



*From B. E. Maxham's daguerrotype (1856)  
Courtesy The Thoreau Society*

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

*The Correspondence of*

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

*Edited by* WALTER HARDING *and* CARL BODE



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*To Marjorie Harding and Margaret Bode*

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## *The History of Thoreau's Published Correspondence*

Although scattered letters by Thoreau have been published in numerous books and articles, only two major editions of his letters have appeared. Neither of these is inclusive; neither attempts to add the letters written to Thoreau. Ralph Waldo Emerson edited the first compilation, *Letters to Various Persons*, in 1865, only three years after Thoreau's death. His purpose, as he told Thoreau's sister Sophia, was to exhibit "a most perfect piece of stoicism." To that end he omitted from some of the letters "private or personal references." Many letters he simply omitted entirely. Sophia Thoreau protested and insisted on inserting letters that would show "some tokens of natural affection." She said that "it did not seem quite honest to Henry" to omit such passages. Emerson said, though, that she had "marred his classic statue"; and the matter was referred to James T. Fields for settlement. He proposed a compromise that retained a few of the letters she had inserted. So says Sanborn in his *Henry D. Thoreau* (pp. 305-6).

Emerson's edition was, then, highly selective. He included only sixty-five letters. "Verbal corrections" were made. The recipients were frequently identified only by initials, and there were no indications of excisions. No doubt Emerson's intentions were of the best, since he was doing what he thought most likely to insure Thoreau's fame and emphasizing what he thought to be Thoreau's strongest point. But he succeeded only in producing a distorted picture, forgetting all the warmer qualities "needed to balance the fundamental stoicism which Emerson perceived in his friend." It was this edition that gave James Russell Lowell the opportunity to denounce Thoreau as cold and humorless. In the *Atlantic* for October 1865 Thomas Wentworth Higginson similarly

complained of these letters: "There is almost no private history in them; and even of Thoreau's beloved science of Natural History, very little." Apparently only Bronson Alcott was satisfied with the edition. He commented in his *Journals* (p. 374): "The most remarkable addition to epistolary literature that we have had; a book likely to be read and prized as are Marcus Antoninus, Pliny, Plutarch, and the delightful works of that class, for years to come. Indeed, I may say, the book is unique for the weight of wit, the high moral tone, the surpassing insights, and the fast hold it shows alike on thoughts and persons. The style, too, is as remarkable as the rest, and altogether proves the remarkable gifts of the man and the author. Thoreau is sure of living while New England survives and Nature continues to interest mankind." Perhaps because Alcott knew Thoreau so well as a person, he was able to see the humanity in the letters. Today's reader is apt to find Emerson's edition of the letters unsatisfactory.

In 1894 Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, another friend and neighbor of Thoreau, edited a more comprehensive volume under the title *Familiar Letters of Henry David Thoreau*. It contains 130 letters—more or less, for Sanborn's kind of editing makes it hard to tell—by Thoreau (increased to about 140 in the 1906 edition, entitled simply *Familiar Letters*, Volume VI of *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*) and fragments from a few letters to him. All the letters in Emerson's edition are included, many in more detailed form. It was Sanborn's announced intention "to give the world . . . a fuller and more familiar view of our friend" than that afforded by the Emerson edition. For this purpose he chose "many letters and mere notes, illustrating his domestic and gossipy moods . . . and even the colloquial vulgarity . . . that he sometimes allowed himself."

Although Sanborn's edition was twice the size of Emerson's, it likewise aimed at neither completeness nor accuracy. It omitted many letters published elsewhere, even some published by Sanborn himself. He was guided in his editing by the practice, then common, of revising and polishing the originals to suit the style of the day. Hardly a letter was left untouched. In one letter, chosen at random, there are over 100 changes in punctuation, grammar, spelling, and wording. Although these changes do not as a rule alter the meaning, they do give us a false idea of Thoreau's style. Moreover, in a few of the letters the changes are so drastic that the original can scarcely be recognized at first glance. An excellent example is the letter to Horace Greeley of May 19, 1848,

as a comparison of the manuscript in the Boston Public Library with Sanborn's transcription will show. Furthermore Sanborn sometimes gave two different versions of the same letter. For example, he printed one version of the letter written to Thoreau by James Elliot Cabot on May 27, 1847, in his *Henry D. Thoreau* and a second in *Familiar Letters of Thoreau*. The two versions overlap in parts, but each contains material not in the other. Because the original manuscript has disappeared, we have to be satisfied with a mosaic of the two and wonder about the original letter. Sanborn was also careless about dates. He occasionally dated the same letter differently in different printings, as for example the letter of February 12, 1843 from Emerson, which he dated correctly in the *Atlantic*, but February 10, 1843 in *Bronson Alcott at Alcott House*. In *Familiar Letters of Thoreau* he quoted a portion of a letter of December 2, 1847 from Emerson and a part of another letter of March 25, 1848, entering them together as one letter dated February 1848, halfway between the two. Sanborn forces the student to question the dating of many of the letters he handled.

Sanborn published elsewhere, as we have seen, a number of letters from Thoreau's correspondence. He printed a large portion of the Thoreau-Greeley correspondence in his 1882 biography of Thoreau, including twenty-three letters from Greeley and one from Thoreau. In 1892 he printed thirty-one letters (as he counted them) from the Emerson-Thoreau correspondence in two installments in the *Atlantic Monthly*. He also scattered other letters to and from Thoreau throughout his various books and articles, too often with little regard to appropriateness. Unfortunately all these printings display the same faults that mar his editions of the letters. Exactly how many letters Sanborn changed drastically we shall never know, for many of the manuscripts have disappeared. Yet with all his faults as an editor—faults more the product of the time than of the man—he compels our gratitude for a great many letters from Thoreau's correspondence that we might otherwise never have known.

Although the Emerson and the Sanborn volumes have been the only major editions of Thoreau's correspondence, over the years several small groups of his letters have appeared in print and remain as important source material. One of these is *Some Unpublished Letters of Henry D. and Sophia E. Thoreau*, edited by Dr. Samuel Arthur Jones in 1899. It contains the brief correspondence with Calvin Greene, Thoreau's Michigan disciple, later reprinted in Sanborn's edition of 1906. Dr. Jones

established an important precedent in the editing of Thoreau's letters by printing a relatively accurate and literal transcription of the original manuscripts. Dr. Jones's friend Edwin B. Hill carried on this tradition in leaflets giving exact transcriptions of several Thoreau manuscript letters. The output of his press was small, but his texts were accurate.

In 1902 Anna and Walton Ricketson issued a memorial volume for their father entitled *Daniel Ricketson and His Friends*, which contained twenty-five letters from Thoreau to Ricketson and thirty-two from him to Thoreau. Except for correcting grammatical errors they gave a reasonably close transcription of the texts and demonstrated once more the value of presenting both sides of a correspondence. In that same year E. Harlow Russell, principal of the State Normal School, Worcester, and inheritor from Harrison Gray Otis Blake of the great bulk of Thoreau manuscripts, published for the American Antiquarian Society at Worcester a pamphlet that contained two letters from Thoreau to Isaac Hecker and two from Hecker to Thoreau—*A Bit of Unpublished Correspondence between Henry D. Thoreau and Isaac T. Hecker*.

In 1908 the Vermont Botanical Club issued a bulletin containing an article, "Thoreau in Vermont in 1856," on the unpublished correspondence of Thoreau and a Miss Mary Brown of Brattleboro. It was poorly edited by Mrs. Elizabeth Davenport, who gave only fragments of three letters.

In 1940 one more collection of Thoreau letters appeared as an appendix to *The Concord Saunterer*, by Reginald Lansing Cook. It contained literal transcriptions by Dr. Viola White of five letters and part of a sixth from Thoreau, the manuscripts of which are now in the Abernethy Library at Middlebury College.

Single letters from Thoreau to his correspondents have been appearing in print ever since William Lloyd Garrison printed a letter in the March 28, 1845 issue of the *Liberator*. They have appeared in magazine articles, newspaper columns, biographies and autobiographies, pamphlets and leaflets, book auction catalogues, critical articles and books, and all sorts of unlikely and inaccessible places. Sanborn gathered a few of these stray printings into his compilations, but the greater number, including all those published since 1906, have remained widely separated.

When we turn to the letters written to Thoreau, we find that their publication has been even more haphazard. Except in the few instances

noted above of editors gathering both sides of a correspondence, most of the letters to Thoreau have been neglected. Sanborn scattered some, particularly those from Horace Greeley, among his biographical works. A few letters from Charles Lane, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and one or two others have appeared in print elsewhere. Professor Ralph L. Rusk has made the most notable contribution in his edition of the Emerson letters. Because the field was permitted to lie fallow so many years, however, the great bulk of the letters to Thoreau have long since disappeared. Only the fact that Thoreau used the backs of many of the letters he received for his essays and *Journal* has preserved some of them for this edition.

The present edition is, then, the first attempt to print in one collection every available surviving letter written by and to Thoreau.

## *Explanatory Note*

Any editor of manuscript materials is immediately faced with the problem whether he is to aim his text at the general reader or the scholar. In this edition we have attempted to satisfy both without compromising the purposes of either. We have tried to make the texts of the letters as readable as possible for the layman and as accurate as possible for the scholar. For clarity therefore we have occasionally had to insert identifications of individuals, places, and other matters mentioned. But every such addition has been set off in brackets. In the rare instances where reproduction of an oddity in the original irresistibly suggests an overlooked printer's error we have permitted ourselves a cautionary "[*sic*]." The only silent change we have made in the text is the omission of a few obviously inadvertently repeated words. Our treatment, we hope, will enable the layman to find a readable text and the scholar to construct an accurate reproduction.

Wherever possible we have based our texts on the original manuscripts. Occasionally we have been forced to resort to microfilms or photostats, and still more rarely to transcripts made by individuals on whom we could depend. (Every such transcript is indicated by the insertion of the word "typescript" immediately after the identification of the manuscript source.) Only as a last resort, when unable to trace a manuscript, have we depended on a printed source, and in that event we have tried to determine the most accurate printed version available.

The letters have been placed in chronological order according to the date of writing. Where there are two or more letters for a single day they have been arranged alphabetically by author or recipient. The letters not exactly dated have been entered as close as possible to the probable date of composition. A letter dated only by month appears at the end of that month; one dated only by year at the end of that year. If

a letter can be dated only before or after a certain date, it will be found immediately before or after that date. If a letter has no date at all and we have not found any clue to its date, it will be found at the end of the book.

We have tried to include in this edition every letter written by or to Thoreau for which any of the text still exists. (In our "Henry David Thoreau: A Check List of His Correspondence," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, LIX, May 1955, 227-52, we have also listed many letters that once existed but have since disappeared; also the letters misdated by other editors.) The only exceptions that we know of—we should be sanguine indeed if we were to assert that no other letters may at some later date come to light—are some letters in the possession of Professor Raymond Adams of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, who has not seen fit to release them for our use.

We have given each letter a heading that indicates, if the letter were written by Thoreau, to whom it was written, or, if it were written to Thoreau, by whom it was written. Any of this information about which there is doubt we have followed with a question mark.

Although we have been careful to follow the paragraphing indentions of the original letters, we have not attempted to indicate the *exact* spacing of the heading, close, and paragraph indentation; these have been blocked and formalized.

Many of the letters we have followed with brief annotations. In these we have tried to make a compromise between the kind of information the general reader wants and the kind the specialist asks. What one reader will need, another will not; there is no perfect answer to the problem of annotation. For the reader's convenience we have repeated some of the information from letter to letter.

At the end of each letter (or of the notes on it) we have indicated the source of our text. For some of the more frequent sources we have used abbreviations, a chart of which follows this explanatory note. If the text of a letter is first printed here, the source is followed by the words "previously unpublished." It should also be noted that many letters not so marked contain new material, for earlier editors have often printed cut versions of them.

At the beginning of each year we have inserted, to help place the letters in their proper context, a brief note indicating some of Thoreau's activities for the year and some of the events in the world around him.

## Abbreviations and Major Sources

<i>Abernethy</i>	The Abernethy Library of American Literature, Middlebury College; Manuscript
<i>Atlantic</i>	<i>The Atlantic Monthly</i>
<i>Berg</i>	The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, New York Public Library; Manuscript
<i>Cholmondeley</i>	"Thoreau and His Friend Thomas Cholmondeley," edited by F. B. Sanborn, <i>The Atlantic Monthly</i> , LXXII (December 1893), 741-56
<i>Emerson Letters</i>	<i>The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson</i> , edited by Ralph L. Rusk, six volumes (1939)
<i>Emerson-Thoreau</i>	"The Emerson-Thoreau Correspondence," edited by F. B. Sanborn, <i>The Atlantic Monthly</i> , LXIX (May-June 1892), 577-96 and 736-53
<i>Familiar Letters</i>	<i>Familiar Letters</i> , enlarged edition, edited by F. B. Sanborn; Volume VI in The Manuscript Edition of <i>The Writings of Henry David Thoreau</i> (1906)
<i>Familiar Letters of Thoreau</i>	<i>Familiar Letters of Henry David Thoreau</i> , edited by F. B. Sanborn (1894)
<i>Harvard</i>	The Harvard University Library; Manuscript
<i>Hosmer</i>	The Alfred Hosmer Collection, Concord Free Public Library; Manuscript
<i>Huntington</i>	The Henry E. Huntington Library; Manuscript
<i>Lownes</i>	The Albert E. Lownes Collection; Manuscript
<i>Morgan</i>	The Pierpont Morgan Library; Manuscript
<i>New York</i>	The New York Public Library; Manuscript not in the Berg Collection
<i>Ricketson</i>	<i>Daniel Ricketson and His Friends</i> , edited by Anna and Walton Ricketson (1902)