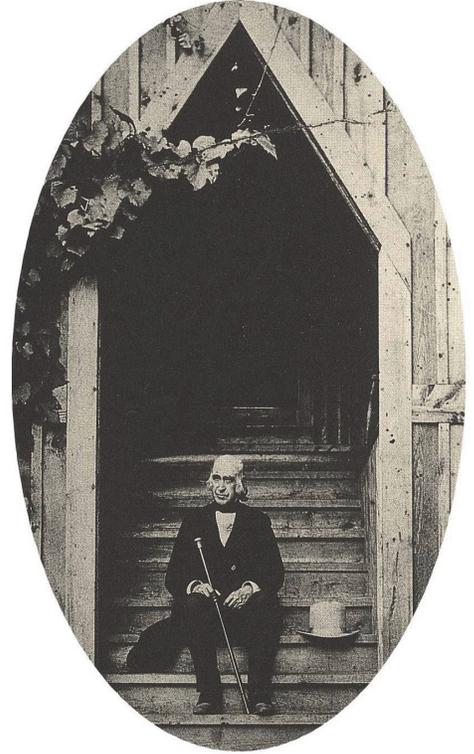


The Concord School of Philosophy

Many visitors at once notice the unusual structure on the hillside beyond Orchard House on their way to the Visitor Entrance. Dreamt about for forty years by Amos Bronson Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Franklin Sanborn, and William Torrey Harris, "The Concord Summer School of Philosophy" was founded in 1879 as one of the first adult summer schools in the United States that was largely based upon the ideal of Plato's Academy. Conducted its first year inside the Study of Orchard House, The School received a generous donation from a New York City philanthropist, enabling Mr. Alcott to design and have constructed what was originally called "Hillside Chapel," where the next eight years of school sessions were held.



Mr. Alcott The School steps, 1880

In addition to Alcott, Emerson, Sanborn, and Harris, early speakers at The School included Julia Ward Howe, William James, and Elizabeth Peabody, who were among the first to encourage the study of the uniquely American philosophical thought known as Transcendentalism. The School was an enormous success, drawing hundreds of participants each summer from throughout this country as well as Europe, more than half of whom were women. Lectures and open discussion of important intellectual, social, and cultural issues of the day were the foundation of each series, and left profound impressions upon its participants. With Mr. Alcott's death in 1888, The School was closed in his honor.



A glimpse inside The School during a summer session in the 1880s

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A grant from the Massachusetts Historical Commission in 1975 enabled restoration work to be done on the building, which had been re-located several times since the late 1800s. The structure was restored and re-opened the following year for a series of summer lectures. The exterior of the building is exactly as it was in Mr. Alcott's time, deliberately left unfinished to harmonize with the natural surroundings, while only minor modifications have been made to the equally rustic (and unheated) interior.

Each year, the modern-day "Summer Conversational Series" has endeavored to keep the spirit and purpose of earlier proceedings alive. Notable speakers have included psychologist B. F. Skinner, cartoonist Paul Szep, educator Theodore Sizer, Alcott scholars Sarah Elbert, Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Pulitzer-Prize winning Alcott biographer John Matteson. Themes for each Series are determined by Orchard House Staff and are carefully chosen to reflect current issues of importance so as to promote productive thought and stimulating discussion.

The School has also had its "lighter side" -- in 1982, it was the site of a one-woman show by Katharine Houghton, niece of actress Katharine Hepburn, who starred as "Jo March" in the 1933 *Little Women* movie and was in attendance at the performance. Numerous children's programs, poetry readings, author events, and musical entertainments have also been presented in The School to the benefit and delight of local residents and visitors from around the world. In October 2018, The School was also used to film a scene for the latest *Little Women* motion picture (2019).

The use of this building remains true to Mr. Alcott's original intent, and continues to pay tribute to his insight and foresight.

[Emerson] ... speaks of our Summer School as a "brave thing," successful beyond all reasonable expectation. ... Even my neighbors looked for its failure, surprised at the intelligence and enthusiasm that brought so many from afar. So it may have been, as my friend says, "a brave thing" truly. (1879)

