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Diary

John Bartram

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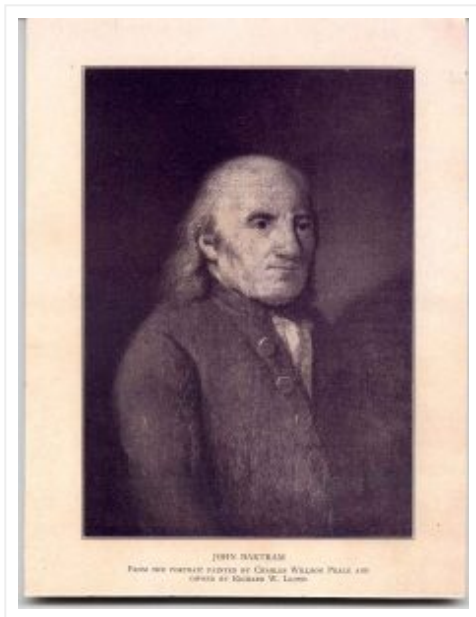
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Early Visions of Florida

Poetry • Stories • Chronicles from an American Borderland

John Bartram, Diary



— Portrait of John Bartram (Courtesy, University of North Florida)

John Bartram (1699-1777), a Quaker, Pennsylvania farmer, and father of William, was called by Carl Linnaeus “the greatest natural botanist in the world.” Having trained himself scientifically at a young age, John maintained an extensive correspondence with leading minds of the Enlightenment on both sides of the Atlantic. A life’s work in natural history earned Bartram an annual stipend of fifty pounds by King George III in 1765, and with that income, the elder Bartram and son William explored East Florida’s St. Johns River. Whereas William’s writing blends the literary, religious, and scientific fields, John leans more on the scientific. Nonetheless, his Diary (sometimes called his Journal) provides a benchmark description of this important waterway.

Edited by Brent Jowers and Michael Sadler, University of South Florida St. Petersburg

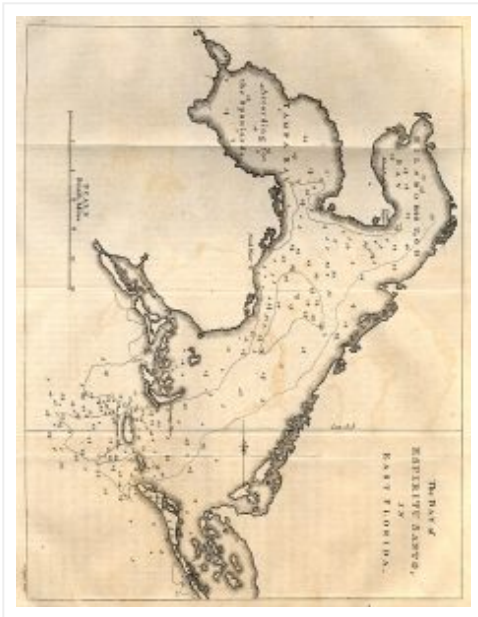
Further Reading

Edmund and Dorothy Smith Berkeley (eds.). *The Correspondence of John Bartram, 1734-1777*. Gainesville: U Press of Florida, 1992.

Thomas Hallock and Richard Franz (eds.). *John and William Bartram: Travels on the St. Johns River*. Gainesville: U Press of Florida, 2016.

Daniel Shafer (ed.). [Florida History Online: New World in a State of Nature](#).

John Bartram. *Diary of a Journey through the Carolinas, Georgia and Florida from July 1, 1765, to April 10, 1766*. Ed. Francis Harper. *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 33:1 (1942).



— Tampa Bay, or Bay of Espiritu Santo, published with John Bartram's Diary.

December the 19th, 1765, set out from St. Augustine early in the morning, which was frosty, the ground being covered with a white hoar frost. We travelled to Greenwood's house, where we lodged; the roads were very wet, by reason of much rain that lately fell; here I observed very large oaks, magnolias, liquid-amber, near 100 foot high, and guilandina 30; these grew on a high bluff 8 or 10 foot above the surface of the river, which rises here 18 inches at a high water, and in dry seasons is sometimes brackish, but in wet is drinkable to Cow-ford, which is 12 miles below this, and about 24 from its mouth.

20th. Set out for Robert Davis's, whose son the Governor had ordered to take us up to search for the head of the river St. John's; and having necessaries provided, I, my son William, Mr. Yates,

and Mr. Davis, embarked in a battoe; Mr. Davis was not only to conduct us, but also to hunt venison for us, being a good hunter, and his Negro was to row and cook for us all, the Governor bearing our expences.

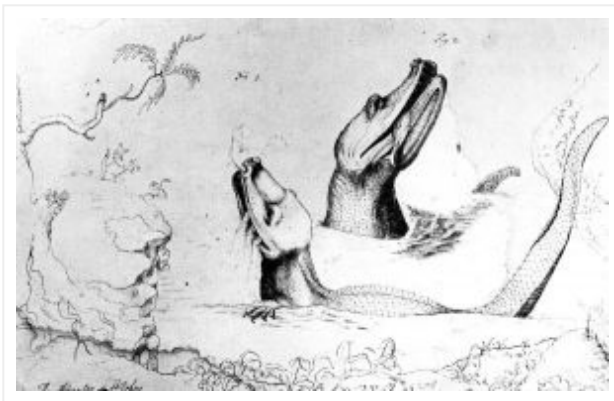
22d. Thermometer 70, wind S.W. Cleared up, and we set out from Mr. Davis's; but the wind turning south again and blowing hard against us, we rowed but a few miles, then landed and walked on shore, found a pretty evergreen, which produces nuts or stones as big as acorns, and good to eat, and perhaps may be improved by culture to be near as good as almonds; it bears plentifully, grows 8 or 10 foot high, the people call them wild limes, for this shrub much resembles that tree; here grew chinquapins, the middling ground being generally 300 yards broad to the higher land, some little swamps bordering the small rivulets; we encamped, saw a large allegator: The shores of the river are generally very shoal for above 100 miles, at 50 yards distance more or less from the banks, the lowish or middle ground between the swamp and pine land is generally sand mixed with black mould, formed from the rotting of the fallen leaves from the thick brush and tall trees, which generally grow plentifully in this kind of ground; the palmettos likewise grow pretty plentifully between these middle grounds and pine lands.

24. Cold morning, thermometer 50, wind N.W. Blowed pretty fresh, but ceased toward night; landed, and Mr. Davis shot a deer, and his Negro a turkey. I and my son walked in the woods to observe the soil and plants, with a man that went to fell some trees for honey: he felled one that contained only some yellow wasps, that had taken up their winter-quarters in a pine-tree; we then walked to another hollow tree, wherein was a swarm of bees and some honey; but both the white people and Indians often meet with such good success, as to find great quantities of honey and wax, even ten gallons, more or less, out of one tree; the Indians eat much of it with their venison and sour oranges, of which they cut off one end, then pour the honey into the pulp, and scoup both out as a relishing morsel. We then soon crossed the river to a point, where we lodged, and saw many rocks of congealed snail and muscle-shells; here was a patch of good swamp, but the pine-lands approached near the river, and generally a perch or more of palmetto-ground, gently rising between the swamp and pine-land.

25th. Cool hazy morning, thermometer 46 in the open air. After several miles, by choice swamps near the river, we landed at a point of high ground, which has been an ancient plantation of Indians or Spaniards; many live oak-trees grew upon it near two foot diameter, and plenty of oranges; the soil was sandy but pretty good; we walked back from the river, the ground rising gradually from the swamp on the right-hand, where grow small evergreen-oaks, hiccory, chinquapins, and great magnolia, and in the swamp grows the swamp or northern kind 18 inches diameter, and 60 foot high, liquid-amber and red-maple 3 foot diameter, elm, ash, and bays; the plants were most sorts of the northern ferns, saururus, iris, pancratium, large long flowering convolvulus running 20 foot high, chenopodium as high, and 4 inches diameter, pontedereia and dracontium. Cloudy cool day, arrived at squire Roll's, a bluff point 17 foot high, more or less, of which 5 foot is composed of snail and muscle-shells, mixed with black mould or rotten vegetables, intermixed with sand, 20 paces distant from the shore, and diminishing all the way to the yellow soil, on which grows large evergreen-oaks, evergreen shrub-oaks, where the pine-lands begin at 50 yards from the river: This shell-Bluff is 300 yards more or less along the river's bank, gradually descending each way to a little swamp, round the head of which the pine-lands continue down the river a good way, and a little way up it; the bluff seems all soil and shells, but back near the Savanna's is found some clay;

there is a small Spanish intrenchment on the bluff about 20 paces square, and pieces of Indian pots; the river is very deep near the bluff, though there is a great barr opposite to the town, and a very rich extensive swamp.

27th. Thermometer 50, fine morning. Set out from the Store, and about 5 miles above, landed on a high bluff, on the east-side of the river, at Johnson's Spring, a run of clear and sweet water, then travelled on foot along thick woody but loamy ground, looking rich on the surface by reason of the continual falling leaves, and by the constant evergreen shade rotting to soil, as the sun never shines on the ground strong enough to exhale their virtue before their dissolution, as under deciduous trees: We crossed several small rivulets of clear sweet water, and as many narrow moist swamps. 'Tis diverting to observe the monstrous grape-vines, 8 inches in diameter, running up the oaks 6 foot in diameter, swamp-magnolia 70 foot high strait, and a foot diameter, the great magnolia very large, liquid-amber, white swamp and live oaks, chinquapines and cluster-cherry all of an uncommon size, mixed with orange-trees, either full of fruit or scattered on the ground, where the sun can hardly shine for the green leaves at Christmas, and all in a mass of white or yellow soil 16 foot more or less above the surface of the river. We came down a steep hill 20 foot high and about 4 or 500 yards from the river, under the foot of which issued out a large fountain (big enough to turn a mill) of warm clear water of a very offensive taste, and smelt like bilge-water, or the washings of a gun-barrel; the sediment that adhered to the trees fallen therein, looked of a pale white or bluish cast, like milk and water mixed: We then crossed the swamp, and ascended and descended two hills and narrow swamps more; at the foot of the last issued out another warm spring of clear water like the other, but not so large. Then travelling alternately over hills and swamps, in all about 3 or 4 miles, came to a great cove, near a quarter of a mile from the river, out of the head of which arose a prodigious large fountain of clear water of loathsome taste, like the other two before-mentioned; it directly formed a large deep creek 40 or 50 yards wide to the river, and deep enough for a large boat to swim loaded to its head, which boils up near 8 foot deep from under the shelly rocks; 'tis full of large fish, as cats, garr, mullets, and several other kinds, and plenty of alligators: — Lodged at Johnson's Bluff, where for a mile the sandy pine-barren comes close or near the shore, and here grew plenty of what is called wild limes, which shows that they will grow in poor soil though chiefly in rich.



— William (John's son) Bartram's drawing of the first alligators he ever encountered while in Florida.
(Courtesy, Wikimedia Commons)

January the 1st, 1766. Hazy morning; thermometer 52. Set out from Spalding's Upper store, about 50 miles above the Lower; the river here is 200 yards broad, and 9 foot deep in the channel; in long continued rains it hath been known to rise here 3 foot perpendicular; no tides from the sea reach here. Thermometer 72. P. M. Landed at a high shelly bluff, where thousands of orange-trees surrounded us, with red cedars and live-oaks, beyond which is a rich swamp and marsh, then pine-land; landed again at a point on the north-side of a great cove on the east lake where we lodged.

3d. Clear cold morning; thermometer 26. Wind N. W. The ground was froze an inch thick on the banks: this was the fatal night that destroyed the lime, citron, and banana trees in Augustine, many curious evergreens up the river, that were near 20 years old, and in a flourishing state; the young green shoots of the maple, elm, and pavia, with many flowering plants and shrubs never before hurt: Set out from Clement's Bluff, rowed by much rich swamp and marsh; saw many elder-trees in flower (which grow in plenty close to the river next the water reeds) and many alligators, though so very cold that it had froze the great convolvulus and coreopsis, yet the great shrub after held out: The banks were in several places 2 or 3 foot high, shelly, and two rood broad; then fell back to a fine rich grassy swamp, chiefly ash, elm, and cypress, but much more open than down the river below the great lake, with more frequent patches of marsh and high grass and small maples, willows, and cephalanthus thinly scattered upon them; the higher banks with live and water-oaks. Landed about noon on the east-side on a bluff, 6 or 8 foot high, and 150 yards broad, but soon falls back to a cypress-swamp, at the upper end of which oaks and palmettos join the river, and a little back the pines begin.

4th. Pleasant morning; thermometer 50. Set out from Whitlow's Bluff... We landed where a sandy bluff joined the river; it produced live and water-oak, palms and bay; coasting the east-side, we soon came to a creek, up which we rowed a mile, in 4 and 6 foot water and 30 yards broad, of the colour of the sea, smelled like bilge water, tasting sweetish and loathsome, warm and very clear, but a whitish matter adhered to the fallen trees near the bottom; the spring-head is about 30 yards broad, and boils up from the bottom like a pot; plummed it, and found about five fathom water; multitudes of fish resort to its head, as very large garr, cats, and several other sorts; the alligators very numerous either on the shore or swimming on the surface of the water, and some on the bottom, so tame, or rather bold, as to allow us to row very near to them. What a surprizing fountain must it be, to furnish such a stream, and what a great space of ground must be taken up in the pine-lands, ponds, savannahs, and swamps, to support and maintain so constant a fountain, continually boiling right up from under the deep rocks, which undoubtedly continue under most part of the country at uncertain depths?

6th. Clear morning; thermometer 38. Strong wind at N. W. Set out and soon saw a great body of very different swamp and marsh joining it, some dry, others middling moist, and some very wet, some reedy soil, some myrtle, oak, cypress, and lastly pine; then we came a little farther to tall water-reeds on both sides, and much elder grew next the river and close to the reeds, which last grew very thick close to the bank, and from 14 to 16 foot high; sometimes a narrow ridge, about a rood wide and a foot or two high, would run close to the river, on which grew oaks, hiccory, maple, and ash, the ground back being scarcely above the common flow of the river; but as we rowed higher up, the soil was in many places of an unknown depth, of tenacious rich mud, especially on the Indian side, which is generally higher than ours, and so stiff that cattle may walk upon it very

safe, and bears choice grass, though full of tall trees, as hiccory, maple, water-oak, and ash: We rowed by a very large island on the east side and another on the west, the best I have seen in Florida; the river, for these two days, has run very crooked. Landed on a high rich shelly bluff, some good flat soil, but full of palms, and a little back the pine-lands begin: The last frost killed the young shoots of ash, hiccory, eupatorium, peanines, sun-flowers, and the tops of two lovely evergreen shrubs, one of which would have grown all winter, if the frost had not killed it; the bark was burst full of flowers, green and ripe berries, yet the tender tops for half a foot were killed: 'Tis very common in this country for vegetables to produce at the same time flowers, green and ripe fruit; and if the tender shoots are by chance killed, they soon send out fresh ones; here is a native gourd or squash, which runs 20 feet up the trees, close to the river; the people eat them when young, but they are bitter when old, and about the size of a man's fist.

7th. Clear morning, thermometer 36. Set out from Cabbage-bluff, so called from the great number of palm or cabbage-trees growing there; after some miles rowing round several points of the compass, it being generally good reed-marsh and some cypress-swamps, we came to the middle lake, 1, 2, or 3 miles broad, and 8 long; its general course is S. E. at the N. E. end is high ground, producing oak, palm, myrtle, bay, and a fine new evergreen, something like the purple-berried bay, but the leaves grow alternately, and the berries close to the stem, like myrtle; here is a pretty stream of sweet water, small enough to run through the bung-hole of a barrel, and at about 200 yards distance from it runs out a large stream of water, so warm as to support the thermometer at 71 in it, feels warm to a coolish hand, tastes more loathsome than the others beforementioned of the same kind, and may be smelt at some roods distant; hereabout is drove on shore, the most delicate crystalline sand I ever saw, except what is got on an island near our capes, though this is still finer: A few hundred yards from the last spring is another much like it in taste, but much larger, and near 30 yards broad, having three heads within 30 yards; the water is very loathsome and warm, but not so hot as one's blood: This differs from the other in having most of its surface covered with duck-meat; its banks full of shelly stone of the snail-shell kind, and running level with the river; the last had some fall; they are not above 200 yards from the lake. Set out and arrived at a rocky bluff, at the entrance of the head of the river, which was two or more miles wide, but gradually narrowed; this bluff is composed of snail and muscle-shells, indurated into hard rocks, which would break or split for building or burning into lime; but a bluff we landed at in the forenoon was more remarkable; for as the bank was perpendicular, we had a better opportunity of searching deeper; we saw about 3 foot above the water a mass of clustered sea-shells, as periwinkles, cockles, and clams, the very productions of the sea, and to what depth they went is unknown; but this I believe, that they reach all under this whole low country at uncertain depths, and support the superior soil, under which the prodigious sulphureous and saline fountains run, which are continually fed by the slow settling of rain-water.

9th. Clear fine morning; thermometer 44. We rowed along several long beaches [reaches?] generally east and N. E. then came to a high bluff of sand on the east-side, under which was a strata four foot thick, of a brownish soft sand stone, easily rubbed to sand between the thumb and fingers; this was a point of pine-land, and on it grew great magnolia, sweet-bay, live-oak, palms, tall andromeda, vaccinium, red-cedar, and an odd zanthoxylum; here we found an Indian hunting cabin covered with palmetto-leaves; we then rowed by a large marsh on the east side with a row of trees on the bank of hiccory, ash, and live-oak; then pine-land on our side for a long reach, and high banks and trees on the Indian side, after rowing several long reaches, generally poorish land,

either near the river or at a distance from it, we came against a creek bearing northward, up which we rowed about a mile, where we saw some good swamps, and much long thick grass, some on pretty dry ground, but generally wet; this creek led us up to a great cypress-swamp, in which it divided invisibly as the other branches did in several parts of the marsh; we came back again to the river, up which we rowed 'till we came to a high bluff, where we encamped, and found 2 or 3 curious shrubs; opposite to this bluff is a very extensive marsh, part of which is reed, and some very good rich dry soil; here are some very large muscle-shells, of which this bluff is composed and enriched; this has been a fine piece of planting-ground.

10th. Pleasant morning; thermometer 50. The wolves howled, the first time I heard them in Florida; here we found a great nest of a wood-rat, built of long pieces of dry sticks, near 4 foot high and 5 in diameter, all laid confusedly together; on stirring the sticks to observe their structure, a large rat ran out, and up a very high saplin with a young one hanging to its tail. Set out, and in half a mile came to a lake, and taking the north-east side, stretched eastward by a very extensive marsh, pretty low next the lake, but farther back good marsh, beyond which is a large cypress-swamp; then the pine-lands begin; we rowed to the east-side of the lake, near which is the mouth of a fine lagoon, a mile long and half as wide, bordered with a very large marsh extending to a large cypress-swamp; we then coasted southward along a sandy beach, back of which is a dryish marsh, then came to a ridge of oaks about 20 roods wide more or less, behind which is a marsh reaching to the cypress-swamp, but more south the pine-lands appear; at the south end of the oak-hammock runs eastward a large branch, which spreads into many branches in this large marsh, draining it and the adjacent cypress-swamps; this marsh is large and looks rich, and I believe reacheth from the lake to the cypress-swamp and pine-land: We then turned round a point, and landed at another sandy beach and hammock, beyond which is a large plain or savannah, half a mile wide more or less to the pines, producing pretty good grass, low shrubs, oaks, and myrtles, the soil black on the surface and moist, though stiff enough to ride upon; there is a small pond within the beach at the south-end, where ducks frequent; this upper lake may be 4 or 5 miles in diameter, and perhaps more in length, and one fathom deep more or less; but the river between this and the last is in many places two and a half fathoms, and in most places near 150 wide; we lodged at a sandy beach, and it rained towards morning, but soon cleared up.

11th. Clear morning; thermometer temperate. Set out and soon came into the river, which sends out numerous branches, that terminate in the east marsh, which is wonderfully intersected and divided with ponds and branches, and the river is also divided with numerous small and great islands of low marsh; so that it is difficult to find the main river, but by the strong current: We came at last to a fine lake or rather three, the lowest of which is the biggest, being a mile diameter; on the east-side the pine-lands appear about two miles distant most of the way more or less from the lake we lodged at; but on the west side we could hardly see them, such a great body of marsh being between; after noon we came to where the river was more entire, and some of its banks 3 foot high and 7 or 8 foot broad to the west marsh, the river being 200 yards broad more or less, and one and a half fathom deep; here several more large branches or lagoons branched eastward, and spread their numerous branches in the marshes; we rowed several long beaches [reaches?] up the rivers, and at last to our great joy came to a bluff where we could set our feet on dry ground; this being a very rich hammock of 6 acres of light black shelly soil (thermometer 58. P. M.) producing red-cedar, celtis, a curious zanthoxylum, and several others we never observed before, a few large orange trees, and some young ones.

12th. Fine clear morning; thermometer 44. Set out, and rowing S. E. soon came to a little lake which we headed, it seemed to be surrounded with marsh, some few pines appeared at a distance; we turned back, and within a mile came into the main river, which turned various courses S. E. and north, but generally east by north; it sends out on each side lagoons and branches that drain those extensive marshes. We came now to a large lake 5 or 6 miles long and near one wide, a long tongue of low marsh comes from the N. E. end, where a long hammock of oaks runs a south course; we then rowed out of the lake, and between several islands, and came again into the main river, which runs in general an east and west course on a sandy bottom, shoaling gradually until the weeds and reeds stopped our battoe in such a manner, that it was impossible to push her any farther, though the water was 3 foot deep, and a small current against us, which we suppose was the draining of the extensive marshes which opened towards the south-east, how far beyond our view we could not determine; the water-reeds grew here in the current as thick and close together as on the marsh, that is, as close as hemp; yet the current forceth its way through, and also under the great patches of the pistia, the water persicaria, and other water-plants, which are all entangled together, covering many thousands of acres on St. Johns and its branches, which heads in numerous rich swamps and marshes. We returned to the rich hammock where we lodged last night.

13th. Fine pleasant morning; thermometer 54. Set out homeward from the rich hammock, the highest up the river we could land at. Thermometer 79. P. M. about one o'clock we came to Round-lake, so we called it, it being one of the roundest I ever saw, almost surrounded with palmetto, pine, and scrub-oak; the lake is 6 miles more or less in diameter, and generally all over the lake about 9 or 10 deep.

14th. Clear morning; wind north. Set out from Coffee bluff, thermometer 52; a very long reach on the west side of the river, of piney, palmetto-ground, with scrub-oaks; about noon we entered the west lake steering S. W. a ridge of pine-land runs on the east side and a marsh a quarter of a mile more or less between it and the lake, which I think is 8 or 10 miles from north to south, and 5 or 6 miles broad, the marsh is in many places a mile or two wide, and then comes to hammocks of oaks; saw a mullet jump three times in a minute or two, which they generally do before the rest, so are called jumping-mullets; on the south side of this lake is a great low cypress-swamp; here to my great disappointment my thermometer was broke accidentally in striving to take a swarm of bees for their honey, which is practised both by the whites and Indians, who take great quantities in the cypress-swamps and pine-lands. We landed on the west side, which was low and rich for 100 yards back, rising gradually from the water to 4 or 5 foot perpendicular, then comes to a level, looking rich and black on the surface for an inch or two, then under it a fine sand to a great depth; this level produceth red-bay, great magnolia, water and live-oaks, liquid amber, hiccory, and some oranges, but no large trees; the lower rich ground produceth gledistia, pishamins, cephalanthus, ash, cypress, and cornu femina: Our hunter killed a large he-bear supposed to weigh 400 pounds, was 7 foot long, cut 4 inches thick of fat on the side, its fore-paw 5 inches broad, his skin when stretched measured five foot and a half long, and 4 foot 10 inches in breadth, and yielded 15 or 16 gallons of clear oil; two of us had never eat an ounce of bears meat before, but we found it to our surprize to be very mild and sweet, above all four-footed creatures, except venison; although it was an old he-bear, his fat, though I loathed the sight of it at first, was incomparably milder than hogs-lard, and near as sweet as oil of olives; it was not hunger that engaged us in its favour; for

we had a fat young buck and three turkeys fresh shot at the same time, and some boiled with the bear, but we chose the last for its sweetness and good relish.