FOOTPRINTS ACROSS THE SOUTH
BARTRAM’S TRAIL
Revisited
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BARTRAM’S TRAIL Revisited

by JAMES KAUTZ

Kennesaw State University Press
This book is dedicated to
Maria Greene.
Wife, fellow saunterer, and irreplaceable home base, her stories of
Southern life enrich my understanding and appreciation of my adopted land.
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Acknowledgments

Multitudes of gracious people have aided me along my journey. Many of them are mentioned in this book. Several went far beyond what I expected.

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Don and Carla Aycock, intelligent and loyal friends who were my students more than thirty years ago, gave me room, board, and the pleasure of their company as I explored the St. Johns River of Florida.

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Thanks, fellow travelers.
Water draining from the belly of my canoe dripped onto the windshield as I drove up the mountain. The day of paddling had been a nice retreat from the bureaucratic canyons of downtown Atlanta. Three of us, an Alabamian, a Texan, and I, had guided our solo canoes through the waves of the Nantahala under clear October skies.

At the end of the trip, we straightened our legs, hoisted our boats onto the racks of our vehicles, and packed our gear. My colleagues left for their homes, but I wanted one more cool, quiet night in the mountains.

“Bartram 4,” said the hand-lettered wooden plaque on the key chain. Pulling a duffel bag from the back of my truck, I crossed the gravel parking lot, walked down the wooden steps of Nantahala Outdoor Center’s “Base Camp,” and opened the door of Room 4 in the Bartram cabin. A bare bulb hung from the ceiling. Grey, plastic-covered mattresses lay on the double-deck bunks nailed to shellacked plywood walls. One window. A space heater. Four coat hooks on the wall. A broom in the corner.

I unrolled my sleeping bag and flopped on the bunk. My left leg cramped in a perverse celebration of its freedom from the thigh strap of my canoe. I’d better walk. In the loft of the outfitter’s store, behind the T-shirts and paddling gear, I found the book display. There, along with guides to the Appalachian Trail, books on camping, and stories of the Cherokees, I read black letters on the green spine of a paperback: The Travels of William Bartram.

Michael Frome’s Strangers in High Places had introduced me to Bartram several years before. I recalled that Bartram was a pioneering botanist who traveled in the 1770s from Philadelphia to the edge of the Smokies and wrote
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about this region's trees and Cherokee inhabitants. Since then, I had seen historical markers of the "Bartram Trail"—one in Georgia near a rusting mobile home beside a clear-cut forest, another in a Baton Rouge subdivision, and one near the canoe put-in on the Nantahala.

Maybe I ought to know more about you, Mr. Bartram, if I'm going to sleep in your cabin tonight, I thought. I gave the clerk a ten dollar bill. She slipped the book into a brown paper bag and handed me my change. I walked back across the river and tossed the sack on my bunk.

A warm shower refreshed me. In the kitchen above the bathhouse I opened a package of seasoned noodles, stirred in a can of tuna, heated it on a stove, and chatted with a couple of Londoners overnighting at Base Camp as a respite from their through-hiking along the Appalachian Trail.

Then, when darkness had wrapped the complex in a quiet envelope, I crawled into my sleeping bag, propped my head on my duffle, and thumbed through Travels. Scattered through the pages of text were drawings: a turtle, flowers, and an arresting portrait of a Creek Indian chief who, despite his tonsure, feathers, and the gorget hung around his neck, looked like a professor I once knew. I delighted in Bartram's description of the "Vale of Cowee," a two-hundred-year-old description of the valley of the Little Tennessee River that I had followed to reach the Nantahala. A few pages farther, I read how, a dozen or so miles from my bunk, the botanist had crossed the Nantahala and met Cherokee Chief Atakullakulla and his entourage.

I switched off the light, dozed off into the cool darkness, and saw Bartram eating hard biscuits, dried meat, and moldy cheese. I'd cooked packaged food on a gas stove. He slept on skins spread on a mattress of hemlock needles. My synthetic-filled sleeping bag lay on a soft bed in a tight room. He talked with a red-skinned diplomat on horseback. My companions had been paddlers from Texas and Alabama and hikers from England. I imagined him standing, bewildered, beside the Class III rapid known as Nantahala Falls, watching yellow rafts full of overweight Americans plunging through white water.

In the quiet of the North Carolina forest, I saw the expanse of a continent, not in miles but in years. America the Developed paraded through my dreams and I awoke, an artifact in an affluent land. And I was curious. Where did Bartram travel? What do those places look like today? Could I find a grove of hemlocks that he saw? Or would it be clear-cut? What chemicals run through the stream where he marveled over tiny golden fish? What is left of his world? And what has replaced it?

I knew that the children and grandchildren of the Cherokees and Muscogees who had helped him along his path had walked the "Trail of Tears." But what else had changed? How? And why?
And so my quest began.

I chose not to try to reconstruct Bartram's journey. Others had debated which mountain he crossed or where he saw the "Great Buffalo Lick," and I would learn from their books and articles. But my goal would be to see, understand, and describe places and people of a nation that had traveled more than two centuries into Bartram's future.

Maps of eight southeastern states, Charleston, Baton Rouge, and dozens of other places covered the passenger seat of my truck. Charts of the St. Johns River in Florida guided me. Books on archaeology, ecology, and sociology made their way to my desk. So did works on Bartram's geography and personality. I waded through swamps and snagged my pants legs on briers. Bald eagles, ospreys, and egrets rode the currents above me, manatees passed beneath my keel, and alligators gave me a wary eye. Live oaks provided respite on sultry days in Florida and Georgia; logs in the North Carolina mountains warmed me. Chiggers from a longleaf forest burrowed under my skin, keeping me awake for nights. Descendants of Wrightsborough, a village where Bartram spent a few nights, welcomed me.

Parking lots and subdivisions surround ancient mounds. Acres of tomatoes grow where a trader and his Cherokee wife served Bartram barbecued venison and strawberries. A 450-foot-tall state capitol looks down on industrial complexes that cover his most western pathways.

Although a few places—Martin Creek Falls in the Georgia mountains is a rare example—resemble the scenes Bartram described, most spots underscore Wendell Berry's observation "that it is no longer possible to imagine how this country looked in the beginning, before the white people drove their plows into it" ("A Native Hill" 15).

Along the way, I have asked myself, Why Bartram? Why start with him? Why has this man, a néer-do-well for the first three decades of his life, sparked my interest and the admiration of thousands of others for two centuries? He was not the first European to reach the remote places of the Southeast. Conquistadors, missionaries, gold-seekers, traders, farmers, planters, and herdsmen preceded him. He was not even the first naturalist on the frontier. But, while history and nature buffs have not established a "Mark Catesby Trail," a "Conquistador Trail," a "Missionary Trail," or a "Gold-Quest Trail" across six states, they have marked the Bartram Trail.

Some are drawn to Bartram by their love of the plants he was the first to identify, others for his sympathetic description of the Indians. Many find in his writings a sensitivity toward nature's intricacies, a passion for what we now speak of as "ecology."

His vigor and stamina are marvels. He went into Alabama and Louisiana in a steaming summer. He penetrated dark wildernesses in rugged mountains,
ate fish seasoned with the juice of wild oranges, and awoke to a wolf stealing his stash of leftover supper. He could, when necessary, slug a pursuing alligator with his paddle. He could also enter a friendly conversation with a gun-toting Indian who had sworn to kill the next white man he saw.

Bartram’s place in history is part of my attraction to him. He attended the American Southland on the day of the nation’s birth pangs. Son of King George’s Royal Botanist, he left his home in Philadelphia when the colonies were smarting under the stress of English tyranny. By the time he returned almost four years later, his countrymen—some of them personal friends—had signed the Declaration of Independence and were engaged in combat with British armies on the very ground he had explored. With eloquence, he described the mountain streams, minuscule darters, and the towns of two nations of Native Americans only a few years before European Americans began to believe that their “manifest destiny” gave them license to transform the continent from wilderness and pastures into urban sprawl.

Above all, his vision and sense of wonder intrigue me. As any scientist should, he saw the little things: roots, stems, and petioles. He dissected a turtle and examined its viscera. He sketched fish scales and described soaring birds, giant snakes, and alligator nests. We learn from his writings the architecture of a Cherokee council house and the layout of Creek towns. But Bartram saw more than the physical pieces of the New World. Panoramas of the fields, forests, skies, and streams breathed the holy into his soul while the prospect of a burgeoning nation wrenched from him passionate prayers for the Creator’s guidance and forgiveness. His “wondrous kind of floundering eloquence” led Thomas Carlyle to propose that Travels is “a kind of biblical article” (Letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson, 8 July 1851).

William Bartram was a “saunterer.” In his essay “Walking,” Henry David Thoreau says that the word “saunter” came from the French “sainte terre” (Holy Land). Children in France said of pilgrims walking the lanes of Europe on their ways to the Sainte Terre, “There goes a Sainte-Terrer, a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander. A saunterer is one who wanders, but not aimlessly. He walks into wildness, ever westward, toward the frontier. His quest is nature; his discovery is the emptiness of “civilization.” “For every walk is a sort of crusade,” writes Thoreau, “preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land from the hands of the Infidels.”

Admittedly, Bartram’s wanderings provided him a livelihood. And, yes, he sometimes was a Chamber-of-Commerce-type promoter. But it is the mind and spirit of the saunterer, revealed in dozens of pages throughout his Travels, that have sealed his fame and attracted latter-day saunterers to follow him.
Bartram lifted his voice in praise to a Divine Force that cares about the earth. And he took moral lessons from fish swimming in a subtropical spring basin. He was a poet, an American Wordsworth on horseback. Bartram knew that
One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.
(William Wordsworth, “The Tables Turned”)

While followers of Bartram’s trail open themselves to such impulses, they also find themselves in a culture whose driving forces have no clue about what “vernal woods” may teach. The humus of mainstream America is corporations. Its flowers are profits. The twenty-first-century saunterer will encounter those who, caught in the web of the multinational economy, have somehow come to believe that the streams, forests, and roadsides are no more than disposal systems for whatever they wish to discard.

Over the past three decades, a tireless group of volunteers, funded by donations and small grants, has laid out the “Bartram Trail.” Drawn on maps, marked by metal signs beside highways and city streets and by blazes on trees, the trail follows the overall pathway of the eighteenth-century naturalist. Francis Harper’s edition of Bartram’s Travels led the way, identifying most of Bartram’s sites and species. More recently, Brad Sanders has given detailed directions to Bartram’s locations and present-day sites along the trail. Charles D. Spornick, Alan R. Cattier, and Robert J. Greene have published a guide for outdoor enthusiasts and history buffs that follows Bartram’s path. Others have documented the plants and animals that Bartram identified. The professional and avocational botanists are more qualified than I to discuss the whereabouts of these species and to describe them in modern science’s terms.

This book is a view of the early twenty-first-century landscapes along Bartram’s trail. I have met the people who live there, seen and smelled the industries that have sunk their steel and concrete roots into the soil of his venues. This is the story of the America that grew around the Bartram Trail.
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More on William Bartram and the Bartram Trail


Note on Citations of Bartram's Writings

Numerous editions of Bartram are on the bookshelves. Throughout this book, I have used Bartram's original page numbers, as noted in Harper, to identify the locations of his words.