Milestones in California History—
John Muir and the California National Parks

A distinctive feature of John Muir’s self-portrait, sent in a letter to a friend in 1887, is the large and penetrating eyes, an appropriate representation of his wilderness vision. Jeanne Carr, his early mentor and confidante, wrote to him that God had given him an “eye within the eye, to see in all natural objects the realized ideas of His mind.” Indeed, Muir had sight beyond sight, for he was able to perceive and comprehend the spiritual, ecological, and rejuvenating qualities of wilderness-values that were heretofore unrecognized by the majority of nineteenth-century Americans. The names John Muir and Yosemite will, of course, be forever linked. Muir’s scientific contribution of the glacial origins of Yosemite Valley alone is significant, but he also became Yosemite’s leading publicist and defender.

Yosemite was opened to the outside world in March 1851, when the Mariposa Battalion pursued Indians into the valley. In July 1856, J. M. Hutchings began promoting Yosemite attractions in his Hutchings’ California Magazine. Prompted by the writing of Horace Greeley and Thomas Starr King, the photography of C. L. Weed and C. E. Watkins, and the artistry of Thomas Ayres and Albert Bierstadt, many Californians began to recognize the aesthetic value of the state’s spectacular mountains. In order to prevent further private claims to Yosemite Valley and to preserve the natural beauty of Yosemite and the nearby Mariposa Big Trees, a group of public-spirited citizens helped draft congressional legislation granting Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Trees to the custody of California for preservation as a park solely “for public use, resort, and recreation.” Signed into law in 1864 by President Abraham Lincoln, this was the first official attempt at wilderness preservation and thus constituted the beginning of our national park system.

To be sure, Muir was not the only California visionary. The passage a century ago this year of legislation officially designating the Yosemite and Sequoia regions as national parks would not have been possible without the cooperation of many individuals with similar vision. A coalition of local, state, and national interests, including representatives from the press, business, aesthetic, and scientific communities, worked to secure congressional approval in the summer and fall of 1890. Since Yellowstone had been designated a national park in 1872, Sequoia and Yosemite became the second and third federally managed wilderness parks. Muir and other catalysts of the 1890 bills were interested in protecting the areas and winning converts to the then radical idea of wilderness preservation. Like Muir, other individuals were disappointed in the state’s guardianship of the valley, but some were interested in achieving national park status primarily for utilitarian reasons. Community and agricultural interests in the San Joaquin Valley supported the legislation to assure federal protection of forest watersheds. The Southern Pacific Railroad provided crucial assistance because its leaders recognized the benefit of enhancing railroad land values and increasing railroad revenues from higher crop production and passenger traffic.

Significantly, 1890 also marked the symbolic end of the American frontier, for it was that year that the federal census confirmed what was already suspected: there were few wild and unexplored places left in America. The end of the era of wilderness exploitation and destruction was thus marked by major milestones—the 1890 founding of Yosemite and Sequoia national parks—in the dawning of another era devoted to the preservation of some of America’s great natural resources.

The ability of Muir and other visionaries to imagine the future is a rare talent. This California national parks centennial issue pays tribute to the wilderness visionaries of our past and hopes to inform and inspire those of tomorrow.

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Front Cover: On the Merced River, undated painting of Yosemite Valley, by Albert Bierstadt. The early artists of Yosemite are the subjects of an article by Kate Nearpass Ogden in this issue. CHS Collection, San Francisco. Photographed by Cecile Keefe.