

Scenes from the Past...



map—1887 Griffith M. Hopkins Map; Kelsey & Associates private collection.

The area that eventually became Meridian Hill Park where Miller's Cabin was located is seen here in 1887. Meridian Street is today's Sixteenth Street, and Columbia Street is today's Fifteenth Street. At the time, the northern portion of the site housed the Wayland Seminary and numerous homes that eventually made way for the park.

Many summer visitors to Rock Creek Park are surprised to find a log cabin along Beach Drive at the overpass of Military Road, and few are likely to know that it was once the home of poet Joaquin Miller, who lived from 1837 to 1913. It was moved there the year of his death from its prior location just east of the cascade in Meridian Hill Park when it was threatened with demolition. Miller would later be well-known in international literary circles, and had built the cabin there in 1883 when he had moved to Washington with political ambitions that ultimately failed. In fact, much of his background and life experiences that he wrote about were apparently wild fabrications.

Known as the "Poet of the Sierras," Joaquin Miller was perhaps best known for his poem "Columbus." His cabin stood along 16th Street for 30 years until threatened with demolition as the new park was being planned. He is 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."

Miller's creative writing began with his assumed name; his real name was Cincinnatus Heiner (or Hiner) Miller. He was born on September 8, 1837, a date that frequently changed during his lifetime. The name "Joaquin" was adapted later from the legendary California bandit, Joaquin Murietta.

Born to Quakers in Indiana, the family moved to Oregon



photo—Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division (George Grantham Bain Collection).

This undated glass plate photograph of the Joaquin Miller Cabin appears to have been taken while it was located on Meridian Hill prior to its relocation to Rock Creek Park where it stands today.

and settled on a small farm. His often cited exploits included a variety of occupations, from mining camp cook, lawyer, judge, newspaper owner and writer, Pony Express rider, and horse thief. As a young man, he moved to northern California during the Gold Rush, and apparently had a variety of adventures, including a year living in a Native American village and being wounded in a battle with Native Americans. A number

of his works, *Life Among the Modocs*, *An Elk Hunt*, and *The Battle of Castle Crags*, draw on these alleged experiences.

About 1857, Miller supposedly married an Indian woman named Paquita and lived in the McCloud River area of northern California; the couple had two children. Miller then married Theresa Dyer (alias Minnie Myrtle) in 1862, and had three children with her. The couple divorced in 1869. Miller married for the third time in 1879 to Abigail Leland in New York City.

He was jailed briefly in New York for stealing a horse, and various accounts give other incidents of his repeating this crime in California and Oregon. Despite that fact, Miller found his way to Canyon City, Oregon by 1864 where he was elected the third Judge of Grant County; his log cabin built there is still standing as well.

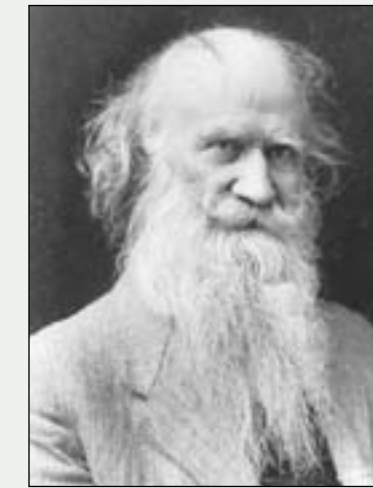
After losing his bid for a seat on the Oregon Supreme Court, he left the Pacific Northwest and spent some years traveling, living in and visiting England, New York, San Francisco, Brazil, and Washington, DC, where he built his cabin on Meridian Hill in 1883.



photo—Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division (George Grantham Bain Collection).

In 1913, the National Park Service disassembled Miller's cabin and rebuilt it in Rock Creek Park where its dedication ceremony was photographed. It remains today near picnic Area #6, on Beach Drive at the Military Road overpass.

Disappointed at not being appointed as Ambassador to Japan, about 10 years later Miller settled in the Oakland Hills of California. He gave his Washington cabin to a friend, who soon gave it to the Sierra Club. In 1912, one year before Miller's death, the National Park Service became its reluctant new owner.



photo—J.E. Purdy, Boston; Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

This picture of poet and writer Joaquin Miller (1839-1913) was taken in 1906.

The California State Association had sought to move it to Rock Creek Park, but the Park Service had refused the request. It was only after Senator John D. Works of California intervened successfully that the cabin was disassembled, moved, and rebuilt at its current location.

From 1893 to his death 1913, Miller resided on a hill in Oakland, California, in a home he called "The Hights" [sic]. He planted hundreds of trees and even built his own funeral pyre on the property. The Hights was purchased by the city of Oakland in 1919 and eventually became the Joaquin Miller Park, a designated California Historical Landmark.

Fellow author Ambrose Bierce once called Miller "the greatest-hearted man I ever knew" but was also quoted as saying that he was "the greatest liar this country ever produced. He cannot, or will not, tell the truth."

Miller's poem "Columbus" was once one of the most widely known American poems, memorized and recited by most school children of the era. It reads:

Behind him lay the gray Azores,
Behind the Gates of Hercules;

Before him not the ghost of shores,
Before him only shoreless seas.

The good mate said: "Now must we pray,
For lo! the very stars are gone.

Brave Admiral, speak, what shall I say?"
"Why, say, 'Sail on! sail on! and on!'"

His other poems include "Songs of the Sierras," "Songs of the Sun-Lands," and "The Ship in the Desert." In 1909, six volumes of his collected poems and other writings were published. He died in Oakland on February 17, 1913.

After Miller's death, his family maintained ties to the cabin. In 1931, Public Buildings and Public Parks leased it to Pherne Miller, his niece, who conducted art classes and sold candy and soft drinks there until the mid 1950's.

Many know the cabin in Rock Creek Park today as the site of the Miller Cabin Poetry Series, one of the oldest summer reading series in Washington. It was begun in 1976 by poet and physicist Jim Beall, when the Park Service gave permission for poets to gather for informal poetry workshops outside the cabin by candlelight, part of the Word Works Program.

The readings continue to this day, every Tuesday evening in June and July, at 7:30 p.m., with both well-established authors and first-time readers and local and foreign poets from around the world.

—Paul Kelsey Williams
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photo—Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division (George Grantham Bain Collection).

The Miller Cabin is seen here with Meridian Hill houses in the background shortly before its removal to Rock Creek Park by the National Park Service.



photo—Charles Todd, *The Story of Washington* (1889); Kelsey & Associates private collection.

Joaquin Miller's log cabin was built in 1883 on what is now Meridian Hill/Malcolm X Park, where he resided surrounded by its wooded location for the next 10 years.