

*Final report to the New England Botanical Club's  
Committee for the Les Mehrhoff Botanical Research Fund*

## **Botanical Details from the Archived Writings of Lorin Low Dame**

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Portrait of Lorin Low Dame (1838-1903), from Collins (1903)

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**Abstract.** Lorin Low Dame (1838-1903) collected many rare plants from the island of Nantucket in the late 19th century. He was also a prolific writer who kept detailed journals and notes, much of which is preserved at the Massachusetts Historical Society. This project involved reviewing a significant portion of Dame's writings, specifically looking at the 1880's, in hopes of finding detailed notes about the locations where he collected rare plants on Nantucket. Unfortunately, the subset of documents reviewed yielded little content specific to Nantucket, but continued work with additional documents yet to be obtained may ultimately prove more fruitful. Other useful data was gained incidental to this work, including important biographical details about Dame and discovery of closely related content in the diaries of Walter Deane, which support this and other ongoing projects related to the flora of Nantucket.

## Background

Lorin Low Dame (1838–1903) was a founding member of the New England Botanical Club, best known for his books on the trees of New England and as coauthor of the Flora of Middlesex County, Massachusetts (Collins 1903; Dame and Collins 1888; Howard 1973). His primary occupation was as a high school principal, but he was also an avid botanist who spent many summers on Nantucket. Specimen data from the Consortium of Northeast Herbaria (2021) portal yielded nearly 600 vascular plant collections attributed to Dame, of which 186 specimens representing 130 taxa were collected from Nantucket County between the years 1878 and 1902. Dame's Nantucket collections are of particular interest because of the number of rare taxa among them, including four state historical and seven endangered species (Table 1). Like many collections from his era, the specimen sheets contain little to no information pertaining to habitat, associates or specific locations, all of which would be of immense value to plant conservation practitioners today.

Table 1. Selection of rare plant taxa vouchered by Lorin Low Dame from Nantucket County, Massachusetts, with state ranking status, year of collection, and herbaria housing specimens (Consortium of Northeast Herbaria 2021). SH = State Historical and E = Endangered in Massachusetts. Nomenclature follows Haines (2011).

State Status	Species	Year(s) Collected	Herbaria w/Specimens
SH*	<i>Chenopodium rubrum</i> L.	1888	NEBC
SH	<i>Euphorbia ipecacuanhae</i> L.	undated	YU
E	<i>Gamochaeta purpurea</i> (L.) Cabrera	1886	NEBC
E	<i>Hypericum stragulum</i> P. Adams & Robson	1886; undated	NEBC
SH	<i>Onosmodium virginianum</i> (L.) DC. (= <i>Lithospermum virginianum</i> )	1897	AMES

E	<i>Malaxis bayardii</i> Fern.	1886; 1895	NEBC, YU
E	<i>Mertensia maritima</i> (L.) S. F. Gray	1886; 1899	NEBC, YU
SH	<i>Platanthera ciliaris</i> (L.) Lindl.	1897	NEBC
E	<i>Sabatia campanulata</i> (L.) Torr.	1886; undated	MASS, NEBC, YU
E**	<i>Schwalbea americana</i> L.	1886	NEBC, YU
E	<i>Scleria triglomerata</i> Michx.	1888	NEBC

\* Presumed to be the rare var. *rubrum*, which has been recorded for Nantucket (R. Wernerehl, Massachusetts Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program, pers. comm.).

\*\* *Schwalbea americana* was listed as SH until its rediscovery on Cape Cod in 2018.

Dame was also a prolific writer, authoring two popular books about trees, as well many articles and pamphlets (Collins 1903; Massachusetts Historical Society 2021). A substantial proportion of his writing, both formal published items and a plethora of personal writings such as diaries, journals, drafts and notes, are preserved at the Massachusetts Historical Society, with indexed notes to aid in the focused review of particular subsets of his work. This project aimed to investigate a portion of these documents to ascertain whether Dame kept any detailed botanical notes about the plants he collected on Nantucket.

### Materials and Methods

Access to the physical collections at the Massachusetts Historical Society was not available during the period of investigation due to COVID-19 concerns, so reproduction services were used as the primary means of obtaining documents. This proved to be a more efficient use of funds than originally outlined in the proposal, so a broader range of documents were able to be obtained and investigated.

Requested items were furnished as high-resolution scans in pdf format. These documents were reviewed for relevance to the project, focusing on dates (i.e. during the growing season) and place names pertinent to Nantucket. Several entries were selected for transcription as an exercise in reading and interpreting Dame's handwriting and shorthand. Potentially relevant entries were transcribed, with special attention given to Nantucket place names and any plants recorded.

Transcriptions were made in a Word document, with place names and plant names flagged in red text and ambiguous or potentially erroneous transcriptions highlighted for review (as needed). Modern nomenclature for plants mentioned was added parenthetically.

### Results

The majority of documents reviewed proved to be irrelevant to the project, with wide-ranging content pertaining to Dame's school duties, other travels, miscellaneous writings on widely varying subjects, and even several works of fiction (Table 2). However, at least one item of substance was found in Box 2, Folder 7, which contained notes on plants found on Nantucket during the summer of 1895, including notes on phenology. A sampling of this item follows:

Wednesday, July 17, 1895  
*Sericocarpus conyzoides* [syn. for *Sericocarpus asteroides*]  
*Solidago con* [maybe *Solidago conferta*, syn. for *S. speciosa*]  
*Sericocarpus solidagineus* [syn. for *Sericocarpus linifolius*]

Thursday, July 18, 1895  
 swamp pink well along – past its prime. [maybe *Calopogon pulchellus?*]

Tuesday, July 30, 1895  
 3 arrow heads  
*Salix rostrata*, Pond Hole, Sauls Hills

Wednesday, July 31, 1895  
 8 arrow heads  
 Sundew going. [Drosera sp.]

Thursday, August 1, 1895  
 Red lilies going. Evening primrose well along  
 [presumably *Lilium philadelphicum*]  
 2 arrow heads  
*Aletris* going. [Aletris farinosa]

Sunday, August 4, 1895  
 First *Liatris*. [Liatris novae-angliae]

Saturday, August 10, 1895  
 Scythe-leaved aster, now abundant  
 [presumably *Symphotrichum lanceolatum*]  
*Clethra* coming in [Clethra alnifolia]

Sunday, August 11, 1895  
*Sericocarpus conyzoides* & *solidagineus* fast fading  
 [Sericocarpus asteroides & linifolius]  
*Aletris* gone. [Aletris farinosa]  
 White orchis going. [presumably *Platanthera blephariglottis*]

Monday, August 12, 1895  
 Indigo plant disappeared as if by enchantment  
 [presumably *Baptisia tinctoria*]

Sunday, August 18, 1895  
*Pop.* [*Populus*] *tremuloides* coming in over the burnt area in Gibb's swamp.

Wednesday, August 21, 1895  
 Ruth, Olive with myself picked 9 qts. berries. Discovered *Q.* [*Quercus*] *stellata*  
 about 3 ft. high, growing near a *Q. tinctoria* [syn. *Quercus velutina*], on southern  
 slope of a hill between Bloomingdale and Seachacha.

Table 2. Notes summarizing the contents of folders reviewed for this project.

Item	Notes
Box 1, Folder 9: Correspondence 1870-1888	Miscellaneous letters written to Dame; pair of letters from Oliver Wendell Holmes to "Mr. Brooks" presumably about Holmes' involvement in writing an introduction for <i>Typical Elms and Other Trees of Massachusetts</i>
Box 2, Folder 3a	School-related journal entries from the 1874-1875 academic year
Box 2, Folder 3b	A continuation of Box 2, Folder 3a; entries in early summer of 1875 reference preparations for a vacation to Nantucket and a brief note upon returning, but no details from the vacation itself
Box 2, Folders 4a & 4b	Dame's journal specifically for his trip to Europe (British Isles & France) in the summer of 1880
Box 2, Folder 5	Misc. letters written by Dame, mostly to his wife Belle, during the summer of 1880, while visiting Europe. Envelopes show addresses in Medford and Nantucket (Siasconset - misspelled on envelope as "Sconicet Village", which looks to be a forwarded piece of mail)
Box 2, Folder 6	A notebook exclusively for Dame's notes while traveling to and attending the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893
Box 2, Folder 7	A pocket-sized journal kept for part of 1895, including a summer spent on Nantucket; the reproduction included a previously transcribed portion specific to the time spent on Nantucket, which had many errors and omissions, especially of plant names; re-transcribed all of the Nantucket content from the original journal
Box 3, Folder 1: "Botanical Notes"	Miscellaneous notes pertaining to plant science, curriculum ideas for teaching about trees and botany, and notes on characteristics of several species of ash trees
Box 3, Folder 12	Appears to contain drafts of fictional stories/plays
Box 3, Folder 13	Mostly drafts of presumably fictional stories, except for page 25 of the pdf, which contains a few paragraphs on Nantucket's founding, its early settlers and some notes on cemeteries, possibly the beginnings of a history of Nantucket envisioned by Dame
Box 3, Folder 14: Fragments & misc.	A detailed draft of a work of fiction, possibly a play in 5 acts
Box 4, Folder 5: Misc. notes	Miscellaneous notes on a broad range of non-botanical topics
Box 4, Folder 6: My Summer Saunterings	Miscellaneous notes, in stream-of-consciousness form; appears to contain a draft of a speech or scholarly address

### Discussion, Incidental Findings & Future Work

The notes from the 1895 journal were terse and lacking in detail, but they did provide some clues to locations that Dame may have frequented, as well as a glimpse into the kinds of botanical observations he made. There was repeated mention of Gibb's Swamp, suggesting it

was part of a regular walk he took. Other locations included Bloomingdale, Seachacha and Polpis. Dame also noted a recent fire at Gibb's Swamp. Species mentioned include some novelties like *Aletris farinosa*, *Liatrix* (presumed to be *L. novae-angliae*), and a "white orchis" (presumably *Platanthera blephariglottis*) which also hint at certain habitat types that are now very limited on the island

Regrettably, Dame's detailed diaries from his summers on Nantucket during his botanical collection years, which he almost certainly maintained, are not held by either the Massachusetts Historical Society nor the Nantucket Historical Association. However, diaries from earlier years are available at the Massachusetts Historical Society, and reproductions of these have been requested but have not been furnished in time for this report.

Shortly after commencing work on this project, I discovered that Kelly Omand of the Nantucket Conservation Foundation had conceived of a nearly identical project in the past. Kelly also has been in contact with one of Dame's descendants, who still maintains a residence on the island and has transcribed some of Dame's diary entries themselves. One transcription shared by the descendant, from August 1872, contained a colorful and detailed narrative about an excursion to Coatue, replete with vivid botanical references. That excerpt hinted at the potential for more rewarding narratives contained within the diaries that are yet to be obtained.

While searching for alternative sources of historical journal content, I also came upon the journals of Walter Deane (Biodiversity Heritage Library 2021), another prominent New England botanist of the late 19th century, who made several excursions to Nantucket and kept meticulously detailed journals of his botanical exploits. Specifically, Deane visited Nantucket on July 10-14, 1884, September 6-11, 1885, and July 13-19, 1887, during which time he and his various companions made extensive collections and took extremely detailed notes about the locations they visited and habitats they observed. Deane also collected many of the same rare taxa collected by Dame, possibly from the same localities, including *Onosmodium virginianum* and *Schwalbea americana*. Transcription of these diary entries is ongoing in collaboration with Kelly Omand.

This investigation has resulted in new collaborations, contributed to ongoing projects, and will be carried on beyond the span of this grant. Specifically, the following projects will benefit directly from this work :

- an ongoing update to the Flora of Nantucket (K. Omand, pers. comm.)
- future transcription of Dame's diaries from other time periods, as they become available (expected early 2022)
- continued and future transcription of the diaries of Walter Deane
- manuscript in preparation re: Dame's collection of *Euphorbia ipecacuanhae*, which represents a newly uncovered addition to the historical flora of Massachusetts

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