

University of Louisville

## ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository

---

College of Arts & Sciences Senior Honors  
Theses

College of Arts & Sciences

---

5-2021

### The idea of wilderness and United States land use policy: American Transcendentalism, preservation, and conservation, 1835-1914.

Arabella A Paulovich  
*University of Louisville*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/honors>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Paulovich, Arabella A, "The idea of wilderness and United States land use policy: American Transcendentalism, preservation, and conservation, 1835-1914." (2021). *College of Arts & Sciences Senior Honors Theses*. Paper 240.

Retrieved from <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/honors/240>

This Senior Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Arts & Sciences Senior Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. This title appears here courtesy of the author, who has retained all other copyrights. For more information, please contact [thinkir@louisville.edu](mailto:thinkir@louisville.edu).

The Idea of Wilderness and United States Land Use Policy: American Transcendentalism,  
Preservation, and Conservation, 1835-1914.

By Arabella Paulovich

## **I. Historiographical Introduction: The West, The Environment, and American History**

In 1893, at the American Historical Association meeting in Chicago, Frederick Jackson Turner read his paper, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” Turner’s work went on to become known as the “Frontier Thesis,” revolutionizing the study of Western History. Turner’s historical narrative painted a mythic portrait of the West, telling of rugged individuals conquering desolate wilderness. Turner argued the frontier process, the movement of pioneers from the Atlantic coast to Pacific Coast, shaped American institutions and values. Firstly, conquering wilderness, men and women isolated themselves into “primitive organizations based on family,”<sup>1</sup> breeding uniquely American characteristics of individualism and perseverance. Secondly, migrating westward “meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe.”<sup>2</sup> In Turner’s eyes, Westward migrants proved responsible for the rebirth of American identity, returning to primitivism and distancing their societies from European culture. The significance of the Frontier then, was that the region and its process formed the bedrock of the nation, Western History was what he called “*really* American History.”<sup>3</sup>

When his contemporaries predominantly asked historical questions about the colonial region, Turner attested American History “is largely the colonization of the Great West,”<sup>4</sup> and thus the Western region of the United States deserved closer examination. For centuries, historians interested in the Great West, the Great Plains, and the Southwest looked to Turner’s thesis for guidance. Pioneer of Regional History and Environmental History, Walter Prescott Webb, marked Turner as his influence. Similar to Turner, Webb argued the existence of a vast

---

<sup>1</sup> Turner, Frederick Jackson. “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin (1894), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 1.

body of free land had effects on the habits, customs, and institutions of those who had access to it. Webb's popular works, *The Great Plains* (1931), *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense* (1935), *Divided We Stand: The Crisis of Frontierless Democracy* (1937), and *The Great Frontier* (1952), offered insight into how westward migration proved to be a mental adventure into an expanding world. In 1954, *More Water for Texas: The Problem and the Plan* demonstrated Webb's interest in the conservation of natural resources. Expanding upon Turner's focus on the West's landscape, Webb drew from the disciplines of geology, geography, and anthropology, generating environmental histories of the West.

Turner's declaration that the frontier was where the American intellect, a combination of "restless energy" and "power to effect great ends,"<sup>5</sup> marked his historical work as nationalist. Nonetheless, the Frontier Thesis and its nationalist ideology shaped methodologies utilized by most Western Historians throughout the twentieth century. It was not until the 1980s when scholars began to challenge the Turnerian definition of the West. Alongside the "New Social History" movement, "New Western History" emerged. Patricia Limerick's book, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, revisited Turner's analysis. Turner had argued the frontier produced individualism. Limerick, writing upon a variety of perspectives of women, natives, and ethnic groups, argued the West was a combination of diverse groups coming together to common goals while conquering the land and its resources. A highlight of *The Legacy of Conquest* is Limerick's interpretation on how the environment influenced the choices of homesteaders, extractive business-owners, and land speculators. However, Limerick's description of westward migrants as "conquestors of land," lacks historical perspective for the men and women, who were seeing the West for the first time—the West looked like opportunity. Nonetheless, Limerick ignited the field of New Western History. *The Legacy of Conquest* set the

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 4.

paradigm for New Western Historians by asking historical “how” and “why” questions regarding race, gender, class, and ethnicity in the trans-Mississippi West. Alongside Limerick, the New Western History movement is best known through the works by William Cronon, Richard White, and David Worster.<sup>6</sup>

New Western Historians began asking questions about the relationship between humans and the environment. Written in 1967, Roderick Frazier Nash’s book, *Wilderness and the American Mind* proved a touchstone book, tracking the intellectual history of the idea of wilderness in the United States. Nash explored how attitudes toward wilderness shifted from the colonial era, through industrialization, into forestry, and into the conservation movement. Intertwining intellectual history with a discussion of legislative landmarks in land use, Nash offered insight into how and why the idea of wilderness influenced United States’ policies over time. Similar to Nash, David Worster asked how humans have been affected by their natural environment, through time, and conversely how they have affected that environment, and with what results in *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (1985). Worster hankers for pre-industrial America, writing “nostalgia may be our only hope of salvation.” Worster’s work often offers a Marxist interpretation, arguing capitalism led to the exploitation and destruction of much of the United States’ land. Nonetheless, Worster’s work offered insight into how humans’ apprehensions and misapprehensions toward nature changed over time.

---

<sup>6</sup> See Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West, 1848-1893* and *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. See White’s *It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West; Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County, Washington;* and *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change Among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos*. See Worster’s *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (1992). *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (1993), *An Unsettled Country: Changing Landscapes of the American West* (1994).

The latest generation of Western historians differ from their predecessors in two ways. First, the newest Western historians have proven eager to reinvigorate concepts of the frontier to focus on borders and sub-regions. Asking “how?” and “why?” questions about the societies situated on the United States’ Mexico and Canada borders, historians have expanded the geographical focus of the American West. Secondly, over the last decade, Western historians strive to not view the West in isolation, but rather make connections with the rest of the nation, and the world. Often the freshest perspectives critique earlier Western history’s tendency to portray Westward migrants as evil conquerors. Historian Stephen Aron reflected upon the Turnerian mythic West *and* New Western History’s doom-narrative, stating “to make sense of the West’s multi-faceted evolutions, we don’t need one-dimensional tales.”<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the various historical interpretations of the West; from Turner, to the New Western History, to the New (New?) Western History, awareness of the unique environment of the West proves continuous. Interested in how the environment shapes us, and how we shape the environment, I explore the varying ideas of nature through the rise of American Environmentalism in the early twentieth century. The historical narrative of the rise of American Environmentalism is often interpreted as a battle between ideas— conservation versus preservation— placing Gifford Pinchot on one end of the spectrum, and John Muir on the other. However, the questions asked by scientists, rural land owners, politicians, and business owners regarding ‘how’ and ‘why’ Americans should protect their land prove far more nuanced— and certainly less polarized than scholarship contends. Firstly, scholarship written on the rise of American Environmentalism often focuses *either* upon the history of the idea of nature, *or* upon the history of environmental policies. However, abstract ideas about nature proved influential in

---

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Aron, *The American West: A Very Short Introduction*. Very Short Introductions, 419. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015.

shaping land use policies. Secondly, the rise of American Environmentalism proved not to be a strict battle between conservation and preservation philosophies. Rather, variant perspectives about how societies should use, protect, and conserve land resources often intersected with one another. Ultimately, in the early twentieth century, ideas and beliefs held toward wilderness, nature, and land shaped United States laws, acts, and statutes.

## **II. Introduction: Founding the Idea of Wilderness in the United States**

In the United States the concept of wilderness changed overtime. In the seventeenth century, when European colonists arrived in the United States, many brought with them ancient European attitudes toward wilderness. To many people living in medieval Europe, wilderness was where frightening beasts and deep shadows lurked. For centuries wilderness had been equated with feelings of bewilderment and fear. New England Puritans reiterated the negative connotation of wilderness, applying their sentiments to the landscape of the New World. As the Biblical story tells, Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden and forced into the wilderness. And as Roderick Frazier Nash pointed out in *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967) for Europeans who first arrived in the United States, wilderness proved to be understood as the antithesis of paradise.

During the eighteenth century, Thomas Jefferson challenged the Puritan interpretation that wilderness was an unpleasant place created by God. For Jefferson, United States' barren prairies and those who worked the land were "the chosen people of God."<sup>8</sup> Jefferson believed farmers were in closer communion with nature and had been endowed with "substantial and genuine virtue."<sup>9</sup> According to Jefferson, farmers kept the "sacred fire" alive in the United

---

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Jefferson, Query XIX, Notes on the State of Virginia, ed. by William Peden (New York: Norton, 1982), 165.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 164-165.

States. Jefferson's concept of wilderness proved continuous with earlier ideas that wilderness proved a manifestation of God. At the same time, Jefferson's attitude toward wilderness diverged from the status-quo; instead of viewing wilderness as the place where sinners were banished to by God, Jefferson understood wild spaces as a gift from God, given to Americans in order to bear fruit for the nation. In spirit, Jefferson was a Westerner. Throughout his career, Jefferson sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on expeditions to survey land in the West and aimed to expand American agriculture. For Jefferson, as outlined in Query XIX in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, the moral security of a nation rested in its agricultural community.<sup>10</sup>

Jefferson's interpretation of wilderness as an offering from God underscored the nineteenth century Manifest Destiny ideology. Under the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, American settlers understood themselves destined to expand westward. American Historian Frederick Merk has argued the concept of Manifest Destiny proved "generated by the potentialities of a new Earth for building a new heaven."<sup>11</sup> Again wilderness was intertwined with God. But by equating wilderness as a symbol of God, the conflicting question arose: how should such a heavenly gift be handled?

Beginning in the nineteenth century, American intellectuals battled over the wilderness idea. New England Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau believed God's wilderness provided the necessary space for inquiry. By walking through Bostonian Woods or by Walden Pond, ordinary men became great philosophical men. New England Transcendentalists understood God planted United States wild spaces for man to better his morale. In the eyes of Transcendentalists, wilderness ought to be utilized by philosophers, writers, and artists. Brief periodic excursions away from the urban city, where thoughts and

---

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Jefferson, Query XIX in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 165.

<sup>11</sup> Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation*.



feelings became muddled, proved necessary for the American intellectual. In other words, United States wild spaces had been gifted by God and addressed specifically to well-educated and upper-class Americans.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the concept of wilderness remained an intellectual movement. As the West underwent expansion and development, John Muir and Gifford Pinchot became the symbolic figures of the tension regarding United States land and natural resources. As Muir and Pinchot rose as leaders of Preservation and Conservation Movements, both men were forced to reckon with the notion that wilderness was God's creation. According to John Muir, God resided in the rocks, trees, and mountains. Thus extracting natural resources proved blasphemy; to exploit the land would be to test God. For Muir and his fellow Sierra Club members— mostly white, upper-class, and educated— wilderness needed to be preserved.

Contending with John Muir's Preservation Model existed Gifford Pinchot's Conservation Model. For Pinchot, the wisest use of United States land would operate under the notion of the greatest good, for the greatest amount of time, for the greatest number of people. Pinchot's model of the sustained use of natural resources proved supported by businessmen, politicians, and railway owners. While Pinchot and Muir have often been regarded as polar opposites, the two men's religious view of nature proved akin. Raised Protestant, Pinchot worked full-time for the Young Men's Christian Association while attending Yale University. Personal journals and diaries reveal Pinchot's intimate connection with God and his avid study of the Bible.

Throughout his career, Pinchot co-authored two books on the country church published by the Federal Council of Churches, guiding churches on how their denominations could restore the value and care of the land.<sup>12</sup> Influenced by his upbringing in the Christian Church, Pinchot's

---

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Jefferson, Query XIX in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 165.

Conservation Model proved rooted in the Bible's concept of stewardship. Thus, the paper argues against the popular argument that John Muir and Gifford Pinchot feuded due to Preservation's religious rhetoric and Pinchot's rejection of religious rhetoric altogether. Both John Muir and Gifford Pinchot believed God created wilderness, but different in their interpretation of how God wished for wilderness to be cared for sparked the Preservation vs. Conservation feud, demonstrated in the Battle of Hetch Hetchy.

Thomas Jefferson, Transcendentalists, John Muir, and Gifford Pinchot called attention to the significance of United States Wilderness as God's support for American development, raising questions regarding how the land ought to be cared for. However, on September 14, 1901, when President Theodore Roosevelt was inaugurated as the twenty-sixth President of the United States, the idea of wilderness and differing models of preserving and conserving America's wild spaces gained federal protection. An outdoorsman, Theodore Roosevelt proved the key figure in transforming the idea of wilderness into proclamations and acts. Roosevelt assembled the United States into a natural empire. At the same time, Roosevelt proved significant in changing the discourse surrounding the idea of wilderness. For centuries, the concept of wilderness had been reserved as a discussion among intellectuals. Roosevelt, a symbol of the American cowboy, and a preacher of righteousness, as well as an intellectual proved available to broaden the support for his policies. The first president to use popular media to appeal directly to the people, Roosevelt bypassed the political parties. Under Roosevelt, American Wilderness became a symbol of masculinity and dominance; a sharp contrast from earlier notions of understanding wilderness as sublime, romantic, and a space for intellectuals.

### **III. Early Ideas of Nature: Emerson, Thoreau, and American Transcendentalism**

On September 8th, 1836, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Unitarian clergymen gathered, establishing what would later be called, “The Transcendental Club.” Inside Willard’s Hotel, George Putnam, Henry Hedge, George Ripley, and Ralph Waldo Emerson agreed the men would periodically convene to discuss “the very unsatisfactory” state of American thought.<sup>13</sup> Protesting against “the arid intellectual climate of Cambridge,”<sup>14</sup> Club members believed knowledge came through intuition and imagination, rather than logic and the senses. In addition to initiating the Club, the men celebrated Ralph Waldo Emerson’s forthcoming publication, *Nature*—released the following morning, anonymously. Writing *Nature*, Emerson asked questions about ‘how’ and ‘why’ nature proved to be a primary source of meaning for Americans. Drawing upon years of journal entries, sermons, and lectures, Emerson’s *Nature* laid out Transcendentalism’s central tenets.

American Transcendentalism proved rooted in the ideas of German Philosopher Immanuel Kant. Following seventeenth and eighteenth century scientific advancements, Kant popularized thinking of nature as ‘lawful’ and ‘orderly.’ Additionally, Kant wrote about ‘the sublime.’ Kant’s idea of the sublime sought to explain why seeing immense mountains or a violent storm often evoked feelings of both awe and terror. In his book, *The Critique of Judgement*, Kant argued “the irresistibility of [nature’s] power certainly makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical powerlessness, but at the same time it reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of nature and a superiority over nature.”<sup>15</sup> Reading works by Samuel Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, and William Wordsworth, and corresponding with many European romantic writers, Emerson gained insight into Kant’s ideas

---

<sup>13</sup> Frederic Henry Hedge, “Progress of Society,” *The Christian Examiner*, March 1834.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Richardson, *Emerson: Mind on Fire*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995

<sup>15</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

on nature. Overtime, as Literary Historian, Cyrus Patell has argued, Emerson domesticated Kantian thinking for American soil.<sup>16</sup> In other words, Emerson synthesized Kantian ideas on nature with his beliefs in Unitarianism. Emerson believed Kant's ideas on nature lacked emphasis on religion, spirit, and revelation— principles central to his 1836 essay, *Nature*.

In *Nature*, Emerson proclaimed “man needs to retire from his chamber as from society” and “go into solitude.”<sup>17</sup> In the woods, men returned to reason and faith.<sup>18</sup> Emerson advocated for what Historian Samantha Harvey has called “the romantic triad of human, spirit, and nature.”<sup>19</sup> In Emerson's eyes, wilderness' value proved trifold: nature was an economic commodity, an aesthetic asset, and a teacher of spiritual and moral lessons. Emerson began his essay pointing toward nature's value as a commodity, not because he believed it to be highest ranked, but because “it is a use all men apprehend.”<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, by stating all of the phenomena of the physical world worked collectively together for the profit of man,<sup>21</sup> Emerson gave currency to the idea that nature belonged to human beings— a philosophy toward nature that would continuously be debated over throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

For Emerson, nature's aesthetic, spiritual, and moral values proved most significant. Emerson advocated for nature's beauty. Writing, “the sky, the mountain, the tree, the animal, give us a delight *in and for themselves*,” Emerson challenged the negative attitudes many eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Americans held toward nature. As Roderick Frazier Nash has contended, at the start of the nineteenth century, many Americans did not perceive nature as beautiful. In less-industrialized areas of the Western United States, settlers confronted

---

<sup>16</sup> Cyrus Patell, “American Transcendentalism,” New York University Lecture Series, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

natural disasters of earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides. Required to deal with the rugged environment, Western dwellers often viewed nature as a challenging force. Emerson, residing in the less severe environment of the Northeast, advocated for nature's beauty. Writing, "one might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give a man, in the heavenly bodies, the perceptual presence of the sublime,"<sup>22</sup> Emerson demonstrated his Kantian influence and the Romantic Movement, generally.

In Europe during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the philosophical movement of Romanticism arose. Amidst an economic boom, factories and urban centers emerged. The natural world appeared to be undergoing destruction, thus artists, writers, and philosophers began to idealize nature, seeking to protest against rapid industrialization. In the United States, at the start of the nineteenth century, Romanticism infiltrated American culture. Similar to the European Movement, Romanticism in the United States stemmed from anxieties regarding industrialization and commercialization. At the same time, American Romanticists diverged from their European counterparts by infusing nationalist rhetoric into the portrayals of America's landscape. In the arts, painters Thomas Cole, Asher Durand, and Frederic Church depicted United States wildlands as sublime. Romantic writers William Gilpin and Walt Whitman idealized the American West as picturesque; both cautious against the prospects of Westward Expansion.

In addition to championing nature's aesthetic value, Emerson promoted nature for its spiritual and moral worth. Calling nature "the ally of religion," Emerson argued prophets, priests, and Jesus had all looked toward nature for moral lessons.<sup>23</sup> Nature had taught the holiest men how to be virtuous, thus modern non-divine men ought to do the same. Emerson asserted

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>23</sup> Emerson, 11.

the woods served as a vehicle to divinity, “in these plantations of God, a decorum of sanctity reign” and “the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.” In addition to advocating for nature as a religious tool, Emerson furthered time spent in wilderness provided time to reason and better individual character. Emerson’s *Nature* postulated American wilderness could be a source for economic, spiritual, and cultural growth. Moreover, Emerson’s *Nature* argued American development could *coexist* with nature, a philosophy which guided transcendentalists, and influenced later preservationists and conservationists.

### **Becoming Ralph Waldo Emerson**

On Christmas Day, in 1832, Emerson boarded the brig, *Jasper*, setting off for Europe—hoping “to find new affinities” and “to observe the affections, surprises, weaknesses, surprises, hopes, and doubts.”<sup>24</sup> Travelling across Europe, Emerson formulated his guiding philosophy toward nature. In February, 1833, Emerson’s ship docked in Malta. From Malta, Emerson ferried to Italy, awing at church architecture, religious artwork, and monastic culture. At the same time, the Italian landscape entranced Emerson. In Syracuse, at the Catacombs of St. Giovanni, Emerson reflected, “the air was soft and the trees in bloom . . . amidst ruins of ruins Nature was still fair.”<sup>25</sup> Inside his room at Hotel di Gran Bretagna, after visiting The Temple of Vesta, Emerson journalled about “the glorious landscape” where “all was bright with a warm sun . . . the grounds sprinkled with gay flowers.”<sup>26</sup> In Italy, Emerson became interested in the relationship between man and the natural world, noting nature produced soul-stirring emotions.

From Italy, Emerson passed through the Alps, into France. On July 13, 1833, gifted a ticket to *Jardin des Plantes*, Emerson visited the Parisian botanical zoo and garden.<sup>27</sup> At *Jardin*

---

<sup>24</sup> Emerson, *Journal 1820-1835*. Consortium of Church Libraries and Archive: Brigham Young University, 28.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 160-161.

*des Plantes*, Emerson marveled at birds, insects, and rocks. Observing “the inexhaustible riches of nature,”<sup>28</sup> Emerson wrote, “I feel the centipede in me — cayman, carp, eagle, and fox . . . I am moved by strange sympathies, I say continually ‘I will be a naturalist.’”<sup>29</sup> In August, 1833, Emerson visited English towns Carlisle and Ambleside, meeting Romantic Poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. Seeking enlightening discussion, Emerson remarked the visit proved “a spectacle rather than a conversation.”<sup>30</sup> Emerson then paid his respects to Wordsworth, journaling “there is nothing very striking about his [Wordsworth’s] appearance.”<sup>31</sup> After meeting Coleridge and Wordsworth, Emerson understood great men could be ordinary; and began asking ‘why should ordinary men not be great?’ Emerson later addressed Harvard Divinity School’s graduating class, stating: “meek young men grow up in libraries believing it their duty to accept the views which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon have given . . . forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote these books.”<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, touring Europe generated Emerson’s guiding philosophy: man and nature were one, nature existed in man, and nature proved part of man.

In 1833, Emerson returned to America, lecturing on natural history throughout New England. At the same time, Emerson ministered at The Second Unitarian Church of Boston. Tying together newfound interests in the natural world with his Unitarian beliefs, Emerson preached God existed in every part of creation; plants, animals, rocks, and sky. Filling journals with descriptions of New England’s mountains, woods, and waters, on June 24th, 1836, Emerson understood nature to be “the projection of God.”<sup>33</sup> For Emerson, noticing “noises of the locust

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>32</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 6.

<sup>33</sup> Emerson, *Journal 1836-1838*, 76.

and bees" and "tints and forms of the leaves and trees"<sup>34</sup> fashioned moments of "divine transcendence."<sup>35</sup> On June 14th, 1836, upon walking along his Concord, Massachusetts property, Emerson wrote "the oracular woods"<sup>36</sup> provided the space necessary to "pursue certain thoughts" and "enter certain states of mind."<sup>37</sup> In Emerson's eyes, wilderness' value laid in its ability to "concrete the soul"<sup>38</sup> and "minister to man"<sup>39</sup>— nature yielded emotional and spiritual rebirth.

Not alone in believing God showcased order and power in wilderness, Emerson began meeting with other Unitarians to discuss nature's transcendent power. In September of 1836, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Hedge, and George Putnam founded the "Transcendental Club." As Historian Max Oelschlaeger has drawn attention to, in the eyes of the transcendentalists, "nature gave proof of God's Providence for the new nation."<sup>40</sup> Shaped by Unitarian upbringings, the men postulated that in nature and through the senses, man became as close as possible to God. In addition to valuing wilderness as a sacred space, Club members also believed entering the wild allowed for reconnection with the past. As romanticists, the transcendentalists supposed modern industrial society corrupted people and members called for a nostalgic return to primitive life. Seeking connections to a pre-industrialized past, transcendentalists advocated for frequent solitude in nature.

### **Becoming Henry David Thoreau**

In autumn of 1837, as Trancendentalists continued debating over nature's moral value, Harvard University student, Henry David Thoreau, read Emerson's seminal essay, *Nature*. After

---

<sup>34</sup> Emerson, Journal, 342.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Emerson, Journal, 63.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Emerson, Journal, 346.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Max Oelschlaeger, "Emerson, Thoreau, and the Hudson River School," *National Humanities Center*.



reading *Nature*, Thoreau began asking questions regarding nature's value to society. Nearly every morning, Thoreau walked Walden and Estabrook Woods, collecting and observing specimens for his journal. In 1838, Thoreau formally joined Concord's Transcendental Club. Among other transcendentalists, Thoreau proved to be what Historian Nina Baym has described as "the most seriously concerned with the question of science."<sup>41</sup> Initially Thoreau agreed with many members' ideas on nature's transcendent power. By the end of 1849, after a four-year stay in the Walden Woods, Thoreau diverted from his contemporaries.

Alone in his cabin in the Concordian woods, Thoreau found nature offered more than individual aesthetic experiences and spiritual transformation. In part due to the growing sense of nationalism sweeping the country, Thoreau proposed American wilderness needed to be safeguarded because it marked a difference from Europe. On April 23, 1851, Thoreau delivered his lecture, "Walking," at the Concord Lyceum, reflecting on his time at Walden Woods. He sought to "speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness" and "to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society."<sup>42</sup> Emerson furthered, "the moon looks larger here than in Europe" and "the heavens of America appear infinitely higher, and the stars brighter."<sup>43</sup> Thoreau proved to be one of the first to advocate for American wilderness as a symbol of national political and economic power.

Thoreau continued considering 'how' and 'why' nature proved valuable for America as a nation. On October 15, 1859, walking throughout Concord, Thoreau journalled each town ought to have a primitive forest "where a stick should never be cut for fuel, a common possession forever, for instruction and recreation."<sup>44</sup> Planting the seeds for preservationist thinking, Thoreau

---

<sup>41</sup> Nina Baym, "Thoreau's View of Science," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26, (1965): 221.

<sup>42</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walking*, 2

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, 67, 15 October 1859.

asserted “precious natural objects of rare beauty should belong to the public.”<sup>45</sup> As Roderick Frazier Nash has drawn attention to, important to Thoreau was the idea of balance between civilization and wilderness.<sup>46</sup> In Thoreau’s eyes, nature proved an asset to American infrastructure and ought to be protected.

In conclusion, in the Eastern United States, early-nineteenth-century attitudes toward nature proved shaped by religious, romantic, and nationalistic rhetoric. Emerson and other transcendentalists proclaimed solitude in nature issued spiritual, emotional, and cultural transformation. At the same time, transcendentalists saw nature as a marker of difference—America’s wilderness proved more vast and fruitful than Europe; nature became an object of national pride. Despite the Club’s nationalist rhetoric, many Americans proved unready to support the transcendental school of thought. As Historian Roderick Frazier Nash has drawn attention to, the few Americans who did talk about nature in ethical terms in the early nineteenth century were ignored completely.<sup>47</sup> Following in Emerson’s footsteps, Henry David Thoreau argued too much commerce, society, and industry degraded civilizations. At the same time, Thoreau moved beyond transcendentalists’ religious and romantic rhetoric, becoming one of the first intellectuals to consider nature as a pragmatic economic and political asset. Setting the stage for the preservation movement, Thoreau argued Americans ought to set aside wild landscapes for national prosperity. By the mid-nineteenth century, American wilderness became a symbol of national identity. Emerson, Thoreau, and other transcendentalists certainly idealized the idea of wilderness from the more-civilized region of the Eastern United States. Nonetheless, transcendentalists’ positive attitude toward nature laid the foundation for Preservation and

---

<sup>45</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, 89, 3 January 1861.

<sup>46</sup> Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 35-37.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

Conservation Movements, philosophies toward nature that would spark national interest in the late nineteenth century.

Throughout the nineteenth century, three forces proved crucial in changing attitudes toward nature. Firstly, scientific disciplines turned away from long-accepted natural history methodologies, leading to professionalized and secularized inquiries about the natural world. Secondly, a growing sense of nationalism swept the nation. Americans began to perceive nature as a resource for national prosperity and a marker of difference from Europe. Thirdly, European romantic landscape aesthetics gained traction in the United States; Americans began regarding nature as the romantic, the beautiful, and the sublime.

#### **IV. Competing Visions of Nature in the West: John Muir and Gifford Pinchot**

At the start of the nineteenth century, Americans “saw the elephant” of the West; deep canyons, vast deserts, and rugged mountain ranges proved distinct from other continents. Many Americans understood the nation’s awe-evoking wild spaces to be a calling from God, demonstrated by popular Manifest Destiny and Transcendental beliefs. By the late nineteenth century, Americans' confrontations with the western landscape and ideas regarding "nature," "wilderness," "frontier," became of governmental interest. Naturalist John Muir and Forester Gifford Pinchot expanded upon transcendentalists’ nature-appreciation to politicize the idea of wilderness. By the turn of the twentieth century, impacts of industrialization deteriorated much of the United States’ wild spaces. Impacts of industrialization were made visible by clear cut logging sites and a general concern regarding the land and its meaning materialized into two ideas regarding land use, preservation and conservation.

John Muir and Gifford Pinchot embodied the twentieth century battle between preservation and conservation. In Muir’s eyes, nature was God and ought to be left untouched

by man. For Pinchot, nature proved a resource to be utilized and dispersed across the nation. Muir's land use ethic proved what Historian Max Oelschlaeger has described as deep, holistic, and arcadian; and Pinchot more shallow and resource-oriented.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, Muir and Pinchot continued Transcendentalist traditions of (1) making nature advocacy a quasi-religious movement and (2) aligning the idea of wilderness as a symbol of American identity. John Muir and Gifford Pinchot rivaled over their ideas regarding nature and its correct use—articulated most clearly in the debates regarding the construction of Hetch Hetchy Dam on the federally protected land of Yosemite National Park. Yet the conflicting philosophies regarding wilderness ultimately balanced to yield America's Public Land System.

### *John Muir*

On April 21, 1838, in Dunbar, Scotland, John Muir was born to Daniel Muir and Anne Gilrye. Raising an evangelical farming family, Daniel and Anne educated their five children in farming and faith. During the day, the family worked in the garden plot and tended to sheep and cows. In the evening, the Muir children memorized and recited large passages of the Old and New Testament per his father's orders.<sup>49</sup> When John Muir could not be found seated in a religious lesson, or laboring on the farm, he was most likely exploring Dunbar. Bird-watching near the sea and climbing peaks by King Edward's old Dunbar Castle, Muir marked his "first excursions— the beginnings of lifelong wanderings."<sup>50</sup> Young Muir drew comparisons between the two guiding forces of his daily life— religion and nature. The garden he and his father routinely worked in the spring and summer became "more like Eden every day,"<sup>51</sup> and Saturday

---

<sup>48</sup> Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*, New Haven: Yale University Press

<sup>49</sup> John Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, 20.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

morning trips to the hilly countryside proved moments of “breezy glory” and “blessed enchantment.”<sup>52</sup> Overtime, Muir abandoned looking for God in the Bible altogether. Upon moving to the United States, Muir discovered God could not be found in scripture— but in treetops, mountain slopes, and river bends.

By the mid-1840s, Scotland’s economic and social pressures of the Highland Clearances<sup>53</sup> proved augmented by lower cattle prices and potato famine. Witnessing blows to the subsistence economy, the agriculturalist Muirs joined the many crofter-families migrating from the Scottish Highlands. In autumn of 1849, John sat fireside with his grandfather and brother when Daniel entered, announcing the family would voyage to America.<sup>54</sup> Uncertain of where the Muir’s would settle, John was one of three Muir children chosen to board the vessel with their father—the rest of the family would join after purchasing a farmstead. Writing upon Daniel’s luggage of cast iron pans, carpenter tools, and beams-scales, Muir recalled “like many other homesteaders my father burdened himself as if America were still a wilderness in which little or nothing could be bought.”<sup>55</sup> The Muir’s landed built a cabin in a shanty town ten miles outside of the nearest city, Portage, Wisconsin. In the “primeval Wisconsin woods”<sup>56</sup> Muir experienced what he described as a “sudden splash into pure wildness— baptism in Nature’s warm heart.”<sup>57</sup> Muir’s deep-rooted understanding of nature as a divine entity would determine the preservationists’ advocacy efforts throughout the early twentieth century.

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>53</sup> Between 1750 and 1860, forced evictions required many farmers to abandon their land. The removals cleared the land of people primarily to allow for the introduction of sheep pastoralism.

<sup>54</sup> John Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, 54.

<sup>55</sup> John Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, 60.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 63.

When Muir turned sixteen, spending days on the family farm building barometers, ploughing, and lining bees, he “began to grow hungry for real knowledge.”<sup>58</sup> Muir taught himself algebra, geometry, and trigonometry. Seeking to enhance his reading and writing skills, Muir borrowed books from neighbors concerning history and dramatics. While funding his education, the devout Daniel and Anne grew weary of Muir’s interest in philosophy. Reflecting on his desire to read Plutarch’s *Lives*, Muir wrote he and his father disputed for weeks over the Bible’s condemnation of philosophy.<sup>59</sup> Muir discovered life on his family’s farm could no longer foster his desire for inquiry. In 1861, Muir left his siblings and parents for Madison, hoping to attend University of Wisconsin-Madison. Upon listening to Muir’s case for seeking higher education while possessing minimal funds, the Dean of Faculty welcomed Muir to the university. Influenced by his interest in invention-making and reading, Muir enrolled in chemistry and physics courses. At the same time, Muir began reading Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau in his literature courses and those authors awed him. At the same time, Muir critiqued the Transcendental Movement for being “too wild.”<sup>60</sup> In Muir’s eyes, transcendentalists lacked sufficient experiences in wilderness— woods on the outskirts of developed Eastern towns were not akin to wild spaces in the Western United States. Under a tree at University of Wisconsin’s courtyard, a classmate gave Muir an informal lesson on botany. through which Muir came to understand the orderliness of the natural world. Muir’s epiphany on nature’s order shaped the rhetoric of his later advocacy for wilderness. More immediately, Muir enrolled in botany, geology, and biology courses, seeking to understand the organization of plants, animals, and natural resources. Still affiliated with the Church, Muir worked Sunday school, teaching botany lessons to his students in order to understand creation.

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 241-242.

<sup>60</sup> John Muir, *Mountain Thoughts*, 4.

In 1869, Muir spent his first summer in California's Sierra Nevadas. Working as a shepherd in Tuolumne Meadows with a group of herders, Muir spent the days caring for sheep and walking the mountains. Muir recorded botany notes and observations on the landscape and journaled about moments of transcendence in California's wilderness. On June 5th, 1869, witnessing the Sierra's Horseshoe Bend, Muir observed nature's order, "the whole landscape showed design, like man's noblest sculptures."<sup>61</sup> Viewing the Merced River atop the mountain range for the first time, Muir wrote he was "glad to be a servant of servants in so holy a wilderness."<sup>62</sup> Ultimately, Muir's first summer in the Sierra prompted his reinterpretation of evangelical protestantism. Walking his cloud of sheep during the day and observing the Sierra landscape, Muir began to believe God was Nature and all of its entities.

Muir's appreciation for nature stemmed from his deep immersion in wilderness. Muir believed excursions in the rugged Western mountains provided an intimate relationship with nature that transcendentalists lacked. Stating "no amount of word-making will ever make a single soul to *know* these mountains,"<sup>63</sup> Muir believed honest respect for nature's beauty required exposure, not books filled with descriptions of sublime wilderness.<sup>64</sup> In Muir's eyes, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau wrote about nature and wildness, but neither experienced nature in the country's wildest spaces. Despite transcendentalists' lack of intimacy with what Muir argued to be the true wilderness of the West, he agreed with Emerson's and Thoreau's school of thought that nature provided spiritual and physical healing.

---

<sup>61</sup> John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, 18.

<sup>62</sup> John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, 22.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>64</sup> In *Mountain Thoughts*, John Muir wrote, "I have a low opinion of books; they are but piles of stones set up to show coming travelers where other minds have been, or at best signal smokes to call attention. Cadmus and all the other inventors of letters receive a thousandfold more credit than they deserve. No amount of word-making will ever make a single soul to know these mountains."

On May 5th, 1871, Ralph Waldo Emerson ventured to California's Yosemite Valley, opportuning Muir to meet one of his nature-writing mentors. Recounting their meeting twenty five years later, Muir noted his fear of meeting one of the most influential forces on his school of thought.<sup>65</sup> Muir journalled Emerson asked to see John Muir's *New York Times* article, "Yosemite Glaciers." Muir provided *New York Times* readers with a new type of nature writing interweaving empirical scientific writing with spirituality. Muir also recalled frustration towards Emerson. Muir sought to enlighten Emerson to true wilderness, rather than the less-wild Bostonian woods. Emerson's choice to sleep in a cabin rather than on the Yosemite Valley floor reinforced Muir's general critique of transcendentalism and its insufficient exposure to America's wildest spaces.

Muir's philosophy toward nature proved rooted in religious ideology. In part due to his upbringing in a devout household, Muir regarded nature as a spiritual force in which God's beauty was made manifest. During one of his Sierra Nevada Mountains excursions, Muir wrote to his friend Jeanne Carr: "Do behold the King in his glory, King Sequoia! . . . I've taken the sacrament with Douglas squirrel, drank Sequoia wine, Sequoia blood, and with its rosy purple drops I am writing this woody gospel letter."<sup>66</sup> Muir's nature spirituality demonstrated his alignment with Emerson and Thoreau attitudes toward nature; wilderness needed to be preserved for its aesthetic and spiritual values. Overtime, Muir became the political advocate for the Romantic-Transcendental preservation ethic.

Published in the *New York Times* and various newspapers circulating in the West, Muir's nature essays popularized a new school of thought regarding the idea of wilderness. For Muir, mankind's relationship with nature needed to be understood in terms of *coexistence* rather than

---

<sup>65</sup> John Muir, *The Life and Letters of John Muir*, 42.

<sup>66</sup> John Muir to Dianne Carr, January 24, 1868, Sierra Club Archives at Bancroft Library at University of California, Berkeley, CA.



hierarchy. For centuries, Americans viewed wilderness as an entity to be controlled and tamed—particularly in the West. Increasing numbers of western migrants in the nineteenth century, encouraged by Homestead Acts and the California Gold Rush, manifested a competitive attitude toward the West’s landscape. Westward migrants perceived the landscape as a challenge, a place to be controlled and tamed. Migrants’ tendency to regard nature as a force to be dominated cultivated what Patricia Limerick has characterized as the Western United States’ “legacy of conquest.” Muir’s philosophy toward nature countered the “triumph-over-the-land” ideology that many Westward migrants embodied as they competed for property, profit, and cultural dominance.<sup>67</sup>

In the late 1870s, Muir began advocating his preservation philosophy. For Muir, preservation meant maintaining the natural world in its existing state and nature would be best preserved when left untouched by man. Muir’s preservation thinking derived from anxieties regarding industrialization. In 1865, the government completed railroads to the West and industry and commercial businesses proved underway. Places west of the Mississippi became flecked with new mining, farming, and ranching communities. Muir’s preservation philosophy proved a response to witnessing the West become a new loci of industry. Like many late nineteenth century Americans weary of the impacts of industrialization, Muir embodied a sense of primitivism. For Muir, Americans became better individuals by wandering in the wilderness. Americans needed to step away from urbanized areas because mechanization and industrialization cultivated an “over civilized” culture. Trusting values of simplicity and unsophistication, Muir longed for an idealized version of the West that was untamed and untouched. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner’s *Frontier Thesis* gave currency to the primitivist

---

<sup>67</sup> Library of Congress, “The American West, 1965-1900,” *Rise of Industrial America, 1876-1900*.

attitude many Americans held. Declaring the Frontier as closed, Turner embodied a nostalgic hankering for the pioneer vision of the West, composed of wild woods and desolate prairies. Akin to Turner, Muir's primitivist ideology longed for a mythic Western past. Muir understood the American West as a pristine and simple Eden— often disregarding the individuals and communities who had occupied the West for centuries.

Generally removed from American politics, Muir entered governmental affairs through his insistence on preserving California's Yosemite region from destruction. Muir manifested two significant moments for preservation policy-making: (1) proposing Yosemite to be made into a national park; and (2) attempting to save Hetch Hetchy from being dammed. Muir had become regarded as a leading figure on United States land use debates, routinely published in *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's Magazine*. Muir continuously urged the federal government to adopt a forest preservation policy in one of his published articles. By September 1890, writing insistently and campaigning to make Yosemite a National Park protected by the federal government, Muir reported in *Century Magazine*, "a bill has already been introduced in Congress . . . creating a national park about the reservation which the State now holds in trust for the people."<sup>68</sup> Muir furthered, "all that is accessible and destructible is being rapidly destroyed" thus "the bill cannot too quickly become a law."<sup>69</sup> On October 1st, 1890, congress declared Yosemite a National Park, outlining plans for federal protection of the area's natural resources.

Muir realized preserving America's wild spaces would require mass support rather than his own individual advocacy. At the same time, Muir noticed an increase in the number of people venturing into wilderness for recreation. Across the nation, "over-civilized people" began understanding "going to the mountains was going home."<sup>70</sup> Muir perceived increased visitor

---

<sup>68</sup> John Muir, *Century Magazine*, September 1890, Sierra Club Archives.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> John Muir, *Our National Parks*, 45-46.

numbers to outdoor recreation in the West as a cue, he needed to ignite a group campaign calling for the federal protection of American wilderness. In 1892, Muir founded the Sierra Club, America's first environmental organization. Climbers, hikers, and campers mainly met to explore the newly established Yosemite National Park. A San Francisco newspaper reported on the establishment of the Sierra Club, writing "[the Sierra Club] will open up and preserve trails and be a general bureau of information to all mountaineers or anyone who contemplate making a trip in the mountains."<sup>71</sup> Gradually, the club indicated politics regarding wilderness as a leading concern. On June 4th, 1892, at 101 Sansome Street in San Francisco, California, the Sierra Club established the organization's charter, bylaws, and aims: to encourage exploration, ensure accessibility to Pacific Coast mountains, and enlist the government in preserving the Sierra Nevada Mountains.<sup>72</sup> Sierra Club members' backgrounds included hobbyist mountaineers, geologists, poets, botanists, business owners, and politicians. Women proved active members of the club, often offering ideas on how the land ought to be cared for in the future. Mountaineer Marion Randall Parsons wrote for the club's bulletin and served as the club's first female board member. Parsons, drawing upon her extended mountaineering excursions concluded the relationship between humans and nature required principles of "fellowship and kinship with the mountain world."<sup>73</sup> Parsons' attitude that nature and humans proved equal— humans ought not dominate the natural world— characterized the Sierra Club's guiding philosophy. In order to manifest visions of a society built on human-nature coexistence, Sierra Club members embraced John Muir's preservationist thinking.

---

<sup>71</sup> "Morning Call, San Francisco, September 17, 1892," from Sierra Club Board of Directors Meeting Minutes 1892-1907, UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library.

<sup>72</sup> "Agreement of Association," from Sierra Club Board of Directors Meeting Minutes 1892-1907, UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library.

<sup>73</sup> Marion Randall Parsons, Book Review: *My First Summer in the Sierra* by John Muir, from Sierra Club Bulletin, January, 1912.

Between 1892 and 1914, under John Muir's leadership, the Sierra Club waged numerous legal battles against proposals seeking to reduce park borders. In 1908, the federal government planned construction of Hetch Hetchy Dam in a corner of California's Yosemite National Park. Following San Francisco's 1906 earthquake, lawmakers argued the dam proved necessary in aiding the city's needs for water and electricity. Muir contested Hetch Hetchy Valley was not a plain and common meadow "as many who have not seen it seem to suppose."<sup>74</sup> In Muir's eyes, Hetch Hetchy proved a "grand landscape garden, one of Nature's rarest and most precious mountain temples."<sup>75</sup> Muir's statement against the Dam at Hetch Hetchy was a statement against the idea of conservation altogether. At the start of the twentieth century, Gifford Pinchot reframed European Forestry initiatives for United States soil. Muir called out conservationists, "the Yellowstone, Yosemite, Sequoia . . . always subject to attack by despoiling gain-seekers and mischief-makers of every degree from Satan to Senators . . . crying, "conservation, conservation, panutilization."<sup>76</sup>

Muir and Pinchot had not always been enemies, and early-on the two camped together throughout the Sierras. Publically, Pinchot proved more interested in the practicalities of preservation rather than the spirituality of nature— but privately, like Muir, he understood nature as God's creation. Historian Char Miller has drawn attention to how Pinchot felt a connection with God that worked in close association with his connection with the land.<sup>77</sup> Writing on experiencing the Grand Canyon, Pinchot wrote the scene symbolized power, peace, and the presence of God. Early on, Muir and Pinchot worked as friends, sharing a belief in nature's

---

<sup>74</sup> John Muir, *The Yosemite* (New York: Century, 1912), 255–257, 260–262. Reprinted in Roderick Nash, *The American Environment: Readings in The History of Conservation* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1968).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Char Miller, *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism*. Washington, DC: Island Press/Shearwater Books (2001): 8-9.

transcendent power. The two men shared an appreciation for nature's aesthetic and spiritual value, but Pinchot made the choice to eliminate the romantic-transcendental rhetoric in his advocacy efforts and in turn gained federal support for conservation ideas. Historian Michael Turgeon has drawn attention to how and why Muir's preservationism was often cast aside in congressional meetings: "Muir's fights, like the foundation of the National Park Service, were only successful because a dollar sign could be applied to the outcome" and ultimately, "nature did not have a very strong voice on the floor of Congress."<sup>78</sup> In other words, Muir's nature-as-divine rhetoric often marked a challenge for his philosophy to gain traction politically. For example, at the 1909 Conference of Governors, President George Kunz of the American Historic and Preservation Society critiqued Muir, warning nature should not be "worshipped as a fetish" and "no fanaticism should carry its advocates to the extreme of opposing crying public needs for physical development."<sup>79</sup> In sum, by demanding the federal government to protect large sums of United States wilderness, Muir presented American Wilderness as part of the nation's culture and identity. At the same time, Muir's equating of nature to "holy temples" and "sublime wonderlands"<sup>80</sup> often discredited his ideas within the United States legal system. Americans in the early twentieth century proved more primed to accept land use ethics laid out by Gifford Pinchot's conservation philosophy.

### *Gifford Pinchot*

By the end of the nineteenth century, industrialization, urbanization, and agriculture's commercialization pushed many to recognize problems of pollution, deforestation, soil

---

<sup>78</sup> Michael Turgeon, "Conservation versus Preservation," Markkula Center for Applied Ethics: Environmental Ethics.

<sup>79</sup> Proceedings of a Conference of Governors in the White House, May 13-15, 1908 (Washington, DC: Washington Government Printing Office, 1909), 413.

<sup>80</sup> John Muir, *The Yosemite* (New York: Century, 1912), 255–257, 260–262. Reprinted in Roderick Nash, *The American Environment: Readings in The History of Conservation* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1968).

degradation, and species extinction in the United States. In 1896, the National Academy of Sciences created the National Forest Commission to study environmental issues in the West. President Grover Cleveland appointed Forester Gifford Pinchot as head of the commission. On a four-month expedition to the American West, the group noted land that had been set aside for homesteading remained empty, entirely unprotected by the government. Vacant land lots drew in sheep who cleared the grass for miles. Additionally, corporations had bought entire forest areas for timber and Americans feared timber shortage was underway.<sup>81</sup> As John Muir led the Preservation Movement, pushing the United States government to set aside wild spaces to be left untouched, Forester-Politician Gifford Pinchot emerged as leader of the Conservation Movement. Pinchot introduced Americans to the idea of conservation, seeking to solve United States' land use issues. Overtime, Pinchot developed his conservation philosophy, insisting with professional management, good science, and economic thinking, the United States could be made a better place and American wilderness a garden.

On August 11, 1865, Gifford Pinchot was born in Simsbury, Connecticut to an elite family made up of politicians, merchants, and land owners. Pinchot's mother inherited wealth from her father, Amos Eno— one of New York's wealthiest real estate developers and his father operated a successful interior furnishing company in the city. Often traveling abroad, Pinchot gained perspective for the natural world. In 1855, Pinchot entered Yale University. Contemplating future plans, James Pinchot asked his son to consider studying Forestry. In part due to the Pinchots' frequent trips abroad, accompanied by the family's history as merchants and land-owners, James Pinchot paid close attention to Europe's growing forestry industry. Living in rural Pennsylvania, James noticed the lack of trees— Northeastern woods had been used up in order to supply timber across the nation. In the United States, the future of forestry appeared

---

<sup>81</sup> Lukas Keel, "Frenemies John Muir and Gifford Pinchot," *Humanities*, Winter 2020.

bleak. James Pinchot interpreted the United States forest-problem as an opportunity for his son and asked Gifford to consider studying forestry. Pinchot recalled he “no conception of what it meant to be a forester than the man in the moon . . . but at least a forester worked in the woods and with the woods - and I loved the woods and everything about them.”<sup>82</sup>

On Pinchot’s twenty first birthday, his parents gifted him George Marsh’s, *Man and Nature*. Marsh tracked the importance of a harmonious relationship between humankind and the natural world. Marsh argued the collapse of ancient Mediterranean society served an example for the dangers of natural resources being used up too quickly. Marsh ascribed deforestation as the cause of ancient Mediterranean’s downfall. By deforesting hillsides and eroding soils, ancient Mediterraneanians destroyed natural resources that sustained their well-being.<sup>83</sup> Ultimately, Marsh warned abusing the natural world resulted in the destruction of economies and institutions. After reading *Man and Nature*, Pinchot understood forests directly influenced societal prosperity. Pinchot conceived America’s health, happiness, and fortunes depended on forests.

Pinchot worked for Phelps Dodge as a land surveyor and in 1891 the company sent him to Arizona to evaluate prospective land holdings. The New Englander experienced the West for the first time and the trip allowed him to “shake hands with the U.S.A.”<sup>84</sup> Pinchot witnessed Yosemite, the Grand Canyon, California sequoias and redwood trees, and the Pacific Northwest douglas firs. Pinchot’s Westward expedition secured his interest in conserving America’s natural resources and pushed him to receive a formal education in Forestry. In 1899, Pinchot moved to Nancy, France to study Forestry at *L’Ecole Nationale Forestière*. Surveying land and working

---

<sup>82</sup> Gifford Pinchot, *Breaking New Ground* (Washington: Island Press, 1998), 25.

<sup>83</sup> George Mash and David Lowenthal. *Man and Nature, or, Physical Geography As Modified by Human Action* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 3-4.

<sup>84</sup> Gifford Pinchot, *Breaking New Ground*, 20.

alongside the most recognized foresters in France, Switzerland, Germany, and Austria. In Europe, Pinchot learned about replanting, stand delineation, and tree spacing in order to ensure exponential forest growth. At the same time, Pinchot recalled growing irritated by European Foresters' elitist attitude. On one survey trip he noted foresters ignored the common people, failing to recognize "the peasant" walked on Earth too.<sup>85</sup> The young twenty-five-year-old forester began formulating his guiding philosophy, United States land and its resources needed to be shared among *all* people. Upon returning to the United States, Pinchot noted that in "the most richly timbered of all continents" not a single acre of Government, state, or private timberland was under systematic forest management anywhere.<sup>86</sup> Appointed to the National Forest Commission, one of Pinchot's first tasks required writing a plan for administering forests on United States land. Pinchot began interweaving his experience as a forester with the realities of bureaucracy. Calling out American's belief that forests were inexhaustible, Pinchot set forth his political agenda to ensure federal supervision over the wise-use of the nation's resources. Proclaiming "without abundant resources prosperity is out of reach,"<sup>87</sup> Pinchot conceived the wise use of land, soil, and water ensured prosperity for America's future generations.

*Transforming Ideas of Wilderness into Land Use Policy: Gifford Pinchot and Theodore Roosevelt*

During Pinchot's early career in government he formed a close friendship with New York Governor Theodore Roosevelt, likeminded in their love of the outdoors. As a nature-writer, Roosevelt published *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (1888) and *The Winning of the West* (1889). Demonstrating his Turnerian vision of the American West, Roosevelt noted, "men who have shared in the fast vanishing frontier life of the present feel a peculiar sympathy with the

---

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 4.



already long-vanished frontier life of the past.”<sup>88</sup> Following President McKinley’s assassination, Theodore Roosevelt became the United States’ 26th president. His background in hunting and camping and belief frontier life was vanishing yielded an administration particularly interested in the issues of Westward exploration, exploitation, and settlement. Theodore Roosevelt proved the first American President to take the idea of nature seriously and played a key role in transforming Pinchot’s conservation philosophy into the United States’ guiding land use ethic.

In 1905, Roosevelt appointed his longtime friend Gifford Pinchot as head of the newly established U.S. Forest Service, an extension of the Department of the Interior. Roosevelt’s aid and his new leadership position enabled Pinchot to transform his conservation ideas into government rules and regulations. On February 1, 1905, a letter signed by Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson addressed to “the Forester” published the mission of the newly established U.S. Forest Service— Historians generally agree Pinchot wrote the letter. Pinchot proclaimed “where conflicting interests must be reconciled, the question shall always be answered from the standpoint of the greatest good of the greatest number in the long run.”<sup>89</sup> “The Pinchot Letter” outlined a new contract between the federal government and nature. Regarding land use, Pinchot enlisted the Department of the Interior and its various divisions to value “the common good of all above the private gain of some” and “the livelihood of the small man as more important to the Nation than the profit of the big man.”<sup>90</sup> According to Pinchot, nature’s resources of water, land, and timber proved designed for human use. However, the use of nature required federal regulation. Significantly, Pinchot noted United States’ new land ethic would be

---

<sup>88</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West* (New York, NY: The Current Publishing Company, 1905), 16.

<sup>89</sup> As Gifford Pinchot’s biographer Char Miller has drawn attention to, the forester’s “greatest good” idea derived from Jeremy Bentham’s Utilitarianism philosophy.

<sup>90</sup> Gifford Pinchot, *The Fight for Conservation*, 29.

rooted in the notions of “sane, and orderly development,”<sup>91</sup> a concept later defined as “sustainable use.”

In 1910, Pinchot published *The Fight for Conservation*. The book sought to educate all Americans on the idea of conservation and persuade them into joining the Movement. Pinchot linked the act of conserving natural resources with ideas of democracy, morality, and the future. Firstly, Pinchot harkened back to Thomas Jefferson’s “society rooted in soil”<sup>92</sup> attitude toward the land. Pinchot interpreted “land as a building block of the new nation.”<sup>93</sup> Secondly, Pinchot reiterated conservation practices yielded “the greatest good for the greatest number of people for the longest time.” In other words, the idea of conservation proved the most ethical contract between humans and nature; conservation practices benefited society as a whole and considering current and future generations. At the same time, Pinchot’s language of the ‘Greatest Good’ suggested conservation practices proved the democratic and moral way to manage United States natural resources. Finitely, Pinchot asked Americans to regard themselves as stewards of the Earth. Pinchot’s idea of *stewardship* offered Americans a new way of thinking about the relationship between man and nature, man held duties to supervise and care for the land. Pinchot’s *Fight for Conservation* declared society and the government needed to work together in order to make conservation practices a reality. Pinchot believed the Conservation Movement required the public and the government working together in order for Americans to secure a fairer and more egalitarian United States for generations to come— an ideology that appealed to many early twentieth century Progressives.

---

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 30

<sup>92</sup> Julianne Lutz Newton, Eric T. Freyfogle, and William C. Sullivan, “Land, Ecology and Democracy: A twenty-first century view,” *Politics and the Life Sciences* 25 (January 2007): 43.

<sup>93</sup> John Ragasta, Jefferson Symposium on *Jefferson, Land, and Liberty*. University of Virginia, *Thoughts from the Lawn*. 8 June, 2020.

During President Roosevelt's two terms, advised by Gifford Pinchot, the Administration increased the size of the forest system by 400% and set the precedent that the American nation held responsibilities to protect the land. Roosevelt signed the Antiquities Act of 1906, modeling the federal government held duties to create national monuments in order to ensure protection of United States significant natural, cultural, and scientific features. For Roosevelt, time spent in the wild enhanced personal growth and individual personal growth promised benefits to the country as a whole. Roosevelt promoted wildness as an American necessity, advocating parks and reservations proved useful for extractive value timber and water and for individual well-being. Gifford Pinchot and President Theodore Roosevelt's allyship worked to diversify and increase the Public Land System, transforming Americans' various ideas of wilderness into a series of federally protected rules and regulations. Gaining Roosevelt's support, Gifford Pinchot's conservation philosophy became the United States guiding land use policy. The Roosevelt Administration established five national parks, eighteen national monuments, fifty-one bird sanctuaries, 100 million acres for national forests— and the idea that the United States' flora, fauna, and waters were Americans' safekeeping.

#### **V. Conclusion**

The United States Public Land system and its guiding land use ethic emerged out of two guiding schools of thought: (1) the romantic-transcendental preservation ethic and (2) the resource conservation ethic. Romantic-Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and later John Muir's embodied a quasi-religious attitude toward nature. John Muir led the Preservation Movement, advocating for nature's *intrinsic value* and arguing wild spaces should be kept pristine and untouched. According to Muir, nature was only to be viewed.

Overtime, the preservation movement yielded America's first environmental organization of the Sierra Club and the establishment of federally protected Wilderness Areas where law mandated wilderness be retained for future generations to experience. In contrast with John Muir, Gifford Pinchot embodied the resource conservation ethic. When approaching land use issues, Pinchot believed in "the greatest good for the greatest amount of people in the long run." Embracing a utilitarian attitude toward nature, Pinchot argued wilderness provided services and goods valuable to humans, advocating for nature's *instrumental value*. Preservationists contended America's wild spaces in the West were the final Eden and "use" would spoil the paradise. Conservationists argued American wilderness proved less of an Eden and more-so a garden—a rich well-cultivated plot producing sharable resources.

Beginning with the Romantic-Transcendentalists, to John Muir, Gifford Pinchot and Theodore Roosevelt, wilderness became a symbol of American identity. Yet Americans continue to debate the idea of wilderness and wilderness' value. While Gifford Pinchot's model, "the greatest good for the greatest amount of people for the longest amount of time," has remained the United States Land Bureau's guiding philosophy and retained the support from business owners and politicians. For others, as technology and industry continue to advance, the need to preserve the American landscape proves imperative. A significant source of tension regarding John Muir's Preservation Movement and Gifford Pinchot's Conservation Movement has been interwoven into contemporary Environmental Movements: *who* does the idea of wilderness belong to and *who* is able to decide? For Emerson and Thoreau, wilderness was a space for the intellectual; for John Muir, wilderness was God's gift to be experienced by poets and naturalists; for Gifford Pinchot, wilderness belonged to businessmen and politicians. Wilderness' value continues to be debated by those who experience wilderness from a distance. In other words,

visitors to Yellowstone Park rather than those who live on the National Park's boundaries in Driggs, Idaho continue to be the individuals cultivating the idea of wilderness, an image which has captivated the collective imagination of Americans for centuries. The American mythic idea of wilderness continues to play a crucial role in United States Environmental History and debates regarding wilderness as an aesthetic asset versus wilderness as a utilitarian resource remain persistent.

## Bibliography

Archival Sources

Sierra Club Archives at Bancroft Library (Berkeley, California)

Sierra Club Meeting Minutes  
Correspondence of John Muir  
John Muir Papers

Library of Congress Digital Collections (Washington, DC)

Theodore Roosevelt Papers  
The Evolution of the Conservation Movement  
Garden and Forest  
Mapping the National Parks  
Frederick Law Olmstead Papers  
Olmstead Associates Papers

Published Primary Sources

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature: Addresses, and Lectures*. Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Tech, 2001.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journal, 1820-1835*. Consortium of Church Libraries and Archive: Brigham Young University,

Kant, Immanuel. Nicholas Walker, and James Creed Meredith eds. *Critique of Judgement*. Oxford, London: Oxford World's Classics, 2007.

Kant, Immanuel, Patrick R Frierson, and Paul Guyer. *Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walking*. Elizabeth Hall Witherell ed. *Collected Essays and Poems*. New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, 2001.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden; or Life in the Woods*. Boston, MA: Ticknor and Fields, 1854.

- Muir, John. *My First Summer in the Sierra*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916.
- Muir, John. *The Life and Letters of John Muir*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924.
- Muir, John. *The Yosemite*. New York, NY: Century Magazine, 1912.
- Muir, John, and Terry Gifford. *John Muir: His Life and Letters and Other Writings*. London: Balton Wicks, 1996.
- Muir, John. *Our National Parks*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981.
- Pinchot, Gifford. *The Fight for Conservation*. New York, NY: Doubleday & Page, 1910.
- Pinchot, Gifford. *Breaking New Ground*. Washington: Island Press, 1998.
- Roosevelt, Theodore. *The Winning of the West*. New York, NY: The Current Literature Publishing Company, 1905.
- Roosevelt, Theodore. "Conservation as a National Duty." Washington, DC. Theodore Roosevelt Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
- Marsh, George, and David Lowenthal. *Man and Nature, or, Physical Geography As Modified by Human Action*. Seattle: University of Washington Press (2003): 3-4.

### Books

- Aron, Stephen. *The American West: A Very Short Introduction*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Bakken, Gordon Morris, and Brenda Farrington. *Where Is the West?* New York, NY: Garland Publications, 2000.
- Cohen, Michael P. *The Pathless Way: John Muir and American Wilderness*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984.
- Judd, Richard William. *The Untilled Garden: Natural History and the Spirit of Conservation in America, 1740-1840*. Studies in Environment and History. New York, NY: Cambridge

- University Press, 2009.
- Limerick, Patricia Nelson. *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. New York: Norton, 1988.
- Miller, Char. *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism*. Washington, DC: Island Press/Shearwater Books, 2001.
- Miller, Char. *Seeking the Greatest Good: The Conservation Legacy of Gifford Pinchot*. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013.
- Merchant, Carolyn. *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. 1st ed. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980.
- Merchant, Carolyn. *The Columbia Guide to American Environmental History*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Myerson, Joel. *Transcendentalism: A Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Nash, Roderick, and Char Miller. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.
- Nash, Roderick. *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.
- Oelschlaeger, Max. *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.
- Richardson, Robert. *Emerson: Mind on Fire*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996.
- White, Richard. *Power and Place in the North American West*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999.
- Worster, Donald. *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas: Studies in Environment and*



History. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Worster, Donald. *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Worster, Donald. *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Worster, Donald. *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

#### Articles, Book Reviews, and Dissertations

Aron, Stephen. "Book Review: Into the West: The Story of Its People." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 20, no. 4 (2001): 124–25.

Aron, Stephen. "The American West Reprised, Revised, and Revived." *Reviews in American History* 28, no. 2 (2000): 245–50.

Baym, Nina. "Thoreau's View of Science." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26, (1965): 221–34.

Capps, D. "Individualism and Naturalism: The Works and Influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson Re-Examined." *Religious Studies Review* 25, no. 4 (1999): 341–48.

Davis, Ryan W. "Frontier Kantianism: Autonomy and Authority in Ralph Waldo Emerson and Joseph Smith." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 2 (2018): 332–59.

Keel, Lukas. "Frenemies John Muir and Gifford Pinchot," *Humanities* (Winter 2020): 12-15.

Lutz Newton, Freyfogle, and Sullivan, "Land, Ecology and Democracy: A Twenty-First Century View," *Politics and the Life Sciences* 25 (2007): 111-115.

Miller, Char. "The Greening of Gifford Pinchot." *Environmental History Review* 16 (1992): 1–20.

MacDonald, Glen M. "John Muir: A Century On." *Boom: A Journal of California* 4 (2014): 60–69.

Oelschlaeger, Max. "Emerson, Thoreau, and the Hudson River School." *Nature Transformed*, National Humanities Center.

Patell, Cyrus. "American Transcendentalism." New York University, *New York University Lecture Series*, 2006.

Ragasta, John. Jefferson Symposium on *Jefferson, Land, and Liberty*. University of Virginia, *Thoughts from the Lawn*, June 2020.

Turgeon, Michael. "Conservation versus Preservation." Markkula Center for Applied Ethics: *Environmental Ethics*, June 2017.