

HISTORY OF THE EAST DOME, GEORGE OBSERVATORY, BRAZOS BEND STATE PARK

Leonard Patillo

Late in 1986, an idea that was conceived from a Haley Comet watch in Brazos Bend State Park, the Houston Museum of Natural Science made plans to somehow purchase a telescope and locate it somewhere that would be easily accessible to the public. This came about during the Haley's Comet mania early in 1986 and due primarily to a response of over 7000 people one Saturday night in early 1986. There were so many people that the park had to be closed and traffic was backed up on FM762 for miles and miles.

And so, a meeting was arranged between Museum officials and representatives of all the local Astronomy Clubs. Plans were discussed, including how much it would cost and where would we put it.

To make a very long story short, months and months of meetings and discussions were held when we were notified that a telescope belonging to LSU was available for a very reasonable price. This was a 36" research instrument. An offer was made to LSU and it was accepted. Now we had the instrument, where do we put such a large telescope. Meetings, and meetings later, someone suggested we might be able to locate it in Brazos Bend State Park. It certainly would be accessible to the public and would be close by. Now all we had to do was convince the State Park people in Austin that we had this huge telescope and that we wanted to make it available to the public free of charge and we wanted to locate it in one of their parks. Well, to our utter amazement, the Park people thought it was one of the best ideas that had come along in a long time.

A survey of Brazos Bend State Park showed that there was one area that was higher than any other. A stake was driven into the ground marking the spot.

You may wonder how all of the above history has anything to do with the East dome, but bear with me...it's coming.

Funds were solicited from major contributors beginning in mid-1988. Sometime during construction, it was determined that not enough funds were available to construct the three domes that were in the original plans. So the two smaller domes were removed from construction.

The Fort Bend Astronomy Club was determined to have at least one of the smaller domes constructed, so the members voted to take on the responsibility of raising the necessary funds to construct the 16' East Dome. There were car washes, bake sales, hamburger bashes, and anything else we could think of to raise the necessary money for construction of the East Dome. The membership alone donated over \$12,000 from individual members. AT last ...we raised the \$23,000 and it was presented to the Museum for construction. There was only one stipulation in the deal ...the dome would become the property of the Museum, but would be operated and maintained by the Fort Bend Astronomy Club.

O.K we got ourselves a Dome, but what do we put in it. Many types of telescopes were considered, keeping in mind that it would be used by our members and for public viewing.

Word came that Meade Instruments was developing a 16" Cassegrain, and if we got in on the pre-production we could get this instrument for \$9,000. Suggested price during production would be around \$12,000. Meade was contacted and a down payment was sent to lock in the pre-production price.

Well that has been better that a year and a half ago, and Meade had gone through ownership change and the new owners didn't want to put any money into the new instrument. We once again contacted Meade to see what our status was and were informed that the original owners had repurchased the company and were going ahead with development of the 16" instrument and if we would be patient we would be getting a much superior instrument than originally ordered.

Meade Instruments then made us an offer. If we would not cancel our order for the 16" instrument, they would sell us a Meade 10" with any accessories we wanted at dealer cost, and if the 10" was in good

shape when delivery of the 16" was made, they would re-purchase it for full purchase price. Now that was an offer we could not refuse...

The Club has about \$2,800 in the 10" instrument that is now the East Dome, making it a total investment of \$4,800. We needed more money to complete the deal. No more car washes, no more cake sales, no more whatever... We needed a lot of money fast and easy ...and the way to get it is to solicit Foundations for funds. We had to be careful not to approach any of the Museum's Foundations. It probably would not set too well with them ...so other avenues were taken.

The Hobby Foundation contributed \$10,000; Fluor Daniel gave \$5000, and British Petroleum \$800. We are working with the Nalco Foundation for an additional \$10,000. So we have the money now, all we need is the 16" instrument from Meade, which now is scheduled for delivery during the first quarter of 1993.

So, that is the history of the East Dome. If you as a new member would like to see what the club has done with the East Dome, come out to the George Observatory any Saturday night during public viewing, and if you want to use the instrument or take part in public viewing night let me know, it is a very easy 10 minute training session to become an operator.

Clear ...Dark Skies

Leonard Pattillo, Pres. Fort Bend Astronomy Club

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And now...more of the story.

Mid-1992 had originally been estimated for delivery of the 16" Meade. When Leonard wrote the history in late 1992, the expectation was that Meade would be able to deliver the 16" within a few months, but the date continued to be extended until in February 1993, it was to be delayed until at least September. In the meantime, Loyd Overcash had offered to sell his 18" Newtonian reflector at an excellent price as an alternate. Even with expected modifications that would have to be made to the existing pier and dome, the price would be about half that of the Meade.

In the Feb 93 issue of The FBAC Observer, president Leonard Patillo suggested that the membership discuss the option of purchasing the 18" Newtonian versus the 16" Meade. During the February FBAC meeting both options were discussed and after the refreshment break it was moved and passed to definitely decide on the Meade during this meeting. A motion to cancel the Meade order passed 32 to 5, and a subsequent motion to purchase the 18" Newtonian passed 28 to 2.

Planning for revisions to be made to the East Dome began immediately. Modifications or additions had to be approved by the Houston Museum of Natural Science (HMNS). Although plans for the 18" Newtonian were initially turned down by HMNS, after extended discussions between FBAC/HMNS/George Observatory, the plans were finally approved in August 1993. This resulted in a Memorandum of Understanding between HMNS and FBAC as reproduced in the September FBAC Observer.

Reaching that point, of course, was not as smooth as perhaps implied. Leonard Patillo and other key members of FBAC as well as others not associated with the club worked many hours to achieve the satisfactory result that we see in the East Dome today.

Achieving approval for the plans allowed the physical work to begin on the pier and dome. Progress can be followed in issues of the Observer through May 1994 as detailed below. In fact, the telescope was ready for Astronomy Day held at the George Observatory in July 1994.

By then, the club was beginning to evaluate CCD cameras and later on to automate the 18"... but those are other stories.

For those who would like to follow the progress of the East Dome telescope project, please see the table on the following page and read the individual reports in The FBAC Observer. Many members helped to make the East Dome and the 18" telescope a reality. Mike Morton and Dennis Borgman were especially instrumental in the early planning, construction modifications, and installation of the 18".

Several FBAC groups used the 18" telescope to do research from a reasonably dark suburban sky. For example, Bill Dillon reported asteroid discoveries made with the 18" and a CCD camera for more than a year in The Observer. Many other examples have also been recorded in The Observer.

The East Dome and the 18" telescope has allowed FBAC to achieve it's purpose, "A non-profit organization dedicated to astronomy by teaching, sharing, and observing". By mid-1994, Jack McKaye, the first East Dome Coordinator was training and supervising volunteers to show "the stars" to visitors on Saturday nights. That sharing and teaching has continued each week for more than 12 years, providing countless visitors memories of the night sky at the George Observatory.

DJ McCracken, August 2006

Article	Issue	Highlight
"From the President"	February 1993	Discussion of the situation.
"Secretary's Report"	March 1993	February meeting minutes; vote taken.
"From the President"	March 1993	Modifications to be submitted to HMNS.
"From the President"	April 1993	Meade order has been cancelled.
"Secretary's Report"	June 1993	HMNS turned down the plans for the 18".
"Secretary's Report"	July 1993	June meeting minutes: Dennis Zwicky gave status.
"Secretary's Report"	August 1993	FBAC/HMNS/George communications improve.
"From the President"	August 1993	Good news..approval.
Page 8	September 1993	Memo of Understanding, HMNS and FBAC
"Secretary's Report"	September 1993	August meeting minutes...approval received.
"From the President"	October 1993	18" to be installed in October.
"Secretary's Report"	November 1993	Telescope is installed. Dennis Borgman has slides.
"From the President"	November 1993	Operator training is necessary.
"What's Happening in Feb"	February 1994	Floor to be completed in February.
"What's Happening in March"	March 1994	New finderscope for the 18".
"Secretary's Report"	March 1994	18" upgrade on hold, waiting for completion of 36" work.
"What's Happening in April"	April 1994	Invitation to check out the views from the 18".
"What's Happening in May"	May 1994	New floor has been installed.
"Secretary's Report"	May 1994	Jack McKaye coordinating volunteers for Sat. nights.
"Secretary's Report"	July 1994	CCD Camera Project