EKU’s Park Observatory

Tabitha Shofner

Mentor: Dr. Gay Sweely, Art & Design

In Greenville, Ohio, two buggy manufacturers, known as the Lotham brothers, became interested in astronomy. In 1907, they built the telescope that was placed inside the Smith Park Observatory. The Smith Park Observatory is named in honor of a Madison County native, the first Chair of the Department of Physics and longtime Chair of the Department of Mathematics at Eastern Kentucky University. He served Eastern from 1923 until his retirement in 1967.

The observatory was acquired from the University of Kentucky by Dr. Smith Park in 1964. The dome and telescope were donated to Eastern by the University of Kentucky. The Smith Park Observatory format is 600 (assignable) square feet, and the original cost was $30,000. At first, the Park Observatory was on the edge of the campus, but as the campus expanded, the observatory was encompassed and university lights made it hard to view the night sky. As time passed, the observatory was used less frequently, and the observatory went into disrepair. The Park Observatory is now used as a storage facility, and the telescope is located in the lobby of the new EKU Planetarium. Although we may focus on what seems to be a dismal ending – when walking by the observatory, remember this: the two men who created vessels to trail across the earth became men who made a vessel to see trails across the heavens, and Dr. Smith Park, who brought it to our EKU campus, envisioned this pivotal building so that others could see these trails. My artwork for Dr. Gay Sweely’s course, U.S. Art History, ARH 498, will reveal this jewel of this building on campus through my own artistic vision and abstract for the UP Showcase in 2013.