

FOCUS

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American Ornithology, Alexander Wilson
State Library of Pennsylvania

Although his books would eventually earn him an international reputation as the father of American ornithology, Alexander Wilson (1766-1813) began his publishing career as an unsuccessful poet. Throughout his late teens and early twenties, he wandered his native Scotland, peddling poetry. He gained few customers, however, and at the age of 28, he decided to start over in America.

Wilson found work as a teacher in Gray's Ferry, PA, where his neighbor, naturalist William Bartram, invited him to use his library and encouraged his interest in birds. Around 1800, Wilson set out on the first of many long, solitary journeys through the wilderness, watching, recording, and drawing birds. These expeditions provided him with data for all nine volumes of his *American Ornithology*, the first text to document the native bird species of America. Each was illustrated with plates, engraved and colored from Wilson's original drawings, and included his notes. He published the first volume in 1808; the ninth was published a year after his death. Following a trip to the New Jersey coast to study water birds in 1813, Wilson passed away, weakened from an ongoing case of travel-related dysentery.

The State Library of Pennsylvania recently brought their *American Ornithology* volumes to the Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts (CCAHA) for treatment. The leaves were discolored and coated in soot from exposure to the environment. Those who had handled the much-used volumes in the past couple centuries left stains and grime. Some of the plates had been removed and were missing, and one had been moved to the wrong location. The original interleaving—thin papers, placed between a plate and the opposite page, that are meant to protect the text from the plate inks—was still in place, but it was crinkled and torn. It had failed to prevent the printing inks from offsetting, so on some of the pages with text, there are shadowy bird illustrations, mirror images of the opposing plates.

CCAHA book conservators will surface clean the leaves and mend the many tears and losses found at their edges. They will reattach loose leaves to the text block, and consolidate flaking media where necessary. Although the volumes' bindings are structurally sound—the covers are intact and the spines still adhered—they are abraded, so conservators will consolidate the leather. They will also replace the original interleaving with new alkaline MicroChamber paper.



Images, clockwise from top: Book Conservator Renée Wolcott surface cleaning a leaf from *American Ornithology* / A plate featuring the Red Owl / A plate featuring the Chimney Swallow, Purple Martin, and Connecticut Warbler / Senior Book Conservator Theresa Cho surface cleaning a plate / Conservation Technician Amber Hares applying a mend to the edge of a page

