

**THE CHARLESTON
MUSEUM: ITS GENESIS
AND DEVELOPMENT**

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The Charleston Museum: Its Genesis and Development by William G. Mazzyck

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WILLIAM G. MAZYCK

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Cannon Park—Showing Entrance to the New Charleston Museum.

THE CHARLESTON MUSEUM

ITS

GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT

BY

WILLIAM G. MAZYCK

WITH

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR
OF THE MUSEUM

Charleston, S. C.
Walker, Evans & Cogswell Co.,
1908

THE CHARLESTON MUSEUM,
ITS GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT.

By WILLIAM G. MAZYCK.

During the war, while Charleston was under fire from the Federal batteries, Professor F. S. Holmes, the then zealous and enthusiastic curator of the Museum of the College of Charleston, removed many of the more valuable specimens belonging to the Museum, together with its records, to his farm in Edgefield County, where his family were refugees, and where they were stored, with his own books, papers and specimens, in one of his barns, which, most unfortunately was burned by a marauding band of negroes, just after the cessation of hostilities. The burning of the records was, of course, most deplorable, and for many years I have endeavored to repair the loss by searching every available source of information, and have succeeded in gathering the facts detailed below.

AN ANCIENT ACCESSION LIST.

In 1865, and for several years after, I was librarian of the Charleston Library Society, and, while looking over a mass of rubbish in a closet, I discovered a small manuscript memorandum book containing, among other items of more or less interest, this important and most valuable entry: "Articles for the Museum, presented 5th June, 1798, by Capt. William Hall." This little volume I recently brought to the attention of Professor Rea, and after a prolonged search of the records of the Library Society, it was found, and a transcript of this entry, and those of its several succeeding pages, was published, in the October, 1906, number of *The Bulletin of the Charleston Museum* (Vol. 2, No. 6). This is doubtless one of the oldest, if not indeed

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the most ancient, accession list in existence, so far, at least, as our American museums are concerned. With this date as a clue, I have diligently followed the trail backwards until the records have been successfully established as far back *positively*, as 1777, and most probably several years earlier.

THE GREAT FIRE OF JANUARY 17, 1778.

In "The South Carolina and American General Gazette" of January 29, 1778, there is a remarkably full account of the very disastrous fire which had laid waste the greater part of this city a few days before, in which this paragraph appears:

"The Charles Town Library Society's valuable collection of books, instruments and apparatus for astronomical and philosophical observations and experiments, etc., etc., is almost entirely lost."

Dr. David Ramsay, a member of the Society, whose name appears among the members of its executive committee, a circumstance which insures his complete familiarity with its affairs and property, amplifies this statement in this extremely interesting and most important note on page 379, Vol. 2, of his "History of South Carolina," (Charleston, 1809).

"On the 17th January, 1778, a very extensive fire took place in Charleston, when this Library, containing between six and seven thousand volumes comprising a valuable collection of ancient authors, with paintings, prints, a pair of elegant globes, mathematical and other instruments, and many specimens of natural history, was almost totally destroyed."

THE FIRST AMERICAN MUSEUM.

The words which I have emphasized taken alone, might not be entitled to much weight in this discussion, but in connection with the entries in the invaluable little memorandum book, in which gifts to "The Museum" are given

equal prominence with books purchased for or given to the Library, fixes, beyond controversy, the fact that this beginning of the Charleston Museum antedates the next oldest record by *at least eight years*. "The first public museum was that founded in Philadelphia, in 1785, by Charles Willson Peale, the bones of a mammoth and a stuffed paddlefish forming its nucleus." (G. Brown Goode, Report U. S. Nat. Museum, 1897, pt. 2, p. 403).

Unfortunately, the minute book of the Library Society prior to March 15, 1815, cannot be found, but the minutes of its [Executive] Committee are extant, and as early as "Wednesday, December 12, 1764, the Committee proceeded to the room presented to the Society by Mr. Manigault, in order to see in what forwardness the same was for the receipt of the books, &ca." Just what the "&ca" consisted of the reader must determine for himself. When, however, it is recalled that as early as January 17, 1778, the Library owned "many specimens of natural history," it is reasonable to conclude that the collection was the outcome of several years' labor, especially as the public mind was fully occupied with the strenuous work of the Revolution and the years immediately preceding it. Scant time, indeed, must there have been in this city or state for the indulgence of scientific activity in the period between 1774 and 1777; it is, therefore, by no means an unwarranted conclusion that "the Committee" included in its ideas of "forwardness" necessary provision for the accommodation not only of the books but also of "The Museum."

Having, we think, thus clearly proven the existence of the Museum belonging to the Charleston Library Society at least as early as 1777, let us now endeavor to trace the connection of this most ancient of all American museums with the Charleston Museum of to-day.

THE EARLY YEARS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.

In 1807, a Philosophical Society was established in Charleston of which Rev. Charles Dewar Simons was president. He was soon after elected Professor of Chemistry

in the South Carolina College at Columbia, and was drowned in Congaree River on his return from a visit in Charleston and the Society probably died with him. (Shecut's Essays, p. 48.)

Early in 1813, Dr. J. L. E. W. Shecut suggested the formation "of a society to be called the Antiquarian Society of Charleston. The objects of this Society were to be *primarily*, the collection, arrangement and preservation of Specimens in Natural History, and of things rare, antique, curious and useful." On the 20th of May, 1813, the Society was formally organized, and on the 30th of June "it's name was changed to The Literary and Philosophical Society of South Carolina; by which name it was incorporated in the year 1814." (Shecut's Essays, p. 49.)

Under the presidency of Mr. Stephen Elliott the Society prospered greatly, and on Wednesday, March 15, 1815, we learn from the Minute Book of the Charleston Library Society it was "Resolved that it be referred to the Book Committee, to report on the expediency of giving to the Philosophical and Literary Society the collection of natural Curiosities belonging to the Society, together with the cases containing them," and at the Quarterly Meeting of the Society held on Wednesday, 21st June, 1815, "The Book Committee Reported in favor of giving to the Philosophical Society the Natural Curiosities belonging to this Society together with the cases containing them," which was "agreed to."

"Numerous donations of specimens, in every department of the arts and sciences, were liberally bestowed, and the collection began to assume a respectable and very flattering appearance."

DR. L'HERMINIER'S COLLECTION.

"The opportune arrival of that distinguished naturalist and practical chemist, Dr. Felix L'Herminier, from Guadeloupe, with an extensive collection of specimens, the fruit of twenty years' application, expense and industry, which he offered to the society, was an advantage not to be lost sight of. Negotiations were immediately entered into with



JOHN LINNÆUS EDWARD WHITRIDGE SHECUT,
Born, Beaufort, S. C., Dec. 4, 1770; Died, Charleston, S. C.,
June 1, 1836.