PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

Michael Sean Mahoney

1939 – 2008

This Memorial Resolution

Prepared by a special committee,

was approved by unanimous rising vote at the meeting

Of the Princeton University Faculty

On November 3, 2008 and ordered spread upon the

records of the Faculty.

Michael Sean Mahoney

June 30, 1939 – July 23, 2008

Michael Sean Mahoney, Professor of History, died in the University Medical Center on Wednesday July 23rd. He had suffered cardiac arrest on Friday the 18th while swimming laps in Dillon Pool and never recovered consciousness.

Mike Mahoney graduated magna cum laude from Harvard College in 1960, having concentrated in the paired fields of History and Science, with emphasis on mathematics. He received a two-year German Foreign Service Fellowship and studied in Munich under the supervision of the eminent historian of mathematics, Kurt Vogel. Thereupon, Mike became a member of Princeton University as a graduate student in the fledgling Program in History of Science, then in its third year. His participation in that program was a signal contribution to its gathering success. In 1965 he was appointed to the faculty as an Instructor, rising through the ranks to a professorship in 1980. A slight elaboration of his email address, mike@princeton.education, may be said to epitomize his manifold service to this University for close on to half a century.

Mike's earliest interest centered on medieval and early modern mathematics. Developed out of his thesis in that area, his most widely read book is The Mathematical Career of Pierre de Fermat, 1601-1665 (1973). A revised edition was published in 1994 on the occasion of Andrew Wiles's proof of Fermat's last theorem, of which Fermat had given the statement but not the proof. Mike also published an annotated translation of Descartes' Le Monde (1979), and for

a Japanese publisher a 1982 survey of which the English title would be Mathematics in History. A revised and expanded edition appeared last year.

Mike's was a focussing mind better adapted to articles than to books, however. He contributed some sixty-five articles and chapters to collections of various sorts along with numerous book reviews, and gave over a hundred invited lectures and papers at universities and meetings of many sorts. Among them were monographic studies of the mathematical techniques of Descartes, Barrow, and Newton. Mike's was an active, not to say a hyper-active, life of scholarship of the highest order.

As time passed, his interests expanded to history of technology and, finally, to the origin and development of computer science. Software engineering was his prinipal preoccupation. None of this excluded his earlier specialization. He frequently recurred to the place of Christiaan Huygens in the Scientific Revolution, particularly with respect to time-keeping. A favorite topic was an analysis of structural similarities between medieval mathematics and computer science.

His expertise was recognized in the industry itself. He was a member of the Association for Computing Machinery, served on several of its committees, and edited its History Series (ACM Press) from 1987 to 1985. Mike also served from time to time as a member of the technical staff and a consultant on software development at Bell Labs. He was never an uncritical observer,

however. He remained skeptical of the cultural and intellectual, if not the economic, benefits of the computer age and the internet and was well aware of the planned obsolescence and increasing complexity of programs and hardware visited on us all in the interest of industrial profits.

Mike was a superb teacher, both as provocative preceptor and spellbinding lecturer. He gave undergraduate courses and graduate seminars on aspects of science in every historical field from antiquity through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, to early modern and recent times. When occasion permitted, he also taught preceptorials in other history courses and was a preceptor in the course on history of mathematics that Professor Albert Tucker, chairman of the Mathematics Department, taught for many years. He was an acute interlocutor in the discussion of papers in the Program seminar and in colloquiums of all sorts. His sense of structure in intellectual propositions was, as it were, three-dimensional. Mike would wait until near the end in a discussion, and then point out an aspect of the subject that its author had not seen.

He was a devoted citizen of many concentric circles of education. Primus inter pares in the Program in History of Science, he had many terms as its Director. He served the History Department in various respects, frequently as Department Representative and most recently as its first Associate Chair. In the University at large he served as faculty adviser to the swimming team, collectively and individually. For some years he was a commanding figure as

Marshall in the academic procession at Matriculation, Baccalaureate, and Commencement. Not just gown, but town: Mike served on the Princeton Regional Schools Board of Education from 1982 to 1986 and was its President in 1985-86. Well beyond the purlieus of Princeton, from 1975 to 2001 he worked with school teachers as a member of the National Faculty of the Humanities, Arts, and Sciences, an association of some 600 college and university professors addressing themselves to the improvement of secondary education. Mike was Chair of its Board from 1994 to 2001.

Finally, we should like to mention Mike's generosity with his time and his knowledge. There must be few members of the Department for whom he did not take time to extricate them from trouble with their computers. If he could not walk us by telephone out of the cybernetic mess we had created, he would drop what he was doing and come to our offices. Sometimes Mike would grow interested in a new topic before completing one he had started. We know of at least two occasions when he turned over his notes and drafts to others working in the area, in one case to a French contemporary writing a history of analytical mechanics in the Enlightenment, and in another, very recent, to one of our graduate students whom he was advising on the reception of Copernicanism in the University of Vienna.

We shall not see Michael Mahoney's like again.

Respectfully submitted by,

Angela N. Creager, Professor of History

Charles C. Gillispie, Dayton-Stockton Professor of History, Emeritus, Professor of History of Science, Emeritus

William C. Jordan, Dayton-Stockton Professor of History, Chair

Robert L. Tignor, Rosengarten Professor of Modern and Contemporary History, Emeritus

Madame President: For the Committee, I move that this Resolution be spread upon the records of the Faculty, and that copies be sent to his wife, Jean Mahoney; their children, Colin Sean Mahoney and Bridget Samuel; his three brothers, Daniel, Timothy, and Patrick Mahoney; and to the Archivist of the University.