THE BEGINNING AND END OF A JESUIT OBSERVATORY
(1841-1972)

by
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A young man from Ireland had taken a position teaching mathematics at Seton College in Philadelphia when he decided to apply for admission to the Jesuits. His name was James Curley. Not much was known about his noviceship days but he appears in his own notes as a Jesuit priest in 1827 and is still teaching mathematics. He is assigned to Georgetown where he exhibited not only an interest in hard science in almost every form from Botany, (then biology), chemistry and physics, (then Natural Philosophy), but was even a competent gardener and landscape artist. He planted the first banana tree in Washington.

In those days the campus of Georgetown was mostly a farm with its cows, giving their fresh milk no doubt to the growing boys in the dormitory, chickens stalking all over and vineyards for altar wine. Through all this maze snaked a foot path worn smooth and barren by the feet of Jesuits reading their divine office that was much longer in those days than it is now. The path was a mile in length, stretching from the front of Old North with its octagonal towers past the little cemetery where the parking sign now reads for Staff Only, into the woods with some of the primeval forest trees on the edge of a deep ravine to the property boundary along what is now Reservoir Road and past a venerable old tree whose proportions won reverence from the worst of the knives of the blazers who put their graffiti of pierced hearts in the bark of so many Georgetown trees. Then the path circled back past the edge of the pasture and vineyard where it ended up climbing to the back of the Mulledy building where most of the Jesuits lived.

At one point it met a T where a narrow lane rose to the crest between the pasture and the vineyard where James Curley felt there ought to be an astronomical observatory. He had this in mind when he and the Rector visited the U.S. Capitol where there was an exhibit of instruments used by the famous Exploring Expedition of Commodore Peary, of Lake Erie fame when he sent word, "We have met the enemy, and they are our's." On display there was a small instrument on an alt-azimuth mount with circles that read to 10 seconds of arc and levels that had the best sensitivity abtainable at the time. It was made by Ertl and Sons of Germany.