



## John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

### Number 2.06 – John Muir's Ancestry

*Some of my grandfathers must have been born on a muirland, for there is heather in me, and tinctures of bog juices.*



Although John Muir was Scots born and loved Scotland for all of his life, he knew little of his roots. The family transition to the United States seems to have severed much of the Muirs' knowledge of their antecedents. At any rate, little was available for biographers like Frederic Bade and Linne Marsh

Wolfe to build a detailed family history and few accounts extend beyond the names of the family's grandparents. From that starting point, a few more details can be glossed into the story.

John Muir was named after his grandfather, **John Muir (1)**, was born in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century at the parish of Crawfordjohn, Lanarkshire. Surname mapping shows that this area was strong in the Muir name. Today it is a quiet backwater; it was then a centre of pastoralism, many small farms employing large numbers of shepherds, stockmen and labourers. Most of the farms were leased from the parish's two or three large landowners by an intermediate class of tenant farmers. Historically, Crawfordjohn was close to the heart of both the Covenanter and Cameronian movements and saw many tragic events in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the Jacobite period it supported the Government and stories persisted that locals had helped hunt down the ragged remnants of Bonnie Prince Charlie's army as they passed on their long retreat to Culloden. Life for John Muir (1) may have been to close to the knuckle, with employment only secure in half yearly contracts, and it appears he enlisted in the British army. He died in service at Manchester in 1804.

There he married **Sarah Hicks**. The Hicks name is from the south of England, approximately the region equating to ancient Wessex. The only thing known about Sarah is that she was prepared to leave family and her home to follow her Scots soldier husband on the coattails of his unit's deployments. She died at Manchester shortly after her son Daniel was born.

**David Gilrye** is the subject of another factsheet. He was one of three known sons of a Northumbrian miller, James Gildroy, whose own roots seem to have been firmly in the border counties of Berwickshire and Northumberland – a true born Borderer in other words. His childhood home was in walking distance of the boundary. The people of this region had for centuries been at the forefront of the rivalry between Scotland and England. Life was hard and bred a special kind of survivor, a people with their own distinct traditions and culture. After the unification of Scotland and England in the 17<sup>th</sup> century the former bitter enemies on either side of the Border gradually learnt to ignore the artificial line as work and family took them from place to place – Hence English born David, from a ‘Scottish’ family, married a Scots girl from Coldstream and migrated north to Dunbar.

**Margaret Hay** is also the subject of another factsheet. Her own family had migrated from Edinburgh into the Borders during the time of her grandfather. Such family lore as the Muirs had seems to have been transmitted by Margaret whose fireside was a favourite berth for John and his siblings, where they were told the old stories and heard the old ballads sung.

So John Muir was correct in his speculation – his roots **were** in muirland, the open uplands of Lanarkshire and the Northern slopes of the Cheviots, areas rich in history and romance.

## More Information

### Further reading

Muir, John, *The Story of my Boyhood and Youth*, Canongate Publishing Ltd., Edinburgh, 1987 (first published Houghton Mifflin Co., 1913).

Bade, WF, *The Life and Letters of John Muir* in Gifford, T, *His Life Letters and Other Writings*, Baton Wicks, London, 1996 (Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1924).

### Websites

John Muir’s ancestry online

[http://www.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/frameindex.html?http://www.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/people/genealogy\\_muir.html](http://www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/frameindex.html?http://www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/people/genealogy_muir.html)

Life and letters online

[http://69.59.163.42/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/frameindex.html?http://69.59.163.42/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/life/life\\_and\\_letters/chapter\\_1.html](http://69.59.163.42/john_muir_exhibit/frameindex.html?http://69.59.163.42/john_muir_exhibit/life/life_and_letters/chapter_1.html)

Surname distributions [www.nationaltrustnames.org.uk](http://www.nationaltrustnames.org.uk)

Grandfather Gilrye [www.jmbt.org.uk/content/media/factsheets/2\\_04.pdf](http://www.jmbt.org.uk/content/media/factsheets/2_04.pdf)

Grandmother Gilrye [www.jmbt.org.uk/content/media/factsheets/2\\_05.pdf](http://www.jmbt.org.uk/content/media/factsheets/2_05.pdf)

John Muir’s Birthplace [www.jmbt.org.uk](http://www.jmbt.org.uk)

Friends of John Muir’s Birthplace [www.muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk](http://www.muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk)

All text and images copyright East Lothian Council Museums Service.

Produced by John Muir’s Birthplace, 126 High Street, Dunbar, East Lothian, Scotland.

E-mail: [info@jmbt.org.uk](mailto:info@jmbt.org.uk). Website: <http://www.jmbt.org.uk>.