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HANNAH ENGLISH WILLIAMS: AMERICA'S FIRST WOMAN NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTOR

BEATRICE SCHEER SMITH*

It was with noe small pleasure yt [that] I received ye Collection of Butterflies wch you were pleased to send me by our worthy friend Major Halstead they were highly acceptable & for wch I return you many thanks there being some amongst ym [them] wch I never saw before, wch I shall suddenly print & own yu [you] as my generous benefactress & first discoverer of them.¹

Thus James Petiver, a London apothecary, ardent collector and student of natural history, and Fellow of the Royal Society, began his letter of May 22, 1701, to Madam Hannah Williams in Charles Town, South Carolina. This letter is one of four between Petiver and Williams that are preserved in the collections of the British Museum in London — the earliest, cited above, dated 1701; the latest, dated 1713. These letters and Petiver's published writings are our sources of information about Hannah Williams' interest in the natural history of the New World. As far as we know at present, she was the first woman collector of the fauna and flora of the British colonies of America.

Interest ran high in the Old World about the strange and yet undescribed plants and animals of the new land across the sea. James Petiver, one of England's early enthusiasts for New World nature study, carried on from his busy apothecary shop in London a remarkable correspondence with potential collectors all over the world.² John Ray, the foremost English naturalist of the day, described him as "a

*A botanist, Dr. Smith was formerly technical editor for several scientific journals and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and is now a resident of St. Paul, Minnesota.

Editor's Note: In accordance with the practice of the *Magazine* in using the expanded Method of Transcription of historical documents (as given in the *Harvard Guide to American History*), modifications have been made in the text of the letters quoted. Punctuation has been modernized, and scribal devices and abbreviations have been expanded (i.e., *ye*, *ym*, & and *wch* become *the*, *them*, *and* and *which*). An exact transcription is available from the author.

¹James Petiver to Hannah Williams, May 22, 1701, Sloane manuscripts, 3334, fol. 67v-68, British Museum, London.

²Sir Hans Sloane, founder of the British Museum, ultimately acquired Petiver's manuscript remains and extensive natural-history collections. They are housed in the British Museum.

man of the greatest correspondence of any in England as to these matters [natural history]."³ In the years between 1685 and 1715 Petiver is reported to have written and received literally thousands of letters. He sent his benefactors instructions and supplies for preserving and shipping plant and animal materials. The New World was one of the most enticing unknown areas at the time. To further his burgeoning collections Petiver established contacts in any way he could devise, one of the most productive being the captains of the ocean-going vessels plying their way between Britain and the American colonies. William Halstead (or Halsted), ship master from South Carolina, was one such man, apparently the initial intermediary in bringing together Hannah Williams and James Petiver in their common interest.

Petiver was obviously highly pleased with the collection of butterflies Williams had sent him, containing as it did species he hadn't seen before. His letter of acknowledgment in 1701 continues:

.... I shall hope to know wherein I can serve you here in England and to enjoin you to continue your favours in sending me whatsoever of this nature your parts afford, by every Shipping.

There are many small Flies, Moths, Bees, Wasps, Beetles, Grasshoppers, etc. that may be sent the same way you have done the Butterflies, or if any thing larger you may send them in a Box, each stuck on a pin or in a little viall drowned in Rum or Brandy, according to some printed directions⁴ I herewith send you, which I desire you will also communicate to Mr. [Joseph] Lord for whose generosity I am also extremely obliged.

I do not, Madam, expect that you should give yourself the trouble of getting these things but that you would be pleased to let any servant for an hour or two once or twice in a weeke when fair to goe into the fields and woods to bring home whatever they shall meet with, and as many of each sort as they can gett, having severall friends both in England and abroad to oblige.

I have sent Mr. Lord something I have printed concerning the Insects, shells and Plants a worthy and kind Person sent me from Maryland, and I am in hopes I may in time from him and

³Raymond P. Stearns, "James Petiver, Promoter of Natural Science, c. 1663-1718," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 62 (part 2), 1952: 243-365, esp. 356. Stearns gives a detailed and well-documented account of Petiver's activities and also evaluates his influence on science in both the Old and New Worlds.

⁴A copy of Petiver's printed directions, entitled "Brief Directions for the Easie Making and Preserving Collections of all Natural Curiosities For James Petiver Fellow of the Royal Society London," is in the collections of the Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University, and of the British Museum. Stearns, "James Petiver, Promoter of Natural Science," pp. 263-365, reproduces it in full.

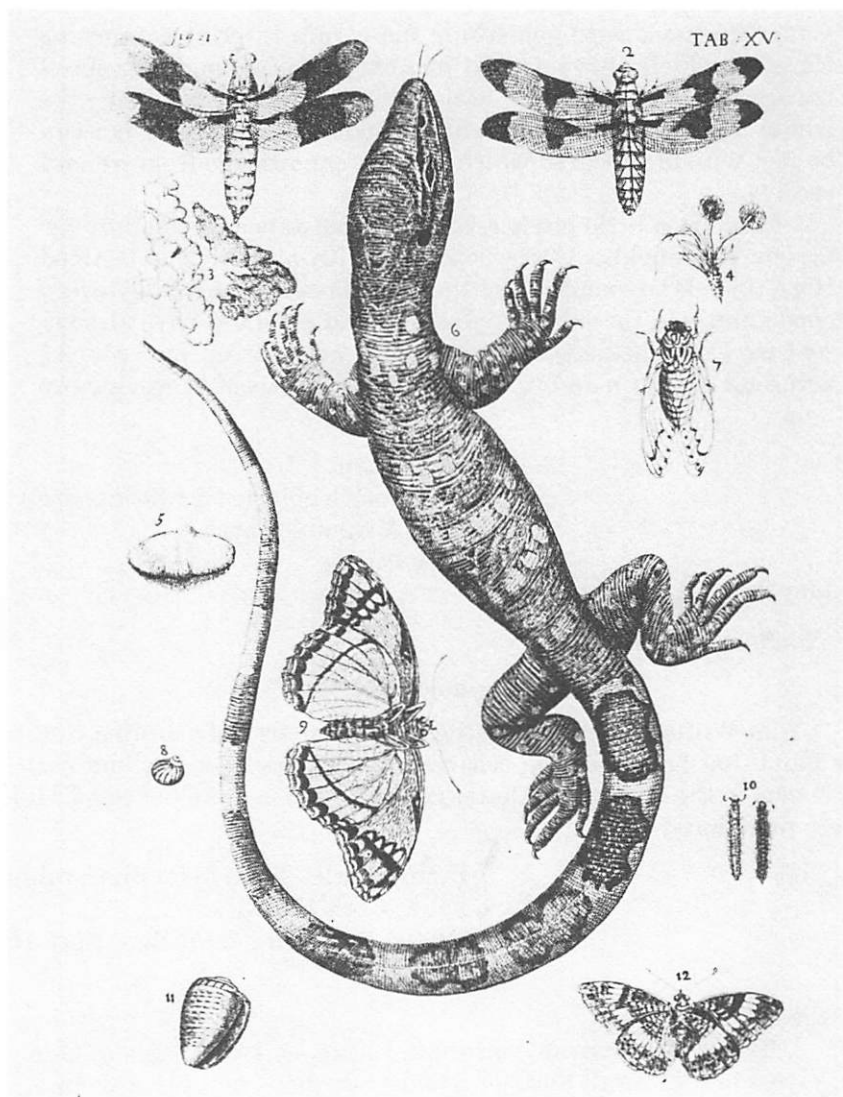


Plate XV from Petiver's *Gazophylacium Naturae et Artis*, volume 1, decade 2, showing Williams' Orange Girdled Carolina Butterfly (9), now called the Viceroy and well known for its "mimicry" of the Monarch.

This is believed to be the first published illustration of the Viceroy, which, we now find, originally bore the name of a South Carolina woman. The species is pictured with collections from various parts of the world; most prominent is "a harmless and very beautiful lizard found in Guinea where they call it Pompom."

you be furnisht with something more rare to print concerning Carolina which I have a great inclination to doe; and therefore I earnestly desire both your assistance in frequently sending me whatever Plants, Insects and Shells and also small Birds etc. can be met with or procured which I shall acknowledge from whom I receive.

I am not a little possessed of . . . assistance as you may see by one . . . I hold a Correspondence with at the Cape of Good Hope. I shall be ambitious of the same favour from you by every opportunity. In the interim what you and Mr. Lord have already sent me I shall acknowledge in my next printed Century⁵ which I will send both him and you, being very desirous of approving my help

Dear Madam
Yr very much obleiged & affectionate
Friend & humble Servt
James Petiver

May 22 1701

You may direct for me here

[remainder illegible]

That Williams' interest in the natural history of Carolina continued and that her collecting became in fact more intensive and varied is shown in the only known letter remaining to us from her hand.⁶ It is here reproduced in full:

From Charles Town in South Carolina
Feby ye 6th 1704/5
[Noted below the date] Recd May 18,
1705

Sir

These may Informe you thatt I have sent you Some of Our Vipers and Severall Sorts of Snakes Scorpions and Lizzards in a Bottle and a few Other Insex; and I would have sent you a Very good Collection of plants if I had any Vollums of brown paper — butt haveing non Could nott. If you are Willing to have any more If you will send paper Vollums to putt them in againn this spring

⁵In 1695 Petiver published a small booklet that contained descriptions of 100 new additions to his collections. He called it *Musei Petiveriani Centuria Prima Rariora Naturae* . . . This *Centuria Prima* and following booklets in the series came to be known as "Centuries."

⁶Williams to Petiver, Feb. 6, 1704/5, Sloane manuscripts, 4064, fol. 53, British Museum. See also this *Magazine* 21 (1920): 5, 50.

I will provide you a Good Collection thatt shall be worth your Exepting and Send you an account of their Virtues to the best of my Knowledge.

I am Very much Troubled with the splene and aske you to send me word whatt is good for the Cure therof. And if you pleas, send me something thatt is proper for the Cure thereof.

I have sent you a Box with the Different shells thatt this Contry doth produce and Likewise a Nest thatt is made by a Wild Bee, and itt is made of Wood.

I Desire you would Send me the newspapers thatt is made between Vessell and Vessells Comeing to and Returning from this place. If you think fitt to send me any medisons, I will Dispose of them and Send you the Vallue in Returns by the first Vessells. I Have Likewise presented you with the Westo Kings Tobacco pipe and a Queens Petticoatt made off Moss.

No more att present. I Rest your Frend and Servant

Hannah Williams

Next Spring I will send you some Mockin birds and Red birds. If I should send you any Now the Could would Kill them.

More than a year passed before Petiver responded to Williams' request for newspaper in which to ship specimens and for help with her health problems. On November 17, 1706, he sent the following letter:⁷

Mrs. Hannah William

att Charles town Carolina

Madam

I wrote to you by Capt. Newton in the Providence, which I hope you have received with some Hysterick pills and others for your head and stomach, with some Packetts of News and a printed Account of the Shells you last sent me from Carolina inclosed. I have added three Tables of some West India shells, Insects and other Animals as Scorpions, Lizards, Froggs, such as I should be glad to receive from you. I have also added some Shells, a Coral, crab, . . . & fishbone. I refer you to the Figures for my wants. So that you may see what you send is highly acceptable, you will see the Pictures of your Westo Kings Tobacco Pipe, a Salamander and the head of a strange Bird you sent. I hope by the next you will supply me with some more Matter. You have several small fish that are strangers to us that may easily be sent in a wide mouth Bottle drowned in Rum with small Birds etc.

⁷James Petiver to Hannah Williams, Nov. 17, 1706, Sloane manuscripts, 3335, fol. 39v-41, British Museum.

I have several Packetts of Newspapers for you which I will send by ye next Ship, this being already in the Downes when I knew of it, so that I could not without some Difficulty get the inclosed sent.

We hear the Virginia fleet is arrived on our Coasts and amongst them is expected two or three Ships from Carolina so that I hope I shall by them hear from you which will be highly acceptable Fr[om],
Kind Madam,

your much obliged and very affectionate
friend James Petiver

London

Nov: 17. 1706.

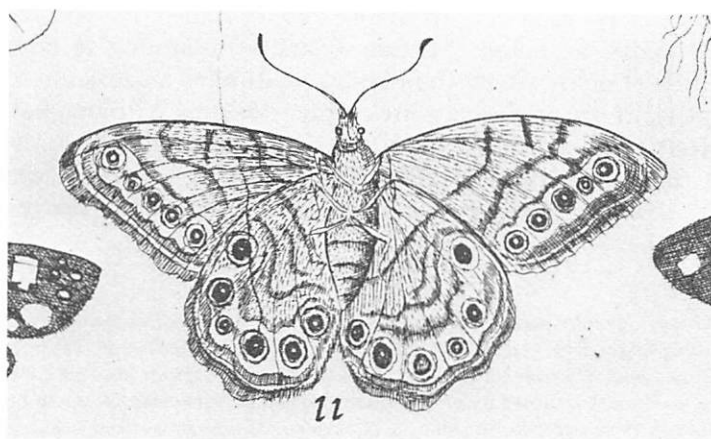
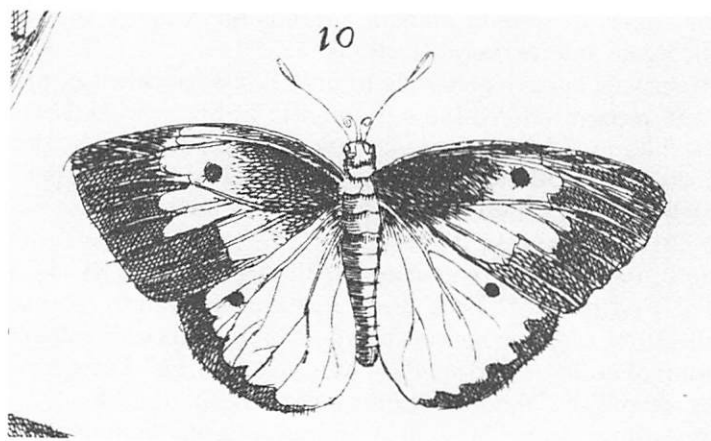
Doubtless Petiver felt that his printed acknowledgment and his illustrations of the "Westo Kings Tobacco Pipe, a Salmander and the head of a strange Bird" she had sent would spur Williams on to further collecting efforts with further exciting results. Instead the correspondence languished, a circumstance that is explained by the last known communication between these two students of natural history. In a letter dated December 12, 1713, Petiver wrote to Williams:⁸

It is with no small Satisfaction that I have now the happiness to see your Son here in England and by him to hear after so many years silence that you are in the Land of the Living and well, as I thank God I still am, and should, I understand, have heard from you before had it not been reported I was dead years ago

Your son, Madam, whom I find very Curious in these Matters tells me you have divers Collections of several things ready . . . which I would have received long since had not the report of my Death prevented it

Petiver went on to recount some of his activities in the intervening years and assured Williams of her importance in his world-wide circle of collectors: "I have lately printed divers East India Shells in twenty Folio Tables, dedicated to my worthy Benefactors, which you, Madam, being one of the Cheifest, I make you a present of. . . ." After detailing his hopes for future publications on various animal groups thus far undescribed and for which she might supply specimens, and assuring her that in any event anything at all "will be very acceptable even if no bigger than a Pepper Corn," he concluded his letter with "heartly

⁸James Petiver to Hannah Williams, Dec. 12, 1713, Sloane manuscripts, 3339, fol. 87-88, British Museum.



First published illustrations, as far as we know at present, of two additional Carolina butterflies collected by Williams and named after her by Petiver. *Above:* Williams' Yellow Tipt Carolina Butterfly (Petiver's *Gazophylacium*, volume 1, decade 1, Plate VII, Figure 10), now known as the Dog's Head. *Below:* Williams' Selvedge Eyed Carolina Butterfly (Petiver's *Gazophylacium*, volume 1, decade 4, Plate XXXIII, Figure 11). We know this butterfly as the Creole Pearly Eye.

Prayers for your Health and Long Life" and earnest wishes to hear from her again. In spite of all this, there is no evidence that Hannah Williams made any further collections.

Petiver was always generous in his acknowledgment of help from others and recognized Williams frequently in his printed accounts. In the first volume of his *Gazophylacium Naturae et Artis* he described three butterflies from her collections that he had not seen before and acknowledged her as their "first discoverer" by naming them Williams' Orange Girdled Carolina Butterfly (Figure 1); Williams' Yellow Tipt Carolina Butterfly (Figure 2A); and Williams' Selvedge Eyed Carolina Butterfly (Figure 2B).⁹ These specimens are believed to represent the first collections of these species on the North American continent. In his account of animals and shells sent from Carolina¹⁰ Petiver recorded having received the "5 holed Carolina Sea Urchin or Friter . . . a very singular Animal" from "Madam Williams, a Gentlewoman whom I am also highly obliged to, for most of the following Shells . . ." (p. 1953); further, in his description of the white Campeachy Spoon-Muscle he reported: "Madam Williams has now sent me one of the largest and fairest I have yet seen . . ." (p. 1954); and, in connection with descriptions of fossils, he noted: "[I] am suddenly (according to advice) in expectation of more, which the Publick shall have an Account of, with the Reptiles, Lizards, Insects, etc., which Madam Williams hath also lately sent me" (p. 1960). From the Carolina material, Petiver described thirty-one kinds of "Bivalves, of which kind are Schollops, Cockles, Oysters, Muscles, etc." and "single Shells." Twenty-one of

⁹Petiver's *Gazophylacium Naturae et Artis* . . . is a small, two-volume work, each volume comprising five "decades" (Decas Prima, Decas Secundus, etc.), or parts. Published in London between 1702 and 1709, the *Gazophylacium* (meaning a treasury of species, or kinds) contained excellent illustrations and brief descriptions in Latin and English of newly received collections. A "Catalogus Classicus et Topicus . . ." accompanied each volume and listed all the figures with titles. The catalogue of volume I of the *Gazophylacium* (1706) contains 607 items, among them Williams' Carolina butterflies. All of Petiver's writings were republished in London in 1764 (again in 1767) by John Millan under the title *Jacobi Petiveri Opera, Historiam Naturalem spectantia: containing several thousand figures of Birds, Beasts, Fish, Reptiles, Insects, Shells, Corals, and Fossils; also of Trees, Shrubs, Herbs, Fruits, Fungus's, Mosses, Sea-Weeds, Etc.* . . . The illustrations shown here of Williams' butterflies were taken from the first volume of this two-volume work, 1767 edition. The *Opera* is in the John Crerar Collection of Rare Books in the History of Science and Medicine at the University of Chicago Library. I would like to acknowledge the generous help of Paul A. Carnahan, Rare Books Assistant in Special Collections at that library.

¹⁰James Petiver, "An Account of Animals and Shells sent from Carolina to Mr. James Petiver, F.R.S.," *Philosophical Transactions (Royal Society of London)* 24 (1704, 1705), no. 299 (May 1705): 1952-1960.

these collections can be attributed to Williams.¹¹

Hannah Williams was apparently the only woman, but was of course not the only person, who contributed to Petiver's Carolina collections during the first decades of the eighteenth century.¹² Very active at the same time was a Charleston minister, Joseph Lord, to whom Petiver referred in his 1701 letter to Williams. Major Halstead himself occasionally furnished Petiver with items of interest in addition to transporting the collections of his friends. These people were preceded in their efforts by Robert Ellis, Edmund Bohun, George Francklyn (or Franklin), and other less enthusiastic collectors. On the basis of his detailed study of the Petiver manuscripts in the British Museum, Stearns concludes that "Madame Hannah Williams and the Reverend Mr. Joseph Lord made contributions to Petiver's Carolina collections which supplemented — if indeed they did not exceed — those of Bohun, Ellis, Francklyn and the earlier group of Carolina correspondents."¹³ The natural-history collections of Hannah Williams and other New World enthusiasts take on added significance when viewed in the light of Stearns' assessment of the importance of Petiver's network of collectors. He theorizes that such exchanges "built up a kind of intellectual hinterland of interest in and receptivity to scientific affairs" and "by such means the new science was planted across the seas."¹⁴

Only a few simple vital statistics for Hannah English Williams can be assembled from the early South Carolina court and land-grant records.¹⁵ When she came to South Carolina is not known. We do know that as Hannah English, Widow, she was awarded a warrant for 500 acres of land near "Stony Poynt" in November 1692, and in May 1695 she was granted a warrant for another 500 acres on the north side of the Ashley River called Stony Point under the name of Mrs. Hannah English *alias* Williams.¹⁶ By her first husband, probably Mathew

¹¹Stearns, in "James Petiver, Promoter of Natural Science . . .," p. 354, states: ". . . the twentieth Table in his [Petiver's] *Pterigraphia Americana* was dedicated 'to that very obliging Gentlewoman Madame *Hannah Williams* at Carolina.'" Such a dedication could not be found in either the first edition of the *Pteri-graphia americana* (London, 1712) or the later republication of all Petiver's writings (the *Opera*, London, 1767) by John Millan.

¹²Petiver acknowledged the efforts of other women collectors in the New World, namely Mrs. Rawlins, Mrs. Rachael Chapman, and Mrs. Rachael Grigg from Antigua in the West Indies, and Madame Carter from Jamaica. For more about the West Indies women see: Raymond P. Stearns, *Science in the British Colonies of America* (Urbana, Ill., 1970).

¹³Stearns, "James Petiver, Promoter of Natural Science," p. 354.

¹⁴*Ibid.* p. 358.

¹⁵"Early Letters from South Carolina upon Natural History," this *Magazine* 21 (1920): 3-9, esp. 3-4.

¹⁶Henry A. M. Smith, "Charleston and Charleston Neck. The Original Grantees and the Settlements along the Ashley and Cooper Rivers," this *Magazine* 19 (1918): 3-76, esp. 50-51.

English, she had a daughter Mary and a son Henroyda. Her second husband, William Williams, was a Carolina planter and apparently held the neighboring plantation.¹⁷ It is not difficult to imagine the wealth of wildlife with which Hannah Williams' 1,000-acre Stony Point plantation on the Ashley River must have abounded, nor yet the thrill of her discovery of the still-undescribed species of plants and animals of the New World.¹⁸

The place and date of her birth are unknown, but it is recorded in the register of St. Philip's Church in Charleston that Mrs. Hannah Williams was buried on December 16, 1722.¹⁹

¹⁷Henry A. M. Smith, "The Ashley River: Its Seats and Settlements," this *Magazine* 20 (1919): 3-51, esp. 6.

¹⁸Confusing statements in the literature attribute scientific pursuits to Hannah English Williams when she was Mrs. Hannah English, that is, before 1695. David D. Wallace, in both his 3-volume *History of South Carolina* (American Historical Society, 1934, vol. 1, p. 408) and the shorter version (*South Carolina, a Short History, 1520-1948*, (Chapel Hill, 1951, p. 201)) writes: "The earliest scientific work here was by physicians, unless we except the correspondence of Mrs. Hannah English with English scientists on birds about the last decade of the seventeenth century." E. A. Leonard, S. H. Drinker, and M. Y. Holden, in *The American Woman in Colonial and Revolutionary Times, 1565-1800* (Philadelphia, 1962, p. 96) state that "Hannah English showed a remarkable knowledge of birds, vipers, and insects." No evidence can be found by the present writer to substantiate the claim that Williams carried on foreign correspondence about Carolina's natural history before 1695, i.e., as Mrs. Hannah English; or that she corresponded "with English scientist on birds." Whether Williams sent Petiver the birds she promised him we do not know. Stearns (*Science in the British Colonies*, p. 167) says that Hannah Williams was a correspondent of Martin Lister, English physician and natural historian, but this statement could not be verified. Williams' name does not appear in any of the manuscript indexes of the Bodleian Library, Oxford University, a principal repository of Lister's scientific correspondence between 1665 and 1710.

¹⁹"Early Letters from South Carolina," this *Magazine* 21 (1920): 4.