History of Canadian Geology

Charles Jackson, M.D. (1805-1880) and Francis Alger (1807-1863)

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Further information on their charges of plagiarism against Abraham Gesner (1797-1864). A document written by the Bostonians Charles Jackson, M.D. and Francis Alger, charging the early Maritime geologist Abraham Gesner, M.D. with plagiarism of their geological work in Nova Scotia was recently described (von Bitter, 1977). This document, a letter sent February 25, 1840 and addressed to the House of Assembly of Nova Scotia, questioned the government of that province to study to recognize and acknowledge their work, and indicated that "A copy of the communication had also been addressed to Governor Sir Colin Campbell, but no acknowledgment of it has ever been received from him; nor are we aware that any note has ever been taken of it". Neither the Nova Scotia Archives (B. Fergusson, 1976, pers. commun.) nor the Nova Scotia Legislative Library (S. Elliot, 1976, pers. commun.) had any record of either of these communications. (Copies of the 1840 letter have been deposited at the Nova Scotia Museum, the Nova Scotia Archives, the Nova Scotia Legislative Library, the New Brunswick Museum, the Central Library of the City of Toronto and the Canadiana Section of the Royal Ontario Museum.) It was therefore of great interest to discover that the letter to Governor Campbell is still in existence and is preserved in the Baldwin Room Manuscript Collection in the Central Library of the City of Toronto.

This earlier letter to Governor Campbell (Fig. 1) is dated June 10th, 1837, and is written only a year after the publication of Abraham Gesner's Remarks on the Geology and Mineralogy of Nova Scotia. It is far more restrained in its charges against Gesner and states only that "it (Jackson and Alger's published work) has evidently served Mr. A. Gesner as the basis of his essay entitled "Remarks on the Geology and Mineralogy of Nova Scotia". Most importantly, the letter of June 10, 1837 supports the authenticity of the letter one dated February 25, 1840. It also provides a measure of Jackson and Alger's less hostile initial reaction to Gesner's publication than does that written three years later after their more polite attempts to gain recognition for their pioneering work had been ignored.

Abraham Gesner received immediate and tangible rewards for his book on the geology and mineralogy of Nova Scotia. Jackson and Alger in their letter to Governor Campbell noted that Gesner was awarded the sum of £100 by the Nova Scotia House of Assembly for his services. In my earlier article (von Bitter, 1977) I listed probable reasons why Gesner was given this recognition freely and without question. It is less clear why Jackson and Alger's extensive earlier work was not recognized. One explanation is that these two authors (Jackson and Alger, 1828, 1829) chose a scientific medium, The American Journal of Science and Arts, to publish their findings unlike Gesner (1836) who chose to publish his book privately. Publication in The American Journal of Science and Arts by Jackson and Alger probably served to insure its unavailability to a more general readership, while Gesner's book would likely have been widely available from booksellers. After Jackson and Alger republished these four articles in yet another scientific and literary journal, The American Academy of Arts and Science (1832a, incorrectly cited as 1831 in von Bitter, 1977), they were republished in book form (1832b) (Fig. 2). Jackson and Alger's letter of June 10, 1837 to Governor Campbell provides important information why the republication in book form could not possibly have resulted in widespread distribution. They wrote that "their Memoir was contributed freely to the Scientific World no copies having been offered for sale on their account. The 100 copies extracted from the Transactions of the Academy were freely distributed to learned Societies in various parts of the world". The fact that no copies were sold in bookstores and only 100 copies were available for distribution accounts not only for the fact that their work was not widely acknowledged but also for the fact that this 1832b republication must be among the scarcest of books, not only among Canadian geological literature, but among Canadiana in general. I know of only five copies in existence; these being at the Nova Scotia Museum, the Nova Scotia Archives, the Nova Scotia Legislative Library, the New Brunswick Museum and the Central Reference Library of the City of Toronto.

In my earlier discussion of Jackson and Alger (von Bitter, 1977) I made reference to the fact that it remained uncertain as to who had written the
document of February 25, 1840 and who had edited it prior to it being sent to Nova Scotia. I speculated that the original was written by Dr. Jackson and edited by Francis Alger. With the discovery of the 1837 letter, written and signed by Dr. Jackson, it is now possible to compare his handwriting and signature with that of the 1840 letter, as well as with another known specimen of Dr. Jackson’s signature. Such comparison suggests that the letter of 1840 was not written by Dr. Jackson since both the signature (Fig. 3a) as well as the handwriting of the 1840 letter (see von Bitter, 1977) are much neater and more carefully formed than are the same features in either the 1837 letter (Fig. 1, 3b) or in the signature dating from an unknown period (Fig. 3c). The penmanship of the 1840 letter as well as the signatures at the end must therefore be attributed to an unknown person, possibly a secretary.

My speculation, however, that the 1840 letter was edited by Francis Alger prior to it being recopied and sent to Nova Scotia is substantiated. When known specimens of Alger’s handwriting and signature (Fig. 4) are compared with that of the edited and added portions of the 1840 letter (Fig. 5) it is clear that Francis Alger corrected and edited this letter.

Before concluding, a word or two about the less well-known Francis Alger (Fig. 6) are in order. Although without formal education beyond “common school” (Jackson, 1865), Francis Alger became interested in mineralogy in 1824 at the age of seventeen. In 1826 he accompanied his father to Nova Scotia where his father was to erect a furnace for the smelting of the bedded iron ores of Devonian age which occur at Clementsport.

Francis Alger enthusiastically collected minerals in Nova Scotia and on his return to Boston published the first...
Figure 3
a) Signatures from letter sent to the Nova Scotia House of Assembly February 25, 1840. (Described by von Bitter, 1977; b) Signatures from letter sent to the Governor of Nova Scotia, Sir Colin Campbell, dated June 10, 1837. (Courtesy of the Metropolitan Toronto Library Board); c) C. T. Jackson’s signature. (From Woodworth, 1897).

Figure 4
Francis Alger’s handwriting and signature. Letter sent by Francis Alger to Thomas Bouvé of Boston. No date, but after 1841. (From BSNH Manuscripts, Boston Museum of Science).

Figure 6
Francis Alger (1807-1863). (From Photograph Album of the Boston Society of Natural History Collection, Boston Museum of Science).
reports on the mineralogy of Nova Scotia (Alger, 1827). He returned to Nova Scotia in 1827 in the company of Dr. C. T. Jackson and the geological explorations and observations made by them in that year and again in 1829 resulted in a series of joint publications (Jackson and Alger, 1828, 1829, 1832a,b) on the mineralogy and geology of Nova Scotia. Francis Alger remained an assiduous collector of minerals for many years and he contributed a number of mineralogical articles to the scientific journals of the day (Jackson, 1865). He was the Curator of Mineralogy to the Boston Society of Natural History for a number of years, until the pressure of business forced him to resign. Although none of his obituary notices (Anonymous, 1864, 1865; Jackson, 1865; Bouvé, 1880) have stated what the nature of this business was it appears, from his father's concern with iron furnaces, his own interest in the iron and zinc mines of Sussex Co., New Jersey, as well as the fact that he died as a result of exposure while "perfectioning shrapnel to be employed in restoring the union of our divided states" (Jackson, 1865), likely that Alger was engaged in a family business concerned with the mining, smelting or manufacture of iron.

Acknowledgements
I am grateful to Miss Joan Burke, ROM, for editing and typing the manuscript and to Mrs. Hilary Geberl, ROM, for assistance in the preparation of figures.

Ms Sharon Hick, Librarian, ROM, kindly assisted in locating the Alger portrait and correspondence. It is a pleasure to acknowledge the assistance of Mrs. Barbara Wiseman, Reference Librarian, Boston Museum of Science in making this portrait and correspondence available. Similarly I wish to thank Miss Sandra Alston, Central Reference Library of the City of Toronto for making a copy of Jackson and Alger's letter to Governor Campbell available.

References

Figure 5
Portion of letter by Charles T. Jackson and Francis Alger of Boston to the Nova Scotia House of Assembly. The part shown is believed to have been added by Francis Alger sometime after the letter was sent on February 25, 1840. It also seems likely that the letter described by me (von Bitter, 1977) is the original which was edited and corrected by Alger prior to its being recopied and sent to Nova Scotia.