THOMAS BARTON'S COLLECTION OF MINERALS

BY CHARLES W. RUTCHEKY, JR.
William Penn Senior High School, York, Pa.

THE accounts of the pioneers in the study of minerals in the New World are as interesting as they are vague. It appears that formal study of the subject did not begin until late in the eighteenth century. In 1792, the Chemical Society of Philadelphia was organized, "with the avowed purpose of acquiring information regarding the minerals of the United States."¹ Prior to this date only a few accounts appear that show an interest in minerals. One refers to a William Sampson Vaux, about whom the historian declares that, "it is not unlikely that he acquired his interest in minerals through his uncle Joseph Sampson (1767-1826) who made perhaps the earliest collection in America, which was later given to Haverford College."² Here supposition gives way to fact. Only when reliable and valid records of the past reveal facts can one be sure of the truth.

There is evidence which allows a refutation of the aforementioned assumption of "perhaps the earliest collection in America." In 1807, Benjamin S. Barton writes of his father, Thomas Barton (1730-1780), "If I do not greatly mistake there were specimens of Tin in the fine collection of North American minerals, which was made by my father, nearly forty years ago, at a time when he paid more attention to this part of Natural History, than, so far as I know, any other person in the (then) colonies. The greater part of my father's collection was sent to England; but falling into the hands of those who knew little of its value, it has never been heard of, or mentioned in any of the printed accounts of minerals, that I have seen."³ This account, coming from a son, might escape notice or receive scant recogni-

² Ibid.
³ Benjamin S. Barton, A Discourse on some of the Principal Desiderata in Natural History (Philadelphia, 1807), p. 86, Appendix, Note R.
tion as being reliably accurate, were it not for the fact that Dr. Benjamin S. Barton was a leading scientist of the times and an internationally recognized authority on the Natural Sciences. Full credence, therefore, can be given to the statement. This places the date of Thomas Barton's collection of minerals about the time of the birth of Joseph Sampson (1767). Accurate verification of this date is found in the following letters written by Thomas Barton himself:

Lancaster, October 28, 1766

Rev. dear Sir.
... I am busy in preparing letters to go by Mr. Andrews and in packing up a box of natural Productions for the Proprietor, which I must beg your leave to direct to your care. ... I am under constant apprehensions that the vessel will sail before I can get them down; if so, I shall be sadly disappointed. Andrews I trust will give me warning. ... 

Tho. Barton.

To Mr. Peters

Lancaster, November 17, 1766

Rev. dear Sir,
I wrote to you about four days ago by Mr. Mitchell a merchant of your city. I now take the liberty to trouble you with a box of fossils etc. for the proprietor which I humbly request the favor of you to forward with the enclosed in the first London vessel. As I had the misfortune to be disappointed in sending them under the care of Mr. Andrews I hope you will commit them to the charge of some captain or passengers going to London, who will be kind enough to have them safely delivered. The box contains a collection of curiosities which cost me much Pains and such a one as I think will be acceptable to Mr. Penn. This makes me anxious about their safety. But I make no doubt but your care will relieve me of my fears about them. Be pleased to request the captain to keep the side with directions on it upwards; to stow it so as to be kept dry; for wet would dissolve the natural salts, marls, and many other things and change the color of the ores etc. I long to receive Mr. Penn's present. I wish Mr. Aiskel would forward it to me.

Tho. Barton.

To R. Peters

*Thomas Barton, Letters to the Reverend Richard Peters (Rector Christ Episcopal Church, Phila., Sec'y of the Province of Pennsylvania), Lancaster County Historical Society.*
Another reference which points to an early collection of minerals by Thomas Barton is found in the catalogue of books and equipment owned by The Library Company at Lancaster, 1759. The list of museum equipment includes among other things, "some curious Mines, Minerals and Fossils (given by the Reverend Mr. Barton, one of the Directors of the Library)."

These letters and the catalogue reference establish a definite priority claim in favor of Thomas Barton as an early American colonial mineralogist. The writer has searched for the collection, but to date no information as to its whereabouts is available. It may be that some reader who chances upon this article may be the means of contributing some data that will be not only of historical importance, but will help to give a pioneer his due credit.

Note:

Thomas Barton (1730-1780), clergyman and teacher, was a native of Ireland, but descended from an English family which settled there in the reign of Charles I. After graduating from Dublin University, he migrated to America. In 1751 he opened a school at Norriton, Pennsylvania. He was, for some time, tutor at the Academy of Philadelphia. In 1753 he married Esther Rittenhouse, a sister of Dr. David Rittenhouse, the distinguished mathematician and astronomer, whose close friendship he enjoyed until his death. In 1754, Barton went to England where he received his episcopal orders. He returned to America as a missionary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and served the congregations of Carlisle, Huntington (York Springs), and York. He accompanied, as chaplain, the expedition to Fort du Quesne.

After leaving York county, he settled in the neighboring town of Lancaster as rector of St. James'. Here he remained nearly twenty years, dividing his time between the duties of his office and the pursuit of natural history. At last, because of his unwillingness to exchange his oath of allegiance taken when he received his holy orders for an adjuration of a secular nature to the newly formed Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, he was compelled to leave his post. He moved to the city of New York, where he died on May 25, 1780, aged fifty years.

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