A Passion for Learning: George Barrell Emerson
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Over the course of a long and remarkable life, George Barrell Emerson (1797–1881) was a Harvard graduate, the first headmaster of what would become Boston’s English High School, a lifelong naturalist, and perhaps most notably, a pioneer of education for girls in America. He was also a founding father of the Arnold Arboretum.

Emerson, second cousin of American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, grew up exploring the natural world in Maine. When he matriculated at Harvard in 1813, he gravitated to the study of plants at its Botanic Garden (which, appropriately, thrived in the environs of present-day Garden Street in Cambridge until the 1940s). For the next twenty years, he served as a preparatory school teacher and was noted for progressive methods of education, particularly the education of girls. His passion for botany remained steadfast, and in 1830 he was among the founders of the Boston Society of Natural Science. With the approval of the Massachusetts Legislature, the Society sponsored surveys of the flora and fauna of the Commonwealth, of which Emerson’s report on Massachusetts trees and shrubs was a part. The report included the botanical image of mountain laurel (Kalmia latifolia) appearing on the cover of this issue of Silva, rendered by Isaac Sprague, an illustrator who collaborated with Harvard botanist Asa Gray and James Audubon.

Emerson married widow Mary Fleming in 1832, an act which would have resounding effect on the history of the Arnold Arboretum. His marriage made him a brother-in-law of New Bedford whaling merchant James Arnold, and in time he would prove the most influential of Arnold’s executors. It was Emerson’s strong affiliation with Harvard University that cemented the agreement to join Arnold’s monetary gift with land donated to the University by Benjamin Bussey (1757–1842), thus creating the Arnold Arboretum in 1872.

TheArnold Arboretum Horticultural Library and Archives holds documents relating to the early history of the institution, including the wills of Arnold and Bussey, correspondence, and early maps of the grounds. George B. Emerson’s papers are located in the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Concord Public Library, the University of Virginia, and other collections. You may peruse Emerson’s two-volume Report on the Trees and Shrubs of Massachusetts in the Horticultural Library Reading Room.

On the cover
Botanical illustration of Kalmia latifolia (mountain laurel) from Trees and Shrubs of Massachusetts by George B. Emerson, 1887 edition, courtesy of the Arnold Arboretum Horticultural Library. Emerson became president of the Boston Society of Natural History in 1836, and under his direction the Society organized botanical and zoological surveys for the Massachusetts legislature. Emerson acted as commissioner for the surveys and conducted the investigation of trees and shrubs himself, publishing his findings in 1846. Read more about the author above, and about Kalmia on the back cover.