

## THE JONESES AND THOREAU'S NARCOLEPSY

"According to legend, Mohammed was cured of [narcolepsy](#) with [coffee](#)."

– Wolfgang Schivelbusch, TASTES OF PARADISE:  
A SOCIAL HISTORY OF SPICES, STIMULANTS, AND  
INTOXICANTS. NY: Pantheon Books, 1992,  
page 17.<sup>1</sup>

"[M]y health inclined me to the peripatetic philosophy." Thoreau wrote in WALDEN, don't you remember, about his Uncle Charley, who once went to sleep while shaving himself. Thoreau had inherited this disorder through his mother Cynthia Dunbar Thoreau, and through Cynthia's mother, of the Jones family, and this troublesome tendency made it necessary for him to walk at least four hours per day. (You knew, didn't you, that we none of us do anything, even become an observer of nature, for just one reason? Does this say anything about the spirit in which Thoreau approached his primary metaphor for the spiritual life, as in "Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep" and "To be awake is to be alive" and "We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn," on page 90 of WALDEN, and "like a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments," on page 324?) We now know not only that the susceptibility to [narcolepsy](#) has a genetic component, but also that almost all affected persons have a chemical called HLA-DR2 on the surface of their white blood cells, and the current hypothesis is that the gene which enables production of this chemical is near the site of some gene which helps schedule the production of some alertness chemical. The name assigned to this alertness chemical is "orexin." The illness, which tends to develop in adolescence or early adulthood, seems to be caused by problems in how the brain processes this neurotransmitter chemical, and it seems likely that what happens is that somehow the body's immune system sometimes tags some of these helpful cells as foreign bodies, and destroys them, thus limiting the production of this orexin. At some point we may have learned enough about this genetic susceptibility to take a sample of DNA from the grave in Sleepy Hollow cemetery, the one on which the stone says simply "HENRY," containing a 5' 7'' skeleton with a size 7 skull and a complete set of false teeth, and a good chunk of toe missing from getting at the family ax "without advice"

1. Schivelbusch points out that this legend is a dubious one as Mohammed died in AD 694 and although [coffee](#) was in use as medicine "as early as the 10th century" its popularity as a beverage in Islam dates to "certainly no earlier than the 15th century." – Nevertheless, could we not recommend this as a form of argumentative outreach, to the Pope?

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at the age of two or three, and the remains of a wreath of Thoreau’s “favorite flower” andromeda on the remains of its rib cage – and study the form taken by this disorder in this famous case.

One historical issue we should face is that in the late 19th Century, the primary theory of narcolepsy became that it was the result of excessive masturbation and the repression of homosexuality. The question would be – did any Thoreau scholars or Thoreau readers during the late 19th Century play connect-the-dots, and reason from this utterly false theory of the origins of narcolepsy to the idea that Thoreau, who suffered from it, must therefore have been a repressed, masturbating homosexual? Or, was nobody paying that much attention to Thoreau during the late 19th Century, and did our memory of him thus escape these erroneous implications?

To get clear on this, we will need to know who, specifically, it was who had formulated such a theory, and in what year, specifically the theory was formulated, and how widely, specifically, that false supposition had been disseminated.

1843

May: “Went to [Judge William Emerson’s home “The Snuggery” at Castleton on] Staten Island, June, 1843, and returned in December, 1843, or to Thanksgiving.”<sup>2</sup> Immediately after arrival Henry Thoreau would come down with two and a half weeks of cold and bronchitis, then a month later he would have an attack of the family [narcolepsy](#). Passing back and forth on the ferry between New-York and Staten Island, Thoreau would have repeatedly passed the immigration center at Castle Garden, a repurposed fortress structure which did not even as yet have a roof.<sup>3</sup> Thoreau’s haunts on Manhattan Island would be the New York Society Library and the Mercantile Library, and his reading list has recently been investigated. He would visit the picture gallery of the National Academy of Design.

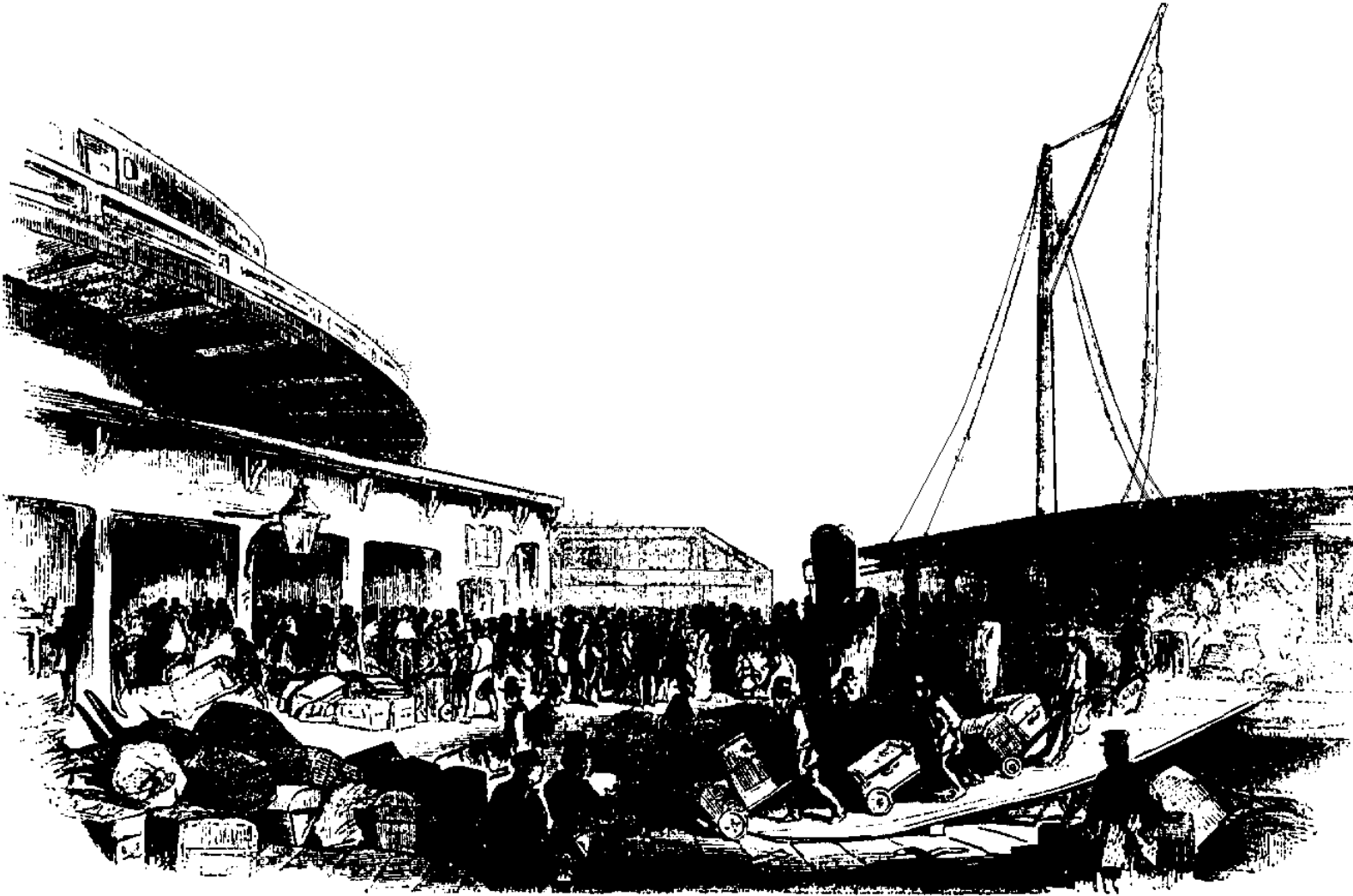
2. Thanksgiving, in November, according to the [Universal Traveller](#), was one of the occasions upon which traditionally apprentices “who are not permitted to visit their parental and rural homes more than twice in a year” were expected to travel home “to renew the bonds of affinity and affection under the paternal roof.”

3. Very little of what Henry Thoreau saw now remains, as the building has been demolished back to its ordinary 1811 appearance.

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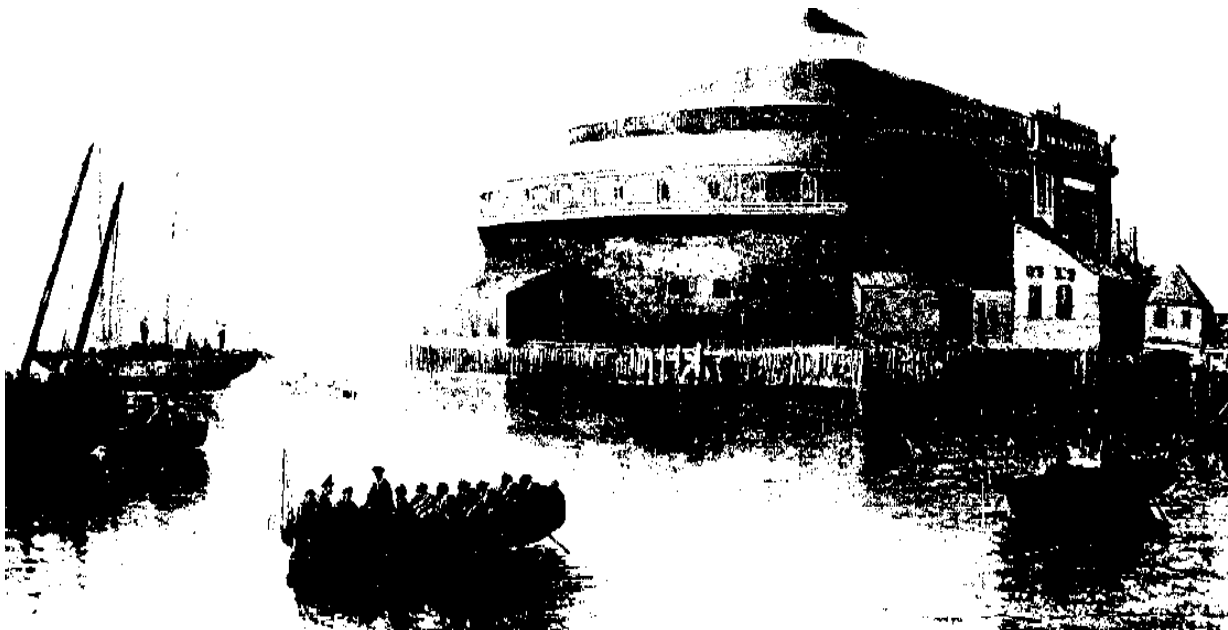
May 6: On the day that Ellery Channing’s ill-fated POEMS BY WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING was with great fanfare being published, Henry Thoreau escorted Mrs. William Emerson, bound from Concord for Staten Island. Thoreau was to tutor Judge Emerson’s son Haven, 7 years old, for wages of \$50.<sup>00</sup> per year plus room and board, while seeking publishing contacts in New-York. They took a boat from New London CT to a wharf by Castle Garden Emigrant Depot in Battery Park on Manhattan Island, and then boarded the ferry to Staten Island.



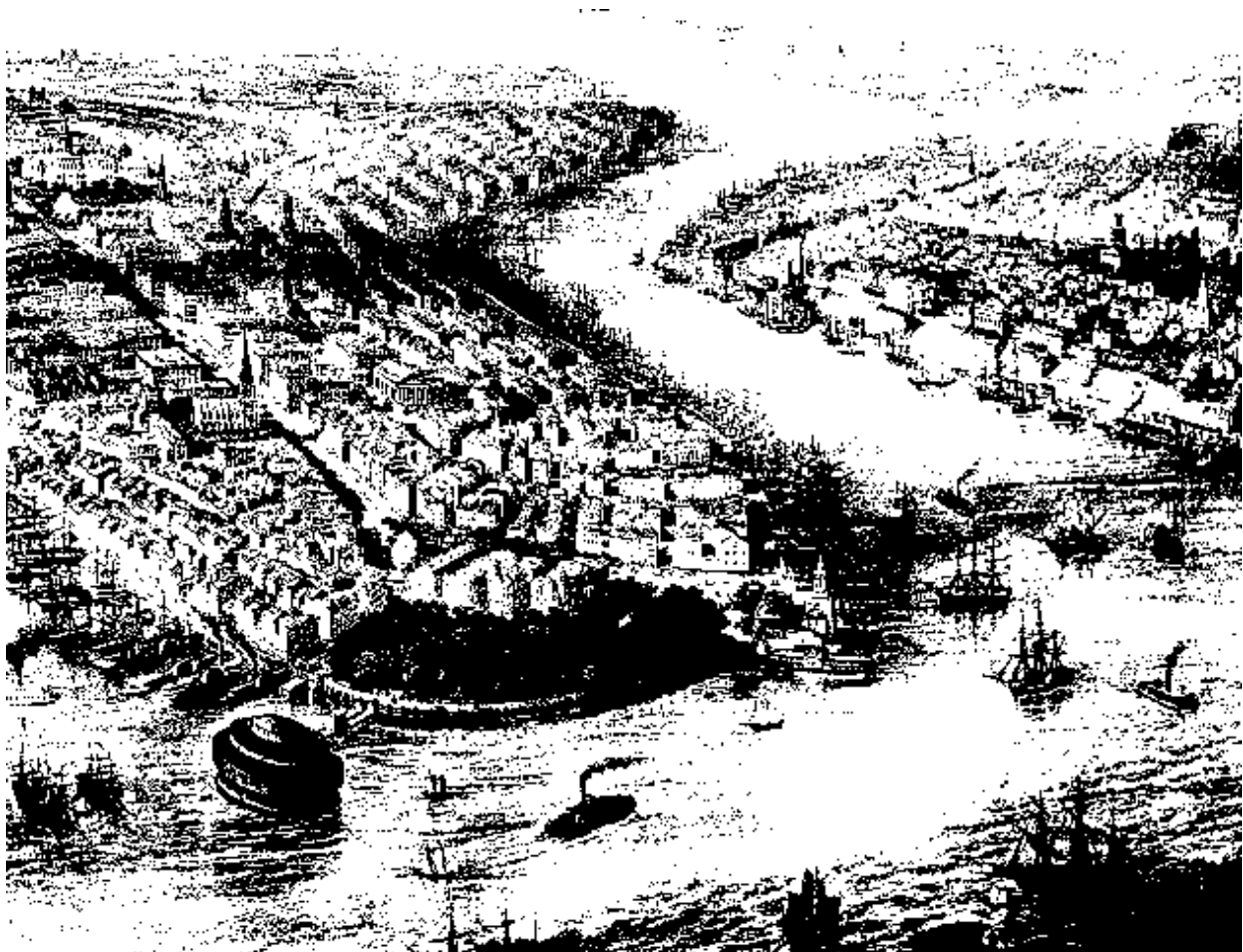
Immigrants disembarking at Castle Garden Emigrant Depot

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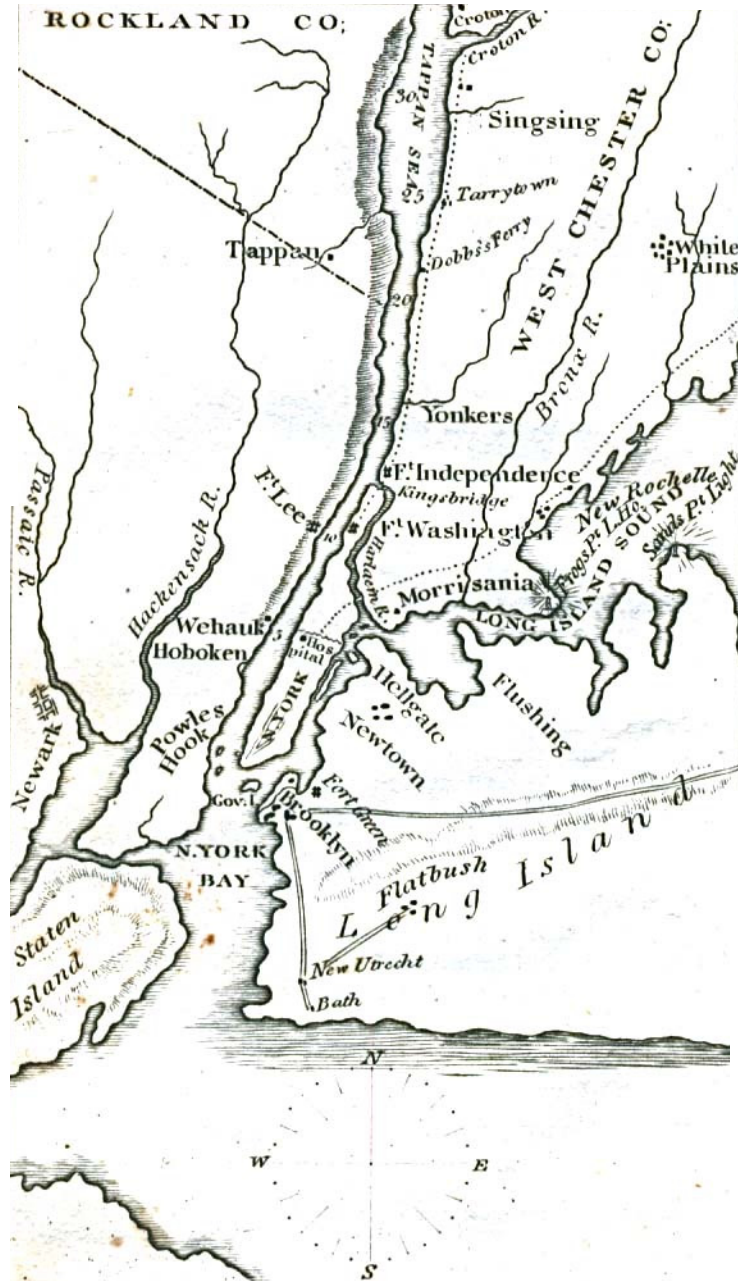


Two more views of a place now forgotten that was important in the memories of a whole lot of people in the 19th Century



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As Henry Thoreau was departing for Staten Island, Elizabeth Sherman Hoar made him the present of an inkstand, which he would use throughout his life.



This is the one now on exhibit in the Concord Museum:

WALDEN: Housework was a pleasant pastime. When my floor was dirty, I rose early, and, setting all my furniture out of doors on the grass, bed and bedstead making but one budget, dashed water on the floor, and sprinkled white sand from the pond on it, and then with a broom scrubbed it clean and white; and by the time the villagers had broken their fast the morning sun had dried my house sufficiently to allow me to move in again, and my meditations were almost uninterrupted. It was pleasant to see my whole household effects out on the grass, making a little pile like a gypsy's pack, and my three-legged table, from which I did not remove the books and pen and ink, standing amid the pines and hickories. They seemed glad to get out themselves, and as if unwilling to be brought in. I was sometimes tempted to stretch an awning over them and take my seat there. It was worth the while to see the sun shine on these things, and hear the free wind blow on them; so much more interesting most familiar objects look out of doors than in the house. A bird sits on the next bough, life-everlasting grows under the table, and blackberry vines run round its legs; pine cones, chestnut burs, and strawberry leaves are strewn about. It looked as if this was the way these forms came to be transferred to our furniture, to tables, chairs, and bedsteads, -because they once stood in their midst.

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One can imagine this inkstand later, on the table in the mottled light under the pines.

While Henry Thoreau would be living on Staten Island and putting up with the stodgy William Emerson the “clear Jones” in him would be becoming so drowsy, or [narcoleptic](#), that in his efforts to counteract



this he would even attempt making spare change by selling magazine subscriptions door to door.

WALDEN: That man who does not believe that each day contains an earlier, more sacred, and auroral hour than he has yet profaned, has despaired of life, and is pursuing a descending and darkening way. After a partial cessation of his sensuous life, the soul of man, or its organs rather, are reinvigorated each day, and his Genius tries again what noble life it can make. All memorable events, I should say, transpire in morning time and in a morning atmosphere. The Vedas say, “All intelligences awake with the morning.” Poetry and art, and the fairest and most memorable of the actions of men, date from such an hour. All poets and heroes, like Memnon, are the children of Aurora, and emit their music at sunrise. To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning. It matters not what the clocks say or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep. Why is it that men give so poor an account of their day if they have not been slumbering? They are not such poor calculators. If they had not been overcome with drowsiness they would have performed something. The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?

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July 7: Henry Thoreau was being attacked by the family tendency to [narcolepsy](#), so strongly present in his Uncle [Charles Jones Dunbar](#) that he described in WALDEN how once his uncle went to sleep while shaving himself with a straight razor, and had to have something to do of a Sunday such as rubbing the sprouts off stored potatoes to keep from going to sleep:

**WALDEN:** Breed's hut was standing only a dozen years ago, though it had long been unoccupied. It was about the size of mine. It was set on fire by mischievous boys, one Election night, if I do not mistake. I lived on the edge of the village then, and had just lost myself over Davenant's Gondibert, that winter that I labored with a lethargy, -which, by the way, I never knew whether to regard as a family complaint, having an uncle who goes to sleep shaving himself, and is obliged to sprout potatoes in a cellar Sundays, in order to keep awake and keep the Sabbath, or as the consequence of my attempt to read Chalmers' collection of English poetry without skipping. It fairly overcame my Nervii. I had just sunk my head on this when the bells rung fire, and in hot haste the engines rolled that way, led by a straggling troop of men and boys, and I among the foremost, for I had leaped the brook. We thought it was far south over the woods, -we who had run to fires before,- barn, shop, or dwelling-house, or all together. "It's Baker's barn," cried one. "It is the Codman Place," affirmed another. And then fresh sparks went up above the wood, as if the roof fell in, and we all shouted "Concord to the rescue!" Wagons shot past with furious speed and crushing loads, bearing, perchance, among the rest, the agent of the Insurance Company, who was bound to go however far; and ever and anon the engine bell tinkled behind, more slow and sure, and rearmost of all, as it was afterward whispered, came they who set the fire and gave the alarm. Thus we kept on like true idealists, rejecting the evidence of our senses, until at a turn in the road we heard crackling and actually felt the heat of the fire from over the wall, and realized, alas! that we were there. The very nearness of the fire but cooled our ardor. At first we thought to throw a frog-pond on to it; but concluded to let it burn, it was so far gone and so worthless. So we stood round our engine, jostled one another, expressed our sentiments through speaking trumpets, or in lower tone referred to the great conflagrations which the world has witness, including Bascom's shop, and, between ourselves we thought that, were we there in season with our "tub", and a full frog-pond by, we could turn that threatened last and universal one into another flood. We finally retreated without doing any mischief, -returned to sleep and Gondibert. But as for Gondibert, I would except that passage in the preface about wit being the soul's powder, -"but most of mankind are strangers to wit, as Indians are to powder."

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*The demon which is said to haunt the Jones family, hovering over their eyelids with wings steeped in juice of poppies, has commenced another campaign against me. I am “clear Jones” in this respect at least.*

**Thoreau was  
“clear Jones”  
in one respect  
at least ...**

According to Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, Uncle [Charles Jones Dunbar](#) had been in the practice of mimicking a currently popular ventriloquist, magician, and juggler named Potter. In corroboration of this he quoted a snippet from Thoreau’s journal:



Ever since I knew him he could swallow his nose. One of his tricks was to swallow the knives and forks and some of the plates at a tavern table, and offer to give them up if the landlord would charge nothing for his meal. He could do anything with cards, yet did not gamble. Uncle Charles should have been in Concord in 1843, when Daniel Webster was there. What a whetter-up of his memory that event would have been! ...



March 28, 1856: Uncle Charles buried at Haverhill. He was born in February, 1780, the winter of the Great Snow, and he died in the winter of another great snow, —a life bounded by great snows. ...

**Consider WALDEN’s “If they had not been overcome with drowsiness ...”:**

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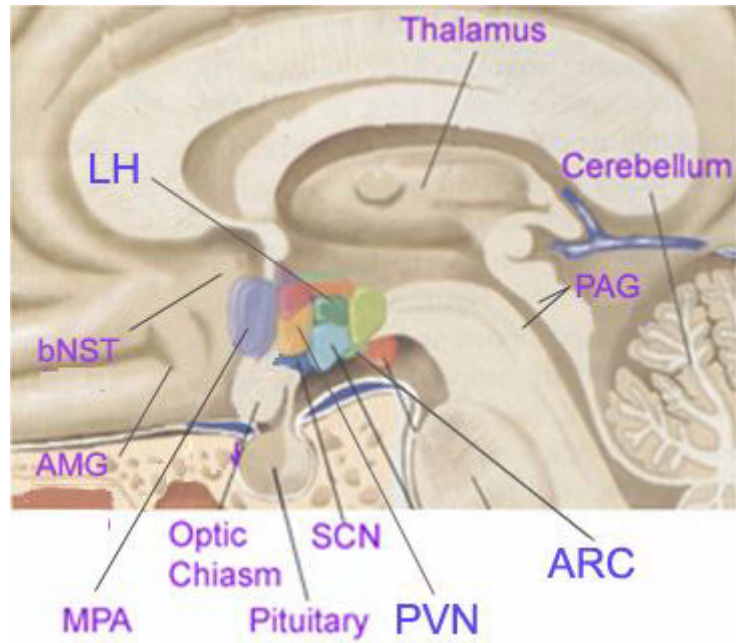
While Henry Thoreau was living on Staten Island and putting up with the stodgy William Emersons in 1843 the “clear Jones” in him had become so drowsy, or [narcoleptic](#), that in his efforts to counteract this he even tried making spare change by selling magazine subscriptions door to door.

**1935**

Doctors began to prescribe amphetamines for [narcolepsy](#).

2004

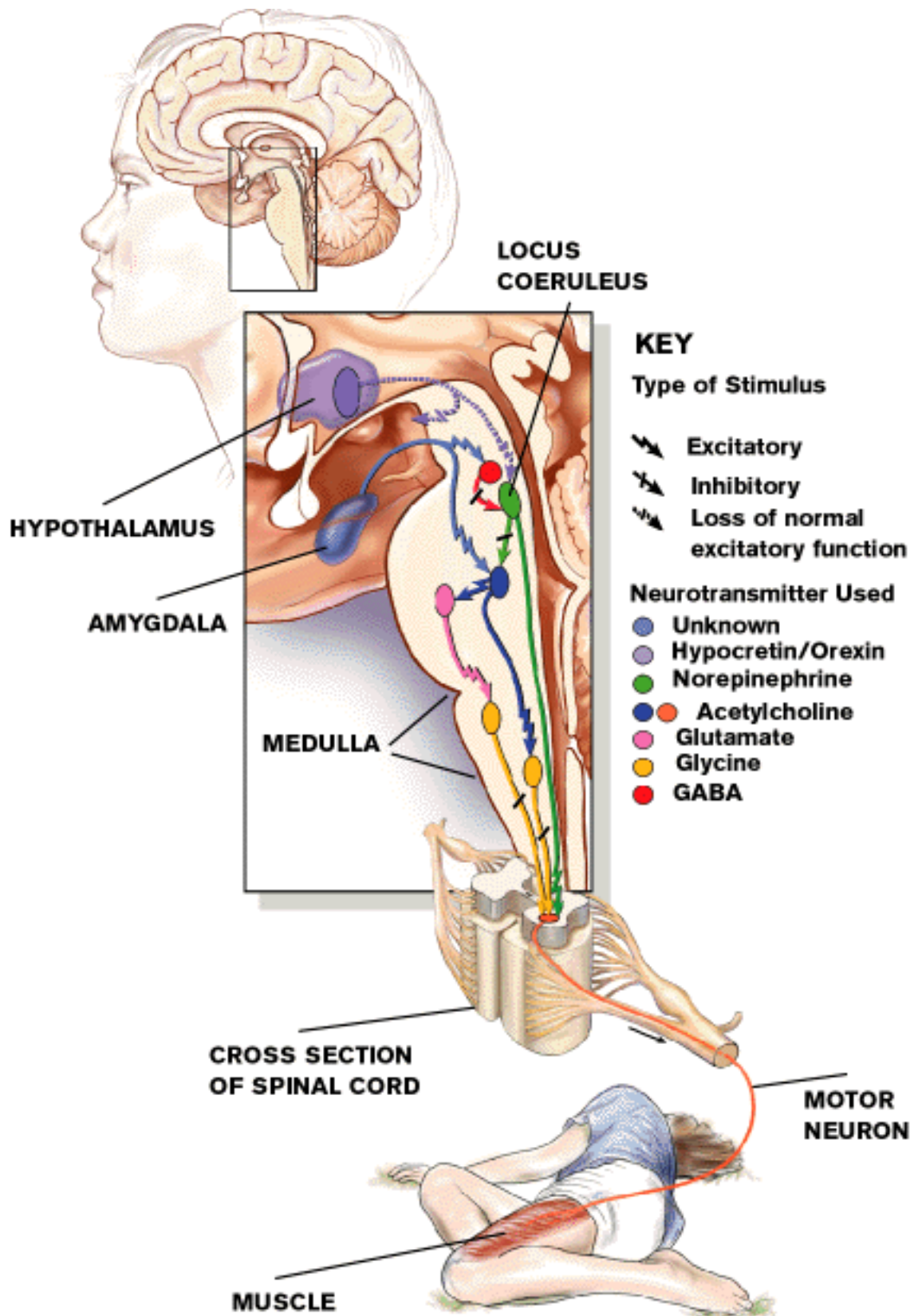
Scientists discovered that [narcolepsy](#) is caused by underproduction of orexin in the lateral region of the hypothalamus in the brain (colored green and marked LH in this illustration).



Henry Thoreau's Brain

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*"It's all now you see. Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago."*

*- Remark by character "Garin Stevens"  
in William Faulkner's INTRUDER IN THE DUST*



**Prepared: October 21, 2008**

## *ARRGH: THE ATOMATED RESEARCH*

### *REPORT GENERATION HOTLINE*



This stuff presumably looks to you as if it were generated by a human. Such is not the case. Instead, upon someone's request we have pulled it out of the hat of a pirate that has grown out of the shoulder of our pet parrot "Laura" (depicted above). What these chronological lists are: they are research reports compiled by ARRGH algorithms out of a database of data modules which we term the Kouroo Contexture. This is data mining. To respond to such a request for information, we merely push a button.

Commonly, the first output of the program has obvious deficiencies and so we need to go back into the data modules stored in the contexture and do a minor amount of tweaking, and then we need to punch that button again and do a recompile of the chronology – but there is nothing here that remotely resembles the ordinary "writerly" process which you know and love. As the contents of this originating contexture improve, and as the programming improves, and as funding becomes available (to date no funding whatever has been needed in the creation of this facility, the entire operation being run out of pocket change) we expect a diminished need to do such tweaking and recompiling, and we fully expect to achieve a simulation of a generous and untiring robotic research librarian. Onward and upward in this brave new world.

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