STATE OF CONNECTICUT

CONSENTED HISTORICAL COMMISSION
59 South Prospect Street, Hartford, Connecticut 06106
(203) 566-3005

HISTORIC RESOURCES INVENTORY FORM
For Buildings and Structures

1. BUILDING NAME: Common: Van Vleck Observatory Historic: same
2. TOWN/CITY: Middletown VILLAGE: COUNTY: Middlesex
3. STREET & NUMBER (and/or location): At end of access road near 90 Cross Street
4. OWNER(S): Wesleyan University PUBLIC X PRIVATE
5. USE: Present: Observatory Historic: same
6. ACCESSIBILITY TO PUBLIC: Exterior visible from public road: yes x no
Interior accessible: x yes, explain with permission no

DESCRIPTION
7. STYLE OF BUILDING: Functional DATE OF CONSTRUCTION: 1914 to 1916
8. MATERIAL(S) (indicate use or location when appropriate):
- clapboard
- wood shingle
- board & batten
- aluminum siding
- other:
- asbestos siding
- asphalt siding
- stucco
- concrete; type:
- brick
- fieldstone
- cobblestone
- cut stone; type: brownstone
coursed rough block
and smooth trim
9. STRUCTURAL SYSTEM:
- wood frame: post and beam balloon
- load bearing masonry structural iron or steel (interior framing)
- other:
10. ROOF: type:
- gable
- gambrel
- shed.
- mansard
- monitor
- sawtooth
- material:
- wood shingle
- roll asphalt
- asphalt shingle built up
- tin
- slate
- other:
11. NUMBER OF STORIES: 1½ APPROXIMATE DIMENSIONS: 85' x 145'
12. CONDITION: Structural: excellent x good fair deteriorated
Exterior: excellent x good fair deteriorated
13. INTEGRITY: Location: x on original site moved, when:
Alterations: no x yes, explain: Addition of west dome and corresponding interior modifications (c. 1959)
14. RELATED OUTBUILDINGS OR LANDSCAPE FEATURES:
barn shed garage x other landscape features or buildings: domed telescope enclosure, west
carriage house shop garden
15. SURROUNDING ENVIRONMENT: College campus open land woodland residential scattered buildings visible from site
commercial industrial rural high building density
16. INTERRELATIONSHIP OF BUILDING AND SURROUNDINGS: Wesleyan's Van Vleck Observatory crowns Foss Hill, the highest point on campus. The old college cemetery and modern, similarly styled dormitories are nearby. A lawn gradually slopes down to Andrus Field with College Row, the focal point of campus activity, beyond. From the campus below, this low building's only apparent feature is its distinctive white dome.
17. OTHER NOTABLE FEATURES OF BUILDING OR SITE (interior and/or exterior):

- Original or early electric fixtures
- Astronomical equipment: six-inch visual refractor obtained by Wesleyan's first president, Wilbur Fisk, in 1836; twenty-inch visual refractor with a focal length of 27.6 feet

SIGNIFICANCE

Architect: Henry Bacon  
Builder: Mylchreest Brothers

18. HISTORICAL OR ARCHITECTURAL IMPORTANCE: VanVleck Observatory, dedicated in 1916, was the third observatory built on campus. Designed by Henry Bacon, it is part of the largest concentration of his architecture in the country. Bacon, whose most famous achievement is the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., planned this building in collaboration with Dr. Frederick Slocum. Slocum, who later came to Wesleyan, was nationally known for his work in solar astronomy.

This low building has a cross plan with a round turret at its east end. A white steel dome caps the turret and is the observatory's most prominent feature. The rotating dome is thirty-two feet in diameter and weighs three tons. This structure houses a telescope that was (in 1964) "one of thirty-eight of equal or larger size in the world and the largest refractor in New England." The floor of the turret can be rotated and elevated to facilitate its use. Beyond the turret, a simple parapet borders the roof. The building's main decorative element is its coursed rock-faced walls. Like the exterior, interior decorations are minimal. A marble tablet, designed by the architect and displayed in the main hall, reads, "This observatory the gift of Joseph Van Vleck, commemorates the service rendered to Wesleyan University 1853-1902, by his brother John Monroe Van Vleck, professor of Mathematics and Astronomy."

PHOTOGRAPH

photographer: Roger Sherman  
date: 6/78  
view: northwest  
negative on file: Roll 23, #18

COMPILED BY:

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20. SUBSEQUENT FIELD EVALUATIONS:

21. THREATS TO BUILDING OR SITE:

[X] none known  
[ ] highways  
[ ] vandalism  
[ ] developers  
[ ] renewal  
[ ] private  
[ ] deterioration  
[ ] zoning  
[ ] other: ____________________________  
[ ] explanation: ______________________