

The Date(s) and Context of Thoreau's Visit to Brook Farm

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Until 1998, when Sterling F. Delano reported that a letter to Emerson from George Partridge Bradford (1807–1890) shows unequivocally that Henry Thoreau visited Brook Farm in December 1843,¹ there had been no firm documentation of such a visit. Dated “Brook Farm Dec 12, 1843,” a Tuesday, the letter begins, “Dear Waldo, I have been troubled at my want of hospitality in letting Henry Thoreau go away last week in the midst of the snowstorm; and have had fears that he may have suffered in his throat in consequence.”²

When he visited Brook Farm, Thoreau was returning to New York from Concord, having just spent the Thanksgiving holiday with his family; through what must have been a misunderstanding, however, Bradford thought that Thoreau was on his way to Concord, not New York. Thus, in his anxiety over the threat to Thoreau's health, Bradford later that day “called at the Concord stage office [almost certainly in Boston] but found the coach had gone and so could not learn whether he suffered.”³ If Thoreau did suffer while traveling in the storm, it would almost certainly have been on a train heading to New York City—or in some drafty railroad waiting room in Boston—not on a

¹ Sterling F. Delano, “Thoreau's Visit to Brook Farm,” *Thoreau Society Bulletin* 221–222 (Fall 1997–Winter 1998): 1–2.

² In his Journal, Emerson records that he had visited Brook Farm sometime earlier that year. “I was at Brook Farm,” he writes in part, “and had a cheerful time. . . . Fine weather, cheerful uplands, & every person you meet is a character & in free costume” (*Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, William H. Gilman and J. E. Parsons, eds. [Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970]: 8: 428).

³ The Fitchburg Railroad was under construction at the time. An item on the second page of the *Boston Evening Transcript* of December 19, 1843—about a fortnight after Thoreau's visit to Brook Farm—reports that, “THE FITCHBURG RAILROAD will be opened to Waltham tomorrow, the first train to leave Charlestown at 9-1/2, morning.” Not until six months later would the railroad reach Concord. (See footnote 7, below.)

stagecoach to Concord. Given the perennially precarious state of Thoreau's health, Bradford's "want of hospitality" could have had serious consequences for Thoreau.⁴

Delano dates Thoreau's visit to (or, to be more precise, his departure *from*) Brook Farm as "approximately nine days" earlier—that is, December 3, 1843. Abundant contemporary weather data make it certain, however, that the visit ended on Thursday, December 7th, only five days before Bradford wrote.

Emerson himself was traveling at the time, having lectured in Providence on December 8th and in nearby Woonsocket, R. I., on either December 5th or 7th. The evidence for this is in a letter of Friday morning, December 8th, to his wife, Lidian, which Emerson wrote in Boston while en route to Newburyport.⁵ He does not mention the storm in the letter but does report having been "at Woonsocket *safely, & safely* at Providence" (emphases added), quite likely in allusion to the dangers of the storm. Exactly where Thoreau was that Friday morning—stranded in Boston or somewhere between there and New York, or actually in New York—has not yet been determined. He might even unknowingly have crossed paths with Emerson in Rhode Island.

⁴ Ellery Channing, writing to Margaret Fuller's mother on November 30th, had noted that Thoreau was at home and looked "fresh and dry" (Raymond R. Borst, *The Thoreau Log: A Documentary Life of Henry D. Thoreau* [Woodbridge, Conn.: G. K. Hall & Co., 1992], p. 102). Yet Walter Harding states that Thoreau had been "in poor health [when he was on Staten Island]. There seems to be every indication that his tuberculosis had flared up again the previous winter. . . . On his way to Staten Island he had caught a new cold and became ill enough to be confined to the 'Snuggery' for most of the month of May. . . . Even as late as August he counted himself 'with the innumerable army of invalids'" (*The Days of Henry Thoreau: A Biography* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965], p. 152).

⁵ The letter says, in part, "I was at Woonsocket safely, & safely at Providence, and mean to go at 1-1/2 P.M. to Newburyport" (Rusk, *Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson in Six Volumes* [New York: Columbia UP, 1939], 3:228). A footnote reads, "On Nov. 8, 1843, Bailey E. Borden wrote Emerson from Woonsocket, asking a lecture there just before or just after the engagement at Providence [on 6 December]. Emerson's endorsement shows he promised to come on Dec. 7, or, by early notice, on the 5th. . ." (*Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*: 3:228 n439).

Delano may have suggested Sunday, December 3rd as the date of the visit because that is the day on which Thoreau is believed to have left Concord to go back to Staten Island, where he had been tutoring William Emerson's children.⁶ From Concord, Thoreau would have traveled first to Boston and thence to New York City, the latter (and far longer) leg of his trip by train, the first leg (Concord to Boston) by stagecoach.⁷ It was during a layover in Boston that he would have visited nearby Brook Farm.

At least six dependable records of Boston's weather exist for December 1843, those of Robert Ball Edes, Jonathan Patten Hall, Robert Treat Paine, James Jackson, Dr. Enoch Hale, and an unnamed observer.⁸ All show unequivocally that the snowstorm

⁶ Harding (*Days of Henry Thoreau*, p. 156) states simply that "he left for Staten Island on December 3." Delano and Harding probably specify the 3rd of December because on that date Sophia Hawthorne, in a note, had asked Thoreau to deliver a letter to J. L. O'Sullivan, editor of *The Democratic Review*, in New York, "& if it be convenient for you, to carry my letters to Boston" (quoted in Borst, *Thoreau Log*, p. 102). Thoreau might have left Concord on Sunday the 3rd or on Monday the 4th. If he did not leave Concord on either of those days it is hard to see why Sophia Hawthorne would have asked him to take her letters to Boston, when by simply being posted in Concord they would have been in Boston the next day.

⁷ The first train on the Fitchburg Railroad, then under construction, did not reach Concord until the following June—June 17, 1844, to be exact.

⁸ Robert Ball Edes's weather diary for Boston and Charlestown (typed copy in the Concord Free Public Library; location of the original MS unknown); (2) Jonathan Patten Hall's published register of temperature and precipitation (Jonathan P. Hall, "Register of the Thermometer for 36 Years, from 1821 to 1856, to Which Is Added the Quantity of Rain Falling in Boston, Mass., for 34 Years, from 1823 to 1856," *Memoirs of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, N.S., 6, no. 2 [1857]: p. 278); (3) Robert Treat Paine's manuscript weather journal in the National Archives and Records Center, Waltham, Massachusetts, in both manuscript and microfilm forms; (4) James Jackson's manuscript weather journal in the collections of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, on deposit in the Houghton Library of Harvard University (fMS Am 1361 *54M-263 [19]); (5) Dr. Enoch Hale's manuscript observations of precipitation at two different elevations at three different sites in the city, from the same collections in the Houghton Library (fMS Am 1361 *54M-263 [1]; fMS Am 1361 *54M-263 [2] being a duplicate copy thereof); and (6) a manuscript meteorological journal, in an unknown hand, of observations made at two elevations at the Massachusetts State House, in the same Academy collections on deposit in the Houghton Library (fMS

Bradford mentions occurred on Thursday, December 7, 1843. They make no mention of snow on any other day of that week during daylight hours.⁹ In addition, published and manuscript records for six other locations amply confirm the data for Boston: those for Watertown, Framingham, Lowell, East Bridgewater, and Worcester, Massachusetts; and for Norwich, Connecticut.¹⁰ There were meteorological observers in many other places throughout New England as well, whose records almost certainly would corroborate the data for Boston and the other places just mentioned. Together, the combined data would show the full extent and intensity of the storm, particularly in the area through which Thoreau would have traveled. In addition to the records of meteorological observers, newspaper reports in Boston and elsewhere give a similar, but broader perspective on the scope and intensity of the storm.

Meteorological Data

According to James Jackson, who took his observations at 6 Pemberton Square in Boston, it had begun snowing “before daylight (about 2 or 3)” and continued snowing throughout the day (December 7th), “[growing] fair about midn^t.” The anonymous observer at the State House recorded that the “[s]torm began at 6 A.M.,” however, and “ended at 12 P.M.,” as did Dr. Hale. Neither Edes nor Hall indicates the times at which the storm began or ended. Together, however, these records show that the storm was confined to one day, December 7th.

Am 1361 *54M-263 [24]). In the last source, the “Nature” of the precipitation is described as “Snow,” and the amount is rendered as “rain” “After Melting.”

⁹ The record for Worcester, referred to below, mentions a snow squall on the afternoon of Tuesday, December 5th.

¹⁰ The data for Watertown and Framingham are on microfilm in the National Archives and Records Center, Waltham, Massachusetts; those for Lowell are on microfilm in the collections of the Lowell Historical Society; those for East Bridgewater appear in Leonard Hill, *Meteorological and Chronological Register*. . . . (Plymouth, Mass.: By the Author, 1869); and those for Worcester are in the Annual Report for 1843 of the State Lunatic Asylum at Worcester.

A Worcester observer working 32.5 miles west of West Roxbury states that the “Snow commenced at 12 at night,” accumulating to a depth of eight inches.¹¹ Leonard Hill noted in his diary that it “Snowed all day” in East Bridgewater, twenty miles south-southeast of West Roxbury.¹² In Lowell, twenty-six miles north of West Roxbury, the Reverend Theodore Edson records that it was “A Snowy day.” On Friday morning in Lowell “The ground [was] covered with snow and [there was] a bright sun. The sleighs [were] going merrily.”¹³

Hale—who was comparing precipitation data for two heights at each of three sites in Boston (7.3 miles northeast of West Roxbury), as well as for Roxbury itself and for Norwich, Connecticut (about 75 miles southwest of West Roxbury)—records that the storm began in Norwich at midnight on December 6th–7th and ended twenty-four hours later, at midnight on December 7th–8th. A total of six inches fell in Norwich. Hale’s entry for Roxbury mentions 1.90 inches of “rain,” but this actually refers to the amount of melted snow, since the other records in this volume (for the three sites in Boston) are expressed as amount of “rain” (that is, melted snow). Thus, along the southern coast of New England, in Rhode Island and Connecticut, the storm would have been raging at exactly the time Thoreau would have been passing through, en route to New York City—had any train been able to make its way through the snow, that is.

Edes records a “heavy snowstorm; 13-1/2 in. fell.” Hale states that 12 inches of snow fell, while Paine records “Snow (8 inch) all day & evening.” Paine also records atmospheric pressure, with the lowest value, 29.40 inches (reduced to 50° F), occurring

¹¹ “Register of the Weather,” *Annual Report of the State Lunatic Hospital at Worcester for the Year 1843*, p. 108. The accompanying annotation “0.55 in. of rain” represents the liquid equivalent of the melted snow.

¹² *Meteorological and Chronological Register*, p. 228. Hill summarizes the month of December as “cold and stormy.”

¹³ Diary of the Reverend Theodore Edson, Lowell Historical Society, Lowell, Mass. Microfilm housed in the Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts at Lowell.

at ten o'clock in the evening of December 7th.¹⁴ Thus, the storm was not at its height until some twelve or more hours after Thoreau left Brook Farm.

Newspaper Accounts

Newspapers in Boston, Providence, Worcester, Hartford, New York, and elsewhere carried reports on the storm that complement the meteorological records.

On Thursday evening the Boston *Evening Transcript*¹⁵ reported that, "Snow is falling and sleigh bells are jingling quite merrily today."

The next evening the *Transcript*¹⁶ carried the following news of the storm (in part quoting from the *Journal of Commerce*):

SNOW, commenced falling early last evening, and has continued most of the time since. It is now 3 or 4 inches deep. The wind has hauled to the westward, from which we infer that the storm is about over. [Journal of Commerce of last evening.]

Snow commenced falling hereabout yesterday morning between 2 and 3 o'clock, and continued until a late hour last night. We have a clear sky today, however, and snow enough to make first rate sleighing. . . .

The Boston *Daily Advertiser*¹⁷ of Saturday, December 9th, reported that

The snow storm of Thursday cleared off at 1 or 2 o'clock at night, and was followed by fine weather through the day yesterday. The snow fell in this vicinity to the depth of 8 or 10 inches. . . . The rail

¹⁴ This suggests that Thoreau would have been traveling into the storm—if, in fact, he had somehow made it to a train station and if, in fact, any train he might have boarded could have negotiated the intensifying storm.

¹⁵ Boston *Evening Transcript*, December 7, 1843, page [2].

¹⁶ Boston *Evening Transcript*, December 8, 1843, page [2].

¹⁷ Boston *Daily Advertiser*, December 9, 1843, page [2].

roads on Thursday afternoon were considerably obstructed.—The afternoon [eastbound] train from Springfield, on the Western Railroad, reached Worcester at 8 o'clock, but the snow was so much accumulated on the [Boston-]Worcester Road, that it did not reach Boston until 6 o'clock yesterday [that is, Friday] morning.

The Providence *Journal* of Saturday, December 9th, quoted the Boston *Daily Advertiser* to the effect that, “We were on Thursday indulged with a regular old fashioned snow storm. The snow began to fall at about two o'clock in the morning, and continued steadily throughout the day and to a late hour last night. It must have accumulated to a very considerable depth.”¹⁸

On Friday, the Hartford *Courant*¹⁹ noted that, “Snow fell on Wednesday evening, and from Thursday morning early, it continued without intermission until our paper went to press.”

The New York *Daily Tribune*²⁰ on Friday reported that

The Acadia [had] arrived in Boston shortly after the departure of the cars, and hence the Foreign News could not have been received here in time for the regular Morning Papers but for the enterprise of the Proprietor of The Sun. By running an Express through in the midst of the storm yesterday, he has enabled us to give the news at an earlier date this morning.

On December 11th, the *Tribune* carried the following information from a letter dated “Washington, Friday Evening, Dec. 8”:

The snow-storm of yesterday extended as far South as this City, and farther. The afternoon Train from Philadelphia, which should have reached Baltimore at 1 or 2 this morning, got in a little before

¹⁸ Providence *Daily Journal*, December 9, 1843, page 2.

¹⁹ Hartford *Courant*, December 8, 1843, page [2].

²⁰ New York *Daily Tribune*, December 8, 1843, page [2].

1. I staid over in Philadelphia, where some attempts at sleighing were made last evening.—All the Eastern Shore of Maryland was covered with snow through to-day, but there is less this side of Baltimore.²¹

One can only speculate what misery Thoreau must have experienced on his long, snowy trip to New York during the same period of time!

Given the fact that Thoreau left Concord three or four days before he left Brook Farm in West Roxbury, a near-suburb of Boston less than twenty air miles from Concord, there is the distinct possibility that Thoreau was at Brook Farm for parts of three or four days, leaving, or trying to leave Boston by train for New York on the day of the snowstorm.²² At the very least, we can now say with complete confidence that Thoreau was at Brook Farm during the night of December 6–7, 1843, and can plausibly conjecture that he had stayed there during the previous two or three nights.²³

²¹ New York *Daily Tribune*, December 11, 1843, page [2].

²² West Roxbury has since been absorbed by the City of Boston.

²³ Exactly when Thoreau arrived at Brook Farm cannot be discerned from the weather data alone, but a likely date and even an approximate time of arrival might be discernable from published stage and omnibus schedules (for instance, in newspapers). It is hard to believe that he would have spent three days in Boston itself before proceeding to Brook Farm. Recall that the Fitchburg Railroad did not yet extend to Concord in December 1843; the first train to arrive there over the Fitchburg line, which was under construction, reached Concord on Bunker Hill Day (June 17) 1844. Thus Thoreau would have to have taken a stage for at least part of the leg between Concord and Boston—perhaps only to Lincoln or Waltham, or perhaps all the way to Boston. Similarly, the most likely time of his departure from Brook Farm might be inferred from bus (“omnibus”) schedules, which were regularly published in the newspapers of the time. Bradford mentions “the omnibus” in his letter to Emerson: “I felt in haste he should go as I feared he might lose the omnibus” (quoted in Delano, p. 2). Arguing, perhaps, for a three-day visit to Brook Farm is Bradford’s statement that the Brook Farmers were “quite indebted to Henry for his brave defense of his thought[,] which gained him much favor in the eyes of some of the friends here who are of the like faith” (also quoted in Delano, p. 2).

Related Events at Fruitlands

December 1843 was also the month that saw the demise of Bronson Alcott's utopian experiment at Fruitlands in the town of Harvard, Massachusetts. During the previous summer, on the Fourth of July, Emerson and Ellery Channing had visited Alcott and his family there. In his Journal entry of July 8th, Emerson had famously written, "They look well in July. We will see them in December."²⁴

Significantly, perhaps, Alcott's associate at Fruitlands, Charles Lane, wrote to Emerson on December 18th asking Emerson to take over Fruitlands as his agent. Emerson replied promptly in the affirmative, whereupon Lane wrote "to May, asking him to execute a transfer deed to Emerson."²⁵

In *Pedlar's Progress* Odell Shepard describes the demise of Fruitlands as follows:

At some time in the first week of January, 1844—one record indicates the second and another the sixth of that month—Charles Lane [who had owned Fruitlands] and his son William left Fruitlands and went to live at the Shaker Village. On the fourteenth of January the Alcotts also left the house, taking three rooms and a kitchen at the home of a neighbor in the village of Still River. The adventure at Fruitlands and Bronson Alcott's career as a reformer had come to an ignominious close.²⁶

²⁴ *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Volume VIII, 1841–1843. W. H. Gilman and J. E. Parsons, editors. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1970, p. 433.

²⁵ *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson in Six Volumes*. Volume 3. New York: Columbia UP, 1939, p. 231.

²⁶ Odell Shepard, *Pedlar's Progress: The Life of Bronson Alcott* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1937), p. 380.

Perhaps it was the snowstorm of December 7th that pushed the Fruitlands experience over the brink. In any case, Thoreau was back in Concord by December 17th.²⁷

²⁷ Borst (in *Thoreau Log*, p. 103) cites Emerson's letter of 17 December to his brother William, which says, in part, "Henry Thoreau brings me his letter from you. . . ."