

Carolina Eyebright and Mr. H.A. Rankin

by Alan Weakley, Curator of the University of North Carolina Herbarium

Grass-of-Parnassus (*Parnassia*)—its white petals filigreed with a delicate tracery of green venation—is one of the most beautiful of North American and Eurasian wildflower genera. Yet one of the North American species of *Parnassia* remained a mystery for over 120 years, finally being solved through the efforts of a Fayetteville, NC, timberman named Henry A. Rankin.

Rankin described himself in a letter to **William Chambers Coker**, founder of the UNC Herbarium: “I am not a botanist, but am much interested in the flora of the section.” This interest, as well as abundant opportunity to explore southeastern North Carolina while seeking stands of timber, made Rankin a distinguished figure in North Carolina botany. Two notable achievements were his discovery of a new species of Jessamine, named *Gelsemium rankinii* in his honor by John K. Small, and his rediscovery of *Parnassia caroliniana*.

Andre Michaux, French botanist (1746–1802), discovered and named *Parnassia caroliniana* from a vague locality in the Coastal Plain of “Carolina.” Through much of the 19th and early 20th centuries, taxonomists assumed that the locality was erroneous, because *Parnassia* was known as a circumboreal genus of cool habitats and its occurrence in the hot southern Coastal Plain seemed implausible. In 1928, though, Henry A. Rankin sent specimens collected near Hallsboro (Columbus County, NC) to Small at the New York Botanical Garden. Rankin was apparently not completely confident in the answer he received, as he wrote Coker on October 8, 1929:

Last fall I sent Dr. Small of the N.Y. Botanical Garden, specimens of *Parnassia* about which he became rather excited—said it was the original *P. caroliniana* found by Michaux on the Carolina coast and that the Northern plant going under that name was [a] different species—that it would now have to be called *P. americana*, Muhl. I have never seen the Northern species, and am sending you specimens from Hallsboro and would like to know—well I’m just wondering if perhaps he is a little too enthusiastic about multiplying species. Yours very sincerely, H.A. Rankin.

Two days later, Coker replied, assuring Rankin that his material represented the “real” *P. caroliniana*, expressing confidence in Small’s judgment and stating, “I am much pleased to get your specimen of the plant; it will prove a valuable addition to our herbarium.” He added, “I would like to get acquainted with you, and suggest that you take some opportunity to run up to Chapel Hill and see our herbarium and Arboretum. I would be much pleased to entertain you

while in town” (a courtesy which we happily extend to our correspondents in 2006 as well). Thus began a fruitful correspondence and acquaintance that lasted at least into the mid-1940s.

In 1934, Small’s colleague E. J. Alexander published a paper in the journal *Addisonia* in which he extensively quoted Rankin, as follows:

That the Grass-of-Parnassus [which I sent] should turn out to be the true Carolina Grass-of-Parnassus is indeed good news and is received almost as a personal vindication, for I have always thought of it as that. Some years ago I found in Blanchan’s *Wildflowers* under Carolina Grass-of-Parnassus, the following—“What’s in a name, certainly our common Grass-of-Parnassus, which is no grass at all, never starred the meadows around about the home of the Muses, nor sought the steaming savannas of the Carolinas.”

I have always resented that passage as an almost personal affront. Owen Wister said in ‘The Virginian,’ ‘When you call me that always smile,’ and in this passage no smile is indicated.

What if our savannas are sometimes steaming, it is the condition necessary for the development for many wonderful plants which find here their most congenial surroundings.

But Grass-of-Parnassus does not star the meadows during the steaming season, instead, the “Eyebright,” its local name, times its first flowers to come just two weeks before frost. . . Its chosen habitat is the wet savannas and hundreds of acres may be seen liberally dotted with its white stars, but it finds its best development in the lower places, and here it often almost covers the ground. Today, November 1st, it is in its prime and is the most conspicuous flower on many acres and in one little depression less than two feet in diameter I counted seventy-two flowers and buds.

Alas, with fire suppression, drainage, and development of outer Coastal Plain pinelands, few places bearing a resemblance to Rankin’s description remain. *Parnassia caroliniana* is an imperiled species, locally uncommon in a few counties of southeastern North

Carolina and one county of the Florida Panhandle.

Thanks to the generosity of Rankin’s granddaughter, Dorothy Rankin, and the efforts of UNC Herbarium associate Bruce Sorrie, we recently received a large archive of Rankin’s correspondence, which promises to be a treasure trove of historical insights into the botanical exploration of North Carolina’s Coastal Plain.

