

Mason and Dixon Stargazing in Cape Town

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SUMMARY

Mason and Dixon Stargazing in Cape Town!

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ABSTRACT

In 1761 the world was abuzz with Transit of Venus fever, because the last time this astronomical phenomenon had occurred was over 100 years prior, and the world's greatest astronomers were planning month-long sea journeys to obtain the best vantage points to observe and record the momentous event. Having only recently been coupled as astro partners, geodetic surveyor/astronomers Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon from England had been honoured with the prestige assignment to make recordings of the transit in the southern hemisphere. To more precisely calculate the required parameters needed to be made at various selected locations around the globe which would not only provide independent cross checks on the data, but also allow for varying climatic conditions which may otherwise prevent sightings in overcast skies. The intrepid pair were on their journey to make the planned observation in Indonesia, but while on their journey were waylaid by a hostile French frigate who delayed their progress before allowing them to

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proceed on their scientific mission. Due to this problem and the imminent occurrence of the transit, the duo opted to stop at the Cape of Good Hope and carry out their epic special viewing from Cape Town. As fate would have it the day of the transit was perfectly clear at their newly ordained station, and their observations were carried out with great precision and skill. Such a world-famous scientific achievement brought immediate world-wide recognition to the two relatively youthful surveyors. On their return journey to England they stopped in at St. Helena, a remote island to the west of Africa, where their head man, Astronomer Royal Nevil Maskelyne, had himself taken recordings of the transit.

Upon their arrival back home they had the fortuitous coincidence to land around the same time that Lord Baltimore, owner of the US colony of Maryland, arrived to negotiate some business with his associates. Seeing as there had been an ongoing 80 year often violent dispute over the location of the boundary between Maryland and the adjoining colony to the north, Pennsylvania, founded by William Penn and still owned by his descendants, he quickly sought a meeting with the most famous surveyors on the planet! Following acceptable discussions, the pair signed a contract to lay out the boundary separating the two US colonies, which ultimately started in 1763 and was nearly completed by 1767, at which time the disgruntled Lord told the pair that their services were no longer required, some 36 miles short of the western terminus of the line. This final piece of the boundary was laid out by surveyors David Rittenhouse and Andrew Ellicott in 1784.