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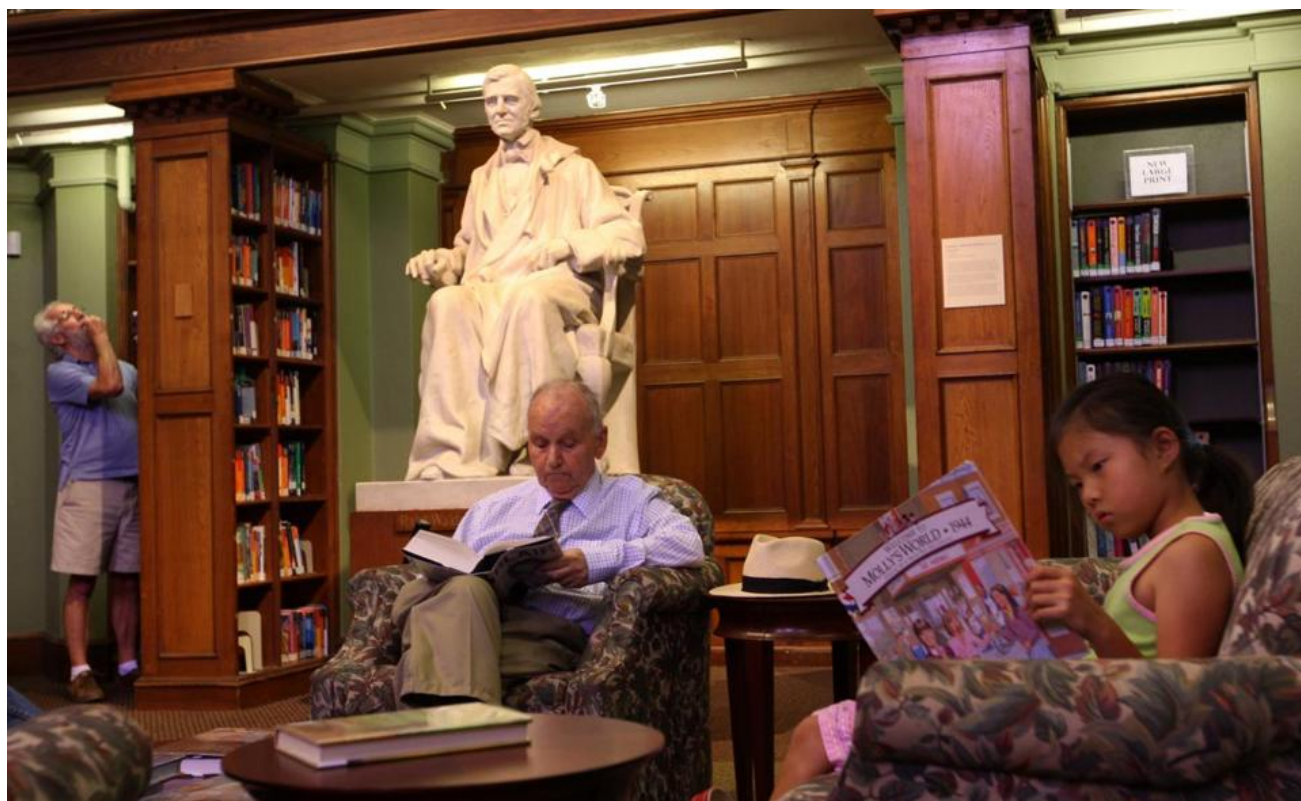


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# Ditch the guidebook and embrace Concord's ambience

By Nancy Shohet West | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 15, 2014



JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF

**Concord Free Public Library Concord | Ralph Waldo Emerson is a presence.**

I like to say there are two ways to visit Concord: the visitors' center way and the Henry David Thoreau way.

Except that, really, when it comes to sightseeing, I am at heart an 8-year-old who

would rather ride my bike, wander through the woods, skip stones across the Concord River, and walk along the Milldam — to use the proper historical name for the downtown area along Main Street — eating ice cream than stand in front of museum exhibits or read explanatory plaques at national historical sites.

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Every member of my family is a more dedicated sightseer than I am, and this is occasionally a point of contention on family trips. It's a shortcoming, I admit, that my way of learning about a place is more through absorbing it than studying it. This is not ideal, given that it's hard to fully grasp the taxation-without-representation debate that culminated in the Revolutionary War, or be able to offer a legally and philosophically sound argument for civil disobedience merely by wading into the depths of Walden Pond.



LINDA ZIEMBA

**Robbins House Exploring a local legacy in abolitionism.**

Nonetheless, when you indulge in the luxury of learning by ambience, and put the guidebooks and the audio tours and the expert facts and figures aside, sightseeing becomes a different experience. The essence of the place seems to seep into your bloodstream rather than into your brain. You don't really study the place as much as you incorporate it, breathing its air, taking in its scents and sounds.

And there are many places in Concord that lend themselves to this kind of Thoreauvian experience — no surprise when you realize you are walking in the footsteps of Henry David himself. For example, step inside the rotunda of the Concord Free Public Library, presided over by a majestic marble statue of Ralph Waldo Emerson that was carved by Daniel Chester French. If you make your way to the special collections department, you can examine Thoreau's own hand-drawn land surveys along with his surveyor's compass and tripod; manuscript pages from "Little Women," by another local literary luminary, Louisa May Alcott; and handwritten town records from the days of the Revolutionary War.

Not to be overlooked on any tour of Concord is the long-ago presence of Native Americans, whose tenure here far preceded the Transcendentalists.

At the confluence of the Assabet and Sudbury rivers, where they join to become the Concord, is Egg Rock, an outcropping whose significance as a Native American gathering point is memorialized by a bronze plaque carved into the rock in 1885 to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the town's founding.

While Egg Rock may be historically important, it is also a beautiful destination by kayak, which you can rent at the South Bridge Boat House on Main Street for a leisurely paddle along wide, placid waters that take you all the way to the North Bridge, with views of Concord's lovely old estates.

Geologically speaking, Walden Pond is a kettle pond. (True to form, I don't know what this means; I just like the way it sounds.) Walden Pond is also, of course, where Thoreau conducted his home-stay experiment in civil disobedience, although he was hardly a hermit, trekking regularly into town to commune with his erudite friends and



eat dinner at his mother's house.

Today you can swim in its waters or walk the path that encircles the pond; either way, you may be motivated enough by the tenor of the woods and the replica of Thoreau's cabin to read a collection of his essays when you get home.



DAVID LYON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

### **Old Hill Burying Ground Revolutionary resting place.**

Concord Center's mystique lies in the blend of its historical importance and its contemporary flair, but West Concord, by contrast, feels timeless. The village is a little over 2 miles from the center of town, past the antique homes of Main Street and across Route 2; you can traverse the distance on foot, by bike or car or even commuter rail.

Once there, soak up the spirit of artisans, craftspeople, industrialists, poets, writers, and shopkeepers stretching over the decades: from the charmingly eclectic clutter of

the West Concord 5 & 10 to the sunny art gallery in the Bradford Mill, a recently renovated space inside the 100-year-old building. Drop into Merlin's Silver Star to watch silversmith Hilary Taylor making jewelry and objets d'art; then savor a ham and cheese crepe or a dish of cinnamon ice cream at Reasons to Be Cheerful, where a seat on the front porch will give you a panoramic view of everything that's going on in this inviting community.

But even if you are a slacker sightseer like me, you might have the nagging feeling that your explorations should include a few hard-and-fast historical details, a little actual information, some guided commentary and explicatory plaques before your visit to Concord ends.

For those of us who tend to be a little on the restless side, there's Concord Bike Tours. Pedal from location to location while learning from professional tour guides about exactly what happened at the North Bridge, who is buried at the Old Hill Burying Ground, why one of the Alcott girls was allowed to draw on the walls of the Orchard House, and what role the Robbins House, recently moved to its current location near the North Bridge, played in abolitionism.

Because, ultimately, it's true: Concord is full of historical wonders. And whether you prefer to immerse yourself in them with the dignity of a scholar, or pedal, paddle, and stroll your way through like me, it's a fascinating journey.

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