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THE BERNARD ROMANS-JOHN ELLIS LETTERS, 1772-1774

by JOHN D. WARE*

JOHN ELLIS, born in Ireland about 1710, was a naturalist who Carl Linnaeus described as a “bright star of natural history” and “the main support of natural history in England.” He was a merchant in London when he was appointed as agent for the British province of West Florida, April 2, 1764, at an annual salary of 200 pounds.

As fiscal agent it was his duty to disburse the parliamentary support fund authorized by proper warrants for the colony. In 1770 he received the additional agency for Dominica. With these two responsibilities came many correspondents, including Bernard Romans, as well as the opportunity to import seeds and plants from America.¹

In recognition of his work as a scientist, he was made a fellow of the Royal Society in 1754. The following year his *An Essay Towards the Natural History of the Corallines* was published, and it was translated into French in 1756. In 1768 he received the Copley award from the Royal Society for his researches. Thereafter, for several years, he published other works on natural history, including the drawings and descriptions of then undescribed genera of plants. Certain of these were included in the *Transactions* of the American Philosophical Society. One of these, *A Catalogue of such FOREIGN PLANTS, as are worthy of being encouraged in our American Colonies, for the Purposes of Medicine, Agriculture, and Commerce*, was from a pamphlet by Ellis. It was presented by Thomas Penn to the American Philosophical Society through the hands of Samuel Powel in 1769. The title of one of Romans's dispatches refers to a “Catalogue of Plants Publishe[d] by John Ellis, Esqre, F. R. S.” At a meeting, January 21, 1774, Ellis, Romans, and George Gauld, an

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1. Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, eds., “John Ellis,” *Dictionary of National Biography*, 21 vols. (London, 1885-1890), VI, 703; Cecil Johnson, *British West Florida, 1763-1783* (New Haven, 1943), 29n, 97-98.

admiralty coastal surveyor with whom Romans had collaborated through a third party, were honored by election to the American Philosophical Society. Ellis's publications on natural history continued until within a year of his death in London, October 15, 1776.²

Bernard Romans was born in the Netherlands about 1720, but he migrated to Great Britain where he received training as an engineer. He arrived in North America during the French and Indian War and was employed as a surveyor and map maker for certain officials of the Crown in Georgia and the Floridas. He engaged in botanical studies during his travels. Romans's letters to John Ellis are largely self-explanatory and would be even more enlightening if Ellis's replies were available.³ Romans's two dispatches from Pensacola were sent some six months before he left West Florida in February 1773, for Charleston, South Carolina, to accept employment promised by John Stuart, superintendent of Indian affairs for the southern district of North America.⁴

Romans's "Observations" on Ellis's *Catalogue of Plants*, dated Pensacola, August 13, 1772, must be regarded as a subtle though none the less sincere form of flattery, since it revealed to the naturalist that his work was being studied and understood on the North American frontier. That Romans's "Scheme for a Botanical Garden in West Florida," of the same date, accompanied this dispatch was probably not a coincidence. Romans's survey and cartographic work in West Florida were almost completed, and he needed employment. The letter stressed the need and feasibility of such a botanical garden, and quite obviously Romans aspired to the position of botanist. It will be noted that he left the amount for salary and traveling expenses of the botanist and the total blank, hoping perhaps thereby to encourage

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2. *Dictionary of National Biography*, VI, 703-04; *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 6 vols., old series, (Philadelphia, 1771), I, 255-71; [J. P. Lesley], comp., "Early Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society . . . from 1744 to 1838," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, XXII (1884), 86-87; Romans to Ellis, "Some Observations on a Catalogue of Plants Published [Published] by John Ellis Esqre F. R. S.," August 13, 1772; P. Lee Phillips, *Notes on the Life and Works of Bernard Romans* (DeLand, 1924), 27-30, *passim*.
 3. *Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Library of the Linnean Society of London; Calendar of the Ellis Manuscripts* lists only the Romans letters. Carl F. Miller to John D. Ware, November 20, 1972.
 4. Phillips, *Notes*, 30.

Ellis to offer a more generous figure than he himself would have dared. Romans's estimate was computed in Spanish milled dollars or "pieces of eight" and *reals* (one-eighth of a dollar).⁵ No figures for salary or traveling expenses were inserted by Ellis, but the itemized amounts estimated by Romans were totaled (incorrectly), perhaps by Ellis, and converted apparently to pounds and shillings in a marginal note. Although the botanical garden was never authorized or established, West Florida Governor Peter Chester recommended that Romans be appointed botanist for the province. He subsequently received an annual grant of fifty pounds, but did not learn of his appointment and grant until after he had left West Florida and had arrived in New York.⁶ Implicit in one of Romans's letters is a beneficence granted by Ellis. Whether this reference might have been to possible influence exerted in London by Ellis to secure Romans's grant cannot be known without Ellis's letters.⁷

Romans, after a near-disastrous voyage, arrived in Charleston in April 1773, and learned that Stuart, for some undisclosed reason, would not employ him as he had previously promised. Under the circumstances Romans proceeded on to New York, arriving there about June 1. At Stuart's request he did deliver two maps of West Florida to General Thomas Gage which he had drawn from surveys previously authorized by the superintendent. In this meeting Romans clarified certain errors which appeared in one of the maps. He then set about capitalizing on the only thing of value he possessed: his observations on East and West Florida.⁸

Learning of his annual grant as botanist of West Florida, Romans, in a dispatch to Ellis, indicated his "streightened" [sic]

5. R. S. Yeoman, ed., *A Guide Book of United States Coins* (Racine, 1947), 2, 5.
6. Romans to Ellis, "Scheme for a Botanical Garden in West Florida," August 13, 1772; Romans to Ellis, November 6, 1773; Peter Chester to Earl of Hillsborough, August 14, 1772, British Public Record Office, Colonial Office Papers, class 5, vol. 589; Lord Dartmouth to Chester, December 9, 1772, *ibid.*; "Estimate of the Civil Establishment . . . of West Florida . . . from 24th of June 1773 to the 24th of June 1774," PRO, CO 5/591.
7. Romans to Ellis, March 1, 1774.
8. Phillips, *Notes*, 30; John Stuart to Thomas Gage, April 22, 1773; Gage to Stuart, June 3, 1773, letters and the two manuscript maps are in the Gage Papers, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The dates of these letters, wherein Romans is mentioned, give an approximation of his arrival in Charleston and New York. Romans to Ellis, November 6, 1773.

circumstances, and since he had been unable to obtain Governor Chester's certificate or warrant for payment, he had decided, to draw on Ellis's credit for the entire fifty pounds. In his next letter some four months later he expressed the hope that his draft had been accepted, thus suggesting that he had not heard from Ellis in the meantime.⁹ Romans indicated that he was impatiently awaiting reaction from a proposal he had made earlier to Lord Dartmouth, the nature of which he disclosed in his next letter. He presumed that Ellis was aware that he had suggested a "Journey through America to Asia," but that "the present troubles in America leave me little hope of my proposal . . . being taken notice of." He hoped to lead such an expedition, though he did not say so in his letter. It was not likely that his proposal would be accepted, and this grieved Romans since, as he noted, he lived in a part of the world little interested in the study of nature and had "but little else to recommend [him] to the attention of mankind."¹⁰

The "overset" or capsized at sea off the lower east coast of the Florida peninsula resulted in a unfortunate loss, Romans wrote from New York; almost all his collection of seeds and plants "gathered in the Western parts of America" [West Florida] were lost. The few he saved he gave to a "Dr. Gardner at Charleston," but he feared they were in a "state past vegetation." Unquestionably, had he arrived safely with his collection he would have sent it on to Ellis. The best he could promise was to send drawings of curious plants and attempt to collect specimens for transmittal to Europe.¹¹

Indicative that he had not entirely abandoned the idea of returning to West Florida was his interest in securing an "Exclusive Patent" for the culture of jalap. He noted in his earlier "Observations" to Ellis that he had discovered this herb on the Chester River. Later he wrote that the drug was of very good

9. Romans to Ellis, November 6, 1773; Romans to Ellis, March 1, 1774.

10. Romans to Ellis, March 1, 1774; Romans to Ellis, May 4, 1774.

11. Phillips, *Notes*, 30; Bernard Romans, *A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida* (New York, 1775; facsimile ed., Gainesville, 1962), appendix: vi-vii; Romans to Ellis, March 1, 1774. "Dr. Gardner" was probably Alexander Garden, a physician who practiced in Charleston from 1752 until near the end of the American Revolution. A friend of John Bartram, Dr. Garden's interest in botany and zoology also led him into voluminous correspondence with John Ellis and Carl Linnaeus. See *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* (1942), New Series, Volume XXXIII, part 1; 6, 8, 13, 56; 62.

quality, and that he felt he could increase the quantity to the point “that Britain might be supplied with this article from the Province.” Without an exclusive privilege, however, he doubted it would be worthwhile to him or to anyone else.¹²

The recurring theme throughout the three letters Romans sent to Ellis from New York was his desperate need for funds. Publication of his book and map had been a drain on his meager resources, and the fifty-pound grant, which ended when he later joined the Patriots, was not enough to meet all the demands for funds. Interestingly, in an effort to provide himself with at least one of the luxuries of life, if not the necessities, he pledged the copper plates of his work to secure a loan of twenty-seven pounds, five shillings, and one penny for two hogsheads of rum.¹³ In his last letter he wrote: “I lead a very neglected Life and am very hard put to it to maintain myself & I have no [other] friend in Europe to apply.” He therefore asked Ellis to recommend him to some place or business, adding that “Be it never So trifling, I will Strive to shew my gratitude by close application to duty.” Thus, upon Ellis’s death Romans lost his last friend and connection in Europe. The high esteem in which he held his fellow naturalist is indicated in the dedication of his *A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida* (1775): “To John Ellis, Esq., Fellow of the Royal Societys [*sic*] of London and Upsal[a], Agent for the Province of West Florida. This Work is with the greatest Respect most humbly Dedicated by his most Obedient humble Servant, Bernard Romans.”¹⁴

Romans survived his privations and lack of money, and enriched Florida history and cartography by successfully publishing his book and map of the Floridas in the face of almost overwhelming difficulties. He went on to serve the Patriot cause in the American Revolution, a phase of his life that extends beyond the scope of his letters to Ellis.

12. Romans to Ellis, March 1, 1774; Romans to Ellis, May 14, 1774. Webster’s *New Twentieth Century Dictionary* (1953), 928, describes jalap as the root of the climbing plant *Ipomaea purga*. Its name was derived from Jalapa, a city in Mexico from which it was, and still is, exported. The Chester River, named for Governor Peter Chester of West Florida, is now known as the Blackwater River and flows into the eastern arm of Pensacola Bay.

13. Phillips, *Notes*, 25, 50.

14. Romans to Ellis, May 14, 1774; Romans, *Concise Natural History*, dedicatory page.

There are many gaps in the life of Bernard Romans which may never be filled. His letters to Ellis, taken with other documents, add a new dimension to this "universal genius," and provide a hitherto undisclosed insight into his life for a period of somewhat less than two years. Originals of these letters from Romans to Ellis are preserved in the Linnean Society of London. A microfilm copy is in the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.¹⁵

	<i>1772 B. Romans</i>
Quercus Suber Quercus Aegilops Quercus Gallifera	} Some Observations on a Catalogue of Plants Publishes by John Ellis Esqre F. R. S. In this country I have Observed 19 Species of Oak the Suber however is not one of them. The 2 others I have reason to think may be found here.
Carthamus Tinctor	Of this I have seen some very fine plants in Georgia.
Olea Europea	There is a species growing naturally here.
Sesamen Orientale	This cultivated by the Negroes, in Carolina, Georgia, and East Florida, in plenty, and I know it (from Experience to yield an Incredible Quantity of Oil.
Gossypium	Two kinds are natural in E: Florida.
Salsola & chenopodium Maritimum	} All the varieties of these may be seen in both the Floridas in amazing Quantities, but the different sorts of Mangroves are far Superior to these for Ashes.
#not Species	NB Of Mangroves I have seen five Genera.# none of them have as yet been tolerably de- scribed.
Pistachia	Of these there is one Species Yielding upon an Insision in the Bark abundance of Turpen- tine, and its Leaves are excellent food for cattle of all kinds.
Lentiscus	a Species of the Mastick I have also seen. But it yields not a great Deal of Gum, at present it is only valuable for its noble Timber. & its fruit which is superior to all other things for fattening of Hogs. NB these two Last are Very common in E: Florida. I have also seen some in this Prov- ince.
Cycas circinalis	a Species of this in both the Floridas.

15. Whitfield J. Bell and Murphy D. Smith, comps., *Guide to the Archives and Manuscript Collections of the American Philosophical Society* (Philadelphia, 1966), 81.

- Conv. Seammonia This I flatter my Self to have discovered Naturally growing in W. Florida, but till a farther Examination I chuse to be Silent on that article.
- Styrax Officin The Gum Storax Tree is in great plenty and perfection in West Florida.
- Jalapium Officin^e: This I have found Natural on Chester River in West Florida, a Specimen is now going to Lord Hillsborough.
- Bixa Orellana Mr. Wegg has some promising plants of this now in his Garden.
- Punica The fruit Bearing sort is not uncommon in West Fl: but of Balaustians I have not as yet Seen any, altho I am certain that this Beneficial article would grow here in perfection.
- Lichen Rocella M^r Charles Yonge half Brother to the Bishop of Norwich Once gathered a considerable parcel of this on an uninhabited island in the West Indies. it proved to be the True Sort.
- Morris papyrifera We find several Species of Morris here in America. but West Florida produces one, which I believe is peculiar to it, the Root of this answers all the purposes of the Fustick Wood. its Timber is one of the most valuable here But tho' yellow does not yield so much of a dye as the Root, the Bark of it is used by the Chactaw & Chicasaw Nations to make a Sort of cloth, of which Looks so much Like Linnen that I really believe it would make paper by a Similar proces as that whereby paper is made of Linen Raggs. I have a promise of a Speciment of the Bark which when I receive it, I will Send over in its unprepared State.
- Smilax A Good Species of Sarsparilla is found near to the Sea in W: Florida. and among the many called China Root, I believe there is one which will be found the true Smilax China.
- Hymenea Courbaril This I have seen in plenty in South America about two degrees Southward of the City of Carthagena.
- Ipecacuanha This I have seen of two Species Natural in West Florida.
Pensacola 13th: August 1772
/s/ B. Romans

1772 *B. Romans*

Scheme for a Botanical Garden in West Florida. as after a Curious plant has once been discovered in any distant part of this Country, before a Complete Description of it can be given, it is necessary to watch the time of its Flowering, and Likewise to procure the ripe fruit or Seed thereof, in order to propagate the Same; and as this must prove a very tedious method, and Sometimes be even liable to the disappointment of years, it is humbly proposed, that a Botanical Garden be attempted near to Pensacola, for immediately transplanting those Shrubs or plants for Examination. The Situation Ought to be such as may afford Both a Northern and a Southern aspect, and to Include Some moist and Swampy Ground, as well as a dry and sandy Soil and Some Oak Lands. Such a Spot might undoubtedly be found, and by the addition of Clay, Sea weed, and Such other manure as might be procured near to this place, a greater Variety of plants Etc. could be raised in it, then in a far richer Soil, in Short every Plant that Grows from the Capes of Florida to Canada might thus be raised at Pensacola. besides several West India Plants might more Easily be brought here from the Islands of Jamaica and Cuba, then to any other part of the Continent.

The variety of Plants both curious and usefull, which grow naturally all along this Coast from the Mississippi eastward to the Tortugas, is immense; upon the Banks of the Rivers of West Florida, and on the high Lands, Especially towards the Indian Nations, there is also a great variety.

Pensacola is the most Central Situation for all this Tract of Country, and it has another recommendation Viz^t that it is the only place that affords frequent opportunities of Sending Such growing plants to England

The Estimate attempted below, is the most moderate that can be thought of to Set on foot Such a Scheme in this Country; but if once it is Established, it may probably be carried on for a much Smaller Sum; or possibly an Exclusive privilege for the Culture of Jalap might defray all the Incidental Expences,

D. R.

The Salary for the Botanist p ^r ann:		[Marginal
Traveling Expenses for do		figures:
To Building a house and first fencing of		not in
the Gardens 500 Dollars to be paid by		Romans's
contract in ten years	50. -	hand]
Wages for two hands constantly employed		252
in the Gardens	96. -	4/s
Provisions for do	72. -	1008
Tools and utensils	10. -	2016
Frames and glass for Tropical plants that		168
are very tender Etc.	22. -	/1176
		58.16

Pensacola 13th. Aug^t: 1772 1st B. Romans

1773 B. Romans

Honoured Sir!

Having Received Intelligence from West Florida of the grant to me last year of £50 and being here for the Publication of my Labours & having not the opportunity to gett Governor Chesters Certificate I have therefore taken the Method of getting a Certificate of my Existence under the Seal of the Mayorally of this City and presume to draw on you for the said Sum in favour of Ennis Graham

I do not know whether I am regular in this proceeding but as I am at present much streightened for want of cash I have been obliged to take this step I hope therefore you will be so kind as to honour my Draught.

With all possible regard I am
Honoured Sir
Your most obed & humble Servt
/s/ B. Romans

New York Nov^r 6th
1773

1774 B. Romans

Honoured Sir!

Your favor of the 1st. of September came to hand a week ago; This attention to me I esteem with the utmost respect & the notice of the beneficence therein mentioned lays me under the greatest obligations, I shall not fail of my utmost endeavours to merit this mark of Patronage; I hope my Letter of advice is duly come to hand & that the draught has met with acceptance which will be a Welcome intelligence to me.

My proposal to Lord Dartmouth I dare say you are acquainted with, I wait impatiently to hear how it is received.

With regard to a Collection of seeds & dry Specimens of plants I have been uncommonly unfortunate with those I gathered in the Western parts of America, having on my passage from Florida been overset at Sea & lost all of that kind except a very few seeds which I gave to Dr. Gardner at Charlestown, but I am afraid in a State past vegetation I never heard from that Gentleman since; I shall continue to send some more drawings of curious plants & employ myself as vigilantly as my present Situation will permit to make a Collection of what Ever comes under my observations & is rare, in order to Send to Europe.

Be so obliging to inform me, whether an Exclusive Patent for the culture of Jalap in Florida for some year might possibly be got, the affair might do me a great deal of good, & be assured that my Sentiments are such, that I would make no further use of it, than what would be denied the using of such a privilege in a genuine manner.

With all possible Respect I am

Honoured Sir

Your most obl: obd^t & hum: Serv:

/s/ B. Romans

New York
 March 1st.
 1774

1774 *B. Romans*

Honoured Sir!

I would Scarce have presumed to write to you again had not this Opportunity by Captⁿ: Miller presented itself to me. My publication Still detains me in this place, but I hope now Soon to See an end thereof, the present troubles in America Leave me little hope of my proposal to Lord Dartmouth, concerning a Journey through America to Asia being taken notice of, which grieves me much, as I live in a part of the World where the Study of Nature, and its votaries is in a most unaccountable manner Neglected & I have but Little Else to recommend me to the attention of mankind I Lead a very neglected Life and am very hard put to it to maintain myself & as I have no friend in Europe to whom to apply, I once more take the freedom to address you on that head, hoping it may be your inclination to recommend me to Some place or business. Be it never So trifling, I will Strive to shew my gratitude by close application to duty. if no more could be obtained, an Exclusive right for the curing and vending of Jalap in West Florida would be of great Service to me, & as that Drugg is there very good in quality. I make no doubt But I could So increase the quantity, that Britain might be Supplied with this article from that Province, but without Such a privileg for Some Years at least I think it would hardly be an persons while.

I am afraid of having already intruded on your goodness and patience, therefore have only to add that I remain respectfully

Honoured Sir

Your most obedient
 humble Servant
 /s/ B. Romans

New York May 14
 1774