

Pa.'s Bartram the king's botanist

By Lou Calabrese

A long time ago, when Delaware was still part of Pennsylvania and a colony of England, a Quaker farmer/botanist from Chester County (now part of Delaware County, Pa.) was world famous for his botanical work in America and for sending plant material to England.

In return, he would receive seeds and bulbs from his Quaker friend, Peter Collinson, who had commissioned him to send various plants, insects and other examples of nature collected from the colonies.

By this exchange, many gardens in Europe were enhanced with beautiful shrubs and trees native to America. His name is John Bartram, a self-taught botanist who established the first botanical garden in America. He and his son, William, are credited with identifying more than 200 of our native plants.

Mr. Bartram traveled from Canada to Florida collecting plant specimens and, in 1765 he and his son came across a grove of trees along the Alatomaha River in Georgia. Seeds were gathered from these trees for planting in his garden, on the west bank of the Schuylkill River, in today's Philadelphia.

Since this tree was determined to be a new species, Bartram named it *Franklinia alatamaha* after his close friend, Benjamin Franklin. Had it not been for this discovery, *F. alatamaha* would be extinct since it was never again found growing in its natural habitat after 1803.

This tree, with its attractive pure white fragrant flowers, bright golden stamens and dark green leaves, exists today thanks to John Bartram's successful growing of this particular species in his garden. As a result, many

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have been grown and are now found throughout the USA.

Many of Mr. Bartram's trips went through dangerous areas; the colonies, during that time, were at war with the French and native Indians and in much of the territory, mountains and deep rivers had to be crossed. He managed to overcome all such obstacles in search of the many plants which made him famous to botanists everywhere. Danger was on his mind during these trips, since his father had been killed by Tuscarora Indians in North Carolina in 1711.

John Bartram was a gentleman as well as a skilled worker.

He belonged to numerous eminent societies and academies abroad; however, he was equally qualified as a versatile mechanic and builder. He built his stone house, which is still standing on its original site, and made many of his own garden tools; he even accomplished blacksmith duties on his farm.

His work in natural history made him world famous; important British and other foreign visitors made it a point to stop by his garden during their stay in Philadelphia.

Carl Linnaeus, the Swedish botanist who developed the Latin system of plant identification, praised him as "the greatest natural botanist in the world." In 1765, he was honored by King

George III, who appointed John Bartram as the American botanist to his majesty, George III.

Those interested in botanical history would find Bartram's garden/farmland most interesting; it's about 1.5 hours from Dover; visit www.bartramsgarden.org for directions and additional information.

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identification, locations, and uses. Call (302) 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the Herbarium and for additional information about this article.



Submitted photo

A blossom springs from the *Franklinia alatamaha*. John Bartram named this tree after his close friend, Benjamin Franklin.