



John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

Number 4.7 – John Muir and Wisconsin

John Muir arrived in Wisconsin with his father and brother David in the spring of 1849 after a six week long crossing on the sailing ship, the 'Warren'. John's father had originally planned to go to Canada. He changed his mind however, after hearing of the many Scots who were settling in America, and of the good farming land in the area.

This sudden splash into pure wildness - baptism in Nature's warm heart – how utterly happy it made us! John and his brother David settled easily into life on their new farm by Fountain Lake, in Buffalo Township. They loved their pets and farm animals, and discovering the many different birds and creatures. They learned to ride bareback on their Indian pony Jack, and to swim in the lake.



Fountain Lake, © J M Manson

Life was hard. John tells us that he *was put to the plough at the age of twelve*. Like other settlers, he often worked a 17 hour day. There was land to clear, grain to plant and harvest, and fences to build. Happily there were also new friends and neighbours to meet.



Hickory Hill Farm, © J M Manson



The well, © J M Manson

In 1856 the family moved to Hickory Hill Farm. Once again John helped to build the new farmhouse. When John's father made him dig a well for the new water supply, John was overcome by 'choke damp' and nearly died.

John missed his lessons. He began to borrow books from his neighbours and to read again. His father insisted that he went to bed with the rest of the family, but that he could get up early in the morning to study. John rose at 1 o'clock and began to work on inventions. He had *five hours to myself...five huge, solid hours!* He made clocks, thermometers and an 'early rising machine' – a bed that tipped the sleeper out at a set time.

When John was twenty two he travelled to Wisconsin State Agricultural Fair. He took some of his inventions with him. The local press wrote of the '*Ingenious Whittler*' whose exhibits attracted large crowds.

John stayed and enrolled at Wisconsin University where he studied chemistry, botany and geology among other subjects. Anxious to do his part in the Civil War, he planned to study medicine. However, having first waited to see if he would be drafted into the union army, he decided to head for the wilderness and join his brother Daniel who was in Canada.

Further reading

- Muir, John. The Story of My Boyhood and Youth. Wisconsin; The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965.
- 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
- The Sierra Club www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit
- Dunbar www.dunbar.org.uk
- US National Parks www.nps.gov
- Wisconsin Historical Society www.wisconsinhistory.org



Model of clock on display at John Muir's Birthplace, Dunbar
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