

# Discovered! The First Engraving of an Audubon Bird

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It is both ironic and appropriate that John James Audubon (1785–1851), who spent much of his life struggling to achieve financial security, wrote that his first engraved illustration of a bird was on a piece of American paper money. Until now, despite repeated efforts by Audubon scholars to substantiate it, the artist's claim has lacked physical evidence, or a plausible explanation for its absence, raising doubts about whether such paper currency ever existed. Beginning in 1955, Audubon's devoted biographer Alice Ford began an unsuccessful, decade-long search for the referenced engraving in both the United States and Great Britain. In 1960, William H. Dillistin, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and a noted numismatic scholar, made his own systematic search for the Audubon bank note. Working at the behest of Princeton University, which was then organizing a

national exhibition on the artist's life and work, Dillistin was no more successful than Ford in tracking down the illusive currency. Audubon's more recent biographers (Ron Tyler, William Souder, and Richard Rhodes) also have searched in vain for the bank note Audubon mentioned. Unable to find the evidence of Audubon's claim, others may have dismissed it as a red herring, invented by Audubon (a frequent embellisher of his own achievements) to burnish his reputation in the lean years before publishing his landmark book, *The Birds of America* (1827–1838). But new research on nineteenth-century American banking and the engraving companies that furnished paper money at the time confirms the reliability of the artist's assertion and explains how forces beyond his control may have hidden Audubon's fledgling entry into the visual world of commerce.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Because Audubon's journal mentions creating his grouse design for a bank note "belonging to the state of New Jersey" (see footnote 2 for the source of this quote), our search began with an examination of New Jersey bank note collections and records. It is known that the state of New Jersey never issued any of its own circulating notes in the nineteenth century, so we assumed that Audubon must have meant that the bank note was issued for use in the state of New Jersey. When an exhaustive survey of this material failed to turn up a grouse illustration there, we expanded the scope of our search to include bank notes and scrip that circulated throughout all of the United States. This search was also unsuccessful at first. Finally, we focused our efforts on locating the few surviving sample sheets created by the printing firms with which Gideon Fairman was associated from 1824 on. This search was more productive, and eventually identified three sheets, produced between 1824 and 1830, in which the small running grouse image illustrated and discussed here appeared. The original grouse engraving is roughly 7/8 inches in width and 5/8 inches in height, including the bird's stylized grass background. The size of this image indicates that it was intended for use on a bank note between the side-by-side signatures of bank officers that generally appeared at the bottom of each bank note. On one sample sheet, two identical images of the grouse appear. The others contain one grouse each. As is typical, neither the artist nor the engraver is identified on any of the sheets. For the sources of Audubon's claim to have created the grouse image for a New Jersey bank note, see footnote 2. Francis Herrick is the first serious Audubon scholar to mention the illusive bank note in his classic two-volume biography of Audubon, Herrick, *Audubon the Naturalist: A History of His Life and Time* (New York, 1917), 1: 331. Beginning in 1955, Alice Ford made repeated searches of the Rathbone collections in Liverpool to locate the missing note (personal conversations prior to her death in 1997). In an e-mail message in response to Robert Peck's inquiry, Katy Hooper, at the University of Liverpool Library, confirmed this search when she wrote, "I'm afraid you are not the first person to ask about this, but no new information has emerged since Alice Ford corresponded with Mrs. R. Rathbone (Sybil Rathbone) in 1955-56 and 1965 during her research work on Audubon. She asked specifically about the bank note, mentioning the 1826 MS journal, and evidently received a disappointing reply. Alice Ford notes that curators at both the Smithsonian and The American Numismatic Society doubted that the bank note ever existed. The correspondence is listed at: RP XVB.2.91-95" (K. Hooper, pers. comm., Sept. 30, 2008). William Dillistin published his (negative) findings in Dillistin, "The World of John James Audubon: Catalogue of an Exhibition in the Princeton University Library, 15 May- 30 September, 1959," *Princeton University Chronicle* 21 (Autumn & Winter, 1960), 36-37. Audubon's sub-

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We know of Audubon's first venture into the realm of commercial illustration from only two sources; both are entries in the artist's private diaries. The first reference occurs on July 12, 1824, when Audubon, who was then seeking patronage for *The Birds of America* in Philadelphia, noted, "I drew for Mr. Fairman a small grouse to be put on a bank note belonging to the State of New-Jersey." Unfortunately, the original diary in which this record appears was lost in a fire and is known only through Audubon's granddaughter's edited transcription. The second, equally cryptic mention of the illustration occurs in the journal he kept while he was in England. Fortunately, this volume still exists. In an entry dated September 9, 1826, the artist mentions showing an example of his grouse-decorated bank note to William Rathbone (1787–1868), a prominent Liverpool merchant and ship owner whose friendship and support of Audubon did much to advance the artist's reputation and acceptance in England: "I remained the night at Wm. Rathbone's," Audubon recorded, "[and] presented him with a copy of Fairman's Engraving of [my] Bank Note Plate."<sup>2</sup>

The Mr. Fairman to whom Audubon refers was Gideon Fairman (1774–1827), a principal in the engraving firm of Fairman, Draper, Underwood & Co. of Philadelphia (1823–1830) that specialized in the

preparation of paper currency for financial institutions. It was Fairman who advised Audubon to seek the superior engraving capabilities in England for the publication of *The Birds of America*. Their brief interaction and its effect on Audubon was described by Audubon in his journal and has been well documented in the existing Audubon literature. Remaining unexamined until now is the paper trail that traces the influence Audubon had on Fairman and his company. A sample sheet of images suitable for the decoration of bank notes that has the imprint of Fairman, Draper, Underwood & Co. in the very year of the fateful Fairman-Audubon meeting (in 1824) serves as the baseline to document the offerings of the Fairman firm prior to Fairman's meeting with Audubon. It contains a selection of some complexly engraved numerals and geometric roundels that were specifically designed for usefulness and decoration as well as to discourage the counterfeiting of paper currency. It also contains classically draped figures, representing commerce, liberty, and the personification of America; small portraits of George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Sir Walter Raleigh; and a number of other allegorical vignettes. It includes seven stylized images of eagles but no grouse. This sheet would have been offered by Fairman to bank officials to help them select images to be used on bank notes printed by the Fairman firm. Such notes,

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sequent biographers, Ron Tyler (*Audubon's Great National Work*, Austin, TX, 1993), William Souder (*Under A Wild Sky*, New York, 2004), and Richard Rhodes (*John James Audubon: The Making of an American*, New York, 2004), were also unsuccessful in locating Audubon's first published bird illustration (R. Tyler, pers. comm., Feb. 13, 2009 and June 7, 2003; W. Souder, pers. comm., Feb. 13, 2009; R. Rhodes, pers. comm., Sept. 21, 2008). For a discussion of Audubon's original, large-format "double-elephant folio" of the birds of America (John James Audubon, *The Birds of America, from Drawings Made in the United States and Their Territories*, 4 vols., London, 1827-1838), see Waldemar H. Fries, *The Double Elephant Folio: The Story of Audubon's Birds of America* (Chicago, 1973); and Duff Hart-Davis, *Audubon's Elephant* (London, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> The first journal entry is quoted in Maria R. Audubon, ed., *Audubon and His Journals* (2 vols., New York, 1897), 1: 56-57. Unfortunately, the original journals from which the artist's granddaughter edited *Audubon and His Journals* were destroyed by fire shortly after their publication, so there is no way to verify the accuracy or completeness of this transcription. Audubon's original 1826 journal, in which the second reference appears, is one of very few Audubon journals to survive. Formerly owned by the famous book collector H. Bradley Martin (1906-1988), the diary was sold at auction by Christies on June 6, 1989 (lot #20). It is now in the collection of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, where the second passage was transcribed by Robert Peck in September 2008. A slightly different (somewhat inaccurate) transcription of it appears in Alice Ford, ed., *The 1826 Journal of John James Audubon* (Norman, OK, 1967; 2nd ed., New York, 1987), 178. Audubon sometimes referred to this family of birds as "grous" on the engraved legends for his plates in *The Birds of America*. For an exact transcription of the legends for each state of each plate in Audubon's book, see Susanne M. Low, *A Guide to Audubon's Birds of America* (New Haven, CT, 2002), especially 117 for a discussion of the Pinnated Grouse. For more on counterfeiting in nineteenth-century America, see Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).

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issued by a wide range of financial institutions, both state incorporated and privately operated, served as currency before the United States government established a centralized issuing program in 1863.<sup>3</sup>

A large number of companies vied for the lucrative business of engraving and printing paper money during the nineteenth century prior to the American Civil War. Fairman's firm (along with its successors) was one of the most successful of these, well known in the banking world for the high quality of the currency it produced. In order to maintain and increase its market share in that competitive business, the company offered a continually expanding variety of original vignettes from which its customers could choose.<sup>4</sup>

Whether the idea of using a grouse on a bank note was Fairman's or Audubon's, it is quite likely that the two men saw in each other an opportunity for mutual benefit. Fairman was constantly in search of new and distinctive designs, especially, it seems, those that reflected American themes, to offer his customers. Audubon, needing income, welcomed a chance to demonstrate his capabilities as an ornithological illustrator. In America, where success was (and often still is) measured by financial achievement, what better

way was there for a struggling artist to make his mark than on bank notes specifically created to be a tangible part of commerce?<sup>5</sup>

It is not certain how quickly Fairman was able to make the image of Audubon's sketch available to his customers in the banking world. Another Fairman, Draper, Underwood & Co. sample sheet of unknown date, but possibly as early as 1825 (see Figure 1), shows many of the same vignettes as were offered on its 1824 graphic menu. Included among the new offerings is a small engraving of a running grouse (see Figure 2). Could this be the illusive Audubon illustration? Several details strongly indicate that it was. Interestingly, the bird shown is not a Ruffed Grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*), a chicken-size game bird that, in Audubon's day, was commonly found in forested country throughout the eastern United States, Canada, and the Pacific Northwest. Instead, the bird depicted is a now extinct eastern subspecies of the Pinnated Grouse or Greater Prairie Chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*) called the Heath Hen, which then ranged in small numbers from North Carolina to Maine. Audubon probably saw and may have procured a male specimen of the species, with its distinctive courting feathers (called "pinnae") that hang from the side of its neck and the featherless air sacks on its throat, during one of his frequent col-

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<sup>3</sup>Fairman was born in Newton, Connecticut, but began his life-long career in engraving in Albany, New York. In 1811 he moved from Newburyport, Massachusetts, to Philadelphia, which was then the center of bank note engraving in the United States. In 1811, Fairman became a partner in the bank note firm of Murray, Draper, Fairman & Co., with offices at 47 Sansom Street. Later, in 1818, the name of the firm became Murray, Fairman & Co., with Jacob Perkins, an inventor of a piecemeal printing process called "siderography," as a silent partner. Fairman, Perkins, and others went to England in 1819 to solicit business, but when John Murray died on July 2, 1822, Fairman came home and formed Fairman, Draper & Co., at 45-47 George Street in Philadelphia. By 1823 the firm moved back to 47 Sansom Street under the name of Fairman, Draper, Underwood & Co. This was the company with which Fairman was associated when Audubon visited Philadelphia (and New Jersey) and provided Fairman with his drawing of a grouse (in 1824). Foster Wild Rice, "Antecedents of the American Bank Note Company of 1858," *The Essay Proof Journal* (New York, 1961), 18: 96 and 140; and Gene Hessler, *Engravers Line: An Encyclopedia of Paper Money & Postage Stamp Art* (New York, 1993), 116. It is important to keep in mind that the mid-nineteenth-century proliferation of state-charted banks, each issuing its own bank notes, grew from an interpretation of the U. S. Constitution, which bankers and legal scholars believed prohibited the Federal Government from circulating its own paper currency. The National Bank Act (ch. 58, 12 Stat. 665, Feb. 25, 1863) established a system of national charters for banks; it encouraged development of a national currency based on bank holdings of U.S. Treasury securities; and it also established the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency (OCC) as part of the Department of the Treasury. The law had defects and was replaced by the National Bank Act of 1864. For more on state and national bank notes of this period, see Herman E. Krooss, ed., *Documentary History of Banking and Currency in the United States* (4 vols., New York, 1969).

<sup>4</sup>For more on Fairman's place in the production of paper currency, see Mark D. Tomansko, *The Feel of Steel: The Art and History of Bank Note Engraving in the United States* (Newtown, PA, 2009), 19.

<sup>5</sup>For a discussion of Audubon's economic struggles, see Rhodes, *John James Audubon*

Photos courtesy of the Eric P. Newman Numismatic Education Society



Figure 1. Sample sheet issued by the firm of Fairman, Draper, Underwood & Co., showing Audubon's running grouse vignette at lower right; unknown date but possibly 1825.

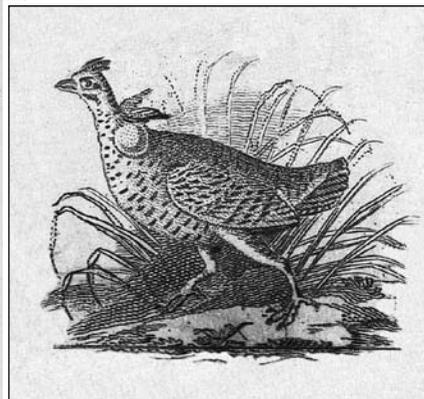


Figure 2: Detail of Audubon's running grouse vignette, from a Fairman, Draper, Underwood & Co. sample sheet.

the time of his meeting with Gideon Fairman that July. The bird is shown in a running posture that is almost identical to that used by Audubon to depict the female Wild Turkey in *The Birds of America* (plate 6) (see Figure 3). This turkey is based on a painting that Audubon had begun in 1820 and may well have been shown to Gideon Fairman at the time the two men were introduced by Audubon's patron Edward Harris.<sup>6</sup>

lecting trips in the mid-Atlantic states. He would have had such an opportunity during a trip up the Hudson River to Lake Erie and Niagara Falls which he made early in 1824, or in Pennsylvania or New Jersey closer to

Could Fairman have requested Audubon to draw this relatively unusual species and to put it into such an animated posture in order to help him catch the eye of his bank note customers? Might its ornithological complexity and specificity have been intended as a way of foiling counterfeiters? Or perhaps Audubon

<sup>6</sup>The Greater Prairie Chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*) now breeds in grasslands from North Dakota and northwest Minnesota south to northeast Colorado, northeast Oklahoma, southwest Missouri, and elsewhere. The Lesser Prairie Chicken (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*) breeds in southwestern Colorado and southwestern Kansas. An endangered race of this bird, Atwater's Prairie Chicken, occurs in Texas coastal prairies. The bird that Audubon drew, the so-called Heath Hen, became extinct in the early twentieth century. For more on the history and distribution of the Greater Prairie Chicken, the Lesser Prairie Chicken, and the Heath Hen, see Christopher Cokinos, *Hope Is the Thing with Feathers: A Personal Chronicle of Vanishing Birds* (New York, 2000); and M. A. Schroeder and L. A. Robb, "Greater Prairie Chicken," in *Birds of North America*, Vol. 1, ed. Alan Poole (Philadelphia, 1993), no. 36. Audubon used a pose similar to that of the Wild Turkey in his illustration of the Sharp-tailed Grouse (plate 382) in *The Birds of America*. According to Susanne Low, that painting was made some time between 1836 and 1838. See Low, *A Guide to Audubon's Birds*, 193.

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Photo courtesy of the Library, Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University



Figure 3. “Great American Hen & Young,” hand-colored engraving by William Lizars after John James Audubon, Plate VI in *The Birds of America* by John James Audubon (Edinburgh and London, 1827–1838). Note the running posture of the adult bird in this image, the painting for which was begun by Audubon in 1820. It was first published in 1827.

selected the species in an effort to set himself apart from more conventional illustrators who would be inclined to depict a more common bird in a static or stylized heraldic posture. The bird’s running posture, somewhat unusual in an avian illustration, shows the artist’s thorough knowledge of the species’ behavior. Since there is no further reference to the bank note illustration in Audubon’s writing and no known references to it in Fairman’s surviving correspondence, we may never know whose idea sparked the image or what discussions may have taken place between the two men about it. As it was, any species of bird other than an eagle was unusual for use in American bank note design in the 1820s. Bills of a slightly later date did incorporate waterfowl (see Figure 4) and other game or domestic birds (see Figure 5) but, for the time in which it was created, Audubon’s grouse stands out from the predictable array of patriotic symbols and

generic vignettes as a refreshing innovation.<sup>7</sup>

If Audubon hoped to enhance his reputation by being able to point to his handiwork on the paper currency of his adopted country, his aspirations were only partially fulfilled. His diary suggests that he had at least one such bank note on hand during his visit to Liverpool in 1826, but the question remains as to whether such a note was ever issued and why are there no known surviving examples of it today. There are two possible answers to this question. The simplest is that the bill Audubon was so proud to show to his English patrons was not an accepted or an issued bank note, but a sample mock-up or a proof created by Fairman to show to potential custom-

ers. Using a slightly skittish (running) grouse in the design of a bank note may have seemed too risky or unconventional for the conservative bankers who selected the vignettes to embellish their bills. Thus, the bird may have been dropped from the final composition, its place going to a more familiar, reassuring, or patriotic subject. The example Audubon showed to William Rathbone could have been given to the artist by Fairman as a thank-you for the submission of his sketch, or might have been given by Fairman to their mutual friend, Edward Harris, who, in turn, may have passed it on to Audubon for his interest and self-promotion. In either case, it is probable that only a very few examples of the New Jersey grouse bank note were printed.<sup>8</sup>

A second, more complicated scenario is that Audubon’s grouse-embellished bill was, in fact, circulated for

<sup>7</sup>After his search for the bank note on behalf of the Princeton University Library in 1960, William H. Dillistin concluded that the vignette most resembling a grouse to appear on any (surviving) nineteenth-century New Jersey bank note was a pair of quail (*Colinus virginianus*). This was issued in 1852 and was identical to a vignette on a Michigan bank note dated two years earlier. Dillistin stated that “it remains to be established that this drawing was made by Audubon” and concluded that, despite his exhaustive research, the “riddle of the Audubon grouse” remain unsolved. (Dillistin, W. H. [1959-60]. The world of John James Audubon. *Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 21[1-2], p. 37).

<sup>8</sup>The authors would like to acknowledge the assistance of Clemency Fisher at the Liverpool Museum, Timothy Parrott at Liverpool Libraries, and Katy Hooper and Maureen Watry at the University of Liverpool Library for their assistance in searching these Liverpool collections for Audubon’s grouse drawing and bank note.

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Figure 4. \$50 note printed by the American Bank Note Company (a successor to Fairman, Draper, Underwood & Co.) for the Merchants Planters Bank, Savannah, Georgia, 1860, showing waterfowl vignette.

Photo courtesy of the Eric P. Newman Numismatic Education Society



Figure 5. \$2 note printed by the American Bank Note Company (a successor to Fairman, Draper, Underwood & Co.) for the Egg Harbor Bank, New Jersey, 1861, showing bobwhite quail vignette.

a short period, but then was intentionally withdrawn and destroyed after some fraudulent alterations of similar bills from another bank caused the legitimate ones to be rejected by the public. The explanation for such a scenario runs as follows: At almost the same time that Audubon created his grouse image for Fairman, the independent State Bank (of New Jersey) at Trenton employed the firm of Fairman, Draper, Underwood & Co. to design and print many of its bills. That Trenton bank began to fail in July, 1825 and its bank notes were deemed worthless by July, 1826. Meanwhile, The State Bank (of New Jersey) at Camden, a totally separate and fiscally sound institution, also issued many bills designed and printed by Fairman, Draper, Underwood & Co. The Camden bills were the same size and somewhat similar in appearance to those issued by the Trenton institution. It appears that forgers, taking advantage of the financial crisis at the Trenton bank, acquired worthless Trenton bank notes and altered them by eradicating the word TRENTON and replacing it with the word CAMDEN in order

to pass them fraudulently to an unsuspecting public. This was a nefarious practice that was common in the days of state-chartered and private banking, when the public was not thoroughly familiar with bank notes from many other banks. Such alterations, when skillfully done, were difficult to detect and far quicker and easier to make than wholly counterfeit bills. They were relatively easy to pass off in small transactions, for they appeared to be backed by the full credit of the solvent bank whose name they appeared to bear. At least an adequate number of altered Trenton-to-Camden notes survive to confirm that such a fraud did occur. Although Audubon was almost certainly unaware of the financial crisis in Trenton, it may have had an impact on his earliest published image of a bird.<sup>9</sup>

With a large number of altered, worthless Trenton bills in circulation, officers of the Camden bank may have tried to protect its good name and to protect the unsuspecting public from succumbing to the fraud by

<sup>9</sup>James A. Haxby, *Standard Catalog of United States Obsolete Bank Notes, 1782-1866* (Iola, WI, 1988), 1269. See also Q. David Bowers, *Obsolete Paper Money Issued by Banks in the United States, 1782-1866: A Study and Appreciation for the Numismatist and Historian* (Atlanta, GA, 2006).

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withdrawing from circulation and destroying its own genuine Camden small-denomination bank notes in the course of doing business.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately for historians (and Audubon), the Camden bank's eradication policy may have been so successful that no small-denomination bills created by Fairman's firm for the Camden bank between 1824 and 1827 have survived. It is therefore impossible to know at this time whether the Camden bank notes ever included Audubon's grouse. We do know that Fairman's firm continued to offer the grouse to its other customers before 1830, however, because a Fairman, Draper, Underwood & Co. sample sheet dated in that year includes that bird, along with other more traditional embellishments (see Figure 6). When an engraving company went out of business or changed ownership, as Fairman's did in 1830, it was common for the metal plates used to create the most popular images to be passed on or sold to another company. For this reason, some of the same vignettes can be found on bank notes issued by different institutions in different parts of the country over a period of many decades.

The earliest surviving example of a bank note bearing the "Audubon" grouse (i.e., the running pinnated grouse that appears on Fairman's proof sheet dated 1830) was created (as a sample only) for the Bank of Norwalk (Ohio) that operated from 1833–1849 (see Figure 7a and 7b). The \$3 note was engraved by Draper, Underwood, Bald and Spencer, a successor company to Fairman, Draper, Underwood & Co., from which it acquired many of the vignettes, illustrations,

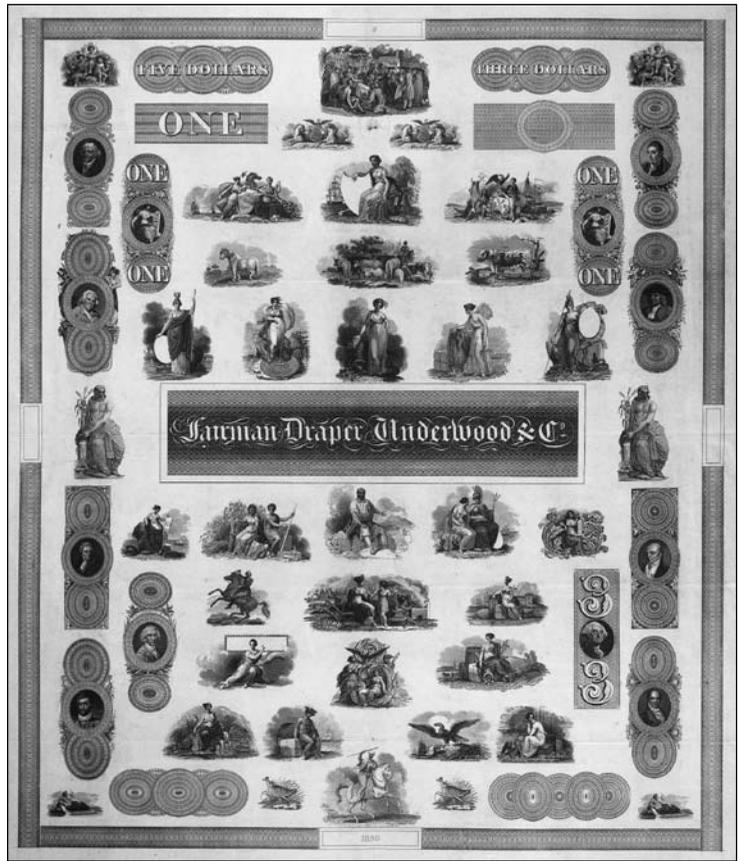


Figure 6. Sample sheet issued by the firm of Fairman, Draper, Underwood & Co., 1830, showing two vignettes of Audubon's running grouse.

and embellishments used to produce bank notes. It is known only in proof form, not being signed or issued. It has plate letter "C," indicating that a plate of four notes was engraved.<sup>11</sup>

The same "Audubon" grouse appears on two undated developmental proofs for a \$5 note, also created by Draper, Underwood, Bald and Spencer, for The Bridgeport (Connecticut) Bank (see Figure 8a and 8b). On both Bridgeport designs, as on the sample note for the Bank of Norwalk, the grouse appears at the bottom center of the bill separating areas reserved

<sup>10</sup>Hodges & Co., *New Bank Note Delineator; A Complete Spurious and Altered Bill Detector, Giving Correct Printed Descriptions of All The Genuine Notes of Every Denomination, of All Banks Doing Business Throughout the United States and Canada* (New York, 1856), 265.

<sup>11</sup>Wendell Wolka, *A History of Nineteenth Century Ohio Obsolete Bank Notes and Scrip* (Greenwood, IN, 2004), 639. Some vignettes and insignia are mentioned, but no grouse or designs between signature spaces.

Photos courtesy of the Eric P. Newman Numismatic Education Society



Figure 7a. Unfinished design for \$3 note for the Bank of Norwalk, Ohio, incorporating Audubon's running grouse vignette.



Figure 7b. Detail of Audubon's running grouse from the Bank of Norwalk \$3 note.



Figure 8a. Preliminary layout for \$5 note design printed by Draper, Underwood, Bald & Spencer for the Bridgeport Bank, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

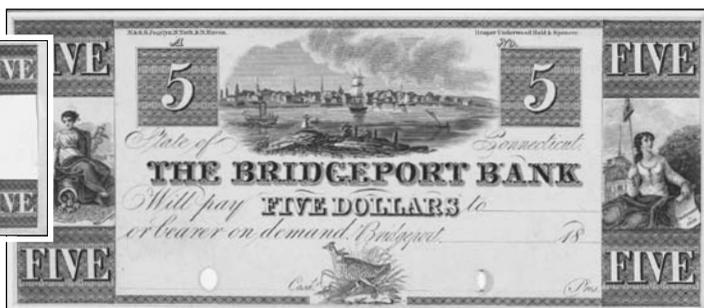


Figure 8b. More fully designed layout for the Bridgeport Bank \$5 note.

Photos courtesy of the Eric P. Newman Numismatic Education Society

for official signatures. The developmental proof has a view of Bridgeport and several counters (denominational insignia) but no engraved text. The fully engraved proof has an additional bank note engraver's name (N. and S.S. Jocelyn, N. York and N. Haven) and a plate letter A.<sup>12</sup>

Because the Norwalk and Bridgeport bank notes incorporating "Audubon's" grouse vignette survive

only in proof and developmental form, it is unknown whether any such final proof design was accepted for general issue. Once again, Audubon may have been denied numismatic immortality because of the nontraditional subject of his design. If the availability of the grouse vignette was ever advertised to potential customers, the identity of the artist who created the running grouse would obviously not have been mentioned.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>The Bridgeport Bank was incorporated in 1806 and operated until 1865.

<sup>13</sup>At the time of Audubon's submission to Gideon Fairman and for the decades that followed until individual banks ceased issuing their own bank notes after the Civil War, newspapers, pamphlets, and other publications gave detailed descriptions of the vignettes and other insignia that appeared on bank notes in order to help the public to distinguish between genuine, counterfeit, spurious, or altered notes. Some lists only pointed out the banks and denominations where fraudulent notes were known to exist. By 1855 about 10,000 bank notes of different design were in circulation in the United States. Lists with simple descriptions of some elements on genuine circulating notes were published, but rarely illustrated. No mention of a grouse, pinnated or otherwise, appears on any of these lists. For those studying and collecting bank notes of state-chartered banks, David C. Wismer and other researchers began publishing descriptive lists of issued bills in the 1920s. Subsequent New Jersey bank note publications did not mention or show any with an image of a grouse. It was not until 1988 that Haxby's comprehensive list of American bank notes (with illustrations) appeared. Buried among the thousands of images of obsolete bank notes was one unissued \$5 bank note of the Bank of Bridgeport Connecticut (described above). Its significance has remained unrecognized until now. Haxby, *Standard Catalog*.

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For reasons we may never know, Audubon's grouse does not appear to have survived as a decorative offering past the 1840s. A careful search of paper currency printed by Fairman, Draper, Underwood & Co., its successor firms, and even its competitors, has failed to locate any other notes bearing the distinctive image. Like the original drawing on which they were based, the bank note plates of Audubon's grouse may have survived for a while and then been lost or destroyed, thus ending the artist's brief entry into the footnotes of numismatic history.<sup>14</sup>

Fortunately for Audubon, by the time his grouse disappeared from the vignette offerings for America's regional currency, the once struggling artist had earned enough grouse-free money of his own to claim his place as America's most revered, beloved — and financially successful — naturalist. By 1840 Audubon had made such strides as an artist that he might have considered the simple sketch of 1824 inadequate and even embarrassing. By then he had many greater accomplishments to his credit, including four hundred and thirty-five hand-colored, life-size “double elephant folio” illustrations of the birds of his adopted country. Among these was a dramatic depiction of the same species he had once illustrated for Gideon Fairman. The engraved plate of the Greater Prairie Chicken (what Audubon called the “Pinnated Grouse”), issued as plate 186 in *The Birds of America* (see Figure 9), demonstrates the work of a fully mature artist at the height of his powers. Audubon's knowledge as an ornithologist, confidence as an artist, and deservedly acclaimed ability to integrate several birds into a single composition are all well reflected in this animated design, some-

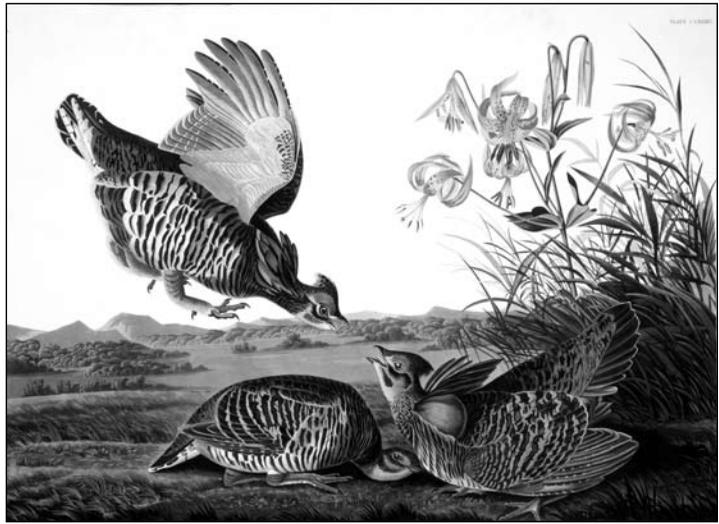


Figure 9. “Pinnated Grouse,” hand-colored engraving by Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon, Plate CLXXXVI in *The Birds of America* by John James Audubon (Edinburgh and London, 1827–1838). The original painting for this may have been made by Audubon in 1824, based on the eastern subspecies of the Greater Prairie Chicken known as the Heath Hen. The image was published in 1834, a decade after Audubon gave his drawing of the same species to Gideon Fairman. In less than a century, due to hunting and habitat loss, the Heath Hen subspecies would be extinct.

thing he did not attempt in his sketchy bank note drawing of 1824. The picture created for his great book on birds documents both the species' habitat and characteristic mating behavior as no previous artist had done. It reveals in one scene what Audubon knew to be the most important aspects of the bird's life cycle, and yet, for all of the scientific information conveyed, the artist has not compromised the visual impact of the picture. Despite the differences in style, intent, and execution between Audubon's running-grouse bank note design and his more sophisticated treatment of the same species in *The Birds of America*, the artist's diary entries, reinforced by the surviving proof sheets from Fairman's engraving company, help to confirm that both illustrations were created by the same hand.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Mark Tomasko owns a print from the American Bank Note Co. archives of unknown date (after 1858) containing the grouse image and two other small vignettes. We are indebted to him for sharing this with us and for his review of this essay. Thanks too to Ron Tyler, Director of the Amon Carter Museum, and Richard Rhodes for their helpful comments.

<sup>15</sup>Susanne Low speculates that the pinnated grouse painting that was used as an illustration in *The Birds of America* might have been made at the same time as the Fairman bank note illustration. The two images could have been based on the same specimen or field observation, but the more sophisticated treatment of the book illustration suggests that, at the very least, the image was reworked by Audubon closer to its publication date in 1834. See Low, *A Guide to Audubon's Birds*, 117.

## Discovered! The First Engraving of an Audubon Bird

Whether or not Audubon's running grouse was ever used on widely issued American currency, its existence on Fairman's design sheets and on at least the one sample bank note that Audubon possessed, may have helped the artist at a critical moment in his life. His ability to show a U.S. bank note, printed with an illustration he had created, to an influential merchant like William Rathbone may have enabled Audubon to establish his professional and artistic credibility at just the right time in his remarkable career. Through Rathbone's extensive introductions, Audubon was able to meet most of the leading lights of Liverpool and make the essential leap from provincial curiosity to lionized darling of the British establishment. The social and artistic acceptance that Rathbone helped him to achieve soon turned into financial support. With this he could take the next critical step in his life's ambition to create a book on America's native birds. Following Gideon Fairman's advice, and with help from his new friends in Liverpool, Audubon sought out and successfully established working relationships with two of the best engravers in England. They, in turn, insured the successful creation of what was — and remains — arguably the most beautiful natural history book ever published.<sup>16</sup>

Like so many of the plates from *The Birds of America*, Audubon's "Pinnated Grouse" is today widely admired by bird lovers and print collectors around the world. It sells for prices that would have astounded Audubon and his contemporaries. Sadly, the species that inspired the plate is now extirpated from most of its original range and struggling to survive even in areas of protected habitat. Its close relative, the Heath Hen,

the bird that inspired the bank note drawing Audubon made for Gideon Fairman, has now completely vanished. In less than two hundred years, this once rare but now extinguished subspecies has moved from a visual guarantee of fiscal stability (through Fairman's printing) to a symbol of human avarice and destruction. Now that it has been rediscovered, and credited to the artist who made it, Audubon's grouse vignette can be added to the visual contributions of America's best known painter of wild birds. In a way he never intended, this simple illustration of a running bird serves as a metaphor for Audubon's early struggle for artistic and financial success. It also represents a small but powerful symbol of the wild America with which Audubon's name and legacy will be forever linked.

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<sup>16</sup>For a discussion of the Rathbone family's critical support in launching Audubon's career in England, see Herrick, *Audubon the Naturalist*, 1: 352-53; Hart-Davis, *Audubon's Elephant*, 18-19; Souder, *Under a Wild Sky*, 198-99; Rhodes, *John James Audubon*, 251-55; Alexander B. Adams, *John James Audubon: A Biography* (New York, 1966), 283-84; and Alice Ford, *John James Audubon: A Biography* (New York, 1988), 178-81. The engravers Audubon employed were William Home Lizars (1788-1859) in Edinburgh and Robert Havell, Jr. (1793-1878) in London. For more on them, see the biographies above.