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Otherworldly Accidents

The ghost of a literary pilgrim

Parkman Howe



FIFTEEN YEARS AGO I DISCOVERED THAT ONE OF MY STUDENTS at Concord Academy—where I teach literature—lived in the house in which Henry David Thoreau had died. In the fall of the school year, I made a succession of appointments with him to view the house on Main Street, but events always intervened. Finally, we settled on a date in early May. As I crossed Main Street from the school campus and walked the short distance to the house, I suddenly realized we had accidentally but perhaps fortuitously chosen May 6, the day on which Thoreau had died in 1862 at precisely 9 in the morning.

The house itself occupies a central position in Transcendental Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau's father bought the yellow colonial frame house for \$1,450 in 1849 (29 years after Josia Davis built it). Henry David Thoreau himself helped the carpenter, Nathan Hosmer, refurbish the house: They put in new doors, new fireplaces, new glass in windows, a new sink, and new roof shingles. They also attached a nearby barn to the house for the family graphite pencil business. Later, they added a shed from their previous house near the train station. They also raised the rooms to make them more uniform: nine-foot high rooms downstairs, eight-foot high rooms upstairs. Furthermore, the front windows facing the street have an unusual feature: they begin at floor level and ascend almost to the ceiling, flooding the parlor rooms on either side of the front door with light. Here in the late winter of 1857 Thoreau had spent an afternoon in conversation with the abolitionist John Brown. Emerson had dropped by for an introduction. Such things happened in Concord then. Later, Louisa May Alcott helped her sister buy the house; here in 1886 Louisa May wrote *Jo's Boys*, the sequel to *Little Women*. Various members of the Alcott family died here, though not Louisa May.

When we entered the house, the rest of my student's family happened to be out, and we were alone. We toured a recently renovated barn and new kitchen that looked out on the enclosed backyard and brick foundations of what had once been the attached shed for the Thoreau lead operation. As we crossed into the original part of the house that fronts Main Street, interior lighting grew dim; little was square or plumb. We climbed the front stairs. I later heard a vague story that previous owners of the house had seen Henry's ghost walking up the stairs. To my mind, such tales pale in comparison to an appreciation of the animating spirit of the writer himself. Thoreau had set up his own living quarters on the third floor, as Walter Harding describes in the

Thoreau died in the parlor of this house in central Concord, Massachusetts. PARKMAN HOWE

biography *The Days of Henry Thoreau*: “The finished attic of the main portion of the house, with an open stairway coming up into the center of the room, sloping ceilings, and windows at both ends.” Dormer windows have since been added, and the original roof-length, open design has been divided into several smaller rooms. But the monastic feel of whitewashed, sloping walls where Thoreau had established his bedroom study still obtained.

We descended to the first-floor parlor with its fireplace. Thoreau’s cane bed, used at Walden, had been brought down here once the invalid was too weak to climb the stairs. As we studied the room, I became aware of a grandfather clock in the corner. A lovely old piece, it had the usual hour and minute hands, but also a small dial just above the central face for a second hand. We both noticed the clock had stopped, apparently a number of days ago: the minute and second hands pointing upright together, precisely at the 12 position; the hour hand directly at the 9 position: exactly, to the second, when the 44-year-old naturalist and writer had expired. “Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in,” Thoreau wrote at the end of “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For” in *Walden*. “Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains.”

II

Coincidences and Thoreau go hand in hand in Concord. Inspired by the gathering of Thoreau devotees to mark the 100th anniversary of the naturalist’s move to his pond-side house, local resident Roland Wells Robbins began a quest to find the exact site of the structure. Working throughout the summer and into the fall of 1945, Robbins unearthed bits of glass and brick, together with hand-forged nails, near the memorial cairn of stones begun by Bronson Alcott in 1872. On October 28, Robbins struck a lump of plaster beneath the stump of a white pine. Just at this moment of elated discovery, two servicemen interrupted Robbins, one of whom identified himself as Sergeant Henry David Thoreau, Jr., of Altadena, California, a distant relative of Concord’s Thoreau family. Two weeks later, on November 12, 1945, Robbins uncovered the chimney foundation, as he describes in his pamphlet, *Discovery at Walden* (Barnstead & Son, 1947):

Henry Thoreau wrote in his 1845 *Journal*, “Left house on account of plastering, Wednesday, November 12th, at night, returned Saturday, December 6th.” One hundred years to the day the Walden house was finished (for its

construction was not completed until it was plastered) its chimney foundation was brought to light.

Robbins calls the appearance of Henry David Thoreau, Jr., a “colossal coincidence,” and the day of the discovery of the chimney foundation an “extraordinary coincidence,” words that downplay the events’ transcendental significance.

Thoreau’s spirit lives on in Concord so powerfully because there is so much more of Thoreau to find. Thoreau was born in Concord, lived in Concord, and died in Concord. Indeed, his birthplace has been restored and preserved as a historic site and gathering place. His family occupied nine dwellings, many of them still standing, several central to Concord’s character and image. These include the Colonial Inn on Monument Square, where the family lived from 1835 to 1837. The inn has one room in which a few guests claim to have seen ghostly figures in the small hours of the night. Inevitably, some have suggested the ghost is Thoreau, although Thoreau himself was away at college when the family occupied the building. Thoreau famously rang the bell of the stately First Parish Church in 1844 to gather citizens to hear Emerson’s first antislavery address. In the spring of 1862, Emerson insisted that Thoreau’s funeral take place here. The house on Main Street where Thoreau died on May 6, 1862, bears a small plaque to commemorate that event.

Concord’s first families of the 19th century have gradually given way to newer families who have largely benefited from the region’s high-tech boom of the 20th and 21st centuries. Still, strict development laws and 2-acre zoning have preserved much of the downtown, the historic houses, and the surrounding meadows and fields. Even Walden Pond and its surrounding woods have been set aside, almost miraculously, by individuals animated by Thoreau’s writing and spirit of preservation of the wild. Henry would recognize his Concord today. The Thoreau Institute near Walden Pond and the Thoreau Society, currently housed in the Thoreau Birthplace, keep Thoreau scholarship and interests actively before the public. Thoreau’s example at Walden Pond continues to stir controversy, even as it did in the day of the “hermit of Walden.” Writers looking for an easy polemic still occasionally mock Thoreau’s frequent visits to the comforts of the town during his “experiment” at the pond. As recently as the 1990s, one official in the Concord Visitor Center described Thoreau as a “kook” who lived near a “mud hole.” Thoreau and Concord will be forever wedded, even if in an argumentative marriage.

III

On April 29, 2012, the First Parish Church in Concord held a commemorative service to mark the 150th anniversary of Thoreau's death and funeral held in the church. Parishioners and Thoreau scholars and fans gathered to read passages from his works, as well as Emerson's eulogy. A reception at the Wright Tavern next door followed, then a walk to Thoreau's grave in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.

On the actual day of the 150th anniversary of Thoreau's death, May 6, 2012, I arrived opposite the house where the writer had passed away, at a little before 9 A.M. I fully expected to meet other Thoreauvians also marking the event. I was mildly surprised to find myself alone on this lovely, sunny Sunday morning with only a few cars in the broad street. The tarnished plaque commemorating the event remained discretely on the lower left clapboards of the house. The original section of the house, still painted yellow, stood forward with its black center door and porch supported by two white columns. The two windows on either side, extending right to the floorboards within, remained dark and blank, framed on the inside by white curtains, on the outside by black louvered shutters. In front of the right-hand window (viewed from the street), where Thoreau died, a lilac branch arched across the panes, its white flowers in full bloom. Thoreau's old friend Edmund Hosmer had spent the last night with him in this parlor room. When he left early in the morning of May 6, Thoreau's mother, Aunt Louisa, and sister Sophia attended him. Sophia read from *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. At 8 A.M., he asked to be elevated in his cane bed. His last spoken sentence contained only two distinct words, "Moose . . . Indian." One hundred fifty years later, I heard the bells of the First Parish Church toll 9 o'clock.

Meanwhile, at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Thoreau scholar, interpreter, and impersonator Richard Smith had gathered a few friends at Thoreau's grave to mark the occasion by reading the last three paragraphs of Thoreau's essay, "Walking," published in the *Atlantic Monthly* shortly after his death. The essay closes with a recollected saunter in November, in a meadow "the source of a small brook, when the sun at last, just before setting, after a cold, gray day, reached a clear stratum in the horizon, and the softest, brightest morning sunlight fell on the dry grass and on the stems of the trees in the opposite horizon and on the leaves of the shrub oaks on the hillside. . . ." Characteristically, Thoreau beholds in that sunset a sunrise, in the autumn a spring, in the unique, perishable moment an eternity of evenings. The essay

ends, “So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bankside in autumn.” Coincidentally, as Smith began the reading, a light gust of wind sprang up among the pines and oaks of Author’s Ridge, and continued throughout the reading, then died at the conclusion into stillness.

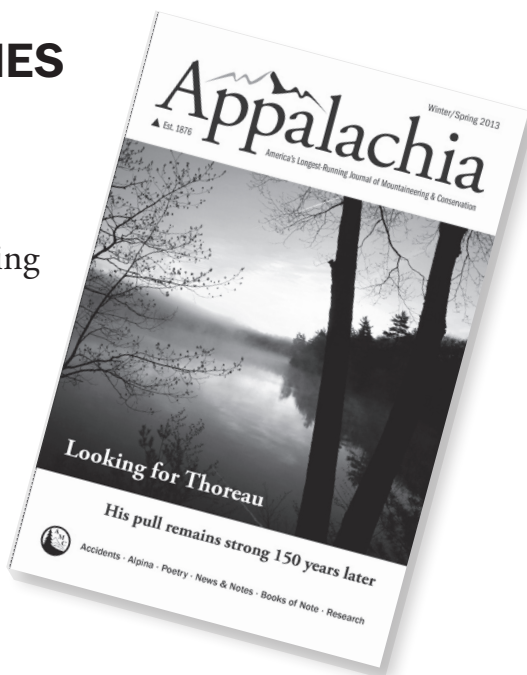
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