

Bell Burnell Observatory Key Points; Updated 04/15/2022

The Bell Burnell Observatory is located on the Promega campus in Fitchburg, WI. The building was first opened in 1882 as The Student Observatory at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. Today, the newly renovated 140-year-old observatory represents a long history and continued commitment to promoting education and public appreciation for astronomy.

- **1882 – UW-Madison opens The Student Observatory.** Future astronomers such as George Comstock and Sidney Townley began their education and careers in The Student Observatory before being allowed to work in Washburn Observatory.
 - Two major railroads depended on timekeeping performed in the observatory using the meridian transit. The Student Observatory was also used for the first North American measurements of atmospheric refraction and the constant of aberration.
- **1960 – Madison Astronomical Society relocates the Student Observatory to Fitchburg.** The observatory had been out of use for several decades, and the university offered to donate the building to MAS if MAS could facilitate moving it to a new location. They accomplished this with financial support from businessman and amateur astronomer Oscar Mayer.
 - The new site was on the grounds of Bjorksten Research Laboratories in Fitchburg. MAS used the facility for observations and public events until 1984.
- **2017-2021 – Bill Linton funds the restoration of the observatory.** Linton worked alongside a core team of engineers, astronomers and craftsmen on renovations that were completed in 2021.
 - The interior now features inlaid wood floors and a library with built-in hardwood shelves. The movable dome has been restored and now houses state-of-the-art reflector and refractor telescopes with cameras to capture celestial objects near and far.
 - The observatory is one of the ten oldest operational observatories in the United States, yet its updated equipment makes it suitable for sophisticated observations and research.
- **2022 – Bill Linton suggests naming the renovated observatory after Professor Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell.** Jocelyn Bell Burnell is an astronomer best known for discovering the rapidly spinning neutron stars later named “pulsars” while she was a graduate student at the University of Cambridge.
 - Jocelyn Bell Burnell has shown a lifelong commitment to supporting women and other marginalized groups in astronomy. Her work aligns with Linton’s goal for the observatory to foster education and public appreciation of astronomy in Madison.
- **The Future of The Bell Burnell Observatory –** Educational programs at The Bell Burnell Observatory are managed by the BTC Institute. These activities are supported by a dedicated education fund established by Bill Linton and Dargar Bjorksten.
 - The BTC Institute is planning to incorporate activities at the Bell Burnell Observatory in several of its educational programs in 2022, including this summer’s Celebration of Life program in partnership with the African American Ethnic Academy.
 - Other collaborations will provide education and entertainment opportunities for community members of all ages.
 - The Bell Burnell Observatory is also equipped to support modern astronomy research, and observations from the telescopes are already providing supporting data to a research project at UW-Madison. Undergraduate students are also receiving mentoring and hands-on experience inside the building, a continuation of the observatory’s long history in education.

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