

Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomers

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Saunders, Samuel Arthur

Born London, England, 18 May 1852

Died Oxford, England, 8 December 1912

English mathematician and amateur astronomer Samuel Saunders was a leading selenographer at the beginning of the 20th century and helped create both a standard system of lunar nomenclature and an accurate system of lunar coordinates. Educated at Cambridge University as a mathematician, Saunders spent his entire career as professor of mathematics at Wellington College, Berkshire.

However, Saunders's great passion was astronomy, especially the study of the Moon. Attracted to the problem of measuring the exact locations of lunar features, Saunders used both a micrometer and photographic plates to determine the position of Möstig A, the Moon's fundamental point. His measurements to within 0.1 arcseconds were fifty times more accurate than those any previous observer had obtained. Saunders then measured positions for over 3,000 other central lunar formations relative to Möstig A

After the invention of the telescope, the naming of lunar features became a source of confusion and great discord among astronomers. Saunders became acutely aware of this problem while measuring the 3,000 reference points and advocated an international committee to blend the various naming conventions that had been introduced over a three-year period. With the strong recommendations of the Royal Astronomical Society and the Royal Society, such a committee was formed in 1907 under the auspices of the International Association of Academies. Saunders was appointed to the committee and, along with Julius Franz, was given the task of constructing an accurate map, using the measurements that the two of them had made.

Unfortunately, the deaths of both Saunders and Franz, along with the advent of World War I, prevented the successful conclusion of the project, and the committee collapsed. A successful resolution to the lunar nomenclature problem was not achieved until after the formation of the International Astronomical Union in 1919.

Leonard B. Abbey

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