



Promoting the Practice and Profession of Statistics

HISTORY OF THE ASA

What do Florence Nightingale, Alexander Graham Bell, Herman Hollerith, Andrew Carnegie, and Martin Van Buren have in common?

These historical figures all were members of the American Statistical Association (ASA), the second oldest [170 years], continuously operating professional association in the country. Since it was founded in Boston one wintry November morning in 1839, the ASA has supported excellence in the development, application, and dissemination of statistical science through meetings, publications, membership services, education, and advocacy. Its members serve in industry, government, and academia in more than 90 countries, advancing research and promoting sound statistical practice to inform public policy and improve human welfare. The association today continues a long tradition of promoting excellence in statistics and in its application to the frontiers of science, from biological to socio-economic to the physical sciences.

The ASA was formed at a meeting in the rooms of the American Education Society in Boston and was chartered by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Present at the organizing meeting were William Cogswell, teacher, fund-raiser for the ministry, and genealogist; Richard Fletcher, lawyer and U.S. Congressman; John Dix Fisher, physician and pioneer in medical reform; Oliver Peabody, lawyer, clergyman, poet, and editor; and Lemuel Shattuck, statistician, genealogist, publisher, and author of perhaps the most significant single document in the history of public health to that date. By 1841, ASA was already an energetic society with a roster of 109 members, including U.S. President Martin Van Buren and the others mentioned in the sub-head above.

From the ASA's inception, the association has had a close affiliation with the statistical work of the U.S. government, particularly the Bureau of the Census. As early as 1844, ASA recommended to Congress that the Sixth Census "be revised and a new and accurate copy be published." In those early years, the heads of the Census were generally ASA members or officers. John B. D. DeBow, superintendent of the Seventh Census, was an ASA member. Francis A. Walker directed the Ninth Census and initiated the Tenth Census. Carroll D. Wright worked on finishing the Eleventh Census. The first director of the permanent census office was S. N. D. North, the sixth president of ASA and the first to serve a one-year term (1910). The current census director, Robert Groves, is a long-time ASA member.

Statistical work in government and business stimulated much expansion after World War I, including the founding of the first local chapters of the association. From 1920--1943, 22 chapters were formed across the country. Generally, these chapters were located in large cities, such as Washington (DC), Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia. In addition, groups were formed in state capitals such as Albany, New York, and Austin, Texas, and at universities, such as the University of Illinois. Today ASA has 78 chapters serving its members all across the country. They vary in composition and size, ranging from groups of less than 50 members to one with over 1,000 members.

In 1939, ASA celebrated its 100th anniversary, and events were held in Boston and Philadelphia. Membership reached an all-time high of more than 3,000. Some declines occurred, however, during the war years, and ASA's activities slowed, resulting in the cancellation of the 1942 and 1943 annual meetings. Following the war, the activities and membership of the association expanded rapidly in response to the many advances in science. The Business and Economic Statistics Section was established in 1950, followed by the Social Sciences Section and the Section on Physical and Engineering Sciences in 1954.

More information may be found in ***ASA: The First 160 Years***, which can be viewed or downloaded at <http://www.amstat.org/about/first160years.cfm>.