

“From Thoreau’s Seasons to Men of Concord: N.C. Wyeth Inspired”

This is a story told in two parts: Of the 1936 publication of the book *Men of Concord*, edited by Francis H. Allen with illustrations by N.C. Wyeth, and how those original illustrations—oil on hardboard panels—became part of the collection of the Concord Free Public Library.

In 1911, N.C. Wyeth wrote: “I have my worshipped friend, without him my life would be a half blank.” His worshipped friend was Henry David Thoreau, whom he knew only through his writings, but who, along with Beethoven, was one of the major influences in the artist’s life. Still, it would take over twenty years before Wyeth could translate his abiding love and admiration for Thoreau into his painting.

Wyeth’s work included book illustration, murals, and fine art. His illustrations for Scribner’s Illustrated Classics series, beginning with Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* in 1911, are among his best known works. His murals adorn public buildings and private businesses across the country, including the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, the Missouri State capitol building, and in a triumphant tour de force, an altar triptych at the National Episcopal Cathedral in Washington, D.C.

But in addition to this work were illustrations used in advertisements for Coca-Cola, Cream of Wheat, Kellogg’s Corn Flakes, Steinway Pianos, Lucky Strike cigarettes, Pierce-Arrows and Pontiacs, which for Wyeth came at a cost. It was in Thoreau’s philosophy that he was able to find a corrective for his conflicted emotional response toward this work, which contributed toward the comfortable life of his wife and five talented children.

For years Wyeth wished to do a book on Thoreau. He imagined a compilation of meaningful passages from Thoreau’s writings that he himself would select and illustrate. For Wyeth, it would truly have been a labor of love. At this time, Boston publishing house Houghton Mifflin was in the forefront in publishing the works of Thoreau. Wyeth had done work for them, and in 1918 was asked to illustrate an edition of Hawthorne’s *Grandfather’s Chair*. He politely declined, but seized the moment to propose another idea: “It is one of my great ambitions to paint . . . a series of interpretations of this author’s message as expressed in his work and life.” The opportunity was offered, and with it he would be given a free hand to explore all aspects of Thoreau, not just Thoreau the naturalist, “. . . a pair of bird glasses forever in his hand.” He had already created a working title, *Thoreau’s Seasons*. But with continual commissions, including several for Houghton Mifflin, Wyeth was unable to get to the project. When the publisher released Odell Shepard’s *The Heart of Thoreau’s Journals* in 1927, it is fair to say that Wyeth was devastated. But in 1930, another chance at doing this long-desired work emerged when he was asked to illustrate *Men of Concord*, a series of character sketches taken from Thoreau’s writings, edited by Francis H. Allen. At this point Wyeth no longer had an editorial role, but took resigned satisfaction in contributing to the project, which was published as a beautifully boxed volume in 1936.

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In July of 1944, Second Lieutenant Caleb Kendall Wheeler, son of Caleb and Ruth Robinson Wheeler, was killed in action over Budapest. Mrs. Wheeler—a longtime historian of Concord—along with her family, wanted to honor Caleb with a suitable memorial, one fit for a young man who had intended to teach the writings and philosophy of Thoreau when he returned home. Ruth Wheeler was certainly familiar with the *Men of Concord* series, her father, Mr. G.F. Robinson, had sponsored an exhibit of the panels that ran from mid-December 1938 until mid-January 1939 in what N.C. Wyeth had a few years earlier referred to as the library’s “corking little gallery.”

In April of 1945 she began corresponding with N.C. Wyeth with the goal of purchasing one of the panels in Caleb’s memory, to be part of the library’s permanent collection, and she chose “The Carpenters Repairing Hubbard’s Bridge.” Wyeth wanted to have it cleaned and framed prior to delivery but unexpectedly, on the morning of October 19, 1945, N.C. and his three-year-old grandson were killed instantly as their car entered a railroad crossing just a few miles from their home in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania.

Not long after, the library purchased two more of the set of twelve panels. These were purchased from the Samuel Hoar Fund and motivated by the library’s mission, as set forth by founder William Munroe, that the library collect and display fine art, in addition to fulfilling the community’s reading needs.

Today, five of the panels hang permanently in the library’s Thoreau Room.

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“From *Thoreau’s Seasons* to *Men of Concord*: N.C. Wyeth Inspired” tells the story behind the book, the paintings, and their role in the library’s collection through documents, images, and artwork. Many examples of Wyeth’s work are included in the exhibit, among them examples of book illustration and commercial work; also correspondence between Houghton Mifflin and Wyeth, selected editions of Thoreau’s works, and the intimate correspondence between N.C. Wyeth and Mrs. Wheeler.

The exhibit, located in the CFPL gallery, runs from April 15 through September 18, 2016. It is free and open to the public during regular library hours. The exhibit is in collaboration with the Concord Museum’s *Men of Concord* exhibit, running concurrently. See the library’s website at www.concordlibrary.org for details on programming, including gallery tours that accompany the exhibit.