

## **The Clock in the Sky – Dan Francis**

One of the constellations in the southern sky is named “Horologium,” the pendulum clock. It is one of fourteen constellations named by the French astronomer Nicolas-Louis de Lacaille, who was the first European to extensively study the sky close to the south celestial pole. In Cape Town, South Africa from 1751 to 1754, Lacaille surveyed some 9,766 stars, and divided the part of the sky not visible in Europe into his fourteen new constellations. Instead of naming his constellations after figures of Greek mythology, as most of the ancient northern constellations were, Lacaille used names of instruments and tools used by scientists and artists. Thus Lacaille had the Air Pump, the Engraver’s tools, the mariner’s compass, the telescope, the microscope, the painter’s easel, and of course, the clock, as well as many others.

Lacaille lived at the height of the Age of Reason, when inventors of new machines and instruments flourished, and in some cases were famous. Many people today might be surprised to find that a common device (in today’s world) such as a clock would have been held in such high regard. Of course the clock made possible some of the great advances of that era. For example, the British clock maker John Harrison (1693-1776) invented a series of clocks and watches that would keep accurate time on a ship, making it possible to determine longitude. This revolutionized navigation, commerce, and warfare.

Horologium the Clock still holds its place of honor in the southern sky. All fourteen of Lacaille’s constellations “made the cut” when astronomers decided in 1930 to “officially” divide the northern and southern skies into 88 constellations. Of course, if you want to see Horologium, you will have to go on a journey.