

HISTORIC ROOTS

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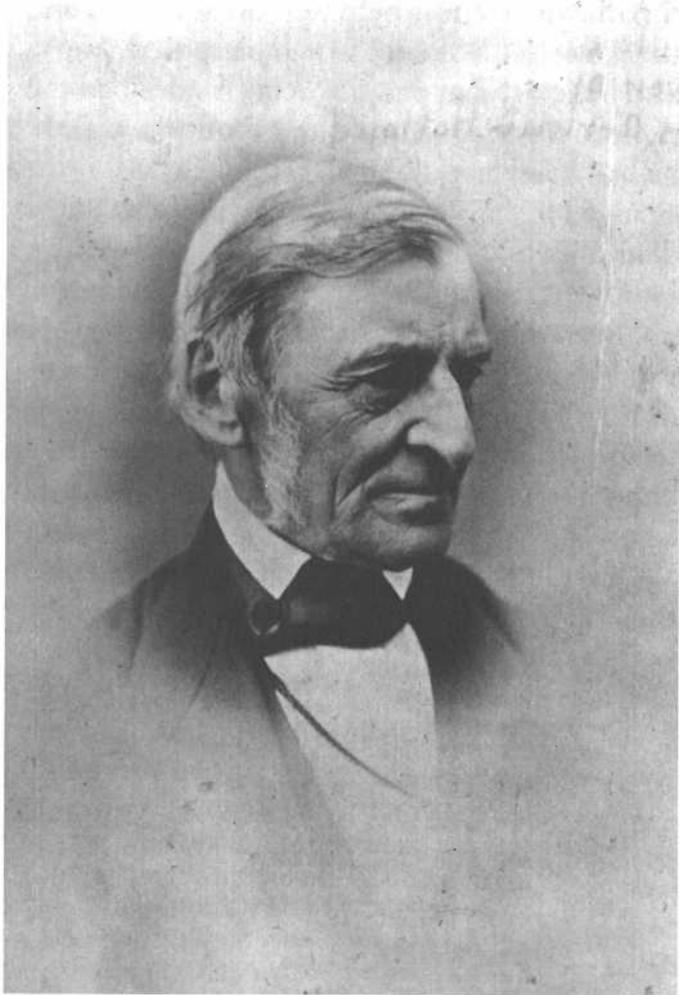
Publication of *Historic Roots* is made
possible in part by grants from the
A.D. Henderson Foundation and Vermont-NEA.

A Magazine of Vermont History

Vol. 4

December 1999

No. 3



The Concord Free Public Library

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in the early 1870s.

A TRIP UP MOUNT MANSFIELD

By SYLVIA ROBISON

In August of 1868, Ralph Waldo Emerson traveled from his home in Concord, Massachusetts to Middlebury College to speak at graduation. It was his third trip to the college. This time his daughter Ellen came with him.

Emerson was a world-famous writer and speaker. He was also a leader of the philosophical movement known as Transcendentalism.¹

We can learn a lot about the human side of this famous man from letters Ellen Tucker Emerson wrote home to her brother, sister, and uncle. We can also learn about how people from Boston viewed life in the Vermont countryside.

The Emersons arrived in Middlebury by train at about seven o'clock on a rainy August morning. Breakfast at a local hotel was not a big success:

The way we were put off from our breakfast was detestable. 'Tables full sir.' 'Ready in 10

¹ The Transcendentalists believed that there is more to the world than what can be seen, that not everything can be explained by reason.

minutes sir.' We waited 20. 'Not quite ready sir, in ten minutes.' We returned in ten. 'Be ready directly sir.' We retired to the parlor and were summoned after a while.... Time was precious to Father & he was disgusted at having an hour so wasted for him.

Following breakfast, a band and procession escorted Emerson to the Congregational Church, where special college events were held. Though the graduating class had only fifteen students, the church was full. The students were pleased with the speech, and so was Ellen Emerson, who reported,

I thought the oration² was a beauty, and Father had no trouble about seeing, and read on quite straight, and looked as well and as much at ease as he ever did. I came home quite proud, and Father very well content.

The local newspaper, *The Middlebury Register*, reported that Emerson “held the audience spellbound, though everyone was ready to affirm that they did not like him.” Many religious and community leaders disliked Ralph Waldo Emerson because he and the

² Oration means speech.



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Ellen Tucker Emerson, around 1868.

other Transcendentalists thought that people can find spiritual truth for themselves, without the need for churches.

That afternoon, on the way back from visiting some falls on Otter Creek, the axle-tree³ of their cart broke, and it began to rain.

³ The axle-tree runs under the cart, from one side to the other. The wheels are connected to it.

The Emersons walked along the muddy road until some “charitable people” helped them get back to town. “That short walk cured me of wishing to live in Vermont,” Ellen wrote. “They have a clay soil. I never saw any before, and hope never to set foot on it, when wet, again. Father was equally disgusted.”

Later that day, they took the train to Essex Junction. They spent the next day relaxing by the Winooski River. Emerson thought such a beautiful place should have a beautiful name. “Onion River” was a great disappointment to him, so he called it “the Onino” River instead.



The Dexter Collection, Special Collections, University of Vermont

Hikers on Mount Mansfield in the 1860s. Can you imagine climbing a mountain in those clothes?

Emerson had long planned to meet one of his oldest friends, George Bradford, in Essex Junction and then walk up Mount Mansfield. When the train arrived that night, however, Bradford was not on it. So father and daughter went by stagecoach to Underhill. The next day they set out on a long, wet hike to the top of the mountain.



The Dexter Collection, Special Collections, University of Vermont

The Half-Way House on Mount Mansfield.

First they walked along a carriage road.

...[T]hose three miles to the Half-way House stretched a good deal in walking.... Up & up forever and ever.... At last we reached it; every room and closet was wide open & absolutely empty.... So we set forth [again, without anything to eat].... [Later on,]... an opening in the woods showed us the mighty

perpendicular wall [of the mountain] still in the distance with the obstinate cloud lower down than ever.... We were very anxious all the way for fear it was a foolhardy undertaking & for fear it should rain hard, and yet we did enjoy going up....

The walk from the Halfway House to the top took more than two hours. During this time, Emerson kept Ellen amused by his comments. She reported his company as “all delightful.”

When they at last reached the hotel at the top of Mount Mansfield, “out rushed Uncle George” Bradford, who asked about their baggage.

We had none.... How could Father have misunderstood, this was the end of the journey, this was where Father had promised to stay several days.... [I]n my fatigue I was glad we hadn't brought even the weight of a toothbrush.

Revived by the parlor fire and a good dinner, Emerson and Bradford hiked around the windy mountaintop, the highest point in Vermont. Ellen napped beside the fire and then took a sunset walk. She “beheld Lake Champlain in all its enormous length and breadth, as big as I had hoped.”



Vermont Historical Society

An early picture of the Summit House on Mount Mansfield.

The next day they had a much more enjoyable walk down. George Bradford walked part of the way with them and named the many plants they saw. The group also attracted attention from other travelers.

Most summer visitors go up and down on horseback, so Father and I were everywhere met with wonder because we were on our own feet....

Ralph Waldo Emerson was famous for writing about serious subjects and spoke to audiences that wanted to hear his views. But it is important to remember that even the most famous people have families and a life outside

of the limelight. Ellen Emerson's letters about this wet and adventurous trip to Vermont in 1868 help introduce all of us to this funny, forgetful, very human man, who was also one of the world's most famous authors.

Rooting Around

Only a few months after the Emersons' visit, construction began of a carriage road to the top of Mount Mansfield. That unpaved road still exists, but there is also a paved road to the top for automobiles. They say that you can see 150 miles from the top on a nice day.

Family letters and diaries give a real sense of what life in the past was like. So do old newspapers and magazines. It's interesting (and fun) to look at the advertisements as well as the articles themselves.