THE FIRST NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM IN AMERICA

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Admiration for superlatives is a human (some say more particularly an American) trait. For the thousands of employees of American natural history museums and for their millions of visitors the identification of the first and the oldest institution of this sort has inevitable fascination. This honor is frequently and authoritatively claimed for the Charleston Museum.1 As far as I know, the claim is not currently made for any other museum. Nevertheless, renewed study of the available historical data shows that some facts have been overlooked and that the previous honest and able interpretation of others becomes equivocal when provided with more complete background. It is, in fact, most unlikely that the Charleston Museum can properly be designated either the first or the oldest in America, and the statement requires careful reconsideration before it becomes ineradicably imbedded in the accepted histories of science.

1 The claim is included in most of the publications of the Charleston Museum and was particularly publicized by a meeting of the American Association of Museums in Charleston in 1923 on the occasion of celebrating the "150th anniversary" of the "first museum founded in America." The following are among the many historical papers and books in which the Charleston Museum is unqualifiedly accepted as first and oldest in America: P. M. Rea, Proc. Amer. Assoc. Mus., IX, pp. 53–65, 1915; L. M. Bragg, Charleston Mus. Quart., I, pp. 3–13, 1923; C. Schuchert, Bull. Peabody Mus. Nat. Hist., I, No. 1, pp. 9–23, 1926; W. M. Smallwood and M. S. C. Smallwood, "Natural History and the American Mind," 1 vol., 8vo. New York. 1941.