Henry's Early Life

Walden Pond State Reservation

The Making of a Philosopher and Writer

Birth and Early Life

Thoreau's birthplace, Virginia Road, Concord

Originally named David Henry, Thoreau was born to John and Cynthia Thoreau on July 12, 1817 at his maternal grandmother's house in Concord, Massachusetts. He was the third of four children; older siblings Helen and brother John, and a younger sister, Sophia. Influenced by his brother, an amateur ornithologist, he developed an early interest in nature, spending his childhood exploring the ponds and woods of Concord. Cynthia Thoreau took in boarders to help with family finances. Many of the leading progressive thinkers of the day had a seat at her table.

> *I have never got over my surprise that I should have been born into the most estimable place in all the world, and in the very nick of time, too.*
>
> — HDT Journal, December 27, 1856

Education

Henry received his education at the public school in Concord and at the private Concord Academy. He was sent to Harvard College where boys enrolled at ages 15 or 16, and did well there, despite having to drop out for several months for financial and health reasons. He graduated in the top half of his class in 1837 at age 20.

Becoming a teacher

Henry was hired as the teacher of the Concord public school, but resigned after only two weeks over his refusal to use corporal punishment for discipline. In 1838, he and his brother John opened the Concord Academy, a grammar school in Concord. They introduced progressive concepts such as nature walks and visits to local shops and businesses. The school closed when John became ill with tuberculosis. In 1842 after a shaving cut, John died of tetanus in Henry's arms. Later, Thoreau would move to Walden Pond for two years, in part to move on with his own life after losing his beloved brother.

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