

Stars and Bars . . . and Botany: E. Kirby Smith

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This summer Kevin Chuang, the 2011 **Charles T. Mohr Herbarium Intern**, is cataloguing newly accessioned specimens collected by famous southeastern botanists such as Charles W. Short (1794–1863, Kentucky), Charles Mohr (1824–1901, Alabama), and Augustin Gattinger (1825–1903, Tennessee). Paper was a precious commodity in the nineteenth century, so specimens were mounted on thin paper or with multiple species on a single sheet. Kevin is learning to cope with such curatorial conundrums and to decipher nineteenth-century penmanship.

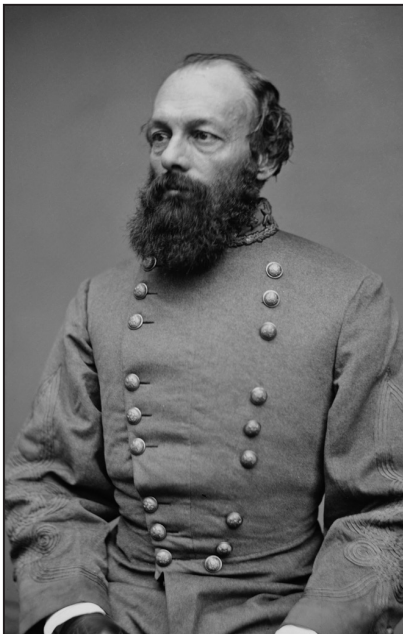
Kevin has also found specimens collected by lesser-known nineteenth-century botanists such as “E. Kirby Smith.” As we catalogue our plant specimens, we also document the people who collected them, so I commenced to search for Mr. or Ms. Smith. I discounted all hits on my first Google® search, “E. Kirby Smith,” as they all dealt with a Civil War general. Adding “botany” to the search string yielded an article by Dr. George Ramseur of the University of the South on the history of botany at Sewanee, which included this information: “Gattinger met and became good friends with retired Confederate General Edmund Kirby Smith, a mathematics and botany professor here at Sewanee. He visited and botanized with Kirby Smith on several of his collecting trips.”¹

Edmund Kirby Smith was born in St. Augustine, FL, in 1824. After graduating from West Point, he served in the Mexican-American War under General Zachary Taylor. After the war, he returned to West Point as a mathematics instructor. The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which had ended the Mexican-American War, established a new border between the two nations, and in 1854, Captain Smith was assigned to the Mexican-American Boundary Survey, which was charged with setting the official boundary. “In recognition of Smith’s interest in plant life, Major W. H. Emory, head of the commission appointed him botanist. The Captain was delighted; this was more to his liking than any peacetime assignment he had ever had.”² Kirby Smith, along with colleagues Bigelow, Thurber, Parry, Schott, and Wright, collected thousands of plants along the survey line.³ These specimens are in the Harvard and Smithsonian Herbaria.

In 1861 Kirby Smith joined the Confederate forces and by 1863 was in Shreveport, LA, in command of the Trans-Mississippi Department (Arkansas, western Louisiana, and Texas). After the

Union seized Vicksburg and the Mississippi River, the Trans-Mississippi Department became so isolated from the rest of the Confederacy that it became known as “Kirby Smithdom.” It’s doubtful that General Kirby Smith had time for botanizing during this busy period.

“Kirby Smithdom” was in fact so isolated that E. Kirby Smith was the last Confederate general to surrender. After taking an oath of amnesty in 1865, he returned to civilian life. In 1875 he became professor of mathematics and acting professor of botany at University of the South in Sewanee. “Kirby Smith himself was a great mathematics teacher but not a great mathematician. He



knew enough to teach undergraduates; he had neither time nor inclination to become a great scholar. During cold winter days he often permitted his two dogs to enter the classroom and occupy choice places around the [stove] while students worked at the blackboard. When some student made an error the professor would whistle for ‘Ned’ or ‘Dick,’ and hand him the eraser. Then with a twinkle in his eyes he would turn to the troubled student. ‘Rub it out,’ he would exclaim. ‘Even Ned knows it’s wrong and wants you to erase it.’”²

No one knows how many specimens Kirby Smith made while he was in Tennessee: the UNC Herbarium has four, University of the South’s herbarium has one. It’s unclear whether there are any more to be found. Gattinger wrote of Kirby Smith, “He would be a

very able man to collect but his work is in ‘darts and fits.’”¹

Edmund Kirby Smith, last surviving full general on either side of the conflict, died on March 28, 1893 and is buried in the Sewanee cemetery. In 2011, the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War, we can hope that Smith’s sentiments expressed in a letter to a Sioux City, Iowa, historical society will come to fruition: “sectional differences are fast disappearing and that, under the blessing of God, we will soon be, if we are not so already, one people in truth and deed.”² ❏

Sources:

1. Ramseur, George. 2001. Augustin Gattinger at Sewanee. *The Plant Press: Newsletter of the Friends of the Herbarium* 5(1): 1.
2. Parks, Joseph Howard. 1954. *General Edmund Kirby Smith, C.S.A.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
3. Emory, William H. 1859. *Report on the United States and Mexican Boundary Survey made under the direction of the Secretary of the Interior. II.* Washington, D.C.: Cornelius Wendell, Printer.