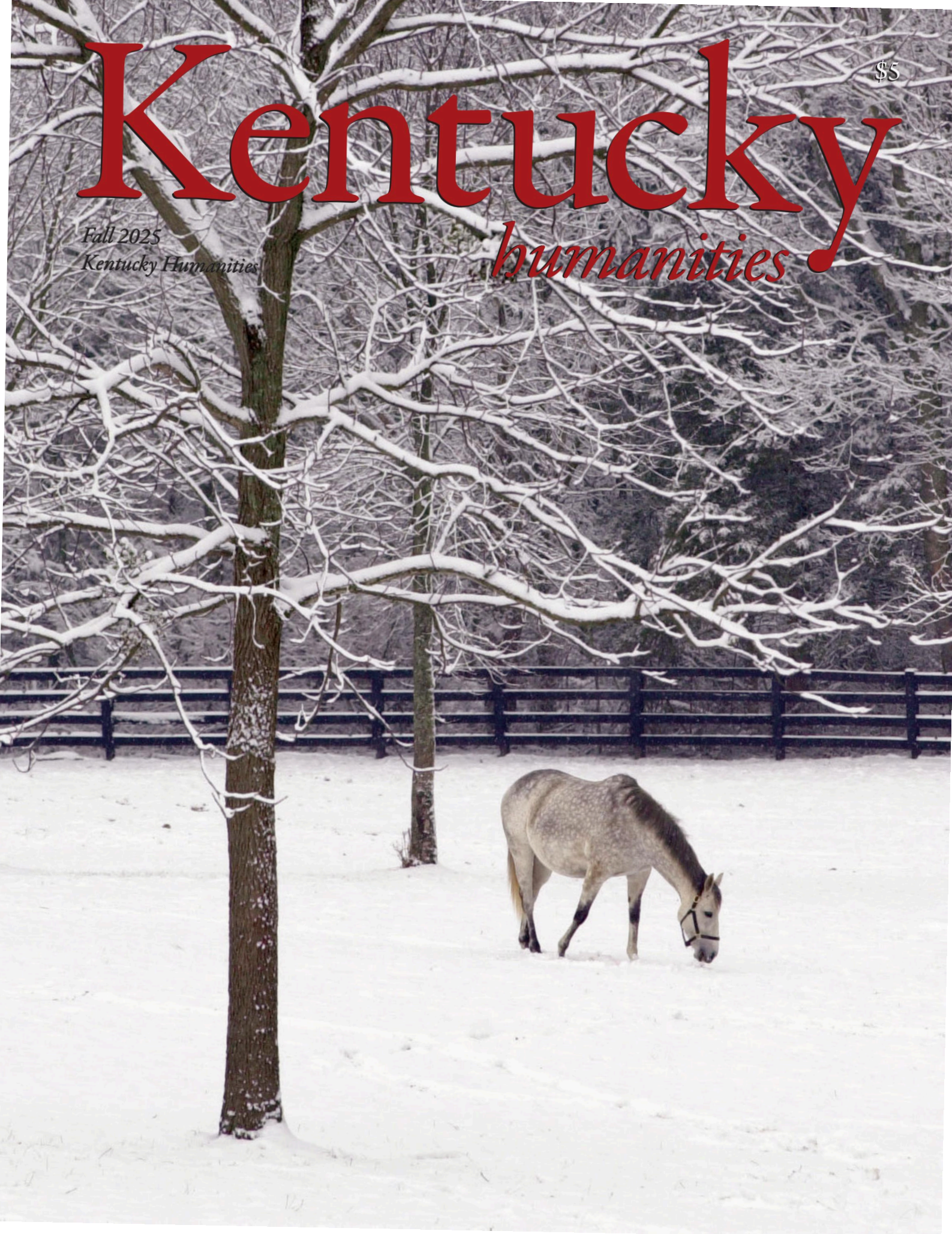

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Photo by Jeff Rogers Photography

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America Before the Floods

Rafinesque and Atlantic Theories of Creation

By Dr. Jeremy Paden

When Constantine Rafinesque, Transylvania University's well-known and infamous professor of botany, outlined the four schools of American geology in an 1832 article published in his *Atlantic Journal* and *Friend of Knowledge*, he made no mention of the Scottish geologist Charles Lyell. Two years before, in 1830, Lyell had published the first volume of his *Principals of Geology: Being an Attempt to Explain the Former Changes of the Earth's Surface, by Reference to Causes Now in Operation*, a book that shook the foundations of how Europeans understood earth formation and that clearly marks a before and after. Lyell eschewed catastrophism for uniformitarianism and set the course for modern geology. The physical world, he argued, is what it is today because of slow changes over time that operate on the land in accordance with constant physical laws. Lyell's ideas refuted the widely held belief of catastrophism or that the world was formed, both geologically and biologically, by events like Noah's flood. As with all such watershed moments, the before is comprised of a series of insights and discoveries that inform the author's revolutionary mind. Lyell relied on, refined, and popularized the work of two other Scottish geologists, James Hutton and John Playfair. Likewise, the landscape of ideas after such moments is never immediately settled.

That Rafinesque does not mention Lyell's now seminal text, a work Charles Darwin took with him on his *Beagle* trip, is quite understandable. Not only does the adoption of novel views take time, the spread of ideas among the educated in the early to mid-19th century, though certainly faster than when the Copernican Revolution shook Western science and religion, was still nowhere near as fast as today. Furthermore, even had he known of Lyell's book, the purpose of his article was to position himself as a leader in the field of geology. The brief list of schools that Rafinesque outlines serves to present his school as the best. He developed his ideas on geology, he states, between 1819 and

Above: Constantine Samuel Rafinesque was born on October 22, 1783, in Galata, a suburb of Constantinople in Turkey. In 1819, Rafinesque arrived in Lexington, at Transylvania University where he had been hired as a professor of botany and natural science.

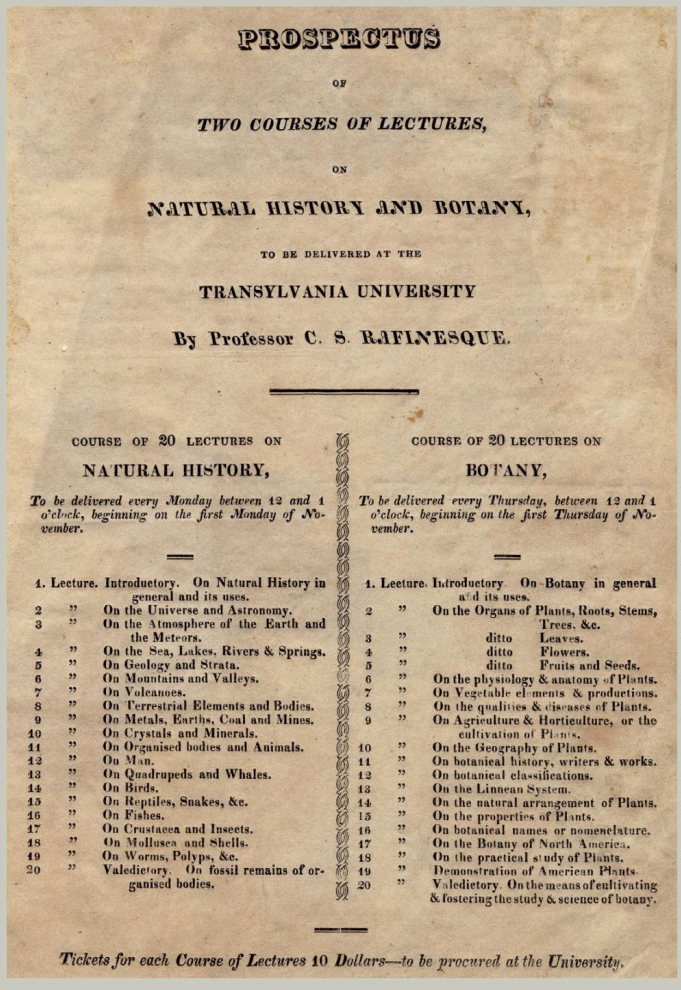
1820 as he prepared lectures in natural history while in Lexington, Kentucky.

The French polymath, who while in Lexington had a reputation for loving dance and for disappearing on trips to observe biota, collect specimens, and visit Indian mounds, does dedicate a few sentences to English geology, which he quickly dismisses as too solipsistic. Curiously, the British Isles were the innovative center of the science of geology, due to institutional reasons (the existence of the Royal Society and the role that geologists played in coal mining) and accidents of geography (the complicated geological history of the Isles that have resulted in the presence of a wide variety of different geological strata and features in a relatively small area). Nothing visualizes this complicated history better than the revolutionary cartography of the self-educated son of a blacksmith and canal digger, William Smith, who in 1817, after almost two decades of work, published the first geological map of any nation.

Rafinesque, ever the entrepreneur and self-promoter, started a series of publishing ventures, of journals and serialized books: *Western Minerva or American Annals of Knowledge and Literature*, 1820, *Atlantic Journal and Friend of Knowledge*, 1832, *The American Nations*; or *Outlines of A National History; of the Ancient and Modern Nations of North and South America*, 1836. His model was Alexander von Humboldt, the renowned German inspector of mines, who was the scientific superstar of the age, and whose writings inspired scientists, like Darwin, and artists, like Fredric Edwin Church, the Hudson School River landscape artist who traveled to South America and painted breathtaking epic canvases of Andean volcanoes. Each of Rafinesque's new ventures promised more volumes that never materialized. As the alternate title of *The American Nations* states, he wanted to produce something systematic and integrative of all the sciences with accompanying maps and illustrations, "the whole history of the earth and mankind in the western hemisphere; the philosophy of American history; the annals, traditions, civilization, languages, &c., of all the American nations, tribes, empires, and states." The front matter of his *Atlantic Journal* contains an advertisement for another never-finished book, his *Iconography and Illustrations*, which was to contain "30 volumes in folio, with 3000 figures and maps." Part 2 was to cover Geography. Part 3, Geology, each, he affirmed, would contain 200 maps, among other images. The prohibitive cost of producing image plates and the dearth of subscribers meant an inability to finance any of the many promised volumes. Rafinesque, unlike Humboldt who relied on inherited wealth, could not personally finance the publication of his projects. Nor did he have the business sense or network that helped his Kentucky rival John James Audubon finance his *Birds of America*.

Should one only read the printed material, it would seem that the maps he alludes to are fiction. Yet tucked away in a gray box in Transylvania University's Special Collections is a hand-drawn map of Central and South America that includes a portion of the Southeastern United States and the westernmost parts of Africa. It is titled, *Carte del Amerique Meridionale avant les Deluges par C. S. Rafinesque*, or *Map of South America before the Floods by C. S. Rafinesque*. It is the only such map in Transylvania's collection; no other information accompanies it, and his various biographers neither mention it nor mention similar maps in their treatment of him.

The landmass of the Western Hemisphere before the Floods, this map suggests, was a series of islands: the southern U.S. is marked as I. Apalache, the isthmus between North and South America as I. Panama, and the island of Hispaniola as I. Hayti. The Amazon Basin is called the *Mer de Maragnun*, or the *Marañón Sea*, and the plains of northern Argentina (the Pampas and the Chaco region) are the *Golfe Paraná*. As the legend on the lower right-hand side of the map notes, the solid lines demarcate historical coastlines, while the dotted lines denote the present-day, 19th-century coastline. Along with names that correspond to the high places of the American continents, off the coast of



PROSPECTUS

OF

TWO COURSES OF LECTURES,

ON

NATURAL HISTORY AND BOTANY,

TO BE DELIVERED AT THE

TRANSYLVANIA UNIVERSITY

By Professor C. S. RAFINESQUE.

COURSE OF 20 LECTURES ON

NATURAL HISTORY,

To be delivered every Monday between 12 and 1 o'clock, beginning on the first Monday of November.

1. Lecture. Introductory. On Natural History in general and its uses.
2 " On the Universe and Astronomy.
3 " On the Atmosphere of the Earth and the Meteors.
4 " On the Sea, Lakes, Rivers & Springs.
5 " On Geology and Strata.
6 " On Mountains and Valleys.
7 " On Volcanoes.
8 " On Terrestrial Elements and Bodies.
9 " On Metals, Earths, Coal and Mines.
10 " On Crystals and Minerals.
11 " On Organised bodies and Animals.
12 " On Man.
13 " On Quadrupeds and Whales.
14 " On Birds.
15 " On Reptiles, Snakes, &c.
16 " On Fishes.
17 " On Crustacea and Insects.
18 " On Mollusca and Shells.
19 " On Worms, Polyps, &c.
20 " Valedictory. On fossil remains of organised bodies.

COURSE OF 20 LECTURES ON

BOTANY,

To be delivered every Thursday, between 12 and 1 o'clock, beginning on the first Thursday of November.

1. Lecture. Introductory. On Botany in general and its uses.
2 " On the Organs of Plants, Roots, Stems, Trees, &c.
3 " ditto Leaves.
4 " ditto Flowers.
5 " ditto Fruits and Seeds.
6 " On the physiology & anatomy of Plants.
7 " On Vegetable elements & productions.
8 " On the qualities & diseases of Plants.
9 " On Agriculture & Horticulture, or the cultivation of Plants.
10 " On the Geography of Plants.
11 " On botanical history, writers & works.
12 " On botanical classifications.
13 " On the Linnean System.
14 " On the natural arrangement of Plants.
15 " On the properties of Plants.
16 " On botanical names or nomenclature.
17 " On the Botany of North America.
18 " On the practical study of Plants.
19 " Demonstration of American Plants.
20 " Valedictory. On the means of cultivating & fostering the study & science of botany.

Tickets for each Course of Lectures 10 Dollars—to be procured at the University.

Photo courtesy of Special Collections & Archives. Gay/Carrick Library. Transylvania University.

The prospectus for Professor Rafinesque's course on Natural History and Botany at Transylvania University.

Photo courtesy of Special Collections & Archives. Gay/Carrcik Library. Transylvania University.

Africa is a land called *Petite Atlantide*, or *Small Atlantis*; the Western Hemisphere, in turn, is *Grande Atlantide*, or *Large Atlantis*; and the great bulge of West Africa is *Atlantes*. As this map and his writings show, Rafinesque believed the origin of America to be the mythical Atlantis.

Wondering about the land and the origin of the people of the Americas has a long history in European and Euro-American letters. Much of this thought is bound up with myth and fiction. When the Spanish first sent priests to Mexico soon after the fall of Tenochtitlan, 12 Franciscan friars were commissioned in hopes that the conversion of what some thought to be the lost tribe of Israel would bring about the end times. A little over 100 years later, Roger Williams, the London-born puritan and founder of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantation, in his *A Key into the Language of America*, a primer on the Narragansett language, after a discussion of the possible origin of the First Peoples, notes that he thinks that the language shares much in common with Hebrew. He goes on to list various customs he thinks are shared by Jews and Native Americans. The persistence of the lost tribe of Israel as the origin of the First Peoples of America is present in Joseph Smith's *Book of Mormon*.

Above: Found in Transylvania University's Special Collections is a hand-drawn map of Central and South America that includes a portion of the Southeastern United States and the westernmost parts of Africa. It is titled, Carte del Amerique Meridionale avant les Deluges par C. S. Rafinesque, *or* Map of South America before the Floods by C. S. Rafinesque. *It is the only such map in Transylvania's collection.*

Rafinesque discredited the Lost Tribe theory, and instead thought the people came to the Americas across the Bering Strait or island-hopped from Europe, using Atlantis as a stop. Almost half a century after Rafinesque's *The American Nations*, the Minnesota politician and celebrated crackpot Ignatius Donnelly published in 1881 his very popular *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, a book that takes Plato's parable as historical fact. Donnelly even mentions Rafinesque and cites an extensive passage from *The American Nations* on the role cataclysms played in forming America. Even as late as 1925 serious thinkers, like the Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos, were still proposing Atlantis as the origin of America's First Peoples.

The 19th century, as Kevin Young notes in his book *Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbugs, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts and Fake News*, was filled with claptrap. Rafinesque, while erudite and a prolific producer of Latinate names for Kentucky flora and fauna, was very much a showman and an entrepreneur. It seems that at the end of his life, this polymath with the undisciplined mind of an autodidactic became a plagiarist and a humbug artist looking for fame and remuneration. While he saw himself as one chosen to "[raise] the veil that was thrown over the annals of" the Americas (*The American Nations*, 15), he is now more remembered as the perpetrator of the Walam Olum archeological hoax. Something that has overshadowed his flashes of insight regarding how to decipher Mayan glyphs or his defense of the Bering Strait as a means of peopling the Americas.

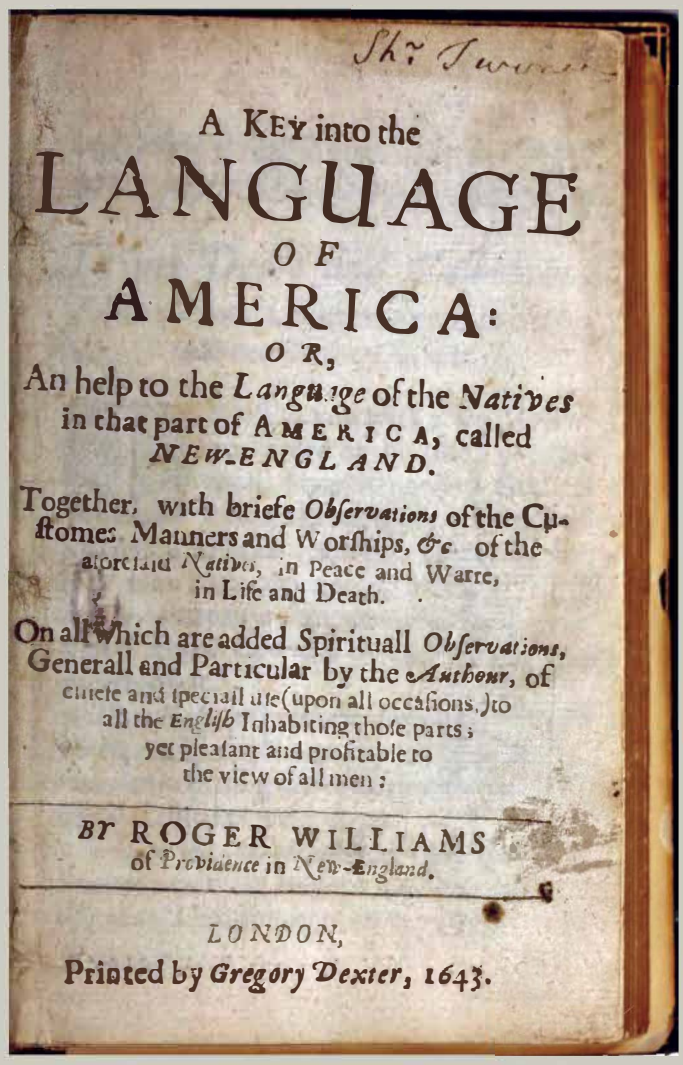
One of the difficulties with determining Rafinesque's status as a hoaxer was the lack of his collection of antiquarian artifacts. Fortunately, as to his hand-drawn map, Rafinesque's 1836 book *The American Nations* sheds light on it. In Chapter 2, as he outlines the four periods of American geography, he mentions a series of maps of America he hopes to publish that correspond to his four main divisions of American geology:

1-Primitive Geography of America
2-Ancient ditto, or between 1400 and 1500
3-Modern Colonial Geography
4-Modern Independent Geography (50)

He states that a subsequent publication (presumably one of the six volumes of *The American Nations*, or in a newly mentioned work, his *Illustrations of the Ancient Geography of America*) will reproduce these maps. *Illustrations* was never published, and only two of the promised six volumes of *The American Nations* saw print.

At the end of chapter 1 of *The American Nations*, Rafinesque traces out a slightly different periodization. There is ancient history, which ends with Columbus, and modern history, which runs from 1492 on. Ancient history, in turn, is divided into three periods, rather than two:

1. *Antidiluvian period*, beginning at the creation, about 6690 years before Columbus according to the Tols, and ending with the last cataclysm of Peleg, about 3788 years before Columbus.


A KEY into the
LANGUAGE
OF
AMERICA:
OR,
An help to the Language of the Natives in that part of AMERICA, called NEW-ENGLAND.
Together, with briefe Observations of the Customes, Manners and Worships, &c. of the aforesaid Natives, in Peace and Warre, in Life and Death.
On all which are added Spirituall Observations, Generall and Particular by the Author, of chiefe and speciall use (upon all occasions) to all the English Inhabiting those parts; yet pleasant and profitable to the view of all men:
BY ROGER WILLIAMS of Providence in New-England.
LONDON,
Printed by Gregory Dexter, 1643.

Roger Williams, author of A Key into the Language of America, was an English clergyman and founder of Rhode Island. His book, published in 1643, was the first comprehensive study of a Native American language in English, focusing on the Narragansett language and providing invaluable insight into the culture and daily life of the Narragansett people.

2. *Doubtful period*, from that epocha [sic] till the reform of Tol astronomy, 1612 years before Columbus…
3. *Certain period*, from 1612 [before Columbus] till Columbus' arrival in 1492. (34-35)

The *Doubtful period* and the *Certain period* are further divided into lesser epochs.

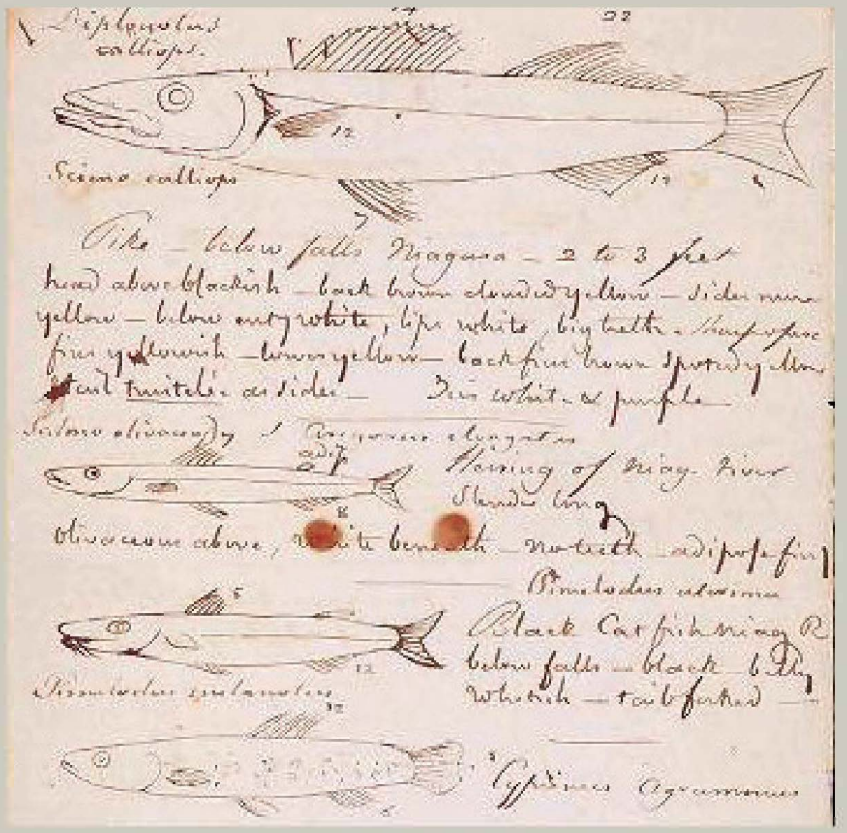
Chapter 3, titled "Cataclysms," goes on to lay out what these various antediluvian, cataclysmic periods looked like. His discussion decribes the map in Transylvania's special collections.

> *The American hemisphere had then probably two great islands in the North and South, with many smaller islands between them, in the tropical sea: the Alleghany and Atlantis forming two others in the east, and many*

others studding the two polar regions… I have endeavored to express this first configuration of America in my two maps of North and South America; when the Ocean was yet about 5000 feet higher than it is actually. Whether this cataclysm was contemporaneous throughout, or by successive throes must be ascertained by Geogony… This was the fourth period of terrestrial events in this hemisphere; but the first of terrestrial separate existence. (79-80)

Rafinesque's understanding of pre-Columbian American geography and geogony is scattered through several works: *Ancient History*; or *Annals of Kentucky* (1824), *Atlantic Journal, The American Nations,* and *The Ancient Monuments of North and South America* (1838). These accounts mix pre-Lyell geological notions with early chapters of Genesis, and they bring together European travel accounts to the Americas, Plato's myth of Atlantis, and Native American cosmologies. A belief in long, unmeasured amounts of time where seabeds rise around a cluster of large islands to form the bulk of the American landmass coincides with an affirmation of an 8,000-year-old earth. This particular mélange of ideas was quite typical in 19th-century American antiquarian thought. Atlantis, Noah's Flood, and cataclysms associated with an obscure reference to the division of the earth during the days of Peleg in Genesis 10 and I Chronicles 1 are common explanations for American geogony in the 19th century. Such ideas only began to wane once continental drift moved from a fringe theory to accepted fact in the 1960s due to the work of geologists and oceanographic cartographers like Marie Tharp, who plotted out the Mid-Atlantic Ridge in the 1950s. It should be noted that today most geologists do not follow a strict and rigid uniformitarianism; for example, catastrophes of various kinds, like the Chicxulub meteor strike near the modern-day Yucatán Peninsula are recognized as having had a drastic effect on the landscape.

The Atlantean notions of Donnelly and Rafinesque are seen as crackpot. In part this is because our knowledge of geology was reformed by Lyell's seminal text and subsequent developments in the discipline. The idiosyncratic histories of geogony produced by natural historians trying to reconcile the textual authority of the Bible and Plato with observations of the natural world that contradict the textual authority make them seem a little off kilter. In the case of Rafinesque, given his role in disseminating the Walam Olum account, it is easy to merge this act of humbuggery with his outdated geological views and fully write him off as outlandish or unstable, regardless of whether or not he afforded the cosmologies of First Peoples an equally important weight as biblical accounts in his attempts to understand the migrations of humans in the western hemisphere.



This drawing can be found in a notebook titled "Notebooks containing a journal kept on Rafinesque's trip from Lexington, Kentucky, to Philadelphia, 1826: notes on his travel to New York and Massachusetts, 1827; a list of his travels, 1819-1830; natural history notes; and drawings, especially of fishes."

What makes the map "America Before the Floods" interesting is the very myths that we now recognize to be erroneous. It is a hand-drawn artifact that gives us a picture of a moment in time before the advent of the new, reigning paradigm. The advance of knowledge is messy. It is hard to let go of preconceived notions to see the world as it is. Ironically, this visual artifact of American natural history encapsulates the provisional nature of knowledge and the need to be humble as we sift through the past and try to understand the present.

About the Author

Born in Milan, Italy, Jeremy Paden was raised in various southern states of the United States of America, in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic. He completed his Ph.D. in Spanish at Emory University and is Professor of Spanish and Latin American Literature as well as the Chair of the Humanities Division at Transylvania University. He is also on faculty at Spalding University's Low-Residency MFA. He is the author of various books of poetry in English and Spanish.