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FOR WHOM IS MOUNT LE CONTE NAMED?

KENNETH WISE*

For the better part of the past century and a half historians have subscribed to the tradition that Mount Le Conte in the Great Smoky Mountains was named for Joseph Le Conte, a professor of chemistry at South Carolina College during the years immediately prior to the Civil War. This tradition, however, is not supported by historical evidence. Participants in the events leading to the naming of Mount Le Conte make no mention of Joseph Le Conte, but do include his brother, John, among those who first determined the elevation of the mountain. An examination of the scientific reports and newspaper correspondence by these participants will clearly show that the third highest peak in the Great Smoky Mountains was intended to be named for John Le Conte and not Joseph, as historians have long supposed.

According to tradition, botanist Samuel Botsford Buckley affixed Joseph Le Conte's name to the mountain in recognition of the professor's assistance in monitoring a stationary barometer in Waynesville, North Carolina, while Buckley and Thomas Lanier Clingman, longtime congressman from the North Carolina mountain district, ventured into the Smoky highlands to measure the higher peaks. There is little doubt that Samuel Buckley endowed Mount Le Conte with its present name. In November 1858, two months after his expedition with Thomas Clingman, Buckley submitted his findings to the *Weekly Raleigh Register*, giving the elevation of a Mount Le Conte and identifying it as "being about three miles from the road and near the Alum Cave, being entirely in Tennessee, and . . . probably the highest Mt. wholly in that State."¹ In this same report he also identified the highest peak in the Smokies, which he called "Mt. Buckley."

In the following year Buckley submitted a report to the *American Journal of Science and Arts* in which he catalogued the elevations of mountains in Tennessee and North Carolina that he had measured in 1858, as well as those of the North Carolina mountains measured in 1838 and 1844 by Elisha Mitchell, professor in sciences at the University of North Carolina, and those made in 1856 by Arnold Guyot, a Swiss scientist from Princeton.² In this report Buckley listed among his measurements the elevations of peaks along the Smoky Mountain chain, including "Mount Buckley . . . 6755 feet" and "Mount LeConte . .

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¹ Communication from S.B. Buckley, October 27, 1858, *Weekly Raleigh Register*, November 10, 1858.

² S.B. Buckley, "Mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee," *American Journal of Science and Arts*, ser. 2, 27 (1859): 286-295.



Mount Le Conte. *Courtesy UTK Special Collections.*

. 6670 feet." Here Buckley also acknowledged his debt to Professor Le Conte for his assistance in observing the stationary barometer while he and Clingman ventured to the top of the Smoky Mountains. "The following are the heights of some mountains and places in North Carolina and Tennessee, south and west of Asheville, which were measured by us with two of Green's standard barometers during the months of September and October in 1858. Prof. J. Le Conte of Columbia, S.C., observed the stationary barometer at Waynesville, N.C., for measurements of most of the highest Smoky Mountains, but being called away by the duties of his professorship, the stationary barometer was removed to Col. Cathey's, at the Forks of the Pigeon, Haywood Co., N.C., and placed in charge of Miss. S. Cathey."³

Up until the time of Buckley's publication, Mount Le Conte was known as the Group of Bullhead, Tennessee, and consisted of three peaks with the generic appellatives Central Peak, West Peak, and North Peak. Buckley affixed the name Mount Le Conte to Central Peak. To North Peak he assigned the name Mount Safford in honor of James M. Safford, state geologist of Tennessee and later a professor at Vanderbilt

³ *Ibid.*, 287.

University, who was one of the earlier scientific explorers in the Smokies. In the year following Buckley's publication, Arnold Guyot submitted a report to the *Asheville News* outlining the results of his ten-year study of the geography of the Allegheny mountain system. In his report Guyot deferred to Buckley regarding the names of the individual peaks of the Smokies. "As to the Smoky range and the mountains of Haywood county, wherever I do not find any name current among the people living about the mountain, I preserve the one attached to it by Mr. Buckley, in the publication of his meritorious measurements made in September, 1858, provided, however, the points can be identified."⁴ Guyot followed Buckley's precedent in retaining the names Mount Le Conte and Mount Safford for Central Peak and North Peak respectively. Guyot departed from Buckley's nomenclature, however, in naming West Peak, which Buckley had left unnamed. "The name of Rev. Mr. Curtis, which was given by Mr. Buckley to Mount Love, is transferred to the western peak of Bullhead, the second in height to that group, the elevation of which was first ascertained by me in 1859."⁵

Hence, by 1860, the individual peaks of the Group of Bullhead were known as Mount Le Conte, Mount Safford, and Mount Curtis. The names Safford and Curtis were not assimilated into popular use, and thus never became part of Smoky Mountain nomenclature. The name Le Conte, however, soon became synonymous with the whole mountain massif. Almost immediately after Guyot's report was published, popular travel literature about the Smoky Mountains would refer to the whole of the Group of Bullhead as Mount Le Conte, a convention that has persisted to this day.⁶

Soon after their expedition to the top of the Smoky Mountains, Buckley and Clingman became embroiled in a bitter public dispute concerning which of the two should receive credit for measuring the highest mountain of the Smokies (Clingmans Dome) and, ultimately, whose name should rightfully be affixed to this highest peak. The controversy ignited a few days after Clingman returned from the

⁴ Arnold Guyot, "Guyot's Measurement of the Mountains of Western North Carolina," in Thomas L. Clingman, ed., *Selections from the Speeches and Writings of Hon. Thomas L. Clingman of North Carolina* (Raleigh, 1978), 140-41. Guyot's report was originally published in the *Asheville News*, July 18, 1860.

⁵ Guyot, "Guyot's Measurement of the Mountains of Western North Carolina," 141.

⁶ An early example is written by R., of Tennessee, "A Week in the Great Smoky Mountains," *Southern Literary Messenger* 31 (1860): 127. "The peaks just above the Alum Cave, are called by the hunters 'Bull's Head' Their altitudes have recently been taken, and one of them has been found to be 6670 feet high. This one had been called Mt. Le Conte, in honor of Professor Le Conte of South Carolina. The other peak is 6559 feet high, and has been called Mt. Safford, for the State Geologist of Tennessee."

mountain when an article appearing in the *Asheville Spectator* credited Buckley, Clingman, and Le Conte with measuring the highest mountain east of the Mississippi and concluded by saying "let it in all conscience be called 'Mt. Clingman.'"⁷

According to the *Spectator's* report, the source of the information was Professor Le Conte. A few days later the newspaper retracted its story. "We learn that in giving the principal credit to Mr. Clingman in the late measurement of the high peak of the Smoky Mountain we made a mistake. We take great pleasure in making the correction. As we learn, upon good authority, Professor Buckley measured the Mountain and Professor Lee Conte [*sic*] observed the stationary barometer at Waynesville, while Mr. Clingman was of little or no assistance, having gone along on his own hook, as 'an independent outsider.'"⁸ At the time of the newspaper report, Clingman was involved in a hotly contested political race. Earlier in his career he had been cast as the villain in a widely-publicized dispute with Professor Elisha Mitchell concerning who first charted Black Mountain (Mount Mitchell), and thus Clingman's enemies seized the opportunity to escalate his contention with Buckley into a minor political rumble.⁹

On Thomas Clingman's behalf, Samuel L. Love, who accompanied Buckley and Clingman on their Smoky Mountain expedition, submitted to the *North Carolina Standard* his account of the events and included with it an exact copy of a letter from Professor Le Conte to Thomas Clingman. In the letter, Le Conte stated "The following are the results of my calculations of the heights of the several peaks of the Balsam and Smoky Mountains, based upon data furnished by the barometric observations of yourself, Mr. Buckley, and myself."¹⁰ After listing a few peaks and corresponding elevations appended by some explanatory paragraphs, the letter, as recorded in the newspaper, is signed "John Le Conte."

The letter from John Le Conte to Clingman was dated November 16, 1858. Le Conte was apparently made aware of the dispute between Buckley and Clingman, and on November 19, 1858, responded with a

⁷ *Asheville Spectator* as reported in the *Asheville News*, October 7, 1858. Clingman probably initiated the news report, since Buckley continued exploring the mountains for two more months after his joint expedition with Clingman.

⁸ *Asheville Spectator* as reported in *New Bern Daily Progress*, October 16, 1858.

⁹ For a recent discussion of the Mitchell-Clingman dispute see Thomas E. Jeffrey, "A Whole Torrent of Mean and Malevolent Abuse': Party Politics and the Clingman-Mitchell Controversy, Part I," *North Carolina Historical Review* 70 (1993): 241-65.

¹⁰ Communication from Samuel L. Love and Bayles M. Edney, November 20, 1858, *North Carolina Standard*, November 23, 1858.

letter to Buckley. It begins "Mr. Buckley, Dear Sir: Inasmuch as I have expressed myself quite positively in relation to Mr. Clingman's claim to the honor of having the highest peak of the Smoky Mountains named after him; I wish to inform you, that had I been acquainted with the nature of the controversy between yourself and him, I should not have felt myself authorized to express any opinion in regard to the subject." Buckley included this letter as corroborating evidence in an extended argument supporting his side of the dispute. He marshaled his arguments in a long essay which he submitted with the letter from Le Conte to the *Greensborough Patriot*.¹¹ This letter, according to the newspaper copy, is likewise signed "John Le Conte."

The John Le Conte with whom Buckley and Clingman corresponded was the older brother of the Joseph Le Conte commonly supposed as the professor who assisted the Buckley-Clingman expedition. The events that gave rise to the later confusion were probably the result of several circumstances, the most important of which was the informal manner by which landmarks in the Great Smoky Mountains were named. As Guyot implied in a report to *The American Journal of Science and Arts*, the naming of mountains in the Smokies was more a matter of lore and local tradition than of systematic nomenclature.¹² The Buckley-Clingman expedition was a relatively minor event even in these isolated mountains, and the particular details in the story of naming Mount Le Conte were probably quickly forgotten in the collective memory of Smoky Mountain inhabitants.

Whatever uncertainties that may have existed about Le Conte's role in the Buckley-Clingman expedition were exacerbated by the fact that the educational and academic careers of the brothers Le Conte were

¹¹ Communication from Samuel B. Buckley, *Greensborough Patriot*, March 11, 1859.

¹² Arnold Guyot, "On the Appalachian Mountain System," *American Journal of Science and Arts*, ser. 2, 31 (1861): 179.

The principles which have seemed to me proper and which have guided me in the adoption of names of mountains are to give preference to the name employed in the immediate neighborhood of the point designated. When more than one name has been given to the same point, as happens when it is seen from valleys on two different sides of the mountain, it seems proper for the observer to adopt that name which appears most natural or more euphonic. When the choice lies between the name of a man and that of a name which is descriptive and characteristic, I should choose the latter. In regard to points without established names, but recently named by scientific observers, and not by residents of the country, the right of priority ought to be respected, provided the identity of the points can be sufficiently established, a matter by no means easy, unless the positions have been determined by instruments, or otherwise, with considerable care. But it is evident that popular usage will decide in the last resort and that the name universally adopted will, in time, become that which geography ought to accept.

remarkably similar. John Le Conte entered Franklin College (as the University of Georgia was then more often called) in 1835. Upon graduation in 1838 he studied medicine at the College of Physicians and Surgeons of New York, receiving his degree in 1841. John returned to Georgia and practiced medicine for four years, then was appointed professor of chemistry and natural history at Franklin College. During 1855 he taught chemistry at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, and in 1856, he and his brother Joseph accepted professorships in physics and chemistry, respectively, at South Carolina College (now the University of South Carolina). After the war, the brothers each accepted professorships at the newly formed University of California in 1869. John held the chair of physics and served two tenures as acting president of the university.¹³

Like his older brother, Joseph also attended Franklin College, graduating in 1841. In 1843 he began studying at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, taking his degree in 1845. After finishing his medical studies, Joseph returned to Georgia and entered medical practice, which he abandoned in 1850 to study zoology and geology with Louis Agassiz at the newly established Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard University. After finishing at Harvard, Joseph began his academic career, teaching various science courses at Oglethorpe University and Franklin College, then moving with his brother to take a post at South Carolina College. In 1869 Joseph followed John to the University of California, where he accepted a professorship in geology and natural history.¹⁴

It is difficult to determine when and where the Joseph Le Conte tradition first started. Contemporaries of Buckley and Clingman familiar with the controversy were probably aware that either of the Le Conte brothers could have monitored the barometer, nevertheless they failed to acknowledge it as a point of possible confusion.¹⁵ Immediately prior to the expedition Buckley rode a horse from Asheville to Flat Rock, North Carolina, where John Le Conte was in summer residence, and prevailed upon the professor to place his barometer at Buckley's service by moving it to Waynesville. From Joseph Le Conte's autobiography it is clear that both brothers were in

¹³ Charles Coulston Gillispie, ed., *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* (New York, 1973), 8:121-22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 122-23.

¹⁵ See letters by Samuel L. Love and Bayles M. Edney, *North Carolina Standard*, November 23, 1858.



Camp at summit of Mount Le Conte, 1937. *Courtesy UTK Special Collections.*

Flat Rock for the summer, an occurrence which could not have easily escaped the notice of Buckley and his fellow travelers.¹⁶

There is strong circumstantial evidence that probably induced later generations to assume that Joseph Le Conte monitored the barometer in Waynesville. Joseph was certainly the better known of the two. While his name was widely disseminated among the academic community through his prolific scientific publications, he was more familiar to the general population as a founding member of the Sierra Club, an organization closely associated with mountains and the wilderness experience. At Harvard he studied with Louis Agassiz, who was a close friend and professional associate of Arnold Guyot.¹⁷ This association linked Joseph Le Conte with Arnold Guyot, who is often, incorrectly, credited with naming Mount Le Conte. Joseph Le Conte may also have made Samuel Buckley's acquaintance during their student days at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, as Buckley finished his studies there the year Joseph Le Conte started.

¹⁶ William Dallam Armes, ed., *The Autobiography of Joseph Le Conte* (New York, 1903), 174.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

Robert Lindsay Mason was perhaps the first to codify the Joseph tradition in written historical narrative. Mason cites no sources and he erroneously attributes the naming of the mountain to Arnold Guyot, suggesting that the tradition he recorded was oral. "His [Arnold Guyot's] friend, Joseph Le Conte, received a signal honor in having one of the most unique peaks named for him. Le Conte was born in Liberty County, Georgia, and later Professor of Geology and Mineralogy in the University of California, served as chemist for the Confederacy at Columbia, South Carolina, during the war."¹⁸

A certain official credence is given to the Mason version by Paul M. Fink, an amateur historian who served with Mason on a commission appointed in 1929 at the behest of the United States Geological Survey to canvass all the place names in the Great Smoky Mountains for correctness in details of nomenclature. Fink followed the Mason tradition, adding only the barometer story. "Smoky's most spectacular mountain, Le Conte, carries the name of a man nationally honored for his researches in the field of geology, but we have no evidence to indicate that Joseph Le Conte ever saw the peak upon which Guyot bestowed his name. Le Conte was a friend for whose attainments Guyot had great admiration; and, too, he was acting as observer at the stationary barometer in Waynesville for a part of the time during which Guyot was making his own readings on the high tops."¹⁹

In 1932 the United States Geographic Board rendered a decision recognizing Le Conte as an authorized place name. In a descriptive narrative accompanying the entry for Le Conte, the board endorsed the Joseph tradition, and in so doing erred not only in honoring Joseph Le Conte but also in giving Arnold Guyot credit for naming the mountain. "This very large mountain has three tops which Guyot named Mount Le Conte, Curtis, and Safford. The last two have been superseded by Cliff Top and Myrtle Point. So named by Prof. Arnold Guyot, prior to 1860, honoring Joseph Le Conte, famous geologist, who acted as observer of a stationary barometer during some of Guyot's explorations in this region."²⁰

The Joseph tradition as established by Mason remained throughout the twentieth century the accepted canon of Smoky Mountain lore,

¹⁸ Robert Lindsay Mason, *The Lure of the Great Smokies* (Boston, 1927), 52.

¹⁹ Paul M. Fink, "Smoky Mountain History as Told in Place Names," *East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications* 6 (1934): 7. Cf. Paul M. Fink, *That's Why They Call It . . . The Names and Lore of the Great Smokies* (Jonesboro, 1956), where Fink corrects his former narrative to include Samuel Buckley as the person responsible for naming Mount Le Conte.

²⁰ United States Geographic Board, *Decisions of the United States Geographic Board* (Washington, 1932), No. 13—Decisions Rendered January 15, 1932.

finding its way into general histories of the Great Smoky Mountains²¹ as well as a definitive scholarly biography of Joseph Le Conte.²² Le Conte's own family apparently understood the mountain to have been named after Joseph, but for reasons that have nothing to do with the Great Smokies.²³

Samuel Botsford Buckley was quite specific in outlining the circumstances under which he named Mount Le Conte. Arnold Guyot, who later also measured Mount Le Conte, confirmed that the name originated with Buckley and took no exception with the circumstances that suggested the name. The correspondence concerning John Le Conte's role in the Buckley-Clingman expedition and the fact that there is no mention of Joseph Le Conte in connection with the Great Smoky Mountains suggest that Samuel Buckley intended that Mount Le Conte be named for the elder brother, John.

²¹ See Elizabeth Skaggs Bowman, *Land of High Horizons* (Kingsport, 1948), 18; Laura Thornborough, *The Great Smoky Mountains* (Knoxville, 1971), 5-6; and Michael Frome, *Strangers in High Places: The Story of the Great Smoky Mountains* (New York, 1966), 40, 104. In the last, the most recent historical sketch of the Great Smoky Mountains, Frome reiterates the basic Joseph narrative but casts some doubt on its veracity as Joseph Le Conte makes no mention of it in his own account of his affairs. See also Dick Murlless and Constance Stallings, *Hiker's Guide to the Smokies* (San Francisco, 1973), 228; and *Hiking Trails of the Smokies* (Gatlinburg, 1994), 416.

²² Lester D. Stephens, *Joseph LeConte: Gentle Prophet of Evolution* (Baton Rouge, 1982), 64.

²³ Hal Johnson, "Berkeleyan's Mountain," *Berkeley* [California] *Gazette*, April 29, 1943. Caroline Le Conte, daughter of Joseph, remembers that the mountain was named for her father because of his contribution to the Confederacy during the Civil War. Her father was consulting chemist of the Confederate States Nitre and Mining Bureau and because of his efforts was "accredited with keeping the Confederate armies in the field a year longer than they could have held out without him."