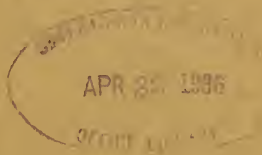


SMITHSONIAN MISCELLANEOUS COLLECTIONS
VOLUME 95, NUMBER 8

THOMAS WALTER, BOTANIST

BY
WILLIAM R. MAXON
U. S. National Museum



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The first descriptive treatise upon the flowering plants of any definite region in eastern North America, using the binomial system of nomenclature, is the "Flora Caroliniana" of Thomas Walter, published at London in 1788 by the famous botanical collector John Fraser, at the latter's expense. This important and historically interesting volume, the specimens upon which it is based, Walter's botanical activity in South Carolina, and visits by more than one eminent botanist to his secluded grave on the banks of the Santee River have been the subjects of several articles, yet comparatively little is known about the man himself. The present notice is written partly with the purpose of bringing together scattered source references, correcting an unusual and long-standing error as to the date of Walter's death, and furnishing data recently obtained as to his marriages, and partly in the hope that something may still be discovered as to his extraction, education, and early life and the circumstances of his removal to this country. For the sake of clearness and both general and local interest these points may be dealt with somewhat categorically.

Birth and education.—Walter was a native of Hampshire, England, and is known merely to have emigrated "as a young man" to South Carolina, where he acquired a plantation on the banks of the Santee River and passed the remainder of his short life. The date of his birth has been placed doubtfully at 1740. That he was a man of very considerable education is obvious from the text of his book, which throughout is written in classical Latin, from the character of his few letters, and from the testimony of his warm friend, Fraser.

His home on the Santee.—The Walter plantation lay at the southern edge of the great swamp bordering the Santee River, in the coastal plain. Its location is given sometimes (probably with correctness) as in St. John's Parish, sometimes as in St. Stephen's, but in any case it is within the boundary of present-day Berkeley County. The date of its acquisition is not known, nor whether it was obtained by purchase or by original grant. Here, in this prosperous region so well described by Coker, he lived during the Revolutionary period and its turbulent

internecine local warfare the life of a gentleman farmer, botany being at least an absorbing avocation. Porcher states that Walter's "devotion to the cause of science led him to the wilds of Carolina", and it is not difficult for us to accept this as a motive, in spite of the doubts implied by Britten. It explains his assiduous study of the flora of the region, his painstaking analysis of a majority of the species sought out, his laborious preparation (completely isolated though he was) of an erudite "flora" of the region, and the formation of a veritable botanical garden upon his estate, where he is said to have brought into cultivation, aside from exotics, a majority of the species described in his book. According to Coker the plantation became after Walter's death a part of the estate called Mexico and for a long time was owned by the Porcher family.

Marriage and descendants.—Walter was thrice married, the essential data being as follows:

(1) March 26, 1769, apparently while residing in Charleston, to Miss Anne Lesesne, of Daniels Island,¹ who died September 11 of the same year.² These published data are substantiated by Miss Anne A. Porcher, of Pinopolis, South Carolina, a great-great-granddaughter of Walter, from records entered in the family Bible.

(2) March 20, 1777, to Miss Ann (not Sarah) Peyre, born March 26, 1755, the fourth child of Samuel Peyre and Sarah (Cantey) Peyre. According to the published record³ their issue was as follows: (i) Ann Walter, married May 29, 1794, to Thomas Hasell Thomas, of St. Stephen's Parish, died April 25, 1818; (ii) Mary Peyre Walter, born in 1780, married August 19, 1800, to Francis Peyre, her cousin, died January 4, 1818. This record is supplemented by Miss Anne A. Porcher to the effect that Ann (Nancy) was one of twins born in 1777, her sister (Polly) dying in October 1779, and that Mary Peyre Walter was born December 5, 1780, her mother dying in childbirth.

(3) Date unknown, to Miss Dorothy (Dolly) Cooper, concerning whom nothing apparently is of record. Their daughter, Emily, married Judge Thomas Usher Pulaski Charlton.

The record of Walter's numerous descendants was sketched by Coker in 1910, at which time some of the above data apparently had not been published, the fact of Walter's earliest marriage being unmentioned. He refers to a son, Thomas, born of the Peyre marriage, who reached maturity but died (unmarried) before his father. No record of this son has been found by Miss Porcher.

¹ So. Car. Hist. & Gen. Mag. 11: 37. 1910.

² Ibid. 10: 157. 1909; 16: 91. 1915.

³ Ibid. 11: 221, 222, 241. 1910.

Death and burial.—Walter died January 17, 1789, "of fever", according to Fraser, or on January 18, 1789, according to Sylvanus Urban. Nevertheless, James Britten gives the year as 1788 in his extended notice, "Thomas Walter (1740?-88) and his Grass", though accepting from Fraser the month, January, and at the same time quoting freely from two letters which, as he correctly states, were written by Walter to Fraser from the Santee on February 18, 1788, and October 9, 1788! These letters are published in full by Fraser. Britten's error has apparently passed unnoticed by all save Dr. John Hendley Barnhart (1928). It is not typographical, but is an odd inadvertence on the part of one well known for meticulous accuracy in biographic and bibliographic detail, and is presumably due to Britten's having unconsciously accepted the erroneous date inscribed upon Walter's tombstone, now to be mentioned.

At his own request Walter was buried on the Santee plantation. His grave was visited by Ravenel in 1856, by Brainerd in 1907, and by Coker in 1910, all of whom published interesting accounts of the region, the gradual reversion of the estate to forest, and the consequent complete neglect of the grave. Each quoted also the inscription upon the tombstone, which is a slab of white crystalline marble about 6 feet long, 2 feet 8 inches broad, and 2 inches thick. According to Brainerd the wording (with a single minor correction) is as follows:

In memory of Thomas Walter. A native of Hampshire in England and many years a resident of this State. He died in the beginning of the year 1788. Aetatis cir. 48 ann. To a mind liberally endowed by nature and refined by a liberal education he added a taste for the study of Natural History and in the department of Botany science is much indebted to his labours. At his desire he was buried in this spot, once the garden in which were cultivated most of the Plants of his FLORA CAROLINIANA. From motives of filial affection his only surviving Children ANN and MARY have placed this memorial.

This inscription, according to family records, was written by the South Carolina botanist, James Macbride, who died in 1817. The phrase "his only surviving children", if true, indicates that the monument must have been erected many years after Walter's death, since Emily Walter (Charlton), born of his third marriage, lived to bear three children, two of whom (sons) survived and left numerous progeny.⁴ The error, 1788 for 1789, is thus explainable; nevertheless the erroneous inscribed date naturally found general acceptance.

⁴ Further corroborative evidence is found in the signature below the inscription. According to Miss Porcher this, although the letters are worn, is definitely not "J. H. D.", as given by Brainerd, but "J. Hall." J. Hall was a stonecutter of Charleston, who erected a number of stones in the vicinity, "all around 1812-1816."

It may here be noted that Walter's grave, after its neglect for more than a hundred years, has recently (1931) been put in order. According to H. R. Dwight, of Pinopolis, it "has been completely restored, with new brick and cement foundation, and the slab repaired and replaced, and a handsome wrought iron fence, 15 ft. square, with gate, has been placed around it." An excellent photograph substantiates this. Mr. Dwight has very kindly sent me also a copy of the inscription upon a bronze tablet to Walter recently erected on State Highway no. 45, at a point where the road to the grave, 3 miles away, branches off.

Flora Caroliniana.—Walter's "Flora" is an octavo volume of 263 pages (exclusive of title page, dedication, preface, and index), describing upward of 1,000 species distributed among 435 genera. Of the former, more than 200 are described as new; of the latter, 32 are so indicated, but only 4 of these are given distinctive names. The work is classical and well deserves the attention it has received. It is based upon studies of specimens collected by Walter within a radius of 50 miles from his plantation and upon similar material brought him by Fraser, who, according to his own account, landed at Charleston September 20, 1786, and "having resided in South Carolina and Georgia nineteen months * * * returned to England in the month of March, 1788." (Fraser's arrival in South Carolina is commonly dated 1785, in error.) The preface of the "Flora" bears the date 30 Dec. 1787. Fraser took the manuscript to England and published it in 1788, as previously stated. Concerning his own travels and the sources of Walter's material he writes most interestingly in the rare folio volume to which reference is here repeatedly made.

Along with Walter's manuscript Fraser carried to England "upwards of thirty thousand dried specimens of plants" of his own collecting and, what is of greater importance to us, the Walter herbarium. The Herbarium remained in the hands of the Fraser family until 1849, when (May 23) it was presented to the Linnean Society of London "by John Fraser, son of John Fraser, the indefatigable North American Botanical Collector from the years 1786 to 1811." It was purchased by the British Museum (Natural History) in 1863, at a sale of the Linnean Society's "surplus collections", for the small sum of 15 shillings. Upon Asa Gray's inquiry during his first visit to England (1839) it had been found in the possession of John Fraser 2d and was submitted to Gray for study. It has been examined more or less critically by many later American botanists, a number of whom are listed by Britten. The grasses have been discussed by Hitchcock. But unfortunately the herbarium is in poor condition and must have

consisted originally of meager specimens, so that its value in the interpretation of Walter's short descriptions is often slight. Various details as to its labeling and condition, the absence of certain specimens (including many types), the identification of Walter's own species, and his interpretation of earlier species are given by Blake, whose paper is commented upon by Britten.

Fraser's Carolina Grass.—This grass, the subject of Fraser's important folio, is *Agrostis perennans* (Walter) Tuckerman, now known as "autumn bent", a widely distributed species of eastern North America. The commercial venture entered into by Walter and Fraser of introducing this into general cultivation in England ended disastrously, and was cut short by Walter's death.

Data sought.—Aside from such information as date and place of birth, education, early history, dates of arrival in South Carolina and acquisition of plantation, and the like, all of this unrecorded, it is desirable surely to know something more of Walter's life in this country and of the man himself than can be gained from his single publication, the two letters quoted by Fraser, and the latter's warm eulogy of his friend, whom he knew for so short a time. Dignity, scholarship, conservatism yet independence of judgment, and—above all—modesty and persistent zeal are so unmistakably reflected in the lines of his preface to the "Flora" that one earnestly hopes that diaries, letters, or contemporaneous accounts or records of some sort may yet be found, which will shed real light upon the life history of this gifted scientist. Why should he have sought seclusion on the Santee? Miss Porcher writes (February 19, 1936): "Evidently Walter remained an Englishman to his death. In our family, whenever he was spoken of, the fact that he was never naturalized was always stressed. His brothers-in-law, the Peyres, remained Loyalists and were both put in prison in Philadelphia." Only one signature of Thomas Walter is known to exist, this in receipt of a bill of goods (September 28, 1787) amounting to 115 pounds, 11 shillings, 4 pence.

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