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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. 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, notices appeared in the *Kentucky 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. 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."4

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.5,6

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).7

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The Rafinesque files in Transylvania’s Special Collections include the Prospectus, a book listing the shareholders, the minutes of meetings, and a journal kept by Rafinesque for one month. The 29 entries made from March 15-April 20, 1825, include:

March 15 – Engaged James Stewart as gardener for $20.00 per month – David Meade sends Billy, an able Black man for labour. Engaged board for him at $5 for one month. I set them to work to pull corn stalks.

March 16 – Bought 2 spades, 2 hoes, 2 rakes, 2 lines for the gardeners. We clean the ground in front of the garden, mend fences, etc.

March 17 – We dig holes for Locust trees. We trace the main walk and the serpentine walk.

March 18 – We begin to plant Cherry trees, Raspberries, Weeping willows, Cotton trees, Wahoos, and several wild plants.

March 19 – Sent Billy to Mr. Meade’s with order to bring cart load of trees, cuttings and seeds from his pleasure grounds.

March 21 – Billy does not come back...

March 22 – Billy comes back with cart load of slips and cuttings from David Meade’s, we begin to plant them.

March 24 – We discover two springs in the garden.

April 4 – Easter Monday – Billy is sick. I lay out the central circle.

April 6 – Billy is better & works...

April 8 – We spade and sow... bought shoes for Billy.

April 9 – Stewart is again drunk.

April 11 – Planted trees, etc... Stewart again drunk, & is to be dismissed at the end of his month.

April 12 – Stewart wants his money, saying his month is out... He does mischief in the garden, steals shrubs, keeps seeds, and comes to threaten me, being drunk all the while. I am compelled to get a warrant against him.

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