

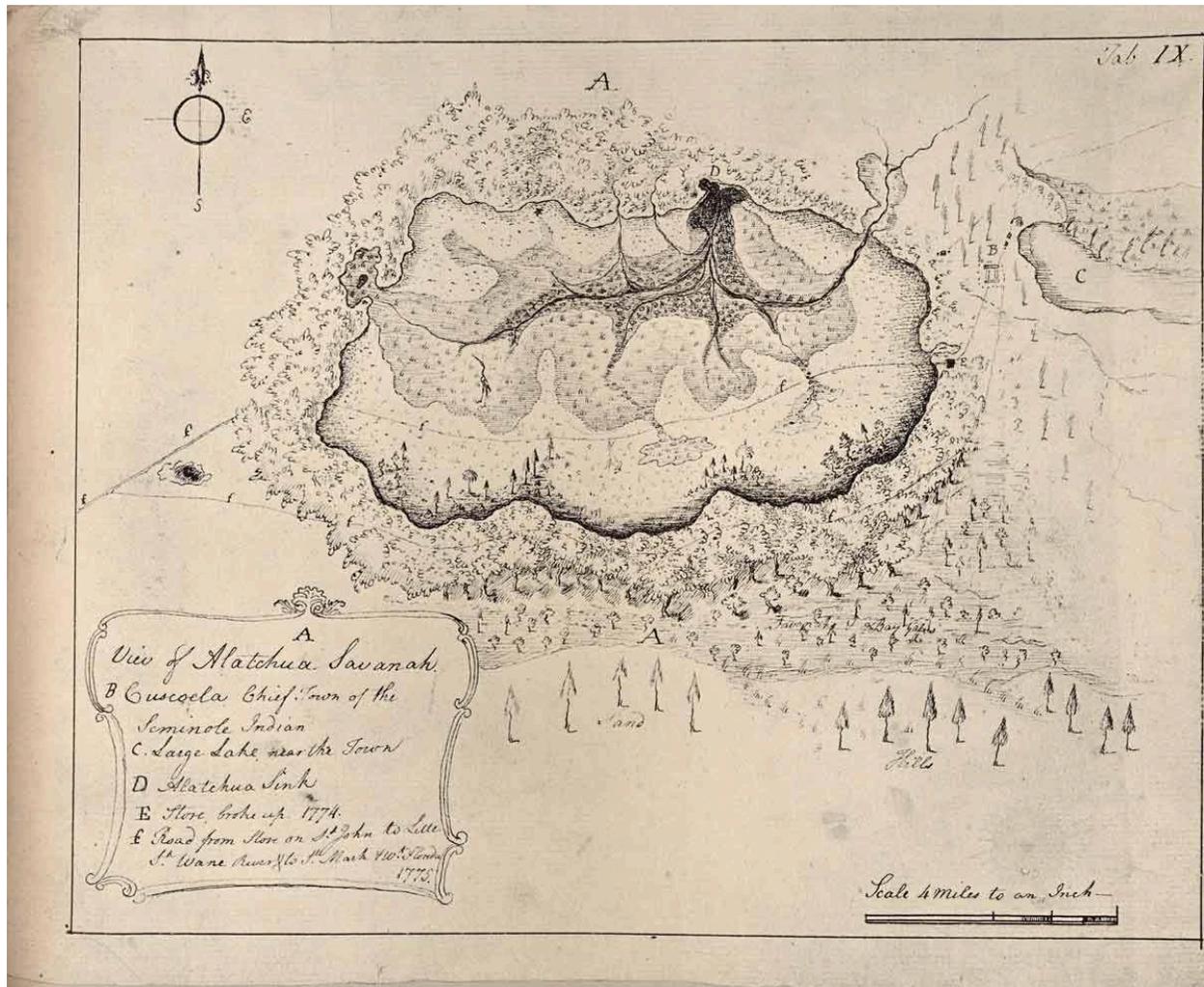
William Bartram, an American Artist/Naturalist

By Mallory M. O'Connor

In 1774, fifty years before the founding of Alachua County, a young man visited what he called “the Great Alachua Savanna,” known today as Payne’s Prairie. Having visited Florida the first time with his father in 1765, he arrived for a second visit in early 1774. After exploring the St. John’s River, he headed West and came upon the Seminole village of Cuscowilla, near present-day Micanopy. “The chief, who is called Cowkeeper,” he wrote, “came to us and in a very free and sociable manner, shook our hands. He was then informed what the nature of my errand was and he received me with complaisance, giving me unlimited permission to travel over the country for the purpose of collecting flowers, medicinal plants, etc, saluting me by the name Puc Puggy, or the Flower Hunter.”

It was Cowkeeper’s men who escorted Flower Hunter to the Great Alachua Savanna. He wrote, “We approached the savanna at the south end by a narrow isthmus of level ground, open to the light of day, and clear of trees or bushes.... The extensive Alachua savanna is a level green plain, above fifteen miles over, fifty miles in circumference, and scarcely a tree or bush of any kind to be seen on it. It is encircled with high sloping hills, covered with waving forests and fragrant orange groves, rising from exuberantly fertile soil. ... verged in summer with green level meadows, its prospect beautified by the prodigious numbers of wild fowl that make their home: cranes, herons, bitterns, plovers. At the same time are seen innumerable droves of cattle, herds of sprightly deer, squadrons of the beautiful, fleet Seminole horses, flocks of turkeys, civilized communities of the sonorous, watchful crane. On the first view of such an amazing display of the wisdom and power of the supreme author of nature, the mind for a moment seems suspended, and impressed with awe.”

Who was this “Flower Hunter” who so vividly described Paynes Prairie? We know him today as “William Bartram.”



Map of the Great Alachua Savanna by William Bartram, 1774
Image courtesy of the Florida Museum of Natural History

Born in Philadelphia in 1739, William Bartram was a homegrown American colonist and America’s first native-born artist-naturalist (Slaughter, 1996: XV). He learned botany from his father, John, who instilled in him a love of the wilderness and a curiosity that verged on obsession. William is a transitional figure in the history of natural science writing: his roots were grounded in the European Enlightenment, but his view of nature as a grand and sublime expression of God’s

handiwork linked him to the Romantic movement of the early nineteenth century. The purpose of William's 1774 trip, which was sponsored by the English physician John Fothergill, was to provide prospects and specimens for commercial production and horticultural investigation. Nevertheless, Bartram's journal reaffirms his utter delight and fascination with the natural environment and his deeply spiritual commitment to the world of Nature. It's not unusual, then, to understand Bartram's fascination with climate. And Florida provided him a fantastic opportunity. He described Florida's climate as "unbearably hot" and noted that the area was prone to thunderstorms that brought a scene of "darkness gathering around" and "black clouds with august majesty and power." He also described the storm as "armed with terrors of thunder and fiery shafts of lightning."

During Bartram's exploration, he came upon Lake Beresford near present-day DeLand where he came face to face with one of Florida's most extreme climate experiences: a hurricane. Alone in a canoe, Bartram describes how the hurricane overtook him:

Being heretofore so closely invested, by high forests and deep swamps of the great river, I was prevented from seeing the progress and increase of the approaching tempest, the terrific appearance of which now at once confounded me; how purple and fiery appeared the tumultuous clouds! swiftly ascending or darting from the horizon upwards; they seemed to oppose and dash against each other; the skies appeared streaked with blood or purple flame overhead, the flaming lightning streaming and darting about in every direction around, seems to fill the world with fire; whilst the heavy thunder keeps the earth in a constant tremor. I had yet some hope of crossing the lake to the plantation [Beresford] in sight. ... The high forests behind me bend to the blast, and the sturdy limbs of the trees crack; I had by this time got up a breast of the grove or hommock [sic], the

hurricane close by, pursuing me, I found it dangerous and imprudent in the highest degree to put in here, as the groves were already torn up, and the spreading limbs of the Live Oaks were flying over my head, and carried about in the air as leaves and stubble ...

Bartram's lively drawings, combined with his effusive narrative, provide us with an inspired vision of what Florida in general, and North Florida in particular, looked and felt like over 200 years ago. Together, he and his father documented over 320 new plants and sent samples to their English patrons, a prodigious feat that earned them both a place in the annals of American natural history.



The American Lotus (*Nelumbo lutea*), a beautiful large aquatic plant admired by William Bartram is shown here with a heron drawn to a different scale. Image courtesy of the Florida Museum of Natural History



Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis pratensis*). the Florida subspecies here performing its mating dance. Image courtesy of the Florida Museum of Natural History

This drawing by Bartram of a “wattoola,” the Indian name for the crane, depicts the crane in motion and possibly was inspired by Bartram’s encounter with two cranes guarding their nest near the Alachua Savanna. “The wary, sharpsighted crane, circumspectly observed our progress. We saw a female of them sitting on her nest, and the male, her mate, watchfully traversing backwards and forwards, at a small distance; they suffered us to approach near them before they arose, when they spread their wings, running and tipping the ground with their feet some time; and then mounted aloft, soaring round and round over the nest” (Bartram, 1928: 175).]



The Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*) with the aquatic plant, thalia, Image courtesy of the Florida Museum of Natural History

Not surprisingly, Bartram was enthralled by the alligators that he encountered nearly everywhere along the St. Johns River. In his Travels he returned to the topic again and again, his curiosity always trumping his fear of the dangerous reptiles. Even after describing his terror at the frequent attacks of the “monsters,” Bartram refused to give up his investigation of their habits.



American alligators (*Alligator mississippiensis*), two bull ‘gators in this pen-and-ink drawing by William Bartram snort like Chinese dragons. Image courtesy of the Florida Museum of Natural History

One of the most celebrated and controversial descriptions recounted by William Bartram in his Travels was the famous alligator battle that he witnessed on Lake Dexter at the entrance to Mud Creek. While a number of his American contemporaries doubted the veracity of his description and thought he had exaggerated his account, European poets and writers, moved by the Romantic passion of his writing, were delighted with his rhapsodic narrative. The vivid account of the battle goes beyond prose -- it verges on poetry.

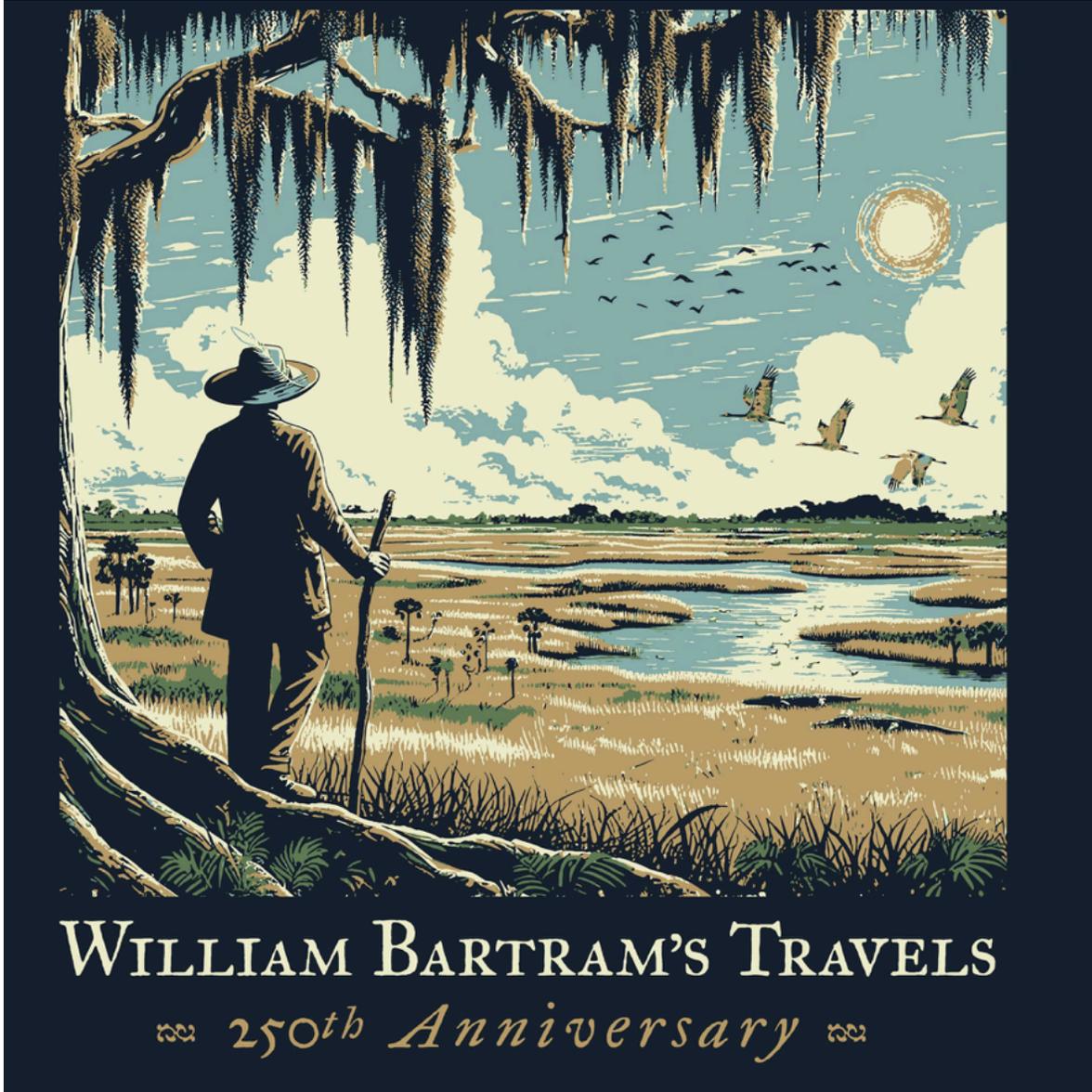
“Behold him rushing forth from the flags and reeds. His enormous body swells. His plaited tail brandished high, floats upon the lake. The waters like a cataract descend from his opening jaws. Clouds of smoke issue from his dilated nostrils. The earth trembles with his thunder. When immediately from the opposite coast of

the lagoon, emerges from the deep his rival champion. They suddenly dart upon each other. The boiling surface of the lake marks their rapid course, and a terrific conflict commences. They now sink to the bottom folded together in horrid wreaths. The water becomes thick and discoloured. Again they rise, their jaws clap together, reechoing through the deep surrounding forests. Again they sink, when the contest ends at the muddy bottom of the lake, and the vanquished makes a hazardous escape, hiding himself in the muddy turbulent waters and sedge on a distant shore. The proud victor exulting returns to the place of action. The shores and forests resound his dreadful roar, together with the triumphing shouts of the plaited tribes around, witnesses of the horrid combat”



Lotus, snake, hummingbird, snail (Nelumbo Lutea, Archilocus colubris, Triodopsis albolabris)

Image courtesy of the UF Smathers Library Special Collections



WILLIAM BARTRAM'S TRAVELS
250th Anniversary

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