Digitizing the Papers of Graceanna Lewis, Ornithologist and Activist

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Quaker naturalist and social reformer Graceanna Lewis (1821–1912) knew what it meant to have clipped wings. Lewis was a respected ornithologist and published several articles about birds (e.g., Lewis 1868, 1870, 1871). She also earned membership at the Academy of Natural Sciences (ANSP) and her scientific illustrations won prizes at national exhibitions. Nevertheless, she lived during a time when women, with few exceptions, were not accepted as professional scientists. Lewis longed for the title of professor, but she collided with the glass ceiling (Warner 1979, Bonta 1985, Stroud 2013). Thanks to a collaborative digitization project among Philadelphia-area libraries and archives, materials documenting this woman’s scientific and personal life are now available online for wider study.

Though Lewis always had an interest in ornithology and other areas of natural history, she did not come into her own in the field until later in life. The catalyst was John Cassin, curator of birds at the ANSP, who introduced her to Philadelphia’s scientific community and gave her access to the ANSP bird collection for research. Lewis met Cassin around 1862, and by 1864 she relocated from Chester County to Philadelphia to pursue ornithology more regularly. She impressed Cassin so much that he named a species of South American bird, now known as White-edged Oriole (*Icterus graceanneae*), in her honor: “This handsome little bird I have named in honor of my highly esteemed friend, Miss Grace Anna Lewis, of this city; accomplished as a teacher of Natural History, conscientious in all social duties and relations, faithful in her friendships” (Cassin 1867). The following year, Lewis published a small pamphlet entitled *Natural History of Birds* (1868) which was intended to be the first of a series. However, for several reasons, Lewis’s publication faltered.

Cassin died suddenly in 1869, and without his support Lewis found herself somewhat adrift in the male space of the ANSP. Although she was elected a member in 1870, a prestigious honor, by 1872 she returned to her family farm, apparently in poor mental health. Lewis continued to support herself through scientific lectures, illustrations, and articles for popular magazines, but money was tight.

In 1878 she applied for a position teaching natural history at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, NY, but was turned down despite recommendations from Spencer Fullerton Baird (1823–1887), ornithologist and secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, and Maria Mitchell (1818–1889), eminent astronomer and professor at Vassar College. Instead the position went to a man, and Lewis believed that she was passed over in part because of her gender. In 1883 she accepted a less prestigious teaching position at the Foster School in Clifton, NY, but she did not remain there long. In 1885, thanks to the generosity of her foster daughter, Lewis retired to Media, PA, where she became active at the Delaware County Institute of Science, an institution founded by Cassin, and devoted herself to research, writing, and illustration. She remained there in a house on Gayley St. until her death at the age of 90, in early 1912.

Many of Lewis’s personal papers are now held at Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore College (FHL), Swarthmore, PA, and are currently being digitized as part of the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries’ “In Her Own Right” project (inherownright.org). This initiative celebrates the anniversary of women’s suffrage by digitizing materials about women’s activism between 1820 and 1920. Digital images of Lewis’s papers in FHL have been uploaded to Swarthmore’s digital image repository (triptych.swarthmore.edu) and can be viewed by searching for “Graceanna Lewis.”

Some of the scanned materials are of interest to local ornithologists, including letters with biographical information about Lewis and some of her watercolor illustrations (e.g., Figure 1). For example, a letter that Lewis wrote in 1877 to her sister’s young grandchildren...
in West Vincent Township (Chester Co., PA) includes a charming description of Common Grackles (Quiscalus quiscula) and Bobolinks (Dolichonyx oryzivorus):

“I must tell you about a great flock of Blackbirds which came into the yard a day or two ago. They had no red on their wings, so I knew they were not swamp blackbirds. They were Crow Blackbirds. Some people call them Grackles. They eat corn, and if such a flock as that was to alight on a corn field, they would eat as much corn in an hour as would feed my nine little chickens all winter. Another time I saw some flocks of Reed Birds. These were little brown mottled birds.... In the Spring these birds are black and cream color and ... are called Bob-o-links.... In the fall they lose their bright feathers and look rusty brown, when they come to us in flocks to get seeds as they do now. They go up north and build nests and lay eggs and hatch their little ones, but not so far north as the Eider Ducks. They do not like very hot nor very cold weather, so they go about half way between.”

This letter and many more concerning Lewis’s scientific and humanitarian work are now available for anyone interested in learning more about this fascinating woman. These materials complement those held at the Delaware County Institute of Science, including her essay “The Cassin Homestead.”

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**Figure 1.** Brown thrasher (Toxostoma rufum) painted by Graceanna Lewis, date unknown. “Harporhynchus Rufus. Brown Thrush” (A00183400). Lewis-Fussell Family Papers, SFHL-RG5-087, Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA. The painting is a copy of the plate from Wilson’s *American Ornithology.*

**Literature Cited**


Lewis-Fussell Family Papers, SFHL-RG5-087. Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA.


