

## THE PEAKS AND THE PROFESSORS

### UNIVERSITY NAMES IN THE HIGH SIERRA

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DURING THE LAST DECADE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, a small group of adventuresome university students and professors, with ties to both the University of California and Stanford, were spending their summers exploring the High Sierra, climbing its highest peaks, and on occasion bestowing names upon them. Some they named after natural features of the landscape, some after prominent scientists or family members, and some after their schools and favored professors.

The record of their place naming indicates that a friendly rivalry between the University of California in Berkeley and the newly established Stanford University in Palo Alto was played out among the highest peaks of the Sierra Nevada, just as it was on the “athletic fields” of the Bay Area during these years. At least two accounts of their Sierra trips provide circumstantial evidence for a competitive race to the top between a Cal alumnus and professor of engineering, Joseph Nisbet LeConte, and a young Stanford professor of drawing and painting, Bolton Coit Brown.

Joseph N. LeConte was the son of professor of geology Joseph LeConte, whose 1870 trip with the “University Excursion Party” to the Yosemite region and meeting with John Muir is recounted elsewhere in this issue.<sup>1</sup> “Little Joe,” as he was known, had made family trips to Yosemite as a boy and in 1889 accompanied his father and his students on a trip



University Peak, circa 1899. Photograph by Joseph N. LeConte. The Bancroft Library (BANC PIC 1971.034:959-PIC).

recreating the 1870 Yosemite adventure. His climbs in the Yosemite region began a lifelong devotion to the High Sierra.

In the summer of 1890 when he was twenty, he joined three other “college boys,” Hubert Dyer, C. B. Lakenan, and Fred Pheby, to visit the almost unknown country at the headwaters of the Kings and Kern rivers in the area now preserved as Kings Canyon National Park. Carrying a small mountain transit and two aneroid barometers, and a 4 x 5 camera “equipped with the newly perfected celluloid film,” the four university students travelled on foot from Fresno in the central valley to peaks well above 13,000 feet.

On July 20, after a difficult ascent in the then-remote Kearsarge Pass/Bubbs Creek region, they reached the crest of the Sierra and climbed a prominent point to take observations. They named this highest point to the north of the pass University Peak in honor of their beloved University of California.<sup>2</sup> The trip continued over the Sierra Crest east to Independence. The four youths then walked north through Owens Valley, to Mono Lake, and then to Yosemite, and home through the foothills and the central valley to Stockton. Years later, LeConte would recall this arduous nine-week “tramp” of 652 miles as “above all others the most exciting and enjoyable” of his many years of travel in the High Sierra.<sup>3</sup>

About the time young LeConte was exploring the southern Sierra, two University of California professors, William Dallam Armes of the English department and Joachim Henry Senger, a philologist and professor of German and Greek, were exploring ideas that would culminate in 1892 in the founding of the Sierra Club. Senger, as early as 1886, had called for the creation of a library in Yosemite to make available books, maps, itineraries, and notes on travels in the Sierra. His idea was expanded, and by 1890 students and professors at the university were discussing the possibility of forming a club. According to a later account by LeConte, the name Sierra Club was thought of at that time. Professor Senger discussed the idea in particular with his colleague Armes, who had already spoken with John Muir about the need for a defense association for the Sierra, and with Warren Olney, a prominent Oakland attorney.

Senger arranged a meeting in the Olney law offices to form an alpine club. His letters to Muir regarding the formation of the club evoked Muir’s enthusiastic endorsement: “I am greatly interested in the formation of an Alpine Club. . . I will do all in my power to further the interests of such a club” (May 10, 1892) and, “Hoping that we will be able to do something for wildness and make the mountains glad” (May 22, 1892). On May 28, the Sierra Club was formed with Muir as its president. The purposes of the club included “to explore, enjoy, and render accessible the mountain regions of the Pacific Coast, and to publish authentic information concerning them,” the initial interests of the Berkeley group. The interests of Muir, and the growing awareness among all of the founding group of the need for protection of the Sierra Nevada, contributed the following to the purposes stated in the bylaws: “To enlist the support and cooperation of the people and government in preserving the forests and other natural features of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.”<sup>4</sup>

Among the twenty-seven men signing the original articles of incorporation were two of LeConte’s companions on the 1890 trek, Fred Pheby ’93 and Hubert Dyer ’90, as well as Robert M. Price ’93, who became a member of the first board of directors. Professors Senger and Armes were joined by fellow professors Willis Linn Jepson, Cornelius Beach Bradley, and Herman Kower. Two Stanford professors were among the original signers, who also included lawyers, government officials, and an artist. Stanford’s president, David Starr Jordan, joined the original board, and Stanford’s first professor of geology, John Branner, was a founding vice president. Many more faculty and students from both campuses joined as charter members, including Joseph LeConte and his trekking son, “Little Joe.”<sup>5</sup>

From the 1890s, then, the university communities of the Bay Area had strong ties to the Sierra Nevada. They were involved in working for its protection and furnished a cadre of enthusiastic explorers breaking new trails, measuring its heights, drawing definitive maps, photographing and illustrating its features, and placing names on the Sierra peaks, creeks, lakes, and meadows.

In 1896, “Little Joe” LeConte, since 1892 a professor of engineering mechanics at Berkeley, returned to the Kearsarge Pass/Bubbs Creek area, this time with his future wife, Helen Gompertz, and friends. Realizing that the peak they had named in honor of the University of California was not after all the highest in the crest, they reassigned the name, University Peak, to a “huge peak, which seems to be the culminating point of the Sierra in this region.”<sup>6</sup> The LeConte party made the first ascent of the 13,632-foot summit, built a small monument, and left an account of the earlier naming in 1890. In the *Sierra Club Bulletin* of 1897, Miss Gompertz described the view from the top after the first ascent of University Peak on July 12: “Thirty beautiful lakes were counted from this point, some shining out of carved bowls on high rocky shelves, others nestling in the green hollows below . . . Mount Brewer, crowning the Great Western Divide, bared its snowy bosom to the sunshine. Bathed in light . . . [it] lay beyond us like the promised land.”<sup>7</sup>



Helen Gompertz, the future Mrs. Joseph N. LeConte, and friends on top of University Peak, 1896. Photograph by Joseph N. LeConte. *The Bancroft Library* (BANC PIC 1971.034:384-PIC).

On that same trip, just before its ascent of University Peak, the LeConte party met and climbed with Stanford professor Bolton Coit Brown, another explorer of the High Sierra. The following month Brown and his wife Lucy determined to “capture a desirable mountain, and name it after Stanford University.”<sup>8</sup> Leaving his wife behind when the ascent became arduous, Brown climbed a peak to the south of University Peak, 300 feet higher, and “accessible with great difficulty.”<sup>9</sup> On this rugged peak he bestowed the name Mount Stanford.

LeConte also had some scores to settle later in that active summer of 1896; he knew that in 1895 the ubiquitous Professor Brown had caught a glimpse of the magnificent range of peaks known as the Palisades above the middle fork of the Kings River. From his vantage point eight miles distant, Brown had named the highest pinnacle in the main crest Mount Jordan, after Stanford's president. In doing so, he was overriding the name "North Palisades" bestowed by the Whitney geological survey party in 1864. In his 1904 account of his first ascent of the North Palisades, LeConte contests Brown's change of name for the highest point. And he notes that, with the name for the highest pinnacle under a cloud after Brown's attempt to memorialize Jordan, in 1896, "I took the liberty of naming the second highest point Mount Sill,"<sup>10</sup> after Edward Rowland Sill, a poet, professor of literature, and the sole professor in the English department at Berkeley from 1874 to 1882.<sup>11</sup> The change from North Palisades to Mount Jordan did not stand, but the Sierra Club in 1925 did name a peak on the Kings-Kern Divide after the ichthyologist, club luminary, and former Stanford president, David Starr Jordan.



*Sierra Club Bulletin*, January 1898.

In 1894, just two years after the Sierra Club was founded, Professor Senger's contributions to the exploration and protection of the mountains were recognized when Theodore Solomons, an inveterate trailblazer in the High Sierra, named a 12,253 foot peak Mount Senger.<sup>12</sup> The following year Solomons christened a 13,361 peak in the same region Mount Hilgard after Professor Eugene Hilgard, born in Bavaria in 1833, a soil scientist who laid the foundations for the College of Agriculture at Berkeley, where he was a professor from 1875 to 1903.<sup>13</sup> "It was thus named at the suggestion of an admiring former pupil of Professor Hilgard, Mr. Ernest C. Bonner '93, who accompanied me on one of my outings," explained Solomons.<sup>14</sup>

In 1897, professor of rhetoric Cornelius Beach Bradley made a 200-mile trek in the High Sierra with former student Robert Price and his wife. While Bradley ascended a lower peak, Price and his friend Joseph Shinn made the first ascent of a 13,780 foot peak next to University Peak in the Kings-Kern region, naming it Mount Bradley.<sup>15</sup> Cornelius Bradley, born in Siam, was at Berkeley from 1882 until 1911 and was a charter member of the Sierra Club; his son, Harold, was president of the club in the 1950s.<sup>16</sup>

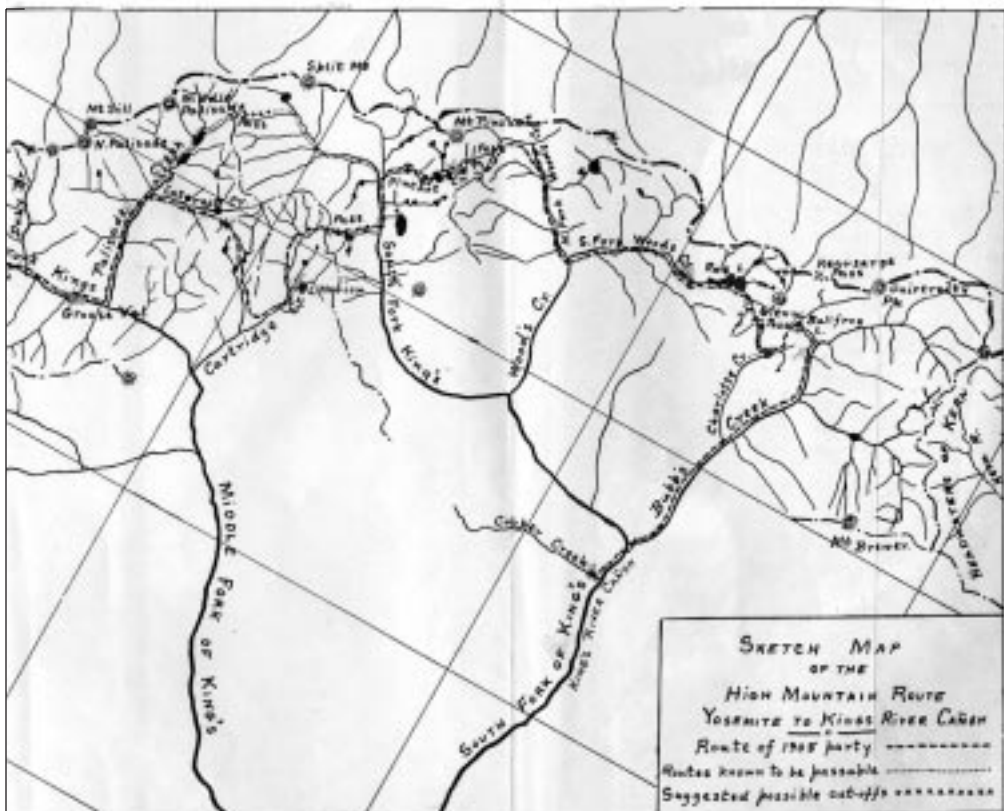
The LeContes, father and son, have been remembered with numerous names in the Sierra Nevada. In 1894, Robert Price and a group of university friends, including E. C. Bonner and William E. Colby '95, travelled through the Tuolumne Canyon in Yosemite National Park, from Tuolumne Meadows to Hetch Hetchy Valley. "The most majestic cascade" in the canyon they called LeConte Cascade, "so named by us in honor of our esteemed Professor, Joseph LeConte."<sup>17</sup> Mount LeConte, over 13,900 feet in the Mount Whitney region, was also named for the elder LeConte, in 1895, by two climbers with no apparent university connections. Describing the peak as "one of the most striking points of the whole range" and "utterly impossible to climb," they placed a monument below the summit, "in honor of the eminent geologist, Professor Joseph LeConte."<sup>18</sup>

Joseph N. LeConte is memorialized in the mountains with LeConte Canyon south of Muir Pass and LeConte Point above Hetch Hetchy, both named by U.S. Geological Survey topographers in tribute to his trailblazing and map making. In 1908, pioneering a high mountain route suitable for pack animals to travel between Yosemite and the Kings River region, "Little Joe," with Duncan McDuffie '99 and James S. Hutchinson '99, travelled south past the Evolution Peaks and brought pack mules over Muir Pass on the Goddard Divide. "Down the other side was an awful looking gorge in the black metamorphic rock, partially choked with snow." Through this precipitous "savage" canyon which later bore his name LeConte and his friends led their pack animals, completing the critical stretch of their high route down the Sierra spine.<sup>19</sup>



End of the 1908 trip from Yosemite to Kings Canyon: left to right, Duncan McDuffie, Joseph N. LeConte, and James S. Hutchinson. *Photograph by Joseph N. LeConte. The Bancroft Library (BANC PIC 1971.034:1952-PIC).*

Joseph N. LeConte, whose teaching career continued until 1937, made the university motto, "Let there be light," a reality when he and fellow engineering professor Clarence Cory installed the first electric lighting system on the campus. His climbing skills proved to be an asset on campus; once, while on his way in full dress to President Kellogg's annual reception, he climbed the light poles to get three crucial lights working in time for the party. He was granted an honorary degree by his alma mater in 1937.<sup>20</sup> LeConte was the second president of the Sierra Club, after John Muir's death, and served as honorary club president from 1930 until his death in 1950. He made forty-four extensive treks in the High Sierra until poor health grounded him in 1930. His scientifically drawn maps guided early explorers until U. S. Geological Survey maps became available, and his Sierra photographs were among the best of his era.<sup>21</sup>



J. N. LeConte Map of 1908, from *Sierra Club Bulletin*, January 1909.

Other peaks were named for University of California faculty in the twenties and thirties, when boards and commissions rather than adventuresome climbers began to place official names on the land. These include Mount Royce, named in 1929 by the California State Geographic Board for Josiah Royce, a graduate of the university in 1875 and teacher of English from 1878 to 1882 when he left for Harvard and fame as a philosopher. Sometime before 1939, the Sierra Club proposed and the board approved the naming of a peak in the North Palisades after Berkeley professor Charles Mills Gayley. Gayley was a legendary figure who shaped the modern Department of English, arriving in 1889 to join Professors Bradley and Armes and retiring in 1923. As Dean of the Academic Faculties he was part of a faculty triumvirate which, after a faculty revolt against President Wheeler, ruled the cam-

pus in 1918 and 1919. A beloved teacher, he filled the Greek Theatre with his Great Books course and wrote Cal songs, including “The Golden Bear.” There is no record of his connection with the Sierra Nevada.<sup>22</sup>

Professor of botany Willis Jepson and professor of geology Andrew Lawson, both pre-eminent scientists, charter members of the Sierra Club, and active in the club’s annual outings in the Sierra, were honored after their deaths with the naming of Mount Jepson (13,390, one mile from Mount Gayley) and Lawson Peak (13,140, Triple Divide quadrangle). By 1976 a total of ten Sierra peaks had been named after University of California professors.<sup>23</sup>

In 1922, the name of a second Stanford professor was given to a Sierra peak. Mount Bolton Brown, a 13,500 foot peak in the upper basin of the south fork of the Kings River, was named in honor of the man who was one of the first to explore, map, sketch, and write about this area in the southern Sierra. Brown had made an impressive first ascent of Mount Clarence King on a solo climb and the first ascent of Mount Gardner with J. N. LeConte in 1896. He trekked and climbed with his wife, Lucy, and by 1899 with their two-year-old daughter, Eleanor. “We put her on a burro, and wither we went she went also.”<sup>24</sup> Bolton Brown was a professor of drawing at Stanford from its founding in 1891 until 1902, when he went east to New York and helped to found the Brydcliffe Arts and Crafts colony in Woodstock. No further accounts or sketches by Brown appear in the *Sierra Club Bulletin* after 1901.

Two California mountaineers at the turn of the last century—Joseph Nisbet LeConte and Bolton Coit Brown—shared a love for the Sierra and a compulsion to explore its heights and to describe, map, picture, and name its features. Their ties, as fellow professors, pioneering hikers and climbers, and members of the Sierra Club, surely outweighed any rivalries they might have felt as faculty members of the University of California and the fledgling Stanford University. Still, their written accounts suggest a friendly competition to place names associated with their respective universities on the mountaintops. If, indeed, we have a contest, we have a score: Cal 10 – Stanford 2.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 “‘Passionate Lovers of Nature’: The University in the High Sierra.” See also LeConte’s *Journal of Ramblings through the High Sierra of California by the “University Excursion Party”* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1960, seventh edition).
- 2 Joseph N. LeConte, “Journal of a Camping Trip Amongst the Highest of the California Sierra, Summer of 1890,” typescript of his journal, 54-57. “My First Summer in the Kings River Sierra,” *Sierra Club Bulletin* [hereafter *SCB*] 26:1 (February 1941), 9-14.
- 3 LeConte, “My First Summer,” 9.
- 4 The account of the founding of the Sierra Club and quotes from the Muir letters are from an article written by Joseph N. LeConte on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Sierra Club, “The Sierra Club,” *SCB* 10:2 (January 1917), 135-141.
- 5 Holway R. Jones, *John Muir and the Sierra Club: The Battle for Yosemite* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1965) 7-10, 170-174.
- 6 J. N. LeConte, “Journal,” 54.
- 7 Helen M. Gompertz, “Up and Down Bubb’s Creek,” *SCB* 2 (May 1897), 84.
- 8 Bolton Coit Brown, “Wanderings in the High Sierra, between Mt. King and Mt. Williamson,” *SCB* 2 (May 1897), 91-92.

- 9 Francis P. Farquhar, *Place Names of the High Sierra* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1926), 89. (This book is dedicated to Joseph Nisbet LeConte, "Mountaineer and Explorer of the High Sierra.")
- 10 Joseph N. LeConte, "The Ascent of the North Palisades," *SCB* 5: 1 (January 1904), 3.
- 11 Peter Browning, *Place Names of the Sierra Nevada: From Abbott to Zumwalt* (Berkeley: Wilderness Press, 1986), 199.
- 12 The peak is in the Kings River region. Farquhar, *Place Names*, 83
- 13 Verne A. Stadtman, ed. *The Centennial Record of the University of California* (Berkeley: University of California Printing Department, 1967), 3.
- 14 Quoted in Browning, 97.
- 15 Cornelius Beach Bradley, "Exploration of the East Creek Amphitheater," *SCB* 2: 5 (1899), 273-274.
- 16 Farquhar, *Place Names*, 9.
- 17 Robert M. Price, "Through the Tuolumne Cañon," *SCB* 1: 6 (May, 1895), 204. Will Colby, a graduate of Boalt Law School and eminent mining lawyer, became John Muir's right-hand man in the fight against damming Hetch Hetchy Valley, and served as secretary of the Sierra Club for over forty years.
- 18 *SCB* 1: 8 (1896), 325-326. Mount LeConte was first climbed in 1925 by Norman Clyde.
- 19 Joseph N. LeConte, "The High Mountain Route between Yosemite and the King's River Cañon," *SCB* 7: 1 (1909), 16-18. Browning, 124.
- 20 *Centennial Record*, 73.
- 21 Farquhar, *History of the Sierra Nevada* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 218, 223-224.
- 22 Browning, 78. George R. Stewart, *The Department of English of the University of California on the Berkeley Campus*, a Centennial Publication of the University of California (1968), 12-16. *Centennial Record*, 10, 85.
- 23 Within the High Sierra region covered by the Browning book, the northern boundary of Alpine County on the north and Walker Pass on the south. Browning, introduction.
- 24 Farquhar, *History*, 221. Farquhar, *Place Names*, 8.

