

A ROARING FORTIES PRESS PUBLICATION



A Journey into the
Transcendentalists'
New England

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ARTPLACE SERIES

Chapter 4
Concord
Heart and Soul



The Old Manse was home to the Alcott Family as well as Nathaniel Hawthorne and is now a museum.

If Transcendentalism exploded on the scene in Boston and Cambridge, its trajectory clearly pointed to Concord, nineteen miles west. The bustling New England market town was home to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Such writers and thinkers as Bronson Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ellery Channing, and the Transcendental educator and Concord schoolmaster Franklin Sanborn were drawn there in some measure because of him. Even Thoreau, who had the best claim of any Transcendentalist to being Concord's native son, seemed to orbit the Emersonian sun.

With its roots in agriculture and market commerce, Concord was the natural home for this galaxy of writers. Some might even argue that Transcendentalism didn't come to Concord; it was already in the soil, waiting to be drawn out. In any case, Concord, with its meandering rivers and fertile ground, has served as an inspirational place for people throughout the ages, and the Transcendentalists were no exception.

Along the Grassy Banks of the Musketaquid

Much of the topography that makes Concord so suited for its role as muse was a gift of the ice age. As the mile-deep sheets of ice retreated north, they left chunks stuck in the ground to become ponds such as Walden, White, and Bateman's ponds. The freshly scrubbed earth became home to early forests of white pines, then oaks, pitch pines, and hemlocks; and two rivers, the Assabet and the Sudbury, which merge at a place called Egg Rock to form a third river, the Concord. This river flows north out of town, joining eventually with the Merrimack River on its way to the ocean just above Newburyport, Massachusetts, near Cape Ann.

Surrounding the ponds and rivers of Concord are the rolling ridges and hills that give the town many of its more appealing hikes. Thoreau favored the trip out to the Fair Haven Cliff, which gave him a view to the west of Concord. On clear days, he could see as far as Mount Monadnock. Emerson enjoyed the path above Walden now called Emerson Cliffs. Appropriately enough, Hawthorne favored the quiet seclusion of the

steep hill behind the Wayside, the home he bought from the Alcotts, for his climbing.

Concord's History

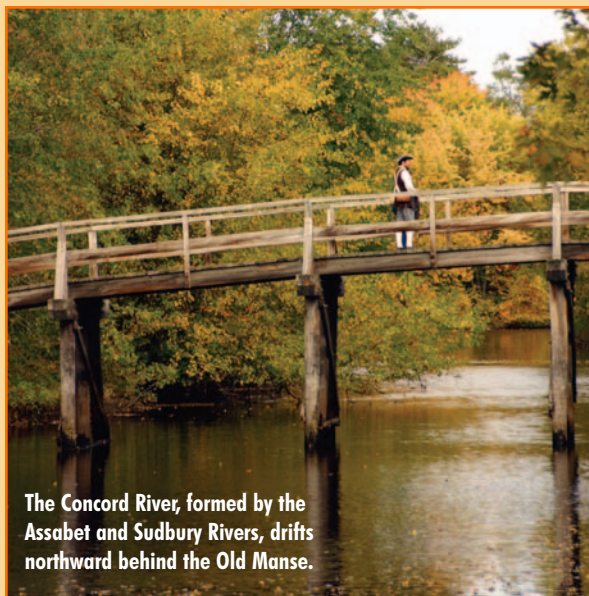
The Transcendentalists who followed Emerson to Concord were not the first to sense the town's advantages. The first known humans to wander through

Take Me to the River

Many of the Transcendentalists wrote about the rivers of Concord and freely employed water imagery in their works. Journalist George Curtis claimed that the river made Concord a "dreaming, pastoral poet of a village." Ellery Channing noted the inspiration found in the river: "There is an inward voice, that in the stream / Sends forth its spirit to the listening ear." Thoreau's first published book was an account of his trip along the Concord and Merrimack rivers. Emerson likens his mind to a river in journal entries; in "Musketaquid," his poem in honor of the Concord River, he claims that his love of the river and its area has "through my rock-like, solitary wont / Shot million rays of thought and tenderness."

Hawthorne also focuses his reader's attention on the Concord River in his introduction to *Mosses from the Old Manse*:

We stand now on the river's brink. It may well be called the Concord—the river of peace and quietness—for it is certainly the most unexcitable and sluggish stream that ever loitered, imperceptibly, towards its eternity, the sea. . . . It slumbers between broad prairies, kissing the long meadow-grass, and bathes the overhanging boughs of elder-bushes and willows, or the roots of elms and ash-trees and clumps of maples. Flags and rushes grow along its plashy shore; the yellow water-lily spreads its broad flat leaves on the margin; and the fragrant yellow pond-lily abounds, generally selecting



The Concord River, formed by the Assabet and Sudbury Rivers, drifts northward behind the Old Manse.

a position just so far from the river's brink, that it cannot be grasped, save at the hazard of plunging in.

Although they were neither the first nor the last artists to find inspiration in moving water, the Transcendentalist philosophy made the depth and variety of their communion with the rivers particularly notable. While Thoreau studied the movement of their currents, Emerson marveled at their sheer beauty and peaceful splendor.



(about twelve to eighteen millennia ago) probably shared the forests with mastodons and large herds of caribou. Sometime between one and eight millennia ago, tribes began using the area as a summer camp and began planting small crop plots including corn, beans, and melons. The flat lands near the rivers served as perfect seasonal camps. Artifacts such as stone pendants, clay pots, spears, and arrows have been found underneath what is now the Emerson Hospital parking lot.

When the British arrived in 1635, they found the friendly and open Musketaquid people living on Nashawtuc Hill, beside the slow-running river with its good, clear water. They also found a system of trails leading through the forests. Nine-tenths of the land was forested with conifers, oaks, chestnuts, and pitch pines. There were fields with grass for winter grazing and good level ground. It appeared to be the perfect place for a new town, and although the British settlers ostensibly regarded the land as already belonging to the crown, Simon Willard, Peter Bulkeley, and other early settlers opted for prudence and paid the

Musketaquids for a six-mile square of land beside the river. Where they then began to build the first inland Puritan settlement.

Once the settlers had established their claim to the land, they used the sacred sites of the native people for grazing their cattle and set about converting the natives



The above is a northern view in the central part of Concord village. Part of the Court-House is seen on the left. Burying-ground Hill (a post of observation to the British officers in the invasion of 1775) is seen a short distance beyond. The Unitarian Church and Middlesex Hotel are seen on the right.

Concord's town square in the early nineteenth century.

to Christianity. Their houses were small, mostly single-story structures with a steep roof, massive timbers, small windows, and a big chimney. The Thomas Dane house at 47 Lexington Road, the Edward Bulkeley House at 92 Sudbury Road, and the Parkman Tavern at 20 Powder Mill Road may be the best remaining examples of this type of architecture.

For the next century and a half, the villagers were hard at work cutting their existence out of the forests. Much of the land was cleared to create firewood and open space for the roughly two hundred Concord farms that existed by the mid-eighteenth century. By the time the War of Independence came to town in 1775, Concord was an established market town with good roads to Boston as well as points west.

A Heritage of Rebellion: The First Revolution

It was in good part due to these well-maintained roads that the leaders of the revolution chose Concord to be their armory and headquarters. During the years leading up to the war, forces stockpiled weapons in the



The Concord Bridge, site of a major revolutionary battle.

town. Then, on the night of April 18, 1775, British forces left the garrisons of Boston for Concord to seize those weapons. Paul Revere, according to the predetermined plan, rode to Concord to raise the alarms. He was captured by a patrol near Lexington, but his comrade, Dr. Prescott, made it to Concord to warn the citizens. One of Dr. Prescott's first stops was the home of Samuel Whitney. Whitney, the muster master of Concord's militia, lived in the house on Lexington Road that would later be home to the Alcotts and then the Hawthornes. When Whitney received the alarm from Prescott, his job was to rouse Concord's "minute men," the local farmers and laborers who could take up arms and become soldiers "in a minute." They gathered on the town green, accompanied by Concord's Unitarian minister, the Reverend William Emerson.

After gathering on the green, the minute men moved up to positions on the west side of the river on John Buttrick's farm. The actual battle took place on the Old North Bridge within sight of the Old Manse, the parsonage of the Reverend William Emerson. A portion of the British troops had amassed on the opposite side of the bridge from the rebels. Other redcoats, in an effort to find the reported arms caches in town, burned the Liberty Pole in the town square. Farmer Joseph Hosmer, wrongly thinking that the British had set fire to the entire town, cried out, "Will you let them burn the town down?!" As the minute men advanced on the British regulars amassed on the town side of the bridge, one soldier, no one is quite sure who, fired what Emerson later dubbed "the shot heard round the world." Buttrick then gave the order to fire, and for the next two minutes, the air was filled with the smoke of exploding gunpowder. As the smoke drifted down to the Manse, the death toll from this opening salvo was recorded: two British redcoats and two minute men.

The ensuing battle lasted all day and occupied most of the twenty-two miles back to Boston, costing the British nearly a third of their troops. They awoke the next day to find soldiers arriving from all corners of

New England to challenge them. The Battle of Bunker Hill, one of the first major fights of the revolution, would take place a mere two months later.

Minute Man National Historical Park

1 Minute Man National Historical Park, a national historic site comprising nearly a thousand acres, stretches across the towns of Lexington, Lincoln, and Concord. It features a five-mile Battle Road Trail that charts the route the British regulars followed after the skirmish at 2 the Old North Bridge.

The original bridge no longer stands. By 1793, road rerouting and flooding had caused it to be torn down. The river remained without a bridge until 1875, when a fancier bridge was constructed and the minute man statue by Daniel Chester French was erected on the west bank of the river. That bridge lasted only thirteen years until it washed downstream in a flood. An oak bridge survived from 1889 through 1908, when flooding took its toll again. The town then tried concrete, which fared better but could not outlast Hurricane Diane in 1955. It was replaced in 1956 by the next bridge, which survived for nearly fifty years until time and constant use took their toll. In 2005, the bridge was rebuilt and now welcomes busloads of interested history buffs as well as families enjoying a sunny weekend day with a costumed park ranger and a variety of informational displays.

The park also includes Nathaniel Hawthorne's house, The Wayside, and Major John Buttrick's mansion on the bluff overlooking the river where the North Bridge was located. Buttrick's house now serves as an information booth and gift shop for the park.

This is at least the seventh bridge at the spot of the original North Bridge.



This bronze statue commemorating the farmers who took up arms against the British was one of the first done by Daniel Chester French. French's later projects included the Lincoln Memorial.

