A historical review of the Lettered Olive
by Harry G. Lee

The Lettered Olive is one of the prized finds on beaches from North Carolina (Kurtz, 1860) to NE Yucatán (Vokes and Vokes, 1964: 56). It is Official State Shell of South Carolina, which state is also the type locality.

On page 19 of his catalogue, Charlestonian Edmund Ravenel (1834; see Fig. 1) introduced the binomen Oliva sayana for a species he no doubt collected near his home. He indicated that he believed Oliva sayana and O. litterata [sic] Say (1838: unpaginated text [see Fig. 2 and note misspelling "litterata"] and plate 3 [see Fig. 3]) were specifically distinct from O. litterata Lamarck, which Ravenel placed in Ceylon. There was apparently a printer’s error, and an asterisk was placed to the left of Oliva litterata Say rather than to the left of O. litterata Lamarck; in Fig. 1 these have been struck through and pencilled in, respectively, by a previous owner of the catalogue.

![Image of shells](image_url)

Can we be absolutely sure what shell Ravenel intended for his O. sayana? Tursch et al. (1998: 29) wrote: “The type is missing from the Ravenel Collection, housed at the Charleston Museum (fide Dr. Harry D. [sic] Lee, in litt.),” which I can confirm. Lacking a type specimen, can the reference I made above to Say hold up as iconic for Ravenel’s species? Gary Rosenberg (2009) wrote: “Ravenel (1834) did not refer explicit [sic] to Say’s American Conchology, but must have meant that work, in which Say provided an excellent illustration of the species only four years earlier.” I certainly concur with Gary’s analysis as
there is copious evidence that Say and Ravenel were in contact for a substantial period dating to the latter’s attendance at the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Medicine, not far from Say’s haunts at the Academy of Natural Sciences, and from which he graduated as valedictorian in 1819. Thus we may safely regard the Say illustration as the type figure. Coupling this image with his statement "sometimes exceeds three inches," I think there can be little doubt as to the identity of *O. sayana* Ravenel.

End of story? Not exactly; there are certainly some loose ends here. What the heck is *Oliva litterata* Lamarck, 1811? Lamarck (1811: 315; species no. 20) referred to Bruguière (1798: plate 362 fig. 1a, 1b [see Fig. 4 above, bottom right]) as the indication for this species, for which no locality was provided. There can be little doubt that it is the same as Ravenel’s species! Thus it appears that Ravenel actually misidentified the Lamarck taxon as something in his collection that apparently originated in Ceylon!

But there’s one more hitch: Röding (1798: 36) coined the binomen *Porphyria litterata* citing two references, which combine for five indications. Given the heterogeneous assortment and variable quality of these figures *[vidi in partim]*, it is not surprising that various authors have applied this name to several different taxa including *Oliva olive* (Linnaeus, 1758), *O. spicata* (Röding, 1798), and several other candidates, none of which bears any significant resemblance to our Lettered Olive. The type of Röding’s genus *Porphyria* is *Voluta porphyria* Linnaeus, 1758 by application of the Principle of Absolute autonomy (ICZN, 1999: Article 68.4). This well-known species is universally regarded as a member of the genus *Oliva* Bruguière, 1789, which indicts *Porphyria* Röding, 1798 as a subjective synonym. That synonymy places *Oliva litterata* Lamarck, 1811 in secondary junior homonymy of *O. litterata* (Röding, 1798) and thus unavailable for use in formal taxonomic nomenclature.

Thus, although the species was first illustrated by Bruguière (1798), first named by Lamarck (1811), and first tied to American waters by Say (1830), Ravenel gets the credit for giving it its appropriately eponymous scientific name. While Ravenel saw that Thomas Say was memorialized for his role in this elucidation, Jean Baptiste Pierre Antoine de Monet Comte de Lamarck, having suffered the indignity of nomenclatorial disenfranchisement, may take some solace in knowing that he is responsible for the official vernacular name (Turgeon, Quinn et al., 1998: 99) as featured in the title above.

**NB:** Components of the four figures have been edited into juxtaposition.


Vokes, H. E. and E. H. Vokes, 1984 [*"1983"]]. *Distribution of shallow-water marine Mollusca, Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico. Mesoamerican Ecological Institute, Monograph 1, Middle American Research Institute, Publication 54*: i-viii + 1-183 incl. 50 pls.