

This unusual sepia toned photograph had long been stored in the collections of the Fairfield County Historical Society /Museum in Winnsboro. Someone, perhaps the donor of the old picture, had marked the identities of two local men. The name over the head of the man on the far right is local merchant/livery stable owner William Royston Doty. The X over the bearded man's head marks him as the celebrated principal of Mt. Zion School, Professor J. M. Witherow. Museum workers in the past had thought that the photo showed the event of an outdoor science class with a long telescope seen on the left, but closer examination of the telescope shows some sort of cover or filter over the open end of the cylinder, obviously a smoked glass or blackened lens cover. Three wooden boxes in the foreground appear to offer small observing booths on the ground, two apparently "manned" by gentlemen wearing fashionable straw boater hats. A short barreled scope, or perhaps a camera, is seen on top of the middle box. Obviously, this group was not gathered for an everyday event, but an eclipse of some sort.

Last fall, Davidson College's professor of astrophysics Kristen Thompson contacted me at the Museum to ask me if there were any documented Fairfield County history of a solar eclipse observation on May 28, 1900. That date was the last full-occlusion solar eclipse that was visible across a wide band of the continental US in our area of the Southeast until the upcoming eclipse that will happen on August 21, 2017. So the the full story of this photograph was finally revealed. Prof. Thompson's research in old newspapers and scientific journals of the day had uncovered the story of Winnsboro's national prominence as an official observatory site for the rare total occlusion solar eclipse that was recorded on that day 117 years ago.

On May 28, 1900, an astronomical observation station for scientifically observing and photographing the anticipated total eclipse of the sun was set up on a hill in Winnsboro, SC near St. John's Episcopal cemetery. The project was a partnership between Professor Ormond Stone from the University of Virginia, the town fathers, Professor J. M. Witherow of Mt. Zion Institute, and several professors and astronomers/physicists from colleges and universities such as Rutgers, Davidson, Southwestern Presbyterian, and Winthrop. Winnsboro had been chosen as an ideal spot where the duration of totality of occlusion was about 90 seconds.

Some of the assistants were sent to SC well ahead of time to set up a 5-inch aperture photographic telescope, with 40-foot focal length and one or more 5-inch Venus transit telescopes borrowed from the Naval Observatory. A fine new 6-inch refractor telescope was brought from Davidson. According to a news story in the *Fairfield News and Herald* from May 30, 1900, Ormond Stone was joined by Davidson physics professor Henry Smith to view and photograph the eclipse. The photo from the collection of the Museum is thought to show a number of dignitaries, visiting academicians and scientists, and members of the student bodies of Mt. Zion and Winthrop College. Newspaper accounts tell of the widespread hospitality of our little town in boarding the visiting scientists in private homes.

As you may be aware, an upcoming total eclipse on August 21, 2017 will be once again visible from Winnsboro. A solar eclipse occurs when the moon passes between earth and the sun, thereby totally or partly obscuring the image of the sun for a viewer on earth. A total solar eclipse occurs when the Moon's apparent diameter is larger than the sun's, blocking all direct sunlight, turning day into darkness. Totality of occlusion occurs in a narrow path across earth's surface, with the partial eclipse visible over a surrounding region thousands of miles wide.

Astronomy Professor Kristin Thompson of Davidson College has joined the Fairfield County Historical Society and Fairfield County Museum to organize a series of events, presentations, and an exhibit to observe the viewing of the next total eclipse and the commemoration of Winnsboro's 1900 partnership with that institution on August 21. The professor will be presenting a program on the preceding evening (Sunday, Aug. 20) in the Christ Central Community Center at 235 S. Congress St. next door to the Museum. The Museum will be open after the program for the public to view its ground-floor exhibit about the 1900 solar eclipse researched and assembled by staff and volunteers Ed Gates and Suzanne Johnson. Davidson College has sent along its brass telescope of the type that would have been used in 1900. This instrument had long been kept in a storage area at the college and Professor Thompson has sent it to Winnsboro for this exhibit.

The Aug. 21 eclipse viewing area of the Garden Street Park at the corner of Drayton and Garden is adjacent to and slightly north of the original 1900 observatory site.

Contact the Fairfield County Museum at fairfieldmus@truvista.net or 803-635-9811 with any suggestions or interest.