

John Muir's Crossing of the Cumberland

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John Muir – who would later acquire the nickname John o' Mountains – encountered mountains for the first time in his life at the age of 29 years, on 10, 11, and 12 September, 1867, when he crossed the Cumberland Plateau of Tennessee as part of his thousand-mile walk from Louisville, Kentucky, to Cedar Key, Florida.

Muir recorded the story of this crossing in a notebook [1], which was edited and published posthumously as *A Thousand-Mile Walk To the Gulf* [2]. The crossing of the Cumberland [3] provided some of the best human stories of the book: The “young man on horseback ... [who] intended to rob me if he should find the job worth while.” The blacksmith and his wife, a “bright, good-natured, good looking little woman,” with whom Muir discussed Solomon's love of botany. And a harrowing encounter with “the most irreclaimable of the guerrilla bands who, long accustomed to plunder [during the Civil War], deplored the coming of peace.”

These three days also held superlative encounters with nature: On 10 September Muir “began the ascent of the Cumberland Mountains, the first real mountains that my foot ever touched or eyes beheld. ... [T]he glorious forest road of Kentucky was grandly seen, stretching over hill and valley, adjusted to every slope and curve by the hands of Nature – the most sublime and comprehensive picture that ever entered my eyes.” Two days later, descending from the Cumberland Plateau, Muir “crossed a wide cool stream There is nothing more eloquent in Nature than a mountain stream, and this is the first I ever saw. ... Near this stream I spent some joyous time in a grand rock-dwelling full of mosses, birds, and flowers. Most heavenly place I ever entered.”

Through study of Muir's writings and of Civil War-era and other historical maps, and through a visit to the area, I have been able to retrace Muir's overmountain route with relative certainty, and to speculate on the location and fate of the “most heavenly place.”

Historical maps

Muir's journal provides only a sketchy outline of his geographical route. To recover that route, one must combine hints from the journal with hints from contemporary maps. This brings up the problem that the maps available in 1867 had but a fraction of the accuracy and detail that we take for granted today.

I have examined hundreds of nineteenth-century maps, and judged their quality by examining their fidelity among themselves [4], by questioning their reasonableness in light of Muir's route choices [5], and through comparison to modern maps [6]. The maps I examined were all the relevant, internet-available maps from the collections of the Library of Congress [7], the David Rumsey collection of historical maps [8], and the historical map archive of the University of Alabama [9].

My comparisons show that the best available map from the era of Muir's walk is Charles E. Swann's 1863 "Military Map Of Kentucky And Tennessee" [10]. Also valuable, because it gives the names and characteristics of roads, is N. Michler's 1862 "Map of middle and east Tennessee" [11]. The 1863 map "Mountain region of North Carolina and Tennessee" by W. L. Nicholson and A. Lindenkohl [12] has almost twice the scale but is useful for confirming the previous two maps.

Finally, the "General topographical map" by Julius Bien & Co. was issued by the United States War Department in 1895, but it was part of an "Atlas to Accompany the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 1861-1865" and seems to show features as they existed in 1865, not 1895. Sheet XV is the relevant map [13].

None of these maps show features with the accuracy and scale that we are familiar with today. None of them show elevation contours. (The "General topographical map" of Julius Bien [13] depicts mountainous terrain through hachures.) The earliest maps that we would today consider topographic maps are the 30 minute quadrangles [14] issued by the US Geological Survey in the 1890s. These were surveyed two or three decades after Muir's walk, so they need to be used judiciously and in connection with the Civil War-era maps.

Reconstructing the route

In order to reconstruct Muir's probable route, I read Muir's book and journal for geographical clues, traced out a reasonable route on Civil War-era maps, transferred that route to topographical maps from the 1890s, and then transferred that route to modern maps. I have recorded the result of this process on Google maps [15].

This process is for the most part easier than it sounds, and while it cannot be and does not pretend to be exact, most individuals performing the process would come up with a route very similar to the one I produced. Someone with detailed local historical and geographical knowledge could improve my reconstruction. I urge any such interested individual to do so.

According to [1,2], Muir passed through Burkesville, Kentucky on 8 September. He crossed the state line into Tennessee "toward evening" on 9 September. The next day, "after a few miles of level ground" Muir walked upgrade with occasional views in which "Kentucky was grandly seen" for "six or seven hours" to reach the top of the Cumberland Plateau. He passed through Jamestown and spent the night with a blacksmith and his

wife. On 11 September he walked a “long stretch of level sandstone plateau” and was “compelled to sleep with the trees.” Finally, on 12 September Muir breakfasted in Montgomery and descended the east slope of the Cumberland Plateau. He “forded the Clinch” and “reached Kingston before dark.”

The Civil War-era maps show several routes from Burkesville to Jamestown, but the most direct route, the route that would be more in Kentucky than in Tennessee [16], the only route that would give a view north to Kentucky while climbing the plateau, and the only route that is level until one long steady climb to the top of the plateau, is the route through Albany, Kentucky and Pall Mall, Tennessee.

The only plausible route from Jamestown to Montgomery is the Pile Turnpike. (Montgomery, now a ghost town but then the Morgan County Seat, was then located on the upper reaches of Emory River, just west of Wartburg.)

From Montgomery to Kingston, the only practicable route is east through Wartburg, then branching southeast at Crooked Fork and proceeding northeast of Bitter Creek. This road reaches Emory Iron Works on the watercourse variously known as Emory Creek, or Little Emory Creek, or Little Emory River (its modern name). This only practicable route then descends through a gap in Walden Ridge on the left bank of the Little Emory, and finally fords the Emory and Clinch Rivers in the lowlands east of the plateau.

In the text of *A Thousand-Mile Walk To the Gulf* [2], the “eloquent ... mountain stream” crossed by Muir on 12 September is identified parenthetically as the Emory River. However the mountain stream is unnamed in the journal [1]. The gorge of the Emory River, as it descends from the plateau, is so rugged that no road followed it in 1867 and no road follows it even today. I surmise that the name was inserted incorrectly either by Muir or by editor William Frederic Badè long after the trip [17], and that the eloquent mountain stream is actually the Little Emory River.

The question of the “most heavenly place”

On 12 September 1867, while descending the east slope of the Cumberland Plateau, Muir “spent some joyous time in a grand rock-dwelling full of mosses, birds, and flowers. Most heavenly place I ever entered.” By this stage of his life, Muir had already experienced living in Scotland, Wisconsin, and Indiana, botanizing in Iowa, Ontario, and Illinois, and journeying by foot along the Wisconsin River from Madison to the Mississippi. If, after all these encounters with nature, Muir considered a place to be the “most heavenly [he had] ever entered,” then I judge this to be a place worth visiting.

I spent much of the day 2 January 2010 driving and hiking in the mountainous area between Montgomery and Kingston, looking for an overhanging cliff that would match Muir’s description. With no leaves on the trees, I was able to get a good view of the rocks. Much to my disappointment, I found no “grand rock-dwelling.” I did, however, find a large rock-face that had been blasted away to allow US Route 27 to pass through the gorge where the Little Emory River cuts through Walden Ridge. (On the east side of

the road, south of Coal Hill Road and north of the Morgan County – Roane County boundary.)

I hope that I am wrong, and that someone with local knowledge will be able to locate Muir’s “grand rock-dwelling.” But from the evidence at hand, I suggest that this “most heavenly place” was destroyed by blasting.

The blacksmith question

Who was the blacksmith who shared his home with Muir on the night of 10 September? Muir provides no name. On the 1870 US census sheets [18] for Fentress County, Tennessee, only seven of the 1117 county residents have their occupation listed as “blacksmith”:

blacksmith	his age	wife	her age	census district	census dwelling number
John Livingston	33	Sarah	23	3	25
Pleasant Taylor	61	Martha	39	3	37
Henry Livingston	38	Lucinda	32	3	42
Wm. Davidson	56	Margaret	48	7	28
Sherwood Delk	47	Melissa	37	8	5
Thomas Crabtree	30	Crissey	26	8	41
John Draughn	60	Hannah	50	10	11

Everyone recognizes, of course, that things could change in the three years between Muir’s walk and this census: people can die, remarry, change occupations, and move away over the course of three years. At the same time it is certainly plausible that one of these seven individuals is the answer to our question.

To be even more speculative, we can ask which wife would Muir have considered a “bright, good-natured, good looking little woman” when he passed through. I lack a thorough grasp of Muir’s taste in women [19], yet I doubt that the 29-year-old Muir would have described the 47-year-old Hannah Draughn in this way. I think it more likely that he was referring to the 20-year-old Sarah Livingston, the 29-year-old Lucina Livingston, or the 23-year-old Crissey Crabtree.

One might object that such identification doesn’t gain us anything about the Muir’s route, because we don’t know how the 1870 census districts correspond to the 2010 map. (At the time Fentress County had but one post office, and all twelve census districts have locations listed simply as “Jamestown Post Office”.) This is almost but not entirely correct. All the residents with occupation “lawyer” lived in census district 3, so that district must have represented the county seat of Jamestown. Indeed, even today the telephone book shows that there are three households named “Livingston” in Jamestown. And all of them live near my estimated route south of downtown Jamestown!

This is as far as I have been able to work toward a solution of the blacksmith question. Many Fentress County records were lost through a 1905 courthouse fire, but a determined seeker armed with local records and local knowledge might be able to uncover more.

A visit today

In his thousand-mile walk, Muir sought out “the wildest, leafiest, and least trodden way I could find.” The geographical route Muir took is no longer particularly wild, leafy, or untrodden. Anyone wishing to recreate Muir’s journey will need to take side trips away from Muir’s geographical route to glimpse his spiritual route through the wild, the leafy, and the least trodden. The web site [15] suggests more than two dozen sites to visit, from waterfalls to overlooks to springs to virgin forests [20].

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Willie R. Beaty, President of the Fentress County Historical Society in Jamestown, Tennessee, suggested some profitable avenues of investigation. Wil Reding of Kalamazoo, Michigan (who with his wife Sarah Reding retraced the thousand-mile walk route on 5 May to 25 June 2006) suggested improvements to a late draft of this article.

[1] Digitized images of Muir’s notebooks are available through
<http://library.pacific.edu/ha/digital/muirjournals/muirjournals.asp>
See journal number 1, images 9 through 13.

[2] John Muir, *A Thousand-Mile Walk To the Gulf*, edited by William Frederic Badè (Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, November 1916). Muir died on 24 December 1914.

[3] Also interesting is Muir’s 9 September 1867 letter to Jeanne Carr. [Bonnie Johanna Gisel, editor, *Kindred and Related Spirits: The Letters of John Muir and Jeanne C. Carr* (University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 2001) pages 57–59.] This letter eloquently records the intertwined feelings of ecstasy (“miles and miles of beauty”) and of despair (“I hardly dare to think of home and friends”) familiar to many long-distance solitary wilderness travelers.

[4] George Woolworth Colton’s 1869 map of Kentucky and Tennessee (scale 1:1,584,000) is available through
http://alabamamaps.ua.edu/historicalmaps/us_states/kentucky/index.html
It shows a road running from Montgomery, Tennessee, to Kingston, Tennessee, along the west bank of the Emory River. No other map of that era shows this road. Therefore, I don’t rely on Colton’s map.

[5] A.J. Johnson's 1866 map of Kentucky and Tennessee (scale 1:1,521,000) is available at the same web site as [4]. It shows a road direct from Kingston, Tennessee, to Madisonville, Tennessee. If this direct road existed, why would Muir take such pains, on 13 and 14 September, to go between these two towns via Philadelphia, Tennessee, "a very filthy village"? I don't rely on Johnson's map, either.

[6] The road shown in [4] supposedly crossed Obed's River just before that river joins with Emery's River. (Modern names for these rivers are Obed River and Emory River.) Modern maps show that this supposed road would have to descend a 400-foot cliff to reach the Obed and then immediately ascend a 400-foot cliff on the other side. Colton's map also shows Clear Creek emptying into the Obed upstream of Daddy's Creek, whereas modern maps show that the reverse is correct.

[7] <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/gmdhome.html>

[8] <http://www.davidrumsey.com/>

[9] <http://alabamamaps.ua.edu/historicalmaps/index.html>

[10] Charles E. Swann, "Military Map Of Kentucky And Tennessee," 1863, scale 1:350,000. Available through

<http://www.davidrumsey.com/maps2433.html>

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3951s.cw0216800>

[11] N. Michler, "Map of middle and east Tennessee," 1862, scale 1:235,000. Available through

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3962t.cws00162>

[12] W. L. Nicholson and A. Lindenkohl, "Mountain region of North Carolina and Tennessee," 1863, scale 1:633,600. Available through

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3900.cw0053000>

[13] Julius Bien & Co., "General topographical map," sheet XV, (United States War Department, 1895) scale 1:633,600. Available through

<http://www.davidrumsey.com/detail?id=1-1-26982-1100281>

[14] These US Geological Survey 30 minute quadrangles (scale 1:125,000) are relevant: Wartburg, Tennessee, "Edition of Mar. 1896. Topography by A.E.Murlin. Surveyed in 1893."

Briceville, Tennessee, "Edition of July 1896. Topography by J.F.Knight and E.C.Barnard. Surveyed in 1888-91."

Loudon, Tennessee, "Edition of Oct. 1895. Topography by F.M.Pearson 1884-5. Topography by C.E.Cooke 1891."

Kingston, Tennessee, "Edition of Mar. 1891. Topography by F.M.Pearson. Surveyed in 1884-5."

Available through

http://alabamamaps.ua.edu/historicalmaps/us_states/tennessee/topos/30mintopos.html

[15] "John Muir's Crossing of the Cumberland". Available through

<http://maps.google.com/>

Search "User-created maps" for "John Muir Cumberland".

[16] About 25 miles in Kentucky and 10 miles in Tennessee, to the base of the plateau at Pall Mall.

[17] Although most of *A Thousand-Mile Walk To the Gulf* is a journal, written as the walk proceeds, some parts are clearly anachronisms added long after the walk terminated. The entry for 13 September 1867 describes "seeking the way to Philadelphia (in Loudon County, Tennessee)." But in fact Loudon County was not established until 1870. The entry for 3 October 1867 describes Mr. Cameron's vision for a future in which "electricity will do the work of the world," and then remarks that "nearly all that he foresaw has been accomplished." These anachronisms are present in the 1916 published book [2] but not in the source journal [1]. It is not clear whether they were added by Muir or by editor William Frederic Badè, but in either case they were added long after the fact, when memory had undoubtedly faded.

[18] The microfilm for this census has been electronically scanned by HeritageQuest Online and is available through

<http://www.HeritageQuestOnline.com>

[19] It is worth noting that when Muir married on 14 April 1880 he was 41 years old and his bride was 33 years old.

[20] The "thousand-mile" route taken by Muir is *not* the route taken by the present-day John Muir Trail, which runs for 42 miles in the Cumberland Plateau through Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area and adjoining Pickett State Forest. Nor is it the route taken by the John Muir National Recreation Trail, which runs for 21 miles along the north bank of Hiwassee River within Cherokee National Forest in eastern Tennessee. These two trails were named to acknowledge Muir as an early naturalist walker in the area, not to re-create his precise route.