Denison Olmsted (1791-1859)

Denison Olmsted was born on June 18, 1791 in East Hartford, Connecticut. He started his career attending Yale University and graduated in 1813 with a B.A. Immediately after graduating he went to New London where he was in charge of the Union School. He stayed there for two years and in 1815 returned to Yale to be a tutor. After being at Yale for a couple of years Olmsted headed south to North Carolina where he made quite an impact at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill (UNC).

In 1817 Denison Olmsted was brought to the University of North Carolina to be the professor of chemistry and mineralogy and in 1824 geology was added to the mix. Not too long after Olmsted moved to Chapel Hill, Elisha Mitchell, who graduated from Yale the same year as Olmsted, also began teaching at UNC. Mitchell taught mathematics and natural philosophy. Together the two men pushed forward scientific learning at UNC and helped to recruit the most up-to-date scientific equipment for the university. In his 1859 address *Fifty Years Since*, William Hooper said the following about Olmsted and Mitchell:

> As for Chemistry and Integral Calculus and all that, we never heard of such hard things. They had not then crossed the Roanoke, nor did they appear among us, till they were brought in by the northern barbarians, about the year 1818.

In 1823, while at UNC, Olmsted was appointed director of a geological survey that the North Carolina General Assembly created. The Assembly funded the survey in response to the discovery of a 17-pound piece of gold in 1799. For the first survey Olmsted rode on horseback to the Smokey Mountains where he collected data and mineral specimens. His reports from the survey were published in 1825 and 1827 and were said to be the first state geological reports in the U.S.

Although Olmsted was busy promoting the development of the mineral and agricultural resources of North Carolina, he was drawn back to Yale in 1825 where he became the professor of mathematics and natural philosophy and also held a chair in astronomy. As soon as Olmsted returned to Yale the academic standards became more rigorous and he had a big part in that. Noah Porter said that before Olmsted was in office the tutor used to sit on the floor with the students in a relaxed setting and no record was ever made of a student's performance. After, he said that each tutor had to stand behind a "very ugly table, with a box before him, from which he drew the ballots which called the students" and not long after that the tutors began to mark in a book their assessment of the students' performance. Until 1830 or 1831 students voted to rank their fellow classmates and then the faculty took those votes into consideration when they assigned college honors.

At Yale, Olmsted's interest in astronomy grew and in 1830 Sheldon Clark gave a gift to Yale that make Olmsted's interest flourish. Clark gave the most powerful telescope in America, a five-inch reflecting telescope, to Yale. The telescope was placed in the steeple of Atheneum where the windows in the steeple prevented anyone from seeing more than thirty degrees above the horizon. Despite the restrictions of the steeple Olmsted and tutor Elias Loomis became the first people in America to report the return of Halley's Comet in 1835. This was not the first time that Olmsted made a mark in the astronomy world. In 1833 the Leonid meteor showers could be seen over America. After this storm, in 1834, Olmsted gathered all of his observations and published them in the *American Journal of Science and Arts*. Actually, the name Leonid meteors came from Olmsted's discovery that the meteors appeared to have originated from the constellation Leo. He realized that the meteors were just particles that were entering the atmosphere at a very high speed. In fact, Olmsted is credited with the start of meteor science.

In 1836 Anthony D. Stanley was appointed the professor of mathematics at Yale and for the first time mathematics was a separate department at Yale. As you can imagine, Olmsted was thrilled because he was now able to concentrate on natural philosophy and astronomy. When the Department of Philosophy and Arts (later to be the Graduate School and the Sheffield School of Science) was started on August 17, 1847, it had eleven students. The courses offered by Olmsted in the department were lectures on natural philosophy and astronomy and private instruction in experimental philosophy and astronomical calculations.

In 1849 an unidentified graduate student offered to raise $50,000 for a new astronomical observatory. President Woosely and Olmsted looked into the matter and decided that they could not pursue the goal at the time. This is interesting because Olmsted was not happy with the current observatory. It was even written in the diary of Hadley in 1851 that it seemed as though Olmsted was pushing for an observatory and that he had commented on how more money had been put towards chemistry than to natural philosophy. Hadley also wrote that Olmsted stated that Mr. Silliman (a professor of chemistry) was allowed $500 for apparatus and that he was refused $500 for his own department and that "Such was the difference between one man and another".

Nonetheless, there was still no money for a new observatory and the university was saying that the money was needed for salaries. In 1853 William Hillhouse donated a clock and transit telescope valued at $1,200 or more and Mrs. C. L. Hillhouse, along with her daughters, were kind enough to offer a site for a new astronomical observatory. But the college refused the offer! In 1858 they were again offered 6 acres of land only to be used as an observatory and this time the land was accepted but nothing was done with it. I can only imagine the frustration of Olmsted.

Sadly, on May 13, 1859 Olmsted died in New Haven, Connecticut. But his dream for a new observatory at Yale was still alive. In 1871 a successful businessman named Oliver F. Winchester bought the 32 acres of land next to the 6 acres that the college never did anything with. He then gave the 32 acres of land to Yale on the condition that it would be used "for astronomical and physical researches". Finally, Denison Olmsted's dream of an astronomical observatory was looking hopeful.

Written Sources:

1. Edgar S. Furniss, *The Graduate School of Yale: A Brief History*, The Carl Purington Rollins Printing Office, New Haven, Connecticut, 1965.
2. William S. Powell, *The First State University: A Pictorial History of The University of North Carolina*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1972.
3. Louis R. Wilson, *The University of North Carolina 1900-1930: The Making of a Modern University*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1957.
4. Brooks Mather Kelley, *Yale: A History*, Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1974.

Internet Sources:

1. Virtual American Biographies: http://www.famousamericans.net/denisonolmsted/
2. "A Long Look at Nature", a book by Margaret Martin: http://uncpress.unc.edu/chapters/martin_long.html
3. Astronomy Magazine: http://www.astronomy.com/Content/Dynamic/Articles/000/000/001/097zpuet.asp

Sasha Sisser
May 6, 2004