

BENJAMIN SMITH BARTON (1766-1815)

The American naturalist and physician, Barton received his education at the College of Philadelphia and the University of Edinburgh. After winning the Harveian Prize for his dissertation on black henbane, and pursuing his studies further in London and Goettingen, he returned to Philadelphia in 1789. At the age of twenty-three, he became professor of natural history and botany at the College of Philadelphia, and succeeded to the professorship of materia medica several years later.

Barton's Collections for an Essay Towards a Materia of the United States (1798) constitutes his major medical work. A systematic treatise on medicinal plants, it contains descriptions and uses of native plants, arranged according to their therapeutic properties. The Elements of Botany (1803), considered Barton's most important work, follows the classification schema outlined by Linnaeus, and incorporates the author's own observations, experiments and suggestions for improving the classification of plants. Noting that life is a process difficult to understand, he adds: "And we never shall understand it, if we attempt to construct systems, before we know how or where to collect facts."

Despite ill health, Barton continued to live a busy life. His interest in American flora led him to assemble an extensive herbarium of native plants (over 1600 specimens). He was active in several professional societies, and served as one of American Philosophical Society's curators from 1790 to 1800. In 1804, he established the Philadelphia Medical and Physical Journal, to which he contributed numerous articles relating to medicine, natural history, physical geography of North America and the anthropology of the Indians. It is reported that his collection of books in natural history was the largest private library of his time.



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