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Rafinesque and Transylvania’s First Botanical Garden

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Constantine Samuel Rafinesque (1783-1840) was Professor of Botany and Natural History (Zoology) at Transylvania University from 1819-1826. He anticipated by several decades Darwin's theory of evolution with respect to mutability of species, but during his lifetime he was generally dismissed by American naturalists.1 While in Lexington Rafinesque sought to establish the first botanical garden west of the Alleghenies. His plan was likely inspired by the famous Bartram's Garden in Philadelphia and the Orto Botanico in Palermo—places where Rafinesque had previously lived. In his Lexington garden, Rafinesque envisioned growing medicinal herbs and various flora of North America, especially those of Kentucky.

In January 1824, Rafinesque sought an appropriation from the Kentucky legislature for a public botanical garden, but his bill was voted down by the House. The legislature later issued a charter for establishing the garden but provided no funding. In February 1824, a notice appeared in the Kentucky Gazette about a public lecture in the Medical Lecture Room by "Dr. Rafinesque [on] the prospects, advantages and plan of the Agricultural, Medical and Botanical Garden to be established in Lexington."2 A joint stock company was formed and issued 100 shares at $50 each, payable in 10 installments of $5 each. Eventually 63 shareholders purchased a total of 90 shares. Three donations to the garden represented the equivalent of four shares. Rafinesque and Dr. Benjamin Dudley each bought five shares; Dr. Daniel Drake and others bought two shares each; and Henry Clay, Transylvania President Horace Holley, and most others bought one share each. Two members purchased six shares each. Rafinesque anticipated that the garden would ultimately produce revenue and dividends from the sale of plants, shrubs, and trees grown there and herbal medicines, such as rhubarb (a mild laxative), senna (a purgative), and opium.

By September 1824 enough funds had been collected so that the Transylvania Botanical Garden Company purchased a seven-acre lot from Joseph R. Megowan for $1,000, payable over five years. It was located on the south side of Main Street between Ransom and Woodland avenues, today the site of Second Presbyterian Church, built in the 1920s, and The Woodlands, a condominium. Starting in April 1824 and continuing to February 1825, notices appeared in the Gazette about pending meetings of the stockholders, reminders to pay installments due on shares, and solicitations for work to be done in the garden. Notices were signed by a succession of garden presidents: William H. Richardson (professor), R. Wickliffe (attorney), and Joseph Ficklin (Lexington postmaster). Rafinesque was secretary and superintendent.3 The term "botanic" came to be used over that of "botanical."

Rafinesque drafted a Prospectus, By-Laws and Charter of the Transylvania Botanic-Garden Company that listed benefits for the community:
Our Garden will be situated in such a manner, and so far ornamented as to become a great embellishment to Lexington. A convenient lot is to be chosen within the town limits, a small but elegant building erected, with a portico, green house, aviaries, bowers, library, museum and many other suitable ornaments. The Garden will be such as to unite utility with pleasure, and will afford a pleasant resort and delightful walk to the citizens and ladies, where health, instructions, and pleasure will be met at every step.

Rafinesque went to Washington from June to November of that year, leaving supervision of the garden to others at a crucial time. Apparently he was then at odds with President Holley. Upon his return to Lexington, Rafinesque found that one of his rooms at the university had been given to a student and his belongings thrown into the other. He was dismissed from his position as librarian and took lodging in town.

When he called several meetings of the garden board, no one came. Little further work appears to have been done in the garden. Funds may have been in short supply because many stockholders did not pay their full subscriptions. At a final session of the Botanic Garden Company in March 1826, five members of the board, including Rafinesque, elected to sell the property and "divide the proceeds...proportionately among such shareholders as have paid their installments or any part of them."  

No further explanation was given in the formally worded minutes. Soon afterwards, Rafinesque departed permanently for Philadelphia with 40 crates containing 8,000 specimens of Western plants and 4,500 shells and fossils of Kentucky, which he claimed to have collected.

Thus ended an ambitious botanical venture, which failed largely from lack of the continuing support of Rafinesque and his vision. The contemporary Community Garden recently created on campus is meeting with greater success (see Page 4).  

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