Observatory Timeline

Original Observatory.

Proposed Jan. 30, 1839. Completion Unknown.

Described as “a wooden house—a little box, some fifteen feet square and as many high, holding a two-foot transit—was then the nucleus of the best appointed observatory in Pennsylvania” (A History of Haverford College for the first sixty years of its Existence pg.200)

“small building about ten feet square that stood a little southeast of the present Alumna Hall. This had been John Gummere’s observatory; but contained only an astronomical clock, and a small transit instrument mounted on a granite pier. These with a small portable telescope, and a sextant comprised the astronomical outfit belonging to Haverford.” (Hugh Vail Memoirs, red notebook, pg. 28)

Strawbridge Observatory.

Built 1852-1853

Hugh Vail drove the initiative. “No addition, however was made to them until 1851 or 1852 when William Young, who had made an astronomical transit of the same size…offered to loan it to me if I would be at the expense of mounting it… Managers of the College were consulted, the offer accepted, and the piers ordered…great acquisition and initial move towards getting a real observatory. The transit was out of proportion to all our other instruments…I took an early opportunity of calling the attention of the Managers to our need of an equatorially mounted telescope. The answer to this was, that there was no money to pay for such an instrument or for a building to put it in. A subscription was therefore started to raise the money, and was so far successful, that in about six months Thomas Kimber Jr. was appointed by the Managers to join me in making a contract with Henry Fitz for one his [sic.] largest instruments…was not what it should have been according to the contract, nor was the mounting. But before the final payment was made, the parties…agreed that it was nearly so as could be expected.” (Hugh Vail Memoirs, red notebook, pg. 28-31)

“The first site selected was that of John Gummere’s observatory. But when this was staked out, and were about to excavate for the foundation, I became convinced that it would be too much surrounded by trees and that the house would house and woods would interfere with some observations. I at once went to the city and obtained the consent of some of the managers to locate it off the college grounds…While I was staking out the foundations, and making the lines due north and south, and east and west, some of our neighbors were greatly puzzled to know ‘with what I was squaring it’ as it did not square with either the college or the road. My reply ‘with the earth,’ probably did not much enlighten them.” (Hugh Vail Memoirs, red notebook, pg. 31-32)

“When completed, all the instruments from the small building were removed to the new observatory, and the building itself converted into a paint shop. The granite pier the support of John Gummere’s transit was left lying for a long time on the ground, where it had stood. But some thirty years ago (I speak from memory) I had it replanted in its original site and a dial, carefully computed to the latitude of Haverford placed on it. I am told this stone, after having been removed to the front of the old college building has since been replaced and duly marked as one of the historical monuments of the school; while the dial is on another stone in front of the house.” (Hugh Vail Memoirs, red notebook, pg. 32-33.)

“Equatorial telescope, a Meridian Transit circle, an 18 inch transit instrument, by Dollond, mounted in the Prime Vertical, a sidereal clock, and Bond’s ingenious and beautiful “Spring Governor.”” (Description of the Observatory. Haverford College. 1857. HCHC Box 1830s-1870s)

Henry Fitz made the telescope, 8 ¼ aperture, focal length 11ft., “furnished with eye-pieces, varying in power from 60-900 times.” (Description of the Observatory).

Cost said to be $1,950, transit circle made by William J. Young of Philadelphia (A History of Haverford College for the First Sixty Years of its Existence, pg. 253.)

Strawbridge Modifications-1883

Driven mainly by Isaac Sharpless.

“The Executive Committee reported that the Professor of Astronomy having for some time felt the need of improved facilities for his Observatory work they had concluded to procure a 10 inch refracting telescope, of first class make, with the needed equipment, provided the necessary funds, estimated at $4000., could be raised by voluntary contributions. They, also, reported that the sum of $4075. had been promised for the purpose and that it was their intention to order the instrument so soon as Prof. Sharpless decides as to the maker and some other details. The Board approved the action…provided the funds of the Corporation are not called upon for any part of the Expense.” (B.ofM. Minutes April 26, 1883.)

“The following contract with Alvan Clark + Sons, of Cambridge Port, Mass. for the new 10 inch telescope was read and approved. Information was received from Prof. Sharpless that the instrument was promised on or before 11mo. 1st 1883. ‘We hereby agree to make for Haverford College Observatory a 10 inch achromatic object glass with mounting to correspond. The lens will be made of the best material procurable and of best possible shape. The mounting will be similar in general plan to that of the West Point Telescope and of proportionate size. Omitting micrometer, eyepieces, regulator for clock and apparatus for reading the circles from the eye end. The workmanship will all be first class. The charge will be $3800. to be paid when the telescope is mounted and is pronounced satisfactory by Prof. Sharpless.’” (B.ofM. Minutes June 1, 1883.)

“New Observatory building intended to house the new 10 inch refractor lately ordered by the aid of various interested friends of the College. This building is in process of erection, adjoining the Observatory built in 1852, with which it will be connected by covered passage. Presented by James Whitall. (B.ofM. Minutes December 7, 1883.)

Total cost of observatory $2332.69, total cost for telescope $3900. (B.ofM. Minutes October 13, 1884.)