Note on a Determination of the Date of the Founding of the AAVSO

Michael Saladyga
AAVSO, 25 Birch Street, Cambridge, MA 02138

Received December 1, 2006; accepted December 1, 2006

Abstract From a search of the AAVSO Archive and library material, it can be reasonably determined that the founding date of the AAVSO is October 10, 1911.

1. Introduction

The historical literature of the AAVSO, and its correspondence, letterheads, meeting souvenirs, and so on, all clearly point to 1911 as the year of the Association's birth. But when in 1911 was the AAVSO begun? Any explicit mention of an exact date has yet to come to light. Part of the problem was that the AAVSO from the start was concerned with doing its work, rather than with trumpeting its beginnings, as AAVSO Recorder Leon Campbell once pointed out:

> And be it said to the everlasting credit of the Association, it did not start out with a lot of ballyhoo, but instead began its work modestly. No formal organization with officers and so forth was planned at the beginning, but an Association whose sole purpose was to render practical aid to the professional astronomer and to variable star astronomy. (Campbell 1931)

Fortunately, material available in the AAVSO Archives and library can help us to determine a reasonably accurate birth date for the AAVSO.

2. Archival indications

There are two letters in the AAVSO Archives which help to bracket the Association's founding date. The first letter is written by William Tyler Olcott to Miss Harriett W. Bigelow, Professor of Astronomy at Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts. It is dated October 4, 1911:

> Dear Madam:
>
> There is an effort being made to organize a Variable Star Section in this Country. Prof. Pickering of the Harvard College Observatory favors the plan and I thought possibly you might be able through some of your classes to cooperate in this work as Vassar, Mt. Holyoke, & Amherst are doing. Prof. Pickering furnishes the necessary charts, and I will gladly assist those who care to take up the work in any way that I can.
>
> I hope that you will give the matter your attention for your cooperation is earnestly desired. (Olcott 1911a)

The other letter, also written by Olcott, is dated October 29th, 1911. It is addressed to Helen M. Swartz, a high school mathematics teacher in South Norwalk, Connecticut. (Swartz, a Vassar graduate and student of Mary Whitney, had been submitting variable star observations directly to E. C. Pickering since 1902). In this letter, Olcott extends his gratitude to Swartz for volunteering to contribute variable star observations:

> My dear Miss Swartz,
>
> Your very welcome letter recd. and I was so glad to learn that you would cooperate with us in this plan to popularize variable star observing, for that is what it amounts to. My sole aim is to call the attention of amateurs to this line of observational work and thereby secure for Prof. Pickering additional data.
>
> ...Dr. Furness, Miss Young, Mr. Hunter and Mr. Jacobs have joined us and I have succeeded in interesting seven other amateurs to date. This is doing pretty well I think as the V.S.S. of the B.A.A. only contained 13 members last year....” (Olcott 1911b)

Somewhere between these two letters seems to be the date of the AAVSO’s founding. Notice that the letter of October 4th begins “*there is an effort being made* to organize a Variable Star Section”; while in the letter of October 29th, Olcott lists the amateurs and professionals who “*have joined us...*” making a favorable comparison of this group to the membership of the Variable Star Section of the British Astronomical Association. At this point Olcott is clearly thinking of his collection of variable star observers as members of an organized body.

Furthermore, this letter of October 29, 1911, is with an envelope bearing Swartz’s South Norwalk address (the name and postmark are cut away, however), and the envelope is printed with an early AAVSO seal (which states “Founded 1911” and “Office of the Secretary, 62 Church Street, Norwich, Conn., U.S.A.”—Olcott’s home address).

3. Published indications

There is evidence in print which points to an exact date falling between these two letters. First, the November 1911 issue of *Popular Astronomy* contains a report of “Variable Star Observations, Sept. 10th to Oct. 10th 1911. W. T. Olcott, Norwich, Conn. 3” Refractor” (Olcott 1911c). In his remarks accompanying this report, Olcott states:

> In response to the Editor’s suggestion under “Notes for Observers” in the October issue, that the variable star observers in this country organize a section or association for the furtherance of the work by cooperation, and for the mutual encouragement, and benefit to be derived from such an association, I would report that progress is being made toward the end, and there is every prospect that by next month, we can submit

> several lists of observations made by members of such an association. It is suggested that the title of this organization be "The American Association of Variable Star Observers."

Second, the December 1911 issue of *Popular Astronomy* contains "The first Monthly Report of the American Association of Variable Star Observers" (Olcott 1911d). Here, Olcott begins:

> The growth of this Association since the initial notice of its formation in the November issue of *Popular Astronomy* has been most encouraging. Fifteen observers are now cooperating in this work....

The report contains observations made by AAVSO members from October 10, 1911, to November 10, 1911.

The date October 10, 1911, can be adopted as the effective date of the founding of the AAVSO. This date marks the transition between the final report of variable star observations made by an unaffiliated individual, W. T. Olcott, and the first AAVSO report of observations made by Olcott and other members of the new organization, published in the December 1911 issue of *Popular Astronomy*.

4. Conclusion

Until some documentation of an explicitly stated date can be located, it is reasonable to conclude that, according to the available evidence found in the AAVSO Archives and in published sources, the AAVSO was founded on October 10, 1911.

References

Campbell, L. 1931, *Variable Comments*, **2**, 45.

Olcott, W. T. 1911a, letter to Harriett W. Bigelow dated October 4, 1911, AAVSO Organization ECP/WTO/LC Box 1 Early Correspondence, AAVSO Archives, Cambridge, MA.

Olcott, W. T. 1911b, letter to Helen M. Swartz dated October 29, 1911, AAVSO Organization ECP/WTO/LC Box 1 Early Correspondence, AAVSO Archives, Cambridge, MA.

Olcott, W. T. 1911c, *Popular Astronomy*, **19**, 9 (November 1911), 586.

Olcott, W. T. 1911d, *Popular Astronomy*, **19**, 10 (December 1911), 655.