

John James Audubon - Scientist, Ornithologist

From Left to Right Scott #874 issued in 1940,
#1241 issued in 1963, #1863 issued in 1985,
#3236e issued in 1998, and #3650 issued in 2002.

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John James Audubon was born on April 26, 1785 in Les Cayes Saint-Domingue (Haiti)

John was the illegitimate son of a French merchant, planter, and slave trader and a Creole woman of Saint-Domingue, John and his illegitimate half-sister (who was also born in the West Indies) were legalized by adoption in 1794, five years after their father returned to France. Young Audubon developed an interest in drawing birds during his boyhood in France. At age 18 he was sent to the United States in order to avoid conscription and to enter business. He was educated in France and in 1803 came to the Audubon estate, "Mill Grove," near Philadelphia. There he spent much time observing birds and making the first American bird-banding experiments. In 1808 he married Lucy Bakewell, whose faith and support were factors in his eventual success. Between 1808 and 1820 he lived mostly in Kentucky, frequently changing his occupation and neglecting his business to carry on his bird observations.

He began painting portraits for a livelihood and descended the Mississippi to New Orleans, where for a time he taught drawing. From 1823 to 1828 his wife conducted a private school, in which he taught for a short time, in West Feliciana parish, La. In 1826 he went to Great Britain in search of a publisher and subscribers for his bird drawings, meeting with favorable response in Edinburgh and London. *The Birds of America*, in elephant folio size, was published in parts between 1827 and 1838, with engravings by Robert Havell, Jr. The accompanying text, called the *Ornithological Biography* (5 vol., 1831–39), was prepared largely in Edinburgh in collaboration with the Scottish naturalist William MacGillivray, who was responsible for its more scientific information. Extracts from Audubon's contributions, edited in 1926 by F. H. Herrick as *Delineations of American Scenery and Character*, reveal his stylistic qualities and furnish many pictures of American frontier life. Audubon worked on a smaller edition of his great work and also, in collaboration with John Bachman, began *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*, which was completed by his sons Victor Gifford Audubon and John Woodhouse Audubon (plates, 30 parts, 1842–45; text, 3 vol., 1846–54).

During these years his home was on the Hudson River in the northern part of Manhattan island. While his drawings and paintings of bird life may not wholly satisfy both the critical artist and the meticulous scientist, their achievement in both areas is considerable. They remain one of the great achievements of American intellectual history and have gained wide popularity, having been reprinted many times.

John James Audubon died on January 27, 1851 in New York, NY.

