

## John Burroughs -- Naturalist of West Park

### Descendants of John Burroughs

**John Burroughs**  
born 3 Apr 1837  
Roxbury NY  
died 29 March 1921  
en route from West Coast to West Park  
buried:  
Roxbury NY

married 12 Sept 1857  
Tongore (now Olive) NY

**Ursula North**  
born 3 Jan 1836  
Tongore NY  
died 6 Mar 1907  
West Park  
buried: May 1907  
Tongore

**Julian Burroughs**  
born -15 Apr 1878  
West Park NY  
died 15 Dec 1954  
West Park NY  
buried  
Ascension Cemetery  
West Park NY

married 15 Sept 1902  
Keene Heights NY  
now called St. Hubert's  
in Adirondacks.

**Emily DuBois Mackay**  
born 6 Oct 1973  
died April 1974  
West Park NY

**Elizabeth Burroughs**  
b 12 Aug 1903  
West Park NY  
d 15 Nov 1999  
Kingston NY  
buried Ascension Cemetery  
West Park NY  
married  
Hugh Bentley Kelley  
born 25 May 1895  
died January 1971  
West Park NY  
buried Ascension Cemetery  
West Park NY

**Ursula Burroughs**  
born 1905 West Park NY  
d ???  
buried Ascension Cemetery  
West Park NY  
married  
William Edward Love, Jr  
born 28 May 1898  
died Aug 1973  
West Park NY  
buried Ascension Cemetery  
West Park NY

(Olive) NY	buried: Ascension Cemetery, West Park NY	John Burroughs b 21 July 1909, West Park NY d Nov 1968, West Park NY buried Ascension Cemetery West Park NY married Annie Reed b ??? d ???
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information derived from many sources, including Social Security Death Index

Ancestors of John Burroughs					
Hiram 1827 - 1904	Chauncey A born 20 Dec 1803 Roxbury NY died about 9 Jan 1883	Eden born 1795 moved from Stamford CT to Beaver Dam Roxbury	Ephraim 1740 - 1818 moved to Stanford NY Delaware Co, NY from Bridgeport CT	Stephen b Feb 1695	
Olly Ann 1829 - Wilson					Ruth Nichols
Curtis					
Edmund					
Jane	Amy Kelly born 1808	Edmund Kelly born 1767 Dutchess Co with Geo Washington			
<b>John Burroughs</b> 3 April 1837 29 Mar 1921					
Eden					
1839 - Evaline					

1840 - 1852	died 20 Dec 1880	at Valley Forge		
Abigail 1843 - 1901		Lavinia Minot Roxbury & Greene County		

this information pieced together from various sources

John Burroughs was born 3 April 1837 in Roxbury, New York, the son of Chauncey Burroughs and Amy Kelly, farmers. The Burroughs were early settlers in Massachusetts and traveled the common route from eastern Massachusetts to Connecticut, then to upstate New York, bypassing the Hudson Valley for the most part because the greater part of the Valley was engaged in tenant farming, and many settlers preferred to be yeomen rather than continue the pattern of existence they had experienced in Europe. The land west of the highest Catskills is more adaptable to farming, and attracted persons from central New York down through Delhi and Onteora. John Burroughs' maternal grandfather, Edmund Kelly, of Irish descent, was born in Dutchess County, New York; his maternal grandmother, Lovina Liscom Minot, was a practical housewife. Their daughter, Amy Kelly, like her father was an Old-School Baptist. Burroughs thought that from his paternal ancestry he derived his love of peace and solitude and his intellectual impetus, and from his maternal, his love of nature and introspective habit and idealism. John Burroughs parents operated a farm in Roxbury NY of 320 acres. The land stayed within the family but came on hard times. In 1913, Henry Ford purchased the Roxbury farm as a present for John Burroughs, who had built a cabin "Woodchuck Lodge" John's nephew, John C, the sun of Curtis Burroughs, ran the farm from the main house.

One of John's schoolmates was Jay Gould, later to become one of the famous "robber barons" whose country home Lyndhurst, in Westchester County is now part of the National Trust. After both Gould and Burroughs left Roxbury, they rarely if ever spoke. However, Gould's history of Delaware County provides a glimpse of life near Roxbury when they were adolescents.

John became a teacher when he was seventeen and

taught in several county schools in New York, New Jersey and Illinois. One such was in Tongore in Ulster County (now called Olive) where he saved enough money to study for a time in the Ashland Collegiate Institute in Greene County. In 1856 he studied at Cooperstown Seminary, where his literary enthusiasms included Wordsworth and especially Emerson. "I got him in my blood, and he colored my whole intellectual outlook.: He taught for six months in Polo, Illinois. He returned to Tongore. There he met Ursula North, thirteen months his senior, the daughter of a trustee of the school. They married September 12, 1857, but could not set up housekeeping until he obtained a position in East Orange, New Jersey. One week after the wedding he told Ursula "If I live, I shall be an author. My life will be one of study." At age 23 he submitted an essay "Expression" so Emersonian in thought that Lowell, before printing it in the Atlantic Monthly, looked through Emerson's writings for it. It was published unsigned, but Poole's Index attributed the work to Emerson.

Burroughs kept at teaching to earn a livelihood, but he wrote a series of nature essays called "From the Back Country". For a short time he abandoned teaching to study medicine with Ursula's father. In 1863 he published his first poem "Waiting" which was reprinted many time. He began to take a livelier interest in the study of wild flowers and birds, influenced by a botanist named Eddy and reading Audubon's book in the library at West Point.

In 1863, he went to Washington, D.C., where for a decade he sat at a desk in the Currency Bureau of the Treasury Department. There he formed the most important friendship of his life -- Walt Whitman, whose poetry he had discovered two years before. Whitman was eighteen years his senior, but they had walks and talks together, and sometimes Burroughs accompanied Whitman on his hospital rounds. 'I loved him as I never loved any man. We were companionable without talking. I owe more to him than to any other man in the world. He brooded me; he gave me things to think of; he taught me generosity, breadth, and an all-embracing charity". Burrough's first published book was *Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person* (1867) to which Whitman contributed the title, a large part of the notes and much detailed revision.

Upon leaving Washington in 1873, Burroughs returned

to his native country. He first looked at property on Long Island (Whitman's home territory), then along the Hudson, finally deciding upon a nine-acre farm about one-half mile south of the Payne property on the west shore of the river originally owned by the Deyo family, one of the original Huguenot families in New Paltz. Here he began to build his house. The land slopes south and east towards the Hudson, making it suitable to growing grapes. There was a large pile of stone on the property. To build his house, John used stones from the property and finished with unstained wood timbers to the gable. He called the place Riverby. In 1888 he purchased more land, bringing the total to twenty acres more or less. He grew grapes and currants, and shipped them to New York City via boats from the West Park landing.

During this time, Burroughs built a detached study about 150 feet below his dwelling. He used this to read and write, turning out a book every two years for the rest of his life. He spent the summers following 1908 at a farmhouse "Woodchuck Lodge" on the old home farm at Roxbury, using the hay-barn as his literary workshop.

Looking for even more remote solitude, Burroughs joined with Amassa Martin to purchase 100 swampy acres inland from Riverby. He financed the project and reserved twenty acres to himself. They drained the swamp, built an entry road, and constructed a very rustic cabin, later named Slabsides after the suggestion of a neighbor, Mrs. William van Benschoten. The cabin was ready for occupancy April 1896. After Burroughs' death, Slabsides became a memorial to him. Additional land was donated by the Gordons, and the Burroughs Society maintains the property, opening the house to visitors several times each year.

John and Ursula had no natural children, but in 1888 adopted a son, Julian. John doted on Julian, took him along as companion on many walks and trips, and insisted Julian attend school in Poughkeepsie, and then Harvard, from which Julian graduated in 1901. Julian returned to Riverby, married, and had three children. Julian acted as superintendent of the Payne estate from 1913 until 1918, and his daughter, Elizabeth became the historian of West Park. Her recollections of her life on the Payne estate as a teenager are refreshing and surprising accurate. Julian returned to Riverby in 1918, as Ursula Burroughs had died and left the property to him. (John had transferred Riverby to Ursula in

1892.) After Julian died in 1954, the property passed to Julian's daughter Ursula.

John Burroughs' diary recited an interesting story about Julian, which took place November 28, 1897, when Julian was 19 years old. Julian went up the Hudson in his boat after ducks. By 3 pm John worried that the ice floes were loud, and it seems impossible for a boat to survive in the river. John started up the river bank hoping to see Julian coming back. "The ice roars louder and louder and jams and grinds harder and harder, and I become more and more alarmed. At last I reach Esopus dock, but no Julian in sight. A man there tells me he saw him go up about 2 p.m. ... The boy with his canvas boat will be ground to pieces, or frozen fast in the ice. I tear up the river and reach Pell's dock, a mile further up." "At ten minutes to six we are at home, and a few minutes later, Julian reaches the dock."

The biographies say very little about the Burroughs marriage, but it certainly was unusual. Ursula was described as "a self-complacent, thrifty, and forceful young woman, thirteen months John's senior." In 1892, John himself wrote: "It is the oft-told story. A crude, undeveloped young man marries a girl older and more experienced than himself. He develops, she simply hardens, and their interests diverge. In middle life they are far apart; she know him not at all, does not share his real life, only his kitchen life. The things he lives for are nothing to her; she has no mental or intellectual or social wants, hardly any religious wants. One supreme want she had, to which she sacrifices everything --- health, hospitality, friends, husband, child --- the want to be free from dirt and disorder. She is one of those terrible housekeepers with whom there is no living -- a housekeeper, but not a homemaker. ..."

"I am not blameless. I have my own sins to answer for -- sins she had driven me into -- but she has not been true to any of my higher wants and needs -- has trampled them all under foot, though ignorantly and blindly, I admit. She has no self knowledge at all -- I never saw her like in this respect. She thinks herself a model wife. ... I don't see how I can live here much longer. I should like a year or two of real peace and sunshine before I die. ... Oh, what a boon is good nature! Like sunshine, like a genial climate."

The 1910 census tells its own story. John Burroughs is

listed alone at 36 Albany Post Road, as an author of literature. His son Julian is listed separately at 40 Albany Post Road, together with his wife Emily and their children Elizabeth, Ursula and John Jr. Emily MacKay is listed as born in Pennsylvania of an Irish father and a mother born in Ohio. Ursula Burroughs is listed separately at 41 Albany Post Road together with two servants.

In his last years, when he was regarded not only as a naturalist but also as a sage and prophet, all manner of persons made the pilgrimage to "Slabsides", including Thomas Edison, Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, Oscar Wilde, Theodore Dreiser, John Muir and Ida Tarbell. Via photographs (for which he rarely refused to pose) his erect, substantial figure, steady eyes, long rustic beard, and pervasive air of repose, formed an image familiar to readers, an image that blended easily with a background of woods and pastures and long sloping hills.

Burroughs also traveled extensively -- the Western and Southern states, Jamaica and Bermuda, Hawaii, Canada, the Maine woods, Europe, Alaska. He camped in the Yosemite woods with John Muir, and in Yellowstone with President Theodore Roosevelt.

Burroughs will probably be most remembered as a writer by whom the American "nature essay" was definitely established as a literary genre. This form blended the Transcendental emotional interest in nature and the scientific interest manifested by naturalists and travelers. One thinks of Thoreau and Lowell, but it was Burroughs who employed the form with the greatest frequency and most thoroughly exploited its capacities. He brought the nature essay into widespread vogue (but it declined after World War One). He contributed a series of essays marked by delicate feeling, fine observation, honest thought, and a style simple and natural without affront to the traditions of English prose.

John Burroughs was not an devotee of formal religion, despite his mother's Baptist background. An entry in his journal of November 6, 1891 was prophetic: " Walk up to Terpenning's for butter in afternoon. Pause in the cemetery on my return. Already the names of so many people there whom I know, quite a throng of them. I linger long about their graves. Consider whether or not I want to be buried here. The old Baptist burying-ground at Home is offensive to

me. Had rather be buried beside my dogs; or else in one of the old fields at home." In 1921 he died in a railroad car while returning from California to New York. He was buried on what would have been his birthday 3 April 1921 near a large rock on the old farm land in Roxbury. The view from that rock remains serene today, and conveys the calm and peace associated with the man. It's worth a visit!.

## References:

Edward J. Renehan, Jr., *John Burroughs, An American Naturalist*, Post Mills Vermont, Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 1992, 356pp. I judge this to be the most authoritative and balanced biography of John Burroughs. Ed Renehan lived in Riverby when he was a student at SUNY New Paltz, and developed a lasting interest in the Burroughs family.

John Burroughs, *Dictionary of American Biography*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943, pp 330-334

John Burroughs, *American National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 1999, vol. 4, pp. 49-51

Clara Barrus, *Our Friend John Burroughs*, including autobiographical sketches by Mr. Burroughs with illustrations from photographs. Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1914 (available in Mount Vernon Public Library and Port Ewen Public Library)

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Elizabeth Burroughs Kelley, *Town of Esopus Story 3000 BC - 1978 AD*, "Esopus and West Park", pp 109 - 148, copyright 1979 by Town of Esopus Bicentennial Commission.  
Elizabeth Burroughs-Kelley, *"A West Parker Remembers When"*, Riverby Books, 1987, available at Port Ewen Library.



*Editor's note:* Clara Barrus, M. D. originally came to treat John Burroughs, then moved in with John and Ursula Burroughs permanently, and stayed after the deaths of John's wife (1917) and John himself (1921). She was his literary executor, and edited *Under the Maples* (1921), *The Last Harvest* (1922), and *The Heart of Burrough's Journals* (1928), as well as his principal biography.

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