

Mt. Rafinesque

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AT THE NORTHERN EDGE OF TROY, N.Y., near the campus of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, rises a hill of modest pretensions with the sonorous name *Mt. Rafinesque*. The summit of this elevation is slightly less than 1200 feet above sea level, and was given its official designation in 1894, according to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names.¹ Already its name is becoming garbled in local usage: a homemakers' club which perches on its slope in Brunswick Township now goes under the name of the Rafanesque [*sic*] Home Demonstration Unit.² Even the Department of the Interior is unsure how the hill came to get its name in the first place, and the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey knows only that a triangulation station marked with a copper bolt set in a rock was established there in 1874 by R. D. Cutts, a member of the Survey.³ Mr. Henry S. Shaw, whose avocation is the recovery of forgotten triangulation stations, recently verified that the copper bolt remains, and that the stone in which it sets is marked with a cross, an arrow and another cross appearing on rocks nearby.⁴

One supposes the hill was named for Constantine Samuel Rafinesque (1783–1840), an immigrant naturalist, a prolific namer of things himself who singlehandedly proposed some 6,700 new binomials for plants.⁵ It is probably the only prominent geographical

¹ Information supplied in January, 1958, by the executive secretary of the Board on Geographic Names at the request of Mr. Charles B. Fobes and transmitted by Mr. Fobes to me.

² *Troy Record*, April 18, 1957.

³ Letter to me by Mr. Henry S. Shaw, January, 1958.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Elmer D. Merrill, *Index Rafinesquianus* (Jamaica Plain, Mass., 1949), p. 17.

feature which does bear his name today.⁶ Since it happens that for other reasons I have probably gone more thoroughly into the life and writings of this all-but-forgotten botanist than anyone else, I feel that the scanty evidence is worth bringing together. The mountain was indeed named for Rafinesque, a signal honor to one who in his lifetime received few honors.

Among the scattered literary remains of Rafinesque himself are a few bits of information on how the name came about. Leaving Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, where he had occupied a professorship in modern languages and natural science, Rafinesque turned to the East in 1826, aiming to get back to Philadelphia eventually. He walked most of the way and, wishing to see as much of the country as possible, chose to go by way of Niagara Falls. When at last he came upon Amos Eaton and a group of the latter's students from the Rensselaer School botanizing in slow-paced comfort on an Erie Canal barge, Rafinesque joined them and happily accompanied them to Troy. This was the first of many visits he subsequently paid Eaton. Thereafter, Rafinesque made almost annual trips to the Albany area, where he often gave guest lectures before the Troy Lyceum of Natural History, or before Eaton's classes.

In 1833, while visiting this little enclave of scientists, he and a Rev. Mr. Wiley, a Baptist clergyman of Lansingburg, N.Y., botanized together on what was then called Bald Mountain. They climbed the hill on July 30 and returned the next day to Albany in Mr. Wiley's carriage.⁷ Of the event Rafinesque later wrote: "With the Rev. Mr. Wiley I ascended the Bald mt. 4 miles east of it [Lansingburg], which is not in the maps altho' 1030 feet high; I surveyed it, and explored the plants and minerals of it. As there are many mts. of that name [i.e., Bald], Mr. W. proposed to change it to *mt. Rafinesque*. It is primitive and transitive like the mts. Taconick in the

⁶ There is a Rafinesque Hall in Mammoth Cave. (Press release, "Celebrated Conservationists and Naturalists in Our National Parks," U.S. Department of the Interior, July 22, 1938.)

⁷ Rafinesque, "Journal of C. S. Rafinesque Prof.," beginning May 15, 1833. Transcript by T. J. Fitzpatrick, Rafinesque's bibliographer, in the University of Kansas Library. See my article, "Rafinesque at Lawrence," *Books and Libraries*, No. 21 (May, 1959), 1-3.

neighborhood. It is visible afar, and 10 or 12 miles in circuit.”⁸ It is unlikely that any map remains from Rafinesque’s survey, and no other reference to the event or to the identity of Mr. Wiley exists among the Rafinesque papers.⁹ Aside from the passage I have quoted from Rafinesque’s autobiography, no other information appears in his printed works, which comprise a bibliography of more than 900 items.

One doubts that Mr. Wiley, whoever he was, had the name recognized in any official sense. But it must have stuck in popular usage, and when the triangulation station was established in 1874 the name was a convenient one with which to distinguish this spot from another Bald Mountain only four miles farther north. Rafinesque, who lamented that because of his poverty he had never owned an acre of ground in his life, died believing that “time renders justice to all at last.” Perhaps the perpetuation of his name in association with the mountain is an ironic measure of that justice.

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⁸ Rafinesque, *A Life of Travels* (Philadelphia, 1836), p. 108.

⁹ Considering the manner of the disposition of his effects after his death, it is a wonder that nearly 300 documents of his still exist. See my article, “The Manuscripts of C. S. Rafinesque (1783–1840),” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, CII (December 15, 1958), 590–595.