

UMW Department of Mathematics Colloquium Announcement

The Curious Aftermath of Neptune's Discovery

Presented by

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Abstract: Neptune was first recognized as a new planet on 23 September 1846 at the Berlin observatory. The sensational news reached London a week later and the ensuing dispute created one of the great (and ongoing) priority debates in the history of science. About a month after the initial observation, word of the new planet also arrived in America where the controversy captured both popular interest and scientific attention. A handful of nineteenth-century scientists who shared a vision for professionalizing science in America viewed the Neptune affair as an opportunity to establish the legitimacy of American science in response to perceived European scientific superiority. While European administrators of science quibbled over the priority question, the Harvard mathematician Benjamin Peirce dared to question the mathematical particulars of the discovery. More recent manuscript discoveries further illuminate the story of planetary controversy and ongoing investigations of the mathematics involved.

