

BY DAVID RUTTER



An American Spring

WHEN JOHN JAMES AND LUCY FELL IN LOVE,
AMERICA'S SPRING TOOK WING

H HE NEVER SPOKE ENGLISH until she taught him to say “I love you.” She never spoke French until he taught her to whisper “Je t’aime.”

He was 18, handsome, rugged, and smart. He painted, played the violin and flute, danced gracefully, and was a master fencer. He also was a crack shot who eventually wore buckskins to claim his artistic personality as “The American Woodsman.”

She was 16, lovely, studious, educated, born to English gentry before immigrating to America, and was an exceptionally grounded, mature person.

They were very smart kids. They flirted. They were a match. And then, as nature inevitably suggests, they were in love.

It was spring, the perfect moment in the perfect place to share a rapturous devotion. They were young ingénues thrown together by history

and captured by circumstance.

Along one path of consideration, the nation can define itself by the great loves that dominated their eras as much as the great events of those days. History is the story of people living extraordinary lives.

America first adored the Colonial love story of John and Abigail Adams. They were the first of America’s beloved national couples. We had shunned royalty, but the young nation greeted them with the same reverence as if they wore crowns. But then another couple ascended the stage and presented themselves. And they were the grandest mates of their era.

She was Lucy Bakewell of Derbyshire, England, and then the rolling farm valleys and woods of Pennsylvania. Her family’s Flatford Ford farm

20 miles northwest of Philadelphia stood next to the undulating hills of his father’s farm—the 284 acres of Mill Grove.

His father had been a rambunctious, rich French sea captain who sought out America to build a new life and, not coincidentally, save his son from being conscripted into Napoleon’s army. His dad forged his son’s passport for the trip, thus making his son the most famous undocumented alien in American history.

The boy was baptized at 16 as Jean Jacques Rabin LaForest (or sometimes LaForet) Fougere. His face, voice, and soaring dramatic persona were straight out of “Les Miserables” and the French Revolution.

Had you asked him then, he would have pronounced his surname “Ahh-doo-bohn.”

Over the course of what would become a four-decade marriage, they were the defining young American lovers who grasped fame by surviving personal hardship and tragedy to triumph. They belong to history now—just faces and names in old books—but they were real humans with amazing hearts. They were what America was.

Consider that it is 1803, and they were just beginning to share life as was the nation.

The Audubons, as with their country, had never learned what was impossible. So they, as did the nation, came to see there were no limits except those that human nature imposed. He had stopped calling himself Jean-Jacque. He was



Above: Lucy Bakewell Audubon and John James Audubon

an American now, not French. Americans had started to think of themselves as Americans. We were here to stay.

Now he would be John James Audubon, who would make himself the greatest American naturalist of all time, and the artist who defined for the entire world that America's young heart thumped to a wild, but free, frontier rhythm. Their spirit was as rambunctious as the country. When they met, America had only 6 million people inside its frontier nation boundaries, and a million were slaves.

But the fame John James Audubon achieved as America's first great natural scientist was only partly his. He was pretentious, vain, theatrically grandiose, but also deeply fearful he could never be as great as he hoped to be. He never trusted his brilliance, which was unmatched.

He desired fame and sought it. But he never quite trusted that he deserved it. He trusted her, only her.

He had been prone to deep despondencies during his many questing separations from Lucy—long expeditions to capture and study birds. The darkness had

threatened to thwart him. But she would not let that happen and buoyed him relentlessly. He was often self-inflated, but told her in his quiet, desperate moments that his only real strength and reality in life was her.

"My dearest La Foret," she would say to him with his private name.

The vast memoirs, letters, and journals written by both of them—often to each other—make clear that Lucy Bakewell was the heart and sinew of a frontier family that allowed his skill to capture the world's attention. His 435 paintings of American birds still define modern scientific observation. He had immense, self-shaped talent, but she was the brains of the partnership. And perhaps the heart.

She constructed and sustained a resolute family, nurtured the relationship through trauma, became a famed teacher in Louisiana, and paid for her husband's quest for immortality

while he was away seeking that fame. Without knowing her, you would not understand John James Audubon. As he once said, "With her, am I not always rich?" The question answered itself.

The arrival of spring celebrates the annual restatement of human hope, and also honors the power of love. That devotion drove great achievement in both the Audubons.

When they met, it was America's spring. We were an impossibly young country then, although time has obscured the many other ways we were a youthful, impish sprite of a nation. Even by 1820, nearly 67 percent of America was age 20 or younger.

In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson had just dispatched Lewis and Clark to explore the route west. Jefferson also had just spent \$15 million to buy 828,000 square miles of the Louisiana Territory from France, and he wanted a better understanding of what he'd bought.

It was spring then, as it is now.



TAKING A CHANCE ON LOVE

Lucy Bakewell's family was not happy. She loved John James, but he spent all his time in the woods sketching and cataloging images of birds and animals. And killing birds, because there were no binoculars or photography and, to accurately capture wildlife required killing it. He ate most of what he killed. It was the way of things then. To Lucy's family, that was a hobby, and hardly a career to stabilize Lucy's life. But they reluctantly relented, because Lucy would not have it otherwise.

He was 20 and she 18 when they wed, and they set off on their life adventure almost immediately. They sailed down the Ohio River and set up a general store in Louisville, Ky., and then sailed again to set up new commerce in Henderson, Ky. It was crude and uncivilized.

He loved the wild frontier and the woods. She despised it. No libraries. No orchestras.

love
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And her husband was gone for long interludes into the woods to grow his already spectacular skill in painting wild creatures. He sold hardware to make money, but his soul was in the forests. She steeled herself to their differences and adapted.

They had four children, but the frontier often was randomly cruel to families. People died quickly and inexplicably from invisible maladies. Daughter Lucy died of a fever at 2, and Rose perished shortly after her birth. Two sons survived to adulthood. And then the financial Panic of 1819 bankrupted their gristmill partnership and sent them into bankruptcy. He was jailed briefly for unpaid debts.

Ninety percent of businesses in trans-Appalachia went bankrupt that year, oddly enough because of an immature country's immature monetary system. The banks called in all their loans to meet a demand of the central bank for specie—gold and silver—to pay France the final installment on that \$15 million Louisiana Purchase. One was John James Audubon. France had caught up to him, after all.

It was a deeply traumatic, humiliating pain for both because, aside from the financial hardship, it seemed to validate her family's suspicions of John James as an intemperate eccentric. Lucy suffered from the gossip and whispers about his unfitnes.

She would have none of that. Her faith in him was boundless. It was then Lucy decided that if her husband would become famous for his rapturous wildlife art, he must now allow the obsession to seize all of his attention. He must travel, paint, grow and build his reputation. He must start his epic.

By 1825, he had produced a collection of 435 virtually life-size portraits of American birds that would become his masterpiece, "The Birds of America." Contemporary naturalists were stunned by his achievement. He pictured animals in their natural state with an undefined but obvious personality.

He had not only found how to portray American nature in exquisite precision, he had written long treatises on their personalities and life patterns. To publish such works would require him to find the greatest color printers and publishers in Europe. America had no one capable of reproducing 2-by-3-foot watercolor originals on hand-painted copper plates.

On the day he left on the last great, compelling solo odyssey of his life, Audubon wept, only to be consoled by Lucy. He arrived in England broke, so

he spent his time painting for cash every noble person he could enlist in England.

The books he would publish would required a fabulously expensive \$1,000 price tag—a modern equivalent of \$100,000—for each four-volume "elephant portfolio." He turned his charming Gallic affectations into a magnetic selling art form. Only nobles, libraries, and governments could afford them. To get such works published on copper lithographs would require he raise the modern equivalent of \$2 million. He did.

He cast a spell over Europe. Edinburgh engraver William Lizars had engraved many bird illustrations when Audubon presented his portfolio in 1826. Lizars' first response was, "My God, I never saw anything like this before!"

But Audubon grew deeply fearful. Letters from Lucy had become progressively darker and



more foreboding. He had never quite appreciated how hard she worked to maintain the family in his absence. Or perhaps how much she had suffered.

She founded two schools for daughters of Louisiana plantation owners and reconstructed a living by instructing them not only on domestic arts, but writing, literature, math, and science. She had become as revered in educational circles as had he in natural science. But she knew he had become famous in England. He was a handsome, vain man surrounded by rich admirers. Did he still love her? She could not tell, though he always had written passionate love letters.

He, in turn, was deeply worried because he could not triumph in life without her. What

would be the point? Fame without her love was meaningless.

They had been apart for three years while he built the fame that still endures in museums, parks and scientific foundations, plus eventually the enduring financial fortune that went with it. Though there had been hundreds of long, intimate letters, those words seemed too thin to sustain their passion. A letter from New Orleans would take three months to reach England. Three months for a response. He would write three letters every day plus a journal for her.


But time and distance can doom passion. They had not heard each other's voices for a thousand days. John James feared that she had invested her heart so deeply in the school that she would never leave it to be with him in England. He remained a man deeply in love. Something had to be done.

Finally, in 1829, fearful that he gained the fame he so desired but lost her, Audubon simply put the work of producing his book in the hands of friends, jumped on a ship, and sailed to New York. Virtually without pause, he grabbed a stage coach to Pittsburgh, took a steamboat down the Ohio and the Mississippi to the steamboat landing at Bayou Sarah, borrowed a horse in the middle of the night, rode to Lucy's school, pushed open the door just at dawn and, in his words: "I pronounced her name gently, she saw me, and the next moment I held her in my arms. Her emotion was so great I feared I had acted rashly, but tears relieved our hearts, once more we were together."

Word swept up and down the Mississippi River coasts of Louisiana. He was back.

They soon sailed back to England together, and lived out a devoted marriage of 43 years. They never again would part.

He had taught her to say "Je t'aime." She had taught him "I love you."

It was spring then as it now, and they had always been in love. 



David Rutter is a frequent contributor to *Quintessential Barrington*. (Audubon images: Library of Congress Archives)

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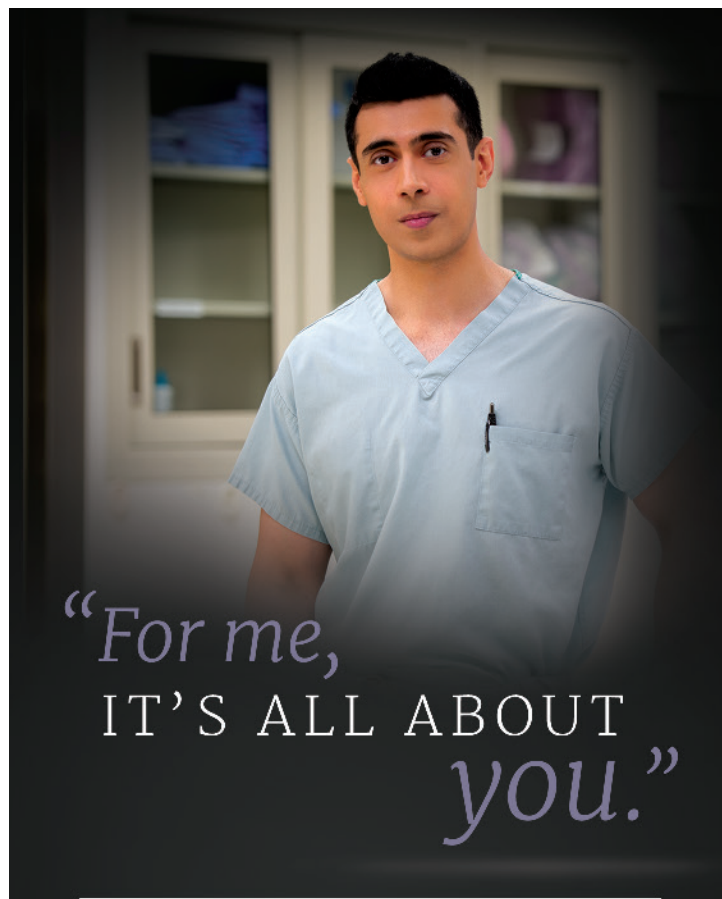
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The Lost Dauphin

BY DAVID RUTTER

John James Audubon was eccentric, mercurial, flamboyant, and French enough in his soul that he could not bring himself shrug off the preposterous rumors of noble family origin. There is even surviving personal correspondence in which he stoked those rumors by his seeming refusal to squelch them. He could pose as the disenfranchised nobleman with little effort.



Many Audubon admirers, including his granddaughters who edited his memoirs, were sure he was the lost crown prince, the lost son of Louis XVI and the exiled young king of France. Really. They did.

That sounds preposterous now, but made perfect sense then. Audubon looked the aristocratic part and, though he chose to be an American, it always was clear from his idiomatic speech patterns that he was French by origin. He was the same age as the “Lost Dauphin” would have been.

Unfortunately for the mystery, DNA evidence in 2000 ended the theory. After his parents’ date with the guillotine, the royal child was imprisoned in Temple Prison and was 10 when he died. His heart was removed before he was buried. Scientists matched DNA from that heart with a strand of Queen Marie Antoinette’s hair that had survived.

They matched.

For 200 years after the execution of France’s Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, French expatriates arose to claim they were the oldest son of the king, the legendary “Lost Dauphin.” As such, they might reclaim that throne with its vast power and riches. And, of course, throw France into the chaotic tumult it had only recently escaped. Thousands had died to doom the royal Bourbon family monarchy. France’s Revolution republicans sought to stamp out any chance of a Bourbon family reclamation by executing as many members of it as they could.

The “Lost Dauphin” was among the great conspiratorial hoaxes before the 20th century. Dozens of pretenders employed the theory as a worldwide cottage industry in false celebrity and easy fundraising. There was even an evangelical minister in Wisconsin who claimed to be Louis XVI’s son. But rumors had thrived that the young prince had been rescued, spirited away to freedom, and was replaced by a doomed imposter.

For much of the early 19th century, Audubon was suspected of being the “Lost Dauphin” partly because the precise details and complex family relationships of Audubon’s young years were clouded in uncertainty. Until researchers finally matched chronology, events, relatives, and common sense, some of his greatest admirers had always believed he had been born in Louisiana. Most contemporary biographies claimed that. But all later and verified facts validate he was the illegitimate child of French chambermaid Jeanne Rabine in French Colonial Saint-Domingue, now called Haiti. She died of tropical fever several months after his birth, and his seafaring father—Jean Audubon—fled Haiti’s inflamed slave revolution for his home in Coueron, near Nantes, France.

The young Audubon, as well as a half-sister, were sent to France to be raised by his father’s childless wife.



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