

“The Reality Which Surrounds Us”:

Thoreau’s Landscape in Survey, Text, and Image

Henry David Thoreau has been the subject of scholarly inquiry since the late nineteenth century. The focus of innumerable theses, dissertations, and books, both the man and his work have been explored from every conceivable perspective, with an exception: Thoreau as surveyor.

But recently scholars and researchers have awakened to the possibilities inherent in analyzing this aspect of Thoreau’s work. For here, in the practice of surveying, is the locus for the convergence of his varied ways of perceiving the world: spatial, mathematical, topographical, visual, observational, and experiential among them. Immersed in the Concord landscape over a lifetime, surveying became another mechanism through which Thoreau could expand and deepen his understanding of the place with which he was so familiar.

In 2010 Patrick Chura, associate professor of English at the University of Akron, published *Thoreau the Land Surveyor*, his personal knowledge of surveying prompting his inquiry into Thoreau’s own work and how it shaped his thinking. Chura recognized that as far as Thoreau was concerned, a property survey was much more than a two-dimensional rendering of a parcel of land, and so the door was opened.

Among the titles in the library’s collection of books from Thoreau’s personal library is *Elements of Surveying* by Charles Davies (1847). It is from this volume that Thoreau taught himself the surveyor’s skills. Early on he accomplished his work with borrowed equipment, later purchasing his own, and in the spring of 1850 recording in his field notes the first use of a new compass. (Thoreau’s compass and tripod are on display in William Munroe Special Collections).

As Laura Walls pointed out in *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science* (1995), “One of Thoreau’s ways of seeing a thing was to measure it . . . but to regard this behavior as merely compulsive is to overlook its purpose, which was to reveal patterns that enabled insight into all sorts of unexpected connections.” Surveying was for Thoreau one form of the “perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality which surrounds us” that he urged in *Walden*.

Because of their accuracy and attention to detail, a Thoreau survey was a respected product and legal instrument, so we might be surprised to learn that Thoreau himself was ambivalent regarding the vocation. He did not much respect the work, indeed any work compensated monetarily. “Do not hire a man who does your work for money, but him who does it for the love of it.” In spite of his sputtering, surveying allowed him to spend his working hours outdoors, where he was happiest. He grudgingly allowed that it provided him with “. . . slight but positive discoveries.” The work also unexpectedly provides us with a lens into the landscape and social dynamics of antebellum Concord, the finished surveys, drafts, elevations, and related notes serving as important additions to the historical record.

Like his writings, his capture of detail through surveying represents that “cultivation of a local, specific way of knowing” —the merging of objective data-gathering and subjective personal engagement with the landscape—about which Peter Blakemore wrote in the essay “Reading Home: Thoreau, Literature, and the Phenomenon of Inhabitation” (published in the collection *Thoreau’s Sense of Place: Essays in American Environmental Writing*, 2000).

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The exhibit is the first of three to be presented by the Concord Free Public Library to commemorate Henry David Thoreau’s life and work as we approach the bicentennial of his birth. Displayed here are a selection of his surveys, both drafts and finished products, his field notebook, in which he recorded information pertinent to the surveys he created between 1849 and 1861, excerpts from his writings, and a collection of his surveying tools. The surveys include some of his more recognizable work: *Plan of A. Bronson Alcott’s Estate*, *Plan of the Yellow House, So called* (Thoreau-Alcott house on Main Street), *White Pond*, and several depictions of Walden Pond. Other surveys include *Plan of the Town-House Lot*, *Plan of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Estate*, and an interesting series consisting of four surveys and elevations that Thoreau created for use as evidence in a lawsuit—*Collier v. Pierce*—a property dispute between two merchants on Concord’s Milldam.

Thoreau’s surveys and related materials were deposited in the Concord Free Public Library in 1874 by his sister, Sophia, and acquired permanently through her bequest in 1876.

Interspersed among the surveys are photographs by early Thoreauvian and environmentalist Herbert Wendell Gleason (1855-1937), who traced the author’s footsteps and thoughtfully interpreted Thoreau’s world through his camera lens for nearly forty years. Gleason’s photographs, consisting of tens of thousands of glass plate and film negatives, are among the library’s more significant holdings.

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Concord Free Public Library Art Gallery

October 13th – December 30th 2015

Free and open to the public during library hours

The exhibit will open with a reception on October 16th from 6:30-8:00, featuring a talk by Robert M. Thorson, Professor of Geology, University of Connecticut, and author of *Walden’s Shore: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Science* (2014) as well as a brief concert featuring selections from the Library’s collection of Sophia Thoreau’s sheet music performed by Jenny Tang and Sally Sanford.

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