

# THE SECRET BIRDING JOURNAL OF G. WASHINGTON FROM VIRGINIA

*Selected transcriptions from the original manuscript*

**Pete Dunne**

## A Note to the Reader

The package, string tied and double-bag wrapped, was stuffed in the mailbox. "Hope this isn't another road-killed bird needing identification," I mused, painfully. The last one, deposited by a neighbor, went a full ten count before anyone opened the box and the postmistress hasn't forgiven us yet.

The package bore no return address; its postmark dated March 30 read: Baltimore, Maryland. "Well," I concluded, "whatever else it might be, clearly it's not another solicitation." No marketing firm would wrap an appeal in shopping bags emblazoned with the legend: *JUST SAY NO*.

It seemed too heavy for a t-shirt and too light for a bomb. "Well, maybe a small bomb." Besides those congenial pirates at Land's End always use UPS. A rejected manuscript? No. The binoculars I sent off for realignment in 1967? No. I hadn't entirely rejected the bomb idea—not that I specifically ordered one. Gingerly I felt for wires and passed a questing nose along the seams.

"No, no plastic explosives . . . no arsenic . . . no hint of tabasco . . ."

Some quick but delicate surgery disclosed a pile of moldy bound parchment overrun with faded flowing script. A typed *postit* note slapped over the title read: "Found in an old church in Baltimore. What do you think?" I pulled the note, held the top page closer to the light, and did my best to decipher the florid design.

If my collar bone hadn't gotten in the way, there is no telling where my jaw would have finally come to a stop. When I could see well enough to read again I reached for the brittle pages and re-read the impossible legend.

"The Collected Lifetime Observations of OUR OWN BIRDS of the UNITED STATES made by his EXCELLENCY G. WASHINGTON of Virginia as Compiled at his Request



Illustration by Taylor Jones, Courtesy of The Heritage Plantation of Sandwich, MA

by his LOVING and AGGRIEVED wife, Martha."

At the bottom of the page was a pen-and-ink drawing that looked like a pelican that had been tarred and feathered by Daniel Shay and burned by the British. The caption read: The Great American Bald Eagle—MW.

"Whew," I mused, "I guess if I was responsible for a sketch that ugly I would have hidden the manuscript, too."

It took the better part of an evening to read it through. The manuscript itself is in poor condition, much of the text faded beyond recognition. As to its legitimacy, I'm no judge. It certainly has all the signs of great age upon it. I mean the paper isn't computer stock, three-hole binder perforated, or even typewriter bond, and, you'd have to soak paper in a lot of pickle juice and bake it long enough to tenderize a scoter to get it to look the way this stuff does. But whether or not G. Washing-

ton of Virginia, I mean *THE G.* Washington of Virginia was the author, well, that I couldn't say. It's legitimacy notwithstanding, the accounts are fascinating and, if true, not only add a few chapters to the history of bird study in America but provide fascinating insight into the very roots of our republic.

I leave it to the readers of *American Birds* to pass judgement as they may.

**June 11, 1740**

**Ferry Farm, Virginia**

The cardinal red bird is a creature of uncommon attractiveness and boldness. It sits high atop some perch in plain open sight calling attention to itself by lusty singing. It seems passing strange to me that a bird so clad in a bright red coat would be so bold to stand in the open. It makes so easy a mark for the woodland hawks and marksmen.

Were I a bird, I would ere be like the spot thrush of the woodland that

is dressed in brown and much given to hide behind trees. I'faith it is hard to see and near impossible to shoot.

I fain admire the cardinal red bird for its bold courage but think the bird stupid to wear so bright a red coat and stand so still in open places.

**July 4, 1745**

**Ferry Farm, Virginia**

'Tis unlikely that I will sit for a week. I'faith but my father is stern with his discipline and not one to stroke lightly with a switch. A hawke had nested in the branch of a fruiting tree. I was ambitious to gather one or more of the young falcons and train them to hunt. 'Tis true they are small, but fearless and to fly one from the fist would be grand sport.

The tree was uncommonly difficult to fell and my hatchet ill suited for the task. But I was resolute and ere long the tree tottered and fell. The cavity was deep and I was hard put to reach even one hawk, still, and took many a bite for my trouble. Leaving I was surprised to espy a small gray owl sitting outside a hole opening to a different limb. It was dazed or confused by daylight (as owls are night birds) but flew as I reached to claim it. I marvel that two such hunting birds could live so close together and govern their lives from separate branches.

**September 2, 1749**

**Shenandoah Valley**

While resting from the heat of the day I espied what seemed at first a leaf held by the web of a great black and yellow spider. Er long I moved to investigate and, Merry! was surprised to find no leaf but a small woodland bird caught by a single feather of its wing. It hung suspended and could not break its bond.

What manner of bird it was I am helpless to say. In shape it was like onto the gray "yank" that walks on the trunks of trees but was smaller. It was vigorously striped black and white and its eye was pert and black.

I released it with no harm and admonished that henceforth it would do well to avoid such foreign entanglements.

**May 1, 1777**

**Morristown, New Jersey**

There is no turning back spring now. The oaks are in flower and horses grow

fat and the spirits of the men who suffered greatly this winter rises with the temperature. The roads will soon be dry enough for an army to move along. What will Howe now?

I beheld a sight that was passing strange and sad. On the huts of the Pennsylvania line, a black-winged red bird, a bird I knew as a lad in Virginia, flew up and back again; landing on the roof of one hut, then another. Some of the men, because of its color, jested that it was a spy and would have shot it had not an officer interfered.

I recall it a shy forest bird and I marvel to see it in so open a place. It seemed the bird was searching and confused and it comes to me that perhaps the bird was one that lived here and missed the trees cut last winter. It could not know that it perched on the very trees, now laid into huts. It remained all day near the huts; the only red coat in camp but seemed gone this evening.

**June 15, 1782**

**Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

I suffer to think that having come so far the undoing of our struggle will be o'r a bird. What comes over Franklin that he should favor turkey as a proper symbol for our fledgling nation? My regard for the bird, proper trussed and done to a turn, is surpassed by no man—not even Franklin, whose love of victuals surpasses legend, but to elevate a common table fowl to the stature of the National Bird goes beyond reason.

I have no trifle with the eagle, as some have favored, though it feeds on carrion and seems at the mercy of crows. For my part, I favor the Great Ivory-beaked Woodpecker—a noble bird whose colors recall somewhat our flag. It is industrious and fearless and much prized by the savage. It lives in the deep forests that stretch in limitless fashion and so will never know shortage. It's hammering is like the ax falls of the woodsman and its golden eye hath an intelligence that the turkey lacks.

What's more 'tis unlikely that any man would deign eat the bird unless faced by starvation whereas turkey is common on the table. It doth not show proper respect, I think, to carve and serve the national symbol. As well we might have to eat our own words after fighting long in order to be able to openly speak them.

**Mt. Vernon**

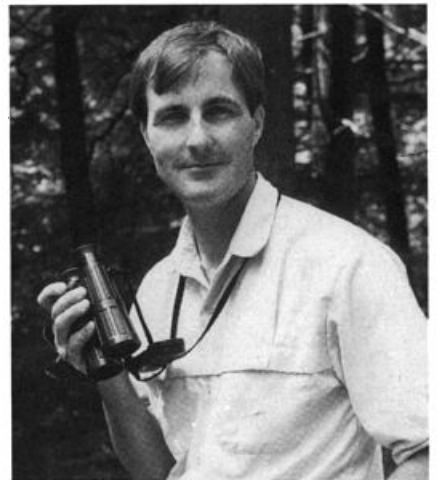
**December 13, 1799**

I am taken to bed with fever so have opportunity to write of the bird I chanced upon while riding. If not new to this region it was at least one I have not seen in a long life. A great flock of blackbirds was feeding amid the field animals. One among them caught my eye as it seemed to have a golden head. I could not shoot for fear of hitting one of the animals and each time I approached the flock took wing.

The golden headed blackbird seemed larger with white on the wing where many of the marsh blackbirds have red. But the wariness of the birds defeated me. I could not approach to a distance that would permit study or the safe release of shot.

It occurs to me that a spyglass would have aided me greatly in my effort. My eyes get no better with the years and my skill with a fowling piece is not as it was. Though I have not admitted it, I find, too, I relish less and less the hunt. Perhaps the spyglass is the answer. It will satisfy the curiosity and lessen the blood letting. When this magnificent cough subsides, I will write to Jefferson about this. He has a quick mind for contrivances, though Franklin, near ten years in his grave, had a genius for spectacles.

I feel certain the bird is not native, here, for I have never seen its like in all my years. There are, I doubt not, many new things to be found in this great continent. This next century will be one filled with discovery. I look forward to it, God willing.



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