

JOHN ABBOT'S "LOST" DRAWINGS FOR JOHN E. LE CONTE IN THE AMERICAN  
PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY, PHILADELPHIAJOHN V. CALHOUN<sup>1</sup>  
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**ABSTRACT.** Between 1813 and 1835, artist-naturalist John Abbot completed as many as 3,000 natural history illustrations for American naturalist John E. Le Conte. Long believed lost, the majority of these drawings are undoubtedly included among an extensive collection of small watercolors deposited in the American Philosophical Society Library. An overview of the collection is provided and several drawings of Lepidoptera are identified and figured. Le Conte's drawings of plants, reptiles, and amphibians are also discussed. Similar collections of drawings by Abbot are summarized.

**Additional key words:** Coleoptera, Georgia, John Lawrence LeConte, Lepidoptera

**INTRODUCTION**

Scudder (1884) observed that John Eatton Le Conte, Jr. (1784-1860) "left behind a most extensive series of water-color illustrations of our native insects and plants made with his own hands." He further described the insect drawings as small in size and "mounted on paper of variable form" (Scudder 1888-1889). He recognized that they were similar in format to other drawings once owned by the French entomologist Jean B. A. D. de Boisduval (1799-1879), who collaborated with Le Conte on a book about North American butterflies. Scudder used this as evidence to suggest that most of the illustrations in Boisduval & Le Conte (1829-[1837]) were derived from Le Conte, not John Abbot as generally accepted. Skinner (1911) later revealed that "the superb collection of Major LeConte's drawings of insects are now the property of the Missouri Botanical Garden."

Rehn (1954) described eight volumes of arthropod drawings that were acquired in 1953 by the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Purchased from the Missouri Botanical Garden, they are some of the same drawings that were once owned by J. E. Le Conte. Rehn credited Le Conte as the primary artist, but speculated that "some of the illustrations in the volumes...may have been the work of John Abbot." However, he cautioned that there was "no definite evidence" to this effect, "other than information that Abbot supplied certain illustrations to J. E. LeConte." Rehn probably derived this information from Dow (1914a), who reproduced an 1835 letter in which Abbot estimated that Le Conte must have been in possession of "2 to 3000" of his drawings (transcript in Mayr Library, Harvard University). Abbot's friend, Augustus G. Oemler, noted in 1851 that "Major John Le Conte has a great number [of Abbot's drawings] but without

the plants the insect feeds on" (letter to T. W. Harris, Mayr Library). Dow (1914b) speculated that Abbot's many drawings for Le Conte "probably still exist." "We can only wonder, with Dow," wrote Mallis (1971), "what happened to the some two or three thousand water colors of insects done by John Abbot, which the Major [J. E. Le Conte] had accumulated over many years."

Based mostly on Abbot's drawings and specimens, J. E. Le Conte co-authored a treatise on North American butterflies (Boisduval & Le Conte (1829-[1837])). It included the descriptions of many new species, but remained unfinished. A planned companion volume on moths was never attempted. Most of the original Abbot drawings that were used for the color plates in Boisduval & Le Conte (1829-[1837]) are deposited in the Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina. Other Abbot drawings used for this book are missing and presumed lost (Calhoun 2004). These collections of illustrations were probably given to Boisduval by Le Conte, who visited Paris in 1828 (Sallé 1883). Le Conte retained other drawings by Abbot, adding to his collection until at least 1835. It is my contention that most of these remaining drawings have been improperly attributed to Le Conte for over a century. They likely played a crucial role in Le Conte's understanding of the invertebrate fauna of Georgia. Moreover, they possibly helped to encourage the entomological pursuits of his son, John Lawrence LeConte (1825-1883), who would become the most celebrated American entomologist of the 19th century. As another installment in my study of John Abbot's entomological contributions, I present a brief analysis of the illustrations at the American Philosophical Society Library and identify several Lepidoptera drawings that are believed to be the work of Abbot.

**METHODS**

Drawings once owned by John E. Le Conte were examined and photographed at the American

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Philosophical Society Library and the Thomas Cooper Library (University of South Carolina). Le Conte's personal correspondence was also examined at the APS. Information on other Le Conte drawings was obtained from the Hesburgh Library (Notre Dame University). Relevant manuscripts and drawings were also consulted at The Natural History Museum, London, Linnean Society of London, Ernst Mayr Library (Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University), and the Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library (University of Georgia). Copies of additional manuscripts were obtained from the Carl A. Kroch Library (Cornell University).

### RESULTS

**Background.** Artist-naturalist John Abbot (1751-ca.1840) first became acquainted with John E. Le Conte in 1813, when he mentioned "a Mr Le Compte who has a General taste for Nat. history," and further remarked that he was "Employed in Drawing the Georgian Insects for a Mr Le Compte, particularly the Coleoptera." That year, Le Conte engaged Abbot "to make a General Collection of & draw all the Coleoptera of Georgia for him, Then all the Lepidoptera." The following year, Abbot wrote, "I continue to draw for Mr Le Compte as leisure & opportunity permits." Abbot described his early relationship with Le Conte in more detail in 1816, explaining, "At present I am under no particular engagement to any person to collect or Draw for but only a Mr Le Conte...he has a Taste for General Natural history but seems mostly attached to Botany, for him I have Drawed and am continuing to Draw a large Collection of Insects. I believe he has some publication in view." Back to misspelling Le Conte's name in 1817, Abbot stated, "Mr Le Comte is not in the habit of keeping a collection of Insects, he only collects such as he wants me to draw for him" (letters to Heinrich Escher-Zollikofer, Kroch Library, and William Swainson, Linnean Society of London).

Le Conte's specimens probably explain the inclusion of the butterfly *Speyeria idalia* (Drury) among Abbot's drawings for Boisduval & Le Conte (1829-[1837]). This book gave the distribution of *S. idalia* as "environs de New-York et de Philadelphie" (environs of New York and Philadelphia), with no mention of Georgia. The erroneous mention of "Jamaïque" (Jamaica) was probably derived from Cramer ([1775-1776]). Abbot previously illustrated this species, but from a male specimen collected by the South Carolina botanist Stephen Elliott who traveled northward in 1808. The reference to "New-York" may also have been derived from Cramer ([1775-1776]), but Le Conte lived in New York. Although the published plate was credited to Le

Conte, it is more likely that the specimen came from him, not the original drawing (see Calhoun 2004).

Abbot eventually collected specimens for Le Conte, who requested in 1828 "an extensive Collection of Lepidopa & Coleoptera Insects" (Kroch Library). In 1835, Abbot was still corresponding with Le Conte, "for whom I continue to draw for every Year," though there is no evidence that he produced more drawings after 1835. Depending upon the size of the drawing, Le Conte paid Abbot from 6.25 cents ("16 for a Dollar") to 50 cents each (letter to T. W. Harris, Mayr Library).

In 1810, Le Conte's brother, Louis, assumed management of the family's rice plantation near Riceboro, Liberty County, Georgia. This immense plantation, called "Woodmanston," was located 40 km (25 mi) southwest of Savannah. A portion still remains as a botanical garden on the National Register of Historic Places (Armes 1903, Bigley 2001). John E. Le Conte often traveled to the plantation during the winter months. Abbot may even have visited Le Conte at Woodmanston (Bigley 2001).

After the death of J. E. Le Conte, his collection of drawings passed into the hands of his son, famed coleopterist John Lawrence LeConte (1825-1883), whose own library was sold in 1884 (Henkels 1884, Scudder 1888-1889). Although his father signed his name as "Le Conte" (Calhoun 2005), signatures of John Lawrence indicate that he preferred the compressed variant of "LeConte." Both of these versions have repeatedly been simplified in the literature – even during their lifetimes – to read "Leconte." The altered spellings of J. E. Le Conte's name by Abbot are not surprising, as Abbot often varied correspondent's names (Calhoun in press). Interestingly, his spellings of "Le Compte" and "Le Comte" are also known variants of this French surname. All these variations have contributed to the persistent confusion over the proper format of this name. It is therefore advisable to abide by the signatures of the naturalists themselves.

At the time of J. L. LeConte's death in 1883, he possessed 4,765 original drawings of arthropods, reptiles, amphibians, and flowers. They were contained in twelve portfolios that Henkels (1884) described as "Scrap-books, filled with Figures of Entomological Specimens, faithfully drawn and artistically colored by hand, by the late Major [J. E.] and Dr. [J. L.] Le Conte." The arthropod drawings were purchased at the J. L. LeConte library auction by the Pennsylvania botanist Benjamin M. Everhart (1818-1904). After the death of Everhart, they were acquired by the naturalist Samuel N. Rhoads, who owned the Franklin Book Shop in Philadelphia. According to a letter dated 8 December 1905, Rhoads unsuccessfully offered them to the

philanthropist Wymberly Jones De Renne (1853-1926) of Wormsloe, Georgia. Under the heading "Quotation on 8 Leconte Portfolios," Rhoads described them as "the original handiwork of Major Dr. Leconte...Most of them are on single sheets 5 x 3 inches and were evidently intended for an extensive illustrated monograph never published." He noted that they "came from the B. M. Everhart collection recently sold, he having purchased them at the sale of Le Conte's effects in this city many years ago" (Hargrett Library). Rhodes seems to have combined father and son into a single person by his reference to "Major [John Eatton] Dr. [John Lawrence] Leconte." In 1907, Rhoads sold the drawings to the Missouri Botanical Garden. Inscribed in pencil on the 1905 letter to De Renne is a signed memorandum by Rhoads, dated 1918, that reads, "Mr. De Renne did not buy these. They were sold to the St. Louis Botanical Garden." Rhoads must have been visiting W. J. De Renne when he inserted this annotation. The Missouri Botanical Garden sold these drawings in 1953 to the American Philosophical Society. The published library catalog of the American Philosophical Society ([APS 1970]) listed letters and other materials pertaining to the provenance of these drawings, but repeated attempts by current librarians to locate them were unsuccessful.

The 49 drawings of reptiles and amphibians by J. E. Le Conte are now deposited in the Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia. They were evidently purchased by B. M. Everhart at the J. L. LeConte library auction. After Everhart's death, they were obtained by S. N. Rhoads, probably in 1905, who shortly after sold them to W. J. De Renne. Inscribed on a flyleaf of this volume is a notation by De Renne that reads, "bought from S. N. Rhoads, Phila. Nov. 27, 1905" (Mary Ellen Brooks pers comm.). These drawings were purchased less than two weeks before Rhoads offered the arthropod drawings to De Renne. They were listed in the 1931 De Renne Library catalog as "Forty-Nine original Drawings in Color, by Leconte, of the Turtles, Tortoises, Frogs and Salamanders of Georgia and South Carolina" (Mackall 1931). The collections of the De Renne Library were acquired in 1938 by the University of Georgia.

The 42 flower illustrations by J. E. Le Conte are preserved in the Hesburgh Library, University of Notre Dame. A manuscript note pasted on the inside front cover of this volume indicates that they were purchased at the J. L. LeConte library auction by the New Jersey botanist Isaac C. Martindale (1842-1893). After the death of Martindale, these drawings were presumed lost. In 1897, the botanist Edward L. Greene (1843-1915) stumbled upon them in a secondhand bookstore

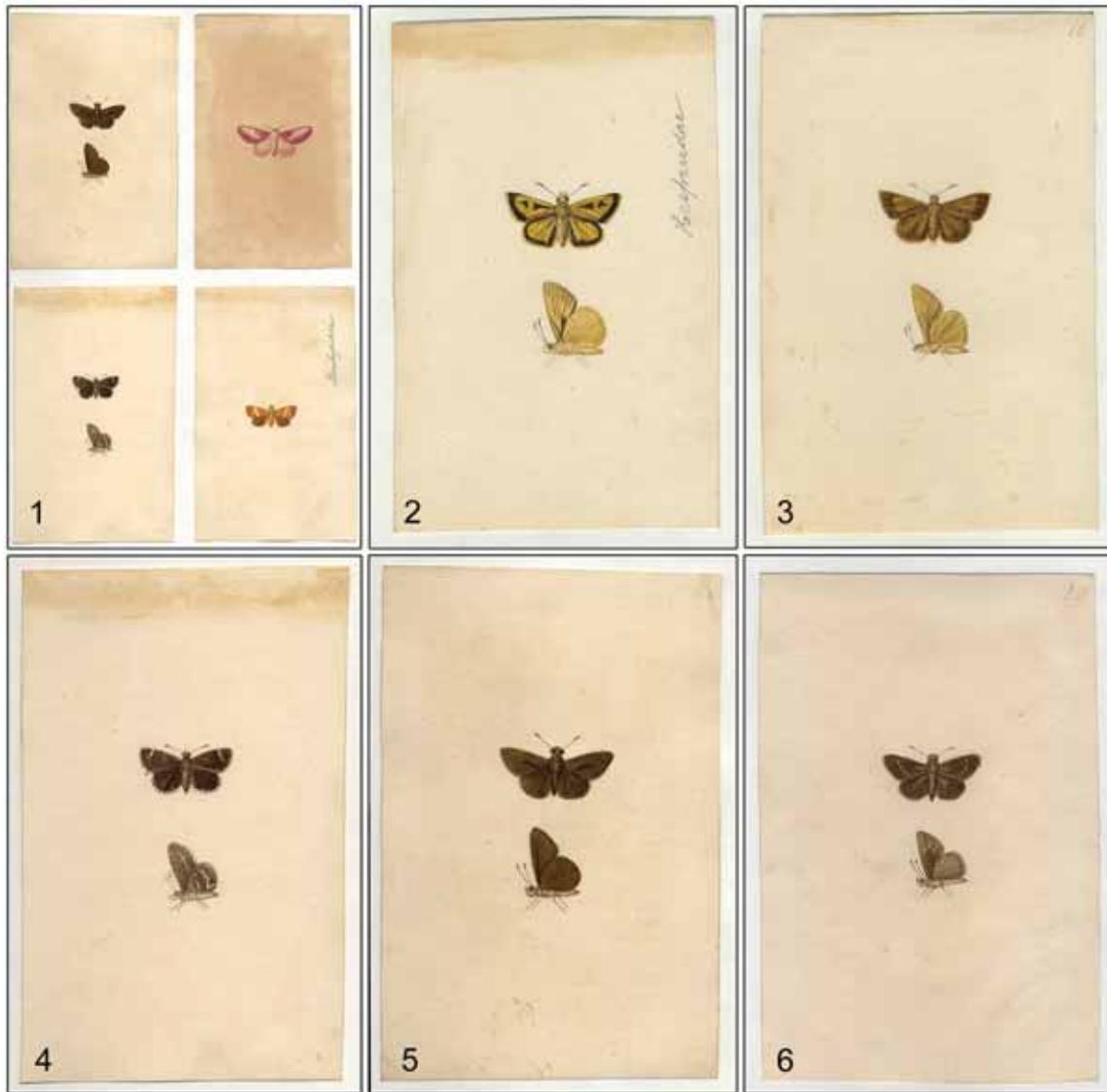
in Philadelphia. Either as a gift from Greene, or upon his death, they were acquired in 1915 by the University of Notre Dame (Baird 1938, Nieuwland 1917).

Illustrations from these portfolios were used for the published descriptions of several new species, most notably in the botanical works of Le Conte (1824a, 1824b, 1828). Le Conte did not reproduce his flower drawings, but they were later figured by Nieuwland (1917). As suggested by Rehn (1954), some of the insect drawings may portray type specimens, but additional research is necessary to determine if any were reproduced to accompany published descriptions. None of them appeared in Boisduval & Le Conte (1829-[1837]).

*Analysis.* The American Philosophical Society acquired eight volumes of arthropod drawings, bound with board covers and leather spines (Rehn 1954). This corresponds to the earlier description by bookseller S. N. Rhoads; "Eight large 4to portfolio Scrap Books bound in 1/2 morocco" (1905 letter to W. J. De Renne, Hargrett Library). Although Henkels (1884) previously listed ten volumes of arthropod drawings, each portfolio was sold as a separate lot at the 1884 J. L. LeConte library auction. The two additional portfolios were presumably not purchased by B. M. Everhart.

The remaining eight portfolios of arthropod drawings were re-housed in 1987 and placed into beige buckram cases with gilt titles that read "LECONTE/ENTOMOLOGICAL DRAWINGS." They comprise over 3,700 small drawings, which typically include only one or two figures each (Fig. 1). From two to nine drawings are pasted onto larger sheets of paper measuring 21.6 x 35.6 cm (8.5 x 14.0 in). Individual pages are now enclosed within clear archival sleeves. Written in graphite in the first volume is the title, "Portfolio of Original Figures of Entomological and Other Subjects by Le Conte." This title page was possibly created in 1884 for the J. L. LeConte library auction. Stamped in red ink at the bottom of the page is "Mo. Bot. Garden/1907." Also written at the beginning of the first volume is "Am. Philosophical Soc./Dec. 15, 1953/Philadelphia."

It is reasonable to assume that J. E. Le Conte and his son were responsible for initially arranging and mounting the drawings. Most possess handwritten numbers, which are not consecutive and were obviously added before the drawings were pasted onto the larger sheets of paper. Many also bear scale lines that indicate the actual sizes of the depicted subjects, which were sometimes drawn larger to show more detail. Inscriptions in Abbot's hand, including penciled numbers, are present on some of the drawings. A few are signed and dated by the naturalist Titian R. Peale



FIGS. 1-6. Drawings probably by John Abbot in the American Philosophical Society Library. 1, four drawings of butterflies (left) and moths on a page in the second volume. The moths are *Dryocampa rubicunda* (Fabricius) (top right) and probably *Lithacodes fasciola* (bottom right). 2, female *Anatrytone logan* (graphite "Hesperidae" in an unknown hand). 3, female *Atrytone arogos*. 4, female *Amblyscirtes* sp., possibly *alternata*. 5, male *Euphyes vestris*. 6, probably a female *Euphyes vestris*.

(1799-1885). Some give localities such as "Texas" and "Europe," suggesting they were probably drawn and inscribed by J. L. LeConte and possibly also his father. The majority of the insect drawings portray Coleoptera. Others depict species of Diptera, Hemiptera, Hymenoptera, and Lepidoptera. In addition to insects, there are spiders and a few species of myriopods. Rehn (1954) discussed additional details about the volumes.

The Lepidoptera are contained in the second volume, with 85 drawings of over 200 figures rendered on cream colored wove paper. The overall quality of these drawings is good, but some are decidedly inferior. All but five portray moths, mostly diminutive species. The

remaining five drawings, measuring approximately 14.6 x 11.4 cm (5.8 x 4.5 in), are butterflies of the family Hesperidae. They are included on the first three pages of the volume and each depicts life-sized dorsal and ventral aspects of a single species. I have identified them as: no. 15, female *Anatrytone logan* (W. H. Edwards) (Fig. 2); no. 16, female *Atrytone arogos* (Boisduval & Le Conte) (Fig. 3); no. 17, female *Amblyscirtes* sp. (Fig. 4); no. 43, male *Euphyes vestris* (Boisduval) (Fig. 5); no. 44, probably a female *Euphyes vestris* (Fig. 6). The figures on drawing no. 17 are poorly rendered, but may be exaggerated representations of *Amblyscirtes alternata* Grote &

Robinson, which John Abbot illustrated several times. The identity of no. 44 is indeterminate, but its consecutive number suggests that it was intended to portray the female of no. 43.

Despite the conclusion by Rogers-Price (1983, 1997) that some of the drawings in these eight volumes are the work of Abbot, most continue to be credited to J. E. Le Conte. However, Abbot stated that most of his illustrations for Le Conte were small in size. Abbot wrote in 1833, "as to the number of Paintings I have made either for F<sup>n</sup> [Francillon] or Le Conte...I made about 350 Q<sup>o</sup> [quarto] of the changes of the Insects for Mr F<sup>n</sup> & 2000 small ones, & 500 Spiders, & must have made more small ones than that for Le Conte" (letter to A. G. Oemler, Mayr Library). Abbot further remarked in 1835 that "Mr Le Conte preferred a single Insect on a paper, as he said he cou'd then class them as he received them." He noted that these drawings depicted "mostly small Insects, & many are Minutia." He drew "magnified" (enlarged) figures of the smallest species so that they would "shew better" (letter to T. W. Harris, Mayr Library).

Abbot executed numerous small illustrations during his long career in America. Many drawings for London jeweler John Francillon (1744-1816) were purchased in 1818 by The Natural History Museum, London. They include watercolors that are reminiscent of those at the American Philosophical Society, with single insects and spiders portrayed on small pieces of paper. Enlarged figures of very small species are likewise accompanied by outlines or scale lines that indicate the actual sizes of the subjects. Two other volumes of small drawings of moths were acquired by The Natural History Museum in 1910 as part of the bequest of Thomas de Grey, 6th Baron Walsingham. Gilbert (1998) questioned their association with Abbot, but they are consistent with his work and portray species that occur in Georgia. These drawings were probably from among the "2000 small ones" that Abbot completed for Francillon.

Abbot also sent numerous small drawings to English naturalist William Swainson (1789-1855). Abbot described these in 1835 as "about 650 Drawings of single Insects, on small papers" (Parkinson 1978). The Alexander Turnbull Library (Wellington, New Zealand) preserves a series of 27 small watercolors of moths that were acquired in 1927, rendered on papers as tiny as 9.3 x 9.2 cm (3.7 x 3.6 in). They lack inscriptions, but the format and artistic style are like the small drawings in London and the American Philosophical Society. They even possess the same type of scale lines. The species portrayed in these drawings are found in Georgia, confirming their likely origin with Abbot (Calhoun in press). Swainson moved from London to New Zealand

in 1840. The remainder of the 650 small drawings may have been lost in September 1841 when a ship carrying a portion of Swainson's library sunk en route to his new home.

French naturalist Jean B. A. D. de Boisduval possessed a large number of small drawings that Scudder (1888-1889) examined during a trip to Paris, probably in 1871. Some were purchased at auction in 1964 by the University of South Carolina. Although several are probably by J. E. Le Conte, others are consistent with Abbot's style and even include inscriptions in his hand (Calhoun 2004). Boisduval possessed 452 other small drawings of Lepidoptera, measuring 13.0 x 8.5 cm (5.0 x 3.3 in). Oberthür (1920) attributed them to Le Conte, but they were more likely from Le Conte's collection of Abbot drawings. Contained in two bound volumes, they were auctioned to a London firm in 1963 (Sotheby & Co. 1963, Cowan 1969) and their disposition is unknown. The Sotheby auction catalog credited them to John L. LeConte.

#### DISCUSSION

Evidence strongly suggests that the majority of the drawings at the American Philosophical Society are by Abbot and they represent the bulk of the enigmatic "2 to 3000" drawings that he completed for J. E. Le Conte between 1813 and 1835. They agree with Abbot's own description of these illustrations and their format is like his other small watercolors. In addition, many figures of Lepidoptera are duplicated in other sets of Abbot's drawings. This includes a unique interpretation of what is thought to be the moth *Lithacodes fasciola* (Herrich-Schäffer) (Fig. 1, bottom right). I have found duplicates of this figure among Abbot's drawings at the Thomas Cooper Library and the Alexander Turnbull Library.

Following Rehn (1954), I previously attributed several Lepidoptera drawings in the American Philosophical Society to J. E. Le Conte (Calhoun 2003). Despite their poor quality, they were undoubtedly rendered by Abbot. Entomologists are generally familiar only with Abbot's larger and more elaborate life history compositions that include hostplants, like those published in Smith & Abbot (1797) (see Calhoun 2006). Three sets of these life history drawings, probably also owned by J. E. Le Conte, were used to create some of the color plates in Boisduval & Le Conte (1829-[1837]) (Calhoun 2004). These illustrations, missing and presumed lost, were probably completed ca. 1810-1815. After his arrival in America, Abbot composed insect drawings in four principal layouts: 1) designs that incorporated one or more species and a supposed hostplant, or a plant inserted for decorative purposes, 2) adults and early stages of one or more species, grouped

in a linear format, 3) geometric designs of adults of multiple species, and 4) one or two figures of adults and/or early stages on small pieces of paper. This flexibility allowed Abbot to sell more of his drawings.

Abbot's relationship with Le Conte was coming to close by 1836 when he lamented, "I have no correspondents (Naturalists) at present but Mr Oemler & Mr Le Conte & I don't hear from them often" (letter to H. Escher-Zollikofer, Kroch Library). Unfortunately, their long association was strained and ultimately ended badly. Abbot stated in 1814 that the low price that Le Conte paid for his drawings would "not admit me to make it my sole employment" (Kroch Library). In 1851, many years after Abbot's death, Augustus G. Oemler defended Abbot to Thaddeus W. Harris, arguing, "Le Conte brags a good deal that he "maintained Abbot for several years." How did he do it? He allowed him for each insect, large or small, in nature and a correct portrait of it, the enormous sum of Six and a quarter Cents, and after all, disputing the last bill of the old man, thus cheating him" (Mayr Library).

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Valerie-Anne Lutz of the American Philosophical Society Library for her assistance during my visit and patient diligence in searching for materials pertinent to this study. She also arranged for photography of the butterfly drawings. For kindly allowing access to manuscripts, I thank Robert Young and Dana Fisher (Mayr Library). Patrick J. Stevens (Kroch Library) provided copies of numerous letters from Abbot. Linda L. Oestry (Missouri Botanical Garden Library) searched for information about the sale of the drawings to the American Philosophical Society and supplied copies of articles about Le Conte's plant drawings. Additional information about Le Conte's plant drawings was obtained from Ben Panciera (Hesburgh Library). I also thank Mary Ellen Brooks (Hargrett Library), as well as librarians in the Entomology Library, The Natural History Museum, London, for access to Abbot drawings in their care. James K. Adams (Dalton College) shared his unrivaled expertise with Georgia moths. Eileen C. Mathias (Ewell Sale Stewart Library, Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia) supplied copies of letters written by John L. LeConte. I am also grateful to Robert Dirig (Cornell University) and Robert K. Robbins (NMNH, USNM) for critically reviewing a draft of the manuscript.

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*Received for publication and accepted for publication*