

June 26, 2020

UC Berkeley Building Name Review Committee
transmitted via electronic mail to building-name-review@berkeley.edu

Dear members of the Building Name Review Committee,

On Wednesday, June 17, the faculty of the Department of Physics voted overwhelmingly to support a formal resolution to request the removal of the name LeConte from our buildings and to ask for a subsequent renaming. This was in response to repeated [calls](#) for action from the Black Student Union and other student organizations since 2015. It was also catalyzed by the Black Lives Matter movement, which has brought the entire nation's attention to the pernicious effects of systemic racism. This vote followed an earlier informal resolution supporting a name change that was adopted by the faculty in January 2018, in response to local newspaper articles about Joseph LeConte.

The Building Name Review Committee has previously recognized the need to reassess the naming of university buildings. The committee's website states, "The legacy of a building's namesake should be in alignment with the values and mission of the university." We understand that LeConte Hall has been included on lists of buildings needing review since 2015.

LeConte Hall: Old LeConte was designed by architect John Galen Howard and completed and occupied in 1923-24. In 1950, an addition was constructed on the northwest side, now commonly referred to as New LeConte. Together, these two buildings — Old LeConte and New LeConte — are often simply called LeConte Hall. A major renovation including seismic retrofitting of Old LeConte was completed in 2006. Some of the most significant advances in physics before and after World War II occurred in LeConte, including the development by Ernest O. Lawrence of the cyclotron, arguably creating the field of high-energy physics, and the establishment by J. Robert Oppenheimer of a theory group widely regarded as the best in the world. LeConte Hall has been listed on the National Registry of Historic Buildings since June 2004.

The LeConte brothers: Most sources, including the university's request to the National Registry, state that the building's name recognizes the early contributions of brothers John and Joseph LeConte to UC Berkeley. Joseph and John LeConte were born, raised, and educated in Liberty County, Georgia, where their childhood home was the Woodmanston plantation, which held an estimated 200 enslaved persons.

John LeConte attended Franklin College at the University of Georgia, in Athens, graduating in 1838. Following the death of his father, Louis, in that year, John LeConte became heir to a large portion of the Woodmanston plantation. He next studied medicine at the New York College of Physicians and Surgeons and earned his M.D. in 1842. He practiced medicine for

four years, then returned to the University of Georgia as a professor of physics and chemistry, resigning in 1855. He then assumed a similar position at South Carolina College in Columbia (now the University of South Carolina). After initially opposing secession, John LeConte became a supporter and Confederate officer and was charged with supervising the Nitre and Mining Bureau operations in upper South Carolina. According to the biography his brother Joseph wrote for the National Academy, John LeConte held the rank of major, yet never wore a Confederate uniform. When Union troops, including Sherman's army, entered South Carolina, John LeConte and his brother were charged with removing the nitre and mining equipment, but federal troops intercepted their wagon train and captured John LeConte. On returning to Columbia after the war, LeConte found his family safe and his home intact, but his scientific manuscripts and other papers had been destroyed by a fire that had swept through Columbia. [Source: Lester Stephens, South Carolina Encyclopedia, www.scencyclopedia.org/sce/entries/leconte-john]

Discouraged and embittered by Reconstruction in post-war South Carolina, John LeConte came to Berkeley in 1869, several months prior to the opening of the new university. He had a long and distinguished career as an administrator and as a physicist. He was the first faculty member hired by Berkeley and served as its initial acting president from 1869 to 1870, prior to the hiring of Henry Durant. After the resignation of President Gilman in 1875, LeConte again served a year as acting president, then five more as president, until stepping down to resume his role as professor of physics.

John LeConte's scientific contributions were primarily in the field of acoustics. Over his career, he published over 100 papers. Topics he explored included the response of flames to sound, measurements of the speed of sound in air and various pure gases, the propagation of vibrations under water, and the formation of ice columns in soil. He remained scientifically active until his death in 1891.

The two articles below contain other references of relevance:

https://www.wikiwand.com/en/John_LeConte

<http://www.scencyclopedia.org/sce/entries/leconte-john/>

Joseph, John's younger brother, attended Harvard University and studied under Louis Agassiz. Agassiz was a proponent of polygenism, the view that human races are of different origins, and he asserted that Europeans were consequently racially superior to people of African descent. Joseph shared many of the racist views of Agassiz, but rejected polygenism, becoming instead an early proponent of Darwin's theory of evolution. [He also supported the social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer]. Joseph LeConte developed a keen interest in geology from excursions with Agassiz.

After graduating from Harvard, Joseph LeConte became professor of natural science at Oglethorpe University in Midway, Georgia, then professor of natural history and geology at Franklin College, a position he held from 1852 to 1856. From 1857 to 1869, he was professor

of chemistry and geology at South Carolina College. [The college was suspended in 1863 due to the war; Joseph joined the Confederate Army and, like his brother, worked as a scientist on the manufacture of gunpowder].

When the LeConte brothers returned in 1866 to their positions at South Carolina College, the institution had reopened as the University of South Carolina, welcoming black students for the first time. It also had black boards of trustees, black professors and, by 1876, a predominantly black student body. Joseph LeConte [wrote](#) despairingly that his former college was becoming “a school for illiterate negroes.”

Joseph followed his brother to the University of California in 1868. There, he became a noted naturalist and geographer, served as president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1892 and of the Sierra Club from 1892 to 1898. He was a friend of and co-explorer with John Muir, with whom he joined to establish the Sierra Club. Arguably, he was the most distinguished scientist and scholar on the Berkeley campus during its early years.

Joseph LeConte was also a virulent and outspoken racist, advocating broadly for the disenfranchisement and repression of communities of color. From <https://hist.franklin.uga.edu/events/content/2019/leconte-forum>:

“To further these aims, he coated his racism in the language of science. He wrote a work entitled ‘The Race Problem in the South’ that was aimed at justifying the inferiority of African-Americans and calling for their disenfranchisement. In that text, LeConte used scientific arguments to underscore his points. In his eyes, slavery was a natural condition representing the ‘inequality of the races,’ and as such, African-Americans were undeserving of rights and should have them confiscated, or should be intimidated from exercising them. At one point he remarks in this work that ‘the sudden enfranchisement of the negro was the greatest political crime ever committed.’ As part of his attacks on African Americans he called for anti-miscegenation laws and poll tests to exclude them from the electorate.

This and other works that LeConte had written were well received by the legislature of Georgia, and they were used to support laws excluding African-Americans from society and their rights. LeConte would also promote the works of figures like Arthur de Gobineau who were unequivocal in their belief in the fundamental inequality of African-Americans, and the corollary that they deserved unequal rights.

LeConte is in many ways an interesting and a reprehensible figure, and until recently, a large portrait of him could be seen on the main floor of [the University of Georgia’s] LeConte Hall. What to make of his legacy still remains a question.”

Joseph LeConte’s racism is directly connected with his scientific work at Berkeley. The material below, which he wrote during his years at Berkeley, includes selections from LeConte’s writings compiled by Gretchen Kell, director of special projects and outreach for UC Berkeley’s Office of Communications and Public Affairs.

In an April 1880 [Berkeley Quarterly Article](#), he argued that sexual reproduction in plants and animals explains the perils of racial intermixing: *“I regard the light-haired blue-eyed Teutonic and the negro as the extreme types, and their mixture as producing the worst effect. ... It seems probable then that the mixture of extreme races produces an inferior result.”*

In his 1889 article [“The South Revisited”](#) and his 1892 book, [“The Race Problem in the South,”](#) LeConte wrote extensively on the “dread race problem” in society and the superiority of white people over black people. From “The South Revisited,” p. 27: *“The extreme gravity and yet the difficulty of this problem no one appreciates as do the Southern people themselves. At the very outset of the discussion of this subject, I would lay down a fundamental proposition. Given two races widely different in intellectual and moral elevation, especially in capacity for self-government, in other words very different in grade of race-evolution; place them together in equal numbers in such conditions that they cannot get away from one another, and leave them to solve for themselves the problem of social organization, and the inevitable result will be, must be, that the higher race will assume control and determine the policy of the community. Not only is this result inevitable, but it is the best result for all parties, and especially for the lower race.”* He continued: *“If there be only a few of a lower race scattered about in a community, we can afford to recognize, nay, more, to patronize, to pet, or even to lionize them. But where numbers are equal, where there is a struggle between the two races for control of the policy of the community, the case is very different. The laws must be made and the state policy must be determined by the superior race.”*

In “The South Revisited,” p. 28, he wrote: *“The whites desire earnestly, more earnestly than most of us at a distance can imagine, the real best interest of the negro. They earnestly desire their elevation by education and by acquisition of property; they would grant, I believe, every just right; but all on one condition, viz., that the whites control the policy of the state. That this is a necessity at present and until some better solution is devised, until some better line be drawn between the capables and the incapables, is plainly shown by the disastrous effects of the brief reign of carpetbaggers sustained by the negro vote after the war.”* He continued: *“But race repulsion and race antagonism is not a wholly irrational sentiment. It is an instinct necessary for the preservation of the purity of the blood of the higher race. ... Wherever the white population is in excess (p. 31), so that there is no doubt about the controlling element in shaping the policy of the community, the negroes are improving in all the respects mentioned above. But wherever the negroes are largely in excess, so that the control of the superior race is lost, as, for example, in parts of Louisiana and the coasts of Carolina and Georgia, the negroes are rapidly retrograding. Here, as in Liberia, Hayti (sp), and wheresoever else they are withdrawn from the personal controlling influence of the white race, they are rapidly relapsing into barbarism.”*

Other references of note:

[The Autobiography of Joseph LeConte](#)

[Wikipedia](#)

[“The Golden State’s Scientific White Supremacist”](#)

Building Name Review Committee Questions:

- A. What building name do you propose removing? *LeConte*
- B. Why was the building named after this person? (Was the name honorific or due to a donation?)
Honorific
- C. What service, if any, did this person perform for the university? *The LeConte brothers were among the most accomplished scholars of the early years of UC Berkeley. John LeConte was UC's first professor, first acting president, and third UC president.*
- D. What is the history of contesting the legacy of the building's namesake, if any? *Our department first became aware of the LeConte controversy through newspaper articles that appeared in 2017. In a January 2018 faculty meeting, the physics faculty agreed informally to support the renaming of LeConte. On June 17, 2020, the faculty formally adopted, by a nearly unanimous vote, a resolution calling for the immediate renaming of LeConte.*
- E. Why do you believe that the legacy of the namesake is fundamentally at odds with the mission of the University? That is, why does the legacy's pernicious effects outweigh the individual's contributions?
The deciding factor for our faculty was the gross misuse of science by Joseph LeConte to repress and advocate against the rights of African-Americans.
- F. What is the likely impact on members of the university community if the name is retained or removed? *The removal of the LeConte name will send a message to our community — within physics and across campus — that we reject the racism associated with the LeConte name and the misuse of science by Joseph LeConte to justify the repression of people of color.*
- G. Please add any other relevant information or arguments.

A resolution was formally approved by overwhelming vote of the physics faculty on June 17, 2020, concerning renaming of LeConte. The resolution includes the following petition to the Building Name Review Committee. Note that at the time of this resolution, the Department was uncertain whether the building had been named for physicist John LeConte, or both brothers John and Joseph. The university document submitted to the National Registry of Historic Buildings, subsequently located, indicates that the building honors both brothers.

Resolution of the Physics Faculty

That we move now to rename LeConte Hall: LeConte Hall honors John LeConte, the first Berkeley faculty member, the first Berkeley physicist, and the first acting president of UC Berkeley. The LeConte name is also associated with Joseph LeConte, a naturalist who followed his brother to Berkeley and espoused extreme racism, including support for the theories of Louis Agassiz. Both brothers served for the South in the Civil War, helping to perpetuate slavery.