Howard Aiken

- Aiken, who died in 1973, was honored in 2014 for his work on the Mark 1 as a posthumous inductee into the National Inventors Hall of Fame, along with co-inventors Clair Lake, Frank Hamilton and Benjamin Durfee.

- In 1944, the installation of the Mark 1 at Harvard University realized Aiken's longtime ambition to create a computer capable of performing complex mathematical calculations at high speeds. Like other computers in those days, the Mark 1 was a huge machine, but it boasted an unusual construction, using a complex system of mechanical parts, punch cards, and telephone relays. While it and its successors represented many innovations and advances in computing, the National Inventors Hall of Fame sums it up simply: It was “the first large-scale digital calculator.”

- In a 2009 article, On Wisconsin magazine recounted great and memorable quotes from UW-Madison alumni. Among them was this quote from Aiken’s 1937 paper, “Proposed automated calculating machine”: “At the present time there exist problems beyond our ability to solve, not because of theoretical difficulties, but because of insufficient means of mechanical computation.”

- Today, it may seem strange to think about computing power in terms of such obstacles—but only because inventors like Aiken made them a thing of the past.

- Relation to UW ECE Department: Bachelor’s Degree at ECE