

Reflections on the History of Logarithms

One of the most surprising things about the creation of logarithms is that there is nothing leading up to their discovery. Most things in mathematics are developed over time with pieces being discovered at different times and places and finally someone recognizes their connection and creates a new branch of mathematics or a new mathematical idea. Logarithms are an exception to this, they were almost entirely developed at one time. The only thing that ever really changed about them is that they were eventually linked to exponents.

Another thing worth noting is how useful logarithms were (and still are). It is easy to over look logarithms in this day and age where all we have to do is enter numbers into a calculator or some other device to get solutions to problems that might have taken hours, days, or years before the invention of logarithms. Logarithms sped up calculations of multiplication and division by converting the operations to addition and subtraction. The only additional work added to the process was looking logs and anti-logs up in tables. Although logarithms were very useful they did have a flaw that made them unacceptable in some areas that could have used them. Logarithms are limited in accuracy, they are only as accurate as the tables that you use, thus the more decimal places the tables contain the greater the accuracy.