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CELEBRATING EARLY
AMERICAN NATURALISTS

THE BARTRAMS

BY KENNETH SETZER

Father and son explored for plants and animals from New York to Florida, beginning well before U.S. independence and earning acclaim as America's first naturalists.

The Bartram name is familiar to anyone with an interest in the natural history of the Southeastern United States—if only through all its eponymous flora and fauna, like Bartram's scrub hairstreak butterfly or Bartram's rose gentian. However, the Bartrams themselves—both John and his son William—are intriguing characters from early Colonial America, often celebrated as America's first naturalists.

John Bartram was a plain Pennsylvania Quaker, born in 1699. This diligent farmer-explorer was self-taught in nature, literature and science. His many discoveries—and his simple, upright character—charmed luminaries in the Colonies, including Benjamin Franklin. One can't help but picture John and Ben brainstorming the founding of the American Philosophical Society while drinking chocolate and sitting within earshot of a tinkling harpsichord. The humble Colonial farmer became an explorer, businessman and, eventually, King George III's Royal Botanist. He lived an American ideal—free to reinvent himself in the New World.

His plant explorations stretched from John Bartram's own Colony of Pennsylvania (where he discovered American ginseng, *Panax quinquefolius*) to New Jersey, New York, Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas (where he found with his son William "an abundance of the ludicrous *Dionaea muscipula*," known also as the Venus flytrap), Georgia and Florida. He initiated a plant export business that supplied curious Europeans with novel North American plants.

John's son William may have followed in his father's footsteps, but certainly did not hide in his shadow. At 14, he accompanied his father on plant explorations in the Catskill Mountains, which ignited

in William the same "Botanick fire" that his father felt. More formally learned but less pragmatic than John, William was a gifted artist who romanticized wilderness, whereas John saw more practical uses for what nature provided.

During their first trip south together, John wrote on October 1, 1765: "This day we found several very curious shrubs." The location was near Fort Barrington on the Altamaha River, in Georgia. These shrubs turned out to be even more curious than either Bartram realized at the time. They eventually named the species *Franklinia alatamaha*, the Franklin tree. William found it flowering on his subsequent visit, but after about 1803, all Franklin trees in the area were gone, and none have ever been found anywhere else. They had unknowingly found a remnant population. Extinct in the wild, many Franklin trees grow today in cultivation; they all descend from the samples the Bartrams collected.

William tested life as a merchant's apprentice, turned down a printing apprenticeship with Franklin and tried running a mercantile business; the subtropics appealed to him enough to convince his father to financially back him as a rice and indigo grower in Florida in 1766—an endeavor at which he failed. However, his excellent illustrations of strange, new plants and animals were making the rounds of influential men back in England, ultimately entering the hands of English physician and plant collector Dr. John Fothergill, who was impressed enough to order several drawings. This swayed the course of William's professional life, earning him backers to finance another expedition throughout the wilds of the southeast Colonies.

LEFT

The Great Alachua Savana, currently Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park, by William Bartram.
Image courtesy of the American Philosophical Society.

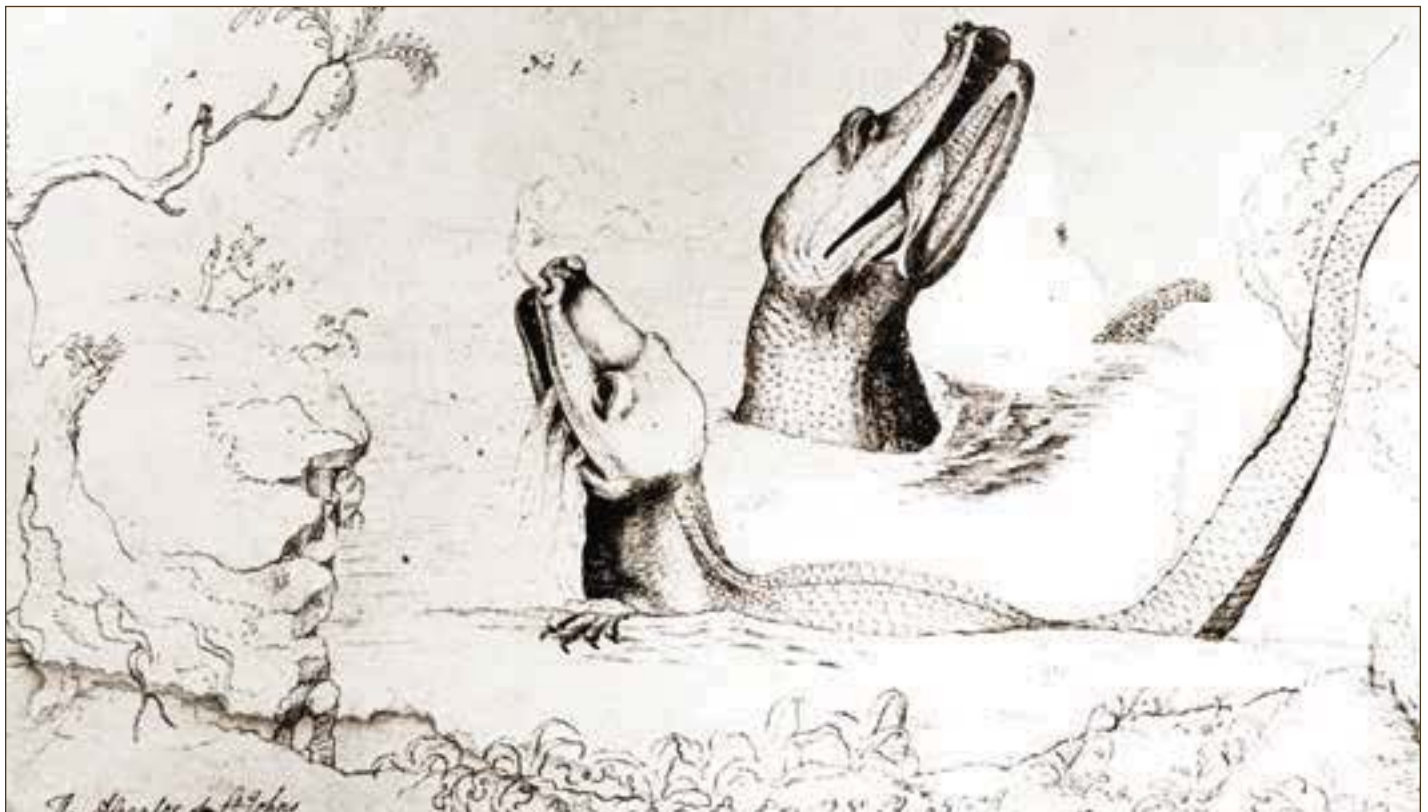
Exploring the Southern Frontier into Florida, 1773-1777

Much of America, especially inland, was then still unexplored by Europeans. Just imagine the wilds of Georgia, Tennessee and parts of the Carolinas: nearly completely natural, still mostly populated by Native Americans. Florida was a wild jungle by comparison, full of giant reptiles from another epoch and primitive forests draped in Spanish moss—ripe for an explorer eager to document new plants, animals and people.

Upon reaching Florida, William mostly followed the St. Johns River, or River San Juan as he called it, where he made some of his most important observations: coonties, palms, limpkins, ibis, black

vultures, sandhill cranes and the infamous painted vulture, spotted near Lake George. In his description of the “painted vulture,” William seems to be talking about a king vulture (*Sarcoramphus papa*), but the Yucatan is their northernmost home. For centuries, naturalists have been vexed about just what he saw. William Bartram was a bit, let’s say, lackadaisical in his chronology (and in sending promised specimens back to Fothergill), but otherwise his observations are considered reliable. For instance, he described the celestial lily, which subsequent hunters were unable to find; after the lily was rediscovered in 1931, his descriptive accuracy was more or less vindicated. Like the Franklin tree, the straggling vulture could have represented a remnant population, or simply an off-course visitor.

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Florida’s terrible monsters, by William Bartram.
Image courtesy of State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.



The rare Franklin tree (*Franklinia alatamaha*), extinct in the wild.
Photo by Kenneth Setzer/FTBG

William also made another observation that continues to puzzle naturalists: He observed towering royal palm trees (*Roystonea regia*) around Lake Dexter, northwest of Deland, Florida. This is truly far north of their current natural range of extreme South Florida. But his description fits: trunks 60, even 90 feet tall and “of bright ash color.”

Near Palatka, Florida, William traveled west to describe eloquently—if a bit over-sentimentally—the great Alachua Savannah, now Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park: “The extensive Alachua savanna is a level green plain. It is encircled with high, sloping hills, covered with waving forests and fragrant orange groves, rising from an exuberantly fertile soil. The towering magnolia grandiflora and transcendent Palm stand conspicuous among them ... Herds of sprightly deer, squadrons of the beautiful fleet Seminole horse, flocks of turkeys, civilized communities of the sonorous watchful crane, mix together, appearing happy and contented in the enjoyment of peace.”

William was fascinated by the many sinkholes and springs of pure water he stumbled into, but was plagued by the alligators he felt stalked him there and in the river. He wrote: “Behold him rushing forth from the flags and reeds. His enormous body swells. The waters like a cataract descend from his opening jaws. Clouds of smoke issue from his dilated nostrils. The earth trembles with his thunder.” Pretty accurate, minus the smoke.



The endangered Bartram's scrub-hairstreak butterfly (*Strymon acis bartrami*).
Photo by Kenneth Setzer/FTBG

Here, he also called upon the Seminole village of Cuscowilla, near Micanopy, where the native chief christened him “Puc puggy,” the flower hunter. William’s Quaker diplomacy and appreciation of Native Americans and their intimate knowledge of local flora and fauna ensured he became their ally.

William’s explorations reached as far south as the “diaphanous” water of Blue Springs (now Blue Springs State Park), where he stopped, turned northward, and began working back home to Philadelphia. He would never embark on such a hunt for “original productions of nature” again, declining a botany position at the University of Pennsylvania and a position on the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Instead, in 1791 he published “Travels,” a classic recollection of his 2,400 miles of exploration throughout the Southeast. “Travels” was a hit, especially in Europe. William’s sometimes florid, always artistic interpretations of what he saw heavily influenced European Romanticism, including poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. Portions of his journey were even retraced by Thomas Nuttall in 1815 and John James Audubon in 1832.

The Bartram legacy lives on in far more than animal and plant names; “Travels” is considered an irreplaceable source of early observations, particularly of Florida. You can also personally retrace William’s path along the Bartram Trail, or even hire a John Bartram impersonator. Or still better, visit the 1728 Bartram House and Garden, which remarkably still stands outside Philadelphia. 