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Smithsonian Libraries Presents “The Curious Mister Catesby”

The Smithsonian Libraries presents “The Curious Mister Catesby,” a panel lecture and book signing, Tuesday, April 14, at 5:30 p.m. in Baird Auditorium at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History. The event is hosted in collaboration with the Catesby Commemorative Trust and is free and open to the public.

The lecture celebrates the new book, *The Curious Mr. Catesby: A “Truly Ingenious” Naturalist Explores New Worlds* (UGA Press: 2015), with speakers Leslie K. Overstreet, the Smithsonian Libraries’ curator of natural history rare books; David Elliott; and E. Charles Nelson. The discussion will cover previously unknown biographical information about English naturalist Mark Catesby (1683–1749) and the physical making of Catesby’s monumental publication, *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands* (London: 1731-1743 [i.e., 1729-1747]), the first fully illustrated account of the flora and fauna of North America.

The Curious Mister Catesby features a chapter by Overstreet. “The chapter presents the results of my investigations into how Catesby went about publishing his book, which was issued in 11 parts over a period of 18 years, forming two large folio volumes,” said Overstreet. “Since little contemporary documentation survives, I based my research on physical evidence—mainly the book’s typography—gleaned from personally examining more than 60 copies of the first edition in the U.S., England and continental Europe. I also discuss three rare, printed ephemera in the Smithsonian Libraries’ copy that reveal Catesby’s own instructions to subscribers for putting the book together.”

In 1712, Catesby crossed the Atlantic to Virginia. After a seven-year stay, he returned to England with paintings of plants and animals he had studied. They sufficiently impressed other naturalists so that in 1722 several Fellows of the Royal Society sponsored his return to North America. There Catesby cataloged the flora and fauna of the Carolinas and the Bahamas by gathering seeds and specimens, compiling notes and making watercolor sketches. Upon his return to England five years later, he began the 20-year task of writing, etching and publishing *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands*.

[Read more](#) about this event. [View the digitized volume](#) of *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands*.

About the Smithsonian Libraries

The Smithsonian Libraries maintains a collection of more than 2 million volumes and serves as an educational resource for the Smithsonian Institution, the global research community and the public. The Libraries are located in Washington, D.C.; Edgewater, Md.; New York City; and the Republic of Panama. For more information, visit the [Smithsonian Libraries website](#).

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