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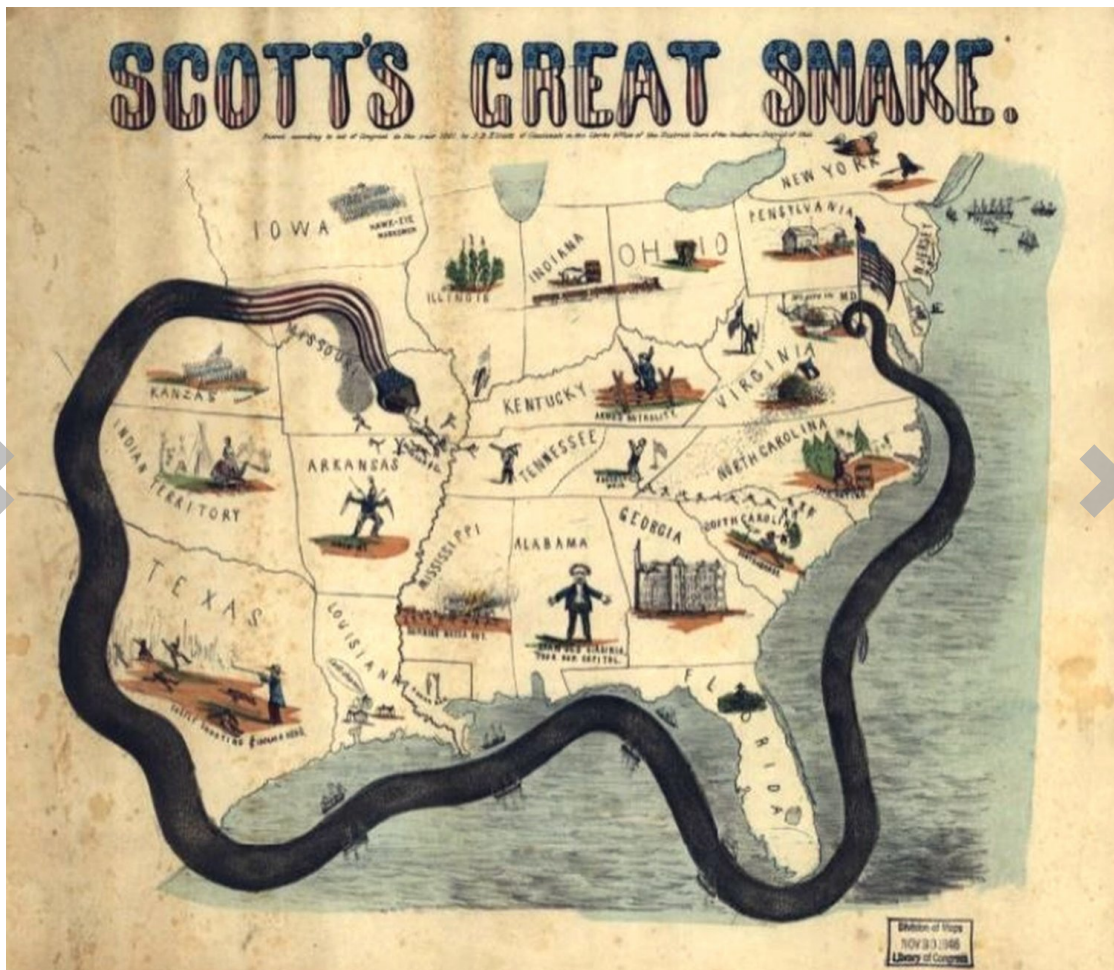
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THE APALACHICOLA TIMES



Chasing Shadows: A deeper look at Dr. Chapman



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A map of Union Gen. Winfield Scott's plan to blockade the South is on the wall of the Raney House

[PHOTO COURTESY AAHS]



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By Caty Greene Special to the Times, The Apalachicola Times

Dr. Alvan Wentworth Chapman (1809-1899) is probably one of the two most well-known residents of Apalachicola, along with the fellow physician Dr. John Gorrie. Many know Gorrie as the “Father of Air Conditioning,” and indeed his statue stands in the US Capitol for that reason. He was also the inventor of a device that made artificial ice. That invention, although not commercialized in Gorrie’s lifetime, eventually spawned other inventions which eventually brought manmade ice to the South.

Chapman was also, in his own way, an inventor. In his long and quiet life, as he pursued his botanical studies, he was at least as important an “inventor” because he brought the study of botany out of New England to the expanding United States, especially to the then Territory of Florida. Imagine a time when the learned scholars of the early 19th century only named the plants in New York City! The Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia founded in 1812, the nation’s first natural sciences research institution, was dependent on collectors like Chapman for specimens for research and collections. Chapman, as he relocated first to the Carolinas then to Territorial Florida, began collecting and describing plants unknown to northern colleagues. His collection area was described as “terra incognita” in the *Botanical Gazette*.

Sadly, there is no definitive biography of Chapman. However, recently published “Florida Explored” by Thomas Peter Bennett (Mercer Press, 2019) covers some of Chapman’s botanical involvement and the state’s many associations with other botanists. Chapter 10, *Florida Plants and the Torreya Legacy*, offers glimpses into Chapman’s friendship and professional associations with Hardy Croom (1797-1837, original owner of Goodwood in Tallahassee who died in the sinking of the vessel “Home”), and John Torrey (1796-1873), among many others. Torrey’s name is remembered in the scientific name of the rare cedar, *Torreya taxifolia*. The torreya, apparently only able to grow in a small range, might be considered the poster-plant of the Apalachicola River Basin region, designated by Conservation International as one of six biodiversity hot spots in the United States. Chapman vigorously explored the region with these well-known botanists. Chapman consulted with Harvard’s revered Asa Gray (1810-1888), who helped him prepare his seminal work *Flora of the Southern United States*, first published in 1860.

Bennett quotes Chapman as saying to Torrey: “Your city Botanists with polished Boots who rolled to your favorite haunts in Steam Boats [and] Cars have but a faint idea of the figure a Florida Botanist cuts in these wild woods.”

While Chapman published few articles in the academic journals of his time, his studies are well-documented in his correspondence with the botanists mentioned above as well as others.

Chapman was well-liked in Apalachicola. In the *Botanical Gazette*, he was said to be “closely identified with the public interest of his fellow-citizens.” He arrived in 1847 and occupied a home at the corner of Sixth Street and Avenue E. Although it was thought he either bought or built the house, records suggest it

was owned by his extended family. Also census data suggests that his final years may have been spent elsewhere in Apalachicola. He died in 1899 at the age of 90.

What we have all called the “Chapman House Museum” for years was his dwelling, meticulously restored in recent years by Helen Tudor. Recent circumstances saw it sold to investors from Oxford, Mississippi, who plan to keep it available to honor Chapmans’ life and as a public gathering space.

In the post-war period Chapman served in a number of elected and appointed positions in Apalachicola including as county judge and customs collector in the 1860s and 1870s.

Out in the field, even in his 80s

Chapman was a tall, thin man, described as erect and elegant. Some described him as somewhat aloof, but at the same time congenial, willing to loan books from his extensive library to local botany enthusiasts. In his later life he suffered from growing deafness, which inclined him toward being a recluse. A fellow Apalachicolian, Winifred Kimball, made the acquaintance of Dr. Chapman when she was a young woman and wrote of her "Reminiscences" in 1921 in the *Journal of the New York Botanical Garden*. She spoke fondly about accompanying him “on his long jaunts through the pine woods and deep into the titi swamps.” He always carted the collection box, believing that it was his responsibility as a gentleman. In one account a specimen label stated "Collected by A. W. Chapman, walking thirteen miles for this plant, in his eighty-third year."

Kimball described his white thatch of hair as “the kind of white hair that age and clean thought gives a man” and declared him even a bit of a dandy in his dark blue suits. Chapman married Mary Anne Simmons Hancock in 1839, three years after her first husband William J. Hancock had died. They lived in Jackson County. Their only child, a daughter Ruth died young. Two granddaughters from Mary’s first marriage, Katherine “Katy” Wood and Mary Chapman Wood lived with the couple in Apalachicola and inherited the home on Chapman’s passing.

During the Civil War, Mary Chapman, a native Southerner and supporter of the Confederate cause, went from Apalachicola to her property in Marianna in Jackson County. Dr. Chapman stayed in Apalachicola and was known as a supporter of the Union. Dr. Chapman was in communication with the Union blockading vessels and was considered a reliable source of information by the Union Navy.

It is not surprising that Chapman called himself “a Union man,” as he was born in Southampton, Massachusetts, and graduated from Amherst College. He also relied heavily on the professional advice of Prof. Asa Gray, director of the Herbarium at Harvard University, and considered the most prominent botanist of the 19th century.

An aside: To show his status in the field of botany, Gray was selected to be one of the botanists on the United States Exploring Expedition (1838–1842). This fabulous, although eventually somewhat disgraced, voyage traveled with a squadron of wooden sailing ships, mapping and collecting specimens along the coasts of the Americas and through the Pacific Ocean. These specimens became the nucleus of the

Smithsonian Institution's collections. Author Nathanael Philbrick's book "Sea of Glory" recounts this first foray by the American government to support such an expedition. Sadly, its place in history was marred by incompetence and even mutiny. Luckily, Gray withdrew from the expedition before it left the port.

A source of intelligence for the Union

As a Unionist, Chapman was supposedly a good source of intelligence for the crew of the *Mercedita* and subsequent ships, which positioned themselves off the coast of St George Island starting in 1861. The *Mercedita* was a "screw steamer." A model of the ship can be seen at the Raney House Museum in Apalachicola, run by the Apalachicola Area Historical Society.

Above the model, on the wall in the Raney House Museum, is the famous map called "Scott's Great Snake." This represented the Union's effort to block all Southern ports, preventing the Confederacy from effectively supporting their war through the sale of "King Cotton," the largest export item of the United States at that time.

Officials from the Union "captured" Apalachicola, encountering only townsfolk whose lives were adversely affected by the blockade, and who had mixed allegiance to the cause of secession. Two prominent families, the Raney and the Orman, were squarely on the side of the Confederacy. It is said Orman's family warned the Confederates away from coming into town by placing a barrel on their roof when Union Navy personnel were ashore. The Raney's three sons served on the Confederate side, and a battle flag, which still hangs in the Museum of Florida History, was sewn in their home by ladies of the town.

The nature of Chapman's interactions with the Union blockade ships is documented in the "Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies," available in full text and searchable through Cornell University's "Making of America" Library. Chapman is mentioned as a prominent citizen and one of the sources that confirmed the explosion of the Confederate gunship *Chattahoochee* in June 1863 (Volume 17, page 390).

This documentation is important, as many tales from this scrappy frontier are exaggerations and even untruths.

It is also well documented that when Confederate forces came to town, Chapman would hide himself overnight in Trinity Episcopal Church, just across from his home. He told Kimball his pew always had cushions for his comfort.

Kimball writes that as a physician and a Unionist, Chapman was called upon to rescue Union prisoners who escaped from the Andersonville Prison, far upriver in Georgia. According to Kimball, soldiers would use the Flint River, part of the Apalachicola- Chattahoochee-Flint river system, to escape to the welcoming hands of the Union ships offshore in the Gulf of Mexico. While Kimball tells a tantalizing tale of escaped war prisoners hiding in the marshes of the Apalachicola River delta, the National Park Services Andersonville National Historic Site webpage suggests that in fact very few prisoners escaped, and the journey was well over 200 miles.

Hardship was a far greater issue in Apalachicola later in the war. With a population of around 500, its residents struggled without the supplies that had previously come in on the ships entering the port to export cotton. Fresh fish and oysters thankfully supplanted the rich variety of food stuffs regularly imported before the war.

Second edition of master work at Orman House

The first edition of Chapman's master work *Flora of the Southern United States* came out just before the war in 1860. It was said to have popular value for the general student and beginner, and expanded the study of botany well outside the confines of the Northeast. A second edition emerged in 1883, and a final edition in 1897, two years before his death. The Orman House State Park, which is the location of the Chapman Botanical Gardens, displays a copy of the second edition. In addition, two copies are in the Rare Book Archives at the Apalachicola Margaret Key Library, which may be used for research purposes.

Chapman's actual specimens, called an "herbarium," were distributed to various academic institutions, including Harvard and Columbia. The Biltmore estate in North Carolina also received specimens and a principal part of his library.

William Trelease, a fellow botanist, provided some additional interesting detail in his contribution to one of Chapman's obituaries. Asa Gray, he said, "saved the plates from destruction during the troublous times of the war then beginning." These plates would have been for pictorial inclusions in the book, which gives a spotlight on how the coming war affected the study of botany in the Southern states during Chapman's life.

Trelease also wrote about the persistence of the aging botanist who, when more than 80 years old, continued to go into the field hundreds of miles from home to gather specimens and took "pleasure in making the acquaintance of many old plant friends."

Finally, Trelease talks about Chapman's problems financing his final edition of "Flora" due to an unforeseen bank failure. He writes "that a friend was found in this time of need, did much to lighten the care of his latest years".

Back in Kimball's *Reminiscences*, the soul of the botanist is revealed. She recounted an incident which explores the doctor's sense of the Almighty. Showing her the spores of a fern she quotes him as saying "Behold the hand of the almighty at this incredible task... and if the All-Seeing has carried his law of order to even these minute spores, has he not so governed the world that no man need fear?"

While Winifred Kimball's account of her friendship with Dr. Chapman does not constitute documentation of his prowess as a botanist, it is invaluable in offering a glimpse into the life of this frontier physician and botanical scholar. It even references how his medical practice was principally effectuated with the use of hot baths and "bread pills," a 19th century term for a placebo. Hand-typed copies of her *Reminiscences* are available at the Apalachicola Margaret Key Library (where this author was the librarian for eight and a half years). There was always a charming photograph of Chapman in his library on display in the library.

Caty Greene is president of the Apalachicola Area Historical Society.

This article originally appeared on The Apalachicola Times: Chasing Shadows: A deeper look at Dr. Chapman (<https://www.apalachtimes.com/story/news/2020/10/22/chasing-shadows-deeper-look-dr-chapman/6003652002/>)

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