

NJS Presents***Museums, Archives, Artifacts, and Documents*****In This Issue:*****The Letter from Mickle Swamp:******John James Audubon, South Jersey, and Birds of America Plate 81: Fish Hawk or Osprey*****By Nicholas P. Ciotola****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v7i2.255>**

Despite the fact that a borough in Camden County bears his name, John James Audubon is rarely associated with New Jersey. The existing art history scholarship, biographies, auction catalogs, and museum exhibitions about the celebrated nineteenth-century artist/naturalist either skim over or completely overlook his time in the Garden State. However, Audubon made multiple trips to the southern part of the state to observe birds. He even lived and worked in New Jersey in the spring and summer of 1829, marveling at the biodiversity of South Jersey and producing a number of bird portraits that would later be published in his magnum opus, Birds of America. A handwritten letter in the archives of the American Philosophical Society brings to light some specific details about Audubon's time in New Jersey, as well as clues to the true origin story of one of his most admired and sought-after works: Plate 81: Fish Hawk or Osprey.

Background

Everyone knows the name Audubon. It graces conservation organizations, nature centers, wildlife areas, and municipalities nationwide. All are the namesake of John James Audubon (1785–1851), the artist/naturalist known the world over for his amazing work on birds. Born to a French naval officer in modern-day Haiti, Audubon immigrated to the United States in 1803 and took up residence in a wooded estate on the banks of the Perkiomen Creek, northwest of

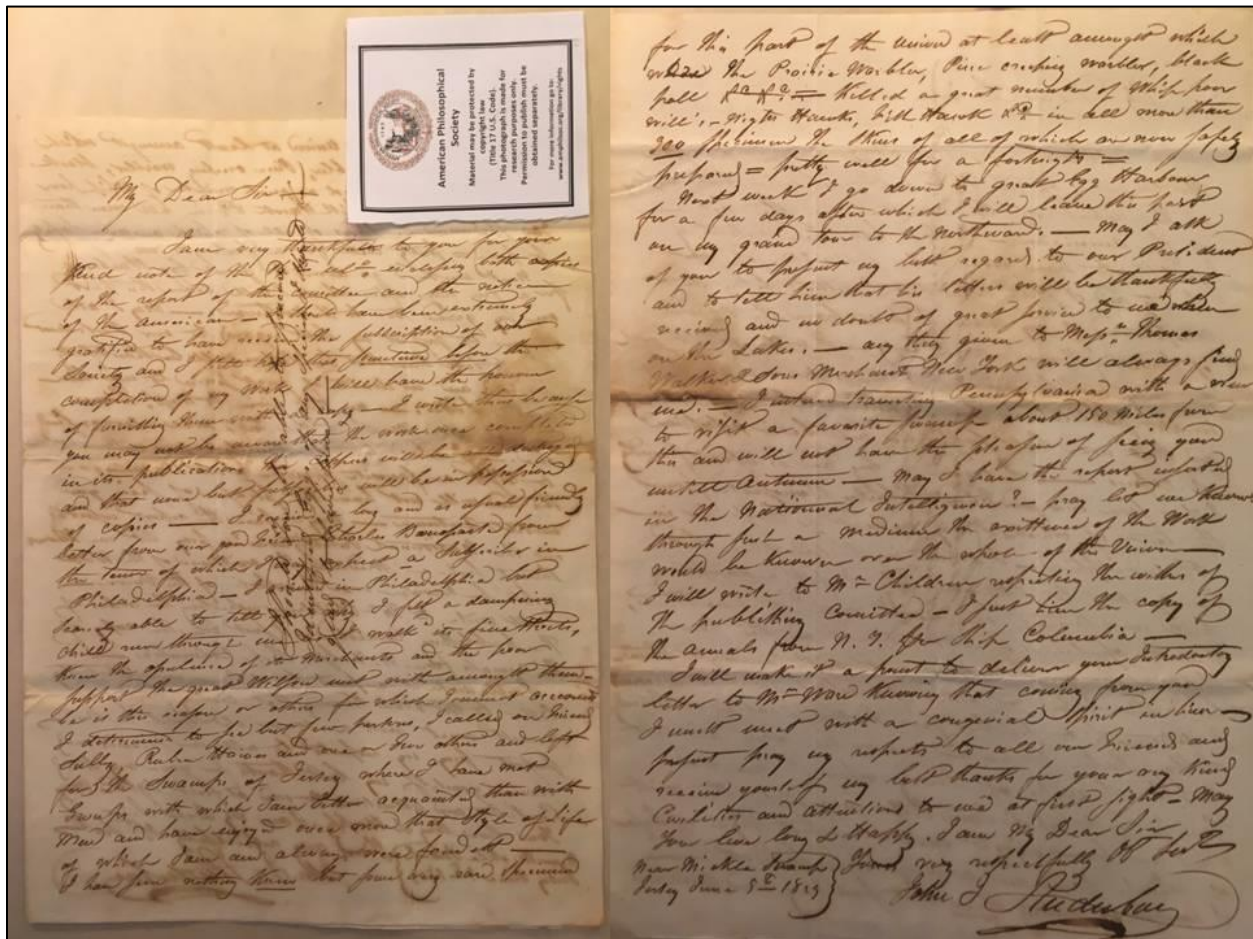
Philadelphia. It was on this property—now the John James Audubon Center at Mill Grove—that Audubon further honed a childhood fascination with birds. Inspired by earlier American ornithologists such as Alexander Wilson, Audubon would go on to undertake the herculean task of attempting to document every bird species in North America. From the 1820s through the 1830s, he executed more than four hundred original watercolors of birds in their natural habitats. Audubon’s artistic achievement was immense. But his methods might seem barbaric by today’s standards. Audubon killed many of the birds that he painted, then used wires to fix them into lifelike poses to serve as models for his artwork. Audubon’s original watercolors were published in the double-elephant folio titled *Birds of America*. The term *double-elephant* refers to the massive size—each page was two feet by three feet. Audubon needed the space. All of the birds in the volume were depicted in true-to-life size. Audubon’s search for birds took him all across North America, including to the Garden State.¹

This article presents the author’s transcription of an unpublished letter written by John James Audubon to William Cooper, an ornithologist at the Lyceum of Natural History in New York City, now the New York Academy of Natural Sciences. It dates to June 5, 1829, and the return address is the place name “Mickle Swamp, New Jersey.” The letter, which features Audubon’s flowing, nineteenth-century cursive, is located in the John James Audubon Papers (Ms.B.Au25) at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. Many of Audubon’s letters have been transcribed and published over the years, most notably in Howard Corning’s two-volume work, *The Letters of John James Audubon, 1826–1840*.² However, this particular piece of

¹ For biographical background on Audubon, see: Lucy Audubon, ed. *The Life of John James Audubon, the Naturalist* (New York: G. P. Putnam & Sons, 1890); Gregory Nobles, *John James Audubon: The Nature of the American Woodsman* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Nancy Plain, *This Strange Wilderness: The Life and Art of John James Audubon* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2015); Richard Rhodes, *John James Audubon: The Making of an American* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004).

² Howard Corning, ed., *Letters of John James Audubon, 1826–1840* (Boston: The Club of Odd Volumes, 1930).

his correspondence was not included in that seminal volume and has never appeared transcribed in print. This article begins with a complete transcription of the letter from Mickle Swamp, with notes explaining the people and places mentioned, followed by an explanation of how this piece of New Jersey-centric correspondence sheds light on the origin story of one of Audubon's most famous works.



John James Audubon's Letter from Mickle Swamp, 1829.
 Courtesy of the American Philosophical Society.

The Letter

[Envelope]

J. J. Audubon

Mickle Swamp

New Jersey June 1829

William Cooper Esq.³

Lyceum of Natural History

New York

[Page 1]

My dearest Sir

I am very thankful to you for your kind note of the 14th enclosing both copies of the report of the committee and the notice of the American⁴ – I should have been extremely gratified to have received the publication of our society and I still hope that sometime before the completion of my work I will have the power of furnishing thee with a copy – I write this because you may not be aware that the work was completed in its publication.⁵ The copper⁶ will be all destroyed and that none but publishers will be in possession of copies. I received a long and as usual friendly letter

³ William Cooper (1798–1864) was the one of the founders of the Lyceum of Natural History, now the New York Academy of Sciences. Cooper served as the organization’s vice president and on its publications committee. He was a close friend of John James Audubon and a great advocate of his work.

⁴ Audubon’s reference to “The American” probably refers to the *American Journal of Science*, also known as “Silliman’s Journal.” An article about Audubon’s unique art form appeared in a May 1829 issue of the journal and Audubon had apparently just received a copy. He uses the words “our society,” since this profile piece about him was authored by a committee from the Lyceum, of which Audubon was closely associated. See “Report of a Committee Appointed by the Lyceum of Natural History at New York to Examine the Splendid Work of Mr. Audubon upon the Birds of North America,” *American Journal of Science*, 16.2 (May 1829), 353–54.

⁵ Audubon’s reference to his “work” having been completed may refer to one “set” of his lithographic prints produced for *Birds of America*. The monumental project consisted of 435 prints in all, but they were printed over a period of many years (1826–1838) in sets of five prints each. Every month or so, a subscriber would receive a tin case that usually contained prints of one very large bird, one medium-sized bird, and three small birds. Audubon is clearly not referring to the entire volume being completed, as his last prints were not made until the late 1830s.

⁶ Audubon’s original watercolors were transferred to prints by publishing firms in Scotland and England using the copperplate engraving process, which he is referring to through the use of the term “copper.”

from our good friend Charles Bonaparte⁷ from the tenor of which I may expect a subscriber in Philadelphia – I arrived in Philadelphia but scarcely able to tell you why I felt a dampening chill run through me as I walk its fine streets, knew the opulence of its merchants, and the poor support the great Wilson⁸ met with amongst them – be it this reason or others for which I cannot account. I determined to see but few persons . . . I called on friend Sully,⁹ Ruben Haines¹⁰ and one or two others and left for the swamp of Jersey where I have met swamps with which I am better acquainted than with these and have enjoyed once more that style of life of which I am and always more fond of – I have seen nothing knew [sic] but found very scarce specimen . . .

[over to page 2]

. . . for this part of the union at least amongst which were the prairie warbler, pine creeping warbler, black poll – killed a great number of whippoorwill, night hawks, fish hawk, in all now have 300 specimens the skins of all of which are now safely prepared = pretty well for a fortnight.

Next week I go down to Great Egg Harbor for a few days after which I will leave this part of my grand tour to the Northward¹¹ – May I call on you to present my best regards to our President¹² and to tell him that his letter will be thankfully received and no doubt of great service to use when

⁷ Charles Lucien Bonaparte (1803–1857) was a French naturalist and ornithologist who married his cousin, Zenaide Bonaparte, the daughter of Napoleon Bonaparte’s brother Joseph. Joseph Bonaparte had a country estate in Bordentown, New Jersey, and Charles Lucien and Zenaide spent time there in the 1820s. In 1824, Charles Bonaparte provided Audubon with important contacts in the Philadelphia scientific and philanthropic community. For the relationship between Bonaparte and Audubon see: Michael J. Brodhead, “The Work of Charles Lucien Bonaparte in America,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 122.4 (August 18, 1978), 198–203.

⁸ Alexander Wilson (1766–1813), a Scottish immigrant to Philadelphia, is considered to be the father of American ornithology. He completed an illustrated volume of North American birds and is believed to have inspired Audubon to embark on his *Birds of America* project.

⁹ Thomas Sully (1783–1872), the famed English-born portrait painter who resided in Philadelphia.

¹⁰ Reuben Haines III (1786–1831), a philanthropist and ornithologist affiliated with the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia.

¹¹ Soon after writing this letter, Audubon traveled to Great Egg Harbor and stayed with a fisherman’s family while documenting numerous bird species that lived on the Jersey Shore. He then made a visit to the “Great Pine Swamp” (parts of Carbon County and Luzerne County, Pennsylvania), which he may be referring to here as his “grand tour to the Northward.”

¹² Major Joseph Delafield (1790–1875), the President of the Lyceum of Natural History. Audubon utilized his connections at the Lyceum in order to validate his work and drum up subscribers to *Birds of America*.

on the lakes – any thing given to Mssrs. Thomas and Co. Merchants¹³ New York will always find use. I intended traveling Pennsylvania with a view to visit a favorite swamp about 150 miles from this and will not have the pleasure of seeing your face until autumn – May I have the report inserted in the *National Intelligencer*?¹⁴ Pray let me know through such a medium the existence of the work would be known over the whole of the Union. I will write to Mr. Children¹⁵ respecting the wishes of the publishing committee – I sent him the copy of the *Annals*¹⁶ from N. Y. on ship Columbia. I will make it a point to deliver your introductory letter to Mr. Ware¹⁷ knowing that coming from you I would meet with a congenial spirit in him. Present kindly my respects to all our friends and receive yourself my best thanks for your very kind civilities and affections to me at first sight. May you live long and happy.

I am my dear sir very respectfully.

John J. Audubon.

Near Mickle Swamp Jersey June 5 1829.

[Written across the body of the letter, page 1]

Should you be able to procure identified eggs of any species I should be glad to have some.

¹³ Here, Audubon is referring to Thomas E. Walker & Company Merchants, New York. Not much is known about Walker, but it appears that Audubon had a close relationship with him and may have used this connection to build subscriptions. Some of Audubon's personal published letters were sent with a return address in care of Thomas Walker & Company, suggesting a close relationship. See, for instance, Francis Hobart Herrick, *Audubon the Naturalist: A History of his Life and Time*, vol. 1 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1917), 424.

¹⁴ Audubon is asking that the report about his artwork referenced earlier in the letter might be made available to a wider audience by having it placed in the *Daily National Intelligencer*, a popular newspaper published in Washington, D.C.

¹⁵ John George Children (1777–1852), a London zoologist affiliated with the British Museum and one of Audubon's European contacts.

¹⁶ Here, Audubon is referring to the Committee on Publications of the Lyceum of Natural History (William Cooper was a member of the committee) and an issue of the organization's publication, the *Annals of the Lyceum of Natural History*.

¹⁷ The identity of "Mr. Ware" is not known. It might refer to Samuel Hibbert-Ware (1782–1848), a Manchester-born geologist and antiquarian who resided in Scotland and who Audubon may have hoped would assist him with his project.

Significance

John James Audubon's letter from Mickle Swamp is significant for several reasons. For one, it provides details about the artist's consequential visits to New Jersey. The existing art history scholarship, biographies, auction catalogs, and other secondary source materials rarely pay much attention to the artist's time in the Garden State. However, Audubon made numerous trips to South Jersey as part of his monumental effort to illustrate every North American species for his publication, *Birds of America*. The letter shows us that his most substantive and lucrative visit to New Jersey happened in 1829. In the first week of May, Audubon landed at New York following a trip to England to promote his endeavor and coordinate with his publishers. From New York, he went on to Philadelphia and then took up a lengthy residence in Camden, which he used as a base of operations for finding and documenting a whole host of birds on the Delaware River, and soon after visited Mickle Swamp.¹⁸ He then went on to spend some time living with a fisherman's family at Great Egg Harbor, where he documented even more South Jersey birds. It is clear from the letter from Mickle Swamp that Audubon very much enjoyed his time in New Jersey, writing how his departure from the city of Philadelphia for South Jersey permitted him to enjoy "that style of life of which I am and always more fond of." We also learn from the letter the sheer volume of birds he documented in the Garden State in 1829.

The letter from Mickle Swamp also provides a significant clue as to the origin story of one of Audubon's most famous works: *Plate 81: Fish Hawk or Osprey*. This hand-colored copperplate engraving based on Audubon's original watercolor is a true magnum opus of bird portraits and one of the artist's personal favorites. Audubon presents the osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) in magnificent

¹⁸ Audubon's place of residence in Camden is believed to have been a boardinghouse located on Cooper Street near the intersection of Third Street. The nearby borough of Audubon was named to honor the artist's 1829 work documenting birds in New Jersey.



Birds of America Plate 81: Fish Hawk or Osprey.
 Courtesy of the New Jersey State Museum.

profile, depicting it in the full act of flight, and carrying a weakfish (*Cynoscion regalis*) in its talons. These cunning raptors will always hold their kill facing headfirst to cut down on wind resistance while flying back to their nests. The name *osprey* is believed to date to the fifteenth century as a Latin phrase for “bird of prey.” Their piercing yellow eyes are another distinctive hallmark.

The watercolor from which this print was made is in the New York Historical Society, along with

Audubon’s other originals.¹⁹ Some of the watercolors have the artist’s notations about where they were painted. This one does not. It only has a very faint handwritten notation reading “Begun Friday at eleven o’clock finished Sunday evening.” Many sources posit that Audubon painted the osprey during his visit to Great Egg Harbor.²⁰ This supposition seems largely based on the existence of a published narrative account by the artist in which he recalled observing ospreys during his visit to Great Egg Harbor. The account was published in Audubon’s other important

¹⁹ The best resource on the original watercolors in the New York Historical Society collection and the *Birds in America* publication is Susanne M. Low, *A Guide to Audubon's Birds of America: A Concordance Containing Current Names of the Birds, Plate Names With Descriptions of Plate Variants, a Description of the Bien Edition, and Corresponding Indexes* (New York, NY and New Haven, CT: Donald Heald and William Reese Company, 2002).

²⁰ See, for instance, Lee A. Vedder, *John James Audubon and the Birds of America: A Visionary Achievement in Ornithological Illustration* (San Marino, CA: Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, 2006), 62–63; Lois Elmer Bannon and Taylor Clark, *Handbook of Audubon Prints*, 4th ed. (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1998), 94.

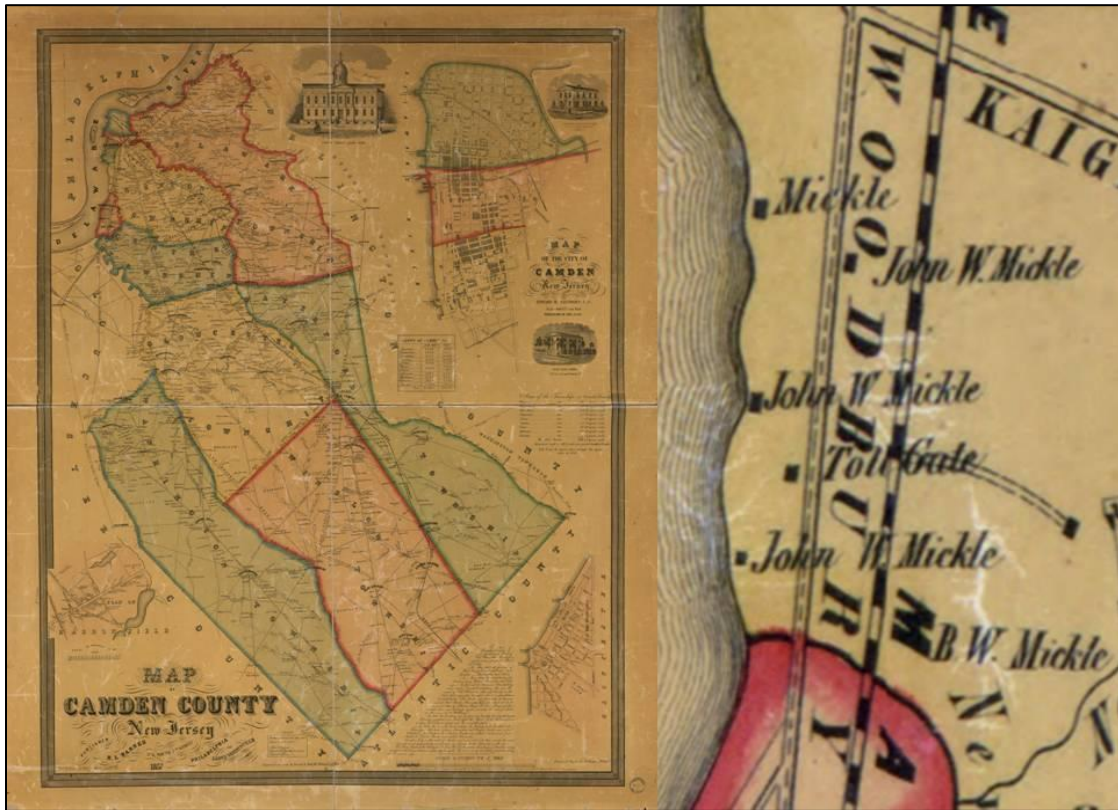
book, *Ornithological Biography*. This massive five-volume set containing narrative descriptions of the habits and habitats of North American birds was published to complement *Birds of America*, which itself was just the illustrations. In describing the ospreys that he observed near Great Egg Harbor, he also gives a glowing portrait of New Jersey.

The first dawn of morn in the Jerseys in the month of June is worthy of a better description than I can furnish, and therefore I shall only say that the moment the sunbeams blazed over the horizon, the loud and mellow notes of the meadowlark saluted our ears. On each side of the road were open woods, on the tallest trees of which I observed at intervals the nest of a Fish Hawk, far above which the white-breasted bird slowly winged its way, as it commenced its early journey to the sea, the odour of which filled me with delight. In half an hour more, we were in the center of Great Egg Harbor.²¹

Audubon's letter from Mickle Swamp, however, suggests that the true inspiration for the osprey painting was a specimen taken from the banks of the Delaware River and not Great Egg Harbor. In the letter, Audubon writes how at Mickle Swamp he "killed a great number of whippoorwills, night hawks, fish hawk, in all now have 300 specimens the skins of all of which are now safely prepared = pretty well for a fortnight." The fish hawk—or osprey—was important enough that he wrote about it as a prized acquisition, and the bird most likely served as the model for his artwork. This is not to say that Great Egg Harbor was insignificant. To be certain, the artist's visit there provided him with additional firsthand observations of this majestic bird. But the letter from Mickle Swamp informs us that the osprey he actually obtained as a specimen was from the other side of the state. It is unclear if he painted this majestic avian portrait while still at Mickle Swamp, or later while at Great Egg Harbor. The date of the letter from Mickle Swamp—June 5, 1829—was, in fact, a Friday. It is certainly possible that this was the Friday that he began painting the work, as indicated in his handwritten notes on the original. It is also possible that he painted it

²¹ John James Audubon, *Ornithological Biography, or an Account of the Habits of the Birds of the United States of America*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh, Scotland: Adam & Charles Black, 1835), 607.

on a following weekend while at Great Egg Harbor. However, if the latter is true, he still would have most certainly used the prized specimen procured at Mickle Swamp as his model.²²



Map of Camden County, New Jersey (1857), and Detail.
Courtesy of Library of Congress.

So if Mickle Swamp is indeed the long-overlooked origin story of this most famous of Audubon prints, where exactly was this mysterious place? On modern maps, there are no references to it, as if it never existed. However, several nineteenth-century maps of the Garden State provide the answer. Frederick C. Merry's *Map of Camden County, New Jersey* (1857) is an important large-scale map of the region. Although published nearly 30 years after Audubon's visit,

²² Audubon employed other artists to paint the foliage and background landscapes that appear in many of his prints. The osprey print background shows a long line of rocky, barren cliffs rising precipitously from a large body of water. Such a landscape would not have been observed either in Mickle Swamp or Great Egg Harbor and was added later for visual effect, not to suggest where the painting was made.

Merry's map is important because it provides the detail needed to locate Mickle Swamp. Large-scale maps like this show a smaller geographic area and therefore tend to have an incredible amount of detail. In an area of land bordering the Delaware River, south of Camden and north of Gloucester City, the map is so detailed that it names a landowner. The landowner's name—John W. Mickle.



Map of the Circuit of Ten Miles Around the City of Philadelphia (1847) and Detail.
Courtesy of David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.

An even earlier map by J. C. Sidney provides corroborating information about the whereabouts of Mickle Swamp. Titled *Map of the Circuit of Ten Miles Around the City of Philadelphia*, this beautiful map dating to 1847 gives us a view not just of Philadelphia proper, but also neighboring New Jersey. Those same riverfront lands that can be seen on the Merry map are

clearly marked as being owned by the Mickle family. Moreover, we can see how the cartographer used thatched lines to show that the area along the waterfront was indeed swamp and marshlands. So this section of riverfront land on the eastern banks of the Delaware River—urban and industrial today—was the Mickle Swamp where Audubon shot and prepared the fish hawk specimen and wrote his letter about it to his friend William Cooper.²³

Nicholas P. Ciotola has been Curator of Cultural History at the New Jersey State Museum since 2009. He is the author of many popular and scholarly history articles on a wide range of topics and has curated numerous exhibitions on Garden State history and art. Most recently, he was the co-curator of Fine Feathered Friends: Birds as Mainstay and Muse, an interdisciplinary art/science exhibition in partnership with the museum's Natural History Bureau. He also served as the writer and producer of a ten-part exhibition video series that examines aspects of Garden State social, cultural, and natural history through the lens of birds.

²³ In addition to the maps bearing the Mickle name, John W. Mickal [sic] also appears on the U.S. Census of 1830 as the head of household residing in Newton Township, Gloucester County, New Jersey. In 1830, the family's land was in Gloucester County. It became part of Camden County upon its creation in 1844. An early volume on Camden County points out that John W. Mickle was the 1818 operator of the family's Delaware River fisheries on these same lands. See George R. Prowell, *The History of Camden County, New Jersey* (Philadelphia: L. J. Richards & Co., 1886), 418.