



*The Beall-Dawson House, 1815
home of the
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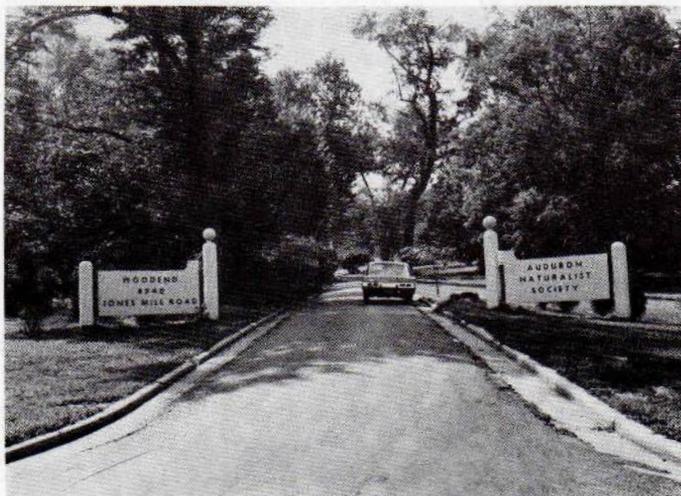
No. 3

THE AUDUBON NATURALIST SOCIETY AND ITS HOME, WOODEND

By Mrs. Neal Fitzsimons

"This society's philosophy is much broader than birds, it extends to preserving our total natural heritage."

(Congressman Gilbert Gude, 1972)



(Photograph by Lt. Col. Samuel G. Trask)

Editor's Note: The Historical Society has in the past published "old" history, including a few histories of early homes in the county. Along with their extensive grounds, many of these landmarks could not be preserved. Although Woodend is located on a Colonial land grant, Clean Drinking, in Chevy Chase, it is not a vintage mansion compared to some. However, the house, the gatehouse-garage, and the forty acres of manorial grounds were bequeathed to the Audubon Society to use as a natural wildlife refuge and environmental center. It is an impressive example of "preservation by utilization," rather than obliteration. We wish that more of our landmarks could receive a similar fate.

The First Audubon Societies

"For two closely related purposes - the study and protection of birds." (May 18, 1897)

Despite the fact that Alexander Wilson is known as the father of ornithology, it is John James Audubon (1785-1851) with whom most Americans associate birds. Audubon's first book, Birds of America, published in Europe in 1826 and in America in 1840, was subscribed to by King George IV, and reprinted for the next eleven years. But Audubon isn't acclaimed just for his bird paintings. He was America's first out-of-doors naturalist, disappearing time and again into the wilderness to record and paint not only America's ornithic life but also its biota.

In Audubon's journals on wildlife, there is enough of an undercurrent of uneasiness, of worry, of warnings, to label him one of our earliest environmentalists. In 1804, he carried out the first bird banding experiment and his bird counts, made in virginal backwoods country, were the only record for many years. His description of the 1812 slaughter of passenger pigeons and parrakeets is as vivid as Rachel Carson's 1962 description of the demise of red-winged blackbirds and robins by chemical sprays. He recorded the scene of fishermen clubbing to death gannets to use as fish bait and of the "egggers" who systematically robbed nests.

From firsthand observations of our settlers hacking into our primeval forests, Audubon envisioned the disappearance of some species of wildlife due to the "gradual diminution of our forests." In 1842 he made note of the decrease in the herds of buffalo, even though "daily we see so many that we hardly notice them more than the cattle in our pastures about our homes."

America seemed to be a long time in recognizing the plight of wildlife. The buffalo, extinct in the east around the time of our Revolution, was nearly annihilated between 1865-85 when the railroads allowed easy access to the west. The land and water bound birds, the Dodo, the Solitaire, and the great Auk, unable to take swift wing and escape man, were extinct by 1844. By 1878 the Labrador Duck, famous for its down and feathers, and migrating as far south as New Jersey, had vanished at the hand of commercial hunters. Even though ornithologists were alert to the dilemma of the passenger pigeons, they could not save them. The last one, Martha, died in 1914 and, in stuffed form, reposes at the Smithsonian from where she exhibited around the country like a rare jewel. Other species of birds were greatly diminished.

The first Ornithological Club was organized in Massachusetts in 1873. The American Ornithologists' Union came into being in 1883, which led to the appropriation of \$5,000 by Congress for a Biological Survey, and small state and local bird groups began to organize. In 1886 the term "Audubon Society" was coined by Dr. George Grinnell, an ex-student and neighbor of Mrs. Audubon's. Dr. Grinnell, editor of Field and Stream Magazine, was part of the group of Americans who became alarmed over the slaughter of birds for the millinery trade. Women's hats were made of the whole skins of gulls and terns and many were ornamented with elaborate feathers and bright plumage. Although Dr. Grinnell's society collapsed, the name of Audubon caught on and in 1897, the Audubon Society was organized in the District of Columbia "for the protection and study of birds." It wasted little time. The first lecture was "Woman as a Bird Enemy." Despite a concerted effort to educate the public, fashion must have continued to dictate, for at its first annual meeting, the Audubon Society was still concerned:

It is now becoming known that some of our most beautiful birds have been all but exterminated to supply the demands of millinery....Few people realize, until their attention is called to it, what it means to wear birds' wings and heads on ones' hat.

George Miller Sternberg, Surgeon-General of the U. S. Army, served as the first President for eighteen years. All the committees, except the Millinery Committee, were routine and since it was before the era of bumper stickers or saucer-sized buttons, a delicate bird pin was designed. The first major publication by the Audubon Society was The Birds of Washington and Vicinity (1898), but it was leaflets such as "The Birds' Message to Children," "A Hint to Mothers," and "Some Common Birds in Relation to Agriculture" that caused public awareness. A "bird day" was set aside in the schools and the Audubon Society trained people to conduct bird identification and awareness classes. The National Geographic is also credited with awakening the general public interest in birds.

The 1900 Lacey Act offered the first comprehensive Federal law for bird protection. In 1901 the first local law was enacted "for the protection of birds and eggs." Slowly other laws were passed and the egrets and terns and other birds that were nearly extinguished by the milliners were allowed to rebuild their population. In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt designated the first Federal wildlife refuge in Florida. A National Audubon Society was formed in 1905 with headquarters in New York, but the local Audubon Society elected to remain independent. International agreements were legislated such as the 1913 Act to terminate the importation of wild birds' feathers and the 1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act between the United States and Canada.

America's depression years were beneficial to wildlife, for governmental programs bringing help to agriculture led to emphasis on soil and water conservation, land use, and provision for wildlife. Conservation and game management required a broader knowledge of ecology, bringing the laboratory-confined scientist out of his narrow role. The public took interest in the wildlife sanctuaries and pursued lay nature studies.

Documentaries on wildlife shown in movie theatres, even before the "talkies" caused great public enthusiasm and gave people an insight into wildlife from distant areas. President Theodore Roosevelt, an active member of the Audubon Society (he turned in a bird count of the White House grounds), hosted a gala showing of the first bird movie in the East Room in 1908. Occasionally movies featured bird-watching

vignettes, as when a group with binoculars making bird counts would shush interlopers; or a bird-watching group stumbling upon a body in the woods would indicate a mystery plot. However, after World War II the Audubon Society became less of a bird-watching society and more involved with the totality of our environment. Irston R. Barnes, President of the Audubon Society from 1947 until 1961, explained:

A group of young and enthusiastic leaders came into the Audubon Society during and immediately after the War [World War II]. Many of the new recruits were as much concerned with conservation problems as they were with the enjoyment of birds...

Also, many of the new members were trained and proficient workers in natural history fields such as the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Forest Service, and the Smithsonian Museums. The Audubon Society began to offer year around field trips, seminars and lectures on field botany, geology, weather, ecology and conservation in addition to the basic bird courses. And according to Mr. Barnes, "eminent citizens who would never have joined a bird club but who were anxious to support a realistic and dedicated conservation program" were attracted by the Audubon Society.

Realizing their potential as an educational and scientific organization, the Audubon Society became an incorporated entity in 1947. Again, Mr. Barnes expressed the society's new turn:

We can be a forum for education in natural history and conservation that will influence public and private programs throughout the country.

The Audubon Society had already influenced several large scale programs concerning an increasing encroachment upon local natural areas; the proposal to construct a super highway through the C & O Canal in the 1930's, and Maryland Route 240 through Rock Creek Park in the 1950's. Most importantly, the society joined in forming and supporting groups such as the Potomac Valley Conservation and Recreation Council, a clearing house and mobilizer of local groups who opposed modern development plans which needlessly destroyed natural and recreational areas.

Thus, with such broadened horizons, in 1960 the Audubon Society changed its name to the Audubon Naturalist Society of the Central Atlantic States. According to Edward F. Rivinus, President of the society from 1971 to 1974, the name change reflected:

Our recognition of the whole natural environmental picture...the only animal capable of saving the natural environment is the animal most capable of destroying it, man; and that the only way man's destructive inclinations could effectively be disciplined is through education.

The Audubon Society's attempt to educate man in his role as predator has also included the one of educating man on the role of nature's own predators. Men like Jack Miner and Charlton Ogburn have probably made the most extreme comments on nature's own circle of brutality. To Jack Miner, who is remembered by many for the Scripture messages he placed on migrating ducks and geese, it was simply a matter of killing all predators. Mr. Ogburn, in The Winter Beach, was more philosophical. He

gave a long listing of predators and chastised Rachel Carson for calling a tidal pool "that enchanted place" when to him it was "a far-worse-than Roman arena" wherein: "the Tubularia had tentacles for petals with which it reached out to ensnare the infant larvae of mullusks and crustaceans," and some species of Nemertea "grew to monsters up to ninety feet long and yanked their victims into their mouths in the coils of a whiplike appendage." Mr. Ogburn comforted himself when writing of those preyed upon:

The brief, horror-beset existence we ascribe to them would surely be unrecognizable to them....To suffer vicariously is given to man alone.

Perhaps Harold Mayfield best explains it:

Predation...is a hard thing for many people to understand...no simple explanation is adequate to explain the complete relationships among living things....But as our understanding grows, we are coming to appreciate more fully that every wild creature has its place.

To the Audubon Society, the wild creatures still need to be protected from commercial interests. If the birds of yesteryear needed protection from the milliners, today's mammals need safety from the furriers and tanners. And both animal and man need extensive research on the harm of chemical poisoning.

Not only are chemicals in our environment of grave concern to the Audubon Society but it is also concerned with the invasion of wildlife territory by man as he literally takes lebensraum from the animals. The society's publications on scientific studies of the population factor have added yet another dimension to their role.

Thus, with the conservation of wildlife still its basic goal, the Audubon Society has extended its efforts to embrace all concepts of conservation. Their recent warning to mankind, "The Species We Save May be Our Own," is a reminder that the Audubon Society has come a long way since it first declared war on women's bird-trimmed hats.

Woodend

"The city grew around it, but Woodend remained an island of natural charm, with its screening of woodland."

(Irston Barnes, 1969)

The Audubon Society operated from its bookstore at 1621 Wisconsin Avenue for nearly ten years; before that from members' homes and a post office box. A mimeographed sheet, the "Wood Thrush," first published in 1947, grew into an informative quarterly journal, the Atlantic Naturalist. No longer having a reputation for just a "bird watching" and study group, surely the society needed a sanctuary of its own.

In 1967 the Audubon Society was recipient of a 30-room mansion on forty acres of land in Chevy Chase, which was part of a Colonial land grant known as Clean Drinking. In Old Manors in the Colony of Maryland - On the Patuxent, Annie L. Sioussset states

that Clean Drinking, which originally consisted of about 1,400 acres, was "taken up" by Col. John Courts of Sproxton, Yorkshire, in 1680 and patented in 1699. Clean Drinking acquired its quaint name when the surveyors were told that they had "drunk clean" all the available alcoholic spirits and would have to resort to nearby spring water.

The Clean Drinking grant remained in the Courts family name until the fourth John Courts sold 350 acres to his sister, Elizabeth, who in 1747 married Charles Jones. The Jones' erected the manor house in 1750.

Clean Drinking was one of the most self-contained agricultural units in the county. It had swift-flowing Rock Creek to furnish power for a mill and for water supply, a dairy house, stone kitchen, slave quarters, gardens, private cemetery, and the twin-chimney house where, in the words of Historian Thomas Scharf, "the planter dispensed a generous and often courtly hospitality." Clay, Webster, and Calhoun were entertained there. George Washington's diary makes reference to his stopping at Clean Drinking for a rest and visit on his return from the ambushcade and retreat from Fort Duquesne in 1755. During the War of 1812, the national post office was moved to Clean Drinking for safe keeping from the British. The Jones family figured prominently in the Revolution and in early state and county government. Until his death in 1911, collateral descendent Nicholas Jones occupied the house. He was alleged to be so fond of his ancestral home that he would not allow changes or repairs, so the house literally tumbled down. Simpson and Yardley described the colorful gentleman and his vintage house:

The arrangement of the back rooms and of the second floor is not known since the last occupant, Nick Jones, would not admit callers to those parts of the house. The enormous door knobs appeared to be made of solid brass and they, and the other brass objects, including the andirons, were kept brilliantly polished, which accentuates the rather 'dowdy' appearance of the structure as a whole. Magnificent boxwoods lined both sides of the path leading from Jones Mill Road to the house.



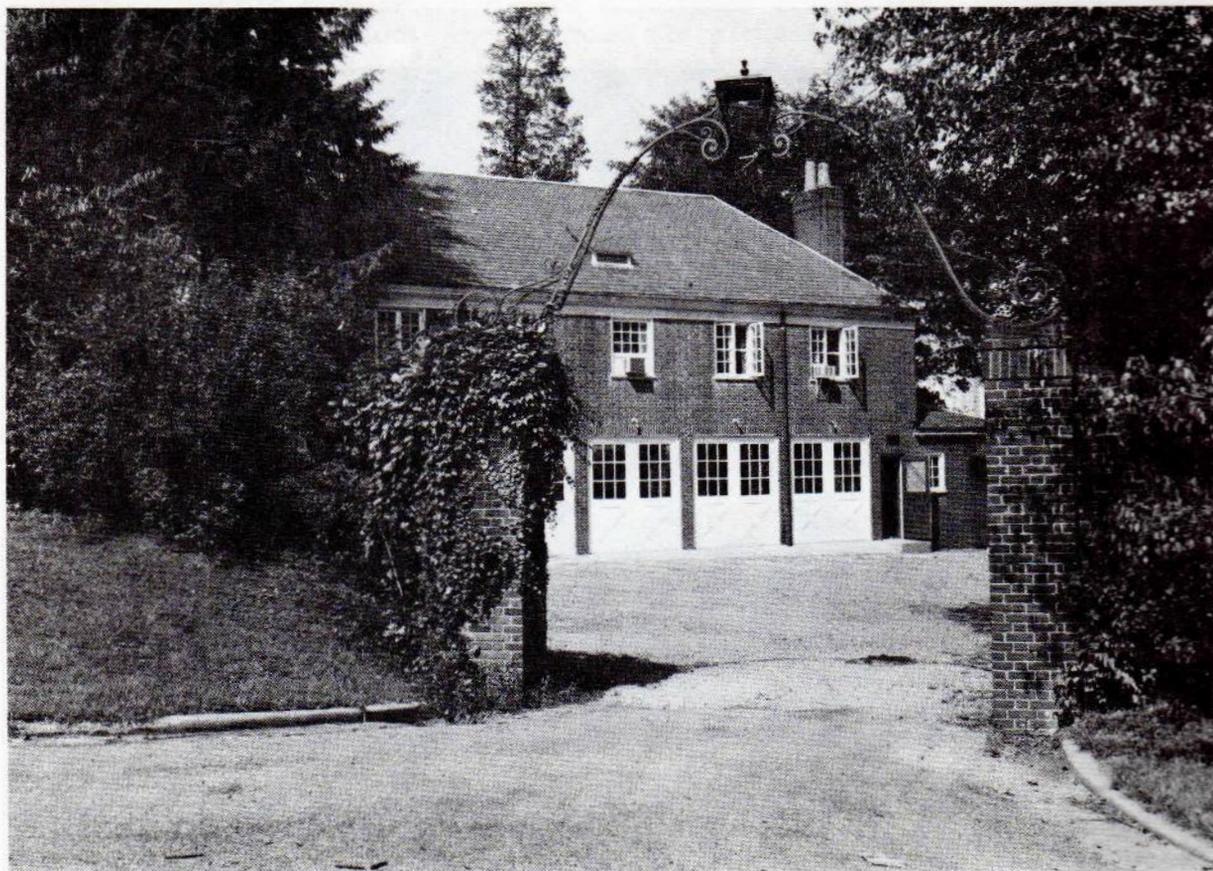
Nicholas Jones, shown here c. 1898, on his porch at Clean Drinking Manor. The house tumbled down in the early 1900's. It was built in 1750.



In 1970, under the supervision of the Historical Society (Bob Braunberg, Curator), archeological digs were undertaken on the out-buildings of Clean Drinking Manor. Shirley Briggs (center, standing), working from Woodend, organized the digs just before the site was razed for construction of the Bethesda-Silver Spring Retirement and Nursing Home Center.

In 1916, Clean Drinking left the Jones lineage when Robert C. Jones sold it to Navy Captain and Mrs. Chester Wells. Six years before that, the Wells' had purchased a farmhouse and approximately ten acres from Charles Barber and they ultimately acquired about 100 acres of adjacent land. Discarding the idea of rebuilding and enlarging on the ruins of Clean Drinking, the Wells' built their mansion, Woodend, on a nearby elevation, preserving the chimneys and foundation of the old Jones house, the remaining out-buildings, garden wall and the boxwoods. (The Jones family cemetery was moved to Rock Creek Cemetery). In addition, Mrs. Wells added something new - birdhouses - in the woods and around the gardens she laid out at Woodend.

Mrs. Wells, ne' Marion Dixson, was an Australian heiress who met Capt. Wells when he was on a Navy mission in her country. Married in 1908, the Wells' decided, when Capt. Wells was serving Navy duty in the Washington area, to build their permanent home in Chevy Chase. Mrs. Wells commissioned John Russell Pope, who designed the National Gallery of Art, the National Archives Building, and the Jefferson Memorial, to design Woodend and to duplicate some of the features of her father's estate near Sidney. Despite the illustrious reputation of Mr. Pope, Mrs. Wells, a strong-minded woman, had him build the five-stall garage before she allowed him to proceed with the house.



Garage-gatehouse at Woodend, 1974.
(Photograph by Lt. Col. Samuel G. Trask)

Woodend dominates the knoll it occupies. It combines the stately elegance of the Georgian style with the balustered roof line of the Greek Revivalists. By means of a low profile hip roof, the partial third story is concealed from viewers on the ground. Flemish bond walls are pierced with tall white, woodframed windows which are dominated by a grey keystone in a brick flat arch lintel. The main entranceway, also white, is typically Georgian, having a neo-classical double-sconce pediment over the door which stands between Corinthian pilasters. The general plan of the mansion is rectangular with an ell-wing on the west side. The "great hall," which contains the main staircase, is entered from the east. A small, semi-circular, collonaded portico attached to the east wing overlooks the area that once contained the Wells' formal gardens.

The rooms of Woodend generally have high ceilings and either wood or plastered paneling. Fireplaces can be found in all the formal rooms and in the main bedrooms. With six rooms for servants at the main house and three others over the brick garage located about 200 yards down the hill, it is easy to see that Mr. Pope planned to have the estate well maintained for the Wells' and their guests.

The original coal-burning heating plant appears to have been large enough for a modest-sized hotel. It is not too surprising when one considers that this mansion contains about 10,000 square feet, excluding the basement (which has a vaulted wine cellar), or about eight times the footage in the average home in suburbia. The house also contains the first underground electrical in-service facilities installed in this area.



Woodend, c. 1969. Designed by John Russell Pope in 1927.
(Courtesy of Ben Osborn, Audubon Society)

Woodend was completed in 1928 but bit by bit, Mrs. Wells lost parcels of the acreage she had acquired. The Maryland Park system sequestered part of the property that formed a portion of Rock Creek Park. The depression years and tax liabilities after the death of Capt. Wells in 1948 made further inroads. It was in 1955 that Mrs. Wells inquired of Mrs. W. O. Spears, a fellow member of the Audubon Society, "And speaking of birds, how would you like me to leave my place to the Audubon Society?" But Mrs. Wells had not definitely made up her mind and it seems that she enjoyed being courted by the Audubon Society. She wanted assurance that all would be well cared for. Ever the entertaining hostess, she announced at a Christmas party that she would leave her beloved house and forty acres to the Audubon Society after her demise. She died in 1967 in her eighties and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Two portraits of Mrs. Wells - one with her two adopted daughters - and a portrait of Capt. Wells, still hang at Woodend.

The Audubon Society, whose membership totals approximately 2,300 (one-third comes from Montgomery County), uses the first floor of Woodend for meeting rooms. The second and third floors are working offices and library. The Rachel Carson Trust for the Living Environment has offices at Woodend; Miss Carson was an Honorary Vice President and Board member of the Audubon Society. The George Whittell Memorial Field Ecology Center and classrooms are located in the gatehouse-garage. Graduate courses are taught in cooperation with the Department of Agriculture. The American Forest Institute has initiated a tree farm project on the Audubon grounds. In addition, the grounds will be sectioned off so that an inventory of existing wildlife can be recorded and studied. About 28 species of resident birds have already been counted at Woodend, and it is expected that Woodend will be included in the traditional Christmas and spring bird counts.

One cannot help but feel that Mr. Nicholas Jones, the quixotic gentleman so proud of the past, and Mrs. Chester Wells, the futurist so concerned with open spaces, would approve of present day Woodend. Preservation of the mansion for use as Audubon Society Headquarters and of the grounds as a sanctuary and for field studies is an admirable endeavor. It is clearly an effort that the "don't tear it downers" would applaud.

Mr. Stanwyn G. Shetler, President of the Audubon Society, and Mrs. Hannah B. Arnold, its Headquarters Manager, were most helpful in granting interviews. Mrs. Laurie Hess, a descendent of the Jones family, and Miss Shirley Briggs, Executive Secretary of the Rachel Carson Trust, were also generous with their time,

The Editor

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