

Meet Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

A life rooted in Concord, shaped by conscience, nature, and words.

Early Life and Education

Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) was born and spent nearly his entire life in Concord, Massachusetts. His family was not wealthy. After attending school in Concord, his parents chose to send Henry to Harvard rather than his older brother John, whose health was more fragile.

Thoreau did well at Harvard. Although he had to leave school for several months because of financial and health problems, he graduated in 1837 in the top half of his class.



Early Work and Teaching

Thoreau graduated during a national economic depression, when jobs were scarce. He was hired as a teacher at the Concord public school but resigned after just two weeks. He disagreed with the superintendent about how to discipline students.

For a time, Thoreau worked in his father's pencil factory, even though he later criticized the "quiet desperation" of business and industry. The family's pencils were considered the best in America, largely because of Henry's research into German pencil-making techniques.

The Thoreau Brothers and Their School

In 1838, Henry and his brother John opened a private school in Concord. The brothers were very close. They worked and traveled together, including a memorable boating trip up the Concord and Merrimack rivers to Mount Washington.

Both brothers fell in love with Ellen Sewall, a frequent visitor to Concord from Plymouth. First John and then Henry proposed marriage, but her father objected to the Thoreaus' liberal religious views, and she declined both proposals.

When John became seriously ill in 1841, the brothers closed the school.

Emerson, Writing, and Loss

Soon afterward, Thoreau moved into the home of his mentor and friend Ralph Waldo Emerson, where he worked as a live-in handyman. During this time, Thoreau became deeply involved in Transcendentalism and began writing seriously. He published poems and essays in *The Dial*, the movement's journal.

A brief attempt to earn a living as a writer in New York City was unsuccessful, and Thoreau returned to Concord at a turning point in his life. In 1842, his brother John died suddenly. Living again in his parents' crowded home meant factory work and little quiet or privacy—conditions that made writing difficult.

Walden Pond

In 1845, Emerson gave Thoreau permission to build a small house on his land at Walden Pond. Thoreau moved there on July 4. He had two main goals: 1) to write *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* as a tribute to his brother John, and 2) to test whether he could meet his needs by working one day a week and devoting the rest of his time to study, nature, and writing.

During his time at Walden, Thoreau began the work that would become *Walden*. He first developed it as a lecture, responding to townspeople curious about his life at the pond. His notes eventually grew into his second book.

Later Years and Travels

Thoreau lived at Walden Pond for two years, from July 1845 to September 1847. During this period, he spent one night in jail for refusing to pay a poll tax. This experience inspired his essay “Resistance to Civil Government,” later known as “Civil Disobedience.”

In 1847, he traveled to Maine and climbed Mount Katahdin, encountering a wilderness far more rugged than Concord. He later returned to live at Emerson’s house while Emerson traveled in Europe. For most of his remaining years, Thoreau rented a room in his parents’ home.

Publishing, Work, and Daily Life

After leaving Walden, Thoreau published *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) and *Walden* (1854). *A Week* sold poorly, prompting him to revise *Walden* extensively before publication.

Walden received good reviews and modest sales, earning Thoreau a small but devoted readership. He supported himself through pencil-making, surveying, lecturing, and publishing essays. His income remained limited, but his daily priorities were clear: long walks in the Concord woods, careful journaling of nature observations, and writing.

Activism, Legacy, and Death

Thoreau was a passionate abolitionist. He helped people who had escaped slavery reach Canada and wrote forceful essays against the Fugitive Slave Law and the execution of John Brown.

His trips to the Maine woods and to Cape Cod provided material for travel essays published first in magazines; these were eventually collected into posthumous books. Other excursions took him to Canada and, near the end of his life, to Minnesota.

Thoreau died of tuberculosis in May 1862, a disease he had battled since his college years. He left behind many unfinished projects, including detailed studies of local nature, extensive notes on American Indians, and dozens of volumes of journals.

At his funeral, Emerson remarked “The country knows not yet, or in the least part, how great a son it has lost. . . . His soul was made for the noblest society; he had in a short life exhausted the capabilities of this world; wherever there is knowledge, wherever there is virtue, wherever there is beauty, he will find a home.”