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Putting Walden Woods Back on the Map

Howard Mansfield

As political theater, the fight to save Walden Woods had it all. It was a fascinating mix of real estate deals, literary homage, celebrities and literati, and even this era's hallmark of charity: a benefit rock concert, which mercifully was not called Henry David Aid.

There have been other fights to save Walden, but this one was different: It changed our conception of Walden as a landscape. All the other conservation efforts had been about protecting Walden Pond; this was about the Walden Woods, and the debate concerned not whether the Woods ought to be developed or preserved, but whether the Woods was a place in its own right.

The Town of Concord had approved the construction of a 150,000-square-foot office park just 700 yards northeast of the Pond. In the 1940s and '50s the site had been quarried for gravel; now it was marked by some stunted trees and a few piles of trash. Thoreau would have known this place as Brister's Hill.

Concord also had approved the construction of 139 condominiums on 25 acres that abutted conservation land on the other side of the Pond. In Thoreau's time, this area was known as Bear Garden Hill, a wooded knoll where he picked huckleberries and took moonlight walks. "My thoughts expand and flourish most on this barren hill," he wrote. "I seem to be nearer the origin of things."

The quickly formed Thoreau Country Conservation Alliance protested that these buildings would be an assault on Walden Woods, the woods through which Thoreau walked. *Walden* and Thoreau's journals are full of references to places in the Woods, the Alliance said; the well-known Walden Pond is but one feature in this landscape.

The powers that be in Concord responded: You just made up Walden Woods (they referred to it as "the alleged Walden Woods") as a way to stop an office building and housing. The chairman of the zoning board of appeals said he did not doubt Thoreau had walked in the moonlight on Bear Garden Hill, but "the fact is Thoreau was a walker; he walked everywhere in this town... . He may have walked through my back yard for all I know." And in a state hearing, the town's attorney claimed that Thoreau made only one or two references to the Woods in all of his journals.

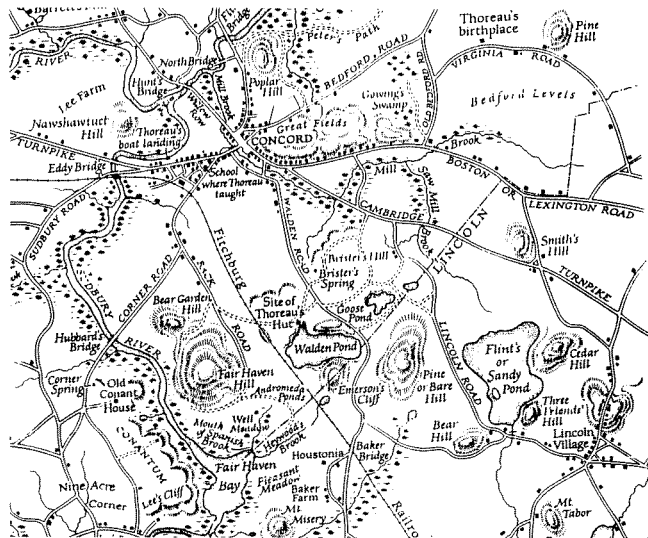
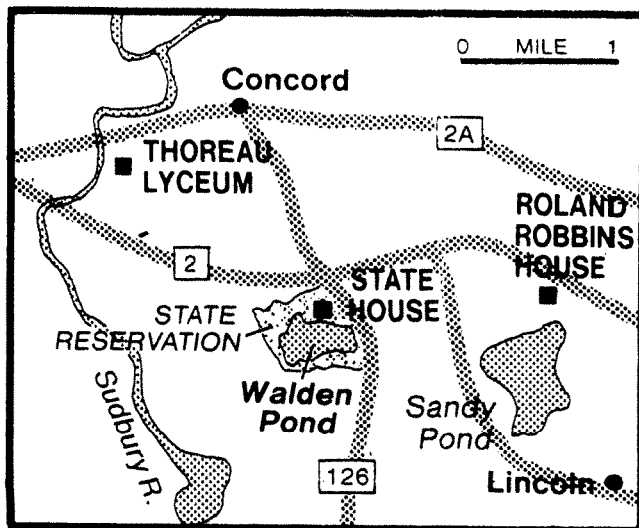
The Alliance countered by gathering hundreds of literary and historical citations showing "Walden Woods" was a common term in Concord until the first decades of this century, when it passed out of usage and fell off almost everyone's mental map. It noted that one of the most celebrated passages in *Walden* begins, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately..." (italics added). And it reprinted a map, drawn in 1906, that shows 2,680 acres crowded with the names of hills, bogs and ridges. Nearly every rill and fold of the earth is recorded, and at its heart is Walden Woods.

Supporters of the development proposals had their map, too, a typical product of our day. It showed Route 2 — its size considerably exaggerated — and a hole for the Pond in flat Cartesian simplicity. The scale had changed: The modern map covered more square mileage, yet was emptier.

Indeed, maps made during the last 50 years have not mentioned Walden Woods, just the Pond, always the Pond. Visitors and pilgrims go to the Pond and cabin site, not the Woods. Neither a state brochure nor one promoting Concord's history mentions the Woods.

Using celebrity and the law, the Walden Woods forces are winning the day. Through their efforts, the National Trust for Historic Preservation declared Walden one of the 11 most endangered historic sites in America. Walden Woods forces purchased the 25 acres that were to become the condo project and are negotiating to buy the office park site. This is still far from a happy ending — they have to raise more than \$3 million to pay for the condo site, and the developer of the office park is holding out for \$7.4 million, more than twice the amount he paid a few years ago.

But most of all, they changed the map, returning to us an awareness of Brister's Hill, Bear Garden Hill, the Boiling Spring, Hubbard's Close, Orchis Swamp, the Andromeda Ponds — an entire world of places Thoreau illuminated in his travels of just a few thousand acres.



Maps confer a legitimacy on our perception of the landscape. Both maps depict the Concord area and both are at the same scale. The top map appeared in the *New York Times* last year; the bottom map was published in 1906.