

STATE OF CONNECTICUT

CONNECTICUT HISTORICAL COMMISSION59 South Prospect Street, Hartford, Connecticut 06106
(203) 566-3005HISTORIC RESOURCES INVENTORY FORM
For Buildings and Structures

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

TOWN NO.: _____ SITE NO.: _____
UTM: 18/---/---/---/---/---
QUAD: _____
DISTRICT: S NR: ACTUAL
POTENTIALIDENTIFICATION

1. BUILDING NAME: Common: Van Vleck Observatory Historic: same
2. TOWN/CITY: Middletown VILLAGE: _____ COUNTY: Middlesex
3. STREET & NUMBER (and/or location): At end of access road near 90 Cross Street
4. OWNER(S): Wesleyan University PUBLIC PRIVATE
5. USE: Present: Observatory Historic: same
6. ACCESSIBILITY TO PUBLIC: Exterior visible from public road: yes no
Interior accessible: yes, explain with permission no

DESCRIPTION

7. STYLE OF BUILDING: Functional DATE OF CONSTRUCTION: 1914 to 1916
8. MATERIAL(S) (indicate use or location when appropriate):
 clapboard asbestos siding brick
 wood shingle asphalt siding fieldstone
 board & batten stucco cobblestone
 aluminum siding concrete: type: _____ cut stone: type: brownstone
 other: _____ coursed rough block and smooth trim
9. STRUCTURAL SYSTEM:
 wood frame: post and beam balloon
 load bearing masonry structural iron or steel (interior framing)
 other: _____
10. ROOF: type:
 gable flat mansard monitor sawtooth
 gambrel shed hip round other _____
 material:
 wood shingle roll asphalt tin slate
 asphalt shingle built up tile other: _____
11. NUMBER OF STORIES: 1½ APPROXIMATE DIMENSIONS: 85'x145'
12. CONDITION: Structural: excellent good fair deteriorated
 Exterior: excellent good fair deteriorated
13. INTEGRITY: Location: on original site moved, when: _____
 Alterations: no yes, explain: Addition of west dome and corresponding interior modifications (c. 1959)
14. RELATED OUTBUILDINGS OR LANDSCAPE FEATURES:
 barn shed garage other landscape features or buildings: domed tele-scope enclosure, west
 carriage house shop garden
15. SURROUNDING ENVIRONMENT: College campus
 open land woodland residential scattered buildings visible from site
 commercial industrial rural high building density
16. INTERRELATIONSHIP OF BUILDING AND SURROUNDINGS: Wesleyan's Van Vleck Observatory crowns Foss Hill, the highest point on campus. The old college cemetery and modern, similarly styled dormitories are nearby. A lawn gradually slopes down to Andrus Field with College Row, the focal point of campus activity, beyond. From the campus below, this low building's only apparent feature is its distinctive white dome.

17. OTHER NOTABLE FEATURES OF BUILDING OR SITE (interior and/or exterior):

Original or early electric fixtures

Astronomical equipment: six-inch visual refractor obtained by Wesleyan's first president, Wilbur Fisk, in 1836; twenty-inch visual refractor with a focal length of 27.6 feet

SIGNIFICANCE

Architect: Henry Bacon

Builder: Mylchreest Brothers

18. HISTORICAL OR ARCHITECTURAL IMPORTANCE: VanVleck Observatory, dedicated in 1916, was the third observatory built on campus. Designed by Henry Bacon, it is part of the largest concentration of his architecture in the country. Bacon, whose most famous achievement is the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., planned this building in collaboration with Dr. Frederick Slocum. Slocum, who later came to Wesleyan, was nationally known for his work in solar astronomy.

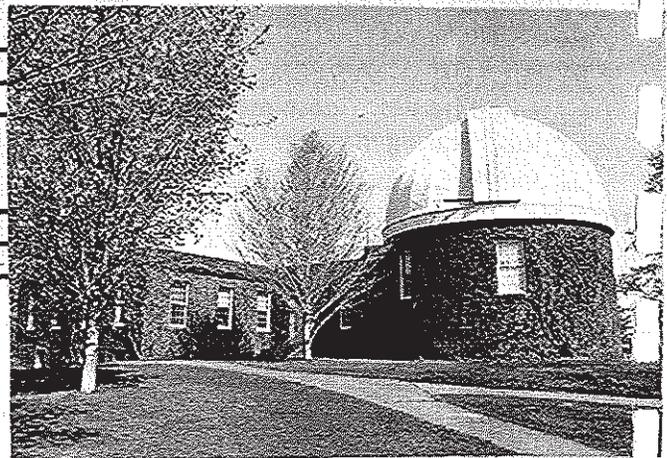
This low building has a cross plan with a round turret at its east end. A white steel dome caps the turret and is the observatory's most prominent feature. The rotating dome is thirty-two feet in diameter and weighs three tons. This structure houses a telescope that was (in 1964) "one of thirty-eight of equal or larger size in the world and the largest refractor in New England." The floor of the turret can be rotated and elevated to facilitate its use. Beyond the turret, a simple parapet borders the roof. The building's main decorative element is its coursed rock-faced walls. Like the exterior, interior decorations are minimal. A marble tablet, designed by the architect and displayed in the main hall, reads, "This observatory the gift of Joseph Van Vleck, commemorates the service rendered to Wesleyan University 1853-1902, by his brother John Monroe Van Vleck, professor of Mathematics and Astronomy."

PHOTOGRAPH

photographer: Roger Sherman

date: 6/78 view: northwest

negative on file: Roll 23, #18



COMPILED BY:

name: Robert Svec date: 8/78

organization: Greater Middletown Preservation Trust

address: 27 Washington St., Middletown, Ct. 06457

19. SOURCES: Wesleyan University Archives; Ruth Ryley Seldon, "Henry Bacon and His Work at Wesleyan University (Unpublished Master's Thesis, 1974)

20. SUBSEQUENT FIELD EVALUATIONS:

21. THREATS TO BUILDING OR SITE:

none known highways vandalism developers other: _____
 renewal private deterioration zoning explanation: _____