

## THOMAS SAY, EARLY AMERICAN ZOOLOGIST OF THE MIDDLE WEST

BY

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There was born in Kingsessing, Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia in 1787 a pioneer in the field of natural science. As was the case the environment was ideal for the future scientist. Philadelphia at this time was the center of culture and education in the United States. In 1812 Thomas Say became a member of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Science and for the next fourteen years spent his time studying, classifying, traveling and collecting scientific material for the Academy.\*

Many papers were prepared and read by Thomas Say while associated with the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Science. A number of these papers were on fossil zoology (shells and crinoids) dealing with the descriptions and classifications made from various collections. It was here that Thomas Say lay the foundations of American Zoology which identify him as the father of American Zoology.

G. D. Harris in his introduction to some of the writings of Thomas Say mentions the fact that he is one of America's greatest naturalists. Too many times European co-workers have overlooked Say's original descriptions of *Exogyra* and credited the genus to Sowerby and too often has Say's work on "Crinoids" been forgotten.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Say did not confine himself to the study of fossil zoology, but made many discoveries in entomology<sup>0</sup> and became much interested in Herpetology—their descriptions, habits, and the composition of poisons of the poisonous varieties, and cures for snake bite.<sup>2</sup>

In 1826 Thomas Say became interested in the New Harmony movement and went to live in New Harmony, Indiana. In and around the New Harmony community there was an inexhaustable fund of zoological material new to the student of natural science. Therefore, it was the pleasure and honor to Thomas Say to name and describe many scientific specimens new to the scientific world. Thomas Say and other scientists of New Harmony spent much time tramping over the hills and searching the valleys, examining the geological strata of the land and studying the fish and shell life in the Wabash River and its small tributaries.<sup>3</sup>

The descriptions of zoological life by Say were published in the newspaper of New Harmony, called the Disseminator, or in pamphlet form. He also published a book on "Conchology" and listed and named in this book most of the shells found in the Wabash River. This book was printed on the school press by the boys of the School of Industry. The pictures of shells in this book were drawn from nature by his wife who formerly was an artist. It is very interesting to note that these drawings were engraved by the teacher of the Industrial School, Cornelius Tiebout, then the engravings were hand painted in water colors by Mrs. Say. These books were

\* Thomas Say made several expeditions to different parts of the United States; one to Florida in 1817; one to the Rocky Mountains (Pike Expedition 1819-1820) and one to the source of St. Peters River in Florida 1823.

<sup>1</sup> Bulletins of American Paleontology, No. V. A Reprint of the Paleontological Writings of Thomas Say. Field Museum Library, Chicago, Illinois.

<sup>2</sup> American Journal of Science, Say on Herpetology, Vol. I., pp. 257-258.

<sup>3</sup> Nora C. Fretagot, Librarian, Thomas Say, Workingmen's Institute Library, New Harmony, Indiana, 1929.

<sup>0</sup> Thomas Say discovered the Colorado beetle commonly called the Potato beetle or bug.

printed in New Harmony in 1830 and are considered of great value among book collectors and of great beauty by art lovers.<sup>4</sup>

The works of Thomas Say are numerous, for today in many of the larger institutions are to be found collections of scientific material.<sup>†</sup>

After eight years crowded with scientific investigations and writings at New Harmony, Thomas Say fell victim to fever and dysentery which resulted in death October 10, 1834.

Today one may visit the town of New Harmony and look upon many of the works and collections of Thomas Say housed in the Workingmen's Institute and there live again the interesting days of discovery. As the *American Journal of Science and Arts* states, "It is no exaggeration to assert that Thomas Say has done more to make known the zoology of his country than any other man."

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<sup>4</sup>Nora C. Fretageot, Librarian, Thomas Say, Workingmen's Institute Library, New Harmony, Indiana. 1929.

<sup>†</sup>National Museum, Washington, D. C., Academy Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, Metropolitan Museum, New York, N. Y.