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Thoreau passed through this area 155 years ago

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If we think of writer-naturalist Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) we might connect him with the town of Concord and with Walden Pond, both located an hour to our east. But on one day in 1856, Mr. Thoreau was a tourist passing through our own Millers River valley, on his way to Brattleboro, Vt.

Despite being known for his Concord-centricity, Henry Thoreau traveled regularly throughout central Massachusetts, and often by train. Such was the case in early September 1856, when he planned a week-long trek with a dual purpose. The first was to “snuff out the musty fragrance of the decaying year in

the primitive woods” of the upper Connecticut River valley. The second was to visit his friend Bronson Alcott, who was then living with his wife and four daughters in Walpole, NH.

On Friday, Sept. 5, Thoreau boarded a westbound train of the Fitchburg Railroad in Concord just before 8:30 a.m. From the window, he studied the yellow and magenta flowers of fall, still in full bloom throughout the passing landscape. “Will not the prime of goldenrods and asters be just before the first severe frosts?” he wrote in his journal. At the same time, the more delicate ferns had seen better days. “As I ride along in the cars, I think

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that the ferns, etc., are browned and crisped more than usual at this season, on account of the very wet weather." Not much escaped his gaze.

When he arrived in the bustling rail hub of Fitchburg at 9:45 a.m., Henry had to change lines to continue his journey. A train from the Cheshire Railroad had just



Henry Thoreau

left for New Hampshire, its time having been coordinated with the Fitchburg line. But the Vermont & Massachusetts Railroad, which provided the more direct route to Brattleboro, had no scheduled departure until 1:30 p.m. Already geared toward his scientific pursuits, Henry Thoreau was not willing to sit around and wait for a ride. "Found on reaching Fitchburg that there was an interval of three and a half hours between this and the Brattleboro train, and so walked on, on the track, with shouldered valise," he wrote. Off he went.

Now on foot, Henry Thoreau could take a closer look at the vegetation he had earlier spied from the train window. "Observed by railroad, in Fitchburg, low slippery elm shrubs with great, rough, one-sided leaves," he wrote. Other track-side plants included *Solidago lanceolata* (Lance-leaved goldenrod) *Aster puniceus* (Purple-stemmed aster), shrubs of *Salix lucida* (Shining willow), and elder berries, just beginning to ripen.

After his five-mile hike, Thoreau "Took the cars again in Westminster," meeting the westbound train at 1:45 p.m. Soon he was rolling through the Millers River valley, making stops at Royalston (2:44 p.m.), Athol (3:05 p.m.), Orange (3:17 p.m.), Wendell (3:26 p.m.), and Erving (3:29 p.m.). Thoreau must have snagged a northside seat, for he caught glimpses of the Tully Mountains. "The scenery began to be mountainous and interesting in Royalston and Athol, but was more so in Erving," he wrote. When the train reached Grout's Corner (now Millers Falls) at 3:50 p.m., it turned north. In Northfield, Thoreau saw fields of sorghum "taller than corn." He noted that "women and children are already picking hops in the fields, in the shade of large white sheets, like sails." He arrived in Brattleboro at 5 p.m.

Henry Thoreau spent four days in Vermont, "botanizing" and studying autumn's effects on the plants along the river. On Sept. 10, he crossed the Connecticut and visited with the Alcotts in Walpole. Friday, Sept. 12, found him using the Cheshire Railroad and the Fitchburg Railroad to return to Concord. He never came this way again.

As we travel to Labor Day outings on Monday, we may drive over or near those same railroad tracks. We may hear the growling thunder of a CSX or Norfolk Southern freighter echoing through our towns and valley. If we do, we might pause for half a minute to consider the sight a century and a half ago, when that proto-ecologist from Concord rode through here on the train and saw the same views that we live with every day.

Note: Corinne H. Smith, of Athol, is a librarian and writer. She is a member of Women of Words (WOW) a writers group based in Athol, as well as the Boston chapter of the National Writers Union.