

John Muir, Wisconsin, and the Pelton Family 1860-1861

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History 489

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Abstract

The years of 1860 – 1863 planted fundamental spiritual seeds in the mental soil bed for a young man named John Muir which led to multi-dimensional growth in his later years. In Portage, Wisconsin, Muir grew into manhood alongside the expansion of the American frontier. While he plowed the lands and worked on his father's Fountain Lake farm his already strong appreciation for the natural wilderness grew and he invented time-saving devices so that he could have more time to toil among the crooks and crevices of the farm. He set out to display his inventions at the Wisconsin State Agriculture Fair in 1860, a path that would lead him to Prairie Du Chien and a hotel called the Mondell House where he met a family named the Peltons. He also formed a life-long relationship with Emily Pelton, their niece. This paper analyzes Muir's formative years between 1860-1861 using letters as the primary source. It also uses secondary sources to provide a background context to the events that defined these important years. The examination of these years is important to the understanding of Muir's inner development as a spiritual and environmental thinker and contributes to the understanding of Muir's youth and early manhood in Wisconsin.

Historiographical Introduction

The life of and legacy of John Muir has played a heroic role in environmental activity in the United States and beyond in the 20th century. Whether it is for inspiration, personal enlightenment, sheer entertainment, or political motivation, a massive collection exists today containing personal letters addressed to family, friends, and close confidantes, nature essays, published and unpublished memoirs in the form of books and poetry, and pictures and drawings which by their virtuous connection to Muir have avoided the death clutch only to be pinned to a microscope and thoroughly analyzed. People reaching far and wide across the country are part of an ever-expanding circle of Americans who deeply appreciate and enjoy his work.

Sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, grand-parents, and people from all walks of life through-out the U.S. have something in common besides their American Nationality – they have access to our National Parks. The Wisconsin State Historical society refers to him as Wisconsin’s “best-known” environmental thinker. By the turn of the twentieth century, Wisconsin had become a center of conservation thinking and activity in the United States. Muir spent his formative years in Wisconsin. During this period he met a family named the Peltons who left a lasting effect on him for the duration of his life. In the following paper I will show that through this relationship historians can piece together Muir’s formative development by using letters as my primary source.

This study focuses on elements that defined his ‘formative’ years between the times of 1860-1861. The manuscript letters of John Muir, 1861-1914 is a collection of 30 letters and over 100 pages that were originally available in the manuscript collection at the University of

the Pacific in California, however, in recent times have become published on the Wisconsin State Historical website. Specifically this study looks at twenty of the letters which are between Emily Ophelia Pelton and Muir written between the years of 1863-1914. This paper will use this collection as a primary source to shed light on the unique characteristics of the relationship between the Peltons and Muir. The origins of their friendship will be traced and the events leading up to their life-long friendship will be analyzed. Through the correspondence between Pelton and Muir, the development of Muir's self is reflected in the letters.

His writings have been the subject of newspaper articles, children's literature, and an assortment of well-researched and carefully crafted biographies. It is for this reason that graduates and undergraduates at universities have made him the center of their research papers and saturated themselves in steeping mounds of primary and secondary sources which span the course of nearly his whole life.

Partly the reason for so many followers of Muir is related to the high number of primary and secondary sources that remain and are being written on every day. No historiography on Muir would be complete without one of the most important sources available on his life. *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, published in 1913 is an autobiographical account in his own words of his childhood beginning in Scotland where he was born to his upbringing in Portage on his father's Fountain Lake farm.¹ The tale tells the story of his youth growing up on the on the farm in the Wisconsin frontier wilderness.² It is a fascinating autobiography that engages the reader with romantic associations between childhood and the natural world.³ Muir

¹ John Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913)

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

foreshadows the internal conflict he would experience in later years when he mentions his father's failed attempts to curtail his wildness and detain him to the backyard.⁴

Many hand-written letters have also survived and served as primary sources for historians. *The Life and Letters of John Muir*, compiled after his death by Muir's literary executor, William Frederic Bade, was originally published in 1924 in two volumes. It is a combination of Muir's unfinished autobiography with letters selected from the voluminous correspondence between Muir and his many friends including the Peltons, all linked by Bade's commentary. The result is a mixed portrait of Muir the explorer, naturalist, writer spiritual prophet, lobbyist, geographer, botanist, and family man. It illustrates the connection between his passion for nature and his emergence as a crusader for the wilderness on the forefront of the American conservation movement and the establishment of the first National Parks.

The cultural fascination with the character of Muir may be related to man's own nestled fascination with the natural world which moves over him like clockwork and is an eternal aspect of his life every passing second of each waking minute until his death. The sun with the coming of morning emerges from the shadow of night, rises to salute the earth and in the evening it departs and the world once again becomes dark. This pattern repeats itself over and over regardless if man is present or not. Thus, the destiny of a man exists and manifests itself within his relationship to nature. *My First Summer in the Sierra*, published in 1911 is the story of his first encounter in Yosemite in 1869. "The radiance in some places is so great as to be fairly dazzling. . . joining the plants in their fine, brave beauty-work—every crystal, every flower a

⁴ *Ibid.*

window opening into heaven, a mirror reflecting the Creator.”⁵ His eloquent use of words, fluid writing style, and higher awareness clearly speaks a message of respect towards nature.

“Butterflies and the grand host of smaller flies are benumbed every night, but they hover and dance in the sunbeams over the meadows before noon with no apparent lack of playful, joyful life. Soon they must all fall like petals in an orchard, dry and wrinkled, not a wing of all the mighty host left to tingle the air. Nevertheless new myriads will arise in the spring, rejoicing, exulting, as if laughing cold death to scorn.”⁶

The essays which Muir wrote must be important contributions to the history of Muir. *The Mountains of California*, published in 1894, *Our National Parks*, published in 1901, *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*, published in 1916, and *To Yosemite and Beyond: Writings from the Years 1863 to 1875*, are tales of his adventures and were published in magazines such as *Outlook*, *Harper’s Weekly*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *World’s Work*, and *Century*. Through the spread of his message of respect toward nature Muir shaped the attitudes of men and women of his time and continues to in the present world we are living in today.

Muir is analyzed a number of different ways by historians. Some biographers have chosen to write about his life while relating it to a particular religion. *The Pathless Way: John Muir and American Wilderness*, published in 1984 by Michael P. Cohen analyzes Muir using Buddhist and Taoist concepts. Buddhists have a strong belief in karma which is defined as a cycle of rebirth where human beings are capable of achieving “higher” forms of life.⁷ “Rebirth can move in either direction, and the human stage is a dangerous one because each human

⁵ John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company)

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Michael Molloy, *Experiencing the World’s Religion: Tradition, Challenge, and Change* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005), 83.

being must make dramatic choices about how to live.”⁸ “Karma is the moral law of cause and effect, and belief in karma is a belief that every action has an automatic moral consequence.”⁹

Cohen captures the powerful vision of Muir and stresses that his ecological consciousness would generate an ecological conscience.

Muir is an important figure of his time because he became the voice of the emergence the conservation movement and the protector of nature. He led the movement towards the establishment of the first National Parks. Through his active worship of mountains, trees, meadows, fields, lakes, streams, animals, glaciers, rocks, flowers and plants he is able to become like a Father to his natural surroundings. Perhaps this is where Linnie Marsh Wolfe coined the term “Father of our National Parks” in *Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir*, published in 1945. Wolfe won a Pulitzer Prize for her work on this biography that is a cornerstone in the history of Muir. Wolfe expands this beautifully crafted biography with insight on Daniel Muir, father of the naturalist. She uses journals and personal interviews with his daughters, Wanda and Helen Muir, and those who knew and worked with him such as Jeanne Carr. This standard biography provides a complete portrait of Muir not only as a conservationist but also as a husband, father, and friend and provided the basis for a great deal of the background of this study.

A Young John Muir: An Environmental History, by Steven J. Holmes is another biography that focuses on his youth and early man hood. Holmes provides a rich and original account of Muir’s inner development as an environmental thinker and offers an interpretation of Muir’s formative years, one that reveals his relationship with the Peltons. This is another secondary

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

source that is frequently cited in this study because of its detailed analysis of the relationship between the Peltons and Muir.

This paper analyzes Muir's formative years between 1860-1861 using letters as the primary source. It also uses secondary sources to provide a background context to the events that defined these important years. These years contribute to the understanding of Muir's inner development as a spiritual and environmental thinker and the understanding of his youth and early manhood in Wisconsin.

John Muir, U.S. Immigration and Wisconsin 1849-1860

Before analyzing the reasons behind how Muir ended up in Wisconsin, it is important to look at his family origins. It is also critical to appreciate that his father, Daniel Muir was the driver behind this change.

Daniel Muir made the choice for his family to emigrate from Scotland to the United States in February of 1849.¹⁰ There were many reasons for his decision. He had a deep and passionate belief in liberty and equality for all men.¹¹ His beliefs “disagreed violently with the Calvinistic doctrine of election, which proclaimed certain favored individuals were preordained by God to be saved while the rest of humanity was doomed to perdition,” and therefore withdrew from the Established Church.¹² He found his spiritual home through Thomas Campbell a preacher who organized his followers into a sect called the Disciples of Christ and called for, “a return to primitive Christianity as a basis of love and unity.”¹³ Furthermore, Campbell planted in his followers’ minds, “a driving urge to emigrate to America as a land of religious freedom and a new Utopia.”¹⁴ His aim was to acquire land and wealth in order to carry on the Lord’s work of saving souls.¹⁵

As he made the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean to the New York Harbor, Daniel kept his ears open to talk about the New World and which places would be best to settle.¹⁶ While many gold-seekers sought wealth in California, he saw a great deal of opportunity for wealth in

¹⁰ Wolfe, *Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir*, 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

Wisconsin.¹⁷ There are a many reasons why he headed towards southeastern Wisconsin. The area had “oak openings” where one could expect to raise a fine harvest the first year.¹⁸ There was talk and excitement about a canal planned to unite the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers.¹⁹ Further, “this single waterway would open up a passage for boats from the St. Lawrence to the Gulf of Mexico, making available to Wisconsin farmers the grain markets of Canada and the South of the United States.”²⁰ “The region had plenty of wood, water, shallow drying lakes, peat bogs, and an abundance of hardwood timber.”²¹ He had received advice from William Gray, a family friend, and his brother Philip Gray of Edinburgh that the land in Wisconsin was good for farming.²² He wanted to make use of the “antiquated farm machinery” he had purchased in Scotland and brought with to America.²³

Wisconsin has a land and inland water area of 56,154 square miles, plus more than 9,000 miles in Lakes Michigan and Superior.²⁴ The state’s land measures 295 miles across at the widest point, and 320 miles in the longest north-south dimension.²⁵ According to *The Wisconsin Frontier*, by Mark Wyman the district’s numbers climbed from a negligible total in 1836 to 7,163 by the 1840 census, while Wisconsin Territory’s overall population rose phenomenally from 30,749 in 1840, to 155,277 by 1846, to 304,756 by 1850.²⁶ (See Maps # 1, #2, and # 3).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ H. Russell Austin, *The Wisconsin Story* (The Milwaukee Journal: 1964), 9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Mark Wyman, *The Wisconsin Frontier* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 159.

The influx of migration to Wisconsin occurred for a number of reasons. The value of land in Wisconsin was rising fast.²⁷ In Milwaukee in 1836 “prices on town lots rose 100 percent in thirty days.”²⁸ “In 1839 when Milwaukee’s land office opened and southeastern lands were offered, sales in Wisconsin Territory topped 650,000 acres, four times Michigan’s total for the year and almost double that of Illinois.”²⁹ By 1845 nearly three million acres had been sold in Wisconsin, bringing the government \$3,768,106.51.³⁰ Other land offices were opened at St. Croix Falls in 1848; Willow River (Hudson) in 1849; Stevens Point in 1852; La Crosse in 1853, Superior and Eau Claire in 1857, and others followed at Menasha, Wausau, and Bayfield.³¹ “They [immigrants] could board a steamboat in Buffalo on a Sunday evening and arrive at Racine the following Friday, or head west in an ox-drawn wagon to Chicago and then proceed north on new but rough-hewn roads.”³² “Western fever” had renewed in Wisconsin a time for enterprise and a well-worn frontier slogan: Go west and grow up with the country.³³ The result was “a mingling of a diverse migrant system.”³⁴

Daniel chose to settle in Portage, Wisconsin for a number of reasons. There was talk of building a canal at Portage which would have made it an important highway of commerce however; it was never accomplished due to the advancement of the railroad system which was considered to be swifter and more practical.³⁵ “The principal rivers of the eastern watershed, the Fox, and that of the western watershed, the Wisconsin, are separated only by a low divide

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 157.

³³ *Ibid.*, 158.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

³⁵ E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past and Present*, no. 38 (1967): 57.

at Portage.”³⁶ A natural route is thus created by the combined valleys connecting the Mississippi and the St. Lawrence basins.³⁷ Throughout history the waterway stimulated the destinies of Native Americans, French trappers, explorers, and missionaries who took advantage of the resource.³⁸ Two famous explorers in 1673, Joliet and Father Marquette sailed up the Fox, crossed Le Portage, and went down the Wisconsin to the Mississippi.³⁹

The family located a farm of eighty acres ten miles to the northwest near the Fox River. It sat alongside a lake filled with fish and had plenty of oaks and hickory timber.⁴⁰ A home was built on the lake, overlooking a meadow.⁴¹ “This boggy, sloping meadow had many springs, all feeding the lake.”⁴² Daniel named his new estate Fountain Lake Farm.

³⁶ H. Russell Austin, *The Wisconsin Story* (The Milwaukee Journal: 1964), 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Wolfe, *Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir*, 31.

⁴⁰ Holmes, *The Young John Muir: An Environmental Biography*, 27.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

John Muir and The Wisconsin State Fair

While he plowed the lands and worked on his father's Fountain Lake farm his appreciation for the wilderness sustained his heart. Daniel was a strict father who had Muir on a work schedule calculated down to his lunch break. Muir invented an early rising machine and he invented time-saving devices so that he could have more time to toil among the crooks and crevices of the farm.

There are four prominent events that define Muir just prior to meeting the Peltons. First, he had just left home for the first time at the age of twenty-two and bid his family since birth farewell.⁴³ Second, his inventions were the talk of the Wisconsin State Agriculture Fair in Madison garnering his first taste of fame and praise which sparked his confidence.⁴⁴ Further, he took long walks along the campus paths which planted a strong desire to return to Madison as a student when he could find the means and as soon as possible.⁴⁵ Lastly, he was offered an apprenticeship-like opportunity from another inventor at the Fair that set the course for him to be in Prairie Du Chien.⁴⁶ In the following paragraphs these points will be further elaborated on.

When Muir left home he had mixed emotions. It was a sad time for him because his father did not approve of him leaving and yet it was also an exciting time because he was stretching his wings in the world. The final meal together as a family before he left the next morning for the Fair was sat in silence.⁴⁷ His father did not say goodbye.⁴⁸ Further, his last

⁴³ Wolfe, *Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir*, 58.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

words spoken to him were “a grim warning that leaving home would be a mistake, for strangers would not care for him had his family.”⁴⁹

Regardless of his father’s approval or disapproval Muir did not hesitate to plow his own destiny. William Duncan, a friend, made the initial suggestion that he should display his inventions at the Wisconsin State Agriculture Fair.⁵⁰ Muir accepted his friends plan and hoped to find an apprenticeship.⁵¹ Mrs. D. H. Johnson who was a resident of Prairie Du Chien and later also a boarder at the same hotel owned by the Peltons was at the Fair that year and recalled in an article published in the *Milwaukee Evening Wisconsin* his physical appearance as a “clumsy looking boy” who carried with him two clocks and a thermometer.⁵² “Muir and his inventions were the chief objects of interest in the Fine Arts hall at the fair.”⁵³ Other exhibits included a squash that weighed 162 pounds, cheese that weighed 1,625 pounds, and three playful cub-bears from Pierce County.⁵⁴ Newspaper accounts recalled his inventions as ‘prodigies in the art of whittling,’ and ‘executed by genuine genius.’⁵⁵ “We will venture to predict that few articles will attract as much attention as these products of Mr. Muir’s ingenuity.”⁵⁶ This marked the first point in history that Muir received praise by the newspapers. It also marked the first time since he was eleven years old and arrived in the United States at the New York Harbor from Scotland that he had mingled among such large

⁴⁹ Steven Holmes, *The Young John Muir: An Environmental Biography* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 73.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁵² *Milwaukee Evening Wisconsin* (Milwaukee), 18 February 1915.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Joseph G. Baier, “John Muir’s Timepieces,” *Wisconsin Academy Review* 45 (Summer 1999):14.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Milwaukee Sentinel* (Milwaukee), 27 September 1860.

crowds which surrounded him and asked him to explain the devices.⁵⁷ When news reached his father at home in the local newspapers Daniel reacted with worry as opposed to joy about his son and warned about the sin of vanity.⁵⁸ To which Muir responded that “he had refrained from reading the newspaper praise lest it go to his head.”⁵⁹

If not for a chance meeting of a fellow inventor at the Fair, Muir probably wouldn't have traveled to Prairie Du Chien where he met the Peltons. “The only exhibit rivaling John's clocks in popularity was the famous ice boat, the *Lady Franklin*.”⁶⁰ Muir was interested to meet “the Wizard of New Jersey,” and his “greatest invention of the age,” which was a “flat-bottomed boat, designed to carry both passengers and freight and would run by steam on ice.”⁶¹ The ice boat had taken prizes at scientific institutes but ultimately was a failure and had bluffed leading engineers.⁶² However, at the time, Muir gladly accepted an unpaid apprenticeship with Wiard in Prairie Du Chien.⁶³

As Muir boarded a railroad car from Madison to Prairie Du Chien he thought about the many changes that had recently occurred in his life. He had no idea what would become of him, how he would provide for himself, or where he would sleep. Still fresh in his mind was the hauntingly silent moments between his father and himself before leaving home. His inventions had received attention and reception at the Fair and he knew deep down that he most wanted to be a student at the University. The trip allowed him to shed a bit of bashfulness. With the praise of his inventions the road ahead became easier. He wondered how he would take care of

⁵⁷ *Milwaukee Evening Wisconsin* (Milwaukee), 18 February 1915.

⁵⁸ Wolfe, *Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir*, 60.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

himself. The fields he plowed endlessly in his youth in Wisconsin were the last thing on his mind. His future gleamed forward with virtue on his way to Prairie Du Chien.

John Muir, The Mondell Hotel, and The Peltons

When Muir arrived with Wiard to Prairie Du Chien they were greeted by the town band.⁶⁴ People were more excited for the arrival of the *Lady Franklin* than Civil War rumblings that were taking place in the recent context of the Lincoln-Douglas debates.⁶⁵ John Muir came to Prairie Du Chien expecting to work in the shop of a Mr. Wiard but soon found Mr. Wiard was too busy to give him much instruction.⁶⁶ “Mr. Pelton offered him the position of chore boy at the Mondell house, and he gladly accepted.”⁶⁷

The Mondell Hotel was located on the corner of Bluff and Minnesota Streets.⁶⁸ “The hotel was built shortly after the railroad spread to the area.”⁶⁹ Soon after it was built the hotel went into the hands of Edward Wright Pelton as a boarding house.⁷⁰ E W. Pelton was born in July of 1808 in Massachusetts.⁷¹ By 1847 he moved to Prairie Du Chien in Wisconsin and built the first regular grist-mill which was situated on the east bank of the Mississippi river, in the northwestern part of the city.⁷² He is listed as a mill proprietor in the 1870 census and the value of his real estate was 40,000 dollars and the value of his personal estate was 3,000

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Milwaukee Evening Wisconsin* (Milwaukee), 18 February 1915.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Jeremiah M. Pelton, “Genealogy of the Pelton Family in America: Being a Record of the Descendants of John Pelton who settled in Boston, Mass., about 1630-1632, and died in Dorchester, Mass., January 23 1681,” <http://books.google.com/books> (accessed 15 March, 2010).

⁷² “*Mills and Manufactories, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin*” <http://www.wisconsin-genealogy.net/prairieduchien/mills-manufactories.htm> (accessed 15 March, 2010).

dollars.⁷³ At the time he was one of the wealthiest men in the county of Crawford.⁷⁴ In 1856 he married Francis Newton.⁷⁵

By 1860 when Muir arrived to the Mondell Hotel the family consisted of Edward, his wife Francis, two children Fannie and Willie, and his niece Emily Pelton.⁷⁶ “Also a boarder was Mrs. D. H. Johnson who had first seen Muir at the Fair. She describes in *The Milwaukee Evening* the scenario when Muir arrived to the hotel.

One of the vacant rooms of the hotel was fitted up and furnished with a cot bed, a light stand, a stove, etc. and we were summoned to see the working of John’s wonderful invention. It was the identical clock which we had seen at the fair which would at any hour at which John might set it gave an alarm, scratch a match, light a candle, light a fire in the stove and finally tip the bed up so that its occupant would find himself upon his feet. These performances were a never failing fun of amusement to the household.

The Peltons and hotel guests admired Muir’s ability to use his mind in a genius and inventive way. Just as his inventions had garnered attention and were the talk of the Wisconsin State Fair in 1860 so also did he receive attention and praise within the hearts of the Pelton family and the hotel guests for his inventions which were located in his room. Many times hotel guests and members of the family were entertained by Muir explaining the many finer details of his inventions to them. Among the boarders were the school principal and several teachers.⁷⁷ All

⁷³ Census Place: Prairie Du Chien, Crawford County, Wisconsin, U.S. Census of Population, 1870, in Family History Library Film: 553206.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Jeremiah M. Pelton, “Genealogy of the Pelton Family in America: Being a Record of the Descendants of John Pelton who settled in Boston, Mass., about 1630-1632, and died in Dorchester, Mass., January 23 1681,” <http://books.google.com/books> (accessed 15 March, 2010).

⁷⁶ Wolfe, *Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir*, 62.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

together they formed an intelligent and vivacious circle of young people, and John, although a servant, was treated as a friend and equal.”⁷⁸ The hotel was the center of the town.

Muir’s experiences and relationships are interconnected as his sense of self hood and his place in nature develops. When Muir developed his spiritual, emotional, and family-like familiarity with the Peltons it was not individualistically based, but the whole Pelton family including “baby” Fannie Mae her younger cousin under the age of two was “dear to Muir as if she was of his own flesh” became emotionally bonded to him.⁷⁹ At the Mondell Hotel Muir gained a second family whom he also brought closer together as a unit by sewing them into his life together. “He initially related to them as a group rather than as individuals.”⁸⁰

The Mondell Hotel is significant in Muir’s life for a number of reasons. “His religious sensibilities were somewhat offended by the “dandy society” of the Pelton household, where the “mannerly and educated” people kissed, had parties, and played games.”⁸¹ He developed intimate and intense relationships with the women of the family: mother Frances, niece Emily, and “baby”, Fannie which extended in ways that his family relationships could not.⁸² Further, due to the nature of the family atmosphere at the Mondell Hotel, Muir is able to place himself in the position of a same-age brother to their niece Emily rather than the traditional domestic relationship that a male/female with admiration for one another might be placed in. This freed

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Holmes, *The Young John Muir: An Environmental Biography*, 82.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁸² *Ibid.*

him from being confronted with the issue of marriage which provided the basis for their brotherly/sisterly love.⁸³

Emily Pelton was born December 21, 1837 just one year prior to when Muir was born in 1838.⁸⁴ This gives them a one year age difference with Pelton being slightly older. She moved to Prairie Du Chien from Massachusetts in 1844 with her father Ezra Pelton Jr., her mother, and her five siblings.⁸⁵ Her father was a carpenter, a builder, and a natural mechanic.⁸⁶ Malaria fever invaded the family home in 1846 and the only survivors were herself and her older sister Ida Estelle.⁸⁷ She was adopted by her uncle Edward Pelton who was the brother of her father.⁸⁸ Emily moves into the Mondell Hotel with her aunt and uncle and in 1860 she meets Muir.

Pelton and Muir form a significant emotional bond that lasts the duration of the rest of their lives. The letters begin in 1864 up until the very last one written in 1914.⁸⁹ In this short letter he wishes her a happy New Year.⁹⁰ The letters which Muir wrote to Emily while he was in Canada in 1863-1864 describe the natural scenery he was surrounded by.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁸⁴ Jeremiah M. Pelton, "Genealogy of the Pelton Family in America: Being a Record of the Descendants of John Pelton who settled in Boston, Mass., about 1630-1632, and died in Dorchester, Mass., January 23 1681," <http://books.google.com/books> (accessed 15 March, 2010).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

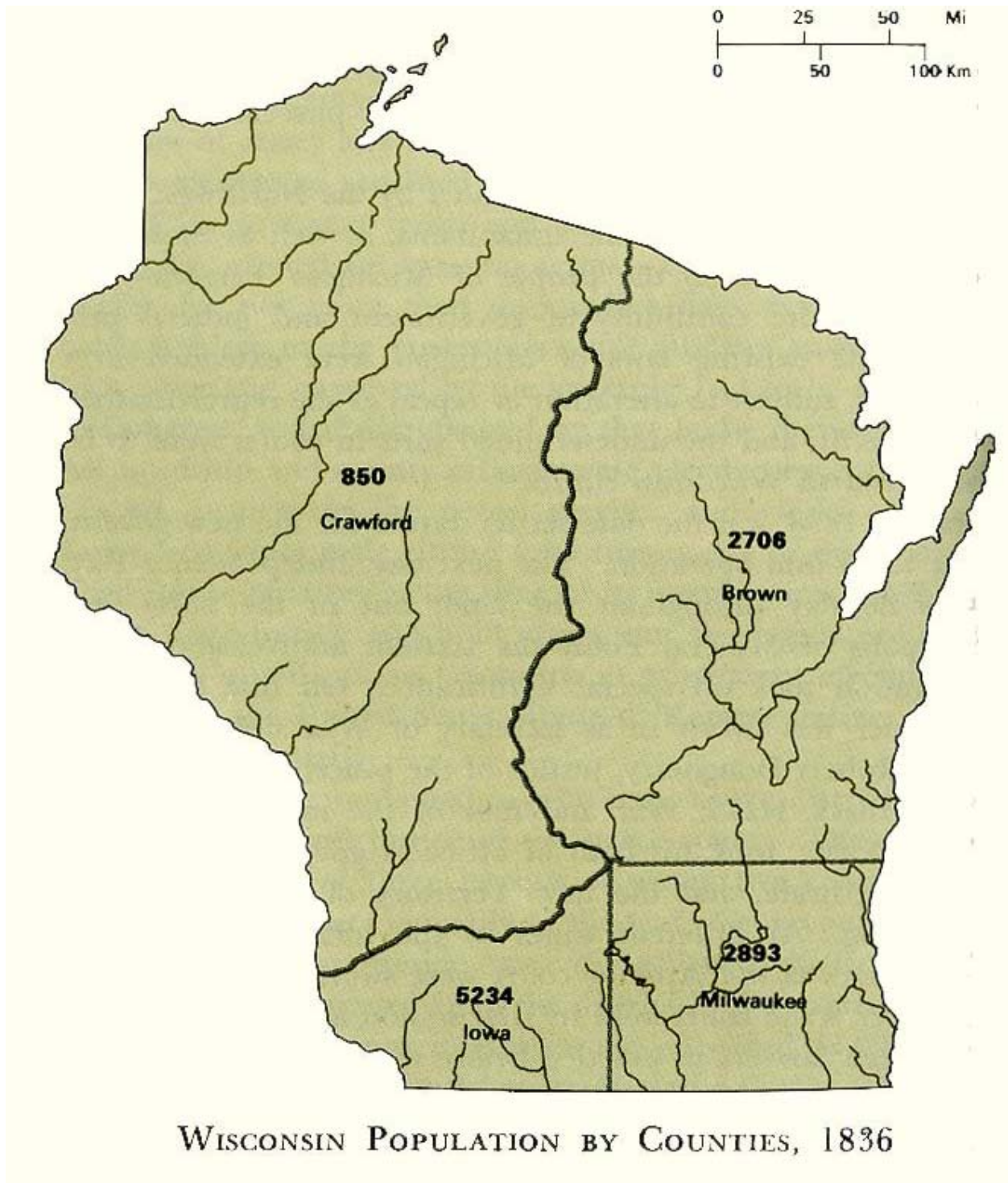
⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ John Muir to Emily Pelton, 3 January 1914, in *The Manuscript Letters of John Muir, 1861-1914*, Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.

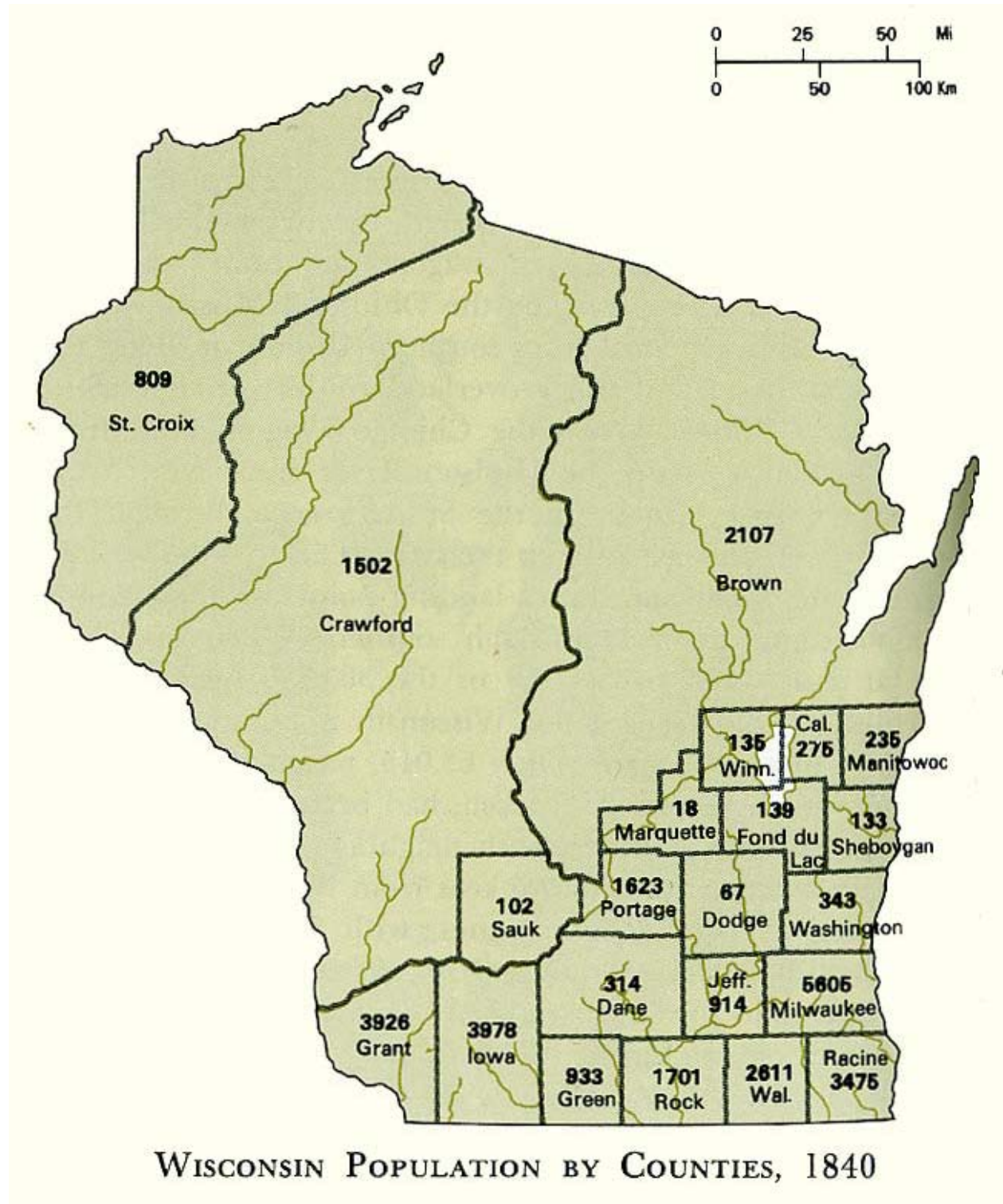
⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Map # 1: Wisconsin Population by Counties, 1836



Source: The History of Wisconsin (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1973-1998), v. 1: From Exploration to Statehood: 250

Map # 2: Wisconsin Population by Counties, 1840



Source: The History of Wisconsin (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1973-1998), v. 1: From Exploration to Statehood: 46

Map # 3: Wisconsin Population by Counties, 1850



Source: The History of Wisconsin (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1973-1998), v. 1: From Exploration to Statehood: 469

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