



Prof. Dr. Walter D. LAMBERT
(1879 – 1968)
Président de
l'Association Internationale de Géodésie
1945 – 1951

OBITUARY

by Charles A. WHITTEN

Dr. Walter D. LAMBERT

Walter Davis Lambert, age 89, died in Washington, D. C., October 27, 1968, after a very brief illness. Mrs. Lambert, the former Bertha Brown whom he married June 18, 1917, died October 15, 1959. In the last few years, Lambert had been living at the Cosmos Club in Washington where it was a great pleasure for him to meet and visit with many of his friends and associates.

Walter Lambert was born January 12, 1879, in New Brighton, New York. His parents were Walter and Elizabeth Bigelow Lambert. He received his early education at a private school on Staten Island, New York, and at a Friends' Seminary in New York City. He attended Harvard University, graduating with highest honors in mathematics, magna cum laude, in 1900. The following year he received a Master of Arts in Mathematics at Harvard.

In 1901 and 1902, Lambert was an instructor of mathematics at Purdue University in Lafayette, Indiana. Then he taught mathematics and astronomy at the University of Maine in Orono for two years. In 1904 he was employed by the Coast and Geodetic Survey as a mathematician.

In 1907, he went to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia as a Harrison Fellow for graduate study and to teach mathematics. His government service record shows that he has assisted the Survey on a part-time basis while he was in Philadelphia. Those tasks included making magnetic measurements and obtaining tidal height readings. Four years later he returned to Washington and resumed work with the Coast and Geodetic Survey.

In 1917 Lambert was commissioned as a First Lieutenant in the U. S. Army and later assigned to the 101st Engineering Regiment in France. In some of his correspondence relating to his military service, he wrote : "I headed a detachment of young Americans who helped run a cement factory at Mantes-sur-Seine, otherwise Mantis—Gassicourt, a suburb of Paris. Presumably this was because I had a good command of French". In 1919, after the war, he was reassigned to the Coast and Geodetic Survey.

Lambert's talents had been recognized by Hayford and Bowie at the time of his initial appointment. They encouraged him to investigate all of the mathematical and physical aspects of the geodetic problems being considered at that time.

He was an ardent student and clear writer. Throughout his life, his advice and knowledge were frequently requested by young geodesists and students. Lambert took great pains to encourage their inquisitiveness and their interest in geodesy. He published more than 60 articles dealing with geodesy, many of them in the Bulletin Géodésique. There are as many unpublished articles and reports in the archives of the Coast and Geodetic Survey which are referred to frequently by scientists in the Washington area.

Lambert always had a great interest in the International Association of Geodesy. His first official position in I.A.G. was "Reporter on Earth Tides". He served in this special capacity from 1924 to 1954, a period of thirty years. The Proceedings of the 5th International Symposium on Earth Tides, held in Brussels in 1964, were published in his honor.

Far more significant is the support he gave during World War II and the years afterward. In 1936 he had been elected as the 2nd Vice President of I.A.G., inasmuch as the next Assembly was scheduled to be in Washington. Vening Meinesz was the President. The Washington General Assembly had just convened in September 1939 when General Perrier, the Secretary General, had to return to Paris. At that Assembly it was not possible to make many administrative decisions. There were no elections. Most of the sessions consisted of scientific reports and discussions by those who were able to attend. Lambert filled the role of the Secretary General and forwarded to the Central Bureau in Paris complete reports on each day's meetings.

During the following seven years, Perrier and Lambert continued to correspond and carry out the work of the Association in a very remarkable manner. Many of the officers of the Association were in places where travel and communication were restricted. Some had died. In 1946, after I.U.G.G. had held an Extraordinary General Assembly, the International Association of Geodesy met in Special General Assembly in Paris. Lambert was elected to serve as President until the Oslo Assembly in 1948. At Oslo, he was reelected President and served until the Assembly in Brussels in 1951. At that time the Association honored him by electing him to be Honorary President for the rest of his life.

Lambert's correspondence files contain letters to and from his colleagues in many countries, all of whom worked together to fulfill the purpose of the Association and to keep it strong. We, in this generation, and those of future years, owe a debt of gratitude to these men for their care and concern of our Association.

Lambert retired from the Coast and Geodetic Survey in 1949 at age 70. He was uniquely honored in that year by election to the National Academy of Sciences and by being awarded the William Bowie Medal of the American Geophysical Union. As the Bowie medalist, he was cited for his unselfish cooperation in the broad field of earth sciences. In his modest way, he expressed his appreciation by thanking his colleagues and his superiors of former years, one of whom had been Bowie.

Lambert began a post-retirement career by becoming an active participant in the research programs of the Institute of Geodesy at Ohio State University. In 1950, Weikko A. Heiskanen had been asked to serve as Director of that Institute and, in the same year, Lambert joined him. The University honored Lambert in 1957 by conferring on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Science.

Dr. Lambert continued to be a participant in scientific activities for several years. His vitality and vigor astounded those who had known him through the years. Many geodetic programs, national and international, were progressing rapidly so that he could see some of the goals which had been set many years before actually being attained. His philosophy is best expressed in his own words which he used in his Presidential Address in Brussels :

“à la fin des fins — — that is, it has taken a long time for us geodesists to do many things that we have long known to be desirable” .