

Maria Mitchell

Woman Astronomer Discovers Comet

Maria Mitchell, the first person, male or female, appointed to the Vassar faculty (1865), was arguably the most famous American scientist of the 19th century. Born in Nantucket, Massachusetts, in 1818, she became interested in astronomy through her father, William Mitchell, and assisted him in his observatory. In the late 1830s she was appointed librarian at the Nantucket Athenaeum, using its collection to educate herself while she worked with her father in the

evenings. In 1847 she discovered a new comet, named for her—she was the first person to record a comet sighting—and was subsequently awarded a gold medal by the King of Denmark. She was the first woman appointed to the Academy of Arts and Sciences (1848); the first woman named to the Association for the Advancement of Science (1850); the first woman to become an astronomy professor in the U.S. (1865); and the first woman elected to the



"We especially need imagination in science. Question everything."

—Maria Mitchell

American Philosophical Society (1869).

Mitchell was a marvelous teacher whose students adored her because she held them to a very high standard of intellectual achievement (despite the fact that they were "only" women) and because she believed in them. Mitchell is famous for asking generation after generation of Vassar students: "Did you learn that from a book or did you observe it yourself?"

What it meant for Maria Mitchell and her students in 1878 was a journey

across country to see the total solar eclipse for themselves. Mitchell, her sister, and four Vassar graduates traveled over 2,000 miles by train in the heat of July, wrangled with stationmasters over lost luggage, pitched their tents on a hill outside Denver, Colorado, and pointed their telescopes to the center of the solar system. All that just to witness an event that would last exactly two minutes and 40 seconds!