

André Michaux letters and papers, 1783-1890
1783-1890
Mss.B.M58

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Summary Information

Repository	American Philosophical Society
Creator	Michaux, André, 1746-1802
Title	André Michaux letters and papers, 1783-1890
Date [inclusive]	1783-1890
Call number	Mss.B.M58
Extent	0.25 Linear feet 6 items
Extent	6 items.
Location	LH-MV-C-14
Language	English
Container	1
Abstract	Includes letters to his son, Francois André, and an act of New Jersey authorizing Michaux to purchase land in the state to establish a botanical garden. Also includes a letter from James MacPherson Le Moine to Henry Phillips, Jr. (1890).

Background note

André Michaux (1749-1802) was a French botanist. He conducted extensive botanical expeditions through Europe, the Middle East, and North America. Michaux, who served as King's Botanist for a time, is best known for his studies of American plants. He and his son François André Michaux (1770-1855, APS 1809), a botanist who accompanied his father on several expeditions, made the acquaintance of many prominent Europeans and North Americans of their time.

Michaux was born in 1749 on a royal farm near Versailles, France, of which his father André was manager. His mother was Marie-Charlotte Barbet (Barbée) Michaux. In addition to four years of formal education, young André received instruction in agricultural practices from his father. After his father's death in 1763, Michaux managed the farm alongside his brother. His aptitude for growing difficult plants soon attracted the attention of influential members of the court of Louis XVI. Upon the recommendation of the king's physician, Michaux decided to study botany. The death of his wife Cecil Claye after giving birth to their only child in 1770, just one year after their marriage, plunged Michaux into a deep depression. The naturalist Louis-Guillaume Le Monnier (1717-1799) recommended a sustained study how foreign plants could be grown in France as a way to occupy the heartbroken Michaux. Michaux followed the advice. He conducted experiments on his farm and later became a student of the French naturalist Bernard de Jussieu (1699-1777) at Trianon.

Michaux subsequently studied at the *Jardin du Roi*, now known as *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris. During this period, he made the acquaintance of many eminent scientists of the day, including the Garden's long-time director Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte du Buffon (1707-1788, APS 1768), whose assertion of American degeneracy provoked an extensive rebuttal by Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes*. Michaux also met the Garden's superintendent André Thouin (1746-1824), a friend and correspondent of Jefferson.

During his tenure at the *Jardin du Roi*, Michaux conducted extensive botanizing expedition throughout England, France and Spain. In 1782 he embarked on what would be a three-year journey through the Middle East to collect seeds and plants. His subsequent plan to explore the regions of Kashmir and Tibet was thwarted when the French government instead chose him to lead a scientific mission to the United States. The primary goal of the expedition was to search for plants that could be used in France, including new species of trees with which to replenish French forests. Prior to the journey Michaux was appointed King's Botanist.

In 1785 Michaux departed for North America with a gardener and his fifteen-year old son François André. Michaux founded a nursery at Hackensack, New Jersey, and the next year established a base in Charleston, South Carolina, from which he launched expeditions through various parts of Canada and the United States, from Nova Scotia to Spanish Florida, into the Ohio River Valley, Kentucky, and the prairies of Illinois. While his main objective was the collection of plants, he also introduced several plants into North America, including the mimosa or silk tree, the crape myrtle, the tea plant, and the camellia. Michaux kept journals in which he recorded in great detail the conditions of travel, the day's progress, and the plants he observed.

Michaux made contact with many leading Americans, including several prominent members of the American Philosophical Society. He met, for example, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington (1731-1799, APS 1780), John Bartram (1699-1777, APS 1768), and Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826, APS 1780). In 1792, Jefferson enlisted the Society to sponsor Michaux to "find the shortest & most convenient route of communication between the U.S. & the Pacific Ocean." However, political complications prematurely ended the mission when Jefferson learned that Michaux apparently intended to aid the French Foreign Minister Edmond-Charles Genet (1763-1834) in his efforts to arouse support for France. The nature of the secret political mission that Michaux supposedly agreed to undertake is still largely unclear; in any event, the controversy left Michaux without support to complete the expedition.

Despite these difficulties and France's diminishing ability to finance his work, Michaux continued with his botanical studies and travels in the United States for three more years. He was not only an astute observer of plants but he also was particularly skilled in questioning local people about their produce and agricultural practices. Indeed, a contemporary noted that Michaux "was not a Frenchman, an Englishman, or a Canadian, but everywhere one found him closer to the natives than any other foreigner would have been."

In 1796 Michaux embarked from North America for France. Four weeks after his departure, his ship was wrecked off the coast of Holland. His herbarium was damaged, and he lost some of his manuscripts, but he arrived safely in Paris in December 1796. To his disappointment, he learned that most of the thousands of trees he had sent from North America had not survived the turmoil of the revolution. Furthermore, he was unable to secure funding that would have allowed him to return to the United States, as he had hoped.

Instead, for the next four years, Michaux focused on the cultivation of his collected plants and on preparing for publication his studies *Oaks of North America* (1801) and *Flora of North America* (1803). Finally, in 1800 Michaux set out for another expedition, this time to Australia. In 1801 he left ship at the island of Mauritius to study plant life there. In 1802 he went on to Madagascar where he died of a fever.

Scope & content

The three letters by André Michaux to his son Francois André shed light on the close relationship between father and son. They are friendly and paternal. There is also an act by the state of New Jersey “to enable Andre Michaux to purchase lands in the State” so that he can establish “a botanical garden...in order to make useful experiments...” (1786). The undated letter by Alexander von Humboldt refers to trees. In 1824, some of André Michaux’s papers were donated to the American Philosophical Society. In a letter (1890) J. M. Le Moine asks Henry Phillips to use Michaux's journal for it describes regions that he himself had also visited.

Administrative Information

Publication Information

American Philosophical Society

Provenance

Acquisition Information

Presented by Francois André Michaux, 1824; accessioned, 1956 (1956 1103ms). See in-house shelf list for additional accession information.

Related Materials

Related Material

For the papers of Michaux's son, [Franc#ois André Michaux](#), see B M58.1.

Indexing Terms

Genre(s)

- Family Correspondence

Geographic Name(s)

- New Jersey -- Politics and government -- 1775-1865.

Personal Name(s)

- Le Moine, J. M., Sir, (James MacPherson), 1825-1912
- Michaux, Francois Andre#, 1770-1855

- Phillips, Henry, Jr.

Subject(s)

- Botanical gardens -- New Jersey.
- Marriage and Family Life

Other Descriptive Information

The Andre Michaux collection contains some correspondence that Michaux, a prominent French visitor to America who undertook various exploring expeditions in the early 19th century, wrote to his son. The collection is not large, but does provide insight into the relationship between father and son. There are also various government documents from New Jersey that contain information on land Michaux owned there. Note, all but the New Jersey documents are in French.

Collection Inventory

Papers

Michaux, André, 1746-1802 May 15, 1783 8-3/4x8

Letter to [Francois André] Michaux, Paris;

A.L.S. 1p.and add. In French. (see André Michaux papers.) Paternal letter.

Michaux, André, 1746-1802 March 21, 1784 7x5

Letter to [Francois André] Michaux, Paris;

A.L.S. 2p.and add. In French. (see André Michaux papers.) Paternal letter.

New Jersey. Laws, statutes, etc. March 2, 1786 12 1/2" x 8"

An act to enable André Michaux to purchase
lands in the state of New Jersey under
certain restrictions;

read in House and passed; March 3, 1786, read in Council and passed. D.S: Wil. Livingston, Presidt;
Benja. Van Cleve; Maskell Ewing; B. Reed. 3 leaves and end. (see André Michaux papers)

Michaux, André, 1746-1802 Oct. 11, 1801 8-1/2x6-1/2

Letter to [Francois André] Michaux, Paris;

Isle de France; Vendémiaire 19, X A.L.S. 2P.and add. In French. (see André Michaux papers.)
Friendly letter. Business.

Le Moine, J. M. (James MacPherson), Sir, 1825-1912 Jan. 29, 1890 8x5

Letter to H[enr]y Phillips, Jr., Phila.;

Quebec, A.L.S. 2p. (see André Michaux papers) Reference to André Michaux.

Humboldt, Alexander von, 1769-1859 undated 7x4-1/2

Letter to [André] Michaux.

Papers

A.L.S. 2p.and add.,end. In French. (see André Michaux papers.) Concerning American trees.
