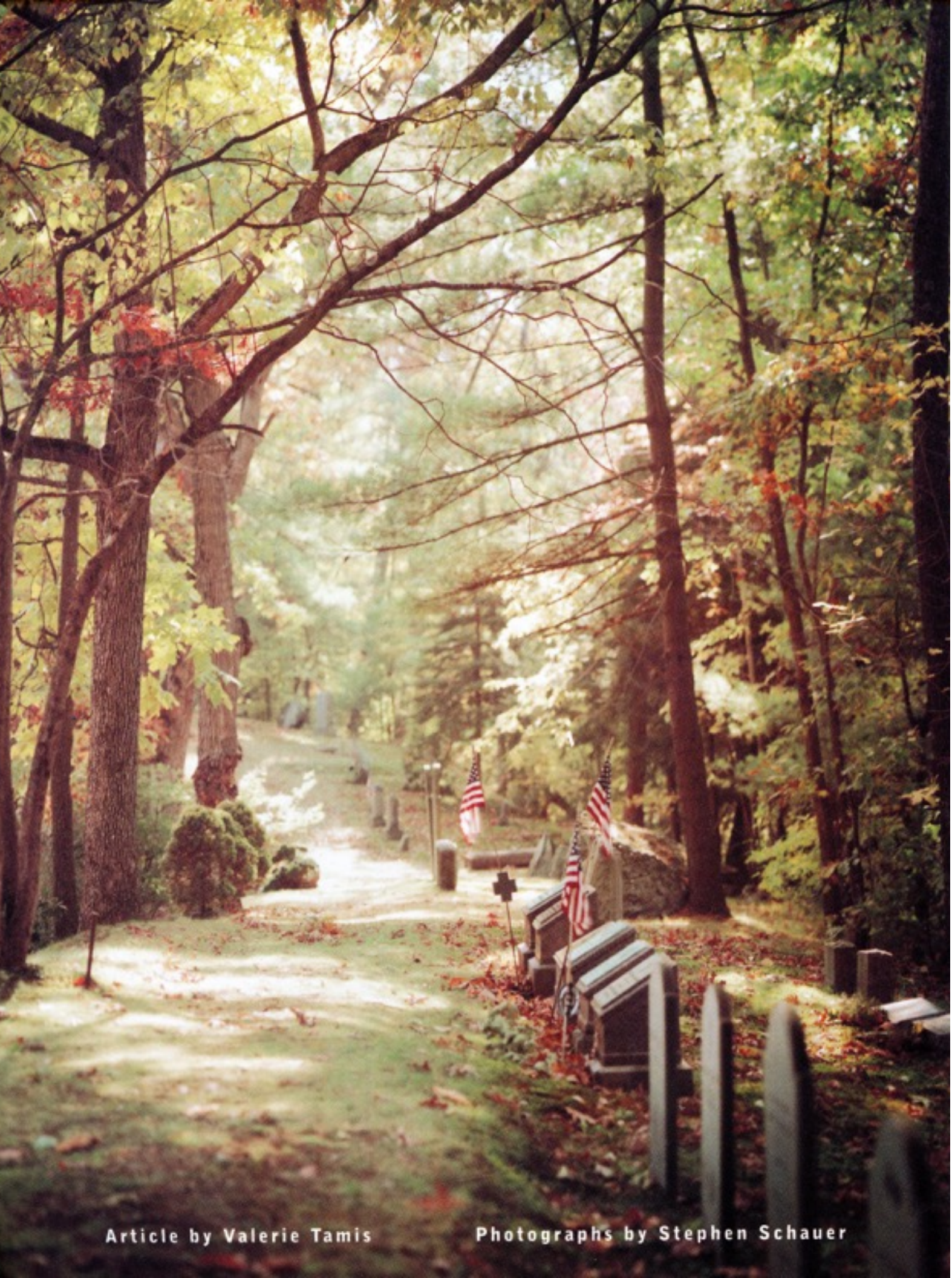


Article by Valerie Tamis

Photographs by Stephen Schauer

Authors' Corner

The tiny New England town of Concord, Massachusetts, was home to Thoreau, Emerson, Alcott, and Hawthorne.

Sleepy Hollow Cemetery (left); first editions at Concord Free Public Library (above).

PEEKING THROUGH a window of the reproduction of Henry David Thoreau's 10-by-15-foot wooden cabin in the pine woods surrounding Walden Pond, I tried to imagine how he spent two years, two months, and two days living in such stark simplicity with only a single bed, three slat-back chairs, a wood-burning stove, a writing desk, an ax, a broom, and . . . a five-gallon drum of latex driveway sealer?

Just then I heard visitors approaching, with unmistakable Southern drawls. "Whad'yawl suppose old Henry did out here in these woods all by his lonesome?" a woman asked.

"Why, he was a poet," her companion answered, "and he probably passed his days just writin' away." Some of the "writin' " Thoreau wrote while living from July 4, 1845, to mid-September, 1847, in the original cabin half a mile away included the first draft of a manuscript eventually published in 1854 as *Walden; or, Life in the Woods.*

Those "woods all to myself" that Thoreau relished and "the small pond, almost a mile and a half south of the village of Concord" described in *Walden* were my first stop in this historic village of 17,000 residents. Just 20 miles west of Boston, Concord gained prominence as early as 1635 as the first inland settlement in Massachusetts. Then, nearly 150 years later, a cadre of minutemen aimed their muskets at red-coated British troops holding the Old North Bridge and fired the "shot heard round the world," which ignited the War of Independence. During post-Revolutionary years, Concord's accessible location along the growing network of roads made it a center for county courts. Aspiring merchants moved into the burgeoning village, setting up craft shops and mills. Many of the original yellow-and-white clapboard homes still stand along the winding roads that lead to Monument Square, the town center.

But unlike most Concord visitors, I hadn't come to picnic along Walden Pond's narrow strip of beach or traipse around the Old North Bridge in Minute Man National Historical Park. I came to follow the footsteps of my four favorite writers, all of whom lived here during the 19th century.

What a quartet! Thoreau, essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Little Women* writer Louisa May Alcott, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, author of *The Scarlet Letter,* had homes so close that popping over to borrow a cup of sugar would have been a strong possibility. But were these neighbors also friends? Had they swapped story ideas over afternoon tea? What personalities simmered behind the frozen tintype portraits I remember from college lit textbooks? Do they mean anything to the slew of writers living in Concord today? That's what I hoped to discover on this sunny day in September.

CABIN FEVER

I left the cabin and walked through the blacktopped (and, I observed, recently latex-sealed) parking lot to the Thoreau Society Shop at Walden Pond. There a poster read HENRY D. THOREAU AVAILABLE FOR WALKING TOURS. CALL BRAD PARKER. *Elvis isn't the only immortal still doing gigs,* I thought.

Downtown Concord preserves a neighborhood feel (left); Emerson's home (right) was his refuge from society; Thoreau's humble gravestone (bottom, right).

"You sure picked a good morning to visit," the saleswoman said as I inspected earrings fashioned from "genuine Walden maple leaves" and a basketful of Thoreau quote magnets. "Next month the place will be teeming with leaf peepers."

I picked up a pamphlet, crossed Walden Street, and started down the sloping path behind a man carrying a fishing rod and tackle box. The maples and oaks mirrored in the clear pond showed hints of the red and yellow explosion that would occur with the next frost. Within 15 minutes I came to the nine stone posts that mark where Thoreau bivouacked from 1845 to 1847 in order to simplify his life. Sitting on his doorstep, he heard "bullfrogs trump to usher in the night." I tilted my head and listened too—and heard a car honking on nearby Route 2, the four-lane commuter artery to Boston.

Not one shard remains of the cabin that cost Thoreau $28.12 to build. After leaving the woods, he gave the cabin to his friend and mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who immediately sold it to his gardener. Several years later, two local farmers bought it for storing grain; they later used the walls for scrap lumber. *Sic transit gloria.*

Suddenly I heard a familiar voice twang, "Now this is where old Henry actually lived." My Southern friends appeared. "Looks like we're on the same schedule," the man said. "Are you going to the other writers' houses too?" When I nodded, he leaned close and said, "I'll tell you what, those poets are as much a part of local history as the North Bridge." A man after my own heart!

AUTHORS IN RESIDENCE

At the Concord Information Booth on Heywood Street, I gathered more brochures and a map and set off to Orchard House, Louisa May Alcott's home, less than a mile from Monument Square on Lexington Road. A gravel path embedded with larger stones led to the visitors' entrance of this impeccably restored, two-story, brown clapboard house. "The next tour is in 15 minutes," a docent told me as I stood in the tiny room that doubles as the admission office and gift shop. On a shelf I spotted a booklet called *Concord Authors* by Alex W. Moore Jr. "It's excellent background reading," the docent said, so I paid her five dollars, settled onto a cozy bench, and started turning the pages.

Every sentence confirmed an old-home-week camaraderie among my literary heroes. Eight-year-old Louisa was still a little woman when she attended classes taught by Henry Thoreau at Concord Academy. On hot July days, Thoreau took the Alcott sisters berry picking and boating on Walden Pond. For many years, Thoreau actually lived in a small room at the top of Emerson's staircase, helping out as a handyman and regaling Emerson's three children with stories. When winter froze the Concord River, Thoreau, Emerson, and Hawthorne liked to go ice skating. Hawthorne's wife, Sophia, noted that Thoreau's remarkable leaps weren't quite comparable to the "grave

"There is a special quality and inspiration in knowing who walked these streets before us."

movements of her husband, who, wrapped in his cloak, moved like a self-impelled Greek statue."

Touring the colonial home Louisa nicknamed Apple Slump because of its low ceilings and sloping floors was like stepping into her lace-up boots. In the parlor, a checkerboard sits on a table near the piano she played. A faded floral drape hangs from the dining room doorway that was used by the Alcott sisters as an entrance for their "evening theatricals," one-act plays written by Louisa. Up in her second-floor bedroom, sunlight streamed through the window beside the half-moon desk where she sat and penned *Little Women*. (I also got a sense of household discipline from a list hanging on the wall in Mrs. Alcott's bedroom, which reads, INDOOR DUTIES FOR CHILDREN: 5 A.M.—GIRLS BATHE.)

The Wayside, the only house Hawthorne ever owned, stands next door to the Alcotts' on Lexington Road. The shy, reclusive author's favorite spot in this mustard-colored house, the story has it, was the third-story tower. If company suddenly knocked at the door, he quickly fled up to his "sky parlour." His other escape was to a wooded ridge behind the house where he liked to sit and meditate. I too sat down on a mossy area near a copse of larch trees but, alas, no sequel to *The House of the Seven Gables* came to mind.

What did occur to me during the five-minute stroll to Emerson's house along the narrow two-lane Lexington Road was how convenient it was for Louisa to skip over to Emerson's library and settle in with his leather-bound copies of Wordsworth, Shakespeare, and Goethe. I was surprised by the simple early- and mid-19th-century furnishings inside this stately, square, white residence that, the guide said, "was Emerson's refuge from stuffy Boston society, whose members, he felt, spent way too much time flaunting their wealth." The musty parlor displays the same plain horsehair sofa he rested upon when he returned from lectures in Boston. I could picture him and Thoreau pacing the floorboards, debating ideas and discussing Thoreau's plan to build a cabin amid the 14 acres Emerson owned in the Walden woods.

The Thoreau family led a vagabondish life in Concord, moving from house to house and depending on the fluctuating fortunes of Thoreau Sr.'s pencil manufacturing business. Since none of those houses are open for tours, the best way to connect with the author is to book room 24 in the main building of the black-shingled Colonial Inn on Monument Square. Several guests who've stayed in that room swear they've seen an apparition of Thoreau lurking around. (The desk clerk offered, "Well, his family did live in that section from 1833 to 1837.")

IN LIVING MEMORY

Late afternoon sun flickered through the towering pine trees as I drove up the driveway of Sleepy Hollow Cemetery on Bedford Street, heading toward Authors' Ridge. As I walked to the graves of Thoreau, Emerson, Alcott, and Hawthorne, I thought what a fitting resting place it was for these giants of American literature. Their simple tombstones crowned a knoll, the highest point in the cemetery.

At the base of Louisa's weathered grave marker were 25 shiny copper pennies, a dime, and a spray of violets. I

knew that violets are a Victorian expression of remembrance and admiration, but the money? "Probably left there by a group of schoolchildren as a token of affection," a docent at Orchard House told me later.

Treasured mementos of the writers' lives are carefully preserved in the Concord Museum on Lexington Road. This brick building across the street from Emerson House displays antique clocks, one of the Paul Revere lanterns that hung in the belfry of the Old North Church in Boston, and the original furnishings of Emerson's study. The museum also boasts a showcase of the world's largest collection of Thoreau artifacts. A review of the case that holds his walking stick

(notched as a ruler), a flute with his name hand-carved above the mouthpiece, his spy glass, and his surveying tools verifies how simply and frugally Thoreau lived.

My tour of museums and historic homes had provided clues about the authors' lives, and a visit to the Concord Free Public Library told me about their continuing influence today. In the three-story, red brick building in the center of town, I spoke with the curator of special collections, Leslie Wilson.

Concord's Literary Circle

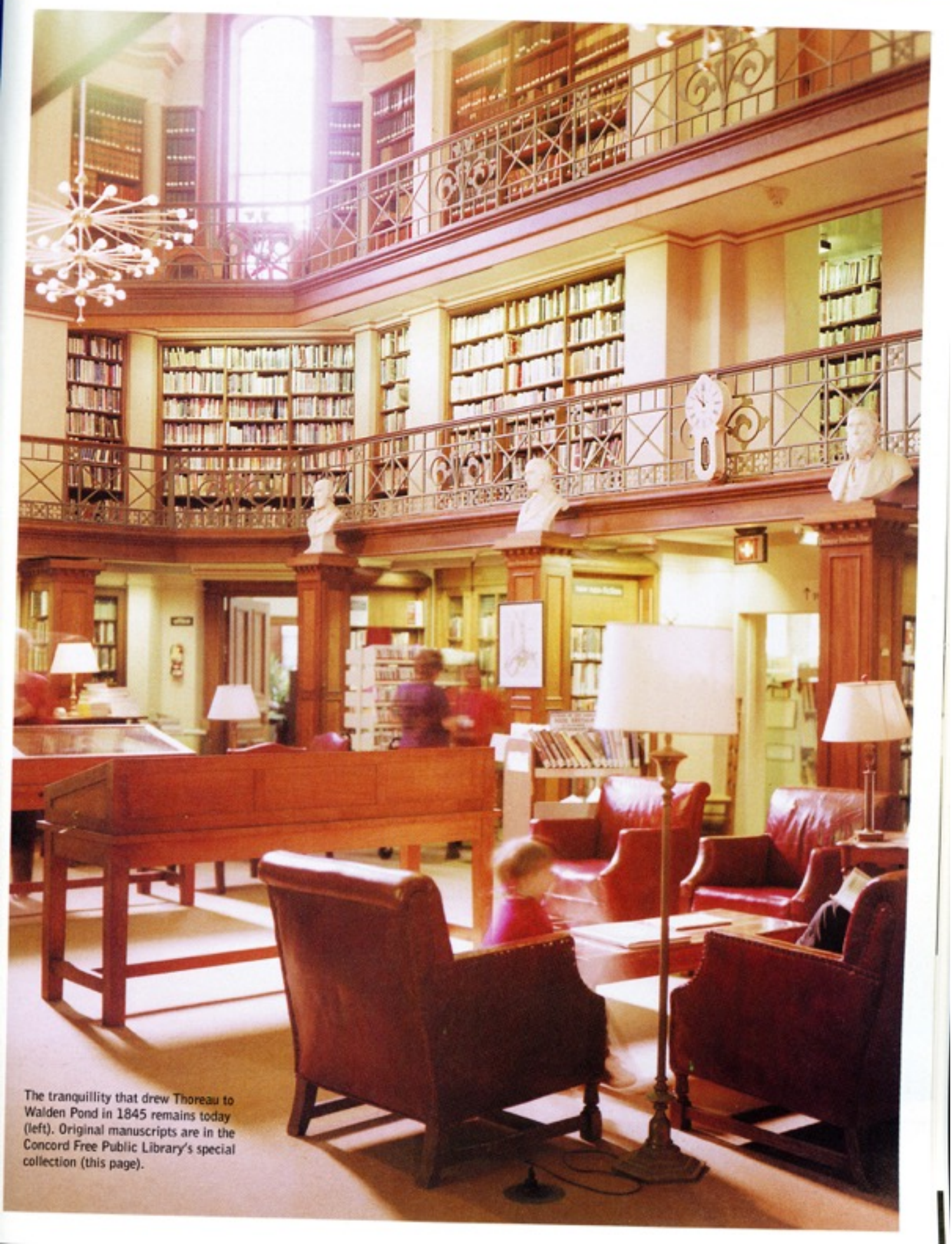
General Information: Concord Information Booth, Heywood Street one block east of Concord Center; open daily 9:30 A.M.–4:30 P.M., May 1 through October 31; (508) 369-3120. Concord Chamber of Commerce, 2 Lexington Road; open Monday through Friday 9 A.M.–4 P.M.; (508) 369-3120.

Good Neighbors: Emerson House, 28 Cambridge Turnpike at Lexington Road; open Thursday through Saturday 10 A.M.–4:30 P.M., Sunday 2 P.M.–4:30 P.M., mid-April through October; adults $4.50, seniors and students $3; (508) 369-2236. Orchard House (Louisa May Alcott's home), 399 Lexington Road; open Monday through Saturday 10 A.M.–4:30 P.M., Sunday 1 P.M.–4:30 P.M., April 1 through October 31; Monday through Friday 11 A.M.–3 P.M., Saturday 10 A.M.–4:30 P.M., Sunday 1 P.M.–4:30 P.M., November 1 through March 31; closed holidays and the first two weeks of January; adults $5.50, children ages six to 17 $3.50, seniors $4.50; (508) 369-4118. Walden Pond State Reservation, Walden Street (Route 126) one and a half miles from Concord Center; open daily 5 A.M.–7:30 P.M., office hours are 8:30 A.M.–4:30 P.M.; parking is $2 Memorial Day through Labor Day; (508) 369-3254. The Wayside (Hawthorne's home), 455 Lexington Road; open daily except Wednesdays 10:30 A.M.–4:30 P.M., mid-April through November 2; adults $4; (508) 369-6975. Colonial Inn, 48 Monument Square; rooms range from $109 to $275; (800) 370-9200.

Keeping in Touch: Concord Free Public Library, 129 Main Street; open Monday through Thursday 9 A.M.–9 P.M., Friday 9 A.M.–6 P.M., Saturday (September through June only) 9 A.M.–5 P.M., Sunday (October to May only) 2 P.M.–5 P.M.; (508) 371-6240. Concord Museum, 200 Lexington Road; open Monday through Saturday 9 A.M.–5 P.M., Sunday noon to 5 P.M., April through December (abbreviated hours January through March); adults $6; (508) 369-9763. Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, north of Monument Square on Route 62, use Pritchard Gate; open daily from 7 A.M. to dusk; (508) 371-6299. —V.T.

"There's no doubt they attracted and continue to attract other writers to Concord," she said as she ushered me into the Trustees Room and pointed at a long bookcase where sits a portion of the thousands of books by Concord authors. Among those in the library's collection, I spotted Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, poetry by William Ellery Channing, and Margaret Sidney's *The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*. Proof of Concord's brimming inkwell today are books by child psychologist Robert Coles and political biographer Doris Kearns Goodwin, who won the 1995 Pulitzer prize in history for *No Ordinary Times; Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II*.

"When the library was built back in 1873," Wilson told me, "the staff immediately began requesting material from local authors. There was a literary consciousness ▶ *on page 62*



The tranquillity that drew Thoreau to Walden Pond in 1845 remains today (left). Original manuscripts are in the Concord Free Public Library's special collection (this page).

▶ *from page 46*

and awareness of Concord's attraction to writers early on." She undoubtedly saw me eyeballing a copy of *Diet, Sex, and Yoga* by Marcia Moore and Mark Douglas because she smiled and added, "It's a bit of a mixed bag, and it's up to the authors to send in their books. But most do because it's become a town tradition."

Literary and historical scholars across the country come to tap the resources in the library's Special Collection, which features town records from 1650, original manuscripts by Alcott and Emerson, and 194 of Thoreau's preliminary and finished surveys. Sitting at a long wooden table, I read chapter two of *Little Women*, handwritten in now-faded brown ink on both sides of eight-by-10-inch blue paper. I marveled at her economy of style; nearly every sentence was written perfectly, with hardly a word deleted. Conversely, Emerson's 137-page essay, "Culture," which he wrote with a sweeping script in a leather-and-cloth-bound ledger, displays numerous cross outs. (A spell checker might have helped occasionally too, I noticed.)

Leaving the library, I decided to act on an impulse. I located a public phone booth, looked up Doris Kearns Goodwin's number, and dialed. It wasn't a total cold call. I'd met her briefly years ago and had watched her many times since on PBS. My hunch was correct. She couldn't have been more gracious.

"There is a special quality and inspiration in knowing who walked these streets before us," admitted the 20-year Concord resident. "I like that my kids go on field trips to Walden Pond and learn firsthand how Thoreau lived. I drag all my house guests over to Authors' Ridge and the Concord Museum to show them Emerson's study. And I think Concord's appeal to writers today isn't that different from when Emerson, Thoreau, and the others lived here. This is a town with a strong sense of community. We're all neighbors in the best sense of the word."