Although the first compiler for general-purpose, imperative programming language would not be delivered for three more years, September 20, 1954 marked the first run of a Fortran (Formula Translating) program (see photo of first Fortran programming manual, October 1956).

Fortran was originally developed by IBM. It quickly became the dominant language for engineering and scientific applications. Indeed, Fortran was the trusted language for programs that benchmarked and ranked the world's fastest supercomputers for decades.

The language was born when IBM computer scientists, lead by John W. Backus, were looking for a more practical alternative to assembly language for programming mainframe computers.

"Much of my work has come from being lazy," Backus said during a 1979 interview with Think, the IBM employee magazine. "I didn't like writing programs, and so, when I was working on the IBM 701, writing programs for computing missile trajectories, I started work on a programming system to make it easier to write programs."

The first Fortran compiler delivered in April 1957 was the first optimizing compiler, as customers were reluctant to use a high-level programming language unless its compiler could generate code with performance comparable to that of hand-coded assembly language. They quickly changed their minds when Fortran reduced the number of programming statements necessary to operate a machine by a factor of 20.

While not the only language in today's game, Fortran remains a popular choice for engineering and scientific applications. The latest revision of the language is Fortran 2018, which was released in November 2018.

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For more moments in tech history, see this blog. EDN strives to be historically accurate with these postings. Should you see an error, please notify us.

Editor's note: This article was originally posted on September 20, 2012 and edited on September 20, 2019.