

Welcome to Brook Farm Historic Site!

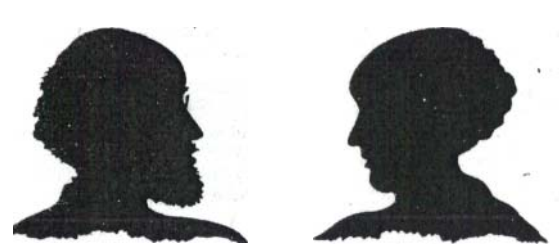
This National Historic landmark, 179 acres of rolling fields, woodlands and wetlands, was acquired by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1988 and is managed by the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR).

“Our farm is a sweet spot...and in this tranquil retreat I have found that entire separation from worldly care and rest to the spirit which I knew was in waiting for me somewhere.”
Sophia Ripley, Letter, 1840

Brook Farm is rich in social and intellectual history spanning four centuries and is the site of the best known cooperative community in American history. The site is a direct link to a movement that reshaped American religious, philosophical and even political life in the 19th century.

Founded in 1841 at the height of the Transcendental movement, an experimental society of men, women and children had dreams of leading a more wholesome and simple life. The Farm’s members and visitors included renowned authors and philosophers Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Dana, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller.

Utilized in later years for a poorhouse, Civil War training camp and orphanage, the site reflects a theme of social consciousness and reform.



George Ripley and Margaret Fuller

The First Settlers

Brook Farm has a long and varied history of land use. Native American presence in the region dates back almost 12,000 years and recent archaeological research indicates that they were camping at the Brook Farm site beginning 5000 or more years ago. Seasonally available fish, such as salmon, shad, and alewives in the nearby Charles River and Sawmill Brook probably attracted native peoples throughout most of prehistory. At the time of the first colonial settlement, Native Americans tended small family gardens of corn, beans, and squash in the fertile meadows near streams and rivers.

By the late 1600s, John Eliot, “the Apostle to the Indians,” had established villages in the region for Christianized Indians. It is believed that Eliot preached to natives from Pulpit Rock, located in the adjacent Mt. Lebanon Cemetery.



This triangular projectile point, excavated from Brook Farm, indicates that Native Americans were there during the late Archaic/ Early Woodland Periods.

Colonial Farming

Local farmers found the area’s rocky soils only fair for crop production. However, this property’s settlers probably grew wheat, rye, barley, corn, apples and pears, supplemented by the products of livestock husbandry.

After passing through a succession of owners through and beyond the 1700s, the property was sold by Charles and Maria Ellis in 1841. Their simple dairy farm would play witness to an adventure that forever set it aside from its neighbors.

“...To insure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor than now exists; ...and thus to prepare a society of liberal, intelligent and cultivated persons whose relation with each other would permit a more wholesome and simple life...”

Transcendentalism and the Utopian Community

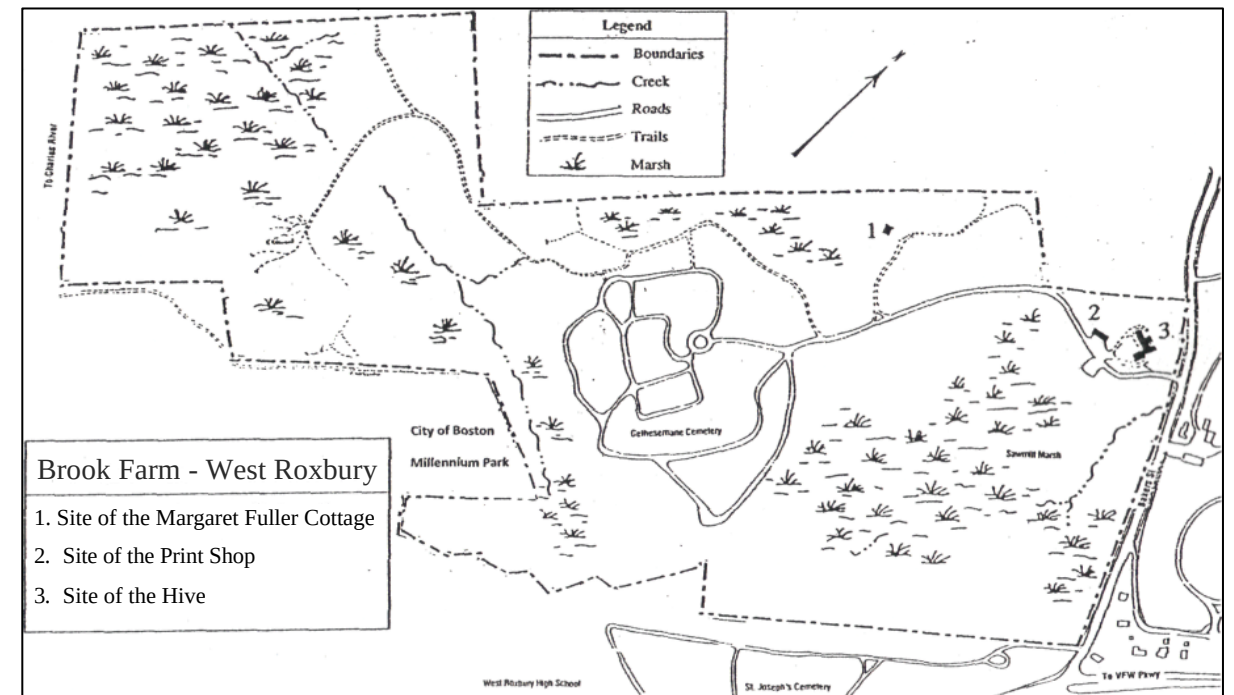
The Transcendentalist movement of the early 1800’s was a product of the social idealism of the time. The American Revolution, Puritan values, and liberal Unitarian beliefs provoked a thoughtful examination of spiritual foundations and morals in the new democracy.

Nature, and its place in the spiritual realm, became a central theme for the growing number of transcendentalist writers. Nature was believed to be symbolic – a living mystery full of signs. Humans were the spiritual center of the Universe and, in man alone could the clues to nature, history and the cosmos be found. God’s voice spoke through human instinct. Transcendentalists did not advocate waiting until eternity for an ideal society and believed that man should lead a better life on Earth.

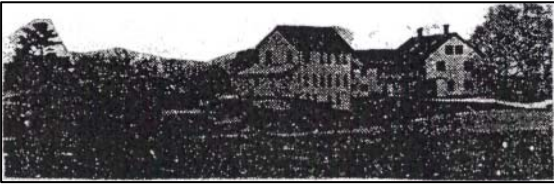
Such beliefs were further described in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay *Nature* and influenced the founder of Brook Farm, George Ripley. Ripley resigned from his Unitarian ministry in 1840 and purchased the farm to try a social and economic experiment based on transcendentalist philosophy.

In 1841 the Brook Farm Institute for Agriculture and Education was established as a cooperative. Each of its original twenty members took up residence with George and Sophia Ripley in the main farm house called the Hive. Individuals could purchase stock at \$500 per share and receive a fixed income regardless of the types of tasks they performed. The community rapidly grew to 120 members. Additional boarders included many visitors and the students attending the highly regarded Brook Farm School (“the Nest”) located across the street. It was the success of the school that provided the main source of income.

Perched with a commanding view of the surrounding farm was the Eyrie, a subsequent residence for the Ripleys. The Italianate structure hosted nightly gatherings of chamber music, group readings and other social activities. The Hive remained the principal dormitory, kitchen and dining area. Between 1842 and 1844 the Margaret Fuller Cottage, the Pilgrim House, a factory building, a commercial greenhouse and the Eyrie were built.



Brook Farmers were concerned with making social relations rewarding, both work and leisure joyous, and the individual and society harmonious. They hoped to refine life and exalt its meaning. However, the concept of transcendentalism and social reform were continually debated. The community eventually embraced the ideas of Charles Fourier, a French social critic, and changed their name to the Brook Farm Phalanx. A large central residential building, the Phalanstery, was near completion when it burned to the ground in March 1846. The loss was financially devastating. In August 1847, a brief six years after its inception, the community disbanded. Brook Farmers traveled past the granite entrance for the last time, but not before sealing its place in literary and intellectual history.



The Print Shop and the Hive in the early 20th century

Civil War Camp

In May 1861, Colonel Gordon and his Second Massachusetts Infantry Regiment arrived at the secluded terrain of Brook Farm, an ideal site for military training. In July, the short-lived Camp Andrew closed with the shipping out of the Second infantry. The soldiers distinguished themselves at Gettysburg, Atlanta, and other battles.

The Last Century

After purchasing the 179-acre Brook Farm in 1870, Gottlieb F. Burkhardt formed, what is called today, the Lutheran Services Association. In 1872, the Martin Luther Orphan’s Home was dedicated using the Hive as the main residence. Gethsemane Cemetery was founded in 1873 and the Print Shop, still standing, was built sometime before 1890. The Orphan home closed in 1943. Five years later, the hive reopened as the Brook Farm Home, a residential treatment center and school managed by the Lutherans until its closure in 1974.



An “outing” at the Martin Luther Orphan’s Home

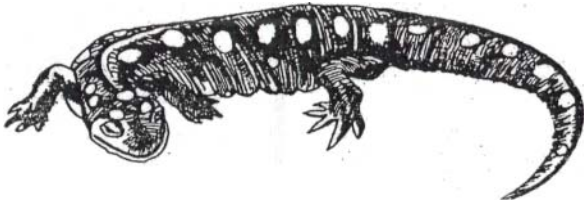
Brook Farm was designated a Boston Landmark in 1977, the same year the Hive was destroyed by fire. Tragically, the Margaret Fuller Cottage was burned by vandals in 1984, four years before the property was acquired by the MDC (now DCR).

On the Natural Side

“...This is one of the most beautiful places I ever saw in my life...There are woods, in which we can ramble all day...”

Nathaniel Hawthorne, Letter 1841

Today, despite years of development impacts and neglect, Brook Farm Historic Site still offers wonderful woodlands and acres of great beauty that evoke an earlier, more pastoral, time. Extensive marshes surround red maple swamps and upland forests, and old fields create habitat for a great diversity of plant and animals, including endangered species. Saw Mill Brook meanders down to the Charles River, a short distance west of the property. As stewards of this resource, DCR plans to restore or enhance impacted natural settings and biological communities. A better defined trail system will allow visitors to further explore the natural heritage of Brook Farm a legacy that so inspired a Rambler named Hawthorne.



Brook Farm Today

Brook Farm was one of the first sites in Massachusetts to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places and be designated a National Historic Site. In 1977, the Boston Landmarks Commission designated Brook Farm a Landmark, the city’s highest recognition for historic sites. Since 1972, the West Roxbury Historical Society has advocated for the preservation of the property and was the guiding force behind the passage of legislation to acquire the site. The Society continues to offer periodic tours of the site.

Archaeological research began in spring 1990, conducted jointly by the MDC (now DCR) and the City of Boston Environment Department, aided by a matching grant from the Massachusetts Historical Commission. Harvard University has conducted an Archaeological Field School Program at Brook Farm and the site has also been the focus of a landscape design seminar at Radcliffe College. Currently, the Department of Conservation and Recreation is developing a preliminary interpretive plan for the site with assistance from the City of Boston’s Landmarks Commission and the West Roxbury Historical Society.

These cooperative undertakings will help DCR formulate sound plans and management strategies and provide periodic visitor services at Brook Farm Historic Site while awaiting Legislative allocation of a site operating budget.

Directions

Brook Farm Historic Site is off Baker Street in West Roxbury, approximately 1/3 mile west of the VFW Parkway. Enter via the Gethsemane Cemetery access road at 670 Baker Street. Designated parking is available. By public transportation, the #52 Dedham Mall-Watertown Square bus stops near the Cemetery entrance. DCR urges all non-guided visitors to call 617-698-1802 for more information or visit www.massparks.org.

