Observatory Hill’s Namesake: A Brief History

Photo from Abbey Quarterly v. 3 n.1 p. 12 January 1985
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/SJUArchives/id/19429
1886 Lake Sagatagan from Observatory Hill (before the Observatory was built),
_Worship & Work_ p. 70g
Then there was the tower, as it was called, or more properly the observatory, a frame structure, but rude, on the summit of a hill in the forest, to the east of the college. The platform was elevated some twenty feet above ground and beneath it was a lattice-work bower in which many a story book was devoured of a Sunday afternoon when summer was lovely in its verdure and the song of the Minnesota birds. A rickety old ladder carried you to the top whence a fine view could be had of the surrounding woodland with scattered farmhouses and far on the eastern horizon the most prominent features of St. Cloud could be distinguished with the bare eye. Time's ravages passed over the concern and finally leveled it to the ground. If you visit this mound today there is not the slightest vestige of the "tower."
1896 Plat Book of Stearns County, Minnesota by C.M. Foste – p. 43, Collegeville Township, Saint John’s College
http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/stearns/id/389/rec/1
p. 27, Avon Township; p. 43, Collegeville Township
Water tower photo from “The Old Water (Watch) Tower – Saint John’s Guardian,” Abbey Banner January 1985 v. 3 n. 1 p. 6
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/SJUArchives/id/19423
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Text & water tower photo from “The Old Water (Watch) Tower – Saint John’s Guardian,” Abbey Banner January 1985 v. 3 n. 1 p. 6
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Last November the astronomical building was so far completed that the setting up and adjusting of the instruments could be begun. The accompanying cut gives a fair view of the observatory. Recently the hill which is about 200 yds. east of the University and just south of the road leading to Collegeville. The top of the revolving dome is 321 ft. above the ground. The entrance faces the south and leads to what is designed to be the permanent

Adjoining it is the transit-instrument and the chronograph; this part is 9½ x 12½ ft. Opposite windows, facing north and south, and a continuous slit in the roof which is ordinarily covered by shutters, afford a complete view of the meridian from horizon to horizon.

From here we enter the round tower which has a diameter of 16 ft. In the center rises a pier of masonry to the respectable height of 19 ft. Altogether independent it pierces the second floor and wears a handsome cap of Kasota stone 8 inch. thick, to which the telescope is bolted. The telescope is mounted equatorially, which means that its principal axis is parallel to the axis of the earth and consequently points to the north pole of the heavens, wherever it is called “polar axis”; perpendicular to this is the
History of a Memory

by Mike Williams

Shortly after the groundbreaking ceremony for the new Prep School last September, a crane eased the top from the old observatory, preserving it for a future one. Then the crane’s wrecking ball and cuts’ blades demolished the building to make room for the new Prep School. Nearly sixty-seven years had elapsed between the raising and the razing of the St. John’s Observatory.

Back in the 1890’s Father Subprior Peter Engel, O.S.B., was deeply interested not only in what lay beyond the stars but in the stars themselves. But he didn’t possess the instruments necessary to indulge in his hobby and there were no instruments available to him in this area. His desire to study the stars eventually prompted him to seek some means of obtaining at least a telescope and whatever other equipment was needed to further his astronomical pursuits. He did not have the ready cash to purchase the instruments and as Father Abbot had repeatedly explained, buying them with community funds would divert money from possible community good to a non-essential. The Abbot’s edict settled the matter as far as everyone was concerned—everyone, that is, except the subprior. Father Peter persisted in his desire. He reasoned and reiterated, discussed and debated, proposed and proposed until 1900 when, after convincing Abbot Bernard that a telescope would be an asset to the entire community, he was given the green light to order one. Father Peter used his hard-earned permission to purchase a top-grade, precision, 60-inch telescope from the world renowned optician, J. A. Braheur. He immediately mounted his prize on the water tower, a logical site.

Father Peter next requested permission to order more equipment because, as he cajoled, these other instruments, position micro-meter, astronomical clock, chronograph, and transit-instrument, would increase the effectiveness of the telescope greatly. Father Abbot granted this permission more readily, for by then Father Peter had done a near-complete job of “brain-washing.” Immediately after receiving these instruments, Father Peter sought permission to erect a building which could contain all the instruments, explaining that it would increase the efficiency of the instruments. Abbot Bernard was very reluctant to grant this permission for one very good reason—he had no money. However, after carefully weighing the merits of the idea—academic potentiality and prestige it would bring to the campus (it would be one of the first observatories in Minnesota)—Father Abbot okayed plans for an observatory, hoping that he would soon be able to pay for it.

The site chosen was 200 yards east of the campus proper, close enough so that it could be reached from anywhere on campus in ten minutes, yet remote enough that campus lights would not impair the telescope’s effectiveness. The location overlooking Lake Sagisagen was sufficiently elevated to assure a commanding view of the horizon.

In November, 1894, the telescope was removed from the water tower and, along with the other instruments, placed in the near-completed observatory. Abbot Bernard died that same month. The election of Subprior Peter to succeed as Abbot was ironical, for now the observatory was ready for use, and Father Peter, the one who had most wanted apparatus for it and who was now in a position to greatly foster astronomical pursuits, would probably be too busy to ever use it.

Father Peter’s dream building was outwardly very plain, yet as structurally sound as its 3-foot solid foundation of masonry. Stressing efficiency and purpose, the interior of the building was even less decorative than the outside. The observatory’s three rooms were conservative in color and their 280 square feet contained no luxuries. The only entrance to the observatory, on the southwest corner, led to the computation room, where astronomer did their more complicated calculations. This room was furnished with chair, desk, and light—all that was needed. The adjoining room held the transit instruments and chronograph, the former observing the meridian passages of heavenly bodies, the latter recording the time of various observations. A thirty-two foot high tower capped by the revolving dome housed the telescope and position micrometer.

Now the observatory is gone. And used by relatively few, but admired by most, it will live for all as long as there is an “Observatory Hill.”

On left: Ca. 1915 – Rudolph Welle photo, from O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Images\Buildings\Observatory
On right: Groundbreaking takes place Sept. 14, 1961
O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Images\Buildings\SJP
On left: Ca. 1915 – Rudolph Welle photo, from O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Images\Buildings\Observatory
Photos on right from: O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Images\Buildings\SJP
Campus map from inside the covers of the 1942 *Sagatagan* yearbook
1919 Sagatagan, p. 77
Middle photo from red scrapbook in the SJU Archives
“What sculpture is to a block of marble, 
Education is to a human soul.” —Addison

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Ad for St. John’s, 1921-22
Photo from red scrapbook in the SJU Archives
Text from 1919 *Sagatogan* yearbook, p. 78-79 (p. 39-40 of the pdf)
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/SJUArchives/id/17055/show/17037
“Section I. The club shall possess [sic] all skis, tobbaggons [sic], or any other property of outdoor winter sports, and these are to be used by members only."

“Section II. Observatory hill shall be reserved for use to the members of this club and the Juniors only.”

One of the many wonderful club & society ledgers in the SJU Archives
1941 *Sagatagan* p. 44 (of the pdf)

http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/SJUArchives/id/18438/show/18409
Text from an April 1953 *Scriptorium* article (p. 76); Fr. Hilary Thimmesh, the only one of the five who became a permanent member of the Abbey, recalled it thus: “The toboggan run started at the very top of Pine Knob and headed more or less west on a more or less straight downhill course—usually avoiding trees. The slope was not heavily wooded, but we managed to locate one of them….It was the last time I went tobogganing. The toboggan ended up with a tree in the middle of it and the five of us strewed around the perimeter in deep snow. Pine Knob gave you a great double-dip ride downhill, into the dip about halfway down, then up, over, and down the long final slope. Then a LONG haul back to the top of the hill to do it over again. Since then the hill is entirely reforested with no trace of the toboggan run.”
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