





March Skies over the Pinnacles

March 2026

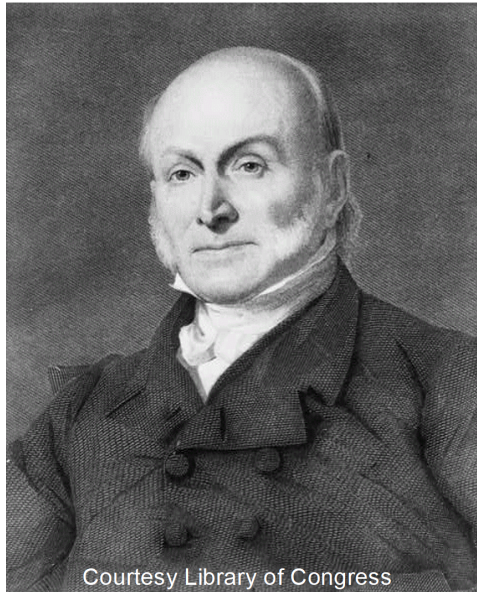
By Jeff Hutton

March's Four Principal Phases of the Moon

March 3	Full Moon	
March 11	Last Quarter	
March 19	New Moon	
March 26	First Quarter	

Two stories of Astronomy and Abolition

For 10 years I served as a volunteer docent and presenter for the Cincinnati Observatory. As the oldest continuously operating observatory in the United States, there is a lot of history about the founding of the observatory. Part of this history was that our 6th president, John Quincy Adams laid the cornerstone of the Cincinnati Observatory in 1845. Reaching back to 1825, Adams, as President, wanted Congress to fund the establishment of astronomical observatories to improve the scientific standing of the young United States of America. Critics said he was trying to create "Lighthouses in the Sky". During his term as president, Adams never achieved this goal. To learn more about the Cincinnati Observatory, go to <https://www.cincinnatiobservatory.org/home/>



Courtesy Library of Congress

In 1829, soon after the Quincy presidency, a two masted Spanish slave ship called the *Amistad* was tugged by the *USS Washington* to Connecticut. During a voyage from Havana, the kidnapped Africans aboard managed to take over the ship, killing the captain, but keeping other crew members alive in order to sail the vessel to Africa. Instead of sailing eastward, the crew headed north. The white crew hoped to be spotted and then land in the slave-holding United States. In 1997, the movie, *Amistad*, dramatised this chapter of history.

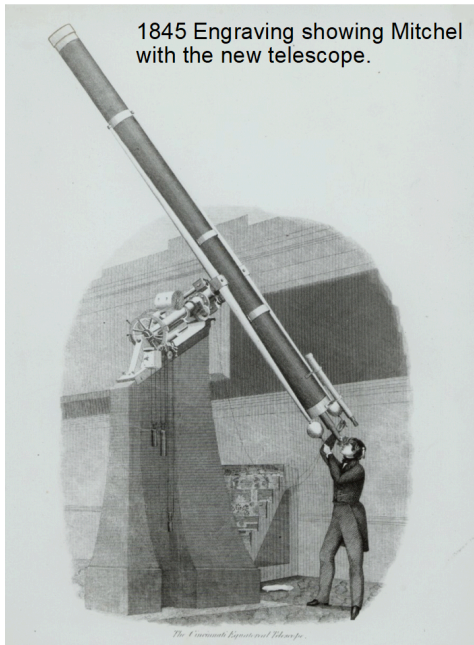
John Quincy Adams was also a long time an anti-slavery abolitionist and lawyer. He argued before the Supreme Court that the African men and women aboard the *Amistad* were human beings and could not be taken as slaves. He was successful.

Also in 1829, Ormsby MacKnight Mitchel graduated from West Point Military Academy along with a more famous graduate, Robert E. Lee, who would later lead the Confederate Army in rebellion against the United States during the Civil War. Mitchel proved so brilliant that he was retained for a time to teach artillery at West Point.

As an officer in the United States Army, Mitchel chafed at being posted to locations that left him frustrated from inactivity. He resigned his commission and took a job as Professor of Mathematics at the newly formed Cincinnati College, now the University of Cincinnati. He also surveyed sites for new railroads. An avid amateur astronomer, Mitchel, on his own, raised funds by soliciting paid memberships in his new **Cincinnati Astronomical Society** to purchase a huge new telescope from a maker in Europe. The telescope he eventually had shipped to Cincinnati was one of the largest in the world in 1845.



He was eventually successful and established a new municipal observatory on donated land overlooking Cincinnati. Later, the skies became so polluted with the burning of soft coal that he took a new appointment at Dudley Observatory in upstate New York.



1845 Engraving showing Mitchel with the new telescope.



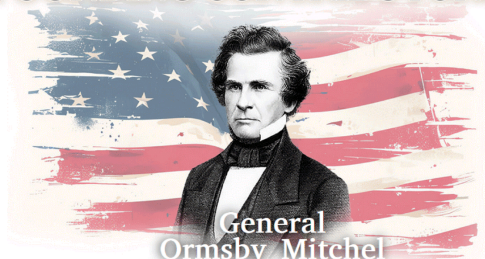
Recent image of the same telescope and the author.

In 1861 the Civil War broke out and Mitchel left his post at Dudley Observatory and offered his services to the Union. He soon rose to the rank of Brigadier General and began the war by training the men General Sherman would eventually march to Atlanta. Given his own command, General Mitchel took western Kentucky from the Confederates and captured the rail hub at Nashville. The first Congressional Medal of Honor was awarded to men under Mitchel's command for their efforts connected to the Nashville Operation.

There isn't a record up to this time that indicated Mitchel's opposition to (or support for) slavery. However Mitchel's final wartime assignment shows his true feelings. In 1861, U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase wanted to address what was to be done with freed Africans, then called "contrabands". How were they to be integrated into the post-war society of the United States? One answer was to create new towns, established and operated by formerly enslaved people.

In 1862, General Ormsby Macknight Mitchel assumed command of this "experiment" on Hilton Head Island. Under his leadership, residents established a working society with offices of Mayor, City Council and all functions run by "freedmen". Tragically Mitchell died later that year from disease and the town was named Michelville, in his honor. Further tragedy was visited on Michelville after the withdrawal of Union trips and the brutal Reconstruction Period as former slaveholders reclaimed their land. To learn more about Michelville go to <https://exploremitchelville.org/our-story/>.

— MITCHELVILLE — FOUNDING CONTRIBUTORS

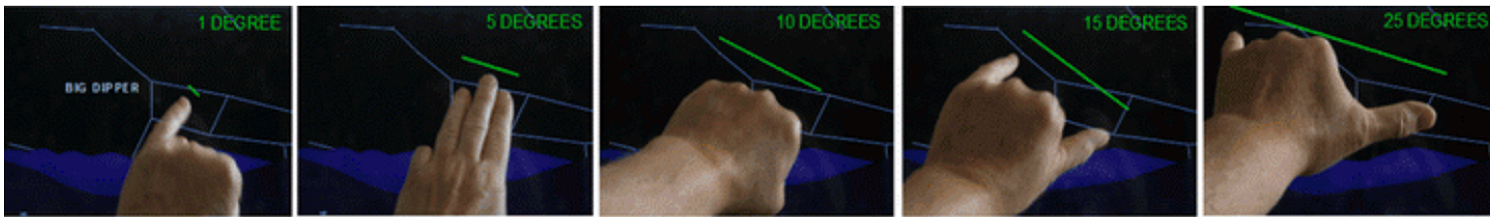


**General
Ormsby Mitchel**

Ormsby General Mitchel initiated the effort that became known as the Port Royal Experiment and was largely regarded as a precursor to the Reconstruction period.

Courtesy Michelville Freedom Park

Attractions in March



There are 180 degrees from, say, from the eastern horizon to the western horizon, and 90 degrees from any horizon to the straight-up point that is called the **zenith**. When you hold your hand all the way out, then hold three fingers out, like the scout's salute shown in panel 2, your fingers trace out an angular distance of 5 degrees. That's about the width of the bowl of the Big Dipper. When I mention the angular distance between two celestial objects I will state that they are separated by a certain number of degrees. The magazine, *Sky and Telescope*, is the source of most of the following information.

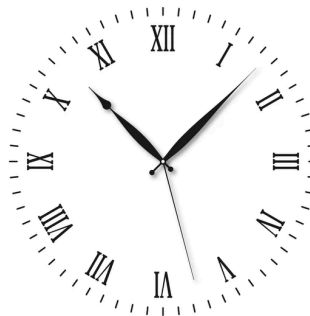
March 3

If skies are clear, early risers will be treated to a pre-dawn view of the eclipsed Moon setting in the west. The Moon will be engulfed in the darkest part of the Earth's shadow between 6:04 to 7:02 local time. Below is a picture I took during the lunar eclipse of November 19, 2021.



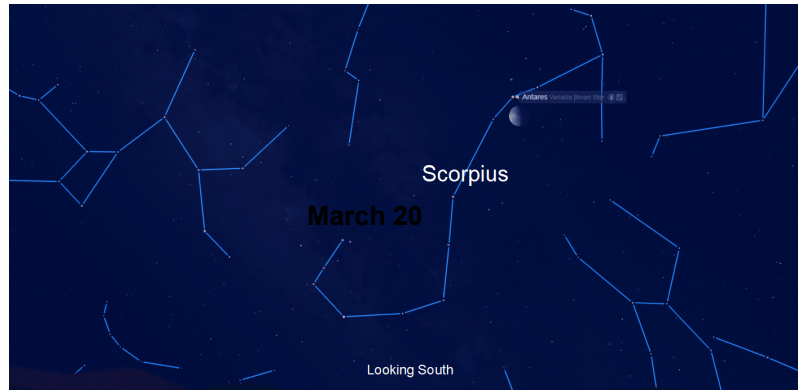
March 8

Sadly, for those of us who enjoy the night sky, Daylight Savings Time begins. This makes star gazing more difficult by artificially making sunset an hour later.



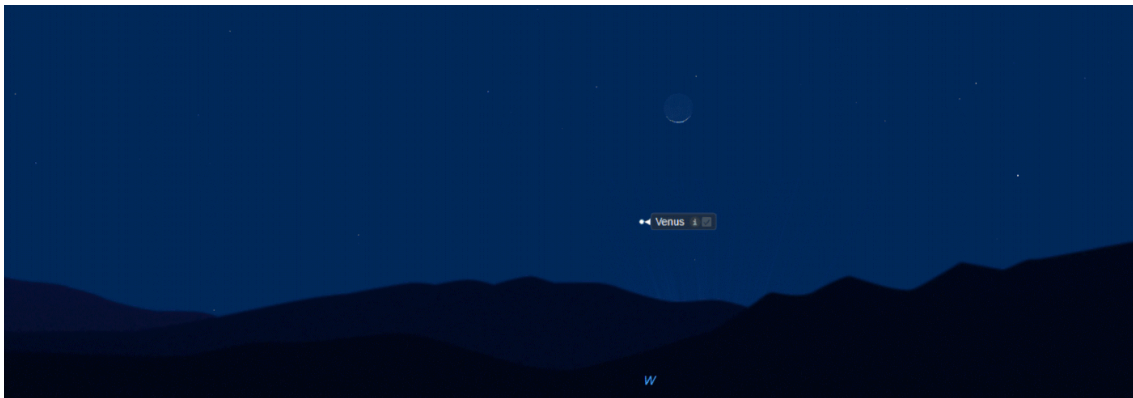
March 10

If you are up early enough to catch the sunrise, get up a little earlier to catch the pretty sight of the thick, crescent Moon just a degree and a half below the red giant star, Antares, the heart of Scorpius.



March 21

Rejoice, Vernal Equinox Lovers! On this day 8:57 the equinox has arrived and it's now spring! Also, check out the gorgeous site of Venus, at dusk, just 8 degrees below the Moon.



Join members of your local astronomy for a star party! View the Moon, Jupiter and other Celestial wonders closeup through our telescopes! If weather doesn't cooperate, we've set a 'rain date' of **March 28**.



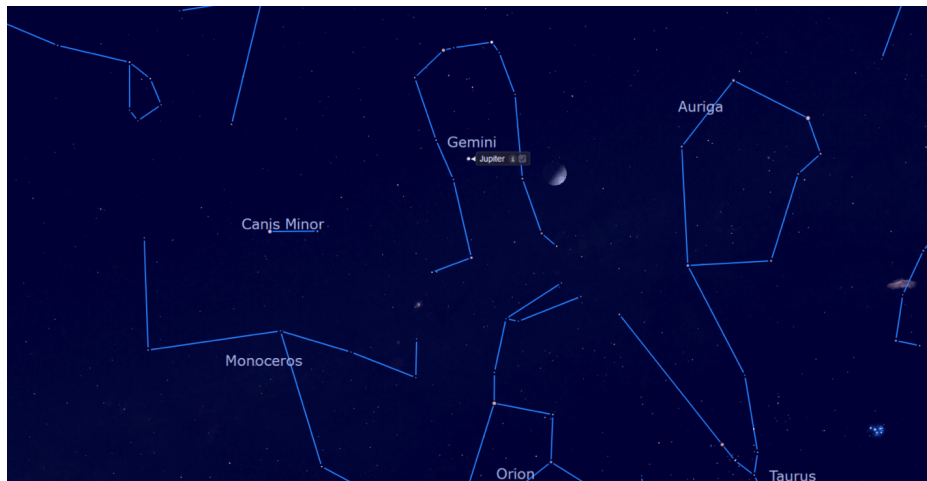
March 22

Catch Venus just before she sets in the west this evening and look up to see the crescent Moon just below the pretty naked-eye star cluster called the Pleiades, or the Seven Sisters.



March 25

This evening, take in the site of the Moon, now just over 6 degrees to the lower right of gleaming Jupiter.



March 29

This evening, look east as the nearly full Moon rises just 3 degrees below Regulus, the brightest star in the constellation Leo.

