

The Unitarian Astronomer



Maria Mitchell of Nantucket, Massachusetts

(1818-1889)

Maria Mitchell was born as one of 10 children into the Quaker family of William Mitchell and Lydia Coleman Mitchell on Nantucket Island, off the coast of Cape Cod. Because Quakers believed in intellectual equality for women and in education, Maria was well-educated and attended a number of schools on the island. The most influential, perhaps, was Unitarian Minister Cyrus Peirce's School for Young Ladies.

From the time she was a small girl, Maria loved to watch the stars with her father through their telescope. Encouraged by her father, Maria was determined to become a "starwatcher" when she grew up.

In 1842, Maria left her Quaker faith and became a Unitarian. In a protest against slavery, Maria refused to wear any garment that was made of cotton! She also worked tirelessly with other suffragists, like her good friend Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and co-founded the American Association for the Advancement of Women.

In 1847, at the age of 29, she made the first telescopic discovery of a particular comet and won a gold medal from the king of Denmark. Her comet came to be called, "Miss Mitchell's Comet," although its official designation is "Comet 1847 VI."

Her role as a scientist extended into the entire scientific community. Maria Mitchell helped organize the Association for the Advancement of Science, subsequently becoming its first woman member in 1850. She also was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

When Vassar College opened in 1865 and the trustees voted to allow women faculty, Maria accepted their offer. Although she had never had any higher education, she was appointed Vassar's first ever Professor of Astronomy and Director of the Vassar College Observatory. After learning that she was paid less than male faculty, Maria insisted on equal pay and received it from the college.

In 1889, at 70, Marie died at her home in Lynn, Massachusetts. The Maria Mitchell Observatory in Nantucket is named in her honor as is the Maria Mitchell Association, founded in 1902. She was posthumously inducted into the U.S. National Women's Hall of Fame, and was the namesake of a World War II Liberty Ship, the *SS Maria Mitchell*. There is also a crater on the Moon named after Maria!

One of Maria's more well-known sayings reminds us of the value of seeking and questioning. She said, "We have a hunger of the mind. We ask for all of the knowledge around us and the more we get, the more we desire."