



Walking in the Footsteps of *Maria Mitchell*

America's First Woman Astronomer

Born on Nantucket Island, Massachusetts thirty miles out to sea in the early nineteenth century, a young girl with a love for mathematics and a keen interest in assisting her astronomer father would help to open the doors of science and education to girls and women. Her legacy of learning-by-doing lives on today, as does the legacy of her work and her beliefs in equality. Maria (Ma-rye-ah) Mitchell's work and life have served as an inspiration for millions and continues to this day, two hundred years after her birth.

1. Nantucket Atheneum

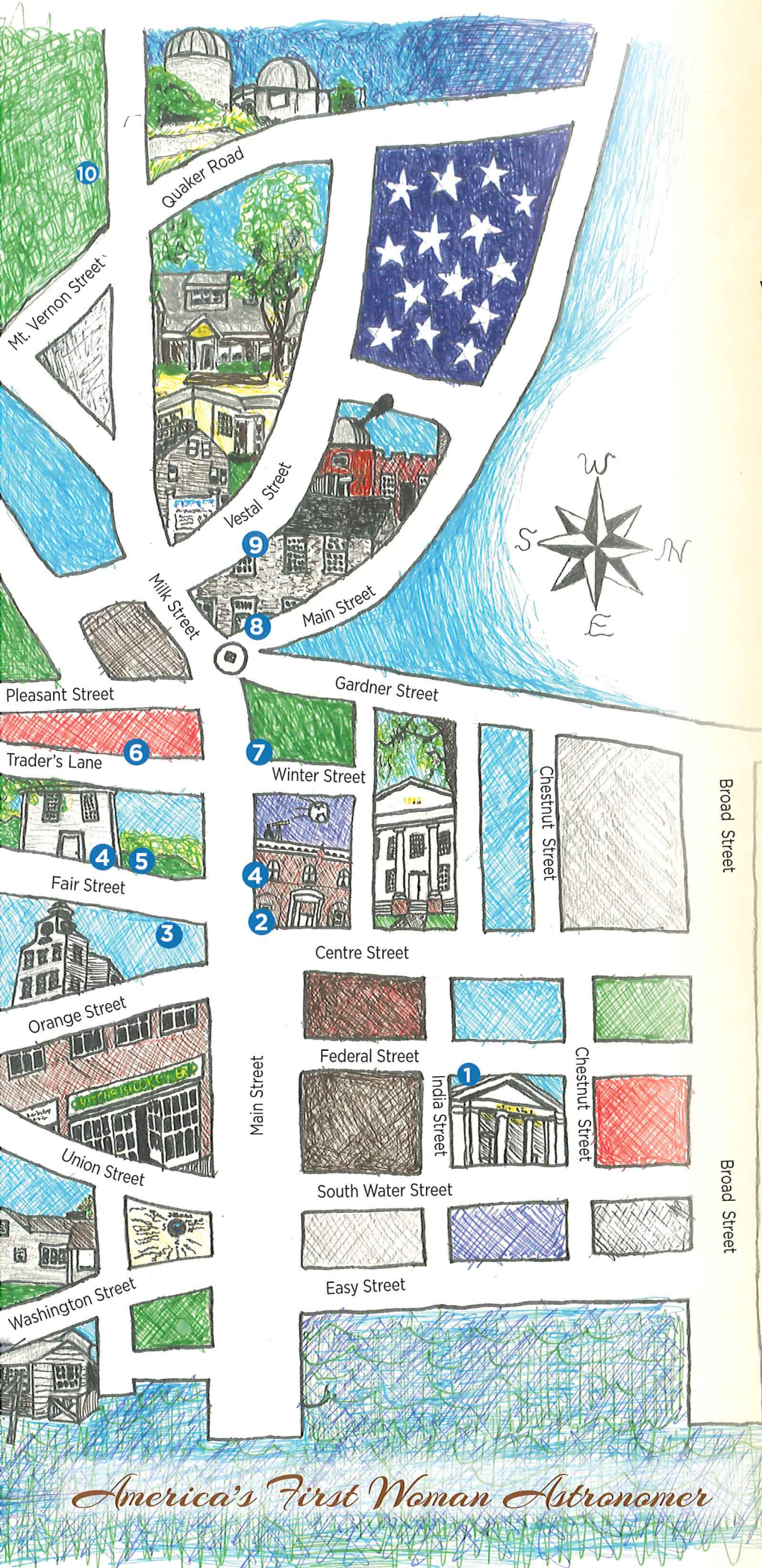
1 India Street

At age 18, Maria became the first librarian at Nantucket's library, the Atheneum. Maria used this position to further her own education, particularly in the sciences, higher mathematics, and languages, as well as helping young patrons with their studies. She held the position for twenty years leaving to take care of her mother and to travel. During her tenure, she oversaw the Atheneum's museum, welcomed notable speakers such as John James Audubon, Frederick Douglass, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau, and helped to rebuild the Atheneum after the Great Fire of 1846.

2. Pacific Bank

61 Main Street

The Mitchell family moved here in 1837 when Maria was 19 years old and her father became the Bank's Cashier, or President. The family lived on the second floor of the building. On October 1, 1847, while scanning the sky with her telescope from the Bank's rooftop observatory, Maria spotted a comet. That discovery prompted the King of Denmark to



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award her a gold medal for her work. Because of this discovery and the international recognition that followed, Maria was in the position to be appointed as the first professor at the newly-formed Vassar College in 1863. She taught at Vassar for twenty-three years. The 1847 discovery of the comet and her astronomy teaching career led her to be known as America's first woman astronomer.

3. Unitarian Universalist Church

11 Orange Street

After leaving the Nantucket's Quaker Meeting in 1843, Maria Mitchell attended the Unitarian Universalist Church for the next two decades. Membership records were destroyed in the Great Fire, but treasurer's books show that Maria paid for her own pew.

4. Meridian Stones (two locations)

Pacific Bank on Main Street and the Quaker Meetinghouse on Fair Street

These two stones are located along the side of the Pacific Bank and the Quaker Meetinghouse. The stones date back to 1840. They were erected by William Mitchell, Maria's father, a prominent astronomer, teacher, and surveyor on Nantucket. These stones helped to determine between magnetic and true north and were utilized for surveying. An act of Congress would later mandate that all towns and cities in the U. S. establish meridian markers.

5. Quaker Meeting House

7 Fair Street

Maria's father was an elder in the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers. Maria's skepticism and outspokenness resulted in her leaving Quaker Meeting - and being "written out" by the Society- in 1843.

6. Trader's Lane

In 1835, at the age of seventeen, Maria Mitchell opened a school for girls ages six and up. The school lasted one year, closing when she accepted the position at the Atheneum in 1836.

7). The Admiral Sir Isaac Coffin School

4 Winter Street

This school, founded by an American-born English admiral and a descendant of Nantucket's Coffin family, was also the site for a small observatory built for Maria by the people of Nantucket around 1858. Maria made the observatory available to island school children, particularly those at the Coffin School. One of Maria's sisters taught languages at the school and her brother-in-law was the school's principal.



Pacific Bank

8. Southwest Corner of Main and Milk Streets

Today a Victorian-style house stands on the land that once housed the Town building for Nantucket in a location that was then the center of Town. William Mitchell taught school on the second floor of the Town building.

9. Mitchell House

1 Vestal Street

This house is the birthplace of Maria Mitchell. She was the third child of Lydia and William Mitchell and one of ten children born in the family. Maria learned astronomy from her father, observing her first solar eclipse here at age 12. The house is preserved as it was when Maria lived there with many personal and family artifacts. The house is adjacent to the Vestal Street Observatory built after her death in 1908. Both the Mitchell House and Vestal Street Observatory are operated by the Maria Mitchell Association and are open to the public. Across the street, the wooden portion of the MMA's Research Center was once the schoolhouse of William Mitchell.

10. Prospect Hill Cemetery

Milk Street Extension and Mount Vernon Street

Maria died on June 28, 1889 in Lynn, MA, a year after her retirement from Vassar College in 1888. She is buried in the shadow of the Maria Mitchell Association's Loines Observatory - a working observatory open year-round for public viewing of the night sky.



mariamitchell.org

Maria Mitchell Timeline

- 1818** Maria is born on August 1.
- 1831** She observes a solar eclipse with her father.
- 1836** Becomes first librarian of Nantucket Atheneum.
- 1837** Her father is made Chief Cashier of the Pacific Bank, moving the family there and building a rooftop observatory.
- 1846** The Great Fire destroys much of the lower portion of Town and the wharves, including the Atheneum.
- 1847** Maria discovers a comet on October 1.
- 1848** American Academy of Arts and Sciences elects her as the first female member.
- 1849** Becomes a paid computer for the American Nautical Almanac, calculating the ephemeris of Venus.
- 1850** American Association for the Advancement of Science elects her as its first female member.
- 1857/58** Tours the southern United States and Europe.
- 1861** Maria's mother dies. Moves with her father to Lynn, MA, to be near several family members and their friends and colleagues, the Bonds, at Harvard College Observatory.
- 1863** Invited by the newly-founded Vassar Female College to serve as its first professor of astronomy and mathematics. Maria was the first professor hired.
- 1869** American Philosophical Society elects her as a member. Travels with students to Iowa to observe a solar eclipse.
- 1873** Another tour of Europe with family brings her to Russia. Combined with her first trip, she visits all the major observatories in Europe.
- 1875** Elected president of the Association for the Advancement of Women which she helps to establish in the early 1870s.
- 1878** Travels to Denver, CO with students to observe solar eclipse.
- 1888** Retires from Vassar due to failing health. Returns to Lynn, MA where a nephew designs and builds her an observatory behind her youngest sister's house.
- 1889** Maria dies on June 28. She is buried in the Mitchell family plot in the Prospect Hill Cemetery.
- 1902** The Nantucket Maria Mitchell Association is founded by Maria's family, friends, and students to honor her legacy and preserve her birthplace.
- 1903** The NMMA is officially incorporated by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts making it one of the first museums in the country to honor a woman.



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