

THE HISTORY OF CARTOGRAPHY PROJECT
NO. 17. HENRY DAVID THOREAU IN NORTHERN MAINE, 1846

Commentary by Kent C. Ryden

This year's quotation records Henry David Thoreau's brief visit in September 1846 to a tavern at Mattawamkeag, early in his first foray into the forests of northern Maine.¹ Not only does this quotation beautifully display Thoreau's characteristically dry and waspish sense of humor, it also opens a window onto his ambiguous relationship with maps and land surveying. Thoreau expected maps to be accurate, to show fidelity to the facts on the ground; yet he realized that the medium of ink and paper could only show so much, that there were many aspects of the land, and of the experience of that land, that were simply unmappable.²

While we may tend to think of Thoreau as the self-invented hermit of *Walden* or the solitary stroller of "Walking," he was a talented and widely-employed surveyor for much of his adult life. For 1851 alone, his account book lists thirty surveying jobs.³ His best-known surveying project appears in *Walden*, in the chapter "The Pond in Winter." Seeking among other things to dispel the popular local belief that Walden Pond was bottomless, Thoreau took over one hundred soundings through the pond's icy surface and confidently determined that the pond's greatest depth was "exactly one hundred and two feet."⁴ He then mapped the pond at a scale of ten rods to an inch; a simplified version of this plan appeared in the first edition of *Walden* (1854) and has been included in most editions since. Overall, surveying satisfied Thoreau's taste for precise observation and empirical experience that also characterize his descriptions of the natural world.

But Thoreau was not only a hard-headed surveyor; he was also a visionary Transcendentalist and was painfully aware that his surveys not only turned natural landscape into private property but also necessarily excluded all the things about the mapped lands that, to him, made them truly valuable. As he comments in his journal entry for November 10, 1860,

How little there is on an ordinary map! How little, I mean, that concerns the walker and the lover of nature. Between those lines indicating roads is a plain blank space in the form of a square or triangle or polygon or segment of a circle, and there is naught to distinguish this from another area of similar size and form. Yet the one may be covered, in fact, with a primitive oak wood, like that of Boxboro, waving and creaking in the wind, such as may make the reputation of a county, while the other is a stretching plain with scarcely a tree on it. The waving woods, the dells and glades and green banks and smiling fields, the huge boulders, etc., etc., are not on the map, nor to be inferred from the map.⁵

Nor, for that matter, can the map include the moral lessons and metaphysical truths that Thoreau discerned in the facts of the natural world, facts of the sort that he includes in his complaint.

Thus Thoreau would have found the third edition of Moses Greenleaf's *Map of the State of Maine with the Province of New Brunswick* (1844) doubly inaccurate, both geographically misleading and physically and philosophically empty.⁶ In "Ktaadn," as well as in his other essays collected in *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau tries in essence to rectify both aspects of the map's inaccuracy, using words rather than cartographic means both to describe the landscape accurately and to represent the natural world and the moral truths that world reveals. In discussing the lessons he finds in his Walden Pond map, Thoreau remarks that most people "are conversant only with the bights of the bay of poesy, or steer for the public ports of entry, and go into the dry docks of science,"⁷ but he is both kinds of person in one, simultaneously a poet and a scientist. So, he implies, should every cartographer be, lest that cartographer's efforts turn out to be simply another "labyrinth of errors."⁸

1. Henry David Thoreau, "Ktaadn, and the Maine Woods. No. II. Life in the Wilderness," *Union Magazine of Literature and Art* 3, no. 2 (Aug. 1848): 73-79, esp. 73; reprinted in *The Maine Woods* (Boston, 1864).
2. Kent C. Ryden, *Landscape with Figures: Nature and Culture in New England* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 96-134.
3. Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (New York: Knopf, 1970), 275-76.
4. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Michael Meyer (New York: Penguin, 1983), 335.
5. Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, 14 vols., ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906; reprinted 1949), 14:228-29.
6. Matthew H. Edney, Jack Lamb, and George S. Carhart, "Bibliography of the Works of Moses Greenleaf," in *Settling the Maine Wilderness: Moses Greenleaf, His Maps and His Household of Faith, 1777-1834*, by Walter M. Macdougall (Portland, Me.: Osher Map Library and Smith Center for Cartographic Education, 2006), 125-27, esp. item 5, states 4 and 5.
7. Thoreau, *Walden*, 340.
8. Thoreau, "Ktaadn."

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The map detail is from Moses Greenleaf, *Map of the Principal Rivers, Mountains and Highland Ranges of the State of Maine . . . 1828*, in his *Atlas Accompanying Greenleaf's Map and Statistical Survey of Maine* (Portland: Shirley & Hyde, 1829), pl. 1.

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