Henrietta Swan Leavitt

Astronomer

1868 -1921

Henrietta Swan Leavitt was an American astronomer who discovered the Cepheid luminosity-period relationship, laying the foundation for the revelation that the universe was expanding. She discovered that the luminosity and pulse period of Cepheid variable stars are related, creating the first “standard candle” to allow for measurements of distance between the Milky Way and other galaxies in the universe. This led to the measurements that revealed “Hubble’s Law”.

Miss Leavitt began her astronomical work in 1893 at the age of 25, when she joined the Harvard College Observatory as a female “computer”, cataloging variable stars on photographic plates for 30 cents an hour. Despite both chronic illness and increasing deafness that began around the start of her time at the Observatory, she was known to her peers to be “a variable-star fiend”: meticulous and brilliantly productive. She eventually became the head of stellar photometry at Harvard, though never being awarded a degree for her multiple PhDs of contribution to stellar photometry and variable stars. She remains a mysterious figure since her death in 1921 due to her humility in life; she left behind no diaries, memoirs, or boxes of correspondence.