**Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: Most Popular Poet of the Nineteenth Century**

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People around the world know Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poetry even if they don’t know who wrote it. His poetry is recited to us in childhood, and lines from one of his poems have even been found etched into a window pane in North Carolina. In the mid 1800's the Chinese government presented Longfellow with a fan inscribed with his poem The Psalm of Life. A tribute to his popularity, his poems have been translated into dozens of languages.

**Longfellow’s Ancestors**

In 1676 Henry Longfellow’s ancestors came to America from Yorkshire, England. On his mother’s side, Longfellow is related to John Alden, who sailed on the Mayflower and became the first man to land at Plymouth. His mother, Zilpah, was the oldest daughter of General Peleg Wadsworth who was a brigadier general of militia in the Revolutionary War and later a congressman. Henry’s father, Stephen Longfellow, is one of many men named Stephen in the family tree. The first Stephen was a blacksmith, the second Stephen a Harvard graduate and schoolmaster who held public seats. The third Stephen became a member of the legislator, a senator and a judge. The fourth Stephen, Longfellow’s father, graduated Harvard and became a lawyer. The name Stephen went to Henry’s older brother.

**Youth & School**

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was born in Portland, Maine (a district of Massachusetts at that time) on February 27, 1807 with blue eyes and fair hair. The second son of seven siblings (three brothers and four sisters), Henry was named after his uncle, Henry Wadsworth, who served in the navy aboard the fire-ship Intrepid and who heroically died aboard ship in 1804.

When only three years old, Longfellow attended school with his older brother Stephen. Longfellow’s first teacher, Ma’am Fellows, was a exacting rule-enforcer. Henry and his brother soon transferred to a public school. Then they relocated to a private school run by Nathaniel H. Carter. Incredibly intelligent, by age six, Longfellow already knew Latin grammar, could read, spell and multiply. He then moved to Portland Academy to continue his education where he remained until he enrolled in college.

After the roof of Longfellow’s house caught fire from the chimney in 1814, Henry’s father decided to add a third floor to the home. The family divided and lived with various relatives during construction. Henry and his mother stayed with his grandfather. At age eight, during this time, Henry developed an infection in his foot, and doctors believed the foot might have to be amputated. After a month, he recovered from the infection and started to walk again, and thankfully did not need his foot removed.

When Longfellow returned to school, he studied Algebra, Latin and Greek. His family hired a private tutor to teach him French. Longfellow’s mother encouraged her children to participate in music, and Longfellow learned the piano and flute, developing a life-long love of music.

**Bowdoin College**

Henry started college at Bowdoin when only fourteen years old. Longfellow’s father wanted him to become a lawyer, but Longfellow, after a short stint studying law, developed scholarly interests. At age nineteen, ranking fourth in a class of thirty-eight students, Longfellow delivered one of the commencement speeches at graduation in 1825. One of his classmates was Nathaniel Hawthorne.

After graduating from Bowdoin College, Longfellow was asked to become the first professor of Modern Languages there. He accepted the position with the provision that the College allow him to travel to Europe for study. The school initially offered him a salary of $1000. Then while Longfellow traveled through Europe, the college decided he was too young for the position of professor. Bowdoin College offered Longfellow the job of tutor for less money. Longfellow, furious, declined the position. The college reconsidered the situation and offered Longfellow the professorship if he would also become the school librarian. Longfellow accepted, earning a salary of $800 as professor and $100 as librarian. After three years in Europe, traveling England, France, Germany, Holland, Italy and Spain, Longfellow returned home in 1829 and taught at Bowdoin between 1829 to 1835. At the time, no texts existed for his classes, so Longfellow wrote his own.

**Harvard University**

In 1834, Longfellow was appointed a professorship at Harvard. From 1836 to 1854, Longfellow served as Smith Professor of Modern Languages. He returned to Europe for a year to study German, and his first wife, Mary Storer Potter, accompanied him. Between appointments and meetings (he had letters of introduction to influential people), Longfellow walked the countries of Denmark, England, Germany, Holland, Sweden and Switzerland. Drawing upon his love of music, he played his silver flute to make people feel at ease with him. He enjoyed meeting people no matter what they did for a living or their place in society. In 1835, tragedy occurred when his wife, Mary, died in Rotterdam. Later, Longfellow returned to Cambridge where he boarded at Craigie House (once headquarters to George Washington). In 1839, Longfellow published his first book of poems, Voices of the Night. He felt that teaching interfered with his writing and resigned from Harvard in 1854. In June of that year he started writing The Song of Hiawatha.

**Longfellow’s First Wife: Mary Storer Potter**

Mary Storer Potter, born on May 12, 1812 in Cambridge, was the daughter of Judge Potter of Portland, Maine. Longfellow knew Mary from school days and met her again in Portland during a church service. He lacked the courage to speak with her after following her home; but at age 24, Longfellow married Mary on September 14, 1831.

While married to Mary, Longfellow contributed travel sketches to New England Magazine. In 1834, Mary accompanied him when he returned to Europe to study. Her poor health contributed to a miscarriage in 1835, and a few weeks later she died at age 22 in Rotterdam. They were married for four years. After Mary’s death, Longfellow continued his travels through Germany and Switzerland before returning to Harvard to teach.

**Longfellow’s Second Wife: Frances Appleton**

Eight months after Mary’s death, Longfellow met Frances Appleton during his travels through Germany and Switzerland. He again met Frances (nicknamed Fanny), daughter of Nathan Appleton, a prominent Boston merchant, seven years after he returned to Cambridge. They married July 13, 1843 after a long courtship. By this time, Nathan Appleton owned Craigie House and gave Craigie House, which overlooked the Charles River, to Longfellow as a wedding gift. Their home became a meeting place for students, literary and philosophical figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Julia Ward Howe, and Charles Sumner. During their happy marriage, Longfellow sired six children (two boys and four girls). Fanny became the first obstetric recipient of ether in the United States on April 7, 1847 during her third pregnancy. Her daughter, also named Fanny, died one year later.

Longfellow based the heroine in Hyperion, written in 1839, on his wife Fanny. His children also influenced his writing as evidenced in his poem The Children’s Hour. Starting in 1857 with the first issue, The Atlantic Monthly magazine published over fifty of Longfellow’s poems. In 1858, Longfellow published The Courtship of Miles Standish, which sold over 15,000 copies during the first week of publication.

On July 9, 1861, tragedy again tormented Longfellow when his wife died in a fire at age 44. She and her two youngest daughters, aged five and seven, were in the library. While melting wax to seal envelopes containing cuttings of her children’s hair, Fanny dropped a match onto her dress. Longfellow tried to rescue his wife by smothering the flames with a rug only to receive terrible burns on his hands and face. Since shaving became difficult due to scars from the fire, Longfellow grew a beard. Deeply depressed, Longfellow immersed himself in translating Dante into English and returned to Europe.

**Longfellow’s Later Years**

In 1868, Longfellow traveled to Europe for the last time accompanied by his children. During this trip, he received honorary degrees at Oxford and Cambridge. Longfellow was selected as a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences and of the Spanish Academy. He also immortalized The Wayside Inn in Sudbury, Massachusetts with his Tales Of a Wayside Inn in 1863. When the chestnut tree on Brattle Street had to come down, the tree featured in his poem A Village Blacksmith ("Under a spreading chestnut tree"), the children of Cambridge collected pennies to have a chair made for Longfellow from the chestnut tree’s wood for his 72nd birthday.

Longfellow published over twenty books, the last book, In the Harbor, in 1882. The Bells of San Blas (his last poem) was written close to March 24, 1882, the date he died at age 75 of peritonitis, which claimed his life within five days. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow lays at rest in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Two years after his death, he was the first American poet whose bust was placed in the Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey.