

HUNTIA

A JOURNAL OF BOTANICAL HISTORY



VOLUME 3

NUMBER 2

NOVEMBER 1979

HUNT INSTITUTE FOR BOTANICAL DOCUMENTATION

CARNEGIE-MELLON UNIVERSITY

PITTSBURGH

Huntia is published one volume per year, in two or more numbers issued irregularly and totaling approximately 300 pages, by the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh PA 15213.

Editor Robert W. Kiger
Associate Editors John V. Brindle
A. F. Günther Buchheim

Subscription rate is \$25.00 per volume. Associates of the Hunt Institute may elect to receive *Huntia* as a benefit of membership.

Editorial correspondence, manuscripts, and books for review should be addressed to Dr. Kiger at the Institute.

Orders for subscriptions and back issues should be sent to the Institute from North America; from elsewhere, to Wheldon & Wesley, Ltd., Lytton Lodge, Codicote, Hitchin, Herts. SG4 8TE England.

Design by Thomas C. Pears III
Typography and printing by Davis & Warde, Inc., Pittsburgh

Copyright © 1979 by
Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation
All Rights Reserved

ISSN 0073-4071

Frederick Pursh's "Prospectus of an expedition to New Mexico" and California (1814?)

Joseph Ewan

WHAT A FLURRY of unfamiliar names would we encounter today in our manuals if Pursh had gained support for an expedition to botanize beginning about 1814 from Santa Fe to California! In view of Pursh's North American field experience especially during 1806 and 1807 from Mountain Lake, Virginia, to Rutland, Vermont, and his years of residence in and travels about Philadelphia, his knowledge of botanical literature and herbaria, and his writing a two-volume *Flora* (1814), we may expect he would have contributed significantly to botanical knowledge of the Southwest.¹ Not a word of commentary, published or unpublished, has been seen relative to Pursh's "Prospectus," preserved in the autograph collection of the Botany Department, British Museum (Natural History).²

The manuscript in Pursh's careful handwriting is undated but probably came to the Museum with the papers of Joseph Banks. Indeed, in line with Banks's encouraging role in the lives of botanical explorers who went to Africa, Australia, South America, and Canada, botanizing for Kew, Pursh possibly planned this expedition to the Southwest aware of these supporting nods. Banks and others may have bought shares inadequately in the adventure, but the aftermath of the war of 1812 may have made the scheme unpopular. Pursh worked as editor until 1816 when he went to Canada, where Banks had supported Francis Masson who had died in Montreal in 1805. There

is a letter dated 10 December 1815 from Banks to an unidentified recipient.³

Soho Square
Dec 10, 1815

Sir

At the Request of Mr. Frederick Pursh I beg leave to inform you that I consider Mr. Pursh as a person well skill'd in Botany, I have deriv'd from his Book *Flora americanae septentrionalis* much good information relative to the plants of the western world & I think him capable of making still very great additions to our knowledge of that interesting country.

In consideration of his knowledge of Botany & in hopes that he may pursue his labors & still further improve it, I have at different times advanced him money in the hopes of enabling him to Return to America & I beg leave to assure you Sir that I shall think my money well bestow'd if he resumes his studies altho I never receive any part of it again.

I have the honor to be Sir
Your faithfull Hble Servt
Jos Banks

Pursh's affirmation in the "Prospectus" of early friendship with Nuttall when he suggested that Nuttall would travel and collect with him is antidotal, for example, to the repeated story of Pursh's unfair practices toward Nuttall in the publishing of the description of *Bartonia*, which commemorated their mutual patron, Benjamin Smith Barton. Nuttall attended the meetings of the Linnean Society in London between 7 December 1813 and 2 May 1815.⁴

Pursh attended the Society's meeting of 7 December when Nuttall was admitted as a member. We do not know how often they met, but that Nuttall sailed from Gravesend for Philadelphia on 8 May 1815. Pursh noted in his "Prospectus" that Nuttall had "only lately" returned from an expedition up the Missouri River — that was his journey with Hunt and the "Astorians" when he was, with some apparent infelicity, on the same expedition with John Bradbury. Nuttall's handsome discoveries must have excited Pursh when he described them for inclusion in his *Flora*.

The maps by Raisz that illustrate McKelvey's monument⁵ provide an excellent summary of what in fact was accomplished in the Southwest. De Candolle had hoped to send Berlandier to Santa Fe during the 1820's. Could De Candolle have known of Pursh's proposal through his correspondent Rafinesque, in turn from his acquaintance, Nuttall, at the Philadelphia Academy?

PROSPECTUS OF AN EXPEDITION TO NEW MEXICO

The great advantages science in general has reaped from the informations & discoveries of late travellers, are so universally acknowledged, that it would be vain to recapitulate them here, & as long as any part of our globe remains unsearched or imperfectly known, we will have from time to time the infinite pleasure, to augment our knowledge with new & interesting subjects, by either encouraging & promoting these researches or embarking ourself in travels to those regions & countries yet but little known.

Among those last mentioned countries, I consider the Interior of New Mexico & California particularly worth our attention, as its natural productions, which, are probably as interesting as any in the world, as well as its geography, are almost entirely unknown.

For numbers of years past, I have had the most ardent desire to visit that country, but

political relations of countries as well as my own circumstances & means did not admit to gratify my wishes.

A residence of nearly twelve years in North America, which as far as my humble means would permit, were chiefly devoted to researches in Natural history, have not diminished my desire, on the contrary have made me much more anxious to pursue this my favorite plan, being so much more acquainted with the mode of travelling in those wilds & hardened to its privations. But considering it as a fruitless undertaking to perform it without proper support, as I already had experienced it in similar pursuit in North America, I resolved to throw myself on the liberality of a nation, where science in general have found friends, encouragement & support.

Should I be happy enough to meet with that liberal support I so often have witnessed others to enjoy, I should endeavour to deserve that patronage, to the utmost of my feeble abilities.

I therefore submit a rough sketch of an expedition to the above named country, its objects, means, & probable benefits.

I Intended route — If political circumstances will admit, to go from here to New Orleans; from there by the Red river to Natchitoches; this river is navigable to a great extent for small boats & canoes & its headwaters are in a high rigge of mountains in the province of Texas, no considerable distance from Santa Fe; from this last place a passage over the Andes must be found, as there is, according to information, a communication between the latter place and California; after crossing this stupendous chain of mountains, there are plenty of navigable rivers, falling into the Gulf of California. Here an immense unknown country would be open to our researches, as well as to the North, as on both sides of the Gulph, the most interesting & desirable.

After spending sufficient time in this country, we either might retrace our steps, for finishing or correcting our observa-

tions, or opportunity might offer to return by sea.

- II Arrangement — Difficulties &c. — The expedition ought to consist of four or at least three persons, all conversant with the different branches of Science, necessary on such occasions. Here I am happy to state, that Mr Nuttall, a gentleman only lately return'd from an expedition on the upper part of the Missouri, is as anxious as myself to go on this tour. His general knowledge in Natural history, his practice in travelling in those Countries & his enterprizing spirit are sufficient to give me a chearful hope of splendid success.

The difficulties & dangers to go through, are great & many, but firm resolution, perseverance, & circumspection have been done wonders in similar undertakings & I trust for the good of Science they will do the same now. In California the Missionaries are hospitable & obliging to a great degree, according to information I have from American Whalers, who frequently call on these. The Savages though represented very fierce, I dread not so much as might be expected, as I well know that by a certain mode of treatment, their friendship can be secured & then they are generally faithful to you.

- III Objects — The objects of our observations would comprehend all the different branches of Zoology, Botany, Mineralogy, particularly Geology, Geography, History of the country & any other useful or interesting information coming within the reach of our knowledge. Specimens and drawings of all such objects as might be interesting or new should be particularly attended to.
- IV Time — Expenses. It is difficult to state the exact time of such an undertaking, but I should suggest that two years & a half would be sufficient. The Equipment, Instruments, of all descriptions, Books, Charts, &c. Purchase of presents for the Indians & in some instances even for the white inhabitants, Provisions, Arms & Ammuni-

tions &c. Hire of boats & Horse &c. & the pay of about six men which in some instances would be but trifling, as I suggest would be the chief expenses we would have to look for, since when we are once fitted out properly & get underway our expenses can & will be but trifling, And as Mr Nuttall intends to add to the general stock I am able to raise, his own share to some amount, I should consider a sum between 1000 and 2000 £ sufficient to cover all our expenses.

- V Mode of raising this Sum — A subscription opened among the Patrons & Promoters of science, in shares of 10 £ each, would probably soon raise the sum. Each subscriber being at liberty to take as many shares, as he should find proper. The money so subscribed might be put into a general stock, under three or more trustees to the company, who would take upon themselves the trouble to answer the respective drafts of the expedition.

A regular account of monies expended, should be kept by the expedition & if any surplus should remain, it would be at the disposal of the Company.

- VI Benefits to the Company — All specimens of Natural History such as Animals, Plants, & Minerals of every description, Curiosities, Antiquities &c. or whatever might be collected should be the property of the subscribers & according to their own respective pleasures & pursuits divided among them, according & in proportion to the shares subscribed. Should any doubt arise in cases, where there is but a solitary specimen, it may be decided by lotteries or otherwise.
- VII Compensations — For myself, Mr Nuttall, & probably any other gentlemen who should wish to embark in this expedition, I should consider the publication of our travels including all the Drawings & charts collected, as sufficient compensation, unless the company of subscribers should think it proper to take them into their own hands for publication in which case we

should expect to have allowance made to us accordingly, for our time & labour. However these are minor objects, & if success should crown our pursuits we would be sure of adequate reward.

I respectfully submit the presents to the consideration of the friends & promoters of general knowledge & only wish to see the happy day when I shall be enabled to show practically how much I wish to be of general use in promoting those laudable pursuits.

Frederick Pursh

NOTES

1. For a recent sketch of Frederick Pursh (1774-1820) see *Dictionary of scientific biography* 11: 217-219. 1975.
2. I am grateful to the staff of the British Museum (Natural History) for the privilege of studying its resources, first enjoyed in 1954, when this ms. was copied with my Contoura, and for permission to publish this record.
3. Pursh is not mentioned in *The Banks letters* (London, 1958), a calendar of 7000 letters compiled by W. R. Dawson, nor in the two supplements published by the British Museum (Natural History) in 1962 and 1965. This letter, preserved in the J. L. Curry Autograph Collection, Library of Congress, is therefore of interest as adding to the panoply of important persons known to Joseph Banks (1743-1820).
4. Jeannette E. Graustein: *Thomas Nuttall, naturalist*. Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press, 1967, pp. 92, 416.
5. Susan Delano McKelvey: *Botanical exploration of the Trans-Mississippi West*. Jamaica Plain, Arnold Arboretum, 1955.

Department of Biology
Tulane University
New Orleans, LA 70118