

John Farrand, Jr. MOMENTS IN HISTORY

The Connecticut Warbler

Somewhere along the road between New Haven and Middletown, or between Middletown and Hartford, Alexander Wilson came upon an unknown bird in a low thicket.

ON SUNDAY MORNING, OCTOBER 2, 1808, Alexander Wilson stepped aboard a small passenger boat in New York City and headed up the East River. Forty-two years old, an immigrant from Scotland, and America's leading ornithologist, Wilson was making his first visit to New England. Unlike his other trips, this was not a search for birds. The first volume of his *American Ornithology* had just been published, with Wilson's own text and nine color plates. He had come north from Philadelphia to sell subscriptions to this pioneering work on American birds.

Eight hours later, as Wilson wrote to a friend, "the high red-fronted mountain of New Haven rose to our

view," and soon he stepped ashore into the "stillness and solemnity" of Sunday evening in a New Haven that was still very much a Puritan town. He spent Monday and Tuesday calling on prominent citizens, professors at Yale, and booksellers. All were polite, and he learned that woodpeckers had once attacked the wooden spires on the college buildings along the northwest side of the New Haven Green with such persistence that armed men had been posted to shoot them. A few of the people he met were interested, but no one in New Haven was willing to spend \$120 for a subscription.

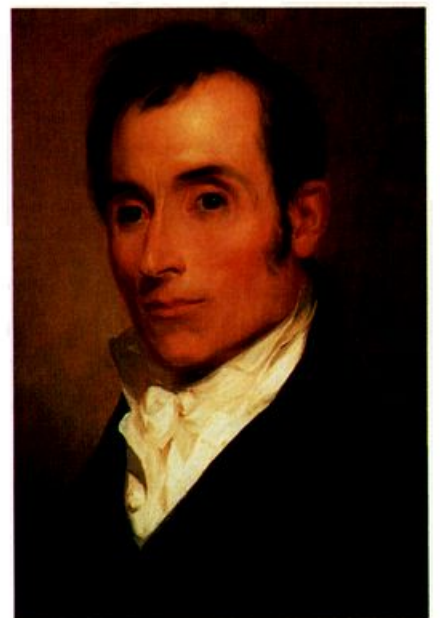
On Wednesday, October 5, he walked 22 miles to Middletown. Here the countryside was "very beautiful and the ground rich," for this was not the sandy soil of New Haven, but the fertile floodplain of the Connecticut River. In Middletown he was entertained by Richard Alsop, sportsman, scholar, poet, and one of the Hartford Wits—a group known mainly for its satiric political poetry. Alsop was "a man of fortune and education," as Wilson put it.

The two men had a long conversation about birds. Alsop had kept a caged Rose-breasted Grosbeak; it not only sang during the day, but through the night as well. To Alsop, "its notes were...the sweetest of any

bird with which he is acquainted." Alsop presented Wilson with several stuffed birds, gave him letters of introduction to men in Boston, and introduced him to other prominent Middletown citizens. But no one in Middletown bought a subscription.

Wilson continued on to Hartford, where things took a modest turn for the better. Congressman Chauncey Goodrich introduced him to the illustrious Daniel Wadsworth, later president of Connecticut's first savings bank, founder of the Hartford Fire Insurance Company, and the man who donated the land on which Hartford's famous Wadsworth Atheneum now stands. Wadsworth subscribed, and so did the Hartford Library, ancestor of today's Hartford Public Library on Main Street. A mysterious Mr. Beers and Mr. Howe accounted for the third subscription Wilson sold in Connecticut. After a day or two, Wilson traveled 128 miles by coach from Hartford to Boston, stopping at Springfield and Worcester, where, as usual, he sold no subscriptions. When he crossed the border into Massachusetts, he left Connecticut, never to return.

Intent on raising money for his great project, Wilson tells us little about the birds he encountered during his short visit to Connecticut. We



Alexander Wilson

PAINTING BY REMBRANDT PEALE COURTESY OF AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL LIBRARY

know he saw White-throated Sparrows, and later, in his account of the Bay-breasted Warbler, he noted that he had “received a very neat drawing of this bird, done by a young lady in Middleton [Middletown], Connecticut, where it seems also to be a rare species.”

There was one major find during that week in early October of 1808. Somewhere along the road between New Haven and Middletown, or between Middletown and Hartford, he came upon an unknown bird in a low thicket. It was five and three-quarter inches long, with rich yellow-olive upperparts, a dirty white or ash-colored throat, a dull greenish breast, a pure rich, yellow belly, long slender legs that were “flesh color,” and a narrow ring of yellowish white around the eye. The bird “seemed more than commonly active, not remaining for a moment in the same position.”

By a stroke of luck—the kind of luck that seems to follow people who are truly devoted to some purpose or cause—Wilson had discovered a bird that to this day is considered a rarity. In 1812, in the fifth volume of *American Ornithology*, he named it the Connecticut Warbler, and for its scientific name he chose *Sylvia agilis*—*Sylvia* because that was the genus to which most warblers were assigned in those days, and *agilis*, Latin for “nimble,” because it had seemed “more than commonly active.” From his description and plate, his specimen was probably a bird hatched that same year.

It is possible that Wilson’s first specimen was among the stuffed birds given to him by Richard Alsop, but Wilson was usually careful to cite his sources, especially where habits, such as “more than commonly active,” were involved. And the wording of the first draft of his original description—when he had accumulated three specimens—strongly suggests that Wilson himself shot all three: “The different specimens I have shot corresponded very nearly



Connecticut Warbler.

SYLVIA AGILIS WILSON

Male of the Year?

Connecticut Warbler

Plate 138 by John James Audubon

in their markings; two of these were males, and the other undetermined, but conjectured also to be a male.” If Alsop had collected the original Connecticut Warbler, Wilson would almost certainly have said so.

Wilson discovered six warblers besides the Connecticut: the Tennessee, Nashville, Kentucky, Mourning, Bay-breasted, and Cerulean, and he was the first to publish a description of a bird he called the “green black-capped fly catcher,” today called Wilson’s Warbler in his honor.

He named four warblers after places, but it is perhaps surprising that he named one after Connecticut.

Although he signed up 250 subscribers in Savannah alone, and 60 in New Orleans, Wilson obtained only 22 subscriptions in all of New England. He must have found it difficult to show his painstakingly prepared *American Ornithology* to brusque men who had scant interest in birds, even less in spending money on books about them, and who didn’t hesitate to tell him so.

Wilson was a shy, sensitive, and introverted man, whom Elliott Coues, the leading ornithologist of the late 19th century, unkindly called "Wilson, the patient, the long-suffering, the football of fortune." Even the self-confident John James Audubon, when his own turn came to solicit subscriptions for *Birds of America*, commented on how painful this episode must have been for Wilson. "How often I thought during these visits of poor Alexander Wilson," wrote Audubon in 1827. "When travelling as I am now, to procure subscribers, he as well as myself was received with rude coldness, and sometimes with that arrogance which belongs to *parvenus*."

Wilson's lack of success on this trip may be why his letters contain caustic remarks about Connecticut and New England. He refers, with just a hint of sarcasm, to the "literati" of New Haven. To his engraver in Philadelphia, he wrote: "My journey through almost the whole of New England has rather lowered the Yankeys in my esteem. Except a few neat academies, I found their schoolhouses equally ruinous and deserted as our own—fields and mountains covered with stones—stone fences & pasture fields—scrubby oaks and pine trees—a meeting house and steeple painted white every 4 or 5 miles—wretched orchards—scarce one grain field in 20 miles—the taverns along the road dirty, and filled with loungers, bawling about law suits and politics—the people snappish, and extortioners, lazy, and 200 years behind the Pennsylvanians in agricultural improvements."

Nevertheless, when the time came to name his new bird, he chose the name of the state in which he had found it. Today we realize it was no accident that Wilson found the Connecticut Warbler in October. In its fall migration, this bird of the bogs and aspen groves of central Canada and the Great Lakes region flies eastward to the Atlantic coast and then

southward to the tropics. In spring the birds travel northward west of the Appalachians.

The Connecticut Warbler has always been an elusive bird, seen and recognized only by those with experience. Audubon knew the species and adopted Wilson's name for it; his Plate 138 shows two birds feeding among fall-flowering soapwort gentians. On September 29, 1859, Henry David Thoreau wrote a description in his journal of what was almost certainly a Connecticut Warbler, although he never knew it. He men-

Today we realize it was no accident that Wilson found the Connecticut Warbler in October.

tions a "light-slate head," a "distinct light ring around the eye," and "flesh color legs." What he saw was probably a southbound adult. Wilson's book, which Thoreau consulted often, describes only the young bird. Seventy-five years passed before the first Connecticut Warbler's nest was found by Ernest Thompson Seton, in a tamarack bog a few miles south of Carberry, Manitoba, on June 21, 1883. Seton sent the nest and the adult male to the Smithsonian Institution for verification, and both are still in that museum. Even today, the winter range of the Connecticut Warbler is poorly known; a few scattered specimens from northern South America are all we have.

After Wilson's death in 1813, his own Connecticut specimen passed into the collection of the artist and naturalist Charles Willson Peale. After Peale died in 1827, the bird belonged for a time to his son, Rubens Peale, but eventually it disappeared.

Like the bird Wilson found in a low thicket that October day, the copies of *American Ornithology* he sold in Connecticut have also disappeared. The Hartford Public Library no longer has the original edition, and Daniel Wadsworth's set may—or may not—be the same as the one auctioned off many decades later by one of his descendants. And the fate of the set purchased by Mr. Beers and Mr. Howe is as mysterious as what became of Mr. Beers and Mr. Howe themselves.

Wilson's great nine-volume undertaking was soon overshadowed by Audubon's more sumptuous and engaging *Birds of America*. But Wilson's *American Ornithology* was quickly recognized as the foundation of serious ornithology in this country, and went into several posthumous editions. The highest praise finally came from none other than Elliott Coues, who had called Wilson "the football of fortune." With his usual dogmatic tone, Coues wrote: "Science would lose little, but, on the contrary, would gain much, if every scrap of pre-Wilsonian writing about United States birds could be annihilated."

Because of Wilson's visit 185 years ago, Connecticut, forty-eighth in size among the 50 states, is one of only eight states that have given their names to birds. Today, a goose, a duck, a hawk, a rail, a crow, an oo, and three honeycreepers are named for Hawaii. California has a condor, a quail, a gull, a gnatcatcher, a thrasher, and a towhee. Kentucky and Tennessee have their warblers, both named by Wilson. Louisiana has its waterthrush. Mississippi has its kite, also named by Wilson. Virginia has its rail. And Connecticut its warbler. Although he spent less than a week there, and sold only three subscriptions, Alexander Wilson made himself very much a part of the ornithological history of this small New England state. 