

## Introduction

ON THE THIRTY-FIRST of August, 1839, John and Henry Thoreau—brothers, aged twenty-five and twenty-two—set out from their home in Concord, Massachusetts, in a small skiff on the Sudbury River. They were bound for Hooksett, New Hampshire, about fifty-five water miles north. The boat was fifteen feet long, styled like a dory, and new. They had made it in a week. They carried two sets of oars and a sail. On the thirty-first of August, 2003, with a college roommate who has long lived in Concord, I set out in a sixteen-foot Old Town canoe at a put-in site on the Sudbury that is Thoreau scholars' best guess as the place where the Thoreaus took off. It is now the backyard of a couple named Kate Stout and Pete Funkhouser, who live at the intersection of Thoreau and Main. Across Main is the house where Henry David Thoreau died. He and John grew up in a now-long-gone dwelling thought to have been very nearby. John was his brother's best friend, perhaps his only close one. After nicking himself with a razor, John died of tetanus at the age of twenty-seven. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Henry's first book, rehearses their journey as a species of memorial, the fact notwithstanding that Thoreau never mentions his brother's name.

On August 31st, 1839, as the brothers prepare to launch, "a warm drizzling rain" rains all morning, so the Thoreaus delay their departure until the "mild afternoon." On August 31st, 2003, a cool and sunlit day, we were on the Sudbury soon after breakfast. In addition to houses with sloping lawns, Concord Academy was off to our right. Henry Thoreau founded an earlier Concord Academy in 1838. John taught there. Across a swamp on the left was Nashawtuc Hill, but in 2003

we could see neither school nor hill from the tree-screened Sudbury. The water was slow and smooth. In half a mile we came to Egg Rock, an outcrop of diorite, as impressive in its size as in words inscribed in the rock: “On the hill at the meeting of these rivers and along the banks lived the owners of Musketaquid before the white men came.” The rivers Sudbury and Assabet join at Egg Rock to form—as Thoreau tells us in the first words of his book—“the Musketaquid, or Grass-ground River.” It had been renamed Concord River, but “it will be Grass-ground River as long as grass grows and water runs here,” he says, suggesting a viewpoint not widespread in his time. Far into his text, he recalls boatmen, in low water, mowing the grass of the Concord River as if it were a hayfield, the better to deliver their freight.

Under light, steady current, the bent river grass pointed us downstream, and through the oaken pilings of the Old North Bridge. On the right bank—the British side of the bridge as the redcoats faced the Colonial militia—was an obelisk dated 1836. Off the other end, in bronze, was the Minuteman sculpture by Daniel Chester French, whose sitting Lincoln sits in the Lincoln Memorial. Inscribed below the Minuteman was the least obscure stanza of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Concord Hymn,” which Thoreau quotes and then follows with a couple of pages of his own verse. The “Concord Hymn” was first performed in 1837, when the obelisk was dedicated. Henry Thoreau was in the choir, singing. He was a senior at Harvard, days away from his graduation. John was in all likelihood present as well. The choir sang:

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,  
Their flag to April’s breeze unfurled,  
Here once the embattled farmers stood  
And fired the shot heard round the world.

The Thoreaus carried guns and fired them to signal their departure from town. In his book, Thoreau refers to Emerson—his mentor, his model, his benefactor, his employer—only as “a Concord poet.” In Thoreau’s wanderings north of the Moosehead—which resulted in “The Allegash and East Branch,” the first recreational American canoe trip reported to the future—Edward Hoar, a Concord neighbor, was with him all the way, and in nearly ten thousand words was mentioned only as “my companion” or “my friend.” This was, of course, not churlishness on the author’s part but a diffident custom practiced in his time, as if it were ordered by “The Concord Manual of Style,” or, for that matter, in the way that the modern *New York Times* seems to insist that the first-person pronoun be swaddled as “a visitor.” In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, John Thoreau is immortalized as “the other,” although it is not always clear who “the other” is. At dusk on the day they reach Hooksett, “one of us” goes up the bank to look for a farmhouse “where we might replenish our stores” while “the other remained cruising about the stream, and exploring the opposite shores” for a place to stay the night. It’s always “one” or “the other” never “me” and “my brother.” But this time Henry is trapped in his own terminology, as, in the past tense and from the author’s perspective in the rowboat, “the other voyageur returned from his inland expedition,” and we know that it was John who replenished the stores, getting precious little credit for it.

Not being as mannerly as Henry David Thoreau or the *New York Times*, I don’t mind telling you that my companion on the Concord River was Dick Kazmaier, who, after that first day, bid me farewell, yielding his place to my son-in-law Mark Senvold, who went up the Merrimack with me to Hooksett. The Thoreau brothers reached Hooksett on September 4th, as did

we, but along the way we stayed in different places than they did. Their first campsite was on an island in Billerica seven miles from Concord. At the end of the second day, they pitched their tent in Tyngsborough, on the Merrimack, a short distance below the ferry there. A short distance below Tyngsborough Bridge, where the ferry was, we slept higher up the bank, in a resort hotel called Stonehedge. On September 2nd, they rowed upstream into New Hampshire and on to the mouth of Penichook Brook, a little north of Nashua, where we arrived a full day ahead of them, taking out at Nashua's Greeley Park on September 1st. The difference was caused by an altered structure of the journey. The Thoreaus were traveling not only on two rivers but also on two commercial waterways. At the falls of Billerica, eleven miles below their home, they intersected the Middlesex Canal, which ran from salt water in Boston to the Merrimack at Middlesex (now part of the city of Lowell), "and as we did not care to loiter in this part of our voyage, while one ran along the tow-path drawing the boat by a cord, the other kept it off the shore with a pole, so that we accomplished the whole distance in little more than an hour." The whole distance was six miles, and by 2003 it included, among other things, the multipetaled cloverleaf where I-495 crosses U.S. 3 and also connects with an interstate spur. On the Billerica side of that cloverleaf, east and west of Brick Kiln Road, you can walk nearly two miles through deep woods along the old canal, which has aged there for a century and a half untouched and unrestored, thirty feet wide, water still in it, but low under green algal scum. White pines are there, tall enough to be the masts of ships. Honeysuckle, huckleberries, birches, oaks. In the low and distant hum of internal combustion, the quiet path is precisely the one the brothers used with their cord and their pole.

In Lowell, nearing the Merrimack, the canal emerges from woods and, conjoining Black Brook, becomes the water hazard that divides the second and third fairways of Mount Pleasant Golf Club, John and Henry all but visible hauling their skiff from the second tee and the third green to the second green and the third tee among the putting golfers, the swinging golfers, the riding golfers in their rolling carts.

Mark Svenvold and I—on September 1st—started out early in the day on the Merrimack in Lowell, directly opposite the place where three stair-step locks, in the afternoon of the same date, lowered the Thoreaus into the river. If we had it easier than they did, skipping over by necessity the Middlesex Canal, they had a softer time of it in New Hampshire. In 1826, a dam was built at Pawtucket Falls, in the heart of Lowell, Massachusetts, and, as Thoreau reports, “the influence of the Pawtucket Dam is felt as far up as Cromwell’s Falls,” in New Hampshire, five miles above Nashua. (The word “falls,” then as now, was applied not only to free-falling water but also to rapids.) The Thoreaus bypassed Cromwell’s Falls by means of a canal-and-lock system on the west side of the river. In the eleven miles between Cromwell’s Falls and Amoskeag Falls, in Manchester, the Merrimack ran (and still runs) on its post-Pleistocene gradient, white in its bouldered rapids. Above Cromwell’s and below Amoskeag, the heavier falls were circumvented by seven lock systems collectively known as the Union Canal. The Thoreaus, of course, whisked their boat upstream through the whole of the Union Canal, rowing, yes, against the currents of the pools, but everywhere relieved of the rigors of the rapids. Things would not be so for us. The Union Canal is rubble. Scouting our trip by car in mid-summer, I felt discouragement looking down into the massive boulderfields laced with white water in all

those miles approaching Manchester. I doubted that we could make much progress there.

Scarcely a quarter of a mile below the Old North Bridge, the Concord River enters the Great Meadows, which, in Thoreau's words, "like a broad moccasin print, have levelled a fertile and juicy place in nature." Part floodplain, part swamp, now on one side of the river, now on both, the moccasin print is six miles long, looks essentially as it must have in 1839, and is now Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge. Kazmaier, paddling in the bow, noting plants on the banks, said, "You can tell that fall is coming when you spot the purple loosestrife." Kaz is less well known as a naturalist than as a businessman whose Kazmaier Associates has seemed to have a tentacle in every aspect of most known sports, from the international licensing of basketball broadcasts to the manufacture and sale of baseball uniforms and football helmets. There was a time when the coming of fall would have been signaled to him by a little more than loosestrife. In the decades since 1945, he is one of four recipients of the Heisman Memorial Trophy who did not go into professional football. Instead, he earned an M.B.A. at Harvard Business School. The stiff-arm trophy is on a bookshelf in Concord, looking underattended in an acreage devoted to dogs, hens, roosters, goats, dressage rings, stables, and horses of his youngest daughter, Kristen, a professional equestrian, who lives next door. Routinely, he does "night barn" for Kristen—goes out in the late evening, fills buckets with water, and flips leaves of hay to the horses.

In a couple of administrations, Kazmaier had been chairman of the President's Council on Physical Fitness, but he didn't have to work hard on this placid river. Thoreau compares its "scarcely perceptible"

current to the character of people in nineteenth-century Concord. He also says the river's "wild and noble sights" are "such as they who sit in parlors never dream of."

We passed two fishermen in a boat, and asked how they were doing. "One fourteen-inch pickerel. Last week, I caught a thirty-inch northern."

Drawing away, we heard the man who had responded to our question explaining to the other fisherman that a pickerel is crafty and "lies in ambush."

In this same reach between Ball's Hill and Carlisle, the Thoreaus pass a bank fisherman with a silver-birch pole, and that sets Henry off into his classic and digressive set piece—four thousand words if it's a syllable—on fish and fishing: the passage in which the pickerel, "motionless as a jewel," waits to swallow "at a gulp . . . a brother pickerel half as large as itself," and "sometimes a striped snake, bound to greener meadows across the stream, ends its undulatory progress in the same receptacle"; the passage in which he tells us that he lovingly massages fish with his hands in the water; the passage in which he tells us that "he who has not hooked the red chivin is not yet a complete angler"; the passage in which he counsels the American shad, blocked in its runs by ever more dams, to "keep a stiff fin" and hope for a better world.

Another mile, and we watched a young guy on a granite outcrop pull a young pike from the water. It was two feet long. Where Thoreau heard "a faint tinkling music" of distant bells, we heard the tinkling of a motorcycle, but it was the only such sound to come over the river on this day before Labor Day. Hearing it, too, were a man and a woman rowing on the river in a four-oared shell. The Thoreaus' first overnight was on the west side of the island seven miles below Concord, four miles above the falls at Billerica, and we stopped

there for lunch. This was probably the same island. Thoreau mentions two, close together, and only one distinctly remains. We drank sweet bottled tea, and voluminously ate oatmeal cookies, fruit, potato chips, and ham and turkey sandwiches. For dinner in that first campsite, the Thoreaus had—make of it what you will—“bread and sugar, and cocoa boiled in river water.” They also drank the river cool. They heard foxes on the island in the night.

Obscured by the trees on the west side of the river was a Billerica subdivision called Rio Vista—its houses, bungalows, and cottages dating from the nineteen-twenties, its entrances flanked by concrete pillars raisined with spherical stones. I had wandered around in Rio Vista two months before, ingesting information. Billerica is pronounced as if he were one of three brothers named Ricka. John Ricka. Henry David Ricka. Bill Ricka. Rio Vista has a street named Thoreau, and I wondered how the residents pronounce that. Thoreau scholars generally accent the first syllable of his name. Elizabeth Witherell, editor-in-chief of *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau*, had told me that people around Concord seem to say therr-oh, as in “I gave it a thorough cleaning.” I knocked on the door at No. 22 Thoreau. Two slats of a Venetian blind came slowly apart. A woman of upper middle years informed me that she was not about to open the door. I shouted back through the glass, asking about an island in the river behind her house. “I never heard of one!” she shouted back. Would she mind telling me how she pronounces the name of her street? “Thor-OH!” she shouted, with a bold stroke on the “OH.”

“A name pronounced is the recognition of the individual to whom it belongs,” Henry Thoreau says, near the end of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. “He who can pronounce my name aright . . . is

entitled to my love and service.” His name is everywhere in Thoreau country. At the foot of Lock Street in Nashua, you approach the Merrimack through Thoreau’s Landing, a spread of nature-colored condos—handsome, homogenous, extensive.

Sunday morning and “the air was so elastic and crystalline that it had the same effect on the landscape that a glass has on a picture,” he writes. “We were uncertain whether the water floated the land, or the land held the water.” In 2003, the Concord was similar for us that Sunday afternoon. Blue herons lined it like gargoyles. Who knows what pious thoughts they were thinking. Thoreau says that on this day “the fishes swam more staid and soberly, as maidens go to church,” and “the frogs sat meditating, all sabbath thoughts, summing up their week.” Like the Thoreaus’ dory, our canoe moved through flat-calm water that reflected the surrounding world. Thoreau says, “It required some rudeness to disturb with our boat the mirror-like surface of the water . . . for only nature may exaggerate herself.” The water we rudely broke with our paddles was as clear as the air and the reflection. Moreover, in eleven miles on the Concord we saw one beer can (afloat), one orange-and-white plastic barrel (in the alders), and no other flotsam or jetsam. The Clean Water Act of 1972 was among the highest legislative accomplishments of the twentieth century. It owed more than a little to thought set in motion by Henry David Thoreau.

Just as he describes it, the Concord narrows dramatically and shallows out over a “yellow pebbly bottom” as it approaches the falls in Billerica, where the Thoreaus went off on the Middlesex Canal and where Kaz and I were to rendezvous with my wife, Yolanda Whitman, in her *Odyssey*. To let her know that we were in Billerica and when we would be landing, Kaz produced

a cell phone, waved it in the air, and said, “Henry David couldn’t do this!”

In the last quarter-mile, where the river widened and was something like a pond, we homed in on a small rock island with a single tree, and a very old brick factory that had been built, above the dam, forty-one years after the Thoreaus went through. Helen Potter’s Mill Mouse Gallery was in the bricks now, Colleen Sgroi’s Gallery and Art Classes, and the law office of Margaret Loranger Sweeney. The Middlesex Canal had crossed the Concord River here, drawing from this high point the water that filled the canal to the north and to the south. In a boulder on the left bank we saw a big iron D ring. It had held one end of the canal’s “floating bridge,” which supported horses hauling the commercial traffic. On Faulkner Street, the brick factory and a concrete bridge from 1930 occluded the route of the Thoreaus.

Where the brothers entered the Merrimack, whatever is left of the three locks that took them down to the river is buried beside Advance Auto Parts, 1-800 Rent-a-Car, the Tandoori Grill, and the Asian Pacific Buffet. The remains are under the Sterling warehouse for North American Van Lines and the rails of the Boston & Maine. Across Broadway from all those historic places is Hadley Field, with its baseball diamond, its children’s playground, its skateboard park, and its low stone marker as the route of the Middlesex Canal. Coming through the park, the canal went right through the warehouse and stair-stepped down to the river.

On September 1st at 7:50 in the morning, Mark Svenvold and I started off in a light rain, due west up the Merrimack. Starting up the Merrimack, Thoreau says, “We now felt as if we were fairly launched on the ocean-stream of our voyage,” and he compares the

village harbors in that reach of the river to the harbors of Venice, Syracuse, and Rhodes. The Merrimack there is a thousand feet wide and subject to the winds if not of an ocean at least of a good-sized lake. I hate fighting headwinds, so I was grateful for the calm gray overcast, the rain that diminished to mist. We would be paddling upstream about forty miles, at least twenty-five per cent of it with no help from the pooling influence of dams. Mark is six foot three, in his early forties, athletic. In this endeavor, I preferred him to his wife or, certainly, my wife. This wasn't my first rodeo. Mark also has the high fluency and ironic humor of someone else who went up this river, long ago. He is a poet, a creative-writing professor, and the author of *Elmer McCurdy*, a nonfiction book in which he easily bests the challenge that his central figure is a corpse.

Lowell, which had more than a hundred thousand people by 2003, already had twenty thousand in 1839. For Thoreau, this was not a wilderness trip; these were not the woods of Maine. It was a journey up a minor American Ruhr, partly developed and partly under construction, ever more nascent with miles north. On the riverbanks, rails were being laid as he rowed. In his book, when he calls Lowell "the city of spindles and Manchester of America," he is not referring to the ambitious village thirty miles upstream. Nor is he above a borrowed thought. In his duffel, he had John Hayward's *The New England Gazetteer* (published earlier in 1839), which describes Lowell as "the American Manchester."

The red bricks of Lowell and neighboring Chelmsford had come down the Merrimack in canal boats. Mark and I passed a four-story factory in whose tall windows about half the glass was not present—an empty brick shell of a bygone New England. CHELMSFORD MILLS FOR LEASE. The Merrimack is formed in central New

Hampshire by the conjunction of the Pemigewasset and the Winnepesaukee (Thoreau's Winnepisiogee) and flows pretty much due south to the Great Bend at Chelmsford, where it turns east for Lowell and the ocean. The Thoreaus, taking their "nooning," sat on sand under an apple tree and ate wild plums "opposite the Glass-house village" here at the Great Bend. Henry says that Merrimack means Sturgeon River. He doesn't say to whom. In the Algonquian language family, the word means, variously, Deep River and Rapid Water.

We turned the corner, headed north, and before nine in the morning were entering the channel behind Tyng's Island—the Pennacook Confederacy's phonetic Wickasee, Thoreau's Wicasuck, "a favorite residence of the Indians," home of the sachem Wannalancet, son of Passaconaway. Thoreau repeatedly brings up the history and predicament of native Americans from the seventeenth century forward, and what has become of their possessions, as he does here. Yet he might have been slow to understand the scene we came into now: men riding in little carts and seeming to kill things on the ground. In the mouth of the channel, paddling, we watched them, to our left, approach and putt on the third green. This was Vesper Country Club, dating from 1875, where Harry Vardon, who would win six British Open Championships, slept in a tent in 1900, got up, and set the course record. Joe Kirkwood played here. Walter Hagen played here. Vesper's first champion (1895) was Austin Chadwick, destined to become president of the Lowell Five Cent Savings Bank. The fourth hole, par 3, plays over the channel, its green on the mainland. As we went by, the golfers we had been watching were teeing off. A guy hit a shot into the water right in front of us, as if he were shelling a frigate. Running three-quarters of a mile before rejoining the main river, the channel was generally a hundred and fifty feet wide. Crossed by two small bridges,

it resembled a canal, which it had once been, when the dam in Lowell was less high and a lock lifted boats circumventing the rapids on the far side of Wickasee Island; but that was before the Thoreaus' time. In Henry's book, they row straight up the silenced rapids.

On their fifth day, above Amoskeag Falls, in Manchester, the brothers pass a ten-foot obeliscal monument to the family of Major General John Stark. It "commands a prospect several miles up and down the Merrimack," Thoreau reports, and goes on to say, "It suggested how much more impressive in the landscape is the tomb of a hero than the dwellings of the inglorious living." Then, in purest hermitspeak, he asks, "Who is most dead—a hero by whose monument you stand, or his descendants of whom you have never heard?" Five hundred feet up the bank, the monument is still there, veiled in vegetation and not visible from the river.

Stark died in 1822 at the age of ninety-three. While Thoreau notes that Stark "commanded a regiment of the New Hampshire militia at the battle of Bunker Hill; and fought and won the battle of Bennington in 1777," Thoreau seems not to have been aware that every automobile in New Hampshire would bear on its license plates the first four words of this apothegm from the general: "Live free or die; death is not the worst of evils." In any case, Thoreau does not quote it. Instead, looking up at the Stark memorial, he smolders with indignant irony, saying, "The graves of Passaconaway and Wannalancet are marked by no monument on the bank of their native river." That is no longer strictly true. In Litchfield, on the east bank of the Merrimack about halfway between Nashua and Manchester—where the Thoreaus saw acres of elms and maples six inches high—is Passaconaway Country Club.

As the Thoreaus rowed past Wannalancet's Wickasee, in 1839, a couple of men asked them for a ride off the

island, which Henry and John, freighted low, declined to provide. "As we glided away," Henry would recall, "we could still see them far off over the water, running along the shore and climbing over the rocks and fallen trees like insects." Or golfers.

At their campsite below the Tyngsborough ferry, they "hung a lantern to the tent-pole," spread their buffalo hides on the grass, and read the gazetteer, "our Navigator, and from its bald natural facts extracted the pleasure of poetry." They carried potatoes and melons: "We threw our rinds into the water for the fishes to nibble." Above Nashua at the mouth of the Penichook, they had more boiled cocoa for supper. At Coos Falls, below Manchester, they inadvertently pitched their tent in a trail used by masons who were working on the lock there. Early the following morning, while they were rolling up their buffaloes, the masons came by on their way to work. This was the only instance, Thoreau says, when anyone saw them in any of their campsites. Try that in century twenty-one. In Hooksett, when "the other" went to the farmhouse for food, he came back with "a loaf of home-made bread, and musk and water-melons for dessert." In Tyngsborough, when Mark and I went up the bank to the Stonehedge Inn, leaving behind the Thoreau brothers with their melon rinds and cocoa, we perused a menu that included, sans punctuation, "Herb Crusted Cod with a Organic Baby Vegetable and Wild Rice Casserole Maple Smoked Bacon Reduction." I had one of those. The wine list was only a little shorter than the Boston Area telephone directory, and might have appealed to a British banker. You could have a 1996 Meursault for \$176, a 1997 Gevrey-Chambertin for \$245, a 1984 Robert Mondavi Reserve for \$254, a 1953 Château Mouton-Rothschild for \$1,585, a 1947 Château Latour for \$3,400, or a 1945 Margaux for \$3,600. Laid down in the Stonehedge cave

were ninety-six thousand bottles of wine. In the center of the dining room was a glass tower of recumbent wines that may have been an architectural reference to the glass column of visible books in the Beinecke Library at Yale. Under the Stonehedge portico was a lingering black Jaguar, evidently a prop.

“We occasionally rested in the shade of a maple or a willow,” says the younger Thoreau, “and drew forth a melon for our refreshment, while we contemplated at our leisure the lapse of the river and of human life.” One night, “by a deep ravine, under the skirts of a pine wood,” a high wind arose. “The pines murmured, the water rippled, and the tent rocked a little, but we only laid our ears closer to the ground, while the blast swept on to alarm other men. . . . Long before daylight we ranged abroad with hatchet in hand. . . . Then with our fire we burned up a portion of the loitering night, while the kettle sang its homely strain to the morning star.” Thoreau had difficulty in his search for a publisher for this book. He eventually published it himself. After seven hundred and six copies were returned to him unsold, he said, “I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself.” From the Penichook campsite, after the wind subsided, he and John took off upstream in the dark at three a.m. in an enveloping river fog.

At the Tyngsborough ferry, the Thoreaus see “a gig in the gray morning, in the mist,” and “children with their two cents done up in paper.” The children’s fare was two cents. Off the west end of the modern bridge is the Henry Farwell House, dating from 1705, where English proprietors serve cheese scones, crustless mini-sandwiches, and, in bone china, teas that come out from under cozies. Farwell started the ferry service in 1809. The old town hall across from the Farwell House was five years old when the Thoreaus went by,

in 1839. Neighboring houses, still there, date from 1808 and 1790.

Svenvold and I went under the Tyngsborough Bridge soon after nine in the morning, hoping to complete the stretch from Lowell to upper Nashua by nightfall. We underestimated what we could do. At ten, we came to a sign on the right—"Welcome to Hudson, New Hampshire." A few more strokes and I looked over my shoulder. Nothing welcoming there. Massachusetts didn't care whether you died free or lived in California. The river was peaceful, mostly silent, secluded. From time to time, we heard the surf of highways we could not see. We saw kingfishers along the Merrimack, and blue herons, the fisher kings. Eight Canada geese came in, splat, for bellyflopping crash landings—the only kind of landing they can manage. We saw a shopping cart, a truck muffler, a dolly, dead sweepers full of styrofoam debris. A sweeper is a tree that is still connected to the shore but has fallen into the river. Current moves flotsam into the sweeper, which collects the flotsam. The Merrimack had its share of foul sweepers, but overall the river was remarkably clean, the sight we now came to notwithstanding.

Far ahead and near the west bank, a small geyser was shooting white water straight upward in the otherwise flat river. The eruption was only a couple of feet high but in that apparently motionless riverscape it had the focal effect of a natural phenomenon. It drew us toward it—the ultimate orifice of the Nashua Wastewater Treatment Facility, spinning great concentric swirls of white foam on the river, like half an acre of cappuccino. This hideous sight was enough to frighten a shipful of Vikings, as Mark Svenvold was prepared to affirm. The discharge smelled like laundry detergent and chlorine, nothing worse, but in this place more than anywhere else—including all the rocks and

rapids to come—I preferred that the canoe remain upright. The effluent seemed to disperse quickly and the water downstream had been clear as we approached—peculiarly, the signature of Thoreau and the environmental movement. In communities along the river, some three hundred thousand people drink the treated Merrimack.

Passing under a pair of high bridges, we came to the mouth of the Nashua River not long after noon. Turning into it, we pulled up the canoe on a sandy beach among boulders, and, under red maples, ate Stonehedge-prepared club sandwiches laced with avocado. The Nashua was clear, smooth, and fast—not white water but a firm current coming down through a railroad bridge whose bowstring trusses enhanced a lovely scene. The Nashua River, near its mouth, bisects the city, flourishing three oxbow bends before debouching into the Merrimack. The Thoreaus, after passing under a covered bridge and arriving at the Nashua, were not much interested. Henry praises the tributary for its “elm-shaded meadows” at Groton, but says that “near its mouth it is obstructed by falls and factories, and did not tempt us to explore it.” It tempted Mark and me, and we took off for the public library, digging hard against deceptive currents. A week earlier, for training purposes, we had gone a mile and a half against the upper Delaware at a stage near flood. But this was more difficult, possibly because the Nashua was shallow and we were not poling. Working off the avocado, we got around a meander bend and under the 101 bridge, almost a mile up. Then we came to a small island, beyond which were another railroad bridge and a dam. On our left was the spire of St. Casimir’s Catholic Church, dark-red brick, 1857. St. Casimir’s is on Temple Street near Scripture.

Scripture is one-way. On our right was a brick mill, fourteen years old when the Thoreaus went by, with three large arches standing in the river, framing a pitch-black watery cavern. We fought up past the arches to the top of the island, where we decided to let the Nashua return us to the Merrimack.

A two-mile digression is not a rarity in Thoreau. He is, to a fare-thee-well, an author with the courage to digress. In this same reach of the Merrimack, while slicing his midday melons, he mentions that they are “a fruit of the east,” and his thoughts go off, his pencil with them, to “Arabia, Persia, and Hindostan, the lands of contemplation and dwelling places of the ruminant nations.” He visits a lot of ruminant nations—their faiths, literatures, and philosophies—and returns reliably after a detour of six thousand words. On the Sunday morning that he hauls the dory through the Middlesex Canal, he passes a church, close to the Merrimack, whose congregation pours out as the brothers go by. This triggers five thousand words on comparative religion before the dory is lowered to the river. Had he been a candidate for employment in the pulpit of that church, the congregation might not have been eager to hire him. “Absolutely speaking, Do unto others as you would that they should do unto you, is by no means a golden rule, but the best of current silver,” he remarks. Jesus Christ “taught mankind but imperfectly how to live.” “The church is a sort of hospital for men’s souls, and as full of quackery.” On the Merrimack approaching Tyngsborough, he refers to God as “the Scene-shifter.”

One of his consultations with *The New England Gazetteer* gives rise to six thousand words of literary theory. “Books of natural history aim commonly to be hasty schedules, or inventories of God’s property, by some clerk,” he writes. Literary criticism is “the art of

navigation by those who have never been out of sight of land.” You can all but hear a student shout, “Go, T!”

Some of his digressions repay in brevity whatever the long ones may have borrowed. Paddling under an overhanging tree a few miles below Nashua, he goes into a high-density set piece of two hundred and thirty-five words about the species *Tilia americana* (American basswood), from which people have made matting, ropes, shoes, nets, cloth, roofing, bucklers, baskets, paper, cradles, sugar, medicine, gunpowder, and the “sounding-boards of piano-fortes.” The wood is remarkable for its “toughness and flexibility,” he says, and, withal, for being unusually light—as Mark and Kaz and I could testify after moving our canoe fifty-some miles with Shaw & Tenney basswood paddles in our hands.

In the dense fog above Penichook, Thoreau on the river cannot see a mountain he knows to be there, so he describes instead, in four thousand words, a mountain-climbing hike he once made in the Berkshires near Williamstown, with allusions to the Catskills thrown in. The pitted rocks of Amoskeag Falls inspire in him five hundred words on the notable potholes of New England, and they in turn lead him to outline his understanding of geomorphology, which somehow leads him into the ramifications of Roman history. The scholar Linck Johnson calls these patterns a “complex weave.” The first image that came to my mind was a string of lights—or any linear structure with things hanging on it, like a heavily loaded clothesline. In the magisterial Emerson, Johnson finds the aptest image. Emerson described the narrative of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* as “a very slender thread for such big beads & ingots as are strung on it.”

Thoreau’s structure would be almost pure free association were it not for the river reeling him back in.

The book seems something like a carnival midway, or a hall full of convention booths, or an aisle in a flea market. Thoreau invites you to linger at one of his tables, booths, or sideshows, a characteristic for which he surely deserves to be forgiven. This writing is commentary, editorial, philosophical, homiletic—defying generic assignment. Now he is John Muir, now he is Joseph Campbell, now he lingers in the doorway between psychiatry and religion. Near Reeds Ferry, he remarks, en passant, “We are double-edged blades, and every time we whet our virtue the return stroke straps our vice.”

By rough word count, most of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* is ninety per cent digression and ten per cent narrative. Near the end, the ratio is even more lopsided. Thoreau seems anxious to be done with the rivers, to get the geography out of the way, and bring the piece of writing to its oblique but cardinal purpose: a nine-thousand-word final digression, on friendship. Elizabeth Witherell, whose scholarly editing project *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau* was once on the Princeton campus and is now at Northern Illinois University, has pointed out to me, “John died in January 1842. His younger brother decided to memorialize him in a book in which he would combine an account of the trip with philosophical observations and meditations.” And she went on to say that “Thoreau looks first at and then through the landscape”; he is demonstrating “the timelessness at the heart of change.” Thoreau is in such a hurry going south that he seems to have enhanced the distance he traveled. In a two-day return voyage of fifty-four miles, he indicates that he went fifteen miles one day and fifty the next—a twenty per cent exaggeration, not an unheard-of inflation in recollections ten years old.

Thoreau did not begin writing *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* until 1845. That is what he was doing in his wee house at Walden Pond, which he built on Emerson's land. He also began *Walden* there, which he published in 1854. These were his only two books to appear in his lifetime. In 1839, he had not rowed to New Hampshire with intent to write a book. In the fourteen volumes of his journal, three pages derive from the trip on the rivers when he was twenty-two. After he died, at the age of forty-four, pieces he had contributed to *Sartain's Union Magazine*, *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, and the *Atlantic Monthly* were collected by Ticknor and Fields as *Cape Cod* and *The Maine Woods*. "Typically he would make a trip, write a lecture, lecture again, making changes, and eventually publish the lecture in a magazine," Witherell says. "There is no notebook from the Concord-Merrimack trip. He did write some things on the trip, because he says so."

In a light but steady rain, Mark Svenvold and I started out from Greeley Park, Nashua, around nine in the morning on September 2nd, six hours later than the Thoreaus, on September 3rd, left their nearby campsite at Penichook Brook and rowed off in the pitch-black fog. The banks of the Merrimack characteristically rise sheer for ten or so vertical feet before leveling out and then rising again steeply to a second terrace. Just about where the Thoreaus camped, a bit downstream from the mouth of the brook, we saw two small concrete tombstones, scarcely a foot high, on the shelf between the terraces. Mark somehow got himself up the ten feet, and read the inscriptions from the metal plates on the tombstones: HENRY 85-95, RILEY 86-95. Henry? An Airedale, possibly. A cat.

A gerbil. A parrot. A python. In the windless rain, we proceeded on, where Thoreau, on this “calm and beautiful day,” saw potato fields, pastures, corn, rye, oats, and “few houses.” From the Merrimack, “the country appeared much more wild and primitive than to the traveller on the neighboring roads. The river is by far the most attractive highway.” He could say that again in the twenty-first century. High behind the Merrimack’s western flank was Route 3—north-south like the river—a plastic strip mall running from one New Hampshire city to the next, a fast-food industrial complex. We rarely heard it and never glimpsed it. The Merrimack, bordered in its densities of trees, was a discrete world.

About two miles above Penichook Brook we came to Cromwell’s Falls. The impoundment of water behind Pawtucket Dam, at Lowell, is now said to extend to Reeds Ferry, five miles up from Cromwell’s Falls, but I would not describe as impounded a riffle of water gurgling over a ledge. It was an alluring sight at last to see the real river with its clothes off. There was nothing small about it—eight hundred feet wide, with a cluster of islands on the eastern side. Near the west bank was the massive stonework of the lock and canal that the Thoreaus and the floating freight carriers of their time had used to circumvent the ledge. Completed in 1815, it is one of the two best preserved components of the canal-and-lock systems on the Merrimack. Others are little more than big perches of cut stone strewn along the edge of the river. The lock doors, of course, were wooden and perishable, but some of the remains include hinges. The guide wall stood on the easterly side. Opposite was a large part of the long wall that led boats to the lock, just as the long walls of the Ohio, the Illinois, the Tennessee, the upper Mississippi lead thousand-foot tows past the bullnoses of guide walls

and into locks today. In boulders along the Merrimack we saw iron rings, where canal boats, in the heavy traffic, were tied up to wait for their turns in the lock. The drop at Cromwell's Falls is about six feet in something over half a mile—enough to make us work, and more than enough to make us wonder about the multiple rapids ahead. Once again, the rain was turning into mist.

“We passed Cromwell's Falls, the first we met with on this river, this forenoon, by means of locks, without using our wheels,” Thoreau says. They had brought a set of wheels from Concord to help them get around the rips of the Merrimack, but they never needed them. Reading *The New England Gazetteer*, Thoreau learned that Cromwell was a seventeenth-century trader whose dishonesty made a poor impression on the natives and they resolved to murder him. “This intention was communicated to Cromwell, who buried his wealth and made his escape,” said the gazetteer. Locally, Cromwell's buried wealth gave rise to as much legend as a Spanish galleon under the Straits of Florida. Thoreau rehearses various tales about farmers who may or may not have plowed their way to Park Avenue, and concludes with a remark that could have founded the Republican Party: “The truth is, there is money buried every where, and you have only to go work to find it.”

“These falls are the Nesenkeag of the Indians,” he points out. “Great Nesenkeag Stream comes in on the right just above.” The *keag* in “Nesenkeag” is pronounced *keg*, as is the same syllable in Amoskeag. Just above Cromwell's Falls on Route 3, very close to but not visible from the river, is a Budweiser brewery that has a production average of eighteen thousand kegs a day.

Several canal boats were present; the Thoreaus had to wait for the locks, for they were now “fairly in the

stream of this week's commerce." In 1839, commerce was what the river was about, the purpose toward which it had been altered. Some years before, the bricks of Lowell had been clay in the ground five or six miles above Cromwell's Falls, and now the bricks of Manchester were coming downriver to Amoskeag from Hooksett, much in the way that the Empire State Building would come to New York from bedrock near Bloomington, Indiana. A canal boat—seventy-five feet long, nine and a half feet wide—could carry sixteen cords of wood. It could carry sixteen thousand bricks. The Middlesex Canal and the canals of the Merrimack falls had opened the way to market for the commercial freight of northern New England. Dams, pools, locks, and canals had urbanized Passaconaway's river and implied the future of other rivers. Thoreau is lyrical on the working life of the river boatmen, whose outdoor existence he ranks extremely high. At Cromwell's, the brothers talk with one, "a rude Apollo of a man . . . in whose wrinkles the sun still lodged, as little touched by the heats and frosts and withering cares of life, as a maple of the mountain." Two such men crewed each boat, often barefoot. Upcurrent, they used poles about fifteen feet long with iron tips. They jammed the pole into the river bottom and then strained against it, same way you pole a canoe. Downcurrent, they steered—an oar at either end. Horses drew them the twenty-seven miles on the Middlesex Canal. A horse, just walking around, can carry roughly two hundred and fifty pounds. A horse dragging a canal boat could move fifty tons.

When the Thoreaus were small boys, the steamboat *Merrimack*, with a hundred and fifty people and a brass band, went up the canal from Boston and fifty-some miles into New Hampshire. Occasionally, in their boyhood years, a canal boat would come up the Concord

River “silently as a cloud, without noise or dust.” They marveled that the “vessel would float, like a huge chip, sustaining so many casks of lime, and thousands of bricks, and such heaps of iron ore, with wheel-barrows aboard.”

On the Merrimack in 1839, they would hang on to a canal boat, drift back with it, chat with the boatmen, and make use of the company water jug. Rowing north, Henry seems to have developed an opinion of the canal boats themselves that hovered closer to hate than to love: “A canal boat, with its sail set, glided round a point before us, like some huge river beast, and changed the scene in an instant; and then another and another glided into sight, and we found ourselves in the current of commerce once more.” He describes them “creeping stealthily up the side of the stream like alligators.” His metaphor goes halfway around the world, mixing in the process: “However, we were delivered from this fleet of junks, and possessed the river in solitude, once more rowing steadily upward.” Elsewhere, “with their broad sails set, they moved slowly up the stream in the sluggish and fitful breeze, like one-winged antediluvian birds.” The railroad was about to kill all these creatures. Writing his story in the eighteen-forties, Thoreau said, “The locks are fast wearing out, and will soon be impassable.”

A mile or so above Cromwell’s Falls, Thoreau climbed the always isolating bank and the steep river terraces above it to a point where he could see the precursory Route 3 “a quarter or half a mile distant, and the particolored Concord stage, with its cloud of dust, its van of earnest travelling faces.” A mile upriver were Thornton’s Ferry and Naticook Brook, which the Thoreaus drank. Matthew Thornton’s is one of the three New Hampshire signatures on the Declaration of Independence. Had the Thoreaus climbed the banks

and terraces there, they would have seen his homestead, which still stands, a door away from Dunkin' Donuts.

At the mouth of the Souhegan, which comes in a mile and a half above Thornton's Ferry, Thoreau digresses into a story about a hostile band of Mohawks who were there almost precisely as many years before Thoreau as Thoreau was before us. We digressed into the clear currents of the freestone Souhegan, as Thoreau evidently preferred not to do, and went up past its confluence with Baboosic Brook and on maybe half a mile before we were stopped by a calendar scene: water spilling white over a thirty-foot mill dam framed in the arch of a bridge.

Another mile up the Merrimack, the Thoreaus stop for lunch, as did we, on "a large island . . . with steep banks and scattered elms and oaks." The island is a couple of thousand feet long, and where they stop is not reported, but this is what they do for lunch: they notice a flock of migrating pigeons filling up the trees, and Thoreau bursts into song about the "greater travellers far than we" and the "wiry winnowing sound of their wings" and "their gentle and tremulous cooing." Running out of ode, he says, "We obtained one of these handsome birds, which lingered too long upon its perch. . . . It is true, it did not seem to be putting this bird to its right use, to pluck off its feathers, and extract its entrails, and broil its carcass on the coals; but we heroically persevered, nevertheless, waiting for further information."

Under a red maple near the north end of the island, where driftwood trees were piled high, Mark and I ate tuna-salad sandwiches, and, in lieu of boiled cocoa, finished them off with bittersweet chocolate. On the mainland, a cell phone tower, its head above the trees, watched over us. In the sand at our feet were two golf balls—each a Strata o. The Thoreaus would go on to

camp on the west bank above Coos Falls, but we elected to stop at Reeds Ferry and spend some time in the late afternoon assessing the Union Canal.

Frankly, it seemed impossible. Along the riverbanks leading into Manchester are precious few places—among all the industrial parking lots, airport approach roads, and dead-end streets—where you can get close enough to the river to have a look at the rapids, but from the Granite Street Bridge and the long Amoskeag River Walk at Arms Park we saw tumbling cascades that were even more rock than rapid. Through dense trees in Londonderry, near the airport, we glimpsed Coos Falls, fifty vertical feet below us and not much farther away. The water wove itself in white strands through massive black boulders. In Litchfield, farther south, we walked half a mile on a trail through high grass and along an abandoned trolley line in forest and down to Moore's Falls, longest of all, about a third of a mile—a beautiful riverscape in white, black, and green, the fact notwithstanding that it called to mind a quarry.

From Moore's Falls to Amoskeag Falls, a distance of about nine miles, the river least resembles what the Thoreaus saw, not only because a city of a hundred thousand has arisen where they entered a growing village whose population in 1830 had been eight hundred and seventy-seven, but, as noted, because they ascended the falls in locks and passed them in canals. We faced not only the sequence of rapids but the boniest rapids you would ever see, and we were facing them in the wrong direction. What to do?

At nine in the morning, we set off from Reeds Ferry and paddled up toward Moore's Falls, scarcely half a mile. From downriver, the rapids seemed to be a high New England stone wall across the end of a field, an illusion to be repeated all day. After landing on the east

bank, we set the canoe's center thwart, which was shaped as a carrying yoke, on Mark's shoulders, and we climbed in two hundred yards the sixty vertical feet that got us to St. Francis of Assisi Church, on the river's highest terrace, among parochial schoolchildren aswim in a playground. There we met Yolanda and the Odyssey, put the canoe on top, and further portaged a third of a mile to a cul-de-sac where an empty house with a real-estate sign hovered over the river. It was a form of portage I came, marginally, to regret, but the Thoreaus had two wheels, never mind that they didn't use them, and we had four. They had a two-thousand-foot canal down there and two locks to lift their boat ten feet; we had the ruins. Moreover, Moore's Falls is not only the longest rapid in the river, it is also the shallowest, suggesting Lexington Avenue in a heavy rain. With a fifty-foot rope, we lowered the loaded canoe down the precipitous incline, and from the lip of the bank lowered it again, the ten-foot drop to the river. You can't hurt an Old Town Penobscot 16.

Quoting *The New England Gazetteer*, Thoreau says, "We reached some rapids called Moore's Falls, and entered on 'that section of the river, nine miles in extent, converted, by law, into the Union Canal, comprehending in that space six distinct falls.'" Aimed at the next five, Mark and I continued upriver. Having no idea what sort of progress we could make, we had decided to give eight hours to the Union Canal, see how far we could get, and then find a way to remove the canoe from the river. We thought of Stark Landing, in the middle of the city, about three hundred yards below the Granite Street Bridge, but that was wishful thinking. Above Moore's Falls was a mile of flat water, or almost flat water. It was moving right along, but it was nothing like our training pitch on the upper Delaware. Thoreau describes "rowing incessantly"

through here and how pleasant it was to ease over into a canal and “lock ourselves through . . . for commonly there was no lock-man at hand,—one sitting in the boat, while the other, sometimes with no little labor and heave-yeing, opened and shut the gates, waiting patiently to see the locks fill.” A few lines later, he says, “We rowed leisurely up the stream,” and in places it was like that for Mark and me as well. It wasn’t all heave-yeing. It wasn’t all stiff current coming around boulders. There were swirling eddies, where current locally turned upriver. There were some deep, long pools.

On this date (September 3rd), the Thoreaus camped on the west bank just above Coos Falls—a name pronounced in New Hampshire with two syllables, like chaos, and in Oregon with one syllable, as in goose. As we approached Coos, we were again confronted by the chimeric stone wall, making the river look impassable. At each big rapid, a wing dam had been a component of the engineering—an oblique arm sticking far up into but not all the way across the river, its purpose to divert water through the canals and locks. The wing dam at Moore’s Falls had been thirty-two hundred feet long, at Coos twenty-five hundred. That’s a lot of rock to pile up. Now scattered through the rapids, it appears from a distance to be as integral as it once was, and from nearby to be the rocks of a riverbed on Mars. The Coos canal had been framed by the east bank and an island, and now consisted of two small pools separated by isthmuses of high dry rock. It was certainly no thoroughfare, but it seemed preferable to the souse holes, standing waves, and growling water that reached across the river from the west side of the island. We carried the canoe up and over the first isthmus, paddled the second pool, and carried the canoe across the boulders to the north end of the island. There was still a lot of

white water in front of us and no way to paddle it, so I walked upcurrent with the fifty-foot rope and, when it was straight, turned and pulled the canoe up to me. Three good pulls and it came on its own, or so it seemed—just picked its way around the boulders, up ledges, and through the little rips until I had to stop it with my hand. Mark came up and held the canoe while I made my way upstream another fifty feet with the rope. I turned and pulled. That got us to the pool above Coos Falls.

Soon we were at Goff's Falls, where the Thoreaus found "a small village, and a handsome green islet in the middle of the stream," and we found New Hampshire's largest city. The United States Geological Survey has a gauge at Goff's Falls, and on this day (as we would learn later) it was registering 3.25 feet, the river running at fourteen hundred and sixty cubic feet per second. A week before, it had been running at twice that volume. Four days later, it would be doing so again. There was a big iron bracket—like a staple, in cross-section two inches square—at the base of Goff's Falls. Mark tied the canoe to the iron for a while, to let it calm down before we lined it up the rapids.

The next rapid was just downstream of the bridge where I-293 completes a link from its parent highway to the Everett Turnpike, on the west side of the river. The trucks looked down into the Class 3 chaos of Short's Falls, the whitest water avoided by the Union Canal, with a central drop of seven feet in eleven yards. The roar of the river swallowed the sound from the bridge. We couldn't hear the trucks. We got into the river and walked the canoe, shoved it up sluices and hauled it over ledges. Mark later asked me what I had liked best about this day, and I said, "The way the canoe came up through the rips, following so readily when you pulled on the rope. It seemed to want to get

up there as much as we did.” In Short’s Falls, though, there wasn’t much of a chance to pull rope. Hanging on to the canoe, letting it support us as we moved against the currents, seemed the more sensible thing to do. A given piece of white water can be both softer than you think and less forgiving. It can let you walk through it, and it can pin you to a rock for the rest of your life. There were times, in holes, when I was up to my armpits, but that could not be called dramatic. Among armpits on this planet, mine do not imply great depth.

Four hundred yards above the interstate bridge we came to Carthagina Island, standing in a flatwater pool. Thoreau doesn’t call it by name, but he describes it as “a large and densely wooded island . . . the fairest which we had met with, with a handsome grove of elms at its head.” Carthagina Island is more than two thousand feet long. The American elms seemed to be gone, as you might expect; but there, sitting on a big rock in the river near the head of the island, was the icon American bird—a bald eagle, which appeared to have enjoyed a lifetime in which it had eaten extremely well. The Merrimack, even in Massachusetts, had been well attended by kingfishers, sandpipers, and eagles in the air. But this big eagle on the rock seemed in no hurry to move, seemed to have shed whatever ambition it once had. It looked lazy, fat, accomplished, interested mainly in its investments.

Less than half a mile above Carthagina, at Griffin’s Falls, where a twenty-five-hundred-foot wing dam had deflected water toward the east bank of the river and into a canal, the wing dam was, as usual, strewn through the rapids, but the canal was in beautiful condition. On its two sides, the big perches of windlassed granite were close in appearance to what they would have looked like when masons finished them in 1811. With Cromwell’s Locks, this was the best relic of the

Union Canal. Beside the top of the east wall was flat ground, a filled-in piece of the steep riverside, where the lockman's house must have been. Water was racing through the canal and lock, the doors, of course, long gone, and we would have put the canoe up through there had a large fallen tree, five or six feet in circumference, not been lying across the foot of the canal a few inches off the water. So we had to go around the lock, shoving and lining the canoe up the rapids and back into the canal at its upper end.

We decided to stop for lunch, Griffin's being a lovely place. If you are familiar with necropolitan Manchester, it is just down the bank from Pine Grove Cemetery, a mile below the Queen City Bridge. We had beached the canoe, spread our provender on the rocks, and were drying out a little when I happened to glance upward. My wife was studying us through the trees. All morning, she had been tracking us from byways and bridges, a feat so difficult in an automobile that she had failed to catch up until now, never mind that she was cleverer than I had been in finding places to get at the river, such as this one. We offered her lunch, and she accepted.

We shoved off. There was some tumbling water near an island half a mile up, and it seemed to be making sound befitting a big falls. I thought, That little rapid sure makes a lot of noise for something that is scarcely more than a riffle. What we were hearing, through a cuff of trees, was the combined Everett Turnpike and I-293, which go through downtown Manchester tight to the west bank of the river. In Thoreau's words, "The trees made an admirable fence to the landscape, skirting the horizon on every side."

Against the somewhat stepped-up current, we went under the Queen City Bridge and past the mouth of a tributary stream. Or, as Thoreau tells it, "Not long after

this we saw the Piscataquoag, or Sparkling Water, emptying in on our left, and heard the Falls of Amoskeag above.” The falls of Amoskeag were two miles upstream, and mighty they had been, but now—in 1839—they had long since been eunuched by the dam that was providing water for Manchester’s power canals, not to mention the thousands of feet of boat canal on which the Thoreaus would cruise through town. What the brothers were hearing from the mouth of the Piscataquog, as they soon discovered, was not Amoskeag Falls but the outlet of the power canals. Growing there as the Thoreaus went by was a solid mile of brick buildings, rising in four long tiers above the river—far and away the largest collocation of cotton mills in the world, and destined to make Lowell the Second City of spindles.

Just above the mouth of this river we passed the artificial falls where the canals of the Manchester Manufacturing Company discharge themselves into the Merrimack. They are striking enough to have a name, and, with the scenery of a Bashpish, would be visited from far and near. The water falls thirty or forty feet over seven or eight steep and narrow terraces of stone, to break its force, and is converted into one mass of foam.

In September 2003, no roaring water was falling down the terraces of stone, no exotic tourists were present, and there was nothing much to see on the river but forty seagulls in conference. Soon, we came to Stark Landing—farther up all the rapids than we had thought we’d ever get. Yolanda and the *Odyssey* had not arrived to meet us. The canoe, once again, had been faster. An elderly fisherman was sitting in a folding chair, flipping his lure into the river with no apparent interest in what it might encounter. He asked us what time it was.

“Two-thirty.”

Mark and I looked at each other. We had been on the river less than six hours.

The stem of the canoe never touched the landing. Instead it swung left, and headed for Amoskeag Falls. Quickly, we came to the rapids under the Granite Street Bridge. We crossed the river below them, and went up a few chutes on the west side, before paddling became impossible. We poled a little, but gave that up, jumped into the river, and walked and lined as before. To tell you the truth, it was easier hauling upstream than it would have been going in the other direction and clunking against all those rocks. It was actually a lot of fun—reading the river, picking the river, showing the boat up the *fil d'eau*, using the tongues of water, walking the eddy walls. So why did we cross the river to go up the western side? To mitigate embarrassment, among other things. This was Merrill's Falls, Manchester, at the city's central riverfront, where—from Arms Park, on the eastern side—a virtual amphitheater of granite steps descended to the river. In bed at night for three or four months I'd been listening to Manchester laughing—a chorus of Mancunians sitting on those steps convulsed by us on the way uphill with our canoe. If they had laughed at the Thoreau brothers, they would surely laugh at us:

We locked ourselves through here with much ado, surmounting the successive watery steps of this river's stair-case in the midst of a crowd of villagers, jumping into the canal to their amusement, to save our boat from upsetting, and consuming much river water in our service.

Through boulder gardens and bygone weirs, we gained on Notre Dame Bridge, passing Arms Park, the granite steps, and a completely indifferent Manchester—an all-but-empty River Walk, a chorus of zero. Overhead were a great many quarter-inch cables,

perpendicular to the currents, a gridiron in the air, strung high from shore to shore. From the cables, during kayak competitions, slalom gates are hung, touching the white water. I found three golf balls in Merrill's Falls. One was from a driving range who knows where, and one carried the logo of Intervale Country Club, two miles above Amoskeag Dam. Gradually, we got to the northern side of Notre Dame Bridge, and for us the end of white water. But not the end of stiff current. We climbed back over the gunwales, settled in, and to stay above the rips were paddling with all we had when the cell phone rang in the canoe. Someone closely related to us was calling to congratulate us, but we were paddling for all we were worth—really working at it in a muscle-aching way—and were in no position to take an adulation break, so, rudely, we didn't take the call. Glancing across the river, we could see the caller on the Amoskeag River Walk.

As Thoreau notes, "The descent of Amoskeag Falls, which are the most considerable in the Merrimack, is fifty-four feet in half a mile." That will give you a rapid to reckon with, and at this thunderous place native American people immemorially convened. Thoreau says that Amoskeag meant "great fishing place." R. A. Douglas-Lithgow's *Native American Place Names of Maine, New Hampshire, & Vermont* says it also means "One takes small fish." Be that as it may, Wannalancet kept a house nearby. We gained momentum and went on up the west side of the river in the tailrace pool of the dam, past the bare and truly mountainous beds of the dead cascade. The boat canal had required nine staired locks to get above it, when the thunder ceased.

On a small sandy beach just below the dam, Mark and I gave each other a high ten. Then we carried the canoe up an extremely short, extremely steep

trail—those fifty-four vertical feet—and into the parking lot of a Ramada, where we were checked in.

This was storied Amoskeag, where the spray curled up like smoke, and where Indians and colonists, in an annual rite of the spring migrations, danced, feasted, fished, and wrote treaties. In 1739, a hundred years before the Thoreaus' journey, the preacher Joseph Seccombe, who called himself *Fluviatulis Piscator*, delivered a sermon here that was later published as *A Discourse Utter'd in Part at Ammauskeeg-Falls, in the Fishing-Season*. Nine known copies exist of this first American publication on sport fishing, which *Fluviatulis Piscator* resonantly defended before his racially mixed outdoor congregation. A copy was sold at auction in 2001 for eighteen thousand dollars. That would surely impress Thoreau, in various respects: in 2003, you could still buy an original cloth first edition of *Walden* from [www.theworldsgreatbooks.com/literature.htm](http://www.theworldsgreatbooks.com/literature.htm) for only twelve thousand five.

Just above the dam we launched the canoe at nine-fifteen in the morning, in water, on this 4th of September, 52.8 feet higher than the water we had left the afternoon before. After scraping nine miles over bedrock and boulders, we were all but disoriented by the depth. It felt aerial. "Above Amoskeag the river spreads out into a lake reaching a mile or two without a bend," Thoreau writes, and this expansive reach among shorefront condominiums and broadcasting towers is where he thought the canal boats, sailing on ahead of him, were like a flight of one-winged antediluvian birds. Two miles north, at the first bend, we passed Intervale Country Club in a light steady rain, the calming, cooling sort of weather that had followed us all through the trip. We were outrun by a golf cart rolling along a fairway with a large umbrella open

overhead, making it appear to be a rickshaw from NASA. Aiming now for the big piers where Interstate 93 crosses the river, we passed private homes in the trophy range, with tessellated riprap like fortress walls, and elaborate stairways, balustered white, descending the riprap in stages to dual-console cockpit boats tied up below.

Making good time on the motionless water, we had soon covered more than five miles, were back in the wooded isolation characteristic of the river, and were looking up a straight shot of two and a half miles to a small distinctive mountain, or, in Thoreau's words, "We could see rising before us through the mist a dark conical eminence called Hooksett Pinnacle." After passing under three bridges, two of them abandoned, we would come to the end of our trip at A. J. Lambert Riverside Park, Hooksett Village, below Hooksett Dam—a spectacular scene colluding natural white cascades with water falling over the dam and plunging from the powerhouse. We would meet the Odyssey there, not to mention Yolanda, who would drop down from the interstate past the corrugated structures of HOOKSETT SELF STORAGE—RECORD PROTECTION.

The Thoreaus had not rowed that far. They had stopped for the night—September 4th—somewhere close to the beginnings of the last long reach toward the Pinnacle, where we were now. This was where John went to the farmhouse for provisions and came back with "a loaf of home-made bread, and musk and water-melons for dessert." Then the brothers crossed the river, to the east bank, and found a "convenient harbor"—the mouth of a small stream—where they could hide their boat. This was as far north as they traveled on the Merrimack River, the place from which they went off on foot and by stagecoach for seventeen

pages in the White Mountains—their week within a week—and then returned to find the hidden boat and head downstream for home. Mark and I found the mouth of a brook coming in from under a railroad track through a very long cylindrical culvert, which we could look through as through a telescope, seeing verdure at the far end, H. D. Thoreau framed in cameo.

“We had come away up here among the hills to learn the impartial and unbribable beneficence of Nature,” he says of this moment, but while he was waxing philosophical one of his melons drifted away. He had put it in the mouth of the creek to cool, and it took off. “In pursuit of this property,” the brothers jumped into their boat, chased the melon downstream, and, “after long straining of the eyes, its green disk was discovered far down the river, gently floating seaward.” They had cut a tap out of the melon to hasten the cooling, yet the melon had stayed upright, and, in the unbribable beneficence of Nature, no water had gone into the tap.

—*John McPhee*  
*Fall, 2003*