

## Some very ingenious sleuthing leads to a long-lost stand of *Lygodium palmatum*

### Thoreau's Climbing Fern Rediscovered

Ray Angelo

[In preparing his botanical index to Thoreau's Journal (reviewed on pages 30 to 32), Ray Angelo did a great deal of painstaking research, not all of it in herbaria and archives. Sometimes, map in hand and armed with historical data gleaned from many quarters, Angelo hunted down the sites of noteworthy plants Thoreau mentioned in his Journal. Following is his account of a successful search for the stand of climbing fern (*Lygodium palmatum*) that Thoreau discovered in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1851. Angelo's account is reprinted with permission from Thoreau Society Bulletin 149 (Fall 1979).]

While surveying the Ministerial Swamp in Concord, Massachusetts, on November 24, 1851, Henry Thoreau came upon a rare and unusual fern—the climbing fern (*Lygodium palmatum*)—the only fern in New England that twines like a vine. Thoreau wrote of it in his Journal on July 30, 1853:

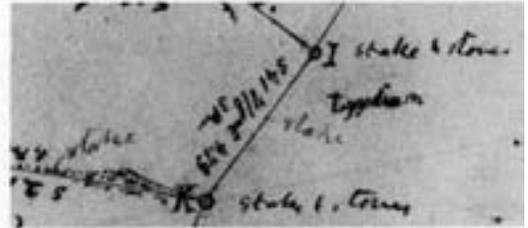
It is a most beautiful slender and delicate fern, twining like [a] vine about the stem of the meadow-sweet, paniced andromeda, goldenrods, etc., to the height of three feet or more, and difficult to detach from them . . . Our most beautiful fern, and most suitable for wreaths or garlands. It is rare.

and, on August 14, 1854:

3 P.M.—To climbing fern with E[dward]. Hoar.

It takes a good deal of care and patience to unwind this fern without injuring it. Sometimes same frond is half leaf, half fruit. E[dward]. talked of sending one such leaf to G[eorge]. Bradford to remind him that the sun still shone in America.

In 1857 Thoreau sent a spray of the fern to Miss Mary Brown of Vermont and remarked that the



Part of the Thoreau survey map that led the author to the lost colony of climbing fern. The word "Lygodium" marks the colony. Used with the permission of the Concord Free Public Library.

name "climbing fern" would have been "a pretty name for some delicate Indian maiden." There are at least fourteen Journal entries from 1851 onwards referring to the climbing fern (also called "lygodium" or "tree fern" by Thoreau).

He disclosed the location to a number of friends. One of these would be Minot Pratt (1805–1878). Some time in the 1850s, Pratt showed the rarity to Miss Annie Sawyer, who later gave the following account:

Mr. Pratt had promised to take me to the only place in Concord where the climbing fern could be found. I had given my word of honor that I would not tell, and in due season we were on the ground. In the midst of our enjoyment we heard a snapping of twigs, a brisk step, in the bordering thicket, and in a second Mr. Thoreau's spare figure and amazed face confronted us. Mr. Pratt answered for my trustworthiness, and so won over Mr. Thoreau by representing what a deed of charity it was to enlighten my ignorance. . .

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The climbing fern colony rediscovered in 1978 by the author. Photographed in 1901 by Herbert W. Gleason. Used with the permission of the Concord Free Public Library.



Thoreau often visited the west part of Concord, . . . where he first found the climbing fern. The writer saw him the day he found the rare plant while returning home with his prize. I never saw such a pleased, happy look on his face as he had that day. He took off his hat, in the crown of which the fern was coiled up, and showed me the dainty, graceful glory of the swamp.

—Horace R. Hosmer, *Concord Enterprise*, April 22, 1893

In an 1863 article for the newspaper *Commonwealth* Pratt wrote: "In a wild spot . . . (long may it remain secluded), the graceful climbing fern, very rare, and the large purple orchis . . . are found."

Pressed specimens of the fern collected from Concord by Thoreau's sister Sophia, and by others were all certainly taken from the same colony that Henry discovered.

Some time after 1920, knowledge of the exact location of the colony became lost. By the time Concord's foremost botanist, the late Richard J. Eaton, started inquiring about it, no one could tell him precisely where it was or had been. He searched the Ministerial Swamp repeatedly without success and concluded in his *A Flora of Concord* that the colony had probably been exterminated by the dumping of rubbish.

Mr. Eaton apparently concentrated his search in the vicinity of two small bogs in the swamp. However, Thoreau did not associate the fern with the bogs, while both Minot Pratt and Alfred W. Hosmer (1851–1903) mention the colony as occurring in "woods." The label on a specimen of the fern collected on August 6, 1899, by Alfred Hosmer describes the habitat as "dense, low, shady woods among thick bushes."

In the Concord Free Public Library there is a photographic plate of the fern taken by the well-known nature photographer Herbert W. Gleason. Unfortunately, it shows little of the background. Reference Librarian Marcia E. Moss, produced from the library archives a key piece of evidence—the survey sketch of the Ministerial

Swamp that Thoreau prepared at the time he discovered the fern. At one spot on the map in tiny print is the word "Lygodium." It is not near the bogs in the swamp.

Mary Fenn of Concord (who has had a long-standing interest in the climbing fern) and I set out for the Ministerial Swamp on November 6, 1978, with a photocopy of Thoreau's 1851 survey map in hand, courtesy of the Library through Marcia Moss. We proceeded to a low thicket that seemed to correspond to the spot indicated on the map. A careful search of the thicket proved unsuccessful. Reexamining the map carefully and noting its scale, I did some pacing that indicated the thicket was not the place to look. We decided to search a swath of woodland that was in better agreement with the survey map. We had not taken more than a few strides when I noticed a peculiar growth five to ten yards ahead. . . .

In the most ordinary of woodland settings the climbing fern sprawled over an area about three yards wide and five yards long. Being an evergreen fern, it could not have been displayed to better advantage than amidst the sere hues of late autumn. For more than half a century the delicate maiden had quietly waited, avoiding the gaze of all, until the arrival of two well-wishers bearing a remembrance from six score and seven Novembers past.

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