

“In May last, I set on a botanic tour to Augusta and to Savannah town and continuing southwest to the river Altamaha in Georgia,” writes Moses Marshall in his account of his southeast Georgia expedition in 1790. “I here found the Franklinana.”

Searching for Franklinia

The Lost Flower of the Altamaha

ROBERT LATIMER HURST

Marshall's sighting was the last recorded observation of the Franklinia plant in its native habitat; henceforth, to the present day, the only viewing of the Franklinia, named in honor of Benjamin Franklin, has been at arboretums and botanical

the “Lost Gordonia,” has been classified as “America's first rare plant,” and it has become legendary in the way of the demise or near demise of the passenger pigeon, ivory-billed woodpecker and American chestnut.

In America's “First” Rare Plant—*The Franklin Tree*, Lucy Rowland referred to the disappearing act by this member of

two botanists who initiated this plant's puzzling story nearly 250 years ago.

John Bartram and his son, William, first discovered “a modest grove of this unusually beautiful small tree in Georgia in 1765.” The small tree was growing wild and in profusion in the immense bottomlands along the Altamaha River in southeast Georgia. John Bartram, a charter member of the

American Philosophical Society, was a self-educated man. A liberal Quaker and an active farmer, he had an “impelling scientific curiosity” to explore America's virgin forests, almost at odds sometimes with his strict religious background.

Bartram began gathering seeds and plants and found a lucrative market selling them to wealthy collectors in Europe. By sending these discoveries overseas, the botanist spread his name among European scientists, including the noted botanists Peter Kalm and Carl Linnaeus. Kalm had traveled colonial North America

from 1748 to 1751, collecting plants that he preserved for future study; his work provided firsthand information to other botanists, especially Bartram, who also credited Swedish botanist Linnaeus, the “father of modern taxonomy and ecology,” in beginning his studies.



The mysterious flower that first attracted and then eluded the Bartrams and other naturalists carries a mystique that hovers between history and legend.

gardens throughout the world.

The Franklinia's mysterious disappearance from its original range is little-known outside the relatively small community of botanists and naturalists intrigued by the story. The Franklin Tree, also known as the “Lost Camellia” and

the camellia family as a “romantic, mysterious past” exceeding that of any other American plant. Rowland, a University of Georgia library administrator and a Clarke County planning commissioner for more than 20 years, set the scene for this mystery by introducing readers to

With a surge of interest in American colonial native flora and fauna by 1765, John Bartram received a commission from the British crown to visit the Indian tribes of the League of Six Nations and to explore the Canadian wilderness. Later, under King George III, Bartram held the position of Royal Botanist for North America. This appointment allowed him to travel throughout the colonies, collecting and preserving floral “treasures,” just as his mentors had done. These collections were transplanted both in America and in Europe.

Exploring Georgia and Florida in the company of his son, William, during 1765 and 1766, Bartram discovered the shrub that later would be classified as *Franklinia alatamaha*. He had traveled from Philadelphia to Georgia in search of new species of native flora. During this trip—the only one the elder Bartram made to Georgia—he first observed the mystery plant. No name was given the shrub at this time, but Bartram and his son never forgot the gorgeous bloom found near the Altamaha River.

Seven years later, William Bartram returned to Georgia in search of the beautiful flower that he remembered so vividly. In those days, the Altamaha was remote, dangerous and full of secrets. In 1770, poet Oliver Goldsmith described the “Altama as a place filled with blazing sun, savage Indians, unsinging birds, silent bats, tornadoes, poisonous plants, scorpions, rattlesnakes and ‘Where crouching tigers wait their hapless prey.’”

According to Altamaha River authority Bob Hanies, the Altamaha means different things to different people. To those early English settlers, “It was the southern boundary of Georgia, separating those pioneers from the hostile tribes to the south and west; then the river became a buffer zone, cushioning relations between the Spanish of Florida and English in Georgia. The now-vanished Fort Barrington attested to the strategic location of the Altamaha.”

For thousands of years, the Altamaha has journeyed through southeastern Georgia, beginning strongly near

Lumber City, where the Ocmulgee and Oconee rivers unite. The Altamaha River watershed is the largest river system east of the Mississippi River, offering priceless habitat along its winding course of approximately 140 miles. More than 100 species of rare or endangered plants and animals find shelter in this basin, including Georgia’s spiny mussel, Atlantic sturgeon, swallow-tailed kite, American oystercatcher and piping plover. Further inland, the watershed includes old stands of longleaf pine, colonies of red-cockaded woodpeckers, gopher tortoises and a variety of rare plants.

Close to the time when Goldsmith was writing his verse, John and William Bartram were following the Altamaha River trails searching out new species of native flora. They camped near Fort Barrington, which was located between present-day Jesup and coastal Darien. This section of the Altamaha watershed is pinpointed as the location where they discovered the overcup oak, Ogeechee lime, and the most famous of all their discoveries—the Franklinia.

Describing his second odyssey into this wilderness territory, William wrote: “I got up early in the morning and took the road from the northeast side of the Altamaha River to Fort Barrington. On drawing near the fort, I was greatly delighted at the appearance of two new beautiful shrubs in all their blooming graces. One of them appeared to be a species of the Franklinia, but the flowers were larger and more fragrant than those of the *Gordonia Lashianthus*, and are sessile; the seed vessel is also very different.

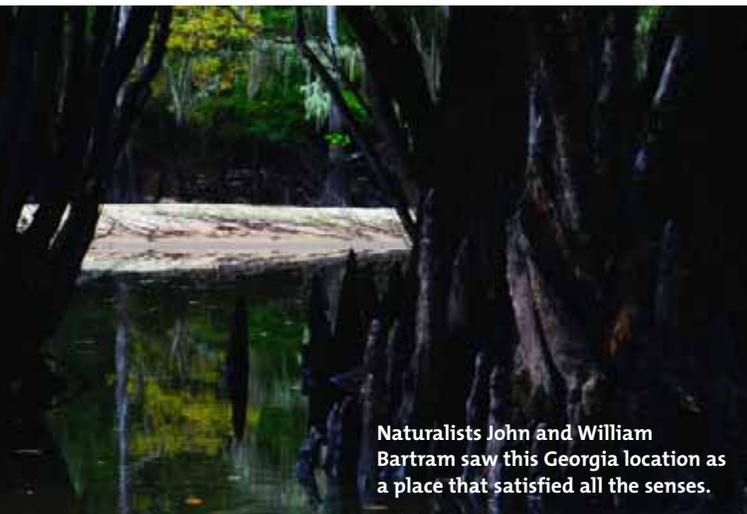
“This very curious tree was at first taken notice of about ten or twelve years ago at this place when I attended my father on a botanical excursion in the autumn. We never saw it grow in any other place, nor have I ever seen it growing wild in all of my travels from Pennsylvania to Point Coupe on the banks of the Mississippi River, which must be allowed a very singular and inaccountable circumstance. At this place there are two or three acres of ground where it grows plentifully.”



The lovely and mysterious Altamaha River near the historic site of Fort Barrington. Botanists periodically search for the Franklin Tree, but it was last seen here in the wild more than two centuries ago.

It was William Bartram’s works, including his magnificent and detailed descriptions of nature in *Travels through North and South Carolina*, published in 1791, that influenced William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, two poets who initiated the Romantic Age in English literature. Not suddenly, but over time, Europe and North America stepped gingerly into nature instead of struggling against it. The Romantic movement centered on emotions, and the change from conflict to peace signaled a form of contentment.

William Bartram underlined this movement as he viewed the Altamaha River from his canoe while collecting plant specimens to send back home: “How gently flow thy peaceful floods, O Alatomaha! How sublimely rise to view, on thy elevated shores, yon magnolian groves, from whose tops the surrounding expanse is perfumed by clouds of incense, blended with the exhaling balm



Naturalists John and William Bartram saw this Georgia location as a place that satisfied all the senses.

of the liquidamber, and odours continually arising from circumambient aromatic groves of illicium, myrica, laurus and bigonia....”

Bartram sent his *Franklinia* plant and seed collection from Georgia to Philadelphia, where specimens were planted and, in four years, flowered. In another year they produced viable seed, related Robert L. Groover in *Jesup Sentinel* newspaper story in 1965.

Humphrey Marshall first mentioned the *Frankliniana alatamaha* in the 1785 publication, *Arbustim Americanum*, which was the first American botanical work. After Marshall’s nephew, Moses, made his find in 1790, the shy flower became legend. It was Humphrey Marshall, by the way, who reported that William Bartram had given the name *Franklinia* to the plant in honor of the “great patron of the sciences, Dr. Benjamin Franklin. The trivial name (‘alatamaha’) is added from the river, where alone it [once was] observed to grow naturally. It delighted in loose, sandy and moist soil.”

Efforts by plant experts through the years to rediscover the *Franklinia* in the wild have been unsuccessful. A modern seed catalogue offering “*Franklinia—Lost Gordonia*” specimens for sale from cultivated stock states: “It is presumed the colony was destroyed during a later flood.” Other theories advanced for the disappearance of the species have been many. One centers on scientific groups that came after the Bartrams, asserting that these groups did not follow the exact trails as determined by the early botanists

through the Georgia swamplands and thus weren’t able to find the colony in the vast and nearly trackless Altamaha bottomlands. Another speculation declares that the entire plant colony was dug up and shipped to England centuries ago, leaving nothing in the wild.

Moses Marshall enters this story in 1790 as the last known collector of the *Franklinia* in its wild state. And it is here that suggestions are made indicating a

“How gently flow thy peaceful floods, O Alatamaha!”

great mistake by both Humphrey and Moses Marshall. In order to fill the large *Franklinia* orders made by a London company in 1787 and 1789, the botanists harvested too many of the rare plants, thus eradicating the only colony then in existence in the wild.

The story of a legendary plant discovered, lost and re-discovered by John and William Bartram and Moses Marshall before it was lost forever from its natural habitat is fascinating. Prompted by my own interest, I have furthered my

research through written documents and have wandered the area around the original location of Fort Barrington. I really didn’t expect to find the *Franklinia*’s camellia-like white blooms and I didn’t; however, visiting an area so remote yet so filled with compelling natural and human history was the experience I sought and found.

On October 1, 1941, the Long County Garden Club and the State of Georgia erected a historical marker on U.S. Highway 84 just north of the Altamaha River. Helen Williams Coxon, in presenting the slab, borrowed from Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” in stating,

“...somewhere in the vastness (of this Altamaha marshland) the *Franklinia*... born to blush unseen, wastes its sweetness on the forest air.”

And so it just might, though even today, no one has rediscovered the lost grove of flowering plants that so enthralled John and William Bartram 240 years ago and many other botanists through the ages. ▀

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