

Thoreau and the Laborers of Concord

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HENRY DAVID THOREAU liked to present himself as a laborer. For all his Harvard education, he identified with workingmen and took pride in his ability to get a living “by the labor of my hands only”—a point he emphasized in the first sentence of *Walden* and illustrated with accounts of his successes at erecting a house, laying a fireplace, baking bread, catching fish, and growing beans. It was his boast that “for more than five years I maintained myself . . . solely by the labor of my hands.” No calling suited him better. He had tried farming at Walden and proved himself a worthy husbandman with his seven miles of beans, but abandoned the crop after a single season. “For myself I found that the occupation of a day laborer was the most independent of any.” With a mere “thirty or forty days” effort he could earn his subsistence for the year and be carefree, with ample time for whatever and whomever he wished. When not at his writing desk, Thoreau enjoyed the liberty of the meadows and the woods. There he was likely to find the ne’er-do-well hunters and fishermen with whom he loved to talk. Not for him the polite ladies and gentlemen in village parlors. Thoreau’s preferred company consisted of disreputable woodsmen, common farmers, and Irish laborers—men who were “racy in speech and personal in character,” as one contemporary noted. Speaking plainly and bluntly from hard-won experience, these workingmen were, in Thoreau’s estimation, down to earth, without any hint of artificiality or convention.

So it is fitting that these rough-hewn men figure prominently in the pages of *Walden*, more prominently than the respectable set. Thoreau took his Concord neighbors as both his subjects and his audience, and, although he referred to only a few contemporaries in the text, the editors of his writings have identified nearly all. The code was easy enough to crack. Ellery Channing makes two quick appearances as the “poet” who interrupts the reverie of Walden’s “hermit”

in his impatience to go fishing—"That's the true industry for poets"—and who later comes calling in winter "through deepest snows and most dismal tempests." Bronson Alcott receives an extended tribute as Connecticut's gift to the world: "one of the last of the philosophers" and "a true friend of man." As for Ralph Waldo Emerson, who furnished the very land on which Thoreau squatted rent-free, he was acknowledged in a short sentence as "one other with whom I had 'solid seasons.'" Two pages suffice for them all. By contrast, a few laborers seized Thoreau's sustained attention. No companion in the Walden woods was more welcome than an anonymous French Canadian "woodchopper and post maker"—a migrant worker actually named Alexander Therien—who entrances and puzzles the author with his natural simplicity for most of the chapter "Visitors." And no one distressed Thoreau more than the Irish laborer John Field, who occupied a miserable shanty not far from the transcendentalist's well-made cabin. A notable encounter with the Irishman and his family, with Thoreau's animadversions and advice, fills up the entire chapter "Baker Farm." To claim Thoreau's notice in *Walden*, a workingman need not even be alive. Vignettes of the "former inhabitants" of Walden woods conjure up the hardscrabble lives of the onetime African American slaves—Cato Ingraham, Zilpah, Brister Freeman and his wife Fenda—who once eked out an existence as free people "with their little gardens and dwellings" along the road a short walk from Thoreau's house. "Alas!" Thoreau lamented. "How little does the memory of these human inhabitants enhance the beauty of the landscape!" *Walden* reclaims all these hard-working souls, black and white, native and newcomer, from oblivion and perpetuates their unheralded stories in Concord's annals. This classic of American literature is also a pioneer of history from the bottom up.

Why so much interest in laborers on the margins of society, a preoccupation that was uncommon among New England's writers? Possessed of little or no property, laborers toiled for others, surviving on meager wages and subsisting from hand to mouth. To inquire into their condition was to confront without illusions the implacable economic circumstances of rural lives in New England during the

take-off of modern capitalism in the first half of the nineteenth century—the desperate lengths to which Thoreau’s farming neighbors would go to gain a piece of land and a hope of security, as well as the swelling tide of the landless left behind in their wake. Thoreau surveyed a society stunningly similar to the United States today, mortgaged to the hilt and increasingly dependent on foreign laborers to accomplish its necessary work. “On applying to the assessors,” he observed, “I am surprised to learn that they cannot at once name a dozen in the town who own their farms free and clear. If you would know the history of these homesteads, inquire at the bank where they are mortgaged. The man who has actually paid for his farm with labor on it is so rare that every neighbor can point to him. I doubt if there are three such men in Concord.”

The problem of the proper relation of land and labor lay at the heart of Thoreau’s experiment at Walden. With an acute awareness of his neighbors’ struggles, Thoreau was appalled at all the anxiety and torments they readily suffered for the sake of getting and spending. “The inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways.” Hardly any—not the farmer or the craftsman, not the storekeeper or his clerk, not the manufacturer or the operative—could escape the constant strain. A few at the top, “seemingly wealthy,” were actually “the most terribly impoverished” of all, with no idea how to “use...or get rid of” the “accumulated dross” crushing their lives. The laboring man was caught in a different trap. Obligated to earn his daily bread, he “has not leisure for a true integrity day by day.... He has no time to be any thing but a machine.” Wherever Thoreau looked, he saw “the mass of men...discontented, and idly complaining of the hardness of their lot or of the times,” yet convinced there was no other way. Need things be so bad? Thoreau’s object at Walden was to show that “men labor under a mistake.” It was not necessary to sacrifice life to sustain it. A man could curb his wants, reduce his needs, and support himself with ease—indeed, find joy in labor and leisure together and fulfill his higher self. “I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to maintain one’s self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and

wisely... It is not necessary that a man should earn his living by the sweat of his brow, unless he sweats easier than I do."

Thoreau was not alone in these concerns. Schemes for labor reform abounded in the 1830s and 1840s, as New England burgeoned into a commercial and manufacturing powerhouse. Young men and women by the thousands deserted ancestral farms in quest of opportunities in mill villages and port cities and on the beckoning western frontier. Many were in flight from farm work and aspired to posts in counting houses and schoolhouses, in editorial offices and in the learned professions, any place they could earn a living with their heads and not their hands. The flight from manual labor was key to the rise of a new middle class. But the scramble for wealth and status also generated unprecedented inequalities and heightened class antagonisms. Workingmen and women, in particular, fought for higher wages, shorter hours, and greater autonomy on the job in a losing battle against mechanization and the extending division of labor. In the partisan contests of the day, Democrats cast themselves as the friend of the workingman and celebrated "the planter, the farmer, the mechanic, and the laborer," in the words of Andrew Jackson, as "the bone and sinew of the country"—steadfast supporters of liberty and producers of the nation's wealth. Whigs countered that claim by admitting virtually all white Americans into the house of labor and then assigning them to different levels, according to their skills. If labor was "the foundation and cause of wealth," the Whig political economist Calvin Colton explained, it was also a form of capital, whose value rose in proportion to the marketable knowledge and enterprise it deployed. In this version of mind over matter, "a man's power of labor is limited; but his skill is unlimited... It is the fruit of the labor of the mind," and hence the driving force of progress "in every pursuit and occupation of life."

In reaction against these developments, social reformers urged the dignity and value of physical labor. "A man should have a farm or a mechanical craft for his culture," Emerson advised a group of mechanics' apprentices in January 1841. If everyone did his own work and supplied his own needs, the sharpening distinctions between the

educated and the laboring classes would dissolve, and all would benefit, physically, intellectually, and spiritually, from the experience. "Labor is God's education... he only can become a master, who learns the secret of labor." On that ideal the founders of Brook Farm established their plan for the equal sharing of chores among the members, with every task earning the same pay.

Our objects, [as George Ripley explained to Emerson]... are to insure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor than now exists; to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual; to guarantee the highest freedom, by providing all with labor, adapted to their tastes and talents, and securing to them the fruits of their industry; to do away with the necessity of menial services, by opening the benefits of education and the profits of labor to all; and thus to prepare a society of liberal, intelligent, and cultivated persons, whose relations with each other would permit a more simple and wholesome life, than can be led amidst the pressure of our competitive institutions.

The collective venture in West Roxbury had no appeal to Thoreau, who preferred to "keep a bachelor's room in Hell [rather] than go to board in Heaven." Even so, in his community of one by the shores of Walden Pond, he embarked on a parallel plan of labor reform. Like the Brook Farmers, he dissolved the distinction between mental and manual labor that furnished the ideological foundation for capitalist development in antebellum America and that justified the resulting inequalities and class divisions. In his settlement in the woods, the thinker and the worker were one. Determined to make every act of his life a conscious choice, Thoreau cultivated his beans and labored over his prose with equal deliberation. He would invigorate body and mind together by providing for his own needs and through the free exercise of his creative powers turn work itself into play. The union of head and hands was central to his authorial calling. Attuned to the democratic currents of the times, the writer sought

his audience not in a genteel elite, comfortable and complacent in college and parlor, but in the fields and shops, the cottages and tenements of the working man, "The Man of the Age." In this spirit, Thoreau embraced the daily demands of hard, physical labor as a necessary "discipline" for his art and as a common bond with readers. "Surely, the writer is to address a world of laborers," he affirmed in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. But no one would heed the words of a bookworm confined to the study. "A sentence should read as if its author, had he held a plough instead of a pen, could have drawn a furrow straight and deep to the end. The scholar requires hard and serious labor to give an impetus to his thought."

Wherever Thoreau labored, he was invariably on his own. How, then, could he enter into the thoughts and experiences of workingmen? There lies the inventiveness of *Walden* and the radical challenge the democratic author set for himself. He opened the pages of his book to the laboring men he had encountered during the two years, two months, and two days of his "life in the woods," portrayed their characters, and gave them their say, quoting at length from his conversations with them. (Alas, for this "bachelor of nature," no women need apply.) Set against an Anglo-American tradition of letters that for centuries had stereotyped, mocked, and condescended to the lower orders—when it noticed them at all—this bid to cross class lines and connect with individuals on the fringes of society marks a significant and underappreciated attempt to stir up American literature with an egalitarian spirit.

Concord's laborers thus posed a test case for Thoreau's project at Walden. Would they take up his call to live simply, sincerely, and wisely on the land? The philosopher in the woods, intent on reaching "the mass of men, who are discontented, and idly complaining of the hardness of their lot or of the times, when they might improve them," was doomed to disappointment. No more than the reformers at Brook Farm could Thoreau shed the elite intellectual presumptions he carried into his encounters with the lowly, uneducated men in the immediate neighborhood of Walden. Nor could he sympathize with workingmen's aspirations to be homeowners and family men.

When the “head” and the “hands” met, it was the former that set the agenda, directed the dialogue, and issued the judgments. For Thoreau, the real question was, at bottom, whether the laboring men could live up to *his* ideals and not what he could learn from theirs. In that failure of imagination and empathy, the transcendentalist was hardly unique; he stands at the front of a long line of American intellectuals so enamored of their own visions of the workingman in general that they are seldom capable of relating to individual laborers in particular. The episodes that follow offer a cautionary tale.



Thoreau's interest in the laborer's cause was more than intellectual. It had deep roots in his personal situation. After finishing college in 1837, the Harvard graduate tried out various lines of work—schoolmaster, tutor, pencil maker, gardener, house painter, carpenter, handyman, surveyor—even as he cultivated his talents as a writer and came to identify as a man of letters. But to judge from his listing in the assessors' records, he was indistinguishable from the many day laborers employed on Concord's farms and in its shops, stores, and mills: a young man with no property to his name, owing only an annual poll tax to the town—an obligation he declined to pay. As late as 1850 Thoreau, at age thirty-three, remained among the landless, whose ranks had swollen over the first half of the nineteenth century. Some 150 men possessed not a single acre in 1801, comprising 42 percent of all taxpayers; a generation later, in 1826, the landless numbered more than 250—well over half (56 percent) of the tax list. But that was just a momentary crest in a flood tide of laborers washing over the town. Concord's assessors found more than 300 men without land in 1840 (59 percent) and 419 ten years later (69 percent). At a time when the population of Concord was increasing at a snail's pace—by little more than a tenth between 1825 and 1850—the landless segment soared by 62 percent. For all his singularity, Thoreau did not stand out in the economic order. He was part of a large, varied, and growing company in the town and all over New England, incorporating into its ranks the luckless sons of the region's

hardscrabble farms, the tramping poor shuffling in and out of its almshouses, the factory operatives who shifted back and forth from farm to mill, depending on what was available, and the penurious refugees from foreign lands washing onto American shores.

In crucial respects—and not simply by virtue of his prestigious college degree—Thoreau differed sharply from the sea of laboring men around him. Born and bred in Concord, he took inordinate satisfaction in his origin and could not bear to be away for long. “I have never got over my surprise,” he exulted, “that I should have been born into the most estimable place in all the world, and in the very nick of time, too.” As he stuck around town, residing most years in his parents’ household and helping out in the family business of pencil making, he witnessed a host of strangers coming and going with each passing year. During its boom times, in Thoreau’s boyhood, Concord was a magnet for enterprising newcomers—not just laborers and journeymen mechanics but also aspiring storekeepers and professionals; in 1835 two out of every three adult males had come from somewhere else. Few stayed for long. Even so, these birds of passage were a familiar flock, belonging almost entirely to the Yankee species. The great majority had grown up in the Massachusetts and New Hampshire countryside, no more than a day’s journey from Concord, and along with a scattering of others from Boston and the seaboard, these transients shared cultural values and social understandings with their hosts. That bond between natives and newcomers frayed sharply over the next two decades. With the coming of the railroad in 1844, Concord was more tightly integrated than ever into the wider world. As Thoreau was taking up quarters at Walden, small crews of Irish laborers were nearby working on the tracks. A decade later, as his great book was being published, immigrants were pouring in, mostly from famine-ravaged Ireland but also from hard-pressed rural Nova Scotia and Quebec. As the foreigners settled in, the natives made an exodus. By 1855, one fifth of Concord’s 2,250 people were immigrants. Even more dramatically, Irishmen made up nearly half of all the local laborers, with Canadians adding another 4 percent. Similar changes were taking place all over Massachusetts and across

the entire Union. The surge of newcomers raised the foreign-born share of the population to an all-time high, unequaled in American history before or since. As in the agricultural areas of the United States today, so it was in the 1850s: if Concord farmers were to plant and harvest their corn, potatoes, and hay, if they were to ditch and drain their meadows, chop their firewood, and pick their apples and grapes, they had to resort to the willing hands of aliens from distant lands—like it or not.

Alexander Therien, the French Canadian woodchopper, and John Field, the Irish bogtrotter, were, then, the new face of the laboring class in Thoreau's Concord, and as the transcendentalist was composing the final version of *Walden* in the winter of 1853–54, he gave the two men a prominence in the manuscript they had not held in previous drafts. Thoreau had encountered both workingmen during his first summer at Walden—Therien on 12 July 1845, ten days after he had begun his sojourn in the woods and, as it happened, his twenty-eighth birthday; Field some five weeks later—and had written up sketches of their characters and accounts of their conversation in his journal shortly thereafter. Therien made it into *Walden* from the earliest draft, Field not for a couple of years. To judge by his journal entries, Thoreau may never have seen the Irishman again after their brief and accidental run-in on a rainy Saturday in August 1845. But Therien was still felling trees for Concord landowners and Thoreau recording the woodsman's remarks six years after they first met. Then in the months before *Walden* went to press, Concord's Herodotus discerned a new significance in the two workingmen, retrieving the Field material for "Baker Farm" and setting it at a pivotal point in the narrative and expanding on the portrait of Therien in "Visitors." For the latter revision he deliberately sought out the woodchopper and, with an inquisitiveness reminiscent of Thoreau's neighbors, pointedly made some "very particular inquiries" regarding his "mode of life." How much wood did he cut? How long did he work? What was he reading? Was he satisfied with his life? Like the author of *Walden* with his questioners, Therien was happy to oblige.

What provoked these apparently last-minute decisions to feature the two laborers in *Walden*? It seems likely that as Thoreau read over his manuscript and reflected on the continuing changes in Concord's social and economic landscape, he recognized the imperative need for an update. His strictures on the "desperate" measures of his countrymen, his indictment of their false "economy," his laying out, through personal example, the prospect of a simpler, more natural way of life: these sections of *Walden* had been largely composed in the mid-1840s with a Yankee audience in view. But it was one thing to address readers in the middling and working classes whose anxieties and discontents he already knew well; these were the very folks who signed up for Brook Farm and enlisted in the abolitionist crusade. It was quite another to reach the new immigrants fleeing poverty in foreign lands and seeking fresh chances in America. Was his counsel of simplicity pertinent to them?

Few of New England's leaders or writers showed interest in the hopes and desires of the thousands of workingmen and women streaming into the land. Thoreau engaged them in serious conversation and "purposely talked to [John Field], as if he were a philosopher, or desired to be one." If Thoreau failed in his bid to cross the class divide, if his censoriousness overcame his empathy, he nonetheless deserves credit for opening up the social horizons of *Walden* and letting the immigrants in.

Not that the encounters with Therien or Field turned out well. Both men, as any reader of *Walden* quickly discovers, proved disappointments to the hypercritical author. Neither the Canadian nor the Irishman could live up to the "man of Concord's" ideals—who could?—and neither was disposed to take his advice. Thoreau, in turn, came away from these contacts with his long-held opinions reconfirmed. The problem with Therien, a bachelor about the same age as Thoreau, lay not with his material circumstances but with his intellectual condition. On first meeting the woodchopper, Thoreau admired his hearty approach to life. A "true Homeric boor," he was at home in the woods, happy to live off its bounty, and curious about books and people as well—an individual, it appeared, very much in

Thoreau's mold. "The simple man" inspired the transcendentalist. "May the Gods send him many woodchucks." In the ensuing years, Thoreau discovered additional reasons to admire the cheerful man with the efficient ax. Therien evinced a spontaneous joy in his physical labor seldom seen in Yankee workingmen. No "anxiety or haste" drove him into the woods: "He wasn't a-going to kill himself." Indeed, he made an art of felling trees, taking the trouble to cut them "level and close to the ground," so that sleds could easily pass over and saplings could sprout more vigorously. The woodsman had come down from Quebec in 1834 in hopes of earning enough with his ax to buy a farm back home; two decades later he was no closer to that goal, yet he was content with life. "He had got money enough—he cut enough to earn his board." Why complain, as did so many of Thoreau's neighbors, and speculate about reform? Therien took the world as it was and cleared his own path. "A more simple and natural man it would be hard to find." But there was the rub. The French Canadian was too accepting of circumstances, too deferential to authority, too limited in his aspirations. No matter how hard he tried, Thoreau could never provoke the "humble" woodsman to take "a spiritual view of things" and to "substitute within him for the priest without...some higher motive for living." Like other creatures of the forest, Therien existed exclusively on a physical plane, without the slightest self-awareness; in Thoreau's damning judgment, "he was cousin to the pine and the rock." Clearly, a simple life close to nature did not a transcendentalist make.

John Field evoked even less sympathy from the hermit of Walden. "Baker Farm" shows Thoreau at his worst, hectoring the hapless Irishman with unsolicited advice. No matter that the opinionated Yankee is a guest in the immigrant's hut, in which he has found shelter from a sudden downpour. Once safely inside, Thoreau quickly sizes up the man's existence: a leaky roof, a dirty floor, a scolding wife, a brood of children, and another of chickens. "An honest, hard-working, but shiftless man plainly was John Field," who, to Thoreau's dismay, was quite pleased with his circumstances. The thirty-year-old laborer proudly recounts how he "bogs" wet meadows for

a local farmer at \$10 an acre, a regular job that enables him to feed his family well with tea and coffee, milk, butter, and meat—no small achievement for a refugee from the Irish famine. Thoreau would have none of this: Field's paltry gains exacted too high a price; he had made a bad "bargain" with his life. So, without hesitation, the transcendentalist sets out "to help him with my experience." His explanation of how Field can ease his labors by curbing his wants falls on deaf ears—and clearly irritates the wife, who is impatient for the annoying visitor to be gone and for her husband to go fishing for dinner. "Alas!" Thoreau sighs, "the culture of an Irishman is an enterprise to be undertaken with a sort of moral bog hoe."

So certain is Thoreau in his convictions, so blinded by his sense of superiority, that he rides roughshod over the Fields' privacy and exposes the family to public scorn. Some critics have considered the Irishman's name "fictitious"—a synecdoche for farm laborers. But John and Mary Field were real people, who had arrived in Lincoln, the town bordering Walden woods, by May 1844, when their infant daughter—"the poor starveling brat" Thoreau saw in the hut—was born; six years later, the couple was living with six children, ranging from age one to fifteen, and John's adult sister in a household enumerated on the 1850 Lincoln census. Whether they remained next door to Concord when *Walden* was published is unknown. Perhaps Thoreau thought they were long gone when he used their real name in his text. That was a departure from his practice in every other case where a neighbor turns up. Thoreau assigns playful pseudonyms to his literary friends—"poet," "philosopher"—and he does the same for the farmer Edmund Hosmer, "one of the few of his vocation who are 'men on their farms.'" He even regretted rendering Therien anonymous, "so suitable and poetic a name I am sorry I cannot print it here." Only Field appears in his own right—a choice about which Thoreau evidently had second thoughts. "Poor John Field!—I trust he does not read this, unless he will improve by it."

Was the Irishman so lowly a figure, so devoid of social standing, that he forfeited the courtesy accorded everyone else? It would be easy to accuse Thoreau of anti-Irish prejudice, not to mention the

misogyny which pervades his portrayal of Mrs. Field, and to charge him with exacerbating the nativist sentiments surging in Massachusetts just as *Walden* was going to press. The publication coincided with the triumph of the Native American Party—the “Know-Nothings”—in Concord and nearly everywhere else in the 1854 elections. The indictment has merit, but it misses the subversive character of Thoreau’s text. A close reading suggests that he meant to intervene in public debate and challenge the rising current of nativism. An Irishman, in his view, was surely as capable as a Yankee of leading a life of simplicity and independence—and equally susceptible to betraying the promise of America with foolish economic choices. “The only true America” for anyone, Thoreau declares, “is that country where you are at liberty to pursue such a mode of life as may enable you to do without” such unnecessary items as “tea, and coffee, and meat every day” and “where the state does not endeavor to compel you to sustain...slavery and war and other superfluous expenses.” In that judgment, Thoreau links Field’s self-inflicted bondage to oppression by the state. In a society that does not value true freedom, what prospects of independence for a common man?

A contemporary laborer’s life, then, was far less enviable than it first appeared. So, Thoreau turned to Walden’s recent history, digging into the lives of the “former inhabitants”—the free blacks and poor whites—who once made an industrious hamlet in the woods, weaving baskets, spinning linen, braiding mats, turning pots. But this excursion into the past carried no practical lessons for the present. It was the story of a fortunate failure; in their inability to make “the wilderness to blossom like the rose,” the struggling settlers had saved Walden from the ravages of development and preserved “the beauty of the landscape.”

Curiously, Thoreau paid no attention in *Walden* to the African Americans actually living in Concord as he wrote: the Garrison, Hutchinson, and Robbins families, who were carving out a living on the edge of the Great Meadows, and the Dugans along the Old Marlborough Road. These black neighbors offered a more hopeful model of African American advancement. By dint of strenuous effort and

self-sacrifice over a half century, a rising generation was moving up from laboring for others to farming on their own and was entering as well into the public life of the town, voting, holding office, joining the anti-slavery society, and sending their children to public school. Indeed, Peter Robbins, son of a slave who had gained his freedom during the Revolutionary War, belonged among the handful of Concord's citizens who had "actually paid for his farm with labor on it"—an accomplishment "so rare," Thoreau said, "that every neighbor can point to him. I doubt if there are three such men in Concord." Yet, the author paid him no mind in *Walden*, although Robbins's unsuccessful struggle to sustain a family on the land—he eventually mortgaged and lost the property to the town's richest man—could have supplied ample material for a Thoreauvian sermon. One would never know of Robbins's existence or of the other hard-working African Americans living in Concord during the 1830s and 1840s from the pages of *Walden*. Blacks counted only among the "former inhabitants."

To a sympathetic reader, the omission of blacks from the ranks of Thoreau's neighbors was arguably a literary and not a racial choice. The Robbins clan did not reside in the immediate neighborhood of Chanticleer and hence did not fit into the overall design of the book. But that may not be the whole story. Surprisingly, considering the militant abolitionism of the entire Thoreau clan and the personal involvement of Henry David in aiding the flight of fugitive slaves through Concord, the black inhabitants of the town make few appearances in his journals. When they do so, the contacts are casual, resulting from chance meetings when Thoreau is out botanizing in the meadows and woods. Peter Robbins informs him in July 1852 that a heavy rain the day before had not ruined the potato crop, as had been feared—"exorbitant potatoes!" Thoreau remarks. "It takes a good deal to reach them." In 1854, Peter Hutchinson reports seeing sea gulls and sheldrakes flying over the flooded Great Meadows, and Isaac Dugan comes across the same snapping turtle nest that Thoreau had previously spotted. (Dugan admitted breaking one of the eggs.) In these and similar instances, the African Americans are

fellow naturalists, sharing observations of the flora and fauna and passing along local lore, as does Peter Hutchinson when he recalls the times “when Haymakers from Sudbury 30 or 40 years ago used to come down the river in numbers & unite with Concord to clear the weeds out of the river in shallow places & the larger streams emptying in.”

What is most striking about these entries is their utterly commonplace character. In the journals, black informants are no different from their white counterparts: sources of information useful to Thoreau. In fact, Thoreau makes no mention of their race, unlike some in the white elite who could not talk about a black person without sneering. These individuals are his neighbors; nothing more need be said. And yet, the puzzle remains: why did he show so little interest in their lives? One can only speculate about the silence, but I want to suggest that Thoreau disregarded the strivings of African American townsmen for the same reason he had so little empathy for John Field. These people on the margins were aspiring to the same goals as the established farmers: a house and land, comfortable subsistence, and secure families. So, it turned out, did the black laborer Peter Hutchinson, who acquired his kinsman Peter Robbins’s old farm and restored it to African American ownership. (It was later sold to an Irishman.) Likewise Alexander Therien, who married an Irish immigrant named Ann Kelly of Watertown in August 1861 and raised three children in and around Concord—always in rented quarters. At his death in 1885 he was still a laborer, whose dream of a farm back in Canada had long since faded away.

But Thoreau, the lifelong bachelor of nature, had little sympathy for such conventional aims, or at least they did not capture his literary imagination. Considering himself a “gentleman,” the occupation he reported on the state census in 1855, he was alienated from the very trappings of middle-class existence that the Garrisons and Hutchinsons labored so long and hard to achieve. Ironically, Thoreau had given much of himself to his family economy, and after his father’s death in January 1859, he succeeded to the position of household head—a man of property at last, with \$4,000 in real estate and

\$1,500 in personal estate. Yet, he preferred to write about heroic individuals and solitary souls—independent men acting alone and set off from the ordinary run of humankind. So it was with John Brown of Harper's Ferry. And so, too, with the one Concord African American Thoreau memorialized in verse. In the poem "The Old Marlborough Road," included in "Walking," the final essay he sent to press but originally delivered as a lecture in 1851, the transcendentalist celebrated the deserted road, with its abandoned farms and forgotten denizens, as his favorite route for an excursion on foot. One lonely figure embodies the spirit of the place: Elisha Dugan, whom the poet evokes as a

...man of wild habits,
Partridges and rabbits,
Who hast no cares
Only to set snares.
Who liv'st all alone,
Close to the bone,
And where life is sweetest,
Constantly eatest.

The African American Dugan was, indeed, a man on his own—one of only eighteen individuals in Concord to live by themselves in 1850, around the time Thoreau was drafting the piece. But the laborer was hardly an isolate. His father, Thomas, had fled slavery in Virginia for a new life in Concord, where he gained local celebrity as an agriculturist, introducing the first rye cradle into the area and instructing his neighbors in grafting apple trees. At his death in 1827, Dugan left behind a widow, Jennie, and three sons—Elisha, George, and Isaac—who were in and out of Concord through the Civil War. Thoreau elides these family ties and represents Elisha Dugan as "a man of wild habits" alone in the woods contentedly trapping game, much like Therien. Shorn of property and kin, he led an ideal Thoreauvian life "close to the bone"—a space for gnawing existence down to essentials, as the author recommended in *Walden*. "Cultivate poverty like a garden herb..." he urged readers:

If you are restricted in your range by poverty...you are but confined to the most significant and vital experiences; you are compelled to deal with the material which yields the most sugar and the most starch. It is life near the bone where it is sweetest....No man loses ever on a lower level by magnanimity on a higher. Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul.

Try telling that to Thomas Dugan or Jack Garrison, Peter Robbins or Peter Hutchinson, John Field or Alex Therien. The hunters and the laborers were ultimately projections of Thoreau's own longings, and while we can be grateful for the details he recorded of their lives and the sketches he drew, the author of *Walden* is no reliable source to answer the question, "How much land does a man need?" Still, he remains a compelling voice, insisting that any answer to that query come to terms with another: at what cost in life does a man obtain that land?

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