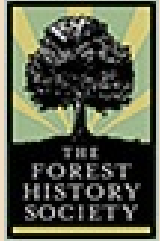


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The Virtue of Thoreau: Biography, Geography, and History in Walden Woods

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Abstract

In the field of environmental history, Henry David Thoreau has come to symbolize the arrival of a preservationist ethos in American culture. His retreat to a secluded house in Walden woods, his book *Walden*, and essay “Walking,” and millions of journal words about the Concord and New England landscape have all suggested the possession of a proto-environmentalism in Thoreau's life and literature. This essay documents the construction and use of the preservationist Thoreau by environmental historians. It then offers a summative profile of Thoreau's life leading up to his Walden experiment that challenges our common view. Finally, it examines the context of Thoreau's activity and writing following his Walden stay during the late 1840s and 1850s (Thoreau's most nature-oriented period), revealing the preservationist reading to be an incomplete rendering of Thoreau's overall interests.

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