PART I

Geographic Contexts

CHAPTER 1

Concord

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If Henry David Thoreau "travelled a good deal in Concord" (*W* 4), he also wrote prolifically – and often critically – about his hometown. In *Walden*, he identified "the grocery, the bar-room, the post-office, and the bank" as "the vitals of the village" and confessed his pressing need to escape back to the woods from the town center (*W* 168–69). He reported hearing the distant sound of "a military turnout," which provoked "a vague sense all the day of some sort of itching and disease in the horizon" (*W* 160). In his Journal, he found fault with the high cost of Concord's new Town House as contrasted with the town's disregard for meaningful education (*PJ* 4:101–2). And he disparaged the forms of work by which his townsmen earned money (*J* VIII:7). With few aspects of local life escaping his barbed pen, his acerbic commentary fueled a divided portrait. But Thoreau himself was entirely at ease with the duality between his intense embrace of the town's landscape, flora, and fauna and his ambivalence about the web of connections that constituted community membership.

In mellower moods, he wrote with fond exaggeration about Concord. He boasted of having been "born into the most estimable place in all the world, and in the very nick of time, too" (*J* IX:160). In a letter to Richard Frederick Fuller, he referred to Concord as his Rome and its people as his Romans, mock-heroically suggesting that, for him, all roads led to Concord (*PCorr* 1:152). But nineteenth-century Concord was hardly Rome. It was a small, growing town (population 2,249 in 1850), sustained by agriculture, commerce, and some manufacture, and affected by multiple forces of change then shaping New England at large.[1] Thoreau played off a common perception beyond Concord of the town's sense of its own importance. There was some historical justification for this self-image. Founded in 1635, Concord was the earliest inland town in Massachusetts and the mother town from which most of the adjacent towns eventually broke. From the late seventeenth century into the 1860s, it was a seat of the Middlesex County courts. Court sessions drew plaintiffs, defendants,

lawyers, and jurors from surrounding towns, giving it an early reputation as a place to which people came from elsewhere. This status necessitated a decent road network, which later advanced the colonial cause as revolution approached. The Massachusetts Provincial Congress met in Concord in 1774 and 1775. On the eve of war with Britain, the colonists hid arms, ammunition, and supplies in Concord. The outbreak of open rebellion on April 19, 1775, reinforced for all time the town's conviction that it was special.[2]

Henry Thoreau, too, was inclined to elevate Concord, although for reasons other than those behind the general collective self-regard. The town mattered to him not for its administrative and historical reputation but rather for its centrality to his own modes of meaning-making. It served him as a microcosm conducive to self-realization. He wrote, "If these fields and streams and woods, the phenomena of nature here, and the simple occupations of the inhabitants should cease to interest and inspire me, no culture or wealth would atone for the loss . . . I wish so to live ever . . . so that what my senses hourly perceive . . . may inspire me, and I may dream of no heaven but that which lies about me" (*J* VIII:204). He could be lyrical about it: "I think I should write a poem to be called Concord– For argument I should have the River–the Woods–the Ponds–the Hills–the Fields–the Swamps and Meadows–the Streets and Buildings–and the Villagers" (*PJ* 1:330). Such passages reveal his acceptance of Concord as a place of human habitation as well as a natural environment. Still, he always kept his focus on Concord as a means of access to broader consciousness: "I too love Concord best– But I am glad when I discover in oceans & wildernesses far away the materials out of which a million Concords can be made. Indeed, unless I discover them I am lost myself" (*PJ* 3:97).

Thoreau did not idealize Concord, nor was he sentimental about it. Instead, he loved it as it presented itself. Loving Concord and knowing Concord were essentially the same process for him. His attachment to the town as a social and historical organism reflected that same drive toward intense, purposeful observation with which he approached nature. The reality of the place held meaning for him as he quested toward higher truth and put words to paper. His perpetual scrutiny of Concord typified what Peter Blakemore has termed his "local, specific way of knowing" – the merging of objective data-gathering and subjective personal engagement.[3] In *Walden*, Thoreau urged seeing things truly, for what they are: "I perceive that we inhabitants of New England live this mean life . . . because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. We think that

that *is* which *appears* to be. If a man should walk through this town and see only the reality, we should not recognize the place in his description" (*W* 96). Thoreau's regard for Concord and its institutions was corollary to his habitual stance "right fronting and face to face to a fact" (*W* 98). He was clear on the point that where we carry out the struggle toward meaning is inconsequential: "Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star . . . In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages" (*W* 96–97). Thoreau thus approached Concord as generic – non-unique in its capacity to advance truth-seeking – and, simultaneously, central to his particular approach to truth. As Robert Richardson has commented in writing of Thoreau and Concord, "Place is not what matters; *caring* about a place is what matters."[4]

Thoreau so cared about Concord that it became as a second skin to him. He wrote to Daniel Ricketson in 1855, "I am ill fitted for going abroad . . . The old coat that I wear is Concord—it is my morning robe & study gown, my working dress and suit of ceremony, and my night-gown after all" (*Corr* 386). Through his immersion in Concord, the boundaries between the place and its inhabitant became indistinct. "I carry Concord ground in my boots and in my hat," he explained to Lidian Emerson, "and am I not made of Concord dust?" (*PCorr* 1:167). The relationship between Thoreau and his native town was both intimate and organic. He knew Concord through diverse means, most importantly his day-in, day-out, first-hand experience of living, breathing, and walking every inch of it. He knew it through the process of distilling what he saw into words. He knew it through the deliberate and systematic recording of particular types of information over time and through surveying particular parcels. Accordingly, Thoreau was a unique authority on Concord.

He also drew upon other authorities. He acquired knowledge of Concord's past through talking with old-timers and through books and documentation. He was familiar with Lemuel Shattuck's *A History of the Town of Concord* (1835), the first comprehensive history of the town.[5] And in his Journal, he described at length the account book of eighteenth-century Concord storekeeper Ephraim Jones (*PJ* 7:249–51). Fascinated by the details of trade in the 1740s, he analyzed the data it contained, concluding "You could not easily crowd more facts into one line" (*PJ* 7:251) – serious (if subtle) praise from a man devoted to accumulating and mining facts. He connected with

Concord's history, too, through awareness and appreciation – "connoisseurship" – of the town's artifactual legacy – for example, his fascination with the old Humphrey Hunt House, which he studied and described in the 1850s.[6]

Thoreau had a keen interest, too, in his family's Concord history. Late in 1855, he recalled, "with the aid of Mother, the various houses . . . in which I have lived and some events of my life" (*J* VIII:64–67). He presented his story with reference to Uncle David, Grandmother, Cousin Charles, Uncle Charles, Grandfather, and Aunt Sarah. Since he lived most of his life with family – except for the periods in the 1840s when he stayed in the Emerson household, in William Emerson's home on Staten Island, and at Walden Pond, and for his occasional excursions away from Concord – his life was, in fact, intertwined with theirs and informed by their connections to Concord.

Thoreau's grandfather Jean (John) Thoreau came to America in 1773. In 1799, he bought a house on the common in Concord and moved his family there in 1800. His daughters Sarah and Betsey later ran the place as a boardinghouse. From 1835 to 1837, during Henry Thoreau's Harvard years, his immediate family lived there (*Days* 4–5, 21, 44). Thoreau's father John was a storekeeper and pencil maker in Concord. In 1859, shortly after his death, Henry Thoreau wrote that John had been "not only one of the oldest men in the middle of Concord, but the one perhaps best acquainted with the inhabitants, and the local, social, and street history of . . . the town, for the last fifty years. He belonged in a peculiar sense to the village street; loved to sit in the shops or at the post-office and read the daily papers. I think that he remembered more about the worthies . . . of Concord village forty years ago . . . than any one else" (*J* XI:436–37). Although Thoreau's engagement with Concord differed substantially from his father's, local knowledge mattered to both of them.

In 1812, John Thoreau married Cynthia Dunbar. David Henry Thoreau was born in the Virginia Road farmhouse that constituted part of the "widow's thirds" of his maternal grandmother, Mary Jones Dunbar Minott (*Days* 7, 11). John belonged to several Concord organizations – the Concord Fire Society, the Charitable Library Society, the Concord Atheneum, the Concord Ornamental Tree Society, the Middlesex Agricultural Society, and the First Parish in Concord.[7] Cynthia Thoreau was also integrated into the fabric of community life. She took in boarders to supplement what her husband earned (*Days* 22), belonged to the Concord Female Charitable Society, and participated in organized antislavery – a commitment shared by her daughters Helen and Sophia.[8]

Unlike his parents, Thoreau was indifferent to membership in Concord's voluntary associations. He recognized that "to act collectively is according to the spirit of our institutions" (*PJ* 5:319), but for the most part chose not to do so. Still, he took advantage of such organizations as provided benefits that he actually valued. Longing for a higher level of town culture, he served the Concord Lyceum as curator and secretary.[9] He also used the collection of the Concord Social Library (the proprietary predecessor of the Concord Town Library), even though not a shareholding supporter of it.[10] On the other hand, he chose to dissociate himself from Concord's then tax-supported First Parish rather than pay the parish tax, formally signing off from membership in 1841.[11] And he found it unnecessary to belong to societies simply to think about their special areas of interest. Although not a member of the Concord Farmers' Club, for example, he seriously contemplated a number of subjects of consequence to progressive working farmers in that organization.[12]

The neighborhood of Main Street formed an important aspect of the Thoreau family's Concord life. The Thoreaus lived as tenants in several homes on the street and, eventually, in 1849, bought the "Yellow House" on Main Street, where Henry Thoreau died in 1862 (*Days* 7–23, 44, 177–78, 263–66). The neighborhood was vibrant and close knit. Other residents included the Hoar, Brooks, Prichard, Whiting, Loring, and Monroe (Munroe) families, and (at the head of Sudbury Road) the Bigelows.[13] The old Concord Academy building – where Thoreau and his siblings were educated and where he and his brother John later taught school – was located in the vicinity. Like Thoreau, a number of fellow former academy students lived along Main Street in adulthood. Not surprisingly, surviving documentation reveals a good deal of social interaction among neighboring families, including the Thoreaus.[14]

In Thoreau's time, Main Street from the intersection with Sudbury Road westward constituted an antislavery nexus. Mary Merrick Brooks was a leader of the Concord Female Antislavery Society and prominent in the Middlesex County Antislavery Society. Samuel Hoar and his son Ebenezer Rockwood Hoar addressed slavery through the law and politics. Carriage maker William Whiting was president of the Middlesex County Antislavery Society and vice president of the Massachusetts Antislavery Society. His son William Jr. and daughters Anna Maria and Louisa Jane (Mrs. Stephen Barker) also championed the cause.[15] The Prichard family was divided on the subject, but

daughter Lizzie – who married Edward Sherman Hoar in 1858 – was, in the opinion of her brother Moses, a "Red Hot Abolitionist."[16] Several area households (the Thoreaus included) also participated in hiding and transporting fugitives from slavery. The cohesion of this neighborhood network contributed to Concord's reputation as an antislavery town, nurtured a sense of trust among those engaged in illegal activities, and formed the backdrop to Thoreau's mounting indignation as he made his way toward the radical stance articulated in "Slavery in Massachusetts" (1854) and "A Plea for Captain John Brown" (1859).

Thoreau earned a mixed reputation for sociability. Contemporary assessments ranged from the assertion that he thought only about himself, to the observation that he was often misunderstood, to the opinion that he was "one of the pleasantest gentlemen, most social and agreeable, I ever met."[17] But there is no doubt that Thoreau needed friendship and companionship, and that Concord offered them. His associates ranged from thinkers, writers, and iconoclasts to humbler folk whose ingenuity, simplicity, and connection with nature he admired. Significantly, from 1834, Concord was Emerson's home. After Thoreau's graduation from Harvard in 1837, the two formed a close bond. Thoreau enjoyed Emerson's company, his family, his library, and (sometimes) the intellectual seekers who visited the town's resident philosopher. Between 1840 and 1843, Bronson Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Ellery Channing moved to Concord in quick succession. All three spent time with Thoreau. Moreover, he explored the natural world with his good friend Edward Sherman Hoar, with whom he shared a passion for Concord's plant life. (Alas, the misfortune of their accidentally setting fire to the woods at Fairhaven Bay in April 1844 fed the righteous anger of townspeople inclined to view Thoreau as selfish and arrogant.)

Thoreau's local friends were not only Concord's intellectuals. Although he sometimes disparaged the ordinary farmer, among Concord farmers were some he respected and a few he counted among his friends. He described Cyrus Hubbard as "a man of a certain New England probity and worth, immortal and natural, like a natural product" (*J* IX:144). He appreciated Edmund Hosmer – who helped him build his cabin at Walden Pond in 1845 and whom he dubbed "the most intelligent farmer in Concord–& perchance in Middlesex" (*PJ* 5:191) – and George Minott – "perhaps the most poetical farmer" (*PJ* 4:116). He esteemed other out-of-doors types, too: "Fishermen, hunters,

woodchoppers . . . spending their lives in the fields and woods, in a peculiar sense a part of Nature themselves . . . often in a more favorable mood for observing her . . . than philosophers or poets even, who approach her with expectation" (*W* 210). He had ample opportunity to interact with such men while living at Walden and while traversing the local terrain.

If life in the center of Concord kept Thoreau tenuously within the social grid, his residence at Walden Pond between 1845 and 1847 took him away from the village. Without offering actual wilderness, Walden fully demonstrated the necessity and the advantage of the wild, and dwelling there reinforced and sharpened Thoreau's awareness of and perspective on the disordered demands of commercial life, common culture, politics, religion, and education. The environs of the pond held evidence of the social marginalization that Concord's values could beget. Civilized Concord relegated the immigrant Irish who came to lay the Fitchburg Railroad to a fringe existence: "It is a mistake to suppose that, in a country where the usual evidences of civilization exist, the condition of a very large body of the inhabitants may not be as degraded as that of savages . . . To know this I should not need to look farther than to the shanties which every where border our railroads, that last improvement in civilization; where I see in my daily walks human beings living in sties" (*W* 34–35). Likewise, neither did Concord fully embrace the various "Former Inhabitants" – African Americans and others of little social standing – who had occupied the Walden area before Thoreau moved there, or the few remaining descendants of the Native people who had populated Concord before English settlement. Thoreau wrote: "Still here and there an Indian squaw with her dog–her only companion–lives in some lone house–insulted by school-children–making baskets & picking berries her employment" (*PJ* 3:93).

Concord was Thoreau's place of residence, and it was also where he earned his living – as a teacher, a household caretaker for Emerson, an odd-jobber, a pencil maker, and a surveyor. (He practiced writing in Concord, as well, but that proved more craft than livelihood.) The town favored the Thoreaus' success in the pencil and graphite business. It was a hub of pencil-making from the early nineteenth century, when William Monroe produced some of the earliest lead pencils made in America. Charles Dunbar (Thoreau's uncle) and Cyrus Stow of Concord followed Monroe, and, in the 1820s, Thoreau's father John took over their business.[18] Pencil-making in the family enterprise channeled

Henry Thoreau's innate mechanical ability and pride in a job well done. Nevertheless, he objected to the way doing anything for money reduced the individual: "To have done anything by which you earned money *merely* is to have been truly idle or worse . . . Those services which the community will most readily pay for it is most disagreeable to render . . . The aim of the laborer should be, not to get his living . . . but to perform well a certain work" (*RP* 158–59).

Surveying – Thoreau's other main profession – proved conflicting because it required looking at the Concord landscape as a marketable commodity and thus in a manner radically different from his practice of observing the landscape as a means of accessing truth.[19] Most of the surveys that Thoreau undertook for his Concord clients were motivated by pragmatic considerations – establishing boundary lines between neighboring properties, preparing for the sale of properties, opening up new parcels of real estate for development, estimating the amount of lumber available for cutting on particular woodlots, providing the data necessary to resolve legal disputes.[20] All of these motivations reflected a sense of reality at odds with Thoreau's. But surveying also took Thoreau outside. Noticing nearby vegetation while working, he commented: "Even this is a cheering and compensating discovery in my otherwise barren work. I get thus a few positive values, answering to the bread and cheese which make my dinner. I owe thus to my weeks at surveying a few . . . slight but positive discoveries" (*J* X:221). Moreover, the process drew on the same powers of perception and expression as did the nature observations that filled his Journal, the social commentary conveyed in his reform lectures and writings, and his sustained accumulation of information on Native life and culture.[21] Surveying provided another lens through which he looked at Concord and, through Concord, at the world. As Laura Walls has noted, "One of Thoreau's ways of seeing a thing was to measure it . . . but to regard this behavior as merely compulsive is to overlook its purpose, which was to reveal patterns that enabled insight into all sorts of unsuspected connections."[22]

Thoreau's relationship with Concord was fundamental and complex, and he acknowledged as much: "A man dwells in his native valley like a corolla in its calyx, like an acorn in its cup. *Here*, of course, is all that you love, all that you expect, all that you are . . . Here is all the best and all the worst you can imagine. What more do you want?" (*J* XI:275). His close readers and admirers have always grasped the inseparability of the author and his hometown. Significantly, in the late nineteenth

century, the proto-Thoreauvians who aimed to secure his reputation for posterity orbited around Alfred Hosmer of Concord – another life-long Concordian who knew the place inside-out.[23] Today, despite the fact that Thoreau is read and studied in far-flung corners of the globe, awareness of Concord's centrality to him still conspicuously expresses itself in pilgrimages to his hometown as a means of fathoming his life and work.

Notes

1 Robert A. Gross, "'That Terrible Thoreau': Concord and Its Hermit," in *A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. William E. Cain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 181–241.
2 Leslie Perrin Wilson, *In History's Embrace: Past and Present in Concord, Massachusetts* (Hollis, NH: Hollis Publishing, 2007), xi, 1–2.
3 Peter Blakemore "Reading Home: Thoreau, Literature, and the Phenomenon of Inhabitation," in *Thoreau's Sense of Place: Essays in American Environmental Writing*, ed. Richard J. Schneider (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 117.
4 Robert D. Richardson, Jr., "Thoreau and Concord," in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Joel Myerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 23.
5 Robert Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading: A Study in Intellectual History, with Bibliographical Catalogue* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 267–68.
6 David F. Wood, *An Observant Eye: The Thoreau Collection at the Concord Museum* (Concord, MA: Concord Museum, 2006), 24–28.
7 Fire Society records, Charitable Library Society records, Concord Atheneum records, Concord Ornamental Tree Society records, Middlesex Agricultural Society records (Box 2, Item 1), First Parish in Concord records (Box IV.1, Folder 1), William Munroe Special Collections, Concord Free Public Library (hereafter designated CFPL).
8 Concord Female Charitable Society records, Volume I.a.1, William Munroe Special Collections, CFPL; Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, *To Set This World Right: The Antislavery Movement in Thoreau's Concord* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).
9 Concord Lyceum records, Volume A1, William Munroe Special Collections, CFPL.
10 Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading*, 26, 42; Concord Social Library records, Box 1, Folder 2 (record book, 1821–51), William Munroe Special Collections, CFPL.
11 Henry David Thoreau, sign-off from membership in First Parish in Concord, January 6, 1841. First Parish in Concord records, Box IV.6, Folder 1. Robert Gross observes that Thoreau was far from alone in signing off from membership. "'That Terrible Thoreau,'" 187.
12 Concord Farmers' Club records, William Munroe Special Collections, CFPL.