



Concord Historical Commission

141 Keyes Road • Concord, MA 01742

TO: Christopher Whelan, Town Manager
FROM: Barbara Lynn-Davis, Chair, Concord Historical Commission
DATE: June 1, 2007
CC: Marcia Rasmussen, Director of Planning and Land Management
RE: **Opinion on the Historical Significance of the Proposed Playing Fields Land**

As requested, the Concord Historical Commission is responding to claims made by Friends of Thoreau Country with respect to the historic significance of the proposed playing fields site behind Concord-Carlisle Regional High School. After considerable review, we feel that our original assessment of this area---made in November 2006 when we voted unanimously that this parcel of land was not of highly significant historic value---is still correct.

The Commission considers issues surrounding Walden Pond, Walden Woods and Henry David Thoreau to be very serious matters that must not be taken lightly. We do not disagree that this area is technically and historically part of Walden Woods; however, in its current condition, it is a fragment of Walden Woods---no longer part of a contiguous larger landscape.

When we referred, in our earlier vote, to the degraded condition of the land, we weren't referring to the condition or quality of the trees on the land, but to the overall disturbance and isolation of the area. This site is bounded on all sides by modern and intrusive development: Route 2 to the south; Brister's Hill Road housing to the east; the high school complex---including a bus depot---to the north. It is not accessible to the public, except across school land or private property, and cannot be enjoyed, of a piece, with either the land surrounding Walden Pond or the land, preserved by the Walden Woods Project, on Brister's Hill.

We have consulted numerous maps and aerial photographs of the area as well numerous accounts of activities on this land. We've heard from experts on the history and geology of this area. The maps are, at best, conflicting and the experts disagree and have, over time, revised their opinions as to the location of various historic landscape features within Walden Woods---and particularly those features that may or may not have been on this parcel. The one clearly historic feature of this area, Laurel Glen---

which was officially laid-out as a path in Concord in 1671, was filled in by Route 2 construction; Brister's Hill Road housing was later actually built in Laurel Glen. Laurel Glen, however, is significantly east of the proposed playing fields and, even if it were still intact, would not be disturbed by this new development. Another ancient path, as we heard from an expert, that may have crossed this land, was similarly excavated by Route 2 construction.

We are fortunate, as a town, to have in our possession a high level of archeological data. Our "map", which identifies over 400 sites, forms the basis of the Massachusetts Historical Commission's many listings for archeological sites in Concord. This data was confirmed and updated in 1981 by Dr. Shirley Blancke. At that time she indicated which sites were intact, destroyed or disturbed by construction. Our recent review of this map confirms that no archeological sites are listed on the land behind the Concord-Carlisle Regional High School. The closest known site on school property is at the edge of Thoreau Street---quite distant from the proposed playing field site---and is noted as "disturbed."

In a town as steeped in history as Concord is, it is important to be able to make informed judgments as to the relative merits of our historic resources. All our resources are not equally valuable, and forgetting that puts us in jeopardy of diminishing the genuine significance of our truly prized and well-preserved historic places.

For all of the reasons stated above---discrepancies as to the actual location of valued landscape features; disturbance and destruction of historic resources by 20th century development; fragmentation of this site from the greater Walden Woods landscape; no known archeological sites---it is our judgment that this particular piece of woodland has regrettably, but irrevocably, been significantly compromised of its historic integrity as a part of Walden Woods.

J. Walter Brain, a scholar of Thoreau's writings, wrote in The Concord Journal (7/8/99) that a certain "Thrush Alley" he sought to identify from various entries in the writer's journal "must be understood then, not as a physiographic or ecological corridor in Walden Woods, but as a poetic corridor..." This term, a "poetic corridor," is what this cut-off piece of land in our view can never be again, cut off from the past by the intrusion of too much modern development since Thoreau's lifetime and writings.