

JOHN MUIR

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE CALIFORNIA



*"Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees.*

*The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves."*

John Muir was born in Scotland on April 21, 1838, the eldest son of Daniel and Anne Gilrye Muir. The training and education of his early boyhood was strict and severe. He learned his lessons well. When he was 11 years old, the family emigrated to America and hewed a farm out of the backwoods of Wisconsin. There, despite a hard-driving father and the heavy farm chores, John stole time for his own pursuits. Of a quick and eager mind, he taught himself new subjects through reading and observation. He borrowed books from neighbors and learned the principles of mechanics and physics. Sacrificing hours of much needed sleep, he built a variety of astonishing mechanical devices. Three of them were exhibited at the Wisconsin State Fair of 1860, attracting widespread attention. Muir then left the farm to work for a fellow inventor, but their enterprise soon failed and Muir, "hungry and thirsty for knowledge and willing to endure anything to get it," proceeded to Madison to enroll at the State University.

After accumulating 2½ years of credits he left without qualifying for a degree. The system then in effect permitted him to take the courses he preferred—courses that were significant for his objectives, rather than the prescribed curriculum for a degree. It was at the University of Wisconsin that he turned toward the natural sciences. He began there his geological and botanical rambles which in a few years carried him on foot through Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana, and into Canada.

After an eye injury in 1867, he finally "bid adieu to mechanical inventions" and devoted the rest of his life "to the study of the inventions of God." He soon set out to walk from Indiana to the Gulf of Mexico, keeping a journal of his observations which was later published under the title of *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*. These treks continued for the rest of his life and took him through much of wilderness America, and to Alaska, South America, Africa, India, the Orient, and Australia. The Sierra Nevada was his special tramping ground. On these trips he collected specimens, investigated glaciers, and studied trees, which had become a great passion in his life. He traveled with many of the famous scientists of his day and slowly developed his philosophy of conservation. "Wildness is a necessity," he said. "Mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life."

Muir House. Built 1882.



Man must see himself as a child of nature, he thought, with a vast stake in achieving a harmonious relationship with the rest of the natural world.

During the early 1870's Muir wrote his first magazine and newspaper articles. By 1875 he had resolved to do what he could to make the wilderness better known and loved, so that future generations would cherish a common but fast-dwindling heritage. He continued to write many persuasive articles which urged Americans not only to save the wilderness, but to conserve the Nation's natural resources and to establish national parks and forest reserves. In all his writings, he remained the basic naturalist and lover of nature.

In 1880 John Muir married Louie Strentzel, the only surviving child of John and Louisiana Strentzel. An immigrant from Poland, Strentzel came to California in 1849 and eventually settled near Martinez. A physician, he also became a noted horticulturist and landowner of the Alhambra Valley. Two years after their daughter's marriage to Muir, the Strentzels turned over their original ranchhouse to the Muirs. For themselves, they built a new and larger home on their ranch within sight of the old adobe. When Dr. Strentzel died in 1890, the Muirs moved into the "big house."

During the first decade of his marriage Muir succeeded so handsomely at his new livelihood of fruit growing that he was able to provide permanently for his wife and two daughters, Wanda and Helen, while devoting the rest of his life to travel, study, and writing.

While living in this house from 1890 until his death in 1914, Muir wrote many of his articles and books on

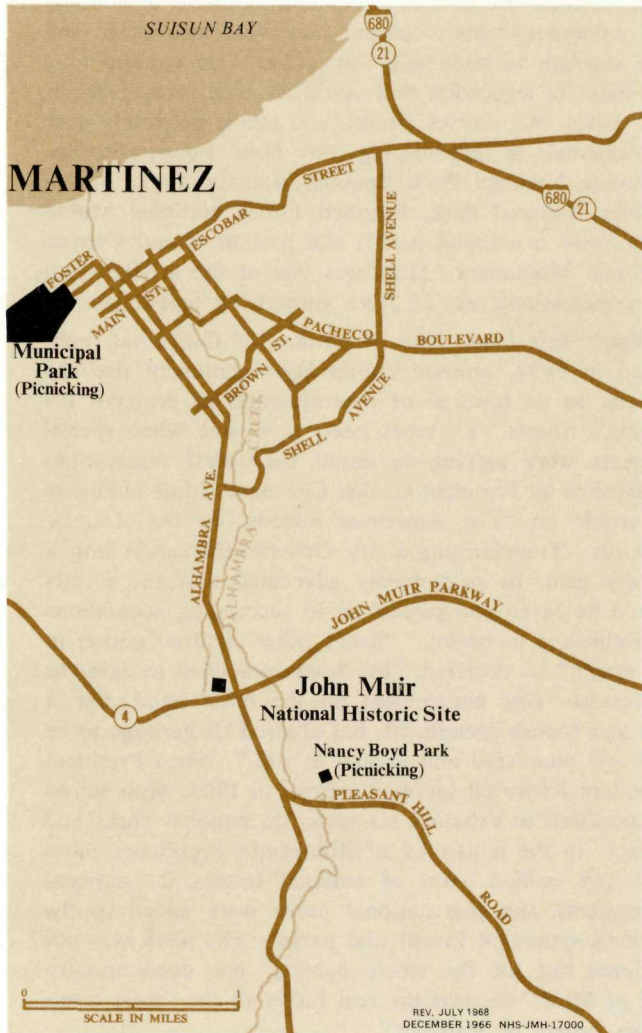
conservation and natural history that made such a notable impact on the public mind.

A competent scientist, he subscribed to Louis Agassiz's theories. Muir discovered a number of living glaciers in Yosemite and was the first to demonstrate that the relentless grinding of glaciers, not a catastrophe, had sculptured the Yosemite-type valleys of the Sierra Nevada. He extended his observations to glaciers in the Cascades and Alaska, discovering and describing one which now bears his name. His later life was more involved in botany. As an inspired naturalist and conservationist, he became the intimate friend of John Burroughs, and associated with Asa Gray, John Tyndall, and Sir Joseph Hooker. The botanist Gray, to whom Muir sent many new specimens of flora, named one plant in his honor, *Ivesia muirii*.

Muir made his most lasting contribution as a conservationist. He believed that trees and forests should be saved both for their use as watersheds and as places of solitude and wilderness "where nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike." He worked long and hard for legislation that would set aside forest reserves and parks. His articles, books, and public proposals were instrumental in establishing the U.S. Forest Service, Yosemite National Park, Sequoia National Park, Mount Rainier National Park, Petrified Forest National Monument (now a national park), and part of Grand Canyon National Monument. Muir was one of the architects of the congressional act of 1891 authorizing forest reserves.

Muir's first book, *The Mountains of California*, published in 1894, aroused conservation sentiment and led directly to an upsurge of determination to preserve the Nation's forests. Six years later, at a time when special interests were seeking to annul the forest reservations established by President Grover Cleveland, Muir published an article on "The American Forests" in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Transforming a dry Government report into a literary gem, he passionately advocated that the forests should be saved and passed on to succeeding generations undiminished in beauty. "Every other civilized nation in the world," he declared, "has been compelled to care for its forests. Our government on the other hand, like a rich and foolish spendthrift, has allowed its heritage to be sold and plundered and wasted at will." When President Theodore Roosevelt toured Yosemite in 1903, Muir seized the occasion to expound his views on national parks and forests. In the remainder of Roosevelt's Presidency more than 148 million acres of national forests, 23 national monuments, and five national parks were added to the Nation's system of forests and parks. "His work was not sectional but for the whole people," one contemporary said of Muir. "He was the real father of the forest reservation system of America."





Today, as populations multiply, resources diminish, and emerging nations recognize the need to conserve their great natural places, John Muir's legacy becomes more relevant than ever to the needs of our time.

How fitting then that his home, where he produced the writings that greatly advanced the cause of conservation, is honored as a national historic site, a unit of the National Park System.

Through the efforts of members of the John Muir Memorial Association, the Muir home was declared a national historic site by Congress in 1964. The National Park Service has begun the restoration of the buildings and grounds to their appearance between 1906 and 1914. The exterior of the home is now historically accurate and the 8¾ acres of land have been restored as a miniature of the orchards and vineyards that once comprised the 2,600-acre ranch. As appropriate, windmills and other historic structures will be reconstructed to create an island of the past in the midst of modern suburbia.

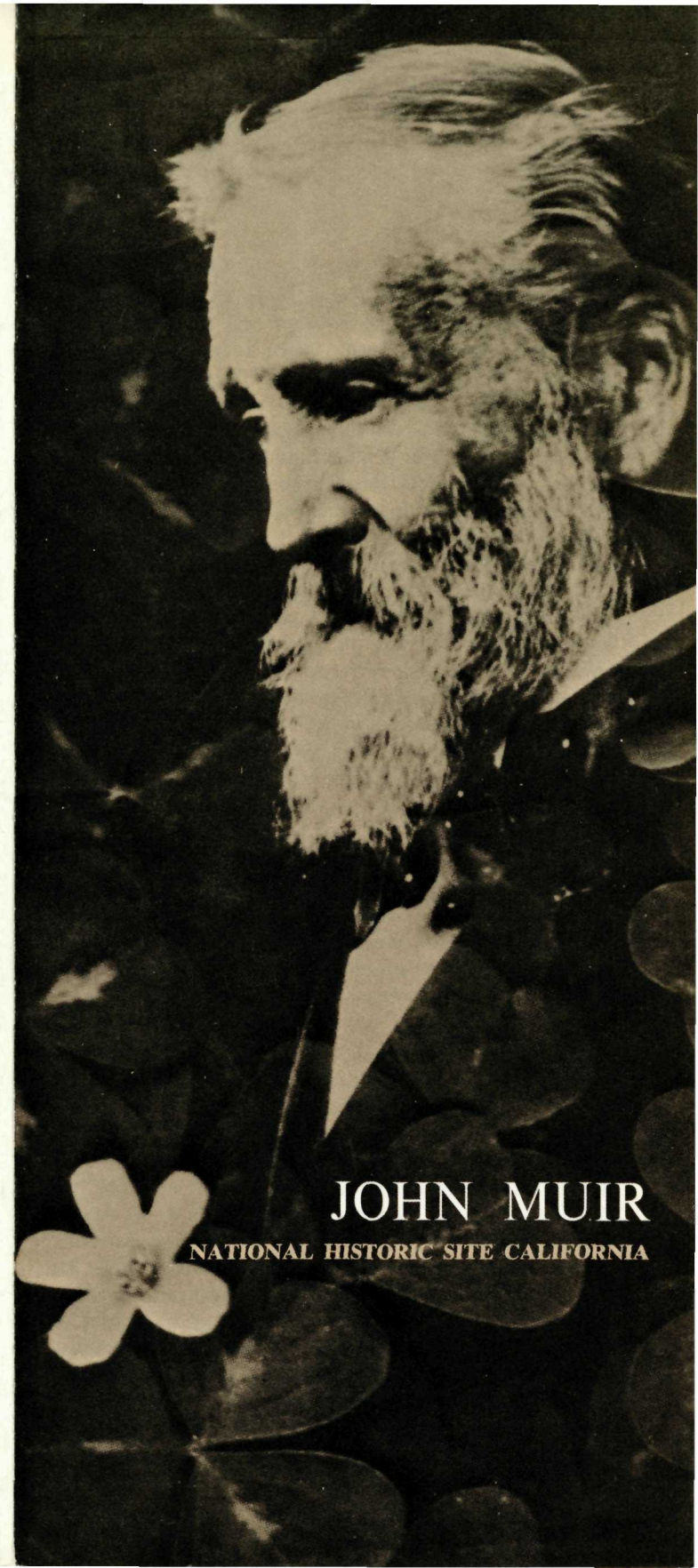
*About your visit.* The house and grounds are open daily except on Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. Tours are self-guiding. Groups should arrange in advance for guided tours. A film about John Muir's life and philosophy is shown hourly.

*Administration.* John Muir National Historic Site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is 4202 Alhambra Ave., Martinez, CA 94553, is in immediate charge. Telephone: 415-228-8860.

Please be extra cautious while visiting the park. Your best defense against accidents is common sense. For those who need assistance up the steep hill to the house, special transportation arrangements are made upon request.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

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