THOREAU DIDN'T LIKE GRANITE MONUMENTS

Simplicity. Simplicity. Simplicity. This is what Henry David Thoreau said about monumental architecture.

His family understood. After Henry's untimely death in 1862, they marked his grave in Concord's Sleepy Hollow Cemetery with nothing more than a brick of marble, set low to the ground.

 Literary pilgrims of the Victorian and Gilded Ages understood. Notables such as John Burroughs and John Muir honored Thoreau's memory by dropping pebbles, cobbles and small boulders from the nearby area onto a simple pile marking the spot where Henry lived in the woods and began work on his literary masterpiece, "Walden." Today, that pile is an unstructured mound of glacially milled and water-washed stones more than 20 feet long, and referred to as a cairn, perhaps because one formerly marked the same place.

 Local residents of the mid-20th century evidently did not understand. After an excavation of Thoreau's house site in 1945 by Roland Wells Robbins, and with the best intentions in mind, they dishonored his memory with a monument he most likely would have hated. Surrounding the 150-square-foot floor plan of the house are nine massive granite pillars, which are connected by drapes of heavy chain. Four smaller granite posts mark the former woodshed.

 All in all, there are 13 uprights of what Henry would have called "hammered" stone, because that's how quarrying was done in his day. To cut blocks from the earth's crust, stone masons used blunt hammers to pound percussion drills and chisels and to pound the rock itself for finishing touches.

 "To what end, pray, is so much stone hammered?" Thoreau asked himself in "Economy," his opening diatribe against the vanity and superficiality of human society. "In Arcadia," he writes of the classical Greek ideal of pastoral simplicity, "I did not see any [workers] hammering stone."

 "Nations are possessed," he continues, "with an insane ambition to perpetuate the memory of themselves by the amount of hammered stone they leave. ... Most of the stone a nation hammers goes toward its tomb only. It buries itself alive. As for the Pyramids, there is nothing to wonder at in them so much as the fact that so many men could be found degraded enough to spend their lives constructing a tomb for some ambitious booby, whom it would have been wiser and manlier to have drowned in the Nile, and then given his body to the dogs."

 When I first read those words in 1971, I was a young idealist searching for answers, an undergraduate geology student also interested in archaeology and the proud owner of a well-used rock hammer. Hence, I distinctly recall the passage.

 Thirteen years later, I moved from Alaska to northeastern Connecticut, giving me my first chance to visit Thoreau's house site, now the historic epicenter of the modern environmental movement. On my first pilgrimage in the spring of 1985, I was shocked and disturbed to find megaliths of hammered stone marking the tomb of Thoreau's house.

 I've visited the same site many times since, often with a busload of students. Each time, I'm saddened to see a hammered stone memorial to a man who detested hammered stone.

 "I love better to see stones in place," Thoreau wrote. "The grandeur of Thebes was a vulgar grandeur. More sensible is a rod of stone wall that bounds an honest man's field than a hundred-gated Thebes that has wandered farther from the true end of life."
I agree., but the Commonwealth of Massachusetts apparently does not. Unless there are legal restrictions to the contrary, they have jurisdiction over the hammered stone anti-memorial desecrating the house site at Walden Pond State Reservation. The dishonor done to Thoreau 65 years ago continues at their discretion.