

John Muir Day

By

Toby A. Echelberry

John Muir Day commemorates not only the birth of a towering figure in American environmental history, but also the life, legacy, and journeys of a man whose influence extended far beyond the wilderness he loved. Recognizing John Muir Day is to acknowledge a remarkable biography, a final resting place entwined with his family's roots, and even the historical route he trod through what is now Santa Clara County including near Gilroy.

John Muir was born on April 21, 1838, in Dunbar, East Lothian, Scotland, and emigrated with his family to the United States in 1849, settling on a farm in Wisconsin. Raised in rural surroundings, Muir developed an early fascination with nature; his formal education was modest, but he studied on his own, teaching himself mathematics and natural sciences while working on the farm. After a near-blinding accident in 1867, he abandoned mechanical work and resolved to devote his life to nature.

In 1868, Muir embarked on a transformative journey west: he walked into California, traversing the Santa Clara Valley, passing through the area that would become Gilroy, then over the Diablo Range into the Central Valley, before finally ascending to Yosemite. That trip laid the foundation for his later work: he played a crucial role in the preservation of Yosemite Valley and Sequoia National Park, co-founded the Sierra Club in 1892, and became a leading advocate for wilderness protection.

John Muir's 1868 ramble across California followed a deliberate, low-speed path through the Santa Clara Valley that hugged the Diablo foothills and the old stagecoach and wagon roads of the era. From his arrival in the Bay Area, he moved south along the valley floor and the base of the Coast Range, passing through what is today the southern edge of San José, then down the historic Monterey Road corridor through San Martin and Morgan Hill and into Gilroy. Monterey Road an historic north-south thoroughfare that developed from stagecoach and El Camino Real alignments and later became the local surface route paralleling old US-101 closely approximates the path Muir took as he moved south through the valley toward the Diablo foothills. Modern Monterey Road still traces the spine of that nineteenth-century corridor and passes the towns and roadside landscapes Muir described.

From Gilroy Muir turned inland and began his ascent of the Diablo Range toward Pacheco Pass and the San Joaquin Valley beyond. Historical reconstructions and modern retracings (notably the “Muir Ramble Route”) place his crossing in the general Pacheco Pass corridor: rather than following today’s high-speed state highway exactly, Muir’s path used a network of ranch roads, paths and low passes that arose out of the Gilroy/Morgan Hill area up into the Diablo foothills, then eastward across Pacheco Pass into the Central Valley. Contemporary walkers who follow the Muir Ramble seek out private ranch roads and low-use county roads in this same watershed stretches that the Ramble authors describe as “through country that has been untouched since the time of Muir’s walk.” That modern recreation route therefore gives us the best available approximation of his nineteenth century crossing through the Diablo Range from San Jose to Los Banos. In his journal, Muir described this stretch with great fondness of the hills alive with flowers, the air vivid with spring songbirds impressions that resonated deeply in his later conservation writings.

Muir’s writings are lyrical, spiritual, and grounded in his intimate observations of the natural world — became powerful tools in promoting conservation. His major works include *The Mountains of California*, *Our National Parks*, *The Yosemite*, as well as his journals, including *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*. He died of pneumonia on December 24, 1914, in Los Angeles at the age of seventy-six.

He is buried in a small family cemetery; the Strentzel/Muir Gravesite in Martinez, California, about a mile from his longtime home. His wife, Louie Strentzel Muir, as well as other family members, lie beside him. The gravesite lies within a historic pear orchard along Alhambra Creek, under trees that include eucalyptus and incense cedar, trees that were planted by his father-in-law and remain part of the landscape today. The headstones are crafted of granite sourced from the Sierra Nevada, linking his final resting place materially to the landscapes he loved.

Although the City of Gilroy and Santa Clara County do not appear to have enacted special resolutions declaring a “John Muir Day” of their own, the broader cultural and environmental heritage of Muir’s route gives local resonance to his legacy. The memory of his trek through the valley contributes to a sense of place and history, inspiring local open-space efforts, and ecological awareness. Today, many who honor John Muir Day reflect not only on national conservation, but also the intimate connection he formed with landscapes like those around Gilroy landscapes that once passed lightly under his boots, but which remain shaped in spirit by his vision.