

About Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*

Thoreau's Life at Walden Pond

On July 4, 1845, 27-year-old Henry Thoreau moved into his self-built, one-room house at Walden Pond. But, as he would later report in his book, *Walden*, the house was far from finished:

“When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which, by accident, was on Independence Day, or the Fourth of July, 1845, my house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defence against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walls being of rough, weather-stained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night...”

Thoreau would eventually add a hearth and chimney, with plastered walls inside and a shingled exterior. During his second winter at the Pond he would add a wood-burning stove.

Thoreau moved to Walden Pond for several reasons: first, he was there to write his first book, an account of a boating excursion he and his late brother John had taken up the Concord and Merrimack Rivers in the summer of 1839. He would complete two drafts of the book at Walden but it wouldn't be published until 1849. In addition, Thoreau would also write an essay about Thomas Carlyle, and an account of his trip to Maine in the summer of 1846. He would also start writing a lecture about his time at Walden Pond, which he called “A History of Myself.” Secondly, it was to be an experiment. Thoreau was at the pond to explore a life of the mind, one of moral, spiritual, and economic simplicity. While he had no plans to be a hermit, he was at Walden Pond for solitude and quiet contemplation with Nature. He would live at Walden Pond until September 6, 1847—his sojourn would last 2 years, 2 months and 2 days.

On August 9, 1854, Henry Thoreau published his second book, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, an account of Thoreau's two-year experiment in simple living on the shores of Walden Pond in his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts. Ticknor and Fields of Boston published 2,000 copies of the book. While it was not considered a best seller, it enjoyed some success upon its release, but it still took five years to sell out the 2,000 copies.

Thoreau seemed proud of his book. It had taken 7 years and gone through eight drafts before he thought it good enough to see print. On the eve of its publication his mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote of Thoreau: "He is walking up & down Concord, firm-looking, but in a tremble of great expectations." Although he seemed excited to Emerson, Thoreau tried to remain stoic about the book. In his typical, understated fashion, his entire journal entry for the day reads: "Aug. 9. Wednesday. —To Boston. 'Walden' published. Elder-berries. Waxwork yellowing."

Reviews of the book were mixed, but mostly positive. Today, of course, *Walden* is considered Thoreau's masterpiece and an American classic. It has not been out of print since 1862 and has been published in dozens of languages (some sources estimate the count to be well over 50). Thoreau himself said in the book: "How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book."

Thoreau's Reflections on life at Walden Pond

"I went to the woods because I wished 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. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that

was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.”

Two days after moving into his house at Walden Pond, Thoreau writes:

“I wish to meet the facts of life - the vital facts, which are the phenomena or actuality the gods meant to show us - face to face, and so I came down here. Life! who knows what it is, what it does? If I am not quite right here, I am less wrong than before...” ~From Thoreau’s Journal; July 6, 1845.

Thoreau Exploring Solitude and Simple Living at Walden Pond

“This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt-sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whip-poor-will is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled...”

“I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers. A man thinking or working is always alone, let him be where he will. Solitude is not measured by the miles of space that intervene between a man and his fellows. The really

diligent student in one of the crowded hives of Cambridge College is as solitary as a dervish in the desert. The farmer can work alone in the field or the woods all day, hoeing or chopping, and not feel lonesome, because he is employed; but when he comes home at night he cannot sit down in a room alone, at the mercy of his thoughts, but must be where he can 'see the folks,' and recreate, and, as he thinks, remunerate himself for his day's solitude; and hence he wonders how the student can sit alone in the house all night and most of the day without ennui and 'the blues'; but he does not realize that the student, though in the house, is still at work in his field, and chopping in his woods, as the farmer in his, and in turn seeks the same recreation and society that the latter does, though it may be a more condensed form of it." ~From the "Solitude" chapter in *Walden*