'It is a great art to saunter.'

*H. D. Thoreau, April 26, 1841*
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The Concord Saunterer: A Journal of Thoreau Studies, an annual publication of The Thoreau Society, seeks biographical, historical, textual, bibliographical, and interpretive articles relating to Henry David Thoreau and his associates, the Concord circle of authors, and Transcendentalism more generally. Submissions of all lengths are invited; shorter pieces not accepted will also be considered for the quarterly Thoreau Society Bulletin. Contributions should conform to MLA documentation style. Send two copies plus SASF and/or electronic copy to Laura Dassow Walls, Editor, The Concord Saunterer: A Journal of Thoreau Studies, Department of English, 356 O'Shaughnessy Hall, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, 46556; or e-mail as an attachment (MS Word preferred) to lwalls@nd.edu. We strive to report decisions within three months. Subscription is by membership in the Society; see the back cover for additional information. The Concord Saunterer: A Journal of Thoreau Studies is a member of CEJ (the Council of Editors of Learned Journals), and is referenced in American Literary Scholarship, American Humanities Index, and the MLA Bibliography.

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Cover Art: detail from Thoreau’s sketch of Champlain’s 1612 map, from the Library of Congress.
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Contents

Editor’s Page  ii

From Ortelius to Champlain: The Lost Maps of Henry David Thoreau
John Hessler 1

Thoreau’s Rhetoric of Estrangement in Cape Cod:
Looking at America through a Knot-hole
Bradley Ray King 27

Aesthetic Inflections: Thoreau, Gender, and Geology
Patrick Morgan 46

Henry David Thoreau in the American Art of the 1950s
Mark Sullivan 68

The Poet at Walden: Sojourn
J. Walter Brain 91

On Not Building a Cabin: Notes from Henry Thoreau’s Journal,
21st-Century Edition
Ian Marshall 108

“All the Change Has Been in Me”: My Life as a Transcendentalist
Audrey Raden 116

Deconstructing the Shed: Where I Live and What I Live For
Samuel Alexander 125

Notes on Contributors  144
Presidents of the Thoreau Society  146
Editor’s Page

Our theme for this issue is mapping, both inner and outer. We open with a remarkable essay by John Hessler, an historian of cartography, in which he recounts not only his discovery of Thoreau’s lost maps (which turn out to be much more than mere tracings), but also of Thoreau as himself an historian of cartography of surprising sophistication. Hessler’s work helps us further extend our understanding of Thoreau’s deep involvement with the sciences and practices of placemaking: surveying and cartography, empirical science and the poetry of the specific. But as readers of Walden know, for Thoreau, to draw a map was also to locate the self in relation to inner nature: in that spirit, Bradley Ray King takes up Thoreau’s stance as a stranger, an outsider, in Cape Cod, the very work most deeply informed by the mappings explored by Hessler. For the making of maps not only draws, but undercuts, boundaries—a notion considered by Patrick Morgan in his own surprising discovery that Thoreau’s geomorphology of rivers pursues the gendered “line of beauty” into a gender fluidity associated more readily with Margaret Fuller.

How, in turn, have we “mapped” Thoreau? One could say this is the question taken up by Mark Sullivan, in a fascinating look at the way artists in the 1950s represented Thoreau: their art reflects the ideology of their time, in ways that only later became visible. But Thoreau, in his way, also maps us as well: in Walden he speculates that if we were to draw lines through the length, breadth, and depth of our personal coves and inlets, just as he does at the Pond, we will find at their intersection the height or depth of our character. This insight unites the writings of our final four authors. First, J. Walter Brain contributes a poem cycle, graced by John Caffrey’s painting, tracing his own intense dialogue with Thoreau’s inner and outer places. Ian Marshall laughs at his frustration, yet still holds out renewed hope, as bureaucrats trip up his Thoreauvian educational experiment; finally, writing from the opposite poles of the planet—New York and Melbourne, Australia—Audrey Raden and Samuel Alexander suggest how even city lives can map rural Walden onto urban spaces. Simplicity, as all these contributions show, is hardly simple; earning it can be the task of a lifetime.

Your editor, in her own longing to find a fresh way to map Thoreau onto our time, is herewith bidding farewell to these pages. She hopes you have enjoyed our sojourns together over the last four years, and bids the grace of simplicity to all who read these pages.

Laura Dassow Walls
Columbia, South Carolina, May 29, 2011
From Ortelius to Champlain:  
The Lost Maps of Henry David Thoreau  

John Hessler

Descriptions of nature, I would here repeat, may be sharply defined and scientifically correct, without being deprived thereby of the vivifying breath of imagination. The poetic elements must be derived from a recognition of the links which unite the sensuous with the intellectual. — Alexander von Humboldt, Cosmos

“Historian of cartography” is a title not normally associated with the great American writer Henry David Thoreau, nor is mapmaking a field in which he is generally known to have achieved any notoriety. But during the last twelve years of his life, from 1850 to 1862, this icon of American letters and environmentalism spent a great deal of time not only working as a land surveyor, but also reading the earliest exploration narratives of the New World, taking detailed notes on the names of places and the plants and animals mentioned in them, and making scaled copies and sketches of some of the earliest maps of North America that they contained. As an avid reader of Thoreau I have often wondered about his long passages concerning exploration and maps in his published works, such as Cape Cod and The Maine Woods. As an historian of cartography, I have found myself pondering what it was that compelled Thoreau to make such extensive glosses on early maps, and questioning what it was that he took from all this detailed information on early American cartography. But it was my reading of Thoreau’s unpublished Canadian Notebook that really sparked my interest in Thoreau the cartographer, and made me question why I had never before heard of him. In the Canadian Notebook Thoreau wrote a list “of the maps that I have copied,” the entries of which are some of the most important early maps of the northeastern United States. The idea that Thoreau would have thought it important enough to make copies of maps was something new to me, something I had never read about in all of the scholarship and in all of the biographies of Thoreau that I had read over the years, and this lack of notice sent me searching to see what, if anything, remained of the author of Walden’s cartographic explorations.¹

¹ The Concord Saunterer: A Journal of Thoreau Studies, N.S. Vol. 18, 2010
I am not sure when I initially heard about the Canadian Notebook, but I certainly remember when I first held it in my hands, in the reading room of the Morgan Library in New York City, of whose collections, along with nearly 2000 pages of other unpublished Thoreau manuscripts, it is a part. The Morgan is one of the great repositories of manuscripts from all periods of history, and it is a library much in the old school mode, holding their collections close and requiring permission and reference letters to access them. Examining anything there gives one’s research a particular air of seriousness.

Reading the Canadian Notebook was the first time that I had approached Thoreau in manuscript form, unmediated by the more polished and published Thoreau that I had come to know so well. For an historian, it is the manuscript that gives access to the past as something seen anew, as something previously unread, and a hopeful sense of discovery anticipates every encounter. When I opened Thoreau’s notebook it was not the words that I initially noticed, but rather the manuscript’s form. Although it is a simple notebook, with marbled covers and pages of unremarkable off-white ledger paper, what dominated my first glance was the ink and handwriting. The paleography was dark and sloppy, more difficult to make out than many of the Medieval and Renaissance manuscripts of my previous experience. The beginnings of research on any manuscript are always more sensory than intellectual, and tend to fill me with a peculiar anxiety. This encounter was no different. Usually, when presented with a manuscript, it takes some time for my emotions to settle: these pieces of paper were in Thoreau’s hands and are as close as one can get, a century and a half later, to his actual thoughts. I have had these same feelings many times in working on manuscripts from much earlier periods. Eventually, the feeling passes, allowing my mind to begin to make sense of the writing on the page.

It was then that I first saw the list. Written in the back of the Canadian Notebook in pencil (most of the notebook being in ink) was Thoreau’s list of the maps that he had copied, maps that I had never seen mentioned elsewhere and that apparently no one had ever written about. With this list in hand, I have, in the last few years, searched for Thoreau’s copies and sketches of maps, and tried to determine which ones have survived and how they fit into his larger literary endeavors. Thoreau’s surviving copies of maps are well-drawn, showing that he was a talented draftsman, and in some cases they are drawn to scale. Thoreau takes extreme care in assembling his sketches, being sure to accurately depict boundaries and coastlines, to locate place names properly, and to draw any animals and plants in the same way as the early mapmakers. Such attention to detail, combined with the critical
commentary he composed on each of these maps, suggests that Thoreau was one of the first writers whom we might call an historian of cartography, and during these last years of his life he seems to have been at work on some unfinished geographical project that captivated his imagination. What follows is a chronicle of my search for this unknown cartographic Thoreau, and for what his mapmaking might tell us about the shifting currents of his thought.

In April of 1858, Ralph Waldo Emerson, in a letter to H. S. Randall (the future biographer of Thomas Jefferson), wrote that “Thoreau’s study seems at present to be equally shared between natural and civil history,” and that “he reads both with a keen and original eye” (quoted in Moldenhauer 283). The civil history that Emerson refers to here is that of the early exploration and discovery of the North American continent, especially the northeastern coast of New England and Canada. During the last twelve years of his life, Thoreau dedicated himself to historical and cartographic studies that have either been ignored by or have puzzled his commentators. During these extremely productive years, his interests seem to have turned sharply toward more empirical and less transcendental studies, more influenced by the geographically oriented science of Humboldt and Darwin than by the idealism of Emerson. It is in this geographical spirit that Thoreau’s writings such as *The Maine Woods*, *Cape Cod*, *Walden*, “A Yankee in Canada,” his natural history essays, and of course his journals have occasionally been probed by scholars and linked with the beginnings of modern geographical and environmental thought (Pipkin 527-45). This linkage stems mostly from Thoreau’s intense concern with the concept of place (all his published writings are about some particular place), and his ability to see deep connections between historical process and environmental change.

It is well-known that many of Thoreau’s published writings, such as *The Maine Woods* and *Cape Cod*, have continual references to cartography, but these works contain no maps, and Thoreau’s many comments on cartography are often thought of as mere digressions which readers may safely ignore. To discover Thoreau the mapmaker, we must turn to his unpublished manuscripts. It is only in these jottings, written in moments of close interaction with original books and maps, that we see in stark detail how Thoreau’s cartographic explorations helped form in his mind the geographical link between natural and civil history that has been noted by scholars. The search for the roots of what I have called Thoreau’s “geographical turn,” and the reasons for his extensive interactions with early American cartography, have led me
to investigate two separate, but interrelated, aspects of Thoreau’s largely unknown, and thus certainly understudied, cartographic manuscripts.

The first aspect, and the most significant one in terms of his technical understanding of cartography and the process of mapmaking, was his work as a land surveyor in and around Concord, Massachusetts, during the 1850’s. Surveying as a profession gave Thoreau the ability to look at maps critically and helped him to understand not only their mathematical limits but also their broader utility for the study of history and natural science. It also allowed him to wander the fields and woodlots of Concord and to observe nature closely in all seasons in a way that his mentor and fellow Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson certainly never would have.5

The second aspect, and the driving reason for his engagement with early American cartography, was his interest in the history of the indigenous peoples of the northeast. Thoreau would take nearly 3,000 pages of notes on this subject, the vast majority of which have yet to be published, and all of which are mostly unknown even to Thoreau specialists. In the course of this note-taking Thoreau would copy and comment on many of the early maps of the northeastern United States and Canada by such seminal figures as Samuel Champlain (1580-1635), Abraham Ortelius (1527-1598), John Smith (1580-1631), John de Verrazano (1485-1527), and Cornelius Wytflieit (d. ca. 1597).

Thoreau set himself up as a surveyor late in 1849, and by the end of 1851 he was recognized as one of best and most accurate operating in the region. He surveyed many places around Concord and the list of his clients reads like a library of early American literature, including places such as Bronson Alcott’s farm and land owned by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The question of exactly how Thoreau learned to survey is for the most part an open one, but it appears that he was self-taught. A copy of the 1847 edition of Charles Davies’s Elements of Surveying and Navigation survives in Thoreau’s library. Davies’s text was one of the most widely used books on surveying during the middle of the nineteenth century, and with Galbraith’s Mathematical Tables, a title that Thoreau also borrowed from Harvard, it represents a solid introduction to the principles of land measurement as practiced at the time. Thoreau annotated his copy of Davies with notes from Galbraith on particular mathematical and trigonometric problems, such as the calculation of areas or the sine of angles.

Thoreau took much more from his reading of William Galbraith, however, than mere mathematical instruction. In a journal entry dated June 9th of 1850, Thoreau lists nine books recommended by Galbraith’s text, several of which concern the esoteric subject of the magnetic
variation of compass needles (Journal [Princeton] 3:83-84). Thoreau’s interest in magnetic variation was first indicated on the advertising broadside he prepared for his surveying services. The broadside begins, “Land surveying of all kinds, according to the best methods known; the necessary data supplied, in order that the boundaries of farms may be accurately described in deeds.” Thoreau continues his advertisement by explaining that the variation of the compass will be noted so that the survey can be repeated: “Areas warranted accurate within almost any degree of exactness, and the Variation of the Compass needle given, so that the lines can be run again. Apply to Henry D. Thoreau.”

Throughout the early 1850’s one finds references throughout his journals and field notebooks to the volumes and articles he was reading on the subject of magnetic variation, and to the observations of the compass needle that he made in and around Concord.

Magnetic variation is the difference that we see between magnetic north, this being the north to which a compass needle points, and true north, the direction of the pole. The variation in the compass needle is caused by the continual shifting of the earth’s magnetic field and was the subject of a great deal of scientific research in the mid-nineteenth century. The exact direction towards which the needle points is not constant through time even for a specific location, and although few people noticed these small changes, Thoreau recognized them quite explicitly. For example, in November of 1850, he made an entry in his journal that marks the beginning of what would become a brief obsession with the subject: “When I am considering which way I will walk my needle is slow to settle—my compass varies by a few degrees and does not always point due south west—and there is good authority for these variations in the heavens” (Journal [Princeton] 3:141). Thoreau’s interest here is more than just passing, and he delves into the science of magnetic declination in a way that would become representative of the way he approached cartography, symptomatic of his geographical turn.

Of all of the notes that Thoreau left behind concerning the subject of mapmaking, the most cryptic and difficult to contextualize are those found in the field notebook into which he scribbled measurements from his surveying activity. The field notebook, which can be found in the collections of the Concord Free Public Library, appears on the surface to be a jumble of uninteresting calculations and rough sketches, with numbers and locations of places around Concord that Thoreau surveyed. On closer examination, however, this seemingly incoherent mass of numbers becomes a detailed record of how he approached the more technical aspects of cartography. Reading through the notebook, I was struck by his methodology and his scientific
approach to problems such as the straying of his compass. In the field notebook Thoreau details how he established the “true meridian” so he could continually check his surveys against the variation of his compass needle: “I found the direction of the pole star at its western elongation (1,58-1/2) at 9h 26m PM (Feb 7th 1851). N coincides with a line drawn from the SE course of the stone post on the E side of our western small front gate, to the S side of the first door on the W side of the depot.”

Although it is at first difficult to interpret this passage, what Thoreau has actually done is measure a reference line for the direction of true north from the west gate of his home in Concord to a building across the street. By establishing a sight line for the true meridian from his family’s house, Thoreau could easily check the variation of his compass before or after surveying. Thoreau would begin to include this information on his surveys even though it made little difference to the purpose of the survey itself.

Around this same time, Thoreau would also begin to take empirical measurements of magnetic variation. In his field notes one finds several entries showing that he took time series measurements at intervals during the course of the day, recording the variations he noticed on his compass. On July 3, 1851 he takes nine measurements, and then another series nine days later.

In July of the same year, to further his already deep familiarity with the subject, Thoreau corresponded and visited with William Cranch Bond, the director of the Harvard Observatory. Bond was conducting experiments in magnetic variation in Cambridge, and he took thousands of measurements in order to try to predict the changes that he and Thoreau saw in compass needles. Thoreau soon found that Bond’s results, even though they were the best available for Cambridge, were not at all useful in Concord, just a few miles away.

One of the more surprising things one finds in all of Thoreau’s notebook jottings on the technical aspects of cartography is how they highlight his turn away from the Transcendentalist themes that drove his early works. Among the Transcendentalists’ core beliefs, at least as imagined by Emerson, was an ideal spiritual state that “transcends” the physical and empirical and is realized only through the individual's intuition. Emerson found little of higher worth in the empirical, and downgraded most of science as “mere facts,” at least until they were joined with human concerns. The foundations of the Transcendentalist system of rationality and their core belief in the power of the mind as the locus of knowledge were developed as a reaction to the prevailing themes found in John Locke’s Essay on Human Understanding. Locke would make the human senses the primary gatherers of knowledge and stress the experiential nature of knowledge and existence. Emerson,
reacting against the sensual, would say in his essay *Nature* that “empirical science is apt to cloud the sight, and, by the very knowledge of functions and processes, to bereave the student of the manly contemplation of the whole” (39). By the early 1850’s, Thoreau was starting to move beyond these idealist tendencies toward more realist studies of nature and history, to the point that by early 1852 he could write in his journal, seemingly against Emerson, that “Mere facts & names & dates communicate much more than we suspect” (Journal [Princeton] 4:296). The empirical turn toward a more scientific world view that Thoreau expresses in his studies of subjects such as the variation of compass needles would become an integral part of all of his work, especially from around 1852 onwards. And although we can never really call Thoreau a thinker who fully embraced the pure empiricism and mechanistic nature of late-nineteenth-century science, there is a change in him that affects all of his future reading and observations, even his approach to and interpretation of the early exploration narratives and the history of cartography.

In order to uncover the foundations of Thoreau’s interest in the early exploration and cartography of North America, I needed to become familiar with a group of manuscripts that are for the most part unknown even to Thoreau specialists. The most significant of these is the aforementioned “Canadian Notebook.” Thoreau began to write in this copybook shortly after his return from a trip to Canada, and those few scholars who have actually read it differ in their opinions of why it was composed. The manuscript contains the notes of Thoreau’s reading of historical and geographic sources related to Canada and the northeastern United States. It can be divided into three parts, with the first seventy-six pages relating to works on the physical and cultural geography of the Northeast, and the second forty-two pages being a sustained commentary on the cartography of early American exploration. These forty-two pages are the most intense interaction with cartography and cartographic literature that one will find in the entire Thoreau corpus, and they form the backdrop to the sketches of the maps Thoreau would make to accompany them. The third part of the notebook consists of a group of unbound sheets of paper and fragments that also contain important cartographic references.

When I started to look closely at the second part of the notebook, I was surprised to find the amount of detail that Thoreau gleans from his reading of early exploration narratives. His observations, both technical and bibliographic, on maps by such figures as Champlain, Lescarbot, John Smith, Ortelius and Wytfliet, are very critical, and show Thoreau as a well-informed and very modern historian of cartography.
He concentrated on specific subjects such as the changing of place names over time, the plants and animals that the explorers encountered, the size and flow of rivers, temperatures, snowfall, and the changing shape of the lakes and rivers shown on their maps. His efforts reflect an intense concern with the changes that have occurred in the landscape since the days when these early maps were made, and display a geographical sense that is unusual in an American nineteenth-century writer (Taylor 92-110). John S. Pipkin, in his study of the geographic influences on Thoreau, makes the case that “during Thoreau’s lifetime, American geography, by that name at least, was indeed a weak and marginal endeavor” (532). Pipkin goes on to explain that Thoreau typically used the word “geography” in the limited sense of topography, as when he was speaking of such things as the length of rivers, the proportion of the globe covered by water, or the location of places. In his notes on cartographic themes, however, Thoreau shows a broader definition of geography, one that is more universalizing in the spirit of Alexander Humboldt and Arnold Guyot, for it embraces both ethnographic and biogeographic themes.\(^\text{13}\)

Even as Thoreau was taking extensive notes on the maps and geographic details found in these early exploration narratives, he also expressed his frustration with the study of the history of pre-colonial America. He recognizes the difficulties of finding historical evidence and rebuilding past geographical knowledge, and he contrasts this with his other interest at the time, natural history. In his journal of October 19, 1860, he writes, “It is easier far to recover the history of the trees which stood here a century or more ago than it is to recover the history of the men who walked beneath them. How much do we know—who little more can we know—of these two centuries of Concord life?” (J [1906] XIV:152). It was to help him answer this inherently geographical question that Thoreau turned to early cartography and the texts that accompanied it.

In the back of the Canadian Notebook, written in Thoreau’s hand, and in the wrong direction if one is reading from the front, is the list that began my search for Thoreau’s maps (Thoreau wrote in the Canadian notebook starting from the front and then turned the notebook around in order to write from the back). He says,

I have copied—
maps made ac[ording] to Verarzanus’ [sic] plot in Hacklyts Divers Voyages 1582
map made in forme [sic] of map sent from Seville in 1527 by Thorne
map Nova Francia etc. in Ramusio 3rd volume (1556)
ac[companying] a discourse of a great French sea captain
of America in Ortelius (1570 &c) who used Cabot and others
of Norumbega and Virginia 1597, Wytfliet Lovanni
Nouvelle France Champlain 1612,
[Nouvelle France Champlain] 1632.

The list is a curious grouping, as these are all very detailed early
maps, copies of which are rare and not easily obtainable. My initial
reaction to Thoreau’s compilation was to question what it was that he
meant by “copied.” Many of these maps, such as Champlain’s map of
New France from 1612, are quite large and if Thoreau’s copies of any of
them had survived, surely, I thought, they would be well known. In my
reading about Thoreau over the years, however, I had not remembered
seeing any references to maps drawn by Thoreau except for the
occasional mention of his land surveys, and certainly none that anyone
had previously connected with the list in the Canadian Notebook.¹⁴ It
was with good reason, therefore, that I had my doubts as to the survival
any of his maps.

Astonishingly, once I started looking, two of the maps on the list
turned out to be quite easy to locate, as they are part of the collection of
Thoreau surveys and papers in the Concord Free Public Library.¹⁵ The
first (Figure 1) was copied by Thoreau from Abraham Ortelius’s world
atlas, the Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, first published in 1570. Ortelius was
the royal geographer to King Phillip II of Spain and a prolific atlas
maker. Consulting Thoreau’s book borrowing records from the Harvard
Library, one sees that he borrowed the 1584 edition of the book on
November 18th, 1850.¹⁶ In his notes on all of the maps that he drew,
Thoreau shows an attention to bibliographic detail that allows the
modern researcher to easily trace the exact editions of the books and
maps that he used. For example, in the case of Ortelius, he begins his
notes by writing,

Preface dated 1570. Date at end 1584. [then in pencil]
Bancroft says there are at Cam[bridge] editions 1584 & 92 [in
ink again] Another edition . . . dated 1575 which I must see though
Harris says the maps I used are identical in both.

In his sketch of the Ortelius map, Thoreau copies only a portion of the
original, constraining his version to the eastern seaboard, but carefully
reproducing Ortelius’s gridlines in pencil so he might later be able to
judge the map’s accuracy. Thoreau is very interested in maps related to
America and its early history, and for the most part limits his attention
to the northeast; the notes on Ortelius and his partial sketch of the map
from the Theatrum represent a good example of the other sketches and
notes.
At the start of the second section of the Canadian Notebook, where he begins his jottings on Ortelius, Thoreau writes,

Prefixed to Ortelius' Theatrum is a list of geographers whose charts he is acquainted with. Looking it over it hastily for those relative to America—I noticed Ptolemy, Gemma Frisius—universi orbis tabulam—Medebach Orbis terrarum—Diego Gutierus, America . . . .

Not so coincidentally of course, Thoreau’s notes on Ortelius in the Canadian Notebook are principally devoted to a commentary on a map entitled “A new description of America.” Thoreau’s exegesis on this map is concerned with the antiquity of particular place names, and how the form of specific geographic regions may have changed as new geographic information was acquired. Thoreau quotes Biddle: “In the ‘Theatrum Orbis Terrarum’ of the celebrated geographer Ortelius, will be found a map designated as “America sive Novi Orbis descriptio”; in which he depicts with accuracy that cannot be attributed to accident, the form of
Hudson’s Bay, and a channel leading from its northern extremity towards the pole. The publication preceded not only Hudson but Frobisher; and Ortelius tells us that he had Cabot’s map before him . . . On the map of Ortelius the Northern Coast of America is studded with Portuguese names.” The recovering of ancient and indigenous place names and the evolution of cartographic forms of information are the two subjects that dominate much of Thoreau’s commentary in the Canadian Notebook on the particular maps he chose to copy.

![Figure 2: Thoreau’s sketch from Wytfliet’s map of 1597](by permission of the Concord Free Public Library)

The second of Thoreau’s manuscript maps in the Concord Free Public Library collections was made from an original by Cornelius Wytfliet (Figure 2). Wytfliet was a Flemish geographer who, in 1597, published an atlas called the Descriptionis Ptolemaicae Augmentum, from which Thoreau’s sketch is copied. Wytfliet attempted to bring up to date some of the cartography of the New World from information received from the explorations of the early sixteenth century and contrasts his own mapmaking with that of the second century geographer Claudius Ptolemy. Thoreau looked at Wytfliet’s book, but did not borrow it from the Harvard Library, on the same day that he removed the Ortelius. His
sketch, which is much cruder than the Ortelius drawing, shows the coast of the Eastern United States as far south as the Chesapeake Bay. In his comments on Wytfliet, Thoreau’s depth of knowledge of early cartography is extraordinary, especially when one considers the state of cartographic history in the mid-nineteenth century. Thoreau takes extensive notes on the maps contained in Wytfliet’s book regarding place names and the evolution of geographic knowledge. He writes a detailed commentary on several maps from Wytfliet and his comparative methodology strikes one as quite modern—as, for example, when he says,

I believe that this is older than Metallus Sequannis America Cologne 1600. At any rate the maps I looked at were identical. A map named “Conibus Regio cum vicinis gentibus” contains Saguenai R. and Hochelaga—but is for the most part a fancy sketch. Another called “Nova Francia et Canada” has St. Law. called “Hochlega flu.” It is more particular and on a larger scale than Ortelius and would do to read Cartier by.

Reading in this way one map through the information found on another earlier or later map is the central hallmark of Thoreau’s critical approach to cartography.

The other five maps on Thoreau’s list were much more difficult to find and to identify. Remarkably, I found three of them several years after I first read the Canadian Notebook, folded up in the miscellaneous papers that make up the fragments from that manuscript (Figure 3). Each of the folded maps is accompanied by a page or two of notes and critical glosses on their geographic representation and references to all three maps find their way into Cape Cod. All of the maps are glued to the pages of notes that Thoreau had written to accompany them and they are more crudely executed than his other map sketches. They are all dated in Thoreau’s hand, December 10th, 1855.

Thoreau’s three map sketches found in the Morgan fragments come from two sources. The first is found in the work of Giovanni Battista Ramusio (1485-1557), an Italian geographer, whose Navigationi et Viaggi was extremely influential after its publication was completed in 1556. The book is one of the earliest collections of maps and first hand accounts of the travels of many explorers of the New World, and was quoted extensively by later histories of the subject. The second two sketches find their source in another compilation of exploration narratives written by Richard Hakluyt (1552-1616). The book, entitled Divers Voyages Touching on the discoveries of America, was composed in 1582, and Thoreau wrote six pages of detailed notes on the maps it contains.
Figure 3: Maps from the Morgan Fragments
(images courtesy of the Morgan Library, New York, NY)
Thoreau’s interest in these maps typically develops around specific ancient place names, and all three are particularly important to the construction of the geographical information found in *Cape Cod*. Thoreau spends some time in the early chapters of the book lingering over the origins of place names of certain areas, including some that are still the subject of research among historians of cartography. Using his knowledge of the three maps found in the Morgan fragments, Thoreau formulates his own theory about an area named Norumbega, found on many maps that date from the sixteenth century. Thoreau writes,

We hear rumors of this country of “Norumbega” and its great city from many quarters. In a discourse by a great French sea-captain in Ramusio’s third volume (1556-65), this is said to be the name given to the land by its inhabitants, and Verrazzani is called the discoverer of it; another in 1607 makes the natives call it, or the river, Aguncia. It is represented as an island on an accompanying chart . . . These maps . . . may have been the origin of the notion, common among the early settlers, that New England was an island.

Finding five of the maps on Thoreau’s list and reconnecting them with his notes was certainly gratifying, but the last two maps, by Samuel Champlain, were to me the most important of all. Of all of the notes in the Canadian Notebook about cartography, by far the most extensive are those associated with the narrative of Champlain’s voyages, *Voyages de la Nouvelle France*. The two maps of Champlain’s that Thoreau said he drew appear in the inventories of no libraries, are not mentioned in any scholarly articles, and, after many years of looking, they seemed to me to have been lost.

Champlain made several voyages to the New World and explored the St. Lawrence River, along with most of the New England coast, at least as far south as Cape Cod. Time and time again Thoreau would return to the various editions of the *Voyages* and re-visit Champlain’s maps and the descriptions of his travels. Thoreau takes down detailed bibliographic information about the various editions in the Canadian Notebook: “I have seen 3 vols of Champlain one dated 1613—chez Jean Berjon—very rare—containing the fullest account of his New England voyages and also the [account] of his Canada voyages to 1612 with many maps.” Champlain’s narrative of his travels is filled with reflections on his expeditions and is accompanied by both large and small scale cartography. Thoreau’s notes in the Canadian Notebook on Champlain’s texts contain many details on plants, animals, and place names, and especially on the differences in the various editions of the maps Champlain made. Thoreau writes praising Champlain’s accuracy as
a geographer, and he quotes in detail Champlain’s own commentary on the methods of his mapmaking.

Thoreau’s familiarity with Champlain’s maps comes out most clearly in Cape Cod, where he quotes from him many times: “In Champlain’s admirable Map of New France, including the oldest recognizable map of what is now the New England coast with which I am acquainted, Cape Cod is called C. Blan (i. e. Cape White), ‘from the color of its sands’ (178). In retracing the history of New England Thoreau often relies on Champlain’s maps, and he finds them superior to all the others made by the earliest explorers. As he wrote, while John Smith’s map of 1616 is by many regarded as the oldest map of New England . . . there is a map of it made when it was known to Christendom as New France, Carte Géographique de la Nouvelle Franse . . . 1612, from his observations between 1604 and 1607; a map extending from Labrador to Cape Cod and westward to the Great Lakes, and crowded with information, geographical, ethnographical, zöological, and botanical. He even gives the variation of the compass as observed by himself at that date on many parts of the coast. (180-81)

Like Thoreau in his land surveys, Champlain is extremely attentive to the technical aspects of mapmaking. Particulars like magnetic variation and the errors of compasses, subjects that would have obviously endeared Champlain to Thoreau at this time, are singled out by him for commentary.

After years of wondering, and having nearly given up on finding Thoreau’s copies of the Champlain maps, it was pointed out to me by my colleagues that the Library of Congress, where I am the Senior Cartographic Librarian, had obtained, in the early 1970s, several manuscript maps that were thought to possibly have been drawn by Thoreau, but that no one had yet done any research on them. Not expecting much (we have 5.5 million maps in thousands of drawers), I went to the case that contained this group of manuscripts, and to my surprise it contained four pages of notes that appeared to be in Thoreau’s hand. After a few moments of anxious anticipation, I could not believe what I was seeing (Figure 4). The briefest examination of Thoreau’s contorted paleography allowed me to conclude that the notes were describing two maps made by Samuel Champlain. Accompanying the notes were two large sketches of maps that at first sight resembled the 1612 and 1632 maps that Thoreau had listed on the flyleaf of the Canadian notebook! Was it really possible that after all this time the two missing maps had for many decades been in the Library of Congress,
where they had gone unnoticed for all this time, without anyone connecting them to the Canadian Notebook?

The copy of 1632 map found in the Library of Congress, known as the Carte de la Nouvelle France, was easy to identify as Thoreau’s because it was so obviously in his hand and, although much larger than the copies of the other maps that he had made, fit the general form of his map sketches (Figure 5). Indeed, both manuscripts of the Champlain maps that Thoreau copied are larger and more expertly rendered than his other five map drawings. The other map, copied from Champlain’s version of 1612 titled the Carte Géographique de la Nouvelle France, was more difficult to attribute to Thoreau (detail shown in Figure 6). As mentioned above, this is the map Thoreau referred to in Cape Cod as having been earlier than, and superior to, that by John Smith. By far the largest of all the sketches, this map was a tracing on surveyor’s cloth rather than a drawing, and it appeared to contain almost nothing that would link it directly to Thoreau. Because it was a tracing, there was no
Figure 5: Thoreau’s sketch of Champlain’s 1632 map (from the Library of Congress)
Figure 6: Detail, Thoreau’s sketch of Champlain’s 1612 map (from the Library of Congress)

way to identify the lettering on the map as in Thoreau’s hand, he having repeated the style of the fonts of all of the titles and place names that are found on the original. In this way, Thoreau’s copy of the 1612 map was unlike all of the other sketches that I had located up to this point. The tracing was also incomplete (see the detail, Figure 7), with some of the areas on the original map showing plants and animals around the border only outlined in pencil, and not inked as in the rest of Thoreau’s tracing. Those portions of the tracing that Thoreau did complete were colored in both red and brown inks (detail in Figure 8), with the information contained in the red part of the tracing coming from some source other than the original 1612 map as it appears in Champlain’s book.

Not knowing how to make sense of the additional geographical information contained in the red annotations, I settled down to transcribe the four pages of manuscript. Thankfully, the pages of Thoreau’s notes that were located along with the two maps described some specifics on how Thoreau copied and annotated the Champlain maps, and provided the key to the origin of the different colors of ink.
Figure 7: Incomplete section of Thoreau’s sketch of Champlain’s 1612 map (from the Library of Congress)

Figure 8: Detail, showing red and brown inks (from the Library of Congress)
Thoreau’s notations regarding how he copied the 1612 map were not immediately decipherable, and it took some time for me to understand what it was that Thoreau was trying to say. After several days of work it occurred to me that what Thoreau had done was to update Champlain’s 1612 map in red with new place names and other information taken from Champlain’s 1632 map, as well as other later maps of the region. This is clear from what Thoreau says on one of the four manuscript pages: “I have traced about a little more than a quarter of this . . . and have written on the French map most of the different new versions which are current in red ink—excepting the western part which is quite different” (Figure 9):

![Figure 9: Detail showing Thoreau’s methodology of annotation, from page 3 of his notes on Champlain (from the Library of Congress)](image)

The 1612 tracing was, therefore, a composite of several maps, amounting to Thoreau’s version, in graphic form, of the history of the growing geographical knowledge of the region. Comparing what Thoreau said in the four pages of manuscript about his method of annotation, with the red additions on the 1612 tracing, allowed final confirmation that this rendering of the 1612 Champlain map was drawn by Thoreau.

The two Champlain maps that Thoreau copied and annotated with those four pages of notes were also the subject of comments in the Canadian Notebook. These two maps represent very different types of cartographic representations, and they vary in their accuracy, their content, and their purpose of composition. The 1612 map was made by Champlain for the use of navigators who specifically used French
compasses, while in contrast, the 1632 map is meant as a summary of his explorations and a representation of the extent of New France.

In his notes, Thoreau uses a truncated title for the 1612 map, calling it the *Carte géographique de la son vrai meridian*. The title reflects the fact that Champlain corrected the meridians on the map to account for error associated with the use of the French compass in North American waters. Geographic north on the 1612 map points toward northeast on the compass rose. The oblique meridian shown on the map has the latitudinal scale on it, which Thoreau is careful to draw precisely, and is aligned in the north-northeast direction. The *fleur-de-lis*, which Thoreau also precisely renders, indicates the amount of correction the users of the French compass would have to make in order to use the map.

Thoreau’s interpretation of Champlain’s 1612 map is very detailed and insightful, and one example will serve to show the depth of his knowledge of the cartography of early American exploration. Of all of the regions shown on Champlain’s maps, the most difficult to understand is that found in the western portions of the St. Lawrence River and what are now known as the Great Lakes. The information found on the 1612 map for this region west of the Lachin Rapids was obtained by Champlain during his early 1603 explorations. On that trip Champlain made contact with the Algonquian tribe, and he had three of their members draw illustrations of the region that he calls sketch maps. It has been difficult for modern scholars to understand how Champlain incorporated this information into the 1612 map because all three of the accounts differ. The first sketch obtained by Champlain was the most complete, and outlines an area from the Lachin rapids to Lake Huron. In his notes Thoreau mentions difficulties he is having with the various sizes of Lake St. Louis and Lake Ontario on the various forms of Champlain’s maps. Champlain also had problems with this particular region, as none of the three versions of the sketches that he obtained from the Native-American mapmakers agree in the size of Lake Ontario. Thoreau is quite correct in questioning this feature, and he puzzles over it in the notes, saying that one version “is quite different,” and obviously wondering how Champlain decided the issue on his maps.

Of all of the complications that Thoreau notes regarding the 1612 map, perhaps the most interesting concerns his problems in interpreting a group of place names north of Lake Ontario. Champlain notes the size of the lake as “15 journées de canaux des sauvages,” and above the lake he shows the location and names of several Native American tribes. After puzzling over Champlain’s depiction of the size of Lake Ontario, Thoreau, once again in the notes he made to accompany the map, lists a
group of names that he cannot interpret properly. In recognizing the linguistic problem associated with the names above Lake Ontario, Thoreau has pointed out, perhaps for the first time, a difficulty that still confronts modern scholarship regarding Champlain’s 1612 map. The names of almost all of the tribes given by Champlain above Lake Ontario on the 1612 map remain unidentified by scholars today, and they still present one of the great open unsolved historical problems regarding Champlain’s contact with Native Americans. That Thoreau also realized this in the mid-1850s is a credit to the amount of early geographic knowledge that he had absorbed from his examinations of early cartography.

While the finding of Thoreau’s two Champlain maps completed my search for the maps that he listed in the Canadian Notebook, it opened up a new question, how to understand Thoreau’s cartographic explorations in relation to his larger projects and more popular works. For Thoreau’s relationship to cartography is a complicated one and, as should be obvious by now, has suffered from a lack of scholarly attention. In his published works Thoreau seems skeptical of maps even as he made constant use of them as sources. In his journals he could write, “How little there is on an ordinary map! How little, I mean, that concerns the walker and the lover of nature. Between those lines indicating roads is a plain blank space in the form of a square or triangle or polygon or segment of a circle, and there is naught to distinguish this from another area of similar size and form” (Journal [1906] XIV: 228). And in The Maine Woods, he remarks on the ability of Native American guides to find their way in the wilderness without the use of maps, exclaiming that the inaccurate maps of Maine that he had with him on the trip contained “a labyrinth of errors” (15).

While skeptical and metaphorical references to cartography are scattered throughout his well-read books, Thoreau’s attitude toward mapmaking is easier to assess if one reads closely through his notes and manuscripts on the subject. Unfortunately, Thoreau did not live long enough to complete the great work on geography and the indigenous peoples of North America, on which his extensive notes and map sketches would lead us to believe he was working. What we see in his cartographic explorations, as fragmentary as they are, is that Thoreau, unlike many of his contemporaries, did not think of historic maps from the past as obsolete, but rather as graphic and ideological documents that could help him understand what had been in a particular place before. His readings and his study of cartography allowed him to gain a better understanding of pre-colonial American history, and deeply enriched the unique sense of place that have made him an iconic American author. But by looking at his studies of maps, and at the
geographical turn in his thought that they reflect, we see a new side of Thoreau, one that is less mythic, more pragmatic, and has gone largely unnoticed. For in the notes of a surveyor, a mapmaker, and perhaps the first truly modern historian of American cartography, we find the geographical link that joins the sensuous with the intellectual, and natural with civil history.

NOTES


2 Canadian Notebook, MA 595, and the eleven Indian Notebooks, MA 596-MA 606, are part of the manuscript collections of the Pierpont Morgan Library.


4 One need only look at the beginning of the Provincetown chapter of Cape Cod for an example of Thoreau’s writing on the history of cartography. Pages 179-95 are especially focused on early representations of New England.

5 Thoreau’s surveys may be viewed on the website of the Concord Free Public Library, special collections: see http://www.concordlibrary.org/scollect/Thoreau_Surveys/Thoreau_Surveys.htm.

6 Surveying broadside part of the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library.

7 For more on magnetic variation, see Albert F. Melean, Jr., “Thoreau’s True Meridian: Natural Fact and Metaphor,” American Quarterly 20.3 (Autumn 1968), 567-79.

I use Lawrence Willson’s division of the notebook into three sections, even though in the Canadian Notebook, Thoreau himself makes no distinction.

Thoreau quotes from Arnold Henry Guyot’s *Earth and Man: Lectures in Comparative Physical Geography* (1849) in several places in the Canadian Notebook.

In the textual notes to *Cape Cod*, Joseph Moldenhauer connects the first three mentioned maps with those in the miscellaneous Morgan Library fragments. See textual note 178.19-21 in *Cape Cod*, p. 283.


It was not until later that I found that Joseph J. Moldenhauer, in the Textual Notes to his edition of *Cape Cod*, identifies the sources for Thoreau’s maps (256-57). Although Moldenhauer points out the existence in the Canadian Notebook of Thoreau’s notes on maps, he does not identify those not included in the Canadian Notebook fragments in the Morgan Library. The three maps are published in facsimile in Cameron, *Transcendental Climate*, 1:277, 1:279, and 1:282.
18 Canadian Notebook, section 2
19 I thank Ronald Grim, Curator of the Leventhal Collection at the Boston Public Library, and James Flatness, former Curator of Rare Materials in the Geography and Map Division of the Library of Congress, for pointing out to me these maps and the accompanying manuscripts ten years ago.

**WORKS CITED**


The sea-shore is a sort of neutral ground, a most advantageous point from which to contemplate this world. 
-H. D. Thoreau

In Cape Cod, a posthumously published and uncompleted text, Thoreau presents himself sauntering along the eastern shore of the United States. At one point in the travel narrative, Thoreau and his unnamed companion (Ellery Channing) stumble upon a “charity house” — a small hut built for shipwrecked sailors, or as Thoreau describes it, “a lonely building on piles driven into the sand, with a slight nail put through the staple, which a freezing man can bend” (57). As he often does throughout Cape Cod, Thoreau turns to one of his many guidebooks for a description of what he sees: “Each hut,’ says the author of the ‘Description of the Eastern Coast of the County of Barnstable,’ ‘stands on piles, is eight feet long, eight feet wide, and seven feet high; […] within it is supplied either with straw or hay, and further accommodated with a bench” (58). He and his fellow traveler imagine themselves as shipwrecked sailors, and though the windowless hut is completely dark, they look inside, hoping to find charity:

We put our eyes, by turns, to a knot-hole in the door, and, after long looking, without seeing, into the dark—not knowing how many shipwrecked men's bones we might see at last, looking with the eye of faith, knowing that, though to him that knocketh it may not always be opened, yet to him that looketh long enough through a knot-hole the inside shall be visible,—for we had had some practice at looking inward,—by steadily keeping our other ball covered from the light meanwhile, putting the outward world behind us, ocean and land, and the beach,—till the pupil became enlarged and collected the rays of light that were wandering in that dark, (for the pupil shall be enlarged by looking; there never was so
dark a night but a faithful and patient eye, however small, might at last prevail over it)—after all this, I say, things began to take shape to our vision,—if we may use this expression where there was nothing but emptiness,—and we obtained the long-wished-for insight. (59-60)

But what takes shape before them as they peer inside is not what the guidebooks promise: “we discovered that there were some stones and some loose wads of wool on the floor, and an empty fire-place at the further end; but it was not supplied with matches, or straw, or hay, that we could see, nor ‘accommodated with a bench’” (60). From the perspective of those on the outside looking in, the charity house on the shore of America brings a cold disappointment: “Turning our backs on the outward world, we thus looked through the knot-hole into the human house, into the very bowels of mercy; and for bread we found a stone” (60). When his companion accuses Thoreau of being too harsh and having “not a particle of sentiment,” Thoreau’s response is that “I did not intend for this to be a sentimental journey” (61).

This identity of an unsentimental outsider-looking-in is one Thoreau develops throughout *Cape Cod* as he observes landscapes, inhabitants, and histories. He refers to himself as a “stranger” several times, and he often invokes the ethos of a detached observer in his descriptions of the physical features of the Cape and in his frequent reflections on American history and politics. As in the passage quoted above—where Thoreau constantly reminds his readers of the active role his eye plays in shaping what he sees inside the humane house and of the limitation of looking through a knot-hole—throughout *Cape Cod* a geographical, historical, and political world takes form before this stranger’s eyes. Thoreau’s ethos of outsider-looking-in opens two conflicting rhetorical possibilities. On the one hand, he represents himself as an unsentimental, reliable witness. One the other hand, Thoreau suggests that his identity as a stranger leads him to naive illusions—such as mistaking beach trash for another human being—that a local would mock (105, 126). These rhetorics are both at work in Thoreau’s bleak portrayal of the charity house. He presents his account of its interior as more factual than the local guidebook, yet he simultaneously undercuts his claim to empiricism by questioning the boundary between his own mind and the interior of the house. When he refers to what he finally sees as “the long-wished-for insight,” he plays with the distinction between observing the outward details of the house and “looking inward,” between his sight and his “insight.” Throughout *Cape Cod*, these two rhetorics play off one another to produce a narrator who is ostensibly indifferent and objective, yet who does not seem to
regard his observations as authoritative or to believe them to be of any transcendental value.

Many Thoreau scholars have mistakenly developed the interpretive habit of using an idea of Thoreau-the-person (the man who retreats to the woods to escape the town, refuses to pay taxes, and authors *Walden*) to determine the significance of *Cape Cod*. A paradigmatic example of this is Phillip Gura’s article in *The Cambridge Companion to Thoreau*, which suggests that scholars should read *Cape Cod* and Thoreau’s other minor texts “as elaborations—indeed, further considerations—of the Walden experience” (142). Similarly, Mitchell Breitwieser argues that because Thoreau left *Cape Cod* incomplete, “the reader must salvage what can be salvaged, using *Walden* as an aid, wondering in what ways *Cape Cod* might be read as a sequel” (144). Yet the narrators of *Walden* and *Cape Cod* have significantly distinct tones, attitudes, and personalities. The narrator of *Walden*, who claims in the epigraph “to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning,” speaks with moral zeal and frequently condemns and instructs his readers; by contrast, the narrator of *Cape Cod* hesitates to draw absolute moral conclusions and explicitly undercuts his own observations. Many scholars (most famously Stanley Cavell and Sacvan Bercovitch) have convincingly identified the speaker in *Walden* with Old Testament prophets who leave a corrupt city, retire into nature, and criticize their community for their moral abominations. Yet this description does not at all fit *Cape Cod*’s detached, self-effacing narrative voice.

The interpretive tendency to ground Thoreau’s writing in a stable authorial identity—“the father and owner of his work,” as Roland Barthes puts it—has prohibited the scholars who write about *Cape Cod* from asking the important question to which its narrator consistently returns: “What does it matter who is speaking?” (Barthes 61, Foucault 120). Barthes and Michel Foucault famously critique the attempt to stabilize a text by appealing to the authority of an author, but for neither does this mean that authors should not be mentioned at all. “It is not that the Author cannot ‘return’ in the text, in his text,” Barthes writes,

> but he does so, one might say, as a guest; if he is a novelist, he inscribes himself there as one of his characters, drawn as a figure in the carpet; his inscription is no longer privileged, paternal, alethic, but ludic; he becomes, one can say, a paper author, his life is no longer the origin of his fables. (161-162)

Rather than functioning as a truth-originating (alethic) basis for a reading of text, the author is no less ambiguous and no more stabilizing that any other character would be. The perspective from which a narrative is told signifies just as much as the narrative itself. Even after
“the death of the author,” Foucault writes, “one must return to this question [of authorship], not in order to reestablish the theme of an originating subject, but to grasp the subject’s points of insertion [. . . and] modes of functioning” (118). Thoreau’s insertion of himself as a stranger in Cape Cod seems to demand Barthes and Foucault’s approach to authorship, without which one might overlook that the narrator’s observations and criticisms are consciously presented from a particular angle—that of an outsider looking in. My inspiration for applying this “figure in the carpet” notion of authorship to Thoreau is Stanley Cavell, who, in The Senses of Walden, reads Walden as a book about writing Walden. Its author’s task, he writes, “is epitomized in discovering [. . . ] what writing Walden is” (5). In this essay, I suggest that at least part of Thoreau’s task in Cape Cod is to discover what it means to write about America, and especially about American history, from the marginal, estranged identity that he sustains throughout the text. To rephrase Barthes, the Thoreau who writes Cape Cod is never anything but a paper Thoreau—a character who narrates a glorified beachcombing expedition along the shore of America.

I want to focus especially on how this detached, yet self-effacing identity of outsider allows Thoreau to represent the discovery and settlement of the land that would become New England. Walking past Provincetown Harbor—America’s oldest international port, reports Thoreau—he begins a history of Cape Cod’s discovery, which quickly evolves into a meditation on the relationship between historiography, nationalism, and American expansionism. Like his cynical description of the humane house, Thoreau’s portrayal of early New England history is critical and iconoclastic. He represents the Pilgrims as ignorant cartographers and unjust land grabbers—far from the paragons of democratic virtue that his contemporary George Bancroft (whom Thoreau explicitly attacks) had recently represented in his widely read History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent (first published in 1834). Bancroft depicted the Pilgrims as initiating a teleological narrative of democratic progress in the New World. According to History of the United States, the early English settlers “scattered the seminal principles of republican freedom and national independence,” seeds that would grow into Bancroft’s beloved Jacksonian democracy (323). The Pilgrims’ “germ” finds fruition in the 1840s and 50s, in the expansion of American Christianity and democracy across the “uncivilized” continent. (As President Polk’s Secretary of the Navy, Bancroft had advocated in 1845 and 1846 for the invasion of Mexico, which had precipitated the Mexican War.) Thoreau’s outrage at the Mexican War, expressed by his famous refusal to pay his poll tax, probably led to his portrayal in Cape Cod of the
George Pilgrims and Puritans as imperialistic. He began working on this book in 1849, one year after the U.S. sacked Mexico City and acquired 1.2 million square miles of Mexico’s territory, including most of what we now think of as the American West. Given his direct attack on Bancroft, Thoreau’s revisionist history should be read as a critique not only of the Pilgrims, but also of the politics of expansionism in Thoreau’s own day.

Florian Schwieger also argues for “Thoreau’s importance as a historian,” and traces what he calls “the emergence of a transcendental historiography” in Cape Cod (114). Schwieger rightly claims that “the critique of the founding myths of the early republic in Cape Cod reveal[s] a preoccupation with the mythical fabric that fashions the United States as a cultural and political entity,” but my argument here challenges his claims about Thoreau’s historical writing and its difference from mainstream history such as Bancroft’s (115). Schwieger argues that Thoreau rejects the “restricting convention” of “adherence to an objectifying historical distance that enables the author to compile and evaluate the relevant information on the subject” (130). “In contrast to other examples of historical mythmaking of the period,” he continues, “such as the works of [. . .] George Bancroft [. . .], Thoreau’s transcendental historiography deliberately employs mythological abstractions, poetic hyperboles, and factual subjectiveness” (116). In my reading, the difference between Bancroft and Thoreau’s historiographical style is more complicated. First, Bancroft does not shy away from using mythology and poetic language; in fact, Thoreau and many other later historians criticize him for neglecting facts and texts that would complicate his mythic narrative of democratic progress (Breisach 260-61). Secondly, Thoreau often adopts a rhetoric of factual objectivity and represents his account as less “factually subjective” than Bancroft’s. The difference between their histories lies less in an historiographical aversion or openness to “mythmaking” or “factual subjectiveness,” and more in the vastly different authorial subject positions from which they write: Bancroft writes as blissful inheritor of the Pilgrims’ errand for God and democracy, representing both his facts and myths as transcendent truths; and Thoreau writes as disaffected outsider to this narrative, undercutting his facts and myths by emphasizing their instability.

The authorial attitude of “stranger” allows Thoreau to situate himself somewhere between Bancroft, who absolutely affirms Manifest Destiny, and authors such as Margaret Fuller, who after the Mexican War condemned the United States as an irredeemably corrupt imperial power. I am borrowing these three attitudes toward Manifest Destiny—victory, defeat, and detachment—from Laura Dassow Walls, who argues that Thoreau’s attitude represents a “third path” — “somewhere
between the polar limits of defeat or victory”—taken by a range of writers, including Alexander von Humboldt, Joseph Nicolett, and Herman Melville (Passage 161). I would like to explore and elaborate on her claim about Thoreau, which she leaves relatively undeveloped, by looking closely at Thoreau’s attitude toward American politics and history in Cape Cod, where I see Thoreau charting this “third path” most clearly. The narrator of Cape Cod emerges as a historian and cultural critic who exposes the contingency and instability of his own histories and criticisms. While evoking a rhetoric of historical objectivity, he also undercuts this rhetoric by critiquing the very possibility of reliable historical narratives. Thoreau’s narrator in Cape Cod thus avoids the unattractive extremes of absolute optimism or cynicism. Like his portrayal of the charity house, his account of America’s forefathers (and their progeny) is harsh and skeptical, yet he remains unwilling to pronounce his critiques in absolute terms.

I. The Stranger as “Sociological Form”

Before I discuss Cape Cod, I would like first to propose a theoretical model for the stranger using the work of Georg Simmel, then to historicize more fully this subjectivity using Walls’s recent work on the construction of Manifest Destiny in the 1840s and 50s and the constellation of attitudes that assemble around this ideology. My characterization of Thoreau as a wandering, detached, and confrontational observer closely resembles Simmel’s description of the “sociological form” of the stranger. First, Simmel limits his analysis to a particular kind of stranger: not “the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather [. . .] the man who comes today and stays tomorrow,” the stranger who remains within the community. According to Simmel, the identity of this stranger consists in a “union of closeness and remoteness”:

If wandering, considered as a state of detachment from any given point in space, is the conceptual opposite of attachment to any point, the sociological form of “the stranger” presents the synthesis, as it were, of both these properties. (143)

The stranger is detached and remote in that he is categorically different from those inside the community, yet close and attached in his very confrontation of the community. The stranger’s “membership within the group involves both being outside it and confronting it” (143).
Simmel argues that the stranger’s remoteness enables him to represent himself as an “objective” voice about matters that concern the group:

Because he is not bound by roots to the particular constituents and partisan dispositions of the group, he confronts all these with a distinctly “objective” attitude, an attitude that does not signify mere detachment and nonparticipation, but is a distinct structure composed of remoteness and nearness, indifference and involvement. (145)

This rhetorical objectivity is based in the stranger’s distance from the group, his “freedom” from their biases: “he is a freer man, practically and theoretically; he examines conditions with less prejudice; he assesses them against standards that are more general and more objective; and his actions are not confined by custom, piety or precedent” (146). The “remoteness and nearness, indifference and involvement” bound up with the stranger’s rhetoric of objectivity seems to me precisely what the narrator of Cape Cod evokes. His revisionist, ostensibly more factual account of early New England is presented as the perspective of an outsider looking in, in the way someone who is estranged from Bancroft’s triumphant narrative of democratic progress might see the Pilgrims. Yet the very fact that this narrative was written and published for antebellum New Englanders to read betrays its author’s intimate involvement with the group he confronts. Like Simmel’s stranger, the wandering narrator of Cape Cod is simultaneously indifferent and involved, detached and confrontational.

Walls’s recent scholarship historically situates this “sociological form” of the wandering detached observer as one response to the politics of Manifest Destiny in antebellum America. Walls argues that the narrative of inevitable progress across the continent represents a response to the unstable “global competition” for land west of the Mississippi River. “There was no automatic assurance that the frontiers [. . .] might consolidate under a U.S. flag,” she writes: “expanding those national boundaries meant jockeying for power with France, England, Spain, Russia, and Mexico while keeping an eye overseas on Africa, China, Japan, and India” (148). To meet such uncertainty, Americans (Walls cites Thomas Jefferson, Bancroft, Washington Irving, and others) constructed a narrative of inevitable progress for their democracy, originating in the Pilgrims’ alleged commitment to political and intellectual liberty. Freedom became what distinguished the U.S. and what the U.S. would bring to the world: “While freedom might initiate American difference, soon that difference would propagate to all nations
and all peoples in a spreading revolution that would revitalize the globe” (149).

Walls argues that the field of texts that respond to the U.S.’s emerging expansionist identity is “marked by contestation,” and she assembles a range of attitudes toward Manifest Destiny and its consequences (151). Some treat the conquest of the American West as a victory—the providential fruition of the progress of democracy. Bancroft, for example, claims that the goal of his historical narrative is “to follow the steps by which a favoring Providence, calling our institutions into being, has conducted the country to its present happiness and glory” (4). The Indian conquests and Mexican War represent the U.S.’s victorious conversion of an “unproductive waste” into a providentially guided democratic nation. Margaret Fuller, on the other hand, “found this narrative troubling” (Walls 159). During the Mexican War, she published an article in the New York Tribune lambasting America’s invasion of Mexico as an abomination of its highest principles:

I listen to the same arguments [. . .] in favor of the spoliation of Poland as for the conquest of Mexico. I find the cause of tyranny and wrong everywhere the same—and lo! My country the darkest offender, because with least excuse, forsworn to the high calling with which she was called,—no champion of the rights of men, but a robber and a jailor; the scourge hidden behind her banner; her eyes fixed not on stars, but on the possessions of other men. (409)

For Fuller, Bancroft’s victorious march signified absolute failure.

Walls also charts a “third path,” “between the polar limits of defeat and victory” (161), and this is where the wandering narrator of Cape Cod seems to fit. Walls associates this position with the attitude of “the flaneur, ‘the strolling urban observer’ who wanders and browses in a nonlinear and nondirected manner, observing in intimate detail, yet always able to step back and with a cock of the theoretical eyebrow, comprehend the whole” (162). This detached observer will not hesitate to frame what he sees within a theoretical model, yet remains uncommitted to any model he might propose—willing to wander into a different one when necessary.

Walls’s “paradigmatic example” of the “third path” is Moby Dick’s narrator, Ishmael, “named after the Bible’s half-caste wandering outsider son of the slave Hagar” (161, my emphasis). Walls suggests that Ishmael represents “Melville’s foil to the murderous Ahab, whose monomanical focus on one transcendental goal, the death of the white whale, brings the ship and its crew to destruction” (161). Ishmael’s noncommittal,
wandering identity presents an alternative: “where Ahab drives, Ishmael floats, open to all” (161). Another of her examples of the “third path” is Thoreau, “the peripatetic nonlinear wanderer” who, she argues, always seeks to see a new world and tests one perspective after another, encouraging his readers to do the same.1 Walls argues that Thoreau strives to see the familiar from a different angle and, like Simmel’s “stranger,” could see “the local with the intensity of the visitor who in his passage comprehends the local in its planetary procedures” (262). Though Walls does not mention the narrator of Cape Cod as a part of this argument, its detached, wandering narrator who calls himself a stranger better represents this “third path” than the Thoreau of Walden or the reform essays, who, as readers often complain, frequently moralizes in absolute terms.

II. The Stranger as Historian

As Cape Cod’s narrator wanders along the shore, he also wanders perceptually—at times celebrating his unbiased, reliable portrayals of the Cape and its politically laden history, and at other times questioning the possibility of textual accuracy and reliability. Thoreau’s depiction of the destitute charity house resembles several other scenes in which he claims that his account of a place or event is more empirical and reliable than its representation in the local guidebook. Yet Thoreau’s claim to present reliable facts about the Cape contrasts with other passages in which he worries that he sees only “mirages.” “Objects on the beach,” he writes, “whether men or animate things, look not only exceedingly grotesque, but much larger and more wonderful than they actually are” (84). Thoreau often reminds his reader that he, as a stranger, cannot determine the size, distance, or nature of what he sees on Cape Cod:

To walk over it makes on a stranger such an impression as being at sea, and he finds it impossible to estimate distances in any weather. [. . .] He is also deluded by other kinds of mirage. When, in summer, I saw a family a-blueberrying a mile off, walking about amid the dwarfish bushes which did not come up higher than their ankles, they seemed to me to be a race of giants, twenty feet high at least. (105)2

Such passages compromise Thoreau’s other claims to empiricism, forcing the reader to question the reliability of his representations of the Cape and its history.

Mitchell Breitwieser argues that Thoreau’s self-effacing comments about his perceptions results from his dissatisfaction with the guidebooks, as if he learns a lesson from them. According to
Breitwieser, the beach becomes a site of wreckage, where human constructions (physical and textual) prove unstable: “Thoreau [. . .] likens the wreck of the ships [another common image in Cape Cod] to the wreck of human representations, such as maps, pictures, or accounts, identifying the beach as the locale of a kind of writing alert to the numerous sources of astonishment” (152). The ever-changing, liminal space between shore and ocean, as another Thoreau scholar writes, “undermines any sense of fixed perspective, historiographical or visual, resulting in a continual questioning of narrative centers and intentions—including [Thoreau’s] own” (Lowney 242).

According to Breitwieser, the self-conscious instability of the narrator’s perspective represents his response to the inevitable wreckage of all perspectives:

having rejected not only specific books [the guidebooks] but also the idea of the Book—[. . .] the idea that writing can be so well-made that it is an adequate substitute for the thing at its extremity—he writes something [. . .] like a book. We must conclude that he writes without the familiar pretensions. The Age of the Book is past; Thoreau writes in the age of the wreck of the book, when miscellanies are not gathered into a new and perfect artifact. (153)

In other words, Cape Cod’s material history actually reflects the theme of incompletion and perspectival instability. Due to his sickness and early death, Thoreau did not finish Cape Cod, and his sister Sophia, Ellery Channing, and James Fields edited the manuscripts into the text we have now, which was first published by Ticknor and Fields in 1865, three years after Thoreau’s death. Breitwieser argues that its unfinished state is not only a result of Thoreau’s death, but a “result of the book’s themes as well” (155-56). The narrator’s record of the guidebooks’ and his own failure to represent the Cape reliably signifies an epistemological attitude: critical detachment from his own accounts and willingness to wander between perspectives. “His treasure,” Breitwieser argues, “is the discovery of an attitude that does not aspire to an immunity from wreck” (155).

Breitwieser associates this openness to ideological wreckage with “national melancholy” (the title of his book), but he does not mention Thoreau’s revisionist account of the Pilgrims, which more than anything else in Cape Cod reflects Thoreau’s disaffection with America and its nationalist histories. Breitwieser claims to trace how this specifically American sentiment or disposition of “national mourning” operates over the course of United States history. The broad scope of his study leads him to overlook the specific historical context of particular expressions of national mourning, so that this sentiment seems to be
expressed in basically the same way for all the authors he studies, from Anne Bradstreet to Jack Kerouac. Yet Thoreau’s account of the Pilgrims is thoroughly lodged in an antebellum discourse on national history, in direct dialogue with Bancroft and Daniel Webster. Thus it is not surprising that Breitwieser’s ahistorical methodology would lead him to focus on Thoreau’s more abstract expressions of ideational transition, rather than Thoreau’s historically situated expressions of national discontent.

Thoreau begins his history of the discovery and settlement of Cape Cod in an iconoclastic, objective tone, as though he were informing the locals of what only a stranger would notice. Thoreau uses “the Ante-Pilgrim history of New England” to complicate (what he portrays as) the common assumption that the early Anglo-Saxon settlers brought the first light of culture to the New World and that American democracy inevitably followed from their errand into the wilderness. Thoreau appeals to Cape Cod’s globally disputed early mapping to remind his New England audience of the region’s cosmopolitan beginnings: “On successive maps, Cape Cod appears sprinkled over with French, Dutch, and English names, as it made part of New France, New Holland, and New England” (178). Thoreau especially emphasizes the explorations of the French, and he criticizes American historians for ignoring their role. The American’s under-representation of the French, Thoreau argues, results from using a later, less informative edition of Champlain’s exploration narrative:

This omission is probably to be accounted for partly by the fact that the early edition of Champlain’s “Voyages” had not been consulted [. . .]. This contains by far the most particular, and, I think, interesting chapter of what we may call the Ante-Pilgrim history of New England, extending to one hundred and sixty pages quarto; but appears to be unknown equally to the historian and the orator on Plymouth Rock. [. . .] all our historians who mention Champlain, refer to the edition of 1632, in which all the separate charts of our harbors, &c., and about one half of the narrative, are omitted. (179).4

By ignoring the importance of the French, New Englanders such as the historian (Bancroft) and orator (Webster), mentioned above, can represent the Pilgrims as the origin of civilization in the New World. For example, in the speech Thoreau refers to in this passage, Daniel Webster designates the Pilgrims’ settlement on Plymouth Rock as “where Christianity, and civilization, and letters made their first lodgment, in a vast extent of country, covered with a wilderness, and peopled by roving barbarians.” But according to Thoreau, “the history
of New England commences, only when it ceases to be New France” (183). Throughout his account of Cape Cod’s early history, Thoreau, playing the stranger to America, complicates its idealizations of the Pilgrims by exploring “unknown” and “ignored” texts about this disputed region, texts that predate their arrival—texts that reveal that “Christianity” and “civilization” were not planted in the New World by the Pilgrims.

Thoreau’s research into “Ante-Pilgrim history” reveals Christians and civilizations were established on the Northeast coast well before the Pilgrims’ arrival. “It is not generally remembered, if known, by the descendants of the Pilgrims,” he writes, “that when their fore-fathers were spending their first memorable winter in the New World, they had for neighbors a colony of French [. . .] three hundred miles distant; where in spite of many vicissitudes they had been for fifteen years” (181-82). Likewise, Thoreau reports (again citing the “ignored” “early edition” of Champlain) that “there were Jesuit priests in what has since been called New England, converting savages [. . .] years before the Pilgrims came hither to enjoy their own religion” (183). The French colony and these Jesuits serve as Thoreau’s (previously ignored) evidence that New England history is more cosmopolitan—and thus more politically complicated—than the “descendants of the Pilgrims” would like to remember.

In contrast to the French, whom Thoreau portrays as competent and heroic, the Pilgrims come across as thieving ignoramuses. Thoreau presents them stealing the lands of previous inhabitants, rather than civilizing an “unproductive waste” as Bancroft and Webster present them. Thoreau quotes Champlain criticizing the Pilgrims “with no little justice” for settling an area already claimed by the French:

“The common consent of all Europe is to represent New France as extending at least to the thirty-fifth and thirty-sixth degrees of latitude [at least as far south as present day Virginia], as appears by the maps of the world printed in Spain, Italy, Holland, Flanders, Germany, and England, until they [the English] possessed themselves of the coasts of New France, [. . .] where they have imposed, according to their fancy, such names as New England, Scotland, and others.” (183)

Thoreau deploys this passage to show how an outsider like Champlain—excluded from and dismissive of the Pilgrims’ claims to begin a providential “errand into the wilderness”—viewed their settlement in the New World.
Bancroft and Webster assume that no one of any significance lived in America before the Anglo-Saxons, and according to Thoreau, this convenient assumption dates all the way back to the Pilgrims themselves. To make this point, Thoreau recounts another early instance of how the Pilgrims “possess themselves” of land. Citing a regional history text, Thoreau describes a group of settlers asking a group of Indians who had “laid claim” to a region of Cape Cod. The Indians replied that “there was not any who owned it.” So the committee asserted that “that land is ours,” and the Indians consented. Thoreau calls this a “remarkable assertion and admission”:

The Pilgrims appear to have regarded themselves as Not Any’s representatives. Perhaps this was the first instance of that quiet way of “speaking for” a place not yet occupied, or at least not improved as much as it may be, which their descendants have practiced, and are still practicing so extensively. Not Any seems to have been the sole proprietor of all America before the Yankees. (33)

As Thoreau capitalizes the Indian’s seemingly banal response “Not Any;” it becomes a trope in his revisionist narrative of American history—naming a habit of thought that he identifies in the Pilgrims, in the pioneers in the American West, and in the historians and orators who historically collapse and applaud the achievements of both. This is one of Cape Cod’s most politically iconoclastic points: there always was and continues to be a cosmopolitan and globally contested history hiding behind Americans’ claim to discover and bring civilization to a “virgin” New World. According to Thoreau, the trope of “Not Any” in the rhetoric of American history marks a willed blindness to those who were already in America, French and Indian alike. This blindness makes possible the teleological narrative of progress from “a wilderness [. . .] peopled by roving barbarians” to civilized, Christian and democratic America.

Thoreau also mocks the early English settlers for their geographical ignorance, as he idealizes the French explorers for their detailed knowledge of the same region:

Even as late as 1633 we find Winthrop, the first Governor of the Massachusetts Colony, who was not the most likely to be misinformed, [. . .] talking about the “Great Lake” and the “hideous swamps about it,” near which the Connecticut and the “Patomack” took their rise. (185-86)
Thoreau believes that John Winthrop thought he could see the Connecticut Lakes in northern New Hampshire, which are hundreds of miles from Plymouth Rock (and impossible to see). Thoreau also jabs at Winthrop for recording that another settler, standing on a hill, “saw eastward what he ‘judged to be Gulf of Canada,’ and westward what he ‘judged to be the great lake which the Canada River comes out of’” (186).” In Thoreau’s account, compared to Champlain, Winthrop and the Puritans seem like bumbling amateurs, not the founders of a glorious, powerful nation:

While the very inhabitants of New England were thus fabling about the country a hundred miles inland, which was a terra incognita to them, [. . .] Champlain, the first Governor of Canada, [. . .] had already gone to war against the Iroquois in their forest forts, and penetrated to the Great Lakes and wintered there, before a Pilgrim had heard of New England. (186, emphasis in original)

As the Pilgrims betray their geographical ignorance, Champlain and the French show their expertise and power as competent settlers of the New World.

Thoreau thus debunks Bancroft and Webster’s claims that the Pilgrims brought the light of European culture to the New World and that America’s expansion in the nineteenth century inevitably followed from their errand. For the first several pages of Thoreau’s account of New England history, it seems that he wants to replace the Pilgrims with the French as the rightful discoverers and proprietors of the region; yet he then shows that the French, like the English, also found evidence of previous European exploration. Thoreau quotes Champlain’s report that “we found a cross, which was very old, covered with moss and almost all decayed, which was a clear sign that there had formerly been Christians there” (quoted on 189). Likewise, Thoreau quotes the accounts of the first English exploration (Bartholomew Gosnold’s), which records finding Native Americans with “an iron grapple, and a kettle of copper”; and one “apparelled with a waistcoat and breeches of black serge, [. . .] hose and shoes on his feet” (qtd. on 191-92). Thoreau reports that “These they at first mistook for ‘Christians distressed’” (191). So the French and English explorers, each believing themselves to be the first Europeans to explore the northeast of North America, both find relics of Christianity and civilization. “This was a remarkable discovery for the discoverers,” quips Thoreau (192).

Thoreau then continues to ridicule the idea of a single, authoritative “discovery” of America by recounting several explorers and sailors who claimed to be (or whom others claimed to be) the first
Europeans to visit this region. According to Thoreau, “old Icelandic manuscripts” report that Thorwald, son of Eric the Red, “broke his keel” on North America in 1004. So Thorwald was the first, “unless possibly one Biarne Herulfson, [. . .] who had been seized with a great desire to travel,” had gotten lost sailing from Iceland to Greenland, and ended up within eyeshot of Cape Cod in 986: “he may put forth a strong claim to be regarded as the discoverer of the American continent,” Thoreau jokes (195). “If time and space permitted,” he goes on, “I could present the claims of several other worthy persons” (196). Thoreau presents a few more such claims and concludes with one by Guillaume Postel, “a learned but extravagant French author, born in 1510”: “This land, on account of its very lucrative fishery, was accustomed to be visited by the Gauls from the very dawn of history” (qtd. on 196). These various, conflicting accounts destabilize any historical rendering of the discovery of North America. It is as if America has always been discovered—already found and claimed “from the very dawn of history.”

Thoreau’s playful account of North America’s “discovery” leads to a skeptical reflection on historiography:

Consider what stuff history is made of,—that for the most part it is merely a story agreed on by posterity. Who will tell us even how many Russians were engaged in the battle of the Chernaya, the other day? Yet no doubt Mr. Scriblerus, the historian, will fix on a definite number for the schoolboys to commit to their excellent memories. What, then, of the number of Persians at Salamis? The historian whom I read knew as much about the position of the parties and their tactics in the last mentioned affair, as they who describe a recent battle in an article for the press now-a-days, before the particulars have arrived. (197)

Here Thoreau portrays the composition of history as having more to do with meeting the demands of a discursive situation than with producing reliable, objective information. If history is “merely a story agreed on by posterity,” then there will be as many histories of an event as there are communities who remain invested in its significance, and as these communities change and realign, so will history. Thoreau concludes his reflection on historiography by implicitly equating even the best history texts with the unreliable guidebooks to Cape Cod: “I believe that, if I were to live the life of mankind over again myself [. . .], with the Universal History in my hands, I should not be able to tell what was what” (197). The community represented by Bancroft and Webster, that identifies with the Pilgrims’ values and idealizes them as the originators
of America, produces histories that the wandering “stranger” who narrates *Cape Cod* finds just as unreliable as the local guidebooks he consults as he walks along the shore. Thoreau first presents his account as a more historically objective alternative, invoking the voice of a detached observer and citing texts that challenge their national narratives, but he then undercuts the possibility of reliable history altogether. Thoreau’s rhetorically more objective, iconoclastic account of the French discovery and rightful settlement turns out be another illusion on the beach—a mirage (like the family of giants a-blueberrying) that perhaps only a stranger would see, and that fades as he looks further into texts about New England history. By questioning even his own historical account of America’s settlement and discovery, Thoreau offers not simply an iconoclastic alternative to Bancroft’s affirmative Puritan origin story, but a powerful complication of the terms and coherence of the discovery-of-America narrative as an ideological form.

Throughout *Cape Cod*, Thoreau writes from the perspective of someone who acknowledges himself as part of the Pilgrims’ heritage, but ultimately emerges as estranged from them and the community of their descendants as represented by Bancroft and Webster. Adopting the attitude of an outsider looking in allows Thoreau to represent what is understood as the originary moment in American history (the landing and settlement of the Pilgrims and Puritans) the same way he represents the interior of the charity house on the shore: as an unsentimental, detached observer who distrusts and disproves what his sources tell him to expect. Looking at both the charity house and the Pilgrims, the stranger who narrates *Cape Cod* finds stones instead of bread. But the very existence of *Cape Cod* and its carefully researched and crafted revisionist history belies Thoreau’s identity as an uninvolved, unconcerned outsider. Thoreau, like Simmel’s “stranger,” occupies a position within his community of Pilgrim descendants of “indifference and involvement”—or even better, involvement through a veneer of indifference.

Even Thoreau’s physical presence on the Cape materially signifies his rhetoric of ideological marginality in *Cape Cod*. The text’s final sentence locates Thoreau standing literally on the fringe of America, and he comments on the advantage of this “point from which to contemplate the world”: “A man may stand there and put all America behind him” (215). Facing away from the country whose past and present he denounces, he looks to the ocean, *Cape Cod*’s (albeit always disappointing) image of potentiality and “ceaseless activity” (145). The text’s final image of Thoreau standing on the unstable shore and facing the unpredictable ocean materially expresses the unavailability of
certainty: “beaches [.] are here made and unmade in a day [.] by the
sea shifting its sands.” This image suggests ideological flexibility in the
face of instability and unpredictability. As Thoreau says of the ocean,
“There is no telling what it might not vomit up” (90).

Thoreau’s location on the fringe of America resembles his
position on the threshold of the charity house, looking inward through a
knot-hole. Both images materialize the rhetoric of estrangement: both
suggest Thoreau’s marginality and detachment from what he observes
and contemplates while at the same time suggesting intimacy with it.
Together, they indicate his willingness to modify his ideas based on what
comes into focus through the knot-hole or what emerges from the sea.
Both images also push against a mistaken, yet common, assumption
about Thoreau shared alike by those who claim to be his disciples and
his detractors: that he exemplifies and articulates a stable, coherent
moral vision that can be championed or condemned. The Thoreau who
narrates Cape Cod embraces ideological abandonment; he rejects all
claims to surety, even his own. The questioning of historical authority
that follows his own apparently authoritative historical account suggests
that he remains open to different arcs of history than the one he has
charted. The text’s final image suggests that he is willing to put even his
cyphal representation of America behind him and remain vigilant and
receptive to whatever emerges from the unknowable future, whether it
be wreck, “vomit,” or treasure.

NOTES

1 Though she does not develop this claim in Passage to Cosmos, Walls
argues this point at length in her first book (as the title suggests), Seeing New
Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science, especially in
the chapter “A Plurality of Worlds” (167-211).

2 Here is another humorous quotation from Cape Cod that
exemplifies this rhetoric of perceptual uncertainty: “We were so often
disappointed in the size of such things as came ashore, the ridiculous bits of
wood or weed, with which the ocean labored, that we began to doubt
whether the Atlantic itself would bear a still closer inspection, and would
not turn out to be but a small pond, if it should come ashore to us” (52).

3 Lowney argues compellingly that Cape Cod is a book about the
unsettling of assumptions, yet his argument does not account for what I’ve
called Thoreau’s rhetoric of objectivity, nor does he consider Thoreau’s
identity as “stranger.” He cites Thoreau’s revisionist history of the Pilgrims’
erand as an example of something Thoreau “unsettles”, but he not specify
exactly what Thoreau is unsettling or precisely how he does so.
For more on Thoreau and Champlain’s publications, particularly his maps, see the essay by John Hessler in this issue. According to Gordon Sayre, Champlain published four books on the New World, in 1603, 1613, 1619, and 1632. The “early edition” Thoreau refers to here is apparently the 1613 publication, titled Les Voyages du Sieur de Champlain Xaintongeois. The title of the 1632 text, which he criticizes Bancroft and other historians for using, is called Les Voyages de la Nouvelle France Occidentale.


According to Moldenhauer, Thoreau’s source for this material is John Winthrop’s The History of New England from 1630 to 1649, ed. James Savage (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1853), I:135 (Thoreau, Cape Cod 367).

According to Moldenhauer, Thoreau’s sources are the narratives of Gosnold’s 1602 voyage by Gabriel Archer and John Brereton, which were republished in Collections Mass. Hist. Soc., 3d ser., vol. 8 (1843): 72-81, 83-94 (Thoreau, Cape Cod 367).

Thoreau indicates that he borrows this quotation from Marc Lescarbot’s Histoire de Nouvelle-France (1609).

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Aesthetic Inflections: Thoreau, Gender, and Geology

Patrick Morgan

In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification.

— Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari

Thoreau wasn’t necessarily exaggerating when he wrote in his journal, “You can do anything with water” (3:54). He might have further claimed that you could do anything with river water because, alongside his reflections on Walden Pond, Thoreau was also concerned, throughout his life, with water in its more undulating, flowing aspect. As early as 1837, soon after he began to keep a journal, Thoreau made the connection between rivers and mental processes: “If one would reflect let him embark on some placid stream, and float with the current” (1:10). In his writing, the cognitive realm is both reflected and fulfilled through physical movement on water. Reflections are facilitated through the performance of drifting down a river; and conversely, to see a river is to link it to human cognition. On the very morning of his death, Thoreau’s sister Sophia read to him from the “Thursday” chapter of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (Richardson 389): of all the words he might have listened to before he died, he chose to revisit language about flowing, undulating river water. As he wrote in that chapter, “Undulation is the gentlest and most ideal of motions, produced by one fluid falling on another” (260).

The literal fluidity of rivers forms the basis of Thoreau’s approach to gender fluidity. For Thoreau, rivers signify the diverse play of possibilities; they are a means by which he can better envision not only his personal self-reflections, but also his reflections on society and aesthetics, and their relation to the gender constrictions of nineteenth-century America. In his journal, Thoreau formulates these gender constrictions through an extended meditation on the eighteenth-century aesthetic concept of the “line of beauty.” Whereas aestheticians such as William Hogarth and Edmund Burke had firmly affixed the serpentine line of beauty to the female gender, Thoreau diverges from this route by transposing the line of beauty onto rivers—that is, onto the river as a geomorphological system. The river as a system includes not only the

river water itself, but also the sediment transported and deposited by the flowing river, along with the shores which constrain where the river flows, and thereby allow the water to follow a meandering course characterized by both “male” and “female” sides. By transposing the line of beauty onto river systems, Thoreau not only challenges eighteenth-century aesthetics by assigning both genders to the river system, but also by framing this river-gender system as being in constant flux. He thus implies that there are no fixed gender identities—or at least, to the extent that he essentializes gender, he also questions this very essentialization.

Rivers, for Thoreau, are not a simple concept: they connote not only geomorphology and aesthetics, but also gender and sexuality. In thinking about rivers in terms of thought processes and gender identities, Thoreau creates the possibility for an ecofeminist reading, insofar as ecofeminism concerns itself with how both female and male subjectivity are created in relation to the environment. Ecofeminism melds together both feminist and ecological criticism by focusing on the links between gendered domination and the exploitation of nature. This can be seen in recent academic discourse that posits a “true” Thoreau, as is especially apparent in the debate over whether his works represent a dualistic, gendered agenda that furthers ecological exploitation. For instance, in their reply to Carolyn Merchant’s *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England*, Leonard Scigaj and Nancy Simmons affirm that “One finds the true Thoreau not by emphasizing socioeconomic externals in *Walden* . . . as does Merchant, but by elucidating the non-dualistic, ecofeminist interrelatedness of all things that can be known through growing one’s own cosmos from within outward” (128). Being non-dualistic ecofeminists themselves, Scigaj and Simmons construct a Thoreau who himself acts as a primordial, non-dualistic ecofeminist, thereby furthering the current theoretical climate that tends to uphold a fluid construction of Thoreau. Similarly, from a feminist more than an ecofeminist, standpoint, Sarah Ann Wider takes a similarly fluid stance when she reframes the words of Laura Dassow Walls: “Given the ‘gender fluidity’ he creates in his writing, Thoreau opens possibilities. Rather than perpetuating a world of ‘binary [and mutually exclusive] oppositions,’ he envisions that ‘ideal house’ where ‘housekeeping is no longer a woman’s chore but a necessary and beautiful aspect of the economy of living’” (154-55).

Not surprisingly, then, there are two sides to this dualist debate: those who argue that Thoreau falls prey to the logic of binaries and hierarchies, and those who assert that in his writings he constructs a fluid, non-dualistic world. As far as representations of gender in *Walden* are concerned, Wider believes that Thoreau rejects dualism. While this
may indeed be the case in *Walden*, Thoreau’s journal tells a slightly different story – one that complicates this very duality between dualists and non-dualists. In her own essay, Walls anticipates Thoreau’s confounding of dualism and non-dualism when she discusses the constant interchange between binaries: “Thoreau’s stance, finally, is to flow between both male and female ideals” (524). That is, Thoreau may acknowledge the binaries, but at the same time question them insofar as they are situated within a fluid framework. In this essay, I would like to extend Walls’s poststructuralist reading of *Walden* by ensconcing Thoreau’s works within an aesthetic and a geological context.

Thoreau never shies away from gendering the landscape. He actually assigns gender roles to specific geomorphological features of a river, as when he writes in his 1852 journal entry, “Methinks there is a male & female shore to the river” (5:98). This deliberate gendering of rivers complicates the clear distinction between dualistic essentialism and fluid constructionism since, on one level, Thoreau’s words are situated within a discourse that flows from the eighteenth-century aestheticians Hogarth and Burke, who assigned the S-shaped curving “line of beauty” to the female gender. But in the process of co-opting eighteenth-century aesthetic principles and transposing them onto the gendered geomorphology of rivers, Thoreau deconstructs his predecessors’ conceptions of beauty: whereas these influential aestheticians associate the line of beauty, or undulation, with the female body only, Thoreau rejects this concept by applying to the rolling river both femininity and masculinity, challenging the aesthetic duality that had defined femininity as undulating and masculinity as linear. Where the early aestheticians defined beauty in feminine terms, insofar as the line of beauty is mapped onto women’s bodies, Thoreau counters by recognizing femaleness and maleness within a single river. He thus rethinks the fundamental aesthetic principle that assigns the curving line of beauty to females and the linear, angular line to males; but on another level, Thoreau’s gendering of the river shows him complicating the constructionist-essentialist duality with a kind of “geo-feminist” reading of river systems. By “geo-feminism,” I am referring to a specific lens within ecofeminism, an interdisciplinary approach that combines feminism and geology, analyzing subjectivity not only in relation to rivers, but also to the structures, or geomorphology, of landforms.

Given that Thoreau was a close observer of the geomorphology of rivers, a geo-feminist reading is quite revealing. He was well aware of the aggradational and erosive forces in the development of meandering rivers and, by assigning the language of gender to rivers, he implies that this dynamic view of river formation also applies to gender. His concept of river formation is therefore in accord with what Ynestra King calls
the goal of ecological feminism: “a dynamic, developmental theory of the person – male and female – who emerges out of nonhuman nature, where difference is neither reified [nor] ignored and the dialectical relationship between human and nonhuman nature is understood” (130-31). In ascribing gender roles to the ever-changing, flowing, erosive river, Thoreau implies that gender roles are likewise ever-changing, flowing, and erosive. As Ophelia Selam asks, “Do we, perhaps, embrace essentialism in order to complicate it?” (90). In the same way, Thoreau’s gendering of rivers can be seen as a response to Hogarth and Burke: he both embraces, and complicates, their essentialism, creating an interplay between aesthetics, geology, and gender which, for Thoreau, acts as a point of inflection – a space in which the very distinction between duality and fluidity, essentialism and constructionism, is both created and questioned. As of yet, no critic has sought to inform a feminist reading of Thoreau’s writings with the geologic principles underlying the geomorphology of river formation, although, as will be shown, this argument not only informs a reading of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, but it also contains implications for Walden.

Although the present essay focuses on Thoreau, similar methods could be used to analyze the works of Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau’s fellow Transcendentalists, who likely influenced his fluid conception of gender and thought. For example, in her essay “The Great Lawsuit,” which the Dial published in 1843 (when Thoreau was one of its editors), Fuller writes that “male and female [. . .] are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman” (43). This linking of fluidity and gender anticipates Thoreau’s own linking of the two concepts. In a similar way, Emerson’s framing of thought in terms of fluidity anticipates Thoreau’s.² In his 1837 address “The American Scholar,” Emerson not only discusses “undulation in nature,” but compares thinking to river processes: “Thinking is the function. Living is the functionary. The stream retreats to its source” (62). Thus Thoreau is not alone in conceptualizing thought and gender in terms of fluidity, and the relationship between geology and gender in the works of Thoreau’s fellow Transcendentalists is an area ripe for future scholarship. Thoreau’s unique contribution, though, lies in the way that geology and gender are so explicitly mediated in his work by eighteenth-century aesthetic theories.

I. The Line of Beauty Meets Thoreau

Undulations, curves, and ripples are featured prominently throughout Thoreau’s journal, including passages Thoreau incorporates
into his 1840 essay, “The Service,” and in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. Other scholars have noted Thoreau’s fascination with undulations and how a river, in the words of Rosemary Whitaker, “allowed to flow in its destined channel is a symbol of the beauty and harmony which existed when man did not interfere with the natural processes. Its undulations, its rippling motions are symbols of the ideal, instinctive movements of all nature” (11). Although Whitaker has in mind A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers as a whole, in which Thoreau consistently links an undulating river with beauty and naturalness, the same logic holds for specific passages such as those in the “Sunday” chapter. Here, linear, man-made canals contrast with the natural beauty of an undulating river. As Thoreau writes:

There appeared some want of harmony in [the canal’s] scenery, since it was not of equal date with the woods and meadows through which it is led, and we missed the conciliatory influence of time on land and water; but in the lapse of ages, Nature will recover and indemnify herself, and gradually plant fit shrubs and flowers along its borders. (51)

The practice of characterizing undulations as beautiful is not unique to Thoreau, and in doing so, he responds to eighteenth-century aesthetic principles first theorized by William Hogarth. In order to see how Thoreau appropriates and modifies these aesthetic principles, one must understand what they are, and how his predecessors framed these concepts. Hogarth, an eighteenth-century English painter and aesthetician, was the originator of the phrase “line of beauty.” In his 1753 treatise The Analysis of Beauty, he sets up a gradation of waving lines, ranging from straight to greatly undulating, and he defines the line of beauty as being the median among this waving-line index (Figure 1):

![Figure 1: The Analysis of Beauty, by William Hogarth, Plate 1. The fourth curve in each set denotes the line of beauty.](image-url)
In this diagram, Hogarth assigns the number one to weakly undulating lines, and the number seven to highly undulating lines:

Though all sorts of waving-lines are ornamental, when properly applied; yet, strictly speaking, there is but one precise line, properly to be called the line of beauty, which in the scale of them [...] is number 4: the lines 5, 6, 7, by their bulging too much in their curvature [become] gross and clumsy; and, on the contrary, 3, 2, 1, as they straighten, [become] mean and poor. (65)

For Hogarth, the medium-waving line, which is assigned the number four, is the ideally beautiful line because as opposed to angular, straight lines, it embodies variety and freedom. In addition to defining the line of beauty, Hogarth also uses aesthetics to essentialize gender insofar as, referring to a diagram of girdles that range from straight to widely undulating, he asserts that the straighter girdles “would better fit a well-shaped man,” while the line of beauty “would better fit a well-form’d woman” (66). He concludes this gendered paragraph with a frank summation: “it has been shewn by our principles, how much finer and more beautiful number 4 is, than number 2: does not this in our determination enhance the merit of these principles, as it proves at the same time how much the form of a woman’s body surpasses in beauty that of a man?” (66). In addition to assigning the second, poorly undulating line to males, and the fourth, beautifully undulating line to females, Hogarth also remarks how “serpentine rivers [...] are composed principally of what I call, the waving and serpentine lines,” thereby implying that rivers are more closely associated with women than men (42). As far as Hogarth is concerned, rivers are akin to women in that both embody the undulating line of beauty.

In A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of The Sublime and Beautiful, Edmund Burke, Hogarth’s contemporary, appropriates and extends the line of beauty in both overt and subtle ways. He does this on a subtle level when he asserts that a bird’s flight is beautiful because of its changing motion. Although Burke does not use Hogarth’s phrase “line of beauty” to describe the bird’s movement and variation, he nevertheless couches his description in the language of beauty, with one feature flowing into the next, as in the following excerpt: “Here we see the head increasing insensibly to the middle, from whence it lessens gradually until it mixes with the neck; the neck loses itself in a larger swell, which continues to the middle of the body [...] and the line is perpetually changing, above, below, upon every side” (115). The passage is subtle in its appropriation of Hogarth’s line of beauty not only because the phrase “line of beauty” is implicit, but also because it
extends Hogarth’s aesthetics insofar as Hogarth doesn’t refer to beauty in relation to the flight of birds. On a more obvious level, Burke not only links the line of beauty with the female figure, but he also pays homage to the illustrator:

Observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily [. . .]. Is not this a demonstration of that change of surface [. . .] which forms one of the great constituents of beauty? It gives me no small pleasure to find that I can strengthen my theory in this point, by the opinion of the very ingenious Mr. Hogarth; whose idea of the line of beauty I take in general to be extremely just. (115)

This passage is significant because here Burke not only continues Hogarth’s manner of associating undulating, changing lines with beauty and femininity, but he also couches this aesthetics/gender link in explicit, even erotic language. While he certainly appropriates Hogarth’s manner of essentializing gender by necessarily linking femininity with the curving line of beauty, Burke extends his predecessor’s idea by more fully ensconcing the line of beauty within the feminine form. Where Hogarth compares the gradations of the line of beauty between female and male bodies, Burke makes no mention of males, and thereby implicitly relegates beauty to females.

Any essay about Thoreau and the line of beauty would not be complete without a mention of William Gilpin, an eighteenth-century landscape painter who greatly influenced Thoreau, as Robert Richardson indicates in his biography: “Gilpin showed Thoreau the grand and integrative language of landscape” (260). Indeed, Thoreau avidly read Gilpin’s works from the spring of 1852 to the winter of 1854, borrowing his *Remarks on Forest Scenery* from the Harvard Library on March 22, 1852 (Boudreau 358). Richardson points out that “Thoreau read Gilpin all during April, and either referred to Gilpin or wrote in obvious imitation of him every day” (263). There is no doubt that Gilpin influenced Thoreau, and that Gilpin was himself cognizant of Hogarth since, in *Remarks on Forest Scenery*, Gilpin not only mentions the phrase “line of beauty,” but also frequently describes the beauty of undulating lines, including meandering rivers (64, 164). He even mentions Hogarth’s name with affection in *Observations on the River Wye*, a book Thoreau checked out from the Harvard Library on May 24, 1854 (Boudreau 359).
Yet while there is ample evidence for Thoreau having encountered the line of beauty in Gilpin’s work, Gilpin could not have influenced Thoreau’s linking of undulations with beauty in his essay “The Service,” or his book A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, because these works were published in 1840 and 1849, several years before Thoreau encountered Gilpin’s ideas. Although Gilpin’s influence on Thoreau is chronologically out of sync with these early mentions of the line of beauty, Burke’s influence coincides perfectly. As Alan Hodder notes, as a Harvard undergraduate in 1837, Thoreau wrote an undergraduate essay on the sublime in response to A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of The Sublime and Beautiful (56). While to my knowledge no other critic has yet suggested this, it is quite likely that Thoreau encountered Hogarth’s line of beauty through Burke’s work. Thus Thoreau’s conception of the line of beauty represents two degrees of separation; there is no evidence that Thoreau directly read Hogarth’s work, since he never checked out The Analysis of Beauty from the Harvard Library, and mentions Hogarth only once in his journal.

There are, of course, many other avenues by which Thoreau may have happened upon the line of beauty, since the concept appears to be a part of what Stanley Fish might call Thoreau’s interpretive community. In the inaugural issue of The Dial (published on July 1, 1840), Thoreau’s friend Amos Bronson Alcott writes of how “The line of beauty symbolizes motion” (97). It seems likely that Thoreau encountered the line of beauty here because, aside from being the first issue of The Dial, it also represents Thoreau’s christening as a writer: his essay “Aulus Persius Flaccus” was published in this issue. As Richardson writes, “The summer of 1840 was busy and exciting for the Concord circle around Emerson [. . .]. With the appearance of The Dial, Thoreau was a published writer” (79-80). Regardless of whether Thoreau encountered the phrase “line of beauty” in this specific issue of The Dial, though, the very fact that this phrase appears in it implies that Hogarth’s line of beauty was a familiar concept in Thoreau’s interpretive community. Be it through Burke, or through a fellow Transcendentalist, one way or another, Thoreau chanced upon Hogarth’s line of beauty.

II. Mapping Gender

Although it may seem as though Thoreau easily associates river geomorphology and gender in his 1852 journal entry, his linking of aesthetics, geology, and gender represents a gradual development of thought that begins with his first mention of the line of beauty, in a journal entry on July 4, 1840: “All dignity and grandeur has something of the undulatoriness of the sphere. It is the secret of majesty in the
rolling gait of the elephant and of all grace in action and in art. The line of beauty is a curve [...]. What shame that our lives which should be the source of planetary motion [...] are full of abruptness and angulosity, so as not to roll, nor move majestically” (1:150). Interestingly, this reference to the line of beauty occurs just three days after the publication of the inaugural issue of The Dial, where Alcott also mentions the line of beauty. Being separated by two degrees from Hogarth, it is not surprising that Thoreau, in associating the line of beauty with spheres and planets, misinterprets Hogarth’s concept. Whereas Hogarth defines the line of beauty as “being composed of two curves contrasted” (55), Thoreau apparently has a more open interpretation, asserting that the singular curve – and not two curves – exhibits the line of beauty. He incorporates this 1840 journal entry into his 1840 essay, “The Service,” which, significantly, adds new connotations to Hogarth’s version of beauty. “The Service” was full of martial imagery celebrating soldiery and bravery, firmly ensconced in the eighteenth century’s notion of the masculine public sphere. Like many Transcendentalists of his day, Thoreau appreciated Goethian bravery and heroism. Interestingly, he asserts that “we say justly that the weak person is flat, for like all flat substances, he does not stand in the direction of his strength, that is on his edge, but affords a convenient surface to put upon [...]. Most things are strong in one direction [...] but the brave man is a perfect sphere, which cannot fall on its flat side, and is equally strong every way” (10). Whereas straight, flat objects are associated with cowards because they rest on their flat sides, curves and spheres are associated with brave men because they always stand on their edges. By thus couching the line of beauty within a masculine discourse, in opposition to Burke and Hogarth who aligned curves and undulations with femininity, Thoreau employs a rhetorical tactic that reverses the gender associations of the line of beauty. Thoreau begins to blur the boundary between essentialism and constructionism: he embraces essentialism insofar as he links the line of beauty with masculine, soldier-like bravery, while at the same time, he complicates the essentialist aesthetics of Hogarth and Burke by the very act of reversing the expected associations between the line of beauty and femininity. Whereas Burke and Hogarth link the beautiful line with women, Thoreau links it with men.

Nevertheless, he is still stuck in the binary: his July 4th, 1840 journal entry only reverses the expected gendering of the line of beauty – it does not question the foundation of binary logic itself. To see Thoreau do this, one has to examine his conception of rivers. The complexity of Thoreau’s appropriation of the Hogarthian line of beauty increases on December 16, 1840, when Thoreau contrasts the angular,
abrupt movements of quadrupeds with the fluid movements of birds and fish:

The former move by their weight or opposition to nature, the latter by their buoyancy, or yielding to nature [. . .]. The line which would express the motion of the former would be a tangent to the sphere, of the latter a radius. But the subtlest and most ideal and spiritual motion is undulation. It is produced by the most subtle element falling on the next subtlest [. . .]. Rippling is a more graceful flight. If you consider it from the hill top you will detect in it the wings of birds endlessly repeated. The two waving lines which express their flight seem copied from the ripple. (1: 206)

It is evident that Thoreau ruminated on this passage, since he incorporates a version of it in the final version of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, though this time he situates the scene in aesthetic terms:

The forms of beauty fall naturally around the path of him who is in the performance of his proper work; as the curled shavings drop from the plane, and borings cluster round the auger. Undulation is the gentlest and most ideal of motions, produced by one fluid falling on another. Rippling is a more graceful flight. From a hill-top you may detect in it the wings of birds endlessly repeated. The two *waving* lines which represent the flight of birds appear to have been copied from the ripple. (259-60)

In mentioning “the forms of beauty,” undulating lines, and flowing water, Thoreau forges a link between landscape and aesthetics, while at the same time echoing Burke’s aforementioned linking of beauty with a flock of birds (Burke 115). These associations pave the way for a radical reworking of nineteenth-century gender conventions.

If the 1840s represent the period when Thoreau begins to explore the link between the undulating line of beauty, rivers, and gender, then his June 15, 1852 journal entry in which he writes, “Methinks there is a male & female shore to the river” (5:98), represents the full extension of a decade-long line of thought. To encapsulate this progression in a single sentence, on July 4, 1840, Thoreau complicates the aesthetics of Hogarth and Burke by rejecting the binary that equates the line of beauty only with femininity; then on December 16, 1840, Thoreau asserts the connection between rivers and the undulating line of beauty; finally, on June 15, 1852, Thoreau radically rethinks the very practice of
associating undulating lines with any single gender. In so doing, Thoreau creates a tension between essentialism and constructionism, fluidity and duality—that is, whereas Hogarth and Burke limit the possibilities of undulating lines to one gender, Thoreau opens up possibilities by associating the undulating line of beauty with both genders. He embraces essentialism insofar as he links specific locations along a river with specific genders, while at the same time complicating it by refusing to define an undulating, meandering river in solely feminine terms. Thoreau reconceives his predecessors’ aesthetic principles, and in so doing, he challenges the chain linking the female, with undulation, with beauty.

III. Changing River, Changing Gender

Although Thoreau’s very act of gendering different sides of a river eschews the rigidly gendered divisions of Hogarth and Burke, a consideration of the geological underpinnings of Thoreau’s thought goes even further, insofar as it reveals how Thoreau conceives the shores of the rivers as sites of constant flux. In order to see how geology and gender work within Thoreau’s thought, one must first see how he frames his idea of a gendered river. On June 15, 1852, he writes: “Methinks there is a male & female shore to the river – One abrupt the other flat & meadowy. Have not all streams this contrast more or less – on the one hand eating into the bank – on the other depositing their sediment?” (5:98). Here Thoreau does not timidly dichotomize rivers along gender lines; he specifically locates gender within observable, geomorphological locations in a river, defining the abrupt side as the male shore, and the meadowy side as the female shore. Nor is this gendering of the river a mere passing thought of one specific summer day in 1852; he continues this mode of thinking well into the 1850s. For instance, a month later, on July 4, 1852, he writes:

I look down on the river behind Dod’s at 2 1/2 Pm a slate colored stream with a scarcely perceptible current with a male & female shore – the former more abrupt of button bushes & willows – the other flat of grass & pickerel weed alone. Beyond the former the water being deep extends a border or fringe of green and purplish pads lying perfectly flat on the surface – but on the latter side the pads extend a half a rod or a rod beyond the pickerel weed – shining pads reflecting the light dotted with white or yellow lilies. (5:182)

Aside from further characterizing the gendered stream, this passage reveals that this gendered conceptual framework is still a new concept
for Thoreau, for he still finds the need to define what he means by the male and female sides of the river. This stands in contrast to his February 27, 1854 entry:

The rain water & melted snow have run swiftly over the frozen ground into the river, & raised it with the ice on it & flooded the meadows – covering the ice there which remains on the bottom – So that you have on the male side a narrow canal above the ice – then a floating ice everywhere bridging the river – & then a broad meadowy flood above ice again. (8: 20)

Compared with the earlier passages, this passage illustrates how Thoreau has normalized his idea of a gendered river. Whereas he defines the concept in the 1852 entries, by 1854 he refers to it as a familiar concept, since he does not focus on the phrase, “male side,” in the passage; the gendered term is now equivalent to a certain side of a river, and warrants no explanation. The very fact that Thoreau consistently attributes gendered terms to specific locations along a river implies that river geomorphology is intertwined with gender; he is literally mapping gender onto the landscape.

While Thoreau, understandably, uses different words to frame his ideas, his observations and descriptions of meandering river formations are very similar to modern conceptions. Thoreau’s description of the female and male sides of a meandering river are mirrored in Marie Morisawa’s modern portrayal of a meandering river in Streams: Their Dynamics and Morphology:

The profile of a meandering stream shows a series of pools and shallows. The crossover, or point of inflection, of the thread of maximum velocity usually marks a shoal. The deeper sections, or pools, are downstream from the axis of the bend. As already pointed out, the inner sides of bends are areas of deposition, and the outer edges are places of erosion. This combination of erosion and sedimentation at the bends gives a characteristic asymmetric channel cross section. (138)

Morisawa describes the two edges of a meandering river: the deeper, eroding side, at which water flows with a high velocity, and the shallower, aggrading side, at which water flows with a low velocity (Figure 2). Her description closely echoes Thoreau’s description of the male and female sides of the river since, in his 1852 journal entries, he characterizes the male side as abrupt, deep, and eroding, and the female side as flat, shallow, and aggrading (5:98, 182). Modern geologists refer
Figure 2: Diagram of a meandering river. Arrows indicate location of the point bar and cut-bank. (Morisawa 139)

to the abrupt, eroding side as a cut-bank, and to the gradual, aggrading side as a point bar, which means that, for Thoreau, point bars represent the female sides and cut-banks represent the male sides of rivers. His June 15, 1852 journal entry not only accurately describes the point bars and cut-banks of meandering rivers, but also anticipates the modern realization that a majority of rivers meander. As Morisawa writes, “A straight course is not the vogue” (137).

While Thoreau certainly displays his knowledge of river geomorphology, the complexity of his thought goes even further. As Michael Summerfield points out in Global Geomorphology: An Introduction to the Study of Landforms, modern geologists picture rivers as dynamic systems, in which sand bars migrate downstream, meanders shift, and river courses change (211). Thoreau’s journal reveals that he has an equally dynamic conception of meandering rivers. In his July 15, 1852 journal entry, he pictures the forces acting within rivers, including the constant erosion of the cut-bank and the aggrading sediment at the point bar. This erosion, transportation, and deposition of material is featured throughout his journal, as in the following entry from March 29th, 1853:

The river here has in the course of ages gullied into the hill, at a curve making a high & steep bank—on which a few Hemlocks grow & overhang the deep eddying basin— For as long as I can remember one or more of these has always been slanting over the stream at various angles, being undermined
by it, until one after another from year to year they fall in &
are swept away. (6:47)

Thoreau sees rivers as powerful, dynamic forces that constantly remold and remake the landscape; rather than stay in its riverbed, the river continually erodes its banks, transports trees and sediment downriver, and deposits material. His dynamic view of meandering river formations can be found even in his earliest journal entries, such as the one from September 5, 1838, entitled “Rivers”: “For the first time it occurred to me this afternoon what a piece of wonder a river is.— A huge volume of matter ceaselessly rolling through the fields and meadows of this substantial earth – making haste from the high places […] to its restless reservoir” (1:55). Thoreau envisions rivers as powerful, restless, rolling forces even from the beginning of his journal, and this is significant because it holds several implications about his conception of gender.

On the surface, Thoreau’s gendering of rivers is problematic because the apparent duality falls into the logic of hierarchies, as is apparent in the 1852 journal entries. For example, Thoreau associates males with the part of the river that is abrupt, deep, erosive, and adjacent to trees, while he associates females with the part of the river that is flat, shallow, aggradational, and adjacent to grass, weeds, and flowers (5:98, 182). He not only channels traditional gender norms in his linking of the female side of the river with flowers, but he also channels his personal sign-system, which, throughout his life, linked deep water with deep minds and shallow water with shallow minds. This link appears as early as his November 9, 1837 entry, when he writes, “But there are souls whose depths are never fathomed” (1:10). Thus his gendering of rivers seems to uphold a sexist framework in which men are associated with mental depth, a hierarchy that is only strengthened in his July 18, 1852 entry, when he writes, “The river has its active & its passive side . . .” (5:232). The active corresponds to the male cut-bank, and the passive corresponds to the female point bar. At the same time that Thoreau seems to uphold gender hierarchies, though, he also questions them, which he does the day after his June 15, 1854 journal entry: “What wealth in a stagnant river!” (5:103). Although this exclamation implies that, in Thoreau’s eyes, the female side of the river does not carry blatantly negative connotations, this alone does not dispute his essentialization of the river. To do that, one has to look at the interplay between gender and his dynamic conception of rivers.

While many implications arise from Thoreau’s intimate knowledge of the geomorphology of river formation, the major implication for gender is that the very fact that Thoreau has a dynamic view of rivers implies that his view of gender is equally dynamic. His
journal entries reveal that he is well aware of the powerful, changing forces of a river; in assigning gender to parts of a river, he suggests that gender is just as amorphous, shifting, and powerful. Thoreau destabilizes the clear gender differences that he simultaneously establishes because he assigns gender distinctions to a fluvial system – a system that he clearly sees as dynamic. Rivers, for Thoreau, might be said to constantly remold gender. This shows how he rethinks the dualist-fluid dichotomy: gender is rendered ambiguous by the very act of transposing it onto the ever-changing landscape. His decentering of gender can be seen in something as simple as his description of nouns in terms of verbs since, although his entry on June 15 places the nouns “female” and “male” onto specific geomorphological locations along a river, he nevertheless defines both locations in terms of forces and actions. That is, rather than define a cut-bank and a point bar as static units on the landscape, he defines both with the present participle, describing the former as “eating onto the bank,” and the latter as “depositing their sediment” (5:98). In addition, on July 18, 1852, Thoreau actually sketches a meandering river, referring to the sides that erode and deposit such that the river “fertilizes this side or that & adorns its banks with flowers” (Figure 3):

![Figure 3: Thoreau’s sketch of a meandering river, July 18, 1852 (5:232)](image)

This sketch is significant not only because it depicts what Thoreau envisions when he thinks of a river in the abstract, but also because it shows that point bars and cut-banks are constantly alternating and grading into one another. Contrary to his assertion on June 15, 1852, that the male and female sides are oppositional, this sketch reveals a far more fluid, connected interrelationship between them. By situating gender within a system that is constantly changing, Thoreau implies that there are no fixed gender identities – or, to the extent that he essentializes gender, he also questions this essentialization. Although he divides the river into masculine and feminine sides, he implicitly questions this division insofar as the riversides are in constant flux, forever remolded by the flowing water. His conception of gender, then, when seen in context with his knowledge of river formation, agrees with
King’s definition of ecofeminism which, according to her, “calls for a dynamic, developmental theory of the person – male and female” (130-31). Gender identities are not rigid, binary frameworks, but rather spaces of perpetual flux and development—in the same way, implies Thoreau, as a meandering river.

Thoreau’s anti-foundational view of gender is reiterated on May 3, 1841: “Our true character silently under lies all our words and actions – as the granite underlies the other strata” (1:308). Since he associates sediment and strata with what he believes are the outward, malleable aspects of a person’s identity, by placing gender onto the cut-bank and point bars of rivers, which are composed of sediment, Thoreau implies that gender, too, is malleable, defined by words and actions. Gender, for Thoreau, appears to be performative. While there is certainly a tension between constructionism and essentialism in this passage, the overlying sediment metaphor shows how gender is doubly fluid: it is fluid with regard to Thoreau’s dynamic view of river formation, and it is fluid by the very fact that it is situated in sediment and strata, which are substances Thoreau sees as highly changeable. The combination of gender variability associated with sediment and rivers creates a radical view of gender that is mirrored by certain twentieth-century feminists, such as Judith Butler, who states that the body is “a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy” (2499). In his own nineteenth-century fashion, Thoreau implies a similar message, insofar as rivers constantly remold gendered sediment; he blurs the clear distinction between fluid constructionism and monolithic essentialism, thereby deconstructing the very duality between dualists and non-dualists.

IV. Rippling Outward

Rivers are a means by which Thoreau destabilizes the very duality between fluid, non-dualistic constructionism and rigid, dualistic essentialism. In aesthetic terms, Thoreau responds to eighteenth-century aestheticians by refusing to associate the line of beauty with only one gender since, in the very act of inscribing both female and male genders onto rivers, Thoreau at once both essentializes, and counters the essentialism of Hogarth and Burke. He may still define gender according to certain conceptions, but he nevertheless questions the paradigm that links femininity with beauty. Similarly, in geologic terms, while Thoreau defines a point bar as feminine and a cut-bank as masculine, he implies that this definition is not stable insofar as rivers signify dynamic forces of change — a system of networks that constantly reconfigure not only
themselves, but also the surrounding landscape. Given the aesthetic and
deglogic contexts of Thoreau’s conception of rivers in relation to
gender, there appear to be many implications packed up in his statement
about male and female sides of rivers (5:98).

The practice of using a geologic context to shed light on
Thoreau’s gender conceptions is a promising method of interpretation.
Thoreau’s journal is suffused with ambivalence since, throughout his
life, he had a tendency to highlight differences in order to show
similarities. As he writes on June 23, 1852: “Time will make the most
discordant materials harmonize” (5:127). This terse phrase reiterates
the same paradox that the gendered river phrase does, since, in order to talk
about the eventual harmonizing of discordant materials, he must first
assert the initial discordance; just as he blurs the distinction between
essentialism and constructionism, he blurs the differences between unity
and difference. In a certain sense, time is the agent of change in both
this passage and in the river passages; whereas a river may not appear to
be eroding its banks at any given instant, when situated within a longer
duration of time it is actually in a constant state of flux. Thoreau’s
linking of discordant and harmonizing materials also reflects the
ontological basis of change: change involves both difference and
similarity, since the changed object must still be recognizable, or partly
unchanged, for the alteration to be observable. It makes sense that
Thoreau would use water as a symbol of gender’s fluidity because he is
open to the symbolic possibilities of water throughout his journal, as is
evidenced on June 26, 1852: “everything is transmuted by the water”
(5:152). Although he is specifically referring to the perception of
sediment as it is transported down a stream, it is still significant that he
associates water with change. The water/perception link is evident
throughout his journal, as in his entry from March 25, 1860: “To see the
phenomena of the water and see the earth from the water side, to stand
outside of it on another element, and so to get a pry on it in thought at
least, that is no small advantage” (Journal [1906], XIII:226-27). If water
represents a way for Thoreau to change his subject position, to alter his
perception of the world, then rivers are a means by which Thoreau re-
envisions gender.

The apparent ambivalence Thoreau creates in associating
aesthetics, geology, and gender holds implications not only for other
sections of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, but also for his
other major works. With Thoreau’s gender inflections in mind, even his
poem “On Women,” which is perhaps the most superficially sexist part
of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, contains multitudes. After
allocating certain characteristics to specific animals, such as swiftness to
hares and flight to birds, he writes that nature has granted the following:
To men wisdom.
For woman she had nothing beside;
What then does she give? Beauty, –
Instead of all shields,
Instead of all spears;
And she conquers even iron
And fire, who is beautiful. (186-87)

To state the obvious, this poem not only refers to what Simone de
Beauvoir calls “the myth of woman,” but it also bluntly dichotomizes
gender, associating women with appearance and men with mental
processes, similar to the aforementioned passage on depth and
shallowness. At the same time, though, women are granted agency
within the poem as strong, active conquerors, which stands in contrast
to men: whereas men are associated with mere nouns (such as wisdom,
shields, and spears), women are decidedly active: “she conquers” (line 12).
Defining men in terms of static objects and women in terms of active
agency renders the poem ambiguous, despite the sexist association of
women with beauty. Furthermore, Thoreau’s construction of women as
strong objects of the gaze brings to mind an argument by Elaine Scarry,
who, in her interpretation of voyeurism, affirms that “Staring [. . ] is a
version of the wish to create; it is directly connected to acts of drawing,
describing, composing, lovemaking. It is odd that contemporary
accounts of ‘staring’ or ‘gazing’ place exclusive emphasis on the risks
suffered by the person being looked at, for the vulnerability of the
perceiver seems equal to, or greater than, the vulnerability of the person
being perceived” (49-50). Thoreau’s poem, therefore, does not
necessarily diminish female power by constructing women as objects of
the gaze; the ambiguity present in linking women with both beauty and
action implies that, despite the obvious sexism, there is nevertheless a
complexity to the poem; the (male) perceiver is vulnerable as well. Also,
one cannot forget that the overriding agency within the poem stems
from “Nature,” who is referred to by feminine pronouns, thereby
implying that the very ground of agency is feminine. Tensions also arise
in the poem’s metrics: after the first seven lines of variable dimeter and
trimeter, the eighth line, in which women appear—“For woman she had
nothing beside”—is not only written in tetrameter, but also contains
more polysyllables than any other line in the poem. So ironically, the line
that relegates “nothing beside” to women is the line that contains the
most syllables, and the most polysyllabic words; this tension implies that
beauty is more than merely a sole, essentialized trait. Thus the poem’s
blatant sexism is ambiguous: neither fully fortified, nor completely
rejected. In a poem dominated by monosyllabic and disyllabic words, it
is also significant that the longest and last word within the poem—"beautiful"—is written in reference to women, implying a complexity of personhood that is, sadly, absent when the poem is given a cursory reading.

The link between fluids, aesthetics, and gender also sheds light on the subjectivity of the pond in Walden and, more specifically, partly explains Walden’s ambiguous personhood. Thoreau sometimes frames the pond in a feminine context, as when he expounds on how the ice breaks up during spring: “But such was not the effect on Walden that year, for she had soon got a thick new garment to take the place of the old” (561). But elsewhere, in seeming contradiction, Thoreau refers to the pond’s beard being trimmed by high water (468), and how it “stretched itself and yawned like a waking man” (562). Since the line of beauty acts, for Thoreau, as a point of gender inflection, where the boundary is both created and questioned, it therefore makes sense that the diaphanous line between femininity and masculinity within the pond also appropriates Hogarth’s line of beauty: “Not a fish can leap or an insect fall on the pond but it is thus reported in circling dimples, in lines of beauty, as it were the constant welling up of its fountain, the gentle pulsing of its life, the heaving of its breast” (472). Given that the line of beauty is a dynamic concept that signifies his recalcitrance to the gendered ideas of his eighteenth-century aesthetic precursors, it is only to be expected that Thoreau both defines the pond aesthetically and blurs the masculine-feminine gender lines. Much like the river in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, the line of beauty in Walden represents a space in which Thoreau renders gender ambiguous—it is a point of inflection whereby, rather than choose one option within a binary, Thoreau chooses both options, thereby challenging the very core of the dualistic, either/or mindset.

Thoreau’s interlinking concept of aesthetics, geology, and gender may rethink nineteenth-century gender relations, but it also does much more; it upholds what Ynestra King calls the major goal of eco-feminism: that “human liberation and the liberation of nature are inextricably connected” (730). In transposing gender onto natural rivers, Thoreau associates the free flow of rivers with gender fluidity. He creates a complex weave in which a fluid conception of gender, rivers, and the line of beauty all intertwine and influence one another, withholding any notion that the line of beauty statically signifies the feminine gender. Whereas Hogarth and Burke pictured a concrete line of beauty, Thoreau envisions a changing, eroding, aggrading line that does not reduce beauty to a single gender. Thoreau, in a sense, constantly echoes his journal entry from April 19, 1840, with which we began: You can, indeed, do anything with water.
NOTES

1 For a discussion of Thoreau, landscape, and aesthetics, see Smithson 93-114.

2 Emerson extends his ideas of thought and fluidity in his later lectures. In “Natural Method of Mental Philosophy,” he states, “the measure of a mind is its fluidity,” and in “Self-Possession,” he closely juxtaposes rivers with thinking (93, 122). Since both of these lectures were written in 1858, they could not have influenced Thoreau’s writing of On the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, and yet both are nevertheless important in understanding Emerson’s conception of fluid thought.

3 The last mention of the line of beauty in Thoreau’s journal, however, occurs on November 30th, 1853, well within the time-period during which he was influenced by Gilpin (7:185).

4 When speaking of the line of beauty a river, it is important to point out that Hogarth’s concept is seen on several levels. The ripples in the river water itself are described in terms of the line of beauty. In addition, the river’s meandering path marks the line of beauty. Since the river’s sides determine the path of the river, and are geomorphologically linked to the river-system, I therefore use the words “river” and “riversides” interchangeably.

5 For specific selected quotations by Thoreau on rivers, see Thoreau’s The River, edited by Dudley C. Lunt.

6 In Walden, depth is also associated with purity (463).

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Henry David Thoreau in the American Art of the 1950s

Mark Sullivan

For the past few years, I have been studying the many portraits of Henry David Thoreau that have been done over the years since 1854, when he published his masterpiece Walden. I have been looking at photographs, sculptures, prints and paintings of Thoreau; but also at book illustrations, dust jackets, cartoons, and various advertisements in which Thoreau’s features have been used (or misused, as the case may be).

It is not commonly known that many American artists have tried their hands at depicting Thoreau, for a variety of reasons. Some of the better-known fine artists who have produced Thoreau portraits include Leonard Baskin, Malvina Hoffman, Jo Davidson, Andrew Wyeth, N. C. Wyeth, James Daugherty, Man Ray, Reginald Marsh, Antonio Frasconi, Seymour Chwast, Barry Moser, Michael McCurdy, and Mary Azarian (to name only a few). In addition, cartoonists such as Edward Sorel and David Levine have also given us their visions of Thoreau, some reverent, others quite irreverent.

Each of these depictions of Thoreau tells us a little about Thoreau, but perhaps even more about the artist who is portraying Thoreau than about Thoreau himself. Each depiction also tells us a great deal about the popular reception, or perception, of Thoreau, at the time and place in which that image was being created. I am finding, as I explore these images in more depth, that artists (and people in general) have seized upon Thoreau for a wide range of reasons at different times in our history, using what they liked about him for their own purposes or agenda, and then discarding the rest.

My research so far confirms the claims by literary historians such as Gary Scharnhorst, Fritz Oelschlaeger and George Hendrick that Thoreau’s reputation grew slowly, though steadily, from the time of his death in 1862 until the 1930s, then started to grow exponentially in the 1940s and ’50s. As high school and college English classes started to make the reading of Walden a regular part of their curriculum in the ’40s and ’50s, and as scholars of American literature such as F. O. Matthiessen (in his important book of 1941, The American Renaissance) started to include Thoreau in the canon of great American writers, Thoreau’s reputation did indeed grow by leaps and bounds. His name
became much more familiar to the general public in these two decades than it had been ever before. Dozens of popular editions of *Walden* appeared, eclipsing by far the number of editions of *Walden* that had been published in the eighty-odd years between 1854 and 1939 (Harding, *Centennial Checklist*).

But a brief survey of the portraits of Thoreau done by American artists in the 1950s tells us something that literary historians have, for the most part, not discussed. When we compare, side by side, any random group of Thoreau portraits from that period, we see very quickly, and quite graphically, that only certain aspects of Thoreau were of interest to many artists, as well as to the general public, of that time. Americans were by then accepting Thoreau the naturalist, as we shall see; and they were even interested in Thoreau as a friend and a nature guide for children. But most Americans did not want to be reminded (if they were even aware of it) of Thoreau’s tendency toward civil disobedience. These were times when strong individualism was less valued than team play and being an “organization man,” times when the rule of law was more highly valued than it was, for instance, in the late 1960s. In the 1950s, Americans were just emerging from the uncertainties that had surrounded them during World War II, and being “a law-abiding citizen,” or feeling that one’s neighbor was a “law-abiding citizen,” brought with it a strong sense of security.

One might argue that the 1950s were also years in which the Cold War and the possibility of nuclear war were starting to have a strong effect on American culture, or to create a new sense of uncertainty. Soviet propaganda and rhetoric were causing Americans to “to build up their cultural institutions: e.g., Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center, the many new and/or enlarged museums, the NEA and NEH, in order to counter what they saw as a Soviet ‘cultural offensive’” (Marquis). At a time like this, it would make sense for Americans to celebrate writers like Thoreau, who had helped to make the United States into a cultural and literary powerhouse.

The late historian David Halberstam did much to show us that the 1950s were, contrary to public opinion, a period of great social, economic, and political change. In his easygoing but authoritative manner, he tells about the personalities who shook up that period, people like Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, and Marlon Brando; and about the technological changes that were revolutionizing every aspect of American life in the ’50s, from television to birth-control pills and space exploration. And he explains, in great detail, how disenfranchised segments of American society began to unite and feel their strength during the 1950s, although they would not take their issues to the street until the 1960s.
According to Halberstam, we tend to think of the 1950s as a placid decade mainly because the decade portrayed itself this way on television. As he puts it:

One reason that Americans as a people became nostalgic about the fifties more than twenty-five years later was not so much that life was better in the fifties (though in some ways it was), but because at the time it had been portrayed so idyllically on television. It was the television images of the era that remained so remarkably sharp in people’s memories, often fresher than memories of real life. Television reflected a world of warm-hearted, sensitive, tolerant Americans, a world devoid of anger and meanness of spirit and, of course, failure. (514)

By twentieth-century standards, however, there is no question that the 1950s were indeed a conservative, quiet decade. Decades such as the 1960s and the decades that witnessed the two world wars saw far more sweeping changes than did the period from 1950 to 1960. And anyone not convinced of the rise of conservatism in all aspects of American life in the 1950s need only consult a few entries in American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia. This 2006 publication, edited by Bruce Frohnen and containing 626 entries by over 250 contributors, tells the story of how a few key books written by conservatives just after World War II (including Richard Weaver’s Ideas Have Consequences of 1948, Whittaker Chambers’s Witness of 1952, and Russell Kirk’s Conservative Mind of 1953) grew into a movement that by the end of the ’50s could boast hundreds of thriving foundations, organizations, and publications, among them William F. Buckley’s National Review, the John Birch Society, and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute.

Although a few American artists were making names for themselves as rebels and innovators in the 1950s (including painters such as Jackson Pollock, Willem De Kooning, and the other members of the Abstract Expressionist movement), most Americans of this decade still preferred the “realist” (that is, narrative and representational) art that had been popular in the United States since the 1930s, when Regionalism and American Scene Painting were the norm and painters like Edward Hopper and Grant Wood were in their heyday. American commercial art, according to Steven Heller and Seymour Chwast, was in a conservative mode as well. They observe that “book jacket design of the 1950s did not have considerable luster,” and argue more generally that,
Like the social and political temperament of America, the period’s graphic style was comparatively conservative. Book jacket illustration, like its counterpart in the national magazines, was overly narrative, romantic, sentimental, and saccharine. (17)

In a similar manner, the Thoreau of 1950s American art tends to be a non-threatening, nature-boy figure, sometimes even a mindless “hayseed.” In contrast to the Thoreau that we find in images from the 1960s, this Thoreau is somewhat emasculated. He is strong enough (in most cases) to embody the American values of freedom of speech and freedom of thought, but he is not strong enough to be a threat to the status quo or to organized society.

Interestingly, the Thoreau of 1950s American art is as non-threatening at the end of the decade as he was at its beginning. In no other decade since the 1850s have representations of Thoreau been so consistent in their tone and message. Why? One reason may be partly because most of the images from the 1950s (I have found about twenty) were made on commission or for commercial purposes, thus making it harder for an artist to express his or her personal vision or interpretation of Thoreau. But surely this consistency also emerges because, as Halberstam argues, turmoil was just under the surface in the American society of the 1950s, but as yet had not yet bubbled up and fully manifested itself. There were phenomena like Elvis Presley and the Beat Poets as early as 1953 or 1954, but throughout the 1850s popular culture in general exhibited few changes.

For those who may not be familiar with what Thoreau looked like in real life, a daguerreotype taken of him in 1856 (Figure 1), when he was 39 years old, may prove helpful. Or one may prefer to consult the photo taken of him by E. S. Dunshee in 1861, the year before his death (Figure 2). From the time of his death until just prior to the 1940s, most of the artists who did portraits of Thoreau tended to rely upon one or both of these images for their information about Thoreau’s physical appearance. And few artists before the 1940s strayed far from these two images in their portrayals of the so-called “Hermit of Walden”; they tended to be very concerned with recording Thoreau’s features accurately for future generations.

One artist of the ’30s who wanted to portray Thoreau’s features accurately, but also to go beyond that and make a statement about Thoreau’s importance to the modern world, was N. C. Wyeth, the famous book illustrator, who did a painting of Thoreau in 1932-33 entitled Walden Pond Revisited (Figure 3; now owned by the Brandywine River Museum and Conservancy in Chadd’s Ford, PA). Wyeth borrows from the 1856 daguerreotype quite directly when he paints Thoreau’s
Figure 1: The Maxham daguerreotype of Henry David Thoreau, 1856. Courtesy the Thoreau Society and the Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods.

Figure 2: Engraving from the Dunshee Ambrotype of Henry David Thoreau, 1861. Courtesy of the Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods.
face and upper body, but in the rest of the painting Wyeth is not so literal. He emphasizes Thoreau’s independence and strength of character, presenting Thoreau as a model of self-reliance. At a time when the nation was suffering through the Great Depression, Wyeth used this image to encourage each person (himself included) to stand up boldly on his or her own, just as Thoreau did, and not wait for the government to solve one’s economic or social problems. In this picture, Thoreau comes across as being very connected to nature (he had been seen primarily as a naturalist since the late nineteenth century), but also as a tower of strength whose self-discipline and knowledge of the land will see him through any difficult circumstances (Sullivan).

Such an image of Thoreau, however, would not have been appreciated as much in the 1950s as it was in the 1930s. In fact, this painting earns no mention in any literature from the 1950s. It was out of public view throughout the decade (in the private collection of N. C.’s daughter Carolyn Wyeth), which might explain why it received no mentions then. But the painting may also have been feared as promoting

individuality too strongly. If it had been painted twenty years later, one wonders whether it would have been accepted for exhibition by a major gallery.

By the late 1940s, there were still a few artists who on occasion tried to make Thoreau look like a strong individualist. But they were few and far between. An example of one of these artists would be Henry Bugbee Kane, who did a drawing of Thoreau for the half-title of his book *Thoreau’s Walden: A Photographic Register*. Kane’s portrait rather resembles the 1854 crayon sketch of Thoreau by Samuel Worcester Rowse (Figure 4). Rowse had been a very sentimentalizing artist, making each of his subjects look younger and more attractive than they were in real life. By contrast, Kane’s drawing gives Thoreau a change of clothing and hairstyle, strong and more piercing eyes, a more prominent nose,
and a rugged look to his face; whether Kane actually saw the Rowse drawing is unclear. Instead, we meet an imaginary figure whose face looks almost like that of the young Abraham Lincoln (the suggestion no doubt being intentional). In the following decade, the rush to “domesticate” Thoreau, to make him less threatening to certain segments of American society, would lead to a rash of portraits in which the author of *Walden* looks nothing like himself, and nothing like the visage captured by the photographic images of 1856 and 1861. In the ’50s, there would be none of that stark objectivity in portraits of Thoreau that has always fascinated us about camera images of the author of *Walden*.

In 1946, however, Henry Kane would have had a patriotic reason for portraying Thoreau as a strong individualist. At this time, many Americans were equating individualism with the will to be free, with the willingness to fight the Nazi threat, or any other challenge to the American democratic way of life. George F. Whicber’s patriotic assessment of Thoreau in his 1945 book *Walden Revisited* surely echoed widespread American sentiment:

> Of more concern than the state of Walden’s water or the beauty of its shores is the moral heritage of human freedom and loyalty to principle that descends from Thoreau. Nothing could be more opposite to the totalitarian doctrines of our times than the transcendentalist’s belief in the dignity of man and the supremacy of individual conscience over a debased collective authority. (7)

Aligning Thoreau with a patriotic American history, Kane’s portrait also resembles the Minuteman statues in Concord and Lexington, Massachusetts, and calls to mind the many portraits of Paul Revere done during periods when our country was at war. The resemblance may not be coincidental: as it turns out, the face of the Concord Minuteman was reproduced on thousands of war bonds during World War II, and by 1946, when Kane did his drawing of Thoreau, it was one of the most familiar images in the country (Bier).

But within a few years after the end of World War II, this patriotic strain would be gone from portraits of Thoreau. When one looks, for instance, at Barry Faulkner’s 1950 mural of Thoreau at the Keene National Bank, in Keene, New Hampshire (Figure 5), there is little that would make one think of Thoreau as a warrior patriot or even a strong individualist. What we get here is Thoreau the naturalist and Thoreau the lover of the outdoors: in short, a Thoreau who has been packaged so as not to offend any constituencies in the American public.
Figure 5: Barry Faulkner mural of Thoreau, 1850. Keene National Bank, Keene, NH (now National Bank of America). Image Collection of the Historical Society of Cheshire County, Keene, New Hampshire.
Thoreau the naturalist is actually somewhat subdued here, with our hero looking a bit overdressed and bit too obviously posed as he looks out from the top of Mount Monadnock, one of his favorite haunts in New Hampshire. And Thoreau’s rough, craggy features (the features that appear in the old daguerreotype and the old ambrotype) are gone now. Taking their place are the features of a young movie-star type, with ever-so-slightly long and romantically curled hair instead of the wild, disheveled mop of hair visible in the 1856 daguerreotype by Benjamin Maxham. This is definitely not the Thoreau of “Civil Disobedience,” the Thoreau who would rather go to jail than pay a tax that supported slavery.

Why, one wonders, does Faulkner choose to portray Thoreau in this manner? Faulkner gives few clues to go on in his autobiography, Sketches from an Artist’s Life. When he got the commission to do this mural, he recalls,

I chose as the subject of my panels, Men of Monadnock: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, and Abbott Thayer; all three men knew the mountain well and had celebrated its grandeur. I pictured Emerson in contemplation resting on a rock with a squirrel at his feet; a young Thoreau striding forward, a porcupine beside him; Thayer at his easel, his attention distracted from his painting by a flock of birds. The summit of the mountain gave the figures a common background. (184)

M. A. DeWolfe Howe, whom the Keene National Bank commissioned to write a short booklet about these murals just after their completion, repeatedly describes the Thoreau of these murals as a naturalist. At one point in his essay, Howe says:

In Thoreau’s capacity of poet he once wrote, “I moments live who lived but years.” It was not so much as poet as naturalist—though with a strain of poetry throughout his prose—that Thoreau visited Monadnock. There were moments of rapturous vision, but his chief concern was for the natural objects that attracted the attention of this inveterate walker, climber, observer, and recorder. (n. p.)

A bit later in this same essay, Howe explains that “it is not the bearded Thoreau of the final years who appears in Mr. Faulkner’s mural, but the vigorous young pilgrim scaling the mountain alone. The staff he carries represents a minute fraction of his full equipment for a Monadnock expedition.” This is the Thoreau who climbed Monadnock almost on a
lark in the early 1840s and again in 1852, not the older, bearded Thoreau who went to Monadnock for extended periods in 1858 and 1860.

But why not show the Thoreau of 1858 or 1860, since the Thoreau of those years was a much more serious naturalist than the youth of the early 1840s, or the 35-year-old Thoreau of 1852? Thoreau’s features here look very much like those found in Rowse’s sentimentalizing sketch, and I suspect that Faulkner was influenced by it, at least in part; he could easily have seen it at the Concord Free Public Library in Concord, Massachusetts. Faulkner, after all, was executing a commission for an important building in the hometown of Thoreau’s mother, Cynthia Dunbar. Cynthia came from an old and distinguished family in Keene, a family that was still influential there during the 1950s. This was a family, and a town, that no doubt wanted its most famous offspring depicted as a gentleman-scholar of sorts, not as the rebel or wild-haired individualist that Thoreau could often be in real life, especially as he got older.²

Even if this mural were in another town, however, I believe that Faulkner would still have been conservative in his portrayal of Thoreau. A large part of the American public of the 1950s (beatniks like Jack Kerouac being notable exceptions) simply did not want to be brought face-to-face with a difficult or controversial Thoreau. One of the greatest Thoreau scholars of the last fifty years, Walter Harding, wrote:

when, in the mid-1950s, the United States Information Service included as a standard book in all their libraries around the world a textbook of American literature which reprinted “Civil Disobedience,” the late Senator Joe McCarthy of Wisconsin succeeded in having that book removed from the shelves of those libraries—specifically because of the Thoreau essay.³

In the 1950s, there were a number of heated debates, especially in college classrooms and in scholarly journals, about the “practical” versus the “impractical” Thoreau, whenever his politics happened to come up for discussion. Two critics of the mid-1950s, for example, Louis B. Salomon and Wade Thompson, held a running debate about Thoreau’s “practicality” in the pages of College English. In this exchange, Salomon and Thompson agreed that Thoreau was a great naturalist, but they argued vigorously with one another about what would happen if everyone were to go off and become the extreme individualists that Thoreau had seemed to be. A similar debate took place in the pages of the journal Ethics in the years 1957-59, with Vincent Buranelli and Ralph L. Ketcham as sparring partners.⁴

Occasionally during the 1950s, someone would speak out in favor of Thoreau’s supposedly radical individualism. Louis Adamic, for
instance, did so when he and sixteen other American citizens took out a quarter-page advertisement in the *New York Times* of January 15, 1951, calling upon Americans “to protest violations of the right to free opinion,” and to be willing to go to jail for their beliefs, the way Thoreau had (9). But Adamic (1899-1951) was an anomaly at that time. He is famous now as an early advocate of multiculturalism in the United States, but in the early 1950s he was seen by many as dangerously liberal.5

Almost every image of Thoreau that I have seen from the 1950s (please see the end of this article for a complete list) portrays him as a harmless, usually young and unsophisticated, character, a friend to animals and small children rather than a rebel or a strong individualist. The most serious image of Thoreau that I can find from this decade is Everett McNear’s portrait, which appears on the March page of the Kimberly-Clark Corporation’s 1951 calendar. Here, a small figure of Thoreau is seen walking briskly out of Concord and toward Walden Pond, wearing a cape and hat that make him look more like Paul Revere than anyone else. The town dwindles in the distance, and the image is dominated by the strong vertical bars of three tree trunks. Inscribed above the figure of Thoreau is this quotation from his writings: “Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth.” This picture won the Art Directors’ Club of New York Medal for 1951, but it was most unusual in its day for the strength and independence that it gives to the figure of Thoreau.

Consider, for instance, Hazard Durfee’s (1916-2003) full-page color illustration of Thoreau playing his flute, done as part of the Container Corporation of America’s series “Great Ideas of Western Man.” This illustration, along with a brief passage from *Walden*, appeared in the December 1953 issue of *Fortune Magazine* (148). Here, Thoreau is portrayed as a delicate, boyish, beardless figure who seems to have not a care in the world; and Durfee does not seem to have consulted any photographs or previous portraits of Thoreau.

Or consider Margaret Bloy Graham’s illustrations for the 1954 children’s book *To a Different Drum*, one of the first full-length biographies of Thoreau written specifically for children (this one being by Charles Norman). In an illustration on page 61 (Figure 6), we see Thoreau sweeping out his cabin at Walden Pond in a very industrious manner (it would never do for a children’s book of the ’50s to show Thoreau lounging about, appearing to be shiftless or lazy). And in another illustration on page 79, we see Thoreau popping corn in the fireplace for a young friend and admirer (Figure 7). The real Thoreau did indeed enjoy popping corn for his young neighbors, but this rendering makes him look somewhat ridiculous, although the artist’s
Figures 6 and 7: Margaret Bloy Graham, book illustrations of Thoreau from Charles Norman’s *To a Different Drummer* (1954), p. 61, 79.
intention no doubt was to make him look friendly and harmless (countering the recurring myth that Thoreau was a misanthrope). It goes without saying that no children’s book from any period would want to present Thoreau as a threatening or dangerous sort of character; but here, Thoreau looks remarkably “lightweight” compared to his portrayal in children’s books of the 1960s and later. See, for instance, an illustration from James Daugherty’s 1967 book, Henry David Thoreau: A Man for Our Time (Figure 8). In Daugherty’s illustrations, Thoreau seems approachable (that is, unthreatening to children) but at the same time somewhat rugged and independent.

Another portrait of Thoreau from the 1950s graces the cover of a 1955 paperback edition of Walden published by the New American Library of New York. Here, Thoreau leans against a tree and looks meditatively out over Walden Pond, with a face again resembling the young Abraham Lincoln’s. This Thoreau is beardless, and his homespun clothing makes him look more like a farmhand than an individualist, a rebel, or even a naturalist (although there is definitely an attempt to suggest Thoreau’s oneness with nature).

And then there are the illustrations from Sterling North’s 1959 Thoreau of Walden Pond, a juvenile biography illustrated by Harve Stein. Here, the young Thoreau looks a little more “weighty” than he does in the Graham illustrations of 1954, but the emphasis is still on Thoreau as the boyish character who loves nature and small children. See, for instance, the illustrations on pages 114, showing Thoreau rowing three children (a boy and two girls), pointing to something in the distance; and 166, showing a relaxed Thoreau sitting at his cabin door. There is nothing difficult or controversial in these; here is a Thoreau who is designed to appeal to everyone.

Even the great comic-book artist of that era, Harvey Kurtzman (the originator of Mad Magazine, and someone who was famous for challenging the norms of his day), portrayed Thoreau in a rather harmless manner in 1957. In the first issue of a new publication called Trump Magazine, Kurtzman made an amusing proposal for a new edition of Walden that would make the old classic a nation-wide best seller. Illustrating this proposal, he depicts Thoreau kneeling near Walden Pond, his hand reaching toward the ground, as though he is a detective in search of footprints. Below the picture are the following words: “What was the secret of the quiet pond? What could he learn from the lonely cabin? An entirely different sleuth tackles one of the GREATEST MYSTERIES OF ALL TIME!” This proposed edition of Walden certainly provokes a laugh, but the Thoreau of this illustration is just as sanitized as any other Thoreau image of the ’50s. With his bland, boyish face, he
Figure 8: Cover illustration by James Daugherty, from his book *Henry David Thoreau: A Man for Our Time* (New York: Viking, 1967).
looks like Frank or Joe Hardy, the great boy detectives of that era, both of whom were notable not only for solving difficult mysteries, but also for their squeaky-clean behavior and their obedience to all the authority figures of their day.\(^6\)

Images of Thoreau would have to wait until the late 1960s to become real or aggressive, or controversial, again. The image that finally made that breakthrough, once and for all, was the Leonard Baskin design of 1967 for a United States postage stamp in honor of Thoreau (Figure 9). There we see Thoreau at his most rebellious-looking, as individualist, environmentalist, and rebel all rolled into one. As a writer for *Time Magazine* reported on July 21, 1967, Baskin’s Thoreau stamp was not issued without some opposition from the public. According to the unnamed correspondent,
Philately may seem a gentle avocation, but Postmaster Larry O’Brien knows better. After he approved a 5-cent stamp to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Henry David Thoreau’s birth, furious collectors complained that the Post Office Department was making the Walden Ponderer look like a thug, a Communist, a hippie or “a beatnik suffering from withdrawal symptoms.” One fan even threatened civil disobedience. “If you bring a blown-up poster of this hideous thing into Concord, Mass.,” he wrote, “you’d better send along a contingent of the National Guard.”

The author adds, however, that no actual violence resulted from the issuing of the Thoreau stamp: “Fortunately no one had to call out the troops last week when Assistant Postmaster Richard Murphy formally issued the stamp—bearing a rugged, brooding likeness of Thoreau by Artists Leonard Baskin—before a well-behaved crowd of 400 in Concord” (“Philatelic Fury”).

This is an amusing story, amusingly told, but it points out that by 1967, something about Thoreau’s reputation had changed significantly. The general public was no longer trying to avoid images of a crotchety, difficult, and perhaps radical Thoreau. In fact, many enthusiastically embraced such an image and made it their own. As Cecelia Tichi shows, by the late 1960s Thoreau was being seen by the counter-culture as the “ur-hippie”: “The artist Leonard Baskin’s portrait of a bearded Thoreau for a first-class, five-cent U. S. postal stamp issued in the summer of 1967 became a benchmark of divisiveness over who ‘owned’ Thoreau, the hippies or the straights, the counterculture communards or the traditionalist ‘huge audience among lovers of bird and bush’” (78). By 1967, the national mood in America was quite different from what it had been in the 1950s, and looking at the changes in the way in which Thoreau was portrayed from the 1950s to the 1960s can help us tremendously as we attempt to understand more fully that sea-change in the American consciousness.

Annotated Checklist
of Thoreau Images Done by American Artists in the 1950s

The author would appreciate being notified of any images not included here; he can be reached at Mark.Sullivan@villanova.edu

1949:

Everett McNear (1904-1984) does a portrait of Thoreau that appears on the March page of a calendar published by the Kimberly-
Clark Corporation. The same portrait will appear in the 1951 Kimberly-Clark calendar (again on the page for March). Thoreau is seen walking briskly out of Concord and toward Walden Pond, wearing a cape and a hat that make him look more like Paul Revere than a man of the 1840s. Accompanying the picture is this quotation from Thoreau: “Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth.” The picture won the Art Directors Club of New York Medal for 1951.

1950:

Henry Bugbee Kane (1902-1971) starts to illustrate a series of new editions of Thoreau’s works for Bramhall House/Clarkson N. Potter. Between 1950 and 1954, he illustrates four titles by Thoreau: The Maine Woods, Cape Cod, Walden, and A Week on the Concord and the Merrimack. The small black-and-white illustrations give us a few distant views of Thoreau, but once or twice he is seen in a close-up, profile view. Kane seems to rely on a combination of the Rowse and Maxham images in these profile views, as he did in his 1946 profile drawing.

Anthony Saris illustrates an edition of Walden (New York: Doric Books). According to Harding, the drawings “show little acquaintance with either Thoreau or Concord” (see Harding and Advena 258).

Ca. 1950:

Robert D. Wild, a sculptor of Newtonville, Massacchusetts, completes a twenty-one-inch-tall statuette of Thoreau, with the facial features taken from Walton Ricketson’s 1898 bust of Thoreau. Copies are to be sold for $30.00 each (unless there are orders for more than twelve copies, at which point the price will be reduced to $25.00 each). First illustrated in the Thoreau Society Bulletin in October 1950 (4).

At the same time, Wild does a seven-inch-tall statuette of Thoreau, copies of which can be had for $8.50, according to the above article in the Bulletin. A photograph of this statuette, which is being done by Wild “for those who live in modern apartments and want a smaller-sized statue,” is on file at the Thoreau Institute, in the Harding Collection. The Concord Free Public Library has owned one of these smaller statuettes since 1970, according to a survey done recently by the Smithsonian Institution’s National Portrait Gallery (and available on their website as of November 1, 2004).

Barry Faulkner (1881-1966) completes a mural for the First National Bank in Keene, New Hampshire (now a branch of Bank of America). The painting is entitled “Men of Monadnock” and features portraits of Emerson, Thoreau, and the painter Abbott Thayer. First

1953:

New York artist **Hazard Durfee** (1916-2003) does a full-color illustration of Thoreau playing his flute as part of the Container Corporation of America’s series “Great Ideas of Western Man.” Durfee’s portrait of Thoreau, along with a quote from *Walden*, appears in the December issue of *Fortune Magazine* (148). Here, Thoreau is portrayed as a boyish, beardless figure who seems to have not a care in the world. Durfee apparently has not consulted any photographs or previous portraits of Thoreau.

1954:

**Charles Norman’s** juvenile biography of Thoreau appears under the title *To a Different Drum*. Included are illustrations by Margaret Bloy Graham. On August 8th, a full-page color portrait of Thoreau at his cabin, by **Don Sinks**, appears in the *Chicago Tribune Magazine of Books* (1).

1955:

In *The Saturday Review* for January 29th, an anonymous cartoon of Thoreau fishing at a pond in New York’s Central Park appears at the head of an article by Joseph Wood Krutch entitled “Thoreau on Madison Avenue.”

A new edition of *Walden* (published by the New American Library of New York) features an anonymous cover illustration of Thoreau leaning against a tree and looking out over Walden Pond. Thoreau’s face resembles the young Lincoln’s. He is beardless, and his homespun clothing makes him look more like a farmhand than an individualist, a rebel, or even a naturalist.

1956:

The New York City Radio Station WQXR includes a cartoon portrait of Thoreau on the front cover of the May issue of the *WQXR Program Guide*. This image was reproduced in the *Thoreau Society Bulletin* for Fall 1957.
The artist T. Eyges does a small portrait of Thoreau in copper relief as part of a series of portraits that includes Walt Whitman and Samuel Langhorne Clemens ("Mark Twain"). Now owned by the American Jewish Historical Society.

1957:

In the first issue of his Trump Magazine, comic book artist Harvey Kurtzman (1924-1993) proposes a dramatic cover for a new edition of Walden that will make the book a nationwide bestseller. Thoreau is shown kneeling next to Walden Pond, as though he is a detective in search of footprints. Below the image are the following words in large print: "What was the secret of the quiet pond? What could he learn from the lonely cabin? An entirely different sleuth tackles one of THE GREATEST MYSTERIES OF ALL TIME!" This proposed cover for a new edition of Walden is reproduced in the Thoreau Society Bulletin for Winter 1957 (3).

1959:

Harve Stein illustrates another children’s biography of Thoreau, this one by Sterling North and called Thoreau of Walden Pond (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin).

Tom Kay does a drawing of Thoreau for the December 8th issue of the Anoka Herald, a Minnesota newspaper. The drawing closely resembles the Dunshee ambrotype, and is accompanied by a quote from Thoreau on how a reading of the New Testament might shed light, for legislators, upon "the science of government."

NOTES

1 A good recent study of Paul Revere’s portraits (with some good illustrations) is the exhibition catalogue Revere’s Ride and Longfellow’s Legend (Chadd’s Ford, PA: Brandywine River Museum and Conservancy, 2004). For good photographs of the Minuteman Statues by Daniel Chester French (the one in Concord) and Henry Kitson (the one in Lexington), see “A Snow-Touched Concord Minuteman Statue,” The Concord Magazine, March/April 2000 (at http://www.concordma.com/magazine/marapr00/minuteman.html; accessed 1/7/05); and “The Minuteman Statue” (http://www.lexingtonma.org/LexHisSoc/guide/MINUTEMAN.html; accessed 1/7/05.)

2 For Cynthia Dunbar and Thoreau’s Dunbar ancestors in general, some good sources are Jean Munro LeBrun, Henry Thoreau’s Mother
(Lakeland, MI: Edwin B. Hill, 1908), and Milton Meltzer and Walter Harding, A Thoreau Profile (1962; reprint Lincoln, MA: Thoreau Society, 1998), pp. 2-4 and 12. A brief look at the latest telephone directory for the Keene region shows that dozens of Dunbars are still listed, and one of the main streets in downtown Keene is still called Dunbar Street (in honor of Asa Dunbar, Thoreau’s grandfather, who was a well-respected local minister in the late 1700s). For more on Asa Dunbar, see E. Harlow Russell, “Thoreau’s Maternal Grandfather Asa Dunbar: Fragments from His Diary and Commonplace Book,” Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society, N. S. 19 (April, 1908), pp. 66-76.

3 See Harding’s The Variorum Civil Disobedience, as quoted in Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Walden: Notes (New Edition) (Lincoln, NE: Cliff’s Notes, 1971), p. 73.


WORKS CITED


THE POET AT WALDEN

SOJOURN

BY J. WALTER BRAIN

ON EMERSON’S CLIFF

For Joseph C. Wheeler

I hear from the sage’s seat at the
Summit of Emerson’s Cliff’s oak hill
A hermit thrush sing in ecstasy
As the spring light blooms among expanding
Leaves, green embers at heaven’s hearth,
The soul-thirsting lyric from the thrush’s
Throat rising to a higher and higher
Pitch until the thread-thin thrill dissolves
Into pure light at heaven’s threshold.

As the enraptured thrush’s voice transcends,
A solitary towhee, afoot among
Scrub oak coverts, calls with a shy tinkle
Intimating a question …
I have no answer for him, and we fall silent
That we may listen and rise ourselves yet
A little nearer to the thrush’s truth.
Hermit Thrush
Watercolor by John Caffrey, Spring 2011
Shortly before he passed away,
Winnie and I set out together
To Thoreau’s Clintonia Swamp in search
Of the Clintonia Lily, become
Rare at our site—I looked
In coverts where I had seen the herb
In years past; Winnie ventured
Anew and found a blooming clump
To the delight of both our hearts.
How vivifying an obsession,
How fitting a thrill indeed for a lovely
Freak of nature in a man
Whose days would not dawn much longer.
His smile’s bloom resists wilting.
LEBENSFREUDE

For my brother Waldo Brain

I break forth into bud and blossom
And grow into leaves, tendrils, bark;
I break into wind and water ripples
That lap my feet upon the strand.
I break forth into rays of light,
Shining on every leaf, on my skin,
Sparkling on the sand I tread on,
Reflecting the coves’ verdant shores
Upon thoughts diluted in the pond.
Was it not you, Henry, who in
The guise of a hermit thrush once
Led me down a deer path
To your secluse and secret springs
On the lap of Fair Haven Hill?
Was not this your Mount Helicon
And the springs your Hippocrene,
Sacred to the nine muses,
Divine waters inspiring mortals?
Let me then drink from the source
That deer lap, thrushes sip,
And where you whet a mortal’s thirst.
MORNING MIST AT WALDEN

For John Caffrey

A sleeve of mist sweeps in
Hoardingsky, pond, and wood
In its seamless gray fold,
Air and water no longer asunder,
Nor thought or will apart from its hold.
The searching mist dissolves
Every resistance in flesh and soul,
But the reflection of a string of ducks
In skimming flight, the glassy glimpse
Betraying realms of air and water;
The ducks’ advent’s reflective spell
Shimmering still in the mind’s well.
SWEETFERN

For Mary M. Walker

First day of summer at Walden —
Humid, hazy, hot.
A steady breeze affords me relief —
Catch a scent of Comptonia in the air,
Tangy, pungent, sweet —
Summer is that, a peregrine scent
Of sweetfern wafting my way.
O Comptonia peregrina!
BAKER FARM

For Richard O'Connor

“Our feet must be imaginative”
Henry D. Thoreau

Teasing ostent that ever distant draws,
Baker Farm's grassy meadow gleams
Beyond a dark wood in the lap of the sun.
Rolling meadow, brook, and woods, in lazy
Slide to a placid, shimmering lake, beckon
Across fading reach and bleating time;
And though my soul’s pledge strays not,
I reckon that in all my days’ toil
I shall never get to Baker Farm.

Save that, on winged feet, I skim over
“That bottomless sea of grass” and come sit
On that same old fence whose bleached rails
“Shine like silver” on a moonlit eve,
Or, flush out one more great blue heron
From the secluded pool that lies in the shade of
A hemlock wood by the side of the meadow,
The stately bird rising with its legs
Trailing “far behind like an earthy
Residuum to be left behind…”
O Baker Farm!
I’ve come back by summer’s end
Not to miss the very last
Blooms of fern-leaved false foxgloves
That have thrived for ages on
The sun-facing banks of Walden.
Unblemished and pure in their yellow hue,
Bell-shaped pantry for bumblebees,
The banks’ blossoms have been blooming
And buzzing in my mind’s own summer.
THE LOON AT WALDEN

Stranded, apart, or adventure bent,
The loon rides the margins of ponds
As ice tightens a noose and entraps
Water, wood, feather, and fat.
The bird takes off into the air
Bound for another pond at winter’s
Edge. Thus stops the loon at Walden
To snoop its depths and snatch a meal
Before ice closes in again.
He plays the game, with peals of laughter
At nature’s never ending siege.
There he emerges, fresh from the deep,
A bulky bird, stout of bill,
Serene in poise and self-possessed,
To ride the ripples in stately drift
And a loon’s mind to stay the course —
Alone, alert, or lame, defying
Death, to seize the hour and revel
In every morsel snatched from the teeth
Of Mors himself, by the ice’s edge.
DRIFTING CLOUD

A radiant cloud’s reflection drifts by,
The pond’s surface smooth as glass
Mirroring a placid sky.
I gaze at the cloud above, not sure
Which of the two clouds shimmers
The more, which sparkles in my eye
The brighter, which apparition is
The real drifting cloud, the mirror
Beguiling my eye or the cloud that mirrors
Itself from the pupil in my mind.
WALDEN'S DIVING DUCKS

For Bob and Kasha Breau

They tumble out of the sky
In late autumn, buffleheads,
Ruddy ducks, scaups,
Mergansers and goldeneyes.
Feathered corks, they bob
In the swells riding the hours,
Or, more themselves,
They dive home into
Walden's depths, to emerge
With a silvered fish, a trophy
Sparkling in the sun.
Walden stays open, free
Of ice, late into the season,
Until the diving ducks
Arrive, that the ritual of water,
Sun, feather, fish,
And soul, again emerge
Up from the shared depths.
HALCYON DAY
AT WALDEN

December 15, 2007

O, Henry, I have an appointment
To keep this morn at your lovely cove,
Though not with you, I vow, but with
A kingfisher at the start of
These halcyon days, blissful spell
Of heavenly calm we all yearn for.
But hark! The halcyon bird’s now come!
O, Henry, you come too.
ICE FISHERMEN

By dawn, they set out on the pond
And stand by their tip-ups on the ice,
And though alert to a teasing bite,
It isn’t fish they have come after,
But to fish their own souls out of
That gray air, the wind, the cold,
The holes they’ve drilled

... and that will suffice.
WINTER SHARD

For Mike Frederick

Stark, cold, sharp-edged, winter’s
Light smites and shears the air,
Slashing birches, alders, pines
Aslant the rim of Walden Pond,
Walden’s ice but frozen light.
I hit the ice with my staff and it shatters
Like a sheet of glass into slivers and shards.
I pick up a piece the size of a window
Pane and hold it up as though
My hands could hold a shard of winter
Light, or seize a piece of heaven.
WOOD FROGS BREAK OUT OF THE ICE AT WYMAN MEADOW

Wood Frogs, anticipating the spring,
Break out in song even as the ice
 Barely breaks up in the meadow —
A wooden clack to call a mate,
 Yet, an invocation, a summons
To all within earshot of their clucks
To rise with them and dare beyond
Slimy skin, bulging eyes,
Vocal sacs or long webbed feet
To that lyrical exultation
That springs no less from sheer need.

Three poems in this series were previously printed in the Thoreau Society Bulletin: “The Loon at Walden” (No. 270, Spring 2010); “Morning Mist at Walden” (No. 272, Fall 2010); “Baker Farm” (No. 273, Winter 2011).
March 15, 2010

Wish to live a life of simplicity and independence, reduce life to essentials, live life deliberately and all that, do not wish to live what is not life, living is so dear. Have decided to build a cabin by a pond and live there. Perhaps will write up results of my experiment in living.

March 17

A kindly neighbor has volunteered a piece of his land. Initial budget set at $28.12½. Will borrow what tools and materials I can—an axe, for example, which I will be careful to return sharper than it was when I borrowed it. Will scavenge for building materials. I hear James Collins is willing to sell off his fine shanty, with “good boards overhead, good boards all around, and a good window.”

March 20

I borrowed an axe and went down to the woods by the pond, and was preparing to cut down some tall arrowy white pines, still in their youth, for timber, when Sam Staples stopped by on his official rounds and asked to see my building permit. My what, I asked. Was told that I cannot build without first securing necessary permits, available at the township office. These are pleasant spring days, but while the earth may be thawing, I sense the approach of a winter of discontent.

March 21

Discussed cabin idea with township clerk, a pleasant woman named Cassandra. She is helpful but skeptical of project. She suggests that scavenged materials unlikely to meet building code requirements. Similarly was told that my plan to cut white pines not feasible without appropriate environmental impact statement. I protested that I am more friend than foe of the pines, and in cutting them down would become all the better acquainted with them. To no avail. Will pursue Plan B, not yet defined.
March 22
Search of internet has led to discovery of a “Thoreau Cabin Replica Kit,” complete with plans and instructions for assembly. Seems to be just what I had in mind: ten feet by fifteen feet, a loft, two windows, a door. Cost: $17,000, including delivery. Decidedly over budget of $28.12½, but the kit will alleviate concerns about possible building code violations. Will put in fireplace or wood stove.

March 23
Cassandra suggests that fireplace or wood stove will create additional permitting issues. Suggests waiting until rest of cabin is up to code, then install wood stove later.

March 25
Further consultation with Cassandra. Says that since cabin will not be on lot with “pre-existing structure,” will need additional zoning permit for “lot consolidation,” so that lot with cabin will be on same lot with an existing structure, such as a house—which, believe it or not, can then be torn down. So I have to build it on a lot with a house, and then I can tear the house down. Seems odd, but that’s the rule. Cannot build on a lot with no house, even though end result will be the same—a cabin and no house on a lot. The cabin is considered an outbuilding. To get lot consolidation approved, must have architectural firm conduct survey, which must be submitted via Office of Business Operations to Township Supervisors Monthly Planning Board Meeting. Cannot conduct own survey, even though that’s what I do for a living.

April 1
Have secured services of architectural firm of Stifflaw McGuff. Cost: $7,000. Am informed that they will develop “Project Design Schedule.” By my careful and duly recorded calculations, am now 85,333% over budget.

April 3
Strategic planning meeting with Stifflaw McGuff.

April 5
Attended mandated “safety workshop” for working with “striking tools” such as hammers. Will be required to purchase certified safety glasses, work gloves, and steel-toed boots. Steel-shanked boots required for any and all ladder ascents. Nobody permitted on work site without first attending safety workshop.
April 6

“Schematic design” analysis conducted by Stifflaw McGuff. Includes review of building plans and “site investigation.” Immediate concern about planned location near pond—may be within floodplain. Must build instead along road, honoring thirty-foot setback requirement. Am becoming expert on the topic of setbacks.

April 13

Stifflaw McGuff has completed its week-long “structural analysis of building and foundation system design.” Not sure what analysis of foundation system design entailed, since there is no foundation—like the stories of Walden Pond’s alleged bottomlessness. The cabin is free-standing, like a shed, which means it simply sits on a flat spot—on the earth. Perhaps their analysis of “foundation system design” encompasses an analysis of the earth itself! In just one week!

April 15

The two-week phase of “design development” involving measurements, drawings, and site plan review has been completed. Time is but a stream with a consistent flow rate of sixty seconds per minute, sixty minutes per hour, and a pH of 4.2, which makes it highly acidic and marginal for life. You have a better chance of catching trout in a bottle of milk than of thriving in such an environment. May as well cast upwards for fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars, when the current itself is not murky with clouds.

April 30

Final review of the plans by the office of business operations is now complete. Civilizations have risen and fallen, and I have carved a nifty walking stick. Call me the Artist of Kouroo.

May 1

Am told that since I hope to do some labor on the cabin myself, and I am not a licensed contractor, will need to secure work permit from State Board of Labor and Industry. Review of application process may take months.

May 3

Heard from Stifflaw McGuff that construction documents have been prepared. The horizon is never quite at our elbows.
May 10

A big day today: the final design review between the architects and the office of business operations! At the pond the shore rings with the trump of bullfrogs. Tr-r-r-oonk. tr-r-r-oonk, tr-r-r-oonk—each in his turn repeats the same down to the least distended, leakiest, and flabbiest paunched, that there be no mistake, and the call goes round again and again, until the sun disperses the morning mist.

May 20

We’re well on our way now: in the “Submission of plans to Jurisdictional Code Departments” phase! But who exactly are these jurisdictional entities who claim for themselves the authority to approve of the way I build my house? Is not “life” guaranteed under the State’s own Constitution, and is not shelter one of the necessities of life? Do I require permission from the State to live my life? How, then, is it that I require its permission to supply myself with the necessaries of life? Wherever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions and, if they can, constrain him to belong to their desperate odd-fellow society.

May 21

Saw a garter snake today, lying on the bottom of the pond for as long as I watched him. Like most men, he had not yet fairly come out of the torpid state. In other news: “Revisions to Plan Prior to Bidding” now underway.

May 25

Revisions to Plan completed. We’re now in the “Bidding and Award Phase for Probable General Contractor for Foundation System.” “Advertisement for bids” placed. There is some of the same fitness in a man’s building his own house that there is in a bird’s building its own nest—but that nest will not be constructed according to code restrictions governing use of certified materials. And so we do like cowbirds and cuckoos, which lay their eggs in nests which other birds have built, and we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the state-certified contractor.

June 1

Yes—it’s finally here—“Bid Opening” day!

June 4

The seasons turn on their diurnal rounds, and we have entered the “Award and Contract Phase,” during which, over the course of the
next three weeks, we’ll see “completion of contracts and required insurance.”

June 25
“Pre-Construction Meeting.”

June 30

Can it be here already? We are in the “Construction Phase.” At long last I am permitted to place my appropriately work-gloved hands on the shaft of a hammer. Unsure about how to proceed at first, since number of hammer-strikes per nail not specified in plans. Sat down for a drink of water (from PCB-free Nalgene container) at one point, and was bitten by a mosquito. A man sits as many risks as he runs.

July 4
I had hoped to complete the cabin by Independence Day, but now conclude that the Thoreauvian experiment cannot be duplicated in the current environment. Living simply just too complicated. End experiment. I have many more lives to live.

So much for my experiment in Being Henry. The occasion for this little satire is my big idea to focus the Environmental Studies Seminar that I taught in Spring 2010 on the topic of building Thoreau’s cabin. We would read Walden, of course, but in the Thoreauvian spirit of not simply playing at life or studying it merely, we would actually do something: we would build a replica of his cabin. We had a site in mind—a forty-acre steeply forested plot of land recently purchased by the college. There was even a small pond on the land, where the waters from a seasonal seep collected behind a small dam made of rocks and dirt. We promptly named it “Walled-In Pond” and found a suitable flat spot nearby where the cabin could go. The administrative powers—that-be approved the idea and agreed to the expenditure for a cabin replica kit. In fall 2009 I was referred to the appropriate administrative office so they could determine what permits would be needed and begin the process of securing them, and we were on our way—until the semester actually started in January.

At that point the campus police suggested that our planned site deep in the woods by “Walled-In Pond” was too remote, and the cabin would be subject to vandalism, so they asked us to consider a spot visible from the road. Then, around mid-semester, came the kicker—
the Office of Business Operations reported that the permits would not be in place—a building permit from the Township, plus a zoning permit to handle the "lot consolidation," which could only follow a survey conducted by an architectural firm, and so on, as I've recorded the process in the faux-journal above. I should point out that none of the language regarding permitting procedures has been invented—you can't make this stuff up. Most of it came directly from the architects' project design timeline. Nor did I make up the name Cassandra for the Township clerk. (I confess, though, that I did make up the part about requiring an environmental impact statement.) But I should also point out that the main problem lay not with our local township—we could have gotten those permits readily enough—but with a zealous university administrator who treated the cabin like any other on-campus construction project, such as a dorm or a classroom building. In his defense, he was just trying to be thorough in doing his job, but once he got the process into the mire of the university bureaucracy—with its legal team, risk-assessment office, and architectural staff—they all felt that they had to do their jobs as well, to the fullest extent of their purview.

Since we had a class underway but could no longer focus our efforts on building a cabin, we shifted focus to projects we could accomplish on the land itself. The students came through beautifully, completing a tree survey, a biodiversity inventory (with the help of trail cameras), an ecological assessment, and a geological and historical description of the area. Several students built nicely-graded trails, and others built an outdoor classroom and a trailhead kiosk. One student restored the dam at Walled-In Pond and planted native wetland plants. Others wrote a proposal for a team-building challenge course and put up a couple of demonstration sites; another wrote a proposal for a deer exclosure. Others produced maps of the area and established a geocaching course on the property. In other words, we accomplished a lot—despite the time and energy wasted over the process by which we hoped to get permission to begin building the cabin. But as the obstacles accumulated—and the agony and frustration mounted—well, we reached the point where we realized that humor was the only appropriate response. Isn't this sort of bureaucratic nonsense exactly the sort of thing that Thoreau sought to escape?

One of the students pointed out the irony that essentially, as environmentalists, we were hoist with our own petard, since the intent of all those permitting procedures is to regulate uncontrolled development. But we did learn something from it all, too—as people who would be working in the environmental field, in business or government or for environmental non-profits, it was helpful for our
students to gain some understanding of what it might be like to be on the other side of well-intended regulations. And several students suggested that it was ultimately very helpful for us to shift our attention to the land instead of the cabin. Henry would have approved.

And I learned something about Walden as well. The part of the bureaucratic morass that really got me was the bit about the foundation—and having to put it out to bid, so that even if the whole cabin-building project had been able to proceed, we still wouldn’t have been allowed to do that important bit of the building process. And it made me realize how often Thoreau talks about foundations in Walden—though of course he typically does so in terms of metaphor. There’s the part in “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For” where he says,

Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake . . . . (97-98)

Of course, the bureaucratic morass we found ourselves in is part of that “alluvion which covers the globe.” And of course there’s the whole measuring of the pond, in “The Pond in Winter,” where Thoreau puns that the stories of the pond’s bottomlessness have no foundation—and promptly goes about finding exactly where the solid bottom lies. And the story in the “Conclusion” of the man who asked a boy if the swamp he needed to cross had a hard bottom. When he and his horse started sinking and he complained about the bad advice he’d gotten, the boy explained that the swamp did indeed have a hard bottom, “but you have not got halfway to it yet.’ So it is with the bogs and quicksands of society,” comments Thoreau, who also notes, “There is a solid bottom every where” (330). That’s what Walden is about, ultimately, isn’t it? Finding a foundation for our lives, finding the solid ground—the solid earth, the actual world—on which to plant ourselves and say, this is, and no mistake.

My favorite line of the book, out of many, is where Thoreau says, “If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them” (324). Our class started with castles in the air—a dream of building a cabin—and we ended up with some other sort of foundational work that involved the laying out of trails, a tree survey, the construction of an
outdoor classroom, the restoration of a pond, a biodiversity inventory, a proposal for a low ropes course. It is the land itself that is the true foundation for a Thoreauvian life—and we don’t need to put the construction of that out to bid. That job has already been contracted for and completed. Now it is up to us to honor the terms.

WORK CITED

“All the Change Has Been in Me”:
My Life as a Transcendentalist

Audrey Raden

Back in April, I had a dream in which I was talking to my beleaguered dissertation director about Thoreau’s late nature essays, when his office became a car he was driving down a dirt road with plank bridges through brilliantly colored autumn woods. The landscape had many of the features of New England but also tropical ferns, in the same tones of red, yellow, and orange as the trees. As the car thumped over the planks of a bridge, I said to him, “My love of the woods and Thoreau come to me naturally, because my Russian grandmother and her family lived in a village at the edge of a forest and they were constantly gathering berries, chestnuts, and mushrooms. When she came to this country, she ached the rest of her life for those woods. So you see, Transcendentalism is in my blood.” When I awoke, I remembered that my grandmother wasn’t Russian, but came from Budapest where her family ran a tavern. But the dream seemed true. I felt my dream grandmother’s passion and loneliness for her lost forest.

Does this kind of inarticulate yearning toward nature turn one toward Transcendentalism? And what are Transcendentalists? Emerson said they are what Idealists looked like in 1844, and Thoreau said sometimes they are allowed to speak at cattle shows. For me, I can date the change in my life from the reading of a book—Walden, the same book that has changed so many. The strongest message of Walden for me has been the advice to be “forever on the alert.” A Transcendentalist lives mindfully. A greater part of living mindfully may be to discover that one has always lived mindfully. When Thoreau, in “Solitude,” compares himself to Walden Pond, he is at the most obvious level talking about the constant fluctuations in nature that add up to timeless unchangeableness, as compared to the temporal fickleness of human consciousness. All the change has been in him. But at a deeper level one can explicate this comparison as a reference to a change in the orientation of the mind, a stepping back into psychic distance to understand his place in the natural world. Thoreau said he went to the pond to live “deliberately”—one could also say he went there to live mindfully. And to live a deeply mindful life, whether in the mid-1840s or in the second decade of the twenty-first century, is to be a

Transcendentalist. Nothing in life is more important than paying attention.

I grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania and I always had a strong orientation to the natural world, though I didn’t realize this affinity until almost middle age, when reading Emerson and Thoreau with adult perceptions took me back into my child’s mind. From my bedroom window in our subdivision, I looked out over a wooded hill about half a mile away (that hill, sadly, is also a subdivision now) every day of the world to mark the progress of the seasons: bare winter to soft green to the deep green of full summer, the explosion of autumn, and back to winter—but always so gradually. I never thought of this as a significant event in my life—I certainly never thought to tell anyone about it or write about it in my diary. And now when I look back on my storied adolescence, one event above all others stands out: one snowy night I was up in those woods with my dog Edison. The sky was indigo and dark orange. Edison was galloping furiously while I stood absolutely still. When the dog was out of earshot the night was so silent I could hear individual snowflakes hitting the pine needles. I kept my breathing silent and concentrated on the stillness. Then in the distance I heard the tinkling of Edison’s tags, which got louder into a jangle until I heard the whoosh of him through the snow, then his panting. He ran right past me, tongue lolling, racing himself. Then the panting and whoosh decreased, then the jangling and the tinkling faded into the distance, and I was left in the stillness again. I don’t know how long we played this game. I know neither of us wanted it to end.

Now I have lived in New York City twenty-eight years, and one might question whether I can have any mindful orientation to the natural world here. But nature asserts herself as much in a city as in a subdivision. In “Ktaadn” Thoreau writes, “And yet we have not seen pure Nature unless we see her thus vast and drear and inhuman, though in the midst of cities.” Nature can perhaps be at her most inhuman in such a vast aggregate of people as New York, in the fierceness of the weather, the trees buckling the sidewalks, the carnivorous birds growing strong on our detritus, and the very wildness of wind funneled between buildings. On a windy day that fills your teeth and skin with grit you may look up and see pigeons banking in a circle, and then look down and see identical circles in the wind outlining itself in swirls of trash. One can say nature uses us in cities where we think we are farthest and safest from her, but if you pay attention, you know she dogs our steps wherever we go.

City nature does have her gentle side as well. Central Park is a completely manmade environment, but the trees don’t care about that. They lead their arboreal lives as though they have germinated from
animal-borne nuts and seeds, grow and drop their leaves as the sun tells them, and make their shade not out of consideration to the Parks Department. Unconscious of us, still there is often benignity in nature’s aspect. One hears the waving trees in the same wind that makes the trash whirlpools. The tenderest grass sprouts between the rails of the elevated subway tracks. In late winter there is an insistent sweetness in the air, overpowering garbage and restaurants and piss, an indescribable sweetness that must come from the life stirring in the trees and the weeds stretching themselves to grow.

Reading Emerson and Thoreau gave me a name to call myself, and it is perhaps my good fortune that this renaissance in my life came in a city where I had to sharpen my attention and perceptions to mindfully seek out nature. I first read them in an American Literature seminar when I was getting my MFA in poetry. That semester, I saw an old lover on the subway. I had loved this man obsessively for some years after the affair ended, and when I had run into him the year before on the same train, I experienced the well-remembered cacophony of heart as we exchanged our pleasantries. But this time I felt nothing, absolutely nothing. This lack did not feel like a victory to me, but like the fickleness of my own feelings. How could a love like that just go away? I wrote a poem about the experience, and the students in the workshop all uttered encouraging platitudes about “moving on” from a bad relationship. I knew the poem hadn’t been a success because that had not been what I meant at all. Right after that I read “Experience” in my literature class and found the words that told me how I felt: “The only thing grief has taught me is to know how shallow it is...grief too will make us idealists...So is it with this calamity; it does not touch me: some thing which I fancied was part of me, which could not be torn away from me without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar.” In reading Emerson I had discovered the words to my own internal dialogue, words that gave such an eloquence to my loss. Next I started Walden.

I remember this was Columbus Day weekend because I went home to visit my father. I sprawled out under the pin oak in our backyard (though I didn’t know it was a pin oak back then), and read. As I did, watching the leaves grow and die on the hillside came back to me, and that winter night in the woods with the long-dead Edison. For the first time I realized that these were among the signal experiences of my life. I must have always known this, but Walden, like Emerson, had given me the language to know myself. The book gave me something else as well: the importance of simplification. When I finished the book I spoke to my professor, a lovely elderly man who wrote about the Puritans and was about to retire. “Thoreau has made me ashamed of my
stupid, complicated life,” I said. He put his hand on my shoulder, smiled, and said, “Audrey, that’s how he makes us all feel.”

Later, I immersed myself more deeply into Emerson and Thoreau by teaching them—they teach very well. I began a dissertation on Thoreau and dying and reread *Walden* many times, his other books as well, the essays, and most of the Journal. I began to dream about Henry—he quoted himself in my sleep in new and remarkable ways. Has this immersion into Transcendentalism and Thoreau in particular changed me fundamentally? I would like to answer yes, and no. No, because the words simply articulated what was already in my mind, but yes more assertively because I believe there has been a change in my orientation, not just to the natural world, but to myself and other people.

Like Henry, I once took a short journey away from my celibate life that in fact took me a great psychic distance: I was a celibate for nearly seven years and, also like Henry, was prepared to be one for the rest of my life. This was a lonely time, but I was sustained by Thoreau’s idea of purity, something much more complex than my mother’s notion that no man would marry me if I didn’t remain a virgin. Thoreauvian purity, I believe, is about distance and learning. One burns away everything extraneous to the sole self. Thoreau writes, “I am no more lonely than the loon in the pond that laughs so loud, or than Walden Pond itself.” In his Journal, he often talks of flowers or beautiful fish or shells that grow far away from human eyes, and how their beauty is a great mystery. He classed celibacy with this kind of flowering. Emerson said that we learn our entire life is a performance, and Thoreau set out to do away with the performance. He never tells us his choice was completely successful, and I am not sure my experiment was completely successful either. Of course the choice of a life as a single man in the nineteenth century was not the same as an extended experiment in celibacy is for a twenty-first century woman, but I never could have gone through with it without his example.

If you are accommodating yourself to another person, you are going through a constantly adaptive process of your own self. If you are in search of another person, you are absorbed in an other-directedness which can obscure self-knowledge. When looking to form an attachment you constantly scan your own experience, not for its own sake but for the sake of its attractiveness. If you long for someone and you can’t or don’t have them, this brings into sharp relief the experience of longing. And longing for the sake of longing has its own lonely lessons. Alone, my experience was my own. For me, an extended period of loneliness made me a person mindful enough of myself to finally realize I was not constructed for an entire life alone. But those long
years alone gave me an alertness to my own mind, and knowledge of how to live without the absorbing performance of attracting and holding onto another person. I learned the shape of my own thoughts best through an extended, performance-less period of loneliness. When the time came to end the solitude, I had created a space in my own mind, a solitude to which I can always return. I gave up celibacy for as good a reason as I took it up.

But celibacy is only one aspect of solitude. Before I started coming to Thoreau Society Annual Gatherings and making my Thoreauvian friends, I came to Concord alone. I came for the first time in 2002 for the anniversary of Henry’s death. During these early trips I often didn’t talk to anyone except the waitresses at Helen’s, and since I don’t drive, I walked everywhere. I had a strong sense of timelessness when I crossed Route 2 and saw Walden Woods and the Pond for the first time. The Pond was very low in 2002, and I was able to walk the whole circumference on the beach, and walk out onto the sandbar that I later read about. From there I watched two young men from Boston improving their time by attempting to enter the still-icy water. They stood on opposite sides of a small cove and didn’t know that I knew enough Spanish to understand they were taunting each other with the most colorful curses.

The next day I returned to the Pond and was accompanied for part of my circuit by an old gentleman from Worcester who walked with a cane. He was delightful. A widower, he told me how much he missed his wife, and how coming to Walden reminded him of their life together since they’d lived in Concord for some years and visited the pond every summer. He was talkative and told me about changes in the area over the years. I was just starting to differentiate trees that spring, and he pointed out scrub oak, white oak, white pine, birch. He said he used to fish in the pond in his younger days. We spied a man fishing, up to his waist in waders, and he chuckled. “They’re not going to stock this pond for another month.”

“Should we tell him?” I asked.
“No, let him enjoy himself.”

We all know a significant element of Transcendentalism is transition, and the meaning and meaninglessness of time. In my early twenties, I was unable to watch a sunset without extreme anxiety. I remember one spring, late in the day; I was alone in my Brooklyn apartment. All the windows framed lilac, fuchsia, and orange sky. As the colors deepened and intensified, I found it hard to look away, harder to look. I didn’t know how I could single out the moment when the colors would peak and begin to fade. I finally got into bed and put my face in
the pillow. Only in memory and representation can we bear to experience that moment of transition. When I looked up again, the sky was still colorful, but fading into the darker hues of night, and I was able to unclench my stomach.

A few years later I was working the overnight shift at Central Booking. I always timed my breaks so I could go up to the roof of the precinct house and watch the sunrise, but I always missed it. In the gray dawn, the cruisers and police vans would grow more distinct in the thick summer air. But the sun never seemed to rise—the Brooklyn sky just got lighter, and I’d blink or breathe, and there the sun would be, already progressing up the eastern sky. When was it night and when was it morning? I’d demand of myself. When did one day end and another begin? How can something called midnight be an end, or a beginning?

What I’ve learned from the Transcendentalists is that we are all living and dying in a constant state of transition. This explanation is enough for me. Or at least, I can now watch the sun set or rise without getting a stomach ache. In Thoreau especially, I’ve sensed that same anxiety. Up on the precinct roof, I too was anxious to improve the nick of time and notch it on my stick. And I wonder if, like me, Thoreau was never completely satisfied he’d done that. A devotee of morning, he also says morning is “inward,”—perhaps it has nothing to do with the sun’s placement in the sky. The seasons, too, never quite begin or end for Thoreau—summer reaches back to the previous winter and ahead to the next. He says in his 1851 Journal, “It takes but one day to fetch the summer in,” but when does that day occur? In “Spring” he says, “O the evening robin at the end of a New England summer day! [And notice, in a chapter about spring, he is talking about summer.] If I could ever find the twig he sits upon?” All is indeterminate. A tree is felled, or falls naturally, but when does it cease to be a tree and just become wood? He says in Walden that he may be cooking his dinner with the stumps of trees he saw in his childhood. So are these stumps still the same trees? To share Henry’s ambivalence toward the present moment has made me a person more accepting of time’s value, and time’s limitations.

Another way the Transcendentalists have affected me is in regards to religion. We are used to reading them from a postmodern perspective, but as critics such as Kevin Van Anglen and Alan D. Hodder have pointed out, these were not postmodern writers, and their approach to religion was firmly rooted in their nineteenth-century perceptions. Transcendentalism grew out of Christian Unitarianism and in many ways, as has been illustrated especially by Perry Miller, and, later, by Phyllis Cole, it reached back to the older, more mystical approach to God that characterized their Puritan and revivalist forbears. I did not know any of this background information when I first read
Emerson. What I did know was that I called myself a superstitious atheist. But it took just my first immersion into Emerson to know I am no atheist. What Emerson, and later Thoreau, taught me was that I'd always believed in an immanent God. A close reading of Emerson and Thoreau show that they didn't exactly, or didn't always, oppose Christian teachings and beliefs—in fact Emerson was always enamored of Jesus—but their quarrel was with the hypocrisy of the Unitarian church and its professed members.

I have recently considered going to divinity school after I finish my dissertation, to become a non-denominational chaplain for the aging and the dying. Sometimes I find this goal hard to reconcile with the immanent rather than personal god of Transcendentalism, but again I come back to mindfulness as the possible solution to this puzzle. It would be crass to say I study the elderly the way Thoreau studied plants, but I am alert to them all the time. The elderly are closer to that transition—the ending and beginning of life—that is both a core element of Transcendentalism, and which both Emerson and Thoreau would have been comfortable calling God. God is present in the moment of transition from one state to another—in fact, God can be that transition. Though I haven't yet completely worked out the puzzle of religious belief, I do know that faith can open one up to mindful affinity with our relation to nature.

Transcendentalism is also about the gratification and frustrations of friendship. Emerson and Thoreau had notoriously high-minded notions of friendship, which were at the core of their troubles with one another. I was for the most part a lonely child and teen, though I did have a few deeply adherent and occasionally troubled friendships with other girls. Into my twenties and early thirties, my emotional energy for other people was all focused on the romantic/sexual connection. Looking back, though, I see that it was in my early thirties that I began to develop my most cherished talent, a talent for friendship. I wonder now just how coincidental it was that I began forming close and binding friendships, and strengthening my old ones, right around the time when I began to read Emerson and Thoreau. Just as a solitary life opens one to an inner mindfulness, a life of friendship creates the possibility for a shared mindfulness. My friends are remarkable and varied people. When they all met at our wedding in May, they were astonished by each other's beauty and goodness, and they saw in each other what I see in each of them. I felt what I imagine Emerson felt in his study, or Alcott or Fuller at their Conversations, surrounded by brilliant friends, sitting back with a smile as all their beloved young followers broke into high-minded debate. When I'm with my friends I must feel what Thoreau felt with his brother John, or in his early walks with Emerson, his later excursions
with Ellery Channing, and his correspondence with Harrison Blake. Like Henry, I dearly love to talk.

And talking and listening with the beloved voices around you may be the deepest form of mindfulness, and why, even at its most difficult, friendship mattered so much to the Transcendentalists. All the world has something to say to you if you are on the alert, and friendship’s truest essence is to be conversant with that world, whether your friends are companions, strangers, or the trees on a moonlit night.

Last month I dreamt I was in an indeterminate place surrounded by angry, critical people who were shouting at me. To escape, I had to crawl on my belly. After a short time I realized the crawling was much easier, as I was lying on a large skateboard and pushing myself with my hands and feet. I looked up and saw I was on Lexington Road in Concord. Immediately I was on my feet at Walden beach. It was early spring and still cool, an overcast day with morning mist drifting off the pond. I began to take off my shoes and clothes. The angry people were back, standing behind me shouting I should put my clothes back on and the water was too cold. I looked over my shoulder and said, “The only way to embrace the water is to swim,” and stepped in.
“When a dog runs at you, whistle for him.”
—Henry D. Thoreau
Deconstructing the Shed: Where I Live and What I Live For

Samuel Alexander

“How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book.” (Walden 107). Over the last two years, as I have lain down to sleep in my small, self-constructed, inner-city shed, this passage from Henry Thoreau’s Walden was never far from my mind. Whether Thoreau hoped that Walden itself would mark a new era in the lives of its readers, no one can be sure. Nevertheless, it is easy to imagine Thoreau penning the quoted passage above on the shores of Walden Pond, tantalizingly aware that he was in the process of drafting a manifesto that would indeed spark personal revolutions in the lives of generations of readers. My life, for one, has certainly changed drastically since my pre-Walden days, which are seemingly of another lifetime and yet not so long ago, when I would march off to work in my charcoal suit and long black coat to begin my day as a freshly graduated lawyer. The shift in consciousness – an earthquake of the soul – which shook me away from the law firm and into the shed is attributable, almost exclusively, to my engagement with Walden. Putting my own story into words has crystallized what I had previously understood only at the level of raw experience. To paraphrase Soren Kierkegaard, life must be lived forwards, but it can only be understood backwards.

I. Crisis of Vocation

After completing my Master of Laws at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand, I found myself confronted by those great economic questions everyone must face when trying to establish financial independence in a world of scarce resources: How best to earn a living? How much time should I spend at it? How much do I need to live well and to be free? Although I had just graduated from a respectable university, I came to realize that throughout my formal education, the deepest questions concerning how to live had been strangely passed over. Furthermore, when I looked at the world around me, I gained little insight into how I should live my life. I saw the potential for freedom, but not freedom itself. And so, unable to ignite my imagination, I spiralled quietly into a deep, vocational crisis. Completely lost and
lacking any direction, I wallowed around what I now suspect were the margins of a depressive episode.

One day, in an act of desperation, I took a train to a small, rural community called Featherston, an hour or so out of Wellington, and with what little money I had I rented an old, rustic cottage, at a very reasonable price. In retrospect, I feel this temporary exit from society is one of the wisest things I have ever done, if only because it gave me the time and solitude needed to search my soul. I lived in the cottage for three months – alone, at peace, tremendously happy, and absolutely free. Isolated from the worries and expectations of the world, it was a privileged time of uninhibited creativity and committed intellectual inquiry. I would begin each day ritualistically by soaking in a deep, iron-cast tub, while one of Beethoven’s symphonies roared in the background, setting the mood for the day. Bathing in this manner was a meditative, even spiritual, exercise for me, similar, perhaps, to Thoreau’s daily plunge into the icy waters of Walden Pond, except more pleasurable, I would imagine. Subsisting predominantly on bread and cheap red wine, I spent my days and nights in the cottage before an open fire, composing music, writing abundantly, and reading the great philosophers, especially Rousseau and Nietzsche. I would work creatively till exhaustion then sleep till I was refreshed, wholly unconcerned about the hour of the day.

As the weeks passed, moments began to blur into one, until time itself seemed to stand still. I would often find myself gazing into the fire in a trace-like state, rapt in a timeless reverie, as if lost in the richness of ordinary experience. To borrow the apt words of Thoreau, “I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been” (111). Whenever the inclination took me, whether day or night, I would take long walks in the nearby woods or meadows, to absorb the pink and purple hues of the sky at sunrise, or enjoy the silverly blue tints of a moonlit landscape. I recall going out for walk one evening during a fiercely wet and windy storm, just for the experience. As I marched alone in the dark, confronting the tempestuous elements, Tom Waits’ song, “God’s Away on Business,” thundered through my headphones. All my senses were alight, which was typical of this phase in my life.

Be sure, I am not romanticising my experience at the cottage in any way. It was genuinely romantic, for all that word connotes, and I felt intensely alive. I tasted a poeticized existence and its sweetness was intoxicating and unforgettable. For three months I persisted in this state of passionate tranquillity. It was terrifyingly meaningful.

But then the money ran out. My repressed crisis of vocation suddenly returned to the surface in an intensified form, shattering my
artificial utopia like a stone through glass. During my time in the cottage I had experienced an idealized freedom, but foolishly and regrettably I had taken no steps toward securing it. Now, with just a few dollars to my name, I had no option but to return to society to begin my search for a livelihood. The unromantic but important lesson I took away from the cottage was that a poeticized existence depends, at least to some degree, on money and resources. As Marx perceived long ago, life is fundamentally economic.

Fortuitously – if that is the right word – two weeks after leaving the cottage I applied for and was offered an associate position in a small law firm in Christchurch, New Zealand, which I accepted out of financial necessity. Within a few days I had packed my few possessions into a hired van and set out, somewhat despondently, to begin my experiment with reality. It was as if I had been caught in a current and swept out to sea.

I practiced law for about eighteen months. Admittedly, this turned out to be quite a stimulating time for me, owing mainly to the brilliance of my employer, and I proved to be a competent advocate. But my heart was never fully in the game. A career in law promised wealth and status, as well as a form of intellectual engagement, but from the outset I knew it was not my calling. Though at this time I had no idea what my calling was, I knew at least that it did not involve seeking wealth and status. Not all rich people are unimaginative, but only unimaginative people need to be rich; and only timid souls seek status. I was seeking something else.

After a year working in the law firm I managed to exchange a scheduled pay rise for an extra day off work. I now recognize that this negotiation was my first significant act of “downshifting,” which can be crudely defined as the exchange of income/consumption for more freedom, although at the time I was unfamiliar with this concept as such. My friends accused me of entering semi-retirement, which was not so far from the truth. During my final six months in the law firm I used my three-day weekends to prepare a proposal for a doctoral thesis. Doctoral study, I surmised, would at least allow me to pursue my burning passion for philosophy and politics, as well as give me a few years to think about my place in the world, about which I was still confused. I moved to Melbourne, Australia, to begin my doctoral study in the middle of 2006. I was 26.

II. The Political becomes Personal

Like most university students, post-graduate or otherwise, I did not have much money, although my scholarship stipend, as well as a
short stint lecturing, meant that I always had enough. Not long after arriving in Melbourne I rented the cheapest room I could find, which turned out to be in a five person share-house not too far from campus, and there I settled down to begin my post-graduate life. Due to the accidents of my personal history, I enrolled for my PhD in the law school, however my proposed topic was interdisciplinary in nature, more suitable, perhaps, for departments of politics, philosophy, or economics than law. The next few years of study were to change my life in ways that I could never have foreseen. For reasons to be explained, I gratefully hold Thoreau responsible.

Without going into unnecessary detail, my doctoral research (which is all but complete) involved evaluating the notion of a private property/market system “beyond growth.” Directed toward the highly-developed nations, my thesis argues that when an economy grows so large that it reaches or exceeds the threshold point beyond which any further growth is “uneconomic” (i.e. socially or ecologically counter-productive), property rights should no longer be defined and defended in order to grow the economy. Instead, property rights should be constructed or reconstructed in order to achieve more specific welfare enhancing objectives – such as eliminating poverty or protecting the environment – and the efficient growth of GDP (or lack thereof) should be treated as a by-product of secondary importance.¹ Put simply, the normative basis of my thesis is the assumption that money and resources are extremely important to human beings up to a point – the threshold point – but beyond that point, which evidence suggests is surprisingly moderate,² the pursuit of more wealth insidiously detracts from what makes life meaningful and degrades the health and integrity of our living planet. This normative position highlights the importance of having a concept of economic sufficiency and of knowing how much is “enough.”

To cut a long story short, when I began constructing the arguments in support of my “post-growth” theory of property, I quickly realized that my position would be rejected by anyone who subscribed to the dominant view that a nation’s progress depends upon ever-increasing growth in GDP per capita. For my thesis to be persuasive, then – or even given a fair hearing – it became absolutely critical that I present a sound case for why getting richer is not always a trustworthy path to well-being, especially in affluent societies. Indeed, I wanted to argue that, in circumstances of affluence, lowering material “standard of living” (measured by income/consumption) could actually increase “quality of life” (measured by subjective well-being). This required a fundamental rethinking of orthodox views on money and consumption, including a rejection of the consumerist presumption that “more is
always better.” As I began exploring the ethics of consumption and building a normative case for simple living, I found myself naturally drawn to Thoreau’s simple living experiment on the shores of Walden Pond. I studied *Walden* obsessively, almost biblically, and I soon became aware that it was changing my life forever, an impact with which I am sure many readers of this journal can empathize.

Despite my thesis being framed predominantly in terms of political and legal theory, what I was really struggling with was the question of what personal acts could be undertaken to oppose consumer capitalism and whether the cumulative impact of such seemingly insignificant acts could amount to any real significance. I did not just want to theorize about alternative political and legal structures, though I felt that was important too; I also wanted to learn how best to live within the existing regime that I was critiquing. Since my thesis was advocating a radically anti-consumerist stance in relation to money and possessions, I felt this aspect of my thesis, especially, had to be *lived* to be truly sincere. And so, step by step, I escalated my personal exploration of the simple life.

Although I had lived like a poor student for most of my adult life – by this stage I was 28 – I knew that my material standard of living was much higher than it needed to be. Accordingly, I set myself the task of finding ways to live more with less, which, in a sentence, is what I believe simple living is all about. Prompted by the example of Thoreau, the possibility of squatting in the backyard of the house I was renting entered my imagination as a potential means of reducing my outgoings significantly. With barely a moment’s thought, I approached my housemates and tentatively offered to give up my room and live in the backyard, explaining my reasons for wanting to do so. I told them about Thoreau and of my interest in exploring “the simple life” in an urban context. They thought my proposition was humorously insane but unproblematic, and so my plans received their consent, even their positive encouragement. In exchange for living in the backyard it was agreed that I would be responsible for purchasing for the house a number of amenities shared by all, such as dishwashing liquid, washing powder, rubbish bags, toilet paper, mops, etc. This arrangement meant that my “rent” would be extremely low – approximately AU$15 per week – but the reasoning given was that my presence would be no inconvenience at all. Since I would have access to the kitchen and bathroom inside, the costs of electricity, gas, water, etc. were to be split equally, an arrangement which I happily accepted.

With the essential negotiations complete, it was time to make my madness a reality.
III. Constructing the Shed

I built the shed over three weekends in the spring of 2008 with my good friend and house-mate, Mathieu. Neither of us had any building experience, and being Ph.D. students in law and meteorology, it would not be unfair to assume that we were among the least practical people on Earth. Perhaps we were lacking in the necessary skills – we didn’t really know – however the challenge of building a shelter seemed natural and appealing, so we took to the task with zeal. We had ordered two books online about building basic sheds and cabins, but in our enthusiasm we got to work before they arrived. The books turned up in the letterbox a few days after construction had finished, much to our amusement, and they remain unread to this day. Who knows what wisdom they contain!

We knew, at least, that builders need materials, so that seemed like a good place to start. In the spirit of sustainability and frugality, our goal was to reuse or recycle as much material as possible. We found an old wooden bed frame underneath the stairs, along with a few tarpaulins, two strong hinges, a hammer, and some nails and screws. We also appropriated some wood that was lying forgotten underneath the house, which we felt justified putting to good use. My girlfriend, Helen – who was unconditionally supportive throughout this venture despite having some understandable reservations about it – also informed me that there was a pile of abandoned wood by the railway tracks near her place, which I promptly transported to the construction site. A friend lent us an electric drill (apologies to Thoreau) and a painfully blunt handsaw.

All this provided the bulk of our building materials and tools, but it was not quite sufficient for our project. We needed more wood for the frame and floor of the shed, more tarpaulins for waterproofing, more screws and hinges, as well as some polycarbonate sheeting for the roof. These things we obtained from the hardware store. (When we showed the assistant at the hardware store our building plans, which resembled a two-year-old’s drawing of a house, he laughed loudly and firmly recommended that we consider purchasing a ready-made shed or a tent. We thanked him for his sound advice then stubbornly ignored it.) We also picked up some old blankets from a second-hand clothing store to line the inside of the shed. In total, the cost of all these materials was AU$573.

The building process itself was an absolute delight, not only because the spring days were crisp and clear, but also because I was engaged in meaningful (and often entertaining) work with a true friend. The French gypsy-punk music added another dimension, too. In such
circumstances, long days of physical work are no chore at all. We began by constructing the frame of the shed, which was 1.8m wide, 3.6m long, and 2.4m high. The old bed frame was cut up and used to provide extra framing for the base of the shed, upon which we laid the flooring. Tarpaulin was used to waterproof the walls and roof, and the abandoned wood from near the railway tracks was cut up into weatherboards and nailed horizontally into place for the outside walls. With the remaining wood we crafted a simple door and were pleasantly surprised when it swung into place, although the door was not quite square, creating an unfortunate gap which let through a draft. At the front of the shed we also put in place a wooden shutter in the top left corner, which was hinged at the top to swing up and out to create a window space when desired. A piece of thick bamboo was used to hold the wooden shutter up, in the manner of an old beach hut. Finally, three overlapping sheets of polycarbonate sheeting were laid on the roof and nailed into place. Due to a shortage of wood and a complete lack of common sense, we did not create a slope in the roof, hoping that the minor slope of the ground would suffice to induce any rain water to run off. Our hopes were sadly disappointed. During the first heavy rain, water pooled on the roof and the shed leaked, so later some repairs were needed. The result was a truly bizarre roof design that, although ultimately effective, would have had dear Thoreau turning in his grave. (In our defence, however, one stormy Melbourne evening in March 2010 parts of the Southern Cross railway station collapsed, which was made of steel and concrete, while the shed remained dry and erect. The ultimate vindication!)

As the finishing touch, the shed was given a title. The words, “Ceci n’est pas une cabane,” were painted above the door, which translate as, “This is not a shed.”
IV. Practicing Simplicity

Since living in the backyard is a violation of the tenancy agreement, the landlord has not been told of my living experiment. He rarely makes his presence known, anyway (especially when he is needed to fix something). When the yearly house inspection is due, I simply pack the shed full of bikes, crates, chairs, blankets, tools, boxes, bags, etc., and hide any evidence that it is inhabited. That is, I disguise it as a shed.
When the landlord first saw the shed he understandably looked a bit confused and stated firmly that any further building projects must be approved by him first. Much to my relief, however, he was otherwise unbothered by its presence and to this day he seems entirely oblivious to the fact that it is my home. Perhaps one day I’ll send him a copy of this essay.

At the time of writing these words, I have lived in the shed for a little under two years. In all honestly I can report that they have been
the richest and most fulfilling years of my life. Exactly how much longer I will live in the shed, I cannot say, but since I am squatting illegally on someone else’s land, it is hard to conceive of it as a permanent residence. Furthermore, I am in a committed relationship with Helen, who has a magical young child. Someday I would like to live under the same roof with them, and I can hardly invite them to live with me in the shed. It would seem that my days in the shed are numbered.

However, life in the shed is not just about the shed. The building itself is but the most conspicuous (and arguably confused) manifestation of my ongoing struggle with the question of how to live simply in an urban context. The importance of the shed, for me, lies in the fact that housing is typically life’s greatest expense, and potentially, therefore, a category where the most savings can be made. With rent over the last two years at approximately AU$15 per week, significant savings were indeed possible. When the day comes that I must leave the shed, my aim will still be to keep the cost of housing to a minimum by embracing the most modest accommodation possible. For when I remember that the shed took six days to build, and functioned well enough as a shelter, I am deeply bothered that many people spend twenty, thirty, even forty years laboring to pay for their homes. Truthfully, I would sooner live in a tub my whole life, like Diogenes, than exchange forty years of my life for house. Posterity will surely look back on our times and be astounded at how inefficiently we housed ourselves! My time in the shed has taught me the great Thoreauvian lesson that a person can be “richer than the richest now are” while living in very humble circumstances (Walden 40). This has given me “a calm trust in the future” (160), since I now know that a fancy house is not a necessary part of living a happy and meaningful life.

In recent years I have also grown as much of my own food as possible. On top of the financial savings, the very process of gardening is strangely therapeutic – an ancient truth which escaped me far too long. The garden space I have available is approximately 1.5 metres wide and 10 metres long, in which I grow organically all manner of fruit, vegetables, and herbs. Since there are water restrictions in Melbourne, a friend and I installed a water tank behind the shed to secure rainwater. I also keep four chickens in the backyard, which provide two or three eggs a day as well as an abundance of fine manure. The chicken coop also functions well as a compost heap. Some of my happiest memories are of letting the chickens roam freely in the community park behind the house, while I would drink tea in the shade and enjoy the bemused looks of my neighbors.

The garden does not provide all my food, however, so I have come to supplement my vegetarian diet with locally and organically
grown produce, sourced conveniently and surprisingly cheaply by the Melbourne University Food Co-Op. My reasons for choosing a vegetarian diet are, I confess, rather vague and uncertain. Strange as it may sound, there is something of “the ascetic” in me, and perhaps a large part of my motivation for giving up meat and fish was the rather enjoyable challenge of self-discipline. A moment’s research also reveals the troubling environmental impacts of excessive meat and fish consumption, additional motivation to rethink my eating practices. At risk of sounding too sentimental, I am also a bit unsure about whether I, personally, could shoot a cow in the head every time I wanted a steak, a reality of meat consumption that never used to cross my mind, pushed out of sight as it is by the obscuring distances of a money economy. Since I am undecided about this point, I thought it was easy enough to do without the steak and avoid being implicated in the violence. Whatever the case, I have never felt as healthy as I have since eating a vegetarian diet, which perhaps is justification enough.

Staying on the subject of food for a moment longer, I also do my best to avoid supermarkets, and find that it can sometimes be months between visits. I resent supermarkets for using their financial power to promote the toxic practices of agri-business, and thus I do everything I can to avoid giving them any of my money. Their convenience is seductive, however, and avoiding them entirely remains a challenge.

Another feature of my journey toward the simple life has been my purchase of 100% renewable power. Since I did not have the lump sum to purchase solar panels or wind turbines, nor the desire to fix such devices to a rental property, I called my electricity provider and inquired about the possibility of purchasing renewable energy. A few minutes later I was, as they say, burning “green fuel.” This came at a price, of course, but the increased rates soon became a part of life and were forgotten. In any case, I effectively offset the costs of the increased rates by taking many small steps to reduce my energy consumption. My greatest energy savings have come through never using a heater, even on those winter nights which sink to zero degrees. It is always the same temperature inside the shed as it is outside, regrettably, making those winter nights rather character-building. But with the right attitude it is really not so bad. I suspect we are all hardier than we think we are. When it gets cold I put on the wool jersey my Grandma knitted me when I was a teenager or wrap myself in an extra blanket. When necessary – and often it has been necessary – I sleep in my ski-jacket, gloves, and a wool hat. The days and nights may be cold, but I never am.

With respect to clothing, I find that purchasing what is necessary at second-hand stores comes at a minimal cost, given some creativity
and a little discipline. This does not mean puritanically denying self-expression through what I wear, or giving up “style” (although others are entitled to disagree about that). But it does involve rejecting high fashion and all it stands for in favor of an “alternative” aesthetic. According to my calculations, high-fashion clothing is comically expensive, and I would sooner pay $200 for an old turnip than I would for a nice shirt. I have higher aspirations in life than to have my place in the world defined by a nice shirt. As for the cheap, mass-produced clothing found in many department stores, a little research reveals that it is almost always the product of wage-slaves in the factories of the Third World. Accordingly, my policy is to do what I can to avoid being implicated in the fashion industry at all.

Perhaps “dressing down,” as it is sometimes called, should even be understood as an outward statement of simplicity, an effort, however small, to express aesthetically one’s opposition to consumer culture. Politics aside, however, I have never had the desire to look brand new. Moreover, I enjoy being able to lie on the grass without giving a moment’s thought to whether my clothes will get dirty. Over the last year I have spent a total of AU$38 on clothing (roughly the average over the last four years). I did receive a pair of shoes recently as a birthday gift, however, after my parents saw large holes in the pair I had been wearing. I have also been the grateful recipient of a few castaway items from my brother and from friends, which I saved from being thrown away. As Thoreau would say, “if my jacket and trousers, my hat and shoes, are fit to worship God in, they will do; will they not?” (23). It is an interesting question to consider, if not necessarily in relation to the worship of God, then more generally in relation to the living of a passionate life. Old clothes will do, will they not? Thoreau proposed that they will do just fine, and I have come to think that he was quite right.

When I speak publicly about simple living at festivals, conferences, meetings, etc., one of the issues I am almost always asked about is the practice of simplicity. Most people seem to accept the dangers of greed and acquisitiveness, as well as the social, ecological, and humanitarian benefits of living simply. But there is much doubt over what simple living actually consists of and whether it is even feasible to live simply in the consumer cultures of advanced capitalist societies. My response to these important, practical questions usually begins by acknowledging that there is not one and only one way to live simply. I ask people not to expect a 12-point plan that can be formulaically applied, for the reality is that there is no Method or Equation of Simplicity into which we can plug the facts of our lives and be told how to live. The simple life, I say, is as much about questions as answers, in the sense that practicing simplicity calls for creative
interpretation and personalized application. It is not for “experts,” therefore, or for anyone, to prescribe universal rules on how to live simply. We each live unique lives and we each find ourselves in different situations, with different capabilities and different responsibilities. Accordingly, I continue, the practice of simplicity by one person, in one situation, may very well involve different things than for a different person, in a different situation. Furthermore, simple living is not so much a destination as it is an ongoing, creative process. With this non-universalist disclaimer noted, I then make a few general remarks about what a simple life might look like in practice and how one might begin to live it. I might offer something like the following thumbnail sketch.

Simplicity, as I have come to understand it, is first and foremost a set of attitudes, a recognition that abundance is a state of mind, not a quantity of consumer products. In the words of Richard Gregg:

Voluntary simplicity involves both an inner and an outer condition. It means singleness of purpose, sincerity and honesty within, as well as avoidance of exterior clutter, of many possessions irrelevant to the chief purpose of life. It means an ordering and guiding of our energy and desires, a partial restraint in some directions in order to secure a greater abundance of life in other directions. It involves a deliberate organization of life for a purpose. (111-12)

That last sentence gets to the heart of the matter. If we are to know how much material wealth is enough, and thereby avoid laboring without end or purpose, we first need to confront the question, “Enough for what?” Put otherwise, we need to ask ourselves, “What should we want material wealth for?” Anyone who neglects this question is at risk of spending life pursuing material superfluities in a state of “quiet desperation” (Walden 8). There is no single right answer to the question of life’s purpose, of course – we must each find our “own way,” as Thoreau properly advised (71) – but to live simply means always being awake to the question. “To be awake is to be alive” (90).

Having determined a sense of life’s purpose, the practice of simplicity then involves securing the material conditions of life, starting with food, shelter, and clothing. Eating locally, purchasing “green,” eating out in moderation, eating less meat, eating simply and creatively – I know by experience that this can be done very cheaply. Given some thought and a little discipline, a good diet can be obtained at a surprisingly low cost, especially if you are able to cultivate a vegetable garden. Given that sheltering oneself and one’s family is typically life’s greatest expense, rethinking the meaning and purpose of a house is one of the most important aspects to living simply. This is also likely to be
the hardest part of transitioning to a simple life, and may take a lifetime to figure out. Indeed, current political, economic, and social structures can make living in “simple” housing very difficult – perhaps even impossible or illegal – which is one of the main reasons the transition to a sustainable society will depend upon a politics of simplicity (a complex issue which I cannot not explore here, though it is of the utmost importance). In terms of clothing and furniture, buying secondhand is the way to go. Whenever possible, make your own.

With the necessities of life secured, the practice of simplicity can be explored in an infinite variety of ways. I will not try to list them all. Nevertheless, here are a few representative examples. Simple living might involve riding a bike instead of driving a car, choosing a washing line over a dryer; or even something as simple as choosing a book over television. It might involve avoiding air travel, conserving water by taking a bucket into the shower, or taking energy reduction seriously. Or it might simply involve taking a second look at life, for dissatisfaction with our material situations can often be the result of failing to look properly at our lives rather than the result of any genuine “lack.” Simple livers generally aim to declutter all aspects of life – personal, work, social, economic – and they will probably value self-sufficiency and be able to entertain themselves for free. Many simple livers happily subscribe to the frugality maxim of the Depression years: “Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without.” Many will also avoid unnecessary technology and try to live more slowly and peacefully. Baking bread at home is a symbolic practice. Generally speaking, simple livers never go shopping without a proper purpose and are wary of credit cards. They tend to lend when asked and borrow when necessary.

Rather than stay at luxurious resorts, simple livers might spend $12 per night bush camping in the midst of nature. Rather than work long hours to afford a life dedicated to consumption, simple livers might step out of the rush and reduce work hours, freeing up more time to be creative, learn a musical instrument, socialize with friends and family, volunteer or join an organization, meditate, relax, etc. Rather than choose competition, simple livers are likely to choose community. Not money, but meaning. And so on and so forth, until the very elements of life have been transformed. Start with a few small steps, enjoy the adventure, and soon enough your life will have changed.

V. Money

The overarching issue of what place money has in the simple life deserves a little more attention. Although living simply is much more than just being frugal with money and consuming less – as I have said, it
is also a state of mind – in a market economy spending wisely plays a central role. In their celebrated text, *Your Money or Your Life*, Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin provide elaborate financial exercises for readers to undertake which seek to provoke reflection on the real value of money and the true cost of commodities. I found their exercises surprisingly enlightening. To over-simplify greatly, one of their core exercises can be paraphrased as follows: Over a one month period, meticulously record every purchase made, and then categorize your expenses (rent/mortgage, bills, food, clothing, coffee, petrol, books, etc.). Multiply each category by twelve to get a rough estimate of the annual cost. Then carefully calculate how much time was spent obtaining the money required to buy everything that was purchased that month (including time travelling to and from work) and multiply by twelve to get yearly working hours (making appropriate adjustments for holiday entitlements). With this information at hand, Dominguez and Robin invite people to critically assess not only the amount of time and money spent on each category, but also the categories themselves. This exercise may sound mundane and a bit pointless – everybody assumes they are careful, rational spenders – but if it is carried out with precision the results may well surprise, or even shock. One might find that seemingly little purchases add up to an inordinate amount over an entire year, which may raise new and important questions about whether the money might have been better spent elsewhere, or not at all, or exchanged for more time by working less. Once you have worked out the figures for one year, consider how much would be spent on each category over ten years.

The aim of this financial exercise is not to create tightwads, but smart consumers who are conscious of the life/time cost of their purchases. After all, as Thoreau would insist, “the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run” (31). When exploring the simple life with this in mind, I have discovered that some thoughtful reductions and changes to my spending habits, rather than inducing any sense of deprivation, have instead been life affirming. To provide two mundane but personally significant examples, always taking a packed lunch and limiting myself to one take-out coffee per week has resulted in savings of about $75 per week. That’s almost $4000 per year, or $40,000 over ten years.

When I realized how easy it was to eliminate many costs that I once considered necessities, things started getting quite interesting. In the interests of experimentation, I decided to dedicate a year to seriously reducing my expenses. From 4 July 2009 to 3 July 2010, I kept an exact account of every dollar I spent. The total for that year was AU$6,792,
which still included a great many comforts and superfluities. During this period I also spent several hundred dollars printing flyers on simple living, although perhaps this expense was more of a necessity than a superfluity. I can truthfully say that the only time during the year when I felt deprived by my simple living experiment was when my brother had his first child, since I had made a commitment not to travel by plane for a year, and this meant that I could not be with him and his family at that special time. This was by far the most difficult challenge of my living experiment and one that raised the most doubts about its justification.

I was able to live as cheaply as I did partly due to my unusually cheap living arrangements in the shed, which some may regard as a distorted reality. But even so, had I rented a room inside the house (which would have cost AU$530 per month), my living costs would only have risen rise to a total of AU$13,152. When it is remembered that the average full-time wage in Australia today is over AU$67,000, one begins to get some perspective – so easily lost! – on how affluent Western societies really are. Every day in the news we read about how growing the economy is still the number one priority. But is getting even richer really the answer to the problems facing Western societies? Or do we labor under a terrible mistake?

When it comes to spending money in accordance with the ethos of simple living, it is also important to bear in mind Vicki Robin’s profound democratic insight: That how we spend our money is how we vote on what exists in the world. Purchasing something sends a message, consciously or unconsciously, to the marketplace, affirming the product, its ecological impact, its process of manufacture, etc. Simple living, therefore, involves shopping as conscientiously as possible, directing one’s monetary “votes” into socially and ecologically responsible avenues and avoiding irresponsible avenues. A tension can arise here, of course, because shopping conscientiously or ethically tends to be (but is not always) more expensive. If it is true, however, that market expenditure is a vote on what exists in the world, then it would seem that the global consumer class has the potential to become a non-violet revolutionary class and change the world, simply by changing its spending habits. Simplicity is the new spectre haunting capitalism. Never before have so many people had the option of casting off the chains of consumer culture, stepping out of the rat race, and living in opposition to the existing order of things. Money is power, and with this power comes responsibility.

Consumers of the world unite!
VI. Deconstructing the Shed

I am under no illusions about what my time in the shed means. I certainly have not provided, nor did I ever aim to provide, a template for simple living. The reality is that I am squatting illegally on land owned by another, and if I am ever caught living in the shed – which is in breach of the tenancy agreement as well as building regulations – it is almost certain that my experiment will be extinguished at once. There could well be consequences, perhaps in the form of a fine. (Given that my doctoral thesis is exploring ways that property laws could be restructured to promote simple living, it seems only fitting that the current property laws have been hanging threateningly over my head throughout my candidature). Furthermore, my living experiment in the shed only got off the ground due to the good grace of my dear house-mates, and this fact alone means that my experiment may not be easily repeated by others. Should my house-mates ever have a change of heart, to which they would be quite entitled, this would also mark the end of my time in the shed, again exposing the delicate contingency of my way of life.

Such insecurity of accommodation has not bothered me much, I should add, since my unmarried, post-graduate life without dependents has left me unconcerned about the possibility of being summarily evicted at any moment. But I recognize that others, in different circumstances, would understandably find such insecurity a cause of considerable anxiety and worry. Generally speaking, human beings – myself included – wish to lay down roots, and this means that squatting is at most a temporary solution to the problem of how to live. The time is nigh, perhaps, to deconstruct the shed.

If *Walden* has done one thing to me, it has etched into my being the desire to live simply and deliberately. Reading Thoreau’s poetic descriptions of nature opened my eyes like never before to the miracle of Earth’s living processes, and with my eyes now open I crave the nourishment of close contact with nature, even though my urban context cannot provide for the intimacy I truly desire. Having fallen deeply in love with nature, I now see more clearly my duty to protect her from unnecessary violence, and my ongoing journey to live more simply is an attempt to meet that duty as best I can. Thoreau’s words also serve as a fiery reminder that we each owe a duty to ourselves as well, a duty to take our own lives, our own dreams, seriously. In *Walden* Thoreau warned people against wasting their lives in the pursuit of material superfluities, a lesson predicated upon the assumption that every lived moment is of immeasurable importance. When I feel that I am losing sight of this insight, dipping into the pages of *Walden* usually
shakes me awake at once. Any book capable of doing that is worth infinitely more than its own weight in gold.

P.S. A short time after completing this essay the landlord gave notice that he was ending the lease of the rental property where the shed was built (for reasons wholly unrelated to the existence of the shed or my presence, I should add). This meant — by force of property law! — that I was required to deconstruct the shed physically and move out. I have since moved in with Helen, which (as implied in the essay) was already in the cards, and the exploration of the simple life now continues, albeit in different circumstances. I intend to write about this new phase of the journey in the near future, as it raises new and important issues about living simply in an urban context. For now, however, I must tend to the garden.

NOTES


4 In February 2010 the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that the average full-time adult weekly earnings was AU$1,290.70

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Notes on Contributors

Samuel Alexander is the founder of the Simplicity Collective (www.simplicitycollective.com) as well as founder and co-director of the Simplicity Institute (www.simplicityinstitute.org). In January 2011 he submitted his doctoral thesis for examination through Melbourne Law School, entitled “Property beyond Growth: Toward a Politics of Voluntary Simplicity” (available for download at the Simplicity Institute website). In 2011 he will be lecturing in “Consumerism and Sustainability” at the Office for Environmental Programs, University of Melbourne.

J. Walter Brain, an assiduous student of Thoreau Country, has contributed articles and essays in local newspapers and magazines, in monographs, and to both The Concord Saunterer and the Thoreau Society Bulletin. Mr. Brain has had a long career as a professional landscape architect and planner, formerly with studio/offices at Concord, Massachusetts, and he has taught seminars, studios, and lecture courses on regional landscape planning, urban design, and architectural history at the Boston Architectural College and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He has led a number of Architectural Study Tours to Europe for the B.A.C. A resident of Lincoln, Massachusetts, living at "a crow's call" from Walden Woods, Mr. Brain has been a member of the Thoreau Society since 1973 and serves currently in the organization's Board of Directors and chairs its Finance Committee.

John Hessler is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and Senior Cartographic Librarian at the Library of Congress. He is the author of many publications on the history of cartography, including his recent books The Naming of America: Martin Walseemüller’s 1507 Map and the Cosmographiae Introductio (2008), and Thoreau on Cape Cod: His Journeys and the Lost Maps (2010). He is currently at work on a forthcoming book entitled "Henry David Thoreau and the Birth of American Geographical Thought."

Bradley Ray King is working on a Ph.D. in American Literature at the University of Texas at Austin, where he teaches American and African American literatures. His research focuses on the political and aesthetic contours of narratives of U.S. history, literature, and culture. Currently he is doing preliminary research for his dissertation, which will explore creative and critical representations of Melville’s fiction (especially those by black authors) as embodying “Americanness” or America’s “national essence.”
Ian Marshall is a professor of English and Environmental Studies at Penn State Altoona. He is the author of *Story Line: Exploring the Literature of the Appalachian Trail* (Virginia, 1998), *Peak Experiences: Walking Meditations on Literature, Nature, and Need* (Virginia 2003), and *Walden by Haiku* (Georgia, 2009). Ian reports that a second attempt at Penn State Altoona’s Thoreau Cabin project is scheduled for fall 2011.

Patrick Morgan is a freelance science journalist whose work has appeared in *DISCOVER* magazine, *EARTH* magazine, and *The American Gardener*. In the past year, he graduated Summa Cum Laude from the State University of New York at Geneseo, having majored in English Literature and Geological Sciences; he plans on applying to English graduate school this coming autumn to continue exploring the interplay between aesthetics, geology, and gender.

Audrey Raden lives in New York City where she is finishing her dissertation “‘As Long As She Cracks She Holds’: Thoreau's Anticipation of Dying,” at the CUNY Graduate School. This is her first prose publication.

Mark Sullivan grew up a stone’s throw from Walden Pond. He earned a Ph. D. in art history from Bryn Mawr College, and is the Director of the Art History Program at Villanova University. His specialty for many years was the Hudson River School of painters, but in recent years he has returned to his boyhood interest in Thoreau. He is presently writing a book on the many portraits of Thoreau done by American artists since 1853.

Laura Dassow Walls, Editor, has until the time of this issue’s publication served as the John H. Bennett, Jr., Chair of Southern Letters at the University of South Carolina; she is about to step into the William P. and Hazel B. White Chair of English at the University of Notre Dame, where she will continue to teach courses in Transcendentalism, early American literature, and in literature and science. She has published widely on Thoreau, Emerson, and transatlantic Romanticism. Her recent book *The Passage to Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Shaping of America* was given the Merle Curti Award by the Organization of American Historians, and the James Russell Lowell Prize by the Modern Language Association. Currently she is working on a biography of Henry David Thoreau.
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The goals of the Society are:

* To encourage research on Thoreau’s life and works and to act as a repository for Thoreau-related materials
* To educate the public about Thoreau’s ideas and their application to contemporary life
* To preserve Thoreau’s legacy and advocate for the preservation of Thoreau Country.

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