

A Bridge to the Past: Mapping Wilson Trail

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Abstract

My presentation will describe the efforts of myself and others to build a figurative bridge—in time, in physical place and in digital space—to connect Pennsylvanians and New Yorkers to a significant yet little-known piece of American cultural heritage.

Scottish immigrant Alexander Wilson was one of the USA's premier early naturalists. His nine-volume *American Ornithology* predates Audubon by a decade. He was also a poet of note. My project focuses on Wilson's "The Foresters" which is, as the subtitle states, "A Poem Descriptive of a Pedestrian Journey to the Falls of Niagara in the Autumn of 1804." Filled with rich descriptions of settlers, trails, landforms, flora and fauna, the poem provides a new way to see the land.

Only a few specialists are likely ever to read 2200 lines of heroic couplets. If increased historical and cultural awareness is the goal, the appeals must be limited, local and *in situ*. A visitor to Easton, Pennsylvania, for example, may be amused to come across a marker bearing Wilson's description of the city's bleak hospitality in 1804: "The black wet bread, with rancid butter spread,/The beastly drunkards who beside us fed." The visitor might then be interested to learn that bits such as these, ranging from the satiric to the sublime, form a coherent trail more than four hundred miles long, over land, river and lake.

We are applying for a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to fund the creation of this bridge to the past in real and digital space. Our project proposes to 1) determine the route of The Wilson Trail, 2) find locations to place historical markers, 3) create a digital humanities presence for support and education, 4) recruit partners such as state and local historical societies to foster public awareness of this cultural asset.