

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-43395-2 - Patronage, Practice, and the Culture of American Science: Alexander Dallas Bache and the U. S. Coast Survey

Hugh Richard Slotten

Frontmatter

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In this book Hugh Richard Slotten explores the institutional and cultural history of science in the United States. The main focus is on the activities of Alexander Dallas Bache – great-grandson of Benjamin Franklin and the acknowledged “chief” of the American scientific community during the second third of the nineteenth century. Bache played a central role in the organization and management of a number of key scientific institutions, including the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Smithsonian Institution, and the National Academy of Sciences. But his dominance in these institutions was made possible through his control of an organization less well known today, the United States Coast Survey, which he superintended from 1843 until his death in 1867. Under Bache’s command the Coast Survey became the central scientific institution in antebellum America.

Using richly detailed archival records, Slotten pursues an analysis of Bache and the Coast Survey that illuminates important historiographic themes. We gain a better understanding of the particular style of nineteenth-century American science by examining the role of the Coast Survey as a source of patronage. Perhaps most important, this study explores the ways in which scientific knowledge and practice are embedded within local contexts. Although Bache sought to use the Coast Survey to raise the status of American science partly by emulating European scientific elites, his efforts also reflected the cultural and political values of antebellum America. Slotten thus analyzes the interrelationship among political culture, patterns of patronage, and the institutional practice of science in the United States.

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FOR MY PARENTS
Who taught me the value of scholarship

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[More information](#)

TO THE SUN-DIAL

Under the window of the Hall of the House of Representatives of
the United States

Thou silent herald of Time's silent flight!
Say, could'st thou speak, what warning voice were thine!
Shade, who canst only show how others shine!
Dark, sullen witness of resplendent light
In day's broad glare, and when the moontide bright
Of laughing fortune sheds the ray divine,
The clouds of morning and the gloom of night.
Yet are thy counsels faithful, just, and wise;
They bid us seize the moments as they pass –
Snatch the retrieveless sunbeams as it flies,
Nor lose one sand of life's revolving glass –
Aspiring still, with energy sublime,
By virtuous deeds to give eternity to Time.

John Quincy Adams

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[More information](#)

Contents

List of illustrations	<i>page</i> viii
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	i
1 Becoming a man of science: Philadelphia, West Point, and patrician-republican culture	5
2 Reforming American science: Bache, Joseph Henry, and professionalization	25
3 Background to reform: The Hassler years	42
4 Mobilizing for government science: The campaign for control of the Coast Survey	61
5 Reforming the Coast Survey: Negotiating the dilemmas of science in the United States	76
6 Providing patronage for American science: The Humboldtian program	112
7 Practicing government science: The social milieu of the Coast Survey	147
Notes on manuscript sources	179
Notes	182
Index	223

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978-0-521-43395-2 - Patronage, Practice, and the Culture of American Science: Alexander Dallas Bache and the U. S. Coast Survey

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Illustrations

1	Alexander Dallas Bache, n.d.	<i>page</i> 14
2	Sketch by John Foley made between 1817–1841, showing Hassler’s famous carriage in the field.	47
3	Hassler directing transportation of the “grand theodolite” to observing station.	54
4	Hassler’s camp. Fire Island, New York, 1837.	55
5	Assistant Edmund Blunt, 1833.	67
6	Sketch showing the progress of the survey of San Francisco Bay and vicinity.	81
7	Louis Agassiz, Benjamin Peirce, and C. P. Patterson.	91
8	City of San Francisco, California.	102
9	View of the town and mission of Santa Barbara, California.	103
10	Assistant Charles O. Boutelle.	105
11	Astronomical transit, made by Troughton and Simms, England.	122
12	Lines of equal magnetic declination for the year 1850.	125
13	Seacoast tide gauge.	127
14	Charles A. Schott, chief of the Computing Division.	129
15	Sketch showing the positions and comparison of observations of temperature in the Gulf Stream.	138
16	Coast Survey office at New Jersey Avenue and C Street, SE.	150
17	Galveston, Texas.	152
18	Primary triangulation station, California, 1876.	156
19	Provincetown (Cape Cod), Massachusetts.	160
20	Coast Survey Party using the base apparatus.	161
21	Assistant George Davidson (on left) and field party in California, 1890.	163
22	Charles S. Peirce.	165
23	Assistant Henry Mitchell (1830–1902), who was Maria Mitchell’s brother.	168

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ILLUSTRATIONS

ix

- | | | |
|----|---|-----|
| 24 | Etching of Boston Bay by James McNeil Whistler
(1854–1855). | 171 |
| 25 | View of the Crow's Nest and Storm King from West
Point, Hudson River, New York, etching, 1876. | 175 |

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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