



Biographies of those who also lived in Walden Woods

There were many people who lived and worked in Walden Woods besides Henry Thoreau, even though his story is the one we most remember and discuss. Thoreau makes a point of naming several of these individuals, including formerly enslaved people, Irish immigrants, and Indigenous people.

Zilpah White (1738 - 1820)

Zilpah White was a Black woman who spent over 40 years living on her own in Walden Woods in a small one room cabin where she provided for herself by spinning thread and growing vegetables. Enslaved as a child, she and her brother Peter were freed by abandonment during the Revolutionary War when their enslaver fled Massachusetts. Zilpah moved to Walden Woods around 1775 and was well known by the townspeople for her strong singing voice. Some townspeople, including Thoreau, gave donations of meat and fish to Zilpah to help her get by. But in 1813, her house was burned down with her animals inside and no one tried to put out the fire. There is some possibility that members of the Concord community were responsible for the fire rather than English soldiers, as Thoreau supposes in Walden. Source: The Walden Woods Project (<https://www.walden.org/work/zilpah-white-1738-1820/>)

Brister Freeman (- 1822)

Brister Freeman was a Black man enslaved by John Cuming, who was a wealthy resident of Concord and strong proponent of the American Revolution. Brister Freeman himself fought in the Revolution and enlisted under the name “Freeman” rather than “Cuming.” It is not known whether he was freed on the condition of his enlistment or afterwards, as part of the post-war decision under the Massachusetts Constitution that all men were free and equal, which eliminated all slavery in the state by 1790. Brister raised a family and grew apples in Walden Woods, on a piece of land now known as Brister’s Hill, but this land was taken away from his family after his death. Concord residents found him suspicious and insulted and taunted him, which shows the treatment that a freed Black man, a veteran of the Revolution, could expect even in the free state of Massachusetts. Source: Brister Freeman by Jeffrey S. Cramer (http://www.jeffreyscramer.com/uploads/8/3/7/6/8376162/brister_freeman.pdf)

Cato Ingraham (1751 - 1805)

Cato Ingraham was a Black man thought to have been born in Africa and enslaved by Concord resident Duncan Ingraham. Cato married in 1795 and, rather than support the family, Duncan freed them, building them a house in Walden Woods near Zilpah White and Brister Freeman. These families formed a small, free Black community marginalized from the main Concord community. When Duncan moved away from Concord, however, he sold the land on which he had built Cato’s home, leaving him under obligation to pay rent to the new owner – a cost that Cato could not afford. Cato begged Duncan for financial help, but to no avail. He and his family struggled to survive under these conditions and Cato eventually died of tuberculosis. Source: The Walden Woods Project (<https://www.walden.org/work/cato-ingraham-1751-1805/>)

James Collins

James Collins was an Irish immigrant to America who worked on the Fitchburg Railroad as it was built through Concord in the 1840s. While not much is known of Collins and his family, he was one of many Irish immigrants who worked on the railroad. These itinerant workers were looked down on by some citizens of Concord. Ralph Waldo Emerson was aggravated that “the town is full of Irish & the woods of Engineers”, but Nathaniel Hawthorne was charmed by “a little hamlet of huts” built by the rail workers on Walden’s prettiest cove. These homes were meant to be temporary and were made of unfinished lumber and auctioned off when the workers moved along up the line with the railroad. Mrs. Collins showed Thoreau the shanty and he saw that it was made of “good boards” and a “good window” and paid the family \$4.25 for it. He passed the family the next morning as they left, carrying all their possessions in one large bundle. Source: *As You Are Brothers of Mine* by Laura Dassow Walls (The New England Quarterly (2015) 88 (1): 5–36. https://doi.org/10.1162/TNEQ_a_00434)

Tahattawan (- 1670)

Tahattawan was a sachem of the Pennacook Indigenous peoples who, along with several other leaders of that tribe, signed over six square miles of land in 1637 that would become Concord village and Walden Woods in exchange for wampum, hatchets, knives, cotton cloth, and shirts. The Pennacook, sometimes called the Pawtucket and Merrimack, were an Algonquin-speaking tribe closely related to the Abenaki. The name Pennacook comes from the Abenaki word “penakuk” meaning “at the bottom of the hill.” At the time of the sale to the Concord settlers, the tribe had already been decimated by disease, likely contracted from earlier European settlers, and there were only a few families living on the land. At some point, Tahattawan converted to Christianity and was granted a parcel of land to establish an Indian village that bordered Concord, in an area that is now Littleton, where the inhabitants were known as “Praying Indians,” because they had converted to Christianity. Source: *History of Concord, Massachusetts* (<https://historyofmassachusetts.org/concord-massachusetts-history/>)

Notably, Thoreau does not mention the names of some important figures in his own life by name in Walden. His mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson; his family, including his brother John, whose death he was grieving during his time at Walden; his friends and colleagues, Bronson Alcott, Ellery Channing, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne and more. While Thoreau avoids naming these close companions, he makes a point of mentioning the people on the list above.

Why do you think he does this? Are there people in your own life or neighborhood who go unnoticed by others? Are there ways you might help amplify their voices in your own way?