

“How could I make a little book, when I have seen enough to make a dozen large books?”

Birds of America, the culmination of 15 years of passionate study, was a mammoth undertaking. It cost \$115,640 (approximately \$2,000,000 today) and included 435 life-size prints of 497 bird species, engraved on copper plates by Robert Havell, Jr. and colored by an assembly line of 50 colorists.

Printed on “double elephant” sized paper, Audubon laid out the images with an artist’s eye rather than by biological classification, reaping the scorn of ornithological purists, but winning praise even from King George IV. Scottish artist, John Syme, painted his portrait in frontier regalia (which now hangs in the White House). London’s Royal Society elected him a fellow. English and French noblemen became subscribers.

“To have been torn from the study would have been as death; my time was entirely occupied with art.”

Life after Birds of America was a continuing roller coaster ride for Audubon. He reunited with his family in the United States only to return to England to find that many of his subscribers were in default and that he had lost others due to the poor quality of the coloring of the plates. Yet he continued to add to his collection of bird and wildlife drawings, exploring the west, the Florida coast, and Labrador, and publishing three more books, including an octavo edition of Birds of America that included 65 additional plates.

“A true conservationist is a man who knows that the world is not given by his fathers, but borrowed from his children.”

After his death, Lucy sold the New York Historical Society all of the 435 preparatory watercolors for Birds of America. Desperate for money, she sold all but 80 of the original copper plates for scrap.

Yet his legacy is indisputable. He has inspired generations of wildlife artists. George Bird Grinnell, founder of the National Audubon Society, chose to name his bird conservation organization after him. Ornithologists continue to reference his field notes. Even Charles Darwin, who saw him demonstrate his unique method of propping up birds with wire at the Wernerian Natural History Association, quoted him three times in *On the Origin of Species*.

His legacy also lives on at the Audubon Cottages, one of the New Orleans Hotel Collection, where Audubon’s New Orleans home now serves as the hotel’s main breakfast room, accommodating up to 40 guests. The historic French Quarter townhouses ringing the charming brick courtyard that were once an oasis of beauty for Audubon, continue to be New Orleans’ most beguiling retreat.



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NEW ORLEANS HOTEL COLLECTION



John James Audubon by John Syme in 1826

John James Audubon (1785-1851), an ornithologist, naturalist and painter, was born Jean-Jacques Audubon in Les Cayes, Saint-Domingue, a French colony on the island of what is now Haiti. Renowned for his meticulous illustrations of American birds in their natural poses and habitats, his masterpiece is a color-plate book entitled, *Birds of America*, which is universally accepted as the definitive ornithological tome. From 1821 to 1822, he resided in Cottage One of the Audubon Cottages in New Orleans, Louisiana while working on his series of illustrations for *Birds of America*

“Almost every day, instead of going to school, I made for the fields.”

John James Audubon's early days etched the blueprint for his future. The illegitimate son of Lieutenant Jean Audubon, a French naval officer, and his mistress, a 27-year old Creole chambermaid, he was born on a sugar plantation in Saint-Domingue (Haiti). After his mother died from a tropical disease when he was an infant, the Lieutenant's other mistress, took care of Audubon along with the other three children she bore his father.

In 1791, the Lieutenant, who had fled to France after unrest among the slaves, sent for the six year old Audubon. These were carefree years spent learning to play the flute and violin, riding horses, fencing, exploring the countryside, and carting home the a bird's egg or nest.

After failing the officer's qualification test, at 18 years old Audubon set sail for the United States on a false passport, legally changing his name to John James Audubon and avoiding conscription in the Napoleonic Wars. The plan was to start a lead mining business with Ferdinand Rozier, the son of his father's business associate, on Mill Grove, a 284-acre farm near Philadelphia that the Lieutenant owned.

“Hunting, fishing, drawing, and music occupied my every moment.”

When he finally arrived at Mill Grove, forays into the surrounding forests became his occupation. With the stone house as a base camp, he began his first serious attempt at drawing and painting birds, collecting specimens, and recording their behavior.

Falling into a nearby creek led to falling in love with Lucy Bakewell, the daughter of the owner of the neighboring farm. He returned to France after a five-year courtship to ask his father for permission to marry and while home, honed his taxidermy skills and scientific research methods under the tutelage of naturalist, Charles-Marie D'Orbigny.

“I never for a day gave up listening to the songs of our birds, or watching their peculiar habits, or delineating them in the best way I could.”

When he returned to the States, Audubon started a museum to house his collection of woodland creatures and birds, while forging ahead in business. He sold the mine and a portion of the land and moved to New York City to begin an import-export company. The firm of Audubon and Rozier moved west, starting with a general store in Louisville, Kentucky, a major shipping port on the Ohio River, before relocating to Henderson.

The wilderness provided lush fodder for drawing and cataloging birds. Living in a log cabin, he took on the persona of Daniel Boone (whom he met), wearing frontier garb and carrying a rifle. He traveled with Shawnee and Osage hunting parties while sailing downriver on a prospecting trip, relishing learning about their ways.

“I cannot help but think a curious event is this life of mine.”

With war looming with Britain and business suffering, Audubon sold his portion to Rozier in 1811 and began devoting more time to ornithology and art.

1812 to 1819 was a period of highs and lows. He became an American citizen. Rats ate all of his 200 drawings. He spiraled into depression. He resolved to draw better. He prospered from the purchase of land, slaves, and a flour mill. He went bankrupt and ended up in debtor's prison.

“I wish I had eight pairs of hands, and another body to shoot the specimens.”

In 1820, he set out with his gun, painting supplies, and assistant, determined to paint all of the birds of America with the goal of having them published. He floated down the Mississippi River, exploring the forests, bayous and swamps along the way: journeying with landscape artist, George Lehman; hiring hunters to bring him specimens; and painting a bird a day.

“We had a good dinner and a great deal of Mirth that I call french Gayety.”

After a tedious passage on a keel boat, Audubon arrived in **New Orleans** on January 7, 1821, spending his first evening at the home of Mr. Arnauld, a friend of his father's, where festivities included an entertaining monkey. For several years in the 1820s, Audubon would make New Orleans his base of operations for the drawings and watercolors he was preparing for publication, a year of which was spent at what is now known as Audubon Cottage One at the New Orleans Hotel Collection “Audubon Cottages”.

He eked by painting portraits of wealthy patrons, doing charcoals on the street and teaching painting, while completing as many as 62 birds and plants that would later be printed in Birds of America. He studied and painted 20 of these species in New Orleans, including the Great Egret, Great Blue Heron, Whooping Crane, and American White Pelican.

What began to make Audubon's work stand out from his contemporaries, was his unique approach to composition. He killed birds using fine shot and then used wire to create a natural pose, like feeding or hunting, and set them in their natural habitat. He also started arranging and revising his accompanying notes on each bird's behavior, including what they ate, where they lived and how they bred.

When Audubon returned to Philadelphia in 1824 determined to publish his collection of bird drawings, he was roundly rejected. Fortune finally smiled upon him during an oil painting lesson with Charles Bonaparte, who recommended that he go to Europe to have his paintings engraved.

“If I can procure three hundred good substantial names of persons, or bodies, or institutions, I cannot fail to do well for my family.”

In 1826, Audubon set sail from New Orleans for London with 300 of his paintings. The Noblesse Oblige fell in love with his works, and soon “the American woodsman” as he was called, had garnered enough financial support through advance subscriptions, exhibitions, and commissions to publish Birds of America.