
By Witmer Stone

Charles J. Pennock was an ornithologist of standing before the Delaware Valley Club was organized and author of a list of the birds of Chester County, Pennsylvania. Curiously enough, however, he was not acquainted with any of those responsible for the organization, having been more closely associated with the coterie of bird students located at West Chester than with those of the Philadelphia area.

I first met him at the meeting of the American Ornithologists’ Union in New York City in November 1889, the first that either of us had attended. The Club was established in the following year and in 1895 when a Corresponding Membership was provided Pennock was among the first to be chosen. He at once became deeply interested in our work and, in spite of the thirty mile journey from his home in Kennett Square, he was a regular attendant at the meetings. He became an Active Member in 1898 and Vice President in the following year, serving as President from 1901 to 1903. He had become an Associate of the American Ornithologists’ Union in 1888 and a Member in 1901.

Pennock came from an old Chester County, Pennsylvania, family, son of Samuel and Deborah Pennoek and was born in Kennett Square, which was always his home, on November 18, 1857. His father was noted as an inventor and manufacturer of agricultural machinery and was President of the American Road Machine Company of Kennett Square. Charles entered into this business for a time but later engaged in a variety of occupations, the raising of carnations, the lumber and coal business, and a fiber manufacturing project and finally opened a real estate and insurance office. He was actively interested in local politics and served as Chief Burgess of the town and as Justice of the Peace. He was twice married and had two sons and two daughters.

During his earlier life his father moved temporarily to Ithaca, N. Y., in order that his three sons might attend Cornell University, and after that Charles was employed in
the museum at Princeton University for a short time under the noted ornithologist William E. D. Scott. He was also interested in outdoor sports, especially baseball, and played on the college nine both at Cornell and at Princeton. His death occurred at his home in Kennett Square on August 20, 1935.

Such is a brief outline of his business and family life.

From early boyhood, however, Pennock’s absorbing interest was bird study, more particularly the collecting of eggs, the form of ornithology that in past years started so many of us on our careers. Later he learned to prepare skins and throughout his life the collecting of specimens and the attendant elements of trade and exchange, which were especially characteristic of oölogy, was his absorbing hobby. He scoured the woods and fields of his home country for rare specimens, becoming expert in the location of nests of the Great Horned Owl; he continued his field work at Ithaca and was fortunate enough to find a nest of the Passenger Pigeon. While at Princeton he broadened his knowledge by his association with Scott. In later life he became absorbed in the collecting of books and pamphlets relating to American ornithology, his aim being to secure as many as possible of the publications mentioned in Coues’ bibliography appended to his classic “Birds of the Colorado Valley.”

Besides Scott, Pennock early made the acquaintance of Dr. B. Harry Warren, later state ornithologist of Pennsylvania, while his exchange of birds’ eggs brought him in touch with ornithologists in various parts of the country with whom he maintained a correspondence, while he later met many of them at meetings of the American Ornithologists’ Union which he attended with great regularity.

Living close to the Delaware State line, Pennock was as well acquainted with residents of that state as he was with Pennsylvanians, and he purchased a farm at Odessa where he carried on field work although he never lived there. This led to his appointment as Ornithologist of the Delaware State Board of Agriculture, a purely honorary office, and in this capacity he published several pamphlets on economic ornith-
ology. His other publications comprise, in addition to the Chester County list (1886), short papers and notes in ‘The Auk,’ ‘Wilson Bulletin’ and ‘Cassinia’ as well as longer lists in the last journal of birds observed on various excursions in Delaware and a report on the bird life of this state in conjunction with Samuel N. Rhoads, in ‘The Auk.’

Pennock had made winter trips to the South prior to his association with the Delaware Valley Club, especially to Thomasville, Ga., and St. Marks, Fla., and later to Pinehurst, N. C., while his real estate interests in the development of a summer resort at LaPorte, in the mountains of Pennsylvania, gave him opportunities for the study of bird life in this region. No matter where he went or what his business interests, there was always the fascination of bird study underlying more serious occupations.

It was my privilege to accompany Pennock on winter excursions to Delaware City in search of Lapland Longspurs and on spring trips to Marydel, on the Delaware-Maryland line, where Prothonotary and Cerulean Warblers were to be found, and his enthusiasm in field work was as contagious as his personality was delightful. He was also a constant visitor to the Academy of Natural Sciences of which he was a life member and was an active member of all entertainment committees when the American Ornithologists’ Union met in Philadelphia.

A curious incident in Pennock’s life was his disappearance following a meeting of the Club in May, 1913, when, apparently suffering from some form of amnesia, instead of taking the night train for his home he travelled south to St. Marks, Florida, where he had visited years before. Here with his beard removed and under the name of John Williams he lived for six years, leaving no trace whatever of his whereabouts. He found employment in keeping the accounts of a local fishing company and became a prominent citizen serving as County Commissioner and Notary Public, while he drilled a local company for service in the World War. Even under these circumstances he continued his study and collecting of birds and eggs; published short articles in the ‘Wilson
Bulletin'; and submitted reports to the U. S. Biological Survey. One of the latter being forwarded for publication in 'The Auk,' of which I was then editor, was recognized as being in Pennock's handwriting, confirming an earlier suspicion as to the identity of "John Williams" based upon the character of some of his published notes and upon the sudden appearance of such a trained ornithologist at such an out of the way place as St. Marks—a man of whom nothing was previously known. This identification led to a visit by one of his family and he returned home.

During the subsequent years of his life Pennock attended occasional meetings of the Club but his affiliation was mainly with the West Chester Bird Club which was more accessible to him.

Accompanied by his wife he spent his winters in Florida, mainly at Punta Gorda, although he explored the Everglades and made a boat trip to Cape Sable to obtain specimens of the Cape Sable Sparrow.

Pennock's original collection of birds and eggs was presented to the Academy of Natural Sciences, during his absence, in accordance with his expressed wishes, and the same institution secured some of the material later obtained in Florida.

There have been few more active ornithologists in Pennsylvania than Charles J. Pennock and it is to be regretted that the numerous and varied business activities that marked his life prevented a closer attention to ornithological research, which would undoubtedly have yielded rich returns.

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**Note:** Pennock's first wife was Nellie Phillips; they had three children, Margaret, Richard, and Samuel. His second wife (and surviving widow) is Mary Scarlett Pennock; they had one child, Jean. Pennock himself was the second of three children, his older brother being named Frederick M. and his younger one Theodore.