

### **Robert Kennicott (1835-1866)**

Robert Kennicott was born on November 13, 1835 in New Orleans, Louisiana. His parents, Dr. John A. and Mary Kennicott moved soon after to Northfield, Illinois. His father was a practicing doctor but was also a noted horticulturist, finally giving up his medical practice to pursue his horticultural interests full-time. With the help of his father and his father's friends and acquaintances, Robert Kennicott was encouraged to explore the natural world around him. While his health at first limited these pursuits, but by the age of thirteen, Kennicott began to grow stronger and furthered this through the aid of athletic exercises.

Robert decided against the typical classical education due to his health issues and instead learned from the expertise of other naturalists. In 1852, he left the Chicago area to stay in Cleveland and study with the noted naturalist Dr. Kirtland. It was Kirtland who encouraged Kennicott to develop a relationship with those working at the Smithsonian Institution and Kennicott formed a particular bond with Professor S.F. Baird. After Cleveland, Kennicott returned home to Illinois and began studying various fish and reptiles. In 1854, Kennicott continued his scientific training by traveling to Racine to study under Dr. Hoy, the noted ornithologist. In 1855, Kennicott participated in a Natural History Survey of Illinois sponsored by the Illinois Central Railroad Company. In 1856, he began to publish his scientific explorations and working with others, founded the Chicago Academy of Sciences, to which he contributed his efforts at obtaining subscriptions and adding to the collection through his own collecting trips. He was appointed director of this institution in 1857. That same year, he began work to establish a museum of natural science at Northwestern University.

In 1859, Kennicott started on a three year exploration of the Arctic North America, sponsored by the Smithsonian and the Hudson Bay Company. In 1865 he set out on an expedition to explore the possibility an overland route to Europe via Alaska and Siberia for the Western Union Telegraph Company and to collect specimens for both the Smithsonian and the Chicago Academy of Sciences while en route. This was his last trip, Kennicott died on May 12, 1866. The specimens that Kennicott collected for the Chicago Academy of Sciences were destroyed ultimately by the Great Fire of 1871. The Academy still has specimens collected by Kennicott, obtained through transfers from the Smithsonian after the fire to replenish to the collection or from specimens originally deposited with Northwestern University and transferred later to the Academy.