

Jonathan Jarvis, Director
National Park Service
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC

Stephanie Toothman,
Keeper of the National Register
Associate Director for Cultural Resources
National Park Service
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC

Re: Request to Re-Name Le Conte Memorial Lodge, Yosemite National Park

Dear Director Jarvis and Ms. Toothman:

In 1904, the Sierra Club built the structure known as Le Conte Memorial Lodge in the Yosemite Valley, with privately donated funds. The Lodge was originally located in Curry Village, at the base of Glacier Point, but in 1912, it was moved (again at private expense) to its current location, across from Yosemite's Housekeeping Camp, where it serves as a visitor education center and library. The Sierra Club continues to manage, operate, and maintain the Lodge at its own private expense (almost \$100,000 per year), pursuant to a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Park Service, renewable in 2016. The Lodge is open for visitation during late spring and summer and receives approximately 16,000 visitors each year.

The Lodge was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1977, and was designated as a National Historic Landmark (NHL) in 1985, based on its significance in the areas of architecture and conservation. Although the Sierra Club is identified as the owner of the property on the NHL documentation, the property is within Yosemite National Park, and is technically owned by the National Park Service, which has jurisdiction over the property.

The Lodge was originally named for Joseph Le Conte, who was a co-founder of the Sierra Club in 1892. Le Conte died at Yosemite in 1901, and the Sierra Club raised private funds for the construction of the Lodge to recognize his contributions to conservation and science. The Lodge also includes an interior plaque with a bas-relief image of Joseph Le Conte.

However, the Sierra Club would like to change both the common and historic names of the Lodge, to the Yosemite Valley Educational Center. On October 22, 2015 the Sierra Club's national board of directors formally voted to seek the name change, and we request that the National Park Service work with us to promptly begin the process of implementing this change to the common and historic names. Since the initial name of the Lodge was chosen by the Sierra Club, and its construction was privately funded, we

believe that the National Park Service should give strong deference to the Sierra Club's desire to modify that name.

Mr. Le Conte was a respected physician and scientist who served on the faculty at several different colleges and universities, and was a co-founder of the Sierra Club. However, he was an unabashed white supremacist, whose racist views were widely published after the Civil War, including in a book entitled "The Race Problem in the South," in 1892.

A generation or two ago, this aspect of Mr. Le Conte's legacy was virtually unknown to the public. More recently, however, the public is beginning to learn more about Le Conte's racial politics, and public pressure is mounting to change the name of a number of places that were originally named in his honor.

Mr. Le Conte's name is connected to a wide variety of places, both natural and man-made. The natural features named for him include: Mount Le Conte in the Sierra Nevada range; Le Conte Glacier in Alaska; Le Conte Canyon in Kings Canyon National Park; Le Conte Divide in the Sierra National Forest; and Le Conte Falls in Yosemite National Park. Man-made places named for Le Conte include public roads in Berkeley and Los Angeles, buildings on college campuses in South Carolina and Berkeley, and public schools in California.

One of the most recent contexts in which this kind of name change has been recommended is in a local school district in Berkeley, California, where public outcry is leading the school board to consider changing the name of Le Conte Elementary School. Similarly, the Black Student Union at U.C. Berkeley is pushing to rename a building on campus named after Mr. Le Conte.

As Le Conte's racist publications continue to become more widely known through publicity about these high-profile controversies, and the public becomes more aware of the issue, those who visit the Le Conte Memorial Lodge in Yosemite Valley are more likely to be horrified and offended to learn that this public building is named in honor of Mr. Le Conte. It is especially troubling to have his name associated with a building whose very function is to welcome visitors, and to educate and inspire them. His name sends a mixed message to all visitors to the Lodge.

In our view, it is important to distinguish Mr. Le Conte from other historical figures whose actions and views may be inconsistent with our fundamental values of equality and justice today. Many prominent leaders in our nation's history owned slaves or fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War. But Le Conte was a man who actively promoted and published his white supremacist philosophy for more than a generation after the end of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Changing the name of the Sierra Club's lodge would not set a precedent that calls into question every image of the Confederate flag or every statue of Robert E. Lee. Those are very different. The Sierra Club does not seek the eradication of every mention of his name from our nation's public lands. But it would be an insult to visitors to retain his name in association with an educational center that is supposed to serve as a place to welcome visitors with open doors.

We urge you to begin the process at once to formally change the historic and common name of Le Conte Memorial Lodge, and to remove and relocate the plaque honoring Mr. Le Conte, currently located over the Lodge fireplace. We look forward to working with you toward this important goal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Aaron Mair". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "A".

Aaron Mair, Sierra Club Board President

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Brune". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "M".

Michael Brune, Sierra Club Executive Director

Cc: Caroline Hall, Federal Preservation Officer, U.S. Department of the Interior
Sande McDermott, Federal Preservation Officer, National Park Service
Paul Loether, Chief, National Register of Historic Places and National Historic Landmarks,
National Park Service
Don Neubacher, Superintendent, Yosemite National Park
Dr. Robert K. Sutton, Deputy Federal Preservation Officer, National Park Service