

McKim Observatory by Jerome Hixson

(Article originally appeared in the October 1971 DePauw Alumnus magazine)

DePauw University's recently restored telescope and McKim Observatory are closely connected with the transition from Indiana Asbury University to DePauw University. The observatory was the first visible result of the enlarged vision and enterprise which transformed the precarious Indiana Asbury into the dynamic new DePauw University, in 1884. Who was McKim and why was the observatory important?

Robert McKim was a prosperous contractor of Madison, Indiana. He had come from Scotland to Philadelphia and finally to Indiana to carry on his work of construction in the rapidly developing Midwest. It is probable that he became acquainted with Washington C. DePauw through business. "DePauw's American Plate Glass," with extensive works in New Albany, was well known and prosperous in the 1870's and 1880's. As a curious matter of fact, the Indiana Asbury trustees authorized use of DePauw plate glass in the construction of East College, three years before DePauw became a member of the board of Indiana Asbury. McKim must have had extensive dealings with DePauw in his own business.

By 1876, the year when Mr. DePauw became a member of the board, Mr. McKim must have become interested in his friend's philanthropy. Indeed, DePauw had already been helping supply the annual operating deficits. For his own part, DePauw had undoubtedly become acquainted with McKim's hobby of astronomy and had probably visited the small observatory in McKim's Madison home. Both wanted to do something beneficial with their money.

Astronomy had been a branch of the liberal arts curriculum, the quadrivium, since the middle ages. As early as 1840 the catalog of Indiana Asbury listed a course in astronomy. Ten years before McKim's gift of the observatory, William Newkirk, a trustee of the University, had given it a five-inch portable telescope, which was important enough academically to provide occasion for the architects' inclusion of a small circular dome on the east side of East College, then under construction. There it may still be seen.

So it was that Mr. DePauw, already a member of the board of trustees, and from 1881 its president, brought to the attention of his friend, Robert McKim, the need of the University for the fuller development of the academic work in the field of his hobby, astronomy. In 1882 Mr. DePauw felt that an observatory was one of the needs of the University. "Asbury," he told the board, "can live as it is without additional buildings, library, museum, and observatory; but it cannot live, even as it is without a large increase in endowment." His friend, McKim, was already to build the observatory, the first step toward the more ambitious institution envisioned by DePauw in 1883.

There seems to have been an understanding between the men to tie the observatory project into the expansion plans. Washington C. DePauw made it a condition of his own later substantial gifts (October 15, 1883) that "Brother McKim gives a legal obligation to build and equip an observatory." For his part, McKim made his own gift conditional upon DePauw's plan for strengthening the University. A telegram from Robert Holliday, to the trustees on January 16, 1884 read: "Robert McKim authorizes me to say that if DePauw University is founded [that is, named for his friend DePauw] he will build the contemplated observatory."

So important in the thinking of the board was the new observatory that even in a time of great financial stringency it agreed to supplement the gift of McKim in order to provide the best possible observatory. McKim had agreed to supply eight thousand dollars more. There was evidently the feeling that this initial project in the expansion plans would be of psychological value. So hard were the times that the president's salary was reduced, as were those of the professors; and the librarian had not been paid in six months. Nevertheless, the trustees felt that the observatory would so raise the status of the University that they agreed to add for its proper construction two thousand dollars from capital funds in August, 1883.

In his original agreement of November 15, 1883, McKim provided for "building and equipping an astronomical observatory at a cost of \$8,000, as a gift to Indiana Asbury University, to be named McKim Observatory, in memory of my deceased children..." on condition that citizens of Greencastle supply \$60,000 and that other friends of the University should supply one dollar for every two which his friend Washington DePauw would give. This agreement was supposedly to be fulfilled within two years from January 1, 1884; but when it seemed unlikely that the conditions could be fulfilled, McKim agreed "to prosecute the work on the observatory as soon as the trustees in their judgement shall

determine."

The University was not slow to capitalize the new gift. The first catalog published after the gift, the catalog of 1885-6, announced:

The McKim Observatory contains five rooms; a library, a transit room, a chronograph, a clock room, and an equatorial room. An additional structure for the Almucantor will soon be erected. The equatorial room on the second floor is surmounted by an iron dome seventeen feet in diameter, which, though weighing two tons, is revolved by a direct pressure of only twelve pounds. The dome rests on nine iron trucks...Under the dome is mounted the equatorial telescope, which is twelve feet long, with a clear aperture of 9.53 inches. The object glass was made by Alvan Clark and Sons, while the mounting on the telescope, together with the dome, was made by Warner and Swasey. A full battery of eye-pieces is provided giving magnifying powers ranging from forty to twelve hundred diameters. The telescope is provided with a filar micrometer with wires illuminated by an Edison electric burner...

The minutes of the same meeting at which Mr. McKim was officially thanked for his gift (January 17, 1884) record the authorization of the purchase of the Durham Farm for \$20,000, the site of the observatory. Mr. DePauw had felt earlier that the University lacked a "proper or sufficient location." Indeed, he had at one time preferred New Albany, his home, or Indianapolis. For some time after the purchase of this farm near Greencastle, it was known as the DePauw farm, a possible site for future buildings. But the observatory was the only academic building which the University constructed there. The farm was rented to a farmer for agricultural purposes. Probably for protection from the farmer's livestock a fence was built around the observatory.

By January, 1885, the board authorized construction of a residence for the director of the observatory. It authorized the securing of a director at a salary of \$1000 a year. By 1890 the catalog adds to the description of the observatory reference to "a four-inch almucanter, owned by Mr. S.C. Chandler, Jr., has been placed at our disposal for accurate work. In the transit room is mounted a sixteen-inch meridian circle, manufactured by Fauther and Company, of Washington, D.C. Two courses in astronomy are listed: Mathematics XII, Descriptive and General Course in astronomy, and Mathematics XIII, Spherical and Practical Astronomy." The departments of mathematics and astronomy were merged. Doctor W.V. Brown, its head, kept meticulous records of his astronomical observations for many years. Without an astronomical camera, he sketched various formations of stars, as well as made accurate records of angles and declinations. A half century of records books, in his neat hand, may be seen in the University archives.

The number of dollars reckoned in present day terms seems small. Though Robert McKim's gift of eight thousand dollars, augmented by two thousand more from capital funds of the University, seems inconsequential today, the equipment which he specified with great intelligence eighty-eight years ago was well made, and today, in its re-furbished state, has been valued at over \$150,000, nearly twenty fold its original value. The space age has brought new relevance to McKim's gift. From the days when Indiana Asbury was struggling to emerge into DePauw University, McKim's gift has new relevancy. Like the other liberal arts themselves, astronomy has retained an abiding value for its applicability in all times. It was part of the vision and the dream of men like Robert McKim and his friend Washington DePauw and others that an institution must be periodically renewed in a process of change. Vision and growth have been the constant factor in the life of the university we now know as DePauw.