completed her work for the PhD under MacDuffee's direction in 1937 with a major in algebra and a minor in analysis. Lester traveled in Germany in the summer of 1937 and then returned to her position in Albany, where she was promoted to assistant professor by 1939 and to professor in 1950; she retired as emeritus professor in 1967. While at SUNY Albany, she produced manuscripts on "Modern Views of Mathematics – Lectures on Groups, Rings and Fields" and on the "Theory of Matrices."

Lester was on leave from her position at Albany 1943–45, when she was a lieutenant in the United States Coast Guard (Women's Reserve). In a 1990 interview, Lester described her entry into the military during World War II: "I was invited to join the WAVES, but was turned down because of the physical exam. So, I turned to the Coast Guard and was examined by a different doctor and was found to be in perfect health." Commissioned in February 1943, she attended the US Coast Guard

Academy for a three-week course and then was stationed at the Naval Communications Annex in Washington, D.C., as a specialist in cryptanalysis from March 1943 through September 1945. She reported in her 1990 interview that she “decoded messages from Spain, Portugal and North Africa.”

In May 1940 Lester was one of forty-three MAA members to petition for the formation of a section for upstate New York. Lester served as vice chairman of the Upper New York State Section, now called the Seaway Section, 1957–58 and as chairman 1958–59. She was the second woman to serve in these positions; [Harriet Montague](#) had been the first. From 1948 to 1951 Lester served as an associate editor of the *American Mathematical Monthly*.

In the early 1980s Lester moved to Indianapolis, Indiana, where her younger sister was located. Lester was a member of the DAR, the National Society of Colonial Dames of America, and the Mayflower Society. She was a Republican and a member of a Presbyterian church and was especially interested in travel and bridge. Her travels included at least four trips to Europe and two to Central America. Caroline Avery Lester was ninety-four when she died in Indianapolis in 1996. She is buried in the Restvale Cemetery in Seneca Falls, New York.

Organizational affiliations: AMS, MAA, NCTM, Sigma Xi, Phi Beta Kappa.

Thesis and dissertation:

1928 Generalized trigonometric functions. MA thesis, Cornell University, directed by Walter Buckingham Carver. Typescript.

1937 A determination of the automorphisms of certain algebraic fields. PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin, directed by Cyrus Colton MacDuffee. Typescript. Summary: *Summaries of Doctoral Dissertations, University of Wisconsin* 2:127. See also **1938**.

Publications:

1938 A determination of the automorphisms of certain algebraic fields. *Duke Math. J.* 4:277–90. Published version of PhD dissertation. Reviews: *JFM* 64.0136.06 (L. Holzer); *Zbl* 19:49 (O. Taussky). Presented to the AMS, New York City, 30 Oct 1937; abstract: *Bull. Amer. Math. Soc.* 43:628 #370.

1940a Review of *College General Mathematics for Prospective Secondary School Teachers*, by L. E. Boyer. *Amer. Math. Monthly* 47:103–04.

1940b Review of *Mathematico-Deductive Theory of Rote Learning. A Study of Scientific Methodology*, by C. L. Hull, C. I. Hovland, R. T. Ross, M. P. Hall, D. T. Perkins, and F. B. Fitch. *Amer. Math. Monthly* 47:701–03.

1940c Review of *Modern Elementary Theory of Numbers*, by L. E. Dickson. *Bull. Amer. Math. Soc.* 46:388–89.

1940d Review of *Outline of the History of Mathematics*, by R. C. Archibald. *Amer. Math. Monthly* 47:43.

1942 Review of *The Dozen System*, by G. S. Terry. *Amer. Math. Monthly* 49:187.

Presentation not listed above:

Algebra through the ages. Presented to the NCTM, Hartford, CT, 11 Nov 1966.

References to: AmMSc 8, 9P–11P.

Wooster, Kenneth. “Caroline A. Lester, Founder and Former Chair.” *Seaway Current* 21, no. 1 (Fall 1997): 11.

Unpublished interview:

Dr. Caroline Avery Lester. Interview by Agnes L. Wade, Indianapolis, IN, 22 October 1990. NSCD Collection. Tape and transcript deposited at the Women’s Memorial Foundation, Arlington, VA. [Excerpt](#).

Other sources: PhD dissertation vita 1937; Owens questionnaires 1937, 1940; Smithsonian questionnaire 1985; Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library; US Census 1910, 1920, 1930 NY.

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