Joseph Le Conte (1823-1901) was one of the most respected scientists in the United States in his day. Born in Liberty County, Georgia, Le Conte attended the University of Georgia, and in 1845 received the degree of Doctor of Medicine at the College of Physicians & Surgeons in New York. Le Conte began his career as a physician in Macon, Georgia, but soon realized that his primary interest was scientific research and teaching. After a year studying under eminent Harvard Geologist Louis Agassiz, he began his teaching career at the University of Georgia. During the Civil War, he taught chemistry and geology at South Carolina College. After the war, because ‘rebels’ were not eligible for employment, Le Conte traveled west and, with his brother John, took part in the organization of the University of California, where he taught geology, botany and natural history.

At 46 years of age, Le Conte entered a new period of his life. In his autobiography he wrote, “These early years in California were very active ones for me; the wonderful new country, so different from any that I had previously seen, the climate, the splendid scenery, the active, energetic people, and the magnificent field for scientific and especially for geological investigations, stimulating my intellectual activity to the highest degree.”

Le Conte first visited Yosemite in July of 1870. The experience changed his life forever. On this trip he first met naturalist John Muir. He was familiar with Muir’s theories on the geologic development of Yosemite and was anxious to discuss the subject with him.

Muir proposed that Yosemite Valley was formed by ancient glaciers, huge moving sheets of ice that gouged out the spectacular valley walls. Several noted geologists of the day objected to such a view, believing that Yosemite had been formed instead through tremendous earthquakes. Le Conte agreed with Muir’s basic hypothesis about the glacial origin of Yosemite, but believed that stream erosion and pre-glacial action had played a more important role in the valley’s creation. Later scientific studies confirmed Le Conte’s position.

In the summer of 1872, when Le Conte returned to Yosemite, Muir showed him active glaciers whose movement had been recorded with the aid of stakes. In September of that year, Le Conte validated Muir’s findings and published them in an important scientific paper.

Summer after summer, Le Conte returned to Yosemite for scientific research and to renew his spirit. He published numerous papers on glaciers, the origin and structure of mountains and on volcanic activity east of the Sierra.

As a scientist, he was renowned for his profound scholarship. He published many works on geology, including a standard textbook, *Elements of Geology*, that was used for years. His broad-ranging scholarship was also represented by his publication of *Sight*, a book on the physiology of vision, and another work on religion and science. After being elected to the American Philosophical Society, in 1874, Le Conte was elected to the National Academy of Sciences, one of the greatest honors that can be bestowed on a scientist. In addition, in 1891, he served as President of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Le Conte also wrote a popular book, *A Journal of Ramblings Through the High Sierra*, first published in 1875, which
recorded his adventures in the High Sierra. In addition, he published a work popular with both scientists and religious leaders called *Evolution and Its Relation to Religious Thought*. Le Conte was a theistic evolutionist, referred to by the *San Francisco Examiner* as “a gentle prophet of evolution.” Joseph Le Conte was a charter member of the Sierra Club, founded in 1892 by John Muir, and served on the Board of Directors until 1898. Later, his son, Joseph N. Le Conte, succeeded him as a board member until 1940.

Le Conte died on July 6, 1901 in Yosemite Valley. It was his wish to be buried in the Valley, but his family chose to bury him in the family plot in Oakland. In 1903, his admirers and friends in the Sierra Club erected a memorial lodge in his honor in Yosemite Valley. On the wall of the memorial hangs a bronze tablet on which is inscribed, “Joseph Le Conte, Scientist & Savant, Died in this Valley, July 6, 1901.”

“I have heard and read much of this wonderful valley, but I can truly say I have never imagined the grandeur of the reality.” — Joseph Le Conte

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

For more information on Joseph Le Conte and the Le Conte Memorial Lodge, please visit these websites or contact:

*Joseph Le Conte in Sierra Club History*
www.sierraclub.org/history/key_figures/leconte
www.sierraclub.org/education/leconte/

*During the summer, contact*
Sierra Club Le Conte Memorial Lodge Curator
P.O. Box 755, Yosemite, CA 95389, (209) 372-4542
leconte.curator@sierraclub.org

*The Le Conte family’s Woodmanston Plantation*
www.lecontewoodmanston.org

*During the winter, contact*
Le Conte Lodge Committee Chair
P.O. Box 3543, Visalia, CA 93278, (559) 739-8527
leconte.curator@sierraclub.org