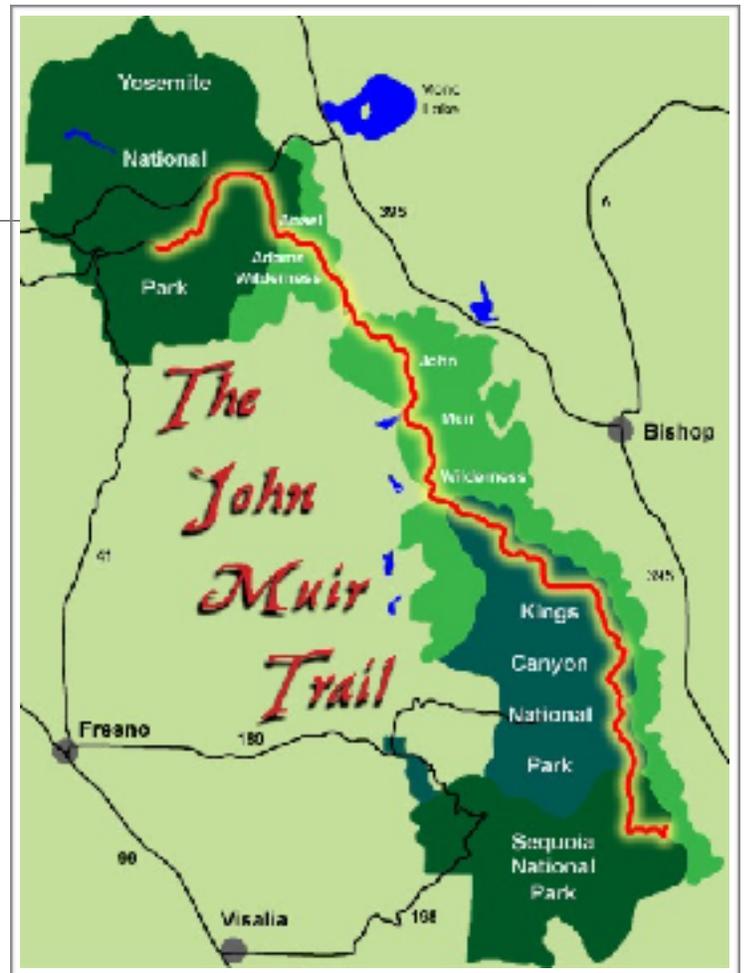


The “Real” Starting Point of the John Muir Trail in Yosemite

Is the Yosemite Conservation Heritage Center in Yosemite Valley, not Happy Isles, the “real” Starting Point of the John Muir Trail in Yosemite National Park?

By Harold Wood
July 7, 2017

The construction of the John Muir Trail itself began in 1915, and took another 23 years to complete - a period of about 46 years from a vague dream to realization in 1938. William Colby, the first secretary of the Sierra Club, called the finished trail "a most appropriate memorial to John Muir, who spent many of the best years of his life exploring the region which it will make accessible."



According to hikehalfdome.com, the original idea for the trail came from Theodore Seixas Solomons (1870 – 1947) an early member of the Sierra Club. As a 14-year old, living in Fresno, some years before the Sierra Club was established, Solomons conceived the idea of a trail along the backbone of the high Sierra. A few years later, members of the newly formed Sierra Club including Joseph N. Le Conte assisted Solomons in his explorations of the canyons and passes between Yosemite and Mt. Whitney. In 1908, a complete route was developed which Solomons called the “High Sierra Trail.” When John Muir died in 1914, members of the Sierra Club discussed how the idea of a trail along the Sierra Crest seemed a fitting tribute to Muir. So the High Sierra Trail was renamed the John Muir Trail – though Muir had neither conceived, nor plotted it. Asked his reaction to the renaming, Solomons said, “Muir is a better name to conjure with. But mine the idea, mine the pioneering.”

In 1915, the year after John Muir died, the Sierra Club won passage of California legislation appropriating \$10,000 for construction of the John Muir Trail, the first of five such

appropriations. Together with the appropriation, the California Legislature stated, in language originally drafted by Colby:

Section 3. The trail to be constructed with the moneys hereby appropriated shall be known as the "John Muir trail" in honor of the late John Muir who has performed an inestimable service in making known to the world the wonders of the mountains of California.

Most of the trail construction was in the Sierra National Forest, as the Yosemite National Park already had a pretty good trail system by that time. So those existing trails inside the park became part of what eventually became the John Muir Trail.

Today, the Yosemite National Park website basically takes the position that there is no specific trailhead for the John Muir Trail itself. It indicates that there is not a single "starting point" for the JMT, at least for wilderness permit purposes, but at least four different starting points using different trails in Yosemite National Park - - - ie.:

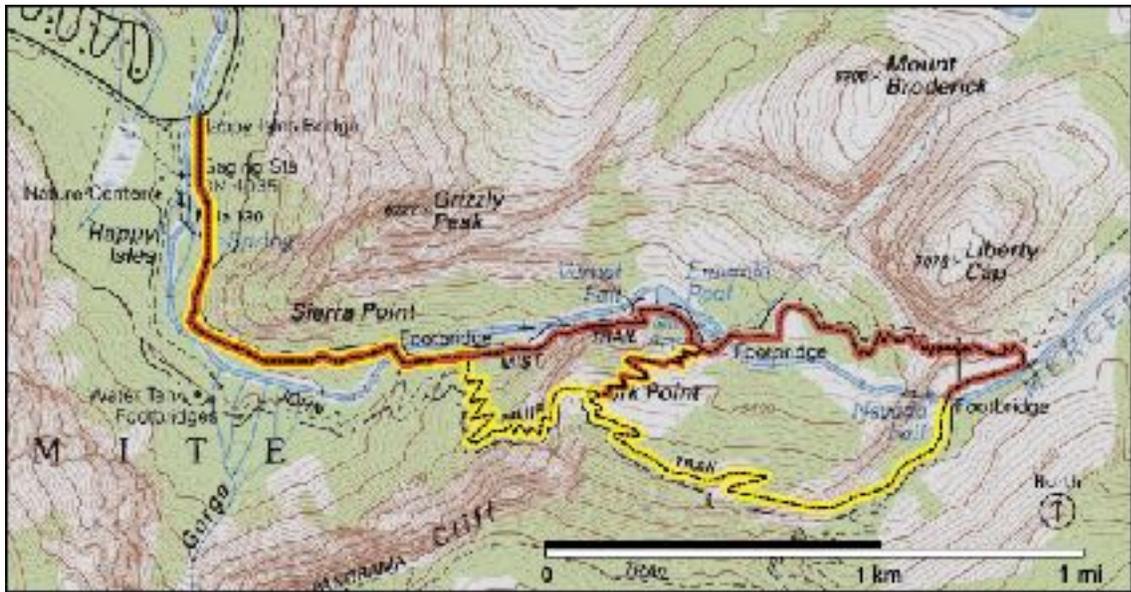
“The **John Muir Trail** can only be directly accessed via these trailheads:

- *From Yosemite Valley:* Happy Isles to Sunrise/Merced Lake (pass through) and Happy Isles to Little Yosemite Valley
- *From Tuolumne Meadows exiting the park:* Lyell Canyon
- *From Glacier Point:* Glacier Point to Little Yosemite Valley
- *From Tuolumne Meadows to Yosemite Valley (not exiting the park):* Cathedral Lakes”

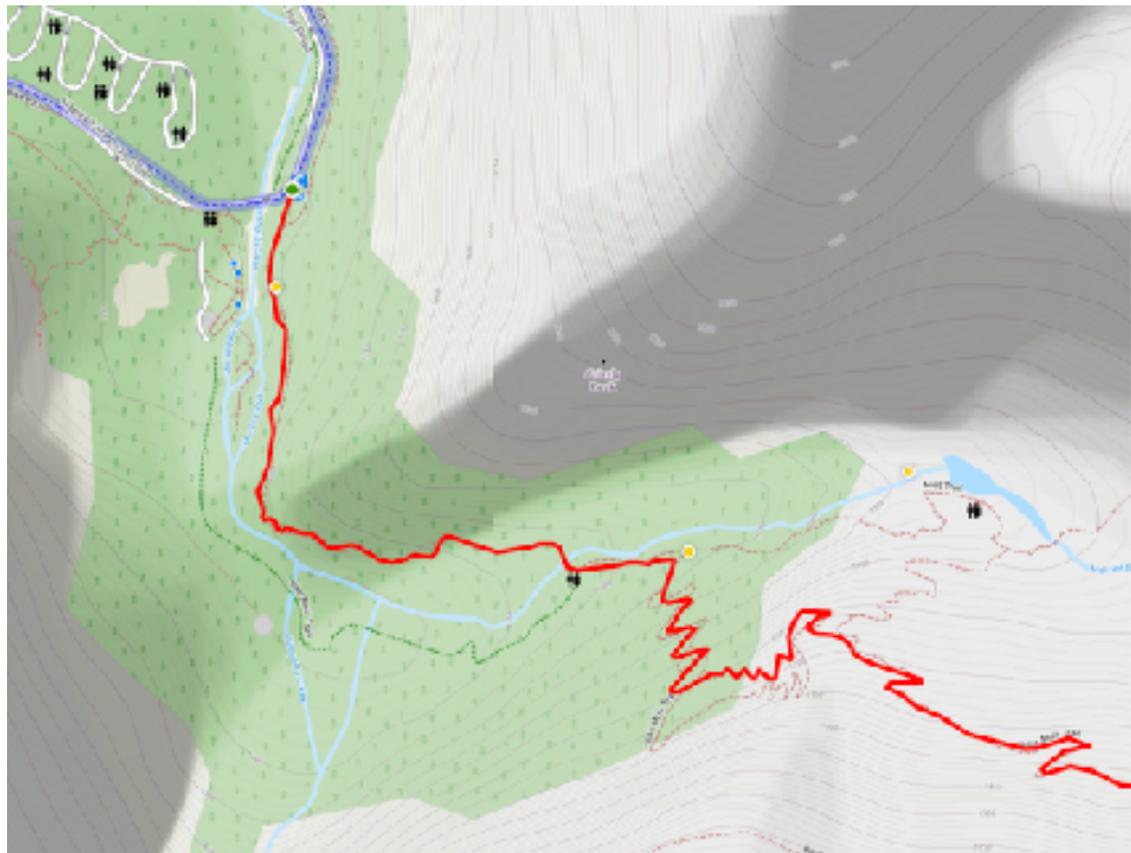
<https://www.nps.gov/yose/planyourvisit/trailheads.htm>

Thus, these four existing trailheads are all said to eventually link up with the John Muir Trail itself, each via a separate trail. However, the start of the John Muir Trail from **Yosemite Valley** specifically is designated as Happy Isles, and the NPS Wilderness Permit form uses Happy Isles as the 0.0 starting point for the JMT as well. The trailhead at Happy Isles is officially designated on NPS maps for day hiking purposes as the ‘Vernal Fall and Nevada Falls Trail.’ The Park Service explains, “You can also take the John Muir Trail to the top of Vernal Fall (via the Clark Point cutoff) and the top of Nevada Fall, or combine the Mist Trail and John Muir Trail into a loop.”

In this NPS map, the “John Muir Trail” is indicated in yellow and the Mist trail is shown in red, The two trails overlap from the Happy Isles Bridge to just above the footbridge below the Mist Trail climb, then the two trails separate and rejoin at some distance above Nevada Falls.

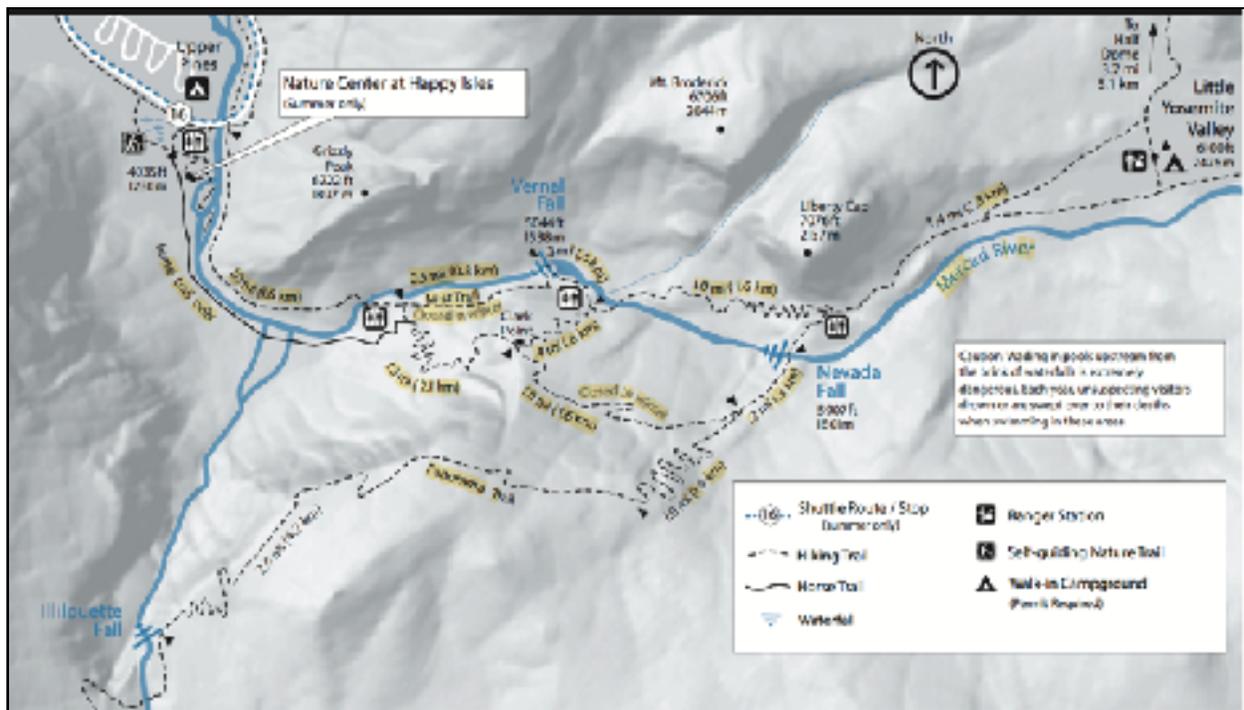


This and other maps show the John Muir Trail as a separate trail from the Happy Isles Nature Center area to just above the footbridge below Mist Falls:



Source: <https://www.alltrails.com/explore/trail/us/california/john-muir-trail-happy-isles-to-tuolumne-meadows>

The portion of the route identified west of the river and the footbridge as the “John Muir Trail” in such maps is designated by the National Park Service as “horse trail only:”



<https://www.nps.gov/yose/planyourvisit/upload/valleyhikes.pdf>

Of course, in the early days many of the trips from Yosemite on the John Muir Trail were pack trips. Early Sierra Club hiking trips had mules to carry camp gear.

In a practical sense, Happy Isles is no longer really a “trailhead” at all. Since the advent of automobiles, a “trailhead” meant the location you parked your car before starting out on foot; but today automobile parking is not available at Happy Isles. Instead the Happy Isles Trailhead parking lot is located just beyond Half Dome Village (formerly Curry Village) (and about a half-mile from Happy Isles). As the NPS states, visitors can walk or use the free Yosemite Valley

shuttle bus to get to the trailhead from there - - stopping at the Happy Isles Shuttle Bus Stop #16. If taking the shuttle bus, this means that hikers can start from virtually any other shuttle bus stop in the valley. Even the walk from Shuttle Bus Stop #6 to the Happy Isles trailheads is a bit of a distance, perhaps a 1/4 mile.

Looking at historical published accounts, the most traditional starting point of the John Muir Trail would appear to be the Le Conte Memorial Lodge - now the Yosemite Conservation Heritage Center.

First published in 1934, a few years before the John Muir Trail itself was finally completed in 1938, the Sierra Club published the first guidebook of its kind, the GUIDE TO THE JOHN MUIR TRAIL AND THE HIGH SIERRA REGION by Walter A. Starr, Jr. This definitive guide, originally conceived in 1929 by its author, a life member of the Sierra Club, and published posthumously, has been reprinted and revised numerous times in the succeeding years.

The second and third editions of Starr’s Guide to the John Muir Trail clearly state:

“The starting point in Yosemite is the Le Conte Memorial Lodge of the Sierra Club.”
(Pg. 16, 1943, 1946 editions).

A table of mileages with marker 0.0 at Le Conte Memorial Lodge verifies this point:

<i>SEC. 2. The John Muir Trail</i>				
<i>Yosemite to Tuolumne Meadows</i>				
<i>via Sunrise Trail</i>	El above Sea-Level	Dist from pt above	Dist from Yosemite	Dist to Tuol Mdws
Yosemite Valley (Le Conte Lodge)	3,970	0.0	0.0	24.4
Happy Isles	4,034	1.4	1.4	23.0
Mist Trail	4,550	1.0	2.4	22.0
Merced River Trail	5,950	2.2	4.6	19.8
Little Yosemite Valley (lower end)	6,150	1.2	5.8	18.6
Half Dome Trail	7,000	1.2	7.0	17.4

Interestingly, however, in the **first edition**, published in 1934, Starr does not mention Le Conte Lodge, but gives four alternative access points, all measured with Yosemite Village being the 0.0 marker (notably *not* Happy Isles). By 1925, the existing Yosemite Village - the “New Village” - had taken shape, and little remained of the Old Village, so Starr must have meant the current location for Yosemite Village in his 1934 book.

At least the 1943 and 1946 editions, as we have seen, give the starting point as Le Conte Lodge (Nonetheless, later editions of Starr's guide, as well as other subsequent popular maps and guides, would identify the starting point as Happy Isles instead).

Several other sources confirm Le Conte Lodge being the original start of the JMT. For example, see *One hundred years in Yosemite; the story of a great park and its friends*, by Carl Parcher Russell (University of California Press, 1947). which notes "A fitting climax to the High Sierra trails in Yosemite National Park is found in that portion of the trail system which has been designated the John Muir Trail. Beginning at the LeConte Lodge in Yosemite Valley..." Pg. 83.

More recently, see *The High Sierra: Peaks, Passes, Trails, 3rd Ed.* by R. J. Sector (The Mountaineer Books, 2009), which after first identifying the current trailhead in Yosemite as being at Happy Isles, states: "The traditional **starting point** of the **John Muir Trail** was from the **LeConte Memorial** Lodge of the Sierra Club when it was located at Curry Village. " As Sector notes, since the lodge has been moved 0.5 miles to the west away from Curry Village, "Starting a hike along the John Muir Trail from Curry Village adds 1 mile to the hike, and a start from LeConte Memorial Lodge adds 1.5 miles."

Likewise, according to John W. Bingaman,

"The plan for a John Muir Trail apparently originated with Theodore Solomon, member of the Sierra Club, and an enthusiastic mountaineer. Much of the preliminary mapping of the route was done by Joseph N. Le Conte, son of the famous geology professor of the University of California. The trail itself was established in 1915, when a grant of \$10,000 was made by the California State Legislature upon the request of the Sierra Club..." A fitting climax to the High Sierra Trails in Yosemite National Park is found in that portion of the trail system which has been designated by John Muir Trail. Beginning at the Le Conte Lodge in Yosemite Valley..."
Pathways: A Story of Trails and Men (1968). <http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/pathways/>

At least a few modern guides do recognize Le Conte Memorial Lodge as the original starting point. Elizabeth Wenk, in the 2014 edition of her book *John Muir Trail: The Essential Guide to Hiking America's Most Famous Trail* (5th Edition, Wilderness Press) states: "Note that the JMT originally began at Le Conte Memorial several miles farther west in Yosemite Valley." (pg. 68).

Although the Forest Service did not complete the last section of the John Muir Trail until 1938, the JMT began to be known by that name as soon as its 1915 origins, and the Le Conte Lodge was popularly thought of as its starting point in Yosemite, most likely because of the integral involvement of the early Sierra Club and its early leaders with the John Muir Trail.

In 1930, Walter L. Huber wrote in an article "The John Muir Trail" in the Sierra Club Bulletin (Vol. XV, No.1 February 1930, pg. 40): "Professor [Joseph Nisbet] Le Conte published in the

Sierra Club Bulletin for January, 1909, the first map showing in detail approximately the present route of the John Muir Trail.” That map does not indicate the Yosemite Valley portion of the John Muir Trail.

As National Park Service historian William Tweed explains:

“John Muir, the famous naturalist and writer, died in December 1914. For the previous dozen years he had served as president of the Sierra Club, which he had helped to create in 1892. Muir died relatively suddenly, and as word spread among his many friends and admirers, the question of an appropriate memorial arose.

“Quickly, the question of a Muir memorial merged with a conversation that had begun the previous summer on the club’s annual outing. While on the trail, a decision had been made to seek funding from the State of California for trail improvements in the Sierra Nevada. These ideas came together in the spring of 1915 in the form of a bill before the California legislature to create a John Muir Trail that would connect Yosemite Valley with Mt. Whitney. The route was to follow as closely as practicable the crest of the Sierra Nevada.

The bill passed, along with an initial state appropriation for \$10,000 (about \$225,000 in 2011 dollars). Responsibility for the construction of the new trail fell to Wilbur McClure, California State Engineer, and McClure began what would be a several-year-long effort to define the trail’s exact route.”

<http://www.sequoiaparksfoundation.org/2011/historic-people-and-places-the-john-muir-trail/>

These accounts explain little more than Yosemite Valley being the starting point for the JMT. Even the 1920 National Park Service brochure titled “Rules and Regulations of Yosemite National Park” is vague on the starting point: “The Yosemite Valley is the northern terminus of the John Muir trail, which California has built southward along the crest of the Sierra in honor of her famous man of letters.” https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/brochures/1920/yose/sec2.htm

Today, there are innumerable published guidebooks, maps, magazines, websites, blogs, Wikis, YouTube “How-to” videos, mobile phone apps, and more describing how to hike the JMT, some of them measuring the JMT with mileage wheels or GPS coordinates. But most of them identify the northern terminus of the JMT at the opposite side of Happy Isles — specifically on the north side of the bridge over the Merced River near a stream-gaging station and a large sign listing various mileages on it.

But even looking at trail signs near the start of the trail, is the length from Yosemite to Mt. Whitney 211 miles, or 215? Published books and websites variously give both mileages. As reported by johmmuirtrail.org: “We saw both distances within a mile of each other.” In any case,

the southern terminus of the John Muir Trail is usually considered the top of Mt. Whitney, which is typically described as 210.4 miles from Happy Isles. But in order to reach a trailhead road, it is an additional 10.6 miles from the summit of Mt. Whitney to Whitney Portal making the total 221 miles.

Given this confusion of mileage, and the vagaries of where a hiker would park or take a shuttle bus from, it would seem that continuing to use Happy Isles as the starting point for the John Muir Trail is quite problematic.

But we have a solution:

As the *The Sierra Club: A Handbook* of 1960 (and subsequent editions), states:

"It is appropriate that the mileage southward along the John Muir Trail is reckoned from the LeConte Lodge, its northern terminus."

Given that the JMT originated through the efforts of Sierra Club members Theodore Solomon, Joseph N. LeConte, and a committee of Sierra Club members in 1914 chaired by Meyer Lissner (and including Walter L. Huber, David P. Barrows, Vernon L. Kellogg, and Clair S. Tappaan), and is named for the Sierra Club's co-founder and first president, it indeed makes sense that the starting point be the Sierra Club's home in Yosemite, the Le Conte Memorial Lodge.

Built before the creation of the National Park Service, the Le Conte Memorial Lodge, and its predecessor, the Sierra Club Reading Room at Sinning's Cottage, served as the first park visitor center. The roots of the Sierra Club reach deeply into this building. One of the building's most notable curators was noted photographer Ansel Adams, who published the first photographic depiction of the John Muir Trail in 1936. Later, Adams and Nancy Newhall designed and mounted a special exhibition in the LeConte Memorial Lodge entitled "This is the American Earth," which focused on the national parks and wilderness areas and their role as resources for the human spirit. The exhibition and refurbishing of the LeConte Memorial Lodge was financed by long-time Sierra Club board member Walter Starr, who had earlier supported the publication of Adams' *Sierra Nevada: The John Muir Trail*. It was Starr's son, Walter A. "Pete" Starr, Jr. who had written the definitive Starr's Guide to the John Muir Trail, published by the Sierra Club in 1934 with many subsequent editions. (*Ansel Adams and the American Landscape: A Biography* by Jonathan Spaulding, pg. 291.) The subsequent exhibition book of the *This is the American Earth* exhibit was designed and written by Newhall and David Brower, then executive Director of the Sierra Club, and was published in 1960. This book was the first of the Sierra Club's award-winning "[Exhibit Format](#)" book series. "*This Is the American Earth* is one of the great statements in the history of conservation," proclaimed Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas. It has been reprinted several times in the subsequent decades and remains an inspirational combination of text and photography.

The LeConte Memorial Lodge was designated a [National Historic Landmark](#) in 1987. This honor was awarded explicitly for the Memorial's design, which complemented the natural surroundings, and the history of the Sierra Club and its role in Yosemite Valley and the national park system.

The original construction of the Le Conte Memorial Lodge was completed in 1904 in Curry Village, and that was the location when the JMT was established in 1915.

However, in 1919 the Le Conte Memorial Lodge was moved from Curry Village to its present location opposite of Housekeeping Camp. The new building construction was still incomplete when the Sierra Club custodian Katharine Stout of Pasadena arrived on May 15th of that year, but was soon completed and opened to visitors on June 5th. And it was immediately used that year as the starting point for the high country.

Interestingly, the announcement for the Sierra Club's Eighteenth Annual Outing in 1919, to Tuolumne Meadows, Mt. Ritter, Thousand Island Lake, Shadow Lake, Devils Post Pile, Rainbow Falls, and Ten Lake Basin referred to the Le Conte Memorial Lodge. The Outing itself was designated to occur from July 11 to August 10th, 1919. The Club announcement stated that those wishing to attend the shorter "Two Weeks Party" would leave by train on July 25th, stay in the Valley "at any of the regular camps that night," and meet the next day to join the pack train that would be at the Le Conte Memorial Lodge the morning of the 27th. *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Vol. X, No. 4, January 1919, pg. 3. This was the same year that Le Conte Memorial Lodge was moved to its current location. The subsequent report on the 1919 outing was published in *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Vol. XI, No. 1, January 1920, p. 14 et seq. but it makes no mention of Le Conte Memorial Lodge. This may be explained by Charles A. Noble, the author, who complained about having to stay in the Valley itself for two nights before leaving for the high country: "...to a Sierran bound for the high mountains the human noise and dust of Yosemite seem desecration of primitive nature; so that the wait-over of twenty-four hours in this anomaly of automobiles and silks he regards, at best, merely as a necessary evil."

In his annual report in the *Sierra Club Bulletin* about LeConte Memorial Lodge in his role as custodian in 1921, Ansel Adams appears to confirm that the Lodge was used as the starting point for trips to the high country, even after its move from Curry Village to its present location. He mentioned that the building had some new shelves installed facilitating storage of small items and thus "whenever the club's annual outing party passes through Yosemite, the members' suitcases can be conveniently stored and handled."

In an article *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Francis Farquhar implied that the John Muir Trail at that time was routed in Yosemite via a different route than it is today, as he writes, "Next day we reached Yosemite by way of Lake Tenaya and Mirror Lake and came to the end of the John Muir Trail." See "Northward over the John Muir Trail" by Francis P. Farquhar, *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Vol. 11, No. 1, January, 1920, pg. 46.

It thus appears that the original starting point, for members of the Sierra Club at least, of the John Muir Trail, and other high-country outings such as the Mirror Lake - Lake Tenaya trails, was traditionally the Le Conte Memorial Lodge, whether at its original site in Curry Village or at its present location.

In 2016, at the request for a name change from the Sierra Club, the National Park service re-named the LeConte Memorial Lodge the “Yosemite Conservation Heritage Center.”

As it has since 1904, the building is still operated by the Sierra Club, presenting and promoting the conservation ethic through educational displays, public programs, and a library. The Center is open May through September. <https://sierraclub.org/yosemite-heritage-center>