

Thoreau's Manuscripts and the Prepared Eye
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In the following document you will find copies of all images I showed during the lecture, as well as links to those images that are available on library Web sites.

First, I want to thank the Harding family and Paul for the opportunity to be here. It's a great honor for me to have been invited to give the Harding Lecture, because Walt was such an important influence in my life. I met him in 1975 when I was a new research assistant at the Thoreau Edition. I was in awe of him because of the formal contributions he had made to the study of Thoreau that I knew about: he had founded both the Thoreau Edition and the Thoreau Society; he had published extensively, including what is still the most comprehensive biography of Thoreau; and he was a distinguished faculty member, both in the English Department here and in the Summer Seminars that focused on Thoreau, Concord, and the Transcendentalists.

Over the next twenty-one years, as I became a Thoreauvian and Walt became a friend, I discovered how much more he had done informally to share what he knew about Thoreau. By founding the two most significant organizations that focus on Thoreau, the Thoreau Edition and the Thoreau Society, he introduced Henry Thoreau to more people around the world than any other single individual. But he also made himself available in person to other Thoreau enthusiasts at the annual gatherings of the Society, and his correspondence was extensive. I witnessed his generous support for others, and the longer I knew him, the more deeply I admired and respected him.

By founding the Thoreau Edition in the mid-1960s, and believing in the late 1970s that I would be able to direct it, Walt gave me the opportunity of a lifetime: forty-

two years of being immersed in Thoreau's work, and especially the opportunity to know Thoreau through his manuscripts. Thanks, Walt!

The title of my talk this evening is "Thoreau's Manuscripts and the Prepared Eye." Thoreau put great stock in the prepared eye—and mind—and in his essay "Autumnal Tints," he describes what that means to him. He writes,

Objects are concealed from our view, not so much because they are out of the course of our visual ray as because we do not bring our minds and eyes to bear on them; for there is no power to see in the eye itself, any more than in any other jelly. . . . We cannot see anything until we are possessed with the idea of it, take it into our heads,—and then we can hardly see anything else. In my botanical rambles, I find that, first, the idea, or image, of a plant occupies my thoughts, though it may seem very foreign to this locality—no nearer than Hudson's Bay—and for some weeks or months I go thinking of it, and expecting it, unconsciously, and at length I surely see it. This, is the history of my finding a score or more of rare plants, which I could name. (*Excursions*, pp. 256-257)

The objects on which I have brought my mind and eyes to bear are Thoreau's manuscripts, and the more I see of them the more I see in them. I'll give you a few examples, and I'll close with a glimpse of the manuscript evidence that reveals the way in which T prepared his own eye and mind to see nature, in detailed parts and in the whole those parts constituted.

To demonstrate how my eyes and mind have been prepared, and what I've seen as a result, I'm going to focus on letters. This is for a couple of reasons. For one thing, I've been concentrating on Thoreau's correspondence—letters to and from him—for the past several years, as we work on a new three-volume edition. And for another, our

edition of Thoreau's correspondence builds on Walt's 1958 edition, which he did with Carl Bode—it's another demonstration of how significant his contributions remain.

The 1958 edition of correspondence was the first collection of all of the extant letters both by Thoreau and to him: 498 letters that were based on the manuscript sources available then. Walt found many of these manuscripts in the traditional way—by tracking down relatives of Thoreau's and descendants of his friends. (For some of Walt's stories, see "Adventures in the Thoreau Trade," *American Scholar* 61.2, 1992, and "In Search of Henry Thoreau," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Spring 1992.)

Since 1958, just over 150 new letters have turned up: letters go everywhere, you know, and it's impossible to find them all. Some of these are recipients' copies:

—A June 22 and 24, 1837, letter to John Shepherd Keyes, a fellow Concordian who entered Harvard just after Thoreau graduated, was sold on February 13, 2013, to an unknown buyer.

Cambridge June 22nd 34.

Dear John.

I can write you nothing definite with regard to a room. I spoke with Mr. Loring upon the subject, and he tells me that he has already received a number of applications, but is so circumstanced as not to be able to return any positive answer at present. However, he says he will remember you, and inform me of the result.

I have called upon Mr. Mason some half-dozen times but have not found him there. I understand that the next class will be a large one — three will enter from Andover.

Yours in haste
D. H. Thoreau

Ps June 24th

I have at last seen Mr. Mason, and have the pleasure of informing you that Holworthy no 9, the room under him, will be reserved for you. He had a deal to say about quiet, irregularity, and order, and inquired particularly with regard to the character of your chamber — indeed he was so apprehensive on that point, as to have no objection to your rooming alone if you chose it.



6

Mr. John Peesey
Concord Mass.

–A December 27, 1850, letter to the Harvard librarian, T. W. Harris, which had accompanied two books a friend returned to the library for Thoreau, was found in one of the returned books, at a page to which Thoreau had called the librarian's attention. This is now at the Houghton Library at Harvard (Autograph File, T).

Received Dec 27 1850

Dear Sir,

Return here-
with Quartier's and Cham-
plain's Voyages. Will
you please send me, by the
bearer, the other (Collet's?)
edition of Champlain's
Voyages. I shall want
it but a short time.

You will find the sentence which I referred to when I saw you, near the bottom of the 86th page of the Quebec volume.

Possibly you have not observed the note V. at the bottom of the 104th page of the same volume; which ^{may serve to} explain

written from
 June 7. 1832 - 2
 Dec. May 9 in
 the Am. Travelling
 from London.
 Daniel Ship of
 service shot,
 between April 3 &
 June 15 wife
 aged 38, with 2 ch.
 Presley a full grown
 & 2 others in company
 & would deny the au-
 thority of the au-
 thor of the 18th
 as far as the 18th
 & before & after the 18th
 in 1832. 1833.
 Wm. A. G. H.

Johnston
of Norwich University
N.H.

The letters I want to talk about tonight, though, weren't found in the traditional way, and they're not the documents—the pieces of paper—received by those to whom Thoreau addressed them. They're drafts, and they have long been available among Thoreau's manuscript remains, but they haven't been seen. These are the ones that my years of work on the manuscripts have prepared me to see.

I've wished for the kinds of adventures Walt had, sometimes involving tart old ladies (they were probably about the age I am now!) and unexplored barns. My discoveries have been tamer, but just as exciting: I've made them sitting at my computer, squinting at images of manuscripts the screen (when you see the images you'll understand the squinting). I've been helped by amazing improvements in imaging technology—high-resolution digital photography and scanning—and a concomitant strong and welcome commitment by special collections libraries to providing open electronic access to their rare materials.

You can expand a high-resolution image, with no distortion, until you can see things the naked eye can only imagine: for example, differences in the amount of pressure Thoreau put on his pencil when he was writing.

So far, seven libraries with significant Thoreau holdings have made images of some or all of their Thoreau manuscripts available freely: the [Abernethy Library](#) at Middlebury College, the [Beinecke Library](#) at Yale University, the [Berg Collection](#) at the New York Public Library, the [William Munroe Special Collections](#) at the Concord Free Public Library, the [Harry Ransom Center](#) at the University of Texas at Austin, the [John Hay Library](#) at Brown University, and the Houghton Library at Harvard University (for [MS Am 278.5-278.5.25](#), [MS Am 1280.214.1](#), [MS Am 3032](#), and [HEW 12.7.10](#))

New technology and open access to collections are important factors in the first discovery. Manuscripts in the Abernethy Collection in Special Collections in the Davis Family Library at Middlebury College in Vermont were scanned and made available at the library's website some time ago.

Last spring I was looking for something else in a group of manuscripts described as "[Excerpts from Journal, December 1850-1860](#)" when I caught a glimpse of T's hand in a [penciled draft letter](#).

But the letter began in another hand, which I recognized (I photographed this letter over twenty years ago in Raymond Adams's study in Chapel Hill, NC; Charlotte Adams, Raymond's widow, had invited me to see the collection. It's now in the Thoreau Society's Adams Collection, housed in the Henley Library at the Thoreau Institute.) A few letters with characteristic shapes are marked with arrows.

→ Concord June 4th 1838

→ Dear George, I should have sent Ann Barney
receipt before, and the only excuse I have to
offer is that I forgot it.
My health & strength is improving and
my appetite ~~tolerably~~ tolerably good, but that
sugly cough is very troublesome, if it was not
for that I think I should soon be restored
to health, Maria's health is better, so that she
is able to walk out. Popham is very feeble I do

Dear George, I should have sent Ann Barney
receipt before, and the only excuse I have to
offer is that I forgot it.
My health & strength is improving and
my appetite ~~tolerably~~ tolerably good, but that
sugly cough is very troublesome, if it was not
for that I think I should soon be restored
to health, Maria's health is better, so that she
is able to walk out, Popham is very feeble I do
wish something could be done for her, but she
has no faith in any thing. I am now trying the
bourbon Whiskey, which I think has helped me
more than anything else.

I have at last made arrangements with one
of the best agents in New York for the sale of my
lead, but not without reducing the price
one half. I have been driven to it by Monroe

with something could be done for her, but she
has no faith in any thing. I am now trying the
bourbon Whiskey, which I think has helped me
more than anything else.

I have at last made arrangements with one
of the best agents in New York for the sale of my
lead, but not without reducing the price
one half. I have been driven to it by Monroe
underselling. The business is no object alone, at that
price and I am in hopes Monroe will see it
and give it up, he ought to be ashamed of himself.

We are enjoying the burning very much.
all send a great deal of love to you &
Mary's family.

Yours truly John Thoreau

Henry's father John started in business as a shopkeeper. In 1821 his brother-in-law, Charles Dunbar, discovered a deposit of plumbago—another name for graphite—in Bristol, VT, and went into partnership with Cyrus Stow of Concord to mine the plumbago and make lead pencils. John Thoreau joined the company in 1823. Stow and Dunbar dropped out; Henry later made several innovations in the manufacturing and in the quality of the pencils; and by the 1840s the company—and the family—had become more stable financially. The business changed focus in the early 1850s to supply finely ground graphite in quantity for electrotyping, a printing process that had emerged in 1849.

The extent of Thoreau's involvement in the family business has often been overlooked or minimized. He deprecated it himself, especially compared to the important work of thinking and writing. But he also said in *Walden*

I have always endeavored to acquire strict business habits; they are indispensable to every man. . . . It is a labor to task the faculties of a man,—such problems of profit and loss, of interest, of tare and tret, and gauging of all kinds in it, as demand a universal knowledge. (pp. 20-21)

In the paragraph preceding this one Thoreau states that his

. . . purpose in going to Walden Pond was not to live cheaply nor to live dearly there, but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles; to be hindered from accomplishing which for want of a little common sense, a little enterprise and business talent, appeared not so sad as foolish. (pp. 19-20)

It's clear that business has a metaphorical level of meaning, but it would be a mistake to ignore the literal level, which came directly from his experience in the family business.

Thoreau's completion of the response that his father began drafting to one of the companies that regularly purchased quantities of ground lead shows something about how he was involved in that business, as well as his enforcement of "strict business habits." Here is the manuscript again:

New York Dec 20/54

Messrs
John Therman & Co
Gents

Enclosed please
find Five dollars, for which send us
immediately the value in your best plumbago.
We wish you would keep an agency & depot
in this City, it would very much oblige
Many Electrotypes
Yours Obedt

A. J. Jocelyn & Co
58 & 60 Fulton St

Camden Dec 22^d 1854

Messrs A. J. Jocelyn & Co

Gentlemen

You say you
should like to have me keep an agency &
depot in your City. I tried ^{many times} to get
similar with Mr W. H. Jones ^{but he} ^{has} ^{been} ^{engaged} ⁱⁿ ^{other} ^{business} ^{and} ^{is} ^{not} ^{able} ^{to} ^{do} ^{it}
I have not secured one yet from
him

The company writes

New York Dec 20th/54
Mesr John Thoreau & Co
Gents
Enclos'd please
find Five dollars, for which send us
immediately the value in your best plumbago,
We wish you would keep an agency & depot
in this city, it would very much oblige
many electrotypers
Your Obt
A H Jocelyn & Co
58 & 60 Fulton St

Thoreau's father begins

Concord Dec^r 22^d 1854
Mess^{rs} A. H. Jocelyn & Co
Gentlemen
You say you should like to have me keep an agency & depot in your
City. I tried something similar with Mr W Filmer—

Then Thoreau chimes in, changing the tone of the letter significantly:

putting it up for him [that is, for Filmer] in 2 pound packages & giving him 3
months credit but though he promised well he has utterly failed to fulfill his
engagements—& though 6 months have elapsed I have not recovered one cent
from him—

Here's a line-by-line transcript of both letters, with Thoreau's contribution to the second
document in smaller blue type:

New York Dec 20th/54
Mesr John Thoreau & Co
Gents
Enclos'd please
find Five dollars, for which send us
immediately the value in your best plumbago,
We wish you would keep an agency & depot
in this city, it would very much oblige
many electrotypers
Your Obt
A H Jocelyn & Co
58 & 60 Fulton St

Concord Dec^r 22^d 1854
Mess^{rs} A. H. Jocelyn & Co
Gentlemen

You say you
should like to have me keep an agency &
& giving him 3 months credit
depot in your City. I tried something
putting it up for him in 2 pound packages^ but though he
promised well
similar with Mr W Filmer— ^first he has
though 6 months have
elapsed
utterly failed to fulfill his engagements—& ^ as
yet I have not recovered one cent from
him—

It may have occurred to you to wonder what those brown spots are. They look like blood to me—a couple of drops of blood that landed on the paper and were wiped away, perhaps with a finger and then the feather end of a quill pen. John Thoreau had tuberculosis; he died of it in 1859. Nosebleeds are one symptom of this disease. Did Henry finish the letter because his father had a nosebleed? Maybe the spots could be analyzed . . .

The Princeton Edition of correspondence will include the texts of twenty-one drafts not published in 1958 that reveal Thoreau engaged in some aspect of business—dealing with plumbago orders, soliciting or responding to lecture invitations, making arrangements to survey land, contacting or responding to publishers. It's not a large number, but it's about 6½ percent of the 325 or so letters by Thoreau that survive (about the same number as to him, to make about 650 all told), and these drafts considerably expand our knowledge of Thoreau as a businessman.

The next discovery I'll describe came about because of my work on the second volume of *Correspondence*. The correspondent in this case is an Englishman, Thomas Cholmondeley (1823-1864), who arrived in Concord in September 1854 with letters of introduction to Emerson; he wanted to observe American institutions and culture. At Emerson's suggestion, he boarded at the Thoreau household—for a dollar a day—for a couple of months. He and Thoreau became good friends, and they corresponded after Cholmondeley returned to England at the end of the year. Their letters cover politics and current events in American and Europe, as well as philosophical topics, and they make for fascinating reading.

In December 1856 Cholmondeley wrote Thoreau a long letter; he included the information that he was

working at an essay on America, which gives me great pleasure and no little pain.

I have a conception of America surveyed as "one thought;" but the members are not yet forthcoming. I have not yet written above a page or two.

For this essay he asked Thoreau for a favor:

. . . please obtain for me a catalogue (you'll hear of it at the Boston Athenæum) of your local histories in the United States. There are hundreds of them, I believe; a list has been made which I want to examine. I suppose you are well versed in the French works written by early travelers and missionaries on America. Would you tell me one or two of the best authors of Canadian or Louisianian research? (p. 506, *Correspondence 2*, forthcoming)

There's no extant answer by Thoreau, but in 1964, Kenneth Walter Cameron published a transcript of a draft response (p. 76); here's the manuscript, which is at the Morgan

Library (it's a partial sheet that was laid into Thoreau's Canadian Notebook, MA 595, and is now kept in a separate folder that has the same accession number):

Here's a line-by-line transcript of the manuscript, showing Thoreau's additions in smaller type:

of local histories
I did my best to find the catalogue
which
you spoke of—but in vain— Its title
is “A Literature of American Local History. A
Bibliographical Essay by Hermann E
Ludewig”—Plublished by Craighead New York
1846— The Author died in N.Y. Dec 1856
an antiquary & a
a Mr. Drake ^ author of the Hist of
A competent authority in Boston &c tells me
that it was never published— ~~only~~ The
at the University
Librarian of the Harvard Library —says that
it is far from complete. A supplement
was published in “the Literary World” NY
Feb. 19th 1848—also separately— You can no-
the whole
doubt find it in the British Museum—
O.
Look also at Rich's “Bibliotheca Americana
nova” published in London— & for books v scrap 2

The cross-reference at the bottom of the draft made me think that Thoreau had continued the draft: “v” is his abbreviation for “vide”, Latin for “see”, and in his later work he often references scraps on which he's written material to be added to a draft.

I knew I was looking for a scrap. I had a set of old photos of bits and pieces laid into the eleven volumes of Indian Books at the Morgan Library, and I started with those. It didn't take me too long to find what I was looking for (I haven't seen this manuscript in person; it's supposed to be in a separate folder that has the same accession number as MA 603, Thoreau's Indian Book 9):

and April 28th
1857
certify -
this day
the area
of
T. Farrar's
which lies
between
the
Cyrus Webb
and my property -
contains
across
rods. ;
J. Thoreau
surveyor.

Negative print of photo
of recto of scrap:
surveying certificate

Negative print of photo of verso of scrap:
continuation of draft response to
Cholmondeley

and from Books in Canada - - and
"Catalogue d'ouvrages sur l'Antiquité
de l'Amérique" { G. B. Feribault
Quebec 1837 This is in the MS. -
As for only 118

Here's a line-by-line transcript; again, Thoreau's additions are in smaller type:

2 and for Books on Canada—at
 “Catalogue D'Ouvrages Sur L'Histoire
 de L'Amerique” by G. B. Faribault
 This is
 Quebec 1837— not in the shops here—
 As for early & v p 8

You'll notice that in the transcripts, the first part ends “& for books v scrap 2” and the second part begins “2 and for Books . . .”. “And for books” functions as a printer's catch-word did: the repetition is a reminder of how the parts of the draft should go together, and the number “2” is an additional aid.

Accepting all of Thoreau's revisions and putting the two parts together, we have a draft letter that reads:

I did my best to find the catalogue of local histories which you spoke of—
but in vain— Its title is "A Literature of American Local History. A Bibliographical
Essay by Hermann E Ludewig"—Plublished by Craighead New York 1846— The
Author died in N.Y. Dec 1856 a Mr. Drake an antiquary & author of a Hist of
Boston &c tells me that it was never published— The Librarian of Harvard—says
that it is far from complete. A supplement was published in "the Literary World"
NY Feb. 19th 1848—also separately— You can no-doubt find the whole in the
British Museum—

Look also at O. Rich's "Bibliotheca Americana nova" published in London—
and for Books on Canada—at “Catalogue D'Ouvrages Sur L'Histoire de
L'Amerique” by G. B. Faribault Quebec 1837— This is not in the shops here—
As for early & V p 8

“As for early & V p 8” is another catch-word, or more accurately a catch-phrase: the next time I’m at the Morgan Library, I’m going to go through all of the scraps that were laid into the Indian Books looking for a paragraph that begins “As for early”. I’ve looked through our old photocopies, but the quality is pretty bad and I know we don’t have shots of both sides of every scrap. If I don’t find it there, it might turn up somewhere in the hundreds of leaves of notes on natural history: these are my unexplored barns.

Another way in which the mind is prepared is by focusing on the same category of things for a long time. Thoreau writes that he “knew a girl who, being sent to pick huckleberries, picked wild gooseberries by the quart, where no one else knew that there were any, because she was accustomed to pick them up country where she came from” (*Excursions*, p. 259). I’m like that girl—after several years of working on letters, I was accustomed to see letters, and I saw them where others had not.

About 2 years ago, I ordered scans from the Houghton Library (of MS Am 278.5 [15]) for some *Correspondence 3* letters. Among them was [this image](#):

The 1st Article might be called
Ktawhwa — The 2^d Oronook
The 3^d The Allegash & ~~Ktawhwa~~
~~Stream~~ East Branch

The Whole 'The Maine Woods'
D.D.T.

Always
" Spoke again
" New-lampstead Road

(17c)

The 1st article might be called
Ktahdn—the 2^d Chesuncook
—the 3^d The Allegash & ~~Webster~~
~~Stream~~ East Branch.

The Whole “The Maine Woods”
H. D. T.

Here’s the backstory: During the last several months of Thoreau’s life he worked, with his sister Sophia’s help, on material that James T. Fields had solicited for publication—Thoreau knew he was dying, and he was making sure his sister and his mother, both of whom survived him, would have sufficient financial support. Among other work, he revised four lectures so they could be printed as essays, and he prepared a final draft of the account of his 1857 trip to Maine, “The Allegash and East Branch,” so it could be added to the first two parts, “Ktaadn” and “Chesuncook,” which had been published in magazines, to make a book. Ticknor and Fields published *The Maine Woods* on May 28, 1864.

When the editor of *The Maine Woods* in the Princeton Edition, Joseph Moldenhauer, saw this manuscript in the course of his work, he was focused on explaining what Thoreau intended for the arrangement of the book—it is evidence for the order in which Thoreau wanted the parts to appear, and for the title of the third essay, which wasn’t published in Thoreau’s lifetime. You’ll notice that there’s a change in that title: Thoreau originally wrote “The Allegash and Webster Stream.” “Webster Stream” is lined out in darker pencil, and “East Branch” is added—this is Sophia’s hand, often seen in these late manuscripts.

Joe, with his eye and mind prepared to see Thoreau's intention for the book, characterized this manuscript as a "rough plan for the organization of the essays" (*Maine Woods*, p. 355). It is that, of course, but conditioned by having worked on the letters for a long time, my eye leapt to the "H. D. T." and I saw . . . a signature at the bottom of a draft letter! It will be in the third volume of *Correspondence*; we assume that he's writing to his publisher, Ticknor & Fields.

And now, as I mentioned at the beginning, just a glimpse into Thoreau's extensive preparations of his own eye and mind. I've been prepared, by working on Thoreau's manuscripts, to see, read, interpret and contextualize his handwriting. But Thoreau had a much more significant and complex quarry—a cosmic quarry—for which he was preparing. He names it in "Autumnal Tints," describing his search in a fantastically extended metaphor of hunting:

Why, it takes a sharp shooter to bring down even such trivial game, as snipes and woodcocks, he must take very particular aim, and know what he is aiming at. He would stand a very small chance, if he fired at random into the sky, being told that snipes were flying there. And so is it with him that shoots at beauty; though he wait till the sky falls, he will not bag any, if he does not already know its seasons and haunts, and the color of its wing,—if he has not dreamed of it, so that he can *anticipate* it; then, indeed, he flushes it at every step, shoots double and on the wing, with both barrels, even in cornfields. The sportsman trains himself, dresses and watches unweariedly, and loads and primes for his particular game. He prays for it, and offers sacrifices, and so he gets it. After due

and long preparation, schooling his eye and hand, dreaming awake and asleep, with gun and paddle and boat he goes out after meadow-hens, which most of his townsmen never saw nor dreamed of, and paddles for miles against a head-wind, and wades in water up to his knees, being out all day without his dinner, and *therefore* he gets them. He had them half-way into his bag when he started, and has only to shove them down. The true sportsman can shoot you almost any of his game from his windows: what else has he windows or eyes for? It comes and perches at last on the barrel of his gun; but the rest of the world never see it *with the feathers on*. (*Excursions*, p. 258)

For over ten years Thoreau prepared his eyes and mind to see and understand the beauty of nature, both the feathers and the bird, both in detail and in the whole.

He had a gift for observation—that's clear even from the first Journal passages—and in the early 1850s he found a new purpose for this gift. He began recording seasonal phenomena in his Journal entries in greater detail than before, and he found himself surprised by the annual variations. In a Journal entry for September 12, 1851, he writes,

I can hardly believe that there is so great a difference between one year & another as my journal shows. The 11th of this month last year the river was as high as it commonly is in the spring—over the causeway on the Corner Road. It is now quite low. Last year Oct 9th the huckleberries were fresh & abundant on Conantum—
They are now already dried up. (*Journal 4*, pp. 76-77)

In spring 1852, he read Linnaeus's *Philosophia Botanica*—"simpler more easy to understand & more comprehensive—than any of the hundred manuals to which it has given birth" (*Journal 4*, p. 354), he wrote in his Journal, and William Gilpin's *Remarks on Forest Scenery*. Linnaeus inspired new attention to the details of plants and their life

cycles. Gilpin, one of the originators of the idea of the picturesque, influenced Thoreau to study and analyze the ways in which details combined to create landscapes, to see prevailing colors and variations.

Thoreau continued and expanded his observations, and in a Journal entry for April 18, 1852, he recorded a realization that represented a paradigm shift in his view of nature:

For the first time I perceive this spring that the year is a circle I see distinctly the spring arc thus far. It is drawn with a firm line.

He follows up this realization with the questions that he spends the rest of his life preparing to answer:

Why should just these sights & sounds accompany our life? Why should I hear the chattering of blackbirds why smell the skunk each year? I would fain explore the mysterious relation between myself & these things. I would at least know what these things unavoidably are make a chart of our life know how its shores trend that butterflies reappear & when know why just this circle of creatures completes the world. Can I not by expectation affect the revolutions of nature make a day to bring forth something new? (*Journal 4*, p. 468)

Thoreau was both a poet and an engineer: he wanted “the events of the day [to] have a mythological character & the most trivial [to be] symbolical” (*Journal 4*, p. 468), and he also wanted to understand the facts of nature. He developed a system in order to learn the details of the seasonal circle and to explore the “mysterious relation” between himself and nature.

For convenience in finding the observations he recorded in his Journal, Thoreau began inscribing two short parallel marks next to them, in the margins of the Journal

pages. I don't know when he started doing this. I suspect that when he realized such marks would come in handy for comparisons, he went back through entries and added them. From the time of that realization forward—whenever it was—he probably included many of them as he was writing.

Here's an instance from a Journal entry dated June 3, 1851—very early: the marks are in pencil; they were probably added retrospectively:

// I observed the grass waving
 to day for the first time—the
 swift Camilla on it— It might
 have been noticed before— You might
 have seen it now for a week past on
 grain fields.

(The manuscript is accessioned as MA 1302:11 at the Morgan Library; the passage appears on p. 243 of *Journal 3*.)

and was there $\frac{3}{4}$ pan in diameter.
The tree was rotten within. The lower
side of the soil, which was originally
the lower, which, clothed the roots for
I felt from the center of the tree, was
white & clayey & appearance -
& a specimen was sitting on 3 eggs
within the mass. Directly under
the massive trunk had stood and within
a part of the surface you could ap-
parently strike in a hole & meet with
no obstruction - & a free cultivation.
There was no sap root to be seen. The roots
were encircled with dark muddy muffs.
The tree which still had a portion
of its trunk in ground I held to them
of the lower on the Leonard side
it was alone and had cleaned out
many of our many branches the leaves were
shredded again.
Quercus bicolor (Pursh) Q. *Prinos* did not die.

I observed the grass growing
to day for the first time - the
Swamp Commission on it. Many of the
have been noticed before - Now might
have seen it now for a week past in
grass fields.

Clover has blossomed.
I noticed the Andropogon seed a week
or two ago, producing of blue asparagus.

Andropogon
I think it must be the small flower
flora? That the dull red mass of leaves
in the many middle branches with
the Rhodora ^{the long with the opposite} as well as the Andropogon
Panicum also called *legitima* & other
Celtica - I saw the Golden Pencil
Serris luteus which I plucked a week
or so in a meadow in Walgrave. The
earliest with the water and anten-
nal looking yellow flowers. Its leaves
stem evensome with their in-
conspicuous meet odor - like I can
not think what.

The phosphy, vulgaris includes several
kinds of leaves. I found them I found a large
one.

Friday June 6th

Spent the night in the strong-
room, preventing several things.
Under the head of the Cicuta Ma-
cata or American Hemlock - "It is a
rule sanctioned by the observations
of medical botanists that some-
thing, or, I want, which grow in
or above the water are of a
poisonous nature." He does not
say that the *Andropogon* is poisonous,
but I suppose that it is. It has
not a small appearance & killing
odor as much as I think of the

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As Thoreau developed this practice, he would have been able to see what phenomena signaled seasonal patterns and variations most characteristically, and that would have shaped his decisions about what he chose to record and mark. I'm sure this was a dynamic process that continued throughout his life as an observer, which came to an end only a few months before he died in May 1862.

At the end of the 1850s—perhaps in spring 1860, as Robert Richardson thinks (p. 381)—Thoreau began compiling the observations he had marked in his Journal, probably with several new projects in mind.

First, he created lists of phenomena by month or by category of event, organized primarily by year and secondarily by date. Here's an example—both sides of a leaf with general phenomena for November 1860 and 1861 (the [recto](#) has items dated November 24-30, 1860 and November 1-11, 1861; items on the [verso](#) are dated November 13-29, 1861 [rotate the image to see the list]).

(This manuscript is in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library. The folder is titled “[Notes on general phenomena]. Holograph notes.”; the entire folder is available at <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/d67fe400-7347-0132-1ea9-58d385a7bbdo>.)

Cyfr. Phenomena for November (last fall)
of last Nov. 1860

'60 The 1st of Nov. - a heavy flurry 24
with light rain in evening.
The hunter & the foxes were out

Last night & today very cold & blustering 25
House broken by wind last night -
Winds blowing from the north -
Cold & blustering day -
Near nothing but frost & ice
Now for winter
Very large & heavy snow
Some 6-8 inches have fallen since

NO 29
The 2nd of Nov. - the night frosty, snow in morning
(Near nothing but fog & frost on ground) 26
F.H. Pond in the morning, the water in the channel
Rain raising river somewhat 30

'61 Clear & pleasant but rather cool. Nothing wind 1st
Cold windy & cloudy turning to rain in the 2nd
A driving easterly storm with very high wind & rain all last night 3rd
A touch of rain in the morning & evening
30 or more thick flocks of birds - a report of the
River raised length of the last (3rd of Nov.) about 12 inches 5th
Clear & pleasant with frost in the morning
Rain has been a fall before now & some snow, but not before October
Flocks of tree-toed geese 6
Rain continues all day 9th
Gray squirrels plenty
A large flock of birds in the air 11
Rain & S.W. wind
Longest frost yet in the close creek within day - 2
C. snow in the morning in the valley

Nov 14-61 River at 11 am 2 1/2 in. above L.S.

See the high water - *Lepidodermis* - *Sisymbrium* (some *Trigonotis*)
 Near the *Thymus* & *Scilla* & *Colchicum* on *Prunella* ground - a *Trigonotis*, none.

2 or 3 *Phytolacca* & now wind N.W. 16 in *Trigonotis*
 River 2 ft. about 1 1/2 ft. below S.L. 17.
 Tawny patch 18.

See a red tide of *Alga* in *Prunella* in *Prunella* 19.
 A *Trigonotis* lake lower along a ditch for a foot

Clear wind *Trigonotis* *Prunella* 22

After *Trigonotis* *Prunella* & *Trigonotis*
 when *Trigonotis* *Prunella* & *Trigonotis*
 after *Trigonotis* a *Trigonotis* *Prunella* 15.

A little more now in *Prunella* which 29
 from *Prunella* - 29
 at *Prunella* *Trigonotis* 15.

Mr. J. J. Brown
 Dear Sir,
 I am very glad to hear
 of your success in the
 study of the *Trigonotis*
 and *Prunella*.

It is very much to be regretted that
 the recent distribution of *Trigonotis*
 is not so much as you wish.

I will send you a *Trigonotis*, when
 you write in *Prunella*, when
 you write of the *Trigonotis* with the
 by your *Trigonotis* for the
 former *Trigonotis*, and must
 apologize for not writing to you
 earlier.

Yours truly,
 J. J. Brown

New York, Oct. 27/54.

So you can see the process, let's focus on these lines on the recto page (these are 1860 items):

Get in boat 29th

Thin ice of the night floating down river in morning

(Hear that some boys skated on Goose Pond the 26th)

F. H. Pond is skimmed over, all but the channel

(You may have noticed that Thoreau has recycled a business letter, dated October 27, 1854, for this list—a common practice for him. This one is especially interesting, though, because it's from the very "W Filmer" whom Thoreau mentions in his addition to his father's letter. Here Filmer says he'll pay in November—we know that as of December 22, 1854, the Thoreau Company had not received "one cent" from him.)

Each of the November 29, 1860, items that Thoreau includes in the list appears in his November 29, 1860, Journal entry, indicated by marginal marks. The first three items on the list are on the first page of the following image; here's a line-by-line transcript:

// Get up my boat 7 am
// Thin ice of the night is floating down the
river— I hear that some boys went on to Goose-
Pond on the 26th & skated. It must have been
thin.

The fourth item is on the fourth page of the image; here's a line-by-line transcript:

F.H. Pond is skimmed over, all but //
the channel.

(The manuscript is accessioned as MA 1302:39 at the Morgan Library.)

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and - only part of the soil of young
hills under the old when cut - the other
being or then as before of their growth -
2nd of the barren soil & that only - which
first covers it for a long time - & that
was after 5 or 6 years h.p. was established
then for seedling trees which are left.

I am pleased to find an evidence that
the h.p. wood cut down here & down the
ridge - was just much & was used to build
new standing in W - then this - along the
to a stage of this position of the hill -
when the abrupt descent begins - I see
many stones which were cast over the
edge of the bank in great heaps when
it was cut down.

The small h.p. zone above the W.F.H. spring
fully more was there - I think in 17.
though there is hardly a seedling left & there.

Young white pine are rapidly growing
up to 10 ft. high - though the nearest red
leaved white pine are across the river 30
or 40 rods off.

I remember when this hill side above
the spring was clear ground. I think

I was here when this field was cleared
the brush burned in 35 years ago or so.

I am sure a good many hickories both
within & without the pine & fast here.

none a tree. I feel about it as though there
were no more for shoots or at roots which have
sprung in the ground so long. How then
did they come here? The can keep in some
of the pines on some side a rod or 2 further
into the open land. I am convinced that
this is the way plants there by gradual push
or high. It is the volunteer differs from
the one in the woods yet spreading. For
I do not see any other than spring-
ing of a grove in a ~~wood~~ grassy ground
in a narrow pine. It will be with the
while to ascertain the age of these exactly.

It is remarkable that the volunteer looks
a little like W - I saw such a grove recently
on Newcomb's - there is another of still larger
trees a little lower down the hill - & then
2' or 3' much more extensive on the same
low slope of Smith's hill. Are animals
more likely to plant volunteers in the land than
acorns? or is it that volunteers are more
likely to live there when planted? What a
lover of the hills is this tree! I may be
mistaken about those - Smith's hill especially.

F.H. Pond is the next one, still back of
the channel.

Can that be the skeleton of a falcon
which I find (killed with long air) on the
CHM hill - measured from back of the body
to the tail it is 15 1/2 inch long
tail 13 1/2 inch long 14 1/2 inch long

There are many lists, covering categories including general phenomena for all months but July, August, September; rainy days and other weather; growth and leafing; birds; frogs; flowers; quadrupeds; reptiles; insects; fishes, shell-fish, and leeches.

The lists were just an intermediate step for Thoreau, though. To make the best use of this phenological information, he needed to see the phenomena over a range of years. So he made charts—essentially databases—like this one that gathers the information in the November general phenomena lists (the manuscript is accessioned as MA 610 at the Morgan Library). You see that the events are written down the left side and the years are written across the top. The boxes contain information from the Journal, via the lists, about the event in (usually) November of the specified year: