About the Covers
Focus on Eclipses

The total solar eclipse of April 8, 2024 was billed as a once in a lifetime opportunity, and its path covered much of northern Vermont. State officials spent months preparing for the influx of visitors, anticipating tourism dollars and traffic gridlock. Entrepreneurs across the state created a huge variety of memorabilia, and journalists covered every possible angle of the event as a scientific and cultural singularity.

This year's astronomical phenomenon is not the first time Vermont has experienced such an event, of course, and the Vermont Historical Society's library and museum collections include examples of other solar eclipses. Diaries, museum objects, and broadsides all show perspectives on a memorable event.

On August 31, 1932, Vermonters and visitors could view a total solar eclipse across the northeastern portion of the state, with totality lasting about 5 minutes from 3:25 to 3:30 PM. Scientists traveled to Vermont, lining up experiments and observations; by one estimate, $1,000,000 in equipment would be deployed to study all aspects of the event. Island Pond was declared the "astronomical capital of Vermont," hosting prominent astronomers from across the country. The *Burlington Free Press* called the eclipse "Burlington's great celestial drama" in their edition on the day of the eclipse, then closed their article with the disappointing reminder that the Queen City would only experience 99 percent totality—it was just west and south of the eclipse path.

The official state apparatus geared up for the crowds expected. With the skies expected to be dark from 2:20 to 4:30 PM, additional motor vehicle officers were dispatched to the Northeast Kingdom in anticipation of more dangerous driving conditions. "Do not attempt to watch the eclipse while your car is in motion," the *Rutland Daily Herald* warned in its eclipse preview on August 27. A judge in Montpelier postponed jury selection so that it would not occur during the eclipse, and the State House recorded a record-breaking number of visitors on the day before the eclipse, deciding to release its legislative clerks from their duties for the afternoon so that they could witness the eclipse.

Diarists across the state recorded the event in their own backyards or

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traveled to view the event. “We caught glimpse of the eclipse but the most wonderful sight was when the totality came on! We could see for miles + miles up toward Canada we saw the blackness coming over the light—till it passed on to the south,” wrote Albert Flanders of Springfield, who had traveled to Berlin for the occasion with his wife and son, future US Senator Ralph Flanders.

“There was a total Eclipse of the sun this PM east of here,” recorded Phil Howes of Montpelier. “Jane Mildred and I went nearly to Joe’s Pond and parked in a field with about 50 cars. The clouds hid the sun part of the time but we saw pretty well and at the total there was a chill in the air and heavy twilight. It was an impressive event.”

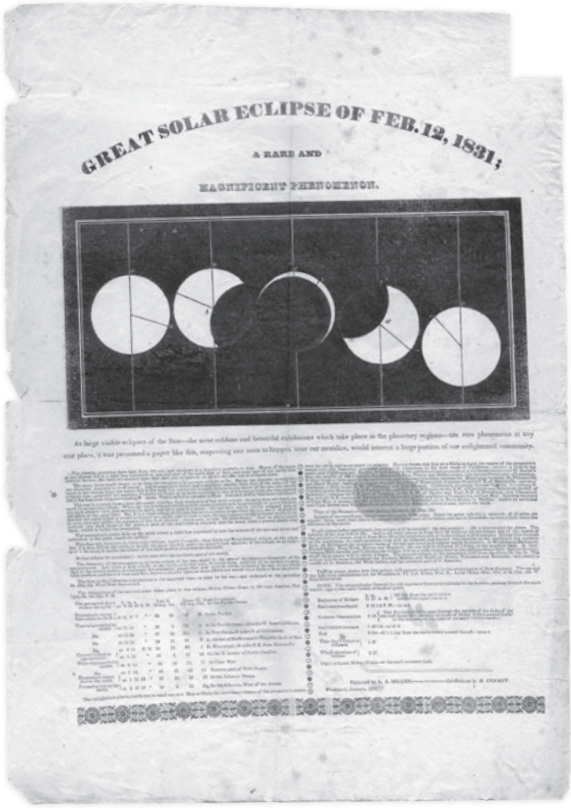
Others, like Henry Ballou of Chester and Warren Chase Bradbury of Randolph, were too far for totality and recorded their views of a partial eclipse, and a few, like Karl and Georgia Karter of Corinth, were perhaps less impressed. The couple’s joint diary recorded their farm chores for the day, including work repairing a covered wagon, and only the scant line “Total ECLIPSE of the Sun” to witness.

One of the most interesting collections pieces connected to the eclipse is a pair of “Viz-Eclipse” glasses (**back cover**). Mack Derick of Derick Studios in Orleans, Vermont, saw an opportunity and created the novelty viewing glasses, meant to protect eyes during the eclipse. While we don’t know if the theory behind Derick’s darkened lenses was sound, the dangers of viewing the eclipse without protection were well-known, and the glasses were a hot enough commodity to warrant advertisements in local newspapers and placements at country stores.

Derick designed the glasses with a map of the path of totality printed on them as well as a diagram that explained how a solar eclipse works In their basic design, the glasses look strikingly similar to the glasses that you can find all over Vermont for the 2024 eclipse: cardboard, boxy in outline, with thin plastic tinted lenses.

VHS’s collections can go back even further than the 1932 event to another solar eclipse in 1831. The “Great Solar Eclipse of Feb. 12, 1831” according to a broadside published by L. A. Miller of Woodstock, was a “rare and magnificent phenomenon” (**front cover**). It was not a total eclipse—Vermont being a touch too western for the path, which skimmed the coast of the Canadian Maritimes—but it did excite considerable local interest.

The broadside is dense, with small-sized font and not terribly readable text describing what scientists understood about the eclipse at that time, defining terms like “annular” and “penumbra” and the basic concept of an eclipse: “The planets, receiving their light from the sun, cast shadows in a direction opposite to him. Hence, if the moon at her change fall in a


GREAT SOLAR ECLIPSE OF FEB. 12, 1831;

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right line conceived to join any part of the sun's disk or face, and some part of the earth then toward the sun, she casts her shadow upon that part, and eclipses it; or, as we say, the sun is eclipsed there."

Despite its complexity, the broadside shows genuine enthusiasm for its subject, and local scientific knowledge—the illustration across its top shows the timing and coverage for the eclipse in Woodstock, with calculations done by local scientist M. Conant. Clearly, there was an eager audience interested in learning more about the natural world – and the universe itself – even nearly 200 years ago.

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