

## **HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT: NEW EVIDENCE ABOUT THE BIRTH, IDENTITY, AND STRATEGIC PSEUDONYMS OF JOHN JAMES AUDUBON**

Author: Olson, Roberta J. M.

Source: Bulletin of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, 163(4) : 129-150

Published By: Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University

URL: <https://doi.org/10.3099/MCZ70>

---

BioOne Complete ([complete.BioOne.org](https://complete.BioOne.org)) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

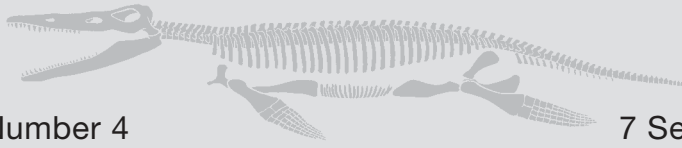
Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at [www.bioone.org/terms-of-use](https://www.bioone.org/terms-of-use).

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

---

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

# Bulletin of the Museum of Comparative Zoology



Volume 163, Number 4

7 September 2021

## Hiding in Plain Sight: New Evidence about the Birth, Identity, and Strategic Pseudonyms of John James Audubon

Roberta J. M. Olson



HARVARD UNIVERSITY | CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS, U.S.A.

# HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT: NEW EVIDENCE ABOUT THE BIRTH, IDENTITY, AND STRATEGIC PSEUDONYMS OF JOHN JAMES AUDUBON

ROBERTA J. M. OLSON<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** John James Audubon, the self-trained artist and naturalist, is best known for *The Birds of America*. Although his life has been widely studied in biographies, his birth mother and the confusing series of names assigned to him during the early decades of his life have never been satisfactorily explained, leading to many misconceptions and controversies. New documentary evidence, including an important unpublished letter, allows us in the first part of this article to connect the historical dots to firmly establish his ancestry and to counter misunderstandings about it. The documents analyzed in the second part clear up the mysteries surrounding his early identities and pseudonyms, which prove to have been both intentional and strategic, and also underline that Jeanne Rabine was his mother. In the process, the study will also illuminate elements in the large cache of Audubon's early ornithological pastels and the manuscript of his earliest autobiography held by the Ernst Mayr Library and Archives of the Museum of Comparative Zoology and Houghton Library of Harvard University.

**Key words:** John James Audubon, *The Birds of America*, "Mississippi River Journal," Charles-Marie Dessalines d'Orbigny, Alcide-Charles-Victor-Marie Dessalines d'Orbigny, Jean Audubon, Jeanne Rabine (Rabin), Anne Moynet, Lucy Bakewell Audubon, Birds, Charles-Lucien Bonaparte, Ornithology, Natural History, Haiti, Saint-Domingue

## INTRODUCTION

A copious number of books and articles has examined the life—as well as the artistic, literary, and natural history contributions—of John James Audubon (1785–1851) (Fig. 1), who created the beloved,

double-elephant-folio-size *The Birds of America* (1827–38). Nevertheless, the artist-naturalist's birth and ancestry, as well as the confusing series of names assigned to him during the early decades of his life, have never been satisfactorily explained, leading to many misconceptions. New documentary evidence, including a pivotal unpublished letter, allows us to connect the historical dots that previous biographers have been unable to link, partly because they treated Audubon as a kind of exemplary American immigrant rather than someone who always felt himself to be an outsider. This material is especially important in light of the recent historically revisionist and unsupported claims about his race and ethnicity explained below, as well as the attempts to prove that Audubon was a con man and liar, rather than a complicated, occasional teller of tall tales who was self-trained, both as an artist and a naturalist. This article will set the record straight and correct several biographical misconceptions about the Haitian-born Audubon, the illegitimate scion of a French sea captain who sent his son to America as the land of promise, where he fell in love with its wildlife. It will also illuminate facets of the large cache of Audubon's early avian pastels and the manuscript of his earliest autobiography held by the Ernst Mayr Library and Archives of the Museum of Comparative Zoology and Houghton Library of Harvard University. More general-

<sup>1</sup> New-York Historical Society, 170 Central Park West, New York, New York 10024; Professor of Art History Emerita, Wheaton College, Norton, Massachusetts (rolson@nyhistory.org).



Figure 1. *John James Audubon (1785–1851), 1826*, by John Syme. Oil on canvas, 35 × 27 in. (88.9 × 68.6 cm). White House Collection, Washington, DC, 963.385.1 (photo: White House Collection/White House Historical Association).

ly, it will illustrate attitudes in the Americas and France toward illegitimacy to end a long-existing biographical controversy in the natural sciences.

### SETTING THE SCENE: STATE OF THE RESEARCH

Although not the first monograph written about Audubon, Francis Hobart Herrick's magisterial, two-volume study remains the primary source for Audubon studies because it includes a thorough chronology, together with the author's transcriptions of the basic documents relative to his life (Herrick, 1917). In the third and fourth quarters of the 20th century, Alice Ford published several books about Audubon and transcribed one of his few surviving journals (Ford, 1988). Whereas these are valuable and essential contributions, Ford also made

many mistakes, compounded by her inability to read French, which marred her transcriptions and translations and caused her to overlook material. In the early years of this millennium, a slew of biographers tackled the Audubon legend, but only Richard Rhodes devoted himself to the study of additional documents to produce a richer, more nuanced historiographical study, albeit not a definitive one (Rhodes, 2004). In addition to the five volumes of the artist-naturalist's *Ornithological Biography* (Audubon, 1831–39), many other books and articles have also shed light on aspects of Audubon's career,<sup>1</sup> thus adding to the knowledge about the man, his writings, and his art, including a cache of his earliest pastels held by Harvard University. The group of 116 sheets contains representations of 114 bird species and two mammal species (Rhodes et al., 2008; Olson, 2012b).<sup>2</sup> Those works are linked to 131 other early pastels—123 depicting birds and eight representing mammals—in the Bibliothèque Scientifique, Société des Sciences Naturelles de la Charente-Maritime, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle de La Rochelle, some of which are earlier versions of the avian pastels at Harvard (Olson, 2012b; Bourroux, 2017). Many of Audubon's inscriptions on the early sheets held by Harvard and the manner in which he signed them dovetail with the evidence about the artist-naturalist's series of names that are explored in this article and will be discussed at a later point.

In recent months Audubon has been much in the news because of the escalating scholarship involved with identity politics

<sup>1</sup> In addition to the *Ornithological Biography*, which is now online, some of Audubon's essential writings are accessible in Audubon, 1999. For a selective, comprehensive bibliography through 2012, see Olson, 2012a: 436–441.

<sup>2</sup> Two of the pastels that contain representations of a pair of birds of the same species have been assigned two numbers, although one has not.

that has filtered down to the mainstream and social media.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the Audubon Society has announced a reconsideration of its patron saint that would take into account the well-known fact of his involvement with enslaved individuals during the years he lived in the slave state of Kentucky. As part of a series of re-evaluations, Gregory Nobles (Nobles, 2020), the author of a nonscholarly biography of Audubon (Nobles, 2017), and J. Drew Lanham (Lanham, 2021) have invited new speculation about his racial origins that were obfuscated by his illegitimate birth in colonial Haiti. Nobles alleges that previous biographers attempted to “whitewash” Audubon and suppress evidence that he was, like his half-sister Rose, multiracial and that his mother was of African descent.<sup>4</sup> To support his claims, Nobles only cites a few odd references—such as the fact that the Ebony Society of Philatelic Events and Reflections has included the Audubon U.S. stamps (1940, 1965) in their list of African Americans depicted on U.S. stamps, together with online sources that flaunt inaccurate, undocumented claims about the artist’s gene-

alogy and mother (Nobles, 2017: 21).<sup>5</sup> Long in gestation, the present article responds to these sweeping assertions about Audubon’s ancestry with revelatory discoveries that will change the current understanding of him and make a compelling contribution to the debates within natural history scholarship about the artist-naturalist and his times. The article is divided into two sections: the first addresses Audubon’s birth and lineage to counter recent claims that he was of a mixed racial background, and the second deals with the various names and pseudonyms assigned to him in the early decades of his life.

#### PART I: AUDUBON’S ANCESTRY AND QUESTIONS ABOUT HIS MATERNITY

For several complex reasons, the birth of John James Audubon in Les Cayes, Saint-Domingue (today’s Haiti) in 1785, as well as the identity of his mother, have remained clouded in mystery and controversy. First and foremost is the fact that he was born of his father’s illegitimate union with a mistress, and hence was a labeled a “bastard,” a fact that haunted him his entire life. As a youth and until he made his mark, his origin as a natural child, or a child born out of wedlock, was problematic, resurfacing later in his life with the gradual onset of dementia. His illegitimacy conferred on him not only the

<sup>3</sup> Among the legions of studies are the 17 in the Routledge Series on Identity Politics, which was defined in Bernstein, 2005 as well as in Adam and Kloos, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Nobles repeats Herrick’s account of Audubon’s birth but emphasizes the absence of a birth certificate. However, as explained in this article, at that time there were no birth certificates in Haiti and in France but rather baptismal documents. Nobles terms Ford’s account “the most definitive (and certainly the most defensive).” He dismisses the documents that she published as informed by the desire to assert the “racial identity” of Audubon’s traditionally accepted birth mother, Jeanne Rabine, pointing out that Audubon’s half-sister Rose was listed on the ship’s manifest as “white,” ignoring the ambiguity of that reference, as pointed out in this article. He also accuses Ford of not pursuing “the possible implications one step further: If one child of Captain Audubon could be given a new racial identity by assigning her to a different mother and calling her ‘white,’ could not another?” (Nobles, 2017: 17–18).

<sup>5</sup> One online source he later cites (Nobles, 2020) is: <https://aaregistry.org/story/artist-of-nature-john-audubon-born/>. It states: “John Audubon . . . was a Black French American ornithologist, naturalist, and painter . . . born in Haiti (then called Saint-Domingue), the illegitimate son of Jean Audubon, a French sea captain and slave master, and Jeanne Rabin. She was a Black Creole slave woman from the Congo, and Jean Audubon’s chambermaid and mistress.” A more reliable source, which Nobles does not cite, the International Genealogical Index (IGI) of the Mormons, gives Jeanne Rabine as Audubon’s mother; see [https://www.familysearch.org/search/family-trees/results?q.anyDate.from=1785&q.anyDate.to=1851&q.birthLikeDate.from=1785&q.anyDate.to=1851&q.birthLikeDate.from=1785&q.birthLikePlace=Haiti&q.givenName=John%20James&q.surname=Audubon/](https://www.familysearch.org/search/family-trees/results?q.anyDate.from=1785&q.anyDate.to=1851&q.birthLikeDate.from=1785&q.birthLikePlace=Haiti&q.givenName=John%20James&q.surname=Audubon/).

stigma of his soul being damned by the Catholic Church, the national church of France, but also the inability to inherit property under French law, even as his father's only son. The profligate ways of his seafaring father, Lieutenant/Captain Jean Audubon (1744–1818)—his inconstancy and affairs with women, a flaw which his son noted—not only caused his illegitimacy but also added to the miasma around his birth.<sup>6</sup> In the “Mississippi River Journal” of 1820–21, the manuscript of which is held in the Ernst Mayr Library and Archives of the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ F117), Audubon revealed his distress about this failing. On 29 November 1820, he wrote, “Most Men have faults, he had One that never Left him untill sobered by a Long Life . . . but this was Counterbalanced by Many qualities—his Generosity was often too great—as a Father I never complained of him and the Many Durable Friends he had prove him to have been a *good Man*.” (Audubon, 1820–21; Audubon, 1999: 29–30).<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, the lives of both father and son played out on two continents during three revolutions: (1) the American Revolution—during which Jean Audubon, an admirer of America, was imprisoned by the British in New York (1779–80) and partic-

<sup>6</sup> Given their long absences from home, extramarital affairs were not unusual for seafaring men of the period.

<sup>7</sup> Audubon would change this assessment in his later autobiographical sketch, “Myself,” probably because Jean Audubon died in Nantes, not with his family, but in the house of another woman, a disillusioning turn of events: “Extrait du register des actes de décès des 3 & 4 cantons de la Ville de Nantes, département de la Loire-Inférieure. L’an 1818, le 19 Février à 11 heures du matin . . . déclaré que ce jur à six heures du matin, Jean Audubon, ancien capitaine de navire . . . époux de dame Anne Moinet, est décédé en la demeure de demoiselle Berthier, située chaussée de la Madeleine, No. 24, 4 canton.” (Herrick, 1917, 2: 369). Translating the document, Herrick noted that “his death did not occur in his own apartments” (Herrick, 1917, 1: 87 n. 18).

ipated in several battles against the British in 1781; (2) the French Revolution in Nantes, the site of the Audubon family's city residence; and (3) the slave rebellions and Haitian Revolution on Saint-Domingue. The last was a successful insurrection by self-liberated enslaved people against French colonial rule that began on 22 August 1791 and ended in 1804 with the former colony's independence.<sup>8</sup> These three revolutions and their tumultuous times precipitated historical confusion and loss of archival documentation that have amplified the ambiguities of Audubon's childhood. This article puts to rest the speculation about his birth by publishing documents proving his maternity and, for the first time, charts the sequence of his early pseudonyms providing the strategic *raison d'être* behind them. These pseudonyms illuminate the corresponding initials found on many of his early avian drawings, including the trove of 114 avian sheets at Harvard University in two collections: MCZ 118, in the Special Collections of the Ernst Mayr Library and Archives of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, and MS Am 21, which belongs to the extensive John James Audubon Letters and Drawings collection held by Houghton Library (Rhodes et al., 2008; Olson, 2012b).

The artist began his autobiographical essay of 1835, “Myself,” which he wrote not for publication but for his sons: “The precise period of my birth is yet an enigma to me, and I can only say what I have often heard my father repeat to me on the subject, which is as follows: It seems that my father had large properties in Santo Domingo, and was in the habit of visiting frequently that portion of our Southern States called, and known by the name of,

<sup>8</sup> For the Haitian revolution, see Bryan (1984), James (1989), Dubois (2005), and Girard (2011).

Louisiana. . . .” (Audubon, 1999: 765).<sup>9</sup> In the past, people have regarded the entire passage as Audubon’s fabrication to cover up his illegitimacy, but assuredly, as Audubon states, much of this account owes its genesis not only to historical confusion but also to the tales his father told him. Above all, Audubon did not want his children to view him as a bastard. Far more telling, and perhaps truthful, is the earlier autobiographical draft that he started in the aforementioned “Mississippi River Journal” (MCZ F117). The “Mississippi River Journal” is one of his four journals to survive the editorial scissors of his granddaughter, Maria Rebecca Audubon (1843–1925). In this earliest autobiography, the artist simply stated: “My Mother, who I have been told was an Extraordinary beautifull Woman, died Shortly after My Birth and My Father having Married in France I was removed there when only Two Years Old and receive by that Best of Women, raised and Cherished to the utmost of her Means.” (Audubon, 1999: 30). He did not remember or know the facts about his birth because he was sent back to France when he was just over three years old, and only knew what others told him. By the time Audubon began to write the second autobiography for his sons, he conflated information from his father, who had indeed been in America several times and had purchased property in Pennsylvania, embellishing it, as was his practice and one that he polished during his “rockstar” salesmanship of *The Birds of America*. Furthermore, it should be noted that Audubon’s passport of 1803, arranged

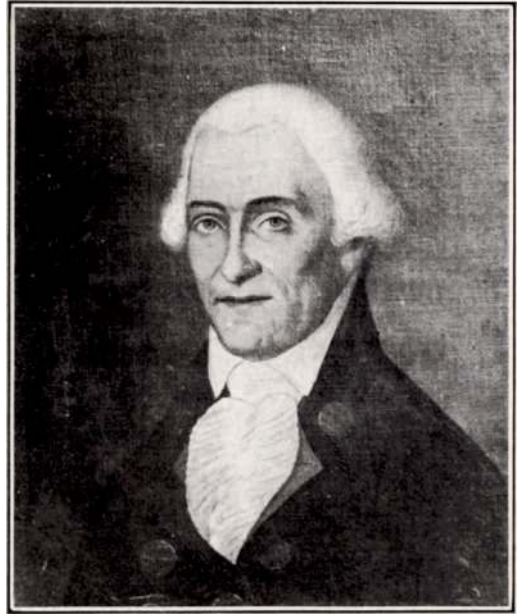


Figure 2. *Jean Audubon (1744–1818)*, c. 1789, by Charles Peale Polk. Oil on canvas. Whereabouts unknown (Herrick, 1917, 1: opposite p. 98).

by his father, contained the information that he was born in Louisiana (Audubon and Coues, 1897, 1: 24, 40; Ford, 1988: 42; Rhodes, 2004: 31)—a fact not cited by his critics.

No one has written a biography of the artist’s father, Jean Audubon (Fig. 2), an entrepreneurial opportunist, who served in the French navy and merchant marine during this turbulent period and had investments in Saint-Domingue. He was imprisoned for 5 years in England, as well as in New York by the British, and fought on the colonies’ side in the American Revolution. The three violent, cataclysmic revolutions that altered the political and social systems of the three countries wherein he operated shaped the events of his life. In 1772 he married the wealthy but childless Anne Moynet (1736–1821), the widow of Georges Ricordel and 9 years his senior; unable to bear children that survived, she would become the doting stepmother of the

<sup>9</sup> The manuscript was found in an old book that had been stored in a barn on Staten Island. It was first published in *Scribner’s Magazine* (March 1893) and later in Audubon and Coues (1897, 1: 7–38). No manuscript copy survives. Audubon’s third account of his life, which is in the introduction to the first volume of his *Ornithological Biography*, is very different in nature and tersely brief. Rather, it focuses on birds and his quest to portray them, with this biographical note: “I received life and light in the New World.”



Figure 3. Plan of the plain of the bottom of Isle à Vache of Isle of Saint-Domingue with the various irrigation canals (*Plan de la plaine du fond de l'Isle à Vache de l'Isle St Domingue avec les divers canaux d'arrosage*) and detail showing the Audubon ("Oudubon") plantation, by René Pheilpeau, 1786. Hand-colored engraving. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Cartes et plans, GE B-6932 (RES) (public domain).

young artist.<sup>10</sup> During the next 11 years, Audubon père would spend little time with his wife in Nantes because he was involved with his sugar plantation and trading ventures on Saint-Domingue, which included enslaved people. In the artist's never-completed "Myself," the younger Audubon, observed, "The different changes occurring at the time of the American Revolution, and afterward during that in France, seem to have sent him from one place to another as if a foot-ball" (Audubon, 1999: 767).

The only record of Audubon's birth at his father's plantation in Les Cayes (Fig. 3) on 26 April 1785 is the itemized bill/receipt of the attending physician Dr. Laurent Sanson. Since Herrick first published it, all his biographers have tended to accept it, save Nobles. The cumulative document—29 December 1783 through 19 October 1785, paid 7 June 1787—is signed by Jean

Audubon and names the mother of his son as "Mlle Rabin." It remains in the Audubon-Lavigne collection in France (Herrick, 1917, 1: 53–56; 2: 314–26).<sup>11</sup> From this record it appears that Rabin (or Rabine), whose surname in the bill is noted as "Rabin," was medically compromised and suffered during the difficult birth. Before the unnamed infant entered the world, Dr. Sanson had spent the previous 2 nights with the mother, who he described as "en mal d[sic] infant" (Herrick, 1917, 2: 322–323).<sup>12</sup> The child's birth is recorded as "Mlle. Rabin est accouchée" (Herrick, 1917, 1: 322). Sanson would continue to administer to her into August (17 times enumerated in the bill) as she developed a breast abscess

<sup>11</sup> The manuscript is held by the descendants of the artist-naturalist and is reproduced on three unpaginated pages (Herrick, 1917, 1: 54–55). The first entry for Mlle. Rabin is on 21 May 1784 and the last on 15 August 1785.

<sup>12</sup> Ford (1988: 22) claims that Sanson called in a surgeon named Guérin to assist and cites a bill from him (1785–86) in the Audubon-Lavigne collection, France, although this may be a confusion because the same surgeon would deliver another Audubon mistress of the artist's half-sister.

<sup>10</sup> For the most thorough discussion and documentation of Jean Audubon's life and career, see Herrick (1917, 1: 24–64, 73–89; 2: 314–335) and Ford (1988: 468–472, 477–498 [for documents beginning with his maritime service as a cabin boy, mousse, like his son and father], 511 [for a listing of where Audubon père is discussed]).



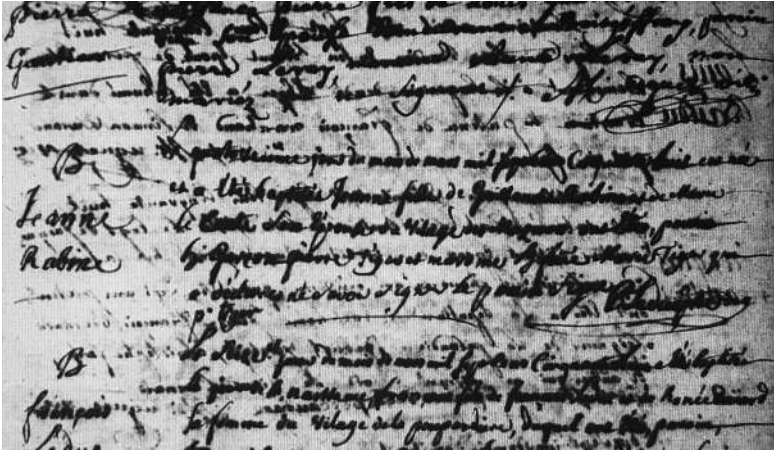


Figure 4. Baptismal record of Jeanne Rabine, 14 March 1758. Detail of folio 5r, Registres paroissiaux et état civil, Sainte-Mélanie, BMS 1758, 3E205/6, Archives départementales et patrimoine du Loire-Atlantique, Les Touches (public domain: <https://www.archinoe.fr/v2/ad44/visualiseur/registre.html?id=440202315/>).

and had fevers, although she was alive in October 1785 because Sanson does not record her death. Due to the tempestuous times, the Sanson document's survival—which is also fascinating for its extensive descriptions of medical treatments for enslaved individuals—is nearly miraculous. As in France, births in the colony were not documented in civic records until after 1792 in the actes or registres d'état civil and after 1793 in the decennial tables. Before that time, they were recorded haphazardly as baptisms in parish registries, registres paroissiaux, where they were chronicled together with marriages and deaths or interments. As Ford points out, contrary to “Breton custom”—and I would add also French custom—there was no baptism of Rabin's infant as the child was born out of wedlock (Ford, 1988: 96). Herrick argues that although the “child's name is not given in the bill, authentic records of Audubon's subsequent adoption and baptism agree so completely in the names and dates as to establish his identity beyond a shadow of a doubt” (Herrick, 1917, 1: 53). As outlined below, his father would initially try to

conceal the illegitimacy of the infant, later known as John James Audubon, by using various pseudonyms. The artist-naturalist's Rabin surname resurfaced whenever it became necessary to use it for legal reasons; even after relocating to America and marrying Lucy Bakewell (1787–1874), the artist was sometimes identified as Jean Rabin.

The “Mlle Rabin” of Sanson's bill has been identified as Jeanne Rabine (1758–1785), who was born on 14 March in the hamlet of Les Mazures in the commune of Les Touches, 30 km from Nantes on the western coast of France in the Loire-Atlantique region. Her baptismal record is now available in the online French regional archives and reproduced here for the first time (Fig. 4).<sup>13</sup> Although the ink has run on the page, under the “B” for baptism, her surnames and those of her parents appear as Rabine with an “e” in an age when spellings

<sup>13</sup> Archives départementales et patrimoine du Loire-Atlantique, Les Touches, Registres paroissiaux et état civil, Sainte-Mélanie, BMS 1758, 3E205/6, fol. 5r. For an image of the entire fol. 5r, page through volume: <https://www.archinoe.fr/v2/ad44/visualiseur/registre.html?id=440202315/>.



Figure 5. Cathedral of Notre-Dame de l'Assomption, Les Cayes, Haiti (formerly Saint-Domingue). This is where Jeanne Rabine was interred in 1785 (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/mweriksson/M. Eriksson> and licensed under CC-BY-SA 2.0).

were frequently irregular or fluid, and Rabin and Rabine were interchangeable, although on Saint-Domingue Rabin was the common form. Jeanne was one of 11 children born to Guillaume Rabine (1734–1802) and Marie LeComte (LeConte) (1729–1789), both of whom descended from peasant stock in Les Touches. The records of her entire family for generations can also be accessed.<sup>14</sup> Jeanne was the only one of the siblings to leave Les Touches, probably because her parents could not support the many hungry mouths they engendered. Les Touches was a familiar source for domestics that served the inhabitants of Nantes and the surrounding landed gentry (Ford, 1988: 433 n. 12). Like many poor young women of the area, she left her home to find employment (Grégoire, 2004: 9). According to archival passenger lists, she departed Nantes aboard *Le Conquérant* on 23 October 1783 in service as a chambermaid to the family of Jacques Pallon de la Bouverie, which included his wife and three

<sup>14</sup> See <https://gw.geneanet.org/lefort44?lang=en&iz=10&p=jeanne&n=rabine&oc=1/>.

children. Therein, she is identified as “Jeanne Rabin, 25, chambermaid, parish of Les Touches, diocese of Nantes.”<sup>15</sup> Downriver from Nantes and the town of Couëron, *Le Conquérant* stopped at Paimboeuf, the last river port before the open Atlantic, and picked up Jean Audubon, age 38, former ship captain going to Les Cayes on business.<sup>16</sup> Both disembarked at Les Cayes. Although no information is available about the voyage, it was in these close quarters where Jean Audubon made the acquaintance of Mademoiselle Rabine.

Within weeks of arriving on Saint-Domingue, Rabine fled her post at the Pallon sugar plantation in Les Cayes for the nearby plantation of Jean Audubon (Fig. 2).<sup>17</sup> Her flight implies that she had already established a rapport, if not a sexual relationship, with Jean Audubon. Herrick speculates that Rabine was already ill—perhaps with island fevers and infections, such as erysipelas, from which she suffered—and could not perform her work properly (Herrick, 1917, 1: 56). By 21 May 1784, Audubon’s physician Sanson was treating her. After giving birth on 26 April 1785, and months of postpartem lingering, Rabine died on 10 November 1785. Most important, she was not denied a Christian burial because the register of the cathedral of Notre-Dame de l’Assomption in Les Cayes (Fig. 5) contains this brief notice: “The body of Demoiselle Rabin, native of Nort, diocese of Nantes, who died yester-

<sup>15</sup> Archives départementales de Loire-Atlantique, Nantes, Archives numérisées/Marine/Rôles de bord, C 1385, no. 58, fol. 2r (26 October 1783): [https://www.archinoe.fr/v2/ad44/visualiseur/navires\\_armement.html?id=440539582/](https://www.archinoe.fr/v2/ad44/visualiseur/navires_armement.html?id=440539582/). See also Ford (1988: 477).

<sup>16</sup> Archives départementales de Loire-Atlantique, Nantes, Archives numérisées/Marine/Rôles de bord, C 1385, no. 58, fol. 2r (26 October 1783): [https://www.archinoe.fr/v2/ad44/visualiseur/navires\\_armement.html?id=440539582/](https://www.archinoe.fr/v2/ad44/visualiseur/navires_armement.html?id=440539582/).

<sup>17</sup> Christoph Imscher reproduced the map for the first time in relation to Audubon (Imscher, 2019).

day. Aged 24 [she was 27].”<sup>18</sup> Although her birth and baptism in France smoothed the way for her interment, the unlikely burial in this prestigious place of a chambermaid who had given birth out of wedlock was no doubt orchestrated by Jean Audubon for the mother of his son, a fact previously ignored by biographers.

An unpublished letter cinches the identity of Jeanne Rabine as the artist’s birth mother and reveals that her pregnancy with a hoped-for heir was well known. The hand-delivered, local letter was written by a Monsieur Desgrottes to his friend and client Monsieur Jean Audubon, merchant in Les Cayes, several days before Mlle. Rabine delivered her child on Tuesday, 26 April. The undated epistle, which is with the descendants of the artist-naturalist, was probably written the week before the birth. It reads in part: “Je désire que vous soyez parvenu hier au soir à donner deux ou trois consolations à Melle Rabin. Dites lui mille choses de ma part et surtout que je l’engage très fort à vous donner d’ici à dimanche un gros garçon et pour cause.” [I want to be assured that last night you successfully delivered to Miss Rabin two or three consolations. Tell her a thousand things on my behalf and especially that I strongly urge her to give you a fat boy by Sunday and for good reason.]<sup>19</sup> This pivotal document proves that neither Rabine’s pregnancy with Audubon’s child nor the father’s desire for

an heir, given a childless marriage, were secrets on Saint-Domingue.

We know that Audubon père had relationships with other women, especially on Saint-Domingue, where the colonial system allowed for relaxed liaisons with little or virtually no documentation. Although it might seem a detour from the main argument, a consideration of the artist’s half-sister Rose (1787–1842) serves as an illuminating foil for young Audubon. Her mother, Catherine Bouffard (?–c. 1805) called “Sanitte,” was the mixed-raced daughter of Gabriel Bouffard, Jean Audubon’s friend from La Rochelle and his early host on Saint-Domingue. Her liaison with Jean Audubon is the easiest to establish, although no documents pertaining to her birth and death have surfaced. Gabriel Bouffard had relocated to Saint-Domingue in 1755 and subsequently prospered as a planter and merchant who had six children with an unknown woman of mixed race. At an uncertain date, Catherine Bouffard, whom Jean Audubon may have met at his friend’s Les Cayes plantation during his year-long stay there in 1772, allegedly became Audubon’s housekeeper and began living at his plantation. Ford believes that she was already in that position when Jeanne Rabine arrived in late 1783 and speculates that Bouffard did not relinquish her role (Ford, 1988: 23). A receipt from a surgeon named Guérin records the birth to Bouffard of another unnamed infant on 17 July 1787—Muguet (“Lily of the Valley”), later called Rose.<sup>20</sup> Like his son, Jean

<sup>18</sup> Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer (ANOM), Aix-en-Provence, Église de Notre-Dame de l’Assomption. La paroisse des Cayes du Fond de l’île à Vache, Saint-Domingue Parish register, 1698–1788: R: 1785 Sépulture: “L’onze novembre mil sept cent quatre vint-cinq a été inhumé dans le cimetière de cette paroisse le corps de demoiselle Rabin, native de Nort, diocèse de Nantes, décédée la vieille, âgée de 24 ans.” ANOM has not digitized this register, but it is available on microfilm at the Family History Library, Salt Lake City, UT, no. 1094177. See also Ford (1988: 22–23, 432–433 n. 17).

<sup>19</sup> Monsieur Desgrottes to Monsieur Jean Audubon, Les Cayes, Saint-Domingue, undated (between 18 and 23 April 1785), Audubon–Lavigne collection, France.

<sup>20</sup> Ford (1988: 22–23, 432 n. 16) quotes the receipt: “et de cette cent livres les couches de Sanitte, sa ménagère. 17 Juillet 1787.” The document is in the Audubon–Lavigne collection, France. Ford strangely links this to the surgeon Guérin visiting Jeanne Rabine and also claims that the bill from Dr. Sanson contains an item for delivering Sanitte of another child in 1785, 6 months after the death of Rabine, who had died in November. Association de Généalogie d’Haïti, ref. 30330 (supplied by the deceased Fritz Gérard Télémaque, FGT), records only Rose as offspring of Bouffard’s union with Audubon with no life dates.

Audubon's natural daughter could not be baptized, so that the only record of her birth is Guérin's receipt.

In summary, this evidence proves that Jeanne Rabine was indeed the mother of the artist-naturalist and counters recent claims about his ancestry. In the subsequent section additional evidence reinforces and underlines this conclusion.

## PART II: TRACING AUDUBON'S YOUTHFUL NAMES

Working with incomplete or fragmentary archival material from this age of revolutions is challenging and results in ambiguities around questions about identity, parentage, race, legitimacy, and national identity. Since there are few archival records pre-1800 in the Archives Nationales d'Haiti that are digitized, it has been impossible to locate additional documents about the individuals related to John James Audubon's early years. This is also the case with the French Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (ANOM, formerly MFOM). Nonvetted genealogical websites, which are hampered by the loss of much material in the chaotic revolutions and exacerbated by colonial politics, offer another resource for tracing individuals, albeit much less reliable. The most extensive and reliable genealogical website for Haiti at this time is the Association de Généalogie d'Haiti, which compiles information supplied by identified and unidentified individuals who are not trained archivists and historians but rather paying members.<sup>21</sup> They can submit material without citing any sources, and that information is not fact-checked. Most interesting for historians of colonial Haiti, their records differentiate between two types of unions: marriages and "conjoinments," or

"common law marriages." Complicating research is the fact that the Association, like many genealogical sites, contains data from oral traditions, some of which is mistaken or confused and, therefore, not definitive and requiring confirmation from other sources.

Alternatively, by tracing chronologically the names assigned to Jean Audubon's illegitimate son in real documents, we learn a great deal about the elaborate schemes intentionally used by the boy's legal parents to conceal not only his illegitimacy, but also to ensure that this natural son would not be disinherited. (In the process, the identity of his birth mother, Jeanne Rabine, is strengthened even more.) It is telling that all of the pseudonyms assigned to the youth, even those that were half-truths, had strong ties to the area around Nantes or Saint-Domingue so that anyone glancing over the documents would think they were legitimate and assume nothing was amiss.

## MAISON NEUVE—1788

In 1788, with the rising tensions between French colonists and enslaved people on Saint-Domingue, as well as the problems of financing his sugar and coffee operations, Jean Audubon began refocusing his investments to both France and North America. No doubt also contributing to his decision to sell his plantation—which had become a precarious place for himself, his assets, and his family—was that Les Cayes, the first city founded by the French, was destroyed by hurricanes in 1781 and again in 1788. In the latter year, Captain Charles Garet of Nantes, a friend of Audubon père and Anne Moynet, agreed to take the nearly 3.5-year-old child on board his ship, *Le Duguesclin*, which was in Saint-Domingue bound for France. Among the three individuals on its passenger list was "maison neuve agé de 3 ans—fils du

<sup>21</sup> My thanks to Maxime Dehoux, treasurer, for his historical information about the site, which aims to reconstruct the genealogical history of Haiti.



Figure 6. Water façade of Mill Grove, Audubon, Pennsylvania, built 1762–64. (Photo: courtesy of Michael J. Ticcino, photographer).

[Mon]sieur Audubon.”<sup>22</sup> The name, which translates “new home,” was symbolic of the mission: the relocation of the toddler to France. *Maisonneuve* was also the surname of local friends of the Audubons, who were also connected to Garet, among them the deputy mayor of Nantes, Jacques-Gilles *Maisonneuve*, and the director of the Mint, René *Maisonneuve* (Ford, 1988: 25, 63). Although the child is listed as Audubon’s son, that listing is ambiguous because it splits *Maisonneuve* into two words. Ford posits that on-board Garet entrusted the child to his 15-year-old nephew and namesake, who served as an apprentice pilot, and speculates that Jean père was fearful that had he used *Rabin* for a surname, *Jeanne*’s relatives might have seized the child. She notes local connections—friends and distantly related family—shared by *Jeanne Rabine*’s family and the Audubons (Ford, 1988: 25, 480). Shortly afterward, Audubon père sailed to the United States on an extended tour to

<sup>22</sup> Archives départementales de Loire-Atlantique, Nantes, Archives numérisées/Marine/Rôles de bord, C1394, no. 140, fol. 2v (arrival 26 August 1788): [https://www.archinoe.fr/v2/ad44/visualiseur/navires\\_armement.html?id=440539623/](https://www.archinoe.fr/v2/ad44/visualiseur/navires_armement.html?id=440539623/). See also Ford (1988: 24–25, 433 n. 22, 477–478), although there are many mistakes in the transcriptions of the documents.

settle his finances in America, which included the purchase of the Mill Grove property (Fig. 6) outside of Philadelphia in 1789.

### SEARCHING FOR AN IDENTITY

Long after Jean Audubon had departed, the unrest on Saint-Domingue became more dangerous for mixed-race individuals, and when Muguet was older, her father arranged for her passage to France on 24 June 1791 aboard the ship *Le Tancrede*. Its captain was Mathurin Gautreau, who would continue his association with Audubon père in subsequent years. The second passenger listed is “D<sup>elle</sup> Rose Bonite; ag[illegible] or erased] 4 ans fille naturelle et orpheline D<sup>elle</sup> Robin [Rabin], blanche.”<sup>23</sup> Because by this time *Jeanne Rabine* had been dead for nearly 5 years and her parents would never think the child was hers, Ford convincingly argues that her name served as a protective shield because *Rabin* was a common surname around Nantes; alternatively, it could have been a mistake on the part of Gautreau, who remembered *Rabine*. Ford claims that the racial designation “*blanche*,” for white, is without precedent in colonial passenger lists in Paris and Nantes (Ford, 1988: 29, 433 n. 36, 478), but it is unclear whether that adjective in the document modifies the child or the listed mother, *Jeanne Rabine*. Like the artist, *Muguet/Rose* could not be baptized in France until she was first adopted, but because she was not a son and presumed heir, her “natural” status could be stated. *Rose* would marry Gabriel Loyer du Puigaudeau on 16 December 1805. In their marriage document she is called “*Rose Bouffard*, younger daughter of the late *Catherine Bouffard*, Créole of Saint-Domingue,” and later

<sup>23</sup> Archives départementales de Loire-Atlantique, Nantes, Archives numérisées/Marine/Rôles de bord, 7 R 4/332, no. 89, fol. 3r (arrival 24 June 1791): [https://www.archinoe.fr/v2/ad44/visualiseur/navires\\_armement.html?id=440542976/](https://www.archinoe.fr/v2/ad44/visualiseur/navires_armement.html?id=440542976/).



Figure 7. La Gerbetière, the Audubon's country house, Couëron, 17th-century (Bourroux, 2017: 118).

“younger daughter of Catherine Bouffard”; her adopted parents are also listed. After their marriage the couple would have two children and live at Les Tourterelles in Couëron, a short distance from the Audubon's country house, La Gerbetière (Fig. 7).

One of the witnesses who signed their marriage certificate was none other than “J. L.[Laforest]J. Audubon, son and brother” (Herrick, 1917, 2: 328).<sup>24</sup> The sequence of the initials J L J A[udubon] is the same that Audubon inscribed at lower left on several of his early pastels at Harvard, including of the Common Redstart (Fig. 8). It was one of the many signatures/initials that Audubon used in the first decade of the 19th century in search of a persona, as exemplified in the aforementioned trove at Harvard. After leaving France in 1806, however, he never placed the “L” initial for Laforest first in the sequence (L J J A), as in several examples in La Rochelle (Olson, 2012b: 459).

As a group, Audubon signed the Harvard drawings more ambitiously than the pastels in La Rochelle, which, when he returned to the United States after his visit to France

<sup>24</sup> Ford (1988: 479). However, Herrick (1917, 1: 61 n. 12) transcribes it as inscribed J.J.L. Audubon. In his early drawings, the artist signed his initials both ways, as well as with other variants (Olson, 2012b: 459; 466 fig 29, 483 no. 5b.

(1805–06), he left with family friend and mentor Dr. Charles-Marie Dessalines d'Orbigny (1770–1856)—surgeon, amateur naturalist, and father of naturalist Alcide-Charles-Victor-Marie Dessalines d'Orbigny (1802–1857), who was Audubon's godson. Some of the Harvard pastels are copies of sheets in La Rochelle that Audubon drew as ricordi to take back with him to America (Olson 2012b). The artist's inscriptions on the Harvard sheets reveal his changing search for an identity. The earliest are dated 1805 and are also inscribed as being drawn in or near “Nantes” or “New York.” He inscribed the pastels variously: J J Audubon (19 times) [cover];<sup>25</sup> J J A (17);<sup>26</sup> J A (nine) [cover];<sup>27</sup> J J L A (three) (Fig. 9);<sup>28</sup> J J L Audubon (13) (Figs. 10, 11);<sup>29</sup> J Audubon (two);<sup>30</sup> and A, J L J A (Fig. 8), Jean J L Audubon (Fig. 12), John J Audubon (once each).<sup>31</sup> This final example, which bears the artist's mature signature (John J Audubon), is the latest of the group and is dated 1821. Taken in aggregate, Audubon's punctuation was not systematic but rather varied, although he never used a period after the “A,” save in the case of two works where the period functioned for the entire line of a longer inscription. Like the other inscriptions on the Harvard works, his signatures display a progressive maturation

<sup>25</sup> Houghton Library (HL), MS Am 21 (4), 21 (5), 21 (10), 21 (13), 21 (28), 21 (50), 21 (71), 21 (78), 21 (79), 21 (81), 21 (82), 21 (87), 21 (88), 21 (90), 21 (93), 21 (94), 21 (97), 21 (99); Ernst Mayr Library and Archives of the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ), MCZ 118.9.

<sup>26</sup> HL, MS Am 21 (7), 21 (8), 21 (16), 21 (20), 21 (26), 21 (34), 21 (36), 21 (38) [trimmed], 21 (39), 21 (43), 21 (46), 21 (47), 21 (48), 21 (85)–21 (86) [one sheet], 21 (89), 21 (104).

<sup>27</sup> HL, MS Am 21 (1), 21 (18), 21 (23), 21 (50), 21 (52), 21 (53), 21 (77), 21 (92); MCZ 118.7.

<sup>28</sup> HL, MS Am 21 (40); MCZ 118.1 (Houghton Deposit), 118.2 (Houghton Deposit).

<sup>29</sup> HL, MS Am 21 (55), 21 (56), 21 (57), 21 (60), 21 (63), 21 (64), 21 (66)–21 (69), 21 (72), 21 (96); MCZ 118.4 (Houghton Deposit).

<sup>30</sup> HL, MS Am 21 (35), 21 (49).

<sup>31</sup> Respectively: HL, MS Am 21 (61), 21 (22); MCZ 118.3 (Houghton Deposit); HL Am 21 (100).



Figure 8. *Le Rossignol de Murailles de Buffon*; Common Redstart (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*), August 1805, by John James Audubon. Graphite, pastel, and brown ink on paper, 9 1/2 × 12 3/16 in. (240 × 310 mm). MS Am 21 (22), Houghton Library, Harvard University. It is signed at lower left: J L J A (no permission needed).

that is analogous to the shifting identities discussed below.

#### FOUGÈRE AUDUBON—1794

On 7 March 1794 Jean Audubon and Anne Moynet adopted his two illegitimate children, Fougère and Muguet. The adoption document states the couple's 1772 marriage and notes that the male child, known as Fougère, was born to Jean Audubon and an inhabitant of America now deceased for 8 years (agreeing roughly with Jeanne Rabine's death in the New World). It describes the female infant

Muguet as from another marriage with an American named Catherine Bouffard, whose whereabouts are unknown, and names the children's respective ages as 9 and 7 years, with approximate birth dates given in French Revolutionary style (Herrick, 1917, 2: 328).<sup>32</sup> Fougère was a common surname around Nantes and in

<sup>32</sup> Herrick (1917, 1: 61) notes that the birth dates were approximate because Jean Audubon did not have access to records—22 April instead of 26 April for the artist and 26 April instead of 29 April for Muguet. It is easy to see why their father may have confused the two, a common occurrence at the time.



Figure 9. *La fauvette de Roseaux Male de Buffon*; Great Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus arundinaceus*), August 1805, by John James Audubon. Graphite, pastel, and brown ink on paper, 8 1/4 × 11 7/8 in. (210 × 300 mm). MCZ 118.1 (Houghton Deposit), Ernst Mayr Library and Archives of the Museum Comparative Zoology, Harvard University. It is signed at lower left: J. J. A. (no permission needed).

Brittany: in fact, the very folio of the register recording Jeanne Rabine's birth lists the birth of a Marie Anne Fougère (n. 14). In French "fougère" means "fern," leading Rhodes to conclude that the artist's adoptive parents used the name as "an offering to placate the Revolutionary authorities, who scorned the names of saints and instead favored Revolutionary names" (Rhodes, 2004: 4). This may be one of the reasons why the couple adopted it, because all of Nantes had suffered during the Terror, which was brutal in 1794, when Jean Audubon's sister, Rosa, had been dragged

through the streets (Herrick, 1917, 1: 75–76; Ford 1988: 35).

Fougère was also a surname found on Saint-Domingue, as recorded in the Association de Généalogie d'Haiti website. Among those bearing the name was Marie-Antoinette Fougère née Rabin (1760 in Gonaïves–1785 in Les Cayes), who serves herein to demonstrate some of the pitfalls of unvetted websites that claim to document the ancestry of the artist-naturalist. Marie-Antoinette's parents are listed inconclusively, but her death date is given as 11 September 1785. Perhaps fueling speculation about Audubon's



racial identity, but not cited by Nobles and others, is that on websites Marie-Antoinette is also listed as conjoined with Jean Audubon.<sup>33</sup> Her union with Belloni Fougère (?–d. 1780 in Jérémie) is termed a “conjoinmment,” not a marriage,<sup>34</sup> which resulted in their child, Belloni Rabin Fougère (1780 in Jérémie–1850 in Les Cayes).<sup>35</sup> She likewise appears in the list of Jean Audubon’s unions, together with his marriage to Anne Moynet and the liaison with Catherine Bouffard that resulted in the child Rose, but without a listing of his liaison with Jeanne Rabine.<sup>36</sup> Strangely, the website does not include Jeanne Rabine among its two individuals with the surname Rabin. Another website based on the former one lists Jean Audubon as married to both Anne Moynet and Marie-Antoinette Rabin Fougère, together with liaisons with Catherine Bouffard and Jeanne Rabine!<sup>37</sup> That site also features Jeanne’s correct parentage,

<sup>33</sup> Association de Généalogie d’Haiti, ref. 30255 (FGT), cites her father as “?Fougère” and her mother as “M. Rabin.” The information on this family tree was provided by a deceased Fougère descendant, Fritz Gérald Télémaque, without any sources. Another derivative site is less specific: <https://sites.rootsweb.com/~htiwgw/familles/fiches/056818.htm/>. The IGI lists Anne Moynet, Catherine Bouffard, Jeanne Rabine, and Marie-Antoinette Rabin as Jean Audubon’s spouses: <https://www.familysearch.org/search/family-trees/results?q.anyDate.from=1744&q.anyDate.to=1816&q.birthLikeDate.from=1744&q.birthLikePlace=France&q.givenName=Jean&q.surname=Audubon/>. The same site gives Marie-Antoinette’s spouses as Belloni Fougère and Jean Audubon with only one child, Belloni Rabin Fougère: <https://www.familysearch.org/search/family-trees/results?q.birthLikeDate.from=1750&q.birthLikeDate.to=1770&q.birthLikePlace=Haiti&q.givenName=Marie%20Antoinette&q.surname=Rabin/>.

<sup>34</sup> Association de Généalogie d’Haiti, ref. 30254 (FGT).

<sup>35</sup> Association de Généalogie d’Haiti, ref. 30264 (FGT).

<sup>36</sup> Association Généalogie d’Haiti, ref. 30255, 32058, 30330 (FGT). It lists not only “J.J. Audubon” (ref. 30263; FGT) with his correct life dates but also another offspring (ref. 30262; FGT) “?Audubon (1779 in Jérémie–1789 in Les Cayes). Another website terms the relationship a “marriage”: <https://sites.rootsweb.com/~htiwgw/familles/fiches/056818.htm/>.

<sup>37</sup> See: <https://sites.rootsweb.com/~htiwgw/familles/fiches/040900.htm/>.

full life dates, and Jean Jacques Audubon as her child fathered by Jean Audubon.<sup>38</sup> Even more intriguing for Audubon’s sequence of names is the fact that the *Généalogie d’Haiti* website lists Belloni Fougère’s parents as Jacques Fougère and Laforest Fougère née D’Ayer, although no trace of the surname D’Ayer or any records of his parents have surfaced, suggesting that some elements might be apocryphal and most certainly confused.<sup>39</sup> Could this reference be the origin of the artist’s pseudonym Fougère, as well as that of Laforest, the name that the artist-naturalist’s wife, Lucy Bakewell, would later always call him? Alternatively, since Fougère and Laforest were common surnames around Nantes and in Haiti, Audubon père could have used them at a later date to conceal his son’s illegitimacy.<sup>40</sup>

From the above discussion it is clear that these genealogical websites enable us to see the facts only through a glass darkly, mixed with oral traditions and muddled recollections. Their tangled records, which in the cases cited do not state a race, may be the sources for the racial confusion in Audubon’s biography. The ones cited are unreliable and lack documentary support of their

<sup>38</sup> See: <https://sites.rootsweb.com/~htiwgw/familles/fiches/040901.htm/>. Adding to the confusion, another website states that Belloni Fougère married Jeanne Rabine, who is also listed together with Jean Audubon as the parents of Jean Jacques Audubon.

<sup>39</sup> Association Généalogie d’Haiti, ref. 30253 (FGT), lists her, the unique person with that surname, without dates or parents. The IGI lists Laforest as the surname of Belloni Fougère’s mother, together with her married name Fougère, without a first name: <https://www.familysearch.org/search/family-trees/results?q.birthLikePlace=Haiti&q.deathLikeDate.from=1779&q.deathLikeDate.to=1780&q.deathLikePlace=Haiti&q.givenName=Belloni&q.surname=Foug%C3%A9re/>.

<sup>40</sup> Rhodes (2004: 5) holds that his “stigmatic birth was a secret John James was sworn to hide: in France bastard children were denied inheritance. To complicate his identity further, he began using the name Laforest, enlarging on Fougère: John James Audubon Fougère.” Rhodes is mistaken about Fougère, because it was Audubon’s parents, not the artist, who began using the pseudonym.



Figure 10. *Le Slicquart ou Clocquare*; Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*) with studies of bills, 1805–06, by John James Audubon. Graphite, pastel, and brown ink on paper, 20 × 26 in. (510 × 660 mm.). MS Am 21 (60), Houghton Library, Harvard University. It is signed at the lower left: J J L Audubon (no permission needed).

family trees. That said, in an attempt to weave all the threads about Audubon together in a hypothetical exercise based on the armature of documentary evidence, the following scenario would cover the bases, although it is highly speculative. After Belloni Fougère's death, Marie-Antoinette Rabin Fougère joined the Audubon plantation household with her son, and perhaps became one of the owner's mistresses. She may have been there when Jeanne Rabine arrived, or when Rabine became seriously ill and then with child. When Jeanne was

bedridden with postpartum ailments until her death 6.5 months later, Marie-Antoinette, a seasoned mother, may have been assigned the care of Rabine's newborn son. Marie-Antoinette, however, predeceased Jeanne Rabine by 2 months and is not among the individuals recorded in Sanson's bill that lists others treated on the property. At the time of her death, Marie-Antoinette was living in Les Cayes, although we do not know if she was at the Audubon plantation. Perhaps 5-year-old Belloni Rabin Fougère, who would also die in that city, could have



Figure 11. *Harle, femelle*, commonly called Shell Duck; female Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*), 28 January 1807, by John James Audubon. Graphite, pastel, and brown ink on paper, 18 7/8 × 27 1/8 in. (480 × 690 mm). MS Am 21 (63), Houghton Library, Harvard University. It is signed at lower left: J J L Audubon (no permission needed).

remained at the Audubon plantation to become a playmate of the young artist. This hypothetical reconstruction would partially account for Jean Audubon's later use of Fougère and Laforest as pseudonyms for his son, ones that had a childhood resonance and connections with Saint-Domingue and with France. Unlike the name Laforest, Audubon himself never used the name Fougère, and there is no mention of Marie-Antoinette or Belloni Fougère in the many documents held by his descendants in the Audubon–Lavigne collection in

<sup>41</sup> Jean-Louis Lavigne, personal correspondence, 2 May 2021.

France, suggesting that a connection with anyone with the surname of Fougère has no basis in historical fact.<sup>41</sup> What is beyond doubt is that the meaning of the words prefigure the artist's future affinity with nature, reinforcing the adage that name is destiny.

#### JEAN JACQUES FOUGÈRE AUDUBON—1800

Six years after the Audubons had adopted the two children born on Saint-Domingue, and after revolutionary fervor had subsided in France, they baptized their son on 23 October 1800, 6 months shy of his 16th



Figure 12. *Ferruginous Thrush Turdus Rufus*, Moquer Francois Buffon; Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*), 10 May 1807, by John James Audubon. Graphite, pastel, and brown ink on paper, 9 × 11 7/16 in. (230 × 290 mm). MCZ 118.3 (Houghton Deposit), Ernst Mayr Library and Archives of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University. It is signed at lower left: Jean J. L. Audubon (no permission needed).

birthday. The baptismal certificate, which was signed by a priest of Saint-Similien in Nantes named Tardiveau, gives the boy's name as "Jean Jacques Fougère Audubon fils," son of Jean Audubon and his legitimate spouse, Anne Moynet (Herrick, 1917, 2: 329). The couple named him out of admiration for the Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and to distinguish him from his father

(Olson, 2012a: 18).<sup>42</sup> They retained the name Fougère from his adoption papers to ensure lawful continuity. The signing of the Concordat of 1801 by Pope Pius VII and Napoleon Bonaparte, whose negotiations had started before the baptism, had returned some power to the Catholic Church and made it acceptable to name children with saints' names.

#### JEAN AUDUBON FILS—1806–14

In a document of 11 April 1806—a property of attorney concerning the partnership in America between the younger

<sup>42</sup> The baptism records of the church have disappeared, probably because of the Revolution, although a copy of the document is in the Audubon-Lavigne collection, France (see also Herrick, 1917, 1: 60).

Audubon and Jean Ferdinand Rozier (1777–1864) at Mill Grove in Pennsylvania—drawn up by their fathers, the youth’s name is given as “Jean Audubon, fils” (Herrick, 1917, 1: 350–351). At the time, the Audubons were living at their country house, La Gerbetière, in Couëron. Since the document pertained to America rather than to France, it could be simpler and used the name that the youth was using at the time in its French form (Fig. 12). Within a few years, the anglicized version of that name would become the accepted one, probably because Audubon fils was in America.

Lieutenant Jean Audubon’s first will (12 May 1812) states that he is the husband of Anne “Moinette” and their son is “Monsieur Jean Audubon,” who is in the United States. Rose is cited in this document and in all subsequent wills with her full roster of names, including that of her spouse, which legitimized her: “dame Rose Bouffard épouse de Monsieur Gabriel Loyen du Puigaudeau” (Herrick, 1917, 2: 360). Two years later, Anne Moynet’s first will (4 December 1814) lists her adopted son as “Monsieur Jean Audubon fils” (Herrick, 1917, 2: 363).

In the parents’ later wills—an additional one for the artist’s father and three for his stepmother—it is clear that as the couple aged during the more stable, post-Revolutionary years, they became concerned about the inheritance of their natural children and feared that their wills could be challenged, even though both children had been adopted and baptized. Probably on legal advice, the couple strove for historical accuracy over obfuscation. Unfortunately, their fears were well founded and their wills were contested (see the discussion below). In their later testaments, they established their son’s lineage by using forms of Rabin for his surname and sometimes adding “Créole de Saint-Dominique.” By this time, both of Jeanne Rabine’s parents were dead, so that any family connections were unproblematic. In France, “creole” was used legally to

mean someone born to French parents outside of France, rather than as a racial description, as it was later used in the colonies.<sup>43</sup>

#### JEAN RABIN (RABAIN)—1816

A sea change occurs with Jean Audubon’s second and last will (15 March 1816), which spells his wife’s surname as “MOINETTE” and identifies the artist as “Monsieur Jean RABAIN créole de Saint-Domingue” (the latter a designation also added after Rose’s litany of names), who is in the United States without dependents but married to “Lucy BACKWELL” (Herrick, 1917, 2: 361–362). Madame Jean Audubon’s second will (10 May 1816) echoes this new approach, naming her stepson “M. Jean RABIN, créole de Saint-Domingue” (again assigning the same epithet to Rose to indicate that her parents were French citizens), married to “Lucy BACKWELL,” in the United States without dependents (Herrick, 1917, 2: 364). These testaments underline that Audubon, born in Saint-Domingue, was the son of a French woman with a local surname and stress that he was married to an American woman. As Audubon père feared, after his death his nieces and nephews contested his last will in the court of Nantes and impugned the name of Anne Moynet. Perceiving this danger, Audubon père had inserted a clause that if his second will was attacked, he left his full estate to his wife instead of dividing it between his children and his wife (Herrick, 1917, 2: 362). The case went to the supreme court at Savenay, where a seasoned defense lawyer, M. Ménard, claimed that since Jean Audubon had declared both Jean Rabin and Rose

<sup>43</sup> The first two definitions of creole, which was the original meaning, according to Merriam Webster (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/creole/>) are: 1. a person of European descent born especially in the West Indies or Spanish America; 2. a white person descended from early French or Spanish settlers of the U.S. Gulf states and preserving their speech and culture.

were his natural children and had provided evidence of adoption, the case should be settled in their favor (Ford, 1988: 98, 101–102). An unpublished letter from 24 September 1817 written by the father to his son reveals the parental reasoning; translated from the French, it reads:

First you tell us that you are sending us a proxy under the name of Jean Rabin and you sign it Jean [i.e., John James] Audubon. This change of name invalidates the proxy; the name you sign must be Jean Rabin, Creole from Santo Domingo, with no question of Jean Audubon except as it concerns the name of your spouse. Since the fall of the usurper [i.e., Napoleon] our laws have changed and are those of a legitimate king; the new code requires that the name of the mother be the only one you employ in your proxy, which, when you have read and judged it, you can sign by the name Jean Rabin. Then get the authorities of the country you live in to legalize it and have it certified by the French consul; and don't forget to have each authority stamp it.<sup>44</sup>

In her third will (26 December 1817), Moynet is listed as the widow of Jean Audubon and the artist as “Monsieur Jean RABIN” (Herrick, 1917, 2: 366). Proof that Audubon's parents were using the name Jean Rabin for historical accuracy and inheritance purposes is found in another legal document of 26 July 1817, signed and notarized in Henderson, Kentucky by the artist. It gives Rose's husband, Gabriel Loyen du Puigaudeau, as the lawful attorney in France for “Jean Rabin, husband of Lucy Bakewell,” and their property. This document was intended to clear up any ambiguity, enabling Puigaudeau to settle

disputes concerning Jean Audubon père's estate. It uses both “Jean Audubon” (twice) and “Jean Rabin” (four times), and is signed “John J. Audubon,” his mature identity (Herrick, 1917, 1: 64 n. 16).

#### JEAN AUDUBON, CALLED JEAN RABIN—1821

Moynet's fourth and final will (16 July 1821) lists her stepson as “Monsieur Jean AUDUBON, dit Jean RABIN,” no less than five times (Herrick, 1917, 2: 367–368). She wanted to ensure that there would be no confusion from earlier wills and documents that might prevent him from inheriting. Therefore, she emphasized rather than concealed his lineage. At that moment, Audubon was on the Mississippi River at Bayou Sarah near St. Francisville, Louisiana, tutoring Eliza Pirrie at Oakley, her father's plantation.<sup>45</sup> As Herrick astutely observed, “It is very plain that Audubon's foster parents considered it advisable to have his identity clearly set forth in legal documents,” whereas that of Rose had been known originally and never concealed (Herrick, 1917, 1: 62).

Although Audubon (Fig. 13)—seen here in a self-portrait signed simply “Audubon . . . by himself” that alludes to his bouts of depression—embroidered the narrative of his birth and youth in several places, knowing the chaotic circumstances of his early childhood and the stigma of his illegitimacy one can understand why he invented various half-truths as smokescreens. This was especially true when writing the self-mythologizing exercise for his sons, claiming his birth was an “enigma” (Audubon, 1999: 765). In addition, because he was an emotional person, the circumstances surrounding his birth and the identity of his birth mother were fraught issues. Although

<sup>44</sup> Jean Audubon to John James Audubon, dated Couëron, France, 24 September 1817 (Yale Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, Connecticut, Morris Tyler Family collection, Gen MSS 85, box 1, folder 2). Thanks to Richard Rhodes for the translation.

<sup>45</sup> Anne Moynet died 18 October 1821, but Audubon would not hear of her death for a very long time, which upset him tremendously.



Figure 13. *Audubon at Green Bank/Almost, Happy!!—*, 1826, by John James Audubon. Black chalk on paper, 5 5/8 × 4 1/4 in. (143 × 108 mm). University of Liverpool Art Gallery & Collections, UK, 2334 (University of Liverpool Art Gallery & Collections, UK © Victoria Gallery & Museum, University of Liverpool/Bridgeman Images) (license permission purchased).

he loved Anne Moynet, he always felt the lack of his birth mother, which explains not only his attraction to stable Lucy Bakewell but also, in contrast to his father, his fidelity to their marriage vows. At times the artist, who was haunted by his illegitimacy and felt like an outsider or outcast, did remember and acknowledge his birthplace. As Irmscher has pointed out (Irmscher, 2019), Audubon inscribed in graphite in a marginal note on one page of the first volume of his copy of Charles-Lucien Bonaparte's *American Ornithology* "J.A. born in Santo Domingue." (Bonaparte, 1825, 1: 40).<sup>46</sup> Moreover, in two

<sup>46</sup> Audubon's copy of Bonaparte's *American Ornithology; or the Natural History of Birds Inhabiting the United States, not Given by Wilson* is in the Audubon Museum and Nature Center, Henderson, Kentucky, JJA.1938.847–850.

of three official documents, dating from 1806 to 1812 relating to his status as an alien with the intention of becoming naturalized and then a citizen in 1812, Audubon unequivocally states that he was born in Les Cayes on Saint-Domingue but, as was frequently the case, was mistaken about dates, including that of his birth (Dallett, 1960).<sup>47</sup>

From the above discussion, it is apparent that Audubon's parents, and not the artist-naturalist himself, assigned the sequence of various names by which he was known during the tumultuous period of political and social change of his youth and early adulthood in France. An analysis of the documents solves the mysteries and reveals the parental motivations behind each name.

## CONCLUSION

By focusing on documentary evidence, this article addresses and resolves several topical controversies about Audubon. After settling the debate about the artist-naturalist's ancestry and his birth mother, Jeanne Rabine, it clears up the mysteries surrounding his early identities and explains the logic behind their adoption. In the process, it also clarifies elements in the rich Audubon collections held at Harvard in the Ernst Mayr Library and Archives of the Museum of Comparative Zoology and Houghton Library. Finally, it helps us to understand Audubon's ambitious drive to become an autodidactic artist and naturalist and thus overcome his stigmatic birth and childhood with the success of *The Birds of America*.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For facilitating my research that spans nearly a decade, I thank the following individuals currently and formerly at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts: at the Ernst Mayr Library and Archives of

<sup>47</sup> All three documents are in the records of the U.S. District Court, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

the Museum of Comparative Zoology: Robert S. Young, Linda S. Ford, Mary Sears, Dana Fisher, and Constance A. Rinaldo; at Houghton Library: Leslie Morris, Heather Cole, Carie McGinnis, and James Capobianco. My special thanks to Alexandra Mazzitelli, former research associate at the New-York Historical Society, who contributed insights and assistance with images; Christoph Irmscher, Distinguished Professor of English at Indiana University, for invaluable advice on Audubon matters; Richard Rhodes, Audubon biographer, for sharing his files of Audubon documents in America; Philippe Charon of the Archives de Loire-Atlantique; Jean-Louis Lavigne; and Heidi L. Taylor-Caudill of the John James Audubon State Park. In addition, Melissa Aja was most helpful in shepherding the manuscript through the editing process.

#### LITERATURE CITED

- Adam, D. and K. Kloos. 2014. *Deeply Divided: Racial Politics and Social Movements in Postwar America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Audubon, J. J. 1820–21. “Mississippi River Journal.” Ernst Mayr Library and Archives of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Spec. Coll. MCZ F117.
- Audubon, J. J. 1831–39. *Ornithological Biography, or An Account of the Habits of the Birds of the United States of America: Accompanied by Descriptions of the Objects Represented in the Work Entitled “The Birds of America,” and Interspersed with Delineations of American Scenery and Manners*, 5 vols. Edinburgh: Adam Black.
- Audubon, J. J. 1999. *Writings and Drawings*. C. Irmscher (editor). New York: Library of America.
- Audubon, M. R., and E. Coues (editors). 1897. *Audubon and His Journals*, 2 vols. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons.
- Bernstein, M. 2005. Identity politics. *Annual Review of Sociology* 31: 47–74.
- Bonaparte, C.-L. 1825. *American Ornithology; or the Natural History of Birds Inhabiting the United States, Not Given by Wilson*. Vol. 1. Philadelphia: Samuel Augustus Mitchell.
- Bourroux, L. (editor). 2017. *Jean-Jacques Audubon 1785–1851. Dessins de Jeunesse. Catalogue Raisonné*. Exh. cat., Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle de La Rochelle. Paris: Les Indes savantes; La Rochelle: Museum La Rochelle; Saintes: Le Croît.
- Bryan, P. E. 1984. *The Haitian Revolution and Its Effects*. Kingston, Jamaica: Heinemann.
- Dallett, F. J. 1960. Citizen Audubon: a documentary discovery. *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 21(1/2): 89–93.
- Dubois, L. 2005. *Avengers of the New World*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Ford, A. 1988. *John James Audubon: A Biography*. New York: Abbeville.
- Girard, P. R. 2011. *The Slaves Who Defeated Napoleon: Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian War of Independence, 1801–1804*. Tuscaloosa: Alabama University Press.
- Grégoire, C. 2004. Jeanne Rabine et le mystère Audubon. 303: *Arts, Recherches et Créations* 82: 9.
- Herrick, F. H. 1917. *Audubon the Naturalist: A History of His Life and Time*, 2 vols. New York: D. Appleton.
- International Genealogical Index (IGI) [Internet]. Salt Lake City, Utah: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. [cited May 7, 2021]. Available from: <https://www.familysearch.org/search/family-trees/results?q.anyDate.from=1785&q.anyDate.to=1851&q.birthLikeDate.from=1785&q.birthLikePlace=Haiti&q.givenName=John%20James&q.surname=Audubon/>.
- Irmscher, C. 2019. Audubon’s Haiti [Internet]. *The Public Domain Review*. Available from: <https://publicdomainreview.org/essay/audubons-haiti/>.
- James, C. L. R. 1989. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Lanham, J. D. 2021. What do we do about John James Audubon? *Audubon* 123(1): 26–35.
- Nobles, G. 2017. *John James Audubon: The Nature of the American Woodsman*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Nobles, G. 2020. The Myth of John James Audubon [Internet]. *Audubon Magazine*. Available from: <https://www.audubon.org/news/the-myth-john-james-audubon/>.
- Olson, R. J. M. 2012a. *Audubon’s Aviary: The Original Watercolors for “The Birds of America”*. New York: Rizzoli.
- Olson, R. J. M. 2012b. The “early birds” of John James Audubon. *Master Drawings* 50(4): 439–494.
- Rhodes, R. 2004. *John James Audubon: The Making of an American*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Rhodes, R., Edwards, S. V., and L. A. Morris (editors). 2008. *Audubon: Early Drawings*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University.



BULLETIN OF THE

# Museum of Comparative Zoology

## BOARD OF EDITORS

*Editor:* James Hanken

*Managing Editor:* Melissa Aja

*Associate Editors:* Andrew Biewener, Scott Edwards,  
Brian Farrell, Gonzalo Giribet, Hopi Hoekstra, George Lauder,  
Javier Ortega-Hernández, Naomi Pierce, Stephanie Pierce,  
and Mansi Srivastava

Publications issued or distributed by the  
Museum of Comparative Zoology,  
Harvard University:

*Bulletin* 1863–

*Breviora* 1952–

*Memoirs* 1865–1938

*Johnsonia, Department of Mollusks*, 1941–1974

*Occasional Papers on Mollusks*, 1945–2002

General queries, questions about author guidelines, or permissions for  
MCZ Publications should be directed to the editorial assistant:

MCZ Publications  
Museum of Comparative Zoology  
Harvard University  
26 Oxford Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138

[mczpublications@mcz.harvard.edu](mailto:mczpublications@mcz.harvard.edu)

## EXCHANGES AND REPRINTS

All our publications are available as e-reprints  
on our website at no charge:  
<https://mcz.harvard.edu/publicationshome>

To join our journal exchange program, please contact the  
Ernst Mayr Library:  
[mayrlib@oeb.harvard.edu](mailto:mayrlib@oeb.harvard.edu).

This publication has been printed on acid-free permanent paper stock.

© The President and Fellows of Harvard College 2021.

Photo on the front cover:

*Belted King Fisher A.W. Aloedo Alcion L'Alcion d'Amerique septtionale Buffon*; Belted Kingfisher (*Megaceryle alcyon*), 15 July 1808, by John James Audubon. Graphite, pastel, and brown ink on paper, 8 11/16 x 16 1/4 in. (220 x 410 mm). MS Am 21 (50), Houghton Library, Harvard University. It is signed at lower right: *J. J. Audubon*; initialed at lower left of center: *J.A.* (no permission needed).

US ISSN 0027-4100

MCZ Publications  
Museum of Comparative Zoology  
Harvard University  
26 Oxford Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138

[mczpublications@mcz.harvard.edu](mailto:mczpublications@mcz.harvard.edu)

© The President and Fellows of Harvard College 2021