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David Fairchild in the Caribbean: Five Months (1931–1932) of Plant Hunting on Board Utowana

By Javier Francisco-Ortega, Ph.D.; Yisu Santamarina; Brett Jestrow, Ph.D.; and Marianne Swan
Fairchild’s Archives and Library contain the core of Dr. David Fairchild’s correspondence, photos, manuscripts, and documents. However, while studying these unique collections, we have found a few “mystery” gaps that we have been trying to fill through research. For instance, the Archives have only two photos of the research yacht Utowana, even though Dr. Fairchild conducted many of his expeditions onboard this vessel between 1925 and 1933. This boat was owned by Allison V. Armour (1863–1941), one of the most important sponsors and supporters of Dr. Fairchild’s plant exploration endeavors. Likewise, the Archives have many photos pertinent to an extensive plant-hunting expedition made by Dr. Fairchild to the West Indies and Guianas between November 1931 and April 1932. However, many of these photos were taken not by Dr. Fairchild, but by the famous USDA botanist and plant collector Palemon H. Dorsett (1862–1943). This large Caribbean plant-hunting expedition also had the Utowana as a key element.

During our research, we wondered if other archives might have pictures of the Utowana or additional photos taken by Dorsett during this Caribbean expedition. What was, for us, just a potential historical study became a research priority in 2016, when a joint Fairchild-Bahamas National Trust plant exploration expedition visited the southern Bahamas with the support of the International Palm Society. Led by Dr. Brett Jestrow, Fairchild’s director of collections, the team’s main objective was to collect seeds and herbarium specimens of the Bahamas endemic palm Coccothrinax inaguensis. This palm species was described by former Fairchild botanist Dr. Robert Read (1931–2003) based on material originally collected by Dr. Fairchild during the 1931–1932 Utowana voyage to the West Indies (you can read more about the palm and the expedition in the 2016 Summer issue of *The Tropical Garden*). This Bahamian plant exploration enterprise allowed us to pursue additional details on the discovery of this Caribbean island palm species. It is the only species originally collected by Dr. Fairchild that was formally described by a Garden botanist. With this in mind, we started searching outside our Garden archives for documents about this expedition and the Utowana.

After following a few initial archival inquiries, our historical detective work identified two relevant places to search: The U.S. National Archives and the Special Collections of the USDA National Agricultural Library, both located in Maryland. In 2016 and 2017, Dr. Javier Francisco-Ortega, Florida International
University (FiU)-Fairchild faculty member, made two visits to those sites. These visits were sponsored by two FiU units: the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center, and the International Center for Tropical Plant Conservation. The Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History provided additional support.

During these expanded archive studies, we located documents and photos on Dr. Fairchild that are not housed in the Garden and that have remained unpublished for almost 90 years. They provide a unique window into the research and daily life of Dr. Fairchild and his colleagues onboard the Utowana. The most important documents we located are pertinent to the November 1931–April 1932 expedition to the Caribbean and Guianas. We’re sharing these new historical findings here.

**Utowana Photos**

One of the two photos of the Utowana housed in the Garden Archives was taken in the Gambia River in West Africa. This photo was also published in Dr. Fairchild’s book Exploring for Plants. The second photo in the Garden Archives is a postcard that was specifically made for the Utowana expeditions and shows the boat on the high seas. During our only visit (in 2016) to the Special Collections of the National Agricultural Library, we located seven unpublished photos of this boat. Taken by Dorsett between January 10 and 30, 1928, these pictures show Utowana on the docks of Colón, Panama, and at anchor in Tela, Honduras; Barrios, Guatemala; and Cozumel, Mexico.

**Dr. David Fairchild in the West Indies and Guianas (1931–1932)**

We visited the U.S. National Archives twice (2016 and 2017); there, we located an extensive two-volume report (902 pages, 684 photos) that Dorsett prepared for the 1931–1932 expedition. Interestingly, this document also includes the travelogue that he wrote during this trip. This Caribbean botany enterprise was sponsored by Armour, but was regarded as an official USDA activity. Therefore, Dorsett’s report was submitted to the agency and includes several official letters concerning required bureaucratic procedures. In addition to Dr. Fairchild, Armour and Dorsett, expedition members were Jordan C. Mott, a personal friend of Armour; Harold Frederick Loomis, an entomologist and botanist who worked in the Miami USDA Research Station at Chapman Field; Dr. Fairchild’s wife Marian and their daughter Nancy; and Leonard R. Toy, a horticulturist who worked at the University.
of Florida’s Florida State Experimental Station at Homestead. According to Dorsett’s report, Utowana “made something more than 44 anchorages” in the Bahamas, Greater and Lesser Antilles, Trinidad, and British and French Guianas.

The explorers collected 1,200 specimens of herbarium material. Through our research so far, we have located more than 395 of them in the United States National Herbarium, Smithsonian Institution. Furthermore, Dorsett reported that “1,200 feet of motion pictures” were produced; our current research activities focus on locating this unique film of high historical value (you can read more about motion pictures made during the USDA expedition led by Dr. Fairchild in The Tropical Garden, Vol. 73, No. 3, 2018). The other four collections are palms: Coccothrinax barbadensis (Plot 107), Coccothrinax litoralis (Plot 151), and Sabal caauvarum (Plot 106). These five collections represent an important historical heritage for the Garden community. Currently, four of them have one plant each, while S. caauvarum is represented by three individuals.

We are preparing a more extensive publication with additional details on material collected, aims and objectives of these expeditions, and expedition discoveries. An initial study, focusing on Dr. Fairchild and his trips to Haiti, has already been published and is available online on the webpage of the journal Huntia (Vol. 17., No. 1, 2018). The whole two-volume report is posted on the Garden’s library website, courtesy of the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

Read Palemon H. Dorsett’s entire report on the West Indies and Guianas expedition: www.fairchildgarden.org/archives-research

To view back issues of The Tropical Garden, please visit www.fairchildgarden.org/ttg

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