



A Professor, A President, and A Meteor: The Birth of American Science

Cathryn J. Prince

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When a fiery meteor crash in 1807 lit up the dark early-morning sky in Weston, Connecticut, it did more than startle the few farmers in the sleepy village. More importantly, it sparked the curiosity of Benjamin Silliman, a young chemistry professor at nearby Yale College. His rigorous investigation of the incident started a chain of events that eventually brought the once-low standing of American science to sudden international prominence. And, by coincidence, the event also embroiled Silliman in politics, pitting him against no less an adversary than President Thomas Jefferson.

Based on a wealth of original source documents and interviews with current experts in history, astronomy, and geology, this journalist tells the remarkable story of Benjamin Silliman, arguably America's first bonafide scientist. In a lively narrative rich with fascinating historical detail, the author documents the primitive state of American science at the time; Silliman's careful analysis of the meteor samples; and the publication of his conclusions, which contradicted both popular superstitions regarding meteors as ominous portents and a common belief that meteors come from volcanic eruptions on the moon.

She also describes Silliman's struggles to build a chemistry department at Yale with rudimentary material; new insights into geology that resulted from his analysis of the meteor; and his report to the prestigious French Academy, which raised the prestige of American science. Finally, she discusses the political turbulence of the time, which Silliman could not escape, and how the meteor event was used to drive a wedge between New England and Jefferson.

This is a fascinating vignette of Federal Period America when science on this continent was still in its infancy, but was just beginning to make its mark.

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