

## Henry David Thoreau's interactions with New York State

### 1843

May-December: Lived on Staten Island, in the area of Richmond Road and Douglas Road, with William Emerson and his family, in order to tutor the son, Haven. He met Henry James in NYC in June. He returned in mid-November to Concord, Massachusetts, to visit family and to celebrate Thanksgiving. Soon he moved back home entirely. [For more info about the Emerson house, see "The Snuggery. Home of the Emersons on Staten Island." *New York Tribune*, May 24, 1903, p. 16.]

"The hills in the interior of this island, though comparatively low, are penetrated in various directions by similar sloping valleys on a humble scale, gradually narrowing and rising to the centre, and at the head of these the Huguenots, who were the first settlers, placed their homes, quite within the land, in rural and sheltered places, in leafy recesses where the breeze played with the poplar and the gum tree, from which, with equal security in calm and storm, they looked out through a widening vista, over miles of forest and stretching salt marsh, to the Huguenots' Tree, an old elm on the shore at whose root they had landed, and across the spacious outer bay of New York to Sandy Hook and the Highlands of Neversink, and thence over the leagues of the Atlantic, perchance to some faint vessel in the horizon, almost a day's sail on her voyage to that Europe whence they had come. When walking in the interior there, in the midst of rural scenery, where there was a little to remind me of the ocean as amid the New Hampshire hills, I have suddenly, through a gap, a cleft or 'clove road' as the Dutch settlers called it, caught sight of a ship under full sail, over a field of corn, twenty or thirty miles at sea. The effect was similar, since I had no means of measuring distances, to seeing a painted ship passed backwards and forwards through a magic lantern."

~ "Tuesday," *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*

### 1844

July: Went on a walking tour of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and New York. Walked to Mount Monadnock (NH), Mount Greylock (MA), and explored the Catskills with friend William Ellery Channing. They took the train to Catskill NY, then hiked along present-day Route NY 23A. They stayed at Kaaterskill Falls, and they saw Kaaterskill Clove. They returned home by train.

"Yesterday I came here to live. My house makes me think of some mountain houses I have seen, which seemed to have a fresher auroral atmosphere about them, as I fancy of the halls of Olympus. I lodged at the house of a saw-miller last summer, on the Caatskills mountains, high up as Pine orchard in the blue-berry & raspberry region, where the quiet and cleanliness & cool coolness seemed to be all one, which has this ambrosial character. He was the miller of the Kauterskill Falls. They were a clean & wholesome family inside and out – like their house. The latter was not plastered – only lathed and the inner doors were not hung. The house seemed high placed, airy, and perfumed, fit to entertain a travelling God. It was so high indeed that all the music, the broken strains, the

waifs & accompaniments of tunes, that swept over the ridge of the Caatskills, passed through its aisles. Could not man be man in such an abode? And would he ever find out this grovelling life?" ~ *Journal*, July 5, 1845

### 1850

July: Went to Patchogue and Fire Island to look for Margaret Fuller, her husband, and her son, after the shipwreck of the *Elizabeth*. He found little.

### 1854

November: Gave a lecture in Philadelphia on November 21. He passed through NYC on his way to and from Philadelphia (crossing New Jersey by train lines originating in Newark). On his way back home, he spent time in NYC. He saw the Crystal Palace. He went to the opera with Horace Greeley, friend and editor of *The New-York Tribune*.

### 1856

October-November: Had a surveying job in Perth Amboy NJ. He reached NYC on the evening of October 24. He visited Barnum's Museum in NYC. He arrived at Eagleswood, Perth Amboy, on the evening of October 25. He gave several lectures while in the area. His friend Bronson Alcott was visiting New York as well. They explored the city and visited people together. They met with Horace Greeley at his farm in Chappaqua, N.Y. On November 10, Alcott and Thoreau visited Walt Whitman for two hours. It was Henry and Walt's only meeting.

"I hoped to put him in communication direct with Thoreau, and tried my hand a little after we came down stairs and sat in the parlour below; but each seemed planted fast in reserves, surveying the other curiously, -- like two beasts, each wondering what the other would do, whether to snap or run; and it came to no more than cold compliments between them. Whether Thoreau was meditating the possibility of Walt's stealing away his 'out-of-doors' for some sinister ends, poetic or pecuniary, I could not well divine, nor was very curious to know; or whether Walt suspected or not that he had here, for once, and the first time, found his match and more at smelling out 'all Nature,' a sagacity potent, penetrating and peerless as his own, if indeed not more piercing and profound, finer and more formidable, I cannot say." ~ Bronson Alcott, *Journal*, November 10, 1856

"[Whitman] is apparently the greatest democrat the world has seen. Kings and aristocracy go by the board at once, as they have long deserved to. A remarkably strong though coarse nature, of a sweet disposition, and much prized by his friends. Though peculiar and rough in his exterior, his skin (all over (?)) red, he is essentially a gentleman. I am still somewhat in a quandary about him, -- feel that he is essentially strange to me, at any rate; but I am surprised by the sight of him. He is very broad, but, as I have said, not fine. He said that I misapprehended him. I am not quite sure that I do. He told us that he loved to ride up and down Broadway all day on an omnibus, sitting beside the driver, listening to the roar of the carts, and sometimes gesticulating and declaiming Homer at the top of his voice." ~ Letter to H.G.O. Blake, November 19, 1856

“We ought to rejoice greatly in him. He occasionally suggests something a little more than human. You cant confound him with the other inhabitants of Brooklyn or New York. How they must shudder when they read him! He is awefully good.”  
~ Letter to H.G.O. Blake, December 7, 1856

### 1860

After abolitionist John Brown died, a memorial service was held at his farm and gravesite in North Elba, N.Y., on July 4, 1860. Thoreau sent the essay “The Last Days of John Brown” to be read at the ceremony. He did not attend the event.

### 1861

May-July: Embarks on “The Journey West,” leading from Massachusetts to Minnesota and back. On May 14, he and Horace Mann Jr. cross New York state via the New York Central Railroad. They spend five days “botanizing” in Niagara Falls. On their way back, they spend a day in Ogdensburg and then cross into Vermont via the Northern (NY) Railroad.

“Albany to Schenectady  
Level – in P. pine plain ...  
Mohawk – at Schenectady – Yellow & clay colored water – bordered with willow & maples  
Above Schenectady – Mohawk Valley -- some ½ mile wide – low bank with interval each side bounded by hills 2 or 300 feet high – N side begins to flat off at Palatine Bridge  
- may-apple? about at Palatine Bridge  
Locusts with pods? or ailanthus? of late  
Most striking & rough scenery at Little Falls – Rises up & country spreads out wide this side Utica  
Yet more high & flat beyond Rome – and often very wet  
Syracuse & its lake -- & salt works  
Onondago (?)  
Considerable cedar swamp thus far & farther  
Syracuse large city like streets  
Rochester with interesting River & falls dividing it – Country bet Syracuse & Rochester more diversified or hill & plain – Afterward flat again & prob at last descending,

#### 15) To Niagara Falls

Pm to Goat Island – sight of rapids from Bride – like sea off Cape Cod – most imposing sight as yet – The great ap. height of the waves tumbling over the recessive ledges – at a distance – while the water view is broad & boundless in that direction as if you were looking out to sea – you are so low – Yet the distances are very deceptive ...  
Many ducks constantly floating a little way down the rapids then flying-back & alighting again –

Water falling ap. broken into lengths of 4 to 6 or more feet – masses of ice under edges of cliff –

Horace Mann asked me if I did not hear the sound of the falls as we went – from the Depot to the Hotel last night – but I had not – though certainly it was loud enough

I had probably mistaken it for a train coming or a locomotive letting off steam, of which we hear so much at home

It sounds hardly as loud this morning though now only 1/3 of a mile off – -- --

As I sit in my chamber the impression is as if I were surrounded by many factories in full blast

This is quite a town – with numerous hotels & stores – pave streets & &c.

I imagine the falls will soon be surrounded by a city.”

Thoreau’s plant inventory of Goat Island: American basswood (*Tilia americana*), American elm (*Ulmus americana*), Eastern arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis*), Eastern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*), Shadbush (*Amelanchier canadensis*), Buffalo-berry (*Shepherdia canadensis*), Prickly gooseberry (*Ribes cynosbati*), Cutleaf grape fern (*Botrychium dissectum*, though the Buffalo men said *Botrychium lunaroides* v. *dissectum*), Cutleaf toothwort (*Dentaria laciniata*), Downy yellow violet (*Viola pubescens*), Dutchman’s breeches (*Dicentra cucullaria*), Large white trillium (*Trillium grandiflorum*), May apple (*Podophyllum peltatum*), Showy orchis (*Orchis spectabilis*), Small-flowered crowfoot or buttercup (*Ranunculus abortivus*), Spring beauty (*Claytonia virginica*), Stinking Benjamin (*Trillium erectum*), White dogtooth violet (*Erythronium albidum*), Spring cress (*Cardamine rhomoides* v. *pupurea*), and Sand cress (*Arabis lyrata*). Questionable: American beech, American hornbeam, Eastern hop-hornbeam, Sugar maple, field peppergrass, White baneberry or “Doll’s eyes,” and Dwarf ginseng. These seven species were not included in the same form on the subsequent inventory of the Buffalo Society of Natural Sciences. Thoreau also saw the Eastern hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*), which the Buffalo men did not have on their list.

### **Recommended Reading / Research**

Harding, Walter, ed. *Thoreau’s Minnesota Journey: Two Documents: Thoreau’s Notes on the Journey West and The Letters of Horace Mann, Jr.* Geneseo, N.Y.: The Thoreau Society [Thoreau Society Booklet No. Sixteen], 1962.

Howarth, William. *Thoreau in the Mountains*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982, pp. 78-80). [Catskill references]

Smith, Corinne Hosfeld. *Westward I Go Free: Tracing Thoreau’s Last Journey*. Winnipeg, Man.: Green Frigate Books, 2012.

Thoreau, Henry David. “Walking.” [essay found online and in compilation volumes]

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*. Ed. by Walter Harding and Carl Bode. New York: New York University Press, 1958. [esp. for letters about Staten Island and New York City]

**For additional teacher resources, visit [www.thoreausjourneywest.com/teacher.htm](http://www.thoreausjourneywest.com/teacher.htm).**

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