



HISTORY & HARMONY

Get in tune with nature and Concord's literary flourishes.

BY CHERYL FENTON



Top: Kayaking on Walden Pond.

Above: A replica of Thoreau's 10-by-15-foot, one-room house in the woods on the north side of the pond.

● The day was April 19, 1775. The scene was an early morning on the Old North Bridge in Concord, a town 40 minutes northwest of Boston, Massachusetts. One single shot rang out, beginning the first battle of the War for Independence—the American Revolution. Sixty years later, this first shot fired upon the British by a militiaman was immortalized as the “shot heard round the world” in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s poem “Concord Hymn.”

While the musket blast may have resonated far and wide in both sound and substance, today’s Concord is really a whisper of a town. It’s steeped in charm and Norman Rockwell-esque Americana—red brick, stars and stripes flag bunting, bucolic parks. Even its original name, Musketaquid (Algonquian for “grassy plain”), lends images of peaceful green spaces—an association easy to understand within its well-known Walden Pond and Minute Man National Historical Park.

Concord also holds the echoes of deep thinkers and celebrated novelists. During the middle of the 19th century the town became home to some of America’s greatest minds. Think Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Louisa May Alcott.

Whether you’re trying to become one with nature or understand the nuances of great American prose through literary landmarks, here are a few ways to enjoy the lovely town of Concord—a place whose motto is “How strong is harmony.”

WALDEN POND

When transcendentalist Thoreau moved to a one-room house in the woods of Walden Pond on July 4, 1845, he did it because he “wished to live deliberately.” Within the confines of this tiny, 10-by-15-foot home, he did just that. He filled



Walden Pond and
its surrounding
Walden Woods offer
opportunities to
swim, canoe, picnic
and commune
with nature.

his journal with thoughts on nature and society, and after two years, two months and two days in virtual solitude, he left. What followed his exodus was “Walden,” his noted piece of literature that told tales of simple harmonious living with nature.

You can still harmonize with nature at the Walden Pond State Reservation, which is now part of the Massachusetts Forests and Parks system. These 462 acres of protected open space and a 62-acre body of water offer opportunities to hike, swim, canoe, picnic, cross-country ski and snowshoe. Ponder how you would fit your own home into Thoreau’s tiny space when you check out the replica on the north side of the pond in a clearing uphill.

If you’re looking to follow in the actual footsteps of Concord’s historic literary figures, stroll the Emerson-Thoreau Amble. This 1.7-mile walking path travels from Emerson’s “Bush” house to Thoreau’s cabin and follows an approximate walking route the two would use to visit each other.

ORCHARD HOUSE

A household full of growing girls is sure to offer enough fodder for a tale or two. And that’s exactly what Louisa May Alcott did. She turned her adventures growing up in this Concord home into a tale of four devoted sisters that became a beloved classic: “Little Women” was loosely based on Alcott’s life at the home, beginning in 1857. Some say you can even get to know the real Alcott through the book’s willful, headstrong heroine Jo.

Named as a nod to the apple trees surrounding the 12 acres of land, today’s Orchard House serves as a museum. About 80 percent of the furniture is original, preserving how the noble abode looked when the Alcotts lived there, and you can tour most of its confines, including Louisa May Alcott’s room where all the magic happened. In it stands the small, white desk on which she wrote “Little Women.”

THE OLD MANSE

The Old Manse, a National Historic Landmark that sits on the banks of the Concord River, has certainly witnessed its

fair share of history. The Battle of Concord, that “shot heard round the world,” happened essentially in the backyard of The Old Manse, which was built in 1770 by Patriot minister William Emerson, the grandfather of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Over half a century later, in the upstairs study Ralph Waldo Emerson drafted his essay “Nature,” which helped give rise to the Transcendentalist movement.

The Old Manse’s literary significance doesn’t end there. Entrench yourself in the love story that took place here when American writer Hawthorne (“The Scarlet Letter”) and his new bride Sophia lived there from 1842 to 1845. These newlyweds used a diamond to etch poems to each other on a windowpane, which you can still see today. A recreation of the heirloom vegetable garden planted by Thoreau to honor the Hawthornes’ wedding is also on-site.

In 2019, the Trustees of Reservations began a revitalization of the historic grounds to celebrate its original landscape of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. A short network of footpaths connects the Old Manse to a boathouse on the Concord River and the North Bridge, viewable from the upstairs rooms.

SLEEPY HOLLOW CEMETERY

Not to be confused with the New York site that spawned Washington Irving’s 1820 short story “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and its Headless Horseman, Concord’s Sleepy Hollow Cemetery is a quintessential 19th-century rural New England burial ground with gentle curving roads that respect the natural plantings. This garden cemetery is just half a mile from Concord’s center and serves as the final resting place of Alcott, Emerson, Daniel Chester French (sculptor of the Lincoln Memorial), Hawthorne and Thoreau on its aptly named “Author’s Ridge.” The park-like setting mirrors the transcendentalist views about how humans should commune with nature. Stop a while and pay respects to both the deceased and the very much alive Mother Nature.

TODAY’S CONCORD

While it boasts a reputation as a historical paradise, Concord is also a place for foodies, art lovers and shoppers.



Top: The Old Manse. **Above:** Sleepy Hollow Cemetery serves as the final resting place of authors Alcott, Emerson, Hawthorne and Thoreau.



The center was voted “Best Town Center in the West” in 2016 by Boston magazine and is very walkable, making it easy to discover the nooks and crannies of the other neighborhoods in town.

Whether it’s a quick bite or a full-on tavern supper, local restaurants serve up every type of cuisine. For a taste of the traditional, Merchants Row in the 300-year-old Colonial Inn in Monument Square has a Yankee Pot Roast feast that you can enjoy alongside the stories of soldiers’ spirits that are said to roam the halls. For more modern cuisine, check out the rustic-chic 80 Thoreau (the burger has earned Boston Globe kudos) and head to Fiorella’s Cucina for Italian eats. Haute Coffee gives you a serious buzz, and you can enjoy free live music (jazz, blues, surf rock and more) at Main Street Market and Café. Saltbox Kitchen, a farm-to-

table café, has Concord’s only craft brewery, and schedules incredible family-style dinners in its fields, complete with beautiful lighting and pastoral views.

There is even more old New England charm in beloved landmarks such as the Concord Bookshop, The Toy Shop of Concord (known as America’s first specialty toy store since 1942) and the Concord Cheese Shop, where turophiles can discover about 200 types of cheese. Those who celebrate fashion can enjoy shopping at Sara Campbell, Grasshopper and French Lessons, while art enthusiasts can take in the exhibits at the Montague Gallery, Lacoste Gallery, Concord Art, Three Stones Gallery and the Umbrella Arts Center.

For a small town, Concord boasts a big history. Take a shot at exploring and make your own memories.

Above: The current Old North Bridge is the fifth replica of the original site of the Battle of Concord.
