

What follows is a supplement to Robert M Thorson's essay, "Thoreau's River Seasons: A Phenological Baseline," in *The Concord Saunterer*, n.s. 32 (2024).

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## Thoreau's River Seasons in Photographs by Donald T. Stevenson

In 2017, Donald T. Stevenson read my book, *The Boatman: Henry David Thoreau's River Years* (Harvard UP, 2017). He reached out to ask if I would like to see some digital photos of the Sudbury River he had taken from his apartment. Of course, I responded gratefully. When I asked if I could share the photos with credit, he gave me written permission to do so.<sup>1</sup>

Stevenson sent me a series of seven dated photographs to which I gave titles that match what I call Thoreau's river seasons, listed in phenological order:

1. March 13, 2005—Aquatic Spring (snow)
2. May 4, 2005—Riparian Spring
3. June 11, 2006—Inland Sea (flood)
4. July 2, 2005—Summer (low water)
5. August 3, 2008—Summer (fog)
6. September 24, 2003—Riparian Autumn (early)
7. October 24, 2003—Riparian Autumn (late)

Several years later, I asked Kathleen Kelly, editor of the *Concord Saunterer*, if she would be interested in reviewing for publication an article about Thoreau's river phenology. In my inquiry, I sent her the Stevenson photographs for a possible pairing between the proposed article and the Thoreau Society website. I was hoping to obtain more photographs and information from Stevenson and to talk over a project with him. However, I had lost his email address. Using the photographs he had sent me, I approximated the line of sight and field of view by comparing the edges and center line of the photographs with images from Google Earth Satellite View. The photographs could only have been taken from the vicinity of Newbury Court, an assisted living property in West Concord. The images reveal a fairly close view of the channel and floodplain of the Sudbury River and its bracketing upland hills. Below are two Google Earth images with my reconstructions in yellow arrows. All photographs show a slightly different field of view. (Figures 1 and 2.)

I contacted the facility. They confirmed that Stevenson had been a resident and was now deceased. He would have been approximately eighty years old when he took the photographs and ninety-four years old when we corresponded. He died at age ninety-eight on October 31, 2021.



Figure 1. Google Earth satellite image showing camera origin and approximate line of direction for series of seven photos taken by D.T. Stevenson from September 24, 2003 to Aug 3, 2008. Camera type and lens unknown. Southeasterly view centers on the crest of Fairhaven Hill (end of yellow arrow) between Walden Pond and Fair Haven Bay; the Sudbury Road Bridge is barely visible in several of the photos.

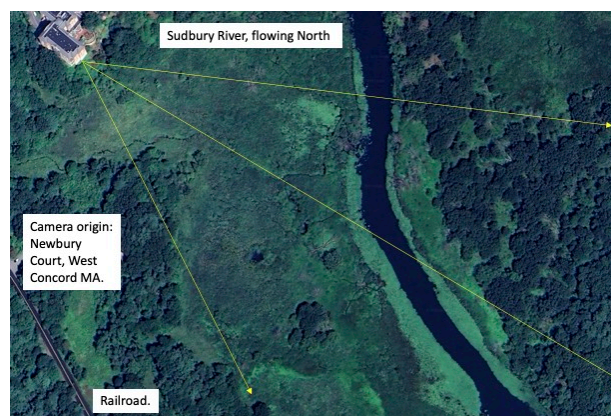


Figure 2. Closeup of Google Earth satellite view of Sudbury River showing with yellow lines the approximate foreground coverage of terrain photographed in 2003-2008 by D.T. Stevenson from Newbury Court, located where the lines converge.

The chief value of the photographs is historic and aesthetic: Stevenson offers excellent images of a consistent, elevated, sweeping view across the Sudbury in an undeveloped part of Concord. It amazes me that such an expanse would seem so undeveloped in this millennia. The photographs depict a common background containing Fairhaven Hill above Walden Pond and the vicinity of Fairhaven Cliffs above Fairhaven Bay.

The line of sight and field of view are generally the same, but they vary slightly with each photograph, suggesting that the camera was hand-held, and that the zoom was somewhat different each time. Critically, the series shows a single physical place for seven different times of the phenological year within a fairly narrow time interval from 2003-2008, predating the most recent two decades of intense climate warming.

Beyond the constancy of the topographic landscape, the images capture the variability of meteorological-hydrological conditions of the river from low stage with flanking ice (March 13) to a summer flood (June 11) and summer low stage (July 2). The only visible ecologic phenology involves the different stages of foliage from completely bare with clinging snow (March 13) to leafed out (June 11) to turning (Sep 24) to post-peak color (Oct 24).

Though the hills are more forested today than in Thoreau's time, the river probably looks very much the same as it did in Thoreau's day. This allows us to imagine what Thoreau's river seasons might have looked like during his river sojourning decade of 1851-1860.

Donald T. Stevenson's Photographs



March 13, 2005—Aquatic Spring (snow)



May 4, 2005—Riparian Spring



June 11, 2006—Inland Sea (flood)



July 2, 2005—Summer (low water)





August 3, 2008—Summer (fog)



September 24, 2003—Riparian Autumn (early)



October 24, 2003—Riparian Autumn (late)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Donald T. Stevenson for contacting me, sharing his photography, and giving me written permission to share it. I am also grateful to the staff person at Newbury Court who worked with me to track down additional details. Finally, thanks to Kathleen Coyne Kelly for her encouragement and support of this project.