

# NATHANIEL LORD BRITTON BIOGRAPHY

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**Britton, Dr Nathaniel Lord (1859–1934)—primary co-author of the 1919-1923 four-Volume books, *The Cactaceae*, the comprehensive, monographic cactus book of its time.**



Born at New Dorp, Staten Island, New York on 15 January 1859 (the eldest of 3 siblings), Nathaniel Lord Britton became a well-known botanist, taxonomist and author. Although his parents wanted a religious career for him, naturalists John J Croke (1824–1911) and John Strong Newberry (1822–1892), showed Nathaniel the wonders of the natural world. At the suggestion of Croke, Nathaniel's higher education began in 1875 at the Columbia College School of Mines in New York City (became a college of Columbia University in 1896), earning him a Mechanical Engineering degree in 1879. He earned a PhD degree at the same College in 1881 with the thesis "A Preliminary Catalogue of the Flora of New Jersey". During his college career he was assistant in geology to John Newberry, who lectured in geology and botany at Columbia.

It was during his college years that Dr Britton became intensely interested in the science of botany. He was only 18 when he became a member of the Torrey Botanical Club in 1877 and through the tireless work of himself, his spouse Elizabeth and others within the Club the "New York Botanical Garden" was founded in Bronx, New York in 1891. He married Elizabeth Gertrude Knight (1858–1934) in 1885, a bryologist with special interests in mosses and ferns. By 1902 the married couple began their annual trips to the Caribbean (spending many winter months in Puerto Rico) to further their respective fields of interest.

Dr Britton became an instructor in botany in 1886 and a full professor of botany and geology in 1891 at Columbia College—also, in charge of its herbarium and botanical library until 1896. From 1896 until his retirement in 1929 he became the first director-in-chief of the New York Botanical Garden. He was co-author with Addison Brown (1830–1913) of *An Illustrated Flora of the Northern United States, Canada and the British Possessions* in three volumes 1896-98.

By 1906, Dr Britton began a study of descriptive flora of cactus plants with the help of Joseph Nelson Rose (1862–1928) and Daniel Trembly MacDougal (1865–1958). After co-authoring a few small books on cacti with Joseph Rose, Britton & Rose finished their study of cactus plants with the comprehensive four-volume monograph *The Cactaceae* of 1,053 pages: Volume 1 *Pereskiae & Opuntiae* in 1919, Volume 2 *Cereanae & Hylocereanae* in 1920, Volume 3 *Echinocereanae, Echinocactanae & Cactanae* in 1922 & Volume 4 *Coryphantanae, Epiphyllanae & Rhipsalidanae* in 1923.

Of further interest to the succulentophile this four-volume book described many new cactus genera that are still good names today—*Arrojadoa*, *Austrocactus*, *Brachycereus*, *Browningia*, *Copiapoa*, *Dendrocereus*, *Denmoza*, *Epithelantha*, *Escobaria*, *Espostoa*, *Facheiroa*, *Ferocactus*, *Frailea*, *Grusonia*, *Jasminocereus*, *Leocereus*, *Matucana*, *Mila*, *Neolloydia*, *Neoraimondia*, *Oroya*, *Pseudorhipsalis*, *Quiabentia*, *Sclerocactus*, *Stetsonia*, *Strombocactus*, *Tacinga* & *Thelocactus*.

Other popular generic names described by Britton & Rose prior to 1919 still good today are: *Bergerocactus*, *Carnegiea*, *Dudleya* (other succulent plant), *Hattiora*, *Hylocereus*, *Leptocereus*, *Pachycereus*, *Pediocactus*, *Peniocereus*, *Peresklopsis*, *Selenicereus*, *Strophocactus*, *Tacinga* & *Weberocereus*—plus another described by only Dr Britton: *Harrisia* in 1908. Other described genera by both have dropped into synonymy; although a few generic names (other than cacti) described by Mr Rose only are still good names. Britton & Rose described many generic species although most have been transferred from their original generic species to other generic species later by other authors. Species named in honor of Dr Britton were: *Agave brittoniana*, *Dudleya brittonii* and *Nopalea brittoni*. Dr Britton also described over 15 species of succulents (including cacti) prior to 1919, some with authors other than Dr Rose.

Dr Britton was a strict user of the American Code of Botanical Nomenclature. At the time of *The Cactaceae* the American Code differed some from the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature. In adopting the form *Neomammillaria* as a genus name, the authors Britton & Rose followed the American Code, by which a name once used cannot be used again. The name *Mammillaria* was given to an alga two years before Haworth used it to a genus of cacti. However, at the International Botanical Congress

meeting in Cambridge, England in 1930, the name was considered and with agreement of the former American codists, it was put on the list of NOMINA CONSERVANDA as Mammillaria; thereby, pushing the name Neomammillaria into synonymy.

Dr Britton was an honorary president of the Cactus and Succulent Society of America (CSSA) from 1929 until his death, becoming the first Life Member of the society. He was president of Botanical Society of America 1898 & 1920 and president of New York Academy of Science 1907—a member of the Torrey Botanical Club 1877, of the National Academy of Sciences in 1907 and of the American Philosophical Society in 1928. He was a foreign member of Linnean Society of London, England in 1925 and received the American Academy of Arts and Sciences Fellow award in the same year. The New York Botanical Garden periodical *Brittonia* was named in his honor in 1931 and its herbarium in 1935. Dr Britton was a prolific writer of technical papers on plant classification.

Dr Britton continued his research work and association with the New York Botanical Garden after retirement until his death on 25 June 1934.

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