

A Short Cultural History of the Thoreau Society

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Chapter 1: Founding of the Thoreau Society

On the morning of July 12th, 1941, rain poured down at Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. Many miles away in the Berkshires, newly minted college graduate Walter Harding boarded a milk delivery truck to Pittsfield, the sun still shining. Filled with aspirations of organizing a society for those who shared a love of his favorite author Henry David Thoreau, Harding then caught the train from Pittsfield to Boston. He tells how he “met Roland Sawyer on the front steps of the State House” and they “drove out together in a drizzle to Concord. By the time we reached the pond, it was a downpour, and there stood one of the wettest boy scouts I have ever seen.”¹ The meeting had been moved to the Daughters of the Revolution (DAR) hall on Lexington Road, the young man told Harding and Sawyer. They weren’t sure if they were going to make it.

Before Harding ever got on the milk truck in Western Massachusetts, he was a high school student in Bridgewater just 40 miles from Walden. During his junior year, American Literature teacher Esther O’Hara got Harding started on what he would come to call “serious reading.” In Harding’s own words, “she was the one who made me aware that there were ordinary books and great books, and that it was silly to waste one’s time on ordinary books when one could be reading great books.”² Just a few years later during his freshman year of college, young Harding made his way to Thoreau. “I felt impelled to buy a copy of WALDEN, the cheapest one available—that typographical monstrosity in Burt’s Home Library—for a dollar.” Harding said. “It was in the middle of the depression then and one dollar was a lot of money for someone trying to earn his way through college. What impelled me to do it I am not sure now.”³

In a different account of the story Harding recalled, “As I started reading, I said to myself, ‘I’m home at last; I’m home at last’ and felt like purring like a kitten on a warm hearth on a cold day. And I’ve never lost that feeling of being at home with Thoreau in the nearly fifty years since.”⁴

Those following fifty years would come to be incredibly fruitful ones for Harding. According to a 1984 edition of the *South Dakota Review*, “since the 1940s no other scholar has had his name so indissolubly linked with the author of *Walden*.”⁵ However, the road to Thoreau scholarship began as a lonely one. Feeling lost as a young admirer of Thoreau, Harding wrote to any Thoreau-related scholar he could find just to keep his sanity. Yearning for a more solid community, he began to drum up interest among these early contacts regarding the formation of a formal society. The response was not exactly what he had hoped: Bill White of Whitman College replied that first one would have to find someone “with the energy and enthusiasm not only to get [a society] going but, more important, to keep it going”—though Harding remembers he “was willing and eager to be that person.”⁶ Albert Lownes of Providence thought Raymond Adams was already doing enough with his Thoreau newsletter, “and besides there were certainly not enough people around interested in Thoreau to support such a society.”⁷ Adams sent Harding not only his latest newsletters but an entire back file and later, the newsletter’s mailing list upon which Harding would draw to gather attendees at the July 12 event. But even Adams, when asked about forming a society, felt there would not be enough interest to support such a venture.

Harding did not give up his dream of organizing a community for fellow Thoreau enthusiasts, and hoped that an event celebrating the writer and philosopher would be the ideal place to realize it. After some convincing, Adams gave the names of 50 people from his mailing list who he thought would be interested in attending a 124th birthday celebration for Henry David Thoreau, organized by Sawyer. Concord historian Allen French agreed to serve as chairman of a

host committee, and Harding sent announcements (mimeographed by another Concordian, Elmer Joslin) to individuals, newspapers, and magazines. However, just one week before the proposed event, French called Harding to suggest that because so few had made reservations for the luncheon they'd better call the whole thing off. Harding convinced him to leave the doors open.

It was with apprehensive hope that a young Harding arrived at the DAR hall in the pouring rain on July 12, 1941. "To our amazement," he would later write, "when we got there we found the tiny hall absolutely filled and people crowded around the doors and windows trying to see in."⁸ The day could not have gone better: after morning readings by Adams, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana, Odell Shepard (then lieutenant-governor of Connecticut), and Judge Francis Nims of Greenfield, MA, the sun began to shine. "By that time," Harding recalls, "the rain had ceased and the sun was baking us all, thus starting the tradition of being either soaked or baked—or both—at the annual meeting."⁹ By all of Harding's accounts, the rest of the afternoon followed in due course. "In the afternoon it was decided to organize a Thoreau Society," he writes, "Raymond Adams was elected President and I, secretary. A committee was chosen to set up a formal organization. The afternoon was spent in informal tours of Thoreau sites in Concord."¹⁰ Of the approximately one hundred in attendance, most became members for one dollar each by Harding's estimate.¹¹ Lownes, one of Harding's pen pals who previously told Harding there were not enough people interested in Thoreau to form a society, joined and remained a communicative and generous member until his death.

The Thoreau Society would go on to become the oldest literary society for an American author in the United States, as well as an important force for environmental preservation in Concord using Thoreau's text, philosophy, and character to save Walden Pond from future

development and maintain it as a conserved green space for future generations to enjoy. In doing so they would bridge literature and environmentalism in a way that created real, tangible change. Though they are a complicated group that can and should be seen from a critical lens, their triumphs speak to a broader connection between writing and preservation that essentially alter how present-day readers view Thoreau's work. Thus, in examining the origins, dynamics, tactics, motivations, and achievements of the society, one may gain a clearer understanding not just of how Walden Pond came to be preserved in Concord, but how Thoreau has come to exist in a modern light.

The Thoreau Society has maintained two publications: the *Thoreau Society Bulletin*, the first of the two, has been published quarterly and sent to all paid membership from the society's founding to today, and is available electronically. Bulletins detail society meetings, Concord happenings, Thoreau-related events, and the financial standing of the group in 3-5 page issues. The second society publication, *The Concord Saunterer*, published annually since 1966, contains longer form articles relating to Thoreau news and scholarship. Due to their reliability, brevity, and accessibility the bulletins have been chosen as the primary tool for analyzing the society's cultural history. Although additional scholarship from *The Concord Saunterer*, local independent newspapers, and society archives exists, the bulletin grants a particularly helpful view of the society's goals and character in chronological, digestible units. As primary source text, then, the bulletin promises a story that is largely told through the society's own lens. Many issues aim to rally members around a cause, raise support for Thoreau-related efforts, or incite outrage against environmental degradation at Walden, leading to bias both towards themselves and towards the events that transpired. On the one hand, the society's voice offers avenues for analyzing motivation and community involvement. However, it must also be seen critically—the selection

of a society publication as a primary text need not impede an understanding of the society that views the group from multiple angles, including critical ones. Nevertheless, from the vantage point of society bulletins, one may better understand the ways in which the society has set itself up to create change in complex ways from the society's origin story, to the saving of Walden Pond, to Thoreau's living persona in the present-day.

In the 1940s, long before the Thoreau Society made history in Concord, the group was just getting on its feet. Throughout Thoreau Society archives and publications, stories of Harding's first encounters with Thoreau and the fateful events of July 12, 1941 are told again and again, including in multiple bulletins. Naturally, these tales become bent over time. For example, in the Spring 1981 bulletin the sum for an edition of Thoreau a young Harding desperately wants costs fifteen dollars, but by 1991 the price tag shrinks to \$7.50.¹² In the decade between retellings the story evolved in small ways, as many folktales do. Instead of discrediting Harding as a storyteller, the small differences in otherwise irrelevant details make the story feel more authentic; instead of a rehearsed narrative, Harding describes an important memory, one that is passed down in a folktale-like way between generations of Thoreau Society members. Differences in details like these do not change the overall narrative. Instead, it is the major elements that remain the same between each telling that shape our understanding of the society and the way Thoreau was used to create and perpetuate its earliest values.

Symbolism in the society's origin story is consistent, and helps illustrate the more informal and intimate qualities of the society's early days. In every retelling of the story, for instance, it is pouring rain when Harding and Sawyer arrive and uncomfortably warm by lunch. One reason for the consistent descriptions of setting may be the visceral impression these details

left in Harding's already environmentally minded memory. However, a more telling explanation for the purposes of characterizing the Thoreau Society is that these elements add to the human aspects of the society's spirit. Excitement and tension are struck up when Harding and Sawyer almost fail to beat the odds; a feeling of mystical, divine intervention is alluded to as the first meeting of the society becomes suddenly bathed in sunlight; and the rain is metaphoric of Harding's personal perseverance as he stays determined to form a Thoreau Society despite pessimism from fellow Thoreauvians. Though official bylaws were drafted in 1942 before Harding left for the war, the technical parts of the first meeting are largely omitted in favor of emotional details, suggesting a more informal and intimate tone for early meetings. With these details, Harding tells a story filled with personal investment and triumph, and hopes to elicit not a scholarly understanding from readers but an empathetic, emotional one. While these retellings come decades after the events themselves occurred, we can infer from them a similar understanding of the society itself in its earliest days: Harding by all accounts was an invested leader who aimed to connect on a personal level with members, not just on a scholarly one. Painting the origins of the Thoreau Society in this symbolic light demonstrates that though there were scholarly aspects to the society, there was also something much larger going on.

A second continuity between retellings of the society's origins is the use of narrative voice. Harding, the charismatic and empathetic leader of the society, does not make any claims toward objectivity. Quoting Thoreau, Harding begins in the Spring 1981 bulletin, "I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well," adding, "there is so much I want to say before I leave."¹³ He goes on to write consistently in the first person, and does not shy away from including his own opinions or morphing into the second person to address readers directly. "By now you are probably wondering if I am...never going to reach the

moment of conception in this history”¹⁴ Harding says to conclude part one of the Thoreau Society history for example, using both first and second person to connect to readers and their imagined mindsets. On the one hand, it can be difficult to take Harding’s words at face value with such prominent subjectivity laced throughout the story. However, on the other an objective tone may in fact be inappropriate for this narrative given both Harding’s and the society’s respective characters. Beginning with a disclaimer not only tips readers off that this will be a personal narrative and not a scholarly or objective one, but helps create a sense of trust in the narrator reflecting Harding’s implied role in the early days of the society as a trusted, charismatic, and empathetic leader. Furthermore, an objective narrator might not understand the beauty or complexity of the type of community created on July 12, 1941. Harding, though, is immersed in the communal spirit of the society, a characteristic that eventually will become a deciding factor in its endurance.

Finally, this communal spirit is demonstrated by Harding’s frequent mentioning of others in each retelling. “Who can forget our first woman president, Gladys Hosmer, dressed in her sky-blue garden gown with floppy hat and elbow-length gloves,” Harding writes. “She was a great help to us scholars,” he goes on to say.¹⁵ Of Ruth Wheeler, Harding writes, “I know no one who did more for the society...Personally I would never have written my biography of Thoreau had she not continually needled me to do it and then dug up all sorts of information for it.”¹⁶ In the same piece Harding goes on to drop another thirteen names, and concludes, “You both have added immeasurably to the meaning of my life and to the friendships I have enjoyed among you.” Though Harding clearly describes the society’s first meeting from his own perspective, he takes the spotlight away from himself and puts it on others who spoke there. Thus, Harding mixes subjective narration with a tone that focuses on others to more clearly show the

community he is a part of. As part of this community he is able to bring characters to life in the story in a way that those without personal experience might not be able to, down to the members' actions, mannerisms, and even clothing. Though these retellings were written decades after the founding of the society, the persistent inclusion of these details imply some of the most important pillars of the society—the community that forms it. By bringing to life these characters years later, Harding inducts newer members into this community and its legacy of intimate connections.

While Harding does an excellent job of alluding to the importance of community in the early days of the Thoreau Society through emotional details, personal storytelling, and characterizations of others, there is another implicit connection holding together this community that should be made explicit in order to understand its real strength—Thoreau himself. In a sense, Thoreau is a living part of the society. After one wartime New York meeting Harding writes in the September 1943 bulletin, “Those of us who attended enjoyed it so much that we wanted to tell the rest of you about it...[but] instead of telling you what we heard at the meeting, we decided to tell you what brought us to it—our individual attitudes toward Thoreau, each as individual as Thoreau himself.” Reasons included “Henry David Thoreau is an alive personality,” “He has revealed himself so completely in his Journals that he represents to me man,” “I believe that Thoreau was a rare spirit...for this reason he has my reverence,” “His significance lies in his absolute and inviolate spiritual integrity,” and, “Thoreau has given me so much that is personal that my attachment is far above literary valuations.”¹⁷ Those involved with the Thoreau Society in the first five years of its existence gathered not just to discuss literature, but to speak collectively on a figure they see as alive, deeply personal, and nearly divine. By including a living version of Thoreau in this community, the society suddenly becomes much

bigger than a simple group of like-minded people. Thoreau and his works are used in this context not just for scholarly criticism, but to create lasting connections.

Besides personal stories from members, the tone and content of the bulletin frequently allude to the living, almost mystical memory of Thoreau in order to build a strong community. A particularly telling example lies in a clipping sent from *The Children's Newspaper* and printed in the April 1944 bulletin. It begins, “although Henry Thoreau died more than 80 years ago, his spirit and teaching yet live.” It goes on to describe an American soldier, who, “like Thoreau...seems able to inspire confidence in any wild living thing, great or small” including a “young rook” who comes to the soldier like a “tame pigeon.”¹⁸ After the war, the fascination with Thoreau’s personality and spirit continues in the bulletins—almost the entirety of the January 1948 issue is an excerpt of a psychological study that aims “to further understand that complex personality Henry David Thoreau.”¹⁹ This takes the living spirit one step further by not only invoking the imagined personality of Thoreau but applying it to our own contexts, both during the war and beyond. He is not just the body attached to the hand that penned famous literary works, but someone with personal complexities that could conceivably exist in any period. He is so complex, in fact, that his nonviolence and activism can be molded into the body of a soldier—an odd paradox to be sure. Harding in his role as Bulletin Editor acknowledges that this is an unusual comparison: “So much has been said about Thoreau’s pacifism that it is refreshing to hear of a soldier with Thoreau traits,”²⁰ the section’s introduction begins. However, the clipping thinks not of Thoreau’s insistence on “peaceable revolution” described in *Civil Disobedience* nor his infamous tax boycott in protest of war, but sees Thoreau as a “scholar-recluse who was the trusted friend of bird and beast” and goes on to see this particular soldier as resembling this second tradition. Finally, the fact that this is newsworthy information not only

says something about Harding, who edited the bulletin, but about readers who are interested in this kind of information. Early members were interested in the ways a living Thoreau was a part of their community, and allowed particular (or if necessary, skewed) invocations of a mystical figure to carry them through an extremely trying time.

The evident strength of the community built by both Harding and the invocation of Thoreau would be tested during World War II. “The Thoreau Society was barely under way when the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred,” Harding writes, “I was drafted almost immediately and having no idea of my future whereabouts, I submitted my resignation as secretary. Instead the society voted to put me on leave-of-absence and T. Morris Longstreth...was made acting secretary to carry on the records until I was free again.” The 1942 meeting was confined to Concord residents, and the 1943 meeting was cancelled. The bulletin, according to Harding, “slipped into a pattern of very sporadic appearance. People began asking if after such a good start the society was going to go moribund.”²¹ As the community scattered, the society was in danger of falling through the cracks. Yet, ever the optimistic leader, Harding was able to join and promote a small group in New York where he worked as a hospital orderly and conscientious objector. In retellings, Harding’s tone may help contemporary readers more clearly understand his conscientious objector status—while he was waiting to be “free” again, he describes himself as a “human guinea pig in medical experiments,”²² showing clear disdain for liberties taken during the war movement. Nevertheless, in both retellings and wartime bulletins, Harding also highlights some of the positive experiences he had during the war with society members. The group he joined in New York, for one, included Rella Ritchell and Roger Payne, each described as colorful characters in Harding’s typical style. Thus, even while Harding’s feelings on the war remain complicated, his consistent leadership in New York helped the society persevere.

Although important to the society's perseverance during the period when annual meetings were impossible to organize, it remains somewhat unclear how important satellite groups were in relation to membership in and around Concord. "If I seem to be over-emphasizing the New York group, they were the ones who really kept the society going during the war. The national group became almost non-existent," Harding writes, suggesting that the core group in Concord (that Harding was once a part of) may have dissolved almost completely. At the same time, however, with the revival of annual meetings in 1944, "more and more Concordians became active in the society."²³ Further evidence of satellite groups and their relative importance may be found in bulletins of the time: "several members have written in asking about the formation of local Thoreau groups," according to the January 1942 bulletin. Although the society had "no definite plan or outline, feeling that they should be planned according to the particular needs and interests of the individuals," the bulletin ends with a reminder that "we will send you a list of all Society members in your vicinity on request."²⁴ The next bulletin sends out a more specific call for satellite groups. "Ira Hoover, 1495 North 53rd Street, Philadelphia," for example, "wonders about starting a local Thoreau group in that city, if you live near, let him know whether you'd be interested in joining."²⁵ This implies readers of the January 1942 bulletin wrote in to the publication not only to organize communities but to advertise already forming ones. The same bulletin goes on to report that "the Society is nationwide now. The other day William T. Webber, of Long Beach, California, sent in a membership dollar for William junior. Hitherto, members in Texas, Oklahoma, and Colorado had marked the western boundary of the Society." This is an impressive feat for a society only in its second year, made even more impressive by the time period it occurred in. Thus, although there were active Concord members during the second World War, the tone of bulletins largely

implies a fracturing and expanding of satellite groups. Although the mostly involuntary expansion of the society due to membership dispersal during World War II tested the strength of the society, it also led to a wider expansion of Thoreau scholarship and society membership. Like Harding in New York, other members likewise found each other in a variety of circumstances and locations well outside the familiar banks of Walden Pond to speak on their joint interest in literature, creating a national interest in their group and its values.

Regardless, both satellite and Concord communities were able to grow despite the dispersal of the society caused by World War II largely due to members' continued dedication to the society and to Thoreau himself. The bulletin served to provide hope and energy to society members who feared for its existence: "this Bulletin of the Thoreau Society comes after a long interval and will at least prove that the Society has not become a casualty of the war. Intervals between the bulletins may be long, but the Society can weather hard buffeting... Your officers know no more about those days than you do,"²⁶ begins the April 1942 issue. Through this uncertainty however, officers like Harding still helped to lead the charge, as the July 1943 bulletin describes. "Walter Harding sent out a call over the whole metropolitan area and held a meeting on Sunday, July 18, in the Roosevelt Memorial Building of the Museum of Natural History," it reads. "Twenty-five attended. Gasoline was no object; subways and Walt Harding's enthusiasm brought out a very satisfying, and also satisfied, crowd."²⁷ Here too, the charisma and personal trust built by Harding evident in his folktale-like, community focused retellings helped rally groups in wartime even among society dispersal, general uncertainty, and personal misgivings about the war.

In the end, however, even Harding had to rely on a larger community building force to get through the war: Thoreau himself. At one of the earlier New York meetings, "after a general

discussion, Harry Lee read some of his favorite parts of *MORE DAY TO DAWN*; Max Cosman read a chapter from his projected biography of Thoreau; and Adin Ballou recited a few of his ‘After Reading Thoreau’ sonnets.”²⁸ From the New York group one may infer a larger phenomenon likely happening in satellite groups around the country (and at home in Concord) during the war—though charismatic leaders and the optimism of the society itself helped bring people together, it was the reading and discussions of Thoreau that had people coming back again and again. This is further evidenced by an argument made in the July 1943 bulletin: that “Thoreau is likely to be needed in the days ahead,” and, ““Simplify, Simplify, Simplify” will be a pretty good trinity to hold to in those days.”²⁹ Like with the story of the Thoreau-like soldier, Thoreau is invoked to create and maintain community. As with the soldier, however, it is wise to consider which version of Thoreau is being called upon—the pacifist, the naturalist, the philosopher? Furthermore, these questions are not purely theoretical but relate to our understanding of the society in the wartime period, because in order to understand which Thoreau the society appeals to we must understand which Thoreau the society needs. The uncertainty laced through retellings and bulletins along with pleas for satellite groups suggest perhaps Thoreau’s work was needed more as a general guiding philosophy important not solely for its messages of minimalism and self-reliance (though these would be important as families make great sacrifices for the war), but for its broader ability to gather communities around these messages. Regardless of intent, the invocation of Thoreau’s spirit helped keep wartime society members connected not only with certain ideals, but with each other.

The Thoreau Society’s origin story is important insofar as it helps modern readers understand the ways community can be built around an American author. Beyond just the scholarly, Thoreau Society members engaged deeply in their own folktale-like founding,

intimate relationships with other members, and in bringing to life the imagined character of Thoreau. In part because of the intimate and dedicated character of the young group, they were able to then maintain the society during the turbulence of World War II, albeit in a somewhat fractured state. By relying on charismatic leadership and Thoreau's steadfast persona to unify membership across state lines, the society was even able to expand. The strength of character developed during these times would go on to help the society fight for preservation on Walden's shores, combining their love of literature with real environmental change. In bridging this important disciplinary divide, the society becomes integral both in the Concord environmental movement and, more broadly, in contextual readings of Thoreau's work. In light of the Thoreau Society's founding, the characteristics taken on in early years, and the change they would go on to make it becomes nearly impossible to read Thoreau's texts without considering how they have historically influenced readers. In understanding the society's origin story, the influence of Thoreau's writing insofar as it brought people together and deepened community connections is made clearer.

In the years following the society's founding, the larger group was able to congregate once more in Concord and thus grew even stronger. Due to the intimate, community-focused character they were able to take on their first cause in 1948, pointing their collective power toward environmental change for the first time. In the proceeding decade from 1948 to 1958, the group would be thrust onto the media stage to promote preservation at Walden Pond, once more testing their strength, resources, and resolve. Nevertheless, through their battle to save Walden and its surrounding banks from future development, they once again bring together the forces of literature, environmentalism, wealth, and community to create positive change. Just as in the

society's founding, the battles the group go on to fight reveal new understandings of the link between literature and the environment, along with essential contexts for reading Thoreau.

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Chapter 2: The Fight for Walden Pond

Almost a decade after the Thoreau Society's founding and five years since the end of the Second World War, a visitor to Walden Pond would likely find a bustling site. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to find a pensive philosopher thoughtfully staring out from Walden's banks through the crowds of children and families that flooded the site in the early 1950s. By one estimate, "as many as thirty-five thousand bathers a day were accommodated" at Walden during the summer of 1950, and "Red Cross swimming lessons were given to about 600 children."¹ By June of 1957 even more swimmers were to be welcomed through an expansion program administered by the Middlesex County Commissioners office, a project that was to replicate existing bath houses and bulldoze some of Walden's historic trees in the process.

During those same years, the Thoreau Society's numbers were continuing to strengthen. Once World War II-era travel bans ceased and Massachusetts residents were able to attend annual meetings in Concord again, the local group grew more robust and more vocal about the impending alterations to Walden Pond. According to the summer 1957 bulletin, "just before the annual meeting, spurred by the despoilment of Walden woodland by bulldozer and chain saws, Concord Thoreau Society members went into action. After a conference with the Board of Selectmen, a pond-side meeting took place with representatives of that body, the County

Commissioner, two State Representatives, and others present.”² A resolution passed at the 1957 annual meeting in July condemned the misuse of Walden, urged public officials to preserve the site, and expressed “an eagerness to cooperate in every way possible with these officials for the preservation and best use of Walden, its shores, and woodlands.”³ Now strong in both numbers and resolve, the Thoreau Society was not going to watch Walden’s trees disappear quietly.

The society was quick to put action behind words. Member Richard Reynolds moved to “empower and direct the officers of the society, especially those in Concord, to pursue this matter as vigorously as possible.” According to the bulletin’s report, “the motion was seconded by Mr. Stephen Sherwin and passed by the members,” and the president appointed a committee chaired by Gladys Hosmer.⁴ The group of Thoreau Society members—known as the “Save Walden Committee”—went on to fight for the conservation of Walden’s shoreline through a string of complicated and highly publicized legal battles in the Massachusetts courts, including a push to shift administration of the pond from the County Commissioners to the State Department of Natural Resources and a taxpayers’ equity suit to stop the Commissioner’s office from continuing to build. Each of these struggles may be further examined, from hearings held calling Thoreau’s own character into question to the financial difficulties that plagued the society in the latter years of their battle. Throughout Walden’s path to conservation, however, both triumphs and hardships shed light on the ways a group of people were able to tie together literature and environmentalism to preserve Walden Pond in ways perhaps unimaginable to even Thoreau himself.

In every story of Walden’s conservation, one finds that it was the coexisting elements of leadership, community, and understandings of Thoreau that made it all possible. In the new era of 1950s environmental activism, additional leaders joined founder Walter Harding in pushing

the group toward making change in Concord and beyond. Gladys Hosmer, Vice President of the Thoreau Society and Save Walden Committee Chair, was one of many female leaders spearheading action. According to *The Boston Herald*, “Another shot to be heard around the world may have been fired on [Mrs. Hosmer’s] cool porch”⁵ on the night of her committee’s first meeting. Hosmer was heavily involved in the Concord community. After graduating from Radcliff in 1909 and earning a master’s degree in education and public health at Harvard in 1924, “she served as the first woman member of Concord’s Board of Health, as Chairman of the town’s Records and Archives Committee and was the first Concord woman to run for the Board of Selectmen,” according to Wheeler. As someone clearly based within the core Concord community, she was able to relate to other Concordians and keep her ear to the ground regarding local politics and environmentalism. With one of their own leading the charge, people of Concord likely felt comfortable following Hosmer into battle.

Other significant female leaders in the society supported Hosmer’s power, helping to demonstrate a second dimension of Hosmer’s character. These accounts paint Hosmer not just as a concerned Concord citizen but as a charismatic and influential figure: Ruth Wheeler in particular “extolled Gladys Hosmer’s management skills and response to emergencies” Wheeler’s son, Joseph Wheeler, writes. Ruth “recalled the flood of the rivers in Concord and Lowell when Concord’s National Guard Company was called up to help evacuate flooded-out people in Lowell. Mrs. Hosmer’s own house was located in Concord on Elm Street near the river...In this situation, she lit the fire in her fireplace, called in neighbors, made sandwiches for the Guard members, went down town and got Frank Peterson at Concord Clothing Company to donate socks and took them all over to Lowell for the Concord Guard.”⁶ Not only was Hosmer notable for her status with the society and her power as a woman in the greater Concord

community, but as a figure remembered and mythologized by others, as Harding was before her. Stories like Wheeler's that get remembered and retold demonstrate the staying power of Hosmer's charisma in the minds of others. Wheeler goes on to say that when she died in 1970, "her body was drawn to Concord's Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in what was then a one-hundred-and-twenty-year-old horse-drawn hearse that had also been used for Thoreau, Emerson, Hawthorne, and Louisa May Alcott." Thus, not just in memory but in explicit allusion Hosmer is mythologized almost to the level of Thoreau and his contemporaries, a sign of Hosmer's influence on those around her. As the Thoreau Society moved toward activism and the public eye, unwavering leadership likely bolstered community members like Ruth Wheeler who drew on the strength of committee and society leaders. Insofar as leaders can unify communities in this way, Hosmer and fellow society officials may be seen as a key element to the Thoreau Society's successes.

Wheeler went on to use her own individual position to create change on behalf of Walden and the Thoreau Society. As News Editor for the *Concord Journal*, she sarcastically wrote in a June 1957 editorial, "one can only suppose that the pond in its natural state did not attract enough people. Possibly more will come when we have made it entirely artificial and synthetic. More people, more jobs, to be handed out to deserving hangers on."⁷ Nearly a decade before her appeal in the media, however, the Thoreau Society's October 1949 bulletin tells how Wheeler spoke on behalf of the Thoreau Society in a different light. This time, Wheeler wrote a pivotal letter to the Middlesex County Commissioners: "at the request of our executive committee, our vice-president, Mrs. Wheeler, wrote a letter to the Middlesex County Commissioners complaining about the present condition of Walden Pond and offering the aid of the society in solving the problem,"⁸ the bulletin reports. Charismatic individuals within the society like Hosmer and

Wheeler worked together, inspired one another to make change, appealed to others outside the society, and ultimately spoke on behalf of the group to move conservation efforts forward. Thus, without these emerging individuals playing key roles in Concord, it is difficult to imagine that the society would be nearly so effective in making change.

The Chairman of the Middlesex County Commissioners' reply to Ruth Wheeler's 1949 letter is recorded in full in Bulletin 29, and through the thin guise of politeness, readers may clearly see it is not in the society's favor. The Chairman explains that though "we have been as much concerned about the situation as you have been...we believe that we have sufficient police and guards and that plenty of money will be available to us to use for the maintenance of the Reservation," and that "until the public is more considerate and better educated regarding the disposition of rubbish on public property, we fear that conditions cannot be improved greatly."⁹ The response is typical of government inaction in how it shifts the burden of blame from government bodies onto the backs of individuals—a tactic practiced by corporations for centuries and utilized today in the ongoing climate crisis. In denying the society's initial call to action, the Commonwealth chooses to participate in *conservation* rather than *preservation*, a classification in the environmental movement that is implicitly at play in the society's fight for Walden. Conservation, as explained by the National Parks Service, "seeks the proper use of nature, while preservation seeks protection of nature from use."¹⁰ While the Commonwealth aimed to use Walden's resources in a productive way that included building and recreation, the Thoreau Society's goal was instead to preserve Walden in its natural state to be enjoyed as Thoreau did for generations to come. Though slight, the difference would spark a merciless fight.

With Hosmer and Wheeler at the helm, they were not in a position to back down from their preservationist post—shortly after Hosmer's Save Walden Committee was created the

society took the Chairman's words to heart, and took their case to the public. "A deluge of publicity followed [the 1957 annual meeting], stimulated by the action of the Annual Meeting in appointing a Save Walden Committee," the summer 1957 bulletin reports. "News stories, feature articles, editorials, etc., appeared in newspapers across the country. CBS radio and NBC-TV broadcast the story, and NEWSWEEK, TIME, and the SATURDAY REVIEW took note."¹¹ it goes on to say. This level of media coverage was neither intimidating nor entirely unintentional. In fact, Thoreau Society members were encouraged to follow along with and participate in the publicity, with a specific section in each bulletin following the 1957 annual meeting dedicated to media coverage. By engaging media in this way, Thoreau Society leaders intended to widen their existing community for the sake of creating change.

The story the Thoreau Society goes on to tell in the media—one where an allied community uses Thoreau's image to promote positive environmental change, ultimately prevailing against antagonist governmental forces—is not entirely untrue, and is worth telling. In the following section, the successes of the Thoreau Society in their battle to save Walden are examined following the triumphant tone of the bulletins during the late 1950s. However, the motivations and privilege of the Concord elite leading this movement may also be questioned, leading to a second version of this tale that is equally informative in determining the Thoreau Society's role in Walden's preservation and in contextualizing Thoreau's texts within 20th century environmentalism. Neither story is more accurate to the events that took place more than sixty years ago, nor more valid. Instead, they together paint a nuanced picture of a complex, dynamic group that impacted Walden Pond for decades to come.

The Thoreau Society was able to transition into the public eye effectively and widen their community to those outside their members' ranks only because of the willing and unified population within it. Society bulletins alert modern readers to a change in the group's overall feeling toward activism, starting in the mid-1950s. In as early as the January 1954 bulletin, editors "call to the attention of our members the work of the Wilderness Society," a group that "is devoted to the conservation of our natural resources and the preservation of our little remaining wilderness."¹² While Thoreau-related, it is outside the bounds of scholarship and education enough to consider it a notable change in the bulletin's tone—the Wilderness Society is not asking for Thoreau scholarship nor directly supporting it besides including a Thoreau quote on some of its stationery. Personal reasons may be considered for this shift as well, since Harding considered Howard Zahniser, executive director of the Wilderness Society a peer and friend.¹³ Regardless, as the society begins to think more about the implications of their position and the causes Thoreauvians might support, they begin to bring up such change-making organizations in the bulletin in a gentle way that does not directly demand support. This is perhaps unsurprising due to the growing awareness of environmental issues during this period—amid growing nuclear fear, questions about unseen effects on environment began to arise in many areas. Rachel Carson first published *The Sea Around Us* in 1951, just eleven years before her pivotal text, *Silent Spring*. The Nature Conservancy took on their first big project in 1954, beginning their long history of land protection on Christmas Eve "when neighbors of a 60-acre forest in New York were given an ultimatum: bid on the wooded ravine or see it developed,"¹⁴ according to the group's official site. With the context of wider cultural shifts in mind, the

bulletins may be seen by contemporary readers as carefully participating in trends of environmental awareness and land preservation, easing the shift into public activism.

These types of Thoreau-adjacent, environmentally conscious issues became somewhat of a theme in proceeding bulletins as the society aimed not only to keep members informed of what they deemed to be related causes, but unify members around them. In the summer 1957 bulletin, this is focused on more heavily—in addition to the actions of the Save Walden Committee, the bulletin opens with extensive writing on “Thoreau and the Preservation of Wilderness,” and reports that at the annual meeting “Mr. Paul Oesher moved that the society commend the stand of Congressman John P. Saylor on conservation...this motion was adopted.”¹⁵ As the community takes on this shift in tone in conjunction with their Save Walden pursuits, two elements emerge. First, taking on these causes within society-wide publications brings the community together around a common goal. More than just by Concord word-of-mouth, formal publication of activist causes ensures the wider community can participate in these causes together. Second, the Thoreau Society’s understanding of Thoreau’s personal character begins to become clearer, as they take on causes they see as related to their own work as Thoreau enthusiasts and scholars. By implicitly invoking Thoreau in this way, the society brings in forces perhaps larger than itself to mobilize community members. Members see Thoreau as someone who would be on the side of making change in the realms of conservation and wilderness (though the society goes about it rather differently than Thoreau himself did). Thus, when it came time to create change with the eyes of the media upon them, the society was able to maintain the dynamic character they had already created surrounding the handling of social issues in annual meetings and society publications, and was therefore poised to preserve a strong front.

Once the fight for Walden went public, other communities began to join as well, meaning the community building that took place was both intercommunity and *intra*-community. According to the October 1957 bulletin, “Prof. Kenneth W. Cameron writes that the Executive Committee of the Emerson Society is ‘backing up the efforts of the Save Walden Committee,’”¹⁶ and just a few months later in the January 1958 edition, the bulletin states that “recent endorsers include...the Trustees of Reservations (Mass.), and the National Council of Teachers of English.”¹⁷ In this way, organizations began to team up as well. This is a particularly notable aspect of community building because of its implications—a unified group of local people was not only a critical element in the society’s ability to fight for Walden, but different groups coming together to add their collective strength furthered publicity and ultimately helped to add political pressure, suggesting that the capacity for communities to make change goes well beyond the Thoreau Society.

While leaders, society members, and the ever-expanding community remained strong in the face of the public, just as in key periods of the society’s early years, one individual remained a mythical and unifying presence—Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau Society members wrote to the bulletin to help promote the fight, advocating for the preservation of the pond specifically for Thoreau’s sake. “I trust all lovers of literature, and all those who have profited from the enduring lessons taught by Thoreau, will unite to resist this latest effort to obliterate this seat of American culture,”¹⁸ Frederic Babcock wrote in the fall 1957 edition. Here, Babcock argues not only for Thoreau as a philosophical teacher but as a cultural figure, with the land he lived on rooted in tradition through Thoreau’s influence. Furthermore, Thoreau is explicitly a unifying presence in Babcock’s mind, as he seems to insist it is the book-lover’s duty to join in the fight for Thoreau regardless of personal opinion on his text. Instead, Thoreau rises above the status of a mere

author, taking on a mythical personification to justify action against the destruction of the land he once roamed.

The media, too, invoked Thoreau's image, though in a much more combative way. According to Joseph Wheeler, the "Saturday Review of Literature suggested that 'the contrast of the provincial, narrow minds of the present-day commissioners to the universal minds of Emerson and Thoreau is strikingly evident.'"¹⁹ Thoreau in this case is used somewhat differently in that he is not seen just as a cultural or literary figure, but an actual thinking being that can be compared to decision-makers in the present day. Additionally, in this example Thoreau's living memory and imagined personhood are used to fight for a particular side, molding understandings of his texts into a character with specific modern values, real power, and significant implications. The power accumulated by Thoreau's memory evidently extended beyond Concord as well. From London, Elizabeth Foster Mann wrote, "perhaps the casual tripper might not have heard of Thoreau, but there are 'others from South London—Downing Street and Westminster in particular—to whom Thoreau is more than a name and Walden more than a pond.'"²⁰ A hint of sarcasm regarding the "casual tripper" mirrors the combative nature of the *Saturday Review's* commentary, invoking Thoreau for the sake of endorsing one side. Furthermore, by drawing on Downing Street and Westminster—the locales of the Prime Minister and Parliament, respectively—Thoreau's personhood is elevated even higher. By being "more than just a name" among the likes of British government, Thoreau takes on a mythical persona high up in a political realm well outside of quaint Concord. Readers far outside of the formal society ranks thus began to imagine him as something more than just a writer or a man, but as a much larger unifying force, bridging even continental boundaries.

Importantly, the invocation of Thoreau was not used merely as a justification for society members, reporters, or outside supporters—it was written in the law. Society members “recalled that in giving the land around Walden to the Commonwealth in 1922 the members of the Forbes and Emerson families stated in their deeds that it was ‘the sole and exclusive purpose of the conveyance to aid the Commonwealth in preserving the Walden of Emerson and Thoreau, its shores and woodlands, for the public who wish to enjoy the pond, the woods, and nature.’”²¹ Though Thoreau was seen as a figure living in the minds of many Thoreauvians in the society since its inception, the living Thoreau takes on a new meaning as he exists as a part of the law. The society and its supporters are not just attempting to preserve Walden, but *Thoreau’s* Walden. The implications are therefore wider than just personal or even community interpretations of Thoreau, because his imagined feelings are used and augmented to provide substance for opposite points. What “Thoreau’s Walden” means in terms of Thoreau’s character, the physical state of the pond, and the recreational use of its waters and shores were suddenly all up for debate in what would become an intense legal and political struggle.

Soon, debate over the legacy of the famed author was heard in court. A hearing was held in April 1958 on the taxpayer suit to discontinue the Commissioner’s building projects, which one spectator is supposed to have called “Thoreau on Trial.”²² Based on Joseph Wheeler’s retelling and news snippets from the society’s bulletin, this may well be an accurate description. Wheeler cites the *Concord Journal* which describes how the defense asked, “Thoreau was just a lazy man, going to Walden to escape work and getting his living by handouts from townspeople, was he not?” “No,” Save Walden Committee representatives answered, “he earned his living but reduced his requirements to the bare essentials.” Perhaps more relevant to the defense’s point, there was also “an exchange about the cutting over of wood lots by Thoreau...suggesting that the

embankment clearing was a comparable action.”²³ According to the Spring 1958 bulletin, “the Committee members submitted to grueling hours of seemingly irrelevant cross-examination.”²⁴ The committee refused to lessen their resolve— “whatever the outcome,” Hosmer wrote in the summer 1958 bulletin, “we feel that we have accomplished a great deal not only for Walden itself but for all other places of natural beauty, literary and historic association, and generous people who want their gifts used for specific purposes.”²⁵ As Hosmer reported, though the future of Thoreau’s land rested in the hands of the court, both the community and their imagined Thoreau valiantly weathered the storm.

The combined effort of charismatic individual leaders, an allied community, and a unifying central figure would become crucial in the complex legal battles over Walden Pond that unfolded between 1957 and 1974. There were three separate battles that the society was a part of: the naming of Walden Pond as a National Historic Landmark, the transfer of custody of the Pond from Middlesex County Commissioners to the State Department of National Resources, and a suit to stop the Commissioners from building more roads or bathhouses. The Thoreau Society was most involved in the latter two, and enlisted the help of attorney Frederick Fisher of well-known Boston firm Hale and Dorr. After petitioning for an injunction, Fisher got to work in the courts on behalf of the Thoreau Society for a discounted rate. Other experts recruited to the cause according to Wheeler’s account included famed architect Walter Gropius, Harvard School of Landscape Architecture’s Norman Newton, and director of the Nature Conservancy Alvin Whitney.²⁶ This group submitted reports to the Commissioner’s office in hopes of continuing negotiation, but after making little headway were forced to rely on Fisher’s legal strategy. The society sent letters in favor of the senate bill that would move the pond to the jurisdiction of the state, but that too failed by a vote of 21-17.²⁷ Finally, a temporary restraining order was awarded

to halt construction at Walden so that arguments could be heard on stopping the construction altogether in front of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court.

In this ultimately happy tale for Concord conservation, a community was able to draw on its strength and its love for an American author to halt human-centered development at an influential literary site. In viewing Walden's path to preservation in this light, one becomes a part of the Thoreau Society's narrative, joining the ranks of likeminded Thoreauvians who wholeheartedly supported the mission to save Walden Pond. The continued intimacy and resiliency of the society in its first two decades is made increasingly clear as the media spotlight shined on them in an intense legal battle. Furthermore, by focusing on their success one may even find hope for future community-led environmental movements, drawing from the society lessons in charismatic leadership and positive media coverage. Thoreau's texts are thus explicitly used to inspire positive environmental change, placing it even more firmly in a context of environmentalism for readers today.

The saving of Walden Pond, a tale full of fearless leaders, rallying troops, and noble causes, has value insofar as it describes real connections between a literary text and a site's preservation. While we can analyze aspects of the Thoreau Society that led to this triumph, we can also shed critical light on the mythologized story, illuminating elements of elitism and wealth that, while perhaps more uncomfortable to confront, also played important roles in Walden's conservation. Diving deeper into the backgrounds of society leaders, examining the makeup of the growing community, and analyzing the flow of funds reveals that though the

society accomplished an amazing feat in conserving the pond, they did so with the money and power of suburban New England on their side.

The leaders that entered into the mythology of the Thoreau Society and pushed it toward environmental change may, for example, may be examined further. Gladys Hosmer for one was a college-educated white woman involved heavily in prestigious New England societies, holding a master's degree from Harvard and acting as President of the College Club of Boston. She was able to lend not only her education but her personal funds to the society. In 1960, for example, she donated \$300 for the society's centennial celebration of Thoreau's death²⁸—roughly the equivalent of \$2,600 in 2021. Furthermore, though her status as Concord resident likely helped her awareness of local politics and earned her legitimacy among other Concord members interested in following her into the fray, it also may point to motivations outside of environmentalism or literary history. The changes happening in her backyard directly affected Hosmer and her property values in a way that it did not affect the broader national and international crowd, as seeing Walden's beauty preserved would ensure a permanent natural oasis for Concord residents. In this way, Hosmer may be seen not only as a charismatic leader but as a resource-laden one, owing in part to her education and wealth in a suburban sphere.

Hosmer is not necessarily an outlier in her dedication of resources toward environmental causes. In fact, the environmental movement the society began to participate in also benefited from wealth and privilege. The Nature Conservancy, officially founded in 1951, drew on the wealth of members to conserve land just a few years prior to the Thoreau Society's pursuits. According to the Nature Conservancy's own account, in 1955 “the Conservancy [worked] with Mianus River Gorge neighbors in Bedford, New York to strike a deal to protect a 60-acre hemlock forest; they [pledged] their life insurance policies, and TNC [financed] \$7,500 of the

purchase.”²⁹ The trend continues to this day—in 2021, the Conservancy is the highest beneficiary of environmental charity.³⁰ In the 1950s, large environmental charities were beginning to take shape, demonstrating the power of wealth in the realm of preservation. The changing tone of bulletins reflecting the society’s involvement in the beginnings of the environmental movement therefore simultaneously reflect their participation in the economy of land protection, and the privilege required to do so.

Within this new environment of financially backed preservation, the society’s ranks grew to involve international members, and other societies began to lend their combined support. It is therefore important not only to analyze the strength and triumphs of this newly connected society but the actual community being cultivated. The aforementioned Elizabeth Foster Mann embodies the society’s international interests in the October 1957 bulletin, writing that there are “others from South London—Downing Street and Westminster in particular—to whom Thoreau is more than a name and Walden more than a pond”³¹ While extraordinary, calling upon the locations of the Prime Minister and British Parliament immediately points to privilege, exaggerating to high degree the notion of wealthy, connected individuals having a hand in environmental change. Furthermore, England was used as an example of internationalism despite its status as a wealthy, majority-white, English-speaking country. Thus, while the reach of the society remains impressive, the community stays relatively homogenous within its supposedly global sphere. Likewise, though groups that aided the Thoreau Society’s efforts demonstrate the combined power of burgeoning communities, they may also demonstrate the combined power of highly educated organizations. According to the January 1958 bulletin, these groups included the Emerson Society and the National Council of Teachers of English, two groups dedicated to sharing scholarship. Therefore, while the widening of the society in terms of membership and

support may be seen as a triumph, it is important to observe how it may illustrate an accumulation of like-minded, privileged groups. In this case, expansion need not necessarily imply diversification.

Financial troubles that tested the strength of the community perhaps show most clearly how wealth in a suburban New England community complicate a grassroots narrative. Gathering funds to fight these legal battles did not prove easy for the Thoreau Society, and they frequently requested money through quarterly bulletins. In the spring 1958 bulletin editors wrote on behalf of the Save Walden Committee, “funds are badly needed for legal fees. Although our first appeal for funds brought contributions from more than 200 people—nearly two-thirds of the amount so far raised coming from citizens of Concord—much more money is needed, for at the moment we are in the red.”³² Following bulletins would continue to ask desperately for funds as the society struggled to pay for their lawyers (even at the discounted rate they graciously received). As the fight wore on, the lengths the wider community—especially when compared with the core Concord group—were willing to go to became clear. Though media attention and town-wide discussion continued, the flow of funds did not.

Although the struggles of the society are notable insofar as they describe the disconnect between discussion and action, so too are the funds the society *had* managed to raise. Concord citizens provided a large majority of them, many of whom were likely white, wealthy, and had a personal stake in protecting the land so close to their own backyard. This was made relatively explicit: a letter sent to Massachusetts state legislators by the Save Walden Committee in February of 1958 concludes, “but most of all, we must preserve [Walden Pond], selfishly, for ourselves, for who among us does not need the tonic recreation that comes only from contact with natural woodlands and growing things...is there any greater satisfaction for a citizen or

lawmaker than springing from the knowledge that they have helped preserve something priceless, unique and irreplaceable as a legacy for their children and their children's children?"³³

It becomes difficult to see the Thoreau Society's key strengths, then, without the tint of elitism laying just beneath the surface—charismatic leaders like Gladys Hosmer were not only powerful forces for change but wealthy, Harvard-educated, locally connected, and personally motivated to stop the destruction taking place in their own backyards, and, though the society grew, it did not necessarily become more diverse. Community members could rally implicitly around their shared interest in property value and literary elitism as much as they could rally around activist causes, and when all was said and done they were the ones to finance the project to its completion.

Though difficult to make concrete claims toward the motivations of individuals, one may certainly question what underlying reasons for saving Walden lay in the back of members' minds, especially in relation to Thoreau. Thoreau himself took advantage of his education, wealth, and status when writing *Walden*; though, perhaps neither the historical nor imagined Thoreau had any large effects on Concord residents at all when compared with aspects of property value and personal legacy. Regardless, these observations need not take away from the powerful notions of what strong leaders, unified communities, and mythologized literary figures may accomplish. Instead, this second, perhaps less triumphant version of Walden's saving may color and add dimension to the first—although elements of community and literature were certainly crucial to the conservation of Walden Pond, without the financial backing, motivation, and political savvy of mostly wealthy Concord residents the story might have ended very differently, as it does in less fortunate communities around the world. Here, the path toward community-led environmental change becomes less clear, as the impact of wealth and resources

must be balanced with those of strong leadership, community strength, and the disciplinary bridge between literature and environmentalism. Nevertheless, the second part to this dual narrative adds important nuance to the environmental context Thoreau becomes placed in.

The ending to both of these stories—one of grassroots triumph and one of suburban wealth—is ultimately the same: despite the intensity and complexity of political and legal battles engaged in by the Thoreau Society, the society succeeded on two main fronts. First, thanks to the convergence of leadership, community building, mythologized literary figures, and local wealth, Walden Pond was officially preserved for posterity. The taxpayers' equity suit was initially given a negative decision and was appealed in addition to mandamus proceedings from an earlier, similar case; both cases landed in the Massachusetts Supreme Court. On May 5th, 1960, the *Concord Journal* reported on the mandamus proceedings with the headline "Supreme Court Saves Walden." Justice R. Ammi Cutter "declared that Walden Pond is an American literary shrine because of Thoreau's WALDEN and Emerson's prose and poetry...Replanting of trees must be undertaken, no bathhouse can be built unless concealed by trees, ramps must be removed or modified to a natural contour and the use of material from the slopes to fill in the pond is improper."³⁴ Today, thanks to these decisions and the administrative work to follow, Walden's lush shores are available for Concord residents and tourists to roam. When the dual stories of Walden's conservation are combined, one finds a confluence of elements that led a literature-loving community to inspire tangible change in Concord successfully.

Second, the society's earliest goals of sharing a love of Thoreau through education and community came to fruition through the extensive media coverage and a flooding of support present in both versions of the story. The community built by early society members became

international, and it gained strength by participating in the growing conservation movement. Although Thoreau's character was argued over extensively in ways the society may not have approved of, the debate ultimately sparked connections between fellow outraged citizens and called into question views of Thoreau's living memory. In exposing others to discussions on literature and environmentalism, the society achieved an extraordinary bridging of writing and activism while simultaneously fulfilling their community's mission. Throughout these two tales Thoreau's legacy was called upon, called into question, and used to call others to action in such a way that irreversibly intertwines his works with political action, law, conservation, change, and privilege. Implicitly, the saving of Walden Pond shows how reading Thoreau outside the context of the Thoreau Society or their activist pursuits is to ignore some of Thoreau's most tangible implications—the way he is brought to life, morphed, and used to make change. Connecting literature to environmental action thus works in both directions. The literature, too, gains a much wider context for consideration.

Importantly, the work of the society in sculpting both Concord conservation and new readings of Thoreau is never over. Instead, the dynamic group must face the new landscape of environmentalism taking flight in the 1960s and 1970s to continue the preservation-minded administration of Walden Pond and related Concord sites. Likewise, the Thoreau Society adds additional nuance to their own understandings of Thoreau, his work, and the implications of environmentalism for reading Thoreau into the end of the 20th century. In the era of the Thoreau Society following Walden's official preservation, new perspectives on both environmentalism and Thoreau foster an increasingly dynamic view of the society, while continuities in environmental interests and the premise of a mythologized personification of Thoreau cement core values present in the society from its founding.

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Chapter 3: Administering Walden Pond

“Thus,” the Save Walden Committee excitedly reported in the July 1960 bulletin, “we have the power in our hands to see that in due course the shores and woods around Walden Pond conform to the natural environment envisioned by the donors ‘to aid the Commonwealth in preserving the Walden of Emerson and Thoreau.’”¹ They refer, of course, to the successes of their various lawsuits ensuring the environmental protection of Walden Pond. The twenty years following that success would be pivotal for the society—with the ball in their own court, as the bulletin so aptly observes, the society now had decisions to make not just as to how big of a role they will play in the ongoing process of conservation, but in the ways they will remain relevant and dynamic as a rapidly maturing society.

Just as conservation efforts at Walden Pond must continue past their turning point in the 1950s, so too must the growth of the Thoreau Society. Some tenets of the society remained the same, including the invocation of a living Thoreau and the power of the New England elite. However, in the 1960s and 1970s nuances began to seep into quarterly bulletins as well—Thoreau’s character is not just invoked but thought of with increasing complexity, and international interest grew well beyond the United Kingdom. Thus, in settling into their new

conservationist role, one finds the society navigating growing pains that paint a telling picture of the society's consistent values, the dynamic nature of the 60s and 70s in New England, and potential future growth. Through both continuities and changes, the consistent core values of the society—and their ever-expanding understandings of literature and environmentalism toward the end of the 20th century—become clear.

For one, conservation does not stop at the bang of the gavel and continues well beyond initial legislation. The Thoreau Society recognized this and maintained their support of environmental preservation in Concord throughout the two decades following official conservation at Walden. At the 1960 annual meeting, “it was voted that the Save Walden Committee be continued as a watchdog committee.”² Even in its new form, however, the committee remained relatively active in keeping track of conservation efforts in Concord and updating Thoreau Society members in bulletins. In 1966, for example, the spring bulletin reported a vote during the annual meeting to donate \$1,000 for purchasing two acres of land in the Esterbrook Woods for the Concord Field Station of the Museum of Comparative Zoology of Harvard University as a memorial to Thoreau, so that the land could be “preserved ‘forever wild’ for ecological study and the enjoyment of future generations.”³

Updates such as these were formalized by 1976, when “the executive committee of the Thoreau Society at its July meeting requested that the secretary include as a regular feature of the bulletin a section on news of Thoreau interest in Concord.”⁴ Following in the activist tradition of the society in the 1950s, the first column concludes with a call to action regarding the cairn at Walden Pond which had been removed due to vandalism, asking Thoreau Society members for help in ideating possible restoration solutions.⁵ Some of the tactics used to save Walden Pond are used again here, including involvement with local government and the use of letter writing

campaigns—in the case of the cairn, a resolution was passed and sent to members of the Massachusetts state government in favor of restoring the cairn to its original location, and members were encouraged to “direct their letters [of support] to Dr. Bette Woody of the Department of Environmental Management.”⁶ Despite the Save Walden Committee’s downgraded status, conservation remained a key feature of society communication in a literal sense through the Concord column. Furthermore, the voice the bulletin takes on in these sections is largely reminiscent of bulletins from the decade prior, insofar as members are asked to rally around local causes and engage actively in preservation at the state political level. By continuing conservation efforts in Concord, the Thoreau Society cemented environmentalism as a core principle among their group.

The origins of this continued environmentalism are tied closely to Thoreau: since the society’s founding, Thoreau has been invoked as a living, mythical figure to justify and promote certain ends. The trend seems to continue both in the scholarly and political aspects of the bulletin. In one extraordinary article, Thoreau is not only imagined in the present day, but as attending an annual meeting. Author Peter G. Fradley imagines himself and Thoreau “have slipped into seats at the rear of the old First Parish Church in Concord where the meeting is held and the proceedings have begun. We are, of course, on a first name basis... ‘You are as much if not more of this generation than any of us here,’” Fradley says to Thoreau. Inevitably Thoreau becomes frustrated with the society’s praises, and though he supposedly acknowledges “a village needs these innocent stimulants of bright and cheery prospects to keep off melancholy and superstition,” he nevertheless finds “in the society of many men, or in the midst of what is called success, I find my life of no account, and my spirits rapidly fall.”⁷ Here, Thoreau is seen as someone who could not only exist but engage in contemporary issues of the society, his character

so full as to include dialogue with modern men. Fradley goes so far as to claim Thoreau as part of the present generation, offering Thoreau as an emblem for those gathered. Invoking Thoreau's image thus continues to play an important role in the society's proceedings, as his living persona engages with and acts as a leading figure for the group.

Furthermore, similar to how Thoreau was previously used to rally support among members in the most trying days of the society, some attempted to use his image to justify support for various political actions. In 1969, for example, "it was voted that the Thoreau Society donate to the National Farm Workers Association five hundred dollars in honor of Cesar Chavez for working for human rights in the tradition of Henry David Thoreau."⁸ Just a year later, "a series of resolutions were presented by Professor Charles W. White of Southeastern Massachusetts University condemning United States intervention in Southeast Asia, condemning our elected officials in Washington for tolerating the continued persecution of Black Americans, and protesting the continued destruction of our environment."⁹ White's concerns were brought to the broader society community via mail-in ballot, which begins, "In accordance with the life & writing of Henry D. Thoreau, we, the members of the Thoreau Society, reaffirm the relevance of his spirit & ideals in our own time by adopting the following resolutions" (followed, of course, by the resolutions presented at the 1970 meeting).¹⁰ Society members explicitly take on the perceived tradition, spirit, and ideals of Thoreau in order to make broader societal changes that extend even beyond Concord environmentalism. That the society may conceive of these issues as Thoreau-related demonstrates just how far understandings of Thoreau may extend, and continues the previously established tradition of turning Thoreau's anticipated wants into actions. Though the scope of these resolutions stretches beyond issues of Concord politics or preservation, the principle intent to invoke Thoreau's character for the sake of change remains the same.

Finally, though these national political issues are discussed in bulletins, there is still a clear concentration of wealth and power within the elite ranks of the society. Like in the process of protecting Walden, this mostly white, suburban group continues to use their resources to enhance Thoreau Society efforts. Reflecting the wealth present in the society as well as general economic growth, society dues were raised twice between 1960 and 1980—by 1976 life membership was a steep \$100.¹¹ Going beyond society dues, individuals frequently donated large sums, including, in one case, a piece of one's own estate: from the estate of Ira Hoover, "long one of the most active members of the Thoreau Society" who "[journeyed] up to Concord for the annual meeting... as long as he was physically able," the society received \$6,562.36.¹² Funds were likewise set aside in the names of certain New England-area members to be used for specific purposes, including \$500 (equivalent to more than \$3,500 in 2021) "established in honor of Mrs. Ruth Wheeler for her many labors on behalf of Thoreau scholarship, her writings on Concord history, and her services as an officer and member of the executive committee." The fund would be "devoted to the improvement of the Thoreau Society archives in the Concord Free Public Library and to be expended under the direction of Mrs. Wheeler."¹³ Importantly, the general wealth of the society especially in relation to its white suburban New England members goes on to fund preservation projects such as the previously mentioned donation toward the Esterbrook woods in Concord and other donations with similar ends in the \$500 to \$1000 range (between roughly \$3,000 and \$7,000 today). The plaque marking the jail where Thoreau spent the night was also donated by the society, and restored by its members after it was briefly stolen.¹⁴ In this way, the continuation of conservation efforts not only demonstrates the maintenance of Thoreau-related environmental principles, but of privilege present within the society. Just as Walden likely could not have been saved without the resources and underlying

motivations of Concord members, preservation in the following decades would not have taken on the same magnitude without hefty donations unique to the privilege of white suburban communities.

Continued administration of Walden Pond reflects the way in which conservation efforts must extend past highly publicized legal cases or political actions in order to succeed. Although it is true that without the saving of Walden Pond in the 1950s the pond would likely look very different than it does today, it is equally true that without the continued involvement in political action campaigns and the funding of special projects, the Walden visited yearly by some half-million people today would likely look very different. These continuities between rising and falling action in the fight to save Walden reflect, then, the static elements of the society that enabled steady action. Thoreau continues to act as a unifying, mythical force, and the privilege of Concord members likewise still played a large role in funding efforts. As they have done now for many decades, these elements are likely to remain the same as the society continues to grow past the 1980s and into the present day, ultimately describing some of the key characteristics of the society over time that help modern readers understand Thoreau's work within the context of environmentalism.

Observing similarities in the actions and characteristics of the Thoreau Society over its first four decades reveals the importance of continued conservation efforts as well as some of the society's key pillars. However, the society since its founding has also been an extremely dynamic group, surviving the challenges of operating during World War II and the intense spotlight during Walden's trials. Thus, the changes the society underwent in terms of both tactics

for conservation and overall character are perhaps equally important to the study of the society in the years following Walden's preservation.

First, though conservation continued through the Save Walden Committee and campaigns such as the one demanding restoration of the cairn, efforts became more ad hoc and generally took a less aggressive tone compared to how the society publicized the initial preservation of Walden. Though the Save Walden Committee didn't disband, its new role as a watchdog committee left open questions about the level of involvement the society would allow. These questions may be answered in part by the issues the committee publicizes versus the actions taken in bulletins. Aside from the active role taken by the society in restoring the cairn, most motions passed at annual meetings primarily involve the donation of money toward preservation projects led by other organizations—the Concord Land Conservation Trust¹⁵ and the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests,¹⁶ to name a few. Even at the local scale, the society chose to support likeminded groups as opposed to taking the reins themselves: “upon motion of Dana Greely” at the 1976 annual meeting, for example, “it was voted that the society offer its support and encouragement to the Friends of Walden Pond in any way that it might be possible for their immediate and long-range planning to keep or to make the site of Thoreau's Walden house what from the local and world point of view it ought to be.”¹⁷ Although the society continued to use its wealth to participate in environmentalism while paying attention to Thoreau-related preservation projects in the area, it did so from a position of support rather than overt activism. Though drawbacks to this less aggressive approach may be further examined, overall the addition of new approaches ultimately created a more nuanced toolkit from which to draw upon when fighting for land conservation.

This less aggressive nature may also be seen as a recognition of previous successes—now that Walden was officially preserved, society members enjoyed the park’s natural shores without near-constant battle. Bulletins balanced environmental issues and calls to action by simultaneously publicizing walking trails, tours, and other conservation success stories. At Walden, for example, “Members of the Thoreau Society who went down to the ceremony were gratified to see that work toward restoring the natural contours above the beach was in progress.”¹⁸ Additionally, the bulletin tells how, “In spite of the population explosion and the fact that Concord, like any other community, has growing pains it is remarkable how many favorite trips one can still follow, and find the same lovely views, the same interesting terrain, and even the same wild flowers growing in the very places where Thoreau described them in his Journals.”¹⁹ The latter information may be found in a quarterly column formalized in the spring 1970 bulletin, written by Concord Walking Society member Mary Fenn. The columns go on to discuss various sites of interest for Thoreau-loving recreationalists to enjoy, describing some of the most pristine preserved trails. Success stories such as these validate the society’s more laidback approach to environmental activism while bolstering their involvement with nature in a different way. By being aggressive in the past and now maintaining their new supportive role, sites in Concord may clearly be enjoyed. Furthermore, by promoting the natural environment around the town, members could engage in the contentious use of resources, adding nuance to their previous position of strict preservation.

This type of nuance was in fact being added across the environmental community. Published shortly after his death in 1949, Aldo Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac* is thought to be one of the founding texts for the preservation movement. The texts describe the “land ethic,” which expands community to include nature: “when we see land as a community to which we

belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”²⁰ However, by the 1960s some were attempting to find middle ground between strict preservation and the consumption of natural resource. The World Wildlife Fund, for example, founded in 1961, valued “the sustainable use of natural resources to support current and future generations,”²¹ helping to protect wildlife while also allowing commercialized hunting in some areas. Although still fighting for environmental change, their mission statement alludes to the schism and proceeding bridging between preservationist and conservationist organizations: while some aim to preserve nature in its pristine and untouched form, others allow for resource use provided that it takes place at a sustainable pace. Organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund had a hand in both protecting wildlife while also seeing value in recreational and economic activities. The Thoreau Society in its key battle for Walden Pond appears to participate mostly in strict preservation; the Commonwealth wanted to build on the land to allow for increased recreation, while the society wanted to restore the land to its natural state. However, as recreation returned to the pond following its official preservation, the society began to take both environmental perspectives into consideration. In supporting preservation efforts through financial aid and sustainable pond recreation through bulletin advertisements of walking trails and park tours, their administration of Walden Pond participated in the wider bridging of camps in the environmental movement. By joining in these trends, the society not only remained relevant to its Concord members but continued to practice environmentalism in a dynamic way.

Just as conservation efforts became more nuanced in the decades following the official preservation of Walden Pond, so too did the invocation of Thoreau’s image. This included examining some of Thoreau’s potential flaws in one bulletin article, which complicated the heroic, mythical image present in so many previous publications. Ray Gagnon found that

Thoreau sometimes “loses sight of the transcendental too often.” “Again and again as I read Thoreau,” Gagnon writes, I find myself wishing he had been able to live those words more closely.”²² Furthermore, understandings of Thoreau began to look outward, as member Carlotta Barnes ventured to collect perceptions of nonmember Concordians and obtains mixed results. Moving past answers regarding Thoreau’s writing or philosophy, Barnes “was...interested in discovering Concord’s opinion, a hundred years later, of Thoreau as a person.” According to Barnes, “some townspeople [felt] as strongly for or against Thoreau as they would have if had been their contemporary...[evoking] a more negative opinion than positive in those who commented on him personally,” including a humorous account from one Concordian who “remembered that his grandfather once chased Thoreau out of his garden for stealing his vegetables.”²³ Here, too, negative and positive interpretations added complexity to Thoreau’s imagined being. By being able to imagine Thoreau in a more three-dimensional way and taking into account potential flaws or broader community understandings, nuance added to the previous heroic image of Thoreau.

Finally, although Thoreau’s character has been called on to justify political action in previous eras of the society, this newly complex Thoreau led in part to a different outcome—here, there were significant numbers of dissenting votes on the actions brought to the society for consideration. According to the summer 1971 bulletin, “the final results were for Resolution One [on Southeast Asia], 243; Against, 79; for Resolution Two [on racism in America] 250; Against, 79; for Resolution Three [on environmental degradation] 286; Against, 58.”²⁴ As social issues confronted by the society extended beyond Concord and environmentalism and Thoreau’s mythologized figure became more nuanced, using Thoreau’s image to support action became much less straightforward. With a more complex, human-like character, more complicated

responses can likewise be afforded—including, with the mythical and unifying Thoreau now somewhat dethroned, dissent. This change does not constitute a complete overhaul of previous images of Thoreau held by Thoreau Society members, as the motions still passed with clear majorities, but the significant number of nays cannot be dismissed as mere outliers and the number of members who voted were low. By expanding beyond Concord politics, an imagined, more nuanced Thoreau was put to the test.

One reason the proposed actions were met with relatively low voting numbers was because of the growing international presence in the society—in fact, “many of the foreign members indicated that they thought it inappropriate to vote on internal American affairs.”²⁵ This foreign membership base was rapidly growing; in various bulletins and annual meetings, Uruguayan, Japanese, and French influences were highlighted. At the 1970 annual meeting, for example, “Vladimir Munoz of Montevideo, Uruguay, was introduced to the society.” He was “presented a special bronze plaque commemorating his trip and...the United States Information Service sent news photographers to cover the meeting and their films will be broadcast over television in Uruguay.”²⁶ A report on the interest in Thoreau in France was given by Mlle. Michiline Flak of Paris Sec. of Les Amis de Henry David Thoreau at the 1969 annual meeting,²⁷ and officers of the Japan Thoreau Society were present at the 1975 meeting.²⁸ Though the society may be criticized for touting its “global” recognition early on when membership extended mostly to majority white English-speaking countries, growth in this sphere during the 60s and 70s begins to fulfill in earnest these international aspirations. By physically bringing foreign speakers into the Concord community—if only briefly for the annual meeting—and publicizing their arrival in bulletins, a more cosmopolitan Thoreau Society begins to take shape. A hint of privilege may still be discerned, as Concordians pay for scholarships and bring speakers into the

existing wealthy suburban community. Nevertheless, an increasingly outward look illustrates an eye toward growth.

With international growth, though, came increased tension between a growing society and its Concord base, exaggerating early disparities between the Concord group and outside members present since the society's founding. Bulletins carefully balance promotion of internationalism with short biographies of Concord leadership, allocation of funds in the names of suburban New Englanders, notice of conservation issues in Concord, and recreational activities. Gladys Hosmer wrote a short biography of Ruth Wheeler for the winter 1967 bulletin,²⁹ for example, and Wheeler was honored with a \$500 fund just three years later.³⁰ Hosmer herself also received a short biography in the 1965 bulletin³¹ and a memorial article after her death in 1970.³² Hosmer and Wheeler are not only Massachusetts-based members, but two of the leaders of the Save Walden fight. Thus, in honoring continued service, the bulletins brought attention to the Concord roots of the society and ensured the tenacity of 1950s leaders was not forgotten. By balancing international growth with reminders of the society's Concord core, dimension and complexity was added to the society insofar as it combined novelty with tradition.

Although tensions may be discerned, what remained clear are the added nuances in the society's understandings in terms of how natural resources may be utilized, how Thoreau's image may be invoked, and how the relationship between Concord members and the international community may be maintained. Changing in these ways helped the society not just survive after their initial triumph but continue to succeed, and helped it eventually become the oldest society for an American author in the United States. In a broader sense, the changing nature of the society added an additional dynamic element to the context we must read Thoreau's texts within—because of the near-constant changes in both the environmental movement and

those like the Thoreau Society who take on environmental action on behalf of Thoreau, contextualization must continue to be reevaluated.

Aspects of the Thoreau Society that helped enable the initial preservation of Walden Pond such as a strong community committed to conservation, the invocation of a mythical Thoreau, and suburban New England privilege remained a part of the society well past their successes of the 1950s. This implies that these are not fleeting elements, but strong and legitimate reasons for change, extending beyond momentary crisis and into the fabric of environmental action the society continued to participate in. In taking Thoreau's writing and becoming a steadfast organization for positive environmental change, the context of *Walden* and other texts was importantly altered.

Yet, change is equally important to understanding continued conservation efforts, the endurance of the society over time, and the relationship between literature and environmentalism. The way Thoreau's texts relate to environmental action are dynamic from the founding of the society through the end of their first 40 years (and perceivably beyond); even after major milestones like the saving of Walden Pond, the society continued to adapt their responses to environmental issues, examined their perceptions of Thoreau, and looked outward toward expansion and growth. Because of this ever-changing relationship, there can therefore never be one answer to the ways in which literature can lead to real preservation—nuances and complexities instead must be duly considered. When reading Thoreau's text, then, we must keep in mind not only the history of environmental change following *Walden's* publication, but the *changing* history of environmentalism and the multidimensional nature of those who participated in it—then, now, and into the future. Indeed, the dynamic nature of the Thoreau Society between

1960 and 1980 foreshadowed the continuation of environmental support, broadening of Thoreau's image, and widening of implications as the society continued its work into the 21st century.

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Conclusion

Over the past 80 years, the Thoreau Society has used their collective power, resources, and love of Thoreau to spark preservation efforts in Concord. Their story continues today—predictably, the changes observed in the two decades following the official preservation of Walden Pond continued into the 1980s, 1990s, and early 21st century. For one, the society continued to gain allies through the foundation of additional groups such as the Walden Woods Project, whose mission is to “[preserve] the land, literature, and legacy of Henry David Thoreau” and “to foster an ethic of environmental stewardship and responsibility.”¹ The January 1991 bulletin shed light on the Thoreau Society’s relationship with the project, and explained how the group, “founded in April, 1990 and co-chaired by recording artist Don Henley, former U.S. Senator Paul Tsongas, and Michael Kennedy of Citizens Energy Corp....is conducting an

international fundraising campaign designed to finance the acquisition of two historic sites which lie in close proximity to Walden Pond,” reminding Thoreau Society readers that “tax deductible donations may be made to the Project in care of The Walden Woods Project, 18 Tremont St., Boston, Mass. 02108.”² With the addition of these groups, the society is able to maintain their supportive role, offering resources and funding to Thoreau-related preservation projects. Though the scale of the campaign to save Walden Pond has not been matched, the society demonstrates their continued interest in environmental issues into the 21st century.

In addition to continued support for conservation efforts, the society remained dynamic in the face of changing sociopolitical landscapes into the 21st century. As recently as the July 2021 bulletin, for example, the society acknowledged that “many of [Thoreau’s] American contemporaries and near-contemporaries who had a thing or two to say about the natural world and their place in it have gone unrecognized, in part because of how we have defined the genre of nature writing itself. As a handful of scholars have argued, perhaps we need to look in unlikely places to find the eco-voices of the nineteenth-century Black Americans (recent readings of Frederic Douglass come to mind) as well as of indigenous peoples.” The article ends with a research call for a special issue of the *Concord Saunterer*, asking for submissions “that are based on archival research, that reposition relatively unknown as well as known African-American writers as nature writers, and/or that revisit those unlikely places: slave narratives, diaries, oral histories, research and field notes, art in various media, or any other cultural artifact, including geographical locations.”² In transitioning from the environmental and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and moving into the most recent decade, there is a continued interest in progressive thinking insofar as it relates to both Thoreau philosophy and scholarship. Here, the Thoreau Society not only looked outward to support social movements but even began

to turn inward, taking steps to align their own methodology with values of inclusion and diversity. In remaining open to change during both the 1960s and in the present day, the society was able to continue participating in scholarship and environmentalism without becoming obsolete.

The continued participation in environmentalism and scholarship despite vast changes in societal understandings was made possible only by the strong foundation laid in the Thoreau Society's history. During the society's lifetime, the group overcame obstacles big and small, from organizing a community during wartime to stopping vandals from stealing rocks at Walden's cairn. Through their triumphs, one finds the true story of a group of literature-loving environmentalists who persevered against the state government to save pristine, historically significant land in dramatic fashion. Of course, there are two sides to every story—in examining society publications, 21st century readers may find much to admire and much to question. Ulterior motives such as personal property value may simultaneously be considered, and the suburban wealth of mostly white, educated New Englanders should not be ignored as a key factor in the society's success. While inspiring, the grassroots narrative put forth in society publications must be balanced with understandings of privilege within the environmental movement and as the context of Thoreau's work.

While supporting materials were used to help understand congruent social movements in different eras of the society, the society's own publication, the *Thoreau Society Bulletin*, has been the primary text of study. Thus, the way the society tells its own story to its members and to the media is often meant to incite outrage over perceived environmental tragedies at Walden Pond, rally support for society efforts, and further scholarship on contemporary understandings of Thoreau. It is easy, then, to get swept up not just in the society's triumphant tale but the real

success they've achieved. However, the bulletins are also admirably factual—they contain financial updates, obituaries, land purchases, information on Concord trails, and Thoreau bibliographies. Pulling apart these two elements of the bulletins reveals two major threads that run through the society's entire history: one of grassroots community organization, and one of suburban Massachusetts affluence. Yet, just as they do in the quarterly bulletins, so too do these competing histories merge together to form a single group of real, complicated people joined by their love of Thoreau. At the core of these combined stories is a tale of conservation inspired by literature, bridging the disciplines of English and environmentalism to create real and lasting change. Aided by community strength, privilege, and readings of Thoreau, the land at Walden Pond is now protected in the name of literary and historical significance.

There is no single way to tell any history, and there is certainly more than the two ways discussed here—further study is needed to bring additional perspectives on society intentions and goals. It is likewise difficult to formulate any clear line connecting Thoreau's text, the Thoreau Society, and environmental protection beyond the acknowledgement of Thoreau's legacy in the society's campaign. Thus, in examining one case where literature leads to preservation and analyzing those involved, numerous complications and questions are raised. Yet, so too are possibilities—possibilities for other communities to follow suit by establishing strong leadership, gathering followers, gaining the attention of the media, participating in local government, and ultimately spurring positive change.

Regardless of how the society's story is viewed or replicated, the implications of this story, at least for local Walden visitors like myself, are large. As a child growing up just seven

miles from Walden Pond, I can remember feeling awe at the pond's natural beauty. It always seemed more like a lake to me than a pond, although its relative size might have appeared larger to a young girl. Though I was always hesitant to swim (to this day I am a terrible swimmer), I do recall walks by the pond and through the woods with family, on school trips, and with friends. I am not sure that I would consider myself a Thoreauvian to the Thoreau Society's standards—admittedly, when I started this project I had many questions as to why a group of people would admire one white, straight man from a wealthy community so much. Unlike Harding, who remembers being introduced to Thoreau by his English teacher as an eye-opening experience, I remember feeling annoyance at my 11th grade teacher Mrs. Cohen when we had to read *Walden* for class. Why did Thoreau ramble about the woods? “You know I heard somewhere that his mom did his laundry,” I remember one classmate remarking on Thoreau's philosophy (whether this is relevant or true, I'm still unsure). Though I looked upon Walden Pond fondly, *Walden's* relevance remained a mystery for much of my early academic career.

However, the work of the Thoreau Society has helped me discover new ways to appreciate Thoreau, the environment, and literature. Walden, for one, is no longer just the place my friends and I sometimes went swimming. Understanding the Thoreau Society's legacy has helped me picture what Walden might have looked like had it *not* been preserved—a site used only for its resources, its shores eroded and its trees felled. Extending the timeline further back in my mind, I imagine too what Walden Pond might have looked like had Emerson never lent the land to Thoreau. Without Thoreau's writing, would we have seen the pond differently? The society, I imagine, would argue yes, that something about Thoreau's texts help us view nature in new and deeper lights. Although I saw the pond only as a local meeting place for many years, I would now be inclined to say yes as well. After examining the society's admiration of Thoreau,

his philosophy, and his texts, I have come to a new personal understanding of how his writing changed the way we view the Concord landscape. In placing Thoreau within a context of real, tangible environmental change, I gained a new perspective on *Walden's* significance not only as a literary text, but as an impetus for environmentalism directly relevant to my experience with nature. I will admit, it's possible I still find *Walden* a bit rambling for my taste. Yet, contextualized in this way, I now read it with a new appreciation for its importance in saving the very places I've been lucky enough to enjoy.

Aside from the ways the Thoreau Society has inspired new readings of Thoreau through their passion for his work and the invocations of his living image, they have also demonstrated environmental change in a way that brings—at least for me—real hope. Despite the initial inaction of Massachusetts officials, the society was able to use their collective resources to push through legislation that preserved natural resources for generations to come. In observing the heightening of the climate crisis in the 21st century and subsequent reactions ranging from flat-out denial to immobilizing panic, the situation at times feels hopeless. Even within climate-conscious communities, fracturing over the importance of environmental justice, alternative energy sources, individual action, and economy-based solutions has mirrored lack of unified action at the higher governmental levels in the United States and elsewhere. As fossil fuel interests continue to mount campaigns encouraging inaction, communities and especially young people around the world today are attempting to identify ways to make a real difference despite the forces pushing against them. At the local level, the Thoreau Society provides a strong historical example of a group able to push through real change. While it is true they had wealth, NIMBYism, and the media on their side, the success of the society in preserving land for future generations despite continued pushback from state officials is nevertheless hopeful. Analyzing

the ways in which the society unified their members through strong leadership and passion for a literary figure may provide lessons against inaction that are useful in this current stage of the climate crisis. At a minimum, the work of the society gives me hope that action is at least feasible when the right elements come together at the right time.

In the end, I am only one of many implicitly impacted by the work of the Thoreau Society. Concord residents, for example, have enjoyed preserved green spaces around their town as well as tourist-attracting literary history since Walden's preservation more than a half century ago and surely feel the society's impact in a different way. However, in speaking for myself as one who grew up just a few miles from Walden's shores, the society's work has brought on a shift within my own mindset at the very least. By diving into the society's lore, I for one have found new appreciation for both Thoreau and those who were inspired by his work to successfully carry out environmental action. While I cannot speak for others, I may begin to imagine how these and other implications can in turn be applied to wider communities outside of Concord and its surrounding towns: just as Harding began his search for fellow Thoreau lovers in the early 1940s, I too wondered how Thoreau and the society might have impacted other contemporary researchers and writers in 2021.

In environmental disciplines, research revisiting Thoreau's particular brand of naturalism within today's context of global warming, extreme weather, and climate change suggests I am not alone in connecting Thoreau's work to the climate crisis unfolding before us. Indeed, the Thoreau Society's story bleeds into this realm. Craig Thomas in his text *Sustainability and the American Naturalist Tradition: Revisiting Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, and Edward O. Wilson* argues that "the roots of the problems...that plagued Thoreau and his era still plague us today: ecosystem regime change, the growing human alienation to both society

and the environment as the result of globalization, and government and corporate corruption” and that “traditional naturalists, given their uniquely equipped approaches to providing a capacitated worldview, most ably offer a view containing integrative principles from the Three Branches” of natural science, social science, and humanities.³ This suggests that elements of Thoreau’s texts may not only be seen in a present context but used to better understand the crisis we face today. Furthermore, the society’s efforts in using Thoreau’s image to ignite environmental change may add weight to these ideas, providing tangible evidence of Thoreau’s ability to act in the present-day environmental realm through their work connecting *Walden* to preservation at Walden Pond.

Likewise, in the realm of contemporary English literature, Thoreau and his imagined living persona alluded to by the Thoreau Society have continued to make an impact. *Now Comes Good Sailing: Writers Reflect on Henry David Thoreau*, a collection of essays from contemporary writers describing Thoreau’s impact on their work, begins in its preface by describing how Thoreau was “honored by the United States Postal Service with a commemorative first-class stamp for ‘his personal example of simple living, his criticism of materialism, and the questions he raises about the place of the individual in society and humanity’s role in the natural world.’”⁴ Although the writers contributing to this anthology likely had little or no knowledge of the Thoreau Society’s efforts to establish a Thoreau stamp, they still implicitly feel the society’s impact insofar as they have pushed forward the image of a living Thoreau through these types of projects. Playwright Will Eno in his essay explains, “the years [Thoreau] spent polishing up his private journals—a real person bent over a wooden desk with dirt under the fingernails of his cramping hand—are a testament to his belief that the present moment and the written moment are hardly the same. There’s potential for real life in both,

though. Knowing this, Thoreau brought a birdwatcher's watchfulness to his hours at his desk...if that can be said."⁵ Eno envisions a living Thoreau, much like the Thoreau Society has done since its founding. Furthermore, he brings Thoreau's methods of describing real events not only to literary criticism, but to his own contemporary writing. Similarly, author Kristen Case feels Thoreau as she writes: though she admits that "I disliked [Thoreau] at first," Case writes that she "suspect[s] that the particular way Thoreau has made a home for himself in my mind—taking up residence in my eyes and hands, becoming part of the way my fingers move across the little black keys of this keyboard and part of my attention to the not-quite-silence that surrounds my typing—has something to do with the way writing and life are always interwoven for him."⁶ Here, the living Thoreau takes on a more mythical persona, inhabiting Case as his host and injecting himself into her writing. In being reimagined by contemporary writers, Thoreau's persona continues to impact not only environmentalism but literature itself in the present day. Thus, the society both in pushing forward these understandings of Thoreau and demonstrating how Thoreau's work may lead to environmental change remains intimately connected with the modern contextualization of Thoreau.

In part because of the society's efforts, readers of Thoreau today view him within the dual contexts of contemporary literature and environmentalism—ones that should not be ignored. The way his text, his philosophy, and his character have been used in cultural, environmental, and literary realms not only reflect the continued success of Thoreau's work, but impact how modern readers may encounter it. Instead of attempting to read *Walden* or other texts in a vacuum, acknowledging the impacts of Thoreau and those who have rallied around him to make change may help counter misconceptions prior to diving into Thoreau while painting a fuller picture of his importance. Since Thoreau's living image continues to run through not only local

New England towns but through environmental movements and contemporary literature, it is difficult to imagine a modern reader of any age reading Thoreau for the first time without ever having experienced (even unknowingly) his impact on environmentalism or literature. It is worthwhile, then, to read his text with its implications in mind, critically digesting its prose with an inkling of what they would later lead to. The Thoreau Society, furthermore, is in no way tangential to these impacts on individuals, environmentalism, or literature in the present day. Instead, their promotion of Thoreau's writing, philosophy, and in some cases mythologized personhood may help modern readers understand how Thoreau has been morphed into a lasting presence. Though the society can and should be examined in a critical light, there is much to learn from the way the group ushered in an era of environmental preservation in Concord through the invocation of an American author from their founding to their continued relevance in the 21st century, bringing in both community activism and disciplinary synthesis. In speaking both for myself and for continued Thoreau scholarship, the society's role in shedding new light on Thoreau's texts and their context prevails today.

Finally, in pulling apart pieces of the Thoreau Society's story and continuing it on in new disciplines today, it is tempting once more to mythologize the group completely, falling into the pattern of lore they've created around Thoreau and around themselves. In some ways, this is warranted: after all, to those skeptical of the feasibility of climate action or of the impacts of Thoreau's texts it may seem miraculous that a group of people could come together around an American author in such a way as to create lasting impacts for preservation in Concord. Although there is room to analyze the intangible forces of Thoreau's legacy, literature, or community that saved Walden, it is equally important to remember that, in the end, it was a group of *people* that created change. In Walter Harding's retellings of the society's founding, he

couldn't help but mention the many society members who became like family to him. While implications of the society's work are abstract, the people who made it all possible are not—following Harding's lead, I too will keep them in mind when concluding their story. Harding remembers the early members' quirks: Esther Anderson, for example, “roamed the woods and fields of Concord on horseback photographing the Thoreau sites. If Thoreau mentioned seeing a lady's slipper in blossom on Brister's Spring on May 30th, Harding remembers, she went out to Brister's Spring on May 30th and photographed it.” He likewise remembers their personal impacts, writing how “those of us who were officers and directors will not forget the dinners [Gladys Hosmer] served on her back porch overlooking the Sudbury River.”⁷ They were flawed, as all humans are, and were not immune to the effects of wealth or privilege. We can criticize them, become inspired by them, or take their story as just an isolated tale of overly-enthusiastic readers. The unquestionable truth, though, is that they are people, just like you and me. While we attempt to express the society's implications for Thoreau's literature and Concord environmentalism, carrying their memory into the present moment, its most basic significance is maybe best understood, then, by the group of *people* the society represents. “I wish I knew how to express fully all that this society and you members have meant to me over this past half century,” Harding concludes in his final bulletin as secretary and editor, “you both have added immeasurably to the meaning of my life and to the friendships I have enjoyed among you.”⁸ For the real people all of this represents, perhaps that alone is enough.

Notes

1. “Mission and History.” The Walden Woods Project. Accessed February 27, 2022. <https://www.walden.org/mission-and-history/>.

2. "Call for Submissions for a Special Issue of The Concord Saunterer: 'Other than Thoreau: 19th-century African-American Nature Writers'." *Thoreau Society Bulletin*, no. 314 (2021): 19. *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed February 8, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A688295972/AONE?u=mlln_m_bostcoll&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=58c58fc2.
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4. Andrew Blauner, "Preface," in *Now Comes Good Sailing*, ed. Andrew Blauner (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2021), p. xi-xii.
5. Will Eno, "Concord Is a Kind of World," in *Now Comes Good Sailing*, ed. Andrew Blauner (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2021), pp. 271-286.
6. Kristen Case, "Following Thoreau," in *Now Comes Good Sailing*, ed. Andrew Blauner (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2021), pp. 148-159.
7. Harding, Walter, "The Early Days of the Thoreau Society," *The Days of Walter Harding, Thoreau Scholar*, accessed October 24, 2021, <https://walterharding.org/items/show/145>.
8. Ibid.

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