

VESTAL STREET NEIGHBORHOOD

The small lane south of Main Street now named Vestal Street was known as Prison Lane in the late eighteenth century. Today Vestal Street is lined with a number of historic structures developed largely in the early nineteenth century as the town grew and several of its institutional buildings were relocated to this neighborhood. Nearby were the Town Hall (once located at the corner of Milk and Main Streets), jail (along Vestal) and poor house (once found at Quaker Lane).

7 Milk Street: Hinchman House Natural Science Museum

Built in the early nineteenth century for Thomas Coffin, the Hinchman House belonged to Mitchell family members who were descendants of Maria Mitchell's uncle, Peleg Mitchell Jr. In 1945, the house came to the Maria Mitchell Association in the estate of C. Russell for use as the MMA's natural science museum.

Today Hinchman House is the center of activity for research on a myriad of subjects related to the island's natural world – from Burying Beetles and Black Widow spiders to the island's birds and snakes, to studies of the invasive species of the island and Ospreys and Barn Owls. Exhibits of the island's animals and insects and the plant life found on the island are on display.

Architectural and Other Features of Note

The Hinchman House is an excellent example of a late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Federal house with a five bay wide front and central hallway. It's interior retains simple woodwork, transoms over doors to allow light to pass through, built-in chests of drawers, simple paneling, interior shutters and two staircases.

1 Vestal Street: Maria Mitchell Birthplace

In 1790, Hezekiah Swain purchased the lot on Vestal Street, then Prison Lane, to build a house in the typical Quaker style. In 1816, Aaron Mitchell purchased the House from Simeon Gardner and in 1818 sold it to his cousin William Mitchell. In that same year, William Mitchell, his wife Lydia Coleman Mitchell, and their two children, Andrew and Sally, moved into the House just in time to welcome a new addition to the family, Maria, on August 1, 1818. Later that year, William added a small addition to the House: a sink room. During their residency in the House, William Mitchell also used his prodigious skills as a craftsman to enhance the structure. By 1825, the needs of a rapidly growing family—they would have ten children—necessitated the addition of a new kitchen to the 1790 structure.

In 1837, William Mitchell was offered a job as cashier at the Pacific National Bank. Mitchell moved his family to the apartments above the bank and sold the House at 1 Vestal Street to his youngest brother, Peleg Mitchell, Junior, a tinsmith. Peleg moved into the House with his new bride, Mary Russell Mitchell, living there until his death in 1882. Peleg also made a few alterations to the House, adding a milk room and a smaller kitchen on the northwest corner of the House with a grape arbor in 1850. He commissioned an itinerant painter to paint the 1825 Kitchen addition with decorative grain painting that still exists today. Sometime after the death of Peleg, Mary

Russell Mitchell moved to Philadelphia to be closer to her daughters but kept the home at 1 Vestal Street as a summer home. Due mainly to Mary Mitchell's deep belief in her Quaker values, the House was not modernized with electricity or running water, leaving the House in its nineteenth century condition.



Maria Mitchell birthplace, 1 Vestal Street

In 1902, family members, former Vassar College students, and friends of Maria Mitchell came together to form the Nantucket Maria Mitchell Association. Their intention for founding such an association was to carry on the legacy of Maria Mitchell. Maria Mitchell's love of the natural world; her constant quest to learn and understand; her love of the sciences and mathematics; her belief in learning-by-doing; and her pursuit of education both for herself and others, especially women, were the foundation on which the MMA was established. In 1903, the organization purchased the House at 1 Vestal Street, where Maria Mitchell was born, from the estate of Mary Russell Mitchell, aunt of Maria Mitchell. In 1945, the MMA was given the house at 7 Milk Street for a natural science museum and the Mitchell House took on the sole responsibility of interpreting the life of Maria Mitchell and her family. In the 1920's, a charming stencil with an astronomical theme was installed in the downstairs and upstairs hallways adding to the collection of decorative painting in the structure.

Architectural and Other Features of Note

Listed as the Swain-Mitchell House in the Historic American Buildings Survey, the two and a half story shingled home has a central ridge chimney with six fireplaces that dominates the roofline and is surrounded by a typical roofwalk. The off-center front door is complimented with a transom and has an eccentric mix of twelve over twelve lights, as well as nine over nine lights, eight over eight, eight over six, six over

six, and several smaller windows. The original structure included a parlor, kitchen, and birthing room on the first floor; three bedrooms on the second floor; and an open attic.

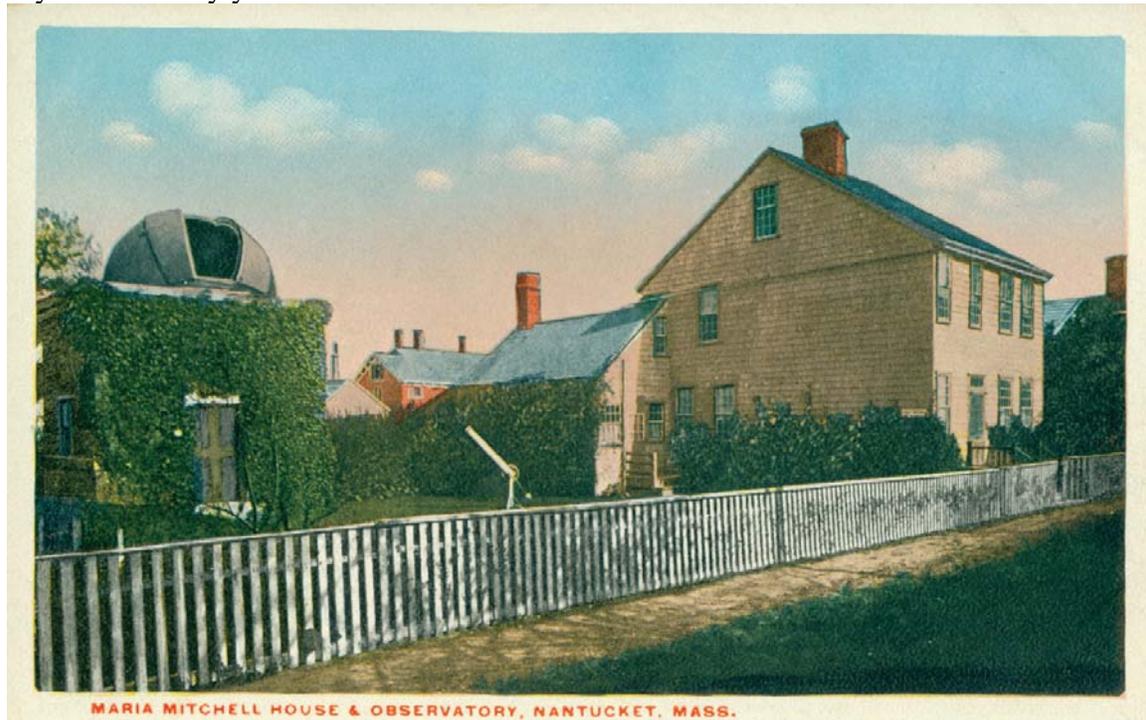
The House boasts original decorative paint on the floors and walls, a large collection of original family pieces, no electricity or running water, and it maintains its original plaster. Original mirror and cradle boards can be found in several rooms. The Mitchell House is the best example left on the island—in its purest form—of a typical Nantucket Quaker style home.

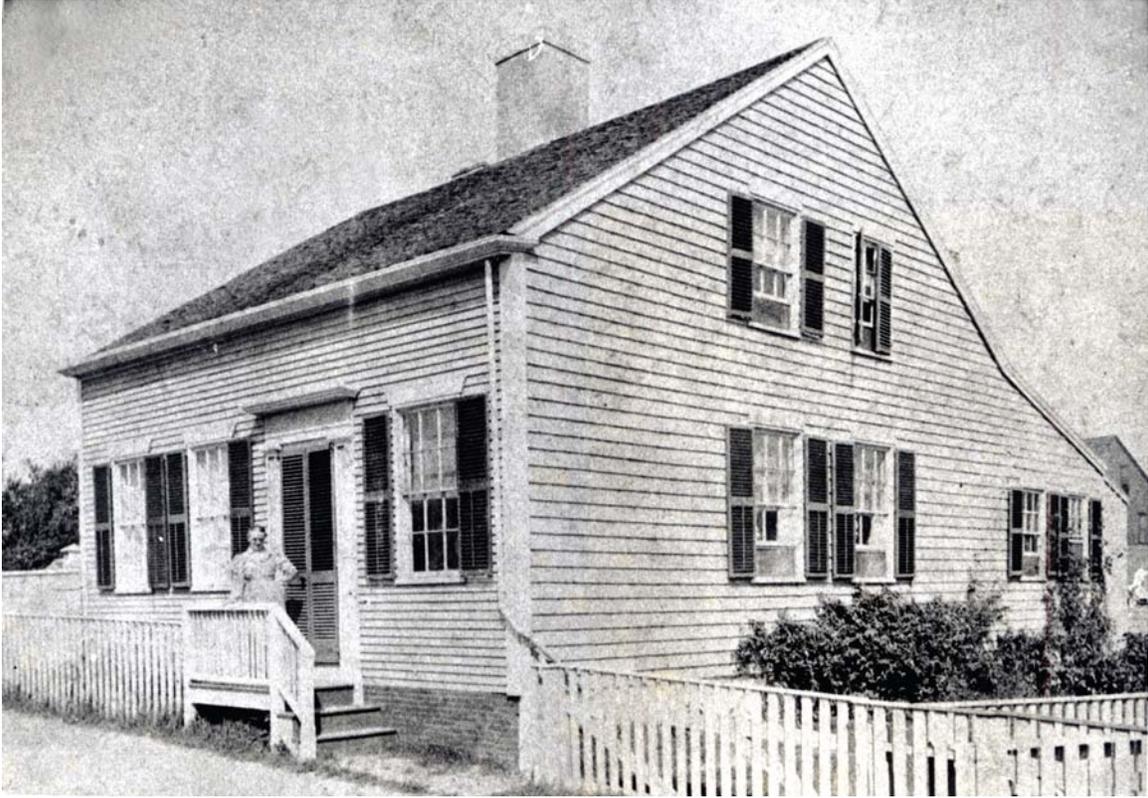
Vestal Street Observatory

The MMO—as it is often referred to—was built to house Maria Mitchell’s five-inch Alvan Clark telescope which she purchased in the 1850s with money raised by the “Women of America” – headed by Elizabeth Peabody. Built in four months in 1908 for a cost of \$4,800.00, the MMO’s inception was brought about with the help of astronomers Annie Jump Cannon, Edward Pickering of Harvard and the generous gifts of many, including Andrew Carnegie. The Observatory has had a long and illustrious career of research and discovery. Its first astronomer and director, Margaret Harwood, was the first woman to head a small private observatory in North America. Its second director, Dorrit Hoffleit, Ph.D., is known for her work with the National Science Foundation and a grant she received in 1957 to allow for the summer training of female undergraduate students in astronomy.

Architectural and Other Features of Note

Note the brick addition to the east added in 1922 which abuts the Mitchell House’s 1825 kitchen. Also note that the brick sides of the original section are not straight, but slant inward as they approach the roof and the dome— typical of Egyptian Revival architecture of the period. The dome, the original was replaced in 1951, now houses a seventeen-inch research telescope purchased with a grant from the National Science Foundation. Additionally, the Observatory houses an exhibit on astronomy, as well as a display of the telescope once used in the dome that took photographic plates of the night sky for over fifty years.





A late-nineteenth-century view of 5 Vestal with an unidentified woman on the stoop

5 Vestal Street

Hezekiah Paddack (1794–1882) probably built this one-and-three-quarter-story house at 5 Vestal Street soon after he purchased the land in 1836. For almost fifty years it was his homestead, where he and his wife, Maria, and their three children lived. With its central ridge chimney and shed roof extension in the rear, the house combines elements of the saltbox style and the traditional Nantucket house, but it is essentially a small-scale Greek Revival house like those at 7 and 9 Vestal Street, and 4 Bloom Street. The doorway was moved to the east side of the house in the late twentieth century, but has been returned to its original location facing Vestal Street. The Paddack house was sold to Harriett A. Smith in 1883, for \$550; it is probably Harriett who is pictured at the front door of the house in a photograph from the 1880s. Photographer Walter Lucas and his wife, Eleanor, were longtime owners of the house in the late twentieth century.

Architectural and Other Features of Note

Like several other houses on the tour, 5 Vestal Street retains simple Greek Revival moldings. Of special note are features in the kitchen area, including the brick fireplace with a board above containing the original owner's name (found hanging from a rafter), old wide board flooring, an untouched back staircase, and a door in the mud room which is painted to simulate maple; it was probably taken from another part of the house and reused.

4 Bloom Street

When Hezekiah Paddock built his house at 5 Vestal Street, his neighbor at the corner of Bloom Street was a small boatbuilder's shop owned by Job Macy 2nd, whose son, Edmund (b. 1812), was in the same trade. In 1841, Edmund bought the land behind the shop on Bloom Street from his father, and built the one-and-three-quarter-story Greek Revival –style house with a clapboard front. In 1852, he purchased the boatbuilder's shop, but by that time he had likely been in business there with his father for more than a decade. The shop was removed sometime before 1887, when the first Sanborn Insurance Company map of the island was published. Edmund and his wife, Elizabeth, had three sons born at 5 Vestal. When economic depression hit Nantucket in the 1860s, Edmund became an “insolvent debtor.” His house was sold to Elizabeth Adlington for \$200 in 1863.

Architectural and Other Features of Note

Note the floor, baseboards, doors with upper lights, mantels as well as the typical Greek Revival moldings with “bull's eye” corner blocks. The living room was originally two rooms and evidence of the dividing wall is visible in the floorboards. The kitchen is housed in a new or rebuilt wing which incorporates old flooring.

6 Vestal Street

Known as the Starbuck Cooper Shop, the construction date of the building at 6 Vestal is unknown. The structure may have been built by Joseph Starbuck (1774–1861) or constructed in the 18th century and later acquired by him. One of the most successful shipowners on the island, Joseph was renowned for his business acumen, and remembered as the man who built the Three Bricks on Main Street for his three sons. When the boatbuilder's shop (now removed) across the street was in business, and Starbuck's coopers were at work, Vestal Street was noisy with commerce. Two of Starbuck's sons, along with his four daughters, sold the cooper shop to his oldest son, George Starbuck, in 1861, after Joseph died. George sold the building to sailmaker William P. Ceely (1810–82) the same year; it remained in the Ceely family for many years, and was used as a cobbler shop in the 1880s, and as a carpenter's shop in the early twentieth century. After more than a hundred years as a work space, the old cooperage was converted to a dwelling in the late twentieth century.

Architectural and Other Features of Note

The building is an excellent example of adaptive reuse. The original work space provides a large open plan for contemporary living. Note the timber frame construction and historic floorboards throughout the first floor. A hatch is evident in the floor between the staircase and kitchen.



Postcard by Henry S. Wyer c. 1905 with 13 Vestal (left) and 16 Vestal

16 Vestal Street

William C. Swain (1801–1885) purchased thirty rods of land from master mariner Reuben Swain in May of 1835 for \$240 and in December of the same year he sold the land and a new dwelling house to Reuben Swain 2nd (1787–1861) for \$1,200. Research indicates that Reuben Swain 2nd was not the son of the Reuben Swain who originally owned the land, nor was he closely related to William C. Swain, who was a well-to-do merchant married to Joseph Starbuck's daughter Mary. William and Mary Swain lived at 92 Main Street, across from Mary's brothers, who lived at the Three Bricks. The daughters of Reuben Swain 2nd sold their father's house to widow Hepsabeth Chase in 1861. Chase held it until 1883. In the twentieth century the house was owned for thirty-two years by author Alice Alberton Shurrocks and her husband, architect Alfred Shurrocks, who may have moved the front door to the east side and added the dormer to the north roof facing the street.

Architectural and Other Features of Note

Note the fine staircase riser detail in the hallway, the simple Greek Revival- style mantels with classical features, original plaster walls, mirror board (between windows) and old flooring.

13 Vestal Street

Gorham Hussey (1797–1879) and his wife, Lydia Macy (1798–1885), probably built the house at 13 Vestal Street shortly after their marriage in 1820. Lydia was the daughter of Job Macy, whose boatbuilder's shop was at the corner of Bloom Street; her younger brother, Edmond, built the house at 4 Bloom two decades later. Gorham and Lydia lived for sixty-five years at 13 Vestal, and their six children were born here. In 1927, artist Edgar Jenney purchased the house, and he and his wife, Kate, summered on Vestal Street for twenty years. Photographer John A. McCalley and his wife, Adrienne, owned the

house from 1959 to 1983. 13 Vestal is a “typical” Nantucket house: two-and-a-half stories high, with a ridge chimney; it was originally three bays wide, with the fourth bay on the west side during the Jenney ownership.

Architectural and Other Features of Note

Note the entry way with old photographs of the house up the staircase and the mortgage button in the newel post. The fanlight, added in the early twentieth century by Jenney, is not visible from the interior. The parlor was extended the beam in the ceiling marks the original room’s end wall. The room holds a collection of Nantucket artwork, including watercolors by Edgar Jenney in the far corner (notice paintings by Hill, Bailey, Frazier and others throughout the first floor). The dining room also shows the evolution of the house with the addition of the later bay window and the twentieth century china cabinet added during the McCalley period. The garden’s upper terrace once held the local women’s jail.

Biographical Sketches of Several Vestal Street Residents

Maria Mitchell (1818-1889)

Maria Mitchell was an astronomer, librarian, naturalist, and above all, educator. She discovered a comet through a telescope, for which she was awarded a gold medal by the King of Denmark. She was then thrust into the international spotlight and became America’s first professional female astronomer. The Quaker tradition taught that both boys and girls should be educated and Maria received an education at local schools and from her father’s tutoring. Her father was a great influence on her life; Maria developed her love of astronomy from his instruction on surveying and navigation. At age 12, Maria helped her father calculate the position of their home by observing a solar eclipse.



Maria Mitchell

By 14, sailors trusted her to do vital navigational computations for their long whaling journeys. Maria pursued her love of learning as a young woman, becoming the Nantucket Atheneum’s first librarian. She and her father continued to acquire astronomical equipment and conduct observations.

On October 1st, 1847, Maria was sweeping the sky from the roof of the Pacific National Bank on Main Street, where her father was a cashier. She spotted a small blurry object that did not appear on her charts. She had discovered a comet! After achieving her fame,

Maria was widely sought after and went on to achieve many great things. She resigned her post at the Atheneum in 1856 to travel throughout the US and Europe. In 1865, she became Professor of Astronomy at the newly-founded Vassar College.

Maria was an inspiration to her students. It was Vassar College that Maria felt was truly her home. She believed in learning by doing, and in the capacity of women to achieve what their male counterparts could. “Miss Mitchell” was beloved by her students whom she taught until her retirement in 1888, due to failing health. She died in 1889, and was buried next to her father in Nantucket’s Prospect Hill Cemetery. (Courtesy of MMA)

Edgar Jenney (1869–1939)

Born in New Bedford, Edgar Jenney was a professional artist who studied in Boston and Paris. Early in his career he worked as a designer of stained glass and studied architectural drafting. After more than twenty years of employment with a prestigious New York interior design firm, he retired in 1927, and began spending time at 13 Vestal Street, his Nantucket home. Jenney is known for his watercolor paintings of Nantucket interiors, which reflect his interest in architecture, design, and decor. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York exhibited forty-five of his interiors posthumously in 1939; forty-one of those interiors were of Nantucket houses. Jenney was also an ardent preservationist, spending the winter of 1932-33 on the island sharing his knowledge of eighteenth- and early- nineteenth- century builders’ guides with local craftsmen. He hoped to inspire those who repaired and maintained Nantucket’s historic buildings with an appreciation and respect for the houses in their care. Information about Edgar Jenney is derived from a discussion of the artist in *Picturing Nantucket: An Art History of the Island with Paintings from the Collection of the Nantucket Historical Association*, edited by Michael Jehle (NHA, 2000)

John W. McCalley (1912–83)

Like Edgar Jenney, John McCalley was a preservationist, serving as chairman of Nantucket’s Historic District Commission from 1963 to 1968. He was also a longtime member of the Nantucket Conservation Foundation, but he is best known on Nantucket today as the photographer whose images of local architecture are found in the *Historic American Buildings Surveys* of the late 1960s and early ‘70s. McCalley, described as a man of great intellectual range and depth, worked as an economist at the Brookings Institute in Washington, D.C., and served as a research economist for the Federal Reserve Bank before becoming a professor of economics at the City College of New York. He had been interested in photography since he was an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley, however, and he pursued that avocation when he moved to Nantucket in 1960. McCalley had a photography studio in his home at 13 Vestal Street, aptly called Studio 13, where he developed photographs and took studio portraits of people, but he also explored the island in winter and summer, photographing landmarks and landscapes. His book, *Nantucket Yesterday and Today*, published in 1981, showcases contemporary photographs of historic houses, juxtaposed with nineteenth-century photographs of the same houses and streetscapes.



Dining room of 13 Vestal when it was the home of John McCalley

Alfred F. Shurrocks (1870–1945)

Alice Albertson Shurrocks (1880–1967) Alfred Shurrocks was born in Providence, Rhode Island, and graduated from M.I.T. with a degree in architecture. In 1927, he was appointed the consulting architect for the restoration of the NHA's "Oldest House" on Sunset Hill by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. That project led to others on the island, and he settled here and married Alice Albertson in 1929. Some of his other historic restoration and renovation projects include the Caleb Gardner house at 139 Main Street, and the house on Gull Island, off Centre Street; he designed one of the first summer houses in Dionis for Jacqueline Harris in the early 1930s. It is fitting that Alice Albertson Shurrocks lived on Vestal Street (16 Vestal); she was a cousin of Maria Mitchell. A Philadelphia native, Alice devoted decades of her life to the Natural Science Department of the Maria Mitchell Association, and she and her husband, Alfred, accumulated a large collection of local Native American artifacts. Her memoir, *Two Steps Down*, published in 1953, recalls childhood memories of her grandparents, Peleg Mitchell and Mary S. Mitchell, and their Nantucket home. A 1958 publication, *A Grain of Mustard Seed*, is devoted to Nantucket botany, one of Alice's many interests.