

### **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Thomas Conrad Porter, botanist, theologian, educator, and poet, was born January 22, 1822 in Alexandria, Pennsylvania. His father, John, was of Scotch-Irish descent, while his mother, Maria was of German-Swiss heritage. Young Porter was raised to read and appreciate Germanic literature. At age twelve, Porter attended Harrisburg Academy where he excelled not only at academics, but at athletics as well. Porter entered Lafayette College at the age of 14 in 1836, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree. He went on to Princeton Seminary from which he graduated in 1843. That same year, Porter also received a Masters degree from Lafayette College. In 1844, he was licensed to preach and took up his first charge at the Presbyterian Church of Huntingdon, PA. He went on to the Presbyterian Mission Church in Monticello, GA where he served from 1846-1847. After a short stint as an assistant to a Dr. Bethune in Philadelphia, he served as pastor at the Second Reformed Church in Reading, PA in 1848. In 1849, Porter turned his hobby of botany into a professional career as a scientist at Marshall College (now Franklin & Marshall) in Mercersburg, PA. There, he was a Professor of Chemistry, Botany and Zoology from 1849-1866. At that time, Porter returned to Lafayette to become a professor of Botany, Zoology and Geology. His "extensive herbarium brought the college a great prestige," however, most of his research and collection of fauna, flora and minerals were lost in the Pardee fire of June 4, 1879.

He continued to preach, this time at the Third Street Reform Church of Easton, PA from 1877-1884. From 1890-1897, Porter served as Dean of the Pardee Scientific Department. In 1865, he received an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Rutgers University, and in 1880, Franklin & Marshall added the degree of Doctor of Laws. Porter was also active in many societies and was the founder of the Linnaean Society and the president of the Pennsylvania German Society until the time of his death in 1901.

Porter's research focused primarily on the plants of particular regions, mainly Pennsylvania. His book-length works, three of which were published posthumously, include Synopsis of the Flora of Colorado (1874), Essays, Verses, and Translations (1901), Flora of Pennsylvania (1903), and the Catalogue of the Bryophyta and Pteridophyta (1904). In addition, Porter wrote many articles, poems, speeches, and also did a number of translations from Greek, Latin, and German into the English language.

In 1858, Porter created a scandal in the literary world when Longfellow's "Hiawatha" was published. Porter claimed that not only did the poem inaccurately represent the wildlife in its setting, but he also suspected that Longfellow merely plagiarized the Finnish epic "Kalevala." He also critiqued Emerson and Holmes, and translated Goethe. But it was as a scientist that Porter left his mark. He was an esteemed botanist for the United States Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories. Porter even had a distinct species of plant found in the foothills West of Denver, CO, "Aster Porteri," named for him.

Porter was said to be of “genial wit,” often “testy and impatient, but never dull.” He married Susan Kunkel of Harrisburg, PA in 1850. Although not formally trained, Susan was also well read and fluent in German. Like Thomas, Susan Porter also translated a number of poems and stories, and even wrote a theological work called *Simon Bar Jona*. The couple had five children, none of whom outlived them: Mary, Katherine Kunkel, John (Lafayette Class of 1876), Elizabeth and Anne. Porter died on April 27, 1901.

### **SCOPE AND CONTENT**

The Thomas Conrad Porter Papers, 1855-1903 (5 linear inches) consists primarily of the notebooks Porter maintained on plants native to Pennsylvania. The ten notebooks contain lists of plants and their locations in counties of Pennsylvania. These formed the basis for Porter’s posthumously published works: *Flora of Pennsylvania* (1903) and *Bryophyta and Pteridophyta of Pennsylvania* (1904).

Each notebook contains numerous pages of loose notes and lists of plants as well as several specimens collected by Porter and others. The loose pages and specimens are housed in folders behind their corresponding notebook.

Box 1, Folders 1-9 contain notebooks, lists and specimens that were published posthumously in 1903 as *Flora of Pennsylvania*. Folder 2 contains a letter from an A.F.K. Knowt who wrote Porter in order to send him a list of more flora that would help with Porter’s research. Other papers removed from the notebook are labeled “Hepatica of Pennsylvania,” “Plts of Pa. not seen by me,” “C.F. Austin’s Ret. in Pa. Mosses etc. 1871,” as well as other notes and lists made by Porter. Another loose page folder that contains notable contents is folder 8, where two lists are labeled “B.H.S.” (Benjamin H. Smith), a few sketches of seeds and plants, as well as a map of Pennsylvania that shows the “Mean Temperature, Rainfall and Prevailing Wind Direction for May, 1895.”

The next set of folders that result in a published work are Box 1, 9-16. These correspond to the book *Bryophyta and Pteridophyta of Pennsylvania*, printed in 1904. Folder 12 not only contains notes and lists, but also includes a published piece by John K. Small entitled “Preliminary List of the Mosses of Lancaster County, PA.” and a letter from the New York Botanical Garden giving Porter some supplemental information. Among the Hepaticae lists in folder 16, there are lists of plants from Erie, PA as well as lists of mosses from the Allegheny region.

Folder 17 contains a notebook listing plants from Northampton County, PA, however, there is no corresponding published work. Folder 18 contains four letters from the following: James Buchanan- President of Franklin and Marshall College (who later became the 15<sup>th</sup> President of the United States), John L. Le Conte - Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, D.G. Brinton, and Philip Schaff. Folder 19 holds both the

manuscript and the published versions of a speech given by Porter at Jefferson College in 1855.

The last folder includes poetry, both printed and hand-written, a copy of the Lafayette Monthly of April, 1872 in which Porter has published a German poetry translation, as well as, other translations, and a miscellaneous typed page listing more plants. Folder 20 also houses some of Thomas Conrad Porter's translations of the "Odes of Horace". The copies found here may have been printer's proofs for Porter's *Essays, Verses and Translations*. This has not been confirmed because the versions found here do not match the ones found in the published book, however, the print and format are similar.

A piece in Folder 20 of particular charm is Porter's poem "Lines on a Head of Cabbage" and the story of its origin. In his years as a Lafayette College student, Porter's conversations with his friend Miss Margaret Junkin (daughter of college president Rev. George Junkin) often turned to literary musings. Miss Margaret's sister Eleanor was not as fond of poetry as they were, so she issued a playful challenge to Thomas and Margaret that at their next meeting the one who first introduced into the conversation any sort of literary flight of fancy would have to pay a forfeit, which was to be fifty lines of verse on a difficult subject. After some deliberation Eleanor spotted a field of cabbage and gaily announced that the poem must be fifty lines on a head of cabbage. At their next meeting Porter was found guilty of the crime. A copy of the resulting poem and the accompanying story was printed in the November 22, 1910 issue of "The Lafayette", a photocopy of which is found in this folder.

Box 2, Folders 1-16 contain plant samples.

## **INVENTORY**

### **Box 1**

#### **Folders**

- 1 Notebook: "Flora of Pennsylvania. I. Filices to Salicaceaea, inclusive"
- 2 Notebook: "Flora of Pennsylvania. I" - Loose pages removed
- 3 Notebook: "Flora of Pennsylvania II. Betulaceae to Anacardiaceae, inclusive"
- 4 Notebook: "Flora of Pennsylvania II." - Loose pages removed
- 5 Notebook: "Flora of Pennsylvania III"
- 6 Notebook: "Flora of Pennsylvania III: Illicaceae to Complanulaceae inclusive"
- 7 Notebook: "Flora of Pennsylvania IV. Compositae"

**PORTER, THOMAS CONRAD  
PAPERS, 1834-1903**

**SKILLMAN LIBRARY  
LAFAYETTE COLLEGE**

- 8 Notebook: "Flora of Pennsylvania IV." - Loose pages removed
- 9 Notebook: "Bryophyta of Pennsylvania" (Book 1)
- 10 Notebook: "Bryophyta of Pennsylvania" (Book 1) - Loose pages removed
- 11 Notebook: "Bryophyta of Pennsylvania" (Book2)
- 12 Notebook: "Bryophyta of Pennsylvania" (Book 2) - Loose pages removed
- 13 Notebook: "Hepaticae of Pennsylvania"
- 14 Notebook: "Hepaticae of Pennsylvania" - Loose pages removed
- 15 Notebook: "Pteridophyta of Pennsylvania"
- 16 Notebook: "Pteridophyta of Pennsylvania" - Loose pages removed
- 17 "Catalogue of the Plants of Northampton County, Pennsylvania"
- 18 Correspondence
- 19 Speech: "The Relation of Man to Nature" to the Franklin Philo Literary Societies of Jefferson College: 1855, July 31
- 20 Writings: Miscellaneous

Box 2

Folders

- 1 Notebook: "Flora of Pennsylvania I" – specimens removed
- 2-15 Notebook: "Bryophyta of Pennsylvania (Book 1 & 2) – specimens removed
- 16 Notebook: "Hepaticae of Pennsylvania" – specimens removed

**ADDITION, 1834-1901**

**SCOPE AND CONTENT**

The Thomas Conrad Porter Papers Addition, 1834-1901 (3 linear inches, 6 folders) consists primarily of correspondence, both personal and professional, from throughout Porter's life, along with writings and estate papers. The strongest concentration of letters is from the years 1844-51, covering Porter's early adult life.

Folder 1 contains correspondence from the years 1834-48. Of particular interest are the two earliest pieces in the collection. The first is a charming letter from 1834, after Porter's enrollment at Harrisburg Academy, addressed to Porter and John Cresswell by two friends, John and James Charlton, giving news of their family and town and asking

Porter and Creswell to come visit soon. The second is a letter from home written in July 1839 before Porter's senior year at Lafayette. Porter's father, upon receipt of a new poem from Thomas, reminds his son to attend to his studies equally or to pay particular attention to math. He also advises him to not neglect his spiritual life and includes \$10 in response to his son's request for money.

The correspondence in folder 2 covers the years 1849-51. Within these letters there are two from his mother, the one from July 1849 describing a breakout of cholera near town. There are also two letters from a friend in Georgia after Porter returned to Pennsylvania, written in 1849 and 1850, of note due to their discussions of plant samples being sent back and forth between the two men and also because of their references to Porter's hints of approaching marriage.

Folder 3 contains correspondence ranging from 1866-96 of a mainly professional nature. There are two letters offering appointments to congregations, the First Presbyterian Church in 1867 and the Third Street Reformed Congregation in 1877, offering \$1800 and \$1400 respectively, along with the accompanying parsonages. There are also several letters concerning Porter's professorship at Lafayette. The 1866 Board of Trustees committee letter proposes to nominate him for the Chair of Botany and Zoology and offers a salary of \$1200 with \$300 for rent on a house on College Hill. In 1877 the trustees accept his proposal to expand his duties, and in 1896 they propose making him an emeritus professor. Also of note is a letter from William C. Cattell written in 1866 when the trustees have started selecting new faculty to hire upon securing the Pardee donation. Cattell praises his colleagues and states that Lafayette "can be placed in the front rank of American colleges—certainly, of those in the 'Middle States.'"

Correspondence from 1897 and undated correspondence are located in folder 4, including a letter from Porter's daughter Elizabeth discussing her chances of singing with the Opera Company or going to London with them. A draft for a reply letter written by Porter's wife Susan describes the couple looking for Elizabeth's name in the New York Daily Tribune "Drama" section and mentions a lecture Porter recently gave on Indian Names.

Folder 5 contains writings, most notably a draft of a letter to Mr. John Burroughs in December 1900 and a clipping from the Easton Free Press in that same month reproducing a portion of the letter. Porter writes to Burroughs concerning his book *Squirrels and Other Fur-Bearers*, which he considers to be enjoyable and scientifically accurate. He offers a few notes to Burroughs on the omission of the otter in the book, the food supply of the red squirrel, and the location of muskrat homes and his observations on their manner of eating mussels. The clipping reprints the muskrat section of the letter and a sentence from Burroughs' reply. The folder also contains a poem by "Mr. Thomas Dinnerbell" about the ladies of Easton.

Folder 6 includes estate papers consisting of the death certificates of Porter and his wife Susan along with an appraisal of his estate.

**PROVENANCE**

The Thomas Conrad Porter Papers Addition was donated to Lafayette College in 2007 by Porter's descendants, Samuel Willet Martin '50, his great-grandson, and Kristina C. Martin Mulligan '91 and Torrey Schlesing Martin '93, great-great-grandchildren.

The addition also included a photograph of Porter which has been removed to Series I of the Lafayette Historical Photographs Collection.

**INVENTORY**

Folders (Location: Oversize Manuscript Collections, Shelf 8)

- 1 Correspondence: 1834-48
- 2 Correspondence: 1849-51
- 3 Correspondence: 1866-96
- 4 Correspondence: 1897 and undated
- 5 Writings
- 6 Estate Papers

**RELATED COLLECTION**

The J. H. Brakeley Collection in Miscellaneous Manuscripts includes a folder containing 13 of T. C. Porter's letters to J. H. Brakeley from the years 1840 and 1844-7. The bulk of the correspondence focuses on the botanical interests and exchange of plants between the two men, including lists of plants for exchange, storage and preservation of samples, and botanical excursions. In September 1844 Porter remarks that "botany has become to me a passion" and in June 1845 he remarks that after two years, his collection will have reached approximately 800 samples. Several letters also contain short poems. The correspondence covers the years Porter lived in Georgia, and his letter from June 1846 provides a detailed description of his impressions of the south. Also of interest are two late letters which inquire about Maggie Junkin, and the statement in the final letter that Porter has seriously considered taking a vow of perpetual celibacy.