

# SCIENCE

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FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 1899.

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## REPORT ON THE NAVAL OBSERVATORY.

WE print on another page of our present issue the report of the Board of Visitors to the Naval Observatory, made on October 2d. Most astronomers will, we believe, agree with us that the work of the Board has been well done in several vital points. It is true that many details are left to be settled and much friction may be produced in putting the plan into operation. But, in any case, much will have been gained. The good features of the report are these:

We have for the first time what may be called an official admission that the Observatory must be reorganized on a civilian basis, made under such auspices and in such a way as to command attention. In stating the case all disagreeable details are avoided and, so far as possible, conclusions are intimated rather than expressed. Yet every point is so stated that no mistake of interpretation by the careful reader is possible. The optimistic impression always so agreeable to entertain, that, however weak may have been the administration from time to time in the past, it is now all right, is guarded against by stating that the scope of the remarks is not limited to the present time, but covers almost the

MSS. intended for publication and books, etc., intended for review should be sent to the responsible editor, Professor J. McKeen Cattell, Garrison-on-Hudson, N. Y.

entire period of the existence of the Observatory. The hope is expressed that under an improved system the Observatory will attain and hold that high standing which should be expected of it, thus clearly intimating that this high standing does not belong to the past or present. What will happen if something effective is not done is stated very plainly. At the same time there is no reflection on any person or any authority.

The second feature of the proposed plan is the appointment of a Board of Visitors so organized as to secure efficiency. The great difficulty in the past has been that, although attempts have from time to time been made to improve the administration, there has been no authority to decide and report whether any real improvement had been effected. The proposed Board, containing as it does six astronomers of high professional standing, has to report at least annually on the efficiency with which the scientific work is prosecuted. If this work is in any way neglected, such a board will surely discover the reason and report what measures are necessary to insure success.

The third feature to which we refer guards against a result which has more than any other cause tended to weaken the efforts made in favor of reform. The fear has constantly been held forth that, in the event of a civilian organization being introduced, appointments would be made through political influence. This has been one of the favorite arguments against reform. The plan guards against this, by having the principal officers recommended

to the appointing power by the Board of Visitors. One feature of the proceedings in making such nominations, shows a remarkably clear insight into the conditions of the case :

"The recommendations shall be determined only by a majority vote of the members present at a regularly called meeting of the Board in the city of Washington."

The great difficulty in the way of making the best nomination lies in the absence of discussion of the merits of the several candidates. We doubt not that, at such a meeting of the Board, the merits of every possible candidate would be discussed in the freest and fullest manner. In this way the best attainable result will be reached.

Minor defects in the report could be pointed out ; but it might show a failure to appreciate the general excellence of the plan to consider these defects in detail. Two, however, may be mentioned. The powers of the proposed astronomical director are not defined. The question is thus left open whether the present system in which the director has all the responsibility for the astronomical work and no real power is to be continued.

Only one nomination to each office is provided for. This may be objected to as not leaving sufficient discretion to the appointing power. The French plan, on which two nominations to each office are made, the order of choice being indicated, seems to us preferable. The number might even be extended to three. As a general rule it might be expected that the appointing power would select the candidate pre-

ferred. At the same time circumstances might render the selection of the second advisable.

The unanimity of the report and the good feeling which has characterized the whole movement is one of the most encouraging features of the case. We trust that the plan will be enacted into law by Congress at its coming session.

*REPORT OF THE BOARD OF VISITORS TO  
THE UNITED STATES NAVAL OBSER-  
VATORY, OCTOBER 2, 1899.*

WASHINGTON, D. C.,  
October 2, 1899.

HON. JOHN D. LONG, *Secy. of the Navy.*

SIR: In compliance with the request contained in your letter of June 30, 1899, the undersigned have acted as a Board of Visitors to the United States Naval Observatory in Washington and now submit their report, including subdivisions as follows:

- I. Recommendations of the Board of Visitors.
- II. Circumstances leading to the appointment of the Board of Visitors.
- III. Cost of the Observatory.
- IV. Comparison with other Observatories.
- V. Present condition and methods of observatory work and the delay in printing its results.
- VI. Historical sketch of the Observatory.
- VII. Minutes of the proceedings of the Board of Visitors.
- VIII. Appendix.

The several portions of the report were put in form by the astronomers who are members of the Board. The recommendations are made unanimously.

Very respectfully,

WM. E. CHANDLER.  
A. G. DAYTON,  
EDWARD C. PICKERING.  
GEO. C. COMSTOCK,  
GEORGE E. HALE.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE BOARD OF  
VISITORS.

In accordance with the instructions contained in the following letter all the mem-

bers of the Board of Visitors to the United States Naval Observatory therein named, met at the Observatory in Washington on Friday, June 30, 1899, and organized by the selection of William E. Chandler as Chairman, and George C. Comstock as Secretary.

NAVY DEPARTMENT,  
Washington, June 30, 1899.

GENTLEMEN: In accordance with previous correspondence and oral conversations, you are hereby requested to act as a Board of Visitors at the United States Naval Observatory in Washington, convening there to-day, and to proceed to examine into the condition of that institution and to report to me your conclusions and recommendations.

Very respectfully,

JOHN D. LONG,  
*Secretary.*

Hon. William E. Chandler,  
Hon. Alston G. Dayton,  
Professor Edward C. Pickering,  
Professor George C. Comstock, and  
Professor George E. Hale.

Captain Charles H. Davis, U. S. N., Superintendent of the Naval Observatory, presented to the Board an informal statement of circumstances leading to the appointment of the Board of Visitors and submitted correspondence relating thereto (Appendix, Exhibit A) and to a proposed reorganization of the Observatory (Appendix, Exhibit B). He also placed before the Board a list of professors of mathematics upon the active list of the navy (Appendix, Exhibit C) from which corps the staff of the observatory is largely drawn and a list of all persons performing duty at the observatory with their respective ranks (Appendix, Exhibit D).

At the request of Messrs. Chandler and Dayton there was submitted to the Board, by its other members, the correspondence conducted by them, as a Committee of the Second Annual Conference of Astronomers and Astrophysicists, for the purpose of obtain-