



GEORGE B. PEGRAM

Compton Medalist

Presentation remarks of Henry A. Barton in honor of the first recipient of the Karl Taylor Compton Medal, October 21, 1957

A GOOD many people contributed to the establishment of the American Institute of Physics. Some of the genesis took place before 1930 in the minds of Dr. Paul D. Foote and the members of a committee of the Physical Society of which he was Chairman. I can't begin to name all of those who were concerned, but I think everyone who had anything to do with starting the AIP recognizes that there were two men who played the principal original roles. One of these was Dr. Compton, and this occasion today memorializes the great contribution which he made. The other was Dean George B. Pegram. If Dr. Compton were with us now I am sure he would agree that we cannot possibly overstate Dean Pegram's part in the planning, forming, and developing of the Institute.

After the organization was provisionally established, Dean Pegram became the author of the By-Laws. I know this well because it was my task to try to put his words down in longhand as fast as he spoke them. Our attorney will be shocked to learn that no lawyer was called in to assist in this composition. Dean Pegram remarked that he was able to read the pertinent provisions of New York Corporation Law and if he had any questions he could check with the Dean of the Columbia Law School! I don't recall that he had much checking to do.

Dean Pegram was the first Secretary of the American Institute of Physics—remaining in that office for the period 1931 to 1945. He was made Treasurer also in 1938 and continued to hold that office until only last year. His resignation was then received by the Governing Board with great regret and the Board voted a resolution of acknowledgment which cited the facts I have already mentioned and went on to say that throughout the history of the Institute scarcely a week passed without some evidence of his devoted concern and interest in the affairs of the AIP. He was recognized by his colleagues on the Board and in the staff of the Institute as the source of the highest human wisdom and inspiration continually available to them in relation to these affairs.

Dean Pegram's contribution to the advancement of physics is, of course, by no means limited to the Institute. Almost all of the kinds of things he did for the AIP he also did over a longer period for the American Physical Society. He was present at its second meeting, in 1899. He was an officer for 38 years and, in the words of Secretary Karl Darrow, "The American Physical Society will never be able to measure what it owes to George Braxton Pegram. He has been the Society incarnate."

As a professor and a Dean of Columbia University, Dr. Pegram is largely responsible for building up that University's activity in physics to its present universally recognized vigor and excellence. On more than one occasion his colleagues at Columbia have testified to this and they recently expressed their indebtedness by dedicating to him the new high-voltage laboratory—The George B. Pegram Laboratory—adjoining the Pupin Laboratory.

During the war, Dean Pegram's efforts were turned to defense. He was deeply involved in the administration of research on antisubmarine and prosubmarine warfare and was a close advisor of J. T. Tate, E. H. Colpitts, E. Hutchisson, W. Waterfall, and others in this important field of applied research. In addition, he took a prominent role in initiating and administering the work related to the early stages of the development of atomic energy. This last mentioned contribution may be most effective in giving him his place in recorded history, but to those of us who know his whole contribution this will be remembered as only a part. This may serve to emphasize the magnitude of the whole.

In view of this record of accomplishment, and much more that could be added if time permitted, Dean George Braxton Pegram has been designated by the Governing Board of the American Institute of Physics to be the first recipient of the Karl Taylor Compton Medal. It is a privilege, Mr. Chairman, to present Dean Pegram for the award of the Compton Medal.