

Charles Fothergill

From the moment he walked away from his father's business in ivory brushes and combs in favour of artistic and scientific pursuits, **young Charles Fothergill's life was characterized by one failure after another.**

Nevertheless, his life was a worthy one, and his contributions to early Upper Canada should not be forgotten. He was a naturalist, artist, writer, businessman, office holder, newspaperman, publisher and politician. Given this list, it is not surprising that **his chief failing seems to have been dreaming too big**, leading to disaster in his business ventures and disappointment in his artistic and scientific endeavours.

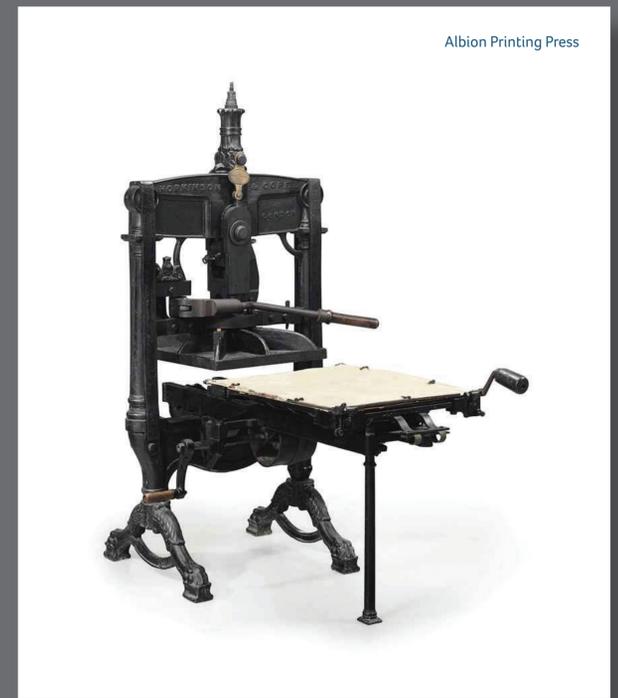
Charles was born in York, England in 1782, into a family which traced its heritage back at least to one of William the Conqueror's generals. Perhaps that brought expectations to the boy which he was generally unable to fulfill.

By the time he immigrated to Canada in 1817, he had already tried his hand, unsuccessfully, at acting, farming, studying to become a doctor, and horse breeding. His attempts to get a commission in the Royal Navy also failed. Canada offered a new start, and a promising one when he was granted 1,200 acres on Rice Lake by the Lieutenant Governor.

Fothergill settled in **Port Hope and was soon named the town's first Post Master.** He quickly became known as an active and generous citizen, and over time established a number of businesses. But once again he overextended, and lost them.

Political connections led to his being named **King's Printer in 1822.** This gave him, for the first time, two valuable tools, a steady income and a printing press. But when, in 1824, he won a controversial election for a seat in the Legislature, the seeds for failure were again sown. In 1826, due to the political positions he took, **he was fired as King's Printer.**

Rice Lake - Fothergill



“...an active and generous citizen.”

He remained active in political life, and although a reformer, supported the government's attempts to quell what eventually became the Rebellion of 1837. In 1832 at a large **public meeting in the Court House at Amherst (Cobourg)** he spoke strongly on behalf of the inhabitants, expressing loyalty to the Crown. His resolution was carried and those supporting William Lyon Mackenzie were silenced.

During all this, Fothergill maintained a love of science and the arts, and it is as a **superb observer and illustrator of nature that we celebrate him** in *Creative Cobourg (and area)*. An early sign of his potential was produced when only 17 - an 11 page folio, *Ornithologia Brittanica*, in which **he classified 301 species of British birds**. Much later, his "Essay descriptive of the quadrupeds of British North America" won the 1830 Silver Medal of the Natural History Society of Montreal.



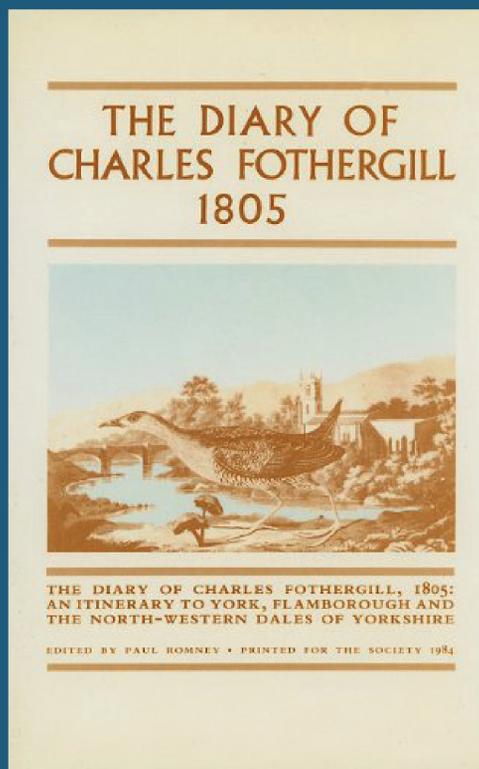
Smith's Creek, Port Hope - Fothergill

A number of his **watercolours of the Port Hope area** are in the collection of the Royal Ontario Museum.

In 1831 and 1832, he contributed articles to the columns of the Cobourg Star, under the pen-name "Atticus". They covered a great variety of subjects – the snapping turtle, the flying squirrel, Indian traditions, history of the art of writing, practical description of the interior of the Newcastle District, duties of parish and town officers, snow crystals, etc.

(Charles Fothergill, by James Little Baillie, Royal Ontario Museum of Zoology)

Charles Fothergill died penniless in 1840, and within a month a fire destroyed much of his great museum collection and many of his papers. Paul Romney, in summing up Fothergill's scientific and artistic work suggests that, if he had only been able to publish it, **it would have rivalled that of the great American, John James Audubon.**



Perhaps Fothergill's grandest dream was what he called a "Lyceum of Natural History and the Fine Arts". It was to include a museum, art gallery, zoo and botanical garden, and occupied him from 1835-1837. In the end, the funding could not be found, and the dream had to be abandoned. In the words of many who thwarted his dreams, **Fothergill was often called a "visionary"**. It was meant as a criticism, but perhaps what was needed was more people to share his vision.

"...would have rivalled that of the great American John James Audubon."