

Asa Gray and His Quest for *Shortia galacifolia*

Charles F. Jenkins

C. F. Jenkins of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was both an excellent writer and an active horticulturist. He served as editor of *The Farm Journal* for many years, and wrote several books on American history. In 1931, he founded the "Hemlock Arboretum" and published the well-known *Hemlock Arboretum Bulletin* until his death in 1951. In the *Arnoldia* article reprinted here, Jenkins, who was an important supporter of the Arnold Arboretum, tells the intriguing story of Asa Gray and C. S. Sargent searching for the botanical equivalent of the Holy Grail.

The word *bewitched* has antipodal meanings. The first, sinister, fearsome, savoring of Salem trials and clouded minds; the second, charmed, enchanted, captivated. In this second sense Asa Gray was bewitched. For forty years, the greater part of his productive life, the memory of a fragmentary, dried, incomplete specimen in a neglected herbarium cabinet in France haunted him. The assurance of its existence as a living plant and the hope of its rediscovery were with him constantly. A shy, evergreen groundcover with dainty, creamy-white flowers in early spring; cheerful, shiny, bright green leaves in summer; a winter coloring rich and rare—it well deserved his lifelong devotion. When the search was ended and the visible assurance of its existence was placed in Gray's hands, he could well exclaim, as he did: "Now let me sing my *nunc dimittis*."

On November 9, 1838, Gray sailed in the packet ship *Philadelphia* for Europe. He had received appointment to a professorship in the newly planned University of Michigan at Ann

Arbor. As the buildings were not ready, he was granted a year's leave of absence, a salary of \$1500, and \$5000 was placed at his disposal to purchase books for the new University library. The main object of his trip, however, was to examine the original sources of American flora as they existed in the principal herbaria of Europe. After a twenty-one-day voyage he landed in Liverpool and then began a year crowded with rich cultural and educational experiences. Everywhere he made friends among the botanists and scientists and everywhere he found in the old established herbaria specimens of American plants collected through the past century by a long list of botanists and travellers.

Finding the Herbarium Specimen in France

By the middle of March, Gray had reached Paris where he remained nearly a month. Here he worked over the collections of André Michaux (1746–1802), that indefatigable collector and botanist, who fifty years before had spent eleven years in the United States, sending home to France great quantities of botanical treasures. Among these in a cabinet of unidentified plants was a faded, incomplete

specimen with the label: "Hautes montagnes de Caroline. *An pyrola spec.! An genus novum!*" In his carefully kept Journal, André Michaux not only tells of the finding of the plant, but gives careful directions so that future botanists might also locate it in the "High Mountains of Carolina."

Michaux's Journal in French, as written, is not readily available, nor is there a translation of the whole Journal for English readers. Through the courtesy of Professor Edith Philips, of the French Department of Swarthmore College, the following translation of that small portion relating to the finding of *Shortia* is here presented. It will give some idea of the hardships borne by the botanist in his travels and covers his experiences on four disagreeable winter days when he came upon the little plant which has intrigued botanists for one hundred and fifty-four years.

The roads became more difficult as we approached the headwaters of the Keowee [spelled Kiwi by Michaux] on the 8th of December, 1788. . . . Two miles before arriving there I recognized the *Magnolia montana* which has been named *M. cordata* or *auriculata* by Bartram. There was in this place a little cabin inhabited by a family of Cherokee Indians. We stopped there to camp and I ran off to make some investigations. **I gathered a new low woody plant with saw-toothed leaves creeping on the mountain at a short distance from the river.** [Michaux here refers to *Shortia*.] The weather changed and it rained all night. Although we were in the shelter of a great Strobilus pine our clothing and our covers were soaked. About the middle of the night I went to the cabin of the Indians, which could scarcely hold the family composed of eight persons, men and women. There were besides six big dogs who added to the filth of this apartment and to its inconveniences. The fire was placed in the middle without any opening in the top of the cabin to let the smoke out; there were plenty of holes, however, to let the rain through the roof of this house. An Indian came to take my place by the fire and offered me his bed which was a bear's skin. But finally the rain having stopped and annoyed by the dogs which kept biting each other continually to keep their place by the fire, I returned to the camp.

This place which is called the source of the Keowee is incorrectly so indicated. It is the junction of two other rivers or large torrents which unite at this place and which is known only as the forks of the Keowee.

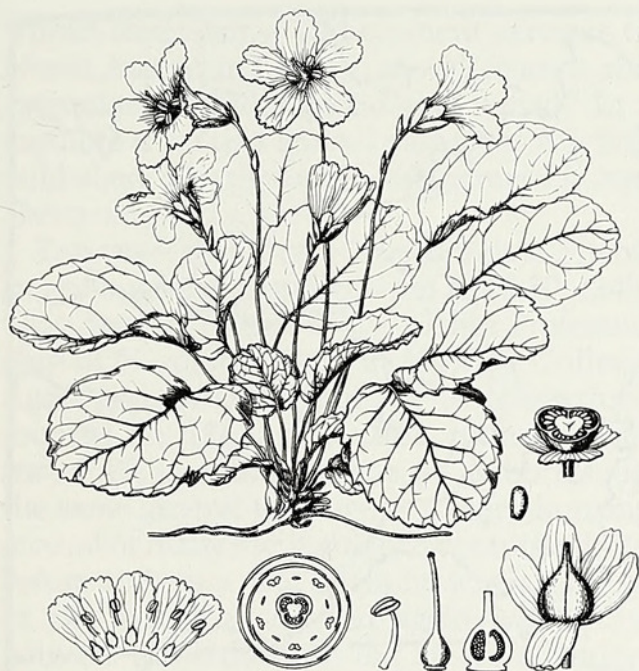
On December 11 it froze hard and the air was clear and keen. I noted a chain of high mountains which extended from west to east and where the frost was little felt in places exposed to the sun. I gathered a *Juniperus [repens]* which I had not yet seen in the southern part of the United States but it must be noted that I saw on these mountains several trees of the northern regions such as *Betula nigra*, *Cornus alternifolia*, *Pinus strobus*, *Abies*, Spruce, etc. We crossed a space of about three miles in the midst of *Rhododendron maximum*. I came back to camp with my guide at the head of the Keowee and gathered a large quantity of the low woody plants with the saw-toothed leaves that I found the day I arrived. I did not see it on any other mountain. The Indians of the place told me that the leaves had a good taste when chewed and the odor was agreeable when they were crushed, which I found to be the case.

[Michaux's directions for finding *Shortia*]

The head of the Keowee is the junction of two torrents of considerable size which flow in cascades from the high mountains. This junction takes place in a small plain where there was once a Cherokee village. On descending from the junction of these two torrents with the river to one's left and the mountains which face north on the right, one finds at about 200-300 feet from the junction, a path formed by the Indian hunters. It leads to a brook where one recognizes the site of an Indian village by the peach trees which still exist in the midst of the underbrush. Continuing on this path one soon reaches the mountains and one finds this plant which covers the ground along with the *Epigaea repens*.

In his journal for April 8, 1839, Gray records the find in the herbarium of the Paris Museum which immediately aroused his interest:

"But I have something better than all this to tell you. I have discovered a new genus in Michaux's herbarium—at the end, among *plantae ignotae*. It is from that great unknown region, the high mountains of North Carolina. We have the fruit, with the persistent calyx and style, but no flowers, and a guess that I made about its affinities has been amply borne out on examination by Decaisne and myself. It is allied to *Galax*, but is 'un très distinct genus,' having axillary one-flowered scapes (the flower large and a style that of a *Pyrola*, long and declined). Indeed I hope it



C. E. Faxon's drawing of *Shortia galacifolia*, first published in *Garden and Forest* in 1888. From the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum.

will settle the riddle about the family of *Galax*, and prove Richard to be right when he says *Ordo Ericarum*. I claim the right of a discoverer to affix the name. So I say, as this is a good North American genus and comes from near Kentucky, it shall be christened *Shortia*, to which we will stand as godfathers. So *Shortia galacifolia*, Torr. and Gr., it shall be. I beg you to inform Dr. Short, and to say that we will lay upon him no greater penalty than this necessary thing—that he make a pilgrimage to the mountains of Carolina this coming summer and procure the flowers."

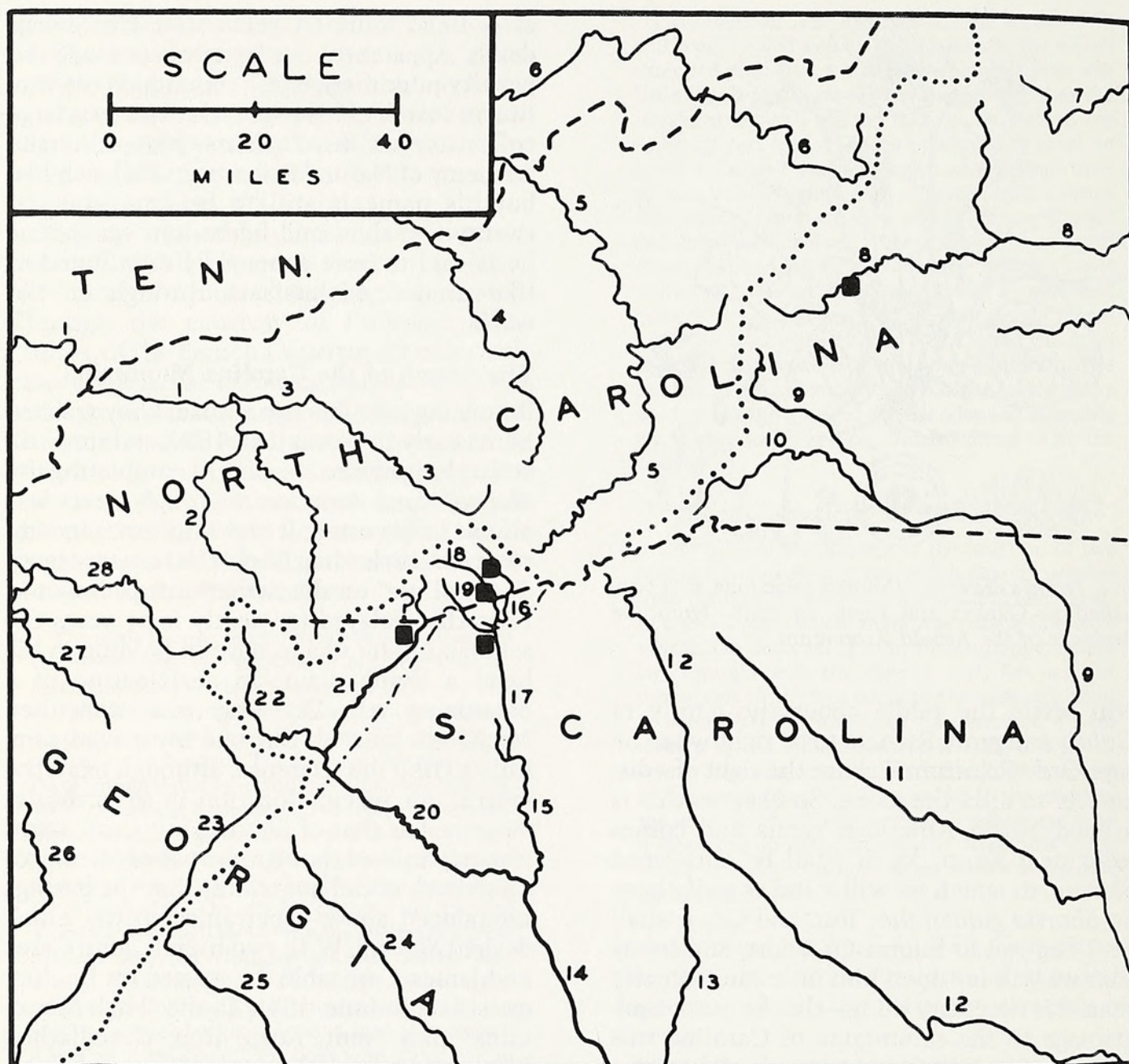
Charles Wilkins Short (1794–1863) and Asa Gray never met. Their friendship was founded on a voluminous correspondence and a mutual respect for the botanical writings and attainments of each other. Both had been graduated in medicine and both were college instructors in science. Short was Gray's senior by sixteen years. He never saw the dainty little plant so honorably named, nor the dried specimen in the Paris herbarium. This and the few lines in Torrey and Gray's *Flora of North America* were all that were definitely known

of it until fourteen years after Dr. Short's death. Apparently the latter never made the penalty pilgrimage to the mountains of Carolina in search of his namesake. His own large collection of dried plants passed to the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, but his name is still to be found on the twenty-five thousand herbarium specimens he is said to have generously distributed to like-minded enthusiasts throughout the world.

The Search of the Carolina Mountains

Returning from his trip abroad, Gray reached home early in November, 1839, and immediately plunged into the task of completing the *Flora of North America*. *Shortia*, however, was always in his mind. It was Michaux's incomplete and misleading label "Hautes montagnes de Caroline" on the herbarium specimen in Paris that delayed for nearly forty years the satisfaction he was to have in holding in his hand a living plant. In anticipation of a botanizing trip Dr. Gray now consulted Michaux's journal. But one must read carefully to find the reference, although in all the journal no species location is so faithfully described as that of *Shortia*, but Gray unfortunately missed the significance of Michaux's directions, or did not realize that the passage reproduced above appertained to the much desired *Shortia*. With two friends, John Carey and James Constable, he started on his first quest late in June, 1841. To the "High Mountains" they went, Roan, Iron, Grandfather, Black, and others, all over 5000 feet in height. Michaux had also visited them. He recorded in his journal that on the 30th of August, 1794, standing on the summit of Grandfather, which he thought was the highest peak in all the Appalachians, he and his guide, John Davenport, had chanted the Marseillaise and cried "Vive l'Amérique et la République Française, Vive la Liberté!"

The Gray exploring party made its headquarters in the little town of Jefferson, the county seat of Ashe County, North Carolina. None of the party knew that *Shortia* flowered



A map showing the limited distribution of *Shortia* in the southern Appalachian mountains, as known in 1950. Since that time some new populations have been located, but others have been destroyed as a result of flooding associated with reservoir construction. Reprinted from *Rhodora*, volume 52, 1950.

in late March or early April, nor did they know at what altitude it grew. Reporting on his extended trip in a classical account which he wrote for Sir William J. Hooker, Gray says: "We were unsuccessful in our search for a remarkable undescribed plant with a habit of *Pyrola* and the foliage of *Galax*, which was

obtained in the high mountains of Carolina. The only specimen extant is among the 'Plantae incognitae' of the Michauxian herbarium, in fruit only; and we were anxious to obtain flowering specimens, that we might complete its history; as I have long wished to dedicate the plant to Professor Short, of Kentucky,

whose attainments and eminent services to North American botany are well known and appreciated both at home and abroad." In a footnote from this quoted passage is the first published description of the genus *Shortia* Torrey and Gray.

Two years passed and the position at Michigan having been abandoned, on April 30, 1842, Gray was appointed to the Fisher Professorship of Natural History at Harvard College. Again *Shortia* called him and for nearly three months in 1843, this time with another friend, William S. Sullivant, he herborized in the same general territory, the happy hunting ground of many distinguished botanists, both before and since. But again he was searching in the wrong place and again was disappointed. In neither trip did he come within many miles of where the little plant had been first discovered.

Dr. John Torrey was the first to suggest, as early as 1852, that *Shortia* was probably an early spring plant and further that it might disappear after flowering and perfecting its seed. "One should be pretty early on the ground to find it in flower," he wrote Dr. Short who was anticipating a journey to the Carolina mountains in quest of it. John Carey about the same time was urging Dr. Short to ascertain the name and whereabouts of Michaux's old guide, John Davenport, from whom he might learn his track "in general if not in particular."

Rediscovery at Last!

It was in May, 1877, that seventeen-year-old George McQueen Hyams (1861-1932) of Statesville, N.C., found *Shortia* growing on the banks of the Catawba River near Marion, the county seat of McDowell County, N.C., some seventy miles in a direct line from the site of Michaux's discovery. His father, M. E. Hyams (1819-1891), was an herbalist but did not know the plant and eighteen months later sent a specimen for identification to a friend, Joseph W. Congdon of East Greenwich, R.I. He in turn wrote Dr. Gray telling him he thought he had *Shortia*. The latter wrote "Send it on"

and at last the search of nearly forty years was at an end. Dr. Gray was triumphant. "No other botanist has the news," he hastened to write, on October 21, 1878, to his close friend and fellow botanist William M. Canby, who was to be the first to share with him the jubilation over the rediscovery. In the period of forty years of waiting, many deserved honors had come to him, including college degrees and memberships in fifty learned and cultural societies throughout the world. A few months previously he had been elected a member of the Academie des Sciences of the Institut de France, one of the most coveted rewards to a scientific man. Yet the discovery he was communicating to his friend, "has given me," he said, "a hundred times the satisfaction that the election to the Institut did." And then he continues: "If you will come here I can show you what will delight your eyes and cure you effectively of the skeptical spirit you used to have about *Shortia galacifolia*. It is before me with corolla and all from North Carolina! Think of that! My long faith rewarded at last."

Dr. Gray wrote to M. E. Hyams, October 27, 1878, telling him how much immortality had been lost for his son by not sending the specimen when it was found eighteen months before, in order that the description might have been included in the edition of the Flora which had gone to press in the meantime, but promising to make his name famous through an article in "Silliman's Journal pro tem." He also informed M. E. Hyams that he or Mr. Canby, or both, would be down the following May, call for the boy, and ask to be taken to the spot. Mr. Hyams in replying, October 31, tells of the finding of the plants: "We were passing along the road and my attention was called to an elevated hillside that I could not ascend as being at the time rather exhausted, being sixty years old, requested him [his son] to ascend and bring whatever was in flower. I have forgotten the locality, but he is fully known to it, as he lived within two miles of the place for several years."

Now that a definite station for *Shortia* had been located, Dr. Gray early in the spring of

1879 organized a real excursion to see it growing in the wild. Mrs. Gray and her brother with the latter's wife and their two daughters and his botanical friends, William M. Canby of Wilmington, Del., Dr. Charles S. Sargent of Brookline, Mass., and J. H. Redfield of Philadelphia, Penna., composed the party. The four principals of the party arrived in Statesville, N.C., by train and were entertained by a Mr. Wallace, a leading citizen of the town. Redfield wrote a full account of the trip but only that portion relating to *Shortia* is included here. He says: "The recent rediscovery of *Shortia* in North Carolina has created much interest among botanists. . . . Searches repeated in the course of many years had proved fruitless, so that to the botanical fraternity and particularly to the author of the genus the recovery was somewhat like that of a long lost child. . . . The object was not only to see *Shortia* but to find more of it if possible and to explore some portions of the mountains which the oldest member of the party [Dr. Gray] had visited in 1841 and 1843. . . .

"A visit to the root and herb warehouse belonging to Wallace Brothers and under the charge of Mr. Hyams, furnished evidence that this branch of industry has reached an extent and importance of which few are aware. The printed catalogue of indigenous plants, dealt in by this house, enumerates about 630 species. . . . These simples find a large market, both in this country and Europe, and the orders come mainly from the wholesale druggists and the manufacturers of patent medicines. Think of a single order for fifteen tons of *Hepatica triloba*! . . .

"Being now in McDowell County, the *Shortia* locality was visited under the guidance of Mr. George M. Hyams, the actual discoverer. In the secluded and well-protected station, well overshadowed by Rhododendrons and Magnolias, was seen the little colony of the plant, so long sought and by many so long doubted. Its companions were *Mitchella repens*, *Asarum virginicum* and *Galax aphylla*. The space over which the plant extended was perhaps 10 feet by 30 and in all

there may have been 50 to 100 plants. As the plant multiplies by stolons it is remarkable that its area should be thus restricted and since in the struggle for life of two allied plants the weaker 'must go,' Dr. Gray suggested the possibility that its stronger cousin, the *Galax*, had crowded out the *Shortia*. And here indeed, in what may be the last foothold of the rarity, *Galax* appeared to be actually doing so. Yet the plants, though comparatively few, were vigorous and healthy. Other stations may be looked for; but they must be hard to find. When we consider the long search which has been made for this plant, how all the mountain region of the Carolinas and Tennessee has been examined by the sharp optics of Buckley, Rugel, M. A. Curtis, Dr. Gray, Canby, Le Roy and Ruger, the Vaseys, elder and younger, Chickering and others, it is very certain that if there be other localities they must be 'few and far between.' " . . .

Dr. Sargent Finds *Shortia*

Dr. Sargent was not satisfied with the meager results of the search for *Shortia* in 1879 and again visited the Carolinas in the early autumn of 1886 hunting for *Magnolia cordata*, mentioned by Michaux. At Sapphire, Transylvania County, N.C., he and Mr. Stiles, who accompanied him, were met by Frank E. Boynton of Highlands. One evening after a botanizing trip Dr. Sargent produced a leaf and asked what it was. Mr. Boynton thought it might be *Galax* but examining it more closely said he did not know. Mr. Stiles jokingly said: "That is *Shortia*," and it turned out so to be. It was a coincidence that in the evening mail the following letter arrived from Dr. Gray:

September 17, 1886

My dear Sargent:

Would I were with you. I can only say crown yourself with glory by discovering a habitat—the original habitat of *Shortia* which we will believe Michaux found near where *Magnolia cordata* came from in that first expedition.

Yours, ever,
Asa Gray

Unfortunately Dr. Sargent could not recall where he had found the *Shortia* leaf. He and his party had travelled all day over rough mountain country searching for *Magnolia cordata*. So the two Boynton brothers were sent back to locate the growing plants from which the leaf had been plucked. Frank Boynton remembered that Dr. Sargent and he had passed through Bear Camp, a small settlement on Bear Camp Creek, a little stream flowing into the Horse Pasture River, which in turn enters the Keowee. Here they found *Shortia* and gathered a small amount, and it was one of these living plants which Dr. Sargent placed in Dr. Gray's hands as coming from the Michaux land, "the headwaters of the Keowee," for it was at this place that Michaux first

found it on December 8, 1788. . . .

As has been stated, up to the time of the rediscovery of *Shortia* Dr. Gray had received fifty honorary degrees and memberships in learned societies. Twenty-one more were to come to him before his death, which occurred January 30, 1888. He was buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, Mass., where a simple stone bearing a cross marks his last resting place. It may not be too late to suggest that, with the soil properly prepared, there might be planted on his grave an ever green and ever beautiful blanket of the little flower which he so loved and which he pronounced "perhaps the most interesting plant in North America."



Jenkins, Charles F. 1991. "Asa Gray and His Quest for *Shortia galacifolia*." *Arnoldia* 51(4), 5–11.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/223944>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/250772>

Holding Institution

Smithsonian Libraries and Archives

Sponsored by

Biodiversity Heritage Library

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: In Copyright. Digitized with the permission of the rights holder

Rights Holder: Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University

License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Rights: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/permissions/>

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.