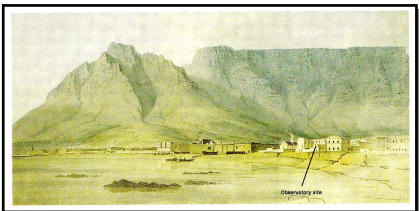


Tercentenary - Nicolas-Louis de La Caille

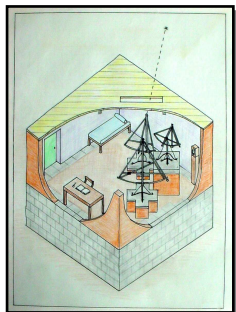


Nicolas-Louis de La Caille, one of the greatest astronomers of the 18th century, was born in Rumigny, northern France, on 28th December, 1713. He was pushed by his parents to become a priest but he was never ordained and took to astronomy instead.

In 1751 he arrived at the Cape to make a survey of the southern sky and measure the distance to the planets. The Governor of the time, Ryk Tulbagh, gave him the resources to set up an observatory in the back garden of No. 2 Strand Street, close to the shoreline.

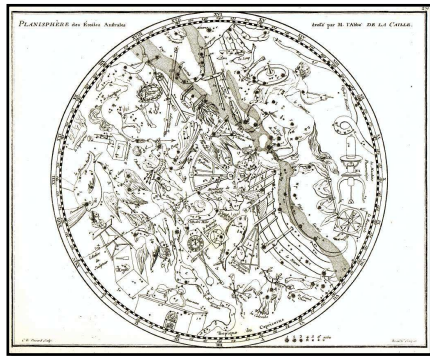


Above: Location of La Caille's observatory on the shoreline of Rogge Bay, close to where present-day St George's Mall and Waterkant Street meet.



Left: Reconstruction of La Caille's observatory in Cape Town. He had three instruments for measuring the positions of the stars.

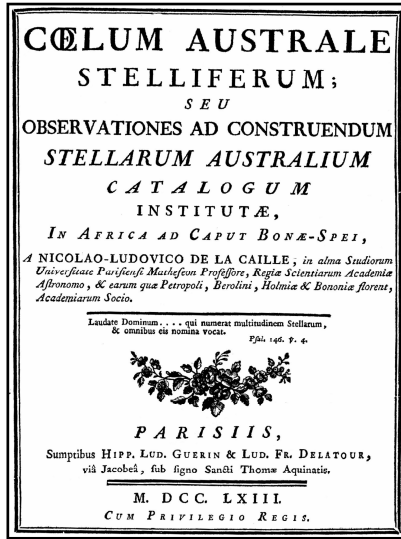
Right: This giant sextant, which still exists at the Paris Observatory, was one of the instruments that La Caille brought to Cape Town



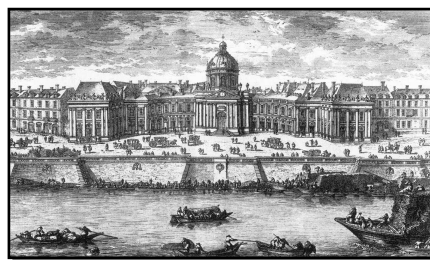
Above: La Caille's map of the southern sky. He intended to be modern by naming 14 new southern constellations after eighteenth-century scientific instruments instead of creatures from Greek mythology.



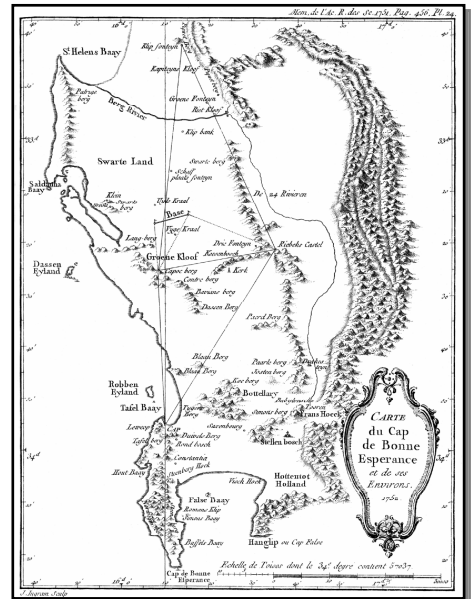
However he named one small constellation after Table Mountain (Mensa), enlarged from the Latin version of the map above. La Caille's constellation names are still in use.



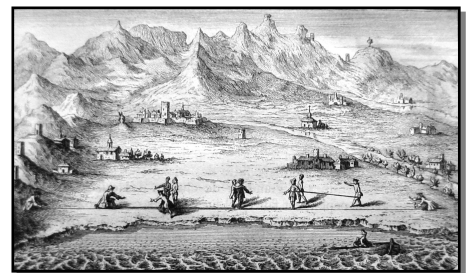
Above: The Catalogue of the southern sky that resulted from La Caille's visit to Cape Town.



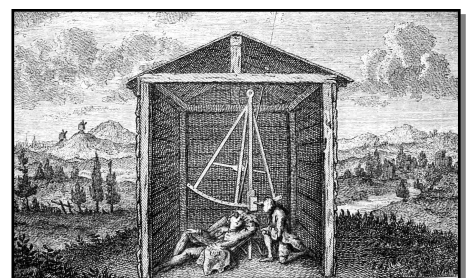
The Collège Mazarin in Paris where La Caille worked and was buried after he died in 1762. Now the Palais de l'Institut.



Part of La Caille's aim was to find the radius of the earth in the southern hemisphere and to do this he surveyed from Cape Town to a spot near Aurora in the Piketberg. Above is his map of the region, showing the positions of his survey points.

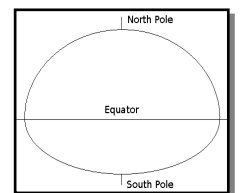


(Above) La Caille laying out a baseline.



(Above) He also had to measure the latitude of each end of his survey using this zenith sector instrument.

Right: La Caille concluded that the earth was slightly pear-shaped, as shown here in exaggerated form



Almost a century later, Thomas Maclear of the Royal Observatory proved that La Caille's latitude measurements had been distorted by local gravitational anomalies.