In the course of my work on Thoreau, I’ve looked at originals or facsimiles of almost all of his manuscripts. This is an essential task in scholarly editing: the manuscripts provide invaluable information about the author's process and intention. For me, working with original manuscripts has also been one of the most intriguing parts of the job. They offer an emotionally engaging physical connection with their creator, and they present their own narratives, conveyed by both physical and circumstantial evidence, some of it textual and some extra-textual. These narratives, which are much less under Thoreau's control than the texts he composed, reveal information that can't be obtained in any other way.

Today, I want to show you three examples of what can be learned by reading the physical features and the extra-textual circumstances of Thoreau's manuscripts along with the textual content.

1. Thoreau’s Manuscript Volume 19

This is an example of reading text and document together to better understand the factors that produced an unusual configuration in the manuscript volume of Thoreau's Journal that he numbered “19.” The volume, which is owned by the Morgan Library & Museum, contains entries dated from May 13, 1855, through January 3, 1856; its accession number is MA 1302:25.
Thoreau was ill in the spring and summer of 1855: in a June 27, 1855, letter to Blake he writes, “I have been sick and good for nothing but to lie on my back and wait for something to turn up, for two or three months.” Emerson and Alcott both comment on Thoreau's condition, and in The Days of Henry Thoreau Walter Harding writes that on September 16 Thoreau noted “After four or five months of invalidity and worthlessness, I begin to feel some stirrings of life in me.”

It turns out that reading Thoreau’s expression of returning health in the manuscript volume is a radically different experience from reading it in Harding’s description, where it seems quite straightforward. The first entry in the manuscript volume is dated May 13, 1855.
May 18, 1855

The sky was the first warm day. I had been out on a sunny day. The sun was up in the sky. It was a beautiful day. I saw a

The sky was up in the sky. It was a beautiful day. I saw a

The sky was up in the sky. It was a beautiful day. I saw a

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Forty-three pages into the manuscript, on the third page of the entry dated June 11, one finds with some surprise (at least I was surprised) that the September 16 comment that Harding quotes is actually part of that entry.
When I heard you saying this lovely thing about me and how much you love me, I felt so happy and...
The manuscript volume holds yet another surprise. Journal entries continue in chronological order until the end of the September 23 entry, where one finds an unusual notation—“For continuation see other end of this book.”
One turns the page, and finds the entries upside down. In fact all of the rest of the entries in the manuscript volume are upside down with respect to entries in the first eighty or so pages of the volume. The first upside-down entry is dated January 3, 1856.

Here’s the entry as you come to it in the manuscript volume:
And here it is with the pages rotated 180° so it’s easier to read:
through the moon last night
I looked so early. The moon
was last night for the sun, and
the east now so fallen out. The
sky is last part left. The sun
is rising.

We travelled many places within a few years.
1. The bear, firm with
many rains, making a hill where
the sun is. Sometimes
a bear is found a year bearing
out. Other. The place,
though it is much.

The place of the sun that
is rising is the place
of the sun's bearing.

The bear is this.
The sun is rising.

The sun is rising
and the moon is rising.

The bear is this.
The sun is rising.

The sun is rising
and the moon is rising.

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To understand what is happening here, one needs to know about both the September 16 comment embedded in the June 11 entry, and Thoreau’s practice of journal-keeping. We know that when Thoreau was outdoors walking and working, as well as during his trips to Cape Cod and Canada, Maine and Minnesota, he noted his observations in pencil, on paper folded to fit into a pocket. He used these field notes as the basis for Journal entries which he sometimes wrote several days and sometimes several weeks after making the notes. Here's one of the few surviving pages of field notes, which is in the William Munroe Special Collections Department of the Concord Free Public Library.
Nov 24 '55

For my own contemplation with C. A. W. I notice a pleasant full day. The light is intense, and somewhat hazy. The morning, as yet, brings no cloud. The sky is still brownish gray, with a path of greenish yellow, which makes me feel that there is more of winter in the air. The men in the gang as usual at the last of the year. I do not know how many work a day, and if the work is going on at the same rate. The setting sun over the river makes me feel that the day is passing. The sky is still brownish gray, and the path of greenish yellow is less evident. The setting sun makes the day appear colder. The Kalamazoo River flows past the town, and the water is clear and cold. As we come from the city in the afternoon, the dark clouds gather, and the west is crowded with heavy black clouds, which are beginning to put on the northwesterly direction. The sky is now clear, and the sun is setting in the west. The moment I see the glint of the setting sun on the water, I feel that the world is ending. The sky is clear, and the sun is setting in the west.
To understand what is happening here, one needs to know about both the September 16 comment embedded in the June 11 entry, and about Thoreau’s practice of journal-keeping. We know that when Thoreau was outdoors walking and working, as well as during his trips to Cape Cod and Canada, Maine and Minnesota, he noted his observations in pencil, on paper folded to fit into a pocket. He used these field notes as the basis for Journal entries which he sometimes wrote several days and sometimes several weeks after making the notes. Here's one of the few surviving pages of field notes, which is in the William Munroe Special Collections Department of the Concord Free Public Library.
Thoreau expanded these notes into Journal entries dated November 23 and 25, 1850.
unexpected—They even played like kittens in their way—shook their heads raised their tails & rushed up & down the hill.

The witch-hazel blossom on Conantum has for the most part lost its ribbons now.

Some distant angle in the sun where a lofty and dense white pine wood with mingled grey & green meets a hill covered with shrub oaks affects me singularly—reinspiring me with all the dreams of my youth. It is a place far away—yet actual and where we have been— I saw the sun falling on a distant white pine wood whose grey & moss covered stems were visible amid the green—in an angle where this forest abutted on a hill covered with shrub oaks— It was like looking into dreamland— It is one of the avenues to my future. Certain coincidences like this are accompanied by a certain flash as of hazy lightning—flooding all the world suddenly with a tremulous serene light which it is difficult to see long at a time.

I saw Fair Haven pond with its Island & meadow between the island & the shore—and a strip of perfectly still & smooth water in the lee of the island—two hawks—fish-hawks perhaps—sailing over it. I did not see how it could be improved—Yet I do not see what these things can be, I begin to see such an object when I cease to understand it—and see that I did not realize or appreciate it before—but I get no farther than this. How adapted these forms and colors to my eye—a meadow & an island; what are these things? Yet the hawks & the ducks keep so aloof! and nature is so reserved! I am made to love the pond & the meadow as the wind is made to ripple the water.

As I looked on the walden woods eastward across the pond, I saw suddenly a white cloud rising above their tops now here now there marking the progress of the cars which were rolling toward Boston far below—behind many hills & woods.

October must be the month of ripe & tinted leaves—Throughout November they are almost entirely withered & somber—the few that remain. In this month the sun is valued—when it shines warmer or brighter we are sure to observe it—There are not so many colors to attract the eye. We begin to remember the summer. We walk fast to keep warm. For a month past I have sat by a fire.

Every sun-set inspires me with the desire to go to a west as distant and as fair as that into which the sun goes down.

I get nothing to eat in my walks now but wild-apples—sometimes some cranberries—& some walnuts. The squirrels have got the hazlenuts & chestnuts.

Nov 23

Today it has been finger cold.

Unexpectedly I found ice by the side of the brooks this afternoon nearly an inch thick. Prudent people get in their barrels of apples today. The difference of the temperature of various localities is greater than is supposed. If I was surprised to find ice on the sides of the brooks—I was much more surprised to find quite a pond in the woods containing an acre or more quite frozen over so that I walked across it.

It was in a cold corner where a pine wood excluded the sun. In the larger ponds & the river of course there is no ice yet. It is a shallow weedy pond. I lay down on the ice and looked through at the bottom. The plants appeared to grow more uprightly than on the dry land, being sustained & protected by the water. Cadis worms were everywhere crawling about in their handsome quiver like sheaths or cases.

The wild apples though they are more mellow & edible have for some time lost their beauty, as well as the leaves, and now too they are beginning to freeze. The apple season is well nigh over. Such however as are frozen while sound are not unpleasant to eat when the spring sun thaws them.

I find it to be the height of wisdom not to endeavor to over-see myself—and live of life of prudence and common sense—but to see over & above myself—entertain sublime conjectures to make myself the thoroughfare of thrilling
thoughts—live all that can be lived. The man who is dissatisfied
with himself—what can he not do?

Nov. 24th

Plucked a butter-cup on Bear Hill today.

I have certain friends whom I visit occasionally—but I
commonly part from them early with a certain bitter-sweet
dissatisfaction. That which we love is so mixed & entangled
with that we hate in one another that we are more grieved &
disappointed, aye and estranged from one another by meeting
than by absence. Some men may be my acquaintances merely
but one whom I have been accustomed to regard to idealize to
have dreams about as a friend & mix up intimately with
myself can never degenerate into an acquaintance. I must
know him on that higher ground or not know him at all.

We do not confess and explain because we would fain be so
intimately related as to understand each other without speech.

Our friend must be broad. His must be an atmosphere
coeextensive with the universe, in which we can expand and
breathe. For the most part we are smothered and stifled by
one another.

I go and see my friend & try his atmosphere. If our
atmospheres do not mingle—if we repel each other strongly, it
is of no use to stay.

Nov. 25th

I feel a little alarmed when it happens that I have walked a
mile into the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit. I
would fain forget all my morning's occupation—my obligations
to society. But sometimes it happens that I cannot easily shake
off the village—the thought of some work—some surveying will
run in my head and I am not where my body is— I am out of
my senses. In my walks I would return to my senses like a
bird or a beast. What business have I in the woods if I am
thinking of something out of the woods.

This afternoon, late & cold as it is has been a sort of Indian
summer. Indeed I think that we have summer days from time
to time the winter through, and that it is often the snow on
the ground makes the whole difference. This afternoon the air
was indescribably clear & exhilarating—& though the
thermometer would have shown it to be cold I thought that
there was a finer & purer warmth than in summer. A
wholesome intellectual warmth in which the body was
warmed by the mind's contentment— The warmth was hardly
sensuous but rather the satisfaction of existence.

I found Fair Haven skimmed entirely over, though the
stones which I threw down on it from the high bank on the
east broke through— Yet the river was open. The landscape
looked singularly clean & pure and dry—the air like a pure
glass being laid over the picture—the trees so tidy stripped of
their leaves the meadows & pastures clothed with clean dry
grass looked as if they had been swept—ice on the water—
winter in the air—but yet not a particle of snow on the ground.
The woods divested in great part of their leaves are being
ventilated. It is the season of perfect works—of hard tough
—ripe twigs—not of tender buds & leaves— The leaves
have made their wood—and a myriad new withes stand up all
around pointing to the sky, able to survive the cold. It is only
the perennial that you see—the iron age of the year.

These expansions of the river skim over before the river
itself takes on its icy fetters. What is the analogy?

I saw a muskrat come out of a hole in the ice— He is a man
wilder than Ray or Melvin. While I am looking at him I am
thinking what he is thinking of me. He is a different sort of
man, that is all. He would dive when I went nearer then
reappear again, and had kept open a place 5 or 6 feet square
so that it had not frozen, by swimming about in it. Then he
would sit on the edge of the ice & busy himself about
something. I could not see whether it was a clam or not. What
a cold blooded fellow—thoughts at a low temperature, sitting
perfectly still on ice covered with water mumbling a
cold wet clam in its shell— What safe low moderate thoughts
it must have. It does not get onto stilts. The generations of
musk rats do not fail. They are not preserved by the legislature of Massachusetts.

Boats are drawn up high which will not be launched again till spring.

There is a beautiful fine wild grass which grows in the path in sprout land now dry white & waving in light beds soft to the touch.

I experience such an interior comfort, far removed from the sense of cold, as if the thin atmosphere were rarified by heat—were the medium of invisible flames—as if the whole landscape were one great hearthside, that where the shrub oak leaves rustle on the hill side I seem to hear a crackling fire and see the pure flame and I wonder that the dry leaves do not blaze in to yellow flames.

I find but little change yet on the S side of the cliffs—only the leaves of the wild apple are a little frost bitten on their edges & curled dry there, but some wild cherry leaves & blueberries are still fresh & tender green and red as well as all the other leaves & plants which I noticed there the other day.

When I got up so high on the side of the cliff the sun was setting like an Indian summer sun—There was a purple tint in the horizon. It was warm on the face of the rocks. And I could have sat till the sun disappeared, to dream there. It was a mild sunset such as is to be attended to.

Just as the sun shines in to us warmly & serenely—our creator breathes on us & re-creates us.

Nov. 26th

An inch of snow on ground this morning—our first

Went tonight to see the Indians who are still living in tents—Showed the horns of the moose, the black moose they call it, that goes in low lands. Horns 3 or 4 feet wide (The red moose they say is another kind runs on Mts & has horns 6 feet wide) can move their horns. The broad flat side portions of the horns are covered with hair and are so soft when the creature is alive that you can run a knife through them. They color the lower portions a darker color by rubbing them on alders &c to harden them. Make Kee-nong-gun or pappoose cradle of the broad part of the horn, putting a rim on it. Once scared will run all day. A dog will hang to their lips and be carried along and swung against a tree & drop off. Always find 2 or three together. Can't run on glare ice but can run in snow four feet deep. The caribou can run on ice. Sometimes spear them with a sharp pole—sometimes with a knife at the end of a pole. Signs good or bad from the turn of the horns. Their caribou horns had been gnawed by mice in their wigwams. The moose horns & others are not gnawed by mice while the creature is alive. Moose cover themselves with water all but noses to escape flies. About as many now as 50 years ago.

Imitated the sounds of the moose caribou & deer with a birch bark horn which last they sometimes make very long. The moose can be heard 8 or ten miles sometimes a loud sort of bellowing sound clearer more sonorous than the looing of cattle—The caribou's a sort of snort—the small deer,—like a lamb.

Made their clothes of the young moose skin. Cure the meat by smoking it—use no salt in curing it, but when they eat it.

Their spear very serviceable. The inner pointed part of a hemlock knot—the side spring pieces of hickory. Spear salmon pickerel—trout—chub &c also by birch-bark light at night using the other end of spear as pole.

Their sled Jeborgon or Jebongen? 1 foot wide 4 or 5 long of thin wood turned up in part draw by a strong rope of bass-wood bark—Canoe of moose hide. One hide will hold 3 or 4—can be taken apart and put together very quickly. Can take out cross bars and bring the sides together a very convenient boat to carry & cross streams with. They say they did not make birch canoes till they had edge tools. The birches the lightest

—they think our birches the same only second growth.
In the case of manuscript volume 19, Thoreau evidently delayed writing up his summer 1855 field notes—which don’t survive—for at least three months, and perhaps for longer. We know that he was working on the June 11 Journal entry in mid-September, but we don’t know how long he let the field notes accumulate or when he started expanding them.

And why did he turn the volume upside down and start writing at the other end? This is, I think, where the manuscript allows us to see the mind of a thrifty engineer at work. As he began to recover, Thoreau was able to do more writing. In September, as he was expanding the notes he had made in earlier months, he was also making new observations. Fall was always a busy time for him, as he recorded changes in leaf colors, the fall of leaves, bird migration, and other autumnal phenomena. He didn’t want to let the fall field notes build up, as the spring and summer ones had, and the only way to prevent that was to start expanding the fall notes at the same time as he was working on the summer notes. He could have skipped ahead in manuscript volume 19, leaving some blank pages for the summer entries, or he could have started a new manuscript volume. But neither solution would have been entirely satisfactory: although he didn’t know how many pages to leave blank, he probably realized that the expanded notes weren’t going to fill the rest of the volume. He didn’t want to waste paper, nor did he want to run out of space for the summer and early fall entries.

So on September 24 or 25 (he often wrote his entries a day or more after the date of the events he’s recording), he flipped the volume, and started the September 24 entry at the end of the book. He continued expanding the summer and then fall notes until
September 23. At the same time, he was making and recording notes for September and October and expanding them—writing from both ends of the book toward the middle.

2. Thoreau’s phenological lists and charts

My second example involves the lists and charts Thoreau used to organize the phenological observations he recorded in the Journal from 1850 on. These manuscripts, which represent, among other things, Thoreau’s detailed, unwavering commitment to understanding the seasonal cycles and his place in them as observer and participant, have to be taken into account in creating a full understanding of his intellectual engagements from 1850 on. In addition, they provide a heretofore unremarked glimpse of the continuation of his commitment to phenological observation and recording through late 1861 and into early 1862.

The lists and charts have their source in the Journal. Starting with an 1850 Journal entry that reads “Plucked a wild-rose the 9th of Oct. on Fair Haven Hill,” Thoreau inscribed hundreds of pairs of short parallel marks in the margins of manuscript volumes of the Journal next to observations about seasonal phenomena that he wanted to keep track of. The last of those marks appears near the end of the Journal, in Thoreau’s manuscript volume 33 (owned by the Morgan Library & Museum, accessioned as MA 1302:39), next to an entry dated May 13, 1861. Thoreau traveled that day from Worcester to Albany, one leg of the trip he took to Minnesota in an attempt to recover his health. After observing that “The leafing is decidedly more advanced in western Mass. than in eastern,” he noted, “Red elder-berry is ap. just beginning to
In the late 1850s Thoreau began to organize these observations into lists of phenomena by year and day, and then further into charts with years across the top, categories of phenomena down the side, and dated observations in the boxes of the grid. There are seventeen extant charts that track different seasonal phenomena, including general phenomena by month, plant life cycles (leafing, flowering, fall of the leaf), birds, insects, and ice in and out at Walden, Flint's, and White ponds, and there are more than twice as many lists as charts. (An additional eighty or so lists of phenomena appear within Journal entries--these may have helped Thoreau determine how to organize the data that appears in the freestanding lists and charts.)

May 14, 1861, is the last regular dated entry in the final volume of the Journal; in it Thoreau names several of the trees he saw between Albany and Schenectady, on his way to Minnesota. He kept field notes recording the events of that trip, but he did not follow his usual practice of expanding them in his Journal. Several paragraphs describing the family kitten follow the May 14 entry; one of these contains the parenthetical date “Oct 5th.” Entries that follows contain the parenthesized dates “Oct. 61” and “sep 29”; the last entry is dated parenthetically “Nov 3d.”

One might reasonably conclude that the end of the Journal marks also the end of Thoreau's practice of observing and recording, but three of the lists and two of the charts record observations made after November 3, in November and December 1861 and in January 1862. Entries dated from November 1 through November 29, 1861, appear on two pages of a list of November phenomena in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library; see high resolution images of these pages at
http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/d8992fa0-7347-0132-3403-58d385a7bbdo and
http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/d87dee20-7347-0132-76e4-58d385a7bbdo.
16th. Phenomena in November 30th you will know the

Nov. 60

The 24th of November there was an

The wind from the south-east prevailed.

Last势力 on 25th night.

Winds are calm and the air is clear.

Very large collection of

Home 6.15 AM with food.

Feb. 1

There was a snowflake in the morning.

Clear the line up on that paper 26th.

Free 130 in the morning from the bank in Channel.

Rain reaching home somewhere 30th.

161

Clean & pleasant in the East, Nottingham 1st.

Cold wind & cloudiness on Thursday 2nd

A spring started again in the bargain and 3rd night

A cloud of rain, 30th. Looks like a hard report.

Rain and fog 27th. Winds from the east.

Rain statement with postman.

Rain has been a fact before. Some leaves are killed before others.

Feb. 2. Free 130, 6

Rain comes all day.

Gray, rainy day.

Rain 5' after 11 AM. 11

Free 130 this.

Some leaves in the snow were covered with ice.
Mr. Ritchie

Dear Sir,

I was much obliged by your letter of the 5th instant, and shall be happy to have an opportunity of seeing you. I hope you will have the kindness to allow me to make you my compliments in person.

The occasion of my departing London is very urgent, but I trust you will excuse me on this account.

I remain, Sir,

Yours faithfully,

[Signature]

[Date]

1861
Thoreau transferred information from the 1861 list to the column headed “61” in a chart he titled “General Phenomena for November,” which is accessioned as MA 610 at the Morgan Library & Museum.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14 Aug, 27</td>
<td>18° join in 11 back from Point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Aug, 27</td>
<td>12°</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 Aug, 27</td>
<td>22° join in 14° back from Point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Aug, 27</td>
<td>25° join in 21° back from Point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 Aug, 27</td>
<td>29° join in 31° back from Point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 Aug, 27</td>
<td>30° join in 41° back from Point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Sep, 27</td>
<td>1°</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Sep, 27</td>
<td>13° join in 11 back from Point</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
- "Nortim" may refer to a location or direction.
- "Declining day" suggests a decrease in the day's duration.
- "23° and 37°" could indicate temperature or latitude.
- "Fairly clear" might describe weather conditions.
- "Fresh wind" suggests a change in wind direction or speed.
- "Clear" implies good visibility or weather.
- "Ground tree" could refer to a natural or hewn tree.
- "Ground small" might indicate a small ground feature.
- "Ground on m " could be a measurement or description.
- "Fresh wind ahead" suggests upcoming conditions.
- "Old white oak" is a specific tree type.
- "Fresh wind ahead" again, indicating ongoing conditions.
- "Fresh wind ahead" continues to describe wind direction.
- "23° and 37° again" could refer to temperature or latitude.
- "Fresh wind ahead" again, indicating persistent conditions.
- "Fresh wind ahead" final reference, maintaining consistent wind direction.

**Legend:**
- "°" indicates degrees or a similar measurement.
- "Fairly clear" signifies good visibility.
- "Ground tree" refers to trees within the terrain.
- "Ground small" might describe small objects or features on the ground.

**Additional Notes:**
- Handwritten entries provide a historical record with varied handwriting styles.
- The table format helps organize the data, making it easier to follow changes over time.
- The entries are likely related to a specific event or study requiring detailed tracking.

**Contextual Knowledge:**
- The date range suggests a possible historical context, possibly late 19th to early 20th century.
- The detailed entries imply a focus on specific events or conditions, possibly related to navigation, weather, or geographical study.
Entries dated from December 1 through December 12, 1861, appear on one page of a list of December phenomena in the Abernethy Library at Middlebury; see a high resolution image of this page at

Pharmaceutical December


Er [illegible] Thoma "Heidelberg"
The [illegible] and "Kwathi"
All sea [illegible] - he [illegible]
C. says that listen [illegible] 15th.
This, one [illegible] 2° important than 22
New has been [illegible] since 4.

2 or 8 - the [illegible] at least 23
This is should be the 24. This month.
A fine day for fishing 25.
Catching crabs outside my 30
catch young turtles now & ever.

Tinte lave have rot.

Sonnar little 10

Turn on last night 11

Saw & Carter 12

Up [illegible] evening & [illegible] for windows 13

Another cold front 14 + 17 I 4°

C. picks T H P. from [illegible] 15

Also my name on drug store bridge at last.

An early [illegible] on the middle 9

11:55 the tide now [illegible] the quiet time the tides croc report in air - Then, point 58. W. W. W.

Set weather - any dry end that SW.

From 14 1/2 60° and 48. 2.

From 18 25.

Another come in at once 9.

2or 3 got [illegible] from that 11

Mak [illegible] 20° 20. 198. 1 pm rain near April 12
Thoreau transferred information from the 1861 list to the column headed “61” in a chart he titled “All Phenomena for December,” which is in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University; see high resolution images of these pages at http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3558328.
Entries dated from January 1 through January 25, 1862, appear on one page of a list of January phenomena at the Huntington Library. There is no corresponding chart for this material.

The existence of these manuscript records doesn’t contradict accounts indicating that Thoreau’s health was failing seriously in the late fall of 1861 and the winter of 1862: many of the observations could have been made from indoors, and in at least two cases Thoreau reports what others, Channing and Rice, have told him. But they demonstrate that for at least three months after he had stopped regular Journal-keeping, Thoreau continued the habit of observing and recording natural phenomena.

3. Thoreau and the American Association for the Advancement of Science

My final example illustrates how the coincidental connection of manuscripts can obscure their real significance.

In 1956, two Thoreau documents were published for the first time in a booklet called Mr. Thoreau Declines an Invitation. These documents, now both accessioned as MA 2108 in the Morgan Library & Museum, were Thoreau’s December 19, 1853, letter to Spencer Fullerton Baird, the first permanent secretary of the American Association for the Advancement of Science:
Decline

Concord Dec. 19, 1883

Spencer F. Baird,

Dear Sir,

I write herewith to convey my thanks to the one who so kindly proposed me as a member of the Association for the Advancement of Science, and also to express my interest in the association itself. Never, however, for the same reason that I should not be able to attend the meetings, unless held in my immediate vicinity, I am compelled to decline the membership.

Yrs. with hearty thanks,

Henry D. Thoren
and Thoreau's response to a printed questionnaire from Baird about his scientific interests:
I may add that I am an observer of nature generally, and the character of my observations, so far as they are scientific, may be inferred from the fact that I am especially attracted by such topics as the "White, Yellow, and Black, Aspects of Nature." With thanks for your "directions," received long since.

Henry D. Thoreau
When the *Mr. Thoreau Declines an Invitation* was published, both documents were owned by John L. Cooley, a collector who supported the publication, and Cooley apparently assumed that Thoreau had included the questionnaire with the letter. Walter Harding, who wrote the title essay in the booklet, accepted that assumption, although he knew from a March 5, 1853, entry in the Journal that Thoreau had received the questionnaire long before December 19. Harding included Thoreau's private response to the questionnaire that appears in that March Journal entry: the part that's often quoted is Thoreau's characterization of himself as “a mystic--a transcendentalist--& a natural philosopher to boot.” Harding did comment on Thoreau's long delay in returning the questionnaire: “Yet, strangely enough,” he wrote, “though Baird’s letter had stirred him so much, for some reason or other he waited nine months before replying directly to him.” However, Harding accepted the idea that the questionnaire was an enclosure. In Harding and Carl Bode’s *Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, which New York University Press published in 1958, the two documents entered the canon connected, with the questionnaire following the December 19 letter (pp. 309-310).

Reviewing the letters to be included in the Princeton Edition’s *Correspondence 2: 1849-1856*, we had a chance to reconsider the connection between these documents. Thoreau’s March 5 Journal entry clearly indicates that he received the questionnaire either late in February or early in March 1853--he says he got it “the other day.” The full entry reads,
closed perfectly tight. It was put into a table drawer. Today I am agreeably surprised to find that it has there dried & opened with perfect regularity, filling the drawer, and from a solid narrow & sharp cone it has become a broad rounded open one--has in fact expanded with the regularity of a flowers petals into a conical flower of rigid scales, and has shed a remarkable quantity of delicate winged seeds. Each scale, which is very elaborately & perfectly constructed is armed with a short spine pointing downward, as if to protect its seed from squirrels & birds--That hard closed cone which defied all violent attempts to open it, and could only be cut open with, has thus yielded to the gentle persuasion of warmth & dryness. The expanding the pinecones that too is a season. Mr Herbert is strenuous that I say ruffed grouse for Partridge & hare for rabbit. He says of the snipe "I am myself satisfied that the sound is produced by the fact, that the bird, by some muscular action or other, turns the quill-feathers edgewise, as he drops plumb through the air; and that, while in this position, during his accelerated descent, the vibration of the feathers, and the passage of the air between them, gives utterance to this wild humming sound."

March 5th

F. Browne showed me today some Lesser Red polls which he shot yesterday--They turn out to be my falsely called chestnut frontleted bird of the winter. "Linaria minor, Ray. Lesser Red poll Linnet."

From Pennsylvania & New Jersey to Maine, in winter; inland to Kentucky. Breeds in Maine, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Labrador, & the Fur Countries--"Aud. Synopsis." They have a sharp bill--black legs & claws--and a bright crimson crown or frontlet--in the male reaching to the base of the bill--with, in his case, a delicate rose or Carmine on the breast & rump.

Though this is described by Nuttall as an occasional visitor in the winter it has been the prevailing bird here this winter.

Yesterday I got my grape cuttings. The day before went to the Corner spring--to look at the tufts of green grass--Got some of the very common leptogium? Is it one of the Collemaceae? Was pleased with the sight of the yellow osiers of the Golden willow--& the red of the cornel now colors are so rare. Saw the green fine threaded conferva in a ditch--commonly called frog-spittle brought it home in my pocket & it expanded again in a tumbler. It appeared quite a fresh growth--with what looked like filmy air bubbles as big as large shot in its midst.

The Secretary of the Association for the Ad. of Science--requested me as he probably has thousands of others--by a printed circular letter from Washington the other day--to fill the blanks against certain questions--among which the most important one was--what branch of science I was specially interested in--Using the term science in the most comprehensive sense possible--Now though I could state to a select few that department of human inquiry which engages me--& should be rejoiced at an opportunity so to do--I felt that it would be to make myself the laughing stock of the scientific community--to describe or attempt to describe to them that branch of science which specially interests me--in as much as they do not believe in a science which deals with the higher law. So I was obliged to speak to their condition and describe to them that poor part of me which alone they can understand. The fact is I am a mystic--a transcendentalist--& a natural philosopher to boot. Now I think--of it--I
should have told them at once that I was a transcendentalist— that would have been the shortest way of telling them that they would not understand my explanations.

How absurd that though I probably stand as near to nature as any of them, and am by constitution as good an observer as most—yet a true account of my relation to nature should excite their ridicule only. If it had been the secretary of an association of which Plato or Aristotle was the President—I should not have hesitated to describe my studies at once & particularly.

Sunday March 6th

Last Sunday I plucked some Alder (ap speckled) twigs— Some (ap tremuloides) aspen— & some Swamp (?) willow— And put them in water in a warm room. Immediately the alder catkins were relaxed & began to lengthen & open & by the 2nd day to drop their pollen—like handsome pendants they hung round the pitcher and at the same time the smaller female flower expanded and brightened. In about 4 days the aspens began to show their red anthers & feathery scales—being an inch in length & still extending

March 2nd I added the Andromeda March 3d the Rhodora. This morning—the ground being still covered with snow—there was quite a fog over the river & meadows which I think owing to a warm atmosphere over the cold snow.

Pm to Lee's Hill

I am pleased to cut the small woods with my knife to see their color—the high blueberry—hazel & swamp pink are green. I love to see the clear green shoots of the sassafras—& its large & fragrant buds & bark. The twigs or extremities of the branches of young trees 20 feet high look as if scorched & blackened. I gathered a pocket full of pignuts from a tree of Lee's Hill. still sound half of them. The water is pretty high on the meadows (though the ground is covered with snow) so that we get a little of the peculiar still lake view at evening when the winds goes down. Two red squirrels made an ado about or above me near the N. river hastily running from tree to tree leaping from the extremity of one bough to that of the nearest on the next tree—until they gained & ascended a large white pine, I approached and stood under this—while they made a great fuss about me. One at length came part way down to reconnoitre me. It seemed that one did the barking—a faint short chippy bark—like that of a toy dog—its tail vibrating each time—while its neck was stretched over a bough as it peered at me— The other higher up—kept up a sort of gurgling whistle—more like a bird than a beast— When I made a noise they would stop a moment. Scared up a partridge—which had crawled into a pile of wood. Saw a Grey Hare—a dirty yellowish gray—not trig & neat—but as usual apparently in a deshabille. As it frequently does—it ran a little way & stopped just at the entrance to its retreat. Then when I moved again suddenly disappeared. By a slight obscure hole in the snow it had access to a large and ap deep woodchucks (?) hole. Stedman Buttrick calls the ducks which we see in the winter widgeons & wood Shelldrakes

The Hemlock cones have shed their seeds— But there are some closed yet on the ground. Part of the pitch pine cones are yet closed. This is the form of one.
Thoreau’s choice of words in the Journal—“So I was obliged to speak to their condition and describe to them that poor part of me which alone they can understand”—strongly suggests that he is referring to what he wrote in the questionnaire after having returned it.

In exploring this question, I looked into Sally Kohlstedt's 1976 history of the AAAS (The Formation of the American Scientific Community: The American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1848-60 [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976]), and I learned that the replies to Baird's questionnaire were bound in a volume titled “Scientific Addresses,” now in the Baird Collection in the Archives of the Smithsonian Institution (call number RU 7002, Box 60). Kohlstedt notes that “The volume . . . shows mutilated areas where autograph seekers apparently removed signatures and even full replies” and mentions Thoreau's questionnaire as “not bound in the volume but held by a collector” (p. 195n11).

Several lines of Thoreau’s completed copy of the questionnaire lack initial characters, and I suspected that the stub might still be bound in the volume of “Scientific Addresses.” Bob Hudspeth, the editor for Correspondence, had an East Coast trip scheduled in spring 2009, and I asked him to check the volume in the Smithsonian Archives for a stub that fitted the left edge of Thoreau's questionnaire. He found it (photo courtesy of the Smithsonian Archives):
The bound questionnaires are in alphabetical order by the name of the respondent, and a number of the other responses are dated in the first two weeks of February 1853.

Bob also found bound in “Scientific Addresses” a copy of the cover letter Baird sent to accompany the questionnaire; it is dated November 25, 1852. This was George N. Burwell’s copy; it includes Burwell’s calculations of the cost of the volumes of *Proceedings of the American Scientific Association* that he wanted to purchase, with postage and an “Initiation fee,” and calculations in another hand that seem to reduce the amount owed by $2.
WASHINGTON, D.C., November 25, 1852.

The undersigned, desirous of obtaining a perfectly accurate list of members of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, respectfully requests that all to whom this Circular may be sent, will fill up the blanks on the opposite leaf, and return the same to him (prepaid) at the earliest possible moment. The name, and scientific, literary, professional, or other occupation, should be given at length; professors stating the institution to which they belong, and the chairs of which they are the incumbents, &c. A column has also been added for the insertion of the branches of science in which especial interest is felt. It is hoped that gentleman will not hesitate to communicate the information desired.

Copies of this circular will be sent to many who are not now members of the American Association, in order, as far as possible, to complete the lists of scientific, literary, and professional men in the United States. Those addresses, thus obtained, will be extensively used by the American Association, the Smithsonian Institution, the Coast Survey, and other bodies and individuals in the distribution of circulars, and printed matter of various kinds.

Very respectfully,

Your obedient servant,

SPENCER F. BAIRD,


The 5th volume of Proceedings of the American Scientific Association is now ready for distribution to members at $1.25 per copy. It may be obtained of Chas. K. PUGH, Rooms of the Boston Natural History Society, Boston; John Patterson, Albany; George P. Putnam & Co., New York; Dr. Zantinieus, Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia; or of Spencer F. Baird, Perm. Sec. Am. Association, Washington. The postage (prepaid) to any part of the United States is 15 cents. The other volumes may also be had of the above named agents at the annexed prices:

1st Meeting, Philadelphia, $1.25—postage, 10 cents.
2nd " Cambridge, 1.50 " 23 "
3rd " Charleston, 1.25 " 14 "
4th Meeting, New Haven, $2.00—postage 25 cents.
5th " Cincinnati, 1.25 " 13 "
6th " Albany, 2.00 " 20 "

9.25
10.25
11.37

$13.37
All of the evidence here, both Harding's and ours, is circumstantial, but I believe that our circumstantial evidence for separating the questionnaire from the December 19 letter and assigning it a date of “before March 5, 1853” is stronger than Harding's evidence--essentially, that the documents came into the possession of a collector together--for assuming the completed questionnaire was enclosed in the December 19 letter.

There is one more aspect to this issue that goes to the question of Thoreau's complicated response to the practice and the goals of science and the scientific community in the 19th century. Harding and others after him have concluded from the March 5 Journal entry and the December 19 letter to Baird that Thoreau declined membership in the AAAS, and indeed, you can see the word “Declines” in another hand on the manuscript. But Kohlstedt includes Thoreau as a member for 1853 based on his being listed as such in the AAAS Proceedings. I think it's likely that Thoreau knew he would be considered a member of the AAAS if he returned the questionnaire, and I think Baird himself proposed Thoreau for continued membership in November or December. I also believe that Thoreau's December 19 response, which Harding characterizes as “a superficial excuse,” was sincere. Newer Thoreau scholarship, especially that by Laura Dassow Walls in Seeing New Worlds, has given us a more nuanced picture of Thoreau's relationship to the scientific community of his time, and perhaps we're now ready to see that Thoreau was capable of joining the AAAS--for a year, at least--without surrendering his unique vision.
I hope I've managed to convey both the significance and the satisfaction involved in reading the stories told by Thoreau's manuscripts as physical objects. Thoreau himself enjoyed observing and interpreting physical evidence, from tracks in the snow to an oak wood springing up when a pine wood was cut down. As I try to wring every drop of information from the manuscripts Thoreau left behind, I have a sense that he would both understand and appreciate the effort.

This piece was initially presented as “Tracking a Life: The Narrative of Thoreau's Manuscripts” in a session at the Modern Language Association’s Convention in January 2011 titled “More Lives to Live: Thoreau's Life/Texts.” The session was sponsored by the Thoreau Society; Laura Dassow Walls presided.

Revised 1/2016