

YOUHADTOASK

By Chris Potter, Managing Editor of *Pittsburgh City Paper* and writer of the weekly "You Had to Ask" column

A friend of mine says there are two bodies buried in the Allegheny Observatory. I find that hard to believe. Is it true?

— Mary Bates, McCandless

Just about any observatory offers viewers the chance to look at the burned-out embers of long-dead stars, but how many give you the chance to do so while practically standing on top of the burned-out embers of long-dead stargazers?

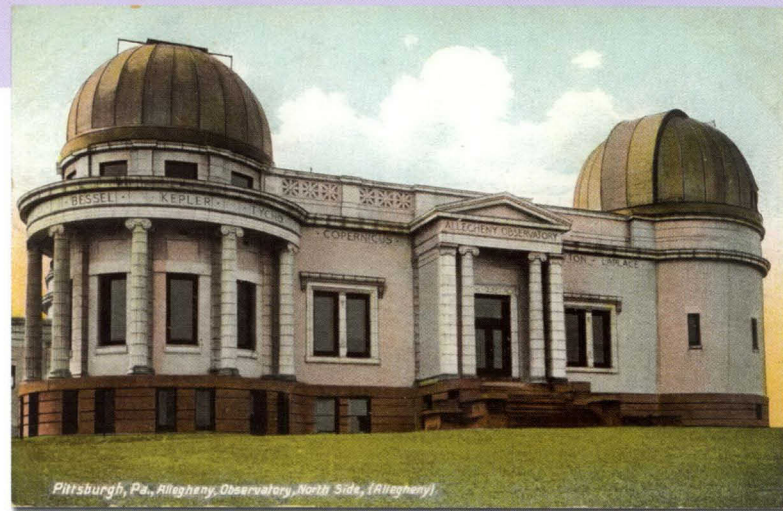
Located on Pittsburgh's aptly-named Observatory Hill on the North Side, the Allegheny Observatory actually has the remains of four people interred within it. All four were cremated, an appropriate end for people who spent their lives studying the glow of celestial furnaces millions of miles away.

The ashes in question are stored in the foundation of the James E. Keeler Memorial Telescope, a 31-inch reflecting scope named for the second person to head the University of Pittsburgh's astronomy program – and the first one to be buried inside its facilities.

James Keeler was an accomplished astronomer in the 1890s. He was best known for proving through spectrographic analysis that Saturn's rings, which look solid from earth, were made up of dust and countless rocks orbiting around the planet. But Keeler was hampered by the small size of his observatory's telescopes. He sought to make new discoveries – he longed for stardom, if you will – and started agitating for a new facility with more sophisticated equipment. Keeler even drew a proposed plan for Allegheny Observatory in 1895. He also enlisted the help of John Brashear, a former South Side steelworker who was making an international reputation for himself by grinding precision lenses that made possible numerous advances in astronomy.

Brashear was a beloved local figure, but at first the stars did not smile on his efforts to attract the attention of Pittsburgh's moneyed interests, who had their minds on other things. As two of Brashear's biographers, Harriet Gaul and Ruby Eiseman, ask in their book *Pennsylvania Lives: John Alfred Brashear*, "What were Saturn's rings to people building museums and city parks?"

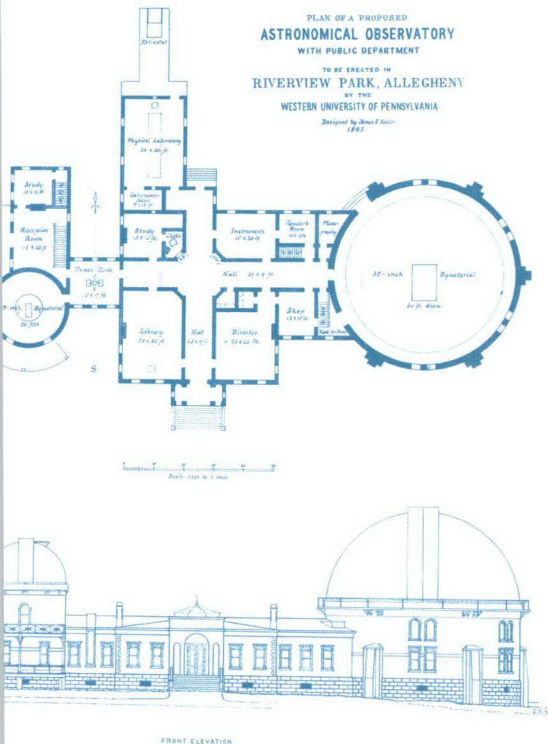
So like any knowledge worker, Keeler left Pittsburgh for California, establishing a trend that would be followed for the next century



or so. Keeler had been offered a job at California's prestigious Lick Observatory, only to be licked by it two years later. Thanks partly to the chilly nighttime mountain air he was exposed to, Keeler contracted a fatal case of pneumonia and died in 1900.

Brashear, who served as Keeler's interim replacement for a time and who finally got funding from railroad mogul, William Thaw, to build Allegheny Observatory, discovered perhaps the only means of retaining talent that Pittsburgh city elders haven't tried. He brought Keeler's remains back to Pittsburgh so they could be interred in the observatory. "Brashear had always mourned that he had been unable to complete raising the funds ... in time to prevent Keeler's leaving," write Gaul and Eiseman, "and felt it only fitting that the place where [Keeler] had spent most of his working years should be his final resting place." Probably the last place most of us would want our remains to be kept is at work – unless the company was paying overtime.

In 1905, Keeler's ashes were placed in the foundation of the newly built observatory's reflecting telescope. His son's ashes were later interred alongside him. So were those of Brashear's wife, Phoebe, in 1910. As Brashear later recounted in his autobiography, "[B]y mutual understanding her remains were cremated and I placed the ashes ... under the dome of the new Allegheny Observatory to which I had



Allegheny Observatory Collection, University Archives, University of Pittsburgh

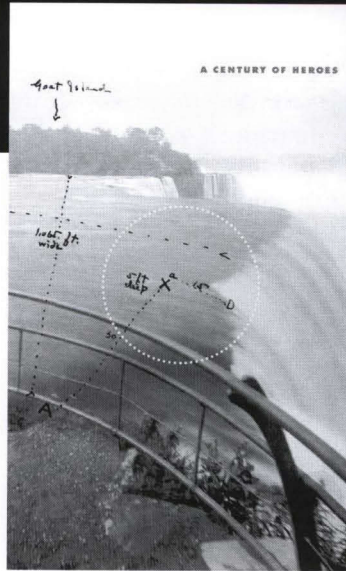
James E. Keeler's 1895 plan for Allegheny Observatory.

given so many years of my life." Brashear died 10 years later and was interred beside her.

Tour givers at the observatory will show you where the remains have been laid: the Brashears' tomb is covered with a marble slab into which Brashear had etched "an anonymous poem I came across in my early life [which expressed] as I could not do the real, the vital principle of our life's work." Taken from Sarah Williams' poem, *The Old Astronomer to his Pupil*, the inscription reads, "We have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night." Very touching, admittedly. But you'll note it does permit us to remain fearful of darkened observatories with dead people lying inside them. ☼

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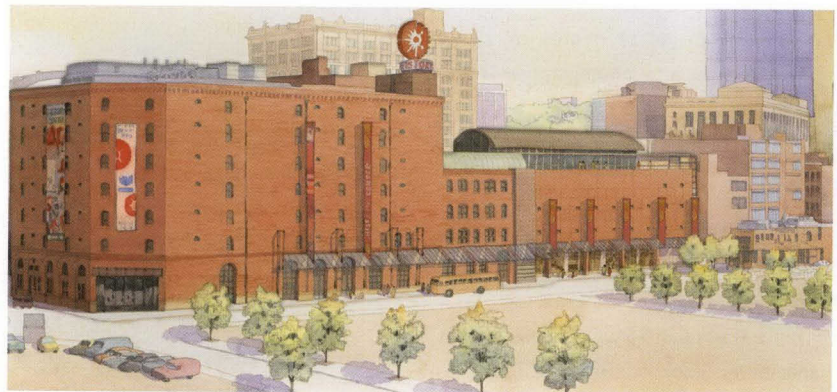
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