Alexander Wilson began teaching at the Kingsessing school on 25 February 1802. A few days earlier he had arrived in Gray’s Ferry, the community whose students attended the school. It was a mostly Quaker community and the children were eager and interested students. We know this from some of Wilson’s comments to his correspondents and from two exercise books belonging to Charles and William Wood, pre-teens in Wilson’s school (Burtt and Davis 1995). The work of the students is excellent and Wilson has added calligraphic headings in several colors of ink (Burtt and Davis 2013; Fig. 2.5), probably a reward for completing assignments well, much as one of your teachers may have placed a multicolored sticker on a fine paper of yours when you were in school.

Sometime in the spring, Wilson must have met William Bartram, perhaps as early as March, when Bartram started preparing his gardens for planting. Their friendship must have been one of those in which the personalities, the personal chemistries bond strongly. On 4 March 1803, Wilson sent Bartram the following letter:

“Dear Sir,

This Bird I take to be the female Yellow Rump. I suppos’d it on first sight to be some other. If Miss Bartram thinks it worth drawing it is at her service. I have this moment rec’d yours, which like all the letters you have honoured me with are to me as valuable as Bank Notes to a Miser.

Yours,

Alex. Wilson”

The letter is more formal than subsequent letters, but suggests a close relationship has developed in the months they have known each other.

Here for the first time, Wilson discusses birds. Wilson not only introduces the topic of birds, but identifies the bird. He and Bartram must have discussed birds before. Had Wilson decided to describe the birds of eastern North America? What had he and Bartram discussed? What was Wilson contemplating in March of 1803?

Finally, this is the first mention of Anne Bartram, known to her family as Nancy. She became one of Wilson’s colorists. Indeed, she may have been in charge of the colorists as some of the notes on the proofs for the books are in her handwriting (Burtt and Peterson 1995). Keep in mind that the technology of the day did not include color printing, so every plate, every bird of every copy of American Ornithology had to be colored by hand.

Among Wilson’s immediate neighbors was the Leech family. Maximillian, who became a close friend of Wilson’s, was a blacksmith, with a shop next to his house. Isaac, the eldest son, and Mary, the eldest daughter, were students in Wilson’s school. Hannah and Henry started school while Wilson was the school master. He was by all accounts a strict disciplinarian but popular among the students. When they discovered that he was teaching himself to draw animals, they, especially the boys, began to bring him birds, mammals, frogs and toads that they caught around their homes, in the school yard, and, once, a mouse caught in the school house itself. Wilson kept many of these animals in his room where he could observe and sketch them.

In the autumn of 1804, Wilson’s wanderlust got the better of him and he decided to walk to Niagara Falls stopping in Ovid, New York on the way to visit his nephew and niece, William and Isabel Duncan, who were farming the land he had bought 2 years earlier. Isaac Leech, age 16 and a student of Wilson’s, pleaded to accompany him. Wilson and Isaac’s family assented. They walked to Ovid, New York where Wilson was impressed with the farm that William and Isabel had carved out of the wilderness. William joined them for the final push to Niagara Falls.

On the return trip, Wilson received word in New York City that Betsy Leech had just given birth to twins and that one was named after Wilson. It was cold and the road was muddy, but Wilson was eager to get home and meet his namesake. Despite carrying two single-barreled shotguns (heavy), a pack of supplies and specimens (also heavy), being dressed in layers of woolens for warmth and shod in leather boots (not exactly your light-weight marathon gear), Wilson walked the 47 miles in one day arriving at the Leech’s house that evening with Isaac in tow. He was thrilled to see Wilson Leech, his namesake, and twin sister Ann and presented Max and Betsy with $6 as a gift. That left him just