

## This Day in History... July 12, 1817

### Birth of Henry David Thoreau

Naturalist, author, and philosopher Henry David Thoreau was born on July 12, 1817, in Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau valued simple living, nature and the importance of protesting injustice through civil disobedience. As one of America's most famous transcendentalists, his works have influenced some of the greatest leaders in modern history.

Thoreau spent most of his life in Concord, Massachusetts, west of Boston. After graduating from Harvard in 1837, he began teaching at the local public school. His teaching career lasted just two weeks, then he resigned because of a disagreement with the superintendent. Thoreau then went to work at his father's pencil factory, which produced the best pencils in America.

After a few years, Thoreau was asked by Ralph Waldo Emerson to be his live-in handyman. The author and philosopher helped Thoreau improve his writing and influenced his worldview towards Transcendentalism (a belief in the importance of the sense and intuition over scientific knowledge). The new writer was able to publish some of his first poems and essays with Emerson's help.

When Thoreau returned to his parent's home and factory, he desperately sought quiet to continue his writing, but could not find it. In 1845, Emerson offered him a part of his land near Walden Pond. Thoreau built a small cabin and stayed there for two years.

During that time, Thoreau wrote his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, a tribute to his brother who had died. In addition, Thoreau wanted to know if it was possible to work one day a week and spend the other six contemplating his Transcendentalist philosophy. During this time, the author began writing *Walden* to answer neighbors' questions about what he did at the pond. He stayed there a total of two years, two

months, and two days.

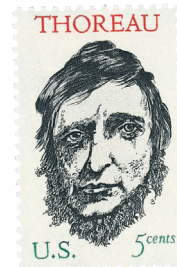
After his experience at Walden Pond, Thoreau returned home and published his first book in 1849. His more successful book, *Walden*, was published five years later, on August 9, 1854. *Walden* compressed Thoreau's two years into one and used the changing of the four seasons to represent human development. *Walden* was relatively successful when it was released, though it took five years to sell 2,000 copies. It then went out of print until after his death.

Thoreau also supported civil disobedience, with his essay "Resistance to Civil Government," which was later retitled "Civil Disobedience." In 1846 he had refused to pay a poll tax, citing that he opposed the Mexican-American War and slavery. He spent a night in jail, but was freed after a family member paid the tax against his wishes. He later began lecturing on "The Rights and Duties of the Individual in relation to the Government." After John Brown raided Harpers Ferry, Thoreau gave a stirring speech in his defense that helped make him a martyr in the abolitionist movement.

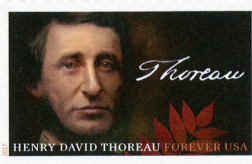
Though he had a small circle of fans, Thoreau was never wealthy. He was more concerned with observing nature during his daily walks in the woods surrounding Concord and with keeping his private journals. In the following years, Thoreau took trips, seeing Maine, Minnesota, and Canada, among other locations. He spent his time lecturing and was a strong abolitionist, becoming a conductor on the Underground Railroad. His life was cut short by tuberculosis on May 6, 1862. During his funeral, Emerson said Thoreau "had in a short life exhausted the capabilities of this world..."

*Thoreau's ideas on civil disobedience inspired several notable figures including Martin Luther King Jr.*

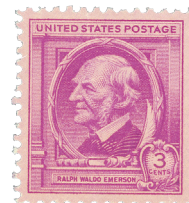
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*Issued for Thoreau's 150th birthday.*



*Issued at the Walden Pond State Reservation in Massachusetts.*



*Ralph Waldo Emerson was a close friend and mentor to Thoreau.*



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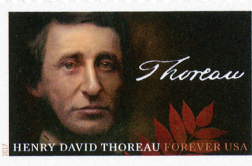
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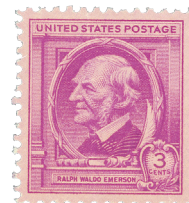


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Thoreau's works were overlooked during his lifetime, but had a big impact down the road. Mahatma Gandhi, John F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr. were just a few who were influenced by him. King once said, "The teachings of Thoreau came alive in our civil rights movement... [our actions] are outgrowths of Thoreau's insistence that evil must be