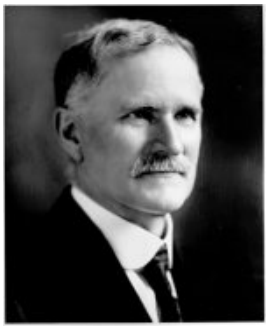
The Lamont-Hussey Observatory
1928 - 1974

The intriguing story about one of Bloemfontein's best kept astronomical secrets

The 27 inch Lamont Refractor is displayed (above) late in its operational life.
It was one of the largest refractor telescopes in the southern hemisphere and did extensive research in the field of double stars.

The Lamont-Hussey Observatory

The Story of a Friendship


Professor WJ Hussey

The name of the Observatory refers to W.J. Hussey and a good friend of his, R.P. Lamont. Hussey and Lamont were University students in engineering in Michigan (USA), in the late 1880's. They were both very ambitious as Hussey wanted to be a great and well-known astronomer and Lamont wanted to be a rich and respected businessman. There existed a strong friendship between them and it was maintained even after they left university.


Mr. RP Lamont

Hussey did become a great astronomer and performed research at the Lick Observatory in California, where he studied variable stars. The results of his research lead him to being awarded the *Lalande Gold Medal of the Paris Academy of Science.*

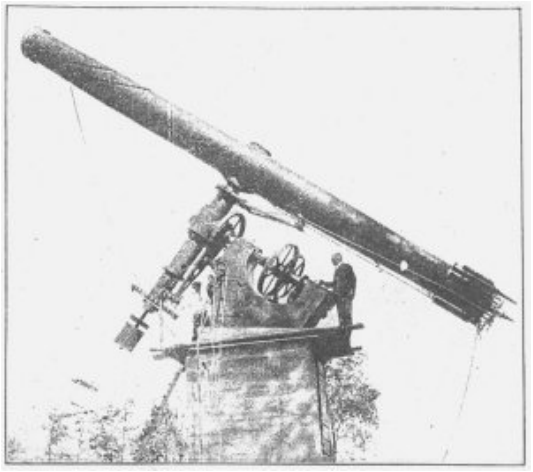
Mr. Lamont did become a wealthy businessman and decided in 1909 to provide funds for the construction of an observatory in the Southern Hemisphere, so Hussey could continue his research in the field of double stars. By this time, Hussey was a Professor in Astronomy at the University of Michigan.

Photo credits: Bentley Historical Library, (University of Michigan).

Plans for a Southern Hemisphere Observatory

In the 1910's a lot of research was still necessary for the mapping and cataloguing of double stars in the southern hemisphere. Prof. W.J. Hussey from the University of Michigan, who would have been the first director of the Observatory was it not for his untimely death, was well known for his work in double star research in the northern hemisphere.

Plans for the observatory and a 24 inch refractor began as early as 1910. World War I intervened, and not till after the war was a **27 inch lens** finally obtained.



The photo on the right shows the gigantic 27 inch refractor where it was set up and calibrated at Ann Arbor in Michigan, USA.

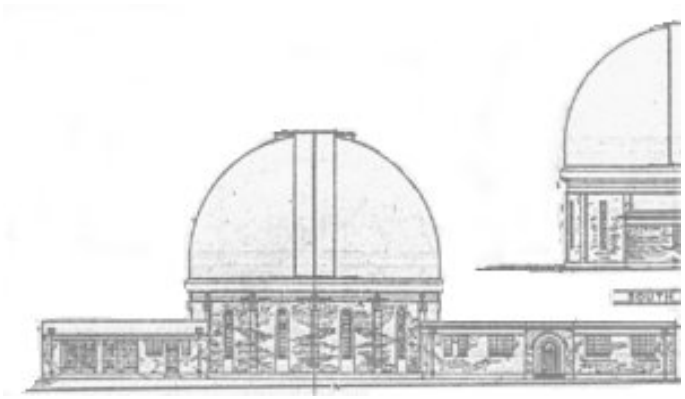
The telescope consists mainly of its tube (separable into two pieces), the counterweight and the mounting. A man is just visible standing to the right of the mounting.

The First Expedition

The first expedition to South Africa was planned for October 1926 and the telescope was also sent directly to South Africa during that time. The party consisted of Hussey and his wife, Rossiter and his wife and their two children. They travelled via London. Just prior to their departure, Hussey had an attack of pleurisy (inflammation of the lungs). One night in London during a dinner with friends he suddenly sank into his chair and died instantly and without pain.

It meant the end of a wonderful dream, but **Rossiter** decided he would continue with Hussey's dream and make it a reality. He decided on Naval Hill in Bloemfontein (a game reserve) as the location for the construction of the building. The municipality met the project with open arms and made generous capital service contributions.
Right: Photo appearing in an article in *Die Burger* – 01/05/1928

Construction of the Building and Dome



Construction of the Observatory commenced in **1927**. In 1928 the telescope and dome were installed and research began on 11 May of that year. The first director was Dr. R.A. Rossiter (also from the University of Michigan). He started an 8 year research project in the mapping of double stars.

The Observatory was opened by the mayor **on 28 April 1928** and research began shortly after.

Research at the Observatory

The first research team consisted of Dr. Rossiter, Mr. H.F. Donner and Mr. M.K. Jessup, all from the University of Michigan. The first double star project had a planned time span of 8 years and over 5 000 double stars were discovered by 1937. By 1947, a total of 7 200 double stars have been found and 25 000 measurements of double stars had been made. Rossiter remained director until 1952. In 1956 noted astronomer Earl C Slipher and an international team visited the Observatory to take photos of Mars. The Observatory was reopened for double star observations in 1962 by its last director, Frank Holden.

Final Days...

Holden made repeated observations of most of the double stars previously discovered at the Observatory in order to see which ones moved. He was director until 1971 when all observations ended. In 1974 the observatory closed and in 1975, the telescope's optics were removed and sent back to Michigan, where it is in safe keeping to this day.

The Observatory Theatre

The University of Michigan gave the building to PACOFS (1976) (who used it as a theatre) and the telescope fell into the hands of the Municipality. During the curatorship of PACOFS the building hosted one of South Africa's most unique theatres. The telescope met a more unfortunate fate as it was discarded to an open veld behind storage buildings, but it was salvaged and kept in safe-keeping in the Fire Station Museum in Erlichpark (the tube, counterweight and mounting).

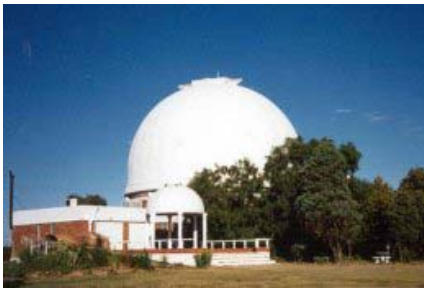


Photo: Wendy Stone

Research: the people involved

Much research has been done on the history of the Lamont-Hussey Observatory. Dr. Patrick Seitzer of the University of Michigan has supplied the South African researchers with a large amount of information. Also part of the research team is Mr. Willie Koorts from SAAO in Cape Town and the members belonging to the History group of ASSA Bloemfontein in the Free State. Wendy Stone from the University of the Free State has done her thesis on the observatory's past and present profile. Through all the research though, there are still loose ends and even mysteries waiting to be solved...