

Fun Facts to Know and Tell about Maria Mitchell (!)

Fun Facts

- See attached list of awards won/earned by Maria Mitchell, and attached chronology of her life
- See attached poem written by very famous suffragette Julia Ward Howe
- Maria Mitchell was born on the island of Nantucket, MA. On Aug. 1, 1818. (Mitchell & Kendall, 1896, p. 8). She died at Lyon, MA on June 29th, 1889 after a lingering illness (
- She was the third child of William and Lydia Mitchell (Mitchell & Kendall, 1896, p. 8), one of ten children
- Her ancestors on both mother's and father's sides were Quakers for many generations (Mitchell & Kendall, 1896, p. 8).
- They moved to Nantucket (which was part of NY then) as a result of religious intolerance on the part of the Puritans (Mitchell & Kendall, 1896, p. 8).
- When she was only 11 years old, she helped her father in his astronomical observations. (de Forest Lamb, p. 36)
- She was hired at 18 years old as the librarian of the Nantucket Atheneum, a post she held for nearly 20 years
- In 1849, she was hired as an astronomer to do computations for the Nautical Almanac, which she did for nearly 20 years
- She was an internationally famous astronomer when she began teaching Astronomy at Vassar in 1865. (de Forest Lamb, p. 36)
- She won a gold medal from the King of Denmark in 1848 for discovery of the Comet of 1847. (Wright, 1949, p. 240).
- She was president of the Association for the Advancement of Women in 1875.

Quotations

About her:

“Overwhelmed by the greatness of sky or mountain and their own comparative insignificance, they turn to the earth and leave the contemplation of the sky and its immensity to others. But Maria herself could never feel that way. Her love of the skies would always be stronger than her roots in the earth or her attachment to any particular place on that earth. Wherever she might be, the stars were always there to be counted on and shared. Sometimes, on the farm [on Nantucket], as she dug her hands into the rich earth, she understood how some people could feel close to the land in which they had planted seeds to watch them grow. But such realizations for her were transitory. In the skies she could know always the positions of the stars at any given time as certainly as she knew the rising and the setting of the sun each day. When a new object appeared there she could predict its future in a way that she could never do on the changeable land” (Wright, 1949, p. 46).

“A small newsboy stopped short in the aisle of the train and stared. ‘Please, ma’am, are you Julia Ward Howe?’ ‘No,’ replied the lady. The boy went away, only to return a few

minutes later, ‘Please, ma’am, are you Elizabeth Stuart Phelps?’ ‘No.’ ‘Are you Harriet Beecher Stowe?’ ‘No.’ ‘Well, who are you lady? You must be *somebody!*’ Somebody the lady certainly was—a world-famous scientist, America’s first woman astronomer, first Professor of Astronomy at the new Vassar Female College, and a delightful and invigorating personality.” (de Forest Lamb, p. 36)

By her:

“Every formula which expresses a law of nature is a hymn of praise to God.” (de Forest Lamb, 1928, p. 36)

“When the American girl carries her energy into the great questions of humanity, into the practical problems of life; when she takes home to her heart the interests of education, of government, of religion, what may we not hope for our country!” ((de Forest Lamb, 1928, p. 37)

“I am but a woman. For women, there are undoubtedly great difficulties in the path but so much the more to overcome. First, no woman should say, “I am but a woman.” But a woman! What more can you ask to be. Born a woman, born with the average brain of humanity, born with more than the average heart, if you are mortal, what higher destiny could you have. No matter where you are, you are a power. Your influence is incalculable, personal influence is always underrated by the person. We are all centres of spheres, we see the portion of the sphere above us and we see how little we affect it, we forget the part of the sphere around and beneath us. It extends just as far every way.” (Albers, 2001, p. 258)

1915 comments from President Taylor and Professor Elizabeth Haight, on the hiring of Maria Mitchell: “This ‘costly luxury’ was secured and Maria Mitchell came to Vassar at the opening as professor of astronomy to bring it the distinction of her name, the stimulus of her intellect, and the vigor of her personality.

The observatory still holds the traditions of her life there: her famous dome parties to her student friends, her outspoken discussions of life and education, her intense interest in the peculiar problems of woman’s training and status, her unwearied mental activity. It was a great boon that a college for women should have had a woman of such a mental and personal caliber to assist at its founding. The keynotes of her character were sincerity and an eager passion for truth, and she helped impart these qualities to the life of Vassar in its pioneer days.” (Albers, 2001, p.154)

Quotations from the book of her letters and journal entries that we have digitized in MBooks, which was compiled by her sister, Phebe Mitchell Kendall (*Maria Mitchell, life, letters, and journals*. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015033356646>):

(Page 11) “Miss Mitchell was an inveterate reader. She devoured books on all subjects. If she saw that boys were eagerly reading a certain book she immediately

read it; if it were harmless she encouraged them to read it; if otherwise, she had a convenient way of losing the book. In November, when the trustees made their annual examination, the book appeared upon the shelf, but the next day after it was again lost.”

(Page 174) “Oct. 31, 1866. Our faculty meetings always try me in this respect: we do things that other colleges have done before. We wait and ask for precedent. If the earth had waited for a precedent, it never would have turned on its axis!”

(Page 176) “Oct. 15, 1868. Resolved, in case of my outliving father and being in good health, to give my efforts to the intellectual culture of women, without regard to salary; if possible, connect myself with liberal Christian institutions, believing, as I do, that happiness and growth in this life are best promoted by them, and that what is good in this life is good in any life.”

(page 25-26) “Feb. 15, 1853. I think Dr. Hall [in his ' Life of Mary Ware '] does wrong when he attempts to encourage the use of the needle. It seems to me that the needle is the chain of woman, and has fettered her more than the laws of the country.

Once emancipate her from the ' stitch, stitch, stitch,' the industry of which would be commendable if it served any purpose except the gratification of her vanity, and she would have time for studies which would engross as the needle never can. I would as soon put a girl alone into a closet to meditate as give her only the society of her needle...”

References

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