



## John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

### Number 1.05 - Local, national and international events: 1850-1895

The 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly between 1850 and 1895, saw great changes to many countries. In both John Muir's adopted home, the United States of America, and the country he left behind, Scotland, these changes were particularly significant.

During this time, two wars took place, the Crimean War, between Russia and an alliance including Britain in the 1850s, and the American Civil War. This five-year war between the Unionist North and the Confederate South in the USA, was partly caused by differences about slavery.



Wisconsin soldiers in 1865  
LOC, LC - B817 - 7543

When the Civil War began in 1861, John Muir himself was studying at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. After he left in 1863, without obtaining a degree, he went to work in Canada for 2 years. He frequently contacted to his mother to see if he had been drafted, but did not volunteer, as he believed war to be *the farthest-reaching and most infernal of all civilised calamities*.

The Civil War left behind a disintegrated society and much bitterness in the South. When John was undertaking his 1867 thousand-mile walk to the Gulf, he saw at firsthand some of the consequences of the war on both the landscape and people.

Around this time, the United States itself was changing. Its population had begun to increase significantly, due to immigrants from Ireland, Scotland and European countries choosing to start a new life in the Americas. Among the many thousands of families who had travelled from Scotland at this time were the Muir family, who emigrated in 1849.



LOC, LC - USZ62 - 106751

Scotland was also in the midst of population change. The largest group to migrate to Scotland were the Irish who settled mainly in the large cities during and after the potato famine in the late 1840s. Many migrants from the Highlands came also after they were cleared by their landowners to make way for sheep and deer.

A significant event at this time was the Industrial Revolution, when the railway industry started to take shape. The railway benefited Dunbar, with the burgh becoming a calling point on the Edinburgh to Berwick-upon-Tweed railway line, opened in 1846, three years before the Muir family's emigration.

When John was 5 years old, in 1843, the Presbyterian Church of Scotland split. Around one third of the Kirk's parishes, including one that opened in 1840 at Belhaven, broke away to form the Free Church of Scotland.

In 1872, the Education (Scotland) Act was passed. This act required all children under the age of 14 to attend school regularly. Before this, provision of education was limited to either the privileged few that could afford to pay for their schooling or to burgh and charity schools.



Lorne Hotel, late 19C  
Courtesy of David Anderson



Dunbar High Street, late 19C  
Courtesy of David Anderson

John Muir saw a different Dunbar when he visited in 1893. The first place he visited was his former home, 130 High Street, which had become the Lorne Temperance Hotel. He wished *for nothing else than to take a look at the dormer window I climbed in my nightgown*. During his ten-day visit, he stayed with his cousin Margaret Hay Lunam and her daughter Maggie, who accompanied him during his walks around Dunbar. He noticed how poor and *wretched* the people were. Every Christmas, until he died in 1914, he sent money to his cousin for the *relief of the poor*, something he even did in the final month of his life.

## Further reading

- Muir, John. A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf. Boston/New York; Mariner Books, 1998
- Muir, John. The Story of My Boyhood and Youth. Madison; University of Wisconsin Press, 1965
- Muir, John. John Muir, His Life and Letters and Other Writings. Baton Wicks Publications; 1996 (Collection)
- Marsh Wolfe, Linnie. Son of the Wilderness. Madison; University of Wisconsin Press, 2003
- Pugh, Roy. Swords, Loaves and Fishes: A History of Dunbar. Harlaw Heritage, 2003

## Websites

- John Muir's Birthplace – [www.jmbt.org.uk](http://www.jmbt.org.uk)
- The Sierra Club – [www.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit](http://www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit)