



## Transylvania's Ossuary

or

### *Who is Buried in Rafinesque's Tomb?*

I SERVED the last 28 years of my 36 year career in academia at a small private institution, Transylvania College, in Lexington, Kentucky. It was named after the Virginia-based, Transylvania Company, which financed much of the exploration of the west. The state of Kentucky was created in 1792 from the western-most county of Virginia, Kentucke County. In 1780, Thomas Jefferson, then Governor of Virginia, chartered a pioneer seminary in central Kentucke County near the village of Danville in the southern outer blue-grass region. It was called Transylvania University, housed in a small, roughly 10x15 foot log cabin, essentially not much more than an elementary school. The largest city in the new state was Lexington, which enticed the school to move there in 1797, donating them a block in the heart of the city on which a large college building was built. The school was the first institution of higher knowledge west of the Alleghenies, the 16<sup>th</sup> college in the young nation. Amazingly, a School of Law and a School of Medicine were soon added to the Seminary

which attracted a mostly foreign faculty of unusually high reputation. The University reached its peak early, and became internationally famous in a decade of excellence, roughly from 1818-1828, especially for its medical school which published its own Journal of Medicine. The college still brags about this period, which is called its *golden age*.

Into this setting, in 1819, came an extremely eccentric polymath, Turkish born Constantine



Samuel Rafinesque, one of the world's gifted naturalists. Kentucky was on the western edge of the settled young nation, and was still largely unexplored. Rafinesque was primarily a botanist. He explored extensively and collected a huge herbarium, discovering and describing thousands of new species. His scientific papers were at first welcomed and published in the few embryonic extant American scientific journals, and encouraged, he overwhelmed them with a flood of

papers every month. Soon labeled as suspicious, he became persona-non-grata and they refused to publish more of his contributions. Frustrated, Rafinesque submitted his papers to European scientific journals which welcomed them. Most of his most important pioneer flora and fauna reports were published in European journals. Blackballed by many American journals, he sought publication anywhere he could find it, in popular magazines and newspapers, and in privately printed books. He defined over 5000 new plant species and many animals, many of which are still valid today, and being in the field working intimately with plants, had a better understanding of the variation within species than most of his contemporaries who were defining species from dry, faded herbarium specimens. His work adumbrated much of that of Charles Darwin, who studied his papers and acknowledged their excellence in the *foreword* of his monumental *Origin of Species*. For a humorous account of his visit with John James Audubon in western Kentucky, I refer you to Audubon's *Autobiography*.

Rafinesque's long absences from his teaching duties at school, and his many eccentricities soon created a rift with the college president who tossed his herbarium and personal possessions into the street, and his rooms given to students. In 1827 he left the school with curses and moved to Philadelphia where he remained until his death in 1840. He was

buried in Ronaldson's Cemetery. After almost a century, Transylvania decided, at last, to honor him by exhuming his remains and reintering them in a crypt within the main college building where it is used as a recruiting ploy for acquiring new students and for entertaining visitors. Tales of Rafinesque's "curse" was carefully nurtured and promulgated. Catastrophic fires and financial calamities since have been routinely blamed on "the curse." At Halloween, it is a big deal for some students to be "honored" by allowing them to spend the night in his crypt.

The truth is that Transylvania's ossuary does not house the bones of Rafinesque. Graves in Philadelphia's cemeteries contain the corpses of more than one person. Two people already occupied the grave where Rafinesque was buried, and three more people were interred above him. Scholars who have since studied the details of cemetery records now agree that the wrong bones were dug up, and that a woman, Mary Passimore, is buried in Rafinesque's tomb.



*Whippoorwill E-Comment* is the personal journal of J. Hill Hamon, a superannuated professor of biology who has read all of the extant papers of Rafinesque, and who respects his memory and appreciates his voluminous contributions to science. 1515 Evergreen Road, Frankfort, KY. 40601

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