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From the Vault

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Welcome to “From the Vault,” where *Journal of Florida Studies* highlights lesser-known repositories, collections, and research materials relevant to Florida Studies. While most journals feature the finished work of scholars and scribes, we are also interested in the process of research, and where it begins. Whether deep in an archive or gleaned from the Internet, the moment of discovery provides excitement and inspiration like few others. With that in mind, Andrew Huse, a Special Collections librarian at the University of South Florida’s Tampa Library will work with an intern to explore sources relevant to the themes of the journal. We are also interested in hearing from our readers for suggestions of lesser-known items, collections, and repositories, from the high-brow to the off-beat. Our next issue will explore the theme of Death. Does an interesting resource come to mind? If so, please email me at ahuse@usf.edu.

For centuries, native Floridians and more recent arrivals have carved trails through Florida’s abundant vegetation. Although conquistadores crisscrossed Florida in the 1500s looking for gold, later generations pioneered the scientific exploration of Florida’s landscape. With more than 2,800 native plant species, Florida is among the most botanically diverse states in the U.S., behind only Texas and California. While cartographers charted the coasts and surveyors mapped the land, it fell to scientists such as William Bartram to describe Florida’s unique flora in the late 1700s. Since Bartram’s time, scholars and scientists have continued to gather and study Florida’s plants. The resulting collections and storehouses of botanical specimens are known as herbaria. While age eventually destroys the genetic material of the specimens, they are in fact storehouses of what is often rare genetic material.

Of the sixteen herbaria in Florida, the University of South Florida's Tampa Campus is home to the second-largest collection, providing physical access to specimens and showcasing them online (along with other collections) through the Atlas of Florida Plants online.

According to Alan Franck, a former director who wrote an extensive history of the herbarium, the act of preserving plants in their physical form as herbarium specimens “[traces] its origins to present-day Italy during the 1500s when paper became an accessible commodity,” with many of these specimens being held in libraries in Florence and Rome (Franck 2018: 40).

The idea of establishing an herbarium played an integral role in the founding of the University of South Florida in 1956. Stewarded by the university's first president, John S. Allen worked with his close colleague George R. Cooley, who was a notable botanist himself (Franck 2018: 1). It was Cooley's hope “that the University of South Florida [would] become the acknowledged depository of all knowledge of vegetation of [Florida] so that scientists, teachers, students, and the public [would] expect the University of South Florida to know everything about its vegetation” (Franck 2018: 4). The upstart botanical institution established its original location in Hernando County, using Chinsegut Hill's manor house as a facility in 1958, which the university leased two years before opening its Tampa Campus (Franck 2018: 1). In 1960, USF leadership moved the collection to the Administration building of the new campus, where the 19,432 specimens occupied two rooms at the time (Franck 2018: 1).

The herbarium gathered such a large collection only years after its founding in part due to George Cooley and the first director of the herbarium, James D. Ray (Franck 2018: 7). In 1960, the USF herbarium hired Olga Lakela, founder of the herbarium at the University of Minnesota, Duluth (Franck 2018: 9). Under her stewardship, the collection moved from the Administration building to the Life Sciences building in 1961 (Franck 2018: 1). The collection moved to its current holding place in the College of Arts & Sciences Multidisciplinary Complex in 2016, accruing around 276,000 specimens (Franck 2018: 2).



Fig. 1- *Ixia caelestina* (*Calydorea caelestina*),

Directors and curators of the herbarium have published numerous works over the years, including *A Flora of Tropical Florida* in 1971, *The Atlas of Florida Vascular Plants* in 1996, and the *Guide to the Vascular Plants of Florida* in 1998, and each publication has lent expert knowledge to the public about Florida’s vegetation (Franck 2018: 1). George Cooley stated that the purpose of USF’s herbarium, like all other herbaria, is to “acquire

all possible knowledge of the vegetation of [their area] to the point where it would be known throughout the world as the authority,” and could distribute its knowledge (Franck 2018: 4). Earlier in the semester we spoke to Arian Farid, the current interim curator of the herbarium, and former director Dr. Alan Franck about the process of overseeing the herbarium. Arian remarked that “DNA gets preserved in the plants—almost like a happy accident—and people have been preserving botanical specimens for hundreds of years, and you can get decent DNA data from the past fifty to one hundred years,” which can then be used to learn more about the plant (Farid and Franck interview 2020). We also asked about their most famous specimen in their collection; *Calydorea caelestina*, or as it is known colloquially *Ixia caelestina*. Dr. Franck had many remarks to share about this particular specimen:

[it] was a plant that [William Bartram the botanist] saw and was one of the few that he published scientifically [in 1791]. It is endemic to northeast Florida, which is kind of cool since there are not a lot of plants endemic to that area. And it is specimen number one because the first president [of USF], John Allen, allegedly collected the specimen [...] The label is written in George Cooley’s hand, who was a very good friend of John Allen and basically started the herbarium, financed it for quite a while. He collected it in Bradford county and whenever they moved the herbarium and started cataloguing things, numbering specimens, I assume George Cooley decided that would be the first specimen. Now we are up to 300,000 accessions.” (Farid and Franck 2020)

The USF herbarium continues to grow and is as active as ever, sharing specimens with researchers digitally and physically. For more information, see Alan Franck’s comprehensive history.

NOTES

Farid, Arian and Alan Franck. “Herbarium Interview.” October 2020.

Franck, Alan. R. “Overview of the University of South Florida Herbarium.” *Plant Atlas USF*, 2018. <<http://florida.plantatlas.usf.edu/documents/USF-Herbarium.pdf>>