

Mysteries of the Museum: Uncovering the History of the Georgia Museum of Natural History

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Introduction

The Georgia Museum of Natural History (GMNH) at the University of Georgia houses over 7 million specimens, but little is known about the origins and history of the museum itself. The museum's collections were not formally recognized by UGA until 1978, despite being in existence since the early 1800s. The museum's collections have survived the Civil War, multiple moves, a fire, and more than one funding crisis.

This study offers a glimpse into the initial years of the GMNH up to 1900 by looking at the who, what, where, and when of this rich cabinet of curiosity and considers its legacy at the University of Georgia.

Methods

In order to conduct this research, an array of resources were used. The Richard B. Russel Special Collections Library and The Hargrett Rare Books & Manuscript Library yielded a variety of sources that assisted in this research. In addition to physical archives, online archival sources were used, such as the Digital Library of Georgia, Georgia Historic Newspapers, and Hathitrust, an online collaborative repository.

The Special Collections library holds archives such as *The Minutes of the Board of Trustees*, which provided exact dates, names, and original descriptions of components related to the museum shown in the timeline. Special Collections has also digitized and transcribed many works, such as Thomas Walter Reed's 1949 account of the University. Using other online sources I was able to access many digital copies of works that I would not have been able to see otherwise. Such works include early catalogs and bulletins of the University and early historical accounts.

While exploring these resources, a number of key phrases, people, and buildings began to appear. By synthesizing a number of primary and secondary sources, I was able to construct a picture of how these key players contributed to the museum. This research highlights important people, events, and places related to the Museum.

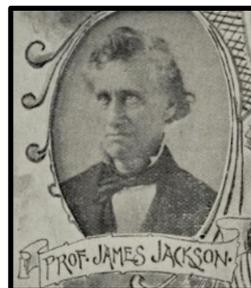
Notable Individuals

Josiah Meigs, President of the University of Georgia from 1801 to 1810, began a collection of natural history specimens. During the earliest years of the collection, these curios and relics that he assembled were linked closely to the library collections.

Henry Jackson advocated for a cabinet of minerals to be established. When he returned from France in 1817, he brought back \$2,000 worth of minerals and scientific equipment. He also served as a natural philosophy and physics professor for over twenty years.

In 1831, *Malthus Ward* established the Botanical Garden. The garden was one of the most praised aspects of the University during its time. One visitor noted the garden was in "the most romantic manner imaginable" and contained "two gurgling brooks, which form a fairy-like island." The visitor viewed it as a "miniature Eden" (Reed).

James Jackson, nephew of Henry Jackson, served as a professor of chemistry, mineralogy, natural philosophy, physics, and natural history until he retired in 1850. He also made contributions to the Botanical Garden after Malthus Ward retired.



Jackson, 1840s (Hull)

In 1865, President *Andrew Lipscomb* made contributions to the museum's ornithology collection by working closely with a Dr. Wilson to clean and stuff the specimens to be placed in the Natural History collection.

Timeline

- 1801 • Josiah Meigs began a Natural History collection at the University.
- 1817 • Henry Jackson brought minerals and equipment from France.
- 1824 • Dr. Daniel of Savannah donated his collection of minerals, sparking a need for a mineralogical cabinet.
- 1830 • George I.S. Walker gave "154 gold, silver, and copper coins of various nations" (Coulter). Rocks from "Mona" (Mauna) Loa, HI were also donated.
- 1831 • The University was rebuilding after the fire in New College, constructing the Ivy Building, and appropriating \$500 for a new mineralogical cabinet.
- 1834 • A professor of Natural History got \$150 for the collection of plants for the Botanical Garden and increased the mineral collection.
- 1835 • A report from the Library and Museum Committee noted how "The cabinet of minerals are in good condition and judiciously arranged" (Minutes).
- 1837 • John Bony Esq. of Schoharie, New York donated rare minerals. The collection of state mineral specimens were also growing rapidly.
- 1840 • During the 1840s, not much is noted about the Museum. It seems it went through a period of stagnation.
- 1856 • The Botanical Garden was closed and sold. The money from the gardens paid for the iron fence to be erected around campus.
- 1862 • The Library Building opened, with the Museum located on the third floor.
- 1863 • The collection grew so big that it was hard for the staff to get proper fixtures for their accommodation.
- 1865 • Additions to the ornithology collection were made under President Lipscomb.
- 1866 • A gift from George R. Gilmer containing "his library, cabinet of minerals, and canorites...and have been placed in the Library Building" (Minutes).
- 1879 • The museum was frequently sent small donations of "curiosities, illustrations of antiquities, etc." (Minutes).
- 1880 • The ceiling with illustrations in the Library Building was "in great danger of complete destruction." The Claiborne fossils were added to the museum.



Museum in the Library Building, 1875 (Reap)

Important Places

Built in 1821, Philosophical Hall housed the school's library, scientific equipment, and a room where curiosities were kept, the earliest version of the physical museum.

Seeing that the library collection was growing rapidly, the Trustees appropriated money to build New College, completed in 1823. It served as the library and museum until 1830, when everything inside the building was destroyed or lost by fire.

The Ivy building, established in 1832, was constructed specifically for a "mineralogical cabinet, and also suitable stands or tables on which to display them" (Minutes).

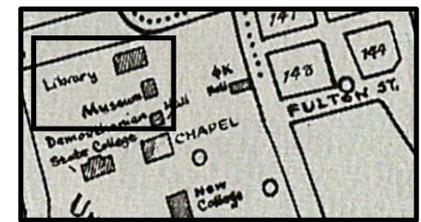


Ivy Building, 1870s (Souvenir Volume of the Class of 1875)



Library Building, 1875 (Bony)

In 1859, the Library Building was erected adjacent to the Ivy Building. The museum's collections moved to the new building. The third floor of the building contained murals. "The entire space was covered with a beautifully painted design, representing the evolution of life through all the geologic or zoologic ages. Each segment of each circle was made typical of a particular stage of evolution. The painting of the higher vertebrates was surprisingly well executed" (Reed).



Map of Athens, 1874, by W.W. Thomas (Bony)

Conclusion & Future Research

The history of the Georgia Museum of Natural History extends well beyond 1978. Dating to collections started by the first President of the University, the Museum is truly one of the oldest entities still in existence at UGA. By 1880 the museum's natural history collection numbered well over 300 specimens, and it has grown exponentially since then.

Because there is so much unknown about the museum's history, additional research is needed in order to provide a more complete record. When looking at the museum's beginnings, records and documentation are sparse. However, as time goes on, information is recorded both more frequently and thoroughly. This research began by attempting to find the earliest origins of the Museum and was focused on the years up to 1900, leaving approximately seventy years of history that still needs to be uncovered. The foundation for future work, along with an extensive list of valuable resources, has been laid out by this project.

Acknowledgments & References

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