

Thoreau on the Estabrook Woods

Journal Entries



September 19, 1851

“Mr. Isaiah Green of Carlisle who lives nearest to the Kibbe Place, can remember when there were three of four houses around him (he is nearly eighty years old and has always lived there and was born there); now his is quite retired, and the nearest road is scarcely used at all.”

October 5, 1851

“My companion remarked that the land (for the most part consisting of decayed orchards, huckleberry pastures and forests) on both sides of the old Carlisle road, uneven and undulating like the road, appeared

to be all in motion like the traveler, travelling on with him.”

Sept 28, 1852

“I find the hood-leaved violet quite abundant in a meadow, and the *pedata* in the Boulder Field. I have now seen all but the *blanda*, *plamata*, and *pubescens* blooming again, and bluebirds and robins, etc. are heard again in the air. This is the commencement, then of the second spring. Violets, *Potentilla Canadensis*, lambkill, wild rose, yellow lily, etc. etc., begin again.

Children are now gathering barberries, - just the right time. Speaking of the great fall flower which the valleys are at present, its brightest petal is still the scarlet one of the dogwood, and in some places the redder red maple one is equally bright; then there is the yellow walnut one, and the broad dull red one of the huckleberry, and the hazel, high blueberry, and *Viburnum nudum* of various similar tints.

It has been too cold for the thinnest coat since the middle of September.

Grapes are still abundant. I have only to shake the birches to bring down a shower of plums. But the flavor of none is quite equal to their fragrance. Some soils, like this rocky one on the old Carlisle road, are so suited to the apple that they spring up wild and bear well in the midst of pines, birches, maples, and oaks, their red and yellow fruit harmonizing with the autumnal tints of the forest in which they grow. I am surprised to see rising amid the maples and birches in a swamp the rounded tops of apple trees rosy with fair fruit.”

March 21, 1853

“The earth is uninhabited but fair to inhabit, like the old Carlisle road. Is then the road so rough that it should be neglected? Not only narrow but rough is the way that leadeth to life everlasting.”

March 21, 1853

“Ah! Then as I was rising this crowning road, just beyond the old lime-kiln, there leaked into my open ear the faint peep of a hyla from some far pool. One little hyla somewhere in the ferns, aroused by the genial season, crawls up the bank or a bush, squats on a dry leaf, and essays a note or two, which scarcely rends the air, does no violence to the zephyr, but yet breaks through all obstacles, thick-planted maples, and far over the downs to the ear of the listening naturalist, who will never see that piper in this world, --nor even the next, it may be, --- as it were the first faint cry of the new-born year, notwithstanding the notes of birds. Where so long I have heard only the brattling and moaning of the wind, what means this tenser, far-piercing sound? All nature rejoices with one joy. If the hyla has revived again, may not I? He is heard the first warm hazy evening.

Came home through Hunt pasture. A warmer sunset marks the season. Some oaks have lost their leaves.”

May 31, 1853

The following passage refers to a brook otherwise known as Dakin's Brook and describes its origin at a location where there was once a swamp and is now a pond in the field east of Boaz Brown's meadow near Estabrook Road.

“Farmer, who was hoeing, came up to the wall, and we fell into a talk bout Dodge’s Brook, which runs through his farm. A man in Cambridge, he said, had recently written to Mr. Monroe about it, but he didn’t know why. All he knew about the brook was that he had seen it dry and then again, after a week of dry weather in which no rain fell, it would be full again, and either the writer or Monroe said there were only two such brooks in all North America. One of its sources – he thought the principal one – was in his land. We all went to it. It was in a meadow – rather a dry one, once a swamp. He said it never ceased to flow at the head now, since he dug it out, and never froze there. He ran a pole down eight or nine feet into the mud to show me the depth. He had minnows there in a large deep pool, and cast an insect into the water, which they presently rose to and swallowed. Fifteen years ago he dug it out nine feed deep and found spruce logs as big as his leg, which the beavers had gnawed, with the marks of their teeth very distinct upon them but the soon crumbled away on coming to the air.”

June 5, 1853

“There is a tract of pasture, woodland, orchard, and swamp in the north part of the town, through which the old Carlisle road runs, which is nearly two miles square, without a single house and scarcely any cultivated land in it, - four square miles.”

June 10, 1853

“What shall this great wild tract over which we strolled be called? Many farmers have pastures there, and wood-lots, and orchards. It consists mainly of rocky pastures. It contains what I call the Boulder Field, the Yellow Birch Swamp, the Black Birch Hill, the Laurel Pasture, the Hog-Pasture, the White· Pine

Grove, the Easterbrooks Place, the Old Lime-Kiln, the Lime Quarries, Spruce Swamp, the Ermine Weasel Woods; also the Oak Meadows, the Cedar Swamp, the Kibbe Place, and the old place northwest of Brooks Clark's. Ponkawtasset bounds it on the south. There are a few frog-ponds and an old mill-pond within it, and Bateman's Pond on its edge. What shall the whole be called? The old Carlisle road, which runs through the middle of it, is bordered on each side with wild apple pastures, where the trees stand without order, having, many if not most of them, sprung up by accident or from pomace sown at random, and are for the most part concealed by birches and pines. These orchards are very extensive, and yet many of these apple trees, growing as forest trees, bear good crops of apples. It is a paradise for walkers in the fall. There are also boundless huckleberry pastures as well as many blueberry swamps. Shall we call it the Easterbrooks Country? It would make a princely estate in Europe, yet it is owned by farmers, who live by the labor of their hands and do not esteem it much. Plenty of huckleberries and barberries here.

A second great uninhabited tract is that on the Marlborough road, stretching westerly from Francis Wheeler's to the river, and beyond about three miles, and from Harrington's on the north to Dakin's on the south, more than a mile in width. A third, the Walden Woods. A fourth, the Great Fields. These four are all in Concord."

June 10, 1853

"...We continued on, round the head of "Cedar Swamp" and may say that we drank at the source of it or of Saw Mill Brook, where a spring is conducted through a hollow log to a tub for cattle. Crossed on to the old Carlisle road by the house north of Isaiah Green's and then across the road through the woods

to the Paul Adams house by Bateman's Pond. Saw a hog-pasture of a dozen acres in the woods, with thirty or forty hogs and a shelter for them a night, a half mile east of the last house, - something rare in these days hereabouts."

Sept 3, 1854 - With Minot Pratt into Carlisle

Woodbine berries purple. Even at this season I see some flocks of yellow butterflies in the damp road after the rain, as earlier. Pratt showed me a tobacco flower, long and tubular, slightly like a datura. In his yard appears a new variety of sweet-briar which he took out of the woods behind his house; larger bush and leaves, leaves less glandular and sticky beneath, the principal serrations deeper and much sharper, and the whole leaf perhaps less rounded. Saw some winged ants silencing a circular space in the pasture grass about five inches in diameter, a few very large ones among them. Very thick and incessantly moving, one upon another, some without wings, all running about in great excitement. It seemed the object of the winged ones to climb to the top of the grass blades, one over another, and then take to wing, which they did. In the meadow southwest of Hubbard's Hill saw white *Polygala sanguinea*, not described. Lambkill again in Hunt Pasture. Close to the left-hand side of bridle-road, about a hundred rods south of the oak, a bayberry bush without fruit, probably a male one. It made me realize that this was only a more distant and elevated sea-beach and that we were within reach of marine influences. My thoughts suffered a sea-turn. North of the oak (four or five rods), on the left of the bridle-road in the pasture next to Mason's, tried to find the white hardhack still out, but it was too late. Found the mountain laurel out again, one flower, *close sessile* on end of this year's shoot. There were numerous blossom-buds expanding, and they may possibly

open this fall. Running over the laurel an amphicarpaea in bloom, some pods nearly an inch long, out probably a week, or ten days at most. *Epilobium molle*, linear, still in flower in the spruce swamp, near my path. A white hardhack out of bloom by a pile of stones (on which I put another) in Robbins's field, and a little south of it a clump of red huckleberries.

September 4, 1857

“At the cleft rock by the hill just west of this swamp, - call it Cornel rock - I found apparently *Aspidium cristatum*. That is an interesting spot. There is the handsomest and most perfect *Cornus circinate* there that I know, now apparently its fruit in prime, hardly light-blue but delicate bluish-white. It is the richest-looking of the cornels, with its large round leaf and showy cymes; a slender bush seven or eight feet high. There is quite a collection of rare plants there...”

Oct 20, 1857 - To the Easterbrooks Country.

“I go along the riverside and by Dakin the pump-maker's. There is a very strong northwest wind, Novemberish and cool, raising waves on the river and admonishing to prepare for winter.

I see two *Chenopodium album* with stems as bright purple and fair as the poke has been, and the calyx-lobes enveloping the seeds the same color.

Apples are gathered; only the ladders here and there, left leaning against the trees.

I had gone but little way on the old Carlisle road when I saw Brooks Clark, who is now about eighty - and bent like a bow, hastening along the road, bare-footed, as usual, with an axe in his hand; was in haste perhaps on account of the cold wind on his bare

feet. It is he who took the *Centinel* so long. When he got up to me, I saw that besides the axe in one hand, he had his shoes in the other, filled with knurly apples and a dead robin. He stopped and talked with me a few moments; said that we had had a noble autumn and might now expect some cold weather. I asked if he had found the robin dead. No, he said, he found it with its wing broken and killed it. He also added that he had found some apples in the woods, and as he hadn't anything to carry them in, he put 'em in his shoes. They were queer-looking trays to carry fruit in. How many he got in along toward the toes, I don't know. I noticed, too, that his pockets were stuffed with them. His old tattered frock coat was hanging in strips about the skirts, as were his pantaloons about his naked feet. He appeared to have been out on a scout this gusty afternoon, to see what he could find, as the youngest boy might. It pleased me to see this cheery old man, with such a feeble hold on life, bent almost double, thus enjoying the evening of his days. Far be it from me to call it avarice or penury, this childlike delight in finding something in the woods or fields and carrying it home in the October evening, as a trophy to be added to his winter's store. Oh, no; he was happy to be Nature's pensioner still, and bird-like to pick up his living. Better his robin than your turkey, his shoes full of apples than your barrels full; they will be sweeter and suggest a better tale. He can afford to tell how he got them, and we to listen. There is an old wife, too, at home, to share them and hear how they were obtained. Like an old squirrel shuf-fling to his hole with a nut. Far less pleasing to me the loaded wain, more suggestive of avarice and of spiritual penury.

This old man's cheeriness was worth a thousand of the church's sacraments and *memento mori's*. It was better than a prayerful mood. It proves to me old age as tolerable, as happy, as infancy. I was glad of an occasion to suspect that this afternoon he had not

been at "work" but living somewhat after my own fashion (though he did not explain the axe), - had been out to see what nature had for him, and now was hasten-ing home to a burrow he knew, where he could warm his old feet. If he had been a young man, he would probably have thrown away his apples and put on his shoes when he saw me coming, for shame. But old age is manlier; it has learned to live, makes fewer apologies, like infancy. This seems a very manly man. I have known him within a few years building stone wall by himself, barefooted. I keep along the old Carlisle road. The leaves having mostly fallen, the country now seems deserted, and you feel further from home and more lonely. I see where squirrels, apparently, have gnawed the apples left in the road. The barberry bushes are now alive with, I should say, thousands of robins feeding on them. They must make a principal part of their food now. I see the yellowish election-cake fungi. Those large chocolate-colored ones have been burst some days (at least).

Warren Brown, who owns the Easterbrooks place, the west side the road, is picking barberries. Allows that the soil thereabouts is excellent for fruit, but it is so rocky that he has not patience to plow it. That is the reason this tract is not cultivated. The yellow birches are generally bare. The sassafras in Sted Buttrick's pasture near to E. Hubbard's Wood, nearly so; leaves all withered. Much or most of the fever-bush still green, though somewhat wrinkled.

There was Melvin, too, a-barberrying and nutting. He had got two baskets, one in each hand, and his game-bag, which hung from his neck, all full of nuts and barberries, and his mouth full of tobacco. Trust him to find where the nuts and berries grow. He is hunting all the year and he marks the bushes and the trees which are fullest, and when the time comes, for once leaves his gun, though not his dog, at home, and takes his baskets to the spot. It is pleasanter to me to

meet him with his gun or with his baskets than to meet some portly caterer for a family, basket on arm, at the stalls of Quincy Market. Better Melvin's pignuts than the others' shagbarks. It is to be observed that the best things are generally most abused, and so are not so much enjoyed as the worst. Shagbarks are eaten by epicures with diseased appetites; pignuts by the country boys who gather them. So fagots and rubbish yield more comfort than sound wood.

Melvin says he has caught partridges in his hands. If there's only one hole, knows they 've not gone out. Sometimes shoots them through the snow.

What a wild and rich domain that Easterbrooks Country! Not a cultivated, hardly a cultivatable field in it, and yet it delights all natural persons, and feeds more still. Such great rocky and moist tracts, which daunt the farmer, are reckoned as unimproved land, and therefore worth but little; but think of the miles of huckleberries, and of barberries, and of wild apples, so fair, both in flower and fruit, resorted to by men and beasts; Clark, Brown, Melvin, and the robins, these, at least, were attracted thither this afternoon. There are barberry bushes or clumps there, behind which I could actually pick two bushels of berries with-out being seen by you on the other side. And they are not a quarter picked at last, by all creatures to-gether. I walk for two or three miles, and still the clumps of barberries, great sheaves with their wreaths of scarlet fruit, show themselves before me and on every side, seeming to issue from between the pines or other trees, as if it were they that were promenading there, not I.

That very dense and handsome maple and pine grove opposite the pond-hole on this old Carlisle road is Ebby Hubbard's (Sted Buttrick's, according to Melvin). Melvin says there are those alive who remember mowing there. Hubbard loves to come

with his axe in the fall or winter and trim up his woods. Melvin tells me that Skinner says he thinks he heard a wildcat scream in E. Hubbard's Wood, by the Close. It is worth the while to have a Skinner in the town; else we should not know that we had wildcats. They had better look out, or he will skin them, for that seems to have been the trade of his ancestors. How long Nature has maneuvered to bring our Skinner within ear-shot of that wildcat's scream! Saved Ebby's wood to be the scene of it! Ebby, the *wood-saver*.

Melvin says that Sted sold the principal log of one of those pasture oaks to Garty for ten dollars and got several cords besides. What a mean bribe to take the life of so noble a tree!

Wesson is so gouty that he rarely comes out-of-doors, and is a spectacle in the street; but he loves to tell his old stories still! How, when he was stealing along to get a shot at his ducks, and was just upon them a red squirrel sounded the alarm, *chickaree chickaree chickaree*, and off they went; but he turned his gun upon the squirrel to avenge himself.

It would seem as if men generally could better appreciate honesty of the John Beaton stamp, which gives you your due to a mill, than the generosity which habitually throws in the half-cent."

November 3, 1857

"As I return down the Boulder Field, I see the now winter-colored – i.e. reddish (of oak leaves) – horizon of hills, with its few white houses, four or five miles distant southward, between two of the boulders, which are a dozen rods from me, a dozen feet high, and nearly as much apart, - as a landscape between the frame of a picture. But what a picture-frame! These two great slumbering masses of rock, reposing like a pair of mastodons on the surface of the pasture,

completely shutting out a mile of the horizon on each side, while between their adjacent sides, which are nearly perpendicular, I see to the now purified, dry, reddish, leafy horizon, with a faint tinge of blue from the distance. To see a remote landscape between two near rocks! I want no other gilding to my picture-frame. There they lie, as perchance they tumbled and spit from off an iceberg. What better frame could you have? The globe itself, here named pasture, for ground and foreground, two great boulders for the sides of the frame, and the sky itself for the top! And for artists and subject, God and Nature! Such pictures cost nothing but eyes, and it will not bankrupt one to own them. They were not stolen by any conqueror as spoils of war, and no one can doubt but they are really the works of an old master. What more, pray will you see between any two slips of gilded wood in that pasture you call Europe and browse in sometimes? It is singular that several of those rocks should be thus split into twins. Even very low ones, just appearing above the surface, are divided and parallel, having a path between them. It would be something to own that pasture with the great rocks in it! Yet I suppose they are considered and incumbrance by the owner. I came along the path that comes out just this side of the lime-kiln.”

November 6, 1857

“When I came out on to the old Carlisle road in the dusk on my return, I saw Brooks Clark coming homeward, with his axe in his hand and both hands behind his back, being bent almost double. He said he was over eighty. Some years ago he bought some land up that way, and, the birches having sprung up there, he called it his birch pasture. There was enough birch wood there to carry him through the winter, and he was now cutting it. He remembered when they began to burn lime there, and bought the

right to get out stone of Easterbrooks more than sixty years ago. It was Peter Barrett that began it. The lime sold for \$5.00 per cask (larger casks than now). But the stone was difficult to get out.”

November 6, 1857

“As for the yellow birch cellar hole, Ephraim Brown told him that old Henry Flint (an ancestor of Clark’s wife) dug it, and erected the frame of a house there, but never finished it, selling out, going to live by the river. Clark’s father told him that he remembered when there were no fences between his house and Lawrence’s; it was all open. This road (the Estabrook Road) was the new one; the bridle road (Two Rod Road) the old one.” (Note: Flint’s house frame is mentioned in his deed of sale John Lawrence’s Farm was in the area now called “Water’s Edge Farm” on Monument Street)

November 6, 1857

“As for the yellow birch cellar hole, Ephraim Brown told him (Brooks Clark) that old Henry Flint (an ancestor of Clark’s wife) dug it, and erected the frame of a house there, but never finished it, selling out, going to live by the river. It was never finished.”

November 11, 1857

“That cellar-hole off northwest of Brooks Clark’s is where Boaz Brown used to live, and the andromeda swamp behind is “Boaz’s meadow,” says Jacob Farmer, who has seen corn growing in the meadow.”

Nov 18, 1857

“How singularly rivers in their sources overlap each other! There is the meadow behind Brooks Clark’s and at the head of which Sted Buttrick’s handsome maple lot stands, on the old Carlisle road. The stream which drains this empties into the Assabet at Dove Rock. A short distance west of this meadow, but a good deal more elevated, is Boaz’s meadow, whose water finds its way, naturally or artificially, northeastward around the other, crossing the road just this side of the lime-kiln, and empties into the Saw Mill Brook and so into the main river.”

Feb 5, 1858

“To Boaz’s Meadow – There is plenty of that handsome-seeded grass which I think Tarbell called goose grass (probably *glyceria*) in the meadow south of the roadway, at Boaz’s Meadow...”

Sept 24, 1859

“Stedman Buttrick's handsome maple and pine swamp is full of cinnamon ferns. I stand on the elevated road, looking down into it. The trees are very tall and slender, without branches for a long distance. All the ground, which is perfectly level, is covered and concealed, as are the bases of the trees, with the tufts of cinnamon fern, now a pale brown. It is a very pretty sight, these northern trees springing out of a ground-work of ferns. It is like pictures of the tropics, except that here the palms are the undergrowth. You could not have arranged a nosegay more tastefully. It is a rich groundwork, out of which the maples and pines spring. But outside the wood and by the roadside, where they are exposed, these ferns are withered, shriveled, and brown, for they are tenderer than the dicksonia. The fern,

especially if large, is so foreign and tropical that these remind me of artificial groundworks set in sand, to set off other plants. These ferns (like brakes) begin to decay, i.e. to turn yellow or brown and ripen, as here, before they are necessarily frost-bitten. There is another change and decay, like that of the brake and sarsaparilla in the woods and swamps, only later, while the exposed ones are killed before they have passed through all their changes. The exposed ones attained to a brighter yellow early and were then killed; the shaded ones pass through various stages of rich, commonly pale brown, as here, and last much longer. The brown ones are the most interesting.

Going along this old Carlisle road, - road for walkers, for berry-pickers, and no more worldly travelers; road for Melvin and Clark, not for the sheriff nor butcher nor the baker's jingling cart; road where all wild things and fruits abound, where there are countless rocks to jar those who venture there in wagons; which no jockey, no wheelwright in his right mind, drives over, no little spidery gigs and Flying Childers; road which leads to and through a great but not famous garden, zoological and botanical garden, at whose gate you never arrive, - as I was going along there, I perceived the grateful scent of the dicksonia fern, now partly decayed, and it reminds me of all up-country with its springy mountainsides and unexhausted vigor. Is there any essence of dicksonia fern, I wonder? Surely that giant who, my neighbor expects, is to bound up the Alleghanies will have his handkerchief scented with that. In the lowest part of the road the dicksonia by the wall-sides is more than half frost-bitten and withered, - a sober Quaker-color, brown crape! - though not so tender or early [?] as the cinnamon fern; but soon I rise to where they are more yellow and green, and so my route is varied. On the higher places there are very handsome tufts of it, all yellowish out-side and green within.

The sweet fragrance of decay! When I wade through by narrow cow-paths, it is as if I had strayed into an ancient and decayed herb-garden. Proper for old ladies to scent their handkerchiefs with.

Road - that old Carlisle one - that leaves towns behind; where you put off worldly thoughts; where you do not carry a watch, nor remember the proprietor; where the proprietor is the only trespasser, - looking after his apples! - the only one who mistakes his calling there, whose title is not good; where fifty may be a-barbering and you do not see one. It is an endless succession of glades where the barberries grow thickest, successive yards amid the barberry bushes where you do not see out. There I see Melvin and the robins, and many a nut-brown maid sashe-ing [sic] to the barberry bushes in hoops and crinoline, and none of them see me. The world-surrounding hoop! faery rings! Oh, the jolly cooper's trade it is the best of any! Carried to the furthest isles where civilized man penetrates. This the girdle they've put round the world! Saturn or Satan set the example: Large and small hogsheads, barrels, kegs, worn by the misses that go to that lone schoolhouse in the Pinkham notch. The lonely horse in its pasture is glad to see company, comes forward to be noticed and takes an apple from your hand. Others are called great roads, but this is greater than they all. The road is only laid out, offered to walkers, not accepted by the town and the travelling world. To be represented by a dotted line on charts, or drawn in lime-juice, undiscoverable to the uninitiated, to be held to a warm imagination. No guide-boards indicate it. No odometer would indicate the miles a wagon had run there. Rocks which the druids might have raised - if they could. There I go searching for malic acid of the right quality, with my tests. The process is simple. Place the fruit between your jaws and then endeavor to make your teeth meet. The very

earth contains it. The Easterbrooks Country contains malic acid.”

Sept 24, 1859

“After four days cloud and rain we have fair weather. A great many have improved this first fair day to come a-barberrying to the Esterbrook fields. These bushy fields are all alive with them, though I scarcely see one. I meet Melvin loaded down with barberries, in bags and baskets, so that he has to travel by stages and is glad to stop and talk with me. It is better to take thus what Nature offers, in her season, than to buy an extra dinner at parkers.”

Oct 15, 1859

“Each town should have a park, or rather a primitive forest, of five hundred or a thousand acres, where a stick should never be cut for fuel, a common possession forever, for instruction and recreation. We hear of cow-commons and ministerial lots, but we want *men*-commons and lay lots, inalienable forever. Let us keep the New World *new*, preserve all the advantages of living in the country. There is meadow and pasture and wood-lot for the town's poor. Why not a forest and huckleberry-field for the town's rich? All Walden Wood might have been preserved for our park forever, with Walden in its midst, and the Easterbrooks Country, an unoccupied area of some four square miles, might have been our huckleberry-field. If any owners of these tracts are about to leave the world without natural heirs who need or deserve to be specially remembered, they will do wisely to abandon their possession to all, and not will them to some individual who perhaps has enough already. As some give to Harvard College or another institution, why might not another give a forest or huckleberry-field to Concord? A town is an

institution which deserves to be remembered. We boast of our system of education, but why stop at schoolmasters and schoolhouses? We are all schoolmasters, and our school-house is the universe. To attend chiefly to the desk or schoolhouse while we neglect the scenery in which it is placed is absurd. If we do not look out we shall find our fine schoolhouse standing in a cow-yard at last.”

Other quotes regarding Estabrook Woods

Gladys Clark, Oral History

“A native American farmhand worked intermittently for Thomas Davis (b 1853) and lived in a rock shelter in the woods south of Bateman’s Pond, known locally as “Indian rock”. It is north of a path leading east from Lowell road”

Sept 4, 1857 - Emerson, describing a walk with Ellery Channing

“Delicious summer stroll through the endless pastures of Barrett, Buttrick, Estabrook farms, yesterday, with Ellery, the glory of summer. What magnificence, yet none to see it.”

John Hanson Mitchell, *Walking Towards Walden*

“By Thoreau’s time Estabrook was a haunted land, the farms deserted, the families departed, and only a wind blowing”

June 5, 1998 - Edward O. Wilson

“Estabrook is a priceless human heritage, and I hope that every square inch of it (and of similar undisturbed lands in this area that might be acquired) will be kept as undisturbed as possible for the benefit of human generations, because, and this is what we learned from Thoreau, it is a place not just of soil and rock and trees but also of the mind”