

Following Genealogical Trails Unearths New Anna Alcott Image & More

by Ray Angelo

When I actively explored the woodlands, meadows, bogs, swamps and rocky hills of Concord, Massachusetts in the late 1970s and early 1980s I became familiar with the long Concord tradition of wild plant exploration. The most notable botanical enthusiast being Henry Thoreau (1817-1862), but approaching his knowledge of the town's myriad natural haunts were his lesser known friends, Edward Hoar (1823-1893) and Minot Pratt (1805-1878). Later assiduous pursuers of the richness of Concord's flora followed, not quite overlapping each other. But, Thoreau and his two friends found most of what was to be found in Concord with later finds being mostly more recent plant invaders or species in difficult, less showy groups.



A little-known bog in Concord, MA. Photo courtesy of Cherrie Corey

Thoreau left the world the treasure of his Journal filled with his reflections on life and, particularly in his later years, notes rich in observations on Nature in Concord, especially with respect to plants. He also left an extensive collection of pressed plants he had collected mostly in Concord, but also elsewhere in his travels. For his era his collection was large for an individual collector. It is now at Harvard University. Edward Hoar left only his pressed specimens, equally large, better collected, and also mostly from Concord. It is now also at Harvard University in the collection of the New England Botanical Club (which also owns Thoreau's grass and sedge specimens, all of which Thoreau had bequeathed to Hoar). Minot Pratt (pronounced MY-naht)

left very few specimens behind as he was mostly interested in the living plants, being a farmer and horticulturist.

But Pratt left behind an excellent listing of Concord's plants including notes on where to find them in Concord, when they flowered and information on frequency and habitat.

Pratt became a problem for later botanical explorers since he made a practice of introducing wild plants not in Concord from Vermont and other nearby areas in order to enrich Concord's flora. He was skilled in choosing the sites in Concord to place them, such that a good number survived after his death in 1878. This has led later Concord botanizers to wonder whether any new find was merely one of Pratt's introductions. Fortunately Pratt recorded all or almost all of his introductions.

I used Thoreau's Journal and Pratt's manuscript (left at his death to The Concord Free Public Library) to help relocate some of Concord's many plant treasures. I became aware that Pratt knew a number of wild flowers that neither Thoreau nor Hoar found in Concord. Since there was essentially no biographical material on Pratt, the only other information I could find about him was in essays he had written for the Concord Farmer's Club in which he was an active member and in at least one anonymous essay he had written for a Boston newspaper (all these in The Concord Free Public Library). Reading all that I could find by him and about him, I became impressed with his character, enough to seek out his grave in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord. The cemetery director at that time (nearly 40 years ago) provided me with the plot number and its location on a map. When I arrived at the spot I was astonished that such a worthy person had no marker of any kind. Almost as surprising was that no image of Minot Pratt seemed to exist. Unlike Thoreau and Hoar (from a notable Concord family) it appeared that Pratt was almost completely forgotten by posterity.

Over the following decades after I moved from Concord (but not far) and continued my explorations of Concord's flora in the herbaria at Harvard University I continued to harbor the disappointment of the absence of a marker for Minot Pratt. In my retirement years I completed a longstanding botanical project and then took up the preparation of an online flora of Concord. In doing so my interest in Minot Pratt



A locally very rare fern ally collected by Minot Pratt in Concord, MA

revived. But now, unlike before, the resources of the internet provided the means to find much previously hidden information. In addition to the online Concord flora I began to compile a biographical sketch of Minot Pratt since none yet existed, although some information had appeared about him in some published articles and in some books of his contemporaries.

As part of my biographical sketch I decided to trace Pratt's ancestry and descendants. I contacted the current supervisor of Concord's cemeteries, Tish Hopkins, to confirm the location of the plot I had received decades before and find out what would be needed to have a marker added. The plot still had no marker for Minot, only an old headstone for his eldest son and without dates. The headstone was apparently erected to honor that son's service in the Civil War -- Frederick Pratt (1831-1905), being the only Concord man drafted into the Civil War. Tish further informed me to my surprise that there were six persons buried in the Pratt plot -- Minot and his wife (Maria), the oldest son and his wife (Frederick and Sarah), and the two youngest children of Minot and Maria -- Caroline and Theodore. The two youngest children did not marry. I already knew that the other son of Minot and Maria, John Bridge Pratt (1833-1870), was buried nearby with his wife, Anna Alcott (1831-1893), who was a sister of Louisa May.



Headstone of Frederick Gray Pratt at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Concord, MA - Provincial Guard Massachusetts Volunteers
Photo courtesy of Cherrie Corey

According to Tish Hopkins, the last owner of the Pratt plot was the only child of Frederick Pratt, Henry Minot Pratt, whose whereabouts were unknown when the cemetery attempted to collect the perpetual care fee. In order for a marker for the Pratt family to be put in the Pratt plot I would need to find a descendant of Henry Minot Pratt who would give approval for the marker, and the perpetual care fee would need to be paid.

For my biographical sketch of Minot Pratt I now had motivation also to trace his genealogy in the hopes of finding a qualified descendant to give approval for a marker and to find an unpublished image of Minot Pratt. With the resources available on the internet, the Concord Free Public Library and cemetery records, it was surprising how much one could find with careful searching and inquiries. I learned the birth and death dates for Henry Minot Pratt (1853-1925), and that he had moved from Concord to Saugus, MA where he is buried with his wife, Mary Annie, later called Annie Mary.

Since the second oldest son of Minot and Maria, John Bridge Pratt, married into the Alcott family, it was relatively easy to locate descendants in that Pratt line. I had the good fortune of making contact with William "Fritz" Kussin (great-grandson of John Bridge Pratt) and his son Karl, both in Concord, as well as John Winsor Pratt (great-grandson of John Bridge Pratt and a retired Harvard Business School professor). These descendants were aware of their Pratt heritage but did not have information about descendants of the older brother, Frederick, of John Bridge Pratt or know of any images of Minot Pratt.

Continuing my genealogical research I was able to find several descendants of the older brother and reached out to several of them by e-mails and/or by letter. Two of these responded. One was Donna Keeler (great-great-granddaughter of Frederick Pratt) and another was one of her nieces (who put me in touch with another niece of Donna). Donna became particularly interested since she had received her college degree in English, had taught in the public schools for many years (now retired) and was aware of a connection of her family to the Alcotts. She believed that one of her relatives possessed a photo of hers of Louisa May Alcott that had been loaned some years ago but not returned.

I had completed my biographical sketch (genealogy at the end) of Minot Pratt that I posted on my web site and shared with the Kussins, John W. Pratt, Donna Keeler and her nieces. Some of the relatively little known facts about Minot given in that sketch were that his father was a noted worker in stone, that Minot abandoned that trade to become a printer, that Minot was married to Maria Bridge by the young minister Ralph Waldo Emerson (reportedly his first such ceremony performed), that Minot was one of the founders of the Brook Farm community and became the head farmer (without farming experience), and that he was the first to discover the Wild Calla (*Calla palustris*) in Concord and shared its location with Thoreau who had not seen it before in Concord.



Wild Calla (*Calla palustris*)
Image courtesy of Erika Sonder
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In June 2017 Donna and her husband visited Sleepy Hollow Cemetery with my wife and me to see the Pratt plot. She was also much interested in the Alcott and Thoreau graves close by. Shortly after that Donna gave her consent for a grave marker to be added to the plot. I designed the marker for her approval and arranged to have it produced. I included two small images on the marker of Calla Lily, the closest image available that resembles and is related to the Wild Calla discovered in Concord by Minot Pratt. On August 30, 2017 Donna and her husband, Fritz and Karl Kussin,

cemetery supervisor Tish Hopkins, and my wife and I met at Sleepy Hollow to view the new marker installed days before. Having these descendants present to honor a new marker for Minot Pratt and his family was a longtime wish come true for me. Also, it was the reconnection of the descendants of the two married sons, Frederick and John, of Minot Pratt.



New Pratt family grave marker at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Concord, MA
Image courtesy of Tish Hopkins



Donna Keeler, Karl Kussin, and William "Fritz" Kussin at the new Pratt family grave marker at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Concord, MA, Aug. 30, 2017
Photo courtesy of Erika Sonder

A short time earlier one of Donna's nieces kindly provided to me digital pictures of photo pages in a family bible she possessed. Most of these finally put faces on some of the descendants in the Frederick Pratt line in the Pratt genealogy, all of them 20th century photos. After the viewing Donna Keeler contacted me to let me know that she had found her family photo album that contained the Louisa May Alcott photo that she thought had not been returned to her. She said it also had photos labeled John Bridge Pratt and Fred Pratt. I was very much interested to see whether the photo of Louisa May was a duplicate of one already known. Donna kindly loaned the album to me.

All the photographs in the album were of 19th century vintage. The one labeled "Fred Pratt" was clearly just another view of John Bridge Pratt from the same sitting as the photo of him two pages before. The young woman labeled "Louisa May Alcott" was not a duplicate of any known photograph of her. It did not quite look like her. I reached out to Susan Bailey of the Louisa May Alcott Is My Passion web site, to Jan Turnquist, Executive Director of the Orchard House in Concord, MA, and to Fritz Kussin to find out who might best determine the identity of the person labeled as Louisa May Alcott, or at least rule her out, if it was not her.

Susan Bailey replied and brought Kristi Martin, a licensed tour guide in Concord and Boston University doctoral candidate in American Studies, into the discussion. I sent them all low-resolution images of the putative Louisa May Alcott photo and the one mistakenly labeled "Fred Pratt". A consensus developed that the image of the woman was actually Anna Alcott. This made perfect sense when I observed that the image of the young woman was a profile, the only image on the page on the right, and that she was facing left toward the only image on the opposite page, which was John Bridge Pratt (misabeled Fred Pratt), a profile picture facing right toward her. So the two opposing pages depicted husband and wife in profile facing each other!



John Bridge Pratt (misabeled) & Anna Alcott (misabeled)
from family photo album of Donna Keeler reproduced with her permission

The two images of John Bridge Pratt resemble a known image of him, but are previously unpublished and likely at the same sitting as the published photo. Susan Bailey and Kristi Martin visited me to view the album before I returned it to Donna Keeler. Jan Turnquist was unable to come, but spoke to us on speaker-phone. Jan had no doubt that it was Anna Alcott in the photo.

When I returned the album to Donna Keeler she was disappointed that image was not Louisa May as she had long thought and wanted to know if everyone agreed that it was Anna Alcott. I told her there was agreement about that, but that it was still significant that she had previously unknown photos of Anna Alcott and John Pratt.



John Bridge Pratt
from family photo album of Donna Keeler
with her permission



Anna Bronson Alcott
from family photo album of Donna Keeler
with her permission



John Bridge Pratt (correctly labeled)
from family photo album of Donna Keeler
with her permission

Donna indicated that she had received the album from her mother but did not know from whom her mother obtained the album. She does not know the other persons whose images are in the album. Some of these are unlabeled and others only have first names. It is evident that the person who put in the names in pencil was not the person who originally owned the photos due to the known mislabeling errors, absence of or incomplete labels on some, and a misspelling of the middle name of John Bridge Pratt. On the outside of the front cover the word “Auntie” is printed in the center in attractive gold lettering. No other printing of ownership appears in the album. A possibility is that Anna Alcott herself is the “Auntie” and that the original owner of the album was her nephew, Henry Minot Pratt, Donna’s great-grandfather. Further research will be needed to see whether named persons were friends of Anna Alcott, or

Henry Minot Pratt, or friends or relatives of Henry's wife, Mary Annie Carr (or Annie Mary).

Although my sketch of Minot Pratt is finished, I still hold the hope of locating a photo or painting of Minot Pratt. One branch of the Pratt line, the one most likely to possess such an image, has resisted my various attempts to connect to various members of that line. But even if this last hope is never fulfilled, I have found it profoundly rewarding to reconnect some of the descendants of Minot Pratt to their worthy heritage and to have memorialized Minot Pratt in Sleepy Hollow and in writing for generations to come.



Pratt family plot in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Concord, MA
with Frederick Pratt marker cleaned, September 8, 2017
Photo courtesy of Tish Hopkins

References links:

Minot Pratt biographical sketch - <http://www.ray-a.com/MinotPratt-bio.pdf>
or https://www.walden.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Angelo_Minot-Pratt.pdf

Louisa May Alcott Is My Passion - <https://louisamayalcottismypassion.com/>

Orchard House - <http://www.louisamayalcott.org/>

Edward Hoar sketch - <http://www.ray-a.com/EdwardHoarRevealed.pdf>

Vascular Flora of Concord, MA - <http://www.ray-a.com/ConcordMassFlora.pdf>