
In the first half of the nineteenth century, the North American botanical community had seen the preparation of the first of several large-scale check-lists or floras, namely Michaux's Flora Boreali-Americana (1803), Muhlenberg's Catalogue Plantarum Americae Septentrionalis (1813), Pursh's Flora Americana Septentrionalis ("1814" [1813]), and Nuttall's The Genera of North American Plants (1818). Twenty years passed before the next large-scale North American flora appeared. It was prepared by Dr. John Torrey, an established botanical scholar and his young colleague, Dr. Asa Gray, destined to become America's leading botanist during the next three decades. Their book, A Flora of North America, in two volumes, became the standard, documented, and authoritative work on the North American flora.

The detailed descriptions of the orders (families), genera, and species, accompanied by copious references to the literature and citations of the names of individuals who provided specimens for the documentation, attests to the meticulous organization and time that was involved in its preparation. Keys for the purpose of plant identification had not yet been used in this country, but an artificial analysis of the orders (families) is presented in the form of a key. The natural system of classification, first used in the United States by John Torrey, rather than the Linnaean Sexual System, was employed throughout these volumes. Unfortunately, the treatments of the families of Monocotyledoneae and several major families of Dicotyledoneae, such as the Chenopodiaceae, Amaranthaceae, Fagaceae, Scrophulariaceae, Labiatae, and Boraginaceae, were never prepared.

This reprint is Volume 4 in the Classica Botanica Americana Series, which consists of reprints of early and important North American Books in plant taxonomy, with introductions by Joseph Ewan. His informative introduction briefly reviews the circumstances and events that led to and surrounded the initiation, writing, and sale of the Flora, as well as the reaction by those who prepared reviews of it. In an accepted historical style, Professor Ewan lets the writers and reviewers speak for themselves by quoting pertinent passages from letters, papers, or books. Dates of issue for the various parts of the Flora and a list of 170 collectors or contributors, with their life's dates, state(s) or region where they worked, and sometimes added sources of information about them or their herbaria, give considerable resource and background information to those using the Flora. Unfortunately, at least 40 of these contributors acknowledged by Torrey and Gray are not listed by Professor Ewan. The reason for these omissions is not known.

Torrey and Gray's Flora continues to stand as a monumental work in floristic North American botany. Present-day taxonomists involved in revisionary and monographic studies will welcome this reprint edition, because it makes more readily available the original descriptions of the many new taxa. Furthermore, the availability of many of the species descriptions provides an insight into the concept of each individual species as it was understood and viewed by Torrey and Gray in their day. Contemporary floristic workers should use past floras to aid in bridging gaps between present and past species' concepts.

Ronald L. Stuckey