



## John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

### Number 4.4 - John Muir the Inventor

From an early age John Muir had a thirst for knowledge that led to a gift for invention. In his native seaside town of Dunbar, Scotland, he developed his love of nature and an interest in many things. The shore and countryside were his playground. With other local boys, he whittled boats out of wood and made a 'gun' from gas piping.

In 1849, John's family emigrated to America. They settled in Wisconsin. Here he worked long hard hours on the family farm. There was little time for learning. When his father said he could get up early to read, he felt he had been given a precious gift, *five huge, solid hours!*



Hickory Hill Farm, courtesy of J M Manson



Model of clock, on display at John Muir's Birthplace, Dunbar  
© ELMS. Photographer Glyn Satterley

In these early hours, John kept warm in the cellar by building inventions. He designed locks, water wheels, barometers, clocks and an automatic feeding machine for the horses.

In 1860 John was encouraged by a neighbour to exhibit some of his inventions at the Madison State Fair. He took one of his clocks and his famous 'early rising machine'. This was also a timekeeping machine. Attached to a bedstead, it set the sleeper on his feet in the morning.

John's inventions were a huge success. The Wisconsin State Journal called the young inventor 'An Ingenious Whittler'. John stayed and enrolled at the University of Wisconsin.



Wisconsin University, courtesy of J M Manson

At university, John invented a 'study desk'. This could open books in the correct order and turn the pages. A thread connected to a lens, burnt through by sunbeams, ensured that it began at sunrise.

During the Civil War years John went to Meaford, Canada. He joined his brother David and worked in a factory that made rakes and broom handles. In 1866 he moved to Indianapolis and became foreman at a carriage factory. In both places he thought up new ways of improving production.



John Muir's study desk, courtesy of J M Manson

In 1867 John was temporarily blinded when a file slipped and damaged his eye. When he recovered, he *bade adieu to all my mechanical inventions determined to devote the rest of my life to the study of all the inventions of God.*

Several images and drawings of John's inventions survive today. His study desk can still be seen at the Wisconsin State Historical Society Museum.

## Further reading

- Muir, John. The Story of My Boyhood and Youth. Wisconsin; The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Wolfe, Linnie Marsh. Son of the Wilderness. Wisconsin; The University of Wisconsin Press, 1945.
- Muir, John. John Muir, The Eight Wilderness-Discovery Books. Baton Wicks Publications; 1996 (Collection).
- Turner, Frederick. John Muir, From Scotland to the Sierra. Edinburgh; Canongate Books Ltd, 1997.
- Stanley, Millie. The Heart of John Muir's World, Wisconsin, Family, & Wilderness Discovery. Madison, Wisconsin; Prairie Oak Press, 1995.

## 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)
- Dunbar [www.dunbar.org.uk](http://www.dunbar.org.uk)
- US National Parks [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov)
- Wisconsin Historical Society [www.wisconsinhistory.org](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org)