Britton, Nathaniel Encyclopedia Article

Britton, Nathaniel

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Britton, Nathaniel

American Botanist
1859-1934

Nathaniel Lord Britton was an American botanist who helped found the New York Botanical Garden and build it into a premier research institution. Britton was born in 1859 in Staten Island, New York, and received both his undergraduate and graduate degrees in geology and mining engineering from Columbia University. His professional interest in botany began while he was working for the New Jersey Geologic Survey, during which time he prepared a list of plants found in the state. He became a professor at Columbia, first in geology and later in botany. In 1885 he married Elizabeth Knight, one of the foremost **bryologists** in the country.

Britton and his wife were inspired by a visit to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, England, and returned in 1891 to the United States to begin planning for what would become the New York Botanical Garden. Britton was its first director, a post he held until his retirement in 1929. Through his administrative skill, scholarship, energy, and force of personality, Britton built the garden into a world-class center for research in plant taxonomy, and the finest botanical garden in the country.

Britton was a prolific author, writing hundreds of scientific papers and several important books. He was the principal author of the *Illustrated Flora* of the northeastern United States, a text that was at one time the major guide to the plants of this region. He published many papers on the flora of the West Indies, and was coauthor of *The Cactaceae of the World.* A large number of **genera** of flowering plants bear his name, as does *Brittonia*, a major journal of American plant taxonomy published by the New York Botanical Garden.

Britton undertook a major revision of the nomenclature of the plants of North America, creating the American Code of Botanical Nomenclature in 1892. Britton meant this system to replace the International Code used widely at that time. Although most major research institutions did not adopt his system, the U.S. Department of Agriculture did, assuring it a prolonged life, if not widespread use. The American Code, however, fell further and further out of favor after Britton's death in 1934, and is no longer used today.

See Also

Botanical Gardens and Arboreta; Curator of a Botanical Garden; Taxonomist; Taxonomy; Taxonomy, History Of.

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