

Elgin National Watch Company Observatory

- The Elgin National Watch Company started in 1864 in Elgin and was in business until about 1960. There were about 60 million watches sold during its existence.
- The main plant was built on 35 acres along the Fox River at (what is now) National St. It had 33,000 sq. ft. of floor space by 1870.
- In 1833 Company built the “National House” with lodging, dining and sports recreation for employees. They had a marching band, operated a watch-makers college and had many sports teams and social clubs. Thousands were employed by ENWC and at its peak there were 4,500 on its payroll.
- In 1909 ENWC decided to build an Observatory on Watch St. to precisely ascertain the exact time to ensure quality instruments straight from the factory for consumers. The movement of the stars due to the Earth’s rotation is used to calculate exact time.
- The observatory, telescope, regulator clocks in the vault and chronograph machine are still standing today in their respective fireproof and temperature controlled rooms, though they haven’t been operational in over 70 years.
- In 1959 as the ENWC was going out of business, they donated the Observatory and land it sits on to Elgin School District U-46 to use for educational purposes. The main plant was demolished in 1966.

The Elgin School District U-46 Planetarium

- Mr. Don Tuttle, the first U-46 teacher/astronomer realized an observatory can be educational, but a planetarium can reach many more students of all ages with lessons in astronomy.
- In 1963 the Planetarium was added to the back of the Observatory and students began coming to for lessons. In his 25 years at the planetarium, he hosted more than 500,000 visitors.
- Mr. Don Tuttle (1960-1985) and later Mr. Gary Kutina (1985-2009) hosted many events in addition to daily lessons with school groups. The after school Jr. Astro Society had many youngsters making their own telescopes and learning to operate the star projector. They also ran “The Star of Bethlehem” evening shows in December, hosted numerous scout groups and served as a meeting point for astronomy clubs.
- One Jr. Astro Society member, Hal Getzelman, grew up to become a capcom (capsule communicator) for the International Space Station. Mr. Tuttle and the U-46 Planetarium were his inspiration. He still works in Houston today and was back in 2016 for the Gail Borden Library’s *Discover Space* exhibit.
- The U-46 Planetarium has never been open to the general public with regular hours, but it has been a special U-46 classroom that is sometimes open to the public.
- It operates full time during the school year for scheduled school groups and has occasional public evening events as listed on the website. Mrs. Peggy Hernandez is the current Teacher/Director.