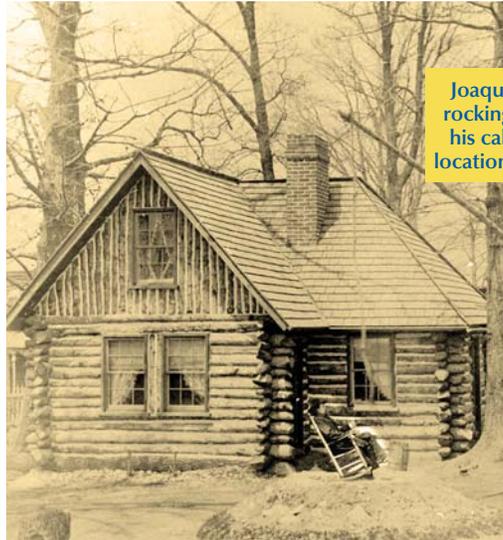


J is for the Joaquin Miller Cabin

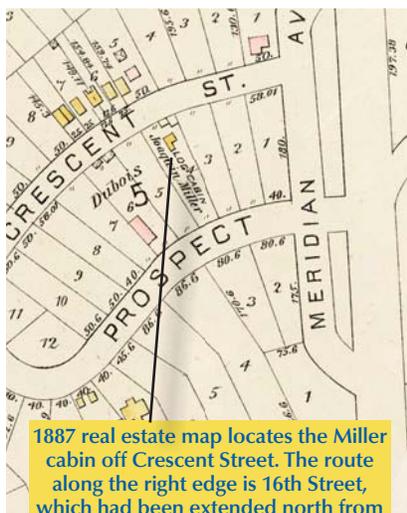


Joaquin Miller sits in a rocking chair in front of his cabin in its original location on Meridian Hill.

Though he became a famous poet and playwright, Joaquin Miller's most original creation may have been the image he crafted of himself. Born Cincinnatus Heine Miller, he took on the name Joaquin (*hwa-'keen*) after a Mexican bandit and fashioned himself into the quintessential frontiersman.

Who was Joaquin Miller and what is his log cabin doing in the middle of Rock Creek Park?

His writings drew on his many adventures in the West. He experienced the California Gold Rush, lived for a year in a Native American village and worked at jobs that ranged from newspaper editor, lawyer and judge to Pony Express rider, mining camp cook and horse thief. His writings became so celebrated in the United States and Britain, he was hailed as the "Poet of the Sierras" and the "Byron of the Rockies." Nearly every American schoolchild could recite his poem "Columbus," which ended, "He gained a world; he gave that world / Its greatest lesson: 'On! sail on!'"



1887 real estate map locates the Miller cabin off Crescent Street. The route along the right edge is 16th Street, which had been extended north from Boundary Street (Florida Avenue) to replace Meridian Avenue. Prospect is now called Belmont Street.

The Poet comes to Washington

For more than two years beginning in 1883, Miller was a fixture in Washington, DC—living and working in a two-room log cabin he built on a wooded section of Meridian Hill, just west of 16th Street near present-day Crescent Street. Miller constructed the home from timber cut from what would become Rock Creek Park. For the foundation, President Arthur offered discarded building stone left over from the construction of the Washington Monument. The poet hung animal hides on the walls, put a bearskin on the floor and greeted visitors with a coonskin cap on his head.

At the start, the location on Meridian Hill suited him. According to the *Evening Star*, "(He) tramped for hours at a time over the hills that skirt the city. He declared that he had visited the famous hills of Rome, that he had traveled over France and viewed the busy life of the city from many hilltops, but it was not until he stood on Meridian Hill, where the memories of the colonial and early life of the republic came surging into the observer's mind, that he realized the real charm of a landscape view."

This illustration of Miller reaching the peak of Mount Shasta appeared in the first U.S. edition of *Life Amongst the Modocs* in 1874. The book was originally published the year before in London, where Miller's frontiersman image and his accounts of the American West dazzled English society.



The February 18, 1913 article went on to recount how his notoriety soon attracted too much attention: "Crowds began to flock to the hilltop and seek admission and interviews with the poet.... Soon there was a fence of rustic yet significant character built around the lots, and the cabin door was shut and bolted against all but those whom he knew."

Miller would walk down into the city each day to keep up with political news. He was quoted as saying, "I sit up here in my fine cabin, while the President himself sits down there at the end of the street with his little cabinet."

After Miller left DC in early 1886, the cabin was occupied by new tenants. A 1902 classified reads,

"For rent—The Joaquin Miller Cabin; suitable for two or three; high, well-shaded grounds ... rent low." When former Ambassador to France Henry White began building a grand house on the property in 1910, White announced that the cabin would have to go.

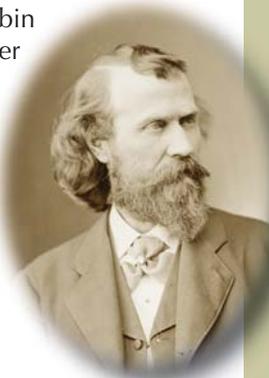
Cabin at the Creek, (re-)Assembly Required

The California State Association proposed disassembling the structure and re-erecting it in Rock Creek Park as a tribute to Miller, who had settled outside San Francisco. Despite pushback from park authorities, the DC Commissioners approved the plan—as long as the Association picked up all the costs, ceded all control over the cabin and let the engineer in charge of the park choose the exact location (which had to be "on Beach drive north of Military road").

And that is where the Joaquin Miller Cabin came to be rebuilt and still resides. Miller composed a poem (right) to be recited at its dedication on June 2, 1912, about eight months before he died.

The family retained a connection to the cabin. The poet's niece, Pherne Miller, leased the space from 1931 into the 1950s, teaching art and selling refreshments.

Beginning in 1976, an annual program of poetry readings at the cabin celebrated Miller's legacy. The Joaquin Miller Poetry Series moved to the Rock Creek Park Nature Center in 2011.



Miller Cabin with Joaquin Miller, 1880s (A. Bearson Searles): National Park Service; *Surveys and Plats of Properties in the City of Washington*, 1887, G.M. Hopkins & Co.: Washingtoniana Map Collection, DC Public Library; *Crossing the Summit*: illustration from *Unwritten History: Life Amongst the Modocs*, American Publishing Company, Hartford, 1874; Miller Cabin, 2005 (DB King): flickr.com under Creative Commons 2.0 license; Miller portrait, 1870s: Library of Congress; signature: *Washington Times*, June 2, 1912.



To My Log Cabin Lovers

Dear, loyal lovers, neighbors mine
 Of California, Washington,
 What word of mine, or deed or sign
 Can compensate what ye have done—
 This housing in your hearts my home,
 My lowly old Log Cabin home.
 Aye, dear the friends and memories
 Of London, Dresden, storied Rome,
 The Arctic, the Antipodes,
 But dearer far than all of these
 Your holding of my hearth and home—
 My lordly, kingly, Cabin home.
 Yea, many hands have been most fair;
 Yea, many trumps of fame and faith
 Mine ears have heard both here and there
 That said as only true love saith,
 But nothing ever seemed so dear
 As this your brave Log Cabin cheer.