

The Heart of Audubon



*“Please take my good friend to my
Father’s old plantation of Mill Grove,
and show him where first American Ornithology
grew in the heart of Audubon!”*

(Letter IV, 1827)

✘ This is a monochrome print of Audubon’s only known self portrait in oils (12.5” X 10” oil on canvas). The original is in the Patricia Rinehart Barratt-Brown Collection, in New York. The late historian John F. McDermott pointed out that this portrait, purportedly painted by Audubon in 1821 as per his journal, was executed with greater skill and technique than two portraits of his sons that were produced the same year. In 1824, Audubon gave the portrait to Reuben Haines, “... on condition that he should have it copied ...”, so there is reason to suspect that the portrait pictured above is the copy, and the original painting has been lost or destroyed. Courtesy of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University (ANSP Archive Collection 457).

Few figures in American history have weathered as intense a scrutiny of their written work as the celebrated ornithologist and artist John James Audubon

(1785–1851). Nearly every scrap of his writing has been transcribed and debated in numerous biographies and articles spanning more than a century, each revisiting the same primary sources in search of a new angle. The first half of his life is generally obscure because his journals and letters have been lost or destroyed, or because there were few to begin with. This is especially true prior to 1826, when Audubon, after ironically failing to find an engraver or publisher for *The Birds of America* in the United States, crossed the Atlantic to pursue the same goal.

Known primary sources from 1824–25 provide almost no information about his artistic vision for the book. This is especially unfortunate because the genesis of *The Birds of America* can be traced to this period. Audubon later confessed that he had not thought seriously about publishing until he met Charles Lucien Bonaparte (1803–1857), the French ornithologist, in Philadelphia on April 10, 1824. Four days later, Audubon's paintings were examined by Philadelphia's foremost engraver, Alexander Lawson (1773–1846), who was unimpressed and refused to engrave them. A second engraver, Mr. Fairman, felt that Audubon's artwork was beyond his ability to engrave, and suggested that the ornithologist find someone with superior skill in Europe. (This may also have been the unexpressed reason that the proud Lawson rebuffed Audubon.) On April 15, Audubon wrote in his journal, "I had now determined to go to Europe with my 'treasures,' since I was assured nothing so fine in the way of ornithological representations existed."

Audubon's journal from this period was deliberately destroyed by his granddaughter Maria in 1895. She later admitted to biographer Stanley Arthur that she had "copied from it all [she] ever meant to give to the public." The destruction of the journal made it impossible to verify the scattered excerpts that she published two years later in *Audubon and His Journals* (1897). Indeed, she refused to transcribe most of the journal, feeling that "the mental suffering of which it [told] so constantly . . . the very heart of the man," should be shielded from public scrutiny. Journal excerpts that appeared three decades earlier in *The Life and Adventures of John James Audubon, the Naturalist* (1868), and *The Life of John James Audubon* (1869), also became impossible to verify when the original journal was destroyed. These works had been produced from the same manuscript, prepared by Audubon's widow, Lucy, and did not differ with respect to the 1824 excerpts.



Watercolor portrait of Reuben Haines III by unknown artist. Judging by the advanced state of his hair loss in a portrait by Rembrandt Peale (c.1831), this watercolor was probably executed in the early 1820s. Courtesy of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University (ANSP Archive Collection 396).

Five unpublished Audubon letters, unknown to most scholars until now, are reproduced and annotated below. Passed down for nearly two centuries by the descendants of their recipient, the Quaker naturalist Reuben Haines III

(1786–1831), the letters fill critical gaps in our understanding of Audubon's early artistic vision for *The Birds of America*, and include the only known copy of the original (American) prospectus. Audubon proposed a collaborative and patriotic work that would be a symbol to the world of the strength and agency of the new American Republic. He envisioned a text in which “the idea of each man of judgment and truth being inserted would go toward increasing the imitation of God's work. . . [Only] then the book would positively contain America and its birds.” But rejection in Philadelphia and New York left him no choice but to abandon that lofty goal for one more practical: to publish on his own without the support of the American scientific community. When *The Birds of America* was eventually financed and published in Europe, Audubon's move was perceived by many in America as having been driven by personal gain, and his original (rejected) vision was lost to history. The letters that outlined that vision were held in the Haines family's private collection, and thus escaped the notice of Alice Ford, whose otherwise comprehensive bibliography in *John James Audubon* (1964) is still used by modern biographers. I came to know of the letters in 2010, during my tenure as resident caretaker of Wyck, the historic house and garden where Audubon was hosted in July 1824—the home of Reuben Haines.

Reuben Haines was an agricultural scientist, meteorologist, and philanthropist whose role in the early development of American science has been largely forgotten. He was elected to the American Philosophical Society (APS) on October 16, 1813, where he later served as secretary (1814), member of the auditing committee (1814–16), and curator (1819); and to the Academy of Natural Sciences (hereafter, the Academy) on November 16, 1813, where he served as corresponding secretary for 17 years (1814–1831). In that capacity, Haines played a pivotal role in the early success of the Lyceum of Natural History in New York, and kept written correspondence with an extraordinary number of naturalists, including Audubon.

The Return to Mill Grove



John James Audubon, “Northern Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*) and Red-shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*),” Havell plate no. 76. Object number 1863.17.76, New-York Historical Society. The piece was executed on paper and attached to card (65.6 x 100 cm), with watercolor, graphite, pastel, black ink, oil, gouache, black chalk, collage, and with some parts glazed and outlined with a stylus. Courtesy of the [New-York Historical Society](#). Digital image created by Oppenheimer Editions.

Audubon spent his final days in the Philadelphia area at Wyck, the country estate of the Haines family in Germantown. The rural landscape that surrounded Wyck in 1824 has long since been consumed by the expanding city, but the house still stands and now functions as a living museum and urban farm. Haines kept

and bred a captive flock of Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*) at Wyck for over a decade, of which he wrote that the males and females were "so much alike that I could not distinguish them from each other until the breeding season when I could distinguish the males from their motions and voice." The flock was composed of seven birds by early 1824, but they did not breed as they had in previous years. Haines was concerned and sought the advice of an expert. On July 25, he made the following entry in an unpublished research journal now housed at the APS Library:

John J. Audubon of Louisiana visited me at Germantown. He states he has reared many wild geese, wood ducks, & & and has no doubt that my confining them all together prevented their breeding. Had I put one pair alone in the pen he has no doubt they would have bred as usual. He evinced great knowledge of these birds, picked out almost instantly all the males from the females and old pair from the others, and the 1 year from 2 year old.



John James Audubon, "Carolina parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*)," Havell plate no. 26. Object number 1863.17.26, New-York Historical Society. The piece was executed on paper and attached to card (75.6 x 54 cm), with watercolor, graphite, pastel, gouache, black ink, and with selective glazing and scraping. The last Carolina Parakeet died in captivity at the Cincinnati Zoo in 1918, and the species was officially declared extinct in 1939. Courtesy of the [New-York Historical Society](#). Digital image created by Oppenheimer Editions.

The next day, Haines took Audubon on a carriage ride to his old home at Mill Grove plantation, where the ornithologist had lived from 1803-05. A note in the margin of Haines's financial ledger, also housed at the APS Library, reads, "[July 1824] 25. With J. J. Audubon Naturalist . . . to Mill Grove (at the junction of the Schuylkill & Perkiomen). Dined at Wetherills with Isaiah Lukens . . ." Mill Grove and nearby Bakewell Plantation were dear to Audubon, for it was there that he met and wooed his future wife, Lucy Bakewell, and where his ornithological talent and artistry first began to flower. Audubon wrote in his journal of the nostalgic experience:

July 26. Reuben Haines, a generous friend, invited me to visit Mill Grove in his carriage, and I was impatient until the day came. His wife [Jane], a beautiful woman, and her daughter [Sarah], accompanied us. On the way my heart swelled with many thoughts of what my life had been there, of the scenes I had passed through since, and of my condition now. As we entered the avenue leading to Mill Grove, every step brought to my mind the memory of past years, and I was bewildered by the recollections until we reached the door of the house, which had once been the residence of my father as well as myself. The cordial welcome of Mr. Watherell [sic], the owner, was extremely agreeable. After resting a few moments, I abruptly took my hat and ran wildly towards the woods, to the grotto where I first heard from my wife the acknowledgment that I was not indifferent to her. It had been torn down,

and some stones carted away; but raising my eyes towards heaven, I repeated the promise we had mutually made. We dined at Mill Grove, and as I entered the parlour I stood motionless for a moment on the spot where my wife and myself were for ever joined. Everybody was kind to me, and invited me to come to the Grove whenever I visited Pennsylvania, and I returned full of delight. Gave Mr. Haines my portrait, drawn by myself, on condition that he should have it copied in case of my death before making another, and send it to my wife.

There seems to have been some genuine affection between Audubon and Haines, but there was also a conflict of interest. Audubon had been ill-received by Haines's Academy colleagues, especially ornithologist George Ord (1781–1866), sitting vice president of the Academy and secretary of the APS, who was financially invested in publishing a second (updated) edition of *American Ornithology*, the foundational work of his late friend and mentor, Alexander Wilson (1766–1813). Ord was hostile to Audubon from the outset, and his enmity increased dramatically after Audubon accused Wilson (posthumously) of academic fraud in 1831. One year after his trip to Philadelphia, Audubon made a personal appeal to Haines, trying in vain to garner formal support from the Academy despite Ord's disapproval. Haines's role as intermediary (or rather, Audubon's wish for him to be) was foreshadowed in the final paragraph of a letter to Thomas Sully on August 14, 1824, in which Audubon wrote: "Should you see honest Quaker Haines, beg him to believe me his friend; should you see Mr. Ord, tell him I never was his enemy."



John James Audubon, "Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*)," Havell plate no. 21. Object number 1863.17.21, New-York Historical Society. The piece was executed on paper and attached to card (75.6 x 53 cm), with watercolor, graphite, pastel, black chalk, gouache, black ink, and with selective glazing and scraping. Courtesy of the [New-York Historical Society](#). Digital image created by Oppenheimer Editions.

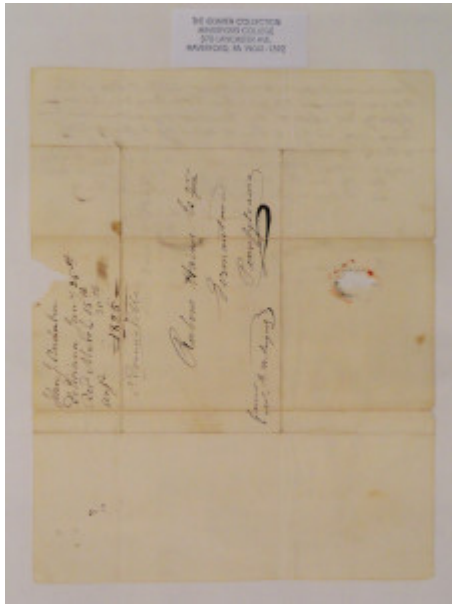
In 1825, Audubon penned three letters to Haines, in which his tone progressed from hopeful (Letter I), to discouraged (Letter II), to near despair (Letter III). Letter II contained an embedded copy of a prospectus for *The Birds of America* that (Audubon claimed) was sent to the president of the New York Lyceum of Natural History, the botanist John Torrey (1796–1873). To my knowledge, this is the only known prospectus that predates Audubon's departure for Europe in 1826. Haines did not respond to Letter III. Audubon wrote to Haines again two years later (1827), apparently unsolicited, to inform him that he was "engaged in publication of [his] work at last," but this letter also received no reply, or Haines neglected to make a note of it on the opposite letter face, as he was in the habit of doing. Letter V was a brief response to an invitation, written during the Audubons' visit to Philadelphia in 1830. Letters I and V have never appeared in print. Bowdlerized excerpts of Letters II–IV appeared in the late

W. Edmund Claussen's *Wyck: The Story of an Historic House* (1970), an independently published and locally distributed book that is now rare and out of print. A brief excerpt from Letter III appeared in Patricia Stroud's biographies *Thomas Say: New World Naturalist* (1992) and *The Emperor of Nature* (2000). The following is the first complete, annotated transcript of the letter series.

Mary Troth Haines (1893–1983), the ultimate proprietor of Wyck, transferred the deed for the house and its collections to the Wyck Charitable Trust in 1973. Most of the Wyck documents were deposited at the APS Library in Philadelphia in 1987, but the Audubon letters had been separated from that collection and passed down through the family of Reuben's great-grand nephew, Robert B. Haines III. Today they are found in a collection bearing Robert's name in the Quaker and Special Collections of the Haverford College Library, which may explain why these letters have not been previously exposed by Audubon biographers. With a stationary stand, I took perpendicular digital photographs of the original documents, and then, referring to the digital images, carefully transcribed the complete text of each letter. I deciphered confusing words by comparing their letter shapes to those of known words, and retained whenever possible Audubon's orthographic conventions including (often inconsistent) spelling and punctuation, underlining, and breviographs. Illegible words were denoted with an ellipsis in brackets, and any words for which my transcription was uncertain were enclosed in brackets. Contractions formed with superscript characters were retained, but punctuation marks that appeared below the superscript were omitted. Digital scans and hard copies of this manuscript have been deposited with the Wyck Association for use by future researchers.

The Wyck Audubon Letters

LETTER I



John James Audubon to Reuben Haines III, letter I, pages 1-4 (January 25, 1825). Courtesy of the Quaker and Special Collections, Haverford College Library, Haverford, Penn.

[Sent to "Ruben Haines Es^{qr}, Germantown, Pennsylvania" from "St. Francisville." Haines added the following notes: "John J. Audubon, Feliciana, January 25th, rec^d March 15th, ans^d " 30th. 1825.]

Beech woods parish of Feliciana, Louisiana.

Jan^y 25th, 1825.

My Dear Friend,

After a long and very circuitous tour, I have at last reached that spot dear to all mankind (I believe), that sweet spot that I call my home.—Perhaps did you think long here this that Audubon had forgotten you and all your kind attentions; perhaps (and I hope this is the case) you have thought better of him, and have taken it for granted that his silence was not occasioned by any wish of his heart but by real actual want of place to write, from which he could be assured the letter would reach you.—The naturalist who is as enthusiastically propelled forward as I am cannot at all times write, although he may at all times wish to do so, in that sentence much of my apology rests for not having done so before.

I have sometimes regretted that I had left your Beautifull Philadelphia and that whilst there I had not called my wife and children to me.—I have felt in your city pleasures imeasureable and the number of the very valuable acquaintances I found there has united me for ever with a will to be one of its constant residents.—Although it is January and the thermometer is rather low for our latitude, I feel just now as if I was yet by your side sitting in your rig moving smoothly toward Mill Grove, and enjoying that

delightfull peace of mind that is allways felt when seated by a person that can be called a friend. ah my dear M^r Haines shall we meet again, shall I ever again see your family at Germantown—it is very doubtfull, but not at all so that I shall allways long for such pleasure.[1]

The Birds of America that are still my pleasures and my sorrows are progressing apace, and each day adds either illustrations on the Brandy Wine Paper or knowledge in my note book. In plainer words, I hunt, draw, write, and again each of these dayly do.[2]

The longer I travel, the more I see how much there is to be done.—Our good friend Willson was short of the mark I assure you when he called his book the American Ornithology, I have begun long before him, I am yet very busy, [own] now upwards of hundred new individuals and know nearly as many more that I have not [been] able to procure although I have seen them.—I now think it presumptuous and vain to attempt a really complete assemblage of the drawings of all our birds, but in the mean time think it deserving some credit to attempt such a collection.[3]

My intention is to leave the U. States for Russia next January.—My ideas have been much altered by some letters that I have received from that country whilst I was in New York.—I cannot in one single letter give you all my ideas and [schemes] but believe me (if you are willing) I shall keep up with you such a correspondance as will very fully enable you to know my heart's contents.[4]

Our good friend Lesueur wrote me really a shocking note, (I cannot call it a letter) but I forgive him and in return will address him like a brother dearly beloved by me.[5]

I send you by M^r George Washington Sargent a Dish Ragg for your Lady. I hope it will be a [...] production to you and her.—It will grow like a Common Calabash in any rich ground where the support of a tree or fence will give it ample room to display its extending power; no sooner will the Wood Ducks begin to lay then I shall send your egg.—Now do not either of you be offended at my sending and calling this plant a Dish Ragg, it is really the only appellation I have for it and finding it here a curiosity I hope you may do so at Germantown.[6]

Remember me please to M^m Fretageot and the pupills of hers that were mine, and kiss your dear little daughter for me.—Present my best respect to our excellent acquaintance and friend Thomas Sully, and beg of him to answer my different letters to him; remember me also to D^r Richa^d Harlan & Mess^r Lukens, Wetherill and all our friends at your Academy.[7]

Now my dear sir answer my letter I beg of you to do so and believe me for ever your unalterable friend,

John J. Audubon

Handwritten text on a single sheet of paper, likely a letter or document. The text is dense and appears to be in a historical or legal context. The paper shows signs of age and wear.

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John James Audubon to Reuben Haines III, letter II, pages 1-5 (May 5, 1825). Courtesy of the Quaker and Special Collections, Haverford College Library, Haverford, Penn.

[Sent to "Ruben Haines Es^{qr}", Germantown, Pennsylvania." Haines added the following notes: "John J. Audubon, Feliciana, May 5th, rec^d June, ans^d Aug 9th. 1825.]

Bayou Sarah May 5th 1825.

My Dear Friend,

Your kind letter of the 31st of March was received a few days since with a pleasure that none can feel but those who can appreciate real worth in friendship. You say that my desire that you should kiss your darling daughter for me when she was only ideally living in your remembrance, brought tears down your face; none in this world beside her mother and yourself can have felt more poignantly than I did when I saw the dire tidings—may for ever the Heavenly Father bless her!—The accident of G.W. Sergeant Es^q was known here several days before your letter arrived. M^m Percy however was gratified to see that no material lasting injury was expected. [8]

I assure you that Philadelphia is yet extremely dear to me and could I manage to procure a good and [standing] situation there enabling me to support my family as we have been in the habit of doing I would gladly [...] to it, perhaps I may yet see the happy days.—I thank you for having called on T. Sully, he kindly wrote to me a few days before you.

I now will resort to that portion of your letter when you speaking of the publication of my Birds of America.—As I am fully convinced that you speak to me with genuine feelings, I will copy here part of a letter forwarded by me to the president of the New York Lyceum and within your own sphere please to sound for me and see and write to me if I am likely to succeed or if indeed I must take the large port folio to Europe. [9]

"I have I am sure much work in my possession all intended for the benefit of man kind.—The number of drawings that I now have on hand is quite sufficient (at least) to begin a publication of the Birds of America, but the manners & means of so doing are rather above my powers of conception or pecuniary means. I have thought that perhaps it could be done by association, that is if I could interest all the literary or scientific societies and institutions of the U. States to help me by recommendation of my drawings or otherwise to raise a sufficient number of solid subscribers to enable either me or the whole of the societies thus inclined to [second] my wish of publishing the work within the United States (say in your city) which in honor to our splendidly growing nation I conceive it ought to be done and toward which all my heart's wishes are that probably such as plan might succeed.—I as poor as I am will readily spend a few more years to help toward the completion of such an undertaking. I cannot help thinking often that if my drawings are unpublished and also my knowledge of the habits of

the birds of our country, much time may elapse before a third attempt pursued as ardently and constantly as mine has been will take place.—Your Lyceum for instance might give one member who would be willing to spend some of his time daily to anglicize my observations.—Philadelphia another, Boston also &^c. The name of the work might also bear a general appellation, in fact all that can be done might be done in America without resorting to crowned heads in Europe to whom I must refer the subject if unable to see it prosper on its own soil. [10]

“If the work is worthy (a fact that has been ascertained) nothing will be lost, but much credit to our country gained by it.—It is true that nothing like it has ever been presented to the public, some of my drawings have positively 18 subjects on them, such for an instance as a hawk attacking a double flock of partridges composed of birds of all ages and sexes; a nest of mocking birds attacked by a rattlesnake; numerous paroquets feeding on cuckle burrs &^c &^c, the mere engravings of which would sell to an immense number I am told if published even separately. I would be satisfied to come in as a partner. I can think myself industrious without assuming.—And the habits I have acquired in the pursuit of the subjects described have brought on me a system of observations that I may safely say none but real hunting and woodsmen ever attain & that would never the less be probably extremely wellcome to classed men and the better informed citizens. [11]

“Although many of my drawings are called historical illustrations of birds more than real ornithological representations I can venture to assure that were such men as Temminck to view them, no characteristics necessary would be thought wanting. The observations of a few of our best judges in America I hope would soon counterpoise the opinions of a paire of initiated minds toward the public’s sanction. [12]

“I think that botanical societies would feel pleased to see the larger flowers and trees of America represented in a style fully as true as Michaux’s performances, and although the intention of the work is far from being bent on that subject many of our ablest botanists besides Mr. Nuthall might feel desirous of subjoining particular remarks bearing their name and having a tendency of rendering the work still more acceptable at home and abroad. It has always been my wish to accompany each plate of a drawing of one specie of bird with a vignet on a plate succeeding it indicating a correspondant part of the country where the birds are found or illustrating more fully although in miniature size its habits; this whilst the engraving of the first object was proceeding might easily be procured either by myself or by some able assistant.—Then the book would positively contain America and its birds. [13]

“I cannot help repeating that under the influence of such an association natural science could not help prospering. Correspondance would be necessarily extended through the vision and the idea of each man of judgment and truth being inserted would go toward increasing the imitation of God’s

work.

“Speaking rationally I think I may thus conclude that a sufficient sum could be raised for this purpose, refunded with a surplus sufficient to gratify the expectations of all concerned.”

Thus my dear M^r Haines I am still busy on the same object and must die with a thorn in my heart if instead of America, Europe must be called on for support on an undertaking so worthy our attention.

I received lately a very kind letter from Prince Charles and I hope his attempt will succeed to the utmost of all his wishes.—I send him by Capⁿ Barclay the bearer of this one skin only. The prince I often thought doubted my words and I must bear it patiently until better proof will come to support me near him.—Unwilling to cause dissensions when I conceive the closest amity and mutual support ought to exist I shall [drop] so sorrowful a subject. [14]

Now I will put aside my work and myself to speak on a point full as dear as the birds of all the world: My second son is about 12 years old—can outline a head tolerably—speak a little French, has a little music and a boyant spirit; he is all my hopes in this world.—I feel toward him all you feel toward your own dear little ones.—I am anxious to put him under charge of the United States Institution of West Point, until he in return can if wanted “turn out” to help the nation.—I have opened the subject to our friend Harlan and mention it to you, because I know that you have some strong friends in New York who probably might help me [via] Governor Clinton &^c, if it is not too troublesome in me to ask for your assistance in such a wish, I beg of you that you will do so with that honesty so becoming you always and following your [...] wherever it moves.—I am told that he is as young as can be received but meanwhile I am assured that it requires to be favored for such an entrance.—Will you write to me a long letter about it and instruct me about the manner of acting &^c, and mentioning the amount of money required &^c. [15]

I must conclude with the desire that you will present my wife’s respects to your amiable lady, and hope that you will know me always the same respectfully

John J. Audubon

LETTER III

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Second line of handwritten text, possibly a sub-header or a specific note.

Main body of handwritten text in the middle section, continuing the cursive script.

Third line of handwritten text, possibly another sub-header or note.

Main body of handwritten text in the bottom section, concluding the cursive script.

Final handwritten text at the bottom of the page, including a signature and possibly a date.

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John James Audubon to Reuben Haines III, letter III, pages 1-4 (December 25, 1825). Courtesy of the Quaker and Special Collections, Haverford College Library, Haverford, Penn.

[Sent to "Mr. Reuben Haines, Philadelphia, Pens^a." If Haines answered this letter, he neglected to indicate so in his margin notes: "John J. Audubon, Louisiana Dec^r 25th 1825, Rec^d Jan^y 1826.]

Beech woods near Bayou Sarah

Dec^r 25, 1825.

My Good Friend,

It is half seven o'clock A.M. of Christmas day, and at this great distance from you I [sit] to answer your long written letter of the 9th August with a wish at heart that you, your aimiable wife and dear children may all be feel happy.

Far from being intimidated with my ill success when I forwarded you plants before, I have [resumed] my endeavors to prove to you, how much I consider and esteem kindnesses such as you and your family bestowed on me whilst in Philadelphia and at your comfortable mansion at Germantown.—I brought about two weeks since from the neighborhood of Woodville in the state of Mississippi 56 young shrubby trees all of one species but so immensely beautiful in their growth of foliage and fragrance of bloom that my heart bounced at the idea that you would be pleased in receiving a good portion of them.—I am unable to give you the scientific appellation, we of the woods vulgarly called it the Great Magnolia.—Look in Nutall for further assistance; I remember your reading some details about it whilst with you at Germantown. I am well satisfied that with some little care they will flourish well with you as I have remarked a great congeniality in the soil natural to it here and that of the country around you.—The bloom is not less in size than the compass of our

Early York Cabbage and the leaves frequently measure 30 inches by 15.—May it succeed with you!—The parcel is directed to Washington Jackson of Philadelphia who is to remitt it either to you or to Charles Bonaparte.—Call on the former and if the parcel is remitted to you please dispose of it as follows.—Present 6 of them with my respects to Washington Sargent Es^{qr} and divide the remainder equally with Charles Bonaparte for his father in law Joseph Napoleon. [16]

Now my dear M^r Haines I must change my subject.—I must touch the only thing that ever vibrated sorrow to my heart.—I must leave America.—And you, and a few more friends.—I must go and seek far from my few connections, a [...] purse for my long labours with as little hope to obtain this abroad as I am sure never to possess it in this my beloved country.—I assure you I count every day that are to [elapse] between this and the awfull moment when the sails will be spread that will waft off the vessel bearing my hopes, much like he who consigned to unmerited punishment hopes and yet dreads that another world will not be better to him than the one he is about to leave for ever.—With an allmost despairing heart I shall leave America early this ensuing spring, and now bid you my farewell.—Yes it is my farewell indeed for unless a success scarce expected should take place, I never will review this happy continent, will have to abandon my long acquired habits of watching nature at work and will droop moreso amongst the dreg of the world as it is called.

Bonaparte's Book is handsome and scientific but nature has not put her stamp upon it.—There are great errors in it and yet some valuable parts, but, it is not Willson who speaks, it is Monsieur Say qui n'est qu'un homme d'esprit.—Bonaparte, I think has been abused and mislead.—It is however a book that will be seen in Europe with pleasure but I must say I am surprised at the scantity of ~~sub~~ both of subjects and matter contained in it, and could I see Charles Bonaparte, and he listen to me as he would to his half known friend I feel satisfied that he would acknowledge, that although I have read but little I have seen a great deal—in the woods.—Please presenting my sincerest thanks, and may God enable me to return the compliments. I am anxious to write to him fully on the subject and yet I fear to offend him.—He may think me forward in thus freely [spreading] my opinions.—But can I relinquish a knowledge acquired through so much perseverance in actual service?—I am sorry that Charles Bonaparte was shy of me when in Philadelphia had he confided in me, depend on it my dear M^r Haines, his [unease] would have been ungratefully delt with.—My heart allways enclined toward him.—I naturally loved his great uncle, Napoleon of France. [17]

D^r Harlan's book I am very much pleased with, it is composed carefully, rationally, and with much truth.—All that I regret about it is the extra quantity of scientific appellations and the want of figures, but you know this is not a fault of the author but a want of education that makes me think so and no doubt say it.—I shall write to him more fully particularly as I can establish the identity of the Common Beaver of this country with that of Europe in the Doct^rs mind at least. [18]

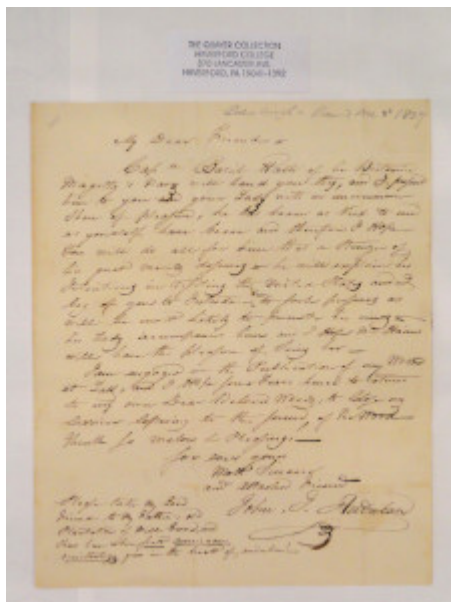
I have moved from one subject to another untill I dare say you are wearied enough.—Yet I have not done.—I addressed Dewitt Clinton about 3 months since begging of him a letter of introduction to Europe, he has not answered me at all.—But when I think and know that the Great Willson was [served] about the same way by T. Jefferson I submit. [\[19\]](#)

Farewell again, be happy and believe me to be unalterably your sincere friend,

John J. Audubon

Should you feel inclined I may yet receive another letter from you.—Call on Mr. Sully and present him my best [remembrances]. I have forward^d some of the same shrubb to D^r Torey and M^r Beakman of New York.

LETTER IV





John James Audubon to Reuben Haines III, letter IV, pages 1-2 (December 3, 1827). Courtesy of the Quaker and Special Collections, Haverford College Library, Haverford, Penn.

[Sent to "Ruben Haines Esq, Philadelphia or Germantown." If Haines answered this letter, he neglected to indicate so in his margin notes: "J. J. Audubon, Edinburgh, Rec^d Dec^r 3rd 1827.]

Edinburgh, received Dec 3^d, 1827

My Dear Friend,

Capⁿ Basil Hall of his Britannic Magesty's navy will hand you this, and I present him to you and your lady with an uncommon share of pleasure, he has been as kind to me as yourself have been and therefore I hope you will do all for him that a stranger of his great merits deserves.—He will explain his intentions in visiting the United States and I beg of you to introduce him to such persons as will be most likely to [promote] his views.—His lady accompanies him and I hope M^m Haines will have the pleasure of seeing her.

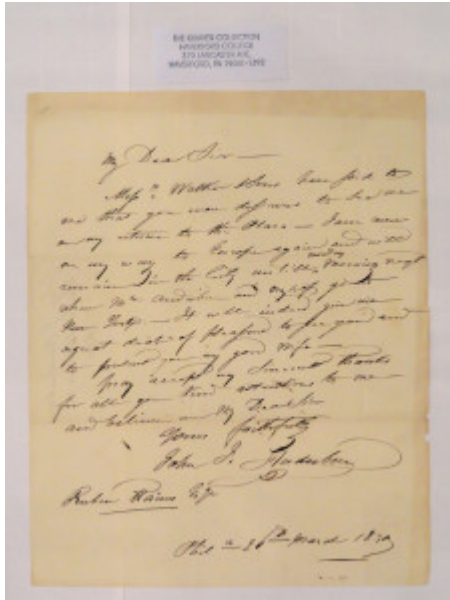
I am engaged in the publication of my work at last, and I hope some years hence to return to my own Dear Beloved Woods to close my carrier listening to the sound of the Wood Thrush so melow & pleasing! [\[20\]](#)

For ever your
most sincere
and attached friend
John J. Audubon

Please take my good
friend to my Father's old

plantation of Mill Grove, and
show him where first American
Ornithology grew in the heart of Audubon!

LETTER V



John James Audubon to Reuben Haines III, letter V, page 1 (March 26, 1830). Courtesy of the Quaker and Special Collections, Haverford College Library, Haverford, Penn.

[This letter is written on a single sheet of paper, with no address or envelope. After the signature, Audubon wrote: "Ruben Haines Esq. Phil^a 26th March 1830"]

My Dear Sir,

Mess^r Walker & Sons have said to me that you were desirous to see me on my return to this place.—I am now on my way to Europe again and will remain in the city untill Monday morning next when Mrs. Audubon and myself go to New York.—It will indeed give me a great deal of pleasure to see you and present you my good wife.—Pray accept my sincerest thanks for all your kind attention to me, and believe me my Dear Sir

yours faithfully,

John J. Audubon

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Albert Filemyr, Joel Fry, Jeff Holt, Andrew Halley, Dalton Hance, Emma Hance, Eileen Rojas, Laura Keim, Addie Quinn, Erin DeCou, Anthony Croasdale, Morgan Evans, Lena Hunt, Sarah Horowitz, Ann Upton, and Krista Oldham.

Further Reading

A rich body of biographical material has been published on the life and travels of John James Audubon. A good starting point for those interested in exploring Audubon sources is the bibliography in Ford's *John James Audubon* (Norman, Okla., 1964). Digital and print copies of many important works can now be found online, including *Audubon and His Journals* (New York, 1897), *The Life and Adventures of John James Audubon, the Naturalist* (London, 1868), Arthur's *Audubon: An Intimate Life of the American Woodsman* (New Orleans, 1937), and Herrick's *Audubon the Naturalist* (New York, 1917). Audubon's masterpiece, *The Birds of America* (Edinburgh, Scotland and London, 1827–1838), and its companion text *Ornithological Biography* (Edinburgh, 1831–1839), are now available online for free in high resolution formats, courtesy of the [National Audubon Society](#).

Notes

[1] This passage corroborates the “Return to Mill Grove” entry from Audubon’s 1824 journal. Ford (1964) was in error when she stated that Audubon returned to Mill Grove on August 1, 1824, because primary sources from Haines and Audubon are dated July 25 and 26, respectively.

[2] Audubon was fond of paper from the Brandywine Paper Mill in northern Delaware, owned by two influential Quaker families, the Gilpins and Fishers. Thomas Gilpin Sr. (1728–1778) and Miers Fisher (1748–1819), who briefly hosted Audubon at his country estate Ury in 1803, had been among the forty-one Quakers exiled to Virginia in 1777, where Gilpin died in captivity. Thus, the “Mr. Gilpin” who discovered the lead ore at Mill Grove in 1791, and visited Audubon in Philadelphia on July 12, 1824, was probably one of his sons that founded the paper mill in 1787, Joshua (1765–1840) or Thomas Gilpin Jr. (1776–1853).

[3] Alexander Wilson (1766–1813) was a Scottish-born poet, ornithologist, and author of the seminal *American Ornithology*. The eighth and ninth volumes, published posthumously, were edited and expanded by George Ord. The Audubon/Wilson relationship has been a topic of lively discussion for more than a century. In the first volume of his *Ornithological Biography* (1831), Audubon accused Wilson of scientific misconduct. And yet, prior to that accusation, Audubon rarely mentioned Wilson in print, and when he did, it was usually to

commiserate. For example, as he prepared to leave Philadelphia in 1824, Audubon wrote: “. . .I see that I shall have to leave here, as Wilson often did, without a cent in my pocket.” To my knowledge, the Wyck Audubon Letters include more direct references to Wilson than any other pre-1831 source.

Audubon's claim that he began “long before” Wilson does not add up, nor does his journal entry dated June 12, 1824: “I have now been twenty-five years in pursuing my ornithological studies.” Audubon arrived at Mill Grove in 1803, and so would have been studying ornithology for 21 years—not 25. Wilson arrived in the United States in 1794 and apparently shot a red-headed woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) upon arrival. Wilson wrote to Thomas Crichton on June 1, 1803, “I am now about to make a collection of all our finest birds,” before Audubon even arrived in the United States.

Nevertheless, that Audubon called Wilson “our good friend” just a few lines after defining the term (“...the delightfull peace of mind that is always felt...”), to Haines, a Quaker, indicates that his respect for his predecessor was genuine. That Wilson was “short of the mark” was not for lack of effort or genius, but because the task itself was too great—a sentiment clearly shared by Audubon (“I now think it presumptuous and vain...”). That Audubon speaks with candor (and even humility!) about the enormity of the task—that it is too great, perhaps, for even he to accomplish—reveals some vulnerability beneath Audubon's confident shell. These letters reveal a more complex character than the hubristic and irreverent Audubon portrayed by Alice Ford, for whom “not even Alexander Wilson's death in 1813 would end the struggle for ascendancy.”

[4] Audubon's correspondent in Russia is not known, but was presumably a lead for a potential financier or engraver. The main point is that Audubon informed Haines of his intentions to leave for Europe the following year.

[5] Charles Alexandre Lesueur (1778–1846), the French-born explorer, artist, American ichthyologist, and active member of the Academy. Audubon noted the date of their first meeting, April 12, 1824, in his journal.

[6] Most likely a reference to *Luffa aegyptica* Mill (Family *Cucurbitaceae*), still known as dish rag or sponge gourd (Joel Fry, pers. comm., Dec. 15, 2014). To my knowledge, there is no wood duck (*Aix sponsa*) egg in the Wyck collection.

[7] Madame Maria Duclos Fretageot (1783–1833) was a French educational reformer and teacher, who moved to Philadelphia in 1821 and established a Pestalozzian school at 240 Filbert Street, where the daughters of Reuben Haines were taught by Audubon during the summer of 1824. Thomas Sully (1783–1872) was an English-born painter who came to America in 1792, and gave Audubon free lessons in oil portraiture during the summer of 1824. Richard Harlan (1796–1843) was an eminent naturalist and author of *Fauna Americana*, for whom Audubon named the black warrior (*Falco harlani*) in 1831, now considered a subspecies of the red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis harlani*). Isaiah Lukens (1779–1846) was a famous clock-maker and naturalist who dined with Haines and

Audubon at Mill Grove. Samuel Wetherill (1764–1829) had purchased Mill Grove from the Audubons in 1813. The underlined “your” may refer to Audubon’s infamously rebuffed Academy nomination (i.e., he did not write “our” Academy).

[8] Audubon consoles Haines over the death of his eleven-year-old daughter Sarah, who had accompanied them to Mill Grove. Jane Middlemist Percy (1772–1831) was proprietor of Beech Woods plantation in West Feliciana Parish, La., after her husband Lt. Robert Percy’s death in 1819. George Washington Sargent was the husband of their daughter, Margaret. Audubon’s wife, Lucy, had been living at Beech Woods since 1823.

[9] The president of the Lyceum of Natural History in 1825 was John Torrey (1796–1873), the American botanist. Audubon refers to Torrey by name at the end of Letter III. Audubon first mentions traveling to Europe in his journal on April 15, 1824. Nevertheless, it is clear from this passage that, as late as May 1825, he was still hoping to find an American engraver/publisher.

[10] This paragraph and the four following it comprise the only known prospectus for *The Birds of America* that pre-dates Audubon’s 1826 European travels. In a vain remark, Audubon subtly acknowledges that Wilson’s contribution to ornithology was equal to his own (“before a third attempt pursued as ardently and constantly as mine”), i.e., Wilson was the first attempt, and Audubon was the second.

[11] The three works described here would later be engraved by Robert Havell Jr. (1793–1878) and published in *The Birds of America*. The originals are now owned by the New-York Historical Society, having been acquired from Lucy Audubon in 1863, and are reproduced here with permission. All three pieces are reported to have been created in 1825. If so, they must have been created before the date of this letter (May 5). Alternatively, they may have been started as early as late November 1824, when Audubon arrived in Louisiana after having been absent since May 1, 1823.

[12] Coenraad Jacob Temminck (1778–1858) was a noted Dutch zoologist. The “pair of initiated minds” whom Audubon mentions as critics of his work may refer to Ord and Lawson, the engraver of Wilson’s and Bonaparte’s plates who famously refused to engrave Audubon’s artwork, claiming that “ornithology requires truth in forms, and correctness in the lines. Here are neither.”

[13] Thomas Nuttall (1786–1859) was an English-born naturalist and renowned botanist who lived and worked in North America from 1808–1841. François André Michaux (1770–1855) was a French botanist.

[14] Charles Lucien Bonaparte (1803–1857), prince of Musignano and Canino, was a French ornithologist who lived in Philadelphia from 1822–1826. At the time of this letter, publication was underway of the first volume of Bonaparte’s *American ornithology*. . . , to which Audubon had contributed extensive field notes on the wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) and an illustration of the great crow-blackbird (*Quiscalus major*), now called boat-tailed grackle. Audubon sent

a bird specimen (“skin”) with the parcel, which was presumably received by Haines on August 9.

[15] Seeking to gain entrance for his son John Woodhouse Audubon (1812–1862) to the Military Academy at West Point, Audubon asked Haines to approach the sitting governor of New York, DeWitt Clinton (1769–1828), for a letter of reference (“it requires to be favored for such an entrance”). Clinton had been reinstated for a second (non-consecutive) term as governor four months prior. Obtaining an appointment at West Point was apparently very difficult in the 1820s, even for individuals with military experience and political connections.

[16] Audubon referred to the southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*) as “Great Magnolia” in volume 1 of *Ornithological Biography*, but the dimensions of the leaves and flowers that he included here do not match that species, but rather, the bigleaf magnolia (*M. macrophylla*), of which Nuttall (1818) wrote: “This small pyramidal tree produces the largest leaves and flowers of any other North American plant.” In contrast to *M. grandiflora*, which had been cultivated in gardens since the early eighteenth century, *M. macrophylla* was a more recent discovery. Further, the severe winter of 1817–1818 killed most of the cultivated *M. macrophylla* trees near Philadelphia, and so greatly increased their rarity and monetary value. Audubon’s gift was intended in part for Joseph Napoléon Bonaparte (1768–1844), elder brother of Napoléon Bonaparte (1769–1821), who resided on a landscaped estate called Point Breeze near Bordentown, New Jersey.

[17] Here we see Audubon’s review of the first volume of Bonaparte’s *American Ornithology* . . . (1825). The French statement is roughly translated “Mr. Say who is only a man of wit,” and refers to Thomas Say (1787–1834), entomologist and editor of “Bonaparte’s Book.” The comment seems to have been intended as insult. It is unclear whether Audubon was aware that Say and Haines were old friends, having been classmates in 1799 at Weston, a Quaker boarding school in Chester County, Pennsylvania.

[18] Here we see Audubon’s review of Harlan’s *Fauna Americana* (1825), in which Harlan wrote: “Some doubts have been expressed relative to the identity of the American and European beaver, founded chiefly on some differences observed in their habits. (The European beaver does not construct huts.) We are inclined to the opinion of their identity, the more especially as no differences are observable on comparing their skulls.”

[19] On February 6, 1806, Alexander Wilson sent via William Bartram an unsolicited letter to Thomas Jefferson that contained a request to join a government-led expedition through the Mississippi Valley scheduled for the following year. Wilson’s original plan to travel west with Bartram was precluded by the latter man’s advanced age (67 in 1806). Wilson received no response from Jefferson. George Ord, in a short biography of the late Wilson in the posthumous 9th volume of *American Ornithology*, printed a transcription of the letter and wrote: “So little did Mr. Jefferson regard the pretensions of

Genius, and the interests of Science...he did not even deign to *reply* to his respectful overture; and Wilson, mortified at the cold, contemptuous neglect, locked up his feelings in his breast, not even permitting a sigh to reach the ear of his most intimate friends." Audubon was fond of this story and invoked it when his own efforts were ignored by public figures, *e.g.*, in an undated 1833 journal entry, and the preface to the second volume of *Ornithological Biography*.

[20] In one of his most moving passages, Audubon (1831) described how the songs of the wood thrush (*Hylocichla mustelina*) inspired him to push forward with his dream despite the many obstacles, including the most difficult challenge of all—to leave his family in America: "To [the Wood Thrush] I owe much. How often has it revived my drooping spirits, when I have listened to its wild notes in the forest ...doubting perhaps if ever again I should return to my home, and embrace my family! ...How fervently, on such occasions, have I blessed the Being who formed the Wood Thrush, and placed it in those solitary forests, as if to console me amidst my privations, to cheer my depressed mind, and to make me feel, as I did, that never ought man to despair, whatever may be his situation, as he can never be certain that aid and deliverance are not at hand."

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