

John Plaskett

The Man behind the Plaskett Telescope

Educator Tomo Nishizawa

John Stanley Plaskett was born and raised on a family farm near Woodstock, Ontario. In the 1890s, Plaskett worked as a technician for the physics department at the University of Toronto while studying for his bachelor's degree in mathematics and physics. He graduated with honours in 1899, age 33.

By the age of 39, Plaskett was a researcher working on the radial velocities of stars (the speed at which stars move away from or towards an observer) at the astronomical branch of the Department of the Interior in Ottawa. By 1910, Plaskett knew he wanted to build a larger telescope that could collect more data.



John Stanley Plaskett lived from 1865 to 1941. He was a telescope mechanic turned astronomer who helped place Canada at the front of astrophysical research.

Plaskett directed the design and construction of a 1.8 metre telescope at the Dominion Astrophysical Observatory (DAO) in Saanich, BC. In 1918, when it first caught starlight, the Plaskett was briefly the world's largest operating telescope.

John Plaskett became the first director of the DAO. Using the new telescope and a spectrograph (an instrument used to measure starlight), he continued with his research on the radial velocities of stars. In 1922, Plaskett discovered the largest binary star system (a system where two stars orbit a common centre of mass) known at the time. From 1928 to 1935, Plaskett and his colleague J.A. Pearce used the new telescope and spectrograph to figure out the size, mass and rotational speed of the Milky Way galaxy—a big contribution to astronomy from BC!

Another contribution John Plaskett made to astronomy was his son, Harry Hemley Plaskett, who also became an astronomer. In 1984, Asteroid (2905) Plaskett was named in honour of both father and son.