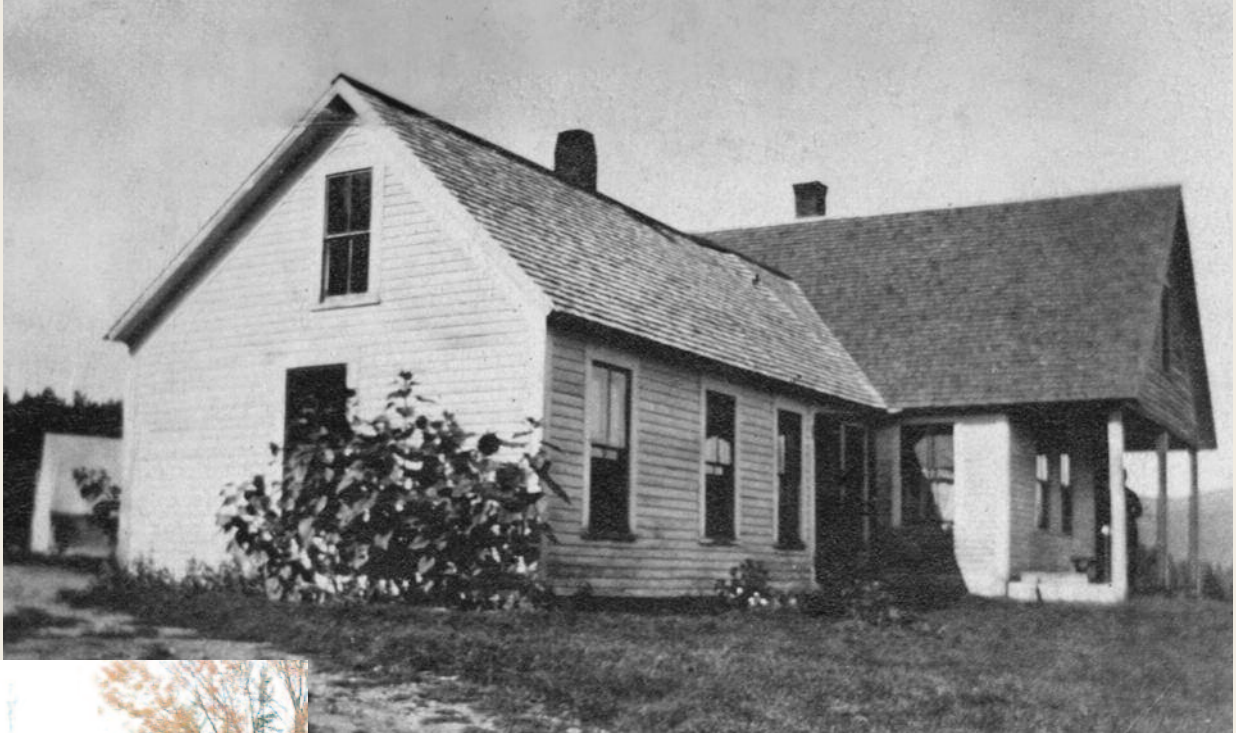




## the personal essay

by Jim Schley



# Persisting, Companionable History

*The Frost Place of Franconia, N.H.,  
is steeped in living history.*

**I**n my present job, I am curator of an unusual little museum, responsible for caretaking and hosting tourists at a site where the past feels immediate and persistent; the events happened long ago but are part of an ongoing, unending story.

This is the hundred-and-fifty-year-old farmstead in Franconia, N.H., now known as the Frost Place, which poet Robert Frost and his family owned between 1915 and 1920 then visited many summers until 1938, when Frost's wife Elinor died and he no longer returned.

When the poet moved here he was just past forty and basically unknown, with two books recently published in England but none in America. His unique abilities — his radical confidence in cutting through Victorian grandiloquence



# Robert Frost



with a tonic of classical rigor and colloquial rhythms — was evident to a few friends and literary acquaintances in Boston and New York, who must have found preposterous Frost's plan to move to northern New Hampshire "to get the thing started" and launch his career. Imagine their dismay: "You'll be living where?"

Yet in the five years while the Frosts owned the Franconia house, the poet did indeed clamber vigorously from obscurity to national acclaim, completing his third book and much of a fourth that would earn the first of his four Pulitzer Prizes. This extraordinarily productive poet infused the rocky soil and brisk air of Franconia with an aura of sanctity and fertility those of us — his descendants, writers and readers drawn to this place — can still sense.

Since 1976, when the local town purchased the Frost house, barn, and about

seven acres to prevent its being razed or renovated beyond recognition, each summer a living poet has been awarded a residency to live and work here, and for the past thirty years The Frost Place has hosted annual writers' conferences, now including gatherings for high school poets and teachers of creative writing and literature as well as very dedicated adult poets.

Why do thousands of people come here every summer, from across New England and North America and far beyond, from India and Australia, China and Great Britain, Brazil and the Middle East? Talking with these travelers as they walk through the rooms where Frost paced, thinking and composing some of the most complex and sensual poems of the twentieth century, I've heard many of them describe themselves as "pilgrims," pulled as if by a current to the singular location where poems they've loved since





childhood were made. They gaze at handwritten manuscripts, letters, and inscriptions in books Frost gave as gifts, his handwriting the visual equivalent of a distinctive voice, almost audible.

It's too simple to say "time stands still" here, because time has assaulted the house and land, with winter storms and spring snowmelt flowing through the foundation and ubiquitous dampness even in the milder months. The clear-cut pastures of Frost's era have grown back to mixed woodlands, but last year two hurricane-force storms smashed more than a hundred trees, some of them towering white pines and maples and black cherries. Time exacts penalties here, of course. Even so — there are certain ways, strikingly noticeable to visitors, in which the Frost Place seems permeated not by change but by endurance.

Standing in the yard, we can hear this

conversation Frost inlaid in the poem New Hampshire, speaking of the Franconia house:

*The farm I made my home on in the mountains*

*I had to take by force rather than buy.*

*I caught the owner outdoors by himself*

*Raking up after winter, and I said,*

*"I'm going to put you off this farm: I want it."*

*"Where are you going to put me? In the road?"*

*"I'm going to put you on the farm next to it."*

*"Why won't the farm next to it do for you?"*

*"I like this better." It was really better.*

Those lines aren't history, or a recollection encased in stony amber like a cluster of primeval flies; this deftly dramatized encounter between two agile minds

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*"The violets in the mountains  
have broken the rock."*

-T. Williams



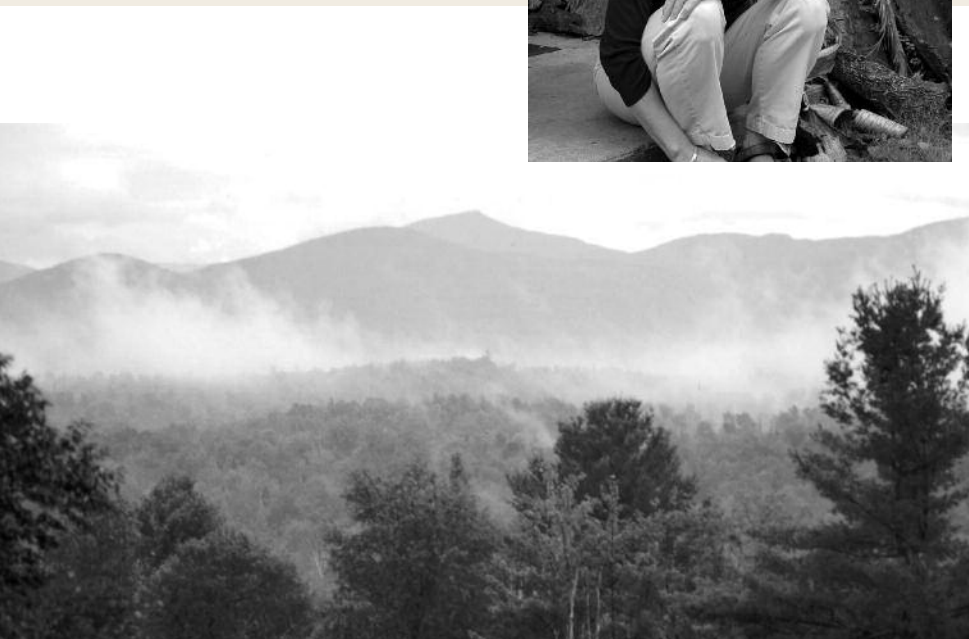
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is freshly occurring every time the lines are read or heard.

The very materials of the house and its contents seem immanent and resonant — clapboards and floorboards, the doors with their handles and latches, Elinor Frost's massive iron cook stove and her treadle sewing machine, left behind when they moved; even a shelf of Poetry magazines from the nineteen-teens and twenties. And what a suffusion of sensory prompts, breezes through blossoms on the unusually tall wild apple trees and a small new orchard, and the next generation of Frost's beloved phoebes returning to nest in the porch eaves—"Their murmur more like the sigh we sigh / From too much dwelling on what has been."

Ordinary things: one of the Morris chairs Frost favored is here in his work room, instantly recognizable in photographs from 1916, with its distinctive little closet; and recently donated, a wooden wheelbarrow supposed to be the poet's along with Robert and Elinor's bed, its headboard decorated with carved vine and leaves. Ordinary things, charged with meaning, and allowed to let be.

I risk rhapsodizing. Combined with the house's remarkable stamina I also see bulging plaster, freed by steady entropy from the lathe beneath, and rippled wallpaper that will eventually flake and tumble, due to the ceaselessly prying moisture that rises from the stone foundation and dirt cellar floor.

Poet Howard Levy calls this "hallowed ground," and former U.S. Poet Laureate Donald Hall has said of the Frost Place, "There is no other poetic institution in the United States that feels more consecrated to the poem itself." The comparison is religious, "pilgrim" and "hallowed" and "consecrated," and though Frost's was a fiercely secular and skeptical intelligence, his place of work feels like a chapel, albeit a



shrine to everyday labor. This was somewhere a supremely receptive, generative artist could concentrate. And rare as can be, in a society of furious rushing and cacophonous noise, this is still a place where one can concentrate. What a miracle.

Stories keep circulating among local people, now shared over and over with visitors: the way Frost trained his cow to be milked at noon and midnight, because he liked to work late then sleep late — maybe the same cow he describes as made drunk by fallen apples fermenting in the long grass, “Her face is flecked with pomace and she drools / A cider syrup.” Or the way Frost stuck his bare feet out the window to cool himself off among the morning glory vines, from which passing neighbors would deduce, “Look . . . he’s working.”

Preservation specialist John Leeke, who for many years has advised the Frost Place staff on maintenance and restoration techniques, became very excited one day when we were talking about Frost’s work room, setting of the story about feet and morning glories. Leeke said to me, his voice darting into urgency, “There are certain auditory properties in that room, as a result of the construction and covering of the walls and floor and ceiling, that Frost used when composing a poem, speaking aloud as though rehearsing a song. We

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have a responsibility to protect and maintain that.”

This approach to historic preservation impresses me greatly, even while presenting managerial challenges, because as curator I need to find a delicate balance between restraint (which could be neglect) and intervention, trying to sustain a feeling of (scuffed, weather-beaten, slightly shabby) authenticity, because this is how Frost himself experienced the house, which unlike most buildings of that era has been sensibly cared for but never “modernized.”

In truth, The Frost Place is a kind of stage set where we project and play out what we imagine and hope for, powerfully evoking the past but not an artifact or mausoleum, still alive as a gathering spot for today’s poets and lovers of poems. The old floor joists have been “sistered” with new lumber set alongside the old, and the sagging post-and-beam barn has been straightened and made plumb with cleverly placed steel cables and turn-buckles.

Yet standing in Frost’s house, the very molecules you turn among and breathe seem to be those Frost captured in poems written here, including *An Old Man’s Winter Night* (an aching evocation of aging fatigue and confusion), where in the “all out-of-doors” that “looked darkly in at him / Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars, / that gathers on the



pane in empty rooms” we see these rooms, and see this as the exact setting of *In the Home Stretch*, a poem that describes how a house recovers its solitude when visitors depart, as they always do, leaving the residents of an old hill farm to realize “Dumped down in paradise we are and happy.” In *The Oven Bird* we hear the ancestor of those who still sound their calls, “teacher, teacher, teacher,” from the surrounding woods, “When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers / On sunny days a moment overcast . . .”

Again I feel compelled to acknowledge the danger of being too romantic . . . brought up short by brutal reminders of transience. During my first summer in this job in 2006, there were ovenbirds calling from hidden nests in the woods beyond the barn, but in 2007, after many trees there had been felled by winter storms that left a splintery clearing of toppled trunks and upended roots, not a

single ovenbird sounded in that glade.

In his ovenbird poem, Frost confides that he shares with that singular bird a need to voice “the question that he frames in all but words” . . . “what to make of a diminished thing.”

Frost’s path through the Franconia rooms remains somehow palpable, yet when visitors ask me if the place feels “haunted,” I respond that I feel a distinctly companionable air about the house. Whenever I spend time there alone, I am filled with the most remarkable calm. The sensed presence of three decades of contemporary resident poets is in many ways as noticeable as the echoed resonance of the original poet-in-residence. Intimations of my predecessors here never feel supernatural to me but natural, a vital alertness and circumspection.

In a letter to a young poet, Frost wrote “Silence used to help me — not saying a word for whole days.” And instead of his sensed or imagined presence troubling the air here, what I experience is his penetrating, well-placed silence.

In addition to being executive director of The Frost Place museum and poetry center, **Jim Schley** is author of a book of poems, *As When, In Season* (Marick Press, 2008). He lives in South Strafford, Vt.

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