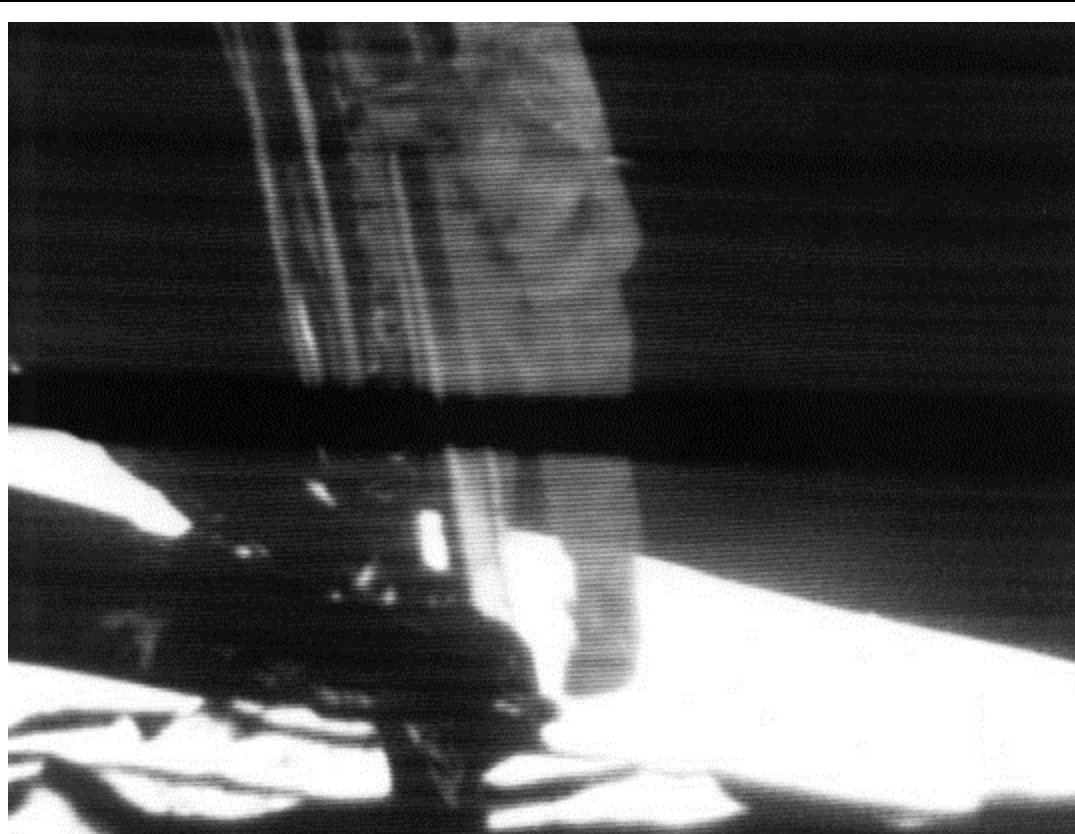




## The 1969 Moon Landing Started with the Astronomical Curiosity of a Union General

By Norm Dasinger, Jr., June 26, 2020  
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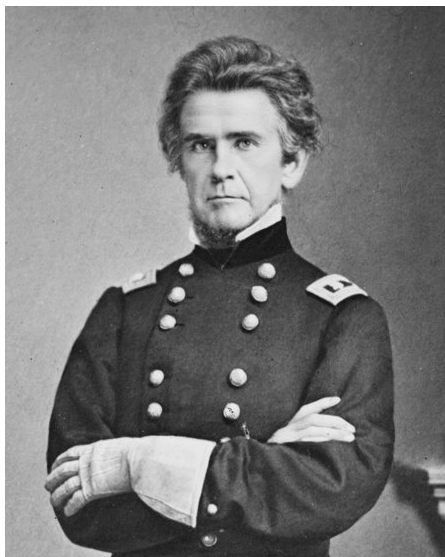


Man's first step on the Moon, 1969 | NASA

As Americans we take pride at being the only nation to have landed men on the Moon. Our country's strong desire to expand beyond our world and learn about the stars and the Moon has been part of our national identity for a long time. It really began with a Civil War general.

Ormsby Mitchel grew up in Ohio and was in the same West Point class as Robert E. Lee. He was a genius at mathematics and his favorite hobby was astronomy. After he graduated, he became a college instructor of math at West Point and then Cincinnati College (the forerunner of the modern University of Cincinnati).

Mitchel believed the United States needed a world-class observatory. U.S. President John Quincy Adams—also an astronomy buff—had advocated for one during his term as president, but could not get Congress to fund it. Mitchel organized the Cincinnati Astronomical Society with dues set at \$25. Soon, the professor was off to Germany to buy the second largest telescope—at that time—in the world, with plans to bring it back to Cincinnati. But it needed a building. Mitchel worked tirelessly to raise the money for one. He was given the land for the structure and former President Adams—at 77 years old—arrived to give the keynote speech for the cornerstone dedication. Mitchel's schedule was demanding. He taught his classes each day and then changed roles to work on fundraising for the observatory building. He got it done by lecturing all over the country, sometimes speaking to 2,000 at one time, telling people about the Moon and the stars. In addition, he started three publications devoted to the study of astronomy.



Ormsby Mitchel

Then the Civil War came.

Commissioned as a general in the Union Army, Mitchel commanded the Department of the Ohio, and it were his troops who briefly assaulted Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1862, and it were his men who carried out the famous "Great Locomotive Chase" (also known as the Andrews' Raid).

Assigned command of the Tenth Corps at Hilton Head, South Carolina, he contracted malaria and died in the fall of 1862.

It is thanks to Civil War Gen. Ormsby Mitchel's tireless efforts that brought the study of astronomy to the forefront of 19th-century America. Mitchel and his advocacy would lead to our nation's continued interest in the Moon and the stars, with the establishment of NASA in the 20th century and eventually the Moon landing.



Ormsby Mitchel | LOC



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