

Introduction

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After the Seven Years' or French and Indian War, the European empires in America shuffled their paper claims. The 1763 Peace of Paris stripped France of Canada and Louisiana but left the French Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Santa Lucia. Havana, which had fallen to England late in the war, was returned to Spain, and to compensate for the loss of Cuba, England gained rights to *la Florida*, which the Seminoles had occupied since the early eighteenth century. The British viewed their new subtropical territory—divided into two colonies, East and West Florida—with an eye toward the interior Indian trade and staple crop plantations. Speculation boomed. Exploration followed. John and William Bartram, the pioneering father-son naturalists, traveled south.

Their 1765–66 trip marked a turning point for the younger Bartram, a culmination for the elder. John, the father, embodied the practical intelligence and hard work of Benjamin Franklin's Philadelphia. Born in 1699, this humble Pennsylvania farmer had taught himself the Latin "characters," or parts of a plant, and leveraged his services as a horticulturalist to establish his place in a heady network of scientific exchange. The search for "nondescript," or undescribed, specimens took him through New Jersey and Pennsylvania, across New York to Niagara Falls, and as far as New England, making his garden on the west banks of the Schuylkill River in Kingsessing (now West Philadelphia) a required stop for luminaries and leaders of state. In 1743 John Bartram co-founded the American Philosophical Society with Franklin, and through the mediation of his longtime London correspondent Peter Collinson, he earned the praise of the venerable Hans Sloane, keeper of London's Kew Gardens, and the great systematizer Carl von Linné, or Linnaeus. When claims to Florida fell to England

in 1763, George III awarded John Bartram the title of King's Botanist, with the expectation that he travel.

John, then in his mid-sixties, needed a companion, so he drafted his talented son "Billy" to join him. At this point in life, the twenty-six-year-old William Bartram was adrift. Despite connections and an outstanding, if abridged, education at the Philadelphia Academy (what would become the University of Pennsylvania), William had little yet to show for his tremendous potential. A decade earlier, watercolors of Pennsylvania birds had caught the eye of patrons in England, and Billy had already accompanied his father on other expeditions. Botany and drawing were his "darling delights," but even in a bustling provincial capital like Philadelphia, those talents would not translate into a profitable career. In 1765 William Bartram was living with his uncle on the Cape Fear River in North Carolina, hoping to establish himself as a trader. A letter came from his father, instructing him to sell his merchandise at "publick vandue" and prepare for a journey. "Son William" had little choice but to comply.¹

Their journey lasted roughly eight months, from July 1765 to spring 1766. The two Bartrams reunited in North Carolina, then rode horseback to Charleston, Savannah, and Augusta, where they reestablished connections and sought out new plants, including their most impressive joint discovery, the *Franklinia altamaha*. In November 1765 they started up the north-flowing St. Johns, where they witnessed a Creek-British conference at Fort Picolata, crucial for maintaining peace in the territory they were set to explore.² At Beauclerc Bluff, an indigo plantation owned by Robert Davis on the St. Johns, the Bartrams formed a small expedition party, which included John Davis (Robert's son), Dr. David Yeats, and an enslaved black man from Davis's plantation. The five travelers then journeyed by flat-bottomed bateau up the river's wide main stem, passed the lower store owned by James Spalding near present-day Palatka, and followed the chain of sheet-flow lakes to the St. Johns's upper reaches, Lake Loughman, where in John's words, the "weeds and reeds finally stopped our battoe."³

By mid-February the two naturalists were back in St. Augustine. John stayed in Florida until March, then stopped in Charleston to recover from his long trip. William purchased a 500-acre tract near Fort Picolata, where he hoped to establish himself as a planter. Drawing from his son's inheritance, John sent "6 likely negroes" and supplies down from South Carolina. Land speculation was booming in Florida, although family and friends held out little faith in this latest, ill-advised venture; their concerns proved well founded. Within a year, William Bartram would pull up stakes on the St. Johns, presumably sell his slaves, and bounce from city to town, trying his hand at various occupations, settling at

none, while continuing to grow as a naturalist and artist. Some scholars speculate that he worked as a surveyor for William Gerard de Brahm, who was then charting the coastal South. A 1767 letter to Benjamin Rush, one of the finest examples of Bartram's prose, describes the rare *Calydorea coelestina*, an Ixia endemic to northeast Florida that was not described again scientifically until the twentieth century. The American Philosophical Society elected him a member in 1768. During this period, even family members lost track of the peripatetic son. Letters would find him in Philadelphia, North Carolina, and back in East Florida for reasons unknown. A cryptic 1772 missive from John railed at William's "wild notion of going to Augustine."⁴

The child possessed of "darling delights" needed a job. Opportunity came his way in late 1772, unsurprisingly, through family connections. The London physician and gardener John Fothergill proposed a tour of the southern colonies, with the promise of fifty pounds annually, plus further compensation for sketches and presumably new plants.⁵ William Bartram embarked upon a four-year journey that took him into eight current-day states: from the St. Johns River to western North Carolina, and from the Georgia sea islands, across the territories of the Creek and Choctaw Indians, to the Mississippi River. Bartram detailed the first two years of his journey in a *Report* for Fothergill, which he sent to London (along with drawings and a *hortus siccus*, or collection of dried plants) in 1773 and 1774. But the complete story of his tour would emerge in 1791 with the book for which he is now famous: *Travels through North & South Carolina, Georgia, East & West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges, or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Chactaws: Containing An Account of the Soil and Natural Productions of those Regions; together with Observations on the Manners of the Indians.*⁶

Most people simply call the book *Travels*. It is a big book, 500+ pages, not one "that requires reading from front to back," as the novelist Charles Frazier quipped.⁷ Readers often have their favorite passages, typically reflecting some geographic loyalty, although scholarly consensus regards the St. Johns section as the work's liquid heart. The chapters featured in the pages that follow cover a complicated sequence of events. Bartram journeyed up the St. Johns in spring and fall 1774, latching onto trading expeditions and breaking up his river travels with overland treks to the fabled Alachua Savannah (Paynes Prairie State Preserve, south of Gainesville) and the Suwannee (or Little St. Johns, San Juanito) River. Although *Travels* is sometimes approached as a straightforward itinerary, Bartram the writer folded content from the river tours into one single narrative, shuffling content to avoid repetition and build dramatic coherence.

To complicate matters further, *Travels* was a retrospective book, one that evolved through a long composition process. (The most reliable day-to-day record of the route through Florida is the *Report to Fothergill*.) Bartram's return to Philadelphia coincided with the British blockade of the city, and John Fothergill died in 1780; both events severed the provincial naturalist's patronage ties to England. We find mention of a manuscript in 1783, but by that point the work had taken a much more philosophical turn than the quotidian *Report*. Somewhere in the publication process, taxonomic descriptions were also folded in, either by Bartram or by an unknown hand, and so the resulting volume would present the "temperate flowery Regions" of the American South as both a subject of scientific description and literary pilgrimage, as natural history and meditation on the "Divine Monitor." Additional political and religious developments help explain the book's radical edge. Early reviewers scoffed at Bartram's "rhapsodical effusions," questioned his dramatic battles with "crocodiles," and took umbrage at his sympathetic portrayal of Native Americans.⁸

But the book was also too important to ignore. *Travels*, despite its perceived eccentricities, established a template for natural history in the new nation and a route of discovery for others to follow. In the decades following publication, colleagues wrote to Bartram for clarification about the specimens he described, they tapped into his store of knowledge, and they sought to claim, or take credit for, his principal discoveries. In 1817–18, fellow Philadelphians Thomas Say, Titian Peale, William Maclure, and George Ord voyaged "up the river St. Johns" with the familiar book close at hand. A letter by Say (regarded as the founder of American entomology) vividly describes preparations that included a perusal of *Travels*: "Mr. Ord is purchasing stores at this moment, Mr. Maclure is looking for a pilot, Mr. Peale is sitting by our cabin fire (though it is not so cold as to need one), reading Bartram's travels."⁹

John James Audubon, who toured Florida in 1831, also used Bartram as a blueprint. Since these early readings, *Travels* has served as a vehicle for transporting us across space and time. Poets and artists continue to tap into his works for inspiration, while naturalists mine him as a sourcebook. Bartram's impassioned Quaker sensibility continues to script our explorations of the natural world, providing the necessary terms for connecting natural beauty and ecology, science and spirit.

This fusion of sensibilities, what we now might regard as a holistic education, was actually a hallmark of eighteenth-century intellectual life. *Travels* coalesced around several strains of enlightenment and early romantic letters. Bartram's observations on American birds bookend the celebrated Audubon, the lesser-

known Mark Catesby (with whom Bartram was compared), and protégé Alexander Wilson (whose *American Ornithology* is sadly out of print). *Travels* belongs on the same shelf as Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) and Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785)—these three books qualifying 1782–91 as the most productive decade for environmental writing in all of U.S. literature. Bartram's southern tour preceded the more famous expedition of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark (1804–6), Alexander von Humboldt's explorations of the Andes, or the South Sea voyages of James Cook. *Travels* also falls within a line of spiritualized nature observation that runs from Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selborne* (1789), through Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), to the tweedy and earnest tradition that thrives to this day. Bartram's lyrical rhapsodies hail from a time when botanists wrote poetry and poets botanized. Erasmus Darwin (Charles's grandfather) explained the Linnaean system in verse couplets with *Loves of the Plants* (1798), while Samuel Taylor Coleridge borrowed from Bartram's description of Salt Springs to render the "mighty fountain" of Kubla Khan:

... Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And amid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momentarily the sacred river.¹⁰

The reading of Bartram by Coleridge (which has been described, with some hyperbole, as influence) testifies to the confluence of science and dreamscape, taxonomy and wonder.

Popular myth holds that William Bartram accomplished little else after *Travels*, that he published his one book and then pattered idly in his garden until his death in 1823. The more interesting truth is that he remained active in intellectual circles, often invisibly as a collaborator, into his final decades. The family business fell to the younger John Bartram, William's brother, but it was William who prepared orders and catalogues. And while William Bartram never married or had children (he claimed the title of "dishonourable bachelor"), he was a favorite uncle who tutored nieces and nephews and who from his "Seminary of American Vegetables" mentored a generation of naturalists.¹¹ His illustrations would grace *The Elements of Botany* (1803–4) by longtime collaborator Benjamin Smith Barton, and provide the frontispiece for a still-undetermined number of pamphlets, proceedings and essays. Although he has been cast as a lone eccentric or solitary wilderness adventurer, Bartram's deep engagement in American intellectual life spanned a remarkable six decades.

In 1818, five years before the octogenarian William Bartram collapsed outside his Kingsessing home (by a favorite pear tree planted by his father), Benjamin Smith Barton published a short pamphlet describing a favorite Florida bird, the limpkin: *Some Account of the Tantalous ephouskyca*. Barton, who was never anywhere near the limpkin's limited range, relied upon the observations of his friend. *Travels* described the limpkin (now *Aramus guarauna*) as a "very curious bird . . . about the size of a large domestic hen," the native name "ephouskyca" signifying "the crying bird."¹² The image fronting Barton's pamphlet in no way ranks among Bartram's best work. The abstract background allows for little sense of the native habitat, the anatomy feels disjointed, and the crude engraving fails to capture the limpkin's gangly, doe-like grace. But the illustration does connect us. The same bird, even if not so much recently, is still found on the St. Johns. Readers of *Travels* who see a limpkin in the wild hold a special kinship to William Bartram. His presence cuts across centuries.



This book, *Travels on the St. Johns River*, seeks to foster connection and kinship: it is about a river and two of its early explorers. Part 1 presents selections from the vast array of materials that followed the Bartrams' wanderings through "East Florida." Part 2 situates their discoveries in a scientific and historical context, updating the taxa (or names and classification of the flora and fauna) for the first time in a generation. Thomas Hallock and Matthew Jackson edited part 1, Richard Franz (with his "brother gardeners") prepared the materials in part 2, and Dean Campbell created the map. Read together, these texts bring us closer to the river; at the same time, the words and images take us to an earlier, lost milieu. All too often the name Bartram serves as an easy shorthand, as a "sound bite" for stewardship and natural beauty, with little consideration for the authors in their own time. Our goal is to build upon the remarkable body of Bartram scholarship from the past few decades and present core texts in reliable form to as many readers as possible—to students and river rats, backpackers, birders, conservative politicians and left-wing activists, native plant nuts and armchair explorers alike. This book allows for many paths of discovery.

Chapter 1, part 1, presents the Florida section of John Bartram's *Diary*. (William left no record of this trip.) John's manuscript journal is now preserved at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, although the Florida section (19 December 1765 to 12 February 1766) remains missing. The elder Bartram most likely sent this portion to England, where it appeared as an appendix to Wil-



William Bartram's drawing of a limpkin (*Aramus guarauna*). Frontispiece to Benjamin Smith Barton, *Some Account of the Tantalous ephouskyca* (1818). Courtesy of George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.