

**John Fothergill letters, 1737-1778**  
**1737-1750**  
**Mss.B.F82**

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## Table of Contents

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Summary Information .....	3
Background note .....	4
Scope & content .....	6
Administrative Information .....	7
Indexing Terms .....	7
Other Descriptive Information .....	8
Collection Inventory .....	9
Correspondence.....	9

## Summary Information

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<b>Repository</b>	American Philosophical Society
<b>Creator</b>	Fothergill, John, 1712-1780
<b>Title</b>	John Fothergill letters, 1737-1778
<b>Date [inclusive]</b>	1737-1750
<b>Call number</b>	Mss.B.F82
<b>Extent</b>	0.25 Linear feet 15 photocopies
<b>Extent</b>	15 photocopies.
<b>Location</b>	LH-B-17-4
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Container</b>	1
<b>Abstract</b>	All but one of these letters are to Charles Alston, the professor of botany at Edinburgh University, and concern medicine, botany, and science in general. They are dated between 1737 and 1750. One letter is to George Whately, dated 1778.

## Background note

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John Fothergill (1712–1780, APS 1770) was a British physician, naturalist, and philanthropist. A Quaker and a London physician, he published widely on medical topics, including an essay that offered the first accurate description of diphtheria. His studies in the natural sciences focused on conchology and botany. He was an acquaintance of many eminent figures who shared his passion for natural science, including Peter Collinson (1694–1768), John Bartram (1699-1777, APS 1768), and Benjamin Franklin. Even though Fothergill never visited the New World, he took an active interest in North American developments.

Fothergill was born in Yorkshire, the son of the farmer and Quaker John Fothergill and his wife Margaret Hough. His father traveled extensively as a preacher, including three times to North America. John attended a distinguished grammar school before being apprenticed to the well-known apothecary, bookseller, Quaker minister, and botanist Benjamin Bartlett. With Bartlett's encouragement, Fothergill studied medicine at Edinburgh University. He subsequently opened a practice in London.

In 1747 Fothergill published an *Account of the Sore-Throat Attended with Ulcers* which included the first detailed description of diphtheria. The book was an immediate success, and Fothergill soon became one of England's richest physicians. Over the following years, he produced over fifty papers on topics such as migraine, angina pectoris, obesity, epilepsy, and coffee. Among his close friends were the banker David Barclay and the merchant and botanist Peter Collinson. The latter introduced Fothergill to the work of the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778, APS 1769) and to John Bartram. After Collinson's death, Fothergill became the recipient of seeds sent by Bartram to London from North America. Collinson also introduced Fothergill to Benjamin Franklin. When Franklin fell ill after his arrival in London in 1757 he became Fothergill's patient, and the two became close friends. Fothergill was also an acquaintance of Franklin's friend George Whately.

In 1767 Fothergill was a leading figure in the movement to force the Royal College of Physicians to include licentiates in its government. Fothergill did not take part in the riot that ensued in June of that year, but he did assist the cause by raising funds for a legal challenge. This episode and the dismissal of the case in 1770 led to the formation of a rival society, the Society of Collegiate Physicians.

The success of his medical practice allowed Fothergill to acquire a large estate in Upton in Essex. There he maintained an extensive botanical garden as well as a large collection of insects, shells and drawings. In his studies of plants Fothergill was deeply influenced by the ideas of his friend Linnaeus, who later gave the scientific name *Fothergilla* to an American genus of witch hazel that Fothergill had introduced into England. The physician John Coakley Lettsom, one of Fothergill's protégés, eventually published a catalog of the plants in his garden.

Fothergill's interest in the North American colonies is evident in several of his activities. He corresponded on behalf of the English Friends Meeting with the Philadelphia Meeting, and he was a trustee of the Pennsylvania Land Company. In 1771 he raised funds for the New York Hospital. He opposed the Stamp Act, and he and Franklin encouraged the theologian and scientist Joseph Priestley

(1733-1804, APS 1785) to publish an essay in defense of the revolution. In 1777 he attempted with Barclay and Franklin to negotiate an agreement between the colonies and Britain in an effort to avert war.

Throughout his life Fothergill was a strict Friend, which is reflected in his many philanthropic endeavors. He consistently used his medical expertise, influence and personal wealth to improve the lives of the poor and oppressed. His services included free medical care to the poor and monetary donations to charitable causes. Furthermore, he did not hesitate to support what were then considered radical causes, such as the abolition of the slave trade, prisoner's health, the diet of the poor, and public baths. One of his final projects was the founding of the Ackworth School in Yorkshire which he intended as "a school for a plain education" of the children of Quakers.

In 1754 Fothergill was elected a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh. Seven years later he became a fellow of the Royal Society. In 1770 he was elected to the American Philosophical Society.

Fothergill never married. In 1780 he died of a urinary retention possibly caused by prostate cancer. Upon Fothergill's death Benjamin Franklin remarked that "I think a worthier man never lived."

## Scope & content

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The collection includes photographs of fifteen letters from Fothergill to Charles Alston, dated between 1737 and 1750. There is also one manuscript letter from Fothergill to George Whately, dated 1778. A typed table of contents is included in the box.

The letters to Alston deal primarily with medical matters. The detailed letter to Whately concerns Fothergill's diet, several mutual friends, and books he is reading.

## Administrative Information

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### Publication Information

American Philosophical Society

## Provenance

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### Acquisition Information

Presented by Betsy Copping Corner, 1959; accessioned, 1961 (1961 98ph).

### Original Location

Originals in Edinburgh University Library.

## Indexing Terms

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### Corporate Name(s)

- University of Edinburgh.

### Genre(s)

- General Correspondence
- Scientific Correspondence

### Personal Name(s)

- Alston, Charles, 1683-1760

### Subject(s)

- Botany.
- Education
- Medicine
- Medicine.
- Science.

## **Other Descriptive Information**

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The John Fothergill Letters Collection, 1737-1778 (bulk 1737-1750), consists of fourteen copies of letters Fothergill wrote. Most of the letters are addressed to Charles Aston and most discuss medicine.



## Correspondence

## Collection Inventory

## Correspondence

**Fothergill, John, 1712-1780**

Oct. 13, 1737

Letter to [Charles Alston]

London, Photo. of A.L.S. 2p. and add., end. Concerning rattlesnake root. Presented by Mrs. Corner; 1959.

**Fothergill, John, 1712-1780**

Sept. 16, 1738

Letter to [Charles Alston]

London, Photo. of A.L.S. 3p. Hopes to give lectures on medicine. Presented by Mrs. Corner; 1959.

**Fothergill, John, 1712-1780**

Nov. 11, 1738

Letter to [Charles Alston]

London, Photo. of A.L.S. 2p. and add., end. Botany. Correspondence pertaining to Pennsylvania botany and Bartram. Presented by Mrs. Corner; 1959.

**Fothergill, John, 1712-1780**

July 22, 1739

Letter to [Charles Alston]

London, Photo. of A.L.S. 1p. Describes the cabinet he had made for his botanical specimens. Presented by Mrs. Corner; 1959.

**Fothergill, John, 1712-1780**

Sept. 22, 1739

Letter to [Charles Alston]

London, Photo. of A.L.S. 2p. Concerning the elaterium. Presented by Mrs. Corner; 1959.

**Fothergill, John, 1712-1780**

March 26, 1740

Letter to [Charles Alston]

London, Photo. of A.L.S. 3p. Botany. Mineral water. Ambergris. Has met Hans Sloane. Presented by Mrs. corner; 1959.

## Correspondence

**Fothergill, John, 1712-1780**

June 4, 1741

Letter to [Charles Alston]

London, Photo. of A.L.S. 1p. Botanical matters. Presented by Mrs. Corner; 1959.

**Fothergill, John, 1712-1780**

Sept. 18, 1741

Letter to Charles Alston, Edinburgh

London, Photo. of A.L.S. 2p. and add., end. Sends American seeds which he received from Collinson. Concerning the use of beeswax. presented by Mrs. Corner; 1959.

**Fothergill, John, 1712-1780**

Dec. 19, 1741

Letter to [Charles Alston]

London, Photo. of A.L.S. 3p. Botany. Concerning Collinson. Refers to Gronovius. Presented by Mrs. Corner; 1959.

**Fothergill, John, 1712-1780**

March 18, 1741/2

Letter to [Charles Alston]

London, Photo. of A.L.S. 1p. Concerning seeds from Peter Collinson (some from Pennsylvania) and publications on botany. Presented by Mrs. Corner; 1959.

**Fothergill, John, 1712-1780**

1742

Letter to [Charles Alston]

Photo. of A.L.S. 2p., end. Medicine. Forwards seeds. Presented by Mrs. Corner; 1959.

**Fothergill, John, 1712-1780**

Oct. 27, 1742

Letter to [Charles Alston]

London, Photo. of A.L.S. 1p. Medical news. Presented by Mrs. Corner; 1959.

**Fothergill, John, 1712-1780**

July 14, 1743

Letter to Charles Alston, Edinburgh

London, Photo. of A.L.S. 2p. and add., end. Recommendation for a young student of medicine. Seeds from P. Collinson. Concerning amber. Presented by Mrs. Corner; 1959.

**Fothergill, John, 1712-1780**

July 19, 1744

Correspondence

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Letter to [Charles Alston]

London, Photo. of A.L.S. 3p. Introduces a student for medicine. Concerning his paper on neutral salts. Mineral waters. Presented by Mrs. Corner; 1959.

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**Fothergill, John, 1712-1780**

Feb. 18, 1750

Letter to Charles Alston, Edinburgh

London, Photo. of A.L.S. 3p. and add., end. Medical news. Presented by Mrs. Corner; 1959.

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**Fothergill, John, 1712-1780**

Aug 15, 1778

Letter to George Whately

Middlewick, Eng., A.L.S. 4p.end. Discusses diet, child welfare, several mutual friends, and books he is reading. Opinions on American War and France; "...all nations but our selves wish to avoid the carnage of War." Discusses Nichols.

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