

Poet to Ornithologist

By Jeff Holt

When you examine the background of North America's most influential authors of ornithological works going back to the mid-eighteenth century, each share a common denominator – a lengthy (sometimes decades long) apprenticeship in ornithology and natural history. From Catesby, through Audubon and Peterson, to Sibley, all spent years learning the science of our avifauna and perfecting the artistic techniques necessary to accurately depict our bird population before they undertook the task of publishing their respective works. Yet in this blanket statement, one exception does emerge, Alexander Wilson. “Very few of the men whose force of character has raised them from obscurity to eminence have had to make their way by the aid of slenderer qualifications, or in the face of more insuperable obstacles, than were the lot of the pioneer of American ornithology.” (Gardner, 1876) To examine the provenance of the man who authored *American Ornithology*, one would unlikely conclude that this individual would eventually be honored as the Father of American Ornithology. Written almost a century ago, the sentiment remains true to this day, “While he did not discover his true vocation until the last ten years of his life and the work, in which must rest his claim to distinction, was crowded in those few years, yet no other ornithologist in America has accomplished anything approaching it in so brief a time.” (Burns, 1909)

Alexander Wilson was born on July 6, 1766 in Paisley, Scotland. Wilson's early childhood was largely uneventful, until shortly before his tenth birthday when his mother became ill and died. In July, 1779, Wilson became an apprentice weaver under the tutelage of his brother-in-law, William Duncan. His apprenticeship concluded three years later, which allowed Wilson to work at his trade in Paisley. When he wasn't working as a weaver, Wilson occupied his time as a wandering peddler. It was during this period that Wilson became enamored with the writing and study of poetry and particularly the work of Robert Burns. Wilson was a prolific poet, and enjoyed some minor literary success, most notably with his poem “Watty and Meg”, which he wrote in 1791. Perhaps influenced by the American and French revolutions, Wilson authored a number of poems designed to incite discontent in the local trade circles. Not surprising, local authorities and business owners took offense. This resulted in a series of minor run-ins with law in 1792 and 1793, resulting in Wilson being assessed multiple fines and sentenced to short periods of incarceration. The suppression of Wilson's literary expression probably led him to look to North America and the newly won freedoms of an infant nation, for on May 23, 1794, Wilson boarded the ship *Swift* bound for America. He would step off that ship in Newcastle, Delaware, on July 14, just days after celebrating his 28th birthday. Wilson initially worked in and around Philadelphia in a number of occupations, including that of weaver. By 1795, Wilson found work as a schoolteacher which would be his primary profession and source of income for the next decade.

The dramatic evolution of Wilson from a poet to an ornithologist is demonstrated in his correspondence and writings between June, 1803 and his death on August 23, 1813. “The idea of publishing an illustrated work on the birds of America was an audacious one to be conceived in the mind of a middle-aged and poverty stricken Scotch schoolmaster.”

(Christy, 1926) Yet, beginning in 1802, a confluence of circumstances occurred that would affect the study of North American ornithology for posterity.

In a letter to friend dated February 14, 1802 Wilson writes, with less than great enthusiasm; “On the 25th of this month I remove to the schoolhouse beyond Gray’s Ferry to succeed the present teacher there. I shall recommence that painful profession once more with the same gloomy sullen resignation that a prisoner re-enters his dungeon or a malefactor mounts the scaffold; fate urges him, necessity me.” (Grosart, 1876) The reference to prison may not have been far from the mark. One writer described the schoolhouse building as looking “uncomfortably like a jail.” (Cantwell, 1956) Had Wilson known how this new job would change his life, his attitude would have doubtless, been far different. Fortuitously, Wilson’s new situation at the Union School was located a short distance from Bartram’s Garden, a botanical garden and home built by John Bartram in 1728. Linnaeus is said to have described Bartram as “the greatest natural botanist in the World.” (Cantwell, 1961) By 1802, the garden and home was under the ownership of John’s son, William Bartram. William was an accomplished explorer and naturalist in his own right, having published a major work, *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida*, in 1791, based on his travels through those States. Wilson’s locale brought him in contact with “the one man in all America able and unselfishly willing to initiate him into the mysteries and delights of ornithology: for William Bartram was one of Nature’s noblemen... Without a Bartram there probably would have been no Wilson...” (Burns, 1908) Wilson’s correspondence fails to reveal the exact date he first made Bartram’s acquaintance, but once he had, he “had free access to the beautiful grounds, to the small but select library, and the personal intercourse with refined household. There he observed the wonders accomplished by the skill and industry of a single individual.” (Burns, 1908) “No one assisted him more than William Bartram,... He gained more than technical knowledge from Bartram; he absorbed a romantic view of nature.” (Hunter, 1983) While Bartram’s influence can not be underestimated, that impact was primarily the bellows which stoked the furnace of Wilson’s own natural curiosity. “From Bartram he extracted all that experience of that remarkable man had gathered, but without accepting the information as correctly philosophical. When the one stated that such and such were the habits of such and such birds, the other placed the birds referred to under strict surveillance; surprised them in their homes, interrupted them in their domestic felicities, robbed them of their suppers, and otherwise behaved in an inquisitorial manner. Thus, by making experience and observation his only guides, he became an ornithologist.” (Seymour, 1858)

While Bartram’s influence on Wilson can not be understated, another acquaintance, Alexander Lawson, provided additional motivation. Lawson, a Scotch engraver living in Philadelphia had befriended Wilson and noted that Wilson was subject periodic bouts of depression. To alleviate this malady, Lawson suggested that Wilson put aside his flute and poetry “and the substituting of the amusement of drawing in their stead, as being most likely to restore the balance of his mind.” (Wilson, 1828, Vol. 1) Accepting the suggestion of Lawson, Wilson “attempted some landscapes and sketches of the human figure, but turned from his trials with disgust. At the suggestion of Mr. Bartram, he was induced to make a second attempt, upon birds and other objects of natural history, and in

this he succeeded beyond his anticipations.” (Wilson, 1832, Vol. 1) While it’s true that ultimately Wilson did enjoy success in this new endeavor, that success was far from instantaneous. Nevertheless, the painting of birds “aroused all the energies of his soul; he saw, as it were, the dayspring of a new creation.” (Wilson, 1828, Vol. 1)

In an early 1803 letter to Bartram, we find mention of Wilson’s early artistic attempts (as well as his ornithological naiveté); “I send with more diffidence than on any occasion some further attempts. If from the rough draughts here given you can discover what Birds they are, please give me their names. Any advice for their amendment from you will be truly welcome.” (Hunter, 1983) Yet, even in the infancy of his artistic and ornithological training did Wilson begin to consider a larger work. In letter written on June 1, 1803 to a friend back in Scotland, Wilson wrote “...Close application to the duties of my profession, which I have followed since November, 1795, has deeply injured my constitution, the more so, that my rambling disposition was the worst calculated of anyone’s in the world for the austere regularity of a teacher’s life. I have had many pursuits since I left Scotland – Mathematics, the German Language, Music, Drawing, &c., and I am now about to make a collection of our finest birds.” (Grosart, 1876) Interestingly, during this period, in addition to painting birds, Wilson also refined his artistic skill by drawing plants. In two letters to Bartram written in the Fall of 1803, Wilson mentions his “feeble imitation” of a shrub and a drawing where he “murdered your Rose...After I have gained a little more practice I shall make one desperate attempt more on these Roses. I hope you will excuse my present failure.” (Hunter, 1983) Fortunately for posterity, Wilson wasn’t discouraged with his initial results. “The duties of my profession will not admit me to apply to this study with the assiduity and perseverance I could wish. Chief part of what I do is sketched by candle-light; and for this I am obliged to sacrifice the pleasures of social life...” (Grosart, 1876)

The devotion to his study evidently paid early dividends to Wilson’s confidence, for in a letter dated March 12, 1804 to Lawson, we again find reference to something on grander scale; “Six days in one week I have no more time just to swallow my meals, and return to my *Sanctum Sanctorum*. Five days of the following week are occupied in the same routine of *pedagoguing* matters; and the other two are sacrificed to that itch for drawing, which I caught from your honorable self...I am most earnestly bent on pursuing my plan of making a collection of all the birds in this part of North America. Now I don’t want you to throw cold water, as Shakspeare says, on this notion, Quixotic as it may appear. I have been so long accustomed to the building of airy castles and brain windmills, that it has become one of my earthly comforts, a sort of rough bone, that amuses me when sated with the dull drudgery of life.” (Grosart, 1876) On March 29, Wilson comments on the scope of his collection, his immediate plans and the status of his ornithological knowledge in the following letter to Bartram; “I have now got my collection of native birds considerably enlarged; and shall endeavour, if possible, to obtain all the smaller ones this summer. Be pleased to mark on the drawings, with a pencil, the names of each bird, as, except three or four, I do not know them.” (Grosart, 1876) And, in a May 1 letter, Wilson again seeks assistance from Bartram; “...I send you a few imitations of birds fro your opinion...Please to send me the names of birds. I wish to draw a small flower, in order to represent the Humming-bird in the act of feeding: will

you be good as to send me one suitable, and not too large? The legs and feet of some are unfinished; they are all miserably imperfect, but your generous candour I know to be beyond all defects.” (Hunter, 1983)

Little was written by Wilson during the balance of 1804 about his grand project. “On May 1, 1804, he sent another shipment of bird drawings to Bartram, and announced that these would be the last for some time, as he was still eager to write poetry.” (Allen, 1951) (The poems “Solitary Tutor” and “The Rural Walk” were written and published during this period.) Though his creative energies were focused on endeavors outside the field of ornithology, the remainder of 1804 was not without importance in the life of Wilson. First, on June 9, Wilson presented a petition for and was granted citizenship in the United States. Second, the publication of another work on natural history came to Wilson’s attention which likely added fuel to his desire to publish his own work. In his critique of September 17, 1804 he writes “The second volume of Pinkerton’s *Geography* has at length made its appearance;... Taking it *all in all*, it is certainly the best treatise on the subject hereto published; though had the author extended his plan, and, instead of two, give us four volumes, it would not frequently have laid him under the necessity of disappointing his reader by the bare mention of things that required greater illustration; and of compressing the natural history of whole regions into half a page. Only *thirty-four* pages allotted to the whole United States! This is brevity with a vengeance.” (Grosart, 1876) Third, in October, perhaps influenced by the travels of Bartram, Wilson embarked on a two month journey to Niagara Falls. During this journey, Wilson collected specimens of what he initially thought were new bird species. Wilson returned to Gray’s Ferry on December 7, where he spent the balance of the winter composing a lengthy poem describing his journey and making drawings from the specimens he’d collected, the later of which he then sent to Thomas Jefferson on March 18, 1805. On April 7, 1805, Jefferson sent his thanks for the drawings, and in his reply wrote; “As you are curious in birds there is one well worthy your attention, to be found or rather heard in every part of America, & yet scarcely ever seen. It is in all the forests, from spring to fall, and never but on the tops of the tallest trees from which it perpetually serenades us with some of the sweetest notes, & as clear as those of the nightingale. I have followed it miles without ever but once getting a good view of it. It is of the size & make of the Mockingbird, lightly thrush-coloured on the back, & a grayish-white on the breast & belly.” (Hunter, 1983) Wilson shared his letter from the President with Bartram, who surmised that the elusive bird was a Wood Thrush.

On July 2, 1805, Wilson appears for the first time to reveal his plan to Bartram, however, in that letter, suggests it to be less ambitious than earlier stated to others; “I dare say you will smile at my presumption, when I tell you that I have seriously begun to make a collection of drawings of the birds to be found in Pennsylvania, or that occasionally pass through it: twenty-eight, as the beginning, I send for your opinion... One or two of these I cannot find either in your nomenclature, or among the seven volumes of (George) Edwards... Any hint for promoting my plan, or enabling me to execute better, I will receive from you with much pleasure.” (Hunter, 1983) Apparently Bartram’s response was less than enthusiastic. “Bartram had no doubt of the abilities and perseverance of his pupil, but dreaded lest his zeal should lead to embarrassments from

which he could not be extricated, and accordingly he dwelt upon the lack of mechanical resources in this country for the production of such a work as Wilson proposed, and of adequate patronage when it should be produced.” (Gardner, 1876)

On September 30, Wilson again sent a selection of drawings to Jefferson, including one of the elusive Thrush. In his accompanying letter he notes “at some future day of publishing in a more finished manner all the Birds resident in or which Emigrate to the United State from the South & north.” (Hunter, 1983)

The reference by Wilson to Edwards work (*A Natural History of Birds*) is important, as it provided Wilson with critical information he needed to move his project along. Like Mark Catesby before him, Edwards was able to reduce the cost of publication by himself engraving the copper plates used for the colored illustrations. To Wilson’s benefit, Edwards provided specific instruction in the art of engraving in the preface to his work. “Here Wilson began. He purchased a copper plate, took it to Lawson, who grounded it for him, borrowed from Lawson an etching needle, and betook himself to his chamber. The next day, Lawson afterward narrated, Wilson came bouncing into his room, exclaiming ‘I have finished my plate! Let us bite it with the aqua fortis, for I must have proof before I leave town.’ And forthwith the plate was bitten, and a proof was struck.” (Christy, 1926) The prints from this and a second plate were sent to Bartram for his comments on November 29, 1805 and January 4, 1806. “Let the reader pause and reflect on the extravagance of the enthusiasm, which could lead a person to imagine, that, without any knowledge of an art derived from experience, he could at once produce that effect, which is the result of years of trial and diligence.” (Wilson, 1828, Vol. 1) Recognizing that his efforts at engraving were less than satisfactory, Wilson put aside further thoughts of being his own engraver. Later, reflecting on his failure; “From the great expense of engravings executed by artists of established reputation, many of those who have published works of this kind, have had recourse to their own ingenuity in etching their plates; but, however honourable this might have been to their industry, it has been injurious to the effect intended to be produced by the figures; since the point, alone, is not sufficient to produce a finished engraving; and many years of application are necessary to enable a person, whatever may be his talents or diligence, to handle the graver with the facility and effect of the pencil; while the time, thus consumed, might be more advantageously employed in finishing drawings, and collecting facts, for the descriptive part, which is the proper province of the Ornithologist. Every person who is acquainted with the extreme accuracy of eminent engravers, must likewise be sensible of the advantage of having imperfections of the pencil corrected by the excellence of the graver.” (Wilson, 1808-14, Vol. 1)¹ As the need for someone with greater skills was required, “a proposition was now made to Mr. Lawson to engage in the work, on a joint concern. But there were several objections which this gentleman urged, sufficiently weighty, in his opinion, to warrant this non-acceptance of the offer.” (Wilson, 1828, Vol.1) As envisioned by Wilson, his work would amount to 10 volumes with 10 plates in

¹ One of the first jobs Wilson secured upon his arrival in Philadelphia was working for a copper-plate printer. While he only remained in this vocation for a few weeks, one must wonder if that exposure to the profession was an additional impetus for Wilson to undertake the labor of engraving his own prints.

each volume. Thus, 200 sets would entail hand-coloring, 20,000 plates, the production cost being more than Lawson felt could be recouped in sales. Despite Lawson's refusal to join the undertaking, Wilson remained undaunted. "I shall, at least, leave a small beacon to point out where I perished." (Gardner, 1876)²

In late January, 1806, Wilson read in the newspapers that Jefferson was sending an expedition west, to Arkansas, to explore the Red River and other southern tributaries of the Mississippi River. Anticipating an opportunity to expand the geographic scope of his ornithological studies, and knowing of the President's interest in natural history, Wilson sent an overture, accompanied by a recommendation from Bartram, to participate in the expedition. In his letter of February 6, 1806 to Jefferson, Wilson makes clear for all his goal (though not without a bit of factual license, given his failed attempts at engraving); "Having been engaged, these several years, in collecting materials, and furnishing drawings from nature, with the design of publishing a new Ornithology of the United States of America, so deficient in the works of Catesby, Edwards, and other Europeans, ... Upwards of one hundred drawings are completed; and two in folio already engraved." (Hunter, 1983) Jefferson however never received Wilson's request.³

Wilson's failure to join the Arkansas expedition was fortuitous, for shortly after he dispatched his request to Jefferson, an employment opportunity emerged which would

² The production costs associated with undertaking as proposed by Wilson were considerable. "The copper for a single engraving cost \$5.66. The cost of engraving varied, but ran from \$50 to \$80 a plate, depending on the picture to be engraved and the reputation of the engraver. Coloring the impressions by hand after they were engraved and printed cost at least 25 cents per page. If Wilson drew a hundred birds, the copper for the plates would cost more than \$500, the engraving would cost between \$5000 and \$8000, and the hand coloring, if 500 copies of each were painted, would cost \$12,500. Before paper, printing and binding costs were considered for a single volume of 10 colored plates, Wilson would have to spend \$2000. Every copy of an edition of 500 copies would necessarily have to be sold for around \$12 apiece to return \$6000 for the edition. A ship or a big farm cost \$6000. And it was highly doubtful if anyone would pay anything for the splintery and amateurish bird paintings that Wilson had produced." (Cantwell, 1961) Furthermore, Wilson was hardly in a financial position to fund the enterprise from his own pocket, being "in possession of the enormous fortune of seventy-five cents." (Seymour, 1858)

³ George Ord, in the preface to volume IX of *American Ornithology*, published after Wilson's death, wrote of Wilson's request "Mr. Jefferson had in his port-folio decisive proof of Wilson's talents as an ornithologist, ... Yet with these evidences before him, backed with the recommendation of a discerning and experienced naturalist, Mr. Jefferson was either so scandalized at the informal application of our ornithologist, or so occupied in the great concerns of his exalted station, that no answer was returned to the overture; and the cause of the supposed, contemptuous neglect, neither Wilson nor Bartram could ever ascertain. Whatever might have been the views of the president, ... there can be but one opinion on the insufficiency of that plan of discovery which does not embrace the co-operation of men of letters and science: those whose knowledge will teach them to digest it for the advantage of others." (Wilson, 1808-14, Vol. IX) As was his wont, Ord's myopic view of the situation failed to take into account two salient facts, to wit, Jefferson never received Wilson's request and, more importantly, the expedition was purely military in nature. Writing to a former colleague from Monticello in October of 1818, Jefferson takes exception to Ord's attack; "I never saw till lately the IXth vol. of Wilson's Ornithology to this a life of the Author is prefixed by a Mr. Ord, in which he has indulged himself in great personal asperity against myself, ... he almost makes his hero die of chagrin at my refusing to associate him with Pike in his expedition to the Arkansas ... if my memory is right that was a military expedition. ... I have not among my papers a scrip or a pen on that subject; which is proof I took no part in it's direction. (Greenway, 1931)

ultimately have an enormous influence on the emergence of *American Ornithology* in published form. On April 1, 1806, Wilson resigned his teaching position in order to accept a far more lucrative position as an assistant editor of Rees's *New Cyclopaedia*, a 22 volume work to be published by the preeminent publishing house, Bradford & Inskeep of Philadelphia. Anticipating that his changed circumstances would favorably effect his grand plan, two days after signing his contract, Wilson wrote to Bartram: "This engagement will, I hope, enable me, in more ways than one, to proceed in my intended Ornithology, to which all my leisure moments will be devoted." (Seymour, 1858) Shortly thereafter, Wilson made known to his new employer, Samuel Bradford, his desire to publish an ornithological work. While Lawson found the initial idea of prosecuting Wilson's work too costly, Bradford saw the work as an opportunity to enhance the reputation of his publishing firm. Thus, Bradford agreed to finance the initial production costs of the first 200 sets on condition that Wilson obtains a like number of subscribers. With financing now secure, Lawson agreed to undertake the engraving. On April 8, 1807, a proof-sheet of the prospectus was sent by Wilson to Bartram with the following: "This afternoon, Mr. Lawson is to have on of the plates completely finished; and I am going to set the copper-plate printer at work to print each bird in its natural colours, which will be a great advantage in colouring, as the black ink will not then stain the fine tints. We mean to bind in the prospectus at the end of the next volume, for which purpose twenty-five hundred copies are to be thrown off; and an agent will be appointed in every town in the Union. The prospectus will also be printed in all the newspapers, and everything done to promote the undertaking." (Grosart, 1876) By letter received three days later did Wilson receive approval for his project from Bartram. 2500 copies of the prospectus were printed and distributed to "eminent persons in the United States." (Cantwell, 1961) The prospectus read in part:

TO THE LOVERS OF NATURAL HISTORY.
A New and Superb.... Being the first of the kind
ever published in America.

PROPOSALS
FOR PUBLISHING BY SUBSCRIPTION,
BY SAMUEL F. BRADFORD, PHILADELPHIA,
IN IMPERIAL QUARTO,
AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGY
OR,
THE NATURAL HISTORY OF THE BIRDS OF
THE UNITED STATES,
COMPRHENDING
THOSE RESIDENTS WITHIN OUR TERRITORY,
AND
THOSE THAT MIGRATE HITHER FROM OTHER REGIONS:
AMONG WHICH
WILL BE FOUND A GREAT NUMBER OF LAND AND
WATER BIRDS HITHERTO UNDESCRIBED SPECIFYING

THE CLASS, ORDER AND GENUS TO WHICH EACH
PARTICULAR SPECIES BELONGS. FOLLOWING WITH
A FEW EXCEPTIONS, THE ARRANGEMENT OF LATHAM.
Describing their size, Plumage, Places of Resort, General Habits,
Peculiarities, Food, Mode of Constructing their Nests,
Term of Incubation, Migration, &c. &c.

BY ALEXANDER WILSON

CONDITIONS:

The work will printed in large Imperial Quarto, on rich vellum Paper, and issued in Numbers, price Two Dollars each, payable on delivery... Three plates, 13 inches by 10, will accompany each Number, containing at least ten Birds, engraved and coloured from original drawings, taken from Nature.... The Numbers to be continued regularly once every two months, until the whole be completed.

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Thus, began *American Ornithology*, for truly did Wilson's work become an American undertaking. As a naturalized citizen of this young country, his strong feelings for his adopted home appear in the prospectus: "Much as we are indebted to the efforts of the naturalist, to whatever nation he may belong, it is yet mortifying truth to our literary pride, that by foreigners alone, has not only this, but almost every other branch of our natural history been illustrated. Nothing similar to the present undertaking has ever been attempted in America; and, indeed, if we except the efforts of a few distinguished individuals, the annals of our literary history present a long and melancholy void in this most interesting and instructive department of science. It remains now with Americans themselves to decide, whether they will still send across the Atlantic for an account of the productions of their own country, or become, like every other enlightened people, the proper historians of their own territories." (Hunter, 1983) Even the materials used in the finished product bore a distinct nationalist flavor. While the finest paper of Wilson's day was usually imported from Europe, Bradford insisted on using American manufactured paper. Writing in the preface to Volume 2, "Hitherto the whole materials and mechanical parts of this publication have been the production of the United States, except the colors, as these form so important an article in a work of this kind, the most particular attention has been paid to their real, and not merely specious, good qualities; but it is not without regret and mortification he is obliged to confess, that for these he has been principally indebted to Europe. The present unexampled spirit, however, for new and valuable manufactures, which are almost every day rising around us; and the exertions of other intelligent and truly patriotic individuals, in the divine science of Chemistry, give the most encouraging hopes, that a short time will render him completely independent of all foreign aid; and enable him to exhibit the native hues of his subjects in colors of our own, equal in brilliancy, durability and effect to any others. In the present volume some

beautiful native ochres have been introduced; and one of the richest yellows is from the laboratory of Messrs. Peale and Son, of the Museum of this city. Other tints of equal excellence are confidently expected from the same quarter.” (Wilson, 1808-14, Vol. 2)

An additional nationalistic boost for Wilson’s work came when Wilson’s employer, Bradford & Inskeep obtained the rights to publish Meriwether Lewis two-volume account of the famous Lewis and Clark expedition. In the Spring of 1807, Lewis arrived in Philadelphia to work on the book. Upon meeting Wilson and learning of his emerging ornithological talents: “The birds he had discovered, Lewis gave to Wilson. The greatest encouragement that Wilson had received up to that time was ‘the request and particular wish of Captain Lewis, made to me in person, that I should make drawings of such feathered tribes as had been preserved and were new’.” (Cantwell, 1961) Amongst the new birds provided to Wilson and described by him were the Louisiana Tanager (Western Tanager), Clark’s Crow (Clark’s Nutcracker) and Lewis’s Woodpecker.⁴

In the Fall of 1807, with the prospectus and plate samples in hand, Wilson began the arduous task of soliciting subscribers. In what was evidently a business trip undertaken at the behest of Bradford & Inskeep, Wilson writes to his employer and publisher from New York on October 7: “I have visited the whole Booksellers of New York distributed your letters and exhibited specimens of the Ornithology, called on a number of gentlemen to whom I have been recommended and having done everything here for both works that I have been able I shall leave New York tomorrow and pass slowly through N. Jersey so as to be home some time early next week. Messrs. Brisbane and Brannan declined engaging for any number of copies of the Ornithology but reserved their offers until the first number should be published. The specimens attracted general admiration and few or no subscribers.” (Stone, 1906)

On September 21, 1808, Volume 1 of *American Ornithology* was completed and 200 copies of this edition were published. For the sum of \$12.00, the subscriber would receive in this volume, 9 colored plates depicting 34 birds, 158 pages of companion text and a 6 page preface. Immediately thereafter, Wilson set off to fulfill his obligation of obtaining subscribers. In a farewell letter he notes the itinerary: “In a few minutes I set out for the Eastern States, through Boston to Maine, and back through the State of Vermont, in search of birds and subscribers.” (Grosart, 1876) If Wilson had any trepidation that his work would be scorned, these fears were soon laid to rest. From Boston on October 10, he coyly writes “I have purposely avoided saying anything either good or bad, on the encouragement I have met with. I shall only say, that among the many thousands who have examined my book, and among these were men of the first

⁴ Apparently, there may have been a reconsideration on the decision to allow Wilson to include these three new species as part of his *American Ornithology*, for in a letter dated April 6, 1810 to Alexander Lawson written from Lexington, KY., Wilson writes: “I did not think Mr. Peale (Likely Titian Ramsey Peale, artist and son of Charles W. Peale founder of Peale’s Museum in Philadelphia) would have acted as he has done. I sincerely believe that the publication of these 3 of Clark’s Birds in the Amer. Orn. would be advantageous to his work; but if they think otherwise and prefer Peale’s drawings, I am satisfied.” (Hunter, 1983) Evidently, they were not satisfied with Peale’s work, as Wilson ultimately did include the three new birds in his work, along with a Black-billed Magpie which had been shipped east prior to Lewis return.

character for taste and literature, I have heard nothing but expressions of the highest admiration and esteem.” (Hunter, 1983) From a letter dated 16 days later is Wilson’s indefatigable composition demonstrated, in that he mentions having traveled during this period to Salem and Newburyport, Massachusetts, through New Hampshire to Portland, Maine, back south to Dartmouth College and then to Windsor, Vermont. His plan was then to proceed to Albany, New York which he anticipated reaching by the 31st. While critical acclaim was forthcoming, the cost of the work seems to have been the primary obstacle that Wilson had to hurdle in securing subscriptions. In a letter written from Albany on November 3 to Lawson: “I ought to thank you for the thousands of compliments I have rec’d for my birds, from persons of all descriptions, which chiefly due to the taste and skill of the engraver. In short, the book, in all its parts, so far exceeds the ideas and expectations of the first literary characters in the eastern parts of the United States, as to command their admiration and respect. The only objection has been the 120 dollars, which, in innumerable instances, has risen like my evil genius between me and my hopes. Yet I doubt not but when those subscribers for are delivered, and the book a little better known, the whole number will be disposed of, and perhaps encouragement given to go on with the rest. To effect this, to me, most desirable object, I have encountered the hardships and fatigues of a long, circuitous unproductive and expensive journey, with a zeal that has increased with increasing difficulties and sorry I am to say that the whole number of subscribers which I have obtained amount only to 41!” (Hunter, 1983) “Daniel D. Tompkins, then Governor of New York and afterward twice Vice President of the United States; after turning over a few pages and looking at a picture or two; upon learning the price, closed the book and briskly said: ‘I would not give a hundred dollars for all the birds you intend to describe, even had I them alive’.” (Burns, 1908) While Wilson may have still lamented his inability to accompany the 1806 Arkansas expedition, his disappointment should have been partially assuaged by finding, upon his return to Philadelphia, a subscription and letter from Thomas Jefferson dated October 9, 1807, the later of which states: “He salutes Mr. Wilson with great respect.” (Cantwell, 1961) Wilson stay in Philadelphia was short lived, departing almost immediately, this time heading south to canvas the important cities along the eastern seaboard for subscribers. His southern trip would take him as far as Savannah, Georgia, where, on March 5, 1809, shortly before boarding a ship for home, he could write with some satisfaction to Bartram: “This has been the most arduous, expensive, and fatiguing expedition I ever undertook. I have, however, gained my point in procuring two hundred and fifty subscribers, in all, for my Ornithology; and a great mass of information respecting the birds that winter in the Southern States, and some that never visit the Middle States; and this information I have derived personally, and can therefore the more certainly depend upon it. I have also found several new birds, of which I can find no account in Linnaeus.” (Hunter, 1983)⁵

⁵ Doubtless, one of the new birds unknown to Wilson was the Black-billed Cuckoo. His “discovery” of this new species led him to meet the noted entomologist, John Abbot. “Wilson had drawn the yellow-billed cuckoo – the rain crow, it was popularly called – and Abbot told him there was another common bird, very like it in appearance. It was usually considered the same by naturalists. A distinguishing mark was a patch of bare wrinkled skin, of a reddish color, above the eye. Observation as exact as this impressed Wilson, who pictured the bird that Abbot had found, and gave it the name of the black-billed cuckoo. In *Ornithology* Wilson gave Abbot full credit for having spotted the bird. But such was the curious fate of both Abbot and Wilson that Wilson received credit in ornithological literature for having distinguished a

From a letter dated June 15, 1809 to his father, we know that Wilson, upon his return to Philadelphia, resumed his job Bradford & Inskeep as an assistant editor for Rees's *New Cyclopaedia*. However, the complexity involved in producing his own work compelled Wilson to "set up the *Ornithology* as a separate department of the publishing firm. He made individual agreements with engravers, colorists and artists, as well as with printing specialists, like those who made the impressions from the engravings. Special craftsmen were also required for each detail, like cutting into the copper plates the neat lettering that carried the name of each bird – the engravers could not do this. When the organization for turning out additional copies was functioning, Wilson worked steadily on his second volume." (Cantwell, 1961)

Even though his vision for *American Ornithology* was beginning to bear fruit, Wilson's insecurity as an ornithologist was still evident in his August 4, 1809 letter to Bartram. Noting that the second volume was almost ready to go to press, "...you will permit me to trespass on your time, for a few moments, by inquiring of you have anything interesting to add to the history of the following birds, the figures of which will be found in this volume...I have already said everything of the forgoing that my own observations suggested, or that I have been enabled to collect from those on whom I could rely. As it has fallen to my lot to be the biographer of the feathered tribes of the United States, I am solicitous to do full justice to every species; and I would not conceal one good quality that any of them possesses. I have paid particular attention to the mocking-bird, humming-bird, king-bird and cat-bird; all the principal traits in their character I have delineated in full. If you have anything to add on either of them, I wish you would communicate it in the form of a letter, addressed particularly to me." (Grosart, 1876) In late October, Wilson again seeks Bartram's input; "With an anxious wish to make the second volume of *American Ornithology* as acceptable as I can, I have increased the number of figures to 50, occupying nine plates. In doing this I have introduced several species that I think necessary to inform you of, that if you are acquainted with anything remarkable in their history you may be so obliging as communicate it to me for publication." (Hunter, 1983)

Volume 2 of *American Ornithology* was published in January of 1810. His plan for the entire work to consist of 10 volumes remained. "In sketching out the present plan it was calculated that the whole of our *Ornithology* could be comprised in ten volumes, commencing with the Land Birds, and closing with the Water Fowl. The same opinion is still entertained. The different species, of both Divisions, which are either occasionally or regularly found within the territory of the United States, may amount to about four hundred. The first Section will, probably, occupy six volumes; and the remaining four comprehend the whole of the Waders and Aquatic tribes." (Wilson, 1808-14, Vol. 2)⁶ At

new species, though in the very essay in which he reported it, he gave the credit to Abbot." (Cantwell, 1961) For more on John Abbot and his work in ornithology, see *John Abbot: Forgotten Ornithologist*, Cassinia, Vol. 71:

⁶ The total number of species that Wilson portrayed in the 8 Volumes he oversaw prior to his death equals 275. Thus, unless he planned to increase substantially the number of species depicted in the last two volumes, his work would have fell short of his predicted number of 400.

the end of January, Wilson departed yet again on sales trip, this time heading west. As a bonus, given the sales success of the earlier east coast trip, the publishers elected to increase the publication to 500 in number, likely adding more pressure to Wilson's already full work load. The increase in the publication run would prove prophetic as 458 sets would eventually be subscribed for.⁷ Crossing Southern Pennsylvania, he arrived in Pittsburgh on February 15. In Pittsburgh, Wilson purchased a small boat with which he intended to descend the Ohio River. He christened the vessel, ORNITHOLOGIST. On February 23, he set sail, reaching Louisville, Kentucky 21 days later. It was here, that Wilson made his infamous sale call on John James Audubon. At the time, Audubon had not yet begun to undertake the production of his celebrated work on ornithology, being but a simple shop keeper struggling to support his young family.⁸ From Louisville, Wilson traveled to Lexington, where he received from Lawson on April 6, a sample of Plate 1 for Volume 3 for approval. On April 14, Wilson left Lexington, arriving in Nashville, Tennessee on the 20th. On the 28th, Wilson wrote a lengthy letter to Lawson which included the following; "Here I have been busily employed these eight days; and send you the enclosed parcel of drawings, the result of every moment of leisure and convenience I could obtain. Many of the birds are altogether new; and you will find along with them every explanation necessary for your purpose." (Grosart, 1876) Unfortunately, while the letter to Lawson arrived in Philadelphia, the drawings did not. Wilson departed Nashville southward on May 4, arriving two weeks later in Natchez, where he stayed until May 23, bound for New Orleans. On June 24, Wilson's western excursion ended as he boarded a ship bound for New York. In hand were 64 new subscribers.

We know from a September 2 letter to Bartram that the loss of the drawings sent from Nashville, required Wilson to devote "Incessant labour since my return to make up my loss of drawings, which were sent by post from Nashville, has hitherto prevented me from paying you a visit. I am closely engaged in my third volume." (Hunter, 1983)

In November of 1810, Wilson left Philadelphia for the New Jersey coast and the area around the Great Egg Harbor inlet.⁹ His intent was to secure specimens for the 4th volume. However, a financial crisis loomed. While Wilson had secured orders totaling \$60,000, the subscription method of sale dictated that monies would be received in increments, as each volume was delivered. However, by necessity costs were being incurred and funds expended in the present to produce each volume. The initial plan called for new volume to be published each year, the effect being that payments on one volume would cover the production costs of the next volume. However, by the time the

⁷ The 300 additional copies of Volume 1, bear the original year of publication, 1808, however, were not produced until 1809. These new volumes in fact represent a distinct second edition as the text was reset and minor errors were corrected and additions to the original text were made by Wilson.

⁸ For a complete discussion of the Wilson/Audubon encounter and the resultant "feud", see *Wilson, Audubon, Ord and a Flycatcher*, Cassinia, Vol. 70: 11-21.

⁹ This journey would be the first of six trips over the next two years Wilson would make to the Jersey Coast.

second volume was published, Wilson's schedule was behind. Instead of being released 1809, the delay of the second volume until January of 1810 meant that 16 months had elapsed between the publication of the first two volumes. Furthermore, while Wilson assiduously devoted his energies to prosecuting his work, the sense of urgency wasn't shared by Lawson and the colorists, thus delaying publication of the third volume until February of 1811. Hence, payment on that volume would not be received from subscribers until the end of that year. In essence, Wilson had a cash flow problem. "Wilson was thus a literary and scientific figure on the edge of very great eminence, and an impoverished artist with very substantial sums due him..." (Cantwell, 1961)¹⁰

The spring and summer of 1811 was spent primarily ensconced at friend Bartram's home, "secluded from the rest of Mankind always poring over Birds, or pursuing them in the woods..." (Hunter, 1983) It was during this period that Wilson faced another bump in the road. In a letter dated July 9 he notes that text for Volume 4 was complete, but two plates remained to be completed. "The persons employed in coloring his plates proved so negligent and incompetent, that it became necessary for him to take charge of this process himself; and, indeed, for a time this mere drudgery furnished his only resource for his support, as he was absolutely without other income." (Gardner, 1876)¹¹ Writing in the preface to the fourth volume on September 12, "...the arrangements made with engravers and others engaged in the work, will enable him to publish the remaining volumes with more punctuality than it has hitherto been possible for him to do. At the same time, the correct execution of the plates will be rendered more secure, by the constant superintendance of the author; and by the whole of the coloring being performed in his own room, under his immediate inspection. The great precision requisite in this last process, and the difficulty of impressing on the mind of every one whose assistance was found necessary, similar ideas of neatness and accuracy, have been a constant source of anxiety to the author, and of much loss and delay." (Wilson, 1808-14, Vol. 4)¹² Thus, in addition to being responsible for the collecting of new specimens, creating new paintings for each new species collected, authoring an accompanying text and selling subscriptions;

¹⁰ One commentator has also suggested that well before *American Ornithology* was complete, the publisher's enthusiasm for the project had waned. "The success of the work did not satisfy their expectations, and to continue its publication became merely a matter of professional pride with them. Wilson could not be unmindful of this fact, and it must have pained him sadly." (Seymour, 1858)

¹¹ During the course of producing *American Ornithology*, Alexander Rider, John H. Beck, E. Leslie, Anna C. Peale, John H. Hopkins, Louise Adelersterren and Prosper Martin were all employed as colorists by Wilson.

¹² In the same preface, Wilson suggests a modicum of early environmentalism: "It is not sufficient that a work of this kind should speak to the eye alone, its portraits should reach the heart, particularly of our youth, who are generally much interested with subjects of this kind. By entering minutely into the manners of this beautiful portion of the animate creation, and faithfully exhibiting them *as they are*, sentiments of esteem, humanity and admiration will necessarily result. It is chiefly owing to ignorance of their true character, that some of our thoughtless youth delight in wantonly tormenting and destroying those innocent warblers; for who can either respect, pity or admire what they are totally unacquainted with?" (Wilson, 1808-14, Vol. 4)

now, Wilson had the burden of being intimately involved in the mechanical production of his book.

By early November, Volume 5 was in the process of being printed and in a letter to Bartram dated February 12, 1812 (the same date as appears in the preface for this volume), Wilson mentions being able to deliver the completed volume within 3 or 4 weeks. May found Wilson once again along the Jersey shore, this time accompanied by George Ord, whom he had first met the previous summer. The grateful assistance provided by Ord is described by Wilson in his commentary on the Cape May Warbler: "This new and beautiful little species was discovered in a maple swamp, in Cape May County, not far from the coast, by Mr. George Ord of Philadelphia, who accompanied me on a shooting excursion to that quarter on the month of May last. Through the zeal and activity of this gentleman, I succeeded in procuring many rare and elegant birds among the sea islands and extensive salt marshes that border that part of the Atlantic; and much interesting information relative to their nests, eggs and particular habits. I have also at various times been favoured with specimens of other birds from the same friend, for all which I return my grateful acknowledgements." (Wilson, 1808-14, Vol. 6) Wilson returned to Philadelphia on June 5th, less than two weeks prior to the start of the war of 1812. "The declaration of war did nothing for Wilson's peace of mind and the business-like Bradford had visions of many subscribers defaulting, particularly those in the maritime states where commerce was likely to suffer from a British blockade." (Hunter, 1983) The financial concerns of Bradford are detailed in a letter of Wilson's dated August 7: "I cannot be out tomorrow as I expected Mr. B. and having all our accounts to settle...I must now either run the risk of losing all or make one last and very long and expensive journey to collect what is due, and see how accounts are with the agents. There is no other choice left between this and absolute ruin...Mr. B. has positively refused to advance any thing until he receives it and I have as positively told him that I will proceed no further with the work until I am paid for what I have done." (Hunter, 1983) Nevertheless, Wilson forged on as Volume 6 appeared on August 12. In September, in order to collect on the unpaid accounts, Wilson embarked on a trip to New England by sailing up the Hudson River, reaching Burlington, Vermont on the 23rd. By October 13, Wilson had made his way back south to Boston, from whence he returned to Philadelphia.

In the preface to Volume 7, written on March 1, 1813, Wilson informs his subscribers for the first time that the scope of the project will be reduced to nine volumes. "The publisher, who long since had found the expense burdensome, was glad to reduce the series from ten to nine volumes in agreement with the author." (Burns, 1929) Second, in explaining mechanical rendering of the "Water Birds" to be depicted in the last three volumes, he explains how his work will remain a useful tool to future students of ornithology: "The figures in the plates which accompany this volume have been generally reduced to one half the dimensions of the living bird. In the succeeding volumes where some of the subjects measure upwards of five feet in height, one general standard of reduction will be used, by which means the comparative size of each species can be easily ascertained at first glance..." (Wilson, 1808-14, Vol. 7) In a letter written on April 21, 1813, Wilson described the tribulations encountered in bringing his work to fruition: "I

have been extremely busy these several months, my colorists having all left me; so I have been obliged to do extra duty this last winter. Next week I shall publish my seventh volume... Since I had the pleasure of seeing you, I have hardly left the house half-an-hour; and I long most ardently to breathe once more the fresh air of the country, and gaze on the lovely face of Nature.” (Grosart, 1876)¹³ Following release of the seventh volume, in late Spring, Wilson, accompanied by Ord, made his excursion to the New Jersey coast, where he remained for four weeks collecting material for volume eight. One writer has suggested that upon Wilson’s “return to Philadelphia, he applied himself with fresh enthusiasm to his task.” (Seymour, 1858) However, in one of his last letters dated July 6, Wilson suggests that the intense physical and mental strain was taking its toll: “I am myself far from good health. Intense application to study has hurt me much. My 8th volume is now in press and will be published in November. One volume more will complete the whole.” (Burns, 1908)

On August 13, while conversing with a friend, Wilson observed a bird he had long been searching for. In the attempt to secure the specimen, Wilson forded a stream. Apparently his compromised physical constitution resulted in Wilson contracting a cold and then dysentery from which he would never recover. Ten days later, on August 23, 1813, at the age of 47, Alexander Wilson died. He was buried at Old Swedes Church in Philadelphia.¹⁴

The preface to Volume 8 is dated January 19, 1814, and while no name is appended to the manuscript, it is safe to assume that George Ord was the author. In that document, we are provided with the status of Wilson’s labors at the time of his death. “The historical part of the present volume was fully completed and printed off; and all the plates, except one engraved, under the superintendence of the author himself. But from the defection of those on whom he had relied for assistance in the coloring of his subjects, and the great difficulty of immediately procuring others to the task, that branch of the work did not keep pace with the rest; and hence the publication of the volume was delayed, by causes beyond the control of those on whom, at Mr. Wilson’s death, his affairs devolved... The publication of the eighth volume has been attended with increased expense, as the nature of the figures, and the crowded manner in which the author found himself necessitated to introduce them, in order that nine volumes should comprise the whole of our ornithology, have compelled the artists to devote more time to the faithful discharge of their trust... But it is proper to state that the present volume was a favorite with its author, and

¹³ In this same letter, Wilson mentions being recently elected to the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia.

¹⁴ The inscription on his grave stone reads:

This monument covers the remains of
ALEXANDER WILSON,
Author of the American Ornithology,
He was born in Paisley, Renfrewshire, Scotland, on the 6th July, 1766,
Emigrated to the United States in the year 1794,
And died in Philadelphia of the Dysentery on the 23rd August 1813, Aged 47
Ingenio stat sine morte decus

he had formed the resolution of devoting to it a more than ordinary share of his personal attention; intending thereby to afford to his patrons a proof that there was no falling off from his original elegance; and to the friends of the arts, and lovers of science, a brilliant illustration of what unwearied industry could accomplish, when associated with zeal and talent. Mr. Wilson intended coloring the chief part of the plates himself; but that design, which sprang from the most refined sense of duty, and so fondly cherished, he did not live to accomplish.” (Wilson, 1808-14, Vol. 8)

Following the publication of Volume 8, Ord, as co-executor of Wilson’s estate was faced with the task of assessing the status of the unfinished project. His initial review of Wilson’s papers revealed three complete sheets of drawings, ready to be engraved. At first, the plan was to provide these additional prints to subscribers as a supplement to the 8th Volume. Upon reconsideration, Ord decided that the appropriate tribute to Wilson’s memory required that the 9th Volume be produced in full. However, Ord was faced with a problem involving the wealth (or lack thereof) of relevant materials contained in Wilson’s notes. “When it was resolved upon, the editor cast his eyes eagerly over the papers and journals of his friend, persuaded that he should there find copious materials to carry into full effect his project of furnishing an account of those birds which were found delineated as before mentioned. But he was mortified to discover of some, merely a few facts scattered throughout the journals, with imperfect descriptions, and others no record whatever; it having been the practice of Mr. Wilson to make brief notes and hasty sketches, trusting altogether in his ability to fill up and perfect as the occasion demanded. Hence his journals must be considered merely as indexes to his mind, that comprehensive volume, the fair transcripts of which have contributed so much to our delight and instruction.” (Wilson, 1808-14, Vol. 9)

The reader of *American Ornithology* may note some notable exclusions in the avifauna delineated. Ord notes that on the day Wilson’s death, he prepared a list of those species he intended to include but had not yet been drawn. The list totaled 24 species and included such relatively common birds as the Herring Gull and Wild Turkey. The omission of the later Ord found particularly troubling as it “is peculiarly our own, we regret exceedingly that no figures and account have been given by Mr. Wilson; as their noble portraits would not only have beautified his work, but their histories from his elegant pen would have been valuable articles in the biography of American birds.” (Wilson, 1808-14, Vol. 9) However incomplete, thanks to Ord’s diligence, in May of 1814, *American Ornithology* was finished.

At the beginning of his labors, Wilson offered this vision of *American Ornithology*: “As to the nature of the work, it is intended to comprehend a description, and representation of every species of our native birds, from the shores of St. Lawrence, to the mouths of the Mississippi, and from the Atlantic ocean to the interior of Louisiana: these will be engraved in a style superior to any thing of the kind hitherto published and colored from nature, with the most scrupulous adherence to the true tints of the original. The bare account of scientific names, color of bills, claws, feathers, &c. would form but a dry detail;...It is also my design to enter more largely than usual into the manners and

disposition of each respective species; to become, as it were, their faithful biographer, and to delineate their various peculiarities, in character, song, building, economy, &c. as far as my own observations have extended, or the kindness of others may furnish me with materials.” (Wilson, 1808-14, Vol. 1) Further, in explaining why his work would not follow the then excepted taxonomic order of birds, “This work is not intended to be a mere compilation from books, with figures taken from stuffed and dried birds, which would be but a sorry compliment to science, but a transcript from living Nature, embracing the whole Ornithology of the United States; and it is highly probable that numerous species, at present entirely unknown, would come into our possession long after that part of the work appropriated for the particular genera to which they belonged had been finished...The Birds will, therefore, appear without regard to generical arrangement; but the order, genus, &c. of each, will be particularly noted; and a complete Index added to the whole, in which every species will be arranged in systematic order, with reference to the volume, page, and plate, where each figure and description may be instantly found.” (Wilson, 1808-14, Vol. 1)

Why did Wilson undertake such a monumental task, when, under the circumstances was ill trained or equipped? Certainly financial remuneration wasn't a motivating factor. Wilson died with far more liabilities than assets. In the introduction to Volume 1 Wilson offers both an explanation why and one that answers the why not. “Biassed, almost from infancy, by a fondness for birds, and little less than an enthusiast in my researches after them, I feel happy to communicate my observations to others, probably from mere principal of self-gratification; that source of so many even of our most virtuous actions; but I candidly declare, that *lucrative* views have nothing to do in the business. In all my wild-wood rambles *these* never were sufficient either to allure me to a single excursion, to discourage me from one, or to engage my pen and pencil in the present publication. My hopes on this head, are humble enough; I ask only support equal to merits, and to the laudability of my intentions. I expect no more; I am not altogether certain even of this. But leaving the issue of these matters to futurity, I shall, in the meantime, comfort myself with the old adage, ‘Happy are they who expect *nothing*, for they shall not be disappointed’.” (Wilson, 1808-14, Vol. 1)

While the work of those European trained naturalists who preceded Wilson may not have been the singular influence which pushed Wilson into his ornithological project, his initial studies in Bartram's library caused him to recognize the obvious errors of those authors and which observations likely helped plant the seed for his work. As Ord noted “...even with *his* slender stock of information, to detect errors and absurdities into which these authors had fallen...” (Wilson, 1828, Vol. 1)¹⁵ Commenting on the work of those who preceded him, in the prospectus, Wilson writes, “the author will be pardoned for

¹⁵ An example of the errors committed by the European naturalists of Wilson's day are noted in this comment contained in the initial prospectus for *American Ornithology*: “Where the plumage of the male and female is nearly alike, the former only will be figured; but where the difference is considerable, both will be represented, in order to correct the numerous errors into which European naturalists have fallen, in describing the male and female of the same nest, as two males of separate species...in mistaking the *male* of others for the *female*, and vice versa; and in considering a periodical change of plumage, to which many of our birds are subject as marks of an entire different species.” (Hunter, 1983)

believing that much remains yet to be done, that half or our birds have not been figured by any of these writers; and that a more full and faithful publication than has ever yet appeared on this subject is due to *America*, and to the *World* in which the glare of false and gaudy colouring, and the extravagant distortion of posture will not be substituted for the simplicity of truth and nature.” (Hunter, 1983) Writing to Bartram in April, 1807, shortly after the initial prospectus had been prepared for publication: “The more I read and reflect upon the subject, the more dissatisfied I am with the *specific* names which have been used by almost every writer. A name should, if possible, be expressive of some peculiarity in colour, conformation, or habit; if it will equally apply to two different species, it is certainly an improper one. Is *migratorius* an epithet peculiarly applicable to the robin? Is it not equally so to almost every species of *turdus* we have? *Europea* has been applied by Pennant to our large *sitta* or nuthatch, which is certainly a different species from the European, the latter being destitute of the black head, neck and shoulders or ours. Latham calls it *carolinensis*, but it is as much an inhabitant of Pennsylvania and New York as Carolina. The small red-bellied *sitta* is called *canadensis* by Latham, a name equally objectionable with the other. *Turdus minor* seems also improper; in short I consider this part of the business as peculiarly perplexing; and I beg to have your opinion on the matter, particularly with respect to the birds I have mentioned, whether I shall hazard a new nomenclature, or, by copying, sanction what I do not approve of.” (Grosart, 1876)¹⁶ In the introduction to volume 1, Wilson diplomatically writes “not neglecting the labours of his predecessors in this particular path, Messrs. Catesby and Edwards, whose memories he truly respects. But as a sacred regard to truth requires that the errors or inadvertencies of those authors, as well as of others, should be noticed, and corrected, let it not be imputed to unworthy motives, but to its true cause, a zeal for the promotion of that science, in which these gentlemen so much delighted, and for which they have done so much.” (Wilson, 1808-14, Vol. 1) More importantly, as Wilson’s knowledge of ornithology grew, his dissatisfaction with the work of earlier authors may have been the fuel which stoked the arduous process of shepherding his work to completion. By the time the third volume of *American Ornithology* was published three years later, Wilson was not nearly as reluctant to state the inadequacy of his predecessor’s works. “Such is the barrenness of the best European works on the feathered tribes of the United States, and so numerous are the mistakes (to call them by the gentlest name) with which they are disfigured, that little has been, or indeed can be, derived from that quarter.” (Wilson, 1808-14, Vol. 3) And finally, at the time Volume 5 was published in 1812, perhaps fueled with a growing confidence in his own abilities, Wilson abandoned any attempt at circumspection regarding the work of his old world predecessors; “In endeavouring to collect materials for describing truly our feather tribes, he has frequently had recourse to the works of those European naturalists who have written on the subject; he has examined their pages with an eager and inquisitive eye; but his researches in that quarter have been too frequently repaid with

¹⁶ What Bartram’s reply was to this query is unknown. Interestingly, in Volume 1 of *American Ornithology*, Wilson maintained the offensive appellations of *Turdus migratorius*, *Sitta carolinensis* and *Sitta Canadensis* for the American Robin, White-breasted and Red-breasted Nuthatches. By the time he published Volume 5, perhaps emboldened by his success, re-named the Hermit Thrush, *Turdus solitarius*. After Wilson’s death, both Charles Lucian Bonaparte in his continuation of Wilson’s work and John James Audubon in his *Ornithological Biography* revert back to the earlier nomenclature, *Turdus minor*.

disappointment, and often with disgust. On the subject of *manners* and *migration* of our birds, which in fact constitute almost the only instructive and interesting parts of their history, all is a barren and dreary waste. A few vague and formal particulars of their size, specific marks, &c. accompanied sometimes with figured representations that would seem rather intended to caricature than to illustrate their originals, is all that the greater part of them can boast of. Nor are these the most exceptionable parts of their performances; the novelty of fable, and the wildness of fanciful theory, are frequently substituted for realities; *conjectures* instead of *facts*, called up for their support. Prejudice, as usual, has in numerous instances united with its parent, ignorance, to depreciate and treat with contempt what neither of them understood; ..." (Wilson, 1808-14, Vol. 5)

It was also in the preface to Volume 5, written on February 12, 1812, where Wilson realistically, tinged with a smattering of immodesty, recognized that no matter how hard he worked; *American Ornithology* would not be the last word on North American avifauna. "When the population of this immense western Republic will have diffused itself over every acre of ground fit for comfortable habitation of man – when farms, villages, towns and glittering cities, thick as the stars in a winter's evening, overspread the face of our beloved country, and every hill, valley and stream has its favorite name, its native flocks and rural inhabitants; then, not a warbler shall flit through our thickets but its name, its notes and habits will be familiar to all; repeated in their saying, celebrated in their village songs. At that happy period, should any vestige or memory of the present publication exist, be it known to our enlightened posterity, as some apology for the deficiencies of its author, that in the period in which he wrote three-fourths of our feathered tribes were altogether unknown even to the proprietors of the woods which they frequented – that, without patron, fortune, or recompence, he brought the greater part of these from the obscurity of ages, gave each 'a local habitation and a name' – collected from personal observation whatever of their characters and manners seemed deserving of attention; and delineated their forms and features, in their native colors, as faithfully as he could, as records, at least, of their existence." (Wilson, 1808-14, Vol. 5)

The importance of *American Ornithology* in North American ornithological history is hardly subject to debate. As Sir William Jardine aptly wrote, "He was the first who truly studied the birds of North America in their natural abodes, and from real observation; and his work will remain an ever-to-be-unrivalled in descriptions; and if some plates and illustrations may vie with it in finer workmanship or pictorial splendour, few, indeed, can rival it in fidelity and truth of delineation." (Wilson, 1832, Vol. 1) And, as stated in the preface to the second edition of *American Ornithology*, published posthumously under the guidance of George Ord, "Wilson has proved to us what genius and industry can effect in despite of obstacles, which men of ordinary abilities would consider insurmountable. His example will not be disregarded; and his success will be productive of benefits, the extent of which cannot now be estimated." (Wilson, 1828, Vol. 1) Cantwell, quoting from Francis Herrick, who wrote a legendary two volume biography on Audubon, perhaps sums up the achievement of Wilson best: "When we consider that Wilson's entire working period on the *Ornithology* was not over ten years, and that at the age of forty-seven he was called to lay down his pen and brush forever; that he produced

in this brief space a work of great originality and charm, which did inestimable service in promoting the cause of natural history in both America and England, and which is likely to be read and prized for centuries to come, the achievement of this man is little short of marvelous.” (Cantwell, 1961) Thus, as we approach the bicentennial anniversary of Wilson’s seminal work, let us not forget the extraordinary industry of the man, who in the span of decade, went from itinerant poet to the Father of American Ornithology.

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