

# Maria Mitchell Biography

## Maria Mitchell

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# Biography

The American astronomer and educator Maria Mitchell (1818-1889) was the first woman in America to become a professional astronomer. She discovered a new comet and worked out its orbit and added several new nebulae to sky maps.

Born in Nantucket, Mass., on Aug. 1, 1818, Maria Mitchell was the daughter of an amateur astronomer who made a living by rating chronometers brought to him by returning ships' captains. She learned astronomy and mathematics while working as her father's helper and continued her private study for 20 years while working as librarian of the town of Atheneum.

Her discovery of a new comet in 1847 brought Mitchell worldwide recognition from other astronomers and scientists and a gold medal from the King of Denmark. In 1848 she became the first woman to be elected an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, was appointed a computer for the American Ephemeris and Nautical Almanac, and was presented with a new telescope by a group of American women in recognition of her achievement. In 1857-1858 she traveled abroad in order to visit observatories and meet European scientists, some of whom she had been corresponding with earlier.

After the death of her mother in 1861, Mitchell and her father moved to Lynn, Mass., the same year that plans began to be laid for the founding of Vassar College, the first institution in America dedicated to the higher education of women. In 1865, after some initial reluctance, she accepted the invitation of Matthew Vassar to become the first professor of astronomy at Vassar. The only member of the original faculty widely known both at home and abroad, she has been credited with a major role in the success of the institution both by her name, which inspired confidence in the college, and by her remarkable teaching ability.

In 1869 Mitchell received a further honor by being elected a member of the American Philosophical Society. She was also the recipient of honorary degrees from several universities. She died June 28, 1889, at Lynn, where she had retired to work in her small private observatory. In 1908 the Maria Mitchell Astronomical Observatory, built on Nantucket Island by a fund raised by American women, was dedicated to the memory of Maria Mitchell, who had become a symbol of what a woman could accomplish in the scholarly world when given opportunity and encouragement.