

The Names You Know, the People You Don't:

Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira

By Derek Tustin

In preparing and researching this series of articles on "The Names You Know, the People You Don't", I looked at a variety of source material to identify the names of the various individuals that I would be researching. Many of them I was familiar with, others only vaguely so, but others were completely unfamiliar. If a name caught my interest, I did a bit of research to see if there was an interesting story behind the name. One scientific name that caught my attention was *Osteoglossum ferreirai*. Both the name of the individual nor that of the fish was immediately familiar to me and I'm betting that neither is immediately familiar to you. But as soon as I name the fish, I guarantee that you will recognize it (and almost as sure that none of you have kept it). And the story behind the person that it is named in honour of is interesting as well.



On April 27th, 1756, Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira was born in Bahia (today known as Salvador) a city in the then Portuguese colony of Brazil. His father, Manuel Rodrigues Ferreira, was a merchant, which undoubtedly accounts for the family being in Brazil.

As a young man Alexandre studied at the Convento das Mercês, a convent school located in Maranhao, Brazil. He was obviously a diligent and/or gifted student because he was sent across the Atlantic Ocean to study at the Universidade de Coimbra (University of Coimbra) in Coimbra, Portugal. The University of Coimbra, established in 1290, is one of the oldest universities in continuous operation in the world. But even in 1775, it was an extremely prestigious educational institution.

At the University of Coimbra he studied law, then natural history and then mathematics, culminating in his obtaining his baccalaureate in 1777. A year later, at age 23, he obtained his doctorate after once again studying natural history.

Shortly thereafter he began working at the Museum of Ajuda in Lisbon, Portugal. There he worked for the next five years cataloguing specimens contained in the museum's collection, and writing both reports on the contents as well as scholarly monographs. His dedication and accomplishments were recognized during his tenure with him being elected as a Corresponding Member of the Academy of Sciences at Lisbon on March 22nd, 1780.

The city of Ajuda was where Maria I, the Queen regnant of Portugal, resided. Alexandre had come to her attention, and the Queen, wanting to know more about the central and northern portions of Portugal's Brazil colony, ordered him to leverage his knowledge and experience as a naturalist and to undertake an expedition through those regions. It was hoped that through the knowledge gained from such an expedition, avenues for economic profit, methods to conquest disputed territories and potential locations for future cities all would be found. She termed it a "philosophical voyage".

It is in this royal order that the difference between Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira and other contemporary explorers is found. While during the voyage he was to describe the flora, fauna and native inhabitants and search for mineral resources, he was also charged with writing political and philosophical commentaries about what he saw. Queen Maria I wanted to understand the native people of the colony of Brazil as well as to explore avenues to exploit the resources contained therein.

So in 1783 Alexandre, in the company of draftsmen José Codina and José Joaquim Freire (who between them would produce 912 drawings and prints during the expedition), and botanist Agostinho do Cabo, set sail on the vessel *Águia e Coração de Jesus* ("Eagle and Heart of Jesus") for the country of his birth.

Now the exploration that Alexandre undertook kept him in Brazil for nine years, from 1783 – 1792. Obviously this was an extensive exploration, and to record it here would be tedious. Instead, let me touch on the highlights;

1783 / 1784: Explored the coastal region, preparing reports on the cultivation of indigo (a highly sought after purple dye), coffee, cocoa and sugar.

1784 / 1785: Explorations of the Rio Tocantins, Amazon River and Rio Negro.

1785 / 1786: In-depth exploration of the Rio Negro and various tributaries, including the Rio Icana and Rio Uuapes.

Travelling by canoe and then overland, he explored the Rio Branco, Rio Tacutu, Rio Surumu and Rio Uraricoera.

1787: Exploration of the Rio Araca and Rio Solimoes.

1788: Exploration of the Rio Madeira.

1788 / 1790: Exploration of the Rio Guapore, Rio Cuiaba and upper reaches of the Rio Paraguay.

1791: Exploration of the Rio Jauru.

1792: Departs for Portugal, returning home in early 1793, almost ten years after he left.

There is also another interesting story associated with the explorations. The ship that had carried Alexandre from Portugal to Brazil, the *Águia e Coração de Jesus*, had remained on the coast of Brazil as he explored the interior. As drawings were completed, as reports were finished, and as specimens were gathered, Alexandre would forward them back to the coast and the captain of the *Águia e Coração de Jesus*, Luiz Pereira da Cunha, would in turn have them forwarded to the royal court in Portugal.

Upon his return to the coast from the interior, as he was preparing to return home, Alexandre discovered that Luiz Pereira da Cunha had been paying for the cost of shipping the items to the royal court himself. In doing so, he had exhausted his daughter's dowry. Alexandre, not wanting to shame the daughter when she did get married, sought her hand and married the captain's daughter, Germana Pereira de Queiroz, on September 16th, 1792.

In the company of his new wife Alexandre arrived in Lisbon in early 1793. Queen Maria I awarded him honours in recognition of his explorations including the Order of Christ (a Portuguese order of knighthood). He quickly adapted to metropolitan life, becoming the Secretary of State of Sea Commerce and Ultramarine Dominions. He also served as Deputy Director of the Museum of Ajuda in Lisbon, Director of the Royal Cabinet of Natural History, Director of the Botanical Garden of the University of Coimbra, Administrator of the Royal Farms, and a Deputy of the Royal Junta of Commerce.

He was still serving in many of these posts when he died on April 23rd, 1815, just shy of his 69th birthday.

But the story of Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira doesn't end with his death. The majority of the drawings, prints, records, journals, reports, specimens and associated documents that Alexandre produced during his nine years of exploration in Brazil were shipped back to Portugal, and were stored in museums of the time. However no one, not even Alexandre himself, refined, indexed or further studied the records that had been produced.

For almost two centuries they lay, for the most part, undisturbed. Then in the early 1970's scholars began to look at the documents that had been stored. Since then the story of Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira's Brazilian exploration have been told. Between 1971 and 1974 the Brazilian Committee of Federal Culture published a paperback series of books entitled *The Philosophical Voyage*. In the early 1980's, the Brazilian National Library published a set of print reproductions from the explorations, first as a two volume set, and later as a single boxed set. In 1996 an illustrated book, *Memorias da Amazônia* (Memories of the Amazon), was published to accompany an exhibit of Alexandre's anthropology collections, and in 1999 came a paperback edition of *The Philosophical Voyage*.

Recognizing his contributions, various species of animals have been named in his honour, including but not limited to;

The Mammal

- *Neusticomys ferreirai* (Ferreira's fish-eating rat)

The Insects

- *Amiltonia ferreirai* (grasshopper)
- *Archaeolycorea ferreirai* (swallowtail butterfly)
- *Flebotomus ferreirai* (sandfly)
- *Hyalyris ferreirai* (butterfly)
- *Partamona ferreirai* (bee)
- *Ruspolia ferreirai* (grasshopper)
- *Scapacartus ferreirai* (beetle)
- *Styracoptinus ferreirai* (weevil)
- *Uchuca ferreirai* (grasshopper)



Mopalia ferreirai

The Reptile & Amphibian

- *Hyperolius ferreirai* (frog)
- *Leposoma ferreirai* (lizard)

The Fish

- *Acanthochitona ferreirai* (mollusk [Marine])
- *Cetopsidium ferreirai* (whale catfish)
- *Glabella ferreirai* (conch [Marine])
- *Lepidozona ferreirai* (mollusk [Marine])
- *Macrobrachium ferreirai* (freshwater shrimp)
- *Mopalia ferreirai* (chiton [Marine])
- (Black arowana)
- *Trochus ferreirai* (sea snail [Marine])
- *Marginella ferreirai* (conch [Marine])



Osteoglossum ferreirai

So did you see the fish that I was referring to? The black arowana (*Osteoglossum ferreirai*) is something that many of us have seen, but few have kept. The unique name is what leads me to look at Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira. A fascinating life, and one which the next time you see or think about an arowana, you will remember.



Cetopsidium ferreirai