



THE OBSERVATORY ON LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN



Lookout Mountain - An Ideal Site

Who would have thought that at one time, Del Norte, Colorado was home to one of the finest telescopes in the entire country! The year was 1885, and the project was the dream of the Reverend George M. Darley.

The high altitude and clear skies of the San Luis Valley created an ideal environment for exploring the nighttime skies. But building the Observatory was not without its challenges.

Lookout Mountain (often referred to as Mt. Lookout), at 8,468' elevation, towers 600' above the small town of Del Norte. And in 1885 there was no easy route to the peak. [\[Read More: Environment\]](#)

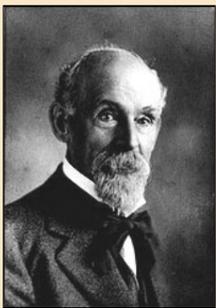
The Presbyterian College of the Southwest

The history of the Observatory is closely intertwined with that of the Rev. George M. Darley and the Presbyterian College of the Southwest. Darley was instrumental in the founding of the College in Del Norte, and the building of its state-of-the-art observatory.



The Presbyterian College of the Southwest was founded in 1883, and construction began the next year. The college greeted its first students in September, 1884.

By March 14, 1885, plans to construct an observatory on Mount Lookout were published in the local *San Juan Prospector* newspaper. Local citizens were quite enthusiastic about the project and many pitched in to help. [\[Read More: College\]](#)



One of the Most Powerful Telescopes in the West

Visitors from far and wide came to the Lookout Mountain Observatory to take a lesson in astronomy and perhaps enjoy a picnic and outing for the day. [\[Read More: Outings\]](#)

Not known for its understatement, the *San Juan Prospector* noted that [the] telescope "is certainly a monster in comparison to those of other observatories," and that it exceeds the size of the 6 1/2 inch object glass of the "new observatory at St. Louis."

The telescope is to weigh 1,500 pounds, to have a 10-foot focus and 9 1/2 inch aperture. [It] is to have a fine astronomical clock with right ascension circle, declination circle, terrestrial eye-pieces and three extra lenses.

Professor Notestein thinks this will be one of the finest, if not the finest telescope used by any college in the United States.

The firm [John Brashear - see inset] that is to make this telescope has a world-wide reputation and has shipped many telescopes to England and France, where the oldest telescope manufactories in the world are located.

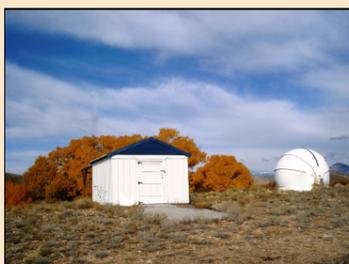
San Juan Prospector, August 15, 1885

The telescope had fallen into disrepair by 1897, and had been dismantled and put into storage. Vandals had done serious damage to the facilities on top of Lookout Mountain.

Unfortunately, the college never became financially stable and by 1902 the board had decided to close its doors. In November of that year the telescope was sent to Occidental College in Los Angeles, California. [\[Read More: Telescope\]](#)

The Leo Fontenot Memorial Observatory

There's a *new* Observatory in Del Norte these days! It's sponsored by the Lookout Mountain Observatory Association, a nonprofit group that's trying to rebuild the original Observatory. [\[Read More: LMOA\]](#)



The new project is called the Leo Fontenot Memorial Observatory, located on the prominent hilltop behind the Rio Grande County Court House. It was built for educational purposes and use by active amateur astronomers.



The one-acre+ property, a modern "clam shell" type dome, a roll-off roof observatory, and two large professional-grade telescopes were donated to the Association.

The Association Board of Directors meets at the Courthouse Annex on a Saturday that has been preselected for best viewing conditions, weather permitting. Afterwards, public "star parties" are held to view celestial attractions of current interest. At times, special parties are held and are announced in the local media or by e-mail. [\[Read More: Fontenot\]](#)

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| Star Parties |
| Museum Trail Site |
| Lookout Mountain |
| The College |
| The Telescope |
| Old Stories About The Observatory |
| The New Observatory |
| Lookout Mountain Observatory Assn |

Bringing Back the Telescope

In the early 1990s a dedicated group of local Del Norters resolved to make an effort to locate the original telescope and rebuild the observatory.

[\[Learn More: LMOA\]](#)

Astronomy in Del Norte Today

The Association holds regular meetings for "Star Gazing". You can contact them for more information.

The Lookout Mountain Observatory Association

PO Box 432

Del Norte, CO 81132

Or Email [Alva Hibbs](#)

Historical Research and Resources

Much of the historical perspective on these web pages was provided by our good friend Dr. A.J. Taylor of the Rio Grande County Museum and is published here with her permission. We certainly do appreciate the use of her research paper: *"Stars in Their Eyes: The Mount Lookout Observatory History"*.

Additional thanks go out to Peg Schall of the Monte Vista Historical Society for allowing us to use some of their extensive collection of old photographs.

And finally, we appreciate the help of Alva Hibbs who provided some old sketches and photographs of the Observatory.