Henry David Thoreau’s Final Journey: Minnesota

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Henry David Thoreau — essayist, transcendentalist, philosopher, poet, naturalist, abolitionist — is closely associated with Concord, Massachusetts, and mid-19th century New England. However, despite his reputation as “New England’s hermit,” Thoreau traveled frequently. His last and longest journey was to Minnesota.

Thoreau was born David Henry Thoreau in Concord on July 12, 1817, and began calling himself “Henry David” after graduating from Harvard College in 1837. His father, John, was a pencil manufacturer; his mother, Cynthia Dunbar, was the daughter of Asa Dunbar, who led the “Butter Rebellion” over poor quality college food while a Harvard student in 1766 — the earliest recorded American student protest.

After graduation and a brief period working in the family pencil business, Henry Thoreau taught grammar school with his older brother John (until John’s death of tetanus in 1842) and later worked as a land surveyor.

On May 11, 1861, a month after the Civil War began with an attack on Fort Sumter, Thoreau departed Concord accompanied by a family friend, 17-year-old Horace Mann, Jr. Thoreau was suffering from consumption (ie, tuberculosis), with which he had first been diagnosed in the mid-1830s while at Harvard College. He had been unwell since contracting bronchitis in 1860, allegedly after a late-night walk counting tree stumps in a rainstorm. His physicians advised him to go to the Mediterranean, Caribbean, or the Mississippi Valley to try and recuperate in a different climate — a common recommendation for tuberculosis during that era.

Thoreau chose Minnesota, writing to a friend, “It will be most expedient for me to try the air of Minnesota, say somewhere about St. Paul’s.” At the time, Minnesota was a sparsely populated “frontier” state, and the bracing continental climate of the Northern Plains was considered health-promoting.

Thoreau’s journey to Minnesota for health purposes is echoed in the migration of William Worrall Mayo (1819-1911), founder of Mayo Clinic. In 1854, after W.W. Mayo had been in practice in the Wabash River valley near Lafayette, Indiana, for several years, he grew tired of treating patients with “fever and ague” (ie, malaria) and weary of getting malaria himself. He hitched up his wagon and headed west out of town, telling his wife Louise, “I’m going to keep on driving until I get well or die.”

Mayo ended up in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he attempted to develop a medical practice. However, there were already several physicians in St. Paul who were well established before Mayo arrived, and the patients he did see often could not pay him, so Mayo found it impossible to develop a practice that would support his family. Mayo then moved to a farm in the Minnesota River Valley near Le Seuer. In 1863, he was named the examining surgeon of the draft enrollment board for the 1st Minnesota District and moved to Rochester. Mayo’s first son, William James, was born in June of 1861 (coincidentally, while Thoreau was traveling nearby in Minnesota). William’s brother Charles Horace Mayo would follow in 1865.

On May 23, 1861, after brief stops to visit Niagara Falls, Detroit, and Chicago, Henry Thoreau and Horace Mann Jr, arrived at the Mississippi River near East Dubuque, Illinois, and boarded the steamboat Itasca headed upriver. Three days later, they reached St. Paul, and spent the next two weeks exploring Lake Calhoun, Lake Harriet, and Minnehaha Falls with Minnesota state geologist Charles Anderson. Thoreau was particularly interested in prairie gophers and wild crabapples.

Coincidentally, the visitors came across an advertisement in a Minneapolis newspaper...
offering a 6-day excursion down the Minnesota River. For $10, paying guests could join Minnesota Governor Alexander Ramsey (1815-1903) on the steamboat *Frank Steele* to the Lower Sioux Agency reservation in Redwood County. The occasion of this trip was the annual distribution of a 50-year annuity payment from the US Government to the Mdewakanton Dakota Indians, as outlined in the 1851 Treaty of Mendota.

Thoreau noted that the Indians spoke eloquently but looked unhappy, especially their leader, Little Crow. Disputes over the annuity and insensitive handling of food sales by the US Indian Agents contributed to the Dakota War of 1862, of which Little Crow was a leader. The climax of the Dakota War was the “Battle of New Ulm” in August 1862, where W.W. Mayo distinguished himself as a field surgeon. During his 1861 journey to the reservation, Thoreau was disappointed not to see a bison, though he was fascinated to walk 3 miles on the prairie and not see a single tree.

Thoreau's companion on his Minnesota journey was the son of Horace Mann, the leading proponent of public education in America, who had died in 1859 while on a trip to Antioch College in Ohio. Thoreau promoted the younger Mann's early interest in botany. At Harvard College, Mann Jr took zoology classes with the noted naturalist Louis Agassiz (1807-1873) and studied botany with Asa Gray (1810-1888), a leading 19th century botanist. Gray hoped the promising young Mann Jr would be his successor as Harvard botany chair and director of the university's Botanical Garden, but Mann Jr died of tuberculosis in 1868.

The journey to Minnesota failed to improve Thoreau's condition. Although he planned to stay 3 months, Thoreau cut his trip short and returned a month early, stopping in Red Wing, Minnesota, and Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, en route back to Dubuque. Their rail journey home to Concord took a different route than the outbound trip, via Milwaukee, Mackinac Island, Toronto, and Vermont. For much of the next year Thoreau was bedridden. He finally died on May 6, 1862, and left his papers to his sister Sophia.

Unlike other journeys Thoreau took — trips to Maine, New Hampshire's White Mountains, Cape Cod, or the famous week he spent with his brother John in 1839 on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers — Thoreau did not lecture or write about his final westward journey to Minnesota, since he died the year after his return. However, 100 pages of field notes that Thoreau made are preserved at the Huntington Library in California, and a letter to his young friend Frank Sanborn (1831-1917) described the trip in some detail.

Thoreau has been honored twice philatelically by the United States: In 2017 on the 200th anniversary of his birth, and in 1967 (Scott 1327 — a rather scruffy-looking sketch) on the 150th anniversary. The 2017 stamp's image of Thoreau is based on an 1856 daguerreotype by Benjamin Maxham (1810-1895) and includes a cluster of sumac leaves and Thoreau's signature.

A stamp is perhaps not the most appropriate tribute to Thoreau, as he wrote in *Walden*, “For my part, I could easily do without the post-office. I think that there are very few important communications made through it. To speak critically, I never received more than one or two letters in my life — I wrote this some years ago — that were worth the postage.”