



TO: Community Preservation Committee (CPC)  
Eve Isenberg, Chair

FROM: Robert M. Thorson, Ph.D.  
Professor of Earth Sciences  
University of Connecticut.

SUBJECT: Thoreau Survey Preservation and Access Project  
Concord Free Public Library Corporation

DATE: November 9, 2025

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I strongly support the application for a grant to the CPC from the Concord Free Public Library Corporation to digitize, rehouse, and conserve Thoreau's 200 surveys. They have been crucial to my work.

I am a published Thoreau Scholar, a Board Member of the Thoreau Society, a member of its Collections Committee, a trained geologist and self-taught surveyor who has made hundreds of maps, and a geometrically oriented thinker who built a transit to survey my family neighborhood at the age of 11. Needless to say, I appreciate Thoreau's surveys more than most. I refer to those documents held in the William Munroe Special Collections in the archive of Concord Free Public Library. Though I have examined and/or studied them all, five have been critical importance.

My book *The Boatman: Henry David Thoreau's River Year* was published by Harvard University Press in 2017, the bicentennial year of Thoreau's birth. In it, I dubbed his "river survey" the Rosetta Stone of his previously little understood River Project. At seven feet long, and with drafting paper glued to surveying cloth, his map "Plan of Concord River..." (107a) is a compilation of work dating from an original survey by Baldwin in 1811 to Thoreau's observations and measurements in 1859. It has drawings and text in three shades of ink and pencil and is smudged and folded from having been taken into the field for work. Additionally, depended heavily on his "Statistics of the Bridges..." (107b). In both cases, I mostly I studied the original document in the archive. But there were many times when I needed to consult the map and table digitally, and I was usually disappointed because of lost details owing to low scanning resolution. His map is the largest and most intellectually intricate map Thoreau made in his lifetime, so important that it was recently loaded for exhibit to the Huntington Museum.

My earlier book, *Walden's Shore: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth Century Science*, published by Harvard University Press in 2014, also depended heavily on Thoreau's three survey maps of Walden Pond: the original draft (133b), the finished map (133a), and the map used to reduce it to quarter scale (133c). I have studied all in the archive using the originals. All have text and marks that are difficult to read in the original documents, and nearly impossible to read in current scanned versions.

My present book, *The Walden Experiments: The Science of Henry David Thoreau* is now in press at Princeton University Press with an anticipated publication date in summer 2026. Its frontispiece is a detail of a segment of Thoreau's bathymetric map where his data collection was most intense -- a set of seven lines drawn at various intersections to iteratively locate the maximum depth at 102 feet below the top of the winter ice in early 1846. The online surveys were not sufficient, so CFPL staff Jessie Hopper scanned this section at high resolution and sent them to me as digital files. Not being able to be in Concord at the time, the higher resolution scans were essential to make out the many marks I needed to decipher.

Again, I strongly support funding the proposed project.

Robert M. Thorson

