

# The Traveller

A Newsletter of the Bartram Trail Conference

Spring, 2022

## Fort Barrington Excursion

When it was announced that the Fort Barrington Hunt Club would host members of the Bartram Trail Conference for a field trip to their property, one BTC member remarked, "I think we are all viewing this as if we will finally get to be on holy ground!" Indeed, the trip proved to be so popular that nearly every participant in the 2022 Bartram Trail Conference chose to come to Darien a day early just to have the opportunity to explore Fort Barrington.

As fans of the Bartrams know, Fort Barrington is where John and William discovered *Franklinia* in October 1765. Upon returning to Fort Barrington in April 1773, William saw the small plot of *Franklinias* again, but he probably did not see them in flower until the summer of 1776. Because he was able to collect seeds and propagate *Franklinia* at the Bartram Garden when he returned home to Philadelphia, this enigmatic plant was saved from extinction. It is probable that every existing plant is a descendent of those at the Bartram Garden.

Members of the Bartram Trail Conference gathered at the Fort Barrington Hunt Club Lodge on Friday morning, January 28. We were greeted by Doug Sappenfield, president of the hunt club. The lodge and the adjacent large open space where we gathered are located within the ramparts of Fort Barrington. Because our group was so large Doug divided us into two groups and sent us in two directions; one along the old Post Road that connected Savannah and St. Augustine, the other to explore the banks of the Altamaha River and an 18th century Indian village site. One of our members found a remnant of a colonial era clay smoking pipe in the river bank.

After the two groups had a chance to



*Doug Sappenfield, president of the Fort Barrington Club, oriented participants to the location of the ramparts and explained the history of the Fort Barrington area.*

explore all of the Fort Barrington property, we retreated to the lodge to view the many artifacts that have been unearthed during the hundred year history of the Fort Barrington Hunt Club. Lee and Gina Foskey, caretakers of the hunt club, proudly displayed their young *Franklinias* (in pots on their patio, of course).

Doug Sappenfield, president of the hunt club, is dedicated to restoring the 2000 acres of the hunt club property to its natural state of the time when William Bartram visited during his travels. This means replacing the Loblolly Pines with Longleaf Pines and encouraging native plants to flourish.

The Fort Barrington Hunt Club was fortunate to hire as their caretaker Lee Foskey, a native of nearby Uvalda. Lee



*Philip Juras found an 18th century clay pipe fragment on the banks of the Altamaha River.*

has a passion for nature and the history of the Altamaha region. He told this author that when the hunt club suggested that he and Gina take a vacation his response was, "Why would I want to go somewhere else? I'm right where I want to be." ❁

# January in Darien!

Devoted fans of William Bartram converged on Darien, Georgia, for our Bartram Trail conference. Although the weather was a bit chilly and windy, we enjoyed a warm welcome from our hosts for the weekend: the Fort Barrington Hunt Club, the Friends of Ashantilly, and the St Andrews Episcopal Church who provided their parish hall as our venue.

Friday morning kicked off with a highly anticipated visit to the site of Fort Barrington, upstream from Darien on the Altamaha River. It was here in 1765 that William and John Bartram first discovered the small tree that would come to be known as *Franklinia alatamaha*, the genus named in honor of the Bartram's family friend Benjamin Franklin. On his solo trip, William relocated the plants in the summer of 1773, seeing them in bloom for the first time in 1776.

Friday afternoon the BTC Board and other interested members convened to discuss the prospects for pursuing National Park Service designation for a Bartram Trail National Historic Corridor. We benefited greatly from the ability to teleconference with Ms. Elissa Kunz, from the NPS regional office, about the process from the standpoint of National Park Service requirements. We then heard from Dr. Dionne Hoskins-Brown, executive director for the Gullah-Geechee National Historic Corridor, who provided us with her perspective on what it means to develop and manage a National Historic Corridor. Our group concluded that at this time we should continue to develop our state-by-state focus, led by the BTC membership, as we go into our 250th anniversary celebration. On Saturday, President Sam Carr and Harriet Langford, president of the Friends of Ashantilly, welcomed everyone to the conference which opened with Brad Sanders' talk, "Bartram on the Georgia Coast." This helped to orient everyone to the significance of Darien and surrounding McIntosh County to William Bartram over the course of his exploration of the Southeast. Landscape artist Philip Juras used his paintings to re-envision the coastal landscapes that Bartram came to know so well. Dorinda Dallmeyer and Harriet Langford presented "A Tale of Two Williams," newly discovered watercolor sketches by William E. Haynes il-



*Bill Haynes's print of William Bartram botanizing the banks of the Altamaha River.*

lustrating his version of Bartram's *Travels*. Haynes, who spent most of his life living in Darien at the family home "Ashantilly," was a noted printer and teacher of the art of letterpress printing. Dr. Joel Fry, curator at Bartram's Garden in Philadelphia, discussed the history of *Franklinia* and rightfully was one of the most enthusiastic visitors to the Fort Barrington site.

Following lunch we had a presentation on one of our projects funded by the Fothergill Award: the Florida Mapping Project, which revealed how online resources and mapping programs are making it possible to generate detailed, user-friendly maps along the St. Johns Corridor and beyond. President Sam Carr then led a discussion about the status of the Bartram Heritage Corridor Project, encouraging all of us to return to our home states and continue to build partnerships to celebrate our 250th anniversary and sustain it for the years to come.

The afternoon was open for members to visit the Bartram Trail Marker at the McIntosh Family Cemetery north of Darien. Christopher Robinson led the tour, joined by William Bartram re-enactor Mike Adams, and special guests Suzanne Forsyth and Mariana Hagan, who are direct descendants of Donald McIntosh. Other participants visited Ashantilly and its print shop where people printed their own commemorative memento of the conference. Some members visited Ft. King George and took advantage of coastal bird-watching opportunities in the vicinity.

On Saturday evening we reconvened for our banquet and keynote lecture, delivered by Christi Lambert, Coast and Marine Director of Conservation at The Nature Conservancy. She described the decades-long effort to conserve lands along the Altamaha to protect that landscape for generations yet to come.

On Sunday's frosty morn, a hardy group boarded a pontoon boat to experience Bartram's Altamaha for themselves. On our tour, we watched for wintering birds as we progressed from the salt marsh upstream into the tidal freshwater marshes. ❁



## A Note from the Fort Barrington Hunt Club

The visit by the Bartram group was beneficial to the Fort Barrington Club in understanding greater details about the visits of William Bartram through the club property. The information and maps provided to the club are very helpful in identifying the trail paths through our property that connected Savannah, Darien and where the river was forded to the trail south of the Altamaha River.

Using the measurements from the 1790's survey titled "Environs of Fort Barrington," we intend to restore the path through our property. We knew where a section of it was, but we were unsure of certain parts. On a future visit by the Bartram group, we would hope to have the entire original path restored and the Bartram group members could walk it. Again, many thanks to the conference attendees for sharing information with us.

Doug Sappenfield  
*President, Fort Barrington Club*



# William Bartram and Major Robert Farmar

*Christopher Robinson, PhD*

When we are on the road with William Bartram, we are introduced to places, people, plants, and often witnesses to events. When we follow Bartram from Augusta to Mobile, we experience all of these.

At this point, Bartram was two years into his travels, and he had been exploring Georgia, South Carolina, Florida, western North Carolina (and nearly popping into Tennessee). Before we follow him on his next leg of his southern travels, we must remember that William was being paid to explore. His patron, John Fothergill, expected him to collect plants, seeds, and other natural productions in Florida. William, however, decided to travel with traders west to Mobile. We must be glad he did, for it gives us an excuse to follow him.

Since Bartram followed existing Indian trails that were later built up into the Old Federal Road, we can follow his route with a fair amount of accuracy (Braund, Waselkov, & Christopher, 2019; Sanders, 2002; Southerland & Brown, 1990). While we do spend some time in interesting places, his route remains out of the way of the modern highway. As we head toward Macon, Georgia, we pass the Ocmulgee Indian mounds, ancient even in Bartram's time. As we move into Alabama, we generally find ourselves on backroads, often away from major cities. There is a stretch of road, near Anderson Stage Coach Stop (31.74892, -86.92257, a structure from just after William's time), and if you follow the dirt road south to Middleton Cemetery you are as close to the feel of Bartram's actual trail as in nearly any other place.

When Bartram went through this area it was claimed by the Creeks. While the Indians usually left groups of traders alone, there were real risks from warring groups to individuals or small groups of settlers. Even a seasoned traveler such as William Bartram had reasonable fear that when his horse began to falter that he would be left to be killed along the trail (Harper, 1998).



*Major Robert Farmar*

William and his father, John, were able to travel through Florida because England had acquired Florida after the French and Indian War. While we can recognize this in the abstract, on the ground particular individuals had to take possession of the land. For this transfer of power, Major Robert Farmar was the man who took control. In 1775, William would meet Farmar.

Major Farmar was considered by many to be the military governor in West Florida, although he wasn't. In order to introduce Farmar, I want to align Farmar's career prior to meeting William with events in William's life.

Farmar's family once owned land just up the river from the future Bartram's Gardens. Robert Farmar, however, was born in New Jersey as the sixth son of a locally prominent family. He later went to

be educated in England and was a career British soldier. He fought all over, but let's concentrate on the wars in North America: the French and Indian War and the American Revolution.

We call it the French and Indian War in the US because that's who the colonists fought. The war, however, involved other countries and is also called the Seven Years War in Europe. The most important other country for us is Spain; Spain fought against the English.

At the time, Spain controlled Florida, Cuba, and other territories. With Florida and Cuba, Spain effectively controlled trade routes in and out of the Gulf of Mexico. Farmar fought in battles that broke this control. Most famously, he fought in the Battle of Havana. This British victory helped make this battle one of the last battles of the Seven Years War. After the war, there was some land swapping, with England getting Florida (allowing for John and William's later visit) and Spain getting land west of the Mississippi (including New Orleans).

Major Farmar was the British military leader who took control of the forts in West Florida and gradually helped convert this into British territory. His base of operation was Mobile, and this area would remain his home the rest of his life. During this period, military and political rule were separate, with each jealous of its prerogatives. This led Farmar and Governor George Johnstone into a dispute that ended with Farmar being court-martialed. On April 20, 1768 Farmar was acquitted and even praised for his action.

This was William's 29th birthday, and it gives us a chance to synchronize their lives. In 1768, Farmar had every reason to believe his star was on the rise, and William was in perhaps one of his lowest depressions. At this point, Farmar and William are seven years from meeting.

William's plantation in Florida had just failed. William fled to Philadelphia in 1767 and his father's friend, Peter Collinson, would die in 1768. Before his death, Collinson lamented, "I have often thought what a pity it is, that his Ingenuity could not be of service to him"



*The Old Federal Road near Middleton Cemetery.*



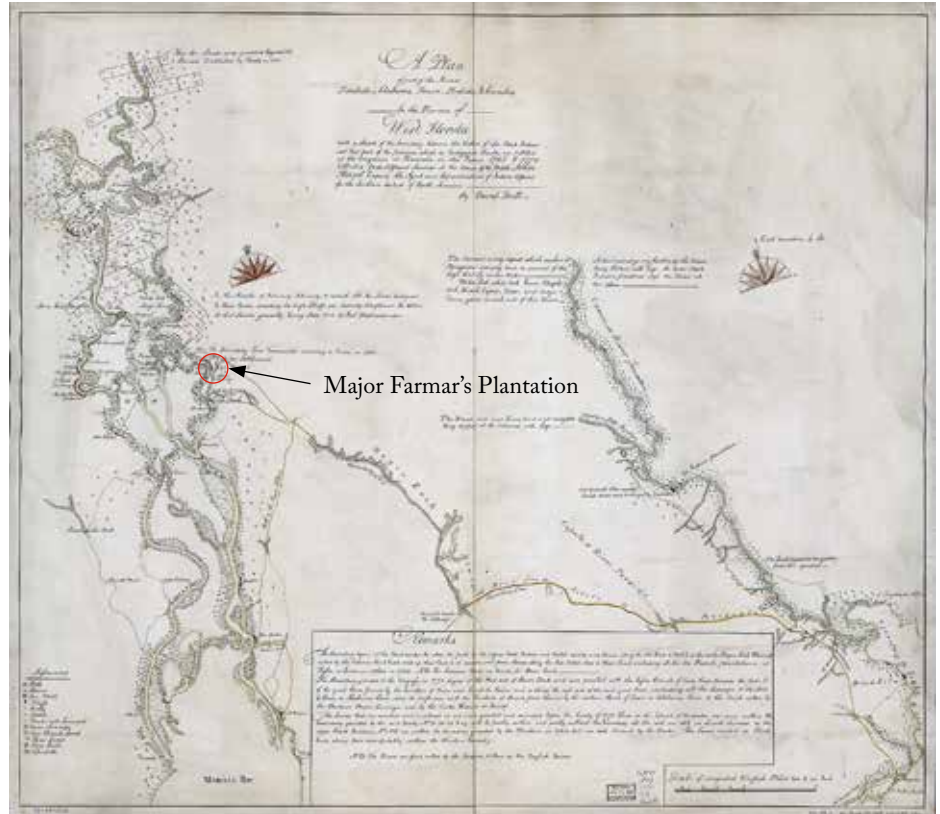
*Oenothera grandiflora*, by William Bartram

(April 10, 1767) and he hoped he would find some job that is at least above “the Servile drudgery of a Day Labourer” (December 25, 1767). Collinson praised William’s charming and ingenious drawings (31 July 31, 1767) and a month before his death formally recommended that John Fothergill become William’s patron. Years later, in deciding to fund William’s travel, Fothergill would point out the obvious: William was “bred to merchandise, but not fitted to it by inclination at least” (Fothergill to Chalmers, October 23, 1772).

After his acquittal, Farmar traveled to England to secure his military commission, only to find it had been sold. He returned to the Mobile area, established a plantation and lost others, but eventually lived a life of provincial political power and planter comfort at his plantation near modern day Stockton, Alabama.

Farmar invited William to his home, and William spent some time exploring the twisting rivers and creeks that make up this area. William discovered the Evening Primrose and called it, “perhaps the most pompous and brilliant herbaceous plant yet known to exist.” In the fall of 1775, William took his leave of Farmar’s hospitality.

Farmar died in the Fall of 1778. It is tempting to wonder how much William and Farmar talked about the potential war with Britain. This was even more in-



A plan of part of the rivers Tombeche, Alabama, Tensa, Perdido, & Scambia in the province of West Florida; with a sketch of the boundary between the nation of upper Creek Indians and that part of the province which is contiguous thereto, as settled at the congresses at Pensacola in the years 1765 & 1771.

By David Tait and John Stuart. Reprinted with permission of the Library of Congress

teresting, for the previous year William spent a lot of time with Lachlan McIntosh, who was one of Georgia’s revolutionary generals. While Farmar had said that “none would be suffered to remain Neuter and Idle Spectators,” we actually can only guess his attitude from a letter he wrote. He thought the Americans only wanted to participate in the privileges and liberties of the British, which they had a right to. Given they shared William’s friendship, I often wonder if Farmar and McIntosh would be friends.

As we have seen, there is a physicality to traveling with Bartram, and when we travel with him, we are able to share his world. His route from Augusta to Mobile allows us to capture some of this, and it also allows us to meet some of the people connected to events that made his trips possible. ☘

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## Regional News

### Blue Ridge Bartram Trail Society

By Brent Martin

The Blue Ridge Bartram Trail Conservancy has had a busy spring so far. We've had three well attended youth volunteer days on the trail and are currently interviewing for our Youth Conservation Corps positions this coming summer. Six 16–18 year-old youth and two young adults will have full time employment for a month on the Bartram Trail! We have also received funding from the National Forest Foundation and US Forest Service to hire a young adult crew (19–30) for sixteen weeks starting in August. If you know of young adults interested in seasonal trail work employment, contact [brent@blueridgebartram.org](mailto:brent@blueridgebartram.org)

Our Bartram Week this year is June 6–10, which includes a Boating with Bartram kayaking trip, a Foxfire Museum sponsored botanical outing, a Birding with Bartram outing, and a Center for Life Enrichment hike which follows Dorinda Dallmeyer and a screening of *Cultivating the Wild* in Highlands, NC. We are also currently working on new maps of the Georgia and North Carolina sections of the trail, and Brent Martin has recently completed a Cultural and Natural History Guide to the Georgia/North Carolina Bartram Trail that will be published by University of Georgia Press.

Our monthly Walking with Bartram hikes continue, and we will have hiked the entire trail by early summer 2022. This series will be part of a documentary on the trail being produced by Christine Tranchina and Backlot Cinema. We'll start all over going south after that!

For more information, [www.blueridgebartram.org](http://www.blueridgebartram.org)

### Bartram Trail Society of Florida

By Mike Adams

Following design, editing and installation in record time, a new trail marker, number 82, I believe, was dedicated at a May 7, 2022, festival at the Little Orange Creek Nature Park and Education Center, located outside Hawthorne, in north central Florida. Leading the festivities were living historians Billy Bartram, his guide and interpreter Job Wiggins, sister Elizabeth and cousin Mary. Ran-



Job Wiggins (l. Robert Wilson) and William Bartram (r. Mike Adams) flank Ken Mahaffey at the dedication of a new historical marker at Little Orange Creek Nature Park and Education Center.

di Cameon, the project proponent, and President of the Friends of Little Orange Creek spearheaded the project and worked closely with TR Henderson and Dorinda Dallmeyer to accomplish it in a record time of about 90 days. Other contributing partners and sponsors were City of Hawthorne, Alachua Conservancy, Putnam Land Conservancy, Hawthorne Historical Society, Florida Communities Trust, Bartram Trail Society of Florida and of course the Bartram Trail Conference.

The beautiful park is approximately 2,900 acres of diverse high-quality Florida ecosystems that include Longleaf Pine forest, oak hammock, sand ridge, a watercourse named Little Orange Creek and wetlands. In addition to the “sand ridges” and “rippling brook,” Bartram was the first to describe in detail the “great land tortoise, called gopher.” Today, this burrow-dwelling Gopher Tortoise is a protected species throughout its historical Southeast range. Bartram explored this area in April 1774 on his way from the St. Johns River basin in the East Florida Territory, west to the “Alachua Savanna,” now Payne’s Prairie State Park immediately south of Gainesville. The Little Orange Creek Park and marker is strategically located along an east-west Native American trail that is now Highway 20.

## From the President

Let me begin by thanking Sam Carr for his dedicated leadership as president of the Bartram Trail Conference over the last two years. He has led by example with his enthusiasm for all things Bartram. Sam and his collaborators up and down Florida’s St. Johns River have set the mark for what each of us can do to promote the Bartram story in our own states and regions.

In 2023, we begin to mark our 250th anniversary of Bartram’s sojourn in the south. I’m thinking now of what the opportunity to return to the places he visited with his father in 1765–1766 must have meant to him, not to mention his desire to set eyes on the Mississippi and all in between. Dr. Fothergill certainly got more than he bargained for and so did we.

It’s not often that we get the chance to celebrate a 250th anniversary and reflect on where we go from here. I’m hoping we can hold a conference every year, from 2023 to 2027, to mark the significance of William Bartram to the many fields his work encompasses.

Let me hear from you about ideas you want to pursue in your part of Bartram Country.

Dorinda G. Dallmeyer

Mark your calendars now for our next Bartram Trail Conference, set for August 4–5, 2023 at the Special Collections Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia. In addition to this conference kicking off our “semiquincentennial,” there will be field trips to follow Bartram’s path through northeast Georgia on foot, bicycle, even kayaking. We also hope to dedicate new Bartram Trail markers.

### Bartram Trail Conference Board

President, Dorinda Dallmeyer

1st Vice President, Matt Jennings

2nd Vice President, Sam Carr

Treasurers, Ken & Janice Mahaffey

Secretary, Michele Deshotels

Board Members:

Brad Sanders (*Newsletter Editor*)

Matt Jennings (*Fothergill Award Chair*)

Kathryn Braund

Dean Campbell.

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# William Bartram's Man-Eating Monster

An early American naturalist's terrifying account continues to color how the public views an iconic reptile

Mark V. Barrow Jr.

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In the spring of 1774, Philadelphia naturalist William Bartram journeyed up the St. Johns River in East Florida and encountered a series of terrifying alligators.

Bartram was in the second year of a nearly four-year expedition through the frontier wilds of southeastern North America, a trip sponsored by the British physician, plant collector, and fellow Quaker John Fothergill. Almost two decades later, Bartram memorialized his experience in *Travels Through North & South Carolina, Georgia, East & West Florida* (1791), which remains the most famous account of this curious reptile, the American alligator.

Bartram's story begins on a "temperately cool and calm" evening, when he found a spot to set up camp on a twelve-foot-high bluff overlooking a point in the river that widened into a small freshwater lake, now known as Lake Dexter. Soon after arriving, Bartram noticed that "crocodiles began to roar and appear in uncommon numbers along the shores and in the river." Looking down from the bluff, he spotted a cove about 100 yards away that opened into a lagoon, a shallow area where he witnessed an alarming struggle between two large alligators.

Using vivid, captivating language, Bartram stressed the size, power, and ferocity of the creature: "Behold him rushing forth from the flags and reeds. His enormous body swells. His plaited tail brandished high, floats upon the lake. The waters like a cataract descend from his opening jaws. Clouds of smoke issue from his dilated nostrils. The earth trembles with his thunder." When his "rival champion" arrived from the opposite shore, the two alligators "suddenly dart[ed] upon each other" in a "horrid combat" that roiled the waters and echoed through the surrounding forests. Bartram dubbed the site "Battle La-

goon" to commemorate the epic conflict.

Although daunted by the prospect of venturing back onto the water, especially with darkness about to fall, Bartram was also hungry. So, after a long day of travel, he reluctantly headed out in his canoe to secure fish for dinner. Several large alligators immediately began stalking him as he hastily paddled toward the entrance of the lagoon. Armed with only a club and barely halfway to his destination, he found himself engaged in what he depicted as a life-or-death struggle:

*I was attacked on all sides, several endeavoring to overset the canoe. My situation now became precarious to the last degree: two very large ones attacked me closely, at the same instant, rushing up with their heads and part of their bodies above the water, roaring terribly and belching floods of water over me. They struck their jaws together so close to my ears, as almost to stun me, and I expected every moment to be dragged out of the boat and instantly devoured.*

Bartram managed to fend off the attack, catch several trout, and safely return to camp. As soon as he stepped onshore, however, a menacing 12-foot long alligator "rushed up near my feet." Bartram dashed back to his campsite to retrieve his gun and dispatched the bold reptile with a single shot to the head. He then began cleaning the fish he had caught but was quickly interrupted when another "very large alligator" lunged forward. This one swept away several of Bartram's fish with its tail just as the naturalist stepped aside. Had he not moved, Bartram reported, "the monster would probably . . . have seized and dragged me into the river."

As dusk arrived, Bartram was struck by another "tumultuous noise," and peering down from the bluff he observed a "prodigious assemblage of crocodiles . . . , which exceeded everything of the kind I had ever heard of." The alligators were so closely crowded together that he claimed

he could have walked from "shore to shore" across their heads, "had the animals been harmless." He witnessed "the devouring alligators" swallow "thousands, I may say hundreds of thousands" of fish as they struggled to crowd through a narrow pass. "The horrid noise of their closing jaws, their plunging amidst the broken banks of fish, and rising with their prey some feet upright above the water, then floods of water and blood rushing out of their mouths and the clouds of vapour issuing from their wide nostrils, were truly frightful." The "shocking and tremendous" feeding frenzy kept him awake most of the night.

The next morning the sleep-deprived Bartram seriously considered abandoning plans to continue his upriver travels but then decided to give it one more day. Just as he was crossing Battle Lagoon, though, a "huge alligator rushed out of the reeds, and with a tremendous roar, came up, and darted as swift as an arrow under my boat, emerging upright on my lea quarter, with open jaws, and belching water and smoke that fell upon me like rain in a hurricane." While Bartram once again managed to beat back the attacking alligator with his club, he endured several other frightening encounters with the species before the day ended.

Bartram's alligator stories are certainly compelling, but are they true? Did he actually experience everything he wrote about the reptile in *Travels*? Scholars who have scrutinized his correspondence, journals, and publications have long noted that Bartram could be careless with dates and often exaggerated the sizes, quantities, and distances of the objects and places he described, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Bartram aimed for general accuracy in a work he hoped would simultaneously represent a contribution to science, presenting "new as well as useful information to the botanist and zoologist." He also wanted to celebrate God's handiwork in what one biographer has described as an "ode to unspoiled natural beauty."

But we know that he presented some episodes in *Travels* out of their actual chronological order to strengthen the narrative and heighten its dramatic effect. We also know from the report that he sent to his patron John Fothergill in 1774 that he was actually traveling with

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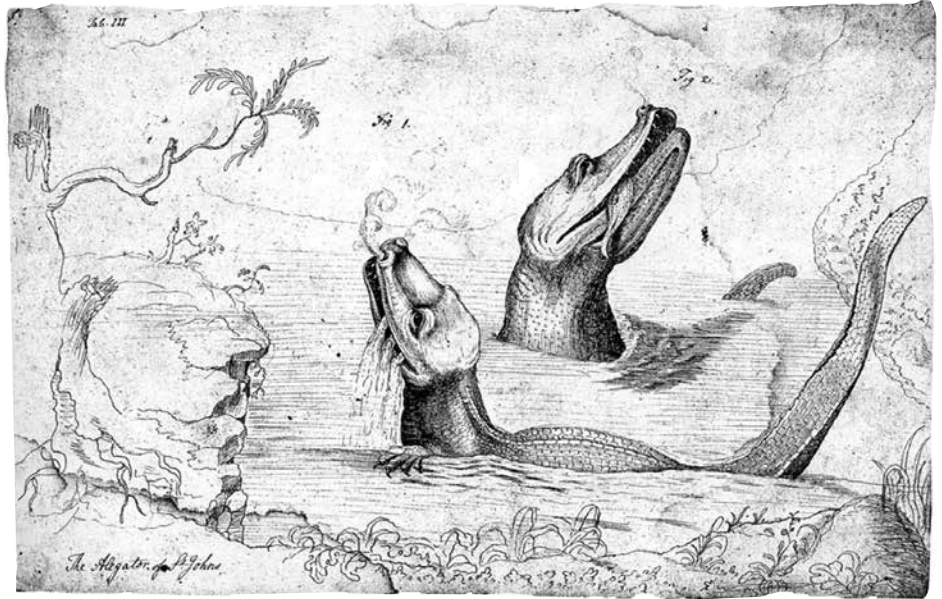
a companion, not alone as he portrayed in *Travels*, when he encountered a fearsome congregation of alligators on Florida's St. Johns River.

His experience of the alligator—and the lurid description of that experience that he published—might have been unconsciously biased by previous accounts of crocodylians, which almost invariably stressed their ferocity. His desire to refute the famed French naturalist Buffon, whose theory of degeneracy had depicted the fauna (and people) of the New World as weak and feeble, might also have colored his presentation of the species as large, aggressive, and frightful. In short, while naturalists have verified much of what Bartram wrote about the alligator, some of his claims continue to elicit skepticism and debate. The ferocity of the alligator is one of those contentious claims.

Part natural history, part travelog, Bartram's engaging book is one of the great classics of American nature writing. Its florid descriptions inspired the British Romantic poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge and the American Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, among many others. *Travels*, which remains in print to this day, is also a pioneering contribution to the natural history of the southeastern United States. Bartram's account of the flora and fauna he encountered during his four-year journey includes over 130 plants that were new to science.

While many would question the veracity of Bartram's version of his brush with the American alligator, his description has long remained a touchstone for subsequent naturalists who wrote about the species. Indeed, Bartram's memorable depiction of the reptile as a ferocious, man-eating monster helped make the alligator into the fearsome icon that it has become and continues to shape responses to the species today. Despite the tireless efforts of wildlife biologists, game officials, and other experts who have long insisted that the risk of alligator attack is exceedingly remote, most Americans continue to disproportionately fear the species.

When it was finally published in 1791, the initial reception to Bartram's *Travels* was mixed. One reviewer thought the book "entitle[d] the author to a respectable place among those, who have devoted



In William Bartram's illustration, the feisty alligators of St. Johns River blow puffs of steam from their nostrils as they flop about the water. The Natural History Museum / Alamy Stock Photo

their time and talents to the improvement of natural science" but also lamented the many "rhapsodical effusions" that "might have been omitted . . . with advantage to the work." Another reviewer echoed this sentiment, acknowledging that Bartram had "accurately described a variety of birds, fish and reptiles, hitherto but little known," while criticizing his language as "rather too luxuriant and florid, to merit the palm of chastity and correctness."

Whether offering critique or praise, most reviewers seemed enthralled by Bartram's dramatic confrontation with alligators on the St. Johns River. A review in the British periodical *The Monthly Review; or, Literary Journal* included a lengthy extract from Bartram's alligator encounter that was so terrifying that the reviewer said it made the reader "shudder," and then noted that after "perusing his descriptions, it is most certain that we will never chuse to visit" the homeland of that "horrible monster."

After Bartram, the next lengthy account of the alligator came from the hand of the American artist and naturalist John James Audubon. In 1826, Audubon traveled from New Orleans to England to find an engraver to print and subscribers to underwrite his *Birds of America*, a monumental publication that would include 435 hand-colored, life-size engravings of all the known birds of North America, a total of nearly five hundred species.

In an effort to drum up support for the ambitious project, Audubon exhibited his magnificent watercolor bird portraits and published several articles, including "Observations on the Natural History of the Alligator," that he hoped would shore up his bona fides.

Based on personal observations made while living and traveling in Louisiana and Mississippi, Audubon's account failed to mention Bartram by name, but the opening paragraph challenged the notion that the alligator was an aggressive, bloodthirsty reptile. After proclaiming the alligator to be "one of the most remarkable objects connected with the natural history of the United States," Audubon argued it is "neither wild nor shy, neither is it the very dangerous animal represented by travelers."

Audubon then seemed to echo Bartram—and backtrack a bit—when he noted that the alligator's large, powerful tail was its chief means of defense or attack: "Woe be to him who goes within reach of this tremendous thrashing instrument, for no matter how strong or muscular; if human, he must suffer greatly, if he escapes with his life." Audubon admitted that he was terrified when he first encountered large numbers of alligators while traveling through Louisiana's wetlands, but, with a local hunter wielding a small club leading the way, he soon felt quite at ease, even in waist-deep water that was crawling with



Muddy Alligators, 1917, by John Singer Sargent.  
© Worcester Art Museum, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

the reptile.

“They will swim swiftly after a dog, or a deer, or a horse, before attempting the destruction of a man,” Audubon asserted, “if the man feared not them.” He did admit that during the spring, when waters were low, food was scarce, and mates were being sought, the species could be “dreadfully dangerous,” “ferocious,” and “very considerably more active:” “At this time no man swims or wades among them; they are usually left alone at this season.” For Audubon, then, context mattered and, during certain times of the year, the alligator could be quite deadly.

The American Revolution and the ensuing War of 1812 unleashed an ardent nationalism in the United States, including a desire to gain scientific independence to accompany the young nation’s hard-won political freedom. Rather than continuing to rely on European experts to name and describe their native species, American naturalists increasingly sought to craft their own authoritative natural history inventories. The most economically important species—birds, mammals, fish, and insects—received the lion’s share of attention, but by the mid 1820s the South Carolina physician and naturalist John Edwards Holbrook began gathering material for a book describing all the known reptiles and amphibians in the United States. In the preface to the first edition of his beautifully illustrated *North*

*American Herpetology*, first published in four volumes between 1836 and 1840, Holbrook declared, “In no department of American zoology is there so much confusion as in herpetology.” The first comprehensive study of its kind, Holbrook’s book gained international recognition as it sought to impose order on that chaos.

Its entry for the American alligator listed all the scientific names that had been conferred on the species over the years, gave a technical description of the reptile, and discussed its geographical distribution and habits. Holbrook pointed out that in the mid-eighteenth century the British naturalist Mark Catesby provided the first proper description and “tolerable figure” of the species. In 1801, the famed French comparative anatomist and paleontologist Georges Cuvier became the first to accurately sort out the differences between the crocodylians of the Old and New Worlds. He suspected that the American alligator was a distinct species from the South American animal but awaited further evidence to make a definitive ruling. A year later, one of Cuvier’s colleagues, the French zoologist François M. Daudin, published an account of the animal under the name *Crocodylius mississippiensis* (inadvertently misspelled) based on a specimen taken from the Mississippi River. In 1807, Cuvier described the American alligator as a new species under the scientific name *Alligator*

*lucius*. Daudin’s specific name had priority, Holbrook declared, so the appropriate binomial should be *Alligator mississippiensis*. Competing scientific names for the species continued to circulate, but Holbrook’s ruling—complete with a correct spelling—eventually won the day.

Holbrook’s account of the alligator repeatedly referenced Bartram. He noted that the species could grow to a length of 13 1/2 feet in the Carolinas, while Bartram claimed it could reach more than 23 feet in Florida, “a size almost incredible.” During the spring and early summer, alligators often made a startling noise—a “croak... not unlike that of the bull-frog, but louder and less prolonged; Bartram compares it to distant thunder!” Holbrook waffled on whether alligators routinely attacked humans. He claimed that the species is “more timid than is commonly supposed,” but then immediately added, “at least on land.” He knew of no authenticated instance of the reptile “having preyed on man” in the Carolinas, but he left open the possibility that it might act more aggressively toward humans in the southern portion of its range. After recounting Bartram’s description of the alligator being so “very ferocious” that he was “nearly devoured by one” while in Florida, Holbrook warned that the Philadelphia naturalist’s words should be “received with some caution.” He then suggested that the reptile’s behavior might be malleable, depending on whether it had experienced much contact with humans: “perhaps... the encroachments of man upon their dwelling-places, since Bartram wrote, may have rendered them more timid and distrustful.”

The Scottish naturalist Charles Lyell, who helped lay the foundations for modern geology by arguing that known natural causes could explain the history of the Earth, gave even more credence to Bartram’s account of the alligator. In the 1840s and 1850s, Lyell made four trips to the United States, totaling more than two years, where he traveled widely to lecture and pursue field work. In a published account, Lyell noted that he was near Butler Island, Georgia, when he spotted a nine-foot alligator basking in the sun. The species had once been much more abundant and fearless, he noted, but now it had grown shy “since they have learnt



to dread the avenging rifle of the planter, whose stray hogs and sporting dogs they often devour.” Lyell then commented favorably on Bartram’s reliability: “When I first read Bartram’s account of alligators more than twenty feet long, and how they attacked his boat and bellowed like bulls, and made a sound like distant thunder, I suspected him of exaggeration, but all my inquiries here [in Georgia] and Louisiana, convinced me that he may be depended on.”

The American naturalist John Eatton Le Conte also vouched for Bartram’s reliability. Le Conte spent winters on a family-owned rice and cotton plantation in southeastern Georgia and published widely on plants, insects, crustaceans, amphibians, and reptiles, particularly turtles. In 1822, a year after Florida became an official U.S. territory, he secured federal funding to explore the St. Johns River, with the aim of discovering its source. Over three decades later he published an article highlighting a series of North American animals that had not been seen since they were originally described, including several species that Bartram had included in his *Travels*.

“I remember when it was much the custom to ridicule Mr. Bartram and, to doubt the truth of many of his relations,” he wrote.

*For my own part, I must say, that having travelled in his track I have tested his accuracy, and can bear testimony to the absolute correctness of all his statements. I travelled through Florida before it was overrun by the present inhabitants, and found everything as he reported it when he was there, even to the locality of small and insignificant plants. Mr. Bartram was a man of unimpeached integrity and veracity.*

By the twentieth century, naturalists who spent a great deal of time observing the alligator in the field were much more likely to challenge Bartram’s characterization of its aggressive behavior toward humans. Albert M. Reese, who earned his doctoral degree in biology from Johns Hopkins University, authored the first scientific monograph on the reptile, *The Alligator and Its Allies*, in 1915. After research trips to Florida and southern Georgia, Reese argued that the alligator

was not a particularly aggressive species. While it would defend itself when cornered, like most other wild animals, Reese commented, “it will always flee from man if possible, and the writer has frequently waded and swam in ponds and lakes where alligators lived without the least fear of attack.” Echoing Holbrook, Reese did admit that this might not have been possible in the days when alligators were “more numerous and had not been intimidated by man and his weapons.”

Two decades later, the wealthy Louisiana entrepreneur, sportsman, conservationist, and amateur naturalist Edward A. McIlhenny published *The Alligator’s Life History* (1935), based largely on firsthand observations made over more than five decades in the area surrounding his family’s large estate on Avery Island. The site was not only prime alligator habitat but also home to the McIlhenny Company, which his father had established to produce Tabasco brand pepper sauce. McIlhenny and his boyhood playmates felt so little fear of the species that when they went swimming in streams they “paid no more attention to them than we did the flocks of birds about the place” and even made a game of pelting large alligators with mud. He acknowledged that the reptile might kill dogs and livestock, even a full-grown cow, but he vehemently denied that it would go out of its way to attack humans. The two exceptions were alligators provoked by hunters or trappers trying to capture them and females defending their nests.

Others who intensely studied or lived in proximity to the alligator generally agreed that it was rarely aggressive toward humans. A similar conclusion could be reasonably drawn from records kept by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, which has been tracking alligator attacks since the 1970s. Over the past 50 years, the number of alligator attacks in Florida has been averaging between 3.5 and 7 per year, and the number of fatal encounters has averaged less than 1 every two years. This remarkably low rate has occurred in a state that now has an estimated 1.3 million alligators, 21.5 million residents, and over 129 million visitors each year. Yet the perception of the species that has predominated in the broader culture is one of great fear.



*Alligator in Chesser Prairie, Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge.*

One curious absence in the history of interactions with the American alligator is a systematic effort to eradicate the species. Since the publication of Barry Lopez’s *Of Wolves and Men* in 1978, numerous scholars have documented the fear and loathing that Americans have long directed toward top-level carnivores, especially the wolf, coyote, bear, and cougar. Informed by enduring myths and fearful for their livestock and personal safety, European settlers in North America waged a brutal campaign of extermination that began soon after their arrival and spread across the continent as whites moved westward and southward.

As environmental historian Jon T. Coleman notes in his sobering account of the campaign to eradicate the gray wolf, American colonists “shared a conviction that wolves not only deserved death but deserved to be punished for living.” Driven by that deep-seated hatred, they engaged in unspeakable acts of cruelty directed against the species they persecuted, like burning wolves alive, dragging them behind their horses, turning them to their dogs after hamstringing them, wiring their mouths shut, feeding them sharp hooks buried in balls of tallow, and poisoning them with abandon. Over time the relentless crusade to eradicate North American predators dramatically reduced numerous species, pushing several, including the wolf, to the very brink of extinction. Although the alligator has also triggered general fear and anxiety, it has been spared from the aggressive bounty programs designed to wipe out other large predators.

Why has the alligator proven the exception? It turns out that while we tend to hold a deep visceral fear of the reptile as a potential assailant, our attitudes to-

ward this apex predator are complex and multifaceted. While the alligator terrifies us, just as it clearly did Bartram, it has also been valued as a landscape symbol, a precious commodity, an endangered species, and a sentinel species alerting us to the dangers of the toxic substances we have introduced into the environment. Because of these many positive associations, we have rescued the alligator from the threat of extinction it faced due to overhunting in the mid-twentieth century, and we have now found a way to coexist with large populations of the species.

Bartram was not the first to propagate the myth of the alligator as bloodthirsty, man-eating predator, nor would he be the last. His vivid, sensational, and widely reproduced depiction of the American alligator was consistent with previous accounts of crocodilians that had been circulating in the West for two millennia, and it has continued to shape broader cultural perceptions of this curious reptile for more than two centuries. ❁

## Fothergill Award

*Joel Fry  
Curator, Bartram's Garden*

The Bartram Trail Conference has awarded the 2022 Fothergill Award to Alexandria (Ally) Mitchem, Ph.D. Candidate in Anthropology at Columbia University.

Ally and others have been working for several years analyzing a large collection of dried plant material that was recovered in 1977, from beneath floor boards in a third floor chamber of the Bartram House. This research is ongoing with archaeobotanist Dr. Chantel E. White and the Center for the Analysis of Archaeological Materials at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology.

Summarizing prior decades of archaeological research and identifying and quantifying the Bartram House botanic collection has become a part of Ally's research for her Ph.D. degree in anthropol-

ogy/archaeology at Columbia University. This year she has begun a preliminary archaeological survey at Bartram's Garden in areas adjacent to the Bartram House. She will be looking to identify soil from preserved 18th and 19th century garden beds.

This survey plans to recover further plant remains preserved underground in the historic botanic garden. There is reason to suppose botanic material of various sorts is preserved in intact areas of the historic garden. Modern forms of archaeobotanic recovery and analysis were only just emerging as a field of study in the 1980s when field archaeology first started at Bartram's Garden. Limited funding for field work and testing has precluded previous archaeobotanic survey.

The work that Ally is now undertaking is a valuable addition to the previous decades of field archaeology at Bartram's Garden and promises to add significant new data to our understanding of the workings of the family botanic garden. ❁