

MILL GROVE — AUDUBON'S HOME

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Audubon called it "Mill Grove, that blessed spot." He came to live there, his first home in America, as a young man in 1804.

It lies in the historic Valley Forge country, twenty-five miles west of Philadelphia. It is a beautiful 200-year old ivy-covered house, built of stone in the Georgian style. The English ivy on the walls flowers profusely in the fall, and the black fruits stay on all winter. The fruits are not eaten by the birds until the following spring when the returning robins, catbirds, and bluebirds eagerly devour them.

In its long history Mill Grove has seen many owners, yet most of the time it was owned by one family, the Wetherills. It was their country home. Another early owner was John Penn, a grandson of William Penn and the last English governor of Pennsylvania.

Mill Grove was built by James Morgan, one of the early Welsh settlers. He had a mill on the Perkiomen Creek and prospered. He married one of the rich Pawling girls and built this fine house high above the creek, with wide views over the valley to the distant hills.

In 1789 the home was bought by Captain Jean Audubon, the father of John James. Jean Audubon was a retired French naval officer with extensive business interests in Santo Domingo, a French colony in the West Indies, now the Republic of Haiti. While he was in America on business he found Mill Grove for sale and purchased it as a speculation, for there was a small lead mine near the house. After returning to Santo Domingo to settle his affairs, he retired to his home on the banks of the Loire in France, taking his small son, John James, with him. Fifteen years later the son returned to America to take charge of the Mill Grove estate and develop the mineral deposits.

But John James was no miner. His father gave him a generous allowance and he enjoyed the life of a country squire, hunting and taking part in the local social activities. During his explorations along the banks of the Perkiomen he discovered a small cave and liked it so well that he made it his headquarters. There he transferred his painting materials and soon found that he had neighbors rearing a family on one of the ledges of the cave. Pewees (or phoebes, as they are now called) had a nestful of young, and often Audubon interrupted his painting to study the family life of the birds. He knew that they were insect eaters and therefore migrated in the fall and returned in the spring. Did the same birds return in the spring? He pondered the problem and thought that if he could mark the young birds in some way he would look out in the spring for marked birds. How could he mark the birds without injuring or handicapping them? Paint would be no good. It would wear

off or be lost when the birds molted. Then he had an idea. He wound fine silver wire on their legs. Sure enough, next spring he saw phoebes with his silver wire on their legs. Does this make John James Audubon the first bird bander in America?

Many visitors to Mill Grove ask for directions to Audubon's cave, but it no longer exists. It was destroyed soon after he sold the estate. In his journal Audubon writes that on a later visit he found that the cave was gone. Probably a charge of blasting powder had been used to loosen rock needed for repairs to the dam.

Always Audubon had been interested in drawing birds. At Mill Grove a new world of bird life opened before him. He was in despair at his lack of success in reproducing the beautiful creatures he saw flitting through the trees and along the banks of the creek, full of life and action.

The solution came to him in a dream. He hurriedly dressed, jumped on his horse, and galloped to Norristown, some five miles away. He arrived so early that he found the shops still closed. A swim in the river cooled him off, and after the swim he bought what he wanted — some flexible wire — and hurried back to Mill Grove. His breakfast was ready upon his return, but Audubon had no time for eating. He grabbed his gun, ran down to the creek, and shot the first bird he saw — a kingfisher.

Now he began to learn a new technique, which he later developed and used all his life to show the bird in the lifelike attitudes he had observed. He carefully poked the wires through the body of the bird, and by bending them into the required posture he had his model. This is the secret of those spirited reproductions of bird life that started a new school of bird painting.

Another important event took place during the short period that Audubon lived at Mill Grove — he met his future wife.

The neighboring estate of Fatland was owned by a wealthy Englishman, William Bakewell. Mr. Bakewell met John James while out hunting one day and invited him back to his house. There Audubon met Lucy, his host's eldest daughter, and fell in love. That was the best day's work that he ever did, for if he had not had Lucy's help and encouragement we would never have heard of Audubon.

After their marriage Lucy taught school and took care of their two children, thus enabling Audubon to explore the forests and rivers of North America, always searching for new birds to include in his monumental "Birds of America," 435 life-size pictures.

Mill Grove was sold before his marriage to Lucy, and in 1813 it was bought by Samuel Wetherill, who needed the lead from the mine for his paint business in Philadelphia. Wetherill's supplies from Europe had been

cut off by the Napoleonic wars. The galena proved to be of good quality, running 75% lead.

Later, in the 1850's, a company was formed to operate two mines, the Ecton Mine on the Mill Grove estate and the Perkiomen Mine across Egypt Road. After some refining the ore was shipped by wagon to the Schuylkill Canal and then by barge to Baltimore and New York. The company went bankrupt after a few years due to high cost of operation. The site of the old Ecton Mine is now marked by a stack of the smelter, and the surrounding dumps are visited by collectors in search of many varieties of copper, lead, and zinc ores. Serpierite, a rare ore of copper, is found nowhere else in America.

The Wetherills owned Mill Grove from 1813 to 1951, except for an interval of sixteen years. In 1951 it was sold to the Commissioners of Montgomery County, and it is now maintained as a memorial to John James Audubon. Many examples of his bird pictures hang on the walls. They are from the elephant folio edition of "The Birds of America," life-size and colored by hand. These were made in London between 1827 and 1838 from copper plate engravings done by Havell. In one of the exhibition rooms at Mill Grove is one of the original copper plates, the Labrador Falcons. These plates are very rare, most of them having been either melted down for the copper content or destroyed accidentally.

Also on exhibition is a complete set of "The Birds," the Barret-Church set, 435 prints bound in four volumes in full brown morocco, which was presented to the Shrine in 1961. Included in the gift was a set of 150 plates, imperial folio, of "The Quadrupeds of North America" in two volumes, a set of the Ornithological Biography (text of "The Birds") in five volumes, and the text of "The Quadrupeds" in three volumes, truly a magnificent gift. Some pieces of furniture from "Minniesland," Audubon's old home in New York City, are also to be seen at Mill Grove. These include a dining room table and sideboard and a sofa.

The estate of 120 acres is a wildlife sanctuary. Some 160 species of birds have been recorded in the last eight years, over fifty of which have nested. One unusual nesting bird was the Prothonotary Warbler, a pair of which raised a family in 1954. Feeding is carried on throughout the year, nesting boxes are provided, and many hundreds of trees and shrubs attractive to birds have been planted. Even the birds find Mill Grove "that blessed spot."