

## ROLAND WELLS ROBBINS



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1863

September 27, Sunday: [Bronson Alcott](#) noted: "Abby walks with me to Walden. We find the old paths by which I used to visit [[Henry Thoreau](#)] from 'Hillside,' but the grounds are much overgrown with shrubbery, and the site of the hermitage is almost obliterated."

ALCOTT FAMILY

HERMITS

(It is clear that at this point no cairn had yet been begun at the site on the shore of Walden Pond, where [Emerson's \(Thoreau's\) shanty](#) had once stood.)

THOREAU'S CAIRN



1908

March 21, Saturday: [Roland Wells Robbins](#) was born in Worcester.

Wages at cotton mills in Chicopee and Holyoke, Massachusetts were cut 10%.

Three songs by Frederick Delius for solo voice and orchestra were premiered in Liverpool, England: Twilight Fancies to words of Bjørnson, The Bird's Story to words of Ibsen, and The Violet to words of Holstein.

An Italian auto-racing team had been motoring west from New York for some five weeks in their powerful *Züst* when, in Wyoming, they encountered a road hazard. The New York Times would report that they needed to honk the horn and blink the headlights to frighten wolves away — killing 20 with their rifles (refer to Antonio Scarfoglio's 1909 *Il giro del mondo in automobile*).

1924

[Roland Wells Robbins](#) dropped out of high school.

1929

In the Great Depression, [Roland Wells Robbins](#) lost his job. His mother, Lucy May Robbins, died.

1931

[Roland Wells Robbins](#) father, Fred Flint Robbins, died.

1932

[Roland Wells Robbins](#) moved to Vermont to write poetry.



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1934

August: [Roland Wells Robbins](#) got married with Geraldine Prior. The couple returned from Vermont to Massachusetts.

1936

The family of [Roland Wells Robbins](#) moved into a new house.

1937

[Roland Wells Robbins](#) and Geraldine Prior Robbins had a son, Richard “Dick” Robbins.

1938

[Roland Wells Robbins](#) published THRU THE COVERED BRIDGE, a book of poems mostly about Vermont rural living, in 500 copies, illustrated by Karl E. Genter (Stoneham MA: George R. Barnstead & Son).

September 21, Wednesday: British mediator Lord Runciman recommended to Prime Minister Chamberlain that the Sudenland be transferred to [Germany](#) without a referendum.

Czechoslovakia agreed to an Anglo-French plan which included the cession of the Sudetenland to [Germany](#). President Benes announced the agreement in a communique critical of Czechoslovakia’s “friends” Great Britain and France.

Spanish leader Juan Negrín advised the League of Nations that all International Brigades were to be withdrawn from the fighting.

Poland demanded that Czechoslovakia hand over the Teschen (Cieszyn) district.

In the worst weather disaster for New England in its history, the 4th most fatal in all US history, the Category



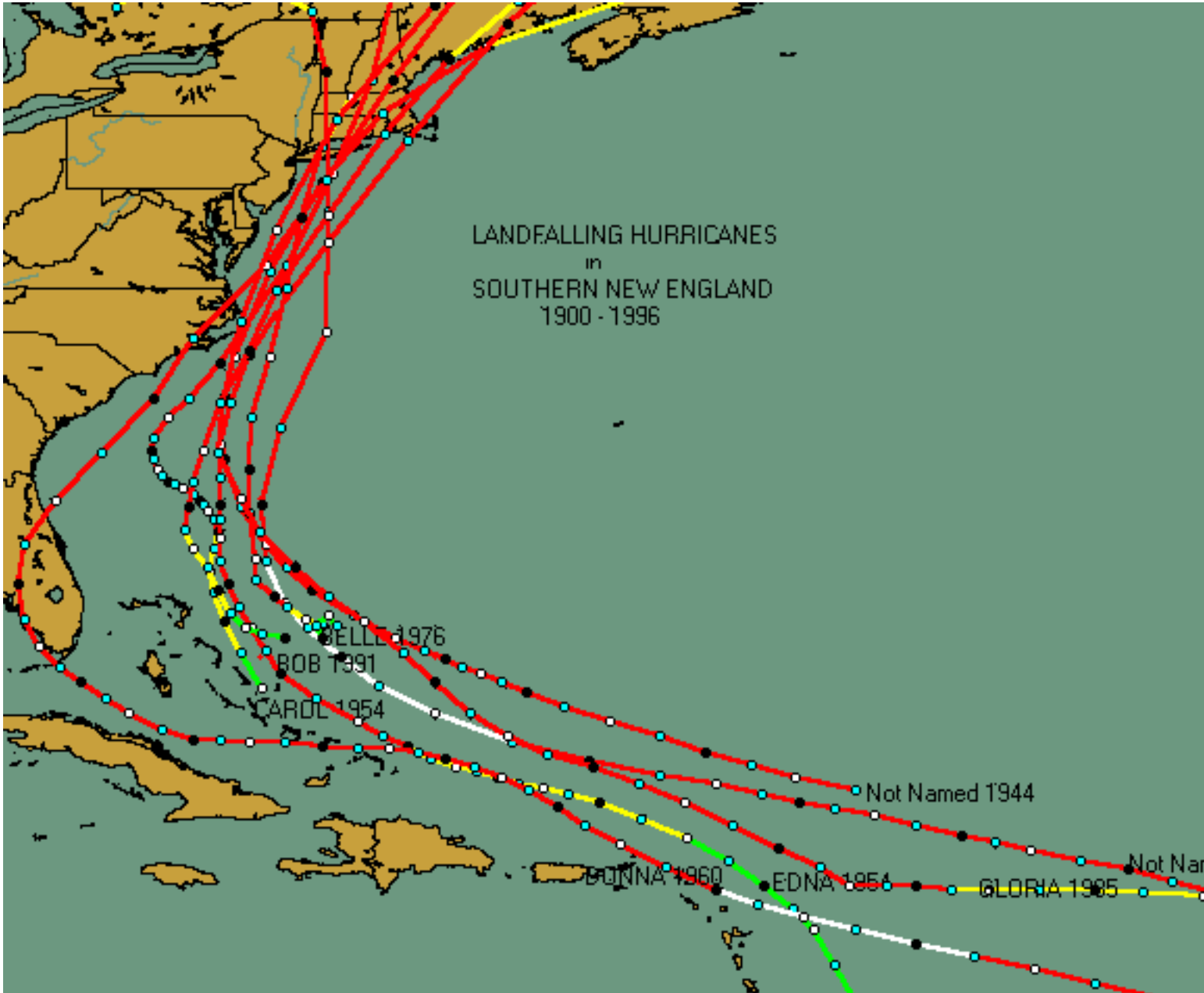
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Four hurricane to be known as the “Long Island Express” struck seven states in seven hours and 682 died, 433 of whom were [Rhode Islanders](#).<sup>1</sup> Drifting dead, typically wearing heavy boots, were initially estimated from the air by counting the tops of heads that could be seen bobbing along the surfline. The downtown of [Providence](#) flooded 17 feet above its street surfaces. All the enormous mature elm-trees surrounding the [Newport](#) “cottage” named “The Elms” were blown down.<sup>2</sup> In Arlington, the steeple of the Pleasant Street Congregational Church was toppled. Most of the remaining isolated mature white pines that had been planted in the sandy loam by [Henry Thoreau](#) in what had been his beanfield in Walden Woods during his residency on Walden Pond, those that had not burned in that railroad fire in the 1890s, isolated as they had become by fire and standing only in sandy soil, were upset by the winds, which were measured to occasionally gust up to 183 miles per hour — with the exception of one grand old tree which could still be seen from a distance.<sup>3</sup>

**WALDEN:** I planted about two acres and a half of upland; and as it was only about fifteen years since the land was cleared, and I myself had got out two or three cords of stumps, I did not give it any manure; but in the course of the summer it appeared by the arrowheads which I turned up in hoeing, that an extinct nation had anciently dwelt here and planted corn and beans ere white men came to clear the land, and so, to some extent, had exhausted the soil for this very crop.

1. Some 4-foot-long metal tubes jammed into the marshy soil and sediment layers at Succotash Marsh in East Matunuck, [Rhode Island](#) (at the west side of the ocean entrance of the [Narragansett Bay](#)) by Tom Webb of the Geological Sciences Department of [Brown University](#), have revealed that there has been a series of overwash fans created by storm tidal surges, indicating that seven category-three hurricanes have struck Narragansett lowlands in about the past millennium. The 1st such overwash fan that has been revealed dated to the period 1295-1407CE, the 2nd to the period of roughly the first half of the 15th Century, the 3rd to approximately 1520CE (give or take a few decades), the 4th to the historic storm of the 14th and 15th of August, 1635, the 5th to the historic storm of September 23, 1815, and the 6th to the historic storm of October 4/5, 1869. The 7th such overwash fan obviously dates specifically to this historic storm of September 21, 1938.
2. 15% of the mature trees in New England were destroyed.
3. Professor Walter Roy Harding was said to be able to lead walkers through the woods to the base of this remaining tree.



Securely held in the root system of one of the white pines which had been blown over –although no-one would recognize this until [Roland Wells Robbins](#), an archeologist who lived on the old Cambridge turnpike, would inspect this eroded root system on November 11, 1945– were some of the stones from the foundation of the chimney of [Emerson's \(Thoreau's\) shanty](#):



A tree snapped and fell over the roof of the [Concord](#) bank, and one of the Doric pillars was knocked off its front portico.



The “Texas” House, already damaged by fire, was destroyed during this hurricane.



The Great Elm on Monument Square, the one known about town as the “Whipping Post Elm” despite the fact that it had never been used in such a manner, was severely damaged.

In [New Bedford](#), there was a storm surge of between 12 and 16 feet, and damage amounting to what today would be at least \$3.5 billion.

1939

[Roland Wells Robbins](#) and Geraldine Prior Robbins had a daughter, Jean Robbins.

1943

[Roland Wells Robbins](#) began research on “[The Minuteman](#)” statue.



1944

[Roland Wells Robbins](#) and Geraldine Prior Robbins had another daughter, Bonita Robbins.

1945

Roland Wells Robbins's THE STORY OF THE MINUTEMAN (Stoneham MA: George R. Bamstead and Son).



➡ Our national birthday, the 4th of July, Wednesday: In Berlin, Germany in a formal ceremony involving a 48-gun salute, the Stars and Stripes was being hoisted over the Adolf Hitler Barracks (before this year, as everyone present for the ceremony appreciated, it would have been hard to imagine something like this being allowed to happen on the 4th of July).

CELEBRATING OUR B-DAY  
WORLD WAR II




With written permission from the park authorities, Roland Wells Robbins, an amateur archeologist who lived on the old Cambridge turnpike, began to search for the remains of Henry Thoreau's habitation near the shore of Walden Pond.

In the ➡ July issue of The Atlantic Monthly, which was on the newsstand in Concord while Robbins was digging at Walden Pond, we saw another signal event in the development of ELECTRIC WALDEN: Dr. Vannevar Bush, a bomb expert, had finally found a forum for his pioneering article "As We May Think," the foundation thinking on the MEMEX or memory-expander (an idea for a personal computer of sorts, and on hypertext).

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November 11, Sunday: [Roland Wells Robbins](#) discovered, on this day, embedded in the roots of one of the white pines on the bank of Walden Pond that had blown down in the 1938 hurricane,  some of the stones of the foundation of [Henry Thoreau](#)'s chimney.





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1976

During this year [Roland Wells Robbins](#) was serving as a Lecturer-in-Residence at Juniata State College. He concluded that when in 1891 in darkness and secrecy, Judge Ebenezer Rockwood Hoar had reinterred at the [Old North Bridge](#) a Revolutionary-War skull (it had been taken by [Doctor Walton Felch](#), he had chosen the wrong gravesite, in that the skull should instead have been returned to a Revolutionary-War gravesite in Lincoln. Does the Concord gravesite now contain one, two, or three skulls, and does the Lincoln gravesite now contain three or five skulls? –Although it is unlikely that either burial is now going to be opened in order to clear this up, there do exist techniques by which such sites can be explored without appreciable digging.

1977

[Roland Wells Robbins](#) delivered a Dublin Seminar lecture.



1978

July: The rock cairn near the site of Emerson's (Thoreau's) shanty, which had been removed in 1975 at the order of Reservation Commissioner Brennan because he considered the big pile of stones to be "unsightly," was replaced (presumably using other rocks) due to continual complaints from the Thoreau Society.

CABIN ESCAPISM AND HOW IT GREW:

"We went to the wilderness because 100 years ago a man wrote a book."



YEAR	PERSON	BOOK	PLACE
1889	Philip G. Herbert, Jr.	LIBERTY AND A LIVING	Long Island
1951	Vena Angier and Bradford Angier	AT HOME IN THE WOODS: LIVING THE LIFE OF THOREAU TODAY	Hudson Hope, British Columbia
1968	Edward Abby	DESERT SOLITAIRE	Utah
1971	Charles Seib	THE WOODS: ONE MAN'S ESCAPE TO NATURE	North Carolina
1974	Annie Dillard	PILGRIM AT TINKER CREEK	Virginia
1978	George Sibley	PART OF A WINTER	mountains of Colorado
1983	Gilbert Byron	COVE DWELLER	Maryland's eastern shore
1987	Anne LaBastille	BEYOND BLACK BEAR LAKE	Adirondack Mountains

1984

Roland Wells Robbins conducted excavations at the Munroe Tavern.

1987

February 8, Sunday: Roland Wells Robbins died in Lincoln, Massachusetts.



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1998

June 10, Wednesday: Bradley P. Dean, Ph.D. has provided us with an account of the grand opening of the Thoreau Institute:

Sure, I'll say a bit about the grand opening, prefacing my remarks with the observation that it was a spectacular event. We were blessed with almost unbelievably wonderful weather (sunny, low humidity, pleasant breeze), lots of laudatory talk about Thoreau, lots of laudatory talk about those of us involved in getting the Institute going, a truly stunning new building, very lovely grounds, terrific volunteers (about 70 of them!), excellent and plentiful food and drinks (from what I heard), and gracious and patient guests (maybe 600 or so), some of them quite prominent.

It would be very nice, I think, if others who attended the event, in whatever capacity, were to write up descriptions of the event from their particular perspective. If they would send their descriptions to me, I will collect them and, before long, put them on our Web site as part of a special "grand-opening" section of the site. And if they send me photos and other materials relating to the event, I will digitize those as well and put them on our site. Anyway, here goes.

In anticipation of the President and First Lady arriving, the Secret Service shut down the entire Institute site Friday at 10:30 a.m. Everyone had to leave the site during the sweep, which was conducted by agents and dogs. The Secret Service opened the site back up just before noon, and staff and volunteers and service people and others participating in the day (students for the videoconference, for instance) started filing back onto the site after waiting atop Pine Hill, about 500 yards northwest of the Institute, or waiting on the path on the southeast slope of Pine Hill.

Guests began to arrive around 11:45 or so and parked at the Codman House, about three-quarters of a mile south of the Institute, near Lincoln Center. Some VIPs parked in the lot down near Walden Pond, and a very few high-profile V-VIPs were driven up Baker Farm, the road leading to the Institute, to the

Institute grounds. Vans shuttled the non-V-VIP guests from the



Codman House and the Walden parking areas up to the top of Pine Hill, which is directly east of Walden Pond along Route 126 or Walden Road. There's an access road, usually locked, leading from Route 126 next to the pond to the top of Pine Hill, and at the top of the hill is an area to turn a vehicle around and a large water reservoir, built in the 1930s, I hear.

As guests got on the vans, they were given a descriptive flyer telling them about the significance of Pine Hill to Thoreau. Guests were dropped off at the top of the hill, and then they walked down a gently sloping path to the Institute grounds, where they had to go through a metal detector and where they were given a packet containing a lovely commemorative booklet and some other items. (Gift bags for each guest were placed before the event on each seat on the front lawn of the Institute.) Because I had to be down in the Media Center delivering presentations (see the multimedia tour at [www.walden.org](http://www.walden.org)-a trimmed-down version of part of the presentation we gave here, put together primarily by Mark Mosher, Jeanne Morley, and Monroe Poteet, all of Colorado Springs, who very generously donated their time and efforts), I did not see much of what was going on out on the front lawn, but I hear reports that all went very well.

The President and First Lady had attended the MIT graduation, where he delivered the commencement address, and then they went to a picnic with members of the Kennedy family to commemorate the anniversary of RFK's death. The President and First Lady were running about an hour late, which threw things off a bit for those of us at the Institute. In any case, the President and First Lady flew in one of four helicopters to nearby Hanscom Field, where their motorcade awaited them. Then they drove to the top of Pine Hill, where Don Henley and a bunch of press people met them. Don, the President, and the First Lady walked down the path from the top of Pine Hill to the Institute,



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arriving on the grounds, I think, at about 3:50 p.m. (They had been scheduled to get here at 3 p.m.) They joined several others who awaited them at the entrance to the new Research Center, and the party then toured the main floor of the Research Center, went out into the contemplative garden behind the Research Center, and then walked into the back door of the Media Center, where I was waiting with two young ladies (Kim Wing and Allyson Sgro, students from Boston Latin and Concord Middle School, respectively) and a very pleasant and talkative Secret Service agent, Roy Wilson. In addition to Don, with the Presidential party, as I recall, were Kathi Anderson, some aides, Don Henley's in-laws, and Senators Ted Kennedy and John Kerry.

Because we were running a bit later than planned, Kathi, who preceded the Presidential party, asked me to cut my presentation in half, so I had the two young ladies show the party the "virtual tour" that is on the Web site and that we projected onto a large screen so that a group of people could view it. (My colleagues and I figured that the President and First Lady would feel better about having two young people show them the technology rather than an old fellow with a reputation for saying untoward things at inconvenient times. Incidentally, there are two differences between what we showed in the Media Center and what is on the Web site: during the tours we ran a complete version of the computer-generated "fly-out" from the Institute, over Pine Hill, across Walden Pond, to Thoreau's Walden house site [Monroe Poteet put that together, and it is wonderful]; and we showed a videoclip of a helicopter fly-over of Walden Pond [put together by Scott Beyers of Minnesota from footage shot by the Rendon Group of Boston, a long-time donor to the Walden Woods Project] where on the Web site there is simply a partial panorama showing part of Thoreau's Cove and a portion of the pond.)

After leaving the Media Center, the Presidential party went upstairs, where the President and First Lady placed an original brick from Thoreau's Walden house site into the south wall of the Research Center. The brick came from the collection of [Roland Wells Robbins](#), which is now in the archives of the Research Center. The President and First Lady then went into the Executive Director's office on the main level of the Research Center and relaxed for a few minutes before joining the video conversation that was taking place in the library of the old building between that location (where students from three local schools were assembled) and a school in St. Petersburg, Russia. During this time the aforementioned young ladies and I walked to the Education Center, the old building here, so that they could participate in the video conversation and so that I could watch the rest of the day's festivities.

I went out to the front lawn, where the 600 or so guests were assembled, and we all watched the President, First Lady, and Don Henley participate in the video conversation, where some interesting things were said. Sometime after that, as I recall, Tony Bennett came out and sang the first part of "America the Beautiful." Then the two senators and Kathi and Don came out and sat on the platform that was set up out on the front lawn. Then the President and First Lady were introduced and walked to the



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platform. All the folks on the platform spoke, and everything went real well. Then the President and First Lady left the platform and walked a rope line that had been set up, shaking hands and such. The First Lady broke off early and came into the Education Center, but the President stayed behind to shake hands with guests and with the band that had played earlier. When he came into the house, all the Institute staff had assembled on the steps of the old building's great hall leading to the second floor, and the President and First Lady came in and had their photo taken with us. They then walked down a receiving line and shook hands with others who had helped make the day so successful. Just as they were ready to leave, the President made an odd, shrugging gesture to one of the Secret Service agents, and the two of them headed off at a trot to the second floor, obviously to find a bathroom that was not being used. That was a nice touch, I thought! A couple of minutes later the President and First Lady got into their limo, and the long motorcade headed out, presumably for Hanscom Field. An hour or more later Air Force One took off, followed shortly thereafter (during the [E.O. Wilson](#) speech that evening and with quite a roar) by the transport plane that presumably carries the Presidential limo. As soon as I am able to digitize materials from the event (press reports, sound bytes, videoclips, photos, and so on), I will put them on our Web site; so check the site once in a while. It probably won't be for a while, though, because I have to travel to Colorado Springs to meet with representatives of our principal donor, Digital Equipment Corporation, on how to implement the very generous Platinum Service contract we recently signed with them, a donation worth some \$650,000 and lasting a full year!

HDT

WHAT?

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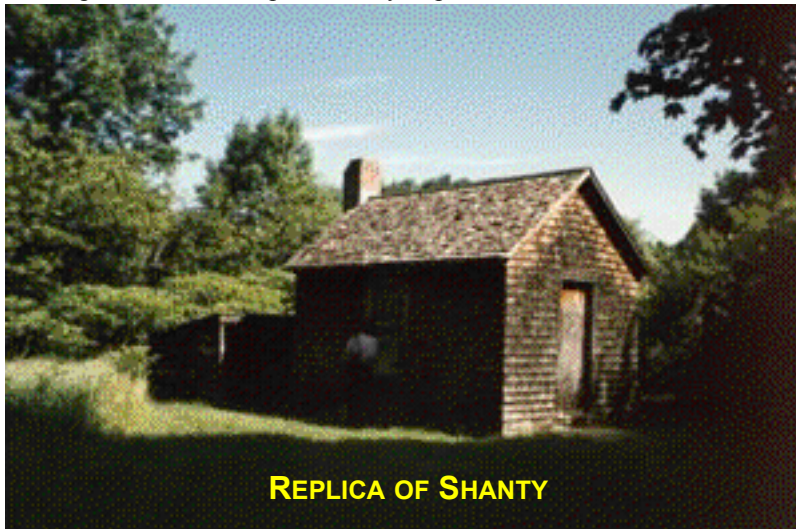
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1999

June: W. Barksdale Maynard, an adjunct faculty member of the Delaware College of Art and Design, writing in the Art Bulletin for June 1999 on "Thoreau's House at Walden" (pages 303-325), properly protested that although Henry Thoreau has been "long mythologized as a uniquely brilliant and self-sufficient figure," literary scholars have been failing to provide the sort of "broadly contextual studies" which are needed if we are to understand how the guy fitted into his locale and his era. An example of this, he offers, is the improper adulation which has been expressed for Thoreau as a seminal architectural thinker who, in the first half of the 19th Century, was allegedly writing already in anticipation of the tradition of Frank Lloyd Wright and other 20th-Century architectural innovators. That sort of adulation is improper because these hagiographers really have not make any serious study of 19th-Century architectural attitudes or of how Thoreau's own attitudes compared with these. They have not properly contextualized their appreciation. Maynard's present article is offered in partial correction of this deficiency: it is an attempt at such a contextualization, demonstrating that rather than being a seminal architectural thinker who was already in the 1st half of the 19th Century anticipating such 20th-Century figures as Frank Lloyd Wright, Thoreau was actually a man of his times, with architectural attitudes typical of the most enlightened of his times. The 10 X 15 shanty at Walden Pond, which was framed not with the new "balloon" framing that had been being pioneered in Chicago but with the older style of in-place framing, "has seldom been examined in the full context of contemporary architectural thought." The shanty structure was not depicted with exact precision by Sophia Thoreau in her famous frontispiece drawing, for

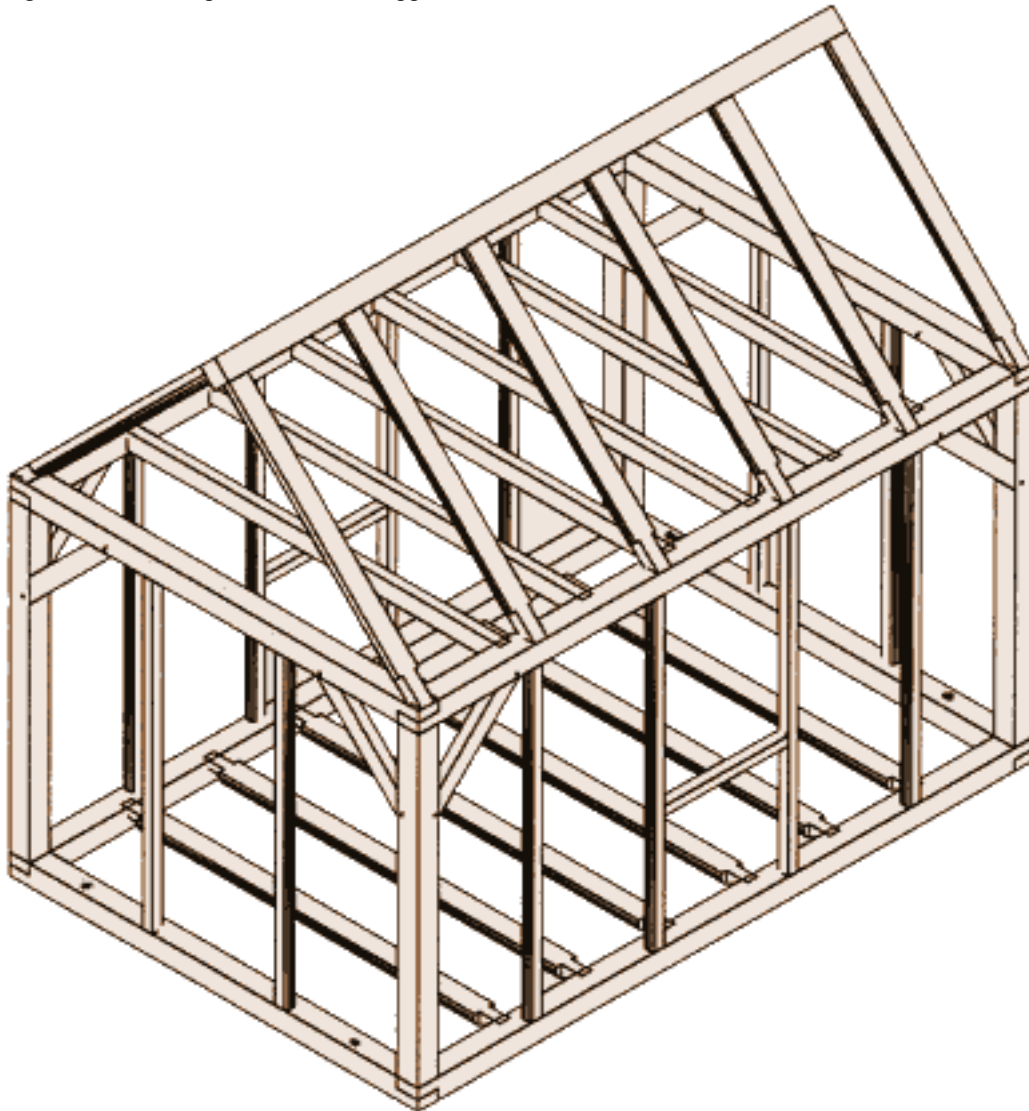


REPLICA OF SHANTY

EMERSON'S SHANTY

Henry noted in his copy of the book that "I would suggest a little alteration, chiefly in the door, in the wide projection of the roof at the front; and that the bank more immediately about the house be brought out more distinctly." Evidently, in accordance with what was considered good architectural design in that period, Thoreau had made the eaves of the roof project a bit farther out over the doorway than was depicted by his sister, in order to protect his lintel from falling rain, and evidently the structure was, in accordance with what was then considered the best siting for a country villa, more snugly than would be apparent in Sophia's drawing under the protection of the slope to the northwest.

This is what the frame of the shanty would have looked like, standing in the woods before any boards or shingles or lathe and plaster had been applied:



(I would not myself have bothered to demonstrate that the hagiographers who have alleged that [Thoreau](#) was not a man of his times, but had already in the 1st half of the 19th Century uniquely been anticipating such 20th-Century architects as Frank Lloyd Wright, had their heads up their collective asses. I would have assumed that **everyone who matters already is very well aware** that such hagiographers have their heads up their collective asses. I would have automatically assumed that such hagiographers had actually not done their homework, had not done any comparative research whatever into architectural history. I have **met** some of these hagiographers, and understand where they are coming from. I ignore their work product.)



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Along the way, W. Barksdale Maynard points out that [Roland Wells Robbins](#) found the cabin foundation at 204 feet from the pond edge (when the pond is full enough to form a marsh in Thoreau's Cove), whereas on [Thoreau](#)'s manuscript map (to his eye) the distance to the little marshy protrusion appears to be about 190 feet,<sup>1</sup> and whereas, in the text of [WALDEN](#), Thoreau roughly indicated this distance as merely some "half a dozen rods," which, if it had been intended as a precise measurement rather than a fuzzy approximation, would have been precisely 99 feet and therefore most inaccurate. "About a dozen rods" would be appropriate, if the foundation that Robbins dug into was indeed the foundation of Thoreau's shanty rather than that of some other unknown previous or subsequent structure that had stood on that small ledge of land. The orientation of the shanty, on Thoreau's 1846 manuscript survey map of Walden Pond, is at about 145 degrees, its door facing between southeast and south-southeast. The compass declination taken by Robbins from the chimney foundation which he uncovered, when corrected for the known magnetic differences between 1846 and 1946, does corroborate this survey map.

(I find that I am not as amazed as Maynard, that [Thoreau](#)'s fuzzy approximation "half a dozen rods" actually was off by about half a dozen rods.)

1. This is now controverted by Professor Donald W. Linebaugh, who tells me that he has overlaid Thoreau's map over his own GPS map of Robbins's diggings and has demonstrated that they do match within a foot or two.



What Maynard intends by all this is that “within the boundaries of the nearly fourteen acres owned by Emerson, [Thoreau] had located his house in precisely the way prescribed by the villa books” that were contemporary in Thoreau’s era, books that he may well have perused either firsthand or secondhand. “Suiting the ideal –and at the same time adapting itself to the somewhat awkward orientation of Emerson’s lot– it stood partway up a moderate rise, was protected to the north and east, and faced southeast, toward a sunny exposure and the view of the lake.” Could this similarity to the recommendations of the existing villa books have been a mere coincidence? “Naturally, some of the similarities between Thoreau’s situation at Walden and the villa books are coincidental, but his own written accounts seem to emphasize these similarities deliberately, as if to signal his awareness of accepted principles concerning the fitness of a country house to its location.”

Building on pastoral conventions popularized by eighteenth-century poetry, these men advocated the habit of retirement and the reform of domestic architecture along the lines of the humble English cottage, a model of integrity, fitness, and the rustic Picturesque.

Maynard provides an interesting commentary on [Thoreau](#)’s lengthy architectural remark in [WALDEN](#),

Far from being novel, this is an eloquent summary of philosophies in the villa books, signaling [Thoreau](#)’s sympathy for a central goal of those books – to reform architecture in light of “humble log huts and cottages of the poor.” It is in this same spirit of the “indweller” that he attacks the “take up a handful of earth” conceit: “What do you take up a handful of dirt for – Why dont [sic] you paint your house with your blood?” ... [Thoreau] did not pioneer fitness, truth, or the “organic”; all these ideas he borrowed, shaping them to his own purposes and expressing them in bold, sharp words that [Andrew Jackson] Downing, bound by polite conventions, necessarily avoided. Rather than seeing Thoreau as an anomalous visionary, we should appreciate his shrewd grasp and effective rephrasing of the radical architectural ideas current in his day.



WALDEN: True, there are architects so called in this country, and I have heard of one at least possessed with the idea of making architectural ornaments have a core of truth, a necessity, and hence a beauty, as if it were a revelation to him. All very well perhaps from his point of view, but only a little better than the common dilettantism. A sentimental reformer in architecture, he began at the cornice, not at the foundation. It was only how to put a core of truth within the ornaments, that every sugar plum in fact might have an almond or caraway seed in it -though I hold that almonds are most wholesome without the sugar,- and not how the inhabitant, the indweller, might build truly within and without, and let the ornaments take care of themselves. What reasonable man ever supposed that ornaments were something outward and in the skin merely, -that the tortoise got his spotted shell, or the shellfish its mother-o'-pearl tints, by such a contract as the inhabitants of Broadway their Trinity Church? But a man has no more to do with the style of architecture of his house than a tortoise with that of its shell, nor need the soldier be so idle as to try to paint the precise **color** of his virtue on his standard. The enemy will find it out. He may turn pale when the trial comes. This man seemed to me to lean over the cornice and timidly whisper his half truth to the rude occupants who really knew it better than he. What of architectural beauty I now see, I know has gradually grown from within outward, out of the necessities and character of the indweller, who is the only builder, - out of some unconscious truthfulness, and nobleness, without ever a thought for the appearance; and whatever additional beauty of this kind is destined to be produced will be preceded by a like unconscious beauty of life. The most interesting dwellings in this country, as the painter knows, are the most unpretending, humble log huts and cottages of the poor commonly; it is the life of the inhabitants whose shells they are, and not any peculiarity in their surfaces merely, which makes them **picturesque**; and equally interesting will be the citizen's suburban box, when his life shall be as simple and as agreeable to the imagination, and there is as little straining after effect in the style of his dwelling. A great proportion of architectural ornaments are literally hollow, and a September gale would strip them off, like borrowed plumes, without injury to the substantials. They can do without **architecture** who have no olives nor wines in the cellar. What if an equal ado were made about the ornaments of style in literature, and the architects of our bibles spent as much time about their cornices as the architects of our churches do? So are made the *belles-lettres* and the *beaux-arts* and their professors. Much it concerns a man, forsooth, how a few sticks are slanted over him or under him, and what colors are daubed upon his box. It would signify somewhat, if, in any earnest sense, **he** slanted them and daubed it; but the spirit having departed out of the tenant, it is of a piece with constructing his own coffin, -the architecture of the grave, and "carpenter" is but another name for "coffin-maker." One man says, in his despair or indifference to life, take up a handful of the earth at your feet, and paint your house that color. Is he thinking of his last and narrow house? Toss up a copper for it as well. What an abundance of leisure he must have! Why do you take up a handful of dirt? Better paint your house your own complexion; let it turn pale or blush for you. An enterprise to improve the style of cottage architecture! When you have got my ornaments ready I will wear them.



W. Barksdale Maynard gives Thomas Woodson full credit for having already pointed out to us that there was an obvious and important link yet to be discovered between [Thoreau](#)'s excursion to the Berkshires and Catskills during 1844 and his subsequent sojourn on Walden Pond. "His country house ... seems to have been initially suggested by a Catskills 'mountain house' he had recently admired," a house which, when it was looked for, turns out, most sadly, no longer to be in existence. (We can visit the approximate site of this structure – but there is now nothing there.)

At this point Maynard conflates the author Thoreau with the literary protagonist he created in [WALDEN](#), and conflates Thoreau's stay at Walden Pond with the book by that title: "His Catskills trip has been virtually overlooked as an essential source of inspiration for Walden." In committing such an elementary error, Maynard more or less places himself in the same boat as the folks who summer after summer wrongheadedly make a pilgrimage to Walden Pond expecting that this venue will inspire them, only to find themselves turned off by its crowds, noise, trash, and natural degradation, and its general local crassness being right next door to a trailer park and a dump and visible from a well-traveled road and from a railroad tracks on which there are frequent trains. Such reader pilgrims depart cursing Concord and/or the 20th Century, and cursing their fellow [tourists](#), but only because they fail to recognize that the book [WALDEN](#) wasn't about **finding** some really great geographical place to be at, the very best place to be at, better than any other place to have a pic-nic at, a beautiful pristine place that can in itself because of its beauteousness and pristineness provoke endless inspiration, and reporting that place's location so that everybody and her brother could go there and enjoy it, but rather was about **learning how to make the place where one is**, wherever one is, whatever its condition, become endlessly inspiring by means of an internal change in one's personal climate of mentation. Maynard supposes that the book [WALDEN](#) was preaching about the external circumstances which Thoreau describes – a mistake which admittedly is an easy one to commit because Thoreau simply does not allow any easy binary opposition between the external and the internal. By making such a conflation, however, Maynard puts [Thoreau](#) more than I would consider entirely appropriate in the same bucket with other 19th-Century disaffected individualist types such as Friend Ricketson of New Bedford, folks who equivalently indulged themselves with personal shanties.

In the wake of his Catskills trip of 1844, Maynard alleges,

Thoreau creatively translated wilderness values to a suburban location as part of his desire "to live a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization." Following, in part, the lead of the villa books, he published his house design in *WALDEN; OR, LIFE IN THE WOODS* (1854), urging it as a model both intellectual and practical, stressing its complete opposition to all that was false and pretentious in the architecture of the day and highlighting its affinities to the so-called primitive hut, thereby joining the many contemporaries concerned with the origins of architecture and the promise, by return to "first principles," of true architectural reform. Viewed in context, the Walden experiment no longer seems, as it is so often portrayed, anomalous, antisocial, and escapist; instead, it may be understood as an intelligent and ambitious attempt to engage in current dialogues on the villa, the rustic, and the reform of domestic architecture, as Thoreau sought to participate in a popular new kind of lifestyle, suburban retirement.



(While I cannot disagree that the author of [WALDEN](#) is often portrayed as “anomalous, antisocial, and escapist,” I do not agree that at this point our scholars need to produce any further refutations of such popular attitudes. Such attitudes are held only by those who have not yet begun their study of this literary figure, and do not need to be treated with any seriousness.)

However, I have a further caveat: Was that all that Henry David Thoreau’s life and writing supposedly was about? –About a mere seeking to “participate in a popular new kind of lifestyle, suburban retirement,” as indicated by this architectural historian in the summation to his article? If this was indeed so, I suggest, Cynthia should have sent our poet up garret at once: “And don’t you sneak back down here, either, Hank, my boy, until you are ready to be a full human being!” No, this wasn’t so. [Thoreau](#)’s life and writing, although it was conducted largely within a town, Concord, which was at that point becoming a bedroom community connected to beautiful downtown business Boston by a commuter rail line, was **not** about seeking retirement to the suburbs as a popular new kind of lifestyle. Get a clue!

[WALDEN](#): A comfortable house for a rude and hardy race, that lived mostly out of doors, was once made here almost entirely of such materials as Nature furnished ready to their hands. Gookin, who was superintendent of the Indians subject to the Massachusetts Colony, writing in 1674, says, “The best of their houses are covered very neatly, tight and warm, with barks of trees, slipped from their bodies at those seasons when the sap is up, and made into great flakes, with pressure of weighty timber, when they are green.... The meaner sort are covered with mats which they make of a kind of bulrush, and are also indifferently tight and warm, but not so good as the former.... Some I have seen, sixty or a hundred feet long and thirty feet broad.... I have often lodged in their wigwams, and found them as warm as the best English houses.” He adds, that they were commonly carpeted and lined within with well-wrought embroidered mats, and were furnished with various utensils. The Indians had advanced so far as to regulate the effect of the wind by a mat suspended over the hole in the roof and moved by a string. Such a lodge was in the first instance constructed in a day or two at most, and taken down and put up in a few hours; and every family owned one, or its apartment in one.

PEOPLE OF  
WALDEN

DANIEL GOOKIN

## ROLAND ROBBINS

## ROLAND ROBBINS

To encapsule my personal attitude in regard all this, [WALDEN](#) didn't happen to be about living in a house, it happened to be about living:



**(WROTE WALDEN)**



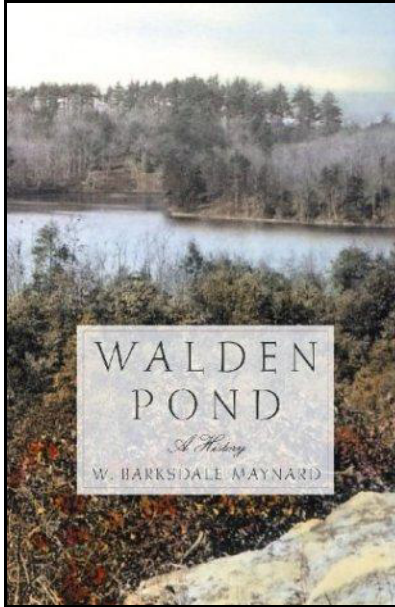
**(DID NOT WRITE WALDEN)**

But don't bother to consult our architect wannabee's lengthy 1999 article. Due to the passage of time, you can consult his hot idea at greater length:

ROLAND ROBBINS

ROLAND ROBBINS

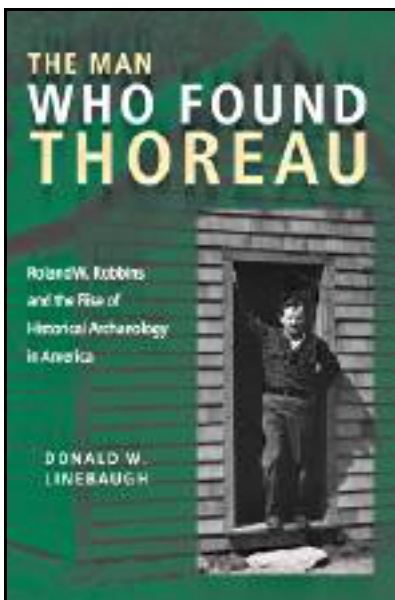
W. Barksdale Maynard. WALDEN POND: A HISTORY. NY: Oxford UP, 2004



EMERSON'S SHANTY

2004

Professor Donald W. Linebaugh's THE MAN WHO FOUND THOREAU: ROLAND W. ROBBINS AND THE RISE OF HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN AMERICA. Durham NH: U of New Hampshire P, 2004.<sup>2</sup>



ROLAND WELLS ROBBINS

2005

April 8, Friday: Professor Donald W. Linebaugh gave a presentation at the Industrial History Center at Stonehill College in North Easton, Massachusetts on Roland W. Robbins, presenting his new book *THE MAN WHO FOUND THOREAU: ROLAND W. ROBBINS AND THE RISE OF HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN AMERICA* (Durham NH: U of New Hampshire P, 2004).

Professor Linebaugh put doubt to rest. Knowing that [Henry Thoreau](#) was not the only person ever to inhabit that bank of Walden Pond, knowing that in 1866 there had been considerable disruption and heavy use due to recreational use and that in 1870 Emerson had allowed another person to reside there for a time (the theology student Edmond Stuart Hotham), I had been wondering how we could be certain that what [Roland Wells Robbins](#) had uncovered with his archeology was the site of Thoreau's shanty rather than the site perhaps of Hotham's shanty? Professor Linebaugh carefully explained to us all that:

- the sort of cut nails Robbins found on the site had been in use in the 1st half of the 19th Century but had been replaced by wire nails by early in the 2d half of the century, making it rather unlikely that they would have been available in 1866



(The above examples, made about 1860, would have been about the last of this sort of manufacture.)

- the sort of construction found in the base of the chimney matched the sort of construction in the chimney base of the Texas house that had been built by John Thoreau, Senior with the assistance of his son Henry

2. Previously, Donald W. Linebaugh's "The Road to Ruins and Restoration: [Roland Wells Robbins](#) and the Professionalization of Historical Archaeology" (Ph.D. Dissertation, American Studies Program, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia: Ann Arbor, MI, UMI #9701093, 1997), and his "The Road to Ruins and Restoration?: Roland W. Robbins, Henry D. Thoreau, and the *Discovery at Walden*." *CS*, 2 (Fall 1994): 33-62.



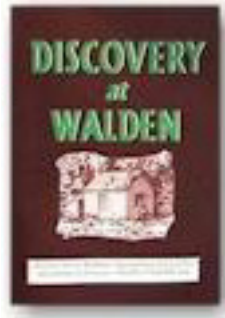
**ROLAND ROBBINS**

**ROLAND ROBBINS**

- a number of the Thoreau artifacts had been dug from beneath the roots of a tree that has been dated dendrochronologically (by examination of tree rings) as having begun to grow considerably prior to the arrival of this Hotham dude.



## DISCOVERY AT WALDEN



### A Word from the Author

SHORTLY after completing my Walden Pond excavating, late in 1945, I received a letter from a person in New York congratulating me on having discovered Thoreau's grave. Later, while rehearsing for a radio interview, the director approached me with, "Let me shake the hand of the man who found Thoreau's body."

It seems fitting here that I outline the extent of my discovery. I did not locate Thoreau's body, or his grave nor am I acquainted with their discoverer. My good fortune was limited to the finding of the site of Thoreau's Walden Pond house and the remains of its chimney foundation. Also found were several bushels of plaster, fireplace and chimney bricks, nails, and window glass which had played a part in the construction of the Walden Pond house and Thoreau's woodshed. Also, several unusual coincidences came about during my work at Walden.

Here in New England may be found many old houses, famous for their historic backgrounds. Some of these old houses had been standing for as much as two centuries before Thoreau began building his Walden Pond house. Yet the fascinating stories of the building of these earlier landmarks may not capture the imagination as does Thoreau's vivid and matter-of-fact account of the manual labor and financial expenses involved in building his Walden Pond home. Thoreau's record of this work in Walden is a classic.

Then again, many of New England's early houses have survived the Walden Pond house by three-quarters of a century. Shortly after Thoreau vacated his Walden Pond house, in September 1847, and moved its furnishings back to the hustle and bustle of Concord's Village, the house itself was moved. Within a few years the action of the elements on sandy soil, and the work of erosion, eliminated all surface evidence of the original site of the house. Surviving two or three movings, its ruins were finally pulled down June 4, 1868 and its boards used in the construction of a barn on the old Brooks Clarke farm, in the north part of Concord. Its boards never were used in the construction of a barn on Sudbury Road, Concord, as has often been erroneously stated. By July 4th, 1945, when the commemorative services were held at Walden Pond, marking the hundredth anniversary of Thoreau's moving into his more there, those legends still flourished. In fact, at this time, the controversy as to its original site had advanced beyond the legendary stage to one of personal opinions on the subject. It was at the Walden Pond centennial service that my interest in the controversy became aroused.

"Discovery at Walden" is not a philosophical account of my research and excavating at Walden Pond. It is not eloquent, nor is it inspirational. Rather, it is a New England Yankee's experience in finding things out in his own way. There are those who insist that my way is the hard way. But my way, coupled with reason and patience, has produced a personal contentment suitable for my way of life. Certainly Henry David Thoreau would not object to this.



## ROLAND ROBBINS

## ROLAND ROBBINS

The accomplishments of the historical research worker are not the results of his individual investigation alone. Without the aid of others he could no more uncover, assemble, assort and evaluate the untold number of controversies, personal opinions and pieces of documentary evidence associated with an historical problem, than he could actually participate in the historic event itself.

I am especially indebted to the following: Aaron Bagg, of Holyoke, Mass.; Miss Sarah R. Bartlett, Librarian, and her assistants of the Concord Free Public Library, Concord, Mass.; Mrs. Herbert G. Farrar, Lincoln Library, Lincoln, Mass.; the late Allen French, Concord, Mass.; Fred R. Hart, Supt. Walden Pond State Reservation, Concord, Mass.; the Middlesex County Commissioners, Cambridge, Mass.; T. Mott Shaw, Concord, Mass.; Miss Louise Stimson, Concord, Mass.; and Mrs. Caleb Wheeler, Concord, Mass. They have given freely of their time their knowledge of the subject.

I am grateful to the Concord citizens and the members of the Thoreau Society who participated in the removing of stones from the rear of Thoreau's cairn and the placing of these stones on the front of the cairn. I wish to thank them also for their assistance in opening up Thoreau's filled-in cellar hole.

I am indebted to the following persons for their photographic recordings of the work at Walden: Mrs. Leslie Anderson, of Concord, Mass.; Earl Hicks, Concord, Mass.; Anton Huffert, North Bergen, N. J.; Henry B. Kane, Lincoln, Mass.; Joseph C. McIlwaine, McKownville, Albany, N. Y.; Edwin Way Teale, Baldwin, L. I., N. Y.; and Miss Marcia Webber, Bedford, Mass.

The Frontispiece is by Archibald H. Ferran, of Concord, Mass. For details of the Walden house Mr. Ferran was guided by the Baker-Andrews sketch of Thoreau's house that appeared in the first edition of Walden. However, the Baker-Andrews sketch does not place Thoreau beside the house. That is a liberty which I have taken.

I am grateful to Alton Hall Blackington, of Lynn, Mass., for suggesting Discovery at Walden for the title of this book.

Most certainly also I am grateful to my wife Geraldine, and my three children. They made possible my Walden investigation by sharing generously the evenings, Sundays and holidays which I would normally have spent with them. I like to feel that they shared their home with Henry David Thoreau.

ROLAND WELLS ROBBINS



ROLAND ROBBINS

ROLAND ROBBINS

## A THOREAU YANKEE

### LINCOLN, MASSACHUSETTS

DECEMBER 25, 1946

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#### DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the late Allen French who, though pressed for time, always found the time to listen and to assist me with my historical research problems; was always ready to share generously with me his vast knowledge of Concord history; encouraged me at times when encouragement was needed; and brought about this book by suggesting my active participation in the century old controversy about the site of Thoreau's house at Walden Pond.

#### INTRODUCTION

##### BY WALTER HARDING, Secretary of the Thoreau Society

I AM not one to get excited over historical sites. Like Henry James, I find myself much more stimulated by ideas than things. Even though I have found the writings of Henry David Thoreau to be worthy of a lifetime of study, I have rarely found myself able to wax sentimental over his birthplace or his grave. Yet I must confess that when Roland Wells Robbins took me out to Walden Pond last summer and before my very eyes excavated nails, plaster, bricks and glass from the site of Thoreau's cabin, I felt that little shiver of excitement which one reserves for the most special occasions run up and down my spine like an ecstatic butterfly.

Like every other student of Thoreau who has visited Concord, I had often found myself wondering just where the site of Thoreau's cabin was. It hardly seemed possible that the foundation of such a sturdy little building as he described could completely disappear in a hundred years. Yet never did two Thoreauvians arrive at Walden Pond at the same time but that a controversy arose over where it could have been. Some said the cairn marked the spot — but then there were rumors that years ago the cairn itself had been in a different spot.



**ROLAND ROBBINS**

**ROLAND ROBBINS**

Others were sufficiently sure of a nearby foundation hole to mark it with four granite posts. Still others studied all the clues in Walden and decided on completely unmarked sites. Like that genius of the Renaissance who decided the best way to discover the number of teeth in a horse's head was to look in a horse's mouth rather than to consult Aristotle, Roland Robbins ended the controversy by going out and searching for the evidence. And after a prodigious amount of labor, and with a precision in his work that put the most scholarly archeologists to shame, he discovered and authenticated the exact site of the cabin so that now we are far more certain of just where Thoreau dwelt than on which boulder the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Beach.

I must confess too that when I first heard of Mr. Robbins' discovery, I was skeptical. Many other men had searched and found nothing. Even if he had found something, how was he certain that it was not the relic of the hut built by the theological student Hotham some years after Thoreau's death? But after spending hours poring over Mr. Robbins' records and photographs, examining all the material he has uncovered, talking at length with him, and going out and digging around at his site myself, I am completely convinced that his discovery is authentic.

Now Mr. Robbins has set down the story of his discovery for all to read. It is a careful recording of each step in his labors, scholarly in the best sense of the word, and as fascinating as a detective story. One does not have to be a follower of Thoreau to find this story interesting. But I will wager that few will read his words without taking a copy of Walden down from the shelves and reading that great masterpiece with a new interest.

Chapel Hill, N. C.

January 7, 1947.



## CHAPTER I

### THE CENTENNIAL ANNIVERSARY

ON July 4th, 1945, the early rising sun greeted Concord, Mass., with a panorama of its choicest colors viewed across the cloudless local skies. What a day for a holiday! While cities and rural communities the nation over were eager to display their traditional programs of celebration, for the Town of Concord this was to be a very special day. To the traditional celebration of the holiday was to be added a commemorative exercise to be held at the site of the house in which one of her sons, famous in American literature, had begun to live exactly one hundred years earlier. It was on July 4th, 1845, that Henry David Thoreau deserted the companionship of the village to take up residence in his self-made house at Walden Pond.

Like Thoreau, Mrs. Robbins and I had moved into our new home on a July 4th in the beautiful, retiring –as yet unmolested by the wheels of modern progress– village of Lincoln which shares boundaries with Concord. Our new home had been made possible by my small and successful domestic window cleaning and house painting business. Many times Thoreau spoke kindly of Lincoln and its rolling hills, its lush land and its beautiful Flint’s Pond, now named Sandy Pond. There is evidence that Thoreau’s first desire was to build at Flint’s Pond. This could not be arranged so he settled at Walden Pond, one half mile west of Flint’s Pond, and separated only by the forest wilderness Thoreau loved.

Of course, our occupancy was more recent than that of Henry Thoreau’s, in fact by 91 years. As Mrs. Robbins and I had attempted to settle our new home that 4th of July we felt we had reached a milestone in our young lives. Our enthusiasm told us the whole community followed and encouraged our progress. Naturally this was not so. For our community, like any other, had its own concern and problems — and a new family in its neighborhood wasn’t one of them.

Henry Thoreau in settling down in his Walden abode was little concerned with the personal opinions and suggestions of local mortals, or for that matter with any mortal’s observations concerning his personal endeavors. This home in the woods was to be his laboratory where the social and economic problems of mankind could be analyzed and treated. Thoreau’s house-warming didn’t include the rasping static of backslapping mortals toasting him “good luck.” Rather, we might say, it was well attended by his many philosophical problems and their desire for his success.

A century has passed since Thoreau’s unceremonious moving-in. And how things have changed! For today Henry David Thoreau is a Pied Piper of American literature. Not until many years after Thoreau had completed his experiment at Walden Pond and vacated his lodgings with nature was it universally discovered that he had compounded a tablet of exalted phrases that, when taken in literary doses, acted as a sedative which would ease many of life’s spiritual pains.

With such thoughts in mind I prepared to join the pilgrimage to Walden Pond this July 4th morning for the Thoreau Centennial exercises. For there I could be introduced to the literary works of Thoreau as well as become acquainted with the trails and haunts that he had frequented.

I will never forget the simplicity and reverence which prevailed throughout the services. Concord’s eminent historian and gentleman, Mr. Allen French, conducted the exercises held at the stone cairn which supposedly marked the site of Thoreau’s house. Many selections from Thoreau’s writings were presented by members of the gathering. I was impressed by the gray and intellectual heads that predominated among those in attendance. I, with all my 37 years, felt conscious of stepping from my generation into one I was not in a literary way prepared for. Here I was among the “Big League” of the literary world. Prominent professors of literature, as well as authors of note, were paying their respects to this site which, supposedly, had supported the 10 by 15 foot single room house that provided shelter and rest for Henry Thoreau while he communed with nature.



The cairn itself spoke of the several generations that had played a part in pyramiding its construction. Stones of many sizes and shapes had been piled one on the other by pilgrims from the world over, pilgrims who had brought with them wishes or ambitions which they hoped to fulfill. Finding a stone nearby (in many cases they had brought their stones with them), each had enclosed his wish in it to keep it eternal, then placed it on the cairn as his contribution to this evergrowing memorial. The cornerstone for this mound of wishes had been laid in June, 1872, by Bronson Alcott and a Mrs. Adams from Dubuque, Iowa. Bringing stones up the hill from the shore of Thoreau's cove, they had laid them on a spot which Alcott had determined to be the place where Thoreau's house had stood. Bronson Alcott was well qualified to point out the site of the house, as he himself had aided Thoreau in raising its frame. A Unitarian Church picnic was being held that day at Walden Pond. Some of the picknickers joined in the laying of the first stones of the cairn by bringing stones from the shore and placing them beside Alcott's and Mrs. Adams'. Thus, Thoreau's cairn was started by an old friend and a group of sincere admirers at a time when mankind's progress was synchronized to the gait of the horse-and-buggy and the undeveloped potential powers of the iron-horse.

Surely the cairn's beginning was a fitting memorial to Thoreau. The stones, broken bottles and the like, which crown the summit of today's cairn, were placed years later by more casual mortals of this modern world. And the use of the cairn's bronze plaque as a target for boys to sharpen their pitching arms speaks only too well of this atomic age.

Near the close of the centennial exercises someone brought the question of the cairn's position being properly located to the attention of the speaker. Several in attendance felt certain that 25 or 35 years earlier the cairn had been much closer to Walden Pond. Besides, said others familiar with the details of the house, Thoreau's very words condemned the cairn's site as too remote. One dignified gentleman quoted from Thoreau's Walden that the house had been built, "on the shore of Walden Pond... My house was on the side of a hill... and half a dozen rods from the pond." The man was obviously right. Most certainly the cairn is not on the shore. Nor is it, in a true sense, on the side of the hill, but rather on a fairly level piece of ground.

"Rather intangible evidence," objected someone else.

"Maybe so," returned the first gentleman, "but you must remember Henry Thoreau was a surveyor — and a Harvard graduate — and it has been said that by eye alone he was nearly as accurate as with a measuring tool. And even blindfolded he couldn't have stretched that half a dozen rods from the shore till it reached the site of the cairn — now could he?"

"How much is a rod?" asked a lady. The question reddened many faces, for no one was certain of the answer — including myself. Twelve and fourteen feet gained the most supporters. I held to fifteen and a half feet but I didn't intend to noose my neck. Whatever the length of a rod, it was determined six of them couldn't connect the cairn with the pond.

Someone shelved this problem of measurement by quoting a significant passage from Walden... "a mink steals out of the marsh before my door and seizes a frog by the shore." Most revealing! Henry Thoreau's casual observation, made as he sat by his window, appeared to eliminate the possibility that the cairn had been correctly placed. For, standing by the cairn, or on top of it for that matter, and looking in the direction of the marsh, it was physically impossible to see it — to say nothing of seeing the shoreline of that side of the pond. A large knoll obstructed a view of the marsh and the sharp rise of the pond's bank hid the shoreline. Certainly, Henry Thoreau could never have made such observations from this spot — nor identified an object the size of a frog at such a distance, even if the shoreline had been visible. This seemed definitely to eliminate the possibility of the cairn's sitting on the spot where Henry Thoreau had built.

But time was running short, and, as a box lunch picnic was to be enjoyed by many of us at the Cliffs, which overlook Fairhaven Bay, one of Thoreau's favorite haunts, we had to be getting on. The commemorative services were terminated with the customary handshaking and words of greeting. As I spoke to Mr. French, he greeted me with a most flattering compliment:



“Mr. Robbins, I am so pleased to see you turn your interests to Henry Thoreau. You are the one to settle this issue once and for all. I do hope you will seek the answer!”

My avocation is seeking answers to some of Concord’s unsolved historical problems. It was while compiling the true happenings involved in the making and dedicating of Daniel Chester French’s famous Minute Man statue for my booklet *The Story of the Minute Man* that I became acquainted with Mr. Allen French. After such a verbal pat on the back as was given me by Mr. French — not too common an experience with me — I had no alternative. Besides, I had become unusually interested in the controversy. I made up my mind that I must try to establish the site of Thoreau’s house.

On the hike through the woods and over the hills to the Cliffs of Fairhaven Bay, T. Morris Longstreth, the author, introduced me to a kind and dignified gentleman. As I walked with this gentleman we discussed human nature, its virtues and failings, and noted how often traditions distort the truth as they age. My philosophy sparred with his as we walked part way around the pond, across the railway Thoreau mentions, through blueberry patches and woods and through a corn field which was the last barrier to the Cliffs. As the journey’s end terminated our debating I stuck my tongue in my cheek, and gave my head a small nod of self-approval for gaining a draw decision with my literary adversary.

When I met Mr. Longstreth several days later in the Concord Library, he inquired how I had enjoyed the company of Professor Odell Shepard.

“You mean Pulitzer Prize winner, Odell Shepard?” I inquired.

“None other,” said Mr. Longstreth.

“Phew!” thought I. “Good thing I hadn’t known it at the time. I would never have survived even the first literary round!”

It was at the Cliffs I met Aaron Bagg of Holyoke, Mass. We struck up a warm friendship. Aaron is a few years younger than I am and is a naturalist in a true sense of the word. He is a writer by profession and gives most of his time to interpreting nature. As we sat munching crackers and peanut butter and sucking on oranges, he told of his trip to Concord. He had made the pilgrimage from Holyoke by night train. Reaching Concord at 2:30 A.M. with a knapsack strapped to his shoulders, he had proved ideal material for the local police car to investigate. After he had convinced the officers that he had arrived early for the day’s services at Walden Pond they had driven him to the station-house and provided him with every courtesy at their disposal, including a wooden bench on which he had stretched out for a little solid comfort.

He had been back on the road before daybreak. Going to Walden Pond, he had watched the sun come up and display the beauty already mentioned. In greeting the first rays of dawn to strike upon the site of Henry Thoreau’s house on this one hundredth anniversary, Aaron had acted as envoy for the enthusiasts who were to arrive later. As the sun had climbed and cleared the air of the night’s dampness, Aaron had followed the path that circled the pond.

“Why,” I asked, “was it necessary to arrive at the pond before the sun did?”

“Well, to see the real beauty of nature, one must view it as it awakens. Besides, to grasp fully the symbolism of the pond and its woods one must see it as Thoreau best recalls it with its freshness and crispness revived by the night of rest. You see,” he added, “nature, too, benefits by relaxation.”

Not being qualified to debate the habits of nature, I let silence give my consent.

As the day grew long and enthusiasm ebbed, people began collecting their belongings and departing for home. I felt that I had accomplished a great deal this day. I had been formally introduced to the familiar haunts of Henry David Thoreau, had met many fine people, had become better acquainted with the natural beauties of my neighboring town, and had met a young fellow with whom I shared much in common. Meanwhile I had had my fill of healthful exercise — and been told where Henry David Thoreau could not have built his house! Farmer Ezra Nudkins tersely summed up the observations of many of us by reciting this little rhyme on our way home:



**ROLAND ROBBINS**

**ROLAND ROBBINS**

“For a hundred years we’ve tipped our hat

To a site where Henry’s hut ne’er sat.”

Ezra also added, “Maybe it would have been a good idea to have found ourselves a lucky stone and placed it on the cairn, a stone filled with the wish that when we next convene someone will really have found the site of Henry David Thoreau’s house.”

“How true!” I thought. “How true!”



## CHAPTER II

### CHANNING'S NOTES ON THOREAU'S HOUSE

MANY times during the following five weeks I recalled my experiences of that day — and intended to look into the site controversy as soon as “time” permitted. In the meantime, Aaron Bagg kept prodding me with constructive letters quoting Henry Thoreau’s references to the location. Wrote he on August 15, “At the ceremony at Walden I heard two men who seemed to be planning the same hunt. At least I overheard the remark: ‘In looking for its true location, I don’t think we should be too concerned over popular feelings on the subject’ ... or words to that effect. So you may have a race on your hands.”

That startled me into getting out my inadequate six-foot steel ruler the following evening and heading for the pond together with Mrs. Robbins. We measured the distance from the bronze plaque which marks the front of the cairn, to the edge of the shore-line of Thoreau’s Cove, making allowance for the variation that comes with the seasons. It was two-hundred and four feet. Of course by now I could tell anyone the length of a rod. Taking the sixteen and one-half feet and wiggling an answer from my finger tips, I turned to Mrs. Robbins and said, “Well, Gerry, this much is certain. Either Henry Thoreau slipped in his count or Bronson Alcott’s memory failed him when he started placing the first stones of the cairn. I favor the poor memories.” For it didn’t seem likely that one acquainted with measurements and distances — particularly as accurate a person as Henry Thoreau — would call a distance greater than twelve rods “half a dozen rods”. No sir! And the more I thought of it the more curious and interested I became.

Purchasing a 95¢ copy of Walden at The Concord Bookshop I decided the answer would be found by carefully listening to Henry Thoreau’s description of his house and its location. After all, he should be the best authority on the subject.

Here is an ideal place to explain my consistent use of the word house rather than the customary hut, shack, or cabin when speaking of Henry Thoreau’s Walden home. I too, before reading Walden, thought of the house as a poor imitation of a 19th century woodshed, converted into livable — but entirely unhealthy — dwelling quarters deserving of a name no better than hut, shack, etc. But for one to read Walden and then refer to it as such is denying Henry Thoreau a courtesy he rightfully deserves. First, of the nearly one hundred references to his abode which he makes in Walden, eighty odd of the number are “house”. He says “lodge” three times, “dwelling” twice, “apartment” twice, “homestead” once; and on only one occasion does he use the word “hut”. Second, in every sense of the word it was a house, carefully planned and built and finished down to its plastering and a brick chimney and fireplace. Ellery Channing in his copy of Walden, presented him by Thoreau, made this notation: “The house stood in perfect condition so far as the frame and covering, to June 4, ’68, a period of 23 years, and would have lasted a century. It was well built, the covering being poor.” With this in mind, I replace custom with courtesy and respectfully address my references to the house as such. Possibly the smallness of its size, coupled with its isolated location in what was then considered a forest wilderness, could be responsible for the many misnomers applied to it.



Channing made many other significant notations in this copy of *Walden*. Some of them were corrections of Thoreau's references to the location of the Walden house. For instance, where Thoreau, in *Walden*, said, "I dug my cellar in the side of a hill," Channing writes, "There is nothing like a hill here and never was. At present (Oct., '63), I tried with Mr. Green to find the cellar hole, but could not fix it, — but have since. It is in the pathway to the pond. (The place is a bank gently sloping towards the pond, — a hill in some places, but not so marked here.)" Channing also recorded, "H. means the small rise in the ground, but it is no hill, not 20 foot rise. The stones that were brought up from the pond for the chimney were carried away, I think, by the Scotch gardener, Hugh Whelan, for his intended house on the Bean-field." Channing's record could account for the fact that little evidence of the site of the house remained above the level of the soil in 1863. Thoreau tells in *Walden* of digging a cellar, "six feet square by seven deep, to a fine sand where potatoes would not freeze in any winter. The sides were left, shelving, and not stoned." Later in *Walden* he wrote, "I laid the foundation of a chimney at one end, bringing two cartloads of stones up the hill from the pond in my arms".

Apparently Hugh Whelan, after removing the house from its original site to the bean-field shortly after Thoreau vacated it in September, 1847, filled in the cellar hole. Then, finding no stones available in the bean-field's sandy soil with which to build his chimney foundation, returned to Thoreau's chimney foundation and removed the top section. By October, 1863, erosion and slope-wash had covered the remaining evidence of the original site to the extent that Ellery Channing had difficulty locating it. As Channing also had helped Thoreau raise the frame of the Walden house, as well as having lived in it for two weeks with Thoreau, we must assume he would have had no difficulty locating the original site if much evidence of it were visible in 1863.

When Thoreau says, in speaking of where he built, "a small open field in the woods, where pines and hickories were springing up", Channing writes, "In 1863, Oct. 11, the pines, chiefly pitch, and other trees, have made a small wood here, about 25 or 30 feet in height. The pond not visible scarcely now". The difficulty in seeing the pond at this time, because of "a small wood," indicates that the house must have been separated from the pond by quite a stretch of land. Yet Thoreau had said in the very first paragraph of *Walden* that he had built a house "on the shore of Walden Pond." I found it hard to reconcile the conflicting statements.

Of the last years of the Walden house Ellery Channing said, "The windows were gone in '63, and the plaster mostly cracked off, from the moving to old Clark's (from the bean-field), in the N. part of the town, very near the opening of the old Carlisle Road. Used as a place to store corn — visited with Blake and Brown, Sept. 11, '64".

At that time the Walden house could rightfully have been called a shack, etc. No longer was it a rendezvous for philosophers and thinkers. Sacks of grain now bulged the walls that had once sheltered Thoreau, Emerson, Bronson Alcott, Channing and other great minds. Of the Walden house's last days Channing says, "I saw H's rafters, June 4, 1868, the ruins of this house on the old Carlisle Road, just pulled down". Yet the house had survived Thoreau by six years.

From several readings of *Walden* I carefully compiled the many passages, references and casual observations which Thoreau made concerning the house and its location. With these I painstakingly reconstructed in my mind the scene as Henry Thoreau had so graphically described it. Taking this mental model out to Walden Pond, I endeavoured to locate the spot into which it would fit. (Bear in mind the trees and vegetation that now exist had to be mentally swept away as they had no place in the pattern of a century ago.) The site of the cairn provided no accommodations for my mental model. In fact, the only place that beckoned welcome was the strip within the "half a dozen rods" of the pond. Wonderful, thought I, "the distance from the pond is settled." But trying to determine the spot along the "half a dozen rods" distance as it paralleled the pond was difficult. For several hundred feet along the shore I could pick out any spot and find that it had features conforming to my mental model. It made no difference how I twisted the Walden references about, I couldn't condense this haystack to a size small enough to warrant my looking for the needle. The needle in this case I had already decided was the remains of the foundation to the house chimney which Henry Thoreau so clearly describes in *Walden*. Though Hugh Whelan had removed the top of the foundation, surely the base must remain.



## CHAPTER III

### AN ANALYSIS OF WALDEN

RECALLING a letter Prof. Elliott Adams White of Norwich, Vermont, had published in the Concord Journal, telling of his discovery of what he presumed to be a corner post-hole of the house, I wrote him for details. He answered, telling me to get in touch with Mrs. Caleb Wheeler of Concord, as he had showed her his “find”. Prof. White considerably warned me to go prepared to combat poison ivy as he paid for his discovery with a painful and badly swollen countenance. “Sorry for you professor,” thought I. “Thanks for your warning, but I’m immune.”

Sunday afternoon, September 16, Mrs. Wheeler, Mr. and Mrs. Wallace Conant and I went to Walden Pond. Mrs. Wheeler spent the better part of an hour searching for the ‘post-hole’ but couldn’t locate it. However, in her search she did find evidence which ultimately led to the key to the solution. She called our attention to two or three pieces of brick embedded in the soil just back of the cairn, in the pathway up the hill.

“Now Henry Thoreau was the only one to have brought brick into this vicinity. We had better cherish these fragments as gems,” I remarked.

“Hold on to them then”, agreed Mrs. Wheeler.

The following Wednesday getting home too early for supper I called to my six year old daughter, “What say, Jean, shall we go over to Walden Pond and walk up an appetite?” It was on this hike that we accidentally located the “post-hole”. Time not permitting an investigation then, I returned the following night. Finding no evidence of poison ivy, I smiled to myself, “Well, professor, it’s not for me to say you didn’t have a spell of ivy poisoning — but you didn’t catch it here”. I carefully examined the hole and found it to be two or three feet deep with a base of another two feet of loose soil. It was eight to ten inches in diameter, and its unusualness did stimulate my imagination — but not into believing it at one time supported a corner-post of Henry Thoreau’s house. It seemed logical that erosion would have sealed such a hole many times during a century. Even if its top had been carefully covered during that time, seepage and the working of frosts would have filled it in long ago. No, I didn’t know what it was but I knew what it wasn’t, that being a century-old petrified posthole!

The following Saturday my left eye developed a most unpleasant and annoying itch. As the day advanced the irritation became so bad that I had to halt a set of tennis that I was enjoying. One of the tennis group being a doctor, I inquired, “Doe, what’s annoying my eye so?” Examining it, he said,

“You’ve been making eyes at ivy — poison ivy.”

“Ridiculous, Doc,” I said. “I’m immune! Why, I’ve picked the stuff up by the handful!”

“Maybe so,” he said, “but this is probably the first time you tried picking it up with your eye — and succeeded.”

Success it was; for, before my itchy friend decided to vacate, he treated me to a five-day, one-eye view of my surroundings, plus a bonus of a face swollen to the proportions of my Uncle Hekimer’s waist-line after one of his celebrated beer parties. A local doctor and his medical poison ivy neutralizer, a needle that rivaled in length the four-foot long steel probing rod I used for locating solid objects in the soil, managed, after several proddings, to dislodge the barbs the ivy curse had embedded. So Professor White we’re even. You were wrong about the post-hole and I was wrong about the poison ivy.

By now I was getting disgusted with the whole business, particularly the references in Walden to the house and its location. There were too many contradictions and too many pieces of the puzzle left over. Why not check Thoreau’s Journals that record the two years he lived at Walden Pond and see how they coordinate with Walden, I decided.



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Choosing from Walden his reference to “a mink steals out of the marsh before my door and seizes a frog by the shore” as the most dependable spoke in the wheel whose turning led always away from the cairn in determining the original location of the house, I matched it against the same passage in his Journal.

The Walden passage read, word for word, “As I sit at my window this summer afternoon, hawks are circling about my clearing; the tantivy of wild pigeons, flying by twos and threes athwart my view, or perching restless on the white pine boughs behind my house, gives a voice to the air; a fish hawk dimples the glassy surface of the pond and brings up a fish;” (and here’s the key that opened the door to all the debating) “a mink steals out of the marsh before my door and seizes a frog by the shore; the sedge is bending under the weight of the reed-birds flitting hither and thither; and for the last half-hour I have heard the rattle of railroad cars, now dying away and then reviving like the beat of a partridge....” Can’t you just live this scene with Thoreau, its casual detail makes it so life-like. Let’s see what his Journals for that period say about it.

How odd! Thoreau wrote but little in his Journals while living at Walden Pond. However, for August 6, 1845 was recorded the essence of what I quoted from Walden, except for the words “a mink steals out of the marsh before my door and seizes a frog by the shore; the sedge is bending under the weight of the reed-birds flitting hither and thither.” How odd that no mention of the mink and the reed-birds is found in his Journals!

But wait! It’s not odd. Rather, it’s most revealing! I should have discovered this much earlier. Henry David Thoreau did not write Walden while living at Walden Pond. While there, he wrote “A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers”. Walden was written about 1849 and was published in 1854, seven years after he had left Walden Pond.

Taking the scanty Journals he kept while living at the pond, Thoreau blew them up to book proportions with the aid of his memory and imagination. To do so required the addition of a great many extra details. Consequently, while Thoreau writes in Walden, “a mink steals out of a marsh”, in reality it is not what he actually saw from his window, but only a figment of his imagination or his memory of such an incident observed as he stood by Walden’s shore. My questioning the authenticity of Walden’s details may be shocking to those who consider it as a sort of literary Bible. But this questioning was necessary in order to determine whether I was on the right track. It proved I was not.

That settled it. No need of my seeking the answer from Henry Thoreau’s writings alone. I wrote to Aaron Bagg saying that it seemed to me a waste of time to expect that Henry Thoreau’s recorded references to his house and its location would lead me to the solution.

“This has got to be done the hard way,” I wrote. “I’m going to start from scratch.”

And “scratch” it was, in a big way.



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## CHAPTER IV

### THOREAU'S "ONE THOUSAND OLD BRICK" SITE

#### DISCOVERED

WALDEN Pond reservation is property of the State of Massachusetts, under the jurisdiction of the Middlesex County Commissioners. Mr. Fred Hart is the overseer. I now asked for and obtained permission from the proper authorities to carry out excavation work in the vicinity of the cairn.

Purchasing a pocket compass, a ninety-eight cent G.I. trench shovel, getting a couple more longer and stronger probing rods and several pairs of canvas gloves — but now I was questioning my immunity to poison ivy — I headed for Walden Pond the morning of October 18th. Thought I, “Where there’s smoke there’s fire. Guess I’ll see what burns around the spot where Mrs. Wheeler located the brick pieces.”

It didn’t take much digging to find an answer. In an area eight feet long, three feet wide in its greatest width, and from two to seven inches beneath the surface of the ground, I found one hundred pieces of brick ranging from three quarters of an inch to a third of a brick in size. “Such luck — such gold!” I shouted to myself.

Taking the fragments, I hastened to Cambridge in the afternoon and had Mr. Carleton of the New England Brick Company check them for age. He found them to be old water-struck, hand-made brick.

“Could they be a century and a half old?”, I asked hesitantly, fearing a negative answer.

“Easily”, Mr. Carleton replied.

If ever there was a time when I desired to embrace a fellow man, it was then. Mr. Carleton went on to tell the history of brick and pottery, even reading from the ninth chapter of Genesis to prove his point and show that brick was one of mankind’s first products. Mr. Carleton also told why some of the brick fragments I found had retained their solid state while others found were decomposed.

“You see,” he said, “all bricks entering a kiln get off to an equal start. Made of the same ingredients, there is no such thing as a poor brick at the beginning. It’s the positions they retain while being baked that determines the quality of brick. Those receiving the most heat shrink and condense into a more solid and better product than those further from the heat. Consequently they are impervious to frost and cold weather. They could remain buried one thousand years only to be removed in perfect shape. But it is not so with the brick not properly cooked. They come out larger in size, are porous and are no match for cold weather and frosts.” Here he summed up this biographical study of brick with a philosophical comparison of a brick’s beginning with that of mankind. “We, too, start life as equals. I believe they credit but ten per cent of our being at the time of birth to heredity, while the remaining ninety per cent is the character which we as individuals are to mold. Of course, you will say, the brick had no choice of position when placed in the kiln. That’s true, but neither do we pick our parents or the station in life we desire to start from. As we develop we may choose the plan we desire to occupy and strive to achieve it. In this respect we have a decided advantage over the brick. You will find, son, the overall pattern of man, nature and beast is the same, the difference being in the modifications essential to adapt each to his environment”.

“Most interesting”, I commented.

Then, philosophy not being uppermost in my mind at the time, I remarked how late it was getting, thanked Mr. Carleton for his invaluable information and departed for Walden Pond.



My luck seemed to have run out. Further digging in the vicinity of the brick vein produced no new evidence. I didn't complain though; for I knew that I had in my possession brick which Henry David Thoreau had handled and used. "Wait," I told myself. "Had these pieces played a part in the construction of the chimney?" Examining the collection more carefully I found no evidence of mortar on them. As the soil I removed them from showed no other evidence I knew that I had not discovered the original location of the house. Nor could I honestly say that the brick had seen service in the chimney. Yet I was sure that these pieces were of the "one thousand old brick" which Thoreau had purchased for four dollars in order to build his chimney. I had worked it out that Henry Thoreau in carrying his brick from where he had piled them to where they were to be used had slipped or dropped a load of them on this spot. Picking up the undamaged brick, he had left the useless pieces where they had fallen, for erosion and slope-wash to shield and keep for me.

That evening there appeared in the Concord Journal a most interesting request.

THOREAU UNDERGROUND

The "Concord Chamber of Commerce" has received a request for a photograph of the grave of Henry D. Thoreau from a woman in Baltimore who writes:

"My son was the only one saved when his B-17 crashed near Assens, Denmark. He feels deeply indebted to his rescuer who was a member of the Danish underground. The only things he has asked for are some American cigars and a picture of the tomb of Thoreau. 'I know I shall never visit your great country, but if I could I would make a pilgrimage on bare feet, the last few miles to Concord, Mass.,' he writes."

The Journal is trying to answer the request from this brave Danish brother, in the name of the Concord Board of Trade, even if it necessitates the taking of pictures at the grave. Has anyone a suggestion to help us?

I wrote to Mr. Kent, the editor of the Concord Journal and told him that the day "Thoreau Underground" appeared in his paper I had had the good fortune to find pieces of Thoreau's "One thousand old brick." I had no picture of Thoreau's grave other than my deeply embedded mental picture from many visits to Author's Ridge, in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, where Thoreau is buried. As there was no way of conveying my mental picture to this courageous Dane, I suggested I would like to contribute a piece of Thoreau's "One thousand old brick" to be included with the picture of Thoreau's grave. My contribution was never accepted.

On Sunday, October 21st, I went again to Walden Pond. While seeking a likely spot to dig, I recalled the controversy that had centered about the four granite posts set out a dozen or so years earlier by a visitor to this "shrine" marking what he presumed to be the four corners of Thoreau's house. Fifty odd feet to the rear and northwest of the cairn is what appears to be a place dug in the side of the hill at one time to level it off for building purposes. It is just the right size to accommodate nicely a house the size of Henry Thoreau's. It was here that the granite posts had been erected. Because of its isolated and concealed position I had eliminated this spot long before as one ever having supported the house. Nevertheless it intrigued me.

My first shoveling in its area produced brick fragments! I spent the day, digging there. Also the morning of the following Sunday. Within an area twelve feet square and from two to seven inches deep, I removed several thousand pieces of brick, most of which were small in size. Digging was difficult because of a network of roots that had grown over and clung to almost every one of the brick particles.



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“Strange that the party who set out the granite posts hadn’t noticed this brick,” I puzzled.

Here again I found no evidence of mortar on the brick fragments. Undoubtedly this was where the load of “one thousand old brick” had been piled or dumped when first brought to the pond. The smallness of the fragments seemed to further verify this, they being similar in size to what would be chipped from brick when dumped in a pile and handled. It seemed to indicate that Henry Thoreau must have leveled out this spot himself. Possibly he had intended at first to build there, only to decide differently later. Perhaps he had meant to make a garden of it, or to use it as a place for piling extra fire wood. Perhaps he had used the soil for filling or banking purposes where he had built; or his privy could have occupied the spot. Your guess is as good as mine.

Probing about this area revealed no sign of the chimney’s foundation. I was satisfied that the brick were first piled here and then carried towards the spot where I had found the other fragments. Having thus made up my mind as to the course that Henry Thoreau had apparently followed while traversing from the brick pile to the house, I pursued it with vigor.



## CHAPTER V

## HENRY DAVID THOREAU JR. VISITS ME

ON Sunday afternoon, October 28, I struck a solid object embedded about a foot in the ground, beneath the stump of a white pine tree. This stump was several feet to the rear and west of the cairn. Approaching it as I had dozens of similar objects with an attitude of “here I go again,” I brought up a large quantity of plaster in the first shovelful of dirt. “Eureka!” I shouted, “this is it!” Shaking all over with enthusiasm I rushed two ten-quart pails to the spot and dug feverishly, but carefully. Much plaster and a number of large pieces of brick with mortar on them came to light. What is more, I found several old, badly rusted, hand-made square nails. Within 15 minutes time I had one pail filled with pieces of plaster and the other with brick. Some of the evidence was smoke-blackened, proving it had been exposed to fire. “Right from the very fireplace itself!” I concluded. Further digging led me under the roots of the stump. “What a seal of authenticity!” I smiled.

“What are you digging for?” inquired a young voice.

Looking up startled, I found two army sergeants viewing my labors. Bedecked in campaign ribbons, a presidential unit citation and the insignia of the Army Air Force, they lent an air of security to the scene. Even so, this was not the time to make public my good fortune. Skirting about their question by asking one myself, I said, “Welcome home, fellows. Been back long?”

One of them was a six-foot, rather slender, good-looking young man who seemed unusually interested in what I was doing. Courteously, but insistently, he plied me with questions concerning Henry Thoreau and his life at Walden Pond. Fearing that I might accidentally reveal my discovery, I parried his questions with observations on the beauty of this fall day and the like. Apparently, realizing that he was annoying me with his questions, he apologized:

“Sorry to bother you, sir, but you see, I am a distant relative of Henry David Thoreau. I live in California and I am on my way home from the European Theatre of Operations. I have never been here before — may never get here again — so naturally I am anxious to learn what I can of Walden.”

“You mind my asking your name?” I inquired.

“I am Henry David Thoreau, Jr.,” he replied.

I don’t know what held me steady on my feet on hearing this. The first person to witness the first evidence ever found at Walden Pond of Henry David Thoreau’s house was Henry David Thoreau, Jr. What a colossal coincidence!

Before I could recover from this pleasant shock we were interrupted by,

“Well, if it isn’t Mr. Robbins! Say, you’re the most persistent fellow.”

Turning about, I found Mr. and Mrs. Wallace Conant, of Concord, and three guests of theirs approaching. Things were happening fast — too fast to control. I wasn’t anxious for witnesses quite so soon; but here they were, and maybe it was all for the best

I said to Mr. Conant, “I would like to have you meet Sgt. Henry David Thoreau, Jr.” Mr. Conant very cordially accepted Sgt. Thoreau’s hand in both his, saying, “How do you do, Mr. Thoreau.” Then, while still grasping Sgt. Thoreau’s hand, turned to the other soldier and with his dry Yankee humor asked, “— and who is this, Ralph Waldo Emerson?”

Poor Sgt. Thoreau! He blushed, and, fumbling about for his army identification tag said, “My name is Henry David Thoreau, Jr. Here; see for yourself.”



## ROLAND ROBBINS

## ROLAND ROBBINS

Sure enough, it read;  
Henry D. Thoreau, Jr.  
19132462 T-43-43 B  
Henry D. Thoreau  
2479 N. Highland Ave.  
Altadena, Calif. P.

We stared at one another, amazed that this could really be true. Finally I suggested that they all gather around the pine stump while I continued my digging. As I added more brick and plaster to the pails, they overflowed onto the ground, making as fascinating a sight as I ever had seen. As Sgt. Thoreau and his soldier companion turned to leave, I suggested that they each take a piece of brick with them as a memento of this day. They were pleased at the idea, and did so gratefully.

When Mr. and Mrs. Conant and their party had departed and my composure was restored, I collected my working tools and sat down on the ground to rest and review this eventful day. Little had I realized when I awoke that morning what was in store for me. It is well I hadn't. Certainly I wouldn't have been up to it.

Sitting relaxed and admiring my collection of debris, I wouldn't have exchanged it at that moment for its weight in gems. After all, gems can be replaced; but when a piece of brick or plaster or nail from Thoreau's house gets lost there is no replacing it. I couldn't help but think what a revealing story the big, smoke-blackened, mortar-scarred brick now crowning the pail could tell if only it had eyes, ears and a voice. It could answer many of the questions which never will be answered. Henry David Thoreau's true personality, the very heart of the man would be known. His moods, his friends and their conversations, the food he prepared, habits he kept, his communion with his nature friends — even the consideration he had shown this brick by finding a place in the chimney where it would be best fitted. The story that brick could tell if it could but speak! But the scars that it bore disclosed the part it had played in sheltering Henry David Thoreau.

The coolness of the twilight air chilled me and checked my philosophical mood. It was just as well, for I was tired and hungry — yes, very weary, too.

The following morning I returned to complete my digging about the tree stump. In the afternoon my friends, Lt. Commander and Mrs. McIlwaine, drove up from Lexington and photographed brick and plaster that I had uncovered but had not removed from its virgin positions. Some of these pictures showed evidence beneath the stump itself.

On Sunday, November 4th, we had an unseasonable snow storm. It covered everything with a two to three inch depth of wet snow. Aaron Bagg drove down from Holyoke in the morning; and in the afternoon Aaron, John Lambert Jr. of Concord, and I went to Walden Pond. John is with the Division of Forestry, a branch of the Massachusetts Department of Conservation, and was well qualified to determine the age of this tree stump. Carefully and methodically, John went about analyzing the problem while our three heads and necks acted as catch basins for the wet snow, converting it into little rivulets of icy water that trickled down the course of our spines. At last John was ready with his answer.

"Eighty-eight years — a year one way or the other," he said. Slapping Aaron on the back, I said, "Hear that fella! For all but ten of the ninety-eight years since the house was moved away, the brick and plaster evidence has been protected by the spread of that tree's roots. Let the doubters try and discount such evidence!"

In November, 1869, Edmund Stuart Hotham, of New York, a young theological student, built himself a cabin at Walden and lived there until May 18, 1870. As this was twelve years after the tree began to grow over the brick and plaster evidence, it eliminated the possibility of its connection with Hotham's cabin. As to the location to where Hotham built Channing records: "Hotham's cabin was by the pond on the bank, in front of Henry's."



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Several days later I dug in a spot two to three feet northeast of the tree stump and at a foot depth I found pieces of old window glass, bluish in color, and uneven in thickness. One piece still retained putty at its edge. Here I also found glass similar to that used in a thin tumbler, as well as glass pieces that could have come from a vase or jar. I found more nails also.

By now I had thoroughly sifted the soil around and adjacent to the pine tree stump and had been well rewarded for my efforts. But the much sought chimney foundation was nowhere in evidence.

Meeting Mr. Conant at the Concord library one evening, I told him that I doubted if I would ever locate the foundation. "I have been all over the hillside with probing rods and shovels, blistered my hands, found much evidence of the house and the work it involved, but no sign of the chimney foundation," I said ruefully. "It just doesn't make sense. We know the chimney had a foundation and foundations aren't salvaged when buildings are moved."



## CHAPTER VI

### CHIMNEY FOUNDATION DISCOVERED

ARMISTICE Day came on Sunday. It was a rainy, raw day — no fit day to spend at Walden Pond. But the season was late. Regardless of the rain I had to make the most of what little time remained before cold weather should freeze the soil and terminate my excavating.

Digging several feet back of the cairn, in a place where I had probed many times before without finding evidence, I was surprised at the number of nails and pieces of nails I found after digging a foot deep. Thought I, “Erosion has been unusually generous here.” Pushing my probing rod down until it had penetrated to more than two feet, I struck something solid. Debating whether or not I should dig that deep — for surely nothing constructive could be found so deeply embedded — reluctantly I dug until I saw a large, fairly flat boulder. Pushing my rod in several directions handy to the boulder, I struck other solid objects. “Could this be it?” I wondered. A crescendo of enthusiasm seized me as I uncovered another boulder, bound to the first one with lime mortar! Further digging revealed the southwest corner of the much debated, long sought, foundation to Henry David Thoreau’s house chimney. By now it was nearly dark; and, as I carefully refilled my diggings I realized that I had been unusually fortunate in pushing my rod down where I had. Had it been four inches further to the southwest I would have missed my goal entirely.

That evening I called Aaron Bagg, told him of my good fortune and asked him to come down in the morning and we would uncover the foundation together.

Jubilantly we began our work on Monday morning. We had to approach the foundation cautiously with our digging as we did not know its size or exact position. This day also was rainy and raw, but it didn’t dampen our spirit. By evening earth that for nearly a century had covered the top of the remains of the chimney’s foundation was removed revealing the answer to the true location of Thoreau’s Walden house.

Here another extraordinary coincidence presented itself. Henry Thoreau wrote in his 1845 Journal, “Left house on account of plastering, Wednesday, November 12th, at night, returned Saturday December 6th.” One hundred years to the day the Walden house was finished (for its construction was not completed until it was plastered) its chimney foundation was brought to light. It was not constructed of boulders alone, for the northeast corner was formed from broken brick that could not be used in the chimney. Also, throughout the foundation, brick was used for wedging purposes, or filling spaces its size. Lime mortar was not used throughout, only in key positions such as the corners of the foundation and between boulders and brick to bind them together. The same pattern is found in the cellar walls of the “Texas House” which Thoreau and his father built six months before Thoreau went to Walden. The Thoreau family was living in the “Texas House” at the time Henry undertook his Walden enterprise. The remains of the chimney foundation is nearly a perfect five foot square. The hearth and the top layer of the chimney foundation were found to be missing. This substantiated Ellery Channing’s opinion that they had been removed by Hugh Whelan.

Tuesday morning Aaron and I continued our digging. In the afternoon Mr. and Mrs. Allen French, Mrs. Caleb Wheeler and Mr. Wallace Conant came to witness the discovery. This being another day of intermittent showers, pictures Aaron took of the group developed poorly.



Although the weather for several days couldn't decide what it wanted to do, by Wednesday morning it had made a decision. And what a wet one! Intense showers spotted the morning. As the newspapers predicted rain for Thursday, I decided I shouldn't wait for good weather to take pictures. Aaron had gone home Tuesday night. My brother, Leonard, went to the pond this morning and between showers proceeded with the work of removing soil from about the boulders so they would photograph well. I made arrangements with Miss Marcia Webber, of Bedford, Mass., a young, attractive and excellent photographer, to take pictures that afternoon. It was after 3 P.M. when Miss Webber got her equipment set up. The weather by then was the worst I had encountered at any time during my work at Walden Pond. Mr. Conant, my brother and I held three umbrellas over Miss Webber and her equipment while she worked. But here again good fortune smiled my way. The rain on the foundation made it glisten and the sun's absence eliminated any chance of shadows about the boulders. The prints were of unusual quality and detail.

Thursday morning I returned to Walden and took compass readings of the chimney foundation's position. Then, placing a painter's drop-cloth over and around the foundation, I covered it carefully with its soil, packing it down and leveling it off so that little evidence of this excavating should remain. As I proceeded with these last physical efforts connected with research on the subject, I made a mental picture of the foundation — a deeply and permanently embedded picture of its location, size, depth and structure.

Shortly after finishing my Walden Pond work I chanced to meet Ezra Nudkins on Concord's Mill-dam. "Ezra", I said, "how did that little verse you made up about Thoreau's cairn being in the wrong place go?"

Ezra chuckled. Then ribbing me with his elbow he said, "Say, that was cute, eh? Listen:

For a hundred years we've tipped out hat

To a site where Henry's hut ne'er sat."

"Well, Ezra," I said, "you change the last line so it reads, 'To the site where Henry's house had sat', and it will not only be cute — but also correct."

"Shucks, no!" said Ezra, "Who'da thunk it — well I'll be — aw shucks no!"



## CHAPTER VII

### SUGGESTIONS FOR A NEW WALDEN MEMORIAL

DURING the winter months that followed many suggestions were advanced as to the proper means of preserving the chimney foundation and marking the site of the Walden house.

All suggestions were given due consideration by competent architects. There were those who would like to have built a replica of the house. This was an excellent idea but proves impractical. The location being off in the woods and on unpatrolled land afforded no protection against vandalism. (In 1845 its location was its protection.) There were others who would have liked to have the chimney foundation uncovered so that it would be visible to visitors. While this suggestion appeared to be a simple solution to the problem, it proves otherwise. First the chimney foundation would have to be uncovered. Then it would have to be carefully removed, each boulder and brick being marked to insure its position when being relaid. A four foot rubble foundation would then be laid beneath the base of the chimney foundation. The chimney foundation would then be relaid. But in relaying the chimney foundation cement would have to be used extensively about the boulders and bricks to prevent water from settling between them and freezing during the winter. When it was realized that the visitor would see as much cement as he would chimney foundation, this plan lost its favor. Besides, visitors would decide to place their stones on the chimney foundation rather than the cairn. Or they would chip pieces from the brick used in the chimney foundation for keepsakes. Then again this plan would encourage youthful Walden bathers to toss the stones from the cairn into the pit and onto the chimney foundation, burying it from sight. Still again someone suggested this plan would be hazardous to Walden's summer amorous parties — what if petters should stumble into this pit?

“Would serve them right,” grumbled a person whose age disposed him against these more youthful activities.

“Let us put an iron grill over the open pit,” suggested another.

“And put Thoreau beneath bars? Not on your life!” replied someone indignantly. It was suggested that the chimney foundation be placed in the Concord Antiquarian.

“How much significance would Lincoln's cabin present if it stood on Boston's Common?” demanded another. He continued, “If we move, or disturb, the chimney foundation of Thoreau's Walden house, we disturb the very soul of Thoreau. If Thoreau had not made his Walden Pond experiment his name would be obscure today. Five hundred years from now Concord will be famous because of Thoreau and his Walden — and not because of the Old North Bridge. The Walden Thoreau memorial must preserve the chimney foundation, mark the site of Thoreau's house and be in keeping with Thoreau's simplicity and ideals.”

Before those interested became too involved with final plans for a Walden Thoreau memorial, some concern had to be given to the means of financing it. Consensus of opinion agrees that this would prove no problem. But after writing and contacting several organizations that support and sponsor the preservation of historical buildings and antiquities, it was discovered they could not assist in financing a Walden Thoreau memorial. Many of these organizations invest only in projects over which they can have control. Walden Pond being part of a state reservation would not permit private enterprise.

A friend suggested that I write to a very prominent New York citizen who had shown much interest in the past in such undertakings. However, my friend cautioned me that the New York person might prove to be a very caustic correspondent if he was not taken with my idea. This I learned to be the truth. My letter to this party stated that I had discovered Thoreau's Walden home site and that he might be able to assist in suggesting some form of appropriate memorial. I also enclosed a clipping of the Concord Journal which had a picture of me standing in the open pit beside the chimney foundation. Two weeks later I received his answer:



## ROLAND ROBBINS

## ROLAND ROBBINS

New York

N.Y.

Mr. Roland Wells Robbins January 17, 1946

R.F.D. No. 1

Concord, Mass.

My dear Mr. Robbins:

Please excuse my delay in answering your letter but I have been trying to find out who this man Thoreau was whose grave you have been trying to discover. None of my acquaintances in the New York Fire Department ever heard of him. I stopped in at a branch library. There they told me they had heard the name and thought he was a writer who used to write special articles for the now defunct Evening World. Following up this literary lead I asked some literary people. One person said he had been gardener for Guy Lowell and another one told me he was a founder of the "Do What You Please Club." From this you can see that Thoreau's name is not well known in New York, although he may have been a prominent enough citizen of Concord to justify a national society to perpetuate his name. I think that you have a literary detective in Boston who could be much more valuable to you in this connection than I can. I beg to refer you to \_\_\_\_\_ Boston, Mass.

Yours sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_

I answered this New York letter:

R.F.D. #1

Concord, Massachusetts

Sunday, January 20, 1946

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

New York, N. Y.

My dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I was profoundly disappointed, yet mildly surprised, to learn that members of the New York Fire Department had yet to become acquainted with the name Thoreau. You see, I am not a Concordian — don't even live in the town — but rather in the bordering town of Lincoln, Mass. None of my people ever lived in Concord and like myself knew much about the place other than what was read from history and books on American literature. My education, I shamefully admit, was limited to one year of high school and part of this education was a product of a Maine rural school. I am not a scholar, and by profession I operate a small and successful domestic window cleaning and painting business — yet even I had heard of Henry Thoreau long before I began kicking up Concord dust. I don't say all I heard was pleasant but nevertheless I had heard of the man.

Many people find food for a youthful ambition by chasing fire engines. As for me, my youthful ambition was to become better acquainted with some of those who preceded me and lent a hand in building traditions that have stabilized our way of living. Made no difference what field they operated in as long as their part was important to the pattern.



## ROLAND ROBBINS

## ROLAND ROBBINS

So my spare time is spent in roaming around cemeteries introducing myself to some of the immortal names we are all familiar with. It is surprising, how the great people who paved the way for us, and who would never have had the time to converse with us when they carried their load of flesh, literally beg and crave your companionship today. They will talk on anything — particularly about themselves. They will give you an insight into the problems that confronted them and answer any question you might put to them.

It was on one of these grave-digging pilgrimages that I became acquainted with Henry Thoreau. I have spent many enjoyable and refreshing visits with Henry since then. (He insists that I call him Henry.) The things I have learned about that man one would never imagine. Believe me, no man was ever so misunderstood or bore so much undeserving humiliation, according to him. He asked but one favor of me — pleaded that I go out to Walden Pond and uncover the foundation to his hut's chimney so the professors of literature and followers of his philosophy could concentrate on his writings without interrupting their studies with bickerings on the true location of the hut.

I carefully followed his instructions and, sure enough, had no trouble locating the chimney's foundation after six months of blistering excavation work.

Henry doesn't know I am trying to make arrangements to preserve and properly present this five by five square of boulders to the many thousands of tourists who annually visit Walden Pond to pay their respects to him. I want to surprise him. But at this date the surprise in store for Thoreau is that vandals and souvenir hunters will dismantle the much discussed, long sought chimney foundation come spring thaw. They hover around like locust and I and my wet shammy can't hold them off once my strong ally, Jack Frost, deserts me.

I am sending you a copy of Henry Thoreau's Walden for your acquaintances in the New York Fire Department. Also a copy of my "Thru The Covered Bridge," a book of rural poems I wrote while barnstorming around Vermont trying to make a living. I also enclose three copies of my "Story of The Minute Man" which Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has broadcast three times within the year, once a coast to coast hook-up.

You will note that I am the author, poet, historian, research collaborator, editor, publisher and distributor in the case of all my literary work. This is the way it has had to be in the past and undoubtedly will be with my story "House Hunting for Henry David Thoreau." Nevertheless, if my good health continues, I expect by spring to have accumulated the means to publish the story — and let me assure you, it is anything but dull, even for firemen. It will include invaluable photographs of which I alone have title to.

Before the ink of the first copies of this story has set I will forward same to your acquaintances in the New York Fire Department.

In the meantime if I get to New York (and I never have been there) I will be glad to talk to the city's firemen about my friend, Henry Thoreau. And tell of my visits with Henry and show slides pertaining to the work and discoveries on the hut's location controversy.

Until then

Yours for a more Thoreau New York Fire Department.

(Sgd.) Roland Wells Robbins

On February 1st, 1946 the morning mail included a large manila envelope addressed to:

Mr. Henry David Thoreau

c/o Master Roland Wells Robbins

Lincoln, Mass.

Opening it I found an 8- x 12-inch piece of white cardboard on which was printed in red lettering:

This serves to remind

Henry David Thoreau

That he is a loyal member of the



**ROLAND ROBBINS**

**ROLAND ROBBINS**

Do whay you please club

I thanked my correspondent with:

R.F.D. #1

Concord, Mass.

February 3, 1946

My Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Your certificate of membership to the "Do What You Please Club" for Henry David Thoreau arrived save and sound this morning. The was a most pleasant surprise, as I secretly had expected the certificate to be an honorary membership to the New York Fire Department for my friend.

Nevertheless I hastened over to Sleepy Hollow Cemetery and lifting back the two-foot blanket of snow, I presented it to Henry. You should have seen his joy when learning of you thoughtfulness. 'Twas though he had at last been well rewarded for the load of abuse his narrow, sloping shoulders had supported for the past century.

I couldn't but help recall a similar scene that took place this past Xmas when I handed an unfortunate waif a ragged, headless doll. (It was all I had to offer.) Turning her drawn, dejected face to me, it suddenly was aglow with a new life and spirit as she thanked me with, "Gee, mister, ain't it the most beautiful doll in the world!"

You know, I can't but help feel I, too, will share this honorary degree with Henry for the small part I played in bringing it about.

It takes me back some twenty years to the day I was rewarded for my first sincere effort in life when receiving my Tenderfoot Badge I became a full-fledged Boy Scout.

In behalf of Henry David Thoreau, I enclose our deepest appreciations for your interest in our problems, and assure you we won't again beseech you with the problems of our future.

Thoreauly yours

(Sgd.) Roland Wells Robbins

Fortunately, by now the Middlesex County Commissioners, who have jurisdiction over the Walden Pond State Reservation, had appropriated one thousand dollars towards a Walden Pond Thoreau memorial. Nevertheless, my New York adversary and I continued our saucy sparring. This time I started the action:

R.F.D. #1

Concord, Mass.

April 18, 1946

New York, N. Y.

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

Imagine my surprise when a recent mail brought an invitation for me to address the New York Thoreau Fellowship the evening of May 2 at the Museum of Natural History. I understand the purpose of this meeting will be to open the National Thoreau Memorial Fund campaign.

Naturally I seized this opportunity to vacation three days from my window-cleaning work, and make this first trip to your big city.

Being my first attempt at public speaking, I will not venture to predict my delivery. However, I promise not to preach on the virtues of Henry's philosophy. Rather my sermon will deal with the value of having a hobby.

This should prove an excellent opportunity for you to gather invaluable information on the literary world's man Friday for the New York Fire Department, as well as acquaint you with the necessity of your sponsorship for this worthy cause.



**ROLAND ROBBINS**

**ROLAND ROBBINS**

May I welcome you as my guest?

Very truly yours,

(Sgd.) Roland Wells Robbins P.S.

By the way, it wasn't I who discovered Thoreau's body, his grave, or the pie-tin over which he toasted his corn-bread, as has so erroneously been credited to me — nor am I acquainted with their discoverer. My discovery being limited to the remains of his hut's chimney foundation at Walden Pond.

Be seeing you May 2nd.

My New York correspondent didn't accept my invitation to hear me speak. He did, however, accept my invitation to continue with our bickering. And he did a real good job of it:

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New York, N. Y.

May 9, 1946

My dear Mr. Robbins,

I am sorry that I could not accommodate you with bed and breakfast on May 2nd, which I knew was why you wrote, but under the circumstances there were no vacancies in this hotel.

I hope that you did not attempt to receive any instruction from \_\_\_\_\_ on public speaking because of all people he is the most awful speaker I have ever heard. In the early days when he did not have photographs, before I told him how to photograph, he tried to dodge many ripe eggs. Then after he became more efficient at taking photographs the public spared the screen because they wanted to see the pictures. However, my mentor in public speaking was Chief Massasoit, who taught me not to say too much. I was never pelted with eggs because I always stayed in the back and ran the projector and threw my voice from the screen. This has two advantages. I did not need an operator and I did not have to put on a white front. The latter two has found extremely expensive as he had to hire a man to run the pictures, and during the paper scarcity he often found it hard to get shirt fronts.

If you are in the window cleaning business I wish you would clean office windows sometime because I have never seen such a grimy office in my life.

Yours sincerely,

---

I answered the best I could with:

R.F.D. #1

Concord, Mass.

May 12, 1946.

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New York, N.Y.

My dear

Your letter sure made me blush with shame. Little did I realize you would see through my guise for conniving a meal and night's lodging from you while in New York. You did, however, slip on the date as it wasn't May 2nd I had in mind but rather the week-end.



**ROLAND ROBBINS**

**ROLAND ROBBINS**

Nevertheless I was successful in using my self-pity to good advantage. I snared a fellow from Forest Hills. He took royal care of me and didn't for a minute catch on to my act — although at times I think he was suspicious. I did miss you at the lecture though, and delayed its start for thirty minutes in the hope that some local fire delayed your presence temporarily.

You know, you and I have much in common — even though it isn't Henry Thoreau. For instance, you saw through the paper shirt front guise that \_\_\_\_\_ has been getting away with for years. You're the only one wise to \_\_\_\_\_ conservatism (it's his Yankee background, you know). To be sure, the paper shortage would have proved a calamity to \_\_\_\_\_ if it hadn't been for me. My experience in the window-cleaning and paint cleaning business proved invaluable in renovating these false fronts. I beg you not to mention this to him as he's very touchy in this respect.

Very truly yours,

(Sgd.) Roland Wells Robbins



## CHAPTER VIII

### NEW DISCOVERIES

BY May the warm spring air had thawed and dried the soil at Walden and I returned and continued my investigation. More nails were located about the site of the Walden house and I discovered the foundation for the northwest corner of the house.

I had been intrigued by an area just back of the site where the chimney foundation was discovered. This area was banked on three sides and was about 8 feet wide and 10 feet long. According to the early sketches of Thoreau's Walden home and its woodshed, as well as the evidence I had found, this area fitted perfectly into the pattern and excavation should prove it to be the site of the woodshed.

Memorial Day morning I picked lady-slippers, violets and ferns from about the site of the Walden house and taking them to Sleepy Hollow Cemetery placed them upon Thoreau's grave. I realized it was unlawful to pick flowers on the Walden Pond State Reservation. But then, this was Memorial Day, and I was sentimental. While at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery I met two people who had not been on speaking terms with each other for several years. Individually they conversed with me.

I watched as they decorated the same grave, neither speaking to the other. How ironic, decorating the dead, yet not speaking to the living.

Memorial Day afternoon I returned to Walden and began excavating along the banked area where, I presumed, the woodshed had stood. My physical efforts were well rewarded. Digging along the crest of the banked area I removed from two of its sides thirty old and rusted square nails, of assorted sizes, as well as a piece of lead that showed knife lines across it. Most of the evidence had been buried about a foot in the soil. Later it was determined that the lead piece might have furnished Thoreau with sinkers for his fish lines. Also the lead piece could have been used by Thoreau for a base over which leather etc. were cut.

Returning to Sleepy Hollow Cemetery Memorial Day evening, I found a garland of field flowers had been placed around my small bouquet. Together they made a simple and fitting Memorial Day token to Henry Thoreau. Later I learned Mrs. Caleb Wheeler had been responsible for the garland, a practice she had been carrying on for some time. Yet these small mementos alone were the only consideration shown Henry Thoreau on Memorial Day, a day given to "In memory of." Does he not deserve a wider recognition on Memorial Day from the many who have derived a personal and guiding comfort from his writings? There are those who believe, "Thoreau would prefer it that way". If that be true, then neither would Thoreau approve of the Walden cairn. Still the Walden cairn has had far more stones placed upon it than has Thoreau's grave had flowers — and the grave is ten years the senior.

In May T. Mott Shaw of Concord, a prominent architect, proposed a Walden Thoreau memorial that came close to meeting with everyone's approval. Mr. Shaw suggested that granite posts three feet high be set on the four corners of the house site. Where the door to the house originally stood two more granite posts would be set. A wrought iron chain would sag between the granite posts, leaving an entrance to the enclosed house site between the granite posts marking the door. At the opposite end of the enclosed area over the remains of the chimney foundation, large, flat-surfaced, field boulders would be embedded about one foot, rising six inches above the soil. On the center boulder an inscription would be cut stating that "beneath these boulders lies Thoreau's chimney foundation." There would also be inscribed some appropriate passage from Walden. The original position of Thoreau's woodshed would be marked by four, foot high, granite posts set out on the four corners of its site. The woodshed area would not be enclosed with chains.



Mr. Shaw's proposed memorial provided the requirements essential to protect, yet not disturb the remains, and would present to the visitor the actual site and the significance of the smallness of Thoreau's Walden house. Mr. Shaw's plan was in keeping with the Walden environs and would convey to the visitor the thought-provoking fact that from this ten by fifteen foot area — an area smaller than the modern single car garage — such great literary work came to the world.

I spent the morning of July 4th, the one hundred and first anniversary of Thoreau's moving into his Walden home, digging in the area of the woodshed. My physical efforts were again well rewarded. I located the southeast corner foundation of the woodshed. It was a foot and a half in the soil and was constructed of bricks and stone. Phoning Mrs. Allen French and Mrs. Caleb Wheeler I asked if they would care to witness the discovery before I carefully covered it again. It was not convenient for Mrs. French. But Mrs. Wheeler and her son Warren came out to Walden and witnessed the evidence. Both shared my belief that it was the foundation for the southeast corner of Thoreau's woodshed.

What a contrast the one hundred and first anniversary presented to the one hundredth anniversary of Thoreau's settling in his Walden home. There was no pilgrimage to Walden this year, no readings. Alas, the morning brought no visitors to the cairn. The 1945 centennial service would have to suffice until the one hundred and tenth, or maybe the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary.

When Mrs. Wheeler and her son Warren had departed and I had covered up my digging, I sat down and reminisced for several minutes. I recalled the 1945 commemorative exercises — how Mr. Allen French had stood just to the rear of the cairn as he presided. Then, when the controversy as to the true site of Thoreau's Walden house was being discussed, Mr. French had stepped back several paces, opened his shooting-stick, a form of walking-stick that can be opened and used as a seat, and relaxed. What a furore I would have created if at the height of that discussion I could have stepped forward and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, debate the subject no further. Mr. French has placed his shooting-stick above the remains of the chimney foundation itself!" Yet, if I had possessed this knowledge a year earlier, there would have been no need of the debating.

Miss Louise Stimson of Concord made an excellent miniature model of the Walden Thoreau memorial as proposed by T. Mott Shaw. It was so lifelike that one would imagine himself standing before the finished and dedicated Walden memorial.

On July 13th the National Thoreau Society convened in Concord. The business meeting was held in the vestry of the First Parish Meeting House. Miss Stimson's model of the proposed Walden Thoreau memorial was exhibited. I exhibited many of the relics that I had found at Walden, as well as all the photographs taken of the work and statements by those who had participated.

The Thoreau Society's morning business meeting was followed by an interesting talk given by Prof. Walter Richard Eaton of Yale. At the afternoon session I spoke of my research and excavating at Walden, showing slides of the work and outlining its results. At the conclusion of my talk the proposed Walden Thoreau memorial plans were fumed over to those assembled for discussion. T. Mott Shaw's suggestion met the hearty approval of all. The only discussion centered on the proposed inscriptions. Naturally there were many different views as to appropriate inscriptions. It was voted to have the National Thoreau Society provide the boulder and its inscription, which was to be centered over the remains of Thoreau's chimney foundation.

To carry out T. Mott Shaw's proposed plan for a Walden Thoreau memorial would necessitate the moving of stones from the rear of the cairn to new positions nearer the cairn's front. This was essential, as twenty-five per cent of the cairn actually occupied part of the ten by fifteen foot area where Thoreau built his house. (Bronson Alcott, often accused of being incorrect and impractical, certainly knew what he was doing when he carries the first stones for the cairn from Walden's shore and placed them on the true site of Thoreau's house.)



## CHAPTER IX

### THOREAU'S CELLAR HOLE

TUESDAY morning, Aug. 13, Raymond Emerson of Concord, a grandson of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and I visited the Middlesex County Commissioners and asked permission to move the rear section of the cairn that rested on the site of the house to a position nearer the cairn's front; also to open the "six feet square by seven deep" cellar hole that Thoreau had dug in the sandy soil beneath his house to store his potatoes. It was expected that many more relics would be discovered in the cellar. Permission was granted.

Saturday morning, August 31, I went to Walden and began moving stones from the rear of the cairn to positions nearer the front and to the left of the large boulder that holds the inscribed plaque. In an hour's time I had cleared stones from two feet of the area to be cleared. Digging out a stone, half the size of a football, from the sandy soil at the bottom of the cairn, I was startled to find the name "Mr. and Mrs. G. T. Pratt — 1878" printed with black paint on its underside. Replacing it in the position it had occupied, I hastened home and telephoned Mrs. Allen French, Mrs. Leslie Anderson, Mrs. Caleb Wheeler and Rothwell MacRae, all of Concord. They arrived shortly and Mrs. Anderson and Rothwell MacRae took pictures of the inscribed stone and its position at the bottom of the cairn. Continuing with the moving of the cairn's stones, I found many more with inscriptions. By noon their total was fourteen. In the afternoon Anton Kovar, a member of the National Thoreau Society, Mrs. Leslie Anderson and Miss Evelyn Knowlton arrived and helped with the work. By evening a total of thirty stones with inscriptions on them had been removed from the bottom of the cairn. Mrs. Anderson photographed them. Then the stones were hidden in the brush for the night.

Sunday morning I met Anton Kovar in Concord Center and we drove to Walden and continued with the work of moving the cairn from the area of Thoreau's house site. By noon the work was completed. Eight more inscribed stones had been found. Of the thirty-eight inscribed stones removed from the bottom of the cairn, apparently twenty-seven had been placed there by a group of visitors who had made a pilgrimage to the pond in 1878. This was evident as the inscribed names and dates on the twenty-seven stones had been printed with black paint and by the same person. Having been protected from the elements by being buried face down in the sandy soil, much of the black printing retained a gloss.

One stone with "F. W. C. Hersey, 1893" printed on it had been inscribed with red paint. Mrs. Allen French and Mrs. Caleb Wheeler both were acquainted with the name and said it was Prof. F. W. C. Hersey of Harvard College, now retired and living in Cambridge.

Of the twenty-seven inscribed stones apparently placed on the cairn in 1878 by a group on a picnic, or on a pilgrimage to Walden, two were inscribed "Boston Herald" (the name of a Boston daily newspaper) and "Banner of light." Could it have been an outing by a newspaper organization? However, Banner of Light took on a more religious aspect. Among the names inscribed on the 1878 stones were Dr. York, Boston; Giles B. Stebbins, Detroit, Mich.; Mr. and Mrs. J. F. Gault (O.M.A.), Boston; W. P. McCobb (O.M.A.); Mr. and Mrs. S. Burrill, Jr. (O.M.A.), Chelsea; G. A. Fuller; J. W. Day; Mr. and Mrs. Hatch Jr.; Mr. and Mrs. J. H. Currier; and Lutie Blair Murdock. What was the meaning of O.M.A.?



Having cleared the cairn from the area which Thoreau's house had occupied, we set to work opening Thoreau's "six feet square by seven deep" cellar hole. The surface soil of the filled-in cellar hole was a layer of humus which had accumulated during the twenty-five-year period between the moving of the house in 1847 and the beginning of the cairn in 1872. Two feet beneath the humus were located bent and rusted square nails, pieces of plaster, pottery and glass, and wood ashes. Five feet beneath the humus the sandy soil was mixed with rich soil. As no relics were found much deeper than two feet in the cellar hole, apparently a load of fill had been carted in and dropped into the cellar hole after the Walden house was moved to the bean field. The top two feet of fill possibly came from about the house site, which accounted for the nails, plaster pieces, etc., found nearer the surface.

Late that afternoon, Walter Harding, Secretary of the National Thoreau Society appeared with a sleeping-bag strapped to his shoulders and announced he was going to spend the night there. Walter and Anton Kovar accompanied me to my home and we had supper. Then we journeyed to the Thoreau Farm, now owned by Mrs. Caleb Wheeler. It was here that Thoreau was born, though the house in which he was born had later been moved.

Mrs. Wheeler had generously offered to donate the boulder which the National Thoreau Society would place at Walden. How fitting that this boulder should come from the Thoreau birthplace! The Thoreau Farm's pastures are littered with granite boulders of all sizes and shapes. After inspecting many, we decided on a flat surfaced boulder about three feet long and two feet wide. It weighed about twelve hundred pounds and would insure protection for the chimney foundation. Later T. Mott Shaw, the architect, and Mr. and Mrs. Allen French examined the boulder and approved our choice.

Leaving Mrs. Wheeler's, Anton and I drove Walter out to Walden and helped him locate his sleeping-bag.

Early Monday morning I went to Walden and found Walter digging in the cellar hole. Enthusiastically he told how he had enjoyed the night — and how he had had a visitor. A great-great-great-great-etc.-grandson of a fox that had shared the woods with Thoreau had strolled up to see how he was faring. However, being unaccustomed to the glare of a flashlight, he had high-footed away before Walter could make his acquaintance.

Thoreau did not have his cellar in the very center of the house. Rather it lay at one end, between the door and the center of the house. This sort of balanced the fireplace and hearth which occupied the opposite end. In the very center of the house site was located a boulder foundation for some sort of a support. It is difficult to imagine why a structure the size of Thoreau's house required a center support. Nevertheless there is evidence to show this to be so. In the May 6, 1880 edition of the Concord Freeman there appeared a Thoreau Annex. Joseph Hosmer, then of Chicago, recalled a day which he had spent with Thoreau at the Walden house in September, 1845.

"The building was not then finished, the chimney had no beginning — the sides were not battered, or the walls plastered.... The king-post was an entire tree, extending from the bottom of the cellar to the ridge-pole, upon which we descended, as the sailors do, into the hold of a vessel."

To be sure, Hosmer was recalling his visit to Walden thirty five years after it had taken place. Time distorts memories, particularly where details are concerned. No foundation for a king-post was found at the bottom of the cellar hole. What could have been such a foundation was located next to the cellar hole, on the ground level and in the very center of the house — a logical place for it to be located. Certainly Hosmer's memory would not have recalled a king-post in the house, and its use as a conveyance, if it had not existed in some form. However, it is likely that its use in this connection was to and from the garret which Thoreau mentioned.

Before refilling and closing the cellar hole, Walter Harding wrote a statement pertaining to its excavation, which statement was signed by all witnesses.

"The undersigned have witnessed the excavation of the cellar-hole of Henry David Thoreau's Walden cabin on Labor Day, September 2, 1946, by Roland Wells Robbins who discovered the site of the chimney foundation on November 11, 1945."

Roland Wells Robbins, Lincoln, Mass. T. Morris Longstreth, Concord, Mass. Aletta L French, Concord, Mass. Wallace B. Conant, Concord, Mass. Anton Kovar, Arlington, Mass.

Walter Harding, Secretary of the Thoreau Society, Bridgewater Mass.



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The above are members of the Thoreau Society. [The three signatures below are of non-member witnesses.]

Madeline Van Antwerp Huffert, North Bergen, N. J. Anton M. Huffert, North Bergen, N. J.

Rothwell N. MacRae, Concord, Mass.

Anton Kovar had purchased a long, narrow bottle with a plastic cover, at a Concord drug-store. Placing the statement in the bottle and screwing the cover on tightly, we deposited it at about a four-foot depth in the center of the cellar hole.

With the cellar hole nearly two-thirds filled, I was probing and digging to the front of it, just outside of the house site and in front of where the door had stood. At a depth of fifteen inches I discovered a large deposit of poorly mixed, unused lime plaster. When it was uncovered it was found to be seven feet, ten inches long, a foot thick and as wide in places as three feet. It had been deposited just to the front of where the door stood, running along the southwest front of the house until it extended three feet and nine inches beyond the corner. Thoreau could not have mixed his plaster there as the ground was not level. Besides, the length and the narrowness of the deposit did not suggest the site of Thoreau's mortar-bed. Possibly Thoreau had mixed his plaster on the inside of the house, so that it would be handy to the four walls. Perhaps, finishing his plastering late in the day, he had discovered that he had mixed more than the walls required (he may have planned it that way). Needing more fill to the front of the house, he had spread the remains of the batch along that area, then departed for the family home, where he had lived while the plaster dried. [By leaving a newly plastered dwelling without heat during freezing weather, Thoreau displayed poor judgment.] About four weeks later he had returned to Walden to live. Covering the hardened plaster deposit in front of his house with a foot of soil had completed the terracing.

By Tuesday noon the work of reshaping the cairn and investigating Thoreau's cellar hole was completed. The labor exerted by those who assisted with the work gave a picked-up appearance to the vicinity. The calm was no longer strewn in an ungainly heap over a large area. Surprisingly the depth of the cairn at its crown was no more than two feet. We had expected it to be about four feet.

In 1872, when Bronson Alcott began the cairn, the site was quite level, probably because Thoreau had brought soil from the dug-out area in the hill to the rear for this purpose. Since 1872 the cairn's stones had protected the soil beneath it, diverting the washings from the hill back of it. Much of the soil to the sides of the cairn had thus been washed away during the intervening years. In this manner had been created the exaggerated impression as to the height of the cairn. Today the area cleared of the cairn appears as a small plateau.



## CHAPTER X

### “BANNER OF LIGHT”

I HAD been quite intrigued with the inscribed stones found at the bottom of the cairn, and I made up my mind to try to satisfy my curiosity. Though realizing that my chances of ever running down a record telling of how they came to be placed there were more than slim, I nevertheless went to the library of the Boston Herald, the daily newspaper whose name appeared on one of the stones. I was informed by the librarian that their files went back only twenty-five years. She recommended that I try the Archives.

Sure enough the Archives had a thorough collection of Boston Heralds as far as they went back. But they didn't go back far enough, their oldest being the 1881 editions. It was suggested that I try the Boston Public Library.

Yes indeed, the Boston Public Library had the 1878 edition. However, it was not stored there, but rather at the New England Deposit. Library in Allston.

Still undismayed, I hastened to Allston with a slip granting me permission to examine the 1878 files. The clerk at the New England Deposit Library took my slip, disappeared for a few minutes, then resumed and informed me that the editions which I desired had been misplaced. He had no idea at the moment as to where they could be found.

Apparently that terminated my hopes of ever locating an answer to the problem. But did it? Turning back to the clerk, I asked, “Did you ever run across the name Banner of Light in your travels?”

“Banner of Light? Seems to me I have. Let me check my index,” he answered.

Returning, he said “Why yes, Banner of Light was a popular weekly periodical given to spiritualism. It flourished during the latter part of the nineteenth century.”

“Have you got any of the 1878 editions filed here?” I asked, shaking anew with enthusiasm.

“Wouldn't be surprised if Harvard's got some filed here,” he said, as he turned to investigate. Back he came with a large dusty folder.

“Here she be.”

Turning hastily to the summer months, I glanced through the columns for any mention of Walden Pond. On page 8 of the July 27, 1878 edition was recorded:

“Sunday, July 21st, 1878 marked the official commencement of the Spiritualist Camp meeting now in progress at Lake Walden, Concord, under the management of J. B. Hatch.

Saturday evening, July 20th, a ball was given by the management at the Pavilion, music by Dunbar's Band, J. B. Hatch, Jr. {this name found on one of the stones} being the chief supervisor of the floor.”

On page 8 of the August 3, 1878, edition under the heading, “Lake Walden Camp Meeting, the Thoreau Pilgrimage, etc.,” appeared the following:

“On Thursday morning {July 25, 1878} in obedience to a general impulse to do honor to liberality of sentiment wherever found, about one hundred campers took up their line of march around the Lake to a spot nearly opposite the canvas city, where a simple pile of stones surmounted by a wooden upright, announced the fact that the ‘Site of Thoreau's Hut’ had been reached. The objective point being gained, the people formed in semi-circle before it, and being called to order listened to opening words by Dr. Currier and J. B. Hatch, after which Mrs. C. Fannie Allyn read an extract from the Woman's Journal relative to Thoreau and his hermitage at Walden Pond.



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Remarks were made in extension of the exercises by Geo. A. Fuller, Dr. C. C. York, Mrs. Hattie Wilson and others. Music was furnished by Dunbar's Band. The people sang 'Auld Lang Syne' and other pieces with instrumental accompaniment, and Mrs. Allyn delivered an improvised poem appropriate to the occasion. Mr. Wing photographed the party in a group, and the company dispersed.

A unique feature in the ceremonies was the depositing of a large number of stones, suitably named and dated, upon the cairn which is being formed by visitors to the spot in memory of the illustrious recluse. Among the mementos so placed were several brought there by direction of Mr. Hatch, and inscribed with the names of the Boston, the New York City, the Brooklyn and the Cleveland Children's Progressive Lyceums; two were also deposited by him bearing respectively the names of the Boston Herald and the Banner of Light."

Of the names mentioned in the Banner of Light article, those of Dr. York, Dr. Currier and Geo. A. Fuller were found inscribed on stones. The Spiritualist Camp-Meeting at Walden Pond closed Aug. 6th, 1878.

Later I located the much-sought 1878 Boston Herald records at Harvard's Widener Library. They could add nothing to the detailed account found in the Banner of Light files. However, the July 29, 1878, edition did confirm the Banner of Light's record with:

"Among the 50 large stones, with names on them, added to the monument to Thoreau Thursday last was one placed there by Mr. Hatch, marked Boston Herald."

I never did learn the meaning of the O.M.A. found on several of the inscribed stones. Nor have I been successful in locating the picture Mr. Wing took of the group.

The stones having been placed on the cairn with such ceremony and good faith by those who participated, they will in time be reburied face down in the sandy soil around the base of the king-post foundation. This being approximately the same location where they were discovered.

During a visit of mine to Prof. F. W. C. Hersey, he related this interesting story about the placing of his stone, inscribed with red paint, upon the cairn in 1893:

"We moved to Lincoln from Chelsea, Mass., in the spring of 1889 and stayed there until the spring of 1895, the year I entered Harvard College. Since I was already very much interested in Literature and History, we began making trips to Concord to visit the various historic and literary shrines. We used to drive over in the carriage with our horse, Paragon. You can imagine how inspiring all these places were to me.

"Later I read Thoreau's Walden. His life in the woods there had a strong romantic appeal; it had some of the same fascination for me that Robinson Crusoe had. On my visits to the cairn I observed that many of the stones were marked with the names of the donors and the dates. Naturally I thought that marking the stones was the customary thing to do. Accordingly in the summer of 1893, when I was 16 1/2, I prepared a stone which I found on our place in Lincoln. It was about 10 inches long by 6 wide and 6 deep. I remember clearly sitting on the step of the woodshed and painting my name and the date with red paint, since we had some red paint on hand for painting a rocking-chair and other things. Then one day when the paint was thoroughly dry, we drove over to Lake Walden in the carriage — my mother, my grandfather Wilson Cheney and I — and with zest and enthusiasm I placed my stone on the cairn. And I can recall how pleased I was that the red letters made the stone so bright and gay."

Prof. Hersey granted me permission to keep this stone so that it could be placed in my collection of memorabilia connected with the Thoreau house at Walden.



## CHAPTER XI

### THOREAU'S MAP CONFIRMS MY DISCOVERY

ONE revealing thing that can be said about the finding of inscribed stones at the bottom of the cairn is that they proved that the memories of old-timers had erred in their recollections of the cairn's position years earlier. The stones placed on the cairn in 1878, being buried for sixty-eight years, more than spanned the memories of the eldest old-timer I talked with. However, this proof wasn't needed, as a check of the photographs taken of the cairn during the past fifty years proved its relation to a white pine tree [now a stump, the one from under which I removed the brick and plaster evidence] to be the same through the years. To be sure, the cairn's shape and appearance, as well as the surrounding woods and vegetation, have changed constantly during that period. But the cairn's position had been permanent.

Thus terminated the one hundred and first year since Thoreau settled down in his Walden house, intent on doing things his way. The one hundred and first year had proved eventful for me. I had not only located Thoreau's chimney foundation, the site of the Walden house, many Thoreau relics, and found Walden's details to be misleading, but I had an affidavit from Henry Thoreau himself attesting to my discovery. That affidavit is Thoreau's 1846 map of Walden, drawn while he lived at the pond. On that map Thoreau places the location of his Walden house, its distance from the shore of Thoreau's cove, and the direction in which it faced. The site of my discovery corresponds exactly with the position of the Walden house and its distance from the cove as shown in Thoreau's 1846 map. Compass readings taken of the chimney foundation when it was uncovered, showing the direction in which it faced, tally perfectly with readings from the 1846 map showing the direction in which the Walden house faced. The 1846-1946 comparisons were made after the compass declinations for those years had been corrected. Bronson Alcott's cairn and Ellery Channing's notes on the subject agree with Thoreau's location of the house as shown on the 1846 map — as well as confirm my discovery of the Walden house site.

Today as I recall my experiences with this work, a feeling akin to nostalgia seizes me — sort of like finding an old friend only to have to say good-bye to him. It's like recalling the pleasant memories of childhood; pleasant to remember but not to relive.

I may not be considered a Thoreauvian by the literary world. Yet, in my heart, I lived with Henry Thoreau for several months. He helped me reconstruct the Walden he knew; he confided in me the plans he made and carried out in building his house; he introduced me to his nature friends. Yes, much of the wild life still remains as Henry Thoreau knew it — and five deer visited me during my work [there were no deer at Walden when Thoreau lived there]. The woods are there, the hills remain, the pond's water is cool and clear, "the rattle of railroad cars" is still to be heard — but now there is more of it and it is heard more frequently. Yet the long winter months return the Walden Pond State Reservation to the solitude Henry David Thoreau knew. Of this I am sure. Last winter, for weeks on end, the only human tracks to disturb the snow that blanketed the woodroads to the cairn and to the true location of the Walden house were mine. The snow also covered the scars and the carelessness left by summer bathers and picnickers.

With a self-satisfaction in having terminated successfully a piece of historical research work, more difficult than first I had anticipated, I have probably come as close as any of my contemporaries to meeting and visiting with Henry David Thoreau in person. Maybe I did it the hard way. But then I did it my way. And by doing it my way I found a contentment suitable for my way of life.



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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: July 15, 2013

ARRGH AUTOMATED 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.



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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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