

Famous New Yorker John Burroughs

As a young man, John Burroughs left his father's farm home to broaden his mind. His own farm eventually became a shrine to one of America's greatest writers on nature and rural life.

John Burroughs was born near Roxbury, in Delaware County, on April 3, 1837. The seventh child of a former county school teacher, John attended a local primary school known as "the Stone Jug." His school time was limited by his duties on the family farm. John loved books and yearned to learn and know more about the world and his natural surroundings. His father thought that John needed no more than a primary-school education. When he refused to pay tuition for his son's further education, John left home at age 17. He became a schoolteacher to pay his way through the Hedding Literary Institute and the Cooperstown Seminary.

Teaching provided an income while Burroughs tried to become a professional writer. John was influenced by the philosophy and writing style of the popular author Ralph Waldo Emerson. When he submitted an essay to the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1860, the editor suspected him of copying Emerson's words; others suspected Emerson himself of writing the essay under an assumed name. Burroughs soon proved his individual talent, but still needed a full-time job to make ends meet. During the Civil War he moved to Washington D.C. and became a clerk in the Treasury Department. He befriended the poet Walt Whitman and published the first book-length study of him in 1867.

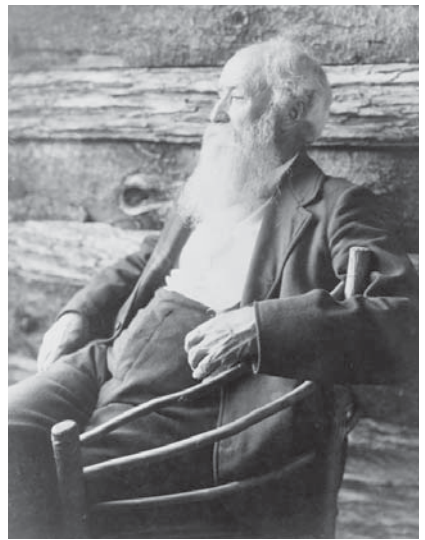
John Burroughs published more than 20 books in his lifetime. He became the country's most popular nature writer, starting with the publication of his essay collection *Wake-Robin* in 1871. Burroughs had never rejected farm life. He showed his love for it in his writing and his decision to buy a farm in West Park in 1874. While he worked as a federal bank examiner, he grew grapes and currants on "Riverby" and continued to write.

Burroughs's approach to nature was different from the previous generation of writers and artists. They often saw nature as something massive and awesome, almost to be worshipped. Burroughs wrote about the "art of seeing" and the wonders of living close to nature on a small scale. He also differed from many later nature writers who portrayed animals with human-like personalities. Burroughs considered his own viewpoint more scientific and closer to nature.

As he grew older, John Burroughs became a national celebrity. In 1903 he joined President Theodore Roosevelt on a tour of Yellowstone National Park and wrote a book about their journey. Burroughs often welcomed famous visitors to "Slabsides," his cabin on the Riverby farm, and went on expeditions with them. He shared Roosevelt's commitment to nature conservation and spoke out for world peace before and after World War I. Following his death on March 29, 1921, the John Burroughs Association formed to carry on his legacy. The Association gives an annual award for nature writing and preserves Riverby and Slabsides (now a National Historic Landmark) as a gateway to the world of nature Burroughs knew.



Roxbury is located in the Catskill Mountains about 60 miles southwest of Albany. West Park is a hamlet in the town of Esopus on west bank of the Hudson River.



**John Burroughs in a rustic chair, c1901
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To plan a visit to John Burroughs Memorial State Historic Site in Roxbury go online to www.nysparks.com. Plan a stop at nearby "Slabsides." For more information go online to www.research.amnh.org/burroughs/index.html This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA-Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2013.