
RALPH WALDO EMERSON

THE SCHOOLMASTER OF
FRANKLIN PARK

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RALPH WALDO EMERSON IN FRANKLIN PARK

In the woods is perpetual youth.
Within these plantations of God,
A decorum and sanctity reign,
a perennial festival is dressed . . .
in the woods, we return to reason
and faith.

Nature, 1836

The land that is now Franklin Park belonged to thirty-four different owners at the time the site was chosen for Boston's central park in 1881. Two of the land owners — Williams and Sargent — were venerable Roxbury¹ families that had been living in the town for generations. Portions of the Sargent family property became the Franklin Park Zoo and Long Crouch Woods. (Sargent's Tower and Sargent Field in the Zoo commemorate the name.)

Jeremiah Williams sold 5½ acres of property to the city for Franklin Park in 1882. It was rocky, steep and comprised a grove of hemlocks and oaks. Located approximately in the center of the 527-acre site, its significance lay in that it provided a commanding view of broad meadowland and the peaks of the Blue Hills in the distance. The view impressed Frederick Law Olmstead so much that he chose this farmland as the site for the centerpiece of his proposed Park System for Boston.

¹ In this essay Roxbury refers to the original boundaries of the city before it was incorporated into Boston; that is, from approximately Ball Street (north of Dudley Square) to Bellevue Hill in present-day West Roxbury. The old city of Roxbury took in the Jamaica Plain and Roslindale districts of Boston.

In *NOTES ON THE PLAN OF FRANKLIN PARK (1886)*, F. L. Olmsted wrote of what he intended for the hill:

"Near the picturesque declivity and hanging wood of Schoolmaster Hill, several level places are designed to be formed by rough terracing on the hillside. Each of these is to be covered by vines on trellises, and furnished with tables and seats. Most of the arbors so formed look, at considerable elevation and advantageously, upon the broadest and quietest purely pastoral scene that the park can offer."

Jeremiah Williams' property had a further significance which Olmsted learned in his study of the area² before designing Franklin Park: that the great poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson lived on the hill as a schoolteacher forty years before. It was Olmsted's practice to name portions of his parks in memory of previous owners or historic events significant to the area. He called Williams' hill Schoolmaster Hill in honor of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

² Olmsted always studied the history of areas in which his parks were planned along with census reports, topographic maps and city records. In this way he would learn how the land was used and how the area had grown so as to be better able to judge how the area would develop in the future. Park entrances, drives and specific elements like promenades and picnic areas would be planned accordingly.

One has to read deep into the Emerson biography to learn about his time in Canterbury (as that section of Roxbury was called³). He lived there only a brief time before his entry into Harvard Divinity School. Nevertheless, Emerson's sojourn in Roxbury gave him the opportunity to clear his thoughts and decide on a future course for himself.

After Ralph Waldo Emerson was graduated from Harvard College in 1821 he joined his brother William in teaching at William's "School for Young Ladies." The school was located in their mother's home on Federal Street in Boston.

Emerson was a slow learner and made no mark at Harvard as an undergraduate. He had little enthusiasm for teaching and only did it to earn a living. His life was tedious and apathy sapped his vitality.

His Aunt Mary Emerson, a strong-willed woman who was a great influence on young Emerson (then only eighteen), urged him to go to the country to recoup his energy. She was convinced that only solitude and the contemplation of Nature would nurture intellectual growth.⁴

Her wish was granted in May of 1823 when Mrs. Emerson, Ralph and William moved to a rented house on the Williams' farm in Roxbury. The move may have been an economy move as well; Mrs. Emerson lived on a pension from the First Church in Boston, where Emerson, Sr. preached until his death in 1811.

³ "Canterbury was that quiet and obscure portion of the town, whose nomenclature is a puzzle to the antiquary, lying between Forest Hills and Dorchester." E. S. Drake, *The Town of Roxbury*, 1878.

⁴ A theory that would gain credence as the nineteenth century progressed. Olmsted strongly believed in the concept.

The house was quite old. In Drake's 1878 history of Roxbury, Moses Williams (then eighty-eight reminisces about the property:

"The two Williams' houses on Walnut Avenue (which ran next to Schoolmaster Hill), the one now owned by Aaron D. Williams and the other formerly owned by my brother Stedman Williams were previously owned by my grandfather . . . The old house on the east side of Walnut Avenue (which the Emerson's rented) . . . belonged eighty or ninety years ago to Deacon Samuel Sumner. A. D. Williams' house and my brother Stedman's were originally lean-to's . . . I remember when my brother Stedman altered his."

Young Emerson described his new neighborhood in a June 19, 1823 letter to a Harvard classmate:

"I am going to tell you where I live. The Dedham Turnpike, which is only a continuation of the main street in Boston leads you after about two miles to a lane (the first left-hand turning upon the turnpike). Go to the head of said lane and turn right and you will straightway be in the neighborhood of Mr. Steadman Williams, a farmer of 30 years standing in whose vicinity we live and whose tenants we are."

He concluded at the beginning of his career that scenery worked an unconscious process on the human mind to relax and unbend faculties made tense by strain, noise and artificial surroundings of urban life. In his NOTES ON THE PLAN OF FRANKLIN PARK, he wrote,

"The purpose of Franklin Park (is) to be that of placing within easy reach of the people of the city the enjoyment of rural scenery (which) has the effect of counteracting certain oppressions of town life . . ."

The area was rural; the nearest community being Roxbury Center 2 miles north. In the opposite direction was Jamaica Pond, a favorite summer resort for Boston merchants. Scattered in between were farms. The railroad was over a decade in the future so the area was sparsely settled. The Dedham Turnpike (now Washington Street) was a busy thoroughfare since it was the only land route to Boston. The Emersons lived about a ½ mile from the Turnpike.

Emerson spent his spare time walking, reading and writing in his journal. The journal entries give a good picture of how Emerson felt about living in Canterbury. And it is from these books that we learn whether the solitude of the woods and meadows was beneficial to the confused, bored young man.

His reading was voracious and varied: Newton, Shakespeare, Plato, Hume, Byron, Johnson and Franklin are a few of the writers mentioned in the journals.

In the letter to his Harvard classmate, he is skeptical about living in the country, but he does try to enjoy it.

"I am seeking to put myself on a footing of old acquaintance with Nature, as a poet should . . . I confess I cannot find myself as perfectly at home on the rock and in the wood as my ancient and infant aspirations led me to expect.

My aunt . . . has spent a great part of her life in the country, is an idolater of nature . . . and she was anxious that her nephew might hold high and reverential notions about it . . . When I took my book, therefore, to the woods, I found nature not half poetical, not half visionary enough."

The broad fields, thick groves and rugged rocks that made the old farmhouse attractive began to have a soothing effect on Emerson. He found himself content in the Roxbury woods. In a January, 1824 journal entry he extols agriculture as the "venerable mother of all arts" (tell that to old Steadman sweating in his fields!).

In February, Emerson is convinced: "I never saw a country which more delighted me. A man might travel many hundred miles and not find so fine woodlands as abound in this neighborhood . . ." Later on in the month he writes a short poem called "The Blackbird" which is clearly inspired by the Roxbury landscape near his home where he often walked:

"The blackbird's song is in my ears,
A summer sound I leap to hear . . .
And I am glad the day is come
to greet me in my ancient home . . .
Ye are my home ye ancient rocks."

Another poem written in February, 1824 was to become his first published poem fifteen years later. It's a remarkable poem because it starts the train of thought which leads directly to *NATURE* (1836).

"GOOD BYE"

Good-bye, cruel world! I'm going home . . .
I am going to our hearth stone,
Bosomed in your green hills alone,
A secret nook in a pleasant land, . . .
Oh, when I am safe in my sylvan home,
I tread on the pride of Greece and Rome:
and when I am stretched beneath the Pines,
where the evening star so holy shines,
I laugh at the lore and pride of man,
At the sophist schools and the learned clan;
For what are they all, in their high conceit,
When man in the bush with God may meet?"

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When the poem was published in *The Western Messenger*, Emerson wrote "the lines were written 16 years ago when I lived in a corner of Roxbury called Canterbury. They have a slight misanthropy, a shade deeper than belongs to me . . ."

The poem is a prophecy of Emerson's transcendentalist philosophy that unfolded in the 1830s. Compare the poem's last lines with these words from *Nature* published a dozen years later:

"In the woods is perpetual youth.
Within these plantations of God,
a decorum and sanctity reign . . .
in the woods we return to reason
and faith."

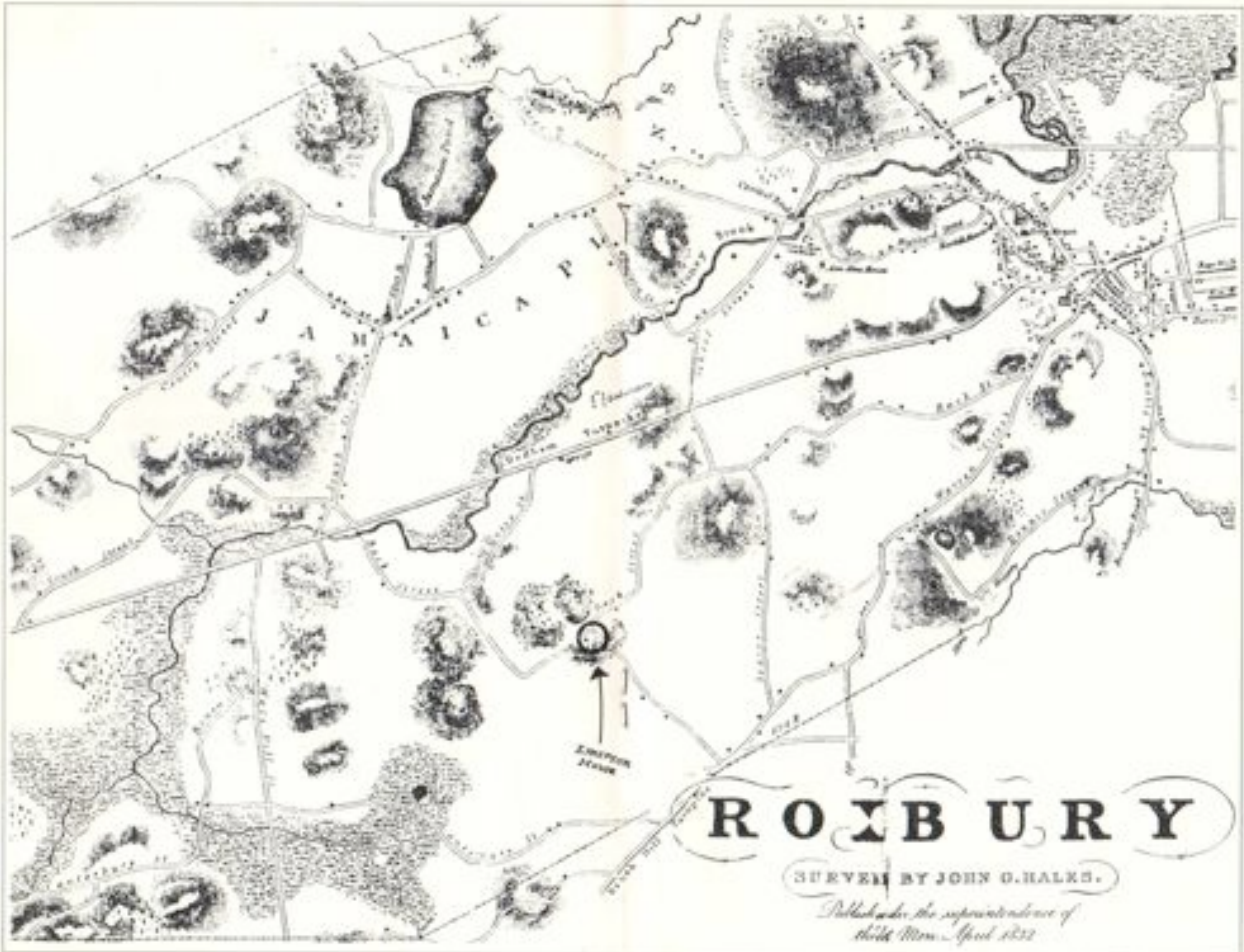
Discovering the diffused presence of God and His kinship with man was a necessary preliminary to his later philosophy. From this and other creative contacts with nature in the early journals we can see emerging the Emerson we know so well — the idealist so glad of life.³

Emerson was coming to terms with himself in Roxbury. His writings become less melancholy and discuss themes and ideas based on his wide reading.

In a letter to Aunt Mary of April 20, 1824, he discussed Benjamin Franklin, whose philosophy he had finished reading:

"One enjoys a higher conception of human worth in measuring the vast influence exercised on men's minds by Franklin's characters . . . his subtle observation, his seasonable wit, his profound reason and his mild and majestic virtues."

³ *Main Currents in American Thought*, Vernon Parrington, 1927. Vol. II pg. 390.



ROXBURY

SURVEYED BY JOHN G. HALKE.

*Published under the superintendance of
Child Men. April 1832.*

Patriotism is the subject of a December 10, 1824, journal page:

"I confess I am a little cynical on some topics, and when a whole nation is roaring patriotism at the top of its voice, I am fain to explore the cleanliness of its hands and purity of its heart."

In mid-1824, William Emerson left his school to study law abroad.⁶ Ralph Waldo closed the school but continued to teach in Cambridge. After he was accepted at Harvard Divinity School late in 1824, Emerson stopped teaching in January of 1825.

In his journal on February 8, 1825, he wrote rather solemnly and almost portentiously:

"It is the evening of February eighth, which was never renowned that I know. But be that as it may, 'tis the last evening I spend in Canterbury. I go to my college chamber tomorrow a little changed for better or worse, since I left it in 1821."

A little changed Emerson certainly was after his nineteen months in the Roxbury woods. The confused, apathetic youth who saw little future for himself in 1821 had been given a long chance to think; to pause and consider his future. When William went to Europe, Ralph was on his own for the first time. The experience strengthened his convictions and resolve to enter the ministry. The months in the rocky woods of Roxbury made young Emerson more self-reliant.

⁶ After he became a New York judge, William Emerson lived on Staten Island between 1841 and 1865. He lived about 2 miles for the farm Frederick Law Olmsted kept on the island from 1848 to 1855. Olmsted often joined Emerson in discussions with other intellectuals of the day at the Emerson home. At that time, Olmsted was seriously considering a career as a political journalist. Today the area of Judge Emerson's estate is called Emerson Hill.

The time in Roxbury also awakened some basic ideas in young Emerson which formed his later philosophy. Not that there was something magical in the puddingstone ledges of William's farm, but that Emerson had never experienced the countryside before; he was a city boy born and bred. The solitude of the fields and groves shook Emerson into facing another, more profound way of looking at life.

Forty years later, the old house was gone and another Williams — Jeremiah, who lived a mile away — owned the property. When Frederick Law Olmsted staked out the lines of his park in 1884 and 1885, he went to some pains to locate the site of the Emerson house. Nearby was an enormous puddingstone boulder. He used this rock as the anchor for the terraces he designed with his stepson John Olmsted for Schoolmaster Hill. These were erected in 1892. In 1896 — at the Olmsted's urging — a bronze plaque⁷ was placed on the boulder which reads:

Near this Rock
A.D. 1823 — 1825
was the home of Schoolmaster
Ralph Waldo Emerson

⁷ The plaque was stolen in 1980. In August, 1985, it was replaced with funds from the Henderson Foundation.

Here some of his earlier poems were written; among them that from which the following lines are taken:

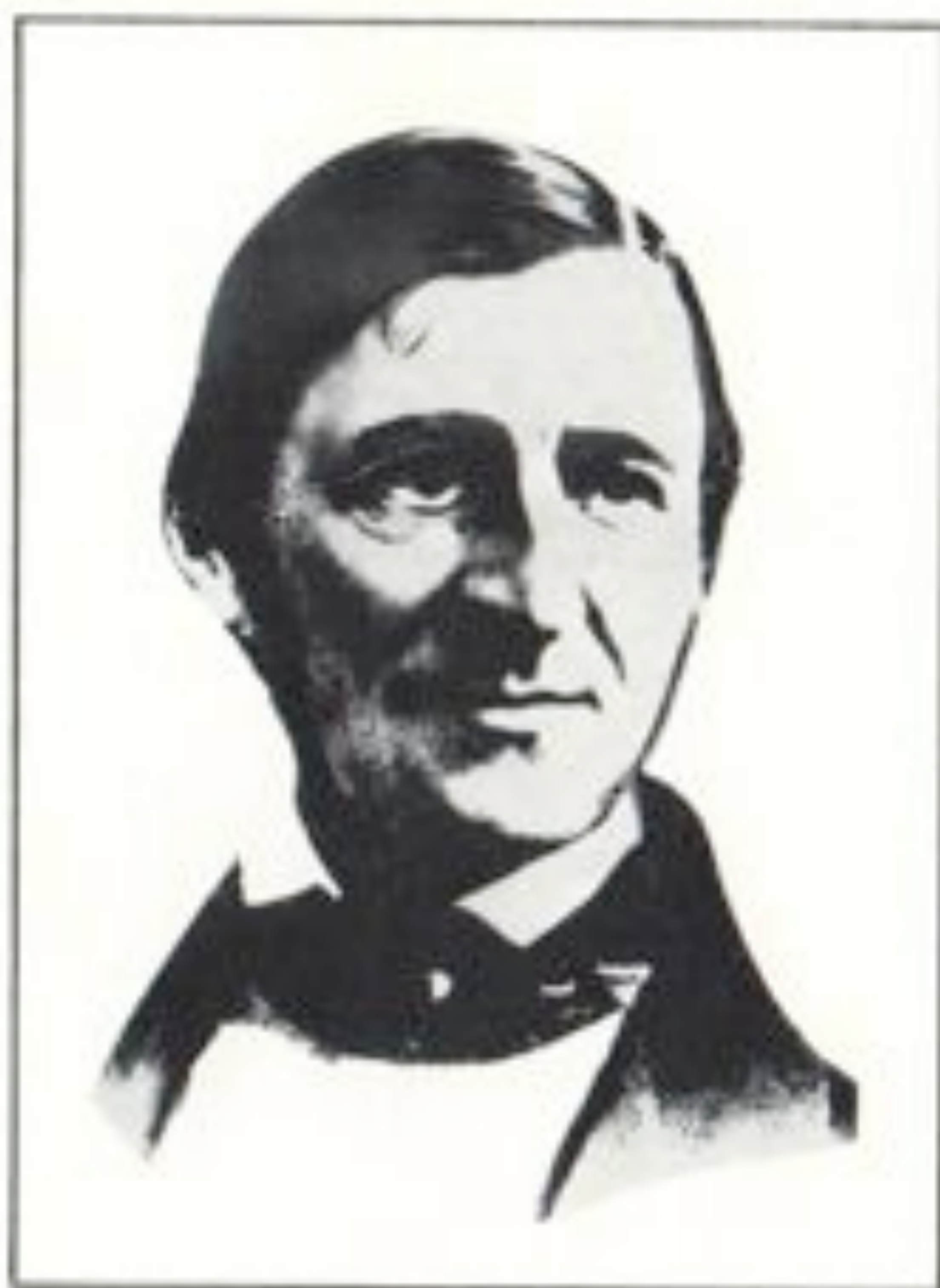
“O, when I am safe in my sylvan home,
I tread on the pride of Greece and Rome;
And when I am stretched beneath the pines,
Where the evening star so holy shines,
I laugh at the lore and pride of man,
At the Sophist schools and learned clan
For what are they all in their high conceit,
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Acknowledgement

The Author wishes to thank Prof. Mark Jay Mirsky of City College of New York for first pointing out the influence that the Franklin Park Landscape had on the young Emerson. In his important essay, *IN SEARCH OF FRANKLIN PARK* (*Boston Globe Magazine*, Sept. 30, 1979) Prof. Mirsky asserts that “(Emerson’s) Nature . . . had its germination in the soil of Franklin Park.” Mirsky’s initial research was the genesis for this study.

Richard Heath

April 7, 1980



RALPH WALDO EMERSON 1803-1882



STEDMAN WILLIAMS FARM HOUSE ABOUT 1830



THE WILLIAMS FARM, 1884 AT THE FOOT OF SCHOOLMASTER HILL

Terrace on the Overlook, Franklin Park,
Boston, Mass.



SCHOOLMASTER HILL TERRACE, FROM AN OLD POSTCARD, ABOUT 1910

SCHOOLMASTER HILL TERRACE, WITH THE COUNTY PARK MEADOW





SCHOOLMASTER HILL TERRACE

EMERSON ROCK





RAYMOND L. FLYNN, MAYOR

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