

Stuffed into a Parakeet: Speculations on Alexander Wilson's "Faithful Companion," Specimen MCZ 67853



At a foot long and no wider than an adult's hand, the *Conuropsis Carolinensis*, the Carolina Parakeet (MCZ 67853) glows in cool greens, blues, and yellows. Its arched wings, useless, contorted claws, dangling tag, and lone glass eye remind careful viewers of the artifice of its preservation (fig. 1). It has survived for over two centuries, moving from its home in Kentucky, to Charles Willson Peale's Philadelphia Museum, and finally to a quiet drawer in the Ornithology Department of Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology. The species represented by MCZ 67853 has been extinct for decades and was a favorite of naturalist Alexander Wilson (1766-1813), who almost definitely collected, sketched, and wrote about this particular bird.

When I first learned about this specimen, I wondered what it could possibly offer beyond its illustrious provenance and curious status as an illustration of a lost species. Yet, as I looked closely at this colorful bird and tried to piece together its life history, I realized that this small creature is both a carefully collected scientific specimen and a consciously constructed object, and maybe, something more: a memory, a story—perhaps even the likeness of a lost friend.



Fig. 1 Carolina Parakeet specimen MCZ 67853. Courtesy of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The Parakeet and the Naturalist

This Carolina Parakeet came into the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ) in 1914, as part of a large collection of birds. Prior to their acquisition by Harvard, the specimens had been in the Boston Museum and were probably purchased by Moses Kimball in 1850 from the Peale Museum. By 1914, their original labels, cases and mountings had already been lost and Walter Faxon of the MCZ worked to reconstruct the history of these things. The next year, he published his findings under the title [“Relics of Peale’s Museum.”](#) He traced the long, tenuous history of the collection of birds from their origins at the center of American natural history—once housed perhaps in the rectangular glass cases depicted in Charles Willson Peale’s 1822 self-portrait [The Artist in his Museum](#)—to Harvard’s halls. The parakeet was among an unspecified number of Peale birds Faxon branded as the models for Alexander Wilson’s illustrations, which form the basis of his well-known work, *American Ornithology*. For Faxon, this was a useful and exciting bit of ornithological detective work that might assist his peers in understanding Wilson’s definitions of species by comparing his drawings to existing specimens. Faxon did not waste time describing the details of every species. The brightly plumed parakeet merited just over one line of text, “*Conuropsis Carolinensis* (Linn.). M.C.Z. No. 67853. Original of Wilson’s figure 3, 1811, pl. 26, fig. 1.” Taken together, Wilson’s vivid plate and the small stuffed bird are a visually compelling pair (fig. 2).



Fig. 2 "Carolina Parrot," drawn from nature by A. Wilson, Fig. 1, Plate 26, from *American Ornithology or The Natural History of the Birds of the United States*, Alexander Wilson, Vol. III (Philadelphia, 1811). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Alexander Wilson, a Scottish-born poet, emigrated to America in 1794 after writing verses in protest of the local manufacturing elite (fig. 3). Upon his arrival in America, he made his way to Philadelphia and developed an interest in natural history. In the early years of the nineteenth century, Wilson befriended the naturalist William Bartram and considered himself Bartram's student, as he learned the craft of recording specimens in the wild. As a member of Philadelphia's natural history crowd, Wilson figures in Peale's [Exhumation of the Mastodon \(1806-1808\)](#) painting. He is the lone character, in mustard pants and a blue jacket, on the left side of the painting, surveying the busy scene of discovery and recovery with folded arms. As many scholars have detailed, for Wilson and others in the early republic, natural history was a key to defining and recognizing the possibilities of the new American nation.

While lesser known today than John James Audubon (his posthumous competitor), Wilson gained fame as a naturalist from his single great work, [American Ornithology or the Natural History of the Birds of the United States Illustrated with Plates Engraved and Colored from Original Drawings Taken from Nature](#), the foundation of ornithological study in the United States (fig. 4). Wilson catalogued America's birds in these nine volumes from 1807 until his death in 1813. His entries for each bird included a sketch, which was engraved by his compatriot Alexander Lawson (among other engravers), a short description, and sometimes a longer, lyrical essay describing the features of a particular bird. As American studies scholar Laura Rigal has noted, these descriptions sometimes turned the birds he observed into "feeling subjects," whose personalities and character had implications for the future of American identity. As indicated in the title of his masterwork, his drawings were supposed to come "from nature." This mandated his travel over thousands of

miles of rough trails and non-existent paths in search of birds. He gathered images, specimens, and vivid descriptions of 500 birds, including about eighty-five of which he identified and described under new names. Wilson donated several of the birds he collected to Peale's museum, including, as he noted, examples of the Carolina Parakeet.



Fig. 3 "Alexander Wilson, author of *American Ornithology*," engraved by Edwin from a painting by Peale. Illustration in *The Port Folio*, by Oliver Oldschool, Esq., Third Series, Vol. IV, No. V (Nov. 1814). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In 1810, Wilson roamed from Ohio to New Orleans as he worked on this project. At Big Bone Lick in Northern Kentucky, he encountered a large flock of Carolina Parakeets, which he described in an essay in *American Ornithology*.

When they alighted on the ground, it appeared at a distance as if covered with a carpet of the richest green, orange, and yellow: they afterwards settled, in one body, on a neighboring tree, which stood detached from any other, covering almost every twig of it, and the sun, shining strongly on their gay and glossy plumage, produced a very beautiful and splendid appearance.

In the midst of this carpet of color, he shot several of the birds. In what modern scientists think may have been an adaptive strategy, the birds were not frightened away by the shots, and hovered around the wounded members of their flock with what Wilson characterized as affection and sympathy. Wilson's account of the parakeet flitted from a physical description to a careful reading of the character of the birds.

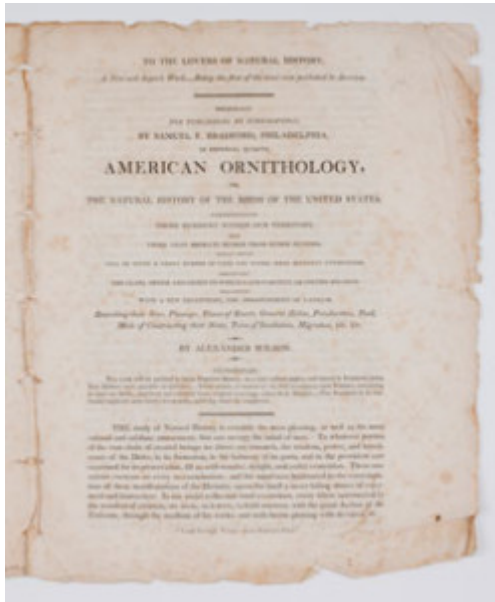


Fig. 4 Title page of prospectus for the first American bird book with colored plates published in America. "To The Lovers of Natural History. A New and Superb Work..." by Alexander Wilson (Philadelphia: Samuel F. Bradford, 1807). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In the midst of the confused and seemingly mourning animals, Wilson realized that he had only slightly injured one of the birds. He decided to keep it as his companion and called it Poll—a generic name for a parakeet since at least the seventeenth century. Wilson initially imprisoned Poll in the stern of his boat in a makeshift cage. He later tied up the small bird in his handkerchief. He placed it in his pocket and carried it with him for over a thousand miles. The living bird initially bit and clawed him; it sometimes escaped and Wilson risked his life to chase through "the worst of the morass" to reclaim the creature. On other occasions, it acted as an object in spite of itself. For example, it served as a medium of communication in his conversations with Native Americans. Wilson explained, "The Chickasaws called it in their language 'Kelinky' but when they heard me call it Poll, they soon repeated the name; and, wherever I chanced to stop among these people, we soon became familiar with each other through the medium of Poll." On other occasions, Poll seemed closer to a sentient being—one who missed companionship. Wilson procured a friend for it, but the friend quickly perished and was replaced with a mirror. The bird was satisfied with the relationship it forged with its own reflection. Eventually, Wilson tamed Poll and it learned to sit quietly by his side. Shortly after they achieved this balance in their relationship, Poll flew overboard one night and drowned in the Gulf of Mexico. Poll had journeyed with Wilson all the way from Kentucky to the sea and was on its way home with him to Philadelphia. In all of these descriptions Wilson described a particular bird and a particular friend. In its watery grave, Poll escaped the fate of many of its compatriots, which Wilson sometimes ate out of necessity, or dissected, or in some cases preserved for donation to Peale's museum.

Throughout this journey, Wilson recorded his movements and his discoveries

through his catalog of birds, in this case for the third volume of his *Ornithology*. His descriptions of Poll were not as a bird in its own habitat, but as his companion. As Laura Rigal has explained, Wilson did not arrange his book in a Linnaean system or in any other hierarchy as was found in Peale's museum, but in the order in which he acquired the birds. As he traveled, Wilson had to prepare drawings for an engraver. He would make observations, write notes, and produce drawings, which would then be sent home to Philadelphia for speedy inclusion in the next volume of the project. Because of the great cost and labor involved in producing *American Ornithology*, which was supposed to be printed in an edition of 200 books, of ten plates apiece, in ten volumes, totaling 20,000 plates, Wilson worked to find subscribers, to collect payments, and to finish the book as rapidly as possible. The state of the early republic's roads and mail often made this process risky. Wilson sent a large packet of drawings home to Philadelphia on April 28, 1810, but the packet never arrived. Unique data, collected from the field and sketched from nature, was lost. When Wilson returned home, he found his publishing project behind schedule and had to recreate his drawings quickly. His sketches of the Carolina Parakeet were probably in this packet, as he observed the bird around the time he mailed the ill-fated drawings. One of the specimens donated to Peale's museum would have made a ready model for his new, speedily executed, drawings.



Fig. 5 Detail, Carolina Parakeet specimen MCZ 67853



Fig. 6 Detail, Carolina Parakeet specimen MCZ 67853



Fig. 7 Detail, Carolina Parakeet specimen MCZ 67853

The Specimen

The specimen Wilson turned to was probably MCZ 67853. Peale did not mention a Carolina Parakeet in the museum in an 1810 inventory; Wilson sent Peale specimens after his 1810 trip. Though original labels are lost, Faxon's hypothesis that Wilson donated this particular specimen to Peale's museum is almost certainly correct. In Peale's museum the bird probably assumed its current shape. Preserved without its original perch, its carefully constructed body now lies like a coin with an obverse and reverse. There is no obvious evidence of its death or capture. Its bright feathers are not marred with blood, and its two-century-old skin is mainly intact. On the reverse of its body, the feathers begin with a bright orange crown at the top of its head and continue through yellows, greens, and finally dark gray tail feathers,

completing a spectrum of colors that becomes increasingly cool as they proceed from the bird's head to tail. Two harsh little feet interrupt the gentle flow of color (fig. 5). This skin and feathers would likely have been initially treated by Wilson in the field before being sent back to Philadelphia for further preservation with a carefully formulated, poisonous concoction.

Instead of a limp lifeless form—as preserved bird skins are currently stored—the skin of this specimen is animated by means of rigid ferrous wires. Cotton batting helps to fill out its wire skeleton. A variety of wire skeletal structures were possible for nineteenth-century taxidermists. The wires may have formed a shape similar to one published in E. Donovan's [*Instructions for Collecting and Preserving Various Subjects of Natural History*](#) (1805). The gray wire substrate peeks through only in the soles of the feet and beneath the long tail feathers (fig. 6). The wires are hidden, for the most part, but reveal themselves in the unbending form of the little bird. The bird also would have been given a label, perhaps similar to the one now on it. The label, which contains its scientific name (*Conuropsis Carolinensis*) and illustrious museum history, seem to weigh the bird down with both the details of its history and the physical shackle of the tag.



Fig. 8 “Carolina Parrot or Parrakeet,” drawn from nature by J.J. Audubon; lith. & printed by J.T. Bowen. Taken from Plate 278 in *The Birds of America from Drawings Made in the United States and Their Territories* (New York, 1842). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Wilson's personal understanding of the bird may have shaped—or been shaped by—the form its body took. In this way, the stuffed bird's body may be linked to Wilson's written observations. The greatest potential for movement in the specimen is in the wings: the tension of the wires beneath the surface suggests that they may be able to open, and they do not rest flat against the body. The cascading feathers could spread open and the rounded, strong shoulders could

allow the bird to fly or to maintain balance on a precarious perch (fig. 7). Their flight was a visual treat, as Wilson noted in his description: "they flew usually in a circuitous way, making a great variety of elegant and easy serpentine meanders, as if for pleasure." The bird's body suggests this motion, but also limits it. The feet, a messy amalgam of scaly skin, talons, and wire contrast with the wings. Wires barely protrude from the fleshy part of the bird's feet, like little iron stigmata. These metal points seem to act as pivots around which the legs may be twisted and contorted to fit the needs of a particular display. The gnarled talons are splayed. Without this foundation, its legs and feet seem useless. The mounting seems to support Wilson's assertion, "I could not but take notice of the remarkable contrast between their elegant manner of flight, and their lame and crawling gait among the branches." The wings appear able to open and move, but the legs could not be part of this motion, leaving the powerful wings and beautiful feathers without any sort of landing apparatus.

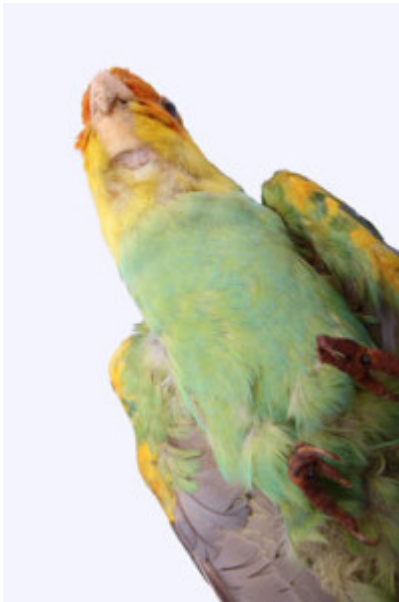


Fig. 9 Detail, Carolina Parakeet specimen MCZ 67853

John James Audubon's iconic image of Carolina Parakeets published in his 1831 *Ornithological Biography, Or an Account of the Habits of the Birds of the United States of America*, presents a completely different picture of the species and does not suggest this awkwardness (fig. 8). In Audubon's prints, the birds swarm over cocklebur branches, violently grasping at the stalks of the weed and clawing out at the viewer. Audubon described the parakeets as pests to crops and farmers. Their harsh, quick movements suggest a group of bugs alighting upon and devouring a tasty treat. Their bodies and beaks appear powerful and active, in marked contrast to the docile appearance of the Peale specimen.

The information contained within the bird's body, whether an accident of its construction, or intended as part of its display, also suggest other

characteristics of the species. The parakeet, Wilson noted, was probably unable to mimic songs taught to it or to sing in an attractive way. A modern naturalist has discovered one description of its cry, which is something like a loud, long, shrill "quiiiiii." The beak protrudes from its face, but does not curve. Like the stilted mouth of a wooden Christmas nutcracker, it seems merely able to open and close. In its shut position, it echoes the curve at the back of the bird's neck. Any sharp movement would destroy the symmetry of the bird's body. It may be easier to mount a bird in this manner, with fewer angles to be stressed or possibilities for damage, but the result is a passive and silent specimen, especially when compared to the hostility and dynamism suggested by the Audubon birds (fig. 9).

In spite of this silence, the streamlined body does not seem to be completely at rest. The head does not lie flat but remains eternally cocked and turned slightly to the right, observing something with its one good (glass) eye. There is a hole in the skin where the other eye had been, and cotton batting peeks through, maintaining the shape of the bird's head, even as it belies its fabrication. The right eye, a round glass dome with a deep black pupil and brownish-orange iris, is inset into the head. The shiny dome of the unnatural eye, which seems to be repeated in Wilson's drawing, captures and mirrors the movement and shapes around it. This glass eye evokes Wilson's description of one of his bird's companions—the mirror he placed in its cage.

The body of the specimen cannot convey some features Wilson noted in his observations of the parakeets, like the taste of their flesh (which he found rather poor), or the ways the feathers looked in the wild. This variety is impossible to capture through a lone type specimen, a single bird designed to represent the species as a whole. The plumage of this specimen recorded a bird at a particular moment in its life and it indexes itself as well as its species. The role that changing plumage has in identifying the life stages of birds is very clear in Audubon's painting, as an all-green juvenile is shown with a group of mature male and female adults. The feathers of the Peale specimen form an iridescent stratigraphy of yellows, greens, and blues, from a golden yellow-orange crown, down through deep blue-greens and the gray of the tail feathers. Wilson noted, "A number of these birds, in all their grades of progressive change from green to yellow, have been deposited in Mr. Peale's museum." The stuffed specimen was probably an adult killed after or in the spring of its second year. On the bird's belly, tufts of dull gray down peek through the rich green feathers. These wisps offer the bird a life cycle outside of its eternal one as a specimen.

In the winter of 1813, months before his death, Wilson labored over the hand coloring of many of the plates for his books. According to Wilson, the colorists were not working fast or well enough, he was out of money, and he had a personal stake in perfecting the details of the seemingly endless plates needed for his series. Faxon recorded the memories of an artist who worked by Wilson's side during this process, who noted, "We worked from birds which he had shot and stuffed, and I well remember the extreme accuracy of his drawings,

and how carefully he had counted the number of scales on the tiny legs and feet of his subject." Specimens were used to accurately color match the plates to the real feathers of the birds. Wilson had to recreate and represent every detail of a particular individual, in order to attempt to represent the species. Knowing one bird, this mode of representation suggested, allowed the naturalist to know all.

But what about his Poll? Could the carefully colored plates also become the individual or the personal? Poor Poll had drowned in the Gulf of Mexico by the time Wilson colored his plates, and that bird certainly did not make it home with him to Philadelphia. Can the specimen and plates in *American Ornithology* still represent Wilson's pocket-sized companion from his long journey?

A Faithful Resemblance

The fact that Wilson befriended a particular bird may just be an interesting note in his essays and letters. He had captured and tried to tame other birds. Laura Rigal described a disastrous story in which a woodpecker completely destroyed Wilson's hotel room. The naturalist noted his acquaintance with a few other Carolina Parakeets in his essay. However, in the case of Poll, he expressly noted his affection for his departed companion. On May 1, 1810, he wrote to his love, Sarah Miller, back in Philadelphia, "My paerokeet is my faithful companion yet, and I shall try hard to bring him home with me." Although Poll drowned, Wilson did not forget his bird, as he had so many of the parakeets he had eaten for dinner or dissected. He wrote in his essay,

As so little has hitherto been known of the disposition and manners of this species, the reader will not, I hope, be displeased at my detailing some of these, in the history of a particular favorite, my sole companion in many a lonesome day's march, and of which the figure in the plate is a faithful resemblance.

The representation of the parakeet is not particularly different from other images in the book, and is surely not rendered as a specific portrait, except perhaps of the specimen from Peale's museum. As a "faithful resemblance," the specimen seems to become Poll in Wilson's depiction. That may stretch the symbolic powers of the specimen. But the dual nature of taxidermy, the mixture of natural and artificial, its work as both representation and relic, gives it broader representational possibilities. The skin and feathers act as a synecdoche for a whole bird with bones and guts or even for the whole species. The mounted bird is molded and shaped to offer an appearance, even a likeness, of the bird's remembered form.

The words "resemblance" and "likeness," close synonyms, pepper advertisements for miniature painters at the turn of the nineteenth century. When Wilson argued that his picture was a "faithful resemblance" of his departed friend, he was in company with miniature painters throughout Philadelphia who claimed that

they were able to recreate “striking resemblances” of deceased loved ones. Raphaele Peale advertised his miniatures quite explicitly as mementos of someone lost. He warned his potential clients in an 1801 advertisement in *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser*, “Death deprives us of our friends and then we regret having neglected the opportunity of obtaining their likenesses.” His contemporary Samuel Folwell advertised “mourning lockets . . . furnished with any device in hair or likeness in miniature.” A painting of the deceased could be accompanied by the hair of the deceased, sometimes mixed with hair of the living, a relic of lost love or friendship. Art historian Robin Jaffee Frank described the power hair held within a particularly evocative miniature, that of [Harriet Mackie \(“The Dead Bride”\)](#), 1804. Her picture reminded her betrothed of her visage, while her hair was both a “residue of her identity” and a tool for binding the living to the dead. The front contained a representation of the person while the reverse contained a piece of that being. Object as symbol and object as index were two sides of the same coin.

The presence of the hair of a loved one gave the mourning miniature, and the sentiment attached to its use and care, an authenticity that would not have been associated simply with an image of a deceased person. The taxidermy specimen worked in the same way. In its constructed form it represented both itself—as the actual skin of a dead bird, it’s a relic of a lost being—and its species. Prior to DNA testing, a strand of hair lacked the specificity of a picture or a fingerprint. As scholar of hairwork Helen Sheumaker makes clear, hair was personal and ultimately very individual, but knowledge and experience of how and when it was acquired was integral to its authenticity, otherwise anyone’s brown or golden locks, unknowingly, could be worn close to one’s heart. Presumably the person who created the hair jewelry *knew* the hair was genuine because she had been there and collected the sacred tresses herself.

In a similar way, the authenticity of the bird skin as well as the representation created by the pose of the bird’s body were validated by the details of its collection by Wilson. As James Cook noted in *The Arts of Deception*, Peale earned credibility for his museum through the clear and careful presentation of the artifacts on display. Proper name, place of origin, and donor information all helped the visitor understand and believe the claims Peale made in his carefully organized museum cases. In 1812, Peale recorded Wilson’s donation to his museum, among others, [in a Philadelphia paper](#): “A considerable number of the skins of American Birds, many of which are nondescript, collected by the donor.” Wilson’s publication was noted in the listing, and the same donation also included the most recent volumes of *American Ornithology*. The Carolina Parakeet was likely among this group. The power of knowing the origins of each bird in the museum permitted the specimen to possess a particular history and set of meanings.

MCZ 67853, a scientific object, was able to document a memory as well as ordered knowledge and a growing vision of America’s natural riches. The bird’s body was a memento of Wilson’s travels and experiences. Viewed through the lens of these experiences, it suggests another way of understanding Peale’s ordered

and formal taxonomic displays. The preserved physical body of the scientific specimen was shaped by romantic observations of its movement, beauty, and utility. As relic and representation it inhabited the cultural context of the mourning miniature, a familiar object known for its role in easing and explaining loss. The specimen stood in for and suggested both the most particular and personal and the most scientific and general Carolina Parakeet.



Fig. 10 Carolina Parakeet specimen under a glass dome (1912). Courtesy of the Richard and Pat Johnson Palm Beach County History Museum, West Palm Beach, Florida.

Extinction

In the early twentieth century, a Carolina Parakeet specimen was collected in Florida by men from the Smithsonian Institution and given to their hosts as a thank you gift. By that time, the once ubiquitous bird was almost extinct. The thank you gift, now in the collection of the Historical Society of Palm Beach County, is the story of this parakeet's collection and perhaps a memory of the lost natural abundance of Florida. Under a glass dome, it is a physical link to the past, a visual cue to remind observers of what Florida once looked like (fig. 10). There are no known photographs of the Carolina Parakeet in the wild, no living examples, and no chance of species redevelopment. Only descriptions, drawings, and about 800 specimens survive. Combined, these resources are now the only approximation of the Carolina Parakeet. In the end, preserved relics of the bird signify themselves and something lost. They are the most detailed, specific, and particular representations of the parakeet that survive, but they are only relics, bits and pieces of real birds. Today, the Carolina Parakeet is a lesson to modern day naturalists on the realities of extinction and little more than an entry in a great taxonomical system. In the context of its creation, the history, image, and metonymical body of a lost pet, MCZ 67853 is both sentimental and scientific. Wilson's words and pictures and the bird's

stuffed skin continue to reanimate and recreate the extinct parakeet, as a species and maybe, just maybe, as the “faithful resemblance” of a friend.

Further Reading:

To learn more about Alexander Wilson, *The Life and Letters of Alexander Wilson* by Clark Hunter (Philadelphia, 1983) is a good starting point. Wilson’s careful account of the Carolina Parakeet in his *American Ornithology or the Natural History of the Birds of the United States Illustrated with Plates Engraved and Colored from Original Drawings Taken from Nature*, vol. III (Philadelphia, 1811) is one of a few descriptions of the now extinct bird. The Carolina Parakeet once covered much of the United States stretching from Florida to as far north as southern Michigan and as far west as eastern Colorado. Linnaeus first identified the species in 1758 from a drawing by Mark Catsby in South Carolina; this location led to the bird’s identification with the Carolinas. Like the Carrier Pigeon, the bird became extinct in the early decades of the twentieth century. To learn more about this species, see Noel F. R. Snyder, *The Carolina Parakeet: Glimpses of a Vanished Bird* (Princeton, 2004).

For more on natural history in the early republic see Andrew Lewis, *A Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic* (Philadelphia, 2011); Laura Rigal, *The American Manufactory: Art, Labor, and the World of Things in the Early Republic* (Princeton, 1998); David Brigham, *Public Culture in The Early Republic: Peale’s Museum and Its Audience* (Washington, 1995); Christopher Looby, “The Constitution of Nature: Taxonomy as Politics in Jefferson, Peale and Bartram,” *Early American Literature* 22 (1987): 252-273; Brooke Hindle, “Charles Willson Peale’s Science and Technology” in *Charles Willson Peale and His World*, Edgar Richardson, Brooke Hindle and Lillian Miller, eds. (New York, 1983). *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*, Lillian Miller, ed., and John James Audubon, *Writings and Drawings*, ed. Christoph Irmscher (New York, 1999) are also useful resources. Helen Sheumaker’s *Love Entwined: The Curious History of Hairwork in America* (Philadelphia, 2007) offers an excellent introduction to hairwork.

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