

McKim Observatory by John J. Baughman

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One of the unique buildings in Putnam County is the McKim Observatory of DePauw University in Greencastle. Built in 1884, it is not located on the campus but, in the middle of the Haskell Residential Addition in the northeast part of the city. In 1979 it was placed on the National Registry of Historical Places, largely through the initiative of Charlotte Dudley who sensed its importance when she came to live in Greencastle.

When Indiana Asbury University was renamed DePauw University and endowed extensively in 1884 by the New Albany glass manufacturer, Washington C. DePauw, the revitalized university plan called for an optimistic vision of physical expansion of the campus. The university purchased (essentially W.C. DePauw himself and as a primary condition of his gifts) the Jacob Durham farm located to the northeast of the city, roughly including present Northwood and Haskell Additions. This was a major tract of rolling farmland about a mile from the campus to be called University Park. This was seen as a potential site for the future campus when the old campus would be sold off and moved. This was mentioned in catalogues up to 1901. However the only major campus building ever built on this property was the Observatory on an eastern knoll of University Park.

The university's first Observatory for astronomy classes had been in the small tower on the southeast side of East College built in the 1870s, whose small dome is visible though unused today. Its small telescope is still kept in the DePauw Mathematics Department. However the trustees decided to build another observatory away from campus as dense smoke from homes, university, and factory buildings distracted viewing the stars.

Robert McKim, a prosperous contractor from Madison, Indiana who had a small observatory on his own property and who was a friend of Washington DePauw, generously donated \$8,000 to the university for a new observatory and equipment. The university added \$2,000 to this. Robert McKim was a Madison coal dealer, furniture manufacturer, and builder. There is a story that one day he and a partner went down to the Ohio river when there was a flood and discovered an unattended barge of coal floating downstream. They managed to secure it and laid claim to it under some salvage laws. They were on the way to considerable business in coal. As a prominent Methodist builder McKim superintended the construction of Trinity United Methodist Church in Madison. His home built in 1870 still stands.

McKim and Professor, later President, John P.D. John visited several prominent observatories in the United States when construction was planned to make sure no mistakes were made in the Observatory design.

Originally the building was brick with one foot thick walls, not covered by white stucco as it is today. What was built was an "L"-shaped two-story structure. On the first floor was the library, the chronograph room, the octagonal clock vault, and a transit room. The main telescope was housed under the dome on the second floor, accessed by a spiral oak staircase. A balcony leads from the dome to an observing deck above the library. There are porthole windows. The original 17 foot diameter dome was made of iron and activated by a hand pull. In 1975 a new aluminum dome with electrical motor and controls to turn it was installed. Still in use is the main telescope, a 9.5 inch clear aperture refractor on a Warner and Swasey mounting of Cleveland, produced by Alvan Clark and Sons of Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1885.

For over a century the observatory has been used by the DePauw students. Initially supervision was under Wilbur V. Brown, one of the first professors to earn a doctorate, Assistant Director from 1885-1889 and Director from 1889 to his death in 1928. William E. Eddington became Director from 1930 to 1953 after which various members of the Mathematics Department were responsible, particularly Joseph W. Corbett from 1968 to 1980. In 1981 the astronomy courses were moved from the Mathematics to the Physics Department.

The university built a nearby home in University Park for Professor Brown, and later used by Eddington, in the 1880s at a cost of \$2,000 so he could be near the Observatory. A fine home and barn, it faced a small road that continued from the corner of Franklin and Arlington and wandered up the hill to the Observatory. Remaining to 1955 on the same site (now the backyard of the DeCarlo home on Highridge) it was moved south a short distance where it still stands with its entrance now on East Franklin, the original back of the house.

Part of University Park became Northwood in the 1920s and part was used for faculty "Victory"

Gardens in the Second World War. After the war the university bought fifteen pre-fabricated cottages formerly used at a powder plant in Wilmington, Illinois and placed these one, two, and three bedroom houses on the grounds south of the Observatory toward Franklin Street and called it Observatory Hill. These were to be used by the married veterans now returning to campus with families. Also four former army barracks were placed northeast of the Observatory and called Observatory Court. After the married veterans disappeared, the buildings became homes essentially for junior DePauw faculty needing low rental facilities. In 1961 Observatory Court was torn down, and the barracks sold to a local man who moved them to a northside location. They still stand, much disguised. The pre-fabs were removed not long after.

After the Berkshire apartments on East Washington Street were built for new faculty, the university moved the Eddington home and platted the land around the Observatory for new home construction by university faculty and staff called the Haskell Addition. While the area has gradually opened up to non-DePauw University connected people, the university still retains the first option to buy any of the homes put up for sale. And most conspicuously there are no streetlights around the Observatory to distract the stargazers.

In the book by H.T. Kirby-Smith entitled U.S. Observatories: A Directory and Travel Guide our Observatory is highly praised. "Since it has not been continually modernized, it seems to furnish the outstanding example in the country of an excellent nineteenth-century observatory. One wishes the Smithsonian could arrange to have it preserved and regularly open as a museum piece...This is one of the most interesting small observatories in the world from an historical point of view." Wow! Is that little old funny building the adolescents dangerously race their cars around on summer nights in Greencastle unique for the whole wide globe? Let's treasure it.

McKim Observatory still uses the two telescopes that were acquired when the facility was built. A meridian circle transit telescope manufactured by Fauth and Company of Washington, D.C. is routinely used to observe the transit of the Sun across the local meridian. The instrument, with a 3.5 aperture and 16 inch circles is capable of observing 12th magnitude stars and has a precision of 0.1 arc minutes. The main telescope is the 9.5 inch clear aperture refractor built by Warner and Swasey of Cleveland. The objective lens was produced by Alvan Clark and Sons of Cambridge, Massachusetts. The original gravity-driven tracking clock has been installed in the pier of the telescope allowing prolonged observations of any celestial object.

An operational chronograph, a time-recording device displayed in the entry room, was also manufactured by Warner and Swasey. The solar and sidereal clocks, built by E. Howard and Company of Boston, have been removed from McKim and are displayed in the Mathematics Department office on the DePauw Campus.

A collection of books and journals and other pieces of equipment from the early years of McKim are on display in the library.