PH0011576

Form 10-300
(July 1969)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY – NOMINATION FORM

(Type all entries – complete applicable sections)

STATE:	
COUNTY:	
FOR NPS USE ONLY	
ENTRY NUMBER	DATE
JUL 2 1973	

1. NAME

COMMON:
Georgetown University Astronomical Observatory (within the boundaries of the Georgetown Historic District)

AND/OR HISTORIC:

2. LOCATION

STREET AND NUMBER:
Georgetown University

CITY OR TOWN:
Washington (Congressman Walter E Fauntroy, District of Columbia)

STATE	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE
District of Columbia	11	District of Columbia	001

3. CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY (Check One)	OWNERSHIP		STATUS	ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC
☐ District ☒ Building	☐ Public	Public Acquisition:	☐ Occupied	Yes:
☐ Site ☐ Structure	☒ Private	☐ In Process	☒ Unoccupied	☒ Restricted
☐ Object	☐ Both	☐ Being Considered	☐ Preservation work in progress	☐ Unrestricted
				☐ No

PRESENT USE *(Check One or More as Appropriate)*

☐ Agricultural	☐ Government	☐ Park	☐ Transportation	☐ Comments
☐ Commercial	☐ Industrial	☐ Private Residence	☒ Other *(Specify)*	
☒ Educational	☐ Military	☐ Religious	Observatory	
☐ Entertainment	☐ Museum	☒ Scientific		

4. OWNER OF PROPERTY

OWNER'S NAME:
Georgetown University

STREET AND NUMBER:
37th and O Streets, N.W.

CITY OR TOWN:	STATE:	CODE
Washington	District of Columbia	11

5. LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC:
Recorder of Deeds

STREET AND NUMBER:
6th and D Streets, N.W.

CITY OR TOWN:	STATE	CODE
Washington	District of Columbia	11

6. REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE OF SURVEY: Proposed District of Columbia Additions to the National Register of Historic Places recommended by the Joint Committee on Landmarks

DATE OF SURVEY: March 7, 1968 ☒ Federal ☐ State ☐ County ☐ Local

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS:
National Capital Planning Commission

STREET AND NUMBER:
1325 G Street, N.W.

CITY OR TOWN:	STATE:	CODE
Washington	District of Columbia	11

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

STATE: | COUNTY: | FOR NPS USE ONLY — ENTRY NUMBER: JUL 2 1973 — DATE:

7. DESCRIPTION

CONDITION	(Check One)					
	☐ Excellent	☒ Good	☐ Fair	☐ Deteriorated	☐ Ruins	☐ Unexposed
	(Check One)		(Check One)			
	☐ Altered	☒ Unaltered	☐ Moved	☒ Original Site		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL *(if known)* PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The small, Greek Revival astronomical observatory of Georgetown University is located on a knoll in the southwest corner of the campus, south of Kehoe Field and north of McDonough Memorial Gym on the Georgetown campus. It is oriented with its main facades facing due north and south. The observatory, the third oldest in the United States, was planned in 1841 and sufficiently completed by 1844 to receive its first instrument. The symmetrically ordered building is still Greek Revival in feeling although there have been some alterations to its facade.

The building contains a center section three bays wide and two stories high plus dome and two flanking wings one story high. The building is excavated under the main section and both wings; the basement contains the masonry foundations for the piers which support the instruments. The roofs of the main and wing sections originally contained a wood urn baluster balustrade surround which still remains on the wings but which has been replaced by a modern mesh screen on the center section. The white painted brick building is sixty feet long and thirty feet wide.

The three bays of the center section are separated by square pilasters which extend up two stories to a simple projecting brick cornice. The windows in the main block are eight light casement windows; there are three on the second floor and two flanking the main entrance door on the north and south facades. The original doors have been covered over by projecting wood enclosed stoops. The main facades of the wings originally each had one bay which was a twelve light casement window which opened to allow horizontal use of the Meridan circle and transit instruments. These instruments are no longer in place in the observatory. The windows now have been either bricked in and replaced by a wooden projecting bay or reduced in size.

The rotating dome is 20 feet in diameter and made of wooden ribs bent to shape and covered with tin. The original dome, much lower in profile, was replaced primarily due to acquisition of a 12" refractor telescope in 1890. (The original 5" scope purchased in 1848 from Sims of London is still used to guide the 5" Ross camera mounted in a small observatory to the south of the main building.)

The central interior space on the first floor consists of a large room 30' square and 15' high, a second story room 13' high, and a dome room 20' in diameter. An 18' x 18' solid granite pier rising approximately 30' to support the main equatorial telescope mounted under the dome occupies most of the space of the rooms below. To each side of this pier, columns support the three floor loads as the floors do not touch the central pier.

The observatory is no longer used due to lack of interest in an astronomy department and also due to the fact that the glare from Washington's night lights made a giant telescope near the city impracticable. It is now used as storage for water samples from the Potomac River by the Biology Department, and its telescope is used by the astronomy club. The observatory has been little changed and it would be relatively easy to restore it to its original appearance.

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

8. SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD *(Check One or More as Appropriate)*

- ☐ Pre-Columbian
- ☐ 15th Century
- ☐ 16th Century
- ☐ 17th Century
- ☐ 18th Century
- ☒ 19th Century
- ☐ 20th Century

SPECIFIC DATE(S) *(If Applicable and Known)* built 1841-1844

AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE *(Check One or More as Appropriate)*

- ☐ Aboriginal
- ☐ Prehistoric
- ☐ Historic
- ☐ Agriculture
- ☒ Architecture
- ☐ Art
- ☐ Commerce
- ☐ Communications
- ☐ Conservation
- ☒ Education
- ☐ Engineering
- ☐ Industry
- ☐ Invention
- ☐ Landscape Architecture
- ☐ Literature
- ☐ Military
- ☐ Music
- ☐ Political
- ☐ Religion/Philosophy
- ☒ Science
- ☐ Sculpture
- ☐ Social/Humanitarian
- ☐ Theater
- ☐ Transportation
- ☐ Urban Planning
- ☒ Other *(Specify)* early observatory

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Joint Committee on Landmarks has designated the Georgetown University Astronomical Observatory a Category II Landmark of importance which contributes significantly to the cultural heritage and visual beauty of the District of Columbia. This small, Greek Revival observatory was built between 1841 and 1844 and is the third oldest observatory in the United States. Despite a few exterior alterations, it still retains its Greek Revival characteristics. The Observatory was planned and its construction supervised by Father James Curley. Father Curley, a self-taught mathematical genius, calculated the latitude and longitude of the District for the first time. Accomplishments by succeeding astronomers brought world recognition to this department at Georgetown University.

Father Curley drew up the plans for the building, supervised the construction, and purchased the astronomical instruments. When he founded this observatory, there were only two such installations in the United States: one at Williams College and another at Western Reserve. (Neither the United States Naval Observatory nor the Harvard Observatory was yet in existence.) One of Father Curley's achievements was to calculate the latitude and longitude of the District of Columbia for the first time. Subsequent rechecks of his figures proved them to be almost perfectly correct--a notable achievement considering the lack of precise instruments at that time.

In 1888 the department secured the services of the internationally known astronomer, Father John Hagen. Under his direction, the observatory was renovated and a 12" equatorial telescope was purchased. During Father Hagen's first year at Georgetown, the first volume of his "Synopsis der Hoeheren Mathematik" was published. Father Hagen was also responsible for research which established that the position of the earth on its axis of rotation was not constant. A second major work was produced by Father Hagen's assistant, Father George A. Fargis, entitled "The Photochronograph and Its Application to the Star Transits, Georgetown College Observatory." Father Fargis invented the first practicable instrument for photographing star transits, a predecessor of the Baker-Nunn camera.

Today the observatory is used only by the astronomy club, while the biology department has stored water samples from the Potomac River in one of its rooms. It cannot be used for important viewing because of the glare of the lights from the city at night, and there has been a decreased interest in astronomy as part of the curriculum at Georgetown University. The University at present is investigating means for restoring the Observatory to its original state. As the building has undergone no major alterations, it would be relatively easy to restore.

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

The research for this form was prepared by Mr. William A. Miller, Vice-President Planning and Physical Plant, Georgetown University. He was assisted by Mr. Dean Price, University Architect. Also of assistance to NCPC were Mr. Donald O'Neal and Mr. Robert A. Miller of Georgetown University.

Heyden, Francis. "Astronomy at Georgetown College." Typescript, n.d.
Durkin, Joseph T.S.J., Georgetown University: The Middle Years (1840-1900). Washington, D.C.: University Press, 1963.

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE COORDINATES DEFINING A RECTANGLE LOCATING THE PROPERTY						OR	LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE COORDINATES DEFINING THE CENTER POINT OF A PROPERTY OF LESS THAN TEN ACRES					
CORNER	LATITUDE			LONGITUDE			LATITUDE			LONGITUDE		
	Degrees	Minutes	Seconds	Degrees	Minutes	Seconds	Degrees	Minutes	Seconds	Degrees	Minutes	Seconds
NW	°	'	"	°	'	"	38°	54'	30"	77°	04'	38"
NE	°	'	"	°	'	"						
SE	°	'	"	°	'	"						
SW	°	'	"	°	'	"						

APPROXIMATE ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY: less than one acre

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE:	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE

RECEIVED FEB 6 1973 NATIONAL REGISTER

11. FORM PREPARED BY

NAME AND TITLE:
Suzanne Ganschinietz, Architectural Historian

ORGANIZATION: National Capital Planning Commission
DATE: 14 Nov. 1972

STREET AND NUMBER: 1325 G Street, N.W.

CITY OR TOWN: Washington
STATE: District of Columbia
CODE: 11

12. STATE LIAISON OFFICER CERTIFICATION

As the designated State Liaison Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service. The recommended level of significance of this nomination is:

National ☐ State ☒ Local ☐

Name _____

Title Deputy Mayor-Commissioner

Date _____

NATIONAL REGISTER VERIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register.

_____
Chief, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation

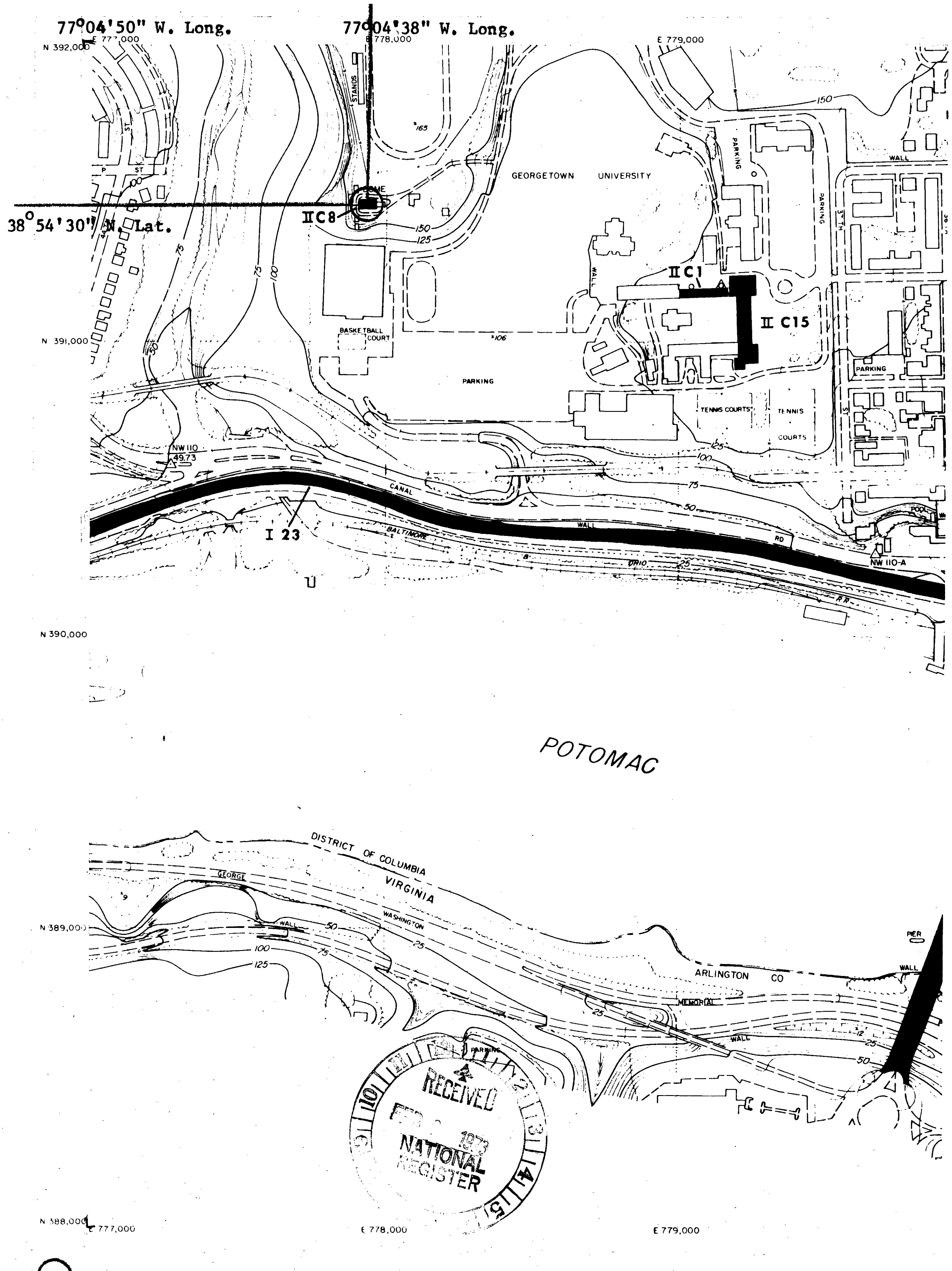
Date 7/2/73

ATTEST:

_____
Keeper of The National Register

Date 6 18 73

SEE INSTRUCTIONS



77°04'50" W. Long.
77°04'38" W. Long.
38°54'30" N. Lat.
N 392,000
E 777,000
E 778,000
E 779,000
N 391,000
N 390,000
N 389,000
N 388,000
STANDS
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
PARKING
WALL
IIC8
IIC1
II C15
BASKETBALL COURT
TENNIS COURTS
COURTS
POOL
NW 110
49.73
NW 110-A
CANAL
WALL
BALTIMORE
OHIO
RR
I 23
POTOMAC
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
VIRGINIA
GEORGE
WASHINGTON
MEMORIAL
ARLINGTON CO
PIER
RECEIVED
1973
NATIONAL REGISTER