

Thoreau's Missing Militia Service

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In 1840, Massachusetts abolished compulsory militia service. Since 1793, all able-bodied men between the ages of 18 and 45 (with limited exceptions, e.g., students) had been required to enroll in local militia companies and drill several days per year under the direction of their officers.

Thoreau turned 18 in July of 1835. In 1837 he completed college and returned home to Concord. According to the letter of the law, he should have been enrolled and drilling with the local militia from late 1837 until 1840. The image, to us, is preposterous—this icon of individualism and nonconformity, who preaches that we should step to our own music, here marching in formation in the streets and fields of Concord, standing at attention and saluting, loading and firing a gun on command. Did it really happen?

Thoreau never refers to drilling with the local militia and biographical scholarship makes no mention of it. Evidence from militia archives, discussed below, is suggestive but not conclusive. Compulsory militia service was unpopular, and military historians believe that many local companies stopped meeting and drilling before compulsory service was legally abolished. The last meeting of the Concord enrolled company that can be positively confirmed was in 1836. It is quite possible that the Concord militia never drilled after 1836 and Thoreau never actually served. If we take into account the silence in Thoreau's writing, we might even say it was highly probable that he never served.

And yet the militia occupied a prominent place in Thoreau's mind, especially as a young man. Militia imagery appears regularly in the early journals. And ironically, while many of Thoreau's contemporaries were actively and passively resisting militia service, engaging in bona fide civil disobedience against an institution they felt was unjust and anti-democratic, Thoreau's emotional associations with militia imagery were positive, even glowing. In context, Thoreau's famous quip about marching to a different drummer should be understood as anti-conformist but not at all anti-militia. On the contrary, he is pointing us to a "higher" militia.

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14 *The Concord Saunterer: A Journal of Thoreau Studies*

The remainder of this essay is in three parts. First, we review the documentary evidence for and against the propositions that the Concord militia met in the years 1837-1840 and that Thoreau served. Second, we become acquainted with the politics of militia service in the early nineteenth century and the reasons why many were disgruntled with compulsory service (and why Thoreau might have been too, if he had served). Finally, we trace Thoreau's evolving attitude toward the militia in his journal and other writings and examine the evidence from those sources for and against the proposition that he trained with the enrolled militia.

1. Did Thoreau Serve?

Some basic facts about Massachusetts militia service, to start with:

The most local unit in the *enrolled* (i.e., compulsory) militia was the company, which was led by a captain, a lieutenant, and an ensign, and consisted of something on the order of 64 men. Companies were organized into regiments, typically 10 companies per regiment. Company officers were elected by their men. Regimental officers (colonel, lieutenant colonel, and major) were elected by the company-grade officers. Regiments were further grouped into brigades and divisions. Before 1840, most male citizens of the Commonwealth belonged to and drilled with an enrolled company.

In addition to the enrolled companies, there were elite *volunteer* units. Concord had two volunteer units in the 1830s: the Concord Light Infantry and the Concord Artillery. Members of volunteer units (which carried a certain amount of prestige, and doubled as social clubs), also called "uniformed" units, were excused from service in enrolled companies.

The 1793 law (1793 Massachusetts Acts, Chapter 14) required that each enrolled militia company train for three days each year, and assemble for review on the first Tuesday in May: every other year a full regimental review, and in alternate years a muster at the town level. The other days of service were generally in the spring and/or fall. Enrolled companies might meet at other times as well: e.g., to elect new officers if a vacancy occurred.

In 1834, the Massachusetts Militia underwent a re-organization (1834 Massachusetts Acts, Chapter CLII), eliminating training for enrolled companies save the general muster on the first Tuesday in May and increasing subsidies for the volunteer companies.

Under the 1840 law (1840 Massachusetts Acts, Chapter 92), the enrolled companies were disbanded and new requirements and provisions for the volunteer companies were set out. The 1840 reform was passed in March, so there was no May drill for the enrolled companies that year. For our purpose, the question comes down to this: Did the Concord enrolled company drill (and did Thoreau take part) in 1838 and 1839?

As to the question of whether the enrolled company met, two main lines of evidence are considered. One is the militia archives, housed in Concord. The other is contemporary newspaper reports.

Brigadier General Leonid Kondratiuk, Director of Historical Services at the Adjutant General's Office in Concord, graciously reviewed the records in the militia archives from the 1830s. Information about individual companies is sparse, but the Adjutant General did keep records about the election of new officers. There was no defined term of service for officers; new officers were elected whenever there was a vacancy. Archival records show that reports of elections of new officers became less frequent in the late 1830s across the state, so we can be reasonably certain that many enrolled units stopped meeting and drilling. But it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when individual units stopped drilling. The archives show that the last election of an officer for the Concord Company (3rd Regiment, 1st Brigade, 3rd Division) was the selection of one Uriah H. Reed as captain on May 3, 1836. So we can be reasonably certain that the Concord enrolled company met for its general review in 1836. In the absence of any further updates from the Concord unit, it is possible that the company continued to muster every May until 1840 under Reed's direction, or that it quietly disbanded sometime after 1836.

Newspaper records tell the same story. The May 28, 1836 issue of the *Concord Freeman* announces that on Tuesday, the 3rd of the month, Uriah H. Reed was elected captain in place of Edmund Crouch, discharged, and that Henry L. Dodge was elected lieutenant. There appear to be no other announcements pertaining to the enrolled company in the years that follow in either the *Concord Freeman* or the *Yeoman Gazette*.

Curiously, although meetings of the volunteer companies (the Concord Light Infantry and the Concord Artillery) were regularly announced in advance in the Concord newspapers in the 1830s, meetings of the enrolled company apparently were not. According to the 1793 law, notifications about upcoming meetings were required to be delivered in person by individuals designated by

officers, so newspaper announcements would not have been strictly necessary. After the 1834 reforms, when enrolled companies met only once per year on a date set by law, published announcements would have been even less necessary.

As mentioned above, there is no known mention of any militia service by Thoreau in any journal entry, piece of correspondence, or other primary source in the world of Thoreau studies. On its face this would appear to be further evidence that the militia did not meet. On the other hand, Thoreau did not record much detail about life events in his early journals. Militia service could conceivably have been a simple fact of village life not considered worth mentioning. And in any case, many family papers did not come down to us at all because they were destroyed by Sophia Thoreau (Walls, preface).

According to the 1793 law, schoolteachers could be exempted from militia duty with the written consent of town selectmen. Could Thoreau have received an exemption? We were unable to find any documentation of exemptions granted by selectmen, or any indication of how readily such exemptions were granted in the 1830s. Thoreau's school-teaching during this period, of course, was intermittent. He taught at Center School briefly in the fall of 1837. In September 1838 he took charge of the Concord Academy with his brother John.

Where was he on the first Tuesday of May in these years? In May of 1838, Thoreau made a journey to Maine to look for a teaching position, leaving Concord on either May 2 or May 3.¹ The first Tuesday of the month that year was May 1, so he could have been present for the 1838 muster if it took place. Indeed, if it took place, he might have scheduled his travel around it. In May of 1839 he was teaching school in Concord and thus again presumably available for a muster.

Thus the documentary evidence is inconclusive. We cannot confirm that Thoreau served in May of 1838 or 1839, or even that the enrolled militia met in those years. But we cannot positively rule it out either.

A history of Concord written by John S. Keyes, which makes no mention of regular musters, nevertheless describes two notable militia-related events in 1838 and 1839. Neither event left an impression in Thoreau's journal or correspondence. In October 1838, the two uniformed militia companies held a grand training with

rival parades that (almost?) came to blows. At the Cornwallis Day celebration (presumably also in October) in 1839, a grand re-enactment of the battle of Yorktown was staged, with uniformed companies from all over Middlesex county playing the part of the British and volunteer companies playing the rebels.

The line was formed on the Common in the forenoon, extending the whole length in double ranks of Continentallers, displaying every old and odd article of dress that could be ransacked from the garrets of the county.... The two armies had a sham fight in the afternoon, that was hardly bloodless, one or two being wounded with ramrods, fired off in the haste of loading, or a bayonet prick in the excitement of a charge. At dark Cornwallis surrendered, and this was duly celebrated at the taverns, where both forces fraternized afterward.” (ch. 45)

2. The Politics of Compulsory Militia Service

The Massachusetts militia law of 1793 was, like the similar militia laws of other states, passed in response to the federal Uniform Militia Act of 1792. The new uniform militia system retained and formalized common elements of colonial and early U.S. militia systems, including universal (white, male, adult) enrollment, requirements that individuals furnish their own weapons and gear, and fines for failure to appear or be properly equipped. A companion law, the Calling Forth Act, set out the conditions for ordering state militia into federal service. State quotas were to be met first by calling for volunteers and then by conscription. Most states allowed conscripts to purchase exemptions and/or hire substitutes.

The system was generally unpopular.² In the first place, the militia system put a large and inequitable burden on the poor. Militia service (generally four full days per year) meant lost wages and neglected farmwork, and purchasing the necessary equipment could represent a serious financial hardship. Failure to appear and be fully equipped could result in confiscation of property and debtor's prison. Organizations like the Prison Discipline Society of Boston,

which opposed imprisonment for debt, considered the militia system deeply implicated in society's persecution and criminalization of the poor. Prison Discipline Society reports tell the story of a Boston laborer, for example, earning \$10 a month, who was imprisoned for four days over a militia fine amounting to \$8.50, and another of six men in Berkshire, Massachusetts, who were incarcerated for six days for militia fines ranging from \$0.50 to \$3.00 (London, 137).

As militia gatherings were frequently an excuse for drunkenness, the temperance movement opposed the militia system, and it was often joined by business leaders who resented the loss of productive work time. During the relatively quiet years after the War of 1812, a vocal pacifist faction also emerged, questioning the necessity and virtue of universal conscription.

Military leaders and politicians also were dissatisfied with the system. The common wisdom was that four days of training per year were inadequate to impart any real knowledge or skill, and that conscripted units had lousy morale. Conscripted militia enjoyed a very poor reputation as fighting units. According to Lena London, every president from Washington to Van Buren asked Congress to fix what they considered a broken militia system (138).

As we have observed, it took decades for politicians to enact meaningful reform: eliminating compulsory training in peacetime, making the supply of arms and equipment the responsibility of the state, strengthening the volunteer units and paying them properly. Compulsory military service was eliminated in Delaware in 1831, in Massachusetts in 1840, and in Maine, Vermont, Ohio, Connecticut, New York, and New Hampshire between 1844 and 1851 (London 138, 142).

Impatient of reform, some citizens took matters into their own hands. Entire units made a mockery of the law by assembling in ludicrous costumes and "wielding weapons that ranged from brooms to dead fish" (Bulik, 155). Such units, often called "fantasticals," were sometimes accompanied grotesquely by "callithumpian bands," made up of every kind of instrument and non-instrument in place of fife and drum. Such spectacles were seen in Massachusetts. The *Concord Yeoman's Gazette* of May 24, 1834, reprinted a report of a parade of the "First Regiment of the Massachusetts Fantasticals" in Worcester:

One who seemed to bear the rank of Quarter-Master-General, before he quitted the shades of peaceful life for the tented field, must have been by profession a grocer, or else violently in love with a

grocer's daughter. His scrimped coat was trimmed with crackers for buttons, and smoked herrings for epaulets—his sugar-loaf cap was decorated with bunches of long-nine cigars for tassels, and laced with strings of dried apple. For a sword he carried a toddy stick full six feet long.

Another common tactic was to hamstring the enterprise by electing the town drunk as commanding officer. The Massachusetts legislature found it expedient in 1835 to pass a new law that “no idiot, lunatic, common drunkard, vagabond or pauper...shall be enrolled in the militia of this Commonwealth, or shall be eligible to any office therein,” and that the commander in chief would have the power to declare elections of such persons null and void and appoint replacements (1835 Massachusetts Acts, Chapter CXLIV).

Such a high-handed response might be expected to trigger additional confrontation, even insubordination. The backstory is not entirely clear, but the Concord newspapers report at least one case of insubordination in a neighboring town: On inspection day in May of 1837, the Bedford company refused to recognize the authority of out-of-town officers imposed by regimental command, and (at least for the day) succeeded in electing their own and having these officers recognized by the regimental colonel (reported in the *Yeoman Gazette*, May 13, 1837).

The papers do not carry stories of any such upheavals in Concord itself in the 1830s. But it can hardly be doubted that the resentments that were felt all across the nation and burst forth colorfully in places like Worcester and Bedford were felt in Concord too. George Frisbie Hoar (1826-1904), in his memoirs, recalled of the musters of the enrolled company in Concord during his childhood that “they turned out just to save the penalty of the law, and used to dress in old clothes, and their awkward evolutions were the object of great scorn to the boy of the time” (55-56). This was in contrast to the smart drills of the two local volunteer companies, which inspired awe and admiration in the children. According to Hoar and others (e.g., Keyes, “Autobiography,” 8), the general muster of the enrolled militia had a nickname: “Old Shad.”³ The expression appears to refer to shad as a sport fish that resists being reeled in. It was presumably in this sense that the Bedford militiamen toasted their victory over the regimental colonel, according to the

20 *The Concord Saunterer: A Journal of Thoreau Studies*

Yeoman Gazette article, by raising a glass to “The Bedford Shad – A fish not to be caught with a naked hook.”

3. Thoreau Romanticizes the Militia

Though many of his contemporaries were discontented with the compulsory militia system, young Thoreau viewed soldiering in an almost entirely positive light.

In the essay “The Service,” completed in 1840, and the early journals Thoreau drew from in the essay’s composition, courage and music are major themes, and they come together in celebration of the soldier on parade:

I tug at my hilt and I march on my post / And feel myself more than a match for a host. (Journal 1: 68, February 9, 1839)

[The life of the brave soldier] is a holiday and the contagion of his example unhinges the universe....One tap of the drum sets the political and moral harmonies all ajar. (Journal 1: 94, December 1839)

The steady flux of [the brave man’s] thought constitutes time in music. The universe falls in and keeps pace with it, which before proceeded singly and discordant. (Journal 1: 95, December 1839, also “The Service,” *Higher Law* 9)

If the soldier marches to the sack of a town, he must be preceded by drum and trumpet, which shall as it were identify his cause with the accordant universe....The roll-call musters for him all the forces of nature.” (Journal 1: 95-96, December 1839, also “The Service,” *Higher Law* 9)

All sounds, and more than all, silence, do fife and drum for us. (Journal 1: 96, December 1839, also “The Service,” *Higher Law* 10)

In 1839 and 1840, Thoreau had some encounters with local militia companies that figured prominently in the journals. In one instance, while camping along the Merrimack River,⁴ Thoreau heard a drummer practicing in the dead of night. Far from being annoyed, he wrote afterwards that he had been “lulled” by the sound: “Far into the night I hear some tyro beating a drum incessantly with a view to some country muster, and am thrilled by an infinite sweetness as of a music which the breeze drew from the sinews of war.” He rhapsodizes: “How I wish it would wake the whole world to march to its melody... Cease not thou drummer of the night, thou too shalt have thy reward. The stars and the firmament hear thee, and their aisles shall echo thy beat till its call is answered, and the forces are mustered” (Journal 1: 132, June 19, 1840).

When Thoreau composed *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* a few years later, this memory and this journal passage served as the germ of an extended meditation, several pages long, on music, sublimity, soldiery, heroism, and communion with the universe. “That harmony which exists naturally between the hero’s moods and the universe the soldier would fain imitate with drum and trumpet. When we are in health all sounds fife and drum for us; we hear the notes of music in the air, or catch its echoes dying away when we awake in the dawn. Marching is when the pulse of the hero beats in unison with the pulse of Nature, and he steps to the measure of the universe; then there is true courage and invincible strength” (175).

In a second instance, on July 3, 1840, the Townsend Light Infantry (a volunteer company) encamped near the Thoreau family’s residence. Thoreau wrote in his journal that “low-thoughted, plodding men have come and camped in my neighbor’s field to-night, with camp music and bustle.” This is the single negative remark Thoreau makes in connection with militia in the early journals. He immediately back-pedals: “Their bugle instantly finds a sounding board in the heavens, though mean lips blow it. The sky is delighted” (Journal 1: 148-49, July 3, 1840). The bugle and sounding-board made their way into “The Service” (Higher Law 10).

In his journal entry on the following day, July 4, Thoreau is inspired and transported by the sounds of the camp:

The night still breathes slumbrously over field and wood, when a few soldiers gather about one tent in

22 *The Concord Saunterer: A Journal of Thoreau Studies*

the twilight, and their band plays an old Scotch air—with bugle and drum and fife attuned to the season. It seems like the morning hymn of creation. The first sounds of the awakening camp—mingled with the chastened strains which so sweetly salute the dawn, impress me as the morning prayer of an army.

And now the morning gun fires—the soldier awakening to creation and awakening it—I am sure none are cowards now. These strains are the roving dreams which steal from tent to tent,—and break forth into distinct melody—they are the soldiers morning thought. Each man awakes himself with lofty emotions; and would do some heroic deed. You need preach no homily to him—he is the stuff they are made of.

The whole course of our lives should be analogous to one day of the soldiers. His Genius seems to whisper in his ear what demeanor is befitting, and in his bravery and his march he yields a blind and partial obedience. (1: 149, July 4, 1840)

Only a few days before this he had written in his journal that “a man’s life should be a stately march to a sweet but unheard music, and when to his fellows it shall seem irregular and inharmonious, he will only be stepping to a livelier measure; or his nicer ear hurry him into a thousand symphonies and concordant variations” (1: 146, June 30, 1840; a slightly modified form appears in “The Service,” *Higher Law* 11). This of course is an early version of the famous aphorism we have alluded to above that appeared in final form in *Walden*: “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away” (326). Variations on the imagery and sentiment abound in the early writings (e.g., Journal 1: 165; Journal 1: 96 and *Higher Law* 11; Journal 1: 399).

In May of 1841, Thoreau’s journal overflows with admiration for a new acquaintance; this passage is probably the most fulsome praise of any living person expressed in the early journals. The new acquaintance is “a Mr. Wattles...from Vermont,” a reformer “with two soldier’s eyes and shoulders.” At the age of ten, when only a “ragged mountain boy,” he had joined a militia company as fifer, “with set purpose to remould it from those first years.” Evidently, we are to understand, he had succeeded. The anecdote hits all the

right notes for Thoreau: music, soldiery, contagious heroism. Thoreau's editorial remark is that "the great person never wants an opportunity to be great—but makes occasion for all about him" (1: 312, May 31, 1841). Mr. Wattles appears to answer Thoreau's proposition in "The Service" that "the brave man, without drum or trumpet [or fife, he might have added], compels concord everywhere by the universality and tunefulness of his soul" (Higher Law 11; variant appears in Journal 1: 96, December 1839).

Militia members in their exercises were colloquially called "trainers" by local boys. Curiously enough, during the period of the missing militia service Thoreau's nickname among the schoolboys he taught was "Trainer Thoreau." Hoar, who had been a pupil, remembered the nickname as originating in Thoreau's comportment, the "long, measured stride and...erect carriage which made him seem something like a soldier" (70). It is possible that Thoreau was self-consciously emulating the part of the soldier and that the inner aspiration to heroism was visible in his carriage.

Later in life, Thoreau shed his romanticism concerning soldiering. In *Walden*, he speaks of a Concord muster as a distant event that concerns him little and only faintly intrudes on his attention as he hoes his beans by the pond: "a vague sense of itching or disease" on the horizon, the thunder of cannon reduced to the burst of a puffball (160). A 1857 journal entry describing a military muster is thoroughly clinical, almost like an account of birdwatching:

I hear the sound of fife and drum the other side of the village, and am reminded that it is May Training. Some thirty young men are marching in the streets in two straight sections, with each a very heavy and warm cap for the season on his head and a bright red stripe down the legs of his pantaloons, and at their head march two with white stripes down their pants, one beating a drum, the other blowing a fife. I see them all standing in a row by the side of the streets in front of their captain's residence, with a dozen or more ragged boys looking on, but presently they all remove to the opposite side, as it were with one consent, not being satisfied with their former position, which probably had its disadvantages. Thus they strut the better part of the day, going into the tavern two or three times, to abandon themselves to unconstrained positions out

of sight, and at night they may be seen going home singly with swelling breasts.

When I first saw them I was ascending the Hill, they were going along the road to the Battle-Ground far away under the hill, a fifer and a drummer to keep each other company and spell one another. Ever and anon the drum sounded more hollowly loud and distinct, as if they had just emerged from a subterranean passage, though it was only from behind some barn. (IX: 381-82)

Describing another encounter with a militia the following year (October 17, 1858) he displays some ambivalence. He acknowledges the intoxicating effect of military music and regalia, and debates with himself whether it is wise to indulge in the “luxury” of the spectacle (X: 103).

In his mature political writings, Thoreau went further and made the militia a target of disdain and satire. In “Resistance to Civil Government,” he pictures soldiers marching off to war “against their wills, aye, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed” (*Higher Law* 65). Militia soldiers are among those who degrade themselves by serving the state not as men, but as machines (*Higher Law* 66). Big talkers against the war with Mexico who nevertheless furnish a substitute when called up by their state militia for service, he argues, are really collaborators (*Higher Law* 71).

In “Slavery in Massachusetts,” Thoreau ridicules the spectacle of the Governor of Massachusetts reviewing the assembled militias with pomp and ceremony on muster days, and not ordering them to prevent the kidnapping of black citizens. “Is this what all these soldiers, all this *training* has been for these seventy-nine years past? Have they been trained merely to rob Mexico, and carry back fugitive slaves to their masters?” (*Higher Law* 92, 94-95). He goes on: “These very nights, I heard the sound of a drum in our streets. There were men *training* still; and for what?...I could not excuse this rub-a-dub of the ‘trainers.’ The slave was carried back by exactly such as these, i.e., by the soldier, of whom the best you can say in this connection is, that he is a fool made conspicuous by a painted coat” (*Higher Law* 95). Thoreau held up as a virtue in Captain John Brown that he had contempt for military life, and “refused to train when warned, and was fined for it” (*Higher Law* 112). He wrote that “only the defeated and deserters go to the wars—Cowards that run away and enlist” (*Higher Law* 195).

From this survey, it is clear that as Thoreau matured he gave up his romantic notions about soldiering, and as he became radicalized by the Mexican War and the fugitive slave laws he came to view militias as complicit in the guilt of the corrupt state that authorized and commanded them.

Thoreau's early romantic fascination with soldiering was obviously the result of a search for adequate imagery for the courage and heroism he aspired to. Thoreau idealized warriors of all kinds, from Homeric heroes to chivalric knights to savage Indian braves. The militia were merely the contemporary manifestation of the warrior ideal in his own society. The romantic fascination undoubtedly had other valences as well. It could have been a form of escapism on the part of a young man struggling to define himself in a household dominated by powerful women (c.f. Richard Lebeaux's *Young Man Thoreau*). On another level, the romantic fascination could represent a wish to set aside the overbearing demands of a conscience that requires independence and non-conformity, and submerge himself in a setting where the only virtue required is "a blind and partial [i.e., partisan] obedience." On a more mundane level, it could also represent an awkward and misunderstood young man's fantasy of being "just one of the guys" ("It is that friendship there is in war that makes it chivalrous and heroic." [*Higher Law*, 9]).

Almost entirely missing from Thoreau's early romantic fascination with soldiering is the notion of combat, of inflicting violence. Young Thoreau never rhapsodizes over the sack of a town, only "march[ing] to the sack of a town." As Thoreau matured and it became impossible to separate the spectacle and camaraderie of a militia from the purpose of a militia (as an arm of state violence), he had to look elsewhere for his ideals of heroism: to literature and history, and to contemporaries like Joe Polis (who, as Thoreau describes in the *Maine Woods*, rallied young Penobscot braves to prevent the destruction of the village school) and anti-slavery crusader John Brown. The question of violence invites the question of purpose—why and for what does one fight? For the mature Thoreau, the critical distinction is that a hero like Polis or Brown is animated not by "blind and partial obedience" but by conscience.

Until some new evidence comes to light, we cannot say for certain whether the Concord enrolled company met in May of 1838 and 1839 and whether Thoreau drilled. We can, however, make some informed speculation.

The fact that the fife-and-drum rhapsodies in Thoreau's early journals can be traced to specific biographical events at arm's length from actual service (i.e., sounds wafting from the neighbor's

yard and from across the Merrimack river) suggests that Thoreau probably did not have any personal militia experience of his own on which to draw. If this is the case, lack of personal experience with the militia could help explain the ease with which young Thoreau idealized and romanticized an institution that many contemporaries found to be degrading and coercive.

We should remember that there is a distinction between the enrolled companies (all pre-1840) and the volunteer companies. It was only the enrolled militia that was considered to be degrading and coercive. Most or all of the militia encounters that called forth positive associations in the mind of young Thoreau involved volunteer companies. His admiration of the volunteer companies was not untypical. Hoar indicated that the volunteer companies fired the imagination of every Concord boy. We can't be quite sure what effect induction into the enrolled militia would have on a young man in this regard—would child-like admiration for the volunteer companies turn to envy? Bitterness? A rival's disdain? A comrade's sodality? Apathy? What we can say for certain in the case of Thoreau is that as a young man of militia age he showed none of those other attitudes that experience might engender; he retained the schoolboy's innocent admiration.

If evidence were to come to light that the enrolled company did meet in 1838 or 1839, it may be necessary to ask whether Thoreau received a schoolteacher's exemption. It seems unlikely that Thoreau would have sought an exemption for himself, given his evident sympathy for soldiering. (For the sake of argument: If it was exclusively the volunteer companies that fired his imagination, perhaps he might have sought an exit from service in the enrolled company. But in that case, why not sign up for one of the volunteer companies rather than seeking a schoolteacher's exemption?)

On the other hand, it is conceivable that his parents would have sought an exemption for their precocious college-graduate son.⁵ A schoolteacher's exemption from militia service would have been a sign of the family's status, as well as a way of smoothing their son's entry into professional life. If in fact Thoreau's parents (let us say, his mother) had in fact sought an exemption, it is easy to imagine that Thoreau would have felt conflicted: simultaneously grateful for the favor and resentful of the intercession, possibly resentful also of the missed opportunity to taste the soldier's life. Such a state of affairs would add a new dimension of interest to Thoreau's abrupt decision

to quit his position at the Central School and his ambivalent efforts to find other teaching positions, as well as to the vehemence with which the young man clung to boyish admiration of the “manly” militia and with which he idolized the soldiering profession generally.

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NOTES

1. Harding (1982 [1962], 59) asserts that Thoreau left Concord on May 2, but May 3 may be more probable. Thoreau carried a letter of introduction from R.W. Emerson dated May 2 (Sanborn 1882, 59). His journal entry for the overnight Boston-to-Portland voyage is dated May 3d-4th (Hudspeth 2014, 44).
2. For the purpose of this brief and necessarily superficial overview of early nineteenth century militia politics, I have relied primarily on Marcus Cunliffe’s *Soldiers and Civilians*, Lena London’s “The Militia Fine 1830-1860,” and Jeffrey Rogers Hummel’s “The American militia and the origin of conscription: A reassessment.”
3. Hoar, writing decades after the fact, describes the “Old Shad” as taking place on the last Wednesday of May. He appears to be mixing up the general muster of enrolled companies (the “Old Shad”), which took place on the first Tuesday in May before 1840, with the annual reviews of the volunteer companies, which the 1840 law required to take place on the last Wednesday of May.
4. This would have been from the trip he and his brother had taken up the Merrimack River in late August and September of 1839. It appears in a journal entry dated June 19th, 1840. Thoreau evidently copied notes from the trip into the journal on June 19-21, 1840.
5. This is speculation. State law did not specify how exemptions were to be sought or granted. I have seen no evidence about common practices in Concord (e.g., whether exemptions could be

28 *The Concord Saunterer: A Journal of Thoreau Studies*

sought by proxy or whether application had to be made in person).

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