

ANNALS OF IOWA

EDITORIAL DEPARTMENT

DATE AND PLACE OF JOHN J. AUDUBON'S BIRTH

We are in receipt of a communication from Mr. William H. Powers, Librarian of South Dakota State College, Brookings, South Dakota, in which he calls attention to a statement in the article in the last ANNALS which says that when the famous naturalist, John J. Audubon, made his trip up along the west edge of Iowa in 1843 he was sixty-three years old. The authority for the statement as to Audubon's age was *The National Cyclopedia of American Biography*, published in 1896, which gives the date of his birth as May 4, 1780, and *Audubon and His Journals*, by Maria R. Audubon, published by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1897. In the latter the author says, "In his journals and letters various allusions are made to his age, and many passages bearing on the matter are found, but with one exception no two agree; he may have been born anywhere between 1772 and 1783, and in the face of this uncertainty the date usually given, May 5, 1780, may be accepted, though the true one is no doubt earlier."¹ With these authorities at hand we felt safe in saying that in 1843 Audubon was sixty-three years old.

Also as to the place of birth—in *Audubon and His Journals* the author says, "The village of Mandeville in the parish of St. Tammany, Louisiana, is about twenty miles from New Orleans on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. Here on the plantation of the same name, owned by Marquis de Mandeville de Marigny, John James Laforest Audubon was born, . . ."²

But Mr. Powers refers us to *Audubon the Naturalist*, by F. H. Herrick, published by D. Appleton & Co., in 1917, in which the author cites documentary evidence showing the naturalist was born at Les Cayes, Santo Domingo (now Haiti) on April 26, 1785. The author, Dr. Herrick, realizing that the date of the natural-

¹*Audubon and His Journals*, by Maria R. Audubon, Vol. I, p. 6.

²*Ibid.*, p. 5.

ist's birth was not definitely fixed, and that little was known of the father, Jean Audubon, except that he was a sea captain and lived in Nantes, France, visited that city and was successful in locating in the commune of Couron, nine miles below Nantes, documents which were filed at the time of the settlement of the family estate on the death of the naturalist's step-mother in 1821. These documents consisted of "letters, wills, deeds, certificates of births, baptisms, adoptions, marriages, deaths," etc.³

Captain Jean Audubon was born at Les Sables, France, October 11, 1774.⁴ He was a sailor, much of the time being captain of a vessel of his own in carrying trade between France and America. During this time there was war between France and England, and Captain Audubon's vessel went heavily armed and fought off many attacks by English vessels as well as by pirates. At two different times he was held by the English as a prisoner. He finally joined the fleet of Count de Grasse before Yorktown, where he later witnessed Cornwallis' surrender.⁵ Soon after that he embarked in Santo Domingo "as a merchant, planter, and dealer in slaves, and amassed a large fortune."⁶ He left much of his property there in the hands of agents as he carried on his shipping trade and was absent much of the time. He finally left Santo Domingo in 1789, taking his two children, the future naturalist and his half-sister, the one four and the other two years old, with him to Nantes, France, where he established his home.⁷

"The bill of the physician, Dr. Sanson of Les Cayes, who assisted at young Audubon's birth, still exists. . . . Written in the Doctor's own hand, it is receipted by him, as well as approved and signed by Jean Audubon himself."⁸ It and the other documentary evidence cited by Dr. Herrick seem to establish the place and date of the naturalist's birth as Les Cayes, Haiti, April 26, 1785. That would cause him to be fifty-eight years old at the time of the Iowa trip instead of sixty-three, which, considering the necessary fatigue of such a trip, appears more natural.

³*Audubon the Naturalist*, by F. H. Herrick, Vol. I, p. viii.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 53.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.