The Journals of Edmund Quincy Sewall Jr.

Thomas Knoles

What does education often do! —It makes a straight-cut ditch —of a free meandering brook. –Henry David Thoreau[1]

Thoreau scholars have long been aware of the journal kept during the spring of 1840 in Concord, Massachusetts, by a boy named Edmund Quincy Sewall Jr. The entries cover a period of seven weeks when the twelve-year-old was attending John and Henry David Thoreau's Concord Academy and boarding in the Thoreau household. One reason Edmund's journal is of interest is the fact that it contains one of the most detailed surviving contemporary accounts of the school then being run by the young Thoreau brothers. Another reason is that when Edmund visited Concord the preceding summer Henry wrote of him as "a pure uncompromising spirit....such it is impossible not to love"[2] and then wrote the poem "Sympathy," which begins

> Lately alas I knew a gentle boy,
> Whose features all were cast in Virtue's mould,
> As one she had designed for Beauty's toy,
> But after manned him for her own stronghold.[3]

---

[1] Henry D. Thoreau, *Journal*, ed. John C. Broderick et al., vol. 3, *1848-1851* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 76-77 (entry written after October 31, 1850).

[2] Ibid, 74. In an entry dated June 22, 1839, Thoreau wrote:

> I have within the last few days come into contact with a pure uncompromising spirit, that is somewhere wandering in the atmosphere, but settles not positively anywhere. Some persons carry about them the air and conviction of virtue, though they themselves are unconscious of it—and are even backward to appreciate it in others. Such it is impossible not to love—still is their loveliness, as it were, independent of them, so that you seem not to lose it when they are absent, for when they are near it is like an invisible presence which attends you.
>
> That virtue we appreciate is as much ours as another's. We see only so much as we possess.

[3] The poem is as follows:

Lately alas I knew a gentle boy,
Whose features all were cast in Virtue's mould,
As one she had designed for Beauty's toy,
But after manned him for her own stronghold.

On every side he open was as day,
That you might see no lack of strength within,
For walls and ports do only serve alway
For a pretence to feebleness and sin.

Say not that Caesar was victorious,
With toil and strife who stormed the House of Fame

In other sense this youth was glorious,
Himself a kingdom wheresoe'er he came.

No strength went out to get him victory,
When all was income of its own accord;
For where he went none other was to see,
But all were parcel of their noble lord.

He forayed like the subtle haze of summer,
That stilly shows fresh landscapes to our eyes,
And revolutions works without a murmur,
Or rustling of a leaf beneath the skies.

So was I taken unawares by this,
I quite forgot my homage to confess;
Yet now am forced to know, though hard it is,
I might have loved him, had I loved him less.

Each moment, as we nearer drew to each,
A stern respect withheld us farther yet,
So that we seemed beyond each other's reach,
And less acquainted than when first we met.

We two were one while we did sympathize,
So could we not the simplest bargain drive;
And what avails it now that we are wise,
If absence doth this doubleness contrive?

Eternity may not the chance repeat,
But I must tread my single way alone,
In sad remembrance that we once did meet,
And know that bliss irrevocably gone.

The spheres henceforth my elegy shall sing,
For elegy has other subject none;
Each strain of music in my ears shall ring
Knell of departure from that other one.

Make haste and celebrate my tragedy;
With fitting strain resound ye woods and fields;
Sorrow is dearer in such case to me
Than all the joys other occasion yields.

Is't then too late the damage to repair?
Distance, forsooth, from my weak grasp hath reft
The empty husk, and clutched the useless tare,
But in my hands the wheat and kernel left.

If I but love that virtue which he is,
Though it be scented in the morning air,

A few months after Edmund's time at the Concord Academy, first John and then Henry proposed unsuccessfully to Edmund's eighteen-year-old sister Ellen. Henry never married, and interpretations of the poem and the proposal have caused generations of speculation about their meaning and also about Henry's sexuality.[4]

Edmund's manuscript journal of 1840 was given to the American Antiquarian Society in 1945 by his granddaughter Louise Sewall Chapman, along with two of the essays Edmund wrote as school assignments. Only recently has it become possible to present this journal alongside three earlier journals Edmund kept between 1837 and 1840, mostly detailing his home life in Scituate, Massachusetts. Also newly available is an additional school essay and family correspondence that provide additional details about the events described in these journals.[5]

Taken together, Edmund's journals provide a boy's-eye view of life amid New England's reformers and intellectuals in a moment of intense cultural ferment. Edmund was born into an old New England. He was the son of a Harvard-educated Unitarian minister and his relatives included the reformers Amos Bronson Alcott and Samuel J. May. Family acquaintances mentioned in the journals include Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Lloyd Garrison as well as members of the Thoreau family. The connections among three families in particular provide the

---

Still shall we be truest acquaintances,
Nor mortals know a sympathy more rare.

Thoreau, *Journal*, 1:76-77 (entry for June 24, 1839).

[4] As early as 1882 it was suggested that "Sympathy" actually referred to a woman (F. B. Sanborn, *Henry D. Thoreau* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1882], 163-64). This theory, attributed to the testimony of Ralph Waldo Emerson and others, persisted even after it became known that Thoreau had written "Sympathy" while Edmund, and not Ellen, was visiting Concord. For example, see Henry S. Salt, *Life of Henry David Thoreau* (London: Walter Scott, 1896), 39, and F. B. Sanborn, *The Life of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917), 350-51. This was possibly because of the perceived impropriety of addressing such verses to a boy. See, for example, Henry Salt to S. A. Jones, December 2, 1895, in *Toward the Making of Thoreau's Modern Reputation*, ed. Fritz Oehlschlaeger and George Hendrick (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 248-49. Walter Harding attempts a balanced view of the matter in his *Days of Henry Thoreau* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 77-79, 94-104.

Some more recent critics have discussed Thoreau's feelings about Edmund and then Ellen in terms of confused or thwarted feelings about one or both of them. See, for example, *Consciousness in Concord: The Text of Thoreau's Hitherto "Lost Journal," Together with Notes and a Commentary by Perry Miller* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 95-96; Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U. S. A.* (New York: Meridian, 1992), 483-90; and Michael Warner, "Walden's Erotic Economy," in *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*, ed. Hortense J. Spillers (New York: Routledge, 1991), 157-94.

Thoreau evidently saw no impropriety in the poem. He showed it to Emerson a few days after he wrote it and at some point gave a copy to the Sewall family. It was published in the first issue of the *Dial* on July 1, and then reprinted in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers* in 1849.

[5] The author is grateful to the Thoreau Institute, owner of Journal No. 2, and particularly grateful to Edmund's great-grandson Quincy S. Abbot, who was most energetic in locating materials and generous in sharing them, supplying two transcriptions of the still unlocated No. 1 and the manuscript of No. 3, which he obtained from a family member. In 2016 Mr. Abbot gave his Sewall Family Papers to AAS. Additional manuscript material relating to the Sewalls in this period may be found in the Thoreau Institute, the Huntington Library, and Middlebury College.

real foundation for the journal: the Sewalls, their relatives the Wards, and their friends the Thoreaus.

While Edmund's journals provide at least brief glimpses of many dimensions of the life of the period—from a visit to an animal show to the experimental brain surgery his father endured—the boy's world as depicted in his journals is centered on education. In Scituate, Edmund's opportunities for instruction came largely through activities such as private and family reading, church services, Sunday school, attendance at lectures, participation in reform meetings, walks and other outdoor activities with adults, and advice and admonitions from adults, most notably his parents. As we shall see, even the roots of Edmund's practice of keeping a journal were educational in nature. In the Concord journal of 1840 we see how the learning that results from Edmund's contact with his social and familial networks was augmented by his formal and informal education by the Thoreau brothers. Throughout these journals we see the presence of manifold mechanisms available for the education of a boy with the good fortune to be born into a culturally elite sphere.

Edmund's father, Reverend Edmund Quincy Sewall,[6] was born in Marblehead, Massachusetts, in 1796. In 1815 he graduated from Harvard College, as five generations of Sewalls had done before him. Afterwards, he studied for the ministry with Ezra Ripley, minister of Concord's First Church (and incidentally Ralph Waldo Emerson's step-grandfather), while living with Ripley's family.[7] Also living in Concord during that same period was the man who would become Henry David Thoreau's father, John Thoreau (1787-1859).[8] It was during a visit to their Concord relatives that John's sisters Maria and Jane Thoreau introduced Sewall to his future bride, Caroline Ward (1797-1867), then eighteen years old. Given this connection between the families, it seems likely that the aspiring minister was present when Ripley christened Henry David Thoreau in October 1817. [9]

In 1819 Sewall accepted the pastorate of the East Parish Church in Barnstable, Massachusetts, and the following year he and Caroline were married.[10] They had three children: Ellen Devereux Sewall (1822-92), our diarist Edmund Quincy Sewall Jr. (1828-1908), and George Ward Sewall (1834-1923). After periods of residence in Barnstable, Boston, and Amherst, New Hampshire, the family moved to Scituate, Massachusetts, in 1832 when Sewall was called to be minister of the first parish there.[11]

---

[6] For the sake of clarity, Rev. Edmund Q. Sewall Sr. will be referred to as "Sewall" and Edmund Q. Sewall Jr. as "Edmund" throughout this introduction and in the notes to the journals.

[7] "On the very day after I graduated I went to Bolton and to Concord, to obtain a place for theological study—Entered Dr. Ezra Ripley's family of Concord." Edmund Quincy Sewall Sr., autobiographical sketch, ca. 1866, Sewall Family Papers, AAS. Ripley was Ralph Waldo Emerson's step-grandfather, having married Emerson's widowed grandmother.

[8] Harding, *Days of Henry Thoreau*, 73.

[9] Thoreau was baptized as David Henry; he reversed his names around the time he graduated from Harvard.

[10] Louisa F. Cobb, "The East Parish Church," in Donald G. Trayser, *Barnstable: Three Centuries of a Cape Cod Town* (Hyannis: F. B. and F. P. Goss, 1939), 58-59.

[11] Shortly after their arrival Sewall described the situation in a letter: "My parish is very widely scattered and contains 214 families…We are a mile from Church. Some of my people live four miles from me, and almost all are two miles from the house of worship, and more than that from my house. There is no

In 1836 the family's circle of relations in the town increased when Sewall's cousin Samuel J. May (1797-1871) came to be minister of the Second or South Church in South Scituate.[12]

In this period and afterwards, relations between the Thoreau sisters and the Wards developed further. They corresponded and visited, both while Maria and Jane Thoreau lived in the Boston area and after they began to spend more of their time in Concord. In 1830, the Thoreau sisters invited Edmund's aunt Prudence to spend part of the summer with them in Keene, New Hampshire.[13] By the following summer, the Thoreau sisters had moved into their sister Elizabeth's house on the square in Concord, where they were once again visited by Prudence Ward. This time Prudence was accompanied by her sister Caroline Ward Sewall as well as Caroline's daughter Ellen (aged eight) and son Edmund (aged two).[14] In 1833, Prudence and her mother Prudence Bird Ward moved to Concord to board with Maria, Jane, and Elizabeth Thoreau (1782-1839).

Edmund began his first journal on August 10, 1837, when he was nine years old. As the editors of the Princeton Thoreau edition note, journal keeping had long been relatively common among educated New Englanders driven by a "twin impulse to record the particulars of life and to inquire into the state of the soul, a tradition reaching back to the first generation of Puritan Divines."[15] However, that popularity had taken on a new dimension among the transcendentalists "because it captured the transitory moment of illumination…and admitted the eclectic range of the sources of truth—reading, conversation, the correspondence of friends, nature, and solitary meditation."[16]

It was the suggestion of a transcendentalist, Amos Bronson Alcott, that prompted Edmund to start keeping his journal. Alcott, married to one of Edmund's cousins and the father

---

Village around the Church. At the Harbour, 2 miles off, there are stores, Post office &c. The mackerel fishery is a staple here….The ocean is so near as to mingle its roar with the many-voiced winds that whistle around my house, and is in sight from the church…. I occupy the dwelling of the last Clergyman. It is pleasantly situated, has a wide unbroken prospect, a garden, front-yard, large lawn about the house on each side, has the sun from rising till its setting, some fruit trees. On the whole it will be called by most people a beautiful spot. Our horizon on the west is a noble grove of Forest-trees. We are on a hill that slopes very gradually down to wide meadows & a fine farm." Edmund Quincy Sewall to Henry Devereux Sewall, February 3, 1832, Sewall Family Papers, AAS.

[12] May was minister of the Unitarian church in South Scituate from 1836 to 1842. By the late 1830s May was already active in the antislavery movement. On his pastorate see *Memoir of Samuel Joseph May* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1873), 163-70. May, his wife Lucretia Flagge Coffin Sewall, and their son John, who was a year younger than Edmund, all appear in Edmund's journals.

[13] On June 29, 1830, Caroline wrote to her brother Dennis Ward that Prudence had "gone to Keene N.H. to pass a fortnight—left last Saturday. The Miss Thoreau's are boarding there for the summer & urged P. to come and make this visit[,] they paying her board—she always wanted to see that place & so accepted the invitation." Sewall Family Papers, AAS.

[14] "Next week P[rudence] & myself and the children go to Concord to pass a few days with the Misses Thoreau." Caroline Ward to Dennis Ward, May 24, 1831, Sewall Family Papers, AAS.

[15] Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. 1, "Historical Introduction," 593.

[16] Ibid, 594.

of novelist Louisa May Alcott, was a somewhat eccentric educator and reformer. A lifelong journal keeper, he encouraged the practice in his family as a way of promoting education and reflection.[17] Several years earlier, when he was conducting the experimental Temple Street School in Boston, he had his young pupils keep journals. Alcott saw it as important to teach students to reflect on experiences rather than simply report them. He told his students:

> You are engaged in recording what happens *out of you*; its advantage is to make you feel and remember what *effect* all outward events, and your action on what is outward, may have on your inward state of mind.—You write down the picture made on your mind by things. These thoughts and feelings are your inward life. Do you understand this; —the spiritual world is the inward life of all beings?[18]

The events Edmund recorded in his journals, while not primarily about his formal schooling, are frequently connected to the process of his education. Thus, in addition to talking about family life, visits, play, chores, and social activities, Edmund describes going with his family to lectures on elocution and astronomy. He writes of hearing his cousin Rev. Samuel J. May speak on common schools. (These events reflected the popularity both of the American lyceum movement and reform activities in Massachusetts.) The journals also record a considerable amount of reading. Edmund borrowed some books on his own from the Sabbath School library or family friends when the Sewalls did not own them. Some books were read aloud in the Sewall family circle. In later life Edmund recalled that his father "was not an austere man, and in his family there was a great deal of reading aloud. Among the authors read were Dickens, Macaulay, and Carlyle."[19] Edmund's journal lists titles ranging from Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* to Thomas Carlyle's *Life of Friedrich Schiller* and Jonathan Brown's *History and Present Condition of San Domingo*. Like attendance at lectures, reading seems to have been an important part of the broad educational climate provided for Edmund.

Edmund's first journal covers a period of nearly ten months of his life in Scituate, and in it he writes about such matters as a Sunday school celebration, school and family matters, and travels around the town. He also describes the family's move in late October 1837 to a house in Scituate Harbor. Edmund and his sister Ellen began to attend a district school half a mile from the Sewalls' house shortly after the family's arrival in Scituate. In 1838 Edmund read Warren Burton's little book *The District School as It Was*.[20] In many ways, the school described by

---

[17] Odell Shepard writes of Alcott, "His own mother kept a journal, which he began to imitate at the age of twelve. So did his wife and at least three of his daughters. As a schoolmaster he required his pupils, as soon as they could write, to keep a daily record of their 'ideas,' believing that this would increase their powers of reflection." Odell Shepard, ed., *The Journals of Bronson Alcott* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1938), xiii.

[18] [Elizabeth Palmer Peabody], *The Record of a School: Exemplifying the General Principles of Spiritual Culture* (Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, 1835), 25.

[19] Notes taken by Caroline Sewall Abbot from her father Edmund Quincy Sewall Jr. in 1891, Sewall Family Papers, AAS.

[20] Warren Burton, *The District School as It Was: By One Who Went to It* (Boston: Carter, Hendee, 1833 (and other editions).

Edmund resembles that attended by Burton in a small New Hampshire town some thirty years earlier.[21]

An ongoing source of concern in Edmund's journals is the health of his father, who had long suffered from a variety of ailments. Perhaps worst were the severe headaches and seizures that finally led him to undergo an operation to remove a piece of bone from his skull in 1838. The procedure was unusual enough that George Hayward, the surgeon who performed it, wrote an account of it for the *Boston Medical Journal*.[22] This was some eight years before the introduction of ether as an anesthetic.

The operation resulted in an immediate though ultimately temporary improvement in Sewall's condition. Hayward noted that "the patient declare[ed], while on the table, that he had not felt so well for thirteen years."[23] News of the operation's success and his father's quick recovery led Edmund to make the only overtly religious comment in any of the four journals, in April: "How happy we *should* be if he should indeed recover and come home! How thankful we ought to be to God for his great mercy!"

There is a gap of more than eight months between the last entry of Edmund's first journal (June 2, 1838) and the first entry of the second volume (February 13, 1839). We know little

---

[21] Notes taken by Caroline Sewall Abbot, Sewall Family Papers, AAS. One can get a clearer sense of the nature of Scituate's district schools in this period from the 1837 report of the school committee, written by Sewall as its chairman:

> In the District Schools, as they are at present constituted, the youth of all periods from early infancy to incipient manhood are collected without discrimination under one roof and in charge of a single master….Now, it is easy to see how nearly impossible it is for the wants and discipline of the child of four years to be properly provided for in the same instruction which is devoted to the culture of young men and women.…The older scholars are obliged often to wait while their instructor is called off by these many interruptions [of the youngest scholars]…and the younger are sometimes unnaturally cramped and exposed to inflictions of pain, which, however necessary, will seem to them wanton, and which may lay the foundation of a lasting hatred of all learning and all discipline.
>
> *Report of the School Committee: Scituate, March 6, 1837* (Hingham: J. Farmer, [1837]), 4-6.

The following year's report gives a sense of physical conditions in the schoolhouses: "Not half our school houses are 20 ft. square. Only two of them are as much as 24 ft. square. One of them is a little more than 9 ft. high. Few of the rest are as much as 8 ft. In rooms so small, thirty, forty, fifty, and even sixty children have been brought together, and there kept three hours each half day, with intermissions of only five or ten minutes." *Report of the School Committee of the Town of Scituate, Mass. Read April 2d, 1838* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838), 6.

[22] George Hayward, "Trephining for Epilepsy," *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 18 (1838): 325-29, cf. 144-45. Hayward's article includes much information about the earlier history of Sewall's condition that is lacking in Edmund's account.

[23] Hayward, "Trephining for Epilepsy," 328.

about the doings of the Sewall family during this period.[24] In December, Sewall suffered a seizure while preaching a sermon. A few days afterward he wrote, "On Sunday I was again smitten of God—struck down by a sudden attack of spasms in the midst of a half uttered sentence. They lasted an hour and a half….I think it was no evidence that the Operation failed. The doctor forewarned me that I *might* have one or two such turns."[25]

By the time he began the second volume of his journal Edmund had left the district school and was attending the high school in Scituate. In that term the school was kept by Nathaniel Holmes Morison (1815-90) and Edmund attended this school for the next four years.[26] Morrison is mentioned in the first entry in Edmund's new journal and continues to reappear frequently in the journal until the end of June. The schoolmaster was frequently present in the Sewall home as well during that period. Edmund describes Morison visiting the Sewalls, lending them books, inviting Ellen to a ball, giving lectures on astronomy, and showing Ellen and Edmund Mars and Jupiter in the nighttime sky. It is possible that he was attracted to the Sewall household not only by his pupil Edmund but also by Edmund's sister Ellen, now seventeen.

In June 1839, Edmund and his mother made what was apparently Edmund's first visit to his aunt and grandmother in Concord in nine years.[27] One of the highlights of the trip for him was "a beautiful sail…in a boat which Messrs John & Henry T made themselves." This boat was the *Musketaquid*, which had just been built by John and Henry and which would be used by them a few months later for the trip memorialized in Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.[28] In the account of this visit written after his return home, Edmund describes his enjoyment in hearing John Thoreau's humorous stories and watching him practice shooting.

It was on this visit that Edmund drew the attention of Henry Thoreau. The day the Sewalls left Concord, Thoreau wrote in his journal:

---

[24] During the summer Edmund's mother and brother George may have visited Caroline's brother Dennis Ward in Spencer, Massachusetts. See Edmund Quincy Sewall to Dennis Ward, June 4, 1838, Sewall Family Papers, AAS.

[25] Edmund Quincy Sewall to Dennis Ward, December 12, 1838, Sewall Family Papers, AAS.

[26] Notes taken by Caroline Sewall Abbot, Sewall Family Papers, AAS. On Nathaniel Holmes Morison (1815-90) see also George Abbot Morison, *Nathaniel Morison and His Descendants* (Peterborough, N.H.: Peterborough Historical Society, 1951), 112-17.

[27] Harding, *Days of Henry Thoreau*, 77.

[28] "Our boat, which had cost us a week's labor in the spring, was in form like a fisherman's dory, fifteen feet long, by three and a half in breadth at the widest part, painted green below, with a border of blue, with reference to the two elements in which it was to spend its existence. It had been loaded the evening before at our door, half a mile from the river, with potatoes and melons from a patch we had cultivated, and a few utensils, and was provided with wheels in order to be rolled around falls, as well as with two sets of oars, and several slender poles for shoving in shallow places, and also two masts, one of which served for a tent-pole at night; for a buffalo skin was to be our bed, and a tent of cotton cloth our roof. It was strongly built but heavy, and hardly of better model than usual." Henry D. Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, ed. Carl F. Hovde et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 15-16. Seven months after John's death in 1842, Henry sold the *Musketaquid* to Nathaniel Hawthorne (Raymond R. Borst, *The Thoreau Log: A Documentary Life of Henry David Thoreau, 1817-1862* [New York: G. K. Hall, 1992], 82).

> I have within the last few days come into contact with a pure uncompromising spirit, that is somewhere wandering in the atmosphere, but settles not positively anywhere. Some persons carry about them the air and conviction of virtue, though they themselves are unconscious of it—and are even backward to appreciate it in others. Such it is impossible not to love—still is their loveliness, as it were, independent of them, so that you seem not to lose it when they are absent, for when they are near it is like an invisible presence which attends you.
>
> That virtue we appreciate is as much ours as another's. We see so much only as we possess.[29]

Two days later, Thoreau wrote the poem "Sympathy."

Edmund finished filling his second journal on June 26, 1839, shortly after his return from Concord, and he began his third journal the following day. The briefest of the four, this journal covers a period of a little more than three months, ending October 4. In it we see Edmund cultivating a knack for narrating amusing stories, as when he and his younger brother lost a pair of scissors while gathering a basket of flowers and then while searching for it lost the basket. Also described are Edmund's misadventures trying to capture the Sewalls' horse after it had gotten loose. He recorded the words of the song "The Pilot on the Deep," which he memorized after hearing because he thought them "very fine."

Edmund barely mentions the event from this period that would later draw so much attention. From July 20 to August 2 Ellen visited Concord. It was this visit and its aftermath that marked the beginning of John's, and then Henry's, romantic pursuit of her.[30] Not long after Ellen's departure, the Thoreau brothers began their two-week trip to New Hampshire in the *Musketaquid*. At the end of September, shortly after their return, John came to Scituate. At the time of this visit, Sewall and his wife Caroline were out of town. After John's departure Ellen wrote to her aunt Prudence:

> You do not know how much pleasure Mr. John's visit here brought us. As to my "household" affairs I get along very well and found time as perhaps he told you to walk on Colman's hill with him Tuesday afternoon. Frances Chamberlin was with us the night he arrived. He mistook the name. Sarah Otis came the day he went from here and has been here ever since, and will continue to make this her home till mother and father return. She would have come the day John was here if I had needed any assistance but I thought it would be so much pleasanter not to have a stranger with us when he was here that I did not ask her to stop when she called. He gave us a very interesting account of his jaunt to the White Mountains. What a delightful time they must have had. Should not you have liked to have gone? Georgie thought "Henry" (as he persisted in calling him) a most

[29] Thoreau, *Journal*, 1:74.
[30] See, for example, Harding, *Days of Henry Thoreau*, 94-104.

> interesting gentleman for he had innumerable stories of wild animals to tell him which amused him very much.[31]

Edmund does not mention this visit in his journal, which ends about this time. He did not begin another one until after his arrival in Concord more than six months later to attend the school being conducted by the Thoreau brothers while living in the Thoreau household.

Edmund's classmates at the Concord Academy included boys and girls from Concord and nearby towns, as well as fellow boarders in the Thoreau household. After his arrival Edmund wrote to his mother that "Charles, one of my schoolfellows, came up with me in the stage….the other 2 boys, Joseph and Jesse came up on Wednesday."[32] However, his journal provides only Jesse Harding's surname. Horace Hosmer, who attended the academy during the summer term, identified Charles as Charles Henry Cummings.[33] The identity of Joseph is uncertain. In the fourth journal Edmund gives the full names of two boys named Joseph—Joseph Boyden Keyes and Joseph Brooks. Keyes was a member of a Concord family and therefore not likely to be boarding with the Thoreaus. Joseph Brooks, whom Edmund calls by the Shandean nickname "Dr. Slop," is described by Horace Hosmer as the "janitor boy," one of whose duties was to ring the school bell.[34] Neither of these boys seems likely to have been the Joseph who was boarding with the Thoreaus.

In the Thoreau family Edmund found a crowded household. The United States census of 1840, taken nominally on June 1, listed a total of twelve people in John Thoreau Sr.'s house. Heads of households were listed by name in the census, with other persons enumerated by only gender, race, and age range. However, on the basis of other evidence it is possible to identify seven of the individuals by name. The nucleus of the family consisted of John and Cynthia Thoreau and their sons John and Henry. The other residents included Cynthia's sister Louisa Dunbar; Prudence Ward and her mother Prudence; and three boys aged between ten and fifteen, who were undoubtedly students at the Thoreau brothers' school and may have included Edmund. The census also listed two "free colored" women aged between ten and twenty-three. These were likely servants, possibly two of the twenty-three African Americans listed as residents of Concord in the 1840 census. They were no longer in the Thoreau household by October.[35]

---

[31] Ellen Sewall to Prudence Ward, Sunday, September 29, 1839, quoted in Shawn Stewart, "Transcendental Romance Meets the Ministry of Pain: The Thoreau Brothers, Ellen Sewall, and Her Father," *Concord Saunterer* 14 (2006): 11.

[32] Edmund to Caroline Ward Sewall ,March 28, 1840, quoted in Clayton Hoagland, "The Diary of Thoreau's 'Gentle Boy,'" *New England Quarterly* 28 (1955): 478.

[33] In 1891 Horace Hosmer recalled that "Harding was a Watchmaker and Jeweller in Boston for many years, and Cummings was a Civil Engineer I am told." Horace Hosmer, letter to S. A. Jones, March 9, 1891, in *Remembrances of Concord and the Thoreaus: Letters of Horace Hosmer to Dr. S. A. Jones* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 12. On Cummings in Concord see also A[nne] R. M[cGrath], "Arrowheads from Thoreau's Ground," *Concord Saunterer* 10, no. 3 (1975): 16-17, and Anne R. McGrath, "Spear Fishing with the Thoreau Brothers," *Concord Saunterer* 13, no. 3 (1978): 1-2.

[34] *Remembrances of Concord and the Thoreaus*, 75.

[35] A newly available letter provides some details about servants and boarders in the Thoreau household in this period. On October 8, 1840, Prudence Ward wrote to her sister Caroline include last name?: "Some change has taken place in our family—besides the coming & going of girls & the doing without, as at this present—Mrs. T has consented to take Mrs. Brown to board, & she is expected shortly, & she will also

We have no direct record of John Thoreau's reaction to this bustling environment, except that Edmund's journal depicts him as regularly engaged with the boy boarders. Edmund slept with John, probably an honor accorded to the Wards' young relative.[36] John took Edmund with him when running errands in town and in other ways gave him special treatment, as when the two cooked and ate clams in John's room.

Henry is mentioned much less frequently in Edmund's journal, and that is probably a reflection of the fact that his reaction to the presence of boarders was different from that of his brother John. In his 1939 biography of Thoreau, Henry Seidel Canby noted that:

> The influence of boarders and a boarding-house upon Henry's life and philosophy has been unaccountably neglected….And there is a striking series of indirect, but not the less poignant, comments in his Journal, beginning on October 22, 1837, when he was just out of Harvard, with 'I seek a garret,' which indicate only too clearly the effect of a family circle too much enlarged upon a scholar and lover of solitude.[37]

Edmund's diary helps demonstrate the practical implications of the presence of four active boys in the Thoreau household. In the first entry alone Edmund describes a snowball fight, a pudding knocked out of a window, a fall that damaged a chair, and a bottle of ink spilled on a tablecloth. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that on April 8, 1840, Henry wrote:

> How shall I help myself? By withdrawing into the garret, and associating with spiders and mice—determining to meet myself face to face sooner or later….The most positive life that history notices has been a constant retiring out of life—a wiping ones' [sic] hands of it—seeing how mean it is, and having nothing to do with it.[38]

Further contributing to Henry's discomfort was probably the fact that this was an unsettled period in his life. He was several years out of college but seemingly with no real plan for a profession. He had had difficulties finding work as a teacher, and it is not clear that he actually enjoyed teaching. Hosmer recalled, "As a teacher Henry was 'merciless' i.e. the thing to be done must be done *correctly*. He was rigidly exacting—a *faithful* teacher to the parent whose child he had & to the child. He never mixed with the schoolboys; he was hated. The bell tolled instead of rang, when he taught alone...."[39]

---

take a Dr. & Mrs. Prescott—an old gentleman and his wife, that is if they assent to terms—then we are to have no boys. Mrs. T required a q[uarte]r of a dollar more for their board if they stayed this winter in view of being obliged to keep an extra fire for them—The parents are not willing for this, & another place has been found for them.—At present Jessey & two little brothers are here, the latter because of their mother's wishes—Jessey will leave when his brothers go away. He would like best to remain—& could stay—as one could be accommodated at the parlor fire—but the family where the others have gone choose to have three or none." Sewall Family Papers, AAS. On June 29 Prudence had written to her brother Dennis "J[ohn's] school is flourishing—There are four boys from Boston boarding with us." Sewall Family Papers, AAS.

[36] Hoagland, "Diary of Thoreau's 'Gentle Boy,'" 478.

[37] Henry Seidel Canby, *Thoreau* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1939), 23-24.

[38] Thoreau, *Journal*, 1:121.

[39] *Remembrances of Concord and the Thoreaus*, 13.

There are reports that Henry was the butt of some boyhood jokes. One day, when John was away, one of the boys cut the school bell rope and another rang the bell from the belfry as Henry walked from his house to the school.[40] John Shepard Keyes, a lawyer and member of one of Concord's most prominent families, recalled "the boys made much fun of him. A picture of a booby in an almanack that year, resembled him so much that it was cut out, and shown round among his scholars as a likeness! and it did resemble him more than most caricatures."[41] The "booby" mentioned by Keyes is almost certainly a drawing that appeared in *The Old American Comic Almanac* for 1839.[42]

In terms of subjects taught, the curriculum at the Concord Academy was largely typical of the period. In a letter to his father written a few weeks after his arrival in Concord, Edmund described his studies:

> In the morning I recite Solid Geometry. I draw the figures and write down the demonstration on the slate after Mr. Henry has taken the book and when I have done carry it to him. He examines it to see that it is right. Geography comes next, immediately after recess. Smith's geography[43] is the one used. I borrow it of one of the boys who has done studying it. Grammar comes next. Parker and Fox's is used.[44] It is in two parts. I have been through the first part and have begun the second. I borrow it of Mr. Thoreau...
>
> In the afternoon I am exclusively under Mr. Henry's jurisdiction. I recite in Algebra and Latin generally before recess. In the afternoon Mr. Henry's classes go up into the hall over the schoolroom to recite. In Latin I am in company with Miss Hine. We are now on the life of Alcibiades in Nepos and in the exceptions in conjugation in the grammar.
>
> Geography is studied by a good many. We draw maps of the states. Saturday morning is devoted to writing composition. The two that I have written have been on birds and berries.[45]

Like Scituate, Concord offered numerous opportunities for education and self-improvement. While living with the Thoreaus, Edmund regularly attended church (typically both morning and afternoon services) as well as Sabbath school. Edmund, the son of a minister, routinely recorded the Bible verses upon which the sermons were based.

---

[40] Harding, *Days of Henry Thoreau*, 86.
[41] John Shepard Keyes to F. H. Underwood, November 15, 1886, "John Shepard Keyes on Thoreau," *Thoreau Society Bulletin* 103 (1968): 2.
[42] *The Old American Comic Almanac* (Boston: S. N. Dickinson, [1838]).
[43] Possibly Roswell C. Smith, *Geography on the Productive System* (Philadelphia: W. Marshall; Hartford: D. Burgess, 1835) and numerous other editions.
[44] Richard Green Parker and Charles Fox, *Progressive Exercises in English Grammar* (Boston: Crocker & Brewster; New York: Leavitt, Lord, 1834) and numerous other editions.
[45] Edmund Q. Sewall Jr. to Rev. Edmund Q. Sewall, April 23, 1840, quoted in Harding, *Days of Henry Thoreau*, 81.

Lectures were an important part of the social fabric in many nineteenth-century New England towns. The Concord Lyceum, founded in 1829, sponsored an annual season of lectures. Henry Thoreau was secretary of the lyceum during the period of Edmund's visits.[46] On April 1, Edmund attended a lyceum lecture on Roger Williams by Henry's Harvard classmate, David Greene Haskins, and a week later he heard Emerson speak on "Literature," the second lecture in his series on "The Present Age." After hearing Emerson, Edmund wrote, "I was not at all interested," and this may explain why, although Emerson gave six more lectures in his series while Edmund was in Concord, there is no evidence that he attended any of them.[47]

On April 2, Edmund attended an antislavery lecture by Rev. James Trask Woodbury of Acton; he also attended four lectures on phrenology delivered by Walton Felch and made detailed notes on them, as he had on Nathaniel Holmes Morison's lectures on astronomy in Scituate the previous year.

The environs of Concord also offered ample opportunities for learning about history. Reminders of the past seemed to be everywhere. Walton Felch's phrenological apparatus included the skull of a British soldier killed in the battle of Lexington and Concord.[48] Edmund mentions the monument to the battle, which had been dedicated in 1837. He was shown a seventeenth-century weather vane from an early meetinghouse and the cemetery where victims of a 1792 outbreak of smallpox were buried. On a walk with John, Edmund looked for arrowheads and was given a part of an Indian implement. Some history was more recent; on May 10 John took Edmund to the "red bridge" and Edmund wrote, "The railing was all cut over with names many of which were effaced by time and weather. I saw Ellen's name cut in the wood between the initials of Mr. J. and Mr H Thoreau which were dated 1830 and '35. Mr. Henry's initials was cut very neatly and deep."

But some of the most significant educational opportunities for Edmund resulted from the many outdoor activities described in his journals, generally occurring in the afternoons after school or on Saturdays. Almost daily, Edmund and some of the other boys explored the Concord area with the Thoreaus and particularly John. It seems evident that John's sunny personality made him a good companion for the boys. John was strongly interested in nature and particularly ornithology, assigning his students to write essays on birds and fish. At the same time, it is clear

---

[46] "Early Records of the Concord Lyceum," in Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Transcendental Climate: New Resources for the Study of Emerson, Thoreau and Their Contemporaries* (Hartford: Transcendental Books [1963]), 3:688-95.

[47] This was "the second lecture of his course on 'The Present Age'" ("Early Records of the Concord Lyceum," 694) and had first been delivered at the New York Mercantile Library on March 17. See Robert E. Spiller and Wallace E. William, eds., *The Early Lectures* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1972), 3:202. A version entitled "Thoughts on Modern Literature" appeared in the October 1840 issue of the *Dial*.

[48] "I visited a retired—now almost unused graveyard in Lincoln to-day where (5) British soldiers lie buried who fell on the 19th April '75. Edmund Wheeler—grandfather of William—who lived in the old house now pulled down near the present—went over the next day & carted them to this ground—A few years ago one Felch a Phrenologist by leave of the select men dug up—and took away two skulls. The skeletons were very large—probably those of grenadiers. Wm Wheeler who was present—told me this—He said that he had heard old Mr. Child, who lived opposite—say that when one soldier was shot he leaped right up his full length out of the ranks and fell dead. & he Wm Wheeler—saw a bullet hole through & through one of the skulls." (May 31, 1850, or afterward.) Thoreau, *Journal*, 3:73.

from Edmund's journal that John passed along to the boys his belief in the importance of experience, observation, and reflection. On walks, John frequently shot birds in order to examine them. On one occasion, Edmund reported the differences in the accounts of the hermit thrush in three books on ornithology, no doubt repeating what John had told him. Edmund's aunt Prudence Ward also contributed to his education while he lived in the Thoreau household. She gave him the blank book for his journal, and also shared her interest in botany, taking Edmund for walks to look for early spring flowers.[49] She is also said to have taught the Thoreau sisters to paint, and at least one of her watercolors, of mosses, has survived.

Although Edmund wrote shortly after he arrived on March 23 that he would be with the Thoreaus for three months (with the next term beginning June 25), his Concord journal ends abruptly on May 16. We do know that his sister Ellen arrived in Concord for a visit with the Wards sometime in June.[50]

In July, a few weeks after Ellen's visit to Concord, John Thoreau visited Scituate with the Wards and proposed to Ellen. She accepted, but when her parents learned what had happened, they insisted she end the engagement and sent her to stay with her uncle Henry Devereux Sewall and his family in Watertown, New York. She was in Watertown when Henry wrote to her with his own proposal, probably in early November. On November 18 Ellen wrote to her aunt Prudence, "Last week Tuesday [i.e., November 10], the day I sent my last letter to you I received one from Father. He wished me to write immediately in a '*short, explicit* and *cold* manner to Mr. T.' He seemed very glad I was of the same opinion as himself with regard to the matter. I wrote to H. T. that evening. I never felt so badly at sending a letter in my life. I could not bear to think that both those friends whom I have enjoyed so much with would now no longer be able to have the free pleasant intercourse with us as formerly."[51]

Edmund entered Harvard in 1843, graduating in 1847. He soon began working for railroads and his career took him to a dozen states, Canada, and Honduras. In 1852 he married Louisa Kilham Lovett (1831-1906) and the couple had seven children. Edmund's sister Ellen married Rev. Joseph O. Osgood (1815-98) and the Osgoods had eight children.

Perhaps because of Henry David Thoreau's increasing fame in the second half of the nineteenth century,[52] the Sewalls' relationship with the Thoreau family and particularly John and Henry's proposals to Ellen came to be a part of family history. Ellen's daughter Frances Parsons

[49] Caroline Ward Sewall had written her brother Dennis from Boston on April 5, 1838, "Mother is with our children at Scituate. I asked P. to come & stay with them, but as she had been there this winter, mother liked to come. Besides it was not the season of the year when her [Prudence's] little peculiarities could be indulged as going into the woods for flowers, or into the fields for berries, or upon the shore to see what wonders of the deep, the sea might have cast up." Sewall Family Papers, AAS.
[50] See Thoreau, *Journal*, 1:132, entry for June 19, 1840.
[51] Ellen Sewall to Prudence Ward, November 18, 1840, quoted in Harding, *Days of Henry Thoreau*, 101-2.
[52] *Walden* was published in 1854; Thoreau died in 1862.

Osgood (later Mrs. George W. Collier), who was born in 1862, later recalled, "We had a good picture of Henry hanging on the wall of our north parlor, I remember."[53]

In 1896, Edmund's daughter Caroline Sewall Abbot (1860-1939) was considering a career in writing and asked her father about the family's copy of "Sympathy" written in Henry Thoreau's own hand. Edmund seems to have been uncomfortable about the poem, writing in later life:

> As to the verses, I enclose them as we received them from my sister Ellen, long ago. We have always understood this to be the *original*, and in H. D. T.'s own hand. Mr Blake[54] w[d] doubtless recognize the handwriting, if H. D. T.'s— & I don't know whose else it can be.—I am surprised to hear it ["Sympathy"] has appeared in print. Doubtless H. D. T. retained a copy, when he sent this to my sister. At least one verse sounds much like love-poetry, & it is not strange it sh[d] be supposed addressed to a young lady, except that it purports to be abt a boy.— I read the lines over last evening, the first time for long, & was once more out of patience with their author. If Ellen was right in supposing *me the boy*, H. D. T. must have seen me *before* I went to Concord in 1840.[55]

Ellen's daughter Louise Lovett Osgood Koopman wrote many years later that her "uncle Edmund was always ashamed of the poem, but his descendants value the manuscript of it highly."[56]

Although Edmund's daughter was interested in capitalizing on his connection with Henry Thoreau by writing a magazine article based on his boyhood journal, Edmund tried to discourage the idea. The one personal anecdote he shared is capped with a comment of disapproval.

> Wishing to be quite fair, I will tell you the one characteristic thing I do distinctly remember his saying to me. It is not in the diary—probably was said after that ended.— He said to me, (a child barely twelve years old) that "everything is a miracle." I had just been preparing some little fish for the frying pan, and replied to him "I just threw some fish-heads into the fry-pan—was that a miracle?" to which he answered, "yes" without an explanation of his meaning. I disliked this at the time, and have never thought of it in late years without feeling that he ought to have been ashamed of himself, especially as I was a child away from home, and to a certain extent entrusted to him & he must have been perfectly aware how my parents would have been troubled, had his suggestion to me borne fruit, later.—"[57]

The Unitarians believed that the miracles worked by Jesus Christ were evidence of his divinity. However, the transcendentalists rejected this notion, believing, as Emerson said in his

---

[53] Frances Parsons Osgood to Theodore S. Abbot, February 16, 1956, transcription, Sewall Family Papers, AAS.
[54] H. G. O. Blake (1818-76) of Worcester, who began a lengthy correspondence with Thoreau in 1848.
[55] Edmund Quincy Sewall Jr. to Caroline Sewall Abbot, February 20, 1896, Sewall Family Papers, AAS. This is evidence that Edmund did not recall visiting Concord in 1838.
[56] Louise Osgood Koopman, "The Thoreau Romance," *Massachusetts Review* 4 (1962): 63.
[57] Edmund Quincy Sewall Jr. to Caroline Sewall Abbot, February 8, 1896, Sewall Family Papers, AAS.

divinity school address, that Jesus did not work miracles, but rather that he "spoke of miracles; for he felt that man's life was a miracle, and all that man doth, and he knew that this daily miracle shines, as the man is diviner. But the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain."[58] Thus, Edmund saw Henry's comment as a rejection of his father's Unitarian beliefs.

In the end, although Edmund grudgingly granted his daughter permission to publish an article based on his journals—provided his name was not mentioned—she never proceeded with her planned project. And only excerpts from Edmund's journals have been published up until now. And that is probably how he wanted it. As Edmund insisted to his daughter:

> I have just looked over the diary at Concord.— It was only kept from March 28th to May 16th, 1840, ending abruptly about the middle of my three month's sojourn in Concord. There are but very few references to H. D. T. (his brother John was my favorite and hero).— And no one of those few preserves any *characteristic* saying or doing of Henry's or approaches the dignity of an *anecdote*.—
>
> Well, I really do not think all that is above written could do you or anybody any good, as material for a magazine article, however short—Thoreau having been already very thoroughly written up and *biographized*.[59]

Edmund Quincy Sewall might well be surprised to see the extent to which Thoreau has been "biographized" today. But whether or not Edmund's journals can offer the "dignity of an anecdote," they stand on their own not only as eyewitness testimony of a period Henry David Thoreau spent as a teacher in Concord, but also as a valuable record of one boy's experience of living, learning, and growing up inside a circle of New England's progressive intellectuals and reformers in an unparalleled moment of ferment.

About the Text

It appears that after Edmund's death in 1908 his four early journals were divided among his children.[60] Three of the volumes are now known to exist, and there are also two surviving transcriptions of the fourth.

The original manuscript of Journal No. 1 is unlocated, but two transcriptions survive, both in the Sewall Family Papers at the American Antiquarian Society. One is in a volume containing copies of all four journals plus other material transcribed by Sarah F. Earle (*Earle*) for William F. Abbot of Worcester. The second transcription is an anonymous typescript (*Typescript*). Collation of the two transcriptions suggests that both were made from the original rather than one being a copy of

[58] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Divinity School Address," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert E. Spiller (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1971), 81.
[59] Edmund Quincy Sewall Jr. to Caroline Sewall Abbot, February 8, 1896, Sewall Family Papers, AAS.
[60] No. 1 went to Samuel Lovett Sewell (d. 1938); no. 2 to Caroline Ward Sewall Abbot (d. 1939); and nos. 3 and 4 to Louise Lovett Sewall Chapman (d. 1947).

the other. *Earle* contains numerous corrections in pencil, including restorations of Edmund's misspellings of some words. *Typescript* contains a number of typographical errors and appears generally to be a less careful job. Thus the transcription in this article is based on *Earle*. A few significant and possibly more accurate variations found in the typescript are indicated in footnotes.

Journal No. 2 (February 13 to June 26, 1839) is part of the Sewall Family Papers at the Thoreau Institute in Concord. It was given to the Thoreau Society (whose papers at the time were housed at the Concord Free Public Library) by Quincy S. Abbot in 1986. 18 leaves, 16 x 20.5 cm.

Journal No. 3 (June 27 to October 4, 1839) was owned by Harriet Line Flaccus, who gave it to Quincy S. Abbot in 2003. Quincy Abbot gave the journal to AAS in 2016. Sewall Family Papers, AAS. 12 leaves (6 blank), 17 x 21 cm.

Journal No. 4 (March 28 to May 16, 1840) was given to the American Antiquarian Society in 1945 by Mrs. Louise S. Chapman. 12 leaves, 16.5 x 20.5 cm.

The transcriptions follow Edmund's originals in spelling (including misspellings) and punctuation. Editorial additions and explanations are given in brackets [as in this example]. Words crossed out by Edmund are written with strikethrough ~~as in this example~~ and later insertions by Edmund are set off by carets as in ^this^ example.