

## *Boston and Concord*

*Jacob Risinger*

Emerson had been living in Concord, Massachusetts, for less than a year when he was asked to deliver an address marking the bicentennial anniversary of the town's incorporation. Looking back to the rugged conditions of its colonial origin, Emerson evoked for his audience the arduous transit Concord's founders made from Boston to the confluence of the Musketaquid and Assabet Rivers: "A march of a number of families with their stuff, through twenty miles of unknown forest, from a little rising town that had not much to spare, to an Indian town in the wilderness that had nothing, must be laborious to all, and for those who were new to the country, and bred in softness, a formidable adventure" (*CW* 10:21). His account of this demanding errand into the wilderness was also a striking manifestation of one of those historical parallels between the whole of history and individual experience that Emerson relished. He, too, had recently made the twenty-mile transit from Boston to settle in Concord, and while his own journey was hardly so incommensurable, his life there could only be understood in relation to the metropolis of his birth. In his historical address, Emerson explained that while Concord's original inhabitants had "found themselves separate and independent of Boston" – sundered from the city by distance and divergent interests – they nevertheless enjoyed "a strict and loving fellowship with Boston" (*CW* 10:27).

When he moved to Concord in October 1834, Emerson was following a venerable literary tradition that equated poetic prestige with a turn from public affairs to the contemplative privacy of rural life. In his *Georgics*, Virgil had celebrated the man who turned his back on public fame and political strife to gain a better acquaintance with both the "the law of nature's working" and the "rural gods."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Wordsworth left London for the Lake District, where he spent much of his career attempting to write a philosophical poem that had for its "principal subject the sensations and opinions of a Poet living in retirement."<sup>2</sup> Emerson met Wordsworth shortly before his own withdrawal from Boston, but Concord's interdependence

with and proximity to Boston meant Emerson's rural retirement could never quite rival that of his precursors.

Concord's fate was firmly intertwined with that of the metropolis. Emerson once quipped in his journal that while Concord remained a little town, it nevertheless received a "handful of every ton that comes to the city" (*JMN* 8:385). The early and inextricable connection between Boston and Concord was only intensified at the turn of the nineteenth century as new forms of transportation made the twenty-mile gulf between them more navigable. In 1803, the year of Emerson's birth, Jeduthun Wellington, a militia colonel from the American Revolution, championed the construction of a turnpike road stretching from Concord to Cambridge Common. Thirty years later, shortly after acquiring a white clapboard house alongside this same turnpike, Emerson noted in his journal that "I listen by night [and] I gaze by day at the endless procession of wagons loaded with the wealth of all regions of England, of China, of Turkey, of the Indies which from Boston creep by my gate to all the towns of New Hampshire & Vermont" (*JMN* 5:296–97). He later observed that the arrival of the railroad in Concord in 1844 allowed him, in 1856, to "pay for a passage to Boston from Concord, 60 cents; & the trip costs one hour instead of 2 1/2 hours" (*JMN* 14:32).

At a certain, superficial level, Emerson was keen to disparage the homogenizing life of cities. He could easily take aim at the frivolity of the "crowd in the cities" who were, in his opinion, "all more or less mad" (*LL* 2:63–64), and in *Nature*, he had no trouble explaining "the advantage which the country-life possesses for a powerful mind, over the artificial and curtailed life of cities" (*CW* 1:21). Emerson's life in Concord, however, was a product of the convergence rather than the polarity of city and country. In many ways, he stood at the vanguard of a new suburban sensibility that would sweep through the nation, one that, in Henry Binford's terms, balanced "the traditions and institutions of an older peripheral society with the innovations and threats of the growing city."<sup>3</sup> In 1844, Emerson lamented that he wished to have "rural strength & religion for my children" as well as "city facility & polish" (*JMN* 9:87). He worried such a fusion was impossible, but the rapid transformation and urbanization of Boston throughout his lifetime left a significant imprint on Concord and other rural villages at its outskirts. Emerson may well have been the sage of Concord, but as the expositor of a new kind of community and ideal forged at the intersection of the urban and the rural, he was also one of the first eloquent spokesmen of what, in time, would come to be called suburbia.

In 1856, R. L. Midgley's *Sights in Boston and Suburbs, or Guide to the Stranger*, implied that the "Travelling Public" as well as Boston's own inhabitants could hardly claim to have explored Boston in its entirety if they confined themselves to city sights:

The vicinity of Boston presents a succession of villages probably not to be paralleled for beauty in the United States. They are generally the residence of business men from the city; and a suburban residence has become so attractive, and the villages so stocked with comforts and luxuries, that many wealthy families who used formerly to pass the winter in the city and the summer in the country make the latter their permanent dwelling-place only.<sup>4</sup>

When Emerson moved to Concord, a clear term for describing the synthesis of rural nature and urban practicality did not yet exist. In appealing to "the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking . . . in these suburbs and extremities of nature," for example, he was using an older, pejorative sense of *suburb*, one that pointed toward rough and industrial areas at a city's extreme edge (*CW*1:67–68).<sup>5</sup> The fifty years Emerson spent in Concord corresponded with the innovation and growing prestige of a suburban ideal that Frederick Law Olmsted could confidently define in 1871 as a community whose "sylvan surroundings" were counterbalanced by "a considerable share of urban convenience."<sup>6</sup> Emerson's literary reputation rests, in part, on his defense of the aesthetic and salutary force of the permanent objects of nature, but he was only one among many of his generation who would look past the city in the recognition that "[w]e need Nature, & cities give the human senses not room enough" (*JMN* 5:372). At the same time, he also recognized that this desire for natural immersion existed in tension with the social, financial, and cultural pull of the city. His own business hardly involved a daily commute to State Street, but he had his own interests in the metropolis: "The reason why I wish to live near Boston, is, because I use Boston" (*JMN* 9:301).

Emerson was only one of many proto-suburbanites who pursued a modified version of the agrarian ideal in Boston's hinterlands while relying on the city for his livelihood. Crude surveys of Boston's traffic point toward an increasingly decentralized population: Between 1826 and 1847, the number of people who crossed Boston's city boundaries on any given day rose from about five thousand to twenty-two thousand. By the middle of the nineteenth century, half of Boston's attorneys and bankers lived in the suburbs (Binford, *First Suburbs*, pp. 131–35). While those who worked long hours, earned low wages, or had little property tended to live within the city limits, Boston's population was so dispersed that in 1848,

Mayor Josiah Quincy Jr. warned the city council that an accurate picture of Boston's population would have to include "those persons who daily resort to our City, who spend here most of their waking hours, and occupy streets and warehouses in the same way they would do if . . . their families resided within our territorial limits" (cited in Binford, *First Suburbs*, p. 128). The spread of the populace across the continent was mirrored in a suburban shift away from the city; as Emerson himself observed, the railroad and other novel forms of transportation made it increasingly feasible "to cultivate very distant tracts, and yet remain in strict intercourse with the centres of trade and population" (*CW* 1:228). He once described the utopian community at Brook Farm as "a piece of Boston gone out into the fields," but in this sense it offered a representative rather than idiosyncratic picture of Boston's rapid expansion and dispersal throughout the nineteenth century (*JMN* 8:230).

The Boston of Emerson's birth in 1803 was home to about twenty-five thousand people.<sup>7</sup> Though making headway as a mercantile and manufacturing town, it had yet to lose its rural charm: Its houses had large gardens, orchards abounded, and cows wandered across its common and through its city streets. The city was almost entirely confined to the Shawmut Peninsula, a 487-acre promontory crowned by three conspicuous hills, bordered on one side by the Charles River and on the other by a thriving Atlantic harbor. In the rush of postcolonial prosperity, two bridges were built across the Charles River, reducing its insular character, but Henry Adams could still claim that Boston in 1800 "was little changed in appearance, habits, and style from what it had been under its old king."<sup>8</sup> But all of that was about to change.

Upon his graduation from Harvard in 1821, Emerson likely would have crossed the West Boston Bridge on his way back from Cambridge, but the metropolis that awaited him on the other side was no longer the quiet seaport town of his youth. The population of Boston had grown by eighteen thousand people in just two decades. By the time Emerson took up the pulpit at Boston's Second Church in 1829, the population of Boston had reached sixty thousand; that number would increase sixfold by 1882, the year of his death (Kennedy, *Planning*, p. 261). In 1822, the people of Boston voted to forego their traditional town meetings in favor of city incorporation. A year later, as the second mayor of the new "City of Boston," Josiah Quincy set about modernizing its antiquated services and infrastructure: A new market district was constructed, fire hoses replaced bucket brigades, a House of Industry was built to provide shelter and sustenance for the city's poor, and sewers were extended throughout the city.

In his first year as mayor, more than six thousand tons of street dirt was swept up throughout the city.<sup>9</sup>

The most obvious sign of Boston's expanding population lay in the massive landmaking projects that transformed its physical geography. As industry expanded, immigration spiked, and affluent Bostonians migrated to fashionable new enclaves away from the waterfront, enterprising developers met an increasing demand for new open land by filling in the tidal flats and low-lying lands around Boston's peninsula. At the turn of the century, Harrison Gray Otis and the Mount Vernon Proprietors used the top fifty feet of Mount Vernon to fill in the land around Charles Street, creating out of mere pastures and mudflats a swanky new neighborhood perched just below Charles Bulfinch's newly constructed state house. Otis would later recall that this topographical shift "excited as much attention as Bonaparte's road over the Alps."<sup>10</sup> Between 1811 and 1824, dirt and gravel composing the top sixty feet of Beacon Hill were carted down and dumped into Mill Pond, adding fifty habitable acres to the tip of Boston's peninsula. Emerson enthusiastically described these transformations in an 1844 lecture:

The narrow peninsula, which a few years ago easily held its thirty or forty thousand people, with many pastures and waste lands, not to mention the large private gardens in the midst of the town, has been found too strait when forty are swelled to a hundred thousand. The waste lands have been fenced in and builded over, the private gardens one after the other have become streets. . . . Acre after acre has been since won from the sea, and in a short time the antiquary will find it difficult to trace the peninsular topography. (*CW* 1:223)

In *Nature*, Emerson had marveled at how thoroughly "the face of the world changed, from the era of Noah to that of Napoleon!" (*CW* 1:12). In Boston's shifting topography, he found a staggering local example of humanity's own impress on the earth's unceasing evolution.

While impressive in themselves, radical alterations to Boston's physical landscape were only manifestations of deeper changes. In the same year that Emerson helped Concord celebrate its two hundredth anniversary, the city of Boston welcomed its first three passenger railways. Over the course of the next fifteen years, seven rail terminals would be built in the city, most of them on recently filled land. Rail transportation connected Boston not only to its suburban outposts, but also to the rest of the country and the world. Emerson observed that flour from Michigan and Illinois easily passed through Boston to Liverpool and Le Havre; in his terms, Boston's "iron rivers" promised "a great prosperity to that city" (*JMN* 8:281).

Boston's growing cosmopolitanism owed as much to its growing immigrant population as it did to its position in a global mercantile network. Between 1845 and 1855, almost a quarter of a million immigrants passed through Boston's ports. While many migrated toward the textile mills in Waltham, Lawrence, and Lowell or farther inward into the country, others remained to sink roots in the city. In 1847 alone, more than thirty-seven thousand immigrants settled in Boston, most of them officially listed as "Irish labourers."<sup>11</sup> Crowding an already congested peninsula, this influx of inexpensive labor helped fuel a rapid expansion of the city's industry at the same time it resulted in a realignment of the city's population. As well-to-do and middle-class Bostonians moved to surrounding towns or upscale real estate near the Common, old mansions and warehouses were converted into crowded tenements as Fox Hill and the North End slowly became slums.<sup>12</sup> Such alterations led Emerson's former congregation at Boston's Second Church to leave the North End behind for more desirable quarters, but Emerson himself often passed through the North End's Prince Street on the Concord coach and found its denizens to be "greatly more interesting than the clean shaved & silk robed procession in Washington & Tremont streets" (*JMN* 7:440; Whitehill and Kennedy, *Boston*, p. 113). Emerson often decried urbanites for building "street on street all round the horizon," for shutting out the sky and relegating all traces of reality and correspondent contact with the world to the city's periphery – but his willingness to acknowledge a version of that reality in the heart of the city's most indigent districts exemplifies his own recognition that any broad distinction between rural ideality and urban superficiality must necessarily be a reductive one (*EL* 2:273).

Concord was not immune to the seismic transformations that rocked Boston throughout Emerson's lifetime. Just six years before Emerson experienced a state of "perfect exhilaration" while walking across the common at twilight (*CW* 1:10), Bostonians overturned a two-hundred-year-old precedent when they outlawed the grazing of cows on their Common in May 1830 (Rawson, *Eden on the Charles*, pp. 58–64). This bovine eviction – just one small sign of a larger shift – was part of a general centrifugal displacement of the agriculture that had marked Boston in Emerson's youth. As land scarcity in Boston increased its value, farmers in Concord altered their practices, moving away from sustenance farming to meet the demands of the urban market in Boston. George Washington Hosmer – born, like Emerson, in 1803 – recalled making early morning deliveries from his father's farm in Concord to Boston, "riding down in the night on

top of the load of farm-produce, potatoes, eggs, butter – passing Harvard College in the dimness of the early morning.”<sup>13</sup> The flow of produce from Concord to Boston’s markets would only increase throughout Emerson’s lifetime. In 1865 alone, Concord’s farmers produced 21,707 gallons of milk for thirsty Bostonians; by 1874, they grew about eighty thousand quarts of strawberries and about seventy-five thousand bunches of asparagus.<sup>14</sup> Like many Boston suburbanites, Emerson was himself a horticultural dilettante; in planting more than a hundred fruit trees behind his house, he attempted to legitimize his own preference for Concord’s agrarian scene while also distancing himself from the entrepreneurial spirit that was rendering self-sufficiency and self-cultivation obsolete (see *Mind*, pp. 433–35).

In his essay “Manners,” Emerson observed that the city was “recruited from the country” and would have “died out, rotted, and exploded, long ago, but that it was reinforced from the fields” (*CW* 3:76). The exchange he described went both ways: While Boston’s thriving markets allowed for the expansion of Concord’s already existent agriculture, its swelling labor force prompted an industrial boom throughout its periphery. When Emerson arrived in 1834, Concord was already home to the oldest cotton mill in the state and a factory that annually wrought three hundred thousand pounds of lead into pipes. The thousands of pencils, hats, bricks, and bars of soap produced in Concord every year were, according to local merchant Lemuel Shattuck, “principally sold abroad.”<sup>15</sup> Recent immigrants, particularly from Ireland, helped lay the track for the Boston and Fitchburg railway, and they supplied a steady stream of labor for Concord’s small manufactories. In his memoirs, Concord physician Edward Jarvis recalled a substantial increase in Concord’s foreign-born population throughout the middle of the nineteenth century; its Irish population in 1855 numbered 424, and by 1875, the relatively small suburb was home to 535 foreign-born citizens (Jarvis, *Traditions*, pp. 153, 221). Like Thoreau, Emerson often encountered these immigrants in their “villages of shanties at the water’s edge & in the most sequestered nooks of the town”; observing the dangers of their work, he wondered what the railroad and the “indefinite promise” of its concomitant transformations would “do & undo for the town hereafter” (*JMN* 9:7).

Scholars almost always lump Concord with Boston when they celebrate the intellectual pursuits, artistic ambitions, and reform efforts that prompted William Tudor to label nineteenth-century Boston “the Athens of America,” but the mundane practicalities of life in Concord

and Boston upheld this cultural flourishing and made it possible. While colonial Concord started off as a place apart from Boston, their fates and fortunes were decisively soldered together throughout Emerson's lifetime. When he spoke at the dedication of the Concord Free Public Library in 1873, Emerson shrewdly acknowledged the fact of this aggregation in the annexation language typical of the period, claiming that when Boston learned of Concord's new library, "it will not be a little envious, nor rest until it has annexed Concord to the city" (*CW* 10:514).

### Notes

- 1 Virgil, *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I-IV*, trans. H. R. Fairclough, rev. G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 171.
- 2 William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James Butler, and Michael Jaye (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 39.
- 3 Henry Binford, *The First Suburbs: Residential Communities on the Boston Periphery, 1815–1860* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 8.
- 4 R. L. Midgley, *Sights in Boston and Suburbs, or Guide to the Stranger* (Boston, MA: John P. Jewett, 1856), p. 129.
- 5 See Michael Rawson, *Eden on the Charles: The Making of Boston* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 137.
- 6 Cited in John Archer, "Country and City in the American Romantic Suburb," *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 42 (May 1983): 139.
- 7 See Lawrence W. Kennedy, *Planning the City upon a Hill: Boston since 1630* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), p. 261.
- 8 Henry Adams, *History of the United States during the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Library of America, 1986), p. 64.
- 9 See Thomas O'Connor, *The Athens of America: Boston, 1825–1845* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), pp. 28–40.
- 10 Walter Muir Whitehill and Lawrence W. Kennedy, *Boston: A Topographical History*, Third Edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 62.
- 11 Thomas O'Connor, *The Hub: Boston Past and Present* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2001), p. 152.
- 12 See Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants, 1790–1880: A Study in Acculturation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 100–103.
- 13 J. K. Hosmer et. al., *Memorial of George Washington Hosmer* (n.p., 1882), p. 28. Cited in Binford, *First Suburbs*, p. 32.
- 14 Edward Jarvis, *Traditions and Reminiscences of Concord, Massachusetts, 1779–1878*, ed. Sarah Chapin (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), p. 198.
- 15 Lemuel Shattuck, *A History of the Town of Concord; From its Earliest Settlement to 1832* (Boston, MA: Russell, Odiorne, and Co., 1835), pp. 217–18.



FURTHER READING

- Gross, Robert. "Transcendentalism and Urbanism: Concord, Boston, and the Wider World." *Journal of American Studies* 18 (December 1984): 361–81.
- Seasholes, Nancy S. *Gaining Ground: A History of Landmaking in Boston*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.
- Stilgoe, John. *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820–1939*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988.
- Thornton, Tamara Plakins. *Cultivating Gentlemen: The Meaning of Country Life among the Boston Elite 1785–1860*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989. Pp. 15–56.