

**Bartram's Flower: The Life and Times of John Bartram, Colonial
Botanist**

Thomas Leverett
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JOHN BARTRAM
BEN FRANKLIN
MARY MARIS
ANN MENDENHALL
JANE
ELIAS HICKS
REDCOAT #1
REDCOAT #2

(BEN comes to front, speaks to audience)

BEN:

I am Ben, as I'm sure you know, and I've got a story to tell you. I was living in Philadelphia, well, I guess you know that, the key, the electricity, and all that, but that's not my story. No, this is the story of the public life of John Bartram, a Quaker and a botanist. We were pretty good friends, Bartram, and I. He was born in 1699, in Darby. That was near Philadelphia, farm country, but these days, I suppose it's all part of the city.

(BEN exits; ANN comes to front, speaks to audience)

ANN:

My name is Ann. I grew up in Darby, near Philadelphia. As a young girl, a Quaker farmer caught my eye; his name was John Bartram, and I'm here to tell you his story. He became famous, but his personal story is just as interesting as his public story. Now, as a girl, I kept my eye on him, because he was honest, straightforward, strong of character. I was disappointed, though, because another woman, Mary Maris, found him and married him first. They were both members of our Quaker meeting, and so was Jane, the wife of the clerk. Jane was quite a sharp lady; I liked her and admired her, but, she didn't care for John, I think.

(JANE enters)

JANE:

Good first-day, Ann.

ANN:

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JANE:

I am fine, thank thee. Say, I know a young Quaker lad whom I would like thee to meet. He is like John Bartram, but he has two advantages. One, he's single, unlike Bartram. Also, he's quite humble.

ANN:

I am not interested.

JANE:

Not interested? Do you have another?

ANN:

Well, no. Listen, Jane, I'll take care of myself. I appreciate your interest, and your concern. Really I do. Thank you. Good day.

(ANN and JANE exit; JOHN comes to front, speaks to audience)

JOHN (to audience)

My name is John. One day I was very busy in holding my plough (for thee seest that I am but a ploughman) and being weary I ran under the shade of a tree to repose myself. I cast my eyes upon a daisy. I plucked it mechanically and viewed it with more curiosity than common country farmers are wont to do; and observed therein many distinct parts, some perpendicular, some horizontal. What a shame, said my mind, or something that inspired my mind, that thee shouldest have employed so many flowers and plants, without being acquainted with their structures and uses! *(exits)*

(BEN comes to front, speaks to audience)

BEN:

So this Bartram guy, we were good friends and all, he was a farmer, you see, quite prosperous also. His farm was quite well organized; a place for everything, and everything in its place, as I like to say. He was married, and a good and faithful husband, but he gets interested in botany and wild plants, you see, not the usual stuff, like wheat and flax, but the wild stuff they got around here, in the new world, like pawpaw, winterberry, inkberry, that kind of thing. He starts with a daisy, but he finds other stuff; he studies it; he grows it; he understands it. But his wife doesn't like it, you see.

(BEN leaves, JOHN comes back to front; he is digging and putting dirt in pots)

JOHN:

I mentioned it to my wife, who greatly discouraged me from prosecuting my new scheme, as she called it. I was not opulent enough, she said, to dedicate much of my time to studies and labors which might rob me of that portion of it which is the only wealth of the American farmer.

(MARY enters)

MARY:

John, what are you doing?

JOHN:

I'm planting daisies. I saw one in the field one day, and wanted to know more about it. So, I now have seeds here, and some young daisies.

MARY:

John, you're a farmer, and a Quaker. Why aren't you working with more useful things, like, say, wheat? Or flax?

JOHN:

I've already done that. Don't you have wheat on the table? This is my free time. The crops are in.

MARY:

Yes, but my point is, these flowers are wild. They are of no use that we know of. Why are you doing this with your time?

JOHN:

No use that we know of, indeed! It may be, that it's because we don't know about them, that we don't know all of their uses!

MARY:

John, please remember. We are but farmers. We are not herbalists. We do not need the kind of trouble like those people in Massachusetts. They were killed for their trouble, you know.

JOHN:

In Salem?

MARY:

Yes. When you use those plants too much, then you know too much; it's like you've made a pact with the devil. And when people sense that, you end up on the outside of the social community. And that would be bad for all of us.

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(JANE enters)

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JOHN:

(leaning on his shovel) Mary, I am an honest farmer; I work day in and day out. I put wheat and flax on our table, and I grow Indian corn for the market. I find myself interested in the natural order of our plants, their place in the natural system of God's living beings on earth. I see no devil at work here. This is a daisy. It is beautiful as part of God's work. It is not evil.

(they leave; ANN enters and speaks to audience)

ANN:

So his wife, Mary Maris, becomes sick. You see, at that time, we had these epidemics that passed through; this was one of them. There were no hospitals. There were no known cures.

(JANE enters)

JANE:

Hello Anne!

ANN:

Hello Jane!

JANE:

Have you heard, Mary Maris is now sick? It seems many people are getting sick!

ANN:

Yes, in fact, I have heard that.

JANE:

I wonder what it is?

ANN:

I have no idea.

JANE:

I have heard that her husband, John Bartram, studies the wild plants, rather than sticking with wheat and flax, as good farmers do.

ANN:

What are you suggesting?

JANE:

Well, my point is, if he knows these plants, perhaps he can find a cure for his wife! Or, perhaps he knows better than we what ails her!

ANN:

I hadn't thought of that.

(they exit; BEN comes to front)

BEN:

So he learns a bit about the wild plants, the daisy, the St. Johnswort, the jimson weed. But it's obviously not enough. He doesn't know the ones that cure the influenza, which was common at that time.

(JOHN enters)

JOHN:

Ben, I need your help.

BEN:

Yes?

JOHN:

My wife; she's deathly ill.

BEN:

And there are none of your wild plants that will help?

JOHN:

None, Ben. It's a flu. I know nothing that will help it. Do you know of a hospital that will take her?

BEN:

John, this is Philadelphia. There are no hospitals.

(JOHN exits, crying; ANNE enters)

ANN:

I have to say, men and women lived quite separately in those days. In other words, we women knew of Mary Maris' ailments, as we were in the same Meeting, and I'm sure John was familiar with them, as he was her husband. When she died, he grieved, I'm sure. He was quite upset. But it was difficult for us to see this, as women; we women worshipped separately; we had a separate social life.

(she exits, BEN enters)

BEN:

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So his first wife dies, and right around that time, he buys some land out on the Schuylkill (*SKOOKUL*) River up there, and starts rebuilding the house, so that he can study his wild plants and all. Like I said, we were pretty good friends and all, and did things together.

(JOHN enters)

JOHN:

Ben! Ben Franklin! It's good to see you again!

BEN:

Indeed, John Bartram. How have you been?

JOHN:

I've been set back a bit. My wife died, about a year ago. But I have a new house; my farm prospers. And you are still a printer?

BEN:

Yes, indeed I am. I've just finished the almanac, and am working on another. You know, it is not a very good age, for us thinkers. I am hoping to do things to get people to think about the issues of the day.

JOHN:

There is a general lack of things to read. I have been to Philadelphia many times, looking for books on Latin and such.

BEN:

Latin? Why do you want to learn Latin?

JOHN:

Have you ever heard of Linnaeus? He has developed a system of classifying plants, and I am quite interested in this system; but, one must know Latin to understand it, or to read his writing. And, I would also like any reading material on natural sciences. But we have so little!

BEN:

I have an idea. Maybe we should make a collection of reading material, that the public can share. We could call it, a library.

JOHN:

Splendid idea. In fact, I know of a place near my home in Darby that we could use. This is what I like about you, Ben. When we get together, we have ideas, we do things. Let's make this library; this would be good for the colonies.

(they exit; ANN comes to front)

ANN:

Well, so John was single now, and one day I caught his eye, and, well, to make a long story short, we were married. And, eventually, I had nine children, five boys and four girls, and one boy, William, was quite an artist. So it happened, that they would find these plants, and John would study them, and categorize them, but William would draw them. But my story is not really about William, who also became famous, but about John himself, who continued to study plants, even though the community was somewhat set against him.

(JANE enters)

JANE:

Ann! I haven't seen you in some time! How is the farm doing at your place?

ANN:

We're doing quite well; we have wheat, and oats, and Indian corn, as usual.

JANE:

At our house we had more wheat than ever before. Did you?

ANN:

We had about the same as last year.

JANE:

But didn't your husband plant part of your land in wild flowers and grasses? And make a little greenhouse to keep them in?

ANN:

Yes, in fact he did. Altogether two acres were given over to wild plants.

JANE:

Two acres! With that you could have grown quite a bit of wheat! What does he plan to do with these wild flowers and plants?

ANN:

Study them, I suppose. He fancies himself a botanist. He has little education or training, yet he grows and studies them very carefully.

JANE:

No good will come of this, my friend, I guarantee you.

(they leave)

ANN:

It is what he wishes.

JANE:

Then maybe you can change what he wishes.

ANN:

I'll not try that; it can't be done. It is taking unusually long upstairs at the Meeting; what do you think is happening?

JANE:

My husband is calling for a minute, as we speak, asking every member Friend to proclaim allegiance to Christ our Savior.

ANN:

You will ask every member of the Darby meeting to make such a declaration?

JANE:

Yes, is that a problem?

ANNE:

No, no, I suppose not.

JANE:

Listen to me; Ann Mendenhall. Your husband is in dangerous territory. He is out there studying the wild grasses, the wild herbs. Those young women in Salem were killed; do you know why they were killed? It is not our place as Quaker farmers to learn too much about these things. Now you listen to me. I would like you to get your husband to proclaim his allegiance to Christ our Savior. Then, I would like you to get him to give up on studying these wild plants, do you understand me?

ANN:

Yes, ma'am!

(they leave)(BEN enters)

BEN:

It was a turbulent time in the colonies. The British were setting taxes, the Stamp Act and all, and the colonists didn't like them. All my friends, Tom Paine, John Adams, Tom Jefferson, they were talking independence. The redcoats were on everyone, trying to get us to pay our taxes and all.

(REDCOATS enter)

REDCOAT #1:

Pay your taxes! Pay your taxes! In the name of King George!

BEN:

Be off with you!

REDCOAT #2:

In the name of King George! Pay your taxes or you'll hang!

BEN:

Get along now! Go home! Get out of here! *(to audience)* So you have to understand, in these days I was going back and forth a bit, from the colonies to England; I knew people. This Carl Linnaeus? I'd met him. I had friends, you could say. *(JOHN enters)*. John! How are you?

JOHN:

Fine, and you?

BEN:

Very well, very well. Are you still studying the wild plants?

JOHN:

Yes, in fact, when I am not farming, I often walk into the wild territory *(sweeps his arm to indicate far horizon)* and collect wild plants and their seeds. I have a collection of wild plants behind my barn, and I have labeled them. If among the many plants I am acquainted with, there are any thee wantest to send abroad, I will cheerfully procure the, and give thee moreover whatever directions thee mayest want.

BEN:

The reason I mention it, is that I have met a man in England. His name is Peter Collinson. He believes that these specimens might be of interest in England. England is quite a crowded place, you know. Less wildlife and wildflowers there, than here. Yet people are quite interested in them. I should make you acquainted with him. I do believe you two will have a fruitful acquaintance.

JOHN:

I would appreciate that. In fact, I find that here in the colonies, people are busy, and don't appreciate wildflowers; they are eager to plow them over, and are not even interested in knowing their various uses. I have talked to people in this area about the wildflowers, and have

gathered some information about them, but I have found no one to tell about them.

BEN:

As I like to say, if passion drives you, let reason hold the reins. I mention this, because you are quite passionate about this botany business. I will tell Mr. Collinson about you forthwith, and you shall be able to write to him. And about our library, I will be in touch with you about some books that we can put there, in Darby. This shall be a place where the average man can read edifying material. As I like to say, an investment in knowledge pays the best interest!

(BEN leaves; ANN enters)

ANN:

John, I've been looking for you.

JOHN:

Really, why?

ANN:

There is bad news from the meeting. Jane and her husband, the clerk, have gathered a group of Friends who, as you know, feel that the meeting should unite behind its belief in Jesus as Son of God and Savior. This will not be easy for you, will it, John?

JOHN:

You know, Ann, I spend my days farming. And I spend my weekends studying the infinite and glorious patterns of wild plants.

ANN:

Yes?

JOHN:

I see the work of God everywhere. I see God in the wildflowers, in the branches, the bark, the roots, the leaves.

ANNE:

Yes?

JOHN:

But I do not see Jesus in these things.

ANNE:

John, they will call you a Deist. They already call you a Deist.

JOHN:

I do not care what they call me. I have been in this meeting for many years, and I do not plan to leave it. Do you see this?

ANNE:

Yes, what is it?

JOHN:

It's a bush which I call rhododendron. It was found in the mountains, down by North Carolina.

ANNE:

Where do you get such a name?

JOHN:

I am influenced by the Linnean system of naming. I have named many of the wild plants I have found, but I have yet to really explore. In North Carolina, for example, there are dozens of new ones, and I barely know them, since I have never been there; I got this from my brother, who picked it up merely because he knew I was interested.

ANNE:

John, this is causing trouble for us in our Darby Meeting!

JOHN:

What kind of trouble?

ANNE:

First, many people feel that botany is a frivolous occupation. It is also said that the wild plants carry powerful spirits...well, you know what I mean. You have heard of Salem, and of the witch trials.

JOHN:

And, would the Quakers persecute someone who bothered to learn the uses and purposes of God's plants?

ANNE:

No, but they would disown you, if you don't declare allegiance to Christ our Savior!

JOHN: *(puts shovel down):*

Anne, if the good people of the Darby Meeting choose to disown me, they shall have to tell me that to my face. I shall not disown them; I do not plan to change my activities. Do you see this flower?

ANNE:

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Yes.

JOHN:

This one is called the Venus flytrap. You see, it is quite sweet and alluring to the fly, like doctrine to the believer. But the plant actually swallows the fly.

ANN:

Swallows the fly?

JOHN:

Yes, you generally think of insects using plants, eating them, and taking what they need. But in fact, it is sometimes the other way around. I shall be back; I must tend to the horses.

(JOHN exits)

ANN:

You have to understand something. In this day, 1740, meetings were all different, yet this kind of thing, what the Darby meeting did to John, and thus to me, was not especially unusual. First, men and women were separated; what we women felt, had to go through our husbands, or said indirectly. Second, if a meeting felt strongly about an issue, it would discuss it until it had some unity, and if a member really didn't agree, he had little choice but to leave the meeting, or they would disown him. My husband, however, was quite stubborn. He had no intention of leaving. And so it was, that in 1758, they disowned him. He could still attend, and he did. But he was no longer a member. And so also with me. As his wife, I also was disowned.

(ANN leaves, BEN enters)

BEN:

To get back to my story. Where was I? Oh yes. Bartram and I were friends; we started the American Philosophical Society together, as well as that library I mentioned. I travel a lot, you see; in England, this John Bartram is a big hit. He sends these boxes, Bartram's boxes, they are called, to England. Mr. Collinson distributes them, to Linnaeus, to others, around Europe. They become quite popular. Bartram becomes renowned as a botanist; the best in the new world, according to Linnaeus himself, who becomes an avid follower of his work. (pauses) Now I know he has had some problem with his Darby meeting; I am, after all, his friend. But what should he do, quit botany? I think not. As I like to say, Hide not your talents; they for use were made; what's a sundial in the shade? Let me tell you something: on his greenhouse, above the door, he has carved in stone: "slave to

no sect, who takes no private road, but looks through Nature, up to Nature's God." It's how he is. He's an independent thinker, like myself. I admire the guy.

(BEN leaves)(JOHN is working on plant as ELIAS enters. ELIAS is helping)

ELIAS:

John Bartram, I am Elias Hicks. I have come from New York State.

JOHN:

Welcome, young man. Will you hold this plant for a minute?

ELIAS:

Yes, sure. *(holding the plant)* What is this one called?

JOHN:

Toxicodendron, also known as poison ivy. Be careful where you touch it! It will give you a rash. You see, I study them, know them; learn how to handle them. You know, it's a shame we Quakers can't do the same for our own members.

ELIAS:

As I understand it, this meeting disowned you. Why was that?

JOHN:

Well, young man, I guess they felt that everyone in their meeting has to agree to certain things.

ELIAS:

But it would be impossible for everyone to agree on everything, wouldn't it?

JOHN:

Indeed it would.

ELIAS:

Well, I think Quaker Meeting should change its idea!

JOHN:

Thank you, young man; I'm with you on that.

(JOHN and ELIAS leave; ANN enters)

ANN:

That young man, Elias Hicks, went on to start, many years later, a branch of Friends that stressed the prominence of one's conscience.

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(JANE enters)

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That is to say, nowadays it's entirely reasonable that some friends take Jesus as a savior, while others, like Bartram, do not. That is because of Hicks, who did not agree with the way Darby Meeting treated John Bartram. But I will tell you one thing. John Bartram continued to attend that meeting. That meeting disowned John Bartram, but Bartram did not disown the meeting.

(JANE enters)

Good day, Anne. **JANE:**

Good day, Jane. **ANN:**

I saw your John at Meeting again. **JANE:**

Yes, what of it? **ANN:**

He is still working with those wild plants, isn't he? **JANE:**

Jane, it is clear to me that you are not at peace with the idea of his work as a botanist. **ANN:**

I do not think his working with powerful herbs is Quakerly. Yes, I think that is accurate. I am not at peace at all. **JANE:**

Please understand, Jane. I have known him for many years now. There is not one bone in his body that is not Quakerly. **ANN:**

This meeting tried to get him to merely profess his allegiance to Jesus Christ, our Savior. **JANE:**

I did not mean that he was devoted to Jesus. I meant that he was devoted to truth, and to service. And to peace. **ANN:**

JANE:

Ann, it was more than thirty years ago that his first wife died. Even back then, I cursed those wild plants that he was studying. I said, if he knew those wild plants well, why did she die? What did he do?

ANN:

You don't think he killed her with those wild plants, do you? Jane, I know him well. I know he did nothing of the sort.

JANE:

You think I suspect him of killing her? No, that is only partly right. I do not suspect only him. I suspect you also.

ANN:

I am shocked. Jane, I have known you were not at peace. But I did not imagine.

JANE:

I must admit this, Ann. In my mind, I thought that if we could get you to fill yourself with the love of Jesus Christ, that would drive away the evil spirit of the devil's weeds and bushes.

ANN:

There is that of God in every plant, Jane.

JANE:

When he did not agree, we were convinced he was in the hands of the devil.

ANN:

And you still feel this way?

JANE:

No, I must admit. He continues to come to this meeting. I feel now, that he is as honest a man as there is, in this land.

(ANN and JANE exit; BEN enters. JOHN enters also, and works on plants back on stage right)

BEN:

Bartram's fame increased in Europe; in 1765, he became the King's botanist. This offered him a salary, which he was now able to use to travel, particularly to Florida, and Georgia, and the Carolinas. All in all, he identified almost 200 species. One in particular, he named *Franklinia*, after yours truly, by the way. After he removed it, it was destroyed, in the rush to colonize Georgia, so his careful removal and preservation served to save this species forever. But I must mention

to you, time was catching up to him. He was now quite old. The redcoats kept infringing on him; they would break in, trampling his garden.

(REDCOATS enter, swarm both BEN and JOHN)

REDCOAT #1:

Pay your taxes! Pay your taxes or you'll hang! In the name of King George!

REDCOAT #2 (to JOHN):

Pay your taxes! Why do you grow these plants?

JOHN:

Get out! Leave me alone!

BEN:

Be off with you! Out of here! Go home!

(BEN and REDCOATS exit; ANN enters)

ANN:

On that fateful day, Jane had told me that she suspected me, or us, in the death of Mary Maris. I was not guilty; I had not killed her or even dreamed of it. But you can see how the fear of the wild plants had clouded people's judgment, not only in Salem, but all over the colonies. John did more than anyone to dispel these ideas; he kept at work until he knew, and understood, the plants of the new colonies. In addition, he kept faith with his meeting. He was buried there, at Darby Meeting, after he died, in 1777.

(ANN exits. BEN enters).

BEN:

Did I tell you how he died? The redcoats were trampling his garden, his beloved botanical garden. He was quite upset. But let me tell you something about those redcoats: their days were numbered too! We pretty much sent them back to England! As I like to say, of more worth is one honest man to society, and in the sight of God, than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived!

CURTAIN CALL