

On the Transcendentalist Trail: New England's Literary Tourism

By Sydney Hopper
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Walden Pond, where Henry David Thoreau wrote Walden; or Life in the Woods. Photo by Sydney Hopper

Tourists and book worms might seem like polar opposites: tourists eagerly travel around the world, while avid readers often escape from it into books. But a love of reading can also go hand-in-hand with the travel bug.

Literary tourism, in which visitors explore locations related to their favorite books or authors, isn't new. Some of the world's most famous tourist sites are related to writers and their works: Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London, and even the Wizarding World of Harry Potter theme parks.

In the past few years, however, more and more cities are attempting to take advantage of literary tourism's popularity and cater to bookish tourists. Consider Boston. In 2014 the city inaugurated the nation's first "Literary District." Tourists can now take a tour around the "Writer's Block" and see sites ranging from the former home of Sylvia Plath to a statue of Edgar Allen Poe. The city also plans to hold events such poetry slams, themed cuisine, and pop-up Writer's Booths.

Though Boston is a great destination for any book lover, fans of one literary movement would do best to head slightly west: Transcendentalism, an American literary, political, and philosophical movement that began in the 1820s. Featuring writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Louisa May Alcott and the ever-popular Walt Whitman, the Transcendentalists believed in individualism, freedom, and idealism and as such had a uniquely American outlook.

While the Transcendentalist Club officially met in Cambridge, many of its most famous authors resided in Concord, Massachusetts, located just 45 minutes outside Beantown. Though most people might recognize Concord's name such events as Paul Revere's Midnight Ride and the first shots of the Revolutionary War—which the town also plays up—it was, just as importantly, the home of Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott.

In Concord, fans of the Transcendentalist movement can find plenty to keep them busy. Here's a guide.

The Old Manse, which was built for and owned by Emerson's grandparents, was a meeting point of the Concord literary group and a temporary residence of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Thoreau, who both spent time appreciating nature there. It sits just beyond the Old North Bridge, the site of the Battle of Concord, where British and Colonial forces first clashed in 1775. The property of the Manse holds several markers to Transcendentalists' involvement. Hawthorne etched poems to his wife in the window panes, Emerson drafted his famous essay "Nature" in an upstairs room, and Thoreau planted the vegetable garden. For all of these reasons and more, The Old Manse is a National Historic Landmark and deserves a spot on any Transcendentalists' fan's "Must See" list.

The Author's Ridge at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery marks the final resting place of Emerson, Alcott, Hawthorne, Thoreau and more. Before it became a cemetery, Sleepy Hollow was a popular location for evening walks: Emerson, Thoreau and Hawthorne are all noted to have strolled there. These authors were also involved in the area's transformation into a cemetery. Emerson himself gave the main address at the dedication ceremony in 1855, some 27 years before he would be laid in the ground there.

The Concord Museum permanently exhibits artifacts of Thoreau and other writers. The Thoreau collection numbers over 250 different artifacts, including furniture, ceramics, books, photographs, manuscripts and textiles, primarily gifted to the museum by Thoreau's sister, Sophia. Cummings Davis, who founded the Concord museum collection in 1886, was given

several items by Thoreau himself. In addition to maintaining its permanent collections, the museum runs educational outreach programs and special events.



The Concord Museum. Photo by the Concord Museum.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's House contains Emerson's original furniture and objects, much as he left them. The house was not only his home for nearly 50 years, but became the natural center of the Transcendentalist movement. This was natural, as Emerson is largely considered the founder of the movement and one of the largest players in it. He was a prolific writer, keeping a journal for most of his life and writing thousands of letters to friends and contemporaries, in addition to penning essays and poetry published in *The Dial*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and other periodicals. He was also a friend and mentor of Thoreau, who lived on Emerson's property for a few years while working as an au pair for Emerson's four children. In present day, the house offers guided tours.



The Orchard House, Home of Little Women. Photo by Sydney Hopper

The Orchard House was the home of the Alcott family, where Louisa May Alcott wrote and set *Little Women*. Since much of the furniture remains as it was during the Alcott's tenure, visitors have commented that visiting the house is like being transported into the book. The

house offers tours and a gift shop with books, films, posters, and other mementos that can help give further insights into the Alcotts themselves, on whom the books' characters are based. The house was recently visited by celebrities Meryl Streep and Emma Stone as they filmed the most recent film adaption of the classic novel.



Replica of Thoreau's cabin at the Walden Pond State Reservation. Photo by Sydney Hopper

Walden Pond State Reservation is where Thoreau lived for two years as he wrote *Walden*, a book which some see as the kick start to American environmentalism. Visitors can walk around the pond, add a stone to piles placed near to the original site of Thoreau's cabin, view a replica cabin, visit the gift shop, or take part in a number of educational activities. The Walden Woods project is a non-profit organization that uses Thoreau's Walden as a backdrop for modern day conservation work. The group holds public lectures and forums, guided walks around Walden pond, and group visits. Its library holds more than 60,000 Thoreau-related items, including books, manuscripts, maps and art. Guided tours and gallery talks are available.



Rocks left by tourists at the original site of Thoreau's cabin. Photo by Sydney Hopper



Original site of Thoreau's cabin, where he lived for two years while writing Walden. Photo by Sydney Hopper

The reasons to visit these sites are as various as the sites themselves. As Annie Moloney, chief of staff of the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism said, "You don't have to have a Ph.D. in American literature in order to appreciate these sites. They're for everyone." Some may visit Concord out of a love of the authors. Fifty-nine-year-old tourist Melanie Lovejoy came to Walden because Thoreau's writing "spoke to her soul" when she read it in school. Bus-loads of high school students can be seen wandering around Walden and Concord as they see the real-life setting of the monumental works they read in class. Scientists also come to Walden, and in a true example of cross-disciplinary learning, use Thoreau's notes and journals to track climate change. As Boston University biology professor Robert Primack stated, Concord has the "best evidence for climate change[and] the effects of climate change, from probably anywhere in the United States," and all thanks to Thoreau's work.

So we see that for both the casual fan and the serious academic, Concord—and Boston in general—can offer an enlightening trip. So what are you waiting for? Get your nose out of those books and hit the road!

Useful Links for Planning Your Trip:

The Old Manse: <http://www.thetrustees.org/places-to-visit/greater-boston/old-manse.html>

Sleepy Hollow Cemetery:

https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/massachusetts_conservation/sleepy_hollow.html

Concord Museum: <http://www.concordmuseum.org>

Emerson House: <https://www.ralphwaldoemersonhouse.org>

Orchard House: <http://www.louisamayalcott.org>

Walden Woods Project: <https://www.walden.org>

Walden Pond State Reservation: <https://www.mass.gov/locations/walden-pond-state-reservation>