

# John Loomis Blodgett (1809-1853)

A PIONEER BOTANIST OF SOUTH FLORIDA\*

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John Loomis Blodgett was one of the first to collect plants on the Florida Keys, as well as on the mainland of South Florida. He sent his dried specimens to John Torrey\*\* for identification. Blodgett's work in South Florida covered the years from 1838 to 1853 and his plant collection represented botanists' main knowledge of South Florida prior to 1890.

Not much is actually known about his life\*\*\* (14, 18). During his lifetime, and for almost 40 years after his death, no one had undertaken to write his biography. He apparently never married and he did not write of his work nor about plants.

Nothing is known of his family or ancestors, but it is known that he was born in South Amherst, Massachusetts, in 1809. From 1827 to 1831 he studied medicine at the Berkshire Medical Institution in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, a school which was founded in 1821 and had its last commencement in 1867. He graduated from this school in 1831, writing a thesis on "The Use of Friction to the Skin". In 1834 he moved to Ohio and later to Mobile, presumably seeking a warmer climate for his health. Later he went to Mississippi and here he was hired as a physician and surgeon for the Miss-

\* The writer is very much indebted to Joseph Ewan, Associate Professor of Botany, Tulane University, New Orleans, for giving considerable aid in searching for documents which might give some new information on Blodgett's life and work.

\*\* John Torrey (1796-1873) was the first important botanist of the United States and the leading botanist in his day. He was born in New York City, graduated as an M. D. in 1818 from the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University in New York, taught chemistry at West Point for three years, and became Professor of Botany and Chemistry at his Alma Mater. He also lectured at Princeton University. He was the founder of the Lyceum of Natural History (now the New York Academy of Sciences), was the first president of the Torrey Botanical Club, and helped found and build the herbarium of the Smithsonian Institution (now U. S. National Herbarium). During his active life, many survey expeditions were sent throughout the United States (Rocky Mountains, California, Mexico boundary, Pacific Northwest, 40th Parallel, Florida, etc.), and the botanists on these expeditions sent plants to Torrey for identification. Many of these plants were new to Science and, as a result, Torrey named hundreds of new species. In 1872 he visited North Florida (St. Augustine to Tallahassee) in search of rare plants.

\*\*\* The most complete biography was written by Sargent (18). Other references (13, 15, 20, 21, 27) to Blodgett's life are based on Sargent's work.

issippi State Colonization Society. This Society (12), formed in 1827, was the fourth branch of the American Colonization Society which was organized in 1817 and continued to exist until 1912; its main function was to transport liberated slaves from the United States to Liberia in Africa.

In April of 1837, Blodgett, Rev. J. F. C. Finley, and Captain Richards set sail on the schooner "Oriental" from New Orleans with a company of liberated slaves (26). They landed in Liberia a few months later and proceeded to set up a colony, naming it "Greenville" for James Green, one of the first advocates of emancipation. Blodgett's stay in Liberia was less than two years; he left in December of 1838. During his stay in Africa, he probably became acquainted with Miss Mary Skinner, daughter of Dr. Ezekial Skinner, the Colonial physician of Liberia. Miss Skinner "accompanied her father to assist him in his benevolent labors, and especially to take and preserve drawings of the plants and other interesting objects in the natural history of Africa" (26). It is possible that she might have interested Blodgett in natural history.

When Blodgett returned to the United States late in 1838, he settled in Key West. This was a thriving town only 16 years old and populated by about 600 people from New England and the Southern States, as well as from the Bahamas and Cuba. "Wrecking" was their main business (2). The year 1838 also marks another important date; this was the year that Henry Perrine established his tropical plant introduction garden on Indian Key.

Blodgett was a physician, surgeon, and druggist. It is not known what drew him to Key West. He may have been interested in living in the most tropical section of the United States for his health or because of his introduction to tropical flora in Africa. He most probably was active in servicing the Navy and Army stationed in Key West, both of which were in great need of medical men (8). Several outbreaks of yellow fever and small pox had previously occurred. There is no record, however, that Blodgett ever joined the Army or Navy. In the spring of 1853 Blodgett returned to Amherst, Massachusetts, and died in that city in July of the same year, when only 44 years old (1).

In the 15 years that he lived in Key West, Blodgett explored the Keys and the mainland, collecting plants and, as stated, sending them to Torrey for identification. He had a clear field in this respect, a virgin territory, for with only one exception no collecting had been done in this part of the United States. There were some botanists and plant collectors (Doctor Bur-

rows, Doctor Henderson, Doctor G. W. Hulse, Lt. B. R. Alden, Lt. I. H. Allen, and Doctor M. C. Leavenworth) who were stationed at Ft. Brooke (Tampa) during the Seminole Wars, but they collected only in that area or in northern Florida (15, 17, 25). Others (Dr. S. B. Buckley, Dr. J. Baltzell, D. Drummond, H. B. Croom, Dr. Alexander, Dr. A. W. Chapman, Wm. Baldwin, E. F. Leitner, and Count de Castlenau) also collected only in northern Florida (15, 17, 25). One, E. F. Leitner, actually set out on a trip into the southern part of the State in 1832, but unfortunately before he had gone far he was scalped by the Indians. Another, Thomas Drummond, in 1835, planned to travel from Apalachicola to Key West but he "could not conveniently penetrate into South Florida" (17). The so-called "Carolina" botanists (Andre and Francois Michaux, Mark Catesby, Frederick Pursh, John and William Bartram, John Ellis, Thomas Walter, Stephen Elliott, Nathaniel Ware) also failed to reach South Florida (10, 11).

The one person who collected plants in Key West prior to Blodgett was Rev. Alva Bennett of Troy, New York, who was in Key West from October 1834 to April 1835 (2, 25). He served as rector at St. Paul's Episcopal Church. He was in ill health and remained in Key West for only six months. His collection of plants of that Island, which was also sent to Torrey, was, at most, a meager one.

The plants Blodgett collected are still in existence and may be found in the New York Botanical Garden, The National Herbarium in Washington, D. C., The Gray Herbarium of Harvard University, and Kew Herbarium in London.

Apparently Blodgett was so enthusiastic over the tropical vegetation that he started to collect plants shortly after his arrival in Key West. In Torrey and Gray's "Flora of North America", Volume I, 1838 to 1840 (25), Blodgett is given credit thus: "We received a nearly complete and excellent set of plants of that Island (Key West) from Mr. J. L. Blodgett, which, however, reached us too late a period to receive notice in this volume". Some of these plants, however, were published in Volume II of the Flora, 1841-1843. In this second volume, then, the plants of South Florida were first made known to the world. Only a little over two dozen species were recorded and most of these were in the two families, *Rubiaceae* and *Compositae*.

In 1842 Thomas Nuttall included a number of trees and shrubs of South Florida in "The North American Sylva" (16), stating: "While the work was in progress, Prof. Torrey informed me of the arrival of a large collection

of dried plants from Key West, in East Florida, made by Doctor Blodgett of the U. S. Army [sic]. All of the trees in this herbarium—at least forty species—were in the most generous manner given up to me for publication by the professor. Most of them form distinguishing features in the tropical landscape of the West Indian Islands . . . are now for the first time added to the flora of the United States . . .”

In 1843 it is known that Dr. Alvin W. Chapman, of Marianna in North Florida, visited Key West and met Blodgett and collected plants with him. The two made several boat trips, one of which was up to Charlotte Harbour on the West Coast of Florida. Later Chapman set up a correspondence with Blodgett. Apparently Chapman relied on Blodgett for his knowledge of South Florida plants. For in a letter to a Doctor Holden, U. S. A., Ft. Jefferson, Florida, dated January 23, 1866, Apalachicola, Chapman states: “My chief knowledge of Keys production was obtained from Dr. Blodgett who resided on Key West some twenty years ago and died in Amherst, Mass., in the summer of 1853”.\* In Chapman’s “Flora of the Southern United States” (3), published in 1860, nearly 250 species of plants are listed from Key West and South Florida, most of them collected for the first time by Blodgett.

Species not published by Torrey and Gray, Nuttall, and Chapman were eventually recorded by Charles S. Sargent in his “Silva of North America” (1890-1896) (18), and by John K. Small in his “Flora of the Southeastern United States” (1903, second edition 1913) (19), and in his “Ferns of the Southeastern States” (1938) (24). Both Sargent and Small had access to Blodgett’s herbarium specimens.

During Blodgett’s remaining years in Key West, he became interested in collecting marine algae. He was undoubtedly influenced by a visit in 1849 to Key West by W. H. Harvey of Dublin, Ireland, an authority on algae. Blodgett sent specimens to Harvey and these are included in Harvey’s “*Neveis Borealis-americana*”.

We owe much to Doctor Blodgett for opening the eyes of the northern botanists to the wealth of West Indian material in South Florida. Many of the trees, shrubs, vines, ferns, cacti, orchids, etc., that grow wild here were made known to the world through his work, and Blodgett is given credit for collecting many of them for the first time in the United States. It was not until the 1880’s—nearly thirty years after Blodgett’s death—that any further extensive collecting was done in South Florida.

\* This quotation is from a letter belonging to Mr. Joseph Ewan.

Some of the plants that he collected are considered as being rather rare today—*Strumpfia maritima*, *Catesbeana parviflora*, *Cupania glabra*, *Hippomane mancinella*, *Guaiacum sanctum*, to name only five. One species, *Torrubia floridana*, has never been collected since. Apparently it was found on only one island just off Key West, and this island was reportedly destroyed a number of years ago by a hurricane. Unfortunately, Blodgett gave very little information on the places he collected his plants, or dates, etc., and, as a result, several plants sent in by him have been declared by later botanists to belong to our native vegetation when in reality they were cultivated by earlier settlers. The plants are *Clusia rosea*, the pitch apple; *Duranta repens*, the golden dew-drop; *Terminalia cattapa*, the tropical almond; *Tecoma stans*, the yellow elder, and *Xylophylla augustifolia*, the sword bush.

Blodgett's name will always be well known to the botanists of South Florida, for several plants, some of them quite common, have been named for him. These include the following: *Aphora* (now *Ditaxis*) *Blodgettii* (Euphorbiaceae or Spurge family), *Cyperus Blodgettii* (Cyperaceae or Sedge family)—named by John Torrey; *Metastelma Blodgettii* (Asclepiadaceae or Milkweed family)—named by Asa Gray; *Solanum Blodgettii* (Solanaceae or Nightshade family), *Paspalum Blodgettii* (Gramineae or grass family), *Salvia Blodgettii* (Labiatae or Mint family)—named by A. W. Chapman; *Guettardia Blodgettii* (now *G. elliptica*) (Rubiaceae or Madder family)—named by R. J. Shuttleworth; *Vernonia Blodgettii* (Compositae or Sunflower family), *Chamesyce Blodgettii* (Euphorbiaceae or Spurge family)—named by J. K. Small; *Rhus Blodgettii* (Anacardiaceae or Poison Ivy family)—named by Kearney.

Harvey in 1858 named for Blodgett a genus of algae—*Blodgettia*—of which the species, *B. conferooides*, is an interesting marine green alga known only in association with a filamentous fungus which is epiphytic in its cell walls. It probably represents more nearly a marine lichen, for the alga and fungus are always associated together.

#### A LETTER FROM J. L. BLODGETT TO JOHN TORREY

The following, so far as can be determined, is the only one of Blodgett's letters in existence. The original is in the library of the New York Botanical Garden and I am indebted to Dr. Harold Rickett, Bibliographer of the Garden, for sending a copy of it to me. Doctor Rickett states that in the upper left corner of the first page of the letter there is a note, presumably

written by Torrey, stating "Ans. Nov. 1845". The letter is addressed to "John Torrey, M. D., No. 67 Crosby St., Medical College, New York".

Key West 15 Oct 1845

My Dear Sir

I received your letter dated Princeton May 24th but not mailed until Aug. 5th. yesterday—having been absent on a Botanical Tour to the Maine<sup>1</sup>—otherwise I might have obtained it 5 or 6 weeks earlier. My change of buisness does not seem to change my taste as you express a fear. On the contrary judgeing from the time that I have spent to the total neglect of buisness—the expense incurred, the hardship endured, & the health exposed, I think my taste for botany is above fever heat. It is very easy for one to think of making a complete Botanical exploration of Florida but it [is] not easy to put in practice. To do this you must make up your mind to wade swim & crawl, exposed to a heat of from 120 to 140 degrees excepting a few days in the winter, your hand well gloved & your face covered with gauze to prevent being devoured by Mosketoes.<sup>2</sup> For if it is not generally known it is certainly a well established fact in Natural History that these insects have undisputed sway of a large portion of South Florida especially in the neighbourhood of Cape Sable & they are not to be endured for a moment even without some kind of protection—Add to this the drenching rains, want of shelter at seasons most favourable to making collections, loss of your labour as is sometimes unavoidable on account of the weather being unfavourable to the cureing of them and you have then some idea of the difficulties to be encountered. I do not know how soon I shall be able to [do] all that you desire but I intend occasionally to make an excursion as heretofore. On the trip which I have just completed I started with a determination to penetrate to the lake Okechobe but after spending 6 weeks about the coast rivers borders of the everglades & the praire which terminates the peninsula I found myself completely exhausted being finally siezed with Haemoptysis & was obliged to abandon the idea of penetrating the interior at this time. You may think that my description of South Florida is extravagant. But with the exception of Key

<sup>1</sup> Apparently by 1845 Blodgett was quite engrossed in collecting plants. His main profession in Key West was, of course, doctoring, but he seems to have preferred sailing up and down the Keys, exploring, searching, and collecting plants in pinelands, hammocks, and swamps. It is not known if this was his first trip to the mainland or not.

<sup>2</sup> Blodgett chose the worst month to make this trip—September—for then, as well as now, mosquitoes, rain, humidity, and the threat of hurricanes are at their highest.

West the whole country to the southward of Tampa Bay containing 15000 square miles will not for a century hence contain 10,000 inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> But now to the subject of your letter I have collected the ripe fruit of the *Batis Maritima* which shall be sent to you by the first vessel which will be in a few days. I will also furnish such information as regards its habit that may be of service to. I have examined it often. It has perplexed me more than any other plant—I doubt if it has any very close affinity for anything else but of this you are more competent to judge.<sup>4</sup> Of my collections I suppose I may have some 3 or 400 species that I may not have transmitted to you. But many of these are in a bad condition especially those gathered in my last trip which from ill health I was unable to secure properly. But I think that most if not all of them can be made out. You shall if my life is continued get sight of them sometime next June when I hope my collection will be much augmented. I shall only give you now some notice of species which have struck me with the most interest. Of *Palmae*, *Cocos nucifera* is certainly a native of Florida. I have found it in many places always near the beach or upon low mangrove shores of Islands.<sup>5</sup> Another species of *Cocos* is probably a native as I have often observed its fruit which is much smaller size floating about the shores but have not observed it growing.<sup>6</sup> The Royal Palm of the West Indies I have found

<sup>3</sup> We really cannot blame Blodgett for his shortsightedness in failing to see how South Florida would develop. By 1945 the population of South Florida (17 counties south of Tampa) was nearly 650,000! In 1845 the population was approximately 2,500.

<sup>4</sup> *Batis maritima*. Torrey wrote Blodgett and asked him to send some fruits of this interesting plant. Torrey published a paper about it in 1853, entitled "On the Structure and Affinities of the Genus *Batis* of Linnaeus" (Proceedings of the Smithsonian Institution, Volume 6, Article 3). He wrote: "Several years ago the *Batis* was detected at Tampa Bay, East Florida, by Dr. Leavenworth, and shortly afterwards at Key West, by Mr. Blodgett. From this latter gentleman, I have received the ripe and perfect fruit, preserved in spirits" (17).

*Batis maritima* is the saltwort or beachwort, a shrub-like plant with almost prostrate stems; the leaves are fleshy, thick and watery, one inch long, half terete, pale green; the flowers, which apparently were quite a puzzle to the early botanists, are in cones and are not showy. This plant is a native of the beaches of Florida and west to Texas, and is also found throughout the West Indies, Central and South America. It grows along the sandy and rocky shores and near mangrove areas and salt marshes.

<sup>5</sup> By the 1840's the coconut was evidently well established on the Florida coasts. But as to its being a native to Florida, Torrey wrote in the letter over the words *Cocos nucifera*, "certainly not; not orange either".

<sup>6</sup> The palm seeds that Blodgett collected along the seashore were *Manicaria saccarifera*, the Timite palm, a native of Trinidad. The globular seeds are carried by the Caribbean or Antilles currents into the Gulf Stream and are sometimes washed up on our beaches.

growing in all its majesty both upon the eastern & western coasts.<sup>7</sup> Another species of palm having something the appearance of the date Palm but with fronds much longer & armed with the most horrid spines. I have not had leisure to ascertain what it is. But am told that it is common in Mexico.<sup>8</sup> I think that I have now 7 species of *Eugenia*.<sup>9</sup> One which I discovered on my last trip the proudest of all being a lofty tree of the hammocks with a straight trunk & furnishing a beautiful timber.<sup>10</sup> I cannot at this time give you an account of all. I am in hopes of being able to enable you to add a new genus to our conifera.<sup>11</sup> I have some strange epidendrous plants<sup>12</sup> & my collections of Graminea and Cyperoideae to me as I have not paid much attention to those orders are overwhelming. I found them in great variety on prairies & the borders of the everglades. I have quite a variety of aquatic plants. A *Nymphaea* with yellow nearly inodorous flowers not so large

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<sup>7</sup> This statement concerning the Royal Palm, *Roystonea elata* (formerly called *R. regia*), is quite interesting, especially since Blodgett states that he had seen it growing on both the east and west coasts. Three reviews on the history of the palm in Florida (4, 18, 22) state that William Bartram in 1774 was the first to report the Royal Palm growing in Florida; he found it below Lake George near De Land in Central Florida. The next reference to the palm is by Nuttall in 1842 (16), when he states in the preface to his "Silva", "In the Islands of the Everglades, considerable inland in East Florida, we have been informed that a palm about 90 feet high, forming a magnificent tree, has been seen; but of this plant we have been unable to obtain, as yet, any further account". Blodgett, undoubtedly, wrote to Torrey before 1842 and informed him of this palm. Here, then, in this 1845 letter, we have confirmation of the Royal Palm being native to South Florida, and it is also one of the earliest references to the palm in Florida, preceded only by Bartram's reference. In 1860 Cooper (5), who explored and collected plants from March 6 to June 10, 1859, from Key West to Jacksonville, reported that he had found the palm mentioned by Nuttall, on Cape Sable, Cape Romano, and north of Ft. Dallas (near Little River). Chapman (3) included this report in his second edition in the supplement (1884).

<sup>8</sup> This palm must be *Phoenix sylvestris* which was planted very early on the Keys, possibly introduced by Henry Perrine from Mexico.

<sup>9</sup> *Eugenias* are conspicuous plants in the hammocks and on some of the Florida Keys, especially Big Pine Key, and Blodgett could have very easily collected seven species; at least ten species are known today (23).

<sup>10</sup> This could be *Eugenia confusa*.

<sup>11</sup> Blodgett might have been referring to the Gymnosperm, *Zamia floridana*, a common plant in the pinelands of South Florida. It is called "Coontie" and was a source of starch for the early Indians, Seminoles, and early white settlers (9).

<sup>12</sup> Blodgett apparently collected very few of our native epiphytic orchids. This is understandable for most of them occur in dense hammocks and cypress swamps. Only three species are found commonly on the Keys—*Epidendrum tampense*, *E. cochleatum*, and *E. boothianum* (6).



as those of the *Odorata*.<sup>13</sup> A submersed *Parnassia*,<sup>14</sup> *Utricularias*, *Pinguiculas* & some to which I am able to give no cognomen. To the *Euphorbiace* I have made some additions—*Turnerace* 3 or 4 species. *Rubiace* I have found but few. *Convulvulacea* several. One with tuberous roots in shape size & taste almost precisely like the sweet potatoes but the most splendid flowering vine I ever beheld—The flowers almost precisely the colour of those of the *Lobelia Cardinalis* a little deeper if anything. I found it growing in the rocky barrens near the southern extreme of the peninsula. I brought home some of the tubers & am trying to domesticate them.<sup>15</sup> Of the Order *Calycereae* I think I have 2 or 3 sp.<sup>16</sup> Do you remember a succulent leafless jointed vine<sup>17</sup> attached to a stick which I left with you on my visit to Princeton.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> This no doubt is *Castalia flava* (synonym, *Nymphaea flava*), the "banana waterlily", (7, 23). John J. Audubon had shown in his painting of the Whistling Swan (Plate No. 411 of "Birds of America") three yellow flowers of this water lily. E. F. Leitner named the plant *Nymphaea flava* on the strength of Audubon's painting without ever having seen the plant in its native state (7). Audubon and Leitner were severely criticized, since the scientists of their day refused to believe that there was a species of yellow water lily native to the southern states. Blodgett's statement in this 1845 letter that he had found a yellow water lily should have furnished definite proof that such a plant existed. It was not until 1884, however, that Chapman published the species for Florida (3), basing it not on the reference in Blodgett's letter but on collections by A. W. Curtiss in 1874 from the St. John's River, 30 miles south of Jacksonville, and by A. P. Garber in 1877 from what is now the Miami area. It was also collected by F. Rugel at Alachua in 1848, and by Mrs. Mary Treat in 1876 near Cove Springs, Florida. Apparently in the last century the yellow water lily had a greater distribution, for Audubon and Blodgett must have seen it in the Cape Sable area, Garber had seen it in the Miami area, and Curtiss and Treat found it south of Jacksonville. Curtiss (7) stated that it was disappearing from the St. John's River for it could not compete with the recently introduced water hyacinth. Today *Castalia flava* is a rare and restricted plant; in South Florida it is confined to the area around Lake Okeechobee.

The "odorata" is *Castalia odorata* with pinkish or white flowers and is found throughout the eastern United States.

- <sup>14</sup> There are no *Parnassia* species or any number of the *Saxifragaceae* native to South Florida.
- <sup>15</sup> This *Convulvulaceous* morning glory is *Exogonium microdactylum*, the "wild potato", that grows in the rocky soils of the pinelands of South Florida below Miami, but is not known on the Keys (23). It is indeed an attractive vine and the flowers are a beautiful crimson color. The roots that grow in the rocks resemble sweet potatoes. It is worth growing in the garden as an ornamental vine for its attractive flowers. It is interesting to know that Blodgett was so taken by this plant that he took the tubers back to Key West to grow the plant as an ornamental. It is one of our neglected native plants that does well under cultivation.
- <sup>16</sup> The only member of the *Calycereae* (*Brunoniaceae*) native to South Florida is *Scaevola plumieri* which grows in sandy soil along the coast (23).
- <sup>17</sup> The climbing milkweed with small leaves that fall early and leave long green naked stems, is *Metastelma scoparia* (23).
- <sup>18</sup> Torrey, in a letter to Asa Gray, mentions a visit from Blodgett in 1843: "He brought with him about 150 plants not in his former collections. He has visited a number of the Keys since we last heard from him" (17).

It belongs to the Asclepiadeae. I have since obtained the fruit. But I cannot find it descrd in Decandolles Prodrumus,<sup>19</sup> perhaps you can enlighten me. I hope you will retain for me a labelled specimen of all the plants that I have transmited to you. In my next I will give you something of the Geological features of South Florida & its antiquity.<sup>20</sup>

Yours Truly

J L Blodgett

<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to know that Blodgett had a copy of A. P. DeCandolle's Prodrumus Systematis Naturalis, a work that was started in 1824 and was to include descriptions of all the plants of the world.

<sup>20</sup> If there were any additional letters from Blodgett, they have not been discovered.

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