A Visit from John Muir

Toward the end of spring in 1893, the renowned conservationist and nature writer, John Muir (himself a horticulturist at the time), visited the Boston area, primarily to meet in person Charles Sprague Sargent, the first director of the Arnold Arboretum. In a long letter to his wife at their ranch in California, Muir described visits he had just made to both Walden Pond in Concord and "Holm Lea," Sargent's estate, in Brookline. Muir apparently did not visit the Arboretum during the trip but did pay a call on the ailing historian–horticulturist, Francis Parkman (author of The Oregon Trail), who lived nearby, in Jamaica Plain. Excerpts from his letter follow:

After leaving [Thoreau's and Emerson's graves at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord], we walked through the woods to Walden Pond. It is a beautiful lake about half a mile long, fairly embosomed like a bright dark eye in wooded hills of smooth moraine gravel and sand, and with a rich undergrowth of huckleberry, willow, and young oak bushes, etc., and grass and flowers in rich variety. No wonder Thoreau lived here two years. I could have enjoyed living here two hundred years or two thousand. . . .

We went back to Boston that night on a late train, though they wanted to keep us [in Concord], and next day went to Professor Sargent's grand place, where we had a perfectly wonderful time for several days. This is the finest mansion and grounds I ever saw. The house is about two hundred feet long with immense verandas trimmed with huge flowers and vines, standing in the midst of fifty acres of lawns, groves, wild woods of pine, hemlock, maple, beech, hickory, etc., and all kinds of underbrush and wild flowers and cultivated flowers—acres of rhododendrons twelve feet high in full bloom, and a pond covered with lilies, etc., all the ground waving, hill and dale, and clad in the full summer dress of the region, trimmed with exquisite taste.


In another letter, this one to his twelve-year-old elder daughter, he said of Walden that "Beautiful trees & flowers grow there & the water is clear, & all of the banks are shady & leafy."

Muir figures prominently in Stephanne B. Sutton's biography of Sargent, Charles
Sprague Sargent and the Arnold Arboretum, published by Harvard University Press in 1970, to commemorate the Arboretum’s then approaching centenary. For more than three decades, Muir and Sargent corresponded, collaborated, and travelled together on three continents in pursuit of their common interests and goals in horticulture, botany, and forest conservation.

Asa Gray had introduced them to each other in the late 1870s, although they did not meet in person until 1893. Many delightful letters from their long correspondence (some of the 165 Muir–Sargent letters known to be extant) survive in the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum in Jamaica Plain; other records in the Archives suggest that through Asa Gray Muir may have contributed seeds towards the Arboretum’s Living Collections as early as 1872, its very first year of existence; during the summer of that year Gray and Muir had spent many days collecting plants together in the Sierra Nevada and elsewhere in California. Muir visited Boston (and “Holm Lea”) again, in 1896 (to receive an honorary degree from Harvard), 1898, and 1903. In 1898, he visited both Horatio Hollis Hunnewell’s arboretum in nearby Wellesley and the Arnold Arboretum. The visit of 1903 was the rendezvous for the start of an around-the-world trip Muir was to make with Sargent and Sargent’s son, A. Robeson Sargent. The last issue of Arnoldia (Spring 1986) contains a brief account of one leg of that trip.

A view of the grounds and mansion at “Holm Lea.” “This is the finest mansion and grounds I ever saw,” Muir declared. Photograph from the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum.