

MAURY COUNTY ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY, CIRCA 1850

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ABSTRACT—The Maury County Astronomical Society, probably Tennessee's first single-discipline academic society in the pure sciences, was chartered in 1850. There were 15 charter members. The primary objective of the Society was "making original observations in Astronomy."

The Maury County Astronomical Society was probably Tennessee's first single-discipline academic society in the pure sciences. A charter was signed into law on 23 January 1850 (Anonymous, 1850). To be chartered in early 1850, the Society had to be active in 1849. The group may have met regularly for some years before and after the time of its documented existence. There were 15 charter members. The primary objective of the Society was "making original observations in Astronomy."

It is reasonable to view this society as the first of its kind in Tennessee because the early scientific culture of the State is fairly well documented. Pioneer scientific and technical groups formed in eastern Tennessee and in western Tennessee have been studied (Corgan, 1976, 1978). There was no single-discipline society in the pure sciences. Early organizations of middle Tennessee have not been described in detail, but no comparable society is mentioned in general intellectual histories (e.g., Davenport, 1941) or in scientific journals of the era (Corgan, 1977).

While nothing is known of the routine activities of this society, several charter members are discussed in publications on the history of Maury Co. (e.g., Fleming, 1876). No known member was a scientist. Edmund Dillahunt (1800-1852) is representative of the membership. A lawyer and judge, he had once edited a Maury Co. newspaper. E. Dillahunt and his peers formed a local astronomical society during the heyday of amateur science in America. In all parts of the United States, groups such as this did much to integrate science into American popular culture.

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