

MORE ON MOHR: HIS FINAL ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA DAYS

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ABSTRACT

German-born Charles Mohr (1824–1901) spent most of his adult life working as a pharmacist in Mobile, Alabama. In addition, he contributed multiple scientific and popular articles on the botany of the Southeastern United States. Suffering from many physical ailments, he sought treatment in thermal baths and cool climates, including Asheville, North Carolina. There he was able to work with botanists at the newly established Biltmore Herbarium. In early 1900, he and his family moved to Asheville, where he completed reading the proof of his magnum opus, *Plant Life of Alabama*. He died in Asheville 17 July 1901—two weeks before his book was published—and is buried there.

RESUMEN

Charles Mohr (1824–1901), nacido en Alemania, pasó la mayor parte de su vida adulta trabajando como farmacéutico en Mobile, Alabama. Además, contribuyó con múltiples artículos científicos y populares sobre la botánica del sureste de los Estados Unidos. Sufriendo de muchas dolencias físicas, buscó tratamiento en baños termales y climas frescos, incluyendo Asheville, Carolina del Norte. Allí pudo trabajar con botánicos en el recién establecido Herbario Biltmore. A principios de 1900, se mudó con su familia a Asheville, donde terminó de leer las pruebas de su obra magna, *Plant Life of Alabama*. Murió en Asheville el 17 de julio de 1901, dos semanas antes de que su libro fuera publicado, y está enterrado allí.

The life and works of Charles Mohr (1824–1901) have been presented previously (Davenport 1979a, 1979b, 1988, 2015a). A chemist by training, the German-born Mohr settled in Mobile, Alabama, in 1860. There he forged a successful apothecary business and, in his spare time, contributed to local, state, Southeastern, and national botanical projects. His publications culminated in *Plant Life of Alabama* (Mohr 1901), published just two weeks after his death in Asheville, North Carolina.

While saddened by the timing of Mohr's death, most readers wonder why he chose to live out his final days far from his beloved Mobile on Alabama's Gulf Coast. The answer is twofold.

Throughout his adult life, Mohr suffered physically. His first botanical adventure to Surinam (in 1846) was cut short by unrelenting fevers, as was his California Gold Rush experience three years later. Debilitating aches and pains mounted with the years, depressing his spirit and affecting his demeanor. In a letter to Nathaniel Lord Britton, Mohr (1890) sadly wrote: “[With] the opening of this season I find myself handicapped in my movements over field and forest by treacherous attacks of rheumatism. To find me thus deprived of the unhindered enjoyment of my botanical rambles is tending to oppression of spirits, which to overcome, with all philosophy I have not yet learned.”

Like others of his generation, Mohr sought relief in thermal baths and cool climates. Those baths were found as far away from Mobile as Europe (Mohr 1887) or as close as Washington County, Alabama (Keener & Davenport 2013). Cooler climates awaited him in far-northeastern Alabama near Mentone and in north-central Alabama's Cullman County, whose German community included his brother, Paul, and botanically astute nieces, Emily and Mary.

Asheville, North Carolina, offered an even more healthful environment—plus professional botanical stimulation. In a letter to Marsha T. Tracy while visiting Asheville, Mohr (1899a) fairly beamed: “I am glad to say that my health and strength are improving. It was yesterday for the first time that I indulged in a short botanical ramble along the banks of the lovely Swan[n]anoa river and the adjoining hills, in company with one of my botanical friends of the Biltmore Herbarium.” (More on the Biltmore connection later.)

By the mid-1890s, Mohr was acknowledged as the premier botanist in Alabama, and second (to Alvan W. Chapman) in the entire Southern States. He had published widely, both in scientific and popular journals, and worked closely with many top scientists, including Harvard's Charles Sprague Sargent. But he faced stiff competition from younger ones, like the New York Botanical Garden's John K. Small and Auburn University's P.H. Mell. Using Mohr's extensive knowledge of Alabama's plant life—which had been freely but foolishly shared—Mell (1896) published a key part of a flora of the state. Deeply shaken, Mohr returned to his own manuscript with renewed vigor, promising his friend and benefactor, Eugene Allen Smith, that he would publish all new taxa before anyone else did so (Mohr 1896). His efforts soon resulted in two publications in the *Bulletin of the Torrey Botanical Club* (Mohr 1897a, 1899b).

In the late 1890s, Mohr became increasingly concerned about his health and the ability to finish his life's work. In a letter to Samuel M. Tracy, Mohr (1897b) lamented, “[M]y attempt to resume active field work this spring has sadly failed, and [has] so far to be given up; as I could not afford the risk to place further obstacles in the way of my work on the Alabama flora on account of being hors de combat.” But visiting Asheville “solved” two problems. During the same 1899 visit mentioned in his letter to Mrs. Tracy, Mohr (1899c) wrote Smith, “The collectors for this Herbarium have last spring extended their exploration through the mountains of N. Alabama as far south as Birmingham and brought to light a lot of interesting plants from localities I had no chance to visit myself, particularly from the mountains about Guntersville and the Raccoon Mountains. The novelties among them I have entered in the Catalogue of the Alabama flora and they will find yet a place in [*Plant Life of Alabama*].”

In a later lengthy letter to Dr. Tracy, Mohr (1900) emoted that his initial Asheville sojourn had been so beneficial that “the idea has taken possession of me that it is in this place, in which I might spend the evening of my life free from the ills which make it a burden to me. . . [Losing] on my return to Mobile rapidly what I had gained in health in Asheville, I felt that it was best not to delay any longer the serious step of cutting loose from the old home endeared by the associations of a full lifetime.” He then recounted how he had been “urgently called” by Frederick Coville (who headed up the publication process) to read the proof of *Plant Life of Alabama* in Washington, DC; how he and his wife had spent a lonely winter there; and how, on 01 April 1900, they found themselves finally “snugly installed” in their new home at 16 Starnes Avenue in Asheville. Mohr soon after returned to Washington, only to be “taken down” by illness, which forced him to scurry back to Asheville “to escape a sickbed among strangers.” After several weeks’ recovery, he “ventured to visit the Biltmore herbarium and Library. I find there great facilities which enable me to carry on the further revision of the proof without difficulty.”

So what were those “great facilities”? Founded (and funded) by George Vanderbilt, the Biltmore Herbarium aimed to rival the long-established major collections of the eastern United States (Davenport 2015b). Vanderbilt spared no expense, hiring Chauncey D. Beadle as Director, Frank E. Boynton as Guardian of the Collection, and Charles L. Boynton as Chief Collector. Agents scoured Europe to secure a first-rate botanical library. And through its relentless collecting efforts, far-reaching exchange programs, and purchases of important collections (including that of Chapman), the Biltmore Herbarium eventually topped 100,000 specimens (Alexander 2007).

Biltmore offered Mohr the best and most complete array of Southeastern plants anywhere, plus a knowledgeable and helpful staff. Figure 1, possibly taken at Biltmore, offers us a view of Mohr in that element. It is a rare, turn-of-the-last-century glimpse of a prominent botanist at work.

But Mohr survived just 15 months in Asheville. He died 17 July 1901—exactly two weeks before *Plant Life of Alabama* was published—and was buried in Riverside Cemetery there. Herman B. Mohr (1901) informed the Smithsonian Institution of his father's death and “his desire, which is seconded by his widow, that his collection of plants should revert to the National Herbarium.” The Smithsonian immediately dispatched Frank L. Pollard to box up and ship Mohr's herbarium (ca. 18,000 specimens), which Pollard (1901) found housed in “heavy, polished cypress” cases “standing over 10 ft high” at the Mohrs' Asheville home.

Earlier that year, the first issue of *Biltmore Botanical Studies* appeared. In a very appropriate gesture, its

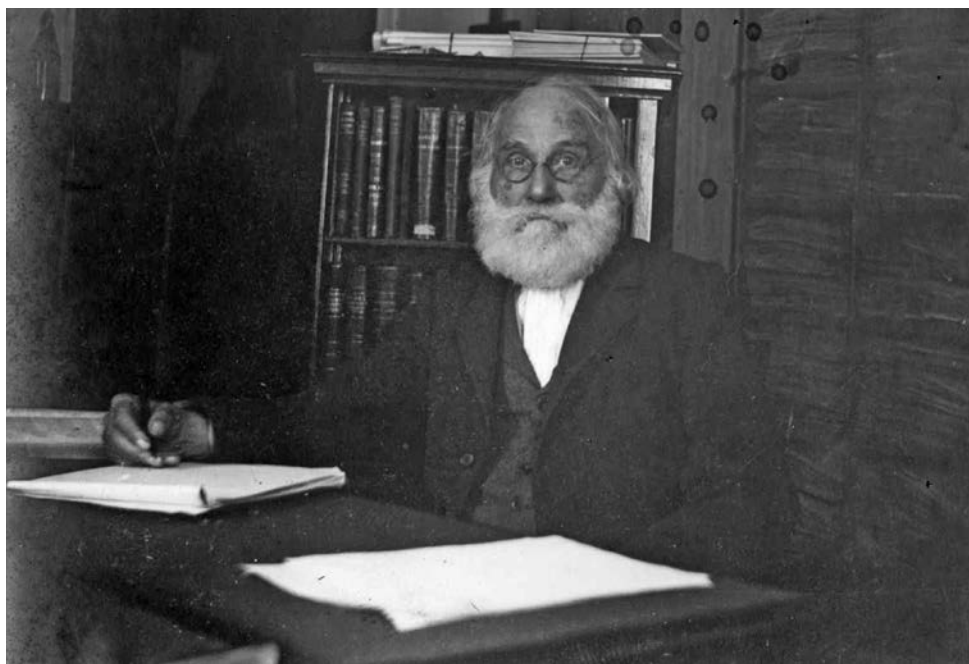


FIG. 1. Charles Mohr reviewing a manuscript, ca. 1900, possibly at the Biltmore Herbarium in Asheville, NC (Missouri Botanical Garden Archives).



FIG. 2. **A.** *Marshallia mohrii*, named and described by Biltmore botanists for “Dr. Charles Mohr, of Asheville, N.C.” **B.** Close-up of flowering head (photos by David M. Frings).

opening article (Beadle & Boynton 1901) gave thanks to “Dr. Charles Mohr, of Asheville, N.C.” and included the description of a new species, *Marshallia mohrii*. Based on specimens gathered near Cullman, Alabama, by Mohr, it remains one of Alabama’s rarest and most iconic plants (Fig. 2).

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