

Lewis A. Swift (1820 – 1913)

Lewis Swift was born in Clarkson (Monroe County), but two Cortland County locales claim him as their own. Two cousins, Lewis and George L. Swift, traveled through Hunt's Corners, a small Lapeer hamlet, on a scientific lecture tour. While there, they met and fell in love with the Hunt Sisters. Lewis married Lucretia in 1850 and G.L. married Louisa. These girls were granddaughters of Asa Hunt, founder of Hunts Corners.¹



At various times, he was interested in: electricity and magnetism, the telegraph, and microscopes. He had seen Halley's Comet in 1835 and was reportedly "dazzled" by "The Great Comet" of 1843, perhaps spurring his interest in astronomy and telescopes. To support his family, Lewis Swift opened a hardware store at the Corners about 1851, but he retained his interest in scientific inventions and began a self-study of astronomy, building a small observatory and traveling to Rochester to attend lectures by Ormsby Mitchel, director of the Cincinnati Observatory. He built his first observatory in 1862 in



Marathon and moved his family there shortly afterwards. On July 19, 1862, he observed a previously unknown comet. He and Horace Tuttle of Harvard, are jointly credited with the discovery, which became known as the Comet Swift-Tuttle, establishing his reputation in the astronomy world.²

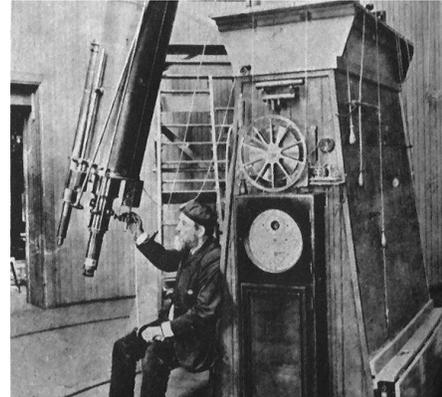
In 1863, his wife Louisa died and he remarried in 1864 to Caroline Topping. He moved to Rochester in 1872 where he continued his research with support from the community including an offer to mount his telescope on the roof of Duffy's cider mill, which had unobstructed views of the sky. He was also hired by Bausch & Lomb as a consultant for their telescopes. He discovered six new comets between 1877 and 1881 and was awarded a gold metal award from the Imperial Academy of Science in Vienna. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society



Photo of Swift's Medals

Upper three are Gold from Austria.
Lower middle, Silver from France.
Large central, Bronze from R. A. S. of England.
All others, Bronze from A. S. of California.

of Rochester and received an honorary Doctor of Philosophy degree from University of Rochester in 1879. It wasn't until 1882 that Swift closed his hardware store in Rochester and became a full-time astronomer at the new Warner Observatory. While best known and possibly most interested in comets, he also made important discoveries about Venus and furthered discoveries of nebulae during this time period.



However, the Warner Observatory developed several problems between 1888 and 1892. A new Presbyterian church next door blocked a portion of the sky and growing light pollution caused further *Lewis Swift at Warner Observatory* degradation in visibility of the night sky. The final blow was the loss of financial support after Warner suffered severe losses in the 1893 financial panic. Lewis Swift was already intrigued with the climate and other advantages to the new observatory being built near Pasadena, California. In 1893, Dr. Swift became director of the world renowned Mt. Lowe Observatory in California. Failing eyesight forced him to retire from observing in 1901. He remained in California until 1904, involved in planning the construction of the Mount Wilson Observatory.

During his long career he had been honored the world over for his discovery of 15 comets including the famous lost Drexel comet and over 1300 new nebulae. Deaf, nearly blind, yet mentally alert, he moved back to Marathon and lived with his daughter, Mrs. Walter Brink. He died in 1913.

Lewis had two children with his first wife, Lucretia – Charles Hunt and Mary Louisa (Brink). He and his second wife, Caroline, had three children – Lewis, Ralph Forbes and Edward.²

1. Transcript of "Squires and Swift among citizens Lapeer Remembered With Pride" by Vera Johnson, provided by Grace Stone
2. Jim Reinhardt, "Lewis Swift: Marathon's connection to the stars", 2008
<http://lso.scimuze.com/Documents/L%20Swift-jr.pdf>, accessed 3/14/2017
Mr. Reinhardt also supplied both pictures of Swift. More information available in the short book: *Lewis Swift: Comet Hunter*, Rising River Publishers, 2015
3. Photo of Lewis' Medals and other background information provided by Jinny Anderson, personal correspondence