

John Bartram, Seeing God's Design in a Simple Daisy

By John Haigis with editing by Jan Haigis

One of our area treasures is Bartram's Garden, located on the Schuylkill River at 54th and Lindbergh Boulevard in Philadelphia. In addition to a stone house overlooking the river, there are a wide variety of plants and trees in a lovely setting and a cider press carved into the rock of the river bank across from Point Breeze. It is a wonderful place to visit, and think about a famous botanist who "saw God's design in a simple daisy."

John Bartram, sometimes called the "Father of American Botany" was born in 1699 on the family farm on the west bank of Darby Creek on Springfield Road in Darby (present day Collingdale, Pennsylvania.) The farm, located on what is believed to have been a section of the Minquas Indian Path later became Eden Cemetery.

Bartram was a Quaker and a member of Darby Friends Meeting and as a Quaker became aware of the gifts of God's natural world. There is a story that one day Bartram cut down a daisy and was struck to his very core by its beauty, its symmetry and its complexity. He is reputed to have said to himself, "I've looked at these things all of my life but before today have never SEEN one." Inspired, he bought a Latin grammar and the treatise by Carl Linnaeus on botany, taught himself Latin and the Linnaeus classification system, began America's oldest botanical garden, America's first seed catalog company, and was eventually appointed Royal Botanist to King George III in 1765.

In 1728 he bought the Swedish plantation of Aronimink on the west bank of the Schuylkill River in what was then Kingsessing Township and built a stone house still standing, overlooking the river. He and his son William would travel the colonies studying and collecting specimens of plants and corresponding with the worldwide scientific community of the day. That community included English Quaker Peter Collinson who was instrumental in helping Bartram in 1743 obtain the books to begin Darby Library, the oldest continuously operating public library in the United States.

In 1758, Bartram was disowned by Darby Meeting for his refusal to accept Trinitarian doctrine, but continued to worship at that Meeting. In 1761 he carved above the door of his greenhouse a quote from Alexander Pope: "Slave to no sect who takes no private road, but looks through Nature up to Nature's God," writing in a letter "It is through the telescope I see God in his glory." Carved into a stone below a window of his house are the words: "It is God alone, Almyty Lord, the Holy One by Me adored". John Bartram 1770"

With little formal education but insatiable curiosity, Bartram, along with Benjamin Franklin, co-founded the American Philosophical Society and once wrote to Benjamin Rush, "I hope a more diligent search will lead you into the knowledge of more certain truths than all the pretended revelations of our mystery mongers and their inspirations." Bartram died in September 1777 and was buried in the Darby Friends Burial Ground. In June of 1993, he was posthumously reinstated as a member in good standing of Darby Friends Meeting in whose burial ground he rests.

Bartram's home and gardens, located at 5400 Lindbergh Blvd in Philadelphia, are now under the care of Philadelphia's Fairmont Park and are easily accessible by the No. 36 Trolley from Philadelphia's City Hall. Among other accomplishments, the Encyclopedia Britannica claims Bartram was the first North

American experimenter to hybridize flowering plants. In this and so many other ways, Bartram's life and legacy continue to inspire us all.

For a map, phone number and hours go to:

<http://bartramsgarden.org/>