

Why Concord?

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The geological origins of the American Revolution

Photographs by Amani Willett

Editor's Note: This article is part of "The Unfinished Revolution," a project exploring 250 years of the American experiment.

Concord, Massachusetts, 18 miles northwest of Boston, was the starting point for the War of Independence. On April 19, 1775, militia and minutemen from Concord and neighboring towns clashed with British regulars at the Old North Bridge and forced a bloody retreat by the King's men back to safety in Boston. Some 4,000 provincials from 30 towns answered the call to arms. Concord claimed precedence as the site of THE FIRST FORCIBLE RESISTANCE TO BRITISH AGGRESSION, the words inscribed on the town's 1836 monument to the battle (to the enduring resentment of nearby Lexington, which actually suffered the first American deaths that day). Concord's boast took hold thanks to Ralph Waldo Emerson, who in 1837 portrayed the brief skirmish at the bridge as "the shot heard round the world." That moment has been a key to local identity ever since.

Concord is widely known for another aspect of its history: It is intimately associated with the Transcendentalist movement in the quarter century before the Civil War. That distinction, too, it owes to Emerson. Born and raised in Boston, the most prominent public intellectual of Civil War America was the scion of six generations of New England divines, going back to Concord's founding minister. In 1835, at age 32, Emerson returned to "the quiet fields of my fathers," and from that ancestral base forged his career as a lecturer in Boston and beyond. He quickly became known as an eloquent voice for a new philosophy—calling on Americans to shed outmoded ways of thinking rooted in the colonial and British past and to put their trust in nature and in themselves. Partaking, as he saw it, of a divinity running through all Creation, Americans had an unprecedented opportunity to build an original culture on the principles of democracy, equality, and individual freedom. Emerson's project was to unleash this infinite force.

In Concord, Emerson attracted a coterie of sympathetic souls who shared his vision, including Henry David Thoreau, who, as the author of *Walden* and "Civil Disobedience," would ultimately surpass Emerson in renown. As the town gained literary stature, *Concord* became a byword for the philosophical movement it hosted. Henry Adams called Transcendentalism "the Concord Church." Emerson projected his influence by means of books and lectures. He was among the founders of *The Atlantic*, calling in its pages for the abolition of slavery (and, a few months later, mourning the death of Thoreau). Concord itself emerged, in the words of Henry James, as "the biggest little place in America."

Why Concord? How did a small town of some 2,200 inhabitants in 1860 become a cradle of not one but two revolutions? The best-known explanations distort the town's history while inflating its self-regard. One view, popularized by Van Wyck Brooks's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Flowering of New England* (1936), emphasizes Concord's bucolic beauty, agricultural economy, and limited industrial development. It was a place fit for poets and philosophers, where nature and man came together in rare harmony. A second view, advanced by the Yale historian Ralph Henry Gabriel in 1940, holds that the Transcendentalists were the intellectual heirs of the minutemen. By challenging the materialism of business and politics and by insisting on the ideals of a democratic faith, Gabriel argued, Emerson and Thoreau were "carrying on the fight which had been started by farmers at the bridge."

It's no wonder that locals and tourists alike continue to indulge such explanations. An attractive civic identity can brand a town and bring in business; ironically, Concord's reputation as a place of principle, carrying the torch of democratic ideals, serves just this purpose. Still, as history, the public image of the Transcendentalists as heirs of the minutemen has little foundation. The minutemen had fought for collective liberty, the communal right to govern themselves and uphold a way of life going back to the Puritan founders. Transcendentalists, by contrast, stressed individual rights in a break with tradition. Forsake inherited institutions and involuntary associations, Emerson urged. Trust thyself was his strategy for changing times.

Graph: A reconstruction of Concord's Old North Bridge, where militia and minutemen forced British soldiers to retreat on April 19, 1775. (Amani Willett for *The Atlantic*)

The town of Concord was not some sheltered enclave, slumbering through the revolutions of the age. In the Transcendentalist era, the community was economically dynamic, religiously diverse, racially heterogeneous, class-stratified, politically divided, and receptive to social and political reform. It stood in the mainstream of antebellum America. It offered no asylum from change.

It's easy to overstate the uniqueness of Concord in politics as well as culture. Why was the town at the forefront of the Revolution? Not because it was more militant than most. In the opposition to British taxes and "tyranny," it took its time, reluctant to unsettle authority and break with the Crown. Then again, so did most towns in Massachusetts, until Britain revoked the colony's provincial charter and assailed local self-government. Moderation made Concord a safe place to store military supplies; its leaders were unlikely to act rashly and precipitate a war. So did its distance from Boston and its pivotal place on the Massachusetts road network. The town was a market center, a seat of courts, and a staging ground for military expeditions—such as the march to Boston in 1689 to overthrow the authoritarian royal governor, Edmund Andros. But other towns, such as Weston and Worcester, could have performed a similar service in 1775.

As for Concord's status as the center of Transcendentalism, the claim is inflated. The movement drew support across the Boston area. Transcendentalists preached from Unitarian pulpits not only in Boston but also in nearby towns such as Watertown, Arlington, and Lexington. So Concord was not alone: Its citizens experienced the same forces unsettling life all over Massachusetts. Its writers just happened to address that social transformation with a vision of nature and the self so compelling that Concord became the symbolic rather than literal center of Transcendentalism.

[From the December 2021 issue: Emerson didn't practice the self-reliance he preached]

In one key respect, though, Concord truly was unique. In 1635, when the Massachusetts General Court authorized the founding of the town, it possessed a natural setting with distinct advantages replicated nowhere else in New England. Over millennia, the forces of geology had fashioned a physical landscape that the Native inhabitants had improved to sustain their way of life, and had unwittingly made ready for appropriation by the newcomers from across the sea. These resources drew pioneers into the interior, well beyond the

seaboard, for the first time, and enabled the creation of new social and intellectual landscapes. Nature blessed Concord from the start. Emerson rightly invoked the universal currents of being, whose natural laws, as he saw it, were the same in his era as at the beginning of time.

The Concord River runs north, rather than southeasterly down the regional slope toward the sea. When the edge of the great ice sheet began to retreat from the area about 17,000 years ago, the Concord River was dammed up by the ice to create a ribbon-shaped glacial lake with a muddy bottom. Eventually the lake drained away, allowing the Concord River to cut an inner valley beneath a moist and fertile lowland.

This process set the stage for the creation of what the Indigenous Massachusetts, Nipmuc, and Pawtucket peoples called Musketaquid, meaning "grass-ground river," a marsh about 20 miles long and so flat and so uninterrupted that Thoreau skated the entire round-trip distance one freezing day—January 31, 1855. The languid stream passed through broad meadows to create a northern version of the Everglades (without the alligators). Nathaniel Hawthorne lived along the bank for three weeks before he discerned which way the river flowed.

This riparian ecology attracted colonists: Concord became the first English town in North America above tidewater, beyond the sight and scent of the sea. Here the lush growth of freshwater hay would undergird a system of English husbandry dependent on livestock. Here migrating shad, herring, and salmon thrived in the aquatic richness, furnishing plentiful protein sources, vitamins, and minerals. Here the firm, muddy banks made an ideal habitat for the freshwater mussels on which other animals depended: muskrat, otters, turtles, human beings. On July 3, 1852, Thoreau estimated that more than 16,335 freshwater clams lay along 330 feet of the riverbank. Migrating waterfowl followed the meadows. Songbirds nested along their edges.

Transplanting Old World methods, the founders of Concord harvested natural hay in its Great Meadow, which was annually enriched with nutrients by flooding. Thoreau gazed at the scene and imagined a river as fertile and ancient as the Nile. "It will be Grass-ground River as long as grass grows and water runs here," he predicted in the opening lines of his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849). Above the meadow stood the Great Field, an

unusually flat, loamy, well-drained terrace that the Native people had long cleared for cultivation, using fish for fertilizer. For the colonists, this was a place to grow cereal grains, including the novel crop of Indian corn, fertilized by manure from cattle fed on hay from the Great Meadow. Above the Great Field was a broad expanse of fairly level habitable land covered by old-growth forest. This extensive lowland gave inhabitants room to spread out on mostly stone-free soils, unlike so much of New England, and create productive farms.

Concord lies at the midpoint of Musketaquid, a place where the Assabet River, a typical midsize New England stream, enters from the west to bisect the ribbon of meadowland, creating the Sudbury River to the south and the Concord River to the north. It's no accident that Concord village was settled in this strategic spot, where three rivers touch—the *axis mundi* of a most unusual valley.

Eighteen miles. That's the distance from Boston Harbor to Concord village. A regiment of British soldiers walked it on their ill-fated expedition. In October 1833, Thoreau hiked the route to Concord from his Harvard dormitory in Cambridge, blistering his feet in the process. Eighteen miles was far enough from the capital to serve as the primary depot of provincial military stores; it made for a long march in the dead of night through hostile countryside, as the British regulars learned to their sorrow. In times of peace, Concord could take advantage of its favorable location—far enough from more urban coastal settlements to cultivate a rural identity centered on agriculture, but close enough to enjoy proximity to educational institutions, literary culture, markets and wharves, and the statehouse. Concord became a right-size county seat, its central village of shops, taverns, courthouse, and meetinghouse surrounded by farms no more than a few minutes' walk in any direction.

The physical separation between Boston and Concord involves more than the linear distance between two points. The population centers occupy different watersheds—the Charles River watershed to the east and the Concord River watershed to the west. In fact, they lie on different bedrock terranes that originated in different places in different eras. The terrane boundary coincides with the Bloody Bluff fault, named for a rocky notch where British troops were trapped by ferocious provincial fire. Here the land leans toward the security of the sea. To the west, it leans toward a hinterland where pioneering residents looked to one another for community support. Without the Lexington Road and its regular stagecoach traffic, 18th-century Concord would have remained an agricultural village. Instead, it became a prominent

node in an expanding trade network. The significance of the watershed divide between country and city diminished only after the Fitchburg Railroad reached Concord in 1844.

Graph

Graph: Top: The woods surrounding Walden Pond. Bottom: Concord's Great Meadow. The construction of a railroad in 1844 made the town a day-trip destination for middle-class urbanites. (Amani Willett for The Atlantic)

Before steam power and the internal combustion engine, the main source of mechanical power in Concord derived from flowing water. Harnessing hydropower required the construction of a dam, behind which a reservoir filled up with streamflow. For much of its history, Concord village was defined by a man-made pond, the filling of which was the counterpart to our putting fuel in a tank or recharging a battery.

At Concord's beginning, in the 1630s, its settlers clustered in a central village to take advantage of the waterpower of Mill Brook. A dam was built on the stream in a constricted space—the site of an abandoned fishing weir put in place by Indigenous occupants to capture the seasonal runs of shad and salmon coming upstream to spawn. The mill dam was sufficient for two centuries to power a diversity of small-scale manufacturing enterprises, including grist- and sawmills and blacksmith shops, but it was not enough to expand and compete even with the small factory cities west of Musketaquid, such as nearby Maynard and Stow, not to mention the industrial behemoths Lowell and Lawrence to the north. The enduring legacy of Mill Brook was to foster the growth of a central village in a colony where dispersed residences became the norm. Together with the Great Field and Great Meadow, the nucleated village of Concord, where people settled thickly under the watchful eyes of neighbors, manifested the Puritan ideal of community on the ground.

Above the marshy meadows of Musketaquid, but below the fairly level wooded land over which Concord center sprawled, is a discrete alluvial floodplain dominated by river-transported silt and sand. And where this alluvium is absent, the meadows have low, natural-edging levees, high and dry enough to provide a habitat for a beautiful "gallery" forest fringing all three rivers on both sides. This extensive strip of trees constituted a buffer zone between the deforested open landscape of farms, fields, and pastures and the never-forested wetland of meadows and streams. As Thoreau floated down the rivers and walked along their

banks, he delighted in this woodland composed not of tall pine and hickory, but of willow, alder, birch, red maple, and other species.

Graph: Ralph Waldo Emerson's home in Concord, and the nature reflected in its window
(Amani Willett for The Atlantic)

While drafting *Nature* from his second-floor study in the Old Manse—the house near Old North Bridge later occupied by Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne—Emerson would look out over a field and stone walls toward a gallery forest on both sides of the Concord River. Thoreau's views, when he traveled the river by boat, skates, or snowshoes, were flanked by woods on both sides. Owing to its hydrology, Concord's gallery forest persisted, even during the peak deforestation of the mid-19th century, when forest cover was reduced to about 10 percent of the town's land area.

Along the southern edge of Concord lies an elevated tract of droughty, infertile, and often bumpy land that remained unfit for development well into the 20th century. The uphill climb to that tract, known as Brister's Hill for a once-enslaved Black man who made his residence there as a free man, is the north-facing escarpment of a forested plateau known as Walden Woods. Composed mainly of river gravel and sand, this upland is an ancient glacial delta that built outward over buried blocks of stagnant glacial ice. When those blocks later melted underground, the result was a chain of sinkhole lakes and ponds called kettles. The largest and purest of these is Walden Pond, the deepest lake in Massachusetts.

For the Transcendentalists of the 1830s and '40s, Walden Pond served as a source of inspiration within an easy walk of Emerson's parlor. When Thoreau lived there in the mid-1840s, the lake became the imagined interlocutor for his philosophical musings—"Walden, is it you?"—and a powerful symbol of the unity of nature. Though the still-beautiful Concord River had been greatly changed by this time, Walden Pond, "earth's eye," became Thoreau's exemplar of purity and eternity in a landscape denuded of trees and drained of its wetlands.

But the commercialism and superficial mass culture that dismayed Emerson and outraged Thoreau intruded even here. An entrepreneurial agent for the Fitchburg Railroad built an amusement park at "Lake Walden." In the Gilded Age, it became a day trip by train for middle-class urbanites and poor children from the Boston tenements. Eventually, the

Emerson family acquired the bulk of the woodland surrounding the pond and donated it for public use.

Concord is not unique in having one or more beautiful lakes within its borders. What makes it singular is that Thoreau's book of the place made the place of the book world-famous. *Walden* became the foundational text for the aesthetic strand of the American environmental movement. Its emphasis on nature's beauty and the spiritual inspiration that could be enjoyed at a humble kettle pond presented a pointed contrast to the utilitarian strand of the movement pioneered by George Perkins Marsh, the author of *Man and Nature* (1864), who sought to conserve nature for economic purposes. Of course, unwittingly, Thoreau's classic also enhanced the tourist trade.

In the 20th century, Concord, a town whose motto at times could be "Resisting change since 1775," became a progressive leader on environmental and sustainability issues. Its otherwise inauspicious lake is now a global symbol and a destination for admirers of Thoreau. The more than 160,000 international pilgrims who come to visit every year, together with the attentions of nearby residents, threaten to love the pond and woods to death. It has been an ongoing political struggle to preserve Walden as it was in Thoreau's day—an admittedly impossible task. Attempting to live up to that responsibility earned Concord acclaim across the world, notwithstanding the town's decision in 1958 to site the town landfill within 800 feet of the lake—a choice considered temporary at the time and that local activists are now seeking to mitigate.

Not everyone has appreciated the distinct landscape created by Concord's geological history. In 1844, Margaret Fuller accused Emerson of settling for a placid suburban existence. A noble soul like his, she believed, required a sublime setting—dazzling waterfalls and mountain peaks—rather than the "poor cold low life" of Concord. Defensively, the country gentleman counted his blessings. If the town lacked "the thickets of the forest and the fatigues of mountains," it was easy to reach and traverse. It was close enough to the city to attract big-name lecturers and performers, and yet distant enough to possess "the grand features of nature."

Graph: More than 160,000 pilgrims from around the globe visit Walden Pond each year.
(Amani Willett for The Atlantic)

Thoreau put the matter succinctly: Wildness lies all around us, and in it is "the preservation of the world." Could not every town, he proposed, create a park "or rather a primitive forest of five hundred or a thousand acres, where a stick should never be cut for fuel," but be "a common possession forever, for instruction and recreation"? His neighbors took the suggestion to heart. In the 160-plus years since his death, they preserved a sizable portion of the town's farms, forests, and wetlands from economic development. Of Concord's nearly 16,200 acres of land, roughly 6,120 acres, or 38 percent, are now "permanently protected open space," according to a 2015 town plan. Thoreau's own close studies of natural phenomena, including his phenological notes on seasonal events—when plants leaf, for example, and when birds migrate, and when the river ice breaks up—are now indispensable records with which scientists assess the advance and toll of climate change today.

Yet the challenge to care for that environmental heritage is ongoing. Concord is not frozen in time. It is an active, changing community facing unrelenting pressures for economic development—for instance, controversial proposals for a cell tower in Walden Woods and for expanded private-jet flights from nearby Hanscom Field. Thoreau witnessed the same root conflict. With geology emerging as a science in his time, he intuited that nature was as subject to change as human society; it was no fixed backdrop.

For all our extraordinary human achievements, we remain earthlings. Rocks and minerals give rise to ecosystems, upon which human cultures are dependent. That's the direction of human history in deep time: up from the ground. In our unprecedented modern geological epoch, the aptly named Anthropocene, human beings have become the dominant geological agents, thanks to the power of fossil fuels—also up from the ground, but exhaustible and not enduring. That change has its origins in the Industrial Revolution, against whose excesses the Transcendentalists warned.

On April 19, 2025, some 70,000 people converged on Concord to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the battle that started it all. Marching in the parade were representatives from some of the 97 communities in the United States that take their name from the birthplace of the Revolution. The celebrations proved to be patriotic as well as inclusive, paying tribute to the heritage of liberty and self-government that is the legacy of the New England town. They were also surprisingly cheerful for our polarized time, though a good many participants did carry signs inspired by the minutemen: NO KING THEN, NO KING NOW.

Every place is unique because every place is the contingent outcome of its own inescapable cascade of events—from rock to ecosystem to culture. Concord was lucky in its location, inheriting advantages from natural landscape and history on which its inhabitants could build a sense of place and community. It was a fierce determination to defend that community, with its tradition of town-meeting government, that inspired the resistance to the British regulars. The location of the Old North Bridge at a bedrock-anchored narrows between two large meadows made a logical place for the shot heard round the world. The Battle Road that led to it was flanked by stone walls and trees lining the edges of fields, at times narrowing to pass over streams or curving sharply to follow landforms. The character of the Concord fight owed much to geology. It helps explain the rout of the redcoats—and the ensuing popular confidence in the possibility of a military victory that lay eight years ahead.

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Graph: Woods along the path of the British retreat from Concord to Boston Amani Willett for The Atlantic

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By Robert A. Gross and Robert M. Thorson

Reported by Author; Author

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