A Brief History of the Life of Dr. Joseph LeConte

The LeConte Family was driven from France in 1685, by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, traveled to Holland, then England, and settled in New York, with one branch of the family moving to the southern United States. Louis LeConte, a medical doctor, became a plantation owner producing rice and sea island cotton, in Liberty County, Georgia. Louis LeConte was also a practical botanist, with an extensive garden. He was the first to bring camellia to the southern United States. Louis LeConte married a Georgia Puritan, whose family was originally from Massachusetts (by way of South Carolina). Joseph LeConte was born February 26, 1823 in Liberty County, Georgia. As a boy he explored meadows and woods that surrounded his family plantation, Woodmanston. At the age of 15, LeConte entered Franklin College at the University of Georgia in Athens. He graduated in August 1841 and in 1845 received a medical degree from the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York. LeConte and Caroline Elizabeth (Bessie) Nisbet were married in January 1847. LeConte began his career as a medical doctor in Macon, Georgia, but soon realized that his primary interest was scientific research and teaching. In 1850, he moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts to study geology and zoology at Harvard University with Louis Agassiz. He accompanied Agassiz to the Florida Keys in 1851, joined the faculty at Oglethorpe University, and in 1852 joined the faculty at the University of Georgia (Athens). In 1856, he joined the faculty at South Carolina College as Professor of chemistry and geology.

Like many southerners, LeConte became caught up in the sentiment of loyalty to the South and joined the secession movement. Convinced that the conflict was neither an insurrection nor a rebellion, as a loyal citizen he defended his nation with moral support and through service to his government. In June 1862, South Carolina College cancelled classes and, in December 1863, suspended operation. During the Civil War, LeConte served as an arbitrator for the Confederacy and as a chemist in the manufacture of medicine and nitrate.

South Carolina College reopened in January 1866. LeConte was rehired as Chair of the School of Chemistry, Pharmacy, Mineralogy, and Geology. In 1867, reconstruction brought significant changes to South Carolina, but for diehard southerners, like LeConte, these events were impossible to accept. In 1869, LeConte, his wife, and his two youngest daughters, Sarah Elizabeth (Sallie) and Caroline Eaton (Carrie), and his brother John, and his family, moved to California, as founding faculty at the University of California (Berkeley), which opened in September 1869. Joseph LeConte joined the faculty as Chair of the geology department. He also taught zoology and botany. John LeConte, a physicist, was the first acting president of the new university.

In the summer of 1870, LeConte, eight of his students, and Professor Frank Soule, Jr., who taught mathematics, headed to the High Sierra. “The University Excursion Party,” rambled six weeks, visited Yosemite Valley, Tanaya Lake, Mono Lake, and Lake Tahoe. John Muir traveled with them for ten days. He shared with LeConte his understanding of the glacial origin of Yosemite Valley. And, LeConte went on to support Muir’s findings.
The grandeur of the Sierra captured LeConte’s spirit. Everything was new and different. He reveled in mountain climbing, geological study, and the worship of God as revealed in the natural world. Muir said of LeConte that he road allowing his horse to go where it liked and he (LeConte) lectured all day “as if trying to be the tongue of every object in sight.” In the evenings around a campfire, LeConte talked about the lessons of the day. After his first visit to the High Sierra and Yosemite Valley, he wrote: “I never enjoyed anything else so much in my life—perfect health, the merry party of young men, the glorious scenery, and, above all, the magnificent opportunity for studying mountain origin and structure.” LeConte recorded his observations and reflections in little pocket notebooks and published both popular and professional pieces from his sojourns in the Sierra. Perhaps the most recognized is *A Journal of Ramblings Through the High Sierra of California*, which recalled his 1870 trip, published in 1875.

LeConte would visit Yosemite a total of 10 times for scientific research and to enjoy the Sierra and the Valley with his family. In 1872, while camping with Muir, Muir wished he and LeConte could spend more time studying the wilderness. Renown for his scholarship and scientific inquiry, LeConte gained national recognition when elected to the American Philosophical Society in 1873. The following year he was elected to the National Academy of Science. A popular and venerated teacher, LeConte remained on the faculty at the University of California throughout his life, though he gave up undergraduate teaching in 1896. He wrote eight books including a standard textbook *Elements of Geology*. By 1898 he had published sixty articles on geological topics.

In 1892 LeConte and his son, Joseph Nisbet LeConte “Little Joe,” were among the founding members of the Sierra Club. LeConte served on the Sierra Club board of Directors until 1898. In July 1901, as a member of the first Sierra Club “outing,” LeConte returned to Yosemite for his 10th visit, which would be his last. At Yosemite Falls, while standing on a rock in the spray of the falls, he raised his arms aloft and shouted in exuberance with joy and delight. On the evening of July 5th, LeConte suffered from pain in his heart “angina pectoris.” Though he rested in his tent in Curry Village, on the morning of July 6th, LeConte died. He is buried in Oakland, California at Mountain View Cemetery, beneath a large rough granite rock taken from Yosemite Valley (supposedly Glacial Point). Immediately following his death, LeConte’s friends and Sierra Club members, suggested a memorial be built. In keeping with his active and useful life as a scientist, teacher, and writer, the Sierra Club erected LeConte Memorial Lodge as a memorial and the first permanent visitor center in Yosemite Valley (replacing the Sierra Club Reading Room at Sinning’s Cottage located by Sentinel Bridge).

LeConte Memorial Lodge was the first permanent visitor center in Yosemite Valley, when Yosemite Valley was a state park, established by the Federal Government in 1864 under President Abraham Lincoln. Before Yosemite National Park was established in 1890 and before the National Park Service was established in 1916.

Following the death of John Muir, the first president of the Sierra Club, Joseph Nisbet LeConte was elected the second president of the Sierra Club.

BJG/2015