

WHO WAS JOHN TORREY'S "PROF." SHELTON LOST ON THE STEAMBOAT *JENNY LIND*?*

JOSEPH EWAN **

SUMMARY

"Prof." C—— C—— Shelton, place and date of birth unknown, collected plants for John Torrey in the mountains above Sacramento. Letters and records not located. He was associated with the artist Paul Emert of New York City, but no record of Shelton's association with founders of California Academy of Sciences were found unless perhaps with Albert Kellogg. Shelton, a victim of the *Jenny Lind* steamboat explosion, collected four California species first named by Torrey.

Naming things, said Henry van Dyke, is one of the oldest and simplest of human pastimes. But *who* was the moss or the mint named for? A modest search tells us *Timmia*, according to Dryander, was named for a consul and pharmacist in the German town of Malchin. For some commemorative names we know a good deal about the man: Henry Nicholas Bolander for whom several California mosses have been named, for example. But when the botanist-librarian Clifton F. Smith asked me if I knew anything of a certain "Mr. Shelton, California Botanist in Traveling Costume" and provided me with a likeness which he had discovered as a loose print in a Santa Barbara bookshop, I admitted with surprise and delight that perhaps a mint, *Monardella sheltoni*, memorialized him. In any event, I would begin a search.¹

Shelton belongs to the Gold Rush, in the company of Nuttall's protégé William Gambel, the New York taxidermist, John Graham Bell, who collected birds for Cassin in Philadelphia, and Audubon's son, John Woodhouse Audubon, who made the overland journey across Northern Mexico to San Diego before hastening to the gold fields. In the seven months after gold was discovered (on January 24th, 1848, on the American River by James W. Marshall who noticed yellow grains in the tailrace), four thousand men had reached the mines. By the end of the year, ten thousand had arrived, and President Polk declared the richness of the strike was enough to pay for the Mexican War one hundred times over. On December 7th, 230 ounces of gold were delivered to Washington in a tea caddy. One year later, the historian Bancroft estimated, 81,000 people had reached California, 42,000 overland.² Benjamin Silliman wrote to the British geologist Gideon Mantell, March 31, 1849, "I agree with you as to the pernicious influence which this 'auri sacra fames' may pro-

*To each in particular ways I am sincerely grateful: the Bancroft Library, Berkeley, for unique materials; Dr. Larry Heckard, Jepson Herbarium, Univ. Calif.; Lois Chambers Stone, Berkeley; Dr. Elizabeth McClintock, San Francisco; Ray Brian, Librarian, California Academy of Sciences; Barney Lipscomb, Herbarium, Southern Methodist Univ.; Clifton Smith, Santa Barbara Museum Nat. Hist.; and James A. Servies, Librarian, Univ. West Florida, Pensacola; Howard Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane Univ., New Orleans, La; and Richard Dillon, Mill Valley, Calif.

**Biology Dept., Tulane University, New Orleans, La.



MR. SHELTON, THE CALIFORNIA BOTANIST.

duce . . . [But] many excellent men have gone from [New Haven] and from other parts of New England, and they will, I trust, prove a pioneer pilgrim band, . . . will establish good institutions and laws, and remain behind and possess the land."³ Among the "excellent men" was Dr. John Boardman Trask, 29, who had travelled with the young Audubon, and who was among the seven founders of the California Academy of Natural Sciences in San Francisco.⁴ There was Dr. John Davis Babcock Stillman who sent plants to Torrey and who had shipped on the *Pacific*—cost: \$300; passage, 194 days—from New York to San Francisco. A third physician, Timothy Langdon Andrews, also sent plants to Torrey. That "Prof. Shelton" should send a mint, a violet, and a "California nutmeg" to Torrey is in the flush of the Gold Rush.

Most of these plant curiosities of the Gold Rush eventually reached John Torrey at New York, Asa Gray at Harvard, or George Engelmann at St. Louis. A few specimens were delivered to Albert Kellogg, another Fortyniner, at the Academy in San Francisco. Some reached Europe, but how many were lost with the cargoes that hurtled down the gorges of the Sierra Nevada with over-burdened burros?

"Prof. C. C. Shelton" according to James Mason Hutchings of Yosemite, who evidently knew him, was in Texas when the Gold Rush began.⁵ While Shelton was a resident in Texas, Asiatic cholera swept his town, killing his mother, brother-in-law, and nephew. He left soon after for Mexico where he worked as a gardener on Mexican estates. During his stay there he administered with great success a remedy for the cholera discovered in India, but about which he had learned in Texas. Sometime in 1850, if we follow the imprecise account by Hutchings, he left for Mazatlan and took passage for San Francisco. Evidently he went directly to the diggings, not for gold, but for plants. During the Fall of 1851 a correspondent of *Hutchings' California Magazine*, identified only as "M.D." met Prof. Shelton at the Bear Hotel in Sacramento where the artist Paul Emert was proprietor. Could this "M.D." have been Dr. Albert Kellogg who, we know, was in the gold district above Sacramento at this time? Emert "subsequently became his traveling companion, to sketch the beauties of California horticulture." "M.D." saw Shelton's room completely filled in a "most glorious confusion" with "hundreds, if not thousands of specimens of the different productions of California." In the yard were "barrels, boxes, bags," too large or dirt-filled to be stored in the hotel room. Shelton told "M.D." that he planned an exhibition. "At this time he had not a dime in his pocket to meet his expenses; and although he had been in the location of the diggings, where men were taking out gold at from ten to fifty dollars per day each, he did not look for gold, but would rather gather the beautiful floral specimens around him. . . . He found some few men who entered into his views and afforded him means to continue his investigations. Then he employed an artist to accompany him to

make drawings of the beautiful flowers he met with." During 1851 Shelton opened what "M.D." called a "museum of natural curiosities" in San Francisco mostly of minerals⁶ but, Hutchings remarked, "gold, gold, gold was the engrossing thought of the people then," and the museum did not pay expenses. Shelton began arranging for the State Agricultural Fair that would feature the California fruits and vegetables which he believed excelled those of other states and should be grown more widely. "He saw, but in a little way in the future, an immense State, densely populated, depending on Chili, the Sandwich Islands, Mexico, Oregon, and even the Atlantic States, for produce to sustain life, which with little trouble, could be raised, of better quality and far cheaper, at their own doors." In the winter of 1853 Shelton was in New York City and delivered a specimen of the "California nutmeg" to John Torrey who must have informed Messrs. Parsons and Co. of Flushing. Without delay, Flushing sent a person to California "for the express purpose of collecting the ornamental and useful plants of that country" and returned with "ripe and fresh seeds" for propagation. Parsons Nursery had been founded in 1838 by Samuel B. Parsons (1819–1906).⁷ We do not know how Torrey learned of "Prof. Shelton." Unfortunately no letters to or from Shelton have been located. We know from Josiah Hoopes's informative *Book of Evergreens* (New York, 1868) that Parsons had "undoubtedly" the best commercial collection of conifers. Incidentally, the enterprising William Lobb, then on the prowl for California novelties for Veitch, purveyor to English garden and greenhouse, noticed *Torreya* about the same time—perhaps as early as 1851—and sent specimens to England.⁸ In the race to announce the new species, Torrey won with his publication of *Torreya californica* on February 3rd, 1854; William Jackson Hooker, who, evidently not knowing of the Shelton discovery, published *Torreya myristica* on May 1st! According to James H. Veitch, in his *Hortus Veitchii*, David Douglas had discovered the tree in the course of his travels in California some years before.

While on his visit in the East, Shelton visited a gentleman in Philadelphia who owned a large tract of land in California. He, in cooperation with a California landowner in New York, "entered into a very liberal arrangement" with Shelton, allowing him unrestricted permission to cultivate their lands for five years, providing cash for seeds, transportation back to California, and the salary of an experienced farmer to assist him—in short, all expenses. Shelton was to retain half of the profits. He arrived back in San Francisco in mid-February 1853. On April 4th there was held the first meeting of the California Academy of Natural Sciences at Lewis W. Sloat's office at 129 Montgomery Street. There is no record that Shelton was aware of the meeting. On April 11th he was a passenger on the steamboat *Jenny Lind* on its regular river run for Sacramento. "Just as she got abreast of the Pulgos Rancho, the plate on the after head

of her boiler blew out, sweeping away, in its course, and followed by the whole body of steam, the cabin bulk head and the exhaustion pipe of the engine."⁹ The "dinner bell had just been rung" in the cabin, empty only five minutes before. The passengers had been seated and were in direct line with the boiler. Eighteen perished at once, including Shelton. Thirty persons were "badly scalded." Steamboat explosions were then only too well known. All, old and young, were known to be in danger of being scalded to death. After the tragedy Hutchings wrote that Shelton had "seemed about to realize the fulfillment of his cherished hopes, to reap the reward of his persevering efforts. . . Alas! Poor Shelton!"

It was the portrait reproduced here that J. M. Hutchings noticed in *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion* (Boston) for Saturday, Sept. 16, 1854, page 165, that induced him to write about the late "Prof. C. C. Shelton." On the same page in the *Companion* is a drawing of the Mariposa Lily, *Calochortus*, correctly shown there as 3-petaled (note the error in the portrait!). We may assume that the artist was Paul Emert. The quotation accompanying the Mariposa on page 165 from a "San Francisco paper," which had appeared while Shelton was still alive, states that he travelled over the state more widely than we have otherwise learned. "He has done, and is doing more to develop the real resources of California, to promote her prosperity and add to the happiness of her citizens, than every quartz crushing machine, pick axe and long ton, from Klamath to San Diego."

What were Shelton's botanical records? The only record that Torrey had learned of the early death of Shelton is his reference to the "late Mr. Shelton" when he published in the *New York Journal of Pharmacy* 3 (1854) 49 on the discovery of the second species of *Torreyia*. Why this notice was missed by William Henry Brewer when he summarized the collectors in the *Botany of California* (1880)¹⁰ may have been due to not seeing that short article. *Torreyia californica* represented the first Shelton collection to be reported upon by Torrey. Andrew D. Rodgers III,¹¹ telling the life of Torrey, adds another ingredient, the existence of a drawing of the California nutmeg. "About 1852 Lobb or one Shelton had found this tree in the Sierra Nevada, and drawing it, reported it to Torrey." Torrey reported that he had lately heard, surely through his correspondents in England, that Lobb had sent seeds to Veitch. But the drawing, if ever sent to Torrey, was not Shelton's but certainly Paul Emert's drawing made at Shelton's bidding.

Next, Torrey commemorated Shelton in the name *Monardella sheltoni*, 1855, but the Henry Pratten collection represents the type. For *Viola sheltoni*, 1857, it is John M. Bigelow's specimen which stands as the type. Torrey had labelled a Shelton collection "*Gilia divaricata*" noting only the general locality, "foothills of the Sierra Nevada." Later Asa Gray published Torrey's herbarium name in 1870.¹² Five of Shelton's collec-

tions, namely *Orobanche comosa* Hook., *Penstemon centranthifolius* Benth., *Cordylanthus filifolius* Nutt., *Monardella candicans* Benth., and *Pogogyne douglasii* Benth., are merely noticed in *Botany of the Mexican Boundary Survey*, and with minimal record of localities.¹³

QUERIES

- 1) Shelton's "herbarium consists of many thousands of pressed flowers. and where the originals could not be preserved, colored drawings[;] while he has procured, in person, specimens from almost every quartz vein in the strata" (Hayes, "California Notes I. 108, 1854-1856," Bancroft Library, Berkeley). Perhaps Shelton's dried plants were lost in the Sacramento flood of March, 1852, or the fire of November 3, the same year?
- 2) Rev. Frederic William Shelton (1815-1881), Episcopal minister in New York and Vermont, son of Nathan Shelton, M.D., published *Gold Mania*. Any possible connection with Prof. C. C. Shelton?
- 3) Shelton met Paul Emert (or Emmert) of New York City at Sacramento. According to Groce and Wallace, *Dictionary of Artists in America, 1564-1860* (Yale Univ. Press, 1957), the two artists Emmert and Penfield exhibited "Original Panorama of the Gold Mines" in New York City and elsewhere during 1850-51. J. R. K. Kantor, "Twelve drawings by Paul Emmert," *Bancroftiana* no. 60 (1975) 10-12, tells of his California days. Distinct but relevant art is a view of Downieville in 1856 done by Charles and Emil Dresel, reproduced by Joseph Henry Jackson, *Gold Rush Album* (Scribner's, New York, 1949), 212-213, where it is noted that "Necessary supplies were brought in from Marysville over seventy-odd miles of pack trails."

Among the "phantom books" for which a California copyright was filed January 24, 1852, by "C. A. Shelton," no copy was located by Edith M. Coulter, *Calif. Hist. Soc. Quart.* 22 (1943): 33. One is entitled *Miners Prospecting and Miner's Cabin, Result of the Day* (*Lithograph engravings*) which would seem to relate also to Emert. Did Shelton and Emert collaborate on the "phantom books?" A note in the Almarin B. Paul (d. 1909) scrapbook at the Bancroft Library, Berkeley, reads that Emert "later went to Hawaii."

- 4) Now for the bryohistorian: Who was the "Mrs. Atwater" who collected *Bryum atwateriae* Müll. on "wet rocks at Yosemite Falls?" And who was "Mrs. J. Roy" who collected *Hypnum royae* Austin in "California?"

NOTES

1. J. H. Barnhart, *Biographical Notes upon Botanists* (New York, "1965" 1966) 3: 268, "Rev. Mr. Shelton" is based on a citation in *Bot. Calif.* (1876) 1: 58, followed by other

- authors. Viola Brainerd Baird, *Wild Violets of North America* (Berkeley, 1942) 62, enlarges on "Rev. Mr. Shelton" with the statement that he botanized "about 1857" in California, but, as Elliott Coues would remark, she must have meant botanizing in the fields of asphodel. Prof. W. L. Jepson, who searched with limited success to identify Shelton, noted in his ms Field Books a reference to Margaret W. Johnson, *Our Methodist Pioneers* (Berkeley, 1938) 29. There will be found a sketch of "Rev. J. C. Shelton," relating that he "joined the gold rush" and lived in Grass Valley. This "Rev. J. C. Shelton" proves from the careful checking by Barney Lipscomb of Southern Methodist University, at my request, to be James Gilbert Shelton (1829–1897). His career may be traced in *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, from 1854 to 1897. He was not the "Prof. C. C. Shelton" who botanized for John Torrey.
2. Prospecting in libraries in the voluminous literature on the Gold Rush, just as with those fortunes sought among the Digger pines, yields ore of low value. W. P. Morrell, *Gold Rushes* (New York, 1941) Chap. IV. "California" with its bibliography is a good vein.
 3. G. P. Fisher, *Life of Benjamin Silliman, M.D., LL.D.* (New York, 1866) 2: 224–225.
 4. J. Ewan, "San Francisco as a Mecca for Nineteenth Century Naturalists," in *Century of Progress in the Natural Sciences, 1853–1953*, ed., E. L. Kessel (San Francisco, 1955) 1–63, with roster of references to persons.
 5. *Hutchings California Magazine* 3 (Oct. 1858) 172–176. The account is based on the meeting of Hutchings and Shelton in San Francisco in the winter of 1852. For life and writings of James Mason Hutchings (1818–1902), see F. P. Farquhar, *Yosemite, Big Trees, and the High Sierra* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1948) 18–21, 73–77, and Franklin Walker, *San Francisco's Literary Frontier* (New York, 1939) 28 *et passim*.
 6. *The Alta California* (San Francisco) reported on October 4, 1851, that "Mr. Shelton, the botanist and mineralogist, has made the [Vigilance] Committee a valuable donation from his collection" toward a public library and museum (*Calif. Hist. Soc. Quart.* 28 (1949) 35).
 7. U. P. Hedrick, *History of Horticulture in America to 1860* (New York, 1950) 245; and *New York Jour. Pharmacy* 3 (1854) 49, 51.
 8. J. Ewan, "William Lobb, Plant hunter for Veitch and messenger of the Big Tree," *Univ. Calif. Publ. Bot.* 67 (1973) 21.
 9. "Awful Steamboat Explosion!" *Alta California* (San Francisco) for April 12 (1853), p. 2, col. 3, where his name appears as "Mr. C. A. Shelton."
 10. W. H. Brewer, "List of persons who have made botanical collections in California," *Botany of California* (1880) 2: 553–559. This near classic account of wide usefulness does not mention Shelton—a singular fact when Brewer, who knew the gold district intimately, would be expected to have heard of Shelton and the tragedy of the *Jenny Lind*. Brewer's journals, excellently amplified by Francis P. Farquhar and published as *Up and Down California* (Yale Univ. Press, 1930), pay particular attention to plant lore.
 11. Andrew Denny Rodgers III, *John Torrey. A Story of North American Botany* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1942) 242. C. S. Sargent, *Silva* (1896) 10: 60, certainly misspelled the name as "Mr. Sheldon."
 12. *Monardella sheltoni* Torr. in Durand, *Jour. Acad. Nat. Sci. Phila.* ser. 2. 3 (1855) 99. Carl Epling, monographer of the genus, selected the Pratten coll. from Nevada [City], Nevada Co., Calif. as the type, *Annals Missouri Bot. Gard.* 12 (1925) 50. *Viola sheltoni* Torr., Pacific RR. Rep. 4 (1857) 67. pl. 2, based on J. M. Bigelow coll. from Yuba River near Downieville, acc. W. L. Jepson, *Flora Calif.* (1936) 2: 519. *Gilia divaricata* Torr. is now *Navarretia divaricata* (Torr.) Greene.
 13. *Mexican Boundary Survey, Botany* (1859) 2: 110, 115, 120, and 129. *Penstemon centranthifolius* may relate to Shelton's southern California visit, otherwise these species are associated with the plains and foothills of Sacramento.



Ewan, Joseph. 1981. "Who was John Torrey's "Prof." Shelton lost on the Steamboat Jenny Lind." *Occasional papers of the Farlow Herbarium of Cryptogamic Botany* 16, 59–65. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.317791>.

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