

Remarks delivered by Kelly Gray upon award of the James C. Bradford Biography Prize to Patrick Spero at the 2025 SHEAR annual meeting

The committee that selected the recipients of the James C. Bradford Biography Prize and the SHEAR Best Book Prize is composed of chairperson Marcus Nevius and myself, Kelly Gray. I will present the biography prize citation, and Marcus will follow with the Best Book Prize citation.

The winner of this year's SHEAR Best Biography Prize is Patrick Spero for his *The Scientist Turned Spy: André Michaux, Thomas Jefferson, and the Conspiracy of 1793*, published by the University of Virginia Press in 2024.

We historians, of course, base our work on the primary sources preserved in archives. All our work and the sources we use depend, ultimately, on such collections. One source—one document—can be fascinating and can reveal much to the researcher. Part of the fascination of research involves finding related sources that provide a more complete picture of our subject. And, of course, if the resulting work sheds new light on well-known people or events, all the better. How often, however, is the document at the center one that, in one important respect, has bragging rights that even the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution lack?

The Scientist Turned Spy begins with such a document—the Michaux Subscription List—which is housed at the American Philosophical Society. Dr. Spero serves as the Society's chief executive officer. "Michaux" is André Michaux, a French "natural historian." Natural historians studied botany, geology, geography, climate, and "animal history." In 1793, Michaux met Thomas Jefferson, who was then serving both as the APS's vice president and as the U.S.'s secretary of state. Michaux told Jefferson that he wanted to travel to the Pacific Ocean and back, gathering information along the way, but he needed a sponsor. The APS was willing to have the trip occur under its auspices but had to raise the funds. On the Michaux Subscription List, Jefferson described the planned expedition, and he circulated it, seeking more donors. Those who made pledges signed their names.

There was extensive support for the expedition because there was bipartisan support for U.S. expansion. The Michaux Subscription List is now kept in the American Philosophical Society's vault, on its "Treasures Cart." It includes signatures from many illustrious leaders and is the only known document that includes the signatures of the first four U.S. presidents.

That makes the document remarkable, but there's more to the story. Despite the extensive and impressive support for Michaux's proposed expedition, the trip never happened. As Dr. Spero engagingly explains, when Michaux met Citizen Edmond Genêt later in 1793, Michaux the "Scientist" became Michaux the "Spy." For example, he claimed that he then traveled to Kentucky as a botanist—to find plants and animals that had not yet been classified, and to classify them. His real purpose, however, was to organize frontiersmen to seize New Orleans and establish a new nation that would be a French ally. Michaux established that supporters of this plan included many sitting members of Congress and Secretary of State Jefferson, though Jefferson would later try to tamp down the rebellious spirit. As Spero notes, Michaux played a prominent role but had received little attention.

Spero addresses the great extent to which Native Americans and enslaved people made Michaux's work possible. The guidance of Native Americans was crucial to him in his travels. Michaux kept many of the plants he had found on his South Carolina plantation, where enslaved people tended them. The work ends with a remarkable theory of the fate of an enslaved boy who Michaux had taken with him to France. It includes the young man's ultimate attainment of freedom and his additional travels.

A work focused on natural history would be valuable, as would one providing new information about Thomas Jefferson or about efforts to establish an independent country out west. With the story of André Michaux, we have all three, in a work that highlights the importance of archival research. The committee is delighted to award the SHEAR Best Biography Prize to Patrick Spero for *The Scientist Turned Spy: André Michaux, Thomas Jefferson, and the Conspiracy of 1793*. Congratulations, Dr. Spero!