

# ALEXANDER WILSON IN LANCASTER

By William Frederic Worner

The name of Alexander Wilson, pioneer ornithologist in America, should be familiar to every well-informed school boy in the land; yet doubtedless many of our local high school students who turn to Wilson's books for information on birds, do not know that this celebrated naturalist once trod the streets of our own Lancaster.

The story of Alexander Wilson's life reads like a romance, and is a fine example of what genius and industry, in the face of obstacles which men of ordinary abilities would consider insurmountable, can accomplish. Born to a life of obscure poverty, and handicapped by a limited education, he labored unceasingly to improve his mind and extend his knowledge. He was rewarded by being able to prepare his great work on ornithology, the pioneer of its kind in North America.

Alexander Wilson was born in Paisley, Renfrewshire, Scotland, July 6, 1766. He worked for some time as a weaver, and then became a peddler. His father, also a weaver, removed to the country and there combined weaving with agriculture, distilling and smuggling—conditions which no doubt helped to develop in the boy that love of rural pursuits and adventure which was to determine his career. In 1790, at the age of twenty-four, young Wilson published a volume of poems, the second edition of which appeared in 1791. The following year, he published, anonymously, "Watty and Mcg," the authorship of which was by some ascribed to Robert Burns. He got into difficulty, in a trade dispute, for satirizing one of the manufacturers, was imprisoned, and after his release emigrated to America. He landed at New Castle, Delaware, July 14, 1794, and walked to Philadelphia. After a few years of weaving, peddling and desultory observation, he became a schoolmaster. About 1802 he obtained an appointment as teacher of a school at Kingsessing, near Philadelphia. It was here that he formed the acquaintance of William Bartram, the naturalist, and Alexander Lawson, the engraver, whose tastes and instructions were invaluable in stimulating his own aspirations. He became interested in the drawing of birds, and conceived a plan to illustrate the ornithology of the United States. In 1804, largely for the purpose of collecting material, he, with two friends, walked to Niagara Falls, an interesting account of which outing he gave in a poem called "The Foresters." Two years later, he assisted in editing Rees's Cyclopaedia and thus had an opportunity to secure an experience that was invaluable to him in the publishing of his American Ornithology, the first volume of which appeared in 1808. Upon its publication, Wilson set out on a journey to secure subscribers.

The second volume was published in January, 1810. In order to collect material for the succeeding volumes and to secure subscribers, Wilson again went on a journey, which lasted for six months and which took him as far south as New Orleans—a journey during which he was obliged to sail down the Ohio river alone in an open skiff for 720 miles, to walk long distances and ride through wildernesses well nigh impassable, to sleep for weeks in the woods, and to subsist on dried beef, biscuits and water.

He left Philadelphia Tuesday, January 30, 1810, for Pittsburg. On this journey he passed through the borough of Lancaster, which at that time was the capital of Pennsylvania. In a letter dated Pittsburg, February 22, 1810, and addressed to his friend and instructor Alexander Lawson, he refers to his sojourn in Lancaster in these words:

"From this first stage of my ornithological pilgrimage, I sit down, with pleasure, to give you some account of my adventures since we parted. On arriving at Lancaster, I waited on the governor, secretary of state, and such other great folks as were likely to be useful to me. The governor received

me with civility, passed some good-natured compliments on the volumes, and readily added his name to my list. He seems an active man, of plain good sense and little ceremony."

The governor referred to, Simon Snyder, was born, I am informed, in a house that stood on or near the site of Philip Rudy's clothing store, 243 North Queen street. At the time of Wilson's visit the governor resided in an elegant mansion (for that day, at least) which stood on the site of Kirk Johnson's music store, 16 West King street. The secretary of state was Nathaniel B. Boileau, whose correct title was "secretary of the commonwealth."

In further writing of the persons whom he met in Lancaster, Wilson states:

"By Mr. L. [probably Presley C. Lane, speaker of the senate] I was introduced to many members of both houses, but I found them, in general, such a pitiful, squabbling, political mob, so split up, and jostling about the mere formalities of legislation, without knowing anything of its realities, that I abandoned them in disgust."

This rather severe criticism of our legislators of that day and generation may have been prompted by the fact that he was able to secure so few subscriptions in Lancaster. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that only the wealthy could afford to subscribe for the books since the price, \$120.00, for the entire work, was prohibitive to people in ordinary financial circumstances. For those who purchased his books or were sympathetically interested in them, he was fair to admit that "I must, however, except from this censure a few intelligent individuals, friends to science, and possessed of taste, who treated me with great kindness."

Mr. Wilson probably arrived in Lancaster on Wednesday evening, January 31, 1810, and remained several days. We have no record of where he lodged. The Lancaster newspapers of that day which I have examined, contain no notice of his stay. Evidently he had not yet established his reputation; and to the public at large was only an itinerant book vendor and an obscure scientific writer.

In the communication already referred to, he states that he had "a letter from Dr. Muhlenberg to a clergyman in Hanover." From this it is natural to infer, though we lack conclusive evidence to substantiate the inference, that while in Lancaster he called upon the venerable pastor of Trinity Lutheran church, the Rev. G. H. E. Muhlenberg, who besides being a mineralogist and chemist was probably the most famous botanist of his day on the American continent. Wilson probably found in him an enthusiastic admirer who appreciated his work and gave him a letter "to a clergyman in Hanover." This clergyman was undoubtedly the Rev. Frederick V. Melsheimer, at that time pastor of the Lutheran church in that town. It was the logical thing for him to do since Melsheimer was a celebrated naturalist and is often referred to as the father of American entomology.

Wilson doubtless spent Thursday and Friday strolling through the streets of Lancaster and in loitering about the public buildings, seeking subscribers. In the letter referred to he says:

"On Friday evening I set out for Columbia, where I spent one day in vain. I crossed the Susquehanna on Sunday forenoon, with some difficulty, having to cut our way through the ice for several hundred yards; and passing on to York, paid my respects to all the literati of that place without success."

Before his monumental work was completed, Mr. Wilson died. Seven volumes of his ornithology were published during his lifetime, and two were issued shortly after his death, under the editorship of George Ord, in 1814. In volume nine appears a complete list of the subscribers. The names are

entered under the states in which the subscribers resided. Among those accredited to Pennsylvania we find the following citizens of old Lancaster: Simon Snyder, Robert Coleman, William Hamilton, Adam Reigart, Charles Smith and Jasper Yeates.

William Henry, Jr., who was born in Lancaster, Pa., on March 12, 1757, also subscribed for this valuable work, though at the time he was living, I think, in Northampton county, where he had been commissioned in 1788 a justice of the peace, and judge of the courts of common pleas and quarter sessions.

The name of Benjamin Smith Barton, M. D., who was a son of the Rev. Thomas Barton, rector of Saint James's Episcopal church, is also entered under the list of subscribers from Pennsylvania. He was born in Lancaster, Pa., February 10, 1766, but at the time he subscribed to Wilson's Ornithology he resided in Philadelphia.

Nathaniel B. Boileau, secretary of the commonwealth, to whom reference was made in the earlier part of this sketch, was also a subscriber, though I am not able to state whether or not he was a citizen of Lancaster Borough at the time.

It might also be of interest to state that the Pennsylvania Legislature, which was in session in Lancaster when Wilson was in the town for a few days in February, 1810, subscribed for three copies of his monumental work.

Mr. Wilson died, August 23, 1813, at the early age of 47 years. His body was buried in the quaint graveyard of Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') church, at the foot of Washington avenue, Philadelphia. A sermon was preached in a block house on the site of this interesting old church as early as 1677. A white marble slab is over the Wilson grave, and bears the following inscription:

This Monument  
covers the remains of  
ALEXANDER WILSON,  
Author of the  
AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGY.  
He was born in Renfrewshire, Scotland,  
on the 6, July, 1766;  
Emigrated to the United States  
in the year 1794;  
And died in Philadelphia,  
of the dysentery,  
on the 23, August, 1813.  
Aged 47.  
Ingenio stat sine morte decus.

This is but a brief sketch of the humble weaver and poet of Paisley who in America had the inclination and the opportunity to study bird lore so sympathetically and so successfully that he will always be regarded as an authority on bird life in our country; but, better still, his remarkable accomplishments should ever prove a splendid incentive to our boys and girls to make the most of their opportunities and not to be overcome by difficulties and limited environments. His motto might well have been, as all young people's should be:—

"Let nothing discourage you;  
Never give up!"