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08 Borough Botanist Was Also a Birder

James Jones

West Chester University of Pennsylvania, JJONES@wcupa.edu

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Borough Botanist Was Also a Birder

By Jim Jones

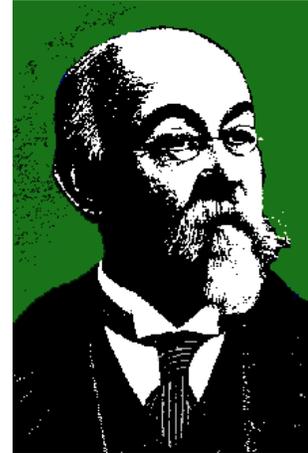
One of the byproducts of hosting a popular website with the word "history" on most of its pages is email from various researchers. Every so often, a truly difficult question arrives, like the one conveyed in a recent email from a man named Ken Kostka that began "I am attempting to locate detailed information about a Purple Martin colony transplantation project conducted by Josiah Hoopes in 1899."

The Columbia encyclopedia had no listing for "purple martin," but under "martin," it said "see swallow." A swallow is a variety of birds that are found all over the world. They are distinguished by their forked tails and dark blue-black coloring, as well as their practice of feeding on insects while in flight, and their preference for nesting in flocks. The entry also mentioned that "the purple martin is deep violet with black wings and tail." Purple martins were once common throughout Pennsylvania, but the introduction of DDT after World War II seriously depleted their food supply. They suffered a final blow in 1972 when Hurricane Agnes passed through, because it generated a week of nearly continuous rain that kept insects from flying. As a result, the purple martins starved to death.

Ken Kostka (the author of the email) is a volunteer with the Purple Martin Preservation Alliance (PMPA) whose goals include the restoration of purple martins to their former habitats in Pennsylvania. He became interested in West Chester history after reading an article about a successful attempt to move a purple martin colony to a new location. The article, entitled *Martins Removed to the "Zoo"* described how "Josiah Hoopes, of this place" constructed a special martin house whose doors could be locked shut after the birds were inside, and used it to transport them to "the Zoological Garden, in Philadelphia."

Apparently, this was a lot trickier than it appears because martins, who migrate south each year, always return to the same location. Simply removing the martin house would not suffice because the martins would simply look for someplace else to build their nests. Hoopes devised a plan based "upon the love the old ones bore their young" to move them within a few days after their eggs hatched. He reasoned that the martins would remain at the new location in order to make sure that their young survived. Based on the above-mentioned article, his plan worked.

The PMPA wanted to know if the plan had really worked; i.e. did the martins return to Philadelphia the following year. To answer that, they wanted to know more about Josiah Hoopes, in the hope that his personal papers included notes on the project. They also wanted to find plans for the trick bird house so that they could build one to move purple martin colonies to new



Josiah Hoopes (1832-1904)



A purple martin in flight

locations in Pennsylvania. The first step was to find out if Josiah Hoopes was the same man who founded the Hoopes Brothers & Thomas Nursery in West Chester.

A quick survey revealed that Hoopes was an accomplished botanist, but offered nothing about any involvement with purple martins. There was, however, an 1893 newspaper clipping that mentioned Hoopes' "collection of mounted birds." A search through the Chester County Historical Society's ornithology records turned up a wealth of information about Hoopes' interest in birds, of which this is merely one sample:

Doubtless the finest collection of birds in Chester county is at the home of Josiah Hoopes, Maple avenue, West Chester, where about 6,000 stuffed specimens, all catalogued and labeled and many of them superbly mounted, may be seen by those fortunate enough to be shown through the gentleman's apartments. Every bird is American. In the same rooms are cabinets containing thousands of eggs which are arranged as carefully as the birds and which represent all the varieties which can be procured. The work has occupied forty years of the owner's life and has cost an infinite amount of work, to say nothing of the money which has been expended in laying hold of rare specimens and those which are found only in distant parts of the country.

Source: "Thousands of Birds. The Largest Flock in Chester County Seen Yesterday. A Peep at the Superb Collection of Josiah Hoopes, West Chester. Forty Years' Work" in *Daily Local News* (February 6, 1894), located in the CCHS clippings files, "Natural History, Ornithology, 1890- 1899."

That, plus the absence of references to any other Josiah Hoopes in the Philadelphia area with an interest in birds, suggested that West Chester's man was the one who moved the purple martins. The next step was to learn if he had left behind notes, drawings, photographs ... anything that could show how he did it and if it was ultimately successful. Since Hoopes was such a successful businessman, his life has been studied by others, including one of the archivists at the Chester County Historical Society. All reached the same conclusion that Hoopes' personal papers did not survive in any accessible collection (i.e. library or archive). It is possible that they are still in the hands of one of his descendants, but he married late (at age 66) and fathered only one child before he died. That child, Josiah Morgan Hoopes, grew up in West Chester, but he died in 1972 and efforts to locate his daughters produced no results.

Thinking that the purple martin experiment might have merited coverage in one of West Chester's two daily newspapers, the next step was to narrow down the search. Martin eggs are most likely to hatch in early June, so and the move would have taken place in the middle of the month. That reduced the task to combing through a month's worth of *Village Record* but produced no results, most likely because 1899 was the year of the Borough's centennial celebration, and local news coverage in May and June was dominated by that.

The last hope was that a photograph of Hoopes' Maple Avenue home might show a purple martin house on the property. Purple martin houses are easy to recognize because they look like little



A purple martin house

"bird apartment houses" with multiple entrances on each side, situated on a pole in the middle of an open space. Unfortunately most of the photos of Josiah Hoopes' property in the Historical Society's collection focused on his business enterprises, and the only photos of his home show it from the front and on side.

The PMPA crew was undaunted. Kostka's last email says that he has applied for state and federal wildlife permits to try a Purple Martin colony transplant experiment again, and added "I'm very excited about it and have high hopes. If successful, it would be a major advance for Purple Martin conservation efforts."

For more information on the Purple Martin Preservation Alliance, visit their web site (<http://www.purple-martin.org/>) or write to them at 2322 Buchanan St., Natrona Heights, PA 15065.