Visiting Concord, Massachusetts:  
The Home of American Heritage

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Introduction:

Concord is a name which evokes for many American people memories of their colonial beginnings, as well as the great literary heritage of the nineteenth century. It was one of the most significant towns in America's history.

The first organized armed resistance to British rule took place in 1775 at the Old North Bridge in Concord, Massachusetts. That led America, then a colony of England, to the War of Independence.

In the 1800's Concord was the home of American intellectuals. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote Nature in 1836, advocating his philosophy, called
transcendentalism. His stature drew other intellectuals to Concord. Bronson Alcott practiced transcendentalism and taught at his school, the Concord School of Philosophy. Alcott’s daughter, Louisa May Alcott, wrote *Little Women*. Nathaniel Hawthorne spent the happiest time of his life at The Old Manse. Henry David Thoreau practiced his own philosophy at Walden Pond and wrote *Walden; Or, Life In the Woods* in 1854. These outstanding individuals are Concord’s literary group—they lived, wrote, and were buried there. Concord was the home of America’s Literary Renaissance in the nineteenth century.

For me, the name *Concord* also evokes inspired, exciting, and somewhat sentimental memories of my own youth.

Born in Japan, I became an exchange student to the United States when I was in high school. When I knew I was going to Concord, a friend of my parents told me that it was a very famous town in American history. She told me how lucky I was to have an opportunity to live there. However, it was Concord, New Hampshire where my host family lived. I had a wonderful time with them nevertheless.

I had the opportunity to travel all around the New England area during my college years: from Concord, New Hampshire and the White Mountains, to Boston and Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Even after I returned home to Japan, I have been able to come back to the area several times. Visiting Concord, Massachusetts was always on my wish list; however, somehow, I never had a chance to go there.

Finally, on the last Sunday in October 2002, the time had come at last. I was a visiting scholar to The American and New England Studies Program at Boston University and was living on Harvard Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was a very beautiful fall day, and I was just in time to enjoy the colored leaves of New England.
Thirty-five long years had passed since I first thought I was coming, and now Concord, Massachusetts was there—only thirty-five minutes by commuter rail from Boston. It proved to be just as beautiful as I had imagined and expected.

In this paper, I will endeavor to introduce Concord, Massachusetts, from my own perspective as a visitor...a town with an extraordinary colonial, revolutionary, literary, and natural heritage.

1. Trip from Boston to Concord

On Sunday, October 27th, I made a very early start, hoping to maximize my time in Concord. There were seven stops from Harvard Square to North Station and one train transfer in between. But, when I got to the station, I found that the commuter rail runs only every two hours on weekends and 9:30 a.m. was the first train. So I had to make an unexpected long wait at the station.

Concord was the tenth stop on the rail’s Fitchburg Line. As the train approached Concord, the scenery from the train window told me that I was
into the great outdoors. Then, a small lake jumped into view. It was Walden Pond, where in 1845, Henry David Thoreau had built a one-room cabin and stayed for over two years writing *Walden*. I was thrilled to see the whole picture of it from my train window. I saw no signboard or souvenir shop from the train, so, without my map, I would not have even known this was the actual location of Walden Pond.³

If it had been during the middle of a hot summer’s day, the beach would have been alive with families at play; however, at the end of October, it was very calm there, with no people on the shore and no boat on the water. A century and a half later, Thoreau’s Walden Pond still remained quiet and peaceful.
2. Train Station to the Center of the Town

Like many other train stations in the suburbs, Concord’s train station was small—the ticket booth opened only a few minutes before a train was scheduled to arrive and there was no waiting room. Passengers walked out from the street-level platform without going through any gate. There were no signs to guide tourists, nor could I find any information of any sort... so, I simply followed some other people who got off the same train.

The center of the town was about fifteen minutes walk from the train station on Middle Street. It was very nice to be walking through the yellow and red leaves of New England, gazing at big, old wooden houses on both sides.
of the street. Every house had big, tree-filled yards, and squirrels were running around everywhere. Concord, though close to Boston, has been able to retain the ambience of a pretty, little town.\(^5\) I was overwhelmed with the richness and beauty of Concord. As I set forth into the town, this feeling of joy grew even greater. I was so moved that I had to stop to take a deep breath. I felt I had been there before, although it was the very first time. Maybe it was a bit late for the summer tourist season... but I was there, and it was beautiful.

3. Visitor Center

The Concord Visitor Center was supposed to be located on Heywood Street, between Lexington Road and Walden Street. I was planning to obtain a local map, but as I was going up and down the street looking for the center, a nice middle-aged couple came up to talk to me. From them I learned that a new Visitor Center had been built in the middle of town and the old building had been taken away. The couple kindly offered me a ride to the new building in their big SUV and wished me the best in my visit. It was a short ride, but I was happy to receive such a nice, friendly welcome from them.

The town report tells about how the new Visitor Center was constructed
after many years of vigorous public debate. A bank in the town offered land for the construction of the building, which was begun in 2001 and completed the following year. (p. 10, Annual Town Report of The Town of Concord Massachusetts 2002) So, I finally found the new Visitor Center, and knew that here I would find all the information about Concord I desired. However, the elderly lady at the counter told me that all the free handouts were gone and new ones were not coming in until the next tourist season.

4. Colonial Inn

Without much information to guide me, I returned to Monument Square where Main Street, Lowell Road, Monument Road, and Lexington Road meet. The most striking architecture here was the Colonial Inn. At the east end of the building was the private home of James Minot, and later the main part of the Inn was added in 1716. (p. 40, Andrews) This charming inn still accommodates guests, providing lodging and serving meals. According to the guide book, the full-course breakfast is worth trying. The guide at the Concord Visitor Center told me that I might find tourist information available at the Colonial Inn. Unfortunately, they had not much information to offer, but I was happy just enjoying being inside the Inn. I sat on a bench there and rested, while I planned what to do next. I decided to take a northern route, going up to the Old Manse and on to the North Bridge on Lowell Road.
5. Old North Bridge

While I was walking on fallen leaves on Monument Street, I met only one person along the way. She was jogging and told me, “Keep going, the Old North Bridge is there on your left.”

In 20 minutes by foot, I arrived at the North Bridge and the Minute Man National Historical Park. There were large, open fields for car parking across from the site. I walked down a tree-shaded path, lined with stone walls along the east bank of the Concord River. The stone walls looked strange and unfamiliar to me.

It was on April 19th, 1775, that the first battle between Britain and her colony of Massachusetts took place at the Bridge. It soon grew into a war for independence that lasted more than eight years.

The colony had been resisting Britain’s heavy taxation policies. The British army had occupied Boston in order to suppress potential revolt for over a year. The British started out from Boston Harbor to search out and destroy the arms, ammunition, and other provisions that they believed were hidden somewhere in Concord. The colonial militia, called Minutemen, heard of the plan in advance, however, and set out to thwart it. Taking differ-
ent routes, Paul Revere and William Dawes rode their horses to warn people that the British were coming. At the Old North Bridge, the first gunfire broke out.

The current Old North Bridge is a graceful, wooden structure, a near-replica of the original that spanned the Concord River. Its center is arched and has sturdy railings. Water was flowing by slowly, as I watched, and the pastoral view expanded beyond. The original bridge was removed in 1793, and the site was empty until a centennial bridge was constructed in 1875. The current bridge was built in 1956. (p. 38, Andrew)

Over the bridge on the west bank of the Concord River stands the sculpture of the Minute Man, his left hand holding his plow and his right hand grasping his musket. It was unveiled in 1875 at the centennial celebration of the battle. The inscription at the base reads, “shot heard ‘round the world.” It was a line from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Concord Hymn*, written in 1835.5)

There is another Minuteman statue in Lexington, Massachusetts, the town next to Concord. I had visited there the previous September and seen the statue on the Lexington Green. Lexington Minuteman holds his musket in both hands and rests it on his knee. The Lexington Minuteman was used to represent the State of Massachusetts on the face of a new coin, one of fifty quarters designed to represent each state in the nation. It is part of the US Mint Fifty State Quarter Program.

After visiting the Minute Man, I walked a curving path up a gentle slope to
the North Bridge Visitor Center. There I found a diorama of the battle, artifacts of historical interest, an audiovisual presentation, and a bookshop. I sat and watched a video show depicting what had happened on that historic night.

6. The Old Manse

As I crossed the field from the Old North Bridge, I came to another fascinating place called the Old Manse. This home was constructed around 1770 by the Reverend William Emerson, Ralph Waldo Emerson's grandfather. Rev. Emerson was the pastor of a church in Concord and married Phebe Bliss, the daughter of the former pastor. After William Emerson's death in 1776, his widow Phebe married Ezra Ripley, the new minister of the church.
Reverend Ripley was as devoted to her Emerson children as he was to the three children they had together. His support extended to her grandchildren, one of whom was Ralph Waldo Emerson. Since the structure remained in the Emerson-Ripley family, many of the furnishings are original, dating back to the eighteenth century.

I took a tour of the house, and our guide was an excellent history teller. She was a retired school teacher in the area and took great pride in her work.

Phebe Bliss Emerson Ripley passed away in 1825. Nine years later, in 1834, Ezra Ripley invited Ralph Waldo Emerson and his mother to live with him in the Manse. That was the year Emerson began writing his first book, *Nature*. The following year, in September 1835, he purchased a house on the Cambridge Turnpike and moved into it with his new bride, Lydia Jackson. (p. 9, Nordblom) It was while in Europe that Emerson encountered the basic philosophy of transcendentalism. The year Emerson lived in the Old Manse was one of the most significant years of his life.

The Old Manse, a Scottish name meaning minister’s house, was originally named by Nathaniel Hawthorn, who lived there between 1842 and 1845. This period was said to be the happiest period of Hawthorne’s life, as he settled down there with his new bride, Sophia Peabody, and wrote his second collection of short stories, *Mosses from an Old Manse*. Sophia’s charming personality shows itself even today, as some scribbles etched on a window with her diamond ring can still be read clearly. We were allowed into every room of the house, and I could almost feel the air of the nineteenth century.
There was a little gift shop at the back of the house, where visitors could purchase keepsakes, reminding them of their experiences there. The Old Manse is a lovely old building and still stands strong in Concord’s landscape today.

### 7. Orchard House

After visiting the Old Manse, I returned all the way back to Monument Center. There I ate lunch and planned my excursion into the eastern part of Concord. I found Louisa May Alcott’s Orchard House on Lexington Road, about ten minutes walk away.

The Alcott family had lived in the house from 1858 to 1877. It was there that Louisa May wrote her classic work, *Little Women*, in 1868. The house was shown by guided tour only, so while I was waiting, I walked around outside. There I found a huge structure at the back of the house. This was the site of the Concord Summer School of Philosophy, where Louisa’s father, Bronson Alcott, gave adult lectures on transcendentalism and philosophy. The school was his lifelong dream and continued for eight years, until his death in 1888. Bronson embodied his philosophy; living it out and teaching it were more important to him than making a good living for his family. The Alcotts were poor until Louisa’s book *Little Women* became a best seller and brought the family a profit.
Though a major renovation was taking place on the foundation of the house, the guide told us that there have been no major structural changes to the site since the Alcotts lived there. Approximately seventy-five percent of the furnishings were owned by the Alcotts, and the rooms still look very much as they did when the family lived there. I could almost see Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy and their mother there, living and breathing. Being there was like
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walking through the book.

The sun was going down, but I had to hurry back to see one more site on the Cambridge Turnpike.

8. Emerson's House and Concord Museum

On the Cambridge Turnpike is a square white Victorian house. Ralph Waldo Emerson moved there after he left the Old Manse in 1835, living there until his death in 1882. Unfortunately, the house was already closed for winter, so I could only view it from the outside. This was the place where all the Concord intellectuals of the time met and conversed, sharing their ideas, debating, and learning together. Fortunately, Emerson's study and some of his precious belongings have been moved across the street to the Concord Museum, in order to preserve and maintain them better.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born into a minister's family in 1803. His father, who was the minister of the Boston First Unitarian Church, died when Ralph was only eight years old. Ralph was educated at Harvard and became a minister at the Boston Second Church in 1829. Soon, however, he began having doubts about the rituals of the church, and in 1832 he resigned his posi-
tion and went to Europe. Emerson drew inspiration about nature and God from the trip, and, upon his return to Concord in 1836, he wrote *Nature*, the first statement of his basic philosophy. Later on, this became the bible of transcendentalism, a philosophical, religious, and literary movement that arose in nineteenth century America. It was Ralph Waldo Emerson who advocated and influenced many men of letters, such as Hawthorn, Thoreau, and Alcott. They came to live in Concord, and it became known as a town of the New England intellectuals. (p. 15, Nordblom)

**Conclusion:**

I have finally had my day to visit Concord, Massachusetts, a town I had wanted to see for thirty-five years. I spent this day visiting five different historical sites—The Colonial Inn, the Old North Bridge, The Old Manse, Orchard House, Emerson's House, and the Concord Museum. All of these sites were within walking distance of each other, and they were preserved for people today to learn from and enjoy.

The town of Concord has played a remarkable part in the history of New England and of the nation. It was the site of the first shot that began the American Revolution. It was the home of great writers and philosophers, who influenced people around the world. It stands today as a town that is rich in history, preserved for us to experience. It is close to Boston, easily accessible from the city, yet it still retains the character of a small town and a rural life.

Concord is truly a beautiful town. I had longed to visit it for so many years that I wondered if it could ever live up to what I had imagined it to be. Concord, however, did not disappoint me in any way.

I appreciate the opportunity given to me by my colleague from college, who offered me one of his apartments on Harvard Square. It was in such a
convenient location, only a few minutes away from the subway station. This easy access to public transportation made visiting new places easy.

Throughout high school and college, I have met and associated with many wonderful people and become joyfully rooted to the New England Area. I have developed an everlasting love for the people, their history and way of life, and the lovely landscape, with its ocean, lakes, forests, mountains, and snow. New England is as much a feeling as it is a region. I am honored to call it my second home.

Notes

1) There are four subway lines in the center of Boston, referred to as the Red Line, Green Line, Blue Line, and Orange Line. These are each transferable in the downtown stations. A new line, extending to Boston’s waterfront, was under construction while I was there. There are two train stations, North Station on the Green Line and South Station on the Red Line. A number of commuter rails run out from either station to connect all the suburbs, as well as other cities and states. Some major construction projects have been underway for several years, including one known as “The Big Dig,” along with more subways. The high cost of these projects has been controversial and has tightened the city budget.

2) Later I found that I didn’t have to go all the way to North Station to catch the Fitchburg Line, because it meets the Red Line at Porter Square, the next station to Harvard. I didn’t mind it at all in the morning; however, I got off at Porter
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Square in the evening, of course.

3) At the site of Thoreau’s cabin stands a small plate, with these words:

“I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life. And see if I could not learn what it had to teach and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” (Thoreau, 1854)

4) The town of Concord was incorporated in 1635.
Population: 15,551 (as of January 2002)
Area: 26 Square miles
Elevation: 130 feet
(Annual Report, 2002)
Concord Hymn
Ralph Waldo Emerson
Sung at the completion of the Battle Monument, July 4, 1837.

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world.

The foe long since in silence slept;
Alike the conqueror silent sleeps;
And Time the ruined bridge has swept
Down the dark stream which seaward creeps.

On this green bank, by this soft stream,
We set today a votive stone;
That memory their deed redeem,
When, like our sires, our sons are gone.
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Spirit, that made those heroes dare
To die, and leave their children free,
Bid Time and Nature gently spare
The shaft we raise to them and thee.

The Concord Minute Man statue is the first major work sculpted by Concord’s Daniel Chester French (1850–1931), who went on to create the imposing Lincoln Memorial statue in Washington, D.C. The Minute Man statue was unveiled in 1875 at the centennial celebration of the battle at the bridge. It was celebrated there by President Ulysses S. Grant, his cabinet, and four thousand people.

Bibliography

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