



## An Uncommon Phenomenon

On the night of November 12-13, 1833, the Leonid Meteor Shower filled the skies over the United States with a continual barrage of thousands of meteors, striking awe or fear in the hearts of those who witnessed it. Two interesting accounts of this phenomenon are found in the Library and Archives at GHS.

Charles L. Eberle (1766-1845) gives his view of the event in a daily diary he kept. Eberle, a German immigrant and farmer, lived in the 1830s in what is now the Mt. Airy section of Philadelphia. He was interested in astronomy, noting in his diary the occurrence of eclipses and comets. Below is shown Eberle's diary entry for Nov. 13, 1833: an eye witness account of the now-famous Leonid Meteor storm. Judith Callard, GHS Archives & Library volunteer, and Jan Lundy are currently editing Eberle's journal for publication

Sixty-six years later, another Germantown resident, Dr. I. Pearson Willits, clipped and pasted into his scrapbook an article from the **1899 Germantown Independent-Gazette** that gives another account of what happened that night in 1833, as remembered 60+ years after the actual event. The clipping is shown to the right.

13. An uncommon Phenomenon appeared the morning before day light in the sky - an uncountable number of Meteors - large & small shooting in all directions, & exploding in the sky - many ~~of them~~ some of them illuminate the objects around like a flash of lightning & left but many streaks behind which were visible from 5 to 30 seconds - I never beheld any thing like this in all my life - It was awfull & grand - It lasted from 4 before five, when I first observed it, untill broad day light without interuptio. I called Catharine & who immediately, & he went & consulted the neighbors - The morning was clear & not cold - & the day very pleasant - We had in Savoy cabbage for winter use & with a hat for head Cabbage & other vegetables - Back at planting again - 1833

While a couple of life-long residents of Germantown were engaged in discussing the late blizzard a few days ago, they branched off into a description of the great meteoric display on November 13, 1833.

"What a terrible night that was in Germantown," said the elder gentleman. "I was about eighteen years of age, and I have as distinct a recollection of it as though it was yesterday. The heavens were for hours in fiery commotion, and nearly every one thought that the world was coming to an end. Its sublimity and awful beauty struck terror to the minds of the beholders. The display lasted about three hours, and the day of judgment was believed to be waiting only until sunrise, and long after the shower had ceased prayer meetings were held and all worldly affairs abandoned. At Keyser's shoemaker shop some of the apprentice boys, who had always been among the gay and festive, and who had stolen many an apple from Uncle Sammy's orchard, edged up close to that old gentleman for protection. He was somewhat frightened himself and could not conceal it. However, he was instrumental in getting a couple of the boys to profess religion then and there, and they always adhered to it, and one of them got to be a prominent man in the Haines Street Methodist Episcopal Church."

The second old gentleman, who had been waiting for an opportunity to get in a few words, said: "A remarkable change of weather from warm to cold took place on November 12, and the exceedingly pleasant weather for this season of the year was followed by frost. The meteors in general were unaccompanied by any peculiar sound, although every now and then a big fellow would make a hissing sound like a rushing sky rocket. Millions of meteors must have fallen in the few hours that the display was visible. They were all shapes, and they twisted and contorted, and ran along the sky, leaving a train of white fire behind them, but sometimes they were tinged with prismatic colors. One large meteor, when it exploded, made quite a noise, the jar of which knocked several observers on their knees, and they prayed for all they were worth, but it did not last long enough to reform many of them. Joseph Sheetz at that time was learning the shoe business, and he, Daniel Bogan and George Freas, the grocer, were in front of John McBride's shoe shop. They looked mightily scared, and some of them led very quiet lives for some weeks after."

**Seeking Library Volunteers:** Are you interested in Germantown history and have three to six hours a week to give during library hours? The Society is seeking interested folks who share our love of northwest Philadelphia and would like to provide invaluable support to our library and archives. Projects include research and public service, data entry and cataloguing, as well as assorted collections-based preservation projects. All training will be provided. Please reply to this email or call 215-844-1683 for more information. We rely on volunteers to make a difference! Thank you for your support!

To remove your name from our monthly e-mailing list, please respond to this email with "unsubscribe" in the subject line.

Questions or comments? E-mail us at [info@germantownhistory.org](mailto:info@germantownhistory.org) or call 215-844-1683.