

Thoreau-ly Digital

CA students extend the life of a landmark Concord Museum exhibition online

When you live in a place as significant to America's history as Concord, Mass., it can be easy to take for granted the treasures in your own backyard. Perhaps no single literary figure is more associated with Concord than transcendentalist author Henry David Thoreau, whose Walden Pond lies just south of Concord Academy.

This fall, an exhibition at the Concord Museum, in cooperation with the Morgan Library and Museum in New York, marked the bicentennial of Thoreau's birth with an unprecedented assemblage of his journals and personal items, from the world's two largest Thoreau collections. The exhibition, *This Ever New Self: Thoreau and His Journal*, has run its course in Concord but lives on online thanks to the work of several CA students.

In its first formal integration with a CA course, the museum partnered with history teacher Topi Dasgupta and the students in her Digital History research seminar. Dasgupta wanted to collaborate with an institution so that her students could both get real-life experience and contribute to the sum of knowledge.

"We wanted to continue pairing the ideas that emerged from the journal with the objects in some way," says Concord Museum curator David Wood. The museum focuses on the lessons to be learned from objects, from how they're made and used. "The students gave us five fascinating and different ways to do that."

"We were amazed by the creativity CA students displayed," says Susan Foster Jones, the museum's manager of school partnerships. "They came up with projects we would never have thought



1. A box that once held John Thoreau & Co. pencils illustrates one of the professions that allowed Thoreau to "get a living." 2. Thoreau sat for a photograph only twice, the last time in 1861. His friend Daniel Ricketson had this replica made in 1862 after Thoreau's death. 3. Around 1830, Thoreau embellished this straight-edge with his initials, DHT, for David Henry Thoreau, his given name. 4. Ill with tuberculosis, Thoreau spent his final months editing lectures and essays for publication. Sophia Thoreau later attached a message to this quill pen: "The pen brother Henry last wrote with." Courtesy of the Concord Museum.

of. Students this age are rarely aware of the kind of pedagogy that differentiates museum education from classroom education, but these students were aware of our field and very sophisticated in the questions they asked."

After touring the exhibition, students returned to pitch their ideas in teams, with rounds of guidance from museum staff. They considered how to spark conversations among different audiences: families, multigenerational groups, even strangers. "That was exciting to pass on to a younger generation," Jones says. "It's what we grapple with on staff, and they provided fresh perspectives. It's a great reason to collaborate with students. It keeps us on our toes and aware of our younger audience."

Using apps and documentaries, the projects explore different facets of Thoreau's writings. Wood is especially taken with one experimental film, an analogy between Thoreau's "library of nature" and postmodern Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges' *The Library of Babel*. "What struck me was that they were insisting on something Thoreau always insisted on: that he could be straightforward and scientific, but that's not all there is to it," he says. "It was just amazing how these students grasped the big picture."

"It was a wonderful experience working with the museum staff," says **Anna Dibble '18**, whose group developed an interactive timeline. "They helped us discover intricate details of Thoreau's work and belongings that would have otherwise gone unseen. Our time at the museum was so influential that my group shifted the goal of our final project to creating a lasting legacy of our experience."



"The rewarding part for us was when we got to pull something out of our quiver to help them shape their ideas," Wood says.

The course culminated with the projects, but they weren't its only focus. Students read case studies from archives and museums, considered the historical shift from an oral to a written culture, delved into laptop reading studies, and questioned their own digital presences and use of technology.

A field just two decades old, digital history is a discipline in the process of defining itself. "Students are thinking creatively about what to do with new media," Dasgupta says. With students constantly on their devices, she says, only half-joking, "They're getting more of an education from them than they are from

us." This course helps train them to engage critically online.

In developing the course, Dasgupta was inspired by her fellowship at the History Design Studio at Harvard's Hutchins Center and her work with Vince Brown, a leader in shaping the digital humanities field. Brown's cartographic narrative about an early Jamaican slave rebellion that demonstrates, counter to British historical records, the coordination and complexity of the slave resistance is a quintessential example of digital history.

The opportunity to tell a different story hit home for **Owen Elton '19**, whose group developed an app to give a historical perspective on the natural world around Concord. "It's a way to acknowledge what people say: that the victors

write history," he says. "This technology allows a more human perspective to shine through."

"The idea that the digital world is an archive of knowledge gained over centuries — that idea of preservation stuck with me," says **Eugene Lee '18**, whose group created an interactive conceptual map. "This project has a reach far beyond Concord."

As for the Concord Museum, the door to future partnerships with CA is open. "As Thoreau said," says Wood, "the prospect hence is infinite." — *Heidi Koelz*

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To experience the students' digital history projects, visit www.concordacademy.org/digitalhistory.