

The Many Colors of Concord

Explore where literary legends lived and experience the inspiration for their masterpieces

By DAN SCHLOSSBERG
Photos courtesy of BayColonyMedia.com



CONCORD'S HISTORY IS AS COLORFUL AS ITS FINEST FALL FOLIAGE.

The Revolutionary War began there. Louisa May Alcott wrote *Little Women* there. And Walden Pond, little more than a land-locked lake, won itself international acclaim after Henry David Thoreau, the 19th century writer and philosopher, lived in solitude there for two years, two months, and two days.

A colonial enclave that became a bastion for literary legends, Concord lies 19 miles west of Boston and 23 miles south of Nashua, New Hampshire. Although its resident population is 17,669, curious tourists fill the hotels, shops, and restaurants during the warm-weather months.

The most prominent, Concord's Colonial Inn, is celebrating its 300th birthday this year. Once called the Thoreau House because the author's relatives lived there, the inn served as a weapons depot, hospital, store, and boarding house before assuming its present function before the dawn of the 20th century. By then, Concord was known around the world as "the biggest little place in America" — a nickname Henry James applied. The local literary lions played no small part.

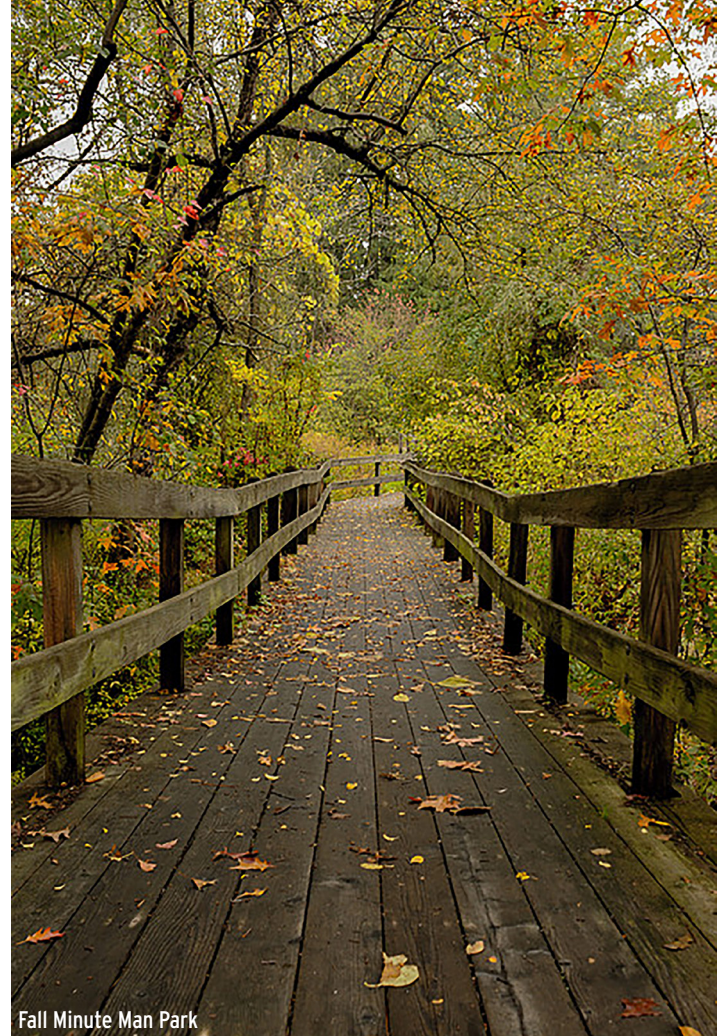
In addition to Thoreau and Alcott, the town was home to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and a host of other writers whose names have not been forgotten. Most lie on Author's Ridge in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery — named after the town Washington Irving created in *The Headless Horseman*.

Emerson, whose grandfather witnessed the North Bridge skirmish that launched the Revolution, was born a year before Hawthorne and 14 years before Thoreau. But he influenced them all. He also influenced Concord city fathers to preserve the homes where all of them lived. It wasn't that difficult, since Thoreau lived briefly in Emerson's home and the Alcotts sold their Lexington Avenue home to Hawthorne, who nicknamed it "the Wayside." Margaret Sidney, a children's book author, lived there later.

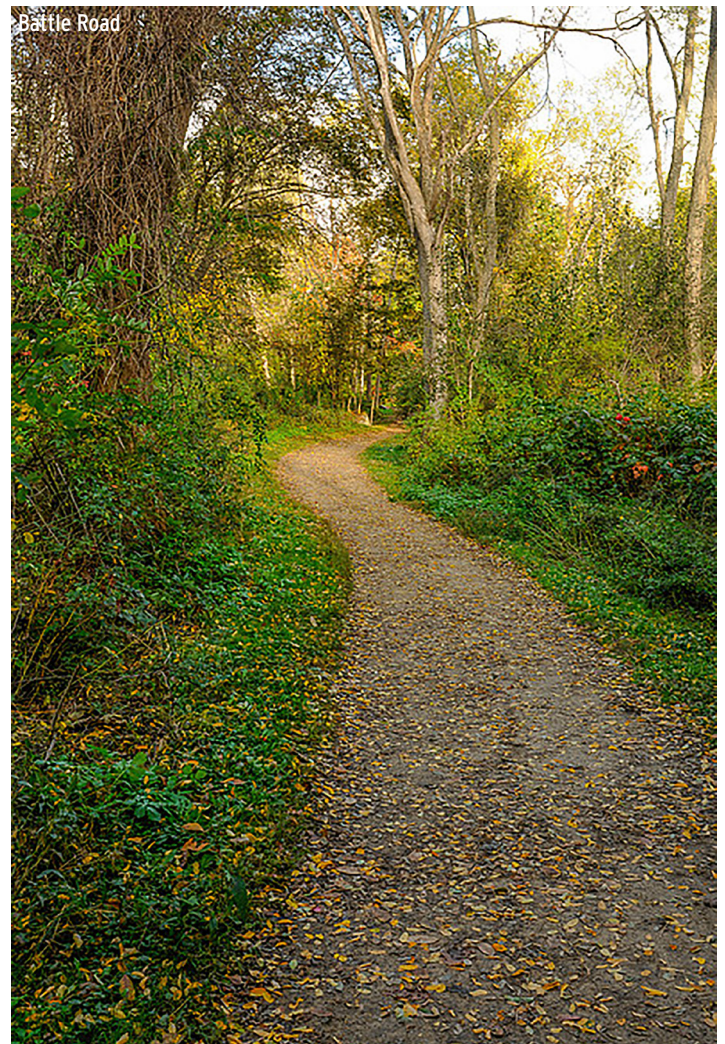
Alcott wrote *Little Women* in The Orchard House, next door to The Wayside, while Hawthorne lived in The Old Manse before buying the Alcott residence. For readers who love old house tours, Emerson's home has also been preserved for posterity. He lived there from 1835-1882.

Thoreau's spirit still thrives in several spots around town. His farm, called "the birthplace of ideas," features artifacts and explanations of ideas considered controversial at the time. An outspoken advocate of communing with nature, he once went to prison for refusing to pay a tax because he opposed the Mexican-American war. He was also a staunch abolitionist who supported John Brown and the Underground Railroad for runaway slaves.

An ecologist more than a century before the word joined the lexicon, Thoreau was also a transcendentalist before anybody even dreamed of transcendental meditation. His other occupations ranged from naturalist and surveyor to historian, essayist, and poet. He once measured the depth of Walden Pond accurately — 103 feet — using only a primitive set of string and rocks. His writings included *Civil Disobedience* and *Walden*, a book about his two-year sojourn.



Fall Minute Man Park



Battle Road

LIFESTYLE TRAVEL

Rocks mark the spot where Thoreau's cabin stood on the north shore of Walden Pond though a replica of his spartan cabin has also been erected on the opposite side. There was no heat, no air-conditioning, no electricity, no running water, no cell phones, no television, no radio, and no contact with the outside world. But he could swim in the pond — as many locals still do, even at sunrise. A few even wear bathing suits. A bed, chair, and desk from the actual cabin are on display in the Concord Museum.

Thoreau's theory of nonviolent protest formed the foundation of philosophies shared by Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Among others enthralled with his writings were Ernest Hemingway, John F. Kennedy, John Muir, George Bernard Shaw, Upton Sinclair, Leo Tolstoy, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Influenced himself by Indian spiritual thought, Thoreau could not have imagined that his ideas would have such a global impact. Nor could anyone have guessed what would follow the sound of musket fire on a spring day 241 years ago.

The Road to Revolution, a free 30-minute show at the Minute Man Visitor Center, reveals how Paul Revere, alerted by two lanterns in Boston's Old North Church, set out to spread the word that the British were coming. Colonists were eager to defend their stores of arms and provisions despite a lack of military training, uniforms, equipment, and

leadership.

Called Minute Men because they had to switch from farmers to fighters in 60 seconds, the colonial soldiers encountered the British in nearby Lexington, where the first shots were fired, and engaged the redcoats again at the North Bridge in Concord. Then they chased the highly-trained regulars back to Boston, where a long siege began.

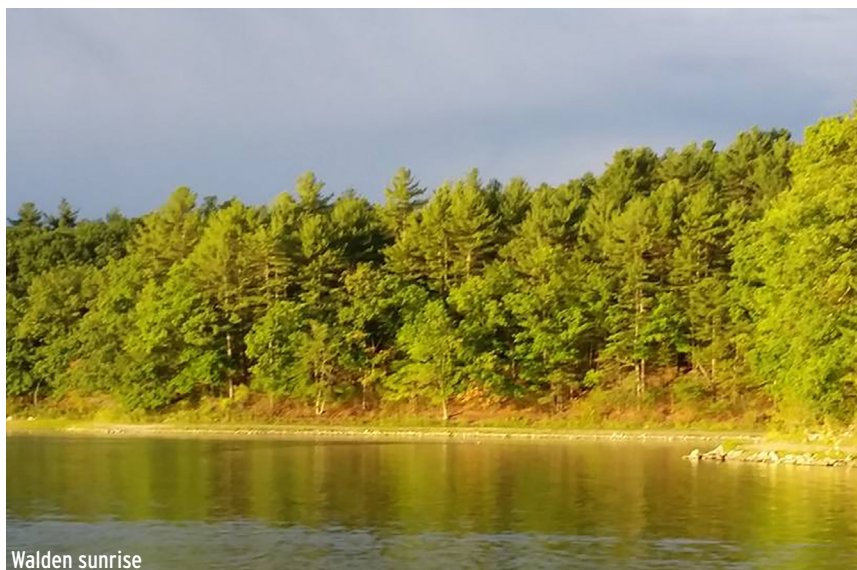
The first shot fired by the Americans in the Battle of Lexington & Concord is known to this day as "the shot heard 'round the world" — even though Bobby Thomson tried to usurp the saying after hitting a ninth-inning playoff home run that won the 1951 National League pennant for the New York Giants. The incident occurred on April 19, 1775, more than a year before the Declaration of Independence was signed, sealed, and delivered. Concord marks the anniversary every year with historical re-enactors on horseback, fife and drum corps, and shows in the local performing arts center.

In Concord, Patriots Day is like Memorial Day, Veterans Day, July 4, and Christmas all wrapped up in a neat little package.

Because of its small size plus its proximity to Boston, Concord often gets short shrift from tour groups. That's unfair, according to Alida Orzechowski, owner-operator of Gatepost Tours. She says people



Colonial Inn



Walden sunrise



Grave of a British Soldier



Soldiers

wanting to spend more time in the authors' homes or in the historical structures at Minute Man National Historic Park.

Her favorite spot is the cemetery. "It's an incredibly special place and wonderfully photogenic and at the same time, usually overlooked as a major attraction," she says. "Since there are no official tours there, a private guide is a must in order to understand the cemetery's place in Concord's history and the deep connection between our authors and the literary revolution of the 19th century. It's by far my favorite place in Concord."

Her clientele includes high school field trips, leisure travelers, and even international groups. "It's not the story that matters," she says, "but how you tell it."

Sean Smith, general manager of Concord's Colonial Inn, doesn't deny his place is haunted. Room 24 was used as a colonial-era operating room during the American Revolution and Room 27 served as a morgue. Multiple reports, from both staff and guests, suggest three benign ghosts are still there.

For worldly creature comforts, Helen's Café sits at the top of the can't-miss list. A local landmark since 1936, the family-run restaurant is famous not only for breakfast for clam chowder, hamburgers, and ice cream. It's a two-minute walk from Monument Square.

In addition to its all-star authors, Concord has also given the world actor Steve Carell, Hall of Fame pitcher Tom Glavine, historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, and JFK speechwriter Richard N. Goodwin, among others.

Most Concord visitors come by car but there are good train connections from Boston and points south. The drive from New Jersey takes about three hours. Although there's a steady flow of visitors during the spring and summer months, leaf-peeping season brings out legions of would-be photographers. The best advice is to plan ahead.

For further information, see Concord's Colonial Inn, 48 Monument Square, tel. 978-369-9200, www.concordcolonialinn.com; Gatepost Tours, P.O. Box 56, Concord, MA 01741, tel. 978-399-8229, info@gateposttours.com; or the Concord Chamber of Commerce, Suite 7, 15 Walden Street, tel. 978-369-3120, www.concordchamberofcommerce.org. ■

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