

Historical Use and Misuse of the Name “Carp”

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The literature is confusing on what year common carp (*Cyprinus carpio*) were introduced into the United States and on which fish is meant by the name “carp.” Cole (1905) cites evidence that carp from France were introduced into the Hudson River and ponds of New York in 1831-1832. Other evidence—growth data, and an 1877 U.S. Fish Commission report that the Hudson River was full of olivaceous goldfish (*Carassius auratus*) sold in the New York market under the carp name—suggests these fish were actually *C. auratus*, which first made their appearance in North America as early as the 1600s. Despite the contradictory evidence, the 1831 date for the introduction of carp is given in two major publications, Page and Burr (1991) and Jenkins and Burkhead (1994).

The first confirmed propagation of carp in the U.S. was in 1872, when a Sonoma, California resident named R. A. Hoppe imported 83 specimens from Germany for culture in private ponds and for sale as food. Five of the 83 carp survived the journey. By May 1873, these five carp had produced over 3,000 carp, news of which spread to entrepreneurs and gourmards around the country who wanted carp to stock in their own private ponds. An 1872 date for the introduction of carp is given by Fritz (1987) and Fuller et al. (1999).

In May 1877, 345 *Cyprinus carpio* were obtained from Germany and placed in ponds in Baltimore’s Druid Hill Park by the U.S. Fish Commission (precursor to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service). Over the next 20 years, hundreds of thousands of government-issue carp per year were distributed throughout the country. Congressmen actually vied with one another to see who could get the most carp for their constituents (Moyle, 1984). By the turn of the 20th century, carp had established themselves in just about every drainage system in

which they were introduced, and were well on their way to becoming the most abundant fish in the inland waters of North America.

Cole (1905) opines that introductions earlier than 1877 by private individuals are a possibility. This leads us to examine older mentions of the word “carp.” John Lawson’s list of fishes in his 1709 journal of his voyage to North Carolina includes a “carp.” Cole (1905) cites the diary of Col. William Cabel of Nelson County, Virginia, which has the entry: “1769, Oct. 25: Caught 2 fine carp in our traps.” (These traps were set in the James River.) Cole believed that the “carp” in question was a carpsucker, or quillback (*Carpiodes cyprinus*). Jenkins and Burkhead (1994) repeat this datum and conclusion.

Thomas Walker, physician to Thomas Jefferson’s father and guardian of the young Thomas, mentioned carp from the Tye River in Virginia in his journal of 1750 under the dates March 5 and April 1 (Rust, 1950). Thomas Jefferson himself was no stranger to the fish. In 1785 he wrote of carp in the Mississippi River (Peterson, 1984). In 1812 he noted his intention to stock a pond with carp “seyned” up with shad (Betts, 2002), and between 1814 and 1820 he stocked his ponds five more times with said fish (Betts, 2002). Since naturalist Jefferson had observed common carp in a pond in England, and referred to carp in the Rhine River (Peterson, 1984), one might think his 1785 and 1812 references were to *Cyprinus carpio*, but this is not the case.

As with Col. Cabel’s use of the word “carp,” it’s almost certain that Lawson, Walker and Jefferson were referring not to *Cyprinus carpio*, but to *Carpiodes cyprinus*. Use of “carp” as a common name for species of *Carpiodes* was extant at least until 1920 (Forbes and Richardson, 1920). For example, in his 1820 description of the closely related river carpsucker

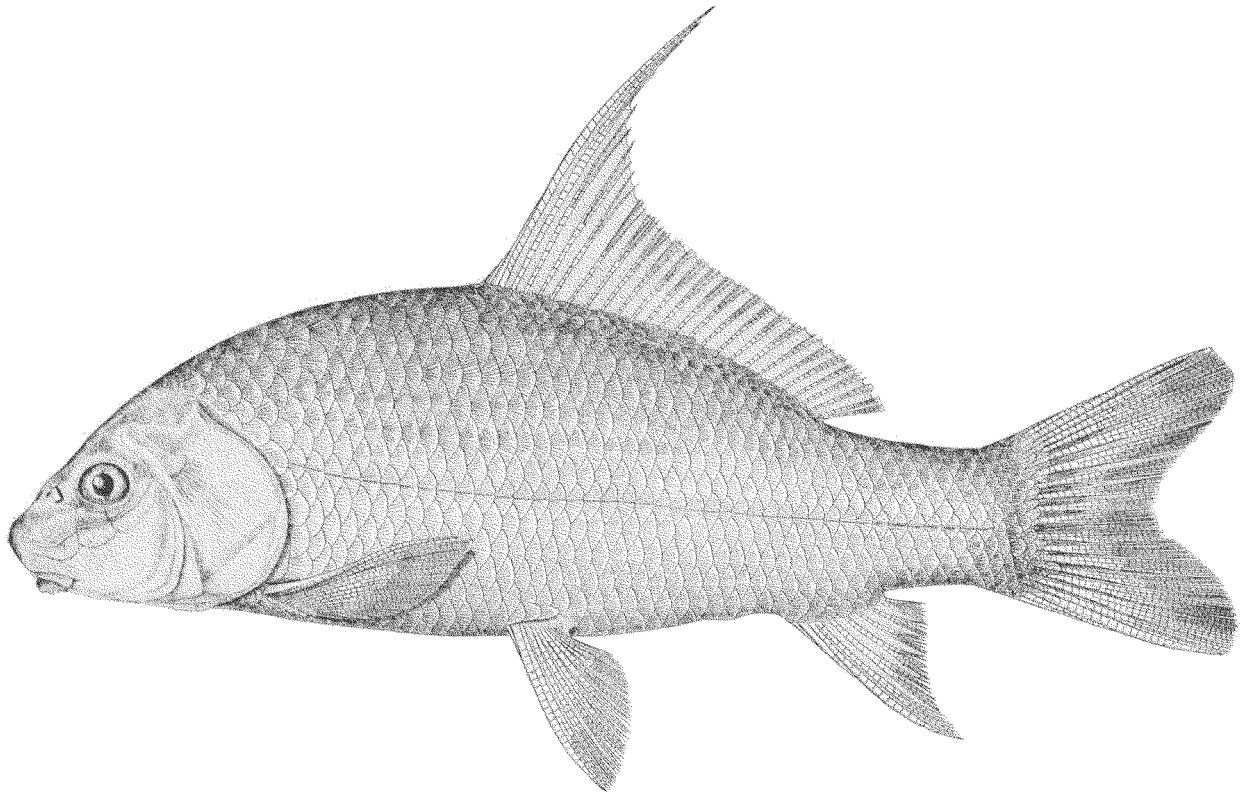


Fig. 1.

Quillback, *Carpoides cyprinus*. Illustration by H.L. Todd, U.S. National Museum, collected at Havre de Grace, MD, June 1882, by Tarleton H. Bean. Courtesy: NOAA Photo Library.

(*Carpoides carpio*), Rafinesque said the fish is “commonly called Carp” (Rafinesque, 1820). The vernacular use of “carp” for both carp and carpsuckers is likely derived from the early classification of European carp and large river suckers in the same genus, *Cyprinus*.

Does Thomas Jefferson’s 1814 stocking of seine-caught carpsuckers into his ponds, which also housed “chub” and “eels,” make him America’s first native fish hobbyist?

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