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 Susan Foster Jones, the museum’s manager of school partnerships. “They came up with ways to do that.”

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. “That struck me as 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 intimate 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 from creating a lasting legacy of our experience to this quill pen: “The pen brother Henry last wrote with.” Sophia Thoreau later attached a message for publication. Sophia Thoreau later attached a message for publication. Sophia Thoreau later attached a message for publication. Sophia Thoreau later attached a message for publication.

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. The opportunity to tell a different story hit home for Owen Elton ’19, whose group created an interactive concept 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 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 victors write history.” “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.”