

# Deerlick Astronomy Village



## Article and Photos by Charlie Warren

**D**eerlick Astronomy Village (DAV) is located about 1.5 hours east of Atlanta conveniently located only about twenty miles off Interstate 20. All roads are paved up to the entrance road (Aaron Grier Road), which is fairly well graded and posed no challenges navigating it with my 36' motorhome.

The Village has an entry gate with a one-lane entry drive that splits to access either the DAV resident's private two-acre sites or forks right to access the approximately eight-acre public observing field (Grier Field). DAV has 96-acres total including areas set aside for conservancy.

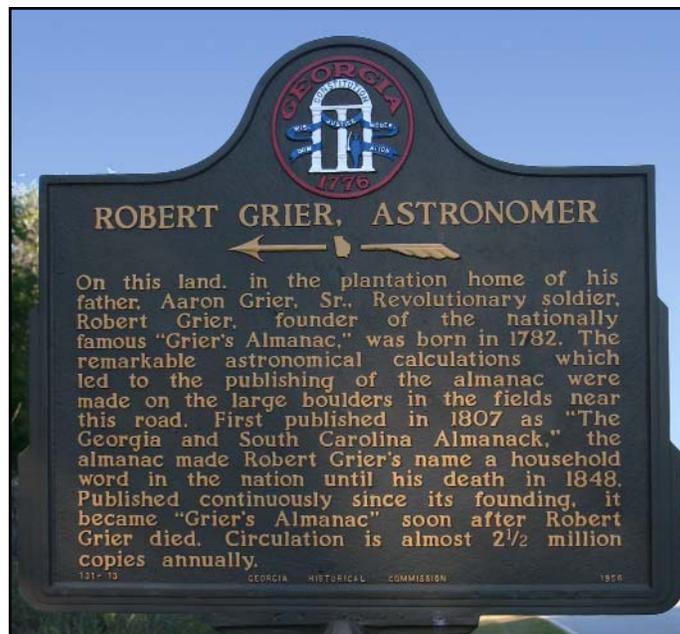
Phase 1 was platted for sixteen individual two-acre sites, which sold out two years after establishing the Village. The founding developers (Chris Hetlage and Dan Ford with financial partners Donovan Conrad, Ralph Bowen, Mike Boni and Eric Benner) developed a business plan with expectations that it would take five years to sell out phase I. At the time of the 2007 Peach State Star Gaze, they were in the process of platting eight more two-acre sites and two larger five-acre sites. By the time we returned for the 2008 Peach State Star Party, all but six were sold. There are currently ten private observatories of various designs

built in phase I.

The owner's field spans about 70 acres and runs down a gentle slope to a retention pond that will be irrigated to maintain a healthy aquatic environment with plans to be stocked with some bass to make sure the mosquito population is kept under control. The front of the field is bordered by three long-term lease roll-off observatories. All are currently leased. For investment purposes, Chris Hetlage stated that the observatories can be sub-leased.

those considering remote imaging and observatory control. We hope to get you more information on that in a future article when AA visits Backyard Observatories, well represented in the Village. Suffice it to say that there are a lot of roofs being rolled off and telescopes robotically scanning the skies and gathering photons at Deerlick for astro-photographers in distant locales.

Chris pointed out an interesting aspect to the Village, which is its astronomical heritage. The Village is bounded by a three and a half mile trail that is part of their conservancy. This trail runs parallel to a historic Conestoga trail that connects Savannah to Washington (GA). Back in the early 1900's, one of the early property owners was a man named Aaron Grier, who's son (Robert) published an almanac in 1807 that is still published today. Robert Grier was an astronomer and one of his claims to fame was his early prediction of a solar eclipse in the year 1905. There is a nice marker located just a little over a mile from DAV memorializing him as an astronomer. People came from all over the world to the historic town of



I am not sure how they pulled it off, but this is probably one of the few remote dark sky remote sites that I am aware of that has both fiber optics and copper running to each lot. The sites currently have DSL access, and will have enhanced (hyper) DSL access in the near future. That is a great advantage to

Washington, GA to view the total solar eclipse on May 28, 1905. A group from MIT came by steamboat to Savannah and then by train and finally traversed the old Conestoga trail to Washington in order to observe the total eclipse of the sun. The leader of the expedition



***Top left: Washington's scenic town square and City hall - Top and Middle right: Two of the many beautifully restored historic Washington houses that are worth a walking tour - Middle left: Quaint row of shops in downtown Washington - Bottom left: Looking up into the owner's lots - Bottom right: Long view down the road leading to the owner's lots from the Grier field side of DAV.***

(professor Alfred Burton), chose Washington after considering optimum viewing, probability of cloud cover and comfortable hotel accommodations. The MIT group was joined by observers from Harvard, Blue Hill and Flagstaff observatories. And we think people go out of their way today to view a total eclipse. It must have taken many of these observers several weeks to travel for this event in 1905!  
Before the early settlers arrived in the

mid to late eighteenth century, the area served as a hunting ground for Creek and Cherokee Indians. According to some DAV residents, there is good arrowhead hunting down around the lower creek bed areas.  
Washington is about a 20 minute drive, and well worth the time if you enjoy historic towns with interesting period architecture. The town has a quaint and tidy central square and store fronts that could be setting for some of Norman

Rockwell's subjects. From the square, a short stroll can provide opportunity to see a number of beautifully restored early to mid nineteenth century mansions and estate homes on classic southern landscaped properties. Washington boasts a number of "firsts" as noted on a monument in the central square. You can read more about Washington's long history at this well documented web site. <http://www.washingtongeorgia.net/History.html>



**Top left and right: Bob Holzer's leased remote observatory setup - Middle and Bottom: Chris Hetlege's fully automated observatory, which he shares with fellow astro-imager Scott Hammonds. Bottom right: Chris is tweaking one of the mounts.**

One of the aspects that I find really appealing about the Village is the inclusion of a public observing field, allowing expanded club members and pre-approved visitors to enjoy this nice dark sky site as well. It is this congregating of amateur astronomers that enamored me to the Chiefland Astronomy Village. Every new moon observers and imagers gather, affording opportunity to interface with other astronomy enthusiasts. This arrangement builds an expanded

brain trust around the community that would otherwise not develop. Chris Hetlege said that outside community groups (Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, local School groups) would be allowed access as well on a pre-approved basis. Chris wisely plans to expand the influence and stake-holders in the club to the local community in order to win support and avoid future light pollution battles. The other motive, of course is public outreach and education.

To this effect Chris has already approached the county with outlines for a feasible light pollution ordinance. He has received positive response and expects it to pass. The county was responsible for building the access road, so DAV is already off to a good cooperative relationship. Chris is also extending some invitations for an educational institution to purchase some land that lies between the observing field and the owner's field. He envi-



*Top left: Mike Boni's observing deck and platform with concrete pier for vibration free viewing. Imagine yourself seated under dark skies in the open air with friends awaiting your turn at the eyepiece. Some also envision a cigar and beverage of choice in this scenario which plays out on many good observing nights. - Top and Middle right: Barry Rui's home taking shape. Out back is his famous "Stoned Henge" monument assembled by local construction crews. The open frame where Barry is standing will frame the deck of his elevated observatory. Middle left: a mini dome observatory on Chris Hetlege property, Bottom left: Old cabin in the woods near the walking trail has seen better days. Bottom right: View of observatories off owner's deck.*

sions remote observatories that can be accessed by students from various locales for science and astronomy education. DAV has done a very nice job enhancing the field. There are currently six 50 amp and plug-ins for RVs. The fence line around the field has twenty 20 amp outlets, which are on individual circuit

breakers. The field has a commercial 800 amp panel, which is a real treat for a dark site location. The club installed a pre-poured concrete structure with three bathrooms that included flush toilets and very nice hot water showers. This is a very friendly feature for those visiting with less astronomy intense spouses. The bathrooms even have a changing

table for those visiting with tots. There are three more out buildings on the field. One is a small log cabin with porch that served as the office. The second building serves as a multi-functional meeting room, warm room, club house, speaker presentation pavilion, etc. for the Atlanta Astronomy

Club. AAC purchased one-acre to supply facilities for their members, which on top of the clubhouse includes several observing pads, the 24-inch Tectron scope and future plans for some bunk houses

.Club membership is very affordable at \$35 / year for an individual or \$50 / year for a family. Contributions for using the facilities (members and pre-approved guests) on overnight stays is only \$5 per night, which, considering the resources, would be a deal at four times that price. The RV power sites are on a first come, first served basis for new moons, and by reservation during the various star parties.

DAV was also in the process of installing a large circular compacted crushed rock ring with a concrete pedestal at the center. On top of the pedestal was a 24" Tectron Dobsonian that used to be Tom Clark's personal scope before he built the 36". On our return visit during PSSG 2008, a nice, very large pole barn facility had been added, which accounts for the third building on the field. I had the pleasure of listening to a live concert performed by John Serrie under this structure. John graciously continued to play well after the sun set, so I was able to return to my scope and view the heavens with John's atmospheric "space music" playing live in the background. It was an observing experience Margie and I will remember for some time.

The skies were good and lived up to the advertised 6.5 rating. The Milky Way cuts a bold and uninterrupted swath across the entire sky from horizon to horizon. There is light dome that extends about 20 degrees up in the ESE that comes from light emitted from a local quarry. Other than this, I did not notice any degradation of the skies above the trees around the field, which provide about a 12-degree hedge (3 to 4 finger).

While I was first touring the field I met Mike Boni, who was completing an octagonal, elevated observing deck for his 14.5" StarMaster telescope. There was a central poured concrete pier that rose flush with the deck to act as a vibration resistant base for the scope. The deck will be finished with seating round the perimeter. It sports a nice overlook to the rest of the properties



*Top: John Serrie plays a live concert in the pole barn located on Grier field at the 2008 Peach State Star Gaze - It was a rare delight to listen to John's creative music live while observing with my scope. Bottom: Row of three leased observatories*

below. What a nice spot to spend long hours under the stars!

Also on my return visit in 2008, Chiefland resident Barry Rui had purchased a lot and built a home at DAV. The observatory was an interesting design that featured a deck that is raised about six feet to avoid ground currents. It was joined to the deck of the house by a whimsical draw bridge arrangement. Gee – two dark sky astronomy village homes. That just isn't right.

DAV continues to develop and more homes and observatories appear with each visit. If you want to be an owner,

you need to act quickly as the remaining lots will likely not last much longer. Even if you do not choose to buy a lot, you can enjoy the dark skies and ambiance of a true dark sky astronomy community by joining DAV and visiting Grier field for an enjoyable astronomy vacation.

Check our the DAV web site for more information, or to join.  
<http://www.deerlickgroup.com>