

Edward Fredrick Leitner (1812-1838) Physician-Botanist

Introduction By Denyse Cunningham, 2007



*Fig. 1 - Memorial Tree, 2006
[Photo by Peter Nolan]*

This fascinating account of the life and work of the nineteenth-century physician-botanist Edward Frederick Leitner (1812 – 1838) by Dr. George Edmund Gifford, Jr. (1930 – 1981) was painstakingly researched by Gifford before the wide-spread use of the internet and e-mail which has made research so much easier for us today. The following article is a testament to Gifford's dogged pursuit of every scrap of information he could find regarding Leitner's career. Gifford, himself a physician and historian of science, often wrote about America's early scientists and naturalists. As a result of his efforts we have this early account of the natural world of South Florida experienced by Leitner in the 1830s.

The late Cooper Kirk, appointed as the first Broward County Historian, had been very interested in Leitner's story. While researching the early history of Broward County and the career of Major Lauderdale for his own book *William Lauderdale: General Andrew Jackson's Warrior*, Kirk had carefully transcribed any account of Leitner's work he found in contemporary newspapers such as the *Charleston Mercury* and the *Niles Register*. After Kirk contacted Gifford in November of 1977 Gifford gave the Broward County Historical Commission permission to reprint Leitner's harrowing story in the *Broward Legacy*.



Fig. 2 - Looking Up, 2006 [Photo by Peter Nolan]

Leitner was associated with the early New River pioneer and Broward County legend William Cooley (1783 – 1863). Cooley and Leitner had both been employed by Lieutenant Levin Powell, U.S. Navy as guides along the coast of South Florida and into the Everglades. Cooley resided in the New River settlement in what is now Fort Lauderdale from 1823 through 1836 and knew the Everglades region well. The massacre of Cooley’s wife, their three children and the family tutor on January 6, 1836 by Seminole warriors on New River is one of the most infamous events in South Florida history at the beginning of the Second Seminole Indian War (1835 – 1842). Cooley held many important offices on the South Florida frontier, including justice of the peace, appraiser, lighthouse keeper and later city councilman and territorial legislator. The Cooley massacre led to the removal of nearly all white settlers for decades.

Leitner’s pioneering work is not widely known in contemporary literature. For example, he is not listed in Gail Fishman’s 2000 book Journeys Through Paradise: Pioneering Naturalists in the Southeast, though, as Gifford pointed out, he was mentioned briefly in other works. Perhaps because he died young, in the wilderness of the present day Palm Beach County in 1838 and did not settle in the area as did the more better-known Charles Torrey Simpson in the late 19th Century, Leitner is often overlooked.

Both Kirk and Gifford tried in vain to find the research materials Leitner had compiled as he issued a prospectus publishing the results of his labors in South Florida. Kirk wrote in 1977 to the National Archives, the Caroliniana Library and the South Carolina Medical College attempting to discover their whereabouts. After Gifford was informed of these attempts, he wrote to Kirk, “As to the missing manuscripts – I could not locate them. I wish you good luck but I am afraid they are lost.”

Dr. George Edmund Gifford was the author of numerous literary works. According to the dust cover of his book Cecil County Maryland 1608-1850 Dr. Gifford held B.S. and M.D. degrees from the University of Maryland and a M. A. from Harvard. He was a practicing psychiatrist, an Associate Professor of Socio-Medical Sciences at Boston University; instructor in Psychiatry, Consultant to the Historical Collections, Countway Library, Harvard University; and Associate in Medicine (Psychiatry) at Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, Boston. Gifford wrote his book on the history of Cecil County as a living memorial to his father, George Edmund Gifford, Sr.



Fig. 3 - *Guzmania* Cluster, 2004 [Photo by Peter Nolan]

Illustrations

Gifford's original manuscript was sparsely illustrated. Many of the sketches and photographs that accompany this reprint have been added to illustrate various points in the manuscript or give the impression of the remote Everglades landscape Leitner explored. The sources for these various images are included in the captions. Some of the most dramatic images included in this article are those of the photographer Peter Nolan of Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

A Floridian since early childhood, Peter J. Nolan has worked as a conservation photographer since 2001. Armed with a 4x5 wooden field camera, Nolan traverses the South Florida landscape capturing the interplay of water, land and sky. Both his shooting and printmaking style deftly blend traditional and modern photographic technique. His images, initially captured using film, are adjusted digitally and then printed as traditional "wet" darkroom prints. Nolan feels that, "The organic nature of using mechanical equipment in the field is very appealing to me. No batteries or beeps, just the whisper quiet sound of a mechanical shutter."

Nolan's work, primarily focused on South Florida, the Everglades, and Big Cypress National Preserve is largely motivated by ecological concerns. He hopes that, through his work, people will gain a greater appreciation for the natural landscape that surrounds them.