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Thoreau Edition at UCSB Receives NEH Grant for Volumes of Correspondence

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) has awarded a \$245,000 grant to The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau, a projected 28-volume series of the work of the 19th-century American naturalist and social philosopher. The Thoreau Edition, which has been headquartered at several universities across the country since its inception in 1966, is now located at UC Santa Barbara.

The grant, which includes \$45,000 in matching funds, will support the editorial work and preparation for Thoreau's "Correspondence," a three-volume collection that will include all the letters written and received by Thoreau from 1834 until just before his death in May 1862. The correspondence series continues a scholarly endeavor that began more than four decades ago. When completed, the Thoreau Edition will also include the contents of all 47 volumes of Thoreau's handwritten Journal, his writings for publication, and other uncollected papers. The Thoreau Edition's first volume, "Walden," was published in 1971.

According to Elizabeth Witherell, editor-in-chief of the Thoreau Edition, the most recent collection of Thoreau's correspondence came out in 1958. "Since then, 151 new letters have surfaced, and an additional 149 are now available in their original manuscript form," she said. The new edition of "Correspondence" is a collaborative endeavor: the team consists of Robert N. Hudspeth, editor of six volumes of

Margaret Fuller's letters and professor emeritus of English at the University of Redlands and Claremont Graduate University; and Lihong Xie and Witherell of the Thoreau Edition staff.

The letters are a virtual treasure trove of information about Thoreau's life as a writer and naturalist, and provide new angles on many ideas and themes he explored in his Journal as well as in his essays and books, Witherell noted. They also offer insight into Thoreau's relationships with others. "In letters, we experience Thoreau's changing voices as he engages with many different people, from his mother, to his friends [Ralph Waldo] Emerson and Arthur Ricketson, to several fans inspired by his writings, to a young autograph seeker," she said. "We don't see these facets of his personality in anything else he wrote."

Addressing topics both lofty and mundane, the letters also provide a glimpse into 19th-century culture and economy, and therefore serve as valuable historical documents. "The letters in the new edition are fully annotated," noted Witherell. "Correspondents are identified, along with most individuals whose names appear, and full titles are given for sources that are quoted or mentioned. Current political, cultural, and economic circumstances to which the letters refer are described, as are relevant events in Thoreau's personal and professional life."

Because of the importance of Thoreau's writings, the Thoreau Edition was designated a National Endowment for the Humanities "We the People" project in 2003. "Thoreau is one of a small group of American writers who have had a significant impact on the shape of American life," Witherell said. His works form critical philosophical cornerstones of both the civil rights movement and the drive to preserve wilderness areas and natural resources, she added. His thoughts and ideals continue to hold an important place in the nation's political and intellectual life, and his records of changes in seasonal phenomena are now seen to provide significant data for the study of climate change.

More information about the Thoreau Edition is available at www.library.ucsb.edu/thoreau

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† Middle photo: February 18, 1862, letter from Thoreau to his publisher; the original is in Special Collections, Davidson Library, UCSB.

Credit: George Foulsham, Office of Public Affairs

†† Bottom photo: Thoreau's signature on his February 18, 1862, letter to his publisher; the original is in Special Collections, Davidson Library, UCSB.

Credit: George Foulsham, Office of Public Affairs

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