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Tragedy and Trigonometry: The Story of Harvard's John Farrar.

John Farrar (1779-1853), Harvard College's Hollis Professor of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy from 1807 to 1836, is significant because he was the first American mathematics professor to translate the great French textbooks of the late eighteenth century into English. While historians of American mathematics have recognized this achievement, they have not necessarily realized that Farrar's life and career also tells us about the active fascination American professors held for European mathematical developments, as well as about these professors' involvement in institutional society and politics at the American colleges. This paper, then, first describes Farrar's "Cambridge Series of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy." The paper further draws upon manuscript materials to evaluate Farrar's mathematical interests, his limited role in the reform of college mathematics education, and his interactions with American and European mathematicians and scientists. Throughout, the paper demonstrates the ways in which a study of John Farrar illustrates how mathematics was defined and taught in the republican United States. (Received August 28, 2000)