

EXETER, NH LITERARY TRAIL

ExeterLitFest.com

Founded in 2019



For hundreds of years, diverse writers in Exeter, NH, have been creating stories that have spread across the region and around the world. ExeterLitFest.com is proud to bring our homegrown written arts tradition to life for you in this accessible, mile-and-a-half walk around downtown, with plenty of

benches along the way. For more, visit our **annual festival the first weekend in April at the town hall** or search for us on social media.

As Exeter itself did, let's begin at the historic Squamscott River by the falls. In 1638, Reverend John Wheelwright drew up an agreement with the native Squamscott tribe that defined shared use of the land and water. Find the public boat ramp and parking lot at 233 Water Street.

Walk over to Stewart Park, a small garden with benches at the edge of the water, just behind the Phillips Exeter Academy Boathouse.

1. Stewart Park (233 Water St.) As you sit on the bench here you see the old mill across the river. To the right lie the falls, and above them, swimming holes, and to left, Swasey Parkway and eventually, the sea. In John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*, the Winter Olympics scene was on Swasey, the fight was at an earlier boathouse, set closer to the river, right up against the dock and much further inland past the falls was the infamous swimming hole and tree of Phineas' doom. As you look left towards the sea, just behind Swasey is the site of the former African-American community of the early 1800s detailed in Henry Shute's *Plupy* books via stories of the lovers Minty-Ann & Josh Zack, and Hannah Blossom the washerwoman. In John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, John Wheelwright and Hester spend time on Swasey Parkway watching the Fourth of July fireworks over the mill.

Exit parking lot and stop on the corner of Water St.

2. Stillwells Ice Cream (190 Water St.) Exeter author Lisa Bunker set her 2017 middle grade novel *Felix Yz*, about a boy fused with an alien, in the fictional town of Littlefield, Maine, but she transplanted this Stillwells Ice Cream store there to be the setting for a scene in which Felix and his family have a super-awkward encounter with Hector, the boy Felix has a crush on, and his family. Zyx, the alien inside Felix, reacts strongly to their first taste of pistachio ice cream, and Felix has what appears to be a convulsion, drops his cone on the floor, and, in finest middle grade fashion, wants to die from embarrassment. Felix and Hector do talk again, though.

Facing Stillwells, turn right and walk uphill.

3. Woolworths Sidewalk Plaque (173 Water St.) In 1957, Harold Ward, Navy veteran, left Brooklyn with his family, moved north, and eventually ran a diner here on Water Street. His son, Michael Cameron Ward, recounts his father's working life in *A Colored Man in Exeter*. Many Woolworth employees would time their vacations with Harold so they would not have to eat elsewhere. Hobos riding the train from the far north to Boston in search of employment, knew to make a quick stop in Exeter and go to the back door at Harold's Place at 191 Water Street to get a free hot meal.

Continue uphill.

4. Water Street Bookstore (125 Water St.) This thriving independent bookstore has been selling "Indie books for Indie minds" since 1991. It is one of the favorite book launch sites for the internationally acclaimed local author Dan Brown of *The DaVinci Code* fame, horror writer Joe Hill (*Locke & Key* series), mystery writer Brendan Dubois (Lewis Cole series), and children's author Paul Durham (*Luck Uglies* series). More local authors who have had recent book launches here include para-Olympian Victoria Arlen (*Locked In*), true crime writer Lara Bricker (*Lie After Lie*), historian Sarah Pruitt (*Vanished*), and historical fiction writer Phyllis Ring (*Munich Girl*).

Continue uphill.

5. Colophon Book Shop (101B Water St.) Specializing in the fields of antiquarian and in-print books about books, literary first editions, and military history, especially World War I Aviation and World War II Aviation.

Continue to intersection.

6. Exeter Town Square (intersection of Water & Front Streets) The Rockingham County Courthouse stood in the center of the square during the 19th century. It was here that Jude Hall, a formerly enslaved man who'd earned his freedom fighting in the Revolution, gave testimony in a murder trial in 1822. His story is mentioned by both Deborah Knowlton's *Color Me Included* and Barbara Rimkunas' *Hidden History of Exeter*. The elegant Swasey Pavilion (or bandstand) was designed by Henry Bacon, architect of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, and erected in 1916. The Exeter Brass Band has performed in the square every summer since 1841. In Henry Shute's humorous semi-autobiographical book, *The Real Diary of a Real Boy*, set in post-Civil War Exeter, young Plupy yearned to play in the band when he grew up. See him in the "March of Time" newsreel, New England's Eight Million Yankees, on YouTube."

Turn left across from bandstand and cross the String Bridge far enough to see the library on the right.

7. String Bridge The original "stringer" log that gave this bridge its name was placed across the river from the mill here in 1640. The bridge as it exists now was built in 1935. The Exeter Public Library, which sits on the far side of the bridge, published a collection of local poets and poems about Exeter aptly entitled "*Where the River Meets the Tide*," which include poets Maggie Dietz, Todd Hearon, and Charles Pratt.

Turn around and return to the corner of Water & Front.

8. Corner (69 Water St.) This building was formerly known as Sparky's Café and is the setting for the poem "Exeter Revisited" by National Poet Laureate and Nobel Prize winner, the Russian exile Joseph Brodsky.

[Continue on Water St.](#)

9. A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words (65 Water St.) At this niche bookstore, book lovers can browse rare and collectible books from Exeter and the region, as well as antique prints and maps. The owners are very knowledgeable about Exeter's publishing past.

[Continue on Water St.](#)

10. Ioka Theater (55 Water St.) Opened in 1915, the first film shown here was D.W. Griffiths racially charged *Birth of a Nation*. This theater was called the "Idaho" by Owen Meany and John, who watched many a movie here in the 1950s. Closed since 2008, and awaiting a new life, recently it was used as a horror setting in Joe Hill's short story *20th Century Ghost*. The basement plays an important part in *Incident at Ioka*, the second in the local mystery series by RM Allen.

[Continue on Water St., use last crosswalk before bridge.](#)

11. Patty Rogers home (1 Franklin St.) Patty Rogers' home (now a parking lot) once stood next to the historic Gilman Garrison house, where she would occasionally dine. Patty Rogers is thought to be the inspiration for Tabitha Gilman Tenney's hapless romantic, Dorcasina, in her anti-romance novel published in 1801, *Female Quixotism*. A 1785 diary of the young Patty remains and is detailed in Marilyn Easton's *Passionate Spinster*. Tabitha Gilman Tenney's hilarious feminist book, modeled on *Don Quixote*, was a 50-year best seller and went through five printings. Her house was relocated to 63 High St., where it now stands. Her grave is in the Exeter Cemetery.

[Walk back towards the bandstand on this side of the street. Turn left onto Front St. and stop near benches.](#)

12. Exeter Town Hall (9 Front St.) Across Front Street, topped by a statue of blind justice, is the historic Exeter Town Hall, built in 1855. Lincoln stumped in this building, and today many presidential candidates get their turn to do the same on the historic stage inside. Over the years the hall has housed concerts, plays, lectures, and contests. For 50 years in the 1900s, Judge Henry Shute,

known as the Mark Twain of Exeter, presided on the Municipal Court bench at the side entrance (where the Exeter Area Chamber of Commerce is now located). The hilarious stewdcats velocipede race and many other scenes in his *Real Diary of a Real Boy* took place inside the great hall. In 1965, a famous UFO sighting was reported to the police station as detailed in John Fuller's *Incident at Exeter*. The steeple plays an important part in Lara Bricker's *Dead on Deadline* in her Piper Greene series.

[Use crosswalk to other side, continue uphill on Front St.](#)

13. Congregational Church (21 Front St.) This 1798 church was the model for Pastor Lewis Merrill's church in John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Current pastor Rev. Emily Heath has written two religious books.

[Continue on Front St.](#)

14. Exeter Historical Society (47 Front St.) The Exeter Historical Society was organized in 1928 to serve as the caretakers of the town's history. Nancy Merrill served as curator of collections for over 25 years and authored *Exeter, New Hampshire: 1888 to 1988* as a follow-up to Charles Bell's earlier work, *History of the Town of Exeter, New Hampshire*. The Society, and its staff, continue to offer books, pamphlets and a video series Exeter History Minute, which can be accessed through their website: www.exeterhistory.org.

[Continue to the grassy green at Phillips Exeter Academy.](#)

15. Phillips Exeter Academy All around you is the campus of Phillips Exeter Academy, founded in 1781. John Irving describes his time here in his memoir *The Imaginary Girlfriend*. This is also Gravesend Academy, as described in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. To the right is the Assembly Building (with flag atop cupola) in which the Volkswagen was placed on the stage and driven down the marble staircase by the enraged headmaster. These are the same stairs that the limping Phineas fell down in *A Separate Peace*. To the left of the Assembly Building is the stone Phillips Church, known as Hurd church in *Owen Meany*, which runs a weekly speakers' series of "Meditations" which are published every several years. Prolific author

Rev. Frederick Buechner once led this church. Left of the church, on the other side of Front St., is the four-story library, designed by Louis Kahn and completed in 1971.

Bonus: Just past the church on the opposite side of the street is Elliot St., (formerly Whitfield's Lane) where African-American Abolitionist poet James Monroe Whitfield (*America and Other Poems 1853*) was born. The family is described in grandniece Pauline E. Hopkins' novel *Contending Forces* and also in Lois Brown's scholarly work *Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins: Black Daughter of the Revolution*. Further up past Elliott St. is 80 Front St., the brick home of the fictitious Owen Meany's friend John Wheelwright.

[Go back along Front St. and turn left on Spring St.](#)

16. Phillips Exeter Academy Bookstore (13 Spring St.) Books for sale usually includes the *Meditations series* and works by Dolores Kendrick, former teacher and poet laureate of Washington, DC, who channeled voices of female slaves in *The Women of Plums*, and other recently published alums like feminist Roxane Gay, gender identity author Alex Myers, philosopher Daniel Dennett, poets Willie Perdomo and Kenji Yoshino, novelists Chang-Rae Lee, Paul Yoon and Joyce Maynard, as well as Roland Merullo's popular *Breakfast with Buddha* series.

[Continue on Spring St.](#)

17. Williams House (17 Spring St. next to bookstore) This academy dorm house is the former Williams Brothers publishing house. It is also reputed to be the setting of Robert Anderson's 1953 visionary play on gender identity, *Tea & Sympathy*, made into a 1956 film directed by Vincente Minelli, starring Deborah Kerr as the faculty wife, and John Kerr as the sensitive student.

[Continue to the end of Spring St., turn right onto Water St., and return to your starting place at the boathouse.](#)

**Thanks for visiting! This map online
at ExeterLitFest.com
or the [iZi Travel app](#).**