

STUDENT OBSERVATORY



Fig. 1. The Student Observatory c. 1890. [Series 9/1, Student Observatory, jf-107]

The student observatory was erected by James Watson (the first director of the Washburn Observatory), in 1880 to provide basic instruction and to free the main equipment for research. Located on Observatory Hill just to the east of Washburn Observatory, the student observatory was in use until 1959 when the astronomers left the Hill for the new Pine Bluff Observatory. In 1960 the student observatory was donated to a local amateur astronomy group.

The genesis of the student observatory lay in the determination that the state of the art equipment at the new Washburn Observatory should be protected from the onslaught of the students and kept free for research purposes. The first director of the Washburn Observatory, J. C. Watson, was a talented and popular lecturer, but his principal interest was research. He came to Wisconsin at least in part because the new Washburn Observatory had superior research instruments.¹

In his first and only report as director of the Washburn Observatory in 1880, Watson informs the regents:

In order supply the need of a smaller observatory for the purposes of more elementary instruction ... I have commenced the erection, at my own expense, of suitable buildings for this purpose ... I shall provide the necessary instruments without cost to the university.²

Watson was stricken with pneumonia and died in November 1880. His successor at the Observatory was Edward Holden, who reported to the regents in 1881:

The student's observatory was left entirely without instruments at the death of Prof. Watson.



Fig. 2. This 1881 etching from the frontispiece of the Washburn Observatory Publications volume 1, shows the position of the student observatory relative to the Washburn Observatory. [series 9/1 Washburn Observatory folder #1, x25-326]



Fig. 3. July 19, 1960. The dome comes off. [Washburn Observatory folder #1, ns-123]

Since that time Gov. Washburn has finished the building in a complete manner ... The six-inch equatorial is now mounted in the small dome ... It is obvious that the large equatorial is too costly and delicate an apparatus to serve as a means of general instruction.³

The student observatory was completed and fully equipped by 1882. It was a one-floor wooden building over a cellar. It was 45 feet long, had an seven foot dome, and a 12 by 14 foot transit room. It was equipped with a six inch telescope, and a three inch transit.⁴ For the next 70 years almost nothing is heard of the little dome. It was in continuous use and probably had the same kind of difficulties as the big dome, constant upkeep and increasing optical pollution from the nearby roads and the growing city of Madison. At some unknown time the six-inch telescope was replaced with a 12-inch one.

When the astronomy department abandoned Observatory Hill in 1959, the University offered to donate the student observatory to the Madison Astronomical Society who wished to reassemble it on the grounds of the Bjorksten laboratory south of Madison.⁵ In July of 1960, trucks and cranes removed the last of J. C. Watson's Observatory Hill projects from Observatory Hill. [Fig. 3]. The student observatory still stands, its site now owned by the Promega company, just off Fish Hatchery Road at Bjorkstein Place, but is no longer in active use.

1) When Watson was hired away from the directorship of the University of Michigan observatory in 1878 by UW President John Bascom, he was already a world figure in astronomical research. He had been published regularly for 11 years, discovered a number of asteroids, and written about the possible existence of a planet inside the orbit of Mercury called Vulcan.

2) *Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin*, 1880 p. 36.

3) *Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin*, 1881 p. 31. C. C. Washburn was the benefactor who had provided funds for all the astronomical projects at the University.

4) Holden, Edward S. *Publications of the Washburn Observatory*, Vol. 1, pp. 33-36. University Archives 7/4/1 box 1. Holden also says (p. 20 and 33) that the design of the student observatory and many features of Washburn observatory were largely the work of a student, F. D. Winkley.

5) *Daily Cardinal*, July 21, 1960 p. 1.