

A Different Kind of Exploration: William Bartram and Science in the 1700s

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By the early eighteenth century, North Carolina's broad outlines, river systems, and American Indian tribes had been "discovered." But the Enlightenment brought a different kind of exploration. Southeastern North America—with its lush, beautiful, and largely undescribed plant life, or flora—became the scene of plenty of plant collecting. Notable collectors who traveled through the Carolinas included the Frenchman André Michaux, Scotsman John Fraser, and Englishman Mark Catesby. Such explorers were part of the Enlightenment era's growing interest in science, as well as the effort to make sense of the world and bring order to it. Science was expanding, with new methods and equipment being tried.

For some botanical explorers, the search for knowledge had patriotic and economic elements. Newly discovered plants could be sold for medicines, food, or ornamental gardens. And they could show that the New World was not "lesser" than Europe.

Two Americans, John and William Bartram, added to this wealth of new understanding with their descriptions of plants and animals. As botanists, or biologists who study plant life, they carefully documented which plants grew where and under what conditions. They interviewed American Indians about the ways they used plants, including their use in healing. William Bartram spent years exploring much of southeastern and southwestern North Carolina in search of unknown plants.

The Bartrams became well known as suppliers of North American plants. They were familiar with the ecosystems in eastern North America and the geographic range of native plants. Father and son also grew famous because of their remarkable skills in growing plants. They used different methods to reproduce wild plants in their large Philadelphia garden. Together, the two helped introduce more than two hundred American trees, shrubs, and flowers into Europe.

William Bartram was born on February 9, 1739, in what is now a suburb of Philadelphia. His father, John, was a successful Quaker farmer and self-taught horticulturist, or plant grower. While in Philadelphia, he worked with his close friend Benjamin Franklin to found the American Philosophical Society—the first American learned society. Over time, John Bartram's interest in botany and the closely related areas of medicine and pharmacy grew. John took his young son on several collecting trips to New York, New England, and Virginia during the mid-1700s. They also explored the Cape Fear River valley in North Carolina, where John's half brother owned a plantation and served in North Carolina's colonial legislature.

Young William had a hard time choosing a career. He turned down Franklin's offer to become an apprentice printer. He rejected an offer to study medicine. Instead, he decided to become a merchant and opened his first store on his uncle's plantation in 1761. However, William spent more time exploring the region and drawing plants than tending to business. His father encouraged William's growing talent for drawing. Catesby's 1743 *Natural History of Carolina*—a book filled with drawings of plants and animals—also influenced him.

An opportunity to escape business came in 1765, when William's father got appointed royal botanist to King George. The first assignment was to explore England's newly acquired colony of Florida. William happily closed his store to go along. On the banks of the Altamaha River, John and William found an intriguing shrub that they would later name *Franklinia* after their friend. Despite the successes of this trip, William decided again—against his father's advice—to try being a businessman. He briefly operated an indigo and rice plantation in Florida, selling it at a loss. After trying to run a store in Philadelphia, he fled, owing money, in 1770.

Despite his business failures, William Bartram was becoming well respected as an artist and botanist in America and abroad. A wealthy London physician, John Fothergill, suggested that William go on a lengthy southeastern expedition to collect and draw plants. Fothergill offered to pay him fifty pounds (about seventy-five dollars) a year in exchange for seeds, drawings, and natural history notes about his discoveries. Bartram accepted, and soon many people would be seeking his advice on horticulture and natural history.

He traveled deep into the southern Appalachian Mountains and as far west as the Mississippi River. From 1773 through 1776, he collected, observed, drew, and recorded plants and animals, as well as his many and friendly interactions with American Indians. Bartram visited western North Carolina (then Cherokee country) in May 1775, following the Savannah River up from the coast of Georgia to its headwaters on the boundary of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. He continued into North Carolina as far as the Nantahala River of Macon and Swain counties. In following the Savannah River, he was traveling the same route that traders from Charleston, South Carolina, and Augusta, Georgia, had used for decades—a route first explored by the Spanish in the 1500s. In contrast to these earlier explorers, who often were seeking riches, Bartram was seeking knowledge. He thus enjoyed much better relations with the Native peoples than many earlier outsiders.

Modern-day U.S. 441 from north Georgia follows the old Cherokee trading path, the route Bartram followed through what is now Clayton, Georgia (Stecoe to the Cherokee), modern Franklin (the Cherokee town of Nikwasi), and up to Cowee, before heading west toward the Nantahalas. In these mountains—then known as the Jore Mountains—he climbed Wayah Bald, writing excitedly of the landscape: “I began again to ascend the Jore mountains, which I at length accomplished, and rested on the most elevated peak; from whence I beheld with rapture and astonishment, a sublimely awful scene of power and magnificence, a world of mountains piled upon mountains.”

After his visit to western North Carolina, Bartram headed west along the Great Trading Path to the Gulf Coast. He returned to Savannah in late January 1776. He explored coastal Georgia and Florida for much of that year.

Bartram's reputation as a botanist, traveler, and keen observer has grown over time. His record of the trip, *Travels through North and South Carolina, [and] Georgia*, became an important vision of early America, influencing many naturalists, as well as Romantic thinkers of the 1800s, like Henry David Thoreau and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. What made Bartram want to undertake his journey of the 1770s? Here is his explanation:

I am continually impelled by a restless spirit of curiosity in pursuit of new productions of nature, my chief happiness consists in tracing and admiring the infinite power, majesty, and perfection of the great almighty Creator, and in the contemplation, that through divine aid and permission, I might be instrumental in discovering, and introducing into my native country, some original productions of nature, which might become useful to society.

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