

**Benjamin Smith Barton**  
**journals ; notebooks, 1785-1806**  
**1785-1806**  
**Mss.B.B284.1**

American Philosophical Society  
105 South Fifth Street  
Philadelphia, PA, 19106  
215-440-3400  
[manuscripts@amphilsoc.org](mailto:manuscripts@amphilsoc.org)

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## Summary Information

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<b>Repository</b>	American Philosophical Society
<b>Creator</b>	Barton, Benjamin Smith, 1766-1815
<b>Title</b>	Benjamin Smith Barton journals ; notebooks, 1785-1806
<b>Date [inclusive]</b>	1785-1806
<b>Call number</b>	Mss.B.B284.1
<b>Extent</b>	0.5 Linear feet 2 boxes; 2 volumes
<b>Location</b>	LH-MV-C-2 (B B284.1); LH-MV-E-1 (B B284.2)
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Container</b>	1-2
<b>Container</b>	1-2
<b>Abstract</b>	<p>This collection includes notes and an unpublished manuscript (275 pages), entitled "Journals and Note-books of Benjamin Smith Barton, 1785-1806," by Waldo L. McAtee. The manuscript includes an introduction with biographical and bibliographical notes, an annotated glossary-index, and an indexed bibliography of works referred to in the various journals. The photocopies of journals and notebooks by Barton include his survey of the boundary of western Pennsylvania and Ohio, 1785; a commonplace book, 1789; journey through New York to Niagara Falls, 1797; Pennsylvania journal, 1798; visit to Virginia, 1802 (published); Salt Pond Mountain, Virginia, 1806; notes on vertebrates and miscellany.</p>

## Background note

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Benjamin Smith Barton (1766-1815, APS 1759) was a physician, naturalist, and professor at the University of Pennsylvania. He was one of the central figures in Philadelphia's early national scientific establishment. Having received his medical training in European universities, Barton was appointed Professor at the University of Pennsylvania in 1789, lecturing on botany, materia medica, and natural history. A prolific author, he established his reputation as one of the nation's preeminent botanists through his botanical text book *The Elements of Botany* (1803), but his contributions to zoology, ethnology, and medicine were equally noteworthy. Barton's monograph on the "fascinating faculty" of the rattlesnake and his efforts in historical linguistics ( *New Views of the Origin of the Tribes and Nations of America*, 1798) were widely read, and his *Philadelphia Medical and Physical Journal* (1804-1809) was one of the nation's first medical journals and an important outlet for natural historical research.

Benjamin Smith Barton was born in 1766 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. His parents were the Anglican priest Thomas Barton and his wife Esther Rittenhouse, sister of the celebrated astronomer David Rittenhouse (1732-1796, APS 1768). Barton spent the early years of his life near Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where his father ministered to the Native Americans. He studied at an academy in York. After he was orphaned at age fourteen he lived with his older brother in Philadelphia.

He evidently began his medical training in 1784 with Dr. William Shippen, Jr. (1736-1808, APS 1768), the Professor of Anatomy and Surgery at the College of Philadelphia (now the University of Pennsylvania). The following year he accompanied his uncle David Rittenhouse on an expedition to survey the western boundary of Pennsylvania. In 1786 Barton entered Edinburgh University under the recommendation of his mentors in Philadelphia, including Benjamin Rush (1745-1813, APS 1768). Ingratiating himself personally and distinguishing himself professionally, Barton joined both the Edinburgh Natural History Society and the Royal Medical Society, receiving the latter's Harveian Prize for his work on *Hyosciannus niger*, the black henbane. He also served as the Society's president from 1787 to 1788. In addition, the College of Pennsylvania awarded him an honorary M.A. in 1787. That year he also published his study of Indian mounds of North America, titled *Observations on some Parts of Natural History*. Such early signs of success, however, soon turned sour. By the winter of 1788, Barton withdrew from Edinburgh, claiming that he had been neglected by his professors, although it is equally plausible that he had worn out his welcome through his penchant for borrowing, and not readily repaying, money from colleagues, and perhaps from the Royal Medical Society.

Whatever the cause of Barton's departure from Edinburgh, depart he did, winding up in either the Netherlands or Germany by the fall of 1788 with no medical degree in hand. Later in life, Barton claimed to have taken a degree at the prestigious University of Göttingen, and when he was elected a member of the American Philosophical Society in January 1789, he was listed as Benjamin Smith Barton, M.D. However Göttingen has no record of granting a degree to Barton, and the timing makes it unlikely that he did: Barton returned to America during the fall of 1789 to become Professor of Natural History and Botany at the College of Philadelphia, a position he held until 1813. From 1796 to 1813, he was also Professor of Materia Medica, and from 1813 until his death in 1815, he served as Professor of the Theory

and Practice of Medicine and physician at the Pennsylvania Hospital. He received an honorary M.D. from the University of Kiel in 1796.

In Philadelphia, Barton rapidly established a reputation as one of the preeminent botanists in the nation, and he was frequently engaged as a public lecturer on scientific topics. His interest in systematic botany, materia medica, and Native American uses of plants blossomed into his best known and most popular work, *The Elements of Botany; or, Outlines of the Natural History of Vegetables* (1803), the first American botanical textbook. Impressed with the broad range of scholarship in the book, Thomas Jefferson asked Barton to assist Meriwether Lewis (1774-1809, APS 1803) in his scientific preparation for the Corps of Discovery. He was the recipient of the first plant specimens returned from the expedition, and, after Lewis' untimely death in 1809, Barton assisted in analyzing the natural historical results of the expedition. However, a natural history book on the expedition promised by Barton was never completed.

From his days at Edinburgh, Barton's interests were never strictly confined to botany nor contained within the walls of the academy. Throughout his tenure at the College of Philadelphia, he offered public lectures on all aspects of natural history, tailoring some to a specifically female audience. His research was both creative and original, reflecting an advanced understanding of the current state of Anglo-American scholarship. His brilliant *Memoir Concerning the Fascinating Faculty Which Has been Ascribed to the Rattle-Snake* (1796), for example, was an examination of the reputed power of rattlesnakes to fascinate their prey, and as such touched not only upon anatomy and zoology, but upon the nature of perception and the relation of body and mind. He also turned his attention to the mastodon, chemistry, mineralogy, meteorology, and electricity.

Most famously, Barton followed his mentor Benjamin Rush in becoming an important early national theorist of race, and he became consumed by his research into the culture, history, archaeology, and biology of American Indians. His *Hints on the Etymology of Certain English Words and on Their Affinity to Words in the Languages of Different European, Asiatic and American (Indian) Nations, in a Letter... to Thomas Beddoes* (1803) was an early effort in comparative linguistics that drew comparisons between American Indian languages and Welsh, and his *New Views of the Origin of the Tribes and Nations of America* (1798) was well received.

Even as his scientific and academic reputations burgeoned, Barton maintained an active medical practice as a member of the staff of the Pennsylvania Hospital. Perhaps his major contribution to medicine was as editor of the *Philadelphia Medical and Physical Journal* (1804-1809), one of the nation's earliest medical journals and an important source for scholarly work in natural history.

However, Barton was not without his detractors. Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827, APS 1786), among others, accused him of concealing sources of his work. Peale believed that Barton had held on to specimens intended for his museum, and even when it turned out that the shipment had simply been delayed, he did not alter his conviction that Barton "never scrupled to take the feathers of others to enrich his own plumage." Another cause for criticism was Barton's description and naming of a plant that André Michaux (1749-1802) had found in Virginia and given to John Bartram (1699-1777, APS 1768). Perhaps most significantly in a community of scientists that was characterized by a willingness to exchange information and specimens, Barton was reluctant to share.

Barton drew accolades for his work, beginning with his election to the American Philosophical Society in 1789. He served as the Society's vice president from 1802 to 1815, contributed actively to the *Transactions*, and was awarded the Magellanic Premium in 1804. He was also inducted as a member

of numerous American and foreign societies, including the Linnaean Society of London, the Swedish Royal Academy of Science, the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, the Danish Royal Society of Sciences, the Royal Danish Medical Society, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Massachusetts Historical Society, and a founder and first president of the Philadelphia Linnaean Society (1806). In 1809 he was elected president of the Philadelphia Medical Society, a position he held until his death.

In the spring of 1815, Barton traveled to Europe, possibly in an effort to improve his deteriorating health. He had been suffering from gout and hemorrhages for most of his life. However, the voyage did not bring the benefits he had hoped for. He died in New York City in December 1815, only a few weeks after his return. By the time of his death at age 49, Barton had become one of the best known citizens in the city of Philadelphia, one of the leaders in American medical education, and one of the more controversial figures in American natural history. He was survived by his wife of 18 years, Mary Pennington, and two children, Sarah Barton and Thomas Pennant Barton.

## Administrative Information

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### Publication Information

American Philosophical Society

## Provenance

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### Acquisition Information

Gift from Waldo L. McAtee and accessioned, 1955 (1955 695ms).

### Alternative Form Available

Part of this collection is available on microfilm (Film 1390).

### Original Location

Originals of the photocopies are in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

## Indexing Terms

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### Genre(s)

- Commonplace Book
- Maps and Surveys
- Travel Narratives and Journals

### Geographic Name(s)

- New York (State) -- Description and travel.
- Niagara Falls (N.Y. and Ont.)
- Ohio -- Description and travel.
- Pennsylvania -- Description and travel.
- Virginia -- Description and travel.

## **Personal Name(s)**

- McAtee, W. L.(Waldo Lee),1883-1962.

## **Subject(s)**

- Colony and State Specific History
- Pennsylvania History
- Surveying -- Ohio.
- Surveying -- Pennsylvania.
- Surveying and Maps

## **Other Descriptive Information**

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This collection contains a typescript copy of Benjamin Smith Barton's account books, diary, and travel log for the period 1785-1803. The material includes a commonplace book, his notes from surveying the state's western boundary in 1785, and travel journals to Niagara and Virginia. It was compiled by Waldo Atlee and contains a manuscript he wrote.



## Collection Inventory

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B B284.1 Journals and Notebooks from the  
Historical Society of Pennsylvania

2.0 box

Box 1-2

Includes photocopies of journals and notebooks by Barton include his survey of the boundary of western Pennsylvania and Ohio, 1785; a commonplace book, 1789; journey through New York to Niagara Falls, 1797; Pennsylvania journal, 1798; visit to Virginia, 1802 (published); Salt Pond Mountain, Virginia, 1806; notes on vertebrates and miscellany.

**Original Location**

Originals are located at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania

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**McAtee, W. L.(Waldo Lee),1883-1962.**

B B284.2 Journals and Note-books of  
Benjamin Smith Barton, 1785-1806

2.0 vols. 275 Volume 1-2  
pages

An unpublished manuscript which includes an introduction with biographical and bibliographical notes, an annotated glossary-index, and an indexed bibliography of works referred to in the various journals.

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