

Mitchell, Maria Encyclopedia Article

Mitchell, Maria

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Mitchell, Maria

American Astronomer 1818–1889

Maria Mitchell, America's first prominent woman astronomer, was one of ten children born to William Mitchell and Lydia Coleman. Mitchell showed a talent for mathematics and an enthusiasm for the field of astronomy at an early age. In 1838, at the age of 20, she became a librarian at the Nantucket Atheneum, which gave her the opportunity to further study astronomy.

Maria Mitchell championed the education and professional advancement of women.

On the evening of October 1, 1847, in the observatory built by her father, Mitchell sighted a comet using her father's 2-inch telescope, which earned her international recognition and a gold medal from the king of Denmark.

Throughout her career, Mitchell was the first woman elected to many prestigious organizations, such as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1848) and the American Philosophical Society (1869). She served as president of the Association for the Advancement of Women (1873). In 1865, she accepted an appointment to Vassar College to become director of the observatory and became the first woman to join the faculty as a professor of astronomy—posts she held until her retirement in 1888. The observatory, built in 1864 for Mitchell, housed her original telescope until 1964, at which time it was donated to the Smithsonian Institution.

In addition to this recognition, she received many honors including honorary degrees from Hanover College (1853), Columbia University (1887), and an honorary doctorate from Rutgers Female College. The Boston Public Library and a public school in Denver, Colorado are named in her honor, as well as a crater on the moon. She died in Lynn, Massachusetts, on June 28, 1889.

Maria Mitchell House: a National Historic Landmark

The Maria Mitchell House, a National Historic Landmark, is located on Nantucket Island, Massachusetts. The Nantucket Maria Mitchell Association, founded in 1902, maintains the property, which is open to the public.

See Also

Astronomer; Astronomy, Measurement In.

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