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Out of the Woods

What we learn from Thoreau's life in Concord

Lucille Stott



I came here to meet him at last.

—*A visitor to Thoreau's birth house*

IN DECEMBER 1995, I WAS SITTING AT MY EDITOR'S DESK AT *The Concord Journal* in Concord, Massachusetts, when I received a call from a town resident living on Virginia Road. The house next door to her—the farmhouse where Henry David Thoreau was born on July 12, 1817—was about to be razed and the twenty acres on which it sat developed into twelve cluster houses. The owner of the house, recently widowed, needed to sell, and the developer had drawn up plans. What, the caller asked, could we do about that?

Before that conversation, I hadn't known that Thoreau was born on a farm along a little-known road miles from both the Main Street house where he died and Walden Pond, the place with which he is most identified. Not long after the call, I was allowed to visit the eighteenth-century house, which was in dilapidated condition and very near collapse. When I entered the second floor room where Thoreau had been born (the "east chamber" of the original structure), I was overcome with unexpected emotion and a most uncommon response: awe. In my mountain hikes and my saunters along the familiar trails of home, Thoreau had always served as an inspiration to slow down, forget peakbagging and mileage counts, and remember that "heaven is under our feet" (as he wrote in "The Pond in Winter" in *Walden*). But here in this house I was imagining a different Thoreau, the man who belonged to his family and to the town he would later dub "the most estimable place in the world" (*Journal*, December 5, 1856).

I was hooked that day on helping to rescue the birth house. For two years, interested citizens worked with local officials to elicit support from the state, public and private foundations, and generous individuals. By spring 1997, when the town meeting voted to allow the town of Concord to buy the house and land, only \$160,000 of the \$960,000 sale price came from municipal coffers. The whole story of the public-private partnership that saved the property from destruction appears on the website of the nonprofit Thoreau Farm Trust, which was founded in 1998 at the behest of the town and

A public-private partnership bought and preserved this Concord, Massachusetts, house where Henry David Thoreau was born in 1817. THOREAU FARM TRUST

charged with raising the money to restore and reuse the house in the spirit of Thoreau's life and work. Today, the Thoreau Farm Trust owns the Virginia Road farmhouse and two acres of surrounding land; the trust operates the property as a "birthplace of ideas."

The upstairs room where Thoreau was born has been kept largely untouched and is open to the public, but Thoreau Farm is not a museum. It is home to the Thoreau Society, the international group devoted to Thoreau's work, and to Gaining Ground, the agricultural nonprofit that cultivates eighteen of the original acres around the house (leasing some of this land from the town) and donates the produce to soup kitchens and shelters. The house's public space and outdoor expanse are used as gathering places and for programs that promote Thoreau's wish to "live deliberately."

The saving and rehabilitation of Thoreau's birth house is a compelling story of what a few people can do when the spirit moves them, yet it represents only one in a long and continuing line of stories that illustrate Thoreau's enduring hold on our minds and hearts. To paraphrase Mark Twain's famous cable to the newspaper that erroneously published his obituary, the death of Henry David Thoreau has been greatly exaggerated.

Finding Thoreau in Concord

Thoreau, the consummate walker, wrote in the opening chapter of *Walden* that he had "traveled a good deal in Concord." Even today, his footprints are everywhere in his hometown. You can take either Walden Street or Thoreau Street from the village center to Walden Pond. Or you can head out in the other direction to the beautiful, trail-woven forest tract—Estabrook Woods—on the northeast edge of town, a favorite Thoreau haunt that merited frequent mention in his journals. Today, "Easterbrook Country," as Thoreau called it, is much more forested than it was in his day, its stone fences and cellar holes the only remains of the farms that once shaped its landscape. You can visit the Thoreau family home and boardinghouse on Monument Square and stroll past the former schoolhouse on Academy Lane where he taught and the Main Street home in whose front room he died. You can even stop by the site of the former jailhouse—commemorated by a granite marker on Monument Square—where Thoreau spent a night in 1846 for not paying his poll tax, an experience that prompted him to write "Resistance to Civil Government," more commonly known today as "Civil Disobedience."

The Concord Free Public Library, one of the finest small libraries in the country, houses the manuscript of Thoreau's essay, "Walking," the surveying field notes he gathered, and the surveys he drew up, including one of Walden. Leslie Perrin Wilson, curator of the library's special collections, says that visitors—even the scholars among them—often react emotionally when holding these documents, particularly the "Walking" manuscript, which originated in journal entries and lecture notes, and which contains, on page 45, the famous axiom, "In Wildness is the preservation of the world."

"To watch people respond to this is very moving," Wilson said in an interview recently. "I've seen them cry." Wilson added that visitors to the Thoreau collection are a diverse group, in age, background, and nationality. "Thoreau doesn't belong to the experts," she said. "He belongs to the people. I love talking to a group of high school or college students who have their breath taken away. Thoreau is truly a universal language."

A visitor interested in artifacts can find more than 250 Thoreau-related objects at the Concord Museum, which contains the world's largest collection of Thoreauviana, including his flute, his walking stick, and the desk on which he wrote "Civil Disobedience" and *Walden*.

Just across the Concord line in Lincoln, the Walden Woods Project, founded by rock musician Don Henley in 1990, is in its third decade of preserving the land around the pond. The nonprofit organization, devoted to conservation, education, and advocacy, welcomes Thoreau scholars, teachers, and students to a lovely retreat house—called the Thoreau Institute—where, in an impressive library, they can peruse the rare materials owned by the Thoreau Society and curated by the institute.

One of the most beautiful Thoreau-related walks in town is through picturesque Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, where Thoreau is buried with his family. Devotees leave tokens at his gravesite—stones, feathers, pinecones, sometimes even personal notes. Originally, Thoreau was buried in the maternal family plot in the earliest part of the cemetery. But in the 1870s, he and his family were moved to the section known as Author's Ridge, near the Hawthornes, the Alcotts, and the Emersons, emphasizing Henry's place in the stunning collective of writers and thinkers who lived in town during the nineteenth-century "American Renaissance."

Among all these luminaries, Thoreau has the distinction of being the only one who was actually born in Concord. Visitors to his birth house are asked to leave behind brief notes about Thoreau's impact on them. A recent stop by the bulletin board near the entrance offers a glimpse of the variety

of responses to this request, a testament to the breadth and depth of Thoreau's message:

I gather local wild berries and other edible wild plants and mushrooms and share with family, friends, and other folks interested in connecting to nature via their taste buds.

I try not to judge but to understand. It's hard work.

I run with my dog off-leash through the woods observing flora and fauna, reflecting each night on the wonder I live in.

Ignore regulations. Respect the heart.

Trying to learn even better what "deliberately" means.

These notes reflect Thoreau's ability to reach people in a variety of ways and prompt them not just to think but to act. He believed that society's hope rests with the individual, and through the years, visitors to this house have been encouraged to imagine ways they could live more considered lives. Thoreau wasn't above preaching—and nagging—but he never prescribed a way of life that would be right for all, certainly not a cabin in the woods. Rather, he urged all people to find their own paths to "living deliberately":

I would not have any one adopt my mode of living, on any account; for, beside that before he has fairly learned it, I may have found another for myself, I desire that there be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead. ("Economy," *Walden*)

Walden

Despite Thoreau's reluctance to become a model for others' lives, the most visited Thoreau-related place in Concord remains Walden Pond State Reservation. There you can walk along a well-worn trail to the house site, discovered by Roland Wells Robbins in 1945, 100 years after Henry built the cabin. Many people leave a stone, often with messages attached, on the commemorative cairn, an idea originated in 1872 by Thoreau's friend

Bronson Alcott. The cabin Thoreau inhabited for two years, two months, and two days is no longer there, however. After Henry left it on September 6, 1847, it was moved and used by local farmers and was finally destroyed for firewood and timber. The Thoreau Society, which runs the Shop at Walden Pond, has constructed a replica that stands beside the entrance to the park.

In her article, “Walden: Pilgrimages and Iconographies” in the *Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, Wilson distinguishes two categories of Thoreauvian visitors to the pond: “Ordinary tourists view Walden as a famous literary locale. Pilgrims invest it with the capacity to spark their own spirituality, insight, and creative energy, as it did Thoreau’s.” Concord historian Richard Smith also speaks of the “pilgrims” who find spiritual sustenance at Walden: “Thoreau speaks so deeply to people . . . They feel connected to his experience at Walden Pond.”

In the mid-1980s, writer Terry Tempest Williams was visiting Concord Academy as an artist-in-residence. She asked me if I would take her to Walden Pond on the morning she left for home, and I was surprised to learn that she had never been there. Arriving in the early hours, we could see two fishermen through the April mist. Otherwise, we were alone. Williams pulled from her satchel her high school copy of *Walden*, showing me sheepishly her many underlines in, of course, *green* ink. With book in hand, she approached the water, crouched down, and dipped her hand in. We stayed for a while as she read aloud from *Walden*. I have never forgotten that moment. Williams had certainly been finding her own Walden for many years in her Utah landscape, but that day she was profoundly moved to find herself at the source.

Wildness Within

Thoreau never claimed that the woods around Walden Pond qualified as some absolute example of wildness. There was something else he was after there—a paring down of his needs that would allow him to fit more snugly into the natural world. For him, the experiment was as much about what he was bringing to the pond as it was about what the pond would bring to him:

It is in vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such. It is the bog in our brains and bowels, the primitive vigor of Nature in us, that inspires that dream. I shall never find in the wilds of Labrador any greater wildness than in some recess of Concord, i.e., than I import into it. (*Journal*, August 30, 1856)

In fact, Thoreau had discovered a landscape that he found dauntingly distant and wild on Katahdin, which he climbed in September 1846, in the middle of his stay at Walden. As John Blair and Augustus Trowbridge say in their *American Quarterly* article, “Thoreau on Katahdin,” here, for the first time, “[Thoreau] encountered nature in its most primitive and forbidding state The raw material of the mountains refused to yield up meaning in the intuitive mode of analogies he had formulated at Concord.”

The Katahdin experience led Thoreau back to Concord’s familiar flatlands and rivers, and to the pond where he felt at ease. While living at Walden, he was not so much taking a walk on the wild side as letting his own wild side out for a walk, and in this less majestic, more humanly scaled realm of nature, he felt able to do so. At home in Walden, he could slow down, look closely at the life teeming around, above, and below him, and feel welcomed as a part of it all. Here, it felt perfectly natural to let loose and give in to the raw, exhilarating rush of “primitive vigor” lurking within. He celebrates a moment of such primal awakening in his *Walden* chapter, “Higher Laws,” which begins:

As I came home through the woods with my string of fish, trailing my pole, it being now quite dark, I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented.

What I find remarkable about this passage is that Thoreau does not feel a need to abandon other sides of himself even as he embraces the predatory animal in him: “I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both.” (“Higher Laws,” *Walden*) His belief that both goodness and savagery are human *instincts*, and that we must acknowledge both to lead a balanced life, is one of the ideological threads that connects Thoreau’s experience at Walden with the rest of his life and work.

That connection is rooted in Thoreau’s commitment to looking and listening closely. He could discern a glimmer of meaning in every experience, whether wild or tame. In an 1857 letter to his friend Harrison Blake (excerpted by Jeffrey Cramer in his annotated edition of *Walden*), Thoreau expressed what forays into forests and hills can mean to those who venture in and up in a spirit of wonder and humility:

It did not take very long to get over the mountain, you thought; but have you got over it indeed? If you have been to the top of Mount Washington, let me ask, what did you find there? . . . Going up there and being blown on is nothing. . . . It is after we get home that we really go over the mountain, if ever. What did the mountain say? What did the mountain do?

For Thoreau, venturing into the woods was a sterile exercise if it did not bear the fruit of wisdom—a taste of what it might mean to lead a fuller life.

Beyond Walden

In her poem “Going to Walden” [*Editor’s note: see the full poem on page 133*], Mary Oliver questions the pilgrimage approach to Walden, honoring instead Thoreau’s wish that we each seek, deliberately, our own path in life:

But in a book I read and cherish,
Going to Walden is not so easy a thing
As a green visit. It is the slow and difficult
Trick of living, and finding it where you are.

So much attention is placed on the time Thoreau spent at the pond that this most literal attempt to “simplify, simplify, simplify,” too often overshadows the rest of his messages about “the slow and difficult trick of living.” Most of his life was, in fact, lived with and in consideration of others. One of his reasons for moving to the edge of town was to write the manuscript that became *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack*, a reflection of his deep bond with his brother, John, who died in 1842 at the age of 26. Henry surely wanted solitude from a family home that took in boarders—solitude to become one with nature and to write in peace—but he never staked a claim to hermithood. He welcomed regular visitors to his tiny home and ventured almost daily into town. In an article, “The Forester,” in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1862, his friend Bronson Alcott called him,

The most welcome of companions, this plain countryman. One shall not meet with thoughts invigorating like his often: coming so scented of mountain and field breezes and rippling springs, so like a luxuriant clod from under forest-leaves, moist and mossy with earth-spirits. His presence is tonic, like ice-water in dog-days to the parched citizen pent in chambers and under brazen ceilings.

Young Edward Emerson, son of Ralph Waldo and profound admirer of Thoreau, noted in his 1862 eulogy that when Henry entered a home in Concord, he would look around for the children, whom he would regale with stories of muskrats and squirrels and of the “Homeric battle of the red and black ants.” His expeditions in search of huckleberries, chestnuts, and grapes were popular local outings, and he even cut down Concord’s first town Christmas tree, beginning a tradition that continues to this day. Another young friend, Louisa May Alcott, who wrote in the March 1869 issue of the magazine *Merry’s Museum*, “Thoreau . . . used to come smiling up to his neighbors, to announce that the bluebirds had arrived, with as much interest in the fact as other men take in messages by the Atlantic cable.”

Thoreau connected with other people—and connected other people to each other—through his fascination with the natural world. I’ve always wished more attention could be paid to that little-heralded aspect of his life and personality, so I was pleased last spring when I saw that the Transcendental Council of First Parish Church in Concord was going to celebrate Thoreau’s human relationships in a special service commemorating the funeral held there for him 150 years ago, on May 9, 1862, three days after he died from tuberculosis at age 44. The commemorative service featured readings of remarks captured in writing from Thoreau’s friends, neighbors, and family members before and after his death. It drew more than 400 people on a beautiful Sunday afternoon. When it was over, I felt emotionally uplifted, as though I had just attended the memorial service of an inspiring personal friend. Looking around at the faces of others leaving the service, I saw I was not alone in that response.

Those who insist on seeing Thoreau as a one-dimensional figure, defined by solitude and ill humor, would have been surprised by the abundance of affection expressed by his contemporaries and the number of devoted friends who gathered around him as he lay dying. Readers at this commemorative event related story after story of human connection, and it was easy to imagine Thoreau captivating the young and engaging the old with vivid tales from his encounters with local flora and fauna. When a group of town children brought food to the house for the ailing Henry and were not allowed in to see their great champion, Henry protested, insisting that the children be allowed to see him—and they were. Sam Staples, his one-time jailor, was quoted as saying after a visit to the bedridden Henry that his friend “seemed so serene and happy,” a quality that Thoreau’s sister Sophia would later describe in a letter as “the power of spirit over matter.”

One reader at the service quoted at length from Ralph Waldo Emerson's eulogy for Thoreau, which the *Atlantic Monthly* published as "Thoreau," in August 1862. Emerson spoke of Henry's "fitness of body and mind," and his prowess as a swimmer, skater, and boatman, adding that his friend "chose to be rich by making his wants few."

The commemoration ended with a recitation of Louisa May Alcott's poem, "Thoreau's Flute," for which she proudly accepted \$10 from the *Atlantic Monthly* when it was published in 1863. The poem, which Louisa told her diary was her "best," speaks of the strong effects Thoreau's presence exerted on those who knew him. But it also predicts his lasting influence on us all—his enduring voice in our heads as we try to stay awake to each day, his abiding reminder of the need to fight for social justice, his hope that we, too, will speak a word for nature:

We sighing said, "Our Pan is dead;
His pipe hangs mute beside the river
Around it wistful sunbeams quiver,
But Music's airy voice is fled.
Spring mourns as for untimely frost;
The bluebird chants a requiem;
The willow-blossom waits for him;
The Genius of the wood is lost."

Then from the flute, untouched by hands,
There came a low, harmonious breath:
"For such as he there is no death;
His life the eternal life commands;
Above man's aims his nature rose.
The wisdom of a just content
Made one small spot a continent
And turned to poetry life's prose.

"Haunting the hills, the stream, the wild,
Swallow and aster, lake and pine,
To him grew human or divine,
Fit mates for this large-hearted child.
Such homage Nature ne'er forgets,
And yearly on the coverlid

'Neath which her darling lieth hid
Will write his name in violets.

“To him no vain regrets belong
Whose soul, that finer instrument,
Gave to the world no poor lament,
But wood-notes ever sweet and strong.
O lonely friend! he still will be
A potent presence, though unseen,
Steadfast, sagacious, and serene;
Seek not for him—he is with thee.”

Bringing Wildness Home

When he left the woods, “because [he] had several more lives to live” (“Conclusion,” *Walden*), Thoreau continued to engage in the hard work of finding balance between the natural and civilized worlds and in the search for ways to articulate how the former can enrich the latter—challenges he urged us all to embrace. In his thinking and writing, Thoreau constantly connected the two worlds. As Blair and Trowbridge note, he used “the facts and processes of nature as a foundation for stating human truths.” For example, on his deathbed, biographers have reported that Thoreau wrote, “The autumn leaves teach us how to die.”¹ And his description of the perfect landscape for living in society remains a blueprint for conservationists and preservationists to this day:

What are the natural features which make a township handsome? A river, with its waterfalls and meadows, a lake, a hill, a cliff or individual rocks, a forest, and ancient trees standing singly. Such things are beautiful. . . . If the inhabitants of a town were wise, they would seek to preserve such things; for such things educate far more than any hired teachers or preachers, or any at present recognized system of school education. (*Journal*, January 3, 1861)

¹ Performers read this quotation at the funeral reenactment I attended. For one of the sources that describe the deathbed writing, see *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*, by Robert D. Richardson (University of California Press, 1988).

In 2011, the Concord Land Conservation Trust began a campaign to purchase an unprotected area of Gowing's Swamp, located not far from Thoreau's birth house. Thoreau wrote of this area in his journal, in "Walking," and in *Walden*, calling it "remote and novel" and detailing the flora that could be found in what is now known as "Thoreau's Bog." Much beauty has been preserved in Concord in Thoreau's name, but the tug he continues to exert on our consciousness—and conscience—ensures that his lessons and legacy will continue to extend far beyond the local. As Emerson said of Thoreau in the eulogy,

I think his fancy for referring everything to the meridian of Concord did not grow out of any ignorance or depreciation of other longitudes or latitudes, but was rather a playful expression of his conviction of the indifference of all places, and that the best place for each is where he stands.

Over my years of living in Concord and walking in Thoreau's footsteps, I have come to appreciate more than anything else the importance he placed on where he stood—with his family, his friends, and his community. The Thoreau who grabs my attention is the man who helped fugitive slaves escape; gave stirring lectures at the Lyceum; kept one chair for solitude, two for friendship, and three for society; planted a garden at Concord's Old Manse to welcome the newly married Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne; and wrote in his journal (1839), "There is no remedy for love but to love more." One reason I continue to work with the Thoreau Farm Trust at the birthplace is my hope that the simple farmhouse where it all began will expand people's understanding of the genius and visionary who found in nature a bracing way to live and a graceful way to die.

LUCILLE DANIEL STOTT is an English teacher at Concord Academy in Concord, Massachusetts, and a former editor of *Appalachia* (2000–2006). She remains a founding board member of the Thoreau Farm Trust.

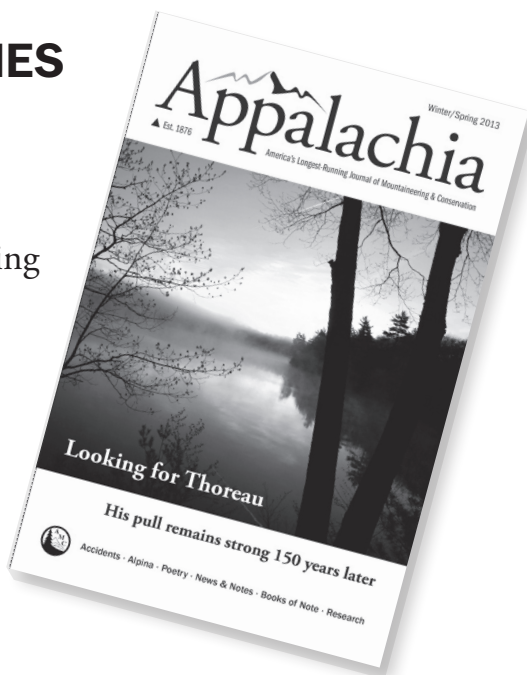
For a list of Thoreau resources and the author's references, see outdoors.org/appalachia

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