

THE NANTUCKET
MARIA MITCHELL ASSOCIATION

Dedication
of the
Fire-Proof Observatory

DEDICATED
JULY FIFTEENTH
1908

Dedication

of the

Fire-Proof Observatory

The new fire-proof observatory was dedicated on the afternoon of July 15th, 1908.

The exercises were held on the grounds opposite the Memorial. These, by the courtesy of Mrs. Charles Woodbridge, were placed at our disposal.

The ample space provided for a large gathering, and in spite of threatening clouds, a goodly throng responded to the very general invitation.

In the absence of the President, Prof. Mary W. Whitney, who was in Europe during the summer, Miss Helen A. Gardner, a member of the Board of Managers, presided and opened the exercises by reading the following letter from Prof. Whitney:

To the Nantucket Maria Mitchell Association:

The mounting of Maria Mitchell's telescope in an observatory built near her birthplace, must be an event of interest to all who had the privilege to know her, and also to all who care for the science to which she devoted her life. It is a fitting memorial to a remarkable woman, whose scientific acquirement was very superior for the generation in which she lived. Astronomy was not much cultivated, a woman astronomer was quite unknown. Her interest in the science began with her youth, and it was never lost sight of in her hopes and aspirations.

It is a pleasing thought that the first person to use the telescope after its mounting is completed, will be a young woman educated at Vassar College and trained in the observatory of Vassar College, where Prof. Mitchell spent her last twenty years of active service. If love and

enthusiasm go into the use of the telescope, something will surely be accomplished with it that will be of value. It may not be a great thing; it may not be so striking an event as the discovery of the comet which established Prof. Mitchell's reputation in 1847, but let us hope it will be something worth while, something the ever-growing realm of truth will claim for its own.

I extend my congratulations on the occasion of the successful opening of the observatory.

Yours very truly,

MARY W. WHITNEY.

MARIA MITCHELL.

BY LUCRETIA M. GARDNER,
(*Written for the Dedication.*)

Tw'as here, O watcher of the evening sky,
While distant echoes over moor and sea
In undertone of rhythm came to thee,
And ever with yon starlit, gleaming eye
The heavens beckoned thee as night drew nigh;
Here, while thou traced the silent mystery
On azure scroll, thy soul's intensity
Did wisdom find, and hear her prophesy.
Thy spirit knew no bounds, for unto thee
This message was revealed: That when one star
Is quenched on high, for ages does its light
Shine on; so now o'er path of memory
Thy gracious radiance steadfast and afar
Will lead us ever on to noblest height.

In the absence of Mr. Alexander Starbuck, Miss Gertrude M. King read "Personal Recollections," prepared by Mr. Starbuck:

My personal and definite recollections of Miss Mitchell run back, as nearly as I can determine, to about the year 1854. I can recall the little telescope that was located on top of the Bank building, then used, as now, for a banking house and a dwelling, the latter the home of her father and mother, her sisters and herself. I remember being invited one beautiful, moonlight night to look at the moon through that telescope, and the peculiar sensation it gave me to see that orb apparently so much reduced in size, but with a clearly defined rotundity, and resembling to my boyish eyes to a marked degree a peeled orange. There was a distinct feeling of surprise and awe inspired by the sight from which I have never fully recovered, as well as a feeling of gratitude that I had been so privileged as to have been allowed to look through the instrument.

Miss Mitchell's father at that time was Cashier of the Pacific Bank, and also conducted the meteorological observations on Nantucket for the United States Government. Those observations included the temperature, state of the barometer, condition of the atmosphere, nature, and direction of motion of the clouds, amount of rainfall and direction of the wind, taken at three definite hours in the day. Miss Mitchell was Librarian at the Athenæum Library, and, astronomically, was engaged in her own observations and in making calculations for the Nautical Almanac.

By some means, that, from my present standpoint, seem to me a little mysterious, I had acquired quite a local reputation for being skillful and accurate with my pen, and a considerable portion of my time, aside from that occupied by my school work and duties, was employed in copying the reports of both Miss Mitchell and her father, for transmission to the authorities at Washington. As the copies and originals had to be carefully compared before being sent, I was naturally often in Miss Mitchell's company.

It was my experience then, corroborated many times in later life, that the seeming austerities of individuals are often

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It was my experience then, corroborated many times in later life, that the seeming austerities of individuals are often

unconscious traits which disappear with closer acquaintance, as one has to penetrate the outer covering of the gem in its natural state to discover its true beauties. My association with Miss Mitchell in this work gave me a clearer insight into the sympathetic and lovable side of her nature than I could have gained in a lifetime by ordinary, everyday contact.

Several months before she resigned her position as Librarian of the Athenæum Library I was employed by her as her assistant. Here again I came into contact with her in another direction. She was a good disciplinarian, yet, withal, a kindly one. She was ever ready to give good advice when advice was sought; her naturally literary tendencies joined with the duties of her position to make her familiar with all the library under her charge.

I do not know in what year the suggestion of card cataloguing of books originated in this country, but I do know that so long ago as 1855 or 1856, under her direction, I worked on a card catalogue of the books of the Nantucket Athenæum which had been begun some time before my employment by her. On each card was a copy of the entire title page of a book. I think some of those cards are still preserved among the archives of the Athenæum. They show, not only that she was progressive and awake to the trend of modern thought in library work, but that the Athenæum Library, under her direction, was among the first in the country to recognize the advantages of this system now so universally used.

I recall, too, in a general way, with considerable distinctness, the new observatory built for Miss Mitchell, which was a somewhat mysterious affair to us young lads; it stood on the north side of the vacant lot back of the Coffin Schoolhouse. This, I believe, was the first properly equipped observatory that Miss Mitchell owned, and was erected in 1859.

In July, 1859, like other Nantucket boys who were ambitious beyond the facilities that our island town afforded, I had to leave my old home and find employment abroad. It was with exceeding pleasure that I received in the following month from Miss Mitchell and her father two letters of recommendation, entirely unsolicited and unexpected, that were complimentary to me perhaps beyond my deserts. They are before

me as I write, and at the risk of being accredited with egotism, I will quote a little from that of Miss Mitchell, for it shows better than anything else that her interest in those she called her "boys" extended beyond the days when they were under her control and into their future life, beyond the control of her presence but not beyond the spirit of her influence.

Commencing, she says, "I meant to write something before you left us, to show to you and to others, my high appreciation of your character, but I put it off from day to day and you left before it was done." "My Athenæum 'boys' have turned out wonderfully well—they were good boys at the outset or I should not have employed them, and I hope they learned no evil from me. Some information they could not help getting from the handling of good books." The especially complimentary parts of her letter to me I omit, but the concluding sentence is so characteristic of the tender and womanly side of her nature, and shows so well her thoughtful care over the young lads who once had been in her employ, that I cannot forbear quoting it: "I should be glad to have you write to me when you can find time and tell me what you are doing and what friends you are making.

"Yours very truly,

"MARIA MITCHELL."

Such was Miss Mitchell as I knew her, and I am exceedingly glad to have the opportunity on this occasion to testify to my very high regard for her as a true-hearted woman.

ALEXANDER STARBUCK.

Waltham, Mass., July 9th, 1908.

The President, in introducing Miss Florence M. Bennett, whose address follows, said, in substance, Miss Bennett is a young woman who also won honor for herself and Nantucket in Vassar College, not one who had honors thrust upon her, but one to whom well-earned and well-merited honors were paid.

Friends of the Maria Mitchell Memorial Association:

In February, 1831, at the age of twelve and a half years, Maria Mitchell performed an early service to the science in which she later signally distinguished herself. As her father's assistant she noted the time of the annular eclipse of that year. Mr. Mitchell's object in observing this eclipse was to determine the longitude of his Vestal Street house, that he might set to accurate Greenwich time the chronometers of the whalemens. Four years later, acquiring prestige as one of the first discoverers of Halley's comet on its return, in 1835, Mr. Mitchell was able to raise his place of observation to the rank of an observatory. To-day's event, in denoting this Vestal Street house an astronomical observatory, merely restores its honors.

The observatory then dates from 1835. The telescope therein mounted belongs to a later year. Shortly after Miss Mitchell's return from her first European tour in 1858 she received, through Miss Elizabeth Peabody, on behalf of the women of America, this telescope, a fine instrument made by Alvan Clarke.

At that time Maria Mitchell had established for herself a commanding position in the scientific world. By her father she had been early trained to an astronomer's duties.

Because of her own consuming interest in things of the mind, in response to the pressure of the speculative and imaginative instinct within her, she had quietly, steadily, indefatigably, without hope of reward, pursued her studies, until in 1847 she won fame by discovering her comet. When it was settled in the great European realm of science that a young woman on a little island in the Atlantic was to be honored, as the discoverer of a telescopic comet, with the gift of a gold medal at the hands of the king of Denmark; when, moreover, it was found that this same young woman had not stumbled upon the discovery by happy chance, but that she was versed in the niceties and difficulties of her art, that she could compute the orbits of celestial objects, and could make predictions based on exact mathematics—then Maria Mitchell became an accredited astronomer.

In 1848 she was elected unanimously to the American

Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 1849 she was recommended by the Regents of the Smithsonian Institute as a worthy recipient of a premium from that institute. The premium was promptly awarded. In the same year she was appointed one of the computers of the Nautical Almanac. Her duties in connection with this publication she performed for nineteen years. Her year in Europe, 1857-8, to which reference has already been made, was filled to the brim with honors. Everywhere she was received with the special courtesies and privileges accorded to a distinguished guest.

This telescope then signifies the esteem in which the women of America held a remarkable woman. That is to be remembered. Nor can we justly lose sight of the fact that Miss Mitchell was cordially in sympathy with what was known as the "Woman's Movement." She was a conspicuous woman among noble women. But her dignity as a scientist was hers irrespective of sex. She worked in fields where men worked. She was rewarded, not because she was a remarkable woman, but because she was a remarkable astronomer among the Americans of her day and generation. Her name is the unique woman's name on the rolls of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. What indeed, however, could be more fitting than that the women of America should put into the hands of this able woman an instrument to be used for further research?

It is also fitting that Miss Mitchell should, at the opening of Vassar College, have taken her place as one of its professors. It was the pioneer woman's college. Hear the words of its founder in 1861: "It occurred to me that woman, having received from her Creator the same intellectual constitution as man, has the same right as man to intellectual culture and development. It is my hope to be the instrument in the hand of Providence of founding an institution which shall accomplish for young women what our colleges are accomplishing for young men."

In the year 1865 Miss Mitchell was appointed Professor of Astronomy and Director of the Observatory at Vassar College. She abandoned a student's life for a teacher's. It is the sacrifice on which our educational system is built. It is the sacrifice which our country still demands. Prof. Mary W.

Whitney, her associate at Vassar College, and the present occupant of the chair which Miss Mitchell held, speaks thus: "It is possible that, had she determined to remain only an observer, she might have contributed more to the stock of astronomical knowledge, since the daily routine of class preparation and class work must essentially curtail the night work of an astronomer. But I must believe that her choice was the wise one, and that what Vassar College has gained, and all the young women have gained who have come under her influence, must far outweigh the possible increase in astronomical fact that might have followed from these twenty-three years, if devoted exclusively to the work of the telescope."

It is a matter which can never be estimated and set down even approximately in figures how much Miss Mitchell's counsel and influence meant at Vassar College in those early days, when the standard of scholarship had to be struck—not merely kept pure as to-day. Heart and soul she worked, bringing to her task the mind of a devoted scholar, a thoughtful worker, a lofty idealist.

To-day Miss Ida Whiteside, a Vassar girl of a later generation, takes up her work in this Observatory, which stands beside the house where Miss Mitchell was born. This Maria Mitchell Association is a Memorial. Work carried on in memory of a worker is more enduring than marble and bronze. It was in this old house that Miss Mitchell dreamed her first imaginings of a scholar's success. It was this house which her father's efforts made an observatory. In this new observatory building even now the stimulus of her personality mounts her telescope for work. Have we not reason to hope for good things? Her bidding would be to lay aside pride in her—pride as Nantucketers, because she was Nantucket born and nurtured; pride as Vassar women, because she gave the last twenty-three years of her life to the growth of that institution; pride as Americans, because she was of our country; pride as men and women, because she used wisely God's great gift of mind. Her bidding would be, "Do. And don't talk about it."

Mrs. Caroline Earle White spoke of the valuable work which Prof. Mitchell accomplished, and of her earnest search after truth. No notes of her address are at the command of the Publication Committee; therefore it cannot be given in full.

Miss Elizabeth R. Coffin, a pupil of Maria Mitchell during the early years of Vassar College, spoke thus of her life and influence at the College:

In those early times when the way was yet to find, Miss Mitchell was a formative power for high ideals and high standards of scholarship in the education of women.

The story of her personal influence on her students can never fully be told. It lives in the consciousness of all who came within its touch.

Incisive and trenchant of speech, and with a keen sense of humor, she was warmly human.

She belonged to a large family, and took a vivid interest in her many nieces and nephews, and all their interests large and small; when she came to Vassar her large social nature took in her pupils with scarcely less vital sympathy.

Many a girl went to her as to a mother confessor with the mental and moral perplexities of youth, and was lifted into a larger, clearer vision and stronger courage to strive for the best.

The Observatory had a home atmosphere from the first, where for more than three years William Mitchell, Miss Mitchell's father, in his beautiful old age was a benignant presence.

Simple open-hearted hospitality was as real a part of Miss Mitchell's life as was hard work and devotion to high scientific aims.

Her humor lent a delightful touch to her talk; singularly devoid of vanity, she dearly loved to tell a good story against herself, and she never allowed the admiration of the young girls who surrounded her to degenerate into sentimentality.

In that time of tense feeling and violent contention following the Civil War, her sense of humor kept her sane and clear and free from all fanaticisms.

In her public and her private life she stood for plain liv-

ing and high thinking, for the value of the intellectual life and for the paramount value of the moral nature.

As an introduction to a Vassar Song, Miss Gardner said:

"Such an occasion as this must of necessity have a reminiscent character not wholly free from sadness. To the native-born Nantucketer and to many visitors the name of Ella Gardner is closely allied to that of Miss Mitchell.

"One of Vassar's most gifted pupils, a favorite of Miss Mitchell, and a member of that 'Dome Party' which met regularly in the Vassar Observatory for relaxation after the serious work was done, it is fitting that our thoughts now turn to her in tender memory, and the dome song written by her in a mirthful mood and showing her humorous side has been selected for this occasion."

This song was rendered by such graduates as were present, aided by young ladies, who later assisted in serving refreshments.

At the conclusion of the exercise Mr. Albert G. Brock, Chairman of the Observatory Building Committee, reported the completion of the work, and handed the keys to Mrs. Maria T. Swain, who received them on behalf of the Observatory Committee.

A letter from Mrs. Julia Ward Howe was received soon after the dedication, expressing regret that her words would not be in time for the event.

The message she has written is so fitting a close to the exercises that it should have place in the annals of the dedication.

She writes: "Let me say how glad I am of the fire-proof observatory and of all that will help to preserve the memory of our dear and noble friend, Maria Mitchell; her companionship was always uplifting and delightful, and her remembrance will always be so."