



NEWS! From the NAVAL OBSERVATORY

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U.S. Naval Observatory Press Release

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For Immediate Release, January 26, 2015

U.S. Naval Observatory Library Accepts Rare Document

WASHINGTON, DC – January 22, 2015 was a special day for the USNO's James M. Gilliss Library. Former Librarian Brenda Corbin presented us with James Gilliss' naval commission paper, signed by President Andrew Jackson in 1833. The document formally recognized Gilliss' advancement to the rank of Passed Midshipman.

Accepting the donation on behalf of the Observatory was former USNO Superintendent and current Oceanographer and Navigator of the Navy Rear Admiral Jonathan White.

Corbin came across the commission paper in an on-line auction in 2009 and successfully outbid a number of collectors for the document.

"They were probably after it for Jackson's signature," she said. "I was after it because it is a piece of the Observatory's history." Fortunately for Brenda the other bidders dropped out of the auction before she reached her price barrier.

James Melville Gilliss was born in Georgetown, District of Columbia, on September 6, 1811 and began his naval career at the age of 15. Shortly after his commissioning as a Passed Midshipman (equivalent to today's rank of Ensign), while visiting Washington, he overheard a Congressman say "There is not an officer of the navy capable to conduct a scientific enterprise." Gilliss set out to prove him wrong.

After studying at the University of Virginia and in Paris, Gilliss returned to the U.S. in 1836 and was assigned to the new Depot of Charts & Instruments, the USNO's forerunner institution. He assumed command of the Depot in 1837. Between 1838 and 1842 Gilliss conducted astronomical observations in support of the U.S. Exploration Expedition under the command of

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LT Charles Wilkes. To this end Gilliss made over 10,000 observations of transits of the Moon, planets, and stars; included in this work was the first volume of astronomical observations to be recorded and published on American soil.

It was under Gilliss' instigation that the expansion of the Depot into the Naval Observatory took place in 1842. In June of that year a bill, S.285, was introduced in the Senate and passed by both houses of Congress and signed into law by President John Tyler on August 31st. Gilliss was placed in charge of purchasing instruments and designing the buildings that were ultimately completed in Washington's Foggy Bottom district in 1844.

During the course of his instrument-purchasing trip to Europe he used \$800 of the \$25,000 Congressional appropriation to purchase the books that established the Library's collection.

Gilliss, however, was passed over as the selectee for the Observatory's first Superintendent; that honor went to Matthew Fontaine Maury. Despite this disappointment, however, Gilliss continued his astronomical pursuits by commanding a naval astronomical expedition to Chile and establishing an observatory there in 1849. Gilliss eventually became Superintendent of the Naval Observatory upon Maury's resignation to join the Confederacy in April, 1861. He died of a stroke on February 9, 1865, barely a day after his son had returned from a Confederate prison camp. He is buried in Georgetown's Oak Hill Cemetery.

The Gilliss commission will join a similar document issued to astronomer Asaph Hall who was granted a commission in the U.S. Navy Corps of Mathematicians in 1864. Hall's commission was signed by President Abraham Lincoln. A copy of the Hall document hangs in the Library under a portrait of its namesake. A copy of Gilliss' commission will hang in a similar space under a bronze bust of the Library's founder.



Above: Brenda Corbin presents the James M. Gilliss commission to RADM Jonathan White, Oceanographer and Navigator of the Navy.
 Below: The Gilliss commission, signed by President Andrew Jackson.
 U.S. Naval Observatory photographs

