
The Forbidden Water: San Francisco and Hetch Hetchy Valley

Gabriel L. Mansfield

Gabriel Mansfield is a sophomore history major from Onarga, Illinois. He wrote this paper for Dr. Lynne Curry's HIS 2500: Historical Writing and Research Methods. After graduation Mr. Mansfield wishes to pursue a career in academic librarianship and double as "Duke Silver" at local jazz clubs.

Northwest of the Yosemite Valley, Half Dome, and other iconic landmarks at Yosemite National Park in Northeastern California is a small valley known as Hetch Hetchy. This was a quiet spot that Sierra Club founder, nature lover, and preservationist John Muir described as "a grand landscape garden, [and] one of Nature's rarest and most precious mountain temples."¹ At the beginning of the 20th Century, this beautiful expanse drew the attention of the city of San Francisco, which planned to dam the area to create a reservoir to use as a water source. Unfortunately for San Franciscans, this would not be an easy journey because of the stiff opposition to the city's plan. This resistance would primarily be spearheaded by Muir, whose actions would ultimately not be enough to quell the city's desire for this new water source. In late 1913, Congress would grant the city permission to begin building a reservoir in Hetch Hetchy Valley. Some of the few instrumental people in this effort to build the dam included: chief forester and conservationist Gifford Pinchot, and James Phelan, the mayor of San Francisco and a dam supporter from the time when the application was first submitted. The battle over the Hetch Hetchy Valley raises questions about how far Americans were willing to go for the sake of progress, and it enflamed a generation who were willing to go above and beyond to protect National Parks as a whole.

This study relates to the emerging field of environmental history, which began around the late 1950's and 1960's with the publication of two books that set the standard for the decades to follow. Two prominent environmental historians, Samuel P. Hays and Roderick Nash published *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency* in 1959 and *Wilderness and the American Mind* in 1967, respectively. These historians focused on conservation and preservation, in particular on figures like Gifford Pinchot and John Muir who shaped the environmental movement, with Muir specifically capturing attention.² This can expressly be seen in the 2009 documentary by Ken Burns on National Parks, which venerates Muir and his "environmental crusade." In dealing with the Hetch Hetchy controversy, Burns spends little time looking at the legitimate concerns of Pinchot and San Francisco in their drive to build a dam in Hetch Hetchy. To Burns, they appear the villains. As I will argue in this study, this villainization is too simplistic and a more neutral approach allows us best to understand both sides in the debate.

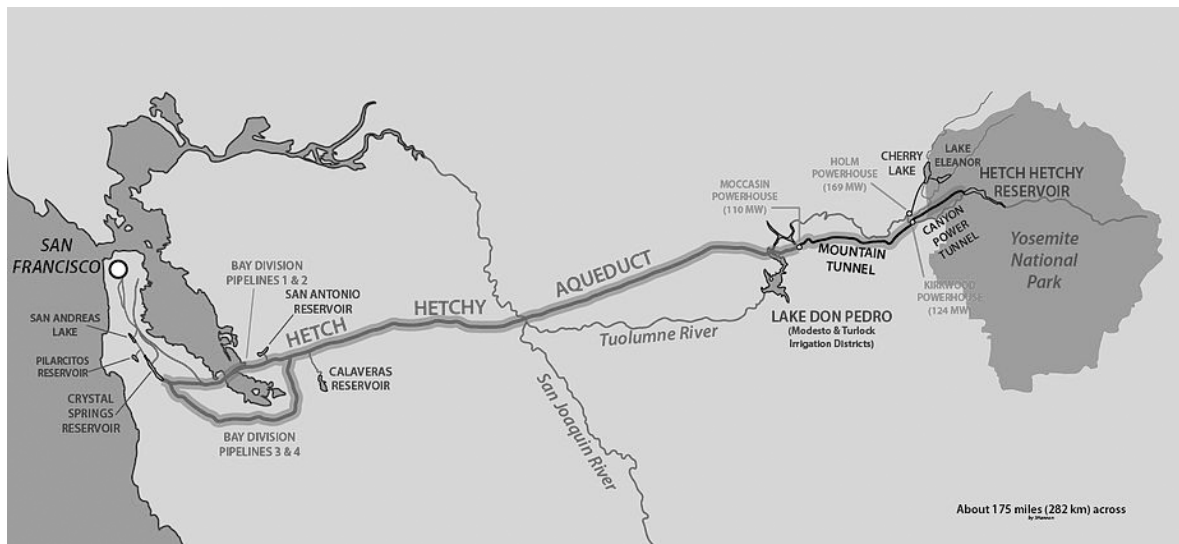
Usually, when the Hetch Hetchy controversy is discussed, it is because of preservation and John Muir's ideal of keeping National Parks, like Yosemite, pure and sacred. The focus is rarely centered on the side that is branded the villain, which in this controversy is San Francisco. However, there is merit to discussing the city's side in this pivotal debate. There was clearly a reason for the city to choose the Hetch Hetchy Valley as a potential water source. For example, the location in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, the cleanliness of the water, and the potential for hydroelectric power all made the site attractive. It seems unlikely that it was to spite the preservationists. One must consider the importance of the two larger forces on a collision course at this valley, conservationism and

¹ John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra and Selected Essays* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2011), 310.

² Richard White, "American Environmental History: The Development of a New Historical Field," *Pacific Historical Review* 54, no. 3 (August 1985): 297-315.

preservationism. The Hetch Hetchy controversy was not between the city of San Francisco and the valley or John Muir and Gifford Pinchot, but what these two conflicting views represented in the larger picture.

San Francisco had an ongoing issue with the sourcing of water long before the controversy with the Hetch Hetchy Valley. With the gold rush of the 1850s, tens of thousands flocked to this ever-growing city. This caused water shortages from the beginning, a struggle that continues to this day. Shortly after San Francisco was founded, merchants began selling water on the streets to take advantage of the thirsty residents. Eventually, “water was being shipped by barge from Marin County while other firms competed with one another and the city to increase the yield from local sources with dams, flumes, and reservoirs.”³ At the height of the water shortages, the city of San Francisco was constantly plagued with fires. Water peddlers and merchants consolidated and offered to contract out their water to the city. This group became known as the Spring Valley Water Works or Company, and it played a key role in the controversy of the Hetch Hetchy reservoir.⁴ Scholars like Norris Hundley Jr., Kendrick Clements, and others would agree that the Spring Valley Water Company was the real villain in the Hetch Hetchy controversy, especially given that the Spring Valley Water Company was one of the sole reasons why San Francisco had to search for a new



water source in the first place. The water company had bought all the usable watershed: springs, areas around rivers, etc.; San Francisco had no choice but to use the water supply that was in the hands of this company.

In 1900, San Francisco finally found the opportunity for which it had been so desperately looking. The city “obtained the state legislature’s approval of a new city charter that mandated municipal ownership of utilities.”⁵ Now the city could own a water supply. City officials set out to find the best private and non-private places to purchase land and break away from the grip the abhorrent Spring Valley Water Company had on San Francisco. Having tried once before to purchase Spring Valley Water Company without success, San Francisco moved on, considering other, more remote regions to purchase land. After considering multiple options, such as Lake

³ Norris Hundley Jr., *The Great Thirst: Californians and Water 1770's-1990's* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 169.

⁴ Kendrick A. Clements, “Politics and the Park: San Francisco's Fight for Hetch Hetchy, 1908-1913,” *Pacific Historical Review* 48, no. 2 (May 1979): 187.

⁵ Hundley Jr., “*The Great Thirst*,” 170.

Tahoe, Mount Shasta, or the Sacramento River,⁶ they finally decided on the Tuolumne River.⁷ The river flows through the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range and went through a smaller valley less than two hundred miles from San Francisco, the Hetch Hetchy Valley.

San Francisco's mayor, James Phelan, saw the potential of the dam, not only for the reservoir itself, but also for hydroelectric power, and he "quietly filed rights for the river" in fear of the Spring Valley Water Company hearing of the transaction and trying to purchase it for themselves.⁸ The valley was property of the federal government as part of Yosemite National Park, which could be a potential issue. Officials thought that "no problems would come to this."⁹ They thought it would be easily approved, and work on the dam would begin shortly. To their dismay, this was far from the truth.

In 1901, when Secretary of the Interior Ethan Allen Hitchcock received the application for permission to build a dam in the Hetch Hetchy Valley, he immediately denied it, proclaiming it was in the best interest of the nation not to imperil the beauty of the national park by putting a reservoir in the valley.¹⁰ Later, in 1903, Phelan tried again to secure rights for Hetch Hetchy but to no avail. In 1905 Phelan attempted to buy the water rights a third-time, but Secretary Hitchcock again denied the acquisition, giving the same reasons. All hope seemed lost for San Francisco in acquiring a new water source and being able to avoid commercially contracted water. Then it got worse for the city.

In 1902, Phelan finished his third term as mayor and stepped down from the position. The man who succeeded him, Eugene Schmitz, had other plans for the proposed Hetch Hetchy reservoir, or rather his boss did. Schmitz, in fact, was irrelevant to this issue. Abe Ruef was the reason Schmitz came to power as mayor. Abraham Ruef was one of San Francisco's most notorious political bosses.¹¹ He used Schmitz as a puppet to get what he wanted and in January of 1906, Ruef moved to circumnavigate the "messy" issue of Hetch Hetchy. Instead, he proposed a contract with the Bay Cities Water Company. The company promised Ruef one million dollars for his efforts. Unfortunately for Ruef, the bribe was discovered during a series of trials on corruption in the city known as the "graft trials."¹² This drive to eliminate corruption, in fact, helped clear the way for the building of the Hetch Hetchy reservoir, which otherwise might have been delayed or halted by political shenanigans.

The San Francisco earthquake of 1906 and the fires that followed were also key factors in going forward with the Hetch Hetchy project. It was not so much the difference the water would have made, but it was the hysteria created by the disaster.¹³ Senator Key Pittman (D-NV) brought the earthquake to national attention. He blamed the extensive fires plaguing the city on the lack of water. "I know it was largely due to the greed of that water monopoly in its efforts to spend as little as possible and to grasp just as much as possible, and I never want to see such a condition again exist in any city," he declared.¹⁴ With the water problem being blown out of proportion, a group of city engineers, who had been ordered to investigate the issue, realized that now was the time to bring back the idea of using Hetch Hetchy as a source of water and power. One engineer who favored this idea, was Marsden Manson. He continued to play a key role in the Hetch Hetchy controversy until the bill was passed in 1913.

⁶ Clements, "Politics and the Park," 187.

⁷ Hundley Jr., "*The Great Thirst*," 170.

⁸ Hundley Jr., "*The Great Thirst*," 171.

⁹ Hundley Jr., "*The Great Thirst*," 171.

¹⁰ Clements, "Politics and the Park," 187.

¹¹ Robert W. Righter, *The Battle over Hetch Hetchy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 55.

¹² Righter, "*Hetch Hetchy*," 58.

¹³ Righter, "*Hetch Hetchy*," 58.

¹⁴ Righter, "*Hetch Hetchy*," 60.

Due to some other coincidences, the Hetch Hetchy Valley was starting to become a more viable option as a source of water and power for the city. The exit of the Secretary of the Interior Ethan A. Hitchcock, an advocate against the dam in 1906, played a key role in the potential use of Hetch Hetchy. Manson now looked to a pivotal friend for help in the government to achieve approval, the chief forester of the US Forestry Service, Gifford Pinchot. Coincidentally, the new secretary of the Interior was a friend of Pinchot, James R. Garfield.¹⁵ In the time leading up to the application submitted in 1908, officials in Washington were busy persuading politicians to back the city of San Francisco's plan. To the surprise of preservationists, Gifford Pinchot, a long-time supporter of their cause, sided with San Francisco on the Hetch Hetchy issue.¹⁶ He believed that the dam, "represented the greatest good for the greatest number of people."¹⁷ In the 1913 hearings regarding the issue of the valley, Pinchot made his stance clear. "Now, the fundamental principle of the whole conservation policy is that of use, to take every part of the land and its resources and put it to that use in which it will best serve the most people," he stated.¹⁸ To him, that meant serving the people and damming the Hetch Hetchy Valley. To keep the project alive, Pinchot did his best to convince other government officials to accept his logic. He met with US Representative James C. Needham (R-CA), to assure him that significant harm would not come to Yosemite. With the new secretary of the interior, James R. Garfield, already on his side, the only person who needed convincing was the president himself, Theodore Roosevelt.¹⁹

Another man who was once good friends with Pinchot, and considered President Roosevelt a dear friend, was very concerned with the decision to dam Hetch Hetchy. A Scottish-born businessman who moved to the United States in the 1870's, John Muir immediately fell in love with the National Parks, particularly with Yosemite. When Roosevelt visited the park and others around the area, he chose Muir as his guide because of the native Scot's communion with nature and love of the parks. In later years, Muir would sum up his stance on Hetch Hetchy and described those who advocated its destruction critically in an essay written a few years before his death:

These temple destroyers, devotees of ravaging commercialism, seem to have a perfect contempt for Nature, and, instead of lifting their eyes to the God of the mountains, lift them to the Almighty Dollar. Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man.²⁰

With the Hetch Hetchy idea revived once more, Muir decided to personally write Roosevelt to counter Pinchot and try to convince the president to reject this idea.²¹ Roosevelt replied, to Muir's dismay, that he had decided to side with Pinchot and allow the application to be accepted. He explained, "If the preserve was used 'so as to interfere with the permanent material development' of the region, the result would be bad." He "did not want to disagree with the people of San Francisco if they wanted this project to happen."²² Although Pinchot and Muir disagreed in the past, this controversy was the final stroke that set them apart indefinitely. Because of his commitment to the preservation of the parks, Muir got as many people as he could to write to Garfield to urge the

¹⁵ Righter, "Hetch Hetchy," 60.

¹⁶ Elmo R. Richardson, "The Struggle for the Valley: California's Hetch Hetchy Controversy, 1905-1913," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (September 1959): 250.

¹⁷ Righter, "Hetch Hetchy," 69.

¹⁸ Roderick Nash, *The Call of the Wild (1900-1916)* (New York, NY: George Braziller, 1970), 86.

¹⁹ Nash, "Wild," 250.

²⁰ John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra and Selected Essays* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2011), 314.

²¹ Richardson, "Struggle for the Valley," 250.

²² Richardson, "Struggle for the Valley," 250.

secretary to change his position. Although Roosevelt did not want to interfere with the people's decision, he attempted to change the mind of Secretary Garfield in a letter enclosed with John Muir's letter to the secretary. Roosevelt suggested that they wait to make a decision on Hetch Hetchy. "It does seem to me unnecessary to decide about the Hetch Hetchy Valley at all at the present...there seems to be no reason why we should take action on the Hetch Hetchy business now," he counseled.²³ Unfortunately for Muir and the preservationists, Garfield held steady to his view, and in May 1908 he allowed San Francisco to use the Hetch Hetchy Valley and Lake Eleanor as a part of the water supply for that area. The only consolation that Garfield may have given to Muir was that he simply asked that Lake Eleanor be used to its full potential first.²⁴

Fortunately for preservationists like John Muir and others, the battle did not end there. They would work tirelessly to try to prevent this "terrible atrocity" from occurring to such a sacred place. Muir looked to a man who might be able to assist them in this cause. He was "the executive director of the American Civic Association and a good friend of the National Parks," J. Horace McFarland.²⁵ He would be of considerable help to Muir in attempting to get this proposition reversed. Others, such as Robert Underwood and members of the Sierra Club, helped as well. Unfortunately for Muir, the Sierra Club became deeply divided on this issue of Hetch Hetchy. Prominent members of the society, including "one of the founding members of the Sierra Club,"²⁶ Warren Olney, and the main opponent of Muir's position, Marsden Manson, as well as others sided with San Francisco on this issue. By 1908, the need was desperate as ever. Muir was pulling out all the stops by contacting various clubs and organizations like "the Mazamas (Portland), the Appalachian Mountain Club, the Saturday Walking Club (Chicago), and the American Civic Association"²⁷ to help support his battle to stop the damming at Hetch Hetchy. With neither Muir or Manson heeding any ground on this project, they continued to use newspapers and journals to attack one another.²⁸

With John Muir and his followers losing hope of being able to deter the government from allowing San Francisco to build a dam in the Hetch Hetchy Valley, 1909 brought some change in their favor. William Howard Taft was elected president, and he appointed a new secretary of the Interior. The new secretary, Richard A. Ballinger, opposed the dam, partly because of a brief feud with chief forester, Gifford Pinchot. Both former Mayor Phelan and John Muir met with Secretary Ballinger to attempt to convince him one way or the other. It appeared that Muir had won over Ballinger, to a certain degree, to their cause. Furthering the dilemma, Taft had fired Gifford Pinchot as chief forester, resulting in the city losing an ally in Washington. To make matters worse for San Francisco officials, they could not actually build any permanent structures unless they owned the land.²⁹ The city of San Francisco was set even further back when, after being pushed by park supporters, Ballinger "issued an order requiring the city to show cause why the Garfield permit should not be revoked."³⁰ This was demanded because of a report issued by the Geologic Survey, on Ballinger's order. The survey was done by two engineers, Louis C. Hill and E. G. Hopson. They had judged that Hetch Hetchy would not necessarily be beneficial as a water source. This surprised Marsden Manson, so he dug a little deeper, in preparation for a congressional hearing with the Secretary in mid-1910. When he found that the survey was poorly researched and borderline

²³ Linnie March Wolfe, *Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), 313.

²⁴ Advisory Board of Army Engineers, *Report on Investigations Relative to Sources of Water Supply to San Francisco and Bay Communities* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913), 7.

²⁵ Righter, "Hetch Hetchy," 62.

²⁶ Clements, "Politics and the Park," 191.

²⁷ Clements, "Politics and the Park," 191.

²⁸ Clements, "Politics and the Park," 192-193.

²⁹ Clements, "Politics and the Park," 193.

³⁰ Clements, "Politics and the Park," 195.

falsified, he blackmailed Ballinger into changing his mind.³¹ When the hearing finished, to the preservationist's dismay, Ballinger sided with the city, and abruptly commissioned a new survey by the Advisory Board of Army Engineers.³²

Since the Advisory Board of Army Engineers had to complete a survey of Hetch Hetchy, for the time being, things had to be tabled until further headway could be made. In the meantime, by 1911, Secretary Ballinger had resigned due to the strain of the job and the controversies he had engendered as head of the Interior Department. This left Taft in a frantic position to make the right political move, and he appointed Walter L. Fisher, who coincidentally was friends with both Gifford Pinchot and James Garfield.³³ To continue the blows being dealt to Muir, the Sierra Club, and preservationists, there was little interest from others to help, even those who had aided in the past, such as the Southern Pacific Railroad, as well as most electric companies in the area. Meanwhile the city of San Francisco moved to prepare a report for the Advisory Board of Army Engineers. The man who would eventually oversee this would be John R. Freeman.³⁴

After compiling numerous reports and surveys done by the city, Freeman's report was published in mid-1912. The thoroughness of the report ensured John Muir and his band of preservationists would not be able to convince congress to change their minds. The report fleshed out the plans for making the dam much bigger than originally intended, making a pipeline straight to San Francisco, as well as hundreds of pages of other adjustments. After the board looked at the report, it mostly aligned with Freeman's position, and victory was almost in view for the city of San Francisco after twelve long frustrating years with a waning water supply. However, before leaving office in 1913 after Taft's term came to an end, Secretary of the Interior Walter L. Fisher announced that his department "would not approve the project without specific congressional authorization."³⁵ So the city waited once more, but the end was in sight.

As the final president of three to tackle the issue of the Hetch Hetchy, Woodrow Wilson settled this affair—to an extent—at the end of 1913. One of the key individuals to conclude this affair was incoming Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane, the former city attorney for San Francisco.³⁶ On top of that, during the middle of the year, John E. Raker, a representative from California, introduced a bill that would allow Hetch Hetchy to finally be transformed into a reservoir for the city of San Francisco.³⁷

One of the last attempts the preservationists had to stop this bill was on the floor of the capitol during a congressional hearing before the bill would be voted on. At the hearing, prominent advocates, including Gifford Pinchot and former mayor James D. Phelan, presented their argument while the main opponent to this bill, a Boston lawyer representing the Society for the Protection of National Parks, Edmund A. Whitman, attempted to rebut their claims. Most of their presentations were the same arguments made over the past years. Some claimed the reservoir would contribute to the beauty of the park, while others thought it would significantly lower the number of visitors to the park, or even that it is not necessary to use Hetch Hetchy at all. Nearing the conclusion of the hearing, the chairman, insisting that many of the anti-development arguments had been settled, cut off Whitman. None of the eleven representatives from California present, the chairman proclaimed, objected to the bill. With all John Muir did to attempt to divert this supposed disaster in the Hetch Hetchy Valley, no more could be done after the hearing.³⁸

³¹ Clements, "Politics and the Park," 196-197.

³² Advisory Board, "*Water Supply*," 9.

³³ Clements, "Politics and the Park," 201.

³⁴ Clements, "Politics and the Park," 203.

³⁵ Clements, "Politics and the Park," 206.

³⁶ Richardson, "Struggle for the Valley," 254.

³⁷ Hetch Hetchy Act of 1913, Public Law 41, 63rd Cong., 1st sess. (December 19, 1913).

³⁸ Nash, "*Wild*," 87-96.

In December of 1913, President Wilson ratified the Raker Act allowing San Francisco to build a dam in the Hetch Hetchy Valley and creating what is known today as Hetch Hetchy Reservoir in Yosemite National Park. Although this was a victory for San Francisco and conservationists alike, the act placed extreme restrictions on dam construction, since it was being built inside Yosemite National Park. Special limitations and constraints imposed by the NPS, along with other restraints, would prove challenging in the construction process.³⁹ Thus, the dam would not be finished until 1925, and conflicts over the restrictions imposed by the Raker Act continued into the 1940's.⁴⁰ In fact, debate about the dam continues to this day with people wanting to drain the valley and restore it to its former glory.

Locally, the issue of Hetch Hetchy involved more than just San Francisco. The water supply controversy spilled over into the long-standing feud between the two prospering cities of Los Angeles and San Francisco. For example, in a 1910 editorial, the *San Bernardino Sun* took aim at "misinformation" spread by the *Los Angeles Times*:

...when the Los Angeles "Times" heads a bias Washington dispatch with the line "Can't Have Yosemite," a wayfaring man can discover that somebody is trying to fool the public and make them think that San Francisco is trying to gobble the Yosemite Valley for a water supply. Nothing of the sort Absolutely untrue, and not only untrue, but maliciously so, calculated to deceive.⁴¹

Both local and national newspapers and pamphlets suggest that at least some of the nation was divided on whether the valley should be dammed or not. This can be seen in a *Los Angeles Herald* article villainizing San Francisco and the dam entitled, "Shall This Beautiful Valley Be Destroyed?"⁴² However, in the city itself, residents did want the dam: they voted six to one in favor of the dam, by municipal bond election.⁴³ When the bill passed the senate 183 to 43, *The San Francisco Call* published an article titled "How San Francisco Men View House Vote on Hetch Hetchy." According to the article, various prominent businessmen were "delighted, thought it was good, and were overall happy with the outcome."⁴⁴

Additionally, on November 11, 1908, the *Call* ran a full-page frontpage article promoting the damming of Hetch Hetchy. It included a political cartoon vilifying Spring Valley Water Company for its outrageous water prices.⁴⁵ Overall, San Francisco wanted the bill passed, if newspaper coverage was any indication.

Throughout this controversy of approximately thirteen years, there were essentially only two powers at work. It simply came down to conservationism versus preservationists. Both sides sought to position themselves as representing the public or national interest. It was the preservationists who used this idea of national interest to keep the valley as it was because of its beauty. The conservationists, by contrast, saw no reason not to take advantage of this "public utility" and use it for the interests of the people, especially in the city of San Francisco.⁴⁶ One of the key reasons that preservationists lost their fight was because of the idea of the pragmatic over aesthetic. Supporters of the dam argued that it is more practical to use the water for economic growth in hydroelectric

³⁹ Hetch Hetchy Act of 1913, Public Law 41, 63rd Cong., 1st sess. (December 19, 1913), 4,5,6 et seq.

⁴⁰ John Ise, *Our National Park Policy: A Critical History* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins Press, 1961), 95-96.

⁴¹ "Can't Have Yosemite," *San Bernardino Sun*, March 2, 1910.

⁴² H.R. Darling, "Shall This Beautiful Valley Be Destroyed?" *Los Angeles Herald Sunday Magazine*, October 17, 1909.

⁴³ Christine Oravec, "Conservationism vs. Preservationism: The Public Interest in The Hetch Hetchy Valley Controversy," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70, no. 4 (1984): 448.

⁴⁴ "House Passes Measure Giving San Francisco Yosemite Water Right," *San Francisco Call*, September 3, 1913.

⁴⁵ "The Words 'Collection Under Injunction' Tell the Story," *San Francisco Call*, November 11, 1908.

⁴⁶ Oravec, "Conservationism vs. Preservationism," 444.

power and save the residents of San Francisco money with lower water bills. Opposing this outlook were some “hardy mountain climbers” who want to enjoy the climb and views of the Hetch Hetchy Valley.⁴⁷

Overall, too many miscalculations were made by preservationists in their battle to prevent the dam from being built. The controversy proved extremely political. John Muir and his fellow preservationists were not prepared for what they faced, and in the end, Hetch Hetchy suffered for it. This would technically be a loss for Muir, and he would die the next year. Thus, he would be unable to see the fruits of his labor emerge later. After the “tragedy” of Hetch Hetchy, people began realizing what had taken place and began to understand what Muir was trying to do. A few short years later in 1916, a branch of the Interior Department was created specifically to promote the preservation of the National Park Service, and more advocates of the parks began to arise. Suddenly, Muir’s message was no longer lost. Sadly, the San Francisco water controversy became overblown, vilifying the city. While some claims of its unfairness to the parks may be true, all the city wanted was a water supply of its own and to take advantage of the utilities of the Tuolumne River and the Hetch Hetchy Valley.

⁴⁷ Oravec, “Conservationism vs. Preservationism,” 447.