

Will. Bartram

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William Bartram

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The name of Bartram had been familiar to me from childhood. This familiarity I held in common with all properly brought-up Philadelphians, and doubtless with a large majority of naturalists throughout the English-speaking world. But when I came to question myself for information regarding the man, or men, who brought fame and honor to this name, I found a distressing lack of knowledge. It came down to something like this: that John Bartram was a botanist who dwelt in a most attractive house in the midst of a beautiful garden. That his son William was a friend and patron of Alexander Wilson, and hence it was safe to conclude that he was somewhat of an ornithologist himself.

With a desire to increase my knowledge of these two men, and especially of William, the subject of this sketch, I have sought for information regarding them in such directions as lay open to me. I now venture to present a brief synopsis of the results of my research to the readers of CASSINIA.

In 1682 there came to Pennsylvania from Derbyshire, England, a worthy Quaker named John Bartram. With his wife

and four children he settled near Darby in Delaware County. The third son, William, was the only child to marry. His Quaker wife was Elizabeth, daughter of James Hunt. The children of this union were John, James and William, and a daughter who died young. John, the eldest, was the botanist. He was born March 23, 1699. I must refer but briefly to this pioneer in the study of American plant-life.

Bred upon the farm and educated in the country school, he developed at an early age a deep love of nature. Having grown to manhood, he took up the study of Latin, so as to be able to read the descriptions of plants in the Latin works of European botanists. William, in writing of his father, says: "He had an inclination to the study of physic and surgery, and did much towards relieving the ailments of his poor neighbors." There is good reason to believe that this interest in medicine and healing herbs gave the first impetus to his serious study of botany.

John Bartram married twice. His first wife was Mary Maris. She died in 1727. There were two sons, Richard and John, by this marriage. In September, 1729, John Bartram married Ann Mendenhall, who survived him. They had nine children, five boys and four girls. The third son was William, who, with his twin sister Elizabeth, was born February 9, 1739.

In 1728 John Bartram purchased a tract of ground on the west bank of the Schuylkill River near Gray's Ferry. "Here," says William, "he built, with his own hands, a large and comfortable house of hewn stone, and laid out a garden containing about five acres." Of course he must have had some necessary assistance in this work, but it is an undoubted fact that he was a skilled mechanic and mason. During his lifetime he is said to have built four other houses. There is well-executed carving about the doors and windows of the Bartram mansion. Upon a stone in the wall is cut:

"JOHN * ANN BARTRAM—1731."

Over the front door of his study is carved the inscription:

"'Tis God alone, Almighty Lord,
The Holy One, by me adored.
JOHN BARTRAM, 1770."

Although a man of deeply religious nature, he was nevertheless exceedingly broad and liberal in his beliefs. So independent did he become in his religious views that in later life he was disowned by the Society of Friends. William's religious attitude appears to have corresponded with that of his father. Their views were simply those of present-day Unitarians. William, however, never severed his connection with Friends. Over the door of John Bartram's greenhouse were written these lines :

"Slave to no sect, who takes no private road,
But looks through Nature up to Nature's God."

William's boyhood was spent under the care and influence of this broad-minded, nature-loving father, and with the now famous garden growing up about him. It was not strange that he too should develop the tastes and instincts of the naturalist and seek to follow in his father's footsteps.

When William was fifteen years of age, we find the elder Bartram writing to his friend Peter Collinson of England—a wealthy Quaker greatly interested in horticulture—and enclosing some of William's drawings of natural objects. At about this time he took him on a trip to the Catskills. In 1755 Bartram writes to Collinson as follows: "I design to set Billy to draw all our turtles, with remarks as he has time, which is only on Seventh Days in the afternoons and First Day mornings, for he is constantly kept to school to learn Latin and French." One might infer from this that William and his father were not altogether regular in their attendance at First Day meeting. Young Bartram thus early showed skill as an artist, and it is evident that his father did not want him to be hampered in his studies, as he himself had been through lack of French and Latin.

In another letter written to Collinson, Bartram writes as follows: "My son William is just turned of sixteen. It is now time to propose some way for him to get his living by. I don't want him to be what is commonly called a gentleman. I want to put him to some business by which he may with care and industry get a temperate, reasonable living. I am afraid that botany and drawing may not afford him one, and hard labour

don't agree with him. I have designed several years to put him to a doctor to learn physic and surgery, but that will take him from his drawing, which he takes particular delight in. Pray, my dear friend Peter, let me have thy opinion about it."

About this time Benjamin Franklin offered to teach William the trade of printing. His father, however, did not think the outlook for printing in Pennsylvania a good one. Franklin also suggested engraving. Finally at the age of eighteen William was placed with a Philadelphia merchant named Child, and remained with him for about four years. Having thus served his apprenticeship, and arrived at his twenty-second year, he left the paternal roof for Cape Fear, North Carolina, where he set up as a trader, his uncle William having established himself there as a young man many years before. In the meantime the elder Bartram, notwithstanding his advancing years, was making frequent expeditions throughout the Eastern and Southern States in the interests of science.

The Indians were at this period in a belligerent mood. The old gentleman seems to have had no high regard for them. In one of his letters he says that the only way to make peace with the Indians "is to bang them stoutly." William appears to have been of a gentler nature, and to have felt a deep sympathy for the red man in the cruel and unjust treatment often meted out to him by the whites. It is possible that the somewhat combative nature of John Bartram may have been one of the reasons for his final exclusion from the Society of Friends.

At length through the influence of Peter Collinson, King George the Third appointed John Bartram his "Botanist for the Floridas," with a salary of fifty pounds a year. Accordingly, in the autumn of 1765 he started for the southern peninsula, and feeling the need of a companion, he took William with him, his business venture at Cape Fear having been far from successful. William states that they had been ordered to search for the sources of the river San Juan (St. John's), and that they ascended the river for almost its entire length, about 400 miles, by one bank, and descended by the opposite shore. They made careful survey of the stream, its branches, and the lakes connecting therewith. They also made notes of the lay of the land,

the character of the soil, and of the plants, birds, mammals, and fishes seen on the expedition. The report of this journey, together with most of the collections made thereon, were forwarded to England, where they met with high praise from the people and king.

William was much taken with the Floridas, and with the assistance of his father established himself as an indigo planter on the St. John's River. But this business venture also ended disastrously, and a year later we find him at work on a farm near his father's home.

Collinson, who had always taken a keen interest in the boy, now wrote that the Duchess of Portland, "a great virtuoso in shells and all marine productions," had just dined at his house and been greatly impressed with some of William's drawings. She accordingly forwarded twenty guineas and a list of objects which she wished him to draw for her. Dr. Fothergill, a wealthy Quaker naturalist of England, and a great friend of John Bartram, now began to send him orders for drawings of shells, turtles, terrapin, and other natural objects. His interest and patronage extended even further than this, for he fairly launched William on his career as a full-fledged naturalist. In 1772 he began explorations in Carolina, Georgia and Florida, and for about five years the expenses of these journeys were borne by Dr. Fothergill. Young Bartram, however, turned over to his patron all drawings and collections made on these expeditions.

In 1791 he published his principal book, entitled, "Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the extensive Territories of the Muscogueges or Creek Confederacy and the Country of the Choctaws."

These southern Indians seem to have aroused a warm and kindly interest in the gentle naturalist. In his charming journal he treats in much detail of their manners and customs. He found them to be for the most part intelligent and hospitable, and he was convinced that their worst faults came through contact with the whites. This book of William Bartram's southern travels is rich in interest and graphic in its literary

style, reminding one at times of the writings of DeFoe. The poet Coleridge, in referring to it, said: "The latest book of travels I know, written in the spirit of the older travellers, is Bartram's account of his tour in the Floridas. It is a work of high merit every way."

On September 22, 1777, John Bartram died at the age of seventy-eight. After his father's death, William continued the vigorous pursuit of the study of natural history, making his home for the most part with his brother John, who inherited the mansion and its now famous botanical garden.

In 1782 William Bartram was elected Professor of Botany in the University of Pennsylvania, but declined the honor on account of ill health. He was also elected a member of the American Philosophical Society, and of various other learned bodies in both Europe and America. Bartram was clever with tools, and, as we have before said, skillful in the handling of pencil and brush. His illustrations, showing much artistic merit, may be found in several of the scientific works of his day, notably in Professor Barton's *Elements of Botany*. His literary style was for the most part simple and graphic. At times his enthusiasm in his subject caused him to be somewhat extravagant in his statements. Some of his more flowery passages remind one of the pen of Audubon. When dealing with purely scientific matter his words are always carefully chosen, intelligent and instructive.

The life and work of William Bartram are best summed up in his own words, when in speaking of himself he says: "Continually impelled by a restless spirit of curiosity, in pursuit of new productions of nature, my chief happiness consisted 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 be useful to society."

And now it may be asked, "What claim has William Bartram to special recognition as an ornithologist, and why does *CASSINIA* regard him as entitled to a place in its list of men noted in this branch of study?" To this we would reply that in the

year 1802 Alexander Wilson took charge of the little school at Kingsessing, near Gray's Ferry and soon made the acquaintance of our gentle Quaker naturalist. It is our firm belief, that had it not been for this acquaintance, which soon ripened into a warm friendship, Wilson's American Ornithology would never have been carried to a successful end. In fact there is evidence to show that its inspiration and commencement were directly due to the influence and assistance of William Bartram.

All that Harris and other friends and patrons were to Audubon, he was to Wilson, and far more. Wilson was well nigh penniless and friendless; with none of Audubon's grace of person and charm of manner, to say nothing of his brilliant and highly cultivated artistic powers. But in this uncouth Scotchman Bartram recognized the mind and heart of a true nature lover, and patiently began to give him the instruction and assistance which finally resulted in his taking up the study of birds as his life work. It is evident that all the ornithological lists and notes of William Bartram were put at Wilson's disposal. Wilson quotes him constantly and gives him the full credit due for this generous help. Unquestionably Bartram's list of birds of the eastern United States was the most correct and complete record of its kind before the time of Wilson; while his "Anecdotes of a Crow" and "Description of *Certhia*" show him to have been a close student of birds. Wilson in writing to him in 1807 says, "The receipt of yours of the 11th inst., in which you approve of my intended publication of American Ornithology gave me much satisfaction; and your promise of befriending me in the arduous attempt commands my unfeigned gratitude. From the opportunities I have lately had of examining into the works of Americans who have treated of this part of our natural history, I am satisfied that none of them have bestowed such minute attention on the subject as you yourself have done. Indeed they have done little more than copied your nomenclature and observations and referred to your authority. To have you therefore to consult with in the course of this great publication, I consider a most happy and even auspicious circumstance; and I hope you will on all occasions, be a rigid censor and kind monitor, whenever you find

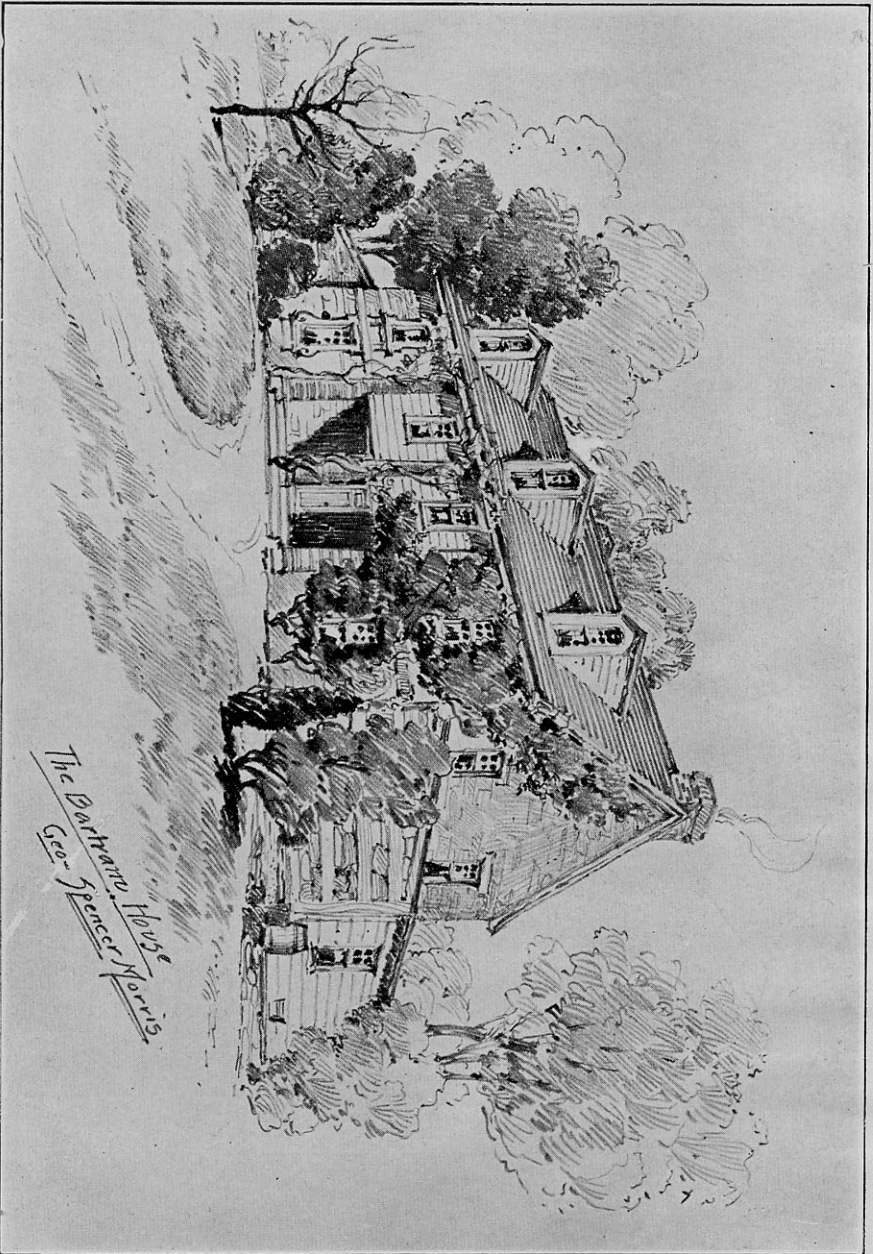
me deviating from the beauties of nature or the truth of description." At this time Wilson was undoubtedly making diligent search for all the extant literature on American birds, and the above quotation clearly shows that he had found no writer who had dealt more fully with the subject than William Bartram.

It is doubtless true that Bartram's most important work was in botanical lines, but ornithology, conchology, ichthyology and entomology also claimed his close attention. In short he was a fine example of the old-fashioned naturalist, a type now well-nigh lost. The day of excessive specialization had not arrived, the country was young and its wonders unstudied. The two Bartrams were among the very first of our really important naturalists. It is not strange that their work should have been of a somewhat general character at a time when every step revealed wonders hitherto unknown. It is hard for us now to realize the utterly crude state of scientific knowledge in this country a century ago. The naturalist of to-day cannot but feel a little envious of the splendid field for original work which lay open to these old pioneer students.

Wilson was not the only one who received assistance and advice from William Bartram. A biographical sketch by an unknown author says, "Mr. Bartram was a source of reference to many naturalists of his day, and there was scarcely an American or foreign writer who attempted the natural history of this country but applied to him for information on relative treatises, and in many instances his generous contributions were received and diffused to the world by other writers without giving credit to the proper author."

William Bartram never married and the ties of family therefore did not interfere seriously with his work. His disposition was affectionate and kindly, and his demeanor somewhat reserved. He was short in stature; the expression of his countenance was refined and intellectual. While his general health was good his constitution was never vigorous or robust. His temperate habits and outdoor life were doubtless the cause of his reaching the advanced age of eighty-five years.

On the morning of July 22, 1823, he was writing the description of a plant in the little study used by his father and himself



THE BARTRAM HOUSE, BARTRAM'S GARDEN, PHILADELPHIA

for such purposes. He then rose from his desk to take his customary stroll through the beautiful garden. He had gone but a few steps from the door when he burst a bloodvessel, and thus suddenly closed his useful life.